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# Beyond the Bamboo: Thailand's Geopolitical Tightrope Between Great Power Hedging and the Myanmar Mess

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## Abstract

This paper looks at the great pressure on Thailand's traditional foreign policy. This pressure comes from two major challenges happening at once: the growing U.S.-China rivalry and the internal conflict in neighboring Myanmar since 2021. Thailand's historical "bamboo diplomacy," which has become a modern "hedging" (or risk-spreading) strategy, is being put to the test. This article asks: How does Thailand's need to manage the immediate security crisis in Myanmar change or support its hedging strategy between Washington and Beijing? This paper argues that the Myanmar crisis is a small-scale test for Thai hedging. It shows that when group efforts like ASEAN fail, Thai policy falls back on a practical, national-interest-first approach, focusing on border security and not interfering. This, however, creates friction with its traditional U.S. ally, while pragmatically (if uncomfortably) aligning with China's "hands-off" policy. This makes its delicate balancing act even harder.

**Keywords:** Thailand, Geopolitics, Hedging, Myanmar Crisis, U.S.-China Relations, Bamboo Diplomacy.

## 1. Introduction

For decades, Thai foreign policy has been praised for its practical and flexible approach, famously known by the metaphor of "bamboo bending in the wind" (Wyatt, 2003). In this new era of great power competition, this flexibility has turned into a more structured "hedging" strategy. This allows Thailand to keep its long-standing security alliance with the United States while also gaining the huge economic benefits of its relationship with China (Raymond, 2019).

However, this careful balance was upset by the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar. The civil war that followed is not a far-away problem for Thailand; it is an immediate and serious security threat happening on its long 2,400-kilometer border. This crisis gives Thailand a tough choice that goes to the core of its foreign policy. The U.S. and Western partners demand that Thailand isolate the military junta (the State Administration Council, or SAC). China, on the other hand, keeps its channels open with the SAC, caring more about stability and its own interests.

This paper asks the main question: How does Thailand handle this dual pressure—the "sideways" strategic rivalry between the U.S. and China, and the "direct" security threat from

the chaos in Myanmar? It argues that Thailand's response to the Myanmar mess is not a break from its hedging strategy, but a practical part of it, one that shows the strategy's hidden tensions.

## 1.2 Research Objective

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the collision between Thailand's long-term geopolitical hedging strategy and an immediate, border-security crisis.

### Specifically, this paper aims to:

1. Examine the specific policy choices Thailand has made in response to the post-2021 Myanmar crisis.
2. Analyze how these choices create friction or alignment with the competing interests of the United States and China.
3. Determine whether the Myanmar crisis is forcing Thailand to abandon its hedging strategy or if it represents an adaptation of it.

## 2. Literature review

The main idea used in this paper is "Hedging" as a foreign policy strategy. Hedging is a strategy used by small or middle-sized countries to avoid picking a clear side between competing great powers. It's not about balancing against one or fully joining the other. Instead, it's about managing risks and getting the most benefits by building relationships with all sides.

Research on Thai foreign policy is often based on this idea:

1. Historical Roots: The traditional "Bamboo Diplomacy" is the original version of Thai hedging. As Wyatt (2003) wrote in his history of Thailand, this is a practical approach focused on being flexible to protect the country's independence.
2. Modern Use: In the 21st century, Raymond (2019) clearly describes Thailand as a "Hedging State." It tries to carefully balance its military alliance with the U.S. and its economic reliance on China.
3. Group Role: In the region, Pongsudhirak (2018) has pointed out Thailand's role as a middle-sized country that uses ASEAN's central role as a tool for "hedging together," acting as a shield against great power pressure.

The Gap: Most research focuses on how Thailand hedges between the U.S. and China. But it has not fully studied how this strategy changes when faced with a serious, nearby security crisis (like Myanmar) that needs a clear and fast response. This paper looks at the clash between this long-term hedging strategy and an immediate security need.

## 3. Methodology

This study uses a Qualitative Research method. Specifically, it's an Explanatory Case Study. The "case" is Thai foreign policy towards the Myanmar crisis after the 2021 coup.

This method tries to explain "how" and "why" Thailand made its specific policy choices under complex pressure. Data was gathered using Documentary Analysis (looking at written materials) and Triangulation (comparing different sources) from:

1. Primary Sources: Official comments from the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ASEAN group statements, and relevant policy papers from the U.S. and China.

