



# Thammasat Institute of Area Studies

WORKING PAPER SERIES 2017

*The Continuity of Thailand's 'Bamboo Bending with the  
Wind' Foreign Policy:  
The Perception of National Independence*

Kornchanok Nushkasem

December, 2017

THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY

# PAPER NO. 14 / 2017

Thammasat Institute of Area Studies, Thammasat University  
Working Paper Series 2017

*The Continuity of Thailand's 'Bamboo Bending with the Wind' Foreign  
Policy: The Perception of National Independence*

Kornchanok Nushkasem

Thammasat Institute of Area Studies, Thammasat University  
99 Moo 18 Khlongnueng Sub District, Khlong Luang District,  
Pathum Thani, 12121, Thailand

©2017 by Kornchanok Nushkasem. All rights reserved. Short sections of text, not to exceed two paragraphs, may be quoted without explicit permission provided that full credit including © notice, is given to the source.

This publication of Working Paper Series is part of Master of Arts in Asia-Pacific Studies Program, Thammasat Institute of Area Studies (TIARA), Thammasat University. The view expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the Institute.

For more information, please contact Academic Support Unit, Thammasat Institute of Area Studies (TIARA), Patumthani, Thailand

Telephone: +02 696 6605

Fax: + 66 2 564-2849

Email: [academic.tiara@gmail.com](mailto:academic.tiara@gmail.com)

Language Editors:     Mr. Mohammad Zaidul Anwar Bin Haji Mohamad Kasim  
                              Ms. Thanyawee Chuanchuen

TIARA Working papers are circulated for discussion and comment purposes. Comments on this paper should be sent to the author of the paper,  
Ms. Kornchanok Nushkasem, Email: *kornchanok.nush@hotmail.com*  
Or Academic Support Unit (ASU), Thammasat Institute of Area Studies, Thammasat University

## Abstract

This thesis seeks to analyze the motives behind the continuity of Thailand's traditional 'bamboo bending with the wind' foreign policy between 1868 and 2017. The research focuses on explaining how Thailand perception of 'national independence' have played role in directing this flexible foreign policy. This has been done by examining speeches at the cabinet meetings from four prominent leaders of Thailand, namely King Chulalongkorn, Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha. Each leader was selected to represent a different time period, world order, external threats, and domestic political structure. However, one common finding is that the image of being independence and free from external controls has remained as an honour and dignity of the nation. Therefore, Thailand would bend to whichever directions of the wind that allow the country to protect its national prestige based on the idea of national independence. By analyzing Thai foreign policy throughout a long period of time, this reveals how a desire in maintaining the image of national independence has long been at the heart of this lasting 'bamboo bending with the wind' foreign policy of Thailand.

*Keywords: Thai foreign policy, 'bamboo bending with the wind', flexibility, self-perception, national independence*

## 1. Introduction

The foreign policy of Thailand, likens a bamboo tree, is flexible enough to bend whichever direction the wind blows without breaking, yet always firmly rooted to the ground. The absence of a solid moral stance and principle allows Thailand to flexibly bend with any foreign powers. This reflects a unique approach to international relations of Thai diplomatic culture. The bamboo bending with the wind analogy commonly used to characterize the nature of Thai foreign policy behavior from the time of ancient Siam through to a modern-day Thailand. Despite its balancing of power between French and the British during the colonial period, its close alliance with the United States during the Vietnam War, its companionship with the Asian region in early twenty-first century, and its conciliation with Beijing during the age of China's rise; throughout a different time periods, world orders, global superpowers, forms of domestic government, and individual leaders, Siam or Thailand has consistently crafted a flexible and pragmatic foreign policy from generations to generations. Therefore, the central question to this thesis is: why Thailand's 'bamboo bending with the wind' has remained continued? Which factor help maintaining the 'bamboo' characteristic in Thailand's foreign policy?

