

**School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry  
Faculty of Humanities**

**Strategic Hedging and Middle Power Foreign Policy: The Case of Thailand as  
Viewed Through Neoclassical Realism**

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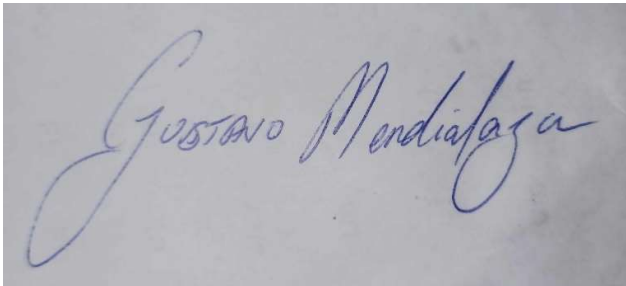
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Doctor of Philosophy  
of  
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Date: 30/10/2023

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### **Strategic Hedging: a case study of nineteenth-century Siam**

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## Abstract

Balancing, bandwagoning, and sometimes neutrality are conventional alignments states are often expected to adopt in circumstances of geopolitical uncertainty. However, such thinking has failed to explain state behaviour in Thailand, which has historically rejected such formal alignments. Whether it is called 'flexible', or 'bending with the wind', Thailand has for the most part favoured a *middle path* approach that attempts to maximise rewards and simultaneously minimise risk since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century. In effect, Thailand has historically and consistently adopted an alignment of strategic hedging, an alignment that blends the behaviours of balancing and bandwagoning to produce an alignment outcome that is counteracting, ambiguous, and allows the hedging state to retain its autonomy. Though largely considered a novel phenomenon, this thesis aims to illustrate that its antecedents can be strongly observed in Thai history.

This thesis challenges the idea that strategic hedging is a modern phenomenon, and instead suggests it can be identified throughout Thai history from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward. By examining the impact of key individuals, the state, and the international system, a detailed analysis can be achieved that demonstrates a preference among the Thai political elite for hedging and hedging-like strategies. Neoclassical realism will be utilised throughout this thesis to provide a theoretical framework that captures the systemic pressures (third image) Siam/Thailand faced (and continues to face), with the incorporation domestic variables that influenced foreign policy. The thesis, therefore, aims to expand the concept of strategic hedging to view it as a historic phenomenon and one from which the lessons of its successes and failures in Siamese/Thai history can be used to navigate the upcoming geopolitical tensions that exist between China and the US.

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## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACD	Asia Cooperation Dialogue
ACMECS	Ayeyawady Chao-Phraya Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy
AFC	Asian Financial Crisis
ASEAN	Association of Southeast East Asian Nations
AUKUS	Australia, United Kingdom, United States trilateral security pact
BRI	Belt Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CAFTA	Chinese-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FPE	Foreign Policy Executive
FOIP	Free and Open Indo Pacific
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LMC	Lancang Mekong Commission
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NGO	Non-government Organization
OUA	Operation Unified Assistance
PLAN	People’s Liberation Army Navy
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (2004-2008)
QUAD II	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (2017-)
RTAF	Royal Thai Air Force
RTG	Royal Thai Government
RTN	Royal Thai Navy
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SEATO	Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation
TIFA	Trade Investment Framework and Agreement
UN	United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WWI	World War One
WWII	World War II

# **Guide to Headings**

This thesis is organised into chapters and appendices, sections, and subheadings.

These use the styles shown below.

## **Chapter and Appendix Heading**

### **Heading Level 2**

**Section Heading**

*Subheading*

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Within the field of international relations, a substantial amount of the intellectual work has focused on the actions of great powers. Unpacking and exploring the decision-making process of the Roman Empire (27BCE-476AD), Napoleonic France (1804-1811), The British Empire (16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries), Qing Dynasty China (1636-1912) The German Empire (1871-1918) and Third Reich (1933-1945), Imperial Japan (1868-1946), the Soviet Union (1922-1991), and the United States (1776-) is considered important within the academic community and consequently commands most of the scholarly attention. By contrast, comparatively little academic attention has been paid to the strategies of smaller powers. The foreign policy strategies of these smaller powers, however, warrants attention as they do indeed play a sizeable role in geopolitical competitions. Rather than simply being reactive to the actions of great powers, smaller states such as Thailand can utilize geopolitical competitions between great powers to their own benefit. Implicit in this statement though is the assumption that it is impossible to disentangle the scholarly examination of smaller powers from their interactions with great ones. Consequently, in examining Thailand throughout this thesis, it is necessary to examine the foreign policy of many of those great empires mentioned above.

This thesis aims to analyse the foreign policy strategies of Thailand, a nation state that has a long history of adeptly navigating great power conflict, from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present period. Such a study is pertinent to our age as the geopolitical importance of the Indo-



Pacific, a result of strategic competition between China and the US, has been widely accepted by scholars and governments (Australian Government, 2017; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019; Vuving, 2020; Blinken, 2021; Parry, 2022). Middle powers such as Thailand, particularly within the Indo-Pacific, are inherently vulnerable to the effects of competition between the two superpowers as each vies for influence in the region, hoping that said influence will translate to advantage. The countries that inhabit the Indo-Pacific, specifically Southeast Asia, are no strangers to great power competition. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain and France, among others, were the dominant colonial powers in the region. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, competitions between Imperial Japan, Britain, the US, and the Soviet Union/Communist Bloc were realities to which all Southeast Asian states had to respond. While scholars may say that this is the century of the Indo-Pacific, the truth of the matter is that the Indo-Pacific has long been a strategic focal point for great power contests. And in the middle of these great geopolitical contests, Thailand alone has continually maintained its sovereignty. It is the lessons from Thailand, how it politically survived 2 centuries of regional conflict, that form the basis of this thesis.

### **Research Questions**

As mentioned above, there are several questions that this thesis primarily aims to resolve. The first is, what are the limits of strategic hedging? Because the literature of hedging has primarily centred on contemporary case studies, there is relatively little analysis on the circumstances both internationally and domestic that demand a state shift from hedging to a more conventional alignment position. Some scholarly analysis has been made, such as that by Koga (2016) and Lim and Cooper (2015), but these analyses focus on niche aspects within

hedging, such as *tactical hedging*. Noteworthy as these studies are, they do not answer the question being brought here. Answering this question demands a temporally wide-scale approach, hence the decision to incorporate analysis of Thai foreign policy going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, examination of Thai strategic policy failures will feature heavily in the case study chapters. For example, the 1893 Paknam Incident and the 1941 Invasion by Imperial Japan represented significant flash points in Thai history. While the former was arguably the result of Thai strategic miscalculations, and the latter was a best-case result at a time of extreme regional geopolitical change, both represent the absolute limits of hedging as a foreign policy strategy. Utilising such a comprehensive empirical dataset that includes nearly 2 centuries of history permits an analysis that comprises sufficient evidence to answer the first question.

The second question builds on the first by asking, what are the causal elements that encourage hedging strategies? Such a question necessitates an approach that integrates third and second image levels of analysis. Essentially, hedging strategies are most likely to be encouraged by a combination of domestic and structural factors with each placing various pressure on the state concerning alignment (Rozman, 2015; Lai & Kuik, 2000; Kuik, 2021). Answering this question through a neoclassical realist lens presupposes that structural factors play the dominant role in state behaviour with domestic factors moderating the scale of said behaviour. This in turn leads to questions regarding the formation of strategy among the Foreign Policy Executive (FPE) and what specific factors in the Thai context contribute to decision making. An examination of these questions will provide the theoretical foundation for the predictive analysis in Chapter 6.

The above two major questions form the crux of this thesis. Consequently, Chapters 3-6 consistently return to these questions when examining Thailand's foreign policy strategy over time. However, they are not the only questions being answered here. Another area worth probing is the implication of geographical proximity and hedging policies. In effect, it is asking whether there exists a direct relationship between the proximity of great powers to a state and the state's preference for hedging over other alignment options. This is worth considering as the instances where Thailand rejected hedging were also those instances when a great power possessed preponderant power on Thailand's doorstep. For example, Bangkok embraced hedging in 1940 at a time when Japanese forces were occupied in China, but it then shifted to bandwagoning in late 1941, when Japanese forces had landed in Thailand and occupied much of Southeast Asia. Similarly, in 1945 the US represented a much greater potential threat, but also one in which cooperation was possible. Hence, Bangkok rejected a return to hedging and instead pursued a balancing strategy in tandem with Washington. What was the extent that geographical proximity played in Bangkok's foreign policy decision making, and what are the implications of this moving forward as the US' regional influence diminishes relative to Chinese growth? In effect, this question is an exploration of an argument posed by Haacke (2019) that hedging is a strategy best suited towards security risks as opposed to security threats. While this thesis will address this question, it is an area where comparative studies would be better suited.

The above questions, understanding how strategic hedging manifests, why it is a preferred alignment option, and what are its future implications, are all fundamentally asking similar

things: what is the causal relationship between structural and domestic pressures that contributes towards eliciting a hedging response? Taking an epistemological perspective on these questions require inquiry that is grounded in empirical positivism. Answering the above questions, which in turn creates new knowledge, demands examining evidence and applying a logic from which to understand it. Neoclassical realism, which embraces elements of positivism, fills this role by providing a framework from which to view the world and by allowing the assumptions held true to neorealism to inform rational discourse. All this is to say is that understanding the present and predicting the future requires reflective analysis of the past guided by theories that allow epistemic justification. Hence, the research throughout this thesis will primarily centre on qualitative evidence in which the chain of causality is examined through process-tracing. While quantitative analysis may form parts of this thesis, they are utilised strategically as an accompaniment to the rationales derived from the qualitative analysis.

To appropriately understand the causal relationship that led Thailand towards preferring strategic hedging, a large historical analysis is warranted. While a narrower temporal analysis may yield the same or similar results, the degree that certainty can be achieved is smaller. For example, an analysis of strategic hedging that focuses on Thailand from 1990 to 2020 would ignore significant periods in Thai foreign policy history when hedging failed or when hedging was rejected for conventional alternatives. It is for this reason that the case studies that are detailed below not only explore Thai hedging behaviour, but also those situations when balancing was preferred. By taking a longer time scale approach to the examination of

strategic hedging, the thesis aims to fill the above-mentioned existing gap in the literature wherein the dominance of contemporary studies ignores the historical causal relationship.

Case studies, as mentioned above, are the primary way in which the information being analysed will be grouped. However, creating a case study implies that history can be broken into neat segments, which is certainly not true. For instance, in discussing WWII where would be a reasonable place to start such a discussion? Starting on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1939 when Nazi Germany invaded Poland would be inappropriate. But would the Versailles Treaty of 1919 be better? The 1870 Franco-Prussian War and the subsequent German unification? Napoleon's short-lived Confederation of the Rhine (1806-1813)? The decision to begin a case study at a specific point, therefore, must be appropriate to the author's central thesis and complement the nature of the study. Secondly, the choice of case studies, the time frames discussed, and the actors analysed are inherently always arbitrarily chosen. Hence, in crafting the case studies two definitions of case study have been considered. The first is based on Moses and Knutsen (2012), who argue that case studies describe single events and are used to explore the explanatory power of a target theory. As Lamont (2015) argues though, the concept of case study as explored by Moses and Knutsen is overly reductionist by utilising singular points of data to create a *histories with a point* style of case study. Despite its limitations, this model of case study has utility in shaping the way in which case studies are crafted as well as its didactic utility in failed scenarios, such as the 1893 Paknam Incident.

The second definition of case study to be considered is that of George and Bennett (2015), who argue that case studies must allow for the detailed examination of historical episodes to

test whether theories may be generalisable. Structure and focus are critical to this definition of case study with the former being important to form the hypotheses that are to be tested, and the latter as it relates to the aspects that are considered in the examination. Essentially, George and Bennett argue for a case-study approach that is rooted in process-tracing, through which final evaluations can be causally identified through the in-depth examination of the multiplicity and intertwining of factors. Using the *historical episodes* approach derived from Moses and Knutsen in combination with George and Bennett's definition, it is possible to arrive at case studies that are bookended by significant points in history while simultaneously serving as structured and focused means of exploring a topic.

### **Framework**

Given that the central focus of this thesis is an analysis of single-actor middle power foreign policy within the context of great power competition, it seems natural that a form of realism would be an appropriate lens with which to explore the subject matter. Neorealism would typically be employed in situations discussing great power competition, but it lacks the capacity to interpret state behaviour beyond the broad and semi-rigid paradigms it has set itself. Its preference for third image, structural explanations behind state behaviour establishes a theory that explains much of state behaviour but does so in the way a scientist would explain a chemical equation. It is for this reason that Arnold Wolfer's (1962) metaphor for states as billiard balls is so apt to describe the neorealist way in which state behaviour is examined. In effect, neorealists view the state as a black box that is self-contained and separated from other states (p. 19). While such a perspective may have its advantages in reducing the inherent complexity of state behaviour to understandable generalisations, it

leaves neorealism incapable of explaining away events that significantly deviate from expectations.

While neorealism is effective at explaining long-term, broad trends in the grand struggles waged between great powers, its reductionist and black boxing tendencies leave it confounded when trying to explain the phenomena that occur within or around these competitions, for example, why responses to threats may be faster, slower, half-hearted (underbalancing), or extreme (overbalancing) (Taliaferro et al., 2009). Neoclassical realism fills this gap, acknowledging that external stimuli must produce certain responses, but those responses are interpreted, moderated, and shaped by domestic factors that include elite attitudes and ideologies, the role of leaders, domestic constraints, extractive/mobilisation factors, and strategic culture. Essentially, neoclassical realism fills the gaps left by neorealism through the inclusion of first and second image factors at the cost of limiting the theory's capacity to generalise—unpacking the black box of the state and attempting to integrate the complexities contained therein into a wider realist analysis. Fundamentally, neoclassical realism is a foreign policy theory that explains what neorealism cannot. As such, the framework of this thesis is broadly set by the decision to employ a neoclassical realist structure that largely subscribes to the paradigms subscribed to by all realists, though complicated by the factors mentioned above.

The other main theory that girds this thesis is strategic hedging. Traditional discourse asserts that states have three choices when it comes to alignment: balance, bandwagon, or a rejection of both through neutrality (Waltz, 1979; Resende-Santos, 2007; Taliaferro et al.,

2009). Such a monochromatic view ignores that geopolitics is rarely so delineative and that states may adopt positions along the spectrum of balancing-bandwagoning to suit their circumstances.<sup>1</sup> As a result of Thailand's typically ambiguous alignment, conceptualising its strategy as either balancing or bandwagoning would ignore the existing contradictions in its foreign policy as well as its famous flexibility, referred to as *bamboo diplomacy* (Busbarat, 2016; Charoenvattananukul & Chachavalpongpun 2020; Poonkham, 2022). Given this inherent paradox, strategic hedging theory is a valuable tool for examining and understanding Thai foreign policy. Despite that caveat, it is worth noting that this thesis aims to expand the literature on strategic hedging by utilising process-tracing to identify, over a period of 2 centuries, the causal factors that encourage hedging both from within and without the state. Hedging, therefore, serves as part of the framework for analysis in this thesis and the subject of examination, which will be explained in greater detail below.

## **Rationale**

The West's fascination with the intrigues of Thai court life stretches back as far as the controversial stories by Anglo-Indian Anna Leonowens in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and her relationship with King Mongkut (Rama IV, r. 1851-1868) of which several adaptations have been made (Leonowens, 1870/2010; Landon, 1944/1999).<sup>2</sup> And yet, even now, Thailand's foreign policy is the subject of debate; is it pro-US, is it pro-Chinese? This, I argue, is no accident. Ambiguity has been a deliberate key component of Thailand's foreign policy strategy as far back as those

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<sup>1</sup> It is implied here that strategic hedging functions within the existing state alignment options. Other thoughts on the matter view strategic hedging as an additive, distinct from balancing and bandwagoning altogether. For further information, refer to Chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> The 1956 movie adaption *The King and I* was nominated for nine Oscars, winning five of them (IMDB, n.d.). Though the original book by Leonowens remains for sale in Thailand, having even been translated into Thai, its film adaptations have for the most part been banned in the kingdom (Aglionby, 1999; Wongcha-um, 2019).



stories written by Mrs Leonowens, shaping the nature of Bangkok's relationship with great powers in a manner that. Existing in a region of the world that over 2 centuries has become increasingly important to global great powers, Thailand has favoured an eclectic foreign policy strategy of power acceptance and simultaneous rejection that has ensured its survival. In particular, the goal of this thesis is to understand how Thailand interacts with great powers, how it navigates great power competition, and how *bamboo diplomacy* has preserved Thai independence for 2 centuries.

**Figure 1.1: Map of Thailand (1974)**



Source: Central Intelligence Agency, (1974). Thailand. 3-74. Call Number: MAP G8025 1974.

Washington D.C.

The decision here to focus on Thailand stems from four key reasons. The first is that Thailand remains a relatively underexamined country within the IR discourse. This has become increasingly true in recent years, in which Bangkok has maintained a low international presence in response to its domestic instabilities. Following from the above, the second reason is that Thailand has a unique history as a middle power in deftly navigating between hegemonic aspirants, as in the case of colonial Britain and France mentioned earlier. This is particularly important at the time of writing because the increasing great power competition between China and the US—between which Thailand is firmly situated—occupies a great deal of scholarly and policy attention around the world. Historical explanations for such survival range from cynical opportunism and pragmatism to the adept application of normative behaviour vis-à-vis European powers among other reasons. This thesis aims to test and add depth to rationales provided above by utilising the theories of strategic hedging, neoclassical realism, and middle power theory.

Thirdly, as a middle power, the foreign policy strategies implemented by Bangkok may provide lessons for other middle powers within the region and beyond. Only by examining the implementation, success, and failure of Thailand's foreign policy will these lessons be extracted. Lastly, this thesis is written with the intention of being a bridging point for further academic research into strategic hedging and Thai foreign policy studies. It is hoped that this thesis spurs more activity in both, but especially the latter, which, as mentioned, is woefully neglected in the existing academic literature. It is for these four reasons that this thesis focuses on Thailand, and though any of these may be cause enough for interest, it is the combination that demands a thesis-level examination.

It is almost a certainty that one of the biggest questions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be how the US and China vie for influence across Asia, perhaps the world. It is the subject of some of the most well-known thinkers in IR studies, such as Morgenthau (1962, 1968), Mearsheimer (2010, 2014), Ikenberry (2003, 2016), Christensen (2015) Christensen and Maher (2017), and so on. The ramifications for this uncertainty, however, are not just limited to great powers, but of profound concern for small, middle, and great states alike, especially those within the Indo-Pacific region. As smaller powers are inherently more vulnerable to geopolitical shifts in the distribution of power, examining successful survival and security management strategies employed in the past by such states remains of great value and import to the current moment. Smaller states being caught in great power competitions are hardly a modern experience with recorded examples going as far back to early antiquity and the Peloponnese War. Yet, over a series of great power competitions from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to the present, Thailand has managed to avoid sharing the same fate as its neighbours, such as colonisation, despite suffering significant setbacks that will be explored later.<sup>3</sup> As such, the 21<sup>st</sup> century issue of how to survive a great power competition has historical precedence and is one that Thailand is uniquely proficient to help answer.

### ***What Makes Thailand's Case Unique?***

Located in the heart of mainland Southeast Asia, the modern kingdom of Thailand is bordered by four neighbours: Myanmar in the north and west, Laos in the north and northeast,

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<sup>3</sup> The use of "Thailand" in this sentence acknowledges a succession of political and foreign policy thought and tradition from the earlier Sukhothai Kingdom through to the modern nation-state of Thailand.

Cambodia in the east, and Malaysia to the far south. Historically the Pagan (Myanmar), Khmer (Cambodia), and Siamese kingdoms viciously competed for regional influence with frequent wars to capture the most important spoils of war in Southeast Asia: labour. Animosity between the successor states is relatively low, though society-to-society relations remain somewhat antagonistic. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the Laotian and Khmer kingdoms were on a relative decline being (violently) exchanged between Siam and Vietnam as vassals until their colonisation by the French in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. To some extent this dynamic continues today with Laos and Cambodia being regionally relatively weak. Malaysia, and previously the Malay sultanates, flank Thailand's south and being Islamic possess a distinctive culture than the other mainland Southeast Asian states. Today, relations between Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok are generally positive, though tensions occasionally flare up due to ongoing tensions between Bangkok and the ethnic Malay majority in Thailand's south. For the most part, Thailand's borders with the four countries above are generally well-respected. Despite the difficulty in maintaining the integrity of borders across Thailand's challenging terrain, their sovereign inviolability is a given fact, and the borders have remained mostly in-place for 70 years without disruption.

Thailand's vast size, measuring 510,890 square kilometres, provides ample opportunity for significant ethnic and linguistic diversity across the country (Food and Agriculture Organization, n.d.). For the most part, Thailand is composed of four subgroups of Thais (Central Thai, Thai-Lao, Lanna, and Pak Tai)<sup>4</sup>, Chinese and Chinese-Thais, Malays, Khmers, Burmese, along with small numbers of other ethnolinguistic minorities (Minority Rights Group

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<sup>4</sup> People from southern Thailand.

International, n.d.).<sup>5</sup> Ethnocultural diversity has historically been a significant impediment to nation and state building, as was seen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the resistance to Bangkok's attempts to consolidate power in the northern province of Chiang Mai, rebellions in the north and northeast, and the difficulty in maintaining control over the majority Malay provinces in the south (Ramsay, 1979; Englehart, 2008).

Currently, political power in Thailand is concentrated in an executive that nominally can be appointed by the semi-elected bicameral parliament, with the lower house comprising elected legislators and a senate appointed by the Royal Thai Armed Forces (Akarawath, 2023; Parliament Thailand, 2018; Sirivunnabood, 2019). This is a result of political power in Thailand being shared primarily between the monarchy and military with civilian elites playing a minor role (Chambers, 2010, 2013).<sup>6</sup> Since 1932 Thailand has had 19 coups (of which 13 were successful),<sup>7</sup> numerous rebellions, and 20 constitutions with the most recent, established in 2017, guaranteeing future military dominance over the senate appointment process (Farrelly, 2013; ConstitutionNet, 2021). The instability of internal Thai politics plays an influential role throughout this thesis as it has substantially impacted Thai foreign policy and the direction in which it navigates great power conflict, in turn problematising the notion of Thailand as an international actor being analysed as a simple black box. For example, in 1944 the National Assembly forced the resignation of the pro-Japanese Premier, Phibunsongkram (Phibun), and replaced him with a leader more sympathetic to the US, radically altering the orientation of

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<sup>5</sup> Note: The official Thai census data is limited in this area. Data taken from the National Statistics Office does not distinguish between Thai subgroups and non-Thai groups.

<sup>6</sup> The exact interplay between the military and political power is likely to change in 2024 as the senate will be replaced.

<sup>7</sup> The number of coups varies from source to source depending on whether certain coups are included, such as the 1971 self-coup by Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn.

Thai foreign policy in WWII (Kasetsiri, 1974; Reynolds, 2004).<sup>8</sup> When the US ultimately defeated Japan and ended WWII, Bangkok remained firmly in the US camp and avoided having to pay significant reparations for its former affiliation. More recently, Thai domestic political instability has created fissures in the US-Thai relationship that have created opportunities for Beijing to fill the gap. Because of the impact of domestic politics on Thai foreign policy, this thesis is compelled to employ a neoclassical realist lens, which will be discussed in more detail below.

## **Chapter Outline**

The structure of this thesis is typical in that the first chapter will be an overview of the research aims, rationale, and methodology. Chapter Two features the literature review as well as identifying existing gaps in the academic literature. Understanding the literature does not just entail identifying the major academic works in each field but gaining a comprehension of how the evolution of theories has occurred. As specified earlier, the theories employed throughout this thesis are not necessarily those adopted by the mainstream IR literature. For example, neoclassical realism is an increasingly popular way in which to explore issues that cannot be adequately explained by neorealism, but its limited capacity to generalise relegates the theory to a niche role. As such, neorealism remains the typical realist way in which to conceptualise IR with its defensive realist and offensive realist branches mostly operating in parallel. Similarly, strategic hedging defies conventional theories of alignment with the

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<sup>8</sup> Thai words and names will predominately follow the Royal Thai Guide Style (RTGS). However, certain well-known names, such as Phibunsongkhram, will be spelt with the most common spelling, typically their nickname. The goal with such a naming convention is to prioritise audience comprehensibility as opposed to some liturgy to linguistic accuracy.

supposition that states can adopt policies that are seemingly counteractive. Rather than balancing or bandwagoning, states can engage policies from both positions to create a third position, hedging. Despite the relative newness of strategic hedging theory, it has quickly become one of the dominant theories explaining Southeast and East Asian alignment strategies with the literature continually expanding (Kuik, 2008, 2016, 2021; Haacke, 2019; Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019; Ciorciari, 2010, 2019; Starting, 2020). Understanding the literature of strategic hedging and neoclassical realism and the rationale behind certain assumptions is fundamental towards analysing the case studies that follow.

Chapters three to five comprise case studies that are form the empirical basis for analysis. The decision to divide these case studies over three chapters stems from the extended period that is being analysed. The first of these chapters introduces the reader to some basic concepts of Thai geography and covers the period from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to 1932. It is during this period that the modern Thai state developed, a result of the geopolitical crises initiated by colonial powers. As such, it is also during this period that hedging became a deliberate strategy pursued in response to great power competition. While it is certainly possible that hedging may have existed as part of Siam's foreign policy strategy before, it is unlikely. Given that Siam's power allowed it to be at or near the peak of the Mandala power hierarchy, hedging would have been of limited utility. This period also includes the important 1893 Paknam Incident where Thai miscalculations almost precipitated the complete annexation of the Siamese state by colonial France. In this chapter I argue that the origins of contemporary Thai foreign policy can be seen, establishing a strategic culture that still perseveres today.

Chapter Four moves on from the colonial era and explores Thai foreign policy from 1932 to 1991. Major changes, both domestically and internationally, had profound impacts on Thai foreign policy strategy during this period. For example, in 1932 Thailand transitioned from an absolutist monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, which ultimately paved the way for military rule during the turbulent years immediately before and during WWII. Further, between 1930 and 1950 European powers lost significant influence in East and Southeast Asia, Imperial Japan briefly occupied substantial parts of those European colonies and following its defeat the US and USSR both moved in to fill the power vacuum. Thai foreign policy reactions to these substantial shifts in the distribution of power necessitated tremendous flexibility and as such is a major focus of the chapter. However, another area of major focus is Thailand's response to the Nixon Doctrine of 1969 in which Washington stated that it would not commit its own troops to future conflicts in Southeast Asia. Facing imminent conflict with Vietnam, Thai leaders engaged in substantial diplomatic efforts to contain Vietnam through ASEAN, the UN, and most importantly utilising its newfound partnership with China to open a second front that restrained Hanoi's capacity for expansionist conflicts. Chapter 4, therefore, covers a period of Thai history when Thailand navigated several great power conflicts and in which its foreign policy strategy had to shift accordingly. Yet, even in situations where balancing or bandwagoning were adopted, Bangkok frequently made efforts to adopt some strategic flexibility, as will be evidenced in the chapter.

Chapter Five concludes the case studies by bringing the focus to the contemporary. This chapter seeks to examine Thai foreign policy from 1991 to 2021. This period is unique not so



much because of the conflicts that occurred but by its distinct *lack* of conflict. The principal concern in this chapter is the evolving relationship between Bangkok and Beijing and its implications for the Thai-US alliance. Since the 1990s, but arguably even before that, the latent capacities of China have represented a very real challenge to the US-led world order. China's growth has significant implications for Thai foreign policy, as Bangkok navigates the risks of engaging with a potentially revisionist emerging superpower while maintaining long-held security relations with the US. As such, this chapter will cover the evolution of the Thai-Chinese relationship in three phases. The first phase (1991-2000) saw Beijing demonstrate itself as a benevolent regional leader when it supported the countries affected by the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) and delayed devaluation of the Yuan. Concurrent to that was a nadir in Thai-US relations stemming from Washington's reluctance to provide aid, a push for strict IMF conditions regarding loans, and the opposition to Thailand's candidate for the World Trade Organisation, Supachai Panitchpakdi. In the second phase from 2000 to 2014, Thai-Chinese relations grew increasingly warm as evidenced by a lowering of barriers to trade, an uptick on various trade agreements, and reciprocal high-level visits. The third phase (2014-present) represents a shift in Thai-Chinese relations to incorporate emerging security elements as well as engaging in economic hedging. Throughout all these shifts, attention will be given to the gradual declining relations between Thailand and the US, which reached new lows in 2014 following the decision by the Royal Thai Army to usurp power in a coup against Prime Minister Yingluck. Despite these issues, risk mitigation in the form of the Thai-US alliance remains in place, while economic maximisation simultaneously occurs with China. Consequently, this chapter illustrates textbook strategic hedging in the ambiguity demonstrated by Bangkok from 2000 to 2021.

Chapter Six analyses and discusses the findings from the preceding chapters. Focus is given to the relationship between Bangkok's preference for hedging and the degree to which regional dominance by an external great power encourages hedging. Questions such as at what point does hedging give way to balancing or bandwagoning? are answered, at least as how they relate to Thailand specifically. While attention is given to 19<sup>th</sup> century hedging, the weight of the argument predominately favours the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century foreign policy strategy employed by Bangkok. The process-tracing methodology explored above is especially vital in this section because the cumulative weight of history allows an understanding of the complex interplay between factors and how it manifests in alignment strategy. The goal of this chapter is to sufficiently discuss the findings discovered in a way that allows a sensible predictive analysis to follow.

Finally, Chapter Seven of this thesis applies the earlier findings in a predictive analysis that examines two potential scenarios exploring the direction great power competition may take and Thailand's likely response. These scenarios are based on realist understandings that assume that China's rise will trigger, if it has not done so already, a powerful balancing response by the US. This, in turn, will allow for predictions on Thailand's foreign policy strategy. To prevent this chapter from transforming into some alternative history divorced from reality, the scenarios are limited to speculation on only the next 15-20 years. The first of these scenarios envisages a strong balancing reaction by a US led coalition comprising of regional powers, such as the US, Japan, Australia, and India (the QUAD),<sup>9</sup> to contain China.

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<sup>9</sup> QUAD and QUAD II both refer to the security dialogue between Australia, India, Japan, and the US. QUAD lasted from 2007 to 2008 and was later re-established in 2017.

Thailand would likely be a hesitant partner in any balancing coalition, indicated by its increasingly ambiguous alignment posture nowadays. The second scenario assumes that a Chinese-led regional order may be a foregone conclusion. Given that such an eventuality is extremely unlikely within the time period specified, this scenario examines Bangkok's response to an emerging Chinese hierarchical regional order. Though there are multiple scenarios that could have been entertained, limits in the scope of research as well as word-limit constraints have reduced the options to just two realist scenarios. The goal of this chapter is not to predict how the great power competition between China and the US will turn, as there are hundreds of articles and books on the matter. Instead, the goal is to understand Bangkok's reactions to future regional shifts in the distribution of power and how that translates to foreign policy strategy.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Examining any topic requires a strong theoretical foundation that can be used to structure analysis. The following literature review is meant to serve as a base for any reader in understanding the theories being applied throughout this thesis. Through this examination, the reader should gain an awareness of the general theories being utilized as well as the preference for certain theories over others, namely neoclassical realism as opposed to other realist perspectives. It should not be assumed that this literature review chapter is exhaustive as each of the theories presented have vast repositories of scholarly work that have scaffolded over time to create the comprehensive theories that they are now. Instead, every effort has been made to explore the development of the three theories that form the foundation of this thesis, the main principals of said theories, as well as their most well-known scholars. These theories, as prescribed in the previous chapter, include neoclassical realism, strategic hedging, and middle power theory. This chapter aims to introduce the reader to these three theories. To facilitate this, the reader is instructed to refer to the contents page for the page numbers relating to specific theories. Further, in several cases where due to the scope of the thesis itself or simply the limits of the format, footnotes are provided leading the reader to more information.

Additionally, it bears mentioning that theories, especially those in IR, are continually evolving. This may be due a suite of reasons, for example, the natural evolution of ideas over time, how theories are interpreted differently between cultures, and how they respond to critiques by

scholars from competing theories. While these factors apply to all three theories employed throughout this thesis, they are most pertinent to strategic hedging, which is a rapidly evolving theory of state alignment. Consequently, the research in this area is limited to studies published prior to 2020 and does not account for some of the intellectual debates that are on-going in the field.

## **Realism**

The first of these theories to be discussed is realism. Its cadet branch, neoclassical realism, forms the basis from which the subject matter of this thesis is framed. Realism, one of the dominant theories in IR, is frequently characterised as a pessimistic theory because the foundational belief of the theory is that interstate conflict is an inevitable aspect of IR. The system in which states find themselves in is inherently anarchic, as agreed by realists and liberals alike.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, states are compelled to fend for themselves in a system that has no supreme authority, a problem Mearsheimer (2014) has referred to as the *911 Problem*. As a result, according to realist theories, security is of paramount importance to all states and that it comes, to paraphrase a practitioner of realist statecraft Mao Zedong (1964), from the barrel of a gun.

### *Classical Realism – Pre-20<sup>th</sup> Century*

The concept that a state's power is primarily derived from its military capacity/power is one that stretches back to antiquity and the earliest of writers on geopolitics, Thucydides (c. 460 – c. 400 B.C.). In his *The Peloponnesian War* (c. late 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E/trans. 1978) Thucydides

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<sup>10</sup> Note: Though classical realism does implicitly identify an anarchic quality to the international system, it does not make this distinction explicit.

examines the causes for the famed war, and, in an analysis that realists thousands of years later would agree with, places the root cause as the shifts in the distribution of power within the system between Athens and Sparta. In aligning with Athens, the Corinthian colony of the Corcyraeans upended a delicate balance of power that had existed and provided Athens the increased economic and military capacity to challenge the Spartan status quo. In trying to ascertain the reasons for conflict, Thucydides laid down what would ultimately become many of the fundamental principles in realism.<sup>11</sup>

Though Thucydides would meticulously account the events of the Peloponnesian War, the central objective of the early chapters was to illustrate that war between Athens and Sparta was inevitable due to shifts in the balance of power coupled with the fact that a state's power cannot be accurately measured by outsiders leading to a fog of war for decision-makers (p. 49). In the account of the Corcyraean's appeal for an alliance with Athens, Thucydides took great lengths to ensure that the reader understood that war between Athens and Sparta was coming, and unless Athens took active measures to increase its relative power in the lead up to the war (internal and external balancing), it would undoubtedly eventually lose. Thucydides, 2,000 years before neorealist scholars, wrote of how misinterpreting the actions of the enemy can create a security dilemma as it did in fuelling paranoid behaviour in Sparta and in Athens in relation to each other. Thucydides captured the heart of realist thinking when describing the Corcyraean delegation's speech in asking for Athens' alliance. Accordingly, if Athens wished to survive the upcoming war, it needed to place its long-term strategic

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that there is recent debate as to how much weight should be given to the conventional notion of realism's rooting being found in Ancient Greece. Specter (2022) argues that realism's roots are found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and came about as a result of the evolution of geopolitics. See Specter, M. (2022). *The Atlantic Realists: Empire and International Political Thought Between Germany and the United States*, Stanford University Press.

interests ahead of its aversion to conflict, and this involved increasing its military capacity through the acquisition of Corcyraean's naval prowess by alliance (external balancing). As laid out by Thucydides, self-interest is a governing norm, and survival is the primary interest of all states. Such thinking guided later classical realist works as well as those of offensive realism in assuming that states inherently pursue security through acquiring greater relative resources. It is ultimately summarised in a single sentence by Thucydides in one of the most pessimistic quotes in realist literature, "The strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept" (p. 402).

Though Thucydides is often credited as one of the earliest realist thinkers, his account of the Peloponnesian War was never intended to be a systematic study of state behaviour. It would take over 2,000 years for realism to emerge as an academic discipline. These earliest works, such as that of Machiavelli, extrapolated the nature of man unto the state, and as the nature of man is inherently wicked, so too is the state (Donnelly, 2000). The works of Machiavelli in the 16<sup>th</sup> century regarding the mechanics of state preservation during Medici Florence were foundational to later scholarly thought that would be grouped as realism. These thoughts were echoed by Hobbes (1651; Navari, 1996) in the *Leviathan*, which was primarily concerned with the concept of power: how it is distributed, concentrated, exercised, and importantly, balanced. However, as Donnelly argues (p. 6), realism, especially these earliest forms of realism, were not defined by an explicit set of assumptions. Instead, they were worldviews that came about from the specific writer's immediate geopolitical environment, an environment that was frequently involved in competitions of power and conflict.

The concept of conflict as an inherent aspect of IR was given distinct academic form in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through efforts of scholarly military men following the Napoleonic Wars. The most famous is that work by Carl Von Clausewitz, so popular that within a year of publication it had already been translated into English. *On War* (1832/1989) saw conflict as a natural part of IR, not something to be shunned, nor something that can be averted. To iterate this, one of the most famous maxims from his unfinished work remains as true today as it did in the Napoleonic period and before, “War is merely the continuation of [foreign] policy by other means” (p. 89). A common thread from Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, all the way to Clausewitz is the implicit recognition that the system in which all units operated, whether it be city states in the Hellenes or massive European empires, is anarchic. This anarchic system in turn compels states to monitor the distribution of power and make strategic decisions based on external perceived threats to security. Many parts of Clausewitz’s work continue to guide how realists perceive the world and the actors that inhabit that world.

### *Modern Classical Realism*

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by several conflicts that saw an unprecedented level of destruction. Wars shifted from the Napoleonic set-piece battles where empires bet everything on the actions of a single afternoon to multi-year conflicts. These wars demanded systematic analysis as scholars tried to understand how these conflicts occurred, why they were on an unprecedented scale, and how did post-conflict settlement sow the seeds for future conflict. Classical realism, as we now refer to it, was dominated by such notable scholars as E. H. Carr (1937; 1942/2010), Reinhold Niebuhr (1932, 1962), Hans J. Morgenthau (1946, 1948), George Kennan (1946), and Raymond Aron (1962), among others. Their approach to realist studies reflected the eclectic backgrounds these scholars



had, some as jurists, diplomats, philosophers, and even theologians. What differentiates them, particularly from modern realist theory, was their focus on the nature of man as well as viewing states as an anthropomorphic entity that acted in a way consistent with the baser instincts of man (Morgenthau, Thompson, Clinton, 1948/2006, p. 4; Niebuhr, 1932; Aron, 1962/2003). Though this more philosophical approach was later discarded by realist scholars in favour of structuralism, the central thesis of realism was preserved: the world system is anarchic, and, consequently, states must be prepared for conflict. Therefore realism, in contrast to the other major schools of thought in IR (the others being liberalism, constructivism, and Marxism), has been described as pessimistic, even by theorists in the field. Algosai (1965, pg. 227) aptly summarised Morgenthau's position of classical realism as "indifferent to moral value," a statement that largely holds true to contemporary realist discourse.

Realism, as Smith (1999) points out, was an intellectual response to the world and the failures of liberalism in maintaining peace. This was a world in which conflict was a regular aspect of IR that Smith traces back through various 'realist' scholars from Weber to Hobbes, to St. Augustine, to Thucydides (p. 34). The failures of the liberal peace and world order shaped by US President Wilson in the wake of WWI further entrenched realist approaches to IR. It demonstrated the pervasive fact that anarchic conditions were, at least in the geopolitical environment that exists, unsurmountable, and, as such, states must always be concerned about their security. After WWII, realism continued to dominate the intellectual and professional discussion within IR as the marriage of convenience between Moscow and Washington quickly dissolved. US diplomat George Kennan most appropriately framed the way in which the post-WWII competition would be conceptualised when he wrote his famous

*The Long Telegram* (1946), which detailed his perception of Soviet logic. Kennan wrote, “Soviet Power [is] impervious to logic of reason, and it is highly sensitive to logic of force” (Part 5 – para 2). The 5,500-word telegram painted a picture of the USSR as one that was inherently expansionist, and yet somewhat reticent of direct conflict and could be cowed if the US were to show sufficient resolve.

The views communicated by Kennan in his *Telegram* specifically about the Soviet Union were reflective of wider realist viewpoints that saw great powers as consumed with the innate desire for more territory, which Morgenthau referred to as the *animus dominandi*. Writing at a time of intense structural bipolarity, Kennan’s realist perspective viewed the ensuing competition between the USSR and the US as zero-sum and that capitulation in any one area would invite Soviet aggression. This later saw expression in the Truman administration’s 1947 decision to contain any and all Soviet expansion, famously in Berlin in 1948 and in Korea in 1950. Though this policy would later lose political support in the jungles of Vietnam, the early years of the Cold War were characterised by realist logic, which aimed to understand the anarchic system for what it was and, with practitioners such as Kennan and others from organisations such as RAND, prepare foreign policy accordingly (Gaddis, 2005; Gottfried, 2010).

Despite the critiques that may nowadays be made of the (lack of) academic rigour in the writings of classical realists, it is necessary to understand that they were writing from their own experiences in a period of intense international instability. The two world wars demonstrated the failings of liberalist approaches to IR and consolidated a belief that conflict was inherent and continuous. Morgenthau’s most famous works, for example, *Scientific Man*

*Versus Power Politics* (1946) and *Politics Among Nations* (1948/2005), were written towards the end of WWII when thoughts towards a future world order were being realised. His work was inherently philosophical, anthropomorphising the state with its own desires and a spirit to dominate. Such thoughts were not a leap of logic given what Morgenthau had seen in Europe vis-à-vis Germany's repeated attempts for hegemonic status and Russia's burgeoning capacity to become the Eurasian hegemon.

Other foundational realist thinkers, such as E. H. Carr and Reinhold Niebuhr, were similarly affected by their political environment. Carr, for example, was deeply critical of the idealist naivety of Wilsonian Liberalism as their worldview misrepresented the importance of the distribution of power and the capacity for normative solutions to restrain violence (Chun, 1997). For realists, the capacity of a state to exercise power and the share of its power within a system is among the principal factors explaining state behaviour. This is an idea that is even shared to some extent by modern liberal scholars, such as Ikenberry in *After Victory* (2001). Ikenberry states that the US' preponderance of power in its new spheres of influence after WWII allowed it the capacity to form institutions that have enabled it to prolong its preeminent status long after its relative decline. Niebuhr, a prominent classical realist and theologian, echoed the realist position on the primacy of power for security in his texts *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940/1969) and *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (1959). In these texts Niebuhr, like Kennan and Morgenthau above, shared a zero-sum view of the world that necessitated confronting the Soviet Union on any expansionism. These scholars wrote at a time when advancements in military technology had, over a single generation, radically transformed warfare and when conflict was increasingly overseen by political, not military, authorities. Further, the eclectic combination of various backgrounds attempting to

examine the brutal nature of IR resulted in a type of realism that shared many aspects but lacked sufficient intellectual coherence and academic rigor.

### *Neorealism*

Neorealism, most famously attributed to Kenneth Waltz and his 1979 book *Theory of IR*, aimed to bring greater academic rigor to the study of IR, a trait lacking in classical realist discourse. Neorealism further diverged from classical realism by its *initial* rejection of the *animus dominandi*—or spirit to dominate—that rationalised great powers’ tendency to engage in territorial aggrandisement.<sup>12</sup> Classical realist rationales for state behaviour were criticised by later neorealists for their rudimentary application of Freudian psychology (Schuett, 2007, 2010). Neorealism pushed forth an era in realist discourse that favoured greater implementation of scientific principles that resoundingly rejected the eclectic mix of philosophy, theology, and psychology that predominated classical realism. Though the basic components of realism were laid out by classical realist scholars in the years surrounding the two world wars, by the 1980s their works had fallen out of favour and by the 1990s were derided by prominent neorealists, such as Rosenberg, as “unsophisticated ... and embarrassing” (Rosenberg, 1990, p. 292). Neorealism was markedly differentiated from its classical realist predecessor by its rejection of unscientific attributes and its desire to create a theory that was generalisable.

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<sup>12</sup> Offensive realism, a branch of neorealism, does believe great powers are inherently driven towards power maximization (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Neorealists, particularly early ones, such as Waltz, attempted to use elements from the hard sciences to explain state behaviour, with deductive explanatory theory being most favoured (Waltz, 1954, 1979, 2001, 2008; Guzzini, 1998). Achieving this involved reducing the elements under analysis to those that can be generalised, in effect delineating levels of analysis from the first image (the leader as an individual), the second image (the state and its components), and the third image (the international system) (Waltz, 1954). While all three images play a role in state behaviour, it is accepted by neorealists that the concerns arising from the third image play the largest role in shaping state behaviour. Holsti (1998) identifies that where neorealism diverged the most was its emphasis on the causality of state behaviour. For instance, a third German/European conflict was an inevitable reality in neorealist thinking given that the distribution of power in Europe favoured Germany, and that any great power would make the run towards hegemony if the chance of success was reasonably convincing. Instead of placing the blame on individual leaders, the fact that Germany went to war against the great powers of Europe three times within a century is indicative of structural causality. Neorealism gained traction during the Cold War at the same time game theory and institutions such as RAND Corp and Council of Foreign Relations were increasingly applying scientific practices to the study of complex state behaviour. According to Humphreys (2013), the reason why Waltz's conceptualisation of realism flourished was its capacity to synthesise the fundamental assumptions of classical realism in a manner that was consolidated and steeped in the scientific approach that dominated intellectual discourse at that time.

A further divergence in neorealism from classical realism was the concept of state aggression. Bessner and Guillhot (2015) note that neorealism does not view states as inherently expansionist, rejecting the *animus dominandi* that was assumed to inspire great powers prior.

Rather, the system was seen to encourage defensive traits as this was seen as the best guarantor of state security and, therefore, survival (Telbami, 2002). In an anarchic system, states are encouraged to monitor relative shifts in power among their neighbours and correspondingly respond with their own efforts at increasing military power. This dynamic leads to a security dilemma that significantly increases the cost of aggression, and hence the neorealist position that anarchy favours defence. This position was adopted by various realist scholars and policy officials writing during the Cold War, such as Robert McNamara (1967), Robert Jervis (1976, 1984), John H. Herz (1950, 1981), and Kenneth Waltz (1979). It was a period in which advancements in weapons technology provided Moscow and Washington unprecedented destructive capacity and second-strike capabilities that restrained each power from a unilateral act of aggression on the other. That is not to say that expansionism does not and will not occur, as they most certainly do. Instead, neorealism views such actions as sporadic rather than endemic to the anarchic system.

In as much as classical realism was a creation of its time, the same can be said of neorealism. Its focus on the anarchic system, balance of power, uncertainty, and security dilemmas reflected the challenges that existed during the Cold War. During an era of uncertainty, global conflicts, and rapidly advancing military technology, there was a need for the interwoven complexities to be made comprehensible—and therefore actionable. However, as capable as it was at providing a framework for understanding great power conflict during the Cold War, Smith (2017) points out that its overly reductionist approach to state behaviour reduced the theory's capacity to explain unexpected state behaviour. This aspect of neorealism was embraced, with early scholars, for example, Wolfers (1962), remarking that states operated as billiard balls, moving across the table (i.e., the system) in a manner that is largely

predictable. However, though certain scholars still uphold the billiard ball metaphor of state behaviour, of which Mearsheimer (2014) is a popular example, new branches of realism have challenged this tired mantra.

### *Neoclassical Realism*

The gaps in neorealism stemmed from its strength in reducing the complex nature of state behaviour into a testable and generalisable theory. By the 1990s various scholarly works had sought to address these gaps, notably that of Randall Schweller (1996, 2004). His concept of underbalancing/overbalancing to explain disproportionate state behaviour in the face of threats aimed to explain a significant gap in existing literature. Similarly, the Copenhagen School of Security Studies sought to expand the concepts of *security* and *securitising* to include environmental, economic, societal, and political security (Buzan et al., 1998; Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Buzan, 1983, 2004; Neumann & Wæver, 1997; de Wilde, 2008). Most pertinent to this thesis was the work by Gideon Rose (1998) titled *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*. The text, as the name would imply, sought to synthesise classical and neorealist branches of realism to examine foreign policy. In effect, neoclassical realism was created to address those earlier mentioned gaps through the systematic incorporation of the second and first image.

Since neorealism was primarily a theory to examine state behaviour, and Innenpolitik models overemphasised internal dynamics in forming foreign policy, neoclassical realism aimed to bridge the gap by utilising the structural concepts for state behaviour in addition to unit level analysis to explain variations in state reactions. Though Rose's 1998 text formed the concept of neoclassical realism, it was the works of Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro that systematised

the theory. In their collaborative work, along with other neoclassical realist scholars, in *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (2009), the structure and limits of the theory were clearly established. In contrast to neorealism, neoclassical realism was fundamentally a theory for foreign policy, and a state's response to external threats and risks was primarily seen as being predicated by structural factors that were then interpreted within the state.

Neoclassical realism has been used to explain various state foreign policy strategies that may not necessarily be explainable through neorealism or neoliberalism. For example, McLean (2016) investigates Australian case studies in situations where a disconnect exists between the Foreign Policy Executive (FPE) and the voting public. For instance, the FPE and public may *initially* disagree on what the strategic priorities of the state should be. This may be because the FPE may be in a better position from which to judge the national interest as they have access to expert advice and secret intelligence that the general public lacks. As such, it is necessary (in democratic states) for the FPE to reconcile the two disparate visions for foreign policy strategy through these tools: *dilution*, *deflection*, and *inflation*. Regardless of the option chosen by the FPE, there are limitations on the capacity of the state to exercise foreign policy in the ways it sees fit, which can lead to situations of overbalancing, underbalancing, delayed responses, etc.

The main theoretical basis for this thesis utilises the neoclassical realist approach to gird analysis. Given that the focus of this thesis is Thai foreign policy, no other model of realism provides the structural framework that facilitates the incorporation of first and second image levels of analysis like neoclassical realism. However, there are substantial trade-offs derived



from the utilisation of any theory that employs analysis at the unit and subunit level. Firstly, there is the issue of what variables at these levels are included. Unit and subunit variables that frequently get included in neoclassical realist discourse are the structure of the state, leaders' perceptions, "civil-military relations, elite belief systems, organizational politics, [and] state-society autonomy" (Lobell, 2009, p. 63). However, not all these variables are relevant all the time and may have varied importance across societies and time. For example, this thesis focuses on Thailand, which is a predominately Buddhist country with the executive simultaneously being the head of state and head of religion. An argument could be made, though, that religion is not a powerful foreign policy driver. It is, though, useful in understanding the political nuance at a domestic level.<sup>13</sup> However, in theocratic states, such as modern Iran, beliefs systems may have a powerful role in shaping foreign policy. Because neoclassical realism nominally provides for a wide range of unit and subunit level variables to be taken into consideration, the author is challenged to identify what variables are necessary and what are not.

The second trade-off that arises from the employment of neoclassical realism is its inability to generalise. By incorporating first and second image levels of analysis, the author is implicitly positing that deviations from expected neorealist behaviour is due to factors that are unique to the state and, therefore, cannot be generalised. By and large this is true, as the variables listed above are, in amalgam, unlikely to occur in other states, even neighbours. For instance, Thailand has a unique civil-military situation in which the military, acting with the blessing of relatively beloved monarch, functions as a strong check on civilian governments, providing

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<sup>13</sup> This will be explored in Chapter 5 where an examination of the modern Thai state is conducted.

what Chambers and Waitoolkiat (2016) have referred to as a *tutelary democracy*. Further complicating matters, political power is contested between three groups, which are composed of the monarchy, military, and civilian politicians of which the former two groups operate in a symbiotic network. This has had significant effects on Thai foreign policy, especially as it pertains to its capacity to conduct relations with the great powers. For example, the decision of Thailand to align with Imperial Japan and then later the US in WWII had part of its process stem from the contestation of power between military and civilian political elites. However, Thailand's situation in this specific regard is unique and largely unable to be applied to other cases. With that being said, neoclassical realism does allow for certain trends to be formulated in comparative studies where similar unit and subunit level variables produce similar outcomes.

From the discourse above, it is possible to summarise the similarities and differences between neorealism and neoclassical realism. As James (2002) states, neorealism purports the primacy of the state as the main unit of analysis, states are rational actors, states seek security, states are undifferentiated, informal hierarchy is a cause of the anarchic system—brought about due to the lack of a supranational authority, and that structure is based on the distribution of power. While both forms of realism agree that the system is governed by a condition of anarchy, where they diverge is that neorealism views anarchy as a permissive condition, while neoclassical realism views anarchy as an independent causal force (Lobell et al., 2009). Further, neoclassical realism does not agree that states are rational actors because there may be instances when domestic pressures persuade the FPE to act irrationally. Neoclassical realism also views that states may be differentiated so that they may specialise in niche areas, sometimes pursuing those niches to the exclusion of typical state behaviour, such as security

(e.g., Iceland). Both theories adopt a deductive approach to examination of IR, using competitive hypotheses to arrive at conclusions. Lastly, neoclassical realism is a theory of foreign policy behaviour, not state behaviour. While both theories may be similar, they differ in some significant respects that, ultimately, make neoclassical realism the more appropriate toolkit with which to analyse Thai foreign policy.

Another area within neoclassical realist literature, building from the concept of intervening variables, is that of how states react to transformative events, such as the arrival of Commodore Perry's Fleet at Edo Bay, Japan in 1853. Neoclassical realist thought predicts that when states are confronted by more powerful and potentially aggressive states, the weaker state is presented with three options: emulation, innovation, or persistence (Taliaferro et al., 2009). Of these three options, emulation is almost always preferred as it provides the state the capacity to offset its weakness quickly and cost-effectively as it does not need to go through the iterative process inherent in innovation (Waltz, 1979; Resende-Santos, 2007; Coetzee, 2018).

Factors inside the state may determine which of the three options is given. For instance, a state which is internally fragile, as the Hapsburg Empire (later Austrian Empire) was during the Napoleonic Wars, may persist in their traditions because the changes needed to adequately emulate the enemy may undermine the foundation of the state. Conversely, states may choose to innovate in the face of adversity to gain some relative advantage against their enemy. Examples of this include the various technological innovations developed during the Cold War. War weariness, fear of nuclear catastrophe, societal factors, as well as ideological factors contributed to specific policies that drove innovation in that time.

Regardless of whether a state selects to emulate, innovate, or persist in their traditions when confronted with a novel challenge is predominately driven by intervening variables, which makes the study of such variables of intrinsic importance.

Determining what intervening variables are impactful when and where is difficult. Ideological drivers, for example, may have been particularly powerful during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but are less powerful today. Religion may be a powerful intervening variable in different regions at different times but reaching a consensus on the 'power of religion' as some kind of static force is an impossibility. To some extent it becomes a tautological exercise, as an author could make the argument that ideology was important factor during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century because people largely believed in ideology as a factor. Ergo, ideology is important when it is important. To avoid this issue, the arguments throughout this thesis will aim to limit intervening variables to those that are historic and universal for civilisations, the public attitudes of key individuals, societal factions, and in Siam/Thailand's case; the military, the monarchy, and the bureaucracy.

#### *Narizny's challenge of Neoclassical Realism*

Neoclassical realism is not without its critics. Being a theory to explain foreign policy that utilises neorealism as its bedrock, while at simultaneously pointing out the limitations of neorealism, neoclassical realism faces challenges from multiple fronts. The most notable of these challenges occurred in 2018 when debate on neoclassical realism was covered by the journal, *International Security*. Narizny (2017) criticises neoclassical realism for its supposed abandonment of the foundational principles in Waltz's neorealist treatise, *Theory of International Politics*, in that states are compelled to have identical preferences and not vary

in those preferences. In response, Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman (2018) argue that such a reading of Waltz's text is a deliberate misreading of the famed work. Not only does Waltz's work not suggest that all states have to have identical preferences, but opens the possibility for states to have varying preferences with the caveat that preserving the states' political survival and political autonomy remain paramount. How the state goes about promoting that preference can be wide ranging.

Other criticisms from Narizny stem from the supposed inability of realism, in any form, the capacity to reconcile the domestic political environment with the international one and remain realist. The argument follows the logic that the neoclassical realist need to incorporate domestic variables to explain anomalies in state behaviour inherently makes neoclassical realism a liberal framework. However, such thinking ignores classical realism's incorporation of domestic factors, belief systems, and even psychology to explain state behaviour. Domestic factors are not the monopoly of liberalism, and also form some of the early modern realist conceptions surrounding state behaviour.

A major argument by Narizny, that I do resonate with, is that which claims neoclassical realism frequently incorporates domestic factors in a patchwork fashion to suit immediate needs. This is certainly a case that is frequent in the works of neoclassical realist literature, but perhaps speaks to its wide adoption – and therefore diffusion – rather than an issue with the theory itself. This thesis aims to arm itself against that argument by being conscious and consistent in the factors included, and aligning those factors to the original principles outlines by Taliferro, Lobell, and Ripsman.

