

A Tick on the Dragon's Back: How Siam Bonded Itself to China's Political and Economic Supply Chains

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Abstract

This paper aims to outline the trajectory by which Siam/Thailand has become bonded to China's political and economic supply chains since the Thaksin Government's fateful turn towards China in the early 2000s. It focuses on the new global and regional geopolitical and economic opportunity structures at that time and the more recent changing domestic political structure that have allowed Siam to latch onto rising Great China. The paper also examines the economic rationale and political thinking of the Thai political and business elites behind that strategic policy shift. The main topics that will be discussed include the *Chimerica* symbiotic relationship, the export-to-the-US team of servants with China as its head, the new less US-oriented generation of the Thai military and royal elites, and the appeal of the China Model.

Keywords: China Model, Cold War, post-Bhumibol era, Sino-Thai elite, symbiotic relationship, Thailand

Introduction

In 1977, under the most right-wing civilian government in modern Thai history, the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to Thailand, His Excellency Mr. Chai Zemin, was unceremoniously summoned by Mr. Dusit Siriwan, Minister without Portfolio. Having arrived at the Government House, Ambassador Chai was unexpectedly subjected to a lengthy lecture by Minister Dusit on the many evils of the doctrine of communism, with the parting good-will advice that it was high time China seriously consider abandoning communism. The Prime Minister at the time was the arch anti-communist former supreme court judge Thanin Kraivixien (October 1976-October 1977), who had been installed by the military and enjoyed the support of the Thai royalty. Such a childish and insolent action, worthy of the extremist, ultra-royalist ideologues running the country at that time, led naturally to a temporary suspension in the diplomatic relations between Thailand and the PRC, relations which had been normalized just two years previously.¹

That grotesque episode in the bygone era of global Cold War-cum-domestic People's War in Thailand's political history stands in sharp and astonishing contrast with a more recent one. On April 12, 2016, the Thai press reported that during a Cabinet meeting, Prime Minister and Head of the military junta, General Prayut Chan-o-cha (2014-present), recommended that his fellow Cabinet members should read *The Governance of China*, a book written by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, whose approach was relevant to Thailand since both countries were going through a similar period of reform.²

An even more frank, if rather unseemly, profession of opportunistic infatuation with, and pragmatic dependence on, China, was later declared by the top-ranking technocrat at a key Thai economic ministry. Dr. Somchai Sujjapongse, the outspoken Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance, came up with the following vivid metaphor for Thailand's relations with China:

The Ministry of Finance has been thinking of introducing the *Siamese Tick Model* to drive our international economic relations forward by stressing the building of trade and investment alliance

with various countries, especially those with continuing growth potential, so as to jointly energize the economic expansion of both Thailand and her allies e.g. China, India, and African and ASEAN countries. This is because an emphasis on competition with other countries won't do any good to Thailand's overall economy in the context of global economic slowdown.

The *Siamese Tick Model* will help us grow along with those expanding economies. We need not grow alone since we can depend on our allies. For example, if China grows, we will also become fattened. But if China stops growing, we can leave it for India or South Africa instead. This is our growth strategy, that is, whoever grows, we will simply get a ride with it.³

Though revealing with regard to Thailand's historically renowned diplomatic posture of "bending with the wind," such an unflattering admission of a fickle attitude toward the country's alliances, cannot but omit the changing political and economic opportunity structures, be they domestic, regional or global, that occasioned and made possible this Thai flexibility as well as, at times, the propensity to lecture others in a rigid and high-handed manner. It is my intention to explore the key milestones and conjunctures that have structured Thailand's changing relations with the PRC in recent times.

Regional Geopolitical Twists and Turns

From the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, a spreading and ferocious communist rural insurgency raged in Thailand, engulfing every region of the country in a protracted guerrilla war of attrition. According to official statistics, during the course of the conflict, there had been at least 10,504 fatalities and 17,771 people injured on both sides, which comes to about 1.5 fatalities and 2.5 people wounded per day all through the bloody twenty-year period.⁴ It pitted the over 10,000-strong, communist-led guerrilla fighters of the People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT) against the Thai state under the military and monarchy power nexus in alliance with the United States. As a localized extension of the American

hot war in Indochina, it aligned Thailand with the US against the PRC and communist North Vietnam in alliance with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), in accordance with the ideological setup of Cold War geopolitics.

The American defeat in Vietnam and its military withdrawal from Indochina in 1975 took the Thai ruling elite by surprise and threw them into panic, as had the unexpected resumption of diplomatic relations of the US with the PRC in 1972. After the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge in April 1975, the newly-elected Prime Minister M.R. Kukrit Pramoj (March 1975-April 1976) decided to visit China with his foreign minister, Major General Chatichai Choonhavan, resulting in his famous handshake with the ailing Chairman Mao Zedong. Kukrit's decision to open diplomatic relations with China came about in the wake of a meeting of the National Security Council, during which a representative of the Thai armed forces declared that the military could not resist a full-scale military attack by the Khmer Rouge for any longer than three days. By establishing relations with the PRC in July 1975, the Thai government thereby adopted a new strategy of "using China to balance Vietnam." Furthermore, against the opposition of the American-oriented, funded and equipped Thai military and the National Security Council, which still regarded China as the principal threat to Thailand, Prime Minister Kukrit and the Thai foreign ministry also pushed for the rapid withdrawal of American troops and military bases from Thailand within a year.⁵ It is interesting to note that the strategic realignment undertaken by Kukrit and Foreign Minister Chatichai also found an echo in Beijing as their Chinese counterparts expressed their own recognition of the necessity of the continued American military presence in Thailand, warning of the danger of a regional power vacuum that would be caused by the departure of American troops.⁶

