

# Balanced Diplomacy between Regional Order and Medium Powers: A Study on Thailand's Strategic Evolution in the ASEAN Framework

Luo Kun<sup>1,\*</sup>, Zifan Zhang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>ASEAN College, Guangxi University for Nationalities/China-ASEAN Regional Country Research Institute, Nanning 530000, China

<sup>2</sup>School of Marxism, Henan University of Economics and Law, Zhengzhou 450000, China

\*Corresponding Author

## Abstract

Since the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, Thailand, as one of the founding members, has always played a key role in the ASEAN integration process and regional diplomacy pattern. This paper aims to systematically analyze Thailand's diplomatic strategic logic, main practices and challenges under the ASEAN framework. The study found that the core goal of Thailand's diplomatic strategy is to maintain national security, promote economic development and enhance regional influence through multilateralism. This paper analyzes from four aspects: historical evolution, diplomatic concepts, policy practices and future directions, and combines the new situation of regional security and economic cooperation, and proposes that Thailand should further strengthen its core position in ASEAN under the strategic framework of "balance-initiative-innovation".

## Keywords

Thailand, Asean, Diplomatic strategy, Regional cooperation, International relations.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research background and significance

In the evolution of the international landscape since the end of the Cold War, geopolitical complexity and economic development potential in Southeast Asia coexist. Thailand is located in the core of the Indochina Peninsula, which is not only a connection hub between ASEAN on land and ASEAN at sea, but also a meeting point for Sino-US competition and regional multilateral cooperation. With the advancement of the construction of the ASEAN community, Thailand's role in ASEAN affairs has become increasingly important, and the adjustment and practice of its diplomatic strategy not only affect its own security and development, but also shape the direction of ASEAN's overall regional cooperation to a certain extent. The significance of this paper is that: on the one hand, it theoretically deepens the understanding of the diplomatic behavior pattern of medium-sized powers in regional organizations; On the other hand, it provides a reference for Thailand and neighboring countries to formulate regional foreign policies from a practical level.

### 1.2 Review of domestic and foreign research

Foreign scholars mostly study Thai diplomacy from the perspectives of "middle power diplomacy" and "regional institutionalism". For example, Acharya (2001) argues that Thailand's diplomatic behavior reflects an "institutional flexible balance" that seeks to maximize benefits between multilateral cooperation and bilateral alliances. Domestic research

mainly focuses on Thailand's foreign policy evolution and Sino-Thai relations, but its overall strategic research under the ASEAN framework is still relatively weak and lacks systematic analysis.

### **1.3 Research problems and methods**

This article aims to answer the following questions: 1. What is the historical logic of the evolution of Thailand's diplomatic strategy under the ASEAN framework? 2. How can Thailand balance its interests with the ASEAN community in multilateral mechanisms? 3. What are the challenges and opportunities facing Thailand's diplomatic strategy under the current changes in the regional pattern? In terms of research methods, this paper adopts historical analysis, literature review and case analysis, and combines the theoretical perspectives of neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism to interpret Thailand's diplomatic behavior in multiple dimensions.

## **2. The evolution of Thailand's diplomatic strategy in ASEAN**

Thailand's diplomatic strategy under the ASEAN framework has undergone a dynamic evolution process from security-oriented to economically driven to multipolar balance. This evolution reflects not only the changes in the regional pattern of Southeast Asia, but also the adjustment of Thailand's domestic politics, economic structure and foreign policy concepts. Overall, Thailand's diplomatic strategy can be divided into three stages: the founding and consolidation stage of ASEAN (1967-1990), the stage of regional economic leadership (1990-2008), and the stage of multipolar competition and rebalancing (2008-present).

### **2.1 ASEAN founding and consolidation stage (1967-1990): security defense and institutional participation**

#### **2.1.1 Cold War background and security considerations**

In the 60s of the 20th century, Southeast Asia was deeply affected by the Cold War pattern. The United States pursued a strategy of "containing communism", while the Soviet Union and China supported left-wing movements in the region. Thailand is located at a strategic point on the Indochina Peninsula, close to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and has extremely high geosecurity risks. In response to the communist threat, Thailand adopted a "security dependency" diplomatic strategy in the 1960s, relying on the U.S.-Thailand alliance (the 1954 Collective Defense Treaty for Southeast Asia and the subsequent Manila Treaty) for military assistance, and promoting the establishment of ASEAN at the regional level to form a framework for political and security cooperation. In August 1967, Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman signed the Bangkok Declaration in Bangkok with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore, marking the official establishment of ASEAN. Thailand is not only the initiator of ASEAN, but also plays the role of coordinator and mediator in the early stages of the organization's formation. Its main goal was not immediate economic integration, but defensive cooperation against communist expansion through political unity.

#### **2.1.2 The formation of "defensive multilateralism"**

In the early days of ASEAN's establishment, Thailand pursued a diplomatic strategy centered on "defensive multilateralism". The strategy has three levels:

- (1) Security collectivization: complementing the bilateral alliance with the United States through the ASEAN mechanism to reduce dependence on a single power;
- (2) Diplomatic flexibility: Avoid getting involved in regional conflicts such as the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation while maintaining cooperation with the West

(3) Institutionalized diplomacy: Promote the establishment of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (1976) and the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Free Zone Treaty (1984) to provide an institutional basis for regional security cooperation.

