4

Flexible Diplomacy: Thanat and the First Dtente (1969–1971)

4.1. 1969 as a *Volte-Face*?

‘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

The year 1969 marked a watershed in Thai politics and diplomacy. In domestic politics, it was an experimental transition from authoritarianism towards (semi-)democracy. After the promulgation of

1 Thanat Khoman, interview with *Los Angeles Times* correspondent, Bangkok, 6 November 1969. Quoted in Astri Suhrki, ‘Smaller-Nation Diplomacy: Thailand’s Current Dilemmas’, *Asian Survey* 11, no. 5 (May 1971): 438.

the new Constitution in June 1968, there was a parliamentary election on 10 February 1969. The result did not see a total victory for the pro-military United Thai People's Party (UTPP), but immediately after the election, the UTPP recruited independents into the party and thereby gained a parliamentary majority. The largest opposition party was the Democrat Party, led by former prime minister MR Seni Pramoj.² Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn retained his position as Prime Minister and Minister of Defense. His close associate, General Praphas Charusathien, remained Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior. The most prominent Cabinet members included Pote Sarasin, Minister of National Development, Air Chief Marshal Dawee Chullasapya, Minister of Communications, and Thanat Khoman, Foreign Minister. While the Cabinet and Parliament were still dominated by the military and civilian bureaucrats, democracy provided for new voices, new advocacy, new factionalism and new criticism. Détente also became a contentious domestic political issue as distinct groups began to contest both whether and how to deal with the communist powers.

In foreign affairs, Thailand encountered the prospect of American retrenchment from the region, culminating in the Nixon Doctrine in July 1969. This was a serious challenge to Thailand's hegemonic discourse of pro-Americanism and anticommunism. Coupled with the deterioration of the Vietnam War, the Thai communist insurgency, supported by the Chinese, loomed larger while the survival of the Thai state was at stake. Many commentators designated Thailand 'another Vietnam'.³ Both internal and external challenges brought about niggling anxieties in the Thai body politic. The greatest puzzle for Thailand was how to deal with these new transformations.

A 'Thai version of détente' was proposed by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman as a thoroughgoing attempt to end antagonism with the communist powers. As one put it, Thanat was not 'advocating a piecemeal adjustment to pressures, but a coming-to-terms with reality'.⁴ While he regarded détente and the US military presence as an either/or situation, his

2 See Clark D Neher, 'Thailand: The Politics of Continuity', *Asian Survey* 10, no. 2 (February 1970): 161–68.

3 See Bernard Gordon, 'Thailand: Its Meaning for the US', *Current History* 52, no. 305 (1967): 16–21, 53–54; Kenneth Young, 'Thailand's Role in Southeast Asia', *Current History* 56, no. 330 (1969): 94–99, 110–11.

4 Harvey Stockwin even envisions Thanat's détente as an equivalent of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik. See 'Thanat's Ostpolitik', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 July 1973, 24–25.

approach was rather gradualist on both issues. That is, Thanat supported a cautious step-by-step process of de-Americanisation from Thailand while advocating a gradual road of détente with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union. Overall, what Thanat aimed for was an independent foreign policy of détente.

This chapter examines Thailand's changing diplomatic practices towards the communist powers between 1969 and 1971. It explicates the ways in which the discourse of détente worked in and through diplomatic practices. The first section discusses how the Thai Government pursued closer trade relations with the USSR, culminating in the bilateral trade agreement of 1970 and air transport agreement of 1971. The second section elucidates the way in which Thailand attempted to contact the Chinese through back-channel diplomacy via third parties in order to explore possibilities of rapprochement. Thanat's 'hope' – a discursive change of communist powers from 'enemies' to 'friends' – was rendered possible through new practices of détente. The chapter concludes by highlighting the politics of discursive contestation in Thai foreign policy, which ended in the 1971 coup d'état.

4.2. Living with the 'Crocodile': Thai–Soviet Relations

The Soviet Union had maintained formal diplomatic relations with Thailand since 12 March 1941 and the two countries first exchanged their ambassadors after the end of the Second World War.⁵ However, during the Cold War, the Thai state was sceptical of Soviet activities in the country. The tension between the two countries rose with the Laotian crisis and Vietnam War in the 1960s. Both countries had condemned and levelled charges against each other, leading to the notorious deportation of Soviet trade representative Leonid Mamurin on espionage charges in September 1969.⁶

5 Noranit Setabutr, *Kwam sampan tang prathet rawang Thai–Russia* [Thai–Russian Foreign Relations] (Bangkok: Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University Press, 1985 [2006]); Chulacheeb Chinwanno, *Siam, Russia, Thai: Karntootkarnmuang Karnmuangkarntoot, Aded pajupan anakod* [Siam, Russia, Thailand: Diplomatic Politics, Politics of Diplomacy, Past Present and Future] (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2013); Jitipat Poonkham, *Withet Panid Sampan tung Songkram Yen: kwam sampan rawangprathet Thai–Russia (1897–1991)* [Foreign Economic Relations to the Cold War: Thai–Russian Foreign Relations (1897–1991)] (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2016).

6 Paul R Shirk, 'Thai–Soviet Relations', *Asian Survey* 9 (September 1969): 691.

From a Thai perspective, the Soviet Union, unlike the PRC, did not directly support North Vietnam and the communist insurgency in Thailand. Therefore, the Thai Government did not regard the USSR as a hostile state. As Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman claimed, Thailand was friendly with the Soviet Union because, unlike communist China, the USSR was not directly engaged in any hostile acts against it.⁷ With the grudging approval from the government of Thanom Kittikachorn, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs led by Thanat demonstrated a willingness to respond favourably to Soviet involvement in the region and take trade relations into consideration. In the early 1970s, two significant changes in Thai–Soviet relations occurred. First, the Soviet Union launched a diplomatic offensive in Southeast Asia which culminated in Brezhnev’s idea of so-called ‘Collective Security system in Asia’. The second was increased Soviet interest in expanding trade and technical cooperation with Thailand. One was regional in nature, the other bilateral.

4.2.1. Brezhnev’s Collective Security in Asia: Thailand’s Views

From 1969, the USSR increasingly ‘pivoted’ to Southeast Asia. While the US was increasingly bent on retrenchment, the Soviet Union was reasserting its presence and influence. At the end of his speech given to the International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties in Moscow on 8 June 1969, Leonid Brezhnev proposed the idea of ‘a system of Collective Security in Asia’:

For us, the burning problems of the present international situations do not push into the background more long-range tasks, especially the creation of a system of Collective Security in those parts of the world where the threat of the unleashing of a new world war and the unleashing of armed conflicts is centred. Such a system is the best substitute for the existing military-political groupings ... We think that the course of events also places on the agenda *the task of creating a system of Collective Security in Asia*.⁸

7 RK Jain, ed., *China and Thailand, 1949–1983* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1984), lvi.

8 Quoted in Soo Eon Moon, ‘Importance of ASEAN in Soviet Foreign Policy: An Evaluation of Soviet Policy Toward Southeast Asia in the Post-Vietnam War Era’ (PhD thesis, Claremont Graduate School, 1984), 57. My emphasis.

Brezhnev's idea was vague, if not superficial, and this inevitably triggered doubts and speculation about Soviet motives. Most observers tended to focus on Sino–Soviet border conflicts, highlighted by the clashes at Damansky Island on the Ussuri River in March 1969.⁹ Brezhnev's proposal was believed to be mainly directed toward the PRC, as described by Vikenty V Matveyev (pseudonym)'s article in *Izvestiya* a few days before Brezhnev's enunciation. The article warned of Chinese expansionist designs on some Asian countries in response to American retrenchment. To counter this threat, the American withdrawal

should pave the way for the laying of the foundation of collective security, in which case the countries that have gained their freedom would, by pooling efforts, consolidate peace and repulse all machinations of imperialist expansionist forces.

Matveyev pledged that the Soviet Union and other socialist countries would be prepared 'to contribute to every effort helping to insure firm, dependable peace in Asia'.¹⁰

In September 1969, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko told the United Nations (UN) General Assembly that international events in the past few years 'proved the need for a system of Collective Security in Asia': 'Many countries in Asia are seeking possibilities to ensure peace and security by collective effort'. He claimed that the Soviet Union was 'ready to take part in consultation and exchanges of views on all questions concerning a Collective Security system in Asia'.¹¹ Rather than clarifying the term, Gromyko merely toyed with Brezhnev's concept at the UN. One scholar argues that this vague concept of a Collective Security system in Asia and its lack of substance was deliberately aimed at testing the waters among Asian countries, and eliciting 'reactions from potential members of the "system" before going further'. In short, it was fundamentally a 'club in search of members'.¹²

9 Alexander O Ghehardt, 'The Soviet System of Collective Security in Asia', *Asian Survey* 13, no. 12 (December 1973): 1075–91.

10 Vikenty V Matveyev, *Izvestiya*, 29 May 1969, quoted in Arnold L Horelick, 'The Soviet Union's Asian Collective Security Proposal: A Club in Search of Members', *Pacific Affairs* 47, no. 3 (Autumn 1974): 271.

11 'Russia Ready for Asian Pact', *Bangkok Post*, 21 September 1969, 12.

12 Horelick, 'The Soviet Union's Asian Collective Security Proposal', 271, 269.

Thailand saw Brezhnev's idea of a Collective Security system in Asia as the Soviet Union preparing to move into the power vacuum in the region.¹³ In an interview with *The Asia Magazine*, Thanat Khoman believed that the USSR wanted a collective defence alliance in Asia in order to protect its interests after the US military withdrew from the region, and more importantly, to contain Communist China. Thanat also said that Thailand was ready to consider Soviet engagement in Southeast Asia as part of a new balance.

In other words, Thailand did not react unfavourably to Brezhnev's Asian Collective Security proposal. As Thanat noted:

the Soviet Union realizes better than the West that a (military) vacuum would not be in its national interest because there will be some other power that will try to fill the gap with its own authority.

'Asian countries', Thanat added, would have to 'look after their own interests and see who should fill the gap when the United States withdraws'.¹⁴ However, he disagreed with any military alliance in Asia, partly because he realised that the countries in the region were not military powers or potential military powers. As he put it, 'there is no use setting up new military alliances just on paper'.¹⁵ Thanat argued:

if it were to be a threatening power which showed itself to be hostile to nations in Asia, they may find the Soviet move more in conformity with their interests, rather than allow that large Asian power to fill the gap.¹⁶

However, at the time, the trouble, according to Thanat, was that

we do not know what shape or form the so-called Soviet suggestion of an Asian Collective Security has. They do not want to spell it out or to elaborate on their suggestion. So many nations, Asian

13 Thanat Khoman, 'Questions Posed by Members of the Republic of China's National Defense College to Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman', Bangkok, 15 July 1969, in *Collected Interviews of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, Vol. 3: 1969* (Bangkok: Department of Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014), 546.

14 'Thanat: Soviets Want to Fill Power Gap', *Bangkok Post*, 31 December 1969, 12.

15 Thanat Khoman, 'Interview Given by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Noel Norton of the Australian Broadcasting Commission', Bangkok, 9 September 1969, in *Collected Interviews of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman, Vol. 3: 1969*, 584.

