



# Systemic Implications of the COVID-19 Crisis in Asia

## Geopolitics of the pandemic in Thailand

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## Executive Summary

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COVID-19 has sweeping implications. The geopolitical landscape, coloured by the rivalry between the great powers, provided a complex political, economic and social environment in which the pandemic took effect. How countries manage the disease and procure the vaccines could add to their credibility and geopolitical capital. Thailand was praised for its handling of the pandemic during the first wave in 2020, managing to maintain a low transmission rate. However, vulnerabilities that manifested in a number of sectors coupled with untimely management from the government rendered Thailand less resilient when a new wave of the pandemic occurred in 2021.

The COVID-19 implications can be seen in five main areas. First, Thailand's navigation through the great powers' rivalry arguably intensified with the pandemic. Thailand tried to maintain relationships with China and the United States in trade and security terms despite the trend of American disengagement in Asia during the Trump administration and the increasing appeal of unilateral actions by both great powers. Prioritizing unilateralism would have negative impacts for smaller states, and Thailand referred to regional and international frameworks to avoid being roped into the great powers' game.

Second, we see an increasing role for middle-power diplomacy. Thailand could capitalize on its willingness to contribute to world politics as a diversifying venue to avoid being overly dependent on either of the great powers. Thailand also could strive to play a middle-power role in regional conflict transformation as a member country of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Third, COVID-19 might accelerate deliberalization and deglobalization. We have seen concerns that several measures to combat the pandemic led to rights encroachments and power consolidation by the state. Countries also turned more protectionist and inward as a result, coupled with the restrictions of movement. Thailand must be aware that a sustainable development path needs to be informed by the rule of law, social justice and an inclusive and participatory process.

Fourth, we've seen trust eroding because of doubt and dissatisfaction with the COVID-19 management at both the national and international levels. The COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access, or COVAX facility, co-led by the World Health Organization, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, brought together different stakeholders in an attempt to ensure fair distribution and equal access. This is in part redeeming and proof of multilateral efforts in providing public goods despite growing criticism that COVAX does not truly ensure equitable distribution of vaccines. Thailand's slow vaccine roll-out and reliance on vaccines from China might go against its intention to diversify the risks and, again, to avoid overreliance on any one country.

Fifth, the digitization of geopolitics, complicated by the evolving decoupling of technologies, has made it more difficult for states to manage cyberthreats and distorted information. COVID-19 has accelerated digital technology usage, with numerous tech-based solutions developed to help combat the pandemic. In reaping benefits from this, Thailand has to bear in mind people's rights to freedom of expression and information and the reality of digital inequalities.

## Introduction

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The COVID-19 crisis likely will leave altering effects on the geopolitical landscape, which will remain to be seen in the years to come. The “new normal” has broad implications towards the geopolitical atmosphere and not only to the new behaviour of people. Although Thailand managed the COVID-19 crisis fairly well in 2020 in terms of transmission control, the country faced disruptions that resulted in severe economic contractions at the expense of small businesses and people. In 2021, it faced a new wave of COVID-19 infections that threatened to undo the work it had achieved in the past year and left an uncertain future for the geopolitical status quo.

After setting the stage for implications of the crisis, the actors involved and the national discourse and policies, this paper analyses Thailand's foreign and security trajectory amid a geopolitical balance altered by the pandemic and influenced by (albeit not exclusively) the following drivers and implications: (i) the great powers' rivalry; (ii) middle-power diplomacy; (iii) deliberalization and deglobalization in the post-pandemic world; (iv) the trust deficit and the politics of vaccines; and (v) the digitization of geopolitics.

## Contextualizing COVID-19 in Thailand: Actors, discourses and debates

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Thailand experienced the first reported SARS-CoV-2 virus case outside China in January 2020. By the end of the month, Thailand had the second-highest number of reported cases globally, after China.<sup>1</sup>

In six months, Thailand went from ranking as one of the riskiest countries regarding coronavirus infection when the pandemic first broke out to occupying the top spot in COVID-19 recovery management, according to the Global COVID-19 Index (July 2020). Then Thailand dropped rapidly, to rank 149th as of July 2021.<sup>2</sup> Untimely management, a slow vaccine roll-out and mismatched communications from the authorities were among the top factors that led to the deteriorating public trust in Thailand.

The ability of Thailand's health care system to prevent and handle epidemics ranked sixth in the world and first in Asia in 2019, according to the Global Health Security Index.<sup>3</sup> This strength made Thailand one of the most prepared countries to tackle a pandemic at the start, contributing

partly to the quick recovery at the beginning. Thailand's health care system benefited from its experiences in communicable disease control, such as with smallpox. The country had since invested in its health care system to increase coverage as well as the availability of health care professionals.

As soon as the situation of pneumonia of an unknown cause was reported in Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019, Thailand activated its Emergency Operations Centre (4 January 2020).<sup>4</sup> This was considered quite early to prepare for any emergency health situation.

