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Thanat Khoman: A Flexible Diplomat

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Abstract

This article argues that while Thailand's foreign minister Thanat Khoman was remembered as a founding father of the ASEAN Community, his role and position as a flexible diplomat who initiated a discourse of so-called 'flexible diplomacy' was relatively forgotten. It aims to revisit this hidden narrative and argues that discourse – culminating in discursive anxiety and Thanat's initiative of flexible diplomacy – was the main explanans of Thai foreign policy transformation in the late 1960s. This article proceeds in three main parts. The first discusses Thailand's discursive anxiety and how Thanat explored foreign policy options in case of American retrenchment from the region. The second part examines a diplomatic innovation of 'flexible diplomacy' and its three main characteristics: increasing doubts on Americanism, regional cooperation and cohesiveness,

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and détente with the great powers. The article concludes with the reassessment of Thailand's relations with the communist powers in the long 1970s. This was a paradigm shift in Thai diplomacy.

Introduction

'Escape from a tiger only to happen upon a crocodile' is a famous Thai proverb. This is similar to the fish, in Aesop's fable, that jumps from the frying pan into the fire. In 1969, Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman used this allegory to describe a state of discursive anxiety in Thailand:

If you avoid a tiger [China] and come to face a crocodile [the Soviet Union], it is not much of a change. ... If we do not have any other alternative, may be we will have to live with the crocodile. ... This is exactly the international pattern that may emerge if and when the United States has to yield to the pressure of completely withdrawing from this part of the world ... because we cannot claim that our regional grouping is powerful enough. ... We hope that you will be understanding and that you will discreetly support the efforts of the nations of the area who are trying to form a cohesive grouping.¹

Dr. Thanat Khoman (1914-2016) was a long-serving and astute foreign minister between 1959 and 1971. His iconic and legendary stewardship in foreign affairs has been remarkably remembered as a founding father of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This turns out to be a notable and famous legacy of Thanat as an Aseanist. The narrative of Thanat as a

flexible diplomat, on the contrary, is less well known. This article aims at revisiting and revitalizing this relatively forgotten and marginalized narrative: Thanat who developed a discourse of so-called ‘flexible diplomacy’ in 1968. That is, the manner in which Thailand – which had pursued a staunch anti-communist, pro-American policy – transformed its foreign policy narrative toward making détente with the communist powers such as the People Republic of China and the Soviet Union was to a large extent initiated by Thanat. To commemorate a diplomatic legacy of Thanat Khoman, it is important to equally remember these two narratives.

Which factor explained this discursive shift? In a conventional wisdom, the Nixon Doctrine is often posited as an important milestone in prominent narratives of the changing trajectory of Thai foreign policy in the late 1960s.² On July 25, 1969, the newly elected US president, Richard M. Nixon, declared this Doctrine while visiting Guam, signaling American retreat from Vietnam under the rubric of Vietnamization and the prospect of demilitarization from the region, including Thailand.³ The possibility of a retrenchment in American policy aroused a growing state of anxiety among the Thai political elites regarding the security arrangement with the US, and its national survival amid the prospect of communist takeovers of Indochina. However, while Thailand’s decision to establish relations with the communist powers undoubtedly followed a transformation of US foreign policy making, it was not directly caused or influenced by the US. In fact, the discourses and practices of Thai détente *preceded* the American decision to demilitarize and deescalate the Vietnam War.⁴

As a matter of fact, the new course happened shortly after President Lyndon Johnson’s dramatic reversal of his Vietnam policy in March 1968. After the Tet Offensive, Johnson ordered a halt to the surgical bombing in Indochina, and started to resuscitate peace talks with the North Vietnamese. Due to the tragedy of the Vietnam War, Johnson also declared that he would not rerun

in an upcoming presidential election. By that time, Thanat Khoman and other like-minded détente proponents began to realize that Thailand's former diplomacy of strategic dependence on the US was no longer tenable. He eloquently declared that 'The United States has tried to raise doubts in our minds and it has succeeded. It has succeeded in raising doubts in its own mind.'⁵ Thanat sought to find Thailand's own alternative way in response to the changing international and regional circumstances. Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to reconsider the situation as 'the old era passes and the new one comes'.⁶ Thanat started to call for a reduction of American military presence in Thailand, and for more nuanced and more balanced relations with other great powers, especially the Soviet Union and China. In 1968, he coined an idea of 'flexible diplomacy' to navigate Thailand in the changing configuration of power.

This article argues that discourse – culminating in discursive anxiety and Thanat's initiative of flexible diplomacy – was the main explanans of Thai foreign policy transformation in the late 1960s. It proceeds in three main parts. The first discusses Thailand's discursive anxiety and how Thanat Khoman explored foreign policy options in case of American retrenchment from the region. The second part examines a diplomatic innovation of 'flexible diplomacy' and its three main characteristics or discourses, including those of increasing doubts on Americanism, regional cooperation and cohesiveness, and détente with the great powers. The article concludes with the reassessment of Thailand's relations with the communist powers in the long 1970s. This was a paradigm shift in Thai diplomacy.

