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Thailand's Alignment Strategy Amidst the US-China Rivalry: A Role Theory Perspective

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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze how Thailand, as a middle power, navigates its alignment choices amid an intensifying US-China rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region through the lens of role theory. This paper also proposes several original mechanisms to operationalize the role theory in the analysis of Thailand's strategy. To this end, Thailand's foreign policy from the past decade (2012 to mid-2025) will be reviewed. The central argument is that Thailand is adopting a "soft hedging" strategy marked by opportunism and driven by its key goal of development, but is, at the same time, complicated by domestic political dysfunction ("fragmented centralism"). Thailand's foreign policy practice, as a consequence, remains strongly ambivalent. Not only is there no clear positioning of the state in relation to the US-China rivalry and no grand strategy to enhance its strategic autonomy, but there is also no active threat identification. Thailand's role as an "opportunistic go-between" is both intended and unintended. The former lies in the fact that Thailand aims to leverage its relations with the great powers (and to some degree, other states) to maximize development benefits, while simultaneously preserving its current autonomy in a way that is representative of its historical past, wherein a clear position will only be revealed when a winner is evident in power rivalries. The latter, as indicated by a divergence in domestic preferences as a result of "fragmented centralism," is self-explanatory in the sense that it does not form part of a calculated, whole-of-government approach.

Keywords: *Thailand, US-China Rivalry, Alignment Strategy, Hedging, Role Theory*

1. Introduction

With China's continued rise, Southeast Asia has evolved into a "dual order" where smaller states increasingly look to the US for security guarantees and to China for economic gains. Thailand is no exception. However, this "dual order" is further complicated by an intensifying geopolitical rivalry between the two great powers, which poses a dilemma for smaller states (Yuan 2020). Among other

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actions, the US has established new institutional arrangements to contain China's security and economic expansion, whereas China has embarked on a more strategically ambitious and assertive approach in the region (Hoo, Li, and Char 2017). Being dependent on both great powers, Southeast Asian states are increasingly hard-pressed to find optimal strategies to avoid alienating either the US or China. When both great powers possess significant overlapping interests and an aversion to tension, smaller states enjoy substantive freedom of action and strategic flexibility. However, increasing divergence in interests between the great powers results in less tolerance for the deviations previously acceptable to either or both, making such actions less palatable at present (Chong 2023). It is precisely due to this existing urgency that the agency of middle powers like Thailand to gain strategic autonomy has become more salient in assessing the prospects of peace or conflict in the region (Paikin and Polansky 2022). "Middle powers" herein is defined as "states that are neither great nor small in terms of international power, capacity and influence, and demonstrate a propensity to promote cohesion and stability in the world system" (Jordaan 2003). Thailand, in this regard, practices calibrated hedging – pursuing multiple, often counteracting options to offset strategic risks (Kuik and Rozman 2015; Kuik 2021; Swaspitchayaskun and Surakitbovorn 2023; Kamaruddin and Kuik 2023). However, other middle powers, such as Australia, that also moved away from equidistance diplomacy to balance against China (Efsthathopoulos 2023). These examples highlight the wide spectrum of strategies that middle powers have adopted to cope with the great power rivalry. Taking these into consideration, there is a need to understand how middle powers derive their strategies and how they exercise them, in order to gain further insights into the "black boxes" that drive these states to translate their intentions into practice.

This paper seeks to answer the central question: how does Thailand navigate alignment choices vis-à-vis the intensifying US-China rivalry? It adopts a qualitative case study approach, underpinned by role theory and building on Kuik and Rozman's (2015) hedging framework, using several proposed mechanisms to analyze Thailand's strategy. Thailand's foreign policy from 2012 to June 2025 (following the ascendancy of Xi Jinping's administration), will be examined. Sources are primarily secondary, including policy documents, databases, newspapers, online surveys, and other online repositories. This will enable a deeper understanding of 1) why Thailand takes these actions, which at times seem to increase perceived risks/threats and reduce opportunities to mitigate the strategic dilemma (in other words, they are "rationally irrational"), and 2) the strategic implications of Thailand's strategy. These theory-driven insights contribute to an updated understanding of Thailand's evolving foreign policy behavior and its implications for Southeast Asia's regional order.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section is a literature review of role theory and introduces mechanisms for operationalizing the role theory and the hedging framework. Thailand's role conception and some of its strategies to navigate dual dependencies will then be discussed. The subsequent four sections will focus on the individual mechanisms. The last section summarizes the paper's findings.

2. Literature Review of the Role Theory and Proposed Mechanisms

The roots of the role theory can be traced back to the field of sociology, and most notably the works of George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman, who examined how individuals enact and negotiate social roles (Mead 1934; Goffman 1959). The term “role” refers to “both a position in an organized group and any socially recognized category of actors” (Stryker and Statham 1985). Proponents of the role theory suggest that all individuals have particular social role(s) and that society is the aggregation of such roles. Applied to international relations (IR) in the 1970s, the role theory sought to explain why states with similar material capabilities behaved differently (Holsti 1970; Harnisch 2012; Walker 2013; He and Walker 2015). One of the key concepts in role theory is national role conception, introduced by Holsti (1970). Role conception can be understood as “a set of norms that drives foreign policies, which entails attitudes, decisions, responses, and functions of, and commitment made, by the government.” It can also be referred to as policymakers’ perceptions of their states in the international system. Research on role theory in IR has evolved through three waves. The first wave (1970s to 1980s) essentially challenged realist assumptions by showing how states could define roles – such as “balancer” or “rival” – beyond structural prescriptions. The second wave (1980s to 1990s) examined the interaction between domestic role conceptions and systemic expectations, often utilizing leaders’ statements as empirical evidence (Wish 1987; Le Prestre 1997). The third wave (2010s to present) positioned role theory as a bridge between different levels of analysis in IR and as a connecting agent and structure – thereby providing crucial insights into the previously commonly discerned but insufficiently understood phenomenon of inquiry into state behavior (Thies 2010; Breuning 2011).

