

# Risk and Threat Perception in the Indo-Pacific

## Thailand

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# CONTENTS

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<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1 The Cold War's Demise and Immediate Impacts	4
1.2 Emergence of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Concerns	4
1.3 Identification of Key Risks	5
1.4 Major Security Challenges: An In-Depth Analysis	6
<b>II. Analysis of Selected Issues and Their Current Perception</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 Southern Unrest	8
2.2 Economic Stagnation	13
2.3 Foreign-Policy Disarrays	20
2.3.1 The US–China Competition	21
2.3.2 Thailand's Incoherent Stance on Major Global Conflicts	23
2.3.3 The Geopolitical Competition in the Mekong Subregion	25
2.3.4 The Crisis in Myanmar and Thailand's Diplomatic Response	28
<b>III. Reflection of Security Issues in Current and Foreseeable Foreign- and Security-Policy Approaches Toward the Indo-Pacific</b>	<b>32</b>
3.1 Current Approaches in Security Policy	32
3.2 The Way Forward	35



## THAILAND

*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of any entity the author represents.*

### I. Introduction

This report aims to assess the security threats and challenges currently facing Thailand. The analysis is structured into three sections.

The first section addresses the broad security challenges Thailand has faced in the post-Cold War era. The authors contend that traditional security threats no longer pose a significant risk to Thailand's survival, with most challenges now being non-traditional. Among these, the authors identified three primary issues: ongoing unrest in the southernmost region, economic stagnation, and foreign-policy disarray. These issues have significant implications for national stability and require a nuanced understanding of their underlying causes and potential solutions.

The second section delves into a detailed analysis of each security challenge. This includes an examination of the background to the challenges, their impact on Thailand, and the perceptions of various stakeholders regarding each issue. Although a detailed assessment of perceptions may warrant separate research, the authors have attempted to provide a broad overview of the similarities and differences in the views held by state actors and the public on each issue. This was achieved by utilizing major published polls, survey results, and insights from various media outlets to approximate our analysis.

The final section focuses on how Thailand has prepared to address these risks and challenges. It assesses measures taken by the Thai government to enhance security, foster economic growth, and maintain regional stability. This section also evaluates the effectiveness of current strategies and identifies areas where improvements are required.

The authors argue that despite the sharp, rapid, and dynamic changes occurring around Thailand, the Thai government has not adequately prepared itself with comprehensive strategic positioning and plans. The lack of a cohesive and forward-looking strategy renders the country vulnerable to both immediate and long-term threats. Therefore, we recommend that the government develop a strategic plan that integrates empirical interests, such as economic and political goals, with normative positions and strategies,

including adherence to norms, values, and principles. Thus, Thailand can better navigate the complexities of its geopolitical landscape and enhance its security and prosperity.

### **1.1 The Cold War's Demise and Immediate Impacts**

The end of the Cold War in the late 1980s marked a pivotal shift in Thailand's security environment. Throughout the Cold War, Thailand's primary security concern was the threat posed by the communist forces, which was significantly heightened by Vietnam's aggressive expansionism in mainland Southeast Asia. This anxiety peaked during Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia on Christmas Day, 1978, posing a direct challenge to Thailand's stability and survival. However, structural changes in the international system in the late 1980s, coupled with Thailand's transition toward democracy, led to a significant reduction in the perceived threat posed by Vietnam.

These geopolitical shifts facilitated reconciliation efforts between conflicting parties in the region. The culmination of these efforts was the resolution of the Cambodian conflict, which was finalized in October 1991 at the Paris Conference on Cambodia. This historic agreement not only resolved a longstanding regional conflict but also ushered in a new era in Southeast Asia's international relations, characterized by a focus on peace and cooperation.

### **1.2 Emergence of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Concerns**

As conventional security threats dissipated, Thailand began to face new, predominantly NTS challenges. Although some traditional security issues persist, particularly along Thailand's extensive borders with neighboring countries, these issues have been managed through bilateral mechanisms, such as joint border committees. These committees work to stabilize borders and resolve territorial disputes, ensuring relative calm and stability. Thailand's non-involvement in the South China Sea maritime disputes has further prevented direct tensions with China, allowing it to focus on internal and regional stability.

In the post-Cold War era, Thailand's security concerns have primarily shifted toward non-traditional issues, many of which are related to human security and domestic challenges. Thailand faces persistent problems related to its long-shared borders, including drug smuggling, human trafficking, illegal immigration, sea piracy, organized crime, and environmental problems, including the management of the Mekong River.

While significant, these issues do not directly threaten the state's stability but require ongoing attention and management. The National Security Policy Paper (NSPP) identified NTS issues as a significant challenge for post-Cold War Thailand. However, the policy approach to addressing these issues lacks consistency. For instance, the NSPP for 1998–2001 mentions money laundering, illicit drugs, illegal workers, and international terrorism within its security-context assessment but does not provide a detailed section addressing these concerns.<sup>[1]</sup> By contrast, the NSSP for 2015–2021 offers a more comprehensive examination of transnational challenges, including illicit drugs, natural disasters, cybersecurity, and illegal migration.<sup>[2]</sup> This shift underscores the evolving recognition of NTS issues as critical threats requiring state attention.

The urgency and perceived threat levels of the NTS issues vary across periods, regions, and populations. Consequently, definitively ranking these issues is challenging and subjective. For example, although drug smuggling is prevalent, it does not necessarily undermine a state's legitimacy. By contrast, drug-related issues can sometimes be used politically to bolster government legitimacy, as seen in the Thaksin Shinawatra government's 2003 War on Drugs, a populist policy that resulted in nearly 3,000 extrajudicial killings.<sup>[3]</sup>

### 1.3 Identification of Key Risks

This report identifies three major ongoing challenges for Thailand: Southern unrest, economic stagnation, and the management of foreign policy within the current geopolitical context. These challenges are persistent and, in some cases, immediate, undermining the state's legitimacy or hindering the government's ability to address domestic and international issues.

The selection of these three security challenges reflects the authors' assessments and acknowledges the lack of a definitive risk ranking in Thailand. Even the current NSPP (2023–2027) characterizes the threat as a hybrid, combining conventional and NTS challenges.<sup>[4]</sup> Therefore, the authors' selection was based on the continuity of the issues and the extent to which they affect a wide range of policy management.

Public debate on threat perception in Thailand remains limited. For example, the 2003 election campaign focused primarily on domestic issues, especially economic stagnation, with foreign policies receiving less attention. Only the Progressive Move-Forward Party (MFP) critically addressed Thailand's diminishing international role. Since then, the issue of Southern unrest has largely faded from public discourse, likely due to its geographic isolation and the protracted nature of the conflict, which garners

[1] Office of the National Security Council, "National Security Policy (1998–2001)," 1997. <https://dl.parliament.go.th/handle/20.500.13072/367180>

[2] Office of the National Security Council, "National Security Policy (2015–2021)," 2014. <https://www.nsc.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/policy58.pdf>

[3] Human Rights Watch. "Human Rights Abuses and the War on Drugs," 2004. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/thailand0704/4.htm>

[4] Office of the National Security Council, "National Security Policy (2023–2027)," 2022. <https://www.nsc.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/nsc-policy-66-70-1.pdf>

media attention only during significant incidents, such as bombings of public offices.

#### 1.4 Major Security Challenges: An In-Depth Analysis

The authors identified three major security challenges for this in-depth analysis: Southern unrest, economic stagnation, and foreign-policy disarray. These challenges were selected because of their significant impact on Thailand's security and stability.

Southern unrest is perhaps the most severe and continuous threat to the Thai state. This conflict involves armed insurgencies in the southern provinces that contest the core elements of Thai identity: nationhood, religion, and monarchy. Over the past two decades, this conflict has caused thousands of deaths and numerous casualties, with no resolution in sight. Southern unrest not only directly threatens the government's legitimacy but also challenges the concept of Thai nationhood, making it a critical issue for national security.

Economic stagnation is also a critical threat to Thailand's national security. A stagnant economy undermines the government's ability to provide for citizens, exacerbating issues such as unemployment, poverty, and social unrest. This prolonged economic slowdown has affected Thailand's global competitiveness and diminished its strategic leverage. Addressing economic stagnation is essential to ensure sustainable development and stability in Thailand because economic health is directly linked to national security.

While foreign-policy challenges may not traditionally be considered security issues, they significantly impact Thailand's ability to manage its external environment. Ineffective foreign policies can lead to isolation, reduced influence, and increased vulnerability in international diplomacy. Thailand faces significant challenges in managing its relationships with the major powers, navigating regional dynamics, and responding to global shifts. Ensuring a coherent and strategic foreign policy is crucial to maintaining Thailand's sovereignty and position on the global stage.

The transformation of Thailand's security environment after the Cold War underscores the dynamic nature of national security challenges. As traditional threats recede, new, non-traditional issues have emerged that require adaptive and comprehensive strategies. By addressing Southern unrest, economic stagnation, and foreign-policy disarray, Thailand can enhance its national security and ensure a stable and prosperous future.

The following section delves into these security challenges in greater detail, demonstrating their profound impact on Thailand's security and well-being. Thailand's security landscape has shifted from conventional to predominantly non-traditional concerns. Among the three identified issues, only Southern unrest involves a degree of armed conflict; however, it remains an internal matter involving non-state actors. The analysis highlights how these challenges affect Thailand's core security interests and proposes strategies to address them.

## II. Analysis of Selected Issues and Their Current Perception

### 2.1 Southern Unrest

Southern unrest in Thailand, particularly in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, represents a persistent and violent conflict that fundamentally challenges the nation's integrity. This conflict is deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and religious differences, with various insurgent groups advocating greater autonomy and complete independence from the Thai state. Despite the government's efforts to address unrest through military intervention, development programs, and peace negotiations, these measures have had limited success.

The legitimacy of the Thai government has been significantly challenged by this unrest as it grapples with maintaining control and ensuring security in the affected regions. Additionally, the conflict raises critical questions about the inclusiveness and adaptability of Thai national identity, which traditionally emphasizes the triad of nation, Buddhism, and monarchy. The predominantly Muslim population in South Thailand often feels marginalized and disconnected from this national narrative, exacerbating discontent and resistance.

The impact of Southern unrest is profound and encompasses significant human, social, and economic costs. This conflict has resulted in thousands of deaths, injuries, and widespread displacement. Ongoing violence disrupts daily life, impedes economic development, and strains public resources. Moreover, the absence of a comprehensive and long-term solution underscores the persistence of this issue as a critical security challenge in Thailand.

To effectively address Southern unrest, the Thai government must adopt a multifaceted approach that extends beyond military measures. This strategy should include promoting inclusive dialogue, respecting cultural and religious diversity, implementing targeted development programs, and ensuring justice and the protection of human rights in all communities. Building trust and co-operation between local leaders and communities is also essential for achieving sustainable peace.

