Thailand’s strategic drift
Domestic determinants amidst superpower competition

Thitinan Pongsudhirak

Introduction

Even before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, Thailand’s strategic posture had been increasingly dominated by its political preoccupations at home. The pandemic, also known as Covid-19, merely accentuated trends and patterns in Thailand’s foreign policy and security outlook in view of the geopolitical rivalry and competition between the US and China. As Covid-19 showed signs of slowing down by June 2020—on the assumption that there would be no ‘second wave’ of similar virulence—Thailand’s strategic role and challenges were on course to return in full, just as they were prior to the virus outbreak. The domestic political instability from cycles of coups, constitutions and elections since constitutionalism replaced absolute monarchy in 1932 has made Thailand unable to make a break for an effective democratic future once and for all. These domestic shortcomings have also impeded Thailand’s role abroad.

After more than five years of lacklustre military–authoritarian government following Thailand’s 13th successful putsch in May 2014, the country’s most recent poll, on 24 March 2019, yielded a controversial parliament and a fractious post-election coalition government, headed by incumbent Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, who led the junta that
seized power to begin with. Thailand’s circular holding pattern risks sliding into anaemic economic growth while some of its neighbours have been expanding twice as fast, with more dynamic prospects and progress ahead. The coronavirus crisis has compounded Thailand’s headwinds, as the Thai economy is forecast to suffer the deepest contraction compared to those of its ASEAN peers. Its seemingly endless colour-coded conflict between yellow versus red street protests that have led to a political standstill since 2005 make it tempting to write off Thailand as an also-ran. But, in geopolitical and geo-economic terms, the country is an indispensable piece of the regional strategic jigsaw puzzle in an era of global power shifts and transitions. Thailand is ultimately too central and crucial to be ignored or marginalised.

Geography renders the country as the economic locomotive of mainland Southeast Asia and a natural hub of ASEAN, with its combined 660 million in population and US$2.9 trillion GDP. The predominantly Buddhist kingdom also has critical mass, a market of 70 million and close to US$500 billion GDP, making it ASEAN’s second largest economy. Thailand’s history of crafty diplomacy in maintaining its independence against the odds over centuries places it in good stead with all of the major powers—it’s a US treaty ally and yet intimately close to China, while favoured by Japanese investors. Despite the persistent impasse in its domestic politics, Thai economic growth stayed on a 3% trajectory, subpar but without contraction prior to Covid-19. Resilience, resourcefulness and an uncommon joie de vivre are strands of the Thai DNA, but so are internal squabbling and power struggles large and small. Unless they face existential external crises such as European imperialism, World War II and the Cold War, the Thais tend to be unable get their act together at home. At issue this time is whether the recent poll and its aftermath will be any different from the back-and-forth, yellow-and-red patterns of the recent past. Much will depend on the kind of politics that unfolds under the new reign of King Maha Vajiralongkorn. Whether this new reign leads Thailand to more stability and a way forward or to more polarisation and a holding pattern with stagnation risks will determine much about Thailand’s strategic role in the region.

Elections, coups and constitutions

To understand the locus of power and determinants of political outcomes in contemporary Thailand, it’s instructive to put the reign of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej into context. His time on the throne remarkably spanned 70 years from 1946—Thailand’s nation-building period from a backwater village to a modern nation. Roughly over the first five decades, the late King devoted himself to the improvement of lives and standards of living, while serving as a unifying and stabilising symbol to thwart communist expansionism. Owing partly to the Thailand–US treaty alliance, King Bhumibol’s reign was immensely successful for keeping communism away and enabling Thai economic development—hence the Thai people’s reverence towards their late monarch. But his reign was challenged by its own success. People later had more means, more education and exposure to the outside world, while the Cold War ended. With no more communism to fight while Thai society became more modernised, the established political order under the monarchy, military and bureaucracy—what can be understood as Thailand’s Cold War fighting machine—soon faced international expectations and upward domestic pressures for elections and democracy.

