Best friends forever?

The Curious Case of the Sino-Thai Relations

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs í sagnfræði

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Abstract
The Sino-Thai relations officially started in 1975 after years of political negotiations. However, the two countries had been in good relations since Thailand, formerly known as Siam, was established in 1238, when the Tai people migrated from China. The aim of this thesis is to examine how the relations between the two states have been since 1238, mainly focusing on the 20th and 21st centuries. The thesis is divided into four parts. In the first part, the aim is to look at the Sino-Thai relations between 1238 until the end of the 19th century, the second part is devoted to the relation during the 20th century, especially when diplomatic relations began in 1975. In the third part, the focus is on how the relation has been in the beginning of the 21st century. Lastly, the social discussion of the Sino-Thai relations during the 21st century will be discussed. Finally, the research questions will be answered in the conclusions.
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Introductions

Although relations between Thailand and China historically began in the 13th century, the present relationship between the countries did not begin until 1975 when they decided to establish diplomatic relations. Since then, the relation between Thailand and China has mainly been economic and political. In the past decades, Thailand has managed to maintain its relations with China skillfully despite its alliance with the United States, where the Chinese and the Americans have been competing for economic and political relations with Thailand.

From the perspective of theories, some have tried to explain China’s rise in the international system. One, in particular, is defensive realism, where it offers an optimistic story about China’s rise. China, according to defensive realism, will look for opportunities to shift the balance of power in its favor, as China’s neighbors will have to balance against China to keep it in check. Defensive realists believe that security competition will not disappear altogether from Asia as China grows more powerful. Nevertheless, defensive realism believes that the security competition surrounding China’s rise will not be intense and that China should be able to coexist peacefully with both its neighbors and the United States. For starters, it would not make strategic sense for great powers, such as China, to pursue hegemony, because their rivals will form a balancing coalition and maybe even crush them. Besides, defensive realists think that it would be smarter for Chinese leaders to act like Otto von Bismarck, the first Chancellor of the German Empire, rather than Kaiser Wilhelm or Adolf Hitler, who both made a run at hegemony. This is not to deny that China could attempt to gain power in Asia, but with a limited aim, China could be reasonably easy to contain and to engage in cooperative endeavors. Defensive realists point out that China’s nuclear weapon program and economy have an uneven effect on its position internationally. The Chinese economy has also been pointed out by defensive realists, as it has been growing at an impressive pace without foreign adventures. If China starts to conquer and occupy other countries economically, it is likely to run into fierce resistance from the populations which fall under its control. Though other scholars indicate that China’s rise could be relatively peaceful, defensive realists point out the possibility that domestic political considerations might cause China to act in strategically irrational ways. For comparison, defensive realists recognize that Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany made ill-aided runs at hegemony. They also claim that the behavior of those great powers was
motivated by domestic political pathologies, not sound strategic logic. This could lead to China following a similar path, in which case the rise of China would not be peaceful. However, structural realists who criticize what defensive realism think about China’s rise in the international system and ask whether or not China’s rise will be peaceful. If the world is unipolar, as some structural realists argue, then the growth of Chinese power will eventually put an end to unipolarity. When it does, the world will be a more dangerous place, since there cannot be a war between great powers in unipolarity, while there certainly can be if both China and the United States are great powers.1

In this thesis, I shall discuss the Sino-Thai relations during the 20th and 21st centuries but with a keen look at the preceding history, with a special focus on the economic, political and military relations. The goal is to determine how the Sino-Thai relations have evolved during the 20th century, especially after 1975 when diplomatic relations began. Also, I will use defensive realism to understand the Sino-Thai relations, based on that the anarchical structure of the international system which states to maintain moderate and reserved policies to attain security. Finally, in the conclusions I will answer the following questions:

1. How were the economic and political relations between Thailand and China during the 20th century?
2. How did the Second World War and the Vietnam War effect the Sino-Thai relations?
3. Did the 2006 and 2014 Thai military coups have enormous effect on the Sino-Thai relations?
4. How did the Sino-Thai relations develop under the military junta after the 2014 coup?

The reason why I chose these questions is that I find it interesting to see how the Sino-Thai relations changed during the 20th and 21st centuries, especially after 1975, compared to previous centuries. I also find it interesting to see how the Second World War and Vietnam War had a huge impact on the Sino-Thai relations during the 20th century. The 2006 and 2014 Thai military coups are important to look at as they were quiet different from those during the 20th century.

Theoretical Framework

This chapter explores the theoretical framework of the thesis. In the beginning, I will discuss what theories in international relations are. Secondly, the theories of realism and defensive realism will be introduced, where I will discuss their structure. Finally, I will discuss the rise of China according to defensive realism.

Theories in international relations

It could be said that theories of international relations (IR) can be traced to E. H. Carr’s, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, published in 1939, and to Hans Morgenthau’s *Politics Among Nations*, published in 1948, which were works of theory in three central respects. Each of those respects developed a broad framework of analysis that distilled the essence of international politics from disparate events. Carr’s and Morgenthau’s main claims in their writings were that all efforts to reform the international system which ignored the struggle for power would quickly fail. Years after the publication of *Politics Among Nations* many scholars, particularly in the 1960s, believed that Morgenthau’s theoretical framework was too impressionistic in nature. They agreed that historical illustrations had been used to support rather than demonstrate ingenious conjectures about general patterns of international relations. During and after the Second World War, new theories in IR began to emerge, some were made to better explain the international situation, others in the belief that science held the key to understanding how to transform international politics for the better.²

But what are IR theories? IR theories attempt to provide a conceptual framework upon which international relations can be analyzed. Their main goals are to make international politics more intelligible, i.e. to make better sense of the international actors, structures and, institutions. Some theories may be involved in testing hypotheses, where they propose a causal explanation to identify the main trends and patterns in international relations. Theories have also been necessary means of bringing order to the subject matter of IR, where theories are needed to conceptualize contemporary events. IR theories have also helped us to think critically, logically and coherently by sorting the international phenomena into manageable categories so that

² Scott Burchill and Andrew Linklater, „Introduction,“ in *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd edition, ed. Scott Burchill et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1-2
the appropriate units and level of analysis can be chosen and significant connections and patterns of behavior identified.  

**Realism**

Realism is defined as a tradition of analysis that stresses the imperatives states face to pursue a power politics of the national interest, where its core premises are rationality and state-centrism. Realism has been divided into three historical periods: *classical realism* (up to the 20th century), which is frequently depicted as beginning with Thucydides’ writings about the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta; *modern realism* (1939-79), which typically takes as its point of departure of the *First Great Debate* between the scholars of the inter-war period and the scholars who began to enter the field of IR before and after the Second World War; and *structural realism* (1979 onwards) which officially entered the picture following the publication of Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics*. As a theory realism emphasizes on the constraints on politics imposed by human selfishness and the absence of international government (*anarchy*). Although realism recognizes that human desires range widely and are remarkably variable, the theory focuses on that the sordid and selfish aspects of human nature should be placed on the conduct of diplomacy. The most known figures in realism are Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, and E. H. Carr, they are considered to be founding fathers of modern realism. In the history of Western political thought, Niccolò Machiavelli, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Thomas Hobbes are usually considered realists, as they were associated with classical realism. Realism is considered to be the oldest and most dominant theory of international relations, theoretically formalizing the *Realpolitik* statesmanship of early modern Europe. However, realism has been dominating the academic study of international relations since the end of the Second World War, where it has claimed to offer both the most accurate explanation of state behavior and a set of policy prescriptions for ameliorating the inherent destabilizing elements of international affairs.  

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3 Ibid., 15-16  
5 Jack Donnelly, „Realism,“ in *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd edition, ed. Scott Burchill et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 29-31
Defensive realism

The main reason why I choose defensive realism is that the theory offers an optimistic prediction about China’s rise in the international system. The theory also provides a reason to think that the security competition surrounding China’s rise will not be intense, as China should be able to coexist peacefully with both its neighbors and the United States. Moreover, both the United States and China’s neighbors will have to balance against China to keep it in check. Security competition will not disappear altogether from Asia as China grows more powerful. Defensive realism is a structural theory that finds its foundation in Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics*. Based on Waltz’s structural realism, defensive realism claims that the international system provides incentives for expansion only under certain conditions. Defensive realism also emphasizes that if any state becomes too powerful, balancing will occur, specifically when a certain great power will build up their militaries and form a balancing coalition that will leave the aspiring hegemony at least less secure, and maybe even destroy it. Defensive realists have pointed out that this has already happened before when Napoleonic France (1792–1815), Imperial Germany (1900–18), and Nazi Germany (1933–45) tried to run at dominating Europe, which led to each aspiring hegemony was decisively defeated by another great power. Defensive realists, such as Waltz, argue that states have security as their principal interest, where they only seek the requisite amount of power to ensure their survival. They also argue that there is an offense-defense balance in the international system, i.e. it has either been easy or difficult to conquer territory or defeat a defender in battle. The theory then holds that even when conquest is feasible, it does not pay; the costs outweigh the benefits. Because of nationalism, it is especially difficult for the conqueror to subdue the conquered.\(^6\)

Many defensive realists believe that the great powers often behave in ways that contradict their theory and that those states were not behaving rationally. Defensive realists, such as Barry Posen and Jack Snyder argue that structural logic can explain a reasonable amount of state behavior, but a substantial amount of it cannot be explained by structural realism. This has led them to examine other theories to explain those instances where great powers act in non-strategic ways. Because of this, defensive realists have to go beyond structural realism to explain how states act.

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\(^6\) John H. Mearsheimer, „Structural Realism,“ 76-77
in the international system. Defensive realism is often confused with neo-liberalism, as they both recognize the costs of war and assume that it usually results from irrational forces in a society. Although defensive realists have some sympathy for the neo-liberal argument that war can be avoided by creating security institutions that diminish the security dilemma and provide mutual security for participating states, they do not see institutions as the most effective way to prevent all wars. However, defensive realism is less optimistic than neo-liberals for several reasons. Firstly, defensive realists see conflict as unnecessary only in a subset of situations. Secondly, leaders can never be certain whether an aggressive move will be made by another state. Thirdly, defensive realists challenge the neo-liberal view that it is relatively easy to find areas where national interests might converge and become the basis for cooperation and institution-building. 