After the political and ideological aberration that was the massacre of student activists on October 6, 1976 and the accompanying *coup d'état*, which brought to power for little over a year the extremist anti-communist and royalist government of Thanin Kraivixien, the dramatic strategic realignment carried out by Kukrit, Chatichai, and the PRC leadership proved to be prescient. The subsequent Third Indochina War,

consisting of the protracted Cambodian-Vietnamese War from 1975 to 1989 and the brief Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979, pitted Thailand, the US, China and the Khmer Rouge on one side, against Vietnam, Laos, the People's Republic of Kampuchea, and the USSR on the other, with the Communist Party of Thailand being cut loose and sacrificed by China in return for Thailand's support of the Khmer Rouge.⁷ The renewed Sino-Thai strategic partnership was cemented by the exchange of historic visits in 1978, first, to China by the Thai reformist Prime Minister General Kriangsak Chomanand, and subsequently to Thailand by Deng Xiaoping, the *de facto* leader of post-Mao China, during which he attended the Buddhist ordination ceremony of Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn (now King Vajiralongkorn) at the Royal Temple of the Emerald Buddha, along with King Bhumibol, Queen Sirikit, and Princess Mother Srinagarindra.⁸

Another daring Thai diplomatic realignment initiative came about almost a decade later in 1988, when the newly-elected Prime Minister Major General Chatichai Choonhavan (April 1988-February 1991), a diplomatic maverick to the core, declared shortly after taking office a new shift in foreign policy to push for peace and for mutual profit in Indochina. Famously dubbed, "Turning Indochina Battlefields into Marketplaces," this new drive to befriend and trade with Thailand's erstwhile hostile eastern neighbors—Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—initially met with near-universal shock and fierce opposition both at home and abroad, especially from the pro-China lobby among Thai businesses, diplomats, security officials, and scholars as well as the PRC leadership.⁹ By persistent and painstaking lobbying and persuasion, both official and personal, the Chatichai government and his team of personal academic advisers, led by his left-leaning, British-educated son, Kraisak Choonhavan, managed to win the support of the US under President George H. W. Bush and overcome objections on the domestic front.¹⁰

China, and especially Deng Xiaoping himself, however, proved to be a tougher nut to crack. The initial discussion between PM Chatichai and Deng during the former's visit to Beijing in March 1989 went quite badly, with Deng berating and lecturing Chatichai on the evils of Soviet imperialism for a quarter of an hour. Nevertheless, a breakthrough came later that night through a key informal contact a relation with whom

Chatichai had cultivated over the years of his personal liaison with communist China. Kraissak's account of what happened deserves to be quoted in full as an illustration of the peculiar actual workings of Thai-Chinese diplomatic relationship:

That night the first real thing happened. My father (Prime Minister Chatichai) said I had to go meet Deng's patron, an 80-year-old man by the name of Wang Zheng who apparently had controlled the army since Mao. "What the hell?" But he said that's the way China is. So at about 11 PM I was taken out of the kitchen exit of this huge hotel and taken inside a Mercedes 500 to the old part of Beijing. Now the guy was alert, a skinny man who lived in an old brick house, not very well lit. All he wanted to hear from me was that we remain friends, that we were not betraying them for the Soviet Union. He gave me a red vase, which he claimed is the most difficult to make because the color can go off—I laughed to myself thinking that Red is indeed very difficult to make.

The next day the atmosphere changed completely, nearly 100 percent. No more lecturing. One of the officials said, 'You asked us to support the Khmer Rouge, so we did for the past ten years, and now you tell us to stop. How come you didn't tell us before you came?' Chatichai said he didn't have time, that he had only been made prime minister a couple of months ago. The Chinese said that we are friends and will do whatever you ask us to do.¹¹

With China on board, Thailand's regional geopolitical shift went through, paving the way for the official end of the Cambodian-Vietnamese War with the conclusion of the Comprehensive Cambodian Peace Agreements in Paris in October 1991.¹²

Laying the Groundwork for a Strategic Economic Partnership

During the 1990s, economic developments in both countries had laid the groundwork for an economic partnership with the emergence of a new economic opportunity structure across the region as well as the rest of

the globe. Thailand's rapid economic growth, then the world's highest at an average rate of 8 percent between 1985 and 1995, had significantly transformed the country's international trade structure. Its imports and exports were now mainly industrial products such as machinery and manufactured goods. Much of this trade was intra-industry in character and constituted part of the expanding network of multinational corporations. Supported by Thai government policy, Thai capital investment abroad, including in China, had also grown.¹³ And yet, beginning in July 1997, Thailand suffered a brutal economic contraction brought about by a devastating currency collapse and financial meltdown, a calamity induced by its macroeconomic mismanagement of financial liberalization.¹⁴

Widespread bankruptcies and unemployment, rising poverty, and fire sales of assets to foreign financial investors ensued. Thai GDP contracted by a massive 10.8 percent in 1998. One hundred firms, more than a quarter of the companies listed on the Thai Stock Exchange, were delisted, half of them due to bankruptcy or collapse. Seven of the top thirty business groups in pre-crisis Thailand (and fifty of the top 220) either vanished altogether or shrank drastically. Nearly two-thirds of the big Sino-Thai capitalists went bankrupt, thousands of companies folded, and two-thirds of the private commercial banks went under or changed hands. One million Thai workers lost their jobs and three million Thais fell below the poverty line.¹⁵

The Thai business community, the plurality of whose members were Sino-Thai, blamed these upheavals on the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The US-led IMF loan imposed conditions that entailed further liberalization, privatization, fiscal austerity, and high interest rates. These measures in turn led to severe deflation, aggravated the economic contraction, and inflicted painful adjustments on Sino-Thai businesses of all sizes.¹⁶