### *Liberal Counterarguments*

The principal challenge to realism comes through liberalism, which partially shifts the loci of attention away from the state as a unit to instead focus on the individuals that comprise that state. Originating from the enlightenment period from philosophers such as Kant, liberalism holds that the pessimistic viewpoint that realism subscribes to, in which states are compelled towards competition and conflict, can be mitigated through economic integration and institutional cooperation (Williams, 2013). This section aims to provide a brief overview of the principles and philosophies that liberalism contains and why it is an incompatible theory with the goals of this thesis.

Liberalism, and its more common modern form of neoliberalism, fundamentally rejects the three key premises of realism (Ikenberry, 2001). The first is, as mentioned above, that competition and conflict are an inevitable aspect of IR. This is not to deny that power politics are a significant aspect of IR, but that alternative outcomes are also possible. In effect, it rejects the “nasty, brutish, and short” philosophy that at times guides realist thinking (Hobbes, 1651/Navari, 1996, xiii).<sup>14</sup> Second, while acknowledging the existence of anarchy, neoliberalism rejects that it necessarily leads to zero-sum competitions. Instead, neoliberalism posits that through cooperation mutual benefits are possible that need not be viewed as zero-sum competitions but instead as absolute gains. Third, neoliberalism holds that institutions are powerful agents for shaping foreign policy, binding states, and socialising states to adopt normative behaviour.

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<sup>14</sup> It has been brought up in review that this quote relates to the actions of people within states and, therefore, not appropriate here. I would argue this quote is directly relevant as it relates to the actions of people existing in a realm without a supranational body to regulate the actions of man. As such, it is a parallel to the anarchic situation among states.

Liberal scholars also have vastly different interpretations of the concept of power, with scholars, such as Nye (1990, 2012), expanding the term to include non-military/economic aspects. Soft power, as Nye refers to it, is the capacity of a state to encourage a target state into a certain form of behaviour that it may or may not be entirely aware. Rather than reflecting the capacity of the state to wage war, soft power is the power of a states' values and culture. Other scholars, such as Robert O. Keohane (1986, 1989, 2003) and G. John Ikenberry (2001, 2003), have instead focused their attention on the importance of institutions to establish conditions that prolong geopolitical dominance despite relative power declines. For instance, Ikenberry's *After Victory* (2001) argues that a reason for the US' continued geopolitical dominance in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century stems from its willingness to bind some of its power to institutions such as the United Nations to create a rules-based system. With this, the US has been able to erect a system that is seen as fair and has only recently come under significant challenge despite surviving 70 years.

Finally, a key area in which realism and liberalism disagree is the influence of regime types. There is the argument in neoliberal theory positing that cooperation between states is greatly aided in cases where both parties are democracies (Singer & Small, 1976). This is because it is believed that democracies, with their cumbersome democratic processes are restrained in their capacity to act against the demands of their constituents. Consequently, democratic states are supposed to be less militarily aggressive. It was these beliefs that directed US President Woodrow Wilson's agenda between 1918 and 1919 when negotiating with the European great powers on the post-war order (Ikenberry, 2001; Johnson, 2015). It also informed George Bush Jr.'s position to promote democracy in the Middle East that has since been a significant aspect of the US foreign policy strategy in the region. Germany is often

invoked as evidence of the democratic peace theory, having restrained its hegemonic aspirations following WWII (Ripsman, 2007). Though Germany did become a democratic state after WWII as West Germany and later in 1991 as the Germany Federation, arguments for its peaceful nature in Europe may as easily be traced towards the greater strategic threat the Soviet Union and later Russia pose than any democratic peace theory. In addition, Rummel (1997) illustrates that young democracies are especially likely to engage in wars even if democracies are less war prone (Müller & Wolff, 2004). Mansfield and Snyder (1995) argue that as democracies take form, so does nationalism, which invariably is an uncontrollable phenomenon and leads young democracies to be more war-prone than mature ones. Lastly, neoliberal theories on democratic peace, as Gilber and Owsiak (2017) point out, are likely misattributing correlation as causation.

While liberalism is a useful framework with which to conceptualise the world around us, there are several elements that preclude its utility in this thesis. The first is its emphasis on the power of institutions to shape the geopolitical landscape (Keohane & Martin, 1995). While most theories of realism do not outright reject the importance of institutions, their importance is superseded by the state, which is the main driver in the system (Lieven, 2021). Realism instead views institutions as an extension of state power rather than something that significantly transforms power and socialises states. Only offensive realists reject the value of institutions, viewing them as a guise for the power politics great powers engage in (Mearsheimer, 1995). Because this thesis does not focus to any great extent on institutions, but instead on power politics, liberal theories of IR would bear little relevance.



The second reason why neoliberalism fails to be a useful theory in structuring this thesis is that it fails to appropriately prioritise the importance of variables from the subunit to the system. Neoliberalism generally utilises bottom-up explanations for foreign policy in which leaders and domestic politics have greater influence over foreign policy than structural factors (Taliaferro et al., 2009). However, as Dueck (2009) notes, there are few instances in which such a conceptual position holds water. For instance, Dueck illustrates that the argument that the Bush Jr. administration's decision in 2003 to invade Iraq was a cynical tactic to gain a 'rally round the flag' advantage going into the 2004 election is demonstrably false. Instead, misperceptions in the Bush administration appear to have the leading factors towards committing to war as indicated by the overlap of public and private rationales given for the invasion. Further, as Ripsman (2016) illustrates in his study of peace settlements between regional rivals, only in cases where structural constraints encouraged peace did hostilities cease. However, only in those settlements that were socialised was the peace considered stable. Neoclassical realism, with its basis in realism that positions the unit as the main locus of action explains foreign policy much more systematically and reliably than neoliberalism.

### **Strategic Hedging**

Within IR, it has been the conventional wisdom that states either balance or bandwagon against perceived threats. In the former, the balancing state seeks to counter a potential revisionist threat by increasing its own power (internal balancing). However, states can also cooperate in balancing against a common adversary through alliances and partnerships (external balancing). In both cases, the goal is to maintain the status quo through the mobilisation of greater military and economic power to prevent the revisionist power from upsetting the status quo. Examples of balancing are common, such as the Lacedaemonian-led

Peloponnesian League balancing against the Athenian-led Delian League, the various coalitions against Napoleonic France, the Triple Entente between Britain, France, and Imperial Russia against the German Empire, and even nowadays with the US forming balancing coalitions against China through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Australia, India, Japan, and the US), the trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK, and the US (AUKUS), and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP). Balancing is a preferred strategy, when available, as it allows the state a chance to retain its sovereignty and ensures a status quo that is implicitly favourable, having provided the conditions necessary for the status quo power's growth.

Bandwagoning, on the other hand, represents a state's decision to align *with* the revisionist power. A bandwagoning state may assume the inevitability of the revisionist power's victory and that early alignment could lead to favourable treatment later in the new regional order or that the spoils of war may be shared with bandwagoning parties. States may also choose to bandwagon based on geographic proximity and their relative weakness to the revisionist power. Examples of bandwagoning include the Aedui and the Roman Republic, the Duchy of Warsaw and Napoleonic France, Italy and Nazi Germany in WWII, Thailand and Imperial Japan, and in a contemporary example, Laos and Cambodia with China. In these cases, bandwagoning can be understood as a pragmatic decision by these states, understanding their relative weak position in the regional distribution of power and that resistance would entail negative consequences regardless.

The dichotomous position that states either balance or bandwagon has been transformed since the 2000s with the emergency of strategic hedging. The theory *generally* posits that

states may, if the situation is perceived as conducive, employ policies of bandwagoning and balancing simultaneously to pursue reward maximization alongside risk mitigation (Kuik 2008, 2016). Hedging, as the name would imply, requires that a relatively weaker power navigate emerging geopolitical tensions between a status quo and revisionist power—in the event that there is no other power to hedge between, states can hedge against the dominant power by itself.<sup>15</sup> Strategic hedging allows for a mixed approach that is intended to shroud the hedging states' alignment in ambiguity and thus shelter it from animosity by either the status quo or revisionist state (Wu, 2019).

Hedging may take multiple forms depending on the hedging state and the geopolitical environment. As Tessman and Wolfe (2011) point out, second-tier states—which comprise great, emerging, and revisionist powers—may choose to hedge against the dominant power in the system. Second-tier states choose to adopt a hedging position because they anticipate that at some point in the future conflict between themselves and the dominant power is likely, perhaps even inevitable, and this is referred to as Type A hedging (Tessman & Wolfe, 2011; Salman & Geeraerts, 2015; Geeraerts & Salman, 2016; Salman, 2017). Rather than balancing or bandwagoning against the dominant power and thereby either antagonising or ceding partial sovereignty, the hedging state seeks to employ both strategies to buy time to develop its economic and military industrial complexes to a position in which it can compete with the dominant power (Vennet & Salman, 2019). An example of this is the relationship between China and the US between the 1980s and early 2000s when Deng Xiaoping's policy of *taoguang yanghui* (keep a low profile and bide your time) was the dominant guiding

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<sup>15</sup> Most of the scholarly discourse on the matter focuses on great powers, but strategic hedging is applicable at the smaller scale too. See: El-Dessouki & Mansour, 2020. *Small States and Strategic Hedging: the United Arab Emirates' Policy Towards Iran, Review of Economics & Political Science, ahead-of-print.*

principal for Chinese foreign policy (Hongying, 2014). During this policy, China opened to greater foreign investment, became an increasingly important part of the world economy and supply chain, made domestic reforms towards capitalism, resolved many of its territorial disputes, and in situations where resolutions were not possible, did not press the issue militarily. Beijing demonstrated its capability to be a responsible global citizen and an emerging regional leader that had adopted and embraced the rules-based order imposed by the US (Goldstein, 2001). Since the 2000s, and 2010s under Xi Jinping in particular, Beijing has since shifted to a more overt balancing posture in which it seeks to recast the regional order in its own image. Type A hedging under the *taoguang yanghui* policy provided China the time in which to develop into a rival superpower that now challenges the US for influence in the Indo-Pacific.

In addition to Type A hedging, in which a future potential adversary elects to hedge in order to bide time, allies of a hegemon/leading power may also elect to hedge. This is referred to as Type B hedging, and while the mechanics of it are similar to Type A hedging, the motivations differ. In contrast to Type A hedging, allies of the leading power may choose to hedge if they perceive that the leading power is in decline and will be unable or unwilling to provide certain public goods that it has done so in the foreseeable future. This type of hedging is like the hedging practices investors on Wall Street may make. To offset potential losses by investing in a particular stock, an investor may choose to diversify their investments to provide a cushion if their major investment does not pay out. For example, since the early 2010s, Japan has accelerated the development of its armed forces, sought strategic relationships with friendly states in the Indo-Pacific, and participated and cultivated regional security architecture (Cannon, 2021). For the most part, these actions were crafted to

augment what may be viewed as declining US capabilities relative to China's rapidly advancing armed forces. However, at the same time, Tokyo has been careful not to frame its military advancements as being targeted against any particular state, a necessary precaution to avoid provoking Beijing and alienating its strategic partners in Southeast Asia. As will be seen in Chapter 3, these forms of hedging will be of particular interest to the Thai situation, especially during the colonial era when the Siamese kingdom was confronted by powerful and threatening neighbours.

In the above examples of strategic hedging, the focus was predominately on second-tier powers. While the term *second-tier* is loosely defined by the scholars, the theory itself is even more ambiguous. Hedging, as described above mostly consists of behaviour that allows a hedging state to bide time or manage uncertainty due to a declining or reluctant leading power. The theory itself says little about what specific policies the state may engage in, nor does it say how the hedging state calculates how its alignment other than as *hedging*. Kuik (2008, 2016, 2021) was among the first to consolidate hedging theory by viewing it as a balancing-act in which the hedging state performs acts of limited bandwagoning towards a rising and potentially revisionist power while at the same time engaging in counteracting policies that seek to balance the rising power to a limited extent. These policies may include risk-contingency options, such as indirect balancing and dominance denial, as well as return-maximising options, including economic-pragmatism, binding engagement, and limited bandwagoning. These policies are not just conducted bilaterally, but typically trilaterally or more as the situation demands.

**Table 2.1: Similarities and differences between Type A and Type B hedging strategies**

	<b>Type A Hedging</b>	<b>Type B Hedging</b>
<b>Military-Cooperation</b>	Cooperation with the hegemon is used to bide time until inevitable conflict occurs.	Cooperation with hegemon is maintained to uphold status quo.
<b>Balancing</b>	Hedging state increases its military capabilities. Does not significantly seek external balancing to avoid provoking hegemon.	Hedging state increases internal and external balancing. Seeks to complement aid from hegemon with other great and significant middle powers.
<b>Economic-Costs</b>	Hedging state willing to bear immediate cost for long term benefit.	Hedging state willing to bear immediate cost for long term benefit.
<b>Public Goods</b>	Seeks to accumulate significant reserves. May then seek to provide competing alternative public goods.	Seeks to offset potential losses from anticipated decline/removal of public goods through fail-safe mechanisms.
<b>Drivers</b>	Fear of conflict.	Fear of abandonment.

Unlike balancing or bandwagoning, hedging is inherently a temporary foreign policy strategy. Haacke (2019) goes further by explicating that hedging is typically applied in situations where a state is facing a security risk, but not a security threat. The difference is not simply a matter of semantics, but a reflection of how dangerous the hedging state perceives its geopolitical

environment. For instance, many states in Southeast Asia are currently hedging between the US and China, knowing that the risk of conflict between the two powers at the time of writing is low, but not non-existent. Were the risk of conflict to be considered highly likely in the immediate future, states would shift their alignment towards balancing to protect their security interests. This pattern of state behaviour is entirely reasonable as states seek to pursue policy autonomy as much as the geopolitical environment permits.

**Table 2.2: Strategies available to hedging states**

<b>Hedging Strategy</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
<b>Indirect Balancing</b>	Hedging state seeks to increase its own military capabilities in a non-specific manner. May also seek security cooperation from others without expressly targeting the revisionist power.
<b>Dominance Denial</b>	Hedging state seeks to involve multiple powers to have a stake in the regional security.
<b>Economic Pragmatism</b>	Hedging state increases its economic relationship with revisionist power.
<b>Binding Engagement</b>	Hedging state institutionalises its diplomatic relationship with the revisionist power. Goal is to establish voicing opportunities and mitigate revisionist goals of the great power.
<b>Limited Bandwagoning</b>	The hedging state engages in a political partnership with the revisionist power involving policy coordination, voluntary deference.

Despite the above, strategic hedging is not a panacea to the issue that states face when situated between two great powers. As Lim and Cooper (2015) argue, most literature in the subject area ignores the possibility that there are trade-offs for states in pursuing foreign policies that play both sides. For states that employ hedging, fostering alignment ambiguity is critical and a defining characteristic of the strategy. However, ambiguity raises the concern that the hedging state may be abandoned by its security patron and/or risk provoking the other great power that the hedging state is depending on. If we take the example of Thailand, as will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 6, Bangkok has made moderate alignment signals towards Beijing since 2014. This is illustrated through the acquisition of major defence platforms, increasing the scale and frequency of their joint military exercises, as well as engagement and enmeshment of Beijing through regional institutions. The cultivation of the Sino-Thai relationship is likely to alienate Washington, which views China as its primary geostrategic competitor. The consequence for Bangkok may be that Washington will be reluctant to lend it weight in politically supporting Thailand, as well as providing Thailand access to advanced defence technology, for instance the *F-35 Lightning II* fighter plane. Consequently, in trying to play both sides, Thailand could find itself facing significant trade-offs.

A further issue with the concept of strategic hedging is how liberally the term has been used to describe any foreign policy alignment strategy that does not meet with traditional conventions. The ubiquity of the term has meant that hedging has been used to describe the foreign policies of the US (Medeiros, 2005-2006), the EU and NATO (Art, 2004), China, Russia, France, the UK, Germany (Kuik, 2016), Iran (Salman & Geeraerts, 2015; Puri, 2017), Cambodia (Leng, 2017), Oman (Binhuwaidin, 2019), Japan (Midford, 2018; Yoshimatsu, 2019), Kuwait,



Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman (Guzansky, 2015), Vietnam (Le Hong Hiep, 2013), Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, (Wu, 2019), South Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand (Kuik, 2008; Goh, 2005; Strating, 2019). Lim and Cooper (2015) argue that the widespread adoption of the term to cover all foreign policy strategies that fail to neatly conform to balancing or bandwagoning only serves to dilute the term and weaken its analytical utility. To avoid contributing to this dilution of the term, considerable effort in the following chapters will be spent on illustrating that Thailand's foreign policy strategy meets the criteria to be considered as hedging.

Strategic hedging is a relatively recent theory to conceptualise state foreign policy. Implicit in this theory, but not frequently explicated in the literature, is that foreign policy is a combination of systemic and unit level factors impacting each other. In realist terms, to understand why a state would choose to employ strategic hedging and the manner that it does employ it necessitates analysis that incorporates the various image levels of analysis. For instance, in an emerging great power competition, impacted weaker countries are presented varied options in how to respond. While systemic pressures would likely encourage all states to pursue economically rewarding strategies if they can be achieved without compromising state security, the way that such strategies are achieved vary from state to state. Countries that have relatively autonomous foreign policy executives may be more willing, and more able, to adapt their foreign policy strategies to the constantly shifting geopolitical environment (Massie, 2013; 2016).

The executive's autonomy is further augmented when considering the impact that domestic ethnic groups, notably diasporic communities, may have. Having sizeable diasporic

communities from other states, particularly other great powers, has been demonstrated to have a significant influence in shaping and constraining foreign policy (Kandel, 2010; Lutz, 2017; Aram, 2019). As Thailand has a sizeable, economically, and politically powerful, ethnic Chinese community in Bangkok, there exist incentives for Bangkok to establish policies that engage Beijing. Conversely, should there be the need to balance against China at a later point, there would be pressures constraining Bangkok's policy options.

Considering the above, strategic hedging should not be thought of as simply a means for a state to ride on the coattails of a rising power whilst protected from future eventualities by its patron. Hedging entails significant risks as the hedging state risks alienating both great powers rather than one. Managing these risks, therefore, occupies a significant aspect of the state's foreign policy. In effect, to walk the tightrope of hedging, the state must be prepared to shift its weight when appropriate and necessary. For instance, between 1997 and 2001 Thailand and China were cultivating a deepening and warm relationship, which constrained Bangkok's desire to support the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>16</sup> However, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was able to reverse course and lend its support, which was a major factor behind US President George W. Bush's decision to elevate Thailand to Major non-NATO Ally status a month after the Thai shift in foreign policy. Had the Thaksin government been slower to grasp the shifting geopolitical environment, it may have risked raising Washington's ire and destabilising its security relationship. However, that 2003 moment marks the last highpoint of the US-Thai relationship, which has since then fallen into disrepair with neither side particularly caring about rebuilding. This has allowed Bangkok to

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<sup>16</sup> Another factor worth noting is that Thailand is home to six million Muslims, mostly in its southern provinces. Embracing the US-led war in Iraq would likely have antagonized a sizeable voting bloc as well as triggered greater insurgent activities (Blaxland & Raymond, 2017).

maintain a hedging strategy while still somewhat secure that its existing formal security agreements with the US, despite a nadir in relations, serves as a failsafe should Chinese aggression somehow manifest.

Before ending this subsection, it is important to explicate the framework that will inform the later analysis. As explored earlier, critiques of strategic hedging point to its seemingly eclectic framework that guides analysis in the determination of whether a state is hedging or not. This thesis aims to adopt, therefore, the framework as developed by Kuik, mentioned above. Firstly, this framework is the most widely adopted within the strategic hedging literature. Secondly, its focus on Southeast Asian geopolitics is particularly useful as it is built around the unique geopolitical history of the region. Thirdly, the framework most glaringly captures the essence of hedging, as the deft political manoeuvring by a state between balancing and bandwagoning, status quo and revisionist, economic maximisation and risk mitigation.

In arguing that Siam/Thailand has and continues to engage in strategic hedging, the framework developed by Kuik is most appropriate. It is testable. By examining Siamese/Thai political history, the author may identify instances where mixed approaches were apparent. For instance, during the post-Cold War period Thailand has made substantially friendly acts towards China, while at the same time acting in ways that balance the China threat. The contradiction between being friends and in opposition simultaneously is at the heart of strategic hedging theory and the framework employed here.

### **Middle Power Theory**

States are frequently defined by their perceived capacity to effect impact on the international geopolitical environment. Hegemons are those few great powers in history whose military

capacity is of such proportions that even a concert of great powers would struggle to challenge them. Great powers are those that have relatively significant military capabilities and influence over the regional, and occasionally the global, political environment. However, when the discussion centres on middle powers, there are fewer certainties.

According to Robertson (2017) and Chapnick (2000) the origins of the term arguably date back much earlier than WWII with Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Bartolus of Sassoferrato (1313-1357), and Giovanni Botero's text, *Ragion di Stato* (1589/2-17). In particular, the *Ragion di Stato* or Reason/Principle of State examined how states are created, their regimes, and their comparative power (Tempesta, 1972). Following a realist logic, Botero noted that all states seek self-preservation, and that states with military capacity naturally, because their security is all but guaranteed, must expand and conquer those states who are militarily less capable. What distinguished Botero from his contemporary Niccolò Machiavelli was that Botero used the principles of Christianity as a guiding principle for state leaders. However, these same Christian traditions also lent to Botero the idea that states assume a hierarchical position and that this position is based on strength. Interestingly though, Botero posited that it is middle sized states that are most apt to survive as they attract less jealousy than the large whilst simultaneously being strong enough to protect themselves, unlike the weak (p. 8). Botero's writing remains useful in the study of middle powers, combining aspects of realism, Judeo-Christian ideals, and middle power theory in one of the earliest texts that explicitly look at the hierarchy of power and middle powers.

The term *middle power* is without a widely agreed upon definition (Flemes, 2007). In contrast to other terms frequently used by IR scholars such as *great power*, *hegemon*, or *small power*,

the term middle power is frequently employed based on vague assumptions that lack internal consistency (Vandamme, 2018). For example, the traditional approach to middle powers views them as Western, affluent, relatively egalitarian, and ruled by a liberal democratic government. Countries typically listed as middle powers, therefore, include states as disparate as Canada (Cooper, 2015), Australia (Abbondanza, 2021), Japan (Wilkins, 2021), the United Kingdom, France, and Germany (Martin & Krpata, 2021), Norway (Græger, 2019) Sweden (Buzan, 2004), the Netherlands (Norichika, 2003), Italy (Siddi, 2019), and Spain (Abbondanza, 2018). This list includes some of the most politically influential states of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, nuclear powers, several members of the Group of Seven, and two out of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. To add to this confusion, certain scholars have sought to provide greater descriptive power to the term by employing substitutional terms and adjectives, for example, *traditional*, *emerging*, *rising*, *regional*, and *niche* (Prys, 2012; Cooper, 2013; Dal, 2014; Aydin, 2019). To avoid adding to this confusion, the following section will explore the development of the middle power concept and apply characteristics that will be useful to the critical analysis later.

From its early modern usage in Canadian academic and political discourse, the concept of middle power has been consistently tied with characteristics that promote certain normative behaviour (Chapnick, 2000). A common refrain in the discourse on middle powers was the outsized capacity middle powers had to promote normative behaviour on the world stage (Cooper et al., 1993; Beeson, 2011; Chapnick, 2013). In effect, this concept was based on the state's function within the system and followed similar patterns for characterising great and small powers. However, the implication in such a method of defining middle power is that it left the term profoundly fluid as changes in government could thereby affect whether a state

was a middle power or not. Additionally, linking the term middle power to affluence, egalitarianism, and liberal democracy was inherently restrictive and gave primacy to factors that were not based on power. In effect, one might ask the question of whether middle power denoted any real-world notion of power, or was it a political term to describe like-minded states?

As a result of their limited bargaining power, middle powers frequently coordinate their policies in alignment with their security patrons and therefore legitimise the regional/global order their patron has established (Cooper, 2011; Theis & Sari, 2018). However, within those constraints, middle powers can exercise influence in a variety of means. Middle powers are encouraged, by their limited capacity, to be highly selective in where their political efforts are directed. Therefore, Jones argues, middle powers are notable for their disproportionate influence in niche areas.<sup>17</sup> For example, both Singapore and Denmark, despite their relatively small size, have outsized influence in commercial shipping. Similarly, Australia has, for the most part, been internationally influential in the promotion of trade liberalisation, human rights, and environmental security (Carr, 2014). Middle powers, however, do not seek influence in these niche areas for the sake of influence, but typically do so for national self-interest. For instance, the earlier example of Denmark and Singapore's niche influence in commercial shipping is a natural result of their dependency on maritime trade. By concentrating their efforts in niche areas, middle powers are more likely able to successfully effect change.

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<sup>17</sup> Influence in niche areas should not be confused with *niche powers*, a sub-category of middle powers. See Table 2.3.

In the post-Cold War environment, linking affluence, egalitarianism, and liberal democracy to the term middle power made little sense. States such as Turkey, South Africa, Argentina, and Iran were commanding greater regional influence and in some cases were emerging regional leaders. Jordaan (2003) made the strong case that it was time to open the term middle power by expanding it to include non-traditional or *emerging* middle powers. These countries were regionally influential, but often lacked the wherewithal, capacity, or public interest to act at a global level. These countries included Mexico, South Korea, Indonesia, South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and several others.<sup>18</sup>

What distinguished these emerging middle powers from their traditional counterparts was the fact that these states are, for the most part, members of the global south, illiberal, experienced high inequality, and are relatively economically fragile (Jordaan, 2003; Aydin, 2021). Further differences between the traditional and emerging middle powers were their regional association (Tinh & Ngan, 2021). Traditionally middle powers frequently lack regional influence due to nearby great powers, for example, Canada and the US in North America, and the Netherlands and Germany in Europe. In contrast, emerging middle powers typically have strong regional associations, for example, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia with the Middle East/North African Region, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam in Southeast Asia, and South Africa, Nigeria, and Angola in Sub-Saharan Africa (Black & Hornsby, 2016). Further, emerging middle powers generally seek to effect reform in political norms, whereas traditional middle powers are for the most part appeasing and legitimising of the status quo

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<sup>18</sup> It must be noted that some scholars vehemently disagree with classifying Brazil as a middle power, instead preferring to seek a comprise term, such as rising power, emerging power, regional power, etc. This again illustrates the perils in attempting to group countries as middle powers. See: Burges, S. (2013). Mistaking Brazil for a Middle Power, *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, 19(2), pp. 286-302.

(Jordaan, 2003). Jordaan’s concept has served to considerably expand the conceptualisation of middle powers, providing scholars a structured approach to the analysis of middle powers.

**Table 2.3: List of various middle power types and explanations**

<b>Type</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Traditional</b>	Favours multilateralism, ad hoc coalitions, institutions, and mediate disputes (Cooper, 2013). Often wealthy, egalitarian, political stable democracies, and regionally non-influential (Jordaan, 2013).	Canada, Australia, Benelux, Nordic States. Jordaan includes Mexico, South Korea, and Japan.
<b>Emerging</b>	Regionally powerful, but globally weak. Relatively high social disparities, weak democratic institutions, historically outside the global decision-making process, tend to be reformist. (Jordaan, 2013)	Argentina, Malaysia, Nigeria, South Africa, Turkey, Thailand, and Venezuela.
<b>Rising</b>	South-oriented, sovereigntist world image, regional hegemonic aspirations (Stephen, 2012).	India, South Africa, Brazil (Stephen, 2012). Germany 1989-1999 (Berger, 2001) Turkey (Dal, 2014)
<b>Niche</b>	Small and unable to exert geopolitical influence outside of their niche area (Cooper, 2013).	Denmark - shipping. Qatar - media. North Korea – nuclear weapons. Norway – oil and the Nobel Peace Prize.



Ping (2005, 2017) made efforts to redress qualitative-led middle power analysis by adopting a quantitative approach. Firstly, Ping illustrates that for the most part, scholarly research on middle powers has originated from those countries that have traditionally defined themselves as such, with Canada and Australia being prime examples. In effect, Ping identifies the tautological issue that middle powers defined themselves as such by creating a definition that was self-descriptive. It is this self-description as a middle power that Chapnick (2003) illustrates was central to the initial premise of the descriptor for Canada's political elite to etch out a niche international influence. Ping (2005) expanded the theory by substituting the qualitative definitions that focused on state behaviour and instead identifies middle powers based on nine criteria: "population, area, military expenditure, GDP, growth rate, export, per capita, trade in GDP, and life expectancy" (Sudo, 2007, p. 469). However, rather than an end in itself, Ping (2005) uses quantitative analysis of states to firstly identify middle powers and from that to understand where middle power states' interests are derived from. Though this is a niche theory within the wider middle power theory, it remains useful as it attempts to answer the ambiguity that has been mentioned earlier. The work by Ping will be used to complement later definitions of Thailand as a middle power.

In the behavioural model, middle powers are distinguished from both great and small powers by their preference for multilateralism (Chapnick, 2013). Given the limited bargaining power of middle powers to effect change unilaterally, middle powers achieve their goals in concert with other powers through institutions. However, it is implied that these proposed reforms either align with the interests of great powers or at least do not challenge them.

Successful multilateralism can be seen in ASEAN, of which Thailand is a founding member. To bind Vietnam's aggression in the 1990s and make it a stakeholder in regional stability, Thailand campaigned for Hanoi's ASEAN membership, as it did later for Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. In effect, Bangkok utilised the ASEAN forum and the economic incentives that membership brought with it to lock-in regional stability and prosperity (Tung, 2010). This was neatly summarised by Thai Foreign Minister Kasem Kasemsri when he stated that ASEAN would not be complete until Vietnam's inclusion (Frost, 1995). Conversely, Turnbull (2022) demonstrates the limits of middle power multilateralism in examining Ottawa and Canberra's push for a ban on cluster munitions that ultimately led to the UN Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM). In creating the CCM, both Ottawa and Canberra were constrained by Washington in the scope of their proposed reforms with both middle powers opting to moderate their goals rather than risk antagonising their security patron. Despite occasional failures, middle powers are incentivised to collaborate in actualising their objectives given their limited bargaining power and, therefore, favour the use of multilateral institutions.

**Table 2.4: Cooper's (2013) concept of relative power in middle power theory**

<b>System Level</b>	<b>Australia's Position</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
<b>Global</b>	Middle Power	Australia's proactive international diplomacy is guaranteed by its political closeness to the global dominant power, the USA. Consequently, Australia may have latitude in pursuing its agenda, provided it does not conflict with its patron.
<b>Regional</b>	Secondary Power	Middle The Asia region is dominated by China with several powerful middle powers possessing much more political cachet in the region, such as Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, and Singapore.
<b>Sub-regional</b>	Hegemony	In the Australasia region, Australia assumes a hegemonic status as its population, military capacity, international political cachet, and diplomatic corps capabilities preponderantly outstrip all its neighbours, including New Zealand, Tonga, Fiji, The Solomon Islands, and other countries.

An issue implicit in the dichotomy of traditional and emerging middle powers is that the concept of power is a relative condition. Cooper (2013) illustrates that what might constitute a middle power at one level of analysis may fail to be considered one at other levels. For example, at a regional level, Thailand occupies a middle power position, being among the leading Southeast Asian states responsible for regional institutions, maintaining a relatively large GDP, and other metrics mentioned above. However, were the scope of analysis to view Thailand's impact at a global level, it would be difficult to make the case that Thailand has an influence comparable to other middle powers such as Canada and Australia. Similarly, within the Mekong River sub-region, Thailand is the dominant power and displays this by leading the region in security, economic, and political integration. Cooper's argument endorses the

primacy of behavioural approaches to characterising middle powers but augments it by viewing power as a sliding scale determined by relative power.

As has been demonstrated, the term middle power is notoriously difficult to define. Starting with a restrictive and flawed term used to class influential Western, affluent, liberal democracies, the term has since expanded to meet geopolitical realities. In contrast to the term great powers, of which a reasonably coherent definition is agreed on and used, the term middle power has extremely fuzzy edges. The literature examined here is not meant to resolve this issue, but instead explore the difficulties in defining middle powers as well as identifying some core characteristics that will be important throughout the thesis. These characteristics include niche influence in certain fundamental interest areas, a preference for multilateralism, economically significant, and in the case of emerging powers, reformist and regionally oriented agendas can be included. Thus, because of the difficulty in formulating a singular definition that appropriately encompasses all middle powers, we are left with an eclectic mix of definitions that are overly inclusive and subject to inconsistencies. Regardless, by having a common core of similarities as mentioned above, in conjunction with neoclassical realist and strategic hedging focus on foreign policy, a framework for analysing Thailand's foreign policy is possible.

## Chapter 3

### Colonialism and Thailand 1782 – 1932

*Our wars with Burma and Vietnam are over; they won't be a threat anymore. Only the threats of Western powers remain. We must be wary of them. We should study their innovations for our own benefit but not to the degree of obsession or worship.*

King Rama III (1851)<sup>19</sup>

The modern history of Siam/Thailand is one characterised by change. The relatively isolated geopolitical environment in which Siam existed prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century was shaped primarily by its rivalries with its neighbours: Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. It was a system in which loose decentralised authority emanated from major population centres in what is referred to as the Mandala System.<sup>20</sup> While knowledge and contact of the outside world existed, its impact was negligible, especially in regarding daily political life. This changed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Britain, following its triumph in the Napoleonic Wars, had the available resources to commit towards the colonisation of Southeast Asia (Belich, 2009; Giblin, 2015). France followed in Britain's footsteps not long after in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, Europe's leading two powers competed for influence and territory in Southeast Asia in the hopes to translate success in Asia into economic and strategic advantage

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<sup>19</sup> The Coin Museum. (n.d.). Red Purse Money. Retrieved from: [http://coinmuseum.treasury.go.th/en/news\\_view.php?nid=111](http://coinmuseum.treasury.go.th/en/news_view.php?nid=111)

<sup>20</sup> The Mandala System may best be thought of a hierarchical system in which major population centres exercised loose decentralised authority over less powerful population centres. For more information see: Tooker, D. E. (1996). Putting the mandala in its place: A practice-based approach to the spatialization of power on the Southeast Asian 'periphery'--the case of the Akha, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 55(2), 323-358.

in Europe. In this geopolitical competition there was only one kingdom that maintained its sovereignty, remained distinct, and nominally independent: Siam. This chapter seeks to explore the systemic pressures placed on Siam by this geostrategic competition, Bangkok's foreign policy response, and the outcomes.

A challenge in any examination of Siamese history, especially the colonial period, is the pace at which events occurred. Rather than conveying that information in a chronological order with the actions of all the states involved being discussed simultaneously, this chapter is divided into four sections. The first section explores the geopolitical context of Siam prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Siam's early interactions with European powers. The second examines the Anglo-Siamese relationship during the period of *Pax Britannica* (1815-1914) until the end of Siamese absolute monarchy in 1932 and the ways in which Bangkok accepted London's regional pre-eminence while also challenging and attempting to dilute it, in effect, enacting strategic hedging. The third section explores the Franco-Siamese relationship, the aggressive and rapid nature of French colonial expansion, and Bangkok's foreign policy response. Lastly, the final section explores Siamese emulation of European practices as a means of survival, particularly in reference to the European military, technological, and governmental advances.

Throughout the first three sections, analysis will predominately focus on the third image: the structure of the international system and the way in which it shapes state behaviour. However, given that Thailand is the only state within Southeast Asia that escaped colonisation, relying solely on the third image is insufficient. As such, the fourth section of this chapter will examine in greater depth second image factors during the period from the Burney

Treaty to the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. This will provide a deeper understanding of the internal mechanisms that moderated the intensity of Siam's growth and foreign policy. By examining Siam's experience with colonial Britain and France, a pattern of state behaviour can be established illustrating Siamese consistency in employing strategic hedging amid great power competition.

### **Siam and its Geopolitical Environment: 16<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Before examining Siamese foreign policy during the colonial period, it is important to understand the Siamese geopolitical environment. Though Siam's interactions with Britain and France are well-known, Siam's first contact with Europeans were with the Portuguese. In 1511, a diplomatic mission headed by Duarte Fernandes to King Ramathibodi II (r. 1491-1529) set the first formal contact between Europe and Siam and helped usher in a period of increased trade and interaction between the two kingdoms (Halikowski-Smith, 2006). Trade between the Portuguese and Siamese expanded to include the Dutch, English, and French who were later allowed to set up factories within Siamese territory during the reign of King Narai (r. 1656-1688) (Dung, 2017). This was notable as it encouraged sustained commercial and diplomatic contact between Europe and Siam allowing the former significant influence in the Siamese court.

Narai was cautious to balance the growing influence of the Portuguese and Dutch at court through the French to whom he granted special concessions (Ruangsilp, 2007). However, another side effect of the increasing European economic presence was that it upset the

interests of previously established economic and political elites. This allowed Phetracha, a high-ranking military advisor to the king, to gather forces and seize power for himself ruling from 1688 to 1703 (Strathern, 2022). Phetracha violently ejected the French from Siam in the Siege of Bangkok (1688) and then severed ties with all European powers, save the Dutch (Ruangsilp, 2007). It is noteworthy that in 1688 Siam, under Phetracha, could reject European influence and forcefully end the relationship on its own terms. Such an episode would not be repeated.

Despite ending in a coup, the beginnings of Siamese strategic hedging are visible in the above episode. Conscious of being overly reliant on the Portuguese, Narai attempted to negate their influence through the deliberate invitation of other European powers (Pombejra, 2003; Ruangsilp, 2007). In effect, Narai was rejecting Portuguese influence in a non-confrontational way that left Lisbon and Ayutthaya on good terms. Further, Narai was noted for playing European powers off each other, using their rivalries back home to prevent any unified European opposition to Siam. This was most evident when Narai managed competing European trade interests in Junk Ceylon (modern Phuket) by appointing French Brother Rene Charbonneau as governor of the island from 1682 to 1685, knowing this would fuel tensions between the various European powers in the area (Choisy & Chaumont, 1998). At the time Phuket was already well-established as a trading hub, and the island's rich source of tin was highly desired by European traders. Rather than directly intervening and managing the tin trade, Narai's decision to allow the European powers to compete amongst each other allowed them to direct their energies in that, rather than against the Siamese kingdom. Though Narai's reign ended in a coup and a rejection of European, especially French, influence, the practice



of playing powers against each other and employing dominance denial strategies was already becoming established. In effect, elements of hedging can be seen in Thai foreign policy as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Despite the attempts to play various powers off each other, the reality is that the geopolitical environment was not immediately existentially threatening. Much of the European activity in Siam was through merchants with little in the way of governmental support, especially militarily. In essence, the relationship between the European powers and Siam in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries before the violent expulsion of the former was primarily commercial. The goal of establishing a colonial outpost or a full-fledged colony were not primary drivers. However, after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 and other geopolitical shifts between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century within mainland Southeast Asia and Europe, the drivers of policy changed. Burma, Siam's long-time rival and led by King Hsinbyushin (r. 1736-1776), invaded Siam in August 1765, supposedly to disrupt Ayutthaya's regional economic dominance (James, 2000; Kasetsiri, 2015). After a 16-month siege starting in January 1766 Burmese forces violently sacked the capital of Ayutthaya and ended the 400-year-old Ayutthaya Kingdom (Wyatt, 1984). The power vacuum that followed led to Siam's temporary fragmentation, the creation of new principalities, and the seizure of strategic areas and major population centres, such as the northern valley area of Lan Na by the Burmese (Harvey, 1967). Though these territories would be recaptured by King Taksin (r. 1767-1782) in the successor Thonburi Kingdom (1767-1782), Siamese political stability and security had been significantly undermined (Van Roy, 2017). While Siam recovered from its defeats and reconstituted itself twice in a 20-year period as the Thonburi Kingdom and then the Rattanakosin Kingdom, Britain became the leading

economic and political power in Europe. Additionally, after the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1789-1815), many European powers started to view East and Southeast Asia as areas particularly desirable for colonisation. In contrast to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in which European activity in mainland Southeast Asia was mostly limited to commercial enterprises, European policy in the region in the 19<sup>th</sup> century activities was guided primarily by strategic concerns.

European powers were not the only outsiders that had vested interests in the region. Siam had long been a tributary client of Imperial China and in the early Rattanakosin Kingdom was one of the Qing dynasty's largest trading partners (Wills, 2012; Baker & Phongpaichit, 2017). Siam was a major supplier of foodstuffs to China, especially rice and other staples that China was unable to produce in sufficient quantities as Chinese farmers transitioned to cash crops. Further, Bangkok's protected bay along the maritime route between China and Europe positioned the city as a significant economic trading hub (Nibhatsukit, 2019). For instance, during the reign of King Rama III (r. 1825-1850) it has been claimed that much of the bay around Bangkok was filled with Chinese vessels and that Bangkok was a major hub for Chinese goods that would go on to be exported around the world (Viraphol, 1977; Teeraviriyakul, 2016). In addition to economic relations, the relationship between Siam and China was especially important to the Siamese monarch, who partly derived his legitimacy from the Chinese emperor.

Among the policies of King Rama I (r. 1782-1809), an important one early in his reign was providing tribute to China to receive imperial recognition, critical in helping consolidate his

position (Jory, 2021).<sup>21</sup> Though China and Thailand enjoyed a special relationship that was rooted in centuries of reciprocity, it did not survive the dissolution of the Chinese regional order following its defeat in the Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860) (Chan, 2015). European powers, especially Britain, were so preponderantly powerful that even regional hegemony such as China were not safe from their ambitions. Prior to the Opium Wars a workaround by Siamese officials was to continue sending tribute to Imperial China by labelling high value goods, for example, ivory and fine porcelain, as “ballast” on cargo documents, which was reciprocated by Beijing (Tagliacozzo, 2004). Though the relationship between Imperial China and Siam faded into the background during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is telling how reluctant Siam was to see the relationship disappear.

Beyond humbling Imperial China, European powers had a profound effect on the regional order within Southeast Asia. Before the Opium Wars, the Burmese Kingdom had to contend with a growing British colonial empire that sought to acquire Burma for its lucrative resources, such as teak wood and rare gems (Tagliacozzo, 2004; Coclanis, 2019). In the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) Britain acquired the provinces of Assam, Manipur, Cachar, Jaintia, as well as the Burmese coastal territories of Arakan Province and Tenasserim (Kwarteng, 2012). Over three wars Burma was completely absorbed into the British Empire and formally under the control of the British Raj as a province of India by 1885.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Chinese recognition was of such importance that during periods of instability competing leaders would send tributes, hoping to leverage that recognition domestically for support by political elites.

<sup>22</sup> These wars were from 1824-1826, 1852-1853, and 1885. They ended with the dissolution of the Konbaung dynasty of Burma and continued British rule until 1948.

Secondly, Britain's establishment of the Straits Settlements to Siam's south exacerbated London's regional maritime preponderance (Webster, 2011).<sup>23</sup> Demarcation of the border and control over the islands was formalised in the 1826 Treaty of Commerce and Friendship between Siam and Britain, commonly referred to as the Burney Treaty. The treaty required Siam to cede all claims to the island of Penang along with guarantees to not interfere in trading on the islands of Kelantan and Terengganu (Article XII of the Treaty between the King of Siam and Great Britain, 1826). Consequently, by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Britain was not just a European power with some disconnected colonies, but a vast interconnected empire whose possessions included some of the most strategic and economically valuable parts of South and Southeast Asia (Tagliacozzo, 2005; Lewis, 2016). British guns, diplomacy, and trade brought it such power that dwarfed the local states.

Thirdly, in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Siam faced a new threat in the form of Imperial France. Under Napoleon III, the nephew of Napoleon I, France sought to become a colonial power and compete with Britain in Southeast Asia (Tuck, 1995). Siam, historically in competition with the Vietnamese over control of Laos and Cambodia, now had to deal with an aggressive French campaign seeking to create a colony across Indochina.<sup>24</sup> In contrast to the more amenable British that did not have an explicit desire to colonise Siam, having reached an accord in 1855, France was highly expansionist and aggressive. Where it took

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<sup>23</sup> The territories of the Straits Settlements include modern Malaysia, Singapore, Christmas Island, Cocos Islands, and parts of Borneo. For more information see: Borschberg, P., (2017). *Singapore and its Straits, c.1500-1800*. *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 45(133). p. 373-390 and Ding, C. H., (1978). *A History of Straits Settlements Foreign Trade 1870-1915*. Singapore National Museum, Singapore.

<sup>24</sup> The three kingdoms that comprised what is collectively referred to Laos were the Kingdoms of Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champassak. These kingdoms had previously been united as the Lan Xang kingdom that existed from 1353-1707. For more information see: Van Roy, E. (2017). *Siamese Melting Pot: Ethnic Minorities in the Making of Bangkok*, Singapore & Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books & ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute.

Britain 60 years to colonise and control Burma, France did the same in the areas of modern Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in half the time, expanding their colony until it reached Siam's frontiers. As the epitaph at the beginning of this chapter states, Siam's local rivals were no longer a strategic concern: "Only the threats of Western powers remain." The following two sections will explore how Siam navigated the dual British and French threat to remain the only independent indigenous state in Southeast Asia.

### **Siam and Britain from the 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

#### *The Burney Treaty*

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the British posed a particular risk to Siamese security, having expanded their colonial influence over India, many of the areas near Siam's south, and beginning to encroach on Burmese territory (Porter & Louis, 1999). In contrast to the violent resistance Siam offered the French a century earlier, Bangkok was undeniably not in a position in which it could resist Britain. Instead, Siam sought diplomacy and aligned with Britain in its campaign against the Burmese in 1824 (Englehart, 2010). Siamese cooperation was later rewarded for this cooperation in the relatively equitable 1826 Burney Treaty that sought to demarcate Britain and Siam's shared border in the south (Articles I, XII, XIII, and XIV) (Treaty between Kingdom of Siam and Great Britain, 1826). Additionally, the treaty sought to reinforce provisions agreed upon earlier that Siam would not interfere in the trading practices of British colonists at their ports in south of Siam (Article VI). In aligning with Britain early, Bangkok had sought to shield itself from British predation and was somewhat rewarded by recognition of its south border (Article III). Further, the Burney Treaty provided for territorial inviolability and thus implicitly acknowledged Siam as a member of the European Westphalian

system, albeit as a lesser power. This is notable as Siam was, in effect, accepted into an exclusive club that none of its neighbours could claim. Lastly, the treaty restricted British merchants to trading within Bangkok and they were subject to Siamese law, meaning that British subjects could be expelled at the king's discretion (Tagliacozzo, 2004).

The Burney Treaty was, however, limited in its scope.<sup>25</sup> Given that Britain had been engaged in a costly war against the Burmese in which they lost 15,000 personnel from the 40,000 combined British Indian force assembled, they were not in a strong position to leverage their influence against Siam (Snodgrass, 1827). The result was a treaty that was limited and refrained from overplaying either party's hand. Harvey (1992) argues that in negotiating the treaty London was primarily concerned with consolidating new gains and extracting resources rather than establishing colonial possessions. The treaty also weakened the Siamese royal monopolies. These monopolies, though, were already in decline before the treaty was established with King Rama II (r. 1809-1824), who was forced on occasion to pay for labour and goods in coveted white fabric as his coffers were empty (Mead, 2004). Despite weakening Siamese royal monopolies, the economic benefits to Siam were significant. Wyatt (1984) notes that the Burney Treaty increased Siamese trade with Singapore by 50%.

King Rama II, to pre-empt some the treaty's articles and avoid being viewed as a *king merchant*, opened Siam to international trade and limited economic liberalisation (Cushman, 1981). This is evident in the significant increase in bilateral trade between Siam and China

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<sup>25</sup> Newspapers in 1855 derided the Burney treaty as requiring a drawn-out negotiation that achieved little. For more information see: The Commercial Treaty with Siam. (1855). *The Examiner*, 467.

between 1810-1840 and Siam and Britain from 1826 onward (Viraphol, 1977; Viraphol, 2014). As Mead (2004) argues, this declaration of economic liberalisation was not the result of external pressure only, but instead the recognition by a monarch of the inability to maintain economic solvency through mercantile trade. In such a sense, the Burney Treaty had the inadvertent impact of increasing the absolutist nature of the Siamese monarch by reinforcing the internal shift from a trade-based means of acquiring funds to tax farming, which required increasing authoritative power. These factors smoothed relations between Britain and Siam as Rama II's decision to move away from utilising royal monopolies in favour of tax farms allowed greater economic cooperation between the two far-flung powers.

Despite its notable achievements, the Burney Treaty was very quickly perceived as insufficient by London in meeting the commercial interests of the British Empire, especially once London had recovered from its costly war against Burma (Terwiel, 1991). By occupying the major coastal port cities of Burma, Britain effectively controlled the export and import of goods into Burma. This had the added benefit of securing British India's sea routes as now the Burmese Kingdom had limited access to the Indian Ocean. Consequently, British forces operating in Burma had greater manoeuvrability and security than before, which was advanced even further following the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852-1853). However, the biggest change in the geopolitical environment came with the First Opium War (1839-1842) and the subsequent 1842 Anglo-Chinese Treaty of Nanking (Jianlang, 2016:2). The mechanisms present in this treaty later provided the foundation for a similar treaty between the UK and

Siam (Mead, 2004).<sup>26</sup> As such, between 1826 when the Burney Treaty was signed and its replacement in 1855, the British position in Southeast Asia had strengthened significantly, providing it the capacity and confidence to rewrite the rules that had previously guided its relationship with Siam. If the Burney Treaty was considered weak and ineffective by London, the same would not be said of the 1855 Bowring Treaty.

### *The Bowring Treaty*

In 1851, London, seeing its regional position emboldened following its victories in China, sent a diplomatic delegation to Siam led by the White Raja of Sarawak (modern Borneo), Sir James Brooke (Wannamethee, 1990). This mission, however, failed to achieve its aim of revising the earlier Burney Treaty as King Rama III was ill and refused to meet with the delegation. In lieu of the king, Sir James Brooke was met by officials of the Finance Ministry who, due to their position, were unable to make any concessions to London. It is reported that Sir James Brooke left Siam fuming with this failure and failed to deliver presents of good faith to the King (Terwiel, 1991).<sup>27</sup> Shortly after Brooke's departure King Rama III passed away, paving the way for renewed negotiations by London with the new king. Sir John Bowring, of whom the Bowring Treaty is named after, was the Governor of Hong Kong and had been requested by London to meet with Siamese officials in order to sign a new treaty (Terwiel, 1991; Bowring, 2014). Bowring had already established himself as a skilled government economist having led accounting investigations in France, the Netherlands, Egypt, Syria, Switzerland, Italy, and

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<sup>26</sup> These mechanisms comprise most of what is commonly associated with 'unequal' treaties. Included in these treaties are extraterritoriality and the foreign control of trade, taxes, and most favoured nation status.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, these presents were salvaged by Sir John Bowring's team despite their water damage when the *Auckland* sunk. Parkes (in Terwiel, 1989) notes that the damage was considerable, but that 36 out of 45 packages were salvaged.



Germany. Further, Bowring had been a member of parliament from 1835-1837, and after an economic depression wiped out his capital became the British consul at Canton (Norton-Kyshe, 1971:12). Bowring had been selected by London to lead negotiations with the new King, 47-year-old King Rama IV (Mongkut r. 1851-1868).<sup>28</sup>

King Rama III's son, Mongkut, was vastly different than his father having spent over a decade as a monk during which time he learnt various subjects, such as astronomy, as well as languages, including Latin, French, and English from his friend Vicar Pallegoix.<sup>29</sup> Being the second son of Rama III, Mongkut was not expected to be king especially given that King Rama III had an estimated 51 sons. Consequently, Mongkut's greatest achievements prior to his accession as monarch was primarily in the field of theology. Mongkut is noted for his reforms within Buddhism, which culminated in the founding of his own sect *Dhammayuttika Nikaya* (ธรรมยุติกนิกาย), meaning Followers of the Teachings of Buddha. This sect nowadays represents one of the two dominant sects of Buddhism in Thailand (Dhammasakiyo, 2019).

Upon his accession King Mongkut, realising he was ill-prepared for a life as monarch, appointed his younger brother Prince Chutamani/Pinklao to the Front Palace/wang na (วังหน้า) in the role of *Uparaja* (อุปราช).<sup>30</sup> In effect, Mongkut elevated his brother to the role of a viceroy,

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<sup>28</sup> From Rama IV onward this thesis will mostly use the monarch's common name. See Appendix A for a list of common names of monarchs of the Chakri Dynasty.

<sup>29</sup> Pallegoix had attempted to convert Mongkut, unsuccessfully. In a famous quote on the topic, Mongkut is quoted to have said to the vicar, "What you teach people to do is admirable, but what you teach them to believe is foolish." See: Bruce, R. (1969). King Mongkut of Siam and his treaty with Britain, *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 9, 82-100.

<sup>30</sup> As the name would imply, the Front Palace was a palace located in front of the main palace. The title holder, "Lord of the Front Palace," was typically the heir presumptive and thus commanded significant power.

a position of great significance and power in Siamese society. However, unlike other Front Palace appointments in the past, Prince Pinklao was crowned and ruled as a second king alongside his brother and like his brother had reportedly an excellent command of English (Bennui & Hashim, 2014). This was useful to King Mongkut later during negotiations with Bowring as well as later negotiations with the American delegation in the Harris Treaty of 1856 (Moon 1935; Loos, 2005). It was this political environment that Bowring was entering when he departed Singapore in 1855 on board the *HMS Rattler*.

### *The Details of the Bowring Treaty*

The Bowring Treaty has been described by Southeast Asian scholar Tuck (1995) as, “the most drastic of all the unequal treaties to be accepted by an Asiatic power” (p. 9). Perhaps an overzealous statement in comparison to the treaties of Nanking and Shimonoseki forced upon China by Britain and Imperial Japan respectively. Tuck’s statement, however, does speak to the extensiveness of the treaty, especially given that it was not the result of humiliating military defeat. Among its provisions, the treaty established extraterritoriality for British subjects (Article I), the right for British warships to enter the mouth of the Chao Phraya River<sup>31</sup> (Article VII), and the reduction/elimination of certain tariffs (Article VIII). Further, the treaty provided specific tariff rates for a comprehensive list of goods to be exported or imported by Siam. For example, major cash crops, such as sugar, were exempt from export duties and had a transit duty not exceeding two salung.<sup>32</sup> These provisions were designed to open the

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<sup>31</sup> Name of the main river in Bangkok.

<sup>32</sup> Historic Thai currency. Prior to decimalization, Thai currency worked in octaves Pai, Fuang, Salung, Baht, and Tamlung in order of increasing value. See: The Treasury Department, (n.d.). Thai Currency Standard. Retrieved from: [http://coinmuseum.treasury.go.th/en/news\\_view.php?nid=115](http://coinmuseum.treasury.go.th/en/news_view.php?nid=115).

Siamese economy, dismantle the many layers of tariffs that existed, and make the purchase of foreign goods exorbitantly expensive.

Where the Burney Treaty of earlier had been signed as a treaty between relative equals and out of mutual necessity, the Bowring Treaty was clearly unequal, representing a clear shift in the balance of power, and Britain's surety of its regional position. London made no secret of the obvious discrepancy in power between itself and Bangkok by expanding the scope of the treaty to areas that directly impacted Siamese sovereignty. For example, in addition to the other provisions listed above, the Bowring Treaty compelled Bangkok to allow British subjects to purchase land (Article III). Further, the treaty also forcefully opened the Siamese domestic market to British opium, a highly addictive narcotic (Article VIII). Lastly, the treaty also ensured that Britain would remain Siam's preferred trading partner by the establishment of most favoured nation status (Article X) (Ouyyanont, 2017). Overall, the treaty illustrated the fundamental changes in the relative power between the two states with Siam being forced to hand over control over many aspects of its foreign trade and domestic policy to the British.

The effects of the Bowring Treaty, at least economically, are easily measurable. Tagliacozzo (2004) argues that the treaty essentially made Siam into a British satellite as nearly all Siamese trade was done either through or with Britain.<sup>33</sup> For example, by 1893 it is estimated that around 93% of all Siamese trade was either with Britain or its colonies, such as Singapore. Siamese exports grew considerably during this period as well with the export of rice, teak,

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<sup>33</sup> For more information of the Siamese economy and a regional analysis during this period see: *Ouyyanont, P. (2017). A Regional Economic History of Thailand*, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.

and sugar increasingly significantly. For example, in 1873 Siamese official teak exports were estimated to be 5,600 cubic metres. This figure increased by 1885-1889 to 62,000 cubic metres per year. Further, Tagliacozzo estimates that 90% of the revenue in licit and illicit teak exports were in the hands of British subjects with the remaining amount likely held by Siamese merchants. These figures are estimates only as the capacity for Bangkok to monitor activities beyond any major cities in its immediate area was quite limited and as such smuggling was common. Consequently, it can be argued that Britain's lack of interest in colonising Siam was economically pragmatic. Without necessitating the costs of colonial administration, London had most of the benefits of colonisation. The Bowring Treaty gave London a dominant and long-lasting hold over the Siamese economy that lasted until Britain's ejection from the region by Imperial Japan in WWII.

