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BEYOND SOFT POWER: THE TRANSFORMATION OF SINO-THAI DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

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Abstract. This article explores the PRC's strategy of transitioning the foreign policy stance of Thailand from that of a traditional U.S. security partner toward a more China-aligned orientation. The methodological framework is grounded in the structuralist paradigm of international relations, utilizing the concept of «weaponized interdependence», alongside an analytical approach that includes content, institutional, and trend analysis. The study concludes that the PRC's approach to gaining leverage over Thailand does not rely solely on soft or hard power; rather, China constructs «nodes» of asymmetrical dependence through informal relations with high-ranking officials to establish a neopatrimonial system. Consequently, political stakeholders prefer the pragmatic preservation of existing ties over confrontational policies toward the PRC, which in turn limits engagement with third-party states. Prospects for further research include examining this pattern in other regional states, as well as exploring the negative consequences of such strategies for China's broader soft power.

Key words: Thailand-PRC partnership, ASEAN, asymmetrical dependence, neopatrimonialism, foreign policy alignment, panda diplomacy.

Introduction. Research into the foreign policy instruments utilized by great powers to secure national interests and shift the regional balance of power remains central to the metatheoretical debate in international relations. Both scientific ambiguity and the political exigencies of current geopolitical contestation underscore the relevance of this study. Thailand serves as a cogent case study, given Bangkok's transition from a traditional U.S. security partner toward a more China-aligned stance. Furthermore, Thailand's foreign policy carries significant weight due to its status as one of the four principal ASEAN powers. Should Thailand shift its strategic alignment toward China, it would likely alter the regional power balance and reinforce broader geopolitical trends.

The purpose of this article is to identify the primary instruments of Chinese foreign policy directed toward Thailand and to trace the resulting shifts in regional influence.

Literature Review. Professor Kerry K. Gershaneck, a visiting scholar at the Graduate Institute of East Asian Studies at National Chengchi University and a former U.S. Marine Corps officer, previously served as a distinguished visiting professor at the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy in Thailand, a senior research associate with the Center for International Affairs at Thammasat University. His book, *Political Warfare: Strategies for Combating China's Plan to «Win Without Fighting»* (Gershaneck, 2020), provides firsthand observations on Thai-Sino relations from a deeply

informed analytical perspective, offering significant insights into the application of these strategies within the domain of military contention.

Gregory Raymond, an Associate Professor in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, specializes in Southeast Asian politics, defense, and foreign relations. In his 2024 article, *Explaining 'Grey Capital': The Sociology of Transnational Chinese Companies and Crime in Thailand* (Raymond, 2025), Raymond analyzes Thai-Chinese relations through the lens of commercial networks that may align with state political interests. Utilizing a cross-border sociological approach, the study traces the development of informal interstate relationships and the growing proximity between state actors and business interests.

Chonlawit Sirikupt, a PhD candidate in political science at the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, explores these dynamics in his 2025 paper, *China Index Spotlight: As Close as One Family? Examining PRC's Influence in Thailand* (Sirikupt, 2025). This research provides a multidimensional examination of Chinese influence over Thailand, systematically categorizing various PRC initiatives and diplomatic efforts within a single analytical framework.

Methods. The methodological framework of this study is grounded in the structuralist paradigm of international relations. To investigate these dynamics, the research utilizes a multi-dimensional analytical approach: content analysis of historical archives, official communiqués, and public statements from high-level foreign policy officials to reconstruct discourse and delineate the strategic priorities of state actors; institutional analysis to evaluate the efficacy and functions of the organizations governing Thai-Sino relations; and trend analysis to map policy shifts catalyzed by Chinese initiatives within the regional geopolitical landscape.

Main results of research. In his 1991 Foreign Affairs article, «*America in Asia: Emerging Architecture for a Pacific Community*», then-Secretary of State James A. Baker III articulated a U.S. vision for further integrating ASEAN member states into a Western-oriented framework. His logic was predicated on the post-Vietnam War era, during which the United States feared that Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia would succumb to the communist bloc, as posited by the domino theory. Instead, the inverse occurred: Baker noted that «ASEAN today is America's fifth largest trading partner, rivaling U.S. commerce with Germany; and America is ASEAN's largest export market». Consequently, trade was identified as the primary mechanism for political alignment. Baker further referenced President George H.W. Bush's June 1991 address at Yale University, in which the President observed that there was no historical precedent for a nation successfully «importing the world's goods and services while stopping foreign ideas at the border».

