

**Thailand Seeking to Re-engage Myanmar Junta with Asean:
National Interest or Political Ambition?**

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Abstract

The government of Thailand under Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha hosted an informal meeting to have a discussion on Myanmar in Pattaya, 18-19 June 2023. The invitation was rejected by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore because the meeting disagrees with the ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus issued to respond to Myanmar military coup d'état in February 2021 and its after-effects. Apart from Thai Foreign Minister, only a few officials at a minister level attended the gathering, including Myanmar Foreign Minister, Than Swe; and Lao Foreign Minister, Saleumxay Kommasith. Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines sent their representatives; and India and China were also present. Thailand defended its move, emphasizing that direct talks with Myanmar were necessary to protect Thailand because its territorial proximity with Myanmar had been creating refugee and border problems, and affecting badly their bilateral trade. The research seeks to explain whether Thailand promoting re-engagement between Myanmar junta and ASEAN is only based on the national interests of the country or there are other influencing factors, by focusing on Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha's political track record and Thailand's foreign policy under his government; and referring to hedging strategy. The research finds that the policy to re-engage Myanmar junta with ASEAN was influenced by the Prime Minister's political interest, along with the need for Thailand to protect its national interests. Omnidirectional hedging strategy, in its relations with the US, China, and regional power house such as India, helps as well to explain the move Thailand made with regards to Myanmar and ASEAN.

Keywords: *Thailand's Foreign Policy, National Interests, Political Interests, Hedging, US-China Rivalry*

Introduction

Thailand is located in the Southeast Asia and covers an area of 513,000 square kilometers (Tourism Thailand, 2020). The country consists of larger main section in the north and a smaller peninsular extension in the south. The main body is surrounded by Myanmar to the west, Laos to the north and east, Cambodia to the southeast, and the Gulf of Thailand to the south. Peninsular Thailand stretches from the southwestern corner of the country along the eastern edge of the Malay Peninsula to the south. Myanmar extends along the western portion of the peninsula as far as the Kra Isthmus (see Figure 1.) (Britannica, 2010).



Figure 1: Map of Thailand
Source: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc

Its population is 70,325,637 as of Friday, July 7, 2023 (Worldometer, 2023). Thailand is an emerging economy and a newly industrialized economy; with manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism as its leading sectors. Thai Government system is a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy; however, Thailand has experienced multiple coups and periods of military dictatorships (Barry’s Borderpoints, 2010).

Due to its geographical closeness with Myanmar, Thailand has been affected by the military coup d’état that took place in Myanmar in February 2021 and the following ongoing crises. There are five affected areas, namely migration; transborder security; economic affairs; diplomacy; and geopolitics. Thailand has experienced more migrants and refugees from Myanmar consisting of those who crossed into Thailand temporarily, waiting to be able to return to their properties in their country; economic migrants who hope to integrate into Thailand’s labor forces; and activists and high-profile individuals who oppose the coup, in which some of them would like to resettle in a third country. The coup also poses threats to Thai nationals living along the border areas, such as cross-border gunfire; concerns about Myanmar military operations inside Thailand; increasing drug activities; and public health challenges. Furthermore, Myanmar crisis disrupted cross-border trade and regular economic affairs (Jittiing et al, 2022).

Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw) has a strong grip over the country. It created an illusion of a democratic Myanmar to solve problems caused by its enduring international isolation and outdated centrally planned economy that highlighted its backwardness and poverty, sharply contrasting the rapid economic growth of neighboring countries, such as Thailand and China. The illusion was created by releasing an opposition figure from house arrest and letting her play a bigger role in the political arena. Myanmar’s democracy leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest on 13 November 2010. After the Tatmadaw allowed her to return to politics, her party, National League for Democracy

(NLD) won the 2015 election and she assumed position as the State Counselor, the de facto leader of Myanmar (Barany, 2016). Later on, when NLD won 920 seats of the total 1,117 seats in the 2020 election (61 more seats compared to the 2015 election), the main opposition party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) that was controlled by the Tatmadaw and won only 71 seats (down 46 seats from the 2015 election), accused the NLD of engaging in electoral fraud. The Tatmadaw launched a coup d'état on 1 February 2021 (Muhammad, 2022).

The 2021 Military coup was massively protested and demonstrators were responded with violence that often resulted in deaths. Almost 30,000 lives lost on all sides due to the conflict (Robinson, 2023). The Myanmar political conflict has been affecting not only the stability and security of the country, but also the Southeast Asia. ASEAN has been impacted badly from the perspective of security and commercial interests, and has suffered as well reputational costs (Hein and Myers, 2023).

Thai Government is mainly concerned about the influx of the displaced persons and Myanmar's opposition parties, although other security, economic, and international relations impacts are also acknowledged. Since the coup, the Thai government's responses to the Myanmar crisis have been perceived as business as usual with an ad hoc feature. They consist of dual-track diplomacy, namely military-to-military led by the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTAF), and government-to-government led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The approach makes Thailand appear to support Myanmar military junta (Jittieng et al, 2022).

