The Art of Thai Diplomacy:
Parables of Alliance

Ryan Ashley and Apichai W. Shipper

Abstract

This paper argues that a pragmatist theory of international relations, combined with parables of alliance formation from local proverbs and literary classics, best explains the art of Thai diplomacy from a historical perspective. Notably avoiding Western colonization, the Thais have enjoyed relative sovereignty and independence throughout their history. Rather than balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging, our study finds that Thailand has deliberately leveraged asymmetrical partnerships between often-opposed great powers and more symmetrical partnerships with less powerful states and multilateral organizations in order to maintain its physical and identity-based ontological security. We draw our empirical evidence from four historical periods: the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, World War II, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War modern era. Our findings can be applied to other Southeast Asian states and their own parables of alliance.

Keywords: ontological security, pragmatism, leveraging, alliances, Thai diplomacy, Bang Rachan, Wanthong

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Thais pride themselves on their fabulous international relations achievements and adept diplomatic maneuvering. In the official narrative, the origins of the Thai people lie in an escape en masse from the Chinese encroachment into their kingdom in Sipsong Panna, southern Yunnan Province, to present-day Thailand during the early thirteenth century.[1] They then established self-governing states after the

Ryan C. Ashley is a PhD student at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin and an active duty air force officer.

Apichai W. Shipper is an adjunct professor in the Asian Studies program at Georgetown University and the Asia Regional Chair at the Foreign Service Institute of the US Department of State.

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[1] David Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). While Wyatt offers a conservative view of Thai history, Sujit Wongthet provocatively argues that Thai people of the central plain area had always been there as Lao, Mon, and Khmer. If they had migrated from anywhere,

decline of the Pagan and Khmer kingdoms. The Thais enjoyed relative sovereignty and independence throughout their history, despite having been sacked by the Burmese at least twice. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they alone in Southeast Asia avoided Western colonization. Even before they successfully navigated their way out of Japanese military domination in Asia during World War II, Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Phibun hereafter) decided to celebrate his country's remarkable achievement in preserving its freedom by renaming it "Thailand," or Land of the Free.[2]

Having avoided direct Western colonization, Thailand provides a unique model for the study of international relations conducted by small-medium states. Unlike other Southeast Asian countries, where European colonizers ran foreign relations, Thailand (Siam) improvised and developed an independent form of foreign policy from its interactions with Western powers and Asian neighbours.[3] In doing so, it embraced Western-style mapping, national boundaries, fixed taxation, and bureaucratization, without having to abandon traditional behaviours.[4] Today, it sends most of its aspiring young diplomats and IR scholars to elite US universities to learn "modern" techniques of diplomacy.

Sadly, these academies expose them to Western international relations theories and foreign policy strategies that are deprived of Thai cultural context and local narratives. For instance, they read works from scholars who simply apply Western theories to Thailand.[5] As a result, their theories are oftentimes ahistorical or inadequate in fully explaining the foreign relations of Thailand.[6] In an attempt to bring in cultural context and local narratives,

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they would have done it from around 950 CE from the Lanna Kingdom (Laos)—not around the late thirteenth century from southern China, where many ethnic Thais still live happily today. According to Sujit, people moved from the Mekong area (around Luang Prabang) down the Nan and Yom Rivers into the Chaophraya Plain. See Sujit Wongthet, *Khon thai maa chak nai?* [Where did Thai people come from?] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2005).

[2] The brainchild for the name change was Luang Wichit Wattakan, who was instrumental in formulating an official notion of "Thai" identity on behalf of the military-dominated state. See Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wattakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1993).

[3] Anthony Reid, *A History of Southeast Asia: Critical Crossroads* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

[4] See Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Seksan Prasertkul, "The Transformation of the Thai State and Economic Change" (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1989).

[5] For example, see Chanintira na Thalang, Soravis Jayanama, Jittipat Poonkham, eds., *International Relations as a Discipline in Thailand* (New York: Routledge, 2019). In this edited volume, Jittipat Poonkham (47–70) asks, "Why is there no Thai (critical) International Relations theory?" and argues that this is in part due to Thailand's status as a small state in the global political economy, and in part because "almost all Thai IR scholars have been trained in Western universities, especially the 'American social sciences'" (347). In fact, Chanintira na Thalang (251–278) finds far more conceptual and theoretical discussions on Thai domestic politics than on its international relations.

[6] A notable exception is Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin Shinawatra and His Foreign Policy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010). Amitav Acharya, who often employs historical context in his work, laments this shortcoming when scholars think theoretically about Asian IR. See his "Thinking Theoretically about Asian IR," in *International Relations of Asia,* eds. David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 59–92.

this article introduces a cognitive approach to understanding Thailand's international relations and repeated decisions to forge alliances, especially with competing great powers, by examining well-known Thai parables from classical sources. It posits that Thailand actively cultivates and leverages these partnerships in a conscious effort to maintain its identity-based ontological security. This approach also provides a new perspective on the geopolitical strategy and intentions of a vital regional power in Southeast Asia.

This article is organized into eight sections, consisting of a theoretical part and an empirical part. The first section reviews the dominant discourse on Thailand's international relations from the realist school and offers our critique. It then reframes Thailand's international relations as those of a self-confident nation that actively leverages its relationships between great powers. The second section advances a pragmatic approach to understanding Thailand's international relations by employing the concept of ontological pragmatism to Thai diplomacy. The third section explores Thai parables of alliance derived from classical literature and proverbs with an assumption that a pattern of diplomatic behaviour can be explained based on the cultural products policy makers consumed during their formative years. The next four sections offer empirical evidence from four historical periods: the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, World War II, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War period. Finally, the conclusion explores the possibility of employing this approach to understand other Southeast Asian nations.

Our data are drawn from archival documents of the Thai National Archives, press releases on the websites of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, Japan, and the People's Republic of China, oral histories of US diplomats posted in Thailand on the website of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, personal interviews with Thai and US government officials, and a variety of secondary sources.

Theoretical Discourse on Alliance Formation

From Realism to Pragmatism

A dominant theory often used to explain alliance formation comes out of the realist tradition. According to realism, alliances form when small-medium states choose either to bandwagon with a stronger power or balance against a prevailing threat. Bandwagoning is typically associated with "offensive realism," and balancing with "defensive realism." Kenneth Waltz believes that states prefer to act defensively rather than offensively within anarchic systems because "the first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their position in the system."[7] Similarly, Stephen Walt points to

[7] Kenneth Waltz, *Theories of International Politics* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 126.

balancing as the main driver of alliance formation.[8] In other words, anarchy in international politics does not spur continuous competition among states, but rather promotes threat balancing. For Walt, threat balancing occurs regardless of the aggregate power of the states involved and is triggered by shared perceptions among states of an outside threat.

With the rise of China, scholars have applied realist theories of bandwagoning and balancing to international relations in Asia.[9] For example, Laos and Cambodia are widely described as choosing bandwagoning with China for economic gains.[10] Most Southeast Asian countries, however, employ a mixed or "limited bandwagoning" strategy: economic engagement with China and soft balancing against China via security alignment or reassurances with the US.[11] They align with two competing larger powers who may threaten their national sovereignty, or what Evan Laksmana calls "pragmatic equidistance."[12] In this way, Southeast Asian states maintain good relations with both China and the US in case one relation spirals downwards. Evelyn Goh interprets this behaviour as "hedging," when states carry out two *contradictory* policy directions (balancing and engagement) simultaneously.[13] In hedging, a state prepares for the worst by balancing and for the best by engaging. Cheng-Chwee Kuik explains that threat balancing entails maintaining a strong military, building and strengthening alliances including trade networks, increasing diplomatic links, and creating binding multilateral frameworks.[14] Kuik describes hedging as a behaviour guided by the degrees of "power rejection" and "power acceptance" a small state holds towards one of two imposing and competing great powers.[15] In this framework, small states accept or reject varying degrees of power according to their risk tolerance. A state can reject power by accepting "risk-contingency" options,

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[8] Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 17–49.

[9] For Northeast Asia, see, for example, David C. Kang, "Between balancing and bandwagoning: South Korea's response to China," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 9, no. 1 (2009): 1–28.

[10] Sovinda Po and Christopher B. Primiano, "An 'Ironclad Friend': Explaining Cambodia's Bandwagoning Policy towards China," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* (2020): 1–21; Edgar Pang, "'Same-Same but Different': Laos and Cambodia's Political Embrace of China," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 66 (2017).

[11] For example, see Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam's hedging strategy against China since normalization," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 35, no. 3 (2013): 333–368; Enze Han, "Under the shadow of China-US competition: Myanmar and Thailand's alignment choices," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 1 (2018): 81–104; see Seng Tan, "Consigned to Hedge: South-East Asia and America's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy," *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 131–148.

[12] Evan Laksmana, "Pragmatic Equidistance: How Indonesia Manages its Great Power Relations," in *China, the United States, and the Future of Southeast Asia*, ed. David Denoon (New York: New York University Press, 2017), chapter 4.

[13] Evelyn Goh, *Meeting the China challenge: The US in Southeast Asian regional security strategies* (Washington, DC: East West Center, 2005).

[14] Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "The essence of hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's response to a rising China," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 2 (2008): 159–185.

[15] Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "How do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN states' alignment behavior towards China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (2016): 500–514.

or accept power by committing to "returns-maximizing" options. Each of these choices exists on a spectrum from balancing (the most risk-contingency and power rejection) to bandwagoning (the most returns-maximizing and power accepting). For both Kuik and Goh, hedging refers to a mixed approach that enables small-medium states to seek a middle path to navigate through security uncertainty while maintaining economic incentives through engagement with great powers. Some scholars term this strategy "economic pragmatism."

Realist concepts of "bandwagoning,"or "balancing," and pragmatist concepts of "equidistancing," or "hedging" inadequately explain Thailand's foreign relations. Why does Thailand need to seek a security alternative from China in ensuring its own survival, when little pressing challenge or threat from China to Thailand exists? Indeed, while the South China Sea represents a major security concern for the Philippines and Vietnam, that is not so for Thailand.[16] Moreover, the frameworks of "equidistancing" and "hedging" are overly dependent on the Cold War and post-Cold War periods as the context for strategic alignment decisions, especially in Southeast Asia. By focusing on the duopoly of the US-China or the US-Soviet Union relationship, such theories overrate the role of great power competition in the foreign policy making of Southeast Asian countries, consequently underrating the agency of those countries themselves and of other influential actors.

Instead of viewing international relations in terms of "balancing," "bandwagoning," "equidistancing," or "hedging," we interpret anarchy in international relations to be a deliberative effort of leveraging among strong states to expand the role of state control abroad and among weaker states to avoid being controlled by external powers. Leveraging differs from balancing and hedging. Small-medium countries leverage their geopolitical positions and wealth/resources against regional powers by diversifying their partnerships for reasons more complex than simple avoidance of commitment and/or to protect themselves against possible losses. Rather, they make unequal commitments and asymmetrical relationships in the form of formal and informal alliances.[17] Instead of hedging by maintaining an economic engagement with one power (China) and a security alliance with another (US), they deliberately maintain both economic and security ties with competing powers and form new and more symmetrical ones with regional organization/s in order to leverage their resources with each partner to achieve a specific outcome. These resources may be real or aspirational but require a high level of self-perception of their own national identity. Leveraging entails practical knowledge, informal processes, and constant

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[16] Gregory Vincent Raymond, *Thai Military Power: A Culture of Strategic Accommodation* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2018).

