

## What Does Thai International Relations Want?\*\*

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### Abstract

The article employs the notion of 'forced choice' to reflect on and interrogate four key theoretical dilemmas in the IR scholarship in Thailand: (1) whether Thai IR is an art of the state or an academic discipline; (2) whether it is a 'problem-solving' or 'critical' theory; (3) whether there is a Thai IR theory; and (4) whether it should be a consensual field of study. It makes a case for a refusal of these forced choices.

By engaging with a disciplinary history and autobiographical narrative (I, IR), the article suggests (1) the brief development of Thai IR, which has been dominated by the dual hegemony of area studies and realist-liberal theoretical continuum; (2) two 'great debates' including the first policy-oriented one in the 1980s and the second great debate with the emergence of critical theory since the early 2000s; (3) seven theses explaining a lack of Thai IR theory; and (4) a debate between consensus and dissensus. The article recommends skepticism of consensus, critical self-reflexivity, a dialogue with global IR, and a more pluralistic and dissensual field of IR in Thailand.

**Key Words:** Thai IR Theory, Great Debate, Dissensus, Critical Self-reflexivity, Forced Choice

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## สาขาวิชาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศของไทยต้องการอะไร?\*\*

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้อาศัยแนวคิด “ทางเลือกที่บังคับเลือก” เพื่อที่จะสะท้อนและถกท้ากับทางแพร่ทางทฤษฎีอย่างน้อยสี่ประการในสาขาวิชาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศในประเทศไทย ดังนี้คือ (1) ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศของไทยนั้นเป็นศิลป์ของรัฐหรือสาขาวิชาทางวิชาการ; (2) เป็นทฤษฎี “ที่มุ่งเน้นการแก้ไขปัญหา” หรือ “วิพากษ์”; (3) เรามีทฤษฎีความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศของไทยหรือไม่ และ (4) ควรจะเป็นสาขาวิชาที่มีความสมานฉันท์หรือไม่ บทความเสนอการปฏิเสธทางเลือกที่บังคับเลือกดังกล่าว

จากการสนทนากับประวัติศาสตร์สาขาวิชาและกระแสอัตชีวประวัติ (I, IR) บทความนี้เสนอ (1) พัฒนาการโดยสังเขปของ IR ในไทย ซึ่งยังคงถูกครอบงำด้วยความบริโภคศึกษาภูมิสังคมและเชิงวิชาการ ที่มุ่งเน้นการแก้ไขปัญหา ไม่ได้แก่ การถกเถียงในเชิงนโยบายในช่วงทศวรรษที่ 1980 และการถกเถียงในช่วงที่ 2 ผ่านการก่อตัวของทฤษฎีวิพากษ์ ตั้งแต่ในช่วงต้นทศวรรษที่ 2000 (3) ข้อเสนอ 7 ประการในการอธิบายการริءาทฤษฎีความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศของไทยและ (4) ข้อโต้แย้งระหว่างความสมานฉันท์กับความเห็นต่าง บทความนี้เสนอแนวทางการกังข่าต่อความสมานฉันท์ การพินิจพิจารณา ศึกษาเชิงวิพากษ์ การเสนอแนะนักวิชาการ IR ในระดับโลก และการพัฒนา IR ในประเทศไทยที่ส่งเสริมพุนิยมและการเห็นต่าง

คำสำคัญ: ทฤษฎีความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศของไทย, การถกเถียงในช่วงทศวรรษที่ 2000, การพินิจพิจารณา ศึกษาเชิงวิพากษ์, ทางเลือกที่บังคับเลือก

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## Introduction

'Theories of international relations are like planes flying at different altitudes and in different directions'. – Stanley Hoffmann (1959, 348)

Following the feminist question, 'what does the woman want?' and the Žižekian question, 'what does Europe want?' (Žižek and Horvat 2013), this article asks a basic question, 'What does Thai International Relations (IR) want?'<sup>1</sup> Is IR in Thailand a professional school training students to be(come) diplomats or an academic discipline of IR scholarship training them to be(come) scholars? Is IR in Thailand a 'problem-solving theory' or a 'critical theory' (Cox 1986)? Does IR in Thailand need its own theory? (If so, why is there no Thai IR theory?) And should IR in Thailand be a consensual field? This article engages with and interrogate these four sub-questions, or theoretical dilemmas.

These dilemmas situate the 'I' within the IR scholarship in Thailand, and yet there are two different 'I's. On the one hand, the first I ( $I_1$ ) is a subject outside the grammar of IR, and yet a 'social I' within the context of Thai politics and society. On the other hand, the second I ( $I_2$ ) is a subject inside the grammar of IR, or the 'IR-ized I', that is socially constructed and intersubjectively socialized by a certain set of knowledge, languages and thoughts of IR. In itself, IR as the collective is a 'big (br)other' or the capitalized 'We'. The dialogue, disagreement and perhaps contradiction between these two 'I's and the 'We' shape the way in which IR in Thailand has been developed, as well as render these dilemmas theoretically problematic or pedagogically unsettled. That is, how do/should we teach and research IR? And for whom?

The article employs the notion of 'forced choice' – that one has the freedom to choose, but on condition that one chooses the 'right' one, thereby neglecting the real alternative – so as to interrogate the dichotomous dilemmas in IR. As Slavoj Žižek (2000, 90) quotes the famous Marx

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<sup>1</sup>In this article, the terms 'Thai IR' and 'IR in Thailand' are used interchangeably.

