5

Interregnum – 1971: A Coup against Diplomacy?

The decision to send Prasit [Kanchanawat] and the ping-pong team to China [in 1972] is a major turning point in the process of redirecting Bangkok's policy toward Beijing that was inaugurated by former foreign minister Thanat in 1968.

– Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)¹

On 17 November 1971, the Thai military junta, led by Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, launched a coup d'état against itself, ending the short-lived democracy. One of the first acts of the new regime was to oust Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Over the previous three years, an emerging discourse of détente had challenged the existing hegemony of Cold War rhetoric. The military and conservative elite remained deeply committed to the certainties provided by pro-Americanism, anticommunism and antagonism towards the Soviet Union and China. Proponents of détente, led by Thanat, questioned these certainties. Adjusting to a shift in global and regional power relations, they sought alternative diplomatic practices. Both within the elite, and through popular channels, they spoke openly about a new 'flexible diplomacy' and in doing so instigated what might be described as a series of 'discursive struggles'. While existing scholarship has tended to

1 Central Intelligence Agency, *Central Intelligence Bulletin*, 4 August 1972, 5.

characterise the 1971 coup as a coup against democracy, this chapter sees it equally as a coup against diplomacy.² The dismissal of Thanat as foreign minister was a clear attempt to pull back from the move toward détente.

However, by early 1972, Thailand risked being left behind. Détente was becoming an international phenomenon driven largely by the US, China and the Soviet Union. In February 1972, US President Richard Nixon made his famous visit to China, and formally established a course toward Sino-US rapprochement. By then, the authority of new discursive practices within Thailand was already partially secured. This chapter demonstrates how the post-1971 military regime was, implicitly if not explicitly, hemmed in by the discursive practices established prior to the coup. What began as an attempt to halt the progress of détente saw 'flexible diplomacy' continue but at a reduced pace. While a more formalised approach toward normalising relations was put on the backburner, developments such as ping-pong and economic diplomacy ensured it continued to smoulder. In truth, the coup only deferred rather than deterred Thai détente. By 1972, the process of Sino-Thai rapprochement was, therefore, already well established.

This chapter begins by reviewing the discursive struggle that preceded the 1971 coup. It then moves to looking at the coup itself, and after that discusses how, despite the coup attempting to preserve hegemonic discourse, small moves toward détente diplomacy continued in the shape of the famous 'ping-pong' diplomacy and the relaxation of trade restrictions. The chapter considers how diplomatic practice continued to evolve in this period.

5.1. Discourses at War

This section situates the newly emerging discourse of détente within the discursive struggles of Thai politics between 1969 and 1971. In particular, it focuses on the tussles that took place within the Cabinet, between Thanat and the House of Parliament, and between Thanat and the press.

2 See Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2007), 228. The exception includes Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead, *Kanmueng Thai yuk Sarit–Thanom phaitai khongsang amnat lok* [Thai Politics during Sarit–Thanom Regimes under a Global Power Structure] (Bangkok: 50 Years Foundation, The Bank of Thailand, 2007); Rapeeporn Lertwongweerachai, 'The Role of Thanat Khoman in Thai Foreign Affairs during 1958–1971' (MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2002).

It argues that these struggles were not simply between détente proponents and opponents but between those who championed a cautious approach to détente, compared with those who sought rapid progress, especially within Parliament. I argue that these discursive struggles set the conditions that made the November 1971 military coup possible.

The discourse of détente with the communist powers, initiated by Thanat, triggered policy debates and contestations among the Thai elite. This was particularly true within the military, who remained largely committed to the existing discourse of anticommunism. The general perspective of the Thai ruling elite on rapprochement with China was one of scepticism, largely due to lingering suspicion over Chinese support for the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Deputy Prime Minister General Praphas Charusathien stated in January 1971 that ‘as long as I remain in office, I would follow the present policy towards Beijing’, and ‘would not stand on two boats’.³ For him, Thailand would not recognise both the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan at the same time. The government’s position was further expounded by Thanom’s younger brother and Deputy Foreign Minister Sa-nga Kittikachorn, who said that ‘as long as Beijing pursues a hostile policy towards Thailand it would be “too early” to plan any change in the existing policy’.⁴

The emerging discourse of détente was also further complicated by the new domestic context of democratisation. The promulgation of the eighth Constitution in June 1968, and its concomitant parliamentary election, held on 10 February 1969, unleashed political debate and free speech both within political parties and the public sphere. While the military-dominated United Thai People’s Party (UTPP), coupled with other pro-military parties, controlled Parliament, other political parties that had been banned in 1958 were extremely active in questioning and criticising various areas – including foreign affairs. Regarding détente, ‘the most important problem’, as one local newspaper put it, was ‘that rapprochement with Red China remains ambiguous. So far it was not understandable. Some say this and some say that. It is hard to apprehend’.⁵ In part, it was the confused and mixed messages of the government’s stated policies on the PRC that brought about the debate in the first place.

3 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.

4 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 May 1971.

5 ‘Thailand in One Week’, *Daily News*, 13 June 1971.

The main target of this debate was Foreign Minister Thanat, who reacted and responded to those who criticised détente in a temperamental manner, exacerbating an already fierce debate. This was no doubt made worse by the fact that in a semi-democratic regime, Parliament was more comfortable attacking the military regime's foreign minister than the military leaders themselves.

Moreover, the debate was not about Thanat per se, but rather was underpinned by discursive struggles concerned with how Thailand should respond to the provocative question of the communist powers, and in particular the PRC. This can be represented in three sets of struggles: those between Thanat and the press, Thanat and the parliamentarians, and struggles within the Cabinet itself.

The first struggle, the debate between Thanat and the press, had begun with the promulgation of détente policy towards the communist countries, described in the previous chapter. The latest and perhaps harshest confrontation came to a head in May 1971 when Thanat alleged that certain journalists might have taken bribes from foreign sources or embassies to attack his flexible foreign policy towards Communist China. Some reporters claimed the foreign minister linked the *Siam Rath* newspaper to his allegation.⁶ This prompted *Siam Rath's* publisher, MR Kukrit Pramoj, to write a front-page statement demanding Thanat to name the 'corrupt journalist or journalists'. He ended by saying that *should* the foreign minister fail to come up with the identification, 'the people would not have confidence in Thanat Khoman as the Foreign Minister'.⁷

The situation deteriorated when Thanat appeared on TV Channel 4 on 19 May, and attacked some journalists who had repeatedly criticised him. As he put it, 'these newspapermen have become the instruments of the aliens and have written reports antagonistic to government policy especially that of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs'.⁸ The four press associations – including the Press Association, the Reporters Association, the Journalists Association and the Regional Press Association of Thailand – issued

6 Suthichai Yoon, 'Thanat Versus the Press', *The Nation*, 15 June 1971 found in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/35, the National Archive of Thailand (TNA), Bangkok, 21.