According to He (2018), the theory itself is particularly relevant for analyzing state behaviors during an international order transition. He argues that no single theory can sufficiently explain such a transition due to its complexity, citing Kissinger (2014)’s proposition that an international order comprises all the key elements of conventional IR theories. Role theory thus provides a framework for synthesizing these differing perspectives. This includes material capabilities captured under the “position” part of the definition of “role,” as well as a relational perspective on states vis-à-vis others in the international system, captured under the “recognition” part. Weaving role theory into the notion of middle powers, this framework highlights how intersubjective understandings shape the role conceptions and agency vis-à-vis great powers. This is also crucial given that middle powers, unlike small powers, have greater capabilities and capacities to exercise their agency to gain more autonomy. The role theory has also been applied to the study of other statuses of middle powers, for instance, major and emerging middle powers (Thies and Sari 2018).

Proposed Mechanisms to Define Thailand’s Alignment Strategy

For a start, Kuik and Rozman’s (2015) framework for alignment strategies will serve as a broad reference point to determine Thailand’s adopted strategy. The framework is as follows.

Table 1: Alignment Strategies Along the Balancing-Bandwagoning Spectrum

Balancing Strategy vis-à-vis the US or China	Hedging Strategy					Bandwagoning Strategy vis-à-vis the US or China
(In Totality)	Hard Hedging (For Risk Contingency)		Soft Hedging (For Benefit Maximization)			(In Totality)
	Mutually Counteracting Options					
	Indirect-Balancing	Dominance-Denial	Economic Pragmatism	Binding-Engagement	Limited-Bandwagoning	
	Minimizing security risks via the creation of military alignments, without the explicit mention of any target power	Minimizing political risks of autonomy loss by fostering stronger political relations with other states to achieve political leverage against the target power	Maximizing economic returns through the creation of pragmatic economic ties	Maximizing diplomatic returns through engagement and enmeshment of the great powers in both bilateral and multilateral settings	Maximizing political returns by cherry-picking which states to give deference to and/or cherry-picking which states to collaborate on foreign policy with	
	<i>“Military Hedge”</i>	<i>“Political Hedge”</i>	Economic Diversification	<i>“Diplomatic Insurance-Seeking”</i>	<i>“Selective Subservience”</i>	
			Minimizing economic risks from reliance by diversifying pragmatic economic ties			
			<i>“Economic Hedge”</i>			
Extent of Defiance Neutral Point Extent of Subservience						

Source: Adapted from Kuik and Rozman (2015).

To operationalize this framework and also to incorporate the role theory, the following mechanisms are proposed. These mechanisms, each comprising measurement variables spanning different domains, are designed to better deduce which policy options under Kuik and Rozman's (2015) framework are adopted by Thailand, and to what extent.

Mechanism I: The Role's Impact on the Securitization of the US and China

This mechanism assesses how Thailand's role conceptions serve as catalysts in its security assessments of both the US and China. This is evaluated based on Thailand's geographic proximity to military hotspots and any significant changes in defense expenditure patterns.

Mechanism II: The Role's Impact on Engagement Levels with the US and China

This mechanism assesses how the role concept influences Thailand's engagement levels with both great powers. This is reflected by three indicators. The first is the frequency of two-way high-level visits. The second are military relations, which include joint exercises/training, arms sales by the great powers, the presence of US/Chinese bases, and the types of institutional support in force (treaties, either bilateral or as part of a security network). The third are economic relations, which include two-way trade volumes, foreign direct investment from the great powers, and Thailand's participation in development initiatives pushed forth by the great powers.

Mechanism III: The Role's Urgency for Elite Legitimization

This mechanism examines how role conceptions impact the urgency for domestic elite legitimization. Causal relationships can be established by studying the opinions of Thailand's populace toward the US and China, its domestic regime type, its socioeconomic development status, and elite perceptions of the US-led and China-led orders.

Mechanism IV: Role Activeness in Increasing Autonomy vis-à-vis the US and China

This mechanism examines the level of activeness Thailand exercises in its pursuit of greater autonomy vis-à-vis the great powers. This is studied through the agency Thailand exercises - for instance, its engagements or norm entrepreneurship in international/regional institutions, unilateral actions to increase autonomy, and the vision it has articulated for the region.

Next, to gauge Thailand's level in its adopted role, the following framework is proposed. This comprises three key activity levels that apply to the alignment strategies outlined in Table 1. As the names suggest, this framework provides a clearer understanding of Thailand's agency. Specifically, it helps to identify whether Thailand is more proactive or reactive in its overall pursuit of strategic autonomy. This is contingent on two key factors. The first is Thailand's level of agency to pursue strategic autonomy in institutional settings and unilaterally, vis-à-vis the US and China. The second is whether such actions are consciously undertaken with the possibility of incurring greater costs for oneself, but at the expense of other states in Southeast Asia, or more so as mere reactions to the great powers. Such insights complement the deduced findings on the state's alignment strategy.

The Autonomy Crusader

1. Proactive in pursuing autonomy and regional stability in many multilateral settings, as well as unilaterally.

2. May undertake policies and actions at times that provoke either a great power, but as part of a proactive approach.

The Opportunistic Go-Between

1. Active in pursuing autonomy and regional stability in some multilateral settings, as well as unilaterally.
2. The active approach undertaken is mainly for self-benefit (vis-à-vis other states in the region), and the state may not take leadership in norm entrepreneurship.
3. May prioritize bilateral deals over multilateral ones to enhance its own position.

Reactive Autonomy Pursuer

1. Pursues autonomy and regional stability in multilateral settings, as well as unilaterally, but mainly as a follower of other middle powers.
2. Mainly reactive to the actions of the US and China.