Since the failure of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus on the situation of Myanmar until the 2023 ASEAN Summit in May 2023, ASEAN Member States, including Thailand, had consented to not engage with Myanmar military junta. The ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus was agreed upon during ASEAN Leaders Meeting (ALM) in Jakarta on 24 April 2021, attended as well by the Myanmar military commander Min Aung Hlaing (Jaipragas, 2021). The consensus states that 1) there shall be immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint; 2) constructive dialogue among all parties concerned shall commence to seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people; 3) a special envoy of the ASEAN Chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process, with the assistance of the Secretary General of ASEAN; 4) ASEAN shall provide humanitarian assistance through the AHA Centre; and 5) the special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned (Sandhika, 2023).

More than two years after, the political and security situation in Myanmar has not yet improved. A table presented on 18 April 2023 by Nikkei Asia Research, which is divided into two columns, the Agreed Points and the Current Status, demonstrated only insignificant progresses have been achieved (See Table 1.). Military regime brutality intensifies and armed conflicts between the military and ethnic armed groups continue to occur (Robinson, 2023).

ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar

(Agreed at special summit in April 2021)

	Agreed points	Current status
1	Immediate cessation of violence, utmost restraint by all parties	Military regime intensifies brutal campaign against resistance forces; rebels and some ethnic armed groups continue guerilla attacks on army
2	Constructive dialogue among all parties to seek peaceful solution	Key groups on all sides refuse to negotiate, although new ASEAN chair Indonesia claims "some progress"
3	ASEAN special envoy to mediate dialogue	After Brunei and Cambodia hold special envoy post in 2021 and 2022, Indonesia establishes Office of Special Envoy in Jakarta, headed by Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi; she indicates engagement with all sides
4	ASEAN to provide humanitarian assistance	Efforts stalled but Indonesia in April claims progress with "key stakeholders" toward talks on humanitarian aid
5	Special envoy and delegation to visit Myanmar, meet with all parties	Marsudi's new office claims progress; previous envoy, Cambodia's Prak Sokhonn, visited Myanmar twice in 2022 but was denied access to jailed leader Aung San Suu Kyi

Source: ASEAN, Nikkei Asia research

Table 1: April 2023 Status of ASEAN Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar
Source: Nikkei Asia Research

The 42nd ASEAN Summit, held on 10-11 May 2023 in Labuan Bajo, Nusa Tenggara Timur Province, Indonesia, did not invite Myanmar military leader, Min Aung Hlaing (Sithu, 2023). The Indonesian President Joko Widodo closed the 42nd ASEAN Summit reiterating the urgency of implementing the five-point consensus, which had mandated ASEAN to involve all stakeholders. He emphasized that the unity of ASEAN was of the utmost importance, because without that, it would be easy for other parties to divide ASEAN (Office of Assistant to Indonesian Deputy Cabinet Secretary for State Documents & Translation, 2023).

Regardless, Thailand made the decision to encourage ASEAN to re-engage with Myanmar junta, indicated by an informal gathering it held in Pattaya on 18-19 June 2023. The meeting was attended by Myanmar Foreign Minister, Than Swe, along with representatives of five other ASEAN countries, namely Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and the Philippines. India and China were also present (Benar News, 2023). There were only a few officials at a minister level, which included Thai Foreign Minister, Don Pramudwinai; Myanmar Foreign Minister; and Lao Foreign Minister, Saleumxay Kommasith. China sent its special envoy to Myanmar, Deng Xijun; and India was represented by its ambassador and a foreign ministry director (Thai PBS, 2023).

Myanmar Embassy in Kuala Lumpur on its facebook page issued a press release about the meeting, emphasizing that Myanmar had been undertaking necessary measures to cease violence. The press release was accompanied by a photograph (See Figure 2.) taken during the meeting (Embassy of Myanmar in Kuala Lumpur, 2023). Their explanation appeared to be against the existing insignificant process referring to the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar.



Figure 2: informal Discussion on Myanmar, Pattaya, 18-19 June 2023
Source: Embassy of Myanmar in Kuala Lumpur

Thailand's Foreign Minister on a letter dated 14 June 2023 to invite his ASEAN counterparts stated that the gathering would be informal and serve as initial steps to resuscitate the peace process of Myanmar (Petty, 2023). The Indonesian Foreign Minister, Retno L.P. Marsudi, rejected the invitation on 15 June 2023, while the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement to the same effect on 18 June 2023. On 17 June 2023, Singapore Foreign Minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, conveyed that it was premature to re-engage with Myanmar junta (ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, 2023). According to Hunter S. Marston, a researcher on Asian affairs at the Australian National University, despite the fact that Cambodia and the Philippines attended the meeting, they signalled discomfort by not sending their top diplomats (Benar News, 2023).

Indonesia criticized Thailand. Special Staff to the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs for regional diplomacy, Ngurah Swajaya, at a press conference in Jakarta, 19 June 2023, stated that Thailand's approach was not in line with the ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar. An approach involving all stakeholders in Myanmar must be carried out to encourage national inclusive dialogue and find a peaceful solution. (Antara News, 2023).