16 'Thanat: Soviets Want to Fill Power Gap', 12. See also Thanat Khoman, 'Interview Given by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Suman Dubey, Associate Editor of The Asian Magazine', Bangkok, 31 October 1969, in *Collected Interviews of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman, Vol. 3: 1969*, 606.

or non-Asian, have been asking this question, but so far we have received no elucidation. It is very vague just to throw out the idea that Asian nations should develop their own security.¹⁷

Later, Thanat asked the Soviet Ambassador to Bangkok to elaborate on what Brezhnev had in mind by collective Asian security. He explained:

the reply that we got was that [the Soviet leaders] would like to hear the reaction from Asian nations about this idea. So we said that to be in a position to offer a reaction, we must first know what it is all about and what we can expect.¹⁸

Brezhnev did not specifically explain the project until 1972. In his address at the Fifteenth Congress of the Soviet Trade Unions in March 1972, Brezhnev asserted:

It is becoming increasingly clear that the real road to security in Asia is not the road of military blocs and groupings, not the road of opposing some states against others, but the road of good-neighbourly cooperation by all interested states. Collective Security in Asia, as we see it, should be based on such principles as renunciation of the use of force in relations among states, respect for sovereignty and inviolability of borders, noninterference in internal affairs, extensive development of economic and other cooperation on the basis of full equality and mutual advantage.¹⁹

At that time, Brezhnev's idea of a 'Collective Security system in Asia' was largely ignored by Asian countries, including Thailand. However, many countries in the region started to accommodate the more assertive Soviet power and its presence in the form of military aid, a naval presence and bilateral relations, specifically trade relations.²⁰

17 Thanat, 'Interview Given by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Noel Norton of the Australian Broadcasting Commission', 584.

18 Thanat Khoman, 'Interview Given by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Welles Hagen, NBC TV', Bangkok, 28 August 1969, in *Collected Interviews of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman, Vol. 3: 1969*, 601.

19 Quoted in Moon, 'Importance of ASEAN in Soviet Foreign Policy', 60.

20 Also, the Soviet Union readjusted relations with the region in general as part of its foreign policy of détente. It established diplomatic relations with Malaysia in 1967, Singapore in 1968, and the Philippines in 1976. Particularly in the case of Malaysia, Nikolai S Patolichev, Minister of Foreign Trade, visited Kuala Lumpur in 1969, concluding the Soviet import of 240,000 tons of Malaysian rubber, which rendered Malaysia the most important trading partner in the region. In October 1972, Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak paid an official visit to the Soviet Union, and signed economic and technical agreements as well as a science and cultural cooperation agreement. Charles B McLane, *Soviet-Asian Relations* (London: Central Asian Research Center, 1973), 107.

4.2.2. Trade Relations

The USSR accelerated its trade relations with Thailand from 1968, beginning with the Soviet Government wanting its ambassador in Bangkok to push Thai–Soviet commercial cooperation and agreement.²¹ Conversations between the Soviet leaders, the Thai Ambassador to Moscow, Police Major Pramote Chongcharoen (1963–1967) and Yuad Lertrit (1968–1971) show this. For example, Pramote concurred with his Soviet counterpart that despite their political differences, both countries should begin with trade and cultural relations to strengthen their ties.²² Yuad agreed that Thailand was determined to expand trade with the Soviet Union. However, in the views of the Soviet leaders, they had pushed proposals for trade agreement with Thailand for at least seven years with no response. The Soviet Ambassador to Bangkok, Mikhail M Volkov (1965–1969), said that both sides needed to first determine what agendas and issues would be negotiated so as to successfully achieve a trade agreement.²³

The Thai Government responded positively to the Soviets because it felt that the USSR did not pursue ‘hostile’ policies and practices towards Thailand. In his conversation with Soviet Ambassador Volkov in early 1968, Air Chief Marshal Dawee Chullasapya said that Thai–Soviet relations were ‘normal, but not close friends’. Dawee respected the USSR in the sense that the Soviet Union, unlike the PRC, did not use force to expand its ideology in the region.²⁴ The present trend of improving relations with the USSR, as Foreign Minister Thanat subsequently asserted, was because the Soviet Union did not pose a direct threat to

21 Record of conversation held between Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union Nikolai V Podgorny and Thai Ambassador to Moscow Police Major Pramote Chongcharoen, 22 November 1967, in Thailand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volume of Soviet Archival Documents, 1941–1970* (Bangkok: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016), 265.

22 Record of conversation held between Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and Thai Ambassador to Moscow Police Major Pramote Chongcharoen, 20 November 1967, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volume of Soviet Archival Documents, 1941–1970*, 263–64.

23 Record of conversation held between the Soviet Ambassador to Bangkok MM Volkov and Thai Ambassador to Moscow Yuad Lertrit, 15 February 1968, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volume of Soviet Archival Documents, 1941–1970*, 271–72.

24 Record of conversation held between the Soviet Ambassador to Bangkok MM Volkov and Air Chief Marshal Dawee Chullasapya, 15 January 1968, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volume of Soviet Archival Documents, 1941–1970*, 268–70.

Thailand's existence and the improved relations were 'part of the policy of widening our horizons', in a search for the possibility of 'consolidating peace through commercial relations and cultural exchanges'.²⁵

In 1968, Prime Minister Thanom asked the new Ambassador to Moscow, Yuad Lertrit, to convey a message to the Soviet Government that Thailand wished to strengthen and further develop friendly relations with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and would send a delegation of Thai business representatives in the near future. He also encouraged the Soviet Trade Organization to buy more rubber from Thailand.²⁶ With regards to the proposed trade agreement, meetings were held once a week between the Economic Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led by its Director-General Sompong Sucharitkul, and EA Dmitriev, the chargé d'affaires of the Soviet embassy in Bangkok, together with Russian Commercial Counsellor, Nikolai P Karpov. The pact was delayed considerably because of the Thai refusal to give in to Russia's demands to accord full diplomatic privileges, including immunity, to its trade representation to Thailand, as well as to attach a navigation agreement to the trade agreement.²⁷ Sompong strongly defended the position, by insisting that navigation would be negotiated only after concluding and signing the trade agreement.²⁸

Thanat commented in August 1968 that a trade agreement with the Soviet Union was mentioned 'for many years, but no formal agreement has been reached'.²⁹ This was due to many factors. First, bilateral trade was not in great volume. Second, the two economic systems were seemingly too different. As Thanat put it:

25 Thanat Khoman, 'Interview Given by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Shin-Il Park of the Kyunghyang Shinmoon of the Republic of Korea', Bangkok, 6 August 1969, in *Collected Interviews of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman, Vol. 3: 1969*, 596.

26 Record of conversation held between Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Nikolai Feryubin and Thai Ambassador to Moscow Yuad Lertrit, 10 June 1968, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volume of Soviet Archival Documents, 1941–1970*, 273.

27 'USSR Trade Pact Being Drafted', *Bangkok Post*, 13 December 1969, 5.

28 Record of conversation held between Soviet Charge d'Affaires EA Dmitriev, and Director-General of the Economic Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sompong Sucharitkul, 7 May 1969, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volume of Soviet Archival Documents, 1941–1970*, 282.

29 Thanat Khoman, 'Interview Given by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Miss Frances Starnier 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, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, Vol. 2: 1968* (Bangkok: Department of Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014), 245.

Trade on our side is free. The Soviet Union can buy what it wants here and also tries to sell what it can, but there is a very competitive market. Of course, trade on the other side is not free, it is a state monopoly; we do not have a socialist system; therefore, the state doesn't engage in controlling the merchants. Private firms not the governments are engaged in trade. Therefore, it is very difficult. And we in Thailand do not believe in the barter system.³⁰

However, he emphasised that Thailand had been prepared to discuss trade with the USSR 'for many many years'.³¹

Despite faltering negotiations on a trade agreement, the Thai Government expressed willingness to widen the scope of relations with Moscow. In 1968, Prime Minister Thanom sent a Thai trade mission to Eastern Europe to seek new markets for Thai products, especially agricultural goods such as rice, jute and rubber. Pramote, who was promoted to Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Ministry after his five-year turn as Ambassador to Moscow, informed Soviet Ambassador Volkov that the purpose of this delegation, which would last one month, was to explore trade opportunities, both export and import. He asked the Soviet Union to take this trade delegation seriously.³²

In May 1969, Prime Minister Thanom stated that 'we already export many products to the free world, but now we wish to expand our trade with Eastern Communist countries': 'It is to the benefit of our international trade if we can expand markets for our products in these countries'.³³ A 26-member Thai trade delegation was led by Vicharn Nivatwongse, the Director of the Commercial Intelligence Department, and included two government officials and another 23 prominent business representatives. Over the course of the month, delegates visited the Soviet Union, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia.³⁴

30 Thanat, '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', 245.

31 Thanat, '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', 245.

32 Record of conversation held between the Soviet Ambassador to Bangkok MM Volkov and Thai Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Police Major Pramote Chongcharoen, 20 November 1968, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volume of Soviet Archival Documents, 1941-1970*, 279-80.

33 'Thanom: Seek New Markets in E. Europe', *Bangkok Post*, 9 May 1969, 13.

34 The itinerary for the trade delegation was: Finland (12-15 May), Denmark (15-17 May), the Soviet Union (17-26 May), Hungary (26-30 May), Czechoslovakia (30 May - 3 June), Poland (3-8 June), Bulgaria (8-11 June), Romania (11-14 June), Yugoslavia (14-19 June) and Italy (19-20 June). The mission returned to Bangkok on 21 June. 'Thanom: Seek New Markets in E. Europe', 13.

Economic Affairs Minister, Bunchana Atthakorn, asked the mission to study ways and means of promoting the direct sale of Thai products to East European countries. Before his departure, Vicharn told the press that 'the mission has absolutely nothing to do with politics. All we want to succeed is to sell our raw materials and agricultural products to them'.³⁵ By the end of the trip, Thailand exchanged goodwill missions with Yugoslavia, and established commercial relations with Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia.

The symbolic gesture of Thai trade delegation to a certain extent rendered the bilateral trade agreement unavoidable. But Russia's demand for (a) a 'Most Favoured Nation' clause; (b) full diplomatic privileges, including immunity, to its trade representation based in Thailand; and (c) a navigation agreement, delayed agreement. The Soviet Union wished to negotiate both trade and air agreements together. Thailand suggested that both agreements should be considered separately.

By the end of 1969, an agreement was in place that regulated imports and exports between the two countries, but that did not fix a trade balance figure. It excluded air and navigation agreements. The draft also stated that all trade transactions would have to be made on a government-to-government basis, through the Thai Chamber of Commerce or through the Ministry of Economic Affairs, thereby prohibiting private Thai exporters from dealing directly with the Russians.³⁶ In March 1970, the new Soviet Ambassador to Thailand, Anatoly A Rozanov (1970–1974), arrived in Bangkok and presented his letter of credentials to the king.

On 25 December, Thanat and Rozanov signed the first Thai–Soviet trade agreement, marking a pivotal moment in their relations. The pact was aimed at improving and developing closer commercial relations between the two countries. It identified a means of international payment, facilitation of trade and transportation, and lists of tradable commodities. The Soviet Union was determined to import rice and rice products, natural rubber, mineral products (especially fluorites), maize, millet, leather, precious stones and jewellery, while Thailand would import metals and metal parts, machinery products and their components, electrical equipment and parts, cars and car parts, tractors and polymers.³⁷

35 'Trade Group Leaves for E. Europe', *Bangkok Post*, 12 May 1969, 1.

