

## International Initiatives in Thai Foreign Affairs and its Lost Decade?<sup>\*\*</sup>

Kittipos Phuttivanich<sup>\*</sup>

### Abstract

This research article argues that the lost years of Thailand roles as an initiator in regional cooperation are the result of the changing great power politics since 2010. The US and China has competed with each other to play the leading role in initiating and driving many regional architectures since early 2010's. Applying the neorealist paradigm shows that there are more than one international structures a state has to encounter at the same time, namely the international structure, a regional structure and a sub-regional structure. Certainly, a state acts differently in each structure. The geopolitical competition between the US and China has taken place in both regional and sub-regional levels, where Thailand used to play a very active role before. Therefore, the lost decade of Thai

---

<sup>\*</sup> Lecturer, Faculty of Political Science, Ramkhamheang University, Bangkok 10240, Thailand. Email: kittipos.p@gmail.com

<sup>\*\*</sup> This research is sponsored by Research and Development Center, Ramkhamheang University, Thailand

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Received October 20, 2023; Revised December 17, 2023; Accepted December 21, 2023.

foreign policy actually means the period when Thailand has to reconsider its role in both regional and sub-regional structures.

**Keywords:** Thai foreign policy, geopolitics, great power politics.

## Background

Regardless of its political regime, Thailand has long been referred to bending-with-the-wind strategy in conducting its foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> It had declared war against the Central Powers 5 months before World War I ended. During World War II, it allied with the Axis but at the end of the war with the support from the US, Thailand stood with the winners. Thailand also secretly sent special envoys to the People's Republic of China during 1950's while receiving a huge amount of aid from the US for vanquishing the Communist movement in Indochina. Today, it is still

---

<sup>1</sup> See, Nushkhasem, K. (2018). **The Continuity of Thailand's 'Bamboo Bending with the Wind Foreign Policy': The Perception of National Independence.** (Master's Thesis) Thammasart Institute of Art Studies; Busarat, P. (2016). "Bamboo Swirling in the Wind": Thailand's Foreign Policy Imbalance between China and the United States" **Contemporary Southeast Asia**, 38(2); Chachavalpongpan, P. (2010). **Reinventing Thailand. Thaksin and His Foreign Policy.** Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian; Charoenvattananukul, P. (2019). "Beyond Bamboo Diplomacy: The Factor of Status Anxiety and Thai Foreign Policy Behavior." In Chachavalpongpan, P. (Ed.) **Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand.** Oxon: Routledge; Poonkham, J. (2022). **A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy: The Politics of Thai Détente with Russia and China.** Australia: ANU Press.

unclear whether it will stand with the US or China in the current great power competition in Indo-Pacific region.

Despite these stereotypical images of its foreign policy style, Thailand was the initiator and the major driving force of Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN), Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), Chiangmai Initiative (CI), Ayeyawady- Chao Phraya- Mekong Economic Cooperation (ACMECS), and Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), all of which have contributed to the peace and prosperity of the broader Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, Thailand was also among the first who contributed to the Paris Peace Agreement that brought the end to the Cambodian crisis in 1991 and had laid the foundation of international support for the democratization in Myanmar after the end of Cold War, even before the US claimed it did. Consequently, some claim that Thailand considers itself as the hub-and-spoke in the regional dynamics.

However, since the beginning of 2010's both images of Thai foreign policy have become irrelevant as Thailand appeared to lose the direction and leading role in its foreign policy almost completely. It could benefit nothing from president Obama's visit in November 2012 compared to other countries like Vietnam and Myanmar, which he also visited during his Asia tour ("President Obama's First Stop in Asia Is in Thailand"). Although Wang Yi, the Chinese foreign minister, recognized that Thailand initiated the idea of creating the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) in

2014, it had minor role in shaping and driving LMC after it was launched. Or even in the first Belt and Road Forum organized by China in 2017, Thailand was not invited to the leader roundtable sessions (Belt and Road Forum, 2017), but it later participated in the second leader roundtable in 2019 (Belt and Road Forum, 2019). Moreover, Thailand has been accused of doing nothing in the Myanmar crisis since 2021. Therefore, it seems that Thailand has totally lost its importance and capacity that it used to possess in the past.

### **Research Question**

Why has Thailand lost its role and capacity in leading and driving the regional initiatives since 2010's?

