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Trump's America 2.0: Thailand's response under China's shadow

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Once a close ally of the United States, Thailand now finds itself walking a diplomatic tightrope under the shadow of Donald Trump's second presidency and China's growing influence. Trump's America First doctrine, characterized by disengagement and transactionalism, has left allies such as Bangkok questioning Washington's reliability. Confronted with the uncertainties precipitated by the Trump administration, Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra has positioned the nation closer to Beijing, even making controversial accommodations, notably the deportation of Uyghur refugees to China. Caught between two major powers, Thailand faces a political dilemma. While China's influence is rapidly expanding, its demands risk fostering overdependence and provoking domestic backlash. Conversely, the United States now appears distant and unpredictable. This study highlights Thailand's efforts to maintain a delicate balance amid these strategic fluctuations, urging the United States to reclaim its role as a balancer in continental Southeast Asia, where nations such as Thailand continue to seek equilibrium of major power influence amid intense geopolitical rivalry.

KEYWORDS

China, Thailand, Thai-U.S. relations, Trump's foreign policy, United States

1 Introduction

Much has been written about Donald Trump's victory and his return to the Oval Office in 2025 (e.g., [Takayuki, 2025](#)). While his first presidency was often characterized by "over-promising and under-delivering" and reflected a conventional Republican foreign policy, his second term has generated greater consternation among America's allies worldwide. Trump has finally found a way to circumvent the obstacles that prevented him from fully realizing his "America First" slogan and "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) agenda during his first term. This time, it is not restricted to a war of words on X, the social media platform he frequently uses. There are significant concerns that the United States' influence might drift away from Asia, potentially shifting its military focus away from the Indo-Pacific region, as it did during Trump's first presidency ([Kelly, 2025](#)).

Amidst intensifying competition between the United States and China, Thailand, under Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, is walking a tightrope between the two major powers ([Regalado, 2025](#)). At the same time, the Thailand government appears to be aligning more closely with Beijing. Chinese-led extraterritorial operations to dismantle Chinese-owned scam hubs along the Thai-Myanmar border, coupled with Thailand's deportation of Uyghur refugees to Chinese authorities despite widespread condemnation, highlight Thailand's unusual stance. The extent to which these controversial actions may impact Thai-U.S. relations under Trump's leadership in Washington warrants further examination.

2 Trump's American foreign policy—indispensable, yet unreliable

Trump's capitulation strategy to secure a ceasefire—which may end the four-year war on terms favoring Russia—marks an unprecedented shift by the United States. His Oval Office meeting with President Zelensky underscored Trump's personal animosity, as he criticized Zelensky's perceived lack of gratitude for U.S. support and warned, "You're gambling with World War 3" (*HT News Desk, 2025*). After this exchange, Trump temporarily suspended military aid to Kyiv, signaling a sharp departure from Biden-era policy. In seeking to draw Moscow away from Beijing, Trump's strategy represents a significant strategic gamble, testing both Russia's resilience and its posture with China.

Overshadowed by the Russo-Ukrainian war and Trump's strategic surrender, a second ceasefire in Gaza—intended to ease Hamas-Israel tensions—appears to have reached a deadlock. In Asia, Trump's stance has placed regional states in a strategic dilemma. Notably, his two-front war not only signals an unconventional trajectory and transactional approach in American foreign policy, but also forces many Asian states to reassess their long-term strategic positioning vis-à-vis a power that is both indispensable and increasingly unreliable. This is significant as the United States has begun imposing high tariffs on countries with trade surpluses with Washington, while simultaneously terminating countless programs sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Undoubtedly, driven by the MAGA agenda, the current U.S. foreign policy such as the proposed annexation of Greenland and Canada, the vow to reclaim the Panama Canal, and the imposition of high tariffs on neighboring countries, particularly China, has positioned Trump 2.0 as an imperial presidency. While the new American imperialism under the Trump administration echoes that of William McKinley's era (*The Economist, 2025*), its execution clearly undermines the credibility the United States has built over the past seven decades.

Narratives of American decline have long been a recurring theme in both academic and public discourse. In defense of American pre-eminence, *Nye (2015)* argued that three dimensions of power—military, economic and soft power—must be considered. Although the U.S. economy has experienced a series of negative effects since the 2008 financial crisis, the United States remains stronger than other regional and rising powers in terms of aggregated capabilities. However, under Trump's leadership, America appears to be undermining its own position by diminishing its role as a liberal hegemon and relinquishing its place as a defender of the rule-based international order. This is evident in actions such as cuts to USAID, the imposition of high tariffs and proposals for burden-sharing among American allies in Europe and East Asia.

