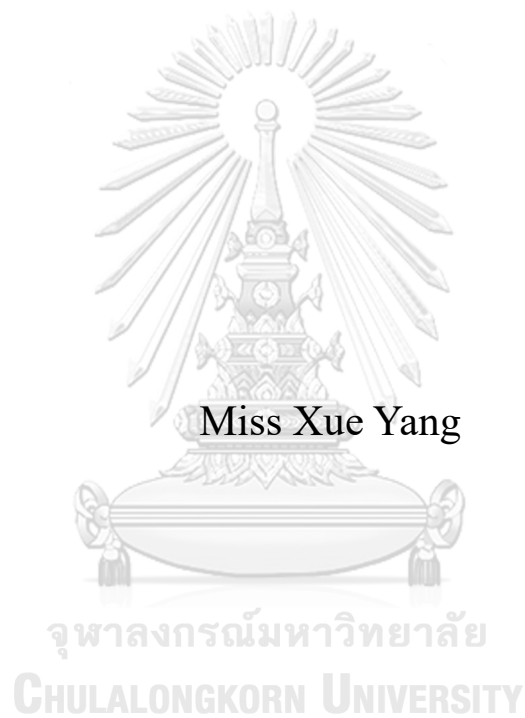


THE IMPACTS OF THE 2014 COUP ON THAILAND'S
RELATIONS WITH THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA
AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



An Independent Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts in Thai Studies

Faculty Of Arts

Chulalongkorn University

Academic Year 2023



จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย
CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

ผลกระทบของรัฐประหาร พ.ศ. 2557 ต่อความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศไทยกับสาธารณรัฐ
ประชาชนจีนและสหรัฐอเมริกา



สารนิพนธ์นี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตรปริญญาอักษรศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต

สาขาวิชาไทยศึกษา

คณะอักษรศาสตร์ จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

ปีการศึกษา 2566



จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย
CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

Independent Study Title THE IMPACTS OF THE 2014 COUP ON
THAILAND'S RELATIONS WITH THE
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
By Miss Xue Yang
Field of Study Thai Studies
Thesis Advisor Assistant Professor KANYA WATTANAGUN,
Ph.D.

Accepted by the FACULTY OF ARTS, Chulalongkorn University in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Master of Arts

INDEPENDENT STUDY COMMITTEE

Chairman

.....
(Assistant Professor NAMPHUENG
PADAMALANGULA, Ph.D.)

Advisor

.....
(Assistant Professor KANYA WATTANAGUN,
Ph.D.)

Examiner

.....
(Associate Professor WASANA WONGSURAWAT,
Ph.D.)

จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย
CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

เสวีย์ หยาง : ผลกระทบของรัฐประหาร พ.ศ. 2557 ต่อความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศไทยกับสาธารณรัฐ

ประชาชนจีนและสหรัฐอเมริกา. (THE IMPACTS OF THE 2014 COUP ON
THAILAND'S RELATIONS WITH THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF
CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA) อ.ที่ปรึกษาหลัก : ผศ. ดร.

กัญญา วัฒนกุล

นโยบายต่างประเทศของราชอาณาจักรไทยในเวทีระหว่างประเทศมักถูกเปรียบเสมือนไม้ไผ่ที่งอตามสายลม ปฏิกริยาที่แตกต่างจากประเทศจีน และสหรัฐอเมริกา ต่อรัฐประหารของไทยในปี 2557 ได้นำไปสู่แนวทางใหม่ของความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศของไทย ประเทศจีนดำเนินนโยบายต่างประเทศในการไม่แทรกแซงกิจการภายในของประเทศอื่นๆมาโดยตลอด จึงมีความสัมพันธ์อันดีกับรัฐบาลทหารที่นำโดยพลเอกประยุทธ์ ในขณะที่รัฐบาลสหรัฐฯ ซึ่งนำโดยประธานาธิบดีโอบามา ออกมาประณามรัฐประหารปี 2557 และทำการคว่ำบาตรทางทหารต่อประเทศไทย คสช. จึงตอบสนองต่อการคว่ำบาตรของสหรัฐฯและนโยบายไม่แทรกแซงกิจการภายในของประเทศอื่นจากจีนด้วยการค่อยๆถอยห่างจากสหรัฐฯและกระชับความสัมพันธ์กับจีนให้แน่นแฟ้นขึ้น จากการศึกษาจุดยืนและบทบาทของไทยในประเด็นต่างๆ เช่น โครงการเส้นทางสายไหมในศตวรรษที่ 21 กรณีพิพาททะเลจีนใต้ และการเข้าร่วมพหุภาคีทางเศรษฐกิจต่างๆ งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้พบว่า ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศของไทยได้รับผลกระทบจากรัฐประหารปี 2557 โดยมีลักษณะถอยห่างจากสหรัฐฯและสร้างความแน่นแฟ้นกับจีนทั้งในด้านการทหารและเศรษฐกิจ นอกจากนี้ งานวิจัยนี้ยังเสนอว่านโยบายต่างประเทศของรัฐบาลทหาร คสช. ไม่สามารถเรียกได้ว่าเป็นการทูตแบบไผ่ลู่ลม

สาขาวิชา ไทยศึกษา

ลายมือชื่อนิสิต

ปีการศึกษา 2566

ลายมือชื่อ อ.ที่ปรึกษาหลัก

6488055022 : MAJOR THAI STUDIES

KEYWORD The 2014 Coup, International Relations, Military Government, Thai
D: Diplomacy

Xue Yang : THE IMPACTS OF THE 2014 COUP ON THAILAND'S
RELATIONS WITH THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. Advisor: Asst. Prof. KANYA
WATTANAGUN, Ph.D.

Thailand's foreign policy in the international stage has often been compared to bamboo that bends with the wind. The contrasting reactions from China and the United States to Thailand's 2014 military coup have shaped the new orientation of Thailand's international relations. China has traditionally pursued a foreign policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, gaining favor with the military government led by General Prayuth. The U.S. government, led by President Obama, issued strong outright condemnation and military sanctions against the 2014 coup. In response to the U.S. criticism of the coup and China's non-interference policy, Thailand under the NCPO regime gradually distanced from the U.S. while moving closer to China. By examining Thailand's positions and roles in the selected agendas, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the South China Sea dispute, and the joining of multilateral economic organizations, this study found that as a result of the 2014 coup, Thailand's international relations are characterized by gradual estrangement from the United States and closer alliance to China in regard to both military and economic relations. Moreover, this study proposes that the foreign policy of the military government during the NCPO regime cannot be described as "bending with the wind" diplomacy.

จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย
CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

Field of Study: Thai Studies

Student's

Signature

Academic Year: 2023

Advisor's

Signature

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, sincere thanks to my advisor, Ajarn Kanya. I benefited a lot from Ajarn Kanya's intense academic enthusiasm and rigorous logical thinking. Throughout the paper writing, Ajarn patiently gave me valuable advice every time. I am very grateful to Ajarn Kanya for her effort and time on my paper.

Secondly, I would like to thank Ajarn Namphueng and Ajarn Wasana of the defense committee. Thanks Ajarn for giving me the chance to pass the defense, and all the Ajarn's comments were used in my final paper revision.

Furthermore, I would like to thank my family for their unselfish support and encouragement all the time.

Finally, I would like to thank all the kind teachers and friendly classmates in Thai Studies program. Especially Khun Terk usually provides a lot of help for us to complete our studies. Moreover, thanks to the school for providing us with a high quality learning platform and colorful learning opportunities. The wonderful time strolling around the CU campus will be one of the most beautiful scenery of my youth.

Xue Yang

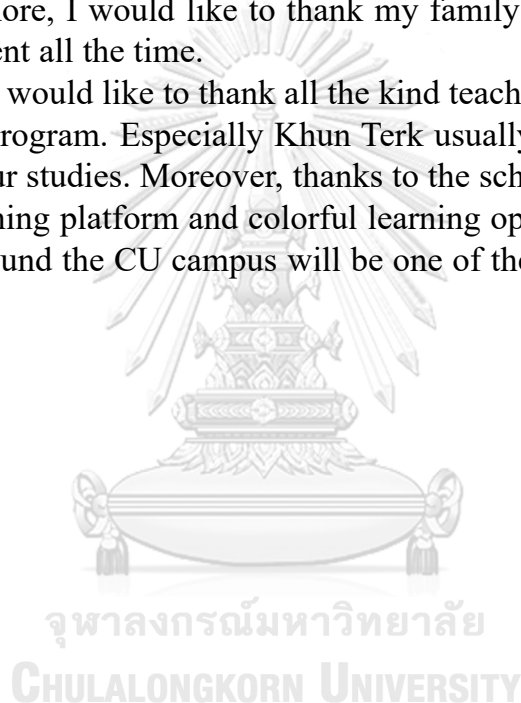


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1.Introduction

1.1Rationale

Since the 19th century, Thailand's international relations under different administrations have been affected by an unstable domestic political situation and tested by a complex external international environment. Against this background, Thailand has maintained good international relations, preserved its national independence, and even become the only country that did not experience Western colonization in Southeast Asia. Undeniably, this is closely related to Thailand's comprehensive and effective consideration of international relations in the formulation of its foreign policy. Since its transformation from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in 1932, Thailand has experienced 13 successful military coups. Each new government that comes to power inevitably adjusts its relations with different countries in line with its own policies. After the 2014 coup, the Thai government was led by the former army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who served from 2014 to 2019 as Thailand's Prime Minister and the chairman of National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). After the military coup, the international community generally expressed concern. Under the leadership of General Prayuth, Thailand has actively participated in international affairs, seeking to gain more understanding and support from the international community on the situation in Thailand. As the reactions of different countries to the 2014 coup in Thailand varied greatly, the NCPO has made appropriate adjustments to the direction of Thailand's international relations in the face of the different voices from the

international community on the coup.

1.2Hypothesis

During the NCPO regime, Thailand allied closer to China that adopted non-interference approach to Thailand's military government. In the meantime, Thailand started to distance herself from the U.S., which express disapproval of the 2014 coup. This closer alliance with China and alienation from the U.S. are apparent on Thailand's increasing collaborations with China and reduced cooperation with the United States of America.

1.3Research questions

(1)What was China's reaction to the 2014 coup? How did this reaction affect China-Thailand diplomatic relation?

(2)What was the US's reaction to the 2014 coup? How did this reaction affect USA-Thailand diplomatic relation?

(3)What were concrete evidences of Thailand's closer alliance with China and Thailand's distancing from the U.S. under the NCPO regime (May 2014-July 2019)?

1.4Objectives

(1)To study China's reaction to Thailand's 2014 coup and the ways in which this reaction shaped China-Thailand diplomatic relation.

(2)To examine the US's reaction to Thailand's 2014 coup and the ways in which this reaction shaped USA-Thailand diplomatic relation.

(3)To present and analyze concrete evidences of Thailand's closer alliance to

China and Thailand's distancing from the US under the NCPO regime (May 2014-July 2019).

1.5 Methodology

(1) Document research

Through sources such as Chulalongkorn University Library, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, this paper collects information about the 2014 coup in Thailand, Thailand's international relations and Thailand's foreign policy under the NCPO regime. Primary sources on the 2014 coup d'état and Thailand's international relations include relevant news and official reports or documents from May 2014 to July 2019. The official information comes from the official websites of government agencies such as foreign ministries and embassies of different countries. As well as from authoritative Thai and international agencies such as The Nation, Thairath, Bangkok Post, Reuters and TIME magazine.