### **Objectives**

1. To examine the conditions of the successes and limitations of being the initiator and driving seat in international cooperation and the facilitator or the broker of regional conflict;
2. To contribute to the body of knowledge on pattern of Thai foreign policy;
3. To review the role and to find the solution about the lost decade of Thai foreign policy;
4. To develop the theoretical framework in the studies of Thai foreign policy.

## Theoretical Approach

This research article adapts the neorealist framework in explaining the cause of Thailand's role and capacity in leading and driving the regional initiatives and its lost decade after 2010 by suggesting that there are more than one material structures facing the state at the time when it makes a decision. In other words, the reality of international structure is geographically multi-layered.

Most of the literatures that apply neorealism at the state level often assume that each state can be either great power, medium power, or small power by overlooking the fact that the size of the power is caused by the structure covering it. For example, Alice Ba in her *[Re]Negotiating East and Southeast Asia* argued that ASEAN way, the foundational practices of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations member states, was caused by the fact that the founding member states possessed relatively low material capabilities but high dependency with the outer great powers, there were a number of factors causing the instability in the region like the great powers' interference in internal affairs of each members and the dependency to the great power politics. Yet, being the lesser powers in world politics, according to Ba, allowed the founding member states to consider that they should be more compromising rather

than coercive, more consultative rather than confrontational and more ostracizing rather than isolation, all of which are the qualities of ASEAN way up till the present. (Ba, 2009, pp. 17-41)

However, what is missing in her theory and most of the neorealist assumption is that there are more than one international structures that a state has to encounter at each moment and it also perceives them separately and acts differently in each international structure. Geographically, the international structures can be divided into 3 categories: international structure, regional structure, and sub-regional structure. In other words, a state can be both a small power in international structure and a great power in regional or sub-regional structure, and it also perceives itself differently and acts a different role depending on which international structure it takes into consideration at the same time.

When discussing about the international structure, most neorealist theorists believe that it is the only structure in the international system that influences the state's behavior. They argue that the International Relations theory is based only on the great power politics. Kenneth N. Waltz, one of the most influential IR neorealist theorists, once stated

The theory, like a story, of international politics is written in terms of the great powers of an era...It would be as ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics based on Malaysia and Costa Rica as it would be to construct an economic theory of oligopolistic competition based on the minor firms in a sector of an economy. The fate of all the states and of all the firms in a system are affected much more by the acts and interactions of the major ones than of the minor ones (Waltz, 1979, p. 72).

As such, neorealism holds that the structural factor, the polarization among great powers, determines state behavior as well as the stability of the international system. Accordingly, no matter how much capabilities other non- great power states possesses, their behaviors are equally influenced by the great power politics.

It consequently overlooks that a state with small capability can be considered as a great power at the regional or sub-regional level as well. And the followers of this trend of thought also tend to miscalculate the fact that there are always more than one international structures in world politics. The superpowers are always the superpowers at any international structures, but the small powers may not be the same when we reduce the scope of the international structure to the regional or the sub-regional one.

The regional structure of international politics can be broadly defined as the group of states that share the same geographical location, culture, and religion. Samuel Huntington mentioned this kind of structure in his *Clash of Civilization*, which foresaw that the cause of conflict among humankind after the Cold War would be the great differences among civilizations. In his map of civilizations, he divided the world into the Western, the Orthodox, the Islamic, the African, the Latin American, the Sinic, the Hindu, the Buddhist, and the Japanese. However, this way of regional deviation is not all popular, conflict between the Western and the Islamic is the only one that is popularly accepted after the 9/11 incident. Moreover, there is no clear distinctions between some civilizations such as those between the Sinic and The Buddhist, or those between the Sinic and the Japanese (Huntington, 1996). Therefore, this article will give less attention to the cultural distinction of regional structure.

Another way of dividing regional structure can be seen from the European integration after World War II. This gave rise to many regional organizations such as ASEAN, AU, SAARC, MERCOSUR, etc., all of which are based on geographical criteria. Amitav Archarya in his *The Making of Southeast Asia: International Relations of a Region* suggested that the regional structure can be considered as the shared practices among a specific group of states in interacting with one another (Archarya, 2012,



pp.1-20). This characterization of regional structure is quite difficult to strictly define because the practice has its own dynamics that can change, expand, or even shrink itself. Yet, we cannot overlook this dimension of regional structure. As a result, the geographical division of regional structure means the group of states that share not only the same location but also the regional practices.

