AN EXAMINATION OF FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGIES OF MIDDLE POWERS DURING GREAT POWER COMPETITION: A CASE STUDY OF THAILAND'S STRATEGIC HEDGING BETWEEN A DOMINANT USA AND ASCENDING CHINA

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Abstract: *Recent years has seen confusion in the international political system as the hegemony of the U.S. has waned while China's international influence has dramatically increased. This change to the status quo from a unipolar system immediately after the Cold War to a bipolar or multipolar system has compelled states in the Asia region to formulate strategies in response to this change. The three typical strategies available to a state are what is referred to as bandwagoning, balancing, and this article's focus; hedging. In the case of Thailand, being relatively far removed from the epicentre of any future confrontation between Washington and Beijing, the state has options as to how it will approach the upcoming change in the regional power distribution. This essay intends to analyse the foreign policy strategy of Bangkok from early 2012 to the contemporary period to determine whether trends have emerged that may illustrate the direction of its foreign policy in the near future. By examining recent hardware purchase diversification, public statements, and the changing nature of military exercises between Thailand and the USA and Thailand and China, it is possible to make the conclusion that Thailand has adopted a hedging policy. This essay will explore how Thailand has moved beyond the traditional Thai-U.S. Alliance that lasted for most of the Cold War and is now entering into a more pragmatic position where overt allegiance is less public than before, prompting questions and possibly suspicion from both great powers in the near future.*

Keywords: *Middle powers, Great Power Conflict, Foreign Policy, China, Thailand*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the conclusion to the Cold War that marked 45 years of global tension, the U.S. has been the undisputed hegemon, a situation unprecedented in human history. However, as the year's roll-on, U.S. hegemony and interest in being hegemon has diminished as new challenges to its dominance proliferate. In Europe, the once forgotten threat of the Soviet Union has been replaced with a resurgent Russia commanded by strongman Vladimir Putin. This new threat has torn at the boundaries of Europe through its use of proxy forces in Ukraine (Rauta, 2016), information warfare against the electoral systems of Western liberal democracies (Richey, 2018), in addition to making successful overtures to key NATO ally: Turkey (Atlas, 2018). In the Middle East, the U.S. dominance is threatened through poor policy as well as Iranian initiatives to exploit power vacuums that have arisen. The Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syrian interventions by the U.S. has facilitated the establishment and consolidation of an Iranian arc of influence stretching from Central Asia to the Mediterranean (Freedman, 2006; Ebrahimi, Yusoff, Seyed & Mir, 2017, Byman, 2018). Finally in Asia, the single greatest challenge to the U.S. global preponderance has emerged in the form of a renewed China. The incredible speed at which China has risen has

prompted academics, analysts, and industries to scramble in ascertaining how best to mitigate this assumed threat. Much of the attention has viewed the upcoming confrontation between Washington and Beijing with the view that nearly all other states have predetermined strategies, and consequently should not be given special attention. However, as the great powers continue their game, the grand strategies of smaller powers has warranted scant attention. Generally speaking, small and middle powers have three options when caught in the conflagration that is great power politics; they may either acquiesce to whichever belligerent is the greater perceived threat, side with the weaker great power to balance the field, or they may hedge against both powers in order to preserve their sovereignty. Unlike in Europe, a Swiss form of "aggressive neutrality" is not an option as no state in Asia has the power to independently secure their own territory (DeVore & Stähli, 2011). This leads to the question then; how are specific middle powers in Southeast Asia going to formulate their foreign policies in order to protect their interests? Are they, in the case of Cambodia and Laos, going to forfeit part of their sovereignty to China, or, in the case of Thailand, conduct a Bismarckian performance of political gambling, hedging its bets until it is forced to show its hand?

1.1 Purpose of the Study

This article aims to understand Thailand's grand strategy through the lens of realism and how, despite recent changes in internal politics, Bangkok's outward stance has always been pragmatic in preserving its historical independence (Chonlaworn, 2014). Thailand, however, is often overlooked in literature concerning international relations and specifically great power struggles, as Thailand often takes a back seat behind U.S-Sino and then Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese foreign policy concerns. However, a lack of literature does not by itself warrant examination. Thailand is an important country to study stemming from its historical ties with both the U.S. and China that continue to manifest to these days. Thai people have a deep and intimate bond with China, their language deriving from the Tai-Kadai linguistic group of Southern China (Brunelli et al, 2017), significant numbers in Bangkok's urbanized areas identify as Chinese immigrants (or descendants of) and the wider Chinese diaspora (Bun & Kiong, 1993). Further, Thailand, despite its deep Chinese roots, was within the U.S. political sphere of influence in the Cold War, supporting U.S. excursions in Cambodia, Vietnam and even engaging militarily the Laotian armed forces in the 1988 Thai-Laos War. During this time, the U.S. was viewed by political elite in Thailand as an indispensable power and formed a 'special relationship' (Busbarat, 2017).

Additionally, though beyond the scope of this essay, Thailand has historically functioned as a natural leader in the region in being fundamental to the establishment of the premier regional organisation, ASEAN. Furthermore, in conjunction with the other potential middle powers of the region (Indonesia, Malaysia, The Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam), Thailand has been responsible for norm setting and developing Goh's *Hierarchical Order* as will be explored in the literature review.