7 Quoted in Suthichai, 'Thanat Versus the Press'; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/35, TNA, Bangkok, 21.

8 'Press Group Refutes Thanat's remarks', *Bangkok Post*, 23 May 1971.

a joint statement demanding that Thanat should name the ‘misbehaving journalists’ while describing his speech as ‘an act of temper from a person unfit to hold the post of foreign affairs minister’.⁹

This prompted Thanat to meet with the presidents of the four press associations in order to ease tensions. A ‘joint communiqué’ was issued, following their luncheon meeting, stating the foreign minister’s faith in the press. The supposed compromise nevertheless backfired when many reporters angrily claimed that the communiqué had been made without first consulting the associations’ members. Some local newspapers maintained their criticism against Thanat’s policy towards China as well as his ‘hot-headed’ personality. Some even charged Thanat with having been bribed by the Chinese communists.¹⁰

In response, Thanat reportedly put strong pressure on the Thanom Government to make charges against three journalists. On 7 June 1971, the police department arrested Nopporn Bunyarit, editor of *Siam Rath*; Kampol Vajarapol, director of *Thai Rath*; and Prasarn Meefuengsart, a *Thai Rath* columnist on charges of ‘defaming the character of a government official on duty’. Prasarn, alias ‘Krashae’,¹¹ described Thanat as a very ‘temperamental person’, who was ‘unsuited for a position which requires a cool-headed person’, and pledged to fight for the freedom of the press to the end. Also, the four press associations immediately held a meeting and decided to boycott Thanat in all newspapers by banning publication of all interviews with, and pictures of, the foreign minister until the controversy was settled or the foreign minister’s term complete.¹²

This controversy dragged on for months until the coup in November. Despite the personal nature of the public wrangling between Thanat and the press, it was clear that the underlying tensions concerned the ongoing debate on Thai foreign policy towards China.

9 ‘Press Group Refutes Thanat’s Remarks’. See also ‘Press Statement on Thanat’, *Bangkok Post* 25 May 1971.

10 For example, Prasarn Meefuengsart, a prominent *Thai Rath* columnist, claimed in his column that Thanat trusted Communist China too easily and that he had received bribes from that country. After his arrest, he disclosed that ‘the first comment I copied from a *Straits Times*’ editorial and the second is my own’. ‘Newsmen Move Against Thanat’, *Bangkok World*, 8 June 1971; *Thai Rath*, 19 May 1971.

11 ‘Krashae’ in Thai connotes homemade liquor or spirit. “Krashae” – Thai Rath’s Columnist Extraordinary’, *Bangkok Post*, 8 June 1971.

12 ‘Journalists Free on 50,000 Baht Bail’, *Bangkok Post*, 8 June 1971.

The second debate was between Thanat and Parliament. Coupled with the press, many Members of Parliament attacked Thanat's temperamental personality, and urged the Thanom Government to dismiss him. Once again, the underlying conflict was in regard to his policy toward China. Some members of Parliament remained sceptical of the thaw in relations. Leader of Democrat Party, MR Seni Pramoj, for example, said that 'you offer the Communists a hand and they grab your whole body. They don't understand us'. However, at the same time he conceded that 'China is there whether we like it or not, like the moon. Her entry into the community of nations is inevitable'.¹³

In August, Thanat was questioned by MP Praseng Nuengchamnon (Independent, Chon Buri), who asked whether the government intended to 'take action against the Foreign Minister for having explicitly supported Communism through his declaration that he will open diplomatic relations with a Communist country (Communist China), without governmental authority'.¹⁴ Thanat made the observation that the question would violate the House Meeting Rules and Regulations, which precipitated a protest by a number of MPs who demanded Thanat formally withdraw his observation. Dissatisfied by Thanat's replies, a group of over 40 MPs, including those from the UTPP, walked out. They also sought to pressure the prime minister to remove Thanat from the Cabinet.¹⁵ The motion was withdrawn shortly after Thanom defended Thanat during a meeting with the UTPP. He claimed that Thanat had

carried out his functions and duties according to the government's policy with the interests of the nation in mind. Every time before he leaves for an official trip, he always comes to me for policy.

Several MPs continued to argue that Thanat's temper was an obstacle to better outcomes in diplomacy.¹⁶

However, many MPs in both government and opposition parties supported opening a dialogue with China. This second discursive struggle was primarily, therefore, concerned more with both the extent and speed with which the Thai Government should pursue the policy. One group of parliamentarians put pressure on the Thanom Government to

13 'Seni: We're unprepared', *Bangkok Post*, 16 May 1971, 2.

14 'Question to be Asked about Foreign Minister', *The Nation*, 5 August 1971.

15 'MPs Demand Cabinet Changes', *Bangkok Post*, 6 August 1971, 1.

16 'Thanom Defends FM: Minister Fights Off Crisis', *Bangkok Post*, 11 August 1971, 1, 3.

expedite the Sino–Thai rapprochement in the form of commercial and diplomatic ties with the Chinese. In August 1971, 70 MPs called on the prime minister to repeal the trade ban on China on the grounds that the Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53, banning trade with all communist countries, especially China – initiated by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in 1959 – was not effective due to the unstoppable inflow of Chinese goods into Thailand.¹⁷

MP Yuang Iamsila (UTPP, Udon Thani) went further, suggesting that the prime minister should visit Beijing. He said the Thai Government should not send anybody ‘like Dr. Kissinger’ to Beijing to ‘fish’ for an invitation, but wait for the Chinese prime minister to send one: ‘When we get an invitation, we, the UTPP, will ask the Prime Minister to make the trip himself’. ‘Our Prime Minister should even visit Beijing ahead of President Nixon. We are closer’. He added, ‘we should not wait-and-see, as advocated by some government and opposition leaders, but get moving’.¹⁸ Another MP also asked the government to allow him to visit China, though Thanom told Parliament that he could not allow any MPs to go on a fact-finding mission there.¹⁹

Parliamentarians found the way in which Thanat and the MFA were dealing with the Chinese neither fast nor efficient. In other words, Parliament favoured a ‘go-fast’ (*pai-reu*) diplomacy as opposed to the ‘go-slow’ ‘wait-and-see’ attitude of the military regime. Unfortunately, Thanat’s form of détente was considered to be in the middle of these two diplomatic practices.

