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## The role of China's foreign policy with Chinese characteristics in Thailand

**Panitta Sriwongyu**

E-mail: [panitta.sriw@gmail.com](mailto:panitta.sriw@gmail.com)

*Ph.D.(Candidate) in Politics and Development Strategy,  
Graduate School of Social Development and Management Strategy,  
National Institute of Development Administration (Bangkok, Thailand)*

**Li Renliang**

E-mail: [li.renliang@nida.ac.th](mailto:li.renliang@nida.ac.th)

*Associate Professor, Ph.D. in Social Development and Environmental Management,  
Deputy Dean for Academic Affairs, Graduate School of Social Development and Management Strategy,  
National Institute of Development Administration (Bangkok, Thailand)*

### ABSTRACT

China's growing interest in Southeast Asia focuses on preventing anti-China groups, increasing trade, building strategic relationships, and securing land claims. Since 2009, China has been more aggressive in controlling disputed areas in the South China Sea and uses politics, economy, and military efforts to keep the region's countries from reacting strongly. This article is a part of a doctoral dissertation in Politics and Development Strategy, titled "The Role of China's Foreign Policy with Chinese Characteristics in Southeast Asia". This article examines the role of China's foreign policy with Chinese characteristics in Thailand, consisting of two parts: the first part presents the relationship between internal factors, external factors and China's intentions in China's foreign policy. The second part discusses the roles of politics, geopolitics and economics in Thailand. The study employed a qualitative research approach. The research result of the role of China's foreign policy with Chinese characteristics in Thailand found that China's foreign policy, characterized by its unique attributes, is centered on the examination of its foreign policy that reflects distinctive features arising from the contributions of Chinese scholars to the theory of IR from a Chinese viewpoint. China's foreign policy concerning Thailand arises from a diverse mix of economic, strategic, and geopolitical influences. China's diplomatic strategies in Thailand have significantly benefited the region, motivated by a convergence of economic, political, and geopolitical roles.

**KEYWORDS:** China's foreign policy, Chinese characteristics, Thailand, geopolitics

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**1. Formulation of the problem.** China's foreign policy toward Southeast Asia embodies a multifaceted strategy that integrates economic diplomacy with strategic alliances to promote national interests while navigating regional tensions. Following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, during which China opted not to devalue its currency to aid Thailand while the U.S. hesitated to provide support (Kurlantzick, 2007). China had established itself as ASEAN's foremost trading partner by 2009, outpacing significant economies (Meredith, 2015). The ASEAN-China Free Trade Area, launched in 2010, resulted in the formation of the world's largest free trade zone by population. At the heart of this strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative, aimed at enhancing China's economic sway through infrastructure investments (Liu, 2023). Nevertheless, China's assertive maneuvers in the South China Sea have sparked territorial disputes with neighboring nations (Liu & Zhou, 2018), while China has effectively thwarted a united ASEAN opposition through diplomatic tactics and economic incentives (Darmawan, et al., 2022).

To achieve its strategic developmental goals, Southeast Asia is of strategic significance to China because of its geographical closeness, economic prospects, and function as a vital energy supply corridor. Chinese security analysts perceive the region as susceptible to U.S. containment strategies (Ott, 2006), which has led China to pursue regional supremacy while diminishing American military presence (Banlaoi, 2003). The region's rich natural resources and favorable positioning bolster China's overarching ambition to attain global prestige by 2049 through initiatives like the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (Swielande & Orinx, 2020). Despite China's attempts to portray itself as a responsible power advocating for harmony in Southeast Asian, the region's economic reliance on China complicates foreign policy choices amid the U.S.-China strategic rivalry, especially within the Indo-Pacific context, as countries continue to depend on the U.S. to counterbalance Chinese dominance (Cooney & Sato, 2009).

China-Thailand relations illustrate the broader evolution in China's engagement with Southeast Asia, shifting from discord to a strategic partnership shaped by geopolitical, economic, and historical elements. The bilateral relationship showcases mutual interests in economic cooperation, regional stability, and cultural exchange while being affected by wider geopolitical factors involving major powers like the U.S. China's role in Thailand fosters economic growth and strategic partnerships, but it also presents challenges such as managing competing superpower influences and addressing cultural perceptions that necessitate careful navigation by both nations. These changing Sino-Thai interactions reflect broader regional and global trends that define China's holistic approach to Southeast Asian foreign policy (Zhang, 2023).

## **2. Analysis of recent research and publications.**

**2.1 International Relations Theory.** China's increasing impact on global politics is reshaping our perception of international relations, highlighting the need for fresh perspectives encompassing regions beyond the Western world. The ascent of China in global politics marks a significant development, prompting academics to reconsider International Relations (IR) frameworks by incorporating viewpoints

from both Asia and the West, to foster a more comprehensive and worldwide understanding. This transition towards a post-Western IR framework recognizes China's escalating influence and posits that conventional Western-centric theories may not fully grasp the intricacies of modern global politics (Pan & Kavalski, 2022). Winston's study initiates an opportunity for the simultaneous existence of varied standards in overseeing global politics and international governance (Peng, 2018).