Discursive Anxiety and Thanat Khoman's Foreign Policy Options

The events of 1968 situated Thailand in a rapidly changing world, leading to what I call 'discursive anxiety'. Discursive anxiety happened under a situation that the old narrative, such as

anticommunism, could no longer make sense of the world and cause an existential anxiety for the state. The way forward was to find an alternative narrative in order to better grasp the transformation of global politics and situate the country's position and foreign policy within the changing world. By the late 1960s, discursive anxiety urged Thanat Khoman to initiate a discourse of 'flexible diplomacy', which marked a paradigmatic rupture in Thai foreign policy.

With great uncertainty about the role of the US in Southeast Asia, Thanat at first began to reassess foreign policy options in case of American retrenchment. He came up with five possible options that can be described as: non-alignment, bandwagoning, neutralisation, bipolarisation and regional cooperation.

The first option was non-alignment or non-involvement. For Thanat, a 'policy of not being involved with one side or another' was 'not very easy', and:

not a cure all, it is not even a safe device, because those who chose to follow a non-aligned policy have been the first to be subject to attacks and also to threatening dangers.

In his historical understanding, those non-aligned countries were 'those who suffered most' from their non-alignment strategy.⁷ This was because the great powers were 'not willing to recognize that you are in the middle and that they should come to trample upon you'. According to Thanat, the non-aligned countries were 'under boots, under the threat, under the guns, or right in the middle of the danger'. They were 'right in the firing line'.⁸ As such, for Thanat non-alignment policy was not a suitable option.

The second option was bandwagoning, meaning a policy of coming to terms with the sources of danger themselves, especially the PRC. In Thanat's words, this option was to 'win their

favors' and while equivalent to détente, Thanat at the time did not see it as such. In relation to this course of action, he questioned why Thailand should go 'straight to the sources of danger and try to reason with, argue with them, and to come to terms with them'. According to Thanat, while this offered a practical solution, from his recent experience, it was not yet possible. As a small state, he puzzled:

who are we ... to dare to go direct to the source of danger? What result can we expect from having direct discussion, heart to heart discussions, and try to come to terms with the possible source of danger.⁹

For the time being, this option was not viable. However, Thanat still kept this policy option open for the future. As he succinctly asserted,

We do not lose hope. If tomorrow, there are straws in the wind, and if the wind begins to blow and if the straws begin to fly, we may decide to go directly and face the dangers, and try to talk and see what is going to happen. But so far there has been no indication. ... There have been no straws and no winds.¹⁰

As a result, Thanat concluded:

I don't expect that in the case of Thailand, we can produce the straws and make the wind blow. But we keep our fingers crossed and we keep in the back of our mind the possibility.¹¹

This possibility was the option for détente with the communist powers in the near future, which would be the bedrock of his flexible diplomacy.

The third option was neutralisation, where the state officially declared its nonparticipation in any conflicts or wars. Thanat condemned ‘liberals’ in the West, who suggested that those Southeast Asian nations threatened by communist encroachments should ‘bow to such threats and neutralize themselves’. In an address to the University of Minnesota on 22 October 1968, Thanat stated:

The authors of neutralization plan who do not call for similar neutralization on the part of the Marxist regimes, contend that the actual and potential aggressors may grant them a lease of free national life. The least one can say is that such a proposal is entirely one-sided and does not take into account the realities of life in Southeast Asia where bitter struggles are going on between the expansionist forces and those which staunchly resist Communist expansion and conquest.¹²

For Thanat, this unilateral neutralisation policy was a worst-case scenario that he ruled out from the outset. He said that

even if you join them because you cannot lick them, even if you join them, you are also licked. Even if you join them, you have to expect tanks, guns and troops to come to your doors. So it does not solve the problems. ... If you join them, you have to bow your heads very low, you have to follow the dogmas strictly to the letters and spirit. If you try to move a little bit away, you are either a revisionist or deviationist, with all the risks that accompany such qualifications.

Thanat admitted that, ‘Of course you can survive; for how long, you don’t know’.¹³

Thus, ‘If you want to survive as free men, free nations’, contended Thanat, ‘neither of these solutions, non-alignment, win their favors, or even join them, will enable you to enjoy life as free peoples and free nations’.¹⁴ The fourth option was what Thanat termed the ‘bipolarisation’ policy, which was predicated upon

the coexistence of two centers of powers, one respecting the other and one allowing the other to exert its rights and influence without undue interferences. If such a situation is not recognized and one side even goes so far to seek the destruction of the other, such a proposition becomes wholly impractical.¹⁵

In a Southeast Asian context, this policy of ‘bipolarisation’ meant that there should be two poles or centres of power – namely the US and the PRC. Both would be obliged to guarantee peaceful coexistence among secondary or small states. However, for Thanat, this ‘bipolarisation’ policy ‘didn’t work, because China didn’t play the game’.¹⁶ Elsewhere, he contended that

neither a neutralization plan nor even a bipolarization policy has been able to guarantee [small states] a peaceful and free existence, because some parties have shown themselves to be unwilling to play the game.¹⁷