Meanwhile, China came to Thailand's aid by magnanimously contributing one billion US dollars to the IMF rescue plan, while promising not to take advantage of the currency crisis by lowering the value of the yuan against the Thai baht. Even though Thailand made a full economic recovery from the crisis and paid off its IMF loan in 2003,

the experience left a lasting bitter taste in the mouths of many Sino-Thais. As a result, China won from Thailand its gratitude, taking on the endearing image of a sympathetic friend in dire need, in contrast to the haughty and avaricious United States.¹⁷

During the same decade, China was making necessary preparations for accession to the World Trade Organization, measures which officially commenced on January 1, 1995. These preparations involved negotiating with member countries, including Thailand, concerning their obligations in accordance with the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT) and reforming various economic policies to comply with WTO rules and regulations. China's accession to the WTO became official in 2001.¹⁸

Between 1998 and 2000, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Commerce, Dr. Supachai Panitchpakdi, who oversaw Thailand's international economic policy and would later become the fourth Director-General of the WTO (2002-2005), led many delegations to China for trade talks with his Chinese counterparts.¹⁹ During this period, successive Thai governments continued an economic strategy that sought to position the country as the regional and sub-regional hub of various economic activities as well as the key point of linkage between the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, from 1967) and China.²⁰ In 1999, the Chuan Government concluded the comprehensive Sino-Thai "Plan of Action for the 21st Century," the first such plan that China had signed with any ASEAN member country.²¹ The plan has been "widely recognized as Chinese code for a desire for a decline in American power" and also served to formalize "Thailand's role as a Chinese link to ASEAN."²²

Thailand's Decisive Turn towards China

And yet, it was the subsequent popularly-elected populist government of the billionaire-tycoon Prime Minister Dr. Thaksin Shinawatra (February 2001-September 2006) that carried out the decisive reorientation of Thailand's foreign economic policy towards China. Prime Minister Thaksin enjoyed an unprecedented solid majority in the House of Representatives, and a strong executive branch along with a pro-big

party electoral system, made possible by the constitutional reforms of 1997.²³ The perceived convergence of foreign policy and economic strategy of a sort took place thereafter.

According to the analyses of several key Thai government agencies (e.g. the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Armed Forces, the National Intelligence Agency), China's regional strategic objective is to create a China-centric ASEAN with Thailand as its geopolitical gateway to the organization.²⁴ In response, Prime Minister Thaksin vowed to pursue a nationalist and Asia-centric foreign policy, with "Asia" being understood principally as "China."²⁵ It is quite telling that Thaksin's reference to "Asia" made a point of excluding not only the US, arguably on geographical grounds, but also Taiwan, a close East Asian ally of the US but a thorn in the side of China, which was not invited to join the Thailand-initiated Asia Cooperation Dialogue, obviously on geopolitical grounds.²⁶ Thaksin also told a group of Thai government officials that, if a choice had to be made, he would favor China over the US.²⁷ Thaksin's diplomatic overtures were favorably received by his Chinese counterpart, Premier Zhu Rongji, and Thailand's prioritization of China in its foreign economic policy was reciprocated by China's prioritization of Thailand over other ASEAN nations. In their meetings, both Prime Minister Thaksin and Premier Zhu described the other's country as a strategic partner.²⁸

Thaksin's turn towards China also received the full support of many big Thai business groups in banking, manufacturing, and agribusiness, which had long maintained trade and investment links with China since the 1980s. These groups included the Charoen Pokphand Group, the Bangkok Bank, the Siam Motors Group, the Thai Asahi Glass Public Co. Ltd., the Mitr Phol Sugar Business Group, the Saha-Union Company, and the Rojana Industrial Park.²⁹ In the meantime, Thailand's former greatest ally was so preoccupied with the war against international terrorism in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks that its foreign policy gave little attention to Southeast Asia and Thailand, allowing China to expand its regional influence in its place.³⁰

Nonetheless, Thaksin's smart and timely diplomatic move did contain one specific pitfall. In his rush to ensure that Thailand would remain ahead of its fellow ASEAN member countries in building economic and

political ties with China, the Sino-Thai terms of engagement were mostly set in favor of China. Not only could China worm its way into ASEAN through the backdoor opened by Thailand, but it also brought to bear its greater bargaining power as a gigantic regional emerging market over the ASEAN member countries.³¹ This set an unequal precedent that undermined the ability of ASEAN to pool their strength and act in concert with regard to China. Instead, they appeared to be stuck with having to enter into any bilateral negotiations with China as small states rather than as a unified coalition of nations.³²

A New Global and Regional Economic Opportunity Structure

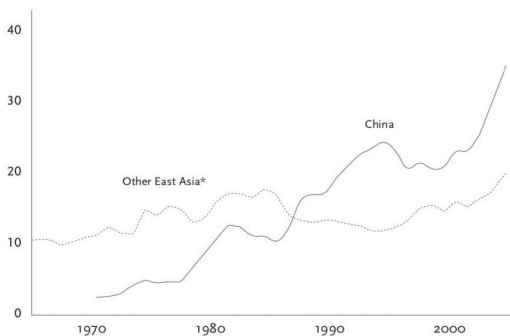
China's accession to the WTO in 2001 opened a new stage in the globalized economy. At this point, the US and China, soon to become the largest economies in the world, complemented each other structurally as the key economic motors of global supply and demand. Famously termed "Chimerica" by the Scottish economic historian Niall Ferguson, China and the USA entered into a unique and multifaceted symbiotic relationship which made them appear as though they constituted a single economic unit.³³ Although structurally complementary, the relationship became imbalanced, with the private debt-fueled, demand-generating US succumbing to the subprime loan debacle in 2008, and the export-led, supply-providing China suffering an economic slowdown and attempting domestic market-based restructuring through massive fiscal stimulus measures.³⁴