After the Albanian resolution passed in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on 25 October 1971, three MPs cabled congratulations to Mao Zedong on China’s admission to the UN.²⁰ Some parliamentarians now called for the resignation of Foreign Minister Thanat due to his failure to vote with the international community. MP Sanam Thirasirichote (Socialist Economic Front, Khon Kaen) proposed an urgent session of Parliament to discuss foreign policy in light of the Chinese entry to the UN, stated that ‘Thanat should have already resigned because he

17 Some Chinese products were illegally imported into Thailand mainly through Hong Kong. *Bangkok Post*, 5 November 1971.

18 ‘Pressure on for PM to Visit Beijing’, *Bangkok Post*, 26 July 1971.

19 ‘Thanom Bars MPs from China Visit’, *Bangkok Post*, 27 August 1971, 1.

20 ‘Three MPs Send Cable to Mao’, *Bangkok Post*, 30 October 1971, 1; ‘MPs who Cabled Mao may Face Charges’, *Bangkok Post*, 2 November 1971, 1.

blundered and should not be given the opportunity to continue doing so'. The motion also criticised Thailand's support for the US resolution of the two Chinas in the UN, asserting that it was against world opinion. The motion suggested that Parliament should be consulted before the government formulated a foreign policy. It was supported by many members from both the government and opposition parties.²¹

What made the debates in Parliament relatively distinct, therefore, was that rather than being concerned with whether détente should be pursued, they were more preoccupied with the speed of the process. It can be argued that criticism from Parliament was simultaneously both anti-Thanat and pro-détente. In this sense, strong voices in the Thai Parliament were generally *pro-Chinese*.

The last and arguably most important struggle was within the Cabinet itself. This was much more contested than is normally acknowledged. For Thanat, a high degree of confidence in his position, coupled with Thanom's 'green light' signals and gestures of support, fuelled the progress of a cautious rapprochement with the PRC. Well aware of the Cold War discursive hegemony, Thanat recognised the need to be discreet and to move cautiously within the military-led government. He routinely asserted that Thailand should not recognise the PRC until they had indicated their intention to curtail support for communist insurgencies in Thailand.

Nonetheless, the foreign minister provoked public debate and strong criticism of Thai foreign policy toward the communist powers. The military saw this policy as unnecessary and potentially reckless and dangerous to Thailand's security and economic interests. By the end of May 1971, Cold Warriors like Thanom and Praphas, who were much more hesitant about the haste with which Thanat expedited the diplomatic process, specifically ordered the MFA to follow 'go-slow' (*pai-cha*) diplomacy. They claimed that any contacts with China would not be possible until such a time that China ceased supporting insurgent movements in Thailand.²²

21 'MPs Calls for Thanat to Quit FM Post', *Bangkok World*, 28 October 1971.

22 Theh Chongkhadikij, 'Govt Orders Slowdown in Beijing Thaw', *Bangkok Post*, 24 May 1971; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.2/36, TNA, Bangkok, 366.

The Thai National Security Council, chaired by Thanom, decided against opening trade relations with Communist China.²³ The council was concerned that China would not separate trade from politics. Pote Sarasin, the Minister for National Development, 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.

Consequently, for Pote, it would be better for Thailand to be cautious in developing economic relations with China and only consider closer ties ‘when Red China separates her trade from political issues’.²⁴ The government’s go-slow diplomacy, as the *Bangkok Post* put it, ‘replaced a quickened pace to seek better understanding with Communist China’.²⁵

In early November 1971, when asked by reporters whether it was true that Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman had discussed establishing trade relations with a Chinese 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 with Thailand, Thanom said that such trade would certainly be beneficial, but added that the government was not sure that China had such intentions. He insisted that a ‘wait and see’ attitude would be most appropriate in dealing with China for the time being.²⁶

This chapter argues that the target of these triple struggles was primarily Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman and his version of détente. Discursively, there were struggles between three forms of discourse, namely anticommunism, a gradual détente and a rapid détente. The discourse of anticommunism was spearheaded by military leaders while a rapid

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

24 Likewise, 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. Thus, Bunchana emphasised that if Beijing changed ‘its attitude towards us’, Thailand would change its policy. Quoted in Kim, ‘The Politics of Thailand’s Trade Relations’, 314–15.

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

26 Quoted in Kim, ‘The Politics of Thailand’s Trade Relations’, 315–16.

détente was supported by several factions in Parliament and a portion of public opinion. Thanat, who supported a gradual détente, was in the midst of these discursive struggles.

By the early 1970s, Suthichai Yoon of *The Nation* could identify two broad rival 'schools of thought', regarding Thailand's policy toward the PRC. One school clung to an existing Cold War hegemony and sought to 'make clear to China that Thailand cannot possibly establish some sort of relations with her and sacrifice Taiwan, which has been a staunch ally for more than a decade'.²⁷ Another school sought to consolidate a discourse of détente, which required 'a total overhaul of the country's approach towards China'.²⁸ Given Thailand's changing attitude toward China, which had not only been admitted into the UN but had shown 'signs of willingness to establish some dialogue with Thailand' through third parties, this approach asserted the need for a more flexible diplomacy with China.²⁹ This discourse consisted of Thanat and the MFA, who preferred a cautious rapprochement, and a number of Members of Parliament who urged for a rapid rapprochement.

5.2. 1971: A Coup against Détente?

On 17 November 1971, Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn staged a coup d'état against his own government, established military rule under the National Executive Council (NEC), and appointed himself foreign minister. This section argues that the 1971 coup was not only a coup against democracy but also, more significantly, a coup against diplomacy. It also asserts that while initially Thanom sought to freeze Sino–Thai rapprochement, changes in international circumstances, especially Nixon's trip to Beijing in February 1972, made Thai détente inevitable. Détente continued, if reluctantly, on the same course.