Thailand's bending with the wind is more than just to protect the country's survival. Rather, Thailand flexed its foreign policy in order to maintain its national core value which is the image of Thailand as an independent nation. Thailand's perception of its independence is a little more than just a free sovereign nation today, yet Thailand views itself as a long independent nation due to the fact that it is the only Southeast Asian nation to never been colonized during the age of colonization. This pride of national independence is embedded as Thai identity. As parts of national identity, therefore Thailand needs to protect its image of independence in order to maintain its sense of nation. Hence, foreign policy plays a major role in retaining the country's independent image.

This thesis evaluates the unchanging nature of Thai foreign policy between 1868 and 2017. It examines 149-year of Thailand's bamboo in the wind policy and offer a distinct reason behind this continuous nature of Thai foreign policy. Contrary to the traditional debate that generally argues that the ultimate goal in the conduct of bamboo diplomacy is the protection of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and to minimize the degree of foreign intervention in domestic affairs, this thesis insists that such conventional wisdom is outdated especially in explaining Thai

foreign policy in the post-Cold War era when potential security threat is absent. Therefore, the central argument of this study is that the continuity of bamboo bending with the wind foreign policy is driven by Thailand's continuous desire to preserve its long lasting national image of independence because such image is one distinctive self-perception of the nation. Hence, the reason behind the bend is not to safeguard the national security, rather to retain its national identity. This thesis aims to examine how notional factor of self-perception, particularly Thailand views itself as an independent nation, has certain influences on the conduct of Thai foreign policy.

## **2. Thailand's 'Bamboo Bending with the Wind'**

### **2.1 Nature of Thailand's Foreign Policy**

An analogy of 'bamboo bending with the wind' is inseparable from a study of Thailand's foreign policy. Most analysts seem to be in agreement that Thai foreign policy is best characterized as flexible likens a bamboo tree bends with the wind, meaning "always solidly rooted, but flexible enough to bend whichever way the wind blows in order to survive" (Kislenko, 2002, p.537). This view has been evaluated Thailand's diplomacy from a distant past of the ancient Siam (Klausner, 1981). Several early Siamese kingdoms have demonstrated a flexible policy towards Great Powers. Based on the ancient practice of a Hindu-Buddhist cosmological concept of Mandala, the less powerful kingdoms often acknowledge the superiority of the most powerful empires by submitting themselves as tributary states. This accommodation helps to guarantee the survival of the weaker polities (Busbarat, 2016). The ancient Siamese kingdoms submit themselves as a Chinese tributaries in order to maintain their autonomies, and to overcome the Khmer and Pagan kingdom (Kislenko, 2002).

Following the arrival of European powers in Southeast Asia, from the middle of fourteenth to sixteenth century, the Ayuthaya Kingdom switches focus and maintains complex yet friendly political, military and trade relationships with many Western powers (Kislenko, 2002). In the mid-nineteen century, with the arrival of European colonizer, the Chakri dynasty (Thailand's current dynasty) is capable of flexibility in playing off the British against the French and vice versa. Later, despairing to counter-balance between French and the British, Siam is flexible enough to reach out for Germany and Russia to be the new counter-balancers in the region in order to protect the Siamese national interests which is national sovereignty and territorial integrity (Kislenko, 2002; Busbarat, 2016). This makes the idea of flexibility becomes a core value in the conduct of Thai foreign policy (Busbarat, 2016).

The flexible policies continue as in the First World War, the Siamese king switches to hold on to the potential winner United States and the Allies power, and declares war on the Central Powers in order to undermining the European imperialism. Similar story repeats during the Second World War, following the stimulation of anti-Western sentiment, Siam - renames Thailand declared war on the British and the United States on January 1942. However, due to the fact that the United States does not accept the war declaration, instead recognizes a Thai in-exile-government in Washington who in opposition to the Japanese occupation. In the end, Thailand stays in the winning side and receipts war preparation (Kislenko, 2002; Busbarat, 2016).