Thailand existed primarily as a "stability promoter" during this period. In the late 1970s, with the reunification of Vietnam and the socialization of Indochina, Thailand's security anxiety intensified, and ASEAN became the fulcrum of its "defensive diplomacy". After Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1979, Thailand became one of the leading countries in ASEAN's collective condemnation of Vietnam's actions and actively sought international support for Cambodian rebels at the UN level. It can be seen that the ASEAN framework provided Thailand with an "external shield" for security and diplomatic legitimacy at that time.

### **2.1.3. Institutionalized transformation of diplomatic concepts**

By the mid-1980s, Thailand gradually recognized that ASEAN was not only a mechanism for security cooperation, but also a platform for economic and political dialogue. In 1984, Thai Prime Minister Bing Tin Su Rahan put forward the view that "regional stability should be based on economic cooperation", marking a shift in Thailand's diplomatic philosophy. Thailand's influence within the organization has continued to expand by promoting the establishment of a secretariat in ASEAN and holding a series of summits. This period established Thailand's image as a "pragmatic center" in ASEAN affairs.

## **2.2 Regional economic leadership stage (1990-2008): from security-oriented to economic-driven**

### **2.2.1 The end of the Cold War and strategic repositioning**

The end of the Cold War has greatly reduced the security threat to ASEAN members, and the focus of regional cooperation has begun to shift to economic development. Thailand's economy grew rapidly at this time and was known as one of the "Four Tigers of Asia". In the early 1990s, Thailand shifted its diplomatic strategic focus from "defensive security" to "economic diplomacy" and worked to expand its trade and investment network through the ASEAN mechanism. In 1992, Thai Prime Minister Anand Banyaratchon proposed the initiative to build an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), which was officially adopted in 1993, becoming an important starting point for ASEAN integration. This move not only enhances ASEAN's competitiveness in the regional economy, but also provides a broad market for Thailand's own manufacturing and agricultural exports. Thailand has demonstrated its new role as a "regional economic leader" by promoting AFTA.

### **2.2.2 "Active regionalism" and the expansion of the ASEAN+ mechanism**

Before the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Thailand was once seen as a representative of the economic miracle of Southeast Asia. But after the crisis, Thailand became the first country to collapse its financial system, prompting its foreign policy to shift from a purely economic orientation to institutionalized regional cooperation. After the crisis, Thailand actively advocated for strengthening the regional financial stability mechanism and led the promotion of the Chiang Mai Initiative (2000), which marked the beginning of monetary cooperation in East Asia. In this process, Thailand promoted the formation of ASEAN+3 (ASEAN+3, that is, the ASEAN-China, Japan, and South Korea cooperation mechanism) and proposed the establishment of the "Asian Cooperation Dialogue" (ACD), which aims to enhance ASEAN's centrality through multi-level mechanisms. Thailand's "positive regionalism" strategy aims to shape its diplomatic identity as a "coordinator of Southeast Asia" through institutional innovation and agenda setting.

### **2.2.3. Greater Mekong Subregional Cooperation (GMS) and Subregional Diplomacy**

In addition to macroeconomic cooperation, Thailand actively promoted the Greater Mekong Subregional Cooperation (GMS) in the 1990s. With Thailand at its core, the mechanism unites

Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar and Yunnan, China, with a focus on the development of transportation, energy and cross-border trade. Thailand plays a bridging role in the GMS, leveraging its industrial and financial advantages to promote regional development and expand its influence in the Indochina Peninsula.

#### **2.2.4. Diplomacy in crisis self-repair**

After the 1997 financial crisis, Thailand experienced a severe economic recession and political instability, but its diplomatic strategy did not back down. On the contrary, Thailand attaches more importance to the stabilizing function of the ASEAN framework. With Cambodia's return to ASEAN in 1999 and ASEAN's resumption of economic growth in 2000, Thailand's multilateral diplomacy has once again gained momentum. The Thaksin government (2001-2006) promoted the so-called "proactive diplomacy", advocating a regional policy of "economy first, politics second", and put forward the slogan "Thailand is the center of ASEAN". Thaksin Shinawatra tried to consolidate its leadership in ASEAN with economic power, but the diplomatic line stalled after 2006 due to domestic coups and a tendency to centralize power.

### **2.3 Multipolar competition and rebalancing stage (2008-present): flexible balance and strategic restructuring**

#### **2.3.1. Changes in the international pattern and Thailand's repositioning**

After the global financial crisis in 2008, Southeast Asia ushered in a new geopolitical competition pattern. The rise of China's economy, the "return to Asia" of the United States, and the active involvement of Japan and India have made the trend of regional multipolarization obvious. In this context, Thailand has re-examined its positioning and shifted from an "ASEAN economic leader" to an "ASEAN balancer". The Thai government has proposed a "new balanced diplomacy" in the post-crisis era, which aims to maintain strategic flexibility between China and the United States, maintain "centrality" within ASEAN, and avoid being marginalized by great power competition.

#### **2.3.2. The dual dependence strategy under Sino-US competition**

In the face of the expansion of influence between China and the United States, Thailand has adopted a strategy of "dual dependence and two-way benefit". Economically, Thailand has deepened cooperation with China, actively participated in the "Belt and Road" initiative, and promoted the construction of China-Thailand railway projects and cross-border economic corridors. In terms of security, it maintains a military alliance with the United States and continues to participate in the "Golden Cobra" joint military exercise. Thailand's diplomacy is "dual-track" to a certain extent: it relies on the U.S. institutional network for politics and security, and relies on Chinese capital and markets for economy and infrastructure.