The root cause of Southern unrest is intrinsically linked to the conflicting historiographies held by the Thai state and most of the local Malay population. The Thai state has historically adhered to a unitary model by constructing an official narrative that underscores the unity of the modern Thai nation. This narrative, as reflected in Thai-school history textbooks, presents

Thai history as a continuum from the Sukhothai Kingdom in the 13th century to the Ayutthaya Empire between the 14th and 18th centuries. In the late 18th century, Bangkok succeeded Ayutthaya, evolving into Siam and subsequently into modern-day Thailand.

The official Thai narrative seldom acknowledges the southernmost region as a distinct entity with its own history. Instead, it portrays the region as a peripheral area inhabited by ethnic Malay-Muslim minorities. According to the Thai state narrative, this area was historically under the suzerainty of the Siamese Kingdom and was officially incorporated into modern Thailand following the demarcation of the border between British Malaya and Siam in the late 19th century.<sup>[5]</sup>

Although the Thai state perceives the southern periphery as an integral part of the modern Thai nation, the local population has divergent views. Historically, this region was occupied by various groups situated along the ancient trade route between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Different kingdoms have been established in this area since the first century BCE. The Kingdom of Patani emerged in the 14th century, gaining prominence as a flourishing trading entrepôt in the upper Malay Peninsula, and it converted to Islam in the mid-15th century.

Following the restoration of the Siamese Kingdom after the fall of Ayutthaya, Patani was attacked by the Siamese, which forced it to become a tributary state of Siam. A series of rebellions against Bangkok ensued, prompting Siam to reassert its rule by dividing the Kingdom into seven states in the early 19th century. Concurrently, British efforts to control the Malay Peninsula trade route led to an agreement between Siam and Britain, demarcating their spheres of influence and sovereignty. Under the Burney Treaty, the British recognized Siam's control over the Patani and other northern Malay sultanates. Patani's ruler also accommodated these two powers by submitting a golden tree as a tribute to Siam. Ultimately, Siam annexed Patani into its modern administrative framework in the early 20th century, effectively ending Patani's status as a self-governing state. This historical context underscores the complex and often contentious relationship between the central Thai state and the local Malay-Muslim population in the southernmost province.

The brief histories outlined above demonstrate the historical and identity-based foundation for ethnic conflict between the local Malay population and the Thai state. Since the incorporation of Pattani into modern Thailand, persistent efforts have been made to liberate Pattani as an independent state or to secure greater autonomy. One of the longstanding separatist movements dates back to the period preceding World War I and evolved into the Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani (Islamic Liberation Front of Patani), which was particularly active during the 1970s and 1980s and regained

[5] Aurel Croissant, "Unrest in South Thailand: Contours, Causes, and Consequences since 2001," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27(1) (2005): 21–43. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25798718>



support in the early 2000s.<sup>[6]</sup> Additionally, other insurgent groups have also emerged, most of which operate relatively independently and have loose co-ordination.

In 2003, Thailand's Southern unrest reemerged, and since then, it has persisted without a decisive resolution. The conflict has fluctuated in intensity, with periods of escalation and de-escalation, yet incidents such as bombings and killings continue to occur, impeding the establishment of the peace and stability necessary for development opportunities. One significant obstacle to the Thai government's management of the unrest is the presence of multiple active insurgencies, ranging from well-established organizations to loosely organized groups.

The most prominent and active insurgent group was the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (BRN), established in the 1960s. The BRN's driving ideology combined Patani nationalism with revolutionary Islamism, employing both political and armed tactics to advance the peace process and establish a Patani state. The BRN commands a significant number of armed personnel in the area, with members operating flexibly and sometimes autonomously. The geography of the conflict area, which shares a long border with Malaysia and contains dense forests, allows insurgents to easily escape across the border. Many BRN members and sympathizers are religious leaders within the community, which enables them to propagate separatist sentiments among followers, particularly those targeting the youth.

The separatist movement in southern Thailand is primarily ethno-national, with limited evidence linking it to international jihadism. Nevertheless, the influence of international terrorist networks, particularly since the early 2000s, may have infiltrated some groups. For instance, the Southeast Asian terrorist group, Jemaah Islamiyah, received assistance from Muslims in Thailand. However, this connection appears to have targeted Western interests rather than supporting separatism in southern Thailand.<sup>[7]</sup> Concurrently, the Thai state endeavored to prevent conflicts from escalating into the international arena. Despite these efforts, attempts have been made to establish peace negotiations between the Thai security authorities and groups that claim to represent most insurgents.

Economically, the three southernmost provinces have experienced relatively lower growth than other parts of the southern region and more developed regions of Thailand. Narathiwat Province, for instance, has the lowest gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the country.<sup>[8]</sup> Despite significant budget allocations—approximately THB 500 billion between 2003 and 2024—the region's economic development has remained stunted.<sup>[9]</sup>

The human costs of these conflicts remain significant. According to the

[6] Barry M. Rubin, *Guide to Islamist Movements* (M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2010)

[7] Neil J. Melvin, "Islamism and the Patani Insurgency," In: *Conflict in Southern Thailand: Islamism, Violence and the State in the Patani Insurgency, 19–27* (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2007).

[8] Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, "Gross Regional and Provincial Products: Chain Volume Measures 2021 Edition," Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, May 2023. [https://www.nesdc.go.th/ewt\\_dl\\_link.php?nid=13913&filename=gross\\_regional](https://www.nesdc.go.th/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=13913&filename=gross_regional)

[9] Southern News Center, "Budget for Unrest in the Southern Regions in 2024 Increased by 450 Million – Reaching 6.6 Billion," *Isranews*, June 23, 2024. <https://www.isranews.org/article/south-news/south-slide/125181-southbudget.html>



Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre (SBPAC), nearly 6,000 incidents occurred in the three provinces from 2003 to 2022. These incidents resulted in 19,262 casualties among civilians and law-enforcement personnel. This figure includes 5,836 deaths, 12,541 injuries, and approximately 885 disabilities. Additionally, although the government has spent approximately THB 4.2 billion on various forms of assistance,<sup>[10]</sup> and there has been a trend toward de-escalating violence, the conflict remains unresolved.

This ongoing security problem reflects the evolving nature of security challenges facing the Thai state in the post-Cold War era. First, while the issue has been longstanding, it has resurfaced within the new context of rising Islamization since September 11, 2001. This global trend has had a profound impact on the Muslim world, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, with increased violence observed in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Second, the resurgence of violence in Thailand's southern provinces underscores the role of non-state actors in modern warfare. Over the past two decades, external funding from insurgent groups has also contributed to sustaining these activities.

However, Thai security authorities face an unfamiliar challenge in addressing the evolving nature of conflict in the southern provinces. This conflict is not only para-militaristic but also inherently political. Although the Thai authorities have occasionally succeeded in suppressing separatist movements through force, such actions have undermined the authorities' legitimacy in the eyes of the local population. It is crucial for the authorities to exercise restraint in the use of force to avoid civilian harm. Moreover, effective public-relations strategies that demonstrate Bangkok's commitment to fairness and justice are essential for gaining the trust and support of the local population.

Conflict resolution is complex in this context. Thai authorities have often struggled to identify the legitimate representatives of insurgent groups. Additionally, the primary agencies handling conflicts are within the security apparatus, particularly the military and police, which often lack expertise in political negotiations and public affairs. Conflict is multidimensional and is rooted in historical grievances, religious differences, and economic and political disparities that have persisted for centuries. Furthermore, criminal activities and syndicates, such as drug smuggling, exacerbate the severity and complexity of conflicts. These organized criminal elements sometimes exploit the situation to instigate attacks on authorities, leading to public misunderstanding about the nature of violence.<sup>[11]</sup>

Furthermore, this prolonged conflict undeniably benefits certain businesses and individuals, including politicians and the arms industry. Bureaucratic politics reveals that the security apparatus has been granted

[10] Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre, "Statistics of Incidents and Casualties from the Unrest Situation in the Southern Border Provinces (Certified by 3 Parties) from 2003 to 2022)," 2020. <https://www.sbpac.go.th/?p=55404>

[11] Marc Askew, "Fighting with Ghosts: Querying Thailand's 'Southern Fire,'" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32(2) (2007): 117–155. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41756324>

increased authority and, at times, impunity in its operations. As previously mentioned, a larger budget was allocated to the military, police, and related offices responsible for managing conflicts. However, these authorities often lack unity and effective coordination, resulting in disarray in addressing this situation.

At the regional level, support from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries is essential for the Thai state. Co-operation with Malaysian authorities is critical for preventing the escalation of violence. To secure this co-operation, Thailand must demonstrate that it treats the Muslim population in its three southernmost provinces fairly and equitably. This requires a strong political sector capable of leading the security apparatus. However, in the past two decades, Thai politics has been marked by instability and frequent changes in the government. In recent decades, military intervention has weakened political and civilian leadership. Consequently, the political struggle sidelined the conflict in the south within Thai political discourse, leaving the management of Southern unrest predominantly in the hands of the security apparatus. Their strategies and tactics may be ill-suited to effectively address the multifaceted nature of the conflict.

This security challenge remains the most significant in terms of the financial commitment that Thailand has pledged to restore peace and stability. Assessing the National Security Policy from 2003 onwards, it consistently addresses Southern unrest in various contexts. Primarily, it frames unrest as being caused by uneven development between urban and rural areas, exacerbating issues such as mistreatment, injustice, corruption, and organized crime in the southernmost provinces. It also explores the possible connection between these internal grievances and external influences, particularly international terrorist networks, which might inspire radical groups to resist the Thai state.<sup>[12]</sup>

Thailand's security system has unequivocally focused on this issue, recognizing it as a means of increasing its power, responsibilities, and budget. Substantial funding is required to address this issue. Additionally, specific government agencies have gained prominence due to persistent unrest in the south. The military plays a crucial role in managing unrest by acting as the primary ground force. The SBPAC also benefited from this situation. Established in 1981 to co-ordinate policy and implementation in the five southernmost provinces and foster a better understanding between the central government and local people, the SBPAC was decommissioned in 2002, reflecting a period when the conflict had eased to a manageable level. However, it was revived in 2004 after the unrest reemerged in 2003.