**2.2 Chinese Characteristics and Theories of International Relations.** Since the 21st century began, China's growth has led to increased interest in how Chinese scholars view international relations, with research showing the evolution of Chinese IR studies since 1949 and the development of distinctly Chinese approaches that offer valuable contributions for understanding global interactions from a new perspective (Hwang, 2022). Nevertheless, the field of Chinese scholarship in International Relations encounters considerable obstacles, such as a largely Sinocentric viewpoint, critical assessments of Western ideologies, presuppositions regarding the benevolence of Chinese leadership, and idealized interpretations of East-West relations, all while endeavoring to establish its distinctiveness by invoking so-called Chinese conditions without engaging in a critical evaluation of their exclusivity to the Chinese context. The limitations imposed on academic freedom in China significantly exacerbate the complexities surrounding Chinese International Relations scholarship, as the endeavors of notable scholars are inextricably intertwined with the positions of the Chinese Communist Party, rather than being driven solely by scholarly pursuits.

**2.3 The Motivational Factors of China's Foreign Policy with Chinese Characteristics.** When conceptualizing China's foreign policy, numerous academics have devoted to upholding the pluralist perspectives on the importance of internal influences and non-governmental bodies towards China's external strategies. To examine the literature on the impact of these variables on China's external relations, the researcher will focus towards assessing the influence of primary domestic elements including History and Culture traditions, ideology, governmental leadership and political structure, economic modernization, and soft power efforts on China's foreign policy (Huwaidin & Antwi-Boateng, 2021).

**2.3.1 History and Culture Traditions.** China's foreign policy is profoundly shaped by its rich cultural heritage and historical experiences, with philosophical frameworks emphasizing harmony and hierarchy rather than Western-style confrontation (Veres, 2022). This orientation manifests practically through soft power strategies like Confucius Institutes that promote Chinese culture globally, while historical memories of past invasions reinforce China's emphasis on sovereignty and cautious diplomatic approaches (Madani et al., 2020). The distinctive blend of traditional cultural values with Communist Party influence creates unique diplomatic practices that combine professionalization with particularities rooted in China's political and cultural history (Ptácková et al., 2021).

**2.3.2 Ideology.** Ideology has been a paramount factor in shaping Chinese foreign policy since the founding of the PRC in 1949, serving as the rationale for the legitimacy of the ruling Chinese

Communist Party and evolving significantly over time (Zha, 2023). Chinese foreign policy is influenced by a symbiotic neorealist–constructivist approach, where ideological principles interact with conditioning factors like geographical environment, power, and historical experience alongside determining factors such as national interests and leadership traits (Warmerdam & Haan, 2015). The practical application of ideological principles in foreign policy remains complex and conditional, reflecting the CCP’s adaptive and strategic approach that uses ideology as both a tool for domestic legitimacy and a strategic asset in international relations (Cai, 2020).

**2.3.3 Governmental Leadership and Political Structure.** The structure of the Chinese government has significantly influenced the formulation and implementation of its foreign policy, reflecting a complex interplay of historical legacy, bureaucratic dynamics, and leadership vision. Since the era of Deng Xiaoping, the implementation of reforms has engendered a multifaceted foreign policy environment characterized by an excess of stakeholders and their corresponding obligations, which often dissolves in disputes regarding jurisdiction (Duggan, 2020). Concurrently, the influence of global frameworks on China’s foreign policy determinations underscores the intricate relationship between domestic identities and the evolving international norms (Johnston, 2018). Under Xi Jinping, China has striven for achievements and maximizing influence through economic interactions and multilateral frameworks, aiming to reshape global rules to its benefit (Chang–Liao, 2016), demonstrating how the combination of historical development, complex bureaucratic processes, and leadership approaches shapes the course of China’s foreign policy.

**2.3.4 Economic Modernization.** In the post–Mao era, China’s foreign policy, headed by Deng Xiaoping and subsequent successors, shifted from engaging in armed conflict and promoting global revolution to adopting the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. (Huwaidin, 2001). By 2035, China aims to significantly enhance its economic, scientific, technological, and overall national strength, positioning itself among the top innovative countries globally and reaching the development level of medium–developed countries. China plans to maintain rapid growth in labor productivity, leveraging its large labor force and continuous improvement in human capital, which is crucial for sustaining medium–to–high–speed economic growth and strengthening its position in agriculture and Intellectual Property Rights (Hu, 2023).

**2.3.5 Soft Power.** Soft power, rooted in the ability to attract and co–opt rather than coerce, has been embraced by China’s foreign policy as a key component of its peaceful rise on the global stage by shaping its international relations and diplomatic strategies. It is evident in the establishment of Confucius Institutes worldwide to promote Chinese language and culture as a means of positive image of China (Nye, 2023) and the BRI as a foundation seeking to expand influence through economic partnerships and infrastructure development (Duarte & Ferreira–Pereira, 2021). These initiatives demonstrate China’s desire to portray itself as a generous contributor on the international platform,

striving to nurture understanding, respect, and endorsement for its political systems and policies (Schultz, 2022).

**2.4 The Context.** Context is that external factors have a profound impact on the foreign policy of China, molding its strategies and reactions on the global platform. The international security landscape, marked by instability and delicacy, demands a well-rounded stance from China to safeguard its interests while avoiding yielding to internal demands for more aggressive measures (Liu & He, 2023). The existence of the United States in the Asia-Pacific area and its approach towards China are factors that contribute to a perception of containment, thus adding complexity to China's foreign policy choices (Darmawan, 2018).

