

THE CHANGING PATTERNS IN CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICIES TOWARDS THAILAND SINCE 1949

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The focus of this paper is to examine and analyse the underlying factors shaping China's foreign policies towards Thailand covering the period from 1949 to 1990. These factors include inter alia 1. historical legacies; 2. leadership; 3. ideology; 4. ethnicity; 5. trade; 6. Sino-Vietnamese relations; 7. Vietnam's Indochina policies; 8. the US policies towards Southeast Asia; 9. Sino-Soviet rivalries; 10. superpower rivalries in Southeast Asia, etc. The pertinent question is: what is or are the most important factors?

China's policies towards Thailand can be succinctly summarized as follows: 1. the pattern of distrust 1949-1958; 2. the pattern of hostility: 1959-1969; 3. the pattern of detente and accomodation: 1970-1974; 4. the pattern of normalization: 1975-1978; and finally the pattern of political and diplomatic alignment: 1979-1990.

Hence, section one deals with a brief historical background; section two analyses the period from 1949-1958; section three covers the period of hostility, i.e. from 1959-1969; section four deals with the period from 1970-1974; section five concentrates on the period from 1975-1978; section six centers on the period from 1979-1990 and the final section concludes with an assessment.

I. Historical Background

China and Thailand had long-standing historical ties which dated back to as far as A.D. 900 when the Thai Kingdom of Nanchao (situated in Yunnan province) became China's vassal state.⁽¹⁾ In fact, maritime trade already existed between China and Siam during the Yuan Dynasty (1278-1368).⁽²⁾ Imperial China then recognized the importance of using trade as an instrument of Chi-mi (political influence)⁽³⁾ which was aimed at making Siam as successfully as Vietnam, part of China's sphere of influence. Unlike western imperialism which was primarily based on economic motives, Chinese imperialism was mainly centered on the self-image that China was the center of civilization. The Chinese perceived their culture and civilization as superior, whereas the peripheral states were considered to be uncivilized barbarians. There was therefore a self-righteous need on the part of China to civilize the "barbarians" in the moral and ethnic code of confucianism. This special "patron-client" relationship between China and the Southeast Asian states, on balance, turned out to be shortsighted and unbusinesslike and worse still it ended up as being at the expense of Chinese national interests and power. Invariably, "client" states like Thailand took advantage of this tributary system and looked after their own needs and interests first, more so than the patron's whose need was mainly psychological in the sense that imperial China's power had been at last recognized if not accepted to satisfy the egotrips of the imperial rulers.

Contemporary Sino-Thai relations entered a new phase in 1946 when both states agreed to formalize their diplomatic relations. Thailand continued to maintain political and economic relations with

the nationalist government which escaped to Taiwan after Mao captured the power in Mainland China in 1949. However, Thailand refused to recognise Mao's government until Beijing and Bangkok established diplomatic relations in July, 1975 under Kukrit Pramroj's administration.

Geography played a part in cementing the Sino-Thai political bonds. China was interested in Thailand because the Kingdom occupies a pivotal strategic position in the mainland of Southeast Asia. Thailand is located in the center between Burma and India on the west, Kampuchea and Vietnam in the east, Malaysia and Singapore and Indonesia in the south. For any major power in Northeast Asia who harbors imperialist ambitions, such as the Japanese fascists did in the early 1940's, Thailand is a corridor or a landridge which has to be used for linking the land from the north to the south and vice-versa. Because of Thailand's geographical position, it was of no accident that the major imperialist powers such as the French and the British agreed that Thailand should be a buffer between their respective spheres of influence.

Since the 1970's, Thailand has become an important counterweight in China's strategy against the spread of Vietnam's and the Soviet Union's influence in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, from the Chinese perspective, Thailand can be, if necessary, a useful catalyst in the wider Sino-ASEAN states' political and diplomatic cooperation. China's link with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) since its inception in the early 1920's and the presence of the powerful Chinese community which practically controlled the Thai economy, contributed to China's interest in Thailand.

II. The Pattern of Distrust: 1949-1958

Why could China and Thailand not trust each other from the period of 1949 to 1958? Firstly, the victory of Maoist communism in 1949 was perceived from the Thai perspective to be totally incompatible with the Thais (meaning freedom) who perceived Maoist communism as a real threat to the independence of their Kingdom.

When Phibun Songgram captured the power in a successful coup in 1948, he immediately took steps to curtail the influences of the Chinese community (Chinese schools were banned, pro-Chinese leftists detained, the Chinese migration quota reduced from 1000 to 200 per year, etc.)⁽⁴⁾ and more importantly to negate the influence of the CPT on the Chinese community.