#### **2.3.3. ASEAN centrality and mediation diplomacy**

As ASEAN faces internal challenges such as disputes in the South China Sea and the Myanmar issue, Thailand positions itself as a "mediator and defender". On the South China Sea issue, Thailand avoids public side selection and advocates consultations through the multilateral mechanism of "ASEAN + China"; On the Myanmar issue, although Thailand expressed concern about the coup, it emphasized the principle of "ASEAN internal settlement", reflecting its firm stance on upholding the "ASEAN Way". During Thailand's ASEAN presidency in 2019, it proposed the theme of "Advancing Partnership for Sustainability", emphasizing regional inclusive development and environmental cooperation, showing its attempt to shape the regional agenda with soft issues.

#### **2.3.4. The impact of domestic political uncertainty**

However, Thailand's long-term political instability constraints the continuity of its diplomatic strategy. Since the military junta came to power in 2006, coups have alternated with democratic transitions, leading to a lack of coherence in foreign policy decisions. Despite this, Thai

governments have not denied the importance of the ASEAN framework, but have seen it as a guarantee of diplomatic legitimacy. ASEAN's multilateral mechanism provides a relatively stable institutional basis for Thailand's identity in the international community.

### **2.3.5. Multilateral innovation and diplomatic transformation in the new era**

In recent years, Thailand has further expanded its diplomatic agenda to non-traditional security areas, such as climate change, public health, the digital economy, and cross-border crime prevention. Especially during the new crown epidemic, Thailand actively advocated the establishment of the "ASEAN Public Health Emergency Response Mechanism" and advocated the sharing of regional health sovereignty, showing that its diplomatic agenda has been comprehensively expanded from the traditional three dimensions of security, economy and society. In addition, Thailand is committed to promoting the alignment of the ASEAN Connectivity 2.0 and Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) plans with the ASEAN Master Connectivity Plan (MPAC 2025), trying to reshape its regional hub status through infrastructure diplomacy. This transformation reflects the development of Thai diplomacy from passive defense to active shaping.

Overall, Thailand's diplomatic strategy has evolved in ASEAN with the following three characteristics:

1. Functional transformation from security defense to economic cooperation - From "defensive multilateralism" in the early Cold War to "economic-driven diplomacy" in the post-Cold War era, and then to the current "comprehensive balanced diplomacy", Thailand has gradually diversified its diplomatic functions.
2. Change in the role from follower to agenda setter - Thailand mainly relied on the United States and regional cooperation in the early days of ASEAN, but gradually turned to "institutional promoter" and "agenda leader" as its economic strength increased.
3. Strategic shift from passive adaptation to active shaping - In the face of new geopolitical competition, Thailand strives to build sustainable diplomatic influence under the ASEAN framework through institutional innovation, subregional cooperation and soft issue advocacy. It can be seen that the evolution of Thailand's diplomatic strategy under the ASEAN framework is not only an external projection of its domestic political and economic changes, but also a microcosm of the logic of multilateral cooperation in Southeast Asia. From "security dependency" to "economic leadership" to "flexible balance", Thailand's diplomatic path reflects the typical adaptability and strategy of a medium-sized power in the multilateral system.

## **3. The core logic of Thailand's diplomatic strategy**

Thailand's diplomatic strategy under the ASEAN framework reflects a multi-dimensional and multi-level thinking logic. Its core is not a single security defense or economic cooperation, but a "balanced diplomacy" as the axis, taking into account the triple goal of national security, economic interests and international identity. In general, the core logic of Thailand's diplomatic strategy can be summarized in three aspects: balancing diplomatic principles, development priority orientation and maintaining ASEAN centrality.

### **3.1 The principle of "balanced diplomacy": maintain strategic autonomy in the competition of great powers**

#### **3.1.1. Historical formation and theoretical foundation**

"Balanced diplomacy" is a long-standing tradition of Thailand's foreign strategy, dating back to the reigns of Rama IV and Rama V (mid-19th century). At that time, Siam successfully avoided the fate of colonization by skillfully maneuvering between the British and French colonial powers. This diplomatic thinking of "survival by flexibility" has become the core of Thailand's diplomatic culture in later generations. In the Cold War, this principle was institutionalized as

a model of "dependency-autonomy balance": maintaining diplomatic contacts with countries such as China and the Soviet Union while allying with the United States in exchange for security guarantees to prevent strategic overdependence. In the framework of contemporary international relations theory, Thailand's "balanced diplomacy" can be regarded as a typical survival strategy of medium-sized powers, that is, to diversify risks through multilateral mechanisms and institutional cooperation to achieve diplomatic autonomy.

### **3.1.2. Embodiment in the ASEAN framework**

Within ASEAN, Thailand's "balanced diplomacy" is mainly reflected in the following three levels: (1) Institutional balance: Thailand actively uses the ASEAN mechanism to balance the influence of major powers. For example, in the ASEAN+3 and East Asia Summit (EAS) mechanisms, Thailand supports multi-party participation to prevent a single country from dominating the regional agenda.

(2) Geopolitical balance: Thailand participates in both the "Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism (LMC)" led by China and the "Mekong-Downstream Initiative (MLI)" promoted by the United States, maintaining coordination and cooperation space between the two.

(3) Security balance: Thailand continues to maintain its traditional military alliance with the United States, while deepening defense dialogue and military exercise cooperation with China, thereby maintaining a "dual-track strategy" in the regional security architecture.