The sub-regional structure is the subdivision of the regional structure based primarily on the connecting geography. Many natural features such as rivers, lakes, islands, and continents, have been used to divide one region into many sub-regions. Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine, the world oldest international organization established in 1815, is an example of the cooperation at the sub-regional level which divide the countries along Rhine river from other European countries. Ironically, we can see the high level of homogeneous culture in this sub-regional structure rather than the regional one. Thus, the sub-regional structure also plays a significant role in conditioning the state foreign policy especially that towards the neighboring countries.

In the case of Thailand, the role as the international initiator reflected the birth of regional structure in Cold War during 1950's – 1960's. Southeast Asian regional structure was the result of the nationalist movements both during and after World War II. The Japanese invasion of

the region under the ideology of *Dai Toa Kyoeiken* (大東亜共栄圏) or Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere allowed the Southeast Asian to see how the Westerners fled from their colonies, abandoning their native servants to suffer and be tortured under the Japanese occupation.

It was after the Potsdam Conference, which was concluded on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1945, that the Great Britain and France wanted to reclaim their colonies in Southeast Asia. This sparked the anger among Southeast Asian people and the nationalist movements for decolonization. As a result, many countries fought for their independence and gained their self-determination. It gradually began with the Philippines in 1946, Burma in 1948, Indonesia in 1949, Indochina, which includes Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, in 1954, Malaysia in 1963 and Singapore in 1965. In other words, Southeast Asia was constructed through the story of decolonization.

However, this also posted new challenges to the countries in the region as well. Though being all natives in the region, they barely knew about each other at that moment. The relationships among the natives were cut off during the colonial era, forcing them to get closer to the colonizers rather than to one another. Since most of the stories in Southeast Asia before colonial period were those of conflict and competition, the nationalist groups tended to dislike each other. This

caused such serious atmosphere to the region when it was first constructed.

Moreover, as the USSR expanded its sphere of influence in east Europe and east and southeast Asia after WWII, the US countered back with the Truman Doctrine in 1947, aiming to contain the expansion of USSR empire (Office of the Historian, n.d). Southeast Asia was also affected by this superpower competition. The tension rose after Ho Chi Minh's victory in the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The liberation forces of Vietnam were divided into two camps, which were the Democratic Republic of Vietnam supported by the USSR and PRC, and the Republic of Vietnam provisioned by the US, and they fought each other to unite the country. This is the first interaction between the international structure and the regional one.

Thailand firstly participated in the international part as the US ally. During this period, it gained a lot of political and economic benefits from the US in the exchange of being the US first front in Southeast Asia (Raynold, 2005, pp. 375-380). However, there has never been the treaty of military alliance between the two, which caused Thailand so much frustration of the US abandoning of the region. The highest thing Thailand got at that time was the Thanat-Rusk Communique in 1962, but it was not enough to guarantee the survival of it. Consequently, Thailand began to find its stand in the regional structure instead.

At the regional structure, Thailand has played an important role as the initiator of many regional mechanisms such as ASEAN, GMS, Chiang Mai Initiative (developed from ASEAN Swap Arrangement since 1977), ACMECS and ACD. Moreover, it also contributed to the regional peace and stability in Cambodian crisis during 1978 – 1989 and Myanmar Cyclone Nargis crisis in 2008. These are because Thailand has been a relatively big power in its region and is located at the center of the mainland Southeast Asia. Therefore, it perceives itself as the hub-and-spoke of the region which the regional problems no matter political or economic always affect its security.

However, it seems that Thailand has lost its stance at the regional level since 2010's as mentioned above. In the next part, I examine the changing geopolitical structure at the regional level, which is my hypothesis that it is the prime cause of the lost decade of Thailand foreign affairs.

### **Research Summary**

The critical juncture that changed the global geopolitics is the US policy of Pivot to Asia, which was the result of the subprime crisis in the US that erupted after the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, one of the biggest American financial service companies, in September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008. This

crisis stemmed from the speculation of the real estate price that got higher continuously. The financial sector also reacted with this opportunity by allowing mortgage delinquency, which later caused a lot of Non-Profitable Loan (NPL). Consequently, the mortgage delinquency caused a serious deflation in the US and spread throughout many countries.

