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Beyond myths: Unpacking Thailand's soft balancing in foreign policy toward China

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ABSTRACT

Amid intensifying great power rivalry between the United States and China, how does Thailand navigate its foreign policy direction? Since the coup in 2014, Thailand has often been portrayed as bandwagoning with China. Through documentary analysis, empirical data, and case study methods, this article challenges that myth by arguing that elements of balancing exist, albeit in a soft form. This “soft balancing” is driven by Thailand’s prerequisite conditions to restrain China’s power through institutions without resorting to hard military measures. The strategy spans three dimensions: security, economy, and diplomacy. Evidence suggests that Thailand employs soft balancing by capitalizing on its alliance with the United States, imposing conditions on infrastructure investments as well as diversifying partnerships, and leveraging ASEAN institutional mechanisms. By unpacking Thailand’s soft balancing in practice, this article contributes to debates on secondary state alignments, particularly regarding how secondary states respond to great power competition and China’s growing influence, and offers policy lessons for other smaller states on deftly maneuvering toward greater powers.

KEYWORDS: soft balancing, U.S. alliance, Thai foreign policy, China

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1. Introduction. Following the 2014 coup, Thailand has been widely perceived as bandwagoning with China while distancing itself from its longstanding ally, the United States, amid intensifying great power competition between Washington and Beijing (Pongsudhirak, 2016; Han, 2018; Shambaugh, 2018). This perception contradicts the conventional wisdom of realism, which holds that states tend to balance against rising powers. China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea and its expanding economic domination through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Thailand's neighboring countries such as Laos and Cambodia raise concerns for Bangkok, despite the absence of a direct security threat. As a longstanding U.S. ally with a long history of maintaining its sovereignty, Thailand is determined not to be dominated by China either economically or strategically. Yet, overt hard balancing policies, such as military buildup or confrontation, could prove excessive, risk provoking China, and potentially trigger a security dilemma in the region. Moreover, China is of great economic significance. This raises the central question of how Thailand navigates its alignment choices and responds to China's growing influence. This article argues that the notion of Thailand's bandwagoning with China is a myth, and that its balancing efforts exist, albeit in a soft form. It aims to examine the conditions under which Thailand pursues soft balancing and how such strategies are employed in practice. In doing so, this article contributes to the studies on secondary state alignments and Thai foreign policy by challenging prevailing misperceptions. This paper employs a documentary analysis based on official reports, academic articles, books, and news reports. Empirical data including the joint military dataset, the SIPRI arms transfers database, and World Bank trade volume are also used. A case study of Thailand is employed to illustrate how a secondary state responds to China through soft balancing strategies across different dimensions. The discussion begins with a review of the theory of soft balancing. It then presents the conditions that prod Thailand toward this strategy, followed by empirical evidence of Thailand's soft balancing in action.

2. The Theory of Soft Balancing . After the fall of the Soviet Union, the global balance of power shifted from bipolarity to unipolarity led by the United States. As a sole hegemon, the United States no longer faced challengers or balancing powers as it did during the Cold War. This cast doubt among scholars about the viability of realist theory. For instance, Wohlforth (1999) notes: "...the second-tier states face incentives to bandwagon with the unipolar power as long as the expected costs of balancing remain prohibitive" (p. 8). Likewise, Lebow (1994) criticizes realism for its failure to explain the post-Cold War phenomenon in which the United States became uncontested. However, believing that such a phenomenon was only temporary, Waltz (2000) contends that unipolarity is likely to be "the least durable of international configurations" (p. 27). As he suggests, it is only a matter of time before new challengers emerge. Today, the rise of China has largely confirmed Waltz's speculation. In fact, even in a unipolar world, there were still balancing attempts against the United States. When the United States sought to conquer Iraq in 2003, several major powers made efforts "to delay, frustrate, and even undermine" the U.S. war plans (Pape, 2005). Suggesting that major powers were concerned about

Bush's unilateralism, Pape implies that balancing still persisted even in the post-Cold War context. Such efforts took the form of soft balancing rather than traditional hard balancing. The question here is what is soft balancing? Since hard balancing involves military tools – including domestic military buildups (internal balancing) and alliance formation (external balancing) – that could not be employed against the United States, weaker states have been compelled to find alternative ways to check and balance the power of the hegemon.

