

Research review : searching for a new framework for Thailand's foreign policy in the post-cold war era

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Research Review: Searching for a New Framework for Thailand's Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era

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Abstract

Thai foreign policy in the 1990s has been said to be contingent on the government in power, which changes between (or within) these groups and vacillates between pro-democratic reformists/principle-pursuers and the conservatives/profit-seekers. In these studies, Thailand's Indochinese policy has often been referred to as a typical consequence of politics between the pragmatists and the reformists. However, whether or not domestic oppositional politics is the key determinant of foreign policy in the post-Cold War era still requires further examination, precisely because the model is now facing serious challenges between theory and reality.

In this paper, I review the existing arguments concerning Thailand's foreign policy in the post-Cold War Era and point out their limitations and questions for future study.

Keywords: Thailand, democratization, foreign policy, globalization

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Introduction

This paper examines prevailing assumptions about the influence of domestic politics over democratization on Thailand's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun, one of the leading scholars of Thai foreign policy and a former diplomat, boldly admitted in his recent book that Thailand's foreign policy has been little studied (Pavin 2010, xiii)¹. In fact, the number of papers on this topic, especially on post-Cold War foreign policy, is far from abundant. Among those studies, some have depicted Thailand's foreign policy as a consequence of international dynamics among the states and left its domestic policymaking process almost untouched. Others have focused on the domestic process and shown that Thailand's policy in the post-Cold War era has been swayed by frequent government changes, which has made it difficult for most governments to formulate long-term strategic thinking.

The domestic argument is divided between the different views of two groups on domestic politics in general and over democratization in particular. One is the pro-democratic group or reformists that comprise urban white collar workers, international capitalists, the mass media and NGOs, who have supported liberal principles such as democracy and human rights in both Thailand and international society. The other group is the conservatives or pragmatists that are composed of politicians and local businessmen who have attached greater importance to their own economic profits and have been ignorant about (or even ignored) public interests (Anek 1992, Surin and MacCargo 1997). Thai foreign policy in the 1990s has been said to be contingent on the government in power, which changes between (or within) these groups and vacillates between reformists/principle-pursuers and pragmatists/profit-seekers (Kusuma 2001, Pavin 2005). In these studies, Thailand's Indochinese policy has often been referred to as a typical consequence of politics between the pragmatists and the reformists. Initiatives such as Chartichai Choonhavan's "making

¹ All the citations of Thai literatures in this paper are referred by the author's first name, following the academic practice regarding Thai area studies.

Indochina from a battlefield into a marketplace” policy in the late 1980s, the pro-Myanmar policy by Chavalit Yongchaiyudh in the middle of the ‘90s, and regional cooperation by Thaksin Sinnawatra in the early 2000s have been regarded as profit-seeking by politicians and political businessmen, and often criticized by media and intellectuals as the privatization of diplomacy (Khien 2004).

However, whether or not domestic oppositional politics is the key determinant of foreign policy in the post-Cold War era still requires further examination, precisely because the model is now facing serious challenges between theory and reality. In this paper, I review the existing arguments concerning Thailand’s foreign policy in the post-Cold War Era and point out their limitations and questions for future study.

1. Bureaucratic Polity and Foreign Policy in the Cold War Era

To understand the existing research on post-Cold War foreign policy in Thailand, it is important to understand the political power structure during Cold War period. There seems to be an agreement among the students of Thai politics that Thai foreign policy has long been autonomous from bureaucracy and the military. Importantly, their views were influenced by the notion of bureaucratic polity. Bureaucratic polity was widely known to prevail in the Thai political system until the end of the 1980s. Riggs introduced this idea in his study tracing the change in government membership from 1932 to 1958. After finding that more than 80 percent of the total 237 cabinet members in that period were from the military or bureaucracy, Riggs concluded that the Thai state was highly independent from society and that the military and bureaucrats exclusively made decisions, and all the channels from the outside to the policymaking process were limited to the personal connection within those military and civilian cadres (Riggs 1966). Chai-anan developed this idea in his study of Thai politics from the 60s to the 70s and explained that there had been a political chance for an emergent bourgeois middle class to express their opinions, but most of the

important government posts and the legislative seats were dominated by top bureaucrats and military personnel (Chai-anan 1989).