36 'USSR Trade Pact Being Drafted', 5.

37 Alexander A Karchava, *Kaewsip pee kwam sampan tang karntoot Russia–Thai* [Ninety-Year Russian–Thai Diplomatic Relations] (Bangkok: Bapith Printing, 1988), 102.

The Soviet Union would establish trade representation with a residence in Bangkok. Ambassador Rozanov wrote a related letter to Thanat on the day of signing the agreement, specifically emphasising the importance of trade representation. Due to that fact that the state had a monopoly on foreign economic relations in the Soviet Union, the ambassador claimed that the Soviet Government needed trade representation in Bangkok. As he elaborated:

The trade representation shall have the following functions to perform:

- a. to promote the development of trade relations between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Kingdom of Thailand;
- b. to represent the interests of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in the Kingdom of Thailand in all matters relating to foreign trade of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics;
- c. to effect trade between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Kingdom of Thailand.

Rozanov insisted that the trade representation, which was an integral part of the Soviet embassy in Thailand, had full diplomatic privileges and immunity equivalent to diplomatic representatives.³⁸

With the signing of the trade agreement, Thanat expected greater cooperation with the USSR. Likewise, Deputy Foreign Minister Police Major General Sa-nga Kittikachorn observed that in general the improved relations with the communist bloc had led to an increased opportunity to export goods. The former policy of enmity toward the communist powers would be now 'very risky'. Due to Thailand's easing of relations with the Soviet Union and East European countries, Sa-nga claimed, 'our foreign policy has made possible the reduction of the Communist threat'. 'This will mean that we can devote more of our budgetary funds to economic development than to military defence'.³⁹ In relation to the trade agreement specifically he stated that the Soviet Union 'has already brought about an improvement in the price of fluorite'. Previously, Japan had been the sole market, and, as a monopoly, this had depressed the price for many years. Sa-nga thus asked Thai exporters not to sell all fluorites to the Japanese,

38 A letter from Soviet Ambassador to Bangkok Anatoly A Rozanov to Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman, 25 December 1970, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volume of Soviet Archival Documents, 1941–1970*, 305.

39 'Govt's Foreign Policy "Eases Red Threat"', *Bangkok Post*, 1 March 1971, 3.

but to also sell to the Russians, which helped them bid at higher prices.⁴⁰ To reporters who asked him whether the US would object to the proposed closer trade relations with the USSR, Sa-nga markedly replied that

we don't care. We mean to maintain our good relations with the United States. But through Russia we may reach an agricultural commodities agreement involving countries in the Soviet bloc. We may sell tapioca and animal foodstuffs.⁴¹

According to Thai trade statistics, the percentage of bilateral trade with the Soviet Union rose exponentially in the 1970s, though with relatively small volume compared to Thailand's trade with other major partners. For example, in 1970, Thailand for the first time sold almost 35,000 tons of maize to the USSR.⁴² The overall volume of bilateral trade with the USSR in 1971 amounted to 6.6 million roubles. This increased to 17.3 and 173.1 million roubles in 1975 and 1980, respectively. In 1971, Thai exports to Moscow were 4.1 million roubles, whereas Thai imports were 2.5 million roubles (see Table 4.1). Between 1971 through the end of the Cold War, Thailand had a surplus in trade with the Soviet Union. In the year 1981, out of all the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, Thailand was the Soviet Union's largest trade partner.

Table 4.1: Thailand's trade volume with the USSR (million roubles).

Year	Volume	Export	Import	Trade balance
1970	3.4	2.6	0.8	+
1971	6.6	4.1	2.5	+
1975	17.3	13.3	4.0	+
1979	33.9	26.3	7.6	+
1980	173.1	164.5	8.6	+
1981	320.4	312.4	8.0	+
1982	141.8	132.9	8.9	+
1983	62.5	54.7	7.8	+
1984	73.9	62.6	11.3	+
1985	67.9	54.5	13.4	+
1986	90.9	80.7	10.2	+

Source: Thai Ministry of Commerce.

40 Police Major-General Sa-nga Kittikachorn, interview given to the press, 23 December 1970, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangkok, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (9) MFA 1.1/107, the National Archives of Thailand (TNA), 21.

41 'FM Softens Line on Red Bloc', *Bangkok Post*, 29 December 1970, 1.

42 *Bangkok Post*, 25 December 1970, 2.

At the same time, the Soviet Union pushed for an air transport agreement with Thailand, which was drafted by the Soviets in early February 1970. The Soviet airline, Aeroflot, which had recently begun to expand its flights and develop new routes in Southeast Asia to locations such as Singapore and Cambodia, asked the Thai Government for flyover rights to Phnom Penh and landing rights in Bangkok.⁴³ The negotiations officially started in May, when a Russian air team, led by aviation chief AV Besedine, went to Bangkok to discuss the air transport agreement with Thai officials headed by Sirilak Chandrangu, Permanent Secretary of Communications. Thailand and the Soviet Union readily agreed in principle to allow each other's national airlines to fly to their respective capitals and four points beyond. Thailand would grant Aeroflot rights to fly to Bangkok, and connect to Phnom Penh, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Jakarta. In return, Thai Airways International hoped to have stopovers at Tashkent and Moscow, and connect with Copenhagen, London, Paris and New York, which would provide the shortest route service from Southeast Asia to Europe and America. The exchange of rights would be incorporated into the air transport agreement. Sirilak pointed out that the agreement would be fair to both countries. However, he said the USSR may have more benefits 'because it has a larger company and will be able to make use of its rights much before THAI [Airways International]'.⁴⁴

However, the first meeting ended in a stalemate. Officials on both sides conceded that no agreement had been reached, and their governments had to be consulted before further negotiations could be carried out. Sirilak said that 'there are many important obstacles that have to be looked into by the Cabinet'. He claimed that both sides had 'mostly differences in attitudes and ideologies'.⁴⁵

In fact, the differences mainly concerned the stationing of Aeroflot's sales officers and mechanical personnel in Bangkok, which the Soviets demanded as necessary to facilitate its air operations. Earlier, the Thai Government had ruled that Thailand would not allow the Russians to station those personnel in Bangkok. The Thanom Government then decided to relax the restrictions, provided the offices were not used for political purposes. Thanom was also willing to speed up the discussion of

43 Record of conversation held between the Soviet Ambassador to Bangkok MM Volkov and Thai Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Police Major Pramote Chongcharoen, 6 February 1969, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volume of Soviet Archival Documents, 1941–1970*, 281.

44 'Russian Team due to Discuss Air Pact', *Bangkok Post*, 10 May 1970, 5.

45 'Thai, USSR Air Talks End in Stalemate', *Bangkok Post*, 20 May 1970, 3.

other details with the Russians. Soviet Commercial Counsellor, Nikolai P Karpov, expressed optimism, saying that the decision was a 'good sign'.⁴⁶ The negotiators returned to the meetings and settled any difficulties.

On 6 May 1971, the air transport agreement was signed by Deputy Foreign Minister Police Major General Sa-nga Kittikachorn, and the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly A Rozanov, in Bangkok. The agreement was based on the principle of a 'fair and equal opportunity' for the designated airlines of the two countries to operate agreed services on their respective routes. On the one hand, Thai Airways International was entitled to operate its services from Thailand via New Delhi, Karachi, Kabul and Teheran to Tashkent and/or Moscow, and beyond to Copenhagen, Paris, London and New York, and vice versa. On the other hand, Aeroflot was entitled to operate its services from the Soviet Union via Tehran, Karachi, New Delhi and Rangoon to Bangkok, and beyond to Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Manila, Jakarta and Australia, and vice versa. After the signing of the agreement, Sa-nga expressed the hope that the direct air services would serve to 'further strengthen the cordial relations between the two nations'. Ambassador Rozanov assured Sa-nga that Aeroflot would begin its air services to Bangkok within a few months, following approval from the Thai Government for its Bangkok-based personnel.⁴⁷ The inaugural Aeroflot flight arrived in Bangkok in November 1971.⁴⁸

On 15 May 1971, the Thanom Government dispatched the second trade team, led by Economic Affairs Minister Bunchana Atthakorn, to the USSR and the East European countries, including Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Romania. Three days before the departure, the 34-person Thai trade and economic delegation was instructed by Deputy Prime Minister General Praphas Charusathien to remember that the Thai Government wished to trade with any country that maintained a friendly attitude towards Thailand. Praphas expressed his support for Thailand's more extensive trade relations with the Soviet Union: 'Russia has shown her good attitude towards us and has not

46 Karpov claimed that he knew about the Thai decision to allow Aeroflot to set up offices in Bangkok from the *Bangkok Post* newspaper. As he put it, 'I don't know where we are. We haven't got any news for the Thais. We have no information whatsoever'. 'Soviets Happy with Air Talks', *Bangkok Post*, 27 June 1970, 2.

47 'Russians Jets May Land by August', *Bangkok Post*, 7 May 1971, 1.

48 Thai Ambassador to Moscow Yuad Lertrit and his wife, coupled with their two daughters, were guests of honour of Aeroflot who arrived in Bangkok with this historic flight. 'Govt Sets Out Rules for USSR Air Service', *Bangkok Post*, 25 May, 1971, 3; 'Envoy to Propose Thai-Soviet Move', *The Nation*, 4 November 1971.

involved itself in causing political problems for Thailand'.⁴⁹ The mission, which lasted for three weeks, aimed at exploring the possibilities of expanding trade relations between Thailand and those countries.⁵⁰ The mission was the first to be led by a Cabinet minister, and the largest ever to be sent to the communist bloc by the Thai Government. According to Bunchana, 'Russia has expressed its willingness to open broader trade relations with Thailand and the visit of our mission would help achieve this'. The mission listed 35 items to export to those countries, including rice, rubber, sugar, timber and mineral ores.⁵¹

When the Thai trade delegation reached Moscow on 19 May, Bunchana initiated talks with the Soviet Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade, Ivan Grishin. The talks were aimed at improving the trade agreement of 1970. One important issue was whether trade should be conducted between the governments or between a government agency and private firms. He said that trade between the USSR and Thailand was worth 3.4 million roubles last year, and wished to increase the volume of export and import.⁵² The most interesting item was fluorite, which the USSR had begun to import from Thailand in 1970. The USSR wanted a five-year fluorite deal with Thailand. This presented an economic opportunity for Thai producers to diversify their markets, especially from the Japanese ones. The business representatives responded favourably to the Russian offer.⁵³ One of them, Major General Pramarn Adireksarn, an influential politician and the President of the Association of Thai Industries, revealed later that throughout the mission, chambers of commerce in those communist countries complained over restrictions on the entry of their people into Thailand. First, he suggested that 'if the government lifted its restrictions on visas, we'll see that trade relations between Thailand and those countries would move up very fast'. Second, Pramarn also recommended that the government form a single organisation to trade with communist countries because their foreign trade was undertaken by their governments.⁵⁴

49 'Trade Team to USSR Will Represent Government', *Bangkok Post*, 13 May 1971, 13.