(2) Comparative research

This paper compares and contrasts Thailand's different positions towards China and the US in the same period in order to form a comparative perspective that reveals Thailand's alliance with China in contrast to the country's alienation from the US.

1.6 Literature review

1.6.1 On the 2014 coup

About the coup d'état in Thailand in 2014, scholars at home and abroad have made a profound analysis on the outbreak of the coup d'état. A few months after the 2014

coup, Thitinan Pongsudhirak director of ISIS (Institute of Security and International Studies) at Chulalongkorn University published an article titled "Thailand: The Coup and its consequences" (Pongsudhirak 2014). The article suggests that compared to the "half-baked" 2006 coup, the May 22, 2014 coup can be considered "all-in". Because the NCPO has not delegated power to any bureaucracy, as in the previous coups. From the start, the NCPO has concentrated power in a military dictatorship. Pongsudhirak predicted that NCPO policies may become arbitrary and capricious. The NCPO and Prayuth will be under pressure to stick to the election timetable, but may also delay the vote unless the junta can control the post-election outcome, perhaps the NCPO may try to form a political party or co-opt some politicians to maintain power. In addition, a master thesis *Political Conflict and the 2014 Coup D'ETAT* of Praphaporn Siha, Chulalongkorn University (Siha 2017), showed that the military utilized political conflict to justify the 2014 coup d'état. Political rallies and protests have caused social unrest, and the military has gradually become involved in politics by trying to adjust its role. Military began as a moderator, bringing together both sides of the political conflict to negotiate a solution to the political situation. The military then overthrew Yingluck's government and seized power in the name of the guardian. Finally, the military becomes the ruler, controlling power and administering the country.

The International Crisis Group published a report entitled "A Coup Ordained? Thailand's Prospects for Stability" (2014), it noted that since coming to power, the NCPO has banned political gatherings. The 2014 interim constitution of Thailand gave

the NCPO vast powers. It conspicuously downplays the role of elected representatives as well as any means of popular political participation. In the authors' view, this approach suppressed and silenced, rather than resolves, arguments about political legitimacy. On the third anniversary of the May 22, 2017 coup, Thai Lawyers for Human Rights analyzes the role of the judiciary in the coup. In a report entitled "The Miracle of 'Law': the Judiciary and the 22 May 2014 Coup", the group explains in detail how the July 2014 interim constitution granted Prayuth and the NCPO members immunity from another coup and any attempts to insurgency. The NCPO regime could not have successfully governed Thailand without the active role of the judiciary. Similarly, the 2021 Chulalongkorn University master thesis *Militarization of Thai legal system during the coup regime:2014-2019*, Doungkamon Praditduang studies the military's involvement in Thailand's legal system after the 2014 coup. The NCPO enacts laws to control those who express political views opposed to the NCPO, ultimately infringing on the rights of the people and the free judicial process. The study found that laws under the NCPO regime undermines liberal democracy. The NCPO's use of the law does not serve to limit the power of the state (NCPO), but rather to use the law as a tool to achieve long-term rule, resulting in the destruction of Thai democracy.

And "The Path of Military Power Interference in the Politics of Thailand" (2014), Septyanto Galan Prakoso discusses the reasons why Yingluck's government was opposed, not only by the amnesty bill proposed by the Pheu Thai Party, but also by the fact that the Yingluck Shinawatra family was hated by some stakeholders. In this

situation, the wishes of Yingluck's political opponents were realized when the military seized power from the government, and the military may have played the role of executor in the 2014 coup.

In 2015 Peace Research Institute Frankfurt published a report entitled "Civil-Military Relations in Thailand since the 2014 Coup", Paul Chambers analyzing the coup from the perspective of civil-military relations in Thailand and arguing that it is possible that the 2014 coup was an attempt to secure monarchical rule in Thailand. From "Introduction: Understanding Thailand's Politics" of Veerayooth Kanchoochat and Kevin Hewison published in *Journal of Contemporary Asia* in 2016, it can be known that the key actors in Thailand's political struggle include the military, the monarchy, the bureaucracy controlled by state officials, the powerful bourgeoisie, the politically active middle class, and the oppressed lower class. After the 2014 coup, the junta engaged in a broad crackdown on the opposition, including the imposition of martial law, the issuance of special decrees, and the stricter enforcement of the draconian *lèse-majesté* law. Another article published in the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, "The 2014 Thai Coup and Some Roots of Authoritarianism" (2016), Chris Baker analyzes that while the military executed the 2014 coup, forces from outside provided the impetus for the coup. In addition to the PDRC organized and planned the protests, the official and professional elites who use the public space of the media, and the businesses operating in the context of street protests are two key factors. For example, in early 2014, the Council of University Presidents, the medical network, and the

Federation of Thai Industries, called on Yingluck's government to resign, citing rising violence and a declining economy. Besides, ongoing street protests held by the PDRC require a lot of resources and preparations, and significant financial support is likely to come from corporations. The author also mentions the development of an oligarchy in Thailand around the three pillars of the monarchy, the military, and the bureaucracy. Thaksin is seen as a serious challenge to the oligarchy. The goal of the 2014 coup was not only to abolish Thaksin's influence, but also to gear Thai politics towards an authoritarian direction.

1.6.2 On the effects of the 2014 coup

Several studies on the impact of the 2014 coup was mainly focus on the domestic level, among other things: The article "Thailand's Relapse: The Implications of the May 2014 Coup", Claudio Sopranzetti argues that Thailand is oscillating between authoritarianism and democratic rule, and that the 2014 coup undermined democratic achievements, leading to the possibility that Thailand's democratization process will be interrupted once again and that it will fall into dictatorship. In "The 2014 Military Coup in Thailand: Implications for Political Conflicts and Resolution" (2016), Janjira Sombatpoonsiri argues that the junta's promise to restore peace and unity was an attempt to cover up the conflict. Rather than solving the political conflict in Thai society, the 2014 military coup planted a time bomb of conflict traps that could explode in the future. The article "Towards recentralisation?: Thailand's 2014 coup, tutelage democracy and their effects on local government" (2020), Andrew Harding and Rawin

Leelapatana assesses the negative impact of the 2014 coup on the decentralization process in Thailand. The authors suggest that the fate of Thailand's devolution is linked to the entrenched struggle between two forces, the Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts.

In addition to the democratic aspect, from the 2015 report "Repression, Resistance, and the Law in Post-Coup Thailand" (2015), Tyrell Haberkorn describes in detail the impact of the 2014 coup on Thai law. The junta has actively used the law to maintain regime stability and a climate of fear was created. Of course, Thailand's economy was also affected by the 2014 coup. "Thailand in 2014: Another Coup, a Different Coup?" is an article from *Asian Survey*, Kitti Prasirtusk shows that political turmoil has slowed exports and reduced tourists, resulting in Thailand's economic growth rate in Southeast Asia in 2014 being the lowest. In another article "The Economic Impact of Geopolitical Unrest on Thailand's Tourism Industry" (2018), Johan Van Rooyen states that although the 2014 coup d'état led to a drop in travel to Thailand, it only had a short-lived impact, with tourism starting to pick up again less than three months later.

Contrary to the widely held belief that coups have a negative impact, in "Good coup, bad coup. Evidence from Thailand's financial markets" (2018), Sutsarun Lumjiak examines the short and long term impacts of the 2014 coup on Thailand's financial markets. The study shows that uncertainty of the coup has instead created new investment opportunities. Moreover, in the long run, the coup may boost the country's development. This is because the 2014 coup d'état put an end to the political uncertainty

that had long hampered the economy. During the junta, currency markets were less volatile and foreign investors had more confidence in the military-led government. After the coup, many investment projects were approved and this will contribute to Thailand's future stability and economic competitiveness. The 2019 article, "The Impact of Coup d'états on the Relationship between Stock Market and Exchange Rate: Evidence from Thailand", Kamonchai Rujirarangsana analyzes economic data before and after the 2014 coup. The study suggests that the short-term impact of the coup on the Thai baht exchange rate is both good and bad.

A number of studies examine the impact of the 2014 coup in the social sphere, for example, "Mass Surveillance and the Militarization of Cyberspace in Post-Coup Thailand" (2016), Pinkaew Laungaramsri found that the military after the 2014 coup further consolidated a stable regime by managing cyberspace. The junta uses a number of techniques to block and censor the Internet. The authors argue that mass surveillance not only jeopardizes Thai democracy but also stifles the culture of individual freedom in Thai society. In "The effects of coups d'état on journalists: The case of the 2014 Thai coup as both exemplary and exceptional" (2020), Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman analyses the use of journalistic discourse and public discourse about coups d'état. The main pressure that journalists face on a daily basis, and the most serious constraints that existed in the post-coup environment of 2014 were the *lèse-majesté* constraints that came from the Thai authorities. The report "The value of family control during political uncertainty: Evidence from Thailand's constitutional change in 2014" (2020), Tanapond

Swanpitak examines the impact of the constitutional reform caused by the 2014 coup in Thailand on family business decision-making. The study found that Thai family firms sacrificed minority shareholders' interests in order to increase firm viability during periods of political turmoil. "The Influence of Military Coup 2014 on Public Trust Among Student in Thai Public Services" (Azhari, Sripokangkul, Kamil, Sulistyaningsih 2020), this paper refers to the changes in the government's public service policy as a result of the new constitution following the coup d'état in 2014. If public trust in government is high, then any form of government production will be welcomed. When governments fail to meet the needs of the public, tensions and violence often arise between policymakers and their recipients.

1.6.3 Foreign policy under special circumstances

In the paper, Thai diplomacy is understood through literature research when international relations are the subject of the study. Most of the literature indicates that Thailand's diplomatic tradition is known for its pragmatism and flexibility, which is especially evident in the changing world landscape in the post-Cold War period. For example, "Thailand's Foreign Policy in the post-Cold War Period: Uncovering New Actors in the Foreign Policy-making Process towards Neighbouring Countries" (2015), Pasuwat Yathip describes Thailand's foreign policy during Cold War and post-Cold War periods. During the Cold War, Thailand's foreign policy was entirely the responsibility of security-based government institutions. Since the end of the Cold War, Thailand's foreign policy has been economically oriented, and trade and investment have gradually

been used to improve international relations. As documented in the 1989 article "New Aspirations and Old Constraints in Thailand's Foreign Policy", Leszek Buszynski wrote that the foreign policy of Chatichai's last government was to build and consolidate an international coalition to put pressure on Vietnam. Chatichai, however, has been active in encouraging trade cooperation with Vietnam, emphasizing the use of foreign policy to promote economic growth. And "Bending with the wind, The continuity and flexibility of Thai foreign policy" (2002), Arne Kislenko pointed out that despite Thailand being surrounded by historic enemies and at the heart of a region beset by revolution and war, Thailand has emerged as a significant regional power in the 21st century. Thailand's foreign policy has been compared to "bamboo in the wind", firmly rooted but flexible enough to reflect a cherished philosophical approach to international relations. For example, Thailand allied with Japan during World War II, supported the United States in the Vietnam War, and has been careful to avoid ad hoc agreements with foreign powers, and under Luang Phibunsongkhram's regime, Thailand's foreign policy became decisively anti-Western, in the context of Japan's rapid rise in Asia. It can be seen that Thailand has great flexibility and pragmatism in handling foreign relations. In a master thesis from Thammasat University, *The Continuity of Thailand's 'bamboo bending with the wind foreign policy': The perception of national independence* (2018), Kornchanok Nushkasem shows that from the era of King Chulalongkorn to the Thaksin government, Thailand is free to shift or change its position, rather than following a fixed political ideology. Thailand's foreign policy is therefore free to tilt towards any country

that helps preserve Thailand's national independence. And "Thai foreign policy's continuities and changes: a comparative analysis from 2008-2014" (2021), Nguyen Huy Hoang shows that Thailand's foreign policy choices and decisions are largely influenced by international, national and personal factors. International factors, such as political and economic competition between countries, and pressures of world interdependence. National factors such as domestic political struggles, interest groups competition, and the country's traditional political values. Personal factors such as the beliefs and styles of leaders, prominent elites, and professional diplomats all play a role in influencing Thailand's foreign policy.