Lastly, and most importantly, Thailand is undergoing a significant transition with the widely respected monarch Bhumibol Adulydej (Rama IX) passing in late 2016 and his son, Maha Vajiralongkorn (Rama X) aged 64 at the time assuming the throne. Though the transition of power to Rama X has not so far produced any problems, the 70 year legacy and power politics of the father continues to leave a long shadow. This has been most noticeable in Rama X's decision to remove the 'old guard' of the Privy Council, those who had closely served his father (Chachavalpongpun, 2018). Such actions are likely only the beginning on the new monarch's consolidation of power, which makes understanding the politics of Thailand more crucial than at any other time in recent history. Consequently, this article will not just examine Thailand's foreign

policy, but also provide a historical context to the policies examined that will allow the uninitiated reader in Thai foreign affairs to readily grasp what can be a confusing situation.

2. DEFINITIONS

Trying to define the concept of what constitutes a middle power is complicated and fraught with difficulties. In addition, the context in which one is trying to define the term middle power is especially important. For example, middle powers can have a global presence and may even be recognized as regional powers where no great power exists locally to dominant the political landscape. Turkey, Iran, Chile, Italy, France, and Australia all fall within this definition of middle power. However, middle powers can be viewed within the context of their region, such as Colombia, Qatar, and Portugal would be considered middle powers, but not a regional power. Thus, middle powers can exist along a spectrum depending on the scope of the globe we are examining. Further, scholars differ on their assessment of what constitutes a middle power, to which we will briefly consider three academics thoughts on this issue. Carr (2014) defines a middle power by its ability to exert international influence, whether on a global scale or a regional one. On the other hand, while middle powers may exert international influence, they are not responsible for the creation of the international political architecture. In contrast to the above, Jordaan (2001) draws a distinction between traditional middle powers and newer ones. Jordaan argues that new middle powers may, because of their exclusion during their rule-creating process historically, be instrumental in establishing or at least shaping regional architecture. Lastly, Shin (2015) states that middle powers can be defined primarily by meeting three criteria: function, self-identification, and capacity. The first criteria is the ability of the state to exert international influence in a stable, consistent manner. The second are obvious declarations of the perception of the state by key leaders that the state is a middle power. The last criteria is whether the capabilities of the state align closely with other middle powers through quantitative indices such as gross domestic product, population, per capita income, armed forces, volume of trade, etc. In essence, Carr and Shin promote a functionalist approach to understanding what establishes a middle power. Middle powers are defined by their capacity. In contrast, Jordaan views middle powers in a slightly more holistic approach, contending that traditional middle powers are motivated by their history as great powers, whereas newer middle powers may seek to address the inequalities of the international system and architecture. Though there are other schools of thought on what makes a middle power – such as Evan as Grant's view that middle powers are defined by their behaviour as oppose to their capacity (1995) – these definitions often are western-centric, and rely on less tangible criteria for their definitions; active diplomacy, coalition building, international citizenship, and a belief in cooperation being some of the criteria often listed.

As this article will focus primarily concrete displays of middle power assertion, the criteria used will be based on Shin's observations. Thus, should we consider Thailand as a middle power? If we first consider the international influence that Bangkok maintains, we must certainly recognize an immense capacity to influence and shape regional architecture. Thailand has since early in the Cold War been instrumental in leading the Southeast Asian region by being foundational to the regional organization ASEAN, with the charter even being signed in Bangkok in 1967. Further, Thailand has demonstrated its regional importance of a global scale by hosting, in the lead up to the UN Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, a regional meeting of Asian states. The concluding declaration, often referred to as a the Bangkok Declaration, brought to the attention of the world that while Asian states continue to affirm the inherent importance of human

rights, such rights should not be couched in universalist terms. Universal human rights would not and could not expect to flourish in Asia because of 'Asian Values'. Secondly, despite Thailand's considerable international influence, no significant leader has referred to Thailand as a middle power. Though some such as Thitinan Pongsudhirak (2012) have made the argument that Thailand is a regional power, the view has not spread widely. It is worth noting that a possible explanation for a lack of any statement affirming Thailand's middle power status may be cultural with many Thai's feeling inadequate in comparison to established middle powers such as Japan and South Korea. Lastly, if we compare Thailand to international correlates, it is safe to assume Thailand as a middle power. As seen in the table below, Thailand scores comparably with other middle power states across the world. Consequently, it would be fair and accurate to label Thailand as a middle power. Its ability to exert limited influence within its region while domestically performing comparable to other more traditional powers cements this author's opinion on whether Thailand meets Shin's criteria for middle power.

