



**No Longer Under
the American Wing?
The Thai Monarchy in Global
Affairs**

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Abstract: During the Cold War period, the Thai monarchy, under the reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1946–2016), was recognised for its role in stabilising Thailand, which in turn was crucial to stem the tide of communism in Southeast Asia. Bhumibol’s active diplomacy was a part of the political alliance between the Thai monarchy and the United States. Together, they closely cooperated to confront a variety of threats against the monarchy, from political opponents at home to communists across the borders. For the United States, allying with the Thai monarchy fulfilled its security mission in Southeast Asia. But the end of the Cold War diminished this political alliance. The arrival of King Vajiralongkorn in 2016 and his seeming disengagement in diplomacy suggest that international support for the throne has become redundant. Vajiralongkorn, set free from Cold War obligations, has been increasingly detached from foreign affairs because the main focus of the throne has been solely on internal security. Vajiralongkorn’s position reaffirms that political alliance is today irrelevant because it no longer serves the palace’s domestic purposes.

Keywords: Bhumibol Adulyadej; China; Monarchy; Political Alliance; Thailand; United States; Vajiralongkorn.



Within the realm of Southeast Asian politics, the Thai monarchy once played an important role as a trusted ally of the United States.¹ During the Cold War, the monarchy assisted the United States in shaping the regional political landscape. This role, in turn, served to strengthen the position of the monarchy at home, with the American backing of the throne against domestic challenges. King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) was crowned in 1946. Over a decade later, with the keen support of the military and the foreign ministry, Bhumibol was able to exert his influence on Thai foreign policy making. Altogether, they wove an intimate alliance with the United States intended to contain the threat of communism. Successive Thai governments, as a result,

¹ Thai words and names are transliterated according to the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS), except in cases where widely recognised alternative spellings (e.g., King Bhumibol Adulyadej) are used for consistency with common English-language usage.

actively formulated a pro-American, pro-monarchy, and anti-communist policy. Since the monarchy was reinvented as an embodiment of the nation, communists, real or imagined, were depicted as a number-one enemy of the nation and automatically became an enemy of the monarchy. Through this depiction, the Thai state placed the monarchy at the heart of Thailand’s foreign policy. This allowed the military, as defender of the monarchy, to claim a political and economic role. Defending the monarchy was therefore a top foreign policy agenda. Befriending the United States was not merely a foreign policy option, but an imperative factor safeguarding both the monarchy and the nation at the same time. The article traces the history of the international engagements of King Bhumibol to exhibit his influence in foreign affairs. It then examines the shifting international role of the Thai monarchy, now under the early reign of King Vajiralongkorn, who has become a rather reclusive monarch in the diplomatic world.

An Ally with the United States

The condition of the Cold War prescribed a major role for the Thai monarchy in managing security crisis in the neighbourhood. Because the Thai alliance was crucial for the United States in the war on communism in the region, and because the monarchy was considered a symbol of Thai independence, King Bhumibol became a natural and strategic choice for the consolidation of bilateral ties between Washington and Bangkok.² Daniel Fineman asserts that the Americans demanded much more from Thailand than simple friendship. They expected outspoken support for the United States in the diplomatic arena.³ Robert D. Murphy, Acting American Secretary of State in 1957, saw King Bhumibol as a symbol of Thai unity and stability who could defend the American interests in Thailand.⁴ Simply put, the Thai domestic political situation surrounding the position of the monarchy determined the relationship between Bhumibol and the United States. To revive the declining royal institution caused by the abolition of absolute monarchy in 1932, Bhumibol enthusiastically sought the recognition of his throne by the United States. From 1932 to 1957, Thai politics was coloured by intense competitions for power among different factions. During this period, the royalists sought to regain their power by oscillating their alliance as well as inimicality with one faction against the other—in this context, between that of Pridi Banomyong and

² Chachavalponpun, “The Rich, the Powerful and the Banana Man,” 250.

³ Fineman, *A Special Relationship*, 261.

⁴ Chaiching, *Khunsuk Sakdina Lae Phraya Insee*, 258.

that of Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram.⁵ Both Pridi and Phibun were members of the *khanaratsadon*, or the People’s Party, which overthrew the absolute monarchy.⁶ Although at first attempting to strip the monarchy of power, Pridi chose to reconcile with the royalists to consolidate his political position. But the reconciliation proved fragile due to the lack of mutual trust. Pridi served as prime minister when King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII, 1935–1946) was found dead in his bedroom in the Boromphiman Throne Hall.⁷ The royalists grabbed this opportunity, in collaboration with Phibun, to delegitimise Pridi.⁸ In 1947, the military staged a coup against the government of Thawan Thamrongnawasawat, who was a political ally of Pridi. That coup marked the end of Pridi’s political career and the return of Phibun to politics.⁹

Phibun became prime minister for the second time in 1948.¹⁰ In the aftermath of Pridi’s departure, the new focus was on the conflict between Phibun and the royalists. The political dynamic shifted as Thailand entered the Cold War. Although initially the United States did not support the Phibun government, the beginning of the Cold War and the United States’ apprehension of the communists swallowing up Southeast Asia, based on the domino theory, compelled Washington to construct a working relationship with Phibun. In the period that followed, Phibun gained the United States’ support, particularly in terms of weapons, intended to combat a communist threat. But these weapons were then also used to quell Phibun’s political rivals. Acknowledging the immense role of the United States in the Thai domestic politics, other political factions—including Phibun’s rivals and the royalists—all reached out to the United States for its recognition. Bhumibol, a young king who succeeded to the throne following the death of his brother Ananda, was then studying in Switzerland. Upon returning to Thailand to resume his kingship in 1951, Bhumibol slowly utilised his personal friendship with the United States as a way to counteract the power of Phibun, a position encouraged by the royalists and Phibun’s rivals. He was well acquainted

⁵ Winichakul, *Rath Racha Chat*, 105.

⁶ Kesboonchoo-Mead, *Rabob Somburana Yasitthirat*, 266. Note that, in Thailand, first names are more commonly used than family names to refer to individuals, hence “Pridi” rather than “Banomyong.”

⁷ King Ananda was found dead inside the palace on 9 June 1946. His death has remained a taboo subject in Thailand supposedly because Bhumibol was suspected of having a part in his untimely departure. See Chachavalpongpon, *Love and Death of King Ananda Mahidol of Thailand*.

⁸ After the election in 1946, Pridi resigned from the premiership. In 1949, he left Thailand and never returned. First, he exiled himself in China. In 1970, he relocated to France and lived there until he died in 1983.

⁹ Chaiching, “The Monarchy and the Royalist Movement,” 165–167.