A number of precedent studies examines the characteristics of Thai foreign policy under General Prayuth. For instance, in "Thailand 4.0 in World Politics: The 5S Foreign Affairs Strategy" (2019), Hongpha Subboonrueng examines the Thai government under General Prayuth's leadership in making foreign policy part of the Thailand 4.0 vision. The Prayuth government's 5S Foreign Affairs Strategy is widely recognized as making the external environment more conducive to Thailand's economic development. In "Thailand's Bamboo Diplomacy in the Age of Geopolitical Rivalry: Bending or Gone with the Wind?" (2022), the associate professor of Thammasat University, Jittipat Poonkham believes that Thailand's security and foreign policy are no longer bamboo bent in the wind. In practice, Thailand's strategic partnership with China under the regime of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha has become closer and more comprehensive, rather than "bamboo diplomacy". This is mainly due to the rise of

China and its economic influence, the decline of the status of the U.S. in the region and the reduction of strategic commitment, the weakening of Thailand's national strategic posture and limited options after the 2014 coup. Western sanctions triggered by the 2014 coup have further stimulated Thailand's China-centric foreign policy. Some scholars have also defined the foreign policy of the Prayuth government as 'Complex Engagement'. In the article "Thailand's 'Complex Engagement' Approach in Foreign Policy: A Balancing Act" (2020), Supalak Ganjanakhundee clarifies that the military government's complex engagement is characterized by non-coercive, open communication and cooperative relationships of mutual understanding and interdependence in the face of both cooperation and conflict. In addition, in an article from the International Cooperation Division, Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters, "Additional Strategy for Thailand's Foreign Policy to Counterbalance Influences of The U.S. and China" (2020), Ektewan Manowong states that in the context of the new U.S.-China rivalry, Thailand needs to maintain its geopolitical importance, first by strengthening economic engagement with China, Japan and South Korea, and second by enhancing security cooperation with the US. Diversifying foreign relations by strengthening relations with other major and medium-sized countries is also a promising measure for Thailand.

1.6.4 Thailand's coup and international relations

In article "The Politics of International Sanctions: The 2014 coup in Thailand" (2014), from the Journal of *International Affairs*, Pavin Chachavalpongpun indicated

that after the seizure of power, the military government of Thailand was subject to severe sanctions from the United States and the European Union, even affecting the economic livelihoods of the Thai people, which could increase the people's discontent with the military regime. The military junta distributes economic benefits to the people and tries to gain their acceptance through various populist programs. This article mentions that the military, in the face of international sanctions, has bolstered its regime's legitimacy by allying with China and Southeast Asian countries.

In the article “Thailand: an old relationship renewed” (2017), Kevin Hewison explains that Thailand and China have a long and complex relationship. Through the period of conflict during the Cold War, the relationship between the two countries has grown with the expansion of business ties and increased bilateral investment after the Asian economic crisis. Nowadays, bilateral relations have reached a new height. Since the Thai military government came to power in 2014, China has become an important partner for Thailand, and this article mentions that in part because of the junta's inability to deal with the U.S. after the 2014 coup. Many countries in the West criticized General Prayuth's military dictatorship, and the junta sought closer relations with other countries such as China, Russia, and Cambodia, including a number of smaller countries in the Pacific and Africa. In examining Thai-Chinese relations after the 2014 coup, this article discusses aspects of infrastructure, commerce, trade, military cooperation and cultural exchanges.

In the article "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship" (2017), Pongphisoot Busbarat describes the Thai coup d'état and Thai-U.S. relations in "Post-Thaksin era". In September 2006, the military staged a coup d'état to overthrow the Thaksin regime. Similar to the 1991 coup, the 2006 coup was met with a brief condemnation and suspension of some military aid by the U.S.. The U.S.'s response to the 2006 coup was minimal, as the military government returned power to civilian rule for a short period of time. But after the 2014 coup, the U.S. not only suspend military aid and arms sales to Thailand, but also publicly criticize the junta on several occasions and reduce engagement. Unlike past coups that usually transferred power to civilian rule within a year, the 2014 coup did not make a clear commitment to new elections. The U.S. had a quiet foreign policy of conducting itself privately during previous Thai coups, since the 2014 coup the U.S. had acted and criticized loudly and openly. This has tarnished Thailand's international image and triggered an outcry from Thai elites and the junta-supporting public. They have criticized the U.S. for not understanding the complexities of Thai politics and have appreciated the understanding and support of their Asian friends. In the conclusion, this paper argues that relations may improve if both the U.S. and Thailand can take a more pragmatic approach. If the U.S. maintains its current critical attitude toward Thailand, it may push Bangkok to become more closer to Beijing.

1.7 Significance of the research

This paper examines the 2014 coup d'état in Thailand, the most recent coup d'état in Thailand to date. On the one hand, studies of the 2014 coup tend to be based on the history of the Thai military's intervention in politics, analyzing the origins of the coup and changes made by military government. This paper exclusively looks into the 2014 coup itself and the post-coup stabilization regime NCPO, which contributes to a detailed knowledge of the context of the 2014 coup and the impact it has on Thai society. This study augments existing literature on coups d'état in Thailand.

On the other hand, the profound impact of the 2014 coup on Thailand involves both political and social dimensions, which are still being extensively assessed by scholars. This paper goes beyond the domestic scope of Thailand and instead takes an international relations perspective. It also analyzes Thailand's relations with the United States and China, which provides necessary information for a comprehensive understanding of Thailand's international relations and foreign policy strategies under the NCPO regime.

2.The 2014 Coup in Thailand

2.1 The Background of the 2014 Coup

The current polarization in Thailand began in 2001 (Ward 2020), at the time, Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai party (TRT) won the 2001 election. TRT has delegated more centralized power to local management organizations, providing affordable healthcare and a large amount of loan funding for villagers (Leeahtam 2011). To stimulate people's entrepreneurship and increase income, TRT designed the One

Tumbon One Product program. TRT also increased investment in education such as One District One Scholarship program. These gave Thaksin unprecedented popularity in rural Thailand. However, the royalists argued that Thaksin's fast-growing popularity challenged the royal family's dominance, and that the TRT's policies could reconfigure Thailand's social hierarchy and even inspire a peasant insurgency (Sombatpoonsiri 2020, 69). In addition, a growing number of urban middle-class people view Thaksin's policies towards the people as unjustly populist measures (Panduprasert 2019, 9). According to political scientist Aneke Lautatas, Thaksin was considered a populist mainly for Thaksin established himself as a strongman independent of his party and was the first very popular prime minister in Thailand. At the same time, Thaksin puts emphasis on direct relationship with the people, adopts policies in favor of the poor to enhance his popularity, and opposes NGOs as a bridge between the government and the poor. Moreover, Thaksinomics is not a system that imposes policies only on the poor, it also imposes policies on other segments of society (Tangpianpant 2010, 33). Despite this, Thaksin was re-elected Prime Minister in 2005 with 377 out of 500 seats in the house of representatives (Panduprasert 2019, 82). The anti-Thaksin groups united to form the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) with Sondhi Limthongkul as its main leader. In late 2005, Sondhi's open-air talk show in Lumpini Park sparked the initial anti-Thaksin protest movement. For months Sondhi criticized the Thaksin government by holding weekly anti-government roadshows around the country. For example, he accused Thaksin of receiving 3.5 billion baht in kickbacks and forcing the military to

buy outdated old Russian warplanes, including the Shinawatra family's tax-free sale of Shin Corp to government investment corporation of Singapore. Sondhi, an outspoken critic of Thaksin's use of power for personal gain, alleged tax evasion and the sale of state assets, drew a growing number of people to the demonstrations (Schaffar 2008, 41).

In early 2006, hundreds of thousands of people participated in a series of rallies and demonstrations organized by PAD in Bangkok. Anti-Thaksin sentiments reached a boiling point in fierce street protests. In the end, during Thaksin's visit to the United Nations General Assembly, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin led the Thai army to launch a coup and appointed retired General Surayud Chulanont as Prime Minister, forcing Thaksin to flee overseas. As recently as 2006, Thaksin's supporters founded Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) to start an anti-coup campaign (Sombatpoonsiri 2020, 70).

The December 2007 elections brought Thaksin's party back to power, and the PAD took to the streets to protest the results, triggering a crisis of governance. Then in 2008, the Constitutional Court dissolved the People's Power Party (PPP), the successor to TRT. The PPP was accused of electoral fraud in the 2007 general election. Thaksin avoided arrest on the charges and fled the country after a brief five-month return. The Democrat Party, backed by the PAD forces, returned to power in 2008, and the Red Shirts' prolonged and destructive street protests against the Democrat-led government were severely suppressed in 2009 (Sombatpoonsiri 2020, 71). Large-scale Red Shirt protests and demonstrations were held in March 2010, calling for new general elections.

In April 2010 security forces attempted to forcibly disperse the Red Shirts protestors, resulting in more than 20 deaths and 800 injuries, making the clashes Thailand's worst riots in nearly two decades (Sopranzetti 2016, 300).

In the 2011 general election, Pheu Thai party won 265 of the 500 parliamentary seats and became the new ruling party. The government, led by Yingluck Shinnawatra, proposed an amnesty bill after coming to power. This amnesty bill covers all court cases related to the political conflicts occurring from 2004 to 2013. As such, the bill, if approved by the parliament, would absolve Taksin of his 2008 conviction for abuse of power, as well as the former Prime Minister Abhisit of the charge of murder, as he was held responsible for the violent suppression of the Red Shirt protestors in 2010 (International Crisis Group 2014, 9). As a result, a new round of protests started when the PAD suspected that the amnesty bill might be intended to favor former Prime Minister Thaksin. Former Prime Minister Yingluck has repeatedly reiterated that the amnesty bill is not a draft of the Government but a bill of the parliamentarians, and that the amnesty was initially intended to solve political polarization in order to move the country forward.

The PAD was reorganized in 2013 and renamed the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) under the leadership of Suthep Thaugsuban, a staunch supporter of the Democrat Party and a former Deputy Prime Minister (Kanchoochat and Hewison 2016, 314). The PDRC began its activity in November 2013 with an ongoing mass political protests against the amnesty bill. The amnesty bill was later withdrawn by the

Pheu Thai Party, but Suthep used the momentum to increase the size of the rallies with the aim of overthrowing the Yingluck government altogether. The PDRC demonstrations focused on allegations of corruption against the Yingluck government, particularly the rice pledging program. The rice pledging program has reportedly resulted in the Thai government's inability to export the purchased rice at competitive prices. The government suffered huge losses, and Thailand's National Counter Corruption Committee (NCCC) found Yingluck guilty of condoning corruption (Prasirtsuk 2015, 201).