**2.4.1 Regional Multilateralism.** Regional multilateralism has held considerable significance in influencing China's foreign policy and strategy following the Cold War period, involving four crucial dimensions: the quest for maximizing material power, the appeasement of neighboring regions, the safeguarding of fundamental interests, and the elevation of global standing, which have distinctly impacted China's foreign policy tendencies towards engaging actively in regional multilateral cooperation and organizations (Blackwill & Tellis, 2015). China's active participation in regional multilateral partnerships facilitates its integration into the East Asian production network and global economic system, contributing to economic prosperity and national strength enhancement while helping Beijing alleviate regional tensions and maintain a peaceful international atmosphere. Overall, China's approach to regional multilateralism in its foreign policy is heavily shaped by an evolving overarching strategy focused on security and the achievement of a prominent position as a great power (Zhou, 2018).

**2.4.2 Geopolitical Factors.** Chinese foreign policy actors and theorists reject both the conventional Chinese notion of a universal leader and the concept of great power hegemony, with supporting the existing order and preferring cooperation over conflict through engagement in international groups like the WTO and ASEAN, seeking to reshape China's portrayal as a prominent player on the global stage (Huma, 2014). Southeast Asia's location has historically attracted the attention of larger powers, emphasizing its strategic importance in global geopolitics and trade routes (Zhang, 2023), with China aiming to maintain friendly or neutral relationships to enhance trade and investment opportunities. Establishing strong connections with Southeast Asian nations is significant for China as it contributes to realizing its broader strategic and security goals (Heginbotham, 2018).

**2.4.3 Global Economic Trends.** China requires a favorable global environment to uphold domestic economic stability and increasingly pursues entry into overseas markets (Li, 2009). The rise of China from a weak and low-income country to one gaining global recognition has been driven by significant capital investment, productivity improvements, and competitive advantages from its sizable population and low-cost labor, with foreign direct investment contributing through nearly half a million registered foreign-owned enterprises. China's international engagement includes regional collaborations,

the initiation of the Silk Road Belt and Maritime Silk Road Belt, and noticeable restrictions on U.S. trade capabilities evident in Trans-Pacific Partnership discussions (Li, 2009). The "Go Global" initiative introduced in 2000 motivated Chinese companies to venture into foreign investments, frequently obtaining natural resources to support domestic expansion (Leon, 2016), while China's economic reforms emphasized the strategic value of the South China Sea and BRI for national interests and global positioning in the 21st century (Nugraha et al., 2022).

**2.5 China's Intention.** China's foreign policy intentions toward Southeast Asia are multifaceted, influenced by strategic, economic, and geopolitical factors. The region's strategic positioning, economic prospects, and geopolitical importance render it central to China's overarching foreign policy aims. In its strategy, China weaves together elements of economic diplomacy, diplomatic connections, and significant undertakings like the BRI to amplify its sway and respond to the leadership of other nations, particularly the U.S. The subsequent sections explore the principal facets of China's foreign policy intentions towards Southeast Asia by strategic and economic imperatives; it concurrently encounters considerable obstacles. The nations within the region exhibit a degree of caution regarding China's intentions, as they strive to balance collaboration with apprehensions surrounding sovereignty and autonomy. These dynamics underscore the delicate equilibrium that China must sustain in its diplomatic approach towards the region.

**2.6 China's Foreign Policy with Chinese Characteristics.** China's international relations scholars are 'Sinicizing' the concepts of power, harmony, and order, broadening the notion of power to encompass not only the ability to compel others but also the promotion of good governance and the observance of ethics towards weaker nations, guided by the principle of 'humane authority' (Smith, 2020). China's foreign policy, distinguished by a distinctive combination of historical, cultural, and ideological components, illustrates "Chinese characteristics" through partnership diplomacy aimed at establishing worldwide partnerships to cultivate a secure global atmosphere, deeply entrenched in traditional Chinese ideologies such as Tianxia and Guanxi that emphasize harmonious global structure and interpersonal connections (Letiaev & Wang, 2022). China's foreign policy demonstrates a combination of tangible interests and non-materialistic goals, including prestige and global reputation, essential to its self-perception as a prominent civilization that establishes worldwide norms, with the development of foreign policy theories embodying Chinese characteristics motivated by national identity and global recognition (Zhang & Yang, 2020).

In conclusion, the theoretical foundations and motivational factors underlying China's foreign policy create a comprehensive framework that directly shapes the distinctive characteristics of China's international engagement. The evolution of international relations theory has necessitated a post-Western approach that incorporates Chinese perspectives, as China's increasing global influence challenges conventional Western-centric frameworks. This theoretical shift provides the intellectual foundation for understanding how Chinese characteristics manifest in foreign policy practice.

Chinese theories of international relations, despite their Sinocentric perspective and alignment with Communist Party objectives, have developed unique interpretations that integrate cultural, political, and diplomatic elements specific to the Chinese context. These theoretical underpinnings are reinforced by the motivational factors that drive China's foreign policy, beginning with deeply rooted historical experiences and cultural traditions that emphasize harmony, hierarchy, and conflict avoidance rather than confrontation.

