

## THAILAND 2025: A YEAR OF INSECURITY AND TRANSITION

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*2025 began in Thailand with the Thaksin Shinawatra-influenced Pheu Thai party leading a coalition government headed by his daughter Paetongtarn. But in June, amidst growing border tensions with Cambodia, revelations of an audio clip between her and Cambodia's ex-Premier caused the judiciary to temporarily suspend Paetongtarn from office (while deciding whether she had violated ethics rules) and she was replaced by acting-PM Phumtham Wechayachai. In July Thailand's military engaged in violent border altercations with Cambodia. These frontier security problems gave the military a pretext to increasingly act independent of civilian control. In August the judiciary ruled that Paetongtarn had broken the law: she and her government were forced from office, replaced by Bhumjai Thai party leader Anutin Charnvirakul and his coalition. Though close to the military and monarch, Anutin was supported by the progressive People's Party because he promised to dissolve the Lower House in four months and support constitutional reform. Meanwhile, tensions increased along the Thai-Cambodian border, Anutin was criticized for mishandling a severe flooding fiasco, and reports emerged that Bhumjai Thai-aligned cabinet ministers had been involved with crime syndicates. The year ended with Thailand's economy still weak, Anutin dissolving the Lower House, and a new December Thai-Cambodian peace deal in place.*

KEYWORDS – Pheu Thai; Thaksin Shinawatra; Paetongtarn Shinawatra; Anutin Charnvirakul; Phumtham Wechayachai; General Phana Klaeoplodtuk; King Maha Vajiralongkorn; Thai-Cambodian relations; Thai-Myanmar relations; Thai-U.S. relations; Thai-China relations; Thailand economy

## 1. *Introduction*

This essay chronologically examines the year 2025 in Thailand with regard to domestic politics, foreign relations and the economy. It argues that in 2025 elite suspicions of Pheu Thai combined with border security issues led the military to disregard civilian control while the archroyalist judiciary forced Pheu Thai from office. Meanwhile, by the end of 2025, Thailand was continuing a hedging policy between the United States and China, though increasingly tilting toward China. Following this Introduction (Section One), the essay is organized into seven sections. Section Two looks at the government under Paetongtarn Shinawatra during January–May. Section Three investigates Thai-Cambodian relations and their effect on Thai civil-military relations until August 2025. Section Four scrutinizes the fall of the Pheu Thai-led government and its replacement with a Bhumjai Thai-led coalition. Section Five examines the Anutin Charnvirakul government until December 2025. Section Six looks at Thailand’s relations with Myanmar, the United States, and China. Section Seven investigates Thailand’s economy in 2025. Section Eight is the conclusion.

## 2. *The Paetongtarn government: January-May 2025*

Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Prime Minister since August 2024 (after her predecessor Pheu Thai’s Settha Thavisin had been removed from office by the Constitutional Court) early on appeared as an inexperienced leader with her father Thaksin indirectly dominating the Pheu Thai-led coalition government [*Thai PBS World* 2024, 2 December].

In January 2025 her government implemented the second phase of a digital cash transfer scheme which was to provide payments to senior citizens by April. In this second phase, the government provided 10,000 baht per person to three million elderly persons. The entire digital wallet scheme had been one of Pheu Thai’s promises during the 2023 election. Besides helping the poor, Pheu Thai had also stated that the initiative would inject funding to spark economic growth. However, significant post-2023 criticism from numerous economists and opposition political parties compelled the government to adjust the cash dispersal (*Thai PBS World* 2025, 17 February]. In May 2025 the government indefinitely postponed phase three of the digital wallet program until the economy improved but also because of pressures from increased tariffs of the US Trump administration on Thailand [Liang 2025, 26 May].

Also in January, the cabinet approved a bill to legalize casinos inside of entertainment complexes in Thailand as a tool to encourage tourism and boost the economy. A modified second draft was approved in March

following advice from the Council of State. The bill then moved forward where it was expected to sail through votes in the Lower House and Senate, followed by an endorsement from the King. Yet the bill hit numerous delays. Ultimately, it was withdrawn in July at the request of the Finance Minister, following criticism and protests from social conservatives [*Thai PBS World* 2025, 8 July].