In 1950, Phibun decided to send 4000 Thai troops to South Korea to support the US in their struggle against Maoist communism.⁽⁵⁾ From China's perspective, Phibun's behaviour was regarded as anti-China. Worse still, China was annoyed when Phibun decided to sign a military and economic agreement with the US in September/October, 1950 which put Thailand de facto under a formal alliance with the US. Beijing's suspicion and distrust of Thailand could have been less if Thailand like Indonesia had adopted a non-alignment foreign policy posture, which was perceived by Phibun as an unwise option in view of the aggressive nature of Maoist communism. China's unfriendly attitude could be seen from the commentary made by *Hsin-hua* on 21st November, 1950 in which it accused "America is turning Thailand into an advance base of aggression against Vietnam and China". Phibun, in particular, was singled out as "fascist" who has become the lackey of Wall Street in order to get cash and arms

from the US.⁽⁶⁾ Furthermore, the Phibun government was dubbed as a “puppet” government, completely controlled by the American “advisers.”⁽⁷⁾

China made use of the ethnic Chinese issue by accusing the Phibun government of committing “oppression” over the Overseas Chinese in Bangkok and demanded the cessation of “illtreatment” of the Overseas Chinese.⁽⁸⁾

Sino - Thai relations further deteriorated after the Phibun government passed an Anti-Communist Activities Act on 13th November, 1952 which empowered the government to detain any pro-communists, jail them from ten years to life imprisonment. China was critical about this Act which was perceived to be anti-China. Hence in July, 1954, *Jen Min Jihpao* published an article, calling on the Thai people to overthrow the Phibun government.⁽⁹⁾

In 1954, Phibun decided to join the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), a multi-lateral security arrangement initiated by the US. The fact that Bangkok became the headquarters of SEATO, testified to the importance Phibun attached to the US/Thai military alliance which *de jure*, together with the Philippines, had become the US's two most important partners in Southeast Asia to contain the spread of Maoist communism in the region.

China reacted to the formation of SEATO understandably sharply and accused that SEATO was “an aggressive organization directed against the Chinese people.”⁽¹⁰⁾ China also criticized “the American ruling clique” who tried to “form a ring of encirclement around the Chinese People's Republic.”⁽¹¹⁾

The Phibun government however justified its alliance with the US because of the threat from China. In September, 1954, Zhou En-lai refuted the charge that China was a threat to Thailand and the

Philippines as being groundless. On the contrary, Zhou believed that there was no reason why China and Thailand would not establish normal state to state relations.⁽¹²⁾

From 1955 onwards, China tried to cultivate the image of being a good neighbour. Zhou personally attended the Bandung Conference in 1955 during which he tried to promote a “smiling diplomacy” and a “peaceful image”. He took this opportunity and informed Thailand’s representative, Prince Waithayakon, the then Foreign Minister of Thailand, of China’s intention to establish formal diplomatic relations with the Kingdom on the basis of peaceful coexistence.⁽¹³⁾ Furthermore, China tried to use trade as part of her strategy of “people’s” diplomacy to improve political contact with Thailand. Accordingly, the Chinese authorities approached the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Bangkok to strengthen trade between the two sides. In fact, it was reported that since 1955, some Chinese goods appeared on the Thai markets in Bangkok.⁽¹⁴⁾

The Phibun government responded favorably to China’s “smiling diplomacy” after his return from a world tour in 1955. Thereafter, until his downfall in 1957 by a successful coup initiated by General Sarit Thanarat, the Phibun government allowed a limited form of liberalized policies, for example, allowing political parties and the press to operate freely. In June, 1956, the Phibun government lifted the ban on trade with China, allowing more Chinese goods to be imported to Bangkok. It also relaxed restrictions on travel to China. Phibun’s “liberal” policy lasted until Sarit Thanarat took over the government in 1958 which ushered in a new era of closer alliance with the US as well as a staunch anti-China policy.

III. The Pattern of Hostility: 1959-1969

By 1959, evidence suggested that the period of "smiling" diplomacy was over, as a number of developments turned the Sino-Thai relations sour.

Why did China adopt a hostile policy towards Thailand from 1959 to 1969? China's hostile policy was mainly a reaction to a number of events which were beyond the control of Beijing's authorities. Firstly, there was a change of leadership from Phibun Songgram to Sarit Thanarat, a strongman who believed in despotic rule. Phibun's more liberal policies were anathema to him, as in Sarit's perception, they could lead to "subversion" by Beijing and thereby threaten the security of the Kingdom. Sarit was a fervent anti-Maoist communist and a staunch supporter of the US/Thai alliance. Thus after coming to power in a bloodless coup against his own protege Thanom Kittikachon whom he appointed as the head of the interim government, Sarit immediately adopted a strong anti-communist and anti-China policy. Hence as expected, leftwing pro-communists were detained and Chinese schools were closed down. Secondly, China's hostile policy was also a reaction to Sarit's outright pro-US policy. This could be seen from Beijing's sharp reaction to the signing of the Thanat Khoman-Dean Rusk Agreement in 1962. Thereafter, Sarit permitted the US to station her troops in Thailand which was in Beijing's perception a "serious threat to the security of China."⁽¹⁵⁾ A survey of Beijing's press and official announcements suggests clearly that China's policy towards Thailand was mainly preoccupied with the presence of the US's bases in Southeast Asia, especially the bases in Thailand. Throughout the whole year of 1962, Beijing frequently