In 1950s and 60s, during the Cold War, Thai foreign policy shifts from retaining contact with both democratic and communist bloc to adapting an anti-communist position. Thailand at the time adopts a pro-Western posture, especially retains close relations with the United States (Corrine, 1999). Later, at the time when the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union has declined, Thailand shifts its focus and re-approach with other great powers, such as China and Russia during the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia in 1980 (Busbarat, 2016). In absence of traditional security threats during the late 20th century, Thailand attempt to maintaining a balance position between the current global hegemon United States, and the new rising power China, in order to be pragmatic and flexible in a new changing political environment (Busbarat, 2016).

## **2.2 The Definitions of 'Bamboo Bending with the Wind' Policies**

The fundamental definition of 'bending with the wind' refers to the capable of flexibility. Thoroughly, the distinct characteristics of flexibility according to Thailand's 'bamboo bending with the wind' foreign policy has been described as follows (Corrine, 1999; Kislenko, 2002; Chachavalpongpun, 2012; Busbarat, 2016):

- 1) pragmatism as Thai leaders acknowledges the nation's level of capabilities and strengths, and conduct a foreign policy in respond to the reality rather than to the idealistic principles or uninhabited ambitions;

- 2) absence of fundamental principles and moral stances as in changing its alignment without being overly concerned on losing its own principles and stances, nor overly concerned

on losing trusts or benefits from other polities. Thailand is capable of making friendly relationships with whoever is in power or in a winning position regardless of its historical conflicts or policies;

3) accommodating the demands of the great powers through the strategy of alignment, bandwagoning and balance of power in order to maintain friendly relations, yet avoiding conflicts with any potential threats to its survival;

4) Opportunism as in seeking to take every opportunity to exploit from the superpowers of the day. While Thai foreign policy seems to depend on interests of the great powers, at the same time Thailand also takes advantages of them for its own interests such as to ensure its national security and stability;

5) The protection of national sovereignty has been the ultimate goal for Thailand's flexible foreign policy. This flexibility allows Thailand to preserve its status quo regarding the maintaining of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and also minimising external intervention into the domestic affairs.

### **2.3 The Study of Thailand's 'bamboo bending with the wind' Diplomacy**

Related to the discussion in the previous section, the study of 'bamboo bending with the wind' behavior in Thailand's foreign policy is relatively limited. This is due to several reasons. First, in most literatures on Thai foreign policy, the 'bending with the wind' concept is limitedly used in a descriptive manner rather than as an argumentative fashion. As mentioned above, the term 'bamboo bending with the wind' is inseparable from the study of Thai foreign policy. However, most of the time, the bamboo concept is used to describe the characteristics, natures and patterns of Thailand's foreign policy. Limited number of scholars have criticized or challenged the concept itself. As a long-lasting continuous conventional wisdom, therefore, the understanding of bamboo diplomacy seems to be taken for granted. This thesis is interested in the continuity of 'bamboo bending with the wind' behavior. It aims to examine a distinct reason why Thailand's 'bamboo' policy is continued, particularly from the age of colonialism.

Second, it has been most of the time that the 'bamboo bending with the wind' is studied under a relatively short-term rather than in a long linear fashion. Scholars often focus their studies on a one specific point in time. For example, '*Siam and Colonialism, 1855-1909: An Analysis of Diplomatic Relations*' by Dhiravegin in 1974; '*Thailand's Foreign Policies: The Four Decades After*



*The Second World War (1945-1989)* by Corrine Phuabgkasem in 1999; *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy* by Pavin Chachavalpongpun in 2010; *Bamboo Swirling in the Wind: Thailand's Foreign Policy Imbalance between China and the United States* by Busarat Pongphisoot in 2016. The concept of 'bamboo bending with the wind' has appeared to describe the nature of Thai foreign policy in each different time period throughout its diplomatic history. However, the study of 'bamboo' policies in a long linear timeframe covering from a past history through to a recent period is limited, especially in the twenty-first century where a traditional threat is absent. Interestingly, as mentioned in the earlier section, the changing circumstances has not changed the flexible nature of Thailand's foreign policy. Therefore, it is important to study the Thai 'bamboo' diplomacy in a continuous fashion in order to understand the motive behind its consistency.