[17] Tom Long, "It's not the size, it's the relationship: from 'small states' to asymmetry," *International Politics* 54, no. 2 (2017): 144–160.

improvisation in the face of unpredictability. These three characteristics are germane for a small-medium nation's survival, independence, and sovereignty.

Historically, such diplomatic efforts intensified in Europe following the Westphalia Treaty, with the recognition of state sovereignty and the development of international trade to promote capital accumulation and national wealth. Strong states took the lead in creating international organizations and determining membership rules (and selecting organizational leadership) in order to maintain maximum influence in international relations. Weaker or smaller states have a variety of options if they do not want to be subjected to the international system created by strong states. First, they can decide not to join the dominant intergovernmental organization (IGO) and join an alternative and smaller one. For example, many newly independent states in Asia and Africa preferred to join the Non-Aligned Movement rather than an organization established by Western powers. Second, they can form regional alliances with like-minded states to increase leverage vis-à-vis strong states in decision making within the dominant intergovernmental organization. Because members of the alliance of smaller states often vote together as a block, their collective votes can outweigh those of stronger and independent states. Third, smaller states can join the dominant international system but try to maintain both sovereignty and national security, while maximizing wealth.

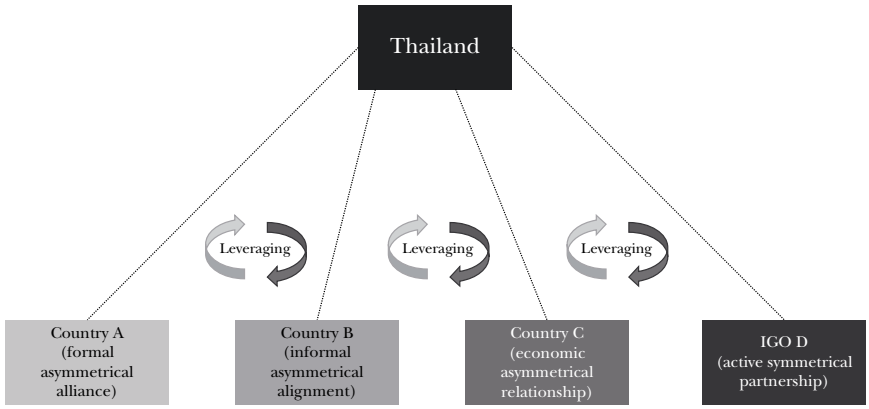
Therefore, states act pragmatically in their foreign engagement.[18] Pragmatism in international relations entails the formation of formal and informal alliances, allowing a non-dominant country to formally choose A and informally B, even if A and B are rivals or enemies. This pragmatic alliance may appear irrational or contradictory but is based on maximizing its private national interests and avoiding control by foreign powers. Moreover, a pragmatic country can avoid choosing between A and B altogether, and go with non-contentious (yet powerful) C and D. Of course, it also may decide not to choose at all. In this sense, pragmatist international relations theory, or "thick constructivism," focuses on the agency of weaker states. Figure 1 summarizes the proposition discussed above.

Thailand has exercised pragmatic options throughout its long diplomatic history. Today, Thailand has established asymmetrical relationships with the US (formal), China (informal), and Japan (informal).[19] It has also formed symmetrical and formal relationships with regional organizations, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and various Mekong partnerships. The result is a Thai propensity for what are often described as seeming alliances of interest and convenience. As Phibun stated, "whoever

[18] Simon Frankel Pratt, "Pragmatism as Ontology, Not (Just) Epistemology: Exploring the Full Horizon of Pragmatism as an Approach to IR Theory," *International Studies Review* 18 (2016): 508–527.

[19] Pongphisoot Busbarat, "Bamboo Swirling in the Wind: Thailand's Foreign Policy Imbalance between China and the United States," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 2 (2016): 233–257.

Figure 1
Pragmatist IR



Source: Created by author.

loses this war [WWII] will certainly become our enemy."[20] This sentiment still resonates in a popular 2021 meme featuring Japanese Emperor Showa asking a stern-faced Phibun: "[I]f Japan loses, we will be responsible together, right?" Historian Wasana Wongsurawat aptly describes this tendency: "[S]ince the nineteenth century, Thai leaders have seemed willing to ally with whichever world power appeared to be on the winning side, even if that meant breaking a treaty of alliance signed in the [most sacred] Temple of the Emerald Buddha."[21] Pavin Chachavalpongpun refers to this style of Thai diplomacy as "bamboo diplomacy," which bends with the wind (*pai loo lom*), yet never snaps.[22] For him, Thai diplomacy follows pragmatic goals and constitutes part of a larger nation-building project. Foreign relations serve the domestic priorities of elites. Therefore, the primary goals of Thai diplomacy are to maximize national sovereignty and territorial integrity, while keeping external interferences to a minimum. Pragmatism in Thai diplomacy entails close observation of mistakes and of the conduct of

[20] Net Khemayothin, *Ngan taidin khong Phan-ek Yothi* [The underground work of Colonel Yothi], 3 vols. (Bangkok: Kasem Bannakit, 1967). In other words: "Who is Siam's friend? Whoever wins!"

[21] Wasana Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists; the Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 154.

[22] Chachavalpongpun, *Reinventing Thailand*; Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "Thailand: The Enigma of Bamboo Diplomacy," in *Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft*, ed. Brian McKercher (London: Routledge, 2012). He developed this idea from the work of Arne Kislenko, "Bending with the Wind: The Continuity and Flexibility of Thai Foreign Policy," *International Journal* 57, no. 4 (2002): 537–561.

neighbouring states, while adjusting one's own goals and conduct accordingly. In order to maintain sovereignty and territorial integrity, Thai leaders pragmatically bend or swirl with international changes as they occur.

Figure 2
Phibun and Japan WWII meme

Translation (left to right / top to bottom):
Phibun: "Siam agrees to join Japan [in the war]."
Showa: "So if Japan loses, we will be responsible together, right?"
Phibun "…"
Showa: "… right?"

Source: "Thai history meme." Reddit, 17 June 2021, available at https://i.redd.it./58svy7yd7u571.jpg

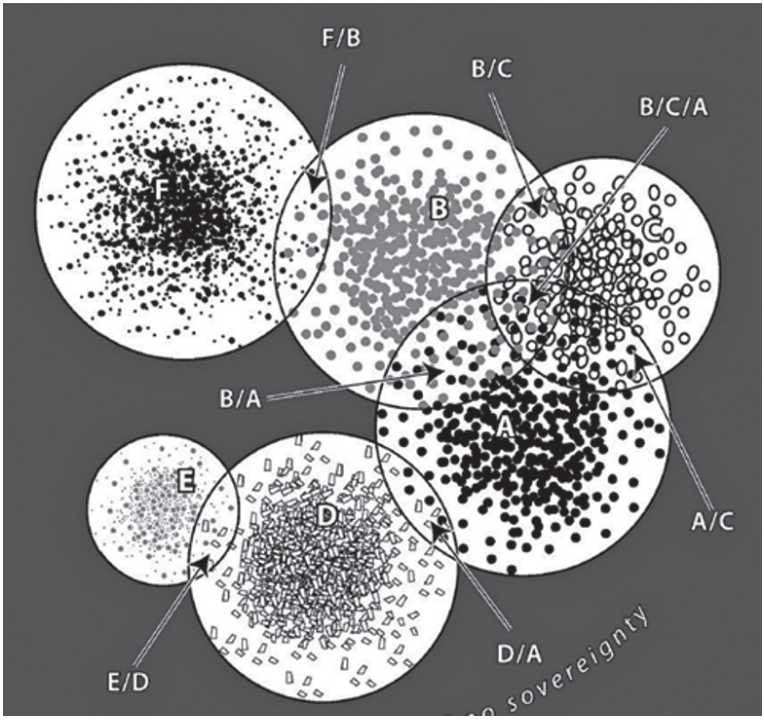
This diplomatic practice is not new to the region. During the premodern period, Thailand (then Siam) was part of an international system that scholars refer to as a "mandala" system.[23] A typical mandala consisted of a dominant kingdom at the centre, in connection with numerous smaller kingdoms. James C. Scott explains:

[23] Oliver W. Wolters first introduced this mandala concept in his *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspective* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982). His student Sunait Chutintaranond later applied it to Siam in "Mandala, Segmentary State and Politics of Centralization in Medieval Ayudhya," *Journal of the Siam Society* 78, no. 1 (1990): 88–100.

> Outside the central core of a kingdom, dual or multiple sovereignty or … no sovereignty, was less an anomaly than the norm. Thus, Chiang Khaeng, a small town near the current borders of Laos, Burma, and China, was tributary to Chiang Mai and Nan (in turn, tributary to Siam) and to Chiang Tung… (in turn, tributary to Burma). The situation was common enough that small kingdoms were often identified as "under two lords" or "under three lords" … and a "two-headed bird" in the case of nineteenth-century Cambodia's tributary relationship to both Siam and Dai Nan (Vietnam).[24]

In Scott's mandala conceptualization, Southeast Asian states recognized relative equality between mandalas A, B, and C without disputing territorial boundaries. Geographical boundaries were mutually recognized and typically fungible based on the season and the extent of state control over the territory.

Figure 3
Mandala governance



Source: James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 60.

[24] James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 61.

Under this system, overlapping boundaries were not rare, and those people who lived under several mandalas paid tribute to each mandala, rather than choosing one over the others. In this way, they enjoyed relative freedom and avoided the central core's meddling in their internal affairs. This system changed after the British and French colonizers encroached onto mainland Southeast Asia, forcing Siam to fix its borders and officially take in various minor kingdoms within its modern physical boundaries.[25]

Thai Diplomacy as Ontological Pragmatism

Pragmatists emphasize ever-changing complexity, intersubjectivity, and contingency in social relations. In this framework, Thai diplomatic acts are pragmatic transactions between the "geobody" and its environment, stimulated by survival impulses and past experiences. As a result, forming asymmetrical relations with both competing great powers, while simultaneously seeking more symmetrical partnerships with multilateral organizations, characterizes a habitual action of Thai diplomacy. This habitual action follows sub-intentional imperatives and supplies the context for its own behaviour revision. That is, such consistently diplomatic practices are not simply repetitive, ingrained behaviour, but reveal the process of human learning. In the face of domestic uncertainty and international unpredictability, diplomatic action requires constant improvisation, based on human experience, and oriented toward solving practical problems. In this way, repeated diplomatic behaviour constitutes social reality, which manifests in similar (though not identical) acts across social time and space.

What is the goal of Thailand's international relations? Rather than seeking material gains and protecting physical security, Thai diplomacy aims to maintain and improve upon its international prestige and to protect its "ontological security." Ontological security entails having a positive or optimistic view of the self, the world, and the future. Thai elites cultivate such a positive self-image by promoting the notion that the greatness of the Thai nation, since ancient times, is rooted in the Thai race.[26] They espouse a now-debunked narrative that a "Thai race" exists and is shaped by a pure ethnicity and the unity of Thai culture. This unity of Thai culture includes a combination of a shared Buddhist faith, Thai language, and reverence to the monarchy.[27] Since the 1910s, the government has socialized this nationalistic narrative to the public through popular songs and literature. In particular, literature became a foundational part of coping with the West's

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[25] Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*.