harpred on the theme of "patriotic struggle" of the Thai freedom-loving people against the "Sarit Clique" and "US Imperialism".⁽¹⁶⁾ Beijing's radio also increased the frequency of anti-Sarit broadcasts and anti-Sarit propaganda from the Voice of the People's of Thailand (VOPT), a radio controlled by the CPT. Thirdly, China was hostile towards Thailand because of Bangkok's anti-China policy. Beijing was particularly disturbed by the Sarit government's criticism of China's policy towards Tibet. In September, 1959, for example, the Thai representative in the UN accused China of suppressing the rights of Tibetans to conduct peaceful protests against the Beijing authorities. Two years later, in August, 1961, Sarit supported Tunku Abdul Rahman's government of Malaysia's request that the "question of Tibet" should be included on the agenda in the debates of the UN General Assembly.⁽¹⁷⁾ China accused Sarit of taking a posture that was a blatant act of "interfering in China's internal affairs, inciting an anti-Chinese campaign."⁽¹⁸⁾

Thailand's pro-Taiwan policy was also from Beijing's perspective, a source of Sino-Thai irritants. China perceived that the Sarit government was seeking closer links with Taipei. Furthermore, the special privileges given to Taiwan's embassy in Bangkok was taken as a concrete evidence of Thailand's anti-Beijing foreign policy. As far as Beijing was concerned, China always insisted that she cannot accept a "Two China" policy and least of all a policy which was in favour of Taipei and at the expense of Beijing.

In 1963, Sarit Thanarat passed away and General Thanom Kittikachorn became the Prime Minister. He basically followed the same domestic and foreign policies adopted by his mentor. China reacted coolly to the death of Sarit and appeared to be less critical towards the new administration until January, 1965, when the then

Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi declared that “people’s war” in Thailand was in the offing.

This threat of “people’s war”, however, was more of a response to Thailand’s supporting the US war efforts in Indochina than to promote communism per se. The Thai government helped the US to attack the communists in Laos and Kampuchea in November and in December, 1965 and thereafter again in May 1966 when it sent the Thai Royal Armed Forces to South Vietnam to assist the latter to fight against North Vietnam. Hence it was not a genuine desire on the part of Beijing to promote Maoist revolution in Thailand and to overthrow Thanom’s government, but it was simply a reaction to the Thai government’s active involvement in the US’s Indochinese war. Perceiving Thanom as being a keen supporter of the US’s policy in Indochina, it was not a coincidence for China to strengthen her link with the CPT which was typical of China’s “united front from below” strategy. What else could China do, except criticizing Thanom’s anti-Chinese policy and teach Thanom a “lesson” by supporting the CPT. Besides of course engaging in diplomacy and propaganda against the Thai military government, China also strengthened her support for Kampuchea, such as to Prince Sihanouk’s government and the leftist Laotian leaders.

Hence it was not surprising that China announced the formation of the “Thai Patriotic Front” (TPF) in 1965, a front organization of the CPT which has been under the influence of China since its inception in 1942. Thus Beijing advised the Thai people “to rise and struggle against US imperialism and the traitorous and dictatorial Bangkok government”.⁽¹⁹⁾ On 19th April, 1965, China offered a red carpet welcome to the TPF leader Phayom Chulanont when he visited Beijing as a sign of solidarity with the Thai communist revolutionary

movement.

The first encounter with “people’s war” began on 7th August, 1965 between the CPT armed guerrillas and the government’s security forces in the northern region of the province of Nakhon Phanom.

At this stage, however, the CPT remained a weak revolutionary force which in no way posed a serious security challenge and threat to Thanom’s government. At any rate, Beijing’s open support for the CPT rendered any prospects of better relations between the two states dim. In response, Thanom was equally determined to meet these challenges by establishing the Communist Suppression Operations Centre (CSOC) in December, 1965 and his anti-insurgency campaigns in the north, with the help from the US, and the south, with the cooperation from the Malaysian government.

Thanom’s hardline policy contributed to Beijing’s increasing hostility towards Bangkok. In December, 1965, Beijing announced the merger of the Thailand Independent Movement (TIM) with the Thai United Patriotic Front (TPF) so as to widen their struggle against the Thanom government.

1966 was a very important year for China as Mao launched the Cultural Revolution. China was therefore in no mood to adopt a policy of accommodation towards Thailand. In fact, Thailand had now become a target for Mao’s Great Proletarian Revolutionary policy. Hence China increased her hostility towards Bangkok by calling on the Thai people to earnestly wage a glorious “people’s war”. Beijing’s hardening attitude was also partially a reaction to Thailand’s increasing involvement in the Vietnam war by allowing more American troops to be stationed in Thailand⁽²⁰⁾ and allowing 80% of the US’s air bombing missions over North Vietnam to take off from Thai bases.⁽²¹⁾ China was worried that an escalation of the

conflict in Indochina might draw her again into direct armed conflicts with the US as had happened during the Korean war in the 1950's.