The governmental structure under Xi Jinping's leadership has introduced new diplomatic concepts that emphasize economic interactions and multilateral frameworks designed to reshape global rules to China's advantage. Economic modernization goals demonstrate how domestic development priorities inform foreign policy strategies. Soft power initiatives, particularly through Confucius Institutes and the Belt and Road Initiative, represent practical applications of China's cultural and economic influence strategies.

The contextual factors surrounding China's foreign policy further illuminate how these motivational elements translate into practice. Regional multilateralism serves multiple strategic purposes, while geopolitical considerations focus on countering perceived containment efforts and maintaining favorable relationships with neighboring countries. Global economic trends, particularly China's "Go Global" initiative and the strategic importance of international markets for domestic stability, underscore the economic imperatives driving foreign policy decisions.

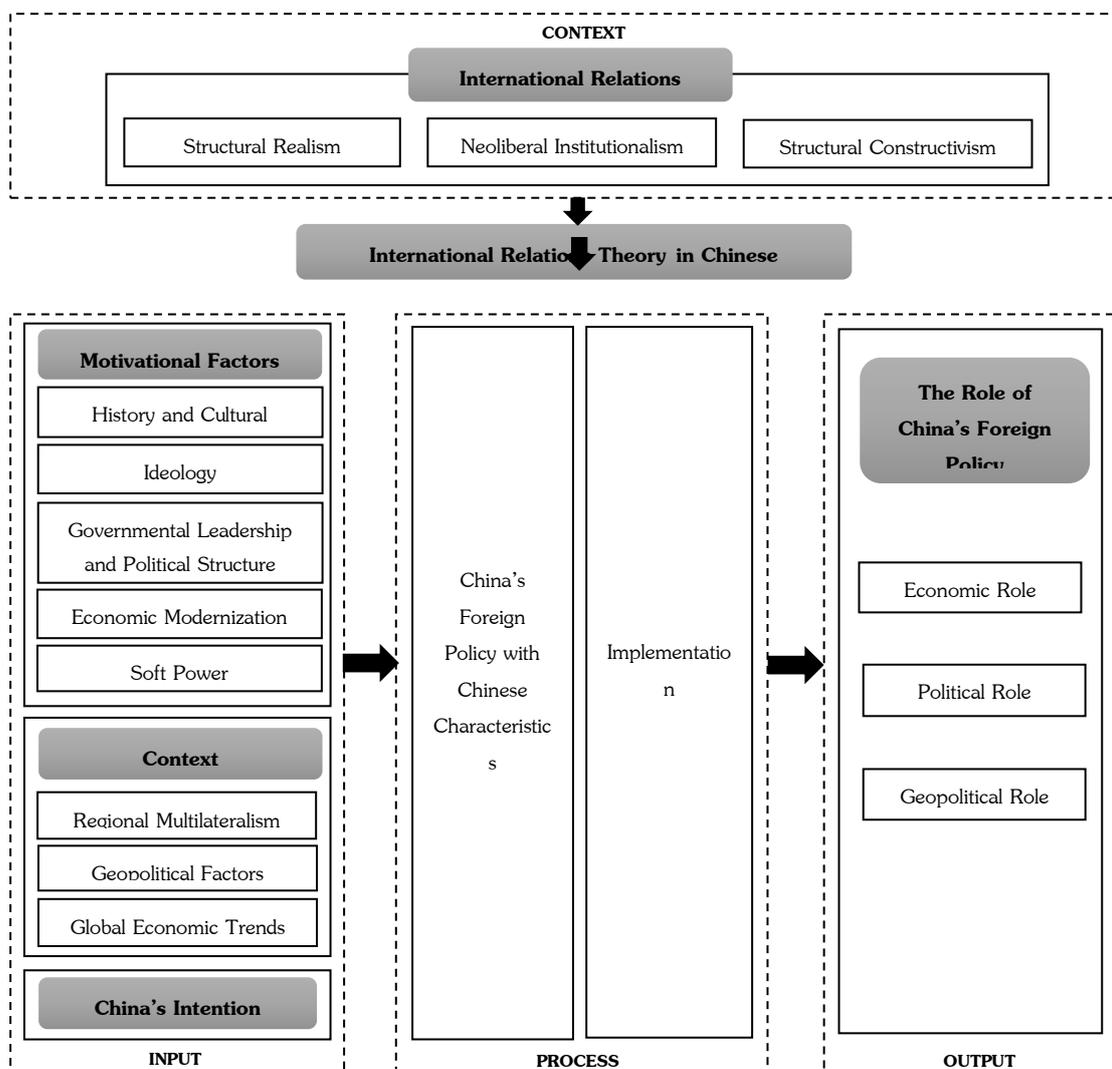
These interconnected theoretical foundations, motivational factors, and contextual considerations culminate in China's foreign policy with Chinese characteristics, which represents a distinctive blend of hierarchical pluralism and traditional Chinese concepts such as Tianxia and Guanxi. The resulting foreign policy approach demonstrates how China seeks to establish a multipolar world order that reflects its historical and philosophical roots while advancing its material interests and non-materialistic goals, including global prestige and recognition as a civilization that sets international standards.