[26] Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wattakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity*.

[27] Duncan McCargo observes that shared faith and language have provided the state with an opportunity to promote Buddhism as a patriotic act of political Thai-ness. Moreover, royalist elites routinely use Buddhism as a political tool to legitimize state power. See Duncan McCargo, "Buddhism, democracy and identity in Thailand," *Democratization* 11, no. 4 (2004): 155–170.

influence and the construction of modern Thai nationalism.[28] Under an expanding public school system, students were encouraged to participate in newly written dramas with scripts that contained patriotic themes, emphasizing the glory of the Thai race.[29] On December 15, 2021, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha (Prayut hereafter) reinforced this idea of Thailand's greatness (*thai ying yai*) during his visit to the southern province of Yala by stating: "Although Thailand is inferior to the U.S. in terms of military might, we have a great culture of nation, religion, and king—that is our 'soft power.' We must make everyone accept that that's the source of Thai happiness."[30]

Thai elites prioritize cultivating a strong international image—a source of national pride to further enhance a positive self-image. They also seek ontological security that allows their compatriots to freely practice their daily routines, providing certainty and familiarity to their existence, thereby giving meaning to their lives.[31] States become ontologically insecure when critical situations rupture their routines, thus bringing fundamental questions to public discourse. Insecurity then arises with events that are inconsistent with the meaning of a collective life. To ensure their ontological security, states may even jeopardize their physical territory. As a result, Thai leaders have willingly ceded territories and physical sovereignty in the pursuit of the greater security of Thai identity.[32] They act in a manner consistent with the traditional conception of overlapping rings which characterizes "mandala"-style governance.

This ontological security and international image are based on promoting Thai perceptions of prosperity and freedom. For example, the Kingdom of Ayutthaya (1351–1767) built a great deal of its domestic legitimacy on its real and/or symbolic prosperity.[33] Buddhist notions of karma provide a moral justification for the riches of prosperous people. Moreover, the people of Ayutthaya defined themselves as free from rule by their former Khmer

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[28] Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Read Till It Shatters: Nationalism and Identity in Modern Thai Literature* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2018).

[29] Charnvit Kasetsiri, "The First Phibun Government and Its Involvement in World War II," *Journal of the Siam Society* 62, no. 2 (1974): 25–88 (see 39–40).

[30] Translated from Thai in Khaosod's twitter account at: https://twitter.com/KhaosodOnline/status/1471029425932099586.

[31] Anthony Giddens first introduced this concept in his *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

[32] For example, in 1893, Siam gave up its claim to the territories on the east bank of the Mekong River. In 1904, France further acquired control of the Lao provinces of Sayaburi and Champasak. In 1907, they obtained the Cambodian provinces of Battambang, Sisophon, and Siem Reap. In 1909, the British negotiated an end to Bangkok's claim to suzerainty over the northern Malay states of Kedah, Perlis, Trengganu, and Kelantan.

[33] Charnvit Kasetsiri, *The Rise of Ayudhya: A History of Siam in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976). In addition to the control of the Tenasserim coast and its trade, the Siamese king went to war against the Burmese over white elephants that he refused to give to the Burmese king in order to protect Siam's symbol of prosperity.

overlords, and they embraced the Thai word of "free man" (*tai*) to describe themselves.[34] In fact, the freedom to live amongst and associate with other Thais who shared ties of language and religion was the bedrock of early Thai states. During the last Burmese military campaign against Ayutthaya (1765–1767), its soldiers tried to abduct Siamese women. Some villagers gathered at Bang Rachan (about 80 kilometres north of Ayutthaya) and fought against the Burmese forces, who challenged their ontological security by disrupting their practiced daily routines.[35] Faced with impossible odds and nearly certain death, the villagers fought to protect their rights to live free (of harassment). However, they did not necessarily fight on behalf of Ayutthaya or its king.[36] In fact, the villagers felt bitterly towards Ayutthaya (to this day!) for its refusal to send weapons (particularly cannons), reinforcements, or assistance despite multiple requests. This is one example of the common practice among both Thai elites and commoners to value the symbols of prosperity and freedom that highlight the importance of ensuring Thailand's ontological security. Therefore, material gains and physical security are merely secondary goals, the results of promoting a positive national image. Today, Thailand aims to improve its international image of prosperity and freedom by attracting foreign investment from Japan, China, and the US. It chooses not to become bonded to a single country, as this may lessen its ontological security.[37]

Thailand's ontological pragmatism is based on a mechanism of positive (not zero-sum) leveraging of various relations with multiple powers in order to maintain Thai sovereignty, freedom, and prosperity. These foreign policy goals are based on an ontological sense of security, rather than a threat-centric security mindset. While Thai diplomats favour the presence of two powerful partners, one formal and one informal, they prefer additional partnerships with less powerful countries or multilateral organizations in order to safeguard Thai sovereignty, freedom, and prosperity. Thai leaders prioritize the projection of a positive Thai reputation based on the relative freedom and prosperity of its people. Preferred partners, then, are typically those that

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[34] George Cœdès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1968), 197.

[35] Burmese forces also included captured Siamese troops, who had pledged allegiance to the Burmese general. On the battles of Bang Rachan, see Chaweegnam Macharoen, *Wirachon Khai Bang Rachan* [The heroes of Bang Rachan] (Bangkok: Rongphim Kan Satsana, 1976). Mai Muangdoem also wrote a historical novel of *Bang Rachan* (Bangkok: Samnakphim Bannakhan, 1968). Two popular films about Bang Rachan came out in 1966 and 2000. A folk song "Bang Rachan" by Carabao is highly popular.

[36] Sunait Chutintaranon argues that Prince Damrong (King Chulalongkorn's half-brother) vastly exaggerated the battles of Bang Rachan to be anti-Burmese to promote popular support and Siamese nationalism for the newly emerged Chakri dynasty in Bangkok. See his "The Image of the Burmese Enemy in Thai Perceptions and Historical Writings," *Journal of the Siam Society*, 80, no. 1.1 (1992): 89–103. School children are taught Prince Damrong's nationalist version of Bang Rachan history in their textbooks.

[37] Peera Charoenvattananukul, *Ontological Security and Status-Seeking: Thailand's Proactive Behaviors During the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 2020), 7.

offer a foreign policy that helps promote such an image of Thailand, while maximizing its leveraging capacity. These pragmatic styles of Thai foreign relations offer a unique local perspective on the conduct of small-medium states, particularly in their ties with great powers, weaker states, and regional institutional infrastructure.

Previous studies of leveraging in international relations focus on a state's use of international organizations to "name, shame, and sanction" its rivals.[38] This frame perpetuates the Cold War paradigm of states building tools to exercise negative power to gain relative power within the international system, or between two jostling great powers. Within this understanding of leveraging, the largest risk to states is the temptation to over-leverage, depending on an abundance of relations that may contain unworkable contradictions. In its practice of ontological pragmatism, Thailand has risked leveraging too many relations in the face of a crisis.

Leveraging may appear similar to Kuik's idea of hedging, which includes three policy traits: not taking sides between competing powers, adopting opposite and contradictory measures, and using opposite acts to pressure gains while cultivating a "fallback" position.[39] Our conceptualization of ontological pragmatism and leveraging diverges from Kuik's hedging in three ways. First, states practicing ontological pragmatism do not limit their alignment choices by responding to two imposing and competing great powers. Instead, leveraging allows for a complementary deepening of relations with multiple great powers and international institutions, even if such ties are seemingly contradictory from an outsider's perspective. Second, we view foreign relations as driven by a positive choice to leverage upwards from small states to great powers. As such, ontological pragmatism allows for small states to forge formal or informal ties with great powers through positive and complementary acts, rather than "opposite" acts that are "mutually counteracting" or as a negative choice forced upon a small state by outside powers. Third, insights into the unique cultural identities driving ontological pragmatism provide nation-state-level context unavailable to theories applied to the region of Southeast Asia as a whole. By factoring in the ideals, norms, and cultural preferences common amongst a country's foreign policy elites, ontological pragmatism provides a frame ideally applied to a single nation-state, rather than a grouping of culturally diverse countries.

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[38] For example, see H. Richard Friman, *The Politics of Leverage in International Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[39] Kuik, "How Do Weaker States Hedge? 502–506.

Thai Parables of Alliance

Common Thai diplomatic practices of alliance formation follow the sub-intentional imperatives absorbed and developed through state schooling and pop culture. The action of choosing competing sides is well precedented in Thai culture, as demonstrated in various Thai parables and literary classics, such as the epic poems of *Sepha Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (KCKP hereafter).[40] The tragic tale depicts aristocratic life during the early Ayutthaya era, with all protagonists possessing a positive self-image. It is universally studied by school children and adapted into various mass media formats, making it well known among Thais.[41] Like the classics and mythologies of any culture, the parables of alliance from these texts and associated proverbs live in both the unconscious and the practical consciousness of educated Thais, which in turn helps to guide common behaviour.

Originally, KCKP was an unremarkable hero tale about Khun Phaen's unconditional loyalty to an absolute ruler of Suvarnaphumi (Suphanburi) and his acclaimed military campaigns of the Lanna (Chiang Mai) kingdom.[42] During the early Rattanakosin (Bangkok) period, the Chakri courts of King Loetlanaphalai (Rama II) commissioned literary figures, including Prince Sakdiphonlasep (Loetlanaphalai's uncle) and Sunthorn Phu (Siam's illustrious poet), among others, to recreate the tale of KCKP from an oral tradition into written form, with additional chapters and accompanying parables. The main parable of KCKP, especially for government officials, is arguably about unconditional "loyalty" to the ruler, regardless of whether or not the ruler is just or competent. Soon after the failed Palace Revolt of 1912, Prince Damrong (King Chulalongkorn's half-brother) constructed a standard edition of the tale based on four sets of manuscripts, in order to foster people's loyalty to an absolute monarchy.[43] In 1917 and 1918, the Vajirayan Royal Library, headed by Prince Damrong, published the book in three volumes. Since Prince Damrong was the founder of Siam's modern educational system, the Ministry of Education to this day mandates the use of his intertextuality of KCKP as one of the primary works in Thai language classes in order to teach the many Thai proverbs, idioms, and parables stemming from the text.[44] According to the 2008 *Basic Education Core*

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[40] We use the following Thai and English editions of KCKP: *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (Bangkok: Bamrungsahn, 1990); Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, translators, *The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2010).

[41] James H. Grayson, "The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen: Siam's Great Folk Epic of Love and War," *Folklore* 123, no. 2 (2012): 239.

[42] Interview on Thai cable TV with Sujit Wongthet, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScoHjzfrxVQ.

43 See Kittosak Jermsittiparsert, "Political Implication in 'Sepha Khun Chang—Khun Phaen,'" *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, no. 10 (2013): 86–95.

[44] Other notable Thai epic poems required for study in secondary schools include *Lilit Phra Lo* and Sunthorn Phu's *Phra Aphai Mani*. Because these classical tales do not metaphorically deal with alliance formation, we exclude them from the discussion. Although *Lilit Phra Lo* depicts the male

Curriculum, KCKP is included in the Thai language curriculum twice: in chapter 24, in which Khun Chang discovers and describes Wanthong's *song jai* (two hearts), and in chapter 35, in which the King of Ayutthaya orders Wanthong's execution for refusing to choose between Khun Chang and Khun Phaen.[45] It has been adapted into five full-length films, four television series, dozens of novelizations, and two pop songs. A recent and highly popular TV drama (*lakorn*), which focuses on the perspective of Wanthong, aired between 2020 and 2021, and featured a hit pop song *Songjai*.