On April 1st, 1967, Thanom announced that the Thai government would allow US B-52 bombers to be stationed at the Utapao base. Beijing immediately reacted sharply, accusing the Thanom government of "stubbornly serving as US imperialist tool for aggression and making itself an enemy of the Vietnamese people and other Asian people".⁽²²⁾ Two months later, on 1st June, 1967, the *People's Daily* in a commentary entitled "Fire is Raging Ever More Fiercely" hailed the growth of the "people's war" in Thailand and predicted that the situation there was getting better and better for armed struggle.⁽²³⁾ In August, 1967, the *People's Daily* reiterated this propaganda theme in an article entitled "Let the Flames of Revolution Burn Ever Higher in Thailand".⁽²⁴⁾

1967 was a significant year for the development of regional cooperation among the communist states in Southeast Asia. Thailand's Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman, together with his like-minded counter-parts, Adam Malik, the then Foreign Minister of Indonesia, and Tunku Adbul Rahman, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, decided to form an indigenous grouping, i.e. the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with the hope to promote regional economic growth.

China however misinterpreted the intention of ASEAN and accused the regional grouping of being another extension of SEATO propped up by the US as well as a "dark scheme" initiated by the US to encircle China. China's hostility towards the ASEAN grouping *en bloc* as well as the individual ASEAN member states, especially Thailand remained unabated until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1969. China's mass media continued to highlight the "success" of

people's war in Thailand, predicting the inevitable downfall of the "reactionary regime" of Thanom's government. The so-called "success" of people's war was however nothing more than propaganda. It underlines China's constraints in adopting a revolutionary strategy and showed it was more out of frustration rather than a serious commitment to revolution in Thailand. The simple message was that China wanted to teach the Thanom government a lesson because of its pro-US policy in Indochina as well as its anti-China policy.

IV. The Patterns of Accommodation and Diplomatic Recognition: 1970-1975

Since the beginning of the 1970's, Sino-Thai relations entered a new era of accommodation thus reversing the previous phase of hostility. Why did China change her foreign policy towards Thailand from enmity to amity? A combination of both internal political developments as well as the changing external environment had motivated Beijing to change her foreign policy posture. Firstly, internally, the Cultural Revolution ended in 1969. After three years of chaotic and disastrous struggle which resulted in China's near complete isolation from the world, Mao's policy had not brought China any gains from her foreign relations, except internally, Mao was able to get rid of his opponents in the Liu Shao-chi and the Deng Xiao-ping group. This achievement however was at the expense of badly needed economic development. Externally, 1969 was the worst year for China's external relations vis-a-vis the two superpowers, i.e. the US and the USSR, especially as the latter contemplated to destroy China's nuclear capability after the armed conflicts in March over the Ussuri River. Nothing was more dangerous and senseless than to confront

simultaneously two militarily far superior superpowers. Finally, Mao and Zhou decided, wisely enough, that such a policy must be put to a stop. Secondly, one can argue that the most important factor which motivated the change of course was the external environment. Here again, the constraints this largest state in Asia was facing, clearly came to the fore, as Mao had little options but to follow the tide set by Richard Nixon who became the President of the US in January, 1969. Mao correctly perceived the progressively declining security threats from the US in 1968 which was subsequently confirmed by the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement which resulted in the complete withdrawal from Indochina by the US. By now, Mao perceived that the “Russian Bear” had replaced the “US Eagle” as China’s number one adversary who could be far more dangerous than her previous enemy. By the beginning of the 1970’s a poker game was on the way. Mao decided to use the “American card” against the “Russian card”. Detente with the US therefore was a logical choice. The Sino-US secret diplomacy between Zhou En-lai and Henry Kissinger, the then US Secretary of State, resulted in Nixon’s historic “tribute” to Beijing in 1972 which ushered in not only a new era of international politics to Northeast Asia but to Southeast Asia as well.

Together with the other Asian states, including some of the US’s allies, such as Japan who established diplomatic relation with China in 1972, and sensing the wave of change, Thailand was no exception and swiftly joined the bandwagon. Thus the establishment of diplomatic recognition with China in 1975, after Malaysia and the Philippines was an expected outcome as both Beijing and Bangkok saw the need, perhaps more so Beijing than Bangkok, to make good on their previously hostile and unfruitful relationship.

This volte face of China’s foreign policy towards ASEAN *en bloc*

and the individual ASEAN states was clearly on the way in 1971, when Zhou En-lai went out of his way to meet Tunku Razaleigh, the then Malaysian Trade and Industry Minister, when the latter paid an informal visit to Beijing.⁽²⁵⁾ During this meeting, Zhou gave a surprising unequivocal positive endorsement for ASEAN's ZOPFAN proposal. Thirdly, China's changing attitude and move towards the pattern of accommodation in its relations with Thailand could also partly be explained in terms of the latter's changing attitude towards China in 1971. During a press conference on 2nd December, 1971, Thanom declared: "Thailand would promote friendly relations with all countries which were not hostile towards it. If Communist China did not display hostility towards Thailand, steps towards mutual understanding would be easier."⁽²⁶⁾

Beijing reacted positively to Thanom's new position. By 1972, there were signs that Beijing was interested in promoting "people's diplomacy" through semi-official channels. Thanom's decision to withdraw his troops from South Vietnam in February, 1972 removed an important irritant as far as Beijing was concerned. In April, 1972, the Chinese Table Tennis Association officially invited its Thai counterpart for a "political friendship" gathering. This invitation was not unusual as it was a commonly employed practice by Beijing to cement political bonds in a situation where there is no diplomatic relations in the hope to bring about eventually full diplomatic recognition.

