

SOUTHEAST ASIAN RESPONSES TOWARDS CHINA-RELATED RAIL  
PROJECTS: THE CASES OF LAOS, MALAYSIA, AND THAILAND

SYED AHMAD ISRAA' BIN SYED IBRAHIM

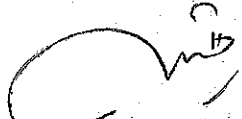
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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this thesis is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

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SYED AHMAD ISRAA' BIN  
SYED IBRAHIM  
P92935

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## ABSTRACT

This study seeks to provide the causal explanation of the puzzling variation in responses made by Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand in dealing with rail projects involving China. Despite facing similar structural pressure and comparable domestic conditions, the three countries displayed different pattern of responses in term of scope of China's involvement, scale of project, and speed of dealing process with China. The responses are also counter-intuitive; where economic benefit is expectedly higher, the response is more cautious while in case of higher political and security concerns are involved, the response is more eager. The main question being investigated in this study is what are the factors that drive the different degrees of responses from Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand towards China in the domain of rail infrastructure? This study adopts a focused and structured comparative approach to analyze data obtained from official documents, media reports, and scholarly writings along with semi-structured interviews with diplomats and experts. This thesis argues that the responses of Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand towards China's rail project are chiefly determined by the calculation of the ruling elite, which capitalize on economic, security, and geopolitical factors in congruence with their interest of seeking performance legitimacy. This is based on the main findings of this study, which are two-fold. First, domestic and external factors have generated pushing and limiting effects in producing the responses in the three cases. The imperative of developing the country via infrastructure upgrades, the deliberation of political and security risks, and the uncertainties in structural condition integrated and affect the degrees of receptiveness towards China's 'rail diplomacy'. Second, the ruling elite in the countries has redefined the benefits and the risks of the rail projects to suit their own concerns. In seeking performance-based political legitimation, the ruling elite will filter the degree of influence from internal and external drivers to form the suitable response vis-à-vis China by either augmenting benefits and mitigating risks thus allowing more enthusiastic response, or projecting image of safeguarding national interests hence more deliberation in dealing with China. The analysis made in this study may theoretically be applied to understand small states' behavior towards economic inducement in term of connectivity infrastructure made by big powers, especially in Southeast Asia.

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