1

Introduction

1.1. Puzzles

‘Bamboo’ or ‘bending with the wind’ diplomacy is a key concept frequently used in international relations (IR) and describes Thailand’s diplomacy in particular. It alludes to the way in which the country has pursued a flexible, pragmatic policy, aimed at maintaining national survival and independence. In bamboo diplomacy, Thailand is blatantly playing one great power off against the others amid great power competition. The extant literature almost always treats this concept as universal, highlighting its historical continuity and heuristic tool of justification for appropriate foreign policy. For example, Pavin Chachavalpongpun sees bamboo diplomacy as a ‘traditional’ or ‘classic’ Thai diplomacy, which continued ‘since Siam’s old days up to Thailand’s modern era’.¹ For Arne Kislenko, Thailand’s diplomacy was ‘a long-cherished, philosophical approach to international relations’, which is ‘always solidly rooted’ but ‘flexible enough to bend whichever way it had to in order to survive’.² These works largely neglect to ask the key question: when and how this strategic discourse came about. This is a puzzle of discontinuity or rupture, rather than continuity.

1 Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), 63–64, 274.

2 Arne Kislenko, ‘Bamboo in the Wind: United States Foreign Policy and Thailand during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, 1961–1969’ (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2000), 8.

The book is first and foremost a genealogy of bamboo diplomacy. Its purposes are twofold. One is to critically interrogate how the birth of ‘bamboo’ or ‘flexible’ diplomacy emerged and became the dominant or hegemonic discourse in Thai foreign policy. It should be noted here that Thailand in the pre-1968 period had sought to adjust relations with the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the example of which was Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Phibun)’s attempt to work with Beijing between 1955 and 1957. However, these diplomatic practices were generally short-lived and merely tactical in the sense that they were used as a diplomatic tool in order to bargain with the US. Importantly, these diplomatic practices were not understood at that time as flexible or bamboo diplomacy. In particular, Phibun’s ‘brief encounter’ with China was seen as part of a broader narrative of non-alignment.³

In other words, these previous diplomatic practices, despite their significant moves, were neither explicitly challenging the hegemonic discourse of anticommunism nor directly establishing the new discourse of détente par excellence. The book argues differently, that the term ‘bamboo’ diplomacy was discursively produced only by the late 1960s, when Thailand began to conduct a different set of diplomatic practices toward the USSR and China. In addition, as an epistemic knowledge, the term ‘bamboo’ diplomacy was not used before the 1970s. In order to justify contemporary diplomacy, many academic works retrospectively used this recently constructed concept to explain past diplomatic history. They anachronistically linked the new concept to the balance of power diplomacy of King Chulalongkorn, which will be subsequently discussed in this chapter.

In this sense, rather than following a conventional history in the study of Thai foreign policy, this book historically problematises the dominant knowledge and situates it within history. Therefore, my argument is that bamboo diplomacy was recently constructed as a new narrative in order to manage the anxiety instigated by the changing landscape of regional and world order – in particular, the prospect of American retrenchment from the region – as well as to make sense of how the world worked in the new era of détente.

3 Anuson Chinvanho, *‘Brief Encounter’: Sino-Thai Rapprochement after Bandung, 1955–1957* (Bangkok: Institute of Foreign Affairs, 1991).

This leads to the second purpose of the book, which is to investigate and reassess why and specifically how Thailand transformed its foreign policy towards the Soviet Union and the PRC in the long 1970s (1968–1980), when the country pursued *détente* with the Communist powers.

Détente, broadly defined as the relaxation of international tension, has been used particularly in relation to the Cold War politics, including the superpower *détente* of Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Leonid Brezhnev, Mao Zedong, Charles de Gaulle and Willy Brandt. It was used, to a lesser extent, to describe small powers' *détente* and it was rarely used in literature on Thailand's diplomacy toward the Soviet Union and China in the 1970s. The book asserts that Thailand had its own conception of *détente*, culminating in so-called 'flexible diplomacy' (*karntoot yeutyun*) and 'triangular diplomacy' (*karntoot samsao*) with the Soviet Union and the PRC. In this book, Thai *détente* is studied in three main phases: (1) Thanat Khoman's (1969–1971); (2) MR Kukrit Pramoj's (1975–1976); and (3) General Kriangsak Chomanan's (1977–1980).

Détente marked a remarkable shift, from a discourse of 'enemy' toward that of 'friend' in Thai foreign relations with the Communist powers. *Détente*, in turn, intersubjectively constituted a new normal or common sense in the 1970s. In addition, it ultimately reflected power struggles within Thai politics. The emergence of Thai *détente* was not merely an ideational change or a change in norms, but represented a radical break in knowledge and political practices. It emerged out of a power contestation between different social forces at the top echelons of power, in particular between so-called *détente* proponents and *détente* opponents.

The former can be defined as those whose identities were intersubjectively shaped by Thai *détente*'s discursive changes, and who enacted them in foreign policy thinking or decisions. The latter were those whose identities had not (yet) 'interpellated' or identified with the novel discourse and remained attached to the predominantly Cold War ideology, thereby envisaging the Soviet Union and China as 'Communist menaces'.

To achieve these two goals regarding the birth of bamboo diplomacy and *détente* with the Communist powers, the book employs a genealogical approach, which is a critical ethos for analysing and reinterpreting practice-based discourses of Thai diplomacy. This chapter is structured into four main sections. It begins with an examination of a historiographical literature of Thai *détente*. The second section elucidates a genealogical

approach to Thai détente, which comprises a history of rupture, the discourse approach and a history of the present. The third section discusses sources of evidence, primarily newly declassified materials from Thai archives. The last section lays out the contribution and structure of the book.

1.2. The Narrative of ‘Bamboo Diplomacy’

In this book, I take issue with two groups of literature on Thai foreign policy in the 1970s. Both groups explain Thai foreign policy in the détente era either by the continual narrative of bamboo diplomacy or by the motivations behind Thai foreign policy in specific periods of time and/or its bilateral relations.

The first group conceptualises Thai foreign policy through the conventional lens of ‘bamboo’ diplomacy, claiming that the history of Thai diplomatic relations has been interpreted as one of continuity. According to them, Thai diplomacy, at least since the reign of King Rama V, or King Chulalongkorn, in the late nineteenth century, has sought to balance one great power or a number of powers vis-à-vis the others.⁴ By using a bamboo analogy, Thai diplomacy is flexible, pragmatic and even opportunistic. Given its status as a small power, Thailand strives for survival amid great power politics.⁵ As Sarasin Viraphol sums up:

Thailand is only a regional state with no desire for involvement in the great power rivalry; all that it desires is the maintenance and protection of its own national security.⁶

4 See Likhit Dhiravegin, ‘Thailand Foreign Policy Determination’, *The Journal of Social Sciences* 11, no. 4 (1974); Likhit Dhiravegin, *Siam and Colonialism (1855–1909): An Analysis of Diplomatic Relations* (Bangkok: Thai Wattana Panich, 1975); Pensri Duke, *Karntangprated kub aekkarat lae attippatai kong thai* [Foreign affairs and Thailand’s Independence and Sovereignty, since King Rama V to the Phibun Government] (Bangkok: The Royal Institute, 1999); Chulacheeb Chinwanno, *Siam, Russia, Thai: Karntootkarnmuang Karnmuangkarntoot, Aded pajupan anakod* [Siam, Russia, Thailand: Diplomatic Politics, Politics of Diplomacy, Past Present and Future] (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2013).

5 Sarasin Viraphol, *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1976); Wiwat Mungkandi and William Warren, eds, *A Century and a Half of Thai-American Relations* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1982); Arne Kislenko, ‘Bending with the Wind: The Continuity and Flexibility of Thai Foreign Policy’, *International Journal* 57, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 537–561. For literature on Thailand as a small power, see Astri Suhrki, ‘Smaller-Nation Diplomacy: Thailand’s Current Dilemmas’, *Asian Survey* 11, no. 5 (May 1971): 438.

6 Sarasin Viraphol, ‘The Soviet Threat: Development of the Thai Perception’, *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 11, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 69.