3. Thailand's Role Conception & Evolution of Geopolitical Strategies to Navigate Dual Dependencies

Thailand's role conception in IR has long been debated domestically. This stems from Thailand's unique history and position as the only Southeast Asian state never to have been colonized by foreign powers. As Prince Wan Waithayakon noted, during the nineteenth century, Thailand had skillfully navigated British and French regional expansion by forging treaties with them – albeit unequal – and implementing internal reforms in governance, infrastructure, and education to facilitate trade (Waithayakon 2022). Although later designated as a “buffer zone” between the two colonial powers, Thailand preserved its overall sovereignty at the cost of territorial concessions. When World War II broke out in Europe in 1939, Thailand signed non-aggression treaties with Britain and France. Thailand also sought to demonstrate “goodwill” in the name of peace by signing the “Treaty between Thailand and Japan Concerning the Continuance of Friendly Relations and the Mutual Respect of Each Other's Territorial Integrity” in 1940, despite Japan's invasion of Thailand and compelling the country to fight against the Allied forces (Waithayakon 2022; Thailand Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022).

While the above actions to protect Thailand's overall independence may be attributed in part to adept diplomacy – albeit arguably interpreted as a sign of subservience – the root of these actions predominantly lies in preserving a type of national security akin to other smaller states (Vital 1971; Ayoob 1989; Buzan 1991), where the “state” and “regime” are intertwined (Acharya 2018). In the specific context of Thailand, its security conception is mainly influenced by the “royalist-nationalist” ideology. While the state's monarchy has existed for centuries, the foundations of the contemporary dogma originated in the time when Thailand introduced the aforementioned reforms. As a means to forestall foreign domination, reforms to the government included the centralization of power as well as the official establishment of a three-pillared ideology, namely 1)

nation, 2) religion, and 3) king. Subsequently, the ideology became central in conceptualizing a multitude of threats, including communism, political opposition, and dissent. For Thailand's military, in particular, coups d'état are rationalized as legitimate measures to eradicate such threats, and thereby allowing military and political elites to rewrite the rulebooks by means of a new constitution. Following the establishment of the state's primordial constitution in 1932, Thailand has weathered 22 coup d'état and 20 constitutional amendments (Connors 2007; Na Thalang 2023). These were, in part, to reinforce the monarchy's legitimacy in politics and to sacralize the state's history (Fong 2009). In the 1950s, Thailand developed close relations with the US to counter communist movements and dissenting groups within its military. This alignment was formalized and strengthened through the 1954 Manila Pact and the 1962 Thanat-Rusk Communiqué (US Embassy & Consulate in Thailand n.d.). Following the US withdrawal from Vietnam in the 1970s, Thailand accelerated its engagement with China, culminating in the formal establishment of diplomatic ties in 1975 (Ang and Liow 2015). Thailand also sought to strengthen regional cooperation through ASEAN (Na Thalang 2023; Krishnamra 2024). Consistent with its "multiple diplomacy" approach (Young 1971), Thailand further courted economic ties with the Soviet Union despite ideological differences (Viraphol 1985). Thailand later bolstered relations with China during the Cambodian-Vietnamese war and subsequently rejected the Vietnam- and Soviet-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea's attempt to gain legitimacy at the UN through ASEAN (Rungswasdisab 2006).

There was, however, a shift in Thailand's behavior during the post-Cold War period. Despite the US being the global hegemon, Thailand further strengthened relations with China. The key reasons for doing so were 1) a perceived incompatibility with the US promulgation of the conception of human rights as part of the liberal international order, and 2) the rise of China's influence in Asia. China's timely financial assistance to Thailand during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, through direct aid, the Chiang Mai Initiative, and its maintenance of currency stability, further reinforced this shift (Grimes 2015). By contrast, US contributions via the International Monetary Fund rescue package were viewed as inadequate. This marked a turning point in Thailand's perception of its "old friend," given that Thailand had strongly supported the US during the Cold War and also presented its first constitution crafted by an elected Constituent Assembly, which set in motion direct elections in its bicameral system (Han 2022).

Thailand's foreign policy behavior reflects a recurring pattern of somewhat "picking sides" in accordance with the prescribed external circumstances, aligning with the prevailing international consensus. This was affirmed by Thailand's Chairman of the Prime Minister's Security Advisory Committee, Dr. Panitan Wattanayagorn, who claimed it was more advantageous for the state to "go with the flow" of such a consensus (Bangprapa and Tangsathaporn 2022). Nevertheless, Thailand remains protective of its monarchy and "Thai-style democracy," often perceived as illiberal by the US. The US has repeatedly condemned Thailand's coup d'état. Despite the US Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, which under Section 513 provides for military assistance to Thailand

(GovInfo 2025), Na Thalang (2023) notes that the US government banned assistance, which includes weapons, funding, education, and training, and limited military engagements in response to coup d'état in 1991, 2006, and 2014. Thailand's leaders have viewed these measures as supercilious. On the flipside, China's principle of non-interference and its economic ascent have made it a more appealing partner for Thailand's development goals – though this does not signify a clear alignment with China over the US.

To this end, Thailand's adaptive diplomacy has been metaphorically described as “bamboo bending with the wind,” “bamboo swirling in the wind,” and even “gone with the wind,” symbolizing flexibility in shifting geopolitical contexts (Busbarat 2016; Storey 2022). Critics argue this reflects a lack of “grand strategy” and “transformative agency” (Jones and Jenne 2022; Na Thalang 2023; Poonkham 2023; Ankersen 2024). As such, policy practices can be said to be only partially aligned with the state's foreign policy goals as outlined in June 2025, which focused on two enduring objectives: 1) being “a friendly-to-all nation” and an “active promoter of peace and common prosperity” and 2) advancing economic development (Thailand Public Relations Department 2025a).

Yet, based on Thailand's past diplomatic approach to protecting its interests, its role conception may best be characterized as a “pragmatic and flexible balancer and subregional convening power.”

