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Thailand Is Not Lost

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Thailand: Shifting Ground Between the US and a Rising China

by Benjamin Zawacki

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The idea of one country “losing” another implies ownership. It belongs to the vocabularies of the cold war and the Great Game. In *Thailand: Shifting Ground Between the US and a Rising China*, Benjamin Zawacki argues that since around 2000 the US has “lost” Thailand to China through negligence and bad diplomacy. He assumes that although economic relations among countries are now multilateral, in politics “the world is again more bipolar than multipolar,” with the US on one side and China on the other. “‘Spheres of influence’ à la the Cold War,” he writes, “remain the order of the day.” He wants the US to win Thailand back.



Roberto Schmidt/AFP/Getty Images

Thai and US soldiers at the end of a live-fire military display, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand, February 2017

Zawacki’s book has two parts. The first, based on published works and interviews, begins around World War II. The US started to develop its presence in Asia during the late 1940s, when British power was receding and the West came to consider Maoist China an enemy. Starting in the early 1950s, as the US became embroiled in Indochina, Thailand was important because it was next door to the conflict and its military was more than willing to be a US ally. The US built seven

air bases from which bombing raids were flown into Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, while Bangkok and Pattaya provided GIs with “rest and recreation.”

With American support and cash, Thai army officers staged a coup in 1957; they stayed in power for sixteen years. The US built one of its largest embassies in Bangkok and posted its top diplomats there. The Thai army received American hardware, the next generations of the Thai officer corps went to the US for training, and Peace Corps volunteers came in droves. During Thailand’s “American period,” the strategic relationship between the two countries was complemented by many personal ties, from barrack-room camaraderies to marriages between American officials and Thai aristocrats.

Zawacki shows that the relationship faltered when the US began to withdraw from Indochina in 1969. Thailand feared that without US protection it would suffer revenge, especially from Vietnam. Immediately, Thai leaders began talking to China. In 1975 the Thai prime minister, Kukrit Pramoj, visited Mao Zedong. Four years later, China attacked Vietnam, forcing it to withdraw several thousand troops stationed threateningly on the Thai border. This was the first point at which Thailand tilted from the US toward China. But Thailand and the US still needed each other because two decades of war in Southeast Asia had left behind animosity between neighbors, mines and unexploded ordnance, and half a million refugees in Thai camps. The Thai-US relationship was patched up, largely with military aid.

In 1997 Thailand blundered into a financial crisis. In return for its assistance, the IMF demanded that Thailand close down many financial institutions and sharply deflate the economy. The US insisted that Thailand comply with the plan but contributed nothing to the bailout fund. China offered \$1 billion (without any evidence, Zawacki claims this sum was never actually paid). This was the second tilt of the scales. For Thailand, the crisis was vicious. A quarter to a third of Thailand’s major companies were destroyed or radically downsized. Millions of people lost their jobs. When asked why the US refused to help its ally, a Treasury deputy secretary explained that “Thailand is not on our border.”

The second part of Zawacki’s book begins in 2001. This section draws on a larger number of interviews and, for the material on late 2004 to early 2010, on the US embassy cables in the WikiLeaks files. Zawacki interviewed American diplomats and officials along with Thai diplomats, generals, officials, journalists,

businessmen, and politicians, including the former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra in London in 2015. Zawacki did not interview any Chinese. Throughout this period he lived in Bangkok, working first on refugee issues and then for Amnesty International.

In Zawacki's account, two events drew Thailand closer to China in 2001. First, the September 11 attacks focused US foreign policy on the Middle East at the expense of everywhere else, especially Asia. Second, Thaksin came to office that year with ambitious plans to change the country's domestic and foreign policy. A product of Thailand's American period, Thaksin had attended university in the US, modeled himself after risk-taking American entrepreneurs, and used the vocabulary of American books about how to succeed in business. Most of his cabinet had similar American influences. But Thaksin was also a fourth-generation descendant of an immigrant from China. Most of his associates in business and politics had similar backgrounds. In Zawacki's account, blood proved thicker than education.

The US was Thailand's largest economic partner but no longer a source of growth. China's economy was growing fast. During Thaksin's five years in power, Thailand's trade with China quadrupled. Zawacki describes how Thaksin welcomed a string of Chinese leaders to Bangkok, proposed a free trade agreement with China (negotiated in record time by 2003), brokered another between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, began joint Thai-Chinese military exercises, and bought Chinese arms. The stimulus from economic ties with China helped Thailand rebound from the 1997 financial crisis, and Thaksin happily took the credit.