Early 2025 moreover saw Thailand deploy heightened anti-scam center operations along border areas with Myanmar and Cambodia — following pressure from China. Indeed, Thailand suspended electricity, fuel and the internet to Myanmar border areas in February 2025 to combat massive cyber scam centers, often run by Chinese syndicates, that were damaging Thailand's image and economy, though some centers continued using generators [Olarn and Adkin 2025, 5 February]. Meanwhile, along the Thai-Cambodian border, over 100 Thais were arrested in a raid on scam centres in border regions there [Reuters 2025, 4 March].

Then, in May, plans were laid to restrict cannabis production — though coalition member Bhumjai Thai had championed cannabis since 2019. Indeed, the action seemed directed at Bhumjai Thai, which had recently seemed to be criticizing coalition leader Pheu Thai.

Thus, by late June 2025, Thailand engaged in a significant regulatory shift, transitioning from a loosely regulated framework to a strictly medical model. This reform impacted every part of the cannabis supply chain — from cultivation to retail [Cannavigia.com 2025, 25 September].

### *3. Thai-Cambodian relations and the Thai military: January-August 2025*

Though post-Cold War Thai-Cambodian relations might be characterized as at times edgy amidst a more general state of peace, in 2025, the two countries engaged in violent border hostilities and almost entered into war. One would have thought that peace would have been preserved given longtime close ties between Thaksin and Cambodia's ex-Premier Hun Sen. But by early 2025 the two were increasingly on the outs. It has been speculated that this perhaps owed to the Paetongtarn government's decision to support legalized gambling, which allegedly threatened Cambodia's own casino industry or Thailand's intense crackdown on scam centres located along the Thai-Cambodian border: profits from such centres have been funnelled to Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party. Yet another possibility is that Hun Sen might have felt that Thaksin had lost influence in Thailand and it was time to drum up Cambodian nationalism [Head 2025, 24 July; Jackson 2024, 13 September]. Whatever the truth regarding their split, it played into the hands

of the Thai military which, since the 2023 election had been seeking to repopularize its image and emancipate itself from civilian control.

Late 2024 had already witnessed Thailand and Cambodia disputing their marine border line and the sovereignty of Koh Kood island. Then, in February 2025, a group of Cambodians appeared at an ancient Khmer temple administered by Thailand along the vaguely demarcated boundary and sang nationalist songs. Instead of consulting the government for direction, Thai Second Army Region Commander Lieutenant-General Boonsin Padklang launched a formal protest against the event [The Nation 2025, 17 February]. General Boonsin is close to Army Commander General Pana Klaeoplodtuk [Matichon 2025, 4 February].

Then, on 28 May, following a Thai-Cambodian border skirmish that killed a Cambodian soldier, Paetongtarn immediately urged calm and de-escalation [Pimuk 2025]. But on 3 June, General Boonsin broke ranks with his prime minister and further undermined civilian control. He announced that he would only recognize a Royal Thai Survey Department border map (which is more favourable to Thailand) [Facebook Nation Story 2025, 3 June] and not the one used by the Thai-Cambodia Joint Boundary Commission.

On 5 June, the Thai Army defied the government's de-escalation attempts by launching a militaristic rhetoric dissemination campaign, entitled «Thais are peace-loving but not cowards when at war» [Thai PBS 2025, 6 June]. The media campaign appeared designed to encourage public support for the military, so that it would have a freer rein in its actions against Cambodia.

The next day, Paetongtarn held a National Security Council meeting, afterwards stating, «The military has confirmed readiness for any scenario ... but clashes will cause damage, so we will pursue peaceful means (adding that) the government and military (will) work together» [Juarawee and Panu, 2025, 6 June]. At any rate, Paetongtarn's entreaties appeared to fall on deaf ears, with the Army's subsequent announcement of upping readiness «for a high-level military» [Ibid.].

Civilian control was again thwarted on 7 June when Thailand's army began limiting the opening times of several Thai-Cambodian border posts [Visapra 2025, 7 June]. Amidst the army's growing assertiveness, Paetongtarn reaffirmed her peace and dialogue commitment between Thailand and Cambodia [VOV5, 2025, 17 June].

Then, on 15 June, she engaged in a phone conversation with Hun Sen. The call, which was recorded by the Cambodian government, revealed increasing difficulties in Thai civil-military relations. She told Hun Sen, referring to him as «Uncle», that «people from the opposite side» such as General Boonsin might have made comments that might make Hun Sen

«angry», but stressed that the Thai general wanted to «look cool». Paetongarn told Hun Sen that all she wanted was «peace» [Plewissara 2025, 22 June].