50 Infodept News, 17 May 1971, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/35, TNA, Bangkok, 119.

51 'Trade Team to USSR Will Represent Government', 13.

52 Infodept News, 17 May 1971, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/35, Bangkok, TNA, 119; 'Thai, USSR Talks Begin', *Bangkok Post*, 20 May 1971, 13.

53 'USSR-Thai Fluorite Trade Move Welcomed', *Bangkok Post*, 12 June 1971, 11.

54 'Pramarn Expects Large Growth in Red Trade', *Bangkok Post*, 15 June 1971, 11.

The trade agreement facilitated increasing commercial contacts between Thailand and the USSR in the 1970s. For instance, in 1971, the USSR made an approach to buy an additional 150,000 tons of maize, worth approximately 270 million baht. The proposal came from the new Commercial Counsellor of the USSR embassy, Victor I Ocheretin, who had direct contact with Vicharn Nivatwongse, Director-General of the Foreign Trade Department. Ocheretin informed Vicharn that the Russian buyers wished to import between 20,000 and 30,000 tons per month. Vicharn guaranteed that Thailand would be in a position to supply the Russians.⁵⁵ Overall, according to Yuad Lertrit, the Ambassador to Moscow, there was good potential for Thailand to export maize, tin, fluorite, rubber and tobacco to the Soviet Union despite some residual issues.⁵⁶

In sum, Thailand since 1969 established 'closer but correct and careful ties' with the Soviet Union, which began to seek greater involvement in the region.⁵⁷ For Thailand, the Soviet Union was no longer considered an enemy. The Thai Government performed diplomatic practices of détente with the Soviet Union in the realms of regional receptivity toward the Soviet Union as well as bilateral trade and air transport agreements, thereby increasing their mutual contact. Readjustment with the Soviet Union was still an ongoing and unfinished project in the 1970s, yet it was much further ahead than any rapprochement with China, which will be discussed in the next section.

4.3. Facing the 'Tiger': Back-Channel Diplomacy with China

I don't see why, if the United States can meet with the representatives of Beijing in Warsaw, we cannot meet with them somewhere in Asia, such as Japan or Hong Kong.

– Thanat Khoman, foreign minister⁵⁸

55 'USSR Wants 150,000 Tons Maize', *Bangkok Post*, 28 October 1971, 13.

56 For example, there were reports that Thai fluorite ore shipped to the USSR in early 1971 did not measure up to Soviet standards. Yuad also mentioned two other obstacles which needed to be overcome, namely poor Thai export control and the lack of a regular shipping service to the Soviet Union. He recommended that should the Thai government develop the potential, it would establish a group consisting of Thai exporters and government representatives dealing specifically with each item: 'Envoy to Propose Thai-Soviet Move'.

57 Theh Chongkhadikij, 'Thailand 1971: A Year for Adjustments of Political Alignments', *Bangkok Post*, 27 December 1970, 19.

58 Thanat Khoman, interview, 'Strategy for Peace', *Bangkok Post*, 30 March 1969.

From early 1969, Thanat Khoman publicly offered a dialogue with the PRC. Between 1970 and 1971, Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) tried to establish greater contact with the PRC via third parties such as Albania, Sweden, France and Italy, respectively. After China's entry to the UN in October 1971, Thanat directly contacted Chinese representatives at the UN in New York. This section is divided into two parts. The first part discusses back-channel diplomacy with China. The second examines Thailand's position and practices regarding China's admission to the UN. These processes were not mutually exclusive.

4.3.1. Contact via Third Parties

The Thai MFA made incessant attempts to contact Chinese representatives via third parties at international venues. While there is no official memorandum available documenting the specific detail of back-channel diplomacy, we can deduce the practices from what Thanat and high-ranking diplomats said and did throughout the periods of 1969 and 1971. We now know that Prime Minister Thanom authorised and closely supervised the process himself.⁵⁹ The absence of official documents suggests that the operation was diplomatically covert and secretive. Almost all these conversations were conducted verbally, rather than written. The anxiety of the Thai state in general, and the ambiguity of Chinese intentions toward Thailand, rendered diplomatic contact with the Chinese largely secret, if not politically dangerous. Minimising documentation, to an extent, provided a deniability clause for the Thai military elite. Nonetheless, despite the behind-the-scenes diplomatic missions, the indirect contacts with the PRC were leaked, both intentionally and unintentionally.

Since early 1969, Thanat had consistently engaged in a 'peace offensive' with China. He said that Thailand was 'ready to sit down and talk with Red China, to seek genuine peace for the sake of Asia'.⁶⁰ In March 1969, in a speech to Parliament, Thanat reiterated that he was willing and ready to carry 'the offensive for peace and stability to Beijing', and if possible, to negotiate a trade pact with China. However, diplomatic relations were not contemplated for the time being.⁶¹ Because of Beijing's stance, Thanat knew that the peace offensive was complicated. Beijing, he said, was

59 Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/35, TNA, Bangkok, 141–43; 'Thanat Makes a Verbal Détente', *Bangkok Post*, 15 May 1971.

60 *Bangkok Post*, 27 February 1969.

61 *Bangkok Post*, 25 March 1969.

conservative. The Communist Chinese are petrified in their position. They have not changed their policy of supporting terrorist activities in many Asian countries, including Thailand. They have shown no flexibility whatsoever in their attitude towards peaceful coexistence.⁶²

But for Thailand, this was a matter of national survival as well as peace and security in the region. Therefore, Thanat stated:

we must be more flexible in our approach. We cannot simply stay behind an imaginary Maginot Line. If they [Chinese Communist leaders] do not respond to this peaceful initiative, they will be seen in an unfavourable light by the outside world.⁶³

Thanat suggested that if talks with China were held, it would be 'open talks', something similar to those that took place at the Bandung Conference in 1955. He emphasised that there would be no 'secret mission' by any Thais to Mainland China.⁶⁴ In 1969, Thanat's main idea was to end the hostile situation so that both countries could return to the 'spirit of Bandung' when there was 'an attempt to create a certain sense of solidarity and peaceful coexistence'.⁶⁵ In early 1970, Thanat specifically called for a 'revival of the Bandung formula with necessary modifications'. He stated that 'if the smaller nations could cooperate, they might convince China at such a meeting to come to terms with its neighbors'.⁶⁶

By the end of the 1960s, the Chinese had not responded to Thanat's various offers in kind. As Thanat put it in June 1969:

so far there has been no reply or reaction on the part of Beijing. I suppose that is the general attitude of Beijing for the time being. Beijing has declined to meet with other nations; the only visible contact which Beijing has is with Albania and perhaps with Sweden. But so far I am not aware that any progress has been achieved.⁶⁷

62 *Bangkok Post*, 25 April 1969.

63 *Bangkok Post*, 25 April 1969.

64 *Bangkok Post*, 11 June 1969.

65 Thanat Khoman, 'Interview Given by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Beryl Bernay of the Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, Derek Davies of the Far Eastern Economic Review, Joonghee Park of the Central Daily News of South Korea, Jung Suk Lee of the Dong-a Ilbo of South Korea and Kim Willenson of UPI', Bangkok, 26 March 1969, in *Collected Interviews of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman*, Vol. 3: 1969, 489.

66 *Strait Times*, 26 February 1970.

67 Thanat Khoman, 'Interview Given by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to Mass Media Representatives at Kawana Japan', 10 June 1969, in *Collected Interviews of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman*, Vol. 3: 1969, 542.

Throughout 1970, Chinese reactions to Thailand were mixed. China continued its aggressive gestures and policies against Thailand. For example, it built a road in northern Laos near the Mekong River, which the Thai Government perceived to be a vital threat to its territorial sovereignty.⁶⁸

The idea of meeting with the Chinese, nevertheless, remained open. In September 1970, Thanat reiterated that there remained a 'public offer' by the Thai Government to 'sit down and meet with Beijing representatives'. Thanat presumed that the Chinese Government had not yet responded to his offer because it wanted secret talks.⁶⁹ Separately, a spokesman for the Government's United Thai People's Party and representative, Yuang Iamsila (Udon Thani), proposed trade with Communist China through third countries. He said: 'Why not trade through Hong Kong or Singapore?' In this issue, Thanat suggested that 'whether we trade directly or through third countries, we have to first find out if we stand to gain or lose'.⁷⁰

In 1970, Thanat and his close associates at the Foreign Ministry began to make contact with the Chinese. Discussions with Chinese officials were conducted through Pridi Phanomyong, the former Thai prime minister who had previously been exiled in China for more than 20 years, and since 1970 remained in exile in Paris,⁷¹ and Étienne Manac'h, the new French Ambassador to Beijing (1969–1975).⁷² Manac'h was a personal acquaintance of Thanat and had passed through Bangkok in 1969 before he took up his ambassadorial post in Beijing.⁷³

In an interview with *The Nation's* special correspondent in Paris in August 1971, Pridi claimed China was ready to establish relations with Thailand if the Thai Government 'changes her hostile policy'. His exile in Beijing made him quite familiar with some high-ranking Chinese officials and he said that the crucial issue for rapprochement with China was about motives:

68 *Bangkok Post*, 5 July 1969.

69 *Bangkok Post*, 10 September 1970.

70 *Bangkok Post*, 29 December 1970.

71 Maynard Parker, 'Untying Thailand', *Foreign Affairs*, January 1973, 334.

72 *Bangkok Post*, 22 May 1969.

73 Suthichai Yoon, 'Thai-China Talks Likely', *The Nation*, 6 September 1971.

If Thailand had good motives towards them, they would certainly reciprocate. Let bygones be bygones. I don't think there are any problems with Communist China. It would be a noble thing if two hostile persons can patch up their quarrels.⁷⁴

Like Thanat, Pridi strongly urged a '*flexible*' foreign policy – with the objective of ensuring Thailand's survival amid the changing global and regional dynamisms. He traced this policy back to the reign of King Rama V in the late nineteenth century:

Just look back at the example as that set down by King Rama V. We followed a neutral policy and that saved our country. There was a balance of powers. We must accept that while all other neighbouring countries fell into the hands of foreign countries, King Rama V saved Thailand from imperialism because His Majesty followed a flexible policy.

'Whenever we took a different line set down by His Majesty King Rama V', Pridi continued, 'we always had troubles such as when we sided with Japan during World War II'.⁷⁵

Pridi also suggested that Thailand should trade with every country without taking their political regimes or ideologies into consideration. As he queried:

What kind of Chinese are we talking about? Look at those Chinese merchants in the country. Why are they so rich? If we trade with Communist China, it should be on a government-to-government basis. They hold two trade exhibitions every year. When foreign merchants visit them and sign trade contracts, they sign on behalf of their governments. The government can also choose to allow some particular organizations to deal with Communist China – not private merchants.⁷⁶

74 Somrit Intaphanti, 'Pridi: China Ready for Thailand Ties', *The Nation*, 16 August 1971; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/36, TNA, Bangkok, 175.

75 Somrit, 'Pridi: China Ready for Thailand Ties'; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/36, TNA, Bangkok, 175.

76 Somrit, 'Pridi: China Ready for Thailand Ties'; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/36, TNA, Bangkok, 175.