In 2006 Thaksin was swept away by a military coup. The US was obliged to downgrade its official relations, including those involving the military, under rules governing relations with foreign powers after a military overthrow. When US leaders and diplomats called for Thailand to return to democratic rule, Thai supporters of the coup called them misguided and arrogant.

Although Thaksin was forced into exile and Thailand was then run by a string of short-lived governments, Zawacki argues that the changes made during Thaksin's tenure stuck. China overtook the US as Thailand's major trading partner and foreign investor. The US failed to conclude a free-trade agreement with Thailand because pharmaceutical companies wanted provisions that would have prevented Thailand from manufacturing its own cheap AIDS drugs. The personal ties

between the Thai and US military decayed over time, while the Chinese cozied up to the Thai generals with offers of cheap weapons.

As a result of China's economic rise, the idea of a "China Model" crept into the vocabulary of foreign policy analysts. At first it referred to the pragmatic way in which China was dismantling its socialist command economy and allowing markets to develop. Later the definition was expanded to include China's combination of authoritarian rule and a liberalized economy. For many Asian rulers, including Thaksin and the generals who overthrew him, this combination was attractive. Zawacki suggests that the Chinese provided "intellectual cover" for the authoritarian shift in Thai politics that began in 2001.

During the 2000s, Zawacki argues, American diplomats and businessmen grew increasingly frustrated with Washington's neglect of Asia. Only at the start of his second term in 2013 did President Obama announce a "strategic pivot" to Asia, visit the region (he was in Thailand for less than a day), and promise new economic initiatives, including a fast-tracked implementation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. As secretary of state, Hillary Clinton also visited Thailand: "We're back," she said. But few of those proposed initiatives were carried out.

After another coup in 2014, the US embassy again downgraded official ties and called for a rapid return to democracy. Thai society ladies gathered outside the embassy to protest, and social media users accused the US of arrogance, hypocrisy, and bad faith with old friends. The Chinese said that they would work with any Thai government. Zawacki concludes:

More than any other domestic or foreign factor—including China itself—the United States has accounted for Thailand's adoption of the China Model, and its foreign policy shift into China's geopolitical sphere of influence. That is, both within and outside the kingdom, the US has "lost" Thailand more than China has gained it.

Zawacki identifies two main reasons the US "lost" Thailand. First, it squandered its expertise on Southeast Asia. University programs established during the cold war withered for lack of funds. Language training for foreign-service officials declined. Appointments to ambassadorships and other diplomatic positions became shorter-term. Few new Thai hands appeared as the old ones left. By contrast, Chinese diplomats posted to Bangkok were at the senior level and linguistically skilled.

Second, Zawacki argues that the US lost credibility with Thailand because of its inconsistent support for democracy and human rights. The US “has been sufficiently discredited since the late 1990s” by its involvement in the Middle East, Zawacki writes, “that the Thais are no longer willing to listen.” Nor has it “been *competing* with China for influence in how Thai leadership perceives power, treats its people, and applies its laws.”

In other words, the US has failed to reliably present democracy and human rights as alternatives to the China Model. It has allowed its “interests” to override its “values,” and hence is vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy. Zawacki argues that the US must correct for these two failures and make the kind of commitment to Asia that Obama promised but never delivered. “For the sake of America’s geopolitical interests—*all of them*—there is no choice.”



Tang Chhin Sothy/AFP/Getty Images

Supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra, Bangkok, March 2006

Zawacki has seized an unprecedented opportunity. The WikiLeaks cables allow a detailed and intimate view of US diplomacy in the recent past. But when the data are so rich, there is always a risk that they will narrow one’s vision. Zawacki’s account is strictly one of diplomacy—international agreements, official visits, arms sales, and military exercises. But a relationship between countries is shaped by other factors too: interactions between their peoples, the legacies of history, and the domestic politics on both sides. Omitting these factors has shaped Zawacki’s conclusions.