Third and related to the characteristics of 'bamboo' policies discussed above, the general trend in major literature of Thai foreign policy studies view Thailand's 'bamboo bending with the wind' nature based on a security-oriented notion. The reason behind Thailand's flexible foreign policy almost at all time refers to the protection of national security through the maintaining of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and to minimizing a degree of external intervention into the domestic affairs. Theoretically speaking, Thailand's 'bamboo' foreign policy has been limitedly understood through a view of realist approach, focusing on a struggle for power and survival in the international system. There is an absence of multidimensional understandings to Thai foreign policy. Moreover, this security-oriented view can be problematic when it comes to explaining Thai foreign policy in the present day where the significance of traditional security threat is lessening. Therefore, this thesis intends to insert a distinct angle to view and to understand the reason behind the continuity of Thailand's 'bamboo bending with the wind' nature, using Thailand's self-perception of independence.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research method to understand the underlying reason of Thailand's continuous 'bamboo bending with the wind' foreign policy. The thesis examines the possible connection between the role of self-perception and the conduct of foreign policy. The main strategy is to investigate how Thailand views itself as an independence - has never been colonized - nation has influenced and helped shaping the foreign policy preferences of the Thai

leaders. It focuses on analyzing the role of self-perception as independence in the conduct of Thai foreign policy.

The analysis of self-perception in the conduct of foreign policy has been relatively ignored in the field of international relations. To understand human cognitive in political behaviors, international relations has borrowed the analysis of perception from the field of psychology. Adopting to the decision of policy makers, Robert Jervis (1976) argues in his 'Perception and misperception in international politics' that the perception of decision makers such as beliefs, principles and images appear as a basis driving force behind political decisions. Perceptions determine the direction of foreign policy toward others in international arena (Herrmann, 1986).

This thesis employed the self-perception theory to analyze Thailand's self-perception. The Self-perception theory argues that social behavior is formed based on 'principles, attitudes and beliefs' (Bem, 1972, p.55) which are formed based on the past history. This theory believes that the image formed in the first place is usually stable with little change occurring afterwards. Individuals usually want to reinforce their beliefs and images by conducting their behaviors to reflect such image.

Drawing to the case of Thailand, the formation of national image process started in the reign of King Chulalongkorn. The concept of nation was taught in the standard textbook of Thammachariya as a community of sharing similar historical experiences, cultures and values (Kullada, 2004). Prince Damrong wrote a Thai history text of *Laksana kan pokkhrong Sayam tae boran* suggesting that one of the main characteristics of Thai people is 'love of national independence' (Prince Damrong cited in Chatchai, 1991, p.354) due to the past kings efforts in protecting the independence of Siam. Therefore, the image of Siam exited as independent nation, at the same time dictated the image of Siamese people as national independence lovers.

This historical narrative applied to four case studies representing Thai foreign policy in four different eras. The selected periods are:

1) King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910)

Significant event: Western Colonialism in Southeast Asia

International system: Multipolarity (Western Colonizers)

form of government: Absolute monarchy

2) Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda (1980-1988)

Significant event: Cold War (the United States and the Soviet Union)

International system: Bipolarity

form of government: Military government

3) Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006)

Significant event: The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis

International system: Unipolarity (The United States)

form of government: Parliamentary democracy

4) Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha (2014-present)