Zhou En-lai attached considerable importance to the visit of the Thai Table Tennis team in September, 1972 by assuring the chief of Thailand's delegation, Prasit, that China wanted to maintain with Thailand good state-to-state relations. Zhou told Prasit personally that China did not have any intention to intervene in the internal

affairs of Thailand. In fact, Zhou tried to project his magnanimous statesmanship by allowing Thailand to continue its close links with Taiwan which had been criticized by China and proved to be a source of irritation in Sino-Thai relations. China's policy of accommodation was also reflected in the official Chinese mass media and the state-controlled radio. Prior to 26th August, 1972, Beijing's radio invariably labelled the Thai government as "Thanom-Prappat clique" which was then dropped after this date and replaced by the phrase "the National Executive Council". Furthermore, the hostile and negative comments by the VOPT were purposely omitted from Beijing's Thai radio transmissions. Instead, Beijing radio carried favorable broadcasts. On September 7th 1972, for example, Beijing radio declared "Let us Plant and Build Friendship Together", emphasizing friendship and solidarity between the Thai and the Chinese peoples.⁽²⁷⁾

The best concrete example of China's initiative to win over Thailand's political friendship was the sale in December, 1973 of 50,000 tons of diesel oil to Thailand. This deal was finalized during Chatichai Choonhaven's visit to Beijing for a friendship price which was much lower than the international market price.⁽²⁸⁾ In January, 1975, another deal was struck by Chatichai in Beijing in which China agreed to sell 75,000 tons of diesel oil. The political significance of these business transactions suggest that China did not hesitate to use trade as an instrument to promote diplomacy. In a small way, China sacrificed her economic interests to trade off political gains as trade subsequently triggered off better political relations. Finally, the trade diplomacy removed the psychological inhibitions on the Thai side towards China as the former felt they would also gain from Beijing in the political arena. Thus this minimization of fear or paranoia made

it easier for the civilian Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj to convince the anti-communist military elites to give up their hardline attitude and accept a modus vivendi with China by establishing full diplomatic relations in July 1975. Finally, but ironically however, the victory of communism in Indochina in 1975 turned out to be another factor in speeding up Sino-Thai diplomatic relations. China did not mind accepting the ideologically committed anti-Communist Thailand.

From Thailand's perspective, the victory of Indochinese communism especially Vietnamese communism, had changed fundamentally the regional balance of power in Southeast Asia. Non-communist Laos and Kampuchea which have always been perceived as important buffers for Thailand's national security had now been destroyed by the SRV, Thailand's potential arch adversary.

Given the victory of communism and the withdrawal of the US from Indochina, what would be the best option to ensure the survival of the Kingdom? As far as Kukrit Pramoj was concerned, he saw Beijing as an important source to ensure the independence of his Buddhist nation. The road to Beijing, if necessary paying "tribute" was worth taking so as to counter the Vietnamese threat which was now at Thailand's doorstep.

From Beijing's perspective, there was also a need to foster closer political association with Bangkok because of Thailand's strategic position vis-a-vis Vietnam as well as to counter the increasingly growing Soviet inroads into Southeast Asia since the late 1960's. Thailand, being the frontline state of the ASEAN grouping, can be an important partner to counter in the vocabulary of Chinese parlance, i.e. "anti-hegemonism". Hence Thailand has become together with the other ASEAN states, in the hope of China, part of a broader international united front against Vietnam and the USSR.

V. Post-Diplomatic Recognition Period since 1975

China's policies towards Thailand since 1975 appeared to be an extension of her Indochina policies, i.e. the Kampuchean conflict, the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations and larger issues of Sino-Soviet rivalries in Southeast Asia. Thus Sino-Thai relations must be tied up with China's larger strategic-security considerations in Southeast Asia, i.e. beyond the perimeters of bilateral Sino-Thai relations which now see closer political, economic and diplomatic cooperation from the period of 1975 to 1978. However, since Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea in January, 1979, one can observe a greater emphasis on the security and military dimensions in the cooperation between the two states, besides improved political and economic cooperation.

How does one explain China's closer political and diplomatic cooperation and in particular her closer security cooperation with Thailand since 1978? The fact that China's paramount leader Deng Xiao-ping decided to choose Bangkok as the first stop-over on his three nations ASEAN sojourn in November, 1978, suggested that China attached considerable importance to Thailand's roles in China's anti-Vietnam strategy. One can argue that one of Deng's motivations was to rally support for the Kampuchean conflict.