¹⁰ Phibun served as a prime minister for the first time from 1938 to 1944, and again from 1948 to 1957.

with all the American ambassadors in Bangkok and even sent Colonel Phraya Srivisanvaja (Thiangliang Hoontrakun), a privy councillor, to meet with President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the United States in 1954 as his personal envoy.¹¹ Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who toppled the Phibun government in 1957, openly adopted the tactic of promoting the monarchy to win the support from both the royalists and the United States. In the viewpoint of the United States, the increasingly unpopular Phibun regime would not bring political stability of Thailand, which would not be beneficial to the United States’ anti-communist strategy in the region. This American viewpoint led to the establishment of the “triangle of power,” consisting of the United States, the monarchy and the military, which served as an important structure of power in Thai politics throughout the Cold War period.¹²

Under Sarit’s despotic regime, Bhumibol’s political position was consolidated, particularly on the diplomatic front. This was most evident when the king embarked on numerous world tours at the beginning of his reign, including two visits to the United States in 1960 and 1967. These world tours were instrumental both to formulate a royally focused foreign policy against communism and to legitimise royal power in the Thai domestic politics.¹³ With his charm and charisma, Bhumibol emerged as an ambassadorial magnet connecting Thailand with the international community, through pomp, magnanimity, and national pride. Because of Bhumibol’s weighty role in diplomacy, it is undeniable that Thailand’s Cold War foreign policy in the post-Phibun era was considerably influenced by the palace. For the most part, the military and the foreign ministry—although occasionally in competition over the domination of foreign policy—agreed that the monarchy ultimately held the key for the trajectory of Thai foreign relations.¹⁴

Shifting Domestic and International Environment

The end of the communist insurgency in the early 1980s and the eventual end of the Cold War later in that decade, however, drastically transformed the role of the Thai monarchy in global affairs. King Bhumibol’s last international trip took place in 1994, as he visited Laos to inaugurate the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, signalling the sunset of his active diplomacy. The immediate post-Cold War international system echoed the early post-Second World War period when the United States was the only unchallenged superpower. But the new

¹¹ Chaiching, *Khunsuk Sakdina Lae Phraya Insee*, 268.

¹² Hewison, “Black Site,” 555; also see Kanthic, “Nayobai Tangprathet Thai Nai Songkramyen,” 46.

¹³ Kasetsiri, *Thailand*, 228.

¹⁴ Funston, “The Role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Thailand,” 236.

millennium, marked by the war on terror and the rise of China, brought about a new world order based on multipolarity, contesting American hegemony. The shift in international politics further led to a serious question regarding the relevance of the Thai monarchy in global affairs. The Cold War-type alliance became obsolete. There were no more communists who could be used as a pretext to sustain both the monarchy-United States alliance and the royal hegemony within the Thai domestic politics. This coincided with the growing disinterest of the United States in Southeast Asia and the looming end of the authoritative reign of Bhumibol. Hospitalised since 2009, Bhumibol was politically incapacitated. Around this time, Thailand fell into relentless political conflicts, caused by a power struggle between the palace and a new political faction led by Thaksin Shinawatra, whose party won elections in 2001 and 2005 with overwhelming majorities. Preserving the royal hegemony, the military toppled the Thaksin government in 2006 in a military coup, with the tacit support of the weakened monarchy.¹⁵ Thaksin was identified as a new threat to the monarchy, replacing the communists of yesteryears. Essentially, the Thaksin threat signified the monarchy's disdain for an elected power. Thaksin was considered outside of the royal network. A billionaire himself, he was not only politically powerful, but also financially well-endowed. Thus, his emergence also threatened other institutions supporting the monarchy, including the political power and wealth of the Thai military.¹⁶ The political situation worsened following another successful coup in 2014 ousting Prime Minister Yingluck, Thaksin's sister. In both coups against the Shinawatras, the United States government tacitly supported the monarchy, its traditional ally, despite the fact that this support compromised its supposed agenda of promoting democracy.¹⁷ According to its constitution, the United States was obliged to impose sanctions against Thailand for overthrowing elected governments.¹⁸ But these sanctions were insubstantial. The United States' approach inevitably brought about a dilemma: searching to renew its relationship with Thailand but failing to shake off its Cold War mindset which prioritised their narrow interest in the monarchy. Aggravating the dilemma was the need of the United States to maintain its ties with the Thai military and bureaucratic elites and to defend American business interests. Here, the role of China must not be overlooked. China has served as an important balancing actor in the Thai-American

¹⁵ Winichakul, "The Monarchy and Anti-Monarchy," 100.

¹⁶ Unchanam, *Royal Capitalism*, 160–162.

¹⁷ Emma Chanlett-Avery, Ben Dolan, and Kirt Smith, "Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations," *Congressional Research Service*, version 9, 11 September 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10253>.

¹⁸ Weatherbee, "Southeast Asia in 2006," 12.

relations. The close friendship between the Thai monarchy and the Chinese leadership further complicated the United States' position vis-à-vis Thailand. This could explain why the United States was not fully supportive of the democratic agenda of the anti-monarchy red shirts, for fear that it could further drive the monarchy into the arms of China.¹⁹ Other actors in Thailand also forged good ties with Beijing, including the Thai military and big conglomerates. The United States' dilemma offered an opportunity for China to firm up its influence in Thailand. The United States' inconsistent position led to a new perception of Thai officials who perceived China as a more trustworthy partner than the United States.²⁰

Bhumibol passed away in October 2016 against the backdrop of the rising Sino-American rivalry. The advent of the new king, Vajiralongkorn (Rama X), suggested a bleak future for the role of the Thai monarchy on the international stage and its relations with the United States. Unlike Bhumibol, Vajiralongkorn has earned an unsavoury reputation, both in Thailand and beyond, as evident in the global media's reports regarding his eccentric lifestyle.²¹ Besides, Vajiralongkorn has expressed little interest in foreign relations, even behaving undiplomatically while residing or visiting overseas. The world of multipolarity today has introduced a new reality in which an exclusive alliance has become outmoded. International recognition, indispensable for the stability of the throne in the past, is now redundant. Vajiralongkorn has been largely acquitted from diplomatic responsibilities once required by the Cold War politics.

Conceptual Framework

This article argues that the Thai monarchy's dynamic engagements in global affairs were specially conditioned by its alliance with the United States. Washington opened the door for the Thai monarchy to vigorously partake in global politics. The monarchy-United States alliance was predominantly based on a shared objective of defending their common interest. In the particular context of the Cold War, their common interest was to contain the threat of communism, although communism did not mean the same for both at all times. It is

¹⁹ "Red shirts" loosely refer to a movement of pro-democracy Thais. They originated in the 2006 coup that overthrew Thaksin: first as an anti-coup force, then as a pro-Thaksin group. They identified themselves as red, as opposed to royalist yellow. Yellow is the colour of Monday which is the birthday of King Bhumibol. The division between red and yellow shirts was used to explain the colour-coded politics of Thailand.