Paetongarn's comments were considered traitorous by Thai military and right-wing elements [The Nation 2025, 29 June]. Before the clip was revealed, a royal entourage (including a Privy Councillor) delivered gifts to border-based Thai soldiers and met with General Boonsin in mid-June [The Nation 2025, 15 June]. The message seemed clear: the palace supported the military hard line rather than civilian control. On 18 June, the Bhumjaithai Party resigned from the coalition. Regarding the phone call, on 1 July, the powerful and interventionist Constitutional Court, which had often interceded in Thailand's political process, ousting the pro-Thaksin Prime Minister, now opened an ethics investigation of Paetongarn, temporarily forcing her from office until it made a decision. She was replaced temporarily by Pheu Thai caretaker Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai, who was close to Thaksin.

Thailand's military, riding a wave of anti-Cambodian nationalism, had now shaken off any civilian controls. When Thai soldiers were injured by landmines along the border on 16 July, General Boonsin threatened military retaliation, stating, «There is no need to wait for orders from the government». Army Commander Pana supported General Boonsin, stating that the current state of play justified retaliation [*Thai PBS World* 2025, 19 July]. After five more soldiers were injured by mines on 23 July, General Boonsin ordered further closures of border crossings [*The Nation*, 2025, 7 July]. For Thailand, the July 23 landmine injuries and Cambodia's firing of rockets into Thai civilian areas triggered a sustained frontier conflict. Cambodia, on the other hand, alleged that the prolonged borderlands combat had begun after Thai soldiers fired at Cambodian soldiers at a temple claimed by both countries [Nierenberg and Wee 2025, 30 July]. Each side claimed to possess evidence supporting its opposing nationalistic narrative about the other. Regardless, on 24 July, hostilities erupted and Thailand's army proactively assumed effective control over directing the conflict for Thailand, while civilian leaders became passive. Thereupon Army Commander Pana readied a war plan against Cambodia [PPTV 2025, 23 July] and, on 25 July, the Thai army instituted martial law in parts of Chanthaburi and Trat provinces [Thai PBS 2025, 25 July]. Though civilians negotiated a 28 July ceasefire [Al Jazeera 2025, 29 July], gunfire only ceased following a meeting of Thai and Cambodian senior military on 29 July [*Associated Press* 2025, 29 July]. Clearly, this meant that the Thai military must give its approval before any ceasefire would hold. And even that armistice proved to be flimsy. By August Thailand and Cambodia remained in a very tenuous ceasefire.

#### 4. Enter new Prime Minister Anutin

On August 29, the Constitutional Court ruled 6-3 that Paetongtarn in her controversial phone call had violated ethics rules and she was officially removed from office. The court added that she «lacks the qualifications and possesses prohibited characteristics» under the Thai constitution, and «lacked demonstrable honesty and integrity, and seriously violated or failed to comply with ethical standards» [Regan and Olarn 2025, 29 August]. Though she served as Prime Minister for approximately one year, the ruling made her ineligible to ever serve as Prime Minister again [Wee 2025, 28 August]. Indeed, the ruling demonstrated the enormous power of Thailand’s arch royalist judiciary.

PARTIES	MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT
Bhumjai Thai	68
Kla Tham	31
Palang Pracharat	17
United Thai Nation (Suchart Chomklin faction)	16
Pheu Thai defectors	8
Thai Sang Thai	3
Democrat defectors	3
Chart Thai Pattana	10
Fair Party	1
Total	157
People’s Party (pledged support)	143
Source: <i>Bangkok Post</i> , 23 November 2025; author’s calculations	

Pheu Thai immediately tried to install Chaikasem Nitisiri, its sole remaining prime ministerial candidate (the 2017 Thai constitution requires all parties to name such candidates prior to a general election), but he was defeated by Bhumjai Thai party leader Anutin Charnvirakul: Chaikasem received 152 votes, Anutin 311 votes [*Al Jazeera* 2025, 5 September]. Anutin’s victory owed to his ability to cobble together multiple small parties, factions, and Pheu Thai defectors, as well as secure backing from the 153-MP Progressive Party, the largest political party. Over time, the number of

MPs in Anutin's coalition came to 157 (see Table 1). Still, this number is fluid as Anutin continues to try and attract more MPs to his side. The Progressive Party refused to join Anutin's coalition, but conditioned its support on a promise by Anutin to dissolve the Lower House in four months and also begin the process of redrafting a new constitution [*The Nation* 2025, 2 September]. The decision, controversial even within the Progressive Party, would return to haunt the party in December when Anutin prevented the referendum reform the former had expected. Left in the Opposition was Thaksin's Pheu Thai with 140 MPs.

