

# Chinese autocracy promotion towards Myanmar and Thailand

**Priscilla Tonetto**

Università di Trieste

priscilla.tonetto@units.it

**Italia**

*L'autocracy promotion della Cina verso Myanmar and Thailand*

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## Abstract

In its autocracy promotion towards Myanmar's and Thailand's military regimes, China especially applied incentives but also blackmailing practices. However, China also supported hybrid regimes. Then, China always selected soft and not hard power; military pressure has been indirect. There were strong emulative processes of both Myanmar and Thailand. Chinese pragmatism promoted both options since, if China opposed hybrid regimes, this could cause the defeat of the military and the possible victory of pro-Western and anti-Chinese political actors. In order to avoid this result, Beijing governments adopted a more flexible autocracy promotion, reflecting a real-politik approach to foreign policy, which allowed to preserve Chinese diplomatic interests.

## Keywords

**China, Myanmar, Thailand, Autocracy promotion, Hybrid regimes.**

## Riassunto

Nella sua autocracy promotion verso i regimi militari di Myanmar e Thailand, la Cina ha applicato soprattutto incentivi ma anche ricatti. La Cina ha comunque sostenuto anche i regimi ibridi. Poi, la Cina ha sempre preferito il soft all'hard power; la pressione militare è stata indiretta. Si sono sviluppati così forti processi imitativi sia da parte del Myanmar che della Thailandia. Il pragmatismo cinese ha promosso entrambe le opzioni, perché se la Cina avesse ostacolato i regimi ibridi, ciò avrebbe causato la sconfitta delle forze armate e la possibile vittoria degli attori politici filo-occidentali e anti cinesi. Per evitare tale esito, i governi di Pechino hanno adottato una autocracy promotion flessibile, attraverso l'applicazione della real-politik alla politica estera, per tutelare gli interessi diplomatici cinesi.

## Parole chiave

**Cina, Myanmar, Thailand, Regimi autoritari, Regimi ibridi.**

## Introduction

Considering the most recent evolutions of political regimes in South-East Asia, this article is aimed at studying the Chinese autocracy promotion in the region. In order to proceed in the analysis, two case studies will be considered, the Burmese and the Thai one. Despite not being the only countries involved in the Chinese influence sphere, the role of their respective military apparatus in the political transition of the countries distinguishes them with respect to other States which are more clearly identifiable as Chinese followers. Given the historical relevance of their communist parties, the Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian regimes specifically might seem to more faithfully embody the Chinese model, aimed at coupling single-party authoritarianism with moderate economic liberalism. Besides, the Vietnamese and the Laotian communist parties are still protagonists of the political life of the two countries, whereas in Cambodia a new leader has emerged since the middle Eighties, Hun Sen. On the con-

trary, in Myanmar and Thailand the role of the military has been predominant: in the first case, they established an unusual regime, associating political authoritarianism to almost socialist economic structures starting in the Sixties, maybe as a consequence of the traditional Sino-Burmese ties, while in the last decade Naypyidaw maintained a more ambiguous attitude towards Beijing; the Thai case is peculiar both because of its royal-military leadership and because of the strong relationship between Bangkok and Washington, an heritage of the Cold War period challenged since the Nineties by the rapprochement of the Chinese Popular Republic. The evolution of these two regimes, so different from one another but sharing the military attribute, seems to converge today toward the model (directly or indirectly) inspired by Beijing. It should therefore be understood whether China is actively promoting this trend in the region, and specifically in Myanmar and Thailand. In order to clarify this issue, in the first paragraph of the article an evolution of the Burmese institutions will be presented, from the independence to this day, and a parallel overview will be dedicated to the Thai regime in the second paragraph, from the Siam Kingdom of the beginning of the XX century until the most recent political developments. The third and the fourth paragraphs will deal more in detail with Chinese autocracy promotion in Myanmar and Thailand respectively; lastly, some conclusions will be drawn. The aim is therefore to understand to which degree China is relying on active autocracy promotion and, on the contrary, to which degree there are spontaneous emulation mechanisms from the Burmese and Thai regimes.

## Myanmar's institutions

On the aftermath of its independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, Burma (the official name of Myanmar till 1989) refused to access the Commonwealth of the Nations and the country was shattered by armed conflicts between the different communist factions which, inspired by the Chinese example, aimed at establishing a communist regime in Burma; besides, some Kuomintang forces escaped in the Northern regions of Burma, exposing the country to the constant risk of an intervention of Mao communist forces. In order to avoid this eventuality, the Prime Minister U Nu nourished a personal friendship with Chinese leaders, coining the term “Pauk-Phaw” (meaning kinship), to describe the

<sup>1)</sup> The Pauk-Phaw included the rejection for the Chinese suzeraineté; a non-alignment policy, even if alliance were available; the establishment of interdependence and not dependence relations with China; the recognition of Chinese interests in the area (Myoe, 2016).

<sup>2)</sup> Another military regime which applied (semi)-socialist economic institutions was the Peruvian one with Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968-1975). Among the most important reforms there was the nationalization of the National Bank, of mineral resources, of the fishing industry, the land reform against the landlord oligarchy, the establishment of rural cooperatives and the State control on the main telecommunication company.

<sup>3)</sup> According to Freedom House data, in the Seventies and the Eighties Burma was to be considered a “Not Free” regime, with a score between 6 and 7 for the political rights and between 5 and 7 for civil liberties.

bilateral relations between the two States (Myoe, 2016), based on the solid affirmation of Burmese sovereignty and of the reckoning of the opportunities arising from a collaboration with China.<sup>1</sup> Between 1948 and 1962 Burma was a “lawless” hybrid regime because of its weaknesses in the rule of law domain (Morlino, 2008).