Table 1: Comparison between 'traditionally recognised Middle Powers and Thailand

Country	**Thailand**	**Iran**	**Chile**	**South Africa**
Gross Domestic Product (nominal)[1] (U.S.$MM)	483,739 (#26)	418,875 (#27)	280,269 (#42)	370,887 (#33)
Per Capita GDP (U.S.$)	6,591 (#83)	5,305 (#94)	15,070 (#53)	6,180 (#85)
Population[2]	69,037,513 (#20)	81,162,788 (#18)	18,054,726 (#65)	56,717,156 (#25)
Land Area (km2)[3]	513,120 (#50)	1,648,195 (#17)	756,102 (#37)	1,221,037 (#24)
Military Spending (U.S.$ M)[4]	6,334	14,548	5,135	3,618
Military Personnel[5]	699,550	913,000	149,450	82,150

[1]International Monetary Fund., (2018). World Economic Outlook Database, retrieved on 17 June, 2018 from: http://www.imf.org

[2]United Nations., (2017). World Population Prospects Revision, retrieved on 1 July, 2018 from: http://esa.un.org/wpp/.

[3]Central Intelligence Agency., (2005). CIA World Factbook, retrieved on 1 July, 2018 from: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2147.html.

[4]Stockholm International Peace Research Institute., (2017). Military Expenditure by Country, in constant (2016), retrieved on 1 July, 2018 from: https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/1_Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932017%20in%20constant%20%282016%29%20USD.pdf.

[5] International Institute of Strategic Studies., (2014). The Military Balance, Routledge Publishing, London.

Ultimately, there are varying definitions on what constitutes a middle power, a great power, regional power, and small power. The perfect descriptor is elusive because the concepts are relative both in terms of geography and in time. Often relegated to the footnotes of history, there is still academic debate about what constitutes a middle power with McMahon stating that 'everyone is a middle power now. (2012)' Robertson (2017) explores the philosophical implications of this dilution of the term since 2000 when the term garnered greater interest than it had ever had in the past. The Cold War and academic focus on great power dynamics relegated middle powers to mere footnotes in history, pieces of a much greater game. Since then, however, middle powers have come to occupy a greater part of the decision making process utilising calculated balancing and hedging to make the traditional great powers more beholden to the concerns middle power states. In each region, the influence of traditional great powers such as the USA, China, and Russia has diminished, while middle power states such as Iran, Thailand, Chile, Brazil, Italy, Sweden, Australia, and others, have had some greater latitude in effecting change.

2.1 What is strategic hedging?

In essence, hedging means engaging with both leading states simultaneously while preparing for responses to potentially threatening actions by a leading state.

Chong, (2016, p.155)

"Hedging" is defined here as a behaviour in which a country seeks to offset risks by pursuing multiple policy options that are intended to produce mutually counteracting effects, under the situation of high-uncertainties and high-stakes.

Kuik (2008, p.163)

In international relations, hedging refers to the policy strategies of middle and small powers in response to uncertainty in the international system to either maximize their gains or at least mitigate their potential loses if there is a conflict (Chong, 2016). Hedging typically occurs in middle powers because it relies on a combination of two factors working together to produce a set of policies. Firstly, the state in question needs to have an ability to accurately reflect upon its own power, capabilities, and strategic depth in relative proportion to their perceived threats. It is important that the state recognizes their comparative strength as this will certainly play a decisive role on whether or not the state chooses to hedge and risk, or bandwagon with the larger state. States that are significantly weak or unstable in relation to the rising or dominant power often opt to bandwagon, such as contemporary Cambodia (Hutt, 2016). The second factor that needs to be considered is the threat perception of either two nations that the middle power is hedging between. If the state does not perceive either one of the powers to be a threat, then it does not need to consider hedging as a policy strategy. For example, in the case of the ascendant China and the still globally dominant U.S., countries such as Chile, which have no reason to fear China's rise, will likely maintain its current foreign policy. Conversely, countries such as South Korea, Vietnam, and Malaysia who are fearful regarding China's rise and doubtful about U.S. willingness to commit wholeheartedly to maintaining the status quo, are likely to hedge their bets (Lee, 2016).

Bandwagoning on the other hand is distinct from hedging with Elgström (2000) equating it as a form of appeasement. In such a situation, a state, for example Cambodia, sides with the most threatening state, China, to make it more benign. The problem that can develop from such strategies is that by joining the most threatening or powerful state on their side of international politics lends even more strength to it. Consequently, other states may choose to bandwagon as

the power of the most threatening state is being combined with other states as well. This was evident in the fear of a Communism domino effect taking root in Asia, or partly in the French bandwagoning with Nazi Germany after a brief contestation of northern France. Though unintentional, it is entirely possible that through a process of bandwagoning, the formation of power blocs can occur in turn escalating the possibility for conflict as neither the existing dominant power nor the ascendant power can back down without losing status in the eyes of their partner(s) and client states. An example of this exists in the work of Schweller (1994) where he looks at American dominance in the area of Greece, Turkey, and the wider Western Europe. Schweller quotes U.S. Secretary Dean Acheson where he states the bandwagon effect and its dangers, 'if Greece fell within Russian obit, not only Turkey would be affected but also Italy, France, and the whole of Western Europe.' In such a situation, the possibility of losing a single client state could have the potential to unravel the entire system. This means that powerful states must take active measures to maintain their power and conversely, smaller states have considerable psychological power defying their size through bandwagoning. Walt (1991) contributes to this discussion by positing that within the Southeast Asian region at the time of his writing, bandwagoning has the potential to be a suitable strategic posture due to the region's internal politics. Walt contends that states that have the capacity to balance would rationally seek to do so, especially in a region where aggression is rewarded, such as those without a single dominant power.[6] As a consequence of this, it is natural to see in Southeast Asia, a region with some of the largest and most powerful countries in the world involved, that some of the smaller states eschew balancing in favour of bandwagoning. However, where Elgström argues that bandwagoning and appeasement are essentially the same thing, Walt argues that there may be a second rationale behind bandwagoning: 'share the spoils of victory' (p. 8). Whether or not that is currently occurring in Southeast Asia is beyond the scope of this article to examine, but given the reluctance of Southeast Asian states to form an open partnership/alliance with Beijing, it may be argued Walt's second option is not the reason behind current Southeast Asian bandwagoning.

