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Thailand's Bilateral Response to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup: Historical Contexts and Evolving Strategies

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Abstract

Thailand has pursued its own bilateral policy towards Myanmar, which stands in stark contrast to the Five-Point Consensus policy of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The central research question of this article is: Why has Thailand articulated its own independent policy towards Myanmar and what are the motivating factors behind this policy? The methodology is based on published materials on the subject and elite interviews with Bangkok-based academics specialising in Myanmar and national security policymakers. Developments are discussed within a neoclassical realist framework that privileges a state's internal demands, agency choices, and their interaction in turn with emerging opportunities in the external environment. The findings suggest that Thailand has resorted to bilateralism as part of a time-tested strategy that is consistent with similar previous attempts in 1975 and 1988.

Keywords: ASEAN, Myanmar, Thailand, Thai-Myanmar relations, neoclassical realism, bilateral policy, foreign policy

Since November 2022, Thailand has articulated a bilateral response to the 2021 military coup in Myanmar that is unique and different from other countries. The response contrasts with that of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which agreed to a Five-Point Consensus (5PC) plan in April 2021 (Bangkok Post 2021). The unusual decision by the organisation to intervene in the internal affairs of a member state called for an end to political violence, the facilitation of dialogue among all parties, the provision of humanitarian aid, the appointment of an ASEAN Special Envoy and the Special Envoy's visit to Myanmar. The aim of the 5PC was to restore calm in Myanmar by attempting

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to involve the elected government in the running of the country, while caring for those displaced by the post-coup violence. It should be noted that the maritime countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore have been the most vocal critics of the coup, while the mainland countries of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam have been much more accommodating (Ganesan 2024).

The reasons for this divide in policy output likely stem from the fact that the maritime countries practice some form of procedural democracy, in contrast to the mainland, where only Thailand can currently claim a limited form of democracy, following the installation of the Pheu Thai coalition government in August 2023. The preceding military government, led by General Prayuth Chan-ocha, came to power in a coup in May 2014, overthrowing the Yingluck Shinawatra government. This was followed by a constitution drafted under military oversight in 2017, which empowered an appointed senate. Moreover, during Prayuth's term, state institutions intended to protect and promote democracy were repurposed to support entrenched elite interests instead. In contrast, Laos and Vietnam are communist states, while Cambodia has drifted toward authoritarianism under Hun Sen's premiership, further widening the gap in democratic practices and governance across the region.

The maritime countries are also distinguished by a substantial Muslim population, with clear majorities in Indonesia and Malaysia and influential minorities in the Philippines and Singapore. Myanmar's history of political violence against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine state – including the displacement of approximately 730,000 Rohingya into neighbouring Bangladesh in 2017 – drew strong criticism from Indonesia and Malaysia. As of December 2023, Malaysia was also hosting 162,440 Myanmar refugees, including 106,670 Rohingyas, under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2023a). Finally, at a broader level, the maritime countries generally align their foreign policies with the United States and the West, whereas the mainland countries have increasingly shifted their alignment toward China (Ganesan 2024).

Efforts to address the crisis in Myanmar have been pursued by successive ASEAN Chairs since the adoption of the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) on Myanmar. Brunei, which held the ASEAN Chair in 2021, appointed its Second Minister of Foreign Affairs, Erywan Yusof, as Special Envoy. However, he ultimately did not visit Myanmar due to indications that he would be unable to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, the deposed leader of the elected government. Cambodia, as the ASEAN Chair in 2022, continued these efforts by appointing Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn as Special Envoy in hopes of brokering the dispute, yet this initiative also proved unsuccessful (Ganesan 2024). Even Prime Minister Hun Sen attempted to step in personally to assist in the process but faced similar setbacks.

In 2023, Indonesia took over the Chair, with Foreign Minster Retno Marsudi adopting a more low-key approach to mediation, conducting numerous meetings with affected parties. However, despite this quieter diplomatic approach, Indonesia's efforts also did not yield positive results (Ganesan 2024). Laos, holding the ASEAN Chair in 2024, appointed veteran diplomat Alounkeo Kittikhoun as its Special Envoy. He concluded an early visit to Myanmar in January 2024, but there is no indication that his efforts have been more successful than those of his predecessors. Notwithstanding these repeated setbacks, the Five-Point Consensus has nonetheless strengthened ASEAN's sense of solidarity and central role in regional affairs. It has also helped ASEAN deflect criticism of inaction, garnering broad support from Western countries, including the United States (Ba 2023).

In contrast, Thai foreign policy appears to be strongly influenced by neoclassical realist notions of international relations, which emphasise the interaction between a state's domestic imperatives and the agency responses that arise to address these demands. Such demands are articulated in relation to external opportunities that can be leveraged to advance state interests (Rose 1998). While this approach traces its philosophical roots to realism, it downplays the reductionist, state-centric focus of traditional realism, which tends to portray foreign policy as the competitive pursuit of state power. Recent theoretical contributions suggest that neoclassical realism can effectively incorporate history as a sequence of events, a cognitive tool, or a collective narrative to support decision-making (Meibauer 2021).