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7 Ibid., „Structural Realism,“ 77
The Sino-Thai relations between the 13th and 19th centuries

The Sino-Thai relation has a long and interesting history which has been important to look at to understand their relations in modern times. It is generally accepted that China has significantly influenced the history of the Thai kingdoms and the Thai people. Since time immemorial, China has been noted for its historical-mindedness, and its people and their society have lived under the tutelage of history. China has been imbued with the writing of history since as early as 841 BC, and since then, the Chinese people have been able to “look at the past from the present”. This was done to judge and shape the present in the light of the ideal past and to judge the past in the light of the present ideals thus shaped. According to the Chinese, history is shaped by human pathos in reflective and often tragic living as the Chinese people integrated meaningfully or disintegrated pathetically with the vicissitudes of Chinese history. This is because Qian Mu, a Chinese historian, said in his book *The Spirit of Chinese History* that national history awakens the soul of a nation as history is the whole experience of our life, the whole life past. In other words, Chinese history is taken as the crystallization of past personal life experiences. Chinese historians believe that history lets us understand ourselves and plan our future because history, as seemingly neutral, is the description of what happened, and precisely because of this, as it provokes us to formulate some universal principles of life.9 For a long time, Thailand has been a very strong and loyal Sinophilic country, and traditionally the Chinese regarded Thailand with a strong respect and wanted to ensure its alliance with the country. However, official relations between Thailand and China between the 13th and 19th centuries were conducted within the framework of the Chinese tribute system, which were the existing international order regulating relations among states in East Asia. This international order was *Sinocentric* because age, size, and wealth all made China the natural center of the East Asian world. The Chinese tended to think of their foreign relations as giving expression externally to the same social and political order that was manifested internally.

The first record of relations between Thailand and China can be traced to when the first Thai kingdom was founded in 1238 by the Tai people who migrated from Nanzhao, a city in the Yunnan province in southern China, where it had been invaded by the Khmer Empire. The group of Tai people who managed escape moved

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south into modern-day Thailand, where they founded the Sukhothai Kingdom (known in China as Xian) and made Sri Indraditya the first king of the newly founded kingdom. This is known from a text that was written on stone tablets, which were named *The Inscription of Ram Khamhaeng*, which were discovered by King Mongkut (Rama IV) in 1833. These stone tablets are dated back to 1292 and they were named after King Ram Khamhaeng the Great, who ruled the Sukhothai Kingdom from 1279 until 1298. The inscription had immense influence over the development of Thai historiography from the early 20th century, which came to regard Sukhothai as the first Thai kingdom. The kingdom managed to expand under the control of King Ram Khamhaeng which led to other nearby kingdoms coming under his control, but on the other hand, more Tai people emigrated to the kingdom from neighboring countries, including China.\(^\text{10}\) During the Sukhothai period (1238-1438) and the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767), the leaders of the two Thai kingdoms decided to have tributary relations with the Chinese Empire under the Yuan, the Ming and the Qing Dynasties for political and economic reasons. This strengthened the friendly relationship between the two countries, and the kings who ruled between 1238 and 1767 did not perceive themselves as tributary vassals of China, as the Chinese Empire did not threaten the two Thai kingdoms. They also looked at Thailand as a tool to open the trade door, where maritime trade between Thailand and China began sometime during the Sukhothai period.\(^\text{11}\)

From the beginning of the tributary trade between the two countries, it was divided into the official and the private trade. The official trade, the so-called tributary trade, was under the control of the Bureau of Trading Junks (called Shibosi in Chinese) located in Guangzhou, China, while the private trade was not just under Thailand-based Chinese merchants, but also Thai kings, Thai royal family members, and other high-ranking officials were also engaged. While trading with the Chinese, Thailand focused more on the official trade rather than the private trade. For example, the government in Ayutthaya attached importance to the tributary trade from the beginning, where the reason is thought to be that profits could be expected of the trade entailed by the sending tribute missions to China. While sailing to China, the Thai tribute ships were loaded with native produce, such as pepper and sappanwood for


\(^{11}\) Chulacheeb Chinwanno, *Thai-Chinese relations: Security and Strategic Partnership* (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2008), 2
ballast cargo. In return, the Chinese would send junk ships with high-valued Chinese goods.¹²

During the late 13th and early 14th century, some ports in Thailand began to compete against each other to gain larger shares in trade, due to the declining trade between the Indonesian city Srivijaya and other states in Southeast Asia. In the 1280s, the Chinese court decided to include the Sukhothai Kingdom as one of its trading partners, where the kingdom was near one of the largest gulfs in the South China Sea. During the mid-14th century, various cities in Thailand sent trade missions to China, but in 1368 the newly founded Ming dynasty decided to limit all trade missions to China. This was done for the Chinese to manage better what was being imported, and to monitor all foreign import companies. Tribute missions were only allowed to trade and only recognized states were only allowed to trade in China. This led to Ayutthaya becoming one of China’s largest trading partners, where the main imports from Thailand to China were animals, textiles, and peppers. But between 1457 and 1481, traders from Thailand were heavily criticized by the Chinese for illegally purchasing and importing salt and children which, on the contrary, was against the trade agreements between the two countries. However, this was highly ignored by the Thai trade workers because they had been bribing their colleagues in China.¹³

During a trade mission between China and other kingdoms in Southeast Asia in the late 14th century, the Chinese Emperor decided only to trade with the Ayutthaya Kingdom and the Khmer Empire due to the strong ties between the countries. At the end of the 14th century, Ayutthaya’s influence in the southern part of the Malay Peninsula began to fade when a high-ranking vassal ruler from Ayutthaya was thrown out of Temasek, a settlement on the southern part of the Malay Peninsula. This led to Thailand invading some states in the area, including the Malaysian state Melaka. The Thai government decided in 1407 to invade Melaka again, plus two other states. Among what was stolen by the Thai invaders were some Chinese official seals, which caused a rebuke from the Chinese. To prevent further invasion of the Thai people, the Chinese decided in the mid-15th century to put up stone tablets to define Melaka’s status. By defining Melaka’s status, the Thai government decided to not invade the southern parts of the peninsula for some time. It was decided in 1419 to send Chinese

troops to Melaka to protect the area from another invasion, but it was not until 1491 when the ruler of the Melaka state offered to pay taxes of local products to the Chinese government. In 1431, the government in Melaka complained to the Chinese court because of the impending invasions from its neighboring state. The court decided to send a group of government officials to instruct the king of Thailand not to oppress or mistreat the Melaka people. A peace treaty was concluded between Thailand and the Melaka state in the mid-15th century, with the presence of the Chinese.  

The tributary trade between the countries between the 16th and 18th centuries continued mostly without any major conflict. During the 17th century, the private sector in the Sino-Thai trade continued to expand, even though there was a trade ban between the countries. The private trade had been important between the countries, especially China. During the trade ban, some Thai and Chinese fleets decided to smuggle merchants between the countries. Instead of using Thai ships to sail to Guangzhou and other ports in China, it was decided to sail under Dutch and British flags. During the trade ban the Thai government decided to secretly trade with the Zheng family despite its tributary trade relation with the Qing Dynasty. It could be argued that a coup d’état, which took place within the Thai royal family in 1688, had a major impact on the overall revitalization of the future Sino-Thai trade. Prince Phetracha staged a coup d’état against his uncle King Narai and took over as king. During the coup, all European traders, except the Dutch, stopped all tributary trade with the Ayutthaya kingdom, which led to a new foreign trade policy by King Phetracha. It was decided that in the king’s new foreign trade policy that tributary trade with the Chinese should be continued as long as needed.  

In 1760, a war broke out between Burma and the Ayutthaya kingdom, when the Burmese attacked the city of Ayutthaya and took it under control. The war, commonly known as the Burmese-Siamese war, ended in 1767 with the fall of the Ayutthaya Kingdom and the end of the Ayutthaya period. Surprisingly, Thailand continued to sending tributary missions to China during the height of the war, in 1761, 1762, and 1766. The fact that Thailand could still send tributary missions to China even though Ayutthaya was under attack by the Burmese, suggests that the work of a
commercial network of Chinese traders between the Gulf of Thailand and Guangzhou had never been disturbed very much.\textsuperscript{16}

Fifteen years after the Burmese-Siamese war had ended, King Phutthayotfa Chulalok (Rama I), the first monarch of the reigning Chakri dynasty in Thailand, began negotiations with the Chinese to continue the tributary trade between the two countries.\textsuperscript{17} The traditional relations between China and Thailand under the tributary system continued until King Mongkut (Rama IV) decided the tributary mission to China in 1853 would be the last one. One of the reasons for the suspension of the tributary missions was that China was in turmoil during that period, mostly due to the Chinese losing the Opium War in 1842. Another reason was that King Rama IV did not want the Xianfeng Emperor of China to misperceive that Thailand was China’s tributary state and could be sacrificed or given away.\textsuperscript{18} After King Rama IV sent the last tributary mission to Beijing in 1853, the Chinese continually requested Thailand to continue their tributary missions without any success. This went on for the next decades, where Thailand used a variety of excuses in order not to send further tributary missions to China instead of declaring a cessation of the tribute system; the monsoon season had already passed, it needed to prepare new ships, it wanted to go through Tianjin rather than Guangzhou, and so on. The Thai government was also concerned about the country’s position in the Sino-Thai relations, where the main concern was demographic. The Thai people were afraid about the kingdom’s growing ethnic Chinese community, where they predicted the Chinese would be around half of Bangkok’s population by the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{19} In 1855, Thailand decided to sign the Bowring Treaty with Great Britain, which removed extensive barriers to British trade by ending the Thai state’s trading monopolies. The British were therefore allowed to trade at all ports in Thailand on the same conditions as Thais and Chinese had done before. The treaty changed Thailand’s trading policy so that the country was open to more foreign countries to trade with.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{16} Masuda Erika, „The Fall of Ayutthaya and Siam’s Disrupted Order of Tribute to China (1767-1782),” \textit{Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian Studies} 4, no. 2 (2007): 80-81
\textsuperscript{18} Chulacheeb Chinwanno, \textit{Thai-Chinese relations: Security and Strategic Partnership}, 2
\textsuperscript{20} HistorySG, „Bowring Treaty signed with Bangkok,”
\url{http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/ae996879-bb92-4dab-a62b-594824b803e6} (accessed March 15, 2019)
Since the foundation of the Sukhothai Kingdom until the mid-19th century, the relations between Thailand and China had a tremendous impact on their future relations. This was mainly due to that the Chinese Empire had encountered several difficulties from the western imperialism. Because of the great turmoil in China in the mid-19th century, many Chinese decided to flee their home country and settle in Thailand to escape the chaos and poverty and to find new opportunities. Those Chinese played important roles in the informal trade between the two countries as well as between Thailand and the world. 21