Despite the continuing security challenge it poses to the Thai state, Southern unrest is currently fading due to mainstream public attention and

[12] Office of the National Security Council, "National Security Policy (2003–2006)," 2002. <https://dl.parliament.go.th/handle/20.500.13072/417240>

media coverage. Reports are sporadic, and public interest is piqued only when large-scale casualties and deaths occur. Moreover, one of the main surveys in Thailand that examines public opinions on security issues does not mention the Southern unrest but includes other regional security issues, especially military modernization in neighboring countries.<sup>[13]</sup> These discrepancies in perceptions between the government and the public highlight several aspects of the conflict. First, the conflict is primarily contained within the three southernmost provinces and remains distant from other parts of Thailand. Consequently, the general public beyond the three provinces may not have been directly affected. Second, the problem has been securitized and routinized by government agencies. Managing conflict has become a standard duty among the concerned agencies, reducing the pressure for urgent responses that might attract media and public attention. Moreover, the Thai government has attempted to avoid internationalizing this issue to garner wider international attention. Peace negotiations with the separatist groups are mostly kept quiet from public attention. Simultaneously, the Thai government attempts to shape the narrative of the situation by avoiding the term “peace negotiation” and instead uses “talks for peace.”<sup>[14]</sup>

Nonetheless, conflict remains a challenging security issue in Thailand. Incidents continue to occur although the number of incidents has declined. In 2023, it was reported that more than 120 people were injured, and 30 people, excluding the instigators, were killed.<sup>[15]</sup> If this situation is not appropriately managed, it will escalate.

## 2.2 Economic Stagnation

Considering Thailand’s security landscape, characterized more by NTS challenges than traditional military concerns, and global economic and security insecurities, economic stagnation has emerged as an immediate challenge. This issue has been central to Thailand’s socio-economic transition. Following the decade-long political unrest precipitated by the 2006 military coup that unseated the Thaksin administration, the Kingdom grappled with economic stagnation for over two decades. Consequently, Thailand has witnessed a significant decline in economic vitality, with its annual GDP growth decreasing from 7% in 2003 to 2.5% in 2022.<sup>[16]</sup> In recent years, GDP growth has remained low, at 1.6% in 2023, with an estimated growth of approximately 2.6% in 2024 (Figure 1).<sup>[17]</sup>

[13] “Super Poll: Security, Politics, and Digital Money,” June 9, 2024. <https://storage.googleapis.com/wzukusers/user-17406417/documents/89c2317490cd4d8a988d765323021763/Super%20Poll%20ความมั่นคง%20การเมือง%20พื้นที่%20ใต้.pdf>

[14] Policy Watch, “Two Decades of Southern Unrest, the Peace Unattained,” June 6, 2024. <https://policywatch.thaipbs.or.th/article/government-29>

[15] Benar News, “The Trend of Violence in the Southern Border Area May Increase in 2023,” January 6, 2024. <https://www.benarnews.org/thai/commentary/th-my-abuza-deep-south-violence-01062023160614.html>

[16] World Bank, “GDP per Capita Growth (Annual %) Thailand,” <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD.ZG?contextual=max&end=2022&locations=TH&skipRedirection=true&start=2001&view=chart>

[17] Bank of Thailand, “Thai Economy: Economic Outlook,” <https://www.bot.or.th/en/thai-economy/economic-outlook.html>

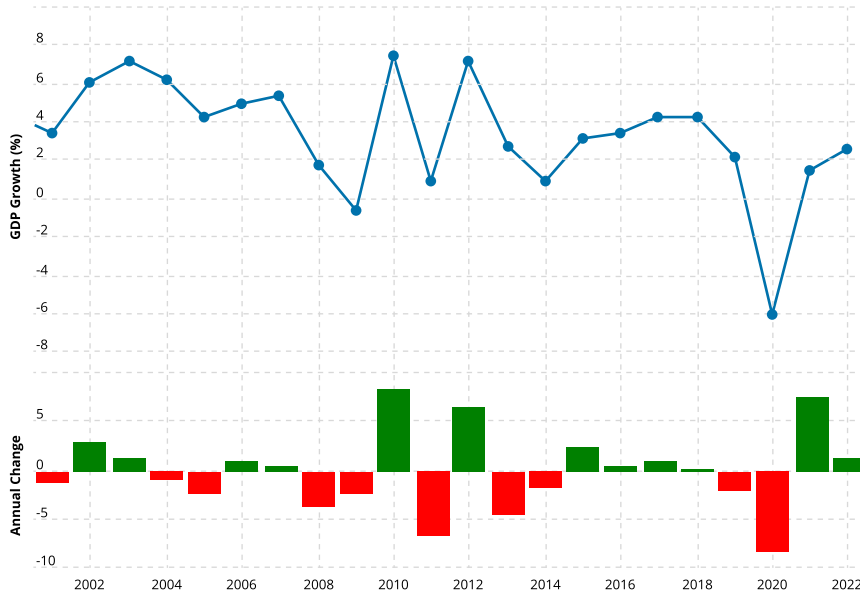


Figure 1. Thailand's annual GDP growth (%) between 2001 and 2022<sup>[18]</sup>

Thailand's struggle to revitalize and modernize its economy to evade the middle-income trap is palpable. Hindered by outdated infrastructure and a lack of innovative economic strategies, Thailand's policymakers appear constrained by obsolete paradigms that often rely on outdated methods to tackle contemporary challenges. The nation's economic pillars—traditional manufacturing, agricultural exports, and tourism—face intense competition from emerging economies that exemplify the “flying geese” development model. Consequently, its modest economic growth places Thailand among the least rapidly growing economies in the ASEAN region (Figure 2).

GDP Growth Rate (% per year)					
	2022	2023		2024	
		April	September	April	September
<b>Southeast Asia</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>5.6</b>
Brunei Darussalam	-1.6	-1.6	-1.6	-1.6	-1.6
Cambodia	5.2	5.2	5.2	5.2	5.2
Indonesia	5.3	5.3	5.3	5.3	5.3
Lao People's Democratic Republic	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5
Malaysia	8.7	8.7	8.7	8.7	8.7
Myanmar	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0
Philippines	7.6	7.6	7.6	7.6	7.6
Singapore	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.6
Thailand	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6
Timor-Leste	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.2
Viet Nam	8.0	8.0	8.0	8.0	8.0

Figure 2. ASEAN member countries' GDP growth rate (% per annum) between 2022 and 2024<sup>[19]</sup>

[18] World Bank, “GDP per Capita Growth.”

[19] Asian Development Bank, “Growth Outlook by Subregion,” September 2023. <https://www.adb.org/outlook/editions/september-2023#subregion>

Thailand's traditional manufacturing sector, once a robust engine of economic growth, is increasingly being challenged by regional competitors

that offer lower production costs and higher efficiency. Countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia attract significant foreign manufacturing investments, eroding Thailand's competitive edge. The agricultural sector, another cornerstone of the Thai economy, is also under pressure. Global market volatility, climate change, and technological advancements in agriculture have exposed vulnerabilities in the agricultural sector, leading to declining productivity and profitability.<sup>[20]</sup>

Tourism, long heralded as a vital economic driver in Thailand, has faced significant hurdles. The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted global travel, drastically reducing tourist arrivals and revenues. Although there has been a gradual recovery, the tourism sector remains susceptible to fluctuations in global economic conditions and geopolitical tensions. More importantly, Thailand lacks a clear direction for improving its tourism industry,<sup>[21]</sup> and its heavy reliance on low-cost tourism and specific large markets, such as China,<sup>[22]</sup> renders it susceptible to disruption.

Furthermore, Thailand's infrastructure, particularly its transportation and digital connectivity, has not kept pace with the demands of the modern economy. Outdated transportation networks hinder efficient logistics and supply-chain management, and inadequate digital infrastructure limits innovation and growth in the digital economy. These infrastructural deficits exacerbate the challenges businesses and investors face, discourage new investments, and impede economic progress.<sup>[23]</sup>

In addition to sector-specific challenges, Thailand's economic-policy framework has struggled to adapt to the rapidly changing global economic landscape. Policymakers often rely on conventional economic strategies that are ill-suited for addressing the complexities of a globalized economy. There is a pressing need for forward-thinking policies to promote technological innovation, enhance human capital, and support sustainable development. However, efforts to implement these reforms have been slow and inconsistent, hampering economic growth.

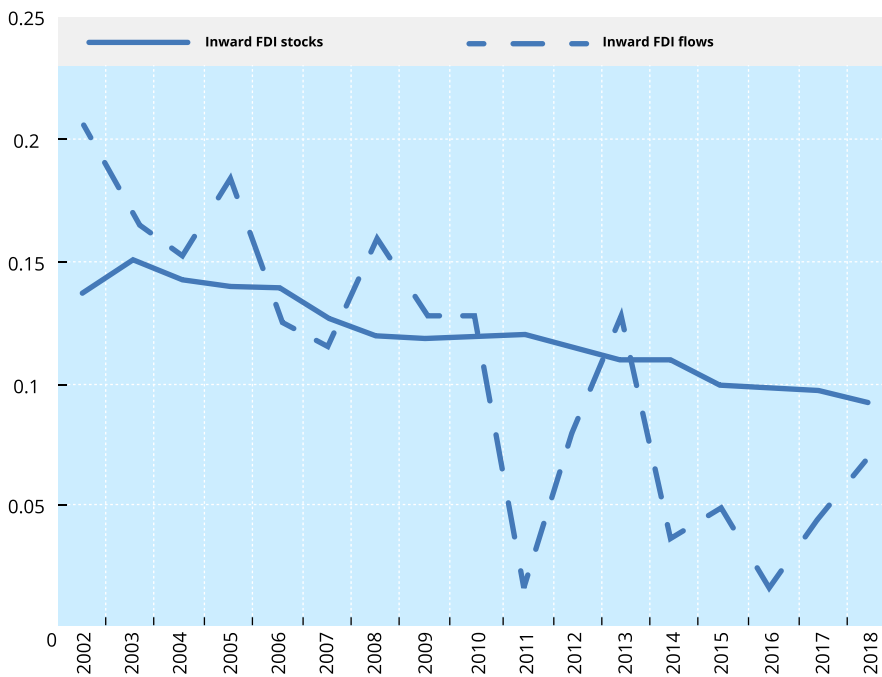
Foreign direct investment (FDI) has been a critical driver of Thailand's economic growth since the 1980s. However, recent statistics indicate that Thailand's attractiveness as an FDI destination has steadily declined over the past two decades, particularly compared to other ASEAN countries (Figure 3). An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study highlighted that one critical reason for this decline is the relatively higher cost of production in Thailand compared to other emerging markets in mainland Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam

[20] World Bank, "World Bank Outlines Five Reform Priorities for Thailand to Revitalize Growth," March 25, 2024. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/03/25/world-bank-outlines-five-reform-priorities-for-thailand-to-revitalize-growth>

[21] Narumon Kasemsuk, "Thailand Falls by More Than 10 Places in Tourism Ranking," Bangkok Post, May 27, 2024. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/general/2800278/thailand-falls-by-more-than-10-places-in-tourism-ranking>

[22] Tommy Walker, "Why Are Fewer Chinese Tourists Visiting Thailand?" Deutsche Welle, May 12, 2023. <https://www.dw.com/en/why-are-fewer-chinese-tourists-visiting-thailand/a-67637283>

[23] Asian Development Bank, "Thailand, Industrialization and Economic Catch-up: Country Diagnostic Study," 2015, 43-48. <https://www.adb.org/publications/thailand-industrialization-and-economic-catch-up>



**Figure 3.** Thailand's inward FDI flows and stocks as the % of total ASEAN countries. Source: OECD

(CLMV),<sup>[24]</sup> reflecting Thailand's middle-income trap.