This approach is also seen as facilitating the process of learning and emulation. In line with this, Thailand has initiated a policy of direct engagement, sometimes referred to as the "Bangkok Process".[1] Thai academics specialising in Myanmar have articulated Thailand's reliance on Myanmar, while Thai officials involved in policy-making have suggested that the current situation mirrors previous moments when Thailand identified new opportunities to launch new policy platforms that further its national interests. Although this policy may not achieve Thailand's desired outcome, it represents a fresh attempt to overcome the political deadlock between factions opposed to the post-coup, military-led government and the military itself. Additionally, longstanding bilateral structural frameworks exist to support such exclusive policy initiatives. This process, however, also confers legitimacy on the Myanmar military government – a legitimacy that many Western countries and several ASEAN member states are unwilling to endorse. Meanwhile, the political situation in Myanmar has deteriorated to the extent that both supporters and opponents of the military

1 Interestingly, this phrase was also used by negotiators from the Myanmar National Reconciliation and Peace Centre (NRPC) in reference to holding talks with the Ethnic Armed Groups informally in Thailand first and as a way of maintaining contact, author interview with NRPC senior official, 3 January 2020, Yangon.

government are no longer willing to negotiate or seek reconciliation. Instead, both sides now appear determined to pursue their objectives through military force (Ganesan 2023b).

In light of the complex political dynamics in Myanmar, this article examines the current trajectory of Thailand's bilateral policy toward Myanmar following the 2021 coup. The central research question is: What is the nature of Thailand's policy toward Myanmar since the 2021 military coup, and how does this policy diverge from ASEAN's broader approach? Secondary questions include whether this current policy contrasts with Thailand's historical trajectory of bilateral relations with Myanmar and, if so, what factors are driving this shift? Thai policy elites aim to reset the country's bilateral approach to Myanmar, moving away from a previously competitive and conflictual stance toward a more mutually beneficial developmental relationship. However, this effort is more likely to benefit Myanmar's military junta and the Thai elites involved in the process, rather than the general populations of both countries. Thailand's hope is to replicate its success in normalising bilateral relations with Vietnam in the 1990s, which saw a similar transformation.

Neoclassical realist theory is applied to explain Thailand's current initiative, supported by historical examples to strengthen the argument. Evidence from 1975 and 1988 suggests that Thailand has behaved in a similar way in the past, driven by changing internal political dynamics coupled with path-breaking elite decisions made in response to external changes, to articulate similar outcomes. These historical examples strengthen the argument and situate the discussion within a broader historical framework that places the current trajectory of Thai-Myanmar relations well within an established pattern of foreign policy output.

Methodologically, the article draws on published materials and newspaper articles, as well as ten elite interviews conducted between 2021 to 2023 with Bangkok-based Thai academics specialising in Myanmar and senior officials from the Thai National Security Council to corroborate findings from published sources. This article is organised into five main sections. The first section reviews the recent history of Thai-Myanmar relations to provide a broader contextual perspective. The second section explores Thailand's historically contingent foreign policy behaviour in mainland Southeast Asia at critical junctures. The third section analyses the domestic imperatives, elite decisions, and external opportunities shaping the new bilateral policy toward Myanmar. The fourth section details the current Thai policy, while the fifth section assesses the likely future trajectory of this new Thai-Myanmar initiative.

A brief history of recent Thai-Myanmar relations

Historically, Thailand regarded Myanmar as an enemy and sought to contain it. This perception is deeply rooted, tracing back to 1787, when the Thai Kingdom of Ayutthaya was destroyed during the Siamese-Burmese War after a prolonged siege. Since then, Thai kings and military officials have viewed Burma as an adversary, deserving of containment (Raymond / Blaxland 2021). Fortunately for Thailand, the subsequent Chakri Dynasty, which was established in 1782 and continues to the present day, proved more successful in preserving its sovereignty. Burma, on the other hand, endured the Three Anglo-Burmese Wars against the British, who eventually colonised the entire country in 1885 (Taylor 1987). After its subjugation, Burma was largely governed from India by the British and was eventually granted political independence in 1948, following the end of World War II. During this period of European colonisation in Southeast Asia, Thai kings skillfully avoided a similar fate by ceding large portions of territory to both the British and the French, who occupied present-day Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam as part of the French Indochinese Union (Hall 1995). King Mongkut, in particular, is noted for deflecting British attempts through a cordial policy toward Lord John Bowring (Wyatt 1984: 183). Additionally, by permitting Japanese troops access to landing points along the country's coast through a policy of neutrality, while simultaneously resisting British advances in the south, Thailand successfully avoided Japanese occupation during World War II (Wyatt 1984: 256).

Thailand's good fortune continued into the post-World War II period when it became a staunch ally of the United States during the Cold War. Along with the Philippines, the two countries formed part of the U.S.-hub-and-spokes model for containing communism in Southeast Asia (Yahuda 2004). Thailand's status as an ally provided its early military rulers with significant external political legitimacy and support, a backing that lasted until 1973, when a student-led uprising overthrew the military junta in power.

However, the military returned with vengeance and considerable political violence three years later, in 1976, reassuming its position as part of a triumvirate of powerful groups that included the monarchy and the bureaucracy. Regardless of changes in regime type and multiple transformations over the years, the military has remained a major political institution (Samudavanija 1982). The most recent prime minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, initially came to power through a coup staged in May 2014, after which a new constitution was promulgated in 2017, with subsequent attempts to amend it being deflected (Chalermpalanupap 2021). Despite occasional bouts of political violence, the country has generally fared much better than Burma and has traditionally been the most socio-economically developed in mainland Southeast Asia.

Since the Cold War, the policy of containing Burma involved supporting Ethnic Armed Groups (EAOs) along the shared Thai-Burma border as part of a buffer strategy. This support staved off pressure from the Burmese military, as the EAOs were actively engaged in conflict with it. The Karen National Union (KNU) and the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) benefited from this buffer policy (Thawnghmung 2010). Thailand's buffer policy was initiated by military strongman Colonel Phibun Songkhram after the Second World War and was easily justified during the Cold War because Burma's ethnic minorities were anti-communist. Their location and control of border areas provided lucrative trade opportunities that could be used by the Thai military. In addition, portraying the Burmese as the enemy was a way of consolidating a virtuous Thai identity by portraying the Burmese as the stereotypical other. In doing so, the military was also able to enhance its own domestic legitimacy and access to power (Chachavalpongpun 2005). Over time, the military became one of the dominant power centres in Thai domestic politics and developed a mutually beneficial relationship with the Thai monarchy. The Privy Council, composed of serving and retired military officers, advises the Thai monarchy and is an important extension of this convergence of interests.