Within the context of the US-China rivalry, Thailand faces narrowing strategic choices due to its deep but complex ties with both powers. As of 2024, China and the US are Thailand's top and second-largest trading partners, respectively (Thailand Board of Investment 2025), while, in terms of foreign investment, China is the second-largest source (Thailand Public Relations Department 2025b). Despite its position as a US treaty ally, Thailand maintains an ambiguous posture to preserve policy flexibility amid domestic constraints and limited relative capabilities (Zawacki 2024; Poonkham 2024). Such ambivalence is exacerbated by “fragmented centralism,” where overlapping bureaucratic authorities hinder coherent policy implementation, resulting in suboptimal outcomes (Vititanon 2018; Kumlungpat 2021; Ungsuchaval 2023; Nam 2024). From a macro-perspective, Thailand adopts a “soft hedging” strategy vis-à-vis the US and China. This is despite Thailand having ushered in eight successive Prime Ministers since 2012, up until mid-2025. Thailand has engaged both great powers through numerous bilateral and multilateral institutional mechanisms (e.g., ASEAN, APEC, and EAS), in a bid to safeguard its own interests. However, there has been a gradual shift toward greater cooperation with China rather than the US. This has been driven by perceptions of US neglect and punitive measures following the 2014 coup – both in rhetoric and policy, especially during the then-Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's two leadership terms. It was also during this period that Thailand viewed the US as a greater threat than China (Na Thalang 2023). China's “charm offensive” capitalized on these. In 2012, Thailand-China relations were elevated to a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.” Thailand also participated in new, major China-led development initiatives and institutions such as the BRI, RCEP, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Security cooperation was later expanded

as well (Prasirtsuk 2017). Furthermore, Thailand's elites often invoke historical kinship to frame ties with China, with Princess Sirindhorn likening it to a "friendship between brothers that will last a thousand years and beyond" (Bukh 2022).

Nonetheless, Thailand remains wary of closer relations with China. Economically, there have been issues such as higher costs and a lack of technological transfers from China in Thailand's medium- and high-speed railway projects, as well as large-scale land acquisitions of land by China and the subsequent lack of revenue gains from land development. In terms of security, the South China Sea (SCS) dispute has worsened tensions between China and some of Thailand's largest partners, including the US, Japan, and ASEAN members. Therefore, it may not be tenable for Thailand to become too close to China (Prasirtsuk 2017). In any case, these developments do not change the way the great powers view Thailand's role in Southeast Asia. It is argued that China perceives Thailand as a "strategic partner for geostrategic goals" (Skaggs, Chukaew, and Stephens 2023; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025) while the US sees it as a treaty ally (as is the case) (US Department of State 2022), albeit at times paling in comparison with other non-allied states in Southeast Asia (Pongsudhirak 2016; Kurlantzick 2016; Raymond and Blaxland 2021).

To counterbalance its relations with the great powers, Thailand has continued to engage extra-regional states such as Japan, Australia, India, and Russia (Manowong 2020). It also leverages ASEAN's principle of centrality as an anchor for "collective hedging," despite contending regional visions (Yang 2021; Zhou 2022). To this end, Poonkham (2023) posits that Thailand has shifted from its "bamboo diplomacy" to "hedging by default." Regardless of the umbrella terms utilized by scholars to categorize Thailand's strategy (or lack thereof) to enhance its autonomy, it remains clear that the state is adopting the "soft hedging" strategy based on the framework provided in this study, founded upon its role conception as a "pragmatic and flexible balancer." Yet, arguably, the "pragmatism" in Thailand's role conception is to a large degree synonymous with "pragmatism in favor of the state's royalist-nationalist conception of national security." This carries nuanced, but important implications for Thailand's "soft hedging" strategy. An elaboration on Thailand's hedging behavior through its role is provided in the following sections.

4. Mechanism I Findings: "Fragmented Centralism" and Ambivalence Toward the US and China

For Thailand, "fragmented centralism" has produced a correspondingly "fragmented" foreign policy. However, in its coalesced form, it can be understood that Thailand has adhered to omnidirectional engagement with states regardless of how seemingly disjointed its bureaucracy may be. Ambivalence is the key signal emanating from Thailand's diplomacy in relation to the US-China rivalry, whether intended or unintended. From another perspective, it is argued that ambivalence opens, or at least maintains, the strategic space for Thailand to "be a friendly-to-all nation" as espoused in its foreign policy objectives. For a start, Thailand's geographical proximity to potential hotspots is examined.

Located at the center of continental Southeast Asia, there are several factors affecting Thailand's security in the region. For one, Thailand is an important node in the sub-region's supply chain network. Thailand's economic growth, along with its natural endowments, people, culture, and infrastructure, provides the state with a strong bearing to undertake a leadership role in the Mekong subregion (Charoensri 2024). Given that Thailand's neighboring states - Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV) - have varying degrees of political proximity to the US and China, further intensification of the great power rivalry may lead to severe fractures among these states. This may be manifested through the SCS dispute, as well as the great powers' own engagements with the individual subregional states. For Thailand, this threatens its supply chains and own development – in particular, with the CLMV states through self-initiated plans such as the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) (Asian Development Bank n.d.-a). Fractures within the ASEAN bloc also signify a poorer collective bargaining position vis-à-vis the US and China. Next, Thailand's immediate periphery, the Gulf of Thailand (as an extension of the SCS), is also posited to be an emerging flashpoint of conflict between the great powers. Cambodia, in 2024, launched construction of the Funan-Techo Canal project, which will reduce transshipment via Vietnam by 70% and greatly boost the state's socio-economic development. However, the project is funded by China and will provide its naval forces with direct access to the Gulf of Thailand. For the US, such developments are a worrying concern for the following reasons. Firstly, China could, through the Gulf of Thailand, disrupt the US's free access to the Strait of Malacca and, thereafter, to the Indian and Pacific oceans. This is arguably China's counter to the US "Malacca dilemma." Secondly, direct access to the Gulf of Thailand would also mean that China's naval forces could bypass the SCS and the Indochina states to reach the Gulf. This greatly reduces Chinese forces' deployment time to the Gulf and the larger SCS, providing stronger leverage against adversarial forces. Thirdly, the project would expand China's presence in Vietnam's west rather than only in the east in the SCS. This is strategically pivotal, as the Cam Ranh Bay naval base in southeastern Vietnam is 1) operated by Vietnam's naval forces to support its artificial islands in the SCS and 2) could potentially be reused by the US Navy (as it was, during the Vietnam War) to deter China's forces in the SCS (Grossman 2024). While Thailand is not a claimant state in the SCS dispute, the SCS dispute arguably does not impact Thailand on the scale of a conflict in the Gulf of Thailand, which, in a geographical sense, is closer to Thailand's shores. Another potential security risk for Thailand lies at the Ream Naval Base, located on the coast of the Gulf of Thailand in Cambodia's Sihanoukville province. The naval base is home to joint Cambodia-China facilities funded by China, which has stationed several warships there and reportedly has exclusive access to some of these facilities. Furthermore, China reportedly has plans to develop an "air defense command and general headquarters" and a "naval radar system" in the vicinity (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2025). This has inevitably fueled US suspicions that the base could be another military outpost for China, despite Cambodia having openly welcomed other navies, including the US, to visit (The Straits Times 2024). On the other hand, the US