Trade with China, for him, was inevitable. Commenting on the possibility that President Nixon could visit Beijing in the near future, Pridi asserted that: 'the United States simply cannot afford to ignore a country with 800 million people. It's a big market'.⁷⁷

Later, Prime Minister Thanom admitted that both Foreign Minister Thanat and Deputy Foreign Minister Sa-nga Kittikachorn had met separately with Pridi at the Royal Thai Embassy in Paris in 1971, but denied that Pridi was asked to serve as a middleman in contacting China. As he told Thai reporters, 'I have never assigned Pridi to do anything'. Thanom said the Cabinet members did not discuss any political issues with Pridi, who spoke 'about his life in Beijing'.⁷⁸ Pridi himself also denied that he was a 'third party' in making contact between the two countries.⁷⁹

However, Thanat continued to make appeals for dialogue with the Chinese. On 13 January 1971, in an interview with Columbia Broadcasting Corporation (CBS) Television, he reemphasised his 'peace offensive' with China, despite the fact the Chinese had failed to respond. He said that time would be needed for the Chinese leaders to realise the benefits of peaceful coexistence with Thailand and other Asian countries. Thanat added:

As Asians, we are patient. If they want to play ball with us, we in Asia are always ready to join in the game. If, on the contrary, they want to create disturbances and insurgencies in our lands, we will fight them as indeed we are doing.⁸⁰

The absence of any Chinese response was largely due to the domestic politics of the Cultural Revolution. When the Cultural Revolution ended in the early 1970s, the Chinese Government began to look outward, and normalise its diplomacy with other countries, thereby opening a window of opportunity for Thailand. The first sign, or turning point, was Sino-US détente, beginning with 'non-political' events like a table tennis, or ping-pong, tournament in April 1971, and followed by the relaxation of the

77 Somrit, 'Pridi: China Ready for Thailand Ties'; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/36, TNA, Bangkok, 175.

78 'PM Says Ministers Met Pridi in Paris', *Bangkok Post*, 22 July 1971.

79 Theh Chongkhadikij, 'Pridi: Recognize China Now', *Bangkok Post*, 7 November 1971.

80 Thanat Khoman's interview with CBS Television in Bangkok, 13 January 1971 (extracts), in Jain, *China and Thailand*, doc. 183; see also 'Govt Launches Asian Peace Offensive', *Bangkok Post*, 14 January 1971.

American trade embargo with the PRC.⁸¹ The Thai Government officially welcomed this détente. As Prime Minister Thanom said, if the Chinese leaders 'stop giving us trouble, we can be friends'. Thanat observed that 'the Chinese, clever and chauvinistic, have now opened a window to the rest of the world'. He went on:

Communist China has undergone internal convulsions and has isolated itself. It is now realizing that times have changed and that isolation is costly in terms of economic development. It cannot keep up with modern technology and it cannot compete with the United States, Japan and Europe.⁸²

Thanat said that China had moved in 'a rather clever way' because they used non-political ping-pong diplomacy to allow them to take steps toward the relaxation of relations with Washington.⁸³ Nevertheless, for Thanat, China 'continues to constitute a danger' to Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries. He expressed hope that China would renounce its sponsorship and support of 'national liberation movements' in those countries, including Thailand. As Thanat put it, 'if the Chinese Communist leaders change their attitude, we will change ours'.⁸⁴

Another good sign was the decrease in Red Radio attacks on the Thai Government. In March 1971, General Saiyud Kerdphol, Director of the Communist Suppression Operations Command, announced that communist propaganda and attacks against the Thai Government via the clandestine radio station, Voice of the Thai People, had been reduced to a certain extent over the past 30 days. He attributed the ebbing of such attacks to improved trade relations between Thailand and other Eastern European countries. However, Saiyud said that communist activities, which were intent on winning the hearts and minds of local villagers and undermining Thailand's national security, remained ongoing.⁸⁵

Despite some good signs, the Thanom Government made it clear that Thailand would refrain from automatically following the American move, which was using ping-pong diplomacy to kick-start the normalisation

81 'American Sportsmen to Visit Red China', *Bangkok Post*, 8 April 1971. See Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon in China: The Week That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2007), 173–81.

82 'We Can be Friends, PM Tells China', *Bangkok Post*, 17 April 1971.

83 Thanat Khoman, interview, *The New York Times*, 21 April 1971 found in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/35, TNA, Bangkok, 141.

84 'We Can be Friends, PM Tells China'.

85 'Attacks by Red Radio Lessen', *Bangkok Post*, 4 March 1971.

of Sino–US relations. Foreign Minister Thanat stressed that Thailand had its own independent policy to follow in order to protect its own national interests. He claimed he had anticipated the American move ‘for quite some time’: ‘We knew that the United States would change its attitude towards Communist China and reopen trade links. Therefore, we are not surprised’.⁸⁶ Thanat remarked:

We watch developments with great interest. If the new smiles [from the Chinese] were to be followed by measures to ease the situation in Southeast Asia, so much the better. What we would like to know is what exactly is the meaning and import of those new smiles. Was it to pave the way toward recognition by more countries or to prevent what Beijing itself has called ‘hostile collusion’ between the United States and the Soviet Union? Was it a move to join the Big-Powers club? Was there a real change of attitude or policy ... a reversal to the Bandung policy? No one knows exactly.⁸⁷

According to Thanat, there could be at least two possible tests of China’s real intention:

The first important test ... is the Vietnam War. If there were a real change, then we should see a new mood or atmosphere reflected in the attitudes of North Vietnam and the Viet Cong at Paris ... The second important test is the situation in Southeast Asia, especially Beijing’s attitude toward Thailand and other countries in the region. If Beijing were to adopt a more peaceful approach with less doctrinaire support to ‘wars of national liberation’, then there would be a real change in Chinese attitude.

Thanat contended that ‘these two tests will be sufficient to gauge the reality of the new smile ... But if nothing happens, then it would be just a superficial, tactical move, and not a real change of direction’.⁸⁸

Thai foreign policy was thus forging a wait-and-see approach. As Thanat put it, ‘at present there are no changes. I cannot say now the Government will make any changes in the future’.⁸⁹ In addition, the Thanom

⁸⁶ ‘Thailand hails US China Move’, *Bangkok Post*, 16 April 1971.

⁸⁷ Thanat Khoman, interview, *The New York Times*, 21 April 1971 found in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/35, TNA, Bangkok, 141.

⁸⁸ Thanat Khoman, interview, *The New York Times*, 21 April 1971 found in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2 35, TNA, Bangkok, 141.

⁸⁹ ‘Thailand Hails US China Move’.

Government took a cautious attitude towards the question of trade with China. The option of trade, without prior diplomatic recognition, was left open, should the Chinese renounce their aggressive and hostile policies. Mentioning that a number of European countries had begun to trade with the Chinese without having first set up formal diplomatic relations, Thanat said that Thailand could trade with China without prior diplomatic relations if it deemed to be economically advantageous to conduct such commerce.⁹⁰ Legally, trade with China would also infringe the Revolutionary Party Announcement No. 53, prohibiting the sale of goods to China. Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs, Prasit Kanchanawat, recommended that the law be abolished as a step to further establish trade relations with China. If the government repealed the law, trade would become possible.⁹¹

At the MFA, Thanat set up a China-watching committee to study the pros and cons of trading with Communist China, as well as to monitor the developments in China and its external relations.⁹² Other Cabinet members also gave their opinions. Deputy Prime Minister Praphas Charusathien said that China, like any other country, should purchase rice and other products directly from Thailand. Pote Sarasin, Minister of National Development, insisted that Thailand would begin trading if China separated 'her trade from political issues'. However, according to Pote, the opening up of trade would not directly lead to diplomatic relations.⁹³

Support for trade with Communist China was growing not only in the government but also among other members of the political and business community. Some opposition parties' members, such as Pichai Rattakul (Democrat, Bangkok) and Somkid Srisangkhom (Social Democrat), agreed with Thanat's proposal to establish dialogue with the Chinese but cautioned that it must be carried out with extreme care and planning. As Pichai said, 'unlike the countries in the West, Thailand is within easy reach of Red China geographically'.⁹⁴ Even the well-renowned proprietor of the *Siam Rath* newspaper, MR Kukrit Pramoj, who had previously disregarded Thanat's ideas, now began to show support for the discourse

90 'We Can be Friends, PM Tells China'.

91 'Abolish China Trade, Says Prasit', *Bangkok Post*, 18 April 1971.

92 Theh Chongkhadikij, 'Pressure Grows to Trade with China', *Bangkok Post*, 26 April 1971.

93 Statement by Pote Sarasin, 18 May 1971, and Deputy Prime Minister Praphas Charusathien's interview with the *Bangkok Post*, 26 May 1971, in Jain, *China and Thailand*, 178.

94 'MPs Back Thanat on Dialogue', *Bangkok Post*, 24 May 1971.

of flexible diplomacy with China. He said that Thailand had to admit the existence of the PRC: 'China is a big country, and being an enemy will not be beneficial to Thailand'.⁹⁵

Similarly, in the business community, Charoon Sibunruang, the President of the Thai Chamber of Commerce and of the Board of Trade, favoured the opening of trade with China. He suggested that the government should abrogate the laws and regulations to permit trade with China, by explaining that 'Thailand will gain a lot from trading with Communist China, since it is a huge market'. However, Charoon opposed direct trade with Communist China because 'we are uncertain of what the Chinese Communists are up to'. For the present, trade should be conducted through a third country, preferably Hong Kong.⁹⁶ Some business representatives, such as Major General Pramarn Adireksarn, the President of the Association of Thai Industries, disagreed. Pramarn claimed that Thailand was not yet ready for trading with Beijing because of the vulnerability to communism and the danger of developing a large trade deficit with Communist China.⁹⁷

Following the establishment of Sino-US rapprochement, Chinese leaders led by Premier Zhou Enlai opened up normal diplomacy with other countries. In May 1971, Thanat sounded optimistic about Sino-Thai relations, and accordingly used the term 'People's Republic of China' for the first time. He claimed that Beijing had responded favourably to Thailand. Communist China, he added, 'have shown interest in contacting us and are watching our attitude'.⁹⁸ Having appealed to Chinese leaders for an open dialogue two years ago, Thanat disclosed that a number of 'third parties' had since approached Beijing on behalf of Thailand.⁹⁹ He revealed:

after our announcement that we would like open dialogue with Beijing ... some friendly 'third parties' offered to make approaches for us. Tensions have been relaxed. Disturbances along the border have been reduced.¹⁰⁰

95 'M.R. Kukrit Backs Thanat on China', *Bangkok Post*, 11 June 1971.

96 'Charoon Backs Beijing Trade', *Bangkok Post*, 4 May 1971.

97 *Bangkok Post*, 5 May 1971.

98 'Thanat Makes a Verbal Détente'.

99 An anonymous foreign ministry official told the *New York Times* that Thanat had opened the door to better relations with China in a speech in Tokyo in 1969, even before Beijing invited the US ping-pong team to China in April 1971. He claimed that Thailand had received encouraging indications from Beijing through third parties. Henry Kamm, 'Thailand Cites own China Moves', *New York Times*, 16 May 1971.

100 'Thanat Makes a Verbal Détente'.