Polls came and went in the 1970s and much of the 1980s, characterised by weak political parties and graft-prone politicians. By 1988, a newly elected government with new ideas to transform Indochina from ‘battlefields’ to ‘marketplaces’, headed by Chatichai Choonhavan, used its democratic mandate to promote elected representatives at the expense of military dominance over politics. But because it was also known as a ‘buffet cabinet’ for widespread graft, the Chatichai government gave the military a pretext to stage a coup in February 1991. Not long thereafter, the disguised military dictatorship was overthrown by a civil-society popular uprising in May 1992. This pro-democracy catharsis led to an organic, bottom-up reform movement, with unprecedented public participation. It culminated with the widely popular 1997 constitution, which was intended to get rid of Thailand’s ‘money politics’, in which elected politicians bought votes and gained office to recoup and make handsome profits from graft, enabling a military coup that ultimately ended up with a new election in a ‘vicious cycle’ of elections, coups and constitutions.

Designed eclectically by studying charters from a range of established democracies, the 1997 constitution promoted transparency and accountability in the political system and the stability and effectiveness of government, which had been chronically fractious and unwieldy. The 200-member Senate became fully elected for the first time, and the 500-strong House of Representatives was
Thailand’s strategic drift: Domestic determinants amidst superpower competition

The first-ever party-list system could also draw in policy experts who didn’t have to get down and dirty with electioneering and campaigning. Most important was a clutch of newly established accountability-promoting independent agencies, led by the Election Commission, National Anti-Corruption Commission and Constitutional Court. Members of those agencies were selected by the popularly chosen Senate. For a while, Thailand was being touted worldwide as a showcase in democratic transition on its way towards consolidation.8

Notwithstanding its good intentions and mechanisms, the 1997 constitution ran up against the political juggernaut represented by Thaksin Shinawatra, a mobile phone concessionaire who spearheaded veteran provincial politicians, progressive activists and academics, new business groups from media, property and telecommunications, and others whose wealth derived from the stock market and global finance.9 Armed with innovative policy ideas, such as cheap health care and rural microcredit schemes, and yet prone to conflicts of interest because his entrepreneurial stakes blurred the lines between public resources and private gains, Thaksin soon became the most electorally successful politician in Thai history. As his policies connected with the electorate by addressing their grievances and giving them a sense of upward mobility, he and his associates also made a lucrative business out of politics and power, and thereby became susceptible to attack from his establishment opponents among the Privy Council, the army and the judiciary, palace insiders, senior bureaucrats, and many Bangkok-based elites of older wealth that came from owning land and state concessions. After winning a landslide and unprecedented re-election in February 2005—a critical juncture when Thaksin’s opponents began to see him as an existential threat to the established political order—the Thaksin government faced its first street demonstrations in August 2005.10 Thai politics has been in a tailspin since.

The way to address the Thaksin challenge was to beat him at the polls, but his opponents answered instead with two military coups in September 2006 and May 2014, as well as a judicial dissolution of the Thaksin-aligned governing party in December 2008. Those interventions were preceded and paved by yellow-clad street protests in Bangkok in three major rounds: August 2005 to September 2006, May to December 2008, and November 2013 to May 2014. The pro-Thaksin redshirts under the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (that is, supporters of the policies he introduced) took their turns in the streets in April 2009 and March–May 2010, each time dispersed and suppressed by the army. The redshirts protested less frequently because they won the polls under Thaksin’s party banners each time elections were held. In turn, the two military coups in 2006 and 2014 came up with as many constitutions, respectively promulgated in August 2007 and April 2017, each time tinkering and tweaking the rules set out in the 1997 charter to effect desired outcomes.11

In 2007, charter provisions mandated a half-appointed, half-elected Senate, and reapportioned the lower house of parliament to 375 constituencies and 125 party-list members. The idea was to give the Democrat Party, which had lost widely on constituency ballots but tracked closer to Thaksin’s party machine on the proportional party list, a better chance. The half-appointed Senate, chosen by the Election Commission and a coup-appointed committee, later took part in appointing officials to the Election Commission, Constitutional Court and anticorruption agency. In May 2007, the Constitutional Court duly dissolved Thaksin’s juggernaut Thai Rak Thai party, which had triumphed in the 2001 and 2005 polls. Yet the December 2007 election returned largely the same results. Thaksin’s second-generation Palang Prachachon (People’s Power) party still won a near majority in the lower house.12

In 2017, after another putsch by the same cohort of generals, self-styled the National Council for Peace and Order, charter provisions have gone further to the right. The entire 250-member Senate is now directly and indirectly selected by the junta and is empowered to vote for the Prime Minister. Constituency seats are reduced to 350, and the party-list boosted to 150 in a ‘mixed-member apportionment’ system. With one ballot this time instead of two, voters choose a constituency MP but all ballots (including those for losing MP candidates) are counted nationwide for apportionment in the proportional party-list system. The constitutional intent is to curb the role of big parties, such as Thaksin’s, in favour of smaller banners. Parties that poll well on constituency allotment would inversely be assigned fewer seats on the party list. With smaller parties more in charge, the resulting government is likely to be a weak and unwieldy coalition. Keeping the political party system weak, politicians in check
and the executive branch down allows the trinity of institutions from the conservative political order—military, monarchy and bureaucracy—to continue to call the shots.