²⁰ Peera Charoenvattananukul, "In China's Pocket: A Misguided Thai Foreign Policy," *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 32 (March 2022), <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-32/in-chinas-pocket-a-misguided-thai-foreign-policy/>.

²¹ "Thailand's King Vajiralongkorn: Turning back the time," *New Mandala*, 27 July 2020, <https://www.newmandala.org/thailands-king-vajiralongkorn-turning-back-time/>.

important to emphasise that although the nature of the monarchy-United States alliance was exclusive, this alliance was somewhat inclusive within a war of ideological conflict which defined the international system of the time. The end of the Cold War hugely affected the monarchy-United States alliance and hence the monarchy's position in foreign affairs. The disappearance of a common interest—in this case the containment of communism—challenged the alliance and limited the global role of the Thai monarchy. The new global environment unlocked obligations and responsibilities of the Thai monarchy both in its relations with the United States and with the international community. Although the emerging rivalry between the United States and China is currently shaping the world's state of affairs, it is not the ideological conflict of the past. Today's China is not yesteryear's communists. Moreover, the waning of the Thai monarchy under King Vajiralongkorn occurs at a critical juncture in the international politics. Vajiralongkorn is neither ready, nor willing, to cast China as his enemy in order to justify his continued alliance with the United States. Today, domestic challenges for the throne are different from those in the Cold War. The Thai monarchy no longer finds its security in an exclusive alliance with the United States.

The analytical framework for this study is based on the necessity, and now lack, of the political alliance through which the Thai monarchy has engaged with the United States. It is not uncommon for any state, including the United States, to forge an exclusive alliance with powerful institutions, even powerful political figures, in another nation-state as a prerequisite to the strengthening of an overall bilateral relationship at the national level. The reasons behind the United States' exclusive engagements with particular foreign institutions could derive from either evolving domestic political situations in such foreign states, or personal predilections of American leadership vis-à-vis such foreign institutions. The Thai monarchy increasingly represented a powerful institution within Thailand from the late 1950s onwards; King Bhumibol in particular had a personal link with the United States as his birthplace. The pattern of the United States' exclusive alliances with foreign actors can be seen elsewhere, as in the United States' special ties with Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko, Indonesia's Suharto, and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.²² These cases exemplify the way in which the United States developed exclusive alliances with the key institutions/actors to solidify overall bilateral ties with their countries.

²² Carothers and Feldman, “Examining US Relations with Authoritarian Countries,” 3. The American President Joe Biden met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh in July 2022, bringing an end to frosty relations caused by the 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Alliances have long been a central concept in the study of international relations. This particular theoretical stance assumes that states (or actors within the states) forge alliances with like-minded partners to safeguard their interests or to promote what are perceived to be common objectives.²³ Political alliances are necessary, particularly among weak states which have sought to augment their position in the international system in coalitions with strong states, ultimately for their own survival.²⁴ This view of survival, either of the nation or of the regime, guaranteed by political alliances, reflects the influence of a realist approach in the interpretation of international politics. In this realist approach, enemies are identified to justify political collations and measures against those enemies.²⁵ From the early days of the Cold War onwards, the Thai monarchy embraced the inherent value of an alliance with the United States for the defence of its own security. The alliance provided the Thai monarchy with much-needed support, from the backing of military regimes (except Phibun’s)—both in the form of finance and of weaponry, in the name of protecting the Thai nation—to validating communism as a threat to the throne. The construction of the communist enemy legitimised the monarchy-United States alliance throughout much of the Cold War period. It is however imperative to note that the term “political alliance,” in the context of monarchy-United States relations, is neither official nor legal, but nothing more than a *de facto* relationship between the two parties sharing common interests. This is to avoid confusion with legal and official alliances between the Thai military and the United States. The Thai military and the United States have been defence-treaty allies since the signature of the Southeast Asian Collective Defence Treaty in 1954, the origin of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Decades later, the military alliance was further strengthened by the joint military exercise under the codename “Cobra Gold” in 1982 and by the nomination of Thailand as a United States’ major non-NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) ally in 2003.²⁶ The military alliance between the Thai army and the United States has continued to function to date.

Additionally, during the Cold War period, an intensifying royal hegemony redefined Thai politics, leading to a blossoming of the relationship between the monarchy and the military. The two institutions were once strange bedfellows, given that the military overthrew the absolute monarchy in 1932. The newfound partnership between the monarchy

²³ Hussain, “Alliances in International Politics,” 51.

²⁴ See Wright, *A Study of War*.

²⁵ Niou and Ordeshook, “Alliances in Anarchic International System.”

²⁶ Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet*, 91.

and the army led to the revival of the royal hegemony which transpired in tandem with American efforts to place King Bhumibol at the core of the Thai-United States alliance, fuelled by the ideological conflict of the Cold War.²⁷ Aside from the military, the Thai foreign ministry also performed a crucial role in the Bhumibol era as an instrument both to promote royal hegemony on a global stage and to exploit the monarchy in achieving foreign policy purposes. In the pre-1932 period, the royal family had its hands firmly on Thai foreign policy because its members dominated chief positions in foreign affairs. The post of foreign minister was mostly occupied by members of the royal family, from Chao Phraya Bhanuwong Maha Kosathibodi (1871–1881), through Prince Devawongse Varopakarn (1881–1884), to Prince Devawongse Varothai (1924–1932). Thai diplomats reported directly to the king in regard to international relations. Subsequent periods saw members of the upper class taking charge of the foreign ministry, which has since earned a reputation of being a “playground for aristocrats.”²⁸ Their monopoly on foreign policy explained the monarchy-focused foreign policy. The Thai foreign ministry was tasked to ensure that foreign relations were to be based on international respect for the monarchy, international security to safeguard the monarchy, and international recognition for the position of the monarchy at home and abroad—tasks that were perfectly in sync with the monarchy-United States alliance, which prioritised the role of Bhumibol in foreign affairs.²⁹ Thai ambassadors are representatives of the king before the nation. As in Britain and Japan, they are traditionally granted an audience with the king before departing to station in embassies overseas.³⁰ One of the main functions of the Thai embassies is to receive royal visits, a process which is extremely intricate as it represents the nation’s pride and indicates the state of a relationship with the host country.³¹

But at the end of the Cold War, the evaporation of ideological conflict broke down the political alliance. From around the new century, the new multipolar world redesigned the international system to become more multidimensional and superseded the Cold War type of alliance which once bound the Thai monarchy and the United States together. If a political alliance is defined by common interests, the question—now that Thailand is under King

²⁷ Handley, *The King Never Smiles*, 89–90.

²⁸ Chachavalpongpun, *Reinventing Thailand*, 70.

