

CHAPTER III

THAILAND'S FOREIGN POLICY

This chapter looks at changing Thai foreign policy in each period, due to internal situation of Thailand. The first section discusses the general characteristics of Thai foreign policy and the basic foundation of Thai foreign policy. The second section periodizes political episodes of Thailand, they are: 1945 – 1949, the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and the 1990s to the present.

3.1 Traditional Thai Diplomacy and Characteristics

During the history of more than 700 years of Thailand, especially in the modern history, its traditional foreign policy have developed an important function, the traditional Thai foreign policies have the following characteristics:

3.1.1 Establishment of Contact Worldwide

Thailand, compared to many other countries, has paid attention to the experiences and the advanced technology of the outside world in order to open itself up.

Under absolute monarchy, the conduct of foreign policy rested entirely in the hands of the all-powerful monarch. Diplomacy in those days was personal in the sense that it was identified with the person of the reigning monarch. According to Thai tradition, King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai (1279-1300) was proficient in the art of cultivating friendly relations. He has been often described as a brilliant diplomat.¹ He established cordial relations with the Emperor of China. Many good-will missions were

¹ International Studies Centre, "A Diplomatic History of Thailand" in *The Centennial of His Royal Highness Prince Wan Waithayakorn Krommun Naradhip Bongsprabandh*, (Bangkok: Thai Great Diplomat and Scholar, 1991), pp. 16-20.

sent to Peking bearing suitable gifts for presentation to the Chinese court; and Sino-Thai trade soon began to flourish.

As early as in the Sukhothai period, Siam or Thailand had close contact with neighboring countries. Later, along with the navigation technology development and trade increasing with various countries, to the Ayuthaya period, Siam had established political and economic relations with many countries of the world. Every year it sent out large quantities of diplomatic corps on friendly visits to various countries, and organized the commercial marine trade with these countries. At the same time, foreigners were also allowed to do business, settle down, and do missionary work in Siam. As a result of Siam's policy of opening to the outside world, the foreign businessmen came to Siam one after another to do business, build business firms, construct the church, and engage in missionary activity. In the 16th century, after the east-bound of west people, Ayuthaya Dynasty opened the door to the outside world further. In C.E.1602 and C.E.1608, the Dutch built business firms in Pattani and Ayuthaya successively, afterwards the British and French followed hard on with other firms. From the end of the 15th century to the beginning of 16th century, the Japanese and the Dutch were allowed to settle down in Siam, and established their own residential districts.

Siam also focused on the recruitment of talented people, and once employed a large quantity of foreigners to hold posts in the royal court and government departments. This was greatly different from the policy of closing the country to external contact and opposing everything foreign indiscriminately adopted by many feudal nations at that time. Cases in point were that in the 1620's a Japanese Yamada Nagamasa (山田长政)* was appointed to hold the post of armed escort command of the

* Yamada Nagamasa, who was conferred the title of "Okya Senabhimuk" and given command over the Japanese volunteer corps during the reign of King Songtham (1610-1628). Yamada served King Songtham with loyalty, as evidenced by his role in supporting the King's brother to assume the throne, also played a part in getting rid of Phya Silpa and in promoting Phra Arthityawong (August-September 1692) to the throne over King Prasattong (1629-1656).

royal court, and in the 1680's, a Greek Constantine Phaulkon (康斯坦特·华尔康)* was assigned for foreign trade majordomo, and at the beginning of the 1700's, Chinese also were appointed to serve the royal court foreign trade and so on.*

By the time of the Bangkok period (from 1782 on), especially since the Rama IV and Rama V ruling period, apart from maintenance of trade relations with the world, Thailand also paid very good attention to the advanced western systems and culture. A large number of western people were hired for office in the main departments of government, and contacts with the west were expanded. In the reign of King Mongkut or Rama IV (1851 - 1868) (拉玛四世王 - 蒙固), which coincided with the period of western colonialism, foreign affairs became an increasingly prominent feature of the Kingdom's activities, leading to the conclusion of a series of treaties with foreign powers.² Because of influence and promotion by western civilization, he had implemented a series of reforms in Thailand. King Mongkut also invited a female teacher from England to tutor the royal family and children, there popularizing the western language and culture in Thailand.³