With the country once again in political crisis, the Pheu Thai government announced the dissolution of the cabinet, hence national election was held in February 2014. However, this decision triggered a new turbulence. The PDRC protesters blocked polling stations and stormed a polling station where ballots were being printed, successfully disrupting the normal election and ultimately causing the Constitutional Court to nullify the results (Sombatpoonsiri 2020, 69). In order to continue to pressure the government, Suthep adopted a "closed Bangkok" strategy from January 13, 2014, to March 2, 2014 (Panduprasert 2019, 156). Finally, Yingluck resigned from office.

The ongoing rallies and protests led to the closure of government agencies, the blocking of several major roads in Bangkok and even the paralysis of the country (Prasirtsuk 2015, 201). For example, the stock market has plummeted, many foreign governments have issued travel warnings. After seven months of anti-government protests, the army staged a coup in May 2014 and succeeded in seizing power. On May

22, in an effort to control political conflict and social unrest, with the military acting as a mediator, General Prayuth convened leaders and senior officials of the PDRC, DP, UDD, and PTP for talks (International Crisis Group 2014, 16). However, the outcome of the negotiations was that all parties insisted on their own views and could not reach a consensus. The negotiations failed and Prayuth suddenly announced a coup d'état (Prasirtsuk 2015, 203). Prayuth said, "Sorry, I must seize power. "He ordered the detention of major Thai political figures and set up the NCPO to run Thailand (Chambers 2015, 25). In a televised address, General Prayuth vowed to restore order and implement political reforms. Prayuth said he was taking over power because “ the violence in Bangkok and many parts of the country that resulted in loss of innocent lives and property, [which] was likely to escalate”. On June 6, Prayuth said: “Our decision was based on the fact that the three main branches of national administration – executive, legislative, and judiciary – were being undermined. We therefore have had to safeguard democracy.” In addition to this, the lack of legitimacy of the government is a factor that contributes to the legitimacy for a coup d'état. Yingluck was found guilty of privately transferring Thawil Pliensri, the secretary-general of the National Security Council, to the post of adviser to the prime minister. Allegations of Yingluck's corrupted government arose as a result. This also created favorable conditions for the military to stage a coup (Siha 2017, 155).

To summarize, the ongoing protests and violence took a heavy toll on Thai society, and the crisis of political conflict in Thailand gave the military a reason to intervene in

politics, and in order to stop the conflict and bring things back to normal, General Prayuth led the military in a coup d'état and succeeded in seizing power.

2.2 Thailand under the NCPO

After the military announced the coup d'état, Thailand's political turmoil, which had lasted for many months, finally subsided. General Prayuth came to power and proposed a program for the restoration of democracy: the first phase would take about three months to essentially achieve reconciliation; the second phase would be the implementation of the interim constitution and the enactment of a new constitution and related laws; and the third phase would be the implementation of the new constitution and the holding of a national election that would result in a democratically elected government (International Crisis Group 2014, 19).

There were no further large demonstrations in Thailand in 2015, with only a few small protests, mainly by students. The NCPO lifted martial law in March 2015, but with it came Article 44 of the interim constitution. This article of the constitution gives the prime minister the power to suppress all threats to national security or the monarchy by executive order. It also guarantees the military government immunity from scrutiny and accountability (Prasirtsuk 2015, 204).

At the same time, the NCPO regime published 11 reform topics, including political, administrative, economic, and education (Prasirtsuk 2015, 204). The military froze local elections at all levels, saying the move was aimed at avoiding divisions (Smith 2017). While serving as Army Chief, General Prayuth repeatedly stated that one of the

most important tasks of the armed forces is to protect the monarchy (Suchit 2013, 179). The *lèse-majesté* law was further expanded after Prayuth came to power in 2014. Article 112 criminalizing insults and disrespect for the monarch and the royal family has become more severe and the number of arrests has increased dramatically (The Thai Lawyers for Human Rights 2017, 6). The NCPO regime seems to believe that taking a tough stance on violations of royal law will demonstrate unwavering loyalty to the crown while also galvanizing public support (Panduprasert 2019, 173). NCPO also implements tough new Computer Crimes Act to help junta suppress online political dissent (McCargo 2017, 4). To win popular support, the NCPO has also adopted new economic programs, such as welfare cards for registered low-income earners. But some are calling it a rehash of Thaksin's populism (Tamada 2019, 5).

In addition to the National Legislative Assembly (NLA), which carries out legislative functions, the NCPO has established the 250-member National Reform Council (NRC) (McCargo 2015, 331). Like the NLA, the NRC is dominated by military personnel and junta loyalists, and its membership reflects little of the diversity of opinions within Thailand. The Constitutional Drafting Committee (CDC) has 36 members, 25 of whom are elected by the NRC and the rest nominated by the Cabinet and the NCPO (Prasirtsuk 2015, 204). It is clear that the new structural power is all under the control of the NCPO, with the military dominating.

On April 6, 2017, the NCPO promulgated a new constitution to replace the 2014 interim constitution, the 20th in Thailand's history. In accordance with Article 279 of

the 2017 Constitution, the exercise of the powers and all actions of the NCPO and the head of the NCPO, irrespective of their administrative, legal or judicial validity, are legal and constitutional. Besides, Article 44 of the Interim Constitution was granted continuing effect (The Thai Lawyers for Human Rights 2017, 5). This means that General Prayuth and the military junta were still able to exercise absolute power under the 2014 Interim Constitution as well as the 2017 Constitution. Under the 2017 Constitution, the 500 seats in the House of Commons remain unchanged, with 150 members from party lists and 350 members elected (Haberkorn 2015, 242). In addition to this, NCPO had designed a new electoral system called the mixed-member apportionment system (MMA). Under the MMA system, voters cast only one ballot for a candidate. This vote counts both for the candidate and also for the party list seat of the candidate's party (no longer two votes, one for the candidate and the other for the party list). A simulation of the 2011 election results shows that Pheu Thai will be the biggest loser in the MMA system. Meanwhile, the Democrat Party will get about the same number of seats under the MMA system. The biggest winners would be the medium-sized parties. This is significant because the NCPO pulls in medium-sized parties in the election, hoping that they prevent landslide victory of one dominant party. (Kongkirati 2018, 283). The number of seats in the upper house has increased to 250, but all of them are directly appointed by the military junta. This change gives the upper house a decisive role in the election of the Prime Minister (Russell, 2020). The new constitution places the upper house under the control of the military.

In summary, the NCPO has adopted various strategies of legitimization, repression and cooptation since coming to power. The reforms implemented during the NCPO period were fundamentally dictatorial and authoritarian.

3.China’s reaction to the 2014 coup

3.1 China’s response to the coup

Friendly relationship between Thailand and China has a long history, China and Thailand formally established diplomatic relations in 1975. Despite frequent changes in Thailand's political situation and regime, no matter which Thai political party comes to power, China has always taken a noninterference policy towards Thailand’s internal affairs and actively develops friendly diplomatic relations with the kingdom of Thailand. In 1953, Premier Zhou Enlai established the foreign policy that China still pursues today, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. According to the papers and proceedings of the Second Joint Seminar of International Studies Center (Thailand) in 1991, the establishment of a New World Order (NWO) was a by-product of the Gulf War (1990-1991), at that time neither Thailand nor China had the opportunity to become NWO directors. However, China has expressed its desire to establish an NWO based on the Five Principles (Khoman 1992, 101). Chinese government has always adhered to this basic foreign policy in developing bilateral diplomacy and maintaining a healthy and harmonious China-Thailand relationship. Going back even further, in 1972, before the Kingdom of Thailand and China formally established diplomatic relations, China made a breakthrough by inviting a Thai delegation to participate in the

Asian Table Tennis Federation Championships in Beijing. The Thai government accepted the invitation and the Thai representative advisor discussed with Zhou Enlai various issues of concern to Thailand. Regarding the Chinese backing of the communist insurgency in Thailand, Zhou Enlai promised that China would not meddle in Thailand's internal affairs. The insurgency was an internal affair of Thailand and should be settled by the Thai people on their own. China respected territorial sovereignty, regional integrity and does not intervene in internal affairs of other countries (Chinwanno 2009, 86). On July 1, 1975, Thai Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj went to Beijing to sign the “Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the Kingdom of Thailand and the People's Republic of China” with Premier Zhou Enlai. Bilateral agreement to uphold the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Chinwanno 2009, 88). A new chapter was opened in 1975 with the founding of diplomatic relations between Thailand and China.

In 2014, nearly two weeks after the Thai military staged the coup, the question from foreign journalists and the answer of the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson fully demonstrated the Chinese government's firm stance of not taking sides and not interfering in Thai 2014 military coup. China's non-interference policy was clearly stated in a Chinese foreign ministry press conference hosted by Hong Lei on June 5, 2014:

Q: “The spokesperson of the Thai army said that Chinese Ambassador to Thailand visited Thai military leader Gen. Prayuth Chan-Ocha on June 4. The spokesperson also

said that this visit demonstrated China's support to Thai military regime. Does China agree with this?"

A: "Please verify relevant remarks made by Thai military spokesperson. As far as I understand, Supreme Commander Gen. Thanasak Patimaprakorn of the Thai army met with Chinese Ambassador to Thailand Ning Fukui and informed him of the current Thai situation. As a friendly and close neighbor to Thailand, China is happy to see that all parties of Thailand are stepping up dialogue and negotiation and reaching for reconciliation. We hope for early restoration of normality to the Thai situation. Over the past long time, China and Thailand have maintained good exchanges and cooperation in various fields. China attaches great importance to developing amicable relations with Thailand and stands ready to work with the Thai side to continuously push forward bilateral relations and mutual beneficial cooperation."

According to the website of the Chinese Embassy in Thailand, On October 1, 2014, coinciding with China's National Day, the Chinese ambassador to Thailand stated in his speech at the reception that since the founding of formal diplomacy between both countries, the Thai-Chinese friendship has endured regardless of the changes in the situation at home and abroad. The Chinese authorities continue to attach great importance to the strengthening of China-Thailand relations with the new Thai Cabinet that has just taken office.

On October 17, 2014, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and General Prayuth met in Milan, the first time since General Prayuth took power that he met with a senior Chinese

government leader, while Li Keqiang took the opportunity to say that relations between the both countries have maintained healthful and steady development, and the friendship between the two countries has withstood the vicissitudes of the world stage and Thailand's domestic stage. China hopes to work with Thailand to maintain senior level exchanges, fulfill the agreements reached between the two countries, expand humanistic exchanges, and promote cooperation in infrastructure, agricultural products, trade, finance and other areas. Since the 2014 coup, China has followed a strict policy of non-interference in Thailand. Beijing's leaders have focused on “making money rather than making enemies”, maintaining neutrality in Thailand's polarized politics and receiving a positive response from Thai elites who insist on solving their own internal problems without external pressure. Facts show that China's non-interference policy has effectively consolidated relations with Thailand (Chachavalpongpun 2016,3).

General Prayuth's military government came to power at a time of great adjustment of China's neighborhood diplomatic strategy, for instance, China put forward the "One Belt, One Road" initiative in late 2013. Against this background, the Chinese government is actively seeking further cooperation with Thai government. About half a year after the establishment of the Thai new government, according to the website of China's foreign ministry, Prime Minister Prayuth went to Beijing to attend the APEC economic leaders' meeting on November 9, 2014. President Xi Jinping held a meeting with General Prayuth, noting that China and Thailand were like one family. Lead by prime minister Prayuth, Thai society has remained stable and reforms are progressing

on schedule. China sincerely hopes that Thailand will achieve lasting social security and a prosperous life for the people. China is ready to work with the Thai side to expand the China-Thailand all-round strategic cooperative partnership.