Deflation crisis means the sudden reduction of the money volume circulating in the market, which causes economic stagnation, so, theoretically, the solution to this crisis is to add more money to the market. Interestingly, it was such a coincident that the crisis took place at the same time when the US was going to have the presidential election on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The result of this election was that the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, got 365 electoral votes, while the Republican, John McCain, got 173 electoral votes (“2008 Presidential Election”). So the head of the US executive was shifted to the Democrat. Right after taking the office, Obama started conducting Keynesian economic policy of market intervention in order to restore the economy. The governmental spending was increased in many sectors, and a lot of measures, including Obamacare, were implemented to intervene the market. Still, the domestic measures alone were not sufficient to revive US market at that

time. Of course, it had to look at the foreign countries who had the capability enough to fulfill its market.

Unfortunately, the US closest alliance like European Union (EU) was still struggling with its Greece debt crisis, so it lacked the capacity to help the US economy. Moreover, when looking at the Middle East, where the US had long invested since 1970's, the US government saw its huge budget loss from the war on terror. Surprisingly, the region where the US had abandoned for a long time like Asia-Pacific was still growing in its economy despite the world economic down turn. The large contribution of this growth was from China and ASEAN countries. Therefore, the solution to the American problem was that the US had to return to Asia-Pacific (Manyin, 2012, pp. 1-10).

The Pivot to Asia was motivated both by the need to rely on the growing Chinese economy in order to fix the US economy and by the fear that the rise of China would one day threaten the US superpower status. Obama administration thus designed the Pivot to Asia as the means for indirectly buck passing to its alliance against China while directly cooperating with China.

Initially, the US considered ASEAN as the gateway to Asia-Pacific. It began with the US signing of ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation

(TAC) on 22 July 2009 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009). In the same year, Obama came to participate in the ASEAN-US Summit on 15 November 2009 (ASEAN, 2009). Then, Hilary Clinton, the US secretary of state, participated in the fifth East Asia Summit in 2010, which paved the way for the US official participation in the sixth East Asia Summit on 19 November 2011 (The East Asia Summit, n.d). According to Ann Marie Murphy,

The broad American goal is to support the EAS as the primary venue for dialogue on regional political and security issues and to strengthen its capacity for problem solving. The United States also hopes that the EAS will provide guidance and leadership to other institutions such as the ARF, which implies that Washington would like some role for non-ASEAN members in agenda-setting (Murphy, 2011).

Moreover, the US also initiate some regional cooperation frameworks so as to focus on China's neighbors. At the sub-regional level, it created 2 new frameworks: Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) and New Silk Road Initiative (NSRI). At the pan-regional level, the US push the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

On 23 July 2009, Hilary Clinton launched “ Lower Mekong Initiative”, which included the US, Cambodia, Laos PDR, Thailand, Vietnam,

and Myanmar, in order to allow the US to cooperate with the lower Mekong countries in six Pillars, including Agriculture and Food Security, Connectivity, Education, Energy Security, Environment and Water, and Health, Gender and other and cross-cutting issues (USAID, n.d). The US also created the group called “Friends of the Lower Mekong” (FLM), which includes Australia, Japan, S. Korea, New Zealand, the European Union, Asian Development Bank, and World Bank. This group carried out two main tracks: 1) Annual Policy Dialogue between foreign affairs ministries on non-traditional security issues; and 2) Donor Dialogue among partner country development agencies and multilateral development institutions in order to expand information sharing, strengthen partner country ownership of programs, and support emerging donors in the lower Mekong sub-region. (USAID, 2013).

In 2011, the US also tried to establish “New Silk Road Initiative”, which aimed to include the US, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. It planned that NSRI would bolster peace and stability in the region by supporting a transition to trade and helping open new markets connecting Afghanistan to Central Asia, Pakistan, India and beyond. The regional energy market was also the important part of this initiative. The US would support



Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (TAPI) and CASA-1000 regional electricity grid in the region (McBride, 2015). The person who originated this initiative was David Petraeus, the director US Central Intelligence Agency. He saw that this initiative would guarantee the stability of Afghanistan and isolate Russia, but the effect of it was also to prevent China from accessing to the energy market in this region as well.<sup>2</sup>

At the pan-regional level, Obama administration supported the “Trans-Pacific Partnership”, which was the original idea of Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, Chile, and New Zealand in 2006. The US considered it as the means to contain Chinese economic influence, so it began to support this framework in 2008 and had been promoting it since 2009 in many Asia-Pacific countries except China. TPP was said to be the most comprehensive and the most progressive free trade agreement which covered market access, agricultural products, intellectual property rights, rules of origins, government procurement, and rule setting of the e-commerce. TPP was finally concluded on 4 October 2015 that there were

---

<sup>2</sup> Further detail, see Asian Development Bank. (2012). **Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Natural Gas Pipeline Project (Phase 3)** From

<https://www.adb.org/projects/documents/turkmenistan-afghanistan-pakistan-india-natural-gas-pipeline-project-phase-3-tar>

12 founding member states: Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the US, and Vietnam (Fergusson, McMinimy, & William, 2014; Thiparat, 2018, pp. 129-142).