#### *British influence, emulation, and 'siwilai'*

Beyond economic considerations the Bowring Treaty and British influence more largely had significant social impact, especially for the Siamese political elite. Concepts of '*siwilai*' or 'civilisation' dominated Siamese political discourse with Winichakul (2000) arguing that Siamese backwardness was a pressing concern at the time. Charnvit (2015, p. 3-6) quotes Mongkut as remarking that Siam was "half-civilised and half-barbarian," indicating that the pressure to modernise in the face of British dominance was a major pressing concern of Siam's political elite. It was this sense of inferiority, and the implicit consequences that continued 'barbarism' would entail, that informed Siamese modernisation efforts. One could, in some respects compare the situation to that of Japan prior to its Meiji Restoration. The arrival of Commodore Perry's US fleet in 1853 in Edo Bay and subsequent opening of Japan triggered

transformative changes over a single generation resulting in Japan's revolution into a great power. While Siam did significantly modernise, as will be explored later, these changes did not occur to a similar extent.

When states are faced with an existential threat by a potentially aggressive power, as Siam was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, states typically have three options in response: innovate, emulate, or persist. Taliaferro (2006) and Ripsman (2011) argue that emulation is frequently the preferred option as the emulating state benefits from adopting the best practices of the potential aggressor without the expensive iterative process that is frequently required. The extent to which emulation can occur is limited to the capacity of the state to extract and mobilise resources. In this, Mongkut was severely limited. Ruling in a kingdom operating under the Mandala state model, state resources were nominally under the control of the monarch. In reality, monarchs were frequently dependent on their lords who ruled in semi-autonomous kingdoms in a reciprocal relationship that may be, albeit poorly, compared to European feudalism. Consequently, while the international system placed pressures on the Siamese state to emulate European practices, factors at the state level hindered effective emulation.

Areas that Mongkut was able to effect emulation were in culture, dress, and architecture. Reynolds (1971), basing his work on the pre-eminent Thai historian, K.S.R. Kulap, argues that it was during Mongkut's reign that many of the major changes to Thai dress took place. Seeking to emulate the dress of Europeans, and therefore at least achieve a facsimile of '*siwilai*,' Thai men were obliged to wear shirts at the royal court. Further, foreign dignitaries were no longer required to prostrate themselves in the presence of the king. In another small,

but symbolic, step towards modernity commoners were no longer expected to avert their gaze nor close their windows when the king passed. Significantly, Mongkut tore down many of the old fortresses that protected Bangkok to make room for canals and roads at the behest of the European diplomatic community who cited health concerns from constantly travelling in small vessels along the *klongs* (canals) that frequent Bangkok (McFarland, 1999). These aesthetic changes were redoubled by Mongkut's successor, Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910), who demanded that houses built along new roads follow the style in Singapore. Emulation of aesthetics was given high priority as the capacity of the Siamese state to emulate European military, technology, and governance were beyond the capacity of Mongkut, and even Chulalongkorn had only mixed success in his endeavours, such as against the Shan Rebellion (Ramsey, 1979; Mendiolaza, Rich, & Muraviev, 2023).

Beyond emulating the aesthetics of European powers, significant effort was made towards imitating British governance, especially in state centralisation. This is particularly true for the reign of Chulalongkorn, whose modernisation reforms will form the fourth section of this chapter. Modernisation was aided by the British who, following the Bowring Treaty, were a constant fixture in the royal court (Tuck, 1995). British diplomats, in contrast to their French peers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, often stayed in Siam on extended assignments. As such, their knowledge of Siam and their constant proximity to the monarch gave Britain substantial influence in educating Siamese nobles who later formed the bureaucratic elite.

As Tuck notes, in the late 1890s when French diplomatic pressure on Siam reached critical levels, Chulalongkorn went directly to the British embassy for advice, even suggesting to the

British consul to represent Siam in its dealings with France.<sup>34</sup> In effect, Siam demonstrated a willingness to perform limited bandwagoning by submitting itself as a junior partner to London. Rather than following through with this opportunity, fearing Paris' response were they to believe that Britain colonised Siam, the British consul rejected the offer. Britain did intervene in preventing France establishing a protectorate over Siam but did not shield Siam from losing the territories of Battambang, Siem Reap, and Luang Prabang (modern day west Cambodia and northern Laos). Though Chulalongkorn also invited Moscow to mediate the dispute (a form of dominance denial) and shield Bangkok, neither London nor Moscow were willing to risk triggering a war in Europe over issues in far-flung Thailand. In these foreign policy decisions by Chulalongkorn, elements of hedging can be discerned in Bangkok's relations with London as well as more conventional balancing against Paris. These elements include ambiguity, dominance denial, and limited bandwagoning.

### *Siamese hedging*

In strategic hedging, it is expected that the hedging state employs policies that accept and simultaneously reject the power of a potentially threatening state. This contradictory action is meant to create a foreign policy that is perceived as ambiguous, non-confrontational, and provides the hedging state some risk mitigation while also economically benefiting. In Thai academic discourse this is something referred to as bamboo diplomacy. However, it is a term that is rejected here as a parochialism that lacks a sufficient theoretical framework. Consequently, this sub-section examines Siam's foreign policy response to British regional

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<sup>34</sup> For more information see the sub-section below titled, 'Paknam and the failure of hedging.'

dominance and behaviour exhibited by Bangkok utilising the structural framework of strategic hedging theory.

Among the first attempts by Bangkok to dilute British dominance was by inviting various Western powers into the area. Shortly following the signing of the Burney Treaty in 1826, Rama III signed a similar treaty with the US in 1833, popularly known as the Roberts Treaty, named after US minister plenipotentiary Edmund Roberts. Additionally, after signing the Bowring Treaty Siam signed similar treaties with the US, Denmark, the Hanseatic Republics, Portugal, the Netherlands, the German Customs Union, Norway, Belgium, Austria-Hungary, Spain, and Japan.<sup>35</sup> A goal of Bangkok in crafting these treaties was to diversify its economic partners and create stakeholders in Siam's continued independence. Though these treaties extended conditions, for example, extraterritoriality and most favoured nation status to several countries, the trade-off may have been viewed as acceptable given that it exposed Siam to several of the leading Western powers. Coupled with attempts to dilute Britain's influence, Siam also accepted British influence by frequently receiving British envoys at the royal court and being among the first called upon in the event of issues with other powers. The contradiction between diluting British dominance and simultaneously seeking out their advice and thereby increasing their influence indicates that Bangkok was not interested in balancing nor bandwagoning with Britain, but instead pursuing a mixed strategy of hedging.

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<sup>35</sup> A list with more details can be found in Appendix D.



Another area that Siam endeavoured to hedge was through binding engagement with Britain. Between 1826 and 1925 Bangkok and London signed roughly 11 treaties of significance recognising territorial limits, regulating commerce, and reiterating their continued friendship.<sup>36</sup> These treaties normalised existing behaviour, restrained Britain from pursuing unilateral colonialism at Siam's expense, and formalised the means for each state to address grievances. London and Bangkok maintained consistent and amiable relations that are best expressed when compared to the scant communication and treaties between France and Siam.<sup>37</sup> The existence of numerous treaties between Britain and Siam, most of which were relatively benign, is illustrative of the close relationship between the powers, one in which Siam was keen to reciprocate despite Britain being among its chief security concerns. These relations, however, must be noted served to cement systemic factors that brought Siam and Britain together. To expound, Britain's contentment with informal empire at the time allowed London to extract economic benefits from the region without administrative burden as well as to utilise Siam as a buffer to France's colonial empire.

### **Siam and France from the 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

#### *France and its colonisation of Vietnam*

The history of France and Britain, prior to WWI, is one characterised by sustained animosity at best and violent conflict at worst. It is, therefore, no surprise that when France and Britain found themselves in various far-flung areas of the world that their rivalry persisted and thus shaped their colonial activities. In contrast to Britain and its famed naval dominance, France

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<sup>36</sup> An edited list of these treaties can be found in Appendix B.

<sup>37</sup> An edited list of these treaties can be found in Appendix C.

operated from a comparatively smaller starting point. The French colonial empire is typically divided into two periods: from 1534 to the early 1800s and again from 1830 to 1980. Colonialism was primarily driven by economic and strategic considerations as France sought to turn colonial wealth and possessions into advantages that could be utilised in Europe against Britain. In the first period France's colonial empire in Asia was limited to outposts on the Indian subcontinent, such as Trincomalee (1673), Pondicherry (1674), Chandernagar (1675), Mahe (1725), Yanam (1725), & Karikal (1739) (Agmon, 2017). These colonies were for the most part small, near each other, and frequently did not project far inland beyond the coast (Mahalakshmi & Raghavan, 2015). As seen earlier in the Siege of Bangkok in 1688, the colonial powers had limited capacity to challenge the established kingdoms of the region despite moderate technological advantages.

Britain and France, Western Europe's leading powers emerged as the dominant colonial empires in Asia. Though Portugal and the Netherlands maintained lucrative colonies, such as the Dutch colony on Java, their relatively small size back in Europe did not allow for the sustained maintenance of a global colonial empire. Ultimately, Britain emerged in the early 1800s as the sole major colonial power in East and Southeast Asia after France was forced to concentrate on European affairs in the French Revolutionary Wars and Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815), which they eventually lost (Porter & Louis, 1999; Belich, 2009). Consequently, when France was ready to resume colonial activities in the 1830s, the Quay d'Orsay (France's foreign ministry in overall command on France's colonial activities) was far more risk averse than it had been previously (Tuck, 1995). Additionally, the Quay d'Orsay was wary of directly competing with Britain, which had used the relatively benign European geopolitical

environment post-1815 to extend its colonial empires significantly, contributing to a period sometimes referred to as *Pax Britannica* (Chamberlain, 1988; Barlas et al., 2020).

France's emergence as a Southeast Asian colonial power was the result of convenient circumstances that provided France a moral justification for intervention (Tuck, 1995). Attacks and discrimination against Catholics in the Kingdom of Đại Việt Nam (hereafter Vietnam) were regular occurrences and calls for protection had frequently been asked. These calls fell on deaf ears as the post-Napoleonic monarchs, from the House of Orléans, felt no great need to undertake such endeavours when their legitimacy no longer depended on the church as it had in pre-revolutionary France (Daughton, 2006). By 1850 the situation had changed as Napoleon III owed a great part of his legitimacy to his ties to the church and as such was obligated to intervene on behalf of local Catholics in Vietnam (Koizumi, 2016).<sup>38</sup> The Quay d'Orsay, concerned with the costs of creating a colony halfway across the world, recommended establishing a protectorate over the Hue region, Vietnam's capital (Tuck, 1995). It would allow France to politically dominate Vietnam without entailing the costs of complete colonisation. The task of capturing Hue was entrusted to Admiral Charles Rigault de Genouilly operating with a combined Franco-Spanish force to take Touranne, a key economic port. The combined Franco-Spanish forces ultimately failed in their objective, having been violently ejected by Vietnamese forces in 1860 (Haley, 2006; Gojosso, 2015). Rather than persisting in capturing Touranne, and pressed with difficult options, Admiral Rigault sailed south to capture Saigon.<sup>39</sup> Admiral Rigault believed that by separating the political centre of

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<sup>38</sup> The Spanish Empire equally viewed the execution of its nationals, especially those representing the church, as demanding reprisals. In conjunction with French forces, Spain sent 1,000 troops in the Siege of Tourane. See: Tuck, P. (1995). *The French Wolf and Siamese Lamb*. Bangkok: White Lotus.

<sup>39</sup> A very detailed, albeit old, account of the subsequent administration of Cochinchina can be in: Bising, A. (1972). *The Admirals' Government: A History of the Naval Colony that was French Cochinchina, 1862-1879* (Doctoral dissertation, New York University, New York).

Vietnam from the rice producing areas in the south, the French would better be able to extract concessions.

The consequence of Admiral Rigault's decisions is that rather than establish a protectorate over the entirety of Vietnam, Rigault established a weakly maintained "*cordon sanitaire*" centred in Saigon (Tuck, 1995, p. 16). This required a huge investment of resources of manpower and money from Paris to hold the city. The entire cost of Admiral Rigault's campaign against Saigon cost 139.5 million francs over a 4-year period, an enormous sum at the time. These actions became a common refrain in France's Indochinese colonial period as the Quay d'Orsay would typically recommend limited operations only then to be compelled to support expensive colonial programmes as neither the military nor colonists followed those recommendations.

#### *France and Siam Meet Again: Cambodia*

Following the French capture of Saigon, France moved to expand westwards towards the Siamese vassal, the Khmer Kingdom (hereafter referred to as Cambodia). Cambodia was particularly important to both Siam and Vietnam with the two powers competing over the kingdom ever since the Ayutthaya Kingdom defeated the Khmer Empire in 1432 and sacked its capital, Angkor (Gundry, 1893; Dell et al., 2018). With Vietnam weakened by its conflicts with France, control was uncontestedly in Siamese hands. However, Siam's hold over Cambodia would not last for much longer. From September to November 1862 French Rear-Admiral Bonard was tasked with investigating the interior of Cambodia to assess its economic

and strategic value to France and Cochinchina (Tuck, 1995). The French noted that Siam effectively controlled the Khmer monarch and held indirect control over the fertile and religious centres of Cambodia in Battambang and Siem Reap (Angkor). The fear in the Cochinchina was that Siam would use its regional dominance and suzerainty over Cambodia as a springboard from which to completely annex Cambodia. Were this to happen, a Siamese occupied Cambodia would directly border the French colony. Further, because of limited infrastructure linking north and south Vietnam, much of the trade in the Cochinchina colony moved through Cambodia and Siam before being exported out of Southeast Asia. The French were disappointed in their conquest of Saigon when they realised that most of the trade from the region went through Cambodia and Siam, not the Saigon River. Chasseloup-Laubat (1863), Minister of Marine and Colonies, suspected 'foreign agents' were responsible for this, and used these suspicions to justify French colonial expansion.<sup>40</sup>

By 1863 the Khmer Kingdom became a French protectorate as formalised in the Franco-Cambodian Treaty in 1864 (Koizumi, 2016). Siam, in little position to challenge this, formalised this arrangement in the Franco-Siam Treaty in 1867, in which Bangkok recognised French protection of eastern Cambodia in exchange for exclusive control over the western regions of Battambang and Siem Reap. Further, Siam acknowledged that it would not contest French protection of Cambodia and would not accept any Khmer tributes. Siam's incapacity to challenge France's colonial expansion is indicative of the changed relationship between France and Siam. Whereas in 1688 Siamese forces violently confronted French forces in

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<sup>40</sup> " ... sous la direction d'agents étrangers, jaloux de notre progres, entraver tout le commerce de la Basse Cochinchina" A. O. M. Indochine, (A. F) 37/B30(1), Chasseloup-Laubat to Admiral Bonard, 18 April 1863.

Bangkok, in 1867 Bangkok accepted French dominance and 'played the game' by formalising the relationship through treaty.

#### *French and Siamese Power Contest Over Laos*

The period between 1867 and 1893 saw continuous conflict in the Laotian regions to Siam's north between Siam and France (Tuck, 1995; Van Roy, 2009).<sup>41</sup> These regions were the furthest northern frontiers of Siam, separated by the Mekong River, and only weakly and recently incorporated into the Siamese sphere of influence within the Mandala system. These factors made Siam's hold over the Laotian kingdoms tenuous and ideal for French intervention. Initial French interest in the kingdoms that comprise modern Laos was to ascertain whether it was possible to link the Cochinchina colonies with the markets in southern China by travelling up along the Mekong (Tuck, 1995). Over four excursions from 1879 to 1895, France's Auguste Pavie and his team extensively surveyed the entirety of the Indochina region, made significant diplomatic overtures with the Kingdom of Luang Prabang, and established telegraphic communication between Saigon and France's remote outposts in Cambodia (Pavie, 1898).<sup>42</sup> In addition to his survey mission, Pavie was entrusted with gathering documentation demonstrating that the Kingdom of Luang Prabang had been, at some point, under the suzerainty of Vietnam and, therefore, could provide legal justification for incorporating the territory into France's Asian colonial empire. In this, Pavie failed, finding

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<sup>41</sup> Much of this conflict had to do with slave labour. For more information see: Beemer, B. (2016). Bangkok, Creole City: War Slaves, Refugees, and the Transformation of Culture in Urban Southeast Asia, *Literature Compass*, 14(5), 266-276.

<sup>42</sup> These missions are often referred to as Mission Pavie following Auguste Pavie's four volume account of his experiences. For more information see: Pavie, A., (1898). *Mission Pavie Indo-Chine 1879-1895: Études Diverses Recherches sur la Littérature du Cambodge, du Laos et du Siam*, Paris.

no documents supporting this and thus requiring France explore alternatives to capture Luang Prabang away from Siam.

Despite finding no evidence of Vietnam's legal authority over Luang Prabang, France was in a good position to capitalise on any opportunities that presented themselves. Firstly, France was able to tap into Laotian resentment of the Siamese, who had not so long ago, in 1827, depopulated the Laotian Kingdom of Lan Xang following Laotian rebellions led by Chao Anou and Chao Yo (Vickery, 1990; Baird, 2014). Though Luang Prabang was not directly impacted by Siam's vicious reprisals, it did leave the kingdom isolated and vulnerable to the vicissitudes of Siam's frontier policy. Secondly, Pavie had established close personal friendships with Laotian political elite, especially King Oun Kham, who he saved from being captured by Chinese and T'ai raiders in 1887 (Osbourne, 2004). Lastly, Siam's inability to protect Luang Prabang from those raiders was indicative to Laotian leadership of the need for alternative security guarantees. With these factors in France's favour, the only issue was a lack of flashpoints from which France could exploit its position to capture Luang Prabang from Siam.

In 1892 Auguste Pavie, now the French consul to Siam in Bangkok, was tasked by the French Indochina Governor-General, Jean de Lanessan, with diplomatically coercing Bangkok to concede all Siamese territory east of the Mekong River (Winichakul, 1994; Tuck, 1995).<sup>43</sup> The

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<sup>43</sup> It is worth noting that, in contrast to European conceptualisation of geography, the Mekong River did not represent a hard border between Siam and Laos. In fact, the Mekong united the area, and the effects of dividing territory can be felt in the Isan area of Thailand today that continues to speak a Laotian dialect. The relocation of Laotian refugees into the modern Isan region following Chao Anou's deposition significantly contributed to the linguistical landscape of the region. For more information see: Winichakul, T. (1994). *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

expulsion of three French merchants by Siamese governors in Khammuan (Laos) and Nong Khai (Siam) in September 1892 coupled with the alleged murder of the French consul, M. Massie, in Luang Prabang provided Pavie the justification needed to threaten Bangkok to cede all of Laos. In fact, the death of M. Massie was determined to be suicide during his return to Saigon following a fever yet was nevertheless utilised by France's *Parti Colonial* as a pretext for furthering their colonial interests.<sup>44</sup>

Bangkok's rejection of Pavie's demands, based on the assumption that London would not allow France to militarily annex Laos, were met by a large-scale military reply with de Lanessan sending the French colonial military into the disputed region (Tuck, 1995; du Corail, 2011). Eight Siamese garrisons retreated, though some stayed and mounted significant resistance. The death of a French inspector, Groscurin, brought the situation to a head with France demanding reparations (Malitz, 2021). On the 13th of July 1893 three French ships entered the Chao Phraya River and were engaged by Siamese gunboats and cannon from the Paknam Fort (Tips, 1996).<sup>45</sup> In the ensuing battle, the French were able to secure dominance of the river and lock their guns on the Grand Palace. Immediately after, the French blockaded Bangkok with discussion among the French colonial political elite of making the entirety of Siam a French protectorate. Intervention by the British, who had a clear economic interest in upholding Siamese sovereignty put pressure on both the Siamese and French to reach a

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<sup>44</sup> It is interesting that French colonial ambitions were low from 1860 to 1880. Following the success against Siam in 1893, the French public overwhelmingly supported colonial enterprises. For more information see: Andrew, C. M., & Kanya-Forstner, A. S. (1971). The French 'Colonial Party': Its Composition, Aims and Influence, 1885-1914, *The Historical Journal*, 14(1), 99-128.

<sup>45</sup> The French ships were the steamer *Jean Baptiste Say*, the French Navy aviso *Inconstant*, and the French Navy gunboat *Comete*. It is telling that three small to medium sized vessels were sufficient to defeat the Siamese forces in their territory.



negotiated settlement (Hansard HC, 1893). The resulting Franco-Siamese Treaty was signed on the 3rd of October 1893 in which Siam ceded large portions of land east of the Mekong River in the area of Laos, agreeing to a 25-kilometre exclusion zone on the western side of the Mekong along the Cambodian region, granted temporary control over the Siamese port of Chantaburi, and paid an indemnity of three million French francs (Malitz, 2021). Though Britain played a key role in limiting the ambition of France's colonial interests this event illustrated they would not risk militarily confronting France in order to protect Siam.

France's success over Siam in 1893 demonstrated the overwhelming military capabilities of the European powers and started a process of dismantling Siam's hold over its non-core territories (du Corail, 2011). For example, in 1904 Siam ceded Sainyabuli province to France, an area west of the Mekong and, therefore, separated from Laos, yet also isolated from Siam by the Luang Prabang Range. Other areas ceded to France include the southern extent of Laos in 1904 and the fertile plains of Battambang and Angkor in 1907 (Brailey, 2002). In addition, parts of what constitute west Myanmar nowadays and much of the ethnic Malay areas in Siam's south were ceded to Britain in 1885 and 1909, respectively (Briggs, 1946). By 1909 Siam's borders were mostly finalised and have remained, barring some failed revanchist adventuring in the 1940s, in place till today. Ultimately though, the confrontation between France and Siam over Laos and Cambodia was decided at Paknam with the other cessations of territory being relatively uncontested by Bangkok. Further, the *Entente Cordiale* between France and Britain in 1904 resolved many of the geopolitical tensions between those two powers and effectively left Siam as a buffer state.

The last major cessation of land from Siam to France came in the treaty of 1907. Article I remarked “Le gouvernement Siamois cède à la France les territoires de Battambang, Siemréap et Sisophon, dont le frontières sont définés par la clause I du protcole de délimitation ci-annexé.” In effect, the final non-core Siamese territories of Battambang and Siem Reap were ceded, providing France undisputed control from the Chinese frontier with Laos down through Vietnam and Cambodia to the sea at Saigon. This was the last territory that Siam ceded to France, in effect transforming Siam from an empire of sorts to a kingdom that was predominately comprised of ethnic Thais. This paved the way for the nationalism that became the cornerstone of domestic policy for Kings Chulalongkorn and Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925). Thailand’s experiences with European states, the (accidental) creation of a relatively ethnically homogenous state, and the spread of nationalist ideology all served to create the modern Siamese state. Though European powers continued to play an important role in regional affairs, the crises of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe spelled the end of European hegemony in Asia, of which more will be explored in the following chapter.

### **Siamese Emulation and the Quest for Equality**

As explored above, 19<sup>th</sup> century Siam was undoubtedly in a situation in which strong measures were needed to address the power differential that existed between itself and Britain and France. Of course, the extent that a state perceives that power differential is dependent on that state to assess the distribution of power accurately. Finally, actually acting on its perception of the distribution of power is moderated by the state’s capacity to mobilise resources and extract the necessary resources to increase its power. This final section of the

chapter aims to explore Bangkok's response to the challenges of colonisation and whether these were successful.

Taliaferro (2006) notes that emulation typically takes three forms: military emulation, technological emulation, and emulation of governing practices. The first two may seem common-sense areas in which to copy as they have a direct bearing on the capacity of the state to defend itself, increase its economy, and overall affect a policy of balancing. However, true as this may be, shifts in governance can be equally, if not even more, important. Emulating the governing practices of a more powerful rival may allow the emulating state to improve its capacity to extract and mobilise resources from its domestic society and thus present itself as less of a target.

Mead (2004) notes that the Ayutthaya Kingdom and its successor Rattanakosin Kingdom were feudal-like states in which local lords exercised varying degrees of autonomy. Though the moniker *feudal* is the simplest comparison to European practices, the system was complicated and steeped in religious tradition. In effect, kingdoms were essentially city-states whose powers were so great that they created spheres of influence in which their power projected. Influence was directly related to proximity, and cities further from the power centre were less obliged to contribute and may have even had multiple allegiances or even their own vassals. Further, the basis of the economic system was the *Sakdina*, a system like serfdom in which everyone within the system was measured according to their position within the hierarchy (Vorng, 2011). Commoners were obliged to provide free labour (hereafter referred to as *corvée* labour) to their local lord for part of the year, for example, during harvest times. Local

lords would in turn be required to provide manpower to the king in times of war and pay taxes, which would function as a trickle-up economic system. Such a system was highly susceptible to corruption and abuse and led to an internal crisis during the 16th century when the Utong and Suphannaphum dynasties competed for power ultimately resulting in the assassination of three kings (Chakrabongse, 1967). The fragmented nature of power meant that Siamese monarchs ruled at the pleasure of their local lords, and careful management of religious legitimacy, political machinations, and power were constantly needed. For emulation, and therefore modernisation, to take root, centralisation of authority was needed.

#### *Chulalongkorn and Emulation of Western Governing Practices*

The reign of Chulalongkorn and his modernisation of Siam can be roughly divided into two phases (Heng, 2019). The first phase (1868-1885) saw some advancements carrying on from the programs Mongkut had started. The second phase (1885-1910) saw far wider-reaching and systematic reforms than before and effectively revolutionised many aspects of Siamese governance. The pressures for Chulalongkorn to modernise the Siamese state stemmed from his voyages to Singapore, Java, and India between 1871 and 1872 in which he first-hand understood the difference in advancement between Siam and Europe (Heng, 2019). After coming of age in 1873, Chulalongkorn was able to initiate changes, for example, the abolition of prostration, a seemingly small change but nevertheless major in changing the dynamic in the relationship between lords and their subjects. Other changes included reforming the taxation system in 1873, gradual reforms in corvée labour and slavery in 1874, the establishment of the Royal Treasury Department in 1875, and a ban on gambling dens in 1883

(Feeny, 1989). Reforms during this first period were minor as the Siamese political elite were divided into factions, the most powerful being the Bunnag clan and the ruling Chakri dynasty. Individual members of the Bunnag clan, such as Somdet Chaophraya Sri Suriwongse, were incredibly influential having been regent during Chulalongkorn's youth (Battye, 1974). Consequently, necessary reforms were moderated by internal competition and the risk that reforms could trigger backlash from powerful cliques.

For Chulalongkorn fiscal reform was a central issue because any modernisation program would, obviously, require funds in the form of taxation (Chenpitayaton, 2016). Chulalongkorn sought to lessen his reliance on the benevolence of his nobles to pass on wealth and centralise the process (Mead, 2004). To centralise the tax collection process Chulalongkorn contracted Chinese tax farmers, a decision based on their role as Siam's traditional merchant class. These fiscal reforms, however, alienated the local elite in the provinces, triggering rebellions in 1889 and 1902 in Chiang Mai and Phrae, respectively (Ramsay, 1979). Further, the reforms exacerbated existing tensions between conservative and progressive factions in Bangkok, the former of which was led by Sri Suriwongse of the Bunnag clan and Prince Bovorn Wichaichan, who, as mentioned earlier, was lord of the Front Palace (Copeland, 1993). To ease tensions some reforms were rolled back, but these proved insufficient enough to avoid conflict between the *Old Siam* faction headed by Sri Suriwongse and Prince Wichaichan and the *Young Siam* faction headed by Chulalongkorn (Terwiel, 1983). The pace of reforms and the tense local politics between these two factions meant that a crisis was inevitable.

The Front Palace Crisis began on December 28, 1874. It started with a fire (whether accidental or deliberate is a subject of debate) in the Grand Palace that Prince Wichaichan tried to put out with his own troops (Wyatt, 1984). Wichaichan's troops were barred from entering the palace, and after a series of escalations involving Chulalongkorn Wichaichan appealed to Sri Suriwongse to mediate the dispute. Upon Sri Suriwongse's recommendation, Sir Andrew Clarke, Governor of the Straits Settlement, was called to resolve the crisis. Following the resolution of the crisis, the position of Wang Na and Front Palace were abolished. With the Wang Na out of the picture, the Old Siam faction slowly dissolved and Chulalongkorn was able to concentrate power, arguably becoming the first absolute monarch in Siamese history. With his position relatively stable, Chulalongkorn kept modernising Siam, albeit at a slower pace than in the past saying on the issue in correspondence with Clarke, "to defer the prosecution of further plans of reform until I shall find some demand for them among the leaders of my people. I have not relinquished them, but act according to my opportunities" (Xie, 1988).

From 1885 onward Chulalongkorn was interested in reforming the old bureaucracy by establishing a cabinet style system. In implementing a cabinet, Chulalongkorn was seeking to emulate the European system of governance that focused on the administration's functional differentiation (Heng, 2019). This worked in tandem with greater direct control over the chiefdoms and tributaries that Siam claimed, albeit with discretion to avoid triggering rebellions nor inviting British or French interference (Bunnag, 1977). Additionally, hereditary judges in the provinces were replaced by those educated in Western ways (implicitly from Bangkok), village monasteries educated locals on a standardised Thai script as well as mathematics and science, and by 1910 formal schools were set up with trained teachers. The

legal system was also overhauled, implementing an adapted version of the French civil code originally developed by Emperor Napoleon I and his government. Siamese governance emulation was holistic and encompassed a multitude of aspects at the highest levels of government all the way down to the education of students in Siam's far-flung provinces.

The adoption of European legal codes were a central concern to Bangkok because one of the areas that European powers frequently cited as reason for their demand of extraterritoriality stemmed from the perceived inadequacy of the Siamese legal system (Piyada, 2014).<sup>46</sup> Though Bangkok suffered difficulty in implementing judicial reform because it lacked sufficient qualified judges in Bangkok to say nothing of the outer provinces, it was successful in conveying that it had successfully met European demands for equality (Purcell, 1964). The first to recognise the equality of the Siamese legal code was Britain, which ceded extraterritoriality in 1909. This was followed by Denmark in 1913, Germany and Austro-Hungary in 1917, the US in 1920, Japan in 1924, and France in 1925 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Thailand, n.d.). Consequently, by emulating the governing practices of those states more powerful than itself, Siam was able to shield itself from continued abuses of its sovereignty through extraterritoriality.

Another major focus by Bangkok in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was reforming the Mandala system with a system that gave Bangkok centralised authority (Paik & Vechbanyongratana, 2019). As mentioned earlier, the Mandala system was a unique ordering system to Southeast Asia

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<sup>46</sup> Similar policies were adopted in Meiji Japan to a successful outcome. For more information see: Jones, F. C., (1970). *Extraterritoriality in Japan and the Diplomatic Relations Resulting in its Abolition, 1853-1899*, New York: AMS Press.

characterised by a loose network of power centres with diminishing influence in radiating concentric circles (Tooker, 1996). In effect, the centre, such as Bangkok, had limited influence beyond areas that they could directly administer and received tribute in various forms from their possessions. Chulalongkorn gradually dissolved the Mandala system and replaced it with the *Thesapiban* system in 1892, facilitated by the newly created Royal Survey Department, which was a local adaptation of the systems used by the Dutch and British in their Southeast Asian colonies (Bunnag, 1969; Wolters, 1999). Over a 23-year period the *Thesapiban* system was rolled out with priority being given to those *monthons* (administrative sub-divisions) that were close to Bangkok and/or close to the frontiers with France and Britain. For example, the *monthons* of Prachinburi and Burapha that existed close to the French Cambodia border were among the first integrated in the *Thesapiban* system. Similarly, Syburi in Siam's south was an early inductee into the system given its proximity to British Malaya. Centralising control over these key provinces was viewed as vital to Siamese security because increasing the capacity of Bangkok to manage these provinces was a strategy that increased the costs of aggressive action by Britain and France. Despite its relatively peaceful relationship with Britain, Siam still sought to increase the costs of aggression through soft balancing policies as exhibited in the emulation explored above.

### *Vajiravudh, Nationalism, and Change*

Chulalongkorn's reforms, especially in educating the Siamese elite in Europe, had the unintended effect giving rise to competing factions, not all of which were sympathetic to the idea of absolute monarchy. In 1885, Siamese students studying in Britain sent a 60-page petition to Chulalongkorn urging the king towards some form of constitutional monarchy in



which the views of the populace would be given expression (Wyatt, 1984). Chulalongkorn was able to brush these concerns aside acknowledging that political reform was needed, but that the time was yet unsuitable in a country where most of the population were still uneducated farmers. He did, however, have Prince Devawongse study the European political organisation system, which led to the creation of a systematic bureaucracy and cabinet style government in which state responsibilities were divided in a manner like European states (Heng, 2019). Concerned with the limits to his power that Western political ideals would entail (and implicitly the ineffectiveness a democratic government would be at meeting Siam's existential crisis), Chulalongkorn adopted a style of nationalism that placed the monarch as the pinnacle of religion, government, and society (Gungwu, 2000).<sup>47</sup> In effect, Siamese nationalism was a deliberately constructed artifice in which to maintain power.

Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925) furthered nationalist sentiment in Siam through the establishment of various institutions such as the Wild Tiger Corps, later known as the National Scout Organization of Thailand, in which the king is its head (Sattayanurak, 2019). Vella and Vella (1978) argued that the creation of these groups were important early institutions utilised by the monarch to engender nationalist sentiment in a style like that of Japan. Assisted in this effort was the deliberate construction of a national identity and narrative in which Siam was considered unique within the region for having never being colonised due to the brilliant leadership of the monarch (Poonkham, 2022). The *royal hegemony* discourse, as Poonkham

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<sup>47</sup> Some rudimentary forms of democracy were inspired during this time such as the election of village and sub-district chiefs. For more information see: Vickery, M. (1970). Thai Regional Elites and the Reforms of Chulalongkorn, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 29(4), 863-881.

refers to it, was the dominant discourse in which the Siamese viewed their state and is still among the dominant discourses in contemporary society.<sup>48</sup>

Growing nationalism and monarchical attempts to retain absolute power alienated the growing officer corps. The Wild Tigers Corps, despite being a paramilitary organisation, was increasingly favoured by Vajiravudh as a political tool and, in what would be a recurring motif of Siamese/Thai domestic politics, sections within the army attempted to stage a coup (Farrelly, 2013). Though the coup failed, it was indicative of the growing domestic frustrations with centralisation reforms and annoyance with the Wild Tigers Corps. It is for this reason why neoclassical realism posits that emulation occurs at different rates among states. Each state faces varied internal dynamics that hinder or assist in reforms, and those dynamics are never identical. Vajiravudh attempted to counter this growing factionalism by overturning the nascent meritocracy that had emerged in the bureaucracy and replacing critical thinkers with loyal royalists (Vella & Vella, 1978). Regardless, schisms in society were apparent and growing. This had a tremendous impact on the rate of reform as each major political faction had their own goals that did not necessarily complement those of other factions.

Nationalism also became a point of confrontation not just within Siam, but also in Siamese foreign relations. For example, an incident involving a British engineer working for the Siamese Railway Department kicking two Siamese soldiers for sheltering from the rain outside

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<sup>48</sup> A recent example of the prevalence of this *royal hegemony* discourse is evident in Thai senator the Kitti Wasinondh's claims that Chulalongkorn 'saved' the nation, see: <https://rtehanoi.thaiembassy.org/th/content/the-grand-tour-that-saved-a-nation?cate=5f20eda671c05359785aa647>

his residence became a national sensation (Vella, 1978). Prince Chakrabongse, representing the Ministry of War, wrote articles attacking the engineer and the perceived racial superiority with which the British used to subjugate Siamese people. Other examples of nationalist sentiment directed against others was seen in Vajiravudh's published pamphlets and articles describing the Chinese diaspora in Siam as the "Jews of the Orient" and that they could not be assimilated into Siamese society (King Vajiravudh Foundation, 1985; Wongsurawat, 2016). Thai nationalism, and general suspicion of ethnic Chinese people in Siam, provided the justification for their ill-treatment and surveillance from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to Thailand's détente with China in the 1970s (Landon, 1940; Wongsurawat, 2016).

#### *Prajadhipok, Khana Ratsadon, and the End of Absolute Monarchy?*

By the time Prajadhipok (Rama VII) (r. 1925-1935) ascended the throne, Siam had experienced transformative changes in nearly all aspects of society, politics, and foreign policy. Power had been concentrated in the monarchical faction. The adoption of rails and telegraphs allowed Bangkok new heights in administering its frontier provinces, in effect creating the modern Siamese state (Holm, 1977; du Corail, 2011; Euarchukiati, 2021). And in foreign policy, Siam had participated in WWI as an Allied power, joined the League of Nations as a founding member, and renegotiated the unequal treaties it had signed during Mongkut's reign (Hell, 2010; Leyland, 2011; Raymond, 2019).<sup>49</sup> Despite these impressive reforms, Siam was laden with

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<sup>49</sup> As a caveat, Siam only involved itself in WWI in 1917 and then only sent a token force as a means to gain international acceptance. For an examination of Siam's WWI involvement see Raymond, G. (2019). War as Membership: International Society and Thailand's Participation in World War I, *Asian Studies Review*, 43(1), 132-147.

moderate financial debt by 1925, and the Great Depression in 1929 only served to compound an already tenuous situation for the monarch.<sup>50</sup>

To arrest the increasing impact of mounting financial stress, Prajadhipok placed greater emphasis on meritocracy than his predecessor. Prajadhipok replaced many of the ministry chiefs with more competent officials who were still royal and, therefore, owed greater allegiance to him. Further, Prajadhipok established the Supreme Council of State of Siam, which acted as an advisor body akin to the British cabinet of which he was familiar, having studied at Eton and Sandhurst. The five councillors of the cabinet were all high-ranking princes who held extensive government portfolios during their time.<sup>51</sup> By 1930 when the economic crisis was in full swing the Supreme Council cut the civil service payrolls and reduced the military budget, in effect antagonising two powerful factions: the educated elite who mostly worked in the bureaucracy and the military (Nambara, 1998, p. 36). Both factions, the military and bureaucratic elite, comprised a mix of lower nobility and educated elite. In contrast to the higher-ranking members of the royal family, who were mostly educated in Britain, people from these groups were either educated in France, Russia, Germany, or other areas of Europe, or were educated in Siam. As such, even before Prajadhipok's reforms and salary reductions,

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<sup>50</sup> Following Siam's recovery, Japan replaced Britain as the largest exporter to Siam. For more information see: Swan, W. (1986). *Japanese Economic Relations with Siam: Aspects of their historical development* (Doctoral dissertation, Australian National University, Canberra). Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/japanese-economic-relations-with-siam-aspects/docview/2606864852/se-2>

<sup>51</sup> As an example, Marshal-Admiral Paribatra Sukhuimbandhu, Prince of Nakhon Sawan was the Minister of Defence (1926-1928), Minister of Interior (1928-1932), Minister of the Royal Siamese Navy (1910-1920), Commander of the Navy Department (1903-1910), Chief of Staff of the Royal Thai Army (1926-1928), and member of the Privy Council. For more information see: ทิพนัน บุญวิระ, ทองต๋อ กัลวีย์ไม้ ณ อยุธยา, 2474-2560, นครสวรรค์วรพินิต, จอมพลเรือ สมเด็จพระเจ้าบรมวงศ์เธอ เจ้าฟ้า กรมพระ, 2424-2487 และ เทวาประสิทธิ์ พาทยโกศล (2524). เทอดพระเกียรติ จอมพล สมเด็จพระเจ้าบรมวงศ์เธอ เจ้าฟ้าบริพัตรสุขุมพันธุ์ กรมพระนครสวรรค์วรพินิต. โรงพิมพ์สำนักเลขาธิการ คณะรัฐมนตรี

animosity between lower and higher nobility existed as did tensions between elite commoners and the nobles.

Tensions between the bureaucracy and military against royal primacy led to the 24 June 1932 coup. While Prajadhipok was holidaying in Hua Hin, about 5 hours away from the capital, members from the *Khana Ratsadon* (People's Party) staged a coup, successfully overthrew the government, and replaced it with a democratic constitutional monarchy. The leaders of the coup group came from the armed forces and civilian bureaucrats, of which the most famous are Pridi Panomyong (hereafter referred to as Pridi) and Plaek Phibunsongkram (hereafter referred to as Phibun), each of whom went on to become the Prime Minister later in life.<sup>52</sup> On the morning of the 24th of June 1932, under the pretence of a Chinese uprising, the Khana Ratsadon conspirators were able to arrest the commanding officer of the First Cavalry Regiment of the Royal Guards, occupy the Dusit Palace, and arrest various princes and ministers. In effect, within just a few hours the conspirators were in full control of the armed forces and the royal household. Siam's brief experiment with absolute monarchism came to an end as Prajadhipok submitted himself to the coup by taking the role of a ceremonial figurehead (US State Department, 2008). In a twist of irony, the quick success of the coup can partly be ascribed to the fact that in emulating the absolute monarchies of Europe and intertwining his reign with divine right, resistance to the coup would have resulted in violence and tarnished the monarch's image of divinity (Ferrara, 2012). The monarchy as an institution continues to live on in Thailand, albeit in a vastly reduced capacity from its brief heights during the reigns of Chulalongkorn and Vajiravudh in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

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<sup>52</sup> A selected list of the Khana Ratsadon leaders can be found in Appendix F.

The 1932 coup was the manifestation of tensions and factionalism that had their genesis in changes brought about by Siamese modernisation and the ideas of Siam's educated elite as represented in the earlier mentioned 60-page petition to Chulalongkorn in 1885. However, the coup did not resolve the inherent tensions between the monarchy, military, bureaucracy, and the larger civilian population. Tensions continue to flare up in Thai's history, even as recently as 2020 when student-led protests against the military-monarchy network made international news. This sub-section focused briefly on the 1932 coup as its causes can be traced to Bangkok's policy response to the challenges of colonialism and modernisation as manifested in British and French imperialism. Further chapters will, for the most part, overlook the numerous coups that punctuate Thai history except in cases where they have a direct impact on foreign policy.

### ***Siam's Experience with Colonial Empires***

Two major policies helped preserve Siamese independence as explored in this chapter: strategic hedging and emulation. The former was particularly important during the reigns of Mongkut and Chulalongkorn in which the Siam lacked the capacity to balance against these new threats. By employing policies such as limited bandwagoning, dominance denial, internal balancing, and economic pragmatism, Siam was partly able to fend off British encroaches. Despite being successful with Britain, hedging was not applicable to Siam's relationship with France. Whereas Britain represented a strong security risk, France was an absolute security threat and acted in ways that indicated a mixed strategy would not be feasible. The ability of

Bangkok to successfully navigate its complex geopolitical environment and emerge mostly intact is illustrative of the success such a strategy brought.

During the colonial period, Siam does engage with strategic hedging, but a specific variation, *temporal* strategic hedging. In this, we see Bangkok apply the same behaviours one would expect a hedging state to conduct between two states being conducted against only one state. It engages in a foreign policy that is counteracting, embracing Britain, and submitting to it, while simultaneously rejecting its power. In contrast, France offered no possibility of strategic hedging to be applied, demonstrating itself early on during its colonial conquest of Indochina to be an existential threat to the Siamese state. Siam sought to balance France's power in the region, leveraging its relationship with Britain and other European powers, while also modernising in certain aspects to best mobilise its own internal resources, as well as to best appeal to the European powers on equal terms.

Emulation also played a significant role in Siam's efforts to ward off colonial powers. As demonstrated, the Siamese state underwent transformative changes in just a few decades in all aspects of governance. These reforms allowed Siam to present itself as an equal to the European powers, allowed it to consolidate its territory and thereby increase the cost of aggression, and increase the capacity of the state's ability to extract and mobilise resources to support further modernisation reforms. However, emulation did entail significant trade-offs that ultimately ended the role of the monarchy as the primary holder of domestic power. Tensions and flashpoints within Siam brought about unwanted challenges, for example, the attempted coup against Vajiravudh and the successful 1932 coup that ended absolute

monarchical rule. The following chapter will continue to explore Siam's relations with foreign powers, particularly during WWII and the Cold War, periods in which the Siamese policy flexibility is frequently criticised for its cynical and opportunistic nature (Kislenko, 2002). Further, the next chapter will explore Thai strategic hedging and how it came to dominate the foreign policy strategic culture.



## Chapter 4

### Thai hedging, balancing, and bandwagoning – 1932 to 1991

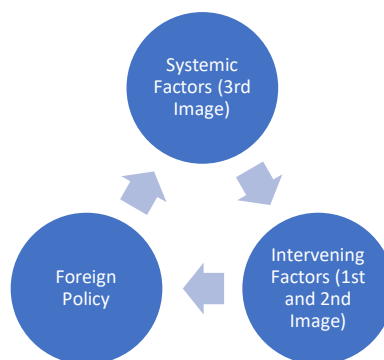
“They [Thais] are like rice in the wind. If they think we are going to lose, they will go the other way.”

Nixon, R. (1969) speaking on the Nixon Doctrine and Domino Theory

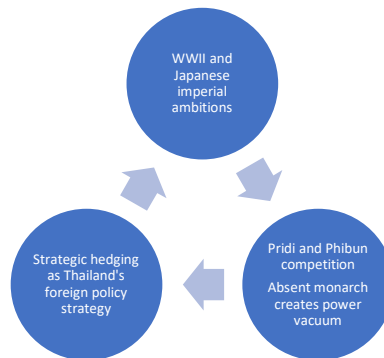
The period between 1932 to 1991 marked some of the most monumental turning points in Thai history, and its results substantially shaped foreign policy. From the dissolution of absolute monarchy in 1932 to the collapse of the Soviet Union from 1988-1991 (Brands, 2016), Thai foreign policy was forced to respond to near continuous challenges. Significant changes in the geopolitical regional order happened during this period, many of which were shaped by great power competition. These include the European colonial empires' conflicts with Imperial Japan, Japan's short-lived regional hegemony and its defeat by the US, and the conflict between communism and capitalism in Southeast Asia, which manifested in three Indochina Wars. In contrast to the relative slow pace of change during the colonial period, the period of WWII and the Cold War saw fast-paced changes actioned by countries with overwhelming military capabilities in comparison to just 50 years earlier. Consequently, the ramifications for miscalculating during the period studied in this chapter were significantly more severe than they had been previously.

Given the fact that this thesis utilises a neoclassical realist approach to understanding foreign policy, this chapter not only explores systemic pressures Thailand faced during the period from 1932-1991, but also the power of interest groups, political elite, and key individuals to shape foreign policy as seen in Figure 4.1. In the parlance of realism, this chapter will uphold the primacy of the third image as the catalyst for state behaviour. However, adding neoclassical realism, this analysis accepts that any state behaviour must be filtered through mediating elements that exist at the second and first image level, including economic interests, state polity, political elite interests, and other relevant factors. Conceptualising Bangkok's foreign policy, especially during periods of hedging, cannot be simply viewed through the reductionist lens of the third image, instead requiring a nuanced examination that necessitates a degree of process-tracing that incorporates the state and the elements within the state. As such, this chapter takes time to analyse the foreign policy decision making behind key Thai figures and factions during the examined period, such as Pridi, Phibun, and the monarchy-military network that dominated Thai domestic politics from the 1960s onward of which an illustration can be seen in Figure 4.2.

**Figure 4.1: Illustration of how foreign policy is shaped under a neoclassical realist lens.**



**Figure 4.2: Illustration of how Thai foreign policy is shaped through systemic and intervening factors.**



This chapter is divided chronologically into four main periods to facilitate analysis regarding changes to Thai foreign policy strategy. Setting up the geopolitical context for WWII, the first section explores Thai domestic changes in the years immediately following the 1932 coup d'état. The second section examines Thai foreign policy in WWII, a period that has been intensely debated by Thai-studies scholars and aims to reconceptualise the bamboo diplomacy discourse into the more coherent strategic hedging discourse (Suwannathat-Pian, 1996; Kislenko, 2002; Oda, 2015; Poonkham, 2022). The third section follows from this by examining the early Cold War in which Thai foreign policy was headed by Phibun and later Sarit and during which Thailand abandoned hedging in favour of balancing. This section also covers the period of the second and third Indochina Wars (1955-1975 and 1975-1991), the emergence of SEATO, the Thanat-Rusk Communiqué, and the Thai détente with the Soviet Union and China. The last section, overlapping with the previous one, covers the later stages of the Cold War, namely the Nixon Doctrine, rapprochement between Thailand and China, and the mixed strategies used by Bangkok to limit Hanoi's regional hegemonic ambition.

## The 1932 Coup d'État and its Effects on Thai Foreign Policy

### *Revolution or Coup d'état?*

The 1932 coup d'état, which came to be known as the 1932 Revolution and changed Thailand from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy under civilian-military control is one of the watershed moments in Thai modern history. Subsequently, its understanding and portrayal in educational institutions, media, and popular culture has been frequently rewritten and contested by various groups. It is not the intention of the writer to get involved in this highly charged debate, and instead the aim is to as objectively as possible present the effects of the coup d'état. Even at the time of writing, conflicts stemming from this event continue to be headline news with the 2020 Bangkok Protests often appropriating symbols and values related to the revolution in anti-government discourse (Bangkok Post, 2020). It is worth exploring this watershed moment because the removal of the absolute monarch in many ways opened the doors for the foreign policy strategy that Thailand undertook in WWII, which may be summarily described as chaotic, conflictual, and opportunistic.

Even the term *revolution*, which is used in public discourse on the matter is fundamentally laden with implicit meaning. It is a term, much like *democracy*, in that it is used to confer a sense of legitimacy and hence “has become vague and slippery” (Goldstone, 1993; Colgan, 2012). As Huntington (1968) writes, “a revolution is a rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activity and policies” (p. 264). Inherent in such a definition is the idea of mass movement and popular support. However, as Hashmi (1962) notes, the revolution that occurred in 1932 Bangkok differed from the revolutions that

occurred in countries such as Russia and Germany in the early 20th century. It was not fuelled by class struggles, nor did such revolutionary philosophies such as Marxism play any significant role. As Hewison (1996) would point out, the revolution was born out of factionalism within the nobility and elite commoners, a continuation of the dynamics discussed in the previous chapter. Zimmerman (as cited in Hashmi, 1962) points out that during the revolution there was little public outcry with the civilian population being indifferent to ongoing political games and palace intrigue. However, one similarity to those far away revolutions in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere is that the military came to play an important, if not the decisive role in future political developments.

It can be argued that the 1932 Revolution was not a revolution in the true sense of the word. The events of 1932 were conceived and executed by an extremely small politically powerful clique, not popular revolts of the masses. Subrahmanyam (2015) refers to the revolution as a bureaucratic coup, given the elite nature of its enactment and the fact that very little changed at a societal level regarding class structure. An interpretation offered here is that the word *revolution* has greater legitimacy in international discourse than more accurate descriptors, for example, *coup d'état*. This interpretation can be supported when viewing other vocabulary used by the coup plotters with the party even being named Khana Ratsadon (meaning People's Party). The appropriation of Western phraseology by elite Thais facilitated the elevation of the coup d'état from a merely factional-based competition for power to an instrument conducted on behalf of the people.<sup>53</sup> Though some of the coup plotters, such as

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<sup>53</sup> Subrahmanyam (2016) notes that Thai lacked a word approximating 'coup' or 'revolution' and that Prince Wan (1933) invited the word *Patiwat* as a facsimile.

Pridi, had desired structural societal change, the fact that the coup comprised of factions united by opposition to an absolute monarchy meant that little changed domestically. Even Thailand's foreign policy, of which this chapter explores in depth, remained relatively consistent from previous monarchical rule.

### *Factional Competition*

Factions were rarely as homogenous as may be implied using terms such as *nobles*, *bureaucratic elites*, and others. For example, even within the nobility there were separate factions distinguished by their rank within the royal family. Further, nobles existed in various ranks and positions within the military and bureaucratic apparatuses of the state and, as such, had conflicting loyalties.<sup>54</sup> At times conflicts within the nobility were the result of issues stemming from the extremely large families that royals at the time had. For example, Chulalongkorn had an estimated 64 children with several wives, creating conflict between those that were born earlier and from higher ranked wives with those that were considered lower ranked. At other times conflict was deliberately exacerbated with Hashmi (1962) noting that high ranking royalty were occasionally placed in positions that were naturally antagonistic, such as Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and Prince Wan Waithayakon and their roles in the Supreme Council and Privy Council, respectively. Subrahmanyam (2013) notes that both men were considered prominent intellectuals of their age but forced into an antagonistic relationship because of the inability of the state to manage such a large royal family.

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<sup>54</sup> Among the key members of Khana Ratsadon that overthrew the absolute monarchy was Khuang Aphaiwong, a member of the Abhayavongsa royal family (Thai-Khmer), and later in life was given Siamese nobility. For more information see: Sutthisongkhram, N. (1979). *Khuang Aphaiwong and the Democrat Party* = นายควง อภัยวงศ์ กับพรรคประชาธิปัตย์, Bangkok: Ruang Sin Press.

The 1932 coup d'état exacerbated existing factionalism. In drafting the new constitution, the new temporary government had directed that specific legal language be used to push out the highest ranks of nobles from any position of governance (Mokarapong, 1962).<sup>55</sup> Phra Tham Nites Tuay Harn, the person who literally wrote the constitution, wrote the provision that royals with the rank of *Mom Chao* or higher should be outside of the political structure. Further, the constitution created a parliamentary system inspired by the British cabinet and allowed indirect democracy. Though this did not create an outright democracy as the constitution required waiting at least 10 years before the populace was sufficiently educated to vote, it did divide political power through departmentalisation and imply a future mandate of the people.

The vast number of changes in the Thai political structure in just a few months produced significant blowback. Prince Boworadet led a 2-week rebellion from 11-25 October 1933 with support of the Isan political elite who reside in the northeast of Thailand (Chotpradit, 2018). The short-lived rebellion failed and was beaten back by government forces, led by Phibun, in the fields outside of Bangkok's Don Mueang Airport. Following his victory over royalist forces, Phibun went on to become the Minister of Defence from 1934 to 1943—a period in which the military budget doubled (Girling, 1981; Matthews, 2005).

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<sup>55</sup> The dissertation by Thawatt Mokarapong goes into much further detail regarding the specific language used and its implications. See: Mokarapong, T. (1962). *The June Revolution Of 1932 in Thailand: A Study in Political Behavior*. In: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Following disagreements between himself and government regarding his role in Thai society, King Prajadhipok abdicated in favour of Prince Ananda Mahidol, which started a new royal line (r. 1935-1946). Given Ananda's young age and that he was studying abroad in Switzerland, a regency council acted on his behalf at first. This council's powers were later transfer to Pridi, who acted as regent from 1941-1946 (Wain, 2000). The fact that Ananda resided in Switzerland proved to have significant implications for Thai foreign policy. As will be explored below, Ananda remained the head of state and, as such, a schism between the head of government and head of state existed. When Thailand later declared war on the Allies in WWII, Pridi (along with others in his faction) was able to argue that the declaration was void as it had never been given royal assent (Seekins, 1989).

### ***WWII and Strategic Hedging 1940-1946***

Bangkok's strategy in WWII has frequently been described as cynical (Kislenko, 2002), opportunistic (Sivaraksa, 1991), but more than anything else, flexible (Buszynski, 1982; Poonkham, 2022). Within a short period, Thailand went from neutrality, ambiguity, alignment with Japan, war against France, war against the Allies, and then alignment with the US. The political whiplash of such changes in alignment over WWII has resulted in academic debate as to whether the government's performance during that time should be commended or condemned (Suwannathat-Pian, 1996; Charoenvattananukul, 2020; Poonkham, 2022).

In the years preceding WWII, there were major changes in the geopolitical environment that shaped Thai foreign policy. Firstly, the rise of nationalism, and especially nationalist dictators



in Germany and Italy, found a sympathetic audience in Thailand's military faction (Suwannathat-Pian, 1996; Reynolds, 2004). This was most true with Phibun, who as early as 1936 was characterised by Britain's minister to Siam, Josiah Crosby, as having a "spiritual affinity" with Mussolini and his colonial-style assault on Ethiopia, an irony that apparently was lost on him (Reynolds, 2004). Sternhell (1996) and Strate (2009) add that nationalism/fascism was a useful tool for Phibun to centralise power in himself and mitigate the influence of Pridi and his leftist leaning faction. Secondly, Imperial Japan had quickly become a great power by this point, having defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) and expanded into Manchuria during the late Shōwa period (1931-1941). Though Britain remained a nominally powerful colonial empire in the region, it lacked the capacity to confront Japan in East Asia and Germany in Europe simultaneously (Wilkins, 2009).<sup>56</sup> Lastly, Phibun shifted the discourse away from monarchical brilliance in evading colonialism to instead focus the popular discourse on the lost territories and humiliation Thailand experienced at the hands of the British and French (Poonkham, 2022). Consequently, by 1940 there were significant pressures on the relatively weak Thai government to align with Japan, as well as first and second image factors that promoted fascism, nationalism, and revanchism domestically.