During the decade-long period of *Chimerica*, China had become a manufacturing export superpower, driven through foreign direct investment and its capacity to produce at lower cost both simple and sophisticated, low-tech and hi-tech, consumer and industrial products, from nappies to microchips.³⁵ Before long, it flooded the US market with its cheaper exports, crowding out those from other East and Southeast Asian exporters, including Thailand. Realizing that they couldn't compete successfully with China, Thailand and other US trading partners subsequently adjusted their foreign economic policies to join China's extended supply chains of exports to the US. Dubbed "America's team

of exporting servants with China at its head,” this emergent regional economic structure was explicated in a 2009 article by Hung Ho-Fung, a scholar of political economy at the Johns Hopkins University, “America’s Head Servant.”³⁶

Hung’s main argument is that the participation and rise of China in the global export economy in the aftermath of its accession to the WTO in 2001 brought the reigning model of development in East and Southeast Asia, which had hitherto followed Japan in a pattern akin to the formation of “flying geese,” to an impasse.³⁷ In a short period of time, China had managed to surpass its East and Southeast Asian neighbors in terms of its exports to the US, accumulating thereby huge foreign exchange reserves. These reserves had then been used to purchase US Treasury Bonds until China became their biggest holder in the world.

Capital investment and their American trading partners migrated away from Japan and other Asian nations *en masse* to the lower-labor costs and greater efficiency of China. In order to avoid the imminent prospect of the hollowing out of their manufacturing bases, the “flying geese” made up of Japan and its emulators decided to break formation and adjust to becoming members of America’s team of exporting servants, at the head of which stood China. By shifting their manufacturing production and trade to industrial machinery and component parts for the Chinese market in place of direct production for, and export to, the American market, these East and Southeast Asian economies instead sought to use China as the key production base for the subsequent export of their finished products to the US.



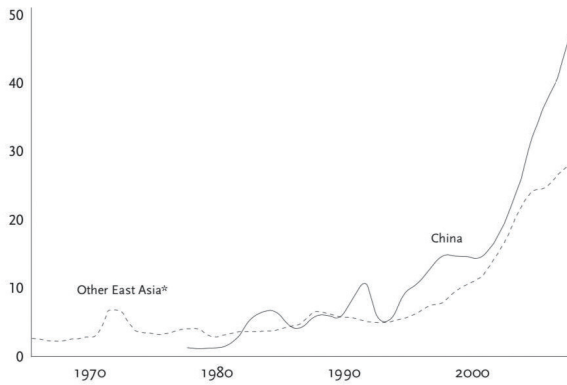
* Other East Asia represents the average of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, and excludes Hong Kong and Singapore because of the large share of entrepôt trade in their economies. Source: World Bank and Taiwan Economic Data Center, AREMOS database.

Figure 1. Exports as a share of GDP in East Asian economies, 1965-2004.³⁸

Table 1. East Asian exports to the US and the world (in trillions of US \$).³⁹

	1985		1995		2005	
	US	World	US	World	US	World
China	2.3	27.3	24.7	149	163.3	762.3
Japan	66.7	177.3	122	443.3	136	594.9
South Korea	10.8	30.3	24.3	131.3	41.5	284.3
Taiwan	14.8	30.7	26.4	113	29.1	198
Hong Kong	9.3	30.2	37.9	173.6	46.5	289.5
Singapore	4.8	23	21.6	118.2	23.9	207.3

Source: IMF Direction of Trade Statistics and Taiwan Economic Data Center AREMOS database.



* Other East Asia represents average of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong.
Source: World Bank and Taiwan Economic Data Center, AREMOS database.

Figure 2. Foreign-exchange reserves as a percentage of GDP in East Asia.⁴⁰

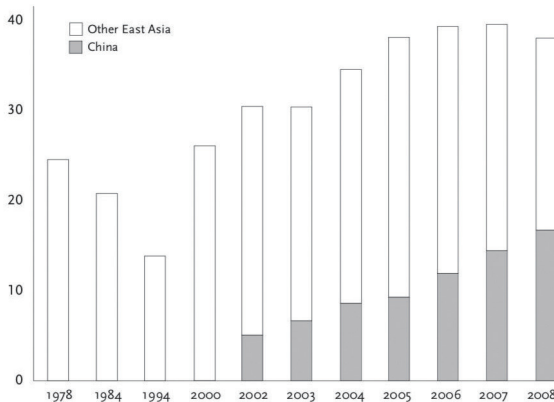


Figure 3. East Asia and Chinese shares of long-term US public debt (%).⁴¹

Table 2. Exports to China and the US as percentage of total exports.⁴²

	1985		1995		2005	
	China	US	China	US	China	US
Japan	7.1	37.6	5	27.5	13.5	22.9
South Korea	0	35.6	7	18.5	21.8	14.6
Taiwan	0	18.1	0.3	23.3	22	14.7
Hong Kong	26	30.8	33.3	21.8	45	16.1
Singapore	1.5	21	2.3	18.3	9.5	11.5

Source: IMF Direction of Trade Statistics and Taiwan Economic Data Center AREMOS database

Thailand also joined the new China-headed team to take advantage of the new global and regional economic opportunity structure, as evident in the following chart.

Table 3. Thailand Imports and Exports.⁴³

	2005		2009	
	US \$ mn			
	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports
China	9105.15	11153.3	16076.2	17161.1
US	16949.7	8723.55	16630.6	8501.9
EU	14954.5	10781.4	17922.3	12203.2
UK	2784.5	1280.52	3227.6	1782.1
Australia	3151.27	3254.86	8544.5	3815.2

Source: IMF, Direction of Trade Statistics, July 2010

The Crisis of Liberal Democracy and a Generational Shift

Concurrently, as the new China-centric global and regional economic opportunity structure became established, Thailand's domestic politics entered a protracted period of great instability and change. Parliamentary democracy fell into a deep crisis, while a generational shift took hold among both the Thai elite and the general voting public. Taken together, these two processes have likewise given rise to a domestic political opportunity structure that presses Thailand to latch onto China politically.

