Thailand: shifting ground between the US and a rising China

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This book shines a useful light on Thailand’s foreign relations since the end of the second World War. Benjamin Zawacki creates a great contribution to the study of Thailand’s triangular relationship with the United States and China, examining the way in which Thailand could situate itself among greater powers. The book presents a succinct and well-informed analysis and investigation on Thailand’s efforts to maintain, balance and bandwagon positions with greater powers. The author argues that at the end of the Cold War the United States became a choice for Thailand to strengthen its relationship with. China has risen in power during the 21st century and, as a result, the relationship with China has also been a fundamental concern of Thailand.

In the earlier stage from the commencement of the Vietnam War in the 1950s, Thailand’s relationship with Washington was close, particularly in terms of help to maintain regional peace and security. However, after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Thai elites shifted Thai foreign policy behavior towards China. The United States seemed to disregard the increasing power vacuum in its relationship with Thailand. The re-emergence of China’s engagement with Thailand is a major development in the current phase. Zawacki chronologically examines the evolution of Thailand shifting positions between the United States and China over the course of time. Thailand was selected by Zawacki as a single case study, and has presented as a well-written piece of work, adopting a content analysis approach. The deeply rhetorical descriptions illustrate the challenging positions that have existed since the end of the Second World War.

The author focuses on the first part of the book examining the historical events of Thai diplomacy and its relationship with the United States and China, from the early post-war period in 1945 to Thailand’s election in 2001 in which Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was victorious. In the second part, the author examines Thailand’s triangular relationship with the United States and China from 2001 to 2014.

The examination of the American–Thai relationship during the Cold War mainly focuses on the military forces, until a key turning point is uncovered, especially regarding the complex relationship with the United States and China towards the end of the Cold War. This bilateral relationship with the United States was a key feature in the formation of Thai foreign policy characteristics in controlling security and armed forces throughout the Cold War period. The desire to return to the relationship continued until the regional conflict in Indochina in the late 1970s. Nevertheless, Thailand had doubts about the next phase of America’s diplomatic relationship with Thailand after the end of the military base usage in the country. At the same time, Sino-Thai relations became much closer, especially when the Cold War ended, with the 1990s the year the relationship between China and Thailand took a new turn. The new era of diplomatic relations between China and Thailand was in the early 1990s.

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