Critics perceive Thailand has undermined the unity of ASEAN. The meeting means that the country has been legitimizing Myanmar junta, and it is undermining Indonesia's effort as ASEAN chair, which emphasized dozens of engagements with multiple stakeholders. Thai Prime Minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, on 19 June 2023, said that direct talks were necessary to protect his country. Thailand suffered more compared to other ASEAN Member States because it shared more than 3,000 km land and maritime border with Myanmar. Earlier, Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai informed that the Myanmar conflict had been creating refugee problems and affecting badly their bilateral trade (Petty, 2023).

Methods

Thailand wants ASEAN to re-engage with Myanmar junta, reasoning that it is necessary to protect Thailand from border and bilateral trade problems caused by the protracted conflict in Myanmar. Thailand's move of hosting a talk between Myanmar and other ASEAN countries on 19 June 2023 in Pattaya was met with criticisms from its fellow ASEAN members. It is interesting that delegations from China and India attended the meeting as well. This particular move of Thailand raises a curiosity on the factors influencing the decision.

The research aims to explain why Thailand's foreign policy promote re-engaging Myanmar junta with ASEAN, by using a qualitative approach and referring to articles from various journals, published news, and information from relevant websites and official pages. The research focuses particularly on Thailand's Foreign Policy during the leadership of Prime

Minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, since he held the position in May 2014 until the startling decision to endorse rekindling ASEAN talks with Myanmar in 2023. The research observes his political track record, from which Thai public's perception on his leadership can be derived as well; and Thailand's foreign policy under his government, moving from its foreign policy in general, to the decision of promoting re-engagement between Myanmar junta and ASEAN.

Theoretical Framework

This research uses foreign policy analysis that is agent oriented and actor specific. V.M. Hudson's identifies seven pillars of foreign policy analysis as a distinct approach to international relations and the said two dimensions are among them, specified in the number six and seven below. Foreign policy (is) 1) incorporates various factors for foreign policy decisions; 2) multilevel because it contains different levels of analysis; 3) interdisciplinary to explain decisions taken; 4) integrative in terms of disciplines and methods; 5) devoted to finding the link between material and ideational factors; 6) agent-oriented because it explains foreign policy decisions by focusing on the human agent and how she/he affects the decision-making process; and 7) actor-specific because it treats human decision-makers as autonomous influencers of foreign policy decisions, not invisible unitary and rational actors (International Affairs Forum, 2023).

Furthermore, the research uses the political process model of foreign policy analysis, which was developed by Roger Hilsman. There are a large number of actors involved in the foreign policy decision-making process, generally concentrated in the office of the leader of the government (president/prime minister) and parliament, although all levels of government have influences as well. The political process model emphasizes bargaining and the presence of various power centers seeking to achieve their respective goals, which can be in conflict or consensus with those of others. Differing from bureaucratic politics model, the political process focuses more on the individual participants and their personal goals and mindsets about international politics rather than organizations and groups as a whole (Norwich University, 2017).

The research also refers to the concept of hedging strategy. The term "hedging" was introduced into the international relations arena in the 1990s, and scholars have used the term to describe intermediate position of countries between the "balancing" and "bandwagoning" strategies. Mixed elements of selective engagement, limited resistance, and partial deference are displayed in hedging (Kuik, 2021).

Given China's recent rise as a regional power, the smaller ASEAN countries may respond with one of the aforementioned strategies: 1) bandwagoning, meaning cooperating closely for benefits from good relation with the regional power; 2) soft balancing by tightening relations with another significant power, China, in order to counterbalance the US' influences; and 3) hedging, the policy of avoiding a close alliance with one power at the expense of the other, or 'keeping the equal distance' from each of the powers present in the region (Dubkowska, 2014).

Hedging is an instinctive act of self-help, especially for smaller nations. When the stakes are high and situations are uncertain, rational actors will avoid risk by pursuing multiple insurance-providing measures. They seek to avoid rigid, irreversible commitments to competing powers (for example insisting on not taking sides between the US and China) and clear-cut actions (such as taking deliberately contradictory actions to offset different risks, pleasing and displeasing both the US and China). They hedge with the aim of keeping options open for as long as possible (Kuik, 2021).

ASEAN states continue to view the US and its allies as crucial partners, they also see the country as insufficient and uncertain counterparts, providing required security support and

economic opportunities, but also presenting the threats of abandonment, entrapment, marginalization, political challenges, and other disadvantages. Their perceptions of China are even more uncertain. They see China as a vital source of economic and political partnerships but a security concern (especially concerning overlapping territorial disputes) will lead them to economic dependency, political subservience, and domestic resentments over the long run (Kuik, 2021).

C. Kuik argues that under such circumstances, balancing is unlikely, primarily because the weaker states are unsure if the US and its allies will come to their defense. Uncertainty that the US will remain as a “resident power” in Asia exists. Bandwagoning is also unlikely, because they are not certain China will be at their sides in the years to come. Hedging is a more logical choice. Although far from perfect, hedging enables weaker states to strike a balance between prioritized benefits and unavoidable costs. It helps the governing elites to concentrate on their domestic tasks, without speculating who will be the more dominant power in the future.