²⁹ Anantasirikiat, “The Evolution of Thai-Style Public Diplomacy,” 99.

³⁰ “Recordbreaking Reign,” *Diplomat Magazine*, 1 September 2015, <https://diplomatmagazine.com/recordbreaking-reign/>. Also see “Audiences and Teas with Ambassadors Taking up their Posts,” *The Imperial Household Agency*, <https://www.kunaicho.go.jp/e-about/shinzen/taishi.html>.

³¹ Chachavalpongpun, “On His Majesty’s Service,” 34.

Vajiralongkorn—is whether there exists such interests to underpin the alliance. The Thai case is somewhat comparable to that of Iran. During the early part of the Cold War, United States-Iranian ties were amicable. Washington dealt with one ruler, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who was enthroned in 1941. The United States’ exclusive alliance with the Iranian royal family came to an end in 1979, following the Islamic revolution which led to the shah’s overthrow and eventually to his death a year later.³² The changing international environment simply proved that political alliances are not necessarily permanent.³³ Some states or institutions no longer need allies to survive, so the Thai monarchy does not need the United States to secure its throne. Likewise, the way in which the United States now perceives the Thai monarchy is different from its perception during the Cold War. The United States may have continued to acknowledge the importance of the Thai monarchy in its bilateral relationship. However, the acknowledgement may have been merely symbolic, as it offered a veneer of legitimacy for the United States to engage with coup governments while the head of the state—the monarchy—did not change.³⁴ The importance of the monarchy for the United States, today, does not go beyond this symbolic relationship because of the absence of common interests between the two parties. Additionally, the changing faces of enemies, from external to internal, provide an answer to why the Thai monarchy might also be able to disregard American support in the form of old alliances. Washington has come to terms with the fact that King Vajiralongkorn, who has yet to capitalise on an American partnership, played a role in the decline of their alliance.

Bhumibol: An American King

The expansion of Western colonial powers into Southeast Asia in the mid-nineteenth century created new pressures on King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851–1868) to engage more openly with foreigners. This process witnessed Siam (as Thailand was then called) concluding a number

³² Ismael, Ismael, and Perry, *Government and Politics of the Contemporary Middle East*, 521; also see Shaul Bakhash, *The US and Iran in Historical Perspective*, Foreign Policy Research Institute (28 September 2009), <https://www.fpri.org/article/2009/09/the-u-s-and-iran-in-historical-perspective/>.

³³ Timofei Bordachev, “The Fate of Alliances in the Modern World,” *Valdai Discussion Club*, 26 September 2022, accessed 4 May 2024, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the-fate-of-alliances-in-the-modern-world/>; Doug Bandow, “The Outdated Alliance?” *Foreign Policy*, 3 April 2019, accessed 4 May 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/03/the-outdated-alliance/>; Christopher B. Johnson and Jeffrey W. Homung, “Separate U.S. Alliances in East Asia are Obsolete,” *Rand*, 14 September 2023, accessed 4 May 2024, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/09/separate-us-alliances-in-east-asia-are-obsolete.html>.

³⁴ Chachavalongpun, “The Military Regime’s Foreign Policy,” 276.

of unequal treaties with European powers. Chulalongkorn (Rama V) succeeded the throne in 1868 (until 1910), being the first Siamese monarch to have travelled to Europe. Shaking hands with Queen Victoria of Britain and dining with Emperor Nicholas II of Russia, Chulalongkorn was extolled through the pages of official history for his shrewd diplomacy that saved his kingdom from European colonisation, as opposed to a critical narrative which explained Siam's independence as a result of it being assigned as a buffer state between Britain and France.³⁵ Although Chulalongkorn modernised Siam in various aspects, his initiatives failed to sustain the longevity of the royal absolutism. The post-Chulalongkorn period saw a decline of the royal institution in Thailand and beyond. Centuries-old monarchies were overthrown in China in 1912, Russia in 1917, and Germany in 1918. These events accelerated the declining state of the Siamese monarchy. Finally in 1932, Siam's absolute monarchy was officially abolished during the reign of King Prajadhipok (Rama VII), who decided to abdicate three years later. Ananda Mahidol was chosen by the National Assembly to succeed the throne in 1935, at the age of 10. The new regime in Bangkok, while celebrating the new era of the constitutional monarchy, was submerged in power struggles among new power holders. Tragedy struck the royal family in 1946 when King Ananda, taking time off from his studies in Switzerland to visit Thailand, was found dead in his palace bedroom in Bangkok. The mystery surrounding the death of Ananda further deteriorated the already fragile monarchy so deeply that it was at the brink of collapse.³⁶ Bhumibol, younger brother of Ananda, was crowned, driving the monarchy into the unknown.

Born in Massachusetts in 1927, Bhumibol forged intimate ties with the United States, serving as a foundation of a solid relationship between the two countries—a relationship that came to the rescue of the waning monarchy. Soon after the end of the Second World War, Thai-United States relations steadily blossomed. The United States played a pivotal part in rescuing Thailand from its wartime alignment with Japan.³⁷ The British government, on the other hand, sought to punish Thailand for declaring war against Britain. Thus, American intervention not only saved Thailand from an accusation of war crimes, but also served to diminish Britain's influence in the country and in the region.³⁸ It was the beginning of Thailand's foreign policy commitment to the United States. This commitment was exploited by Phibun, who sent Thai troops to participate in the Korean War as a ploy to attain the

³⁵ Seton-Watson, *Britain in Europe*, 572; Nana, “Koh Toklong Plaek Plaek Nai Samai Ratchakarn Ti Ha,” 145.

³⁶ Kershaw, *Monarchy in Southeast Asia*, 66.

³⁷ Viraphol, *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy*, 9.

³⁸ Sean, *The United States and Thailand*, 7.

United States’ support for his regime.³⁹ Then, Bhumibol, in his mid-twenties, had just returned from Switzerland. Inexperienced and powerless, he was at first moulded into a puppet of military regimes. But the advent of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, as a coup leader and prime minister in 1957, shifted the relations between the military and the monarchy. To fortify the political position of the military, Sarit manipulated the monarchy by unleashing a neo-royalist ideology designed to sacralise and popularise Bhumibol, a scheme to warrant the military’s own position in politics.⁴⁰ This scheme was successful because it combined traditional ideas of just kingship with modern performances of the monarch. King Bhumibol was extolled as a *dhammarāja* (Thai *thammaracha* ธรรมราชา), or king of righteousness.⁴¹ But he was a *dhammarāja* who performed tasks of modern kingship too, from defending the Thai nation (against communism) to bringing prosperity to the poor (through developmental projects). It was Bhumibol’s status of *dhammarāja* that separated him from his son, Vajiralongkorn. This was not the first time the monarchy was reintroduced into national affairs. Phibun had attempted to do so but failed to find an accommodation with the palace.⁴² Peter Jackson argues that senior echelons of the Thai military in the Sarit era actively sought to establish symbolic links with the monarchy.⁴³ The raging communism in the region provided a necessary catalyst for the flourishing military-monarchy nexus. The top foreign policy agenda had been the security of the monarchy and the protection of the king from the threat of communists. Matthew Phillips asserts, “King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit were now made the centre of a public relations campaign that sought to establish anti-communism and United States capitalist ideology as the correct and natural path for the Thai *chat* [nation].”⁴⁴ This design of foreign policy focused on the monarchy was well reciprocated by the United States for it had an anti-communist agenda of its own.