Wise (and mostly male) statesmen orchestrate the ability to bend with the wind, successfully maintaining Thailand's independence. Thailand, so the stories go, has had a cautious and calculated foreign policy, and avoided anything more than temporary entanglement with the great powers. The cases of Thailand's alignment with Japan during the Second World War, and its 'special relationship' with the US in the Cold War, are not portrayed as radical departures from the bamboo diplomacy paradigm.⁷

Corrine Phuangkasem suggests that Thailand's 'bamboo' or flexible diplomacy comprised three basic tenets.⁸ First, Thailand pursues an accommodation policy with the great powers that are perceived as potential threats to national independence or survival. Second, Thailand plays off one power against another to provide a counterweight. Siddhi Savetsila, the former foreign minister, called it a 'balance of power policy'.⁹ Third, Thailand seeks to befriend all great powers. Some might call this third tenet of Thai diplomacy an 'equidistant policy'.¹⁰ Thai diplomacy is often criticised for a lack of firm principles, in that Thailand almost always aligns with the dominant or victorious power. As Likhit Dhiravegin has put it:

The style of bending with the wind ... means at a time when the dust is still not settled, the Thai leaders will be waiting on the wing ... But as soon as the dust has settled, the Thai leaders will lean to the side which has risen in power.¹¹

Corrine contends that the nature of Thai foreign policy during the Cold War remained 'bamboo diplomacy', in the sense of an alignment with the great powers.¹²

7 See Thamsook Numnonda, *Thailand and the Japanese Presence, 1941–1945* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1977); Pensri, *Karntangprated kub aekkarat lae attipatai kong thai*.

8 Corrine Phuangkasem, *Thailand's Foreign Relations, 1964–80* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984); Corrine Phuangkasem, 'Thai Foreign Policy: Four Decades since the Second World War (1945–1989)', in *A Collection of Articles and Speeches on Thai Foreign Affairs from the Past to the Present*, eds Corrine Phuangkasem et al., vol. 1 (Bangkok: Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, 1999), 56, 70.

9 Siddhi Savetsila, *Pan Rorn Pan Nao* [Through Thick and Thin] (Bangkok, 2013), 78, 191.

10 Thanat Khoman, 'The Initiative of Establishing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)', in Phuangkasem et al., *A Collection of Articles and Speeches*, 186–87.

11 Likhit Dhiravegin, 'Thailand's Relations with China, the US, and Japan in the New Political Environment', in Phuangkasem et al., *A Collection of Articles and Speeches*, 358.

12 Corrine, 'Thai Foreign Policy', 56.

Sarasin claims that in the 1970s, the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs followed bamboo diplomacy: it had pursued 'the traditional pattern of foreign diplomacy (prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) which continually requires attention and wisdom in steering the nation through difficult times'. Unlike Corrine, Sarasin argues that this flexible diplomacy differed from 'the seemingly dogmatic and inflexible pattern of foreign relations as practiced by the previous military and other conservative elements'.¹³

Many, if not most, take the narrative of bamboo diplomacy for granted.¹⁴ They tend to adopt this narrative, and concur that Thai foreign policy is governed by overarching ahistorical and persistent themes such as national interest and national survival.¹⁵ Rarely have scholars asked how bamboo diplomacy came into being in the first place. Because these existing works refer back to the bamboo diplomacy narrative by way of explanation, they fail to ask when and how this style of diplomacy came about and became the dominant explanation, or a so-called 'tradition' of Thai foreign policy. The book argues that this narrative was epistemically constructed in the early 1970s, as the result of the changing practices of Thai détente. Bamboo diplomacy is not a natural or neutral tradition, but rather an invented tradition.¹⁶

13 Sarasin, *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy*, 52.

14 Even the latest works interrogate the bamboo diplomacy narrative without taking the birth of bamboo diplomacy into serious consideration. See, for example, Peera Charoenwattananukul, 'Beyond Bamboo Diplomacy: The Factor of Status Anxiety and Thai Foreign Policy Behaviors', in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand*, ed. Pavin Chachavalpongpun (New York: Routledge, 2020), 408–19.

15 R Sean Randolph, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950–1985* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1986), 129; Sarasin, *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy*; Noranit Setabutr, *Kwam sampan tang prathet rawang Thai–Russia* [Thai–Russian Foreign Relations] (Bangkok: Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University Press, 1985 [2006]).

16 I borrow the term from Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

The second group of scholars include those who studied Thai foreign policy toward the Soviet Union and China in the 1970s. Although the literature on Thailand in the early Cold War is extensive, and widely researched,¹⁷ the era of Thai détente is only sporadically and rarely addressed. The exception is Sarasin Viraphol, who mentioned the term ‘détente’ in passing. In surveying *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy* in the 1970s, he observed: ‘after the loss of the American pivot, Thailand is trying to search for a new political alternative’. The Foreign Ministry had ‘spearheaded détente’ with the Soviet Union and the PRC. The ‘acceleration of involvement by the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China in Thailand’, for Sarasin, needed a policy of equidistance. That is, ‘the adoption of a balancing of interests policy, which has a mind toward keeping the two powers at arm’s

17 The origins and development of Thailand’s Cold War strategy and alignment with the United States can be classified into four main paradigms. First, the Cold War orthodox paradigm emphasises the international narratives and contestations, driven by either ideological or security imperatives: see Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*; Frank C Darling, *Thailand and the United States* (Washington DC: Public Affairs Press, 1965); Donald E Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965); Apichart Chinwanno, ‘Thailand’s Search for Protection: The Making of the Alliance with the United States, 1947–1954’ (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1985).

The second paradigm is domestic politics, focusing on the internal factors in Thailand – in particular the dynamics and interests of the military elites: see Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2007); Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947–1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997); John LS Girling, *Thailand: Society and Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); Surachart Bamrungsuk, *United States Foreign Policy and Thailand Military Rule, 1947–1977* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1988); Sutayut Osornprasop, ‘Thailand and the American Secret War in Indochina, 1960–1974’ (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2006).

The third paradigm is a revisionist one, which stresses the economic dimensions of the Cold War: see Arlene Becker Neher, ‘Prelude to Alliance: The Expansion of American Economic Interest in Thailand during the 1940s’ (PhD thesis, Northern Illinois University, 1980); Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead, *Kanmueng Thai yuk Sarit–Thanom phaitai khongsang amnat lok* [Thai Politics during Sarit–Thanom Regimes under Global Power Structure] (Bangkok: 50 Years Foundation, The Bank of Thailand, 2007); Natthaphon Jaijing, ‘Kanmueng Thai samai rattaban Chomphon Po Phibun Songkhrum phaitai rabiap lok khong Saharat America (2491–2500) [Thai Politics under Field Marshal Phibun in US World Order (1948–1957)]’ (PhD thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1999).

Fourth, the cultural politics paradigm explicates the politics of ‘truth’, ideologies, and culture: see Benedict Anderson, ‘Withdrawal Symptoms’, in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London and New York: Verso Books, 1998), 139–173; Kasian Tejapira, *Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture, 1927–1958* (Australasia: Trans Pacific Press, 2001); Prajak Kongkirati, *And Then The Movement Emerged: Cultural Politics of Thai Students and Intellectuals Movements before the October 14 Uprising* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2005); Puangthong Pawakapan, *Truth in the Vietnam War: The First Casualty of War and the Thai State* (Bangkok: Kobfai, 2006). And yet there is an emerging ‘cultural turn’ in Cold War history, which discerns a broader range of topics such as popular culture, including film, songs, literature, fashion and so forth: see Matthew Phillips, *Thailand in the Cold War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

length'.¹⁸ A few scholars such as Wiwat Mungkandi directly link global détente with changing Thai diplomacy. They tend to agree that it was not easy for Thailand to adjust to changing global power relations.¹⁹ However, most works do not conceptualise the long 1970s as the age of détente in Thai diplomacy.

That said, rather than spelling out and studying détente as a single entity, the existing literature on Thai foreign policy in the 1970s is compartmentalised into specific periods and overly focused on bilateral relations, either with the Soviet Union or the PRC. There is still no comprehensive work on Prime Minister Kriangsak's foreign policy toward the communist powers. This literature is preoccupied with the motivations or factors that determined Thai foreign policy. The literature can be organised into four distinct subgroups.