The persistent armed conflicts in many parts of the country and the political fragmentation led to a growing instability which facilitated the coup organized on March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1962 by general Ne Win. There was a rapid transition toward a military authoritarian regime, led by the military Revolutionary Council. Some weeks later, the Council proclaimed its manifesto, known as “the Burmese way to socialism” and founded the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). The combinations of a military regime with socialist economic institution represented an anomalous case in the world political scenario.<sup>2</sup> This peculiarity is probably due to the intense relationship between Burma and China.

During the brutal dictatorship of Ne Win all political parties but BSPP were disbanded, Buddhism was proclaimed state religion, any form of opposition the federal aspirations of ethnic groups were suppressed, industry and trade were nationalized and in 1974 a new Constitution was adopted, changing the name of the country in “Socialist Republic of the Union in Burma” (Enciclopedia Treccani, 2022). China continued to sustain the Burma Communist Party (BCP), providing arms, munitions, financial technical assistance and fostering local rebellions, especially after Burma refused to cooperate with China in the Vietnam War. In 1967 some anti-Chinese rebellions took place, but Ne Win did not ask neither the US nor USSR for help. At the beginning of the Seventies the two countries reestablished normal diplomatic relations, even if China continued to secretly sponsor the communist guerrilla at least till 1985 (Myoe, 2016).<sup>3</sup>

Ne Win retired from the Presidential office in 1981, although he remained the head of the BSPP till July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1988. In June 1988 a wave of protests began, due to the violent repression of a student manifestation; starting from August 8<sup>th</sup> protests spread all over the country. The movement called the “8888 Uprising” was struck by general Saw Maung’s coup d’état on September 18<sup>th</sup>, when the regular government was replaced by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC): Saw Maung take on in himself the office of President, Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs

Minister, while the BSPP was exiled to China. The second military era of the country began and the name was changed again from in Myanmar. The Constituent Assembly elections took place in May 1990 and the National Unity Party, representing the military forces, was defeated by the National League for Democracy (NLD), an opposition party against the military regime and born from the 8888 Uprising. However, the military government refused to yield the power to the newly elected NLD and sentenced its leaders (Aung San Suu Kyi and U Tin U) to house arrest. Western countries adopted some political conditionality measures, hoping to promote the respect of the electoral results and the democratic development of the country. Notwithstanding international pressure, the SLORC stayed in power and on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1992 general Than Shwe succeeded Saw Maung as President, staying in office till March 30<sup>th</sup> 2011. The democratization attempt carried out by the 8888 Uprising exponents could be traced back to the fourth democratization wave that was spreading all over the world after 1989. In Asia the example was set by the Tiananmen protests in Beijing between April 15<sup>th</sup> and June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989. Unfortunately, the Burmese regime transition was not successful, and the country only experienced two years as a hybrid regime (with military protection) before returning authoritarian in 1992.<sup>4</sup> The Constituent Assembly, elected in 1990 and responsible for the revision of the 1974 Constitution, was dismissed in March 1996, without providing a new Constitutional Chart. The SLORC was officially abolished in 1997 only to be replaced by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Throughout the Nineties the regime was responsible for serious human rights violations, especially against NLD members.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> According to Huntington (1991), in South-East Asia countries political-cultural factors were more responsible for the failure of the transition than economic ones; in particular, he considers the absence of democratic experience and the lack of a political leadership change. The precarious economic situation of those countries certainly contributed to hinder the process, but it was not the determinant cause for its failure.

<sup>5</sup> The USA and the EU consequently increase the sanctions against the regime in 1997 and 2000 respectively. Freedom House highlights that in the Nineties and at the beginning of the XXI century there was little to no change in Myanmar's evaluations. The short-lived period of improvements in the civil liberties domain was linked to the 8888 Uprising, but it was lost by the end of the decade.

<sup>6</sup> The precarious political situation was further worsened by the cy-

In 2003, a “plan in seven points for the opening to democracy” (Zin & Joseph, 2012) was announced and two years later the National Convention was convened for the first time after 1993; however, no major pro-democracy organization or party was admitted. The democratic aspirations of the country invested the military regime in September 2007, when the “Saffron Revolution” began, although it was quickly repressed bloodily.<sup>6</sup> The growing international pressure in the form of trade sanctions forced the military junta to concede a constitutional referendum in 2008. The resulting Constitution yielded wide powers to the military, such as a reserved part of the parliamentary seats (1/4) and the right to choose the new governments. The NLD did not

clone Nargis that devastated most of the rural lands of the country in May 2008. According to the UN, the cyclone caused damages worth 10 billion dollars, left 1 million people homeless and caused 200 thousand fatalities (Unep, 2022).

<sup>7)</sup> Thanks to the 2012 and 2015 political evolution, Freedom House progressively improved Myanmar's scores from 7 in both categories, and the country finally gained the "Partially Free" status in 2016 (with a score of 5 in both sections). Myanmar was considered a hybrid protected regime, and the status was confirmed till 2019. However, after the 2021 coup, the country's performance drastically worsened, achieving a score of 0/40 for political rights and 9/60 for civil liberties, thus confirming the 2020 "Not Free" status.

<sup>8)</sup> This was justified the worsening of the Freedom House scores; however, the regime was still considered a hybrid (partially free) one till 2019.

participate in the 2010 elections as a sign of protest against the new electoral law and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won with 80% of the preferences (although it was accused of electoral fraud). 2011 represented a turning point thanks to the release of the NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi (along with 200 other political prisoners) and thanks to the (nominal) transfer of powers from the junta to the semi-civil government. The newly appointed government promoted a period of reforms which assured syndical representation to workers, the right to strike, a greater (even if not complete) press freedom, a revision of the electoral law which allowed the NLD and other pro-democracy parties to take part in the political life of the country. In 2012 by-elections took place, distributing 1/10 of the parliamentary seats, while the others were reserved for the military candidates; the NLD gained 43 out of the 45 available seats (Zin & Joseph, 2012). The 2015 general elections sealed the NLD victory, which obtained a vast majority in both Chambers of the Parliament with 79.4% of the votes (Blazevic, 2016:101), and his candidate Htin Kyaw was appointed as the next President of Myanmar, the first one in 54 years not coming from the military.<sup>7</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi was constitutionally interdicted from the presidential office; however, she was appointed State Counselor, an office specifically created for her and which allowed her to de facto rule the government since the Prime Minister office was abolished. President Htin Kyaw resigned in March 2018 and was replaced by Win Myint, whose mandate was supposed to end in 2023.