Regarding foreign policy, Fineman focused on the international background of the bureaucratic polity and pointed out the “special relationship” with the United States. Right after capturing power by a coup d’état at the end of the 1940s, Plaek Phibulsongkram (generally referred by his nickname “Pibul”) allied with the US and shifted Thailand’s government to an anti-communist party. Pibul expected to reinforce the Thai military as his power base with material and political support from the US (Fineman 1997). With the purpose of preventing the penetration of communism, the US supported suppression of the opponents of the Thai government. The works by Darling also demonstrated the way two governments mutually developed interdependency facing the outbreak of armed conflicts in Laos and Vietnam in the 50s, which was followed by the escalation of the domestic communist insurgency in the 60s (Darling 1965).

To sum up, bureaucratic polity was an autonomous system with closed recruitment, in which the bureaucrats and military could exclusively hold on to and exercise power under the name of national security against communism outside and within the territory with strong support from the US.

Considering such a situation, Funston, Suchit and Kusuma concluded that the foreign policy under this system had been the realm of the professional diplomats and military, and that there was almost no room left for actors outside of the government (Funston 1987, 1998; Suchit 1990; Kusuma 2001). More precisely, those studies depicted that foreign affairs had been exclusively managed by the National Security Council (NSC), which had been chaired by prime ministers with members such as professional diplomats, military professionals and experts. There the military could reflect their interests and opinions onto foreign policy through the prime ministers with military backgrounds. On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) also played an unignorable role in this field. With the accumulated knowledge, network and art of diplomacy, MFA (especially a

few families that had produced many diplomats since the absolute monarchy era) exerted diplomatic leadership and sometimes out-did the prime ministers or the military. Funston mentioned the policies by Thanat Khoman, one of the founders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and one of the most famous Thai foreign minister from MFA, as a typical example of such MFA diplomacy in that period (Funston 1987). Their ultimate purpose was to protect Thai territorial integrity and national sovereignty from the menace of communism.

2. Liberal Corporatism and Oppositional Politics in Foreign Policy

The concept of the bureaucratic polity and its modifications were challenged later by Anek and Rangsan. They argued that the bureaucratic polity had gradually transformed into a more open, pluralistic system through the 1980s. Precisely, Rangsan examined the cabinet membership up to 1988 in the same manner as Riggs did, and revealed an increasing share of businessmen (Rangsan 1989). Likewise, Anek focused on the non-parliamentary governmental institution and examined the relationship between actors of the state and society. He stated that the non-state actors such as economic organizations played a significant role in the decision-making process there, and concluded that Thailand's political system fit into Shmitter's notion of liberal corporatism in which social actors voluntarily participated in decision-making through institutions, not personal networks (Anek 1992). While Chai-anan stated that most of the businessmen who participated in the bureaucratic polity were "political businessmen" who used personal connections within the bureaucracy and military for their immediate and personal interests, Anek focused on the new type of businessmen who emerged in the economic boom in the early 1980s and stated that they joined politics in order to create better business conditions through direct involvement in policymaking (Anek 1992: 39-69).

There is agreement among the scholars that the bureaucratic polity was imploded by the

political turmoil in the early 1990s. In 1991, the military coup d'états toppled Chartichai Choonhavan's administration, whose popularly elected cabinet members had the largest support, and killed about a hundred of the protesters rallied against the coup in 1992. This incident known as "Black May" finally led to the constitutional amendment that prohibits non-elected military personnel from assuming the prime ministership. Most literature regarded this as a watershed in Thai political de-militarization and democratization and defined those so-called "middle class" protesters as its main promoters. Thus, the politics through the 1990s have been depicted as oppositional politics "between the reformists and the conservatives" (Surin and MacCargo 1997, 146).

In this context, the "reformist" or pro-democratic group has allegedly been comprised of actors such as the internationally oriented capitalists, the urban white-collar workers, the mass media, technocrats and intellectuals (Surin and MacCargo [ibid.] or Anek 1993). Likewise, Kasian cites big-business executives, urban politicians, mainstream economists, state technocrats and human rights campaigners as part of the reformists (2006, 21). Their opponents have been assumed to be local businessmen and politicians representing rural areas (Surin and MacCargo 1997, 145), Thirayuth 1997, 150; Anek 2000, 4), and alleged to be ignorant of national and macroeconomic matters, and instead interested in short-term personal or factional gains (Kasian 2006, 13). Tensions between the reformists and the conservatives have emerged over various policy issues, such as in the areas of deregulation and economic liberalization and foreign policy (Surin and MacCargo 1997, 146).