In addition, according to the Chinese embassy in Thailand, 2015 marks the 40th anniversary of the founding of Sino-Thai diplomatic relationship, the Chinese ambassador to Thailand, Mr. Ning Fukui, once again emphasized China's position of not interfering in Thailand's domestic affairs in an interview with the media, he said that China upholds the principle of non-interference in the interior of other countries. No matter how the situation in Thailand changes, China's policy of developing friendly relations with Thailand has never wavered. This policy has been highly appreciated and praised by various sectors in Thailand. As China and many other Asian countries viewed the 2014 coup d'état as Thailand's internal affair and refrained from interfering, this has led to a more positive view of China. Pongphisoot Busbarat, a scholar from Chulalongkorn University, believes that Thailand's foreign policy makers may abandon their balanced stance in favor of one that is likely to satisfy the public, a change that would favor Beijing (Busbarat 2016, 241).

In summary, although the political turmoil in Thailand in 2014 led to regime change, it did not affect the development of friendly and harmonious diplomatic relations between Thailand and China. Judging from the records kept by the Chinese government's official website, the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs and the Chinese embassy in Thailand to date, the Chinese government have adopted a clear attitude of

not criticizing or condemning the military coup that took place in Thailand in 2014, and actively pushed the Thai-Chinese relationship to a new level as in the past.

3.2 Thailand's response to China's reaction

When General Prayuth was in power, it was customary to conduct a comprehensive review of the contracts signed by the previous government. This protocol induces curiosity among observers of Thai politics whether the new military government would change the Thai-Chinese relationship. But soon, such concerns proved to be redundant, and less than two months after the military coup, the second round of China-Thailand strategic dialogue was successfully held in Beijing on July 11, 2014, according to releases from the foreign ministry of China and Thailand. In the dialogue, Sihasak Phuangketkeow, Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs, gave an update on Thailand's political developments, including the efforts of the NCPO to achieve national reform through three stages, with the main goal of restoring political stabilization and creating an economic environment favourable to sustained development. Thailand fully supports China in maintaining the trend and making advances on the South China Sea issue. Thailand wishes ASEAN-China ties to be a pillar of the region's peace, stabilization and prospering. China is pleased to see a stable, united and flourishing Thailand playing a greater role in the regional and international arenas. The Thai side thanked China for adhering to the policy of not interfering in Thai domestic affairs and believed that a stable Thailand would be conducive to flourishing China-Thailand relations and regional development.

In particular, Prime Minister Prayuth paid a high-level visit to China on December 22-23, 2014, this is the best response of the new Thai government to the friendly attitude of the Chinese government towards the coup. During the meeting, China reiterates its understanding of Thailand's political situation and supports Thailand's efforts to achieve national reform, economic development and improvement of people's livelihood. Meanwhile, according to Reuters, in a year-end address to government officials after a two-day state visit to China, Prime Minister Prayuth called China a model of economic development (Lefevre, 2014). As described in Thailand's 2014 Annual Report on Foreign Affairs, the domestic political situation in Thailand in 2014 did not hinder the development of friendly relationship with China. The frequent exchange of top-level visits and contacts between the two countries not only enhanced mutual trust and close cooperation, but also promoted the development of comprehensive cooperation and strategic partnership between Thailand and China. Premier Li Keqiang visited Thailand on the sidelines of the 5th Greater Mekong Sub-Region Summit on December 19-20, 2014. And the official visit of General Prayuth, Prime Minister of Thailand, to China on December 22-23, 2014. The two meetings resulted in a number of concrete outcomes. Thai and Chinese leaders discussed issues of common concern at the bilateral, regional and international levels to elevate Thai-Chinese relations to a higher level, particularly in the areas of economic and development cooperation. The two sides signed Memorandums of Understanding in the areas of technical cooperation in railroad systems, trade in agricultural products, trade and investment facilitation, and technical

cooperation in water resources and irrigation (Annual Report 2014, 24). At the same time, Thailand and China have strengthened the cooperative partnership in a variety of areas, including safety, anti-terrorism, combating transnational crime, human rights, education, trade and investment, tourism and humanities (Annual Report 2015, 48). For instance, in 2016, Prime Minister Prayut met with Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba Group, to discuss issues such as fostering young Thai entrepreneurs, promoting e-commerce in Thailand, advocating for a cashless society, developing financial services, and encouraging tourists to visit Thailand. Both sides agreed to establish a joint working group as a mechanism of collaboration (Annual Report 2016, 46).

Under China's foreign policy of not intending to interfere in any country's internal affairs, Thailand has built a relatively strong foundation of political and commercial interests with its largest neighbor. In 2016, China signed a \$231 million deal with Thailand for the sale of submarines and tanks, and is keen to provide foreign direct investment in Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (Hemmaphat 2021, 29). General Prayuth's government has received early support and endorsement from Beijing. A series of high-level bilateral visits have led to concrete plans for Chinese infrastructure investment in Thailand (Pongsudhirak 2017, 103). As documented by the Chinese embassy in Thailand, in September 2017, Thailand was invited to attend the 9th meeting of BRICS leaders in Xiamen, China, Prime Minister Prayuth in the media interview stated that Thailand and China have always maintained strong and friendly relations in various fields. Currently, relations between the two countries are at an all-time high.

High-level visits are frequent between both countries and cooperated closely in policy and specific areas. Thailand is open and inclusive, and so is China. The two countries are genuine and dependable strategic partners. After the 2014 coup, cooperation between Thailand and China has flourished. The domestic political situation in Thailand after the coup determined the importance of relations with Beijing. The rapid development of Thai-China relations is seen as evidence of the Thai military government's tilt toward China (Hewison 2017, 125).

To summarize, under the Chinese government's foreign policy of non-interference in Thailand's internal affairs, General Prayuth's military government has also attached great importance to the many achievements made in Thai-Chinese relations, and with the joint efforts of both sides, Thailand and China have established a harmonious bilateral relationship based on mutual political trust, economic benefits and cultural comprehension during the NCPO regime.

4.The US's reaction to the 2014 coup

4.1 The United States' response to the coup

The first recorded contact between the U.S. and Thailand was in 1818. In Asia, Thailand is oldest ally of the US, and the alliance has a solid foundation on relatively close military cooperation. When General Prayuth staged the coup, the U.S. claimed that the 2014 military coup in Thailand was not justified. According to the U.S. embassy in Thailand, on May 22, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry advocated the immediate return of civil government, the restoration of democracy, and the respect of human

rights and basic freedoms, such as freedom of the press. Holding elections will only reflect the will of the Thai people and is the way forward for Thailand. In addition to expressing his desire for the Thai government to restore democracy, John Kerry emphasized that while the U.S. values its longstanding friendship with Thailand, however, the coup will be bad for U.S.-Thai relationship, particularly on U.S. relations with the Thai military.

Following this, the U.S. took strong measures to oppose Thailand's 2014 military coup. On May 24, the office of the spokesperson for foreign affairs of the United States of America issued a statement entitled "Cancellation of U.S.-Thailand Engagements". The statement indicated that in reply to the 2014 military coup, the U.S. department of defense had canceled ongoing military exercises and a number of high-level exchanges and training programs with Thailand, in addition to the previously announced suspension of foreign assistance to Thailand. It also urged Thailand to immediately return to civilian rule and release detained political leaders. Different from the former coup in 2006, the 2014 coup was coupled with severe limitations on civil freedoms, and it quickly became clear that the resumption of civilian rule and elections will be slowly, and possibly not entirely democratic. It caused the Obama government to adopt a tougher stance against the Thai junta than it had in the past, involving more open criticizing of Thailand's democracy and human rights (Blaxland and Raymond 2017,1). According to another statement "Thailand: A Democracy at Risk" from the U.S. embassy in Thailand on June 24, 2014, the United States expresses discontent with the

2014 coup. In the beginning, the U.S. was hopeful that the Thai military would quickly hand over power to a civil government as the coup d'état in 2006, and move toward free and fair elections. However, the 2014 coup has resulted in a long military rule where dissenters were subject to oppressions.

The United States asserts that, under United States law, with few exceptions, no United States foreign assistance may go to a country whose democratically elected leader of government has been overthrown by military coup or decree. Consequently, the Obama administration pressured General Prayuth's government by implementing diplomatic sanctions, mainly on military cooperation, in order to pressure Thailand into holding general election and restoring democracy. According to the statement "Thailand: A Democracy at Risk", the 2014 coup and post-coup crackdown make it unlikely that U.S. relations with Thailand will continue as usual. To protest against the 2014 coup, US withdrew more than \$4.7 million in security aid and canceled senior-level contacts with the Thai military and police, together with a number of exercises and training programs. A number of other countries adopted similar sanction measures. The U.S. hopes that this mighty international signal, coupled with pressure from within Thailand, will ease Thailand's repressive activities and lead to an early return to democracy. For the Obama administration, the political conditions for the restoration of regular diplomacy and politics with the U.S. are a concrete timetable for the restoration of a democratic government in Thailand and the urgent resumption of civilian and political freedoms (Cogan 2018, 27).

As documented by the U.S. embassy in Thailand on January 26, 2015, during the Obama administration, when U.S. assistant secretary Daniel Russell visited Thailand in early 2015, he further worsened the already troubled U.S.-Thai relations with his speech at Chulalongkorn University. During the visit, Russell did not meet with Prime Minister Prayuth, but prior to his speech Russell met with Foreign Minister Thanasak Patimaprakorn, and with former Prime Minister Yingluck, former Prime Minister Abhisit. All spoke of the importance of reconciliation and working towards a democratic future for Thailand. At the same time, some of Russell's speeches were regarded by the Thai government as serious interference in Thai politics. Russell was blunt that when the authorities who staged a coup overthrow, impeach, and criminally charge a democratically selected leader, undermining basic democratic processes and institutions, the international communities are left with the image that this is likely to be driven by unjustified and politically driven ulterior motives. The end of the state of siege throughout Thailand and the removing of limitations on freedom of expression and assembly are essential measures to accommodate and do justice to the broad diversity of viewpoints within Thailand. Russell's visit was handled very poorly, in addition to provoking resentment at the official level, and it fueled anti-American sentiment among the Thai public to some extent (Maier-Knapp, 2015). Supporters of the Prayuth junta urged the U.S. to mind its own business.

Obama's Asia-Pacific rebalance is aimed at reassuring regional actors, especially ASEAN members, that it will maintain and strengthen US's strategic, diplomatic, and

economic presence in the subregion. It also aims to gradually integrate China into the regional order. With the U.S. condemnation of the Thailand's 2014 coup, the security alliance between both sides has become significantly strained, and the Obama administration's relations with the Thai military government have markedly deteriorated, developments that have largely undermined the goals of the Asia-Pacific rebalance strategy (Tow 2017,5). External criticism from the United States was seen as an effort to destabilize Thailand's fragile regime after the Obama administration urged the country to return to what Washington considers a democratic government (Tow 2017,6).