The results of the 24 March 2019 election (Table 1) suggest that the coup-appointed drafters of the 2017 constitution succeeded. The Thaksin-aligned Pheu Thai party, headed by his sister Yingluck Shinawatra until her ouster in the May 2014 putsch, still ended up as the largest, winning 136 constituency seats but zero on the party list. On the other hand, a dozen parties were apportioned one MP each because they failed to win constituency seats but gathered enough popular votes to be counted. In between were the pro-military Palang Pracharat party with 116 MPs, most of them old-style politicians induced or ‘sucked up’ by the National Council for Peace and Order, and Future Forward, a brand new anti-junta vehicle representing younger voices, with 82 MPs. Another first timer that is vehemently anti-junta is Seri Ruam Thai, led by former police chief Seripisut Temiyavet, who led the party to attract sufficient popular votes for 10 party-list seats. On the other hand, the established parties fared poorly. The Democrat Party’s 53 MPs were its lowest representation since the 1980s. The Chart Thai and Chart Thai Pattana parties that used to dominate Thai elections in the 1980s and 1990s garnered just a handful of seats, whereas the Bhumjaithai party, made up of veteran rural politicians based on patronage networks, came in with 51 MPs.

Table 1: Thailand’s election results from 24 March 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>Party list</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Palang Pracharat Party</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pheu Thai Party</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Forward Party</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat Party</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhumjaithai Party</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai Liberal Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chartthaipattana Party</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Economics Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prachachart Party</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pheu Chart Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Coalition for Thailand</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chart Pattana Party</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai Local Power Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai Forest Conservation Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai People Power Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai National Power Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People Progressive Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palang Thai Rak Thai Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai Civilized Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai Teacher for People Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prachaniyom Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai People Justice Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People Reform Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai Citizens Power Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Democracy Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Palangdharma Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>350</strong></td>
<td><strong>150</strong></td>
<td><strong>500</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Large parties were thus constrained, while smaller parties made gains. Apart from weakening large parties, the new rules also allow MPs secret voting without having to toe their party line. The vote for the Prime Minister, for example, is subject to individual MP preferences rather than party positions. This means there can be financial inducements for MPs’ support—an another way to weaken the party system. If MPs go their own way, their parties have little leverage to rein them in. For the electorate, the recent poll was unsurprisingly confusing because each party had a different number in different constituencies, thereby diluting the bond between voters and parties. Since the 1997 constitution, the electoral practice was always one party, one number. Moreover, the 2017 charter mandates that the post-election government will have to follow the current military regime’s ‘20-year national development plan’ by law. Straying away from the plan could result in impeachment and the dissolution of the government. The new charter and its enabling laws also made more space for parties to be dissolved and MPs banned based on vote fraud and electoral infractions.

Not only the rules appeared to be in the junta’s favour; so are the referees. The junta’s strategy was to rely on the Election Commission, Constitutional Court and National Anti-Corruption Commission to pin down the opposing bloc of parties with fraud charges and bans. The election results thus delivered a Prayut-led coalition government with a slim margin in the lower house. Nearly all parties—apart from self-declared anti-junta vehicles comprising the Thaksin-aligned Pheu Thai, Prachachart and Pheu Chart parties, along with Future Forward and Seri Ruam Thai—have joined the coalition government. But the solid and cohesive anti-junta bloc automatically meant that the junta-backed government has been politically fragile and unstable. While the 250-member Senate can vote to choose the Prime Minister for a bicameral majority of 376 in view of the 500 MPs, the junta-appointed upper chamber can’t take part in lawmaking in the lower house. The resulting government is thus fragile. The game plan for Prayut will be to ride out all storms and remain in power at all costs, including the dissolution of Future Forward and a 10-year ban against its leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit.