Significant event: The rise of China

International system: The new bipolar world (The United States and China)

form of government: Military Junta

The case selection is based on three main criteria. First, author selected the case studies from the reign of King Chulalongkorn to Prime Minister Prayut because the time of King Chulalongkorn was the official beginning of Thailand's national image building process. The thesis is willing to examine how the image of independence established during King Chulalongkorn has influenced the direction of Thai foreign policy occurring afterwards. Second, each of the four selected cases illustrate a distinct political environment both domestic and international, as mentioned above, from timeframes, political events, world orders, forms of government to individual leaders. It is more efficient to evaluate the continuity of foreign policy with the concern of changing environment. Those differences help strengthening the overall argument regarding the consistent role of self-perception in shaping the direction of Thai foreign policy. Third, the four selected regimes share one similar strength, referring to a relatively long-term stable government. The administration of King Chulalongkorn was in power for 58 years, Prem for 8 years, Thaksin for 5 years, and Prayut for 3 years and ongoing. These numbers are large enough to prove the stability of the regimes. The author believes that stable governments are more likely to conduct or to adjust the policy closer to the direction of their own preferences due to their continued

administrations. Therefore, the selected regimes are likely to offer a clear, solid and consistent directions in the conduct of their foreign policy which makes the analysis becoming more efficient.

In the analysis, the main source is relied on the speeches of the king/ prime minister delivered at the cabinet meetings. However, some other public speeches delivered by the king/prime minister outside the cabinet meets also be used. The thesis examines the role of national independence through analyzing leaders' speeches in order to analyze the role of self-perception in shaping the policy preference of preserving its image of independence. The research has been done mostly through a traditional library research and online research. This thesis has relied upon archival materials, books, journal articles, newspaper and other online sources to support the analysis.

#### **4. Findings**

Thailand's self-perception appeared as a basis for constructing the foreign policy of independence. As self-perception theory, discussed in Research Methodology section, argues that social behaviors are strongly influenced by one's beliefs and principles based on one's historical experiences. This well explains the connection between self-perception and the conduct of Thai foreign policy. Thailand or formerly known as Siam had experienced freedom and independence during the colonization period, leaving Siam as the only Southeast Asian nations not being colonized. This has strongly affirmed the self-perception of independence for Siam.

To consolidate the nation's image of independence, Thai leaders adopt various foreign policy strategies in order to preserve a sense of independence for the Thai people. In the case of Thaksin administration, Thailand's image of independence strongly influenced the direction of his foreign policy. In 2001, Thaksin came to power at the time when Thailand was still suffer from the 1997 Financial Crisis. The collapse of Thai economy followed with increased rate of unemployment and suicide, plunged numbers of Thais into difficult conditions. With financial assistance and reform guidance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), overall Thai economy gradually recovered from deep recession. Nevertheless, the IMF confronted many criticisms from both Thai and non-Thai critics. At the time, Thailand was seen as a 'US puppet' surrendered to the IMF conditions (Gordon, 2001, p.118). The economic reform program was considered as a modern form of colonialism, spreading the US influence of neoliberalism and financial liberalism ideologies onto Thailand's economic sovereignty (Si-Ariya, 1999). This loyalty to the United States diminished a sense of national pride in its dependence for the Thais.

As Thailand's image of independence had been challenged, the Thaksin government, in response, took a major role to abolish the country's image of dependent nation. Thaksin employed a more assertive and militant role through the anti-IMF, anti-US and anti-Western-influence sentiments in order to prove to all Thais that their nation strongly refused to be subordinated under any foreign influences. This can be seen through Thaksin's famous phrase such as "U.N. is not my father" (Tunyasiri & Ashayagachat, 2003). The image of submissive Thailand further abolished through Thaksin pro-Asia foreign policy. Thaksin successfully relocated Thailand at the forefront of the Asian region as the central hub for regional cooperation, at the same time spreading Thai influences over its neighboring countries. Thailand was a centered to several regional cooperation such as the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). This image of absence of external controls rather a self-dependence and a regional influencer helped restoring a sense of independence to all Thais.

Thaksin's restoration a sense of independence to the people of Thailand helped boosting his popularity at home. As many claims, Thaksin's pro-independence foreign policies was the utilization of Thailand's independence image to satisfy his own interest in stimulating his domestic supports (Symonds, 2001; Lamb, 2004; Bello, 2005). Thaksin government won an outright majority in the election, for the first time by any party ever since 1991, and was able to secure his position in the second term. His success based on the use of the image of independence as a political tool reflects that the people of Thailand still views their nation as independence and also willing to preserve the existence of such image. In the end, it is people's desire to protect the image of Thailand as an independence nation that directed the direction of Thailand's foreign policy during Thaksin's administration.