Thus, though hedging and bandwagoning may seem a simple policy for governments to select, it requires careful analysis of the pitfalls that miscalculation can cause. Further, hedging is a risky strategy as the smaller state must appear collaborative with the dominant and ascendant state without being overt and risking suspicion of duplicity or perceived bandwagoning. As such, states that elect to hedge must pay attention to the ever changing political environment and tailor their strategy to the moment at hand rather than idealized or formulaic behaviour. Such behaviour requires the state's foreign policy apparatus to be well established and insusceptible to strategic or ethnic bias.

2.2 Hedging, not balancing

Hedging and balancing are highly similar terms, and this might lead one to think they are interchangeable. However, following Tessman and Wolfe (2011), the current author is using the term hedging to expand upon traditional logic of interstate balancing to include and account for structural mechanisms that aren't completely appreciated under the traditional framework. Adhering to the five criteria set forth by Tessman and Wolfe in 2011, it is more suitable to see Thailand's foreign policy as a form of hedging as distinct from traditional balancing.[7] Hedging and balancing are similar in that they both require the state to have a conscious understanding of

[6] At the time of Walt (1991), the term hedging had not been introduced into common strategic studies discourse.
[7] See Tessman, B, & Wolfe, W., (2011). Great Powers and Strategic Hedging: The Case of Chinese Energy Security Strategy, *International Studies Review, 13(2),* pp. 214-240.

the distribution of global power and consequently act in a way that is intentional and strategic (at the highest level of government) in response to said distribution of power. In the example of Thailand, both Prayuth and his predecessors are knowledgeable of the power discrepancy that exists between themselves and either China or the USA. Hard balancing in the form of military posturing, arms build-ups, confrontation through alliance systems is not an option for Thailand given the power gap. As such, Thailand and the current Prayuth government must act in a way that avoids direct confrontation with the current system leader and its challenger, whilst simultaneously improving its capacity should a military dispute occur. Where this differs from balancing though is that, in order to avoid confrontation, the state will endure costs in order to pursue this strategy in the form of international backlash, and economic inefficiencies rather than seek simple power maximization. This can be famously seen in the later examined submarine purchases from China that have done little to increase the war making capacity of Thailand, instead being a natural consequence of trying to ingratiate itself into China's growing bosom through purchasing equipment that would not confrontation to the existing system leader: the USA. Therefore, the use of the term hedging is being utilized to explain the entirety of the Thailand and Prayuth's strategy in mitigating the risk of conflict, ingratiating herself to both the current system leader and its chief opposition, while simultaneously maximizing its fighting capability should the need arise. Further, this is being done beyond simple military posturing or appeasement practices, but through strategic behaviour developed at the highest levels of the state.

Kuik (2008 & 2016) views hedging through a perspective more closely entwined with traditional theories of alignment and balancing. This is because traditional balancing fails to fully capture the distinct form of foreign policy strategy that is currently being practiced, specifically in the Southeast Asian region. The argument posed by Kuik is that hedging requires a state to pursue a foreign policy consisting of 'contradictory, mutually counteracting transactions of 'returns-maximizing' and 'risk-contingency' option, which seek to offset the potential drawbacks of one another' (2018:500). If this definition seems confusing, it is because hedging, unlikely balancing, requires a state to engage two powerful adversarial powers simultaneously, in ways that foster the development of ties and bonds, without passing imaginary lines of 'closeness' which would register as a critical 'red line' from the perception of either great power. According to Kuik, hedging forms the gap between full scale balancing on one side and bandwagoning on the other. Consisting of a range of actions, hedging can entail classical balancing through risk-contingency options through military and political hedging where the state in question may forge a military alignment, increase military armaments, and cultivate a balance-of-political-power in the region through dominance denial strategies. The goal however, unlike traditional balancing is that the strategy is not explicitly aimed at any particular power, thus preserving the political engagements made on the other side of the hedging spectrum which are aimed at binding all major powers in a bilateral and multilateral engagements increasing the diplomatic and economic cost of circumvention or breaking of universal norms.