King Chulalongkorn, or Rama V (1868-1910) (拉玛五世王 - 朱拉隆功), also sent Thai scholars and princes to pursue advanced studies in European countries. These unusual actions had a profound influence on Thai society at the time. The period since the reign of King Narai (1656-1688) of the Ayuthaya dynasty and to King Mongkut of

* Constantine Phaulkon was by origin a Greek, who since his youth had sought employment on board English ships. In 1675, he entered Ayuthaya Kingdom alongside British businessmen, and in 1680, deeply got the Chancellor of the Exchequer to regard highly, was promote for the foreign trade majordomo, afterwards was appreciated by the King Narai again, conferred the title of nobility "Chao Phraya Wijayen", controlled both authority of diplomacy and finance of Ayuthaya Kingdom. Until 1688, because Phaulkon collaborated with Frenchmen, attempting to usurp throne, he was sentence to death.

* At that time, there were a lot of Chinese people doing business in Ayuthaya. Chinese people's business ability and value were recognized by Ayuthaya royalty.

² Ministry Foreign Affairs of Kingdom of Thailand, "The King Mongkut" in **Diplomatic History of Thailand [Online]**, available from <http://www.mfa.go.th/web/2.php>.

³ "King Mongkut to President Franklin Pierce (Feb. 14, 1861)" in **Mongkut, the King of Siam**, (Abbot Low Moffat, Ithaca, 1961), p. 89.

the Bangkok dynasty, is generally thought of as the most open time toward foreign countries in Thai history. In these periods, western nations exercised the biggest influence on Thai economy and politics.

3.1.2 Flexibility of Policy

Thailand is a small country, but actually is good at using diplomatic skills, diligently maintaining her independence and sovereignty. In the mid-1900s, the western capitalist countries had turned Southeast Asian countries into their colonies through wars and other methods, and also extended an aggressive hand to Thailand. Facing powerful enemies and a bad international situation, the King Mongkut as Rama IV said: “the genuine weapon we only may bring to protect ourselves is our mouth and a heart of filling the perfect thought and wisdom. (我们唯一可以拿来保护自己的真正武器就是我们的嘴巴和充满着健全思想和智慧的一颗心。)” King Chulalongkorn Rama V, who was the successor of King Mongkut, further pointed out, “Thailand is a small country, the manpower is limited, and cannot carry on the war with the big powers, so must be able to get along well with all persons and not struggle, and cannot be particular intimate with some powerful nations, and may not become estranged from some powerful nation too much. (泰国是一个小国，人力有限，不能与列强进行战争，必须八面玲珑与人无争，不能过份亲近某一个强国，亦不可过份疏远某一强国。)”⁴

According to these teachings of predecessors, Thailand's foreign policy makers have displayed all kinds of diplomatic skills, negotiated with great powers to guarantee national independence and sovereignty. Therefore, the past diplomacy of Thailand mostly was the defensive diplomatic pattern, and followed the lead of the great nations. In order to adapt to the new situation, Thailand often adopted the method of

⁴ David K. Wyatt, “Mongkut and Chulalongkorn 1851-1910” in *Thailand—A Short History*, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books Press, 2002), pp.190-208.

"bend-with- the-wind (随风倒)"⁵ or "the choice of middle path (寻求中间道路)" due to the close association between Thailand and the US. At the end of the time of colonialism and the cold war period, Thailand adopted another kind of diplomatic pattern, which was to form an alliance with great power.

As a result of various reasons, Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia that has never been a colony of western nations. The reason that Thailand has never been reduced to colony is linked to the foreign policy and diplomatic skill that Thailand can achieve success one way or another.

In the pre-World War II era, in order to bargain with the British and France on problems of consular jurisdiction and territory, Thailand made use of Japanese support. Post-World War II, Thailand and America formed an alliance against the USSR, the PRC and other socialistic countries. Thailand dispatched troops abroad without hesitation to join the war of the US with North Korea and later on with Vietnam. At the end of the 1970's Vietnam launched a war to invade Cambodia, and Thailand handled foreign policy to cooperate with the PRC, resisting Vietnam and the Soviet Union.

Thailand's foreign strategy has both effectively maintained national independence, and obtained many kinds of aid from great nations. This success was achieved by both sides gaining advantages from divergency between themselves in order to protect themselves. National peace and stability enabled Thailand to have more time and financial resources to develop the economy.

3.1.3 Practical Approach

In 1914, after World War I broke out, in order to avoid the disaster of war and encroachment of big powers, the Thai government made a proclamation of neutrality.