Thanat’s fifth, and perhaps most reasonable, option – and what Thailand was ‘trying to perform now’ – was regional cooperation and regional solidarity in Southeast Asia.¹⁸ Thanat said that Thailand was at the forefront of developing regional organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – which was established by the Bangkok Declaration on 8 August 1967 – in Southeast Asia, and also the Asian Pacific Council (ASPAC) in the Asia-Pacific

region. These groupings could offset the risks of ‘the withdrawal of the United States from this part of the world’.¹⁹ Thanat suggested that

we are doing this to enable us to deal more effectively and more adequately, not only with our foes, potential and actual, but also with our friends. ... We can deal on a more equal footing and more equal basis with our friends.

Thanat claimed that this possibility was ‘the practical and pragmatic policy’.²⁰

In his other interviews and speeches, Thanat also included the second option of détente with communist powers as one of the practical and pragmatic policies as well.²¹ Both policies – regional cooperation and détente – would be mutually constitutive and inextricably intertwined. However, subsequently, the former was less strategically and discursively important than the latter. Above all, these foreign policies required Thailand to rely on itself, and to work with other nations in Asia-Pacific. As he put it in December 1968,

Now we in Asia do not want to rely on outside powers. We want to rely on ourselves and that is why Thailand for instance has been developing its own national strength in many fields, political, economic, social, cultural fields also. Thailand ... has been making strenuous efforts to develop regional solidarity not only in Southeast Asia but in the Asian and Pacific region with Japan for instance.²²

To put it differently, by 1968 Thanat attempted to lay out the basis for individual and regional self-reliance, thereby replacing excessive dependence on external powers. Thanat repeatedly claimed that this was a change in Thai foreign policy, and we can agree that the salience

of these policy options was part and parcel of the new discourse of flexible diplomacy from 1968 on.

Flexible Diplomacy: Three Discourses

The article now turns to examine ‘flexible diplomacy’, a concept that Thanat coined in 1968. At the outset, flexible diplomacy comprised three main characteristics or discourses: increasing doubts on Americanism, regional cooperation and cohesiveness, and détente with the great powers. As Thanat Khoman summarised,

There are three big question marks. One is the uncertainty of the future attitude and policy of the US, which has been created by the Americans themselves through their mass-media, academic and political channels. ... The second question mark was what will be the future policy of Communist China. And the third question mark was what we are trying to do to fill the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of western colonial powers to try to forge a new working relationship in order to prevent the Asian Communist powers from filling that vacuum with their own authority. We have had many setbacks with ASA [the Association of Southeast Asia]²³ and ASEAN. What will be the outcome of our efforts to create regional solidarity and cooperation? All these questions should be dealt with together.²⁴

Discourse of Anti-Americanism

The first discourse involved increased scepticism of American policy. Thanat began to identify the danger of being drawn into a highly dependent relationship with a single world power. An architect of the Thai–US security alliance in the 1960s, he had originally believed the US presence to be beneficial. The objectives of the US and Thailand were aligned during the Vietnam War. That is, containing communism. Thanat said that he had advocated ‘close cooperation with the United States because our objectives were similar. I did not want, and still do not want, Thailand to be swamped by Communism’. But in 1968, for Thanat:

the United States, for domestic reasons, was no longer able to pursue that objective. ... It became obvious that the objective to resist [the communists], under which Thailand had joined with the United States, was no longer there. The objective was changed on the part of the US. *It was not we who changed; it was the US that changed.* I felt that the presence of American forces in Thailand had lost its justification.²⁵

In early March 1968, Thanat responded to possible US disengagement or withdrawal from Vietnam and the region with irritation. ‘Some people in the United States are advocating that the United States should get out’, he exclaimed, ‘I think those people, who talk so loudly about withdrawal, are not quite realistic’.²⁶ He said that

the recent experience that we have got from our friends ... opened our eyes. ... We here in Thailand, and I should say in Asia in general, have been rather innocent and naïve. We have had a rather simple or simpleton approach that peoples are either friends or foes. That is not

so. There may be foes among our friends [by which Thanat meant some senators and congressmen as well as various media].²⁷

Furthermore, between 1968 and 1969, Thanat emphatically complained that the prospect of American retrenchment from Southeast Asia was not compatible with the image, status, prestige and responsibility of the US as a superpower. For him, this would inevitably lead to an erosion of American power and credibility, both in Southeast Asia and in the international system in general. First and foremost, the effects would be directly felt by the US itself. In August 1968, he argued that

[the] US remains a great power. But if the domestic public opinion in the United States should force the administration to forsake its responsibilities in other parts of the world, then of course the effects will be felt by none other than the United States itself, and the American people. Because then, the US will not be able to perform the role of a great power. Because if you are a great power, whether you like it or not, you will have to bear certain responsibilities. You cannot shake off your responsibilities and remain a great power or otherwise your influence, image, your presence will be eroded.²⁸