After taking office, Prayut led his cabinet on 16 July 2019 to recite an incomplete oath of office in front of King Maha Vajiralongkorn. The incomplete oath, which expressed intentions to uphold and serve the people and the monarch but omitted a similar allegiance to the constitution, became a political controversy, making rounds in opposition motions in parliament and media news. On 27 August 2019, the King conveyed a message of support to the government in writing, and later the Constitutional Court ruled that it didn’t have jurisdiction over the incomplete oath because that was a matter between the government and the King. Consequently, it would appear that the Prayut government is more answerable to the monarch than to the supreme law of the land. This controversy adds to the intricacy and complexity of Thai politics. Unlike the preceding monarch, King Maha Vajiralongkorn has shown a preference to not be used by either side of the yellow–red divide. Many have hoped that perhaps the 67-year-old monarch may be interested in having Thailand move forward through compromise and accommodation, past the conflict and polarisation of the past. That could be a potential legacy of his reign. If so, Thailand’s playing field may become more even, and the country may be able to navigate a way forward. The potential flipside is a longer term authoritarian environment in which elections can take place but the ultimate authority and sovereignty don’t rest with the Thai people but with the traditional institutions of the monarchy, military and bureaucracy.

Thailand in strategic perspective

Unsurprisingly, the projection of Thailand’s foreign policy and strategic role on the fluid regional canvass has been held hostage by the country’s domestic machinations. As a treaty ally of the US, Thailand took sides during the Cold War, and its troops were in action in both the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts in an effort to thwart communist expansionism at home. But after its Cold War success, Thailand’s foreign policy bearings became adrift in search of a new balance. Much of that search in the late 1980s and early 1990s was underpinned by shifting Thai–US relations from patron–client ties to relative partnership on the back of Thailand’s robust economic growth from 1988 to 1995 in the absence of the communist menace. The turning point was Thailand’s economic crisis, which erupted in July 1997, sparking region-wide financial turbulence. When the US, under the Clinton administration, backed the International Monetary Fund’s stringent and austere bailout package for the Thai economy, the Thai people and elites broadly felt abandoned and betrayed by their American counterparts for not doing more to help a treaty ally and ‘oldest friend’ in Asia. Thai–US relations soured dramatically.
Thailand’s post-1997 economic recovery coincided with Thaksin Shinawatra’s rise, which in turn overlapped the terrorist attacks in the US on 11 September 2001. The global war on terror and Southeast Asia’s potential as a second front for jihadist expansionism on the one hand, and Thaksin’s foreign policy framework around bilateral free trade agreements, the Asia Cooperation Dialogue and Ayeyawady – Chao Phraya – Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy on the other, realigned Thai–US relations. Following Thaksin’s June 2003 visit to the White House, Thailand fully signed on to the global war on terror and was designated a ‘major non-Nato ally’ by the administration of President George W Bush. That year was the peak of Thailand’s geopolitical heft. Thaksin was touted as a regional leader in the footsteps of Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohamad and Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew. When Thaksin presided over the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation summit of world leaders in Bangkok in October 2003, the gathering reinforced and showcased his regional leadership prospects and Thailand’s elevation in the geopolitical pecking order. The only major chink in Thaksin’s armour at the time was Thailand’s Malay-Muslim ethno-nationalist insurgency in the country’s three southernmost border provinces. It violently resurfaced in January 2004 after Thaksin restructured local governance frameworks, mechanisms and personnel. Thailand’s southern violence became the one crisis he couldn’t solve and got worse the more he tried to solve it, although it has deteriorated since Thaksin’s demise, without a foreseeable resolution.

Thaksin’s record at home was flawed, especially when it involved conflicts of interest and abuse of power, but his government’s foreign policy projection and propulsion attracted global attention. Thailand’s domestic conflict, which paved the way for the cycle of coups, constitutions and elections enumerated above, was thus incalculably costly because it stalled and curbed Thailand’s international standing. After Thaksin’s overthrow in a putsch in September 2006, Thailand’s foreign relations were hobbled and later taken hostage by domestic politics. For example, the yellowshirt street protests against the Thaksin-aligned government in 2008, including a week-long takeover of Bangkok’s main international airport, embittered Thai–Cambodian relations over an ancient Hindu temple, because Hun Sen had sided with Thaksin. Similarly, after the party they voted for was dissolved in December 2008, redshirt demonstrators went on a rampage and ended up disrupting the 4th East Asia Summit meeting in the seaside resort of Pattaya on the east coast in Chonburi Province. This incident was arguably the lowest point in Thailand’s illustrious diplomatic history. As Thailand was consumed by its colour-coded domestic polarisation and conflict, its foreign policy became reactive and risk-averse in a holding pattern.