### **3.1.3 Balance the strategic significance of diplomacy**

Thailand's balanced diplomacy is not a passive reconciliation, but a manifestation of "strategic flexibility". Through a balanced strategy, Thailand can not only avoid being involved in the camp confrontation of Sino-US competition, but also enhance its agenda influence on multilateral platforms. Thai diplomats generally believe that "neutrality is not negative, but the best way to safeguard national interests." This flexibility allows Thailand to maintain an "active neutral" posture in a complex regional landscape.

## **3.2 "Development first" orientation: a national strategy with economic diplomacy as the core**

### **3.2.1 Economically driven diplomatic concept**

Since the 80s of the 20th century, Thailand has gradually developed the concept of "development-oriented diplomacy", that is, foreign policy must serve economic modernization and industrial transformation. Whether it is the "regional cooperation for development" of the Bing Tinh Sulayan government or the "economic diplomacy first" of the Thaksin government, the essence of ASEAN is to regard ASEAN as an important platform to promote the export of Thailand's economy. Under this logic, Thailand sees ASEAN as the main front of multilateral economic diplomacy: to expand market size and attract foreign investment through free trade agreements, cross-border investment and infrastructure connectivity. The establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) provides Thailand with institutional markets, and mechanisms such as AFTA and RCEP have created a more open trade environment for Thailand's manufacturing, agricultural and service industries.

### **3.2.2 "Connectivity" and regional economic layout**

Thailand's "development first" diplomacy is manifested in actively promoting regional connectivity in practice. Its "Eastern Economic Corridor" (EEC) plan is deeply aligned with the ASEAN Overall Connectivity Plan (MPAC 2025), aiming to build Thailand into a central node of regional logistics and production networks through transportation, energy and digital infrastructure construction.

In addition, the "Greater Mekong Subregional Cooperation (GMS)" and "East-West Economic Corridor" projects led by Thailand also reflect its concept of subregional diplomacy driven by

economic projects. These initiatives not only help promote trade flows within ASEAN, but also strengthen Thailand's geoeconomic influence in the Indochina Peninsula.

### **3.2.3 The institutionalization path of economic diplomacy**

Thailand's institutionalization path of economic diplomacy under the ASEAN framework mainly includes three aspects:

- (1) Strengthen institutional market access through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area and RCEP;
- (2) Enhance regional financial stability through ASEAN financial cooperation (e.g., multilateralization of the Chiang Mai Initiative);
- (3) Promote the digital economy and sustainable development as new areas of cooperation in ASEAN, so as to upgrade economic diplomacy.

### **3.2.4 Challenges and responses**

While the "development first" orientation has brought growth momentum to Thailand, its challenges cannot be ignored. The lagging domestic economic structural transformation, insufficient industrial competitiveness, and global industrial chain restructuring all put pressure on Thailand's export-dependent economic diplomacy. To address these challenges, Thailand is promoting the "Thailand 4.0 Strategy", with high-tech, green energy and digitalization as breakthroughs, and seeking regional cooperation support through ASEAN platforms.

## **3.3 Maintaining "ASEAN centrality": strengthening international identity through multilateralism**

### **3.3.1 The diplomatic logic of ASEAN centrality**

Thailand is well aware that it is a "medium-sized country" in the international system, and it is difficult for bilateral diplomacy alone to take the initiative in the competition of great powers. Therefore, maintaining ASEAN Centrality has become an important strategic logic of Thailand's diplomacy. By relying on ASEAN, a regional multilateral mechanism, Thailand can not only expand its diplomatic influence, but also gain higher legitimacy in international affairs as a "collective identity".

### **3.3.2 Institutional identity and the "ASEAN way"**

Thailand is an active advocate of the ASEAN Way. This approach is based on the principles of consensus, non-interference in internal affairs and gradual cooperation, reflecting the great importance that Southeast Asian countries attach to sovereignty and stability. Thailand is firm in maintaining the "ASEAN way", believing that it is a key mechanism to prevent external interference and maintain regional unity.

On issues such as the Myanmar crisis and the South China Sea dispute, Thailand advocates resolving disputes through "intra-ASEAN consultations" and "constructive contacts" to avoid ASEAN being divided by the agenda of external powers. This "consensus diplomacy", although less efficient, helps maintain organizational cohesion.

### **3.3.3 Agenda shaping with ASEAN as a platform**

Thailand actively uses the opportunity of the ASEAN Presidency or the coordinator of specific issues to promote the internationalization of its agenda. For example, in 2019, Thailand proposed the theme of "Advancing Partnership for Sustainability" as the chairman, which included environmental protection and inclusive growth in the core agenda of ASEAN. In the construction of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, Thailand advocates cooperation in education, health and labor mobility to strengthen its leadership in the field of soft power.

## 4. Thailand's diplomatic practice under the ASEAN framework

Thailand's diplomatic practice under the ASEAN framework is highly flexible and hierarchical, with the core goal of ensuring national security, promoting economic development, and strengthening regional influence through institutional participation and agenda setting. Specifically, Thailand's diplomatic practice is mainly reflected in four aspects: security cooperation, economic cooperation, socio-cultural cooperation and non-traditional security issues. Together, these practices form the practical basis of Thailand's multilateral diplomacy and are also the embodiment of its strategic logic of "balance-development-centrality".