Meanwhile, just after Anutin's 5 September elevation as Prime Minister, Thailand's Supreme Court, on 8 September, ruled that Thaksin had not properly served a previous prison sentence and must be imprisoned for one year. Thereupon, the following day, he began serving his sentence (Ratcliffe 2025, 9 September). The ruling partly besmirched Thaksin's political name and also meant that he would not be able to directly involve himself in the 2026 general election.

### *5. Anutin as Prime Minister: September–December 2025*

Born into a wealthy Sino-Thai business family and entering politics in the 1990s, Anutin had earlier served under Thaksin before becoming leader of centrist-conservative Bhumjai in 2012 [Reuters 5 September 2025]. Anutin entered the prime ministership with support from different ideological sides. He was backed by the progressive People's Party because of his promises of fast-paced constitutional reform and the People's Party's greater distrust of Pheu Thai. This was despite his ties to the palace and military, characteristics which appealed to conservatives.

Regarding the palace, Anutin had already long been a «close associate of Thailand's current king» [Wikileaks 2009, 23 November], and, upon the 24 October death of Queen Mother Sirikit, Anutin became the head of her year-long funeral mourning committee [Bangkok Post 2025, 25 October].

As for the military, unlike his predecessor Paetongtarn, Anutin enjoyed a harmonious relationship after taking office. Indeed, with the military eagerly cheering on, Anutin “greenlighted” the army's control over all Thai-Cambodian border issues [*Thai PBS World* 2025, 29 September]. He also directed the Army-led Internal Security Operations Command to combat transnational crime and scam-centers [Bangkok Post 2025b, 4 December]. Finally, he allowed the army a «free hand» over counterinsurgency policy in Thailand's Deep South [Pathan 2025, 28 October].

Finally, Anutin was backed by combination of 1) conservative technocrats; 2) retired military officials; and 3) several regional political strongmen who saw support for him as a way to accrue more wealth and/or political clout. From these three groups he assembled a cabinet [Thitinan 2025, 25 September].

Throughout Anutin's first months in office, the People's Party seemed to be moving forward successfully with its quest for charter changes, to which Anutin continued to give his backing. In October, parliament passed the first reading of the People's Party-favored constitutional amendments [*Thai PBS World* 2025, 16 October] and it appeared that this most progressive version would be passed in all three required readings by December.

However, the new government was immediately confronted with various challenges. Specifically, Anutin began to encounter negative popularity regarding Cambodia, flooding and corruption.

Regarding Cambodia, despite a formal peace declaration in late October, Thai soldiers had continued to be injured by land mines placed by Cambodia along the frontier. Cambodian land mines had been an issue for Thailand's border-based troops since July. Because of this, Anutin, in November, announced that Thailand no longer observed any peace accord with Cambodia [*The Nation* 2025, 12 September]. The US then pressured Anutin, threatening higher tariffs, and Anutin softened his stance [*Thai PBS World* 2025, 26 November]. He was then criticized by moderates for earlier threatening to relocate Thai exports away from the US market and then later by ultra-nationalists for caving in to Washington. By December, intense fighting between Thailand and Cambodia along their border had started again. Though a precarious peace deal was negotiated on December 27, the situation was still tense in January 2026 (Supalak 2026, 7 January).

Meanwhile, Thailand was hit by massive flooding in November, with greatest damage centered upon Had Yai city in the South, but also in central and some northern provinces. The government's slow reaction to it was followed by a Suan Dusit poll showing slippage in popular support for Anutin from 48% to 23%, ominous political news for Bhumjai Thai given Anutin's promised early election expected in March or April 2026 [Panarat et al. 2025, 1 December].