reportedly plans to establish a naval base in Thailand's southern Phang-nga province, which could further ignite tensions with China if realized. This is in addition to several Thai military facilities the US has access to, including Tap Lamu, Sattahip, Songkhla, and U-Tapao (Morris and Nguyen 2025). Besides, as a US ally, Thailand has signed the "2022 Memorandum of Agreement on War Reserve Stocks," which allows the US to stockpile weapons on Thai soil (limited bandwagoning) (FiscalNote 2025). These represent a real threat to Thailand in the event of an actual conflict; should the US launch attacks against China or states siding with China from Thailand, these sites would be legitimate targets for retaliation.

Furthermore, the militarization and potential militarization of continental Southeast Asia increase the likelihood of misperceptions and miscalculations. Despite having demonstrated itself to be somewhat of an "unaligned ally" of the US, Thailand remains an official treaty ally. This brings to the fore the obligations that an ally has should a conflict occur, whether or not Thailand chooses to comply. Although the above risks and threats may not be explicitly stated by Thailand's leaders, they certainly exist. Henceforth, as a "pragmatic and flexible balancer and subregional convening power," Thailand views these risks and threats arising from the US-China rivalry as increasingly pertinent.

In terms of Thailand's defense budgets over the past decade, there is a general pattern of gradual increases up to 2019, followed by sharp dips in 2020 and 2022. A chart depicting Thailand's defense budgets from 2015 to 2030 (anticipated) is provided below. A caveat here is that the chart for Thailand shows actual expenditure up to 2022, given the non-availability of Thailand-specific data in the same database in the years after. However, to fill the gap in actual budget allocations for 2023 and 2024, data from other sources is used.

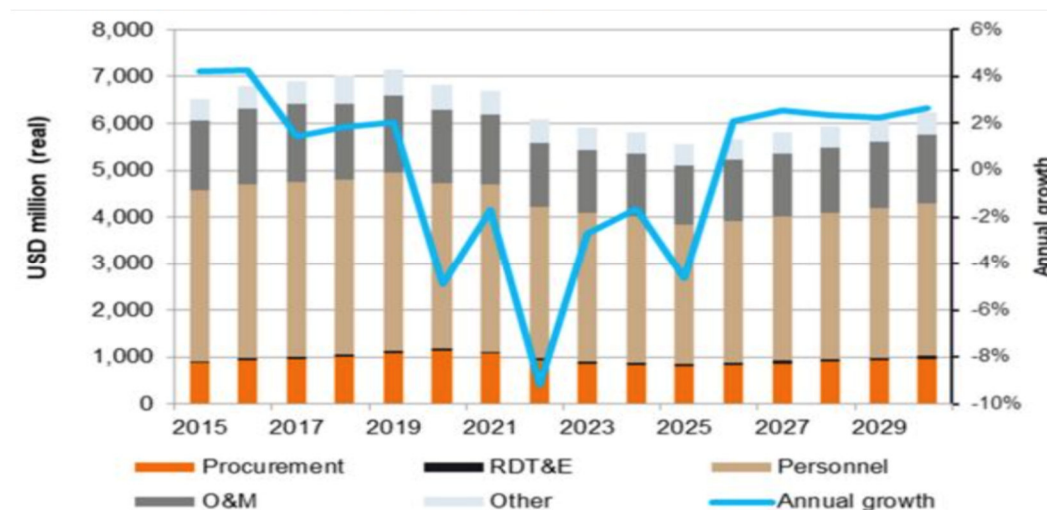


Figure 1: Thailand's Defense Expenditure (Including Expected Spending), 2015 to 2030

Source: Adapted from Grevatt and MacDonald (2022).

The decrease in 2020 and 2022 is attributed to impacts from the COVID pandemic (Grevatt 2020; Bangprapa 2024). For 2023 and 2024, the budget allocations are USD \$5.7 billion and USD \$5.5 billion, respectively (SIPRI n.d.-a). The largest portion of expenditure during this period is attributed to personnel costs, which have increased every year, even as overall budgets have decreased. Yet, this does not equate to an increase in the overall military headcount. Instead, a significant proportion of the earmarked amounts goes to an unusually large number of ultra-high-ranking officials, which does not resonate with the military organizational structure. The further decrease in budget for 2023 and 2024 is also argued to be in tandem with the Pheu Thai government's plans for military downsizing (Bangprapa 2024). As for the forecast of a modest increase in the budget for 2025 onwards, it is difficult to accurately gauge which areas will exactly benefit from this capital expenditure, given that Thailand's Defense Ministry will have to repay debt from past procurement, as pointed out by a Member of Parliament (Bangprapa 2024).

As demonstrated, Thailand's defense budget allocations appear to run counter to the reality on the ground. This is especially so in the context of an intensifying US-China rivalry and the implications described earlier. If Thailand indeed does not view the great power rivalry as a threat to its autonomy, then it would be conceivable to witness stagnant budgets or even the actual downsizing of its military due to a lack of target(s) for deterrence. Compared with its neighboring CLMV states, Thailand already has the strongest military capabilities (Lowy Institute 2024). However, it is argued that "fragmented centralism" is the root cause of Thailand's stance toward the US-China rivalry, blunting the creation of an effective grand strategy to manage the risks and threats. Further elaborations can also be found in the following sections.