Although constitutionally constrained, Bhumibol gradually transformed the monarchy to become the country’s most powerful political institution with support from different institutions and actors. Bhumibol’s reign was authoritative thanks to the unbending backing of the United States. In return, he nominated himself as a vehicle in navigating the

³⁹ “Stanton to the Department of State: Summary of Thai Political and Economic Situation as of 23 January 1953,” ed. Raether and Schwar.

⁴⁰ Chachavalpongpun, “Neo-royalism and the Future of the Thai Monarchy,” 1202.

⁴¹ Baker and Phongpaichit, *Prawatsart Thai Ruamsamai*, 414.

⁴² Boontanondha, “The King’s Soldier,” 294–296.

⁴³ Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation and Conflict*, 42.

⁴⁴ Phillips, “Re-ordering the Cold War Cosmos,” 263.

Thai relations with the United States. Already united negatively against communism, the two nations would enjoy a positive source of unity in “an American king.”⁴⁵ From this perspective, the political interests of the United States and Thailand were deeply intertwined.⁴⁶ The United States intervened in Thai politics, serving as a keen supporter and defender of the throne in crushing the latter’s political opponents. Benjamin Zawacki rightly perceives the United States as a kind of member *ex officio* of network monarchy, a network of royalists that consists of the military, senior bureaucrats, big businesses, and parts of Bangkok middle class.⁴⁷ The United States greatly assisted Bhumibol in strengthening his position both domestically and internationally.

An Anti-Communist Plot

As early as 1954, after the end of the Korean War, the United States embarked on working with Bhumibol in a joint effort to confront the communists. William J. Donovan, American ambassador to Bangkok, proposed to Washington a plan to construct an enemy of the Thai monarchy as a legitimate pretext to deepen a psychological warfare against the communists inside and outside of Thailand. The strategy was endorsed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, implemented by the State Department, and agreed upon by Bhumibol.⁴⁸ As a result, the United States allocated a US\$1.5 million budget for the psychological strategy based in Thailand.⁴⁹ Simultaneously, the United States established SEATO, outwardly modelled on Europe’s NATO, as a regional collective defence against communism. Consisting of eight members including the United States and Thailand, SEATO had its headquarters in Bangkok.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Donovan succeeded in winning trust from Bhumibol.⁵¹ During his one-year term as American ambassador, Donovan was granted an audience with the king at least five times.⁵² To respond to the American strategy, Bhumibol dispatched a privy councillor, Phraya Srivisanvaja, to discuss details with Eisenhower on the expected role of the monarchy

⁴⁵ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 34.

⁴⁶ Fineman, *A Special Relationship*, 261.

⁴⁷ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 188.

⁴⁸ “Memorandum of Conversation at the 161st Meeting of the National Security, 9 August 1953,” ed. Raether and Schwar.

⁴⁹ “U.S. Psychological Strategy based on Thailand, 8 September 1953,” Dwight D. Eisenhower Library.

⁵⁰ SEATO’s first Secretary General was Pote Sarasin, a former prime minister and foreign minister.

⁵¹ Chaiching, “Karn Muang Thai Samai Ratthaban Chompol Por Phibun Songkhram,” 149.

⁵² Donovan sought an audience with the king in October and December 1953, and in January, March, and August 1954.

in the psychological war. The United States recommended a royal outreach programme to expand supporter for the monarchy as a bulwark against communism. This was the beginning of a series of royal tours to Isan, a communist-prone region of the northeast of Thailand. Bhumibol started his journey in the central plain of Thailand in September 1955 and continued to the Isan region in November. The royal tours not only served the United States’ psychological war vis-à-vis the communists, but also fulfilled Bhumibol’s own agenda of hegemonising the monarchy in the face of existing challenges. The royal hegemonisation was, from this view, made possible thanks to the American support.⁵³

King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit paid two official visits to the United States during their reign, the first time in 1960 at the invitation of President Eisenhower and the second time in 1967 when invited by President Lyndon B. Johnson. At the height of the Cold War, the two royal trips highlighted the prominent role of the Thai monarchy in foreign affairs, particularly in the context of the United States’ international politics. This strategy was eerily similar to how the United States cooperated with Saudi and Iranian monarchy to shore up its power in the Middle East during the Cold War.⁵⁴ The United States Senate and House of Representatives held a special session in honour of Bhumibol on 29 June 1960, in which he delivered this speech:

I have long desired to see and learn more of your country. When I hear of intolerance and oppression in so many parts of the world, I want to know how, in this country, millions of people, differing in race, tradition, and belief, can live together freely and in happy harmony. American assistance is to enable the Thais to achieve their objectives through their own efforts. We are grateful for American aid; but we intend one day to do without it. It is only in this present century that we find a great military power refrain from war, except for the defence of right and peace. I refer to the United States of America. In view of the present world tension and the feeling of uncertainty apparent everywhere, it is my sincere feeling that the time is ripe for an even closer cooperation. It will demonstrate to the world that we are one in purpose and conviction, and it can only lead to one thing—mutual benefit.⁵⁵

Not only did the royal couple work indefatigably on the political front, but they also impressed the American public through a cultural approach. During their first trip, Bhumibol

⁵³ Domestic politics of Thailand at that time was complicated. Two opposing factions struggled for power: the Phibun faction and the royalists. The fact that the United States were willing to support the royalists at the expense of the Phibun faction made the return of royal hegemony possible. Had Phibun been the head of a unified faction, he might have been able to contain the monarchy.

⁵⁴ Alshamsi, *Islam and Political Reform in Saudi Arabia*, 160.

