

U.S.-China Maritime Power Play in Southeast Asia: Implications for Thailand

The great power competition has become a fact of life in Southeast Asia. The renewed geopolitical competition intensified by Russia's invasion of Ukraine seems to further complicate this matter. Nine countries in Southeast Asia have cast their votes in favor of the recent United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution denouncing Russia's invasion of Ukraine and urging the withdrawal of its forces.^[i] This implies a mixed reaction and divergence of interests among the eleven countries in the region. While Singapore is the only country publicly condemning the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by Russia, Myanmar's Tatmadaw unsurprisingly supports the military operation of the Putin regime, while Vietnam and Laos abstained. As a country that has had long diplomatic relations with Russia dating back to the Tsar era, the Thai government, with the aim not to cross with Moscow, decided to abstain from condemning Russia's annexation of the eastern region in Ukraine.

Despite being preoccupied with the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II, maritime security in Southeast Asia remains a top priority for great-power countries. It has now become a tautology that countries in Southeast Asia, whether they are small or middle powers, should avoid taking sides between the rising power and the ruled power – China and the U.S. The Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong once famously remarked, "I think it is very desirable for us not to have to take sides, but circumstances may arise when ASEAN may have to choose one or the other. I am hoping that it's not coming soon."^[ii] One may call the art of avoiding the tight security alignment with the great powers "flexible engagement"^[iii], others "hedging strategy"^[iv], but the bottom

line is, we have reached a point where such a *modus operandi* seems to be far removed from reality. Take Laos and Cambodia, both countries heavily dependent on China for economic development, particularly in infrastructure building, despite the potential risks of over-dependency and falling into a debt trap. In a way, the expansion of Beijing's influence in the region alone helps pave the way for its ambitious dream of asserting a military footprint, as well as reviving the Maritime Silk Road after it was abruptly halted by the pandemic. Even the traditional allies of the U.S. in the region, such as Thailand and the Philippines, have been grappling with the dilemma of reaping economic benefits from China while relying on the U.S. as their external security guarantor.

China's Great Power Play

In pursuit of becoming a dominant maritime power, China, under Xi Jinping's leadership is actively promoting the concept of Global Maritime Capital as evidenced in the 13th Five-Year Plan.^[v] The plan aims to position strategic provinces such as Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Tianjin as key hubs for global shipping and logistics. This ambitious initiative is closely tied to China's broader strategy of bolstering the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. While primarily driven by economic considerations, China's playbook goes beyond trade and encompasses military and security aspects. Beijing recognizes that as a global economic powerhouse, it must strengthen its military capabilities. This approach aligns with the predictions of scholars like Mearsheimer, who argued that China would convert its economic strength into military might over time.^[vi] Consequently, China is prioritizing military modernization efforts, with a specific focus on enhancing the capabilities of the People's Liberation Army Navy. This demonstrates the country's commitment to consolidating its maritime

influence and ensuring a strong presence on the global stage.

China's military modernization effort clearly centers around preparing for potential military actions regarding Taiwan and gaining greater control over the near-seas region, particularly the South China Sea. This assertiveness is evident through large-scale land reclamation in the Spratly Islands, along with the construction of its artificial island outposts for potential military operations in the South China Sea. China's naval modernization also focuses on safeguarding its commercial sea lines of communication, particularly those connecting China to the Persian Gulf, while reducing U.S. influence in the Western Pacific and asserting China's role as a leading regional and global power. Observers believe that China aims to develop its navy to function as part of an anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) force. Such a force would serve to deter U.S. intervention in conflicts within China's near-seas region concerning Taiwan or other issues. In the event of intervention, the objective is to either delay or diminish the effectiveness of U.S. forces intervening in the region.^[vii] Recently, China's maritime power projection in disputed areas of the South China Sea includes not only military drills and maritime militia but also military exercises and the deployment of substantial military assets. For example, they have stationed HQ-9 anti-air and YJ-12B anti-ship missiles^[viii], as well as Shaanxi KJ-500^[ix], a state-of-the-art aircraft equipped with early warning radar systems. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing saw the global distraction as an opportunity to construct additional artificial islands and carry out a series of naval maneuvers and exercises. These actions caused an uproar among other claimant states, notably Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Nevertheless, in the case of Cambodia, a nation that has received substantial direct investments from China and established a robust alliance, this partnership facilitates China's provision of financial support for Cambodia's Ream naval

base.[\[x\]](#)

Thailand Embracing the “Big Brother”

Although the views among Southeast Asian countries regarding the threat posed by China are inconclusive, the survey conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in 2023 revealed a strong sentiment among countries with competing claims in the South China Sea. Specifically, Vietnam (65.4%), the Philippines (62.9%), and Malaysia (41.7%) share the belief that China's economic and military power can be wielded to threaten their countries' interests and sovereignty.[\[xi\]](#) This recent development could provide an opportunity for the U.S. to voice its concerns and assume the role of an external balancer in Southeast Asia, which is often regarded as America's sphere of influence.