Initially used to explain the actions of second tier states, such as China by Tessman & Wolfe (2011) and by Tessman (2012), Kuik has expanded the definition.[8] The extension of the term to refer to the policies of middle powers caught in great power competitions, resulting in a potentially unstable political order, is useful for explaining Thailand's strategy and how it cannot be neatly perceived as either balancing or bandwagoning. The practice of expanding the use of hedging to

[8] See Medeiros, E.S., (2005). Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia-Pacific Stability, *The Washington Quarterly, 29(1),* pp. 145-167.

include middle powers has continued with others such as Leng & Liao (2016) in reference to Taiwan and Japan, Fiori & Passeri (2015) regarding Myanmar and China, Hong (2013) about Vietnam, China, and the USA, and Lee (2017) related to South Korea and Malaysia's policies in reference to China and the USA. Thus, the extension of the logic relating to hedging to include middle powers is a well-established trend and one that more accurately reflects the nuances that exist in East and Southeast Asian international politics as it is the only region that has an indigenous state able to contest to an extent the supremacy of the U.S.

3. THAILAND'S FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY

Thailand is a unique country in Southeast Asia as it does not share any maritime of physical border with China and as a result has significantly more freedom and latitude in terms of strategic miscalculations than other neighbours. Hence, the ramifications of mistakes in strategy are far less severe than they may be for more proximate neighbours. Consequently, such physical distance serves to understand why Thailand's foreign policy has at times been crude and overt, in particular during the military junta's tenure. This is in contrast to countries such as the Philippines, Taiwan, South Korea, and Vietnam whom because of their proximity to China and the perceived importance of their shared maritime security interests have to take a nuanced stance and subject their strategies to greater scrutiny. That being said, Thailand has at times bucked the trend in Southeast Asia, sometimes acting as a natural leader and at other times acting independent of the very institutions that it has been fundamental to the establishment of. Its interactions in ASEAN are worth noting as Thailand was instrumental in the formation of the organisation in 1967 as well as its predecessor Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) in 1961 (ASEAN, 2018). In recent years though, as will be examined later, Thailand has worked outside of ASEAN in collaboration with China (Sun, 2018). This stems from identity issues within Thailand in which much of the elite would identify as partially ethnically Chinese (Hewison, 2017). Additionally however, Bangkok has other security concerns in its region where China is not a highly involved actor. As an Indian Ocean state, mostly, Thailand does not share the same maritime conflicts as others in the region and this has allowed Bangkok to pursue policies that differ from its eastern neighbours. Despite how interesting it may be to look at Thailand's history within ASEAN, this essay will specifically focus on Thailand's actions since around 2014 when the military junta seized control of the country. The reason for this is that the military government since 2014 has somewhat departed from the policies set forth by the civilian governments before, and looks to maintain its position for the foreseeable future. Hence, a study of the military government led by General Prayuth since 2014 would provide the best possible forecast for future strategies employed by the Thai kingdom.

As already mentioned, Thailand shares no physical or maritime borders with China and has pursued a mix of policies in recent years that sometimes conflict with the very institutions that it was instrumental in establishing. To understand General Prayuth's policies since 2014, this essay will examine Thailand's hedging and bandwagoning practices through two evaluations. The first process will look at Thailand's military equipment diversification process from prior to the current military junta to the contemporary period. Second, and perhaps more importantly, an overview and analysis of Thailand's shifting strategic partnerships with the U.S. and China hinting at a wider policy of distancing itself from both powers while simultaneously acknowledging the advantages each relationship respectively offers. These two different ways of viewing Thailand's policy of hedging and bandwagoning will illustrate that Thailand, though still formally tied to the concept

of the U.S. security web, is making significant overtures towards Beijing that may place Bangkok in an increasingly difficult situation as the situation in East Asia progresses.

Thailand's modern history has seen it primarily as a staunch ally to U.S. foreign policy in the Southeast Asian region (Hewison, 2017). Though this partnership continues to exist, it has in recent years seen a diminished importance as China has become an increasingly important political partner and military equipment supplier. This has been evidenced in Prayuth's embrace of Chinese produced armaments such as the VT-4 main battle tank, VN1 infantry fighting vehicle, and the controversial S26T diesel-electric submarine (Nanuam, 2017; Grevatt, 2017; Audjarint, 2017). Such acquisitions have raised concerns in Washington regarding the strength of the alliance resulting in pressure to scuttle the submarine deal (Florcruz, 2015). Optimists such as Prasirtsuk state that the current trend by Bangkok towards Beijing is a foreign policy anomaly and that with a return to democracy, Thailand will return to the U.S. balance (2017). This author however sees the Prayuth government's strategy to be the pragmatic choice given the dangers of wholesale bandwagoning. The following section will look at how Thailand is hedging by examining military exercises and equipment deals. The end goal of the Prayuth government, is not bandwagoning with either state, though that may be simple, but to hedge carefully with both states in order to secure its independence.

To paraphrase French President and General Charles de Gaulle, 'states do not have friends, they have interests.' This is certainly true in Thailand as was most publicly displayed in 2012 when an article in a Thai major newspaper, The Nation, revealed the details of a closed-door government, industry, and academia meeting discussing the future of Thai strategy (Chongkittavorn, 2012). The consensus was that although the U.S. alliance is important, it seems 'ad hoc' and that there is 'an urgent need for Thailand to add strategic dynamism to its stalled relations with the U.S.' and 'the country's…diplomatic practice must be adjusted.' Such sentiments were no doubt elevated when U.S.-Thai relations soured after the military assuming government in 2014 and the Obama administration labelling heavy criticism against Prayuth followed by remarks from Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel in Chulalongkorn University questioning the very legitimacy of the military junta (Russel, 2015). These statements have tainted the U.S.-Thai alliance manifesting in subsequent low-key Cobra Gold Exercises that will be discussed in the following section, but also in the diversification of arms suppliers to the military junta.