Over the past two decades, from the time of the victory of Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai Party in 2001 to the current government led

by General Prayut Chan-o-cha Government, which came to power via a military coup in 2014 and then solidified its hold on power by means of a controversial general election in July 2019, Thailand has seen eight prime ministers, two military coups, four constitutions, six general elections (two of which were invalidated by the Constitution Court), seven waves of mass protest movements, four bloody crackdowns of massive public protests, resulting in the deaths of hundreds, injuries to thousands, and economic losses totaling several hundred billion Thai baht.⁴⁴

At its roots, this spiraling violence and conflict represented desperate attempts by the American-allied, monarchy-military power nexus, which has ruled the country since the Cold War, to implement a transition from electoral democracy back to non-democracy, i.e. a process of re-authoritarianization. This strategy has been undertaken in order to thwart the political wishes of the burgeoning new class of often younger voters from liberal democratic, lower-middle class millennial backgrounds.⁴⁵ The willful and arbitrary manipulation and distortion by the old elite of the key liberal counter-majoritarian, regulatory checks-and-balances and other constitutional mechanisms has resulted in their aggravating collective dysfunction, loss of reputation, and decline, whether that be the judiciary, the anti-corruption agencies, the Senate, or the electoral commission.⁴⁶ As American influence on Thailand has waned and the strategic interest and politico-economic clout of authoritarian China has waxed, the Thai military rulers have turned increasingly away from their old ally and toward their newfound friend.⁴⁷

Another key factor contributing to Thailand's political, economic, and geopolitical turn away from the US towards China has been the generational shift among its military and monarchical elite at the turn of the millennium. During the era of the Second Indochina or Vietnam War, a generation of American and Thai military officers trained together at Fort Leavenworth, fought the communists together in the Indochinese battlefields, and developed deep and enduring personal camaraderie as well as a strong commitment to the US-Thai alliance. This generation mostly reached retirement age around 2005, with the junta-installed Prime Minister General Surayud Chulanont (2006-2008) among the last batch of Thai military officers of that generation. Given that they

had constituted about 15% of the Thai Armed Forces' top brass, their collective departure from active military duty signified the wholesale loss for the CIA and the US diplomatic mission of irreplaceable high-value local contacts and sources of intelligence. As incisively discerned and analyzed by Benjamin Zawacki in his recent important book, *Thailand: Shifting Ground Between the US and a Rising China*, this generation was dubbed "the Leavenworth pipeline."⁴⁸

In 2003, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra set as a condition that future officers must complete the full curriculum at their military academies if they were to be eligible for promotion to the top commanding posts in the Thai armed forces. This move disadvantaged the 1,700 Thai officers who had opted to go abroad and enroll in the International Military Education Training Program (IMET) in the US, with its instruction in advanced military science and inculcation of professional and democratic values. Moreover, China opportunely provided a training program for Thai military officers at its own military academies, tailored to those who had completed their studies at the Thai military schools.⁴⁹

With the leadership of the army, traditionally the strongest and most powerful branch of the Thai armed forces, passing to a new generation of officers dubbed the "King's Guard" and "Queen's Guard," it is clear that they have become less enamored of the US and instead hold the "palace and Peking" as their main points of reference.⁵⁰ This new reality is evident from the following statements, cited by Zawacki, of a Thai army officer and a Thai official to their American colleagues:

The Thai perceive regional power dynamics as follows: China is rising; the U.S. is distracted/declining; and Thailand will adjust its policies accordingly.⁵¹

Do whatever you want with Cobra Gold, we've got Dragon Gold if we need it.⁵²

It is with good reason then that Zawacki calls the overthrow of the Thaksin government in 2006 "the last American coup" since it involved members of the Vietnam War generation of Thai military officers and

had the same overall character and general trajectory as its Cold War precedents.⁵³ However, given China's obvious attempt as of late to replace the US as a member *ex officio* of the Thai ruling monarchy-military power nexus, the subsequent coup in 2014, which was led by a new generation of military officers with a distinctly more authoritarian and unyielding views, might be considered, alas, "the first Chinese coup in Thailand."⁵⁴

During the same period, the Thai palace itself was undergoing a traumatic and historic period of transition to the post-Bhumibol era as the world's longest-reigning and perhaps the most politically powerful, Bhumibol Adulyadej (1946-2016), began to suffer from various symptoms and ailments. From 2006 onwards, Bhumibol became increasingly ill, and was repeatedly hospitalized for extended periods of time. His Majesty finally succumbed to serious illnesses and passed away at Siriraj Hospital on October 13, 2016, having reached his 88th year.⁵⁵

With the passing of King Bhumibol, the USA lost, in Zawacki's assessment, "an American king," for His Majesty had been its "single most steadfast Southeast Asian ally over three generations since World War II."⁵⁶ And whereas his successor, King Vajiralongkorn, gave his recognition to "the strategic importance of having a strong alliance with the US," owing to their shared experience of having been allies during the Vietnam War, it was no longer possible to assume that the same sentiment was shared by other members of the royal family.⁵⁷ Indeed, some of the royals, notably Princess Sirindhorn and Princess Chulabhorn, had over the years developed warm and cordial relationships with China.⁵⁸ Given the contrasting assessments of a Thaksin cabinet minister that the US President George W. Bush "did not understand the [Thai] monarchy at all" and a Thai diplomat in Beijing that "the Chinese got it," in the sense that the elevated standing and durable influence of Thailand's monarchy was comparable to that of the Chinese Communist Party, Zawacki could not but conclude that "the next generation [of the Thai monarchy] was looking East."⁵⁹

The Lure of the China Model

In contrast to the hitherto prevalent, post-Cold War, Western/American model of liberal democratic capitalism, the China model combines authoritarian government with a market economy, in the sense that it marries authoritarian politics with liberal economics or reconciles closed politics with open markets.⁶⁰ It has influenced both in spirit and substance not only the illiberal and authoritarian democratic Thaksin government (2001-2006) but also the liberal, undemocratic, royalist-nationalist opposition movement, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD).⁶¹ And it continues to exercise a strong allure for successive Thai governments, be they civilian or military, as both types have followed the Thaksin government's pioneering turn towards China and the China Model.