Emphasizing economic ties, Baker noted that «the United States exports more to Thailand than to the Soviet Union» and identified APEC as «the hallmark of American engagement in the region, as are U.S. security ties». Baker envisioned a 21st-century Southeast Asia modeled on 19th-century American development, in which infrastructure and telecommunications would serve as the veins of economic and political rapprochement. Consequently, he argued that Southeast Asia was poised to transition toward a Western model of «democracy and market-oriented economics» (Baker, 1991).

However, the promising trajectory of U.S.-ASEAN relations, including those between Thailand and the United States, was subsequently overshadowed by Chinese advancements in domains once prioritized by Washington as principal. China is currently Thailand's leading trading partner in terms of imports (approximately \$107 billion) and the primary source of Thailand's trade deficit (approximately \$67 billion), with figures substantially higher than previous year. Meanwhile, the United States, originally conceptualized as an exporter of democratic values alongside goods, now primarily serves as the largest destination for Thai exports (Thailand's Trade Statistic Report System...).

A financial turning point in Thai-American relations occurred during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which originated in Thailand and severely destabilized the economies of other founding ASEAN nations, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia. While it remains a subject of retrospective analysis,

Janet Yellen's tenure as President of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco (frequently characterized as the Federal Reserve's «window to Asia») was likely shaped by the intense criticism the United States faced during the crisis, specifically regarding its initial reluctance to contribute to the international rescue package for Thailand (Cassetta, 2022). Simultaneously, the Chinese government proposed an unconditional aid package (initially promised at 1 billion USD, though never fully delivered) which significantly improved China's public image in Thailand (Gershaneck, 2020).

Concurrently, the People's Republic of China developed channels to bridge the political and military distance with Thailand. Deng Xiaoping, then-Chairman of the Central Military Commission established and maintained a strategic rapport with his Thai counterpart General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, meeting in the late 1980s in Beijing to solidify military cooperation. Following the establishment of this connection, bilateral military relations intensified, characterized by later regular joint exercises and ongoing collaboration.

A high-ranking Chinese officer proposed the creation of a non-governmental body to serve as a streamlined conduit for dialogue. General Chavalit facilitated the legal incorporation of this organization in Thailand and served as its inaugural president.

Thai-Chinese Cultural and Economic Association (TCCEA) proclaims its primary accomplishment to be «serving as the most efficient bridge for strengthening relations between the Royal Thai Armed Forces and the People's Liberation Army, as well as fostering cooperation in military, security, and defense force development». Its secondary stated achievement is the conclusion of the panda-lending agreement. Furthermore, the Association facilitates sister-city relationships between Thai and Chinese provinces, including Phuket and Yantai, Sukhothai and Shaanxi, and Prachinburi and Changchun. Currently, the Association's membership exceeds 660 individuals (เกี่ยวกับสมาคม...).

The election of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001, who was born into a prominent Sino-Thai family, significantly accelerated Thailand's strategic pivot toward Beijing, reinforcing a foreign policy vector characterized by deepened economic integration and heightened political alignment. In his cabinet, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh was appointed Minister of Defense and Deputy Prime Minister. He became the first Defense Minister under whose tenure joint military exercises with the PRC were conducted; Thailand served as China's inaugural partner for such exercises in the region.

In 2001, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh visited China to meet with PRC President Jiang Zemin, personally requesting the loan of a pair of giant pandas for Thailand. By that time, modern «panda diplomacy» (which originated with President Nixon's 1971 visit to Beijing and evolved into high-cost, 10-year leasing agreements) was primarily extended to major economies, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. Thailand's request was notable, as the country was not only a developing economy but was still experiencing the protracted consequences of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, with a GDP that remained below pre-crisis levels and a creditworthiness ranking that had plummeted from 32nd to 51th (Hamlin, 2001).