This appeared to be the first time after Cold War that the great power tried to play the regional politics in Asia-Pacific. Certainly, this triggered the logic of security dilemma in the region, which later invited another great power in the region, China, to come to draw its alliance as well. Consequently, it left Thailand with no choice in the regional structure except abandoning its role as the regional initiator and facilitator and follow the geopolitical change in the region.

Figure 1: The US Initiatives under Pivot to Asia



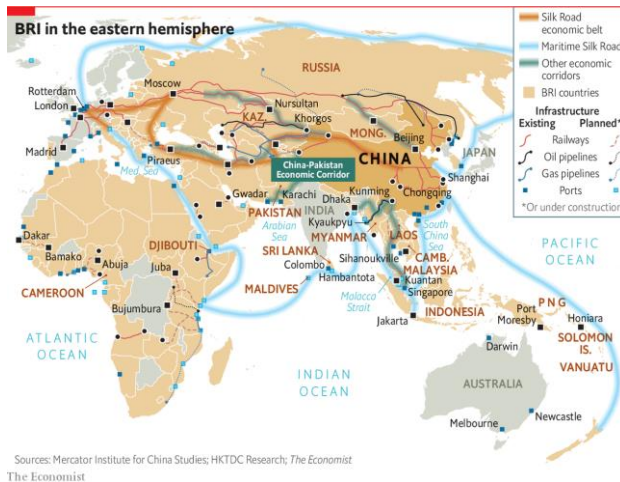
Source: the researcher

As we can see from figure 1, the US campaign to pivot to Asia resulted in the Chinese enclosure: the southern part by LMI, the eastern part by TPP, and the western part by NSRI. Although the direct cooperation between China and the US at that time was extremely positive, China had to react to this encirclement. It was in September 2013 when the new Chinese president Xi Jinping announced his ambition to revive Chinese Silk Road (Xi, 2013), which was later established as “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). He reciprocated the US’ Pivot to Asia and later Asia-Pacific Rebalancing by creating this idea of cross-regional cooperation framework to all over the world except the US.

According to *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* announced by Chinese National Development and Reform Commission on 28 March 2015, BRI included 1) Silk Road Economic Belt which focuses on bridging China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe (the Baltic); linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia; and connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean, and 2) 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road which was the maritime connectivity from China's coast to Europe through the South China Sea

and the Indian Ocean, and from China's coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific (Ministry of Foreign Affairs National Development and Reform Commission, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2015).

Figure 2: China's Belt and Road Initiative



Source: <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/02/06/china-wants-to-put-itself-back-at-the-centre-of-the-world>

To this end, China also countered the US in the sub-regional spheres by establishing new cooperating frameworks like Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) in 2016,<sup>3</sup> China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in

<sup>3</sup> LMC was established in 2016 with 6 member states: China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. This framework overlaps with Greater Mekong

2017.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it created Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)<sup>5</sup> in 2015 to counter US-supported Asian Development Bank (ADB). Moreover, China also hosted two Belt and Road Forums in 2017 and 2019 without US participation in both conference. This China's reciprocal actions of playing political game in the regional structure also further push Thailand out of the position where the later used to be in the regional architectures.

Of course, the China's reaction also caused the US to feel that it had to do more in the regional structure. President Donald Trump applied the Australian concept of "Indo-Pacific" as the strategy for the US to re-counter China. The reason was that the US needed more alliance especially India to balance China from the south. In 2017, Indo-Pacific