In 1939, France, which had held its ground against Imperial German forces for 4 years in WWI, capitulated to Nazi Germany in just a matter of weeks. The result was a massive weakening

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<sup>56</sup> Partly to blame for British military inadequacy in Southeast may stem the intelligence branch's dismissive attitude towards the Japanese armed forces. For more information see: Ferris, J. (2012). 'Consistent with an Intention': The Far East Combined Bureau and the Outbreak of the Pacific War, 1940–41, *Intelligence and National Security*, 27(1), 5-26. Other factors include the false belief that Singapore was an 'unbreakable fortress'. See: Blackburn, K., & Hack, K. (2003). *Did Singapore Have to Fall?: Churchill and the Impregnable Fortress* (1st ed.). Routledge. Also: Attiwill, K. (1959/2017). *Fortress: The Story of the Siege and Fall of Singapore*, Eschenburg Press

of France's colonial empire as the successor Vichy government attempted to maintain a French empire from south France. Fuelled by an irredentist agenda that was diplomatically supported by Japan, Phibun sensed an opportunity and launched an invasion of French Indochina in what is now known as the Franco-Thai War (October 1940 – January 1941). Defeating the French colonial armies, Phibun was effectively in control over much of the lost territories that had become the defining discourse of that period (Poonkham, 2022). These areas included much of Laos, and the Battambang and Siem Reap regions of Cambodia of which the latter was renamed by Phibun to Phibunsongkram Province. Despite Japan having initially confided that it would diplomatically support Phibun, Japanese mediation deprived Thailand of two-thirds of the land it had conquered.<sup>57</sup>

Thai revanchist policies were also notable in the Shan State Campaign from 1942-1944 (Raymond, 2018). This was an area, held by British-held Burma, that Phibun had claimed were historic parts of the Thai state and required unification. Phibun's Thailand benefitted from the Britain's inability to effectively respond caused by Nazi Germany's occupation of Western Europe and Japan's occupation of parts of China, Malaya, the Philippines, and other areas in the Asia-Pacific. Thailand briefly held the Shan States until 1944 before announcing it would renounce its claims and evacuate the area, which it did in 1945 (Ying-Kit, 2020). Thailand's offensive into British-held Burma is interesting in how the systemic and intervening variables intersect. Bangkok was only able to occupy the Shan States because of systemic conditions, beyond its control, that meant those areas would be minimally defended by larger imperial

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<sup>57</sup> In correspondence between the US Consul in Hanoi and the Secretary of State, Tokyo had directly stated that if France failed to agree to ceding an area of 70,000 square kilometres comprising sections of Laos and Cambodia, Japan 'enforce' the mediation itself. See: Reed, C. (1941). The Consul at Hanoi (Reed) to the Secretary of State, retrieved from: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v05/d98>

powers. However, the decision to invade was justified by nationalist and revanchist agendas that promoted concepts of Thai regional supremacy and righting the wrongs of history. In this case we see the manifestation of McClean's inflation, deflection, dilution principle to explain how states mobilise public sentiment to align with foreign policy goals.

The effects of the Franco-Thai War were immediate. Firstly, it disillusioned Phibun as to whether Japan could be trusted. Their goals were in opposition to Thailand, preferring the region to remain splintered and weak in anticipation of Japan's planned invasion of the region. Secondly, it alarmed Britain who, rather than condemning the action instead condoned it, hoping to avoid antagonising Thailand (Aldrich, 1988). While condoning on one hand, Britain prepared plans to invade Thailand in August 1941 with *Operation Matador* in case Thailand joined Japan's orbit. Because of these two factors, the period between January 1941 and the Pacific War starting on 7 December 1941 was one in which Bangkok was in near constant consultation with Tokyo, London, and Washington. In consulting with London and Washington, Phibun was trying to ascertain the level of commitment Britain and the US had in maintaining the regional order and whether they were prepared to challenge Japan if necessary. Conversely, meetings with Tokyo were crucial if Western willingness was lacking and, therefore, to maintain Thailand's position in Japan's good graces and avoid invasion and occupation.

*Thai Strategic Hedging*

Thai hedging with Britain took three forms. The first was a Thai request to Britain to ferment anti-Japanese sentiment in the Thai language through its radio broadcasts (Aldrich, 1988). The concern in Bangkok was that creating the broadcasts themselves might open them to Japanese antipathy. Second, Thailand attempted to balance against the Japanese military by establishing a joint defence of Thailand and Malaya. This was dismissed by Britain's Commander in Chief Far East Air Vice Marshal Brooke-Popham, who viewed Britain's East Asia strategy as being centred on 'Fortress Singapore.' Phibun further tried to court Britain by appointing Direck Jayanama as Foreign Minister, well-known for his pro-British leanings. Lastly, Phibun pressed London and Washington to make statements to the effect that a Japanese attack on Thailand would be treated as an attack on Britain and the US. Though this failed to achieve its desired effect, it is clear that the Phibun government was striving towards a policy of dominance denial by cultivating a regional counter to Japanese power. In conjunction with the policies Bangkok had towards Japan, a flexible foreign policy was adopted that sought to balance, engage, and diplomatically charm both Britain *and* Japan.

To fully conceptualise Thai strategic hedging, it is also necessary to understand how Phibun embraced Tokyo while simultaneously doing the same to London and Washington. Firstly, in 1940 prior to the Franco-Thai War, Thailand and Japan had made a secret agreement that Thailand would be willing to host Japanese troops if Japan's strategic imperatives required it (Swan, 1987). Phibun reneged on this agreement following Japan's unsatisfactory performance as a mediator in the Franco-Thai War. Despite this set-back, relations between Thailand and Japan remained relatively stable owing to genuinely friendly high-level diplomacy between Phibun and the Japanese Military Attaché in Bangkok, Colonel Tamura,

and to a lesser extent the Japanese Ambassador, Tsubogami Teiji, occurring while both countries had raised their legations to embassy status (Swan, 1987). Secondly, in the months immediately before Japan's invasion, Thailand had reticently agreed to allow Japanese troop movements across south Thailand to attack British Malaya (Wyatt, 1984; Battersby, 2000; James, 210). On 28 November 1941 (9 days before the Japanese surprise attack) Phibun addressed his cabinet and informed them that it would be beneficial to align with Japan as the regional balance of power was in their favour. Phibun's pro-Japanese party, however, lacked sufficient executive autonomy in which to pursue the policy and remained officially neutral (Swan, 1987). It is illustrative of Phibun's contradictory foreign policy that he was pressing London and Washington to protect Thailand while simultaneously in negotiations with Japan on the use of Thai territory to attack Britain. In addition, prior to the appointment of Direck Jayanama as Foreign Minister, the previous three Deputy Foreign Ministers had all been selected because of their pro-Japanese positions (Aldrich, 1988).<sup>58</sup>

### *The Japanese Invasion*

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1941, elements from Japan's 15<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> armies supported by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Fleet (100,000 strong force) invaded Thailand in eight locations from the central plains to the southern isthmus (James, 2010). As near contemporary accounts by Seni Pramoj (Thai Prime Minister 1945-1946, 1975, and 1976) (1943) and A. F. Thavenot (1942) illustrate, Thailand was significantly outmatched, and though public sentiment favoured resistance, doing so would likely have only brought Thailand completely under Japanese administration.

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<sup>58</sup> Before appointing Direk Jayanama as Foreign Minister, Phibun held the portfolio himself. Deputy Foreign Ministers were given wide berth to pursue Phibun's objectives as relating to Japan and as such, the three previous Deputy Foreign Ministers were strong supporters of a Japanese-led regional order (Jayanama, 1957).

Within hours of the opening of hostilities British Prime Minister Churchill declared, “The preservation of the full independence and sovereignty of Thailand is a British interest, and we shall regard an attack on you as an attack on ourselves” (Churchill, 1941, p. n/a) and that “Siam will fight, and she will not fight alone” (Thavenot, p. 116). Yet, despite such endorsement by Britain, the reality as earlier mentioned was that Britain was incapable of defending Siam and had refused to make plans for such cooperation earlier. Armed with this knowledge, Phibun capitulated and agreed to an armistice with Japanese forces after only 5 hours of fighting. Following the armistice, Bangkok agreed to host Japanese forces and use the territory in the south of Thailand from which to launch sorties against British Malaya. From 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942 Japanese Forces pressed into Malaya capturing the Peninsula from Britain.<sup>59</sup> The armistice was followed by a formal alliance between Bangkok and Tokyo on 21 December 1941 in which Tokyo agreed to respect Thai autonomy in large part as well as endorse Phibun’s revanchist policies.

In contrast to Tokyo’s treatment of Korea, swathes of China, and other conquests, Thailand was not incorporated into the Japanese Empire, but instead treated as a partner, albeit a much junior partner. As then Foreign Minister Direk Jayanama (2008) stated in his memoirs years after the events, the Thai political elite had already surmised that any Japanese expansion in Asia would necessitate control of Thailand. Consequently, this informed Thai foreign policy, which, as earlier explained, aimed to hedge its bets between Britain and Japan to see which would be the victor and from which side it could benefit the most from. This

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<sup>59</sup> Thai forces also fought at the Battle of the Ledge, in which British forces invaded south Thailand in response to the Japanese invasion of Malaya. British forces were beaten back by a combined force of Thai border police, villagers, and elements from the Imperial Japanese Army’s 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. See: Smith, C. (2006). *Singapore Burning*, London: Penguin Books.

meant that regardless of the event, Thailand would be well-positioned as it had maintained excellent relations with both powers. In addition, Thailand was distinguished from other Japanese conquests as being the only other regional power that had never been colonised and was still ruled by its indigenous population. Further, elements within Japan's political elite supported the idea of an independent Thailand as part of their Pan-Asia ideology, which supported decolonisation and self-rule, albeit administered by a hegemonic Japan (Cho, Bullock, & Ali, 2013).<sup>60</sup> Lastly, allying with Thailand would have given Japanese forces a free hand to concentrate their efforts in other areas vital to their military efforts, such as in the Malaya Campaign and the War in the Pacific. These factors combined, the third image level of war and the second image level of cultural respect, contributed to Tokyo's decision to ally with Bangkok. The treaty that came after the armistice created a formal alliance that had the usual formalities stating that neither country would seek an independent peace and that each would come to the aid of the other if attacked.<sup>61</sup>

### *Seri Thai and the Thai Government in Exile*

As mentioned earlier, Thailand entered WWII governed by political elites comprised of competing factions. As the head of government, Phibun and his pro-Japanese clique were

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<sup>60</sup> Pan-Asianism was a notable, but fringe ideology within Japan's political elite. For more information see: Saaler, S. (2007). The Construction of Regionalism in Modern Japan: Koderu Kenkichi and his "Treatise on Greater Asianism" (1916). *Modern Asian Studies*, 41(6), 1261-1294. For Chinese interpretations of Pan-Asianism: Chor W. Race, Culture, and the Anglo-American Powers: The Views of Chinese Collaborators. *Modern China*. 2011;37(1):69-103. For regional studies perspectives: Tarling, N., (2006). *Regionalism in Southeast Asia: To foster the political will*, London: Routledge, p. 50.; Kimitada, M. (1990) "Japanese policies and concepts for a regional order in Asia, 1938-1940." Pp. 133-56 in James W. White, Michio Umegaki, and Thomas R. H. Havens (eds.), *The Ambivalence of Nationalism: Modern Japan between East and West*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

<sup>61</sup> Interesting the treaty did not make Thailand an Axis Power alongside Nazi Germany, Italy, and Japan. Though Bangkok had tried to join the Axis Alliance, these ambitions were declined by the Japanese Minister of Foreign affairs Shigenori Togo who stated, "it would be better if we Asians stuck together" (Jayanama, 2008, p. 93).

instrumental in pursuing friendly relations with Japan. However, factions oppositional to Japanese hegemony also existed, most notably among the elite bureaucrats and monarchy, led by 1932 coup d'état key figure, Pridi. As regent, Pridi represented the interests of the king and, because of the king's self-imposed exile in Switzerland, had considerable leeway to use his office to pursue his own pro-West agenda. Consequently, on 25 January 1942 when Phibun's government declared war on the US and Britain, Pridi was able to exercise his power as regent to refuse providing royal assent, providing the Thai Ambassador in the US (Seni Pramoj) a pretext in which to refuse delivery of the declaration. This allowed Thailand to later claim that only factions within the country had declared war, and such a declaration was not representative of the country (Martin, 1963). In conjunction with Pramoj's diplomacy with the US, Washington ignored the declaration of war and instead worked with the ad hoc government in exile in London and Washington to restore a pro-West civilian regime in Thailand (Ngamcachonkulkid, 2005; Pongsudhirak, 2007).

To return Thailand back to a civilian government, the Thai government in exile created *Seri Thai* (Free Thai), like that of the *France Libre* (Free France) movement that was led by Charles de Gaulle. As Wiriyawit (1997) argues, *Seri Thai* served a military and political purpose. First, the organisation provided Allied powers a rich resource of intelligence about Thailand's political, social, and military institutions. Secondly, it provided the Allies a pre-existing government with which it could replace Phibun in the post-war environment. Thirdly, it provided the Allies, for relatively low cost, an indigenous force that could undermine Japanese control in the region. However, Wiriyawit notes that an important aspect behind *Seri Thai* was to establish the US as a patron that would shield Thailand from dismemberment as part



of a post-war settlement. The US was thought of as a natural ally to the Thai government in exile as it was nominally anti-colonial and historically had a limited presence in Southeast Asia (Davis, 1943). Further, the War in the Pacific was primarily going to be fought between Japan and the US, and as such, Britain's post-war position would likely be relatively limited.

The contest for domestic political power in Thailand between Pridi and Phibun flourished between 1941 and 1946, partly because of Thailand's unique situation. Having not been occupied by the Japanese, Seri Thai forces were able gain significant influence in the north-eastern provinces that have historically been oppositional to Bangkok's authority, such as in the Boworadet Rebellion mentioned earlier (Ngamcachonkulkid, 2005). In many aspects the domestic conflict was a microcosm of the larger geopolitical contest and as Japan lost power and influence in Asia, so did Phibun's pro-Japanese government lose influence within Thailand. As Japan's defeat towards 1944 appeared inevitable and Phibun's resignation allowed for a pro-Western government, attention was turned to the eventual post-war settlement.<sup>62</sup>

Britain proved to be an implacable victor, unwilling to forgive Thailand's contribution to the Japanese campaigns in Malaya and Burma, thus seeking to partition Thailand as punitive retribution (Fine, 1965). The demands by London included typical demands, for example, handing over Japanese forces in Thailand to British forces, a return of Allied POWs, a

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<sup>62</sup> Phibun was succeeded by Aphaiwong (1944-1946), who resigned on 31 August 1946 following Japan's defeat citing his former loyalty to the Japanese as a point of concern for any post-war arrangement. Aphaiwong was then succeeded by Thawi Bunyaket for two weeks before Pramoj, who had founded the Thai government in exile, returned to Thailand and assumed the role.

repudiation of the 1942 war declaration, and a return to the pre-1940 Thai borders. However, the more extreme demands included a prohibition from constructing a canal through the Kra Isthmus, export controls over its key resources that included teak, tin, rubber, and rice, a 1.5 million tonne rice levy, and the British right to limit restrictions by Thailand on its economy, trade, and military agreements.<sup>63</sup> During negotiations between Britain and the US over Thai reparations, the British underscored their demands by noting that their army (The Indian 7<sup>th</sup> Army) was approaching Thailand. Negotiations over reparations would be determined based on how Thailand met the requirements of British forces occupying the country (Fine, p. 73). The US Department of State shielded Thailand from much of Britain's demands, though many still were made, such as limiting Thailand's sovereignty regarding the construction of a Kra Isthmus canal and the rice levy. In addition, France required that Thailand return territories seized from French Indochina during the Franco-Thai War in 1941 as the price of admission into the United Nations. Thailand was assisted in its reconstruction efforts by the US, which provided a US\$10 million loan (Martin, 1967). Despite having been at war with Britain and France, Thailand escaped significant punitive actions and overbearing reparations.

The effects of Thailand's WWII strategy can be quantified when looking at the situation through an economic perspective. Huff and Majima (2013) note that Thailand was the least affected Southeast Asian economy during the war. It suffered fewer casualties, less infrastructure damage, lower resource extraction demands, and was not formally occupied

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<sup>63</sup> The idea of a canal along the Kra Isthmus has long been a dream of Bangkok as it would allow Thailand to capture more of the maritime shipping commerce by providing a shorter path between Asia and Europe. Even now the prospect of a canal remains an omnipresent thought in the minds of Thailand's political elite. See: Takahashi, T. (2022). Thai 'land bridge' project caught in Sino-U.S. Tug Of War, retrieved from: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Thai-land-bridge-project-caught-in-Sino-U.S.-tug-of-war>

by Imperial Japanese forces. As a result, Thailand's GDP had decreased a relatively small amount during the war with its 1945 GDP being 82.6% of its pre-war GDP. In contrast, Indonesia's immediate post-war GDP was 48% of its pre-war economy and even by 1950 had only reached 74%. Similar statistics, according to Huff and Majima can be found for all Southeast Asian countries as they had suffered considerably greater deleterious effects from the war than Thailand. By maintaining a flexible foreign policy at the beginning of the war, Bangkok was able to easily shift towards Japan once invaded. Then, when Japan's run at hegemony was checked by the Allies, Thailand was able to shift its alignment and seek protection from the US against British retaliation. In effect, Bangkok applied a hedging policy that allowed it to maximise its position during the war by reacquiring former territories while minimising risk through carefully shifting alignment towards 1944. This is not to say that Thailand did not suffer during the war, having lost roughly 5,600 military personnel and thousands more civilians in Allied bombing campaigns and other hardships as a result of occupation (Reynolds, 2005; Oda, 2015; Hashimoto, 2022). Ultimately though, Thai political manoeuvring allowed it to make the best of a horrible situation and come out relatively better off than any of its neighbours.

#### *The Early Cold War—The Convergence of Thai-US Strategic Interests*

The emerging bipolar global geopolitical structure and improved technology that came about immediately following WWII had profound consequences for Thai foreign policy. The US and Soviet Union (USSR) competed for influence on a global scale unprecedented in history while at the time underscored by the advent of atomic weapons that raised the stakes of miscalculation to apocalyptic levels. East Asia saw significant competition between the two

superpowers, for example, the Korean War (1950-1953) and the Indochina Wars (1946-1991), but also in the several civil wars in which Washington and Moscow competed to affect the outcome, such as in Laos (1959-1975), Vietnam (1955-1975), and Cambodia (1967-1975). Thailand, therefore, had significant strategic value to Washington as it represented a bulwark against communism from spreading southwards towards Malaya and Indonesia. The policies of containment, in which the spread of communism needed to be checked wherever it popped up in conjunction with domino theory, which posits that communist takeovers would invite other communist takeovers in neighbouring countries, facilitated a convergence of interests between Bangkok and Washington. As Stanton (1954), the US Ambassador in Thailand stated, "If Thailand's freedom and independence can be preserved, the heart and so much of the body of Southeast Asia will be saved" (pg.72-75).

Following the flexible foreign policy that characterised Thailand during WWII, post-war Thai foreign policy was considerably more straightforward. Faced with an aggressive and expanding communist bloc, Thailand elected to balance against the threat. This precipitated significant domestic and foreign policy changes. Firstly, in 1946 Thailand's leftist Prime Minister, Pridi, resigned following continuing criticism for his leftist sympathies, especially those of the Vietnamese communists, such as Ho Chi Minh (Aphornsuvan, 1987; Hewison, 2020). Thawan Thamrongnawasawat, an ally to Pridi, ruled as Prime Minister from August 1946 to November 1947 before being ousted by elements from the military, monarchy, and civilian elite. Concurrent to Pridi's ousting, a major political crisis occurred when King Ananda was found dead on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 1946, 6 months after returning from exile. Pridi was implicated in Ananda's death, which, in conjunction with his leftist leanings, provided

sufficient pretext for a military coup (Wyatt, 1984). The coup was such a foregone conclusion that even the US Chargé d'affaires, Mr. Turner, in Thailand recounted in a telegram with the Secretary of State the belief among 'Pridi-ites' that Phibun would lead a coup against the Democrats in 1947 (Turner, 1951).

As stated above, the return of Phibun was a foregone conclusion given the structural and subunit convergence of interests in maintaining a strong relationship with the US. Phibun, having been exonerated for his war crimes, returned as Prime Minister in April 1948, and held the position until September 1957. Discarding the revanchist and opportunistic policies that typified his earlier premiership, Phibun's foreign policy was entirely more pragmatic and survival oriented. His return also set the tone for much of the governance during the Cold War, in which military (or at least military aligned) leadership dominated domestic politics. Kullada K. Mead (2012) argues that, given the military faction's US-leanings, the political situation in Bangkok and Washington favoured military rule, which was viewed by the latter as stable and by the former as profitable. The situation was mutually favourable so long as the strategic interests of Thailand and the US remained in alignment. As such, Mead notes that the US did not act in ways that affected home rule either through covert actions or direct interventions as it did with other countries in the region.

By the 1950s Thailand's strategic situation was increasingly vulnerable. The spread of communist ideology was perceived as the largest domestic security issue to Thailand's military government as it had the capacity to ferment mass radicalisation. This was particularly notable in the Isan area of Thailand that constitutes the majority of northeast

Thailand in which Phibun had spent most of 1950 quelling leftist uprisings (Keyes, 2014).<sup>64</sup> The threat of communist uprisings brought Bangkok and Washington further together during which time a patron-client relationship emerged. The era of foreign policy flexibility was over. Bangkok was firmly and unequivocally in alignment with Washington against communism. However, as expressed in multiple telegrams at the time, for example, those from Secretary of State Dean Acheson and later the Chargé d'affaires Mr. Turner, the US was unsure whether Phibun was acting for internal political reasons or for external ones (Acheson, 1949; Turner, 1951).

The structural rationale behind Bangkok's preference for US partnership is quite simple. The US, despite technologies that allowed it to project force globally, was isolated from and simultaneously connected to the Asia through the Pacific Ocean. The stopping power of water, to borrow from Mearsheimer (2014, p. 44), reduced the capacity of the US to dominate mainland Asia militarily. Brzezinski (1997) argues that it was the US' inability to overcome the stopping power of water that made it a reliable partner for Thailand. Further, as the only other superpower, US support was obviously necessary for any state seeking to resist communist influence and regional dominance. In effect, Thailand could be assured that its relationship with the US would remain stable as its capacity to act as an imperial power was curtailed by the vast distances between itself and mainland Southeast Asia.

### *Thai Balancing*

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<sup>64</sup> The Isan area is also where the 1933 Boworadet Rebellion started and the area from which the Seri Thai forces had the most support during WWII.

The first demonstrable display of Thai balancing occurred when the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) launched an invasion of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) on 25 June 1950 triggering the Korean War that lasted until 27 July 1953. Thailand was the first Asian country to support the US in this conflict and thereby position itself as a regional partner (Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs, 2010). Over 11,000 Thai troops served in Korea during the 3 years of conflict, during which time they regularly distinguished themselves. Examples include the Battle of Pork Chop Hill (31 October to 11 November 1952) in which the US 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and the Thai 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment (an elite element of the Queen Sirikit's Guard) repulsed multiple Chinese People's Volunteer Army attacks. As of writing, a small Thai military liaison detachment remains in Seoul (Bangkok Post, 2020). The Korean theatre provided Bangkok an early opportunity to show its willingness and capabilities to its new American patron, as well as an opportunity for its military to gain real-world combat experience abroad. In addition, the Royal Thai Government (RTG) sent rice and other materiel aid to the Korean theatre. Thai support for the US-led UN operation in Korea was carefully orchestrated as a pragmatic course of action by Phibun who stated, "by sending just a small number of troops as a token of our friendship, we will get various things in return" (Baker & Pongpaichit, 2009). Indeed, Thailand received US\$10 million in US aid and a US\$25 million loan from the World Bank as a reward for their alignment, which became a pattern of behaviour between the US and Thailand for much of the Cold War.

Thailand's alignment towards the US was perceived by political elites at the time as genuine and inextricably linked with Washington's East Asia strategy. In secret correspondence between the US Embassy in Thailand and the US Secretary of State in 1951, Ambassador

Stanton viewed the strategic situation thusly, “It is highly probable that as long as Phibun’s Government continues to make the foreign policy for Thailand, it will stick by the United Nations and the United States” (Document No. 611.92/3-15510). As a result, US policy in Thailand was aimed at maintaining the strong relationship, which not only required assisting in the development of Thailand but also shielding it from immediate external threats to its independence (Stanton, 1951).<sup>65</sup> Consequently, US military assistance to Thailand between 1951 to 1971 to encourage loyalty grew considerably with a declared figure of US\$935 million being given to Thailand during this time period (Chai-Anan, 1990). This amount represented 50% of Thailand’s own military spending and as such significantly shaped Thai foreign policy and reinforced a balancing position by Bangkok.

Further assistance by the US was demonstrated in their willingness to support the construction and improvement of naval facilities in Sattahip and an airbase in U-Tapao (near Bangkok and Pattaya). The Thai government welcomed these donations and, according to Yensabai (2019), consciously used the narrative of the communist threat to shape public opinion in favour of alignment with the US. In effect, the Phibun government was inflating the importance of the communist threat to shape public opinion to support existing foreign policy. In neoclassical realist discourse, this strategy may be referred to as that of *inflation* in which foreign policy elite manipulate domestic public opinion to align with foreign policy strategy (McClellan, 2015). Phibun’s administration(s), until his overthrow by coup in 1957, can

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<sup>65</sup> A complete list of recommendations by Stanton regarding methods to shore up Thai independence can be found in his communication with the US Secretary of State. See: Stanton, E. (1951). The Ambassador in Thailand (Stanton) to the Secretary of State, in *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1951, Asia and the Pacific, Volume VI, Part 2* (ed. Paul Claussen, John P. Glennon, David W. Mabon, Neal H. Petersen, & Carl N. Raether). Retrieved from: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v06p2/d71>



be summarised as, paradoxically, being dynamic and pragmatic. In the pre-WWII environment where strategic uncertainty prevailed, Phibun dynamically courted all major powers in such a way that none were sure about Bangkok's true intentions. In the early Cold War environment Phibun marshalled foreign policy in a completely different direction, pragmatically aligning with the US in a way that was unprecedented in Thai history.

### *Post-Phibun and the 'American Era'*

Phibun's foreign policy legacy, whether fair or unfair, has frequently been characterised as cynically opportunistic and that he manipulated the Cold War mania about communism to his own personal benefit (Kislenko, 2002). The same, however, cannot be said of his successors, Thanom Kittikachorn (1958 & 1963-1973) and Sarit Thanarat (1959-1963), who were staunch anti-communists and willing to enhance cooperation with Washington.<sup>66</sup> US aid, which can be seen in Table 4.1, played a substantial role in Thai foreign policy and domestic life to the point that Anderson refers to the period from 1958-1973 as the "American Era" in Thai history (p. 2). Though primarily focused on perceived cultural decay within Thailand due to the influx of US capitalism and culture, which was made possible through permissive governments reliant on military and economic aid, Anderson also covered the shifts in foreign policy that resulted. Through such aid, Anderson argues that Thailand was persuaded to follow a foreign policy strategy that may not have been ideal.

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<sup>66</sup> It should be no surprise that Thanom's earliest mention in the published telegrams from the era refer to him as, "approachable by US in varying degrees directly or indirectly" while also critiquing him as being politically inexperienced. Foreign Relations of The United States, 1955-1957, Southeast Asia, Volume XXII, eds. Robert J. McMahon, Harriet D. Schwar, & Louis J. Smith (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 529. See also: Foreign Relations of The United States, 1958-1960, South and Southeast Asia, Volume XV, eds. Madeline Chi, John P. Glennon, William K. Klingaman, & Robert J. McMahon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 468.

**Table 4.1: Aid USA to Thailand (millions of US\$)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>1958</b>	<b>1960</b>	<b>1962</b>	<b>1964</b>	<b>1966</b>	<b>1968</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1972</b>
<b>Economic</b>	25.9	25.9	47.6	15.1	60.4	56.4	63.2	29.5
<b>Military</b>	19.7	24.7	88.0	35.2	42.3	72.1	61.2	-

<sup>a</sup> Figures from 1958 to 1966: Wyatt, D. (1984). Thailand: A Short History

<sup>b</sup> Figures from 1968 to 1970 military figures: Report to the Subcommittee on U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad Committee on Foreign relations by the Comptroller General of the United States.

<sup>c</sup> Figures from 1968 to 1970 economic aid figures: Intelligence Memorandum: Economic Prospects in Thailand.

<sup>d</sup> Figures from 1968 to 1972 for both types of aid: Viksnins, G., (1973). United States Military Spending and the Economy of Thailand, 1967-1972, *Asian Survey*, 13(5), pp. 441-457.

In contrast to Anderson, Harrison (2010), arguing from a post-modernist interpretation of colonisation argued that the overlay of US popular culture in Thailand had a significant influence on Thai culture. The popular anti-communist discourse that dominated early Cold War US domestic politics had a similarly profound effect in Thailand, lending public support to Thanom and Sarit's internal and external anti-communist policies. Harrison's argument goes so far to as to claim that US cultural proliferation had a quasi-colonial effect in persuading Thai political elites and the public to support Washington's interests. Yensabai (2019) counters Harrison's claims regarding cultural colonisation by arguing that Thai foreign policy was still the product of Thai political elite who collectively made the decision to align with the US. Foreign policy strategy may have partially been driven by cultural linkages, but the dominant drivers were structural realities that compelled Thailand and Washington to mutually rely on each other. To some extent, it is likely that there is strong basis for Anderson, Harrison, and Yensabai's theories on the effect of culture. Applying a neoclassical realist lens, it can be appreciated that cultural proliferation most likely had some effect in moderating the

rate or intensity of Thai foreign policy, but not the direction of the policy itself. That is to say, anti-communist policies were likely always to be present to some extent or another due to structural realities, but the manner of the response may have been guided by second image factors.

US aid during the American Era became a critical element in Washington's overall East Asia strategy. This is illustrated in various documents from the time, for example, in a Department of State telegram in 1967 that stated, "The limited numbers of Thai officials who understand what needs to be done and are willing to take the lead in gearing the RTG to wage an effective fight on insurgency are encouraged to do so by our support under the aid program" (Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968 – Document No. 369, 1967). Further, in another telegram from that period, "Our aid is justified because of the short time fuse which Communist aggression imposes upon Thai efforts to produce unity and economic stability. Above all, our aid is justified because it has worked" (Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968 – Document No. 343, 1967). For as long as the US was willing to provide a regional security umbrella and financial support to the Thai government, they found Thailand a willing and cooperative partner. Stepping back, Thai foreign policy was clearly guided by the structure of the system that brought the US and USSR into competition in Southeast Asia. However, the extent to which Thailand could effectively balance against the USSR and the new communist governments in the region demanded external assistance from the US. In this, the neoclassical realist understanding of structural forces dominating foreign policy, yet moderated by subunit level factors, is evidenced. Rather than using foreign aid directly to

influence policy, foreign aid was reinforcing existing elite perceptions and creating a foreign aid dependency among said elites.

During the American Era the military strategic subculture became further ingrained within society as a result of increased militarisation in part due to the Cold War and aid provided by the US (Hewison, 2020). Hewison argues that US aid to Thailand created an addiction of sorts by the Thai government in which aid created dependence, which in turn dictated foreign policy. While the author disagrees with the extent of psychological manipulation of Thai political elites as a result of US aid dependency, foreign aid to Thailand directly impacted Thai support for US policies in the region. For example, Thailand had participated in most of the East and Southeast Asian conflicts that involved the US. As earlier mentioned, Thailand sent 11,000 personnel to Korea, but it also sent 40,000 to Vietnam, and an estimated 21,000 to Laos.<sup>67</sup> Looking at Table 4.1, US military aid to Thailand peaked in 1962 during US President Kennedy's escalation of the war in Vietnam. Military aid did subsequently dip from 1964 to 1966, but it rose again from 1968 onward as the US policy of Vietnamization sought to shift the burden of fighting onto local forces.

As evidenced in a transcript during a 15 May 1969 joint meeting of the National Security Council and Cabinet it is apparent that there were great concerns how Vietnamization could damage their relationship with Thailand, which is likely why US military and economic aid remained high during the 1968-1970 period. At the meeting Nixon is quoted as saying of

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<sup>67</sup> Thai forces in Laos were an eclectic mix of RTG and RTAF personnel, covert forces, special operations forces, and mercenaries. For more information see: Osornprasop, S. (2012). *Thailand and the Secret War in Laos, 1960-74*. In L. Albert (Ed.). *Southeast Asia and the Cold War*. New York: Routledge

Thailand, “They are like rice in the wind. If they think we are going to lose, they will go the other way” (Foreign Relations of The United States, 1969–1976, Volume VI, Vietnam, January 1969–July 1970). Consequently, there were strong push-pull drivers that moderated the relationship between Thailand and US. Though Thailand had balanced against communism up to that point, the US political elite had identified that a US withdrawal from the region without appropriate support systems in place would likely compel Thailand to pursue an alternative foreign policy strategy.

### **The Indochina Wars**

The Indochina Wars were a series of three major wars and other substantial conflicts fought primarily in and around Vietnam from 1945 to 1991 (Lockhart & Duiker, 2010). Like many of the conflicts from this time and place, Cold War geopolitics transformed these conflicts into major wars with the various sides receiving training, intelligence, and occasionally military support from either of the two superpowers. For example, the First Indochina War between France and Vietnam quickly escalated to involve all three major regional powers: The Soviet Union, China, and the US. Consequently, the conflict spilled over into neighbouring Laos and Cambodia, both of which became communist states by 1975. For much of this period Thailand balanced against communist expansion through its alignment with the US, as explored above.

For context, as a mainland Asian state, proximate to the conflict areas, Thailand’s safety was very much tied to encouraging conditions that contained the conflict in Vietnam and away from Thailand. During the First Indochina (1946-1954), Thailand’s role politically significant,

acting to recognise the Bao Dai government in 1950 - which represented a continuation of the Ngyen Dynasty that had ruled Vietnam since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Adulyasak, 1986). As Adulyasak notes, Phibun's move to recognise the Bao Dai government was controversial in Thailand as it recognised a French created colonial instrument and opened Thailand upon to Vietminh animosity if the Bao Dai government fell. The US State Department, however, was able to encourage Phibun to support the Bao Dai government and cemented, early on, the Thai-US partnership against communism. The Bao Dai's failing capacity to administer the state and France's inability to resist communist forces in Vietnam, encouraged the US to step in. For Bangkok, so long as the US remained opposed to the spread of communism and financially support states to resist it, Bangkok was a willing partner.

Bangkok was increasingly concerned during these ongoing conflicts about the possible spill over into Thailand. Initially such concerns were mitigated by Thailand's membership in SEATO, an organisation for collective security that ideally would have emulated NATO in Southeast Asia with membership comprising Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the UK, and the US. However, it was very early on proven to be dysfunctional as the interests of the various members were not in harmony given that the organisation combined colonial powers, colonised states, and a global superpower. Consequently, in 1962, to address Thai security concerns, the US affirmed its position to defend Thailand in what is now referred to as the Thanat-Rusk Communique on 6 March 1962. The communique recognised the mutual dependence of Washington and Bangkok in their attempts to achieve their own foreign policy and security objectives within the region (Kurlantzick, 2016). Though the treaty

remains a foundation in US-Thai security relations to this day, its actionability following the Nixon Doctrine in 1969 created doubts.

During the Indochina Wars, Thailand represented one of the greatest assets the US had in its efforts against Viet Minh forces in Vietnam. As a sovereign state with a strong government, close geographical proximity to Vietnam without sharing a border, and a willingness to align with US global policy of containing communism, Thailand's strategic value was immense. Thailand also proved itself valuable by the depth of its support of US policy. During the Vietnam War in particular Thailand provided troops, materiel, and the use of its territory to house US troops as well as launch sorties from. As the US increased the intensity of its aerial campaign against Viet Minh forces, 80% of those US air strikes had their origin point from somewhere within Thailand (Brodeur, Lekfuangfu, & Zylberberg, 2014). Randolph (1986) made the comment that Thailand represented an unsinkable aircraft carrier from which the US was able to ensure aerial supremacy over the region. Thailand's utility in US foreign policy in Southeast Asia was fundamentally important to the American capacity to wage war in its attempt to contain the spread of communism. The importance of Thailand was echoed in secret US documents at the time with one saying, "Thailand is an essential US operational base in Southeast Asia. Its continued cooperation is vital to success in Laos and to achievement of many of our other objectives in the area" (Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963 – Document 471, 1962).

### *The Return of Flexibility—Thailand Post-Nixon Doctrine*

In 1975 three Southeast Asian countries fell to communist forces: Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The US, unwilling to spend more blood and money in Asian conflicts adopted a policy that had its roots in the Eisenhower administration (1953-1961): “If there must be a war there in Asia, let it be Asians against Asians” (Dower, 1970, p. 49). Communist expansion had been preceded in 1972 by rapprochement between China and the US when President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger met with Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai (Panda, 1997; Kissinger, 2009/2015). The geopolitical environment for Thailand in 1975 was highly tense, flanked by two communist states, a revisionist and expansionist Vietnam, and the inability to rely on significant US support.

The Nixon Doctrine was a significant departure from prior US foreign policy and placed the US’ partners that depended on that security umbrella in a troubled position. Criticism at the time, such as that by Ensign Caswell (1971), predicted that such a doctrine would risk estranging US allies such as Thailand. Caswell stated of the US-Thai relationship that “Thailand’s drift away from the United States must be considered as a possible sign that the Nixon Doctrine may be considered inappropriate under contemporary condition” (p. 60). Regardless, Kissinger (1969) argued that the Nixon Doctrine was appropriate given that the spread of communism was primarily caused by domestic fractures and weaknesses that were exploited and as such, “The general policy is that internal subversion has to be the primary responsibility of the threatened country” (Document No. 30).



Though the official discourse surrounding the Nixon Doctrine maintained that the US would support allied states in the region from communist expansion, in practice it meant a significant distancing by Washington from the issues in Southeast Asia. As Ken Cole (Kissinger, 1969) wrote in a report forwarded by Kissinger to the Secretary of Defense, the Attorney General, the Director of Central Intelligence, and President Nixon, “You are also, I believe, fully aware of what Souvanna Phouma of Laos, the leaders of Thailand and those of Malaysia--to say nothing of Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan--tell us in confidence as regards their true feelings; i.e., naked fear, concerning a US military withdrawal from SE Asia” (Document No. 39) The announcement of the Nixon Doctrine fundamentally changed the balance of power in the Southeast Asian region and in many ways precipitated the Third Indochina War. Without Washington’s reassurances to its regional partners, Hanoi was given a free hand to expand its influence.

Two major geopolitical changes occurred because of Nixon’s decision to extricate the US from bloody wars in East and Southeast Asia. The first is, as mentioned above, Hanoi had the geopolitical latitude to pursue expansionist aims in the region, notably in neighbouring Cambodia. The second, and globally more significant shift, was the conversion of China into a tacit US partner in the aftermath of the Sino-Soviet split and rapprochement between Beijing and Washington (Goh, 2004). Hood (1986) and Goh (2004) make the case that rapprochement between China and the US shifted the responsibility for regional order onto China’s shoulders and contributed to the breakdown in relations between China and Vietnam later. Though Moscow attempted to fill in the gap China had left in Vietnamese foreign support, issues closer to home commanded greater attention.

*The Thai Détente with China and the Third Indochina War (1978-1989)*

In December 1978 Hanoi invaded Cambodia, which was at the time governed by the Khmer Rouge, a junior partner of China (Mertha, 2014).<sup>68</sup> Vietnamese forces quickly overran Cambodia resulting in its occupation from 1978 to 1989. For the first time in over a century, Thailand and Vietnam shared a common border, which consequently raised major concerns in Bangkok about a possible invasion. Thailand faced two issues regarding a potential invasion, as expressed by Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak Chamanan (1977-1980) to US Vice President Walter Mondale (Kriangsak, 1978). The first was that, despite significant spending and aid, Thai forces were unlikely to prevail militarily against Vietnamese forces and Kriangsak requested greater US and Japanese assistance in both economic and military matters. Secondly, Kriangsak had little faith in the US willingness to protect Thailand and intervene against Vietnam. To address these issues, Kriangsak embraced relations with China and ASEAN to pressure Hanoi into withdrawing its forces from Cambodia. The dearth of evidence in the willingness of the US to intervene led Bangkok to reject balancing and seek a flexible solution.

To contain the threat of Vietnamese expansion, Thailand, through the 1970s, embraced flexible diplomacy in which Bangkok tried to normalise relations with Moscow and Beijing in what Poonkham (2022) refers to as the “Thai détente” (p. 16). Despite Moscow’s continuing support for Vietnamese expansionist policies, Kriangsak visited the USSR (a bold move at the time) to moderate USSR support (Thailand—U.S.S.R. Joint Communique, 1980). Greater

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<sup>68</sup> A detailed account of the China-Cambodian relationship at the time can be found in Mertha, A. (2014). *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

success was had with China where a greater convergence of strategic interests lay. In February 1979, responding to the Vietnamese attack and defeat of Khmer Rouge forces in Cambodia, China attacked the Vietnamese north forcing Hanoi to divert attention to the area. Despite failing to coerce Hanoi into leaving Cambodia or Laos, it did demonstrate the inability of the USSR to defend Vietnam, forced Hanoi to maintain sizeable forces in the region, and internationalise the conflict (Tretiak, 1979). Thailand's détente with China had provided significant dividends with Beijing declaring that it would act to defend Thailand and Singapore from Vietnam (Schier, 1982; Chang, 1983).

Thailand, in addition to normalising relations with Moscow and Beijing, also pursued alternative strategies to restrain Vietnam. Among these strategies were a plan to fund, equip, train, and otherwise generally support indigenous Cambodian factions to resist Vietnamese forces. Initially Bangkok aided the communist Khmer Rouge, a fact that no doubt was supported in Beijing, before shifting support towards the Cambodian monarchy, which had greater appeal to ASEAN (Jones, 2017). The strategy in shifting support towards the Cambodian monarchy was pragmatic given that neither Hanoi nor ASEAN were inclined to deal with the Khmer Rouge (Porter, 1988). Further, Thailand asked for UN and US assistance where Kriangsak represented Thailand as the front-line in the war against communism and that if it fell, so could all Southeast Asia (Kriangsak, 1978). To provide greater legitimacy, Bangkok encouraged the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the International Committee of the Red Cross, UNICEF, and the World Food Program to have a large presence in Thailand, knowing that it would help internationalise the crisis (Kissinger, 1975; Robinson,

1998, 2000). Without the reliability of the US, Bangkok was forced to approach the security crisis brought about by Vietnamese aggression in a unique and flexible way.

### *Post-War Rehabilitation*

The most remarkable aspect of the conflict, and one that is slightly outside the scope of this chapter, is the post-war geopolitical situation in mainland southeast Asia. In 1988 Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan (1988-1991) made efforts to transform relations between mainland Southeast Asian countries in his famed, 'Battlefields to Markets' strategy (Yong, 1988). The strategy, as the name suggests, involved the creation of economic linkages between the mainland Southeast Asian communities to consolidate peace efforts as well as exploit new economic opportunities in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (Pangsapa, 2015). Complementary to this policy was an easing on cross-border migration that during the first Chuan Leekpai government saw roughly 400,000 migrants cross into Thailand from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. Major investments by Thai companies, such as those owned by then Foreign Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, were seen as a means of critical way of reducing tensions (McCargo & Pathmanand, 2005; Pangsapa, 2015).

The end of the Cold War in 1991 further brought about a decrease in regional tensions as Hanoi lost its patron and international communism had 'lost.' Bangkok continued to maintain a policy of 'constructive engagement' with its neighbours partly for economic reasons, but also to bind them to the regional order and make them stakeholders in the regional peace (Roberts, 2012). In the 1990s Bangkok led the charge in ASEAN's expansion by supporting the

application of Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia all of which joined in 1995, 1997, 1997, and 1999, respectively (ASEAN.org, n.d.). Given ASEAN's economic utility, joining ASEAN was a pragmatic choice for those states that had suffered significantly from the various Indochina Wars for the better part of a century.<sup>69</sup> By 1999 all of mainland Southeast Asia had joined ASEAN, which in turn acted to bind the former aspirant regional hegemon, Vietnam, and created a loose regional order that remains formally based on non-interference.

### ***Thai Strategic Hedging***

Though Thailand had ceased to continue its rigid balancing strategy against communism from the late 1960s onwards, would it be fair to call such a shift *hedging*? Hedging typically requires that the hedging state maintain a foreign policy that is characterised by ambiguity. Further, a hedging state should employ behaviours that appear mutually contradictory (Kuik, 2008, 2016). In effect, the state must act in a way that is simultaneously considered balancing and bandwagoning, the combination of which constructs the appearance of ambiguity. However, as Haacke (2019) points out, hedging practices are mostly used in environments of risk rather than overt threat. The rationale is that states cannot afford to hedge in geopolitical environments where strong alignment positions are necessary, such as in the face of impending aggression.

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<sup>69</sup> It must be stated that Cambodia was controversial member given Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's coup against the FUNCINPEC party led by Prince Norodom Rannaridh. For more information see: Roberts, C. (2012). *ASEAN regionalism: cooperation, values and institutionalization*, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, N.Y. : Routledge, p. 62-63.

Following from Haacke's position in that hedging occurs during risks, not threats, it is reasonable to argue that Thailand engaged in hedging in circumstances when it was feasible. When Japanese dominance transformed from a risk in 1940 to an overt threat in 1941, Bangkok moved away from tripartite hedging between Britain, Imperial Japan, and the US to bandwagoning with Imperial Japan. Hedging was only a practicable foreign policy strategy during those tense years before Japan's invasions of the Asia-Pacific which allowed Thailand to act as a junior partner to Japan while also maintaining sufficient political distance that arguments could be made that allowed Thailand to escape the worst of reprisals sought by some leaders of the Allied Powers in the post-war settlement.

### *Balancing*

From at least 1946 to 1989 Thailand could be said to have existed in a high-risk environment as it faced various threats from communist states, for example, China's support for Thai communist insurgents, the threat of spill over from the Laotian and Cambodian civil wars, and lastly the threat of Vietnamese aggression during its expansionist phase. From at least 1946 to 1969 Thailand had a firm balancing position through its alignment with the US against the communist bloc. This is evidenced by the close cooperation between Washington and Bangkok, the patron-client relationship that existed, and Bangkok's willingness to participate in several conflicts in the region. However, the Nixon Doctrine in 1969 and Thailand's détente with the USSR and China during that same period caused fundamental shifts in Thai foreign policy. Firstly, Thailand lost the unquestionable support of its patron forcing Bangkok to reassess its strategic situation. Secondly, the withdrawal of US forces from the region emboldened communist expansion, and by 1975 all of Indochina was governed by ideological

communist regimes. As such, Bangkok acted to mitigate risk by cultivating ties with its former enemy, China, in conjunction with its existing US ties (that had been formalised by treaties and convention in 1954 and 1962). At the same time Thailand's economy grew substantially as it shifted from an agrarian economy to an industrial one, received significant investments from the US and Japan, and began exploring opportunities with China (Pongpaichit, 1996). Given that China had arguably become a tacit US partner at the time, and that Vietnam was Bangkok's principal threat, it must be stated that Thai foreign policy was still focused on balancing, albeit against Hanoi.

A case can be made that Thailand engaged in Type B hedging against the US. In this type of hedging, the hedging state prepares for the eventuality in which their patron is either unwilling or unable to execute continued patronage and/or provision of public goods and, consequently, explores alternatives (Tessman & Wolfe, 2011; Salman, 2017). For Bangkok, the 1969 Nixon Doctrine compelled Thailand to compensate for the partial loss of US patronage and thus contributed to the *détente* with the USSR and China. This would help explain Bangkok's decision to engage in diplomacy with Beijing and Moscow in the early 1970s even prior to the heightened period of tension that followed Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia in 1979. These actions were predicted by US National Security Council Staff in 1970 where they write,

Bangkok could present us with two choices: massive U.S. reassurances or Thai accommodation with their adversaries ... Our other option would be acquiescence in Thai overtures to Hanoi and Peking which would no doubt have to include Thai

neutrality, renunciation of SEATO, and removal of all American bases and troops.

(Foreign Relations of the United States, 1970, Document No. 54)

Despite lacking a framework for Type B hedging, the move by Bangkok to plug security gaps caused by the Nixon Doctrine were logically derived by NSC staff. Under the Nixon Doctrine Washington substantially decreased military aid to Thailand, and consequently resulted in the increased military spending (as a percentage of GDP) seen in Tables 4.2-4.5 from 1976 to 1984. While the Vietnamese potential for aggression was partly responsible for increased military spending, it cannot be ignored that Thailand's spending was partly to offset losses and inconsistent aid from the US post-1969, as evidenced in Table 4.2.

**Table 4.2: US Military Assistance to Thailand 1969-1985 (includes grants, credit financing, and miscellaneous aid)**

Year	1969	1971	1973	1975	1977	1979	1981	1983	1985
<b>Total</b>	96.4	98.7	122.1	41.7	47.3	32.1	54.6	96.2	102.3

Source: Muscat (1990)

Despite maintaining a debatable balancing/Type B hedging foreign policy strategy, Funston (1998) and Raymond (2020) both point out that Thailand's response to the 1970s shifting regional security environment bears similarities to Siam's response during the colonial period. Thai foreign policy, as did Siam's, took a 'flexible' approach in which Bangkok sought to create loose coalitions, cultivate ties with disparate partners, such as China and the US, and employ regional and global norms, for example, multilateral institutions. Further, Raymond (p. 6)



points out that Thai political elite sponsored greater nationalism within the state to build resilience and augment the state’s capacity to resist communism from taking root. Regardless of Thailand’s flexible foreign policy approach, it was still obviously balancing as it sponsored anti-Vietnamese factions in occupied Cambodia, cooperated with China in opening a second front in north Vietnam, and substantially increased their military spending, as seen in Table 4.3 and 4.4. Thai military spending reached its peak (as a percentage of GDP) between 1978 and 1984, the period in which Vietnam occupied Cambodia and Thai-Vietnamese skirmishes were frequent (World Bank, 2020). By 1990, Thai military spending had decreased to even lower than it was in 1970, indicating that Bangkok perceived that a profound change in the regional security dynamic had then emerged.

**Table 4.3: Thai military spending in US\$ millions (adjusted for 2020 inflation)**

<b>Year</b>	1970	1972	1974	1976	1978	1980	1982	1984	1986	1988	1990
<b>Amount</b>	220	280	360	530	940	1,370	1,510	1,700	1,640	1,810	2,210

Source: World Bank, 2020

**Table 4.4: Military spending as a percentage of GDP (Thailand)**

<b>Year</b>	1970	1972	1974	1976	1978	1980	1982	1984	1986	1988	1990
<b>Amount</b>	3.07%	3.47%	2.66%	3.13%	3.92%	4.24%	4.12%	4.06%	3.80%	2.93%	2.59%

Source: World Bank, 2020

## *Hedging*

Hedging was most apparent in three situations. The first strong case for hedging can be made in the year prior to the Pacific Campaign in WWII. Thai foreign policy was ambiguous to the point that both British and Japanese political elite were under the belief that Phibun's government would support their side in the event of an outbreak of hostilities. In doing so, Bangkok generated an ambiguity in London and Japan about their shared security interests with the intention of waiting on the sidelines until a clear and favourable position presented itself. Consequently, hedging in this example was not a policy of long-term ambiguity, but instead as a means in which to bide time without provoking the enmity of the regional great powers. As Lim and Cooper (2015) illustrate, strategic hedging is primarily about risk management, with the hedging state needing to balance and accept trade-offs inherent in the strategic competition as it relates to its autonomy. For Bangkok, hedging between Britain and Japan proved fruitful. Rather than opposing a Japanese invasion to the last man standing, Bangkok was able to negotiate a respectable compromise in which it was treated as a junior partner while simultaneously avoiding serious later implications in 1944-1946 when punitive measures were being formulated.

The second situation in which hedging became apparent is in the burgeoning economic relationship between Thailand and China that developed throughout the 1970s and 1980s, especially after the two countries official restarted trade relations in 1976 (Manarungsan, 2009). Binding policies were to some extent pursued as Bangkok and Beijing codified their relationship bilaterally through signing seven agreements in the 1970s and increasing that to 11 agreements through the 1980s (Department of Treaties and Legal Affairs—Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, Thailand, n.d.). The institutionalisation of peaceful relations between China and Thailand served to act as means of binding each party to the status quo and, therefore, to promote stability. Though Thailand moved closer to China from the 1970s onward, Bangkok continued policies of indirect-balancing and dominance denial by reaffirming its relationship with the US, seeking a *détente* with the USSR during the period of the Sino-Soviet split, and pushing for increased internationalisation of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia.

The third instance where hedging was most apparent is in Bangkok's foreign policy strategy response toward the end of the Indochina Wars and the Cold War in general. Rather than continuing to pursue a balancing position against Vietnam, Bangkok was quick to work towards integrating Vietnam into the regional economy. For instance, the Cambodian Vietnamese War ended on 26 September 1989 and within 2 years Hanoi and Bangkok had formalised two agreements on the regional security order as well as the basis for economic partnership between the two parties (Joint Communiqué Between the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand and the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1991; Agreement Between the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand and the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam for the Promotion and Protection of Investments, 1991; Agreement Between the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand and the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on Establishment of Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation, 1991). Further, Thailand promoted the entry of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam into ASEAN as a means of economically and institutionally binding these former enemies both bilaterally and multilaterally. In this example Thai foreign policy exhibits elements of economic pragmatism and binding engagement with Vietnam to promote stability and

capitalise on its economic growth, while maintaining strong risk-contingency measures through its ties to Beijing and Washington as security patrons and its own increased military spending (in absolute terms).

#### *When to Hedge and When to Balance?*

The examples in this chapter demonstrate the case in which hedging is most useful to the state. As Haacke (2019) illustrates, hedging, in contrast to balancing and bandwagoning is a strategy that works only in situations where the hedging state faces strategic uncertainty and security risk, but not an overt security threat (p. 377). What determines whether a situation represents a security risk or threat depends on its interpretation by political elite. In the example of Thailand from 1932 to 1991 Thai foreign policy strategy shifted substantially as a result of the regional geopolitical distribution of power. Pre-WWII Bangkok employed a hedging policy that sought to promote ambiguity and friendliness in the face of increased uncertainty resulting from Japan's emergence as a great power. However, following the 8 December 1941 invasion by Japan, Thailand opted to bandwagon with Japan as it had no suitable alternatives. Japan's defeat in 1946 and the emergence of communism as a growing global threat compelled Thailand to balance with the US, a strategy that was upheld until 1969 and the Nixon Doctrine.

The withdrawal of the US forces from the region and the doctrine of refraining from committing to Asian wars in 1969 forced Bangkok to reassess its foreign policy strategy moving forward. As explored above, Thailand moved closer towards a hedging strategy post-

1969 by establishing a détente with China and the USSR, establishing economic ties with the former, substantially increasing military spending, and following the termination of the Indochina Wars, sought to institutionally bind its former rivals so as to promote stability, security, and economic interests. Though hedging policies were engaged, the high-threat regional political environment only permitted hedging to materialize as a strategy of choice on a few and passing circumstances. The following chapter builds on the findings from this chapter and follows Thai foreign policy into the contemporary time period. Given the relatively low-risk environment that overshadows contemporary regional politics, for example, the absence of highly militarised and ideologically driven blocs in which the inevitability of war underscores every interaction, Thailand has embraced hedging as its foreign policy strategy. The next chapter examines Thai strategic hedging in a low-risk environment in which evolving competition between the US and China becomes the locus of attention.

## Chapter 5

### Contemporary Thai Foreign Policy: 1991-2021

Much of Siam's concerns in the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century centred on the question of how to appropriately respond to rival great power competition and regional ambitions, namely that of London and Paris. Similar questions were posed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in which Thailand was forced to respond to issues of Japanese attempted hegemony and later the global competition between the Soviet Union and US as it was played out in the territories of third parties. Wars abounded the region from Korea to Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand's borders. Despite inhabiting such an unstable region, Bangkok has avoided the fate of its neighbours through the pragmatic (and perhaps even cynically opportunistic) way in which it crafted its foreign policy strategy. However, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has presented Bangkok a new challenge: that of the gradually intensifying competition between the US and China regarding the regional order specifically, and the world order more generally.

Following the pattern established from the previous chapters, this chapter argues that Thai foreign policy, as it exists contemporary, has largely followed a strategic hedging formula. Growing interdependence within Asia, the arguably ineffectiveness of ASEAN, and the increased political activities of more far away countries, for example, Australia, Britain, and France, have all played roles in shaping Southeast Asian regional political dynamics and, consequently, will be explored in part. Further, adhering to neoclassical realist theory, primacy will be given towards structural factors, such as the shift in the relative distribution

of power. Despite this, significant analysis will also focus on the effects of unit-level and subunit-level actors, for example, the monarchy-military network, key individuals such as Thaksin Shinawatra and Prayuth Chan-o-cha, and state instability from 2006 onward.

