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Thailand's Foreign Policy: Hedging by Default?

By Jittipat Poonkham

SYNOPSIS

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's foreign policy, unlike those of previous Thai governments, is not seen to be bending with the wind, but rather as "hedging by default". China's economic attractiveness, US ambivalence towards the region, and Russia's war on Ukraine have rendered Thailand's long-established strategic posture untenable. To navigate the changing international circumstances, Thailand should adopt a smarter strategy of "leading-from-the-middle".

COMMENTARY

Thailand's foreign policy is commonly characterized as "bamboo diplomacy", i.e., one that bends with the wind. This flexible and pragmatic form of diplomacy, so the saying goes, has helped the country to survive in international relations throughout its history.

It is no surprise that even in the current era of geopolitical competition, Thai elites seem to believe that Thailand can keep to its relatively neutral posture and avoid choosing sides in great power competition. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has claimed that since the 2019 election, Thailand has succeeded in maintaining good relations with all countries and is playing constructive roles internationally. However, its APEC chairmanship in November 2022 saw the absence of key global leaders like President Joe Biden and President Vladimir Putin.

From Bending with the Wind to Hedging by Default?

In reality, Prayut's version of bamboo diplomacy presents a misleading picture and has limited the strategic posture for Thailand. There are three important reasons for this.

First, Thai foreign policy under Prayut is not driven by a strategic, whole-of-government assessment of Thai interests and options. The outcomes may appear like hedging, but the main cause is different government agencies indulging in their own preferences, orientations and options. More accurately, this is hedging by default where a balanced posture occurs only by accident.

The second reason is that in recent years, Thailand has been edging increasingly toward a closer strategic partnership with China. This is due to Thailand's weakened national strategic position and limited options after the 2014 coup. The Western sanctions imposed after the coup further reinforced Thailand's Sino-centric approach. Its return to elections since then has not changed this.

Thailand's shift toward China is also due to China's economic allure in the form of infrastructure investment projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Prayut government is seeking to improve Thailand's infrastructure and to develop new industrial zones (particularly the Eastern Economic Corridor) through Chinese investments. Prayut has described relations between Thailand and China as that of "brothers and sisters" and not of strangers.

On the other hand, like many ASEAN countries, Thailand is doubtful about America's long-term strategic commitment in the region. Notwithstanding Biden's promise to ASEAN leaders of "a new era in US-ASEAN relations", the US has not channeled significant investments to the region or rejoined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), that Donald Trump pulled out of in 2017. Biden's unilateral initiative, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), is not explicitly a free trade agreement that would allow ASEAN countries greater access to the US market.

The third reason why Thailand's strategic posture has become circumscribed is that Thailand's international image and reputation have been critically questioned in recent years, especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai was reported to have said that there was no need for Thailand to "rush into playing a role". But in actual fact, Russia's invasion of Ukraine had overturned the principle of national sovereignty enshrined in the UN Charter, which Thailand has long recognized and upheld.

For the first time in Thailand's diplomatic history, its oft-cited discourse of bamboo diplomacy has been publicly criticized, with some calling the official Thai position "spineless" and lacking in principle. Liberal Thais including many younger citizens have called for a tougher stance against Russia's aggression.

Although Thailand had voted in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution to deplore Russia's actions in March 2022, the country had more recently abstained from a vote to condemn its annexation of the four eastern and southern regions of Ukraine in October. In justifying its abstention, the Prayut government cited concerns that condemning Russia would reduce the chances for diplomacy to bring about a negotiated solution. Of the 10 ASEAN members, only three including Thailand joined China and India in abstaining. In the short term, Thailand's stance on the Russo-Ukrainian War has undermined its prestige internationally. In the long term, the hedging by default approach has compromised Thailand's national interests.

The old narrative about Thailand's bamboo diplomacy no longer makes sense in the changing configuration of power. Emerging around the early 1970s, this discursive strategy seemed to work quite well, especially during the era of détente in Thailand's relationship with China and the Soviet Union. More recently, bamboo diplomacy is seen as an approach that is supportive of the status quo. Consequently, Thailand merely reacts to global and regional transformations. At the same time, it lacks visionary leadership, proactive prescription and the ability to implement constructive policies.

The Way Forward: Leading from the Middle

In formulating a coherent and resilient foreign policy in the emerging bipolar world, Thailand requires more than bamboo diplomacy.

Thailand not only lacks agency; it lacks transformative agency as well as a proactive, prudential and progressive strategy. What Thailand really needs is a new strategic narrative to make sense of the changing world and to facilitate sound decisions on where the country should seek to fit within it.

Whereas Thailand used to bend with the wind, it should now aspire to bend ahead of the wind. That is, Thailand should always proactively think ahead of situations and develop smart strategies including one that will balance power and purpose. In the late 1960s, former Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman had sought to normalize Thailand's relationship with China even before America's withdrawal from Vietnam and the Sino-US rapprochement. This approach can be described as bending ahead of the wind.

Given that the geopolitical winds today are extremely strong, bamboo diplomacy is less viable than in the past. Rather, Thailand should adopt a "leading-from-the-middle" strategy, which is a combination of hedging and a collective/comprehensive security strategy.

A leading-from-the-middle strategic approach is defined as one that a small or medium state pursues in order to hedge with the great powers, bind them within a rules-based order while simultaneously initiating region-wide politico-diplomatic innovations and advocacy. The strategy aims at seeking to reduce strategic uncertainty for small and middle players amid great power competition.

Avoiding a regional security dilemma outcome is paramount. A leading-from-the-middle strategy reinforces hedging's more positive attributes by strengthening Thailand's and ASEAN's bargaining leverage to encourage the US and China to respect their respective interests and, in the longer term, to avoid forcing them to choose sides in a US-China conflict.

Conclusion

Thai foreign policy no longer bends with the wind. Despite being a longtime ally of the US, Thailand is leaning closer toward China, especially in the economic arena. In the emerging bipolar world, which is driven by the Sino-US rivalry and the concomitant clash of value systems, Thailand rhetorically appears to hedge with all major powers without forging a strategic position – thereby hedging by default.

This is because Thailand has encountered discursive anxiety that the old narrative is no longer plausible. Amid the critical juncture of geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific region, it is imperative for Thailand to find a bold new approach such as the leading-from-the-middle strategy outlined above. Without this, it is likely that the country would encounter greater risks in managing relations with major powers engaged in their geopolitical competition – a case of being gone with the wind in the twenty-first century international relations.

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