In early February, the government started quarantine for Thai people who returned from Wuhan for 14 days. Beyond Bangkok, it tightened monitoring in provinces popular with tourists, such as Chiang Mai, Chon Buri, Krabi and Phuket. Towards the end of February, the Ministry of Health issued an announcement, effective 1 March 2020, that COVID-19 was considered a dangerous communicable disease. The announcement allowed

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1 The Bangkok Insight Editorial Team, “ระทึก!! ไทยขึ้นแท่นอันดับ 2 ติด ‘เชื้อไวรัสโคโรนา’ รองจากจีน,” [“Thailand is ranked 2nd in coronavirus infections after China”], The Bangkok Insight, 28 January 2020. Available at <https://www.thebangkokinsight.com/news/politics-general/general/280748/>.

2 “The GCI dashboard: Thailand,” last modified 22 July 2021. Available at <https://covid19.pemandu.org/Thailand>.

3 “GHS Index map”, last modified n.d. Available at <https://www.ghsindex.org/>.

4 Supakit Sirilak, ed., Thailand's Experience in the Covid-19 Response (Thailand, Ministry of Public Health, 2020): 29.

officials to require suspected infected persons to undergo treatment or to quarantine. It also allowed them to close down venues to prevent transmission of the coronavirus. The government expanded monitoring of geographical areas through which people transited from China to Japan, Singapore and South Korea.<sup>5</sup>

The first death linked to COVID-19 in Thailand was reported in early March.<sup>6</sup> The government then upped screening measures and temperature checking, with screening and monitoring in hospitals. Countries with a high risk of the dangerous communicable disease were announced. In the middle of March, a large cluster of cases was linked to a boxing stadium in Bangkok. The government set up the Centre for the Administration of the Situation Due to the Outbreak of the Communicable Disease Coronavirus, under the direct supervision of the prime minister. The Centre later issued the Thai Chana app (meaning “Thailand wins”)<sup>7</sup> for people to use to check themselves in when visiting public venues and thus to facilitate tracking of any potential transmissions. Measures to guard against COVID-19 transmission escalated to the national level, with the campaign of “Stay home, stop the spread, for the nation”.<sup>8</sup>

The government closed schools not long after as well as entertainment venues and massage parlours in Bangkok and surrounding areas, initially for two weeks. Mass gatherings were discouraged. Department stores were also closed, except for necessary services, such as take-home food and pharmacies. Borders were temporarily closed. Field hospitals were prepared. Before the end of March, the prime minister issued an Emergency Decree.<sup>9</sup> Some monetary remedy measures were also issued to help relieve the COVID-19 repercussions.

In early April, a curfew barred people from leaving their home from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m., except for absolute necessities, such as medical professionals, banking and delivery services. International flights were prohibited. The government ensured that people who had COVID-19 would be entitled to free health care. However, it failed to ensure timely access when the pandemic flared up a year later and many were stranded. School terms were rescheduled for a late start (middle of May to early July). The Thai new year, Songkran, festivals were cancelled. Alcoholic beverages were prohibited for sale in Bangkok and ten other provinces to lessen the workload for medical professionals.

During this period, the government also tightened rules prohibiting crowd assembly, using the Emergency Decree. At that time, Thailand had more than 2,000 people testing positive for COVID-19. It was able to control new infections to fewer than ten persons per day towards the end of April, highly contrasting with the situation merely fifteen months after when new infections skyrocketed towards 20,000 per day with estimated even higher unrecorded numbers.

By early May, when the situation seemed to improve, the lockdown was eased and then further relaxed in the middle of the month. The government said it would remain vigilant because the disease could return towards the end of 2020. When the new wave hit Thailand in the first quarter of 2021, the combined political, economic and health care system vulnerabilities left people adrift, with weakened social capital and even more marginalization and exclusion.

Geopolitically, Thailand’s heavy land, sea and air transportation exposure due to its central location

5 The information in this and the following paragraph is summarized by the author from “ย้อนใหม่ไลน์ 100 วัน กับสถานการณ์ ‘โควิด-19’ ในประเทศไทย,” [Timeline 100 days with ‘Covid-19 situation’ in Thailand], Bangkokbiz News, 12 April 2020. Available at <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/news/detail/875664>.

6 Thairath Online, “สรุปใหม่ไลน์ “โควิด-19” ในไทย จากวันที่พบผู้ป่วยรายแรก สู่วันที่ผู้ติดเชื้อ,” [“Summary of timeline Covid-19 in Thailand from the day the first patient was found till the day with no infections”], Thairath, 13 May 2020. Available at <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/society/1843259>.