Thailand’s major external partners were naturally compelled to respond to the twin coups in Bangkok. In the first round under the Bush administration, the US took a decidedly lenient and perfunctory stance towards the 19 September 2006 putsch. It was seen as par for the course in Thai politics. Minimal sanctions, such as the automatic suspension of the Pentagon’s International Military Education and Training program, were imposed, but the coup-appointed government was told that the situation would normalise with the return to elections and popular rule. The administration of President Barack Obama, however, toed a more critical line as the Thai crisis wore on under growing authoritarian tendencies, recalibrating the mix of values and interests. When the follow-up putsch transpired on 22 May 2014 after American diplomats were told by Thailand’s military authorities that it wouldn’t take place, the Obama administration reacted harshly, warning of worsening ties in all facets, including military-to-military relations. Thereafter, Thai–US relations plummeted. Apart from the US, Western and Asian democracies, including India and Japan, were broadly in unison in reaction to the May 2014 coup.

China’s reaction was different. Even before the May 2014 coup, Thailand–China ties had increasingly warmed as Beijing saw Obama’s ‘pivot’ and ‘rebalance’ as a geostrategic challenge. China took Obama’s rebalance strategy to task in the South China Sea, taking over Scarborough Shoal, which was claimed by the Philippines, in April 2012. The ensuing diplomatic row eventually led to the Philippines’ legal victory over China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration. As China ignored the ruling, the Obama administration dithered. The Obama rebalance strategy compelled Thai leaders to take more notice of China’s aggressive response. By coup time in May 2014, facing the Obama administration’s tough talk and posture in favour of democratic rule, the Thai military wasn’t hesitant in seeking Beijing’s superpower succour and embrace. Post-coup Thailand–China relations were steadily bolstered, from senior-level official visits and public diplomacy to upgrades of military-to-military cooperation and arms sales. China’s rise abroad and domestic polarisation at home further tightened the already intimate Bangkok–Beijing axis. While the stock of Thai–US relations remained immense, the bilateral flow of ties favoured China.
Japan was the first democracy to break ranks by accommodating Thailand’s coup regime, receiving Prayut for an official visit in February 2015. However, the Japanese Government was able to entice Prayut to state that elections would be held within a year.\textsuperscript{35} Although that pledge was the first of several election dates that weren’t honoured, it allowed Japan to re-engage with Thailand and maintain its geopolitical interest vis-à-vis China in mainland Southeast Asia and the broader ASEAN region.

The first Western democracy to follow in Japan’s pragmatic footsteps was Australia. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop’s conspicuous visit within a year after the coup caused an international stir.\textsuperscript{36} It also encouraged the coup government in Bangkok. But, in hindsight, Australia was ahead of the curve. Eventually, the leading global democracies caved in because of Thailand’s indispensable role in the regional equation and also because democratic values have been challenged in many of their Western cradles.\textsuperscript{37} By the time President Trump received Prayut at the White House for an official visit on 2 October 2017, the diplomatic floodgates opened for Thailand’s military regime.\textsuperscript{38} Barely two months later, the EU normalised relations with junta-ruled Thailand.\textsuperscript{39}

Thailand’s coup-makers, in other words, got away with their putsch because of the country’s irreplaceable place and position in its crucial neighbourhood as the hub of mainland Southeast Asia, integral to ASEAN’s undertakings. The March 2019 poll enabled Thailand’s military government to appear more civilianised and democratically legitimate, even though it had manipulated the 2017 constitution to ensure its continuity in office with the assistance of the military-appointed Senate.