From the standpoint of the Thai military, political, and business elites, an increasingly unequal middle-income economy like that of Thailand must follow two vital political economic imperatives so as to maintain their power and prosperity, regardless of the nature of the regime.⁶² They are the following:

- 1) *The continuation of economic growth/development.* Here, the best scenario is that the income of the poor should grow in tandem with the widening income gap. It is fine if the income of the rich increases at a faster rate than those of other classes as long as the standard of living of the poor does not remain stagnant for too long a time. This will help lessen the likelihood of popular unrest by the grassroots.
- 2) *The strict limitation of freedom of expression, association, and assembly for the sake of political stability.* These measures will help ensure that any mass protests or demonstrations will be small in size and short-lived. Better still is to prevent all such incidents from occurring in the first place. Failing that, resolute action must be taken to suppress them.

The imperatives of economic development and political stability required by the Thai elites are amply supplied by the China model. Hence, the big Thai bankers spoke openly about the appeal of China's "authoritarian

capitalism” prior to their funding of the marathon mass rallies of the royal-nationalist People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) to protest against the government of Yingluck Shinawatra (2011-2014), the younger sister of Thaksin, which culminated in a military coup in May 2014 staged by the junta calling itself the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). As one Thai scholar comments: “They were prepared in a way they hadn’t been before to put their money behind the defeat of democracy because of the fear of the masses.”⁶³ From the standpoint of the elites of the PRC, it was pleasing to be recognized as the model for Thai political and economic reforms. Fifty days after the May 2014 coup in Thailand, following a meeting with the Thai delegation led by the Thai acting foreign minister, the Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin spoke at a press conference on the occasion of the Second China-Thailand Strategic Dialogue:

[China] had focused on reforms that led to rapid development over the past 30 years, and hoped that the reforms in China could act as a role model for other developing countries in the region including Thailand.⁶⁴

The point of the China model suppliers is not so much that Thailand should directly and precisely copy the model itself. It would not be an exaggeration to say that they do not truly care which type of regime governs Thailand, whether it is in accordance with the China model or not, so long as trade and commerce between the two countries go on as usual. But what the China model does offer to the Thai military dictatorship and other authoritarian regimes in region, in light of the ongoing geopolitical competition between China and the US in Southeast Asia, is the ideological shield provided by an alternative type of legitimacy. This form of legitimacy is to be derived from the so-called Eastern or Asian values, in opposition to the values of the West in general and the US in particular, which are based on the disparate concepts of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Hence, as far as Southeast Asia is concerned, China’s national interests equal China’s geopolitical interests plus the promotion of the China model.⁶⁵

Conclusion

After a hiatus of eight long years, the repeatedly postponed general election was finally held in Thailand on March 24, 2019 under the electoral system which was established in the Constitution of 2017 in accordance with the dictates of the junta of the NCPO. The new measures were designed for the advantage of the newly-established, pro-junta party called Phalang Pracharath (PPRP).⁶⁶ Even though the various parties that ran their election campaigns on a platform that opposed the NCPO and its head, General Prayut, collectively won the majority of the popular vote at 20.3 million votes against the PPRP's 8.4 million, General Prayut was nonetheless voted in as Prime Minister by the National Assembly on June 5, with 500 senators and representatives for and 244 against.⁶⁷ This outcome was due to the almost unanimous support of the junta-picked, 250-person strong, rubber-stamp Senate that was permitted to take part in the election of the Prime Minister alongside the 500 elected members of the House of Representatives in a joint session of Parliament, in accordance with the provisions of the current constitution.⁶⁸ Five days after General Prayut had managed to continue in office under a "democratic dictatorship" regime, in the words of a servile, junta-picked senator, he received a visit at the Government House from a Politburo member of the Communist Party of China, Li Xi.⁶⁹ Mr. Li congratulated him on his election to the premiership and delivered a goodwill message to him from President Xi Jinping.⁷⁰

Comrade Li Xi's emphasis on China's willingness and readiness to coordinate its development strategy with that of Thailand as well as to promote and expand the two countries' cooperation in carrying out Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) project, the centerpiece of the Prayut government's economic development plan, under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), was both timely and opportune. It had already been fully anticipated by Dr. Somkid Jatusripitak, the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs in both the Prayut government and the present one.⁷¹ Tellingly nicknamed "Mr. China" while serving in the Thaksin Cabinet from 2001 to 2004, Somkid told a roadshow seminar in Hong Kong in 2017 that the EEC was ready to be an important part of China's BRI.⁷² This scheme stressed the connectivity between China

and Eurasia by undertaking a Thailand-China rail development project. In the uncertain global situation resulting from Brexit and the changing international trade policy of the US, the BRI was hailed as “the new hope for the world.”⁷³ As a matter of fact, however, it has been a standing practice of Thai technocratic bureaucracy to formulate official foreign economic policy so as to accord with that of China.⁷⁴

However, the Thai tick’s ride on the dragon’s back may not continue to be so smooth or as secure as its engineers might have hoped for. The global and regional ramifications of the ongoing US-China trade and technology war are still uncertain. Furthermore, the current Prayut Government, which can no longer appeal to the “state of exception” and has become shorn of its hitherto absolute power, is now facing a burgeoning opposition from both a defiant and outspoken parliament and civil society such as it had not encountered during its past five years in office.⁷⁵