7 PPTV Online, “วิธีลงทะเบียน “www.ไทยชนะ.com” ใช้เดินห้าง-ร้านค้า,” [“How to register on www.ไทยชนะ.com for department stores-shops visits”], PPTV, 17 May 2020. Available at <https://www.pptvhd36.com/news/ประเด็นร้อน/125544>

8 Ministry of Public Health, Thailand, “อยู่บ้าน หยุดเชื้อ เพื่อชาติ,” [“Stay home, stop the spread, for the nation”], n.d. Available at <https://www.moph.go.th/index.php/news/read/1700>.

9 The information in this and the following two paragraphs is summarized by the author from “Timeline 100 days”, and “Summary of Timeline”.

engendered it particularly vulnerable in the case of a pandemic. It has a long natural border with neighbouring countries, with migrant workers crossing it on a daily basis. Thailand also is a coastal state. The Thai fishing industry employs numerous migrant workers, with coverage to Malaysian and Indonesian waters.

The high infection rates of the countries located to the west of Thailand, such as Bangladesh, India and Myanmar would further test Thailand's management of the pandemic. As case numbers rose to new record levels, it would be wise for Thailand to unify the sector responses to provide a whole-of-government (in which public sector officials work across departments to achieve a common goal) and whole-of-society (in which the society and the private sector, including epistemic communities, cooperate) approach to address the unfolding crisis.

Government measures to provide economic remedy assistance included subsidies for domestic tourism<sup>10</sup>; small monetary compensation for freelancers outside of the social security system; a three-month pay-out (a meagre 1,000 Thai baht each month) for vulnerable groups, such as impoverished people, older persons and people with disabilities; a pay-out for agricultural households; and free vocational online training, inter alia. The Bank of Thailand required banks to help with debt relief measures and provide loans with a low interest rate. Electricity bills and water bills were reduced. For people working from home, the Office of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission provided free 10 GB mobile internet as well as an increase in home broadband speed and free mobile calls.<sup>11</sup> Beyond the state, civil society and the private sector proved to be other important players in the holistic approach.

People were (and remain) highly cooperative with the health care measures to help lower transmissions, such as wearing masks, hand washing, social distancing

and working from home (for those who can afford to do so). Nonetheless, a general dissatisfaction with the government's measures emerged, stemming from the economic losses and masks being too expensive and hard to find. The government provided cloth masks for each household, but they were perceived as less effective than surgical masks. When the mask supply improved, social division ensued from miscommunications and the slow roll-out of vaccinations.

There was a sense of resentment with the government telling people to "stay home" and "don't let your guard down" but not providing much relief. The quick lockdown, although considered efficient for reducing transmissions, caused huge revenue loss. When a second lockdown was suggested again once the new wave occurred, very little remedy measures were offered. Some people who were eligible for the government assistance in the first wave could never claim it due to extensive misinformation. Even then, the relief was perceived by some people as "too little, too late", leaving a need for more inclusive and more universal relief as well as better public communications.

Early on, civil society groups attempted to fill the communications gap to a certain extent. Thailand's village health volunteers visited households door to door to increase their awareness of the risks and precautions. They also monitored all people in their area. The health volunteers typically receive 1,000 Thai baht remuneration a month from the Ministry of Public Health, which was increased by 500 Thai baht for the pandemic period.<sup>12</sup> These volunteers comprise a crucial element in the primary health care system, responsible for local data collection, home visits and local campaigns to support other health care professionals. Even before the pandemic was declared globally, these volunteers were monitoring residents and following up with people who might have had contact with any suspected case.

10 In July 2021, the "Phuket Sandbox" was inaugurated for fully vaccinated international visitors in an attempt to provide a boost to the country's decimated tourist sector, Thai News, "Phuket Sandbox inaugural flight welcomed with water salute", 1 July 2021, Available at <https://thainews.prd.go.th/en/news/detail/TCATG210701222741427>.

11 Thai Publica, "สำรวจมาตรการเยียวยาโควิดฯ แจกแล้ว 6 แสนล้านบาท," ["Exploring Covid relief measures, distributing 6 hundred billion baht"], 23 February 2021. Available at <https://thaipublica.org/2021/02/include-money-giveaway-measures-fight-covid-19/>.

12 Prachachat, "ครม. จ่ายเงินตอบแทนพิเศษ อสม. ต่ออีก 3 เดือน ถึง มิ.ย.," ["The cabinet pay village health volunteers for 3 months more till June,"] Prachachat Turakij, 30 March 2021. Available at <https://www.prachachat.net/politics/news-639635>.

The health care sector experienced a mask crisis during the first wave of cases and needed to depend on donations. A “mask bank” was initiated to spread their availability. For every mask purchased, another one was donated to hospitals or vulnerable groups.<sup>13</sup>

Some businesses regarded the government measures to control transmissions, such as the lockdown and curfew, as directly hurting them, and they tended to cooperate less. The economic repercussions were felt most heavily by the small and medium-sized enterprises, where help remains needed the most. These businesses would like

more proactive measures from the government to prevent any further loss of jobs.