The rationale for focusing from 1991 to 2021 is straightforward. The dissolution of the Soviet Union from 1988 to 1991 and the conclusion of the Cold War represents a significant watershed moment in international politics, the effects of which were felt globally. The world had, arguably, even entered a *brief* unipolar moment as Washington, without peer and with a military presence on every continent, was identified by scholars such as Brilmayer (1994) and Zakaria (1998) as a global hegemon. For Thailand, the geopolitical changes caused by the conclusion of the Cold War were immediate and largely positive: Vietnam had lost its patron, local communist insurgents and radicals were ideologically isolated and forced to join the domestic political process, and a new era in subregional stability emerged that has largely remained intact to the time of writing. However, recently Thailand has had to manage its relationship more carefully with Beijing and Washington as each view themselves in competition with the other over regional dominance. This has led scholars, for example, Goh (2005), White (2012), Morris (2017), Wuthnow (2017), and Scobell (2018), to put forward the case that Thailand has adopted a foreign policy of strategic hedging in recent years. This chapter aims to examine Thai strategic hedging from 1991-2021 and how such a policy has been maintained over successive governments, the findings of which will be used in conjunction with that of the previous chapters to conduct a predictive analysis of Thai foreign policy into the near future.

## **The US-Thai Relationship 1991-2021: American aloofness and Thai Hedging**

After a war between great powers in the quest for hegemony, the victor(s) have three options available to them: domination, abandonment, or restructuring (Ikenberry, 2001). The first entails the political domination of the system, extracting concessions and in effect establishing an empire. This can be seen in varying extents such as in the *Pax Britannica* that followed the Coalition's victory over Napoleonic France in 1815, and the creation of the Western and Eastern Blocs following the Allies' victory against the Axis powers of Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Fascist Italy. The second, abandonment, involves a retrenchment by the victorious power(s) and the pursuit of post-war isolationism. Examples of this are few and far between, of which the most famous example—US post-WWI isolationism—is, arguably, mostly a wishful narrative than an objective reality. Finally, the victorious power(s) can act to restructure the regional/global order through institutions in such a way that extends the victor's dominance beyond what conventional thought on the balance of power would assume. Examples include the Treaty of Westphalia, the Concert of Europe, and the United Nations all of which were constructed as part of a post-war desire to restrain states' aggression. Following the 1969 Nixon Doctrine, abandonment by the US was a feared eventuality among certain Asian states, such as Japan, South Korea, and Thailand (Christensen, 2003; Roehrig, 2017). But it was the US' victory of the Cold War that triggered further concerns in the capitals of Southeast and East Asia that the US, in its aloofness, would abandon the region, focus its interests elsewhere and that the reliability of its security umbrella would wane.



The 1990s were the beginning of a long decline in US-Thai relations that persist to the present period. Reasons for the decline are varied but include the diminishing common strategic interests between Bangkok and Washington, which were facilitated by crises in Iraq-Kuwait and the Balkans, and growing relations between Thailand and ASEAN, China, and Japan. The waning of US-Thai relations first became apparent during the first Chuan Leekpai government (1992-1995), when in 1994 Bangkok denied a US proposal to pre-position military equipment along the Andaman Sea, which required top-level consultations to resolve (Stern, 2009). More significantly though, in 1997 when the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) erupted, Washington was reluctant to extend any support to Bangkok and refused to be part of the IMF rescue package. This action was made more egregious to Thais as Washington had supported a major rescue package for Mexico back in 1995. In contrast, China held off from devaluing its currency allowing greater fiscal stability in the region as well as working with the IMF and Thailand to provide loans up to US\$4 billion (IMF, 1995; Liew, 1999; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, n.d.). In addition, Japan offered soft loans under the Miyazawa Initiative up to US\$30 billion for the affected Asian economies and put forth the idea of creating an Asian Monetary Fund that would better respond to the crises in Asia given the difficulty and discontent generated in Asian countries regarding IMF bailouts.

Chinese and Japanese responses to the AFC greatly enhanced their standing within ASEAN as the organisation was quick to establish ASEAN + 3 in response (Terada, 2010). On the other hand, US prestige in Thailand plummeted as Thais criticised Washington's absence as well as the IMF's unwillingness to respond effectively to the crisis, including the strict conditions imposed by the IMF. Comparison was made to Mexico that had received IMF assistance a few

years earlier quickly and was strongly supported by the US. Further, US opposition to the Japanese proposal of an Asian Monetary Fund was also received poorly in Bangkok (Moss, 2018). In 1998, due to a lack of funds, Thailand deferred and then cancelled its purchase of the F/A-18 aircraft from US' Boeing (Department of Defense Appropriations, 1999). As the decade ended, the US further worsened relations by opposing Thailand's bid for chair of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The decision by the US to oppose Thailand's nominee (Supachai Panitchpakdi) for director-general of the WTO publicly reaffirmed the growing divide between Washington and Bangkok. Leekpai, in his second term (1997-2001), stated that the reason for Washington's veto was so that their favoured nominee, Mike Moore from New Zealand, could win (Agence France Press, 1999). Pongphisoot (2017) argues that the reason Washington supported Moore is that his views represented those of the developed West, whereas Supachai's nomination support predominately came from the global south. Though a compromise was made in which both Supachai and Moore could take turns chairing the WTO, tensions between Washington and Bangkok were considerably heightened as a result with Thai politicians voicing demands for the downgrading of relationship between the US and Thailand (Nullis, 1999; WTO, 2021). As such, by the end of the 1990s US-Thai relations were at an all-time low, whereas Thailand's relations with China and Japan were continually improving as the two competed for regional influence.

### *The War Against Terror and Major non-NATO Ally Status (2001-2003)*

If the 1990s represented a nadir in relations between Washington and Bangkok, the 2000s partially ended this continuous decline, albeit by accident. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006) was elected on a populist platform of economic reform that centred on

increasing the interdependence of Thailand within the Asian economic community, particularly with China. However, the 2001 terrorist attacks on US territory and subsequent *War on Terror* caused a significant shift in Thaksin's foreign policy. Initially resistant to lending support, the Thaksin administration declared its neutrality in the situation, only to quickly backtrack and offer its support for Washington's agenda (Pongsudhirak, 2003). The rationale behind Thaksin's support stemmed at least partly from the perspective in Washington that neutrality was viewed by Washington as hostility and that, given the US-Thai alliance was still in effect, such a policy could engender revision to the alliance. Washington's position on the matter was further entrenched in 2001 when President George W. Bush Jr. (2001-2009) stated, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Bush, 2001). Despite widespread political and public antipathy towards the US in the late 1990s in Thailand, Thaksin became a major Asian supporter of the US-led War on Terror as a pragmatic measure to ensure the survivability of the US-Thai alliance, and for other practical benefits discussed below.

In addition to the foreign policy strategic implications behind Thaksin's support of the War on Terror and subsequent US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the War on Terror substantially impacted domestic policy. As Regilme (2018) points out, the War on Terror created political conditions that were abused by Thaksin to support his populist agenda and, therefore, consolidate power by using the state of fear to push through aggressive security reforms. Among the reforms made by Thaksin included the militarisation of the police from which Thaksin had significant political support having served as a police officer from 1973 to 1987, resigning with the rank Police Lieutenant Colonel (Abuza, 2011; Chambers &

Waitoolkiat, 2019). Employing the police in situations typically reserved for the Royal Thai Army, such as counterinsurgency, Thaksin was able side-step the military clique and pursue certain domestic policies out of reach of the historically powerful military faction.

Thaksin's approach to ongoing Islamic separatist claims in the south of Thailand was well supported by Washington. In a series of soft power moves by Washington, financial and political support were given to Thaksin and his administration's part of the War on Terror. From 2001 to 2005 US foreign aid to Thailand increased by US\$20 million reaching US\$65 million in 2005 and then US\$90 million by 2010 (Regilme, 2018). Further, in September 2005 US President George W. Bush and Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra met at the White House issuing a joint statement signalling the depth of their security relationship as well as underlining the fundamental importance that ASEAN and APEC play in regional security and stability (The White House, 2005). Most importantly though was the 2003 decision by President Bush to elevate US-Thai relations by naming Thailand as a Major non-NATO Ally (Chanlett-Avery, 2010). Thaksin's support of the US-led War on Terror, therefore, brought Thailand significant rewards and, crucially, reinvigorated Thai-US security relations.

#### *US (dis)engagement and the 2004 Tsunami*

Having two concurrent major conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, it would be no surprise if US political attention was primarily focused on those areas. However, the early 2000s to some extent did see the US engage more in Asia and take a proactive role in regional stability and the provision of public goods. For instance, the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami that hit much of

Southeast Asia provided the US an opportunity to rebuild its image in Asia, which had remained low since the 1990s. The tsunami, caused by a massive earthquake off the coast of northwest Sumatra in Indonesia, wrecked incredible damage and resulted in the deaths of 227,898 persons and the displacement of 1.8 million others (U.S. Geological Survey, n.d.). The economic impact of the earthquake and tsunami were estimated to be US\$10 billion across the 10 countries most affected (Asian Disaster Management News, 2006; Athukorala, 2012; Rego, n.d.). In response to the devastation, the US launched and led Operation Unified Assistance, which involved more than 12,600 personnel operating in multiple countries providing emergency medical relief and assistance in rebuilding infrastructure (Shaw, 2013).

The US response to the tsunami went beyond physical support in the form of Operation Unified Assistance (OUA) to also include financial assistance. Initial aid, in the immediate aftermath measured at US\$35 million, but within a week Washington had increased its pledge to US\$350 million, which was supplemented by an additional US\$360-700 million from private donations (Margesson, 2005). US aid was substantially more than Chinese aid, which amounted to US\$63 million, but significantly smaller than Australia's and Japan's, which were US\$819.9 million and US\$500 million, respectively (Xinhua, 2004; Parliament of Australia, 2005; Parliament of Australia 2006; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, 2005; Joint Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs, 2006).<sup>70</sup> Washington followed up on OUA by establishing the Pacific Partnership, an annual deployment by the US Pacific Fleet designed to improve the

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<sup>70</sup> Figures for aid, especially in this case, are notoriously difficult to ascertain. Pledges and final aid are frequently cited without specification and amounts changed substantially as governments reassessed their donations. For more information of see: Inquiry into Australia's Response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami, Parliament of Australia, retrieved from: [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Joint/Completed\\_Inquiries/jfadt/tsunamiresponse/report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Completed_Inquiries/jfadt/tsunamiresponse/report).

interoperability of regional nations' governments, militaries, and NGOs regarding humanitarian assistance. In effect, the US sought to build on its aid to establish a continuous soft power presence in the region.

In contrast to the Pacific Partnership that promoted US soft power, Washington's political presence in the region was substantially lacking. As mentioned above, the two concurrent wars that the US was engaged in occupied vast diplomatic resources and consequently put Southeast Asia as a lower priority. Of note was the absence of high-level US representation in many Asian international forums, for example, then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's absence from the Asian Regional Forum meetings in 2005 and 2007 (Cossa, 2005; Ruwitch, 2007). More important than Rice's absence, however, was the decision of the Bush administration to cancel the US-ASEAN Summit scheduled in 2007. Ba (2009) notes such patterns of behaviour is emblematic of US foreign policy in the region having been predominately characterised by neglect and punctuated by only occasional and intermittent engagement. The consequence of such episodic and transactional relations in the region is that, as Nye illustrated in the 1995 Clinton administration's US Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region, commonly known as the Nye Initiative, it opens the region to influence from powers hostile to US interests, namely China. Yet, despite such obvious consequences, US relative neglect of the region and Thailand specifically is not limited to the presidency of Clinton and Bush but includes those of Barack Obama (2009-2017) and Donald Trump (2017-2021).

### *Economic Relations with the US under Thaksin*

Having reaffirmed their strategic commitments to each other and even elevating them in 2003, US-Thai security relations were relatively robust. However, economic and diplomatic relations, especially in relation to trade, between Washington and Bangkok remained sour. In the early 2000s Thailand participated in two WTO resolution cases against the US regarding anti-dumping subsidies as well as US restrictions on shrimp imports (Morrison, 2003). In a tit-for-tat play, the US similarly complained and criticised Thailand's high barrier to trade and its non-transparent rules and procedures relating to customs. The US, however, resisted from filing any cases against Thailand in the WTO preferring to raise the issues directly with Thai officials. Washington actively sought to de-escalate the issue with Thailand, and in October 2002 the two countries signed the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) (Organisation of American States, n.d.). TIFA provided the two countries a forum from which to negotiate a free trade agreement, a process that lasted 3 years and six rounds of negotiations before being terminated due to the 2006 Thai coup.

The 2006 Thai coup occurred shortly after Thaksin's election victory for a second term as prime minister and resultantly had a significant effect on Thailand's relations with the great powers. The new Thai government was led by Surayud Chulanont, former Supreme Commander of the Thai Armed Forces, whose administration was flagged by criticism from the beginning for the military's usurpation of the democratic process to corruption and substantial economic mismanagement. The US voiced its condemnation of the coup and withheld military aid to Thailand, which in turn led to reciprocal condemnation by Thailand's political elite (Congressional Research Service, 2015; Ockey, 2017). In addition, though

Washington did not break diplomatic ties with Bangkok, it was hesitant to recognise the interim council and military government that followed the coup (Zawacki, 2017). Conversely, China maintained a 'business as usual' approach, working with the interim and military governments as well as the democratic government that followed. In effect, the coup made Thailand into an international pariah among Western countries, significantly damaged US-Thai relations and, in a pattern to be repeated in 2014, paved the way for greater Chinese influence among Thai leadership.

*Obama, Yingluck, and Prayuth (2008-2016)*

The US-Thai relationship during the Obama administration saw significant shifts in US engagement with Thailand, both positive and negative. The most relevant foreign policy strategy during this period was the US's East Asia Strategy, known as the 'Pivot to Asia,' which followed in the spirit of the 1995 Nye Initiative by aiming to enhance existing security alliances as well as deepen cooperation with developing states in the region, including the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. Most notable, the Pivot shifted the majority of the US naval assets away from the Atlantic and towards the Indo-Pacific in a 40-60 ratio (McDonough, 2013).<sup>71</sup> Beyond simple military posturing, the Pivot was significant as it also focused on the proliferation of norms, fostering development, and building regional institutions from which to entrench and legitimise US political and military engagement in the region.

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<sup>71</sup> Kolmaš and Kolmašová (2018) criticise the rebalance as political marketing as the Pivot did not result in an numerical increase in naval assets headed for the Indo-Pacific. Instead, as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wound down, naval assets were retired from the theatre which increased the proportion, not the quantity, of assets in the Indo-Pacific.



Aspects of the Pivot reflected the foreign policy of the Obama Administration and the so-called Obama Doctrine, which, nominally, favoured the pursuit of collective agreement, multilateral discussion, and the use of soft power techniques to achieve strategic objectives (Dueck, 2015). In East and Southeast Asia, the Obama Doctrine, in conjunction with the Pivot, took the form of increased high-level US visits in the region. In contrast to the notable absence of high-level visits during the Bush Jr. administration, the Obama administration made frequent regional contact. For example, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attended the 2009 ARF summit hosted by Thailand. From that summit came the Lower Mekong Initiative, developed as a forum in which to encourage multilateral cooperation between Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and the US on issues relating to the use of the Mekong River (US Department of State, 2010). Further cooperation between Washington and Bangkok was seen in the MoU that created the Mekong-Mississippi River Commission to provide greater cross-cultural exchange and education opportunities (Mekong River Commission, 2017). Among other visits to Southeast Asia during her tenure of note is Clinton's frequent attendance to various regional forums, including the East Asia Summit in 2010, 2011, and 2012, Lower Mekong Initiative meetings in 2010, 2011, and 2012, various US-ASEAN Summits in 2012 as well as meeting with Thai Prime Minister Yingluck three times across 2011-2012 (Office of the Historian).

In addition to Clinton's frequent visits, President Obama regularly attended various meetings and summits in the region. Examples of these visits include the APEC Summits in 2009 and 2010, the 2011-2016 ASEAN Summits (except the 2013 meeting), East Asia Summits 2011, 2012, 2015, and 2016, a Transpacific Partnership meeting in 2012, a meeting with Thai King

Bhumibol Adulyadej and Prime Minister Yingluck as well as a visit to Wat Pho temple in 2012, the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in 2015, and several meetings with the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative across 2014 to 2016 (Office of the Historian, n.d.). These visits helped to improve US regional standing by demonstrating a willingness to cooperatively engage the region, which in turn reinforced its political and security commitments, for example, freedom of navigation, and the security umbrellas it has offered to Thailand and the Philippines.

Relations between the US and Thailand took a severe hit in 2014 when yet another military coup occurred (Prasirtsuk, 2017). Led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, Commander of the Royal Thai Army, the coup followed months of political unrest surrounding the Yingluck administration.<sup>72</sup> In contrast to the Bush Jr. administration, which refrained from breaking diplomatic relations and only applied light sanctions, for example, the withdrawal of military aid, the Obama administration acted in a far stronger manner. In addition to sanctions and refusing to acknowledge the military government, Washington severely criticised Prayuth, and threatened to cancel the annual Cobra Gold joint military exercise. Being among the largest multinational military exercises held by the US and referred to as the “cornerstone of the US-Thailand alliance” the potential cancellation of the exercise was not an insignificant threat (Prasirtsuk, 2021, p. 1). Though Obama held back from outright cancelling Cobra Gold, the exercises were considerably scaled down and remained so for years (Oxford Analytica, 2017). Further, the scope of the exercises shifted from traditional military operations to focus almost exclusively on humanitarian and rescue operations. However, this shift may have had

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<sup>72</sup> Yingluck Shinawatra is the younger sister of previously deposed and exiled Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

multiple causes from the reluctance in Washington to cooperate in military exercises with a military government, to Bangkok's desire to make the exercises less provocative to Beijing with whom relations had substantially grown (Prasirtsuk, 2017).

A further decline in US-Thai relations occurred in 2015 when US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, Daniel Russell, made a speech condemning the military government at Thailand's prestigious (and royal stronghold) Chulalongkorn University (Ghosh, 2015). Russell's statements followed a meeting between himself and ousted Thai leader, Yingluck Shinawatra, in turn prompting Prayuth to take the issue up with the US Charge d'Affaires, Patrick Murphy. Royalist and military politicians and sympathisers rebuked Russell's comments with significant criticism emerging from elements of the Thai government (Busbarat, 2017). Because of continued US admonishment of the Thai military junta and then the spat caused by Russell, Prayuth announced that he would seek deeper ties with Beijing (Busbarat, 2016). Whether this was simply political theatre or a sincere declaration of Thailand's foreign policy strategy, the ultimate result was a prolonged nadir in US-Thai relations for the duration of the Obama administration.

### *The Trump Administration, Hedging, and Asian Disengagement*

Characterising the US-Thai relationship during the Trump presidency is inherently complicated. To begin with, US-Thai relations substantially improved in some respects, such as the return of large Cobra Gold exercises and a meeting with Prayuth at the White House in 2017. However, the Trump administration failed to consistently engage in Southeast Asian

regional politics, with the administration primarily being focused in other areas. Focusing on improvements, in April 2017 Trump and Prayuth had a personal exchange via phone with both parties expressing their desire to enhance bilateral security (Subirana, 2017). This was followed by the 2017 ASEAN Summit held in the Philippines and the earlier mentioned October 2017 meeting between Prayuth and Trump at the White House (Ghosh, 2017; Kurlantzick, 2017).<sup>73</sup>

The 2017 meeting between Prayuth and Trump was assumed to be triggered, in part, by Thai strategic hedging and Washington's desire to draw Thailand away from Beijing (Hiebert, 2017). Regarding the former, strategic hedging typically requires the hedging state to maintain strong security ties with one great power while hitching their economic wagon to another great power. It was this latter fact that may have encouraged Washington to engage Thailand as they and China had greatly increased their economic interdependence from 2000 onward. Indeed, between 2000 and 2019 Thai trade with China increased 929% and 1,383% for exports and imports, respectively (see Table 5.1) (Bank of Thailand, 2020). In comparison, US and Japanese trade, though starting from significantly higher base figures, had only increased modestly. Though the US remains the favoured destination for Thai exports, pulling slightly ahead of China and Japan, Thai imports of Chinese products are more than the US and Japan combined. As will be explored below, growing Chinese-Thai relations have extended beyond the economic realm and frequently touch upon strategic considerations.

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<sup>73</sup> Trump only attended the lunch conference of the ASEAN Summit, leaving the Philippines before the plenary session.

**Table 5.1: Thai imports/exports from the US, China, and Japan (figures in thousands US\$)**

	Thai Exports			Thai Imports		
	US	China	Japan	US	China	Japan
<b>2000</b>	14,870	2,836	10,282	7,316	3,389	15,378
<b>2002</b>	13,509	3,555	9,949	6,147	4,898	14,804
<b>2004</b>	15,502	7,113	13,491	7,206	8,143	22,293
<b>2006</b>	19,449	11,728	16,386	9,588	13,604	25,667
<b>2008</b>	20,275	16,190	20,093	11,423	20,156	33,535
<b>2010</b>	20,201	21,474	20,309	10,676	24,236	37,584
<b>2012</b>	22,785	26,869	23,445	12,520	37,120	48,737
<b>2014</b>	23,890	25,083	21,698	14,579	38,498	35,506
<b>2016</b>	24,449	23,799	20,481	12,040	42,030	30,673
<b>2018</b>	28,040	30,316	24,936	14,969	49,903	35,256
<b>2019</b>	31,348	29,169	24,523	17,282	50,270	33,197
<b>%↑</b>	111% ↑	929%↑	138%↑	136%↑	1,383%↑	116%↑

Source: Bank of Thailand (2020),

[https://www.bot.or.th/App/BTWS\\_STAT/statistics/ReportPage.aspx?reportID=744&language=eng](https://www.bot.or.th/App/BTWS_STAT/statistics/ReportPage.aspx?reportID=744&language=eng)

The uptick in bilateral relations between Bangkok and Washington in 2017 somewhat plateaued. Invitations from Prayuth to Trump to visit Thailand were rejected. This is in addition to a general absence by Trump in most regional fora, having never attended an East Asia Summit (in full), instead sending the Secretary of State in his place or the National

Security Advisor, Robert O'Brien. In lieu of Trump's absence, in 2017 then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited Thailand on a tour of the region, meeting with his counterpart Don Pramudwinai and Prime Minister Prayuth (US Embassy Bangkok, 2017). Tillerson and his successor, Mike Pompeo, each visited Thailand one time and were somewhat engaged in the regional fora, such as in 2019 when Pompeo co-chaired the US-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (Office of the Historian, n.d.). In effect, US-Thai foreign relations during the Trump administration somewhat improved from the lows that occurred during the Obama administration following the 2014 Thai coup. However, they were not significantly robust enough to reverse the gradual decline that had been the pattern in bilateral from 1991.

#### *2021 Onward: Biden, Prayuth, and a 'Democratic' Thailand*

At the time of writing the US and Thailand are entering a new phase in their relationship. Despite a degree of international condemnation, Prayuth managed to stay as Prime Minister from 2014 to 2022.<sup>74</sup> His continued rule has been made possible, and palatable, to international audiences courtesy of elections in 2019, the legitimacy of which was under suspicion almost immediately (Chachavalpongpun, 2019; Selway, 2020). Regardless, those elections provided Thailand the veneer of democratic legitimacy, which, at least in Thailand, has consistently been guided by the military-monarchy network (Chambers, 2010; Chambers & Waitoolkiat, 2016). Another shift in bilateral relations between Bangkok and Washington was the election of Joseph Biden, who won the 2020 presidential election against incumbent

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<sup>74</sup> Prayuth was suspended as Prime Minister on 24 August 2022. The implications of such an event are beyond the scope of this thesis. For more information see: Thepgumpanat, P. (2022). Thai court suspends PM Prayuth pending term limit review, *Reuters*, retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thai-court-suspends-pm-prayuth-chan-ocha-official-duty-pending-result-term-limit-2022-08-24/>.

Donald Trump. While it is too early to make definitive statements on what a Biden administration would likely mean for US-Thai relations, certain things may be gleaned already. Biden is likely to follow the tradition of US presidents since Obama in making the containment of China a major foreign policy theme. To that end, Biden is expected to bring an experienced team of foreign policy experts, specifically Asia-experts, such as Kurt Campbell (Brunnstrom, 2020). However, given the extremely partisan divide that dominates the US political environment, the continued global coronavirus epidemic, the Russo-Ukrainian War, and rising inflation, it may be the case that much of the Asia foreign policy will be led by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Campbell rather than be directed by Biden. The role of Campbell represents a degree of predictability as he had played a significant role in the previous Democrat administration under Obama in formulating the Pivot strategy (Long, 2016). Whether or not Campbell's strategic vision can even be actioned depends on a multitude of factors that he himself acknowledged in 2016 when reflecting on the ineffectiveness of the Pivot. These factors include the defence budget, political deadlock, and a continuous military presence in the Middle East and South Asia. If anything, these factors have only increased in importance as high inflation, political partisanship, and the Russo-Ukrainian War hinder Washington's capacity to make major policy changes towards China and the wider Asia region.

The challenges to Biden's presidency aside, certain historical patterns may be used to predict large parts of Biden's foreign policy. The first is, as mentioned earlier, that the geopolitical triangle between Washington, Beijing, and Tokyo will continue to dominate foreign policy. The relationship between Tokyo and Washington remains the bedrock of Washington's Asia

strategy and, consequently, requires the US to intervene in the case of open conflict between China and Japan. For Bangkok, this represents a unique opportunity to establish security links with Japan to (Type A) hedge against potential US aloofness. It is worth noting in 2022 Thailand and Japan signed a Comprehensive Strategic Agreement that agrees to enhance security cooperation between the two countries and strengthen their supply chain networks (Joint Statement by Prayuth Chan-o-cha & Kishida Fumio, 2022).<sup>75</sup> As such, Washington's focus on China and Japan creates opportunities that are likely to be exploited by Bangkok.

### *The US-Thai Relationship Under Biden?*

For the US-Thai relationship, the Biden presidency represents many things. To some extent, Bangkok, as well as many of Washington's traditional allies and partners in the region are likely to appreciate the predictability that Biden's seasoned foreign policy staff are likely to bring. However, as in the past, it is unlikely that Washington will engage with Bangkok to any significant degree more than had occurred under Trump unless the security environment changes. This is increasingly likely as the Biden administration is forced to contend with ongoing crises in Eastern Europe as a result of the Russo-Ukrainian War and its consequences, such as NATO expansion. In addition, a return to military rule in Thailand may result in an abrogation in US-Thai relations similar to or even more severe than what had occurred under the Obama administration. So long as the security environment in Southeast Asia remains tense, but not in crisis, it is likely that contact will be guided by moralistic, not strategic, concerns.

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<sup>75</sup> At the time of writing, the author expects that the APEC 2022 Summit held between 18-19 November may see further statements and cooperation between Thailand and Japan on security issues.



Strategic hedging is likely to remain the go-to foreign policy strategy of Bangkok. Despite lacking a robust relationship, the US and Thailand are still bound by security agreements that are unlikely to be undone any time soon. As such, even as the US remains relatively aloof regarding Thailand, it is unlikely that Bangkok would bandwagon with Beijing, at least in the immediate future. However, Beijing has made substantial efforts in increasing its political and military influence in Southeast Asia while the US remained focused on the MENA region. Though Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan on 30 August 2021 may provide Washington the freedom to focus on Southeast Asian security matters, this is unlikely to occur. Consequently, as will be explored below, Beijing is likely to capitalise on these opportunities and, therefore, may complicate Bangkok's continued policy of strategic hedging. Ultimately, without a significant change in security environment within Southeast Asia, the US-Thai relationship is likely to remain intact, but stale.

### **The Sino-Thai Relationship 1991-2021: From Frenemies to Friends**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has often been referred to as the Chinese century, suggesting the future centrality of China to global geopolitics (Hunter, 2006; Beckley, 2011; Kipchumba, 2017; Nguyen Huu & Örsal, 2020). Indeed, since the 1980s China has experienced rapid economic growth, which has triggered concerns regarding the future regional and global security order (Wu, 2004; Henson & Yap, 2016; Gunby et al., 2017). China's economy has grown so rapidly that it is estimated to surpass the US' GDP by 2028-2029 (Uehara & Tanaka, 2020).<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> This does not take into account the long-standing effects from the coronavirus pandemic on the US and China economies, both of which have taken vastly different policy paths in controlling the disease.

Concurrent with Beijing's economic growth has been an increased political and military influence both regionally and globally, taking a proactive leadership role and creating new institutions and forums to compete with existing ones that favour US interests and influence. Notable examples include the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2014, the on-going Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) started in 2013, Beijing's participation as a founding member in the BRICS economic organisation in 2009, and its leading role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) formed in 2001 in cooperation with Russia. Additionally, Beijing has used its increased influence to initiate free trade agreement negotiations with various blocs such as ASEAN and the on-going talks with the European Union (Cordenillo, 2005; EU Commission Press Release, 2020). For Thailand, China's economic growth and increasing influence represent substantial opportunities and challenges that need to be navigated.

Thailand, unlike much of its ASEAN partners, shares no overlapping maritime boundaries nor common borders with China. As such, Sino-Thai relations are not overshadowed by ongoing territorial disputes as is the case for Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, as well as South Korea, North Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (Hongyi, 2009; Congressional Research Service, 2021; Center for Preventative Action, 2022). Notwithstanding the absence of a common boundary, tensions do exist regarding water usage of the Lancang-Mekong River. The river, which starts in Southeast China and flows through Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam is one of the major waterways of the world, partly forms the borders between these countries, and has been the subject of increasing regional

tensions (Houba et al., 2011). Despite tensions in this area, Bangkok and Beijing have maintained close bonds that have only increased with time and are the subject of this section.

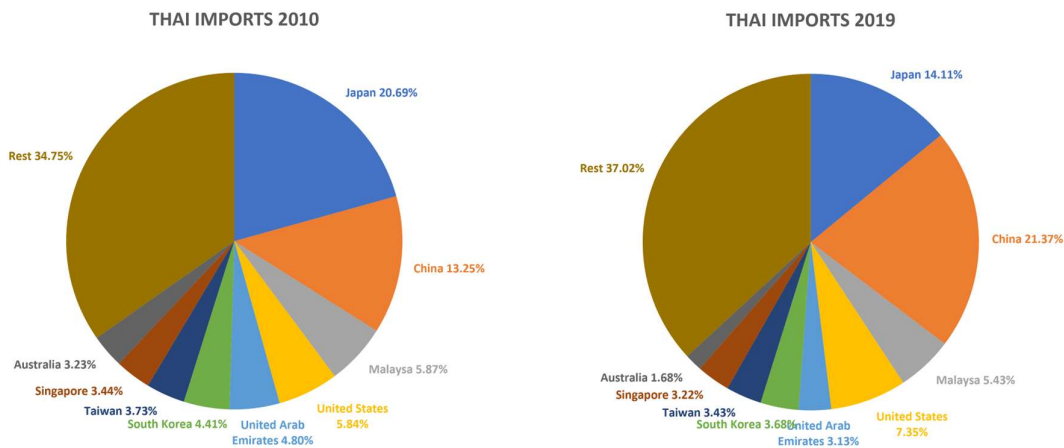
### *The Economic Dimension*

As noted earlier in the thesis, Thailand's relationship with China has a long history stretching back to the Tai migration from southern Yunnan around the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, its modern relationship is quite new, a result of Thailand's need for a partner in turning back Vietnamese expansionist policies in Cambodia. Officially beginning diplomatic relations in 1975, 6 years after the Nixon Doctrine fundamentally changed American foreign policy in Asia, Thailand and China developed an increasingly robust relationship. Examples of how close the two countries are included frequent high-level visits of Thai royalty to China with Princess Sirindhorn visiting over 23 times in an official capacity (Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn's Personal Affairs Division, 2021). Additionally, Chinese high-level officials have frequently visited Thailand with Kurlantzick (2006) noting that in the early 2000s Chinese high-level officials visited Thailand twice as often as their US counterparts. The "charm offensive," as Kurlantzick refers to it, represents an important aspect of Beijing's goals within the region (p. 1).

As seen in Table 5.1, China is one of Thailand's largest trading partners, a fact that has provided Beijing ample influence within Bangkok. In 2010 Thai imports from China measured at US\$24.2 billion and was equal to 13.25% of total Thai imports. By 2019 that figure had increased to US\$50.2 billion comprising 21% of all Thai imports (Bank of Thailand, 2021).

Exports, on the other hand, were a different matter with greater stability among Thailand’s main export destinations from 2010 onward. As seen in Figures 5.2 and 5.3, the relative stability in Thai export destinations indicates that an equilibrium may have been found in which Thai exports are satisfactorily diversified among its three key markets, the US, Japan, and China. The Sino-Thai bilateral trade, however, has been a significant focus for Bangkok since the 1990s to the present day. For instance, in the late 1990s Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai was a strong supporter of an ASEAN-China FTA (Kiyota, 2006). At the time Thai businesses, such as CP, were major investors in China and the financial dividends of enhancing relations with China were already apparent. Further impetus behind Leekpai’s desire for a Thai-China FTA was that his mandate, following the resignation of his predecessor, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, centred on economic reform and setting in place safeguards against future financial crises (Mydans, 1997).

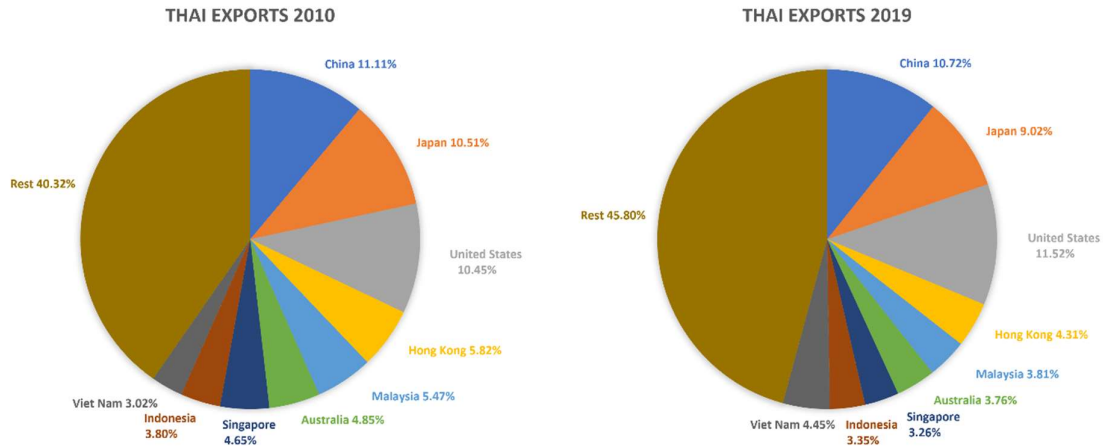
**Figure 5.1: Thai imports 2010-2020 by country**



Source: Bank of Thailand, 2021.

In addition to bilateral economic relations with China, it is worth mentioning that the Chuan administration was instrumental in the formation of the Growth Quadrangle, an initiative aimed at tying the economic growth of southern China, northern Myanmar, northern Laos, and north Thailand together with Vietnam invited to join later (Snitwongse, 2001). This was followed by a 1998 agreement between the states mentioned to manage transport links more effectively along the four major river basins: the Mekong, the Chao-Praya, the Salween, and Irrawaddy. Chuan’s leadership was characterised by greater participation in regional architecture, attempting to use Thailand’s leading position to foster multilateral agreements, and capitalise on China’s then emerging economic potential (Medeiros et al., 2008).<sup>77</sup>

**Figure 5.2: Thai Exports 2010-2020 by country**



Source: Source: Bank of Thailand, 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Outside of this thesis’ scope, Chuan also increased ties with South Asia, forming BIST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation) in 1997. The organization has since grown to include Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan being renamed to the easy-to-remember Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)

### *Thaksin and China*

The Thaksin administration (2001-2006) remains a controversial topic in Thai politics. In contrast to previous prime ministers that typically sought their legitimacy through economic performance or acquiring power directly through the monarchy-military network, Thaksin's main base of support came from the rural provinces, especially those in the Isan region of Thailand.<sup>78</sup> In addition, Thaksin, was one of the wealthiest and most influential private citizens even prior to his accession to office as the founder/owner of Advanced Info Services and Thaicom, the largest Thai telecommunications company and a provider of telecommunication satellites, respectively (The Nation, 2012; Intouchcompany.com, n.d.). Furthermore, Thaksin, like Chuan before him, is Chinese Thai. However, unlike Chuan who was not often maligned because of his cultural heritage, Thaksin's Chinese connections were frequently the subject of scrutiny as it was suggested that it influenced his foreign policy (Chingchit, 2006). His frequent visits to China, more than any other previous Thai prime minister, may have also served to fuel suspicions (Chambers, 2005).

Though Leekpai and Thaksin were both Chinese Thais, Medeiros (2008) notes that they differed significantly in their approach to Sino-Thai relations. While the former favoured multilateral institutions that would bind China to ASEAN, it came at the cost of greater compromise and lethargy in action. Conversely, Thaksin favoured greater personal diplomacy and bilateral agreements, which had the benefit of being faster to achieve and engendered

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<sup>78</sup> As the reader may remember, this area has frequently been a source of contention for Bangkok. The Boworadet Rebellion, the Seri Thai Insurgency, and the Communist Party of Thailand all had their support from the Isan region.

fewer compromises, but came at the expense of *stickiness*, to borrow a term from Ikenberry (2019, p. 269). Chuan's multilateral approach took time but had the advantage of tying down whatever parties were involved, a strategy most associated with middle powers, as will be explored in later chapters (Vandamme, 2018). Despite his pragmatism, Chuan was criticised for his agreement to IMF loan conditions, a fact that contributed to Thaksin's electoral victory in 2001 (Manowong, 2021). Thaksin, however, would be criticised for selling out the people who helped him come to power. For example, the fallout from his Early Harvest Agreement between Thailand and China as part of the larger ASEAN-China FTA was the flooding of the Thai market by substandard Chinese agricultural products, endangering the livelihoods of Thai farmers in Isan (FTA Watch, 2007; Sally, 2007; Pye & Schaffar, 2008). Despite domestic tensions resulting from Thaksin's policies, ties between Thailand and China continued to grow.

### **Thaksin's Foreign Policy**

Thaksin's approach to foreign policy was primarily centred on the basis of bilateralism and engaging partners directly rather than seeking multilateral consensus as his predecessors had done. Further, his administration's foreign policy strategy was, at least regionally, concerned with transactional relations, such as his Forward Engagement Policy with Thailand's neighbours that was premised on the principle of non-intervention and economic pragmatism (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). On a wider scope, Thaksin was concerned with transforming Thailand from a simply a member of the chorus to a regional leading power. To achieve this, Thaksin's foreign policy became heavily intertwined with his domestic economic policies, for example, paying off foreign loans it had accrued from the AFC in 1997/1998 (IMF, 2003).

Thailand was able to complete its payments to the IMF 2 years ahead of schedule, transforming Thailand from an aid recipient to an aid donor. Among some of the Thaksin administration's notable foreign policy successes were the creation of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue, the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), the successful completion of several FTAs, and the Bangkok Process. While some of these were aimed at increasing Thailand's international prestige, others had the goal of further engaging China and to some extent even binding China through these regional institutions.

Among the four major achievements listed above, the most notable foreign policy achievement during the Thaksin administration was that of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue. The ACD was designed to be a regional forum encompassing the entirety of Asia with the express goal to promote interdependence among Asian countries and transform the disparate regions within Asia (and its regional architecture) into a unified Asian community (Asia Cooperation Dialogue, n.d.). Despite being a continent host to several of the most populous states in the world, many of which have historic animosities, Thailand was able to construct a relatively successful forum in which many countries could interact. From 18 founding members in 2002, there are now 33 members, including all significant Asian powers, such as China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Russia, and Turkey. Despite being a multilateral forum, the link between Thailand and China was not obscured. As a means of symbolising improving bilateral ties between Thailand and China the ACD's first ministerial meeting outside of Thailand was held in Qingdao, China in 2004 (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). The ACD's loose structure has allowed the ministerial meetings to focus on a variety of topics with participants adopting projects on a voluntary basis without requiring formal consensus, for instance, the



Pakistani-led Asian Institute of Standards or cooperation on natural disasters, of which Russia is the prime mover (Rahman, 2005; Asia Cooperation Dialogue, n.d.). Though less-well known than more established forums the ACD plays a key role in allowing states the opportunity to cooperate on areas that might not be able to be expressed in the comparatively higher-stakes APEC Summits and other similar organisations.

The Thaksin administration's focus on FTAs highlights a major difference between his administration and previous Thai governments. Being elected in 2001 a few years after the disastrous AFC, the Thaksin administration sought to avoid some of the issues that had spurred that crisis. To that end, Pongsudhirak (2013) argues that Thaksin's policy of establishing FTAs was an economically prudent strategy. The effects of such a strategy were evident in 2008 during the global financial crisis, which Thailand weathered relatively well. In addition to the China-Thailand FTA mentioned above, Bangkok was able to negotiate, or at least open the process of negotiations, with several partners, including Australia, China, India, the US, Peru, New Zealand, and ASEAN. The China-Thailand FTA differed than the others listed as it was created as an early harvest of the ASEAN-China FTA, allowing both China and Thailand to begin free and open trade 7 years before the ASEAN-China FTA was to come into effect (Komolavanij, 2008). Notwithstanding some teething issues in the China-Thailand FTA, for example, the flooding of the Thai agricultural market with cheaper Chinese ones, the agreement was a remarkable demonstration of the closeness that existed between Beijing and Bangkok (Narisa et al., 2013; Nirathron, 2008; Jagan, 2006).

The final major foreign policy achievement by Thaksin explored here is the establishment of the ACMECS. A multilateral institution comprising Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, ACMECS is focused on the promotion of development through cooperation on transport, trade, and investment facilitation (Asia Regional Integration Center, n.d.). While there is no lack of Mekong River institutions, of which 10 at least exist, ACMECS is interesting in that it deliberately excludes China from the mix (Thu & Ting, 2019). Consequently, ACMECS can act as a minilateral forum in which smaller countries are able to exercise their collective weight in negotiating with Beijing (Tow, 2020). However, the organisation fell into disuse between 2006 and 2018 without Thaksin or his party to continue the project (Chambers and Bunyavejchewin, 2019). In 2018 the organisation has since been restructured with its articulated goals and objectives being integrating the regional economies. Pitakdumrongkit (2020) argues that growing tensions between the US and China have increased the importance of ACMECS to respond to growing economic (and water) insecurity. Its yet to be seen what long-term effects this organisation by itself will have in shaping Beijing's water security policies, but changes have already been noted. In October 2020 Beijing agreed in principle to share information regarding its water usage of the Mekong River to lower riparian states. Yet, Beijing has consistently failed to make this information available in a timely manner with Washington's own monitoring system informing Bangkok before Beijing (CTN News, 2021).

#### *Post-Thaksin: Domestic Instability, Ostracism, China, and Japan*

The years between 2006 and 2014 marked a period of intense instability in Thai domestic politics, severely effecting foreign policy strategy. In 2006, following months of protests and

counter protests, Thaksin was deposed in a coup allegedly orchestrated by Prem Tinsulanonda, the leading member of the Privy Council (Hewison, 2008; Pathmanand, 2008; Chachavalpongpun & Kurlantzick, 2019). In 2008 further protests destabilised Thailand as Yellow Shirts (royalists) laid siege to the main domestic airports and stormed the Government House in opposition to Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party, resulting in the impeachment and resignations of Prime Ministers Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat, respectively (Pye & Schaffer, 2008; Chachavalpongpun, 2010). Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the royalist-aligned Democrat party, ruled as Prime Minister from 2008 until 2011 when he was defeated in elections by Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra. Abhisit's defeat was the result of several factors that included Thaksin's sustained popularity, Abhisit's own violent crackdown on protests between April and May 2010, and a larger social shift in which rural Thais became increasingly politically involved (Fullbrook, 2012).<sup>79</sup> However, Yingluck's premiership was short lived; she was removed in another coup in 2014, led by Prayuth Chan-o-cha. Given the quick pace of change in premiership over the period 2006 to 2014 it is difficult to speak to any foreign policy strategy as being anything more than reactionary.

In contrast to Thaksin, whose foreign policy strategy engaged China, the US, and aspired towards regional leadership, Prayuth's foreign policy strategy has, perhaps reluctantly, leaned towards Beijing. Reasons for the Prayuth administration's alignment shift towards China is remarkably simple to explain. Condemnation and ostracism of the Prayuth administration by Washington forced Bangkok to turn to other sources of support, of which Beijing was readily

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<sup>79</sup> The book *Bangkok, May 2010: Perspectives on a Divided Thailand* edited by Montesano, Michael John; Pavin Chachavalpongpun; and Aekapol Chongvilaivan provides deep insights into the 2010 protests and the context in which it occurred.

available (Jory, 2015). In contrast to the US, Beijing made few comments at all regarding the coup with then Chinese Premier Li Keqiang using his visit in 2014 as an opportunity to sign two MoUs, one of which was for a US\$12 billion rail that would be part of a system connecting Singapore to Beijing (Parameswaran, 2014). The visit was reciprocated by Prayuth later in the year when he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang, signing a currency swap agreement worth US\$11.25 billion as well as technology cooperation in water resources, irrigation, and cooperation between the Stock Exchange of Thailand and the People's Bank of China (VOA, 2014). Ultimately, for Bangkok the decision was clear: relations with Washington were predetermined on idealistic concerns of democracy, and subsequently apt to frequent change (in Thailand's case). Conversely, Beijing remained apolitical as far as Thailand's domestic politics were concerned. Though the choice for Bangkok back in 2014 was simple, as will be shown, a simple choice does not necessarily translate into an optimum choice.

Thailand, however, did not completely side with China following its relative ostracism after the 2014 coup. Pongsudhirak (2015) points out that China's loans to Thailand for the highspeed rail mega projects contained unusually high interest rates in addition to relatively short repayment periods. These loans were considerably more oppressive than similar loans Japan had given in 1997 with interest rates at 1.5% as opposed to China's 2-4% (Mahitthirook & Jikkham, 2015). While Washington could afford to isolate Thailand without risking much in terms of its strategic objectives in Asia, Tokyo was not in a similar position given Thailand's leading subregional position and its relative economic importance to Japan. Consequently, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expressed his desire to see Thailand "return to civilian

leadership” in a meeting with Prayuth in Tokyo in 2015 while at the same time signing MoUs promising to cooperate in developing Thailand’s railway infrastructure (Fredrickson, 2015, p. 1). Since then, Thailand and Japan have continued to cooperate substantially, often competing with China for major infrastructure projects (Herman, 2015; Zhao, 2018). High-level meetings between Japan and Thailand have been consistently frequent with over 31 visits having occurred between 2014 and 2020 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan). These visits include the Japanese Emperor and Empress in 2017, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2019, six visits by Thai Prime Minister Prayuth and two by Princess Sirindhorn. For Bangkok, the importance of the relationship is to prevent being completely dependent on Beijing. Likewise, for Tokyo it’s important to hold onto its relationship with Bangkok in order to prevent a key ASEAN state from becoming a quasi-client state of its main strategic rival.

Since 2020, and ongoing at the time of writing in 2022, several shifts in the Sino-Thai relation have emerged and bear inclusion. The first is that Bangkok has decided to avoid using Chinese loans for BRI projects in Thailand, specifically the high-speed railway from Bangkok to Nong Khai that would connect to the Laos HSR through to south China (Wichit, 2017; Lam, 2019). The decision was made in response to high-interest rates on loans offered by China as well as concerns among political elite and public about the potential for a debt trap, as has been the case regarding Laos’ HSR. The second factor, and more strategic, is the decision by Bangkok to engage with Tokyo regarding water security along the Mekong. In 2022 Bangkok and Tokyo signed a series of three agreements mostly relating to maritime security along the Mekong, a post-covid recovery plan, and supply chain hardening (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022; Fukio, 2022). The agreements are expected to lead to a comprehensive strategic

partnership between the two countries, which may antagonise Beijing. It follows Tokyo's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy of maintaining a rules-based order within the region. Both the decision by Bangkok to self-fund the HSR and the decision to further engage Tokyo in strategic concerns are outside of the temporal scope of this thesis but point to a decision by Bangkok to maintain a hedging policy that simultaneously seeks economic pragmatism with dominance denial. In effect, Bangkok can be argued to be politically and economically hedging against China of which more will be explored at the end of this chapter.

Despite competition between Tokyo and Beijing for influence over Bangkok, the competition is arguably in favour of the latter. This was especially true regarding military equipment acquisitions. For example, in 2017 under the Prayuth government, Thailand ordered the delivery of a newly constructed modified Chinese Class S26T submarine at a cost of US\$390 million (Grevatt, 2017). The purchase remains a subject of controversy in Thailand as critics cite the belief that Thailand faces very little subsurface maritime threat that would justify such an extravagant purchase (Reuters, 2020; Abuza, 2022). The irony is that the argument about a lack of subsurface maritime threats had stymied the Yingluck administration's plan to acquire six retiring German submarines for a total cost of US\$257 million, a bargain in comparison to current plans (Lundquist, 2011; Bangkok Post, 2019). Nevertheless, Chief of the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) Admiral Kraisorn resisted criticisms saying that Thailand's neighbours possess submarines and as such Thailand must match this capability (Khaosod English, 2015). This line of thinking was echoed by Minister of Defence General Prawit Wongsuwon adding that the submarines would be used to defend Thailand's natural resources in the Andaman Sea (Arpon, 2017).

Notwithstanding criticisms, the purchase for the Chinese submarine has gone through with plans for a further two being discussed by the RTG. The question remains whether the submarine will fulfil expectations given that there have been concerns on multiple fronts ranging from issues of corruption, the potential inability of the RTN to adequately operate the submarine, to being overly pro-Chinese (Thongnoi, 2020). As Storey (2019) points out, a lack of personnel in manning the submarine may cause the platform to become an unused prestige item, like its aircraft carrier the HTMS Chakri Naruebet, which has had no aircraft since 2006 (Bender, 2015). Regardless of whether the submarine has a role in the RTN, its purchase is highly symbolic of the growing Sino-Thai relationship that Thailand's first submarine since 1941 will be one built by the Chinese.

Bangkok has made other major purchases of Chinese military equipment, most of which have been geared towards the navy and army, and to a far lesser extent the air force. In 2019 Bangkok signed a contract for the procurement of a landing platform dock ship valued at US\$200 million (Vavasseur, 2019). In addition, Thailand has been in the process of modernising and replacing its older US main battle tanks with the Chinese VT-4 and Ukrainian T-84 *Oplot-M* (Nanuam, 2017; BBC News Thai, 2018). Other procurements of note include the VN-1 infantry fighting vehicle delivered in 2020, the Type 85 armoured personnel carrier in the same year, and various self-propelled rocket launchers (Defence Technology Institute, 2016; Defense World.Net, 2017; DEFPOST, 2019). Aside from arms purchases, Thailand and China have engaged in several joint military exercises over the years (Reuters, 2015). China also participated for the first time in the Cobra Gold 2020 exercise, sending a small group of

personnel (Panyue, 2020). Further, China has also paid port calls to Thailand a few times, such as in 2013 and 2017, with the latter also being used as an opportunity for joint naval exercises comprising four ships and 800 personnel (Chiang Rai Times, 2013; Embassy of China in Thailand, 2017). Yet, despite these various activities and exercises, Storey (2019) points out that their complexity and scope are still nascent in comparison to the relatively robust exercises that exist between the US and Thailand.

Thailand's foreign policy, especially since 2014, has been guided by pragmatic concerns, and this has helped encourage Bangkok towards strategic hedging. Firstly, Sino-Thai relations have substantially developed over the past 3 decades, and even though they have started to strengthen their strategic cooperation, it is far away from the depth and breadth of US-Thai strategic cooperation. The closeness between China and Thailand has historic roots but has been exacerbated by Washington's liberal internationalist agenda that has pushed Bangkok away from 2014 onward. Only recently has this issue started to go away as Thailand held elections in 2019 reaffirming the military's dominant role in Thai domestic politics.

Secondly, though US-Thai relations have been turbulent, they have not been undone. For instance, a year after the 2014 coup, Washington and Bangkok resumed their strategic dialogue as each side publicly reaffirmed the continued endurance of the alliance and strategic importance it has in regional security (U.S. Mission Thailand, 2015). This was further illustrated in the 2017 6<sup>th</sup> US-Thailand Strategic Dialogue, following the Sunnyland Declaration between ASEAN and the US in 2016, which had at its core agreements on territorial integrity, inclusive economic growth, and other elements among the 17 points agreed to in the



declaration (The White House, 2016; U.S. Embassy Bangkok, 2017). Given the slow repairs being done to the US-Thai relationship, it is safe to assume that Thai hedging remains intact. Its security is currently guaranteed by the US while at the same time its economic needs are met by China. Nevertheless, it is vital to remember that China and the US are not the only powers that are important to Bangkok.

### **A Risk-Contingency: Russo-Thai Relations**

A typical part in many hedging strategies, as described by Kuik (2015), are the three balancing behaviours of indirect balancing, dominance denial, and economic pragmatism. In each of these behaviours, a hedging states' options are not necessarily binary and depending on the strategic environment may consist of more than just two great powers. As mentioned before, Japan plays a substantial, though secondary role, in Bangkok's foreign policy strategic calculus. Another important power, albeit secondary in Bangkok's calculus, is Russia. Despite having a diminished global presence than the Soviet Union from which it emerged, Russia's influence is still felt within the region.

Russo-Thai relations have substantial history going back as far as the reigns of King Chulalongkorn and Tsar Nicholas II when the Thai monarch visited Moscow in 1897. Later, during the Cold War, interactions between them remained appropriately frosty but not significantly hostile. Thailand was able to reach a *détente* with the Soviet Union in the late 1960s, and though failing to produce any strategic dividends regarding restraining Vietnam, the *détente* did help restore dealings between Moscow and Bangkok. More recently Moscow

and Bangkok continue to have positive relations, but neither views the other as a priority. Their dealings have increased in recent years as Bangkok seeks to diversify its arms acquisitions away from Washington and Beijing, at least in some fields. Dependence on Washington for arms is inherently fragile as Washington's foreign policy regarding smaller states is primarily directed by ideological concerns. Conversely, dependence on Chinese arms may be more stable, but the technology utilised is frequently viewed as inferior to Western equivalents and its primary selling point is based on price (Storey, 2019). Consequently, this leaves room for Moscow to eke out some influence as Bangkok engages in strategic hedging.

Soviet policies developed in the late-Cold War period towards Asia continue to set the tone and orientation of subsequent Russian engagement in the region. Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet General Secretary, and his foreign policy relied greatly on diplomacy rather than hard power and deemphasised communist ideology. Cooperation, not confrontation, greatly characterised the way in which Gorbachev sought to interact with Southeast Asia. This was illustrated in Gorbachev's 1986 speech from Vladivostok, Russia in which he spoke about the need for greater relations with ASEAN and Asia in general. The speech set out a specific foreign policy strategy in the region wherein Moscow would pursue greater bilateral relations with the states of the region, even those previously hostile to communism, including "Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, [and] Singapore" (Gorbachev, 1986/Rudnitskiy, 1991, p.15). Though the Soviet Union would quickly dissolve after those comments by Gorbachev, the foreign policy strategy remained and served as a basis from which future Russo-Southeast Asian relations would be constructed.

From the 1990s onward, Russo-Thai relations gradually improved. In 1993 a high-level visit by Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn to Moscow was made to boost bilateral trade and speak to general areas in which the two countries could foster cooperation. This visit was followed in 1997 by another high-level visit by the President of the Thai Privy Council, Prem Tinsulanonda, nominally to commemorate a century of diplomatic relations and boost trade relations (Embassy of the Russian Federation, n.d.).<sup>80</sup> Moscow reciprocated the visit a month later with its own large delegation and the signing of various trade agreements. By 1997 the number of Russian visitors to Thailand was over 100,000 per year and continued to increase year-on-year to 1.7 million visitors at its peak in 2013 (Makhrov, 2018). Avoiding inserting itself in an international dispute which it had little connection, likely also conditioned by the fact that Russian tourists constituted a significant cash cow for Bangkok, Bangkok refrained from criticising Putin's annexation of Crimea in 2014, though it did vote in favour of UN Resolution 68/262, which affirmed the General Assembly's commitment to the territorial integrity of Ukraine (United Nations General Assembly, 2014). Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs similarly refrained from condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, instead issuing a short comment on the desire for territorial integrity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, 2014).

