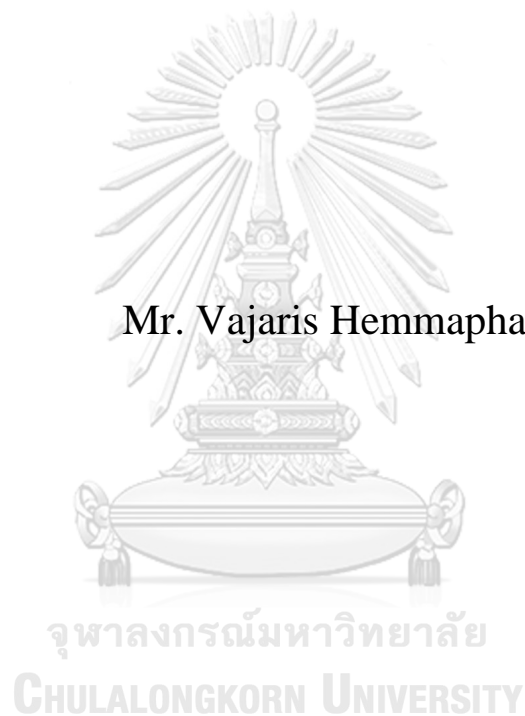


Thai Foreign Policy amid the US-China Competition of Vaccine
Diplomacy between 2020 and 2021



Mr. Vajaris Hemmaphat

An Independent Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations
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การดำเนินนโยบายต่างประเทศไทยท่ามกลางสมรภูมิ 'การทูตวัคซีน' ระหว่างสหรัฐอเมริกาและ
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CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

วัชรวิศ เหมพัฒน์ : การดำเนินนโยบายต่างประเทศไทยท่ามกลางสมรภูมิ 'การทูตวัคซีน' ระหว่างสหรัฐอเมริกาและจีน ตั้งแต่ปี ค.ศ. 2020 - 2021. (Thai Foreign Policy amid the US-China Competition of Vaccine Diplomacy between 2020 and 2021) อ.ที่ปรึกษาหลัก : พงศ์พิสุทธิ์ บุญบาร์ดน์

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์การดำเนินนโยบายต่างประเทศไทยท่ามกลางสมรภูมิ 'การทูตวัคซีน' ระหว่างสหรัฐอเมริกาและจีนในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ ตั้งแต่ปี ค.ศ. 2020 – 2021 โดยมุ่งศึกษาถึงการดำเนินนโยบายต่างประเทศไทย ผ่านกรอบการวิเคราะห์ 'การประกันความเสี่ยง' (Hedging) เพื่อนำมาใช้อธิบายถึงสภาวะการณ์ของประเทศไทยในการถ่วงดุลอำนาจ ผ่านนโยบายการจัดการวัคซีนโควิด-19 โดยมีเป้าหมายเพื่อทำความเข้าใจถึงปัจจัยประการต่าง ๆ ที่ส่งผลกระทบต่อความสามารถในการถ่วงดุลอำนาจของการดำเนินนโยบายต่างประเทศไทย งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้จัดเก็บข้อมูลผ่านการศึกษาเอกสารราชการจากฝ่ายรัฐบาลไทย รัฐบาลจีน และรัฐบาลสหรัฐฯ ซึ่งครอบคลุมตั้งแต่แถลงการณ์และสุนทรพจน์อย่างเป็นทางการ ทั้งจากฝ่ายผู้นำรัฐบาลและเจ้าหน้าที่ระดับสูงของทุกฝ่ายที่เกี่ยวข้อง นอกจากนี้ งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ยังได้มีการศึกษาข้อมูลผ่านสื่อและบทความทั้งในประเทศและต่างประเทศ เพื่อนำข้อเท็จจริงที่ได้ไปวิเคราะห์ถึงภูมิหลังและแรงจูงใจที่เข้ามามีอิทธิพลต่อผู้กำหนดนโยบายต่างประเทศไทยในช่วงเวลาข้างต้น ดังนั้น การวิเคราะห์นโยบายการต่างประเทศไทย โดยเฉพาะประเด็นที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการจัดการวัคซีนโควิด-19 จึงสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงแนวทางการดำเนินนโยบายต่างประเทศที่โอนเอียงเข้าหาฝ่ายรัฐบาลจีนมากขึ้น อันส่งผลให้เกิด 'ความไม่ยืดหยุ่น' (Inflexible) และ 'ความไม่สมดุล' (Imbalance) ในการถ่วงดุลอำนาจระหว่างประเทศมหาอำนาจ ซึ่งส่งผลกระทบต่อผลประโยชน์แห่งชาติของไทยอย่างหลีกเลี่ยงไม่ได้



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This research seeks to analyze Thai foreign policy's posture toward the United States and China amid the competition of vaccine diplomacy in the Southeast Asia region between 2020 and 2021. This research focuses on the conduct of Thai foreign policy by applying 'hedging strategy' as a main theoretical framework in explaining how Thailand managed to diversify its COVID-19 vaccine portfolios, in order to have a clearer understanding of whether Bangkok can perform a well-crafted hedging strategy or Thai's traditional diplomacy has lost ground in its default setting. This research has been done by examining official documents from the Thai government, the People's Republic of China government, and the United States government. These documents include official statements and speeches from all governments and high-level officials concerned. This research extracts empirical information from reputable media and op-ed articles in order to analyze the background and motives of Thai's foreign policy-making at a particular time. By analyzing Thai foreign policy throughout the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, this reveals that Thailand has been drawn into a highly dependent relationship with China and to the extent created an inflexible diplomacy and imbalance stance towards the major powers.



Field of Study: International Relations

Student's Signature

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Vajaris Hemmaphat

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Introduction

The year 2020 was truly a disruptive time in world history. The unprecedented spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused many uncertainties and unknown circumstances in various dimensions, namely politics, economics, socio-cultural, and international affairs. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and challenged multilateralism and international cooperation which threatens the role of international organizations; a case in point is when then-President Donald Trump decided to hold back funding for the World Health Organisation (WHO) at a time when international financing was needed the most in the fight against the COVID-19. (Rogers, 2021) Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic is undeniably a wake-up call for all aspects of life and has also accentuated and accelerated the changes in the international order, the shifts in the global balance of power, the transformation of the global economy, and the rise of the nationalism and protectionism.

Against the backdrop of the intensified great-power competition that has expanded to trade war, technological competition, and an ideological clash. This increasing confrontation seems to expand widely into the field of ‘vaccine race’ in terms of vaccine development and distribution, in order to regain the country’s soft power status, establish new strategic relations, and showcase its capabilities as a world power. It is unquestionably that Southeast Asia is a primary region for US-China competition of vaccine diplomacy due to its strategic importance in terms of geopolitics and geo-economics. Hence, many small and medium countries needed to adjust and reform their balancing strategies in order to preserve their national interests and maintain their equidistance among the major powers amid the intense race of vaccine diplomacy.

In the case of Thailand, the country confronts a critical juncture in global politics amid the COVID-19 pandemic and intensifying economic and technological disruption. In addition, Thailand finds itself in the midst of a shift in the regional balance of power more than ever. In the past, Thailand pursuing a flexible policy toward the great powers is not a new diplomatic strategy. As an ancient Siamese proverb likens foreign policy to the ‘bamboo bending with the wind’ which portrays Thai-style diplomacy as “always solidly rooted, but flexible enough to bend whichever way the wind blows in order to survive”. (Kislenko, 2002a) This

conventional Thailand's foreign policy manifests a nature of small states based on the, "Realism Ideology," that adheres to the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence.(Thompson, 2010) Moreover, this historical discourse of Thailand's interaction with external powers has also portrayed a diplomatic maneuver that values flexibility and pragmatism in its foreign policy. However, such a view has become problematic and inflexible as Thailand has faced difficulties resisting China's influence, especially the country's ability to tactfully maintain its traditional balancing diplomacy amid the vaccine competition between superpower rivalries. In other words, the situation of COVID-19 competition and the stance of the Thai governments great dependence on Chinese medical equipment and vaccines are the results of the widening rift between Thailand and the US since the military coup in May 2014, which has compelled the government to move closer towards China.(Lefevre, 2014) Moreover, the close relationship between the Thai royal family and the high-level officials from China government and the Thai-China conglomerate connections are needed to take into account as well.(*China and Thailand*)

In addition, Thailand needs to re-evaluate its hedging strategy in order to maintain its flexibility and pragmatism in terms of health security and economic prosperity with both Washington and Beijing by pursuing 'limited bandwagoning' and 'binding engagement' with China in regional affairs while keeping the US involved as a counter-balancer aimed at preventing risk-contingency from a predominantly single superpower. However, the degree of Thai's foreign policy in hedging strategy has lost its balancing act and no longer ensures that it can maintain a safe path between China and the US in the foreseeable future.