The Sino-Thai relations before the 20th century according to defensive realism

From the perspective of defensive realism, the relations between the countries were quite good as there were some balances in the relationship. China had grown more powerful while having tributary relations with its neighboring countries, including Thailand as they have been tributary missions for centuries. According to defensive realism, China will look for opportunities to shift the balance of power in its favor, as China will have to balance against China’s neighbors to keep their ambitions in check. This has been shown in the Sino-Thai relations, as the Chinese continually requested Thailand to continue their tributary missions without any success after the last tributary mission to Beijing in 1853. As defensive realists have pointed out that China’s quest for security will not disappear altogether from Asia as China grows more powerful. This has been shown in the Sino-Thai relations during the Burmese-Siamese war when China decided to investigate Thailand’s political situation after the war and assist Thailand if the Burmese were to attack again.

The Sino-Thai relations during the 20th century

In the early 20th century the Sino–Thai relations soured, primarily due to the rising nationalism among the Thais and Chinese, Thai government policies that discriminated against the Chinese and sporadic attempts by the Chinese governments to protect their cousins in Thailand. During that time the position of Chinese immigrants caused a dispute between Thailand and China, as there was a large increase of Chinese immigrants moving to Thailand. At that time, Thailand was transforming into a modern nation-state and many Thais were concerned about this huge increase of immigrants from their neighboring country. The Chinese immigrants then became the main focus of a political controversy over their loyalty to the Thai kingdom and to strengthen its state power, the Thai government decided to push forward the complete assimilation of overseas Chinese into Thai society. In 1909, the Chinese government promulgated the first Chinese Nationality Act, which provided that all offspring of Chinese parents were Chinese citizens. This belated gesture led the Chinese in Thailand to hope for real protection from the Republican government after 1911. However, a great conflict broke out between the Thai and Chinese communities in Thailand during the mid-1910. The peak of the conflict reached in mid-1910, when the Chinese secret societies in Bangkok organized a general strike protesting against a new tax law. The strike, which in effect launched the Chinese Question, caused economic disruption in Bangkok for five days, which showed that a very concrete way that the Chinese could paralyze a whole nation at will.

After a few years of disputes, it was decided to resolve the matter about the status of Thailand-born Chinese who were deemed by the state to be of undefined origin. It was decided that all ethnic Chinese born in Thailand were regarded as Thai according to the Thai Nationality Act of 1913. At the same time, the Chinese government also claimed these overseas Chinese in Thailand as citizens, which meant that the overseas Chinese were forced to identify themselves as either Thai or Chinese. Both King Rama VI (1910-25) and his successor King Rama VII (1925-35) commented about the status of the Chinese immigrants in Thailand. King Rama VI

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22 Michael R. Chambers, „‘The Chinese and the Thais are Brothers’: the evolution of the Sino –Thai friendship,” Journal of Contemporary China 14, no. 45 (2005): 603
used his writings as a tool for national policies where he called the Chinese the *Other*; in the sense, Thais of Chinese origin had different status other Thais. King Rama VI later stated that he was, in fact, skeptical of the Chinese migrants who identified themselves as Chinese and were loyal to China, especially those who largely dominated Thailand’s economy. However, his successor King Rama VII was much more positive towards the Chinese immigrant. He attempted to resolve ethnic tensions and establish friendly relations with the Chinese communities. Instead of calling the Chinese immigrants the *Other*, King Rama VII called them relatives of the Thai people. While visiting the historic Peiying Chinese School, King Rama VII gave a speech regarding the relations between the two countries and welcomed them to Thailand. He also argued that the Thai government should think of the Chinese as relatives of the Thai people and welcome them rather than alienating them.  

During the 1920s, the Chinese in Thailand became very politically active, where they supported Sun Yat-sen, the first president of the Republic of China, and the *Kuomintang* (KMT) in their struggle against the warlords in China. By 1925 various KMT branches began to spread throughout Thailand, and by 1928 regular KMT membership in Thailand was estimated to be around 20,000. At the same time, King Rama VI expressed his concern with the slowing of Chinese assimilation in Thailand. He feared that Chinese money might dominate any representative political institutions he might create, but his main concerns were the growing politicization of the Chinese community, where Communism had been rising in China for some time. Because of the disputes between the Chinese Communists party and the Kuomintang party, many Communists fled China and came to Bangkok in 1927. Consequently, the first Immigration Act was passed in Thailand in order to reduce the number of Chinese immigrants who came to Thailand. 

In 1932, a coup d’etat was staged in Thailand by the *Khana Ratsadon* (e. the People’s Party), a small group of Thai military and civil officers. The coup was a major turning point in Thai politics when Thailand went from being an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, as it changed the whole political system in Thailand. The position of Prime Minister of Thailand was established and Phraya Manopakorn Nititada, a member of the Privy Council of Thailand, became Prime

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26 Anuson Chinvanno, *Thailand’s Policies towards China, 1949-54*, 32-33
Minister. The coup also affected the Sino-Thai relations, where the newly formed government decided that it was time to have it in their foreign policy to deal with the Chinese Question. The government identified four main issues that needed to be resolved: immigration, Chinese domination of the Thai economy, political activities in support of China, and education and other social activities. The government emphasized the first two issues and made some changes to the national legislation. On the question of immigration, the government’s main solution was to change the immigration laws in Thailand. The government introduced the 1932 Immigration Amendment Act which prohibited foreigners under 20 years old to enter the country without being accompanied by their parents. In 1936, new laws were introduced in Thailand, in which new immigrants were inquired to register with the local authorities to obtain a certificate of domicile.

The Second World War

The Second World War was a global war that lasted from 1939 to 1945 and is one of the largest events of human history. The first part of the war affected the Sino-Thai as Thailand allied itself with the Japanese and China was an ally of the United Kingdom and the United States. The Second World War began on September 1, 1939, when the Germans invaded Poland after having staged several false flag border incidents as a pretext to initiate the attack. The Second World War was waged between two opposing military alliances; the alliance of Nazi Germany, Italy, and Japan who were known as the Axis, and the Allies which originally consisted of France, Poland and, the United Kingdom, with the participation of the United States and the Soviet Union later in the war. The lineup of countries fighting the war was complicated, where many of which were still recovering after the First World War. However, a war broke out between China and Japan in 1937, which escalated throughout the Second World War and ended at the beginning of September 1945, with the victory of the Chinese. The war between the Chinese and the Japanese, most commonly known as the Second Sino-Japanese War, began in July 1937 when Japanese and Chinese troops met at the Marco Polo Bridge; a stone bridge located 15 km southwest of

27 B. J. Terwiel, Thailand’s Political History: From the 13th Century to Recent Times, 258-59
28 Anuson Chinvanno, Thailand’s Policies towards China, 1949-54, 33
Beijing city center in the Fengtai District. A battle between the Japanese and Chinese troops escalated when the Japanese decided to seize the bridge, which led to the Chinese losing the battle.  

Thailand, on the other hand, adopted a position of neutrality at the beginning of the Second World War and did not enter the war until it was invaded by Japan on December 8, 1941. The invasion had a great effect on the political career of the Thai Prime Minister Phibun Songkhramas as his government allowed the Japanese to invade the country without his awareness. Just a day before, Japan had alerted the Thai government about the invasion, but in Phibun’s absence, no decision was made to prevent the arrival of Japanese troops. As Phibun returned to Bangkok, he decided to exploit the occupation to his advantage. Without his cabinet’s approval, Phibun decided to negotiate with the Japanese about Thailand being on the Axis powers side during the Second World War. A treaty was signed in late December 1941 between Japan and Thailand, sanctioning Thailand’s alliance with Japan during the war. The occupation of Japanese troops in Thailand had a profound effect on the Sino-Thai relations, especially because of the disputes between the Chinese and the Japanese. While in Thailand, Japanese troops contributed much to the disordering of traditional Chinese institutions located throughout the major cities of Thailand. The Japanese, with the help of Thai authorities, took over the main Chinese institutions in Bangkok and converted them to its own uses.