Upon seizing power, the military junta justified the coup on both domestic and international grounds. Domestically, the coup was to restore order and stability as well as efficient government: to 'set our house in order again'.³⁰ The underlying reason was to end the criticism from

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

28 Suthichai, 'Thailand's New Approach towards China'.

29 Suthichai, 'Thailand's New Approach towards China'.

30 'NEC to Rule 5 Years', *Bangkok Post*, 21 November, 1971, 1.

Parliament. The junta claimed that politicians were demanding economic development budgets for their local provinces, which in turn meant they sought to slash military budgets. Some members of the government's UTPP were threatening to vote against the latter unless their development projects were allocated.³¹

The criticism and obstacles of the parliamentary system annoyed the military.³² As Thanom stated in a press conference two days after the coup, 'never, in my long political career have MPs caused such trouble to government administrators as in these recent times. Some of them even attacked me over my private affairs'. He blamed the country's troubles on those 'self-seeking politicians who had interfered too much in the government to the point where it could not function smoothly and properly'. Thanom came to the conclusion that 'if there were no MPs, government administrators would certainly work more smoothly and efficiently, like the days during the time of the late Field Marshal Sarit [Thanarat]'.³³ In other words, authoritarian impatience prevailed over democratic process.

Thanom also cited the communist threat as justification for the coup. He warned that closer relations with China posed a threat, due to the large number of ethnic Chinese living in Bangkok who may have communist sympathies. As he stated, 'the situation in the country could be turmoil because it will aggravate the existing terrorist infiltration that exists in every part of the country'.³⁴ While abrogating the Constitution, the military junta declared war on crime, pollution and late-night drinking. They issued 47 major decrees, including dissolving political parties, abolishing local elections and prohibiting strikes.

On foreign policy, Thanom cited the need to forestall leftist pressure from MPs for immediate relations with China.³⁵ His task was to 'build up a stable government in full control of the country', and to 'negotiate from a position of strength with the Chinese Communists'. The NEC

31 David Morell, 'Thailand: Military Checkmate', *Asian Survey* 12, no. 2 (1972): 156–67. See also Michael L. Mezey, 'The 1971 Coup in Thailand: Understanding Why the Legislature Fails', *Asian Survey* 13, no. 3 (1973): 306–17.

32 Thak, *Thailand*, 228.

33 Thanom said that King Bhumibol, informed of the reasons for the coup, 'agreed that it was necessary to remedy the situation'. *Bangkok World*, 19 November 1971; *Times* (London), 20 November 1971.

34 'Why Marshall Thanom overthrew the Thai Government', *Times*, 19 November 1971.

35 *New York Times*, 21 November 1971.

did not consider relations with China to be an urgent matter and believed there was no necessity for trade or diplomatic relations in the near future.³⁶ General Praphas, Deputy Chairman of the NEC, echoed these sentiments. He claimed that before the seizure of power, a small but growing number of people were advocating a pro-Beijing diplomatic policy, and to move 'quickly' to establish diplomatic and trade relations with the Chinese communists.³⁷

It can be argued that the coup was intended to end the discursive struggles in Thai politics. The coup was an attempt to take absolute control over the direction of Thai foreign policy, especially towards the Communist great powers. While Thanom had given the green light to Thanat's détente, he was still reluctant to pursue détente with China. That is, he was constantly oscillating between the new discourse and a defence of Cold War discursive hegemony. He was clearly uncomfortable about the switch from an anticommunist strategy to a more flexible diplomacy.

However, the change in US foreign policy paradoxically exacerbated discursive anxiety for the Thai military junta. On the one hand, Nixon's 'peace with honor' in the Vietnam War meant, first, an increase in US troops in Thailand. By the spring of 1972, the number of US troops in Thailand had increased to 45,000. Second, the US used Thai air bases to expedite large-scale and secret bombing in Vietnam.³⁸ But, on the other hand, Nixon and Henry Kissinger pursued détente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with the PRC as leverage both in its triangular diplomacy and vis-à-vis Hanoi. While the former actions seemed to reassure Cold Warriors, who were considered to be détente opponents, the latter raised doubts, complicating Thai foreign policy and the existing discourse of anticommunism.

Nixon's historic visit to Beijing in February 1972 was a watershed event. After the long secret diplomacy and back channels spearheaded by Kissinger and his Chinese counterpart, Zhou Enlai, Sino-US rapprochement was

36 'NEC Shelves Beijing Relations', *Bangkok Post*, 25 December 1971, 1; 'NEC to Rule 5 Years', 1.

37 'No Rush Towards China', *Bangkok Post*, 29 December 1971, 2.

38 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 April 1976, 13. See Surachart Bamrungsuk, *United States Foreign Policy and Thailand Military Rule, 1947–1977* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1988); R. Sean Randolph, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950–1985* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1986), Chapter 5.

looking increasingly inevitable.³⁹ These changing contexts continued to push the Thai military junta toward improving their relations with China. A few months after the coup, the military junta announced, ‘if China is not hostile to us, we are ready to be friends and we will respond to them’.⁴⁰

Domestic developments on both sides in 1972 also made rapprochement increasingly feasible. On the Chinese side, the most radical period of the Cultural Revolution came to an end and domestic politics returned to normality. Zhou Enlai’s peaceful coexistence strategy towards Southeast Asian states was restored. This change from the Chinese side helped facilitate a fundamental reassessment of the prospect of a Sino–Thai rapprochement.⁴¹

On the Thai side, while the military regime under Thanom and Praphas had dismissed détente proponents such as Thanat, it implicitly followed a détente discourse. Though developing formal diplomatic relations with China remained a way off, due to lingering suspicion over Chinese support for communist subversion and insurgency in Thailand, the junta did agree to non-political engagement such as sports and cultural exchanges. At the same time, the Thai business community urged the government to permit trade with China.⁴² For example, Charoon Sibunruang, President of Thai Chamber of Commerce, said that ‘Thailand will gain a lot from trading with Communist China, since it is a huge market’.⁴³ The junta agreed to this as well.