### **3. Conceptual Framework and Methodology.**

**3.1 Conceptual Framework.** China's foreign policy with Chinese characteristics focuses on studying China's foreign policy that possessed its unique characteristics retaining from the influences of Chinese scholars on international relations theory in Chinese perspectives. Internal motives play a vital role in shaping China's foreign policy, impelled by an intricate interplay of history and cultural tradition, ideology, governmental leadership and political structure, economic modernization, and soft power. China's foreign policy is markedly shaped by an intricate interaction of external factors, encompassing regional multilateralism, global economic trends, and geopolitical factors. The nations within the region exhibit a degree of caution regarding China's intentions, as they strive to balance collaboration with apprehensions surrounding sovereignty and autonomy. The delicate and uncertain global security landscape mandates a nuanced strategy in China's foreign policy to steer clear of yielding to domestic

demands for more aggressive international measures. China's foreign policy in Thailand has produced various regional advantages, driven by a blend of economic, political, and geopolitical roles.

**3.2 Methodology.** The research utilizes qualitative research to deliver an overall understanding of China's foreign policy towards Thailand. I hypothesize that China's foreign policy towards Thailand can be explained by several factors, including China's "Internal motives" and "External motives". To demonstrate the hypothesis, the researcher will analyze the data from many secondary sources, including articles, books, and journals. The researcher will use both Chinese language and English language literature regarding China's foreign policy towards Thailand. To answer the research questions, this study first draws on academic literature, semi-academic magazines, policy papers, and national and international media outlets on China's foreign policy objectives, its Thailand strategy, and Sino-Thailand relations. It presents the role of China's foreign policy with Chinese characteristics in Thailand. The research aims to interpret the underlying reasons and motivations in relation to explaining China's foreign policy towards Thailand.



**Figure 1.** *Conceptual Framework*

#### **4. Results.**

##### **4.1 The internal and external motives of China's foreign policy with Chinese characteristics formulation.**

The concept of "IR theory with Chinese characteristics" is deemed to be more credible and relevant than the concept of "Chinese IR theory," when taking into account the subsequent features of "uniqueness" that pertain to the rise of China. China's foreign policy, distinguished by its singular Chinese characteristics, embodies a strategic framework that integrates the nation's unique political ideology, historical context, and global aspirations.

The principal theoretical frameworks within the realm of international relations that underscore the significance of motivational factors as a crucial component of states' foreign policy are the state-level approach and pluralism. The researcher found the impact of internal motives, including history and culture traditions, ideology, governmental leadership and political structure, economic modernization, and soft power efforts on China's foreign policy.

The context is that external factors significantly shape the foreign policy of China, thereby informing its strategies and responses on the international stage. These external influences collectively exert a considerable effect on China's foreign policy, necessitating the nation to navigate complex global landscapes while balancing both domestic and international pressures and China's intention significantly impact the formulation of China's foreign policy.

##### **4.2 China's Foreign Policy with Chinese characteristics in Thailand**

The historical relationship between China and Thailand can be traced back to the tributary system, wherein Siam engaged in tribute missions primarily to secure economic advantages rather than to attain political domination. The phrase "China and Thailand are brothers" has emerged as a diplomatic narrative facilitating the normalization of Sino-Thai relations during the Cold War era. The strategic alliance between Thailand and China has witnessed significant expansion following the coup d'état of 2014, characterized by enhanced military cooperation and joint exercises. Thailand's foreign policy is frequently described as "Bending with the wind," signifying its strategy of maintaining a delicate balance in relations with major powers.

The dynamics between China and Thailand have appreciably altered over the years, evolving from a phase of discord to a context influenced by strategic coalitions. This metamorphosis has been shaped by a multitude of geopolitical, economic, and historical determinants. The bilateral relations are distinguished by shared interests in economic collaboration, regional stability, and cultural interchange, while simultaneously being influenced by the overarching geopolitical dynamics involving principal powers

such as the U.S. China's participation in Thailand through multiple perspectives, including economic collaborations, strategic partnerships, cultural impact, and migratory trends.

#### **4.2.1 Economic Partnerships**

China assumes a crucial position in the economic advancement of Thailand, serving as a significant trading associate and a principal investor, thereby facilitating progress in both technology and infrastructure. The strategic alliance has intensified, especially following the coup in Thailand in 2014, resulting in augmented military collaboration, which encompasses the provision of Chinese military apparatus and collaborative exercises. Furthermore, the establishment of the China–Laos–Thailand transportation corridor as part of the BRI amplifies logistical opportunities, notwithstanding Thailand's adherence to a policy of economic autonomy, which has implications for project timelines and deliberations. The BRI constitutes a fundamental element of China's economic interaction with Thailand. The China–Laos–Thailand transportation corridor represents a prominent endeavor under the BRI, significantly augmenting logistics and trade interconnectedness among the nations. (Vinogradov, 2024).

China constitutes a significant trading associate and investor in Thailand. The creation of the Thai Chinese Industrial Zone in Rayong foster overseas investment and economic collaboration. This zone functions as a paradigm for Chinese enterprises aspiring to broaden their global reach, capitalizing on Thailand's advantageous geographic positioning and economic prospects.