It was unclear why Thailand did not declare war on China during the Second World War. The omission probably derived merely from the non-recognition by Japan of the legality of the Nationalist government in Chongqing. This caused a major conflict between Chinese in Thailand which caused them to split into two groups; those supporting the Nanjing regime because of trading interests with Japan; and those who supported the Chongqing government. The Chinese Nationalist government took advantage of the situation in which no formal state of war with Thailand existed. The Chinese Nationalist government wanted to show sympathetic attitudes towards the Thai people and when the question of declaring war on Thailand was under consideration Wellington Koo, the Chinese Ambassador in London

31 Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 1st ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 445
33 Anuson Chinvanno, *Thailand’s Policies towards China, 1949-54*, 38
suggested that China should consider postponing its action towards Thailand. The Chinese thought that Koo’s approach would also make it easier for possible subsequent Chinese military operations in Thailand against the Japanese.34

While at a meeting in Chongqing it was decided to establish a Free Thai government that would be in exile in India. This would be the first step by many towards Thailand would turn against the Axis empires, especially against Japan. Although the Chinese did not object to the formation of a Free Thai government in exile, they wanted such a government to reside in Chongqing and not in India. Over the next two years, Thailand began slowly allying itself with the Allies and at the end of the war, Thailand completely turned to the Allies by letting them into the country to disarm the Japanese. By the end of the Second World War, there was a considerable improvement in the Sino-Thai relations, as the government of Khuang Aphaiwong, which came to power in mid-1944, decided by the end of the Second World War to remove several restrictions which the Phibun government had placed upon the Chinese community in Thailand. However, there were some disruptions in the Sino-Thai relations when riots occurred between the Chinese and the Thai after the war had ended, where many Thais still believed the Chinese to be enemies of the kingdom because of their connection to Communism. After months of conflict, the governments of both countries reached a peace treaty and by the end of 1945, it was decided to negotiate for the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries by signing the Sino-Siamese Amity Treaty.35

**The Sino-Thai relations post-Second World War**

In November 1947, a military coup d’état was staged by the Khana Ratthaprahan (the Coup Group), which led to Phibun returning to political leadership in April 1948. During Phibun’s years as Prime Minister, the Sino-Thai relation deteriorated because of his aversion to Communism.36 When the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established on October 1, 1949, by the Chinese Communists led by Mao Zedong, the Thai government perceived the rise of Communism as a threat to national security. Thailand yet again allied itself with the United States and the Republic of China in Taiwan. The United States government believed that the most powerful weapon to

34 Ibid., 38-39
35 Ibid., 40-42
36 Ibid., 49-51
spread communist ideology were overseas Chinese people residing in host countries.
With the fear of Communism in Thailand due to the presence of huge Chinese
communities, the Thai government strived to control the ethnic Chinese located in
Thailand, as well as Chinese education and media in Thailand. Phibun decided to
publicly pursue an anti-Communist policy, which led to the massive arrest of Chinese
leaders and newspapermen located in major cities in Thailand, while the total number
of enrolments in Chinese schools in Thailand decreased considerably, as did the
number of schools themselves.  

The Vietnam War
The Vietnam War was an international conflict that had a considerable effect on the
Sino-Thai relations, as several international disputes between China and Thailand
arose during the war. The Vietnam War was the result of the First Indochina War,
which lasted from 1945 until 1954, where the French had been in war with Việt Minh,
a national liberation movement in Vietnam, to keep their colonies in Vietnam, which
led to Vietnam being divided into two countries. In 1954, the Geneva agreement
was signed by several nations, including China. The agreement put an end to the First
Indochina War but failed to end military conflicts in South-East Asia at that time. The
Chinese had been the main patron of the Geneva Agreement of 1954, and their main
policy towards the settlement of the First Indochina War reflected its strategic
considerations at that time. After signing the Geneva agreement, Chinese leaders were
willing to accept the fact that Vietnam would be indefinitely divided, while leaders of
the Việt Minh had different ideas. The Vietnam War began a year later, which was a
protracted conflict between the Communist government in North Vietnam and its
allies in South Vietnam, known as the Mặt trận, against the government of South
Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States.  

In the early 1960s, Thailand had become the bastion of the United States anti-
Communist policy in the Southeast Asian mainland. During that period, the United

States allied with the Eastern and Southeast Asian states, including Thailand, to isolate the Communist regime in China.\textsuperscript{41} During the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Indonesia, the Sino-Thai relations had a brief thaw when the Thai Foreign Minister Wan Waithayakorn had a meeting with the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. During the meeting, Zhou assured Wan about China’s peaceful intentions and tried to clear away many suspicions among the Thai government about the Chinese. This included explaining that the creation of the Dai Autonomous Region was a result of an internal administrative restructuring. The ongoing US-China informal negotiations in Geneva were also discussed, which made Thailand nervous and prompted the Thai government to seek rapprochement with China.\textsuperscript{42}

The main goal of the United States government was to form a military alliance and cooperation with anti-Communist states in East and Southeast Asia, culminating in the establishment of a military foothold in Southeast Asia and the effort to suppress the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{43} This was under the influence of the domino theory, in which posited that if a noncommunist state came under the influence of communism, then the surrounding countries would follow in a domino effect. First proposed by President Harry S. Truman in the 1940s, the theory became popular in the 1950s when President Dwight D. Eisenhower applied it to Southeast Asia, especially South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{44} Between 1954 and 1962, the United States government spent over $100 million on building four major airbases in Thailand where the United States could bomb China and North Korea. Despite Thailand’s cooperation with the United States Armed Forces, the United States viewed the Thai military regime as opportunistic and prone to the accommodation with China. Such accommodation had already occurred in 1955 where Thai military leaders pursued a quasi-neutralist policy by secretly opening political contacts with China. The main reason for the quasi-neutralist policy was that during that time, an agreement was made between China and Thailand on eventual normalization between the countries, and between 1956 and 1957 Thailand had partially lifted the trade embargo against China. Before signing the agreement, Phibun secretly met with Mao Zedong in

\textsuperscript{41} Gareth Porter, \textit{Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to war in Vietnam} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 255
\textsuperscript{42} Chulacheeb Chinwanno, „Rising China and Thailand’s Policy of Strategic Engagement,” 82-83
\textsuperscript{43} Gareth Porter, \textit{Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to war in Vietnam}, 255
Beijing to prepare the agreement without the awareness of the United States government. This allowed Thai businessmen and political figures to travel to China.\textsuperscript{45}

China’s effort on peace talks with Thailand came to an end in early 1959, due to the October 1958 coup led by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat against his protégé General Thanom Kittikachorn. With the advent of the coup, the Sino-Thai relations worsened, where Thailand aligned itself more closely with the United States, while China had aligned itself with Cambodia in 1958. During the 1960s, the relationship worsened even further where China supported the Communist Party of Thailand (the CPT) and Thailand’s cooperation with the United States strengthened even further, which caused some great concerns among several states that participated in the war. The main concern was that if Thailand would not end its cooperation with the United States, Thailand would become a “second Vietnam”. By the end of the 1960s, the Sino-Thai relations were still vulnerable. China viewed Thailand as a threat to its regional security interests – mainly due to Thailand’s involvement in Laos and South Vietnam, while Thailand viewed China’s strong support to Communism as a threat to the security and integrity of the indirectly threatening to the Thai government. China had been supporting revolutionary anti-government Communism mainly in Vietnam and Laos, which could be perceived as indirectly threatening to the government in Thailand.\textsuperscript{46}

During the early 1960s, the Chinese government decided to increase aid to Vietnam which led to an even greater crisis with the Sino-Thai relations. At that time, China offered substantial military aid to Vietnam and it was estimated that by the end of 1963 that China’s military aid to Vietnam totaled 320 million yuan. China’s arms shipments to Vietnam included 270,000 guns, 10,000 pieces of artillery, 1,000 trucks, 15 planes, and 28 naval vessels. It was decided in 1963 that the Chinese would make general security commitments towards North Vietnam and it was stipulated that if the Americans were to attack North Vietnam, China would come to its defense. These general security commitments would last for a year. It was also discussed how the Chinese should co-ordinate their operations in the event of an American invasion of North Vietnam.\textsuperscript{47} During the summer of 1966, while on a holiday in England, King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) strongly criticized the Chinese and declared that

\textsuperscript{45} Gareth Porter, \textit{Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to war in Vietnam}, 255-56
\textsuperscript{46} Michael R. Chambers, „’The Chinese and the Thais are Brothers’: the evolution of the Sino –Thai friendship,” 604-5
\textsuperscript{47} Chen Jian, „China’s Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-69,” 358-60
China and Vietnam were a serious threat to Thailand. He argued that the Chinese have always been a threat to Southeast Asia and criticized them for being associated with the Communists in Vietnam. During his holiday King Rama IX visited several aircraft factories in England, where he decided to buy aircraft for the Thai Royal Army. Even though this wasn’t among his responsibilities, he was getting involved by leading the country through difficult times during the Vietnam War. Later the same year he lobbied the United States to escalate its war against Hanoi, even criticizing the United States government for pausing its air strikes on North Vietnam.48

In 1969, China viewed Thailand as a threat to its regional security interests, and Thailand was still cooperating with the United States military after the war. Thailand, however, viewed China’s support to Communism as a threat to the security and integrity of the country. During the Vietnam War, the Communist insurrection in Vietnam and Lao was supported by the Chinese government, which was in complete contrast with the Thai government’s anti-communist government policy. That same year, Thailand was under heavy pressure from the changes in East Asian politics to begin re-evaluating its relationship with China, due to President Richard Nixon declaring the Vietnamization Policy, which called for the deployment of South Vietnamese troops and a gradual withdrawal of United States fighters. The policy had a tremendous impact on Thailand’s attitude toward Communist powers such as China. The Thai government had long committed to fight against the CPT, which had been created in part with Chinese support for the insurgency in the Thai state. The re-evaluation of the Sino-Thai relations within the Thai government was facilitated by the end of the most radical period of the Cultural Revolution and of Zhou Enlai’s return to management of Chinese foreign policy. After Zhou reorganized the Chinese foreign policy, the Sino-Thai relations improved for the better and would lead to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Forced by domestic and international constraints, the Thai government reconsidered its position and resumed relations with China in the 1970s. In 1972, Prasit Karnchanawat, the Thai Minister for Commerce, visited China to meet with Liao Chengzhi, a member of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, where they discussed the problems in the Sino-Thai relations and how the two countries could improve their relations. Following Prasit’s breakthrough visit, Thailand made an internal adjustment of its

foreign policy, which led to Thailand deciding to resume full diplomatic relations with China.\textsuperscript{49}

**The Sino-Thai relations post-Vietnam War**

By the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, China’s main interest was to normalize the relations with Thailand which revolved around regional strategic considerations. This was due to that Kukrit Pramoj, who became Prime Minister of Thailand just before the end of the war, announced that his government would seek to establish diplomatic relations with China. Anand Punyarachun, the Thai Ambassador to the United States, was sent to China with a delegation to negotiate diplomatic recognition. Even though the Sino-Thai relations improved after the war, the relations were still on a complete minimum. The normalization between the two countries accelerated in the spring of 1975 as Communist forces came to power in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. On July 1, 1975, Thai Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj visited China to sign a joint communiqué with Zhou Enlai to establish diplomatic relations between Thailand and China. After the establishment of diplomatic relations, the Sino-Thai relations went from enmity to friendship and brought the two countries even closer. In the beginning, the relationship between the countries was not close as the Thais were still apprehensive over continued Chinese support for CPT during the 1980s. The Thai government pressed for the cessation of assistance but the Chinese kept insisting that party-to-party relations would not affect state-to-state relations.\textsuperscript{50}