5. Mechanism II Findings: Fluctuating Engagement Levels Stemming from Regime Interests

Given that Thailand's foreign policy is to a large extent determined by regime, interests as exemplified by its history, diplomatic visits are yet another indicator of how the state engages with both great powers. A compilation of reciprocal visits between the heads of state of Thailand, the US, and China is provided in Table 2 and Table 3.

The tables show that Thailand's leaders have undertaken frequent trips to both the US and China (binding engagement). However, based on the agendas of their trips, there is a noticeable difference in the "quality" of trips made to the great powers. For those visits to the US, it can be seen that Thailand's leaders did not necessarily meet their counterparts bilaterally; instead, they participated in multilateral meetings and meetings with lower-level officials and non-state actors. On the contrary, meetings with President Xi Jinping were held during every visit by Thailand's leaders. This suggests a possible differentiation in terms of prioritization of relations, where 1) China is perceived as a more important partner, relative to the US, and 2) the US does not perceive relations with Thailand as important as relations with other states. For the US, no successive presidents have visited Thailand since Barack Obama's visit in 2012.

Table 2: Thailand Prime Ministers' Visits to the US and China and Breakdown of Agenda (2012-2024)

Total No. of Visits to the US	Breakdown in terms of Agenda
8	• Bilateral meetings with the US President and/or cabinet members (1) • Participation at multilateral meetings/forums/summits (6) • Meetings with non-state actors (i.e. business leaders) (1)
Total No. of Visits to China	Breakdown in terms of Agenda
6	• Bilateral meetings with the Chinese President and/or cabinet members (6) • Participation at multilateral meetings/forums/summits (4 – not mutually exclusive) • Meetings with non-state actors (i.e. business leaders) (1 – not mutually exclusive)

Source: Compiled by the author from Thailand Public Relations Department (2024), Thailand Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023), and PRC Embassy in Thailand (2023). If 2025 PRD items are used, specify Thailand Public Relations Department (2025a, 2025b).

Table 3: The US and Chinese Presidents' Visits to Thailand and Breakdown of Agenda (2012-2024)

US (Total No.)	Breakdown in terms of Agenda
1	• Bilateral meetings with the Thai Prime Minister (1)
China (Total No.)	Breakdown in terms of Agenda
1	• Bilateral meetings with the Thai Prime Minister (1) • Participation at multilateral meetings/forums/summits (1 – not mutually exclusive)

Source: The White House (2012) and the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022).

President Trump and President Biden, however, have visited other states in the region, including Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines (US Office of the Historian 2025a; US Office of the Historian 2025b). Despite this, the fact that many diplomatic visits by Thailand's leaders to the US continue to take place indicates that this great power remains a strategic partner for Thailand. In contrast, visits to China were accompanied by the elevation of bilateral ties and in-depth discussions on development projects in Thailand, including the "Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC)," where the Thai-Chinese high-speed railway project is the cornerstone of joint cooperation.

In terms of military relations between Thailand and the two great powers, Thailand as an ally has traditionally been very close to the US. However, over the

past decade, much of this has shifted increasingly in favor of China, although ties with the US remain robust (a binding engagement). The table below illustrates Thailand's arms procurement from the great powers (SIPRI n.d.-b).

Table 4: Thailand's Arm Purchases from the US and China (By Type, 2012-2024)

US		China	
• Transport/combat helicopters (32) • Transport/trainer/light/attack aircraft (31) • Radar systems (25) • Attack missiles (501) • Artillery systems (55) • Engines (36) • Armored vehicles (130) • Unmanned aerial vehicles (2)	Total Units: 812	• Air defense systems (2) • Attack missiles (140) • Artillery systems (20) • Armored vehicles (137) • Combat ships (1)	Total Units: 300

Source: Author's own compilation.

As demonstrated in the table, the absolute number of arms Thailand has procured from both the US and China is a testament to hedging. However, upon deeper analysis, the implications of "fragmented centralism" are evident in Thailand's military. The different branches of the military have differing interests and preferences, leading to an apparently "centralized" but actually "decentralized" procurement of arms. For instance, the Army Chief General Apirat Kongsompong, who assumed power in 2018, prioritized relations with the US, frequently meeting US partners and opting to buy US hardware. This was despite a chill in Thailand-US relations previously under Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha's leadership. However, even though Thailand was slapped with a range of sanctions for the 2014 coup d'état, the US never completely blocked the sales of arms to Thailand (Ganjanakhundee 2020). On the other hand, the Navy was seen as edging closer to China through its preference for buying China-made submarines, though this has not yet been confirmed by the government (Chambers and Chalermpanupap 2024). Furthermore, Prasirtsuk (2017) highlights that there is an increasing overall preference for Chinese hardware, as it is more affordable and offers technology transfer. Yet, in line with its goal of "balanced partnerships," Thailand is also increasingly diversifying its supplier network, purchasing arms from other states such as South Korea, Ukraine, Sweden, Spain, Israel, and Russia (dominance-denial).

When it comes to joint exercises and training with both great powers, there is also a pattern of increasing cooperation with China vis-à-vis the US (binding engagement). A tabulation of such major exercises and training (2012 to 2024) is provided below.