There is no consensus among scholars regarding the definition of soft balancing. According to Pape (2005), a state can employ soft balancing, which primarily relies on non-military tools, “to make a superior state's military forces harder to use without directly confronting that state's power with one's own forces” (p. 36). This implies that soft balancing is mainly for weaker states against stronger powers. Pape further presents four mechanisms of soft balancing including: territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, economic strengthening, and signaling resolve to balance. Like Pape, Walt highlights how weaker states take diplomatic actions to tame U.S. primacy. To Walt (2005), soft balancing refers to “the conscious coordination of diplomatic action in order to obtain outcomes contrary to U.S. preferences” (p. 126). While Pape and Walt agree on the maneuver of soft balancing by weaker states against a great power especially the United States, Paul proposes that soft balancing is being employed by the United States itself against China. According to Paul, soft balancing is defined as “restraining the power or aggressive policies of a state through international institutions, concerted diplomacy via limited, informal ententes, and economic sanctions in order to make its aggressive actions less legitimate in the eyes of the world and hence its strategic goals more difficult to obtain” (2018, p. 20). While others highlight non-military efforts, Kai He and Feng (2008) point to the presence of both military and non-military efforts in soft balancing. In fact, soft balancing includes a military aspect mainly for signaling, yet diplomatic means remain the primary focus (McDougall, 2012). Moreover, Kai He (2008) contends that soft balancing is closely linked with institutional balancing, a relatively new form of balancing in which states conduct balancing strategies through multilateral institutions.

In short, different scholars define soft balancing differently, and hence soft balancing is facing a “concept-stretching problem” (He & Feng, 2008). Despite this, previous studies present two core elements of soft balancing: objectives and means. Regarding the objectives, soft balancing aims to restrain or undermine the power of the target state by making it difficult for the target state to achieve its desired outcomes. As for the means, it can involve security, economic, and diplomatic means. This can also be achieved via institutions which render balancing efforts more indirect and less confrontational. Based on these objectives and means, this paper employs this definition of soft balancing to explain Thailand's foreign policy toward China.

3. Conditions for Thailand's Soft Balancing . This section outlines the conditions that compel Thailand to employ soft balancing. Since different states have different conditions that shape their foreign policy choices, this article contends that, for Thailand, the conditions that make soft balancing a suitable option include U.S. alliance, the absence of a direct security threat, economic dependence on China, and domestic discourse.

3.1 U.S. Alliance

As one of the two only formal allies of the United States in Southeast Asia, rooted in the 1954 Manila Pact and the 1962 Thanat-Rusk communiqué, Thailand finds itself impossible to entirely abandon balancing and adopt a bandwagoning approach toward China. Categorizing states in Southeast Asia in the context of great power competition, Evelyn Goh (2016) asserts that U.S. allies cannot be hedgers, which refer to the middle range of security alignment. Goh's observation implies that Thailand, as a U.S. ally, sits on the opposite end of the spectrum from China-bandwagoning states, thereby retaining a certain degree of balancing. Although Thailand appeared to distance itself from its security patron following the 2014 coup, historical experience has proved that strategic cooperation between the two nations has been a firm feature of Thailand's foreign policy. During the Cold War, the two allies worked closely to counter the communist threat in the region. While the United States provided military and economic assistance, Thailand offered bases for American forces to fight in the Vietnam War. In the 21st century, alliance persisted, adapting to changing security challenges. In the aftermath of the 9/11 incident when counterterrorism became a new agenda for U.S. alliances, Thailand pledged full support for the U.S. War on Terror, earning the designation of a major non-NATO ally in 2003. This decision also provided Thailand with an opportunity to restore its long-strained security ties with the United States in the post-Cold War era. These historical instances demonstrate that the U.S. alliance remains a crucial condition in Bangkok's strategic calculus.