This research assesses Thai's foreign policy amid the vaccine competition between superpower rivalries and argues that the highly dependent relationship with the China government has tested the effectiveness of Thailand's hedging strategy. Specifically, it examines the extent to which Thai's foreign policy has been conducted in what it called 'inflexible' and 'imbalance', as its postures gradually tilted toward China's government rather than pursuing foreign relations that best promote its national interest, particularly with Thailand's stance in defending the Chinese medical distributions. This prospect has led to the ineffectiveness and inability in maintaining a foreign policy to preserve Thai's national interest, and has also deteriorated national

reputation in the international fora. Hence, the situation of vaccine diplomacy between the US and China in the region between 2020 and 2021 has reflected and accentuated Thailand's inflexible diplomacy clearer than ever.

Finally, this research is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the changing world order landscape in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic between the United States and China. It also explains the term 'vaccine diplomacy' and how the Southeast Asia region became the primary location of this battleground between 2020 and 2021. The second section focuses on driving factors that affected the key driver of Thai policymakers concerning the procurement of the COVID-19 vaccines and related medical supplies. It then describes the initial humanitarian assistance from China during 2020 in so-called 'mask diplomacy' and the close relationship between Bangkok and Beijing at all levels that influences the vaccine purchase of the country in the following year, namely, government-to-government relations, Thai royal family and Chinese leader ties, and the Thai-China conglomerate connections. Domestic imperatives and public pressure have also been discussed in this section as well. The third section offers a comprehensive analysis of how vaccine competition between superpower rivalries reflects Thailand's imbalanced position to gradually lean toward China. In this section, three important empirical cases are examined to demonstrate the aforementioned motives. The fourth and final part concludes by summing up the key findings of Thai's foreign policy relating to the COVID-19 circumstances.

Research Question

As the existing study of Thai foreign policy mostly explains the conventional approach of Thai diplomacy by the term 'flexibility, pragmatism, and resilience,' however, this does not mention some scenarios when the conduct of Thai's traditional diplomacy lost ground in its default strategy and is reflected in a so-called 'inflexibility'. Hence, this research aims to study and consider the following research question:

- (1) Can Thai foreign policy manage to maintain its flexibility amid the United States and China's competition of vaccine diplomacy between 2020 and 2021?

Literature Review

The existing literature on the study of Thai foreign policy mostly explains the traditional practice of Thai-style diplomacy as a ‘bamboo bending with the wind’ phenomenon. This bamboo metaphor refers to flexibility, resilience, and pragmatism, with the ultimate goal to secure its national independence and protect itself from external intervention in its domestic affairs. While other scholars often debate that Thai foreign policy – particularly in the current decades – has lost its flexibility and balancing strategy amid international and domestic changes. This results in Thailand’s behavior tilting towards a specific superpower, rather than maintaining equidistance balancing. However, the literature on the study of Thai foreign policy still ignores to explain the decisive factors that have constrained Thailand’s room for manoeuvre amid changing international landscape in the aftermath of the COVID-19, which affects Thai’s inflexibility and imbalance stance concerning foreign powers. Hence, this study aims to fulfill the gap in the study by emphasizing the inflexibility of Thai foreign policy regarding the situation of COVID-19 vaccine procurement in order to have a clearer understanding on the background and motives of Thai’s foreign policy-making at that particular time.

To begin with, Arne Kislenko explains this bamboo nature as a long-cherished philosophical practice that is “always solidly rooted, but flexible enough to bend whichever way the wind blows in order to survive.”(Kislenko, 2002b) According to Kislenko, this prevailing behavior in Thai foreign policy is not a mere random act, rather the policies are consistently crafted and are well calculated with caution. Similar to Kislenko, Pavin Chachavalpongpun believes that the flexibility and pragmatism of Thai foreign policy are considered to be unique characteristics of Thailand. It is the conduct of Thailand’s foreign policy that preserves the national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence that has been inherited from generation to generation throughout history and still exists in Thai foreign policy in the modern era, even though Thailand’s national interests have changed from national security and territorial integrity to economic prosperity and wealth.(Chachavalpongpun, 2012) In addition, Tej Bunnag agrees with other scholars and mentions that the characteristics of Thai foreign policy not just bending *with* the

wind, but also *before* the wind. In other words, it is proactive diplomacy rather than reactive, as Thai policymakers can foresee where the wind is blowing in order to keep safe and survive in a dangerous and difficult world.(Bunnag, 2021)

Elaborately, in recent years, the rise of China has become a significant factor in influencing Thai foreign policy, particularly with China's exponentially increasing economic power in the region. Since Beijing is a rising power and has close proximity to mainland Southeast Asia, Bangkok managed to bend with this prevailing wind in order to secure its economic security and gain economic prosperity from their relationship. Therefore, despite the changing in characteristics of Thai national interest from time through time, many scholars still perceive the unchanging nature of Thai's conventional diplomacy and how Thai foreign policymakers have adopted it to manage these new challenges.

In contrast, Pongphisoot Busbarat has a different view on the nature of Thailand's foreign policy. He argues that this bamboo nature has slightly shifted from 'bamboo bending with the wind' into 'bamboo swirling with the wind' in recent years. Busbarat agrees with other scholars that the bamboo bending with the wind is a well-thought and well-crafted strategy, as this behavior has reflected in the nation's ability to maintain close relationships with more than one great power in the region without having to be concerned too much about losing trust or other mutual benefits from each of those powers. Even though Thailand bends with any direction of strong winds, Thailand always has a solid stance in preserving its national interests. On the other hand, he argues that this behavior has shifted recently. The conduct of Thai foreign policy lacked a well-planned strategy, resulting in some foreign policies partially requiring the sacrifices and compromises of Thailand's national interest to the superiority of other powerful polities. Thailand is willing to bend with any new or stronger wind at the time without having concern about the formulation of long-term foreign policy strategy. For instance, Busbarat claims that nowadays Thailand has a myopic vision and no well-crafted foreign policy strategy to counter-balance and maintain friendly relations with both the United States and China in the Southeast Asia region.(Busbarat, 2016)

Even though the study provides clear explanations of how Thai foreign policy has shifted throughout history, the scholars have neglected to provide the decisive

factors why the shift has taken place. Thus, this research aims to provide details and clear explanations of the changing international context that affects the characteristic of Thai foreign policy during the US-China vaccine competition between 2020 and 2021.

Conceptual Framework

Recently, many scholars have used the term *hedging* as an alternative to *balancing* and *bandwagoning* in describing states' alignment behavior. The term has originally borrowed from Finance academics and has been used by International Relations (IR) scholars to describe small and big states power's strategic actions. Many scholars have various definitions of the term hedging, however, most famously from Evelyn Goh's study explains hedging as "a set of strategies aimed at avoiding a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality." (Goh, 2006) While John Ciorciari similarly uses the term to refer to Southeast Asia countries' strategies toward the great powers. (Ciorciari, 2009) In this research, it applies the term *hedging* defined by Cheng-Chwee Kuik as "an act in which a state seeks to protect its interests by pursuing a bundle of contradictory options, with the ultimate goals of maximizing benefits from a rising power when all is well and simultaneously preparing for possible worst-case scenarios." (Cheng-Chwee, 2008) Hence, this research aims to apply '*hedging theory*' as a main conceptual framework in analyzing the behavior of Thai foreign policy amid the US-China competition of vaccine diplomacy in order to identify whether the conventional Thai approach can perform its well-crafted hedging strategy or the conduct of Thai's traditional diplomacy has lost its default strategy and gradually shifted towards imbalance positioning.

In the case of Thailand's hedging behavior vis-à-vis the US-China competition of vaccine diplomacy, the hedging options are consisting of two sets of opposite and counteracting policies, namely, returns-maximizing and risk-contingency measures, which are altogether designed to offset the effects of one another, with the ultimate goal to avoid the danger of betting on the wrong house and other related risks. The first options, returns-maximizing, are threefold (see Figure 1), from **economic pragmatism** (a policy aimed at pragmatically maximizing as many economic returns

as possible from both the US and China), **binding-engagement** (aimed at maximizing diplomatic returns by engaging and binding with the rising power in various institutionalized bilateral and multilateral platforms, for the purposes of creating the status quo tendency towards major powers), and **limited bandwagoning** (aimed at maximizing foreign policy returns from a big power by giving deference and by collaborating on policy areas of convergent interests, *but without* accepting a subordinate position). On the other hand, the second options known as risk-contingency measures are twofold, namely, **dominance denial** (aimed at preventing the emergence of a predominant power by nonmilitary means, primarily by creating a balance of influence among the major powers) and **limited balancing** (aimed at upgrading one's own defense capability and developed security cooperation with others that share common strategic concerns, *but without* targeting a specific country).(Cheng-Chwee et al.)