⁵⁵ “His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej Speaks at the Joint Meeting of U.S.Congress,” U.S. Embassy Bangkok, accessed 1 December 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhM0N38Mr9M>.

and Sirikit turned up at Paramount Pictures studio, to meet with rock and roll superstar Elvis Presley on the set of *G.I. Blues*. For the United States, the royal visit successfully laid a firm groundwork for a cemented relationship through a personal connection with the Thai king. For Bhumibol, international recognition, particularly from one of the world’s superpowers, was vital for the king’s political legitimacy, and thus security. Bhumibol’s international trips lasted from 1959 until 1967 and included approximately 30 countries, most of which were leading nations of the West and allies of Thailand in the Cold War. He made his final foreign visit to Laos in 1994 to inaugurate the Friendship Bridge which connected Thailand and Laos across the Mekong River.⁵⁶

While Bhumibol acted as his country’s ambassador of goodwill, his wife, Queen Sirikit, brought glamour to the crown, a strategy to reinforce the monarchy’s status overseas. She was, in the 1960s, voted as the most beautiful queen in the world.⁵⁷ Her images appeared on Western magazines, which linked fashion choices to democratic principles.⁵⁸ Sirikit used her fashion style to represent modernity of Thailand which aligned with that of the Western world. Both Sirikit and Bhumibol were diplomatic powerhouses, proliferating a respectable reputation for Thailand. Bhumibol’s philanthropic and charitable works in Thailand, started in 1969, were seen as a legacy of the American diplomat Donovan, who proposed an idea of employing prosperity and development to conquer Thailand’s far-flung regions dominated by the communists. Bhumibol’s royal development projects were designed to tackle problems of deforestation, poverty, and opium production by promoting alternative crops. Initiating these projects, the king was extolled by various international organisations for his devotion to improve the well-being of Thais. The king’s developmental projects were in later years to be replaced by his reinvented philosophy of “sufficiency economy.” It was supposedly driven by the need to achieve harmony and stability in finances and life, and has secured a permanent place in Thailand’s foreign policy.⁵⁹ Even after Bhumibol’s death, Thai foreign policy retains the promotion of sustainability among its major goals. The 2020 foreign policy statement explicitly relates this to Bhumibol’s legacy:

Thailand seeks to play a role as an international partner for sustainable development, as shared prosperity is an important principle of UN Sustainable Development Goals. One key principle

⁵⁶ Grossman, Baker, and Faulder, *King Bhumibol Adulyadej*, 156.

⁵⁷ Leventon and Chakrabongse, *Fit for a Queen*.

⁵⁸ Lynn, *Contested Femininities*, 173.

⁵⁹ Amphan, “From Domestic Legitimacy to International Recognition,” 1.

underpinning this global partnership for development is the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, which was devised by King Bhumibol.⁶⁰

This demonstrates how well the late Bhumibol’s self-sufficiency philosophy fits with the modern concept of multipolarity on the international stage, as opposed to the idea of alliance, which emphasises dependency. At the death of Bhumibol, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon paid a tribute to recognise his legacy as a visionary and a humanitarian, underlining his impactful global status.⁶¹

The End of an Era

The end of the Cold War witnessed the culmination of the royal hegemony and the return of its decline. The military staged a coup in 1991, toppling Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan. A year later, the coup leader, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, appointed himself as prime minister. Suchinda’s premiership propelled Thais to organise a protest which ended in bloody crackdowns. King Bhumibol summoned Suchinda and Major General Chamlong Srimuang, the leader of the protesters, to his palace—an event televised nationwide. Sitting on the couch, Bhumibol told them to stop quarrelling to prevent further bloodshed and urged them to reconcile for the sake of national peace. His role as the country’s stabilising force was reaffirmed, highlighting the culmination of the royal power in Thailand’s troubled politics. The rest of the 1990s was characterised by an advanced stage of Thai democratisation, the result of which saw the launch of the “people’s constitution” in 1997. The new constitution paved the way for the arrival of a new breed of politician, Thaksin Shinawatra. He formed the Thai Rak Thai Party [Thais Love Thais], offering a myriad of populist projects, and eventually triumphed in the election of 2001. Winning a second term in office in 2005, Thaksin confidently emerged to dominate politics against the non-elective institutions of the network monarchy. To eliminate Thaksin, the military, with a tacit support from the palace, overthrew his government in 2006.⁶² By then, however, the network monarchy encountered another trepidation—the looming end of the Bhumibol reign.

⁶⁰ “The 20 Year ‘5S’ Foreign Affairs Masterplan,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, accessed 1 December 2025, <https://image.mfa.go.th/mfa/0/mkKfL2iULZ/เอกสาร/mfa-s-strategy.pdf>.

⁶¹ “King Bhumibol ‘A Visionary and a Humanitarian,’ Secretary-General Says in Tribute to Thailand’s Fallen Monarchy,” United Nations, 28 October 2016, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sgsm18238.doc.htm>.

⁶² Thaksin returned to Thailand for the first time in fifteen years in August 2023, following an apparent deal with the conservative elites. The deal supposedly rehabilitated Thaksin’s image, from an enemy of the monarchy to a new ally against the emerging threat of the pro-reform Move Forward Party.

Bhumibol's ill health raised a level of anxiety among members of the network monarchy and the United States about the future of Thailand without Bhumibol.⁶³ The anxiety was justified by the fact that his successor, Vajiralongkorn, was not supported by the public.

For decades, Bhumibol had provided a legitimacy for the military and the royalists in protecting their position of power in politics. Similarly, he had proven to be a loyal ally of the United States. But since the end of the Cold War, with the diminishing communist threat, the Thai palace had struggled to identify new threats to legitimise royal hegemony, especially in the context of maintaining the American alliance. Following the coup of 2006, the United States, having long invested in the monarchy, remained firmly a defender of Bhumibol by condemning Thaksin as a source of political crisis.⁶⁴ The United States justified its condemnation of Thaksin based on his growing authoritarianism, thus a threat to democracy, and his violent policy in the deep south against the minority Muslims.⁶⁵ The American policy was fraudulent given the United States' support for other authoritarian institutions in Thailand. It echoed the United States' unchanged policy vis-à-vis the Thai monarchy and the military despite the fact that the political landscape, both inside and outside Thailand, had tremendously changed.

Vajiralongkorn: A Reclusive Monarch

Vajiralongkorn succeeded to the throne in 2016. The new world order posed a fresh challenge to the monarchy's role in global affairs, compounded by questions from within the royal institution itself: Vajiralongkorn had largely found comfort in seclusion away from international politics. For years, it was uncertain whether international royal tours under King Vajiralongkorn would take place at all. That changed in 2025, when he made his first official overseas visit: to Bhutan, from 25 to 28 April.⁶⁶ The choice was telling: it allowed him to re-enter the arena of royal diplomacy in a safe, symbolically resonant setting, as the two monarchies share Buddhist traditions and a reputation for ceremonial prestige, while

⁶³ Thomas Fuller, "With King in Declining Health, Future of Monarchy in Thailand is Uncertain," *The New York Times*, 20 September 2015.

⁶⁴ The Congressional Research Service, for example, continued to condemn Thaksin as a source of the Thai crisis year after year since the coup of 2006. See Emma Chanlett-Avery, "Thailand: Background and US Relations," *Congressional Research Service*, 22 January 2010, accessed 4 May 2024, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20100122_RL32593_798ea38de0f940440f3ade448833c5494f5bfb21.pdf.

