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Thailand’s ‘Complex Engagement’ Approach in Foreign Policy: A Balancing Act

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Thailand adopted ‘complex engagement’ as an approach to international relations in an effort to achieve its goals for security and economic survival after the military coup of May 2014.
- Bangkok also highlighted its military-security ties with the US while giving priority to economic engagement with China, Japan and South Korea.
- At the same time, it has been engaging with Europe via business deals, to offset the fact that political contact between Thailand and Europe had been limited since the coup.
- However, political setbacks and economic factors limit Thailand ability to engage significantly with neighbouring countries in Mainland Southeast Asia.

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INTRODUCTION

On 25 July 2019, Thailand's government delivered its foreign policy statement to parliament. The statement said that the country would continue to play constructive roles in the international community, balancing relations with all countries and enhancing mutual trust, respect and benefit. The policy was in fact the same as that of the previous military government, which current Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha led in his capacity as head of the junta that seized power in May 2014. Under both that government and the one formed following elections in March 2014, Thailand has sought economic cooperation with all regions of the world, including Europe, the Middle East and South Asia. It would also promote and enhance ASEAN centrality in the regional security architecture. And the country would seek cooperation on non-traditional security threats in areas such as cyber security, human trafficking and trans-national crimes.¹

This paper discusses the direction of Thai foreign policy under Prime Minister Prayut's current government by applying the concept of "complex engagement" to examine how that government deals with challenges in geopolitics at a time when major powers compete, cooperate, and engage in conflict with each other.

Both domestic problems and rapid changes in geopolitics have confronted Thailand with challenges to the effectiveness of its foreign policy. In January 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was forced to backtrack on its own minister's misstatement on the US assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani by means of a drone strike. The minister had said that Thailand, a treaty ally of the US, was informed about the operation in advance.² In February, the ministry had to issue a statement to defend the Constitutional Court's decision to dissolve the party Future Forward Party³ following strong criticism of the court's action from Canada, the European Union and the United States. Despite such criticism, however, Thailand's military and security ties with the US have grown tighter. This is true even though Thailand is seen to be moving into the orbit of Chinese influence and struggling to play a role in the Mainland Southeast Asian sub-region.

COMPLEX ENGAGEMENT

It is likely that "complex engagement" was an approach to foreign policy adopted after the coup of May 2014, when the junta-backed government employed various ways of managing relations with, and balancing among, rival powers—the US, China, Japan, Europe, Russia, South Korea and India. As it sought roles to play in the region, Thailand faced a situation in which there were simultaneous cooperation and conflict among these powers.⁴ Complex engagement was characterized by "non-coercive, open exchanges at multiple levels and over multiple issue areas. It is the strategic pursuit of cooperative relations based on common understanding, as much as interdependence".⁵

More importantly, as Alice Ba put it, complex engagement is similar to the case of ASEAN-China relations in that it does not require shared 'liberal' values for countries to have significant relations.⁶ The policies and platform of Prayut's current government, which has its roots in a military coup, display many 'illiberal' values. While the 2019 election improved Thailand's classification in indices of democracy from hybrid regime to flawed democracy,⁷ political contestation between the establishment and dissidents and events such

as the dissolution of the opposition Future Forward Party on 21 February 2020 ignited strong criticism from the West — notably the US and EU. At the same time, Thailand needed to engage with Western countries in a range of areas.

To avoid conflict, the Thai foreign ministry refrained from using harsh words in its defence of the court's verdict against the Future Forward Party. It simply said that Thailand remained committed to democratic values and political pluralism. It added, "we trust all friends of Thailand would, in full respect of our sovereignty, render usual support to the exercise of the ... supreme law of the land just as we do in reciprocity with all members of the international community".⁸ Thailand and US have pursued full engagement at all levels since the administration of President Donald Trump took office in 2017. The new US ambassador to Thailand, Michael DeSombre, the first political appointee to serve in that post in decades, finally arrived in Bangkok in late January 2020, over a year after his predecessor left in late 2018. During his confirmation hearings before the US Senate, DeSombre testified that he would prioritize the expansion of economic relations and help Thailand to maintain its sovereignty and protect its security, while he expressed confidence that Thai democratic institutions would be strengthened.