This research also refers to omnidirectional hedging strategy coined by O. Suorsa and M.R. Thompson. Omnidirectional hedging strategy calls for states to maximise their relative strategic flexibility by engaging multiple partners in win-win relationships, diversifying the sources of security, economic, and diplomatic support so as to delay or deny the arduous choice between two great powers, such as the US and China. Countries applying omnidirectional strategy, apart from hedging between the two great powers, will engage closely with other powers in their region, such as India and Russia, in order to not be entrapped in negative impacts of asymmetric relations with great powers (Suorsa and Thompson, 2017).

Result and Discussion

Prayuth Chan-ocha’s Political Track Record

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha was born on 21 March 1954 in Nakhon Ratchasima Province. He comes from a military family. He joined the Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School and later the Chulachomkhalao Royal Military Academy. Being a staunch supporter of the royal family, he worked in the 21st Infantry Regiment known as Queen's Guard. Afterward, he was promoted to commander of the regiment. In October 2003, he became the commander of the Second Infantry Division of the Royal Guard and in October 2006, he took position of Commander of the First Army Area for supporting army chief General Anuphong Phaochinda during a coup executed that year to depose the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. In October 2009, Prayuth was appointed Deputy Chief of the Thai Army, and on 25 September 2010, he succeeded Anuphong Phaochinda as the Chief of the Thai Army (BBC News, 2020).

Initially, Prayuth had been of the view that the army would not interfere in politics, however, in June 2011, he appealed to voters to elect “good people”, which was a form of discouragement to vote Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin Shinawatra’s sister. Then, Prayuth took advantage of a six-month-long political conflict between the Yingluck government and opposition party, and declared a coup d’état on 22 May 2014. A military administration officially named the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) suspended the constitution and elected him as the Prime Minister of Thailand on 21 August 2014. Prayuth enacted an interim constitution that gave the military government unaccountable power, such as the Section 44 that guaranteed its absolute authority to issue orders against any activity the government saw as a threat to order, national security or the monarchy; imposing restrictions on civil liberties, media and dissent; and controversy due to his impulsive and angry behaviour towards the media (BBC News, 2020).

Thai parliament was dominated by members of the military administration. To some, Thailand's 2019 election signaled a possible end to the military regime's rule, but the election was not a democratic event. It was instead a highly organized exercise to ensure the permanence of Prayuth's dictatorship. Thai military junta used institutional manipulation techniques and election fraud to extend Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha's term. The election results suggested that a deep divide remains in Thai society between military supporters and opponents (Ricks, 2019).

The division is apparent as Thailand's reformist opposition garnered the most seats and share of the vote in general elections after voters flatly rejected the military-backed party that has ruled Thailand for almost a decade. About 40 million Thais voted on 14 May 2023 (Lee and Poling, 2023). The Move Forward Party (MFP) and the populist Pheu Thai Party were expected to win around 286 seats in the 500-seat lower house. The biggest winner was the MFP, led by Pita Limjaroenrat, a young man who ran for the first time in a general election with a bold plan to reform the monarchy by rewriting the constitution and abolishing conscription, and to reduce the powers of the military (Rasheed and Wongketjai, 2023).

The Election Commission of Thailand concluded the vote counting on 15 June 2023. The result is as shown by Figure 3 below. MFP's victory under Pita Limjaroenrat's leadership was announced. United Thai Nation Party under Prayuth Chan-ocha was placed in the last position (Bangkok Post, 2023).