A turnaround in the Sino-Thai relations came by the end of December 1978 when Vietnamese troops invaded and occupied Cambodia. The Vietnam invasion brought Vietnamese troops closer to the Thai border for the first time, as they invaded Prachinburi province in July 1980. This enhanced the Thai leadership’s perception of the Vietnamese as a threat to Thai national security. The Vietnamese incursion was an attempt to warn and pressure Thailand to accept the Cambodian occupation as a fait accompli. However, Thailand viewed the Vietnamese action as unacceptable, but realized that international political pressure might not be sufficient. China viewed the Vietnamese invasion into Cambodia as an expansionist move to dominate all of Indochina. The close relations between Vietnam and the Soviet Union made the

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\textsuperscript{49} Michael R. Chambers, „‘The Chinese and the Thais are Brothers’: the evolution of the Sino –Thai friendship,” 605-7
\textsuperscript{50} Chulacheeb Chinwanno, „Rising China and Thailand’s Policy of Strategic Engagement,” 88-89
\end{footnotes}
Chinese suspect that they intended to encircle China. Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader of the People’s Republic of China, warned Thailand about the impending Vietnamese attack, where he proposed that Thailand cooperate closely with China over the Cambodian conflict with Vietnam. The Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia strengthened security interests between Thailand and China that resulted in strategic cooperation. China’s goal with normalizing the Sino-Thai relations back to normal was helping to normalize relations with all members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and to draw the countries of the Southeast Asia region into a united front against the Soviet/Vietnamese expansion.51

During the 1980s, military exchanges began as the two countries developed their strategic cooperation. In 1981, General Serm Nanakorn, a supreme commander within the Thai Royal Army, visited China for the first time to discuss regional security as well as strategic cooperation and military assistance, and by 1983, the two countries were regularly exchanging visits of their top military commanders. These exchanges of senior military officials demonstrated the strategic cooperation and strategic commitment between the countries, which lead to Chinese civilian and military leaders making it clear that China would support Thailand if its security would ever be threatened. Deng Yingzhao, the widow of Zhou Enlai, stated during a Thai parliamentary delegation that if Thai security was threatened, China would stand side by side with the Thai people.52

During the 1990s, the bilateral trade between the countries began to increase. There was a significant increase in exports from Thailand to China, where Thailand’s major export products were mostly agriculture-based with main rubber and rice being the main export products. The trade between the countries peaked in 1995 where the growth rate was 61.5%, owing to the high economic growth of Thailand and the devaluation of the Chinese currency. In 1996, the bilateral trade began to fluctuate as it began to slow down in some parts due to Thailand’s GDP growth declining, as well as exports from Thailand to China. This led to a poor economic situation in Thailand and the Southeast Asian region, which eventually became a financial crisis in 1997.53

51 Ibid., 89-90
52 Ibid., 92
The 1997 Asian financial crisis

The 1997 Asian financial crisis (known in Thailand as the Tom Yum Goong crisis) was a period of financial crisis that swept across East and Southeast Asia which began in July 1997. The crisis, which began in Thailand, caused a collapse in stock markets and currency exchange rates in many Asian countries. The crisis also had a dramatic effect on the countries involved and led to a sharp drop in living standards together with rising unemployment and social dislocation. The Asian financial crisis differs from other financial crises, in that it did not result from the monetization of fiscal imbalances. Instead, the financial crisis mainly rooted in the financial sector fragilities, stemming in part from weaknesses in governance in the corporate, financial, and government sectors.54

The main reason why the crisis began in Thailand was that the economy in Thai experienced a massive outflow of its foreign investments from the country. Thailand’s currency, the baht, had also a huge impact on the crisis, where it was under sustained international pressure in the financial world. The crisis resulted in the closure of one-third of the country’s banks and the government had to apply for loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Because of the financial crisis, major political unrest broke out in Thailand, causing Chavalit Yongchaiyudh to resign as the Prime Minister of Thailand. A new government was formed under the leadership of the former Prime Minister, Chuan Leekpai.55

China, however, was less affected by the crisis mainly due to its ability to sustain a strong gross domestic product (GDP) growth performance at the time of the financial crisis. The Chinese also managed to attract foreign direct investment (FDI), running healthy current account surpluses and maintaining the stability of its currency. During the financial crisis, Thailand received a $17 billion loan from the IMF and because of the strong ties between the countries, the Chinese decided to contribute $1 billion to the IMF loan. Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai publicly thanked China for contributing such a high amount to the IMF package.56 Because of China’s

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54 Timothy Lane and Marianne Schulze-Ghattas, „Overview,“ in Imf-Supported Programs in Indonesia, Korea and Thailand: A Preliminary Assessment, ed. Timothy Lane et al. (Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund, 1999), 1
status as a developing country, the $1 billion contribution was seen by many as quite generous and showed how good the relations were between China and Thailand. As a sign of its gratitude, the Thai government donated $10,000 to the Chinese in 1998 when China was devastated by its worst flooding in 50 years.\(^{57}\) By the end of the financial crisis in 1999, many Chinese companies came to invest in Thailand in many areas, including construction and telecommunications. Chinese companies such as the World Best Company and China Construction Company LTD decided to have branches across Thailand, which led to the strengthening of Thailand’s economy.\(^{58}\)

**China’s rise during the 20\(^{th}\) century according to defensive realism**

During the 20\(^{th}\) century, the Sino-Thai relations were volatile, mainly due to the Second World War and the Vietnam War. In the mid-20\(^{th}\) century, China had the policy of overturning the regimes in Asia, including Thailand. During this period, China actively supported revolutions in many developing countries that it considered imperialist or saw them as imperialist proxies. This threatened China’s neighboring states, especially the United States allies. China essentially wanted to export its socialist ideology to other states. However, since the 1970s China’s policies have shown less radical tendencies. The country has increasingly become a state that is embracing defensive realism. One thread of this evidence is that China has toned-down its revolutionary rhetoric. It is also not supporting insurgencies in other countries. The second thread of evidence is that since the late 1970s China has increasingly pursued a cooperative security approach in its relations with regional neighbors and in the international arena. By and large, China has tried to forge friendly relations with its neighbors. This has been seen in the Sino-Thai relations during and after the Vietnam War, as both countries tried to improve their relations during the war but failed on several occasions. It was not until after the Vietnam War when they managed to improve their relations by establishing diplomatic relations. By having diplomatic relations with Thailand, China could attempt to gain more power in Asia, as China could be reasonably easy to contain and to engage in cooperative endeavors through its relations with Thailand.

\(^{57}\) Michael R. Chambers, „‘The Chinese and the Thais are Brothers’: the evolution of the Sino –Thai friendship,” 621

\(^{58}\) Chulacheeb Chinwanno, „Rising China and Thailand’s Policy of Strategic Engagement,” 104
The Sino-Thai relations during the 21st century

In recent years, the tourism industry in Thailand has dramatically changed, partially due to the Chinese influence, which has become increasingly evident and has been an outstanding part of the non-governmental sources of China’s soft power. Tourism in Thailand has been vigorously supported by the Thai government, and Thailand’s reputation as the most popular tourist destination in Southeast Asia for Chinese tourists, where the top destinations being Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Tourism has also been an important sector of the Thai economy, and the contribution of Chinese tourists to this sector has become increasingly prominent. Moreover, the expansion of direct flights from Chinese cities to the main touristic destinations in Thailand has greatly facilitated traveling for Chinese tourists, in addition to the visa-on-arrival facilities, the short traveling distance, and a high value-for-money factor. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), in 2012 Thailand received around 22 million overseas tourists. Chinese tourists were around 3 million that year, accounting for 12% of the total overseas tourists. The number of Chinese tourists who visited Thailand in 2013 reached 4.7 million, accounting for 17.8% of the total tourist who visited Thailand that year. Since then, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand has ranked among the highest, and so was the growth in the numbers of Chinese tourists. It was estimated by the TAT that by the end of 2015 that the total number of Chinese tourists would reach 8 million.\(^5^9\) However, in recent years, Chinese tourists have declined due to the rise of the Thai baht against the Chinese yuan. Since 2015, Chinese tourists have accounted for up to 30% all foreign visitors to Thailand but their numbers have dropped 5% for the first six months of 2019, from 5.9 million down to 5.6 million because of the exchange rate and after a Thai tour boat incident which killed 47 Chinese tourists in mid-2018. The effect of the surging baht has also affected the arrival of tourists from other countries.\(^6^0\)

At the beginning of the 21st century, Thailand experienced a new political phenomenon. A new political party, Thai Rak Thai (e. the Thais Love Thais party) led by Thaksin Shinawatra, a successful businessman in telecommunications, won a landslide victory in the 2001 general elections. Thaksin became Prime Minister and set up a one-party cabinet. During his first term, Thaksin emphasized on strengthening

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59 Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt, „Culture and Commerce: China’s Soft Power in Thailand,“ 155-56
the Sino-Thai relations because of China’s growing economic power. Thaksin also believed that strategic engagement was crucial as he tried to promote a multi-dimensional relationship with China, especially on increasing trade relations with China and supporting free trade negotiations between the countries. During his second term as Prime Minister, Thaksin wanted to broaden and deepen strategic relations with China into many areas of cooperation, not just political and economic, to strengthen the relationship. Free trade agreements were made between the countries, in which meat, fishery products, and vegetables were the main exports between the countries.\(^{61}\)

