

Investigating Thailand's self-perception in the regional context towards ASEAN*

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Abstract

In the post-war era, empirical puzzles between realist theory and regional institutions have steered many researchers to investigate how small states play a role in the politics of regionalism. Because of the extremely perilous position of small states, they desire to overcome the vulnerability of smallness in economic, security and political affairs. This study argues that based on the powerlessness, Thailand has been continued playing its constructive roles in regional cooperation, within ASEAN. Data was collected by means of literature review including policy documents and memoirs. This study concludes that significant roles of Thailand have been influential in the regional context towards strengthening its regional resilience, as well as in the international level especially in their relationship with greater powers. Implications of Thailand's self-perception in regional cooperation towards ASEAN could be enhancement of Thai foreign policy towards regional cooperation. The question of the constructive roles of Thailand, based on its power ambitions in the region, is influential in this regard.

Key words: ASEAN, Regional Cooperation, Thailand

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Background and Significance of the Study

Over the past two decades, the impact of small states in an interconnected globalised world has become a major focus of research in international relations. Small states have suffered from the inequality of power capacities in the international system, due to a lack of consideration in comparison with the attention given to larger states (Cooper, and Shaw 2009; Veenendaal and Corbett 2014). There is need for further investigation into small states, regarding their effectiveness, abilities, and interests, for the purpose of determining their survival prospects. Small states also might seek to create new opportunities and challenges to achieve their goals based on the basic attributes of 'smallness'.

Within Southeast Asian regionalism, small states play a critical role in regional politics, contributing diversity and dynamism to major areas of concern, such as their efforts to increase their roles in international affairs, and to bargain with larger states and create effective diplomacy in regional institutions. Thus, this study examines the role of Thailand at the regional level to fully exploit the opportunity to comprehend small state studies which are infrequently initiated in IR and realist-based paradigm. Thailand's position in regional cooperation is highlighted in the way of overcoming its vulnerability as well as developing its resilience. Investigation of its behaviour can demonstrate the significance of *smaller* states in a globally democratic multi-polar system through the challenging of the status quo of regional prosperity and development.

The function of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) becomes a good baseline for examining Thailand's regional capacity. The academic literature that does exist is more often concerned only with aspects of Thailand's relations with great powers as well as Thailand's bilateral relations with other state and non-state actors. They largely neglect or offer only limited answers to Thailand's regional leadership role in determining its foreign policy preferences. Furthermore, Thailand identifies itself as a leading country, fruitfully playing a pivotal role in ASEAN, such as the underpinning of good governance of ASEAN institution-building, and the maintenance of an effective regional economy and security. Therefore, Thailand's position in ASEAN can be recognised from either one or a combination of idiosyncratic factors, historical and geopolitical factors, ideology, or domestic politics. These contain an explicit guidance on how an enquiry into Thai foreign policy within regional diplomacy might proceed. To evaluate the various possibilities, the problem must be considered within the framework of the international relations discipline as a whole.

This study proceeds as follows. The first section briefly examines the challenges of Thailand's contentious power in regional cooperation from the viewpoint of being a small state. The following section advances our own investigation of Thailand's diplomacy in regional cooperation. It chronologically illustrates that Thailand has promoted its constructive roles in ASEAN. The final section demonstrates implications of Thailand's self-perception in regional context towards ASEAN.

The challenges of Thailand's role in regional level as a small state

There are many significant debates which argue about the definition of small states. The characteristics of small states can be examined by 'size', 'rank concordance' towards refining complex small-state definitional controversies, and geo-political attributes. Although there are many criteria to be able to explain the features of small states, it has not been possible to truly explain the complex repertoires in understanding of the role of small states which have challenged the status quo of global and regional prosperity and development. Most accounts start from the idea that small states lack the influence, manoeuvrability and independence of large states. For instance, 'small physical size' in relation to geographical size, as well as the size of the economy, the military, the population, and the scale of their operations have been mentioned (Hänggi 1998: 81; Henrikson 2001: 56). However, an investigation of the size of small states shows a remarkable gap in the criteria for analysing 'smallness', and this might appear to be more of a questionable interpretation, rather than a complete definition.