The first subgroup provides a 'security-ideology nexus' explanation. Thai détente with the communist powers happened largely due to the convergence of interests.²⁰ On Sino-Thai rapprochement, a deep and comprehensive study by Chulacheeb Chinwanno emphasises the security dimension. He argues that the diplomatic recognition established on 1 July 1975 was 'a strategic decision as Thai leaders were concerned with change in the international strategic environment, global as well as regional, especially the normalization between the US and China'.²¹ MR Sukhumbhand Paribatra and Surachai Sirikrai also emphasise a convergence between Thailand and China's security interests during the

18 Sarasin, *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy*, 6–7, 52.

19 Wiwat Mungkandi, 'The Security Syndrome (1941–1975)', in *A Century and a Half of Thai-American Relations*, ed. Wiwat Mungkandi and William Warren (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1982), 61–114.

20 In one of the most illuminating works on the rise and decline of Thai-US relations, R Sean Randolph explains a change in Thai foreign policy in the long 1970s toward the US (from a divergence of interests between the two states), which originated from the internal and external pressures underlying the readjustment of Thai relations with the US. He claimed that its alteration was 'the critical problem of national survival'. Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 129.

21 Chulacheeb Chinwanno, 'Thai-Chinese Relations: Security and Strategic Partnership' (Working Paper No. 155, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, 2008): ii. See also Chulacheeb Chinwanno, *Sam sib pee kwam sampan tang karntoot thai-jin: kwam ruammue rawang kalayanamitr*, 2518–2548 [Thirty Years of Diplomatic Relations between Thailand and China: Cooperation between Truthful Friends, 1975–2005] (Bangkok: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005); Chulacheeb Chinwanno, *Sam sib har pee kwam sampan tang karntoot thai-jin*, 2518–2553: *Aded pajupan anakod* [Thirty-five Years of Diplomatic Relations between Thailand China, 1975–2010: Past Present and Future] (Bangkok: Openbook, 2010).

Third Indochina War, when Thailand formed a tacit alliance with the PRC and the US, with support for the Khmer Rouge as the main cause of their closer ties.²²

On Thai–Soviet relations, although most of the literature provides an ideologically driven explanation,²³ Noranit Setaputr suggests that change in Thai foreign policy towards the Soviet Union came because of security interests.²⁴ I have previously argued that Thai–Soviet relations emerged and developed largely due to a synchronisation of economic interests between the two countries.²⁵

The second subgroup focuses on threat perception. These writers explain Thailand's adjustment towards the communist powers as a transformation in threat perceptions in the 1970s. On the one hand, Sarasin Viraphol and Chantima Ongsuragz study Thai perceptions of the USSR, arguing that the Soviet Union remained a persistent threat to Thai national interests until the end of the Cold War. They do not see a change in Thai diplomacy.²⁶ As Chantima states:

Since communism rejects monarchical government and religion and views them as impediments toward a classless society, Thailand is fundamentally anticommunist. The principal values and institutions of the Thai society make communism appear to be a natural enemy.²⁷

On the other hand, Thailand's changing perceptions of the Chinese threat are examined by Naruemit Sodsuk and Surachai Sirikrai, who argue that by the late 1970s Thailand gradually changed its perceptions

22 Sukhumbhand Paribatra, *From Enmity to Alignment: Thailand's Evolving Relations with China* (Bangkok: Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1987); Surachai Sirikrai, 'Sino–Thai Relations: A Thai Perception', in *China–ASEAN Relations: Political, Economic and Ethnic Dimensions*, ed. Theresa C Carino (Manila: De La Salle University, 1991).

23 See, for example, Paul R Shirk, 'Thai–Soviet Relations', *Asian Survey* 9 (September 1969): 682–93; Chulacheeb, *Siam, Russia, Thai: Karntootkarnmuang Karnmuangkarntoot, Aded pajupan anakod*.

24 Noranit, *Kiwam sampan tang prathet rawang Thai–Russia*.

25 Jittipat Poonkham, *Withet Panid Sampan su Songkram Yen: Kwam sampan rawangprathet Thai–Russia (1897–1991)* [Foreign Economic Relations to the Cold War: Thai–Russian Foreign Relations (1897–1991)] (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2016).

26 Sarasin, 'The Soviet Threat', 61–70; Chantima Ongsuragz, 'Thai Perceptions of the Soviet Union and Its Implications for Thai–Soviet Relations', in *The Soviet Union and the Asia-Pacific Region: Views from the Region*, ed. Pushpa Thambipillai, and Daniel C Matuszewski (New York: Praeger, 1989), 122–33.

27 Chantima, 'Thai Perceptions of the Soviet Union', 122.

toward the PRC from enmity to friendship.²⁸ These works also consider the different perceptions of those communist powers among key actors within Thailand, such as the military and civilian elites.

The third subgroup of literature focuses on bureaucratic politics within Thailand. ML Bhansoon Ladavalaya is the exemplar. Based on Graham Allison's bureaucratic politics approach, Bhansoon studies foreign policy decision-making in Thailand's normalisation with the PRC during the Kukrit Pramoj administration, claiming that this decision was the result of 'a long conflict between organizational interests and varying perceptions of national interests within the government', especially between the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs.²⁹

The last subgroup emphasises the internationalisation of the state. Drawing from the declassified documents in the US and UK, Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead highlights the role of US hegemony and its allies, or the so-called internationalised elites, in determining not only Thai foreign policy but also Thai domestic politics.³⁰ Similarly, Rapeeporn Lertwongweerachai studies the role of Thanat Khoman in Thai foreign affairs, by arguing that changes in Thanat's foreign policy, such as Sino–Thai rapprochement, followed the decline of US hegemonic power. These changes led to a direct conflict with the military elites, which ended in the military coup in 1971.³¹

All these significant works ostensibly approach the 1970s from historical and bilateral perspectives. Though some touch upon the domestic and international contexts within which Thai détente emerged, there is a huge gap in the literature that needs to be further explicated. First, despite their differing views on Thai foreign policy in the 1970s, the existing works are preoccupied with explaining the why-question or causation. They pay little attention to how détente emerged and became possible. That is, the process of diplomatic practice transformation, in which the new

28 Naruemit Sodsuk, *Sampantaparp tang karntoot rawang thai jeen* [Diplomatic Relations between Thailand and the People's Republic of China] (Bangkok: Thai Wattana Panich, 1981); Surachai Sirikrai, 'Thai Perceptions of China and Japan', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 12, no. 3 (December 1990): 247–65.

29 Bhansoon Ladavalaya, 'Thailand's Foreign Policy under Kukrit Pramoj: A Study in Decision-Making' (PhD thesis, Northern Illinois University, 1980), 4.

30 Kullada, *Kanmueng Thai yuk Sarit-Thanom phaitai khongsang amnat lok*; Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead, 'The Cold War and Thai Democratization', in *Southeast Asia and the Cold War*, ed. Albert Lau (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 215–40.

31 Rapeeporn Lertwongweerachai, 'The Role of Thanat Khoman in Thai Foreign Affairs during 1958–1971' (MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2002).

discourse of détente transformed foreign policy thinking and practices of key actors. When and how did the discourse of détente come about? How was it possible that during the 1970s, the USSR and China shifted from being Thailand's foes towards friends and even tacit allies? How did this discourse become dominant? When did these discourses come undone? How and to what extent has détente become a discursive legacy in the Thai foreign policy tradition?

For example, when Thailand initiated the new approach of flexible diplomacy toward the communist powers, it deviated from dominant Cold War certainties. Many works tend to concur that it was largely due to the Nixon Doctrine, when US President Richard Nixon foreshadowed withdrawal from the region, under the rubric of 'Vietnamisation' in 1969.³² As this book will indicate, Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman coined the term 'flexible diplomacy' in 1968, even before the promulgation of the Nixon Doctrine. Unlike the bamboo diplomacy narrative, Thailand was in fact bending before the wind had begun to shift.

In addition, failing both to recognise that the term 'détente' accurately conceptualises Thai foreign policy in the 1970s and to see Thai détente as a holistic practice transformation, previous scholarship largely neglects the fact that Thai détente occurred within a changing domestic context and configurations. First, the aforementioned works ignore the discursive struggle within Thai politics; namely how the dominant discourse of anticommunism was called into question, and how the new discourse of détente emerged and developed. This book argues that diplomacy and politics were not separable, and diplomacy was the contested site of domestic political contestation.