Even though Thailand was celebrated as exemplar in its COVID-19 transmission control in the first wave, subsequent policy debates revealed a degree of disparity, dissatisfaction and lack of trust that needed to be addressed so that the pandemic could be controlled in a way that does not decrease social capital. This became even more the case when the new wave occurred. This is to set the stage before we consider the systemic implications of the pandemic in the next part

## Systemic implications of the pandemic

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### The great powers’ rivalry

The China–United States tensions exacerbated further as a result of COVID-19, with both countries blaming each other for mismanagement of the disease. This could result in each power ending up prioritizing unilateral actions and fostering bilateral relationships with allies instead of using a multilateral framework in an already unbalanced world order. The rivalry between the two great powers amid the uncertain atmosphere caused by the pandemic could be accentuated.

Thailand must tread carefully in its relations with these two powers. Thailand has maintained a balance with both countries, trying not to offend one by having good ties with the other, which is an increasingly difficult task. With its major non-NATO ally status, Thailand has historically been one of the closest friends in the region with the United States. When Thailand’s defence cooperation with the United States wound down due to an undemocratic political transition, China stepped up to fill the niche by

collaborating with Thailand on some military exercises and concluding arms deals. China even provided some arms at a price lower than what the United States had previously given. In fostering a comprehensive strategic partnership with Thailand, China looked to deepen the relationship in all aspects, including security.

With military spending rising globally, including in Asia, China and the United States, as usual, are at the forefront of military spending and foreign arms sales.<sup>14</sup> The United States came back to Thailand after the country had controversial elections in 2019 and renewed the arms sales under foreign military sales.<sup>15</sup> Both sides have continued the traditional large-scale military exercises with Thailand. But Thailand must be careful not to get roped into any strategic great-power push-and-pull game.

In recent years, Thailand seemed to be forging close ties with China, deepening bilateral relations in several areas. It has cooperated on high-speed railways and announced intentions in October 2020 to welcome Chinese tourists

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13 “Mask Bank Project,” last modified n.d. Available at [maskbank.org](https://maskbank.org).

14 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “World military spending rises to almost \$2 trillion in 2020,” 26 April 2021. Available at <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/world-military-spending-rises-almost-2-trillion-2020>

15 Bloomberg News, “China competes with US for weapons sales to Thailand,” 3 December 2019. Available at <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/1807664/china-competes-with-us-for-weapons-sales-to-thailand>.



with a special visa once the pandemic-related border restrictions open up.<sup>16</sup>

In celebrating 45 years of a relationship, Thailand hopes to collaborate further with China on trade, technology and innovations. China is indispensable to Thailand's economy, occupying the top spot as its biggest trading partner.

The strategic competition was highlighted further through the China–United States trade war, and the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy, seen as directed against China. The recently concluded Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) also is perceived by some observers as China's further expansion of its zone of influence and mitigation of the United States' influence in the region. Thailand, and ASEAN at large, might benefit from a production base expansion, bolstered regional supply chains and an increase in some exported goods, but it still risks losing out in trade from Chinese dumping. Thailand thus needs to diversify its trade relationships further into other markets while referring to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific vision, which is more neutral and inclusive.<sup>17</sup>

Amid this rivalry, Thailand has attempted to rebalance without downplaying either relationship yet avoiding overdependence on either country. This is going to be increasingly difficult due to the assistance Thailand has received from China in terms of vaccine donations and its vaccine purchases from China. The pandemic has not halted the geopolitical rivalry between the two superpowers. Actually, the tensions with the United States increased when China, first blamed as the cause of the pandemic, seemed to come out better looking in terms of transmission control and its pledge to distribute its vaccines to Asia first. Thailand aims to demonstrate its capability in pandemic management while reassuring

both great powers that it remains open to both countries, a fine balance indeed.

### **Middle-power diplomacy**

Middle powers are countries that do not possess the status of a great power in terms of economic or military prowess but consistently have a role in international politics. They usually contribute to “niche” diplomacy, an area neglected by the great powers. What is more debatable is whether they exhibit normative qualities or norm-conforming behaviours. Middle powers could be guided by norms, be it democratic values, human rights or rule of law. Key players, such as Australia, Germany and Japan, all contribute to international politics, abiding by their middle-power status, such as emphasis on international legal principles and multilateral order. The middle powers' increasing engagement in international politics and conflict transformation provide opportunities for smaller countries to avoid getting locked into the great powers' rivalry.

While the pandemic has exacerbated the rivalry of the two great powers, it has opened up a number of areas for the middle powers to increase their role. This does not mean that they will not find an ally in one of the great powers. But at least the normative value will be intact and can gradually transform some aspects of foreign policy to be more informed by desirable norms. For instance, the trend of the United States' disengagement in Asia during the Trump administration made it more possible for the middle powers to collaborate with China in the “freed-up space”, such as on green issues and environmental protection.