Thailand's main focus in its relations with the US is to strengthen security and military ties. Prayut, who also serves as defence minister, signed the Joint Vision Statement 2020 with US Defence Secretary Mark T. Esper in November 2019. The statement pledges cooperation, increased interoperability, military modernization, information sharing and expanded exercises and training.⁹ Visits of senior US military officers to Thailand, including one by Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral John Aquilino, followed. Admiral Aquilino was among special guests at the royal barge procession in Bangkok in December 2019. Thai Army chief General Apirat Kongsompong has also prioritized military ties with the US since taking office in 2018, often meeting with American counterparts and purchasing military hardware from the US. He met his counterpart US Army Chief of Staff James McConville in Bangkok in September last year¹⁰ and again in Washington on 26 February 2020.¹¹ During General Apirat's tenure, the Army has purchased 60 Stryker infantry carrier vehicles worth US\$ 175 million. The first batch of 10 vehicles arrived Thailand in September last year.¹² In September, Washington also approved the sale to Thailand of 6i light attack helicopters at a cost of US\$ 400 million.¹³

While the US politically slammed the 2014 coup, and some military activities and assistance were ceased, hardware procurement from the US was delayed but never stopped. Over the past decade, the US has sold more than US\$ 1.7 billion in military equipment to Thailand, including Black Hawk and Lakota helicopters, air-to-air missile systems, upgrades to Thai F-16 jet fighters, and naval missile and torpedo systems.¹⁴

Unlike in its relations with the US, Thailand has found some room to manoeuvre in its engagement with the EU. After the 2014 coup, the grouping suspended high-level visits to Thailand, the signing of the EU-Thailand Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, and negotiations on a free trade agreement until October 2019, after a government had been 'elected'.¹⁵ However, the Thai foreign ministry managed to have Prayut's visits to United Kingdom and France in June 2018 focus on private-sector business deals. The trip to France saw the signing of an agreement between Airbus Commercial Aircraft and Thai Airways International, set up a multi-billion-baht maintenance, repair and overhaul facility for jetliners at the U-Tapao airport in Thailand, even as small groups of Thai dissidents in

France protested against Prayut's regime.¹⁶ While full engagement with the EU as a bloc will take time to yield results, Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai visited Luxembourg and the United Kingdom during 11-14 February 2020 to seek more cooperation, notably on economic matters. The visit to UK marked the 165th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Bangkok and London and formalize plans for negotiation of a free trade agreement after Brexit.¹⁷

COMFORT ENGAGEMENT

Thailand has found that it is more comfortable to deal with countries in East Asia — China, Japan and the Republic of Korea—than with those in the West, given that the former have refrained from harsh comment on Thai domestic politics and mainly focused on mutual economic interests. Thailand has drawn closer to China in all areas, most notably after the 2014 coup. Bangkok regards relations with China as a comfort zone for political, security and economic engagement. To that end, Thailand sticks to the One-China policy and complies with Beijing's requests to extradite Chinese dissidents.¹⁸

The Thai elite has found it necessary for the country to tap into China's rise.¹⁹ Many development projects, such as the Eastern Economic Corridor and high speed trains, are connected to China's Belt and Road Initiative. China has been Thailand's biggest trade partner since 2013, with a two-way trade volume of US\$61 billion in that year increasing to US\$77.5 billion in 2019.²⁰ Chinese investors took top position in Thailand's foreign direct investment tables last year, applying to the Board of Investment for investment-promotion privileges valued at US\$8.5 billion.²¹ The Thai economy increasingly depends on China and is quickly affected when China suffers downturns. For example, the Tourism Authority of Thailand has estimated that the number of Chinese visitors to Thailand will drop sharply because of the deadly coronavirus COVID 19. Nearly 11 million Chinese visitors generated US\$ 17 billion in 2019.²²

In recent years, Bangkok has purchased more Chinese military hardware, including the KS-1C missile in 2016, the VT-4 main battle tank in 2017, the S26T submarine in 2017 and armour vehicles in 2018. This is in addition to an increase in joint exercises and training. However, such engagement would bring no significant change in military affairs or security, according to former Army chief General Sonthi Boonyaratglin.²³ The Thai military has looked for supplement sources of equipment for a long time, at least since the end of the Cold War, in order to maintain its capabilities while paying affordable prices for hardware of sufficient quality. "I don't think we would switch camps since we are familiar with NATO weaponry systems," General Sonthi said. He added that there was no need to mention a change in military doctrine, which Thai military adopted from the Americans and has followed for half a century. Military training and exercises with China, such as that under the codename Strike, have increased in recent years, but they are still far from having real influence over Thai military operations.²⁴ The annual US-Thailand Cobra Gold exercise remains the biggest international military drill in Southeast Asia.

