



POINTS OF VIEW

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Dr. Thanat Khoman's Vision for ASEAN¹

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Let's begin with a small scene. It was an evening in Bangkok, sometime in the middle of 1966. A banquet was underway – a formal, stiff sort of dinner that marked the end of a diplomatic crisis rather than a joyful one at the end of a conference. Indonesia and Malaysia had just called off years of “Konfrontasi” or Confrontation. The plates were cleared, the toasts were made, and somewhere between the coffee and the departure of the motorcades, the Thai foreign minister leaned toward his Indonesian counterpart and said, in effect: we should build something more than an ending to a quarrel. We should build a beginning.

That was not a dramatic scene. No flags were raised, no anthem played. It was two tired diplomats talking quietly after dinner. And yet from that conversation between Dr. Thanat Khoman

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and Adam Malik came, within fourteen months, the Bangkok Declaration, and from the Bangkok Declaration came everything we now call ASEAN.

When we speak of founders, we have a tendency to reach for grandeur – for marble busts and thundering speeches – when the actual habit of mind that built this region was more the opposite: patience, almost domestic in its methods, suspicion of grand gestures, and discipline about what could realistically be achieved between neighbours who did not yet fully trust one another.

That habit of mind belonged to Dr. Thanat Khoman. And I am not simply honouring him – history has already been generous to him – but asking a harder question: what, exactly, did he understand about this region and this century that we still need to understand today?

Consider the world as it looked from Bangkok in the late 1960s. Thailand, whatever pride we take in never having been colonised, was in every material sense a small nation on the world stage – sitting between two camps locked in a global contest, in a region still raw from decolonisation, beside a war in Indochina that showed no sign of ending and surrounded by neighbours who, only months earlier, had been arming against one another rather than speaking to one another.

Dr. Thanat Khoman looked at this situation and did something quite unfashionable for his time: he refused the easy answers on offer. Non-alignment, he argued – in public writing, not merely in private counsel – was not the safe harbour it appeared to be. A nation that tried to stand equidistant from both camps usually discovered, in a crisis, that neither side felt any particular obligation to protect it. He observed that states which declared their neutrality often found themselves first in line for trouble rather than shielded from it. Quiet accommodation with the source of danger was, for a country of Thailand's modest weight, no serious option either. And a

purely military alliance, built on the older architecture of a collective defence pact, struck him as a partial answer at best – dependent on outside patrons and brittle wherever the interests of those patrons diverged from the interests of the region itself.

So he proposed a third way, and it is worth being precise about what that third way actually was, because nostalgia has softened it into something more vague than he intended. It was not neutrality. It was not an alliance. It was regional self-reliance built through habit – through the accumulated, unglamorous business of nations with every reason to distrust each other choosing, again and again, to sit at the same table. He spoke of a “collective political defence” – not a euphemism for a military bloc, but a wager that the countries of Southeast Asia, left to manage their own disputes and their own development, would do a better job of both than any outside power managing it for them.

This is worth pausing on because it is easy, decades later, to mistake ASEAN’s caution – its famous consensus-building, its reluctance to intervene in members’ internal affairs, its slow and sometimes maddening pace – for a lack of ambition. It was never a lack of ambition. It was the method. Dr. Thanat Khoman understood that a region still healing from colonial partition and post-independence conflict could not be talked into unity by treaty language alone. Trust had to be built the way it is built everywhere: slowly, through repeated small acts of good faith, none of them individually dramatic, all of them cumulatively binding.

When he sat at the table in the hall of the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the 8th of August, 1967, alongside Adam Malik of Indonesia, Tun Abdul Razak of Malaysia, Narciso Ramos of the Philippines and S. Rajaratnam of Singapore, to sign what we now call the Bangkok Declaration, he described the purpose of the new association in a phrase that has outlived every policy paper written about it since: the goal, he said, was to build and not to destroy. Five words.

No adjectives, no flourish. And underneath them, an entire theory of how a fractured region heals – not by defeating anyone, but by constructing something so evidently useful that old grievances become less interesting than new opportunities.