#### **4.2.2 Strategic Alliances**

After the military coup in Thailand during 2014, the nation has fortified its strategic ties with China, particularly in military domains. This development encompasses an augmented acquisition of military apparatus from China and the conduct of joint military exercises, signifying a notable shift in Thailand's foreign policy towards establishing closer relations with China considering the increasingly fraught relations with the U.S. (Vinogradov, 2024).

The foreign relations strategy of Thailand reflects a thoughtful balancing act involving China and the U.S. Historically, Thailand has upheld a position of neutrality, functioning as a "buffer state" to mitigate the influence exerted by both superpowers. In the economic and political realms, China holds a notable position in Thailand, particularly as Thailand aims to strike a balance between its connections with the U.S. and China. As an integral component of its hedging strategy, this bilateral relationship establishes Thailand as a pivotal geopolitical conduit between the two superpowers, enabling it to exploit its position for economic advancement while preserving a stance of neutrality. Nevertheless, this intricate balancing act poses challenges as Thailand navigates the multifaceted dynamics of the rivalry between the U.S. and China.

#### **4.2.3 Cultural Influence**

China's engagement in Thailand is profoundly influenced by historical connections, economic motivations, and the impact of ethnic Chinese populations. Thailand's vital role in Southeast Asia and its

ties with the U.S. mold China's diplomatic efforts, creating a layered interaction that boosts China's impact and visibility in the region. The manifestation of China's soft power in Thailand is distinctly observable through initiatives such as the Confucius Institutes, which endeavor to advance the appreciation of Chinese culture and language. These endeavors are bolstered by the longstanding historical relations between China and Thailand, alongside the presence of ethnic Chinese communities within Thailand, which serve to enhance both cultural and economic exchanges (Tungkeunkunt, 2016).

China assumes a pivotal position in Thailand through the influx of new Chinese migrants, who are classified as investors, entrepreneurs, highly skilled professionals, unskilled laborers, and students. These migrants significantly enhance Thailand's economy by initiating businesses, addressing labor shortages, and promoting educational exchanges. The presence of Chinese communities not only encourages cultural exchange but also reinforces bilateral relations, while the Thai government can strategically utilize these dynamics for economic advancement and development.

China adopts a comprehensive strategy in its diplomatic relations with Thailand, emphasizing tourism, education, and cultural diplomacy. This tactic not only reinforces the connections shared by the two countries but also aligns with the dreams and goals of both sides. (Raymond, 2019). The escalating economic dependence of Thailand on China, notably through initiatives such as the BRI, raises concerns regarding the potential risks associated with becoming excessively reliant on a singular foreign power (Yang, 2024). The concept of a "positive shared future" is advanced through Sino-Thai folk diplomacy, wherein transnational Chinese entities contribute significantly to the development of both nations, thereby cultivating goodwill and mutual understanding (Lee, 2024). Thailand's interaction with China is layered, covering various economic, political, and cultural territories. Thereby, this discourse examines China's participation in Thailand through multiple perspectives, including economic role, political role, and geopolitical role.

**4.3 Economic Role of China in Thailand.** In 2023, the economic exchanges involving China and Thailand culminated in a significant U.S.\$126.3 billion, as China recorded a trade surplus of U.S.\$25.1 billion. The manufacturing industry is the principal emphasis of China's exports to Thailand, particularly in providing raw materials and essential components. In 2023, a considerable segment of these exports consisted of silicon wafers, which are utilized in the production of solar cells, aggregating a total value of U.S.\$1.29 billion.

The primary role, termed 'Thailand consumer market'. China assumes a pivotal position in influencing Thailand's consumer market trends through many economic, cultural, and infrastructural factors. The bilateral relationship between these two nations has engendered substantial growth prospects, particularly within sectors such as processed food and consumer durables. This dynamic is further

augmented by Chinese investments and the involvement of Chinese intermediaries in Thailand, facilitating market accessibility and cultural interchange.

The second referenced economic role in Thailand, termed ‘Thailand resources’. China occupies a complex and significant position within Thailand’s resource framework, principally through FDI, infrastructure enhancement, and environmental initiatives. This engagement is propelled by China’s strategic objectives aimed at broadening its economic dominance and securing vital resources within Southeast Asia.

The third referenced economic role in Thailand, termed ‘leverage economic incentives’. China also assumes a pivotal role in the facilitation of economic incentives within Thailand through a multitude of mechanisms, encompassing investment policies, infrastructure undertakings, and environmental initiatives.

The fourth referenced economic role in Thailand, termed ‘economic engagement’. The economic relationship between Thailand and China is vital, majorly driven by FDI, trade agreements, and partnerships in strategic initiatives. Endeavors like the BRI and ASEAN+1 underscore the strategic alliance between China and Thailand, concentrating on mutual interests and regional collaboration.

The fifth referenced economic role in Thailand, termed ‘BRI boost China influence in Thailand’. The BRI significantly enhances the sway of China in Thailand via partnerships in economic, infrastructural, and ecological areas.

The sixth referenced economic role in Thailand, termed ‘China’s capital in Thailand’. The capital of China in Thailand predominantly denotes the substantial presence and influence of Chinese investments and communities within Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand. This partnership is defined by a merging of financial, cultural, and diplomatic exchanges that have evolved continuously over the years, especially via projects like the BRI.

The last one referenced the economic role in Thailand, termed ‘Thailand–China trade agreements’. The bonds between Thailand and China, prominently through the ACFTA and the BRI, notably shape the economic advancement and dynamics evolving in both countries. These agreements serve to enhance trade relations, promote investment, and generate opportunities for economic collaboration.

The economic structure of Thailand hinges heavily on international commerce, where the total of exports and imports makes up over 70% of its GDP (Chirathivat, 1995). The ACFTA has markedly enhanced bilateral commerce, establishing China as Thailand’s preeminent trading partner (Shen, 2013). A deficiency in cooperation could precipitate diminished access to Chinese markets, thereby hindering economic growth and constraining export possibilities. Thailand’s geographical proximity to China confers a strategic advantage for trade with the southwestern provinces of China (Phanisharn, 2006). The absence of collaboration may culminate in Thailand forfeiting its competitive advantage to neighboring nations that actively pursue engagement with China.

The substantial influx of commodities originating from China has exerted a profound influence on various industries within Thailand, resulting in insolvency across multiple sectors. This occurrence can be primarily ascribed to the ACFTA, which has engendered heightened competition from Chinese imports. Therefore, it has concurrently afforded opportunities for others to adapt and innovate, potentially culminating in a more competitive market landscape in the long term.

The involvement of China in Thailand is delineated by the circulation of 'Grey capital', which encompasses both lawful and unlawful commercial activities. This cross-border engagement is enabled by informal affiliations that obscure the distinctions between governmental and business entities, as well as between legal and illicit undertakings. China's economic influence in Thailand is accompanied by notable controversy. (Raymond, 2024). Chinese entrepreneurs operating business in Thailand, especially within the context of Gray China, encounter substantial concerns regarding safety and hygiene. These challenges arise from a confluence of socio-political dynamics, health-related crises, and operational hurdles that may adversely affect their business sustainability and personal safety. Some entrepreneurs may identify opportunities in adapting to local circumstances and utilizing community support to enhance their business resilience.

**4.4 Political Role of China in Thailand.** China's political role in Thailand is delineated by a sophisticated interplay of collaboration and rivalry, particularly in the framework of the prevailing Sino-American competition. Thailand's foreign policy embodies a strategically nuanced hedging strategy, facilitating its navigation through the influences exerted by both superpowers while safeguarding its national interests. This intricate relationship is molded by historical connections, economic dependencies, and considerations on regional security.

The primary role, termed 'building influence in Thailand', the influence exerted by China in Thailand has transformed considerably, especially across economic, cultural, and diplomatic spheres. In historical context, the bilateral connection has changed from being adversarial in the Cold War times to becoming one that emphasizes cooperation, driven by aligned interests and transformations in the geopolitical framework (Cai et al., 2024). This advancement has made it feasible to carry out China's soft power frameworks, evident in the setup of Confucius Institutes, which are created to strengthen cultural bonds and elevate the Chinese language and cultural norms throughout Thailand (Tungkeunkunt, 2016).

The second referenced political role in Thailand, termed 'military capability'. China's military capacity in Thailand is defined by an expanding collaboration that epitomizes Thailand's strategic maneuvering amidst global power dynamics. This association has undergone substantial transformation, with Thailand progressively seeking assistance from China for military advancement and procurement, while concurrently preserving its affiliations with the United States.

The third political role is ‘financial dependence and environmental impact’. The BRI of China has increasingly oriented itself towards environmentally sustainable development, thereby fostering eco-friendly tourism and tackling ecological challenges within Thailand (Hung, 2024). The BRI serves as a catalyst for investments in renewable energy and sustainable urban design, which are vital for the ecological integrity of Thailand (Zhang et al., 2023).

The last role is ‘China’s national interest in Thailand’. China’s national interest in Thailand encompasses a diverse array of dimensions, influenced by economic, geopolitical, and historical determinants. Although bilateral relationships are frequently characterized as a fraternal bond, they are predominantly governed by pragmatic assessments of national interests on both sides. China perceives Thailand as an indispensable ally within its BRI, which seeks to augment trade routes and economic connections throughout Southeast Asia (Rappa, 2016). Thailand functions as a pivotal channel for Chinese commodities entering ASEAN markets, thus rendering it strategically vital for China’s economic proliferation.

The researcher’s comprehension of the PRC’s political assessment pertaining to Thailand elucidates a multifaceted interaction of historical circumstances, national prerogatives, and changing viewpoints. During World War II, China worked to assert its power in Thailand, intending to combat the anti-Chinese regime. Nevertheless, these initiatives were impeded by Thailand’s hesitance and the external resistance from Western powers. Thailand’s diplomatic strategy concerning China was chiefly driven by national interests, perceiving China’s expanding influence as a prospective menace to its security. The perception of China as a potential long-term adversary has significantly influenced diplomatic strategies, underscoring the necessity for a prudent approach to engagement.