Burma, by contrast, has experienced a far less successful recent past despite undergoing various regime transformations. After gaining independence, it initially had a functioning democratic government, and in the 1950s was regarded as relatively successful both politically and economically. However, British colonisation had not unified the country territorially, as the highland areas populated by ethnic minorities were not part of mainstream administration. Instead, the British loosely controlled these regions through treaties and treated them as frontier territories. Ethno-religious polarization, stemming from a split within the ruling Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, led to political instability and resulted in the formation of a military caretaker government for 18 months in 1958. This first military administration was formed at the invitation of then-Prime Minister U Nu, who appealed to Commander-in-Chief General Ne Win to take control. A military coup followed in 1962, paving the way for an authoritarian military regime under General Ne Win (Kyaw 2014).

The military governed Burma through the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), which adopted a policy of radical socialism, including the nationalisation of industries (Tin 2007). In foreign policy, it pursued passive neutrality through isolationism (Haacke 2006). Both policies proved disastrous, resulting in capital and resource flight that reversed the country's previous growth. The collapse of the BSPP government in 1988 sparked a pro-democracy uprising, leading to political violence and the deaths of approximately 3,000 protesters. Subsequently, a military junta, led first by General Saw Maung and later by Than Shwe, returned to power. Many frustrated students, including members

of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), fled to the border areas to join the EAOs in fighting the military (Selth 2021).

A nationwide election held in 1990, which was won by the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, who had returned to care for her ailing mother, was not recognized by the ruling authorities. As a result, the military junta remained in power and convened a National Convention, which subsequently adopted a Seven-Point Roadmap to democracy in 2003. This was followed by the hasty ratification of the 2008 Constitution, that entrenched the military structurally within domestic politics (Holliday 2011, Ganesan 2021). Key features of this constitution include the allocation of 25 percent of all state and federal parliamentary seats to the military, its control over the Ministries of Border Affairs, Defence, and Interior, the nomination of one out of the three Vice Presidents (one of whom eventually becomes President), and the right to usurp power from a democratically elected government to maintain sovereignty and ensure compliance with the 2008 Constitution (Taylor 2009: 498). Historically, the military in Myanmar has viewed itself as defenders against threats to the state's territorial integrity and cohesion rather than as state-builders (Callahan 2004).[2] Consequently, it has often conflated its own interests with those of the state, equating challenges to its authority as challenges to the state as well.

In November 2010, Myanmar held a second round of elections in which the military competed under the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), formed by converting a former labour umbrella organisation, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). A semi-civilian government led by President Thein Sein, comprised mostly of former military officers as ministers, assumed power in 2011. Thein Sein had previously served as Prime Minster from 2007 to 2010 under the military junta. Due to the liberal policies implemented during his premiership from 2011 to 2015, Western countries gradually lifted their sanctions against Myanmar (which had officially changed its name in 1997). Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD re-registered as a political party in April 2012 and won 43 out of 45 seats in the subsequent by-elections. In the 2015 elections, the NLD achieved an overwhelming victory and formed the government. It won an even larger victory in 2020 and was about to be sworn into office when the military, led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, staged a coup and seized power (Ganesan 2023b).

During the period after 1988, Thai-Myanmar relations have gone through some ups and downs. The failed 1988 student uprising in Burma led to a large number of Burmese activists fleeing to the Thai-Myanmar border. Many of the student leaders also relocated to Thailand and especially Chiangmai, just as the leader-

2 Burma was renamed Myanmar in 1989, a name adopted by the ruling military junta after the violent suppression of a democratic uprising a year earlier.

ship of many of the EAOs. The Thai border town of Mae Sot in the south was another popular settlement venue with a strong Karen presence (Thawnghmung 2008: 24). Thai civilian-led governments in the 1990s were often critical of the Burmese military, although Thai military elites always maintained a reasonably cordial relationship that included business interests along the border. Similarly, relations between the Thaksin-led government from 2001 to 2006 were cordial, as was the Pheu Thai government from 2011 to 2014. The period in between, and from 2014 to 2019, when a military government was in power in Thailand, relations also remained relatively cordial (Ganesan 2023a).

Another point to note is that democratic regimes have traditionally been much more critical of the military regimes in Myanmar. This was certainly the case when the Democrat Party led the Thai government in the 1990s (Ganesan 2006). The Shinawatra clan's positive relationship with the military is partly a function of converging business interests with Myanmar's military elite and the appointment of General Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh as Defence Minister under the Thaksin government from 2001 to 2002 and then as Deputy Prime Minister from 2001 to 2005.

Since the coup in February 2021, Myanmar has been experiencing widespread political violence after the majority of the population resisted the coup. This resistance initially began as a Civil Disobedience Movement, elements of which later morphed into the People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and took up arms at the urging of the National Unity Government (NUG). The NUG is the civilian government-in-exile led by NLD politicians expelled by the coup. The PDFs are now working with the NUG to fight the military government. Some EAOs, which were part of a long-standing insurgent movement, have joined forces with the PDFs. The post-coup military government is called the State Administration Council (SAC) and has been subject to widespread international sanctions. Many Western countries have also divested from Myanmar (Patton 2023).