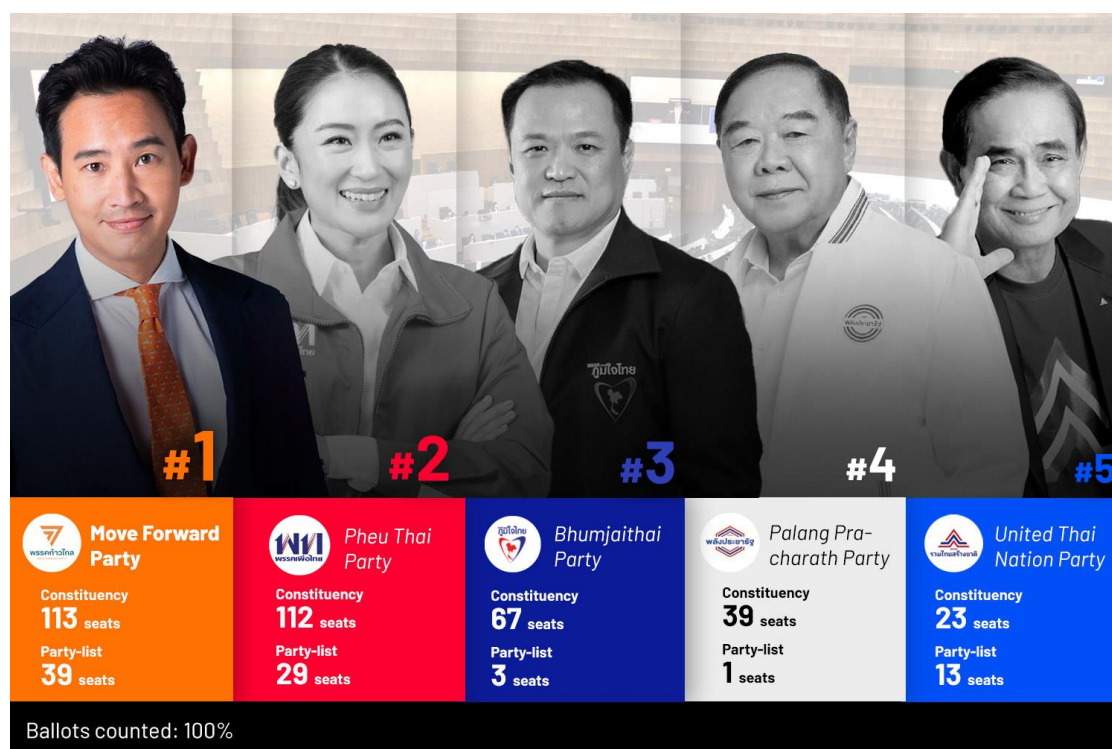


Figure 3: Result of Thailand's May 2023 Election
Source: Bangkok Post

Royalist and military parties were hit hard. The Thai National Party, led by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, was fifth with only 36 seats. His former party, Paran Pracharat, came in fourth with about 40 seats. Third place went to the Bhumjaithai Party, a member of the current ruling coalition, which won about 70 seats. The election result indicates that most Thais want change, which is a big shift for the country (Rasheed and Wongketjai, 2023).

The victorious MVP and Populist Pheu Thai Party secure 151 and 141 seats respectively in the 500-seat House of Representatives. Along with six other parties, it is expected to propose

the leader of the MFP and a US-educated Pita Rimjaroengrat as the next prime minister to replace the incumbent Prayuth Chan-ocha. However, with 312 votes the alliance is short of the 376 votes required in the joint sitting, which includes a conservative-leaning 250-member senate, who were appointed during military rule (Thep gumpanat et al, 2023).

On 13 July 2023, Pita Limjaroengrat failed to secure votes that would make him the Prime Minister of Thailand. Selection of a new prime minister requires winning a majority of votes in a joint sitting of the lower house and the 250-seat Senate. In other words, at least 376 votes must be won. The process was based the 2017 Constitution, drafted and implemented by the military government that seized power in a 2014 coup. Senate members of Thailand, whose terms will end next year, were appointed by the same government. There were only 13 senators supported Pita, while 34 voted against him and 159 abstained. The rests were absent and did not vote, which had the same effect as voting no. Critics believes that the system was designed to secure the power grip of the conservative royalist establishment and weaken its political challengers (Saksornchai, 2023). Another vote is planned to be executed in August 2023.

Because this research is analyzing the decision-making process concerning Thailand's foreign policy to promote re-engaging Myanmar junta with ASEAN, the research tries to seek the correlation between the latest development on Thai political stage and the said foreign policy. Martin Petty from Reuters conveys that it is not clear why the incumbent government has taken the steps to re-engage with the Myanmar military junta despite they have only a few weeks in the office (Petty, 2023).

Different Analysts said the talks were likely an attempt by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha's caretaker government to maintain influence and close ties with the Myanmar military before a potential new government took office. Former army chief, Prayuth took office in May 2014 after leading a coup against the government of democratically elected Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. Here we see the similarity between him and the leader of Myanmar military junta, Min Ang Hlaing. Foreign Minister of Thailand said the decision to hold the meeting with Myanmar on 18-19 June 2023 was already under consideration when the National Election Authority announced the results of elections in May 2023. He did not see any reason why Thailand's interests needed to wait. Over the past nine years, the Thai military has formed significant relationships with the Myanmar military; therefore, preserving the power networks between them is crucial. It is an attempt by the Prime Minister of Thailand to maintain its influential networks and help him preserving his power (Benar News, 2023).

On 11 July 2023, Prayut Chan-Ocha announced that he would retire from politics. Nevertheless, the announcement only came after he bid to stay in office for another term. The bid to extend his rule, which almost reached a decade, failed with the defeat of his party in the May general election. Furthermore, the announcement was only conveyed approximately two months after the general election and only a few before the voting day of the new prime minister (Tanaksempipa, 2023). That announcement does not automatically mean he has lost all his political ambitions, especially when it concerns his government's ambition to re-engage Myanmar junta with ASEAN, a step which is quite puzzling since his tenure is almost over.

ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) Co-chair, Charles Santiago, on 19 June 2023, said that the Thai government's move to hold the meeting with the Myanmar junta and others arrogantly disregarded the unity of ASEAN, the human rights of Myanmar people, and the will of Thai citizens. The current Thai government was significantly defeated in the latest general election. They no longer have a mandate from the people and initiating such talks is "a slap in the face" of the Thai voters. A potential MFP government would reset everything that Prayuth had established and he did not want that. (Benar News, 2023).

