

AN EXAMINATION OF FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGIES OF MIDDLE POWERS DURING GREAT POWER COMPETITION: A CASE STUDY OF THAILAND'S STRATEGIC HEDGING BETWEEN A DOMINANT USA AND ASCENDING CHINA

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Abstract: Recent years has seen confusion in the international political system as the hegemony of the U.S. has waned while China's international influence has dramatically increased. This change to the status quo from a unipolar system immediately after the Cold War to a bipolar or multipolar system has compelled states in the Asia region to formulate strategies in response to this change. The three typical strategies available to a state are what is referred to as bandwagoning, balancing, and this article's focus; hedging. In the case of Thailand, being relatively far removed from the epicentre of any future confrontation between Washington and Beijing, the state has options as to how it will approach the upcoming change in the regional power distribution. This essay intends to analyse the foreign policy strategy of Bangkok from early 2012 to the contemporary period to determine whether trends have emerged that may illustrate the direction of its foreign policy in the near future. By examining recent hardware purchase diversification, public statements, and the changing nature of military exercises between Thailand and the USA and Thailand and China, it is possible to make the conclusion that Thailand has adopted a hedging policy. This essay will explore how Thailand has moved beyond the traditional Thai-U.S. Alliance that lasted for most of the Cold War and is now entering into a more pragmatic position where overt allegiance is less public than before, prompting questions and possibly suspicion from both great powers in the near future.

Keywords: Middle powers, Great Power Conflict, Foreign Policy, China, Thailand

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the conclusion to the Cold War that marked 45 years of global tension, the U.S. has been the undisputed hegemon, a situation unprecedented in human history. However, as the year's roll-on, U.S. hegemony and interest in being hegemon has diminished as new challenges to its dominance proliferate. In Europe, the once forgotten threat of the Soviet Union has been replaced with a resurgent Russia commanded by strongman Vladimir Putin. This new threat has torn at the boundaries of Europe through its use of proxy forces in Ukraine (Rauta, 2016), information warfare against the electoral systems of Western liberal democracies (Richey, 2018), in addition to making successful overtures to key NATO ally: Turkey (Atlas, 2018). In the Middle East, the U.S. dominance is threatened through poor policy as well as Iranian initiatives to exploit power vacuums that have arisen. The Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syrian interventions by the U.S. has facilitated the establishment and consolidation of an Iranian arc of influence stretching from Central Asia to the Mediterranean (Freedman, 2006; Ebrahimi, Yusoff, Seyed & Mir, 2017, Byman, 2018). Finally in Asia, the single greatest challenge to the U.S. global preponderance has emerged in the form of a renewed China. The incredible speed at which China has risen has