Thailand's Indochinese policy has often been referred to as a typical consequence of politics between the reformists and the conservatives. It has been widely recognized that it was a group of businessmen and politicians that broke through the iron alliance of the military and MFA in the late 1980s. The US withdrew the military presence from the region after the liberation of Saigon by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1975, and it was followed by declarations of open-economic

policies by the governments of Vietnam, Lao and Myanmar in the late 80s. The studies of Suchit and Buszynski concluded that the growing thaw in mainland Southeast Asia undermined the *raison d'être* of the Cold War diplomatic regime (Suchit 1990, Buszynski 1994).

Then On the other hand, with a shift toward democracy, the government led by popularly elected politicians was established in the general election in 1987. The new Prime Minister Chartichai and his advisory group wrestled the power from the diplomat-military diplomatic alliance and initiated their new Indochina policy under their slogan, “making Indochina from a battlefield into a marketplace.” Suppakarn stated that behind Chartichai’s initiative, there was strong support from the rural business sectors through associations such as the provincial Thai Chamber of Commerce (TCC) (Suppakarn 2000, 168-169). Referring to Hewson and Anek, Suppakarn explained this policy change as a consequence of Thailand’s economic development after the 1960s. During that period, the Thai economy had shifted its focus from the export of primary commodities to manufacturing, and the emergent export-oriented business groups claimed their interests were to pursue the national interest (Suppakarn 2000, 168-169)². She concluded that the foreign policy after Chartichai has been dominated mainly by politicians and businessmen although Chartichai was dislodged from power by a coup in 1991 (Suppakarn 2000, 2007).

Kusuma adopted the political dichotomy of Surin and MacCargo and depicted Thai foreign policy in the 1990s as a struggle between two groups. One group pursued economic profit and assigned higher priority to trade and investment and concessions for natural resource development. The other group emphasized universal values such as human rights and democracy, and pursued public interests. She categorized initiatives by Chartichai, and Banharn Silpa-archa (1995-1996) and Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh (1996-1997) as profit-seeking, while the second government of Chuan Leekpai (1997-2001)’s policies against Myanmar’s human rights policy or

² However, she emphasized that the business sectors had been collaborators or lobbyists for the policy implementation, not direct policy-makers as Anek argued (Suppakarn 2000, 211).

against border narcotic trade was evaluated as a policy pursuing principles (Kusuma 2001). Kusuma admitted that Chuan had finally gave way to political pressures from ASEAN and for domestic demand for natural resources from Myanmar, but still she stressed in her paper that, “Thai foreign policy needed to have principles because it was a democratic society (2001, 208).

Likewise, Pavin’s study of Thai-Myanmar relations resonated with this dichotomy of profit and principle. In his study, he displayed how the pragmatists sugar-coated their pursuit of private interests in Myanmar with the notion of “Thainess.” The profit-seekers maintained a close relationship with the Myanmar government under the name of Thainess. This concept has sometimes manifested as harmony and friendship between Buddhist nations in contrast to criticism against Myanmar by the Western nations, and sometimes as a regional power (Pavin 2005). I would like to stresses that the “profit” in Pavin’s study seems to be interpreted as “private interest,” in contrast to the Chuan government’s “moral conscious” or public-oriented attitude (Pavin 2005, 145).

It is noteworthy that those studies also mention the manifesto of the Thai leaders, often on the side of profit-seekers, stating that Thailand’s intent was to be a regional leader. Providing some examples, both Funston and Kusuma mentioned Chaovalit’s initiative for the creation of “Suvannaphumi” (literally meaning “golden land”) as a revived image of Thailand’s past hegemon in the region, but they did not provide enough interpretation on them (2001, 194; 1998, 269]). The backgrounds and the motives of the initiatives by those profit-seekers need to be considered from the reason I will explain later in this paper.