Brothers' joke: 'Tea or coffee? Yes, please!' for beverages, that between Coke and Pepsi, 'Yes, please!' and likewise in IR, whether or not there is 'Thai IR theory'? Yes, please!' The meaning behind it (the 'yes, please!') operates as a refusal of this false choice that forcibly imposes on us.

The article is structured in four main parts. The first part examines the first dilemma of IR in Thailand: whether Thai IR is an art of statecraft – which was part and parcel of Thai modern state formation –or an emerging academic field of study. The former aims at producing diplomats for the emerging modern bureaucracy, while the latter aims at developing its own discipline in conversation with other related fields. Regardless of both, it has been largely dominated by the dual hegemony of area studies and realist-liberal theoretical continuum.

The second part discusses with the second dilemma: whether Thai IR is a 'problem-solving' or 'critical' theory. Following a 'great-debates' narrative, I argue that there are at least two key interventions, or 'great debates', the first of which was the policy-oriented debate in the 1980s between the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS) and Institute of Security and International Studies (ISIS) at Chulalongkorn University. The second one has begun around the early 2000s with the emergence of critical theory, particularly that spearheaded by Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead.

The third part asks whether Thai IR should develop its own theorizing. If so, why do we fail? Alternatively, why is there no Thai IR theory? And do we really need one? This part asserts seven theses to reflect on a lack of Thai IR theory. Its absence seems to be a rule rather than an exception. This last part asks whether Thai IR should be a consensual field. Which way does it contribute to a highly productive lacuna for theorizing in Thai IR scholarship as a whole in the foreseeable future? In between, each and every part, there is an interlude providing a summary of the imaginary dialogue between (I<sub>1</sub>) and (I<sub>2</sub>) as well as some critical thoughts from the global IR scholarship.

This article can be read as both a disciplinary history and an autobiographical narrative (I, IR) that the 'I' is part of this discipline called Thai IR scholarship. Its aim is to make a dialogue with the autobiographical (See Inayatullah 2010; Dauphinee 2013; Inayatullah and Dauphinee 2016) as well as historiographical turns in global/ Western IR studies in order to make sense of our IR in Thailand. Thus, the article is not merely an overview of the status and state of IR in Thailand in terms of curriculum and pedagogy (See Kitti Prasirtsuk 2009; Supamit Pitipat 2008; Wararak Chalermpuntusak 2015), but more specifically a close examination of the theoretical dilemmas within, involving also

critical self-reflexivity upon Thai IR scholarship. Overall, the article makes the case for a more pluralistic and dissensual field of IR in Thailand.

What does Thai IR want? (1) Diplomacy or IR?

Is IR in Thailand a professional school or an academic discipline? From the outset, Thai IR scholarship was a professional school aiming at training diplomats for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A study of diplomacy was established as a section within the Royal Pages School in 1902, renamed Chulalongkorn University in 1917. In other words, the formation of Thai IR was part and parcel of modern state formation. In this sense, IR as a field of study was prevalently known as 'diplomacy'. It is unsurprising that up until now the terms 'IR' and 'diplomacy' have been used interchangeably in Thailand.

By the end of the Second World War, a number of departments of international relations were established, and remain under the faculties of political science. The first department, entitled 'Department of International Affairs and Diplomacy' was established at Chulalongkorn University in 1948, providing teaching at the undergraduate level while the Master's degree in 'International Affairs and Diplomacy' was offered at Thammasat University in 1949. At the latter, IR was taught as an undergraduate major subject under the 'International Relations Section' only in 1959 (See Kitti Prasirtsuk 2009, 84-86).

During the Cold War, Thai IR had been supported by the US government and institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation. Many Thai IR scholars at that time were trained in various renowned universities across the US. Since the 1960s onwards the US's IR departments were dominated by the behavioral revolution. Unquestionably, IR in Thailand was to a certain extent 'Americanized' pedagogically, methodologically, and epistemologically. In the 1960s and 1970s, the names of the departments were changed to 'Department of International Relations' at Chulalongkorn University, and to 'Department of International Affairs' at Thammasat University. These changes represented a shift from a non-disciplinary study of 'diplomacy' towards a 'loosely structured' discipline of international relations (IR). Ever since, Thai IR scholarship has teetered the balance between professional training and an academic-oriented discipline (Supamit Pitipat 2008, 65). However, the modern task of serving the bureaucracy remained intact.

Since then, at least two strands of IR in Thailand came to be dominant. The first dominance is of area studies. We can see that, first, almost all publications were descriptive and empirically driven. That said, they adopted a historical approach with limited theoretical frameworks. The most popular theoretical frameworks used in these publications were basic levels of analysis (including on individuals, domestic politics, and the international system), and linkage theory. As Kitti Prasirtsuk (2009, 97) put it, 'In many cases, the teaching and study of IR are not much different from those of history. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks employed tend to be limited'. Second, all, with the exception of Corrine Phuangkasem (1982), employed qualitative research methodology. Third, the degree to which regions studied varied: while Southeast Asia and East Asia were the most studied regions, followed by Europe, the US, and Eurasia, literature on other regions such as Africa and Latin America was very little (See Kitti Prasirtsuk 2009).