When the United States started the process to withdraw from the Paris Agreement in 2017,<sup>18</sup> closer collaboration between the European Union countries and China

16 Bangkokbiz news, “ “พิพัฒน์” อัปเดตใหม่ไลน์ใหม่ นักท่องเที่ยวจีนบินเข้าสุวรรณภูมิ-ภูเก็ต วันที่ 20 กับ 26 ต.ค.นี้,” [“Pipat” updated new Timeline for Chinese tourists flying into Suvarnabhumi-Phuket October 20 and 26”], 10 October 2020. Available at <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/news/detail/901902>.

17 Association of Southeast Asian Nations, “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” 22 June 2019, [https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific\\_FINAL\\_22062019.pdf](https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf).

18 Matt McGrath, “Climate change: US formally withdraws from Paris agreement”, BBC News, 4 November 2020. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-54797743>.

in the area of climate change was bound to happen. The United States re-joined the Paris Agreement recently (April 2021)<sup>19</sup>, but the European Union still practises diversification in terms of green diplomacy. From environmental standards, the European Union is cooperating with other international organizations, such as the International Labour Organization and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, to run a programme to enhance respect for labour rights and responsible business conduct, in partnership with China, Japan, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> These are important trading partners with potential for responsible supply chains.

This has direct implications for any country that wants to conduct a diplomacy of balance to avoid overdependence, such as Thailand. In diversifying its relationships, Thailand should look to the other middle powers for further collaboration in the areas of environment, technology and non-traditional security issues, disease control included. The ASEAN Regional Forum, with which ASEAN is more or less attempting to remain in the driver's seat, provides a multilateral forum for stakeholders outside the region with interests in security issues in Asia and the Pacific. Although China and the United States are involved in the ASEAN Regional Forum, the other eight dialogue partners (Australia, Canada, European Union, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea and the Russian Federation), along with other countries, joined to discuss issues of common interest that avoid specific reciprocity. This is valued by Thailand and other ASEAN member countries as opportunity to branch out, with ASEAN centrality at the core. Non-traditional security issues, by nature, are cross-cutting and do not always follow the given geopolitical alignments.

Thailand geopolitically serves as a “hub”, leading it to be well positioned strategically. This is even more evident when viewing Thailand in the ASEAN context under the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. In a number of cases, Thailand has been expected to perform the

role of a broker in conflict transformation, adhering to international legal principles. Thailand performed this role well when it was country coordinator for China-ASEAN relations to stabilize the situation in the South China Sea, to the satisfaction of the actors involved. ASEAN was looked upon further to help coordinate the Code of Conduct.

Amid the great powers' rivalry, the middle powers might be influenced to take a stronger stance and to “side” with the great powers. If so, Thailand, together with the other ASEAN member countries, may have the difficult, but not unmanageable, task to engage with China in multilateral dialogue to steer it away from unilateral actions as best as possible. They can do this by keeping a channel of communication open as well as engaging on any conflict at hand, such as maritime security.

### **Deliberalization and deglobalization in the post-pandemic world**

There are concerns that COVID-19 may have destabilizing effects on democracy and/or the democratization process. A number of measures aimed to contain the spread of COVID-19 have posed negative repercussions for people's rights and freedoms. China, for example, imposed drastic measures to curb transmission of the coronavirus, including surveillance,<sup>21</sup> and claimed successful results because of the restrictive measures. There is a real danger from general interpretation that the most effective way to control a viral transmission includes the sacrificing of rights not as an exception but as a rule.

Thailand is particularly vulnerable, given its past political incidents and current turmoil. The Emergency Decree issued to tackle the COVID-19 situation was criticized as a tool to control people's freedom of expression and access of information. In its attempts to combat “fake” news, the government also extended containment imperatives

19 H. J. Mai, “U.S. officially rejoins Paris Agreement on climate change,” NPR, 19 February 2021. Available at <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/19/969387323/u-s-officially-rejoins-paris-agreement-on-climate-change>.

20 European Union, “Responsible Supply Chains in Asia,” last modified n.d. Available at [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2018/march/tradoc\\_156624.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2018/march/tradoc_156624.pdf).

21 Paul Mozur, Raymond Zhong, and Aaron Krolik, “In coronavirus fight, china gives citizens a color code, with red flags,” The New York Times, 28 January 2021. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/business/china-coronavirus-surveillance.html>.

to anti-government criticism, as Amnesty International pointed out.<sup>22</sup>

Lacking pandemic leadership from a technocratic organization, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), there have been temptations for governments to centralize and consolidate their powers. Data privacy has been sacrificed in the name of pandemic containment. Extending emergency powers may have created long-term instability. Rather than feeling secure, people may feel threatened.