Dissent is beginning to be voiced more and more within the elites and has even reached General Prayut’s insider circles. The prominent economist and member of the royal family, *Mom Rajawongse* Pridiyathorn Devakula, who had also been a governor of the Bank of Thailand and ex-Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs in the Prayut government (2014-2015), released a widely-publicized, devastating critique of his own former boss in late 2018. His statement singled out as particularly unwise Prayut’s one-sidedly pro-China diplomacy, and attacked the unprecedented privileges and advantages granted to Chinese corporations and investors in the high-speed rail and EEC projects at the expense of the nation’s interests. In Pridiyathorn’s view, such developments were paving the way for the coming of a “new colonialism” from China if the policies of the Prayut administration were to continue.⁷⁶

Last but not least, with the military placed securely under the monarchical authority, in which His Majesty the King Vajiralongkorn holds mediated command, there have been significant signs that the monarchy-military power nexus is adjusting its foreign ties in search of a more balanced security posture.⁷⁷ Under the American-trained General and avowed “king’s man” Apirat Kongsompong, the Royal Thai

Army recently authorized the purchase of 37 M-1126 Stryker armored personnel carriers from the US at the price of nearly three billion baht, a plan to restructure the Army units based on the application of the American-Australian Brigade Combat Team (BCT) system, and the urgent development of the English-language skills of the army officers in preparation for the resumption of the Pentagon IMET Program later this year.⁷⁸

Apparently, at least some part of the Thai elite seems to be having second thoughts about its sometimes-bumpy ride atop the back of the Chinese dragon. A tactical switch by part of the Thai elite is therefore not out of the question, even though this would require a change in the current NCPO-dominated governmental leadership. Politically speaking, this is, as yet, a rather remote possibility.

Notes

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² "Big Tu tells his cabinet to read Xi Jinping's book *The Governance of China* since it is relevant to Thailand [บิ๊กตู่แนะ ครม. อ่านหนังสือการปกครองประเทศจีน บอกสอดคล้องประเทศไทย]," *Matichon Online*, April 12, 2016, <https://www.matichon.co.th/news/103564>.

³ "The Ministry of Finance Promotes the Siamese Tick Model to Push Our International Economic Relations; Whoever Grows, We'll Get a Ride with It [คลังชูโมเดลเห็บสยาม ดันเศรษฐกิจระหว่างประเทศ ใครโตเราก็จะเกาะไปกับเขาด้วย]," *Prachatai*, August 2, 2016, <https://prachatai.com/journal/2016/08/67210>.

⁴ Calculated from data in General Saiyud Kerdphol, *The Struggle for Thailand: Counter-Insurgency 1965-1985* (Bangkok: S. Research Center Company, 1986).

⁵ Asa, "The Transformations of the Thai Elite Networks," 321-24, 330-31.

⁶ Jesadapan Thongsrinuch, "Four Decades of Thailand's Foreign Economic Policy towards China: Policies, Factors and Recommendations [สี่ทศวรรษนโยบายเศรษฐกิจระหว่างประเทศของไทยต่อจีน: นโยบาย ปัจจัยและข้อเสนอแนะ]," (PhD diss., Thammasat University, 2016), 73.

⁷ Benedict Anderson, "Radicalism after Communism," in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), 288-90; and Benjamin Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the US and a Rising China* (London: Zed Books, 2017), 53.

⁸ Asa, "The Transformations of the Thai Elite Networks," 493-94; Nicholas Grossman

et al., eds., *Chronicle of Thailand: Headline News since 1946* (Bangkok: Bangkok Post and Editions Didier Millet, 2009), 225.

⁹ Molly Yong, "Thailand Seeks to Turn Indochina Battlefields into Marketplaces," *AP News*, November 27, 1988, <https://www.apnews.com/3cd9a748b284afa8c300c665551cb935>.

¹⁰ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 81-85.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

¹² "Cambodia—20 years on from the Paris Peace Agreements," *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, October 21, 2011, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/Cambodia-20yearsonfromtheParisPeace.aspx>.

¹³ Jesadapan, "Four Decades," 225; Jeffrey Hays, "Economic History of Thailand: Post-War Boom and the Thaksin and Post-Thaksin Years," *Facts and Details*, accessed July 20, 2019, http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Thailand/sub5_8g/entry-3310.html.

¹⁴ Iyanatul Islam and Anis Chowdhury, *The Political Economy of East Asia: Post-crisis Debates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). See especially Chapter 3, "Capital Flows and Macroeconomic Management."

¹⁵ Chris Baker, "10 Years after the 1997 Crisis," *Nation*, June 12, 2007.

¹⁶ See Kasian Tejapira, "Post-crisis Economic Impasse and Political Recovery in Thailand: The Resurgence of Economic Nationalism," *Critical Asian Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002), 323-56.

¹⁷ Yos Santasombat, *The Variegated Dragon: Expansion of Influence over Territory and Civilizing Mission in Southeast Asia* [มังกรหลากสี: การขยายอิทธิพลเหนือดินแดนและพันธกิจเผยแผ่อารยธรรมในภูมิภาคนี้] (Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University, 2014), 410-11.

¹⁸ Jesadapan, "Four Decades," 218-19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 230-33.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 181-82; Zawacki, *Thailand*, 96-97.

²² *Ibid.* 97.

²³ Concerning Thaksin's background and political role, see Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009).

²⁴ Jesadapan, "Four Decades," 293-96; Zawacki, *Thailand*, 119, 122.

²⁵ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 107, 111, 132.

²⁶ Jesadapan, "Four Decades," 295-97.

²⁷ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 124, 106, 133-34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 114, 123-24, 134, 154, 175; Jesadapan, "Four Decades," 256-58.

²⁹ Jesadapan, "Four Decades," 163, 307.