Table 3: List of Joint Military Exercises Between Thailand and the US and China (2012 to 2024)

US	China
• Exercise Cobra Gold (2012-2024) • Exercise Cope Tiger (2012-2024) • Exercise CARAT (2012-2024) • Exercise Hanuman Guardian (2012-2024) • Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (2012-2024) • Exercise Komodo (2014, 2016, 2018, 2023) • ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise (2019) • The Rim of the Pacific Exercise (2012, 2016, 2018, 2022, 2024)	• Exercise Blue Strike (2012, 2016, 2019, 2023) • Exercise Falcon Strike (2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2022, 2023, 2024) • Exercise Strike (2019, 2024) • Exercise Komodo (2014, 2016, 2018, 2023) • ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise (2018) • The Rim of the Pacific Exercise (2012, 2014, 2016)

Source: Bocanegra (2024), Naval Today (2019), China Daily (2023), Xinhua (2018), and Yu and Xing (2024)

The joint exercises above mark several milestones for Thailand. While regularized exercises with the US are expected, given their alliance, those with China are more consequential. In 2015, the Royal Thai Air Force became the first in Southeast Asia to train with its Chinese counterpart. This followed the Royal Thai Special Forces and Thai Marines conducting the first foreign military training with China in 2007 and 2010, respectively (not included in the above table). However, to avoid regional alarm, exercises with China were focused on non-traditional security domains such as terrorism, humanitarian and disaster relief, and maritime search and rescue. Despite these developments in Thailand-China joint exercises, Western analysts have viewed them as “unsophisticated” (Storey 2019), arguing that China’s military diplomacy “favors form over substance” (Allen, Saunders, and Chen 2017). Several strategic reasons constrained their depth, including interoperability challenges, differing doctrines, and mutual wariness. Such constraints arguably leave the US-led Exercise Cobra Gold as the benchmark when assessing its complexity (Storey 2019). Nevertheless, the fact remains that not only has Thailand facilitated stronger military ties with China, but it has also set the stage for more meaningful exercises with China that could potentially involve other regional states. For Thailand, this is argued to be another way to mitigate the risks of a potential reduction in US commitment to protect the state, or even an outright abandonment of the alliance, should an actual conflict occur.

Next, despite US pressure, Thailand continues to reject the establishment of permanent foreign bases, a stance consistent with its long-standing balancing strategy against other powers (Morris and Nguyen 2025). This arguably deflects further scrutiny by China. Instead, Thailand pursues further “softer” security engagement by upgrading relations with both great powers. For instance, Thailand and the US issued a “Joint Vision Statement” in 2020 for their alliance, which advances the US 2018 National Defense Strategy and Thailand’s 20-Year National Strategy. The caveat here is that the US explicitly targets China (US Department of

Defense 2018), a stance Thailand has failed to address. Thailand's status as a non-major NATO ally (Na Thalang 2023) also enables the possibility of future cooperation frameworks involving Western partners. With China, the series of defense cooperation agreements, most recently renewed in 2025, facilitates expanded bilateral defense cooperation (Wong 2025). This is also in part a follow-up to the vast increase in the intake of Thai military cadets being sent to China for education exchange during the years when the US sanctioned Thailand (Storey 2019). Thailand also leverages on ASEAN, especially the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the ADMM-Plus, to influence the regional security architecture (Manowong, Sukontasap, and Ocha 2017).

Economically, as noted in Section 3, China and the US remain Thailand's top trading partners with trade volumes of USD \$116 billion and USD \$74 billion, respectively, in 2024 (Thailand Ministry of Commerce 2025), whereas for foreign direct investments, China and the US are ranked second and seventh (LH Bank 2025). Of significance are the benefits Thailand gained with the ongoing great power rivalry, with China increasingly relocating parts of its supply chain to Thailand. This is especially so for the electronics, chemicals, and automotive sectors (Open Development Thailand 2024). For Thailand, China's moves support its ambition to become Southeast Asia's electric vehicle production hub and bolster its EEC initiative (Open Development Thailand 2024). Strategically, the EEC is facilitating the transformation of eastern Thailand into a hub for investment, technology, and transportation. This is also where the economic corridors of the Greater Mekong Subregion intersect (Greater Mekong Subregion Secretariat n.d.), highlighting the immense economic benefits that Thailand could potentially reap. Collectively, Thailand's economic drive could help enhance ASEAN's supply chain resilience amid the intensifying US-China rivalry (Medina 2025).

Finally, Thailand is involved in many development initiatives led by the US and China (binding engagement). Major initiatives with the US include the IPEF, the Mekong-US Partnership (an expansion of the Lower Mekong Initiative), the Japan-US-Mekong Power Partnership, and USAID projects focusing on energy, cybersecurity, climate change, and education (US Embassy & Consulate in Thailand 2022; Pitakdumrongkit 2023; US Department of State 2024). Those with China include the BRI, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, and the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program (Bank of Thailand n.d.; Asian Development Bank n.d.-b; Kardkarnklai and Waji 2022). These overlapping frameworks strengthen Thailand's role in bridging regional development gaps and sustaining cooperation with both great powers, while also giving Thailand a voice in the process.

6. Mechanism III Findings: The Urgent Need For Legitimacy and the Trilateral Dilemma in Thailand's Support for the US, China, and ASEAN

Thailand's foreign policy over the past decade has followed a pattern of "tightrope walking" in its relations with the great powers and ASEAN (as a "buffer" against the former). The complexity here is three-fold: 1) the US is a security ally and major economic partner, 2) China is a major economic partner and increasingly so for the security realm, and 3) ASEAN is a political bulwark against the great

powers and also an entity central to Thailand's socio-economic development. Survey results from ISEAS clearly demonstrate Thailand's preferences: the state favors a US-led order in Southeast Asia, supports greater ASEAN influence, but aligns with China if compelled to choose (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute 2024). This must be understood in the context of 1) Thailand's historical diplomatic efforts, during which it managed to remain relatively unscathed (at the very least without losing sovereignty) despite changes in the international and regional orders, and 2) Thailand's "chaotic" internal politics. There is no doubt that the US-China rivalry has caused a rift among Thailand's political elites and society at large, due to differences in interests and preferences ("fragmented centralism"). As a result, the Thai domestic political system is argued to be severely incapacitated. This, in turn, undermines to the efficacy of the government's policies, including its foreign policy. With multiple coups d'état, constitutional amendments, and contests between political parties, the exception to the rule has been Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha: not a single leader has lasted beyond a year in the past decade. The consequent political short-termism arguably shifts the goalposts for governments in power, making them more attuned to short-term benefits (MacKenzie 2016; MacKenzie 2021), and performance legitimacy becomes more salient for them.