Trump's new MAGA agenda has two consequences. First, it wreaks havoc on the liberal international order by adopting an isolationist, might-is-right foreign policy playbook. Second, it highlights its failure to understand the expectations and commitments the international community has placed upon the liberal leviathan for seven decades (*Nye, 2015*). While the United States has championed global security and prosperity since the second half of the twentieth century, the American-led international order now faces a significant challenge, not from external threats, but from within. Indeed,

Americans are not enthusiastic about the United States acting as the world's policeman, especially in matters of foreign aid (*Ingram, 2025*).

Based on *Nye's (2004, 2015)* criteria, Trump's bold actions could leave the United States with only its superior military power, which is merely one-third of the comprehensive power it is expected to wield. Moreover, to preserve the American century and slow the decline of American power, Washington must expand its network of allies and friends—an asset of paramount importance if it seeks to transform Trump's imperialistic diplomatic discourse into fostering long-term, robust strategic partnerships in a world resembling a new Cold War. Therefore, the United States must ultimately re-engage with its longstanding allies, including Thailand.

3 Uneasy Thai–U.S. relations

Thailand, long regarded as the United States' longstanding and trusted ally, has maintained stable economic and political relations with Washington for over two centuries. Since 2003, Bangkok has held the designation of a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA). While the Cold War represented the zenith of the two nations' bilateral relationship, the post-Cold War period witnessed a decline as strategic interests and *raison d'état* waned. Relations reached their nadir following instability and two military coups in Thailand, in 2006 and 2014 (*Pongsudhirak, 2016*).

Despite the efforts of Thailand's military and civilian governments to repair the country's relationship with the United States, regime legitimization and international crises have increasingly driven Thai elites closer to China, often at the expense of their ties with the United States. The Thai government under Paetongtarn has further accentuated this trend: The Paetongtarn government has increasingly accommodated Chinese demands, including Beijing's firm requests on sensitive issues, notably the deportation of Uyghurs to China.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio responded to the Uyghur deportation incident by condemning Thailand for returning 40 Muslim Uyghurs to China. He publicly labelled China's treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities as "genocide." Furthermore, Rubio implemented a new visa restriction measure targeting "current or former foreign government officials responsible for, or complicit in, the forced return of Uyghurs or members of other ethnic or religious groups with protection concerns to China" (*Rubio, 2025*).

On the surface, Bangkok and Washington have continued to highlight their 192-year historical ties, as demonstrated by the February 2025 meeting between U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai, among other high-level talks. These interactions frequently illustrate the breadth of Thai–U.S. cooperation, ranging from the joint military exercises like Cobra Gold to economic collaboration. However, Thailand and the United States no longer share significant strategic interests. In other words, the peak of Thai–U.S. relations has long since passed, following the broader disengagement of the United States from Southeast Asia.

During the Trump 2.0 era, characterized by a predominantly transactional approach, Thailand had little to offer to the United States. As a middle power, Thailand should have retained the Uyghur issue as a strategic card. Instead, it seems to have placed all its eggs in one basket, risking overreliance on China without the United States' support to effectively counterbalance Chinese influence. The recent

statement from the U.S. Department of State has further exacerbated the uneasy ties between Bangkok and Washington (Rubio, 2025), pushing Thailand one step closer to Beijing's orbit.

More visibly, China's recent crackdown on scam hubs and cyber fraud compounds—where individuals of various nationalities were either coerced or deceived into working for multibillion-dollar scam dens along the Thailand–Myanmar border—demonstrates China's ability to politically compel the decision-makers of the Paetongtarn government. For example, leaders in Bangkok were pressured to permit the unusual extraterritorial actions of China's Assistant Minister Liu Zhongyi, which was widely criticized as an infringement on Thailand's sovereignty (McGowan and Veedon, 2025).

China claims to have assisted Thailand; thus, it can be reasonably expected that the former will seek something in return. Although Thailand's decision to compromise with China, particularly regarding the deportation of Uyghur refugees, may be understandable given China's relative strength and influence, it remains a high-risk quid pro quo. Moreover, this stance is likely to place Thailand at odds with the Trump administration, especially following the United States' announcement of a 36 percent tariff on Thai imports (Banchongduang and Reuters, 2025).