In recent decades, the US-Thai relationship has changed far more broadly than just in matters of diplomacy. When Thailand was drawn into an alliance with the US in the mid-twentieth century, it was one of the poorest and least sophisticated countries in Southeast Asia; four fifths of its population lived in villages, and it had only two universities. The US brought growth, urbanization, and modern culture. Thousands of Americans traveled to the country, and thousands of Thai students studied in the US. The US was Thailand’s largest investor. The first waves of mass consumption and popular entertainment in the country were

dominated by American brands and symbols. To be modern was to drink Pepsi, drive a Ford, and enjoy Elvis, Mickey Mouse, and Superman.

After 1975, most of the American sojourners left. More and more Thai students went to Japan, Taiwan, India, and later China. Many US firms stayed put, but few new ones arrived. Meanwhile, Japanese and then Korean money funded the construction of factories producing for local consumption and export. Although Pepsi remained king and the opening of the first McDonald's in 1986 was a national event, American cars, appliances, and processed foods were gradually overtaken by Japanese and then Korean brands.

Asian countries took the technologies of the American entertainment industry and married them with themes and values that had greater local appeal. TV series made in Taiwan, Japan, and Korea were very popular, but American series never made a mark. Hollywood films struggle at the Thai box office—except for action movies, especially those, such as the *Matrix* series, that are influenced by the cinema of China and Hong Kong. J-pop and then K-pop have dictated teenage style. New Japanese manga books are available in Thai translation within a matter of days.

A common ritual is staged repeatedly at international meetings held in Thailand and attended by US and Chinese leaders. The US leader's speech begins by describing Thailand as “our oldest ally in the region” and goes on to trace the history of the two countries' relationship. The Chinese leader then gives a shorter speech that ends with such announcements as “China and Thailand are of the same family” (Xi Jinping, as governor of Fujian, 2001) or, more simply, “We are family” (President Hu Jintao, 2003).

China's relationship with Thailand has a long history. Siam—as the country was known until 1939—was China's major trading partner for centuries. Chinese merchants moved to Siam, managed the Siamese king's trade, and ran his treasury. (Among their descendants are advisers to the office that handles the king's property.) For at least six hundred years, there were waves of mass migration when China suffered famine or political chaos. Most of the new arrivals were men who married locally and assimilated into Thai society. The last of these waves came in the early twentieth century.

From time to time the Thai government imposed restrictions on Chinese schools, newspapers, and associations, because it feared the introduction of rebellious

ideas like nationalism and communism, but few social barriers kept Chinese migrants from adapting to Thai society. Inter-marriage was common. Buddhism was shared. Ethnic clashes were relatively few. Like many poor migrants, the Chinese worked hard and invested in the education of their children. They began as laborers and shopkeepers, but the second and third generations spread into the top ranks of the professions, higher education, officialdom, and armed forces.

In the 1980s the Thai economy surged after an influx of Japanese investment. The leading Thai-Chinese business families became not only fabulously rich but heroes of the migrant's experience, celebrated in novels, TV series, and songs. At the same time, China emerged from the isolation of the Maoist era and started to become a global economic power. Chinese origins became something to be proudly claimed, even by Kukrit Pramoj, the aristocratic prime minister who had visited Mao in 1975. Historians pointed out that much of the current royal dynasty, and earlier ones, had Chinese ancestry.

Almost overnight, the fashionable look for soap opera stars and fashion models became the porcelain complexion and petite facial features that attested to a Chinese origin. (Actors with formerly popular Thai-Western looks were recast as villains.)

Other changes developed from the late 1980s. The fashionable way to speak Thai among young people quietly assumed the softer consonants associated with a Chinese accent. Thai-Chinese families traveled back to their ancestral homes and reconnected with old kin. Many business families had continued to speak Chinese out of cultural pride and for use in business, but others attended Chinese-language schools and bought how-to books for relearning Chinese customs. Politicians advertised their Chinese clan names in their election campaigns. The celebration of Chinese New Year became more ostentatious.

Given the long history of Chinese immigration to Thailand, it is difficult to say what portion of the Thai or Bangkok population is Thai-Chinese. In Thailand's now-dominant urban culture, it is impossible to distinguish what is Chinese from what is Thai. The repeated mantra of "We are family" is not just good diplomacy. The links between the countries bear comparison with the "special relationship" between the US and the UK. Thailand is important to China as a bridge to the rest of Southeast Asia, where the influence of the Chinese has been complicated by colonial divide-and-rule, ethnic anti-colonial nationalism, and religious tension, particularly over Islam.

US diplomacy in Thailand has also been hostage to the turmoil in recent Thai politics. Zawacki would like Thailand to be a passive backdrop to his story of US–China competition. He sketches Thai politics like a cartoon, colorful but unimportant, and dismisses every leader since 2001 as “authoritarian,” whether installed by election or coup. He calls the popular movements “utterly bankrupt,” finds all politicians except one—former prime minister Chuan Leekpai—“devoid of ideology,” and concludes that the country has shown “a clear preference to rule and be ruled rather than to represent and be represented.” These are rather sweeping conclusions. Thailand’s internal political conflicts involve real ideologies and have had a significant part in its diplomacy, including with the US.

Over the past generation, economic growth has tripled the average Thai income and raised expectations for shifts in the distribution of power and social status. Participants in the social movements of the 1990s began to formulate demands for change in the country’s lopsided distribution of power, wealth, and public resources. Encouraged by a new constitution and a shift of power from national to local government, more people discovered that the ballot box could bring about reforms in social services, infrastructure, and economic policies that would help redress the country’s highly unequal income distribution. Because he responded to these demands, Thaksin was adopted as figurehead of this political awakening. When he came under attack in the mid-2000s, his supporters wore red shirts and took to the streets to defend him, while a coalition came together to halt this movement. It included Thailand’s old official establishment—the palace, military, and senior bureaucracy—as well as big business groups and parts of the urban middle class.

This coalition removed Thaksin by coup in 2006 but failed to destroy the movement itself. It then decided to get rid of what it called “Western-style democracy.” The second coup in 2014 was rougher than anything since the 1950s. The generals dispensed with the window-dressing of an appointed civilian government and ruled on their own. All political activity was banned. A few protesters were detained and intimidated to discourage others. An interim constitution gave the prime minister absolute power. The junta is currently framing a guided democracy in which elected politicians will have little power and the generals will probably continue to rule. The date for the transition has been repeatedly delayed.

When the US called for a speedy return to democracy after the coups, several elite voices objected angrily, not because they had been seduced into authoritarianism

by China, but because they had turned against democracy out of fear of a mass political movement. The kind of conflict currently underway in Thailand is far from unique. It can be found in many other countries—Turkey, Egypt, and several Latin American countries, including Argentina and Chile—where economic growth has raised expectations of political change but old bastions of power still feel strong enough to resist. Certainly China’s model of authoritarianism offers encouragement and legitimation to Thailand’s generals. But the roots are local.

Zawacki argues that the US has “lost” Thailand to China and has to win it back by diplomatic means. But he reaches this conclusion by leaving out most of the story—the exceptional historical links between China and Thailand, the decline of America’s “soft power,” and the complications created by Thailand’s turbulent domestic politics. These factors make prizing Thailand away from China something of an illusory goal. More importantly, the entire vocabulary of “winning” and “losing” countries seems outdated.

The idea of “spheres of influence” with hard borders belongs to the cold war era, during which countries had to belong to one sphere or another. These divisions were required partly for ideological reasons and partly because the patronage offered by the Great Powers was so attractive. Thailand offers a good example of this. For twenty years it depended on the US for investment, protection, arms, scholarships, and the new baubles of modern consumer culture. Remaining independent from outside powers was difficult. Some countries formed a Non-Aligned Movement, but its influence was short-lived.

It may be, as Zawacki argues, that two dominant poles have again emerged, but their magnetic force is weaker than it was during the cold war. The ideological division between them is far less stark than the contrast between capitalism and state socialism. The patronage of the Great Powers is less complete and appealing. Countries such as Thailand have grown richer, more sophisticated, and more economically and culturally enmeshed with the rest of the world.

Thailand’s traditional stance has been to keep all options open. In World War II it was officially allied with Japan but established links with the Allies. In the cold war, it was allied with the US but kept doors open to China. Thailand must cultivate its relationship with China, but that does not mean it must change its

relations with the US. The world has moved on from the vocabulary of “losing” countries.

There is nothing surprising about China’s growing influence in Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia. For a millennium, China has been the big power to the north that cannot be ignored. Even when official relations between China and Thailand were broken off, Thai leaders found ways to communicate with China through informal channels. What is happening today is not the rise of China but the return to a normal state of affairs from which the colonial and postcolonial eras have been a relatively short intermission.