In those studies of the opposition politics model, foreign policy by Thaksin has allegedly been defined as an ultimate case of profit-seeking. Right after he assumed the premiership, Thaksin restructured the system of foreign policymaking by appointing those who were close to him, and directly embarked on policies named “proactive foreign policy.” Thus Thaksin promoted regional cooperation with neighboring countries such as Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, together with economic integration via FTAs with economic powers like Japan, China and the US. His drastic

style was later criticized as “privatization of foreign policy.” Khien Theeravit, for example, harshly criticized this “proactive foreign policy” stating that it ignored “genuine” regional/national interests.

The government adheres to the capitalist principle that the interest of the country, the capitalists, and the people are identical. To promote the interest of the capitalists world-wide is a part of the government’s policy. But in these instances the beneficiary on the Thai side happens to be a company belonging to the Prime Minister’s family, Shin Corp, a transnational telecom enterprise. (Khien 2004)

In sum, the oppositional politics model has depicted Thailand’s foreign policy in the post-Cold War age as shown in Figure.

Figure : Comparing the Frameworks Concerning Foreign Policy in the post-Cold War Era

Year	1988-91	1991-92	1992-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-2001	2001-06
Prime minister	Chartichai	Anand	Chuan I	Banharn	Chaovalit	Chuan II	Thaksin
oppositional politics model	Profit-oriented	?		Profit-oriented		Principle-oriented	Profit-oriented
“lokanuwat” model	Transforming the national economy into one dependent on the global economy 						

3. Limit of Oppositional Politics Model and Critics against Liberal Corporatism

The pattern that the profit/principle model, or oppositional politics model proposed is seemingly persuasive. Few researchers will deny the arguments about the personal connection and business deals between leaders of Thailand and CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Burma and Vietnam)

through the 1990s, and some of the leaders actually admitted by themselves that the relations between Thailand and CLMVs were to be developed for the sake of Thai companies³. Nevertheless, notably, their discussion still left room for further verification of the backgrounds and motives of the policymakers for the reasons shown below.

First, it explains foreign policy making solely by domestic politics and discusses international influence separately. Although their arguments have their roots in the emergence of a “middle class” created by the development of international market-oriented economies, the influence of international economic/political relations after that was not taken into account until the outbreak of the Asia Economic Crisis in 1997.

In this regard, the second problem of the oppositional politics model is that much of the research mentioned above has largely focused on the foreign policies of the late 1980s or after the Asia Financial Crisis in ‘97, and little is known about the foreign policy in the early 1990s. In terms of Indochinese policy, it is well-known that the Greater Mekhong Sub-region (GMS), one of the most important initiatives for Indochina regional cooperation was proposed by the Anand Panyarachun government (1991-92), one of the typical “reformist” governments, but no speculation has taken place on their motives and background so far. Likewise, regional diplomacy by Chuan Leekipai’s first government (1992-95) has seldom been examined while his second government (1997-2001) has often been referred to as the prime case of the principle-seeking foreign policy. In order to validate the policies by profit-seeking governments, I suggest that it is indispensable to analyze foreign policies by governments in the early 90s.

Third, the notion of “principle” in the arguments of the oppositional model was quite narrowly defined. In her arguments about Chuan’s Myanmar policy in the late 90s, Kusuma presented the notion as almost equal to democracy and human rights. The principle or long-term strategy need not necessarily be democratic nor humanitarian (although it is ethically desirable to be),

³From the speech by Prime Minister Chaovalit. The Nation, 15 May, 1997.

and there is undeniably the possibility that profit-seeking governments could have some sort of long-term strategy or principle (although they might fail to achieve it). In other words, no speculation has taken place concerning the possible long-term strategy of the governments alleged to be profit-seekers.

This question was exposed by the conflicting evaluations of Thaksin's "proactive foreign policy." In contrast to Thien and other critics to Thaksin, Aoki concluded in a study of Thaksin's "proactive foreign policy" that by that policy Thaksin aimed to upgrade Thailand's status in the global economy (2008). Likewise, Pavin evaluated Thaksin's ODA toward neighboring countries as one that tried to shift "Thailand's role from recipient to donor country and to re-map the political landscape by locating Thailand at the center of the region" (Pavin 2010, 276). Although Aoki and Pavin acknowledged that Thaksin actually gained business deals that were profitable for his private company from national foreign policy such as telecom deals with the Myanmar government, they stated that it is one aspect of Thaksin's foreign policy. What their studies conveyed is that the analytical problem of the prevailing framework for Thailand's foreign policy in the post-Cold War age is not enough to understand the contemporary phenomenon.