From a practical point of view, the concept of power based on constitutional capabilities in international relations is appropriate to consider rather than the physical attributes – the 'size' or the 'rank'. A consideration of size no longer explains the extent of the influence of small states. Instead of investigating the questions of which countries are small states, the current debate, which throws up a number of proposals for a working definition, can be viewed as an inquiry into the power that small states exercise, on both international and regional levels (Neumann and Gstöhl 2006: 6).

Based on power dimension, some scholars such as Browning (2006: 670), Rothstein (1968: 29), and Vital (1971: 9), define small states as having a 'small amount of power' – in other words, 'powerlessness'. They believe that states cannot play a decisive role, especially in terms of their security or economic capacity to counter other states. This interpretation of the power of small states suggests that a realist paradigm lends a negative perspective to the role of small states. Undoubtedly, 'small states are nowadays referred to as small powers'

(Neumann and Gstöhl 2006: 4). However, the effective power of small states, within political, economic and security areas, is strongly emerging. Sutton's study (2011: 147) illustrates a relevant analytical point regarding economic adjustment that suggests that small states can deal with their vulnerability in terms of changing the global trade scheme. In addition, small states have increased their strengths by boosting their own agendas towards collaborating with international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Lee and Smith 2010: 1094). Regional cooperation is another option for small states to raise their resilience as evidenced in participation in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union (EU), and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) (Browning 2006; Cooper and Shaw 2009).

It would be necessary to approach the question empirically for Thailand, regarding the significance of its status and roles in regional level. Although the state may be small by international standards, particularly in its relationship with greater powers, it may be larger in regional terms. So, attention will also be given to Thailand's influence in the regional context regarding the exercising of its power, overcoming the disparity of power, including stressing its policy-making towards strengthening its regional resilience.

While it occupies such a position in international politics, Thailand remains a small state, meaning that it is a state with limited assets in terms of wealth, power, and attention. Its status as a small state suggests that Thailand's diplomacy would be particularly likely to be shaped by external forces (Deutsch and Kaplan 1970). This is particularly the case in situations where Thailand could not act alone to overcome its vulnerability. In this case, it can be implied that a small state needs to face up to an unequal alliance with a greater power like the US; or needs to bandwagon with another greater power like the PRC. For example, external pressures from the US and China shaped the form of Thai foreign policy towards regional security in the 1980s as policymakers sought to respond to the American security umbrella and Sino-Thai alliance (Stern 2009: 2).

In response to such pressures, it can be suggested that Thailand respond by "bending or adjusting". This is likely true of many small states that would have to bend or adjust their policies to accommodate the actions and interests of great powers (Morrison & Suhrke 1978: 9-11). Interestingly, the idea of "bending or adjusting" matches with what is thought of within Thailand as the traditional Thai model of diplomacy, known as "bending with the wind", referring to having a solid root, but being flexible enough to bend whichever way the wind blows in order to survive itself (Kislenko 2002). In this case, Thailand thus

appeared as a small state facing considerable external pressure. Thailand would revise their goals and policies by responding to forces outside by adapting itself to the forces. Thailand can act alone or make a significant impact on the global system. The state is still regarded by others as small, due to its limited capacity. So, the states may work to enhance their power to overcome the weaknesses.

In this case, it is unworthy of debating the physical attributes – the ‘size’ or the ‘rank’ of small states because they may not always be seen as an overwhelming problem, such as an optimistic definition. Thus, we can view that Thailand has engaged with many regional and global forum, such as its involvement in the ASEAN, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Nevertheless, like other small developing states, Thailand has limits in exercising its power and defining its role compared with larger states. Despite such challenges, Thailand has consistently attempted to increase its pivotal role as an important player in the functional aspects of regionalism such as in politics, economy and security.