Nevertheless, on October 12, 2003, Thailand became the first nation in Southeast Asia to host giant pandas, Chuang Chuang and Lin Hui, on long-term loan. (Years later, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia also received pandas from China.) It is significant to note the selected location: Thailand established the exhibit not in the capital, where visitor volume would have been maximized, but in the northern region, which maintains a higher density of the Chinese diaspora. Notably, this region was also the birthplace of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the political power base of then-Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (Hohnholz, 2009).

Furthermore, to construct a high-standard facility covering four rai of exhibition space, the government allocated 39 818 313 THB (approximately 926 000 USD at the time) from its emergency contingency fund, with construction executed by the Royal Thai Army Corps of Engineers (ความเป็นมา).

The evidence presented suggests that the primary accomplishments claimed by the Thai-Chinese Cultural and Economic Association were achieved during the initial years of the political tandem

of Thaksin Shinawatra and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. Both joint military exercises and «panda diplomacy» were inaugurated during their tenure, establishing the foundation for the subsequent expansion of Thai-Sino relations.

By 2004, Thai-Sino ties had expanded to include joint consultations on internal security matters. Critics have argued that this facilitated the transfer of Chinese methodologies regarding the suppression of political dissent, which the Thai government subsequently employed in its approach to the separatist insurgency in the country's Islam southern provinces.

In 2005, China's presence in the Thai media landscape expanded with the launch of an English-language edition of the *China Daily*, augmenting the long-standing operations of the state-run news agency *Xinhua*, which has been active in Thailand since 1975. China's influence in the domestic information space was further solidified through financial incentives directed toward pro-Beijing media outlets, alongside the strategic withholding of advertising revenue from Thai media organizations perceived as skeptical of Chinese policy (Gershaneck, 2020).

Meanwhile, the Confucius Institute network expanded at an unprecedented pace, eventually establishing a presence in Thailand that surpassed the combined total of such centers in neighboring nations. As of July 2025, this infrastructure comprises 16 active Confucius Institutes and 21 Confucius Classrooms integrated into the local education system (Sirikupt, 2025).

Following the 2006 political crisis that challenged the administration of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the Chinese Embassy remained confident that its influence in Thailand was sufficiently robust to withstand domestic volatility. This assessment was predicated on Beijing's perception of an irreversible trend characterized by deepening «growing commercial links, cultural ties, collegial diplomatic relations, and growing military cooperation programs» (Sirikupt, 2025).

The adoption of a new constitution and the holding of elections provided the United States with an opportunity to reverse the strategic shifts instituted by the Thaksin-Chavalit political tandem. However, in the post-coup environment, a pro-U.S. orientation failed to take root. By 2010, a Congressional Research Service (CRS) report stated that «the [U.S.–Thailand] alliance, while institutionally sound, suffers from a lack of strategic alignment». The report further noted that «many analysts saw the suspension of several U.S. military programs following the coup as an opportunity for China to expand its influence in the Thai defense establishment» (Chanlett-Avery, 2010). This stalemate, arising from the U.S. dilemma between advocating for democratic governance and maintaining security ties, was not successfully resolved, and similar challenges persisted during subsequent political crises.

In May 2014, following a military coup d'état, the second such intervention in eight years, Thailand's strategic orientation shifted even more decisively toward Beijing. As the United States adopted a hesitant approach to maintaining existing diplomatic relations, China recognized a strategic opening to further consolidate bilateral ties. Washington initially relied on the perceived pro-Western orientation of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) to maintain stability in the relationship (US embassy cables); however, the King's death in 2016 removed this pillar of support. His successor, Maha Vajiralongkorn (Rama X), has demonstrated neither a strong interest in international politics nor an inclination to prioritize the U.S.-Thai security partnership (Hollister, 2025).

By 2017, Thailand reached an agreement to procure the S-26T Yuan-class submarine from China (a transaction that would have been considered improbable in 2012 due to concerns regarding the quality of Chinese naval hardware and potential amount of necessary spendings. Previously, Thailand had explored the acquisition of six refurbished German submarines, but these negotiations were ultimately abandoned due to excessive projected expenditures.