Thailand's Foreign Policy under Prayuth Chan-o-cha

Thailand's foreign policy is commonly referred to as "bamboo diplomacy", a concept emerging around the early 1970s, which means bending with the wind or flexible. This flexible and practical characteristic of Thai diplomacy is said to have contributed to the country's competitiveness in international affairs throughout its history. Despite the current geopolitical rivalry, many Thai elites still believe that Thailand can remain relatively neutral and avoid choosing sides in the race for great power. It is not surprising that Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha argued that since the 2019 election, Thailand has been able to maintain good relations with all countries and is playing a constructive role internationally (Poonkham, 2023).

However, according to J. Poonkham, Prayuth's bamboo diplomacy creates a misleading picture and constrains Thailand's strategic posture. He has three important reasons for this. First, Thailand's foreign policy under Prayuth is not based on a whole-of-government strategic assessment of Thailand's interests and options. The policy may look like a hedging action; however, different government agencies are preoccupied with their own preferences, directions and options. More precisely, this is hedging by default where a balanced posture occurs only by accident.

Second, Thailand has increasingly sought a closer strategic partnership with China in recent years. Thailand's national strategic status was weakened after the 2014 coup, limiting its options. Western sanctions imposed after the coup further strengthened Thailand's China-centric approach. Thailand's leaning towards China is also due to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Prayuth is trying to use Chinese investment to improve Thailand's infrastructure and develop new industrial zones. Thailand also has doubts about the long-term strategic involvement of the US in the region. Despite Joe Biden's promises to ASEAN that he would take the US and the region to a "new era in US-ASEAN relations," the US has not invested a great deal in the region or re-joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) that Donald Trump pulled out of in 2017. Biden's mini-international initiative, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), is not a type of free-trade deal that would give ASEAN countries better access to the US market.

Third, Thailand's strategic stance is constrained as Thailand's international image and status have been critically questioned in recent years, especially since Russia-Ukraine conflict that began in 24 February 2022. Thailand had voted in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution to deplore Russia's actions in March 2022, but most recently abstained from condemning Russia's annexing regions in Ukraine. Thailand's bamboo diplomacy has been publicly criticized, with some calling Thailand's official stance "spineless" and unprincipled. To justify its position, Prayuth's government raised concerns that blaming Russia would reduce diplomatic opportunities for a negotiated solution.

Regarding the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, since the coup, the Thai Government has been conducted business as usual foreign policy, manifested in military-to-military diplomacy led by the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTAF), and government-to-government diplomacy led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The business-as-usual conduct makes Thailand appear to support Myanmar military junta. Thus, Thailand risks itself of being condemned not only by Myanmar people but also the international community (Jittiang et al, 2022). There is a possibility that the suspicion about Myanmar supporting military junta is correct because later on, Thai Government hosted a meeting to re-engage Myanmar junta to other ASEAN Member States on 19 June 2023 in Pattaya.

Prayuth's Government, justifying its actions, emphasizes that the crisis in Myanmar has been creating refugee problems and badly impacting their bilateral trade, therefore, discussions with Myanmar junta is necessary. Thailand has experienced an increasing number of migrants and refugees from Myanmar who travel both by air and through the natural passes. The

UNHCR reported that approximately 25,000 people have already sought refuge overseas in the beginning of 2022, including in Thailand (UNHCR 2022). There have been several influxes since 1 February 2021. The first two significant movements occurred between 27 March 1 and April 2021, and between 28 and 29 April 2021. The plight of refugees happened after Tatmadaw’s land campaigns and air assaults attacking the anti-coup forces and strongholds of the Karen groups, considered insurgents by Myanmar, which was located close to the Thai border (Jittiang et al, 2022).

By the end of 2022, the conflict in Myanmar has displaced approximately 296,000 people in the region. A significant proportion of displaced persons from Myanmar are believed to have crossed the border with Thailand, joining approximately 91,000 refugees living in Thailand who were displaced due to clashes between Tatmadaw and insurgent armies that took place before the coup (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023).

According to International Institute for Strategic Studies, the 2021 coup posed a security threat to Thai nationals in the border areas. Incidents such as Myanmar Armed Forces shooting Thai residents’ boats and disrupting daily border crossing; Myanmar soldiers inspecting Thai traders’ merchandise were reported. Some of Thai residents were even forced to leave their homes and seek refuge, after the fight between Tatmadaw and Karen National Union (KNU), an insurgent army, erupted. Residents also suspected that Myanmar military jet might have crossed into Thailand’s air space. A resident was injured because of gunshots from the Myanmar side, reinforcing those conflicts in Myanmar have badly affected Thailand. The Thai military negotiated with Myanmar local officers in response to the situation. The Local Tatmadaw agreed not to search or shoot Thai residence and boats, but demanded food delivery. With Thailand's sovereignty at stake, a question on what the Thai military could have done more to defend Thailand and Thai citizens emerged. Apart from small and separate actions, the Thai Government and officials have not taken more proactive steps.