Chronological history of Thailand’s diplomacy in regional cooperation

The widely observed deepening theoretical concept of taking states as the main drivers of regionalism has prompted much scholarly debate since the end of World War II. Scholars who believe in a liberal intergovernmental paradigm argue that state governments perform as the main gate keeper to preserve their domestic interests by participating in regional politics (Moravcsik 1991; Moravcsik 1998). Similarly, in the theoretical aspect of regionalism, more narrowly, the concept refers to a specific regional project, and it can be defined that states become the actors behind this political commitment. As defined in Payne and Gambles research, “regionalism is a state-led or states-led project designed to reorganise a particular regional space along defined economic and political lines” (Payne and Gamble, 1996: 17). So, the main contention with this regard has concerned the extent to which states are the masters of an integrating process and how states might gain strength from inter-state frameworks.

More promising, then, is the rise of Thailand’s diplomacy in regional cooperation by examining parts of historically specific roles in which Thailand has promoted self-perception through ASEAN. There are three relevant functions which can be examined in the overall assessment of Thailand’s position within ASEAN, these being institution-building, the regional economy, and regional security threats, which demonstrate the transitional process of

Thailand's diplomatic power in Southeast Asian regionalism. These three functions are described below.

Institution-building

The dynamic of Thai foreign policy, especially the transition of decision-making process, have influence the development of ASEAN institution building. In the early stage, the administrative role of Thailand in ASEAN was practical, due to the consistency of decision-makers. Snitwongse (1997: 88) illustrates that the continuity in the Thai Foreign Minister role, occupied by Thanat Khoman more than ten years (20 February 1959 – 17 November 1971), provided stable decision-making through promotion of effective ASEAN cooperation, such as the support for impeding the Communist expansion. Moreover, the policy related to Thailand's continual expansion of its role in regional cooperation has proven useful. For example, a negotiation of the Sabah issue – the conflict between Malaysia and the Philippines - was achieved, due to a beneficial role that Thailand played as a mediator for reducing the conflict among members (Severino 2006: 2). As stated by Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister, "Bangkok played a very big part in bringing us together, and Thailand is very keen to expand regional cooperation" (Antolik 1990: 17). For institutional building towards the establishment of ASEAN, it is evident that Thanat and Adam Malik of Indonesia worked together. This organisational building led to the Bangkok Declaration eventually that resulted from the meeting in Bangkok on 2-8 August 1967 (Snitwongse 1997: 88).

The function of developing democratic rule within the ASEAN framework has become a focus of Thailand. In the case of Cambodia, Thailand offered a practical way in bringing about reconciliation towards the process of democratic development for Cambodia during early the 1990s (Snitwongse 2001: 196). Thailand has also pursued involvement with the functional membership of ASEAN, in terms of the competent decision-making policy in ASEAN expansion. Kraft (2000: 461) states that Thailand acted as the key factor to mobilise the strength of ASEAN enlargement, especially through the admission of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV group). In addition, Thailand's contribution to ASEAN has been continuously active. It is evident from a government report that during Thailand's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2008-2009, Thailand was fully committed to the effective implementation of the ASEAN Charter, which is vital to the ASEAN community-building process (Ministry of Thai Foreign Affairs 2012).

Regional economy

An important aspect of strengthening and advancing the position and role of Thailand in ASEAN is the regional economic growth. The concept of decreasing powerlessness vis-a-vis economic influence initially has compelled Thailand to overcome its vulnerability through advancing its regional activity. When a state deems that the ability to influence others and exercise power is low, regional involvement will become an important tool to help the state raise its power.

The first scheme contributing to strong ASEAN economic integration was the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), proposed by the Thai Prime Minister, Anand Panyarachun in 1992 (Stubbs 2000: 304; Narine 2002: 128). This plan, which ensued as a result of the AFTA scheme, led to the economic involvement, in terms of a cooperative wider grouping for trade relations, of external powers, such as Australia, China, Japan, and the US. In 1993, the powerful growth of AFTA was demonstrated when the Thai Deputy Prime Minister in the Chuan administration, Supachai Panitchpakdi, (September 1992-July 1995) identified regional linkages involved in AFTA and the Closer Economic Relations (CER) agreement (Narine 2002: 129; Nagai 2001: 6-7).

