In its contemporary pattern of relations with the outside world, Thailand’s famously pragmatic path has become increasingly patchy, captive to a wrenching political maelstrom at home. Until its political drama reaches a conclusion — which will include the royal succession and its aftermath — Thailand’s foreign policy is likely to appear inert, makeshift and downright murky.

The turmoil that began even before the 2006 coup that unseated the government of Thaksin Shinawatra unleashed stark political divisions that destroyed the domestic consensus that governed policymaking for six decades. Overwhelmed by domestic concerns, Thailand is likely to be out of action in a number of foreign policy areas, while its engagement may appear tentative and haphazard.

This short treatment of the outlook for Thai foreign policy briefly traces historical patterns and focuses on the trends and dynamics of the past decade in order to look at the challenges and prospects that will confront Thai policymakers.

**FOREIGN POLICY LEGACY**

Until recently, Thai foreign policy was renowned for its highly effective flexibility and pragmatism. Known as Siam until 1939, Thailand’s pattern of foreign policy engagement was patently shrewd. The country weathered a century of colonization, two world wars and four decades of ideological struggle between two opposing superpowers. Its geographical position as a buffer between British India (which included Burma) and Malaya on the one hand and French Indochina on the other was instrumental to

**Battle Between Continuity and Change: Thailand’s Topsy-Turvy Foreign Policy Directions**

By Thitinan Pongsudhirak
its survival. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, alliance formation was critical.

Bangkok ensured itself a favorable, albeit marginal, place at Versailles by joining the winning side late in the First World War. It adroitly and fortuitously came out of the Second World War relatively unscathed despite having officially participated in Axis efforts. Against all odds, Bangkok also played its hand well in the Cold War. During those tumultuous times, Thailand’s relationships with the major powers in the region fluctuated, and its engagement with Europe took a back seat in favor of the United States.

Thailand’s alliance with the US, dating from the 1830s, solidified during the Cold War as it supported the US-led coalition against the forces of communist insurgency at home and communist expansionism in Southeast Asia. Its relationships with the Soviet Union and China, as well as with communist Indochina, dimmed correspondingly. To fortify its security, Bangkok became a founding member of successive regional organizations, culminating with the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1967.

Bangkok’s overarching objectives in foreign policy were aimed at maintaining independence and territorial sovereignty. Thailand’s resource-rich agriculture cushioned external vulnerabilities and provided income. Successive Thai governments also were decidedly autocratic, including a 25-year period of military-authoritarian rule that began in 1947, but they conducted foreign policy consistently. Relative domestic stability and the ability to deter external threats enabled Thailand’s export-oriented economic base to expand steadily from the early 1960s. In the latter years of the Cold War, Thai economic dynamism was internationally recognized, reflected in double-digit GDP growth rates during 1988-90. By the mid-1990s, The Economist magazine predicted that Thailand would be among the ten largest economies in the world by 2020, notwithstanding the unanticipated 1997-98 economic crisis that doomed that dream.

**Until recently, Thai foreign policy was renowned for its highly effective flexibility and pragmatism.**

**THE MILITARY AND BUREAUCRATS VS. POLITICIANS**

The waning years of the Cold War also witnessed the first crucial shift in Thai foreign policy dynamics. Until then, foreign policy was the exclusive domain of elite, foreign-educated technocrats within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). They enjoyed substantial latitude, operating with a high degree of political insulation and autonomy. The MFA’s influence was especially pronounced during the period of military-authoritarian rule in the 1950s and 60s. What was dubbed “bureaucratic polity” prevailed as many of the technocrats hailed from aristocratic and patrician backgrounds associated with the royal families of prior decades. By the late 1980s, educational opportunities and capital accumulation on the back of sustained economic development and uneasy democratization gave rise to new business groups and a new breed of elected politicians who began changing the equation.