In theory, China's offensive power and aggressive intentions, particularly Beijing's military buildup and expansionist strategy in the South China Sea, coupled with its geographic proximity to the region, should have posed a significant threat to Thailand's national security. However, the Thai military does not view China as a military threat. In fact, the foreign policy and defense establishment in Bangkok do not accord much attention to China's maritime power projection or maritime security in general, as it is not perceived as an external threat to the Kingdom. Instead, they have embraced the ascending influence of China. This inclination began following the coups in 2006 and 2014, when, in contrast to the U.S., China refrained from criticizing the military regime or pressuring them to restore civilian government. If one were to concur with the sentiment expressed by the late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who quipped that Thai diplomacy does not simply bend with the wind but rather "*bends before the wind*,"[\[xii\]](#) it becomes evident that Thailand has indeed leaned toward China. This strategic alignment

aims to fortify military and economic ties, thereby upholding the prevailing autocratic regime within the country.^[xiii] As the famous diplomatic discourse states, “Chinese and Thais are brothers.” It is evident that the brotherly Sino-Thai relationship has reached its zenith, with Thailand wholeheartedly embracing the Chinese “Big Brother”—both in terms of kinship and the connotation of Orwellian authoritarianism.

What Uncle Sam Really Wants

A champion of the notion of freedom of navigation, the government of the U.S., whether Republican or Democrat, recognizes the significance of military presence and forward deployment in maritime Southeast Asia. According to the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, the American government restates that U.S “has long recognized the Indo-Pacific as vital to our security and prosperity. Our ties were forged two centuries ago.”^[xiv] In fact, Washington's maritime strategy has intertwined with its primary concerns of maintaining American preeminence in the region while preventing any emerging local hegemon from dismantling American regional influence. During the Obama administration, his rebalancing policy is not just about pivoting attention from the Middle East to Asia-Pacific, but also about reprioritizing Southeast Asia in the American foreign policy playbook. Obama's foreign policy clearly emphasized the importance of the Asia-Pacific region and demonstrated strong support for freedom of navigation and securing sea lines of communication. Contrary to conventional belief, the American foreign policy establishment during the Trump administration also embraced the concept of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), introducing a new geopolitical landscape and emphasizing the significance of the world's fastest-growing region. In a similar vein, the Biden White House from which inherited foreign policy legacies from both Obama and Trump also

convey the strong message to the world that the U.S is an Indo-Pacific power.

In light of China's aggression in maritime Southeast Asia, Vice President Kamala Harris remarked that "we know that Beijing continues to coerce, to intimidate, and to make unlawful claims to the vast majority of the South China Sea. Beijing's actions continue to undermine the rules-based order and threaten the sovereignty of nations."^[xv] According to the 2022 National Defense Strategy, China appears to be "the most comprehensive and serious challenge to US national security."^[xvi] The report from Pentagon also emphasizes the threat posed by China to the Indo-Pacific region due to its coercive and aggressive behavior, aiming "to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and the international system to align with its interests and authoritarian preferences."^[xvii]

To counter China's military influence and preserve American primacy in the region, the U.S. can no longer rely on the Cold War playbook of the "Containment Strategy," which appears to be outdated and incapable of attracting other countries to participate. Instead, the U.S. maintains its military presence on land, at sea, and in the air – all of which are considered its most potent assets of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM).^[xviii] Furthermore, the U.S. also sustains its military presence by revitalizing military engagements and implementing rotational deployments across the region.^[xix] In 2023, the U.S. expanded a defense pact with the Philippines, granting American troops access to four additional bases. This move provides Washington with enhanced oversight over the disputed waters of the South China Sea and areas surrounding Taiwan. Furthermore, the U.S. Marines Corps recently inaugurated a new base in Guam, the first in 70 years, intended to accommodate approximately 5,000 marines.^[xx] These marines are tasked with detecting and countering threats in the region, and they would play a crucial role in the event of a conflict with China.

Additionally, the US plans to deploy more military assets in Australia, with plans for jointly developing airfields in the country to support a greater number of aircraft rotations.

The survey from ISEAS also concludes that the favorability of the U.S. among respondents from Southeast Asia is on the rise, increasing from 57.0% in 2022 to 61.1% in 2023. In contrast, only 38.9% of respondents chose China, highlighting a significant widening of the popularity gap between the two major powers in the region.^[xxi] The reactions from Southeast Asian countries could greatly benefit America's plan of containing the expansion of Chinese influence, provided that the U.S. avoids overpromising and underdelivering, as it has done in the past. This endeavor may prove challenging for the U.S., given the significant issues it currently faces in Kiev. The need to address the situation with Moscow could potentially divert its attention and resources away from Southeast Asia. Such a shift might create an opportunity for China to step in and assert its influence as a de facto power in the region, taking advantage of any vacuum left by the US.