When US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo visited Bangkok as part of ASEAN-related ministerial meetings, organised by Thailand as the 2019 rotational ASEAN chair, the Thai elections were noted as a crucial building block in the reaffirmation of bilateral relations and Thailand’s key role in the US’s ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) geostrategy.\textsuperscript{40} Reinforcing its central role in ‘ASEAN centrality’—the notion that major regional cooperative vehicles are anchored around Southeast Asia’s regional organisation—Thailand, as ASEAN chair, pushed through the launch of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,\textsuperscript{41} which was effectively a response to the US-led FOIP. Apart from the US, the three other promoters of the FOIP are Australia, Japan and India, which with the US constitute the so-called ‘Quad’, whose four-way strategic cooperation on the Indo-Pacific dates back more than a decade. Australia, the US, Japan and India all have overlapping, if different, Indo-Pacific visions. Japan’s draws out its international role across Asia to Africa. India’s Indo-Pacific take is tied to its broader ‘Act East’ geostrategy, although New Delhi’s withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership may impede its broader strategic role in Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{42}

**Covid-19 and its aftermath**

Unsurprisingly, Thai politics remains murky and unsettled more than six years after the May 2014 coup, and after a long-awaited general election in March 2019. The military and conservative elites still hold sway but must resort to constitutional manipulation and rely on extra-parliamentary assistance from the Constitutional Court, the Election Commission and the National Anti-Corruption Commission. The 2017 constitution has achieved its pro-military aims of keeping political parties fractious in favour of small parties, resulting in a weak parliament. Although the majority of Thailand’s electorate have voted for anti-junta parties, the conservative minority is running the country overtly and behind the scenes. Yet, until the coronavirus pandemic, the Thai economy held up in the face of protracted polarisation and prolonged instability. Thai economic growth stayed on a subpar range of 3% per year from 2001 to 2020, spanning the Thaksin era to the restoration of the conservative order, although its growth potential can be 4–6% if there are political stability and clearer policy directions. The Prayut-led government’s growth strategies based on ‘Thailand 4.0’ and the ‘Eastern Economic Corridor’ have lost momentum because of the weak and inherently unstable coalition makeup.

The Thai economy has a critical mass of a 70-million-people market and is geographically central in the Mekong region. However, on the coat-tails of growth and development in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, the Covid-19 crisis has exposed Thailand’s structural weaknesses, from an outdated bureaucracy to an unstable political environment, and a lack of economic upgrading and education reforms. According to the International Monetary Fund’s *World Economic Outlook* in view of Covid-19, the Thai economy is set to contract by 6.7%, making it the laggard among ASEAN economies, while economic recovery to pre-Covid levels isn’t expected until at least 2022.\textsuperscript{43}
The upshot over the next 2 or 3 years is that Thailand’s Cold War trinity of military, monarchy and bureaucracy will still call the shots but will come under growing pressure from the growing majority of the electorate who want political representation and ways forward in the 21st century. The younger voices behind the Future Forward Party are indicative of tensions in Thai society. It used to be along the lines of yellows versus reds, but now an additional new fault line is appearing between those under 35, who have suffered opportunity costs for 15 years of crisis and confrontation in the 21st century, and the old guard, who rose up from the Cold War years. Such a tense political landscape appears combustible.

This is the context of King Maha Vajiralongkorn’s rise after the 70-year reign of his father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The monarch in Thailand has been considered the final arbiter and broker of power in times of crisis and impasse. But that modality was specific to and personalised by King Bhumibol and his earned and accumulated moral authority through the hard work of improving the lot of Thais during the Cold War. A new monarch with an old traditional monarchy is now Thailand’s untested, uncharted waters. What Thailand requires is a rebalance of institutions in favour of political parties, parliament and elected representatives in place of men in uniform—and a return to electoral rule and popular mandates.

Current signs aren’t pointing in that direction. In fact, there may have been several constitutional violations since the 2019 election that have further undermined democratic development, led by Prayut’s incomplete oath of office. As the coronavirus pandemic continues to wreak havoc, Thai politics in the medium term will be fiercely contested, and its economy is unlikely to move ahead with any clear direction until a domestic reckoning works itself out.

On the other hand, instead of posing as a common enemy forcing the US and China to close ranks and lead international cooperation to overcome the global pandemic, Covid-19 has merely reinforced tensions between the two superpowers. Conspicuously, Thailand was the first country outside China to register a Covid-19 case—a Chinese tourist from Wuhan on 13 January 2020. Yet Thai authorities didn’t impose travel restrictions against China until the pandemic ran amok in March 2020. As its strategic role in the region will be largely determined by its domestic political manoeuvres, Thailand’s strategic plays on both superpower sides are likely to continue as long as the US subsumes its values agenda for human rights and democracy under its interests of pushing back against China’s assertive rise and regional dominance.