The illiberal effect can manifest in the increasing adversity towards migrant workers and marginalization of vulnerable groups of people. Transparency, good governance and accountability, already elusive, have deteriorated due to the pandemic. But this might compel the authorities to hastily decide on policies without complete information. Thailand needs to be careful, now more than ever, in controlling the spread of the disease but not at the expense of people's goodwill and rights.

Internationally, the liberal order might experience a regressive effect from the COVID-19 containment measures imposing restrictions contrary to the notion of "free" and "open". Countries might emphasize regional blocs rather than placing trust in global institutional order.

Even before COVID-19, we were warned of a deglobalizing trend in world politics. Deglobalization includes mitigated interdependence, manifested in increasing protectionist measures. Not only in economic terms do we see the deglobalizing trends but also in political aspects. The pandemic might be accelerating the deglobalizing trends even further by creating doubt of mutual reciprocity. At the onset of the pandemic, some export restrictions were imposed out of fear of domestic scarcity of necessities, such as medical supplies. Countries had to look for alternative supply chains and made sustained attempts to reduce strategic vulnerabilities in the procurement of essential goods, moving from a "just-in-time" to a "just-in-case" rationale. This was also a result of geopolitical

volatility and divisions created by the pandemic that barred the movement of trade, know-how and people.

This has placed Thailand at an uneasy junction. As noted, Thailand is working to avoid overdependence on any one country, but it might still suffer from smaller export markets due to encroachment by Vietnam. Income inequality has worsened, and it might be more difficult for Thailand to catch up, considering it is still climbing the innovation ladder. These efforts to attract FDIs for 'new S-Curve' industries such as robotics, aviation and logistics, and biofuels must go hand in hand with income redistribution.

### **Trust deficit and the politics of vaccines**

Although the Thai government was praised in terms of its COVID-19 transmission control in the first wave, the economic losses and unequal access to the monetary assistance have deteriorated the public trust. The current political turmoil signifies that some citizens have lost trust in the government. Without quick, transparent, inclusive and participatory management to restore that trust, it could pose long-term volatility for the country.

Ironically, past pandemics have made the world realize the necessity of international cooperation and international organizations for global health governance. It might be different in the case of COVID-19. The pandemic has exposed several limitations in the one international organization, the WHO, tasked with running global health governance. It has cost the WHO credibility and cooperation from some members.

The United States' announced withdrawal from the WHO, which would have taken effect in July 2021,<sup>23</sup> and China's delay in submitting key information regarding the origins of the coronavirus both affected trust in the global multilateral mechanism and pointed towards a trend of unilateralism. Even when the United States under President Biden pledged its renewed support for

22 Amnesty International, *They Are Always Watching: Restricting Freedom of Expression Online in Thailand* (London, Amnesty International, 2020).

23 BBC News, "Coronavirus: Trump moves to pull US out of World Health Organization," 7 July 2020. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53327906>.

the WHO,<sup>24</sup> the organization was already viewed as politicized. The coronavirus posed tremendous strain on global health care service, especially in poorer countries. The WHO's loss of leading roles in global health governance might be the basis for renewed effort for a regional mechanism. The ASEAN ministers, for instance, endorsed a COVID-19 Response Fund in 2020.<sup>25</sup>

The WHO launched the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator to bring together different sectors to collaborate globally to ensure timely development and production of the vaccines as well as equitable access. One of the Accelerator's components is the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access, or COVAX facility, with almost 200 countries participating.<sup>26</sup> This initiative aims to ensure that countries have fair access to the vaccines. COVAX provides an international platform to support vaccine production as well as manage the pricing to ensure that the participating countries can access the vaccines. It was nevertheless accused of avoiding the root cause since it cannot bypass the intellectual property rights to encourage local production and dissemination.

China joined the COVAX facility in October 2020.<sup>27</sup> President Biden reversed the previous administration's decision not to join.<sup>28</sup> The United States' prior actions left countries with concerns that, should the United States have viable vaccines, it would prioritize its domestic population. China also tried to garner trust by leading the world in vaccine candidates. Both Beijing and Washington have recently ramped up vaccine exports to Southeast

Asia and beyond. Vaccinations approved for full use could potentially alter the geopolitical landscape, creating new dependencies and new hegemonies. It is true that the pandemic has propelled advancements in science, biotechnology and medicine, with larger investments in these areas. But technology and innovations have vast effects on the geopolitical balance, which could create inequalities in less-equipped countries. The wealthier nations are in possession of most of the vaccines available.