Table 2: Major Thai Arms Acquisitions 2014-Present

Origin	Model No.	Type	Quantity	Year
China	VT-4	Main Battle Tank	28 + 10	Deal struck in 2016. More ordered in 2017.[9]
China	VN-1	Infantry Fighting Vehicle	34	2017

[9]Yeo, M., (2017). Thailand to Buy More Chinese Tanks, Reportedly for $58M, *Defense News*, retrieved from: https://www.defensenews.com/land/2017/04/04/thailand-to-buy-more-chinese-tanks-reportedly-for-58m/, on 11 February 2018.

China	Type S26T	Diesel Electric Submarine	3	2017-2021 (13 billion baht each)
Israel	ATMOS 2000	155mm self-propelled Howitzer	18	2012-2016[10]
South Korea	KAI T-50	Advanced Fighter Trainer	12	4 order in 2015, 8 more ordered in 2017[11]
South Korea/Thai	DW 3000F	Multi-Role Stealth Frigate	2	2018 expected delivery[12]
Ukraine	T84 Oplot-M	Main Battle Tank	36 + 13	Deal struck in 2011, still being delivered.[13]
Ukraine/Thai	BTR-3E1	APC	217	2008, 2011, 2013
United Kingdom	Starstreak	MANPADS	Unknown	2012 with more ordered in 2015[14]
United Kingdom	River-Class Patrol Vessel	Offshore Patrol Vessel	2	1st commissioned in 2013. 2nd ordered in 2016[15]

The on-going diversification of Thailand's military equipment as evidenced in this table is indeed a reflection of the conscious decisions by the Thai government over recent years to adhere to the advice cautioned at the aforementioned 2012 meeting of government, industry, and academia. However, some of the purchases have not benefited Thailand politically, or even militarily, as may have been hoped by the Prayuth government. In particular, the purchase of the

[10]Military Today.com., (2018), ATMOS 2000, retrieved from: http://www.military-today.com/artillery/atmos_2000.htm, on 19 February 2018.
[11]Waldron, G., (2017). Thailand Orders Eight Additional T-50 TH Trainers, *Flight Global*, retrieved from: https://www.flightglobal.com/news/articles/thailand-orders-eight-additional-t-50th-trainers-439236/, on 19 February 19, 2018.
[12]Global Service Center KOMEC., (2016). DSME-Royal Thai Navy Make Collaboration, retrieved from: http://www.komec.kr/eng/Board.asp?menucode=0503010000&mode=2&no=23058&page=329, on 19 February 2018.
[13]Roblin, S., (2016). Ukraine's Tough T-84 Oplot-M Tank Won't Fight Russia (and is being sold to Thailand?), *The National Interest*, retrieved from: http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/ukraines-tough-t-84-oplot-m-tank-wont-fight-russia-being-17817, on February 2018.
[14]Thales Group., (2015). Royal Thai Army Places Additional Order for Starstreak Air Defence Missile Systems, retrieved from: https://www.thalesgroup.com/en/worldwide/press-release/royal-thai-army-places-additional-order-starstreak-air-defence-missile, on 19 February 2018
[15]Thomas, R., (2016). Second OPV for Royal Thai Navy, Shepard, retrieved from: https://www.shephardmedia.com/news/imps-news/second-opv-royal-thai-navy/, on 19 February 2018.

Type S26T diesel electric submarine has raised concern in Washington regarding the reliability of Thailand as a faithful ally in Southeast Asia. This is especially in light of the limited utility such a platform would have in the Thai navy, a long neglected branch of the Thai Armed Forces. Despite the purchase continuing, it has raised efforts by the recent Trump administration to make some overtures towards Bangkok to preserve the alliance (The White House, 2017).

Diversification in arms procurement can happen for many reasons. In some cases it may be due to unreliability of the supplier as may be the case in emerging technologies or nascent military industries (Krueger, 2010). Diversification could also result from sanctions and embargoes on either the state purchasing the equipment or the supplier (Erickson, 2009). But both of these causes do not exist in the case of Thailand. Thailand's diversification programme is, as earlier eluded to, a deliberate strategy by Bangkok to politically balance their interests and prevent either the Washington or China from being suspicious of the intentions by the Prayuth government. Such situations are not limited contemporarily to Thailand and can be found across many arenas such as in India's convergence with Washington after years of non-alignment (Hughes, 2013), in Turkey seeking to hedge its security interests by moving closer towards Moscow with the purchase of the S-400 system (Gumrukcu & Toksabay, 2017), or in The Philippines where similar to Prayuth, autocrat Rody Duterte has diverged from ties with the U.S. and has instead of courting China due to maritime issues, has courted Moscow (Mogoto, 2017). In all these cases, diversification in military equipment procurement was part of diplomatic signalling regarding strategic interests of the state. Hence, given Bangkok's lack of challenges to equipment procurement, such diversification can, along with the other facts presented, point towards a hedging strategy that would lead to greater convergence with Beijing than at any time in recent history.