Moscow has, for its most part, refrained from allowing Thailand's internal instability to affect their bilateral relationship. In 2006 the Kremlin issued a statement much in the same vein as the Thai statement in 2014, encouraging a "reinforcement of the democratic process with the

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<sup>80</sup> Other notable visits include that of Thaksin Shinwatra in 2022 and King Adulydej Bhumibol in 2003. Russian President Vladimir Putin also visited Thailand in 2003 (source: President of Russia, 2003).

participation of *all* [emphasis added] political forces” (The Nation, 2006, pg.1). A similar statement by the Kremlin followed in 2014 with Moscow refusing to condemn the coup. In 2015 Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev was the first foreign leader to visit Thailand following the 2014 coup, using the crisis in Western-Thai relations to engage Thailand on areas of tourism, trade, energy, transnational crime (specifically narcotics), counterterrorism, intelligence exchanges, and arms supplies (Chongkittavorn, 2015; Thai-Russian Chamber of Commerce, 2015). In that same year the Russian destroyer *Admiral Panteleyev* along with its support ships made a port-call at Thailand’s Sattahip naval base with the Russian Ambassador Kirill Barsky using the opportunity to highlight the growing strategic relationship between Moscow and Bangkok (Embassy of the Russian Federation, 2015; Ehrlich, 2016). Similar port-calls were repeated in 2017 and 2019 with the Russian government using these navy-to-navy contacts to develop strategic relations and then translating strategic relations into arms deals (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2017; PCPR, 2019). Though the relationship obviously lacks the comprehensiveness of the US-Thai alliance, the perceived unreliability of Washington has allowed Moscow to fill a niche—one welcomed by Bangkok.

Arms supplies has been one of the biggest areas in which Bangkok and Moscow have cultivated ties. This is not surprising as Russia’s military industrial complex supplies arms to a suite of states, including China and India. In 2005 the Russian Su-30MK was the favoured contender in RTAF’s combat airplane modernisation programme. However, following allegations of corruption, the Swedish Saab JAS 39 *Gripen* won the contract and has since supplied the RTAF with 11 of the aircraft (The Nation, 2017). In 2016 Thailand took acquisition of seven Mi-17 transport helicopters and its third Sukhoi Superjet for VIP transport (Superjet

International, 2016). The Russian Mi-17 was favoured by the Army Commander-in-Chief Teerachai Nakwanich and Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwon over US suppliers (Nanuam & Prangthong, 2016).

### *How Does the Russo-Thai Relationship Affect Bangkok's Strategic Hedging?*

Strategic hedging typically occurs in situations of strategic uncertainty wherein two or more great powers are in competition with one another. In these situations, the hedging state, in this case Thailand, aims to hedge its options by simultaneously cultivating ties with both great powers. As this thesis observes, the two great powers that Thailand is hedging between are the US and China. While the theoretical ideal scenario would be one in which the hedging state can reliably expect its security and economic concerns to be met by the status quo and revisionist power, respectively, this is hardly the case. As seen above, the US' relationship with Thailand is tenuous and subject to significant shifts depending on a variety of factors. Therefore, relying solely on the US for security is inherently risky and has prompted Bangkok to diversify its security relations to include Japan and in some limited aspect, Russia.

Through the lens of strategic hedging, Thailand's complex relationship with the US, Russia, and Japan function as a political hedge in which Bangkok seeks to deny regional dominance to Beijing. In effect, by cultivating a balance of political power in the region through engaging these different states, Bangkok is arguably attempting to minimise the potential risk of political subservience to Beijing down the road. The development of Russo-Thai relations is particularly attractive to Bangkok as, unlike China, the US, and Japan, Russia's distance

precludes it from having an overwhelming regional role. Consequently, Russo-Thai relations helps dilute China's influence, maintains Thailand's strategic ambiguity, and diversifies Thailand's list of partners to avoid dependence on any single state. Ultimately, Bangkok's incorporation of Russia as part of its strategic calculus allows Thailand to straddle that midpoint between accepting Chinese regional influence and simultaneously rejecting it, at least in some niche areas.

### **Strategic Hedging and Thailand**

The post-Cold War period can be largely characterised by its strategic uncertainty, especially for Thai foreign policy elite. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, and, therefore, the major patron of Vietnamese aggression, marked the end of an era. Since then, Thailand has inhabited a region that is relatively stable with significantly fewer security issues than it had between the 1940s and early 1990s. Conversely, domestic instability has flared up and has had a substantial role in shaping Thailand's foreign policy, vis-à-vis the US and China. However, in recent years that stability has increasingly been threatened as Washington and Beijing compete for regional influence.

From the Obama administration onward, Washington has employed various strategies aimed ostensibly at balancing and potentially containing Beijing (Tellis, 2013; Miejer & Simón, 2021). This is illustrated through the famed Pivot, Trump's trade war, the adoption/implementation of the Japanese FOIP, and more recently the re-establishment of QUAD and the creation of AUKUS. Correspondingly, Beijing has sought to break through containment and assume a

regional and global position commensurate with its relative power through the Belt and Road Initiative, creating its own rival regional institutions, and leveraging its economic power to curtail regional opposition. Such effects were evidenced in the inability of ASEAN to issue a joint statement on maritime security issues in 2012 and 2016 when Cambodia blocked language relating to China's regional maritime activities (Leng, 2017). Though analysts differ in their expectation of conflict, growing competition between Beijing and Washington is a fact that all states need to reckon with.

Given the emerging geopolitical contest between the US and China that has slowly transformed the post-Cold War moment of unipolarity once again to bipolarity, can Thailand's foreign policy during this period be truly described as strategic hedging? First, examining Thailand's relationship with the US illustrates a continued security arrangement in which Thailand's territorial inviolability is guaranteed by the Manila Pact, the Thanat-Rusk Communique, and was subsequently reaffirmed in 2003 with the elevation to Major non-NATO Ally status. Since then, relations have been unsettled, but the foundation of the relationship remains intact with neither state willing to sever the arrangement. However, indicating a potential lack of faith in Washington, Bangkok has explored alternative security arrangements, namely with Japan, and has correspondingly diversified its arms supplies. The decision to pursue some security relations with Japan suggests that Bangkok may be wary of US aloofness, but still committed to a US-centric security approach.

In examining the evolving Sino-Thai relationship, greater nuances are observed. The connection between the two states remains primarily economic as evidenced in the

substantial increase in trade between the two countries since the 1990s. This is further demonstrated in the 2003 decision by Beijing and Bangkok to sign an early harvest agreement, opening their agricultural markets 7 years before the ASEAN-China FTA came into effect. In addition, Thailand was an early avid supporter of the BRI, encouraging Chinese investment to develop the Thai-Chinese Rayong Industrial Zone in Thailand's east (Belt and Road, n.d.). More notable, however, has been the high-speed rail from Bangkok to Nong Khai that was expected to link with another BRI rail project in Laos, thereby ultimately connecting Singapore to Kunming, China. The project has been a source of controversy in Thailand and was even temporarily cancelled in 2016 by Prayuth. Since then, Bangkok has mostly rejected Chinese financing for the project, instead using internal loans for 80% of the project's cost (Chaitrong, 2017; Lam, 2019). Though Bangkok's decision may have stemmed from a variety of reasons, it does demonstrate a willingness on Bangkok's part to resist Chinese economic influence, at least in some circumstances.

Aside from the economic, the Sino-Thai relationship does have a strategic component. From 2007 onward both countries have staged joint military exercises, named Blue Strike and Falcon Strike (Blaxland & Raymond, 2017). The exercises have remained relatively small-scale with both Beijing and Bangkok holding back from demonstrating their more advanced aircraft, for example, the J-20 by China or the F-16 that Thailand operates (Sangpolsit, 2022). These exercises, however, are magnitudes smaller than the Cobra Gold exercise held by the US and Thailand and are likely more political optics than any substantial military training objective. The decision by both Beijing and Bangkok to refuse the use of their more advanced aircraft in



the Falcon Strike exercises indicates a lack of trust by both parties, reinforcing the resilience of the US-Thai security arrangement.

Overall, Bangkok's strategy since the Cold War has increasingly demonstrated hedging characteristics. In typical hedging, Bangkok has constructed a strategy in which its security needs are mostly satisfied by the status quo great power while its economic needs are met by the rising power. In the parlance of strategic hedging theory, Bangkok has clearly adopted a strategy that adopts political and economic hedging. By that, I mean that Thailand has acted in ways to curtail China's regional dominance through the cultivation of other powers, for example, the US, Russia, and Japan, that is, through political hedging. Further, Thailand was pragmatic in hitching its wagon to China's rising economy, but this relationship seems to have matured in recent years as Thai-Chinese trade relations have plateaued. Though Thailand has opened its relationship with China to include some strategic considerations, this is not an indication of growing strategic convergence between Bangkok and Beijing. Instead, extrapolating from an article by Gregory V. Raymond (2019), who posited that Thailand's participation in WWI could be viewed to get a seat at the table, similar to how the decision to engage in small-scale joint exercises may be viewed as the transactional cost of securing sustained access to the Chinese market.

In addition to political hedging, which may be viewed as a risk-contingency measure, Bangkok has also sought returns-maximising measures through binding engagement. As explored above, the policies of the Thaksin administration to conduct an early harvest agreement and the establishment of the ACD can each be viewed as means in which to bind China and

Thailand together and promote responsible global citizenry through the consultative mechanisms the dialogue uses to address problems. This is evidenced in the In addition to conventional forms of binding, there is something to be said of the cultural cooperation that has been on-going. Discourse on the notion that Thailand and China are ‘brothers’ has been increasingly popular in recent years, and Tungkeunkunt and Phuphakdi (2018) make the case that this illustrates a belief in their shared history *and* their shared future. Further, it is a relationship in which Thailand willingly and public acknowledges its junior status, as famously recognised by Prayuth in 2019 when he compared Thailand and China to an ant and lion, respectively (Rojanaphruk, 2019).<sup>81</sup> Bangkok has also been unwilling to criticise Beijing on the Uighur migrant issue, even returning 100 Uighurs to China in 2015 (Tungkeunkunt & Phuphakdi, 2018).

Taking everything into account, it is reasonable to say that Thailand is effectively engaged in strategic hedging. The ambiguity of its alignment in many ways mirrors the hedging exhibited in 1941 during Phibun’s administration. In both instances, Bangkok’s alignment has been deliberately vague in such a sense that Bangkok simultaneously courts two competing powers while at the same time refusing to overtly take sides. Such a decision is pragmatic and not at all uncommon in Southeast and East Asia where the current economic incentives are so strong and the potential for conflict between the US and China remains possible, but not imminent. However, as Haacke (2019) argues, hedging is a policy that exists in environments of security risk, not in the face of security threats. In 1941 Bangkok turned away from hedging and

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<sup>81</sup> The comment was derisively critiqued by journalist Pravit Rojanaphruk (2019) as signalling a return to vassalage.

embraced bandwagoning when Imperial Japan opened the War in the Pacific. The longevity of Bangkok's policy of strategic hedging will be examined in the following chapters that aim to synthesise findings from this and the previous chapters that detail Thailand's foreign policy history and produce a predictive analysis with practical implications.

## Chapter 6

### Analysis and Findings

In the previous chapters it has been demonstrated that strategic hedging has been a recurring foreign policy strategy of Siam/Thailand. Hedging was employed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century against Britain while Siam faced the two-pronged crisis of European colonisation in the form of the British and French colonial empires. It was again employed prior to WWII when strategic ambiguity was desired by Bangkok as Phibun waited to see which side would prevail. Finally, it is engaged contemporarily as Thailand navigates the increasingly competitive geopolitical environment framed by the strategic rivalry between the US and China. However, as Haacke (2019) illustrates, states opt for hedging strategies in the absence of threats and as evidenced in Thai history, balancing and bandwagoning have both been employed in situations, namely in 1942 when Bangkok opted to bandwagon with Imperial Japan, and from the post-WWII period until 1969 when Bangkok balanced against communist states with the US.

This chapter aims to reflect on the macro foreign policy trends that emerged over the 3 centuries of Thai history as explored in the previous chapters. The analysis will examine those instances when strategic hedging was applied, but equally as important, when discontinuities occurred. Neoclassical realism, with its framework that incorporates both the third and second image level factors is especially relevant in this analysis as the power of subunit factors to influence foreign policy is noteworthy.

Beyond examining Thailand's foreign policy and the viability of strategic hedging generally, this chapter also seeks to explore the concept of middle powers and strategic hedging specifically. In contrast to great (and super) powers, which are relatively secure due to a range of factors and as such have the latitude to pursue foreign policies that are not explicitly centred on survival, middle powers are restrained in their capacity and willingness to engage in experimental foreign policies as the consequences for miscalculation are potentially devastating. Academic discourse focusing on middle powers continues to expand, with the discipline of strategic hedging seeking to explain how middle powers construct foreign policy amid great power competition (Goh, 2004; Kuik, 2008, 2016; Guzansky, 2015). However, a failing in the existing literature is the near total focus on contemporary case studies, leaving out historical case studies that may better explain the factors that force states to abandon hedging strategies. This chapter aims to explore three major interest areas: factors that contribute to state hedging adoption/rejection, strategic hedging as a strategy for middle powers, and addressing the gap in existing literature by incorporating a holistic approach that utilises 3 centuries of process tracing.

### **Strategic Hedging: Trends and Discontinuities**

Strategic hedging, in contrast to balancing and bandwagoning, exists along a spectrum that encompasses elements of both balancing and bandwagoning and requires continual self-examination (Kuik, 2008; 2016). Additionally, strategic hedging differs from other conventional foreign policy strategies as a major objective of hedging is to produce ambiguous signalling through the implementation of mutually counteracting policies. The

goal of such ambiguity is to manifest a representation of the hedging state such that the states being hedged against will continue to fulfil their expected role of providing security and economic reward. Strategic hedging as a field of study has changed considerably since its inception in the early 2000s with initial research restricting hedging strategies to second-tier states, for example, China, Russia, Brazil, and France (Tessman & Wolfe 2012; Geeraerts & Salman, 2016). Early research viewed hedging as a strategy employed by potential peer-competitors to the US who would use ambiguity to secure their long-term interests either in bidding time to accumulate power or reduce dependency on a perceived declining superpower (Foot, 2003; Medeiros, 2005; Pape, 2005). This type of hedging has since been labelled as *temporal strategic hedging* by Salman et al. (2015) and at its simplest explains why states may forego immediate gains for long-term ones.

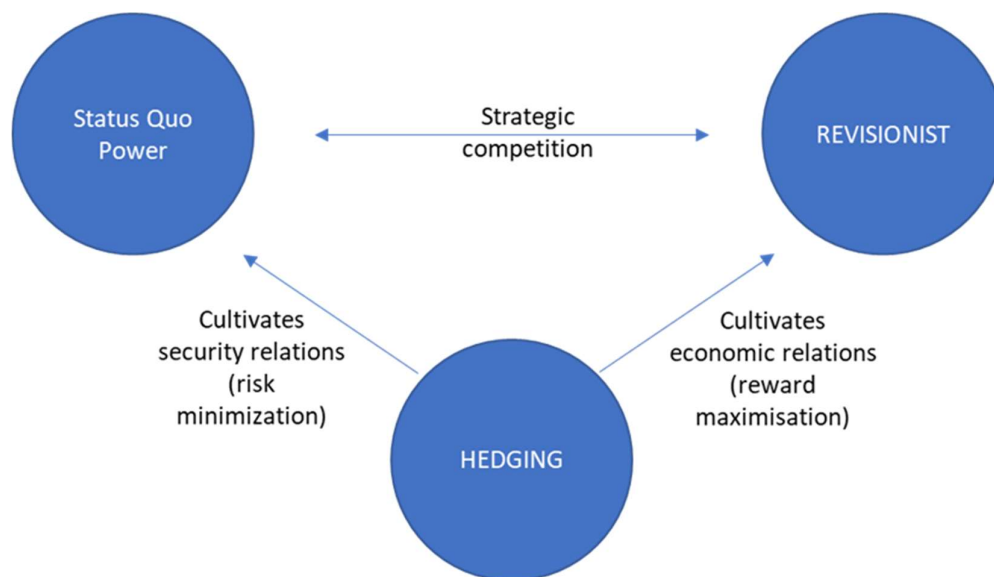
Several examples exist of states employing temporal strategic hedging, of which the most pertinent to this thesis is Siamese hedging against Britain in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the reign of Chulalongkorn, Bangkok simultaneously embraced and rejected British regional dominance. Given the very real fear that Britain's dominating influence could translate into eventual colonisation, Bangkok made efforts to bandwagon and act in deference to London while at the same time seeking to undermine said influence through dominance denial strategies and emulation. Hedging in this case adopted elements that sought to bide time until Bangkok could successfully challenge British influence, but also sought to keep London close as a shield against French colonial activities. Other examples, more in keeping with the concept of second-tier powers, include Beijing's foreign policy strategy from the 1990s to the early 2000s. During this period Beijing refrained from acting in ways that substantially

undermined Washington's foreign policy strategy, only using its veto power twice (1997—UN Meeting 3730 and 1999—UN Meeting 3982) (Multilateral Research Group, 2012). Other examples include Beijing's decision to utilise existing institutions such as the UN to soften sanctions against Iran (Scita, 2022). Salman (2017) notes that Beijing could have used its veto power or other means to block US sanctions, but instead consistently chose to accept some loss of political capital with Iran to preserve its relationship with the US. In effect, by choosing not to challenge US policies and defer global leadership to Washington, Beijing was able to bide its time to rise relatively peacefully. Chinese foreign policy even explicitly expressed the concept of temporal hedging in Deng Xiaoping's famous statement, "hide our capabilities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile while trying to accomplish something, and never claim leadership" (Thompson, 2020, p. 2).

Though strategic hedging as a theory was initially primarily driven by a desire to understand how secondary powers conduct their foreign policy, it has since shifted towards middle and small powers. Goh (2004), conceptualised hedging in a more *positional* orientation rather than temporal. Instead of the hedging being a bilateral relationship between a secondary power and a great/superpower, hedging was instead conceptualised to understand how smaller powers navigate geopolitical competition between two greater powers. This *positional strategic hedging* has now formed the dominant form of hedging theory and views hedging as a triangular relationship in which the hedging state embraces interactions with two (or potentially more) great powers despite each great power competing against one another. Positional hedging presupposes that a hedging state is in conflict regarding deciding how to appropriately align in a situation of geopolitical great power competition. Aligning

with the status quo power may afford the hedging state the greatest security but comes at the expense of economic gains that are expected in aligning with the rising power and vice-versa. Consequently, the hedging state may choose to cultivate relations with both competing powers to maximise its economic opportunities without foregoing security. This can be seen in Figure 6.1, which illustrates the triangular relationship between the hedging state and the two competing great powers. As positional strategic hedging is a pragmatic response to strategic uncertainty, hedging continues to be applied to various case studies in Southeast and East Asia as well as other regions.

**Figure 6.1: Diagram example of positional strategic hedging**



Strategic hedging is an attractive alternative to conventional alignment behaviours as it seeks to mitigate their disadvantages. As seen in Table 6.1, when simply plotting the security/economic relationship, only hedging provides the state an opportunity at both high



reward and high security. Hedging is the most pragmatic strategy for states in Southeast Asia given the vast power asymmetries that exist between themselves and the two superpowers. It must be noted though that asymmetries by themselves do not invalidate neutrality, but also the relative power distribution, the reliability of allies, strategic geography, the aggressiveness of neighbours, and so on. From 1914-1917 Siam remained neutral in WWI, electing to involve itself only when the winning side was already assured. In this case neutrality was an option as the main theatres of combat were far from Siam, meaning that its direct involvement was limited, and it would have risked too much to have entered the war earlier. Even in 1941, Thailand's professed neutrality is emblematic of positional strategic hedging, though an argument (outside of the scope of this thesis) could be made for temporal hedging.

Balancing is an option, but states that balance risk losing out of the economic rewards China's rise may bring. For example, in 2012, following Philippine policies of resisting Chinese encroachment over the Scarborough Shoals, China slowed the purchase of Philippine agricultural products, substantially hurting the industry in what has since been called a *Banana War* (Heydarian, 2018; Trinh, 2022). Subsequently, the Philippines cooled its balancing and under Philippine President Duterte even engaged in some limited bandwagoning. Given the drawbacks in neutrality, balancing, and bandwagoning, hedging is the best viable alternative while the geopolitical environment is conducive.

**Table 6.1: Matrix measuring economic/security trade-off for various alignment configurations**

	<b>Low Economic Reward</b>	<b>High Economic Reward</b>
<b>Low Security</b>	Neutrality	Bandwagoning
<b>High Security</b>	Balancing	Hedging

To outsiders, the ambiguity inherent in a strategy that embraces mutually counteracting policies may be a source of confusion. As the alignment of a hedging state is difficult to discern, some may question the distinction between neutrality and hedging strategies. Neutrality implicitly requires a relative isolation and disengagement from the conflicts between other states. Conversely, hedging views conflict as an opportunity and a situation that creates situations that can be exploited through the economic/security risk matrix seen above. Further, neutral states nominally refrain from having a security patron as that would entirely undermine their position of neutrality. Hedging states frequently have clear security patrons, though the relationship may not necessarily be formalised in treaties or alliance structures. Lastly, in opposition to conventional alignment strategies, hedging is fluid. A hedging state must actively pursue ambiguity in a way that continuously requires the state to maintain a rough equilibrium in its policies rather than lean towards balancing and bandwagoning. The following sections will explore Siam/Thailand’s history with hedging, how it functioned across various geopolitical environments, and its discontinuities.

### *Colonial Era Hedging*

Though Siam had significant and prolonged contact with European powers preceding the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at that time colonisation was not a substantial concern in Bangkok. Early European contact with the Siamese Kingdom was primarily either commercial or religious in nature (Smith, 1977; Wyatt, 1984). Consequently, Siamese foreign policy at this period cannot be described as either balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging. Even applying the term *neutral* would be inappropriate given the aloofness Siamese monarchs had towards European powers. It is only after the Napoleonic Wars in which Britain, with its de facto supremacy of the seas (Corbett, 1910; Lavery, 2012), had a free hand with which to assert an Asian colonial network more intensely than it had before and forced Siam to be more acutely aware of its geopolitical vulnerability (Tsang, 1995; Keirn & Schürer, 2011; Mumford, 2012). Had Britain been the only major European power in the region, it is entirely possible that London would have attempted to colonise Siam after its excursion in Afghanistan and colonisation of Burma (Mallampalli, 2018). However, as it stood, France emerged as an Asian colonial power in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century complicating London's colonial policy and providing Bangkok an opportunity to avoid colonisation.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Siam opted for a limited bandwagoning strategy. This is evidenced in Bangkok's decision to cede certain territories to Britain in the Burney Treaty as well as the agreement to assist British war efforts against Burma in the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) (Wyatt, 1984). The power disparity between Britain and Siam was substantial, given that Britain was able to defeat the same Burmese kingdom that had previously razed Siam's capital back in 1767. Accommodation, therefore, partly satiated

London's colonial drive. Rather than engage in further colonial expansionism, London and Bangkok were able to agree to the Bowring Treaty in 1855, which provided Britain many of the commercial deals it wanted without costly administrative burden. As Barton (1964) and Larsson (2008) illustrate, the relationship between Britain and Siam was mostly quite friendly. This provided the relatively benign security environment, at least temporarily, for Bangkok to adopt a more centred strategy: hedging.

The emergence of France as a colonial power in Asia substantially altered the distribution of power across mainland Southeast Asia. Beyond significantly weakening Siam through the annexation of sizable Siamese territory, it migrated the Anglo-French geopolitical competition into the Southeast Asian theatre. French colonial expansion was rapid and represented an existential threat to Siam. Between 1859 to 1887 France established colonies or protectorates over areas that nowadays comprise Vietnam, most of Cambodia, and Laos (Tuck, 1995; Gojoso, 2015). Accommodation with Paris was untenable for Bangkok given the disconnect between Saigon and Paris, the former frequently defying the Quai d'Orsay's (French Foreign Ministry) directives (Tuck, 1995). From the capture of Saigon (1859) to the establishment of French Indochina (1887)—which incorporated Annam, Tonkin, Cochinchina (nowadays forming the modern state of Vietnam) and the Kingdom of Cambodia—a period of 30 years had passed. In contrast, British expansion along Siam's periphery was comparatively gradual, with London requiring three wars, Siamese assistance, and 61 years to bring Burma completely under its control (Smith, 2003; Green, 2015). The differences in which London and Paris undertook in colonising Southeast Asia had a profound effect on Bangkok's strategic

calculus, which formulated different foreign policy strategies to deal with both European powers.

A strong argument can be made that Thailand discarded conventional alignment strategies to pursue strategic hedging, at least in response to British colonial efforts. The question that naturally arises is, why would a state seek to eschew conventional strategies and instead opt for a strategy that is potentially riskier? The answer lies in the distribution of power. Britain, though the strongest European power in the region, did not preponderantly outmatch France. Additionally, with each year that passed, the power difference between the two colonial powers in Southeast Asia was reduced. Tuck (1995) demonstrates that both British and French colonists were continually aware that the local security dilemma in Southeast Asia could easily translate into conflict in Europe. As such, had Britain chosen to engage French colonial forces in Southeast Asia, it would potentially have to contend with France's far-larger land army in Europe, too. Bangkok, caught in the middle of the two colonial powers was in a precarious position as balancing against or bandwagoning with Britain was considered indefensible given the limited resources London had available to protect Siam. Bangkok was caught in a further bind given that any alignment behaviour that could be perceived as balancing with Britain may have triggered an early aggressive French response. Ultimately, Bangkok made the pragmatic decision to hedge against Britain as the economic rewards and limited security London provided were still greater than had Bangkok opted an alternative strategy.

Neutrality was another conventional alignment posture that was unavailable to Siam in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lacking sufficient defensive capabilities and clearly coordinating its

commerce with London, Bangkok could not realistically present itself as a neutral party to France. With neutrality, balancing, and bandwagoning being unattractive options an alternative was required. The alignment strategy with the greatest chance of preserving Siamese sovereignty, therefore, was strategic hedging. This facilitated the maintenance of economic and security related benefits that the Anglo-Siamese relationship brought while Siam bided time so that it could modernise sufficiently to resist British and French colonial encroachments. This strategy, however, carried certain risks as coordinating any policies with London had the potential to create a cascade effect in which London would desire greater control over Siamese governance. To some extent this can be seen in the earlier discussed Bowring Treaty (1855) that provided London greater direct control over Siam's taxation policies, a much-sought revision by Britain after the Burney Treaty (1826) was viewed as inadequate.

#### *Colonial Era Hedging: Strategic Hedging*

Strategic hedging proved to be successful as Siam was able to hold onto its sovereignty, a claim it shares only with Ethiopia and Japan. This was achieved through a combination of dominance denial, economic pragmatism, limited economic diversification, binding engagement, and limited-bandwagoning with Britain. The hedging behaviour demonstrated by Siam in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century meets nearly all the possible behavioural responses a hedging state can engage in as explored by Kuik (2015). The only risk-contingency measure that I would refrain from applying is indirect balancing. Though Siam did heavily modernise its armed forces during the period discussed, its effectiveness was limited, leading to the

argument that the primary purpose of the armed forces was essentially political and cosmetic (Raymond, 2019; Mendiola et al., 2023).

Bangkok's dominance denial behaviour is clearly illustrated in the government's desire to sign treaties with various Western powers, which in turn provided those Western powers an economic stake in the continued independence of Siam. Further, Chulalongkorn cultivated personal links with the Russian tsar to maintain an uninvolved party to mediate disputes. Even though this failed when Alexander III refused to intervene in the Paknam crisis at Chulalongkorn's request, the attempt at dominance denial still applies.<sup>82</sup> Additional hedging behaviours, such as economic pragmatism and diversification, are similarly evidenced in the treaties signed with various powers. Forging direct commercial links with other powers, of which Britain was given preference, acknowledged Bangkok's acceptance of the new status quo as it provided substantial economic dividends. Consequently, Bangkok engaged in behaviours that sought to reject Britain's influence through dominance denial strategies while simultaneously accepting it in the form of economic pragmatism and limited bandwagoning.

A question that remains after exploring the efficacy and methods of Siam's hedging response to Britain is, given the number of concessions made by Bangkok and its arguable failure in 1893, why did hedging become a major factor in Siam's future strategic culture? Neorealist logic would fail to explain Siam's adoption of hedging policies nor its continued preference for hedging moving forward given its lack of focus on unit-level factors. The answer lies at the

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<sup>82</sup> Chulalongkorn's friendship with Tsar Alexander III and willingness to utilise that friendship in political circumstances demonstrates that the Thai monarchy had been, at least to some extent, accepted as an equal by European monarchs, all of whom derived their legitimacy from (their Christian) god.

subunit level, which can only appreciably be analysed through the neoclassical realist lens. From the 20<sup>th</sup> century onward, the dominant narrative explaining Siam's exceptional case of avoiding colonisation has centred on Chulalongkorn and his flexible foreign policy (Poonkham, 2022). Though I do not subscribe to such great man theory explanations, the discourse has dominated Thai political thinking and significantly shaped foreign policy. Further, another explanation to why strategic hedging remains the preferred tool of Thai leaders and has so deeply penetrated the strategic culture is Thai nationalism. The idealisation of the past, specifically of Chulalongkorn's reign by Prime Minister Sarit (1959-1963), helped to re-establish a deference to monarchical leadership and the father-like role the monarch plays in the state. Subsequently, Chulalongkorn and Bhumibol have achieved cult of personality like fame within Thai society that has reinforced the hedging strategy favoured by Chulalongkorn in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Contemporary Strategic Hedging*

In contrast to the high-stakes period explored earlier, the contemporary period is relatively low-risk for Thailand. Bangkok maintains generally positive relations with both current great powers, the US and China. Thailand and Washington are still parties to the 1954 Manila Pact of the now-defunct SEATO, the Thanat-Rusk Communique of 1962, and the 2003 elevation of Thailand to Major non-NATO Ally status (Department of State, 1962). These three agreements, of which the Thanat-Rusk Communique is unique in that it expressly reaffirmed Washington's security umbrella despite SEATO's decline, establish an alliance that persists to the time of writing. Despite diplomatic turbulence in the relationship between the US and Thailand, the security relationship between the two parties has remained strong and proven



resistant to changes in administrations of both states. As US-Thai trade declines in relation to China-Thai trade, the security relationship remains a critical factor in the relationship and one that neither country contemporaneously is willing to forego. Goh, writing in 2005, mentions that the security relationship has been continually renewed in the post-Cold War environment, evidenced in the elevation to Major non-NATO Ally in 2003.

Enthusiasm in the US-Thai relationship has declined on both sides since 2014, and yet despite that, the foundational security bond remains relatively robust. However, the US-Thai partnership has been challenged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly since 2014, by the emergence of the Sino-Thai relationship that continues to grow. Today, China is among Thailand's largest trading partners and has made considerable inroads into Thailand's defence market as well as public infrastructure. Despite this, Beijing has not replaced the US as Bangkok's primary security guarantor and is unlikely to do so soon. The progress made by Beijing into Thailand's defence market has not yet translated into substantial bilateral security arrangements. The evolution of the relationship ties deeply with modern and nuanced interpretations of strategic hedging behaviour posited by scholars such as Kuik, which will be explored below.

Strategic hedging has been argued by Tessman and Wolfe (2011) to most likely to occur when the concentration of power in a unipolar system is in the process of diffusion (p. 218). Though Tessman and Wolfe were writing of second-tier powers, the argument is applicable to middle powers as well.<sup>83</sup> Pinpointing the period in which power diffusion is said to occur is inherently

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<sup>83</sup> Tessman and Wolfe fail to provide a definition of what constitutes a 'second-tier' state, but provide examples such as Japan, Germany, Russia, and China. Geeraerts and Salman (2016) expand the term to include France, India, and the United Kingdom.

difficult, especially as the process is ongoing, but Layne (2018) makes a strong argument for the 2007/2008 global financial crisis as one such point.<sup>84</sup> Since 2007 the US-led unipolar system has faced growing challenges to its assumed global pre-eminence stemming from a declining relative power differential between the US and its closest peer competitors, including China, India, and possibly the EU. Globally, but especially within Asia, Beijing has emerged as a potential alternative to US leadership.

As China develops and refines the capacities to challenge Washington, both politically and militarily, debate has intensified as to what such a dynamic may mean. The potential for conflict between the two states has been well researched with scholars on both sides of the Pacific Ocean articulating the possibility for conflict soon (Ikenberry, 2001; Feng, 2006; Mearsheimer, 2014; Zhao, 2019; Zhen & Paul, 2020). Discussion on the topic typically centres on the shift in the regional distribution of power from a/an (albeit distantly) US-led order to a system in which China and the US are more equitable. Any significant and open conflict between Beijing and Washington would necessitate clear alignment positions by those states involved and geographically proximate, some of which have even made their positions known already. Examples of this include the creation of the FOIP by Japan, the formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between Australia, India, Japan, and the US, and the Australia-United Kingdom-United States collective security alliance (Eisentraut & Gaens, 2018; Jie, 2019; Rai, 2019). Though some scholars posit that a shift in the distribution of power typically results in conflict (Ferguson, 1999, 2006; Chadeaux, 2011, Mearsheimer, 2014), Zhen and

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<sup>84</sup> The author contends that such pinpointing is unnecessary, and one should look at more general trends than points in history. Despite this, figures such as that by Layne (2018) do allow for neat delineations that aid in analysis.

Paul (2020) found that countries immediately surrounding China have bucked convention by continuing to maintain foreign policies that depend on ongoing stability.

The absence of hard balancing against China by any of the smaller states in its area of influence signals a belief by foreign policy elites that a transition from unipolarity to bipolarity need not necessarily be accompanied by conflict (Karim & Chairil, 2016; Zhang, 2018). Though many Asian heads of states have made public statements regarding the risk of conflict, the ambiguity within the system has meant that strategic hedging currently appears to be the preferred strategy for many of the smaller states operating in the East and Southeast Asia region (Allard, 2020; Jennings, 2021; Vaswani, 2021).

Notwithstanding the absence of overt balancing occurring in Southeast Asia, the risk of conflict between Beijing and Washington is something that all states, Thailand included, have a need to prepare against. Thailand's foreign policy strategy today, having its roots in the strategic culture first formed by Chulalongkorn, favours a strategy that is non-ideological, and instead is driven by the goal of reward-maximisation and risk-minimisation. In effect, Thailand's foreign policy encapsulates the essence of strategic hedging. However, for strategic hedging to function successfully as a foreign policy strategy several factors need to align. The first, already mentioned, is that the system must be in a state of power diffusion which would facilitate the rise of peer competitors to the established (near) hegemonic power. As power diffusion of the leading power (the US) is in process, both the US and any revisionist state may be averse to conflict with each other, which may temporarily produce a benign, though tense, geopolitical environment. Throughout this period, relatively smaller states may ride along on

the rapid development of the revisionist state, using its emerging economic growth to fuel their own.

*Hedging and the Distribution of Power: Why Thailand Hedges Against China*

Improved trade relations between the hedging state and the rising power are unlikely to mature into more substantial alignment policies, particularly those that relate to security interests. The temptation to completely align with the rising power is mitigated by one of the constants in realist theories; the inability of any state to accurately predict the intentions and behaviours of another state. The inherent security dilemma resulting from the fog of international relations, and the ways in which states deal with this fog, are one of the key areas in which neorealist and neoclassical realist assumptions of state behaviour differ. The former is principally focused on the distribution of power and assumes that state decisions are driven by external variables within the international system. In contrast, neoclassical realism incorporates subunit elements to explain foreign policy strategies that may not be typical under neorealist logic, looking at the internal structures of states to partially account for their behaviour. Strategic hedging is one option to deal with the inability to discern the intentions of other states, with the hedging state's actions being guided to some extent by subunit factors, including strategic culture, domestic politics, and factionalism, public opinion, and so on.

Another factor affecting the applicability and potential success of strategic hedging is geographic distance. Hedging states that are geographically proximate to either the dominant or revisionist state face greater risk factors that need consideration. Powerful states may

possess spheres of influence where they retain military or political exclusivity, which may bind weaker states to them. States on the furthest edges of the sphere of influence or on the periphery may possess greater latitude in formulating their foreign policy strategies or breaking away from the sphere of influence entirely. Examples of this include Siam and Japan in the 19th century, the various independence movements of Latin American states in the 18th through 19th Centuries, and more recently France opting out of NATO's command structure in 1966 (Varat, 2008; Nuenlist, 2011).

Proximity, ultimately, is deeply rooted with regional distributions of power. Imperial China's centrality to the East Asian regional order prior to the arrival of colonial powers established a hierarchical system with itself at its peak. Following its defeat in the First Opium War and the subsequent Nanking Treaty (1849), Siamese monarchs ceased complying with the tributary system in 1853 (Wyatt, 1984). Similarly, Britain's regional position in Southeast Asia at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was certainly dominant, but it was not hegemonic. This is demonstrated by the rather equitable Burney Treaty that did not significantly impact Siamese commerce or territory. In the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) the British were able to field an effective force of 50,000 personnel, led by Britain but containing numerous Indian and Burmese troops (Pearn, 1944; Ramachindra, 1978). By the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852-1853), Britain demonstrated its capacity to inflict humiliating defeats on Siam's historic rival as well as the centre of the former hierarchical regional order in Beijing, consequently forcing Siam to recognise the new regional order that was still being established.

A re-emergence of that old pre-colonial regional order is nowadays slowly occurring. China is once again, arguably, regionally dominant. China faces several challenges, such as powerful neighbours, established regional security architecture, and an established regional hegemon that has for the better part of a century has either created or heavily influenced the international institutions that guide relations among states: the US. Notwithstanding these challenges, Thailand remains in a similar position to China as it did 2 centuries ago as it is part of China's orbit, but due to the distances that separates them, is not concerned about China militarily. Issues do exist between the two states, especially regarding water usage of the Lancang/Mekong River, but these issues have not yet substantially impacted their relationship. Hence, hedging remains readily applicable in Thailand's case as the benign geopolitical environment favours opportunism and Thailand's distance from China prevents immediate strategic concerns. Thailand may be thought to currently exist in a 'goldilocks' zone where it is sufficiently close to China to profit from its rise, yet sufficiently distanced to prevent security issues from being transformative.

#### *Hedging, Reward Maximisation, and the Sino-Thai Relationship*

The final factor relating to the applicability of hedging in Siam's contemporary strategy is the perceived benefits the hedging state may gain from pursuing such a strategy. Positional hedging is inherently risky as it requires the hedging state to continuously calculate how its actions may be perceived by both great powers. Consequently, the hedging state faces the possibility that its actions may alienate either or both states with which it is trying to hedge and could potentially be in a worse position than it started. Therefore, the hedging state must act in such a way to prevent alienation from occurring while also establishing increasing

commercial links with the rising power. It stands to reason then, given the inherent risks involved, that the potential rewards from hedging must be substantial enough to entice the hedging state to adopt such an alignment strategy. Neorealism, with its fundamental focus on power politics, is unable to answer why a middle power would elect to endanger its security in the pursuit of gains from trade. Liberalism, on the other end of the spectrum in its rejection of power politics, similarly fails to explain why states that are economically interdependent as the hedging state and revisionist power are, would have contingency measures in place in case of conflict. By assuming the dominance of the unit as the principal actor, guided by subunit factors, neoclassical realism can explain why states may adopt hedging.

In the case of Thailand, it is evident that deliberate decision making has taken place in Bangkok to pursue a relationship with both the US and China in a manner that is demonstrably ambiguous in terms of alignment. Bilateral trade between Thailand and China has substantially increased in the past 20 years, surpassing that of Thai-Japanese and Thai-US trade (World Integrated Trade Solution, n.d.).<sup>85</sup> By itself, this would not be strategic hedging. Most countries in the region have seen China's rise as a means for self-enrichment, but that would not necessarily entail an ambiguous foreign policy. Australia as an example has substantially increased its bilateral trade with China while maintaining close security ties with

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<sup>85</sup> Between first writing this in 2020 and editing in 2022, trade between the US and Thai has dramatically increased following Sino-US trade war under Trump. This anomaly does not detract from the general trends explored in this thesis.

the United States, and few serious commentators would say Canberra is hedging (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.; Kassam, 2021; Zhou & Wagner, 2021).<sup>86</sup>

Even as China's relative strength continues, as does its more aggressive posturing on the issues of the South China Sea, Bangkok and Beijing have continued to pursue a deepening of their relationship, moving it into strategic considerations. Bangkok has since made major defence purchases from China, which most notably include major platforms such as submarine assets and modern VT-4 main battle tank. Concurrent with this, Thailand has also been engaging in limited military cooperation with Beijing in exercises that have been discussed in earlier chapters. For Bangkok, there are clean gains that can be made from a relationship with Beijing that does not necessarily entail foregoing the security that its relationship with Washington provides.

Rationale for the deepening bilateral ties do not necessarily all stem from unit-level factors but include cultural and governmental factors as well. Barring the early Cold War period in which Thailand and China were hostile of one another, the two countries share a deep, and relatively agreeable, history, meaning that relations between the two are likely more familial than they might be otherwise. This has been affirmed several times in high-level discourse as well as evidenced in the notable Sino-Thai commercial links that have been cemented by centuries of Chinese immigration. Secondly, Bangkok's post-2014 military government has

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<sup>86</sup> A notable example of a scholar viewing Australia's foreign policy strategy as hedging include Thomas Wilkins (2021). His work, however, came out before the September 2021 announcement of the AUKUS alliance which seems to demonstrate a strong case for balancing, not hedging. Other academics such as Chan (2020) have proposed hedging to be a viable alternative for Australia's alignment strategy moving forward, but do not indicate that Australia is *currently* hedging.



faced international ostracism and its political elite are wary of depending on the US for arms, leading to a growing convergence of interests between Bangkok and Beijing. Despite the mixed signals this may send, particularly to Washington, Bangkok's hedging policy aims to minimise risks through the continued development of its security relationship with Washington and the cultivation of its emerging relationship with Beijing.

### **Discontinuities**

Notwithstanding hedging's success in the above scenarios, it has not always proved to be a viable strategy. In the above section it was explained that for strategic hedging to function successfully, three factors need to be simultaneously present: a geopolitical environment in which the status quo power is in decline and diffusing power concurrent with the emergence of a rising challenger state, geographic distance, and the obvious potential for rewards. The absence, alteration, or misperception of any of these critical factors may lead to a state unsuccessfully attempting strategic hedging or a recognition that strategic hedging is not feasible. Though strategic hedging has proven to be Bangkok's preferred foreign policy strategy, it has not been the only strategy employed. The following section aims to examine the discontinuities in Bangkok's strategy and understand the limits of strategic hedging's usefulness.

### *Balancing with Imperial Japan*

Phibun's first military government (1938-1944), as earlier explored, was characterised by fascistic traits that favoured the use of nationalistic fervour to garner support. One of the

most notable early ways in which Phibun promoted nationalistic sentiment within the country was replacing the name *Siam* with *Thailand*, which meant, Land of the Free (Paloczi-Horvath, 1995). In doing so, Phibun was able to manipulate nationalist sentiments to support revanchist policies and thus laid the foundation for Thailand's hostility to the West. Strate (2009) refers to the 1932 coup leaders and Phibun specifically as adopting an "ideology of victimization" that gave the government popular legitimacy to pursue irredentist policies (p. 6). Expanding on this, Strate continues that the ideology of victimization does not parallel examples in China where defeat was blamed on previous leaders. Instead, Phibun maintained the narrative of exceptional monarchy leadership, at least under Chulalongkorn, and that Siamese leaders had done their best in the face of overwhelming European power. Phibun's revanchist policies, coupled with a fortuitous situation that weakened France's hold on its Asian colonies, led to a significant shift away from hedging towards balancing.

Bangkok's adoption of balancing policies from 1939 to 1941 can be clearly identified. Firstly, Bangkok shifted its alignment closer to the Axis powers by first seeking diplomatic support and modernising its armed forces with equipment sourced from Tokyo and Rome (Paloczi-Horvath, 1995). Secondly, during the 1939 negotiations between Paris and Bangkok for a non-aggression pact, Phibun used the Quay d'Orsay's desperation to quickly resolve the issue to extract concessions regarding the riverine boundaries between Thailand and French Indochina (Flood, 1969). These concessions were opposed by the French colonial authorities who, after Metropolitan France's capitulation in 1940 to Nazi Germany, oversaw negotiations on behalf of Paris and lagged in sending representatives to Bangkok. Japanese influence also

factored in decision-making with people such as Colonel Tamura Hiroshi leading powerful cliques that inclined Thailand towards Pan-Asianism and anti-Westernism.<sup>87</sup>

France's defeat by Nazi Germany, Vichy/Paris's perceived inability to maintain control of its Indochina colony, and Japanese plans to occupy French Indochina were viewed through Phibun's nationalistic and revanchist lens. In October 1940 Phibun, sensing an exploitable opportunity and with the assurance of Japanese political support, attacked French Indochina in an attempt to retake Laos and Cambodia. Viewed macroscopically, one might argue that Thailand's decision to invade was simply a natural reaction to a shift in the regional distribution of power, which had begun to swing in Thailand's favour. But, if that is the case, why did Thailand wait 4 months after Paris' capitulation to Berlin to invade? An argument can be made that Phibun's irredentist policies were nothing more than a paper tiger and that without assurances from Tokyo and intelligence by Colonel Hiroshi, it is unlikely that Bangkok would have launched an attack. Consequently, while unit level analysis may be useful in identifying policy trends, understanding the specifics requires a subunit exploration, that is, the neoclassical realist lens.

As Busbarat (2016) points out, a common and historic narrative for describing Siamese/Thai foreign policy strategy is the metaphor of bamboo facing the wind. The combination of flexibility and rootedness is similar in concept to strategic hedging in that both are pragmatic, survival seeking, and predicated on a proactive policy that seeks to exploit opportunities to

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<sup>87</sup> The close personal relationship between Hiroshi and Phibun paid dividends later on as Hiroshi provided advanced notice of Japan's preparations to invade the Indochina region (Flood, 1969)

its own advantage. Both Phibun governments represent a break in the strategic culture of hedging as rapidly shifting power distributions, both regionally and system-wide, presented a situation in which hedging was not viable (Reynolds, 2004). As explored earlier, hedging can only be successfully applied in environments where competition has not yet escalated into direct conflict, and neither WWII nor the early Cold War presented such opportunities for Thailand. Though a brief window of hedging appeared from January to early December 1941 while the great powers of Britain, Japan, and the US all cautiously prepared for an inevitably conflict, the window was brief and has been discussed earlier in the thesis. The Phibun government's choice in aligning with Tokyo in WWII was clear bandwagoning, choosing to align with a rising revisionist state and hoping to share the spoils of war.

A less cynical explanation, and the one used by Thailand's foreign minister at the time, behind the Phibun government's choice in aligning with Tokyo is that this was the only realistic option given that Asia lacked any other regional power that could have balanced Japan (Jayanama, 1967). Both Britain and France were contending with issues in Europe at the time and the US was reluctant to pre-emptively exercise its power. Further, at a subunit level, Thailand and Imperial Japan shared many similarities that were conducive to alignment, such as authoritarian leadership, powerful military factions, militant Buddhism, strong nationalistic sentiment, and historical grievances and a sense of superiority from their interactions with imperial powers. It is the unit level factors described, coupled with the subunit factors that produced a convergence in the strategic interests of Tokyo and Bangkok and thus facilitated the bandwagoning seen from December 1941.

The discontinuity in Thai strategic hedging does not end in 1941. Following the Allied victory in 1945/6, which caused a fundamental shift in the distribution of regional and global power, Thailand aligned strongly with the US. From 1944, even before the US had secured victory over Imperial Japan, there was the growing acknowledgement in Thailand that Japan was surely headed towards defeat. A pro-Japanese government, therefore, would certainly have had negative effects in post-war settlement negotiations with the Allied powers. In 1944 Phibun was forced to resign after losing the confidence of critical army officers following plans to move the capital to the *jungle* and build a Buddhist city in Saraburi Province (Batson, 1974). It was felt by senior officers that when the US won the war, if Phibun (a staunch Japanese supporter) remained in government, the US would demand heavy concessions from Thailand (Bečka, 2013). His replacement, Khuang Aphaiwong, was chosen to prepare the political ground for the Seri Thai faction that was supported by Washington. Aphaiwong and his Seri Thai successors, Thawi Bunyaket and Seni Pramoj, were supported by Pridi as an effort to shift Thailand away from Japan towards the Allies. Pridi, in his capacity as regent, abrogated Phibun's declarations of war on the Allies following Japan's surrender after the nuclear bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Pridi and Seni were able to successfully cultivate a favourable relationship with Washington that in turn shielded Thailand from substantial post-conflict reparations, as explored in the previous chapter.

The way in which Thailand emerged from WWII as neither one of the losers nor victors is something that cannot be understood simply at the unit level. A unit-level analysis based on realist assumptions would fail to understand why the US would engage in self-restraint as this would be antithetical to their self-interests. In contrast to Washington, London and Canberra

both expressed their wishes to treat Thailand as a defeated enemy with Australia's External Affairs Minister Herbert Vere Evatt going so far as to call for allied occupation of the kingdom (Battersby, 2000). Despite this, the US sought a restrained approach to the Thai issue that allowed Thailand to remain independent, as articulated in US foreign policy strategy by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941, while also being beholden to US strategic and commercial interests (The Atlantic Charter, 1941; Stone, 1942). The reasons for this are the subunit factors explored above, which include the defeat of Phibun's authoritarian military government and its replacement with civilian authorities, the shift from pro-Japanese to pro-Allied Powers (namely the US), and the actions by key individuals such as Pridi in abrogating the declaration of war before engaging in post-conflict negotiations.

### *Balancing With the US*

The clearest example of Bangkok being unable to hedge is in the years immediately after WWII. By the end of the war, a fundamental shift in the global distribution of power had occurred: European traditional great powers were reduced in status as the two super powers, the US and Soviet Union, competed at a global level.<sup>88</sup> Some shifts in the distribution of power occurred in the wake of WWI, such as the transformation of the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union, the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, but these did not produce the wholesale changes seen after WWII and the subsequent dominance of the world's economic and production capacities by the US (Gaddis, 2005). The emerging Cold War

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<sup>88</sup> Some argument can be made for Britain and France retaining a great power status given their continued global influence through the Francophone communities/colonies and the Commonwealth and position on the United Nations Security Council. Others, such as Italy, Japan, and Germany, however, were defeated and occupied, losing their earlier privileged positions. For more information see: Harrison, M. (1998). *The Economic of World War II: Six great powers in international comparison*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

presented new challenges to all states as the reach and scope of the two super powers far outmatched anything previous European states could achieve. The risks associated with foreign policy miscalculations, therefore, became substantially greater as both great powers and later other states developed nuclear weaponry as well as greater war-making capacities. In addition to technological changes, such as nuclear weapons and platforms that made conflict potentially deadlier than earlier, ideological challenges were a manifest part of the Cold War. Under US President Truman and the Truman Doctrine, capitulation in any contest to communism was inconceivable as it was believed that it could trigger a cascade collapse, vis-à-vis the domino theory (Jervis, 1991; Walt, 1991). It was a view echoed in Bangkok, although its adoption was also influenced by opportunism by the Phibun government, which has been earlier explored (Tangsinmunkong, 2020).

Thailand's decision to align with the US can be better understood when analysing the thinking processes that governed great power foreign policy. In contrast to Britain and France during the Colonial Era, neither Moscow nor Washington believed that a balance of power on a global scale was possible or even in either country's interest. Leaders and analysts at the time often described the competition between Moscow and Washington in existential terms, though Soviet leadership moved away from the 'inevitability of war' thesis by the 1950s (Burin, 1963; Zubok & Harrison, 1999). Consequently, each state viewed the geopolitical struggle framed through their own perspectives with the US considering communist expansion as inherently aggressive while Moscow's leadership believed their actions as largely defensive and vice-versa (Warner, 1989; Cimbala, 1997). This resulted in the creation of a security dilemma as each side escalated their military capacity in response to paranoia regarding the

intentions of the other. Ultimately, such a dilemma created the perception that every contest/conflict was existential and that even remote theatres, such as Korea, were of the utmost importance.

Despite the novelty of domino theory as part of game theory, it was not a new concept. In fact, its antecedents can be seen in the Peloponnesian War where Thucydides described the growing rigidity of Pericles' foreign policy in the Megarian Decree in 436BC as a primary factor behind the war between the great powers of Athens and Sparta (Thucydides, 1954; Gaddis, 2018). Growing rigidity in Athenian policy, just as it was 2,400 years later in the US, meant that neither great power could give ground on any issue without losing prestige, therefore compromising the integrity of the entire empire. Bangkok, in a Megarian-like dilemma was thus required to make a concrete alignment decision during the Cold War in a way that challenged Thailand's strategic cultural preference for hedging.

There are various thoughts as to why states choose to balance or bandwagon in response to shifts in power, a brief explication of which is vital. Neorealists such as Waltz (1979) hold the position that weaker states will, if possible, choose to balance against power. The logic being that weaker states can increase their chances for survival by increasing their own power and acting in coordination with similarly threatened states to aggregate their power. Conversely, defensive realists, such as Walt (1987), posit that bandwagoning is the preferred alignment option of weaker states. Walt's argument posits that weaker states, given their vulnerability, are more likely to cosy up to a revisionist than roll the dice and risk everything. Both writing during the Cold War, each school of thought looked at the geopolitical system as though the



only factors worth considering were unit-level actors, their strengths, and capacities. Neoclassical realist thought on the matter combines the more conventional aspects of realism—its focus on the distribution of power and the primacy of the unit-level—with other components, specifically subunit factors (Lobell et al., 2009). Major subunit factors may include foreign elites' perception of the geopolitical situation, strategic culture, the role of certain institutions and individuals, and domestic factional politics (Kelman, 1970).

Several unit-level and subunit factors contributed towards pushing and pulling Thailand towards alignment with the US. The driving force behind Thailand's Cold War alignment was that the US was already the dominant power in the region. Following the Allied victory in WWII, Washington was instrumental in deciding the post-war fate of Thailand and shielding it from the designs of London and Beijing that wanted to punish Thailand for its alliance with Japan. At the unit level, the US was one of only two great powers that then existed in East and Southeast Asia. Realism holds that unit level factors are the dominant factors that need to be considered when explaining foreign policy choices. From such a perspective, Thailand's alignment with the US was a foregone conclusion and ignores important nuances that may have existed within Thai society that encouraged such a stance.

Subunit factors emphasised within neoclassical realism can help consolidate and provide unique insights into Thai foreign policy that might otherwise be ignored in other realist perspectives. The Allied victory in WWII had a remarkable and calculable effect in shaping Thai domestic politics that would then inform foreign policy. Samudavanija (1982) argues that due to a combination of pressures, the RTA's influence over domestic politics significantly

waned, albeit briefly, after WWII. In 1945, only 20% of cabinet positions in the Pridi administration were held by the military (and police), a record low that was not again achieved until the civilian-led governments of the 1990s. This allowed civilian bureaucrats, many of whom had studied in the US and were socialised into and familiar with American cultural and political norms, to direct Thailand's alignment in favour of the US. Further, architects of Seri Thai, the organisation backed by the US to overthrow the pro-Japanese Thai government, were a significant part of the new civilian government and inherently favoured alignment with the US (Wiriyawit, 1997). Though this civilian-led government lived briefly, subsequent military-led governments were beholden to the foreign policy established before them.<sup>89</sup>

In the high-stakes geopolitical environment of the emerging Cold War, democracy and civilian governments were perceived as ineffectual and weak by the US in thwarting communism. This was affirmed in a telegram in 1949 by US Ambassador to China J. Leighton Stuart, who wrote that democracy was a hopeless antidote to containing communism in Southeast Asia as communist ideologies resonated among the civilian population of the region (Hewison, 2020). Washington's support of Phibun's authoritarian government is hardly surprising in the context as it was violently anti-communist and provided a favourable regime with which the US could engage. Aside from Phibun, anti-communist beliefs were widespread in the military forces, especially in senior officers. Piriyarangsan (1980) explains the reasoning for the military's antipathy towards communism was that nearly all high-level military officers were

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<sup>89</sup> There is a cosmic irony that Pridi, supported by the US for being anti-Japanese, was himself ousted in a US-approved coup by Phibun due to his leftist sympathies (Hewison, 2020). Pridi was exiled from Thailand in 1947, dying in 1983 in Paris not far from where he, Phibun and others had met in 1927 to form the Khana Ratsadon Party that overthrow the monarchy in 1932.

heavily involved in commercial pursuits. Factions within the army, such as the Soi Rajakru faction that dominated the highest levels of the Royal Thai Army, had substantial financial interests in the banking and finance sector, industry and manufacturing, and the commercial sector.<sup>90</sup> A communist takeover in Thailand would have fundamentally and negatively affected these commercial interests, and consequently, as an act of self-interest, the RTA was a staunch anti-communist segment of society. Though structural factors may have determined Thailand's alignment, the extent that such alignment was a genuine manifestation of the interests of the Thai political elite remains unclear at the unit level of analysis. By exploring the first and second image factors that contribute to state decision making, using the neoclassical realist approach, a deeper and more complex understanding of the interconnection between unit and subunit factors effecting foreign policy can be found.