Despite this international isolation, Thailand has maintained its own approach to bilateral relations with Myanmar. Thailand has generally sought to deal with common issues affecting it and neighbouring countries bilaterally, and there are several fora for such dealings with Myanmar. The Thailand-Myanmar Joint Commission on Bilateral Relations is the first and is coordinated by the Foreign Ministers of both countries. There are also separate committees for more strategic cooperation, which involve the military of both countries. These, that date back to the 1960s, were tasked with addressing matters that had both economic and security considerations, including smuggling of goods and arms, as well as drugs and human trafficking. These Joint Boundary Committees (JBCs) meet regularly to resolve outstanding issues. In the case of Myanmar, there are three such committees: The first is the Joint Boundary Committee, which is managed through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The second is the Regional Border Committee (RBC), chaired by the Thai Army's Third Division

and the Myanmar Army's Southeast Command. The final level is the Township Border Committee (TBC), which meets to resolve lower-level cross-border issues (Chachavalpongpun 2010: 131).

Such bilateral attempts are sometimes resisted by other neighbouring countries, which fear they may not be treated fairly due to their lesser size and power. This was for instance the case in 2011, when Cambodia rejected mediation efforts over the Preah Vihear Temple incident, a dispute that brought both countries close to armed conflict before Indonesian mediation, that was also endorsed by the United Nations. Cambodia's rejection of a bilateral dispute resolution mechanism stemmed from concerns that it would be unfairly treated in negotiations with a larger and more powerful country like Thailand. Indonesia, widely regarded as *primus inter pares* in ASEAN, has recently strengthened its peacekeeping credentials (Capie 2016). Bilateralism is a long-established and proven means of solving issues in Southeast Asia among geographically proximate states and continues to be practiced routinely (Ganesan / Amer 2010). In this instance, Thai elite interviewees on 30 December 2022 suggested that the country is justified in articulating its own bilateral policy towards Myanmar, as it has been the most directly affected by the coup.

Navigating rivalries: Thailand in Cold War mainland Southeast Asia

Thailand's location in mainland Southeast Asia and its foreign policy have always had a profound impact on regional politics. In line with neoclassical realism, major policy shifts have generally occurred when domestic politics were recalibrated to allow elites to pursue new policy directions. This suggests that major policy changes are often linked to shifts in the political landscape, where changing power dynamics create space for a reorientation of foreign policy. The emergence of new elites, the displacement of existing elites, or the formation of a coalition representing more diverse policy preferences have often led to such changes. In other words, such shifts have typically occurred during periods of regime transition, when elites have found new opportunities for major changes previously unavailable. Interestingly, in the first two cases of this kind, these shifts also involved transitions towards democratic governance. Additionally, these policy changes coincided with strategic opportunities arising from broader transformations in mainland Southeast Asia.

During the Cold War, for example, Thailand's close ties with the United States were crucial in countering revolutionary communism from Vietnam. Then, following the end of the Second Indochina War and the communist victory in 1975 – events that coincided with domestic regime changes – Thailand adopted a

policy of alignment with China, positioning it as an external security guarantor to replace the United States. Towards the end of the Third Indochina War, Thailand began a policy of economic engagement with Vietnam, driven by a newly elected government with markedly different priorities from those prevailing before the resolution of the Cambodian conflict. Interestingly, on both these earlier occasions, regime change in favour of democratisation was an additional consideration.

During the Cold War, Thailand was an integral part of the U.S. strategy to contain communism in mainland Southeast Asia. The victory of the Chinese Communist Party over the nationalist Kuomintang in 1949, along with China's entry into the Korean War in 1950, alarmed the United States, which was resolute in its goal to prevent the further spread of communism in Asia. This determination led the U.S. to sign a bilateral mutual defence treaty with Thailand in 1954 within the framework of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) (Fineman 1997, Buszynski 1983). Not having been colonised, Thailand was generally less fearful of the West than many other countries in the region, which were largely colonised by the British (Burma, Malaya and Singapore), Dutch (Indonesia), French (Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) and the Spanish (the Philippines). As noted above, Thai kings traditionally appeased more powerful Western countries by making territorial concessions rather than losing sovereignty. They were also adept at adopting Western ways and recruiting Western advisers to modernise the country (Stifel 1976).

Thai policy during the Cold War was significantly influenced by the Indochina Security Complex – a self-contained system that ordered hierarchical notions of power and hegemony within the region (Buzan 1988, Alagappa 1991). Within this framework, Vietnam was the dominant hegemonic power, setting the terms for how neighboring countries responded to regional security threats. Cambodia and Laos, smaller states with limited influence, often saw their destinies shaped by the interests of either Thailand or Vietnam. Major powers were particularly concerned about revolutionary communism, leading them to seek neutral status for Cambodia and Laos upon their political independence in 1953. It was hoped that this neutrality would act as a buffer against the spread of communism from China and Vietnam. The alliance and bilateral treaty between Thailand and the U.S. were intended to strengthen Thailand's defensive capabilities as a medium power positioned against communist Vietnam. Since Thailand itself was under military authoritarian rule until 1973, policies aligned with the U.S. were implemented with relative ease. Following a military coup in 1962, Burma adopted an isolationist and inward-looking stance, effectively excluded from the Indochina Security Complex that served to inform other countries on the mainland (Alagappa 1991).

Thailand's alignment with China, initially intended to replace an external security guarantor against Vietnam, became especially strategic when Vietnam

began drifting towards the Soviet Union in 1976 (Paribatra 1987). This shift in Vietnamese foreign policy culminated in the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Vietnam and the Soviet Union in 1978. The treaty marked a significant realignment in regional alliances, fueling tensions and reshaping Southeast Asian geopolitics.