On another day, he again stressed the requirements of great power responsibility:

As a leading power in the non-Communist camp, if the United States were to say well, alright, we decided to retrench ourselves and recoil into our own hell, in 'our fortress America', the major effect will be felt by the United States and by the American nation, even

more than by the rest of the world. ... If that were to be the case, then the United States will have relinquished its role as a major power, a world power, to become only a regional power. ... Would that be advantageous or disadvantageous to the United States' position as a world power?²⁹

Even after Richard Nixon won the presidential election, Thanat warned of the degenerating effects of 'neo-isolationism' in the US. In December 1968, for example, he stated emphatically:

a world power like the United States in my opinion can afford to isolate itself only if it renounces its role as a world power. I don't think a world power can retreat into Fortress America.³⁰

Although he had discerned that the Nixon administration would reduce military involvement in Vietnam, Thanat still wanted to believe that the reduction would be gradual. In his opinion:

American troops will be withdrawn from South Vietnam in proper time. The question is to withdraw them in a gradual and appropriate way and not in a sudden massive pull-out because then all the efforts and sacrifice which have been made for many years with the cost of so much money and so many lives may be lost.³¹

Subsequently, Thanat suggested that Thailand could no longer rely on America's protecting presence, and should pursue self-reliance. In his speech on Tokyo television on 25 February 1969, Thanat said:

there must be a recognition and perhaps acknowledgement of the fact that the intervention of outside powers in dealing with Asian

problems may not be the most effective nor the most desirable device for their settlement. Either those powers may become tired of the exacting ordeals or their domestic public opinion may find the burden of responsibility too heavy for their taste. ... We would do well, therefore, to acknowledge this new mood and prepare ourselves accordingly.³²

In July 1969, Thanat relayed the same concept of self-reliance at Thammasat University:

Thailand must consider the situation as the old era passes and the new one comes and above all we must strengthen ourselves to meet possible dangers from all sides. For with the possibility that the US would withdraw from the region, we must not continue to rely on others. We should be as self-reliant as we can. However, we must cooperate with all nations on an equal basis and status.³³

In light of talk of American disengagement, put forward in the Nixon Doctrine in July 1969, Thanat stressed a policy of self-reliance and the need for an American military withdrawal. He said 'Thailand has been practicing this policy of self-reliance for many years already'.³⁴ When President Nixon visited Bangkok after his famous declaration of the Nixon Doctrine at Guam on 28 July 1969, he reassured the Thai Government of America's commitment to protect Thailand's security, as promised in the SEATO obligation (1954) and the Thanat-Rusk joint communiqué of 1962:

We will honor our obligations under that treaty. We will honor them not simply because we have to, because of the words that we have signed, but because we believe in those words, and particularly believe in them in association with a proud and a strong people, the

people of Thailand. We have been together in the past, we are together in the present, and *the United States will stand proudly with Thailand against those threaten it from abroad, or from within.*³⁵

In response to Nixon's pledge, which seemed to be in contradiction to the Guam Doctrine, Thanat proclaimed:

We told President Nixon that Thailand is not going to be another Vietnam. We told him that we never asked for American soldiers to come and fight in defense of Thailand. We pledged that we will not ask for American soldiers to come and fight in defense of Thailand in an insurgent war. This includes even a covert invasion of the kind North Vietnam is carrying out against South Vietnam.³⁶

He constantly repeated that the existence of American troops in Thailand were specifically intended for the Vietnam War, rather than for a local fight against communist insurgencies in Thailand.³⁷

Thanat, first of all, had raised doubts about the US's commitment to Thailand. As he told members of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand on 19 August 1969,

The partners to the Treaty will carry out that treaty obligation only if their national interests are concordant with us, but not otherwise. There are many escape clauses, called by such names as 'constitutional processes' and so on and so forth. So, we believe that we can rely on ourselves, and only when our national interests are concordant with the national interests of others can we expect other nations to carry out, to implement, their obligation, not otherwise.³⁸

Consequently, ‘relations between Thailand and the United States’, Thanat suggested, ‘will evolve toward a more selective basis’.³⁹

Secondly, Thanat began to press for the pullout of American forces. On 20 August 1969, he formally proposed to US ambassador Leonard Unger that the process of ‘immediate evacuation’ of 49,000 US military personnel stationed in Thailand had to commence.⁴⁰ Two days later, he announced that negotiations on American withdrawal would start soon. This idea was not so appealing to the military elites who did not want US troops to leave the country, and felt that the security of the regime was inextricably linked to the US military presence. The military government, led by Prime Minister Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn disagreed with the urgency of the issue, and instead suggested a mutually agreed-upon ‘gradual reduction’. On 25 August, Prime Minister Thanom said that the discussions had not yet got underway: ‘a mutual agreement must be reached first’. The next day, a joint Thai–American statement stated that ‘talks to arrange for a gradual reduction of level of United States forces in Thailand consistent with the assessment of both governments of the security situation would be held in the near future’.⁴¹ On 3 September, Thailand and the US began a series of bilateral negotiations, led by Thai Foreign Minister Thanat and US Ambassador Leonard Unger, to discuss this gradual reduction of US troops in Thailand. During the talks, Thanat pulled back from his initial position towards a more gradualist position.