Second, the existing literature does not encompass Thailand's changing discourse and perceptions towards the communist powers. By the early 1970s, the Soviet Union and the PRC were no longer rendered as 'enemies', but rather 'friends' in Thai foreign policy discourses. Third, it overlooks a transformation in identity or subject position of those détente proponents, and in particular within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Through the détente process, the MFA became an increasingly independent institution that sought to conduct diplomacy in a more flexible and professional way.

32 Bhansoon, 'Thailand's Foreign Policy under Kukrit Pramoj'; Sarasin, *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy*.

In contrast to extant work, this book provides a direct, holistic and comprehensive discussion of the term 'Thai détente' to conceptualise changing diplomatic discourses and practices in the long 1970s. It does so for three reasons. First, the Thai elite, especially those in the Foreign Ministry, employed the globally recognised term 'détente' so as to communicate with the world about how Thailand intended to act diplomatically.³³ The practices of détente, such as back-channel, ping-pong and petro-diplomacy, continued throughout the 1970s. Second, the term 'détente' was also widely used by local and foreign newspapers at the time to capture Thailand's changing relationship with both the Soviet Union and the PRC.³⁴ Third, conceptualising Thai diplomacy in the long 1970s as détente situates the book within global studies of détente. The current state and status of Thai détente literature differs little from global détente studies more generally. Both are relatively understudied. This book aspires to fill this gap. It also indicates how the alternative strategy of small states in the Third World was able to contribute to Cold War superpower politics, and how successful that strategy was. In this sense, a study of Thai détente can be framed in terms of comparative and global dimensions of Cold War history.

In this book, the Thai conception of détente is defined as a new diplomatic discourse and practice to normalise relations with the communist powers in general and, specifically, the Soviet Union and the PRC. The terms 'détente' and 'flexible diplomacy' (*karntoot yeutyun*) were used interchangeably. In the process, the Thai state sought to pursue readjustment with the Soviet Union, and rapprochement with China. The other term, 'equidistant' relations with great powers, was also used, in particular during the Kukrit and Kriangsak administrations, as a state of flexible diplomacy that positioned Thailand in a more balanced and equal status vis-à-vis other great powers. All these key concepts were part and parcel of Thai détente. This diplomatic move was first and foremost a response to the prospect of American military disengagement from the region, and how to manage the changing international context. By the early 1970s, détente itself became a well-established norm in world politics of which Thai détente was a part.

33 Sarasin, *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy*.

34 See 'Thanat's Ostpolitik', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 July 1973, 24–25; 'Beijing Ready for Détente with Thailand', *Bangkok Post*, 29 October 1973, 1.

The ultimate aim of the book, therefore, is to examine the emergence, development and transformation of détente discourse, and its concomitant narrative of ‘bamboo diplomacy’, in Thai foreign policy under the prospect of American retrenchment in 1968 until 1980, when the Third Indochina War gained momentum in the regional balance of power. Rather than seeing this as a continuation of Thai diplomacy, the process of détente was fundamentally a pivotal rupture in Thai foreign policy, and established the conditions of possibility for the present. In narrating the rupture in Thai foreign relations with the great powers, the book is methodologically committed to a genealogy of Thai détente.

1.3. A Genealogy of Thai Détente

1.3.1. Genealogy as Historical Problematisation

A genealogy is often supposed to connote a tracing of a pedigree or history back to its origins. For Michel Foucault, it is the opposite: a genealogy is an alternative approach that contentiously discards and disrupts (some commonly held beliefs about) a historical origin.³⁵ In his study of diplomacy, James Der Derian articulates this idea, which is worth quoting at length:

[G]enealogy is a history of the present, not in the sense of tracing the seamless development of a phenomenon from some pristine origin, or projecting contemporary characteristics of it back into

35 In his seminal essay, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, Foucault proposes a genealogical approach with two interrelated concepts: *descent* and *emergence*. First, rather than a search for an origin, genealogy is a search for descent, which ‘is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself’. The analysis of descent dissolves the socially constructed unity of things, and discloses the dispersion, multiplicity and heterogeneity of events, which lie behind any historical beginnings.

Second, genealogy is the analysis of emergence. Historical emergence is conceptualised by Foucault as a temporary episode in ‘a series of subjugations’ or in ‘the hazardous play of dominations’, rather than the culminations of events or the end of a process of development. It is merely a momentary manifestation or a stage in the power struggle between different social forces. The emerging form of events is the (inter)play of dominations. Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1991 [1984]), 82–83. See also Michel Foucault, ‘Lecture on Nietzsche: How to Think the History of Truth with Nietzsche without Relying on Truth’, in *Lectures on the Will to Know: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1970–1971 and Oedipal Knowledge*, trans. Graham Burchell (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 202–23.

the past, but rather in the sense of *discovering the transformations engendered by the instability and violent contests which diplomacy had mediated with discontinuous success*. We might say, then, that while history does not repeat itself, there are *historical confrontations of power and truth which recur and generate parallel sets of mediatory rules and practices*.³⁶

A genealogical approach tells us a radically different story: a history of rupture and a history of the present. As Foucault argues, 'what is found at the historical beginnings of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity'.³⁷ In this book, the Thai conception of détente emerged as disparity or difference – the ubiquitous fear and estrangement from the domino theory, as the fall of Indochina and the prospect of American military disengagement from the region began to loom large on the horizon. This, in turn, generated a new 'system of rules' that helped mediate the ongoing conflicts and violence, thereby rendering détente with the communist powers possible. As a historical method and critical ethos, a genealogy differs from a conventional history in the sense that it historically problematises the political construction of knowledge.

In this book, a genealogy of Thai détente addresses three analyses: a history of rupture, the discourse approach and a history of the present. It closely examines the complex relationship and interplay between discursive and non-discursive meanings and practices, in particular the interaction between power/knowledge, discourses and subject positions in Thai foreign policy. Unlike Foucault, the book focuses on the 'macrophysics' of power: the study of Thai elites, especially those détente proponents.

The book argues that, first, Thai détente was a radical break with the hegemonic discourse of anticommunism. A genealogy of détente sees discursive anxiety in Thai diplomacy, and the power struggle between détente proponents and détente opponents. Second, rather than being simply viewed as an inevitable result of the objective qualities of bamboo diplomacy, as is often supposed, Thai détente is better understood as a political construction that occurred through a series of fortuitous historical events, and as the result of contingent political contestation. Knowledge of bamboo diplomacy was in fact produced by the changing practices of Thai détente.

36 James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 76. My emphasis.

37 Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', 79.

1.3.2. A History of Rupture

First, a genealogy of Thai détente demonstrates a history of rupture. On the one hand, it engages with global détente studies with a different set of questions. Rather than explaining the motivations or factors that precipitated the rise and fall of Thai détente par excellence, a genealogy attempts to understand how and to what extent Thai détente was formed as a hegemonic project in Thai foreign policy.

On the other hand, in reassessing Thai détente, a genealogy negates the teleological historiography of Thai foreign policy, most of which focuses on the continuity of ‘bamboo diplomacy’. This is because this conventional interpretation historically conflates the two. In fact, there was a critical rupture in the late 1960s when a new approach of ‘flexible diplomacy’ emerged. In other words, genealogy rejects history in its uninterrupted, continual, stable and essentialist form, as in fact it was constituted by historical contingency and complexity.