KCKP depicts the love triangle between the beautiful Wanthong and her two suitors: the poor yet dashing maverick Khun Phaen and the rich yet fat bureaucrat Khun Chang. In love and living with Khun Phaen, Wanthong is duped into marrying Khun Chang, thinking that Khun Phaen has been killed at war. Surprisingly to her, Khun Phaen returns with a new wife, but her love for him remains the same. Despite the enormous cultural constraints imposed on Thai women during its feudal period, Wanthong leverages her beauty to maintain intimate relations with both, eventually causing intrigue and calamity, and leading King Pannawasa to order her to choose one under the punishment of death. Although she demonstrates admirable loyalty to both suitors by refusing to choose one over the other, the King is infuriated by her disloyalty to his command and eventually decides to execute her. Thai diplomacy can be understood from the position of Wanthong's *"song jai."* Wanthong longs for the handsome yet oft-absent playboy Khun Phaen and deeply cares for her well-heeled but bald devotee Khun Chang. By being committed and loyal to both men, Wanthong consciously chooses to prioritize no man over the other. As such, Wanthong refrains from speaking negatively about one to the other, as she views both men as equally important and neither as a threat to the other in her life. For her, to choose between them would cause more calamity and sadness for the other.

Similarly, Thai foreign policy and alignment choices operate on a series of mechanisms unique to its political system, decision-making philosophy, and national identity. First, in cultivating simultaneous relations with multiple state partners, Thai leaders will rarely speak poorly about one partner in front of the other in an attempt to play one off of the other. Instead, Thai leaders will use polite and deft diplomacy to directly manage each partner's expectations. This mirrors Wanthong's treatment of each male partner, both of whom resent the other man's presence in Wanthong's life. During the few moments of direct conflict between Khun Chang and Khun Phaen, Wanthong carefully abstains from picking sides and strives to play peacemaker. She leverages each partner to provide her with specific needs in her life. Similarly,

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protagonist as having multiple romantic partners with rival kingdoms, the main parable from this tragic tale is about reconciliation (and the negative impact of revenge).

[45] Thailand's Ministry of Education, *Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551* (Bangkok: Ministry of Education, 2008).

Thai officials handle relationships with opposing foreign partners by deepening ties with all, rather than choosing one over the other. They welcome any state that can contribute to Thailand's ontological security, even if that state is geopolitically opposed to another current partner.

In KCKP, Khun Phaen often leaves Wanthong to busy himself with womanizing and glory-seeking pursuits, like warfare and adventure. This allows Khun Chang to step in and devote all his love and riches to Wanthong. When Khun Phaen returns to the scene, often as a glorious hero, Wanthong then resumes her exciting and stimulating life with him. Similarly, Thailand will adjust or reassess its relationships with partner nations as a result of one partner's increased or decreased presence. It will choose to deepen relations with its partners, or establish new ones, based on its sense of ontological pragmatism, which can occur from internal challenges to Thai culture or an external identity-threatening nation.

"*Wanthong song jai*" also contains a romantic and heroic sentiment of love, loyalty, faithfulness, and personal sacrifice in having a romantic relationship with two men and being willing to die for not choosing one over the other. Given the restrictive norms of behaviour imposed on women in the feudal Ayutthaya society, Wanthong's actions are often sympathetically reinterpreted by modern audiences as heroic.[46] For example, the mid-1980s pop song "Wanthong" by Khon Dan Kwien and the 2021 TV drama "Wanthong" captures this reaction to the restrictions that Wanthong was forced to face in a feudal and chauvinistic system, given her class and gender. The pop song "Songjai" by Da Endorphine from the 2020 TV drama "Wanthong" adds a feminist interpretation to this sentiment. Wanthong laments: "It's my heart's fault for not remembering it shouldn't love someone else … . Even though I must choose someone, all choices only end in sadness." Therefore, she loves both, even when other people may view her as unfaithful or *ying songjai* (a two-hearted woman). Faced with difficult choices, she questions: "But who wants to be a bad person?"[47]

Interestingly, "*Wanthong song jai*" is similar to three other Thai proverbs: "*yiab rua song kham*," "*nok song hua*," and "*chub pla song mue*." *Yiab rua song kham* means to stand on each side of a boat's (canoe's) gunwale. The lesson in the proverb is that, since the sea is turbulent, one needs to stand on both sides of the gunwale in order to maintain balance and avoid falling into the water.[48] According to the Royal Institute Dictionary, *nok song hua* refers to a person who associates him/herself with two opposing/hostile sides for his/

[46] On class and gender relations during Siam's feudal period, see Jit Poumisak, *Chomna sakdina thai nai patchuban* [The real face of Thai feudalism today] (Bangkok: Nitisat, 1957). For the English translation and excellent analysis, see Craig J. Reynolds, *The Radical Discourse: The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1987).

[47] Author's translation.

[48] This is conceptually different from realism's notion of "balancing" with the weaker power to offset the potential aggression of the stronger power.

her own benefits.[49] This proverb also appears in KCKP.[50] The last Thai proverb, *chub pla song mue* (catching fish with two hands or catch [two] fish with each hand) implies a person who decides to engage in two difficult tasks simultaneously, including dating two people, without consideration of his/her own capability. Unlike *yiab rua song kham*, *chub pla song mue* and *nok song hua* contain clear negative connotations. The parable for *chub pla song mue* can be summarized as: don't do it (*ya*), because the probability for success is low. Similarly, a person that is described as a *nok song hua* is one who cannot be trusted.

Thai Diplomacy in Historical Perspective

Empirical evidence from the Ratanakosin (Bangkok) period supports the proposition we outlined above. We divide Thailand's modern history into four historical periods: the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, World War II, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War period. In our historical review, we employ five categories to explore Thailand's pragmatist international relations: its self-image at the time, its status of diplomatic relations, its foreign policy objectives, the outcomes of those diplomatic actions, and its eventual state of ontological security. Table 1 summarizes our central argument with supporting empirical evidence, organizing the four case study periods across five categories of analysis: Thailand's self-image at the time, the state of Thailand's diplomatic relations, the objectives of Thai leveraging, the outcomes of those diplomatic relationships, and the result of each for Thailand's ontological security. Despite variations across each of the first four categories of analysis, our research finds that the fifth remains constant; that is, Thailand's ontological security is consistently focused on improving its international self-image.

Siam During the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

During the nineteenth century, the regional balance of power in Asia shifted from China to Europe. By some luck, the British and the French defeated Siam's major rivals and determined its borders as a modern state. European powers lacked interest in colonizing Siam as they did other regions in Southeast Asia. The kingdom held no position along the European trade routes to China (for silk, porcelain, and tea) or to maritime Southeast Asia (for spices, peppers, and coffee). Moreover, Siam had few products to offer Europe and had no direct land access to China, unlike Burma and Indochina.[51] Nevertheless, Siamese kings exhibited a positive image of Siam

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[49] Royal Society of Thailand, *Royal Institute Dictionary* (Bangkok: Royal Society of Thailand, 2011).

[50] In KCKP, the king of Chiang Mai finds out that Chiang Tung has recently become associated with Ayutthaya and is planning to bring troops to attack Chiang Mai. After he finds out, he becomes furious, as Chiang Tung used to be a subordinate of Chiang Mai. Therefore, the king calls Chiang Tung a "*nok song hua*."

[51] Siamese exports such as sugar, wood, and deerskin were readily available in continental Europe.

Table 1
Thailand's pragmatist IR

<table>
<tr><th></th><th colspan="2">Nineteenth century</th><th colspan="2">WWII</th></tr>
<tr><td>Self-image</td><td colspan="2">-Central to European colonial projects
-Attractive as a buffer state between France and Britain</td><td colspan="2">-Central to Japan's attack against British Burma and Malaya
-Attractive as uncolonized state</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Diplomatic relations</td><td>Formal</td><td>Informal</td><td>Formal</td><td>Informal</td></tr>
<tr><td>Treaties with Britain (Bowring Treaty)</td><td rowspan="2">Traditional tribute relations with Qing China</td><td rowspan="2">Alignment with Imperial Japan in 1941</td><td>Underground "Free Thai" movement with US (via China)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Treaties with various other colonial powers</td><td>Undergroud "Free Thai" movement with Britain</td></tr>
<tr><td>Objective of leveraging</td><td>-Freedom by independence from colonization

-Prosperity through international trade</td><td>-Economic prosperity</td><td>-Return of territories lost to Britain and France in East and South

-Maintain freedom (independence)

-Ensure postwar economic prosperity via gold-backed loans</td><td>-Avoid punishment by Allies after WWII

-Maintain freedom through strategic alignment with rising US over Britain</td></tr>
<tr><td>Outcomes of diplomatic relationships</td><td colspan="2">-Uncolonized, maintained political freedom
-Maintained relative prosperity</td><td colspan="2">-Avoided Japanese control, maintained (relative) political freedom
-Ensured postwar prosperity</td></tr>
<tr><td>Ontological security</td><td colspan="2">Improved international self-image</td><td colspan="2">Improved international self-image</td></tr>
</table>

Cold War		Post-Cold War	
-Central to US war in Indochina -Attractive as a stopgap to the Domino Theory of communist expansion		-Central to regional supply chains and logistics -Attractive as a strategic location between US-China competition	
Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal
Treaty alliance with the US (Thanat-Rusk Communique, SEATO)	PRC (via Sang, Khmer Rouge)	Treaty alliance with the US	Numerous economic agreements and projects with PRC, growing to include defence cooperation
Founding member of ASEAN		ASEAN, faciliation of Mekong institutions with China, Japan, US, and neighbours	
-Prevent falling to communism (freedom) -Economic growth within global capitalist system -Regional stability	-Prevent domino falling to Vietnam in Cambodia -Economic expansion into PRC markets (prosperity)	-Prevent PRC regional hegemony (freedom) -Serve as "bridge-maker" to ensure regional stability and prosperity, notably with Myanmar -Position Thailand as respected free society	-Leverage against US pressure on human rights and democracy -Promote development of regional supply chains and Thailand as a logistics hub
-Avoided communist expansion, maintained political freedom -Economic prosperity through turning Indochina into marketplaces		-Avoiding pressures around US-China competition, ensuring political freedom -Economic prosperity as subregional economic leader	
Improved international self-image		Improved international self-image	

Source: Authors

to the West through a traditional and deeply meaningful symbol of prosperity: elephants. In 1824, King Nangklao (Rama III) supported the British campaigns against Burma with Siamese fleets and elephants.[52] Furthermore, King Mongkut (Rama IV) offered to assist the US president in developing the North's economy by sending him elephants, a gesture intended to project his kingdom's wealth and generosity.[53]

During the early nineteenth century, Siamese foreign trade operated under the old tribute economic regime, and the two ministers in charge of trade were deliberately foreigners. The Siamese king placed his richest Chinese subject (Chodukrachasetthi) in charge of trade with the East, while his richest Muslim (Chularachamontri) handled trade with India, the Middle East, and beyond.[54] Despite this even-handed approach, the China trade clearly ranked as one of the most lucrative of all the Siamese Crown's enterprises, in contrast to relatively meagre flows to the West.[55] Yet, the realities of the colonial period made the Siamese king's preference unworkable. The Chinese and Indian merchants he counted on soon operated in a subordinate role to the powerful Western imperialists. Both former regional powers lost control of their territories and national identities by political and economic projects of the colonial powers. In response, Mongkut and later Chulalongkorn (Rama V) perceived Western imperialism as Siam's greatest ontological security threat, because Western economic and cultural dominance could threaten to unravel the interwoven Thai identities of Buddhism and the Thai language. Thus, these Chakri kings promoted a new strategy focused on avoiding the imperial subjugation experienced by neighbouring states.