⁵ M.L. Pinitbhand Paribatra, "Introduction" in **The Relationship Between Thailand And Myanmar Conflicts And Confrontations Under the Thaksin Shinawatra's Government**, (Chulalongkorn University, [Master's Thesis]2004), p. 5.

From 1915 to 1916, there were some countries calling for Thailand canceling the neutrality standing with allies, Thailand still maintained silence. Yet in 1917, namely the year before the war ended the allies were surely the winners of the war. It was extremely disadvantageous to maintain neutrality, thus in May 1917 the Thai government joined the allies' side and to declare war against German Austro-Hungarian Empire on July 22, 1917. Thailand obtained the treatment of a victorious nation.

In World War II, the Thai government once entered into agreement with Japan and declared war against Great Britain and US. But when the war ended, with the US support and through activities of the Free Thai Movement, Thailand was on the winning side.

In December 1978, after Vietnam invaded Cambodia, the Kriangsak Chomanan government showed "neutral" posture. But in June 1980, the Vietnamese troops were on the border of Thailand, and Thailand's national security was threatened directly. The Thai government then changed the policy of "no interference" to firmly support the Cambodian coalition government in their struggle against Vietnam supported by Soviet Union.

3.2 The Shift of Thai Foreign Policy in Post-War World II

3.2.1 The First Stage (1945 – 1949)

Thailand's foreign policy in this stage is the establishment of friendly relations with all countries of the world, and striving for equal standing in international society.

In the initial post-war period, the key point of Thailand's foreign policy was strengthening relations with the Allies. During the World War II period, the ruling Phibun government leaned to Japan too quickly, and declared war against the US, Great

Britain and other allies.

On the other hand, the Regent, Pridi Banomyong, and Seni Pramoj who was ambassador of Thailand in the US at that time organized and launched the “Free Thai” movement (自由泰运动). They cooperated with the allied forces and opposed Japanese in Thailand.

The Thai government with US support succeeded in convincing the allies that the declaration of war against the allies was forced on Thailand by the presence of the Japanese army. The consequence was that Thailand was not on the side that lost the war.

In September 1945, the Thai Government sent out the delegation to Sri Lanka, to sign agreement with the allied forces, and thus ended the warring situation mutually. In January 1946 Great Britain, the US and other countries acknowledged sovereignty of Thailand, and restored the diplomatic relations. However Thailand had to return territories gained by Japanese support to France as well as to Great Britain.

After Thailand restored relations with the Allies, it requested to join the United Nations. In December 1946, Thailand was admitted as a member nation of the United Nations. However to be admitted as a member of the UN, Thailand had to get a nod from the Soviet Union who sat in the UN Security Council which approved the admission. Subsequently, Thailand established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in January 1947.

3.2.2 The Second Stage (1950s)

The core of Thailand’s foreign policy in this stage was establishment of close relations with the west, such as cooperation with America, Great Britain and France and resistance against threat of communism.

During 1950s, Phibunsongkram and Sarit exercised military power over Thailand. In the foreign affairs, these governments continuously followed US. Professor Khien Theeravit, the doyen of Thai sinologists stated, "Thailand had been conducting a policy of enmity towards China, following the American lead",⁶ and: "Sino-Thai relations have a close connection with US-Thai relations. Until recently, because China was an enemy of America but America was Thailand's friend, the Thai government therefore regarded China as Thailand's enemy."⁷

The establishment of the People's Republic of China and the eruption of the Korean War, deepened Thai worry of the so-called "communism expansion", coupled with the US involvement, in Vietnam, Thailand and the US become members of SEATO (东约) — **The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization** (东南亚条约组织) to carry out the resistance against "the communism expansion" in Southeast Asia.

In April 1955, at the Bandung Conference, PRC and Thailand made official contact, and discussed to clarify partial misunderstandings. The two sides expressed the desire to improve relations between both countries. The Phibun government started to consider the adjustment of foreign policy. Slightly limited intercourses with socialist countries were relaxed. However, the adjustment of Thai foreign policy was blocked in 1957 by Sarit's coup (沙立政变).^{*} Because the power of extreme anti-communism military gained the upper hand in Thai government at that time, Sino-Thai relations were not able to make any substantive progress.