Finally, in October–November, reports surfaced that some of Anutin's cabinet ministers were themselves linked to cyber-crimes and scam centers — which the government claimed to be cracking down on [*Thai Enquirer* 2025, 30 October]. The Prince Group, a cyber-criminal network, had even rented office space from Anutin's family [*The Nation* 2025a, 17 October] while a photograph was discovered of Anutin with Benjamin Mauerberger, a money launderer and the point man of several such criminal networks

[*Bangkok Post* 2025a, 4 December]. Based on these revelations, Pheu Thai promised to file an ethics complaint and a censure motion against the government when it reconvened sometime in December [Jiji Press 2025, 7 December]. But Pheu Thai stated that it would first wait for the parliamentary votes to launch the activation of a new constitutional drafting committee.

## 6. Relations with Myanmar, China, and the United States

Though relations with Cambodia were Thailand's preeminent foreign relations issue in 2025, relations with other countries were also important. Most significant were ties with Myanmar, China, and the United States. These are examined below.

In 2025, Thai-Myanmar relations specifically focused upon border issues, economic interests, and Thailand's support for Myanmar's 2025 election, as well as continuing rosy relations between the Myanmar and Thai militaries. In terms of border issues, scam compounds, crypto fraud hubs, and cyber-slavery operations became the focus of attention. In February, under pressure from China, Thailand cut electricity supplies to frontier areas which were the sites of the scam industry [Olarin and Adkin 2025, 5 February]. By November, Myanmar's troops were raiding and cracking down on the scam centers, though evidence showed that the raids were mostly just for show given that only a small area of the compounds were actually destroyed [Wee 2025, 28 November]. In addition, since the 2021 Myanmar coup, Thailand has continued to facilitate the forced pushback of Burmese war refugees back to Myanmar [*Fortify Rights* 2025, 17 May].

Thailand has significant interests in Myanmar. Indeed, Thailand is the third largest foreign investor in Myanmar. In 2024, Thailand's PTT became the largest shareholder (63.0 per cent) in Myanmar's Yadana natural gas project. Other Thai ventures in Myanmar include Northern Gulf Petroleum, Osotspa Glass, CP, Siam Cement, ThaiBev, Boonrawd, Bangkok Bank, and Siam Commercial Bank [Chambers and Chotisut 2024]. Meanwhile, in August 2024, Thailand offered assistance, including potentially financial or technical support, to Myanmar's military junta for its controversial population census in preparation for planned elections at the end of 2025 [*The Irrawaddy* 2025, 8 August]. Finally, though Thailand's elected civilian government continuously cautioned the post-2021 Burmese government to move toward democracy, Thailand's military has long maintained close, pragmatic, and often surreptitious linkages built upon personal and economic ties. Indeed, leading officers from each country often hold regular meetings, fostering military-to-military bonds [Radio Free Asia 2023, 19 January].

Regarding Thai-China relations in 2025, they must be seen through the prism of a balance of power politics. This is because Thailand has, since at least 2001, sought to follow a realist hedging policy toward China and the United States in which Bangkok seeks to create equilibrium in its ties with both Beijing and Washington.

The relationship in 2025 marked 50 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1975. It was dubbed the Golden Jubilee of Thailand-China Friendship [Zhang 2025, 13 November]. As part of this event, then-Prime Minister Paetongtarn visited Beijing in February, an event which paralleled the signing of 14 Memorandums of Understanding in areas such as digital economy, artificial intelligence, space technology, green energy, and agriculture. This was followed by a Thailand-China Cooperation Expo in September, and the initiation of a new Five-Year (2025–2031) Trade and Economic Cooperation Plan. The two countries also stepped up collaboration against transnational crime such as illegal call centres based along the Thai-Myanmar border [Khaosod 2025, 28 January]. In November, Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn visited Beijing [Al Jazeera 2025, 14 November].

Also in 2025, joint military exercises continued between the armies, navies, and air forces of Thailand and China. These exercises included the annual «Falcon Strike 2025» (air forces), in September and the annual «Blue Strike 2025» (navies), in March–April [Global Defense News 2025, 17 September]. Regarding the annual «Strike Series» armies exercise, it had still not been held as of December. Such defense diplomacy marked a pivotal growth in relations between the two countries. Thailand has also increased its purchases of Chinese military hardware. Indeed, Thailand's cabinet finalized the purchase of a Yuan Class S26T submarine from China using Chinese engines in August [Khaosod 2025, 5 August].