Trump's new "reciprocal tariffs" remain opaque and unilateral in their application against American trading partners. Thailand, ranked eighth on Trump's tariff list, has enjoyed a \$45.6 billion trade surplus with the United States. Nevertheless, facing potential losses of up to \$8 billion (Thaichareon and Sriring, 2025), Thailand has little choice but to appease Washington by purchasing more American products, such as corn and tuna, and by easing non-tariff barriers on U.S. goods.

Despite the disruption of the global economy by Trump's neo-mercantilist policies, which has further triggered trade wars and retaliatory measures, these developments have not served as a wake-up call for Thailand. The serious wake-up call for Bangkok is its relationship with Beijing. Dependence on China is not a favorable long-term strategy, as it exposes Thailand to vulnerabilities stemming from fluctuations in Chinese domestic demand and sudden policy changes. Meanwhile, anti-China sentiment among the Thai middle class has been rising (Bunyavejchewin, 2020), particularly following the recent Myanmar earthquake, which caused the collapse of an unfinished State Audit Office building in Bangkok. China Railway 10th Engineering Group, the contractor, has once again come under public scrutiny, further solidifying mistrust toward Chinese involvement in Thai infrastructure projects (Wei and Upadhyaya, 2025).

Considering these circumstances, a potential shift in Thailand's perception of the United States at multiple levels is not only likely but also inevitable, especially among the common people. Whether Washington capitalizes on this unexpected opportunity to strengthen its ties with Bangkok will depend on the diplomacy exercised by the Trump administration.

4 Directions in Thailand's U.S. policy

Whether or not Trump's MAGA foreign policy with its isolationist tendencies is in play, the Paetongtarn government, with Thaksin Shinawatra as the real decision-maker, would likely lean more toward Beijing and less toward Washington. This orientation stems from the fact that Thaksin, Paetongtarn's father, has long been a pro-China

politician (Siow, 2024). During the formation of the continent-wide Asia Cooperation Dialogue, Thaksin regarded China as an Asian giant whose role was indispensable in realizing his diplomatic ambitions and foreign policy initiatives, thus exemplifying his pro-Chinese stance.

Evidently, Thai foreign policy is not a one-person show. Internally, since the late 1980s, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has played a substantive role in foreign policy formulation. Its importance should not be underestimated, even during the Thaksin government. The highly institutionalized diplomatic culture within the Ministry has served as an "equipoise" to politicians' efforts to translate their electoral mandates into practice, particularly when those efforts risk significantly diverting Thai diplomacy from its established course. Externally, the behavior of other states—especially neighboring countries and major powers—also influences the direction of Thailand's foreign relations.

Although Thailand's U.S. policy has consistently sought to maintain its strategic relevance to the United States (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003), American withdrawals from Southeast Asia in general, and the Mekong region in particular, have continued to resonate within policy circles in Bangkok. This concern not only relates to the United States' withdrawal from South Vietnam during the height of the Cold War but also to more recent events, such as the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," which failed to fulfil its promise of maintaining a lasting American presence in the region.

Besides the failure of President Barack Obama's Asia pivot, the Mekong policy of the United States during President Trump's first term became erratic, if not directionless. This resulted from his dismissal of seasoned diplomats who specialized in, and had long overseen, Mekong affairs. Although the Mekong-U.S. Partnership (MUSP) was launched in 2020, incorporating the U.S.-led Lower Mekong Initiative, the trajectory of this new multilateral mechanism remained unclear, and it did not yield substantive outcomes. Consequently, Mekong nations, including Thailand, have been reluctant to engage closely and confidently in the MUSP process, as it could provoke China.

Geographic proximity often influences a country's foreign policy alignment. The proximity of a major Asian power is more consequential to Thailand than that of the world's hegemon. In the context of the Trump administration's MAGA foreign policy and tariff-driven approach—both of which have contributed to the erosion of the U.S.-led liberal international order—Paetongtarn's decision to "kowtow" to China is understandable (Tostevin, 2025). This is regardless of her father's pro-Chinese stance. Trump's perceived unreliability has compelled Bangkok to embrace Beijing, even if this alignment is not favorable.