Lastly, I would like to emphasize the need to take into account the criticism against liberal corporatism and the arguments of the middle class on which the oppositional model relies in the arguments of foreign policy.

Ji and Tamada criticized the arbitrariness of the definition of "middle class." Although those who actually joined the Black May demonstration were the urban white-colors (the new middle) and the small- and medium-sized self-employers (the old middle), they pointed out that the owners of big business groups have later been included in the middle class (Ji 2000, 77; Tamada 2003, 20). Reminding that Anek and Chai-anan already pointed out that those big business groups had joined/been incorporated into the bureaucratic polity in the 1980s, it raises the question of why those big business owners had changed their preferences from pro-bureaucracy to pro-democracy. The

same question can be asked of technocrats. Technocracy defined in general as “one sub-group of bureaucrats that possesses specialized knowledge” (Centeno 1993, 310) is another keyword for Thai politics. In the 1980s, they had been placed in key positions of the governments by Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda and had worked through the structural adjustment of the World Bank loan following the economic crisis in 1979 (Anek 1992, 32). Surin and MacCargo also cite technocrats as a part of the conservatives but later categorize them as the reformists⁴. These arguments provoke the question of whether or not those technocrats were the same ones as those who worked for and joined in the so-called bureaucratic polity. Even if they were, it is not yet clear why and how they changed their preference to pro-democracy.

Globalization studies in Thailand represented as “lokanuwat” had already recognized this question in the early 1990s. Here we review the gist of their criticism against liberal corporatism (or civil society theory) by referring to Masaki Takahashi’s paper concerning lokanuwat’s discussion (2005). According to Takahashi, lokanuwat studies (literally meaning “being subject to the world”) stressed socio-economic fairness as a key factor of democracy, not only the election system in itself. He referred to the work by Saneh Chamarik, one of the advocates of lokanuwat, and stressed that liberal principles (especially one regarding economics) do not necessarily promote democracy (Takahashi 2005, 172; Saneh 1999, 159-160). Furthermore, Saneh noted that the governments in developing countries regardless of whether they were popularly elected or not, have acted as agents of the foreign capitals or governments and transformed their own national economy into one dependent on the global economic system (Saneh 1993, 1999; 154-159). In this system, Saneh argued, liberal principles have increased the wealth gap within society. Accordingly, those who were categorized as “reformists” by Anek, Surin and MacCargo are nothing but agents of global capital.

Although the significance of lokanuwat is the mechanism for producing socio-economic

⁴ See Surin and MacCargo (1997), pp. 14-146.

disparity between those who are connected with global capital and those who are not, the point that they regard governments as agents of global economy is seen to be of value to formulate a new framework to comprehend Thailand's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. In concluding remarks, I present the implications for future study of Thai foreign policy derived from the arguments discussed above.

Concluding Remarks

In reviewing the research on Thailand's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, this paper has identified the limitations of the current research about the analysis of backgrounds and motives of the policymakers, and proposes a more research framework. The review indicates that the prevailing model based on domestic opposition politics has failed to explain the current situations in domestic and international politics. , and further positive analysis based on a temporally/spatially broader framework is required. In this regard, I recognize the lokanuwat framework as the possible starting point of our future research.

Lokanuwat provides a panoramic viewpoint to analyze the interaction between domestic processes and international relations. Its thesis that foreign policymakers as agents of global capital have tried to transform Thailand into an economy dependent on the global economic system can seemingly be an analytical starting point for future study of Thai foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. In fact, it was during the Asian Economic Crisis that the problem of economic reform was highlighted in 1997, but as Suehiro, Doner and other political-economists have noted, economic reform toward liberalization has been promoted through the 1990s (Suehiro 2000). Considering those studies, it is reasonable to examine its background and motives as a part of foreign policy studies in order to overcome the problems that have been left by the oppositional politics model.

Nevertheless, it would still be unwise to apply the lokanuwat thesis directly as a hypothesis for foreign policy study. The thesis assumes the global economy is quite a static and determined

system and dynamic speculation about its transformation has not taken place so far. Furthermore, lokanuwat sometimes overemphasizes economic factors as a determinant. Therefore, it is important to study political initiatives such as Suvannaphumi and reinterpret their meaning in the new framework.

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