Since Thaksin took office in 2001, military-to-military ties between Thailand and China surged, and Thailand established annual defense and security talks with China. This paved the way for closer military cooperation between the two countries. After the coup, the military alliance between Thailand and the United States ended, as it led to the United States government deciding to suspend a $24 million military aid to Thailand. The Chinese decided to take advantage of the fissure the coup had created in United States-Thai relations. Declaring the coup to be Thailand’s internal affair, the Chinese government immediately recognized the new military government in Thailand and offered $49 million in defense credits.\(^{62}\)

Bilateral trade between countries has increased since the beginning of the 21st century, mainly due to the two countries signing the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Three agreements have been signed, which have been the driving forces to the expansion of the two countries’ economic exchanges. According to China’s official figures, the trend of bilateral trade in goods between China and Thailand between 2002 and 2011 kept its momentum of growth even though Thailand went through political disturbance after 2006. Between 2002 and 2011 the total value of yearly bilateral trade in goods went from $8.5 billion to $577 billion. The trade expansion of the two countries under the CAFTA has been above average in comparison with the trade between China and ASEAN. According to the Thai Customs statistics, China ranks as Thailand’s second trading partner after Japan. China is also Thailand’s largest export market and second-largest source of import. By comparison, Thailand ranks as China’s 15th foreign trade partner owing mostly by

\(^{61}\) Chulacheeb Chinwanno, „Rising China and Thailand’s Policy of Strategic Engagement,” 100-1

\(^{62}\) Paul Chambers, *Civil-Military Relations in Thailand since the 2014 Coup: The Tragedy of Security Sector “Deform”* (Frankfurt am Main: The Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2015), 20-21
the “zero tariffs” preferential policies related to CAFTA. The spectacular characteristics of Sino-Thai bilateral trade differ from that between China and other ASEAN countries because the trade of agricultural products has been greatly expanding contributing to the signing of the Early Harvest Agreement between Thailand and China in January 2004. By signing CAFTA, the trade of agricultural products between the countries has increased by 4.8 folds in 10 years, reaching $3.68 billion in 2011, where the average annual growth rate was 21.5%.  

In recent years China has accepted new concepts of security featuring mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and coordination. During that time, the Chinese government has formulated its national security strategy for the next 20 years, where there has been a remarkable continuity in China’s current foreign and security strategies. The Chinese government has tried to put forward some creative and new concepts, which will become theories for guiding further economic and political reforms in China. In recent years, China’s economy has been developing steadily. If China can maintain the pace of economic development, it will be among the major powers in the world by the mid-21st century. The first two decades of the 21st century will be a period of important strategic opportunity for China, where China has to focus its attention on comprehensively building a prosperous society. The objectives of China’s modernization are to quadruple its GDP by 2020 and to become a mid-level developed country by 2050. In order to do so, China needs a peaceful and stable international security environment beneficial for its economic development.

The 2006 Thai military coup d’état
In mid-2006, the Thai military decided to orchestrate a coup d’état against Thaksin Shinawatra and his government despite his popularity with the Thai people. This was the first non-constitutional change of government in 15 years. A year after his second victory in 2005, the coup was attempted because the political elite in Thailand was concerned that his political strength would intensify. The elite accused Thaksin of disrespecting the King and corruption against the Thai nation.

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65 Pavin Chachavalpongpun, “‘Good Coup’ Gone Bad: Thailand’s Political Developments since Thaksin’s Downfall” in “Good Coup” Gone Bad: Thailand’s Political Developments since Thaksin’s Downfall, ed. Pavin Chachavalpongpun (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), 3-5
orchestrated a coup against the government while Thaksin was attending a meeting at the UN General Assembly. During the coup, under the leadership of General Sonti Boonyaratglin, the Royal Army declared martial law and arrested Thaksin’s allies. Following the coup, Thaksin went to a self-proclaimed exile to avoid a two-year jail sentence. The Army then appointed General Sonti as acting Prime Minister, who promised to hold general elections in the following year. The coup did not have a major impact on Thailand’s relations with China, but after the coup, the military-to-military ties between China and Thailand strengthened even further. Unlike the western countries, China did not criticize the coup and stated that it was an internal affair of Thailand. When Surayuth Chulanond, a former supreme commander of the Royal Thai Army, was appointed Prime Minister in 2006, he traveled to China in 2007 to meet up with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. During their meeting, a Joint Action Plan on Thailand Strategic Cooperation with China was signed, which covered 15 areas in the next five years, including expanding the security and military cooperation between the two countries.

The main cause of the 2006 coup was that there had been a political conflict between Thaksin’s opponents and his supporters, which had deeply divided the country. The military knew that Thaksin’s supporters were a serious threat to the monarchy, and the military believed that his supporters had been planning to adversely affect the monarchy. Moreover, the Thai military believed that Thaksin was planning on a one-party rule in Thailand to control all government agencies, including the army.

The political turmoil in Thailand between 2008 and 2014

A great deal of political turmoil followed the 2006 coup, which led to conflict between the Red Shirts, Thaksin’s rural and working-class supporters, and the People’s Alliance for Democracy or the Yellow Shirt, a Thai political movement who were against Thaksin. The coup and the subsequent attempts to eliminate Thaksin’s influence by military operations, judicial decisions, and street politics helped to provoke the first mass movement in Thai political history. After the coup, an interim civilian government, led by General Surayud Chulanot, was appointed by the Council

67 Chulacheeb Chinwanno, „Rising China and Thailand’s Policy of Strategic Engagement,” 108
of National Security. The interim government sat until January 2008 when a new
government was formed by Samak Sundaravej after winning the general elections in
December 2007. During his seven-month reign, Samak was accused of being a proxy
for the exiled Thaksin, which resulted in a massive street protest between the Red
Shirts and the Yellow Shirts. Through late 2008, Red Shirts held massive stadium
rallies. They were attended by supporters bused in from the north and northeast of
Thailand. Around the rallies of both colors, petty violence increased. The Yellow
Shirts claimed that they were defending the monarchy and the red shirts and claiming
to defending democracy. After the Samak government was disqualified a new
government was formed by Abhisit Vejjajiva, which led to greater political turmoil in
Thailand. In March 2009 a permanent protest camp outside Government House was
established, demanding the government resign and hold an immediate election.
Thaksin appeared almost daily on video link from exile in Dubai, openly accusing
some generals in the Thai military of masterminding his overthrow. While the protests
continued, the Red Shirt movement continued to grow, largely by local activism,
where the number of Red Shirt groups increased from five to 24 between 2008 and
2010. In March 2010, thousands of Red Shirts poured into Bangkok, where they
wanted new general elections. An attempt at negotiation with the government
collapsed within a couple of days, possibly because Thaksin intervened. The protests
escalated, which led to the military having to step in. Over 20 protesters died in just a
few days, mostly from high-velocity rounds.\(^\text{69}\)

It was not until July 2011 when Abhisit Vejjajiva called for general elections,
a year after the protest had started. This led to Thaksin’s younger sister, Yingluck
Shinawatra and the \textit{Pheu Thai Party} forming a new government. Yingluck’s
government sought to avoid the street demonstrations and conservative elite
opposition that destabilized previous pro-Thaksin administrations. The continuing
electoral successes of pro-Thaksin political parties provoked contestation that led to
more violence in Thailand. Political debate whirled around notions of electoral versus
the elite perspectives on democracy and the political roles of institutions such as the
judiciary, military and monarchy.\(^\text{70}\)

\(^{69}\) Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, \textit{A History of Thailand}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed. (Port Melbourne: Cambridge
University Press, 2014), 273-75

\(^{70}\) Veerayooth Kanchoochat & Kevin Hewison, „Introduction: Understanding Thailand’s Politics,”
\textit{Journal of Contemporary Asia} 46, no. 3 (2016): 374
The 2014 Thai military coup d’État

In November 2013, a massive protest broke out in Bangkok when an Amnesty bill was submitted to the National Legislative Assembly, which protected Thaksin Shinawatra against any charges that were leveled against him. The protests escalated when Yingluck was being charged for her role in a rice subsidy program three years prior. After months of absolute chaos, the protests intensified when they moved into central Bangkok, where protesters organized a campaign to “occupy Bangkok”. Just two months after the protests broke out, Yingluck decided to call for new elections. Most of the protesters refused to hold new elections, accusing her of being a puppet of her self-exiled brother. Yingluck had called for an election in early February and some protesters were aware that she could win the elections, because of her support in the north and northeast of Thailand. Even though the political instability and violence in Thailand became more intense over time, the political crisis did affect the Sino-Thai relations in some way, mainly in their economic ties. During the political crisis, Thailand continued to engage in trade agreements with China, including a memorandum of understanding (MoU). The agreement, which had been discussed between the countries for several years, stipulated that China would provide the technology, as well as partial financing, for a north-south high-speed rail line from the Nong Khai Province to Bangkok. The train would move 16 million tons of rice between Nong Khai and Bangkok each year. However, that agreement was set on hold when Yingluck was charged with corruption. As Prime Minister, Yingluck had bought tons of rice from farmers between 2012 and 2014 at prices up to 50% higher than world prices. A large part of the farmers, however, had not been paid for their 2013 October crop which led to major protests in the north of the country. Another agreement had been made alongside the MoU in 2013, which stated that China would buy 1.2 million tons of rice from Thai farmers. The agreement was canceled by the Chinese, mainly because of the ongoing probe on Yingluck. The deal with China would have been the first stage of what the Thai government was hoping to be a larger shipment of rice that year. Niwatthamrong Bunsongphaisan, the Thai Ministry of

Commerce, was rather disappointed about the cancellation and said that China lacked
the confidence to do business with Thailand while Yingluck was under
investigation.\textsuperscript{74} In early May 2014, the Constitutional Court found Yingluck guilty of
abusing her powers as Prime Minister and compelled her to leave office and the
Minister of Commerce, Niwatthamrong Boonsongpaisan, was appointed as acting
Prime Minister.\textsuperscript{75}

