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Bamboo in the Crosswinds: Thailand's 21st Century Hedging Strategy Amidst Sino-U.S. Rivalry

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Thailand is adapting its traditional "bamboo diplomacy" to navigate the intensified geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China. As a long-standing U.S. treaty ally with deep and expanding economic ties to China, Thailand occupies a pivotal but precarious position in the Indo-Pacific. This research addresses the central question: How has Thailand's foreign policy evolved into a modern hedging strategy in the 21st century? Through a qualitative analysis of policy documents, defense procurement data, and diplomatic engagements, this paper argues that Thailand's contemporary approach is a multi-layered hedging strategy characterized by three core pillars: (1) security diversification to maintain the U.S. alliance while building defense ties with China; (2) calculated economic alignment with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while seeking alternative partnerships; and (3) a renewed emphasis on ASEAN centrality as a multilateral buffer against great power pressure. The findings suggest that modern Thai hedging is not passive neutrality but an active, pragmatic, and increasingly complex statecraft designed to maximize autonomy and national interest in a contested geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Hedging, U.S.-China Relations, ASEAN, Indo-Pacific, Bamboo Diplomacy

1. Introduction

The 21st-century strategic competition between the United States and China has forced regional powers like Thailand into a difficult balancing act. As the oldest U.S. treaty ally in mainland Asia and with China as its largest trading partner, Thailand is at the center of this great power rivalry.

Historically, Thai foreign policy is known as "bamboo diplomacy," characterized by its flexibility to ensure sovereignty (Wyatt, 2003). However, the simultaneous and pervasive pressures from both Washington and Beijing demand a more proactive and structured approach.

This paper argues that Thailand has adapted by developing a sophisticated, multi-layered "hedging strategy" to maintain its strategic autonomy

1.1 Research Objective

1. Diversifying security partnerships.
 2. Calculated economic engagement with Chinese initiatives while seeking alternatives.
 3. A reinforced commitment to ASEAN as a multilateral shield to avoid direct alignment.
- This approach demonstrates an active effort to navigate an increasingly polarized world.

2. Literature review

Thailand's strategic behavior is best understood through the international relations theory of "hedging". Distinct from balancing or bandwagoning, hedging is a risk-management strategy where a state avoids clear alignment and instead cultivates relationships with rival powers to create a fallback position (Kuik, 2008).

This framework is highly relevant to Thailand, whose historical "bamboo diplomacy" can be seen as a precursor to modern hedging. This traditional flexibility, rooted in pragmatism, allowed the kingdom to maintain its independence (Wyatt, 2003). While this led to a firm U.S. alliance during the Cold War, Thailand has since diversified its relationships, especially with China.

While existing scholarship identifies Thailand as a "hedging state" (Raymond, 2019) and notes how strains in the U.S. alliance created opportunities for China (Zawacki, 2020), a gap remains in synthesizing the different aspects of this strategy. This paper aims to fill that gap by analyzing the interconnected security, economic, and multilateral diplomatic dimensions of Thailand's hedging behavior in the 21st century

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive case-study methodology to analyze the evolution of Thai foreign policy. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the nuances, motivations, and complexities behind Thailand's strategic decisions, which quantitative data alone cannot capture. The analysis is based on a structured review of a wide range of primary and secondary sources.

Qualitative data verification : By triangulating data from these varied sources, this paper aims to construct a comprehensive and evidence-based account of Thailand's hedging strategy, ensuring the analysis is robust, verifiable, and grounded in empirical reality.

4. Results

4.1 Analysis: The Military-Security Dimension

Thailand's primary military strategy is security diversification, a hedging approach that involves maintaining its foundational alliance with the United States while simultaneously building a credible defense relationship with China. This dual-track policy aims to secure

access to U.S. technology while increasing Bangkok's diplomatic leverage by signaling it has other options.

The U.S.-Thai alliance remains a cornerstone of Thai security, symbolized by the annual Cobra Gold military exercise (Chayanon, 2023). However, the relationship has been strained by U.S. criticism following military coups in 2006 and 2014, leading to a perception of American unreliability in Bangkok (Zawacki, 2020). In response, Thailand has diversified its defense acquisitions, notably procuring Chinese hardware like VT-4 tanks and S26T submarines (IISS, 2023) to fill capability gaps at a lower cost and build goodwill with Beijing. Thailand has also increased bilateral exercises with the PLA, such as "Falcon Strike."

This is not a pivot from the U.S. but a classic hedging move. As Raymond (2019) observes, Thailand balances these engagements carefully, continuing to acquire key U.S. equipment like F-16 upgrades and Stryker vehicles. This strategy allows Thailand to avoid over-dependence and maintain its strategic autonomy, showing its partnerships are a matter of pragmatic choice.

4.2 Analysis: The Geo-Economic Dimension

The second pillar of Thai hedging is calculated economic alignment. Thailand pragmatically engages with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) but does so cautiously, ensuring it aligns with its own national development agenda.

Although China is Thailand's top trading partner, the Sino-Thai high-speed railway (HSR) project demonstrates this careful approach. The project's slow progress is due to tough negotiations, with Thailand insisting on retaining control and using its own financing to support its Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) without incurring unsustainable debt or losing sovereignty (Busbarat, 2021). To avoid over-reliance on China, Thailand simultaneously diversifies its economic ties. It joined the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and maintains strong trade relationships with Japan, South Korea, and the EU. This multi-pronged strategy allows Thailand to maximize economic opportunities while minimizing the geopolitical risks of dependency on any single power.

4.3 Analysis: The Diplomatic Dimension & ASEAN Centrality

The third pillar of Thailand's hedging strategy is its commitment to ASEAN centrality, using the multilateral framework as a buffer against great power competition. By operating within ASEAN, Thailand amplifies its voice and avoids being forced into binary choices between the U.S. and China. It uses platforms like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to address sensitive issues collectively rather than bilaterally.

However, this pillar faces significant challenges, particularly the crisis in Myanmar, which has exposed deep divisions within ASEAN. Thailand's approach of cautious engagement with the junta—driven by national interests like border stability—has sometimes diverged from the bloc's consensus (Patton, 2022). This highlights a core tenet of its foreign policy: national interest is paramount when collective action falters. Nonetheless, Thailand continues to invest in ASEAN as a diplomatic shield, as a weak or divided ASEAN would leave it far more exposed to the pressures of the U.S.-China rivalry (Pongsudhirak, 2018).

5. Conclusion

The evidence across the security, economic, and diplomatic domains demonstrates that Thailand's 21st-century foreign policy is a coherent and calculated hedging strategy,

representing a sophisticated evolution of its traditional "bamboo diplomacy." It is not a policy of passive indecision but one of active, multi-pronged engagement designed to navigate the turbulent waters of Sino-U.S. competition. By diversifying its defense partnerships, cautiously leveraging economic opportunities, and championing multilateralism through ASEAN, Thailand strives to carve out a space for strategic autonomy.

The primary findings of this paper are that Thai hedging is multi-layered, pragmatic, and autonomy-driven. It successfully maintains the U.S. security alliance as a backstop while reaping the economic benefits of China's rise. However, this strategy is not without risks. The balancing act requires immense diplomatic skill and is vulnerable to both internal political instability and external shocks that could force Bangkok into making harder choices. The ongoing crisis in Myanmar and the increasing pressure from both Washington and Beijing to align more clearly on technological and ideological fronts will continue to test the resilience of this strategy.

Ultimately, as the geopolitical winds of the Indo-Pacific continue to blow, Thailand's bamboo-like ability to hedge and adapt will remain the key to its continued sovereignty and prosperity.

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