Moreover, Chinese economic activity in Thailand surged in 2025. In November, China ranked fourth in terms of investments in Thailand, with 116 businesses (13%) and investment totalling THB 25.404 billion. Hong Kong, under Beijing's control, ranked fifth, with 93 businesses (11%) and THB 13.198 billion [The Nation 2025, 30 November]. Meanwhile China has been Thailand's number one trading partner since 2013 [The Nation 2025b, 17 October]. Finally China is a leading provider of economic assistance to Thailand, mostly via the former's Belt and Road Initiative program, though since 2021 Thailand has begun to reduce its reliance on Beijing [Lowy Institute 2025].

Finally, the 2025 Thai-Cambodian imbroglio affected Thai relations with China. This is because the hostilities reflected two China «friends» at odds against each other, producing heightened Chinese efforts in December to seek a ceasefire.

As for Thai-US relations, Bangkok, once a very close Cold War ally of Washington, after 2001, slightly distanced itself from Washington as part of its aforementioned realist hedging strategy of creating a balance between the US and China. However, in 2025, except for security ties, there was a souring of US-Thai relations.

Thai-US security relations seemed generally amicable in 2025 with the Trump administration pushing for defense deals. The US is ahead of other countries (including China) in joint exercises with Thailand. Indeed, though Thailand is involved in joint military drills with other countries, the US remains its principal partner because Washington can provide larger-scale and more complex exercise scenarios, which appeal to senior Thai military officers. Still, China is catching up rapidly [Soto and Rahman 2023, 2 December]. In 2025, principal Thai-US exercises included Operation Cobra Gold in March (involving troops from 30 countries), Hanuman Guardian, an army exercise also held in March, Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training, a Navy exercise held in July, COPE Tiger (including Singapore) held in March, and Enduring Partners, an Army exercise held in August [Facebook Royal Thai Government 2025]. Meanwhile the Trump administration has cut most funding for military education of foreign troops, including for Thai soldiers/officers [Rand 2025, 28 January]. Finally, though Thailand has continued to purchase some US military hardware, US military assistance to Thailand in the form of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) has diminished since 2023 [USA Facts 2024].

As for Thai-US economic relations, the United States ranked second in terms of investments in Thailand with 127 businesses (15%) and an investment of THB 4.83 billion [The Nation 2025, 30 November]. Washington has also been a leading provider of economic assistance to Thailand. Meanwhile, in 2025, the US is Thailand's second largest trading partner after China. Still, trade became a source of Thai-US friction in 2025. The US trade deficit with Thailand was estimated at US\$ 45.6 billion in 2024 as the US was Thailand's largest export market in that year, representing 18.3 per cent of shipments [Reuters 2025, 28 July]. The Trump administration saw Thailand as benefiting from low US import tariffs while engaging in unfair trade practices. Thus, in April, Trump announced an initial tariff rate of 36 per cent on Thailand before negotiating that down to 19 per cent on 1 August.

When fighting broke out between Thailand and Cambodia in July, Washington played a major role (along with Malaysia and China) in bringing the two sides to the table to negotiate a 28 July ceasefire. Hours after the truce, Trump claimed to have brokered it:

I said to Thailand, «We're doing a trading deal and I'm not going to do a deal if you're going to be killing each other»,

and I spoke to Cambodia and said essentially the same thing ... Within less than a day, we had it settled [*Financial Express* 2025, 29 July].

Hun Sen's son, Prime Minister Hun Manet, thereupon nominated Trump for a Nobel Peace Prize [de Guzman 2025, 11 August], to which the White House spokesperson enthusiastically agreed (Trump did not end up receiving one). An enhanced ceasefire agreement was signed between the two countries (following US pressure) on 26 October. However in November, as fighting between the two countries flared up again and Prime Minister Anutin threatened to walk away from the agreement, Trump threatened to halt trade talks with Thailand if Bangkok did so [Holmes 2025, 15 November]. However, fighting between the two countries intensified anyway.

Finally, human rights proved to be a significant part of Thai-US relations in 2025. This may have surprised the Thai government because it might have assumed that Trump prioritized only business. However, Trump's concern for human rights appeared to be a function of whether the issue related to China — a geopolitical rival, unless the human rights victim was American.