2. Secondary Sources: Academic articles (checked by experts) on international relations and Southeast Asia (from journals like *Asian Survey* and *Contemporary Southeast Asia*) and reports from trusted research groups (like the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, which published Patton's (2022) work).

This analysis will compare what Thailand says in its policies with what it does in its diplomatic actions to find the real reasons behind its decisions.

#### 4. The Established Hedging Framework Under Strain

Thailand's modern hedging strategy is built on two main pillars. The Myanmar crisis challenges both of them.

The first pillar is the security relationship with the United States. The U.S.-Thai alliance is still a key part of Thai defense, shown by the yearly Cobra Gold military drills (Chayanon, 2023). However, this relationship is based on shared interests, not always shared values. The U.S. has repeatedly put pressure on Thailand over its own democracy and has pushed for a tough position against the Myanmar junta.

The second pillar is the economic relationship with China. China is Thailand's biggest trading partner and a huge source of investment (especially for the BRI and the EEC). Bangkok sees this partnership as essential for its future growth. Beijing's strict "hands-off" policy on other countries' internal problems—which it uses for Myanmar—matches Bangkok's own long-held approach to its neighbors.

The Myanmar crisis makes these two pillars clash. When the U.S. pressures Thailand to punish the SAC, it conflicts with what Thailand sees as its need for a stable border—a stability that China also believes only the SAC can provide.

#### 5. The Myanmar Crisis: A Realist Default

The chaos in Myanmar creates immediate, real threats for Thailand: a flow of refugees, fighting at the border, the illegal drug trade, and broken supply lines. Faced with these threats, the Thai state—especially its powerful security forces—has fallen back on a practical, "what-works" approach.

This approach showed itself as a "diplomatic tightrope" (Patton, 2022). While publicly supporting ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus (5PC), Thailand also engaged the SAC on its own. This included hosting "informal" meetings with the junta's leaders and trying to set up a "humanitarian corridor" that needed the SAC's help.

This desire to "go it alone" comes from a core belief in Bangkok that the ASEAN-led group approach has failed. As Pongsudhirak (2018) noted, Thailand often uses ASEAN to manage big powers. But when ASEAN itself is stuck and not working on a direct threat to Thailand, the country will act in what it sees as its own best interest.

This "pragmatic engagement" has big consequences. Washington sees it as quietly giving the junta a sense of being legitimate. On the other hand, Thailand's approach finds it in an alignment in fact (if not in name) with China, which also deals directly with the SAC to protect its own interests. While Thailand is not fully siding with China, its policy choice on Myanmar ends up being much closer to Beijing's than to Washington's.

## 4. Results

The analysis yielded three main findings that directly address the research objectives:

1. National Interest Over Hedging: The results show that when faced with a direct, "hard" security threat on its border, Thailand's policy prioritizes immediate national interests (border stability, trade, refugee control) over its long-term, abstract goal of balancing great powers.

2. Failure of Multilateralism: The ineffectiveness of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus (5PC) was a key finding. This failure forced Thailand to pursue its own "diplomatic track," which was perceived by neighbors as undermining ASEAN unity.

3. Unintended Alignment: Thailand's pragmatic engagement with the SAC, while intended to be neutral, resulted in a functional alignment with China's non-interference policy and created a significant policy rift with the United States. This shows that in a crisis, neutral "hedging" can become practically impossible, as practical actions are seen as taking a side.

## 5. Conclusion

The Myanmar crisis has not made Thailand abandon its hedging strategy. Instead, it has tested it and shown what its real priorities are. The crisis shows that when a group shield (ASEAN) fails, and when the value-based demands of one great power (the U.S.) clash with the immediate, real security needs of the nation, Thailand will always choose the latter.

Thailand's response to the Myanmar mess is a small example of its larger worldview: it's an attempt to hedge, but from a very vulnerable position. It tries to calm the U.S. by publicly supporting ASEAN, while also dealing with the SAC to meet its own security needs—which lines it up practically with China.

This balancing act is becoming harder and harder to keep up. The Myanmar crisis has shown the basic conflict in Thai foreign policy: it's hard to be a "bamboo in the wind" when the wind is blowing hard from many directions—East, West, and now, a chaotic storm from the North—all at the same time. The result is a foreign policy that looks conflicting and broken, but is really a desperate, practical attempt to stay independent and secure in a tough geopolitical situation.

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