Thailand was important to China's foreign policy since 1979 partly because of Thailand's geographical proximity to China and even more importantly, due to the Kingdom's pivotal strategic position on the mainland of Southeast Asia vis-a-vis China's arch enemy, the SRV. In Deng's perspective, Thailand was among the ASEAN grouping the most important potential partner who could help achieve China's

anti-hegemonistic policy. Deng's serious concern about the threat from "hegemonism", i.e. his anti-Soviet and anti-SRV policy were clearly articulated in a rare interview given in Bangkok on 8th November, 1978, when he said:

"Internationally, there is not only global hegemonism but also regional hegemonism. Such regional hegemonism exists in Asia, especially in Southeast Asia. Directed by the big hegemonism, the small hegemonism has lorded it over others everywhere, unbridledly invading another country, that is, invading Kampuchea. I think all nations and people who want to safeguard their own independence and sovereignty are opposed to hegemonism, big or small."⁽²⁹⁾

The gist of Deng's comment was to highlight the exaggerated common "threat" posed by Vietnam to both China and Thailand, the latter being the frontier state which was perceived to be the most vulnerable to the "threat" from Hanoi since Thailand had lost her buffer, i.e. non-communist Kampuchea since 1975. In this way, Deng hoped to forge a united front with Thailand against Vietnam which was perceived by Deng as the "Cuba in the East".

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Thailand and the PRC in 1975, the evolvement of closer cooperation between the two states could be seen in the areas of trade, political, diplomatic and especially greater security cooperation to the point of reaching a new phase, i.e. that of an "axis" in the 1980's.⁽³⁰⁾

From Thailand's perspective, with the victory of communism in Indochina in 1975, the decline of the US commitment in Southeast Asia as well as the invasion of Kampuchea by the SRV in December, 1978, Thailand was very preoccupied with the changing Indochina and the security threats from Hanoi. The government was worried as a spillover of the conflict from Kampuchea into Thailand or an outright invasion or subversion through the support of the CPT could happen.

At any rate, the rise of and domination by Vietnamese communism in Indochina posed a direct threat to the security of Thailand.

In line with Thailand's diplomatic tradition of bending with the wind, the Thai bamboo decided to bend towards China. Hence the convergence of security interests mainly was responsible for the Sino-Thai "axis".⁽³¹⁾ Essentially, the Sino-Thai "axis" connotes China's willingness and commitment to help Thailand to build up an adequate military capability as a balance to counter Vietnam's military might even though the extent and effectiveness of China's security commitment are questionable.

China's closer security cooperation with Thailand covered the areas from undertaking a project of joint production of armaments in Bangkok,⁽³²⁾ the establishment of arms stockpiles⁽³³⁾ to direct outright selling of China made tanks, anti-aircraft guns and frigates at friendship prices. From the Chinese perspective, the arms trade was more of a political exercise rather than strictly a business deal, as long as the transactions were in limited form and provided that such deals would in no way drain scarce Chinese resources, especially those needed for her modernization efforts. In fact, the Thais took advantage of China's political generosity or friendship and indeed skillfully made use of it. Why not accept China's "friendship" and cooperation since it only incurred relatively low expenses compared to the price of other sellers. It was unclear whether the Thais really took China's commitment to Thailand's security seriously, but judging from the situation in early 1979, China's assistance in the security area was more of a psychological assurance rather than of military significance as China was the only great power involved in the affairs of Southeast Asia, both able and willing to use force in pursuit of its goals which helped to alleviate Thailand's fears and restored their

self-confidence.⁽³⁴⁾

At any rate, the timing of China's offering to help in 1979 was a right move as Thailand felt insecure after Hanoi's occupation of Kampuchea. The political effects of the growing Sino-Thai security cooperation resulted in Thailand's adopting a hardline policy towards Vietnam. Thus the Thai government was also less willing to accept a compromise solution over the Kampuchean conflict.

In short, it can be argued that the SRV's invasion of Kampuchea in 1978 marked a new phase in Sino-Thai relations from 1979 to 1989. China's decision to discontinue the broadcasts of the VOPT in July, 1979 signaled the end of a chapter of Sino-Thai enmity.

China's policies towards Thailand since 1979 cannot be fully understood if one does not link them to the relationship with China's policies towards Indochina. Essentially, China's policies were aimed at undermining the SRV domination over Kampuchea and Laos and more importantly, to break up the SRV-Soviet alliance. While China does not have a consistent policy of seeking a sphere of domination over Indochina, it does want, if at all possible, to provide together with the help from Thailand and the ASEAN grouping a kind of counter-influence in Southeast Asia vis-a-vis her adversaries, i.e. the SRV and the USSR. In essence, counter-influence connotes ironically what the US did against China in the 1950's and 1960's, i.e. containment. In order to ensure the effectiveness of this containment policy, China adopted various strategies, ranging from direct military pressures along the Sino-Vietnamese border, political propaganda, united front strategies to military aid and political and diplomatic support of the anti-Vietnamese Kampuchean coalition front.