By 8 September, Thanat declared that the Thai Government was ‘willing to discuss the prolongation of the presence of US forces in Thailand as desired by the US government’.⁴² The first pullout of troops, which was essentially a symbolic gesture, was proclaimed on 30 September 1969, stating that 6,000 US military personnel were to be withdrawn from Thailand by July 1970. They were to be pulled out ‘as expeditiously as possible consistent with the operational requirements related to the Vietnam conflict’.⁴³ Nevertheless, there was no mention of any

schedule for the withdrawal of the remaining 42,000 American forces. Another 10,000 were withdrawn the following year, reducing the total US forces in Thailand to 32,000 by June 1971.

While the Thai military elites attached to the Cold War discursive hegemony preferred the preponderance of American troops in Thailand, Thanat consistently pushed for the withdrawal of American military forces from Thailand. As he summed up, the Thailand-initiated withdrawal program for the American forces had ‘improved Thailand’s position and given Thailand greater freedom in the conduct of its foreign policy for its own national interests and the interests of the region’.⁴⁴ By 1968, the discourse of scepticism of Americanism, or even anti-Americanism, was widening and deepening in Thai politics.

Discourse of Regional Cooperation

The second discourse was regional cooperation and cohesiveness. From 1968, Thanat proposed that if the US were to withdraw from the region, a power vacuum would open up. In addition to the policy of national self-reliance, he forcefully recommended regional cooperation, solidarity and cohesiveness as an attempt to avoid any contending powers filling the strategic gap or seeking their own domination in the region. As he stated on television in December 1968:

this is why Thailand has been in the forefront in advocating greater cooperative efforts among the nations of this area, to work together, to think together, to join together in common endeavours, to preserve peace and to safeguard our national and regional interests in this part of the world.⁴⁵

In other words, efforts to build such regional groupings as ASEAN and ASPAC were meant to ‘outweigh the withdrawal of the United States’ from Southeast Asia. As he pointed out, ‘whether

the US stays around here or not, it is in our interest to develop regional cooperation'.⁴⁶ To a certain extent, the prospect of American disengagement, according to Thanat, provided a 'sense of urgency' as well as 'a greater sense of responsibility' for countries in the Asia-Pacific region to shape their own destinies, and to protect their own security and national interests.⁴⁷ The ultimate aim of regional cohesiveness was to obtain a negotiating position vis-à-vis the great powers. Although still 'very young, very tender, very soft, and perhaps very inefficient', a regional grouping was for Thanat an 'entity of respectable size' – with more than 200 million people. As he explained,

We are doing this to enable us to deal more effectively and more adequately, not only with our foes, potential and actual, but also with our friends. If one is better organized, our friends will respect one more. They will not trample upon your foot, step on your toes, they will listen to your voices and your opinions, and they will respect your interests. If you are separated ... you do not count much. But if you are joined together, becoming a respectable and sizable entity in terms of population of resources, and also of prestige, then you become somebody. ... We are doing this so that we can cope with foes and we can deal on a more equal footing and more equal basis with our friends.⁴⁸

Thus, by working together, the region could build a larger or cohesive 'power base' which would 'afford us an entity which can cooperate more closely with friendly and like-minded nations on a more equal footing, to ensure peace and stability in the region'.⁴⁹ Due to its respectable size and influence, a regional grouping could also have a greater say in global politics and deal

adequately with the great powers. For Thanat, his idea of ‘collective political defense’ was not, and could not be, a military organisation. As he reiterated:

none of us in Southeast Asia can be considered a military power:
no military potential, no industry to support a military power.
Therefore, we must use other means than military means to shore up
our positions, our independence and our security. The only available
means are diplomatic and political ones, political consultations,
political and economic cooperation.

‘Anyone who has any sense’, Thanat concluded, ‘can see very well that ASEAN cannot and will not be turned into a military organization’.⁵⁰

In contrast to a collective defence system like SEATO, a new regional grouping would be based on a system that Thanat termed ‘collective political defense’, not military, but political, economic, socio-cultural and technical cooperation with the neighbouring countries. As Thanat observed,

I do not think that military alliance is an answer to the problems. ... Because we in this part of the world, we are smaller nations, we have no military potential, and even if we were to pull together our military resources, it will not be sufficient to stop or to prevent military incursions by big nations like Communist China. Therefore, we believe that we should try to deter the other side, the aggressive regimes, from taking military actions through political means, through building up of regional solidarity and regional cohesiveness rather than expecting results from military means.⁵¹