By 1972, some Thai elite who had once been against détente with China started to change their position. This was an unnerving position for Cold Warriors, including Thanom and Praphas. Faced with the new normal of global détente, they hesitantly continued with Thai détente. One of the key leaders, Pote Sarasin, signalled in June 1972 that ‘Thailand welcomes mutual friendly relations with China, including exchange of visits by sports

39 Margaret MacMillan, ‘Nixon, Kissinger, and the Opening to China’, in *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969–1977*, ed. Fredrick Logevall and Andrew Preston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 107–25. See also Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon in China: The Week That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2007); Evelyn Goh, *Constructing the US Rapprochement with China, 1961–1974: From ‘Red Menace’ to ‘Tacit Ally’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

40 ‘Thai Coup Brings Few Changes’, *Washington Post*, 23 January 1972.

41 See Frank Dikotter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People’s History, 1962–1976* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

42 Chulacheeb Chinwanno, ‘Thai–Chinese Relations: Security and Strategic Partnership’ (Working Paper No. 155, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, 2008), 6.

43 ‘Charoon Backs Beijing Trade’, *Bangkok Post*, 4 May 1971, 11.

teams and trade'.⁴⁴ In brief, the coup that at the outset had strived for halting détente switched to going along with Sino–Thai rapprochement. Harnessed by the global transformation, détente discourse was resilient in Thai diplomacy.

5.3. Détente Continued

This section explores the ways in which the military regime continued the process of détente through sports and economic diplomacy. When Chinese leaders invited the Thai ping-pong team to visit Beijing, the military junta readily dispatched a team. They also sent Prasit Kanchanawat as a special envoy to initiate a rapprochement with the PRC in late August 1972. Further sports and economic diplomacy followed. The section argues that though the military reluctantly accepted détente, the MFA remained strongly committed to the détente discourse.

5.3.1. Ping-pong Diplomacy: Prasit Kanchanawat as 'Thailand's Kissinger'

The small ping-pong ball has moved the big earth ahead.

– Zhou Enlai⁴⁵

The preliminary process of Sino–Thai rapprochement began with ping-pong diplomacy in 1972. The PRC invited Thailand to send a ping-pong team to the first Asian Table Tennis Union Championships in Beijing on 2–13 September 1972. After a highly contentious debate within the Thai National Security Council, Thanom made a decision to accept the invitation and dispatch a 20-member ping-pong team headed by Police Lieutenant General Chumpol Lohachala, Deputy Police Chief on Special Affairs and Chairman of the Badminton Association of Thailand.⁴⁶ The total team included 13 sportspeople and seven officials, including Dr Veekij Viranuvat, a team doctor. One of the sportspeople, Prachan

44 'NEC Says Beijing Contacts Welcome', *Bangkok Post*, 8 June 1972, 1.

45 Cheng Rui-sheng, 'Karntoot ping-pong thai-jin' [Sino–Thai Ping-pong Diplomacy], trans. Vasin Ruengprathepsang, *Saranrom Journal* 63 (February 2006): 106.

46 'Beijing: Contacts Begin – NEC Approves Ping-Pong Visit', *Bangkok Post*, 3 August 1972, 1.

Kunachiva, told the *Bangkok Post* that ‘I have been told what [China] is like, now I would like to see for myself’. Most of them were anxious to see the ‘real’ Communist China.⁴⁷

Following initial footsteps toward US–China rapprochement, Thanom and Praphas wished to use ‘ping-pong diplomacy’ to sound out China’s attitudes and intentions towards Thailand. In particular, they sought to question China’s alleged support for the CPT, and discuss the prospect of trade relations. Praphas, a staunch anticommunist, gradually warmed to the idea of Thai–Chinese rapprochement. As Maynard Parker explained in 1973, Praphas sensed ‘the importance of the China question to Thailand’s future as well as the personally lucrative aspects of trade’, and therefore ‘set about placing the reins of Thailand’s China policy in his own hands’.⁴⁸

Praphas appointed Prasit Kanchanawat, a Deputy Director of Economic Affairs under the NEC, as an adviser to the team.⁴⁹ Better known by his original name Hsu Tun-Mao, Prasit was born in Thailand to Chinese parents and briefly educated in Shanghai. He was a leading Chinese Thai business figure, Director of the Bangkok Bank, and above all, one of Praphas’s closest confidantes. Both the Thais and Chinese knew perfectly well that Prasit would act as a de facto special envoy from Thailand to launch a Sino–Thai rapprochement. Prasit was preparing for the possibility of informal talks with Chinese leaders on many major issues affecting Sino–Thai relations, including China’s support for communist insurgency in Thailand, dual nationality of the Chinese in Thailand, Taiwan, trade and Chinese representation at the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) Headquarters in Bangkok. He was also expected to inform Chinese leaders that Thailand welcomed peaceful coexistence, and sought to resurrect the Bandung spirit of 1955.⁵⁰ Praphas also presented ping-pong team leader Chumpol, and adviser Prasit, to King Bhumibol at Chitrlada Palace. The king expressed his approval of

47 ‘13 Sportsmen Picked for Beijing Trip’, *Bangkok Post*, 9 August 1972, 1.

48 Maynard Parker, ‘Untying Thailand’, *Foreign Affairs*, January 1973, 334.

49 According to Prasit, his trip to Beijing was a surprise for him. He said that after his visit to Indonesia, he met Pote Sarasin, then Director of Economic Affairs at the NEC, who told him that ‘General Praphas wished you to go to China’. Prasit Kanchanawat, ‘Sumphantamaitri Thai-Jeen korn por sor 2518’ [Sino–Thai Friendship before 1975], *Warasan Asiatawanoak suksa* [East Asian Studies Journal] 3, no. 1 (July 1990): 13.