More recently, Thailand has promoted the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) with the aim of reducing the economic and development gap between ASEAN member countries. This is demonstrated in the Thai government's announcement: "Thailand stands ready to take a leading role in conducting the [economic] development cooperation with other countries both in bilateral and trilateral forms" (Thailand International Cooperation Agencies 2013). In supporting the Thai government's campaign of the AEC, Chongkittavorn (2014) maintained that Thailand would be able to conduct better action plans to fulfil two AEC strategies, particularly equitable economic development and integration with the global economy. Additionally, in responding to the AEC concept, the Prayuth government simultaneously promoted Thailand's Special Economic Zones through the East-West Corridors which became an essential concern (Manawapat 2015).

Regional security threats

Furthermore, in the regional security scheme, Thailand has followed the ASEAN approach, which refers to regional independence without any interference from outsiders. Thailand acted as a follower in promoting the belief in self-reliance of ASEAN to counter with great powers; "this strategy manipulates international balances of powers and dependence in order to benefit ASEAN" (Li Choy Chong 1981). The characteristics of ASEAN security cooperation can be identified in the form of 'loose cooperation', having neither a

conventional collective defense nor a collective security function (Indrof 1992: 88). Political negotiation becomes a tool among ASEAN member to solve regional disturbances instead. Moreover, Thailand has underpinned ASEAN's non-interference principle – regional independence without any interference from outsiders. As Sukumbhand Paribatra, the former Deputy Foreign Minister of Thailand asserted, “We [ASEAN members] have always said that we don't want other countries, especially superpowers, to interfere in the region. The time has come to show that we can solve the region's problems ourselves with the cooperation of countries outside the region” (Dupont 2000: 168-69).

Thailand has managed traditional security threats by promoting the strength of ASEAN security, collaborating with its neighbour states, as well as bargaining with external powers. For example, the need for maintaining border security alongside Myanmar became an important agenda for Thailand's security policy development under the principle of constructive engagement in the Chatchai government (Buszynski 1998: 292-94). In addition, during the Chuan government, Thailand became a valuable partner in accordance with United Nations peacekeeping resolutions to participate in INTERFET. Thailand sent the largest number of troops, similar to Australia, to operate in the East Timor crisis in order to support a higher standard of international and regional security cooperation (Haacke 2003: 68).

Additionally, maritime security has been a focus of Thailand's regional security cooperation since the 1990s. Thailand has responded to ASEAN Security Community which is one of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community to be realized by 2020. Evidence from the ASEAN Regional Forum on Maritime Security memoir (2004) illustrates that Thailand has actively engaged with ASEAN's mechanism to fight against transnational crimes by sharing and exchanging information on maritime security within ASEAN members and dialogue partners.

Thailand's self-perception in regional cooperation towards ASEAN

In addressing the concept of self-perception in policymakers, ideas and beliefs have been given as reasons to identify how policymakers conceive their policy objectives. Keohane and Goldstein (1993) stated that ideas and belief can cause state action. This leads to opening new paths for understanding the perception of foreign policy-making of actors on regional politics. However, rather than consider the distinct roles of individual policymakers within the Thai system of government, and rather than treating “ideas/beliefs” as private motives of individual human beings, we should concern about the concept of “policymakers' perceptions” as the publicly-stated perceptions of government.

In explaining Thailand's perception towards foreign policy-making, the Thai governments are at the centre between the domestic and external levels. Their roles represent a challenge to foreign policy analysts. When states define their foreign policies, policymakers who are individuals and groups representing the state are the first and foremost players in making decisions. Their differing actions can have a significant impact on domestic domains or international spheres, depending on the power that is vested in the states. Scholars must be able to demonstrate the influence of policymakers on states' foreign policies in both domestic settings and the international environment. Different purposive actions of policymakers can cause variation in the state's foreign policies. This thus leads us to consider that Thailand's constructive roles in ASEAN have been reinforced by both domestic settings and the international environment.