Thus, from 1968 Thanat sought an alternative to the former policy of dependence on the American security alliance by trying to build up a non-communist counterweight in Southeast Asia through ‘regional cooperation’. Nevertheless, over time, he grappled with the pressing question of American retrenchment by attempting to lessen the hostility of the communist powers, particularly Communist China. In March 1969, while Thanat still discerned that the PRC had aggressive intentions against Thailand, he was shifting the discourse of regional cooperation to help ‘induce Communist China to come out and work with us’. He said the PRC might even agree upon true peaceful coexistence.⁵²

Crucially, therefore, Thanat suggested détente with the communist powers before the promulgation of the Nixon Doctrine. That is to say, from early 1969 the discourse of regional grouping was already signposting and anticipating a future détente with the communists. In February 1969, Thanat said that

the key to a lasting peace in Asia rests in cooperation among the non-Communist nations. Only if we succeed in working together among the non-Communist nations will the Communist nations come and talk to us. The Communist nations will never agree to discuss and build peace unless they know that the other nations of Asia want peace and that they are organized to preserve and maintain it.⁵³

In the *Times* article in August 1969, titled ‘Withdrawal and a New Era’, Thanat wrote

Thus far there has been no dialogue with and no change of heart on the part of the Asian Communists. Nevertheless, renewed efforts must be made to establish, at least in the initial stage. Such efforts

can hope to meet with success only if the Asian nations organize themselves in a constructive manner. They will thus be in a better position to persuade the Communist reactionaries to forsake war for a more productive and mutually beneficial collaboration.⁵⁴

This required ‘some readjustment’ of attitudes within Thailand to ‘envisage a further widening of collaboration. This would include cooperation with the Marxist regimes if they should relinquish their policy of expansion and domination’.⁵⁵ Thus, the practical and pragmatic discourse of détente with the USSR and the PRC loomed larger than the more aspirational discourse of regional cohesiveness and solidarity.

Discourse of Détente

The third discourse was détente with the communists. Between 1968 and 1969, Thanat began to rethink how Thailand should choose to live with the communists. One of his policy options was détente. While this was not deemed an option at the time, he believed that it would be a ‘practical and pragmatic policy’ in the future. He noted that any mention of opening dialogue with the Soviet Union and the PRC tended to be misinterpreted as a Thai foreign policy moving toward a neutralist position. He contended that this was a ‘complete mistake’. It was ‘not inevitable that the Communist aggressors would continue to be aggressive’.⁵⁶ Thanat suggested that Thailand should prepare a policy to deal with the communist powers and that it would be better if Thailand adopted a ‘practical and pragmatic policy’. In particular, this meant being ‘more flexible in its policy towards China’. To date, Thanat admitted that it was the Chinese who showed no desire to meet. Yet, ‘if Beijing were to show any indication that it is approachable, I myself would recommend my Government to sit with them, to talk with them. But there has been no such sign’.⁵⁷

In the future, he continued:

when Communist China should come back to its senses, and would want to deal with other nations on an intelligent, reasonable basis, Southeast Asia shall not and should not be caught unprepared to deal with it, to preserve peace and strengthen our national independence.⁵⁸

By late 1968, Thanat had reassessed Thai foreign policy in order to best deal with the communist powers, and decided that Thailand could pursue two separate approaches. On the one hand, Thailand could pursue regional cohesiveness in order to establish collective negotiating powers vis-à-vis the communists. On the other hand, Thanat began to contemplate a bilateral approach of détente with the communists.

On 26 February 1969, at a press conference in Tokyo, Thanat Khoman spoke of Thailand's willingness to have 'serious talks' with the communist countries, especially the PRC. This was the first time Thanat advocated the opening of an unprecedented Thai-Chinese dialogue. Though it was not directly aimed at paving the way for diplomatic relations, this was a 'peace offensive' towards the PRC. Thanat asserted that Thailand was not 'anti-Communist or anti-Chinese'. The objective of the negotiations was to find out 'what we can do to live in peace'. 'To show that Thailand is not anti-Communist and anti-Chinese', Thanat stressed, 'we are prepared to sit down and talk – and have meaningful discussion – with Beijing to establish peaceful coexistence'.⁵⁹ He contended that 'Thailand wants a dialogue and expect China to respond to a dialogue'. In Bangkok, when he was asked by the foreign press, Thanat replied:

By saying that we are willing to sit down and meet them – enter into contact with them – we want to show that we are willing to take responsibility in our hands and try to deal with the problem

ourselves, not depend on the other nations to try to solve the problem
for us.⁶⁰

The foreign minister also reassured foreign reporters that Thai foreign policy was not anti-Chinese. On the contrary, it was the Chinese who were ‘anti-Thai’, as illustrated by the alleged declaration of Foreign Minister Marshal Chen Yi that the PRC would launch a guerrilla war against Thailand. Thanat said that he wanted to know what China’s genuine intentions and motivations were. Indeed, for him, this was the ultimate purpose of the decision to engage with the Chinese – to clarify exactly what they meant by declaring war on Thailand. ‘We want to know whether that was what they intended to do, whether they intend to pursue that, and what were their motivations.’⁶¹ Thanat wanted to sound out what possibilities there might be for peaceful coexistence between the two countries.