This strategy embraced five seemingly contradictory tenets. First in 1855, the Siamese accepted the change in global geopolitics when the British forced Siam to sign the Bowring Treaty and imposed an end to the royal monopoly on international trade, a fixed tariff rate of 3 percent, and extraterritorial rights for subjects of colonial powers. Rather than resisting this trend, or resigning itself to British dominance, Siam later signed similar "unequal treaties" with France, granting extraterritoriality and access to Siamese trade. These formal treaties were an intricate diplomatic compromise by Siamese leaders, intended to avoid forced concessions. By sacrificing certain aspects of its sovereignty, Siam leveraged both French colonial interests in Indochina and British interests in Burma without describing one party negatively to the other. It then incentivized beneficial competition

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[52] Wyatt, *Thailand*, 169; Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 86.

[53] Abbot Low Moffat, *Mongkut, the King of Siam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961).

[54] The *Rattanakosin Chronicles of 1831* describes Chinese and Indian/Muslim traders as people who would "stay under the complete control of the King," whereas European traders are depicted as bullies. Chaophraya Thiphakorawong, *Phraratchaphongsawadan krung rattanakosin ratchakan thi 3* [Royal chronicles of the third reign of Bangkok] (Bangkok: Khurusapha, 1969), 130.

[55] Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*.

between Britain and France for access to its markets. In contrast, neighbouring states often granted extraterritoriality to a single power, paving the way for future monopolistic trade and political domination.[56]

Second, in the absence of any multilateral organization, Siam later diversified its formal relations with a number of other major and minor powers, including the US and Japan. Mongkut and Chulalongkorn granted these new suitors similar rights of trade access and extraterritoriality. By opening the country to nearly all powers, Siamese leaders increased the competition for access to Bangkok's thriving port and trade markets, making the Western colonial powers competitive stakeholders in its success. Moreover, Siam further diversified its ties by increasing its informal ties to Qing China. By accepting European sovereignty over large swathes of Chinese territory and Southeast Asia, Siam recognized Chinese traders from those territories as equivalent to Europeans themselves, granting them the same extraterritoriality as their European imperial rulers. Many Chinese merchants in various port cities throughout Southeast Asia opportunistically responded by invoking their status as colonial subjects of Western powers to take advantage of extraterritorial rights. As a result, they continued to flourish economically and contributed to the growth and development of Siam's modern nation-state. Meanwhile, the Chakri kings maintained a cordial relationship with leading Chinese entrepreneurs in order to entice them to continue trading and investing in a transformed and bureaucratically modernized Siam.[57] In diversifying and leveraging its relations across formal and informal spaces, Siam managed to remain free from any imperial control, while ending its symbolic tribute system with Qing China in 1853. Table 2 provides a detailed summary of Thailand's various trade treaties.

Third, Siam faced an existential crisis from the two European powers encircling its frontier.[58] To the west and south, the British colonies in India, Burma, and Malaya dominated all commerce in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, and crucially controlled access through the Strait of Malacca at Singapore. To the north and east, French colonizers gradually encroached into Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. In particular, France gave Siam enormous difficulties, approaching a rupture of their relations. Siamese leaders regarded the geopolitical shifts during this period unfavourably and viewed the presence of Westerners in their kingdom with serious concerns. The Chakri kings soon had to seek help from foreign advisors, and preferred to rely upon unbiased or "disinterested" nations for support. In 1892, the Chakri courts established the office of the general-adviser, with extraordinary

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[56] Only Qing China ceded its sovereignty to several Western powers in specific port cities, while losing its domestic and global legitimacy in the process.

[57] Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*.

[58] Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 62–94.

Table 2
"Unequal" treaties with Siam: 1826–1910

Year	Siamese King	Treaty Partner	Treaty Name	Result / Outcome of Treaty
1826	Nangkhlao	Great Britain	Burney Treaty	Transfer of four Malay states to British control, Patani remaining Siamese
1833	Nangkhlao	United States	Siamese-American Treaty of Amity and Commerce	Free trade, most favoured nation status
1855	Mongkut	Great Britain	Bowring Treaty	Free trade, extraterritoriality rights for British in Siam
1856	Mongkut	France	Treaty of Trade and Commerce	Free trade, extraterritoriality for French in Siam, protections for French missionaries
1856	Mongkut	Denmark	Treaty of Amity and Commerce	Free trade, extraterritoriality rights for Danes in Siam
1856	Mongkut	United States	Harris Treaty	Expanded on 1833 treaty by adding extraterritoriality rights to Americans in Siam
1860	Mongkut	Portugal	Treaty of Amity and Commerce	Free trade, extraterritoriality rights for Portuguese in Siam
1862	Mongkut	Prussia	Treaty of Amity and Commerce	Free trade, extraterritoriality rights for Prussians in Siam
1867	Mongkut	France	Treaty between France and Siam	Siamese recognition of French Cambodia, French recognition over Siamese control of Siem Reap/ Battambang
1868	Mongkut	Belgium (& Luxembourg)	Treaty of Commerce, Friendship, and Navigation	Free trade, extraterritoriality rights for Belgians in Siam
1868	Mongkut	Italy	Treaty of Commerce, Friendship, and Navigation	Free trade, extraterritoriality rights for Italians in Siam
1868	Mongkut	Norway	Treaty of Commerce, Friendship, and Navigation	Free trade, extraterritoriality rights for Norwegians in Siam
1868	Mongkut	Sweden	Treaty of Commerce, Friendship, and Navigation	Free trade, extraterritoriality rights for Swedes in Siam
1887	Chulalongkorn	Japan	Declaration of Amity and Commerce between Japan and Siam	Mutual diplomatic recognition, free trade guarantees
1893	Chulalongkorn	France	Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1983	Siam cedes Laos to France

1897	Chulalongkorn	Japan	Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation	Most favoured nation status, extraterritoriality for Japanese in Siam
1899	Chulalongkorn	Russia	Treaty of Friendship and Maritime Navigation	Free trade, extraterritoriality for Russians in Siam
1907	Chulalongkorn	France	Treaty of 1907 between France and Siam	Return of Battambang and Angkor States to Cambodia (now a French Protectorate)
1909	Chulalongkorn	Britain	Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909	Thai recognition of British Malaya, British recognition of Siamese Pattani, Songkhla

Sources: Uma Shankar Singh, "Thailand's Policy towards the Western powers during the reign of Mongkut: 1851-1868," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 40 (1979): 997–1004; Shane Strate, *The Lost Territories: Thailand's History of National Humiliation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 24–36. Relevant archives of these treaties can also be found in the articles of the Siam Society Under Royal Patronage's *Journal of the Siam Society* (https://thesiamsociety.org/publications/journal-of-the-siam-society).

influence and responsibility over the kingdom's foreign policy, home legislation, finance, and the general order of the country.[59] Chulalongkorn reasoned:

> ... our friendliness towards both France and England can cause us concern when coming to the question of appointing our advisers … . If we appoint a British as an adviser, the French will be very concerned about this, or if we appoint a French to such a post, this will also cause concern among the British. Therefore, if we choose to appoint some national of a neutral country ... things will be easier.[60]

As a result, Chakri kings employed a Belgian and three successive Americans to act as general-adviser to the kingdom: M. Rolin-Jacquemyns (1892–1903), Edward H. Strobel (1903–1908), Jens I. Westengard (1908–1915), and Wolcott H. Pitkin (1915–1917). In particular, Strobel, a Harvard law professor, is credited with improving Siam's relations with France and Britain by softening Chulalongkorn's position in regard to the two European nations.

Fourth, Siam embarked on a long-term modernization campaign by developing its infrastructure and centralizing political control within its newly

[59] Thamsook Numnoncla, "The First American Advisers in Thai History," *Journal of the Siam Society* 62, no. 2 (1974): 121–148.

[60] *Papers of Prince Damrong* (Bangkok: National Archives), section 56, file 130.

established borders.[61] Under the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1867–1910), Siam committed to developing into a modern nation-state with the abolition of slavery, construction of schools and railroads, and the creation of a Western-style administrative system.[62] Thongchai Winichakul considered even the simple act of commissioning an authoritative map of Siam to be a politically revolutionary move.[63] Defining Siam's territory on a physical map meant partially forgoing the traditional view of Siam as a "mandala" polity, and embracing Western perceptions of physical sovereignty. This modernization of administrative control and remapping process was accompanied by an acceptance of permanent territorial losses, including Laos, the Shan state, western Cambodia, and northern Malaya.[64] For Chulalongkorn (and Mongkut earlier), these territorial losses over areas outside of Siam's traditional sphere were worth the sacrifice in order for Siam to preserve its ontological security. By removing French troops from Chantaboon Province (near Bangkok) and regaining formal judicial control of the people inside its borders, Siam lost territory on the map, but solidified itself as a state. Interestingly, American General-Adviser Edward Strobel convinced Chulalongkorn to sign the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1904 and the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, which granted these peripheral territories to France and Britain, in exchange for a return of judiciary rights.[65] These diplomatic compromises with European powers and their modernization projects helped to improve Siam's international image and to legitimize its place as an independent polity in the Western-dominated international system. As a result, Siam avoided colonial domination, while allowing Siamese leaders to independently develop their new governance, and to launch modernization.

Fifth, Siam sought to ingratiate itself into the international system. Siam decided to participate in World War II by sending an expeditionary force to the European theatre to demonstrate its modernity and international status. During the 1920s, Siamese representatives to the League of Nations cautiously considered standing for election to the League Council. However, Siamese officials ultimately decided against it for "fear of being drawn into great power disputes, and especially the possibility of having to take sides in the event of a clash between the French and the British governments."[66] They

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[61] Christopher Paik and Jessica Vechbanyongratana, "Path to Centralization and Development: Evidence from Siam," *World Politics* 71, no. 2 (2019): 291–293.

[62] Prasertkul, "The Transformation of the Thai State"; Paik and Vechbanyongratana, "Path to Centralization and Development."

[63] Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*.

[64] By the time of the Franco-Siamese War of 1893, Siam was forced to cede control of modern Laos, but not give up any territory west of the Mekong or cede any further sovereignty to the French. See Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25.

[65] Numnoncla, "The First American Advisers in Thai History," 130–135. Besides Siam's diplomacy and modernization, the Anglo-Franco agreements left the Menam area to be a buffer zone, thereby also partly contributing to Siam's independence.

[66] Benjamin A. Batson, *The End of Absolute Monarchy in Siam* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), 179.

reasoned that "Siam is not strong enough to freely express her opinion [on European matters]," choosing instead to take a subdued yet still active position.[67] By doing so, Siam improved its leveraging power within the newly established international system.