3.2 Absence of Direct Security Threat

Thailand does not perceive any traditional security threat such as territorial disputes from China despite their geographical proximity. However, like Thailand, both Japan and the Philippines are formal U.S. allies, yet they engage in territorial disputes with China, in the Senkaku Islands and South China Sea, respectively. Moreover, these states have experienced growing Chinese maritime activities, which they perceive as infringing upon their national sovereignty such as the 2010 boat collision incident near the Senkaku Islands and the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff. To safeguard their national sovereignty, Japan and the Philippines lean toward hard balancing strategies, which involves both domestic military buildups and strengthening the U.S. alliance. Recently, in response to China's assertiveness, the United States and the Philippines expanded the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Arrangement (EDCA) to include four new bases, allowing U.S. forces to be stationed on Philippine soil (U.S. Department of Defense,

2023). This move provoked a strong reaction from China (Bangkok Post, 2023). If Thailand were to adopt a similar approach, it could trigger a security dilemma in mainland Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, Thailand is primarily concerned with one non-traditional security issue: China's construction of dams on the Mekong River. These dams disrupt the livelihoods of communities in northern and northeastern Thailand, who depend on the river for farming, fishing, and transportation. The construction blocks and alters the river's flow, resulting in drought conditions. According to the Mekong River Commission, the blockage of fish migration caused by the dams could result in nearly \$23 billion in economic losses by 2040 (Chandran, 2023). Therefore, unlike Japan and the Philippines, Thailand faces no direct security threat from Beijing and hence has little incentive to resort to hard balancing since the strategy can be risky and costly (He & Feng, 2008).

3.3 Economic Dependence on China

Economic dependence on China is a key factor that concerns Thailand, particularly in the age of globalization, in which economic interdependence between states has deepened. This intensifying interdependence has amplified state's sensitivity and vulnerability (Keohane & Nye, 2011). For Thailand, China is an important and irreplaceable trading partner, ranking as the country's second-largest partner with a total trade value of USD 34,430 million, accounting for nearly 12% of Thailand's trade (World Bank, n.d.). This figure is second only to Thailand's security patron, the United States, whose trade share is approximately 16%. This shows that Thailand cannot afford to lose an important trade partner, especially in the post-COVID world where economic recovery is crucial. As mentioned earlier, hard balancing could be risky and costly due to its possibility of antagonizing China. Moreover, China is known for its proficiency in maneuvering geoeconomic statecraft, which refers to "the use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results; and the effects of other nation's economic actions on a country's geopolitical goals" (Blackwill & Harris, 2016, p. 20). This is evidenced by China's ban on rare earth mineral exports to Japan in 2010 in response to the boat collision incident, and by the ban on banana imports from the Philippines in 2012 following the Scarborough Shoal standoff, resulting in economic losses in both countries. In 2010, Japan depended on China for 90% of its rare earth elements, which were used to produce electrical components (Terazawa, 2023). Meanwhile, in the case of the Philippines, 150 containers of bananas were destroyed by mid-May 2012, costing losses of USD 760,000 (Zirulnick, 2012). Considering Thailand's economic overreliance and China's robust geoeconomic statecraft, the country is vulnerable and should avoid employing overt military strategies that could resemble the experiences encountered by Japan and the Philippines.

3.4 Domestic Discourse

Another factor that makes soft balancing more suitable than hard balancing for Thailand's foreign policy menu is the Thai public's perception of China. As Henry Kissinger (1966) observed, "foreign policy begins where domestic policy ends" (p. 503). The Thai general public still holds a favorable view of China. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, 80% of Thais have a positive attitude toward China – the highest percentage among the 35 countries studied (Silver et al., 2024). When asked about China's leadership, the survey indicates that 63% of the Thai public remain confident in President Xi Jinping's ability to manage global affairs. Despite China's growing maritime assertiveness in the South China Sea, the survey suggests that a majority of Thais (61%) are not concerned about China's territorial disputes. This is likely due to the absence of direct territorial disputes between Thailand and China, as noted previously. Apart from political views, the Thai public also considers China's economic significance. An ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (2024) survey found that 70.6% of Thais would choose China over the United States if forced to take sides, citing China's greater economic influence in ASEAN. Furthermore, many Thais retain a historical memory of China's role in helping to counter Vietnamese aggression during the Cold War following the Sino-Vietnamese split. Thus, this strong pro-China sentiment makes it difficult for Bangkok to take a confrontational stance toward Beijing, unlike other U.S.-allied nations in the region.

4. Thailand's Soft Balancing in Action . The previous section outlined conditions that drive Thailand toward soft balancing. This section examines how Thailand employs soft balancing strategies toward China in practice. It presents empirical evidence showing that these strategies encompass three dimensions: security, economy, and diplomacy.