Thailand embarked on economic development earlier than many of its regional peers, becoming an FDI haven in the late 1980s following the Plaza Accord. The influx of foreign capital during this period significantly boosted the country's manufacturing sector, which capitalized on low labor costs to attract investment. However, the subsequent economic transformation toward capital-intensive manufacturing has been slow. Therefore, Thailand now finds itself competing for FDI with its less-developed neighbors, who offer lower production costs in similar industries.

Thailand's higher production costs can be attributed to several factors. First, labor costs have risen as the country has developed, diminishing the competitive advantage it once held in this regard. Second, outdated infrastructure and regulatory inefficiencies exacerbate operational costs for foreign investors. By contrast, CLMV countries, with their lower labor costs and improving business environments, present a more attractive proposition for investors seeking cost-efficient production bases. Moreover, Thailand's slow progress in adopting advanced technologies and moving up the value chain in manufacturing has hindered its ability to attract high-value FDIs. While other countries in the region have aggressively pursued policies to modernize their industries and develop a skilled labor force, Thailand's focus has remained mainly on traditional manufacturing sectors.<sup>[25]</sup> This reliance on low-wage strategies is no longer sustainable in a competitive regional landscape where innovation and technological

[24] OECD, "Trends and Qualities of FDI in Thailand," OECD Investment Policy Reviews, 2021. [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-investment-policy-reviews-thailand-2020\\_c4e0001c-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-investment-policy-reviews-thailand-2020_c4e0001c-en.html)

[25] Krislert Samphantharak, "The Thai Economy: A Lost Decade?" SSRN, 2019. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3135033>



advancement are paramount. Moreover, the service sector contributes more than 40% to the GDP; however, it remains in lower-productivity industries that employ lower-skilled workers,<sup>[26]</sup> especially tourism. In addition, the agricultural-sector workforce remains significant, accounting for one-third of the workforce, compared to its contribution of only approximately 10% to the GDP.<sup>[27]</sup>

To regain its attractiveness as an FDI destination, Thailand must undertake significant economic reforms. This should include investing in modern infrastructure, streamlining regulatory processes, and fostering an environment conducive to innovation and high-tech industries. Enhancing the quality of education and vocational training to develop a skilled workforce capable of supporting advanced manufacturing and services is crucial. Additionally, policies aimed at reducing production costs, such as improving energy efficiency and logistics, can help Thailand become a more competitive destination for foreign investment.

Furthermore, diversifying the economy to reduce dependency on traditional manufacturing and developing sectors, such as technology, renewable energy, and high-value services, can attract new types of FDIs. By creating a more dynamic and resilient economic structure, Thailand can compete better with its regional neighbors and achieve sustainable growth. The government has attempted to pursue this strategic direction to upgrade Thailand's industries. However, the effort remains relatively nascent, and its success depends on Thailand's attractiveness compared to neighboring countries that may have more skilled labor or business opportunities, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

Compounding these challenges is a demographic crunch fueled by a worryingly low birth rate of approximately 500,000 births in 2022, the lowest in 77 years. This demographic trend exacerbates existing economic strain, contributing to a tepid economic landscape. These economic challenges, coupled with political strife, have deepened the socio-economic discontent in Thailand. The Economist vividly characterizes Thailand's economic dilemma as "It has gotten old before it has gotten rich,"<sup>[28]</sup> highlighting the nation's struggle to achieve economic prosperity despite its aging population. Consequently, a widening gap between social strata persists, contrasting sharply with Thailand's idealized image as "The Land of Smiles," which often masks the harsh realities of daily life for many Thais.

Moreover, economic stagnation has broader socio-economic implications, perpetuating income inequality and regional disparities and limiting social mobility. This reflects the fact that Thailand is among the most income-unequal countries worldwide. Statistics suggest that approximately 10% of the population earns more than half of the national income.<sup>[29]</sup>

[26] Ulrich Zachau, "Services as a New Driver of Growth for Thailand," World Bank Blogs, December 28, 2016. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/eastasiapacific/services-as-a-new-driver-of-growth-for-thailand>

[27] United Nations, Thailand, "Thai Agricultural Sector: From Problems to Solutions," December 2, 2020. <https://thailand.un.org/en/103307-thai-agricultural-sector-problems-solutions>

[28] The Economist, "Large Parts of Asia Are Getting Old before They Get Rich," October 12, 2023. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/10/12/large-parts-of-asia-are-getting-old-before-they-get-rich>

[29] World Inequality Database, "What's New about Inequality in South and Southeast Asia in 2023?" November 22, 2023. <https://wid.world/news-article/2023-wid-update-south-and-southeast-asia/>

Without substantial and sustained economic growth, effective income distribution, and welfare, these issues will likely intensify, potentially leading to social unrest and political instability. Particularly concerning is the plight of the younger generation within a socio-political structure perceived as rigid, hierarchical, and entrenched in patronage networks. This perception fuels widespread corruption, creating formidable barriers for those outside privileged socio-economic circles within the bureaucracy and business sector. Recent surveys, such as Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index in 2023, reflect growing public concern, with Thailand ranking 108 out of 180 countries,<sup>[30]</sup> indicating a widespread belief that government corruption is a critical issue.

The burgeoning frustration and aspiration for change among Thailand's youth have catalyzed the emergence of new political movements, notably exemplified by the MFP's surprising electoral success. Despite securing most parliamentary seats, the MFP faced challenges in forming a government. Instead, the Pheu Thai Party, a former ally during the election campaign, shifted its alliances to collaborate with other conservative parties, resulting in the establishment of a government under Mr. Srettha Thavisin. This scenario underscores the persistence of entrenched party politics and networks among Thailand's political elites.

These socio-economic and political challenges form the core focus of the current government, which is primarily oriented toward stimulating economic growth. The implications of this economic focus are expected to resonate widely, influencing not only domestic policies but also Thailand's broader foreign relations and security strategies. Given Thailand's heavy dependence on international trade, investment, and tourism, these sectors will significantly shape its policy direction, either opening new avenues of opportunity or imposing constraints on its policy objectives. Therefore, navigating the intricate interplay between domestic socio-economic policies and international economic engagement is crucial for charting Thailand's trajectory in both regional and global arenas.

Economic stagnation in Thailand transcends mere economic implications and profoundly impacts the socio-political arena. Economic hardships, coupled with disillusionment among the younger generation and an entrenched political structure, are driving demands for change. As younger voices increasingly enter the political sphere, there is growing urgency to revitalize Thailand's economy. Since the mid-2000s, Thailand has experienced significant political instability following the military coup that ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Over two decades of political turmoil, exacerbated by economic stagnation, have underscored mounting calls for structural reforms. These intertwined political and economic challenges pose a formidable security risk to Thailand's stability in the near future.

[30] Transparency International, "Our Work in Thailand," 2023. <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/thailand>



Although Thailand has historically been a regional economic powerhouse, it is now confronted with substantial hurdles that necessitate a comprehensive and innovative approach. Policymakers must prioritize infrastructure modernization, foster innovation, and implement forward-thinking economic strategies to restore competitiveness and achieve sustainable growth.

Economic stagnation has received enormous attention from both the government and the public, leading to countless debates in the media. The 2023 election campaign may be used as a proxy for this assessment of public attention. A good reflection of the policies proposed by the major parties during the election campaign was evident in a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) report summarizing the key policy campaigns.<sup>[31]</sup> Economic policies aimed at stimulating growth are the primary focus of all parties. Reflecting the low growth and wage decline, most parties proposed economic distributive measures, such as injecting different forms of cash into the wider population, debt moratoriums for farmers, and increasing the minimum wage for skilled laborers and new graduates. The major parties also proposed stimulating GDP growth by 5%, stimulating the tourism industry, exploring new industries such as the digital economy, creating more special economic zones, and improving Thailand's infrastructure.

Public sentiment regarding the economic situation is also reflected in the Dusit Poll, a key poll in Thailand. In the survey conducted before the 2023 election, three of the five issues people felt most frustrated with were economic. The first-ranked issue was increasing expenses (52.14%), while the third and fourth were high gas prices (48.31%) and the country's economy (44.35%).<sup>[32]</sup> Super Poll, another major poll, suggests the same public sentiments regarding the importance of economic issues. The March 2024 survey on what people want to see indicates that 67.4% of the respondents viewed economic stimulation to solve stagnation as an immediate concern, while 61.8% wanted the government to solve the increasing public debt problem.<sup>[33]</sup>

Thailand's economic stagnation will remain a long-term problem as long as it cannot overcome some of the key factors mentioned earlier, including the low birth rate, diversification of sources of revenue, and industrial transformation to a high-value chain. In 2023, the country's GDP growth remained at 1.9% due to weak exports and fewer incoming Chinese tourists.<sup>[34]</sup> The National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDC) reports that in the first quarter of 2024, GDP growth will only reach 1.5%, and the annual figure will fluctuate only between 2% and 3%,<sup>[35]</sup> while the World Bank predicts it to be 2.4%.<sup>[36]</sup> However, with the global recession, the economic slowdown of the Chinese economy, and the trade war between major powers, Thailand may find it more difficult to boost its economy than predicted.

[31] BBC News Thai, "The 2023 Election: The Summary of Key Policy Campaign of the Nine Major Parties before the Election on 14 May," April 18, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-65307789>

[32] Dusit Poll, "Thai People and the New Government," May 28, 2023. [https://dusitpoll.dusit.ac.th/UPLOAD\\_FILES/POLL/2566/PS-2566-1685240715.pdf](https://dusitpoll.dusit.ac.th/UPLOAD_FILES/POLL/2566/PS-2566-1685240715.pdf)

[33] Super Poll, "The People's Needs," March 31, 2024. <https://storage.googleapis.com/wzukusers/user-17406417/documents/95c807c2aec84cccbeffe39afb38f419/Super%20Poll%20%E0%B8%84%E0%B8%A7%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%A1%E0%B8%95%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%81%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%82%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%9B%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B0%E0%B8%8A%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%8A%E0%B8%99.pdf>

[34] Apornrath Phoonphongphiphat, "Thailand's 2023 GDP Growth Slows to 1.9% on Weak Exports," Nikkei Asia, February 19, 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Thailand-s-2023-GDP-growth-slows-to-1.9-on-weak-exports>

[35] Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, "Thai Economic Performance in Q1 of 2024 and the Outlook for 2024," NESDC News, May 20, 2024. [https://www.nesdc.go.th/nesda\\_en/article\\_attach/article\\_file\\_20240520091503.pdf](https://www.nesdc.go.th/nesda_en/article_attach/article_file_20240520091503.pdf)

[36] World Bank, "Thailand Economic Monitor July 2024: Unlocking the Growth Potential of Secondary Cities," July 3, 2024. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/thailand/publication/temjuly2024>

## 2.3 Foreign-Policy Disarrays

The escalating rivalry between the United States (US) and China, particularly evident in the trade tensions since 2018, is among the most pivotal global issues. This dynamic has prompted Thailand to adjust its diplomatic approach to maintain a strategic balance. Meanwhile, ongoing geopolitical events such as the prolonged conflict in Ukraine since 2022 and unexpected tensions in the Gaza Strip that intensified in October 2023 have added further complexity to the volatile international security landscape. These dynamics are poised to cause significant fluctuations in the global economy in the coming years. Compounding this projection is the expected economic slowdown in China, which threatens to dampen the nation's fragile post-pandemic recovery efforts.