Thailand During the Pacific War

Following Japanese imperial expansion into Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria, Thai leaders understood that the regional balance of power was noticeably shifting away from European powers. On one hand, some viewed the rising power of Japan favourably. Imperial Japan, which expanded its influence with an expressly anti-Western focus, put the overbearing European colonial powers on the defensive. On the other hand, Japanese militarism and colonial excesses in Korea and Manchuria led to skepticism in Bangkok of Japan's actual, presumably imperial goals in spreading its pan-Asian vision.[68] Like Wanthong, Thai leaders chose to cultivate and leverage their relations with both Japan and the Allied powers, despite their rivalry, to counter a larger ontological threat of losing independence and maintaining prosperity.

A pivotal moment came at the League of Nations in 1933, when Japan walked out of the organization in response to a unanimous condemnation of Japanese actions in Manchuria following the Mukden Incident of 1931. In a diplomatic act, Siam provided the single abstaining vote. This "neutral" stance empowered Thailand's position, as both the Japanese and Europeans competed to curry favour in Bangkok in support of future initiatives. Moreover, Japan was a major market for Thai rice. Thai diplomats feared if the League voted to impose economic sanctions on Japan, that would negatively affect Thailand's already depressed rice trade.[69] Thailand's ruling political clique opportunistically but cordially leveraged competing offers, sometimes with strategic exaggeration, in order to gain support from each party. This resulted in a formal relationship with Japan and the recovery of territory previously conceded to France and Britain.

In July 1941, Thailand provided a 10-million-baht loan to Japan, but stipulated that it must be repaid in gold. In August 1941, Thailand provided another 25-million-baht loan, requiring the gold to be stored in Bangkok.[70]

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[67] *Papers of Prince Damrong* (Bangkok: National Archives), section 42, file 118.

[68] Thailand's relative ambiguity between both sides in this rising conflict is best outlined in a contemporary account by John L. Christian and Nobutake Ike, "Thailand in Japan's Foreign Relations," *Pacific Affairs* 15, no. 2 (June 1942): 195–221.

[69] Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Seventh Reign" (Bangkok: National Archives), section 20, file 14.

[70] Interestingly, Phibun and Pridi, who led the 1932 coup that transformed Siam from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, became political rivals with diverging positions on Thailand's alignment choices during the war. The diplomatic efforts to secure these loans in gold held in Bangkok was a rare point of cooperation between them. Despite Pridi's pro-Western leanings, he strongly advocated for the gold-backed loan. Embassy Bangkok, "Chargé in Thailand (Chapman) to the Secretary of State" (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), archival document 438, available at: https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1939v01/d860; "Pridi announcement regarding the negotiations," *Japan Times and Advertiser*, 30 August 1941.

By late 1941, however, Japan forced Thailand's hand. The Imperial Japanese Army menacingly massed its troops along Thailand's southern border, with Thai territory standing as the only barrier to a full invasion of British Malaya.[71] Meanwhile, British forces in Burma and Malaya stood ready to defend their colonies, seemingly prepared to violate Thai sovereignty in the process to do so.[72] Following brief skirmishes with Japan (and Britain) on its southern borders while Prime Minister Phibun was conspicuously on the road visiting Chachoengsao Province, he threw his weight behind a formal alignment with the Japanese, signing an agreement to allow the Japanese free access to move through Thailand for operations against Burma and Malaya.[73] However, calling Phibun's agreement with Imperial Japan a formal "alliance" is a slight misnomer, as not all Thai leaders signed a full alliance treaty with the Japanese. Instead, Phibun signed a formal agreement that specifically "permitted" Japanese free passage through Thailand, as long as the Japanese respected Thai "sovereignty" by, for example, not disarming Thai forces or remaining overnight in Bangkok.[74] Thai leaders carefully crafted an accommodation with Japan that could be perceived by all parties as neither the act of an occupied nation nor one of an unambiguous collaborator.

This distinction empowered other Thai leaders, namely the Regent Pridi Banomyong (Pridi), to form informal ties with the Allied powers to balance Japanese influence. This Western-aligned faction was notably influential within the cabinet. After Phibun declared war on the Allies in early 1942, for example, he could not gather enough signatures to legally certify the action. Meanwhile, Ambassador Seni Promoj failed to deliver a *demarche* to the US government. As a result, the US never declared war on Thailand.[75] In Thailand, the pro-Allies Seri Thai (Free Thai) emerged with Pridi (code name "Ruth") acting as the main interlocutor between the resistance and the US, engaging in informal, clandestine collaboration between the US and high-ranking Thai officials. Seri Thai leaders chose to favour the Office of Strategic Services, the precursor to today's Central Intelligence Agency, over British intelligence, as the British still considered Thais to be "enemy aliens," and responsible for the loss of British Malaya.[76] Choosing the US as a wartime

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[71] E. Bruce Reynolds, *Thailand and Japan's Southern Advance, 1940–1945* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994).

[72] Christian and Ike, "Thailand in Japan's Foreign Relations," 218–219.

[73] Edward Thaddeus Flood, "Japan's Relations with Thailand: 1928–1941," (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 1967).

[74] Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Dainiji sekai taisen to Nipponkoku Taikokukan dōmei jōyaku teiketsu" [World War II and the signing of the Japan-Thailand alliance treaty] (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1941), available at: https://www.digital.archives.go.jp/das/image/M0000000000000800419.

[75] David Van Praagh, *Thailand's Struggle for Democracy: The Life and Times of M. R. Seni Pramoj* (New York: Helmers and Meier, 1996), 51–53.

[76] Puey Ungphakon, "Temporary Soldier," in *Thai Politics: Extracts and Documents, 1932–1957*, ed. Thak Chaloemtiarana (Bangkok: Thammasat University Printing Office, 1978), 406.

partner rather than Britain, which was busy fighting the Japanese in the colonies, was a deliberate act within Thailand's informal ties with the Allies.[77] Despite the raging war, Thailand perceived a postwar imperialist Britain and France to be the biggest threats to Thai sovereignty, freedom, and prosperity.

A less well-known, underground anti-Japanese group in Thailand during World War II involved the Sino-Thais. Prominent and high-ranking *lukjin* (offspring of an ethnic Chinese), who led this group, made secret missions to Chongqing, where Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek operated his wartime government. As a result, Chiang perceived Thailand as a victim of Japanese imperialist aggression, and not as a collaborator. Wongsurawat claims that "China's endorsement of Thailand's pro-Allied position in the Second World War was crucial in bringing about further endorsement by the United States and eventually [a] favourable outcome for Thailand upon the conclusion of the war."[78] This endorsement proved important after the war ended, when the British wanted to punish Thailand for Phibun's "declaration of war" against the Allies and collaborating with Japan. In contrast, the US posited that Thailand was better classified as an occupied territory, and restored it to full sovereignty following the war. As a result of its *songjai*, Thailand remained unconquered by the Japanese during the war and unpunished by the Allied powers after the war. In effect, it even improved its international self-image as both an uncolonized and unconquered (by Japan) nation. More importantly, Thailand emerged prosperous due to its shrewd wartime loan to the Japanese, which it still demanded be paid back in gold after the war had ended.[79]

Thailand During the Cold War

Following World War II, Thailand swapped its informal ties for a formalized alliance relationship with the US throughout the Cold War, with the US serving as Thailand's guarantor of sovereignty and national identity of "*chart* (nation), *sasana* (religion), and *phramaha kasat* (monarchy)." After the 1947 coup, Phibun spearheaded this change in Thai international relations in the form of a formal military alliance with the US in the face of ontological challenges from Communist China and Vietnam. Thailand was the first Southeast Asian country to send troops to the US-led coalition fighting in support of South Korea on the Korean Peninsula. It also supported the US-backed government in Saigon. With its strong formal defence ties with the US, complemented by informal economic partnerships with Japan and China, Thailand set itself up for a comfortable period of both freedom and

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[77] A smaller pro-British faction, the "Free Siamese Movement," played a smaller role throughout the war.

[78] Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 130.

[79] After the war, it took two C-47 planes to transport the gold from Bangkok to Fort Knox for storage on behalf of the Thai government. Interview with Pote Inkaninanda, a former Thai official responsible for this transport, 1 August 1991.

prosperity, leveraging all regional powers, similar to Wanthong's positioning with both Khun Chang and Khun Phaen.

Throughout the Cold War, the Thai government grouped ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese migrants into a single pool of threatening, non-Thai foreign interlopers, dedicated to overthrowing the Thai sociopolitical system. Therefore, Thailand sought new formal security partners to safeguard against perceived challenges from Communist China and Indochina, leading to a formal alliance with the US through the 1954 Manila Pact of the former Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), the 1962 Thanat-Rusk communiqué, and the 1966 Treaty of Amity and Economic Relations.[80] The waves of Communist revolution in Indochina, varyingly sponsored by Moscow and Beijing, threatened the security of Thailand's borders, as well as traditions of commerce and Buddhism, making both the Soviet Union and China unworkable formal partners in national polyandry. In 1967, with the creation of ASEAN, Thailand also established enduring partnerships with four Southeast Asian neighbours. It was the Thai Foreign Ministry that wrote the first draft of the ASEAN Charter, and the founding ASEAN Declaration was promulgated in Bangkok.[81] The declaration stressed the importance of promoting regional prosperity, freedom of movement, and freedom of political association. It provided an alternative economic model for equitable economic growth to Chinese, Vietnamese, or Soviet-style socialism. As a founding member of ASEAN, Thailand has shaped the organization's priorities from an early date and has leveraged ASEAN to promote its perceptions of freedom and prosperity.

Nevertheless, the Phibun government maintained informal person-to-person relations with Beijing through his longtime advisor Sang Phathanothai. Phibun recruited Sang to establish Thailand's informal relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Soon after the 1955 Bandung Conference, Sang led a small delegation of Thai officials to Beijing, meeting both Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong.[82] During the meeting, Mao advised Sang that Thailand should "not side with anyone" in its dealings with China and the US.[83] Despite backing formal alignment with the US, Phibun sent Sang's daughter Sirin as a goodwill offering to Zhou, reenacting a historical practice of human "pledges" sent to China as an act of imperial deference.[84]

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[80] On Thai-US relations during the Cold War, see Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead, "Cold War and Thai Democratization," in *Southeast Asia and the Cold War*, ed. Albert Lau (New York: Routledge, 2012), chapter 11.

[81] Amitav Acharya, *The Making of Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

[82] Mitchell Tan, "Confronting Communism: Sang Phatthanothai and Thailand's Dynamic Relationship with the Cold War, 1948–1957," *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 33, no. 1 (March 2018): 90.

[83] Tan, "Confronting Communism," 91.

[84] Sirin Phathanothai and James Peck, *The Dragon's Pearl* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994). This book discusses the domestic politics surrounding China's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution from a Thai perspective.