The Thai government lacks the political will to remain under China's influence indefinitely—a sentiment shared by many nations. High-profile events and the rhetoric surrounding Sino–Thai relations have been driven solely on Thailand's national interests at specific moments. The notion of a Sino–Thai brotherhood, as claimed by various scholars, is a misrepresentation (Bunyavejchewin et al., 2022). Thus, Bangkok continues to rely on Washington and values the United States' constructive role in Southeast Asian affairs. This reliance stems from the principle that an "equilibrium of major power influences" has been a sine qua non of Thailand's foreign relations (Bunyavejchewin et al., 2022). This is exemplified by Thailand's quick dispatch of delegations to proactively engage and negotiate with the second Trump administration and its announcement of plans to increase imports from the United States. As of August 2025, the White House set a 19% tariff

on Thai imports, reduced from 36%, following Thailand's agreement to a ceasefire in the July armed conflict with Cambodia, during which President Trump engaged in mediation efforts (Bloomberg, 2025).

Strategically, Thailand's decision to allow unprecedented extraterritorial Chinese actions on its territory, followed by the deportation of Uyghurs, should serve as a warning to Washington that Thailand has limited options in managing Chinese pressures. The former incident occurred due to Bangkok's lack of diplomatic capital and strategic leverage, while the latter was an unfortunate casualty of geopolitics. Both events are likely to lead to increased Chinese pressure on Thailand and other Mekong countries to participate in joint security activities under the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. This is a bilateral format that China has sought to promote for a decade. Thus, the role of the United States as a "balancer" against Chinese influence is urgently needed.

Marco Rubio's condemnation regarding Thailand's deportation of Uyghurs to Chinese authorities is a standard procedure in American diplomacy. However, certain factions within the Bangkok establishment—particularly the military—tend to view diplomacy in binary terms (Phuangkasem, 1984). Rubio's condemnation may lead those factions to regard Washington as an unreliable partner, if not an adversary. Consequently, they may shift their support toward China, away from the United States and its allies.

Despite this possible shift in allegiance, Thailand's political relationship with the United States remains a critical component of its foreign policy. Ruling elites and policymakers in Bangkok have strived to ensure that Thailand's policy with the United States remains relevant to the United States. Unfortunately, Washington's increasing tendency toward isolation, not only from Asia but also from the broader world, has created a new context. This has necessitated greater prudence in Thailand's future actions concerning the Trump administration.

During Trump's first term, he telephoned General Prayut Chan-ocha, the Thai 2014-coup leader, inviting him to the White House amidst China's growing influence over the military-backed Thai regime (Bangkok Post, 2017). China was consequently infuriated. Ruling elites and policymakers in Bangkok are now anticipating a similar "Trump-phone-call" moment.

5 Discussion and conclusion

Trump's America 2.0 has, to some extent, isolated itself from Thailand and the wider region across various dimensions, undermining its own credibility and commitments to its allies. American allies in Southeast Asia, including Thailand, have experienced uncertainty regarding their reliance on Washington to safeguard their interests. This uncertainty has been exacerbated by China's growing power and expanding influence, which is manifestly revisionist and competitive with the United States and its coalitions in world politics.

With China's increasing demands, Thailand faces a political dilemma in accommodating such requests from the Chinese government. The pressure exerted by Beijing on Bangkok to deport Uyghur refugees to Chinese authorities exemplifies this predicament. As Russ Jalichandra, Thailand's Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, commented:

... There is no country that has come forward to say it will take responsibility (for Uyghur refugees) and is ready to help negotiate or lobby China to agree to let Thailand send them to that third

country. Nor has any country said it is ready to take in and care for them and, if Thailand faces retaliation from China, is willing to step in and help us (Matichon Online, 2025)

If the United States were a reliable hegemon in the Indo-Pacific and consistently honored its commitments to capitals in the Mekong region, the Thai government might not have deported the refugees to China, notwithstanding the Chinese request. However, given current trends, Washington appears to be repeating its previous actions by effectively withdrawing from both the Mekong and the wider region. This situation leaves countries such as Thailand with little choice but to acquiesce to a series of inequitable Chinese demands.

This is not to suggest that Thailand and its neighbours do not require the presence of Washington and its coalition of democracies. The United States remains the most effective balancer to China. An increased role for the Trump administration's realpolitik in the Mekong and Southeast Asian regions is strategically advantageous for Thailand, as it would render the influence of external powers over the region more symmetrical. In short, Thailand needs Trump's America, as does the region, and vice versa.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

TS: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. PB: Conceptualization, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Resources, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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