During the NCPO regime, Thai-US relations, damaged by the Thai 2014 coup, briefly rebounded in 2017. On January 20, 2017, Donald Trump became the new president of the United States, at the beginning of Trump's presidency, Thailand's military government adopted a neutral stance toward Trump. Relations between the two countries were almost at lowest point during Obama's tenure, and President Trump is likely to recalibrate the values and interests that shape the bilateral alliance. Trump's geopolitical engagement in Southeast Asia will likely be dominated by business interests and less focused on human rights and democracy (Pongsudhirak 2017, 104). Prime Minister Prayuth was invited to visit the U.S. from October 2 to 4, 2017. President Trump's invitation to Prime Minister Prayuth to visit the U.S. is an effort by the U.S. to restore normal diplomatic relationship between Thailand and the United States. General Prayuth and President Trump met to discuss ways to strengthen bilateral

ties and enhance cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. It is the latest sign of warming relations between Thailand and the United States after the 2014 coup (Reuters, 2017). However, compared to the Obama administration, the Trump administration has paid little attention to ASEAN, and President Trump has held few bilateral meetings with Southeast Asian heads of government. At the same time, President Trump has withdrawn from a number of international agreements under the "America First" policy, disregarding the interests of Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries (Storey and Cook 2020, 112). In addition, the Trump administration's trade war with China has also hurt the economic interests of Southeast Asian countries (Kipgen and Nagal 2021, 82). These has led to a sharp decline in trust among Southeast Asian countries in the Trump administration's foreign policy. The impact of President Trump's election on Thailand and Southeast Asia has been disruptive (Zawacki 2021, 311). Overall, the Trump administration's foreign policy toward Thailand has improved to a certain extent during the NCPO regime. It allowed Thai-US relations to rebound briefly after nearly three years of silence, but did not further achieve long-term stable Thai-US friendly relations.

4.2 Thailand's response to the US's reaction

Since the 2014 coup, in response to the hardline attitude of the Obama administration in the United States, the Thai government has emphasized that Thailand is an independent country capable of handling its own internal affairs. Thailand-USA relations have hit rock bottom in the face of the Obama administration's tough rhetoric and gestures in support of democratic rule (Pongsudhirak 2020, 6). In an effort to ease

tensions between the United States and Thailand, the U.S. sent Daniel Russell to Thailand in early 2015, the first high-level U.S. visit to the country since the 2014 coup. However, to Thailand's extreme displeasure, Russell's public and inappropriate remarks about the Thai military junta during this visit aroused the anger of senior Thai government officials, including General Prayuth. General Prayuth's government believed that Russell's assessment of the Thai political situation was one-sided and ignored the complexity of Thailand's situation. The Thai authorities warned the United States not to interfere in Thai political affairs. General Prayuth told reporters that it was sad that the United States did not understand why they had to intervene or how they worked, even though Thailand and the United States had been close allies for many years. He also stated that the recent incident should not affect the overall relationship and that Thai-US relations should continue to develop normally. Despite good defense relations and good personal relationships between senior Thai and U.S. officials, the level of mutual trust among Thai officials has declined significantly, especially after the May 2014 coup. Some Thai military personnel have expressed concern about U.S. interference in Thai politics, seeing it as a threat to Thailand's security (Chongkittavorn 2019,6). On January 29, 2015, The Nation published an article titled "The Ugly American is alive and Kicking", sharply criticizing that if the United States continues to act like an "ugly American" in its foreign policy by applying double standards, the Thais have every right to say that this has gone far enough. Time has changed and the

United States should know how to treat other countries as equals. Failing that, Thailand and the United States should go their separate ways.

Throughout the NCPO regime, General Prayuth's government has experienced a setback followed by a brief period of improvement of Thai-US relations under Obama's and then Trump's administrations. Based on a reassessment of the international environment, in 2019 the General Prayut government has made it clear in Thailand's 20-Year National Strategy (2018 - 2037) that: "In the next 20 years, the environment at home and abroad will undergo great changes. Fast and important, such as having many superpowers in the region, is an external factor that can be good for Thailand. As a medium-sized country, Thailand needs to maintain a balance between national interests and international principles among major powers."

Although Prime Minister Prayuth made a smooth visit to the United States in 2017, as a response to the Trump administration's "America First" strategy and the outbreak of a global trade war that hurt Thailand's interests, the clear position of General Prayuth government can be seen in a TIME magazine interview with Prime Minister Prayuth in July 2018, Prime Minister Prayuth told TIME that President Trump practiced his 'America First' principle. Currently, the US seems less promised than ever to smaller regional allies such as Thailand, one of the 10 members of ASEAN. Washington seems to be a bit occupied with its own problems right now. Some distance seems to exist between the U.S. and ASEAN. As far as regional rivalries are concerned, there are none. Thailand has thousands of years of friendship with China and about 200 years with the

United States. China is Thailand's number one partner.

In summary, General Prayuth's regime was been publicly condemned by the Obama administration on an ongoing basis since it came to power in 2014, Thai leaders were deeply dissatisfied with this treatment. As a result, U.S.-Thai relations have been relatively cold in the three years following the coup, it was the U.S. condemnation for the Thai 2014 coup that led to the rapid deterioration of Thai-U.S. relations. Of course, Thai-U.S. relations have warmed up since the Trump administration came to power, but no steady improvement has been realized in the long run, especially judging from Prime Minister Prayuth's interviews in 2018, and it is safe to say that there has been a rift in Thai-U.S. relations during the NCPO regime.

5.The consequences of 2014 coup on Thailand's international relations

5.1 Closer alliance to China during the NCPO regime (May 2014-July 2019)

5.1.1 Strengthening diplomatic and economic relations

An indicator of interstate relations is the frequency of high-level interactions between countries, especially the exchange of visits by top leaders, which is a significant factor in the development of intercountry relationships. Therefore, by observing the frequency of high-level interactions between Thailand and China, it is evident that the leaders of the two countries invest on the improvement of Thailand-China relations. The list of delegation visits and meetings between Thailand and China, under the civilian government led by Yingluck Shinawatra (2012-2013) in comparison to the first year of the NCPO regime, are shown in the table below.

Table 1 Thailand's Delegation visits of the PRC from 2012-2013

Year	Date	Delegation	Purpose of the visit	Total
2012	17-19 Apr	Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs visited the People's Republic of China.	China and Thailand decide to establish comprehensive strategic partnership.	2
	1-5 Jul	Minister of Foreign Affairs visited the People's Republic of China.	Promoting Thailand-China relations and ASEAN-China cooperation to new heights.	
2013	25 - 26 Feb	The Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs visited the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China.	Discussion and exchange of views on trade and investment developments.	3
	28 - 29 Aug	The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs attended the Special ASEAN – China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Beijing, PRC.	Promoting a comprehensive and in-depth exchange of views between China and ASEAN and reaching important consensus.	
	2 -3 Sep	The Prime Minister attended the 10th China – ASEAN Expo in Nanning, PRC.	Promoting new opportunities for China-ASEAN cooperation and development.	

Source: Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Annual Report (2012-2013)

Table 2 Thailand's Delegation visits of the PRC in 2014

Year	Date	Delegation	Purpose of the visit	Total
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2014	21 May	The Permanent Secretary, as Special Envoy of the Prime Minister, attended the Fourth Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) Summit in Shanghai, People's Republic of China.	Build a new Asia of peace, stability and cooperation.	6
	11-12 Jul	The Permanent Secretary, acting for the Minister of Foreign Affairs, co-chaired the 2nd China – Thailand Strategic Dialogue in Beijing with the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of China in Beijing, People's Republic of China.	To exchange of views on regional and international issues of mutual interest.	
	15 -20 Sep	The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs (General Tanasak Patimapragorn) attended the 11th China – ASEAN Expo in Nanning and met with leaders from the PRC and other countries in Beijing, People's Republic of China.	To promote bilateral trade and relationships between China and the ASEAN.	
	6 -11 Nov	The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs attended the 26th Asia – Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Ministerial Meeting and met with his counterparts in Beijing, People's Republic of China.	To promote regional economic integration.	
	10 - 11 Nov	The Prime Minister attended the 22nd Asia – Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Meeting and met with other leaders in Beijing, Peoples' Republic of China.	Strengthening economic cooperation and promoting trade and investment facilitation.	
	22 -23 Dec	The Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs made an official visit to the People's Republic of China.	Taking Thailand – China relations to a higher ground particularly in the areas of economic and development.	

Source: Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Annual Report (2014)

The comparison reveals that from May-December 2014, the frequency of high-level interactions between Thailand and China increased significantly. Since the beginning of the NCPO regime, the frequency of high-level visits between Thailand and China were more frequent in comparison to official visits to China during the period of previous civilian government led by Yingluck Shinawatra. This is an indicator of Thailand's closer alliance to China after the 2014 coup, especially in regard to economic collaboration and regional integration.

It is worth noting that the increase in Thai-Chinese friendship visits during the NCPO is also tied to the appointment of key leadership figures by Prime Minister Prayuth. Mr. Don Pramudwinai was appointed Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs by the military government in August 2014. He was then promoted to Minister of Foreign Affairs in August 2015. Mr. Pramudwinai has served in the MFA since 1974, having traveled with Minister Khuekrit Pramot to Beijing to establish diplomatic relations. Moreover, Mr. Pramudwinai previously held the post of Ambassador of the Kingdom of Thailand to the People's Republic of China from 2001 to 2004. And according to the Chinese Embassy in Thailand, on July 11, 2019, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in sending a congratulatory message to Mr. Don Pramudwinai on his reelection as Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand, said that Foreign Minister Pramudwinai attaches great importance to the development of relations with China and the promotion of China-Thailand friendship and cooperation in various fields. Over the past four years,

the two sides have met many times, had in-depth communication and reached consensus on almost all issues.

In addition, key players in the development of Thai-Chinese military relations played important roles in the Prayuth military government, such as General Prasert Wongsuwan (Sae-Tung 2019, 156). After the 2014 coup, Wongsuwan was appointed by Prime Minister Prayuth to serve as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense. In 2014, General Prawit Wongsuwan led the shift to China, with the support of a pro-China lobby made up of retired generals (Nikkei Asia, 2018). Thailand's security relations with China can be said to have developed well under General Prawit Wongsuwan, and one of the reasons for this may include General Prawit's friendly relations with China in the security field (Sae-Tung 2019, 114). In a meeting with General Prawit on December 2, 2017, Chinese Ambassador to Thailand Lyu Jian said that Deputy Prime Minister Prawit has contributed to promoting the development of friendly relations between China and Thailand. For a long time, it has enhanced political mutual trust between the two countries and promoted military exchanges and cooperation.

It can be seen that when Prime Minister Prayuth appointed the key leaders of the military government's foreign relations, the important consideration of Thailand's international relations was to be close to China because the personnel who were experienced in dealing with China or amicable towards China were appointed to

important positions. It is enough to show that the Prayuth military government attaches great importance to the friendly relations between Thailand and China.

Respecting trade relations, statistics reveal that import-export rate between Thailand and China during the NCPO regime surpasses Thailand-US trade growth.