During the Cold War, Thai foreign policy was not ruled by a singular logic of strategy, but at least three logics. The first logic was anticommunism. Although ‘anticommunism’ had been introduced within the Thai state when various governments sought to eliminate their domestic political rivals, the narrative itself became a hegemonic discourse only after 1958. At the peak of the Asian Cold War, Thailand pursued a highly unbalanced and rigid strategy by deeply engaging with a Cold War narrative, closely forging an alliance, or ‘special relationship’, with the US, and antagonising the USSR and China.³⁸ For the US, Thailand became an invaluable anticommunist ally, and a forward base, or a so-called ‘unsinkable aircraft carrier’, especially during the Vietnam War.³⁹ The relationship was reflected in US commitments, such as military and economic aid given since 1950, Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) membership between 1954 and 1977, and the Thanat–Rusk joint communiqué in 1962, all of which obliged the US to help Thailand in the event of a communist attack. Under the first logic of strategy, Thailand was extensively involved in the escalating conflicts, both in Vietnam and across the region. Benedict Anderson called the period the ‘American Era’.⁴⁰ Similarly, this period sees

38 Fineman, *A Special Relationship*.

39 Girling, *Thailand: Society and Politics*, 231.

40 Benedict Anderson, *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1985).

Thai foreign relations between late 1950s until 1960s not as 'bamboo', but as strictly tied to a rigid strategy dominated by the anticommunist discourse.⁴¹

The second logic of strategy, namely flexible diplomacy, appeared to emerge in 1968. American power and prestige globally and regionally had been challenged by events in Vietnam, precipitating the reversal of America's Vietnam policy. The US under Lyndon Johnson halted bombing in Vietnam, and then under Richard Nixon, introduced the doctrine of 'Vietnamisation' and the concomitant prospect of military retrenchment from the region in 1969. During this period, Thai foreign policy saw a radical departure from the first logic. Due to its strategic anxiety emerging out of American retrenchment from the region, Thailand initiated a truly balanced form of flexible diplomacy, or *détente* strategy. It pursued 'equidistance' with the great powers, and simultaneously began the processes of normalisation with the communist powers, by adopting rapprochement with China and readjustment with the Soviet Union. Thailand, therefore, deemphasised the role of the US in maintaining its own national security, and pushed the agenda of a demilitarisation of the American presence in Thailand. Girling calls this period a 'new course' in Thai foreign policy.⁴² I can call it Thai *détente*.

The third logic of strategy began in the late 1970s after the Soviet-backed Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978. Many scholars readily agreed that by the end of the decade, *détente* was in decline, and with respect to the communist powers, finally collapsed.⁴³ Despite the relative decline of triangular diplomacy, the discourse of *détente* remained and became the unfinished project of Thai diplomacy. What changed in the 1980s was the nature of strategic flexibility: the move to what might be described as unbalanced *détente*. By the end of the 1970s, triangular diplomacy between Thailand, the USSR and China was orientated toward one side. This is because Thailand formed a close association with a tacit ally, namely China, in the Third Indochina War. In its relationship with the Soviet Union, Thailand did not return to the pre-*détente* era of strategic rigidity and hostility. Instead, it still engaged with the Soviet Union, although from a distance and with scepticism. This was largely

41 Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 10.

42 John LS Girling, 'Thailand's New Course', *Pacific Affairs* 42, no. 3 (Autumn 1969): 346–59.

43 See Leszek Buszynski, 'Thailand: The Erosion of a Balanced Foreign Policy', *Asian Survey* 22, no. 11 (November 1982): 1037–55.

because of Soviet support for Vietnam and its increasing interest in the region in general. Consequently, in the 1980s Thailand under General Prem Tinsulanonda engaged deeply in regional conflicts and in particular joined an unlikely alliance with China and the US in support of the Khmer Rouge.

To conclude, a genealogy differs from a conventional history in the sense that it emphasises rupture in Thai foreign policy, in which détente became a separate logic in diplomatic practice. Although this book mainly focuses on the second logic, it highlights how détente emerged out of the declining anticommunist hegemonic discourse, while maintaining that the second and third logics of Thai strategy are not mutually exclusive.

1.3.3. The Discourse Approach: Discursive Anxiety and the Clash of Discourses

A genealogy also draws on the discourse approach to explicate Thai détente in three different episodes: Thanat Khoman's first détente (1969–1971); MR Kukrit Pramoj's second (1975–1976); and General Kriangsak Chomanan's third (1977–1980). The discourse approach is part and parcel of a genealogy, which closely examines both discursive and extra-discursive practices. Discourses can be broadly defined as ensembles of social practices, representations and interpretations through which certain regimes of truth, and their concomitant identities, are produced and reproduced in a particular historical context.⁴⁴ They are inseparably connected to social practices where meanings are given to subjects, objects and states' behaviours, such as diplomacy.

⁴⁴ In this sense, the genealogical approach of discourse analysis is different from the constructivist approach of ideas, identity and norms, as follows. First, discourse is not purely an idea. Rather, it comprises both ideas and materiality. In other words, discourse is always already a discursive *practice* par excellence. Second, identity is not an a priori, inherently pre-given and objective entity, independent from social context. Rather, it is sociopolitically relational in the sense that it is constructed through discursive practices in representing foreign policy. Identity should be understood in terms of identification or subjectivation that produced and reproduced subjectivity or subject positions in temporal and spatial contexts. Third, a norm is not a standard or rule of appropriate behaviours. Rather, a norm is a normalising process. It defines what counts as 'normal' and 'abnormal', 'thinkable' and 'unthinkable', in social practices including foreign policy practices. See Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); Charlotte Epstein, 'Who Speaks? Discourse, the Subject and the Study of Identity in International Politics', *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 2 (June 2011): 327–50; Maja Zehfuss, 'Constructivism and Identity: A Dangerous Liaison', *European Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 3 (September 2001): 315–48.

In order to narrate each and every episode in Thai détente, the discourse approach analyses how the elite's 'regime of truth' made possible 'certain courses of action' or a state's behaviour while 'excluding other policies as unintelligible or unworkable or improper'. Discourses are meaningful 'background capabilities that are used socially, at least by a small group of officials if not more broadly in a society or among different elites and societies'.⁴⁵ However, as Foucault notes, discourses are not simply 'groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations)', but rather 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'.⁴⁶ Analysing discourses then is not simply a study of meanings but more importantly a study of 'sense-making' practices.⁴⁷ The discourse approach to foreign policy thus focuses on what policymakers actually say and do.

Diplomacy, as a set of social and discursive practices, depends on the representations and articulations of identities, including the representations of national identity and 'the others', such as 'friend' and 'enemy'. The formation of national identities was inseparable from the new representation of otherness. Through the process of foreign policymaking, identities are (re)produced.⁴⁸ In 1970s Thailand, two processes stood out: the subject formation of détente proponents and the representation of the Soviet Union and the PRC as 'friends'. Both marked how Thai détente proponents thought about, spoke of and acted on the communist powers anew, shifting foreign policy in a more flexible direction. Simultaneously, these new identities provided a justification for these emergent foreign policy orientations. In other words, a change in discourse ostensibly legitimised the process of rapprochement with China as well as readjustment with the USSR.

These double representations should be put into historical context. I introduce the concepts of 'the clash of discourses' and 'discursive anxiety' to understand how Thailand encountered diplomatic transformation throughout the 1970s. In general, anxiety is the existential state of feeling an uncomfortable disconnect with the self and disorientation from the

45 Jennifer Milliken, 'The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods', *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 2 (June 1999): 233, 236.

46 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. AM Sheridan Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1972), 49.

47 Charlotte Epstein, *The Power of Words in International Relations: Birth of an Anti-Whaling Discourse* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008).

48 David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

world.⁴⁹ In international politics, discursive anxiety, including diplomatic anxiety, happens when states experience changing international contexts that make national understandings about the world problematic. As Ned Lebow suggests, these states suffer deep-seated anxiety ‘when these routines are disrupted by novel or critical situations’.⁵⁰ Discursive anxiety also brings about uncertainty and unpredictability in diplomatic relations.

This condition of uncertainty not only causes divided selves within the state, but also affects foreign policy toward other states.⁵¹ This kind of anxiety is not simply ontological (about the sense of the self in the world) but discursive (about the understanding and expectation of the world). As anxious actors, states attempt to reduce or relieve discursive anxiety by seeking new discourses or narratives as well as developing coherence and consistency in their understanding of the world. In particular, they will adapt the narratives they have told about who they are, and who their ‘friends’ and ‘foes’ are in international politics. As Epstein argues, the function of discourse is to provide ‘important principles of coherence for statehood’, which are reflected in both ‘the everyday language used to describe international politics’, and ‘the practice of diplomacy’.⁵² Discourse brings narrative coherence to events that seem contingent. In particular, the discourse of a ‘friend’ reduces discursive anxiety and paves the way for international recognition.⁵³ This book argues that in a changing and contingent international context, states do not simply aim to pursue physical or existential security,⁵⁴ but rather seek to have secure discourses that help them make better sense of the world and adjust their diplomatic practices toward other countries.

49 Unlike fear, anxiety is a ‘presupposition’ of despair about nothing. It is the self’s encounter with its own nothingness, or a ‘lost object’, that makes it anxious. See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*. Translated by Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1967); Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, trans. AR Price (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

50 Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 25.