China is the constant variable in Thailand’s foreign policy mix, as Beijing deals with all regime types. As long as Thailand remains under authoritarian shadows, Bangkok will tilt towards Beijing only if it can’t find acceptance and support from its treaty ally in Washington. To the extent that China is the resident superpower, Thailand will handle and accommodate it accordingly, while relying on other middle and larger powers, such as Japan, Australia and the US, to maintain strategic balance.

Beijing’s influence and weight in Southeast Asia appear undeniable, but Thailand, as with some of its immediate neighbours, will always be on the lookout for an autonomous space above and beyond the great powers. Covid-19, while inconclusive and still unpredictable as of mid-2020, has driven a deeper wedge between those who are ‘with’ and those who are ‘against’ China—an either/or proposition that used to be criticised by Washington but seems to have been embraced by Beijing’s new ‘wolf-warrior’ stance in the world. If China maintains momentum as the first-in and first-out patient of the coronavirus ward and is able to reopen its economy and regain economic dynamism, while the US is mired in protracted political polarisation amid a prolonged economic slump, then Thailand’s gravitation towards Beijing is likely to gain a corresponding pull in the foreseeable future.
Implications for Australia

Thailand’s domestic political morass and geopolitical outlook are consequential for Australia. On the face of it, Thailand and Australia hold much in common as two of the five treaty allies of the US—the others are South Korea, Japan and the Philippines—dating to the Cold War decades, playing mutually reinforcing roles in Washington’s so-called ‘hub-and-spokes’ foreign policy projection. Bilateral relations between Thailand and Australia have moved from strength to strength over and since that time, underlined by a two-way free trade agreement during the Thaksin administration.47 While Canberra is a major ASEAN dialogue partner, Thailand and Australia also have played key roles together in architecture-building projects for regional peace and prosperity over the past three decades, from the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation and ASEAN Regional Forum to the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus. Notwithstanding the gamut of their bilateral cooperation in a region-wide framework, Thailand’s and Australia’s geostrategic interests appear increasingly divergent. Somewhat analogous but to a lesser extent, Thai–Australian relations are drifting apart, just like Thai–US ties.

As I’ve mentioned, Australia was the first Western democracy to accept Thailand’s new political realities by engaging with the coup regime as early as May 2015, even while the Obama administration and European governments gave the ruling Thai generals a cold shoulder. In other words, Australian policy elites were spot-on in their sober and smart understanding of Thailand’s political power plays and nuances. But they may have underestimated the deepening and consolidation of the Bangkok–Beijing axis at the expense of the US and the EU. While the junta-backed Thai government moved closer to China from 2014 to 2019, Australia concurrently went the other way.48 In turn, souring Australia–China relations have impinged on Canberra’s dealings with Thailand and some of the other Southeast Asian governments.

Apart from Thailand, the Philippines has been another US treaty ally that has conspicuously warmed up to Beijing while spurning Washington. The government of President Duterte, for example, made good on his threats to downgrade the US treaty alliance in favour of closer ties with China, announcing the termination of the Philippines–US Visiting Forces Agreement on 11 February 2020, effective after 180 days notice.49 Subsequently, in June 2020, he suspended the abrogation for at least six months.50

On the other hand, bilateral cooperation between Australia and Vietnam, the latter with prickly relations with China over the South China Sea, has been stepped up markedly, highlighted by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s official visit to Hanoi in August 2019.51

Alongside the US, Australia’s assertive role in the ‘Quad’ of countries representing the FOIP framework, together with India and Japan, may also risk alienating Canberra from the regional fold. Under Thailand’s chairmanship in 2019, ASEAN came up with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which aims to maintain ASEAN’s role as the front and centre of action for regional cooperation towards peace and security.52 Many have viewed the Quad-backed FOIP as a counterweight to China’s geostrategic Belt and Road Initiative, but, as China and the US joust for geostrategic advantages, ASEAN wants to retain its relevance and central role in the region. Different Southeast Asian governments, however, follow different approaches, some more favourable to Beijing than others.