The election of Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan in 1988 shifted the conduct of Thai
foreign policy in favor of elected politicians at the expense of the MFA’s policymaking elites. They clashed over Chatichai’s policy of turning Indochina’s “battlefields into marketplaces.” Trade benefits and economic interests superseded military and bureaucratic preferences still hung up on outdated Cold War logic and strategy. Relations with the US now had to make room for the realignment with China that began in the mid-1970s. ASEAN was an important foreign policy pillar but Bangkok was intent on occupying more space in the region and the world at large.

The February 1991 putsch, justified on the grounds of the politicians’ unmanageable corruption and graft, restored the bureaucracy-military axis. Thai foreign policy reverted to a focus on ASEAN, bilateral alliances with major powers (particularly the US) and multilateralism. Continuity trumped change. The rest of the 1990s was characterized by regionalism and regionalization anchored around ASEAN, including the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Asia-Europe Meetings (ASEM), and, subsequently, the ASEAN +3 process in the wake of the 1997-98 crisis.

Beyond these were the major powers, with the US as the linchpin but with China and Japan in closer orbit, followed at the outer ring by multilateral bodies like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. Foreign policy tracked regional and international dynamics as opposed to Chatichai’s short-lived assertive posturing.

THAKSIN WHIRLWIND
The political juggernaut embodied by Thaksin’s election in 2001 changed all that. In some ways, Thaksin was the second coming of Chatichai. The two shared the same coterie of policy advisors, and they both favored elected politicians and ministers over unelected bureaucrats and generals, who were viewed with disdain in an era of intensifying democratization. Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai party became the first ever to be re-elected and to form a one-party government. Thaksin and his associates came from big businesses that rode the economic boom of 1988-95 to political power. The TRT soon monopolized Thailand’s political space, dominating and undermining the institutional components and inner-workings of the popular and reform-driven 1997 constitution.

Thaksin’s foreign policy objectives were bold and assertive, reminiscent of Chatichai’s. The Prime Minister’s Office and Government House lorded it over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Their foreign policy prerogatives departed from convention. Amid a crowded international landscape of international and regional organizations, the Thaksin foreign policy team set out to carve its own space in international affairs with very limited input from the MFA. Its key initiatives exhibited the ambitions of an aspiring middle power.

Thaksin’s aggressive rule was marked by a plethora of policy initiatives at home and abroad. In foreign policy, three stood out, namely the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), the Irrawaddy-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic
Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) and bilateral free-trade agreements.

The ACD was premised on fostering intra-regional cooperation in Asia and mobilizing financial resources for its member economies in order to lessen reliance on the West. It was Asia-wide and spanned from the Korean Peninsula to the Middle East, with mainland Southeast Asia as its center of gravity and Thailand at the epicenter. Its objective was to leverage Thailand’s strategic resources, particularly its geographic location at the center of the Asian land mass. The ACD also featured the “Asia Bond” project, which put forward the idea that Asian economies needed to harness the region’s abundant savings for use in the region instead of depositing them in Western countries. The ACD held several ministerial meetings, and attracted more than two dozen member states, yet ultimately it became a major policy overreach for Thaksin, and is currently in tatters after his downfall.

Within the ACD’s range was the ACMECS, spawned in 2003 after Thaksin met with his counterparts from Burma, Laos and Cambodia. At that time, Thaksin’s popularity and power were hitting their peak, with him being touted as a potential regional leader to follow in the footsteps of Malaysia’s then-retiring Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. In that context, ACMECS was Thaksin’s springboard as an economic development plan for mainland Southeast Asia. It envisaged Thailand giving financial assistance to reduce the development disparity between itself and Burma, Laos and Cambodia. (Vietnam joined in 2004, rounding out the group.) A Thai fund of 10 billion baht was pledged in a mixture of soft loans and outright aid transfers. With characteristic fanfare, Thaksin declared Thailand an aid donor and no longer an aid recipient. However, ACMECS was attached with two strings, namely baht-denominated loans and aid and procurement contracts exclusively reserved for Thai firms.

Bilateral FTAs during this period bolstered Thailand’s relations with a host of leading major and middle powers. These FTA negotiations included Thailand’s largest trading partners, sources of foreign direct investment and export markets. At its most frenetic, Thaksin’s FTA strategy including negotiations or agreements with Australia, Bahrain, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Peru, and the US. In addition, the Thaksin government promoted formal trade and economic cooperation with South Asian economies.

GLOBAL AMBITION, DOMESTIC OPPOSITION

As ambitious as the strategy was, the FTA with Australia was the only significant and lasting pact to come out of Thaksin’s tenure. The Thai-US FTA negotiations, in particular, were indicative of Thaksin’s foreign policy rise and domestic demise. He provided staunch Thai support for the global war on terror, sending troops to both Afghanistan and Iraq, in exchange for the George W. Bush administration’s declaration of Thailand as a major non-NATO ally and the commencement of FTA negotiations in November 2003 when Thaksin was riding high as the host of the APEC summit.

The Thai-US FTA talks engendered fierce civil society opposition, manifested in the “FTA Watch” coalition of NGOs against Thaksin’s rule. It snowballed and spilled into a broad-based movement, the yellow-shirted People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), whose demonstrations over a long trail of corruption and graft allegations against Thaksin and his cronies provided the conditions for the September 2006 military coup.

During the coup period of 2006-07, FTA Watch and like-minded networks of activists and NGOs weaved their preferences into the constitution-drafting process, resulting in the controversial
As Thaksin’s overextended foreign policy ambitions shattered, the foreign policy pendulum swung back in the opposite direction. Change, boldness and assertiveness would be subsumed under continuity.

Article 190 of the 2007 charter that mandates parliamentary approval prior to and after international agreements are signed. This article has become symptomatic of Thailand’s political quagmire, a constitutional basis for a host of criminal indictments and convictions of former ministers and politicians who performed and prospered under Thaksin. It was designed to minimize abuses and graft by the executive branch and to promote accountability, but taken too far it can be an albatross on Thailand’s foreign policy.

As Thaksin’s overextended foreign policy ambitions shattered, the foreign policy pendulum swung back in the opposite direction. Change, boldness and assertiveness would be subsumed under continuity.

How things are going can be seen in Thailand’s role in and chairmanship of ASEAN during 2008-09. Unlike the largest ASEAN member, Indonesia, which now has the G-20 as a forum for an enhanced international profile, Bangkok is bound to ASEAN as its primary alliance and platform. But Thai foreign policy continuity has not returned this time. After much turmoil, the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva took power in early 2008 but is widely seen as compromised and partial to pro-establishment forces. Its foreign minister was drawn from the inner sanctum of the anti-Thaksin movement. Thailand’s protracted domestic crisis has constrained its ASEAN chairmanship. Owing to domestic polarization and violent street demonstrations, the annual East Asia Summit, an offshoot of the ASEAN +3 process with the addition of India, Australia and New Zealand, skipped a year because it could not be held in Thailand as planned. Thailand will host the fourth gathering of the EAS in 2009, instead of 2008.

After nearly a decade of topsy-turvy politics that began in 2001 and the last four years of crisis, few Thais seem to doubt Thaksin’s corruption and abuses of power. But a growing number also yearn for a cleaner embodiment of Thaksin’s foreign policy vision, leadership and chutzpah. The Abhisit government has had a lackluster and uninspiring foreign policy performance. To be a “player” in a middle power mold that matters in Southeast Asia and beyond, Thai policymakers will have to balance the pendulum and recognize and maximize Thailand’s strategic resources. These include democratic legitimacy, geographic centrality, resilient economic growth, a fine diplomatic corps, eclectic relationships with all of the region’s major powers and tangible and intangible cultural and economic attributes that have attracted both tourists and investors even in times of crisis. The foreign policy establishment should be mindful of Thailand’s strong domestic attributes in order to ensure the best outcome once the dust of crisis eventually settles.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak is an Associate Professor and the Director of the Institute of Security and International Studies in the faculty of political science at Bangkok’s Chulalongkorn University.