51 I adopt the term ‘divided selves’ from RD Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (New York: Penguin, 1990).

52 Epstein, ‘Who Speaks?’, 341–42.

53 See Felix Berenskoetter, ‘Friends, There Are No Friends? An Intimate Reframing of the International’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 35, no. 3 (2007): 647–76.

54 This is the theoretical stance of ontological security framework, see Brent Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008); Marco A Vieira, ‘Understanding Resilience in International Relations: The Non-Aligned Movement and Ontological Security’, *International Studies Review* 18 (2016): 290–311; Trine Flockhart, ‘The Problem of Change in Constructivist Theory: Ontological Security Seeking and Agent Motivation’, *Review of International Studies* 42, no. 5 (2016): 799–820.

For social agents in Thailand, discursive anxiety emerged in the late 1960s when the dominant discourses of pro-Americanism and anticommunism became increasingly meaningless for making sense of world politics. Discursive anxiety, and its concomitant lack of relative consistency in diplomacy, brought about a change in discourse. Thai détente proponents spoke the discourse of détente, and their subject positions were produced by this new discourse. A change in discourse in turn translated into novel diplomatic practices toward the communist powers, such as ping-pong diplomacy.

Furthermore, discursive anxiety set the conditions for the clash of discourses in politics, whereby the prevailing discourse was deeply delegitimised and challenged by the emerging one. Different social forces, attached to both old and new discourses, were profoundly anxious about their respective status and position within the changing power structure. In this sense, a genealogy emphasises that history is irreducibly based upon a constant struggle, or even warfare, between different power blocs attempting to impose their own systems of domination and rules.⁵⁵

I argue that discursive anxiety and the clash of discourses shed light on both ontological and epistemological dimensions of diplomacy as well as the power relationships of foreign policy. First, discursive anxiety saw a new social ontology: new kinds of social agents, or new subject positions, which in turn brought new social relations into being. These social agents held subject positions, or positions within a discourse.⁵⁶ In doing so, they were establishing themselves as the subjects speaking that particular discourse, such as détente discourse, and thereby identifying themselves as détente proponents. The discourse they spoke and acted upon not only marked who they were, but also provided them with narratives on how to make sense of the world they lived in. The agents were, strictly speaking, socially and discursively embedded actors with particular subject positions in the foreign policymaking process.

In this book, Thai détente proponents were mainly linked to new social forces, mostly civilians, such as Thanat Khoman (foreign minister, 1959–1971) and MR Kukrit Pramoj (prime minister, 1975–1976), or progressive military leaders, such as General Chatichai Choonhavan (deputy foreign minister, 1973–1975, and later foreign minister, 1975–1976) and General

55 Quoted in Barry Smart, *Michel Foucault* (Sussex: Ellis Horwood, 1985), 57.

56 Epstein, *The Power of Words*, 15.

Kriangsak Chomanan (prime minister, 1977–1980). Détente opponents or Cold Warriors, on the other hand, were mostly military leaders or conservative civilians, most notably Thanin Kraivichien (prime minister, 1976–1977). Later, I argue that some ardent détente opponents gradually and implicitly embraced détente discourse, as evidenced in the late Cold War and the Third Indochina War in particular.

The second, and related, issue is that during the period of discursive anxiety, a discursive struggle is unavoidable, if not inevitable. It is evident through a series of sociopolitical showdowns, such as student demonstrations, civil protests, revolutions and coups d'état. These discursive struggles illustrate that foreign policy discourses have never been absolutely hegemonic, but are subject to challenges, rearticulations and resistances. As Foucault notes:

discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized.⁵⁷

In each episode, Thai détente challenged the hegemonic discourse of anticommunism, and brought about a discursive struggle, which manifested in a contestation with the Thai establishment. While détente proponents gained discursive momentum due to the decline of American power in the region, successive episodes of détente were historically contingent and relatively short-lived, resulting in either a military coup d'état or a downfall of the government. Opponents, who held the Cold War ideological hegemony and were strongly supported by conservatives, still dominated Thai politics. In this period, a coup can be equally seen as a coup about/against foreign policy.

Third, epistemologically, discursive anxiety requires a newly formed consensus in terms of knowledge about diplomacy so as to justify the new diplomatic practices, and reinstate the secure representations of national identity and interest. To create successful and effective diplomatic practices, new discourses required knowledge production. Like every social struggle in history, this new diplomatic knowledge informed who the state was and determined what its foreign policy looked like. In the case of Thai détente

57 Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', in *Language and Politics*, ed. Michael J Shapiro (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 110.

that knowledge was bamboo diplomacy, which will be discussed in the next section. In other words, there was a transformation in diplomatic practices at the same time as new knowledge was invented and produced.

In sum, a genealogy in this case concerns the discursive politics of Thai foreign policy. The diplomatic discursive framework can problematise a conventional history in Thai studies, which takes the discourses and practices of diplomacy for granted. Following Foucault, the discourse approach is not only the study of discursive and knowledge formation, but also sheds light on subject formation as well as power contestation between different subject positions. It also illustrates that international politics is the contested realm of friend–enemy relationships.⁵⁸ This book further examines how discursive politics in Thai foreign policy shaped the way in which the discourse of ‘friend’ changed Thailand’s diplomatic perception and practices toward the communist powers.

1.3.4. A History of the Present: The Birth of Bamboo Diplomacy

Last but not least, a genealogy of Thai détente exposes the making of ‘bamboo’ diplomacy which, I argue, only emerged as accepted and legitimate knowledge in the early 1970s. This section examines how knowledge of bamboo diplomacy was disseminated through discursive practices of détente and academic narratives in the early 1970s. The latter historiography began to explain many episodes of Thai foreign policy in the past, as well as in the present, through this new lens. More importantly, both academic and policymaking practices rendered bamboo diplomacy an ahistorical ‘truth’ or conventional wisdom of Thai foreign policy. This section begins with tracing the descent and emergence of a ‘flexible diplomacy’ discourse in elite perspectives. Then it indicates how this new discourse has shaped and constituted knowledge production within Thai academia.

First of all, changing practices produced the new narrative of ‘bamboo diplomacy’. In the early 1970s, the narrative challenged the anticommunist discourse, which had dominated during the early Cold War. Some people

58 See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

termed this new discourse ‘flexible diplomacy’, while others called it ‘bamboo diplomacy’. Regardless of the name, this emerging discourse rendered a rupture with the hegemonic discourse of anticommunism.

This book argues that it was Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman who coined the term ‘flexible diplomacy’ in the late 1960s.⁵⁹ He suggested that foreign policy ‘should be flexible in a world of changing conditions. A rigid policy is dangerous, especially for a small country’.⁶⁰ However, it was in fact Pridi Phanomyong, the former Thai prime minister in exile, who juxtaposed this ‘flexible diplomacy’ with the conceptual lexicon of ‘bamboo’ diplomacy.

In his interview with *The Nation’s* special correspondent in Paris in August 1971, Pridi claimed that China was ready to establish relations with Thailand if the Thai Government ‘changes her hostile policy’. During his exile in Beijing for many years, he became quite familiar with high-ranking Chinese officials. Consequently, he said that the crucial issue for rapprochement with China was about motives:

If Thailand had good motives towards them, they would certainly reciprocate. Let bygones be bygones. I don’t think there are any problems with Communist China. It would be a noble thing if two hostile persons can patch up their quarrels.

Like Thanat, Pridi strongly urged a ‘*flexible*’ foreign policy with the objective of ensuring Thailand’s survival amid changing global and regional dynamics. He traced this policy back to the reign of King Rama V in the late nineteenth century:

59 After obtaining a PhD in law from Paris in 1940, Thanat Khoman returned to Thailand and joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From 1941 to 1943, he was stationed as a second secretary at the Thai Embassy in Tokyo. During the Second World War, Thanat disagreed with Phibun’s foreign policy of alignment with Japan and a so-called virtual Japanese occupation of Thailand, which made him a member of the Seri Thai (‘Free Thai’) resistance movement. His pro-Americanism and anticommunism were gradually formed during his various diplomatic posts, most of which were based in the US. From 1952 to 1957, Thanat served as the deputy to the Permanent Representative from Thailand to the UN before becoming the Thai Ambassador to the US in 1957.