At the end of 2016 the ethnic conflict between the Muslim Rohingya minority and the Buddhist population allied with the government troops began, leading to an operation qualified as ethnic cleansing. Many UN agencies, International Criminal Court officials, NGOs, journalists and governments have described the situation as an ongoing genocide.<sup>8</sup> Taking of the precautionary measures necessary to face the Covid-19 pandemics, the government forbid protests and in presence electoral campaigns, contributing to the NLD victory at the general elections on November 8<sup>th</sup> 2020. The wide NLD victory (396/476 seats) against the USDP (only 33 seats) was followed by an Internet shutdown and a reduced electoral monitoring. On February 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 the Tatmadaw seized the power with a coup d'état, overthrowing Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Myint from their offices and declaring the

elections null and void. In the aftermath of the coup, many NLD members were arrested while general Min Aung Hlaing became the new man in power and proclaimed an emergency state for a year. Subsequently, a civil pacific disobedience movement started to protest against the military and the imposed measures (such as the curfew and limitations and control over the access to Internet and social networks).

## Thailand's institutions

The Kingdom of Siam was the only territory of South-East Asia which maintained its independence through the XVIII, XIX and XX century; it was rather a buffer state between the English and the French possessions in the area. After a coup d'état led by both civilians and the military, Thailand became a constitutional monarchy on June 24<sup>th</sup> 1932; the conflict between the military and party leaders grew, until general Plaek Phibunsongkhram, also known as Phibun, became Prime Minister in 1938. The general established an authoritarian fascist regime, and inaugurated a "thaification" policy aimed at assimilating ethnic minorities.

In 1939 the Kingdom of Siam officially became "Prathet Thai", the local name for Thailand. During the Second World War the regime allied with Japan, but after 1943 the opposition to the Japanese occupation and to the Phibun regime grew and it was led by the national liberation movement Seri Thai. After the ousting of Phibun, the government was entrusted to Banomyong, the leader of the opposition. The first civilian government of the country then promulgated a new Constitution, which established a bicameral parliament and allowed the creation of free and independent political parties.

The democratic regime only lasted till 1947, when Phibun deposed the Prime Minister with a coup, and the power returned to the old military hierarchies. After the seizure of power by the communists in China and Indochina, Thailand sided with the United States, gaining military aids in return. Indeed, according to the principle of the "lesser evil" (Fossati, 2006), the US sustained both authoritarian and hybrid regimes under military tutelage against the possible victory of communist parties. In September 1957, after another coup Phibun was substituted by another general, Sarit Thanarat, who became Prime Minister in 1959. He confirmed the pro-US alignment, also during the Viet Nam

war, and promoted the renaissance in the monarchy as unifying force of the country. Thanarat's successor, general Thanom Kittikachorn monopolized the Thai political scene between 1963 and 1973, when some students protests forced king Rama IX to remove the general from its office and to send him into exile. Therefore, in 1973 the second democratic experience of the country was inaugurated; the different governments of this period ranged from hybrid regimes (either under tutelage or lawless) to limited illiberal democracies, reaching the democratic apex in 1975.

However, leaders and parties proved to be weak and unable to deal with the delicate transition period and popular unrest was always present. When general Kittikachorn tried to seize power again, protests exploded in January 1976 and continued throughout the following months. After two more coups general Kriangsak Chomanan seized power in 1977; the Constitution was changed in order to enhance the powers of the military and new elections were programmed for 1988.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the opposition joined the Thai communist party, which could exploit the economic and military aids coming from China. General Chomanan managed to stop the Chinese action only by allowing Beijing to transit through Thai territory to refurnish the Khmer Rouge during the Cambodian-Vietnamese war. In March 1980 general Prem Tinsulanonda was elected Prime Minister, maintaining the office till August 1988; during its premiership there was an easing of the regime and a national reconciliation program allowed to effectively limit the communist guerrilla in Thailand by the end of the decade.

In 1988, there were the first "free" elections of the past fifteen years, won by the conservative right-wing Thai Nation Party. The party was born during the civil rule (1973-1976) and represented the interests of Phibun's close lobby, which had been excluded from power after the 1957 coup. Its leader, Chatichai Choonhavan, became Prime Minister and the country's regime was again under military tutelage. However, the government was involved in many corruption scandals till 1991, when another coup overthrew Choonhavan and established an authoritarian government led by the pro-monarchy Democratic Party. During the Nineties also the Democratic Party was shattered by many scandals and in 1997 it joined the Thai Nation Party with the aim of producing a new Constitution.

<sup>9</sup> Freedom House registered an improvement for both political rights and civil liberties in the first half of the Seventies (in 1975 the scores were 2 and 3 respectively), but the events of the second half of the decade negatively influenced the Thai performance (only in the late Eighties the scores went back to 2 and 3).