At that time, Thanat said he could not identify the 'third parties' because of the delicate nature of their missions. As Thanat said: 'Even if you asked for ten hours, I would not tell.' Above all else, Thanat believed 'the Beijing leaders have shown interest because we have made an open offer for a dialogue with them'.¹⁰¹ We now know that Thanat wanted to establish more contact with China via third parties such as Albania, Sweden, France and Italy. Among them, France was the principal one.¹⁰²

These indirect exchanges had, he explained, achieved a 'better understanding between the two countries. Our differences have narrowed. The situation has improved. Beijing leaders have begun to understand us [Thailand]. It may well lead to a real dialogue'.¹⁰³ Asked when a real dialogue would take place, he said:

it's not up to us alone. Diplomatic contacts have to be made quietly, discreetly. Participants and subjects of negotiations could never be disclosed. We have to be patient and careful, keeping the national interests in mind.¹⁰⁴

For Thanat, the ultimate aim of state-to-state dialogue with the Chinese was to dampen the communist insurgency in Thailand. As he put it, 'the idea is to stop the killing. We want to stop being the enemy'.¹⁰⁵ However, Thanat warned against rushing willy-nilly into setting up an embassy, due to the risk of propaganda and subversion in Thailand: 'we will deal with the Chinese Communists only on a basis of mutual trust and equality'.¹⁰⁶

Meanwhile, the Thai Government officially ordered Radio Thailand to cease propaganda attacks against Communist China. In May 1971, Deputy Prime Minister Praphas gave an interview, saying that the government had cut down on 'polemics against Communist China over Radio Thailand in order to find out if China would make a friendly response'. He emphasised that Thailand had a policy of being friendly with

101 'Beijing "Wants our Opinions" – Thanat', *Bangkok Post*, 9 May 1971.

102 Kamm, 'Thailand Cites own China Moves' found in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/36, TNA, Bangkok, 83.

103 Theh Chongkhadikij, 'Beijing Dialogue a Step Nearer', *Bangkok Post*, 14 May 1971.

104 'Thanat Makes a Verbal Détente'.

105 'FM Explains Move to Cut Insurgency', *Bangkok Post*, 20 May 1971.

106 'FM Explains Move to Cut Insurgency'.

all countries, including communist states, which were friendly to Thailand.¹⁰⁷ Thanat agreed with Praphas, stating that the halt in radio attacks was ‘a way to reduce tensions’.¹⁰⁸

However, this early Thai détente with China inflamed public debate, and in particular generated discontent against Thanat specifically, discussed in more detail in the next chapter. One consequence of this heated debate was that by the end of May 1971, Thanom made a decision to slow the rate of contact with China until such a time that China ceased supporting the insurgent movements in Thailand: moving the process to what was described as ‘go-slow’ (*pai-cha*) diplomacy.¹⁰⁹ The Thai Government also decided against opening trade relations with Communist China for the present. Thanom was concerned that China would not separate trade from politics.¹¹⁰

The Minister for National Development, Pote Sarasin, asserted:

if China can treat its economic relations with other countries separately from political considerations, there will not be problems in trading with other countries. The question is whether or not Red China can do that.¹¹¹

Consequently, it would be better for Thailand to be cautious in its development of economic relations with China and to open such relations only ‘when Red China separates her trade from political issues’. Economic Affairs Minister Bunchana Atthakorn echoed the same concern. Trading with China would not be ‘safe’ as long as that country continued attacking Thailand through Radio Beijing and carried on its ‘subversive infiltration’ of the kingdom. Thailand would not, therefore, change its ‘policy before that country changed its attitude towards us’.¹¹² In brief, the government’s ‘go-slow, wait-and-see attitude to ensure minimum safety replaced a quickened pace to seek better understanding with Communist China’.¹¹³

107 Deputy Prime Minister Praphas Charusathien’s interview with the *Bangkok Post*, 26 May 1971, in Jain, *China and Thailand*, 178–79.

108 ‘Thanat Makes a Verbal Détente’.

109 Theh Chongkhadikij, ‘Govt Orders Slowdown in Beijing Thaw’, *Bangkok Post*, 24 May 1971 found in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/36, TNA, 366.

110 ‘Thanom Halts Contact with Beijing’, *Bangkok Post*, 5 July 1971.

111 Quoted in Shee Poon Kim, ‘The Politics of Thailand’s Trade Relations with the People’s Republic of China’, *Asian Survey* 21, no. 3 (March 1981): 314.

112 Quoted in Shee Poon Kim, ‘The Politics of Thailand’s Trade Relations with the People’s Republic of China’, *Asian Survey* 21, no. 3 (March 1981): 314–15.

113 Theh, ‘Govt Orders Slowdown in Beijing Thaw’; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/36, TNA, Bangkok, 366.

However, 'go-slow' diplomacy was partially undone by the US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing between 9 and 11 July 1971 and the subsequent announcement that Nixon would visit Beijing in February 1972. Kissinger had visited Bangkok en route and one early morning in July 1971, US Ambassador to Bangkok Leonard Unger invited a group of Thais, including Sulak Sivaraksa, a leading Thai public intellectual, and Tej Bunnag, a young Foreign Ministry official, to a working breakfast with Kissinger. The topic of discussion was 'how to end the Vietnam War'. Tej recalled that at the meeting:

Sulak Sivaraksa said 'the key to resolving the Vietnam War is China'. Kissinger was dumbstruck, but said nothing ... we later learned that he went on a secret trip to Beijing.¹¹⁴

The Beijing visit surprised many in the Thai establishment, including Prime Minister Thanom. He told the reporters that 'Dr. Kissinger was in Bangkok, and then he left to return to the United States. Now, we learn that he had not gone home but made a side trip to Beijing'. Asked for the Thai attitude toward this Sino-US rapprochement, Thanom replied that 'we have not yet done anything about this, but our policy is that we will be friendly to all countries which are not hostile to us'.¹¹⁵ A day later, Thanom said 'we will wait and see how other nations react towards the latest development'. Yet, he also insisted that if the other side eased its hostile attitude, Thailand would reciprocate.¹¹⁶

In his initial response, Thanat expedited contacts with China via third parties to ascertain the possibility of establishing diplomatic relations. In August, Prime Minister Thanom again denied that Thanat had asked former prime minister Pridi Phanomyong to be a middleman to contact with the Chinese leaders.¹¹⁷ Thanom acknowledged that Thanat met Pridi in Paris 'because they used to know each other and had once worked together'. While the prime minister reassured the press that Thailand had not asked any government to establish contact with Communist China, he admitted that 'several countries with good intentions offered to inform Beijing of our policy and to inform us about the attitude of the Chinese Communists'.¹¹⁸

114 Quoted in Supalak Ganjanakhundee and Wiraj Sripong, 'How Sino-Thai Relations Were Sparked Off 40 Years Ago', *The Nation*, 29 June 2015.

115 'Nixon's Beijing Visit Comes as Surprise', *Bangkok Post*, 17 July 1971.

116 'Govt Talks on Nixon Visit Tomorrow', *Bangkok Post*, 19 July 1971.

117 He had also denied the Pridi connection earlier in July.

118 'Thanom Defends FM', *Bangkok Post*, 11 August 1971.

Despite previous attempts to open up back channels for Thailand to approach the Chinese, there was no response until October 1971. According to Ross Terrill, an Australian professor at Harvard University who spent some time in China, it was only in October 1971 that Beijing signalled a readiness to open a dialogue with Thailand.¹¹⁹ Secret reciprocal contacts facilitated by France, in particular the new French Ambassador to Beijing Étienne Manac'h, had advanced to the point where China was now prepared to open talks with Thailand in order to begin the process of establishing formal relations between the two countries.¹²⁰ Despite his attempt to hide the identification of the third party, Thanat reluctantly admitted that particular third country was 'a country which is friendly to us and has a representative in Beijing'.¹²¹ Also, the French embassy in Bangkok had reportedly been using its 'good offices' to bring about an 'understanding' between Thailand and China. Officials of the embassy told *The Nation* newspaper that although the Thai Government had not requested the embassy to contact China and nor had the embassy offered the service, 'it does not mean that things don't take place'. They admitted that since France had an embassy in Beijing, it would only be normal for French officials to discuss Thai–Chinese relations when 'chances arise'.¹²²

In early October, Thanat disclosed in an interview with a foreign correspondent that Communist China had begun to respond to the suggestion of a dialogue with Thailand via a third country. He claimed that Thailand had realised the role which Communist China would play on the international scene for many years and this led to Thailand approaching the possibility of a dialogue. As he put it, 'it will be easier for Thailand to get in touch with the People's Republic of China after its admission to the United Nations'.¹²³ According to Terrill, the Chinese expected to enter into such a relationship on the condition that, following

119 Earlier, in an interview on 30 July, Terrill told Thanat that 'the Chinese are interested in your proposal for a dialogue with them and in particular your personal proposal'. However, Terrill believed that nothing had come of this proposal perhaps because 'there have sometimes come different voices from Thailand'. Thanat agreed that there were different views on the question of China. See 'We can Give a "Friendly" China our Cooperation – Thanat', *Bangkok Post*, 18 September 1971.

120 There was some speculation in Bangkok that Pridi Phanomyong was an intermediary between Thanat and the Chinese. See Parker, 'Untying Thailand', 334. Terrill suggests otherwise, that it was through a French envoy to Beijing who knew Thanat very well and visited him on his way to take up the China post. Thanat did have a meeting with Pridi at an Embassy reception in Paris. However, Pridi was unable or unwilling to act as a go-between. Ross Terrill, 'Reports and Comment – Thailand', *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1972, 7–8.

121 'Beijing Responds to "Dialogue" Plan', *Bangkok Post*, 6 October 1971.

122 Suthichai, 'Thai-China Talks Likely'.

123 'Beijing Responds to "Dialogue" Plan'.

Thanat's claims, American troops would withdraw from Thailand with the peace settlement of the Vietnam War. In return, China was to stick strictly to its Five Principles of Coexistence and a policy of noninterference in Thailand, thereby ending its support of insurgencies.¹²⁴ By that time, the beginning of a breakthrough in Thai–Chinese relations emerged. Critically, on 25 October 1971, the PRC was given Taiwan's seat at the UN. Thailand could now make direct contact with the Chinese at the UN, rather than via third parties.

4.3.2. The PRC's Entry into the UN

The admission of the PRC to the UN was a vital moment in the development of Thai–Chinese relations. At the outset, the Thai Government had had a strong position against Mainland Chinese representation. Giving a statement at the UN General Assembly in November 1969, Anand Panyarachun, Thai Ambassador to the UN, said that Communist China still maintained its 'hostile behavior and inflexible policy', and had not given up its 'aggressive proclivities and expansionist tendencies' towards the neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia, including Thailand. As he put it:

Since its assumption of the reins of Government on the Chinese Mainland, the Beijing regime has conducted a continuing and vicious campaign against this world body. It has defied the United Nations by acts which contravene the latter and the spirit of the Charter. The People's Republic of China has, by word and deed, demonstrated its unwillingness to refrain in its international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State.¹²⁵

In November 1970, Anand reiterated this narrative at the UN General Assembly, by asserting that 'we have seen no evidence that would qualify the People's Republic of China as a peaceloving State'. 'In our view', he claimed, 'the People's Republic of China has so far not shown that it was willing or able to accept the obligations as contained in the Charter of our Organization', in particular no respect for the principle of nonintervention

¹²⁴ Terrill, 'Reports and Comment – Thailand', 7–8.

