

Hedging by Default?

Thai Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific Century

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Short bio

Dr. Jittipat Poonkham (PhD Aberystwyth University; MPhil Oxford University) is Associate Professor of International Relations, Associate Dean for Academic and International Affairs, and Director of International Studies Program in the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University.

His research interests include international relations theories, great power politics and security in the Indo-Pacific region, and Thai foreign policy. Dr. Poonkham is the author of *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy: The Politics of Thai Détente with Russia and China* (ANU Press 2022) and co-editor of *International Relations as a Discipline in Thailand: Theorizing and Sub-fields* (Routledge 2019).

Abstract

China's assertive rise triggers existential and discursive anxieties in the Indo-Pacific since 2017. The US rebalances, using strategies like institutional balancing (minilateralism) and discursive balancing (free and open Indo-Pacific). Thailand, a long-time US ally, hesitates to counterbalance China. Post-2014 coup, Thailand's military junta aligned with China due to necessity, persisting post-2019 elections. This talk reevaluates Thai foreign policy under Prayut Chan-o-cha, suggesting default hedging, not strategic hedging. Various agencies pursue diplomacy without a coherent strategy. The talk unfolds in three parts. First, it examines Thailand's reluctance to embrace the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, stemming from differing threat perceptions and bureaucratic politics. It then discusses Thailand's absence of a comprehensive Indo-Pacific narrative and its default hedging via military, economic, and ideational aspects. The talk concludes by exploring the post-Prayut era's impact on Thai foreign policy.