The new Constitution facilitated another democratic parenthesis in the country, since the 2001 elections were won by the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT), a party founded by the telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, who became Prime Minister. The TRT gained 248/500 seats, defeating the conservative Democratic Party and forming a coalition government including the Thai Nation Party (Thai Parliamentary Chamber, 2022). Shinawatra became the representative of the rural sectors in the north of the country, alienating the sympathies of the industrial and urban lobbies of Bangkok, which sided with the military; besides, the Prime Minister progressively marginalized the opposition parties and privileged a personalistic approach to power. He promoted many policies aimed at protecting the weakest classes, especially in the health and education domain, causing the rapid growth of the inflation from 0.6% in 2002 to 5.1% in 2006 (CIA World Factbook, 2006). Shinawatra represented what in politics is often called a “right-wing populist” or a “plebiscitary conservative” (Fossati, 2020). Shinawatra and its party won again the 2005 and 2006 elections, and managed to relaunch the Thai economy after the severe financial crisis of 1997-1998; Shinawatra also inaugurated a war against the drug dealers and the Islamic separatist groups of the Pattani region, but conducted it in violation of human rights (Amnesty International, 2022). The deep fracture created between the old and the new political elites facilitated the military coup led on September 19<sup>th</sup> 2006, after which all institutional offices was suspended. The country was split in two factions, one supporting conservative and military forces and (the “yellow shirts”) and one supporting Shinawatra (the “red shirts”), generating conflicts in the national territory (Bbc, 2022).

In December 2007, before the elections, the military junta managed to institutionalize its role through the Internal Security Act which attributed wide powers to the military to the detriment of civil liberties. The 2007 elections were won by the People’s Power Party (PPP), Thaksin’s ally, which was then dismantled by the Constitutional Court one year later because of electoral fraud and the Democratic Party could therefore form a coalition government. In 2010 the protests of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship spread throughout the country and, notwithstanding the violent repression, asked for the return of Shinawatra and its party and managed to obtain new elections for

2011. The 2011 Pheu Thai victory, led by Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra, represented just a small success of the United Front forces, since Yingluck was destitute in 2012 by the Constitutional Court because of abuse of power. The social and political conflict rapidly grew till May 20<sup>th</sup> 2014, when the army Commander in Chief Prayuth Chan-ocha, leader of the National Council for Peace and Order, proclaimed the martial law and held a coup to become ad interim Prime Minister. This escalation led to the dissolution of the government, the suspension of the Constitution and the establishment of the curfew. In October 2016 king Rama X succeeded his father Rama IX, enhancing the monarchy involvement in politics, along with a major degree of centralization and an attempt to promote the monarchy absolutism. However, the 2017 Constitution, the 20<sup>th</sup> after 1932, ensured wider guarantees for the military and the Constitutional Court, specially aimed at preventing the return to politics of Thaksin Shinawatra and his allies.<sup>10</sup> After repeatedly postponing them, elections for the Lower Chamber were held in March 2019, while the seats of the Higher one were chosen by the military after the election results, published in May 2019. For the first time, the Thai Raksa Chart Party, an ally of Pheu Thai, proposed ad Prime Minister a member of the royal family, the Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya. However, her brother the king immediately blocked her anti-constitutional candidature, while the Constitutional Court dissolved the party and interdicted many of its member for any political activity for ten years. After some months of contestation, Pheu Thai obtained a relative majority but ended up in the opposition group along with Future Forward (social-democrats and anti-military), while the governing coalitions included Palang Pracharath (the party sustaining the former dictator Prayuth Chan-ocha) and the Democratic Party (conservative and right-wing) (Election Commission of Thailand, 2019). The elections were considered "partly free and not fair" and, notwithstanding the party pluralism, they were rather regarded as an example of competitive authoritarianism (Sawasdee, 2020).

<sup>10</sup>) Freedom House registered a deterioration of the scores in the first half of the Nineties, while in the second half of the decade and at the beginning of the XXI century the scores stabilized around 2-3. The 2006 and 2014 coups even worsened the situation and in 2018 Thailand had a score of 7 for political rights and 5 for civil liberties

Although conducted with some irregularities, the elections led to the first improvement in the performance of the country after the 2014 coup and in 2019 Freedom House classified the regime as "partially free". In July 2019 the military junta devolved its power to the civil government, even if many of its member returned to the political scene, as Prayuth did becoming Prime

<sup>11)</sup> The latest scores of Freedom House show a further worsening of Thailand's performance for 2021, with a score of 5/40 for political rights and 24/60 for civil liberties, confirming the "Not Free" status of 2020.

Minister, while many pro-democracy activists became targets of military attacks. In 2020 Thailand again regressed to the "not free" status because of the dissolution of the opposition part Future Forward and because of the repression of the anti-government youth protests demanding an effective protection of human rights, the abolition of the Thai parliament, a constitutional reform and a downgrading of the monarchy power. The civil government has then exploited the Covid-19 pandemics to declare the state of emergency in the country and to inhibit the right of association. The protests briefly stopped at the end of 2020 also because of a new pandemic wave and then started again in February 2021, in response to the coup in Myanmar, and lastly again in June 2021. <sup>11</sup>

## Chinese autocracy promotion in Myanmar

The repression of the 8888 Uprising and the denial of the 1990 democratic elections caused the deterioration of the relations between Myanmar and Western countries. By the mid-Nineties Western countries adopted political conditionality measures against the authoritarian regime, mainly trade restrictions, visa blockade for the junta members, armaments embargo and suspension of military and non-humanitarian assistance. Therefore, China took advantage and became the first arms provider for Myanmar, which became China's major partner. Between 1990 and 2016 China provided Myanmar with 1 billion US\$ worth arms agreement, beside providing the training to Burmese military cadres (Way, 2016); between 1988 and 2012 Chinese investments in Myanmar were worth more than 1 billion US\$, and Beijing became the country's greatest investor overcoming Thailand (which was surpassed as trading partner in 2009) (Zin & Joseph, 2012). In 1991 the Indian Prime Minister attempted to involve Myanmar in its "Look East Policy", aimed at intensifying their bilateral trade, but Myanmar preferred to tighten its ties with China. After refusing to adhere to the SEATO and the ASEAN in 1967 because of the Chinese veto, Myanmar acceded the second one in 1997, when China finally agreed to its membership. Throughout the Nineties the Chinese action focused on providing incentives to sustain the isolated Burmese regime, especially as supply of

<sup>12)</sup> According to Maung Myoe (2016) in “The logics of Myanmar’s China policy, Burmese armed forces received 16 war ships, 146 aircrafts, 300 tanks, a great number of anti-aircraft missiles, over 100 pieces of artillery.