Thai foreign policy towards communism should thus become ‘more flexible’.⁶² In March, in a television interview, he strenuously urged that he was:

willing to meet a representative of Beijing at any place, at any
time, if such a meeting would help bring peace in Asia. It was
necessary to draw China out of her isolation so that she could
become a member of the Asian family.⁶³

In other words, by early 1969, Thanat made a public offer to meet with the representatives of the PRC at international venues.

Thanat also said he would be prepared to send an emissary to Beijing, and hypothetically suggested that MR Kukrit Pramoj, a well-renowned politician and influential publisher of the *Siam Rath* newspaper, or Klaew Norapati, a key socialist member of the Parliament, might be suitable

emissaries to Beijing. However, Kukrit abruptly dismissed the whole idea of talking with the PRC as utterly useless:

If the purpose of talking with China is to ask China questions on why they want to destroy Thailand, then it is a waste of time, since we clearly know the answers, that is, that Thailand is on the American side.⁶⁴

Thanat repeatedly denied any change in Thai foreign policy in the media. He said that the goal of foreign policy, which remained the protection of Thailand's independence and survival, had never changed. However, he argued that the means to that particular end needed to be adapted to cope with the changing global contexts. As he put it:

realizing the present situation, the changes in world powers' positions and policies, we had to adopt a more direct approach in our policy. It does not mean that we have changed our policy. Our policy remains the same. We shall never depart from the principles underlying our moral and intellectual stand.

What was different now however was that

a defensive policy is no longer possible. We have no other choice but to go ahead and face the trouble as it comes, to go to the source and try to meet the contingencies which may arise.⁶⁵

In other words, Thailand had to go:

[to] the source of the danger and try to argue, to reason with them, and to find out whether there can be any possibility for them to relent in their militant policies or to have peaceful coexistence and cooperation with us.⁶⁶

He termed it a more ‘forward approach’. Suppose the Chinese Government were to respond in kind, Thanat argued that the Thai Government would not hesitate to meet with the Chinese to end the hostile situation and to return to ‘the status of 1954–55 when, at the Bandung Conference there was an attempt to create a certain sense of solidarity and peaceful coexistence’; he reaffirmed that this change is not a ‘personal policy of the Foreign Minister but the official policy of the Government of Thailand’.⁶⁷ Asking what would happen if the Communist Chinese asked Thailand to recognise them, Thanat replied that ‘the question of the recognition of either Beijing or Taiwan as the legitimate government is not a question for outside powers to resolve but for the Chinese to resolve themselves’.⁶⁸ For Thanat, the main point at the moment was to find out whether there were any possibilities for peaceful coexistence between Thailand and the PRC. Thanat publicly proclaimed that Thailand was willing to talk with the communists, by hoping that ‘in our lifetime we may see the change of policy *from enmity to a more friendly cooperation*’.⁶⁹

In brief, the recurring discourse of flexible diplomacy that Thailand embarked upon in the late 1960s was how to act upon in a so-called post-American world. It sought to deal with the communist powers in a more balanced and flexible diplomacy in a rapidly changing global-regional complex. As Thanat had suggested provisionally in September 1968,

What we are trying to do is to have political cooperation not only between the countries of Southeast Asia but between the countries of Southeast Asia and *the outside powers, like the US, like the Soviet Union and in the future, I don’t know when, with Communist China.* This is what we are working at. We hope that within our life time, we will be able to see a new basis of cooperation first between the countries of Southeast Asia, next between the countries of Southeast

Asia and the outside world on a more equal footing than it is the case now.⁷⁰

Coda

The reappraisal of policy discourses brought about the reassessment of Thailand's relations with the communist powers in the long 1970s.⁷¹ Discursively, they shifted from enmity to friendship. Although at the outset flexible diplomacy consisted of three components of anti-Americanism, regional cooperation and détente, subsequently the terms flexible diplomacy and détente were used interchangeably. The main focus of Thanat's foreign policy was détente with the Soviet Union and the PRC. In particular, Thanat launched the back-channel diplomacy with Beijing via third parties in many international venues, such as the UN, to sound out Chinese intentions and the possibilities to contact with it. These ideas and practices, despite (or accurately due to) the covert nature, were a condition of possibility for propitiously groundbreaking events in Thai-Chinese relations, such as the ping-pong diplomacy in September 1972, the visit by Thai deputy foreign minister Chatichai Choonhavan to Beijing in December 1973, and the historic establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in July 1975. Although Thanat constantly said that there was no change in Thai foreign policy direction, this new course had been in a process of shifting toward diplomatic flexibility and resilience. It unwittingly contributed to new discourses of flexible diplomacy and détente with the communist powers. Unlike the ASEAN story, this was a less mentioned story of the legendary foreign minister Thanat Khoman, who served diligently for more than a decade. He, among others, began to think the unthinkable in the Cold War; that is, how to live with both the 'crocodile' and the 'tiger'.