Table 3 Data on trade between Thailand and U.S. from 2014 to 2019 (in million USD)

Year	Export	Import	Total amount	Growth rate
2014	23,968	14,675	38643	+2.44%
2015	24,093	13,959	38052	-1.53%
2016	24,561	12,127	36688	-3.58%
2017	26,634	14,897	41531	+13.2%
2018	28,123	15,201	43324	+4.32%
2019	29,719	16,062	45781	+5.67%

Source: The World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) trade databases

Table 4 Data on trade between Thailand and China from 2014 to 2019 (in million USD)

Year	Export	Import	Total amount	Growth rate
2014	25,084	38,498	63582	-2.13%
2015	23,732	41,065	64797	+1.91%
2016	23,800	42,030	65830	+1.59%
2017	29,506	44,239	73745	+12.02%
2018	30,175	49,953	80128	+8.66%

2019	28,068	45,793	73861	-7.82%
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Source: The World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) trade databases

According to the detailed trade data presented above, after the 2014 coup, total trade between Thailand and the U.S. gradually declined under the Obama administration. The import-export rate then rose sharply under the Trump administration, especially in 2017 when the growth rate rose to 13.2% in comparison to -3.58% of 2016. However, this improvement was surpassed by the trade volume between Thailand and China, given the total amount of transaction in each year that almost doubles the amount of Thailand-US trade. The comparison also reveals that Thailand's trade volume with China steadily expanded from 2014-2018. The growth rate only dropped in 2019, yet the total amount of transaction during this downturn period still surpasses that of the US. In 2017 and 2018 in particular, China has become the largest importer and exporter of Thailand. In addition, this paper also notes that in Thailand's bilateral trade, Thailand's exports to China are always smaller than its imports, while Thailand's exports to the U.S. are always larger than its imports. In this regard, throughout the NCPO period, Thailand was the relatively profitable party in Thailand-U.S. trade, while Thailand was the relatively losing party in Thailand-China trade. Nonetheless, the Thailand's military government has maintained its growing trade cooperation with China rather than choosing to strengthen trade with the United States. The data on Thailand-China versus Thailand-US trade volume from 2014-2019,

together with other evidences that will be presented in the following sections, indicate that Thailand was oriented toward China's economic sphere during the NCPO regime.

5.1.2 Thailand-China Railway Project

China has initiated a high-speed railway project as subcomponent of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and under the frame of the BRI, Beijing plans to explore several infrastructure programs in Southeast Asia. One of the pillars is the Trans-Asian Railway network, envisioned to connect China's southwestern Yunnan province with Southeast Asia. The Thai and Chinese governments have been discussing the possibility of developing a high-speed rail link in Thailand since 2010, and the first high-speed rail agreement was signed between Thailand and China during the Abhisit government, but the project was abandoned with the dissolution of the Abhisit government (Lertpusit and Suvakanta 2023, 38). During Yingluck's government, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Thailand, on October 11, 2013, and signed the MOU on the railroad project with Thailand. Prime Minister Yingluck told reporters after meeting with Premier Li Keqiang that China had expressed interest in helping Thailand develop high-speed rail, and that Thailand was willing to cooperate with China at the governmental level and use agricultural products to pay for part of the cost of the construction (Associated Press, 2013). In November 2013, serious political conflict erupted in Thailand, with large-scale rallies and protests taking place at more than a dozen locations in the capital city of Bangkok. Due to the political situation within Thailand, the Thailand-China railway project was once again put on hold. After General Prayuth came to power in 2014,

Thailand's Minister of Defense, General Prawit Wongsuwon expressed the desire for cooperation on the Thailand-China railway project during his visit to China on October 29, 2014. Soon after, on December 19, 2014, under the joint witness of Prime Minister Prayuth and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, Thailand and China successfully signed the China-Thailand Memorandum of Understanding on Railway Cooperation. It means that the Thai-Chinese high-speed rail project under the Prayuth administration has formally reached a consensus. However, the Thailand-China railway project cooperation has been problematic, with Thailand and China not always agreeing on the details of the project cooperation. According to *The Nation*, from January 2015 to May 2016, Thailand and China held nine negotiations on the railway project. Thai agencies and their Chinese counterparts were in dispute over a number of issues, such as are interest in land, investment program and cost inputs. After many negotiations, the two governments finally agreed to build the Bangkok-Korat section first. The Thai government will invest in the project itself, but construction will rely on Chinese technology and a Chinese loan to Thailand at an interest rate of 2 percent (Aiyara 2019, 340).

The reason for the slow progress of the Thailand-China railway project is not only the disagreement between the two governments on the details of the construction, but also the opposition of some bureaucrats in Thailand to the project. Although the interim constitution gives absolute authority to the military government, some Thai officials have called for the suspension of the Thailand-China railway project because they

question whether the construction is legal (Aiyara 2019, 341). As reported by The Nation, in June 2017, Prime Minister Prayuth issued a blanket order under Article 44 of the interim constitution granting a number of legal exemptions for the Thailand-China railway project, already delayed for nearly two years. President Xi Jinping met with General Prayuth in Xiamen, the two countries signed the Joint Action Plan for China-Thailand Strategic Cooperation and documents in BRI construction, railways and other fields on September 4, 2017. Finally, on December 21, 2017, the first phase of the Thailand-China railway project (Bangkok-Korat) officially started. The groundbreaking ceremony was held in Nakhon Ratchasima province, attended by General Prayuth who delivered a speech. In his speech, Prime Minister Prayuth said that the Thai-Chinese high-speed rail project will stimulate Thailand's economic growth and promote regional connectivity, and make Thailand a transportation and logistics hub for ASEAN, enabling the country to achieve sustainable development and move towards becoming a high-income country. During his trip to China in April 2019 to attend the 2nd BRI Summit, General Prayuth said that the Thai government has made significant progress in effectively implementing the China-Thailand railway project. Like the Chinese saying goes, "Working together, everything goes well." The construction of the Songnen Bridge, the first large bridge in the first phase of the China-Thailand railway cooperation project, was successfully completed on July 6, 2022, according to the China Railway Network, and according to a report by Thai PBS on August 19, 2023, the construction of the China-Thailand railway from Bangkok to

Nong Khai province is progressing smoothly, the 250.77 kilometers of the first phase (Bangkok-Korat) is almost 40% complete.

The Thailand-China railway, as a flagship project of Thailand-China cooperation, was first publicly proposed by the Abhisit government, and went through the Yingluck government until the Prayuth government finally started construction. In general, under the leadership of the NCPO, Thailand has become an important country for the substantial advancement of China's BRI.

5.1.3 Position on the South China Sea Issue

The South China Sea is a dispute over island sovereignty and maritime delimitation between China and Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia. Moreover, the U.S., though not a party in the South China Sea dispute, has also interfered in it. As a result, Vietnam and the Philippines have attempted to further curb China's influence in the South China Sea dispute and have intentionally moved closer to the United States (Busbarat 2016, 3). Thailand is also a non-party to the South China Sea, a country with a long history of collaboration with the U.S., and a founding member of ASEAN. These many identities make Thailand's choice of position in the South China Sea dispute an important intermediate variable that affects the development trend of the South China Sea issue. Thailand served as a coordinator between relevant ASEAN countries and China on the South China Sea dispute. More importantly, Thailand has played a constructive role in the effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). Under the

NCPO, Thailand facilitated or hosted various formal and informal meetings to promote mutual trust between relevant ASEAN relevant countries and China, and to maintain contacts and consultations between the two sides, thus creating a favorable atmosphere and conditions for the negotiation of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC). Under Thailand's active coordination, ASEAN countries and China have been able to fully communicate with each other, and the China-ASEAN Conference on the implementation of the DOC was successfully held on May 18, 2017, in Guiyang, China. The meeting adopted the framework of COC. This marks significant progress in the consultation phase of solving the South China Sea issue, and lays an essential foundation for all parties to promote the drafting of the COC (Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Annual Report 2017, 90). Prayuth's military government lends active support of the achievement of an effective and substantive COC. Thailand's MFA, as the lead agency, has worked closely with relevant internal agencies to facilitate the COC negotiation process. It has pushed the completion of the first reading of the draft COC and initiate the second reading in 2019 (Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Annual Report 2019, 9).

In fact, Thailand was a disinterested bystander when the situation in the South China Sea was tense in 2007-2008. In 2012, although Thailand also served as coordinator, it has done little to push for the COC (Storey 2015, 11). Until the NCPO regime, in addition to promoting the DOC and the COC, Thailand took actions that seem to indicate its inclination toward China in the South China Sea issue. In 2019, the U.S.

enhanced its presence in the South China Sea. The U.S. has expanded military forces and littoral navigation tactics, while strengthening its coordination with Japan, Australia and other allies to increase force involvement in the South China Sea (China.org.cn., 2019). In the meantime, also in 2019, Thailand and China held “Blue Strike” joint naval training. The joint training was held in Zhanjiang, Guangdong Province, bordering the South China Sea. According to Thairath, “Blue Strike-2019” is a good opportunity to strengthen the naval relations between the two countries, and most importantly, it reflects that the long-standing good friendship between China and Thailand will be even stronger. In addition, in February 2019, China and Thailand held strategic consultations in Chiang Mai to exchange in-depth views on the South China Sea issue. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai, both sides stressed that relevant countries should continue efforts to peacefully resolve disputes in the South China Sea through friendly consultations and negotiations. It is obvious that Thailand under the military government attaches great importance to maintaining cooperation with China on the South China Sea issue, showing its willingness to assist China in working toward agreement with relevant ASEAN countries.

The South China Sea issue is complex and sensitive, involving territorial sovereignty disputes of many countries. Since 2014, under the leadership of General Prayuth, substantial progress has been achieved in advancing the peace settlement. Thailand, as the coordinating country, facilitated the COC negotiations, easing tensions on the South China Sea. The NCPO’s stance on the South China Sea dispute is an

explicit proof of growing mutual trust and cooperation between Thailand and China, and closer Thailand-China relations during the NCPO regime.

5.2 Thailand's estrangement from the United States after the 2014 coup

5.2.1 Reducing arm purchase from the U.S.

For Thailand, the choice of source country for arms purchases can reflect the level of closeness of the military relationship between the two countries. By comparing the total amount of arms purchased by Thailand from the U.S. and China during the different government periods of 2011-2013 and 2014-2019. It is found that Thailand's total arms purchases from the U.S. during the Yingluck government far exceeded the transactions with China. However, during the NCPO regime the opposite was true, as Thailand purchased armaments more from China. This apparent shift reflects the fact that during the NCPO regime, the military partnership with the United States was not as strong as it had been under Yingluck's government.

Table 5 Data on Thai Arms Purchases from the United States and China in 2011-2013 (in million USD)

Countries	2011	2012	2013	Total
United States	50	21	54	125
China	2	18	22	42

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database

Table 6 Data on Thai Arms Purchases from the United States and China in 2014-2019 (in million USD)

Countries	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
United States	32	27	46	29	49	10	193
China	7	1	77	131	52	97	364

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database

Armament purchase from China outran the purchase from the U.S. in 2016, while the first two years of the NCPO regime the transaction with U.S. was far exceeded by the purchase from China. This may be because the purchase completed during these first two years were secured by the contracts made before the coup. However, since 2016, the total amount of Thailand's arms purchase from China increased exponentially. While on the U.S. side, despite the Trump administration that resumed military aid to Thailand in 2017, Thailand's armament purchase from the U.S. still lagged far behind in comparison to the transaction with China, which reached its peak in the very same year when the U.S. resumed military relations with Thailand. This may be related to the military government's mistrust of the U.S. and its fear that arms embargo may be imposed on Thailand again should the Thailand-U.S. relations deteriorated in the future (Storey 2019, 4). Armament purchase can be taken as an indicator of the relations between Thailand and the two world superpowers after the 2014 coup. Thailand did not rely on the U.S. as much as it did while Thailand-China military relations have progressed significantly since 2014.