⁶⁵ Wheeler, "Saharat America Songkhram," 506.

⁶⁶ "King and Queen to Pay First Official Royal Visit Abroad to Bhutan," *The Nation*, 21 April 2025, <https://www.nationthailand.com/blogs/news/general/40049026>.

avoiding the political sensitivities of larger powers. His father, by contrast, had waited thirteen years before embarking on the first in a series of international royal tours in 1959, but Bhumibol was then only thirty-two years old. By his coronation in 2019, Vajiralongkorn was already sixty-seven, making him the oldest monarch to ascend the Thai throne, and time is precious for an old king. Yet his long-standing detachment from diplomacy, combined with a lack of follow-up visits, suggests the Bhutan trip may be an isolated gesture rather than the beginning of a sustained programme of royal engagement. A spoiled prince then and an indulgent king now, Vajiralongkorn has broken the traditional mould of Thai kingship, defined on the basis of *dhammarāja à la* Bhumibol, and continues to drift further away from the active global role his father once embraced.

As the head of state of a medium-sized kingdom, Vajiralongkorn's international role is inevitably determined by the change in international relations. Today, there are no common enemies which the monarchy could exploit to warrant its alliance with the United States, and vice versa. Communists in the neighbourhood have long been reassigned as profitable trading partners. Safeguarding the monarchy from foreign threats appears superfluous. Therefore, the United States is compelled to amend its view on the international role of the Thai monarchy, even if it has seemed to rely on the Thai royal institution to protect its interests in the kingdom. It raises the question of the monarchy's ability to protect the United States' interests when they have become unpopular with young, better educated Thais. But certainly, Washington's perception of Vajiralongkorn is greatly different from that of Bhumibol. Vajiralongkorn appears to lack the intellect, charm, curiosity, and diplomatic skill his father had.⁶⁷ Bhumibol had put them to good use in guaranteeing support from the United States as he actively engaged in global diplomacy. Vajiralongkorn is not enthusiastic in diplomacy, particularly in playing the role of his country's ambassador of goodwill. The missing personal connection with the United States, created by Bhumibol, has effectually remoulded the Thai monarchy-United States bilateral relationship to become one that is dully official. The dull monarchy-United States relationship is a similar imprint of a larger bilateral relations between Thailand and the United States.

In the Midst of Sino-American Rivalry

Standing in the backdrop of the changing relationship between the monarchy and the United States is China. China has risen to contest the American influence in the Thai palace. Thailand

⁶⁷ "Crown Prince Discusses Monarchy, Politics in Ambassador's Farewell Call," *WikiLeaks*, 16 November 2007, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BANGKOK5839_a.html.

normalised its diplomatic relations with China in 1975 in the wake of the American departure from the Vietnam War. The regional circumstances forced the Thai monarchy to reposition itself in the war against communists. China was reinvented as a new friend—one which was amicable and trustworthy. Relations between the Thai monarchy and China have thrived precipitously over the decades, particularly after the Cold War. This unravelled the discursiveness of the definition of communism in the view of the Thai state and institutions. Sittitthep Eaksittipong argues that the changing Thai perception of China was the result of the changing knowledge production in Thailand.⁶⁸ The process of portraying the Thais as opposed in nature to the Chinese was reversed so as to manage a new international environment in which China was now perceived as a friend for Thailand’s survival. Today, instead of reinvigorating the role of the Thai monarchy at the international stage, however, the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China has provided more room for manoeuvre for Vajiralongkorn in his relations with them. Comparatively, Bhumibol operated in a much-restrained manner merely because of his obligations in the alliance with the United States, and because “real” communists were not friendly to the monarchy. In the multipolar world of today, Vajiralongkorn is afforded more flexibility, especially with China’s willingness to support his reign in the face of the absent American alliance. This condition enables Vajiralongkorn to become reactive to his surroundings and to exploit the discourse of “constitutional monarchy” in foreign affairs, arguably to counterweight his unconstitutional interventions in domestic politics.

An American diplomat, in an interview on the United States’ opinion of King Vajiralongkorn, informed me that the United States were eager to strengthen their ties with Thailand—whether these ties would be kept in a Cold War-style of alliance, or restructured into something new.⁶⁹ But the main concern of the State Department vis-à-vis Vajiralongkorn has been the latter’s view in regard to China. The diplomat said it boldly, “If Vajiralongkorn favours China over us, we will not go the extra mile to support him.” The diplomat was convinced that Thailand would continue to prioritise its friendship with the United States instead of China. “China is not a friend of Thailand, but a big brother,” the diplomat said. “Members of the Thai royal family are still regular guests to our country,” added the diplomat. The choice of words “big brother” is intriguing, given China itself has employed family metaphors to describe its relationship with Thailand. It is evident that the future

⁶⁸ Eaksittipong, “Textualising the ‘Chinese of Thailand,’” 8.

⁶⁹ In an interview with an American diplomat, the United States State Department, Washington D.C., 23 July 2019. The diplomat requested to remain anonymous.

direction of the relationship between Thailand and the United States depends much upon Vajiralongkorn's position in the Sino-American competition. The view of the diplomat means that the United States understood the extent to which Vajiralongkorn has exerted a major influence in politics that could be extended to foreign affairs.

China, in the meantime, has long reinforced its ties with the monarchy as a way to influence the kingdom. Although Bhumibol never paid an official visit to China, he openly endorsed his daughter, Princess Maha Sirindhorn, to act as the palace's ambassador in consolidating relations with Beijing. She first visited China in 1981 and met with then paramount leader Deng Xiaoping in Beijing. Across four decades, Sirindhorn has become a regular visitor to China and in part helped alter the Thai perception about the country. She was also among few people in Thailand who have travelled to all of China's provinces.⁷⁰ Most of her visits were of course arranged by the Chinese hosts. She took up Mandarin lessons, and performed Chinese calligraphy. In 2000, she received China's inaugural Language, Culture and Friendship Award.⁷¹ In 2019, she was one of six recipients of the Friendship Medal bestowed as China celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Although Vajiralongkorn, as crown prince, had several opportunities to become acquainted with Chinese leaders, he appeared content to let his sister take a lead in cultivating the Sino-Thai relations, just as Bhumibol did. Vajiralongkorn has over the years met with top leaders of China, although those meetings were mostly not publicised. For example, he held talks with then Vice President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in 2011 in Bangkok. But Vajiralongkorn's interactions with China have remained largely limited. Since assuming the throne, Vajiralongkorn has continued to work with China on a routine basis. For example, in January 2020, the king sent a telegram of sympathy to President Xi on the epidemic caused by coronavirus.⁷² A month later, Vajiralongkorn dispatched medical products and equipment to China as a gesture of goodwill, thereby

⁷⁰ Jitsiree Thongnoi, "Thailand's Long-Time Sinophile Princess Sirindhorn to Receive China's Friendship Medal," *South China Morning Post*, 22 September 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3029681/thailands-long-time-sinophile-princess-sirindhorn-receive-chinas>.