Beyond equipment purchases, an integral demonstration of Thailand and the United States' continued collaboration is the Cobra Gold Exercises. For the USA the exercises play an important role in developing their forces for jungle warfare, securing alliances, maintaining interoperability of their forces with their Asian partners in the event of future conflicts, and preserving their presence in the region. For Thailand, there are similar benefits, however principal among them is securing the alliance. While Bangkok may continue its diversification programme of its arms suppliers, securing big contracts with Beijing, it has been seen as necessary to be balanced through annual exercises with the USA. However, Obama Administration in 2014 chose to leverage the Cobra Gold exercises over Thailand's backslide on democracy by the military junta. Subsequent Cobra Gold exercises were significantly scaled back as a demonstration by Obama on his administrations anger over the return to authoritarianism. The exercises could not be cancelled entirely, though threatened, as they are a fundamental part of each government's foreign policy in the region. Nonetheless, the deepening divide between Thailand and the USA during Obama's term may have further pushed Thailand towards China. Consequently, the subsequent Trump administration inherited a frosty relationship requiring a slow, but comprehensive policy readjustment if strategic goals are to be achieved. The 2018 Cobra Gold Exercises were twice as large as previous years signalling a possible return to normal relations as the Trump Administration makes efforts in the region to secure its key alliances during increased pressure in the region. Though the Cobra Gold Exercises may act as a thermometer on U.S.-Thai relations, it is vital to view the relationship as part of strategic hedging by Bangkok. Without fully knowing what kind of hegemonic power Beijing will grow up to be and whether the U.S. will continue to maintain its preponderant position, Bangkok must ensure that it does not become completely reliant on either partner. Prayuth has ensured this by keeping both partners close without allowing either to have total influence over policy, safeguarding Thailand's strategic independence.

However, a single year's exercise should not sway the fact that Prayuth and his government are continuing to distance themselves from Washington in order to find a balance with China. Prayuth has been wary of increasing U.S. presence in Thailand made especially public during 2015 when the U.S. requested to use U-Tapao airport in central Thailand as a base for planes (Parameswaran, 2015). The rejection is interesting as it changed policy from the previous Yingluck government which reluctantly supported the U.S. request. The reason is suspected to be pacification of Beijing's security concern that U.S. forces may use the airbase to spy over China's southern borders (Storey, 2015). In order to assuage Beijing's concerns, Prayuth requested that in order for U.S. planes to be based at U-Tapao all planes would have to have their routes known by Bangkok as well as being escorted by Thai aircraft. This was a significant request and showed how far Washington and Bangkok have grown apart in recent years, exacerbated by personality conflicts between Obama and Prayuth. To put fuel on the embers, Prayuth has entertained Chinese requests to refurbish Sattahip Naval Base near to the U-Tapao airport after holding joint maritime exercise Blue Strike at the base with China. These actions point to a clear declaration by Bangkok that it does not depend on the U.S. for its security and must be treated as an equal partner rather than a simple piece of the great game. By looking at Thailand's military and strategic policy regarding alliances and partnerships, the Prayuth government has externally hedged its interests whilst simultaneously internally building up its military capacity in an attempt to balance the power disparity that exists (Guzansky, 2015).

As shown, the U.S.-Thai is unlikely to break apart any time soon. Both countries have invested significantly in the alliance over the years for it to make any sense for either party to unilaterally part ways. However, it is likely that the alliance will take a different shape in the coming years as Bangkok must take into consideration the views and concerns of Beijing regarding U.S. involvement in Thailand. One direction that the U.S.-Thai alliance may take relating to military exercises is a change from major conflict preparation to that of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). Such a change in direction would be well received by Bangkok as it would relieve concerns in Beijing while also developing Thailand's HADR capabilities. Given the large extent of Thailand's coastline which is prone to flooding and the recent highly publicised SEAL cave rescue of 12 children and one adult in 2018, further development of HADR capabilities are unlikely to go unwanted. Examples of the continuation and development of HADR capabilities between the U.S. and Thailand was in the 2018 Cobra Gold Exercises which featured in the Chachoengsao Province a seven nation HADR exercise designed to increase interoperability in disaster situations (Weisenberger, 2018). These exercises followed similar ones in Thailand in 2017 as well as others in Australia (Exercise KAKADU), Mongolia (Exercise KHAAN QUEST), Hawaii (RIMPAC), Nepal (TEMPEST EXPRESS-1), Tahiti (TEMPEST EXPRESS-2) in 2016 (Australian Civil-Military Centre, 2017). Other exercises included the 2017 multinational Exercise Coordinated Response (EX COORES) hosted in Singapore (Lim, 2017), the Siam-Bharat 17 exercise in Chiang Mai between India and Thailand (Singh, 2017), as well as the 2016 ASEAN Exercise 16-3 (Poggemeyer, 2016). These exercises indicate a prioritisation of HADR capability, especially relating to cooperation with the U.S. Further, as U.S. acquired equipment in Thailand deteriorates and comes closer to forced retirement and replacements are not ordered, it is likely that Thailand will continue its diversification programme while also pursuing the HADR exercises and interoperability in order to maintain and promote the alliance.