As of now, Thailand is considered slow in its vaccine roll-out, and the majority of vaccines used so far were bought from or donated by China. Some Thais even visited the US to receive more effective vaccines while the US donated some to Thailand to help protect medical professionals. Thailand's neighbouring countries (Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Vietnam) will be receiving vaccine allocations from COVAX. To join COVAX, Thailand had to pre-pay, leading it to prioritize direct agreements with manufacturers. This led to Thailand being heavily criticized for not joining earlier. Local production of AstraZeneca, through Siam Bioscience, only recently began and could not adequately serve local demands.<sup>29</sup> Again, trust (or the lack thereof) continues to have a crucial role. Initial accusations argued that the Thai government had not adequately supported a domestically researched and produced COVID-19 vaccine. This was later countered by the National Vaccine Institute as distorted information.<sup>30</sup> Reports in April 2021 that the Institute refused to buy BioNTech-Pfizer vaccines offered by the company, and overall doubts whether US

24 Karen Weintraub, "Biden administration renewed support for World Health Organization is 'good news for America and the world,' scientists say," USA Today, 22 January 2021. Available at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2021/01/22/scientists-applaud-biden-decision-rejoin-world-health-organization/4243377001/>.

25 Jim Gomez, "ASEAN ministers endorse new COVID-19 response fund," The Diplomat, 10 April 2020. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/asean-ministers-endorse-new-covid-19-response-fund/>.

26 World Health Organization, ACT Now, ACT Together: 2020-2021 Impact Report (Geneva, 2021): 9.

27 Colin Qian, and Stephanie Nebehay, "China joins WHO-backed vaccine programme COVAX rejected by Trump," Reuters, 9 October 2020. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-covax-idUSKBN26U027>.

28 Emily Rauhala, "Biden to reengage with World Health Organization, will join global vaccine effort," Washington Post, 21 January 2021. Available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/biden-administration-who-covax/2021/01/20/3ddc25ce-5a8c-11eb-aaad-93988621dd28\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/biden-administration-who-covax/2021/01/20/3ddc25ce-5a8c-11eb-aaad-93988621dd28_story.html).

29 Online Reporters, "Siam Bioscience-produced AstraZeneca vaccine passes quality testing," Bangkok Post, 9 May 2021. Available at <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2112755/siam-bioscience-produced-astrazeneca-vaccine-passes-quality-testing>.

30 Manager Online, "สถาบันวัคซีนฯ ได้ข่าวรัฐไม่หนุนผลิตวัคซีนโควิด-19 ซีข้อมูลคลาดเคลื่อน," ["National Vaccine Institute countered the news that the state did not support covid-19 vaccine production, pointing out that the information is distorted"], 5 September 2020. Available at <https://mgronline.com/uptodate/detail/9630000091173>.

donated vaccines will be allocated appropriately have only perpetuated the mistrust.<sup>31</sup> By July 2021, with COVID numbers growing rapidly, sustained efforts were underway by public authorities and private entities to procure US-produced vaccines such as Pfizer, Moderna as well as Johnson & Johnson. Thailand decided to join COVAX with considerable delay and is expected to receive first shipments through this channel in early 2022.<sup>32</sup>

There are increasing breakthrough cases especially among medical professionals, leading to public demands for better-quality vaccines that should have been provided timely by the government. Moreover, currently available vaccines seem less effective for a number of variants. Other vaccines will be available later through private medical establishments, for a fee, which is provoking concerns for unequal access and increasing burden for the healthcare system.<sup>33</sup> This will eventually delay the vaccination roll-out if the government does not manage the situation efficiently, equipped with clear public communications.

China made it clear to ASEAN countries that Southeast Asia would be a priority to receive its vaccines.<sup>34</sup> It also pledged to help with the ASEAN COVID-19 Respond Fund. This, in a way, raised concerns that China was expanding its sphere of influence yet again. If its vaccines prove to be less effective, geopolitical leverage will go the other way. In a world where effective vaccines are the new status symbol, the future of “vaccine diplomacy” seems not to depend on the fastest delivery, but on which vaccines are being shipped out. Thailand must overcome administrative encumbrance to conduct a multipronged vaccine track policy to diversify the risks of overreliance and regain public trust.

## Digitization of geopolitics

The digitization of geopolitics and potential decoupling of United States and Chinese technology is complicating the situation further. If the vaccine diplomacy is about exercising vaccines aid relating to geopolitical leverage, geopolitical rivalry as such also happens along the digital line. We have seen the recent “tech war” between China and the United States, with the latter, together with European countries, phasing out Chinese technology and companies due to security concerns. A number of countries have banned some Chinese apps. China now focuses more on domestically developed innovations as a development path.

This is closely linked to geopolitics. India banned more Chinese apps as the situation at their shared border worsened. National security was used as justification for the United States to ban some of the Chinese apps under the Trump administration. Though later halted by US courts, the Biden administration shares many of those concerns.<sup>35</sup> The China–United States tech war in itself is seen as a response to disparities in geopolitical pursuits. The United States tried to prevent technology and know-how from being transferred to its competitors. What we know from past experiences, the countries that hold cutting-edge technology will win advantage in any geopolitical rivalry.