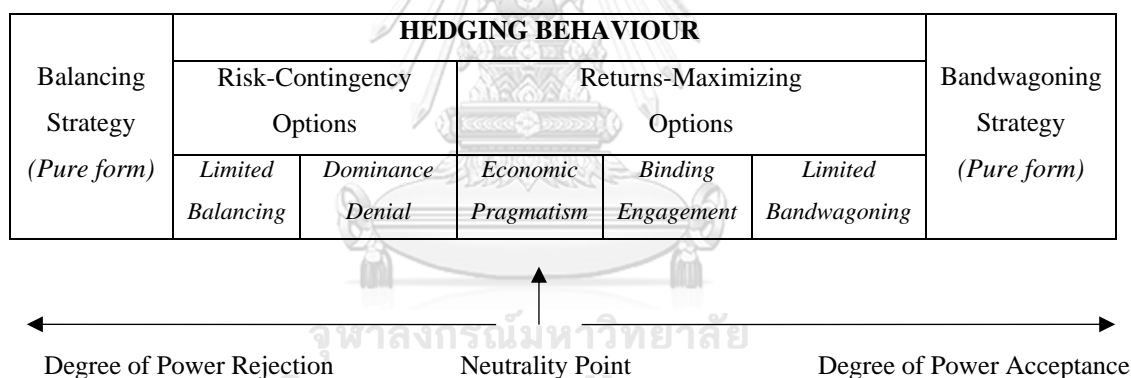


Figure 1. Balancing, hedging, and bandwagoning

By default, the returns-maximizing options allow the hedger states like Thailand to reap as many economic and diplomatic profits as possible from a rising power under regular circumstances. While the risk-contingency options serve to reduce the hedger's loss in case things go unexpected. However, Thailand has faced many limitations and challenges nowadays in maintaining a strategic behavior of hedging strategy vis-à-vis superpower's rivalries amid vaccine competition. As Thailand tends to increase the degree of *limited bandwagoning* in terms of economic and security dependence on China after the 2014 military coup, this has reflected in

the decreasing of the *dominance denial* spectrum which caused China to predominantly dominates Thai's decision-making policy and affected the inflexibility in Thai's conventional diplomacy. Ultimately, these have resulted in limited policy options and a high level of ambivalence in the actions of Bangkok regarding the COVID-19 pandemic scenario towards other major powers concerned.

Research Methodology

This research uses qualitative methodology. The main focus is to understand the motives and causes that affect the behavior of Thailand's foreign policy regarding the situation of COVID-19 vaccine portfolios. To be more precise, this research aims to examine the decisive factors that play a significant role in the decision-making of Thai foreign policy elites from the period of pre-pandemic to the present time (2021).

The qualitative methodology is categorized into 2 types; firstly, official documents from the Thai government, the People's Republic of China government, and the United States government. These documents include official statements and speeches from all governments and high-official levels concerned. Secondly, the secondary sources. This research extracts first-hand facts and information from reputational media both domestic and overseas along with op-ed articles in order to analyze on the background and motives of Thai's foreign policy-making at a particular time, namely, the Nikkei Asia Review, the Diplomat, Foreign Policy, and the Bangkok Post.

The Changing World Order in the Aftermath of the COVID-19

With the occurrence of today's crisis, the world is witnessing an unprecedented event that has not only seriously threatened human life but also severely impacted the world economy, global public health, and international orders. Following the outbreak of the novel COVID-19, the pandemic has highlighted the weakening of multilateralism and international cooperation and has also accentuated the fierce rivalry between the US and China in all dimensions with the full scope and scale.

In terms of the geopolitical rivalry and the clash of interests between superpowers, COVID-19 has deepened the US-China rift and accelerated the shift in

power from the West to the East. The response in European countries has been slow and haphazard, further tarnishing the essence of Western identification. While China's disciplined suppression of COVID-19 has enabled China to recover its former pace of economic growth and expedited its transition to soon become the world's largest economy.(Niblett, 2021) Along with China's neighbors, such as Singapore and Vietnam who have responded effectively to the crisis, this region has no doubt been emerging more quickly from the pandemic than the rest of the globe.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Southeast Asia has proved to be a resilient player and therefore create a stronger, fairer, and more robust economy in the coming decades. This momentum has indeed put ASEAN nations into the very heart of the superpower competition between the US and China. While the US is renewing its interest in effectively engaging with ASEAN and countering China's regional influence, it must acknowledge that the Southeast Asia nations cannot escape the fact that China is in its own backyard and poses the biggest geopolitical challenge to them. This fact led ASEAN countries to be heavily dependent on Beijing in almost every dimension, most significantly on economic interdependence. As a result, the bloc tends to manage their nuanced positions differently which has resulted in a divided approach when the Sino-US cards are laying on the negotiation table. This behavior reflects the stances of ASEAN nations that they will not take sides, despite the intensified competition in the aftermath of the COVID-19, opting instead to strategically engage with two powers based on their own interests and needs.

In the context of Thailand, its general posture between the so-called superpowers is simply to keep a balance – same as ASEAN nations – with the ultimate goal of maintaining the national interest, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of the nation. Its diplomatic footwork has been performed acutely with the 'bending with the wind' mentality since the late 19th century. Despite the fact that strategic competition in the region between Washington and Beijing may increase exponentially, the view and general position of Bangkok between Washington and Beijing is that it still maintains security with the US while deepening economic and political engagement with China in a way that does not offend one another. However, in the post-military coup in 2014, this major event compelled the Thai government to move closer to Beijing, which has resulted in greater distancing between Bangkok and

Washington. After that, the China factor relatively dominates the decision-making of Thai policy elites and gradually has sensitivity toward Thai domestic movements. This development accentuates the direction of Thai foreign policy in health diplomacy regarding the procurement of the COVID-19 vaccines, particularly amidst the superpower's power-play in the form of vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia: A New Battleground for Vaccine Diplomacy

When COVID-19 emerged in early 2020, the Southeast Asia region was the first to early welcome this unknown disease than the rest of the globe. Thailand was the first country to report the first case of COVID-19 outside mainland China on 13 January 2020.(Organization, 2020) Despite Southeast Asia's expertise in the public health sector which has responded well to previous emergencies, there is no exception for COVID-19 to reshape and weaken all countries in every dimension. Therefore, the way to end this pandemic can only be achieved through the distribution and access to global vaccine equity.

However, in a world where access to limited vaccine supplies is the only way to end the crisis, so-called 'vaccine diplomacy' has emerged as a new channel through which major powers seek to shape the international environment to their benefit, handing out vaccines to favored countries according to the perceived national interest.(Alyssa Leng, 2022b) And with the increasing severity of the pandemic in the region and limited access to vaccine supplies, vaccine diplomacy has become a new narrative of the US-China's diplomatic maneuver to shore up their positions in Southeast Asia.

Beijing has been fast-mover and proactive player in the bilateral arena, particularly with the low- and middle-income countries that have been left behind as rich nations hoarded vaccines, and capitalized on slow deliveries of the US and European vaccine makers. China also plays a smart move by leveraging the vaccine inequity and vaccine nationalism of western countries. Moreover, in May 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping proclaimed that Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccines would become 'International Public Goods.' Speaking to the World Health Assembly, Xi noted that the vaccines "will be China's contribution to ensuring vaccine accessibility and affordability in developing countries"(Wheaton, 2020) and that

international vaccine distribution would be part of China's vision of a "shared future for the people of the world to work as one." (Doherty et al., 2021) China's ambition and motivation to provide COVID-19 vaccines as International Public Goods, to some extent, could be speculated as an aim to drive the nation further along the track of global leadership alongside the US and later into a hegemonic power. (Zhao, 2017) Although China argued that the country remains anti-hegemonic because it is not yet a superpower. (Menzel, 2021)

While Washington, after almost a complete absence in Southeast Asia during the former Trump administration, has pledged to re-engage with Southeast Asia as Washington perceived the region as a 'critically important region in the world'. The US proposed to donate 500 million doses of vaccines to 93 low- and middle-income countries, 200 million of these doses were aimed to deliver within 2021, and 300 million more will be delivered in the first half of 2022. (House, 2021b) A total of 7 million doses out of 25 million doses, according to the US allocation plans, were shared among 16 Asian countries to win the hearts and minds of people in the region. (House, 2021a) Somehow, the political motive behind was to contain a rising China and form like-minded alliances to counterbalance Beijing. The case in point is when the US sent high-official levels namely; Vice President Kamala Harris, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, to visit Southeast Asia as a signal that demonstrated that 'America is back.' (Sebastian, 2021) In line with the perspective of Kurt Campbell, Whitehouse Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, who emphasized that Southeast Asia is the heart of Asia and can determine the success and failure of US diplomacy. One of the tangible outcomes the US can play a proactive role is through engagement in vaccine diplomacy with Southeast Asia. (FULLILOVE, 2021)

Therefore, due to the escalating great power rivalry and strategic competitiveness, vaccine doses have been donated based on overly narrow geopolitical considerations rather than need or equity. (Alyssa Leng, 2022a) The global effort in terms of health cooperation between world major powers still dragging their feet backward, with rich nations hoarding their vaccines. The Southeast Asia region has undeniably become a new battleground of the vaccine competition between the US and China. The superpowers' new great game has yet to bear fruit

and has unfavorably affected Thailand's stance as it needs to keep a strategic balance between the two, this equation leaving Thailand in a challenging position more than ever.