⁶ Khien Theeravit, "The Relationship between Thailand and China-problems and prospect" in **Bagkok Bank Monthly Review**, Vol. 19, No. 12, (December 1978), p. 566.

⁷ Khien Theeravit, "The People's Republic of China's Policies and Tactics towards Thailand" in **In Communist China and World Society**, (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand Press, 1976), p.178. See also, Khien Theeravit, "Notes on Thai Foreign Policy" in **The Social Science Review (Bangkok)**, Vol. 13, No. 1, (January-March 1975).

^{*} Sarit was in power for 6 years, died of illness in December 1963. Sarit as well as his successor Thanom continued to carry out the foreign policies after the US to be hostile to the socialist countries, until Thanom regime collapsed in October 1973.

3.2.3 The Third Stage (1960s)

Thailand's foreign policy completely leaned to US in this period. Thailand's military regimes of anti-communism stood on the US side and dispatched troops to help US in the Indo-Chinese war, obtaining American support in the political, economic, and military aids.⁸ On the other side, the relations with the communist countries were tense all along. The PRC and Thailand were hostile sides in the Vietnamese war. However, it was interesting to note that Thailand was a key country to organize regional cooperation which came into being in 1967 known as ASEAN (东盟) — **The Association of Southeast Asian Nation** (东南亚国家联盟).⁹

3.2.4 The Fourth Stage (1970s)

After entering the 1970's, the international situation changed drastically. In July 1969, Richard Nixon, the President of America proposed a new strategy, the main idea of which was for the US not to commit to war such as the Vietnam one any more. In February 1972, Nixon visited the PRC, which opened the door for Sino-American relations. In January 1973, he signed "Peace Agreement to End Vietnam War (《关于在越南结束战争、恢复和平的协定》)" in Paris. The US progressively withdrew troops from Indochina. In April 1975, north-south Vietnams were unified, and Cambodia and Laos were liberated. In Thailand, in October 1973, Thanom – Praphas regime fell after mass demonstration. New Thai governments both appointed and popularly elected administered the countries. Kriangsak Chomanand ushered in semi-democratic rule succeeded by Prem Tinsulanonda. The series of significant events had a significant influence on Thailand. Thai diplomacy took the turn-about— and Thailand started to adjust her foreign policy from then on.

⁸ Toru Yano, "Sarit and Thailand's Pro-American Policy" in **The Developing Economics**, (6 September 1968), pp. 284-299.

⁹ Young, Kenneth T., "Thailand's Role in Southeast Asia" in **Current History**, (February 1969), pp. 94-99.

With the foreign policy adjustment, Thai government's guidance principle was to implement the omni-directional relations seeking peace, opposing the aggressive war, expanding various contacts with world-countries, and using diplomacy to serve for peace, security, and development. In this time, Thailand maintained relations with countries and regimes with different ideology; took notice of improving relations with neighboring countries; Thailand uphold the Charter of the United Nations to maintaining world peace, advocating the Southeast Asian as an area of peace, freedom, and neutrality.

The main reasons Thailand adjusted the foreign policy were: firstly, the US, the PRC, and the USSR, three great powers, stood like a tripod at least in Asia. In order to adapt, Thailand had to adjust her own foreign relations as a small country.¹⁰ Secondly, the Sino-US relations relaxing, the PRC returning to the United Nations, the Sino-USSR confrontation, and the US withdrawal from Vietnam were all external influence factors that Thailand has taken into consideration to adjust the policy towards the PRC. Thirdly, democratic movement in Thailand gave more civilian elected government to rule the country and paid good attention to economic development. Thai export and investment policies favored better relations with trading partners and foreign investors. Under these circumstances, Thailand restored diplomatic relations with the PRC.

The invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam in late 1978 and subsequent control of the country in 1979 put Thailand in the forefront to mobilize support from ASEAN against Vietnam expansion.

3.2.5 The Fifth Stage (1980s)

Under Prem Tinsulanonda administration (1980—1988), Thailand was fully

¹⁰ Young, Kenneth T., "Thailand's and Multiplarity" in *Current History*, (December 1971), pp. 369.

engaged with the issue of “Cambodian conflict”.¹¹ With staunch stand of anti-Vietnam aggression of Cambodia, Thailand sought support from ASEAN, UN, the US, the PRC against Vietnam who was backed by the Soviet Union and her allies. The PRC was in full support of the tripartite government in-exile of Cambodia which retained membership of the UN. In fact, the PRC took the putative pressure on Vietnam by bombarding northern areas of Vietnam.