<sup>13)</sup> According to Maung Myoe (2016), the Burmese military industry was built with the technical aid provided by China; besides, between 1990 and 1999, 615 out of 942 military cadres sent abroad were hosted by the Chinese army.

<sup>14)</sup> For the first time, in 1973 China used its veto power for a non-Taiwan-related issue.

arms<sup>12</sup>, training<sup>13</sup> and low quality consumption goods; Myanmar began to provide wood, gems, fish, marble, carbon, nickel and other national resources in return.

Between the end of the Nineties and the beginning of the XXI century the Burmese regime began to progressively take the distance from the Chinese giant, acknowledging the risks coming from an excessive dependence. Therefore, Myanmar decided to establish closer relations with Russia, Brazil, Ukraine and other Eastern European countries for arm supplies and with Russia, India, Pakistan and Malaysia for cooperation in training. Notwithstanding this new trend, the Sino-Burmese relations remained rather intense: in 2007 the military regime selected some Chinese state-owned enterprises for the making of more than ninety projects in the hydroelectric energy, oil, natural gas and extractive activities field, penalizing Indian and South Korean enterprises instead; on the other hand, China vetoed the US-backed UN resolution aimed at increasing the sanctions against the Burmese regime.<sup>14</sup> This system based on incentives and blackmailing allowed Beijing to maintain important relations with the still internationally isolated Burmese regime. Probably because of the scarce results of Myanmar in diversifying its partners, China did not feel pressured to enhance its sanctions against the regime. Myanmar remained a rather isolated regime with respect to other authoritarian and hybrid regimes.

The Western political conditionality led Myanmar to diversify its production and trading partners and only the textile sectors was eventually harmed by the sanctions; China managed to absorb most of Burmese natural gas exports previously produced for the US, allowing Myanmar to bypass sanctions. Indeed, the so-called Chinese “development assistance” traditionally included not only subsidies and soft loans, but also trade loans and investments. According to an AidData report, less than 25% of Chinese funds in the area between 2000 and 2014 were part of the Official Development Assistance; Chinese assistance came mainly in the form of export credits and extremely favorable loans. The Table below illustrates the foreign direct investment flows in Myanmar, and clearly shows that, even if with a fluctuating trend, China still remains the main provider.

Table 1. FDI in Myanmar, 2009-2018

*(In US\$ Million)*

<i>Source Country</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2016</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>2018</i>
ASEAN	67.8	25.5	84.6	151.2	1,186.8	683.6	2,230.6	1,682.9	2590.4	910.8
BEST OF THE WORLD	895.5	2,223.3	1,973.6	1,203.0	1,434.1	262.6	593.8	1,306.6	1,412.0	699.0
Australia	0.0	4.4	12.4	1.7	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.7	0.6	16.9
Canada	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1	2.8	15.9
China	370.7	1,520.9	670.6	482.2	792.6	70.5	52.4	205.5	554.4	75.3
EU-28	97.8	214.8	369.3	664.2	296.2	28.3	202.9	839.0	447.3	176.8
India	0.0	13.6	1.5	0.0	7.3	0.7	8.1	1.6	-98.1	-215.5
Japan	0.2	0.2	2.2	31.1	36.0	37.7	95.1	16.0	207.7	289.1
Korea, Republic of	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	11.1	37.0	35.3	-189.2	-462.6
New Zealand	65.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
Russian Federation	0.0	0.0	26.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
USA	0.0	0.0	103.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	43.3	21.6	55.3
Others	361.6	469.4	786.1	23.8	301.8	114.1	196.2	165.0	464.9	747.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>963.3</b>	<b>2,248.8</b>	<b>2,058.2</b>	<b>1,354.2</b>	<b>2,620.9</b>	<b>946.2</b>	<b>2,824.5</b>	<b>2,989.5</b>	<b>4,002.4</b>	<b>1,609.8</b>

Source: ASEAN Yearbook 2019.

The change in the trend inaugurated by Myanmar at the beginning of the XXI century became even more evident after Thein Sein appointment as President. In 2011 Myanmar interrupted the building of the Myitsone Dam, the greatest out of a six dams-hydroelectric project on the Irrawaddy river, and built by China in the northern part of Myanmar. Indeed, the regime was forced to this decision by a growing anti-Chinese sentiment among the population because of non-ethic environment and social practices in the building of the dam, and because of a perception of national resources exploitation. China drastically reduced the volume of its trade and investments, especially between 2014 and 2015 (Wong, 2018:7), as a form of economic blackmailing (a usual autocracy promotion measure). This economic conditionality has hardly had a preemptive role, but it was rather a consequence of the Burmese behavior. Chinese investments rose again since 2016, and even more after 2017: in fact, Myanmar was targeted again by Western economic sanctions because of the conflict exploded between the Buddhist majority and the Rohingya Muslim ethnic minority. In this new context of international isolation, State Councilor Aung San Suu Kyi (and not the military junta) promoted new ties with Beijing and the progress of numerous Belt and Road Initiative projects in the Burmese territory.