¹²⁵ Statement by Thai representative Anand Panyarachun in the UN General Assembly on Chinese representation in the UN, 10 November 1969, in Jain, *China and Thailand*, 163–66.

in the domestic affairs of other states. Accordingly, Thailand continued to hold the view that the Republic of China, or Taiwan, was entitled to retain its seat in the UN.¹²⁶

By the mid-1971, a changing global balance of power, in particular the prospect of Sino-US rapprochement, revived the debate regarding China's UN membership among many countries, including Thailand. The Thai Government could not afford to stand idly by, and developed a 'two-China' policy. Thailand, it was decided, would not oppose the admission of the PRC into the UN, yet would vote to retain Nationalist China, or the Republic of China (ROC), in the international organisation.¹²⁷ As Thanom told Parliament in August:

[if] there is a majority vote for Communist China to enter the United Nations, we will not protest. But we cannot support the ouster of Nationalist China because we are old friends.¹²⁸

However, in official discourses, Thailand did not subscribe to a 'two-China' policy because the policy was rejected by both the Communist China and Nationalist China. There was only one China.¹²⁹ In a statement at the UN General Assembly in September 1971, Thanat asserted:

It is indeed a fact that both Beijing and Taiwan firmly adhere to the concept of 'one China'. Other countries, such as Thailand, likewise believe in the unity and integrity of all sovereign states, and it is hoped that time will bring an accommodation to the conflicting claims of the parties concerned.¹³⁰

In brief, though acknowledging de jure One-China policy, Thailand de facto shifted its position towards the dual representation in the UN.

On 10 September 1971, the Thai National Security Council chaired by Prime Minister Thanom made an official decision that Thailand would vote for Beijing's admission to the UN while voting to retain Taiwan inside the world body.¹³¹ According to Thanat, the council realised that

126 Statement by Thai representative Anand Panyarachun in the UN General Assembly on Chinese representation in the UN, 19 November 1970, in Jain, *China and Thailand*, 172–74.

127 'China Policy "to Suit Thailand"', *Bangkok Post*, 7 August 1971.

128 *Bangkok Post*, 27 August 1971.

129 'Beijing Attacks Govt Stand', *Bangkok Post*, 19 September 1971.

130 Statement by Thai representative Thanat Khoman in the UN General Assembly, 30 September 1971, in Jain, *China and Thailand*, 182.

131 'Big Decision on China: Thailand to Vote for Beijing in UN', *Bangkok Post*, 11 September 1971; 'FM Hints at China Ties', *The Nation*, 15 September 1971.

Communist China's admission into the UN would ease world tensions as Beijing would be offered the opportunity to observe the UN Charter. For Thailand, moreover, Beijing's entry to the UN would provide an opportunity for direct dialogue without the necessity of back-channel diplomacy via third parties. With Communist China in the UN, Thailand would be able to get a better sense of Chinese attitudes and be provided with opportunities for ending a Chinese-sponsored 'war of national liberation' in Thailand. The council concluded that Thailand, regardless of its vote for Communist China in the UN, would not follow up with either trade or diplomatic relations with China in the immediate future.¹³² It also banned any individual visits or travel to China.

With regard to the dual representation of the Chinese at the UN, Thanat said that it was a Chinese problem, which both Communist and Nationalist China needed to settle on their own. Thanat saw Taiwan's UN membership as a moral question. As he put it, 'we feel morally bound to support Taiwan membership due to our good relationship since the end of the war'.¹³³ Before Thanat left for the UN in New York, Thailand had not yet decided whether it would co-sponsor the American resolution for admission of Communist China into the UN and the retention of the Nationalist China in the international body.¹³⁴

Parenthetically, at the UN General Assembly sessions, there were two resolutions regarding the Chinese representation. One was the Albanian resolution, which proposed to seat Beijing in the UN and oust Taiwan. The Chinese Communist Government showed clearly that it wanted to enter the UN on the terms of the Albanian resolution, which meant 'restoration to China of its rightful place in the UN'.¹³⁵ The second resolution was the American dual representation resolution, which called for the admission of Communist China in the UN and for consideration of the expulsion of the ROC as an 'important question' requiring two-thirds majority vote in the General Assembly.

A Thai delegation headed by Thanat left to attend the UN General Assembly, which began on 21 September. This included Thai Ambassador to the UN, Anand Panyarachun; Thai Ambassador to the Netherlands,

132 'Big Decision on China: Thailand to Vote for Beijing in UN'; 'Talks in House First: Opposition Backs China Policy', *Bangkok Post*, 12 September 1971.

133 'FM: We Back China's Entry', *Bangkok Post*, 18 September 1971.

134 'Gen Sa-nga Explains Policy', *Bangkok Post*, 16 September 1971.

135 'Beijing Attacks Govt Stand'.

Sompong Sucharitkul; Deputy Secretary-General of the Cabinet, Dusit Boontham and Secretary to the Foreign Minister, ML Pirapongse Kasemsri.¹³⁶ While in New York, Thanat decided to co-sponsor the American dual representation resolution and vote for China's UN membership, while at the same time reaffirming his support for the continued membership of Taiwan in the UN.¹³⁷ According to Deputy Prime Minister Praphas Charusathien, Thailand decided to co-sponsor the American resolution because:

1. Communist China has a population of over 700 million people and should not be kept out of the UN. Because of its size, it should sit in the Security Council.
2. Thailand has diplomatic and friendly relations with Nationalist China, which is a founder member of the UN.¹³⁸

Speaking at the UN General Assembly on 22 October 1971, Thanat as the Thai representative said that the question and reality of Chinese representation was felt more by Thailand due to its proximity. As he put it:

We are, in fact, dealing with something that touches upon tenuous threads of Asian political life as well as the precarious balance of forces both within the Asian and Pacific region and in the outside world.

He emphasised the principle of universality in his speech, noting that the principle had been invoked to justify the seating of Beijing. Thanat stressed that the same principle should be applied with equal force to the 14 million people of Taiwan. As he asserted:

any proposal which would result in the denial of representation of that entity in the UN is an unavoidable infringement of the very same principle and will not bring us any nearer to the goal of universality of membership of the UN.¹³⁹

136 Deputy Foreign Minister Sa-nga Kittikachorn joined the team later to serve as head of the delegation when the Foreign Minister returned to Bangkok before the end of the UN session. 'Thais to Key UN Meet in 9 Days', *The Nation*, 5 September 1971.

137 'Govt Will Back US Stance', *Bangkok Post*, 24 September 1971.

138 'Thailand to Keep Taps on China', *Bangkok Post*, 28 September 1971. See also 'Praphas Opts for Beijing Seat in UN', *The Nation*, 1 September 1971.

139 'FM Thanat Appeals for Two Chinas', *Bangkok Post*, 24 October 1971. See also Statement by Thai representative Thanat Khoman in the UN General Assembly on Chinese representation in the UN, 22 October 1971, in Jain, *China and Thailand*, Doc. 193.

Beijing's entry, even on its own terms, could not undo the reality of Nationalist China. For Thailand, dual representation was the only logical solution, at least in the short term, until the Chinese people could resolve the question for themselves. As Thanat put it:

That is why my Government has decided to support the representation of the People's Republic of China in both the Assembly and the Security Council. If, however, we also support the continued representation of the Republic of China in the Organization, it is because Thailand has had friendly and normal relations with [Taiwan] and there is no valid justification to do away with them.¹⁴⁰

Thanat stated:

ultimately it should be recognized that divergence between the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China is strictly a Chinese affair and must and can only be resolved by the Chinese people themselves, certainly not by outsiders or even the UN.

Finally, he expressed the hope that the peoples of the UN 'will live as one world united under the sign of universality'.¹⁴¹ Thailand thus supported China's UN admission despite wanting the representation of Taiwan to continue.

On 25 October, following the defeat of the American resolution, the General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to admit the PRC into the UN and expel Taiwan under the Albanian resolution, by a historic 76–35 vote. Sino-US rapprochement – most notably, Henry Kissinger's second and public visit to Beijing in October during the UN sessions and the announcement of Nixon's impending visit to Beijing – was one of the key factors in securing the vote. Rather than voting against the Albanian resolution, Thailand abstained.¹⁴² Thanat explained Thailand's decision by claiming that, first, this was a prearranged government decision to record an abstention if the US 'important question' resolution was

140 Statement by Thai representative Thanat Khoman in the UN General Assembly on Chinese representation in the UN, 22 October 1971, in Jain, *China and Thailand*, 184.

141 'FM Thanat Appeals for Two Chinas'. See also Statement by Thai representative Thanat Khoman in the UN General Assembly on Chinese representation in the UN, 22 October 1971, in Jain, *China and Thailand*, Doc. 193.

142 'Beijing's Victory: Drama at the UN', *Bangkok Post*, 27 September 1971; *Bangkok World*, 26 October 1971.

defeated.¹⁴³ Second, he also claimed that the abstention was not a signal of opposition to Communist China's entry, but an objection to the expulsion of Taiwan.¹⁴⁴ As he put it later, 'if we had voted against the resolution, we would have been down on record as against admission of the PRC to the UN'.¹⁴⁵ On a practical level, following China's UN entry, Thailand would have to allow Mainland Chinese delegations into Bangkok for meetings of the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) and other UN bodies.

China's admission to the UN brought forth increased pressure on the Thai Government to readjust its foreign policy towards Mainland China. Thai public opinion clamoured for improved relations with Beijing.¹⁴⁶ Meanwhile, three Members of Parliament, including Khaisaeng Sooksai (Peoples Party; Nakhon Phanom), Sanam Thirasirichote (Socialist Economic Front; Khon Kaen) and Somkid Srisangkhom (Social Democratic Party; Udon Thani) sent a cable to Chairman Mao Zedong congratulating him on the PRC's admission.¹⁴⁷

Shortly after the UN meeting in late October, Thanat had a stopover in Rome on his way back to Bangkok where he was granted an audience with Pope Paul in the Vatican. One Thai newspaper, *Phim Thai*, claimed that Thanat, accompanied by Major General Chatichai Choonhavan, Ambassador to Switzerland and Yugoslavia, would make a secret trip to Beijing to negotiate with the Chinese leaders.¹⁴⁸ Thanat denied the rumour that he would make a trip like Kissinger's secret trip, to Beijing on his return to Thailand.¹⁴⁹ When asked by reporters whether it was true that Foreign Minister Thanat had some talks with the Chinese trade delegation in Rome, Thanom replied, 'Such a report was unfounded and Thailand would not take the initiative to trade with China in the immediate future'. Questioned about what decision his government would make if China wished to open trade relations, Thanom replied that such trade would be certainly be beneficial to the country, but the government was not sure that China had the intentions to trade with

143 'Govt Calls Meet on China', *Bangkok Post*, 1 November 1971.

144 'US Move "Too Late" – Thanat', *Bangkok Post*, 27 October 1971.

145 'China Ready to Begin Talks', *Bangkok Post*, 13 November 1971.

146 'Three MPs Send Cable to Mao', *Bangkok Post*, 30 October 1971; 'MPs who Cabled Mao may Face Charges', *Bangkok Post*, 2 November 1971.