Thailand basically implemented the foreign policy of defending Thailand's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and on effort to maintain the peace and stability of Southeast Asia. On October 27, 1980, when Mr. Deng Xiaoping* met the visiting Prime Minister of Thailand (**Picture 3.1**), he highly praised the action of Thailand in solving the Cambodian problem. In October 1984, Thailand was elected as a nonpermanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (联合国安全理事会). This indicated a rise in Thailand's international standing.



Picture 3.1 On October 29, 1980, Deng Xiaoping, Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC), met the Prime Minister of Thailand Prem Tinsulanonda in the Great Hall of the People, Beijing.

¹¹ Young, Kenneth T., “Thailand's and the Cambodian Conflict” in **Current History**, (December 1970), pp. 351-355.

* Deng Xiaoping (August 22, 1904 – February 19, 1997), or Teng Hsiao-peng, the Vice-Premier of the People's Republic of China.

In August, 1981, the Thai politician Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda even specially took charge to formulate a new policy of diplomacy for foreign trade, and developed a path to promote the national economy and quicker development. The people summarized it as "the economical diplomacy" (经济外交), in which the diplomacy serves for the development of the national economy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs broke the convention which the diplomacy only served for the trade and foreign trade, and changed to develop the commodity market. All diplomats and the visiting parties must give strong emphasis to Thailand's economic situation, and introduce the beautiful scenery of Thailand to attract more foreign capital, tourists, and the advanced science and technology. Under instruction of this policy, all the Thai overseas embassy staffs not only are the political representative and the contact person of Thailand in overseas, also are the active element of the foreign economic-trade relation.*

In 1985, the Thai government adopted "the omni-directional diplomacy" (全方位外交). Its main content was to continue to strengthen the comprehensive relations in politics, economy, culture and other aspects with ASEAN countries while maintaining close relations with the US, expanding "the cooperative foundation" with the PRC, Japan, and Western European countries. It also aimed to continue to promote the understanding and cooperation with third world countries, and played a positive role to bridge "North-South relations" (南北关系) and "East-West relations" (东西关系).

In August 1988, after Chatchai Chunhawan was elected Prime Minister, he further adjusted the foreign policy of Thailand significantly. Prime Minister Chatchai considered mutual dependence was increasing irreversibly rapidly; the ability of various country was weakening, which decided the future of the country to control

* Under the driving of foreign open policy, the Thai economy rapid growth, from 1967 to 1991, during 25 years the mean yearly rate of increment reached as high as 7.5%. The gross National Product (GNP) was rose from 28.2 billion Baht of 1950 to 2154.9 billion Baht of 1990; the per capita GNP was enhanced from 1,390 Baht of 1950 to 38,426 Baht of 1990. During 40 years separately increased 75 times and 26 times. The economical achievement of Thailand was huge.

destiny; the importance of political status was going to be replaced by economic status; the international political contradiction and tension were getting more and more relaxed. According to this judgment, Prime Minister Chatchai proposed Thailand's new diplomatic route to the policy of "offensive, positivity and creativity, but simultaneously also must be in accordance with reality" (进攻性、积极性和创造性, 但同时也要合乎实际).¹²

3.2.6 The Sixth Stage (1990s—)

Thai foreign policy in the earlier 1990s emphasized more flexibility and practicality. It paid attention to strengthen the close relations with ASEAN countries, and promoted peace and stability in Southeast Asian area. To strengthen the status of Thailand in Indochina, Thailand fully supported the implementation of Paris Peace Agreement and tried her best to maintain amicable and fruitful relations with all three Indochinese states. Clearly, economic cooperation within the Asia-Pacific region and with the EU was given priority over the security issue. Exploration for free trade agreement was taken up.

Conclusion

Thailand has a long experiences of contacts with countries in the Southeast Asian and Asian regions as well as with the western powers. Flexibility and practicality of her foreign policy and diplomacy saved her from western colonialism. Thai foreign policy since past World War II upto the end of 1990s has shifted and changed according to the prevailing circumstances.

¹² Chulacheeb Chinwanno, "Thailand-China Relations: An Overview," paper presented at the First Sino-Thai Relations conference, organized by the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, (Beijing: People's Republic of China, July 11-13, 1990).