50 Theh Chongkhadikij, ‘Beijing Offers Thai Ping-Pong Players a Tour of China After Match’, *Bangkok Post*, 16 August 1972, 1.

ping-pong diplomacy as ‘social contacts between fellow human beings’. However, he advised his audience to remain aware of the fundamental political and ideological differences.⁵¹

Before leaving for Beijing, Prasit asked Warnwai Phathanothai to act as personal contact with the Chinese. Warnwai, the son of Sang Phathanothai who was a prominent politician during the Phibun Government, had been sent to Beijing in the mid-1950s at the age of 12, together with his eight-year-old sister, Sirin. Both were brought up under Zhou Enlai’s patronage as a symbolic part of Field Marshal Phibun’s ‘secret diplomacy’ with China. At Warnwai’s insistence, Praphas had put his consent in writing, authorising Prasit and Warnwai to contact Chinese leaders. Prasit’s letter advised:

so that my mission may achieve, in the best way, the results which are expected, I would like to ask Mr. Warnwai Phathanothai to go to Beijing ahead of me, in order to make initial contact, explain the nature of our mission and to arrange the necessary meetings with Chinese authorities.⁵²

This letter served as a guarantor for Warnwai’s security. Due to the changing political situation in Thailand, where the anticommunism act remained intact, Warnwai feared that he might be labelled a ‘communist’ and thrown into jail, as his father, Sang, had once been.⁵³

On 12 August 1972, Warnwai was sent to the United Kingdom to make contact with the Chinese Government through the Chinese embassy in London. He also sought to confirm the arrangements for Prasit’s trip. Warnwai’s younger sister, Sirin Phathanothai – who had stayed in London with her British husband after fleeing Beijing during the Cultural Revolution – arranged the meeting.⁵⁴ Just 10 days before the ping-pong

51 ‘HM Favors “Contacts”’, *Bangkok Post*, 9 August 1972, 1.

52 Warnwai Phathanothai, *Zhou Enlai: Pūpluek maitri Thai-jeen* [Zhou Enlai, The Man Who Planted Thai–Chinese Friendship], 2nd edition (Bangkok: Prakonchai, 1976 [2001]), 154.

53 Warnwai Phathanothai, interview by author, 17 June 2016, Bangkok.

54 See Sirin Phathanothai, *The Dragon’s Pearl* (New York and London: Simon & Schuster, 1994). At the height of Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution, Sirin was forced to publicly denounce her father and brother, and sever all ties to her family back in Bangkok. She later recalled:

My friends and I suffered greatly at the hands of Mao and his policies. Despite our privilege, we were also very much victims of the Cultural Revolution. I was part of the hundreds of thousands that suffered. I was lucky to be alive ... Despite all this though, I had no hatred for Mao – he still felt like my grandfather.

Sirin Phathanothai, interview, ‘A Childhood Spent in the Dragons’ Den’, *Bangkok Post*, 19 July 2015.

team travelled to Beijing,⁵⁵ Sirin made contact with Yu Enguang, chief of Xinhua News Agency in London, who helped arrange the meeting with Ambassador Song Zhiguang. After she explained Prasit's trip, Ambassador Song said he would convey the message to Premier Zhou Enlai. In the meantime, Warnwai discussed the proposal in detail with Pei Jiangzhang, the Chinese embassy counsellor.⁵⁶

Warnwai informed Pei that the Thai Government was sending Prasit to sound out Chinese attitudes toward Thailand and seek to develop contacts. He asked if there might be an opportunity for Prasit to meet with Chinese leaders and, if so, whether Prasit would be able to discuss mutual problems as well as build mutual understanding for the future. Given that Prasit's trip was not a normal sports exchange, but political, Pei then asked why General Praphas had given an interview in which he had claimed that this visit had nothing to do with political negotiations. Warnwai responded that Thailand did not know the precise nature of Chinese intentions, and feared that should things go wrong, Praphas would lose face. He affirmed that this trip was definitely about political negotiations, 'because everyone in Thailand knew well that Prasit had no particular duty in the Thai Table Tennis Association and seemingly could not play ping-pong at all'.⁵⁷

The Chinese had only one reservation: the status of Taiwan. As Pei told Warnwai:

China has only one vital condition in establishing relations with foreign countries, namely, that they recognise the government of the People's Republic of China as the sole government of one China. Taiwan is an inseparable part of China, and governments must be ready to sever any diplomatic relations they have with Taiwan.⁵⁸

He then asked what the Thai Government's attitude on this matter was. Warnwai replied that he had not been authorised to express an opinion but assured Pei that Prasit would be empowered to discuss further details.

55 Warnwai, *Zhou Enlai: Pupluek maitri Thai-jeen*.

56 Sirin, *The Dragon's Pearl*, 300.

57 Warnwai, *Zhou Enlai: Pupluek maitri Thai-jeen*, 157.

58 Sirin, *The Dragon's Pearl*, 300.

In her memoir, *The Dragon's Pearl*, Sirin recalled that, 'a couple of days later, Yu Enguang called. From his voice I knew the news was positive'.⁵⁹ On 18 August, Warnwai was invited to the Chinese embassy in London, and met Ambassador Song Zhiguang. The latter conveyed a message from the Chinese Government:

The government of the People's Republic of China wishes to inform the royal government of Thailand that it warmly welcomes Mr. Prasit Kanchanawat and his advisers Warnwai and Sirin Phathanothai as special guests of the Chinese government.⁶⁰

Song also told Warnwai that he was 'delighted to see better and friendly Sino-Thai relations, starting with ping-pong diplomacy'.⁶¹

Prasit led the ping-pong team to Beijing between 24 August and 10 September 1972, and was well received as a special state guest, despite there being no formal diplomatic relations between the two countries. According to Cheng Rui-sheng, then Deputy Director of Southeast Asian Division of the Chinese Foreign Ministry – who would be a liaison and personal contact with Thai Foreign Ministry officials in developing Thai-Chinese relations in the years to come – the Chinese Government treated Prasit as a 'special envoy'.⁶² In Beijing, Prasit was accompanied by Cheng Rui-sheng, as well as Warnwai and Sirin Phathanothai, who served as sole translator in all official meetings.⁶³ The Chinese also provided Prasit with the same 'Hongqi' car that had carried US President Nixon in early 1972.⁶⁴

Prasit met with Prime Minister Zhou Enlai and other Chinese leaders, including Deputy Foreign Minister Han Nianlong, Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs Li Qiang and Director of the World Peace Committee Liao Chengzhi.⁶⁵ Though fluent in Mandarin, Prasit spoke in Thai while Sirin translated into Chinese. The first meeting was between Prasit and Liao on 1 September at 16:00. Prasit began the conversation by stating:

59 Sirin, *The Dragon's Pearl*, 301.

60 Warnwai, *Zhou Enlai: Pupluek maitri Thai-jeen*, 158.

61 Warnwai, *Zhou Enlai: Pupluek maitri Thai-jeen*, 159.

62 Cheng, 'Karntoot ping-pong thai-jin', 107.

63 It seemed to be the first time that the Chinese leaders allowed the non-Chinese to act as a sole translator throughout every official meeting.

64 'Beijing Peace "Hinges on Reduction of Red Support"', *Bangkok Post*, 16 September 1972, 3.

65 Liao Chengzhi worked in various positions heavily involved in foreign affairs, most prominently, President of the Sino-Japanese Friendship Society, and Minister of the Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs. According to Warnwai, Liao was like his and Sirin's father, as she called him 'Papa Liao', raising them in China, and they retained a close relationship until his death in 1983. Warnwai Phathanothai, interview by author, 17 June 2016, Bangkok.

there is an old Thai saying ‘Chinese and Thais are not strangers to each other but brothers’. From this point of view, there should be no problem in our relations.

‘If there was any problem’, said Prasit, it was because sometimes it was ‘necessary for Thailand to link itself with other countries, especially with the United States and Taiwan after World War Two. Perhaps it is best not to discuss that so as not to arouse antagonisms’.⁶⁶

Liao said that ‘the international situation had been changing rapidly. US President Nixon had visited Beijing’. He also provided the example of Sino–Japanese relations, which had taken 20 years to establish in the postwar period. He said he wished Sino–Thai rapprochement would be quicker. Moreover, he stated that it was ‘not quite correct to say that Thailand had no relations with China. In fact, during the Phibun administration we had initiated contact for a while’. Pointing to Warnwai and Sirin, ‘once, with Prime Minister Phibun, we had good people-to-people relations. They came to China when they were children in 1956, they studied, and they grew up here’. ‘We had trading contacts’, Liao continued, ‘and many Thai delegations paid visits to China’.⁶⁷

Prasit said Thailand was not yet ready to normalise relations with China. First, the Thai alliance with the US made it difficult. Second, Thailand was still afraid of Chinese ideological promotion and support for communist insurgency in Thailand. He emphasised that the Thais were a peace-loving, Buddhist people, with a monarchy. Liao replied that was a domestic problem for Thailand but it was not quite accurate that Thailand was a peace-loving country:

The Thai people were, but what of the Thai soldiers in Laos and Vietnam? Why was Thailand so afraid of China? In its long history, had China ever sent troops to Thailand?⁶⁸

While China supported the peoples’ revolution around the world, he stressed that revolution was not a ‘product that can be exported’. According to Liao, a fear of China was ‘pure nonsense’. Liao asked Prasit to ‘tell the Thai people and government that we wish to be friendly with them. Let them come to China and see our country for themselves’. Liao suggested that the two countries could begin with trade relations, and take sports,

66 Sirin, *The Dragon’s Pearl*, 303.

67 Warnwai, *Zhou Enlai: Pu pluek maitri Thai-jeen*, 166.

68 Sirin, *The Dragon’s Pearl*, 303.

cultural, medical and scientific diplomacy step by step.⁶⁹ Following the Liao–Prasit meeting, the Chinese Government and the Asian Table Tennis Union hosted a formal dinner at the Great Hall of the People to greet all ping-pong teams.⁷⁰

During similar meetings with other Chinese leaders, Prasit initiated trade and cultural contacts with China. On 2 September, at 16:00, Prasit had a two-hour meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Han Nianlong at the Chinese Foreign Ministry. Han Nianlong informed Prasit that China sought peaceful relations with Thailand, and wished to restore the relationship. The only criteria for the establishment of diplomatic relations was the recognition of the One-China policy, meaning Thailand would have to terminate formal relations with Taiwan.⁷¹ He assured Prasit that if the Thai Government was not yet ready to establish formal diplomatic relations, China understood the situation, and could wait until their relations had matured further.⁷² In the meantime, any contact should be based on commercial relations and cultural exchange. Han emphasised that the Chinese respected the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and noninterference. In foreign relations, Chinese leaders emphasised that the relationship should be based on the Bandung's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression; noninterference in each other's internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence.⁷³

Prasit also asked about the issue of dual nationality of overseas Chinese in Thailand. Han Nianlong, and subsequently Zhou Enlai himself, confirmed that his government did not support dual nationalities, but instead urged the overseas Chinese to assimilate with the local population, to adopt the nationality of the country they reside, and respect the domestic laws.⁷⁴ Han assured Prasit that the PRC 'will not try to control overseas Chinese

69 Warnwai, *Zhou Enlai: Pupluek maitri Thai-jeen*, 167, 172.

70 Cheng Rui-sheng wrote later that there was a difficulty in the diplomatic protocol in arranging the table for Prasit because the latter was not the team leader, and should therefore not sit together with the host at the front. At the same time, if he were to sit with the Thai ping-pong team he would be too far back in the room. In the end, the Chinese, according to Cheng, decided to set a separate table for Prasit: 'Table No. 52'. This table was close to the front, and hosted independently by the ranking diplomat, Lu Wei-jao, Director-General of Asian Affairs from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Warnwai, Sirin, and Cheng joined the table too. Cheng, 'Karntoot ping-pong thai-jin', 108.

71 Apiwat Wannakorn, *Prasit Kanchanawat: Nakkannuaeng si todasawat* [Prasit Kanchanawat: Four-decade Politician] (Bangkok: Matichon, 1996), 217.

72 Apiwat, *Prasit Kanchanawat*, 218.

73 Warnwai, *Zhou Enlai: Pupluek maitri Thai-jeen*, 167, 178.

74 Apiwat, *Prasit Kanchanawat*, 219–20.

in Southeast Asian countries'. He asserted that 'overseas Chinese should be loyal to the countries in which they live and obey the laws there'.⁷⁵ Han also suggested to Prasit that, as a friend with goodwill, Thailand should withdraw its troops from Indochina.⁷⁶ At the end of the meeting, Han reiterated that China could wait until such time that Thailand was ready for diplomatic relations, and that there was no obstacle from the Chinese side. In the meantime, Thai–Chinese contacts could be conducted on a step-by-step basis, starting with trade and sports exchanges.