Close to Thailand's borders, the enduring Myanmar crisis presents a pressing challenge to Thailand's foreign policy, requiring a nuanced approach to conflict resolution and humanitarian aid. Positioned at the nexus between regional stability and global geopolitics, Thailand must craft a foreign policy that responds to both global trends and regional commitments.

The convergence of these regional challenges with broader international relations underscores the necessity for Thailand to adopt a flexible and comprehensive foreign policy framework. Such a framework would empower Thailand to navigate immediate geopolitical shifts while aligning its strategic interests with the evolving global economic and political landscapes. As Thailand aims to strengthen its international role, its ability to adequately balance global pressure with regional imperatives is crucial for achieving sustained growth and stability.

In recent decades, Thailand's foreign policy has been criticized for its perceived lack of innovation and leadership. Political turmoil since the mid-2000s, including military intervention until 2019, has hindered consistent policy direction. These domestic challenges have often overshadowed Thailand's engagement in external affairs. The 2014 military intervention further complicated Thailand's strategic alignment with the major global powers. Consequently, Thailand's management of key international issues has been perceived as ineffective.

Despite the civilian government's assumption of power in 2023, the lingering effects of past instability continue to influence Thailand's foreign policy landscape. Addressing these challenges is essential for Thailand as it seeks to assert itself more effectively globally and navigate the complexities of contemporary international relations.

### 2.3.1 The US-China Competition

Navigating the escalating US-China rivalry poses a significant challenge to Thailand's foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Historically adept at maintaining a delicate balance between these global powers, Thailand now faces mounting pressure to choose sides as tensions rise, especially in critical areas such as the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea.

In the past, Thailand has skillfully navigated this balance, leveraging economic advantages from its close ties with China while relying on its longstanding security alliance with the US to counterbalance China's growing influence in the region. Bangkok has actively expanded its global partnerships by fostering diverse collaborations with India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, European nations, and other developing countries.

However, increasing geopolitical tensions have constrained Thailand's ability to sustain this strategy. Nearly a decade of military-led governance after the 2014 coup has shifted Thailand's alignment closer to Beijing. China has emerged as a viable alternative partner for defense co-operation and military modernization, as evidenced by joint exercises, patrols, military procurement, and discussions on technology transfer during the coup government.<sup>[37]</sup> While the Thai-US Cobra Gold Exercise remains pivotal, analysts are concerned that military engagement with China could gain prominence over time, potentially reshaping Thailand's regional strategic alignment.<sup>[38]</sup> As Thailand navigates these complex dynamics, its ability to maintain flexibility and adaptability in its foreign policy is crucial for safeguarding its interests amid the intensifying rivalry between the world's two largest economies.

Thailand's increasing alignment with Beijing has become the cornerstone of its economic strategy, particularly amid ongoing economic challenges. This shift in foreign policy is not confined to specific regimes but spans different political administrations. For instance, the Srettha government actively pursued closer economic ties with China to address its economic stagnation. Attending the 3rd Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Summit in China in October 2023 exemplified this strategy, in which Srettha aimed to enhance economic co-operation by seeking increased Chinese investment and trade. Initiatives such as expediting infrastructure projects including the high-speed railway underscore Thailand's commitment to leveraging Chinese partnerships for economic growth.

Additionally, the introduction of visa-free entry for Chinese nationals in September 2023 complements Thailand's broader strategy of revitalizing its tourism sector following the pandemic. These steps highlight Thailand's proactive approach to harnessing economic opportunities with China while

[37] Bangkok Biznews, "Thailand's Request for China to Jointly Set up a Military Maintenance Facility in Thailand is Confirmed," March 10, 2017. <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/news/detail/744451>

[38] Surachart Bamrungsuk, "Thai-Chinese Special Relationship and Thailand's Foreign Affairs Landscape," *Matichon Weekly*, July 6, 2017. [https://www.matichonweekly.com/column/article\\_43670](https://www.matichonweekly.com/column/article_43670)

navigating global economic uncertainties and domestic development challenges. Notably, Mr. Srettha Thavisin has actively flagged the Land Bridge Project on the southern seaboard to start operations by 2030. This ambitious infrastructure initiative aims to create a land-based link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans crossing Thailand's southern peninsula. This project involves the construction of deep seaports in Chumphon in the Gulf of Thailand and Ranong in the Andaman Sea. These ports are connected via a network of railways and roads. The overarching goal of this development is to tap into the congested traffic in the Strait of Malacca and provide an alternative shipping route through Thailand.

The Land Bridge Project in Thailand's southern region holds substantial promise for local economic growth through extensive infrastructure development. However, it faces significant challenges, such as attracting investors and persuading users to choose this route over established routes such as Singapore and the Strait of Malacca. Strategically, the project is advantageous for China as it provides an additional link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans under Thai control. Upon completion, this project will offer China a new maritime access route through mainland Southeast Asia, seamlessly integrating Thailand's extensive road and rail networks that extend throughout the region. The operational Laos-China railway, already linked to the Thailand-China high-speed railway under construction, enhances this connectivity. This development will enable China to access the Indian Ocean via a route that bypasses the contentious South China Sea, where territorial disputes involving China, the US, and their allies persist. The involvement of Chinese businesses in this project could inadvertently bolster China's economic and political influence in Thailand in the long term. This underscores the strategic implications of infrastructure projects in shaping regional dynamics and economic relationships, and highlights Thailand's evolving role in a broader geopolitical context.<sup>[39]</sup>

Thailand's recent attempts to readjust its international strategy face significant complexities amid the escalating tensions between Washington and Beijing. Increased co-operation with either power risks signaling a preference, potentially disrupting Thailand's longstanding balanced approach. This challenge was compounded by the shifting alignment of Thailand's key partners toward Washington, particularly regarding security matters. Participation in US-led initiatives, such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, AUKUS, and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), demonstrates a growing regional trend toward clearer security alignments. The frequency of joint military exercises and maritime patrols among these partners highlights a shift toward more assertive security postures in the Indo-Pacific region. Navigating these dynamics presents Thailand with the delicate task of maintaining diplomatic equilibrium while responding to evolving regional security dynamics. The strategic choices made in this context will shape Thailand's role in the Indo-

[39] Pongphisoot Busbarat, "Bamboo Stuck in the Chinese Wind: The Continuing Significance of the China Factor in Thailand's Foreign Policy Orientation," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 46(1) (2024): 125–146. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs46-1f>

Pacific region and broader international relationships in the coming years.

In an evolving geopolitical landscape, the prospect of countries being pressured to align with one side is becoming more plausible. For Thailand, this scenario necessitates a careful evaluation of its strategic interests and the potential for significant shifts in foreign relations and security policies. As regional dynamics increasingly align around distinct blocs, Thailand's longstanding policy of balanced diplomacy faces substantial challenges. Thailand's strategic response demands diplomatic skills, forward-thinking strategic planning, and a deep understanding of evolving regional and global geopolitical trends. Effectively navigating these complexities is crucial for Thailand to uphold its interests, preserve its regional stability, and maintain its role as a key player in the evolving Indo-Pacific region.

### 2.3.2 Thailand's Incoherent Stance on Major Global Conflicts

Thailand's traditional foreign policy, often metaphorically described as "bamboo bending in the wind," is currently facing increasing scrutiny. Historically celebrated for its strategic flexibility, this approach has allowed Thailand to adeptly navigate the changing tides of global politics. However, in today's multifaceted and rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape, many perceive this strategy as insufficient.

During General Prayut Chan-o-cha's administration, Thailand adopted a notably low-profile stance on the global stage. This passive approach drew criticism from foreign policy experts, who argued that Thai diplomacy lacked the proactive engagement and innovative strategies necessary to address contemporary international challenges. Critics have pointed out that Thailand's foreign policy was reactive rather than proactive, failing to assert its influence or leverage its strategic position in Southeast Asia.

Managing Russia's invasion of Ukraine during the Prayut administration clearly illustrates this evolving dynamic. In March 2022, Thailand joined the international community by voting to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, calling for its immediate withdrawal. This decision aligned Thailand with the global majority, emphasizing its commitment to international law and sovereignty. However, in a notable shift, Thailand abstained from a United Nations (UN) vote in October 2022 condemning Russia's annexation of Eastern Ukrainian territories. Thai officials justified this abstention as a gesture of neutrality, suggesting that it was aimed at fostering opportunities for negotiation between the conflicting parties. They argued that maintaining a neutral stance could position Thailand as a potential mediator capable of facilitating dialogue and de-escalation.<sup>[40]</sup> This abstention was also seen as a strategic move to demonstrate goodwill toward Russia and

[40] Poramet Tangsathaporn, "Thailand Abstains in UN vote; Refuses to Condemn Russian Annexation," Bangkok Post, October 14, 2022. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2414103/thailand-abstains-in-un-vote>



encourage President Vladimir Putin to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit held in Bangkok in December 2022.<sup>[41]</sup> Thailand's desire to host President Putin at the APEC Summit was driven by economic and diplomatic considerations that reflected the importance of maintaining positive relations with major global powers.

The diplomatic approach under Mr. Srettha Thavisin's new government appears to echo previous patterns, presenting immediate challenges in articulating a consistent stance on global issues, such as the Ukraine conflict and Israeli-Palestinian escalation. Thailand's varying votes on Ukraine-related resolutions, from initial condemnation of the invasion to subsequent abstentions, have raised questions about its position and commitment to international norms. While many nations disagreed with Russia's actions and pressured Moscow to withdraw from Ukraine, Mr. Srettha Thavisin continued to show Thailand's willingness to reaffirm and further strengthen bilateral ties with Russia. Mr. Srettha Thavisin's meeting with President Putin underscored this posture during the BRI Summit in Beijing in October 2023. This discussion focused on enhancing trade and investment co-operation and culminated in an invitation to President Putin to visit Thailand in the near future.<sup>[42]</sup> However, this stance toward Russia contrasts with Thailand's security alliance with the US, creating a complex dynamic when Thailand seeks to re-invigorate its ties with Washington.