Bangkok discarded strategic hedging as a foreign policy strategy during the Cold War when its utility was challenged by evolving circumstances. High-stakes tensions at the time, fuelled by ideological opposition between capitalism and communism, placed Thailand in a situation where hedging was simply unviable. In balancing with the US against communism, Thailand was involved in a series of wars, playing its part in the prevention of a communist domino effect from dominating Southeast Asia. By 1969, the Nixon Doctrine reversed the aggressively proactive US foreign policy that had typified earlier administrations and approached the perceived threat of communism with more flexibility. Conceding the US' necessity to guarantee the security of each of its partners in Asia, Nixon and Kissinger's détente with

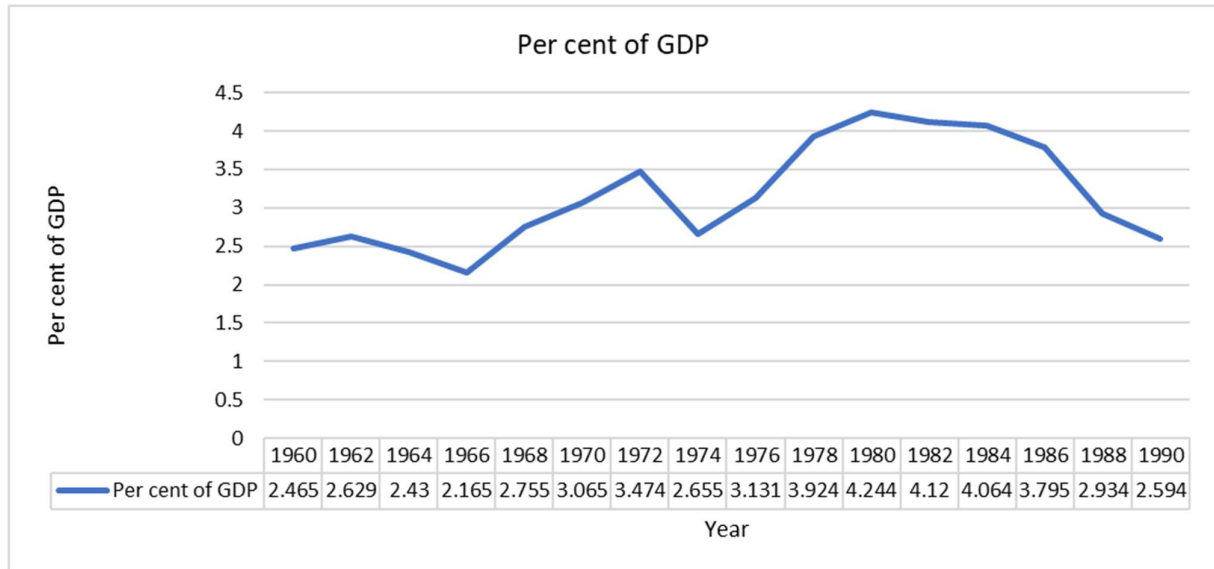
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<sup>90</sup> The intrigues of RTA factionalism are outside the scope of the thesis. For information on the Young Turks, Soi Rajakru and Sisao Deves Clique, see Samudavanija, 1982 and Hewison, 1989. For information on more recent factions, including the Queen's Tiger Guard, Buraphapayak, Wongthewan, Pawai, and Suadam, see Chambers, 2019).

communist China represented a substantially more pragmatic policy than previous administrations. The détente produced a fundamental change in Bangkok's foreign policy strategy as it could no longer assume that Washington would ensure Thailand's sovereign inviolability. This became especially concerning in 1978 when, 3 years after the fall of Saigon to North Vietnamese communist forces, Vietnam invaded neighbouring Cambodia. Balancing was no longer a viable strategy.

Bangkok, facing a revisionist Vietnam, returned to its preferred strategy of flexibility, but not hedging. While continuing to benefit from the special economic and military relationship that it had with Washington, Bangkok sought to simultaneously cultivate ties with Beijing as a counter to Vietnam. This encouraged China to open a new front against Vietnam from the north and provided Bangkok diplomatic and materiel support against Vietnam. In addition, low-commitment arrangements with SEATO (which fell through for various reasons in addition to the dissolution of the institution in 1977) and later ASEAN were made in which to internationalise the conflict and draw greater international attention to Hanoi's occupation of Cambodia. As Cambodia was Thailand's buffer to Vietnam, its occupation by Vietnamese communist forces represented a significant threat to Bangkok, as seen by military spending in Figure 6.2 and 6.3. In this situation, Bangkok's flexible foreign policy approximated what Kuik (2016) would characterise as military and political hedging. In this circumstance Bangkok internationalised the conflict by encouraging Beijing to attack north Vietnam as well as bringing the issue to SEATO and ASEAN for all the invited parties to have a greater political stake in the containing Vietnamese expansionism. In effect, Bangkok found a way of converging the strategic interests varied parties to its own economic and security benefit.

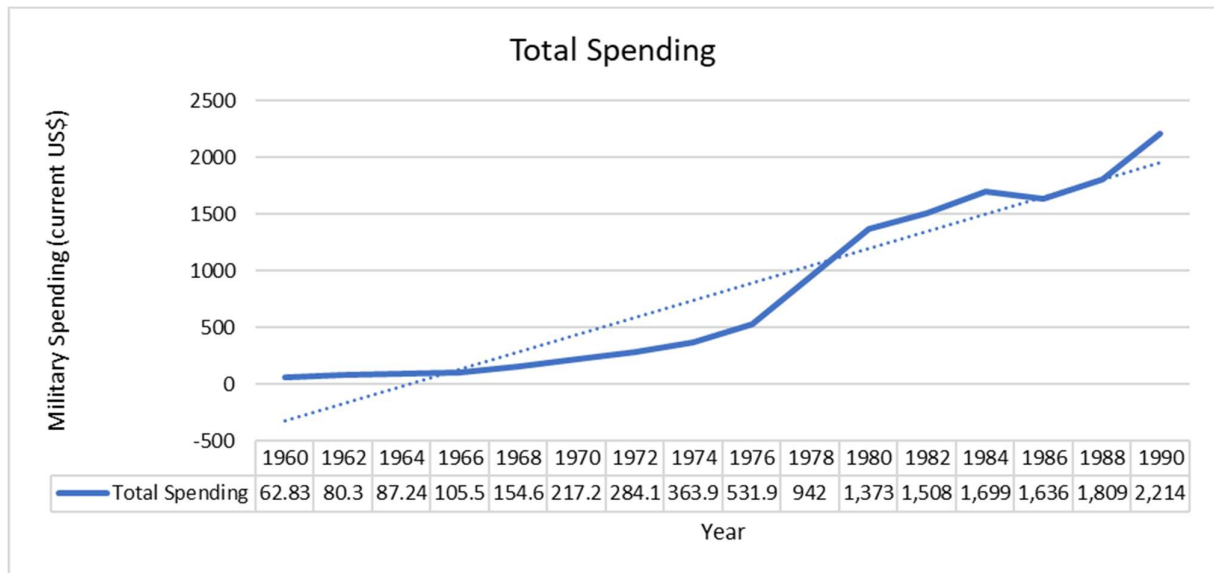
**Figure 6.2: Military spending as a percentage of GDP 1960-1990 (Thailand)**



Source: World Bank (2020). Retrieved from:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?end=1990&locations=TH&start=1960>

**Figure 6.3: Total military spending 1960-1990 in millions US\$ (Thailand)**



Source: World Bank (2020). Retrieved from:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?end=1990&locations=TH&start=1960>

The discontinuity observed in Bangkok’s decision to pivot towards a balancing foreign policy in the early Cold War is illustrative of the failures inherent to strategic hedging. As examined earlier, strategic hedging is typically applicable in situations where there are several geopolitical factors occurring simultaneously in relation to power diffusion, great power competition, and geographic proximity. In the early Cold War, none of these factors were present to any significant extent. The US was in a process of power concentration having eclipsed the traditional European great powers (except the Soviet Union) in the aftermath of WWII. Secondly, the domino theory, which functioned as a foreign policy guiding principle for Washington, served to create a self-imposed security dilemma in turn escalating conflicts into proxy wars in which the legitimacy of both competing world orders were at stake. In such an environment, strategic hedging was completely unviable and consequently discarded by Thai foreign policy elites during the early years of the Cold War.

Hedging, by definition of the word, requires the capacity to choose between two or more options and then playing the situation to an advantage so that risks are minimised while rewards are maximised. Such flexibility was a rare commodity from the late 1940s to the 1960s where the rigidity of policies formulated by the two super powers necessitated weaker states declaring their allegiances openly. However, as flexibility in geopolitics returned following the Nixon Doctrine, so did Bangkok's return to flexibility as its preferred foreign policy strategy. The temporary deviation from hedging during the early Cold War is a useful case-study demonstrating its limits and how, despite a shift in strategic behaviour to pursue a balancing strategic, the strategic cultural preference for flexibility remained intact.

Strategic hedging as a foreign policy strategy remains a useful tool for Thailand. Its efficacy since the colonial era has proven vital in helping preserve Thailand's sovereignty through various crises. Strategic hedging as seen in the case of Thailand, can provide middle powers the capacity to exploit uncertainty in the system to their own advantage while simultaneously preparing for disadvantageous eventualities. The reason why strategic hedging remains enticing to a state such as Thailand is, as a middle power, the inherent inner conflict that arises from being a middle power: the inability to substantially challenge the system while also possessing sufficient resources to stand on their own. Though small powers occasionally display strategic hedging, such as Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, they are hedging against regional powers rather than great powers (Binhuwaidin, 2019; Hamdi & Binhuwaidin, 2020). Positional strategic hedging remains the preferred hedging option for middle powers because it takes advantage of the unique capacities and flexibilities available

to middle powers that are not always accessible to great and small powers, as seen above. Whether Thailand can be considered a middle power is outside the focus of this chapter and is explored in Appendix H.

### **When to and When not to Hedge?**

The above examples have illustrated when strategic hedging has been utilised and when it has been scrapped in favour of alternatives. Positional strategic hedging, as the type being examined within the contemporary period, is often studied in relation to middle powers. The reason for such a relationship between positional strategic hedging and middle powers relates to the unique capacities and limitations inherent to middle powers. This type of hedging requires that the hedging state has the latitude in which to pursue independent foreign policy strategies and alignment preferences, which are not always a certainty for small powers. For example, Laos' small size and influence coupled with its proximity and dependence on China preclude the possibility of entertaining hedging as a viable strategy. Similarly, positional hedging is not typically viable for great powers as they usually lack security guarantors given their preeminent position within the system. For example, during the Cold War, neither the US nor the Soviet Union had a suitable third superpower with which they could conduct hedging. Consequently, much of positional strategic hedging literature has revolved around middle powers, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore Vietnam, and Thailand, (Goh, 2004, Kuik, 2008; Gindarsah, 2016). The fact that positional strategic hedging is predominately, though not exclusively, a middle power phenomenon allows an explanation of the Cold War discontinuities observed above.



During the early Cold War Thailand forewent strategic hedging and instead opted for a balancing strategy, as explored earlier. One explanation for such a strategy assumes that Thailand had not yet emerged as a middle power. Middle powers are characterised in terms of functionalism in a seeming tautology as middle powers are defined as middle powers because they act like middle powers (Chapnick, 2000; Jordaan, 2017). However, during the Cold War (and particularly the early years), the US and Soviet Union were so dominant that many states that are contemporarily considered middle powers did not have the latitude to act as such during that period. Across the Eurasian landmass, states such as South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Germany, and Poland that have such a large international presence nowadays had much smaller comparative presence. Ergo, hedging was not viable as the distribution of power favouring the super powers created a distortion in which middle powers, as we conceptualise them today, were fewer in number and lesser in influence.

It can be argued that the influence held by the US in Thailand and parts of Southeast Asia was far greater than that Britain had previously. Preponderantly powerful following its victory over Imperial Japan and in a position to determine Thailand's fate, Bangkok was pressured to align with the US. Balancing with the US provided security and economic reward, but at cost of some autonomy as Thailand was obliged to align its foreign and domestic policy with the US. This can be seen at the unit-level with Thailand agreeing to cooperate in military operations far from its borders, such as in Korea, to demonstrate its solidarity with the US, but also at the subunit level with key actors and factions supporting anti-communist positions. Such support, as earlier explored, were at times feigned, but grew to become a dominant

ideological position that is still held by an increasing minority of the old guard of the military establishment (Nanuam, 2019).

Thailand's balancing strategy in the early Cold War was clearly borne out of necessity rather than choice and reflects the shift in the distribution of power that occurred towards the end of WWII. Though the UK and France were great powers in the years before WWII, neither possessed the overwhelming dominance that the US did later. Further, so long as France and the UK maintained amicable relations in the region from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to WWII, Thailand could continue to engage in strategic hedging. In asking the question of when not to hedge, the answer is clear: it depends on several factors such as the distribution of power, the likelihood of conflict, and whether there is another great power in which the hedging state can position itself between. The circular shift from hedging-bandwagoning-balancing-hedging from the 1930s to the 1970s illustrates the utility as well as the limits of hedging and its continued preference in Bangkok's strategic culture.

Strategic hedging remains a fundamental aspect of Thailand's strategic culture, one which values pragmatism over idealism. Such cultural attitudes have been evident since the colonial period with temporal strategic hedging being applied regarding Britain and contemporaneously through positional strategic hedging with the US and China. Despite being the dominant strategic culture, hedging was discarded, when necessary, in favour of more appropriate strategies. This was evident in the discontinuities explored above. In these situations, bandwagoning and balancing behaviours became dominant and in each case were applied pragmatically and exploited for their reward potential and risk minimisation despite

not hedging. Bandwagoning with Japan encouraged Thailand to invade French Indochina with the knowledge that Tokyo would mediate in Bangkok's favour. Similarly, balancing with the US was used by the Phibun and later military governments to subsidise domestic civil and military development. The return to a low-risk geopolitical environment since the 1990s has facilitated the return of hedging as the dominant alignment strategy in Bangkok's relations with the US and China. It is a strategy that has allowed Thailand to reap the benefits that China's economic rise has brought while remaining relatively safe with the US acting as a security guarantor. Hedging is ultimately a pragmatic tool that has assured Thai independence despite the major shifts in the distribution of power Southeast Asia has seen over the past 150 years.

This chapter has demonstrated the utility and limitations of strategic hedging as it relates to Thailand's foreign policy strategy. As explored earlier, strategic hedging is comparatively more fluid than its balancing, bandwagoning, and neutrality alternatives in that hedging is not a fixed position. While the other alignment behaviours adopt explicit positions, sometimes even declaring these positions publicly, hedging is muted and intentionally ambiguous. For hedging to function, foreign policy elites within the state must perceive of the international system as accurately as possible. Failing this, faults in policy can emerge. Additionally, in Thailand's case, the boundary between domestic affairs and international affairs is increasingly blurred as is the case of the coups that have punctuated Thai domestic politics in 2006 and 2014.

Coups have had a marked effect on Thailand's hedging position, compromising the stability of the US-Thai security relationship. Despite these setbacks, the connection continues to endure and has in recent years rebuilt some of the trust issues that had existed. Parks and Zawacki (2018) point to more frequent visits by high-level dignitaries and upscaling of the Cobra Gold exercise during the Trump administration as evidence of this 'reset.' As the Biden administration is likely to place greater focus on Asia, the ties that link Thailand and the US are going to be increase in importance. Despite the prospect of greater US attention, Bangkok is unlikely to reduce its current relationship with China in any meaningful way. The benefits that Thailand receives in terms of bilateral trade are increasingly deepening within Thailand, which may ultimately test the limits of hedging as a policy option. The following chapter seeks to explore two potential paths that Thailand's relationship with the US and China may take as the geopolitical environment once again escalates.

## Chapter 7

### Thailand's Potential Foreign Policy Strategy: 2025-2040

What will the Indo-Pacific region look like in 5 years, a decade, or even longer? After the Cold War, IR scholars worked hard in trying to predict future geopolitical developments. Classic examples such as Fukuyama's *End of History* (1992/1998) and Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1996) have both been the subject of massive debate in the decades since their publication. Predictions of the global spread of Western liberal ideology or a resurgent Japan have both failed to materialize despite the sound logic behind their arguments. It is the author's opinion that those miscalculations were directly related to the scope of that which is being predicted. With that in mind, this chapter seeks to narrowly predict Thai foreign policy as it relates to the Sino-American competition over the next 2 decades. Specifically, this chapter will explore Thailand's foreign policy strategy in two potential scenarios. These scenarios, like this thesis, will make use of realist perspectives on the future relationship between China and the US and then a neoclassical realist analysis on Thailand's resulting foreign policy. This is not to say that neoclassical realist theory by itself is insufficient to explain China-US relations, but that the substantial incorporation of multiple images for analysis would exceed the structural constraints of this thesis. As a reminder, a major strength of neorealism is its billiard ball metaphor that largely facilitates an understanding (and predictive capacity) of the action of great powers. Conversely, neoclassical realism enables a granularity that incorporates first and second image factors as well as being a powerful tool to understand foreign policy. The outcomes derived from this chapter will then inform the recommendations for foreign policy strategy in the final chapter.

Fukuyama and Huntington are but some isolated famous examples of predictive analysis in the field of IR. From the realm of professional intelligence Kaplan (2008, 2010, 2012, 2015) has made a career and industry on being able to 'tell the future,' based on the geopolitical understandings articulated by theorists of the late 19th century, such as those postulated by Halford Mackinder and Julian Corbett. Friedman (2010), similarly, has attempted to forecast the entirety of the 21st century. Like Kaplan, Friedman looks to the past to predict the future and envisions the fragmentation of China and Russia during the 2020s, an event that would ultimately destabilise much of Eurasia, if not the world.<sup>91</sup>

This chapter seeks to focus on the near future, predicting up until 2040, rather than the grand predictions of those famed scholars above. Limiting the timeframe to 15-20 years allows greater analysis as well as limiting environmental variables to footnotes, for example, climate change, demographic change, economic cycles, etc. Though these factors are important, their inclusion would only serve to dilute the predictive analysis being made here. Further, to explore these scenarios in sufficient depth, a limit on the time frame must be established. Importantly though, this chapter does carry critical elements of analysis common to many of the authors mentioned above, a preference for geopolitical-based analysis as opposed to ideological basis presented by Fukuyama and Huntington earlier. Though ideology plays a significant role in foreign policy, within realist theories it is often thought of as a secondary factor subordinate to systemic variables such as anarchy and the distribution of power.

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<sup>91</sup> Given the on-going Russo-Ukrainian War (2014), such a prediction may not be that far removed from reality.

The two models explored here are predicated on the assumption that China's rise represents a major challenge to the current world order, based on the Westphalian principles agreed on by various European powers almost 4 centuries ago – specifically as it relates to informal hierarchy (Kang, 2020). Its rapid economic growth coupled with its tremendous population make China an emerging peer competitor to the US, a position that allows it to rewrite the 'rules' of the international system prescribed to it when it was in a far weaker position. Like the Soviet Union immediately after WWII, its increasing influence encourages the state to challenge the established world order and establish its own. As Soviet Leader Stalin (1945) famously noted, "Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach. It cannot be otherwise." Contemporarily, China and the US face a struggle of influence in East and Southeast Asia the result of which will likely determine outcomes far beyond the scope of this thesis as China increases its relative power.

As this chapter will explore, the neorealist position on such a shift in the distribution of power in favour of China is likely to engender balancing by the US and many other states. However, this is predicated on the assumption that balancing can even be achieved. This is because China's rise and growth potential, along with other factors make balancing against China a risky proposition for many states in East and Southeast Asia. Hence, China's rise may go unopposed as a *fait accompli*, allowing China to impose its own regional order based on Chinese hegemonic characteristics – the imposition of a hierarchical hegemony which would reject the Westphalian concepts of sovereign equality (Kang, 2020). It is these two models for the future that will be used as the basis for understanding Thailand's reactions to great power

competition: neorealist balancing and a version of the peaceful transition model. It may seem questionable to examine future geopolitical scenarios using such widely diverging assumptions, but these divergences allow neoclassical realism as a theory to be utilised to its fullest. With one scenario analysing balancing against China and the other assuming an emerging Chinese hegemony, Thailand's foreign policy strategies across a spectrum can be examined and viewed through the prism of neoclassical realism.

Neoclassical realism, along with strategic hedging, are being tested in this chapter. This is because neoclassical realism provides greater depth of analysis than is possible under neorealism, which, for the most part, ignores subunit factors. Therefore, this chapter aims to explore integrate subunit factors, such as strategic culture, culture, nationalism, and leadership among other factors, alongside unit level factors, such as the distribution of power and their influence on Thailand's foreign policy strategy. Thailand's pragmatism leads it to be extremely cautious and employ a 'central position' in international politics, preferring to retain the capacity to shift its position when needed rather than being ideologically driven. This chapter aims to incorporate an understanding of Thailand's strategic culture, its preference for pragmatism, as well as unit/subunit level analysis to predict Thailand's foreign policy from the present to 2040.

### **Structure**

The two scenarios being explored have their basis in neorealism and the peaceful transition model. The former of these theories relies heavily on the conceptualisation of great power



politics as argued by neorealist scholars, for example, Kenneth Waltz (1971, 2001, 2008), John Mearsheimer (2010, 2013, 2014), Stephen Walt (1985, 1987), and Robert Jervis (1976, 1991), among others. Though neorealism contains several branches, it is the dominant two, as distinguished by Jervis and Snyder (1991), that will constitute the basis of the theoretical foundation presented here: offensive and defensive realism. The peaceful transition model contrasts the neorealist assumptions by considering that a peaceful transition can occur if the US willingly accedes to Chinese hegemony in East Asia. Such thinking may seemingly be anathematic to most neorealists as it is expected that great power transitions are fiercely contested, yet there is historical precedent for this: Britain. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain, despite being the foremost naval power and having unofficially been the offshore balancer of Europe was increasingly under strain when it faced multiple challenges to its core strategic interests: access to North Europe by the Germans, the Mediterranean by the Italians, and its Southeast Asian possessions by the Japanese. London, inevitably, accepted the limits of its power and its place as subordinate to the US.

The rationale behind including a scenario that seemingly contradicts a main tenant of realism is that there is historical precedence behind China assuming a regional hegemonic position. The precedence, growing capacity of China to dominate its region, and the lack of hard balancing by its immediate neighbours are all factors that indicate a potential Chinese dominated regional order in the mid/long-term future. This scenario will predominately feature neoclassical thoughts on the matter utilising material developed by Jeffrey Taliaferro (2004, 2006), Randall Schweller (2001), and Robert Gilpin (1988) on power transition and hierarchical hegemony theories. Given the very real possibility that China may prove too

powerful to contain, examining a scenario in which regional dominance is willingly and relatively peacefully handed over from the US to China is a scenario worth studying.

The above scenarios infer an understanding of how neorealist and neoclassical realist scholars conceptualise great power politics occurring in broad strokes. This chapter will not be an explication of the two theories in their minutiae as that is not the scope of this thesis. Instead, the theories serve to facilitate the creation of scenarios in which Thailand's reactions can be predicted and tested to validate whether strategic hedging is a viable strategy and at what point it will fail. It has been established in earlier chapters that Thailand's foreign policy strategy is characteristically pragmatic before anything else, even to the point of being referred to as "cynically opportunistic" (Kislenko, 2002, p. 537). Approaching Thai foreign policy from the relatively two-dimensional realist framework is insufficient. Neoclassical realism, with its inclusion of subunit factors in the analysis provides the appropriate toolkit in which to view Thailand's foreign policy strategy as well as predict its future foreign policy strategy. This toolkit allows for the identification of "a broad range of unit and subunit variables that can intervene between systemic stimuli and foreign policy responses" (Ripsman, 2011, p. 8).

The structure of this chapter will follow a simple formula. First, the geopolitical setting will be established based on the theories that have been discussed earlier. Given the limited scope for expounding on these theories, only a limited exposition will be provided. Second, an exploration of Thailand's foreign policy strategy as a reaction to the geopolitical setting using neoclassical realism will be provided. Where necessary, an exploration of alternatives will be

provided to offset the risk of placing too much faith into one outcome. This will then be repeated for the second scenario, after which a discussion of the findings will be presented.

### **Scenario #1: Sino-American Rivalry/Balancing**

#### *Geopolitical Setting*

The first scenario takes as its basis neorealist arguments. China's non-stop economic rise since the 1980s, as well as its tremendous population, represents a significant threat to the US' position as the only regional hegemon in the world. Though the rise of China was not a pertinent issue in the 1990s after the collapse of the USSR, it has become among the most pressing issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for US strategy. It is possible that if China's rise continues unabated, it may eventuate into a confrontation between itself and the US being triggered by any of the multiple flashpoints that are profuse in the region. Further, as argued by Mearsheimer (2013), a regionally hegemonic China would implicitly dominate its region and, therefore, be free to 'roam' in the US' sphere of influence. Consequently, neorealist predictions for how this great power competition will move forward in the coming years involves some form of balancing and the development of a containment policy akin to that used against the USSR during the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 2014; Hughes, 2016; Akdag, 2019).

As seen in Table 7.1, there are several reasons why states may choose to balance against China. The first is the simplest: revisionist powers threaten the status quo. Asia currently accommodates four great powers (China, Russia, Japan, and India) as well as an emerging great power, Indonesia. It is argued within neorealism that states view gains in power in

relative terms and are therefore wary of when a state shifts the distribution of power significantly in its favour (Waltz, 1979). China's rapid rise represents a loss in relative power for its great power neighbours, in turn weakening their regional position. While Russia, Japan, and India would seek to increase their own sources of power through internal balancing, they may also seek to immediately offset China's rise through external balancing, that is, forming a balancing coalition. Tables 7.2 and 7.3 illustrate the rapidity in which China is closing the gap between itself and the US as well as superseding its regional great power peers. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century US military spending was over 11:1 in comparison to China and in 20 years that ratio has shrunk to 3:1. Such a relative (and absolute) increase in military spending by China is useful in illustrating the shift in the balance of power as China emerges as a peer competitor to the US. Further, while the US maintains forces across the globe, China's forces are nearly completely located within its immediate territory, meaning it can potentially bring to bear a greater regional concentration of power than the US. Though the threat that China poses to US global primacy is nascent, its capacity to challenge the US in its region is continually growing.

**Table 7.1: Arguments for balancing against China**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
<b>Balance of Power</b>	Revisionist Powers threaten the status quo, inviting balancing coalitions.
<b>Balance of Threat</b>	China's irredentist policies are among the main sources of threatening behaviour, particularly for states in the East and South China Seas. States balance against threats.
<b>Continental V Island Hegemons</b>	Continental potential hegemons are inherently dangerous as they must expand (at other states' expense) to become secure.  Island hegemons (e.g., The US & Britain) are typically benign.  The stopping power of water prevents domination of far-off continents.
<b>Latent Power</b>	China's tremendous population and growing economy are inherently worrying as these sources of power can be translated into military power.

**Table 7.2: Ratio of US military expenditure (Constant 2019 US\$)**

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
<b>US</b>	1:1	1:1	1:1	1:1	1:1
<b>China</b>	11.5:1	9.5:1	6.7:1	3.5:1	3:1

Source: SIPRI.org

**Table 7.3: Ratio of Chinese military expenditure (Constant 2019 US\$)**

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
<b>China</b>	1:1	1:1	1:1	1:1	1:1
<b>Russia</b>	1.7:1	2:1	2.6:1	2.6:1	3.7:1
<b>Japan</b>	0.9:1	1.5:1	2.7:1	4:1	5:1
<b>India</b>	1.4:1	1.9:1	2.4:1	3.4:1	3.4:1

Secondly, as China continues to modernise its military capabilities at a rate that increasingly outpaces its nearest rivals, it will inherently be perceived as increasingly threatening, especially if it displays a willingness to use such power. For example, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were several instances when China chose to eschew forceful resolutions to territorial disputes instead preferring low profile diplomatic resolutions, as was the case in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Laos.<sup>92</sup> In contrast, a powerful China may be less restrained to resolve its territorial disputes peacefully and instead use force or even just the threat of force. Seeing

<sup>92</sup> The preference for diplomatic solutions may have been partly influenced by Deng Xiaoping's maxim for foreign policy of, "tao guang yang hui," variously interpreted to mean "keep a low profile and bide your time, while also getting something accomplished."

this transition from the use of diplomacy and negotiated settlements to unilateral demands is inherently threatening and will encourage states to balance as it has in other cases.

The increased likelihood of regional balancing against China, which is arguably already ongoing, is an inevitability given its inherent threatening position. This is best demonstrated in Waltz (1987), in which he provides as an example Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt after the Suez Crisis. Nasser's Egypt was so regionally influential and ambitious that it triggered an Iraqi/Saudi balancing coalition against itself despite sharing many commonalities. The threat posed by Pan Arabism and its continued expansion brought about its own demise as factions and coalitions were formed to contain and rollback Nasser's hegemonic aspirations. Similarly, Pape (2005) argues that the soft balancing against the US by European states and China between 2003-2005 was in response to displayed threatening behaviour by Washington in unilaterally attacking Iraq. According to defensive realist logic, states do not necessarily balance against power but instead against threats with offensive realism adding that continental great powers are inherently threatening. Over the coming decades as China seeks to resolve its territorial disputes, its conduct in resolving these disputes as well as its relative power will be indicators used by foreign policy executives in determining whether balancing is necessary. As illustrated in Table 7.4, China currently has disputed territory with 10 countries and has displayed a willingness, both rhetorically and by action in many cases, to unilaterally assert its territorial claims. The threatening perception created by Chinese actions may serve to encourage balancing as states tend to balance against threatening powers.

**Table 7.4: Ongoing Chinese territorial disputes**

	<b>Territory Disputed</b>
<b>Bhutan</b>	Border demarcation issues
<b>Brunei</b>	Spratly Islands/Nansha Qundao
<b>India</b>	Arunachal Pradesh & Aksai Chin
<b>Indonesia</b>	Natuna Islands EEZ
<b>Japan</b>	Senkaku Islands/Daioyu Dao
<b>Malaysia</b>	Spratly Islands/Nansha Qundao
<b>South Korea</b>	Socotra Rock/Suyan Jiao
<b>Taiwan</b>	Taiwan and the islands of Kinmen and Matsu
<b>The Philippines</b>	Scarborough Reef/Huangyan Dao and the Spratly Islands/Nansha Dao
<b>Vietnam</b>	Paracel & Spratly Islands

Third, continental hegemons tend to be more dangerous, vis-à-vis great power competition, than their insular (read island) counterparts. According to Mearsheimer (2014), insular/island great powers are inherently relatively benign as their frontiers are typically well secured by water against external aggression. That security works both ways as insular hegemons are hindered in their ability to project power due to the stopping power of water. This explains why island great powers (of which the argument can be made that the US' oceans make it effectively an island for the purposes of great power politics) have only on rare occasions invaded continental great powers and did so to preserve the balance of power rather than



seek hegemon status for themselves.<sup>93</sup> Continental great powers, however, are not so secure. Their frontiers are the borders of other states the intentions of which are impossible to completely perceive and always in relative motion. It is, therefore, not surprising that continental great powers and aspiring hegemons seek security by dominating their continent to make the seas their only frontier. In effect, continental great powers are caught in a security dilemma that encourages them to expand in *self-defense* (Mearsheimer, 2014). China is the process of being caught in a similar predicament, as its declared intention of using the Nine-Dash Line to demarcate its border may engender perceived insecurities necessitating further expansion. In this case China's security is doubly vulnerable as a continental power whose maritime access is controlled by other powers.

Beijing's arguments about the need to push and consolidate its influence within the Nine-Dash Line exemplify why continental powers tend to be of greater danger than their island counterparts. It also goes far in explaining recent Chinese activity in the South China Sea, such as incursions into the territories of other states. Further, the growing ethnic Chinese population in East Russia may eventually translate into substantial security concerns as Beijing may argue for the need to protect its people in similar arguments Moscow has made about ethnic Russians in East Europe, specifically Eastern Ukraine and Crimea (Alexeeva, 2008; Reuters, 2014; Liik, 2021). Because continental great powers are troubled by insecure frontiers, they are perceived as greater threats than insular great powers and thus invite balancing coalitions to restrain them.

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<sup>93</sup> Imperial Japan's expansionist behaviour in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century represents an aberration in Mearsheimer's claim, explained by the fact that Japan's lack of natural resources compelled it to expand.

**Table 7.5: GDP per capita of China and US in US\$ from 2000-2018**

	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2018</b>
<b>US</b>	36,334	44,114	48,466	56,803	62,794
<b>China</b>	959	1,753	4,550	8,033	9,770

Source: World Bank (2020)

Lastly, China's latent power is a cause of concern for other states. Latent power refers to a state's potential power that for whatever reason is not immediately directed towards military output. The elements of latent power include, but are not limited to, population, manufacturing output, energy consumption, GDP, and GDP per capita. In many of these areas, China is a global/regional leading state with a population dwarfing nearly all its neighbours apart from India. Its immense population allows it to potentially mobilise forces larger than the total population of Japan. For example, using mobilization figures from the US in WWII of 9.4% (Gropman, 1996), China would be able to mobilise 126.2 million people, roughly equal to Japan's entire population of 125.8 million (World Bank, 2021).<sup>94</sup> The latent power that China possesses is a factor that states must consider in their alignment options. Beyond population, 28.7% of global manufacturing output is performed by China, which is substantially larger than the US' 16.8% (United Nations, 2020).

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<sup>94</sup> Such numbers are inherently disconnected from reality as the logistics of outfitting, training, and mobilising such a vast number is, for the most part, impossible. The potential mobilisation numbers are used to illustrate China's manpower potential.

In the event of a large-scale regional or global conflict, China would be able to, albeit slowly, shift its existing manufacturing output onto a war footing. This could enable mass production of materiel, provided it maintained access to raw material resources. Further, China is expected to become a high-income country by 2023 as its GDP improves, as demonstrated in Table 7.5. China's wealth is an important element to consider because as it continues to expand, so will its ability to acquire, construct, and research military technology and platforms that until now have been either beyond its scope or capacity to indigenously construct or acquire. Therefore, China's latent power represents a significant area of interest for other states in gauging whether to balance.

### ***What Will Balancing Mean, Regionally?***

The most likely scenario involving balancing would centre on a handful of multilateral institutions, supported by bilateral arrangements, with the main elements comprising the US, Japan, and India.<sup>95</sup> This would form the primary basis of balancing with important secondary efforts being contributed by less powerful states, such as South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, among others. It can be expected that leadership of such efforts would fall to Washington, while specific regional aspects would fall to relevant states. Since WWII, the US has maintained a significantly large military presence in Asia and with little expectation that it will leave the region in the immediate future. However, the US is a Western superpower and lacks any territory near China, instead relying on its Asian partners and its own islands within the Pacific for basing personnel (Department

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<sup>95</sup> The strength of such balancing may be undermined as India is also a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation transitioning from an observer to full member in 2017 (Ahmed, Ahmed, & Bhatnagar, 2019).

of Defense, n.d.). The importance of these relationships to US strategy will mean that new bases as well as upgrades and expansions are likely to form a portion of Washington's balancing strategy. Examples of these expansions are evidently undergoing at the time of writing in Australia with the Morrison Government announcing a \$747M upgrade to military facilities in Australia's northern regions (Prime Minister of Australia, 2021). It could also be expected that a Biden administration with its foreign relations under Secretary of State Antony Blinken would redouble its efforts in courting East and Southeast Asian states as these will be the principle states needed to get on-side for effective balancing to occur. A strategy favouring bilateral and multilateral actions is likely to be the preferred US strategy, allowing Washington to offset the cost of balancing as needed.

In much the same ways that Britain contained Revolutionary/Napoleonic France through coalitions and the US contained the USSR partly through NATO, multilateral security is fundamental to any US strategy at balancing against China. As evident in Table 7.6, Washington already leads or participates in several security institutions centred in or around Asia with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD II) and AUKUS being especially relevant here. QUAD II comprises many of the major powers mentioned in the paragraph above, comprising the US, India, Japan, and though not a great power, Australia. The institution's membership includes four of the world's 12 largest economies as well as the second and third most populous states aimed in concert to balance China (The White House, 2021). AUKUS, on the other hand, combines the leading states of the Anglosphere, and being focused on military security, complementing Five Eyes' intelligence-focused alliance. As AUKUS will assist Australia in acquiring nuclear powered submarines, Canberra and Washington will be able to

better secure their maritime interests against China. It bears mentioning that as London seeks greater independence from the EU, it will likely continue to develop its strategic priorities in ways that parallel its Anglophone counterparts. As Heisbourg (2021) writes regarding the future of European-Chinese relations, “the US and its maritime linguistic kin would ‘do China’ while the continental Europeans handle Russia” (p. 54).

**Table 7.6: Multilateral security institutions in Asia involving the US**

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Countries</b>	<b>Arrangement</b>
<b>1941</b>	Five Eyes	Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, US	Intelligence Sharing
<b>1951</b>	ANZUS	Australia, New Zealand, US	Military Alliance
<b>1971</b>	Five Powers Defence	Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, UK, Singapore	Military Alliance
<b>2007/2017</b>	The Quadrilateral Dialogue	Australia, India, Japan, US	Security Forum
<b>2021</b>	AUKUS	Australia, UK, US	Security Pact

Macroscopically, the US would likely seek to contain China through multilateral security institutions. As seen in Table 7.6, the US is already involved in several multilateral security institutions, of which the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD II) and AUKUS are especially relevant. The recent formation of these two significant security institutions is worth noting as they occurred at a time when China’s rise is being increasingly viewed as problematic. Though

neither the QUAD II and AUKUS have their official agenda as being the containment of China, the consensus of scholars and government has been that these institutions are targeted against China (Basu, 2020; Grossman, 2020; Smith, 2021). These institutions demonstrate the staying power of the US in the region while also indicating an emerging encirclement of China on most of its flanks apart from the Russian northern flank.

The EU, or more accurately elements within the EU, will also have a significant role in encouraging normative behaviour from Beijing. As they have a stake in maintaining the established rules-based order, it is in the interests of the EU to align with the US in encouraging Beijing to be a responsible global power. France and Germany are notable within Europe for having deployed vessels within China's claimed territorial waters asserting that it is their legal right (Siebt, 2021; Siebold, 2021). However, barring France and its extensive global maritime interests, most of the EU member states would likely encourage Chinese responsible global citizenship through economic and institutional means (Heisbourg, 2021). As the US focuses greater attention to contain Beijing, Eastern European states, such as the Baltic states, Poland, Romania, and even Germany, will still view Russia as their greatest strategic concern (especially since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine). Therefore, elements of the EU that have the capacity and willingness to confront Beijing may do so, but the EU's greatest power comes from its norm building capacities stemming from its tremendous trading power and norms promotion, not its military.

Within the next decade or two, there are widely shared concerns surrounding whether China's rise will constitute a threat towards US primacy in global affairs and its inherent

consequences (Snelder, 2014; Goldstein, 2015; Paul, et al., 2021; Sun, 2021). Realists, particularly offensive realists, predict that China's rise is inevitably threatening, not so much due to any inherent desire for war on the part of Beijing's elite decision makers, but as a consequence of a system that produces uncertainty and fear (Mearsheimer, 2010). Ultimately, barring an unforeseen crisis, Washington will likely engage in aggressive balancing to prevent China from achieving regional hegemon status and thereby positioning itself as a true peer competitor to the US. Already Washington has sought to establish powerful external balancing partners, comprising some of the richest, most advanced, and populous states. In contrast to the 1950s when Washington's balancing of partners against the USSR was comprised from states that had nearly been totally ruined by WWII and thereby required US protection, Washington's strategic partners now comprise powerful nuclear and near-nuclear states. The difficulty for Washington will lie in Southeast Asia where a reluctance to form multilateral security networks diminishes the possibility of the collective resolve seen in Europe's attitudes towards the former USSR. Existing regional institutions, such as ASEAN, lack the unity that comes from a shared threat as ASEAN is deeply divided internally on whether China constitutes a threat. Thailand, as historically one of the leading states in Southeast Asia, is particularly worth mentioning as it is surrounded by states aligned towards China and has a significant ethnic Chinese population. The following section seeks to examine Thailand's projected foreign policy strategy given the projections provided in this section.

### *Thailand*

Pragmatism is the defining characteristic of Bangkok's foreign policy strategy for the past 2 centuries. Its utilisation of strategic hedging is emblematic of such pragmatic approaches to

foreign policy, which are likely to be maintained moving forward. Therefore, within the next 2 decades as the competition between Beijing and Washington grows in scope and depth, Bangkok will most likely try to adopt a pragmatic strategy seeking to extract the benefits that such great power competition may generate while consciously avoiding high-risk entanglements. While this may be an ideal situation for Bangkok, the reality is that as 'battle lines' are drawn up Thailand and many other states will be compelled to choose sides. Consequently, while Bangkok may prefer to remain outside of conflicts it has no interest in fighting,<sup>96</sup> it may be forced to make an alignment decision provided that the great power competition between the US and China intensifies. The following section illustrates a Thai balancing alignment in support of Washington, centred on neorealist understandings regarding the distribution of power consolidated by an in-depth analysis performed through neoclassical realism. To reiterate, the rationale for using these two forms of realism in tandem is the explanatory power of neorealism in understanding and predicting great power movement akin to scientific principles. Conversely, neoclassical realism is utilised regarding Thailand to predict its foreign policy, which is the primary purpose of neoclassical realism, as well as incorporate the nuances that have been gleaned throughout this thesis.

Though there may be an argument that neoclassical realism may be "neorealism plus classical realism", it is also much more. Its power stems from its capacity to explain deviations from expected outcomes. This thesis has focused on Thailand, a state that has consistently deviated expectations in such ways that it shares the prestige of never having been colonised with only

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<sup>96</sup> A key argument by Gregory Raymond (2019) points out that Thailand has a history of allying and employing its military forces as part of status seeking and patronage arrangements.



2 other countries. It is this reason that neoclassical realism is used to understand Bangkok's reaction to the great billiard balls of China and the US interacting with one another.

The first element of importance is Thailand's immediate geopolitical region, which, running from west to east, is occupied by states aligned with China: Myanmar,<sup>97</sup> Laos, and Cambodia. This presents Thailand an urgent issue as these states are, to varying degrees, supportive of Beijing's foreign policy strategy and would also be or have already demonstrated an amiableness to hosting Chinese military bases. The 2019 secret agreement between Phnom Penh and Beijing allowing the latter to use Cambodian bases is one example of China's growing military activity within Thailand's periphery. The agreement has transformed the Ream Naval Base in Sihanoukville into a base for the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy. This base may be of strategic concern to Bangkok because the Ream Naval Base is located within the Gulf of Thailand and potentially allows China to project maritime power across Southeast Asia much easier than before. The move by Phnom Penh is part of a larger bandwagoning strategy by Cambodia that Leng (2019) argues has its beginnings in 1953. It has since heightened due to Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's perception that Chinese investment is critical to his own political survival.

From a realist perspective, the use of the Ream Naval Base by the PLAN, despite overt friendliness between Bangkok and Beijing, is a concerning imposition for Thailand. This is because it provides China a military foothold on Thailand's periphery as well as the ability to

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<sup>97</sup> Worth noting that Myanmar is less aligned to China than the other states here.

compromise Thailand's shipping lanes. Whether viewed as a balance of power or balance of threat, growing Chinese influence among Thailand's neighbours will likely induce balancing as the inherent uncertainty of intentions means that balancing is the optimum strategy. Thailand has a large and relatively affluent population with strong bureaucratic governance, meaning that Bangkok has the wherewithal to balance rather than bandwagon. Within the foreseeable future, China's growing power and regional influence will more than likely encourage balancing, though, after that period it may be more difficult to predict with certainty.

The second factor is that China's rise, and therefore its use of water resources, poses an existential threat to Thailand's Northeast Isan region, an area inhabited by 22 million people. The Mekong River that flows from the Chinese controlled Tibetan Plateaus down through Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam is a critical waterway. It is an important source of irrigation water, fishing, navigation, and hydroelectric energy for around 65 million people (Mekong River Commission, n.d.). However, China's use of the waterway has recently intensified with the burden being particularly felt by the lower riparian states that receive inadequate or heavily contaminated water (Berg, et al., 2007; Li & Bush, 2015). Despite Chinese assurances that it would communicate with the lower riparian states its water usage, Beijing's aloofness in the matter has meant that this has not always been the case (The Government Public Relations Department [Thailand], 2020). The use of water security as a weapon is certainly a possibility, and something Thailand has been actively trying to prevent through multilateral diplomacy with affected states. The centrality of this issue for the sustainability of Thailand's entire northeast presents an existential problem that would encourage Thailand to balance against China.

Bandwagoning with China is unlikely to ensure Thai water security because it would place Thailand's needs as subordinate to China. Conversely, balancing may allow Thailand to negotiate with China on nominally equal terms. The issue with Chinese water usage of the Lancang-Mekong River is not explicitly the quantity of water used, but the varied usage and contamination of the water supply from developments and hydroelectricity usage. For example, Yao et al. (2021) notes that development of mineral resources near the upper Lancang (the Chinese name for Mekong) may be partially responsible for the high levels of heavy metal pollution in farmland soil further downstream. Yao et al. note that findings of water contamination in the Lancang-Mekong for elements such as Cadmium levels are 60 times above Chinese national standards. Further, a European Parliament study (Soutullo, 2019) notes that China intends to have 19 dams along the Lancang by 2030. Assuming under the best circumstances that Beijing effectively communicated its intentions and actions relating to the Lancang, its growing use of the river will have significant deleterious impacts on states such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. With 22 million Thai people dependent on the Mekong for their livelihood, Chinese mismanagement of the water upstream represents a substantial near-future problem for Bangkok. Therefore, in a balance against threat perspective, it is expected that Thailand would seek to balance.

The importance of the Mekong issue is one that is fundamental to Thailand's strategic concerns. As argued by Po and Primiano (2021, p. 324), the lower Mekong has historically represented Thailand's traditional sphere of influence, with the exclusion of Vietnam. Despite friendly relations that exist between Beijing and Bangkok on other areas of concern, issues surrounding the Mekong have been one strategic area where Thailand has consistently

resisted Chinese influence. The formation of the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy in 2003, discussed in previous chapters, represented Thailand's interests in establishing itself as a regional leader in standing up to Beijing's activities relating to the Mekong (Phanarangsarn, 2009). In addition to this, there are a host of other multilateral institutions, such as the Mekong River Commission, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, Mekong-Japan Cooperation, US-Mekong Partnership (formerly the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI)), the Greater Mekong sub-regional initiative, Mekong-Korea Cooperation, and Friends of the Mekong. These organisations involve a wide array of states beyond the countries situated along the Mekong, including India, South Korea, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the EU, and the US.

China's own Lancang-Mekong Commission (LMC) was established in 2016 in response to the perceived threat that international institutions were having to Chinese influence in the region (Biba, 2018). In 2020 the US Trump administration responded by elevating the LMI into the US-Mekong Partnership, enabling the whole situation to be viewed as an exercise of institutional balancing in which great powers vie for influence by promoting their own institutions. Thailand has been amicable to a growing US presence through the US-Mekong Partnership because it serves to strengthen Bangkok's own influence, contesting the rise of China's influence through the LMC. The use of institutions to balance against China is likely one strategy Bangkok will embrace as balancing on water security would not necessarily antagonise Beijing. This would allow Bangkok to continue hedging even while balancing in certain areas.

A third factor contributing towards Thailand's likely decision to balance against China stems from its strategic inertia. Since the late 1940s Thailand has, for the most part, primarily relied on Washington to provide its geopolitical security. This relationship saw Thailand support the US in various conflicts, such as the Korean War (1950-1953), the Vietnam War (1955-1975), the Laotian Civil War (1959-1975), Persian Gulf War (1990-1991), and the Iraq War (2000-2011) in addition to several other Western conflicts, such as Operation Enduring Freedom off the Horn of Africa and UN peacekeeping operations. Such contributions have enhanced the Thai-US relationship into a formal alliance from 1954 with the formation of SEATO, which was reaffirmed in the 1962 Thanat-Rusk Communique and built on in 2003 when Thailand was designated as a Major non-NATO Ally (Executive Office of the President, 2004). Further, the continuation of the Cobra Gold exercises, even at extreme low points in the relationship indicate that there is a strategic inertia that exists between the two states that is likely to continue. As the US sharpens its focus on East Asia, extricating itself from non-strategic conflicts, such as its 20-year war in Afghanistan, Thailand may once again become a critical ally to US regional concerns. Inertia aside, the relationship has seen Bangkok refuse certain calls for support such as in 2012 when NASA requested access to U-Tapao airport for scientific purposes (Pongphisoot, 2016). It is worth noting that the US has historically been especially negligent in maintaining a diplomatic presence in Southeast Asia, and if this continues, the strategic inertia that has existed since the 1950s is in danger of eroding. Therefore, while balancing is likely to be the response of Bangkok in response to growing Chinese concerns, it cannot be taken for granted and requires a revamping of the Thai-US partnership that has waned since 2014. Further recommendations towards enhancing the cooperation between Thailand and the US will be discussed in the following concluding chapter.

Lastly, Thailand may choose to join a balancing coalition against China because, fundamentally, Thailand's pragmatic strategic culture induces it to seek all the advantages a great power competition would generate. This is historically most evident in the way that Thai Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkram (Phibun) exploited Washington's fears of the potential spread of communism during the early Cold War (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2009). In any upcoming confrontation between China and the US, Thailand occupies an important (though secondary) area of competition. Similar to the concept of the Bamboo Curtain during the Cold War, modern Thailand represents a bottleneck to Chinese penetration further south (Kaplan, 2008). This will allow Bangkok to extract concessions and aid from the US (and its affluent regional partners, such as Japan) much as it did 70 years ago. Further, at a subunit level there are critical reasons why Bangkok may choose to balance. Since 1932 when the absolute monarchy was abolished, Thailand has predominately been administered by various military-led governments. These governments have frequently utilised a 'fear of the other' to consolidate their power or remove perceived ineffectual civilian governments. For example, in 1947 Phibun was able to use fears of communism and the timely death of King Ananda to stage a coup replacing Prime Minister Pridi with the leader of the opposition, Khuang Aphaiwong, who in turn resigned the next year to make way for the return of Phibun (Suwannathat-Pian, 1996). Similarly, Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn utilised the fear of communism in 1971 to do a self-coup, eliminating rivals under the guise of suppression the communist infiltration (The Washington Post, 1971). A more recent example relates to the populist administrations of Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra, deposed in 2005 and 2014, respectively, for their alleged corruption and the continuing influence of Thaksin during his sister's administration (Prasirtsuk, 2015). As China increasingly makes its presence notable

within Southeast Asia, the utilisation of China as a bogeyman for selfish political purposes may reoccur within Thai politics.<sup>98</sup>

### *Conflicting Factors*

Though it has been argued above that Thailand would most likely balance, it is also worth exploring neutrality as an alignment option. This is because if China's rise throughout the 2020s continues unabated, it may become too powerful to contain. Morgenthau (1970) argued that China, upon reaching levels of modernity comparable to the West would be the most powerful state in the world, and by extension containing China would be the greatest challenge US foreign policy would ever face. China is projected to surpass the US GDP by 2028, and as its economic power continues to develop, so do the tools in which China can pursue its foreign policy (Centre for Economics and Business Research, 2021).<sup>99</sup> This may provide Beijing the capacity and confidence in which to unilaterally pursue its regional goals and ultimately push the US out of mainland East and Southeast Asia. Should the US hesitate in firmly establishing a balancing strategy prior to the 2030s, it may be too late to contain China. Some, such as Hugh White (2021), have made the argument that the US' deterrence strategy in the form of internal balancing has come too late to be effective and that the military gap between China and the US is shrinking at a concerning rate.

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<sup>98</sup> More recent scholarly research by Han (2022) points to the contestation of Sinicization in Thai society and the role Thailand plays as part of the Chinese diaspora.

<sup>99</sup> It is worth bearing in mind that projections about Chinese economic growth surpassing the US has frequently been miscalculated. For more information see: Hu, A. (2001). The Chinese Economy in Prospect, in "China, The United States, and the Global Economy", (eds. Chen, S., & Wolf, C.), Santa Monica, Rand Corporation

The efficacy of external balancing through alliances and security forums, such as AUKUS and QUAD, remain questionable. It is entirely possible that China's run at hegemony may be a *fait accompli* and that the US' attempts at balancing are at best trying to slow down the inevitable. Therefore, the time in which the US can achieve its goals of preventing Chinese regional hegemony (if it is even possible to prevent) through balancing is running out and will most certainly be substantially tougher after China's economy surpasses the US. States in East and Southeast Asia are therefore placed in the difficult position, knowing that balancing early may lead to repercussions later. States that are already engaged in strategic hedging, such as Thailand, may see the declining relative regional power of the US as incentive to either declare neutrality or perhaps even align with China. However, the idea of whether China will attain regional hegemony is not a certainty. Geopolitical considerations being paramount, other factors may prevent China from becoming a regional hegemon, such as domestic political stability, demographic issues, and environmental concerns, among others.

Another conflicting factor regarding whether Thailand would choose to balance, typically out of the scope of structural realism's focus on unit-level factors, is demography and ethnography. Thailand has a sizeable and influential Chinese Thai population with estimates of it comprising 11% of the total population (Liu et al., 2019).<sup>100</sup> Much of this population is in Bangkok and, therefore, exerts a non-insignificant influence over Thailand's commerce. Many of Thailand's largest companies and conglomerates are owned by Chinese Thai families, such as CP Group, Central Group, Red Bull, ThaiBeV, King Power Group, and Boon Rawd Brewery

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<sup>100</sup> The actual percentage of Thai-Chinese is debated with various sources providing ranges between 10-15% of the total Thai population. See: World Population Review, (2021). Thailand Population 2021 (live), retrieved from: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/thailand-population>.



(Wechsler, 2020). Further, Thailand hosts dozens of Confucius Institutes and schools that disseminate Chinese culture and language (Han, 2022). All these factors combined may have a significant impact upon the decision by Bangkok not to pursue a balancing strategy. Alienation of this sizeable community risks the antagonism of over 10% of Thailand's Thai Chinese population, many of whom have familial and business relationships back in China (Minorityrights.org, n.d.).<sup>101</sup> However, Bangkok has demonstrated a willingness to antagonise China in the past as was the case during the Cold War. Strategic concerns will ultimately override economic and domestic ones, but the latter are still influential and may shape the way in which balancing takes place warranting their mention in this section.

### **Scenario #2: Chinese Hegemony—A *Fait Accompli***

This section seeks to explore a concept articulated by classical realist scholar Morgenthau (1962, 1965, 1968, 1970). In his discourse surrounding China's rise, Morgenthau notes that unless the US is willing to commit its full resources to containing China, it is an impossible task. Morgenthau, writing in 1968 offers this advice on US policy, "If America does not want to set itself goals which cannot be attained with the means it is willing to employ, it must learn to accommodate itself to the political and cultural predominance of China on the Asian mainland" (p. 31). Further, in that same article Morgenthau notes that even as undeveloped as China was in the 1960s its vast territory, population, and raw resources made it the dominant power in its region. Since writing those words in the 1960s, China has gone on to

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<sup>101</sup> Exact data is hard to ascertain. Various reports place the percentage of Thai-Chinese between 10-15% without further specification. See: Academy for Cultural Diplomacy, (n.d.). Chinese Diaspora, retrieved from: <https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php?chinese-diaspora>. Luangthongkum, T. (2007). The Positions of Non-Thai Languages in Thailand, in Language, Nation and Development (eds. Guan, L., & Suryadinata, L.), Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

become the driving economic force in Asia with the largest GDP, armed forces, and a population that is almost four times that of the US. In many ways, China is a far more capable and potentially fearsome competitor to US global influence and the world order than the USSR was at its height. This leads to the obvious question of whether containing China is even possible, especially when Washington has historically failed to give the issue the centrality it deserves.

This section examines the concept of Chinese regional hegemony as a *fait accompli* that the US lacks either the capacity or wherewithal to prevent. The precise rationale for the US' decision to not contest China's emerging hegemony is not central to the scenario presented and will only be given a passing overview. This section aims to understand Bangkok's foreign policy strategy in a regional environment where China is assumed to be on its way to becoming preponderant, and that balancing is an unavailable or unaffordable strategy to concerned states.

### *Geopolitical Setting*

Between the time of writing and 2040, it is unlikely that China will possess the capabilities, nor the confidence in said capabilities, to eject the US from Asia. That being said, the beginnings of a Chinese regional order can be derived from its actions now, and how that might translate into Beijing's foreign policy in the near future. Mearsheimer (2014) characterises a hegemon quite simplistically as a "state that is so powerful that it dominates all other states in the system" (p. 40). Gilpin (1988) goes further by stating that hegemons

only come to existence through hegemonic wars that fundamentally transform the geopolitical system and the way in which it is ordered. Though Gilpin's assessment is increasingly contested as nuclear weapons and system interconnectedness make the concept of hegemonic wars remote, conflict and competition remain the underlying basis for hegemon transition (Novo, 2016; Goh, 2019; Ikenberry & Nexon, 2019).

Mearsheimer offers little in his definition beyond articulating that regional hegemons actively seek to prevent other regional hegemons from arising, offering the example of the US' actions in preventing four hegemonic challengers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Wilhemine Germany, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union. In the first three, US military force was directly responsible for defeating hegemonic contenders, while the demise of the Soviet Union was far more complicated. The generally accepted reason underlining the lack of a hegemonic war in the previous example is that the threat of mutually assured destruction meant the escalation of even limited conflict between Moscow and Washington could reach nuclear levels (Wallander, 2013; Rovner, 2017). With limited possibility of winning a nuclear war at acceptable costs, the contest between Washington and Moscow was primarily a contest of influence, ideology, and economics. This section operates under the premise that the same constraints that prevented a hegemonic war from taking place between 1947 and 1991 function similarly in the new Sino-American great power competition.