With Thailand's own instability, a rising China and a Sino-Japanese spat, Bangkok does not want to see the decline of Japan, the main engine for its export-led economy for half a century. Japanese investors adopted a 'Thailand plus' strategy long ago to extend supply chains to other low-cost and politically stable countries in Mainland Southeast Asia.²⁵

Political instability after the 2014 coup in Thailand was a grave concern for Tokyo,²⁶ and it is likely to have affected Japanese confidence in the country. However, Thailand put considerable effort into rebuilding confidence. And it managed to meet several goals simultaneously when Chinese and Japanese investors signed onto a joint project to build a high speed railway to link the three major airports of Suvarnabhumi, Don Mueang and U-Tapao in October 2019.²⁷

Bangkok believes that no key player in East Asia should be left alone. Thailand and the Republic of Korea thus signed six memoranda of understanding during President Moon Jae-in's official visit to Bangkok in September 2019, in such areas as smart cities, 'Industry 4.0', water management and rail transport.²⁸ The pact on military intelligence cooperation was significant for Seoul as the Republic of Korea had moved to limit intelligence information with Japan in the wake of trade disputes between the two countries.²⁹

While stating that South Asia as a whole is important, Thailand has mostly engaged with India. However, the meeting of the Thailand-India Joint Commission for Bilateral Cooperation on 10 October 2019 produced no substantive outcomes beyond a statement that both sides "should enhance bilateral cooperation in all dimensions as well as the concrete collaboration between the two regions linking the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Oceans."³⁰ The complementarity of Thailand's Look West Policy and India's Act East Policy, which aim to have more engagement and connectivity by land, sea and air, seems unlikely to bring concrete results.

IRRELEVANT ENGAGEMENT

In order to play a leading role in Mainland Southeast Asia, the post-2014 Prayut government adopted a "CLMVT" strategy for engagement with neighbouring countries in the Mekong basin—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. It also revived the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (AMECS) as a key mechanism to deal with development projects in the sub-region. Since it was initiated in 2003 by the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the ACMECS has never served well as an instrument of Thai foreign policy. Domestic political turmoil during the 2006-2014 period undermined its chance for success. It returned to the spotlight, however, when Thailand hosted the eighth ACMECS summit in Bangkok in June 2018. The military-backed Bangkok government wanted to improve Thailand's international image and enhance its prestige as a patron in sub-regional multilateralism.³¹ The summit came up with a master plan for 2019-2023 stressing three goals: seamless connectivity of infrastructure; synchronization of laws and regulations to facilitate trade, investment and finance; and smart and sustainable development and environment protection.³² A year later, the Thai government allocated US\$ 200 million over five years for the ACMECS, aiming to give financial and technical support to projects under the master plan. Thailand's contribution is two-fifth of the US\$ 500 initially allocated for the ACMECS Fund. The other four countries involved would together contributed US\$ 100 million to the fund, while the grouping was to seek the remaining US\$ 200 from partners such as Australia, Japan, South Korea and the US.³³

The reality is that the ACMECS cannot serve as an effective instrument for Thailand to play a significant role in sub-regional development since all of these partners have their own

tools for promoting that goal. Japan initiated the Mekong-Japan Cooperation programme in 2008, in addition to the major part that it has played in the Asian Development Bank-sponsored Greater Mekong Sub-region programme. The US launched its own Lower Mekong Initiative in 2009. The Republic of Korea has had a Korea-Mekong Cooperation programme since 2011. China launched Lancang-Mekong Cooperation in 2016. And India's Mekong-Ganga Cooperation programme actually dates to 2000. These partners are all more powerful and richer than Thailand, and their presence and their projects could easily overshadow the ACMECS. Thailand has thus repositioned itself as an actor that can bridge all of these undertakings, with Bangkok serving as a hub to connect outsiders to the sub-region. To the extent that this happens, Thailand is likely to be a coordinator, rather than the leader that it aspired to be.

CONCLUSION

Complex engagement has functioned quite well as a means for Thailand to have relations with a changing world. It has allowed the post-2014 Bangkok government to deal with counterparts in various ways, across various sectors and at various levels. No matter how strongly Western countries have been critical of developments in Thai domestic politics, the country retains room to play in seeking to achieve its goals. The basic requirement for utilizing complex engagement in its foreign policy is that it must work at a range of levels and channels of engagement and do so with clear objectives and in pursuit of well defined benefits.

Engagement with the US and China is an example. Thailand does not need to choose between the two rival super powers, as their different strengths can benefit Thailand in different ways. American power and influence may have declined in recent years because of the rise of China, but its military strength has never been weakened. Thanks to the illiberal Trump administration, Washington has offered a 'democracy discount' to Bangkok. Critical statements and delays in hardware procurement from the US have not had a significant impact on Thailand. China can offer substitute military hardware, such as tanks and armoured vehicles, and Thailand has been able to tap into its economic growth. Complex engagement has also allowed Thailand to maintain economic links with the EU via private investment, even while the political contact is limited.

The relative success of this approach notwithstanding, it has had its limitations. Political setbacks have hampered Thailand in its effort to play a role in the international community. The ACMECS, for example, was supposed to be an effective mechanism through which the country could play significant roles in the Mainland Southeast Asia sub-region. But a decade of domestic political conflict stopped Bangkok from pursuing the strategy continuously, and this undermined the initiative to the point that it is beyond rejuvenation.

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