Navigating these diplomatic challenges requires Mr. Srettha Thavisin's government to carefully balance its historical ties, national and regional interests, and global commitments. Strengthening ties with Russia can provide both economic benefits and geopolitical leverage. However, maintaining a robust alliance with the US is crucial for Thailand's security and regional stability. The ability to articulate a coherent foreign policy that aligns with Thailand's strategic objectives while navigating complex international relationships is crucial for shaping its role on the global stage.

The recent conflict in the Gaza Strip has had profound implications for Thailand, marked by the tragic loss of 41 Thai lives and the hostage-taking of several Thai workers. This situation demands a response that delicately balances humanitarian concerns with diplomatic negotiations to ensure the safe release of hostages. This sensitive and urgent matter requires the Thai government to swiftly mobilize its diplomatic channels and navigate the complexities of international conflict resolution.<sup>[43]</sup> Addressing the hostage situation extends beyond merely taking a stance on the conflict; it involves safeguarding Thai citizens and their interests abroad. This requires a nuanced approach, which includes several critical actions. Providing immediate consular assistance to those affected is paramount to ensuring their well-being and offering support to their families. This includes medical care, psychological support, and legal assistance as needed. Second, engaging in strategic diplomacy is essential to securing the release of hostages.

[41] Sebastian Strangio, "Why Did Thailand Abstain on This Week's UN Vote on Ukraine?" *The Diplomat*, October 13, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/why-did-thailand-abstain-on-this-weeks-un-vote-on-ukraine/>

[42] *The Nation*, "PM Srettha Meet Russian President Putin in Beijing," October 17, 2023. <https://www.nationthailand.com/thailand/policies/40031989>

[43] Khaosod English, "Two More Thai Hostages Have Died in Gaza, PM Offers Condolences to Their Families," May 17, 2024. <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/2024/05/17/two-more-thai-hostages-have-died-in-gaza-pm-offers-condolences-to-their-families/>

This involves working closely with international partners, leveraging relationships with key stakeholders, and utilizing backchannel communication to facilitate negotiations. The Thai government must employ a combination of diplomatic pressure, mediation, and incentives to achieve positive outcomes.

### 2.3.3 The Geopolitical Competition in the Mekong Subregion

Given its central location in mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand is influenced by numerous factors and conditions that have significantly shaped its foreign policy. The Mekong Subregion, which encompasses five mainland Southeast Asian countries—Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—plays a crucial role in the regional economic and political dynamics. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the establishment of the Greater Mekong Sub-Region Economic Cooperation Program (GMS Program), this area has become a focal point of engagement in the US, China, Japan, South Korea, and Australia.

The Mekong Subregion, as it is often referred to, is highly politicized and is known by various names, including “Far East India,” “Indo-China,” and the “Greater Mekong Subregion.” These names originated in different historical periods and have distinct political and economic implications for regional development. Additionally, the subregion has seen the development of numerous regional initiatives supported by international organizations and major powers. These include the GMS Program, Japan-Mekong Cooperation, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), Mekong-US Partnership, Mekong-ROK Cooperation, and Mekong-Australia Partnership. Such initiatives place the Mekong Subregion at the forefront of regional co-operation, particularly emphasizing regional transport development.<sup>[44]</sup>

Regional initiatives arise from political competition, further stimulating the economic and political dynamics within the subregion. These initiatives aim not only to foster development through infrastructure, human-resource development, and environmental and social projects but also to provide superpowers with opportunities to engage with the subregion, thereby helping to balance power dynamics. In addition to offering economic- and social-development assistance, these co-operation areas address the threats and challenges facing the subregion, such as human security, environmental issues, cybersecurity, and human and drug trafficking. At the international level, the US’ FOIP, China’s BRI, and Japan’s FOIP are reshaping economic and security orders. The FOIP conceptualizes the Mekong Subregion as a critical link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, while China’s BRI seeks to integrate the Mekong Subregion into its international production networks. These transformations in the international order and

[44] Narut Charoensri, “The Clashes Within: How Do Thai Government Agencies and NGOs View China’s Rise?” *Asian Perspective* 48(3) (2024): 459–478. <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2024.a935486>

subregional initiatives challenge Thailand's traditional security and risk perceptions.

Against the backdrop of global superpower competition and its regional implications, Thailand faces three significant challenges: First, Thailand must prepare to navigate the geopolitical and geo-economic transformations prompted by the FOIP and BRI. Second, Thailand must strategically position itself within regional initiatives to maximize opportunities across various areas of co-operation. Third, the Mekong River has emerged as a critical battleground in superpower competition, necessitating a clear articulation of Thailand's geostrategic stance. These phenomena profoundly impact Thailand's position, requiring a clear and explicit articulation of its geostrategic choices.

Furthermore, regional initiatives in the subregion are heavily politicized. There has been an increase in the number of initiatives supported by the US, China, and Japan, each with different memberships. For example, China does not participate in major regional organizations, such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC). This absence hinders effective river governance in this subregion. Other regional initiatives, such as the GMS Program, face constraints stemming from domestic dynamics within member countries. For example, when Myanmar hosted the 26th Ministerial Conference of the GMS Program in Naypyidaw, it faced criticism from civil society. The critics argued that the GMS Program not only allowed the "illegal junta" to participate but also appointed it as the host of the ministerial conference. These groups called for the immediate cancellation of the planned conference or urged members to decline attendance.<sup>[45]</sup> This situation reflects that while the subregion has developed numerous platforms and mechanisms offering economic and political opportunities, it must address its member countries' domestic politics, which significantly affect regional dynamics. As a neighbor to Myanmar and a participant in many regional initiatives, Thailand must develop a robust yet flexible foreign policy toward Myanmar and these initiatives. Thailand's policy toward Myanmar must also balance international pressure against the junta with the ramifications of its internal conflicts, particularly the influx of migrants. Consequently, the geopolitical context in the Mekong Subregion imposes additional constraints on Thailand's foreign policy, challenging its efforts to regain its leading role and manage its impact on stability and peace in the region.

Apart from the Mekong Subregion as a geographical setting, the Mekong River is a vital international waterway that flows from the Tibetan Plateau through China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, ultimately reaching the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. Governance of this river has become a critical issue among riparian states, especially because of China's extensive upstream dam-construction projects. These projects have sparked considerable debate and concern over their environmental impacts

[45] Mizzima, "Myanmar Junta to Host 26th Ministerial Conference of the Greater Mekong Subregion," December 7, 2023. <https://www.mizzima.com/article/myanmar-junta-host-26th-ministerial-conference-greater-mekong-subregion>



on the Lower Mekong countries. The ecological consequences of dams include altered water flow, reduced sediment transport, and disrupted fish-migration patterns, all of which have significant implications for the livelihoods and food security of millions of people living downstream. These environmental challenges have elicited varied responses from the international community.<sup>[46]</sup>

For instance, the US has expressed concerns regarding the sustainability and ecological impact of these developments. The MRC, the only international organization in the subregion dedicated to addressing the environmental issues of the Mekong River, plays a crucial role in river management and governance. However, the effectiveness of the MRC has been hampered by a lack of active involvement from China, the upstream country with the most significant influence on river flow. The lack of China's participation in the MRC remains a contentious issue. While the MRC fosters co-operation and sustainable management among the Lower Mekong countries, excluding China from its framework limits the commission's ability to address the full scope of environmental challenges facing the river. This situation highlights the complexities of international river governance and the need for more inclusive and co-operative approaches to managing shared natural resources. While Thailand continues to navigate the geopolitical complexities of the Indo-Pacific through economic engagement and strategic ambiguity, the Mekong River issue exemplifies the broader challenges it faces in balancing national interests with regional stability and environmental sustainability.

The environmental challenges posed by the Mekong River destabilize security arrangements within the subregion and significantly impact economic and security configurations across the broader Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, China's extensive dam-construction projects on the Mekong River have had profound environmental repercussions, including altered water flow, reduced sediment transport, and disrupted ecosystems. These changes have seriously affected the livelihoods of local populations in the Lower Mekong River Basin, which depend on the river for agriculture, fishing, and daily sustenance.<sup>[47]</sup>

Recognizing the severity of these impacts, the US has increased its involvement in the region. The environmental degradation caused by China's dam construction has prompted the US to adopt a more active role in addressing the resultant challenges. This involvement is not merely an ecological concern but also a strategic move, as the US seeks to maintain its influence and leadership in the subregion. The US response has been multifaceted, employing both bilateral and multilateral approaches to counterbalance China's growing presence and initiatives.

China's activities on the Mekong River are part of a broader strategic

[46] Khac Giang Nguyen, "The Mekong Region Struggles Economically and Politically but Maintains Geopolitical Balance," East Asian Forum, January 9, 2024. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/01/09/the-mekong-region-struggles-economically-and-politically-but-maintains-geopolitical-balance/>

[47] Poramet Tangsathaporn, "Mekong Basin Projects 'Doing More Harm Than Good,'" Bangkok Post, February 18, 2024. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2744094/mekong-basin-projects-doing-more-harm-than-good>

framework that includes various platforms and initiatives designed to enhance its influence and challenge the US-dominated order in the Indo-Pacific. Among these is the LMC, which aims to foster collaboration and development among Mekong countries, and China's high-speed railway diplomacy, which seeks to strengthen infrastructural connectivity and economic ties. China launched several global initiatives to achieve its strategic goals. The Global Security Initiative emphasizes collective security and aims to build a new international relationship centered on mutual respect and win-win co-operation. The Global Development Initiative promotes sustainable development and reduces poverty through international co-operation and shared prosperity. The Global Civilization Initiative also seeks to enhance cultural exchange and mutual understanding among nations.<sup>[48]</sup>

These platforms and initiatives are integral to China's grand strategy to reshape regional and global order. They serve as mechanisms through which China can project its influence, secure its interests, and provide alternatives to existing US-led frameworks. Through these efforts, China aims to present itself as a leading power capable of offering viable solutions to global challenges, thereby contesting the traditional dominance of the US in the Indo-Pacific region.

The interplay between these strategic maneuvers highlights the complex and dynamic nature of regional geopolitics. As China continues to expand its influence through multifaceted approaches, the US is compelled to adapt and respond to maintain its leadership and uphold the existing order. The situation in the Mekong River Basin exemplifies this broader geopolitical contest in which environmental issues intertwine with strategic interests, shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific region. In addition to superpower competition, Thailand faces a myriad of security issues. These include cybersecurity threats, telephone scams, disruptive technologies, transboundary haze, human and drug trafficking, and illegal cross-border activities. These are just a few examples of security risks that have compelled Thailand to reassess and reconsider its security plans.