I want to mention the second part of his thinking, because it is, if anything, more relevant to us now than it was then. In the years that followed, Dr. Thanat Khoman spoke often of what he called a “Pax Asiana” – an Asian peace, authored and maintained by Asians. This was not an abstraction. It was a direct response to a concrete anxiety: American power in Southeast Asia, he could already sense by 1969 and 1970, was going to recede. The United States would tire of a costly war. Troops would eventually go home. And when that happened, the question facing every government in this region would be brutally simple: who fills the space that a receding great power leaves behind?

His answer was not “another great power”. His answer was: we do. The nations of Southeast Asia, cooperating imperfectly but persistently, would have to be organised enough, coherent enough and useful enough to one another that no single outside power could simply walk in and redraw the map of regional influence. That is an extraordinarily confident thing for the foreign minister of a mid-sized country to say in 1969, in the middle of a war, with colonial memory still fresh. And it required not just confidence but discipline – the discipline to keep working with neighbours one did not always agree with, because the alternative to imperfect regional cooperation was never some ideal independence but a vacuum, and vacuums in this part of the world have rarely stayed empty for long.

Does this sound familiar? It should. Walk into almost any serious conversation about Southeast Asia today – in Bangkok, in Washington, in Beijing, in the corridors of ASEAN itself – and you will find the same question in new disguise. A great power's attention is once again in flux.

A rising power sits close by, offering trade, infrastructure, and, increasingly, expectations. Smaller states are once again being asked, sometimes not very gently, to choose side. And the answer that keeps resurfacing is astonishingly close to Dr. Thanat Khoman's original instinct: do not choose side but build shared interest with every side instead. Your usefulness becomes your own form of security.

I do not say this to suggest that history simply repeats itself, or that a foreign minister from a different century has all the answers ready-made. He did not. His world was divided into two camps; ours has a more tangled arithmetic. His region had five founding members; ours has eleven, an economic weight measured across hundreds of millions of people, and supply chains and technologies he could not have imagined. But the underlying problem – how a collection of proud, unequal, occasionally quarrelling nations preserves enough independence of action to matter, without pretending it can do so entirely alone – has not gone away. If anything, it has grown more urgent, not less.

What, then, do we actually owe him? Not statues, though there are some, and not merely a paragraph in a textbook, though there is that too. I think we owe him something more demanding: the willingness to practise his method rather than simply admire it.

His method asked constant and unglamorous questions. Does this agreement build something or merely postpone a disagreement? Does this partnership increase our capacity to act for ourselves or quietly transfer that capacity elsewhere? Are we choosing cooperation because it serves our people, or because it is the easiest path? These are not comfortable questions. They were not comfortable in 1967, when this region's own neighbours had recently been threatening one another and they are not comfortable now, when the pressure to align – politically, economically, militarily, digitally – arrives from every direction at once.

But comfort was never the promise. Dr. Thanat Khoman never told his countrymen, or his fellow founders, that the path he proposed would be easy. What he offered was a wager on patience: that a region willing to keep talking, keep meeting, keep building small and often unglamorous forms of cooperation, would in the long run outperform a region that simply waited for some great power to arrange its future on its behalf. Nearly six decades on, with eleven member states, a combined economy among the largest in the world, and – whatever the frustrations – a durable habit of dialogue that has kept this region free of major interstate war for two generations, it is clear that the wager has not failed.

So back to that dinner in 1966, with two foreign ministers talking after the plates had been cleared. It would have been easy, that evening, to treat the end of Confrontation as simply an ending – a problem solved, a page turned, nothing further required. Dr. Thanat Khoman chose instead to treat it as an opening. That, in the end, is his diplomatic philosophy contained in a single decision: to look at a moment of relief and ask not “what have we avoided?” but “what can we now build?”

That is the question we need to ask ourselves today. Not as a slogan and not as an exercise in nostalgia for a founder few of us ever met – but as a working method, still unfinished, still ours to practise. The architecture he began is not complete. It was never meant to be complete. It was meant to be inherited, and added to, one patient, unglamorous, mutual act of good faith at a time.