The second dominance was the teaching and writings of IR in line with the realist perspectives, which focus on the national interest, national security, and survival. Thai foreign policy was explained through the metanarrative of realist 'bending-with-the-wind diplomacy'. Many Thai scholars (Likhit Dhiravegin 1974; Sarasin Viraphol 1976) claimed that Thailand as small power is like a bamboo bending with the wind. Its ultimate aim was (and is) a search for survival amid the competition of great powers. Throughout its history, Thai foreign policy, being crafted by wise (and male-dominated) statesmen, has perennially been geared toward this direction. Despite its controversial alignment with Japan during the Second World War, and its anticommunist and pro-American strategy during the Vietnam War, this narrative claims that Thailand has had a pragmatic and flexible diplomacy, and avoided anything more than temporary accommodation with the great powers.

The realist-oriented literature emphatically studied Thai foreign policy in general (Kusuma Snitwongse 2001; Corrine Phuangkasem 1984), and Thai bilateral relations with the great powers, such as the US (Wiwat Mungkandi and Warren 1982; Surachart Bamrungsuk 1988), the Soviet Union (Noranit Setabutr 1985), and the People's Republic of China (Khien Theeravit 1998; Surachai Sirikrai 1991; Chulacheeb Chinwanno 2008). During the Cambodian crisis in the 1980s, Khien Theeravit (1985) seemed to be a doyen of the realist perspective.

We can call the dominance of area studies and realism mainstream IR in Thailand. Other theories such as liberalism were far less dominant (See Kajit Jittasevi 2009). This was partly because Thailand was enduring within the friend-enemy context of the Cold War and partly because of a recurring focus on the roles of the major powers. Kitti Prasirtsuk (2009, 96-97) makes an interesting observation that despite a little influence of the liberal strands, there was the network of scholars affiliated with the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) across the region, which sought to 'socialize the idea of institutionalization among their colleagues' and 'foster regional cooperation through many conferences and workshops'.

**Interlude (1) :**

I<sub>1</sub> : Diplomacy or IR?

I<sub>2</sub> : Yes, please!

In their critical book, 'International Political Sociology: Transversal Lines', Basaran, Bigo, Guittet, and Walker (2017, 1) seek to avoid 'multiple fragmentations', underpinning the studies of the international – namely the levels of analysis, disciplinary boundaries, and rigid distinctions between theoretical and empirical research – and instead emphasize 'transversal lines' that 'cut across conventional planes of scholarship, both theoretically and empirically.' IR should be envisioned as a 'trans-disciplinary project', one that 'necessarily resists more familiar appeals to an interdisciplinary discourse aiming to assemble novel forms of disciplinary knowledge so as to reconstitute a different kind of unified social science'. On the contrary, IR should be 'de-disciplinarianizing'.

What does Thai IR want? (2) Policy relevance or critique?

**Policy Relevance: Realist-Liberal Continuum?**

In Western IR, a disciplinary history is generally understood as the so-called 'great debates' since the onset of the field of IR.<sup>2</sup> Is there any great debate in Thai IR scholarship? And, if so, what is the nature of those debates? Is it for a policy relevance or a critique of knowledge and power? It seems that Thai IR as a discipline was an academic sphere of consensus during the Cold War. However, by the late Cold War, the Cambodian crisis, following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia

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<sup>2</sup>See Dunne, Kurki and Smith (2016). Schmidt (1998) and Vitalis (2015) challenge the origins and genuineness of this great-debates perspective.

in early 1979 and its concomitant crisis within Cambodia, the IR discipline divided. In this section, I argue that the first intervention, or 'great debate', if any, occurred in the 1980s. This debate was between the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS) and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) at Chulalongkorn University. The former was spearheaded by its director, Khien Theeravit, while the latter can be represented by, among others, M.R.Sukhumbhand Paribatra.

Khien Theeravit (1985) staunchly supported the official views that considered Vietnam as an 'aggressor', violating international law and another country's sovereignty and independence, which was seen as even worse than the Khmer Rouge murderous regime. He asked whether Thailand, as a neighboring country, 'would allow the big fish (Vietnam) to swallow the small fish (Cambodia), which is now struck in the big fish's throat; whether we should stay idle and let a few leaders in Hanoi brutalize innocent Cambodians and Vietnamese; whether we should tolerate threats and shoulder the displaced people who escaped the killing by the ruthless people. 'He suggested that 'we should not stay idle'. By justifying that 'man is not a wild animal, which tends to resort to violent means and ignore what is right or wrong', he claimed that 'we must oppose Vietnam's aggression and expose its deception and real goal.' (Khien Theeravit 1985)

In contrast, some Thai IR scholars in particular those affiliated with the ISIS began to interrogate this official dominant narrative. Sukhumbhand argued that Thai foreign policy direction towards the Khmer Rouge issue was 'partly due to conceptual naivety, partly to fear of antagonizing Thailand's Chinese patron, partly to continuing distrust of Vietnam and partly to the existence of bureaucratic vested interests in the Khmer Rouge connection. 'For him, 'there can never be a stable, durable and just political solution in Kampuchea as long as the Khmer Rouge is allowed to retain its present leadership or maintain its present level of military strength' (quoted in Puangthong R. Pawakapan 2009, 100).

On the contrary, M.R.Sukhumbhand Paribatra (1985, 103-104) recommended for ASEAN's peaceful political settlement and economic interdependent linkages with Vietnam and Cambodia. These recommendation became the basis of Chartchai Choonhavan's diplomacy of 'changing from a battlefield into a market place'.

In general, the so-called first great debate in Thai IR scholarship had three key characteristics, as follows. First, it was largely a policy-oriented debate from academic perspectives.

It engaged with how Thailand should position itself in the great power politics and the intraregional conflict, and which policy recommendations, with what consequences, the Thai government should pursue during the Third Indochina War. This debate was quite influential in terms of impact on foreign policymaking, which might be the first time that IR scholars played such direct, if not controversial, roles regarding Thai foreign policy.

Second, the first great debate brought about an ideational or even ideological debate between realist- and liberal- variants of the mainstream IR. The former tended to think in terms of realpolitik , the balance of power, and national interest and security. The latter which was largely informed by liberalism, stressed the peaceful settlement of the conflict through economic interaction across boundaries, and the institutionalization within the ASEAN through a process of dialogue, bargaining and persuasion. However, both variants in the debate entertained the same perception of: threat emanating from Vietnam as being a vital danger to Thai security. They differed in the means to achieve the end. The first great debate marked maybe ‘differences only in degree and form, not in kind’ (Sukhumbhand Paribatra 1985, 104).

Third, this debate did not challenge a disciplinary dual hegemony. On the contrary, it ostensibly strengthened it. To a certain extent, liberalism has taken a firmer ground since this debate. The field of IR thus begins to move into a so-called realist-liberal synthesis, or continuum, whereby it shared a state-centric approach to international relations. In other words, the mainstream scholars largely followed a ‘problem-solving’ kind of theory. However, unlike the global/ Western one, Thai IR did not strictly employ a positivist and rigorous research methodology.

### **Interregnum: One field, many subfields**

Since the end of the Cold War, the realist-liberal continuum became increasingly and deeply embedded in the IR studies and the emerging subfields. There are some significant trends, as follows. First, in the subfield of strategic or security studies, Surachart Bamrungsuk (2008a, 2008b, 2014) and Panitan Wattanayagorn (1998) at Chulalongkorn University as well as Chulacheeb Chinwanno (2008) at Thammasat University researched about security issues. Second, in the subfield of International Political Economy (IPE), Thitinan Pongsudhirak (2004, 2007; Thitinan Pongsudhirak and Sally 2008) at Chulalongkorn, and Kitti Prasirtsuk (2006) at Thammasat study globalization,

regionalism and emerging issues such as free trade agreements (FTAs) from the market-oriented perspectives (see also Chulacheeb Chinwanno 2015). Third, in the subfield of foreign policy analysis (FPA), the younger-generation scholars, such as Pinitbhand Paribatra at Thammasat, focus on the domestic politics of foreign policy and a comparative foreign policy. New theories, such as neo-classical realism and constructivism, are also being applied to Thai foreign policy (Pongphisoot Busbarat 2012)

Fourth, area studies now comprise a number of works, such as the US (Prapat Thepchatree 2014); China (Chulacheeb Chinwanno 2008, 2010, 2012; Surachai Sirikrai 2006; Vorasakdi Mahatdhanobol 2004, 2007, 2013), Russia (Jittipat Poonkham 2012a, 2014, 2016); Japan (Chaiwat Khamchoo 2005, 2006; Siriporn Wajjwalku 2005, 2006; Kitti Prasirtsuk 2006; and Teewin Suputtikun 2012); Southeast Asia (see Sida Sonsri 2007; Corrine Phuangkasem 2011; Kosum Saichan 2014; Pinitbhand Paripatra 2006, 2008; Pongkwan Sawasdipakdi 2016), the EU (Natthanan Kunnamas 2003, 2012), the Middle East (Jaran Maluleem 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014; Chookiat Panaspornprasit 2005) and ASEAN studies (see Pranee Thiparat 2002; Prapat Thepchatree 2013; Kitti Prasirtsuk and Pinitbhand Paribatra 2015; Kasira Cheepensook 2013; Chanitira Na Thalang and Pinn Siraprapasiri 2015). They either followed a historical approach or adopted more explanatory or theoretical frameworks. The distinction between scholarly works in area studies is beyond the scope of this article.

In other words, this literature mainly focuses on the states as its principal subject matter, but every so often it widens the actors to include international organizations and non-state actors as well. Yet, direct engagement with theories is rare (with the exception of Wararak Chalermpuntusak 2008). It is rather geared toward issues. However, we can see in the next section that this realist-liberal continuum differed from those critical approaches in International Relations which emphasize not only the widening to non-state actors, and the proliferation of issue-based studies, but also the problematization of key concepts and the deepening of critical theory-laden perspectives. In short, this broadening literature remains 'problem-solving theory' (Cox 1986).

#### **Critique : The Emergence of Critical Theory**

Given the dual hegemony in Thai IR scholarship, a small number of IR scholars directly problematize the mainstream IR. In the early 2000s, Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead is perhaps the first

among them to challenge the (meta)theoretical dominance. As I have already discussed Kullada's oeuvre of critical thought in IR in detail elsewhere (Jittipat Poonkham 2013), this section examines her works briefly.

In her theoretically grounded empirical research, Kullada (2000) is 'searching for theories that tally with her empirical work'. And those theories are part and parcel of critical theory. Influenced by a historical sociology, Braudel-oriented world system theory, and neo-Gramscian critical international political economy, Kullada's research projects aim at studying the power relationship between the state and global capitalism in a long historical perspective. She specifically focuses on the role of the Thai state and its responses to global power structures at different periods of time, including the absolutist state (see Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead 2004), Thailand in the Cold War (see Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead 2003, 2007, 2009, 2012), and Thailand and Neoliberalism (See Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead 2008). Some scholars regard this critical reflection a so-called 'Kulladian school'.

In terms of metatheory, Kullada challenges the mainstream IR in Thailand in three ways (Jittipat Poonkham 2013). Ontologically, she questions the taken-for-granted concepts such as the state formation, capitalism and hegemony or empire. Rather than assuming the state as a unitary and rational actor, Kullada closely examines the processes of state transformation, which are highly influenced by the integration into the global capitalism. Moving 'beyond the domestic dynamics', Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead (2009) pushes the debate to account for the internationalization of the state and the roles of the internationalized elite in determining the domestic transformation. She also treats the US as a capitalist hegemony or empire which has sought to dominate the world order, and stresses the pivotal role of the US in domestic politics, in particular the process of democratization in Thailand (Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead 2012, 1995).

Epistemologically, Kullada's critical approach questions how a particular (hegemonic) order comes about and comes apart. Knowledge claims are not neutral or value-free, but historically constituted as well as ideological and political, and each theory is always 'for someone' (Cox 1986).

Methodologically, Kullada employs a historical approach through multi-archival research, including ones in Thailand, the US and the UK. Despite the disciplinary dominance of historical

narrative of area studies, generally IR scholars, and political scientists in Thailand rarely undertake archival research.

To sum up, Kullada's ultimate aim is mainly to denaturalize the taken-for-granted concepts in politics and IR, while allowing her students to decide what is to be done or, following Marx's footsteps, to 'change the world'. Emancipation would be impossible without critical thinking and understanding. This critical theorizing has been further developed within and beyond the field of IR.

Although the second great debate emerged from the outbreak of the Kulladian school of critical theory, the former transcends the latter. Since the early 2000s, other 'critical' or 'alternative' approaches in Thai IR include, among others, critical international political economy, poststructuralism, feminism, critical security studies, and cosmopolitan critical theory. Key textbooks in Thai IR such as the work of Chulacheeb Chinwanno (2014) begin to recognize the existence of these critical approaches in general.<sup>3</sup>

The main characteristics of this intervention are at least threefold. First, it problematizes and broadens the key but taken-for-granted concepts in international relations such as state, capitalism, hegemony, empire, security and so on. Second, it puts positivist epistemology into critical scrutiny, implicitly if not explicitly. That is, Thai IR scholars start to question the knowledge claims of the mainstream IR, and more importantly ask how particular knowledge, such as state security, comes about. In Thailand, it was less about the positivist-postpositivist debate than a debate with a taken-for-grantedness of knowledge. Third, it engages to a certain extent with an emancipatory, or at least cosmopolitan, claims. Some scholars such as Soravis Jayanama (2012, 2015) even suggest a more revolutionary project.

This research, among others, includes the metatheoretical critique of realism and mainstream IR as well as Political Science in general (Chairat Charoensin-o-larn 2008); a rethinking of modern state formation (Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead 2004); critical analysis of the American empire (Soravis Jayanama 2009a); a critical introduction of poststructuralist thinkers in IR (Soravis Jayanama 2009b, 2015); a critical investigation of global politics through film (Soravis Jayanama 2012); critical investigations of Neoliberalism in the EU and Central/Eastern Europe (Jittipat Poonkham 2012b;

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<sup>3</sup> Other recent textbooks neglect these critical approaches altogether. See Narut Charoensri (2013).

Jittipat Poonkham and Natthanan Kunnamas 2013); a rethinking of global finance and the field of international political economy (such as Virot Ali and Kalaya Chareonying); a reinterpretation of area studies (Puangthong R. Pawakapan 2006, 2009); critical security studies and human security (Kasira Cheepensook and Vira Somboon 2013); studies of globalization and cosmopolitanism (Vira Somboon 2014; Surat Horachaikul 2007); critical investigation of international ethics and humanitarianism (Janjira Sombatpoonsiri 2014); transnationalism, such as borders and refugees (Decha Tangseefa 2006), social movements (Janjira Sombatpoonsiri 2015), food security (Siriporn Wajjwalku 2015), and so on. In contrast, Marxism, Feminism, Postcolonialism and green theory are hitherto largely neglected in Thai IR.

This proliferation of theories and approaches at the turn of the millennium was to a certain degree part and parcel of the rapidly increasing and expanding field of global/Western IR theories since the outbreak of the 'fourth' global great debate, rather than a homegrown theoretical development in Thai scholarship. This is partly because younger-generations of IR scholars have been trained not only in the US but more importantly in other places across the world, especially in the UK. Therefore, the field of Thai IR is less influenced by American social science than IR during the Cold War. In other words, an increasing, despite limited, proliferation of theories in Thailand has been in large part a result of an IR theoretical cascade from the West.

It should be noted here that despite the demarcation between the mainstream IR and critical approaches, broadly speaking, in fact is not so clear cut. First, quite a number of Thai IR scholars apparently identify themselves with a particular school of thought. Some suggest that IR theories should be rendered as 'tools' to be selected and applied differently to different cases. In this sense, IR theories are more like a 'sweater' rather than a 'skin' (Furlong and Marsh 2010). Second, there is a tendency for IR scholars in Thailand to mind their own business and every so often draw their own separate territories or spheres of academic interest. To use Erskine's word (2012, 449), the current state of Thai IR is similar to 'trench warfare' at worst, or their mutual 'indifference' towards each other at best. In other words, the second great debate (or lack thereof) comprises IR scholars who have written their works with no or little dialogue or disagreement with each other. Third, implicit debate between the mainstream and critical approaches goes along with the disagreement, if not genuine

debate, within each approach itself. The latter, especially within the subfields, tends to be much more challenging and embedded.

However, drawing the imaginary lines in terms of the great debates is merely an ideal type, aiming to shed light on the disciplinary development, and the way forward. Although the aforementioned interventions to an extent happened, the point is how ongoing debates among IR scholars in Thailand, both in the mainstream IR, and in the critical approaches, should be maintained and proliferated. IR in Thailand looks more like 'planes flying at different altitudes and in different directions' (Hoffmann 1959, 348).

Interlude (2) :

I<sub>1</sub> : Policy relevance or Critique?

I<sub>2</sub> : Yes, please!

Given a debate regarding the (failure of) political relevance of IR theory, Beate Jahn (2016) identified two broad positions, namely between (1) the 'gap-bridgers' and (2) the 'gap-minders'. The former are those who claim that much of IR scholarship is politically irrelevant because it focuses mainly on theoretical and metatheoretical problems of little concern and use to political actors. They call for more policy-oriented studies. On the other hand, the latter argue that theoretical work plays an important political role in its own rights. For the 'gap-minders', maintaining a distance between politics and academia is a precondition for political relevance. Jahn argues that both positions differed on the conceptions of political relevance: the former attached to a too narrow conception of 'policy' relevance while for the latter, a wider conception of 'political' relevance.

For Jahn (2016, 11), the source of IR's political relevance largely depends on its (meta)theoretical foundations: 'With every step away from concrete policies, academic studies address broader questions, speak to wider audiences, and play a more foundational role for politics'. IR ably contributes to political relevance at three levels (metatheory; theories; and empirical work) in three different ways (the constitution of modern politics; constitution of political spaces; and their impact on political practice). In sum, theory is indispensable for the political relevance of IR scholarship. As Jahn (2016, 1) puts it, 'Abandoning theory in favor of policy-oriented studies would undermine the discipline's policy relevance and its standing as a modern science.'

What does Thai IR want? (3) Still no Thai IR theory?

Does IR in Thailand need its own theoretical development? If so, why is there no Thai IR theory? And does IR in Thailand really need Thai IR theory? These questions are part of the perennial puzzles in the global IR, namely a series of ‘why-is-there-no-IR-theory’ questions.

Wight (1966) claims that there is no such an international relations theory because it was the nature of the international itself, which – in contrast to political theory which is a realm of the good life – is the realm of survival. That is, the international is a repetition and reproduction of the struggle for power. For him then, ‘what for political theory is the extreme case (as revolution, or civil war) is for international theory the regular case’: ‘International theory remains scattered, unsystematic, and most inaccessible to laymen ... and marked not only by paucity but by intellectual and moral poverty’. Acharya and Buzan (2009) further examine the absence of non-Western IR theory. They disagreed with Wightian parsimonious and pessimistic explanation of the conflict-laden anarchy of the non-West. Their ultimate goal is to ‘challenge non-Western IR thinkers to challenge the dominance of Western theory’, and open the possibility for non-Western contributions to IR theory.

Following these puzzles in global IR studies, I argue that, despite the rich and sophisticated development of Thai IR studies in general, there is still no programmatic and well-established Thai IR theorizing, let alone genuine and explicit great debates between different approaches and schools of thought. Therefore, in order to seek to explain why there is no such a thing called Thai IR theory, this section asserts seven (preliminary) theses, as follows:

**(1) IR departments in this country have had a long history of theoretical importation and cascade from the global/Western IR Theory.** Partly this is because of Thailand’s status as a small power in the world order. Partly this is because almost all IR scholars have been educated in Western universities, mainly in the US and the UK. Partly this is because the key textbooks and literature are dominated by the Western IR Theory. To note, this situation in Thailand is not unique, but rather in commonality with other IR studies in the post-colonial, developing countries in general (See Acharya and Buzan 2009; Tickner and Wæver 2009).

**(2) The disciplinary history of IR shows that at the outset, IR was part and parcel of the formation of Thailand’s modern bureaucracy. Its ultimate aim was and remains to produce diplomats for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Kitti Prasirtsuk 2009).** In this sense, IR, despite its shift from an art to a discipline, was first and foremost a professional school, and until recently was influenced (or

even haunted) by this modern legacy. In public opinion, the terms 'diplomacy' and 'international relations' are interchangeable. In terms of foreign policy recommendations, some Thai IR scholars have occasionally engaged with, made contributions to, and advised governments and/ or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see the so-called 'first great debate' in Thai IR).<sup>4</sup>

**(3) Throughout its disciplinary history, research and the literature in IR were productions and reproductions in the historical narrative and area-studies veins, rather than taking into consideration contemplation on and application of IR theories.** In terms of curriculum and pedagogy, it has been shaped by the academic excellence and sophistication of those area studies scholars. It is important to note here that this phenomenal expertise in area studies is undoubtedly one of the strength of Thai IR scholarship. Paradoxically, it in turn constitutes a yet undertheorized field in general. However, this trend seems to have undergone changes recently. As leading area-studies scholars retire, the IR departments are not able to recruit younger scholars in area studies to fill the increasingly huge gap as rapidly as they wish.

**(4) During the Cold War, Thai IR has been part of, and a subfield within, an 'Americanized' Political Science.** In part it led to a dominance of parsimonious and realist explanation in the discipline. It is undoubtedly why the former generations of IR scholars tended to take IR theory for granted. On the contrary, new scholars have no choice but to have to, to a certain extent, rethink the theoretical frameworks. This is because they received their graduate studies in a more rigorous methodological training in Western universities and the requirement that they publish, in especially internationally, to ensure tenure and career advancement. The discipline of Thai IR seems to be less Americanized, despite the dominant persistence of realism and liberalism. Moreover, the broader and more provocative debate is whether IR should be a field in itself, rather than a subfield within Political Science (Rosenberg 2016). This, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

**(5) Research funding for works on theoretical exploration is limited in Thailand.** In general, most research funding inside and outside the university overly prefer policy-oriented or issue-based

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<sup>4</sup>Rather than 'in and out' circulation between the policy-makers and academics in the US (Nye 2008), in Thailand some IR scholars have served every so often as advisors to the government and/ or Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

projects to theory-laden research ones. Most scholars working on IR theorizing receive no funding or are funded in smaller amounts at the department or faculty level.

(6) In the era of increasingly neoliberal globalization, Thai IR is increasingly regulated, or even demanded, to be competitive by the state and particularly the market – competitive not only within and beyond the field but also within the labor marketplace for the students, the scholars and the knowledge itself. For the students, it is highly demanding that they should have practical tools (*techne*) for a variety of jobs, in both the public and private sectors. The curriculum has started to adapt accordingly in order to meet this striking demand, by having training and exchange programs. Some 'problem-solving' theories are keen to follow this demand, whereas other critical approaches remain skeptical of it. For the scholars, it is highly demanding that they should be attractive to the wider public such as the policy-making world and the media and the knowledge produced in IR is expected to be more policy-oriented, or issue-oriented, and in turn less theoretical. Though some might not care about this market-driven competitiveness, it is doubtless an emerging trend.

(7) The IR departments in Thailand are encountering the politics of decreasing numbers. The faculty members also have highly different aesthetics of academic interests yet likely to sustain a consensual culture and attitudes. That is, there is a small number of Thai IR scholars with an increasing diverse and plural academic interests. Indeed, some might raise the question whether an IR 'community' exists in Thailand at all. More importantly, within the Thai academic community in general, consensus-building and conflict-avoidance attitudes tend to be the norms. This cultural habitus also is evinced the IR departments as well, deterring and deferring genuine debate or disagreement within the field. However, constructive engagement to a certain extent remains prevalent within and beyond the university.

In short, these seven structure-and-agency constraints account for the absence of Thai IR theorizing, which is the rule rather than the exception. Though in recent years IR theories have increasingly proliferated, a dialogue with and beyond the field remains an ongoing and unfinished project for IR in Thailand.

Interlude (3) :

I<sub>1</sub> : Thai IR Theory or Not?

I<sub>2</sub> : Yes, please!

The goal of 'Why is there no Non-Western IR Theory?' (Acharya and Buzan 2009), and 'Worlding beyond the West' book series (See Tickner and Wæver 2009; Tickner and Blaney 2012) is neither to nationalize nor to regionalize an indigenous IR theory, but rather to expand its boundaries and to 'decenter' IR from the dominance of Western-centrism. For Tickner and Blaney (2012, 1), thinking IR otherwise means not only to 'challenge Western or core dominance' of the field of IR, but also to 'create recognition for contributions from the non-core as legitimate sources of IR knowledge'. It urgently requires an interrogation of 'the field's claim to authority as producer of knowledge about world politics'. Likewise, Acharya and Buzan's goal (2009, 2) is 'to introduce non-Western IR traditions to a Western IR audience, and to challenge non-Western IR thinkers to challenge the dominance of Western theory'. For them, Western IR is both 'too narrow in its sources', and 'too dominant in its influence to be good for the health of the wider project to understand the social world in which we live'. In other words, IR is not yet global, but through the process of 'worlding' beyond the West, can be more open, decentered, dehegemonized, and truly global.

What does Thai IR want? (4) Consensus or dissensus?

The last intriguing puzzle is whether the emerging lack of consensus is theoretically good or bad for the field of Thai IR. In his important article, Supamit Pitipat (2005) examines a state of disciplinary anxiety, and thereby identity crisis, regarding 'a lack of consensus' in IR in general and in the Thai context. He raises a concern, with a grain of truth, that 'Rather than critique bringing about dialogue with the aim of exchanging ideas and learning about each other's strengths and weaknesses, what is happening instead is that the debate leads to division between the academic schools of thoughts, thereby making any attempts to build bridges between them fruitless' (Supamit Pitipat 2005, 133).

Soravis Jayanama (2009b) and Jittipat Poonkham (2013) tend to argue in a different direction that theoretical pluralism is at the heart of the great debates in global IR since the onset of the field. Dissensus is not only necessary and inevitable but also should be 'deepening' (Soravis Jayanama 2009b) in the increasingly pluralistic and diverse field in the foreseeable future. What we should be wary of and problematizing is not disagreement, but rather the attempt to establish hegemonic dominance of some approaches over others, thereby marginalizing the latter. In turn, this author posits that theoretical differences and plurality help to build Thai IR theorizing. In short, post-Cold

War Thai IR is not the end of the theoretical proliferation, but perhaps the end of the field that some of us are so familiar with.