---

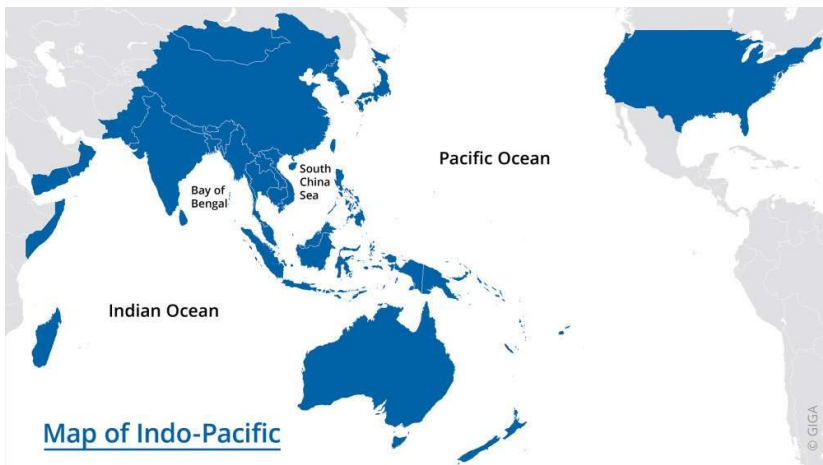
Subregion (GMS), which is composed of the same members but was established in 1992.

<sup>4</sup> CPEC is the bilateral cooperation framework between China and Pakistan, yet the extension of this cooperation would include Iran, Afghanistan, and the Central Asia region as a whole.

<sup>5</sup> AIIB began operations in 2016 with 57 founding Members (37 regional and 20 non-regional) in order to support Infrastructure for Tomorrow (i4t), which addresses ecological impacts like water and air quality, biodiversity, pollution and climate change, projects with sound return on investment that raise economic growth and increase productivity, and gives inclusive access, particularly to citizens excluded from access to infrastructure services.

concept was mentioned in the US National Security Strategy (White House, 2017). In 2019, US State Department enacted “Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision” (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2019).

**Figure 3 Indo-Pacific Region**



Source: <https://eias.org/publications/op-ed/the-indo-pacific-forum-and-the-eus-global-gateway-strategy-engaging-with-the-new-international-order/>

Under Trump’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, the US directly encountered with China as we can see from US-China trade war and cyber war. Moreover, the US also urged its alliances to react to the US Indo-Pacific by implementing their own Indo-Pacific policies like Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept, India’s Act East Policy, Australia’s Indo-Pacific

concept, the Republic of Korea's New Southern Policy, and Taiwan's New Southbound Policy.

As one of the US long standing alliances, Thailand, however, did not react to the US on its own but chose to do it with ASEAN. ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific was announced in 2019 and it mentioned that ASEAN Centrality had to be the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Dialogue Partner System, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting Plus (ADMM+) (ASEAN, 2019).

At the sub-regional level, Trump administration upgraded the LMI to the Mekong-US Partnership (MUP) in 2020. It expanded the cooperation framework to many areas: economic connectivity, human capital development, transboundary water and natural resources management, and non-traditional security, including collaboration on emerging threats such as health security, pandemic response, countering transnational crime, cyber security, and countering trafficking in people, drugs, and wildlife (Mekong-U.S. Partnership, n.d).

## **A Domestic Aspect of the Lost Decade of Thai Foreign Policy**

As indicated above, Thailand's lost decade in its role as a regional player results from the changing of geopolitical structure in Southeast Asia since Obama's Pivot to Asia in that the great powers compete with each other by establishing the regional and sub- regional cooperation frameworks to replace or overlap one another. Thailand, which used to be a very active regional actor, has turned to be a small power as it is in the international structure. However, some may argue that the domestic factors in Thailand also played important roles in reducing its stance at the international level as well. This part will deal with some of the aspects in Thai domestic factors and prove whether they are the case to be considered or not.

First, it is frequently said that the 2014 coup d'état affected Thailand's stance in the international community because the unconstitutional change took Thailand away from democratic path, which is not desirable for most Western countries. However, this is just a political discourse which does not consider the chronological order. As mentioned in the first page of this research article, Thailand had lost its importance before the coup. Obama's visit to Thailand in late 2012 is the evidence that the U.S. interest in Thailand could not compare with that in Myanmar



and Vietnam, both of which Obama proposed the nuclear energy programs for further cooperation among them (Myanmar says it's ready to sign nuclear agreement, 2012; Obama Approved Nuclear Cooperation with Vietnam, 2014). It is worth mentioning that Thailand at that period was governed by the democratically-elected government while Vietnam is the Communist country. Therefore, it is clear that the country's regime really has nothing to do with the international politics.