5.2.2 Thailand-U.S. Military Security Cooperation

The common bond in Thailand-U.S. relations lies in the military relationship. During the Cold War, as communism grew and prospered in the region, including China, posing an imminent threat to the United States. Thailand became a key ally of the U.S. in safeguarding its strategic benefits in Southeast Asia. The United States enjoys privileged rights to use Thailand's armed facilities, such as airports and harbors. And Thailand enjoyed privileged access to U.S. for arms transfers and weapons purchases, as well as financial and technological supports (Kittivorapoom 2019, 23). Thailand and the United States have developed an increasingly close relationship since the signing of the 2012 Joint Vision Statement for the Thai-U.S. Defense Alliance. The 2014 military coup put considerable pressure on Thai-U.S. military security cooperation. Thailand consistently received significant military aid from the U.S. through various programs. However, due to the 2014 military coup, the U.S. canceled a significant amount of military aid to Thailand, but the Obama administration attempted to make compromises to preserve U.S. strategic benefits (Kittivorapoom 2019,66). The U.S. continues to hold Cobra Gold joint military practice with Thailand as usual. In response to the 2014 coup d'état, the U.S. has only scaled down the Cobra Gold exercise, but has not canceled it. The Obama administration has left room for the continuity of military security cooperation as a pillar of U.S.-Thai relations. But on the Thai side, in response to the Obama administration's tough stance condemning the Thai 2014 coup, the NCPO downgraded Thailand-U.S. military security cooperation. The Thai government has reconsidered its decision on the

source countries of military weapons purchases. Following the 2014 military coup, Thailand has chosen to buy more weapons from China than the United States. In 2016, for example, the Thai Army signed a contract with China to purchase 50 VT-4 main battle tanks to substitute for the 1950s M-41 U.S.-built tanks, and is valued at \$231 million (Bangkok Post, 2019). Also, according to the SIPRI, Thailand signed 10 significant weapons contracts with China, including the biggest defense purchases ever made by Thailand: \$1.03 billion for 3 diesel- electric submarines and 48 battle tanks (Bangkok Post, 2019).

Even though the U.S. did not totally sever military relations with Thailand after the 2014 coup, it cannot be said that there were no consequences. The Royal Thai Navy has participated in the U.S.-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) military exercises every time since 2010. Except for 2014 when the U.S. did not invite Thailand to participate in RIMPAC due to the Thai military coup. From a diplomatic point of view, Thailand's not being invited to participate in RIMPAC in the June 2014, such a military snub from the U.S. to Thailand was a clear sign of spoiled relation between the two countries (TIME, 2014). After all, Thailand has been a stable military ally of the U.S., and military cooperation between the two countries is an important component of Thailand-U.S. relations.

Another evidence reveals a setback in Thai-US security relations. After the 2014 coup, the Prayuth government has not always responded to requests made by the U.S. to use air bases in Thailand. U-Tapao airport was once a military airfield for the Royal Thai Navy

and an important U.S. airbase during the Vietnam War. In 2004, the U.S. navy briefly rented the airfield for Indian Ocean tsunami relief, and in 2008, the U.S. military used the airfield to provide assistance for Tropical Storm Nargis in Myanmar. The Utapao is an essential logistical base for the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific region. However, it is noteworthy that during the NCPO regime, the military government reduced the US's access to Thai air bases. For example, after the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, Prayuth's military government allowed the U.S. to station 16 transport planes and aerial refueling tankers at Utapao Airport for three weeks as part of the Nepal earthquake relief operation (The Diplomat, 2015). However, in May 2015, the U.S. asked Thailand to allow to the use of Phuket or U-Tapao airports as temporary bases for U.S. aircraft on the mission of monitoring the smuggling of Rohingya refugees via sea route. Thailand did not directly accede to the U.S. request, instead citing security considerations and demanding more operational details. Thailand has said it is willing to consider the request, on the condition that the U.S. carry out the operation under the supervision of Thai authorities. In the end, the military government did not approve the use of Phuket or Utapao airfields as temporary bases for U.S. surveillance aircraft to take off. Thailand has only allowed U.S. aircraft to fly over its waters accompanied by Thai aircraft to help with the refugee crisis (The Diplomat, 2015). Although maritime military cooperation has been an important means for Thailand to maintain its alliance with the U.S., in 2015 the Thailand did not grant all of U.S.'s requests for the use of airbases. The Prayuth military government's refusal is evidence of the weakening

of the U.S.-Thai military alliance.

5.2.3 Not Joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is a trade deal with 12 member countries led by the U.S.. In Asia, the TPP includes Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Brunei. The deal includes cuts in trade tariffs and the elimination of trade barriers, as well as accords on trade related issues (Bhaopichitr, 2015). Thailand finally decided not to join the TPP, despite the fact that during Yingluck's government, Thailand clearly expressed its intention to join the TPP. At a joint press conference in Bangkok in 2012, Yingluck stated to President Obama that Thailand would start TPP negotiation and take the required domestic legal procedures to bring TPP membership to reality. However, eagerness was not shared by Prayuth's government. In September 2015, after meeting with the U.S.-ASEAN business delegation, General Prayuth publicly stated that such an important TPP agreement could make or break Thailand. Thailand must be careful about joining the TPP and must consult various ministries, especially the Thai Ministry of Public Health (Parameswaran, 2015). It can be seen that the military government had no positive intention of wanting to join the U.S.-initiated TPP, in stark contrast to the eagerness of the earlier civilian government. In October 2015, U.S. Ambassador to Thailand Glyn Davies stated that the U.S. welcomed the Thai junta with open arms and hoped that Thailand would join the U.S.-led TPP trade agreement without having to wait for Thailand to reorganize into a fully democratic government (Wong-Anan and Jitcharoenkul, 2015). Following an interview with reporters in Bangkok in November

2015, General Prayuth again stated that the TPP agreement needs to be thoroughly studied. Careful consideration must be given before making a decision on whether to join or not (Takenaka, 2015). Definitely, joining the TPP requires a detailed evaluation of the costs and rewards in economic and social terms. For example, if Thailand becomes a member of the TPP, Thailand will have to observe the intellectual property rights of TPP member countries, inclusive of pharmaceutical intellectual property rights. Doing so may make medicines in Thailand much more expensive. However, not joining the TPP might result in lost opportunities for some of Thailand's exporters of apparel and agriculture goods to the U.S. Also businesses that depend on U.S. direct investment, and workers in those industries will be negatively impacted (Bhaopichitr, 2015). Overall, the military government's decision not to join TPP, in contrast to the country's joining China-led RECP, implies that the military government inclined towards China's economic sphere.

The TPP was the centerpiece of the return-to-Asia strategy under the Obama administration, and the TPP could become the world's biggest free trade agreement. But in 2017, President Trump made good on his promise to withdraw from the TPP as quickly as he became president. President Trump argued that the TPP agreement could accelerate the decline of the U.S. manufacturing industry, lowering wages and increasing inequality (McBride, 2021). According to a report by The Nation, Bangkok's decision not to join the Washington-led TPP may have been the right one. Thailand has become a member of the RCEP, which includes China in the lead. RCEP originated

from two separate proposals for free trade agreements led by China and Japan in 2006. After study and deliberation, it was decided in 2011 to merge the two proposals into an ASEAN-led RCEP agreement (Wilson 2015, 349). In response to the TPP, that excludes China, Beijing has pledged to support the RCEP, which doesn't include the United States (Busbarat 2016, 250). The TPP and RCEP are competing agreements, and they both seek to bring regional governments on board (Wilson 2015, 350). In contrast to its reluctance to join the TPP, Prayuth government was enthusiastic about the RCEP and has made substantial progress. On November 22, 2015, at the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister Prayuth, together with ASEAN leaders and leaders from other countries, issued a joint statement on the RCEP negotiations (Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Annual Report 2015, 40). During Thailand's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2019, Thailand pushed for the completion of negotiations on all chapters of the RCEP among the 15 member countries, and paved the way for the successful signing of the RECP (Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Annual Report 2019, 1).

It is noteworthy that before the U.S. withdrew from the TPP, the Obama administration conveyed to Thailand's military government its desire to see Thailand joining the TPP. However, Thailand under the NCPO did not accept the U.S. invitation or showed interest in the TPP, unlike the earlier enthusiastic response given by the Yingluck government. At the same time, Thailand actively participated in RCEP, which excludes the United States. Thailand's stance on these two international agreements under the NCPO regime suggests that Thailand has moved away from the U.S.-led

regional cooperation strategy during the military rule.

6. Conclusion

After the military coup in Thailand in 2014, according to the analysis of available information from both official documents produced by government agencies and academic sources, Thailand was condemned and even sanctioned by the U.S. for the coup. Meanwhile, China's non-interference policy towards the coup won the favor of the NCPO. Under the leadership of the NCPO, Thailand made moves that strengthen its relationship with China while distancing itself from the US. Such adjustment of position was obviously shaped by China's and the US's different stances on the 2014 coup. In the face of condemnation by the United States, the military personnel, in particular General Prayuth, has likewise expressed a strong stance against interference in Thailand's internal affairs. However, in practice Thailand did not abruptly or explicitly sever relations with the US. Instead, the distancing was gradually achieved via reduced collaborations in different domains. As for China's non-interference policy, this led to the more explicit inclination of Thailand toward China. After the 2014 coup until 2019, Thailand's relations with the PRC and the U.S., as reflected on trade, military security cooperation, railway project development, South China Sea issue, and international trade agreement selection, seem to be best described as gradual distancing from the US and explicitly favoring China.

The prevailing view is that Thailand's foreign policy is like the flexible and practical bamboo that moves with the wind and has firm roots. I believe that this may

not be enough to explain the features of the Prayuth military government's diplomacy. Bending with the wind usually used in the Cold War and post-Cold War era. During the colonial era, Siam faced two major colonial threats, France and Britain. In World War II, the country that posed the greatest threat to Thailand was the rising Japan. Later, during Prem Tinsulanonda's administration, the state threat took the form of political ideology and the spread of communism posed a serious threat to Thailand. By the Thaksin Shinawatra administration, the main challenge facing Thailand was suffering from the effects of the financial crisis (Nushkasem 2018, 69). Against these backgrounds, the Thai government has used the foreign policy of "bending with the wind" to help Thailand gain or secure national independence (Nushkasem 2018, 67). "Bamboo diplomacy" has occurred so repeatedly that many scholars consider it an important and distinctive feature of Thailand's diplomacy nowadays. But I'd like to contend that "bending with the wind", as Wasana Wongsurawat remarked in her feedback to the earlier draft of this paper, is not the right description of Thai diplomacy. The situation has been simply that Thailand always sides with the winners.

To elucidate, after the 2014 military coup was condemned by the Obama administration, instead of trying to redress the rift in Thailand-U.S. relations, the military government responded with an equally stiff retort or action. Even under the Trump administration, the U.S. quickly expressed its good intentions to improve Thailand-U.S. relations, but the Thai military government was not so eager to improve its spoiled relation with the U.S. It can be said that whether the U.S. attitude is relatively

harsh or friendly, the Thai military government has attempted to reduce the U.S. influence on Thailand and instead moving closer to China. This move seems to reveal choice rather than just forming or maintaining international relations for the immediate or short-term gains. This paper proposes that diplomacy during the NCPO period can be described as “moderate engagement”, because Thai military government makes a choice and determines the degree of intimacy. In recent years, with the rapid rise of China, the U.S. influence may have declined. The choice made by the Thai military government was not radical and decisive, but merely sought the advantages of China and the U.S. , and then decided on the degree of intimacy or estrangement, and in the end was able to keep dealing with all parties at the same time. Therefore, this paper argues that “moderate engagement” as a diplomatic approach was the strategy employed by the NCPO to maintain Thailand’s profitable standing among the world’s superpowers, like the PRC and the USA.

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CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

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VITA

NAME	YANG XUE
DATE OF BIRTH	20 February 1998
PLACE OF BIRTH	YUNNAN, CHINA
INSTITUTIONS ATTENDED	Bachelor of Thai Language Qujing Normal University
HOME ADDRESS	XUNDIAN, KUNMING, YUNNAN



จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย
CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY