

Bridging Oceans and Diplomacy: Geopolitics of 21st-Century Bamboo Diplomacy on Thailand's Kra Isthmus Infrastructure Projects

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The logistics infrastructure projects on Thailand's Kra Isthmus, which connects two oceans, demonstrate the strategic use of resources for geopolitical purposes, particularly in foreign policy. Historically, the Thai government has instrumentalized these projects to manage relationships with global powers; this reflects the adaptive nature of bamboo diplomacy. Under Prime Ministers Prayuth Chan-o-cha (2014–23) and Srettha Thavasin (2023–24), this strategic approach still persisted. This paper examines the geopolitical significance of the Kra Isthmus projects, focusing on their role in foreign policy within practical geopolitics. By analyzing published interviews of key figures related to the infrastructure projects, actions of Thai and international stakeholders, and commentaries about geopolitical situations from reputable think tanks, this research applies a practical geopolitical reasoning framework adapted from Gearóid Ó Tuathail (2002b) to the international relations concept of bamboo diplomacy. It highlights the Thai government's efforts to use the Thai Canal and Thai Land Bridge projects to balance international relations, enhance national interests, and avoid interstate conflict.

Keywords: Thai Canal, land bridge, Kra Isthmus, bamboo diplomacy, practical geopolitics, infrastructure

1 Introduction

The Kra Isthmus, located in southern Thailand, holds potential for linking the Gulf of Thailand (Pacific Ocean) with the Andaman Sea (Indian Ocean) while bypassing the Malay Peninsula. This puts Thailand in an important position geopolitically as well as geoeconomically (Fig. 1). At its narrowest point, spanning just 50 kilometers, the isthmus is poised to become a critical maritime conduit upon the completion and full

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Fig. 1 Map Showing the Strategic Position of Kra Isthmus and Thailand

Source: Made by author

operationalization of planned logistics projects (Tseng and Pilcher 2022; Dwicahyo and Saragih 2024). Proposals such as the Kra Canal (now referred to as the Thai Canal) and the Thai Land Bridge have emerged as key infrastructure projects, designed to potentially cut maritime shipping distances by up to 722.2 nautical miles (Yuan *et al.* 2020). These projects underscore the strategic importance of the region as a potential hub for international trade and commerce.

Infrastructure development is deeply intertwined with political agendas, serving not only economic but also geopolitical functions (Westphal 2008; DeGood 2020). Large-scale projects, such as those envisioned for the Kra Isthmus, have historically been employed to advance foreign policy objectives. In other regions, like the South Caucasus, infrastructure projects have similarly been used to navigate and influence geopolitical landscapes (Davtyan 2014). Taking a practical geopolitics perspective, this research examines how infrastructure development on the Kra Isthmus has been instrumentalized as a promising tool for Thailand's foreign policy, particularly in the context of regional and global geopolitical tensions, to safeguard its status quo and national interests.

This study focuses on “bamboo diplomacy,” a classic view of diplomatic strategy

where Thailand seeks to balance and manage relationships with global powers through adaptability and resilience. Infrastructure development on the Kra Isthmus serves as a lens to explore this diplomacy in practice. The research compares two significant periods: the administrations of Prime Ministers Prayuth Chan-o-cha (2014–23) and Srettha Thavisin (2023–24). Both governments adopted different approaches in their dealings with foreign stakeholders, reflecting varied strategies in executing Thailand’s foreign policy in contemporary geopolitical situations.

Under Prayuth’s administration, foreign investment, particularly from China in the Thai Canal project, led to criticisms of a “bamboo break”—a deviation from the flexible balancing act typically associated with bamboo diplomacy. In contrast, the Srettha administration emphasized a more traditional approach, seeking to balance investments from multiple stakeholders and thereby upholding the tenets of classic bamboo diplomacy. However, this research argues that Prayuth’s engagement with China, despite appearing one-sided, should not be viewed as a break nor an erosion but rather as an evolution in Thailand’s diplomatic strategy.

The central question of this study is: How have infrastructure projects on the Kra Isthmus been instrumentalized by the Thai government in advancing bamboo diplomacy across the Prayuth and Srettha administrations?

The following sections outline the theoretical framework and review the literature on bamboo diplomacy and practical geopolitics, focusing on how geopolitical narratives shape infrastructure projects on the Kra Isthmus. The methodology section details the application of Gearóid Ó Tuathail’s (2002b) practical geopolitical reasoning framework to this case. Finally, the analysis of the two periods offers insights into the dynamics of bamboo diplomacy, highlighting how infrastructure projects serve as platforms for Thailand’s evolving foreign policy strategies.

2 Bamboo Diplomacy’s Role in Practical Geopolitics

Bamboo diplomacy has long underpinned Thailand’s foreign policy, which is characterized by its ability to balance between competing global powers while protecting national interests (Jittipat 2023). The metaphor of the bamboo—with its deep roots and flexible branches—captures Thailand’s resilience and adaptability in a dynamic geopolitical landscape (Pongphisoot 2016). This approach enables the Thai government to engage multiple powers, avoiding confrontation and ensuring survival through pragmatism and flexibility (Pavin 2022; 2024). In each historical period, the Siamese or Thai government has adapted and refined its strategies within the overar-

ching framework of bamboo diplomacy, tailoring its approach to the spatial and temporal contexts of the global geopolitical landscape.

Despite its utility, bamboo diplomacy has faced criticism for lacking theoretical depth. Some argue it functions more as a mechanism for appeasing foreign powers and preserving elite dominance than as a coherent strategy. Critics view its flexibility as opportunistic, driven by shifting allegiances to maintain power rather than strategic foresight (Nidhi 2022). This skepticism raises valid questions about whether bamboo diplomacy is a truly resilient framework or merely a short-term survival mechanism that risks being applied to justify any action Thailand takes in the international arena.

However, this paper argues that bamboo diplomacy is best understood as a framework for analyzing the consistent logic underpinning Thailand's foreign policy, specifically its adaptability to shifting geopolitical contexts in order to safeguard national interests. Far from being a weakness, this flexibility has allowed Thailand, as a medium-sized nation positioned between major powers, to balance relationships and navigate complex geopolitical shifts. While criticisms rightly highlight bamboo diplomacy's opportunistic aspects, this paper defends the framework as a necessary and pragmatic response to Thailand's geopolitical realities. By applying the concept critically, particularly through a comparative analysis of the Prayuth and Srettha governments, the paper demonstrates how the framework reveals patterns of balancing, tilting, and rebalancing, offering strategic insights while recognizing its limitations.

Tracking back through the historical employment of bamboo diplomacy by Siam and then Thailand, it may be observed that Siamese elites employed the framework to navigate power dynamics and safeguard autonomy, notably during the early modern era to evade colonization by balancing between the British and French Empires (Kislenko 2002; Pavin 2022). Strategies included opening free-trading ports for the British and imposing fixed taxation on British imports (Bruce 1969; Goldman 1972; Thongchai 1994). Siam's diplomacy often reflected an adaptive approach in order to maintain the country's sovereignty and manage its relations with regional powers.

During World War II, Thailand aligned with Japan to reclaim lost territories but simultaneously supported the Free Thai Movement, which established a government-in-exile in Washington and prevented US condemnation after the war (Haseman 2002; Kislenko 2002). Similarly, during the Cold War Thailand allied with the United States but employed "flexible diplomacy" under Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to adapt to early détente and balance relations with both sides of the global divide (Fineman 1997; Jittiphat 2022).

In the post-Cold War era, Thailand's geopolitical landscape shifted following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, prompting a reassessment of alliances with China and

Japan (Pavin 2010). This trend gained traction under the Prayuth military government after the 2014 coup (Charoenvattananukul 2020; Jittipat 2021; 2023; Pongphisoot 2023). While some scholars view Prayuth's era as the end of bamboo diplomacy, others argue that Thailand remained a "swing state," aligning with major powers based on opportunities available at the time (Hemmings 2023; Pavin 2024). The next government, led by Srettha (2023–24), sought to rebalance relations by reengaging with the United States for investment while maintaining strong ties with China, a reflection of traditional bamboo diplomacy (Heijmans 2023; Regalado 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, national interests and stability have traditionally been intertwined in Thailand's foreign policy. Historically, national interest was equated with survival and security, while stability referred to the nation's positioning in global affairs (Ebegbulem 2010). Today, however, national interest has evolved to prioritize economic concerns, while stability still largely pertains to foreign affairs. Some scholars continue to view these two concepts as interdependent, arguing that economic prosperity and security remain tightly linked (De Brouwer 2020; Hoshiro 2024). In this paper I distinguish between the two, though both form critical components of bamboo diplomacy's roots.

While bamboo diplomacy has often been analyzed within the realist framework of international relations, there is a gap in connecting it to practical geopolitics—the study of how states implement foreign policy strategies in real-world contexts (Ó Tuathail 2002a; Ouellette and Weiss 2015). This paper addresses the gap by examining infrastructure projects, such as those on the Kra Isthmus, as instruments of foreign policy. The isthmus serves as more than an economic venture; it is a geopolitical nexus that shapes Thailand's interactions with global powers.

By framing bamboo diplomacy within practical geopolitics, this paper highlights how Thailand's infrastructure projects serve as tools for navigating global power dynamics. Through this lens, criticisms of bamboo diplomacy as opportunistic can be reevaluated as practical responses to the need for balance in a complex geopolitical environment.

3 Infrastructure Projects and Geopolitical Discourses

Infrastructure projects, whether in logistics, energy, or transportation, are deeply intertwined with geopolitical considerations from their inception. As Trevor Birkenholtz (2023) has argued, these projects, despite not yet being constructed or operationalized, have spatial-geopolitical dimensions that not only reshape territorial boundaries

but also generate tensions and contestation among stakeholders. Infrastructure, therefore, becomes a battleground for competing geopolitical narratives, reflecting broader struggles over power, influence, and strategic control.

Historically, projects like the Suez and Panama Canals were driven by geopolitical motives from the planning stages. The Suez Canal, championed by figures like Klemens von Metternich and Ferdinand de Lesseps, aimed to boost European prosperity and strengthen Europe's ties with the Arabian region by reducing shipping times to the East (De Lesseps 1976; Šedivý 2022). Similarly, the Panama Canal plan advanced US naval dominance by linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans (Ciprian 2009). In the twenty-first century the Nicaragua Canal, supported by China, emerged as a challenge to US influence, reflecting China's growing geopolitical ambitions (Turzi 2017; McCall and Taylor 2018).

In contemporary times, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) illustrates how infrastructure advances geopolitical goals. The BRI's network of overland and maritime routes aims to enhance connectivity and assert China's influence in global trade (Anastasiadou 2019). By creating alternatives to established routes like the Suez Canal, the BRI is reshaping geopolitical landscapes, with major implications for regions like the Middle East and Central Asia (Noorali and Ahmadi 2022). China's strategic use of infrastructure reflects its ambition to extend its global reach (Lin 2019; Oakes 2021).

Infrastructure projects also serve as powerful tools of foreign policy, shaping international relations in regions such as the South Caucasus. In nations like Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, critical infrastructure in transportation, energy, and water management is central to regional dynamics, influencing both cooperation and conflict (Barry 2013; Davtyan 2014). These projects underscore the role of infrastructure as not just physical entities but as political and strategic instruments that can alter regional power balances.

Even unfinished projects, such as Thailand's proposed Thai Canal and Land Bridge, carry significant geopolitical weight. These two projects symbolize Thailand's strategic ambitions and its potential role as a key player in global trade routes, particularly in the context of China's BRI and other regional initiatives. The mere proposal of infrastructure projects sparks debates about power, influence, and economic integration, reflecting the complex interplay between national aspirations and global geopolitics.

In essence, infrastructure is both shaped by and shapes geopolitical discourses. Whether completed or not, infrastructure projects reflect the ambitions of states and the strategic aspirations of global powers. Understanding the intersection between

geopolitics and infrastructure is thus essential for comprehending contemporary power dynamics and international relations.

4 Geopolitical Importance of Kra Isthmus Infrastructure Projects

The proposed Thai (Kra) Canal has been highlighted in numerous studies for its significant geopolitical and economic potential. Strategically located, the canal could position Thailand as a major player in Southeast Asia, generating up to USD 380 billion annually from fees and spurring investments in industries like transshipment, heavy industry, and tourism (Rhoden 2015; Natthapong 2020). In addition to economic benefits, the canal could enhance national security by providing a direct military route to the south, helping Thailand secure its territorial waters against piracy and illegal migration (Amonthep 2002; Keawwimol 2005).

Neighboring countries would also stand to benefit. The canal could strengthen Thailand's energy ties with Laos and Myanmar by facilitating energy imports and fostering regional cooperation (Amonthep 2002). Vietnam's port cities would likely experience economic growth from the new trade routes (Phan 2022), while China, a major backer of the project, sees the canal as a way to reduce its reliance on the Strait of Malacca and bolster its BRI strategy (Lam 2018; Menon 2018; Storey 2019).

However, not all impacts would be positive. Singapore could see its strategic position weakened as the canal would challenge its role as a regional maritime hub (Jeevan *et al.* 2018; Ho 2020). Additionally, the canal could exacerbate regional tensions, particularly between China and India, potentially intensifying the rivalry in Southeast Asia between China and the US-led coalition—an alliance aimed at contesting the growing Chinese sphere of influence and including some Indo-Pacific countries such as India, Japan, and Australia (Sulong 2012; Babones 2020).

Despite its promise, the Thai Canal faced significant financial and geographical challenges. This led to a shift in focus to the Thai Land Bridge as an alternative to a canal (MGR Online 2021). The main reasons for transitioning from a canal to a land bridge consisted of financial, geographical, and domestic geopolitical concerns. The Land Bridge project, a system of railroads and highways connecting the Andaman Sea to the Gulf of Thailand, became a new geopolitical battleground between the US-led coalition and China, especially under the Srettha administration, which actively sought investment from both powers (Takahashi 2022; Ehrlich and Crispin 2024).

Historically, infrastructure projects on the Kra Isthmus have been used as diplomatic tools. In 1667 King Narai allowed a French engineer to survey the area for a



Fig. 2 Potential Kra (Thai) Canal Routes

Source: Made by author based on information from Trisadikhun (2022)

trade route, though the project was abandoned after the king's death (Amonthep 2002). Later, during the reigns of Kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, the canal project resurfaced amid British and French colonial competition, but it ultimately stalled due to financial and geographical concerns (Nattawut 1982; Dobbs 2016; Nana 2022). The canal symbolized Southeast Asia's delicate power balance during this period, reflecting the region's colonial dynamics. In the twentieth century the canal project experienced multiple revivals (Fig. 2) but faced persistent setbacks, including geographical obstacles and political instability (Rouillard and Saito 2013; Khempatr 2022).

During Prayuth's government (2014–23) the project resurfaced as the Thai Canal (Route 9A) with foreign support, mainly in the form of financial and technological

help, marking a return of foreign engagement that had been absent for much of the twentieth century (Shira 2017; Asian News International 2020c). However, the project is expected to cost up to USD 30 billion (as of the relatively lower inflation rate back in the early 2000s), which is considered too much for Thailand to manage on its own; and the project is consistently criticized for its feasibility when seeking international investments (Storey 2019). Another concern is over the mountainous terrain of the Kra Isthmus, which complicates excavation. There are also fears over the separatist movements in Southern Thailand, which might worsen the domestic geopolitical situation (Naing 2022). Due to the persistent financial and geographical challenges, the government of Prayuth in 2020 decided to pivot from a canal to the Land Bridge.

The Land Bridge is a land-logistics system linking Ranong Port to Chumphon Port, with a motorway and railroad to circumvent budget constraints and avoid dividing the southern region (Fig. 3) (Nontarat 2020; MGR Online 2021). After the project was initiated by the Prayuth administration in September 2020, it remained in the initial study stage, delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the transition to Srettha's administration in 2023. The new logistics project was viewed more favorably than the canal project by the Thai government as it reduced the cost of construction to USD

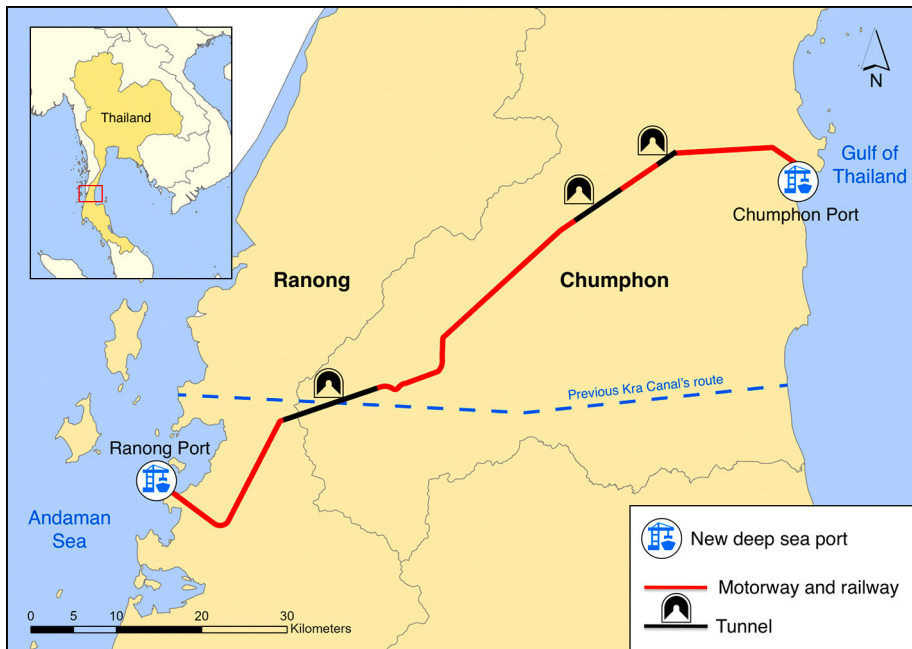


Fig. 3 Land Bridge Project Route

Source: Made by author based on information from Thai Post (2023)

11 billion in the first phase—with ports, a railway, and one direct motorway—and around USD 28–29 billion for the whole system. Even though the transshipment process requires offloading containers at the ports, transiting via land transportation, and unloading once again at the other port, it is expected to cut the transit time compared to the Malacca Strait route by five days and reduce shipping costs by 15 percent. The project also provides a new opportunity for land transportation directly up to the Indochina countries and China without passing through the South China Sea (Nongluck 2023; *Bangkok Post* 2024a).

Despite the extensive literature on the Kra Isthmus's potential geopolitical impact, there is limited research on how the two infrastructure projects have shaped Thailand's foreign policy (Menon 2018; Cogan 2023). This research aims to fill that gap by examining the geopolitical narratives surrounding these infrastructure projects and their broader implications for Thailand's foreign policy.

5 Methodology (Discourse Analysis)

This research adopts a longitudinal approach to explore how bamboo diplomacy has been deployed through infrastructure projects over time. The core focus is on analyzing the geopolitical discourses surrounding these projects and how they reflect Thailand's foreign policy strategies concerning different stakeholder nations (Ó Tuathail 2002b; Müller 2011). To achieve this, discourse analysis is employed as the primary methodological framework.

5.1 Data Collection

Data was collected through online sources using targeted keywords such as “Thai Canal,” “Thai Land Bridge,” and “(foreign) investment” in both Thai and English. Sources included news websites, Nexis Uni, and Google News. The comprehensive lists of keywords and sources of information are provided in Tables 1 and 2. For the Prayuth period (May 2014–August 2023), a variety of materials were analyzed: interviews with the prime minister and other key officials, government policies, state PR campaigns, news reports, parliamentary transcripts, and online video interviews. These sources were crucial for understanding Thailand's geopolitical positioning and the use of bamboo diplomacy during this period. Additionally, the geopolitical perspectives of foreign stakeholders, such as China and India, were analyzed through targeted English-language keyword searches.

For the Srettha period (August 2023–August 2024), with a focus on the Thai

Table 1 Keywords for Searching Data on the Prayuth Period

Types of Datasets	First Keyword	Following Keyword	Sources
Thai Side (mostly in Thai)			
Published interviews with prime minister and cabinet	สัมภาษณ์ (interview) +	คลองไทย (Thai Canal) or คลองกระ (Kra Canal) or แลนด์บริดจ์ (Land Bridge) or	☐ Royal Thai Government official news website ☐ YouTube ☐ Palang Pracharat Party's social media page ☐ News media (in Thai) ○ Thairath Online ○ Manager Online ○ Thai PBS ○ <i>Matichon</i> ○ Voice TV ○ Nation ○ Standard ○ etc. ☐ Google
Policies, campaigns, PR, and media on the government side	นโยบาย (policy) or ผลักดัน (push forward) or สนับสนุน (advocate) or no first keyword +	ขุดคลองไทย (excavating Thai Canal) or ลงทุนคลองไทย (Thai Canal investment) or ลงทุนแลนด์บริดจ์ (Land Bridge investment)	☐ Royal Thai Government official news website ☐ Palang Pracharat Party's social media page ☐ Parliament's official website and policy archives ☐ Prayuth's social media account ☐ Google
News articles, academic articles, and commentaries	—		☐ Various news websites (as mentioned earlier) ☐ Commentaries from experts ☐ Google ☐ Google Scholar ☐ ThaiJo (Thai academic corpus)

Table 1 continued

Types of Datasets	First Keyword	Following Keyword	Sources
Foreign Stakeholders			
Mostly published interviews and news regarding foreign governments, their foreign policies, and commentaries from experts			
Discourses from the Chinese government	One Belt One Road or BRI or China or Chinese dream or Silk road or Maritime trade +	Thai Canal or Kra Isthmus or	☐ International news media websites (China and Asia focus) ○ <i>South China Morning Post</i> ○ Xinhua ○ <i>China Daily</i> ○ Asia Times ○ Nikkei Asia ○ CNN ○ BBC ○ Reuters ○ etc. ☐ Chinese government official website ☐ Official booklet of BRI project ☐ Online commentaries ☐ Online articles ☐ LexisNexis ☐ Google
Discourses from the US government	U.S./America/U.S.A or Reaction to China or The rise of China or Reaction to China +	Kra Canal or Thai Land Bridge or “Thailand” + “Land Bridge” or Land Bridge	☐ International news media websites (Western focus) ○ BBC ○ CNN ○ Reuters ○ <i>New York Times</i> ○ etc. ☐ U.S. government official website ☐ Online commentaries ☐ Online articles ☐ Google
Discourses from the Indian government	India +		☐ International news media websites ○ <i>Indian Express</i> ○ <i>Hindu</i> ○ BBC ○ CNN ○ etc. ☐ Indian government official website ☐ Online commentaries ☐ Online articles ☐ Google

Table 2 Keywords for Searching Data on the Srettha Period

Types of Datasets	First Keyword	Following Keyword	Sources
Thai Side			
Published interviews of the prime minister and cabinet ministers	สัมภาษณ์ (interview) +	แลนด์บริดจ์ (Land Bridge) or ลงทุนแลนด์บริดจ์ (Land Bridge investment)	☐ Royal Thai Government Official News Website ☐ YouTube ☐ Pheu Thai Party's social media page ☐ News media (in Thai) ○ Thairath Online ○ Manager Online ○ Thai PBS ○ <i>Matichon</i> ○ Voice TV ○ <i>Nation</i> ○ Standard ○ etc. ☐ Google ☐ LexisNexis
Policies, campaigns, PR, and media from the government side	นโยบาย (policy) or ผลักดัน (push forward) or สนับสนุน (advocate) or no first keyword +		☐ Royal Thai Government Official News Website ☐ Pheu Thai Party's social media page ☐ Parliament's official website and policy archives ☐ Srettha's social media account ☐ LexisNexis ☐ Google
News articles and commentaries	—		☐ Various news websites (as mentioned earlier) ☐ Commentaries from experts ☐ LexisNexis ☐ Google ☐ Google Scholar ☐ ThaiJo (Thai academic corpus)

Table 2 continued

Types of Datasets	First Keyword	Following Keyword	Sources
Foreign Nation Stakeholders			
Mostly published interviews or news on them, their foreign policies, and commentaries from experts			
Discourses from Chinese government	One Belt One Road or BRI or China or Chinese dream or Silk Road or maritime trade +	Kra Isthmus	☐ International news media websites (China and Asia focus) ◦ <i>South China Morning Post</i> ◦ Xinhua ◦ <i>China Daily</i> ◦ Asia Times ◦ Nikkei Asia ◦ CNN ◦ BBC ◦ Reuters ◦ etc. ☐ Chinese government official website ☐ Official booklet of BRI project ☐ Online commentaries ☐ Online articles ☐ LexisNexis ☐ Google
Discourses from US government	U.S./America/U.S.A or Reaction to China or The rise of China or Reaction to China +	or Thai Land Bridge or “Thailand” + “Land Bridge” or Land Bridge	☐ International news media websites (Western focus) ◦ BBC ◦ CNN ◦ Reuters ◦ <i>New York Times</i> ◦ etc. ☐ US government official website ☐ Online commentaries ☐ Online articles ☐ LexisNexis ☐ Google
Discourses from other governments	India/Japan/Germany/ France/EU/Australia/ Saudi Arabia/Italy +		☐ International news media websites ◦ <i>Indian Express</i> ◦ <i>Hindu</i> ◦ NHK ◦ BBC ◦ CNN ◦ etc. ☐ Online commentaries ☐ Online articles ☐ LexisNexis ☐ Google

Land Bridge project, data collection was expanded to include new keywords and sources. These included official communications from the Royal Thai Government, political parties' social media channels, and the prime minister's social media platforms, reflecting the involvement of new stakeholders and evolving geopolitical dynamics.

In addition to primary sources, academic studies and expert commentaries were consulted to contextualize the geopolitical trends influencing Thailand's foreign policy. These supplementary materials were used to enhance the discourse analysis and to understand the broader geopolitical context within which Thailand's infrastructure projects operate.

5.2 Practical Geopolitical Reasoning Framework

The analysis of data is grounded in Ó Tuathail's (2002b) practical geopolitical reasoning framework, which is applied to clarify the concept of bamboo diplomacy and its relationship to the geopolitical discourses surrounding Thailand's infrastructure projects (see Fig. 4 for the conceptual scheme). This framework allows for a structured analysis of how Siamese and Thai governments have shaped their foreign policy through these projects.

The texts are organized according to five key questions of geopolitical grammar: Who? Where? What? Why? And so what? These questions, adapted from the original framework, are applied to each period under study to unpack the narratives and justifications that Thai governments have constructed around their infrastructure plans:

- **Who?** identifies the foreign actors and stakeholders involved.
- **Where?** examines the geopolitical significance of the Kra Isthmus and its strategic position.
- **What?** contextualizes the global situation, including external threats or opportunities that influence decision making.
- **Why?** explores the motivations of the Thai state for pursuing particular infrastructure projects.
- **So what?** assesses the strategic implications for Thailand, considering both national interests and foreign stakeholders' perspectives.

By answering these questions, a coherent storyline of Thailand's foreign policy challenges emerges, providing insight into how geopolitical discourses have shaped the nation's engagement with infrastructure projects (Ó Tuathail 2002b, 609–619).

A geopolitical storyline is developed for each foreign policy challenge, which leads to the formation of a performative geopolitical script. This script outlines how

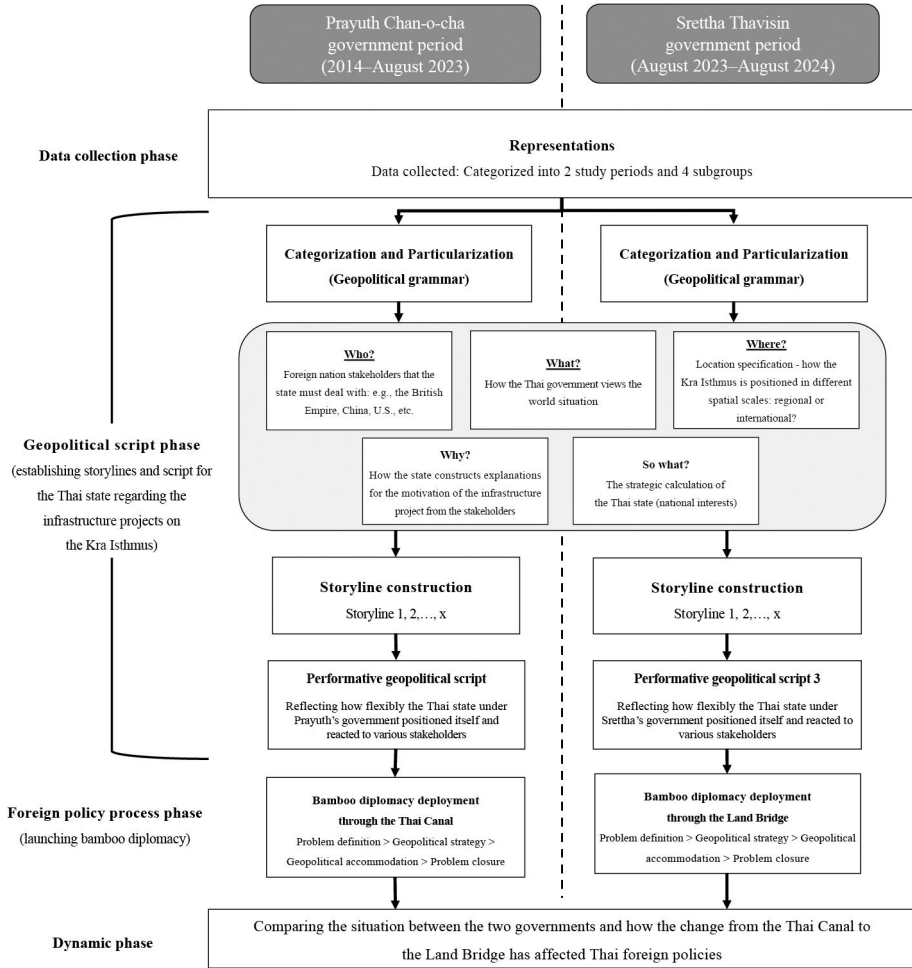


Fig. 4 Conceptual Scheme

Source: Made by author based on Ò Tuathail's (2002b, 608-609) model

political leaders publicly navigate geopolitical issues and respond to policy challenges. In the case of Thailand, these scripts incorporate multiple storylines tailored to different foreign stakeholders, showing the flexible nature of bamboo diplomacy.

The script demonstrates how the Thai state positions itself in the face of various foreign pressures while protecting national interests. As new geopolitical developments unfold, the script adapts, requiring Thai leaders to adjust their foreign policy responses accordingly. The outcome of these adjustments is the deployment of foreign policy as a problem-solving process where problems are defined, strategies

developed, stakeholders' interests accommodated, and solutions proposed (Ó Tuathail 2002b).

6 Leaning toward China? Bamboo Diplomacy through the Thai Canal during the Prayuth Chan-o-cha Government

After the coup d'état on May 22, 2014, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha assumed office as Thailand's 29th prime minister. The coup drew sharp criticism from Thailand's traditional Western allies, including the United States, Germany, France, Great Britain, and Japan, who condemned the military takeover and distanced themselves from the junta (Al Jazeera 2014; Storey 2019). In contrast, China remained notably silent, fostering a shift in Thailand's foreign policy orientation toward closer ties with Beijing during Prayuth's administration (Jittipat 2021; 2024). Despite the isolation from the West, Prayuth's rule continued following the 2019 general election, extending his leadership to nine years over two terms.

In his inaugural addresses, Prayuth laid out a vision for Thailand focused on economic growth, combating corruption, and addressing regional disparities. His 2014 speech emphasized rebuilding the economy and fostering greater transparency, while his 2019 address included plans to decentralize development and promote peace in Southern Thailand along with strengthening international relations (Prayuth 2014; 2019). However, despite these ambitions, Prayuth's growing alignment with China attracted significant criticism. One of the more contentious issues during his administration was the Thai Canal project, viewed as both an opportunity for national development and a point of geopolitical vulnerability.

The Thai Canal project resurfaced in April 2016 when General Han Leelanont, a former Fourth Army Area commander, proposed to Prime Minister Prayuth the excavation of Route 9A across the Kra Isthmus. A month later General Thawatchai Samutsakhon, a junta-appointed senator, publicly endorsed the project during a press conference on May 31, 2016 (Thai PBS 2016). Although Prayuth expressed reservations, citing concerns over potential conflicts and the project's financial viability, the idea remained a subject of public discourse and debate until 2019 (NEW18 2016; Thai PBS 2017; Narong 2018; Prachatai 2018).

Given the scale of the project, foreign investment was crucial, and China emerged as a key potential partner. Although the canal was never officially incorporated into China's BRI, scholars argue that Beijing supported the project for its strategic economic and geopolitical benefits, encouraging private Chinese firms to invest in

its development (Gosset 2015; TerraBKK 2021). This tacit backing from China allowed Thailand to further explore the canal's feasibility, reinforcing the country's tilt toward Chinese influence during Prayuth's time in office.

6.1 *Thai Quandary of “To Dig or Not to Dig?” Establishment of Two Storylines*

During Prime Minister Prayuth's second term, interest in the Thai Canal project intensified, with pressure from various economists and scholars calling for its advancement (Narong 2019). The project officially gained momentum on January 16, 2020, when the House of Representatives approved the creation of an ad hoc committee to study its feasibility. This move came despite Prayuth's repeated assertions that the canal would not materialize under his government (Office of the Secretariat of Thai Parliament 2020). The canal's revival, however, set the stage for conflicting interests between China and India, leading to the establishment of two distinct storylines: economic opportunities and the need to avoid geopolitical tensions (Table 3).

6.1.1 Economic Opportunities

The first storyline focused on the economic potential of the canal. With trade volumes between Asia, Western Eurasia, and Africa on the rise, Thailand saw the canal as an opportunity to address the bottleneck at the congested Malacca Strait (Gosset 2015; Nop 2020). Proponents like Weerawat Kaewnop, an engineer involved with the Thai Canal, highlighted its advantages: “The Malacca Strait is highly congested. Digging the canal will facilitate the flow and save time and energy” (*Post Today* 2020a). The

Table 3 Storyline of Thai Canal under the Prayuth Administration

<i>Storyline Assemblage</i>	<i>Boosting the nation's and the world's economy</i>	<i>A project drawing Asian geopolitical competition</i>
<i>Who?</i>	China will help Thailand.	China vs. India
<i>Where?</i>	A choke point for global trade routes	On the east of the Indian Ocean and India, and in the middle of Southern Thailand.
<i>What?</i>	The world needs a new trade route. China is the most rapidly growing country, and it accepts the Thai junta regime.	Geopolitical conflicts (race to Indian Ocean) and exacerbating Thailand's deep south conflicts.
<i>Why?</i>	Corresponds with China's BRI initiative and reduces shipping costs.	China and India are both interested in the project in order to intercept each other's sphere of influence.
<i>So What?</i>	Boost the economy rather than create conflicts. Decentralize development.	The project should be abandoned in order to avoid geopolitical entanglement.

2021 Suez Canal blockage by the container ship *Ever Given* underscored the global need for alternative maritime routes, with some experts—including Sayan Chantaravipaswongse, a former member of the National Reform Council—noting that a similar blockage at the Malacca Strait would have catastrophic consequences for the global economy (Thansettakij 2021).

China, as Thailand's closest economic partner and a rapidly growing global power, was viewed as the key supporter of the canal. The Prayuth government underscored its strong relationship with China and sought to further expand economic cooperation (Embassy of PRC in Thailand 2020). A Chinese documentary claimed that China was already studying the feasibility of the Kra Isthmus project, with the canal poised to be integrated into China's BRI (CGTN 2015). By bypassing the Malacca Strait, China hoped to cut 80 percent of its shipping costs, positioning the canal as an essential part of its regional strategy (Naing 2022).

Supporters of the canal argued that its economic benefits outweighed any risks of international conflict. Sumet Suwanphrom, vice president of the Southern Joint Development Foundation, likened the canal to Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), arguing, "Investment is like the EEC. Who will quarrel with whom?" (Thai PBS 2020). The project was expected to bring substantial economic gains, akin to the case study of the Suez Canal, creating jobs and transforming the Kra Isthmus into a major logistics and industrial hub (Gosset 2015). Additionally, the canal would benefit Thailand's 14 southern provinces, aligning with the government's aim of decentralizing development (Thansettakij 2021).

6.1.2 Avoiding Geopolitical Tensions

While the canal promised economic growth, it also ignited geopolitical competition, particularly between China and India. India, located just 550–600 kilometers across the Andaman Sea from the Kra Isthmus, viewed the canal with concern due to its strategic significance in the longstanding China-India rivalry (Micallef 2017). China's interest in the canal was seen as an extension of its broader "String of Pearls" strategy to increase its naval presence in the Indian Ocean, potentially encircling India (Fig. 5) (Paul 2018). The completion of the canal would not only resolve China's "Malacca Dilemma" but also provide it with quicker naval access to the Indian Ocean, reinforcing its influence in the region (Asian News International 2020a; *Post Today* 2020a; Jitsiree 2020).

India, alarmed by China's growing influence, responded by upgrading military installations in its Nicobar Islands, referring to them as "new aircraft carriers" for India's regional defense (Gupta 2020). India also raised concerns about China's poten-

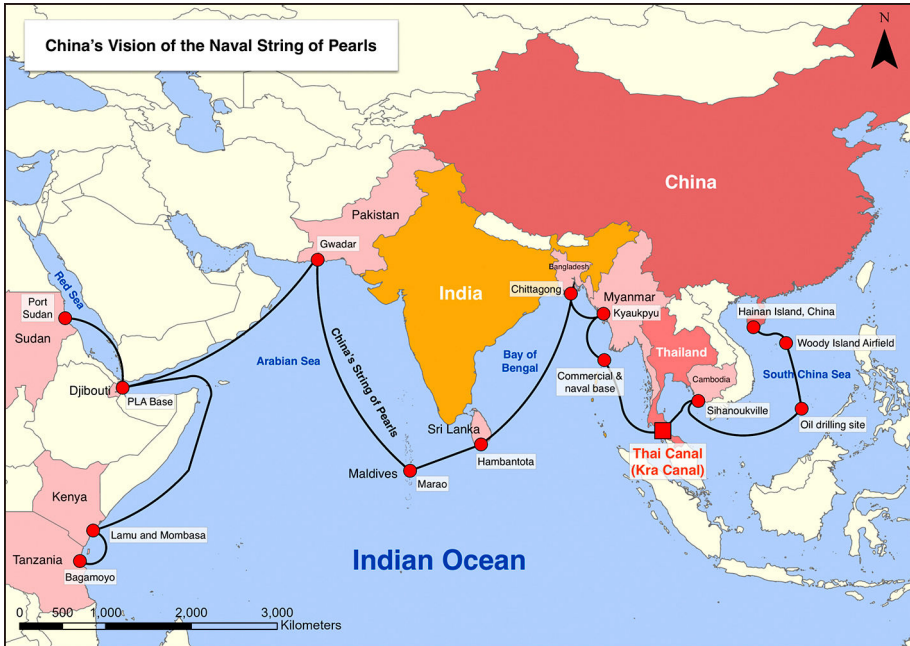


Fig. 5 Thai Canal as a Vital Key for the Chinese String of Pearls

Source: Made by author based on information from (Dabas, 2017)

tial use of “debt-trap diplomacy” to exert influence over Thailand, pointing to Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port and Pakistan’s Gwadar Port as cautionary examples (Shashank 2023). India’s role in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), which includes the United States, Australia, and Japan, further complicated the scenario (Buchan and Rimland 2020). Meanwhile, India, along with the United States and Australia, expressed interest in supporting Thailand’s excavation of the canal, creating a complex geopolitical dynamic (Asian News International 2020c; *Post Today* 2020b). The Thai Canal thus became a strategic battleground between these powers.

Domestically, there were fears that the canal could exacerbate security issues in Thailand’s southern region, potentially intensifying the Muslim separatist insurgency by physically dividing the region (Naing 2022). The Thai government was concerned that the project could turn the country into a geopolitical battleground, similar to the Suez and Panama Canals, where global powers vied for influence (*Post Today* 2020b). Thitinun Pongsutthirak, director of the Institute of Security and International Studies, warned that fewer ships passing through the Malacca Strait would harm ASEAN solidarity and could invite turmoil to Thailand (Prachatai 2018). Ultimately, this second

storyline highlighted the strategic rationale for shelving the project, prioritizing national stability over potential economic gains (Storey 2020).

6.2 *The Art of Being Indecisive: A Performative Script of Bamboo Diplomacy*

After establishing two competing narratives—economic opportunity versus geopolitical caution—regarding the Thai Canal, the Prayuth administration sought to balance these storylines carefully as part of its foreign policy strategy. This delicate balancing act resulted in a performative script of bamboo diplomacy, where the government sought to navigate the tension between fostering economic growth and avoiding geopolitical conflict.

The Prayuth administration adopted a cautious stance toward the Thai Canal project, using it as a bargaining chip to manage relationships with both China and India. On the one hand, the canal was recognized as a potentially crucial infrastructure project to alleviate congestion at the Malacca Strait and support China's BRI. On the other hand, the project raised concerns over China's growing dominance in the Indian Ocean, which threatened to upset regional stability and intensify tensions with India. Furthermore, while the canal could boost Thailand's economy, it risked aggravating the separatist insurgency in the country's southern region by physically dividing the area. The government also feared losing sovereignty to China's debt-trap diplomacy, a concern that had previously surfaced in Thailand's decision to independently finance a high-speed railway project in 2016.

Rear Admiral Chatuporn Sukchalerm, deputy commander of the First Naval Area and a member of the National Security Council's Maritime Interests Protection Committee, voiced the strategic risks, comparing the canal to other geopolitical choke points:

When there are problems in the Middle East, Iran always threatens to close the Persian Gulf because of its strategic location. We cannot deny that the Thai Canal is similarly strategic . . . Look at Djibouti at the mouth of the Suez Canal—foreign military presence there is overwhelming. Can we allow that to happen here? (Thai PBS 2020)

Despite these reservations, the Prayuth administration maintained diplomatic ties with China by commissioning feasibility studies and conducting surveys, which appealed Chinese interests without fully committing to the project (Dezan Shira and Associates 2017). However, there was a visible reluctance to push the project forward. For example, Transport Minister Saksiam Chidchob expressed doubts about the canal's practicality: "Digging the Kra Isthmus isn't appropriate for Thailand at the

moment, as the sea levels on the Andaman coast and the Gulf of Thailand are unequal” (Nontarat 2020). Prime Minister Prayuth proposed the Land Bridge project as a less controversial alternative: “We are exploring ways to connect the east and west coasts . . . I believe this will benefit the long-term economy” (Nontarat 2020). The canal project was subsequently delayed, with plans to renegotiate with China. Government spokesperson Anucha Burapachaisri explained: “The navy will negotiate with China to postpone the project for another year. PM Prayuth has prioritized the public’s concerns about the economy, particularly in light of the pandemic” (Asian News International 2020b).

Major General Songklod Thiparat, head of the Thai Canal ad hoc committee, acknowledged the prime minister’s indecision: “The Land Bridge project doesn’t suit the current situation . . . The Thai Canal is a better option.” However, he also noted that Prayuth had not rejected the canal entirely: “Today, three cabinet members and over 20 representatives met with the Prime Minister, and he did not oppose the canal. Instead, he asked for further studies to ensure it benefits the nation” (Theparat 2020).

Just a month after this delay, the canal project reemerged, with plans to hold public hearings and initiate new feasibility studies. Thosaporn Sirisamphand, secretary-general of the National Economic and Social Development Council, stated: “The Thai Canal and the Land Bridge are central to the government’s economic development plan for the South. Public hearings and feasibility studies will be conducted for both projects” (Theparat 2020).

The Prayuth administration’s handling of the Thai Canal project exemplifies its indecisive approach. While appearing to accommodate China by moving forward with surveys and studies, the administration hesitated to take concrete steps, mindful of the geopolitical risks. Introducing the Land Bridge project as an alternative further delayed any resolution. Ultimately, national stability took precedence over the canal’s potential economic benefits. Concerns resurfaced in mid-2021 as the feasibility study neared completion and the drafting of the Thai Canal Act began (Prachatai 2021).

The indecision came to a head on February 4, 2022, when the House of Representatives rejected the ad hoc committee’s report on the canal’s feasibility and the development of the Southern Economic Corridor. The majority of government coalition representatives voted against the project, citing fears of excessive foreign interference and the potential for the canal to deepen internal divisions (Office of the Secretariat of Thai Parliament 2022, 38–45; *Thai Post* 2022).

The Prayuth administration’s approach to the Thai Canal project embodies the essence of bamboo diplomacy—strategically balancing between economic ambition and geopolitical caution (Table 4). While the government was eager to tap into China’s

Table 4 Prayuth Administration's Script for the Thai Canal

<i>Performative Script</i>	<i>Discursively turning down the project for geopolitical reasons yet maintaining close relations with China</i>
<i>Who?</i>	China is most likely to invest, but India and the US-led alliance are also interested.
<i>Where?</i>	A choke point for trading yet, most importantly, on the eastern side of the Indian Ocean and offers the possibility of cutting through the southern region
<i>What?</i>	A new trade route is needed with the support of China as the closest ally; however, geopolitical competition for the Indian Ocean could increase, along with the exacerbation of Thailand's southern insurgency.
<i>Why?</i>	To enhance China's BRI dream and economy; yet the project will inevitably be instrumentalized to overcome India, and India will never give up the project. This will lead to a tug-of-war.
<i>So What?</i>	Worth it for Thailand's long-term economic growth but not for national stability
<i>Problem Definition</i>	Dealing with economic slowdown is the government's top priority, but the government cannot let foreign states interfere in Thailand's national interests and autonomy through this tug-of-war project.
<i>Geostrategic Response</i>	The Thai government has not stopped China from studying the project and supports China's interest in order to maintain a close relationship; however, it is being indecisive about the project as it plans to delay the process.
<i>Geopolitical Accommodation</i>	While the canal could yield economic benefits, national stability is more important.
<i>Solution</i>	No progress on the project in order to avoid a potential geopolitical clash

economic growth and the opportunities presented by the BRI, it remained wary of China's potential influence and the risk of inflaming tensions with India. In the end, the administration's indecisiveness, marked by interest in the canal yet hesitation to advance it, was a clear manifestation of its desire to safeguard national stability while maintaining flexible foreign policy options.

While some scholars argue that Prayuth's era marked the end of Thailand's bamboo diplomacy, with a clear tilt toward China (Charoenvattananukul 2020; Jittipat 2021; 2023; Pongphisoot 2023), the findings here suggest otherwise. Leaning toward China was just one phase of Thailand's flexible diplomatic strategy. The government sought to maximize national benefits while recognizing the risks of overreliance on any one power. The state remained poised to rebalance when necessary, aligning with John Hemmings's (2023) idea of Thailand as a swing state—one able to engage with multiple powers while prioritizing its national interests (Pavin 2024).

7 The Rebalancing Game: Bamboo Diplomacy through the Thai Land Bridge during the Srettha Thavisin Government

The inauguration of Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin on August 22, 2023, signaled a dramatic shift in Thailand's political landscape, marking the end of nearly a decade of military rule. The new administration prioritized dismantling the legacies of the previous junta government and implementing policies that diverged significantly from its predecessor's. Driven by evolving diplomatic strategies and China's economic slowdown, the Srettha administration sought to realign Thailand's international relations and reduce the country's overreliance on China.

In his inaugural speech on September 11, 2023, PM Srettha outlined his administration's key priorities: economic recovery in the wake of Covid-19, enhancing geopolitical competitiveness, and ensuring national stability. He emphasized the need to address job losses, improve economic liquidity, and reverse the decline in GDP to bolster Thailand's regional significance. This vision led to the initiation of the Land Bridge project, which was designed to safeguard national interests. The prime minister also underscored the importance of maintaining national stability amidst global shifts, recognizing the end of economic globalization and the rise of a more polarized global economy. The Srettha administration committed to recalibrating Thailand's foreign policy to balance diplomatic relationships in a polarized world and mitigate the previous government's heavy tilt toward China (Srettha 2023).

7.1 *The New Economic vs. Geopolitical Storylines*

During the Srettha administration, the narrative surrounding the Land Bridge project shifted from the previous government's approach. The Srettha administration introduced the concept and its geopolitical implications, initiating the project without external prompts. Through Land Bridge roadshows, the administration, led by PM Srettha, sought investments by pitching to major economies such as China, the United States, Japan, France, and Germany. The government then responded to these interests, dealing with ten foreign nations grouped into six stakeholder categories. The increased complexity required a detailed analysis of Thailand's relationship with each stakeholder and combining these insights to form a core storyline focused on the foreign protagonists.

7.1.1 China: Engaging with the Close Blood Giant

In mid-October 2023, Prime Minister Srettha visited China to boost investment in Thailand and promote the Land Bridge project. He emphasized Thailand's close rela-

tionship with China, stating, “In this era of geoeconomics, Thailand should depend on China as our big brother” (Cui and Yang 2023; PRD 2023c).

However, there has been skepticism from China regarding the project. Lu Xiang, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, cautioned that given China’s own economic slowdown, the country would be careful about where it invested and that “China is not convinced of what it can expect from the project” (Chen and Wong 2023). Despite this hesitation, Lu added, “China is unlikely to fund the project, but Chinese companies are likely to secure major contracts if the project gets underway . . . ASEAN is now China’s top export destination” (Chen and Wong 2023). This implies that while China may not directly fund the initiative, its private sector could still play a significant role (Chen and Wong 2023; Nontarat 2024).

From China’s perspective, the Land Bridge fits into the Belt and Road Initiative, reducing reliance on the Malacca Strait. Despite economic concerns (*Bangkok Post* 2023a; Connor 2024), firms like China Harbour Engineering Company have shown interest, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has expressed potential financial backing as “Thailand holds the potential to emerge as an economic leader in the region” (Nation 2024a; Srettha 2024).

For Thailand, the Land Bridge project offers a chance to boost strategic cooperation with China, create jobs, and drive economic growth. The country seeks to facilitate trade between China and global markets by becoming a logistics hub. Despite uncertainties, China remains a crucial partner for this vital project (Cui and Yang 2023; Pheu Thai Party 2023a; PRD 2023b).

7.1.2 United States: (Re)Aligning with the Old Alliance

Following positive feedback from China, Prime Minister Srettha promoted the Land Bridge project at the November 2023 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in San Francisco, seeking support from APEC nations and US investors (PRD 2023d; Wancharoen 2023). He positioned the Land Bridge as a key alternative to the Malacca Strait: “The Land Bridge will be an important route for transport and a solution to the challenges of the Malacca Strait” (Bloomberg News 2023). US investors showed interest, seeing the project’s potential to reduce transport costs and mitigate piracy concerns (Pheu Thai Party 2023b; 2023c).

Later, Thai Foreign Minister Panpree Pahithanukorn met US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who emphasized Thailand’s role in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and noted that “Thailand has an important role” in shaping US Indo-Pacific policy (Thansettakij 2024a; US Department of Commerce, n.d.).

Strategically, the Land Bridge is seen as a way to strengthen multilateral part-

nerships within APEC, particularly with the United States, while paving the way for the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific and enhancing Thailand's economic prospects. Geopolitically, it offers a way to balance China's influence, especially amid growing tensions in Southeast Asia (Ehrlich 2024; Thansettakij 2024a).

While the United States may not become a major investor like China, its role as a stable partner and geopolitical actor across the Pacific remains significant. Thailand views engagement with the United States as crucial for potential trade opportunities, cooperation, and balancing regional power dynamics.

7.1.3 Japan: Connecting with Asia's Second Giant

In mid-December 2023, Prime Minister Srettha traveled to Japan to promote the Land Bridge project, recognizing Japan's role as one of Thailand's top trading partners. The project aims to position the Kra Isthmus as Southeast Asia's logistics hub, enhancing trade routes and facilitating exports to countries like Japan (Bangkok Business 2023; Pheu Thai Party 2023d). Despite Japan's economic stagnation, its strong ties with the United States and involvement in the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific maintain its relevance in global trade (Borah 2023; *Khaosod* 2023).

Japan saw the Land Bridge as a way to cut industrial costs by 15 percent and boost trade with Thailand, offering potential benefits for its economy. Over twenty private firms, including Mitsubishi UFJ Ginko Bank, expressed interest in the project (Inoue and Kitado 2023; Nontsamorn 2023). Strategically, Japan also viewed the project as a counterbalance to China's growing influence in Southeast Asia (Borah 2023).

The Thai prime minister emphasized that Thailand was "open to every foreign investment, especially from Japan," as it aimed to elevate its industrial sector and strengthen its position in Asian geoeconomics (*Khaosod* 2023; Nontsamorn 2023). While Japan may not exert as much influence as China or the United States, its role as Asia's second-largest economy makes it a key partner for Thailand's ambitions.

7.1.4 India: South Asian Linkage

In early 2024 the Srettha administration sought to engage India in the Land Bridge project, recognizing India as a key trading partner in Southeast Asia. The Kra Isthmus was envisioned as a crucial gateway linking Southeast and South Asia, with Thailand positioned at the forefront of this connection (Gokhale 2023; Channel 7 News 2024).

India's interest was driven by its "Act East Policy," which seeks to deepen trade ties with Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. The Land Bridge offered India a more efficient maritime route to Southeast Asia and strengthened cooperation within

the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) (Wadhwa 2019; Thailand Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024).

“India expressed interest in investing but needs more study . . . this project will connect India via maritime route and support BIMSTEC cooperation more efficiently,” noted Thai Foreign Minister Panpree (Borah 2023). India’s Adani Group also showed interest in investing in the project.

The Land Bridge is expected to enhance bilateral trade, improve transportation and tourism, and bolster Thailand’s economy (Channel 7 News 2024; *Matichon* 2024). Like Japan, India’s involvement helps balance China’s influence, making India an important stakeholder in bringing Thailand and South Asia closer together (Borah 2023).

7.1.5 Saudi Arabia and UAE: Oil’s Gateway to China

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have shown sustained interest in the Land Bridge project, dating back to the previous Thai administration. Their goal is to establish Thailand as Asia’s oil hub, providing a strategic route for oil exports—particularly to China, Saudi Arabia’s largest customer, which receives 1.5 million barrels of oil per day. By creating an oil depot in Thailand, these nations could bypass the congested Malacca Strait (TNN 2023; Nation 2024b).

Investment in Thailand also aligns with Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 and could attract major players like SABIC, Aramco, and the Public Investment Fund. Their involvement would stimulate Thailand’s economy, particularly in the southern region, by developing oil-related industries and positioning the country as a central hub for oil distribution and transport across Asia (PRD 2023a; TNN 2024).

7.1.6 Others: World’s Connector

Australia and European nations—France, Germany, and Italy—have expressed strong geopolitical interest in Thailand’s Kra Isthmus project, recognizing its potential to serve as a vital link between Europe, Oceania, and the Americas. During a series of diplomatic meetings in March 2024, Prime Minister Srettha promoted the project’s benefits to these countries (PRD 2024a; 2024b). Italy, led by its ambassador in Thailand, was particularly proactive in supporting the initiative.

Australia and Europe are keenly aware of potential disruptions in the Malacca Strait, a key passage for Thai exports. The Land Bridge project fits into Australia’s Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040 and aligns with the EU’s Global Gateway Initiative, positioning Thailand as a crucial trade hub (Thansettakij 2024b). Thai Minister of Transport Suriya Juangroongruangkit noted interest from a few German

investors, along with widespread interest from investors such as France’s CMA-CGM and Artelia (Mazumdaru 2023; Thansettakij 2024c). The Italian ambassador and Italy’s MERMEC Group also expressed a readiness to invest (Bangkok Business 2024).

Suriya emphasized the project’s economic potential, highlighting its ability to strengthen international alliances and drive Thailand’s economic growth. The Land Bridge is seen as a pivotal infrastructure development that will make Thailand a transportation hub for Europe, Australia, and Asia and position the country as a global connector (Thansettakij 2024c).

7.1.7 Establishment of Core Storylines

As with the previous government, two main storylines were developed around the Land Bridge project during the Srettha administration—one focusing on economic benefits and the other on geopolitical strategy (Table 5). The Thai government’s roadshows made it clear that any nation investing in the project could bring significant benefits to the Thai economy. Many of these nations, including China, Japan, and India, are among Thailand’s top trading partners. For foreign nations, the Land Bridge aligns well with their economic initiatives, such as China’s BRI and India’s Act East Policy, making it a mutually advantageous endeavor. This project represents a prime opportunity for Thailand to enhance its economy, strengthen international relationships, and position itself as a transportation hub for Southeast Asia and the world.

Geopolitically, the Kra Isthmus could become a new focal point of competition

Table 5 Core Storyline of the Land Bridge under the Srettha Administration

<i>Storyline Assemblage</i>	<i>Rebalancing geopolitics and becoming SEA’s trade center</i>	<i>Economic opportunities</i>
<i>Who?</i>	China vs. US, Japan, and India	Every nation can bring economic prosperity to Thailand.
<i>Where?</i>	A vital contested arena for China and the US yet a SEA choke point	World’s logistics hub and an alternative route
<i>What?</i>	There is more than one superpower that Thailand must rely on to balance influences and become SEA’s central geopolitical, logistics, and economic power.	All nations are important to Thailand’s trading economy.
<i>Why?</i>	A project where two powerhouses race to dominate geopolitical influence	A part of its international economic policies
<i>So What?</i>	Not to get trapped in a tug-of-war between major powers	Strengthen Thailand’s economy and relationships and become a transportation hub

between China and the United States, along with their respective allies, in the current era of geoeconomics. However, it also has the potential to transform the region into a major trade route hub. Thailand must navigate the geopolitical landscape carefully, avoiding overreliance on any single global power. Balancing relationships with both China and the United States is a key strategy to avoid being caught in a geopolitical tug-of-war. The project's strategic location between the Indian and Pacific Oceans offers Thailand the chance to secure a critical position in global trade routes and gain geopolitical influence. Furthermore, with the region dominated by Chinese influence from the previous government's policies, Thailand needs to reassert its role as a central power in Southeast Asia while carefully managing the influence of competing global powers.

7.2 Roadshows and Rebalancing: The Performative Script of Bamboo Diplomacy

The Srettha administration, like its predecessor, carefully balanced economic and geopolitical storylines to execute a form of bamboo diplomacy through a performative script. PM Srettha emphasized Thailand's position as the "Geneva of Asia," underscoring its neutrality amid rising geopolitical tensions in the Asia-Pacific (Khaosod 2024). This neutral stance framed the country's foreign policy approach, with the Land Bridge project serving as a prime example of Thailand's flexibility in navigating international relations. By intertwining economic and geopolitical considerations, the project's storyline reinforced Thailand's role as a neutral player, fostering global cooperation (Table 6).

Seeking investment from a range of nations reflects Thailand's strategy to diversify its economic partnerships and avoid overreliance on China, particularly given concerns about China's economic slowdown (Abdel-Latif *et al.* 2023; Huang 2023; PwC 2023). Anutin Charnvirakul, Thailand's deputy prime minister, highlighted the importance of collaboration in the global economy: "Today, the world collaborates, not just competes" (Ehrlich 2024). This approach allowed Thailand to invite diverse investment in the Land Bridge project, maintaining neutrality while reaping economic benefits from multiple stakeholders.

The Land Bridge project, offering an alternative trade route between East and West, promises reduced costs and enhanced efficiency (Nation 2023). Geopolitically, it is seen as a contested space between China and the US-led coalition, both vying for influence in Southeast Asia. However, the Srettha administration sought to avoid entanglement in this rivalry by welcoming investment from a variety of nations (PRD 2024c). The project, expected to boost Thailand's GDP by 5.5 percent annually and create 280,000 jobs, is essential for the country's long-term interests (Nation 2023).

Table 6 Srettha Administration's Script for the Land Bridge

<i>Performative Script</i>	<i>Becoming the world's logistics hub and the Geneva of Asia</i>
<i>Who?</i>	China seems to be the biggest investor, but the Thai government is trying to achieve a balance with the US, Japan, India, and others.
<i>Where?</i>	Region's logistics hub and a connector to the whole world
<i>What?</i>	Economic stagnation of China; every nation can bring benefits to Thailand.
<i>Why?</i>	Reduce travel time and improve safety via this alternative route. A crucial contested arena between China and the US-led coalition
<i>So What?</i>	For the sake of achieving a quick economic win and to become an Asian powerhouse, the government must carefully balance investments from different nations.
<i>Problem Definition</i>	Every nation can bring benefits to Thailand, but the latter may be trapped in a geopolitical dilemma if it does not carefully balance who invests in the Land Bridge project.
<i>Geostrategic Response</i>	Roadshows showed that Thailand sought multilateral cooperation.
<i>Geopolitical Accommodation</i>	The project will bring economic benefits to both Thailand and foreign stakeholders while positioning Thailand as a key hub for promoting international cooperation.
<i>Solution</i>	The government will not stop its roadshows.

Careful management of investment sources is key to maintaining Thailand's neutrality while maximizing economic gains.

The prime minister acknowledged the delicate nature of the project, stating in a January 4, 2024, parliamentary session, "The government approached this megaproject with the current geopolitical landscape in mind, given the absence of conflicts with other nations" (PPTV 2024). Thailand stands to benefit significantly from the project, but overdependence on a single investor brings the risk of geopolitical entanglement. The government's focus is on ensuring neutrality and managing investments impartially to avoid becoming caught in the geopolitical tug-of-war between major powers.

In response to these challenges, the Srettha administration launched a series of roadshows beginning in October 2023, promoting the project to potential investors worldwide. "We propose this Land Bridge to connect the world. China and the U.S. can use Thailand as their product delivery hub; this project holds global significance," stated the prime minister (Nation 2024a). The roadshows demonstrated Thailand's diplomatic adaptability and its fostering of relations with multiple nations while maintaining neutrality.

The Land Bridge project aligns with Thailand's strategic interests, promising

rapid economic growth—a key priority for the current government. It also enhances Thailand’s role as a central player in global trade routes, boosting international cooperation across various sectors, such as trade and industry (Thansettakij 2023). This positions Thailand as the Geneva of Asia, a neutral hub in an increasingly polarized region.

Although the roadshows were intended to continue until multiple governments or companies committed to investing in the project and expediting its construction, they were discontinued in 2024 (*Bangkok Post* 2023b). Beyond economic benefits for Thailand, Suriya noted that “investors are drawn to the project by the 10% internal rate of return it offers” (Ehrlich 2024), ensuring strong incentives for foreign stakeholders. Feedback from the roadshows will be used to fine-tune the project, with potential new legislation to support investments (Thansettakij 2023). A revised plan will then be presented to the Cabinet, showcasing the government’s adaptability in optimizing outcomes for both Thailand and its partners.

The Srettha administration’s flexibility exemplifies bamboo diplomacy. Like bamboo, which bends but does not break, the Thai government’s approach is characterized by adaptability and by listening to diverse perspectives while avoiding geopolitical entanglement. The Land Bridge project remains at the heart of the country’s national interest, ensuring both economic prosperity and Thailand’s emergence as Southeast Asia’s logistics hub. As PM Srettha said in his speech on March 29, 2024, the project embodies the principles of bamboo diplomacy—flexible yet firmly rooted in safeguarding Thailand’s future:

I understand the landscape of geopolitics worldwide, such as big trade wars. Many have opposed one party, but what about Thailand’s historical standpoint? Yes, we are neutral. Today, our neutrality will lead the country out of economic crisis. . . . Every country wants to invest with us because of our political neutrality. What does the Land Bridge have to do with it? If we align with one nation like China, allowing China to be the only nation to transport goods but not allowing the U.S. to transport goods, this will not work. Our neutrality means that people all over the world will be confident that we are the ones who control access to the world. In the long run, we will greatly reduce the purchase of weapons because the Land Bridge investment is an important tool for the stability of Thailand. (PRD 2024c)

The Srettha administration demonstrated a clear intent to use the Land Bridge as a tool for rebalancing international relations, embodying the principles of bamboo diplomacy. Unfortunately, Srettha’s tenure ended abruptly on August 14, 2024, after his dismissal by the constitutional court over an ethics breach (*Bangkok Post* 2024b).

However, the Land Bridge project remains a priority under the new government led by Paetongtarn Shinawatra, who is also from the Pheu Thai coalition. The project continues to be seen as a crucial driver for boosting the economy (Isranews 2024). Paetongtarn's government insisted in December 2024 that the project would go ahead as scheduled as the feasibility study was set to finish in the first half of 2025, commencing with international bidding and then construction in 2026. The first phase of the project is slated for completion and full operation by 2030 (Nation 2024c). A study on Paetongtarn's government could offer valuable insights and serve as a promising avenue for future research. However, this paper was written in September 2024, when Paetongtarn Shinawatra was the prime minister of Thailand. However, she was removed from office by the constitutional court on August 29, 2025.

8 Discussion

Infrastructure projects on Thailand's Kra Isthmus have long served as strategic tools in the country's foreign policy, reflecting the principles of bamboo diplomacy. This approach showcases Thailand's adaptability in managing relations with global powers for its own national survival. Over time, Thailand's use of bamboo diplomacy through infrastructure initiatives has evolved. While earlier efforts focused on ensuring national stability and sovereignty, efforts in the twenty-first century mark a shift toward leveraging economic opportunities and prosperity. The methods of deploying bamboo diplomacy have also varied with changes in government, as seen in the transition from Prayuth's Thai Canal proposal to Srettha's Land Bridge project.

8.1 *The Dynamics of Foreign Stakeholders' Perspectives and the Thai State's Reactions*

Understanding the contrasting storylines from the Prayuth and Srettha administrations sheds light on how foreign stakeholders perceive the Kra Isthmus projects. Both administrations envisioned the projects as solutions to ease congestion in the Malacca Strait and position Thailand as a key trading hub. Geopolitically, these initiatives placed Thailand at the intersection of influence between China, the United States, and India. However, the Prayuth administration prioritized geopolitical concerns, cautiously engaging with foreign powers to avoid potential threats to national stability, especially with the Thai Canal project. Despite economic incentives, Prayuth's government focused on balancing relations with China while avoiding broader geopolitical entanglements.

With the Srettha administration, which took power in August 2023, the focus

shifted toward economic growth and diversification. The Land Bridge project was a strategic pivot, with the government actively seeking to rebalance international relations by attracting investments from various economic powers. This shift signaled a stronger emphasis on economic revival while remaining cautious of overreliance on China. Thailand's diplomatic strategy under Srettha reflected the interconnectedness of economic and geopolitical considerations, aiming to protect national interests while pursuing growth.

This approach to foreign policy diverged from Ó Tuathail's (2002b) traditional narratives that primarily emphasize geopolitical conflict. Instead, during Srettha's administration Thailand's foreign policy integrated economic strategies with diplomatic efforts, positioning the Land Bridge as a mechanism for both economic growth and maintaining geopolitical balance.

8.2 *China: The Most Influential Player in Thailand's Modern Bamboo Diplomacy*

China has played a central role in shaping Thailand's bamboo diplomacy in recent years. Under Prayuth, the government carefully managed relations with China, prioritizing stability while cautiously avoiding overreliance. Although Prayuth's administration appeared aligned with China, particularly with respect to the Thai Canal project, this was a calculated strategy to tap into China's economic potential while protecting Thailand's autonomy from debt risk, challenging the notion that Thailand's traditional "bamboo diplomacy" had collapsed.

As China's economic growth slowed after the Covid-19 pandemic, the Srettha administration recognized the need to diversify its diplomatic and economic partnerships. The roadshows promoting the Land Bridge project were aimed at attracting foreign investments beyond China, signaling a shift toward rebalancing Thailand's international relations. This transition highlights Thailand's agency in navigating global shifts and underscores the flexible nature of its bamboo diplomacy.

Both administrations viewed China's BRI as an opportunity for economic growth. However, Thailand was careful to preserve its own strategic interests, particularly under Prayuth. As China's economic slowdown became evident, the Srettha government sought to engage other nations, signaling a strategic recalibration while ensuring Thailand remained a key player in the region.

8.3 *From Canal to Land Bridge: The Dynamics of Bamboo Diplomacy*

The transition from the Thai Canal to the Land Bridge reshaped both the geopolitical perspectives of foreign stakeholders and Thailand's bamboo diplomacy. Initially supported by China, the Thai Canal project faced skepticism when it changed to the Land

Bridge under the Srettha administration. China was concerned about the increased cost of transporting goods by train instead of the canal as David Zweig, an emeritus professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, noted: “in terms of decreasing the amount of oil going through Malacca, offloading, transporting by train and then unloading would be expensive” (Chen and Wong 2023). Other foreign stakeholders echoed this sentiment, such as Siemens and other German companies (Mazumdaru 2023). These shifts indicated a significant decrease in foreign stakeholder enthusiasm as the project evolved.

The pivot also showed a shift in Thailand’s diplomatic posture. Under Prayuth, the government adopted a more passive approach to avoid geopolitical tensions between China and India, aligning with traditional bamboo diplomacy that adapted to the influence of major powers. In contrast, the Srettha administration took a more active role, seeking foreign investments through international roadshows and engaging a wider range of stakeholders, including Saudi Arabia and Italy. Although more proactive, the Srettha government maintained a careful balance, ensuring the project did not entangle Thailand in geopolitical conflicts.

The Land Bridge project thus represents a shift in Thailand’s bamboo diplomacy. It signifies a move toward a more assertive yet balanced diplomatic strategy—what may be described as “newly modified bamboo diplomacy”—adapted to the current geoeconomic environment.

9 Conclusion

Thailand’s foreign policy has long been characterized by pragmatism, often referred to as bamboo diplomacy. This approach emphasizes flexibility and self-interest, allowing the country to avoid external threats. Historically, it has enabled Thailand to navigate geopolitical challenges, from avoiding colonization in the nineteenth century to sidestepping the modern tug-of-war between China and the US-led coalition. This pragmatism is reflected in infrastructure projects like those on the Kra Isthmus, which Thailand strategically revives or halts to protect its national interests.

Future research should focus on the environmental and social impacts of the Land Bridge project with the aim of minimizing the project’s negative consequences while enhancing its geopolitical advantages. Comparative studies of foreign policy strategies in other Southeast Asian infrastructure initiatives, especially in light of China’s extensive construction efforts, could offer valuable insights. Furthermore, an evaluation of the economic effects of the project on local communities and regional

trade is essential for understanding the long-term benefits and potential risks.

While the Land Bridge project is still in progress, this article refrains from predicting its ultimate success or failure. Instead, it provides an objective analysis of current actions, framing the project as a manifestation of the new bamboo diplomacy championed by the Srettha administration and potentially continued under Paetongtarn, which could be further and closely examined in a potential future study. Regardless of specific tactics, infrastructure projects in the Kra Isthmus will remain pivotal to Thailand's strategy for managing relations with major global powers and ensuring its own national survival.

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