Vietnam is very important to the U.S. strategical interest because it is one of the claimers against China in the South China Sea conflict. Myanmar, at that time, was also important because it used to be the showcase of the U.S. support for democracy (National Security Strategy, 2015). These are the reasons why Thailand is no longer important to the great power politics in this changing geopolitical structure of the region. Besides, Thailand political turbulence since Thaksin era has caused a lot of uncertainties, which used to make the great powers lack the incentive to invest in such a situation.

Second, some may blame Thailand's lost decade in foreign policy as a result of the lack of leadership in domestic politics. This claim is partially true since Thai political leaders after Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra were not active much in the area of foreign policy. However,

historically, most of the initiatives in Thai foreign policy came from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), not from the prime ministers, except those of Chatichai Choonhavan, Anand Panyarachun, and Thaksin Shinawatra. It is also worth mentioning that these three prime ministers had the work experience from the MFA. Chatchai, who initiated the Turning Battle Field into Market Place policy, leading to the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991, used to be the minister of MFA during Kukrit Pramoj, bearing the responsibility of Thailand – People's Republic of China diplomatic normalization. Anand, who initiated the ASEAN Free Trade Area in 1992, began his career by spending 23 years in the foreign service. He was the Ambassadors of Thailand to United Nations, Canada, and the United States during Vietnam War. Thaksin, who initiated Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) in 2002 and Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) in 2003, started his political career by being appointed as the minister of MFA during Chuan Leekpai administration.

At this point, it is quite clear that the MFA does play an important role in Thai foreign policy initiatives, which have been lost after Thaksin's era. Therefore, the lost decade of Thai foreign policy must have something to do with the MFA during that period, which I am going to argue in the third aspect.

Third, it is Thaksin's campaign to reform Thai bureaucracy to be more market-and-efficiency-oriented that made a huge structural change and undermined the capabilities of the MFA. As Supamit Pitipat wrote in his Ph.D. dissertation on *Organizational Adaptation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: A Case Study of "CEO Ambassador" Pilot Projects* as Thaksin's plan for reforming the MFA that

Making the CEO bureaucrat set their own strategy seems like they have more responsibility, freedom and authority in doing their work, but this also allow the politician to have more control on the bureaucrat and to push the latter to directly make a decision on political matter. The bureaucrat turns to be the buffer zone for the politician in the case that strategy and its implementation fell. Moreover, it is also the tool for the politician to claim the result in the case that the strategy succeeds. In this new game, the politician has more opportunities to gain benefit, while the bureaucrat must take more risk from baring more responsibilities (Pitipat, 2004, p. 119).

Moreover, the change also affected the diplomatic training system within the ministry as the staff recruitment became more open to multi-

disciplinary staffs. The point of focus seems to shift from high politics to low politics, i.e. micro-economy, cultural exchange, and 5 Fsas Thailand's soft power.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the result of the reform according to the concept of governance is not always beneficial.

In conclusion, not only does the changing great power politics downplay Thailand's role of regional and sub-regional initiator, but the structural change of Thailand's MFA also further undermines its capacities in adapting to the new geopolitics of the region.

### Reference

- AP. (2014, February 25). **Obama approves nuclear cooperation with Vietnam**. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/general-news-united-states-government-08449743700a47faacfe15844ff0cc32>
- Archarya, A. (2012). **The Making of Southeast Asia: International Relations of a Region**. Singapore: ISEAS.
- ASEAN Secretariat. (2009). **Press Release: US signs Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC)**. Retrieved March 30, 2023, from

---

<sup>6</sup> Food, Film, Fashion, Fighting, Festival

<http://www.asean.org/uploads/archive/PR-42AMM-US-Signed-TAC.pdf>

ASEAN. (2009). **Joint Statement — 1st ASEAN-U.S. Leaders' Meeting.**

Retrieved March 30, 2023, from

[http://asean.org/?static\\_post=joint-statement-1st-asean-us-leaders-meeting-singapore-15-november-2009](http://asean.org/?static_post=joint-statement-1st-asean-us-leaders-meeting-singapore-15-november-2009)

ASEAN. (2019). **ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific.** Retrieved March 30,

2023, from

[https://asean.org/asean2020/wpcontent/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific\\_FINAL\\_22062019.pdf](https://asean.org/asean2020/wpcontent/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf)

Asian Development Bank. (2012). **Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-**