This development greatly angered China, which had spent three decades supporting Vietnamese communist insurgents to defeat the French in the First Indochina War in 1954 and the Americans in 1975. It was widely seen by Chinese elites as a stab in the back. Consequently, the collapse of the Thai military regime in October 1973 and the installation of a democratically elected government led by Kukrit and Seni Pramroj provided an opportunity to rebalance towards China. By this time, bilateral relations between China and the Soviet Union had deteriorated considerably, and the two countries had already fought a war on the Amur-Ussuri border in 1969 (Zagoria 1962). In the 1970s, both China and the Soviet Union were engaged in a strategic rivalry for influence in the wider Asia-Pacific region. Amid this competition, Thailand's newly elected government seized the opportunity to counterbalance the Vietnamese threat. The withdrawal of U.S. security support had created a power vacuum, which the Thai government aimed to fill by realigning with China.

The Third Indochina War, which began in December 1978, led to Vietnam's invasion and subsequent occupation of Cambodia for a decade, from 1979 to 1989. During this period, the Soviet Union supported Vietnam, while China acted as a benefactor to the Khmer Rouge, which had come to power in Cambodia in 1975. The Khmer Rouge's xenophobic policies against Vietnam and its nationals ultimately triggered Vietnam's invasion and occupation. This conflict effectively became another proxy war that began in Southeast Asia, pitting the two communist countries of China and the Soviet Union against each other for strategic power and influence in the wider Asia-Pacific region. The Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 made the Chinese wary of a perceived Soviet attempt to encircle the country. At the broadest level, Soviet policy towards China in the 1970s was deeply influenced by the growing rapprochement between the United States and China (Chi 1983).

The alignment with China paid dividends for Thailand when China launched its punitive expedition against Vietnam in February 1979 to reassure Thailand of China's support against Vietnamese aggression. And importantly, as part of this strategy, Thailand worked with China to provide sanctuary to Khmer Rouge fighters along the Thai-Cambodian border. This initiative came at some cost, as there were several occasions when Vietnamese troops entered and occupied Thai territory in pursuit of Khmer Rouge fighters.

Thailand's central role in the Indochina Security Complex gave it the latitude to determine how the cards fell based on its national interests. And it was in recognition of this fact that ASEAN was prepared to allow Thailand to ar-

ticulate its policy of alignment with China at a time when countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia saw China rather than Vietnam as the source of regional threat (Tilman 1987). Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia and Thailand's "frontline status" in turn gave it the luxury of being able to articulate this policy of alignment with China with the tacit blessing of ASEAN.

This pivotal role in regional developments continued after the end of the policy of alignment with China in 1988. This time the initiative was triggered by changes in the calibration of Thai domestic politics. The relatively liberal regime of General Prem Tinsulanond came to an end in April 1988. His premiership is credited with transforming Thailand's political economy away from the bureaucratic polity that had prevailed (Laothamathas 1992). And in the elections that followed, a new government led by Chatichai Choohavan of the Chart Thai Party took power in August 1988. Foreign policy decision-making shifted from the military to a civilian government devoid of the national security considerations that had guided previous governments. It was this regime change that provided the opportunity for the Chatichai government's call to turn the battlefields of Indochina into marketplaces. It took advantage of the Soviet Union's difficulties to continue its generous aid to Vietnam. Thailand's perception of Vietnam as a security threat effectively ended with this new leadership and pronouncement. Thailand thus laid the groundwork for the collapse of the Indochina Security Complex and the end of the Cold War dynamics in the region, which in turn had shaped the threat perceptions of regional countries.

Naturally, this announcement came as a profound shock to Indonesia, the traditional leader of ASEAN (Smith 1991). As a result, it sought to resolve the Cambodian situation through the Jakarta Informal Meetings (JIM) in order to regain control of the organisation's initiatives. Unfortunately, however, the cocktail diplomacy that resulted from the JIM talks was not successful and the Cambodian situation was destined for international settlement with the assistance of the United Nations (Van der Kroef 1988).

Meanwhile, China, which had lost its leverage over ASEAN through Thailand after 1988, needed to reestablish its diplomatic credentials as a responsible major regional power. Accordingly, it initiated and concluded the Haadyai Accords in December 1989, that led to the dissolution of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) and Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Thailand's policy reversal towards Vietnam thus had the unintended consequence of calming the wider regional environment of communist aggression emanating from China. It also marked the end of the Cold War for Southeast Asia, as it was regionally defined in terms of the spread of communist insurgency and ideology. A similar situation was unfolding in Eastern Europe with the waning power of the Soviet Union, which in turn also led to the collapse of communism there.

Factors shaping Thailand's bilateral policy toward Myanmar

Thailand was one of the countries involved in signing the 5PC in Jakarta in 2021. However, the Myanmar SAC military government has failed to implemented the agreement, leading to growing frustration over the ongoing stalemate. Thailand's situation is unique in that it is the country most affected by negative political developments in Myanmar. This break from ASEAN policy seems to be driven, in part, by these developments. The recalibration of Thai politics following the March 2019 elections enabled Prayuth Chan-ocha to claim a measure of democratic legitimacy, despite his earlier appointment being marred by May 2014 coup that ousted the government of Yingluck Shinawatra. Additionally, during his second term, the military coup in Myanmar provided an opportunity to reset the historically difficult bilateral relationship with Myanmar. Again, there was a confluence of domestic political changes and the emergence of an opportunity to reset relations with Myanmar, which was then seized.