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² See Sarasin Viraphol, *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1976); Wiwat Mungkandi, and William Warren, eds., *A Century and a Half of Thai-American Relations* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1982); Chulacheeb Chinwanno, 'Thai-Chinese Relations: Security and Strategic Partnership', Working Paper No. 155, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, 24 March 2008.

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⁵ Press release No. 52, Permanent Mission of Thailand to the United Nations, New York, July 8, 1968. Quoted in Frank C. Darling, 'Thailand: De-escalation and Uncertainty', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 9: No. 2 (February 1969): 115.

⁶ 'Thanat Khoman's Speech at Thammasat University', July 1969, in R. K. Jain (ed.), *China and Thailand, 1949-1983* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1984), 161.

⁷ Thanat Khoman, 'Statement by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Members of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand', Bangkok, 28 August 1968, in *Collected Interviews of*

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⁸ Thanat, 'Statement by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Members of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand', 250.

⁹ Thanat, 'Statement by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Members of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand', 251.

¹⁰ Thanat, 'Statement by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Members of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand', 251.

¹¹ Thanat, 'Statement by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Members of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand', 251.

¹² 'Address by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman at the University of Minnesota, USA', 22 October 1968, in Jain, *China and Thailand*, 142.

¹³ Thanat, 'Statement by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Members of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand', 253.

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²⁰ Thanat, 'Statement by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Members of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand', 254.

²¹ Thanat Khoman, 'Interview given by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Miss Frances Starner of the Far Eastern Economic Review and to Mr. Donald Kirk of the Washington Star', Bangkok, 23 August 1968, in *Collected Interviews of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman, Vol. 2: 1968*, 245.

²² Thanat Khoman, 'Transcript of an Interview given by H.E. Thanat Khoman to Mr. Yasuo Hozumi, an NHK Correspondent of Japan at his Residence', Bangkok, 10 December 1968, in *Collected Interviews of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman, Vol. 2: 1968*, 314.

²³ ASA was a nascent regional organisation formed by the Philippines, Thailand and the Federation of Malaya (nowadays Malaysia) on 31 July 1961. It was the predecessor to ASEAN.

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²⁵ Thanat Khoman, interview, *The Bangkok Post*, 21 July 1976. My emphasis.

²⁶ Thanat Khoman, 'Interview given by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Mr. Shackford Howards, Reporter for Scripps papers at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs', Bangkok, 6 March 1968, in *Collected Interviews of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman, Vol. 2: 1968*, 192. In an interview with a United Press International reporter in March 1968, Thanat answered:

the people who should feel concerned in the first place, are not the Thais or the Southeast Asians, but the American people because they are well developed enough intellectually, morally and physically to understand what such a decision would mean for the United States. We are a small people around here; we are not the defeated people of the great powers. Quite frankly, I do not see much choice before the United States or before us: either keep on doing what we all have started doing or else call it quit and leave the whole place to the Communists, just to satisfy certain senators, certain newspapers and radio and television commentators. That is all there is to it.

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³² Quoted in John LS Girling, ‘Thailand’s New Course’, *Pacific Affairs* 42, no. 3 (Fall 1969): 349.

³³ ‘Thanat Khoman’s Speech at Thammasat University’, July 1969, in Jain, *China and Thailand*, 161.

³⁴ Thanat Khoman, ‘Interview given by H.E. The Minister of Foreign Affairs to a Group of Newspapers’ Editors from Australia at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’, Bangkok, 30 July 1969, in *Collected Interviews of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman, Vol. 3: 1969*, 562.

³⁵ Quoted in Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 138. My emphasis.

³⁶ *New York Times*, 20 August 1969.

³⁷ For example, Thanat said that:

The purpose for the American forces stationed here in Thailand has been linked with the Vietnam War. American forces in Thailand ... are not here to help Thailand defend itself against Communist activities. American forces are here in Thailand to fight the war in

Vietnam from Thailand and not to engage physically in fighting Communist activities here in Thailand.

Thanat Khoman, 'Interview given by H.E. Thanat Khoman Foreign Minister of Thailand to Bernard Kalb of CBS', Bangkok, 17 July 1969, in *Collected Interviews of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman, Vol. 3: 1969*, 551.

³⁸ Quoted in Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 127.

³⁹ Thanat's speech, American Chamber of Commerce address, 15 July 1970, *Foreign Affairs Bulletin* 9 (June-July 1970): 507. Quoted in Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 137.

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⁴³ Clark D Neher, 'Thailand: The Politics of Continuity', *Asian Survey* 10, no. 2 (February 1970): 166.

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⁵⁵ Thanat, 'Withdrawal and a New Era'.

⁵⁶ Thanat, 'Transcript of H.E. Thanat Khoman, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interviewed by Edwin Newman of WNBC Television', 290.

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⁵⁹ Thanat Khoman, 'Interview given by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to the Press', Bangkok, 26 February 1969, in *Collected Interviews of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman, Vol. 3: 1969*, 619; 'Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman's Statement at a Press Conference in Tokyo, 26 February 1969', in Jain, *China and Thailand*, 155.

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