Attempts were also made on the part of China to exert pressure on the Soviet Union as part of the overall normalization of Sino-

Soviet relations that Moscow must terminate her support towards the SRV over the Kampuchean conflict. In this way, China hoped to squeeze Vietnam from all possible angles.

China also tried to minimize the ideological link with the communist parties in the ASEAN states so as to get the maximum support from the ASEAN states for China's anti-hegemonistic policy. The de-emphasis on party-to-party relations delighted to some extent the Thai military elites who perceived that China's support of the CPT was a root cause of the threat to Thailand's security.

While China cherished and valued the closer political, diplomatic and security cooperation with Thailand, there were signs indicating that China started to shift the priorities in her policies towards Southeast Asia. By the beginning of the 1980's, China had moved her policies towards Southeast Asia from emphasizing security and strategic interests in the 1950's to economics in command in the 1970's. Hence peace is preferable to military confrontation as an instrument of resolving regional conflicts. This is partly in line with Deng's desire to speed up China's modernization efforts and mainly due to the favorable changing international environment.

The most significant development, as far as China was concerned, was the accession to power by Gorbachev in 1985 which not only ushered in a new area in Soviet domestic political and economic reforms but also created a new era of international relations in Asia. Gorbachev decided to scale down the Soviet Union's military and strategic presence in Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union's neutral position during the March, 1988 armed conflict over the Spratley islands between China and Vietnam testified to the fact that a Soviet-Vietnamese alliance exists in name only but not in substance. Furthermore, the Soviet Union's decision to pull out her troops from

Afghanistan in 1978 made Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea totally untenable. In June, 1989, Gorbachev paid "tribute" to Beijing and practically "Kowtowed" to Deng by almost fulfilling three conditions that were imposed by China for attaining full normalization of relations between the two countries, i.e. 1. Soviet troops have to pull out of Afghanistan; 2. withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Sino-Soviet border; 3. cessation of support of Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea.

By the end of the 1980's China did not perceive the Soviet Union as posing any serious threats to her southern flanks anymore, thus a goal of China's foreign policies since the 1960's was by and large achieved. Hence there was no need for China to continue her hard-line policy to "bleed Vietnam white". In fact, since 1985, China has changed her uncompromising stand to a more flexible policy towards the Kampuchean conflict. This drastic change of attitude was partly a response to Hanoi's surprise announcement in May, 1988 that by the end of 1988, the SRV would withdraw 50,000 troops from Kampuchea. By September, 1989, Hanoi claimed that all her troops in Kampuchea had been pulled out, though China for the time being remained sceptical. At any rate, Hanoi's withdrawal made it possible for Beijing to reopen negotiations with the former pending complete normalization of relations between the two states.

Another development which had ramifications for Sino-Thai relations was the pursuit of seeking an independent foreign policy, one of the important goals of China's foreign policy since the 12th Party Congress in 1982. This has resulted not only in China's desire to adopt a more even-handed foreign policy towards the two superpowers but also towards all the states in Southeast Asia. Hence the anti-SRV united front strategy both from "above" (state-to-state) and

from "below", (party-to-party) were de-emphasized. Viewed in this context, Thailand and the ASEAN grouping's usefulness has become less important to China's anti-hegemonistic policy. Thus China decided to normalize relations with the Indochinese states as well as the ASEAN states based on their own merits. The governments of the ASEAN states, especially Indonesia, were not regarded as the "cliques" and "enemies of the people" anymore. The SRV, being the "East of Cuba" became also an invalid propaganda claim. Instead, China's mass media and official announcements emphasized on the reactivation of the Bandung spirit of peaceful coexistence. China in short, has become a de facto status quo maintaining state whose priority is to conduct business-like relations with the ASEAN states. Diplomacy centered on trade, investment and business rather than on politics. China downplayed her romantic revolutionary utopianism for the sake of "economics in command". She thus tries to behave like a huge economic animal. Will she be able to succeed like Japan?

VI. Assessment

What hypotheses can be inferred to from this case study of China's behaviour? Firstly, Maoist communism has never been the most important input in China's foreign policy towards Thailand. The emphasis on Maoist revolutionary ideology in the period from 1966 to 1969 was a means to promote China's security goals in Southeast Asia rather than an end per se. The fact that China de-emphasized party-to-party relations since the 1970's proves that promoting communism in Thailand has never been the main aim of China's foreign policies towards Thailand. However, China's insistence on practicing a "dual track" policy, i.e. party-to-party and state-to-state