4.1 Security

Given the absence of a direct threat, Thailand's economic dependence on China, and domestic discourse, the country is unable to pursue an overt balancing stance toward China despite its alliance with the United States. As a result, Thailand capitalizes on the institutional framework of its U.S. alliance status through the Cobra Gold exercise, the largest joint military exercise in the Indo-Pacific region. Since the collapse of Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), Cobra Gold has become a longstanding symbol of the U.S.-Thailand alliance, having been held since its inception in 1982. Despite the coup in 2014, the drill continued. According to Bernhardt's (2021) joint military exercise dataset, the number of participating U.S. troops slightly declined from 4,000 in 2014 to 3,600 in the following years. However, it skyrocketed to 6,800 in 2018 after normalization when Prime Minister Prayut visited President Trump at the White House in 2017 despite being an undemocratic leader (Chongkittavorn, 2018). In the U.S.-Thailand Joint Statement, both leaders emphasized a "stronger alliance for common security" (U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Thailand, 2017). While Thailand publicly

highlights Cobra Gold as a symbol of its alliance with the United States, it simultaneously utilizes the exercise as a soft-balancing tool against China by avoiding the formalization of a hard military alliance and refrain from directly confronting China. In the statement, despite its focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, Cobra Gold is also framed as ensuring “a free and open Indo-Pacific” (U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Thailand, 2025), signaling deterrence to China amid rising Chinese maritime expansionism in the region. This illustrates what Pape (2005) describes as a signal of resolve to balance.

In addition, Thailand's soft balancing is reflected in its arms purchases. According to Kai He and Feng (2008), military-related soft balancing entails arms sales. Although they emphasize the sales of weapons to the enemy of the target state as a means of shifting the relative power, acquiring weapons from the patron (the United States) to diversify suppliers and avoid vulnerability resulting from overdependence on the target state (China) also demonstrates Thailand's strong commitment to the patron by enhancing interoperability while maintaining strategic autonomy. U.S. arms sales, in turn, are often driven by strategic considerations to shift the regional balance of power in favor of U.S. interests (Thrall et al., 2020), which aligns with Thailand's security calculus. Since 2000, the percentage of Thailand's total weapons from China and the United States has been 20% and 18%, respectively (SIPRI, 2025). Despite a recent trend indicating a decline in U.S. military procurements (Sato & Yaacob, 2023), the data by SIPRI (2025) also suggest that the country has diversified its military procurements to include other nations such as Ukraine (11%), South Korea (9.9%), and Sweden (9.8%). There is also an internal balance within Thai military factions, with the Navy acquiring a Yuan-class submarine from China and the Air Force procuring Gripen fighter jets from Sweden, showing a sophisticated strategy of soft balancing at preserving autonomy as well as avoiding overdependence on China.

4.2 Economy

Thailand seeks to maintain its economic sovereignty and avoid Chinese domination, a situation observed in some of its neighbors, notably Cambodia and Laos, where Chinese-financed infrastructure projects have led to overreliance and issues related to autonomy. This aligns with Pape's discussion of territorial denial as a mechanism for soft balancing. Although Pape (2005) highlights denial in the realm of security, the concept can also be extended to the economic realm whereby a great power could dominate recipient countries through expanding influence via infrastructure investment. China is widely criticized for its inclusion of several conditions that infringe upon recipient countries' autonomy such as requiring the employment of Chinese labor, sourcing materials from China, utilizing Chinese technology, and relying on Chinese design and project consultancy (Aroonpipat, 2024). As soft balancing means restraining the counterpart's power or influence, Thailand's imposition of specific conditions on the Sino-Thai high-speed railway project can be interpreted as a form of economic soft balancing. Through a

project conditionality design” in which infrastructure investment is linked to specific requirements, Thailand sought to safeguard its autonomy by setting the following conditions (Bangkokbiznews, 2017):

1. Thailand will serve as the commercial developer of all railway stations and adjacent areas so that revenue will flow back to the government;
2. Civil construction must be undertaken by Thai contractors;
3. Construction materials and equipment must be sourced domestically as much as possible;
4. No construction workers from China may be brought in except for specialists such as engineers and architects;
5. High-speed train drivers must be Thai personnel from the first day of operation.