Thus far, my discussion on this disciplinary as well as autobiographical history of Thai IR (through the ‘mirror image’ of the dialogue and disagreement between the I<sub>1</sub>, I<sub>2</sub>, and (big brothered) We in IR provides a tragic sketch that IR in Thailand has long been constituted by a lack – a lack of its own IR theorizing – while theory-oriented global/Western IR has in recent years cascaded in. Despite all these (less-than-great) debates and theoretical cascade, there is still in large part a dualistic hegemonic consensus of realist-liberal continuum and area-studies-ness at the heart of the curriculum and pedagogy in IR in Thailand. Though it is a more diverse and pluralistic field at present, critical approaches remain at its margin in terms of teaching, studying, researching and even writing postgraduate theses. However, the pluralization of theories and methods in IR is unquestionably inevitable in the foreseeable future. Although Thai IR is defined by an avoidance of intellectual antagonism, some slight disagreements that have appeared as at least two great debates, a sense of disciplinary anxiety and identity crisis regarding the direction and tendency of the field would persist at least for some time. Some pull the debate, thereby defending unified ‘analytic eclecticism’ (Sil and Katzenstein 2010) and rigor in research methodology, while others might push for a plurality of theories and diversity of research methods, including alternative ones. However, the constraints, discussed in the last section, would undoubtedly shape and determine this push-and-pull pendulum in Thai IR studies in general.

Interlude (4) :

I<sub>1</sub> : Consensus or Dissensus?

I<sub>2</sub> : Yes, please!

According to Behr and Williams (2016, 5), ‘Rejecting “isms” leaves open the question of what to put in their place: eclecticism (itself another “ism”) risks descending into ad hocery. What is more, calls for pluralism often mask continuing if less overt strictures about epistemology, methodology and political responsibility that are far from straightforwardly pluralistic: when the surface is scratched, prevailing orthodoxies about the nature of legitimate, social scientific knowledge are not hard to see’. An alternative is ‘not to reject the “schools” or “isms”

... but to problematize them (and the divides between them) by bringing them into historical, conceptual, and political relations with each other'.

Coda – mind the gap!

So what? And so, what is to be done? First, we need to be skeptical of a consensual contour of Thai IR scholarship, which is a hegemonic or even an ideological agenda. All theories, to use Cox's famous quote (1986), are always 'for someone and for some purposes'. In other words, consensus, in a nutshell, favors some ways of seeing the world over others. As Milja Kurki (2013, 112) puts it, 'if agreement or consensus exists, it may be that one discourse or conceptual meaning structure has assumed "hegemonic" status in societal and cultural power relations'. This is why we need to be wary of an absence of conceptual/ theoretical disagreement, which is by and large a hegemonic project. Rather than a search for consensus, dissensus is vital to theoretical development.

Second, an open-minded ethos of dissensus is (meta)theoretically neither bad nor dangerous. On the one hand, it helps not only to render theoretical cascade from the global field of IR possible but also to have dialogues with both the Western and the non-Western IR worlds. It further opens up the condition of possibility for debate and dialogue within and beyond the field of IR in Thailand. On the other hand, dissensus reinvigorates and deepens the pluralization of IR theorizing and its critical self-reflexivity. Ontologically, dissensus itself brings the field of IR into existence. We should call for what Stefano Guzzino (2013, 535) terms 'ontological theorizing', which means a reflexive engagement with key concepts in IR, which 'are co-constitutive of theories; they are the words in which ... our theorizing is done'. IR theory is about a formation of concept as well as a denaturalization of the taken-for-granted concepts (ranging from the state, states-system, capitalism, diplomacy, security, norm, identity, discourse, and so on). Moreover, this critical self-reflexivity helps to open up the thinking space for Thai IR as a whole. As Michael Shapiro (2013, xv) puts it, 'To **think**... is to invent and apply conceptual frames and create juxtapositions that disrupt and/ or render historically contingent accepted knowledge practices. ... To **think** rather than reproduce accepted knowledge frames is to create the conditions of possibility for imagining alternative worlds (and thus to be able to recognize the political commitments sequestered in every political imaginary).'

Last but not least, theorizing cannot and should not be separable from the social and political world we are theorizing, the realm of practices. Encountered with the global crises<sup>5</sup>, IR paradoxically faces 'the difficult challenge of relating theory to practice'. Rather than a 'plea to abandon theory', 'it is a call to use theory, next to the reflection upon epistemological questions, to move forward to practical questions while this engagement needs to remain grounded in (ongoing) theoretical reflection' (Behr and Williams 2016, 12). What does (Thai, post-Western and global) IR want? We can answer the standard question thus: 'analytical eclecticism' (Sil and Katzenstein 2010) or 'pluralism' (Jackson 2011; Dunne, Hansen and Wight 2013) and/or '(classical) realism' or 'critical theory' (See Booth 1991, 2007; Behr and Williams 2016) with 'yes, please!'

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<sup>5</sup>Žižek (2010) calls them the 'four horsemen of the Apocalypse' – including ecology (impending ecological catastrophes), economy (the global dispossession and financial meltdown), biology (the biogenetic revolution and its impact on our everyday lives), and society (social fragmentation and concomitant protest as well as pernicious violence worldwide).

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