Thanat was promoted to the position of Foreign Minister in 1959 under the Sarit regime and became a strong voice in pro-American and anticommunist policies in the critical time of the Asian Cold War. However, since the late 1960s, Thanat’s foreign policy ideationally shifted and thereafter he became a strong détente proponent until he was ousted from the foreign ministry following the coup in 1971.

60 ‘Thanat urges contact with China’, *Bangkok Post*, 7 January 1973, 1.

Just look back at the example set down by King Rama V. We followed a neutral policy and that saved our country. There was a balance of powers. We must accept that while all other neighboring countries fell into the hands of foreign countries, King Rama V saved Thailand from imperialism because His Majesty followed a flexible policy.

‘Whenever we took a different line set down by His Majesty King Rama V’, Pridi continued, ‘we always had troubles such as when we sided with Japan during World War II’.⁶¹

Pridi also suggested that Thailand should trade with every country without taking their political regimes or ideologies into consideration. As he puzzled:

What kind of Chinese are we talking about? Look at those Chinese merchants in the country. Why are they so rich? If we trade with Communist China, it should be on a government-to-government basis. They hold two trade exhibitions every year. When foreign merchants visit them and sign trade contracts, they sign on behalf of their governments. The government can also choose to allow some particular organizations to deal with Communist China – not private merchants.⁶²

Trade with China, for him, was inevitable. Commenting on President Nixon’s visit to Beijing, he asserted that: ‘the United States simply cannot afford to ignore a country with 800 million people. It’s a big market’.⁶³

While Pridi shared the discourse of flexible diplomacy with Thanat Khoman, and strongly supported détente with the communists, there is no evidence of direct collaboration. Later on, Prime Minister Thanom admitted that both Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman and Deputy Foreign Minister Sa-nga Kittikachorn had met separately with Pridi at the Royal Thai Embassy in Paris in 1971. He denied that Pridi was asked to serve as a middleman in contacting China. As he told Thai reporters, ‘I have never assigned Pridi to do anything’. Both Cabinet members did

61 Somrit Intaphanti, ‘Pridi: China Ready for Thailand Ties’, *The Nation*, 16 August, 1971.

62 Somrit, ‘Pridi: China Ready for Thailand Ties’.

63 Somrit, ‘Pridi: China Ready for Thailand Ties’.

not discuss any political issues with Pridi. Thanom said that 'Pridi talked about his life in Beijing'.⁶⁴ Pridi himself also denied that he was a 'third party' making contact between the two countries.⁶⁵

The concept of 'bamboo diplomacy' only became ubiquitous from the 1970s. In July 1972, Boonchu Rojanastein, the leading and influential director of the Bangkok Bank, gave a speech before the American Chamber of Commerce in Bangkok that later became famous. He spoke about the need to 'bend with the wind':

As Americans, you see us as corrupt, trafficking in drugs, full of bureaucratic red tape, alien bills, etc. On our part, we complain about your military bases, your hippies, your Americanization of our culture, your arrogance. But whatever dissatisfactions there are with each other, America has been the closest friend and ally of Thailand for the past 20 years. For the past 20 years you have served us well, and we have served you well. But the time, I think, of America being our closest friend and ally is coming to an end. Perhaps not of our own choosing, it's more of yours. When the time comes and we shall have to part, let it not be said that Thailand broke away, but rather that the national interests of both our countries made it undesirable for the United States to have exclusive rights over Thailand's relationship. But let us remain good friends.⁶⁶

Boonchu continued:

For example, we are grateful that the U.S. has given us a protective umbrella for many years. How can we now refuse your request to open up an air base, say at Takli? The Thai nature would allow this even if it were against our better judgment. Yet in giving in to such a request, we have virtually allowed the U.S. to bind us to her, and taken away the opportunity of greater flexibility in our foreign policy. The more you want to get out of Vietnam, the more you tie up Thailand. And when the time comes for you to withdraw, we will be blamed for 'flexibility' again. Is this really fair to us?⁶⁷

Subsequently, Anand Panyarachun, former ambassador to the US and the UN, gave a speech by asking 'What is diplomacy?' He said that 'diplomacy is the art of the possible', and compared Thai diplomacy with a 'bamboo'

64 'PM Says Ministers Met Pridi in Paris', *Bangkok Post*, 22 July, 1971, 1.

65 Theh Chongkhadikij, 'Pridi: Recognize China now', *Bangkok Post*, 7 November, 1971, 1.

66 Quoted in Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 164.

67 Quoted in Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 164.

that 'bent with the wind'. Anand disregarded those who charged that Thailand was a country with no firm principles. Rather, he claimed, Thailand pursued 'flexible' diplomacy. 'If international politics or foreign policy of any country did not have flexibility', Anand went on, 'the tree would have broken ... when the storm is coming'. He highlighted the difference between 'slippery' [*kalon*] and 'flexible' [*yeutyun*] diplomacy. For Anand, the former did not 'accept the truth', 'wish to know the truth' or 'seek the truth'. On the contrary, 'the aim of flexibility is to know the certain truth, find a right fact ... and how to deal with the fact'. During the high time of the Cold War, 'Thailand lacked this flexible diplomacy. This was partly because we were a victim in the Cold War'.⁶⁸

This so-called 'bamboo' diplomacy only became the metanarrative in historiography and theory of Thai foreign policy in the 1970s. This kind of knowledge is the result of Thai détente.

Bamboo diplomacy also became a metanarrative in academia during the mid-1970s. This followed the transformation of détente discourse and its diplomatic practices. If we are to understand the emergence of the 'bamboo diplomacy' narrative, we should begin with an analysis of the historiography, which only emerged during the 1970s. Three renowned scholars in Thailand, namely Likhit Dhiravegin, Sarasin Viraphol and Thamsook Numnonda, narrated Thai foreign policy by employing the lens of 'bamboo' diplomacy.⁶⁹ I argue that this was the first time that this conceptual lexicon was employed, not only to justify Thai foreign policy in the present, but also explicate Thai diplomacy in the past. This has included explanations of Siamese foreign policy during the nineteenth century, and Thai foreign policy during the Second World War.

In his 1974 oft-cited article, entitled 'Thailand Foreign Policy Determination', Likhit Dhiravegin conceptualised Thai foreign policy as 'bamboo diplomacy'. He contended that:

68 Anand Panyarachun, 'Negotiating Readjustment in Thai-Vietnam Diplomatic Relations' (presented at seminar 'Thai-Vietnam Relations in the contemporary decade and towards cooperation in the future', Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, 2 August 1996).

69 Likhit, 'Thailand Foreign Policy Determination'; Likhit, *Siam and Colonialism (1855-1909)*; Sarasin, *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy*; Thamsook, *Thailand and the Japanese Presence, 1941-1945*.

the basic foreign policy of the country is to watch the 'direction of the wind' and bend accordingly in order to survive ... The present writer would like to term this Thai national style as 'bamboo diplomacy'.⁷⁰

In his 1975 book, Likhit extends this conceptual lexicon to explain Siam's survival amid colonialism during the nineteenth century. Siam survived the imperialist threat and colonisation because of the 'flexible' diplomacy that the Thai kings diligently mastered.⁷¹

In his 1976 book, Sarasin Viraphol also used the narrative of 'bamboo diplomacy' to explicate contemporary Thai foreign policy.⁷² In 1977, Thamsook Numnonda reinterpreted Phibun's foreign policy during the Second World War in line with this flexible diplomacy. As she put it, 'the Thai art of [bamboo] diplomacy had once again saved the country. And this, of course, has always been the way the Thais have met and overcome every crisis'.⁷³

While such studies were expertly argued, the lens itself is anachronistic, in the sense that scholars have used this very recent concept to universalise or essentialise Thai foreign policy. It is also tautological in the sense that the scholars reproduced knowledge of Thai foreign policy while appearing to be unaware of the power/knowledge production of 'bamboo diplomacy'. Since the 1970s, scholars have repeatedly adopted and shared this powerful narrative. A genealogy of Thai *détente* then renders this 'bamboo diplomacy' narrative highly problematic.