³⁰ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 134.

³¹ Thaksin was reported to have said to Premier Wen Jiabao of China in a private breakfast at an ASEAN summit around 2004 that if China was determined to be the new economic hub of Asia, could Thailand be first among equals? Premier Wen apparently

said yes. Cited in Zawacki, *Thailand*, 110.

³² Jesadapan, "Four Decades," 256.

³³ See Niall Ferguson, *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), especially Chapter 8 "From Empire to Chimerica."

³⁴ Paul Mason, *Meltdown: The End of the Age of Greed* (London: Verso, 2009), 67-71, 164-68.

³⁵ Arthur R. Kroeber, *China's Economy: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), especially Chapter 3 "Industry and the Rise of the Export Economy."

³⁶ Hung Ho-Fung, "America's Head Servant," *New Left Review* 60 (November-December 2009), 5-25.

³⁷ "A panda breaks the formation," *Economist*, August 25, 2001, <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2001/08/23/a-panda-breaks-the-formation>. For the explanation of the Japan-led flying geese pattern of development, see Sabro Okita, "Special presentation: prospect of Pacific economies," in *Pacific cooperation: issues and opportunities, Report of the Fourth Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference April 29-May 1, 1985* (Seoul: Korea Development Institute, 1985), 18-29.

³⁸ Hung, "America's Head Servant," 8, figure 1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9, table 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 11, figure 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, figure 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 17, table 2.

⁴³ Marianna Brungs, "Thailand: No Longer the Land of Smiles?" *Chatham House*, August 2010, table 1. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Asia/0810pp_brungs.pdf.

⁴⁴ For further details, see Kasian Tejapira, "Thailand's first elections in the post-Bhumibol era," *New Mandala*, January 23, 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/thailands-first-elections-in-the-post-bhumibol-era/>.

⁴⁵ For the US-supported military-monarchy power nexus, see Zawacki, *Thailand*, 35, 78. As to the class, generational and cultural-ideological divide and the rise of the new majority voter, see Kasian Tejapira, "The Irony of Democratization and the Decline of Royal Hegemony in Thailand," *Southeast Asian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016): 219-37, https://repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2433/216603/1/sas_5_2_219.pdf; Kasian Tejapira, "Elite Realignment, a Populist Moment: Reflections on Thailand's 2019 General Elections," *New Mandala*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/elite-realignment-a-populist-moment-reflections-on-thailands-2019-general-elections/>; and Preeti Jha, "The Generational Challenge for Thailand's Generals," *Diplomat*, June 20, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/the-generational-challenge-for-thailands-generals/>.

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Michael K. Connors, "Liberalism against the People: Learning to Live with Coups d'état," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 24, no. 1 (2019): 11-31, <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/hXrkYGu6xxSKtheEknf7/full>.

⁴⁷ That is the main thrust of Benjamin Zawacki's arguments in his richly researched and detailed *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the US and a Rising China*. Also see Kasian Tejapira, "The Sino-Thais' Right Turn towards China," *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017): 606-18, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320214918_The_Sino-Thais'_right_turn_towards_China/link/5b39a4064585150d23ee0f12/download.

⁴⁸ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 161-68.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 163-64.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 188, 277.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 311.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 180-91.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 35, 78, 107, 297-99.

⁵⁵ "Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej Dead at 88," *BBC News*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37643326>.

⁵⁶ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 34-35, 107, 197, 221.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁵⁸ Princess Sirindhorn, who has visited China 49 times from 1981 to 2019, was called China's "special goodwill ambassador to Thailand" by a China's Ambassador, voted online as "the second most important among the top ten international friends of China" by the Chinese public in 2009, and lately bestowed by President Xi Jinping with the Friendship Medal—the highest honour given by the Chinese government to foreigners—in a ceremony celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in September this year while Princess Chulabhorn was named Thailand's cultural ambassador to China by the Chinese authorities and traveled to China three times in 2009 alone (Jesadapan, "Four Decades," 285; Zawacki, *Thailand*, 192, 249; Jitsiree Thongnoi, "Thailand's long-time Sinophile Princess Sirindhorn to receive China's Friendship Medal," *South China Morning Post*, September 22, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/print/week-asia/politics/article/3029681/thailands-long-time-sinophile-princess-sirindhorn-receive-chinas>; and "China gives Princess top award," *Bangkok Post*, September 30, 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1761249/china-gives-princess-top-award>).

⁵⁹ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 191, 193, 249.

⁶⁰ These variedly-formulated descriptions basically denote the same notion. They are derived respectively from Zawacki, *Thailand*, 297; Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 28; and John Kampfner, *Freedom for Sale: How We Made Money and Lost Our Liberty* (London: Pocket Books, 2010), 41.

⁶¹ See Elliot Norton, "Illiberal Democrats versus Undemocratic Liberals: The

Struggle over the Future of Thailand's Fragile Democracy," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 20, no. 1 (2012): 46-69; and Connors, "Liberalism against the People."

⁶² This is according to the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook 2018. See "Report: Thailand Most Unequal Country in 2018," *Bangkok Post*, December 6, 2018, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/1588786/report-thailand-most-unequal-country-in-2018>.

⁶³ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 297-99. Also see Kasian, "The Irony of Democratization," 229-33.

⁶⁴ "Prem Gets Invite to Visit China," *Bangkok Post*, July 12, 2015, <https://thailandchatt.com/showthread.php?2717-Thailand-Prem-gets-invite-to-visit-China>.

⁶⁵ My argument in this part is derived from Zawacki, *Thailand*, 299-301.

⁶⁶ "The Constitution is Designed for Us [รัฐธรรมนูญดีไซน์มาเพื่อพวกเรา]," *Khom Chad Luek*, November 19, 2018, <http://www.komchadluek.net/news/scoop/352831>.

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