The first and clearly negative consequence of political violence and instability in Myanmar is the flow of refugees and undocumented migrants into Thailand. The two neighbouring Thai provinces of Tak and Mae Hong Son, across the Moei River from Myanmar, have traditionally absorbed such spillovers. In the past, many of these refugees were ethnic Karen who fled whenever fighting flared up between the military and the KNU. And since it became a long-term problem for Thailand after the fall of the KNU strongholds of Kawmoora and Mannerplaw in the early 1990s, Thailand has worked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to deal with the situation, even though the country is not a signatory to international refugee instruments. There are still some 90,000 refugees in 9 settlement camps along the 2,400 kilometre border between the two countries. Refugees found outside the camps are subject to deportation under Thai immigration law (UNHCR 2023b). Some of the camps are close to the border and are also vulnerable to cross-border incursions. In addition, the UNHCR's ability to monitor these camps is often hampered during the rainy season.

More recently, refugees have crossed the border into the town of Mae Sot and are estimated to number around 30,000.[3] The numbers are fluid and depend on whether there are major skirmishes across the border, especially between the KNU and the Myanmar military. They are in addition to urban migrants to the major cities of Bangkok and Chiangmai. Thailand is also home to many regular and irregular migrant workers from Myanmar, who are estimated to number around 3 million. In fact, Myanmar has been a source of cheap labour for many Thai industries. These include agriculture and fisheries, construction,

3 This figure was provided by a senior official of the National Security Council, which advises the Thai Prime Minister, during an interview in Bangkok on 30 December 2022.

manufacturing, and services. Since the coup, the number of workers is thought to have doubled to approximately 6 million. Thai academics specialising in Myanmar highlighted the urgent need for an additional 100,000 workers to reboot the Thai economy following the country's reopening after the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022.[4]

Thailand is also reliant on fossil fuel from Myanmar and is believed to import up to 20 percent of its oil and gas from the country. The supply of gas from the Yadana field is especially important, and when France's TotalEnergies and U.S. Company Chevron divested from Myanmar in early 2022, Thailand's PTT Exploration and Production took over their operations. As a result, Thailand depends on Myanmar for both energy and labour, which forces it to address any political instability that threatens these key resources. Consequently, it is seen as natural for Thailand to engage with the Myanmar situation more proactively in order to safeguard its economic and, by extension, national interests.

The third issue is that Thailand has been keen to reset its previously strained bilateral relationship with Myanmar. In fact, the Thai military has always maintained a cordial relationship with the Myanmar military, and Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha has good personal relations with General Min Aung Hlaing, having met him several times in the past (Pongsudhirak 2022). An academic interviewee noted that Min Aung Hlaing's first foreign trip was to Thailand and that high-ranking military elites from both countries regularly play golf in Thailand's Kanchanaburi province.[5] Additionally, Min Aung Hlaing was known to regard General Prem Tinsulanonda, who served as Thai Prime Minster from 1980 to 1988, as his godfather (The Nation 2023). Prem later served as Chairman of the powerful Privy Council, which is an important part of what has been described as the network monarchy, a system that consolidates the traditional centres of power in the country (McCargo 2005).

Thai elites apparently view the ongoing developments as part of the post-1988 collapse of the Burmese BSPP government under Ne Win. Within this framework, there is a desire to reset the relationship in a more positive direction. Accordingly, the perception is that a more nuanced and engaging bilateral strategy toward Myanmar may yield better results. It was noted that, conversely, a reactionary and aggressive policy would yield little in terms of mutual benefits.[6] The elite perception that Thailand now has a historic opportunity to recalibrate its bilateral relations with Myanmar aligns with the neoclassical realist historical tradition that informs Thai policy output. Hence, the hope is that successful bilateral engagement will lead to a mutually beneficial relationship going forward. Nonetheless, such an approach would extend recognition to

4 Interview with a Thai academic specialising in Myanmar, particularly labour-related issues, Bangkok, 30 December 2022.

5 Interview with a Thai academic specialising in Myanmar, Bangkok, 29 December 2022.

6 Comments by an adviser to the Thai National Security Council, Bangkok, 30 December 2022.

the Myanmar military regime and its coup against an elected civilian government. The NUG's Foreign Minister, Zin Mar Aung, stated in a recent interview that four ASEAN countries do not reach out to the NUG and have given it the "cold shoulder" (Tan 2024). She also stated that Thailand has not officially reached out to the NUG. This statement confirms that Thailand is articulating its own bilateral policy towards the Myanmar military's SAC.

Thailand's evolving response to the Myanmar crisis

The new bilateral initiative towards Myanmar can be traced to the visit of Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai to Yangon in November 2021 and his talks with Min Aung Hlaing (The Irrawaddy 2021). This was followed by the announcement of the appointment of Pornpimol Kanchanalak as Thailand's special envoy to Myanmar in April 2022 (Bangkok Post 2022). Matters relating to Thailand's policy towards Myanmar have since been coordinated by her. In late December 2022, due to the stalemated and deteriorating situation in Myanmar and Thailand's discomfort with it, a meeting of countries close to Myanmar was held in Bangkok. This meeting was attended by the mainland countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (Thai PBS World 2022).

The maritime countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore apparently declined the invitation to attend the meeting. Their preference was clearly for the 5PC and to avoid involving the Myanmar military junta, whose Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin attended the meeting with two other ministers. The presence of Myanmar military representatives at ministerial level was a violation of the evolving ASEAN protocol that excluded them. In addition, and more importantly, such participation lends legitimacy to the SAC government, which the maritime states are keen to avoid (Strangio 2023).

Since then, Thailand has pursued its own bilateral policy of engaging stakeholders other than the military government. Thai diplomats met with Myanmar NGO leaders in late February 2023. The second thrust of this Thai policy is to engage Myanmar's domestic stakeholders inclusively to find some form of negotiated solution to the situation. And in line with this policy, it has allowed a large number of refugees, many of them CDM members fleeing the violence, to seek refuge in the border town of Mae Sot without harassment. It has also long allowed many of the elites of the EAOs and displaced NGOs to remain and operate from Thailand. Most of these elites operate from the major cities of Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Myanmar has grudgingly accepted this reality when such displacement occurs, although the military often views such behaviour negatively as it complicates its ability to control the domestic political process. Many displaced Myanmar citizens have also crossed into third coun-

tries, particularly the U.S., via Thailand in search of a better life. Such actions are a tacit acknowledgement of Thailand's cooperation with Western states opposed to the SAC (Ganesan 2024).