From a broader perspective, Thailand has largely benefited from engaging both great powers and even from their rivalry. The present status quo arguably embodies riskier, yet acceptable, conditions for Thailand to maintain its national and monarchical security. Moreover, given the relative absence of explicit threat identification, Thailand does not perceive a need to be overly explicit in its alignment posture, which could lead to further internal fractures. All in all, continuous engagement with the great powers, with a lesser focus on security, enables Thailand to deliver development outcomes, thereby granting the state greater autonomy vis-à-vis the great powers. Therefore, past branding by scholars of Thailand's behavior, such as "bamboo bending with the wind," "bamboo swirling with the wind," and "bamboo gone with the wind," is not reflective of the current macro-conditions. Thailand's support for the US, China, and ASEAN, as a basis for its role conception as a "pragmatic and flexible balancer and subregional convening power," provides the government of the day with more leeway to sustain its legitimacy. However, this approach also raises questions as to how it can be sustained if the great power rivalry evolves in a way that changes Thailand's threat perceptions.

7. Mechanism IV Findings: Relative Passivity to Pursue Autonomy Due to Lesser Perception of Threats

Thailand's behavior, as outlined earlier, reflects a relatively passive pursuit of autonomy. Importantly, while its strategy is characterized as "soft hedging," its balanced posture internally is argued to be one that emerged fortuitously as a reaction to the external environment. The examples cited in the earlier sections support this. For one, Thailand's closer relations with China following the 2014 coup stemmed partly from US sanctions rather than a premeditated realignment. Still, Thailand-US relations appeared to be repaired under the Trump administration, evidenced by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's numerous visits

to the US. At the same time, while the military viewed the US as a greater threat than China, the Army (as a branch) prefers closer relations with the US and procures US-made arms (Blaxland and Raymond 2017). Further, the Thai Navy's preference for Chinese submarines was motivated by their affordability and the potential for technology transfer, not by an intent to pivot away from the US alliance. It should be noted that the Thai Navy also considered other suppliers (Chambers and Chalermpananupap 2024). These can hardly be said to have been calculated ex-ante.

However, Thailand is not completely immune to agency. As highlighted in Section 3, Thailand has engaged extra-regional states and supports ASEAN mechanisms to increase its autonomy (dominance-denial). It has also encouraged the finalization of the RCEP, the FTA between ASEAN and the ASEAN+6 members under its Chairmanship in 2019, and coordination with Indonesia to support the AOIP (Na Thalang 2023). In 2025, it joined BRICS as a partner nation to leverage an expanded market for economic security (Tangsathaporn 2025). The support for the AOIP, however, was not based on Thailand's own conception of the region but rather aimed to counterbalance the US' "Indo-Pacific" narrative's confrontational tone by promoting ASEAN's inclusive regional vision (Poonkham 2024).

8. Conclusion

In sum, Thailand is argued to be an "opportunistic go-between" that adopts the "soft hedging" strategy to navigate the US-China rivalry. Its behavior is largely inward-looking, with diplomatic torpor on the external front. This is due to a relative lack of domestic capacity to pursue a consistent and credible foreign policy, as well as a failure to identify threats. Thailand's gravitation toward China's geopolitical orbit is arguably due to several factors: 1) political necessity and normative alignment (for its governance system), 2) economic benefits, and 3) lack of clear strategic commitment on the part of the US. Again, this is argued to be reactive rather than proactive. While it may seem as though Thailand is akin to a "bamboo stuck in the Chinese wind" as most recently described in Busbarat (2024), its history suggests otherwise. Instead, it can be claimed that unless the "direction of the prevailing wind" is extremely clear – in other words, the party that emerges as a winner in the great power rivalry, Thailand is not likely to be more proactive in crafting a grand strategy due to "fragmented centralism." The table below summarizes Thailand's hedging strategy (soft hedging).

Table 6: Overview of Thailand's Hedging Strategy

Thailand's Hedging Strategy				
Hard Hedging (For Risk Contingency)		Soft Hedging (For Benefit Maximization)		
Mutually Counteracting Options				
Indirect-Balancing	Dominance-Denial	Economic Pragmatism	Binding Engagement	Limited Bandwagoning

Note: Darker shade denotes greater intensity.

Thailand's preference for strong binding engagement, as articulated in the earlier sections, arises from a primary desire for development and also domestic stability. This accounts for Thailand's engagements with a wide range of states, through multiple channels. Thailand has also pursued dominance-denial and limited bandwagoning, even though its agency does not extend to binding engagement. For limited bandwagoning, it is posited to be more reactive than a carefully calibrated move. This is especially evident in Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's leadership terms, which are featured heavily under this period of study. This period also reveals a clear gravitation toward China by Thailand, despite Thailand's status as a US ally. Dominance denial can be seen in Thailand's approach to achieving a "balance of relations" in line with historical precedents. That said, a major problem with Thailand's foreign policy is "fragmented centralism." As posited throughout the paper, this has fractured the domestic bureaucratic system and, in turn, contributed to Thailand's ambivalence vis-à-vis the US and China. It is in this light that Thailand's overall strategy (or lack thereof) is carried out – one that could at best be described as a "piecemeal" strategy.

As for Thailand's role in the framework introduced, its classification as an "opportunistic go-between" is consistent with its focus on self-benefits amidst the US-China rivalry. Again, this is due to "fragmented centralism," which has culminated in domestic incapacity and, consequently, the absence of a grand strategy. Strikingly, Thailand's role activeness is markedly lower during this period of study than during the Cold War period (see Section 3). This is due to an expansion of domestic priorities in its conduct of foreign policy, and especially the state's lack of capacity to exercise larger agency. This might pose a problem for Thailand in its ability to respond effectively to contingencies, especially those that occur abruptly and could destabilize the state. Furthermore, this is compounded by the possibility of impediments to aligning goals across various cooperative domains with the larger ASEAN grouping, which plays a key role in stabilizing and promoting growth in Southeast Asia. To this end, Thailand should work toward overcoming "fragmented centralism." This would not only provide greater strategic clarity for Thailand's development goals but also strengthen its overall strategy for navigating shifting geopolitical currents.

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