### 4.1 Security cooperation: multi-level participation from traditional defense to non-traditional security

**Institutionalized Participation in Traditional Security Cooperation:** In the field of traditional security, Thailand has strengthened its regional security position by actively participating in the ASEAN defense cooperation mechanism. Since the 1990s, ASEAN has gradually established security dialogue platforms such as the Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Thailand was one of the early advocates of these mechanisms, advocating "confidence-building measures" to reduce distrust among member states and maintain regional stability through multilateral security cooperation. The Thai military maintains frequent military exchanges with ASEAN member states and partners outside the region. For example, the "ADMM-Plus" mechanism, which includes eight dialogue partners including China, the United States, Japan, India, Australia, and New Zealand, provides Thailand with a multilateral platform to demonstrate its military expertise and security cooperation position. Thailand's active participation in joint exercises, peacekeeping operations, and humanitarian relief has enhanced its international security image.

**Mediation role in the South China Sea and Myanmar:** On the South China Sea dispute, Thailand adheres to the position of "neutrality and constructive participation" and advocates a peaceful settlement through the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the future Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea. As a non-claimant country, Thailand is neither involved in sovereignty disputes nor strives to act as a bridge between China and ASEAN claimants. For example, the Thai foreign minister has repeatedly proposed the principle of "ASEAN consistency", advocating that all parties handle disputes in a consensus manner to maintain ASEAN's unity and centrality. On the Myanmar issue, Thailand's geographical location determines that it is both a directly affected country and a potential mediator. Although the Thai government expressed "concern" after the 2021 coup d'état by the Myanmar military junta, it still adheres to the principle of "non-interference in internal affairs" and promotes ASEAN's policy of "constructive engagement". Thailand proposed to convene an "Informal Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Myanmar" in 2023 in an attempt to create conditions for political dialogue through the ASEAN mechanism and demonstrate its pragmatic and flexible security diplomacy style.

**Expansion of non-traditional security cooperation:** In the 21st century, Thailand's focus in ASEAN security cooperation has gradually shifted to non-traditional areas, including counter-terrorism, transnational crime, cybersecurity and public health. Thailand has led the establishment of the ASEANAPOL Intelligence Sharing Center and actively participates in the ASEAN Plan of Action to Combat Transnational Crime. In terms of cybersecurity, Thailand promotes the "ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy" and advocates the establishment of a regional information security response mechanism; In the field of public health, Thailand took the lead in promoting the establishment of the "ASEAN Public Health Emergency Response Mechanism" during the new crown epidemic and hosted a number of special meetings of health ministers to enhance regional epidemic prevention capabilities. These practices show that

Thailand, as an "institutional innovator", is promoting ASEAN's security issues from traditional defense to comprehensive security.

#### **4.2 Economic cooperation: economic diplomacy with connectivity and free trade as the main axis**

Active promoters in the construction of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC): Economic diplomacy is Thailand's most dynamic area under the ASEAN framework. As the earliest initiator of the AFTA initiative, Thailand has made historic contributions to promoting ASEAN economic integration. Since the AEC was officially established in 2015, the Thai government has always supported the process of removing tariff barriers, promoting investment facilitation and liberalization of trade in services. Direct investment by Thai companies within ASEAN has been growing, especially in neighboring countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, forming a regional production chain system.

Strategic Engagement of RCEP and Multilateral Trading Mechanisms: Thailand plays a significant role in the negotiations of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The signing of RCEP not only expands ASEAN's economic impact, but also provides Thailand with institutional access to major markets such as China, Japan and South Korea. The Thai government sees RCEP as an important pillar for consolidating its export-oriented economy, especially in areas such as automobiles, electronics, agricultural products, and digital services.

#### **4.3 Socio-cultural and people-to-people cooperation: Build regional identity with "soft power diplomacy"**

Education and workforce cooperation: Thailand has long attached importance to the construction of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), which aims to strengthen the social foundation of regional integration through education and human resource development. Thailand hosts the ASEAN University Network (AUN) Secretariat to promote mutual recognition of higher education and student exchange programs. Through the ASEAN Scholarship Program and the ASEAN Vocational Qualifications Framework, Thailand supports the integration of labor mobility and vocational certification in the region, providing human support for regional economic integration.

Cultural Exchange and Public Diplomacy: Thailand leverages its cultural advantages and tourism resources to enhance its regional identity through "soft power diplomacy." Mechanisms such as the ASEAN Culture Ministers' Meeting and the ASEAN Cultural Heritage Cities Network have received active support from Thailand. Thailand has also enhanced its cultural attractiveness and created an "open, harmonious and innovative" national image by holding activities such as the "ASEAN Film Festival" and the "ASEAN Food Festival".

Public health and social security cooperation: Thailand has played a leading role in epidemic prevention and control, health cooperation and social security. It advocates the establishment of an "ASEAN Health Community" and has put forward a number of initiatives in public health emergency management, vaccine research and development, and disease surveillance. Thailand's public health system is relatively complete and has become a model country for regional epidemic prevention experience.

#### **4.4 Environment and climate diplomacy: Advocate of ASEAN's sustainable agenda**

Recognizing the long-term threats of climate change and environmental degradation to Southeast Asia's development, Thailand has included "sustainable diplomacy" at the core of its ASEAN strategy. The "ASEAN Environment Ministers' Meeting (AMME)" led by Thailand has repeatedly proposed cooperation initiatives on ecological protection and renewable energy. During its ASEAN presidency in 2019, Thailand established the theme of "Sustainable

Partnership", promoted the establishment of the "ASEAN Sustainable Development Cooperation Fund", and proposed the "Blue Economy Cooperation Framework". Thailand also actively supports the implementation of the ASEAN Action Plan on Climate Change (AAPCC) and advocates the establishment of a "regional carbon trading mechanism" to promote emission reduction through market-oriented means. These practices show that Thailand is using environmental diplomacy as an important means to enhance the influence of the ASEAN system and its international image.

#### **4.5 Comprehensive assessment: from multilateral participation to regional leadership**

Looking at Thailand's diplomatic practice under the ASEAN framework, the following characteristics can be summarized:

High degree of institutionalization - Thailand embeds its diplomacy into the multilateral institutional network by actively participating in various ASEAN mechanisms;

Strong agenda setting skills – Thailand is good at proposing new issues and promoting regional consensus in the economic, social and environmental fields;

Flexible and pragmatic diplomatic style – Thailand's adherence to the strategy of "cooperation first, non-confrontation" in dealing with complex situations reflects the model of the ASEAN approach;

Regional influence of medium powers - Through the "institutional leverage effect", Thailand is not a dominant player in regional affairs, but an indispensable "hub country".

Therefore, it can be considered that Thailand's diplomatic practice under the ASEAN framework is a realistic projection of its strategic logic: maintaining security through multilateral participation, promoting development through economic cooperation, and shaping identity through social and environmental issues, so as to achieve a comprehensive diplomatic layout based on ASEAN, balanced as the path, and development as the goal.

### **5. Challenges and opportunities**

With the profound evolution of the global landscape and the in-depth development of ASEAN's regional cooperation, Thailand's diplomatic strategy under the ASEAN framework has ushered in unprecedented opportunities and multiple complex challenges. The structural uncertainty of its diplomatic environment is intensifying, and domestic political and economic contradictions, external major power competition, and differentiated development trends within ASEAN are intertwined, posing a double test to Thailand's strategic autonomy and policy stability. At the same time, emerging regional economic momentum, digital transformation and green development agenda provide Thailand with a new diplomatic breakthrough.

#### **5.1 The main challenges faced**

Domestic political instability restricts diplomatic continuity: Thailand's diplomatic strategy has long been influenced by the domestic political structure. Since 2006, Thailand has experienced several coups and changes of government, and the political system has shown an uncertain state of "half civil and half military". Political instability directly undermines the coherence and international credibility of foreign policy. For example, different governments have different positions on handling U.S.-China relations, participating in the Belt and Road Initiative, and ASEAN's leadership mechanism, making it difficult for Thailand to maintain a consistent voice on long-term issues. In addition, domestic social divisions and economic inequality have also affected Thailand's regional diplomatic agenda. Political turmoil often forces foreign policy decisions to be inward, with governments focusing more on domestic stability than regional leadership. This internal friction has weakened Thailand's agenda momentum within ASEAN and reduced its institutional influence.

Competitive pressure from major powers intensifies strategic space squeezing: Southeast Asia is currently becoming the forefront of strategic competition between China and the United States. The United States has strengthened its ties to regional allies through the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), while China has deepened its economic and infrastructure influence through mechanisms such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. Thailand's strategic maneuver space between the two is getting narrower. On the one hand, Thailand's military alliance with the United States remains solid, but the United States' criticism of Thailand's democracy and human rights situation has caused fluctuations in relations between the two sides. On the other hand, China is Thailand's largest trading partner and source of investment, and cooperation in China-Thailand railway and energy development continues to deepen. However, Thailand's over-reliance on either side could undermine its diplomatic autonomy. How to maintain a strategic balance in the competition of great powers while avoiding "choosing sides" has become the core problem facing Thailand's diplomacy.

Internal differentiation and limited "centrality" within ASEAN: Differences in economic development, political systems and security interests within ASEAN make it difficult to form a consistent position in dealing with external challenges. Issues such as the political crisis in Myanmar, the sovereignty dispute in the South China Sea and the implementation of the RCEP have exposed the limitations of ASEAN's "consensus model". Although Thailand has tried to play the role of mediator, its capabilities are limited by the trend of division in ASEAN as a whole. In addition, the rising influence of countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia in regional affairs also challenges Thailand's traditional leadership. Indonesia has gradually become ASEAN's "policy engine" by leading ASEAN's external security agenda and actively participating in G20 affairs; Thailand, on the other hand, has partially lost its past agenda initiative against the backdrop of domestic political turmoil. This relative weakening of its position makes it difficult for Thailand to maintain a long-term dominant role within ASEAN.

Global economic transformation and industrial structure dilemma: Thailand's economy has long relied on exports and tourism, but its traditional industries are under pressure due to the impact of global supply chain restructuring and geoeconomic competition. The implementation of RCEP has created new opportunities for Thailand, but it has also intensified competition with Vietnam, Malaysia and other countries in terms of manufacturing and foreign investment attraction.

In addition, the digital economy and green transformation require Thailand to carry out industrial upgrading, while domestic technological innovation capabilities and human resource reserves are still insufficient. If the ASEAN Cooperation Platform cannot be effectively used to promote technology transfer and knowledge sharing, Thailand may be marginalized in regional competition.

## 5.2 Strategic opportunities faced

Release of new regional economic momentum: ASEAN has become one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, and the integration of regional markets provides new development opportunities for Thailand. The official implementation of RCEP, the promotion of the ASEAN connectivity project and the launch of the "Digital ASEAN" strategy have injected new impetus into Thailand's economic diplomacy. With its geographical advantages and industrial foundation, Thailand is expected to play a role as a bridge connecting the Indochina Peninsula and ASEAN at sea in the restructuring of regional supply chains. In addition, cooperation between ASEAN countries in new energy, digital finance and smart city construction continues to deepen, and Thailand's "Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC)" plan and "Thailand 4.0" strategy can use these regional platforms to attract investment in high-end industries, so as to achieve industrial upgrading and sustainable growth.

Deepening of subregional cooperation and reuse of geographical advantages: Subregional cooperation in the Indochina Peninsula region (such as GMS, ACMECS, and Lancang-Mekong cooperation) is developing rapidly. Thailand is located at the core of the region, with convenient transportation, energy and trade networks, which can make it a hub for cross-border economy and infrastructure. By promoting cross-border rail, road and energy interconnection projects, Thailand can strengthen its geoeconomic advantages in subregional integration while expanding its political influence on neighboring countries.

Diplomatic space brought about by the expansion of multilateral mechanisms: ASEAN's cooperation mechanisms with China, Japan, South Korea, India, the United States, Europe and other major powers continue to deepen, providing Thailand with a new stage for multilateral diplomacy. Thailand can enhance its international visibility and influence regional policy agendas through multi-level mechanisms such as ASEAN+3, the East Asia Summit, APEC and G20.

In addition, climate change and sustainable development have become a global consensus, and Thailand can use its "bio-circular-green economy" (BCG) model to promote regional green cooperation and establish an image as a "sustainable development advocate", thereby expanding its soft power in global governance.

Strategic opportunities driven by digitalization and innovation: Digital transformation provides Thailand with new space for diplomatic and economic growth. ASEAN's Digital Master Plan 2025 emphasizes regional digital economic integration, while Thailand's foundation in e-commerce, fintech and digital infrastructure is relatively well-established. Thailand can play a more leading role in the ASEAN digital agenda by promoting cooperation in digital trade rule-making, cross-border data governance and cybersecurity.

### **5.3 The interaction of challenges and opportunities: rebalancing diplomatic strategies**

In the face of the coexistence of challenges and opportunities, Thailand needs to rebalance its diplomatic strategy. Thailand's diplomatic adjustment in the future may show the following trends:

From passive defense to active shaping: In the competitive landscape between China and the United States, Thailand should shift from the traditional "defensive balance" to "agenda-based balance", and take the initiative to propose issues and set cooperation frameworks through the ASEAN mechanism to enhance strategic dominance.

From economic cooperation to institutional innovation: Thailand can further promote institutional innovation in ASEAN, especially in the areas of digital economy, energy transition and climate governance, and propose feasible solutions to consolidate its position as a "regional agenda enabler".

Coordination from national interests to regional interests: Thailand needs to take on more roles in coordination and public goods supply within ASEAN while protecting its own economic interests. Thailand's diplomatic influence can only be consolidated in the long term if it is seen as a provider of regional public interests.

From traditional diplomacy to multidimensional diplomacy: In the future, Thailand should combine diplomacy with domestic development strategies, enhance the overall national soft power through new forms such as "public diplomacy", "urban diplomacy" and "digital diplomacy", and build an all-round and multi-level diplomatic network.

## **6. Conclusion**

Overall, Thailand's diplomatic strategy under the ASEAN framework is characterized by a combination of historical continuity and structural adjustment. From security dependence during the Cold War, to multilateralism led by economic cooperation after the Cold War, to

comprehensive diplomacy that takes into account security, development and institutional innovation today, Thailand's strategic path clearly reflects the logic of a medium-sized power in the reshaping of regional order.

First, Thailand's diplomatic practice shows that the embedding of the "ASEAN-based" system is the fundamental guarantee for its diplomatic stability. The ASEAN mechanism provides Thailand with a stable regional security environment and a platform for economic cooperation, allowing it to maintain relative independence in an uncertain international landscape. Through institutional participation and agenda setting, Thailand has not only safeguarded national security and economic interests, but also contributed to the institutional evolution of ASEAN.

Second, Thailand's "balanced diplomacy" strategy is its core tool to deal with external great power competition. In the face of structural pressure from Sino-US competition, Thailand has deepened its economic cooperation with China, maintained its alliance with the United States in security, and resolved the dilemma of choosing a side with ASEAN's "centrality" principle diplomatically. This flexible, pragmatic and non-confrontational strategic style reflects the typical "modalization" characteristics of ASEAN diplomacy and also demonstrates Thailand's role as a bridge in maintaining regional stability.

Third, the future direction of Thailand's diplomacy will emphasize "sustainability" and "innovation". With the rise of digital economy, green transformation and non-traditional security issues, Thailand is working hard to integrate the "Bio-Circular-Green Economy (BCG) model" into the ASEAN cooperation agenda to achieve the dual goals of economic structural upgrading and ecological diplomacy. Through the advocacy of innovative issues and the provision of regional public goods, Thailand is expected to shift from a "policy implementer" to an "agenda shaper" and enhance its regional institutional influence.

However, whether Thailand's diplomacy can continue to develop steadily depends on the predictability of domestic politics and the stability of social consensus. If domestic political turmoil continues, the coherence and credibility of foreign policy will be weakened. Therefore, the stability of internal governance and the coordination of external strategies are key prerequisites for Thailand to maintain its vitality and influence in the future ASEAN pattern.