The Covid-19 pandemic further underscores the ASEAN split around China, as the mainland Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand were slower to impose travel restrictions against China compared to Vietnam and maritime countries, such as Indonesia and Singapore. China’s relatively fast recovery from the pandemic and the reopening of its economy have posed a new dilemma to ASEAN states over whether to accept or reject China’s ‘coronavirus diplomacy’ of aid and assistance.53

If the 2008–09 global financial crisis enabled China’s rise, the coronavirus crisis in 2020–21 may well solidify China’s pre-eminence as a superpower second to none. Many countries, including Thailand, are coming round to this new geopolitical reality. China, more than the US, is the most divisive issue in Thai–Australian relations fundamentally underpinned by domestic political outcomes. If Thailand takes a democratic turn away from authoritarian ways, then its geopolitical posture could shift significantly, albeit not substantially, away from Beijing up to a point. But whatever shades of democracy or autocracy Thailand ends up with, Bangkok’s drift away from Washington appears longer term. Thailand–Australia ties fit within this frame, largely determined by Canberra’s strategic calculations vis-à-vis Beijing.
In mid-April 2020, the International Monetary Fund calculated that Thailand’s GDP will contract by 6.7%, the deepest in Southeast Asia.

Notes


6 See, for example, Peter A Jackson (ed.), The May 1992 crisis in Thailand: background and aftermath, National Thai Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1993.

7 For the original formulation of Thailand’s ‘coup cycle’, see Chai-anan Samudavanija, The Thai Young Turks, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1982.


Thailand’s strategic drift: Domestic determinants amidst superpower competition

35 ‘Prayut tells Japan general election to be held in one year’, The Nation, 9 February 2015; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, ‘Japan–Thailand joint press statement on the occasion of the visit by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha of the Kingdom of Thailand to Japan, February 9, 2015, Tokyo’, press release, online.
37 Joshua Kurlantzick, ‘The rest of the world has warmed to Thailand’s military rulers’, World Politics Review, 10 July 2018.
39 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, ‘EU resumes political contacts with Thailand’, press release, 12 December 2017, online.
40 See ‘Secretary of State Michael R Pompeo and Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai at a press availability’, transcript, Royal Thai Embassy, Washington DC, 1 August 2019, online.
41 See ASEAN, ‘ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific’, 2019, online.
42 See, for example, Sourabh Gupta, ‘India’s RCEP blunder’, East Asia Forum, 9 November 2019, online.
43 See International Monetary Forum, World economic outlook, April 2020, online.
46 See Thitinan Pongsudhirak, ‘China wants to know if you are with it or against it’, Nikkei Asian Review, 16 May 2020.
52 See ASEAN, ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific, 23 June 2019, online.
53 See Pongsudhirak, ‘China wants to know if you are with it or against it’; ‘Relevance beyond the crisis: the deepening geopolitical divide’, Geopolitical Intelligence Services, 19 May 2020, online; ‘Geopolitics in the time of the coronavirus’, The Straits Times, 10 March 2020.

Acronyms and abbreviations
ASEAN Association of Southeast Asian Nations
EU European Union
FOIP free and open Indo-Pacific
GDP gross domestic product
Some recent ASPI publications

- **Sticking to our guns**
  - A troubled past produces a superb weapon
  - Chris Masters

- **After Covid-19**
  - Australia and the world rebuild (Volume 1)

- **SPECIAL REPORT**
  - How the geopolitical partnership between China and Russia threatens the West

- **SPECIAL REPORT**
  - Accelerating autonomy
  - Autonomous vessels and the Tiger Helicopter Replacement
  - Ravina Helman

- **SPECIAL REPORT**
  - Projecting national power
  - Acquiring stealthy and powerful ships for an age of high conflict
  - Peter Durrant

- **SPECIAL REPORT**
  - Strong and free!
  - The future of Australia's military
  - David Oliver
WHAT’S YOUR STRATEGY?

Stay informed via the field’s leading think tank, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

*The Strategist*, ASPI’s commentary and analysis website, delivers fresh ideas on Australia’s defence and strategic policy choices as well as encouraging discussion and debate among interested stakeholders in the online strategy community. Visit and subscribe to an email digest at www.aspistrategist.org.au.

facebook.com/ASPI.org
@ASPI_org

To find out more about ASPI go to www.aspi.org.au or contact us on 02 6270 5100 and enquiries@aspi.org.au.
Thailand’s strategic drift
Domestic determinants amidst superpower competition