Thai Foreign Policy in relation to the procurement of COVID-19 Vaccines and related Medical Equipment

Phase 1: The situation of Chinese humanitarian help during 2020

Despite the first countries that detected the first case of COVID-19 outside Wuhan city in 2020, Thailand was well-handled during the initial pandemic months, with the infection numbers being relatively low compared to the West, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, and much of the European Union. Thailand managed to tame the pandemic by imposing tough social distancing measures and strict border controls, these helped keep Thailand's COVID-19 cases low throughout 2020 with fewer than 4,000 cases, and fatalities number below 60. According to the Global COVID-19 Index (GCI), Thailand was ranked first among countries with the highest rate of COVID-19 recoveries with an index score of 82.06 out of 100 points.(D.C., 2020) In addition, the WHO has also praised Thailand during the ceremony of the 73rd World Health Assembly saying that "The Kingdom has supported the WHO's efforts to control the disease, and has emerged as a great example of a country that has inspired good cooperation between the government and the public."(Pornbanggird, 2020) These initial accomplishments have successfully proved Thailand to become a leading country in the fight against the pandemic among other Asian countries.

Apart from the efficient policies and essential health measures, China's initial distribution of medical equipment has come at the appropriate time in responding to the unknown pandemic. China is providing millions of face masks, test kits, and teams of medical experts to people worldwide – so-called 'mask diplomacy' – as the country is seeking to boost its image as a responsible global leader over its initial missteps in handling the virus at home. Since Thailand has dealt with supply and raw materials constraints that led to the lack of capacities in producing quality face masks, China is willing to donate additional supplies to ensure Thai medical and healthcare

personnel have sufficient stocks. The Chinese Embassy in Bangkok has donated a myriad of medical distributions including 1.3 million surgical face masks, 70,000 N95 face masks, 150,000 COVID-19 test kits, and 70,000 PPE suits to the country.(Net, 2020) The Thai Prime Minister, Prayut Chan-o-cha, also attended a donation handover ceremony and expressed his sincere gratitude to China for helping Thailand fight against the outbreak. He also stressed that the long-standing relationship with China will continue in all aspects including social, cultural, and economic ties. This statement is in line with the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok, which expressed the deepest gratitude for the mutual friendship between both countries saying:

“China and Thailand are *as close as one family*. The Chinese people will always stand at the Thai people’s side. We firmly believe that, with concerted efforts of the two countries as well as that of the two peoples, and with the support from various parties, we will surely prevail over the epidemic.”(Thailand, 2020a)



Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha (3rd Right) and Yang Xin (3rd Left), charge d’Affaires of the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok, attend a donation handover ceremony in Bangkok, Thailand, June 29, 2020. (Xinhuanet)

However, regarding the fact that “no one is safe until everyone is safe,” Thailand faced the second wave of the pandemic in December 2020 with the cluster of the seafood market in Samut Sakhon province. This outbreak has been linked to

migrant labors from neighboring countries, namely Myanmar and Cambodia. This has proved that all countries need to work in concert, otherwise, the problem will not just linger; it will expand. In these conditions, for a medium-sized nation such as Thailand, the way to end this pandemic can only be achieved through global vaccination. Despite the relative virus containment success in Thailand earlier, it then suggests the need to expedite inoculation drives in order to ensure the life-saving of Thais and the economic recovery in the post-COVID-19 circumstances.

Phase 2: Key Driver and Driving Factors in relation to the procurement of the COVID-19 Vaccines during 2021

The outbreak morphed into the second year of a devastating pandemic and seems not to fade away anytime soon. Many developed countries have started to locally produce their own vaccines, as well as incorporated them with their overseas manufacturer. Each vaccine alternative has been developing its technology varied from inactivated vaccines, viral-vector vaccines, protein subunit vaccines, and mRNA vaccines. Each type of vaccine technology provides advantages and challenges regarding safety in variable ages of receivers. Therefore, Thailand is faced with additional choices for COVID-19 vaccines at this stage, which has caused many dilemmas in choosing one over another as decided by Thai policymakers.

This section will focus on the four driving factors that affected the key driver of Thai policymakers concerning the procurement of the COVID-19 vaccines. The first section explains the relationship between Bangkok and Beijing at both government-to-government levels and the close ties between the Thai royal family and Chinese leaders. The second section illuminates the conflict of interests and its influence on Thai policymakers. It will focus on the mutual interests of the Thai-Chinese conglomerates, and the Thai royal establishment's deal with Oxford-AstraZeneca. The third section highlights Thai public pressure on the government toward the emergence of new variants. It will describe the role of the private sector in procuring the alternative Moderna vaccine and Thailand's reluctant stance in joining the COVAX scheme. The fourth and final section presents the United States' timely opportunities in vaccine diplomacy as well as explains the motive of middle power donors to Thailand.

The Relationship between Bangkok and Beijing

Bangkok and Beijing officially established diplomatic relations in 1975 (Mr. Lyu Jian, 2018), even though there had been friendship treaties and relations back through the centuries. Since the end of the Cold War, with the US re-strategized its foreign policy away from Southeast Asia to the Middle East, China continually moved to promote bilateral ties with its neighboring countries and has increased the dependence in terms of trade and commerce between Southeast Asia nations. (Fung, 2022) Due to Thailand's geopolitical position, which is located at the heart of mainland Southeast Asia, China has grown exponentially in just a few decades along with its regional economic relationships. This has resulted in Thailand becoming an increasingly important strategic partner for China and also a major trading partner in multiple sectors. Coupled with the recent developments in Thai politics regarding the 2014 military coup, Bangkok has developed a close relationship with the Chinese government, and gradually tilted towards Beijing, and detached itself from Washington. This behavior has reflected the narrative of Thai foreign policy and casts doubts on whether Thailand is tactful enough to maintain its balancing diplomacy. Most significantly, when it comes to the policy relating to the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines among superpower players. Hence, Thailand – along with other Southeast Asia countries – has faced difficulties resisting China's influence on multiple issues, particularly with the Chinese vaccine distribution in 2021.

The Relationship at the Government-to-Government Level

Amid the high demand for vaccination worldwide and the public outcry about insufficient supplies of COVID-19 vaccines, Bangkok has looked for foreign sources of supplies to ensure life and economic saving. While Beijing has gradually curbed its local infection onshore and recovered faster and stronger than the West, Bangkok is more likely to have its eyes on the Chinese-made vaccines. The Chinese-made vaccine, Sinovac, was one of many choices for Thai policymakers to procure due to the less complicated procedure to import the vaccine. In one paper, one of Sinovac's main advantages is that it can be stored in the standard refrigerator at 2-8 degrees Celsius and is made from a genetically inactivated virus, compared to the Western

branches such as Pfizer and Moderna, which are harder to access due to huge demands from around the world and required cold storage chain at -20 degrees Celsius for Moderna and -70 degrees Celsius for Pfizer-BioNTech.(Tan, 2021) As a result, it means that the Sinovac vaccine is considered to be a lot more efficient for developing countries which might not be able to store large amounts of vaccine at such low temperatures.

The Thai Cabinet decided to approve 1.228 billion baht for the purchase of 2 million doses from Sinovac Biotech.(Praphornkul, 2021) The first batch of Sinovac vaccines, in the amount of 200,000 doses, arrived in Thailand on 24 February 2020, only two days after the Thai Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the use of Chinese vaccines. The handover ceremony of the first batch was represented by several Thai Cabinets at the Suvarnabhumi International Airport including; Prime Minister, Public Health Minister, Finance Minister, Transport Minister, Deputy Public Health Minister, and Deputy Finance Minister. The enormous handover ceremony, under the theme of “Returning Smile to Thailand”, was marked by Prayut as a *historic moment*. He appreciated China for its valuable support and pledged to continue purchasing Chinese vaccines due to the reliability and quality functions, and will do its best to provide vaccines for the people of the whole country.(*First Batch of China's Sinovac COVID-19 Vaccines Arrives in Thailand*, 2021) While Yang Xin, then-Charge d’Affaires of the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok, mentioned that Thailand has become the first ASEAN country to purchase Chinese vaccines and the first COVID-19 vaccines Thailand has imported since the pandemic occurred. Yang Xin reiterated that the deepening of China-Thailand vaccine cooperation is a concrete manifestation of China’s active implementation of the COVID-19 vaccines as an ‘International Public Goods,’ and also a concrete manifestation of the relationship *as close as one family* between China and Thailand. Moreover, he further restated that both China and Thailand are recognized as a comprehensive strategic partnership, thus, there is much pragmatic cooperation to promote in various fields in the foreseeable future.



*Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha – along with several Thai Cabinets – attended a handover ceremony of the first batch of China’s Sinovac Vaccines at Suvarnabhumi International Airport Bangkok, February 24, 2021.
(Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Thailand)*

In addition, the handover ceremony has been broadcasted live on all channels, both Thai and foreign media were paying full attention to the arrival of the first batch of COVID-19 vaccine to Thai soil. And 4 days later, in order to boost public confidence, Public Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul received the first shot of Sinovac vaccines – along with several Cabinet members – rather than the country leader himself as the Thai government has adjusted the inoculation campaign of Sinovac vaccines to people aged below 60 instead. (World, 2021c) To this end, the Chinese vaccine initially became the country’s main choice in 2021.

The Close Ties between Thai Royal Family and Chinese Leaders

Besides the deal with the Sinovac vaccine at government-to-government purchase, Thailand’s close ties between the royal family and China government also came into consideration in open negotiation with the second Chinese vaccine that arrived in the country. This mutual relationship and a strong tie between both institutions are considered a ‘push factor’ for the Chulabhorn Royal Academy (CRA) – which is an advanced research and academic institute chaired by HRH Princess Chulabhorn, King Rama X’s youngest sister – and bilaterally dealt with and procured Chinese-made vaccines known as Sinopharm as a first alternative vaccine for Thai citizens and non-Thai nationals living on the Kingdom’s soil.

The Sinopharm is a Chinese state-owned enterprise which already been approved by the WHO for emergency use. However, Sinopharm is made from a genetically inactivated virus, just like the Sinovac. Due to the deal purchased by the CRA with its funding, thus the inoculation is not free. The price per dose is 888 baht which includes 30,000 baht medical insurance for anyone who develops negative side effects following vaccination.(World, 2021a)

According to the Thai Royal Gazette, it announced that the CRA was granted authority to bypass red tape to procure alternative vaccines domestically or abroad until other supplies become sufficient.(Gazette, 2021) In addition, Deputy Prime Minister Wissanu Krea-ngam said that the CRA had the legal authority to import vaccines unless it followed other laws regarding FDA registration. He also reiterated that the CRA can procure vaccines directly from manufacturers as it is using the budget of the CRA instead of the state budget. Meanwhile, several agencies wish to procure alternative vaccines from overseas as well but turn out to face many restrictions due to the government's regulations.

Aside from the direct procurement between the CRA academy and a Chinese state-owned enterprise, the Red Cross Society of China also bilaterally donated the Sinopharm vaccine to the Thai Red Cross Society. The Executive Vice President of the Thai Red Cross Society, HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, also attended the handover ceremony represented by the then-Charge d'Affaires of the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok. To date, the Red Cross Society of China presented over 2 million doses of Sinopharm vaccines to the Thai Red Cross Society.(Society, 2021) These donations not only strengthen to support for the activities in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand but also highlight the close relationship between the Thai royal family and the Chinese's high official government.

Ultimately, by examining the relationship between Bangkok and Beijing at all levels during this phase, it can be seen that the degree of *limited bandwagoning* of Thai foreign policy has increased towards China in the areas of mutual interests, namely, mask and vaccine dependence. While Thailand still managed to diversify and established strategic partnerships with other allies – the United States, Japan, and the European Union – in order to create a balancing strategy and try to prevent single powers to dominate over its internal affairs (*dominance denial spectrum*), however,

the highly dependent relationship with China government and the close ties with the Thai royal family is considered a driving factor that limited the policy options of Thai policy-making elites at that particular time.

The Conflict of Interests and its influence on Thai Policymakers

In general, the Thai policymakers – such as Public Health Ministry and the Thai government – have the authority and right to procure safe and quality vaccines at the timeliness, which attached the highest priority to the safety and well-being of people in the Kingdom. On the contrary, the Thai decision-makers do not have the sole decision ‘to select’ or ‘not to select’ each vaccine choice based on the designated qualifications due to the conflict of interest from influential conglomerates. This aspect also prevents the government from choosing specific choices or vaccine programs, and vice versa. Most significantly, these behavior has myriad implications and influence on the action of Thai policymakers regarding the selection of COVID-19 vaccine choices.

The Thai - China Conglomerate’s Connections

Aside from the direct relationship between Thailand and China at the government-to-government level and the close ties between the Thai royal family and Chinese-state-owned enterprises, one of Thailand’s largest and most influential conglomerates is also implicitly involved in the deal of Sinovac vaccine purchasing.

According to Nikkei Asia, China’s Sinovac Biotech has raised more than 500 million USD from investors to help double the production of its COVID-19 vaccine. Consequently, Hong Kong-listed Sino Biopharmaceutical, controlled by a Thai conglomerate known as CP Pharmaceutical Group, has invested 515 million USD, giving it a 15% stake in Sinovac Life Sciences, the unit in charge of CoronaVac vaccine (Sinovac) production.(Tan, 2020) Sinovac’s chairman also reiterated that the funding to CoronaVac will further enable it to improve, expand, and accelerate vaccine capabilities in an effort to help combat the global pandemic.

The CP Group is one of Thailand’s predominant conglomerates owned by Thailand’s richest man, Dhanin Cheravanont, with a net worth of 18.1 billion USD listed on Forbes in 2021. The Cheravanont family’s wealth has increased by nearly

100 billion bath during the pandemic, despite the overall economy taking a downward spiral from the COVID-19 outbreak. The Thai conglomerate has a long history of business ventures in China and has been associated with high official levels under Prayut's premiership. According to Dhanin's interview with Nikkei Asia, he was the first foreign investor during China's economic reform in 1978 under the Deng Xiaoping administration and was among 500 representatives whom President Xi Jinping invited to bilaterally exchange words at the International Conference of Overseas Chinese in 2014.(Asia, 2016) This cordial relationship reflects ties with the inner circles of the Chinese Communist Party, and it continues.

The news headline of Sino Biopharmaceutical's acquisition of Sinovac Life caused numerous controversy among the public. While some perceived this venture as being beneficial for Thailand because the funding will help accelerate vaccine capability and provide sufficient resources to the kingdom, others are raised concerns it could create a conflict of interest due to the agreement to purchase a high volume of Sinovac vaccine at the amount of 30 million doses to date. On the other hand, the CP group has claimed that the vaccine purchases were made at the government-to-government level and CP was not involved in any way. Also, the share acquisition is likely to be solely for investment purposes, not speculation that Chinese vaccines will take over the Thai market in the near future.(Post, 2021a)

It can be seen from this part that Thailand tries to diversify the risk by employing 'economic pragmatism' behavior with China to gain economic returns from the relationship as much as possible, especially in the post-2014 military coup. These developments have not only established strong ties between the government-to-government level but also private and business sectors. As a result, Thailand and China have strengthened ties further by developing many economic and industrial cooperation that greatly benefits the people of both sides, namely, the scale-up in investments in the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) by Chinese investors that has put China to rank second in terms of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Thailand on 2021 with the amount of 38.6 billion USD.(Bangprapa & Tangsathaporn, 2022) However, as Thailand tends to give high priority to China on the economic front, these developments have also pushed Bangkok to have a closer relationship with

Beijing as well as affected the shaping of decision-making of the Thai government and Thai conglomerate towards the issue of the Chinese vaccines.

Thai Royal Establishment's deal with Oxford-AstraZeneca

The second development that involved and influenced the decision of Thai policymakers was the deal between Thailand's royal establishment and Oxford-AstraZeneca in the United Kingdom. According to the Royal Thai Embassy in London, Thailand and the UK signed the Letter of Intent on the manufacturing and supply of potential COVID-19 vaccine, which agreed to work with Siam Bioscience – a company affiliated with Crown Property Bureau – to be its manufacturing partner and technology transfer to support broad and equitable access to the vaccine in the Southeast Asia region.(Royal Thai Embassy, 2020) Both sides reiterated that the collaboration was undertaken on the basis of being '*non-profit*,' with the genuine intent to produce vaccines for wide distribution and benefit to the mankind.

According to AstraZeneca, Siam Bioscience was the first and only biopharmaceutical manufacturer in Thailand, which had the capability to be a biopharmaceutical manufacturer. As AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine is a modified adenoviral vector grown in mammalian cells, thus, Siam Bioscience considered having experience with manufacturing and exporting products that use such mammalian cells technology. Moreover, the company's plants also meet multiple international standards and are considered the largest biopharmaceutical manufacturer in Thailand, which will have the available capacity to expand production lines in order to meet at least 200 million doses per year in the near future. Therefore, with this high level of operational excellence, AstraZeneca reiterated that Thailand's Siam Bioscience is the only suitable manufacturer that will play a critical role in achieving sustainable vaccine equity in the region and beyond.(AstraZeneca, 2021)

In addition, Thailand decided to sign an advance agreement with Oxford-AstraZeneca in securing the country access to the company's vaccine and authorizing the local manufacturer to produce it.(Post, 2020) It also approved a budget of 2.74 billion baht out of the total budget of 6.2 billion baht for the purchase of 26 million doses of AstraZeneca out of the total of 61 million doses under the Advance Market Commitment.(Government, 2021) The local production of the AstraZeneca vaccine

aims to supply Thailand will start distributing from June onwards. The rollout plan is divided into two phases, with 26 million doses to be distributed to target provinces in the first phase and 35 million doses delivered in the second. In the first phase, 6 million doses aim to distribute in June, 10 million in July, and another 10 million in August. In the second phase, 10 million doses aim to distribute each month from September to November, and 5 million doses in December for a total of 61 million doses by the end of 2021.(Angskul, 2021)

However, due to the high surge of infectious diseases and the strange delays in regional production and delivery of Siam Bioscience, the Thai government was considering imposing limits on exports of locally manufactured AstraZeneca vaccine to ASEAN countries. This move was likely to raise concerns about the so-called ‘vaccine protectionism’ mentality and could adversely impact international relations between Thailand and neighboring countries.(and & Wongcha-um, 2021) For instance, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen said the country had ordered 10 million doses of Thai-made AstraZeneca vaccines but was giving high priority for vaccines to be used domestically for the people in the country instead. The Philippines and Malaysia said they were expecting delays in locally-produced AstraZeneca vaccines due to the production delays, despite Siam Bioscience’s initial plans to become a regional vaccine hub which aims to distribute 200 million doses of vaccines to the Southeast Asia region.(Reuters, 2021)

This linkage has sparked some political controversy toward the Thai government regarding the fair and open selection of the COVID-19 vaccine production hub concerning the mutual business interests between Siam Bioscience and the Oxford-AstraZeneca. To this end, this created both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ pressure on the government side. Internally, the government should have provided more opportunities for several local firms with vaccine development expertise to partner with Oxford-AstraZeneca, to address the insufficient production issues amid surging viruses and high demands for vaccines worldwide. Externally, the delay of Thai-made vaccines to neighboring countries instead become another pressure that critically influence the Thai public to pay more attention to the government’s recent developments.

Thai Public Pressure toward the Emergence of New Variants

Moderna and Private Sector's Role in the Vaccine Procurement

While the earlier section illustrated the conflict of interest between Thai conglomerates and the vaccine deal, which somehow led to the influence of the Thai policymakers 'to select' or 'to prevent' each alternative over the rest. This section will elaborate on the role of the private sector in helping to procure vaccine supplies amid intense global demand and emerging variants.

As Thailand is struggling to contain the surging virus since the Songkran holidays in mid-April due to the highly contagious Delta variant firstly detected in India, coupled with public outcry about insufficient supplies of COVID-19 vaccines, the Thai government is concurrently facing a multi-pronged challenge. The first is an additional new cluster onshore, the second is an increasing demand to supply sufficient vaccination to the public, and the last is the efficacy of the imported vaccines to fight against the emergence of new variants. These dilemmas have caused intensified pressures on Bangkok in order to seek alternative foreign sources of vaccines, particularly with the type of mRNA vaccine technology such as Moderna and Pfizer.

The import of mRNA vaccine, particularly Moderna, has been foot-dragging due to bureaucratic regulations. The case in point is when the Thai FDA still has not initially approved the Moderna vaccine despite the emergency approval by the WHO for its efficacy and safety. In addition, the development has come to the spotlight when several government agencies declared the need to procure Moderna as an alternative vaccine but instead got blocked by the Thai government. A statement issued by the Thai Chamber of Commerce (TCC) says the government can afford to buy enough vaccines for people, therefore, the private sector does not need to acquire more and add a financial burden to company budgets already affected by COVID-19.(Post, 2021b) This has raised debate and public pressure on the Prayut administration to allow the private sector to import alternative vaccines, particularly in a prioritized group, to help cushion the economic impact and speed up vaccinations in Thailand.

Followingly, the private sectors – with the lead of the TCC and The Federations of Thai Industries (FTI) – were among the leading business executives

who met with Prime Minister to discuss solutions and ways to facilitate alternative vaccine procurement. In addition, the Thai FDA has given green light and approved the authorization for the Moderna vaccine for emergency use. This approval will pave the way for commercial vaccinations by private hospitals, as many companies are willing to buy vaccines for their employees in preventing disease transmission and boosting safety confidence among their foreign customers. In this process, the Government Pharmaceuticals Organisation (GPO) will act as the middle man to import the vaccines of their preferences since most vaccine manufacturers do not sell directly to overseas companies. ("Thai FDA approves Moderna vaccine," 2021) To date, Thailand has received the first and second shipment of Moderna vaccines with a total amount of 1,942,700 million doses within 2021, while the remaining 6.8 million doses were scheduled to be delivered in the first quarter of 2022. The vaccine doses will be distributed to private hospitals in accordance with the quota for each place, and the remaining portion will go to the Thai Red Cross, Siriraj Hospital, and Ramathibodi Hospital. (Thadaphrom, 2021)

Thailand's reluctant stance in joining COVAX

The following push factor is the public pressure urging Thailand to join the COVAX scheme. COVAX is a worldwide initiative co-led by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and the WHO. Simply said, it is a global mechanism aimed at ensuring that all participating countries get access to COVID-19 vaccines and that people who could not afford them – particularly those living in 92 lower-income countries account for around half of the world's population – get them at no cost to themselves. (Organization)

Even though the COVAX program has kick-started in late 2020, however, due to the new outbreak and new variants of COVID-19, this has caused the country to have insufficient supplies for domestic demands. Regarding Thailand's initial stance to not procure the vaccines through a multilateral mechanism, the public is urging the government to reconsider its position and take this opportunity to address the immediate issues.

To this end, Bangkok wavers in its reluctant stance due to the overly strict conditions and limitations in terms of vaccine choices. While the public has raised

doubt about its current portfolios of Chinese vaccines regarding the efficacy against new variants, Thailand's lingering position could have worsened the already-exacerbated situation. This development reflects the public opinion which perceives the negative views toward Chinese vaccines, in contrast with the initial procurement when Thailand still had fewer choices of foreign sources.

It can be seen from this aspect that Thailand has a lack of 'binding engagement' behavior by not maximizing diplomatic returns by engaging in other multilateral platforms aimed to diversify the sources of vaccine choices, especially with the western world. Instead, Thailand chose to bind its tendency towards the single power, particularly with the fora that were led and initiated by China. For instance, (1) the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) on 20 February 2020 which had agreed to exchange research through the ASEAN-China Health Ministers' Meeting (ACHMM) and the ASEAN-China Senior Officials Meeting on Health Development (ACSOMHD)(Nations, 2020), (2) the Sixth Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) on 8 June 2021 which discussed ways to promote cooperation on public health on public health and the use of traditional medicine in the prevention and treatment of the COVID-19 pandemic(Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021), and (3) the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Foreign Ministers' Meeting on 3 August 2021 which aimed to make the APT Cooperation Fund and the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund as well as setting-up of an APT Reserve of Medical Supplies for Public Health Emergencies and the ASEAN Reserve of Medical Supplies.(E. o. t. P. s. R. o. C. i. t. K. o. Thailand, 2021)

As a result, these developments have caused Thailand to have an imbalanced position regarding the 'binding engagement' behavior in hedging strategy. Despite the public pressure that plays a significant role in pushing the government to diversify the vaccine strategies and seek supplies from the western world, Thai foreign policy has gradually lost ground in its hedging bid to offset the risk.

The United States' Vaccine Diplomacy and Middle Power Donors

Unlike other members of ASEAN nations, Thailand does not have any label preference for vaccines. By default, Thailand's vaccine portfolios should become diverse and inclusive which citizens can select based on their needs and health

concerns. However, the government rather has received severe criticism from the public regarding how authorities were responsible for an undiversified vaccination procurement plan, which heavily relied on the Chinese players and locally-made AstraZeneca produced by Siam Bioscience. These dilemmas have caused the public to question the government in its sluggish move toward the deal and incoming opportunities from the West, particularly with the mRNA vaccines that Thailand still lingering behind others.

Public pressure has increasingly come amid stress and urgency, and become a significant factor to push Bangkok to start its first move in negotiating with the West. On 6 July 2021, the Thai Cabinet approved a proposal to procure 20 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, expected to be delivered within the fourth quarter of 2021.(Reporters, 2021) In the meantime, the Thai Cabinet gave the green light to import an additional 10.9 million doses of Sinovac vaccines. This has raised concern about procuring other brands apart from the current portfolio, in which most of them have been approved by the Thai FDA so far, namely, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson.

In addition, Washington has made a timely move. The United States under the Biden administration has donated 2.5 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Thailand. This amount was negotiated bilaterally with the US, with the proactive role of the Royal Thai Embassy in Washington D.C. along with the support from Thai-born US Senator Tammy Duckworth, which resulted in the first import of mRNA vaccines to Thailand. The first batch of Pfizer-BioNTech, in an amount of 1,503,450 million doses, arrived in Thailand on 30 July 2021. The US Embassy in Bangkok mentioned this donation via the Embassy's Facebook as:

“a part of President Biden’s promise to help our friends, partners and allies fight this global pandemic. This donation will help Thailand accelerate the country’s vaccination campaign, protect the health of all residents of Thailand and begin the process of economic recovery. The arrival of these vaccines is another testament to our *unbreakable friendship*. We will get through this together.”(U. S. E. a. C. i. Thailand, 2021)



*The United States Donates 1.5 Million Pfizer Vaccine Doses to Friend and Ally Thailand
(U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand)*

The US Embassy in Bangkok reiterated that “our vaccines do not come with *strings attached* as the US is doing this with the singular objective of saving lives and with the full knowledge that none of us are safe until all of us are safe.” To date, Washington has donated a total of 2.5 million mRNA vaccine doses to Bangkok. While the first batch of 1.5 million Pfizer vaccines aims to contain the outbreak, the second batch of 1 million Moderna vaccines aims to help Thailand reach its goal of vaccinating 70% of the population. Aside from the vaccine donations, the US government has also provided ventilators, respirators, testing kits, surgical masks, goggles, and other protective equipment to Thailand’s medical personnel. (Tangsathaporn, 2021)

Moreover, the allied countries – particularly middle power nations – have offered timely opportunities regarding the vaccine deal with the Thai government. This has coincided with a time when those middle power nations managed to maintain their situation and have sufficient supplies for their citizens at home. Japan was the first middle power to distribute vaccines to Thailand, with the motive of counterbalancing China’s assertive move. Followed by donations from the UK, Germany, the Republic of Korea, Iceland, Spain, and France. To date, Tokyo’s vaccine distribution to Bangkok accounted for more than 2 million doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca.

Regarding the US vaccine diplomacy, Thailand managed to maintain its ‘dominance denial’ with its oldest security ally by pursuing negotiations with the US on the vaccine and health cooperation, as a way to counterbalance the sphere of influence among other major powers. However, Bangkok’s behavior to prevent Chinese vaccines from taking over the Thai market coincided with Washington’s proactive role to re-engage with like-minded alliances in Southeast Asia through vaccine diplomacy means. Therefore, Thailand’s move to maximizing risk options was not solely the motive and direction of Thai policymakers, but instead caused by domestic imperatives and changing international landscape in order to capitalize on the incoming opportunities from the US.

Analysis: How Vaccine Diplomacy reflects Thailand’s Imbalance Stance between Superpower’s Power-play?

Thailand’s footwork in the battleground of vaccine diplomacy amid superpower rivalry has underscored the myopic vision of the Kingdom, rather than focusing on a well-crafted hedging strategy in the long run. Despite the initial move that Thailand was resilient enough in handling the outbreak and was praised by the international fora, the latter year highlighted many dilemmas and accentuated domestic pressures toward the imbalance stance of the Thai foreign policy in ‘*putting all its eggs in one basket*’ by relying on specific vaccine alternatives. This turns out to be a testament to the possibility that Bangkok is heavily dependent on Beijing, which somehow becomes an inimical threat to the country.

In this section, three important empirical cases of the superpower’s vaccine diplomacy between 2020 and 2021 are being examined to analyze Thailand’s imbalanced position. First, the strong relationship between Thailand and China at all levels, which strongly influences the decision-making of Thai policymakers. Second, the mutual business interests between Thai conglomerates and China’s inner circle of leaders. And third, China’s assertive foreign policy and its impact on Thai domestic affairs, highlighting the case of the political debate over the efficacy of Chinese vaccines.

The Relationship as ‘close as one family’ between Thailand and China

In the aftermath of the 2014 military coup, Thailand has conducted its foreign policy based on appeasement and compliance in order to seek political recognition from neighbors and partners abroad. China has given support and endorsed the Thai junta by providing legitimacy to the military government.(Amy Sawitta Lefevre, 2014) Later on, both countries exchanged their high levels visit together with Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Prayut in Beijing in December 2014 and Thailand welcomed Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in Bangkok shortly after, this meeting was marked as the most prominent foreign leader to visit the country since the military seized power.(Parameswaran, 2014) After the meeting, Prayut compared Thailand to an ant and China to a lion with the statement “...a tiny ant can sometimes help a big lion or elephant...”(Today, 2019) The animal metaphor reflects that Bangkok has valued and subordinated the relationship with Beijing because it helped boost the confidence of the then-junta that it could hold on the power, while Western governments had imposed sanctions on Bangkok which affected the strained ties with its allies in Washington and Europe. The case in point is when its longest ally, the US, canceled military and arms support to Thailand along with its suspension of nearly 3.5 million USD of its military aid to the country.(News, 2014)

Consequently, due to the widening rift between Washington and the Thai military government, Thai foreign policy in the post-2014 coup has relatively responded by pivoting towards China. With China’s status quo policy that has no apparent intentions of interfering in any country’s domestic affairs, Thailand has relatively established close-knit ties underpinned by mutual political and business interests with its biggest neighbors. China’s foremost foreign policy vis-à-vis Thailand is to ‘make money not enemies’ due to the myriad advantages in the development of many projects ranging from political security to the economic front.(Chachavalpongpun, 2018) In 2016, China signed a deal with Thailand to sell submarines and tanks worth 231 million USD, also showed its interest in a multimillion dollars high-speed train project, and is keen to provide foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) of Thailand.(Macan-Markar, 2017) It cannot be argued that the partnership between Bangkok and Beijing has proved to be a new cornerstone in the Sino-Thai relations, however, Thailand’s

increasingly pro-China policy has also compelled Western countries to amend their stance toward the Kingdom for fear of losing their footmarks in the country in order to counter-balance China's assertive rise.

It seems that Thailand has been able to exploit its relationship with China to offset Western sanctions and the kudos must go to China for being a part of reconciling Thailand's relations with the Western world. However, in the longer run, China can take its relationship with Thailand for granted due to the overwhelming dependency on Chinese political and business support. The China factor also influences Beijing to take over Thai's domestic sentiment and manipulates the decision-making of Thai policy elites concerning the development of COVID-19 vaccines and related medical equipment between 2020 and 2021.

Therefore, it can be argued that Thailand's approach to purchasing Chinese-made vaccines does not only manifest the country's highest priority to the safety and quality of the imported vaccine but also symbolizes a relationship as close as one family between Bangkok and Beijing in which China dominates in several areas of strategic cooperation. As an ancient Chinese adage that likens Sino-Thai relations goes, "Zhong-Tai Yi Jia Qin" (China and Thailand are one family), it looks like blood is still thicker than water. (Thailand, 2020b)

The Mutual Business Interests and its motive behind the Vaccine deal

Since the military coup in 2014, not only the rock-solid relationship between the Thai and China governments has been reaffirmed but also the private sector's mutual interest in doing business. It is undeniable that one of the largest and most influential conglomerates in Thailand – CP Pharmaceutical Group – has received immense benefits from the changing political landscape through several national projects.

First, there was positive momentum in the relationship between Thailand and China after the military coup in 2014. This resulted in Thailand's decision to give high priority to development toward China rather than the United States, as Bangkok has heavily relied on Beijing as its security guarantor in terms of politics in the international community. This development also provides advantages to the CP Group in doing business and opening opportunities with Chinese markets, which helps

expanded the company empire and brought potential Chinese businessmen to invest in nearly all of the CP Group's portfolios. The case in point is when the CP won a bidding approval from the government for the High-Speed Railway infrastructure connecting Suvarnabhumi, Don Mueng, and U Tapao airports in collaboration with China Railway Construction Corporation.(Kishimoto, 2019)

Secondly, Thailand's attempt to reduce the economic interdependence on the US resulted in its positioning to accommodate China, significantly in terms of trade and investment. This development is significant as it encourages free and open trade between the Thai private sector and Chinese companies that benefited and brought advanced industries – such as robotics and next-generation technology – from China to the EEC in Thailand's eastern seaboard. It is indisputable that CP Group is among many Thai private sectors which gained immensely from these ongoing developments, particularly the Thai-Chinese high-speed railway project that attracted Chinese investment into the Thai economic zone as a gateway to extend regional connectivity within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Therefore, CP stands to benefit enormously as it will become a regional hub for international trade within the region via both the China-Lao high-speed railway and a major seaport on the Gulf of Thailand.

Ultimately, this proved that CP Group has strong ties to the Chinese business leaders and predominantly influenced the Thai government's decisions on many sensitive issues. The strength and reach of the group have led many people to question and be concerned that they are no longer a private company, but a country itself. This also reflects the decision-making of Thai policy elites concerning the procurement of the COVID-19 vaccine, as to some extent, business determinants – together with the China factor – play an important role in manifesting Thai's decision away from the default position of its hedging strategy. The CP's mutual interest, combined with its close tie with the Chinese's inner circle leaders, is significantly crucial in asserting and preventing Thai authority *'to choose'* or *'not to choose'* specific vaccine choices, and facilitating a seamless negotiation with Chinese counterparts over the Sinovac and Sinopharm deals.

China's Assertive Foreign Policy and its impact on Thai Domestic Affairs: The political debate over the efficacy of Chinese vaccines

In recent years, Chinese officials have more openly expressed their thoughts – known as ‘wolf-warrior diplomacy’ – and often resulting in negative ramifications on their bilateral relations with other countries, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when China has become more assertive regarding the origin of the outbreak on its soil as well as concerning the development of its homegrown vaccines. This new rhetoric expresses decisive action and attracts the considerable attention, especially with the use of social media platforms by Chinese officials in countering and debating with both the Western elite and the Western public.(Martin, 2021) This new phenomenon has intensified the competition between China and the US on the international fora and also harmed bilateral relations between China and its neighbors as well.

Thailand is also faced with assertive rhetoric from China in so-called wolf warrior diplomacy during 2021, the case in point is when the Thai vaccine portfolios are full with both Sinovac and Sinopharm even though the public perceptions towards the Chinese-made vaccines are negative. To this end, Thailand ordered Sinovac vaccines in the total amount of 50.85 million doses; 47.5 million doses through purchase, and 3.35 million doses through donation.(Bangkok, 2022) Coupled with the amount of Sinopharm vaccines at a total of more than 10 million doses from both China's government donation and direct purchase. This has caused the public to accuse the government of mismanagement of COVID-19 vaccines and initially relying on just the Chinese choices. Later on, this agenda has been brought to the table in the parliamentary debate in September 2021 with the opposition parties criticizing the government for lacking a well-crafted strategy for vaccine procurement, and its growing concern about the government's decision to continue purchasing the Sinovac vaccine despite its dubious efficacy against the surging Delta variant.(World, 2021b)

During the parliamentary debate, the Thai Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Public Health Minister, and Parliamentary Chairperson warned the opposition parties to refrain from discussing the inefficacy of Sinovac lest it could jeopardize bilateral relations with Beijing.(Sattaburuth, 2021) Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai also

expressed concern that criticism of the Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine for political benefits could affect the relationship between Thailand and China. He reiterated that “the criticism of Sinovac vaccine is not only distorting facts, but it also affects the relationship between the two countries.”(N. Thailand, 2021) This incident was incredulously derogatory, because the National Assembly of Thailand and the Thai MFA should, therefore, represent the interest and safety of the Thai people.(Charoenvattananukul, 2021)

In response to the Sinovac’s political debate and vaccine hesitancy, the Chinese embassy announced on its Facebook page after the incident that those criticizing the efficacy of the Sinovac vaccines could erode Sino-Thai relations. This reflects the aggressive and defensive tone of China’s foreign policy in pursuing its national interests. The extracted gist from the Chinese Embassy Facebook Page is as follows:

A Distortion of Chinese Vaccine without Fact:

“This year, China has donated vaccines to Thailand in the fight against the pandemic to ensure sufficient supplies are met with Thai needs. Every dose distributed to Thailand is based solely on the generosity of the China government extended to the Thai government and the Thai people...Sinovac vaccine was approved by the WHO for emergency use and passed the clinical trial in humans following the Thai FDA regulations as a safe, efficacy, and standard vaccine...Recently, some people and organizations have devalued and slandered the Chinese vaccine without reason, which is an attack with no respect to scientific information and fact. It is an assault to the good intention of China in supporting the Thai people’s fight against the pandemic. The Chinese Embassy totally opposes this and calls on related people and organizations to cease their severely wrong actions...”(Bangkok, 2021)

This action has led to the question of whether the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok has pursued combative and aggressive words and unduly try to interfere with

domestic Thai affairs, which is contrary to established customary practice that foreign missions residing in foreign countries should traditionally respect the sovereignty of their hosts. This undiplomatic move of the Chinese Embassy and its assertive rhetoric was doing more harm to themselves and Sinovac vaccine than good as it is more likely to make Thais who are already skeptical even more so. What was even more doubtful was Bangkok's non-reaction to China's brash move, as there was no report of how the Thai MFA might warn the Chinese embassy in Bangkok to tone down their abrasive display.

Followed by the incident, Thais were divided on both sides of the debate over the Sinovac vaccine; the die-hard supporters and the democratic opponents. The die-hard supporters were insisting that they truly appreciated benevolent help from China and apologized for their wrongdoing to the Chinese '*brothers and sisters*'. While the democratic opponents have believed that people should have the right to believe or not believe, to choose or not choose, a particular vaccine based on their decision, scientific information, and fact. (Rojanaphruk, 2021) What was even more interesting than these divisions over the Sinovac debate, is how the China government still predominantly influences and affects Thai's internal affairs. It can be argued that Beijing substantially dominates Thai politics, and the Thai domestic movement has sensitivity toward the Chinese government's national interest in one way or another. Therefore, these case underlines Bangkok's responses in relation to vaccine procurement that has fallen into China's orbit, resulting in an imbalanced position of hedging strategy with other major powers and also accentuating the interdependent ties between Sino-Thai relations. In a summation, the degree of hedging in Thai foreign policy has bent towards 'bandwagoning' with China, while losing its advantage to offset the risk of 'dominance denial' with other superpowers.

Conclusion

This research has sought to demonstrate how Thai foreign policy manages to maintain its flexibility amid the vaccine competition between superpower rivalry and argued that the country has faced difficulties in maintaining strategic hedging between China and the United States, which resulted in Thailand's stance to move closer toward China in all strategic aspects. And due to China's rising power in the

Southeast Asia region and the changing landscape of domestic politics following the 2014 military coup, it is undeniable to say that Beijing has not only deepened economic ties with Bangkok but has also had political and strategic implications on the Thai government and private sectors as a whole. Thailand has relied on China as a source of regime legitimacy due to its endorsement of the then-Thai military junta, this significant development accentuated Thailand's stance on its lack of hedging strategy between major powers. Also, it had a spillover effect on Bangkok and Washington's relationship, as resulted in Washington downgrading multiple security and defense cooperation with Bangkok in the following time. Therefore, it can be said that this behavior was apparently in contrast with Thailand's conventional diplomacy that values pragmatism and flexibility to keep relations between the two superpowers in a so-called 'bamboo bending with the wind'. Despite its ongoing development, Thailand's diplomatic culture has given a number of caveats that relying on a single power is harmful, particularly for the middle size nation situated at the crossroad between intensifying superpower rivalries.

As shown from the three empirical cases analyzed in this research, it underscores the 'push factor' from the government-to-government level, private sector, and domestic imperatives that have influenced the decision-making of Thai foreign policy regarding the COVID-19 vaccine procurement. The aforementioned evidence proves that the China factor has dominated the decision-making process of Thai policymaker elites and continually established an interdependent relationship underpinned by mutual political and business interests, which somehow testify to the possibility of maintaining equidistant balancing to diversify various sources of vaccine alternatives between both superpowers. Even though Bangkok's decision to initially procure Chinese-made vaccines was considered an opportunity that *must not be missed* regarding the safety and well-being of the people in the Kingdom, the domestic imperative and China factor have undeniably constrained Thailand's room to manoeuver and showed that the country lacks a well-crafted balancing act to deal with superpower's vaccine competition.

By analyzing on the conceptual framework, it proves that Thailand's hedging behavior vis-à-vis the US-China rivalries has developed an imbalanced position that leaned toward a limited bandwagoning relationship with the Chinese government on

the vaccine and economic front. Vice versa, these have also affected Thailand's loss of an optimum balance in the dominance denial pillar and resulted in single power – China – dominating over Thai's domestic affairs which can be an inimical threat to the country's interests. Despite Thailand's attempt to hedge against the risk by trying to diversify *'its eggs out of one basket'* in the following phase, the domestic imperative and China factor have irrefutable restrained Thailand's room for manoeuvre which resulted in many limitations in policy options towards the COVID-19 vaccine procurement. Consequently, with the ultimate goal of hedging is to avoid the danger of betting on the wrong horse and offset the effects of one another, it seems that Thailand has developed the degrees in hedging spectrum that is gradually bandwagoning toward China in terms of economic and health dependence rather than pursuing an equidistance balancing between superpowers that best promote its national interest.

To sum up, Thailand has fallen deeper into China's orbit and the situation of COVID-19 vaccine procurement manifested that Beijing's move still predominantly influences and affects Thai's internal affairs in many dimensions, particularly as China seeks to develop an economic corridor and expands political and health advantages over Thailand. Even though Thailand has managed to seek alternative sources of COVID-19 vaccines from the US and other middle powers, the action was perceived as 'reactive' rather than 'proactive', resulting in the loss of Thailand's default hedging strategy and harming the country's national interest in terms of economic recovery, political stability, and public health management.



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