The Burmese leader probably encouraged Chinese investments in order to ensure the country economic progress and to fulfill the electoral promises (Mezzera, 2021); for its part, Beijing promptly seized the chance to sustain the Burmese government through its economic incentives. This approach is not new for China which has often taken advantage of the ethnic-driven withdrawal of Western support to gain credit with pariah regimes. Aung San Suu Kyi opening to Beijing was confirmed by Xi's visit in January 2020 and was constantly thwarted by the military, who instead have generally been nationalist and wary of China's involvement in Myanmar's ethnic conflicts (Mahtani & Diamond, 2020). Notwithstanding the worsening of their relations because of the Rohingya conflict, the Burmese leader and her party tried to preserve the dialogue with Western governments, especially with the US, in order not to preclude any option for the future.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> According to Yun Sun, senior fellow and co-director of the East Asia Program and director of the China Program at the Stimson Center, "Myanmar won't be back in China's pocket [...] The Burmese and the NLD government are using American acquiescence and Chinese desire to gain influence in Myanmar to their own advantage" (CGTN America).

After the February 1, 2021 coup, China was accused of helping building the internet firewall in Myanmar; there have been therefore many protests in front of the Chinese Embassy, but Beijing denied any involvement (The Irrawaddy, 2021). According to Ari Ben-Menashe, a lobbyist for the military, one of the reasons for the coup was also the excessive tightening of relations between Aung San Suu Kyi's government and China. Ben-Menashe was apparently hired along with his communication agency in order to establish a fruitful dialogue with the US and the West in general, especially in order to avoid becoming a Chinese client state (Reuters, 2021). However, the ambiguous relations held by the military with China in the past twenty years makes it hard to understand till what point the Tatmadaw is willing to reduce the Chinese presence in the country. Indeed, China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution aimed at establishing an embargo on arms sent to Myanmar and, along with Russia, it remains Myanmar's major provider. Conversely to what announced by the military spokesperson, the Chinese narrative doesn't seem to oppose a return of the Tatmadaw, since it is regarded as the only actor able to stabilize the country (an imperative assumption for Beijing's investments protection) (Tower & Clapp, 2021). According to an analysis by CNBC correspondent Yen Nee Lee, China would be aiming for a *laissez-faire* approach with respect to the military junta, avoiding to openly condemn the coup and calling instead for regional stability (Lee, 2021). Indeed, Beijing has abandoned the ideological

approach to autocracy promotion used during the Cold War, and it has instead opted for a more realistic and pragmatic one, interchanging its strategies. Differently from the aftermath of 2011, in the last five years the Burmese emulation of the Chinese regime has prevailed over China's policy based on incentives and blackmailing. This trend was first observed during the civil government (after the beginning of the Rohingya conflict), and could be followed not with words but in deeds by the military junta.

## Chinese autocracy promotion in Thailand

The first fundamental difference between Myanmar and Thailand is their alignment during the Cold War: while the first country tried to develop a non-alignment politics despite its proximity to China, the latter established strict ties with the US already in the aftermath of the Second World War. Thailand accepted to become Washington's anti-communist fortress in South-East Asia, thus enjoying the American military protection from the security threats coming from its neighbors.<sup>16</sup> The US involvement in the long term led to the creation of Western-like education and training programs for the ruling and intellectual elites and to a constant support to the pro-monarchy and traditional elites, thus eliminating all potential competition.

<sup>16)</sup> Thailand was among the few non-NATO countries to be officially recognized by the US as an ally.

After the first semi-free elections of 1988, the official development assistance coming from the German, French, British and Japanese governments and from the European institutions significantly rose (Oecd, 2020). Funds coming from the US remained instead unchanged. The deteriorating internal political context and the 1991 coup caused a major fall in the official development assistance coming from all major Thailand's donors.<sup>17</sup> Only after the 1997 Asian financial crisis the European institutions and Germany increased the funds again. Political conditionality in Thailand was actually experienced at the beginning of the Nineties with a certain degree of success, since in the second half of the decade the country improved its political performance (differently from what observed in Myanmar).

<sup>17)</sup> At the same time, according to Freedom House, Thailand reverse from "Free" to "Not Free" country status.

The 1997 Asian financial crisis caused also a worsening of the relations between Thailand and the US, further exacerbated by the political developments in the country in the late Nineties

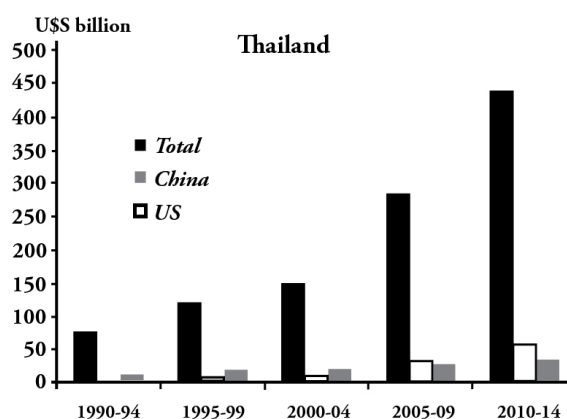
and the beginning of the XXI century. Indeed, the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra was originally perceived as a democratic turn and was accompanied by an increase in the volume of aids, probably conceived as democracy incentives (Oecd, 2020). However, aids began to decrease toward the end of Thaksin's mandate, especially because of its authoritarian means that resembled those of the Malaysian and Singaporean single-party (such as the monopolization of the electoral system or the manipulation of the Constitution) (Pongsudhirak, 2008). Aids further decreased after the 2006 coup, but also with Shinawatra's 2011 return to power, and lastly they drastically dropped after the 2014 coup. Nevertheless, contrary to the political conditionality applied after 1991, the 2006 and 2014 coups caused a fall in the aids, but then they rose again without the proof of actual political progress, probably in order to avoid an excessive rapprochement between Bangkok and Beijing. Historically, China developed less ties with Thailand than the US, especially because of the country's alignment during the Viet Nam war and the Cold War in general. These premises did not lead to a Chinese disappointment with respect to the Thai political development, and China manifested instead an implicit support. Indeed, Chinese pragmatism, an essential feature of its development assistance policy<sup>18</sup>, ended up being more attractive for Thailand than US interventionism. While during the Nineties the Chinese quota of Thai trade was essentially negligible (see the Figure below), throughout the early XXI century the quota rose significantly, overcoming the US one in 2010-2014. Besides, in 2013 China overcame also Japan as Thailand's major trade partner, winning 14% of the total trade of the country.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup>) The Chinese conception of development assistance includes not only subsidies and loans, but also trade loans and investments.