⁷¹ Zawacki, *Thailand*, 78.

⁷² "King Maha Vajiralongkorn of Thailand Sent a Telegram of Sympathy to President Xi Jinping of China," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Thailand, 1 February 2020, https://th.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/ztbd/202002/t20200201_10148415.htm.

performing his legitimate duty as a head of state.⁷³ In November 2025, from 13–17, Vajiralongkorn finally accepted an official invitation to visit Beijing to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Thai-Chinese diplomatic relations. His visit surely strengthened bilateral ties but risked Thailand’s relations with the United States.

Bhumibol closely cooperated with the United States. Similarly, Sirindhorn has invested herself in China. Vajiralongkorn has expressed no particular interest in any specific country, aside from his favourite destination of Germany. Hence, it is unlikely that Vajiralongkorn would desire to go further in upgrading the Thai relations with China. The Thai relations with China have been amicable, sometime unpredictable too. For example, Thailand was left out of the Belt and Road Initiative Summit in 2017. Pongphisoot Busbarat argues that there are in fact two possible reasons for that exclusion. The first is the delay in the Sino-Thai high-speed railway project. The project started in 2012, but the political situation in Thailand terminated the earlier deal due to parliamentary disapproval and then the coup in 2014. Despite Beijing’s endorsement of the military government in Bangkok, Thailand renegotiated the deal, the process of which dragged on until 2019. The second reason may be related to Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha accepting American President Donald Trump’s invitation to visit the White House in 2017. Beijing may want to signal to Bangkok that it will not tolerate being treated as the second choice in Thailand’s diplomatic games.⁷⁴ An important question today is whether friendly relationship between the Thai palace and the Chinese leadership can guarantee the overall friendly bilateral ties between the two countries.

Although, initially, Vajiralongkorn chose Germany as his long-term residence, there was no such special relationship at the state level. On the contrary, his stay in Germany became deeply troublesome. His outrageous lifestyle, dressing in tiny tank tops with fake tattoos all over his body while strolling the streets of Munich, was ridiculed by the world media. While the king resided in Germany, the Thai youth launched nationwide protests to call for immediate monarchical reforms. The call was motivated by a number of factors;

⁷³ “Nailuang Phrarachatan Wechapahan Hai Chine Namsongprom Kruangbin Rap 149 Khon Thai Krabbaan” [The King Offered Medical Equipment to China, Together with Send a Plane to Bring Home 149 Thais], *Matichon*, 3 February 2020, https://www.matichon.co.th/foreign/news_1942386.

⁷⁴ Pongphisoot Busbarat, “Why was Thailand’s Prime Minister Absent in the Belt and Road Initiative Summit?” *ISEAS Commentaries*, 9 June 2017, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/why-was-thailands-prime-minister-absent-in-the-belt-and-road-initiative-summit-by-pongphisoot-busbarat/>.

among them was an allegation that Vajiralongkorn interfered in politics.⁷⁵ Bhumibol had also intervened in politics during his reign. His intervention had then been backed up by his own moral authority, and by the United States. But this kind of royal intervention is no longer accepted in Thailand’s politics today. Vajiralongkorn’s lack of his father’s moral authority prompted the protesters to defy his political role. The other allegation—that he is involved in the abductions and killings of critics of the monarchy overseas—was also responsible for the public outcry against Vajiralongkorn.⁷⁶ Protesters, in November 2020, gathered in front of the German Embassy in Bangkok to appeal to the German government to investigate if Vajiralongkorn violated any laws while he resided in Germany, including his possible involvement in crimes against Thai dissidents.⁷⁷ The domestic uproar against Vajiralongkorn and his trouble in Germany further placed the king largely unfavourably under the world spotlight. Despite Vajiralongkorn’s undemocratic tendency, whether Washington will finally see an interest in him, just as it sees the Saudi monarch as an important ally, will determine the future relationship between the Thai monarchy and the United States.

Conclusion

Vajiralongkorn has been on the throne for nine years now. It is apparent that the diplomatic role of the Thai monarchy has been receding. During the Bhumibol era, the monarchy enthusiastically engaged in shaping Southeast Asian politics. This engagement was made possible due to the Cold War condition, which provided an opportunity for both the United States to forge their ties with the Thai monarchy and for the king himself, who sought the American recognition of his throne. In sum, Bhumibol was a significant ally of the United States in the war against communism in the regional context. The needed alliance in turn was beneficial for the monarchy and the military to uphold their tight grips of power. Hence, the Thai royal establishment and the United States knitted their ties based on common interests which consolidated their political alliance throughout the Cold War. But when the ideological conflict ran its course, the alliance with the United States became out of fashion. Although the United States remained dominant for almost two decades after the end of the

⁷⁵ Chachavalpongpun, “Introduction,” 13.

⁷⁶ Peter Boyle, “Thai King Implicated in Disappearance of Exiled Dissident,” *Green Left*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/thai-king-implicated-disappearance-exiled-dissident>.

⁷⁷ Apornrath Phoonphongphiphat and Masayuki Yuda, “Thailand protesters query German embassy on absent king,” *Nikkei Asia*, 26 October 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Turbulent-Thailand/Thailand-protesters-query-German-embassy-on-absent-king>.

Cold War, it was the period which witnessed the beginning of the end of the Bhumibol era in Thailand. The death of Bhumibol in 2016, coupled with the emerging multipolar international system, allowed Vajiralongkorn to operate with few diplomatic obligations. This study demonstrates how political alliance initially played a fundamental part, and later became redundant, in the relationship between the Thai monarchy and the United States as well as in the position of the Thai monarchy in both domestic and foreign affairs.

In the new era, King Vajiralongkorn has seemingly not prioritised the conduct of foreign policy and diplomacy as a key component of his kingship. He has merely performed as a supposed constitutional monarchy in the domain of foreign affairs. Unlike his father, Vajiralongkorn has never particularly cultivated strong relationships with any foreign countries upon whom he could depend on in time of future crisis. In other words, from the viewpoint of the Thai monarchy, support from foreign powers is not needed, as the source of threats to the institution has visibly become internal. Meanwhile, the world has expected less from Vajiralongkorn: it is the new world where exclusive political alliances no longer fit the current order. At this significant juncture, China has risen to contest American influence in Thailand. The competition between the two countries has in turn created a vacuum of power filled with Vajiralongkorn's own seemingly indifferent stance in diplomacy.

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