relations simultaneously creates a dilemma in her relations with Thailand and the other ASEAN states which can never be resolved. Herein lies one of the potential sources of irritants between China and Thailand.⁽³⁵⁾ Secondly, the most outstanding feature of China's foreign policies was her security-strategic concern. One of the consistent patterns in her behaviour since 1949, was to ensure that China's southern flanks was free from security threats from her adversaries, especially the superpowers. The hypothesis therefore is, when China feels that the security threats increased, she became more hostile. As soon as she however perceived that these threats decreased, the reverse was true. Thus when the Thai government sought a military alliance with the US, China became very hostile towards Thailand. When the US however decided to leave the mainland of Southeast Asia, China became less hostile towards Thailand. Thirdly, while internal political developments, such as changes in leadership did play a part in shaping China's foreign policy behaviour, for most parts however, China's foreign policy towards Thailand was mainly a reaction to the external pressure which underlined the constraints and weaknesses of China in effectively achieving her desired goals. Deng Xiao-ping admitted candidly that China is a big state but a weak power. Fourthly, trade had been used mainly as a political instrument in promoting political gains for China although trade has never been an important factor in shaping China's foreign policy towards Thailand. Unlike China's foreign policies towards Singapore, where "economics" play a major role, politics cum security were the main considerations in China's policies towards Thailand. China was prepared to sacrifice her economic interest in a limited way as a trade off for political gains. Fifthly, the "overseas Chinese" factor was very much underplayed in China's relations with Thailand and

therefore did not pose any serious dilemma in China's foreign policies towards Thailand as compared to Sino-Malaysian and Sino-Indonesian relations, where ethnicity could become a sensitive issue in her relations with these two Muslim dominated states. Despite normalization between China and Indonesia in August, 1990, certain segments of the Indonesian elites, especially the military still perceive China can become a potential security threat by using the Chinese in Indonesia as a "trojan horse", whereas the fear of Chinese subversion in Thailand is much less as the Chinese have been successfully assimilated into Thai society.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) R.K. Jain, ed., *China and Thailand 1949-1983*, (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1984) p.vii
- (2) Sarasin Viraphol. *Tribute and Profit, 1692-1953*, (Mass: Harvard University Press, 1977) p.1
- (3) Sarasin Viraphol, *op. cit.*, pp.1-2
- (4) R.K. Jain, *op. cit.*, p.xlii
- (5) R.K. Jain, *ibid.*, p.xliii
- (6) R.K. Jain, *op. cit.*, p.10
- (7) R.K. Jain, *ibid.*, p.11
- (8) R.K. Jain, *ibid.*, p.6
- (9) *Survey of China Mainland Press*, (hereafter *SUMP*), No.505, 3. 2. 1953, p.23
- (10) *People's Daily*, 6. 8. 1954
- (11) R.K. Jain, *op. cit.*, p.23
- (12) Zhou's report on the "Work of the Government to the National People's Congress", 23. 9. 54. R.K. Jain, Document 24, p.26
- (13) *NCNA*, 19. 4. 1955 in *SCMP*, No.1031, 20. 4. 1955, p.3
- (14) R.K. Jain, *op. cit.*, p.xlvii

- (15) *People's Daily*, 19. 5. 1962, in R.K. Jain, *op. cit.*, Doc. 75, p.75
- (16) *Ta Kung Pao*, (Hong Kong) 31. 3. 1962
- (17) R.K. Jain, *op. cit.*, p.li
- (18) R.K. Jain, *ibid.*, p.67
- (19) *Peking Review*, No.17, 23. 4. 1965, p.5, and No.42, 15. 10. 1965, pp.8-9
- (20) They numbered 34,000
- (21) *New York Times*, 27. 11. 1966
- (22) *NCNA* 2. 4. 1967, in *SCMP*, No.3912, 5. 4. 1967, p.31
- (23) *SCMP*, No.3952, 5. 6. 1967, p.45
- (24) *Jen Min Jih Pao*, (hereafter *JMJP*), 18. 8. 1967
- (25) For a detailed study see Shee Poon Kim, "Peking's Foreign Policy Toward Malaysia", *Issues and Studies*, August, 1987
- (26) *Survey of World Broadcasts*, (hereafter *SWB*), FE/3858/A4/12/, 7. 12. 1971
- (27) *SWB/FE/4111/A3/5*, 6. 10. 1972
- (28) For details see Shee Poon Kim, "The Politics of Thailand's Trade Relations with the People's Republic of China", *Asian Survey*, March, 1981, Vol.XXI, No.3
- (29) Deng's Bangkok Press Conference, 8th November, 1978, *Bangkok Post*, 9th November, 1978
- (30) See Bilveer Singh, "Evolution and Impact of the Sino-Thai Axis", *Sino-Soviet Affairs*, Vol.XIII, No.1 Spring, 1989, The Institute for Sino-Soviet Studies, Hanyang University, Seoul, Korea
- (31) Bilveer Singh, *op. cit.*, p.117, see also Sukhumbhand Paribatra, *From Enmity to Alignment: Thailand's Evolving Relations with China*, ISIS, Chulalongkorn University, 1987, pp.9-14
- (32) *The Nation* (Bangkok), 11. 2. 1989
- (33) *The Straits Times* (Singapore) (hereafter *ST*), 14. 12. 1988
- (34) Sukhumbhand Paribatra, *op. cit.*, p.29
- (35) See Chak-yan Chang, "Chinese Policy Dilemmas in Southeast Asia" in K.S. Liao ed., *Modernization and Diplomacy of China* (H.K., Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1981)