### 2.3.4 The Crisis in Myanmar and Thailand's Diplomatic Response

The evolving crisis in Myanmar was a critical test of Thailand's foreign policy, shaping its regional diplomatic strategy. Since late 2022, the Thai government has approached this complex situation through a policy of "quiet diplomacy," engaging in discreet and multifaceted dialogues, particularly at the ministerial level. A notable initiative was establishing a Track 1.5 minilateral dialogue aimed at including Myanmar's military leadership in peace negotiations. This forum invited a consortium of aligned nations, including China, India, Bangladesh, Laos, Vietnam, and Brunei.

[48] Narut Charoensri, "China's Alternative Approach to Security along the Mekong River," United States Institute of Peace, April 16, 2024. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/04/chinas-alternative-approach-security-along-mekong-river>

This measured approach allowed Thailand to initiate dialogue with Naypyidaw while maintaining influence in fostering co-operation with Myanmar, particularly in efforts toward peaceful conflict resolution and humanitarian aid along their shared borders. Leading these efforts, Thailand has formed a Humanitarian Task Force overseen by foreign ministers. This coalition collaborated with various UN agencies and global organizations to establish a humanitarian corridor, which is still in the process of becoming fully operational.

Despite some tangible but modest achievements, the delivery of humanitarian aid and engagement with senior UN officials have faced frequent delays and impediments from local military factions. Although symbolically significant, the conditional release of Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's ousted leader, did not substantially ease Myanmar's legal challenges. She remained under house arrest, confronting, cumulatively, 14 charges that collectively led to 27 years of imprisonment.

Thailand's foreign policy during the Myanmar crisis was shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external factors, reflecting the country's unique political dynamics. In terms of geopolitics, Thailand shares a long and porous border with Myanmar, rendering it vulnerable to spillover effects from conflicts such as refugee flows and cross-border insurgencies. A strong stance against Myanmar could exacerbate these issues, making it difficult for Thailand to manage border security. Myanmar is Thailand's significant economic partner, particularly in terms of natural resources and trade. Adopting a firm stance could jeopardize economic relations, impacting businesses and economic interests, particularly in border areas. Simultaneously, as a member of ASEAN, Thailand is supposed to adhere to ASEAN's consensus.

Thailand's civilian government has less power to determine foreign policy, especially regarding sensitive border issues. The Thai military has traditionally held significant power over national security and foreign policy, particularly in neighboring countries. This limits civilian governments' ability to independently shape and implement foreign policies. Adopting a strong stance on Myanmar could provoke internal political friction and undermine civilian governmental stability and authority. Thailand's bureaucratic structure and historical precedents also limit the civilian government's ability to diverge from established policies and practices that are heavily influenced by the military. This civil-military relationship is still reflected in the current cabinet. For example, Mr. Sutin Klungsang, who was experienced in the education field rather than in security issues, was appointed as Defense Minister. However, he is sandwiched between the former junta's mentees, General Natthapon Nakpanich and General Somsak Rungsita, as his secretary and advisor, respectively.<sup>[49]</sup>

[49] Busbarat, "Bamboo Stuck in the Chinese Wind," 139.

The Thai army prioritizes national security and stability, which leads to a cautious approach to dealing with the Myanmar crisis. The potential for border conflict, refugee inflows, and insurgent activities are the primary concerns. The army maintain a strategic relationship with the Myanmar military, which is crucial for managing border issues and ensuring regional stability. This relationship often requires a pragmatic and less confrontational approach. In Myanmar, the relationship between the Thai military and Tatmadaw is widely known to be warm and close.<sup>[50]</sup> Therefore, the civilian government often maintains a delicate balance with the military. The Thai army's control over policy implementation implies that any diplomatic or humanitarian initiative by the civilian government must align with the military's strategic interests and security considerations.

Thailand's minilateral approach to addressing the crisis in Myanmar has drawn scrutiny and criticism from several ASEAN countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. These nations perceive Thailand's strategy as diverging from the ASEAN five-point consensus, which aims to promote unity and a collective approach within the ASEAN community. This criticism highlights the delicate balance Thailand must navigate between pursuing its own diplomatic initiatives and upholding ASEAN's collective aspirations.

The ASEAN five-point consensus emphasizes principles such as the cessation of violence, dialogue among all parties, humanitarian assistance, and a special envoy appointment to facilitate mediation efforts. Thailand's minilateral dialogues, aimed at engaging Myanmar's military leadership in peace talks, may be seen as potentially undermining ASEAN's efforts to present a unified stance on Myanmar's internal affairs.<sup>[51]</sup> This tension underscores the complexity of Thailand's role in managing Myanmar's crisis within an ASEAN framework. As Thailand seeks to contribute to a peaceful resolution and humanitarian aid while maintaining its diplomatic engagement, it must navigate sensitivities among ASEAN member states and uphold the organization's collective diplomatic approach.

Subsequently, as Thailand's foreign policy on the Myanmar crisis is characterized by a cautious and pragmatic approach, heavily influenced by the military, and due to geopolitical, economic, and security implications as well as institutional constraints, the civilian government has limited power to assert a clear and independent stance. However, the Thai army's predominant role ensures that policies toward Myanmar prioritize stability, security, and strategic relationships over explicit condemnations or interventions. This nuanced position allows Thailand to navigate the complexities of its domestic and regional environments while maintaining diplomatic flexibility.

[50] Narayanan Ganesan, "Policy Responses of the ASEAN States towards the Myanmar Military Coup," *Hiroshima Peace Research Journal* 11 (2024): 95-114.

[51] Resty Woro Yuniar, "Thailand's Myanmar Talks open up Diplomatic Track 'Parallel' to ASEAN's, Deepen Regional Divide," *South China Morning Post*, July 14, 2023. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3227604/thailands-myanmar-talks-open-diplomatic-track-parallel-aseans-deepen-regional-divide>

Public-opinion surveys on foreign affairs are rare in Thailand, and major polling organizations such as the NIDA Poll, Suan Dusit Poll, and Super Poll primarily focus on domestic and social issues, particularly preferred political parties, elections, social problems, and economic well-being. Nevertheless, some opinion polls gauge the Thai public's perception of the Kingdom's foreign policy. These surveys indicate that while the government and public may share views on specific issues, such as Thailand's regional role, they differ on others, such as the US-China rivalry, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the Mekong issues.

The Asia Foundation (AF) in Bangkok recently conducted a survey on international issues that served as a proxy for understanding Thai public perceptions of foreign-policy challenges.<sup>[52]</sup> The survey demonstrates that the Thai public prioritizes economic growth over national security, consistent with this report's assessment of economic stagnation and Southern unrest as key security challenges. However, geopolitical competition between major powers is ranked low in the AF survey, suggesting that the US-China rivalry feels distant for the average citizen, who is more concerned with issues that impact their daily lives. Consequently, the public agreed that maintaining a balanced posture was suitable in the present situation. Public satisfaction with the current foreign policy reduces pressure on the government to adjust its stance on major global concerns, which explains why the Thai government maintains a friendly attitude toward Moscow despite its invasion of Ukraine. This policy stance contradicts the AF survey, which demonstrated that over 60% of respondents disagreed with the invasion.

The AF survey also illustrated that respondents viewed both China and the US as important to Thailand. However, despite the longstanding Thai-US alliance, they consider China to be more important than the US. A 2024 Pew Research Center survey revealed similar findings, indicating that views on China among Thai people are relatively balanced and reflect broader regional trends. In Thailand, as in several middle-income countries, perceptions of China are mixed but are generally more favorable than views in high-income nations. While a substantial segment of the Thai population views China favorably, concerns about China's international behavior and role in regional geopolitics persist. This dichotomy highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of Sino-Thai relations.<sup>[53]</sup> Therefore, the perceptions of both the public and government toward China are congruent, and consequently, it is unsurprising that Thailand's foreign policy has accommodated Beijing. However, efforts to rebalance these relationships have been slow and insubstantial. Unlike other US allies and strategic partners in the region, Thailand is reluctant to actively embrace a US-led FOIP, primarily due to concerns about offending China.<sup>[54]</sup>

[52] The Asia Foundation, "Thai Public Views on International Issues," June 2024. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/thai-public-views-on-international-issues/>

[53] Laura Silver, "More People View the US Positively than China across 35 Surveyed Countries," Pew Research Center, July 9, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/09/more-people-view-the-us-positively-than-china-across-35-surveyed-countries/>

[54] Busbarat, "Bamboo Stuck in the Chinese Wind."

### III. Reflection of Security Issues in Current and Foreseeable Foreign- and Security-Policy Approaches Toward the Indo-Pacific

#### 3.1 Current Approaches in Security Policy

The challenges triggered by the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific strategies have led to different responses. Many countries have launched their own interpretations of the threats and challenges. Thailand has not developed a strategic viewpoint on the “Indo-Pacific;” accordingly, it has not translated this concept into its national security plan. Thailand’s security is developed under a plan from the Office of the National Council of Security (NCS), which is the focal point of formulating a five-year national security policy and plan. Based on the responses from Thailand’s NCS after Shinzo Abe coined the first idea of the Indo-Pacific in 2016, it is evident that the NCS recognizes the strategic changes in the international order in which the Indo-Pacific strategy, China’s BRI, and the existing international liberal order clash. According to the NSPP (2019–2022), changes in the international security environment are vital for Thailand’s repositioning of its foreign policy:

*“There have been policy shifts among the superpowers that indicate a tendency toward increasing competition and expansion of their influence, both military and economic, for their national interest. The competition is especially fierce between the United States and China as both countries try to secure alliance from small and medium-sized countries. While the United States follows the Indo-Pacific Strategy, China adopted the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Strategy with the goals of securing economic, trade, investment and the inter-regional infrastructure connecting Asia, Africa and Europe. To achieve these goals, China tries hard to extend its political and diplomatic influences over ASEAN countries which resulted in more regional conflict.”<sup>[55]</sup>*

Despite mentioning the Indo-Pacific region in the document, no specific strategies were outlined in the NSPP for 2019–2022. This omission has left a notable gap in the strategic framework. However, five years later, the updated NSPP for 2023–2027 addresses this issue. The new document explicitly states the following:

[55] Office of the National Security Council, “The National Security Policy and Plan (2019–2022),” 2020, 3–4. <https://www.nsc.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/The-National-Security-Policy-and-Plan2019-%E2%80%932022.pdf>



*“Due to differences in values, cultures, levels of development, and systems of governance, ASEAN faces challenges in establishing common rules and values. These challenges can significantly impact issues such as preventing and resolving threats among ASEAN member countries, maintaining unity, ensuring centrality, and ASEAN’s perspective on the Indo-Pacific concept (ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific: AOIP).”<sup>[56]</sup>*

The NSPP for 2023–2027 acknowledges the importance and strategic implications of ongoing superpower competition in the Indo-Pacific region. However, it does not explicitly outline Thailand’s strategy for responding to these dynamics. This absence of a clear strategic direction is noteworthy, particularly given the increasing geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific region.