Moreover, Thailand diversifies its options by welcoming Japanese high-speed railway projects, despite slower progress compared to those with China. Emphasizing the flexibility and self-reliance for the recipient country, the Prayut Chan-o-cha administration allowed Japan to bid for the Bangkok-Chiang Mai route. This diversification exhibits Thailand’s soft balancing efforts toward China, preventing Beijing from monopolizing the projects in the country and helping maintain a geopolitical balance between regional major powers (Aroonpipat, 2024).

4.3 Diplomacy

Pape (2005) asserts that soft balancing entails the use of entangling diplomacy through international institutions. Diplomatically, Thailand primarily employs soft balancing via institutional mechanisms, particularly within the ASEAN framework. As noted by Kai He (2006), ASEAN is “a balancing tool of Southeast Asian countries to address state-to-state relations” (p. 204). Through ASEAN, Thailand – together with other secondary states in Southeast Asia – can increase its leverage in asymmetrical relationships, especially vis-à-vis great powers. By championing collective norms and rule-based mechanisms, China’s power is constrained, as reflected in the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) of 2002. The DOC not only affirmed China’s commitment to self-restraint in the conduct of activities but also signaled its acceptance of ASEAN’s institutional role in conflict settlement. According to Buszynski (2003), “small states are the beneficiaries of norms in that an ordered environment will protect their rights of access against stronger powers, which may otherwise be disposed towards the use of force” (p. 345).

Despite China’s recent growing maritime expansionism in the South China Sea, Thailand’s embrace of China within the institutional framework showcases its efforts to normalize China’s behavior and to restrain its power in the region. Moreover, Thailand has welcomed the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategies of China’s strategic rivals, as evidenced by the adoption of the ASEAN Outlook

on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) during Thailand's chairmanship of the 34th ASEAN Summit in 2019 in Bangkok. Generally, FOIP strategies – especially the U.S. and the Japanese versions – are viewed as counterweights to China. Although the AOIP is less confrontational than those versions, it nonetheless aligns with them in fostering an open, transparent, inclusive, and rule-based regional order. Emphasizing maritime cooperation, the AOIP describes unsolved maritime disputes as “the existing and arising geopolitical challenges” (ASEAN, 2019), thereby implicitly acknowledging Chinese assertiveness as one of the region's challenges. The AOIP also aims to bolster the optimization of ASEAN-centered mechanisms such as the East Asian Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), all of which underscore diplomatic soft balancing via institutions toward China (Paul, 2018).

Table 1

Summary of Thailand's Soft Balancing Strategies toward China

Security	Economy	Diplomacy
Cobra Gold	Imposing conditions on infrastructure investments	ASEAN platforms e.g. AOIP, EAS, ARF, ADMM-Plus
Diversifying arms procurement	Diversifying infrastructure investment partnerships	

Source: Created by the author.

5. Conclusion. Given the prerequisite conditions – including its U.S. alliance, the absence of a direct security threat, economic dependence on China, and domestic discourse – Thailand finds soft balancing the most suitable option for navigating its foreign policy toward China amid rising Chinese influence in the region. To safeguard its autonomy and national interests, Thailand employs soft balancing, a strategy to restrain the power of a state without direct military confrontation, in three dimensions: security, economy, and diplomacy. In terms of security, Bangkok uses the annual Cobra Gold exercise as an institutional platform to maintain security ties with Washington while signaling a degree of deterrence to Beijing. It also diversifies its arms procurement to avoid overdependence on China. Economically, Thailand has imposed conditions on Chinese infrastructure investment projects to preserve its economic

sovereignty, while simultaneously welcoming Japanese projects to prevent Chinese monopolization. Diplomatically, Thailand maneuvers ASEAN mechanisms – including the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) – to enhance its bargaining leverage and to normalize China’s growing assertiveness within a multilateral framework. Taken together, these three dimensions move beyond the myth of Thailand’s bandwagoning with China and instead illustrate Thailand’s deft use of institutions to balance China’s rising power without resorting to overt hard-balancing strategies. More broadly, the case of Thailand provides lessons for other smaller states on how to maneuver strategies toward China while safeguarding autonomy.

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