**India Natural Gas Pipeline Project (Phase 3).** Retrieved March

30, 2023, from <https://www.adb.org/projects/documents/turkmenistan-afghanistan-pakistan-india-natural-gas-pipeline-project-phase-3-tar>

Ba, A. D. (2009). **[Re]Negotiating East and Southeast Asia: Region,**

**Regionalism, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.**

California: Stanford University Press

Belt and Road Forum. (2017). **Joint Communique of the Leaders**

**Roundtable of the Belt and Road Forum for International**

**Cooperation.** Retrieved February 24, 2023, from

<http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2017/0516/c22-423.html>

Belt and Road Forum. (2019). **Joint Communiqué of the Leaders' Roundtable of the 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.** Retrieved February 24, 2023, from <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2019/0427/c36-1311.html>

Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. (2019). **A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision.** Retrieved February 24, 2023, from <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>

Fergusson, I. F., McMinimy, M. A., & Williams, B. R. (2014). **The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP): Negotiations and Issues for Congress.** Retrieved February 24, 2023, from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42694.pdf>.

Huntington, Samuel. (1993). "The Clash of Civilization?." **Foreign Affairs**, 72(3): 22-49.

Manyin, M. (2012). **Pivot to the Pacific? Obama Administration's 'Rebalancing Toward Asia.** Retrieved February 24, 2023, from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf>

McBride, J. (2015). **Building the New Silk Road**. Retrieved March 18, 2023, from <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/building-new-silk-road>

Mekong- U.S. Partnership. ( n. d. ). **About: Mekong- U. S. Partnership**. Retrieved March 20, 2023, from <https://mekonguspartnership.org/about/>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs National Development and Reform Commission, and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China. ( 2015 ). **Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21 st-Century Maritime Silk Road**. Beijing: National Development and Reform Commission.

Murphy, A. M. ( 2011 ). **The United States Joins East Asia Summit: Implications for Regional Cooperation.**” Retrieved March 18, 2023, from <https://www.nbr.org/publication/u-s-joins-east-asia-summit-implications-for-regional-cooperation/>

Obamawhitehouse. (2012, November 18). **President Obama’s First Stop in Asia Is in Thailand**. Retrieved March 23, 2023, from <http://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2012/11/18/president-obamas-first-stop-asia-thailand>.

Office of the Historian. (n.d.) **The Truman Doctrine, 1947**. Retrieved March 30, 2023, from <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine>

- Pitipat, S. (2004). **kān prap tua khōng krasuāng kāntāngprathēt nai yuk lōkaphiwat : suksā kōraṇī khroṅkān namrōṅg ‘ēk’akkhraratchathūt bāp bñ nā kān.** [ Organizational Adaptation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: A Case Study of "CEO Ambassador] ( Doctoral dissertation) Chulalongkorn University, Faculty of Political Science.
- Reynolds, B. (2005). **Thailand’s Secret War: The Free Thai, OSS, and SOE during World War II.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- The East Asia Summit. (n.d.). **About the East Asia Summit.** Retrieved March 15, 2023, from <https://eastiasummit.asean.org/about-east-asia-summit>
- Thiparat, P. (2018). **Prachakom ASEAN: Maya Khati Lae Khwampenching.** [ASEAN Community : Myth and Reality] Bangkok: Phakwicha Khwam Samphan Rawang Prathet Khana Ratthasat Chulalongkon Mahawiththayalai.
- USA Today. (2012, November 21). **Myanmar says it's ready to sign nuclear agreement.** Retrieved March 15, 2023, from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/11/21/myanmar-nuclear-agreement/1719285/>
- USAID. (2013). **Lower Mekong Initiative: Friends of the Lower Mekong.** Retrieved March 6, 2023, from <https://www.usaid.gov/locations/south-east-asia/2017-03-06-lower-mekong-initiative-friends-of-the-lower-mekong>



.2020.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1861/FLM%20Factsheet%20June%202013.pdf

USAID. (n.d.) **The Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI)**. Retrieved March 15, 2023, from <https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/vietnam/lower-mekong-initiative-lmi>

Waltz, K. N. (1979). **Theory of International Politics**. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.

Wendt, Alexander. (1999). **Social Theory of International Politics**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

White House. (2017). **National Security Strategy of the United States of America**. Retrieved March 15, 2023, from <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

Xi, Jinping. (2013). **President Xi Jinping delivers important speech and proposes to build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian countries**. Retrieved March 15, 2023, from [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh\\_665686/t1076334.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml)