



Examining analytical framework of Thailand’s position in ASEAN towards its achieving goals in regional affairs

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Abstract

Due to a lack of consideration in comparison with the attention given to larger states, there is need for further investigation into small states over the past two decades. In a world of powers, small states seem to have their vulnerabilities, regarding their effectiveness, abilities, and interests. This paper examines the role of a small state in Southeast Asian regional cooperation, in the case of Thailand, in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) from the mid-1960s to 2014. Significant activism of Thailand in ASEAN divides into three periods: the early stage (mid-1960s – 1989); the 1990s; and the 2000s. The transitional process of Thailand’s diplomatic power in Southeast Asian regionalism will be chronologically exposed through an analytical framework which has been conceptualized from the challenging characteristics of small states literature in global politics. The framework comprises of: an internal attribute – the decision-making policy; the perception of overcoming the disparity of power; and the belief in strengthening its regional resilience. This paper follows an approach of qualitative analysis in terms of handling the data, conducting the investigation, and explaining Thailand’s diplomacy in regional affairs. Constructivism will be used as a primary approach to discover the interplay of roles between ASEAN and Thailand’s decision-making process and evolving regional role. The advancement of Thailand’s position in ASEAN consistently remains if Thailand demonstrates their relative strengths in regional involvement.

Key words: ASEAN, Regional Cooperation, Small states, Thailand

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Introduction

The application of theory to circumstances in and between behaviour of small states and the framework of regional organisations is complex. The study has three main objects which can be examined as the central thrust of the paper are: to determine the rationale behind Thailand’s involvement in Southeast Asian regionalism; to investigate Thailand’s regional activities aimed at constructing the advancement of its regional diplomacy; and to ascertain perceived changes in Thailand’s attitude to regionalisation through the future of Thai diplomacy towards ASEAN from the mid-1960s to 2014.

In terms of justifying the characteristics of Thailand as a small state, we need to reconsider how to approach the question empirically regarding Thailand’s interpretation as a small state. When examining small states in a practical point of view, the concept of power based on constitutional capabilities in international relations is appropriate to consider rather than the physical attributes – the ‘size’ or the ‘rank’. This can be recognized from the existing debates such as Browning (2006, p. 670); Neumann and Gstöhl (2006, p. 6); Rothstein (1968, p. 29) and Vital (1971, p. 9) that can be viewed as an inquiry into the power that small states exercise, on both international and regional levels. Thailand may look small by international standards, particularly in its relationship with greater powers, it may be larger in regional terms. Consequently, Thailand’s status and roles in regional level is essential.

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm to explain the transformative impact of small states’ activism on regional integration by using Thailand as a case study. For this reason, constructivism can demonstrate an improved understanding of the interactions of ideational variables (norms and identities) with the agency actors (small states) in the regional environment. The ASEAN norms and the ASEAN way – identity enhance cohesion within an association which includes external powers therefore exhibits sharing the understanding of state values through regional identity (Acharya 2014; Ba 2005). Particularly, wider regional cooperation has been increased by such means as ASEAN plus Three (APT), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (plus outsiders – Australia, China, India as well as the US) (Acharya 2007). Thus, a constructivism is appropriate in recapitulating the degree of transformation to the existing regional order in terms of safeguarding cooperative interests among small states in Southeast Asia. Some recent constructivist analyses of Southeast Asian regional integration, mentioning the significance of compatibility of discourse



between states and ASEAN (e.g. Goh 2011; Khoo 2004; Narine 2002; Peou 2002; Weatherbee 2009) have illustrated this.

Methodology

Selecting the type of analysis to use is an important concern for researchers. The qualitative approach can provide advantages over the use of a single method, especially in the field of political science, which involves analysis of complex relationships between power, structure, and agency. Qualitative method has been selected to use in this study to interpret the data from prospective on the relationship between Thailand and regional cooperation in Southeast Asia. Major relevant events and circumstances that emerged from 1976 to 2011 will be exposed in the form of qualitative analysis. It therefore depends upon governmental reports from the Thai Ministry Foreign Affairs, memoirs, ASEAN official documents as well as peer-reviewed articles to help understand how Thailand has situated itself towards regional cooperation – ASEAN and how Thailand enhanced its identity, formation and policy learning towards ASEAN.

Thailand’s position in ASEAN activism since 1967

Thailand seeks to play a constructive role by becoming involved in the framework of institutional organisations, and also in bilateral or multilateral cooperation with regional institutions, such as in ASEAN. The official role of Thailand in ASEAN began in 1967 through the meeting in Bangkok on 2-8 August 1967. Thailand was known as the one of the original ASEAN founders, with establishing this regional institution. For institutional building towards the establishment of ASEAN, it is evident that Thanat and Adam Malik of Indonesia worked together (Snitwongse 1997: 88). Next, the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) was agreed to sign in Thailand as an elementary mechanism among five original ASEAN states – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, with the purpose to accelerate economic, political, and social developments in the region (Hagiwara 2003). On 8 August 1967, the “Bangkok Declaration” officially gave birth to ASEAN (Khoman 1992).

The changing role of small states in the process of regionalisation – in the case of Thailand in ASEAN – will be chronologically exposed, dividing into three periods: the early stage (mid-1960s – 1989); the 1990s; and the 2000s. These three periods will examine significantly relevant events and activities Thailand has conducted through the three analytical frameworks which are: an internal attribute – the decision-making policy; the perception of overcoming the disparity of power; and



the belief in strengthening its regional resilience. These three periods will be investigated as follows.

The early stage (mid-1960s – 1989)

In the early stage, an internal attribute which refers to decision-making policy had a significant impact on the dynamic of Thailand's role in ASEAN since the establishment of ASEAN. The policy can be projected with the aim of preserving national interests through regional interests. However, the foreign decision-making policy is likely to be dependent on the leaders' desire to wield influence over the decision-making process. This will depend upon the leader's ideologies, influence and opinions in different areas. During the 1960s, Thailand's foreign policy emphasised the development of ASEAN institution building. The administrative role of Thailand in ASEAN was practical. The continuity in the Thai Foreign Minister role, occupied by Thanat Khoman for approximately ten years, who was one of the co-founders of ASEAN. Thanat provided stable decision-making through promotion of effective ASEAN cooperation during his long period of being Thai Foreign Minister (Snitwongse 1997, p. 88). The policy related to Thailand's continual expansion of its role in regional cooperation has proven useful. For example, a negotiation of the Sabah issue – the conflict between Malaysia and the Philippines - was achieved, due to a beneficial role that Thailand played as a mediator for hampering the conflict among members (Severino, 2006, p. 2). As stated by Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister, 'Bangkok played a very big part in bringing us together, and Thailand is very keen to expand regional cooperation' (Antolik, 1990, p. 17).

During the 1970s, Thailand responded the idea of strengthening “‘national resilience’ to ensure ‘stability and security from external interference... in order to preserve... national identities’”, as ASEAN promised to member states in the ZOPFAN Declaration in 1971 (ASEAN, 1971). With the ideology of ‘mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations’, ‘the right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion, or coercion’ and ‘non-interference in the affairs of one another’ (ASEAN, 1976), the belief in strengthening its regional resilience becomes a choice for Thailand in supporting ASEAN. As Sukumbhand Paribatra, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Thailand asserts, ‘We [ASEAN members] have always said that we don't want other countries, especially superpowers, to interfere in the region. The time has come to show that we can solve the region's problems ourselves with the cooperation of countries outside the region’ (Dupont, 2000, pp. 168-69). Thailand's belief in strengthening its regional resilience has appeared in ASEAN security.



Even though in 1975 the United States had withdrawn from Southeast Asia after the announcement of the Nixon doctrine, Thailand still maintained its role in regional politics. The Cambodian issue had a significant impact of Thailand regarding security. The decision-making policy of the Thai leader revealed that Thailand supported ASEAN to put pressure against Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978. The decision-making policy on supporting democratic rule among ASEAN members also becomes a focus of Thailand. As Snitwongse (2001 p. 196) stated, 'Thailand played an active role in bringing about reconciliation and found relations with a more democratic Cambodia to be better [than] ever'. Likewise, the Chatchai administration promoted democracy in Myanmar by approaching the concept of constructive engagement during the early 1990s (Buszynski, 1998, pp. 290-91). Even though a sharp decision of Chatchai appeared, it was very difficult to enact the change to a liberal economy and democratic polity in Myanmar. As stated by Ali Alatas, the Indonesian foreign minister, 'the Burmese government was "trying very hard" to make improvements' (Richardson 1994).

The 1990s

The perception of overcoming the disparity of power steers Thailand to consider about limited power capacity, especially in economy. This can be obviously seen during the 1990s. Thailand attempted to conduct strong policy to increase economic influence by collaborating with its neighbour states, as well as bargaining with external powers. Thailand aimed to be the fifth 'Tiger of Asia'. Capital markets were access easier following the direction of liberal economic environment. The diplomacy of the Chatchai government refers us to consider of the initiative – 'changing the battlefield into the marketplace', aiming to create economic prosperous in Indochina. Thailand could advance its economic capacity through progressing its regional activity. This is because regional involvement will become an important tool to help the state increase its power. This initiative also became a starting point of Thailand's economic activism towards regional economic enhancement in the new millennium.

Extension of economic growth is an important aspect of strengthening and advancing the position of Thailand in ASEAN. The first scheme contributing to strong ASEAN economic integration was AFTA, proposed by the Thai Prime Minister, Anand Panyarachun in 1992 (Stubbs, 2000, p. 304; Narine, 2002, p. 128). This plan, which ensued as a result of the AFTA scheme, led to the economic involvement, in terms of a cooperative wider grouping for trade relations, of external powers, such as Australia, China, Japan, and the U.S. In 1993, the powerful growth of AFTA was



demonstrated when the Thai Deputy Prime Minister in the Chuan administration (September 1992-July 1995), Supachai Panitchpakdi identified regional linkages involved in AFTA and the Closer Economic Relations (CER) agreement which is a free trade agreement between the governments of New Zealand and Australia. (Narine, 2002, p. 129; Smith, 1997, pp. 16-20). Even though AFTA was thought to be a solution to improve the economic and political challenges facing ASEAN members, the trade between them is limited due to the imbalance of economic growth among these members. Stubbs (2000, p. 305) states that arrangements for the details of the AFTA agreement did not take much time; ultimately it was rapidly signed in 1992; leading to the relatively limited implementation of a Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT).

During mid-the 1990s, the Thailand had pursued involvement with the functional membership of ASEAN in terms of the competent decision-making policy in ASEAN expansion. Kraft's research (2010, p. 461) provides a clear image of Thailand's ability to mobilise the strength of ASEAN enlargement, especially through the admission of the Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV). In his words, 'the role of Thailand in this new context will be a key factor in the further evolution of ASEAN'. This is because a major role in the long process for the admission of Myanmar and Cambodia to ASEAN membership was conducted by Thailand (Kislenko, 2002, p. 546). Nevertheless, the burden of political issues and human rights in both Burmese and Cambodian cases challenged Thailand's position in ASEAN, in terms of its strong stance and the confrontation with ASEAN's principles of non-interference (Chaipan, 1994, p. 55).

Thailand became a valuable partner to other ASEAN members in its shift towards projecting efficient regional security developments. In the 1990s, the role of Thailand in ASEAN was proactive in regional security development. Participation in INTERFET by sending the largest number of troops, like Australia, to operate the East Timor crisis was decided by the Chuan government, with the aim of supporting a higher standard of international and regional cooperation (Haacke, 2003, p. 68). This can demonstrate that Thailand concerned about regional peacekeeping. Besides, Thailand's maritime interests in the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea have been emphasized since 1993. Both the Air Force and Navy have fully supported Thailand's security interests, including the protection of the Southern seaboard, which supports Thailand's fishing fleet and acts against piracy (Buszynski, 1994, p. 725). Thailand's security scheme has been arranged on the basis of recognising and securitising security challenges, such as terrorism, transnational crime, drug trafficking,



epidemic diseases, and national disasters; however, the limitations operating on these practical actions need to be investigated with the aid of regional, bilateral, and unilateral cooperation. As the Director-General of the Department of ASEAN Affairs, Lieutenant Commander Aitthi Ditbanchong (2011) and Haacke (2009, p. 437) noted, Thai maritime strength needs to be developed with a focus on its security approach throughout the region, particularly with an emphasis on protecting and solving the problematic issue of Southeast Asian piracy and armed robbery in the Straits of Malacca.

The 2000s

In the early 2000s, the strong ideology in economic enhancement of the Thai elites had a significant impact on Thai decision-making policy. Economic sectors such as investment, production and trade were the focus of the Thaksin government. With the emergence the new plan of “ASEAN-plus”, based on the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) on 6 May 2000, Thailand sought to improve its domestic situation through a more integrated regional economy. In the form of “ASEAN plus Three”, consisting of China, Japan and South Korea, Thailand was increasingly expected to gain a fruitful outcome in terms of economic growth roughly 7% of Thai GDP (Bangkok Business Online, 2010). This led Thailand to logically consider the perception of overcoming the disparity of power in economy, that means, Thailand looks itself as a small state in terms of improving its economic growth through the integration of its economy in ASEAN.

Additionally, the establishment of a new regional scheme to increase Thailand’s resilience, such as in Asian Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), and the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekhong economic cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) had emerged. The belief in strengthening its regional resilience during the Thaksin government was evident. As he notes ‘I wish to see Thailand firmly stand in Southeast Asia as a leading country where we can collaborate well with neighbours when they need our aid’ (Shinawatra 2001). Although the role of Thailand in regional economic cooperation seemed proactive, a range of conflicting interests became the focus of an important debate - either prioritising national interests or Thaksin’s interests.

Furthermore, elevating the power of Thailand through bargaining with greater powers, such as the U.S., China and Japan in regional cooperation is a component of Thailand’s decision-making policy. Interacting with two great powers together is a challenge for Thailand’s policy-making process. For instance, Thailand was unable to



take sides when a significant debate emerged between China and Japan regarding extension to new members of the East Asian Summit (EAS) in 2003 (Prasirtsuk, 2006, p. 230). Although this could be perceived as unsure decision-making, it was evidence of smart diplomacy, as adopting the role of neutrality contributed to Thailand's national interests and was an example of a fundamental feature of Thai foreign policy called 'bamboo diplomacy' which refers to 'bending with the wind' approach and can be characterized by three features – opportunism, alliance and bandwagoning. In addition, the ACD is a good example to show how Thailand's regional position is influenced by the great powers. Hamanaka (2010, p. 192) claims that Thailand preferred to include China in the ACD as a great power. Thus, the competent decision-making affects the transitional role of Thailand in ASEAN by enhancing ASEAN institutional development.

Even if Thailand's regional security followed the belief in strengthening its regional resilience, the significant influence of greater powers is still evident. Thailand had been active with external powers such as Australia, China, the EU, and the U.S. in terms of a security approach – in ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) during the early 2000s. For instance, Thailand followed political commitments into practical collaborative actions, in particular anti-terrorism by joining the Sub-Regional Ministerial Conference on Counter-Terrorism with Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore in 2007 (Haacke, 2009, p. 433). Rather than arranging the military defence by itself, joining with external powers in the form of ARF is valuable in advancing Thailand's position by the sharing of expectations of cooperative security among members. However, the influence of great powers on Thailand's decision-making, especially the U.S. and China, becomes an interesting debate to be investigated, especially the triangle position among both great powers.