<sup>19</sup>) This increase was accelerated by China's accession to the World Trade organization in 2001 and by the signature of the Free Trade Area Agreement between China and ASEAN countries.



**Figure 1.** Thailand's trade volumes



Source: IMF 2015.

The increase in trade volumes between China and Thailand was paired with an increase of Chinese investments in the country, another feature of Beijing's development assistance. Notwithstanding this trend that rose especially after 2010, Chinese FDI did not overcome US ones till 2016 and they remained lower than the Japanese and ASEAN ones (in 2017 Tokyo's FDI accounted for 1/3 of the total investments in Thailand).

Table 2. FDI in Thailand, 2009-2018

Source Country	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
ASEAN	2,685.9	2,220.9	952.2	-745.4	528.2	-940.7	433.6	2,001.4	1,814.0	1,671.2
BEST OF THE WORLD	3,725.6	12,525.8	1,521.5	13,644.4	15,407.8	5,916.2	8,494.0	806.8	6,415.1	11,534.0
Australia	124.7	23.4	6.3	276.5	343.8	79.5	661.9	42.0	80.7	48.0
Canada	793.5	782.7	50.2	2,351.5	130.0	900.7	241.2	76.5	-127.4	22.0
China	169.1	633.4	20.9	598.5	938.9	-221.3	238.1	1,071.9	72.9	662.4
EU-28	980.4	1,276.5	843.4	1,515.4	-1,117.0	221.7	1,065.1	4,378.9	710.6	1539.4
India	43.5	92.4	32.5	52.3	59.9	-55.6	-3.9	31.9	39.5	22.4
Japan	1,535.0	4,400.0	-1,370.4	3,706.7	10,927.2	2,430.9	3,006.3	2,986.8	3,131.6	5,250.9
Korea, Republic of	278.1	180.2	97.2	131.1	716.3	247.9	142.6	27.2	168.4	223.7
New Zealand	11.6	3.3	5.6	7.1	4.8	4.9	1.1	1.6	2.6	6.5
Russian Federation	13.9	15.6	-49.7	61.3	167.9	-97.8	-7.8	37.4	40.9	45.2
USA	-43.8	1,431.0	143.4	3,966.5	857.2	2023.0	1,083.1	438.6	-120.5	810.1
Others	180.2	3,733.8	1,742.2	977.5	2,379.0	382.4	2,066.3	471.7	2,416	2,903.3
Total	6,411.5	14,746.7	2,473.7	12,899.0	15,936.0	4,975.5	8,927.6	2,910.2	8,229.1	13,205.1

Source: ASEAN Yearbook 2019.

In the years following the 2014 coup, the Chinese FDI experience a fluctuating trend while Japanese and ASEAN FDI steadily stayed above the Chinese ones. Nevertheless, Chinese attraction to Thailand was already confirmed in 2014 when, just six months after the coup, the Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang visited Thailand to confirm the Chinese willingness to build a railway from Bangkok to China's Southern provinces (Wong, 2018:10). The incentives were not limited to the trade sector, but instead they progressively involved the security domain, with joint military exercises and purchases of Chinese tanks and submarines (Wong, 2018:10). A sharp increase of Chinese investments was registered in 2016, but they decreased already in 2017. In the following years Beijing's trade presence constantly increased to the point that in 2020 the Thai House of Representative discussed the threats deriving from an overreliance on the neighboring economic giant (O'Connor, 2020). Overall, China profited from the establishment of a military regime sustained by Beijing especially through economic incentives at the beginning of the XXI century, become even more relevant after 2014. China did not downsize its incentives after the 2019 election, the first ones after the 2014 coup, neither did China made use of blackmailing means; indeed, Beijing opted for a pragmatic approach and accepted the presence of a hybrid regime under military tutelage. Chinese projects in Thailand proceeded, especially those related to the Belt and Road Initiative; Bangkok occasionally showed some resistance, aimed at maintaining a certain degree of autonomy with respect to Beijing and at avoiding the so-called "debt trap diplomacy" (Zawacki, 2021). Chinese presence in the country spread also on the cultural and political ground since Thailand host the highest number of Asia Confucius Institutes, a number even higher than the rest of all ASEAN countries together. The deep ties between the two countries have been confirmed in the past years by the magnitude of university and media exchange programs and by the personal relation between the Thai princess Sirindhom and Beijing; in 2019 the city honored her with the China's Friendship Medal, the highest honor for foreigners. Therefore, there is no evidence to confirm China's disappointment with respect to Thailand's (seemingly) democratic turn in 2019, also because the country remains a hybrid regime. Besides, similarly to what showcased in Myanmar, China preferred a flexible and pragmatic approach in dealing with

Thai political evolutions and this choice probably favored Bangkok's emulation of the Chinese model in the last year.

## Conclusions

The aim of this article was to analyze the Chinese autocracy promotion in South-East Asia, especially in Myanmar and Thailand. The initial overview on Burmese and Thai institutions has been helpful in order to highlight the Chinese reactions to the main political events of the two countries from the mid-XX century till our days. Subsequently, it has been possible to further investigate Chinese autocracy promotion in the second part of the article.