The 2017 procurement agreement for the S-26T Yuan-class submarine included an option to acquire two additional vessels. When the Thai government moved to exercise this option, it faced significant domestic pushback; the Thai public widely questioned the necessity of an \$800 million expenditure on major naval weaponry in the absence of an immediate or existential maritime threat.

Furthermore, the project encountered a critical impasse in 2022 when Germany reaffirmed its strict export limitations toward China, specifically regarding the MTU-396 diesel engines originally specified for the S-26T (Abuza, 2022). As Beijing could not fulfill the contract with the German-made components, it proposed several alternatives, all of which were initially rejected by Bangkok. The stalemate was eventually resolved when both sides reached an agreement to integrate a domestic Chinese engine, the CHD620, into the vessel, with an anticipated delivery timeframe set for 2028 (Chuanren, 2025).

Concurrently, interest in the Kra Canal project, perceived by Beijing as a vital mechanism to mitigate the «Malacca Dilemma» rather than as a primary economic necessity for Thailand, gained renewed momentum in 2015. From an economic perspective, the proposed Kra Canal remains a megaproject characterized by significant uncertainty regarding its return on investment, as it would reduce transit times between the Indian and Pacific Oceans by only a few days. By contrast, the Panama and Suez Canals offer logistical savings of several weeks. Despite these concerns, the Thai-Chinese Cultural and Economic Association (TCCEA) and the Thai-Chinese Association for Sustainable Development (TCASD) remain among the project's most prominent proponents in Thailand. Both organizations frequently frame the canal as a potential maritime corridor within the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This alignment is consistent with the strategic vision of former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who actively championed the Kra Canal as a key initiative for stimulating the Thai economy in the mid-2000s (Storey, 2019).

Conversely, major multinational military exercises led by the United States have persisted, albeit with modified objectives. Cobra Gold, first established in 1982, has expanded to become the largest U.S.-led multinational exercise in Asia hosted by Thailand. While these exercises have not been discontinued, their operational focus has gradually shifted from high-intensity combat scenarios involving a near-peer competitor toward humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (Ryoo, 2026).

In 2023, following the death of Lin Hui, the last of the giant pandas loaned to Thailand in 2003, the Thai government initiated efforts to secure a new pair of giant pandas to serve as diplomatic goodwill ambassadors. The acquisition of these animals is treated as a high-level diplomatic priority, often featuring prominently in discussions between the Prime Minister and cabinet members. This level of state engagement is reflected in media reporting, which frequently documents the Prime Minister's direct involvement in lobbying Chinese officials and overseeing the logistics of potential loan agreements, including the selection of host zoological institutions.

Jatuporn Buruspat, formerly the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, recently confirmed that the arrival of a new panda pair is anticipated by 2027. He noted that the delay is primarily due to the necessity of upgrading hosting facilities to meet current international standards, thereby ensuring Thailand remains competitive with regional counterparts such as Malaysia and Indonesia. According to official reports, China has expressed satisfaction with Thailand's previous stewardship of the species, citing the pandas' 20-year lifespan in Chiang Mai as a benchmark that exceeds the species' average in captivity (อดใจรอ! "แพนด้ายักษ์" คู่ใหม่ถึงไทยปี 70, 2024).

However, similar to the submarine procurement, public opinion has increasingly questioned the fiscal rationale for these expenditures. The Office of the Auditor General of Thailand estimates that the government spent 98 million THB between 2002 and 2022 on the construction and development of research facilities at the Chiang Mai Zoo (ดีใจมั๊ย! ไทยจะมี..., 2025); this figure excludes the cost of the panda loan itself, which averages approximately 1 million USD annually. Thailand's efforts to safeguard giant pandas have arguably sidelined the conservation of its own native species, the Asian elephant. This concern has catalyzed a movement advocating for the redirection of these funds toward the preservation of Thai elephants, both within the country and throughout their regional habitats (Opponents of panda diplomacy..., 2024).