From the perspective of economic cooperation, despite the havoc, Thailand is still among the top three of Myanmar’s trading partners for the past four fiscal years from the 2018-19 fiscal year to 2021-22 mini-budget period, indicating the business as usual policy. China is leading, followed by Thailand and Singapore (See Figure 4.). Furthermore, from April to September 2022, over US\$17 billion was conducted in trade by Myanmar. The largest proportions were 26% with China and 17% with Thailand (See Figure 5.) (Institute for Strategy and Policy-Myanmar, 2022).

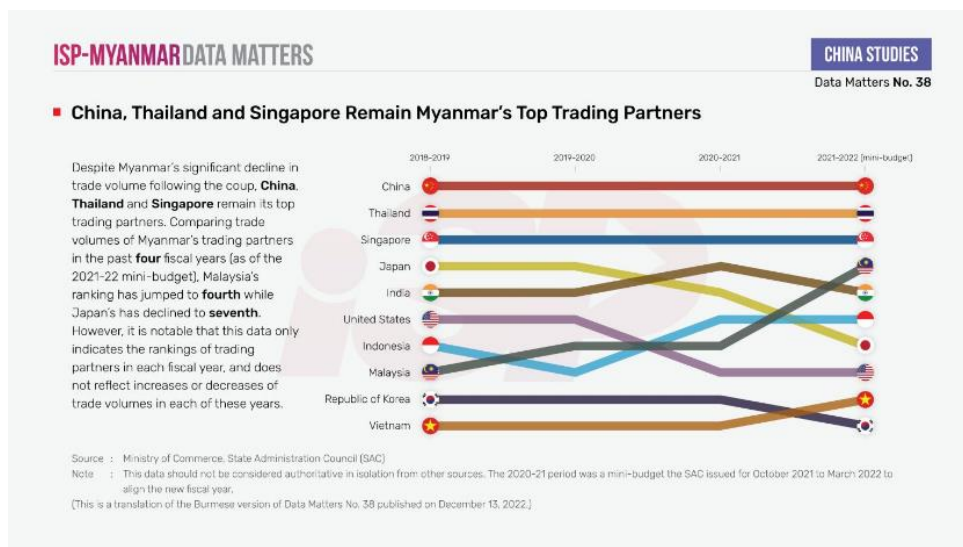


Figure 4: Myanmar’s Top Trading Partners (2018-2022)
 Source: Ministry of Commerce, State Administration Council Myanmar

as used by Institute for Strategy and Policy-Myanmar

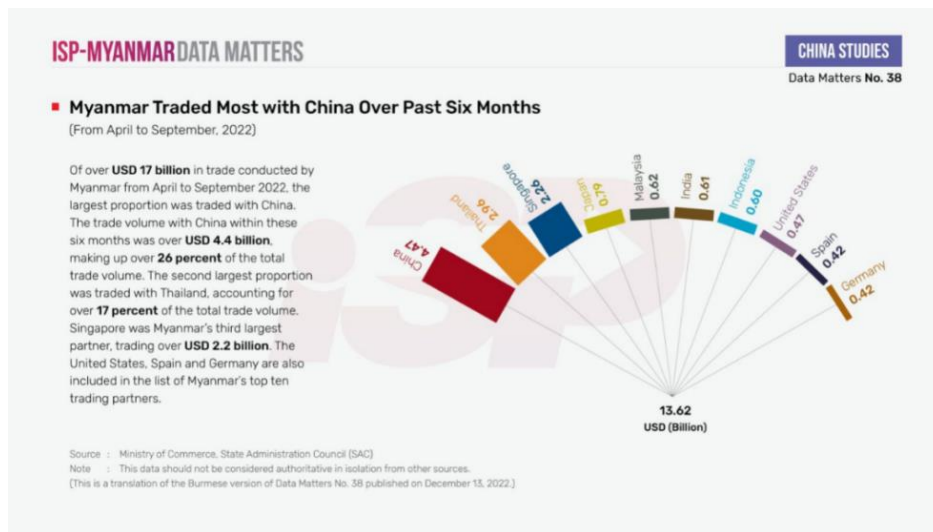


Figure 5: Myanmar's Top Trading Partners (April-September 2022)
Source: Ministry of Commerce, State Administration Council Myanmar
as used by Institute for Strategy and Policy-Myanmar

Professor Ukrist Pathmanand of Chulalongkorn University's Institute of Asian Studies doubted the meeting Thailand hosted to discuss about Myanmar with other ASEAN countries on 18-19 June 2023 could serve the national interest other than the personal interest of the Thai elite in the caretaker government. Gas concessions in Myanmar might serve the country's energy security but it also profits big corporates in the sector. Myanmar supplies about 15 per cent of Thailand's total gas needs and the concession is held by Thai conglomerate PTTEP. Officials in Prayut's government have been working with the Myanmar junta to obtain more concessions. A senior official at the Foreign Ministry said a series of meetings in various forms hosted by the government over the past months, including the latest one, were mostly aimed at providing some space to the Myanmar junta in the Thai domestic arena as well as the regional and international community. In addition, the Thai elite and the military, including Prayuth himself, have deep connections with Myanmar's top leader Min Aung Hlaing and his associates. Min Aung Hlaing reportedly asked help from his counterparts in the Thai armed forces to help clear problematic assets owned by his adult children. The assets were confiscated in Thailand due to alleged links to drug trafficking and money laundering committed by an arms dealer Tun Min Latt, who was arrested last year (Thai PBS, 2023).