After its independence, Myanmar experiences a few short semi-democratic periods, but was mostly ruled by a military regime; the regime had to face the communist guerrilla sponsored by China for several decades, although the country officially maintained good relations with Beijing. Starting from the Seventies, Myanmar experiences an unusual combination of military political regime and socialist economic institutions; this result possibly derived from the Chinese autocracy promotion, which was ideology-oriented during the Cold War. In the Nineties, Myanmar experienced a new democratic wave under Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD, but a new military coup erupted, causing the antipathy of Western governments and facilitating the Chinese penetration instead. At the beginning of the XXI century the regime was well aware of its international isolation and of the risks linked with an excessive reliance on China; therefore, Myanmar progressively tried to diversify its partners. China did not react to this changing trend, but it continued its incentives-based autocracy promotion; the only relevant exception was the blackmailing of 2011, when Myanmar interrupted the construction of the Myitsone Dam. Nevertheless, a few years later Beijing resumed its incentives policy, which was favored by Myanmar's renewed isolation due to the Rohingya conflict and by the emulative dynamics within the country itself. On the contrary, Beijing has not probably played a major role in the military coup of February 1<sup>st</sup> 2021. It is indeed probable that the now ruling Tatmadaw will pursue the path of emulation of the Chinese political and economic model.

On the other hand, the Sino-Thai relations developed especially after the end of the Cold War because of Bangkok's alignment with Washington. Just like Myanmar, Thailand too experienced a

strong role of the military in the political life of the country since the end of the Thirties till nowadays. The few democratic experiments never survived for too long, although during the Nineties Thailand seemed to be steadily heading towards a democratic transition, probably thanks to the Western political conditionality. At the beginning of the XX century, the telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra prevailed and developed a personalistic power, but his plebiscitarianism alienated the sympathies of the Bangkok's élites. The excessive power of the Shinawatra family and of its allies caused the 2006 and the 2014 coups, and only in 2019 elections were held again. China observed the Thai political developments with a pragmatic eye and did not bind the relations between the two countries to a specific regime. In Thailand China's autocracy promotion privileged trade incentives, even after the establishment of a hybrid regime under military tutelage in 2019. On the other hand, the most recent political developments suggest an emulation of the Thai regime with respect to Beijing's model, which would be confirmed also by the repression of the 2020 protests.

Overall, during the Cold War, Beijing's relations with South-East Asia countries were deeply affected by China's relations with other communist parties, thus leaving a major role for ideology; on the contrary, in the past thirty years China has displayed a rather pragmatic approach, supporting not only communist or authoritarian regimes, but also hybrid regimes like Myanmar and Thailand. The Chinese attitude would confirm Beijing's conservative approach to autocracy promotion, where incentives have often prevailed over blackmailing practices. Nonetheless, during the so-called "critical junctures", that is during the switches between different kind of regimes, China has preferred a *laissez-faire* approach. The Chinese autocracy promotion cannot be described neither as ideological, nor as rigid and thus oriented only towards authoritarian regimes. On the contrary, it is a rather flexible one, since it was directed also toward Myanmar's and Thailand's hybrid regimes: indeed, China can exploit the rise of new authoritarian regimes, but it would be against its own interests to punish democratic and hybrid regimes. Furthermore, the Chinese attitude with respect to the critical junctures has sustained emulative dynamic of the follower countries.

<sup>20)</sup> China has never been militarily involved in Myanmar and Thailand possibly in order to avoid an excessive deployment of its forces, already present in other regional conflicts (namely Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia).

The *real-politik* logics exactly assumes a pragmatic stand of a country's foreign policy with respect to its interests, while refusing to rigidly apply ideology. This approach has allowed China to preserve a certain degree of versatility with respect to its follower countries, especially when they seemed to distance themselves from Beijing's authoritarian model (Alieva, 2019). In Myanmar and Thailand, China rarely used measures related to hard power practices, such as military intervention (never used)<sup>20</sup>, military incentives and economic blackmailing (used especially in Myanmar), while soft power measures have prevailed, especially in the form of economic and emulative incentives. However, as reminded by the very creator of the term, Joseph Nye (2021), the concept of soft power is still a matter of discussion among experts, starting from the definition of power and the difference between imposed and coercive (Airaksinen, 1988) behaviors. Therefore, there are many interactions between soft and hard power measures, as observed for example in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Although its authoritarian regime constitutes a limit to its full potential, China seems to have understood the importance of soft power. Indeed, Chinese leaders starting from Hu Jintao have become aware of the risks linked to a growing military-based hard power and have also developed an economic soft power aimed at avoiding the creation of a balancing coalition by neighboring countries (Carminati, 2020). This strategy probably includes the acceptance of hybrid regimes, even if sometimes not perfectly aligned with the Chinese model, which is still the most attractive one not only for Myanmar and Thailand but for the whole region. Therefore, the presence of non-authoritarian regimes is not negatively perceived by Beijing, also because hybrid experiences have often been short-lived and followed by a return of the military to power.

To summarize, in the long run China prefers incentives over blackmailing practices (which are more limited), therefore also supporting hybrid regimes. However, frequently the prevalence of authoritarian regimes or of hybrid regimes with a strong military tutelage leads to emulative practices. Therefore, Chinese pragmatism allows to accept both options since, if China took an ideological stand and opposed hybrid regimes, this could cause the defeat of the military and the possible victory of pro-Western and anti-Chinese forces. In order to avoid this result, Beijing adopts a more flexible and non-ideological autocracy promotion, reflecting a *real-politik* approach to international relations, which allows

to preserve Chinese diplomatic interests. Therefore, Chinese behavior with respect to Myanmar and Thailand will not probably change in the short run and emulative practices could instead consolidate in the future. Asian governments under Chinese influence are aware of the economic incentives linked to the emulation of the Chinese model, just as observed for Myanmar and Thailand. The *real-politik* approach has therefore allowed China to navigate the troubled political developments of its neighbors by alternating its support to the best choice (represented by the military) and the acceptance of hybrid regimes under tutelage, which represent Beijing's second-best choice.

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