All these measures were explained by a senior official as part of a policy of engaging with Myanmar nationals as an honest broker in the hope of assisting with internal political reconciliation.[7] He suggested that progress in the country's bilateral relations with Myanmar could be made through the provision of humanitarian assistance. In return for such understanding and assistance, Thailand expects that the country will not be used as a staging ground for violence or for such violence to spill over into its territory. This bilateral initiative was described as generally supported by the political executive and the military because of the security issues involved.[8] The Thai Third Army, deployed along the common border with Myanmar, was also described as an important part of this policy. The Thai military has traditionally been involved in foreign policy towards neighbouring countries since important security issues are involved. For example, it was at the forefront of the policy towards Vietnam during the three Indochina wars. Similarly, it was involved in decision-making over the Preah Vihear Temple dispute with Cambodia. Thai foreign ministry officials attending meetings hosted by Indonesia were often frustrated by the military's intransigence in adhering to the terms of an Indonesian-brokered agreement. Their presence on the ground in the disputed areas meant that regional military commanders were able to determine the actual political outcome.

Thai security planners have often used natural boundaries to demarcate territory, and rivers have played an important role in such demarcations. In the case of Myanmar, the Moei River, which separates the two countries, is one such natural boundary marker. Similarly, the Golok River informs Thai security planners of the borders with peninsular Malaysia to the south. There, the issue of porous borders and Islamic insurgency in the four southern Thai provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Satun and Yala are important security considerations. To the east, the Mekong plays the role of that boundary marker, and the Thai military is especially sensitive to the Cambodian presence in the Mekong Valley. After all, the Cambodian provinces of Battambang, Sisophon and Siemreap were ceded to the French in 1907 as part of the French protectorate of Cambodia, as were the Lao vassal territories east of the Mekong. As a result, Thailand has often had a testy bilateral relationship with Cambodia along their shared border. The loss of territory to "greedy foreign powers and opportunistic neighbours" is a major theme in Thai nationalism (Chachavalpongpun 2015).

7 Interview with adviser to Thailand's National Security Council, Bangkok, 27 February 2023.

8 This was the position of the adviser to the Thai National Security Council, who said that the bilateral policy initiative was unified and had broad support from the various ministries involved.

The prospective trajectory of Thai-Myanmar bilateral relations

Thailand is highly likely to continue with its current unilateral policy of directly engaging Myanmar at the bilateral level. The primary reason for this outcome is the significant impact of the current situation in Myanmar on Thailand. This impact is most evident in refugees fleeing the ongoing violence, the surge in the number of undocumented workers entering the country, and the large number of Myanmar exiles and NGO leaders who have sought sanctuary there. Academics interviewed in Bangkok spoke of a two-track or dual-faced Thai policy towards Myanmar.[9] The first track involves engaging with the military as the government in power, which in turn confers legitimacy upon it. The second track is to treat those fleeing political violence in Myanmar with leniency. The rationale behind this two-track policy is the fluidity of the political situation in Myanmar and the uncertainty of its outcome.

This fluidity also explains the decision to maintain a discreet and amicable relationship with the National Unity Government (NUG). The NUG is the shadow government formed after the coup and comprises members of the previously elected NLD government from the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hlutaw (CRPH). It claims to be the legitimate representative of the Myanmar government and is recognised by the United States and several Western countries, including France, Norway, and the United Kingdom. Officials acknowledged this political divide, but viewed it more positively as a way of taking a non-judgmental and neutral position on the matter in order to win the trust of all parties to the conflict and portray Thailand as an honest broker or mediator.[10] The current Pheu Thai government is likely to pursue a similar policy, using senior military officers familiar with the situation in Myanmar, and then seek ASEAN's endorsement of the policy, which will use humanitarian aid as a tool to break the current impasse. Whether ASEAN will agree to such an approach, which gives legitimacy to the SAC, remains to be seen.

Thailand's dependence on Myanmar for fossil fuels and labour means that it can claim a legitimate rationale related to its national economic needs. Importantly, this powerful combination is seen as sufficient incentive for the country to articulate its own bilateral policy towards Myanmar. Academics interviewed spoke of a heavy reliance on gas from the Yadana gas field in the Andaman Sea (interviews on 29 and 30 December 2022). The situation is viewed by officials as an important juncture to reset the bilateral relationship on a more positive footing for the future. In other words, the ongoing domestic political violence in Myanmar presents a unique opportunity for Thailand to forge a more positive

9 This was the consensus view of two Bangkok-based academics specialising in Myanmar. The interviews took place in Bangkok on 30 December 2022, 1 January 2023, and 1 March 2023.

10 The security adviser interviewed had a more positive interpretation of the policy than the academics (interview on 27 December 2022, Bangkok).

bilateral relationship that will serve it well with Myanmar in the future. Using long-standing military ties and quiet diplomacy to resolve Myanmar's internal political conflict appears to be the preferred approach from the outset (Sanglee 2021). This policy of "good neighbourliness" has been an important strand of Thailand's bilateral policy towards Myanmar, even as it supports the ASEAN consensus and related principles (Chongkittavorn 2021).

Thai academics and policymakers seem convinced by this attempt to reset relations. However, there are some differences in their opinions and positions on the issue.[11] A senior Chulalongkorn University academic specialising in Myanmar argued that Thai policy towards Myanmar is fragmented and not particularly well coordinated between the political executive and the military, including the Third Army. The same academic suggested that Thai elites underestimate the level of domestic resistance to the military regime in Myanmar, as well as the sympathy of the general Thai population for the plight of Myanmar nationals, compared to their policy-making elites (interview on 30 December 2022, Bangkok). Moreover, the Thai establishment appears to view the current situation as simply part of Myanmar's post-1988 political transition. In other words, Thai policymakers are thought to be unaware of how much the democratic transition from 2010 to 2020 has affected the attitudes of the local population, and particularly the younger generation in Myanmar.

Another academic specialising in Southeast Asian studies at Chulalongkorn University emphasised the very personal nature of the relationship between the military elites in Thailand and Myanmar during an interview (29 December 2022, Bangkok). General Prayuth appears to have no qualms about dealing with the Myanmar military and has met with former Myanmar Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin on several occasions at Don Muang airport.[12] Mutually beneficial business interests appear to be an important part of the equation. The Myanmar military has been known to shut down cross-border trade when bilateral relations are strained, much to the chagrin of Thai businesses and the military.

Developments so far indicate that Thailand will continue and probably deepen its engagement with all Myanmar stakeholders. Whether this policy will produce the desired results remains to be seen. Given the seemingly intractable nature of the political situation in Myanmar, this policy must at least be framed in a medium-term perspective of 3 to 5 years. Thailand needs to convince other ASEAN members that its bilateral policy initiative is not at odds with the broader organisational policy of denying legitimacy to the Myanmar military government. Whether some form of reconciliation between ASEAN and Thailand will take

11 These opinions were consolidated from interviews held in Bangkok on 29 and 30 December 2022 and 1 and 3 March 2023.

12 Interview with Thai academic specialising in Myanmar, 29 December 2022 and 3 March 2023.

place is uncertain, and Indonesia may well mediate the situation with the maritime countries. In practice, there is very little that ASEAN can do to dissuade Thailand from pursuing its own bilateral policy towards Myanmar. This observation is due to Thailand's general tendency to articulate its own policies towards neighbouring mainland states that affect its own interests.

Thailand's national election in May 2023 and the newly elected Pheu Thai-led coalition government ousted the popular politician and leader of the Move Forward Party, Pita Limcharoenrat, who won the most seats. Importantly, the new coalition government includes the two military-backed parties led by Prayuth Chan-ocha and Prawit Wongsuwon. Consequently, it is arguable that the previous policies of the Prayuth government are likely to continue. Nonetheless, the Pheu Thai-led government, led by civilian Prime Minster Srettha Thavisin, may be more sensitive to the plight of Myanmar's civilian population. For now, he seems far more focused on reviving the country's economy. There are still no clear policy directions to indicate whether there will be any substantive changes in Thailand's foreign policy towards Myanmar. However, the military and the Third Army will continue to influence bilateral policy. As one Thai academic noted, the military is an entrenched institution in both countries that is very much part of the structuring of domestic politics. The military may also become more involved if the cross-border situation deteriorates and the security implications for Thailand become much more serious in terms of refugees fleeing the fighting. Such a scenario also raises the possibility of the Thai military becoming even more entrenched in the management of the relationship.

A second possibility is that ASEAN, under the current Lao leadership, can craft a policy that is acceptable to Thailand by addressing its bilateral concerns. Then it will be a marriage of convenience for Thailand, as such policy convergence will bring much greater international legitimacy and support. Indonesia has shown some success in its quiet diplomacy under President Joko Widodo in 2023, and ASEAN has the support of the UN, the United States, and the European Union (The Star 2023). However, such policy convergence has yet to materialise.

Conclusion

Thailand has an ongoing bilateral policy towards Myanmar that is of recent vintage. This policy is at odds with the ASEAN 5PC because it gives legitimacy to Myanmar's military government. It also breaks with ASEAN's norm of consensual decision-making, which is regarded as an important organisational protocol. Thailand's position is that, as Myanmar's immediate neighbour with a long shared border, it is the country most affected by the coup. Consequently, Thailand sees the situation as requiring its own bilateral policy output. The interaction between perceived domestic constraints and agency decisions to exploit the opportunity created by the Myanmar military coup is well within the neoclassical realist tradition. The approach emphasises this interaction between domestic conditions, agency choices, and their interaction with external environmental changes. Suffice it to say that Thailand has a recorded history of unilaterally pursuing such neoclassical realist policies in the past.

Thailand appears to be using the current situation in Myanmar to reset its bilateral policy towards Myanmar. The reset has been described as the pursuit of a more favourable relationship than that achieved under Ne Win's BSPP government until 1988. It is also meant to emulate how Thailand managed such a reset with Vietnam in the 1990s after the end of the Third Indochina War and the collapse of the Indochina Security Complex. Senior Thai military elites are familiar with their Myanmar counterparts and maintain strong personal ties.

To accomplish the new bilateral goal, Thailand had appointed a special envoy, adopted a liberal policy towards Myanmar refugees and exiles, and engaged Myanmar NGO leaders to present itself as a neutral mediator. Whether or not Thailand succeeds in its ambitions will dependent on how the newly elected government, led by the Pheu Thai Party, calibrates its Myanmar policy. It is important to note that the two military-linked political parties led by former Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and his Deputy Prawit Wongsuwon are part of the new coalition government. Consequently, there may well be a degree of continuity in bilateral policy towards Myanmar. In this respect, the traditionally robust policy of democratically elected Thai governments towards military authoritarian regimes in Myanmar may be softened. How Myanmar's domestic political situation evolves will interact with this policy.

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