Washington's concerns were seen most clearly following the Paetongtarn administration's 27 February deportation of 40 Uyghurs to China despite warnings that they could face torture or death back home. Thailand had detained them for 10 years in a Bangkok detention center. Even though Canada and the US had offered to resettle all 43 ethnic Uyghurs held in detention in Thailand, Bangkok feared infuriating China [*The Guardian* 2025, 5 March]. The Trump administration immediately denounced the Thai government [Kunnawut and Pimuk 2025, 27 February]. Washington also refused to issue any future visas to any Thai officials who had been involved in the Uyghur return, including government ministers [Wee 2025, 15 March].

A second human-rights-related bone-of-contention between Thailand and the US was the detention of Thailand-based academic Paul Chambers (author of this article). On 30 March, a regional sub-commander of Thailand's army charged Chambers with violating Section 112 (lèse majesté) of Thailand's Criminal Code and the Computer Crimes Act. On 8 April, when Thai authorities imprisoned Chambers, Washington publicly expressed «alarm» and stated that it was closely monitoring the situation [United States Department of State 2025, 8 April]. He was released from prison on bail late the following evening but was forced to wear an electronic ankle bracelet. According to anonymous Thai and US sources, the tariff talks (which were soon to be negotiated) gave the United States added weight vis-à-vis Thailand regarding the Chambers case. This resulted in charges being

dropped against him in late May and his hurried departure from Thailand on 29 May [Faulder 2025, 11 June]. Though the Trump administration stated that the Chambers case «highlighted [its] longstanding concerns about the use of lèse majesté laws in Thailand» [United States Department of State 2025, 8 April], other than the Chambers case, the Trump administration has said little about Thailand's lèse majesté law, which carries a penalty of up to 15 years in prison per charge. Nor has it mentioned Thailand's repressive Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs).

Tariffs, the breakdown of a Thai-Cambodia peace accord, Thailand's return of the Uyghur to China, and the Chambers case created perhaps temporary discord in the Thai-US relationship in 2025. Nevertheless, economic and security ties remained strong. Relations with China in terms of security and economic relations were also robust. As such, one could argue that the varied problems in US-Thai relations in 2025 strengthened those Thais who continued to call for a hedging relationship with China and the US, given that both superpowers could exert pressure, and already overshadowed Bangkok. As for Thailand's foreign policy toward Cambodia and Myanmar, Thailand (especially Thailand's military) in 2025 was increasingly unwilling to follow the preferences of the US or China, implementing instead policies which it felt best served Thai national interests.

## *7. Thailand's economy in 2025*

At the beginning of 2025, indicators suggested that economic performance in Thailand would be positive. In fact, the economy was expected to grow at an optimistic 3–3.5 percent [Kitipong and Orathai 2025, 27 January]. But by the end of the year the country was still stuck in economic malaise.

Both internal and external factors created problems for the economy. First, household debt had risen to a four-year high — close to a 90 percent ratio. This debt was driven by consumption loans (from credit card debt, personal loans, loan shark loans, and lack of savings), exacerbated by stagnant incomes [Phusadee 2025, 25 September]. Second, increased US tariffs on Thai goods (though these were reduced from the initial 36 percent to 19 percent) shocked the economy [Head 2025, 31 July]. Third, a drop in foreign tourist arrivals diminished the amount of hard currency for the Thai economy. According to Thailand's Ministry of Tourism and Sports, in December 2025, foreign tourist arrivals reached a total of 30,273,872 foreign visitors. However, this cumulative figure represented a 7.19 percent decrease compared to the same period the previous year [*The Nation* 2025, 9 December]. Fourth, sustained Thai-Cambodian border hostilities created a

near total collapse of Thai-Cambodian border trade, extreme labor shortages (especially of Cambodian workers), and negative effects on tourism and investor confidence [*Bangkok Post* 2025, 14 November]. Fifth, the sudden change in government in Thailand in September intensified uncertainty [International Monetary Fund 2025, 13 November].

One bit of bright economic news was inflation. In October, Thailand's inflation rate had dipped by 0.76 percent and the government targeted a 0 percent inflation rate for the year. The rate represented the seventh consecutive month of inflation decline, sixth lowest among 140 countries and lowest in ASEAN [*The Nation* 2025, 5 November]. Also, unemployment decreased from 0.88 percent in 2024 to 0.76 percent in 2025 [*The Nation* 2025, 16 November].