147 'Three MPs Send Cable to Mao'; 'MPs who Cabled Mao may Face Charges'.

148 'Thailand Negotiates Red China: Thanat Flies to Beijing', *Phim Thai*, 26 October 1971; 'Thanat Flies to Rome – Meet Chatichai', *Phim Thai*, 27 October 1971.

149 'Govt Calls Meet on China'.

Thailand. He insisted that a 'wait and see' attitude would be accurate in dealing with China for a time being.¹⁵⁰ Due to the urgency of the changing international situation, Thanom asked Thanat to cut short his stay in Rome.¹⁵¹

Upon his return, a historic meeting of the Thai National Security Council (NSC) was held on 3 November 1971 to discuss the Chinese admission. While Thailand continued to maintain friendly relations with Taiwan, Prime Minister Thanom raised doubts on China: 'Red China has just been made a member of the United Nations and we still do not know whether she will respect the spirit of the UN Charter'.¹⁵² Nonetheless, the NSC decided to establish friendlier relations with the Chinese. The Council agreed in principle to consider removing the ban on trade with Beijing by abolishing the Revolutionary Party Announcement No. 53; to relax existing anticommunist laws; and to allow visits to Communist China of invited sports and cultural missions. The council reportedly approved of Thanat's efforts to ascertain the Chinese Government's position – either indirectly or through third parties. It identified the UN ECAFE annual convention, to be held during 15–27 March 1972 in Bangkok, as an opportunity for the first official talks between Thai and Chinese representatives.¹⁵³

However, the NSC ruled out diplomatic relations with Beijing in the near future, and did not allow individual and political figures to visit Beijing.¹⁵⁴ As Thanom proclaimed, 'the softening of the government attitude toward Mainland China is aimed at paving the way for further relations with that country after it has been admitted to the United Nations'.¹⁵⁵ He said that trade with China would only be allowed on a government-to-government basis in the initial stages. Trade relations between private groups continued to be banned. Thanom confirmed that the government would continue to fight communist infiltration and insurgency, but would no longer consider China as the '*enemy of the nation*'.¹⁵⁶ Although the NSC, led by the military elite, had signalled the necessity of foreign policy transformation, its ultimate aim remained the same: cautious, 'go-slow' diplomacy.

150 'Thanom Denies Report', *Bangkok World*, 26 October 1971.

151 Suthichai Yoon, 'Thailand's New Approach Towards China', *The Nation*, 3 November 1971.

152 'Too Early to Open Ties with Beijing', *Bangkok Post*, 30 October 1971.

153 'Official Contact with China only in March', *The Nation*, 4 November 1971. See Kanchit Kumragse, 'China and ECAFE', *The Nation*, 3 November 1971.

154 'China Trade Ban to Go', *Bangkok Post*, 4 November 1971.

155 'PM Confirms China Decision', *Bangkok Post*, 5 November 1971.

156 'Thanom Paves Way for China Trade', *Bangkok Post*, 10 November 1971. My emphasis.

Many military leaders vocally echoed this stance, and indeed some publicly contradicted the NSC's recommendations, especially on trade. General Praphas Charusathien, Deputy Prime Minister, stressed that there could be no friendly diplomatic relations unless the 'war of national liberation against Thailand' was renounced: 'We have not shown any hostility towards Beijing. But the Chinese Communists have been supporting the insurgents here'.¹⁵⁷ He commented that the admission of Communist China into the UN did 'not mean that Thailand should at once set up diplomatic relations with Beijing'. On the contrary, resuming diplomatic relations 'should be taken calmly, as a matter of course'.¹⁵⁸ Praphas said that the Thai Government would move towards a 'status of relations on a basis of equality' in a stage-by-stage strategy. In its step-by-step plan, the Thai Government would first permit social contacts between Thai diplomats and Communist Chinese officials. Evaluating Beijing's attitude from the response of the Chinese officials at informal meetings, the government would then consider the next move, namely the exchange of sport teams, such as table tennis. Subsequently, it would discuss other cultural exchanges. Praphas said that when the development of informal relations proved satisfactory, the government would consider the advantages and disadvantages of trading with Mainland China. At the outset, he would not allow any private companies to trade with Beijing directly, but through government agencies. As he put it, 'we will not plunge into trade with any country if it looks like we are going to import much more than export'.¹⁵⁹ Only when the government considered it time to trade with Mainland China would it take the necessary legislative measures to abrogate Revolutionary Party Announcement No. 53. There were, for Praphas, 'two kinds of people', who wanted Thailand to immediately establish diplomatic relations with Beijing: 'those who are panicky and those who are ignorant'. Both these people 'want Thailand to go to Beijing and kowtow to the Chinese leaders'.¹⁶⁰

157 'Govt Sanctions China Dialogue', *Bangkok Post*, 11 November 1971.

158 'Govt Sanctions China Dialogue'.

159 'Govt Sanctions China Dialogue'.

160 'Govt Sanctions China Dialogue'. Similarly, despite his attempt to make contact with the Chinese delegation to the UN General Assembly, Deputy Foreign Minister Sa-nga admitted that there was no need to expedite diplomatic links with Beijing because, 'the Chinese people are also interested in having friendly relations with us, we do not have to hurry up such relationship'. He even threatened to resign if Thailand exchanged diplomatic relations with the PRC: 'Sa-nga to Contact Beijing at UN', *Bangkok Post*, 9 November 1971; 'Govt Won't Rush into Beijing Links – Sa-nga', *Bangkok Post*, 16 November 1971.

Thanat, on the other hand, now sought to expedite diplomatic talks with the Chinese. Having been informed by French intermediaries of China's readiness and willingness to enter a dialogue with Thailand, Thanat declared humorously, 'we will meet the Beijing representatives any place mutually convenient except, perhaps, the North and the South Poles'. Instead of contact via third parties, the direct dialogue would be conducted on an ambassadorial level, which was 'the most appropriate level of contact at the moment'.¹⁶¹

Thanat continued:

We will inform the People's Republic of China that we wish to live in a peaceful, neighbourly fashion with all countries. We would like to see peace in the neighbourhood and no interference from the outside.

With regard to the Chinese demand on Thailand to sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan, Thanat said, 'we will have to find out how categorical, absolute, relative, inflexible or flexible the Chinese Communists are on this matter'.¹⁶² He hoped that rapprochement with China would decrease its support of the communist insurgents in Thailand.¹⁶³

However, referring to reports that Mainland China had begun to show interest in a dialogue with Thailand, Thanom remained unsure of Beijing's real attitude because the response was mainly made through a third party.¹⁶⁴ In short, the military leaders remained sceptical about the emerging discourse of détente with China. On 17 November 1971, Thanom launched a coup d'état against his own government, ousting Thanat from the MFA. Heightened discursive anxiety ended with the pre-existing Cold War hegemonic discourse asserting its dominance over détente.

The military coup in November 1971 put an end to the three-year secret diplomacy led by Thanat Khoman, whose aim was to contact the Chinese and ascertain the conditions of possibility for détente.¹⁶⁵ For the military

¹⁶¹ 'China Ready to Begin Talks'.

¹⁶² 'China Ready to Begin Talks'.

¹⁶³ 'Beijing & Peace in Asia', *Bangkok Post*, 18 November 1971.

¹⁶⁴ 'Thanom Paves Way for China Trade'.

¹⁶⁵ According to the American documents, Nixon's reaction to the 1971 coup was relatively positive. One reason for US endorsement of the coup was that Kissinger did not want Thanat to pre-empt him in establishing relations with Mao. Shortly after the coup, Kissinger reported Thanat's dismissal to Nixon, who replied that 'this is what matters'. Quoted in Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead, 'The Cold War and Thai Democratization', in *Southeast Asia and the Cold War*, ed. Albert Lau (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 227.

elite, it was unnecessary to hasten diplomatic ties with Communist China. However, as the following chapter will demonstrate, the process of Sino–Thai dialogue was only deferred, not deterred. One significant discursive shift emerged: détente with China. That is, Thailand began to regard China not as the ‘enemy of the nation’, as Premier Thanom himself put it. Personal contacts between Thai and Chinese diplomats also began and increased at the UN.

4.4. Conclusion

In an interview in the *Bangkok Post* in early November 1971, Pridi Phanomyong said in Paris that he urged the Thai Government to recognise the PRC immediately. He was quoted as saying ‘the period of wait-and-see has ended. The time has come for a decision’. Thailand, he believed, ‘has already waited too long’.

Now that People’s Republic of China has been voted into the rightful place in the United Nations by the overwhelming majority. It is placed in an advantageous position over us in any negotiations on diplomatic or any other relations.

Because China was recently recognised as a de facto and de jure big power, Thailand, as ‘a small nation’, could ‘exercise the balance of power by close friendly relations with all the big powers’ and ‘all nations, irrespective of ideological differences’. ‘We must be friends of all and foes of none’, he argued. Pridi contended that ‘let us remember the ancient Thai saying about going into the jungle with the courage to face a tiger’.¹⁶⁶

This chapter has shown how the diplomatic practices of flexible diplomacy with the two communist powers were gradually introduced by détente proponents, especially Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman. Thanat’s efforts shaped critical events and improved the international situation between Thailand and the communist powers. The work of Thanat and his protégés in establishing new diplomatic practices set a condition of possibility for a more comprehensive détente. In other words, détente rendered many practices, which had previously been unthinkable, possible. This included trade and air transport relations with the Soviet Union and back-channel contacts with the PRC. Détente marked the beginning of a shift from

¹⁶⁶ Theh, ‘Pridi: Recognize China Now’.

a logic of enmity to a logic of friendship. The next chapter will situate Thai détente within the domestic context of a power struggle. It was a clash of discourses, between the hegemonic discourse of Cold War militarism and the emergent discourse of détente. This clash precipitated the coup of 1971 which, as this chapter argues, in the long run only deferred, rather than deterred, flexible diplomacy.

Before proceeding to the next chapter, the different natures and characteristics of Thai–Soviet and Thai–Chinese relations should be noted. First, the Thai state in the Cold War considered the Soviet Union and the PRC as posing differing degrees of threat. That is, Thai elites generally perceived the PRC as a primary threat to its national interests, while seeing the USSR as a lesser one. This was largely because the Chinese directly supported the communist insurgency in Thailand. Second, the USSR and China had different diplomatic histories with Thailand. On the one hand, Communist China did not have diplomatic relations with Thailand, and, more importantly, Thailand had established and maintained close relations with another China, namely Taiwan. On the other hand, despite a brief interruption after the Bolshevik Revolution, Thailand had maintained continual and business-as-usual diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union from 1941, with the exchange of their ambassadors since the end of the Second World War. Third, in Thailand, there were very few Russians, while there were a large number of ethnic Chinese who had long been present, and to an extent had assimilated with the local Thai people. In this sense, relations with China were perceived both as an opportunity (a cultural and commercial interconnectedness) and danger (a threat of communist infiltration). These differences between these two bilateral relations in large part explain why Thailand's diplomatic practices toward the Soviet Union and China proceeded at different paces, at least at the beginning: rapprochement with China was far slower than readjustment with the Soviet Union. The discourse of détente emerged within the context of these historical complexities and legacies.

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