Critics argue that Thailand's bamboo diplomacy is an old narrative that no longer makes sense in the current dynamic of geopolitics. Thailand merely reacts to global and regional transformations and it lacks visionary leadership, proactive prescription and the ability to implement constructive policies. Despite being a long-time ally of the US, Thailand is bending toward China, especially from the economic perspective. In the emerging bipolar world encouraged by the Sino-US rivalry, Thailand seems to hedge with major powers without developing a strategic position. In other words, it is a hedging by default (Institute for Strategy and Policy-Myanmar, 2022).

In relation with its promoting reengagement between Myanmar junta and ASEAN, Thailand seemed to be influenced by China, which is among the few countries that take side with Myanmar junta. China, India, Russia and Thailand are among the few countries that have maintained formal relations with Myanmar's military since it seized power in February 2021. They have refused to condemn or sanction the military junta of Myanmar since the coup (Chau and Oo, 2023). The fact that a representative from China was present during the informal

meeting hosted by Thailand in Pattaya on 19 June 2023 to encourage the re-engagement makes the possibility more valid.

The informal meeting in Pattaya, apart from being attended by several representatives of ASEAN countries and China's special envoy to Myanmar, Deng Xijun, it was also attended by India's Ambassador to Thailand, Nagesh Singh and a foreign ministry director. Omnidirectional hedging can explain why India was also present. According to O. Suorsa and M.R. Thompson, much has been written about Thailand, one of America's oldest allies in the Southeast Asia sided with China against the US after its military coup in 2014. The Thai government has begun to distance itself from its longstanding patronage with the US that dates back to the beginning of the Cold War. The criticisms from the US about the falling state of democracy and rising human rights abuses in Thailand has infuriated the rulers of Thailand, prompting them to strategically distance themselves from the US and turn to China.

These changes are often seen as a failure of the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" and a strategic victory for China. This is often described as a shift from a pro-US to a pro-China stance. However, O. Suorsa and M.R. Thompson argues that Thailand has actually been conducting an omnidirectional hedging (receiving and giving from all directions), which is the diversification of states' economic, diplomatic, and security relations with multiple regional stakeholders with the aim of achieving maximum strategic flexibility. Despite political turbulence with the US, it has maintained its interest to cultivate the treaty alliance with the US (established through 1954 Manila Pact) as a fallback strategy against long-term uncertainty. Despite its proximity to China, Thailand is keen to maintain diversified ties with multiple powers in the region, such as Japan, India and Russia to balance against the growing asymmetric relation with China (Suorsa and Thompson, 2017). This theory can give insights on why India, a non-ASEAN Member State apart from China, was present during the informal meeting Thailand hosted to promote re-engaging Myanmar junta with ASEAN.

Conclusion

The Thai Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha argued that the reason they seek to re-engage Myanmar junta with ASEAN despite the regional organization's decision to exclude Myanmar junta from ASEAN meetings was the national interest of Thailand, as the protracted crisis in the neighbour country has made Thailand suffered security and economic implications. Upon further inspection on the political track record of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha, the research finds an indication that Thailand's foreign policy to seek to re-engage Myanmar junta with ASEAN is also influenced by Prayuth's political interest to maintain influence and close ties with the Myanmar military before a potential new government took office, an attempt to maintain his influential networks and help him preserve his power.

Thailand's foreign policy to promote re-engaging Myanmar junta with ASEAN under Prayuth's leadership, within the context of the US-China rivalry, appeared to take form as a hedging strategy. China is known to be among the few that have maintained relations with Myanmar after the 2021 Myanmar military coup d'état. Prayuth Chan-o-cha performed a military coup in 2014, leading to his appointment as the Prime Minister of Thailand. Since then, the country has increasingly sought a closer strategic partnership with China due to weakening Thailand's national strategic status and western sanctions as the impacts of the coup. Prayuth's government decision to seek to re-engage Myanmar junta with ASEAN was influenced by its economic cooperation with China, despite the possibility of triggering the US, with whom Thailand has been aligning itself since the Cold War but gradually putting distance after the 2014 military coup.

Furthermore, Thailand's foreign policy can also be described as carrying out omnidirectional hedging strategy, where Thailand also engages itself with other powers in the region, for example with India, to avoid the negative impacts entrapment of its growing asymmetrical relationship with China. The delegation from India being present at the informal meeting Thailand hosted in Pattaya on 18-19 June 2023 to promote re-engaging Myanmar junta with ASEAN is in line with the theory.

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