**4.5 Geopolitical Role of China in Thailand.** Thailand’s advantageous geographical positioning as the center of ASEAN significantly amplifies its geopolitical influence in relation to China by functioning as a central hub for commerce, investment, and logistics. Its local benefits enhance the connectivity between China and other ASEAN countries, establishing it as an essential foundation for FDI. This strategic placement empowers Thailand to capitalize on its relationship with China while judiciously preserving its associations with other ASEAN members, thereby achieving a balance in regional dynamics and promoting economic advancement through initiatives such as the BRI.

The primary role, termed ‘Thailand’s strategic location’, substantially contributes to the geographical location of Thailand within Southeast Asia, significantly influencing China’s strategic interests, especially concerning economic and geopolitical factors. Located centrally within the Mekong area, Thailand acts as an essential link for China’s BRI, boosting commerce and connectivity throughout Southeast Asia.

The second referenced geopolitical role, termed ‘Thailand’s natural resources,’ is marked by considerable mineral abundance, especially in antimony, potassium, and tin; however, the nation

encounters obstacles in the sustainable governance and utilization of these resources. The diplomatic strategies of Thailand about resources are gradually merging with China's goals, notably via efforts like the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) and the BRI. This affiliation underscores both opportunities and frictions in resource management and regional collaboration.

The third geopolitical role is 'stability of Thailand', influencing various economic, political, and security factors. As Thailand navigates its relationships with both China and the United States, it endeavors to sustain a delicate equilibrium that advances national interests while circumventing excessive dependence on either power. This relationship is marked by both collaboration and tension, manifesting the complexities inherent in regional geopolitics.

The last one referenced the geopolitical role in Thailand, termed 'Thailand is a battleground between the U.S.-China'. Thailand's role on the geopolitical front has rendered it a vital scene in the enduring clash between the U.S. and China. As both global powers strive for dominance, Thailand has implemented a hedging strategy, meticulously balancing its affiliations to sustain stability and foster economic development. This methodology enables Thailand to adeptly maneuver through the intricacies of international relations while circumventing the risks associated with taking definitive sides.

China's geopolitical analysis of Thailand is profoundly influenced by historical affiliations, economic interests, and the strategic complexities inherent in the U.S.-China rivalry. Thailand's distinctive role as a regional buffer state enables it to navigate complex relationships with both superpowers, whilst China endeavors to augment its influence via economic initiatives and military presence in Southeast Asia. To maintain its foreign relations, Thailand utilizes a strategy that balances its ties with both the U.S. and China which allows Thailand to sustain domestic stability and foster inclusive economic development, while navigating the prevailing geopolitical tensions. Thailand's strategic position in connection to China's landscape is profoundly affected by its geographical indicators, which promote economic and geopolitical engagements. These indicators encompass nearness to China's western provinces, maritime passages, and regional development initiatives that correspond with China's BRI.

**5. Conclusion.** China's foreign policy with Chinese characteristics represents a strategic framework that integrates the nation's unique political ideology, historical context, and global aspirations, driven by both internal motives including cultural traditions, governmental leadership, and economic modernization, as well as external factors that shape China's international strategies. This comprehensive approach manifests distinctly in China's relationship with Thailand, where historical ties dating back to the tributary system have evolved into a modern strategic partnership characterized by the diplomatic narrative of "China and Thailand are brothers." The relationship has significantly strengthened since Thailand's 2014 coup, with enhanced military cooperation, joint exercises, and increased Chinese military equipment

procurement, while Thailand maintains its traditional “bending with the wind” foreign policy strategy to balance relations with major powers.

The economic dimension of China–Thailand relations demonstrates remarkable depth and complexity, with bilateral trade reaching \$126.3 billion in 2023 and China maintaining a \$25.1 billion trade surplus. China’s economic engagement encompasses multiple roles: as Thailand’s primary consumer market influencer, a major investor in Thai resources through foreign direct investment, and a key partner in infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The China–Laos–Thailand transportation corridor exemplifies this cooperation, enhancing logistics and trade connectivity while respecting Thailand’s economic autonomy policies. Chinese investments, including the Thai Chinese Industrial Zone in Rayong, demonstrate China’s strategy to foster overseas investment, though concerns exist regarding “grey capital” involving both legal and illegal commercial activities that complicate the economic relationship.

China’s political and geopolitical roles in Thailand reflect sophisticated power dynamics within the broader Sino–American competition framework. China has successfully built influence through cultural diplomacy, including Confucius Institutes, soft power initiatives, and leveraging the substantial Chinese diaspora in Thailand to enhance bilateral relations and economic exchanges. Thailand’s strategic geographic position as ASEAN’s center amplifies China’s geopolitical interests, serving as a crucial hub for the BRI and facilitating China’s economic expansion throughout Southeast Asia. However, this relationship exists within Thailand’s careful hedging strategy, where the nation functions as a buffer state navigating between Chinese and American influences while maintaining neutrality and domestic stability.

In summary, China’s multifaceted engagement with Thailand represents a comprehensive manifestation of Chinese foreign policy with Chinese characteristics, encompassing economic partnerships worth over \$126 billion annually, strategic military cooperation, cultural influence through soft power and diaspora networks, and geopolitical positioning within ASEAN. This relationship exemplifies China’s broader regional strategy while accommodating Thailand’s balancing act between major powers, creating a complex but mutually beneficial partnership that serves both nations’ strategic interests within the evolving global power structure.

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