These cases suggest that high-level government cooperation between Thailand and China frequently ignores legitimate public concerns. Furthermore, even «panda diplomacy», often regarded as a soft-power tool to cultivate global sympathy toward the People's Republic of China, faces domestic backlash when such cooperation is prioritized over national interests. This pattern is also evident internationally. For instance, in New York, Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney's long-standing campaign to secure a giant panda loan for a local zoo ended unsuccessfully; she was ultimately defeated by a candidate who supported the «No to Pandas in Captivity» movement (Moss, 2022), and public fundraising for the initiative ceased well before the necessary capital was secured. Similarly, in 2024, Finland prematurely terminated its panda loan program, citing economic constraints and shifting priorities.

However, China's long-term diplomatic efforts have significantly influenced regional policy stakeholders, following a pattern observable both in Thailand and across Southeast Asia. According to *The State of Southeast Asia: 2026 Survey Report*, published by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (Lin, J. et al., 2026) and polling over 2,000 regional experts from academia, the private sector, civil society, media, and government, China is recognized by 55.9% of respondents as the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia, while only 13.2% identified ASEAN as the primary economic influence (Lin, J. et al., 2026: 37). Data from 2025 to 2026 indicate a shift in regional sentiment: respondents have become increasingly concerned regarding U.S. economic influence, while welcoming China's economic presence with greater frequency.

When asked, «If ASEAN were forced to align itself with one of the strategic rivals, which should it choose?», a majority of respondents from all panda-hosting ASEAN nations selected China over the United States. Furthermore, these nations generally anticipate that their bilateral relations with the PRC will improve or remain stable; Indonesia notably ranks as the second most optimistic nation in ASEAN regarding these relations, trailing only Bangladesh (Lin, J. et al., 2026: 51). Regarding the question of whether China will «do the right thing» to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance, approximately 30% of respondents expressed confidence. Within this subset, Thailand reported the highest percentage (14.4%) of respondents citing admiration for Chinese culture as a primary basis for trust, although the majority of respondents across the region attributed their trust primarily to China's economic influence and its political ambition to act as a global leader (Lin, J. et al., 2026: 61). Notably, cultural incompatibility remains a low-ranked driver of distrust; this trend is consistent across all ASEAN nations, not merely those participating in «panda diplomacy».

Discussions. This demonstrates that China's projection of economic power and its ambition to achieve superpower status secure more pragmatic support than isolated soft-power initiatives. As James A. Baker forecasted, trade and investment have played a significant role in political alignment, even as Chinese manufacturing output has increasingly outpaced U.S. exports. Prospects for further research include examining whether soft power is losing its relevance in foreign policy decision-making, as well as exploring how the management of expectations and future projections influence the motives of current decision-makers.

Conclusions. The PRC's approach to gaining leverage over Thailand does not rely solely on soft power (such as «panda diplomacy», Confucius Institutes, and media presence) or hard power. Rather, China constructs integral «nodes», leveraging Thailand's asymmetrical dependence. Military hardware acquisitions, trade imbalances, and pro-China media and cultural engagement evolve into a network resilient to political turbulence.

The flow of these influences begins with formal, and subsequently informal, relations among a select group of high-ranking officials who facilitate the diffusion of Chinese influence. Through their support, China establishes a neopatrimonial system in which personal connections carry more weight than official rankings. In such an environment, the national interests of the state are transformed by the personal interests of public officials.

The subsequent phase involves establishing institutions to solidify this network, comprising a limited circle of influential individuals. Although this strategy eventually triggers public backlash, it creates a solidified foundation of asymmetrical dependence that cannot be easily reversed. Consequently, political stakeholders prefer the pragmatic preservation of existing relations over the adoption of a confrontational policy toward the PRC.

This strategy is observed not only in Thailand but among other regional and global actors, suggesting that the United States can no longer rely solely on soft power and trade ties, instruments that lack security within a neopatrimonial system. Moreover, the dilemma of how to advocate for democratic values in authoritarian states remains unresolved. This ongoing challenge forces Washington to confront the prospect of gradually losing allies, as is currently occurring in its relationship with Bangkok.

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