After the 1957 coup, Sarit Thanarat ended Sang's dealings with the PRC and jailed him for alleged leftist tendencies.[85] Until the end of the 1960s, the PRC continued to be at the core of the Thai government's anti-Communist policies, which were further exacerbated by the fall of Laos and Cambodia to Communism. Yet, Thailand's stridently anti-Communist government continued to pursue informal relations with the PRC. These paid off following the US rapprochement with the PRC in 1972 and the fall of Saigon to North Vietnam in 1975. A unified Vietnamese state changed Thai leaders' ontological security perceptions, with the danger of Chinese influence outweighed by potential Vietnamese (and Soviet) regional hegemony. Within a few months after the Communist takeover of Saigon, Thailand switched its diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China in Taipei to the PRC in Beijing. Even the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) issued an official position stating they would stand by the Chinese policy against the "social imperialism of the Soviet and Vietnamese." The CPT based their anti-Soviet and anti-Vietnam position on the "Three World Theory" put forth by the Chinese Communist Party.[86]

This trend accelerated under Deng Xiaoping. Previously seen as a challenge to Bangkok due to its sponsorship of revolution among overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, post-Mao China offered middle-income Thailand a lucrative trading partner and market for Thai exports.[87] For example, the first registered foreign company in the PRC was the Charoen Pokphand (CP) Group (known as *Zhèng Dà* or 正大 in China) of the Sino-Thai Chearavanont family. The informal relationship deepened further following the Asian financial crisis, when the PRC offered US$4 billion in aid to Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries without the "humiliating" conditions attached by the IMF.[88] These ebbs and flows of the informal relationship with China highlight Thailand's actions within the parameters of its formal-informal strategy. The doctrinaire chaos of Mao-era China, for example, removed China as a potential partner for Thai leaders, as China was either absent from Thailand's sphere or only present in order to promote Communist revolution. When China regained its domestic and economic footing under Deng Xiaoping, Thai leaders recognized the benefits of leveraging an informal and complementary partnership with the new China without degrading or subordinating its formal ties with the US.

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[85] Tan, "Confronting Communism," 96–97.

[86] Thigarn Srinara, "Lang 6 tula: wadeau kwam katyang tang kwamkit rawang kabuankan naksueksa kab pak kommunid haeng prathet thai" [After October 6: regarding intellectual dispute between the students and the Communist Party of Thailand] (Bangkok: 6 Tula Lamleuk Press, 2009), 145. We thank Thanet Aphornsuvan for bringing this point to our attention.

[87] Kevin Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," *Pacific Review* 31, no. 1 (2018): 119–120.

[88] Interestingly, as China (and Japan) stepped in to help with the Asian Financial Crisis, the US watched on the sidelines. See William A. Callahan, "Beyond Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism: Diasporic Chinese and Neo-Nationalism in Thailand," *International Organization* 57, no. 3 (2003): 497.

Thailand's less well known but meaningful security cooperation with Deng's China took place in Cambodia, where both the PRC and Thailand sent and sponsored varying levels of support to the Khmer Rouge regime in an attempt to counter a perceived malign Vietnamese influence in the region.[89] Meanwhile, at this time, the US had recently fought a war against Vietnam and shared Thailand's (and China's) skepticism of Vietnamese intentions.[90] The *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Thai officials sponsored the smuggling of arms and supplies to the Khmer Rouge, while the US provided food aid to approximately 40,000 Khmer Rouge insurgents in semi-official bases in Thai territory.[91] Gregory Vincent Raymond observes that, rather than attempting to militarily challenge Vietnam's expanding influence in Indochina, Thai military and foreign policy elites pushed for a strategy of coalition building, akin to leveraging, through Bangkok's relations with Beijing, Washington, and ASEAN. Raymond identifies "politico-military narratives" of Thai culture from the Bangkok and Ayutthaya periods as a primary variable to explain this strategic choice.[92] Facing a self-perceived threat to Thailand's unity (i.e., ontological security), Bangkok chose to call upon its partners and allies, rather than face the Vietnamese threat. These narratives were so prolific and universal as to even impact the internal structure of the Thai Armed Forces, leading to questionable military decision making but focusing military leaders on effective leveraging of diverse international partners.

During the standoff over the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, Raymond claims that Bangkok's overreliance on near-contradictory coalitions built through multi-layered leveraging reduced the success of Thailand's anti-Vietnam strategy.[93] Nevertheless, from the perspective of ontological pragmatism, the successful practice of leveraging seemingly opposed partners represents a success in itself. While such a strategy may not perfectly protect Thai sovereignty from a Western perspective, it does promote Thailand as a respected, prosperous, and free country with high standing in the international community.

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[89] Interview with Stanley Karnow, Potomac, Maryland, 1 November 2012.

[90] Published oral history of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training from Ambassador Victor L. Tomseth, former deputy chief of mission at the US Embassy in Bangkok, 13 May 1999; Ambassador Morton I. Abramowitz, former chief of mission at the US Embassy in Bangkok, 10 April 2007, available at: https://www.adst.org (accessed 8 June 2021).

[91] See Michael Haas, *Cambodia, Pol Pot, and the United States: The Faustian Pact* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991).

[92] Gregory V. Raymond, "Strategic Culture and Thailand's Response to Vietnam's Occupation of Cambodia, 1979–1989: A Cold War Epilogue," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 4–45. doi:10.1162/jcws_a_00924.

[93] Raymond, "Strategic Culture, 4–45.

Post-Cold War Foreign Relations and the 2014 Coup

During the post-Cold War period, Thailand has strived to play a central role in regional supply chains, and to promote itself as providing an attractive strategic location between US-China competition. In a 2021 campaign, Secretary General Duangjai Asawachintachit of the Board of Investment refers to "Thailand's strategic positioning as ASEAN's investment hub and gateway to Asia."[94] Accordingly, Thai leaders have sought to improve the country's international self-image in order to ensure its ontological security. In particular, the Thai government actively seeks "to secure Japanese investment and Thailand's position as the key regional production base with well-equipped infrastructures and abundant natural resources for Japan."[95] Unsurprisingly, Japan dominated Thailand's FDI inflows for five decades, until 2020, when China became Thailand's top source of FDI applicants.[96] Japan plans more investment to complete the Eastern Economic Corridor, connecting industries in Chonburi, Rayong, and Chachoensao.[97] The Thai government also agreed to a nearly 900-kilometre, Chinese-backed, North-South rail network connecting Kunming in the North to Singapore, crossing over Laos, Thailand, and Malaysia along the way.[98] This high profile and expensive high-speed rail project is believed to be a critical part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Southeast Asia and at the heart of China's infrastructure goals for the region. In terms of trade, China, Japan, and the US consistently ranked among the top three trading partners with Thailand between 2009 and 2019. Interestingly, China was Thailand's largest export partner for seven years, while the US held that position for four years. Thailand also enjoyed a trade surplus with the US and consistently suffered a trade deficit with China. Table 3 provides a snapshot of these trends in Thai economic relations from 2009 to 2019.

As for security, Thailand continues to maintain a formal defence treaty with the US. In 2003, the US elevated Thailand's status as a major non-NATO ally (MNNA). This designation came within weeks of a successful joint Thai-US operation to capture Jemaah Islamiah terrorist leader Riduan Isamuddin (a.k.a. Hambali) in Thailand, hailed at the time as an example of US-Thai

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[94] See https://www.boi.go.th/index.php?page=press_releases_detail&topic_id=125494.

[95] See https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/thaijap300764-3?cate=5d5bcb4e15e39c306000683e.

[96] The importance of Japanese FDI to Thailand was further demonstrated by the fact that the junta chose the Japanese Chamber of Commerce as its first meeting with a foreign group after the 2014 coup. See Nobuhiro Aizawa, "The Japanese business community as a diplomatic asset and the 2014 Thai coup d'etat," in *The Courteous Power: Japan and Southeast Asia in the Indo-Pacific Era*, eds. John D. Ciorciari and Kiyoteru Tsutsui (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2021), chapter 8.

[97] Japan International Cooperation Agency, "Southeast Asia and the Pacific," *JICA Annual Report 2019* (Tokyo: JICA, 2018), available at: https://www.jica.go.jp/english/publications/reports/annual/2019/c8h0vm0000f7nzvn-att/2019_05.pdf.

[98] Kate Hodal, "Thailand's ruling junta approves China rail links worth $23bn.," *The Guardian*, 1 August 2014, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/01/thailand-junta-approve-china-rail-link-23bn.

Table 3
Thai economic trends from 2009–2019 (in million USD)

Country	FDI (ranking)	Trade volume (ranking)	Total exports (ranking)	Total imports (ranking)
Japan	38,494 (1)	632,168 (2)	239,340 (3)	392,829 (2)
United States	11,208 (3)	409,919 (3)	262,790 (2)	147,126 (3)
China	5270 (5)	692,117 (1)	279,554 (1)	412,622 (1)

Sources: Bank of Thailand, "Thailand's Macro Economic Indicators," 2020, available at: https://www.bot.or.th/App/BTWS_STAT/statistics/BOTWEBSTAT.aspx?reportID=409&language=ENG; Thailand's Ministry of Commerce, "Foreign Trade Statistics of Thailand," 2020, available at: http://tradereport.moc.go.th/TradeThai.aspx.

security collaboration.[99] However, events following the 2014 coup have placed a strain on Thailand's formal relationship with the US, and have strengthened its informal ties with China. The Obama administration reacted negatively to the coup, cancelling around US$3.5 million in financing for military purchases, reducing funding for the training of Thai military officers, and scaling down the annual Cobra Gold exercises.[100] The Obama administration's swift denunciation dented Thailand's carefully cultivated self-image as a land of freedom and prosperity. Coup leader General Prayut was surprised by the administration's relative tolerance of a similar coup in Egypt, which received no formal downgrade in security ties. In contrast, Prayut appreciated the Trump administration's focus on business interests in American foreign policy and lack of interest in human rights and democracy promotion, a sensitive topic for Thailand's ruling clique.[101] Despite the downgrade in the relationship, the US sold roughly US$600 million of military equipment to Thailand from 2015 to 2019.

With a cooling in its formal relations with the US following the 2014 coup, Thai leaders have leveraged their informal security ties with China to expand military cooperation by purchasing Chinese military equipment and inviting the People's Liberation Army to join bilateral military exercises.[102] In fact, military sales from China to Thailand date back to the late Cold War.[103] From

[99] Interview with Ambassador Alex Arvizu, former deputy chief of mission at the US Embassy in Bangkok, Arlington, Virginia, 4 June 2021.

[100] Claudio Sopranzetti, "Thailand's Relapse: The Implications of the May 2014 Coup," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 2 (May 2016): 299–316; Kasian Tejapira, "Elite alignment, a populist moment: reflections on Thailand 2019 general elections," *New Mandala*, 4 April 2019; Chris Baker, "The 2014 Thai Coup and Some Roots of Authoritarianism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 3 (2016): 388–404.

[101] Interview with Ambassador Glyn Davies, former chief of mission to the US Embassy in Bangkok, Washington, DC, 14 May 2020.

[102] Charlie Campbell and Felix Solomon, "Thailand's Leader Promised to Restore Democracy. Instead, He's Tightening His Grip," *Time*, 21 June 2018, available at: https://time.com/5318235/thailand-prayuth-chan-ocha/.

[103] Ian Storey, "Thailand's Military Relations with China: Moving from Strength to Strength," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 43 (2019): 3–4.