Thailand has not yet developed a comprehensive national document that addresses and responds to burgeoning Indo-Pacific strategies. We argue that the underlying reason for the lack of a defined strategy lies in Thailand’s inherently flexible foreign policy. This policy of not explicitly aligning with the other side has been the cornerstone of Thailand’s diplomatic approach for many years. Amidst intensifying competition between global superpowers in the region, Thailand has opted to maintain a stance of strategic ambiguity. This ambivalence enables Thailand to craft and pursue various approaches based on its national interests without being constrained by formal alliances or rigid geopolitical commitments.

For instance, in the context of high-speed railway development, Thailand’s government will refrain from overtly siding with Japan or China, both of which are significant players in this arena. Instead, Thailand evaluates which type of bilateral cooperation yields the most significant benefits to its national development goals. This pragmatic approach allows Thailand to leverage opportunities from multiple sources while avoiding the potential pitfall of being entangled in superpower rivalries.

Consequently, Thailand has neither issued an official position nor articulated a specific strategy in response to the IPEF. This strategic flexibility is a deliberate choice, reflecting Thailand’s historical and ongoing preference for maintaining autonomy in foreign-policy decisions. By not explicitly committing to one side, Thailand preserves its ability to adapt to changing geopolitical circumstances and maximizes its national interests in a complex and competitive regional landscape.<sup>[57]</sup>

Although Thailand has not issued an official strategic plan specifically responding to Indo-Pacific strategies, it has nonetheless been actively

[56] Office of the National Security Council, “The National Security Policy and Plan (2023–2027),” 2023, 31. <https://www.nsc.go.th/en/national-security-policy-and-plan-2023-2027/>

[57] Narut Charoensri, “Reluctant Partnership: Thailand’s Diplomacy in the Changing Regional Order,” 2020. Paper presented at the First International Conference on Science, Economics and Society Studies, University of Economics and Finance, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, November 27, 2020.

engaged in the region's economic and political dynamics. In 2023, Thailand made a significant move by joining the IPEF. This decision was marked by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-O-Cha's participation in an online event alongside leaders from the US, Japan, Australia, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Brunei.

Following this conference, an important document, the Statement on the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, was released. The IPEF, spearheaded by the US and its allies, aims to establish a multilateral economic framework designed to promote shared economic interests and bolster co-operation among member countries. This initiative is expected to address contemporary challenges, such as pandemics, climate change, digital transformation, and supply-chain disruptions. Although the IPEF does not directly encompass security or political cooperation, Thailand's membership in this framework clearly indicates its strategic intent. By joining the IPEF, Thailand demonstrated a deliberate choice to avoid entangling itself in the political and security conflicts that characterize the Indo-Pacific region. Instead, Thailand viewed its participation in Indo-Pacific-related platforms as an economic opportunity.<sup>[58]</sup>

This strategic approach underscores Thailand's preference to leverage economic tools to navigate the complexities of regional geopolitics. By focusing on economic collaboration, Thailand aims to enhance its national development and address critical issues without drawing on power struggles between major global players. Thus, while Thailand maintains its stance on strategic ambiguity in the realms of security and political affairs, its engagement with the IPEF highlights a pragmatic and economically driven approach to the Indo-Pacific region. Compared with other regional initiatives that incorporate security dimensions, the Indo-Pacific strategies developed by many countries and international organizations tend to emphasize traditional security challenges more. These strategies often focus on issues such as military presence, defense alliances, and strategic deterrence. Thailand's approach is markedly different, prioritizing economic engagement and development over direct involvement in security matters.

Thailand's current responses to these challenges are encompassed in the NSPP. However, the NSPP has not explicitly addressed the evolving dynamics of the international order influenced by Indo-Pacific strategies. However, many Thai security agencies are aware of the significance of the Indo-Pacific region. These agencies have been working diligently to understand the dynamics, impacts, and implications of the Indo-Pacific strategies in Thailand.

The lack of a specific response to the IPEF highlights a key aspect of Thailand's approach to the region. Instead of adopting a proactive stance,

[58] Olivier Languépin, "Thailand Joins Indo-Pacific Framework with 12 Other Countries," Thailand Business News, February 8, 2023. <https://www.thailand-business-news.com/taiwan/90301-thailand-joins-indo-pacific-framework-with-12-other-countries>



Thailand appears to be more reactive, or even somewhat submissive, to the new and challenging international order presented by the Indo-Pacific configuration. Although other nations in the region have formulated explicit strategies to navigate the complexities of the Indo-Pacific Ocean, Thailand has adopted a more cautious approach. This caution reflects Thailand's broader foreign policy of maintaining flexibility and avoiding entanglement with geopolitical conflict. By not committing to a specific Indo-Pacific strategy, Thailand preserves its ability to adapt to changing circumstances and maintains its autonomy in decision-making.

However, this approach has certain drawbacks. Without a clear and proactive strategy, Thailand may be disadvantaged in terms of regional influences and economic opportunities. As the Indo-Pacific region becomes increasingly central to global geopolitics and economics, a well-defined strategy could help Thailand better navigate the associated challenges and leverage potential benefits. Therefore, while Thailand remains aware of the importance of the Indo-Pacific and associated security challenges, its current approach is characterized by a lack of explicit strategic direction. This reflects a broader tendency toward strategic ambiguity and flexibility, allowing Thailand to navigate the complexities of the international order while avoiding overt commitments. Nonetheless, as regional dynamics continue to evolve, Thailand may need to develop a more proactive and comprehensive strategy to effectively address the challenges and opportunities presented by the Indo-Pacific.

### 3.2 The Way Forward

In a contested, dynamic, and unpredictable international order, Thailand must prepare for emerging challenges and opportunities, and the Thai government agencies are currently addressing numerous questions to develop effective response strategies. While the fundamental question concerns the evolving international-polarity scenario, there appears to be a consensus among Thai government agencies that the international order is transitioning toward multipolarity. This recognition has led to subsequent questions regarding identifying major players in world politics and the strategies Thailand should adopt to appropriately respond to these changes.

Presently, the international order is dominated by the US liberal democratic order. However, over the past few decades, questions about alternative orders have gained traction. Thailand must carefully consider its position and navigate this dynamic landscape. Security issues arising from the Russia-Ukraine War, the situation in Myanmar, and other NTS threats necessitate thoroughly reconsidering Thai foreign policy. Considering the Indo-Pacific strategies endorsed by many value-oriented countries, Thailand

faces the challenge of manifesting its values on a global stage while maintaining balanced diplomatic relations.

The US, Japan, India, and Australia have leveraged their Indo-Pacific strategies to promote core values, such as the rule of law, democracy, and human rights, the principles that underlie the existing international order. Conversely, Thailand has not explicitly enunciated its foreign-policy values or principles, primarily because of the need to balance diplomatic relations with countries that adhere to different political and economic values and principles, such as China and Russia. This ambivalence in values and principles allows Thailand to maximize its national interests by seizing emerging opportunities.

As the IPEF continues to uphold its core principles and values, attracting like-minded countries that adhere to democratic ideals, Thailand must accordingly develop its national security plan. To assert strong advocacy in the global arena, Thailand should emphasize certain values and principles. These norms include a commitment to democracy, the rule of law, free and open economic and political values, and human rights. However, these commitments require Thailand to demonstrate a firm dedication to its foreign policy, particularly in addressing pressing humanitarian and ethical issues. For instance, Thailand must address humanitarian challenges along its border with Myanmar, manage the situation of undocumented cross-border workers, and combat illegal child labor in the fishery industry. Furthermore, Thailand must meet international standards for democratization.

Thailand can integrate these principles into the projects, mechanisms, and international platforms with which it engages. Thus, Thailand can reinforce its role as a responsible and principal member of the international community. For example, in addressing the humanitarian crisis at the Myanmar border, Thailand could collaborate with international organizations to provide aid and support to refugees while advocating for long-term solutions to political instability in Myanmar. In terms of undocumented cross-border workers, Thailand could develop policies that ensure their rights and protection, align with international labor standards, and demonstrate a commitment to human rights. Additionally, Thailand could implement stricter regulations and oversight in the fishery industry to eliminate illegal child labor, thereby upholding the rule of law and enhancing its reputation for protecting human rights.

To align with international democratization standards, Thailand should engage in comprehensive electoral reforms, promote civic education, and encourage political participation. By integrating these principles into its foreign policy and international engagement, Thailand can strengthen its global standing and contribute positively to regional and international stability.

This approach not only addresses immediate challenges but also aligns Thailand with broader international norms and values, reinforcing its commitment to a just and equitable global order.

To address these complex issues, the Office of the Council of National Security, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other security-related organizations must engage in serious discussions about Indo-Pacific strategies. Key discussion topics should include superpower competition scenarios and the values and principles underpinning Thailand's foreign policy. Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has emphasized that the country is now implementing the "Link-Lead Revive" strategy to maximize its national interests, which comprises several key components.

**Strategic Positioning (Link):** First, Thailand can leverage its strategic geographical location to play a leading role in the region. Situated at the center of mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand is well positioned to link the subregions and serve as a bridge between South Asia and Northeast Asia. This geographic advantage enables Thailand to see itself as a bridge within Indo-Pacific strategies, facilitating regional connectivity and co-operation.

**Regional Leadership (Lead):** Second, using this linking strategy, Thailand aims to lead various regional initiatives, including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, APEC, Asia Cooperation Dialogue, and IPEF. By taking a proactive role in these initiatives, Thailand seeks to enhance its regional influence and foster economic integration.

**Humanitarian Assistance and Soft Power (Revive):** Third, Thailand intends to play a proactive role in providing humanitarian assistance within the region, thereby enhancing its prominence and influence. Additionally, Thailand aims to increase its "soft power" through cultural diplomacy, build trust with global investors and trade partners, and improve its international image. This "reviving" role will help Thailand project a favorable and trustworthy image on the global stage.<sup>[59]</sup>

Thailand's strategy for navigating the complex Indo-Pacific region involves a balanced and multifaceted approach. By leveraging its strategic location, leading regional initiatives, and enhancing its soft power, Thailand aims to maximize its national interests while maintaining diplomatic flexibility. As the international order continues to evolve, Thailand must adapt and refine its strategies to remain relevant and influential in the global arena.

[59] Chalissas Suk-iem, "Link-Lead-Revive: Cracking Thai Diplomatic Strategy under Maris Sa-ngiampongsa," *Matichon Online*, June 24, 2024. [https://www.matichon.co.th/foreign/indepth/news\\_4655383](https://www.matichon.co.th/foreign/indepth/news_4655383)