China's bid for regional hegemony has, since 2012, been rhetorically guided by the need for a "new type of great power relations" (*xinxing daguo guanxi*) as stated by both then Vice-President Xi Jinping and Premier Hu Jintao (Xiao, 2013p. 1). The fundamental premise behind

these new relations is the need to discard the zero-sum mentality that has typically been used to understand great power politics and avoid the '*Thucydides Trap*' of hegemonic war (Allison, 2013; Zhang, 2019). Hao (2015) contends, however, that this framework lacks definition, has been continually revised, and despite being rhetorically employed, frequently has only been transitorily applicable in describing Sino-American relations. Though the conventional idea that major shifts in the distribution of power necessitate military conflict has, so far, not bore fruit, conflict and confrontation in other areas has certainly been a characteristic of Sino-American relations in the late 2010s and the early 2020s. However, it is because of this lack of military conflict that levels of securitisation have not occurred in East and Southeast Asia as occurred in Europe during the Cold War.

Asian states have, generally, been reluctant to strongly balance against China, indicating a duality in that either Asian states perceive hard balancing as a fruitless endeavour or that China's emerging hegemony may follow a similar path to US hegemony in exercising restraint (Faisal & Chairil, 2016). Additionally, China's efforts in providing regional and global goods such as the BRI and AIIB indicate that China's bid for regional hegemony will seek to confront the US through influence and institutions and not necessarily through military conflict (Ly, 2021). That is not to say that military considerations will be absent, the above scenario clearly explicates China's efforts in expanding its military influence within Southeast Asia, but that military conflict will be an element that complements and is complemented by wider competition.

The first major signal that China's run at regional hegemon may be a *fait accompli* is the absence of any East Asian or Southeast Asian grand alliances aimed at containing China. Stromseth (2019) argues that Southeast Asian states mostly perceive themselves as lacking the alignment flexibility required to balance against China. This stems from two factors, the first being the geopolitical environment in which China is clearly preponderant. The second factor is political elite decisions, especially those of authoritarian leaders in the region, who are more likely to align *with* China rather than in opposition. This argument posits that leaders of developing states, especially in authoritarian ones, are encouraged in their decisions towards those that promote regime stability. Panduprasert (2017) expands on this by acknowledging that authoritarian leaders have three paths of achieving legitimacy: by their economic performance, their capacity to provide security, or a combination of both.<sup>102</sup> Resultantly, authoritarian leaders, especially in Asia and Southeast Asia may be especially mindful of antagonising China through balancing because the economic consequences to balancing may undermine their legitimacy back home. Though China is far from achieving hegemonic status, its relative economic power does allow it to influence foreign policy alignments of neighbours to be, if not overtly favourable, at least benign towards China.<sup>103</sup>

Southeast Asian leaders have had difficulty in finding ways that preserve their US ties while simultaneously staying in China's good graces.<sup>104</sup> Examples of this include Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, whose early foreign policy was characterised by close alignment towards China, moving away from the US. In the process, Duterte threatened the stability of the US-

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<sup>102</sup> This may apply to non-authoritarian leaders as well.

<sup>103</sup> Examples of this include the earlier mentioned 'Banana War' between the Philippines and China in 2012, as well as boycotts in China of Vietnamese, Philippine, and Japanese.

<sup>104</sup> Cases concerning Thailand have already been discussed in Chapter Five.

Philippine alliance when he declared, “Do not treat us like a doormat because you’ll be sorry for it. I will not speak with you. I can always go to China” (Wong, 2020, p. 1). Similarly, in 2021 Phnom Penh refused access to US personnel to the Ream Naval Base (Thul, 2021). Despite the cooperation between Phnom Penh and Beijing being an open secret, closing the base to US personnel was indicative of Cambodia’s willingness to antagonise Washington to preserve its relationship with Beijing. Further, in 2020 Indonesia rejected a US request to use Indonesian facilities for refuelling their P-8 *Poseidon* maritime surveillance aircraft (Allard, 2020). Allard, quoting the former Indonesian Ambassador to the US Dino Patti Djalal speaking of the Sino-American competition and its implications for Indonesia, stated, “Of course we maintain our independence, but there is deeper economic engagement and China is now the most impactful country in the world for Indonesia” (p. 2). This response illustrates the perception by Jakarta that antagonising China would be detrimental to their economic prospects. The dilemma posed by China’s rise and the accompanying Sino-American competition means that states, even relatively powerful ones such as Indonesia, are cautious about balancing. Hedging or bandwagoning currently appears to be the preferred alignment option for many states within Southeast Asia and is indicative of the perception that China’s rise is non-threatening and, further, cannot be avoided.

Another factor worth considering in the Chinese pursuit of hegemony is the way it has mimicked, in some instances, institutional building during the emergence of US hegemony post-WWI and WWII. As neoclassical realist scholar Randall Schweller (1997) points out, there is contention among realist perspectives regarding the impact of institutions as an explanatory factor behind foreign policy. Neorealists such as Mearsheimer (1994/95) regard

institutions as a secondary factor that ultimately is subordinate to more important factors, for example, the distribution of power. In contrast, classical and neoclassical realists view institutions as fundamentally important to hegemons as a means of cementing influence over the long term. Particularly, as Schweller (2001) contends in his review of Ikenberry's *After Victory* (2001/2019), even liberal scholars must acknowledge that the goal of institution building is inherently Machiavellian because the hegemon seeks to be perceived as benevolent, while using institutions to create and consolidate norms of behaviour and restrain the use of power in the hegemon's favour. China's institution building has been the subject of intense scrutiny over the past decade as scholars debate the implications behind such behaviours (Hesengerth, 2010; Chin & Stubbs, 2011; Asgar, 2019; Li & Taube, 2019; Stephen, 2021). In addition to the much-debated BRI and AIIB, Beijing also founded the New Development Bank in 2014 and in 2020 Chinese had nationals leading four of the UN's 15 specialised agencies (Fung & Lam, 2020). Further, Fung and Lam (2021) argue that China has grown increasingly comfortable asserting its veto powers within the UN, noting that between 1971-2010 China issued only five vetoes, but since 2010 has vetoed 10 resolutions.

Combining China's emerging influence within existing international institutions such as the UN, coupled with its own agenda of building regional institutions and architecture, illustrates a growing desire on the part of Beijing to rewrite the rules and norms of a world order it had little part in creating. The fact that these actions may be perceived as undermining or rivalling US influence is further indicative of growing confidence in Beijing that, at least in certain arenas, it can challenge US primacy. Lindsey Ford (2020), before becoming the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia wrote, "Beijing is working to

slowly establish the institutional infrastructure necessary to expand its strategic influence and alter the regional security order” (p. 16). Further, Ford argues that China’s expanding strategic influence will be detrimental to US interests as its aim is to cultivate a security environment that is exclusively Asian, in effect to be the hegemon.

It can be assumed that Beijing, as a revisionist great power, is in the process of seeking to establish itself as the regional hegemon. Mainstream branches of realism would expect to see greater efforts at balancing than what is currently being displayed. Much of the balancing is being conducted by offshore powers, such as Japan, Australia, and the US. Indian balancing, whilst important, is arguably less effective than Japanese, Australian, or US balancing given its limited presence in areas critical to Chinese security. Further, despite historic mistrust between Beijing and Moscow, which could have led to a schism between the two great powers, US policies aimed at isolating Russia and China have brought them closer together (Paikin, 2020). Thus, the future of China’s rise is a difficult one to predict. However, certain traits have been identified and may be critical in understanding the opportunities they present. Firstly, lacking substantive balancing in mainland Southeast and East Asia, China will be unhindered in extending its influence across the mainland and its immediate maritime neighbours. Secondly, Beijing is likely to actively increase its efforts aimed at regional leadership either through pre-existing Western-created institutions, expanding the influence of its own institutions, or founding new institutions. Lastly, while Chinese Premier Xi Jinping’s ‘new type of great power relations’ may be long over, the necessity to avoid unnecessary military conflict is likely to remain an important objective in Chinese foreign policy (Xiao, 2013). A hegemonic China is unlikely to appear before 2040 for the reasons explored above,



but progress may be made towards that goal, and that will have tremendous implications for the region.

### *Thailand*

Assuming that a hegemonic China is, at best, decades away, Thailand is under little immediate pressure to shift its foreign policy strategy in a fundamental way. Historically, Thailand has shied away from committing to a single course of action unless it was perceived by Bangkok that alternatives were lacking. Consequently, between the time of writing and 2040 where the scope of this thesis ends, Bangkok is unlikely to overly bandwagon in Beijing's favour. That being said, there are certain nuances and guiding principles behind Thailand's pragmatic strategic culture that are worth exploring. In addition to China's rise as a variable that needs to be considered in determining Bangkok's foreign policy is Washington's relationship with Bangkok. Thus, this section seeks to elucidate Bangkok's preferred path forward as China's regional dominance increases, potentially becoming hegemonic, and at the same time there is a relative decrease in US influence in Asia and Thailand specifically. Overall, strategic hedging will remain Bangkok's foreign policy strategy of choice between now and 2040 as Bangkok is inherently pragmatic, but it is worth considering both as a thought experiment as well as being able to provide policy recommendation that will be central to the concluding thoughts of this thesis.

If current trends continue, there is a real potential that Bangkok will align in favour of Beijing partly due to Washington's decision to preference liberal ideological thinking in constructing

its Asia foreign policy strategy. As explored in the previous chapter, there has been a significant and growing rift between Washington and Bangkok since 2006 but increasingly so since 2014 when the Prayuth-led military faction seized control of government. The most overt example of US disapproval over the coup was the scaling down of the Cobra Gold exercise, but also further acts, such as cutting military aid, military visits, and urging tourists to cancel their trips, also transpired. The US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Daniel Russel, added to the souring of relations when he voiced his disdain for the then new military government at a public talk hosted by Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. The schism between Washington and Bangkok at this point was so serious that commentators speculated that it might even spell the end of the US-Thai alliance that had existed for over 60 years at that time (Jory, 2015; Storey, 2015; Walton, 2015; Pongsudhirak, 2016). The 2014 reaction under Obama was significantly stronger than under his predecessor Bush Jr. in 2006 and was, in part, guided by a liberal foreign policy that prioritised democracy than pragmatic considerations of influence. Patrick Jory (2015) argued that these reactions created a sense of betrayal among members of Thailand's political elite and the pro-monarchy Yellow Shirt mass movement. This enabled China to fill the void, and small-scale military exercises between Thailand and China commenced in 2015. While both sides have reiterated their commitment to sustaining relations during the 2021 7<sup>th</sup> U.S.-Thailand Strategic Dialogue, the Biden Administration has yet to send an ambassador to Thailand nearly a year after taking office from the Trump Administration. Thus, a combination of ideologically driven foreign policy behaviours coupled with oversights stemming from historical US inattention of Southeast Asia, explored in the chapter before, may contribute to a sense of abandonment or at least neglect that could push Bangkok and Beijing towards each other.

Neoclassical realists Schweller and Priess (1997, p. 13) argue that subordinate states accept to be ruled over by a hegemon when they tangibly benefit and/or the local political elites can extract material benefits from the new regional geopolitical order. The presence or absence of these elements is critical to measuring whether a hegemony's rule is considered legitimate and thus is likely to be unopposed. Benefits to the state and benefits to the local political elites are not exclusive, and as earlier mentioned, political elites may perceive that their longevity in office is directly tied to national progress. One way that such benefits may be conferred towards subordinate states in the modern age is through foreign direct investment. As evident in Table 7.6 and 7.7, China has increased its FDI to Thailand by nearly 180 times between 2005 and 2020, surpassing both the US and Japan, which historically have been the primary sources of FDI. Further, Beijing and Tokyo are in competition to gain influence in Thailand's emerging infrastructure projects as Bangkok seeks to modernise its rail-system to better connect the kingdom's far-flung provinces as well as better integrate Thailand into the regional economy. These projects are anticipated to create roughly 157,000 jobs, improve the land value along the newly established rail lines, and assist in transitioning Thailand's agricultural worker base to the service industry (Amornvivat, et al., 2015).<sup>105</sup> Bangkok may ultimately choose to endorse Beijing's regional aspirations, as large amounts of foreign investment may foster regime stability, something that balancing would jeopardise.

Given the geopolitical competition that exists between Washington and Beijing, a competition that can only be expected to intensify between now and 2040, Beijing is likely to adopt

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<sup>105</sup> A major study by the Institute of Developing Economies Japan External Trade Organization (IDE-JETRO, 2018) contends that the benefits of these railway projects, specifically the Eastern Economic Corridor rail project, may be overestimated with their simulations predicting a modest 0.1% increase to GDP by 2035.

wedging strategies to undermine the unity of a balancing coalition. Crawford (2011) notes that great powers do not sit idly as rivals amass forces and coalitions to contain them. Instead, they actively seek to “prevent, breakup, or weaken a threatening or blocking alliance at an acceptable cost” (Crawford, 2011, p. 156). At the time of writing, Thailand is aligned with the US, having chosen to uphold the alliances and obligations that exist between each other. From Beijing’s perspective, Thailand represents a potential threat that could be neutered by a combination of inducements in the form of threats and pledges and rewards and punishments (p. 159). As mentioned earlier, the Sino-Thai relationship is one that is historic, deep, familial, and yet simultaneously contains security issues. A Beijing that seeks to produce dealignment in Bangkok from the US may utilise its tremendous influence in areas that are critical to Thailand’s security. For example, Beijing might seek to use its possession over the upper riparian parts of the Mekong to press Bangkok into decoupling with Washington. This might function in conjunction with other threats, for example, military assistance to Thailand’s regional rivals, such as Myanmar. However, as Crawford argues, threats alone are unlikely to produce such an effect and might lead to stronger balancing. In that case, Beijing could add inducements in its strategy, for example, preferential trade agreements, security guarantees, territory, or other material benefits. The goal of such a foreign policy strategy would not be to turn Bangkok into a staunch ally, but merely to pry Thailand away from the US and thereby weaken the overall unity of a US containment strategy. Such a strategy is certainly possible as China’s coercive toolkit develops providing Beijing a wider and more effective capacity to influence the alignment strategies of its closest neighbours. Wedging strategies are difficult to enact and have the potential to cause significant blowback. As such, Beijing must determine whether its manipulative efforts will be effective or not, otherwise it could risk strengthening the unity of the balancers. Thailand has illustrated in recent years, particularly since 2014, a

willingness to engage increasingly deeper with China and thus represents a prime candidate for wedging. Further, the reliability of the US-Thai alliance is somewhat questionable, meaning that Bangkok may choose dealignment as preferable course of action.

Thailand has a history of pragmatism. The previous chapters have illustrated that pragmatism and its manifestation of that in strategic hedging have been dominant in Thailand's foreign policy strategy since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. With China continuing to increase its regional dominance, potentially becoming a regional hegemon, Bangkok is likely to shift its foreign policy in response. As of the time of writing, China can be thought of as the leading great power in its region. Its influence is only restrained by the world's sole extant superpower, the US. For Thailand, this unbalanced bipolar regional order is conducive to strategic hedging as competition creates opportunities for reward maximisation. Nevertheless, security plays a fundamental role in state policy, and as such, states that seek to maximise their rewards may choose to hedge or bandwagon depending on a variety of factors. Hence, the situation at the time of writing favours Thai strategic hedging in which it pursues economic rewards through relationships with competing powers while secure in the assumption that its alliance with the only hegemon deters potential aggressors. Thailand may choose to engage China more on common security issues and downgrade the cooperation between itself and the US. Though some aspects of this have occurred previously, such as the downgrading of the Cobra Gold Exercises, those changes were primarily political in nature than strategic. Between the time of writing and 2040, it may be that China's emerging benign hegemony induces neighbours such as Thailand to downgrade their alignments with offshore powers like the US. However, anything further is unlikely to occur within the timeframe set here as Beijing has been

cautious not to appear as an imminent threat to prevent hard balancing among its neighbours.

**Table 7.7: Foreign direct investment net inflow Thailand by country in millions US\$ from 2005-2020**

	<b>2005</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>Growth %</b>
<b>US</b>	3685.13	2129.41	4636.62	5667.53	54%
<b>China</b>	45.84	768.64	6988.48	8290.05	17,984%
<b>Japan</b>	5070.44	6602.07	10512.00	6215.30	23%

Source: Bank of Thailand (2021) from: <https://www.bot.or.th/>

The last factor to be mentioned here is how China’s regional dominance may affect Thailand’s strategic culture. Since the 1930s power within Thailand has alternated between military and civilian leadership. Democratic structures in Thailand are incipient with civilian governments being prone to coups originating from the army and supported by the monarchy. However, since the end of the Cold War, Washington has placed a greater emphasis on the need for democracy to take root in Thailand with both Presidents Bush and Obama condemning coups in Thailand during their time in office and in the latter case taking strong steps towards downgrading relations. Even President Trump, famously transactional in his worldview, maintained his predecessor’s position on the matter that a normalisation of relations could only be facilitated by a return to democracy (Associated Press, 2017). These actions have been viewed within Thailand by politicians and Yellow-Shirt sympathisers as interference in

domestic politics, especially in famous cases such as the earlier mentioned statements by Daniel Russell at Chulalongkorn University. Such arguments, to some extent, are truthful given that elements from the democratic subculture that exists in Thailand have typically received political and popular Western support as in the case of Thaksin in 2005/6 and the Milk Tea Alliance in 2020 (Chia, 2020; The Economist, 2021).<sup>106</sup>

China, in contrast, has proclaimed a non-interference policy, preferring to view such matters as Thailand's own domestic concerns. This may be indicative of China's general transactional and pragmatic approach to foreign policy, potentially indicating what a Chinese-led regional order may look like. For instance, it is possible that if China were to gain regional hegemony, the regional order would be directed by an authoritarian one-party state with little interest in promoting norms of liberalism and democracy. Subsequently, it can be expected that within Thailand, the monarchy-military subculture would thrive in such an environment, being able to exercise greater repressive tools to consolidate their domestic power. Over time, in much the same way that the US' hegemony promoted its preferred norms of human rights and democracy, despite how far short it fell, China may do the same by preferring to promote authoritarian regimes that may be perceived as easier to work with. Friedberg (2011,

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<sup>106</sup> For more information about dyadic support between Taiwan-Hong Kong and Thailand about the Milk Tea Alliance, see: Sopolnawitch, P. (2021). Digital Solidarity Movement of Non-state Actors Against Authoritarianism: Milk Tea Alliance of Hong Kong and Thailand, *Journal of Legal, Ethical and Regulatory Issues, Special Issue 1(24)*, 1-7.

It is also worth noting that US Senators, led by Bob Menendez (D-N.J.) introduced a bill in support of Thailand's pro-democracy movement in late 2020. See: Menendez, B. (2020). Menendez, Durbin, Colleagues Introduce Senate Resolution in Support of Thailand's Pro-Democracy Movement, retrieved from: <https://www.menendez.senate.gov/newsroom/press/menendez-durbin-colleagues-introduce-senate-resolution-in-support-of-thailands-pro-democracy-movement>

p. 24) cynically summarises one of the outcomes of China’s regional influence as being “to make the world safe for authoritarianism.”

**Table 7.8: Thailand’s potential foreign policy strategy in response to Chinese regional hierarchy**

<b>State of Hypothetical Chinese Regional Hegemony</b>	<b>Thailand’s Foreign Policy Strategy</b>
<b>Nascent</b>	Strategic hedging. Maximum economic reward from Chinese trade/investment, minimum risk with strong US-Thai security.
<b>Emerging</b>	Strategic hedging. Maximum economic reward from Chinese trade/investment. Relationship with US becomes increasingly ambiguous, but formally intact.
<b>Evident</b>	Bangkok chooses to pragmatically declare neutrality. Maintains some security relationship with the US, though informal.
<b>Established</b>	Bangkok assumes a position in China’s regional order. Breaks all security relationships with the US.

Continuing with the argument over institutions and China’s use of them, legitimacy is a substantial concern. Schweller and Priess (1997) note that world orders that are perceived as legitimate do not get challenged by dissatisfied states. Changes may be sought within the system, but the system itself, if seen as legitimate, is largely upheld. This can help to explain



China, who as noted by Yan (2019), is driven towards hegemony partially to reassert its perceived historically correct position at the centre of its own regional order. In effect, Beijing does not perceive the current system as entirely legitimate. This explains why Beijing has played a growing role in existing institutions as well as developing its own, thereby revising the established global order. For example, China played a considerable role in the expansion of the Chiang Mai Initiative, shifting the bilateral nature of currency swaps into a multilateral affair, now dubbed the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralised (Yonghui, 2014). Similarly, China was a key supporter behind the Asia Bond Market Initiative in 2002, as well as the driving force behind China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and founding the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative. Chin and Stubbs (2011) argue that the critical juncture of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 helped facilitate China's perception of the system as illegitimate and inadequate to Asia's needs. In conjunction with the 1997 AFC, which provided the opportunity for China to play a long desired leading role in institution building, along with an revisionist agenda aimed at restoring its perceived rightful place at the centre of Asia, Beijing has sought to reshape its regional order to its suiting.

For Bangkok, balancing against China is at times a hard argument to make, especially politically within Thailand. Chinese institutions are uninterested in democratic change and have displayed a willingness to assume regional financial leadership, a role that the US and Japan have been unwilling or unable to play. Assuming that authoritarian leaders often tie their domestic legitimacy towards their capacity to bring stability and/or prosperity, it would be especially challenging for Thailand's current government to argue that balancing, despite its economic costs, is the optimum strategy. In effect, all things continuing as they are, it

would be domestically politically disadvantageous for Thailand's political elite to bite the hand that feeds them, so to speak.

### **Analysis and Evaluation**

The two scenarios above explore vastly different outcomes based on hypothetical expectations of great power behaviour. In the first, where it is argued that a US-led balancing coalition would seek to contain China, the expectation is that Thailand would most likely align in favour of Washington. Fundamentally, the presumed staying power of the US being sufficient to galvanise a powerful coalition comprising three great powers, itself, Japan, and India, along with a suite of other partners would induce Thai to balance. In contrast, the second scenario presumed a controversial premise that China is an unstoppable potential hegemon. Though this is unlikely to manifest itself in empire or hierarchical hegemony in the time frame provided, the preponderance of Beijing's influence institutionally, economically, and militarily may be a situation that demands acquiescence. For Thailand, this means pragmatically waiting and sensing when the most appropriate time is to shift foreign policy strategies. Though system-level factors will remain the dominating influence in state behaviour, the role of unit-level factors is still important. Hence, this chapter has focused on going beyond traditionally neorealist analyses and incorporating unit-level analysis to add complexity and nuance. Despite these diverging outcomes, they are unified by a preference towards pragmatism, which in both cases maintains strategic hedging as a foreign policy strategy for the near future.

In crafting the boundaries for the theories explored in this chapter, much has been deliberately omitted. For example, scholars, such as Friedman (2010), have written that China's unity is fundamentally fragile and likely to disintegrate like the USSR. Others have argued that economic stagnation may trigger domestic crises as the unwritten social contract between the CCP and its citizens is endangered (Chen, 2010; Shullman, 2019; Leggeri, 2020). Others yet argue that as China continues to develop, the desire for democracy by society will force Beijing to adjust its foreign policy strategy and find a strategy to harmoniously cooperate with Washington (Ball, 2020). Though many of these arguments have strong theoretical underpinnings, they have been omitted from consideration. The reason is that they are relevant to Thailand only tangentially and produce outcomes that are beyond the scope of this thesis. In contrast, scenarios based on the distribution of power, balancing, and hegemony have their root cause within the realm of realism from which neoclassical realism can be used to shine a light on Thailand more specifically. This is also the reason why other factors such as climate change and demographic changes have been omitted from consideration. Their influence on geopolitics is likely to be tremendous. However, to include such factors would be irrelevant to the discussion at hand and expand the scope of the thesis beyond its original intent. The decision to employ a neoclassical realist lens to foreign policy predictions implicitly shaped the scenarios that can be imagined in this chapter.

To be prepared for what the future may bring, discussions and examinations of potential scenarios and the system level and unit level factors that influence foreign policy strategy are critical. This examination can then be used to formulate recommendations to FPEs for the likeliest outcomes in certain situations and how best to manage them. As Ripsman (2011)

notes, one of the factors that differentiates neoclassical realism from neorealism is the understanding that leaders and FPEs play an important, albeit subordinate, role in crafting a state's foreign policy strategy. The consequence of this is that leaders are people who in turn rely on others for recommendations and information. This chapter sought to illuminate those in power, providing a detailed analysis of how Thailand is most likely to respond to two substantially different concepts of great power competition. The following chapter seeks to synthesise the lessons learned throughout this thesis in ways that are applicable to the foreign policy strategies of Bangkok, Beijing, and Washington.

## Chapter 8

### Conclusion

Thai contemporary history has frequently had to contend with issues surrounding competition between great powers. Its ability to avoid the fate of those around it has been the result of deft geopolitical and diplomatic manoeuvring by Bangkok's political elite. In seeking to better comprehend the way Bangkok's foreign policy strategy facilitated survival, this thesis has adopted a neoclassical realist lens to guide analysis. Examining nearly 2 centuries of Thai foreign policy history through this lens reveals a clear pattern of behaviour far more complicated than what neorealism might assume. Rather than simply bandwagoning, balancing, or remaining neutral, Bangkok repeatedly adopted a mixed strategy. It is a strategy that embraces a variety of, often contradictory, elements from each of these approaches to maximise its potential rewards while simultaneously minimising risk. In essence, Thailand has engaged in a form of hedging steeped in realism, being pragmatic, cynical, and ambiguous.

### Findings/Analysis

#### *Historical Strategic Hedging*

The examples presented throughout this thesis illustrate that strategic hedging is Bangkok's preferred foreign policy strategy. The presence of this eclectic style of foreign policy that defies clear balancing or bandwagoning paradigms can be considered part of Thai strategic culture. Middle powers, as Thailand can arguably be described as, inherently lack the capacity

to challenge great powers on their own and are innately vulnerable to their predations for the most part. Therefore, middle powers are usually compelled to accept their geopolitical position and the dominance of whatever power is preponderant at that time. But acceptance need not be abasement, and this is where strategic hedging comes to the fore. States may seek to undermine the dominant power through indirect means, for example, through dominance denial, indirect balancing, and economic pragmatism.

An example of the components of hedging are apparent when Britain's regional dominance and leadership in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was accepted by political elites in Bangkok (Raymond, 2019). While cultivating warm and direct ties with London, Bangkok simultaneously worked to undermine British dominance by engaging other Western powers, such as Russia, the US, and others (Snow, 2007). These multilateral ties were important in diluting to some extent British influence, preventing annexation by France in 1893, and positioning Thailand as a buffer between Britain and France in 1896, thereby preventing its conquest or domination by either party (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 1896; Jeshurun, 1970; Raymond, 2019). Strategic hedging played a critical role in manufacturing a foreign policy strategy that was largely resisted the territorial ambitions of Paris.<sup>107</sup> Though Thailand lost roughly 50% of its territory between 1863 and 1907 due to European predations (Phillips, 2019; Raymond, 2019; Charoenvattananukul, 2020), strategic hedging enabled Thailand to remain independently sovereign at a time and region where no other neighbouring states were able to claim such a status.

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<sup>107</sup> A case can be made that territories ceded by Bangkok to European powers were only nominally under Bangkok's control. Their cession may have, arguably, provided the early Thai state the homogeneity that enabled nationalism to take root as strongly as it did.

In WW2, Thailand again displayed a flexible foreign policy through strategic hedging. Between 1939 to 1941 Phibun's administration maintained deliberate ambiguity as part of efforts to manage the deteriorating security conditions in Southeast Asia. This was demonstrated in Thai relations with Japan from 1939 to 1941, in which Bangkok accepted Tokyo's dominance in the region and undertook limited bandwagoning (Reynolds, 2004). At the same time, however, Thailand acted to undermine Japanese dominance by attacking French Indochina as a pre-emptive landgrab before Tokyo could do the same (Charoenvattananukul, 2020). In subsequent Japanese-led mediations, Thailand received a third of the land it had conquered, an outcome that suggested that further attempts to thread the needle of Japanese hegemonic ambition in a manner that would produce positive outcomes for Bangkok was fraught. As a result, throughout 1941 Thailand was in consultations with the Allied powers in London and Washington assessing their potential for resisting the anticipated Japanese invasion (Aldrich, 1988; Charoenvattananukul, 2020). Only when Japan finally invaded on the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 1941 did Bangkok make the shift from hedging to bandwagoning by agreeing to ally with Japan and share the spoils of war. Hedging, therefore, was discarded in the face of the new geopolitical realities in East Asia as there was no other power with which to hedge against Tokyo. Towards the end of WW2 when Japan was finally pushed back towards the main islands by the Allies, Bangkok cast off its partnership with Tokyo to embrace the US. As a middle power, Bangkok expertly navigated the greatest conflict the world had ever experienced with relatively minor consequences and almost reparations<sup>108</sup>.

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<sup>108</sup> Reparations included ceding territories Thailand acquired at Britain's expense during WWII including the Shan States in Burma and four of the Unfederated Malay States. Additionally, Thailand was required to supply 1.5 million tonnes of rice to British Malaya. Thailand was also forced to cede the territories it acquired from

The foreign policy flexibility that has been a defining characteristic of Thai strategy was again used to great effect in the 1970s and 1980s when confronted by aggressive Vietnamese expansion. Utilising a newfound partnership with Beijing, its position in ASEAN, and internationalising the conflict through the UN, Thailand was able to limit Vietnamese aggression without necessitating war. And more recently, hedging has again been utilised in the early phases of the emerging US-China geostrategic competition (Goh, 2016; Starting, 2019). Given that Thai strategic culture favours flexible and pragmatic foreign policy, as evidenced over 2 centuries, it should be no surprise that hedging again is making a comeback.

Ultimately, this thesis has demonstrated hedging as a consistent aspect of Thailand's foreign policy strategy for at least 2 centuries. Further, by process tracing Thai foreign policy over such a prolonged period, the limits of hedging have been exposed. This is particularly important as much of the literature on hedging emphasises contemporary examples and, consequently, lacks sufficient case studies exploring the hard limits of hedging. From these findings it can be expected that hedging, and therefore strategic ambiguity, are likely to persist as Bangkok's preferred foreign policy strategy in the near future. While it may be in alliance with Washington, Bangkok has incrementally distanced itself from the clear strategic alignment that characterised much of its Cold War foreign policy. This has important

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France's Indochinese territories. For further information see: United Nations, (n.d.). Treaty Series, retrieved from: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/Cumulative%20Index/UNTS%20Volume%20No%201-100/cumindex.chrono.en.pdf>. Also see: Tarling, N., (1978). Rice and Reconciliations: The Anglo-Thai Peace Negotiations of 1945. *The Siam Society*, 3, 59-111.



implications for decision makers and scholars who need to account for the tepid commitment Bangkok would likely have in the ongoing US-China great power competition.

### *The Failures/Limits of Strategic Hedging*

Despite the virtues extolled about strategic hedging, it should not be viewed as a panacea for middle powers seeking to navigate their dangerous geopolitical environments. Such an alignment position remains inherently risky, as it demands a near constant and accurate understanding of the hedging state's geopolitical environment to maintain an overtly ambiguous posture that is at odds with balancing and bandwagoning. As the anarchic nature of international relations limits the accuracy of state perceptions, failures can and do arise in strategic hedging. Further, when misperceptions do occur, the consequences can be significant. In 1893 Bangkok miscalculated its geopolitical environment and its own strength when it denied entry of two French naval vessels, triggering a conflict that ended in the French capture of Bangkok. Paris demanded significant territorial and financial concessions in the aftermath, whereas London and Moscow refused to intervene. Though London acted to prevent the outright annexation of Siam by France, the defeat still left an indelible imprint that scholar Charoenvattananukul (2020) likens to a national trauma. A miscalculation by Bangkok on the presumed solidarity of British support emboldened the Thai political elite to take risks that almost consumed the entire nascent nation state.

From the example above, some clear limits to the applicability of strategic hedging can be identified. The first is that effective hedging demands a near-complete assessment of the

hedging state's rival's intentions. Such a demand is near impossible to satisfy as the anarchic system conceptualised by realists is characterised by the inability to every fully know the intentions of others (Taliaferro, 2000; Deudney, 2007). Hedging deals with this issue through risk mitigation strategies that are often accompanied by deliberate displays of alignment ambiguity. The danger with such a strategy is that it allows for fewer security guarantees than what balancing or bandwagoning may provide. This limitation is inherent to strategic hedging and is clear in 1893 when Bangkok wrongly assumed the willingness of French commanders to take the offensive. Bangkok further miscalculated the interventionist protections London and Moscow would be willing to provide against French aggression. As a result, Siam lost sizeable territories in what constitutes modern day Laos and Cambodia (Tuck, 1995). The trade-off in sacrificing security guarantees for policy autonomy is a clear limitation to hedging, necessitating that hedging states remain more attuned of their geopolitical environment than would otherwise be necessary under balancing or bandwagoning.

Secondly, hedging is most successful in times of security risks, as opposed to specific security threats (Lim & Cooper, 2015; Lim & Mukherjee, 2019; Haacke, 2019). In circumstances where external vulnerability is relatively low, hedging is more likely to be employed and more likely to be successful. This explains why hedging was doomed to fail in the situation above. In contrast to contemporary states, the use of armed conflict was a daily reality for colonial powers. As seen in Chapter 3, European diplomacy was nearly always underscored by the implicit threat of violence, from Brooke's 1851 failed mission to Bowring's 1855 arrival in Bangkok on a modern armed steamer (Bruce, 1969; Bowring, 2011). Similarly, colonial France frequently manufactured incidents from which it could utilise its superior military capacity to

compel Bangkok into acquiescence (Tuck, 1995). This was further complicated by French colonists who often acted with their own agenda, frequently at odds with Paris. In effect, Siam had clear and evident security threats on its doorstep, not security risks, and as such demonstrated the failures and limitations of hedging as a policy strategy.

Finally, the shape of strategic hedging is neither static nor a permanent foreign policy strategy fixture, and must, by its very nature, be in a constant state of protean flux. Much like the Thai narrative of foreign policy being like 'bamboo bending with the wind', a state that truly adopts hedging as its strategy must be prepared to be flexible—to be unwedded to longstanding alliances for sentimental or moralistic purposes, to be willing to maintain parallel and often-contradictory relationships and policies, and to be comfortable with inconsistency and paradox. This involves accepting foreign regional dominance and power when the situation requires and denying it at other times, and, counterintuitively, sometimes both. Importantly, it also means understanding when to abandon hedging in favour of conventional alignment strategies. For example, from 1946 to the 1970s Thailand was firmly aligned with the US to balance against the spread of communism. When the US drew down from the region following the Nixon Doctrine and the end of the Vietnam war, hedging reemerged as a favoured tool to facilitate Chinese cooperation in containing Vietnamese aggression. Even though hedging has shown to be the preferred alignment strategy of Bangkok, these case studies illustrate that there are limits to its utility and there are times in which it must be abandoned. In effect, one might say that hedging states need to hedge on hedging. This is to be expected though given that the strategy is, at its core, a temporary solution to the fog of international relations.

To some extent, Thailand's occasionally mismanaged application of hedging opens up questions on the adoption of hedging in the face of threat and risk. As the per the work of Haacke (2019), states elect to adopt strategic hedging at times of geopolitical risk, but not overt threats. This makes sense, as states are inherently security seeking. Unlike individuals that may choose to roll the dice and see what happens, states are rational and gravitate towards certainty over uncertainty. Yet, with that important concept in mind, it could be argued that during the Cold War, faced with the issue of Communism which was not significantly considered a significant threat by Thai political elites, one would expect to see Thailand hedge, rather than bandwagon. Or, during the colonial era, Siam should have consistently engaged in conventional alignment strategies rather than an ambiguous policy that saw Siam lose half its territory and end with French cannons pointed at the royal residence.

These questions are important, as they serve to test the theory and understand the strengths and weaknesses of strategic hedging, and that foreign policy decisions are rarely made in a 2-dimensional world. Siam's choice to hedge against Britain during the colonial era was encouraged by a multiplicity of factors, none of which alone can be identified as having primacy. These included systemic factors such as the European-led bipolar regional order that developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, European colonialism which led to various empires and states, such as Russia, populating the geopolitical neighbourhood, as well as first and second image factors such as the transformation of Siamese bureaucracy and polity, the gradual consolidation of power in the hands of the monarch, and at times the power of individuals and small groups to exercise significant influence on foreign policy. Further, intervening

variables such as the limited capacity of the monarch to make drastic societal change, the shifting realities of transitioning from a Mandala-inspired ordering principle to a Westphalian one. It is only in retrospect that scholars can identify the mistake to adopt strategic hedging in a circumstance where bandwagoning or balancing may have proved more effective.

In the Cold War, different pressures existed that influenced Thailand's decision to balance with the US. First, the power asymmetry between the US and Thailand was immediately apparent and used expertly by Thai political elites for personal and political gain. The military-dominated political landscape of Thailand during the early Cold War made it particularly susceptible to manipulation from the US in the form of rewards. The result was that Thailand's security needs were met by the US security umbrella, and the state (and political elites running the state) was also rewarded by access to US markets, weapons, and aid. Therefore, there were little incentivising factors to push Thailand towards hedging, because, if the reader recalls, hedging exists to allow a state to achieve security and reward maximisation simultaneously. If these needs are met by a single, more powerful state, there is no need to hedge.

### **Limitations of the study**

A limitation in this study is its narrow focus, guided by neoclassical realism and the desire to provide depth. Essentially, neoclassical realism's explanatory power derives from its incorporation of domestic (first and second image) and systemic (third image) factors (Taliaferro et al., 2009). The depth of detail and inclusion of disparate factors realistically limits the capacity of neoclassical realism from making the sweeping generalisations for which its classical and neorealist forefathers are so renowned. In appreciating the complexity of Thai

foreign policy history and avoiding being overly reductionist, a tension is exposed. This inherent tension entails a trade-off that the author has deliberately made: a pursuit of explainability at the expense of generalisability.

To expound on the earlier conflict between explainability and generalisability, a brief examination is warranted. Neorealism posits that in the face of existential threats, states have the option to emulate the advantages of the (potential) enemy, innovate new solutions, or persist in their current practices (Waltz, 1979; Taliaferro, 2006; Coetzee, 2019). Emulation, being easier and safer than the other two, is frequently employed and explains the proliferation of a wide range of things from the fundamental concept of the nation state from the Westphalian System, the widespread adoption of aerial combat capabilities, and the perceived need among nuclear powers to possess second-strike capabilities. What neorealism fails to explain is the extent that emulation may occur or the time frame in which it occurs. Neoclassical realism steps in to fill this gap with its metaphorical microscope, but its use comes at the expense of breadth. Hence, a limitation in this thesis is an inability to claim generalisations.

This dilemma about depth or breadth can be seen in case of Thailand and Japan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Each faced similar threats in the form of Western colonisation and imperialism. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan was an emerging great power and would later signal its newfound power in its victory in the 1904 Russo-Japanese War. Conversely, Siam was still a weak power and relatively helpless in comparison to its new British and French neighbours. Both Bangkok and Tokyo engaged in emulation as neorealism would assume. So, why is it that

Tokyo became a great power, whereas Siam remained relatively weak? Neoclassical realism provides an explanation in the form of the extractive capacities of each state. Japan was able to mobilise resources and people in ways that far outperformed Siam due to differences at the level of leaders, institutions, culture and so on. Neorealism provides an expected path for states to take, but neoclassical realism explains why some walk along the path while others run. Attempting such a comparison in isolated case studies such as above is useful but become increasingly unwieldy the further the comparison is stretched. Consequently, such a comparative study is not attempted in this thesis and thus limits the explanatory capabilities as mentioned above, presenting the possibility of further research on this matter.

The historical timeframe of this thesis is another limitation that needs to be addressed. In choosing to limit this study to an examination of Thai foreign policy starting from the early 19th century to present, discretion has been used to omit aspects of Thai history that may bear importance, but the exploration of which are outside the scope of the thesis. For example, the Mandala system in Southeast Asia is a unique ordering structure characterised by its loose decentralised integration. Even powerful kingdoms, such as Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin, had limited influence outside of the few major population centres in the heart of their territory (Tooker, 1996; Manggala, 2013). The Mandala system placed importance on the ability to command labour rather than territory and as such borders between Southeast Asian empires were often poorly defined. In addition, the concept of 'bending with the wind' that has remained a recurring motif describing Thai foreign policy originates during the Ayutthaya Kingdom and how it dealt with issues stemming from its powerful neighbours the

Burmese and Khmer kingdoms (Busbarat, 2016).<sup>109</sup> Both these examples may be a focus for further studies that trace strategic hedging to the historical evolution of strategic culture.

A final consideration worth bearing in mind is that this study has chosen to limit its analysis to early 2020. The decision to place the limit here has two reasons. The first is that it marks the end of the Trump administration in the US, and therefore provides a neat dividing point that is especially useful in discussions about US-Thai relations. The second is that in 2019 Thailand held its first general election since the 2014 coup, thereby marking the nominal return to civilian leadership. Choosing 2020 allows the analysis contained here to be relevant to contemporary scholars while also being sufficiently removed from the present so the impact of events and policy choices can be more objectively observed. Though it is unlikely that Bangkok will radically alter its strategy soon, continued study of Thai foreign policy strategy and its reactions to growing geopolitical tensions is pertinent to scholars on Southeast Asian IR.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

These case studies of Thai foreign policy history examined in this thesis raise several critical questions regarding strategic hedging and thus present avenues for further research. As demonstrated throughout this thesis through process-tracing, contemporary Thai preferences towards strategic hedging are the result of a strategic culture that favours ambiguity and manoeuvrability. But what does this say for other countries that have been

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<sup>109</sup> Worth noting that despite the motif originating during the Ayutthaya Kingdom, the kingdom itself was an aggressive and expansionist power for two centuries until its final defeat by the Burmese.



described as engaging in strategic hedging? For example, there has been a considerable amount of literature claiming various Persian Gulf states are engaged in hedging in response to the regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Guzansky, 2015; Binhuwaidin, 2019; Hamidi & Salman, 2020; El-Dessouki & Mansour, 2020). However, these studies have largely ignored the extent to which hedging is encouraged by systemic factors and/or the preference inherent in the strategic culture. Essentially, does strategic hedging come about as a response to certain external systemic pressures on a state? If so, why do some states hedge and other balance or bandwagon? Or does hedging derive from the domestic structures of the state? And again, if this is the case, what domestic structures compel a state to choose one strategy over another. Most likely the solution is somewhere between, in that geopolitics combined with certain domestic elements combined produce a preference towards hedging. These are questions for future scholars on strategic hedging.

A second question posed by this thesis is the role of physical geography on enabling strategic hedging as a viable foreign policy strategy. As explored, Thailand is somewhat geographically distanced from threatening great powers, allowing it manoeuvrability in terms of foreign policy strategy. Consequently, Thailand has frequently been in the position where it could negotiate with great powers, achieving limited equality with the monarchies of colonial Europe, junior partner status with Imperial Japan, treaty alliance status with the US, and 'brotherhood' with China (Englehart, 2010; Tungkeunkunt & Phuphakdi, 2018). The same cannot be said for Thailand's neighbours and peers. Laos is a landlocked state, historically comprised of various kingdoms, and sparsely populated (Stuart-Fox, 1997). Its capacity for adventurous foreign policy strategies is limited, hence Laos has typically elected to

bandwagon with threats (Chung, 2009). Vietnam has a similarly large population as Thailand, but its geography has historically split the country between Hanoi in the north and Saigon in the south. This fact was exploited by colonial France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was described by then contemporaries as “two bags of rice hanging from a pole” (Fisher, 1965, p. 502). Further, Vietnam borders China with which it has several maritime territorial disputes. As such, Vietnam’s geography, demography, and geographic proximity to China prevents Hanoi from viewing hedging with the same eagerness as Thailand. Geography, therefore, arguably plays some role in the decision of states in pursuing strategic hedging. Investigating the relationship between physical geography and hedging may be an avenue for further research.

### **Suggestions for Foreign Policy**

An important takeaway is that Thai foreign policy is guided primarily by pragmatic (realpolitik) considerations rather than ideological imperatives. This is an especially critical factor to consider when considering the impulse of Western decision makers to condemn Thai democratic backsliding through public rhetoric and shifts in strategic relations. These actions, as demonstrated in Chapter 5, create openings for more transactionally oriented states, such as China, to supplant their rivals’ influence in Bangkok. That it not to say that moral considerations are unimportant, but they must function as part of a complete strategy rather than as a driving force. In effect, a degree of strategic empathy needs to be part of the calculus in reading Thai domestic politics and responding to it.

Bangkok's desire for strategic hedging is to avoid a loss of policy autonomy that results from conventional alignment strategies. While balancing or bandwagoning may offer greater security guarantees or economic rewards, both alignments require that the weaker state coordinates its policies with the great power. For example, Canberra is not free to pursue any security relationship that it may wish with Beijing because its alignment with the US limits Canberra's strategic manoeuvrability. Canberra's intentions, therefore, are clear for anyone to see and for anyone to predict. Conversely, Thai strategic thinking has historically avoided such commitments as that seen in Australia except under exceptional circumstances. Only twice did Thailand completely align with a great power: first in 1941 *after* being invaded by Japan, and again in 1945/46 when the US won the War in the Pacific and shielded Thailand from excessive retributions sought by London. Yet, even in the latter example it is worth mentioning that Phibun's government did attempt secret diplomacy with Beijing during the mid-1950s to hedge its bets (Poonkham, 2022). In both instances, neither case gave way to a long-term dependency or strident commitment. As such, two assumptions can be drawn from this that have implications for scholars and decision makers. The first is that Bangkok is unlikely to deviate from the pragmatically cautious nature that has been its norm for nearly 2 centuries. The Thai political elite have repeatedly demonstrated a discomfort with being firmly in one camp or another. Secondly, the continued Thai pursuit of policy autonomy means that Bangkok is unlikely to submit itself to Chinese hegemony, at least in its earliest stages even if Beijing made their benign intentions apparent. Were China to become the preponderant power of Southeast Asia bandwagoning may be undertaken, but as evident in Thai history, Bangkok would likely attempt alternative arrangements for security as a countermeasure. Regardless, a potential Chinese hegemony is decades away and not at all a certainty.

Following from the first recommendation, the final recommendation is for foreign policy decision makers to understand that Thailand's employment of strategic hedging favours transactional relationships. For example, moves to bring the Chinese-Thai relationship closer are not merely a reflection of China's newfound power, but that Beijing has demonstrated a willingness to support Thailand. In the 1980s China helped contain Vietnam, shielding Thailand when the US had chosen to withdraw (Blaxland & Raymond, 2017; Poonkham, 2022). Similarly, in 1997 Beijing chose not to devalue its currency in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis, suffering a significant economic setback, to provide breathing room for the Asian economies to recover (Goldstein, 2001). At the same time the US, through the IMF, imposed conditions that were considered humiliating and discriminatory in contrast to its treatment of Mexico at the same time. Later in 2005/6 and in 2014 Beijing was there to support Thailand despite democratic backsliding, times at which the US sharply and publicly condemned Thailand. At each of these instances, it was not grand power politics that brought these two states together. Instead, it was simply reciprocity that was forged in crisis and then sustained through its own momentum.

Even if Thailand reverts to democracy tomorrow, the influence Beijing has gained in the past 2 decades is unlikely to be reversed. The US remains the principal guarantor of Thai security and will likely be so for years to come. However, it is losing influence and credibility in Bangkok at a time when great power competition is once again heating up. It is, therefore, necessary to appreciate that Bangkok views its international relations through a pragmatic lens with next to no ideological contamination. As such, Bangkok's response to great power

competition can be described simply as, 'what's in it for me?'. Scholars and decision makers are recommended to maintain a dispassionate eye when examining Thai foreign policy and its behaviour towards the great powers. The recommendations above serve to guide for decisionmakers in understanding the geopolitical realities of Thailand's foreign policy implications.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this thesis much has been made about Bangkok's clear and persistent preference towards strategic hedging. Flexibility, as expressed in the Thai motif of 'bamboo bending with the wind' and pragmatism are the defining features of Thai foreign policy, features that are best exemplified in hedging. Stemming from its interactions with colonial European powers back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which formed its strategic cultural preferences, hedging remains the principal tool of Thai foreign policy. Hedging has proved itself viable and successful in ways that outright balancing and/or bandwagoning are unlikely to have achieved. And yet, readers should be reminded that hedging is far from a simple strategy. Nor is it a strategy for states that wish to avoid entanglements. Implicit in a hedging strategy are the complications engendered by appearing ambiguous and navigating between the conflicting interests of great powers. Decision makers involved in hedging must be astute observers of their geopolitical environment, understand their own state's strengths and capabilities, and maintain flexibility in the face of adversity.

Thailand's foreign policy was not just informed by its own experiences in Southeast Asia, but by the elite European universities and military academies that the Siamese nobility and aristocracy attended. Consequently, Thailand's interactions with colonial European powers, particularly Britain, were multifaceted and demonstrated a profound understanding of the new world order in which it found itself. However, being well-informed was not enough and Thailand ultimately lost half of its total territory. Hedging, even if well-executed, has limits and all its achievements can be undone in a single afternoon as the Paknam Incident demonstrated. This traumatising defeat serves to illustrate all too clearly the consequences that can occur when hedging fails. In opting for policy autonomy and ambiguity that are cornerstones of hedging, Bangkok failed to acquire a sufficient security guarantor against French aggression. Even though London ultimately intervened, hedging had undeniably failed to a large extent in this case. Despite this, the Thai core remained intact and continues to remain intact more than a century after that devastating defeat in 1893.

Geopolitical uncertainty, as it relates to the emerging US-Chinese great power competition, remains Thailand's principal upcoming challenge. It is a challenge that Thailand is not alone in facing as navigating the emerging competition is the principal area of concern for many states as evidenced in government and academic discourse (Yee & Storey, 2004; Hiep, 2013, Koga, 2016; Alderman & Cohen, 2021).<sup>110</sup> For some states, balancing is the way forward. This is seen in the new QUAD II and AUKUS institutions that are aimed towards China. Conversely, some states have chosen to bandwagon early. Laos, Cambodia, and arguably Myanmar are

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<sup>110</sup> Some examples of this include Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept in 2016, the Australian Defence White Paper (2016), and the UK Defence Command Paper (2021).

prepared to accept Chinese regional influence and the potential rewards that come with it. For Thailand, and perhaps many others in Southeast and East Asia, neither alignment has significant appeal. Balancing means partially forfeiting the economic boon that China's rise brings, whereas bandwagoning means sacrificing a degree of sovereignty to a revisionist power. Consequently, strategic hedging becomes an appealing position to take, enabling greater strategic flexibility without completely foregoing the security guarantees and economic rewards that other alignment options offer.

This thesis has illustrated the complexities of strategic hedging by examining nearly 2 centuries of Thai foreign policy. In trying to understand the past, it is hoped that this thesis may help understand the future. Yet, making predictions about the future is fraught with difficulty. In this an old proverb may serve useful, "It is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future." Despite the difficulty, through examination and using history as our guide in the form of process tracing and case studies, recurring motifs have been discovered that, combined with theory, allow for predictive analysis. In effect, this thesis has aimed to use history to understand the way it rhymes, to paraphrase Mark Twain. Strategic hedging is one such motif, representing a foreign policy strategy that combines flexibility and pragmatism in response to the anarchic and unfeeling system that all states must inhabit. Given Bangkok's pragmatic approach, it is safe to assume that Thai foreign policy will continue to bend yet find ways to stay rooted.

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## Chapter 2

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## Chapter 6

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## **Annex**

## Appendix A

### List of Chakri Dynasty Monarchs

Regnal Name	Common Name	Birth-Death	Reign
Rama I	Phra Buddha Yodfa Chulaloke	1737-1809	1782-1809
Rama II	Phra Buddha Loetla Nabhalai	1767-1824	1809-1824
Rama III	Nangklao	1788-1851	1824-1851
Rama IV	Mongkut	1804-1868	1851-1868
Rama V	Chulalongkorn	1853-1910	1868-1910
Rama VI	Vajiravudh	1881-1925	1910-1925
Rama VII	Prajadhipok	1893-1941	1925-1935
Rama VIII	Ananda Mahidol	1925-1946	1935-1946
Rama IX	Bhumibol Adulyadej	1927-2016	1946-2016
Rama X	Vajiralongkorn	1952-	2016-

## Appendix B

### List of Major Treaties Between Britain and Siam 1826-1925

Year	Title
1826	Treaty Between the King of Siam and Great Britain (Burney Treaty)
1855	Treaty Of Friendship and Commerce Between Siam and Great Britain (Bowring Treaty)
1869	Treaty Between Siam and Great Britain, Respecting Quedah
1897	Convention Between Great Britain and Siam Undertaking on The Part of Siam Not to Alienate Certain Siamese Territories or To Grant Special Facilities
1899	Agreement Between Siam and Great Britain, On the Registration of British Subjects in Siam
1902	Declaration Signed by Representatives of The Kingdom of Siam and Great Britain
1909	Treaty Between Siam and Great Britain (Concerning the Transfer the States of Kelantan, Tringganu, Kedab, Perlis and Adjacent Islands)
1909	Agreement Between Great Britain and Siam Cancelling the Convention of April 6, 1897, Regarding the Non-Alienation of Certain Parts of The Malay Peninsula
1911	Treaties Of Extradition Between Thailand and Great Britain (Comprises 1 Treaty And 2 Agreements (1912 & 1913))
1917	Treaty Of Friendship and Commerce Between Siam and Great Britain
1925	General Treaty of Friendship Between Siam and Great Britain. Note***Revision of 1855 Treaty, Ending Extraterritoriality

## Appendix C

### List of Major Treaties Between France and Siam 1856-1926

Year	Title
1856	Treaty Of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation
1867	Treaty Between the Kingdom of Siam and France for Regulating the Position of The Kingdom of Cambodia
1893	Treaty Between Siam and France
1904	Agreement Between France and Siam Completing and Ratifying Articles I And II of The Convention of The 13th February, 1904
1924	Treaty Of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation Between Siam and France
1926	Convention Between Siam and France Concerning the Special Relations Between Siam and Indochina

## Appendix D

### List of Treaties of Friendship & Commerce

Year	Title	Country
1833	Treaty of Amity and Commerce Between Siam and the United States	United States
1856	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation	United States
1858	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation	Denmark
1858	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation	Hanseatic Republics
1859	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation	Portugal
1860	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation	The Netherlands
1862	Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation	German Customs Union, Meeklenburg-Schwerin And Mecklenburg-Strelitz
1868	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation	Norway
1868	Treaty of Friendship and Commerce	Belgium
1869	Treaty of Commerce	Austria-Hungary
1870	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation	Spain
1898	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation	Japan



## Appendix E

### Revisions to the Unfair Treaties 1920-1926

<b>Year</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Country</b>
1920	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation	US
1924	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation	Japan
1925	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation	France
1925	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation	Netherlands
1925	General Treaty of Friendship	Great Britain
1925	Treaty of Commerce and Navigation	Great Britain
1925	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation	Spain
1925	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation	Portugal
1925	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation	Denmark
1925	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation	Sweden
1926	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation	Italy
1926	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation	Belgium-Luxembourg
1926	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation	Norway

## Appendix F

### List of select members from the 1932 Coup and Khana Ratsadon

Affiliation	Name	Notes
<b>Army</b>	Phahon Phonphayuhasena	Head of the army faction, headed 1933 Coup, and Prime Minister (1933-1938)
<b>Army</b>	Phraya Songsuradet	Forced into exile by Phibulsongkram under the pretext of staging a rebellion.
<b>Army</b>	Luang Phibulsongkram	Prime Minister (1938-1944 and 1948-1957).
<b>Navy</b>	Luang Sinthusongkhramchai	Head of the naval faction
<b>Navy</b>	Luang Supachalasai	First Director General of the Department of Physical Education.
<b>Navy</b>	Luang Thamrongnawasawat	Prime Minister (1946-1947). Only naval officer to hold this position.
<b>Civilian</b>	Luang Praditmanutham (Pridi Phanomyong)	Head of the civilian faction, regent (1941-1945), and Prime Minister (1946). Exiled from 1949 to his death in 1983.
<b>Civilian</b>	Luang Kowit-aphawong (Kuang Aphaiwong)	Prime Minister (1944-1945, 1946, and 1947-1948). Leader of the Democrat Party from 1946-1968).
<b>Civilian</b>	Direk Jayanam	Deputy Prime Minister (1946-1947), and Minister of Foreign Affairs (1941, 1943-1944, and 1946-1947).

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Source:

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## Appendix G

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