4. THAILAND'S STRATEGIC FUTURE

Thailand, unlike its other Southeast Asian neighbours, retains a significant degree of strategic manoeuvrability. Countries such as South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, The Philippines, Japan, and Indonesia have, owing to perceived threats based on either their proximity to Beijing or their strategic geography, focused their attention to the very real potential of a U.S.-Sino conflict and have adjusted their security strategies correspondingly. Conversely, such conversations regarding the future of foreign policy have not had the same attention in Thailand. Purchases such as the infamous submarines by the Prayuth government came under intense scrutiny by the media, however the dialogue was predominately concerned with the issue in terms of domestic policy and issues of corruption and incompetence. The issue was rarely discussed as how it relates to Thailand's foreign policy and the development of Beijing to Bangkok military relations. Such a purchase with no direct utility for the Thai Navy can be shelf as an inefficiency that often accompanies hedging to ingratiate itself to a leading state while being an innocuous enough of a purchase so as not provoke confrontation with the system leader.

As such, within Thailand strategic hedging is likely to continue without issue. Both Washington and Beijing have illustrated an intention to not just keep working with Thailand, but to improve the depth of that relationship. This does however require that Bangkok intelligently moves forward in its strategic hedging. Arousing suspicion or antagonising either China or the U.S. could be enough to undermine years of careful work. Though the Prayuth government has increased its attention towards Beijing, such policies are only as secure as the regime. If for instance the military junta was unable to secure election victory in late 2018 when democratic elections are expected to return, a successive government may see the security interests differently. Such a government may revert to traditional balancing, shifting its military weight towards the U.S. to counter growing Chinese expansionism in the region. Though this is possible, and is the argument put forth by Prasirtsuk as earlier mentioned, I would argue otherwise. Security interests are not determined by any particular government. They are determined by the environment, geographically and politically. Hence, future Thai governments will find themselves in the same situation as Prayuth's government finds itself in today: Unable to faithfully trust in the strength of the U.S.-Thai alliance while not being powerful enough to secure its own independence. Coupled with pressure from Beijing, future Thai governments will not be able to return to a simpler time when the U.S. alliance was non-questionable. Consequently, though a future civilian government may ideologically seek to undo Prayuth's foreign policy, it will find itself unable to do so due to matters circumscribed.

Thailand as a middle power is no different than most in its region. With a sizeable population, a robust middle income economy, and historical entanglements with both China and the USA, Thailand has acted with prudence and strategic foresight in navigating the choppy international relations. By engaging Beijing and Washington simultaneously, avoiding confrontation while developing its own internal balance through arms diversification and build-up, Thailand has acted similar to other middle powers in the region, particularly Vietnam and Singapore (Goh, pp. 129). Both countries have been busy drawing in China diplomatically into the region, establishing or furthering defensive ties to the U.S., while diversifying their arms acquisition programmes to include India. This strategy of engaging the ascendant power and the hegemon at the same time seeks to complicate the international system to the point that conflict is unviable for any party. Similar to Thailand though, such hedging requires precision foreign policy planning at the highest levels.

As shown in the work of Javaid et al (2016), even in highly ideological states, pragmatic attitudes are a prominent feature in foreign policy. Looking at the example of Iran, an Islamic theocracy, ideology can often play a secondary role to calculated self-interests. Pragmatism as the basis for foreign policy is one of the central tenants in classical realism and continues to be supported by academics as a key motivating framework to understand state-level decision making (Casier, 2006, Korkut; 2016, Leng; 2017, Rynning & Ringsmost; 2008) . However, even pragmatism can be viewed as ideological depending on political leaning, and it behoves the academic community to be careful when jumping to conclusions regarding the nature of decision making at a state level. The modern realist position put forth in this article, stemming from Tessman and Wolfe's expansion of traditional balancing into the post-Cold War age, understands that Thailand's position requires deliberate decision making. Though mistakes may occur, it is important to note that the Prayuth government, which is ideologically different than its civilian predecessor, has followed the path set forth in 2012 by the Shinawatra government regarding the need to lessen its reliance on the U.S. Such a series of decisions by the Prayuth government to distance itself from the U.S. in order to preserve its relationship with China in balancing the two great powers is indicative of the pragmatism that is occurring at the highest levels in Thailand. An ascendant China competing with the U.S. in the Southeast Asian region is unlikely to abate soon, and though the potential for conflict is real, the drastic consequences that such a conflict will likely entail may inhibit both parties in engaging each other militarily. Despite that, both China and the U.S. are going to be demanding more from their current partners and allies in the region, and this is something that will pose difficulties for Thailand in the near future. Though balancing the relationship well at the moment, it does seem that Bangkok lacks the strategic foresight to know what it will do if pressed to make a commitment by either of the great powers. However, pragmatism has been a defining feature of Thailand's historical foreign policy and though the eventuality of confrontation (not necessarily armed conflict) between the two great powers does at times seem inevitable, Thailand is unlikely to face this situation unprepared.

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