To sum up, a genealogy of Thai *détente* is a historical problematisation in double senses: in the first place, it explicates the descent and emergence of Thai *détente* in the long 1970s. We can call it a history of rupture. Through the analysis of discourse, it saw discursive anxiety and tussles within this historical rupture. In the second place, a genealogy calls into question the conventional history of 'bamboo diplomacy' and asserts the constructedness of this narrative. We call it a history of the present. In other words, such genealogy aims to historically situate diplomacy, to interrogate what is deemed as conventional wisdom, and to show how knowledge functions as a power relationship.

70 Likhit, 'Thailand Foreign Policy Determination', 48.

71 Likhit, *Siam and Colonialism (1855–1909)*.

72 Sarasin, *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy*.

73 Thamsook, *Thailand and the Japanese Presence, 1941–1945*, vi.

1.4. Archives

In this book, ‘archives’ – including collections of writings, speeches and works as well as other related documents of key policymakers – are closely studied as a ‘set of texts’ in order to understand the overlapping discourses within Thai elite circles, especially the discourse of *détente*. The book also analyses the ‘intertextuality’ of such sources, meaning the interconnectedness among texts and meanings through reference to other texts, in order to observe what practices were performed in diplomacy. These archives are not simply ‘a register of statements’ but also ‘constitute evidence of ways of thinking and ways of relating to the world’. In this sense, archives can be understood as ‘sites of interrogation’, which reflect evidence of imaginaries and ‘power relations involved in deciding what to store, how, where and the design of systems of retrieval of material’. As Luis Lobo-Guerrero put it:

the imaginaries of the researcher meet, if willing, the imaginaries of those who classified and stored the material, of those who recorded the facts and designed the recording systems ... and of the actors involved in the narratives there contained.⁷⁴

Following the Foucauldian way, archives are not merely ‘the mass of texts gathered together at a given period, those from some past epoch that have survived erasure’, but rather ‘the set of rules which at a given period and for a given society define’ what the sayable (and unsayable) statements are, how these sayings are circulated (or prohibited), who has access to them and on what terms, and, importantly, who is permitted to speak of them in the first place.⁷⁵ By interrogating the archives, the discourse of *détente* produced not only diplomatic practices but also conventional wisdom of society at large.

To understand the transformation of Thai foreign policy in the 1970s, the book draws on a number of sources including primary materials such as newly available archival materials, collected volumes, newspapers, memoirs, private correspondence and other related writings, coupled with in-depth interviews and secondary literature. It is largely based

⁷⁴ Luis Lobo-Guerrero, ‘Archives’, in *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Mark B Salter and Can Mutlu (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 121–24.

⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, ‘Politics and the Study of Discourse’, in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 59–60.

on newly declassified archival documents from Thai sources, including those from the National Archives of Thailand (TNA) and Library and Archives Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in Bangkok. The former contains related documents, most of which are a variety of newspapers and a number of official documents from the late 1960s and the early period of the 1970s, while the latter provides a number of official documents from the whole period of the 1970s. Some Chinese sources are available at the Thai MFA. Regarding the Russian sources, Thailand and Russia have closely cooperated in the exchanges and translation of archival documents, all of which are from the Archive of the Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation (AVPRF). Recently, four volumes on Thai–Soviet relations have been published commemorating the 120th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2017. The first volume covers the early Cold War until 1970 while the other three volumes cover the periods between 1971 and 1991.⁷⁶

The book also consults foreign archival documents, most of which have been published online, including the US State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS), and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) online databases.

This book has thus attempted to conduct multiarchival research, with an emphasis on Thai sources. This is largely because it studies Thai détente from a Thai perspective. It focuses mainly on Thailand's shifting discursive perceptions of, and practices toward, such communist powers as the USSR and China, not the other way round. However, I use foreign sources both for cross referencing and for 'imaginary interviewing': in the sense that, as these sources prevailed, these international diplomats and officials directly engaged with and talked to Thai elites as well as pursued a kind of participatory observation during the particular period. I, therefore, use these foreign archives with the aim of being able to 'correct national bias, to measure influence, impact and effect, to monitor perception and misperception and even to learn what cannot be found in the archives at home'.⁷⁷

76 Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volume of Soviet Archival Documents, 1941–1970* (Bangkok: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016); Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volumes of Declassified Documents on Thai–Russian Relations, 1970–1991*, Vols 1–3 (Bangkok: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017).

77 Zara Steiner, 'On Writing International History: Chaps, Maps and Much More', *International Affairs* 73, no. 3 (1997): 541.

1.5. Contribution and Structure

The book makes a contribution to at least three fields of study. First, and most obviously, it theoretically and empirically contributes to Thai studies, especially to the study of Thai foreign policy. The reinterpretation and reassessment of Thai diplomatic practices in the 1970s and their concomitant narrative of ‘bamboo diplomacy’ call into question the dominant historiography within Thai studies. One key finding is that the conception of Thai *détente* is inextricably linked to the knowledge and political construction of bamboo diplomacy as well as to the formation of new subject positions. Diplomatic practices were a result of power contestation within Thailand, and Thai *détente* happened in the long 1970s as a historical rupture in Thai foreign policy. The genealogical break marks the moment when the unthinkable – the normalisation of diplomatic relations with the communists – began to become thinkable, and shaped the way in which Thai foreign policy has been conducted in the present. The second finding is that a genealogy problematises the continuation of ‘bamboo’ diplomacy and asserts that knowledge itself was constituted as the metanarrative in Thai diplomacy in the early 1970s.

Second, the book aspires to contribute to Cold War international history, especially global *détente* studies, in the sense that it provides an insight into the case studies of Thai *détente*, which indicates how small powers, such as Thailand, initiated alternative strategies beyond superpower politics, and how successful these strategies were. Although the success of diplomatic *détente* in part depended on the receptivity of the great powers, this book shows that Third World or non-Western states were no longer passive agents in global politics, and had an impact upon the global Cold War. Cold War international history should pay much greater attention to the agency of small powers, and their strategies of *détente* with the communist powers. Third, this book makes a contribution to international relations (IR) as a discipline, in particular critical IR theories. It takes issue with a genealogy and the discursive formation of bamboo diplomacy – how and in what ways was knowledge discursively constituted by change in diplomatic practices such as *détente*? In addition, the book might also reassess the way in which we can conduct research on Cold War international history by using alternative approaches, especially genealogy.

The remainder of the book is organised as follows. Chapter 2 provides the historical background of the Cold War discursive hegemony and its discontents between 1958 and 1968. The next two chapters examine the first episode of *détente*, discussing Thanat Khoman's discourse of 'flexible diplomacy' (Chapter 3), and Thailand's changing diplomatic practices with the Soviet Union and the PRC under the context of American withdrawal from the region (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 is an interregnum of the 1971 military coup, which at first sought to lessen *détente*, but in fact continued it. *Détente* culminated in ping-pong and trade diplomacy with the PRC.

Chapter 6 examines the second *détente* under Kukrit Pramoj's and Chatichai Choonhavan's foreign policy of rapprochement with China and, to a lesser extent, normal relations with the USSR between 1975 and 1976. Chapter 7 explores the third *détente* under Kriangsak Chomanan, whose foreign policy of 'equidistance' with great powers between 1977 and 1980 culminated in balanced *détente*. Chapter 8 concludes by reflecting on the significance of a genealogical approach to Thai diplomacy. First, a genealogy as a history of rupture reveals the zenith of *détente*'s discursive practices, rather than their decline, in the 1980s. What changed due to, or despite, the Third Indochina War was merely the unbalanced side of flexible diplomacy – closer alignment with China. In other words, while there was a decline in triangular diplomacy, the discourse of flexible diplomacy with the great powers persisted. Second, a genealogy as a history of the present asserts that *détente* epistemically produced the novel knowledge or narrative of 'bamboo diplomacy', which in turn has politically constituted the conditions of possibility for the present representations of identities and foreign policy. In other words, it explicates how and why the practice-based discourse of *détente* has significantly influenced, and had an impact on, Thai foreign policy thinking and implementation until the present day. In general, Thai *détente* was a long-term process of diplomatic transformation that not only shaped the practices of Thai foreign relations with the communist powers but also produced knowledge of bamboo diplomacy itself.

This text is taken from *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy: The Politics of Thai Détente with Russia and China*, by Jittipat Poonkham, published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/GBD.2022.01