After overthrowing Thaksin, the role of Thailand in regional interactions in regional security was uneven. Due to Thailand's political incident, it led Thailand to ineffectively solve the conflict regarding the territory dispute with Cambodia during the Abhisit government. It can be analysed that the strategy only focused on Thailand's self-centred benefit, rather than regional peace-building, unfortunately. Although The new hope had re-emerged for lifting Thailand's position at the regional level since Yingluck became a new prime-minister, expectation of restoring Thailand's role in ASEAN security is still uncertain (Pongphisoot, 2011) especially how to solve Thailand-Cambodian conflict in a sustainable way. Thus, if Thailand strongly emphasises self-benefit, rather than regional advantage, its regional position will be diminished.



Implication of Thailand’s position in ASEAN from 1967 to 2014

The questions under study become particularly interesting in view of the recent significant transformation of Thailand’s position in ASEAN. The way that Thailand operates in regional affairs, such as in ASEAN, can be explained by the relative strength Thailand demonstrates in three elements: the concept of powerlessness; and the belief in self-reliance and an internal attribute – competent decision-making. These can demonstrate the rationales behind the advancement of Thailand’s position in regional cooperation. They can help Thailand increase its regional role, such as in ASEAN economy, security and institution-building. The role of Thailand in ASEAN will be successful if Thailand has a strong power capacity to conduct effective policy through developing regional strength. However, rising domestic issues, such as an uneven political situation, sometime can diminish Thailand’s position in ASEAN.

In order to further understanding the roles of Thailand in ASEAN, Thailand purposed its varying roles in ASEAN from 1967 to 2014. These sorts of role can be interpreted as a follower, joint-initiator, neutral partner, sole-initiator, and sole-mediator. Interestingly, during the early stage, sole-initiator’s and sole-mediator’s role had improved between the 1960s and the end of 1990s, about five times of proposing important initiatives. However, the improvement of sole-initiator’s position in ASEAN in the last stage (the 2000s-2014) had been slightly lesser, approximately a few times of being active on regional initiatives. This is because the process of decision-making had been inconsistent in Thai foreign affairs. The push towards developing its strengths in regional involvement had been diminished, due to unstable political circumstance after the coup in 2006. Thailand had remarkably played its role as a neutral partner during the last stage (the 2000s-2014), especially in terms of regional security. This implies that Thai foreign policy had been imprecise, in order to have a clear direction of Thai diplomacy. In brief, although overall Thailand had persistently been involved in ASEAN from 1967 to 2014, the leadership role in regional cooperation had been unstable.

Limitation and expected outcome

There are some limitations in examining Thailand in the case of the role of a small state in Southeast Asian regional cooperation. Firstly, the examination of the role of Thailand in regional cooperation has been limited, due to selecting the choice of investigating period between 1967 and 2014. Since 2014, political unrest in Thailand became an obstacle for the progress of Thai foreign affairs. In addition,



because this study explains wider analysis of Thailand’s position in ASEAN since the 1960s, three conceptual analyses (an internal attribute – the decision-making policy; the perception of powerlessness; and the belief in self-reliance) could possibly be adopted into a specific case study for further study of other ASEAN state members.

The expected outcomes of this study are the construction and evaluation of an appropriate model for Thailand’s diplomacy within Southeast Asian regionalism, and the useful implications of these empirical findings for actual roles of Thailand in ASEAN in political, economic and security aspects. Moreover, this study would shade light on a complexity of processes of regional enhancement in ASEAN that Thailand could engage with. Optimistically, going beyond next year - in 2019, Thailand, under the military government, could operate well on the status of Chairmanship of ASEAN. It will be worthy to see if Thailand could play more constructive roles in moving forward the ASEAN Community.



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