On 22 May 2014, in response to six months of political crisis, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha carried out the country’s 12\textsuperscript{th} successful coup d’\textsuperscript{\textsc{et}}. Just a few hours after the military took control, General Prayuth addressed the Thai nation on national
television, where he announced that the Thai army had assumed control of national
administration because the military had launched a coup against the government. It
was also announced that martial law was in effect throughout the kingdom. General
Prayuth then said he would govern the country as Prime Minister until a new
candidate would be found.\textsuperscript{76} Just two weeks after the coup, the newly formed military
junta, or the National Council for Peace and Order (the NCPO) as they called
themselves, turned to China who had been Thailand’s ally for decades. General
Prayuth met with Chinese business leaders to discuss trading opportunities between
Thailand and China. The meeting between the two countries was perceived as a
symbolic gesture where the NCPO had enjoyed from China for its needed legitimacy.
China’s role as a legitimacy provider for the NCPO meant a lot to the Thai
government, because of the strong relations that the countries have. This affected the
relations between Thailand and the United States as the economic and military rise of
China had a fiercely contested American interest in the Southeast Asian region. While
the Chinese strengthened its position as a dominant power in the Asian region, the
United States government became concerned about China’s international position. In
response, the Obama administration launched the Asia Pivot policy, which was
designed by the United States to reconnect the Southeast Asia region. In reality, the
policy was made to offset the growing influence of China in the region. However,

\textsuperscript{74} BBC, „China Cancels Thailand Rice Deal amid Probe,“ \textit{BBC News}, February 4, 2014,
\textsuperscript{75} Paul Chambers, \textit{Under the Boot: Military-Civil Relations in Thailand since the 2014 Coup} (Chiang
Mai: ISEAA, 2016), 9
\textsuperscript{76} Sathid Boonmuang et al, „The Current Political Scenario in Thailand in Military Perspective,” in
\textit{Globalization and Nation-States: Dynamics and Implications of the Inter-Actions between Government,
Business & Civil Society}, eds. Abubakar Eby Hara and Shamsuddin L. Taya (School of International
Studies: Sintok-Kedah, 2014), 364-65
Thailand used the opportunity and turned the rivalry between China and the United States into its own political benefit, particularly in diversifying its foreign policy alternatives, instead of being solely depended on the United States in the past. The relationship between China and Thailand has grown over the last century; partly because the Thai government has been willing to keep their Chinese counterparts happy. In contrast, China has been a market for Thai products, which has served as a source for the kingdom’s direct foreign investment. At this critical moment in Thai politics, China has proven to be a trusted ally of Thailand, besides that the Chinese have readily embraced the Thai junta.77

**Thailand’s post-coup relations with China**

The 2014 military coup has not had much impact on the Sino-Thai relations, but it has made important strides at every level — political and economic. Unlike other countries, China did not criticize the military coup. China’s response to the 2014 coup was a virtual replay of its reaction to the military coup in 2006; the Chinese foreign minister urged the Thais to exercise restraint, increase dialogue and restore order as soon as possible. Also, China did not call for new elections nor transferring the junta’s power to elected civilian officials, and nor has it criticized the junta’s human rights record. With this, the Chinese government stated that they would never interfere with Thailand’s internal affairs and that Thailand had China’s full support. Even though relations between Thailand and China were positive after the military coup, three issues were pointed out that could harm future relations. The first issue was continuing an agreement between the two countries for a high-speed rail link Thailand throughout the country. The interest rates and repayment terms offered by the Chinese were blasted as being ungenerous, and led the *Bangkok Post* to describe China as the “transactional superpower”. The second issue was that the NCPO decision to purchase three submarines from China. There was a great deal of controversy where it was thought that the purchase of the submarines would tie the Thai Navy too closely to the PLA-Navy in China. The third issue was junta’s decision to deport over a hundred Uyghur refugees in July 2015 back to China. In 2014, hundreds of illegal Uyghur refugees passed through Thailand and were detained by the security forces were they were trying to reach Turkey. This issue did not affect the relations between Thailand

and China greatly, as the Chinese rejected criticisms of the deportations. However, the Thai government was criticized by violating human rights by international institutions, including the United Nations and the European Union, as well as several other nations.78

The death of King Rama IX

On October 13, 2016, King Rama IX died after a period of failing health at the age of 88. After his death, the royal family announced that the Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn would become the next King of Thailand. A few days later, the Crown Prince announced that he would delay his coronation to mourn his father. It was also announced that Prem Tinsulanonda, who served as Prime Minister from 1980 to 1988, would serve as regent of Thailand until Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn would ascend the throne.79 Few hours after the death of Rama IX was announced, President Xi Jinping sent a message of condolence to Queen Sirikit, other members of the Thai royal family and the Thai people. President Xi said the passing of Rama IX was a great loss for the peoples of Thailand and China, as Rama IX had been a promoter of the Sino-Thai relations for decades.80 After the death of King Rama IX, it was uncertain how Thailand’s future bilateral ties with China would be, as he had focused on strengthening the relationship between the two countries. As one of China’s key allies in Southeast Asia, Thailand’s support has become increasingly crucial as simmering tensions in the disputed South China Sea sour China’s relations with other countries in the region. Thailand has not been involved in any territorial disputes with China that could fuel tension or sour ties, and there has been no friction with the sizeable ethnic Chinese community in Thailand. This has been fully assimilated into Thai society and acts as a useful bridge between the two countries.81

78 Ian Storey, Trends in Southeast Asia: Thailand's Post-Coup Relations with China and America: More Beijing, Less Washington, 13-16
80 Zhang Yunbi, „Chinese leaders offer condolences and sympathy on passing of Thai king,” China Daily, October 14, 2016 http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-10/14/content_27061963.htm (accessed September 1, 2019)
China’s rise during the 21st century according to defensive realism

The Sino-Thai relations improved greatly after they started diplomatic relations in 1975. Bilateral trade between countries has increased since the beginning of the 21st century, as defensive realism points out that China’s economy has been growing at an impressive pace without military adventures abroad. The theory of defensive realism would also support the conclusion that if China starts to conquer and occupy other countries economically, it is likely to run into fierce resistance from the populations which fall under its control. This has not been with the Sino-Thai relations, as the bilateral trade relations between them have grown from year to year. China has the dual benefit of attracting foreign trade and investment while, at the same time, it reassures its neighbors that it does not present a threat to them. China’s transformation into a major economic power in the 21st century has led to an increase in foreign investments in many areas. China’s growing economy has also meant that it has an increasingly large and diverse defense force, which qualified China as a great power according to defensive realism. This can be seen in the Sino-Thai relations as their military alliance has been growing ever since the beginning of the 21st century. Moreover, China consciously pursued a good neighbor policy. The pursuit of good relations with its neighbor is the foundation of its strategy for economic development, as can be seen in its relations with Thailand.
The social discussion of the Sino-Thai relations
Two factors explain why the Sino-Thai relation is so strong. The first point is that unlike other countries, the Chinese have not criticized the political developments that have been going on in Thailand. The second point is the great attention China has given to Thailand’s leaders, where high-level visits between the two countries exceed those Thailand has with other countries.82

The Chinese-United States competition for Thailand
In the last decades, the United States and China have been competing for influence in the Southeast Asian area. Since the competition began the rise of China in recent decades has generated considerable strategic anxiety among the ASEAN states. As for the United States, has the policy of maintaining its primacy in the Asia Pacific region, it has sought to strengthen its existing security alliances while rebalancing its strategic focus to Southeast Asia. The member states of ASEAN have been under growing pressure due to the great power rivalry in the region. Scholars in Southeast Asia have noted that secondary states in the region are not practicing a straightforward balancing strategy in response to the growing great power competition between the United States and China. Thailand has been one of the countries that the United States and China have competing for influence, which has had a profound effect on the relations between the three countries.83 The main focus of Thailand’s foreign relations for the past years has been its relations with China and the United States and it is indisputable that they are two major powers in Thailand’s foreign policy calculations. Even though Thailand has managed to maintain good relations with both countries, Western nations have pushed Thailand to rely more on China, mainly due to the benefits from China’s economic expansion.84

The Chinese-United States competition for Thailand has been in discussion in the academic world for several years, especially after the 2014 military coup. For most of the 21st century, the United States has become much less important to Thailand as the strategic rationales for the alliance dissipated, which has led to

China’s economic power grew in Thailand and domestic political strife put bilateral relations under great strain. Shortly after the 2014 coup, the political and military relations between the United States and Thailand began to decline as the United States expressed that their relations could not return to normal until democracy is restored. Thailand has, therefore, turned to the Chinese for support, as the Sino-Thai relations have accelerated since the coup. Even if relations between the United States and Thailand have deteriorated, the Thai government does not want to become dependent on the Chinese. This suggests that in the future Thai officials will seek to restore balance to their geopolitical relations with the two superpowers.85

In 2018, an economic conflict began between China and the United States, which affected their relationship with the countries in the ASEAN region, especially Thailand. The conflict, dubbed the Trade War, had a major impact on the Thai economy due to threats from both sides and their on-again-off-again negotiations. As China and the United States have been Thailand’s top two export destinations, the Trade War heavily weighs on Thailand’s export-dependent industries, where together they account for 25% of Thailand’s total trade. Another reason why the Trade War has affected Thailand’s economy is the slowdown of the Chinese economy. With the fall of the Chinese currency and declining Chinese equities, there was a gradual downturn in the number of tourists from China beginning in April 2018. Chinese tourists have been important to the Thai economy, where tourism spending accounts for around 12% of Thailand’s GDP. As a result, Thailand’s third-quarter growth dropped below expectations, which was caused mainly by less export to China and the United States and a contraction in tourist arrivals. There have been some positive short-term effects from the trade war due to trade and investment diversion. It was revealed in November 2018 Thai electronic companies have been able to secure new orders from US companies looking to bypass import tariffs. Thailand has been reaping benefits from the Trade War since early 2017 when the US issued an anti-dumping order on washing machines. This led to a surge in Chinese washing machine exports from Thailand, where total value surged from $16 million in February to $71 million in October 2018. Thailand’s merchandise trade with China and the United

85 Ian Storey, Trends in Southeast Asia: Thailand’s Post-Coup Relations with China and America: More Beijing, Less Washington, 25-26
States was expected to recover but was only 0.2% for the last quarter of 2018 versus an expansion of 7.4% in the previous quarter.86