The role of Thailand in ASEAN historically began in 1967 through its engagement, as one of the original ASEAN founders, with establishing this regional institution. In addition, Thailand has attempted to build up internal relationships with other ASEAN members, emphasising the protection of national interests through regional strength. Moreover, its relations with external powers, such as the U.S., China, and Japan have included the formation of regional dialogues. It can be primarily analysed, in this study, that Thailand's active roles in ASEAN have provided significant prospect in the endurance of its leadership in this regional framework. Thailand has proposed initiatives in three areas – institution-building, the economy, and security with varying role positions such as an initiator, a follower and a mediator. Seeking to advance its constructive roles by becoming involved with the framework of institutional organisations, and in bilateral or multilateral cooperation within ASEAN can help us shed light on Thailand's self-perception towards regional cooperation. Amitav Acharya, the UNESCO Chair in Transnational Challenges and Governance and a Distinguished Professor of International Relations at American University in Washington, D.C maintains that "Thailand can emerge as a major player in injecting ASEAN with a new sense of purpose and vitality to ensure its continuing relevance. This remains a major challenge for Thai governments. It's time for Bangkok to lead again" (Thai Embassy in Washington DC 2015). Consequently, Thailand's self-perception towards the politics of regional game has inspired itself to improve Thailand's foreign policy behaviour throughout regional agendas. To achieve these goals, Thailand needs to secure and seek competitive advantages.

Conclusion

The challenges of Thailand's contentious power in regional cooperation from the viewpoint of being a small state has been an essential investigation. One might question how to examine Thailand's performance in Southeast Asian regional cooperation regarding the significance of its status and roles at the regional level. Imperative roles of Thailand have been influential in the regional context regarding the exercising of its power and overcoming the disparity of power, including stressing its policy-making towards strengthening its regional resilience. This can prove that states that are small by international standards, particularly in their relationship with greater powers, may be relatively larger on a regional scale. Moreover, Thailand's chronology illustrates that self-perception on regional diplomacy occurs via promoting its agenda in ASEAN. Besides, it can be evidenced that Thailand illustrates its self-identification as a regional leader by playing pivotal roles in regional cooperation through the engagement of ASEAN institutional functions, regional economy and security in both domestic settings and the international environment.

There are some recommendations for further study. A significant debate regarding whether Thailand's decision-making processes have been perceived to favour the preservation of its national interests through regional stability rather than solely benefiting the ASEAN institution need to be considered. Furthermore, even though Thailand's activism in regional economic cooperation seemed proactive, a range of conflicting interests become the focus of an important discussion - either prioritising national interests or private interests, without consideration of the regional benefit. This directs us to reconsider internal factors, especially about Thai domestic politics, which is a challenge in analysing Thailand's decision-making policy. Moreover, the ongoing political turbulence in Thailand has limited its full implementations, in terms of Thailand's capacity to strengthen its position in the region. Rather than arranging the military defence by itself, joining with external powers in the form of ARF is valuable in advancing Thailand's position by the sharing of expectations of cooperative security among members. However, the influence of great powers on Thailand's decision-making, especially the US and China, becomes an interesting debate to be additionally investigated.

In conclusion, the effectiveness of Thailand's leadership in regional forums has obviously developed, such as in ASEAN institution-building, economy, and security. Its regional role has frequently changed, due to its domestic factors, regional systematic governance, and external influences. The role of Thailand in ASEAN is likely to be successful if Thailand can exert its effective capacity to improve the regional function as a valuable mechanism in the global arena. Although Thailand has been a good supporter of the regional economy within ASEAN, it might be seen as a wicked neighbour, or regional member, if the state focuses heavily on gaining national interests, rather than regional benefits. By doing so, its regional position could diminish.

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