“Great and Good Friends”? Let’s Be Honest About Thai-U.S. Relations

For Thailand, the ties between Bangkok and Washington are not as strong as they were during the Cold War, when Washington was considered an “indispensable ally.” Attempts to rekindle and recalibrate the relations between the two countries in recent years have been thwarted by deeply polarized conflicts in Thai politics. Ongoing political unrest and democratic backsliding over the past two decades not only prevent the country from enjoying the status of a regional leader that shapes and influences regional security architecture, but also create a rift between Thailand and the U.S. Following two coups,

Thai-American diplomatic ties have greatly deteriorated. This is due to the fact that the political establishment in Bangkok views the U.S. as a great power with interests lying outside of Southeast Asia. Additionally, Thailand has consistently been criticized by American diplomats for not immediately returning to democratic and civilian rule, as well as for human rights breaches evident in the increasing use of the draconian *lèse majesté* law against political activists. This criticism has, in turn, stirred uproar among the Thai elites and middle class, resulting in anti-American sentiment. The rising numbers of anti-American propaganda are being propagated by political provocateurs and right-wing nationalist media in Thailand. A prominent instance tied to the great power competition involves the speculation concerning a tunnel beneath the newly established American consular complex in Chiang Mai in the north of Thailand.^[xxii] This tunnel was believed to house a missile installation aimed at China; however, this claim was later refuted by American diplomats.^[xxiii]

Recently, commentaries from pundits and experts have suggested that the U.S. should contribute more to Southeast Asia, and Thailand in particular. While this notion holds some truth, it is both inconceivable and unfair to solely blame the U.S. as an unreliable partner. To accurately assess the current state of Thai-U.S. relations, it is crucial to acknowledge that Thailand no longer shares the same strategic interests with the U.S. as it did during the height of the Cold War.^[xxiv] Furthermore, the prevailing political turmoil in the past decades and uncertainty surrounding the new government must be taken into account. For instance, the Move Forward Party, the progressive political party that won the highest number of seats in the House of Representatives in Thailand's general election, is now excluded from forming a coalition government. With its "3Rs" foreign policy vision – Revive, Rebalance, and Recalibrate – Thai foreign policy under

Pita Limjaroenrat's leadership is believed to be more proactive, bringing back Thailand's status as a regional leader. Unfortunately, this will not happen due to the influence of the Thai establishment and judicial activism. But this very blueprint of Thailand's new approach to foreign affairs triggers concerns and, with the power of right-wing media in the country, raises another rumor that Thailand will lean towards the U.S. and finally become America's pawn in the power rivalry between Washington and Beijing. This is evidenced by the concerns over an agreement between Thailand and the U.S. to establish a military base in the country.^[xxv] Undoubtedly, this is yet another unsubstantiated rumor. However, what holds significant importance is that it underscores the degree to which certain elites in the country harbor anti-American sentiments. Under the circumstances, it is apparent that Thailand's domestic issues are impeding its potential influence in both regional and global politics. This scenario highlights the observation that Thailand's potential to provide substantial contributions to the U.S. seems limited, while the anticipation of receiving military or economic cooperation from the U.S. persists. Inspired by the spirit of President John F. Kennedy, this is the message that should be circulated among the Thais who believe in recalibrating the moribund relations: Ask not what the U.S. can do for Thailand, but what Thailand can now do for the U.S.

Conclusion

The great powers' maritime power projection in Southeast Asia turns the region into another battleground for the U.S. and China. Thai foreign policy and defense establishment do not give much attention to maritime security in general, as Thailand's national security is not directly affected by the maritime conflicts in the region. Hence, as perceived by the Thai state, it is not a credible threat. Nevertheless, the maritime power

play appears intrinsically linked to the great power rivalry, with Southeast Asian states expected to react or even take sides. Although bandwagoning with the source of the threat might not be a good strategy for smaller states, several countries, driven by their main interests in reaping economic benefits from rising China, still choose to walk a tightrope. As a treaty ally of Washington, Thailand is expected to be part of a coalition counterbalancing China's influence in the region. However, internal political instability, especially following the coups in 2006 and 2014, has also compelled the Thai establishment to play a China card at the expense of losing the American. Efforts to revive the relations between Thailand and the U.S. appear more consistent and robust than before, particularly considering the impossibility of a direct confrontation between the U.S. and China. This underscores Thailand's vital role as a crucial asset for the U.S. in containing the influence of the revisionist power. Undoubtedly, this offers a substantial opportunity for Thailand. Nonetheless, without a strong and credible government, this prospect remains nothing more than following a pipe dream.

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