The Sino-Thai military ties
In recent years, military ties between China and Thailand have been a major topic in the international community. The military ties began in the mid-1980s when the two countries forged a de facto strategic alliance to contain Vietnamese expansionism in Southeast Asia. Since the 2014 coup, the NCPO has been criticized for ramping up arms purchases from the Chinese. In January 2019, the NCPO decided to push ahead an arms deal with China, which prompted critics to decry a lack of transparency in the procurement process. After a few days of negotiations, the NCPO approved a 2.3 billion baht deal between Thailand and China that allowed the Thai Army to buy 14 Chinese-made VT-4 battle tanks. This deal, which was the third deal between Thailand and China, was strongly criticized Thai people, as it lacked transparency, with some detractors even calling the deals illegitimate.87

A similar case came into discussion a few months later when the Chinese offered Thailand a package deal, where China has agreed to supply Thailand with three diesel-electric submarines for the price of two. Unlike the previous agreement, this agreement was not criticized. However, a competition between the United States and China began to emerge in the sales of weaponry to the Thai military. Since President Donald Trump took office in 2017, the military ties between Thailand and the United States have been almost fully normalized. This led to the United States lifting an arms sales ban, which allowed Thailand to buy weapons directly from American companies. Many believe that this would create even more competition between China and the United States around their partnership with Thailand. Even though the United States has been Thailand’s most important security partner, China has greatly increased its military cooperation with Thailand and emerged as a serious competitor to the United States as a defense cooperation partner.88

86 Suthad Setboonsarng, „Thailand Looks to Benefit from the Trade War,“ ASEANFocus 1 (2019): 26-27
The 2019 Thai general election

On March 24, 2019, a general elections were held in Thailand nearly five years after the military staged a military coup d’état against the government. The result of the election was that the military group party, the Palang Pracharath Party, won the required Lower House seats to secure its sway on the decision to choose a Prime Minister. However, the Pheu Thai Party and the Future Forward Party of the Thaksin Shinawatra faction won more than 200 Lower House seats, giving them a greater advantage. Following the 2019 election, the National Assembly of Thailand elected Prayut Chan-o-cha as the next Prime Minister. Some discussion arose between scholars in Thailand about how the election in Thailand would affect their relations with China. Many believed that China’s investment in Thailand would not be affected much by the result of the general election as the Thai constitution protects against the Twenty-Year National Strategy which the NCPO prepared just weeks after the 2014 coup was staged. When the Twenty-Year National Strategy was put forth in Thailand, a plan was made between the two countries that Thailand has striven to connect with the China-proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (the BRI). In the months when the new government has been in office the relationship between China and Thailand has further deepened, and scholars have pointed out three points that explains why relations between the countries have not deteriorated since the election took place. Firstly, China and Thailand have built a good friendship over a long period of time. Secondly, the achievements of policy communication between the Chinese and Thai governments have gradually emerged, where it can be seen in the promotion of the BRI. Thirdly, the relations between China and Thailand have entered a new era of deepening their cooperation, which can be seen in how the two countries have established profound understanding and accumulated rich experience in cooperation through the BRI.89

89 Chang Xiang, „How will Thailand’s election affect China?“, “CGTN, March 27, 2019
Conclusion

The main aim of the thesis was to examine Sino-Thai relations during the 20th century with the help of defensive realism. The theory manages to explain the rise of China, which has helped me to better understand the relationship between the countries, especially during the 20th and 21st centuries when they established diplomatic relations. In the thesis I used defensive realism to understand the Sino-Thai relations, where the theory explains their economic and military relations in a relatively good way. The first record of the Sino-Thai relations stems from 1238 when the Sukhothai Kingdom was founded by the Tai people who migrated from southern China. Since the Sukhothai Kingdom was founded, the leaders of Thailand decided to have tributary relations with the Chinese Empire, which strengthened the relationship between the two countries. The tributary trade between the countries was divided into the official trade and private trade. In the mid-14th century, China decided to limit all trade missions to the country, where the Ming Dynasty wanted to manage better what was being imported and to monitor all foreign import companies. In the next few centuries, trade missions between Thailand and China continued to grow mostly without any major conflict.

Tributary trade between China and Thailand continued until 1853 when King Rama IV suspended the missions, which was done due to the turmoil in China and his wish to give priority to trade with the British Empire. Because of the turmoil, many Chinese decided to flee to Thailand, where they played important roles in the informal trade between the two countries. My answer to the first question will be split in half. Firstly, I will look at the first half of the 20th century and then the relations after the Vietnam War. During the first half of the 20th century there was a great deal of unrest in Sino-Thai relations, especially in economic and political affairs. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Sino-Thai relations began to deteriorate, primarily due to the rising nationalism among the Thais and Chinese. Chinese immigrants caused a dispute between Thailand and China, as they became the focus of a political controversy concerning their loyalty to the Thai kingdom. The Thai government decided to introduce various legislations to define the status of the Chinese immigrants in the country, such as the Thai Nationality Act of 1913 where all ethnic Chinese born in Thailand were regarded as Thai. During the 1920s, the Chinese in Thailand became very politically active, where Sun Yat-sen came to power in China. King Rama VI expressed his concern with the slowing of Chinese assimilation in Thailand and was
afraid that the growing politicization of the Chinese community, where Communism had on the rise in China for some time.

To answer my second question the Second World War and the Vietnam War had a tremendous impact on the Sino-Thai relations. During the Second World War, Thailand had been occupied by the Japanese in 1941 who were the enemies of Chinese. Thai Prime Minister Phibun Songkhramas decided that Thailand would be Japanese allies during the Second World War, while the Chinese decided to join the Allies. Though Thailand was not at war with the Chinese, the Thai government decided in 1941 that all foreigners were forbidden to enter Thailand including the Chinese. It was unclear why Thailand did not declare war on China, but it is believed that omission probably derived merely from the non-recognition by Japan of the legality of the Chongqing regime. In 1943, Thailand began slowly allying itself with the Allies and by the end of the war, Thailand completely turned to the Allies by letting them into the country to disarm the Japanese. During the Vietnam War, the Chinese decided to ally itself with the Communist government in North Vietnam and its allies in South Vietnam, while Thailand allied itself with the government of South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States. During the 1960s, Thailand had become the bastion of the United States Anti-Communist policy in the Southeast Asian mainland, as it was the United States’ main goal to form a military alliance and cooperation with anti-Communist states in East and Southeast Asia. Even if Thailand was in cooperation with the United States Armed Forces, the United States viewed the Thai military regime as opportunistic and prone to the accommodation with China. Such accommodation had already occurred in 1955 where Thailand had secretly opening political contacts with China. During that time attempts were made to bring about eventual normalization between the countries. During the 1960s, the Sino-Thai relations worsened even further where China supported and promoted an insurgency led by the CPT and Thailand grew closer to the United States, to counter the perceived threat from China. To answer the second part of the first question, the relations after 1972 were mainly political, as the Chinese wanted to normalize the relations with Thailand due to regional strategic considerations. On July 1, 1975, Thai Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj went to China and signed a joint communiqué with Zhou Enlai to establish diplomatic relations between Thailand and China. A turnaround in the Sino-Thai relations came when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1978. The Vietnamese invasion strengthened security interests between Thailand
and China that resulted in strategic cooperation. The Thai government viewed the Vietnamese action as unacceptable, while China viewed the invasion as an expansionist move to dominate all of Indochina. It was not until the 1990s when the bilateral trade between the countries began to increase. During that time there was a significant increase in exports from Thailand to China, which lasted until 1996 when the bilateral trade between the countries began to fluctuate. During the 1997 Asian financial crisis, China was one of the countries to help Thailand to improve its economy. China decided to contribute $1 billion to the $17 billion loan from the IMF loan, which was seen by many as quite generous and showed how good the relations were between China and Thailand. As a sign of its gratitude, the Thai government donated $10,000 to the Chinese in 1998 when China was devastated by its worst flooding in 50 years.

The relations between Thailand and China during the 21st century were relatively good. In recent years, the tourism industry in Thailand has dramatically changed, partially due to the increase in Chinese tourists. Since 2012, Chinese tourists have increased year by year and it was estimated that by the end of 2015 that the total number of Chinese tourists would reach 8 million. The answer to the third question is that even though there has been a great deal of political instability in Thailand from the 2006 coup onwards and after the 2014 coup, the Sino-Thai relation has been good. After the 2006 coup, the Chinese government immediately recognized the new military government in Thailand and offered $49 million in defense credits. Military ties between the countries increased, which led to the signing of the Sino-Thai Strategic Cooperation in a Joint Action Plan. Unlike other countries, China did not criticize the 2014 coup. China’s response to the 2014 coup was a virtual replay of its reaction to the military coup in 2006; the Chinese foreign minister urged the Thais to exercise restraint, increase dialogue and restore order as soon as possible. Finally, the answer to the last question is that the 2014 coup and the subsequent US antagonism only accelerated Thailand’s gravitation towards China. While China did not criticize the 2014 coup, they stated that Thailand had China’s full support after the NCPO came to power. Thailand continued to negotiate with China, including for a north-south high-speed rail line from the Nong Khai Province to Bangkok. After the coup, the bilateral trade between the countries was estimated to be around $57 billion.

Recently, three issues have dominated the relationship and point towards a potential crisis. First is the United States and China’s competition for Thailand. For
most of the 21st century, the United States has become much less important to Thailand as the political and military relations between the United States and Thailand began to decline which coincided with the growth of China’s economic power and domestic political strife put bilateral relations under great strain. Shortly after the 2014 coup, the United States expressed that their relations could not return to normal until democracy is restored. The second issue is the military ties between China and Thailand. The discussion started when the NCP decided to make three arms deals with China, which allowed the Thai military to buy firearms from the Chinese at a lower price. These deals were criticized among the Thai people, as they lacked transparency, with some detractors even calling the deals illegitimate. The third issue is the 2019 general elections where many believed that China’s investment in Thailand would not be affected much by the result of the general election.
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