1987 to 1988, China sold over 400 armoured personnel carriers, 50 Type 69 main battle tanks, 650 HB-5A man-portable surface-to-air missile systems, and 6 warships to Thailand at remarkably low "friendship prices."[104] Modest military sales, mostly consisting of upkeep and upgrades to previously purchased equipment, continued through the 1990s and 2000s.[105] From 2016 to 2017, China and Thailand committed to the largest round of military purchases in the history of their relationship, with Thailand spending around US$1.3 billion on 48 advanced VT-4 main battle tanks, 3 S-26T diesel-electric submarines, and 34 ZBL-09 armoured personnel carriers.[106] Thailand's recent military purchases from China do not reflect a security realignment away from the US, but are likely a result of China's lack of concern for human rights violations or political restrictions on arms sales—not to mention their relatively low costs of purchase, upkeep, and maintenance. In addition, Thailand committed to a jointly funded weapons production and maintenance centre in Khon Kaen run by Norinco, a leading Chinese arms manufacturer.[107]

Combined Thai-Chinese military exercises also grew in scope and scale, especially after the 2014 coup. Joint military exercises with China began in 2005 and expanded in 2011. In December 2011, all Mekong-adjacent countries (except Vietnam) began conducting joint law enforcement and paramilitary security patrols of the Mekong River.[108] Between 2011 and (April) 2021, Thailand and China collaborated on 103 joint river patrols.[109] These regular patrols formed the first meaningful basis of direct Thai-PRC military

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[104] Armoured personnel carriers, rather than tanks, are a mainstay of Thai arms purchases. Given Thailand's domestic unrest, these weapons can be used against Muslim insurgents in Pattani as well as pro-democracy youth protestors in Bangkok.

[105] This included upgrades to on-board, anti-ship missiles on previously sold Juanghu and Naresuan-class frigates, as well as the latest model QW-18 man-portable, surface-to-air missile systems.

[106] Storey, "Thailand's Military Relations with China," 4.

[107] Panu Wongcha-um, "Thailand Plans Joint Arms Factory with China," *Reuters*, 16 November 2017, available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-defence/thailand-plans-joint-arms-factory-with-chinaidUSKBN1DG0U4.

[108] Michael Sullivan, "China reshapes the vital Mekong River to power its expansion," *NPR*, 6 October 2018, available at: https://www.npr.org/2018/10/06/639280566/china-reshapes-the-vital-mekong-river-to-power-its-expansion; "China Focus: Joint patrols on Mekong revitalize 'golden waterway,'" *Xinhua*, 24 November 2019, available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/24/c_138579268.htm; The "Mekong River Massacre" provided the impetus for the creation of these joint patrols. In October 2011, a transnational criminal group attacked two Chinese shipping vessels, killing 13 Chinese sailors in Thai waters along the Mekong River. This attack led to a Chinese suspension of all shipping along the Mekong, jeopardizing regional economic ties and development. The Thai government rapidly responded and arrested nine militants suspected of conducting the attack, most of whom "disappeared from the justice system" under mysterious circumstances. Brian Eyler, *Last Days of the Mighty Mekong* (Zed Books: London, 2019), 124–127; "Whitewash at Chiang Saen," *Bangkok Post*, 2 October 2016, available at: https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1100293/whitewash-at-chiang-saen.

[109] "Mekong River patrol goes after drug crimes," *China Daily*, 26 March 2021, available at: https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202103/26/WS605d7696a31024ad0bab1d9e_3.html.

cooperation. From 2012 to 2016, a combined counterterrorism exercise called "Blue Strike" nearly doubled in Thai participants. After 2014, Thailand also committed to Air Force and Navy exercises, which are typically longer in duration than ground force exercises. They require detailed integration of highly technical systems and a larger logistical footprint with the transportation of warships and fighter aircrafts. Of note, the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) refused to commit any US-made F-16 fighter aircraft to the Blue Falcon drills and used the Swedish Gripen aircrafts instead, despite its inventory of 38 F-16s and 7 Gripens.[110] Otherwise, these exercises would have provided Chinese pilots with an opportunity to train against a widely used and proliferated US fighter aircraft, a far greater prize for China than any routine bilateral drill.

Like the faithful Wanthong in KCKP, Thailand did not abandon the US when the US downgraded its relations with Thailand after the 2014 coup. Rather, Thailand simply deepened its ties with China regardless of its relative strength, ideology, or position in the international system. In this way, Thailand continued to enjoy the economic and security benefits from leveraging its formal security relations with the US and its informal economic relations with the PRC without any larger alignment choice or major animosity from either partner. As evident from their increased trade and investment in Thailand after the Cold War, the continued sale of US military equipment to Thailand after the 2014 coup, and the PRC's increased military cooperation with Thailand during the past two decades, both the US and China view Thailand as strategically attractive. Meanwhile, the dual partnership with the US and the PRC has assured ontological security for the Thais. Despite its apparent hollowness, Thailand remains active in the formal security alliance with the US and hosts the annual Cobra Gold exercises, still its largest and most sophisticated military exercises.[111] Since 2015, Thai foreign ministers have stressed the strength and history of the formal security alliance in press releases following meetings with the US, emphasizing the benefits of freedom of navigation offered by Bangkok's alliance with Washington. In regard to China, they have highlighted the benefits of continued informal economic cooperation and potential mutual prosperity brought by Thai-Chinese trade and investment.[112] Moreover, they

[110] Storey, "Thailand's Military Relations with China," 7.

[111] Cobra Gold exercises involve more complex inter-service and multinational collaboration than those with China to date.

[112] While this assessment of the tone concerning the US and the PRC came from many press releases, a representative example of the tone of each relationship is found in "Joint Press Statement between the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand and the Government of the People's Republic of China issued on 5 November 2019, Bangkok," available at: https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/111092-joint-press-statement-between-the-government-of-the-kingdom-of-thailand-and-the-government-of-the-people%E2%80%99s-republic-of-china-issued-on-5-november-2019,-bangkok?page=5d5bd3da15e39c306002aaf9; and "Joint Press Statement between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Thailand issued on 2 October 2017," available at: https://th.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-united-states-america-kingdom-thailand/.

do not typically provide full-throated criticisms of provocative Chinese actions near Thai borders, including attempts to control the flows of the Mekong River, lest they risk a backlash to Thailand's favoured position in Beijing. Thus, Thailand continues to follow the tenets of formal-informal asymmetrical alliances, actively leveraging its geopolitical and geoeconomic position against great power competition.

Another example of Thailand's pragmatist approach to alliances during the post-Cold War period is found in its multiple partnerships and multidirectional leveraging of all four major governance institutions for the Mekong River. Thailand actively participates in the China-backed Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), the US-backed Mekong-US Partnership, the Japan-backed Greater Mekong Subregion-Japan Partnership, and the regional Mekong River Commission (MRC).[113] Thailand's participation in and leadership of these partnerships enables it to leverage all parties to maintain Thai sovereignty and to promote its prosperity. Since 2014, Thailand has been satisfied with cultivating its positive international image as a "bridge-maker."[114] In 2015, Thailand twice hosted special international meetings on irregular migrants in the Indian Ocean. Between 2017 and 2018, former foreign minister Surikiart Suthirathai headed the Advisory Board of the Committee for Implementation of the Recommendation on Rakhine State.[115] Despite well-publicized abuses of Rohingyas by Thai boat owners, prominent Thai diplomats served in leadership positions in regional organizations to advance individual freedoms, while addressing Myanmar's incidents of forced migration and ethnic violence against the Rohingyas. Moreover, they proudly played the role of a bridge-maker between ASEAN members and international organizations, thereby improving their self-image in the region and the broader international community.

Representing a nation that seeks to protect its identity and improve its international image and prestige, Thai leaders are concerned with global rankings on human rights, transparency, and democracy. After the US designated Thailand in the lowest tier 3 of the 2016 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, Thai diplomats committed to a considerable lobbying campaign in

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[113] People's Republic of China's Foreign Ministry, "China and Thailand sign the MoU on Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Special Fund Projects," 16 October 2018, available at: http://www.chinaembassy.or.th/eng/sgxw/t1834682.htm; Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Press Release: 1st Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) Policy Dialogue," 30 April 2019, available at: http://www3.mfa.go.th/main/en/news3/6886/102377-1st-Lower-Mekong-Initiative-(LMI)-Policy-Dialogue.html; Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Statement of the 11th Mekong-Japan Summit," (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs), 4 November 2019, available at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000535954.pdf; Mekong River Commission, "About MRC: History," available at: https://www.mrcmekong.org/about/mrc/history/.

[114] Interview with Dr. Witchu Vejjajiva, deputy director-general of the Department of American and South Pacific Affairs of Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Arlington, Virginia, 22 December 2017.

[115] "Outgoing Remarks from Rakhine Advisory Board," *The Irrawaddy*, 17 August 2018.

Washington, DC.[116] Similarly, after the European Union (EU) Commission on Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing gave Thailand a poor ranking, which halted some of Thailand's exports to the EU bloc and forced the government to establish countermeasures, Prayuth was seriously concerned about Thailand's international image. He requested that "[t]he media should consider the impact the news will have on the country. It may cause problems, and affect national security … . If this news get[s] widely published, [it could raise] problems of human trafficking and IUU illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing."[117] In both cases, the negative international attention on Thailand was unacceptable, as each finding depicted Thailand as a country that practices bonded labour rather than one that promotes freedom and prosperity. In response to this tarnishing of the country's international image, Thai leaders committed to thorough countermeasures in order to improve the negative international perception of Thailand's freedom and prosperity, core symbols of its national ontology.

Conclusion

Our understanding of Thai diplomacy can also apply to other ASEAN countries with their own parables. Of the ASEAN states, Thailand and the Philippines have formal security ties with the US, Singapore has a strong security cooperation arrangement with the US and allows American forces to use its air and naval bases, and Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam have recently increased their informal security relations with the US. Formal security arrangements, like the August 2002 US-ASEAN Joint Declaration on Combating Terrorism, form a baseline of security cooperation across the region. On the other hand, no ASEAN members have established a formal security alliance with China, although Laos, Cambodia, and perhaps Myanmar have increasingly turned to the PRC for military support. However, all of the countries mentioned above enjoy strong economic relations with the PRC. The recent signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), an ASEAN-led regional free trade zone, places these ties on track to formalization.

In sum, we hope to shed light on the study of diplomacy by small-medium states. We observe that small-medium states act pragmatically in their foreign engagements by forming formal and informal alliances with great powers to leverage their real or perceived positive self-conception. Specifically, this article examines the art of Thai diplomacy by exploring the parables of

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[116] US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report: 2016*, available at: https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/258876.pdf.

[117] "Thai Junta Warns Media Against Reporting on Human Trafficking," *Khaosod English*, 25 March 2015, available at: https://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2015/03/25/1427268620/.

alliance taken from classical literature and proverbs. In explaining Thai diplomacy, we have focused on the pragmatism of Thai leaders in leveraging great powers throughout its modern history during the Bangkok period. Accepting the importance of ontological security and international image, we have emphasized the ways in which these forces shape and structure Thai leaders with their decisions to form alliances with competing powers in the region. Following a pattern of behaviour in establishing balanced formal-informal relations, Thai leaders actively cultivate and leverage both relations to the furthest extent possible to advance the self-perceived freedom and prosperity of Thailand.

University of Texas, Austin, USA
Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA, April 2022

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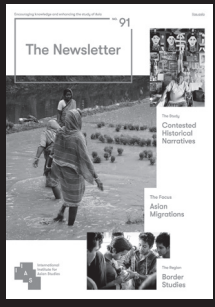

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