To sum up, Thailand's diplomatic strategy under the ASEAN framework is a typical example of small regional countries flexibly responding to major power competition and achieving security and development through the multilateral system. In the future, if Thailand can continue to deepen cooperation, strengthen innovation issues and institutional leadership in the ASEAN mechanism, it will continue to play a key role as a "balancer and coordinator" in the political and economic order of Southeast Asia, providing institutionalized support for long-term peace and prosperity in the region.

## References

- [1] Yuan Chunsheng. 2024 Thailand Research and Development Report [J]. Southeast Asia Review, 2025, (04): 88-100. DOI: 10.20226/j.cnki.issn1003-2479.2025.04.001.
- [2] Liu Shutong. "From Culture to Cultural Tourism" - A Study on the Transformation of the Music Culture of the Lahu Ethnic Group in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand from the Perspective of Area Studies [J]. Journal of Guizhou University (Arts Edition), 2025, 39(02): 109-117. DOI: 10.15958/j.cnki.gdxbysb.2025.02.014.
- [3] Li Qingying, Wang Xueru, Zhang Cha. Sichuan-Thailand Basic Education Cooperation under the Background of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement [J]. Foreign Language and Literature Forum, 2024, (01): 363-373.
- [4] Peng Zhwei, Li Chunlei. Research on the Regional Petroleum Geological Characteristics of the Southwest of Phitsanulok Basin, Thailand [J]. Journal of Jiangnan Petroleum Institute, 2024, 37(03): 39-41.
- [5] Hu Xiaowen. Research on the Construction and External Communication of Guangxi's Economic

- Image towards ASEAN Countries - Taking the Bangkok Post of Thailand as an Example [J]. *Language and Culture Research*, 2024, 32(02): 21-24. DOI: 10.19954/j.cnki.lcr.2024.02.025.
- [6] Peng Wan. Research on the Process, Motivation and Path Selection of China's Tourism Diplomacy towards Thailand [J]. *Northern Economic and Trade*, 2024, (02): 148-152.
- [7] Deng Han. The Triple Identities and Interest Acquisition of Thailand and Vietnam in the Lancang-Mekong Regional Cooperation [J]. *Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies*, 2023, (03): 132-165+168.
- [8] Song Shiyuan. Research on China's Economic Diplomacy towards Thailand after the Cold War [D]. *Guangxi University for Nationalities*, 2023. DOI: 10.27035/d.cnki.ggxmc.2023.000075.
- [9] Qu Jie. Research on ASEAN Countries' "Third Party" Diplomacy towards Japan under the Context of Sino-US Strategic Competition [D]. *Yunnan University*, 2023. DOI: 10.27456/d.cnki.gyndu.2023.000114.
- [10] PHAENGMA (Bai Fangyu) S. Research on Thailand's "Balanced Diplomacy between China and the United States" Policy [D]. *Shanghai International Studies University*, 2023. DOI: 10.27316/d.cnki.gswyu.2023.000651.
- [11] THUNCHANOK A. Research on Thailand's Foreign Policy during World War II [D]. *Shanghai International Studies University*, 2022. DOI: 10.27316/d.cnki.gswyu.2022.001422.
- [12] Xia Lei. Research on the United States' Cultural Diplomacy towards Thailand in the Early Cold War Period (1947-1961) [D]. *Fujian Normal University*, 2022. DOI: 10.27019/d.cnki.gfjsu.2022.002254.
- [13] Hu Huiyin. With the Full Construction of the China-Thailand Railway, Thailand's Economic and Trade Interconnection with the Region Accelerates [N]. *21st Century Business Herald*, 2022-07-18(009). DOI: 10.28723/n.cnki.nsjbd.2022.002672.
- [14] Wang Zhen. Thai Regionalism and Its Attempt to Lead Sub-regional Cooperation in the Indochinese Peninsula [J]. [15] Li Jiangnan. Research on Thailand's Sub-regional Cooperation Strategy from the Perspective of Geopolitical Economy [D]. *Yunnan University*, 2022. DOI: 10.27456/d.cnki.gyndu.2022.003662.
- [15] Liu Yuhang. Investigation and Research on the Current Situation of Campus Sports Culture in Middle Schools in Bangkok and Udon Thani Province, Thailand [D]. *Shaanxi Normal University*, 2022. DOI: 10.27292/d.cnki.gsxfu.2022.001283.
- [16] Zhang Rongmei, Ma Yinfu. Ideal and Reality: Thailand's Asian Regionalism [J]. *Indian Ocean Economic Review*, 2020, (04): 104-120+159. DOI: 10.16717/j.cnki.53-1227/f.2020.04.007.
- [17] [Yang Luhui, Li Caijun. Research on National Follow Behavior from the Perspective of the Follower Theory: A Case Study of Thailand, the United Kingdom, and Japan's Follow Policies towards the United States [J]. *International Review*, 2018, (05): 95-110.
- [18] Li Hengjun, Chen Yushan. The Establishment of Modern Diplomatic Relations between China and Thailand: A Study Centered on the Efforts for Formal Diplomatic Relations between the Two Countries in the 1930s (1932-1946) [J]. *South Seas Studies*, 2014, (04): 97-104. DOI: 10.14073/j.cnki.nywtj.2014.04.011.
- [19] Li Min. On the Reasons for Thailand's Successful Maintenance of National Sovereignty and Independence in the 19th Century [J]. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 2012, (05): 106-112. DOI: 10.19561/j.cnki.sas.2012.05.