## **5. Conclusion**

This thesis has demonstrated that Thailand's self-perception of itself as an independent nation is relevant in the study of Thai foreign policy. Self-perception was built and sustained through a process of the formation of national image. This image embedded in the perception of the Thai people and became a fundamental ideal of the nation as reflected in the conduct of foreign policy. Each leader used the image of independence differently for different purposes. Thai leaders employed various strategies regardless of fundamental political ideologies, moral stances

and historical conflicts to maintain the national sovereignty, territorial integrity and minimising foreign influences in domestic affairs in order to preserve the image of independence for Thailand. It is the continuous image of independence that carries on the foreign policy preference of flexibility. Therefore, this thesis concludes that Thailand's self-perception of itself as an independent nation has played a role in sustaining the continuity of 'bamboo bending with the wind' foreign policy for Thailand.

### Bibliography

- Bem, D. J. (1972). Self-perception theory. *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 6, 1-62.
- Bello, W. (2005). *Dilemmas of domination: The unmaking of the American empire*. Zed Books.
- Busbarat, P. (2016). "Bamboo Swirling in the Wind": Thailand's Foreign Policy Imbalance between China and the United States. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 38(2), 233-257
- Chachavalpongpun, P. (2010). *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and his foreign policy* (Vol. 394). Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Dhiravegin, L. (1974). *Siam and Colonialism, 1855-1909: An Analysis of Diplomatic Relations*. Thai Watana Panich.
- Gordon, B. K. (2001). *America's Trade Follies*. Routledge.
- Herrmann, R. (1986). The Power of Perceptions in Foreign-Policy Decision Making: Do Views of the Soviet Union Determine the Policy Choices of American Leaders?. *American Journal of Political Science*, 841-875.
- Jervis, R. (1976). Perception and misperception in world politics. *Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Jervis Perception and misperception in world politics 1976*.
- Klausner, W. (1960). *Reflections on Thai culture*. Siam society.
- Kislenko, A. (2002). Bending with the wind: The continuity and flexibility of Thai foreign policy. *International Journal*, 57(4), 537-561.
- Kullada Kesboochoo, M. (2004). The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism.
- Lamb, D. (2004, May 04). Forceful Thai Leader Challenged Amid Achievements. *The Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/may/04/world/fg-thaksin4>
- Phuangkasem, C. (1999). *Thailand's Foreign Policies: The Four Decades After the Second World War (1945-1989)*. MIR Program, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University.
- Si-Ariya, Y. (1999). American imperialism and the war to usurp hegemony. *Wikrit Asia*, 49-51.
- Symonds, P. (2001, January 11). Thai Billionaire Capitalizes on anti-IMF Sentiment to Win National Elections. *The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) World Socialist Website*. Retrieved October 14, 2017, from <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2001/01/thai-j11.html>
- Tunyasiri, Y., & Ashayagachat, A. (2003, March 04) PM shoots mouth off over UN query. *Bangkok Post*. p. 23.





## Author's Profile



Name Kornchanok Nushkasem

Date of Birth September 19, 1994

- Educational Attainment
- September 2017 - Present: Graduate School of International Management, Yokohama City University, Yokohama
  - August 2016 - Present: Master of Arts in Asia-Pacific Studies, College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Thammasat University, Bangkok
  - February 2013 - November 2015: Bachelor of Arts, College of Arts and Social Sciences, The Australian National University, Canberra
- Scholarship
- September 2017 - Present: Recipient of Graduate School of International Management, Yokohama City University, Yokohama
- Work Experiences
- July - September 2017: Research Assistance, Thammasat Institute for Area Studies (TIARA), Thammasat

University, Bangkok July -  
September 2017:

- December 2015 - March 2016:  
Internship, The Royal Thai  
Embassy, Canberra