Yet positive indicators were few. According to the International Monetary Fund, despite the expected economic expansion rate of over 3 percent in Thailand at the beginning of 2025, economic growth was now projected to slow to 2.1 and 1.6 percent in late 2025 and 2026 [International Monetary Fund 2025, 13 November]. Already, by late 2025, Thailand's economy demonstrated that it was still in a dismal state. Indeed, the economy had contracted by 0.6 percent in the third quarter of 2025 from the previous quarter, with growth slowing to 1.2 percent year-on-year from 2.8 percent in the second quarter [*The Nation* 2025, 16 November].

Finally, despite any indicators of economic progress in Thailand, poverty is continuing to grow there. According to the World Inequality Report 2026, «inequality [is] continuing to intensify [with] the income gap between the top 10 percent and the bottom 50 percent widen[ing] between 2014 and 2024, indicating growing disparities» [UNDP 2025, 193]. 2014 is significant as the year of the most recent military coup which put an end to many welfare programs of the previous government.

## 8. Conclusion

In sum, Thailand, a façade democracy overshadowed by monarchy and military, encountered insecurity and transition in 2025. Regarding insecurity, Thailand became embroiled in war with Cambodia. A brief border clash in July, it had mushroomed into a prolonged border conflict by December. In terms of transition, the country was led by the Thaksin-dominated Pheu Thai at the beginning of the year only to be replaced by a conservative, Bhumjai Thai-led government in September. A Lower House dissolution had been expected in late January 2026.

Regarding international relations, Thailand sought to balance off China against the United States in a realist hedging foreign policy in order to

best achieve Thailand's national interests. However, the Trump administration's high tariff policy toward Thailand damaged Thai-US relations. Also, when the United States pressured Thailand into a peace accord with Cambodia in July and when Thailand backed away from that ceasefire in October, Washington threatened higher tariffs. Finally, Thailand's deportation of Uyghur refugees to China and detention of a US academic deeply disappointed Washington. As a result, Thai-US relations soured in 2025. Meanwhile, following the end of the Chambers case, Thailand's international human rights reputation did not improve: on September 29, Thai police arrested Australian journalist and academic Murray Hunter on charges of criminal defamation — defaming the Malaysian government because Hunter had written media articles about alleged corruption in the Malaysian government. Hunter was briefly imprisoned and his trial began in December. A conviction could mean eight years for Hunter in a Thai prison as well as a fine of 800,000 baht [EU See 2025, 3 December]. The cases of Chambers and Hunter demonstrate that Thailand in 2025 is willing to instill harsh punishments against anyone, including foreigners, who might seek to enlighten the world about state authoritarianism and impunity within Thailand as well as in its allies abroad.

On December 11, during a vote on the second reading of the People's Party amendment to call a drafting committee for a new constitution, Bhumjai Thai suddenly refused to go along with a promise it had made to the People's Party to allow a new charter to be considered with only 51 per cent of the combined House-Senate vote. Bhumjai Thai now declared that the bill must pass scrutiny of one-third of the Senate (Bhumjai Thai controls at least half of the Senators) before it could be put to a referendum [*The Nation* 2025, 11 December]. As such, the People's Party moved for a no-confidence vote against Anutin that was certain to pass given that a majority of MPs belonging to either the People's Party or Pheu Thai were sure to support it. Before the vote could occur, however, Anutin, on 12 December, suddenly and unexpectedly (he had earlier said he would dissolve parliament in January 2026) dissolved the Lower House and called for a new general election. The election was ultimately held on 8 February, 2026 [*Al Jazeera* 2025, 11 December].

By the very end of 2025, the insecurity and transition which had begun to intensify six months previously had morphed into outright instability for Thailand. Indeed, the country's border skirmishes with Cambodia had moved closer to an outright war. At the same time, the Anutin administration had become only a caretaker government existing in preparation for an election. The situation paved the way for the military to take a greater role in leading the country. As a result, authoritarianism looked likely to grow, relations with neighbours (and even great powers) seemed on

the verge of becoming increasingly chaotic, and the country appeared headed for worsening economic times. At the dawn of 2026, amidst Thailand's sideshow of faux democracy, the country continues to be dominated by vested elites, an arch royalist military, and a conservative judiciary, all oscillating around monarchy. Such a situation represents a difficult obstacle for Thais seeking greater democracy in the future.

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