This is an evolving trend that is complicated further by the pandemic. The COVID-19-induced “new normal” has accelerated the digital economy and digital technology adoption. It has also expanded the digital divide and inequalities. The digital “have-nots” will eventually lose out, which makes the development path more dependent on countries that possess technology and know-how.

31 Matichon Online, “ผอ.สถาบันวัคซีนฯ โต้ข่าวปลอม ยืนยันไม่เคยปฏิเสธไฟเซอร์ สั่งจองซื้อ 10 ล้านโดส ส่งไตรมาส3,” [“The Director of National Vaccine Institute countered fake news, confirming no rejection to Pfizer occurred, saying 10 million doses are reserved to be delivered in the third quarter”], 27 April 2021. Available at [https://www.matichon.co.th/local/quality-life/news\\_2694177](https://www.matichon.co.th/local/quality-life/news_2694177).

32 CAN, “Thailand reports record new COVID-19 cases for second day, apologises for slow vaccine roll-out”, 22 July 2021. Available at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/thailand-record-daily-covid-19-cases-vaccine-slow-roll-out-covax-15266524>.

33 Infoquest, “สมาคม รพ.เอกชน เตรียมจับมือให้บริการวัคซีนโควิด MODERNA ราคากว่า 3 พันบาท/2 เข็ม,” [“Private Hospitals Association collaborate to offer MODERNA vaccine service, costing more than three thousand baht per 2 doses”], 6 May 2021. Available at <https://www.infoquest.co.th/2021/84146>.

34 “China promises to prioritize corona vaccines for ASEAN,” VOI, 17 October 2020. Available at <https://voi.id/en/news/17059/china-promises-to-prioritize-corona-vaccines-for-asean>.

35 Straits Times, “Chinese apps could face subpoenas or bans under Biden order: Sources”, 18 June 2021, Available at <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/chinese-apps-could-face-subpoenas-or-bans-under-biden-order-sources>

It is similar in the political arena. In the lockdown era, we have seen political movements and activities intensified in social media and online platforms, with causes in different countries linked together. Quality content and digital literacy along with cybersecurity are all intertwined and more necessary than ever before. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, more cyberattacks were bound to occur, leaving people and sensitive data vulnerable.

In Thailand, the Computer-Related Crime Act can be used to ban any websites considered wrongful as well as hold people accountable for them. Even though we see online political movements that blur the line of states, there might be an increase in cyberspace fragmentation and online platforms specific to groups of countries that a VPN might not always be able to overcome.

This becomes more of an issue when we see how much technology or tech-based solutions are used to respond to and/or combat the spread of the coronavirus. Online tracking, contact tracing, remote meetings with health care professionals, contactless communications when quarantined—all are viable examples of technology being used to support the public health response. In Thailand, people are required to register online for vaccines where

the system was not always reliable. Technology is being integrated into the fight against COVID-19, and it seems that it is here to stay.

Thailand is well aware of the importance of digitization of geopolitics and the tech war. There have been concerns that the tech war would put Thailand into a tight spot because Thai companies that use the Chinese apps in business would face obstructions. While the United States banned Huawei, Thailand welcomed Huawei initiatives to help combat COVID-19 as well as support its 5G efforts. Huawei gave artificial intelligence solutions and 5G technology to help with COVID-19 diagnosing at Siriraj and Ramathibodi hospitals<sup>36</sup> and the Huawei Telemedicine Solution with video conferencing capacity to hospitals and the Ministry of Public Health.

In increasing its competitiveness as well as capacity in combating COVID-19, Thailand cannot avoid close collaboration with China in terms of technology. Thailand, of course, has focused more on being a tech manufacturing base, with some relocations of industries assisted by government initiatives to facilitate business. However, it needs even more accommodating infrastructure to adopt advanced technology and increase investment, supported by political stability.

## Conclusion

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At the junction with the change of administration in the United States government, it remains to be seen whether the rivalry between the great powers in geopolitical terms, with implications towards trade and technology, will ease up. Some critics are of the opinion that the new United States administration will not revert from containing the rise of China, be it in a subtler way. Thailand is poised to conduct a policy of balance between the two great powers, which will become increasingly difficult. The pandemic has further complicated the geopolitical rivalry

along with the “race for vaccines” and balancing regional and international multilateral frameworks, such as ASEAN and the United Nations organs. In the post-pandemic world, there is temptation for governments to concentrate and consolidate power at the expense of liberal democratization. Nonetheless, Thailand must not forget that social justice and participatory democracy must also inform its pursuit to achieve sustainable results.

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36 Bangkok Post, “Huawei and Siriraj Hospital sign MoU to develop 5G smart services powered by cloud and artificial intelligence,” 2 December 2020. Available at <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/pr/2028971/huawei-and-siriraj-hospital-sign-mou-to-develop-5g-smart-services-powered-by-cloud-and-artificial-intelligence>.

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