On 4 September, at around 16:00, Prasit met Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs Li Qiang. In a one-hour meeting at the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Li told Prasit that China wanted to buy Thai products, such as rice, rubber, sugar, jute, burlap sacks, corn and sorghum, and officially invited Prasit and a Thai trade delegation to the Canton Trade Fair in October 1972. He said that the PRC was 'interested in trade with Thailand, on a government-to-government or government-to-people basis'. Prasit replied that 'trade with China should not be difficult'. He suggested that accounts could be opened in a bank in either country. After a year's trading, settlement could be made, with convertible currencies such as British pounds, US dollars or Swiss or French francs.⁷⁷

The Thai delegation was anxious about the meeting with Zhou Enlai. There had been no confirmation until midnight on 5 September 1972, when Liao phoned Sirin to inform her that Zhou would receive Prasit in the Sichuan Province Reception Room of the Great Hall of the People.⁷⁸ During his 45-minute meeting with Zhou Enlai, Prasit discussed various Thai concerns. Zhou started the meeting by saying that the visit by Prasit and the Thai ping-pong team would be a good beginning for Sino–Thai relations and friendship. As he put it, 'it was a good omen that we are shaking hands. We have opened our doors, and you are the first to come in'. Prasit replied by admitting:

75 'Prasit Opens New Era With China', *Bangkok Post*, 15 September 1972, 1.

76 Warnwai, *Zhou Enlai: Praphuek maitri Thai-jeen*, 184.

77 'Prasit Opens New Era With China', 1.

78 Prasit had been advised to keep himself ready for 'an important occasion'. He had to keep dressed through the night in the hotel before he was summoned. Prasit acknowledged:

I was accorded great honor. The Chinese most probably regarded our acceptance of the invitation to participate in the Asian Table Tennis Union championships as a sign of goodwill on our part, despite the fact that we don't have diplomatic relations.

'Prasit Opens New Era With China', 1.

we feel somewhat awkward in our approach to you because of our long-term close relationship with Taiwan and the United States. We feel it will be difficult to cut off our relations with one side in order to improve our relations with the other.⁷⁹

After reviewing the long history of Thai–Chinese relations, Zhou said that China understood Thailand’s position and sympathised with it. At the present moment, Zhou went on, ‘if there are obstacles to establish immediate diplomatic relations with us we are always patient, so we can wait’.

But in the meantime, our two peoples can promote relations in other fields. Badminton and other sports teams may come. There may be exchange programs in the medical and scientific fields. We can also trade.⁸⁰

During Sirin’s translation, Zhou interrupted, pointing to both Sirin and Warnwai to say:

they are part of the evidence for the existence of good relations between our two countries. They are now a sturdy bridge linking us together. Listen to her Chinese – she speaks Chinese with a better accent than mine.

He continued:

So I hope that on your return you will inform your government that we understand its difficulty. And you know that in Indochina there must be peace. That war must end.⁸¹

In other words, Zhou strongly asserted that the Chinese wished to be friends with Thailand. As Prasit stated later, ‘China has opened its door to us, Mr. Zhou told me’. Zhou welcomed ‘friendship on a basis of equality with Thailand’.⁸² However, China did not need to rush toward establishing formal diplomatic relations, and could wait until Thailand was ready. In the meantime, both countries could benefit from trade as well as cultural and sports exchanges.

79 ‘Prasit Opens New Era With China’, 1.

80 Warnwai, *Zhou Enlai: Paphuk mairi Thai-jeen*.

81 Sirin, *The Dragon’s Pearl*, 304.

82 ‘Prasit Opens New Era With China’, 1.

Prasit also inquired directly about China's alleged support for the CPT's activities. According to Prasit's biography, Zhou claimed that while China generally supported the people's struggle for independence and freedom against imperialism, it did not interfere in other states' internal affairs.⁸³ Likewise, Pote Sarasin, Assistant Chairman of the NEC, shared this topic with the US Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, noting:

Prasit told the Chinese that the Thais were worried about terrorists. The Thai people ... assumed that the Chinese were supporting the insurgents. Zhou said 'we' had nothing to do with this but would continue to support freedom fighters.⁸⁴

However, the Thai Government was 'not yet certain of Chinese motives'.⁸⁵ Last but not least, Pote confirmed that Premier Zhou sent warm regards to the Thai king, government leaders and to Prince Wan Waithayakon, the former foreign minister whom Zhou Enlai had met at the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in 1955.⁸⁶ Above all, Prasit's historic meeting with Zhou, Pote Sarasin said, 'was a correct and formal meeting'.⁸⁷

After spending two weeks in Beijing, Prasit flew back to Bangkok on 10 September, while the remainder of the team continued the ping-pong competition.⁸⁸ At Don Mueang Airport, he boarded a car planeside to

83 Apiwat, *Prasit Kanchanawat*, 233–34.

84 'Memorandum of Conversation', 2 October 1972, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. 20: Southeast Asia, 1969–1972* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 180.

85 'Memorandum of Conversation', 2 October 1972, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. 20: Southeast Asia, 1969–1972*, Document 180.

86 Prince Wan praised Prasit's informal diplomacy as 'good policy', and Zhou Enlai as 'a man of great courtesy and acumen'. He welcomed the opening of China's door to Thailand, but he said that Zhou Enlai's statement that the Chinese did not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries and instead promoted the fight for freedom of various peoples should be made clear. As at Bandung, he insisted that peaceful coexistence should mean 'live and let live', in accordance with the formula set out in the Charter of the United Nations. Seventeen years after Bandung, Prince Wan realised that 'Asia-Africa is too vast a region for this purpose'. Rather, 'arrangements for peaceful coexistence should be made on a regional basis; the region concerned to be cohesive enough to maintain real solidarity'. After his trip to Beijing, Prasit called on Prince Wan to convey Zhou's best wishes. 'Beijing Peace "Hinges on Reduction of Red Support"', 3; 'Prasit Briefs Prince Wan on Results of Beijing Trip', *Bangkok Post*, 18 September 1972, 3.

87 'Memorandum of Conversation', 2 October 1972, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. 20: Southeast Asia, 1969–1972*, Document 180.

88 According to Prasit, he spent a few days in Hong Kong before returning to Bangkok. He asked Warnwai to type the report for the Thai government. The typewriter was borrowed from the Consulate General there. Prasit Kanchanawat, 'Nueng Thosawad Mittaparp Thai-Jeen' [One Decade of Sino–Thai Friendship], in *Prasit Kanchanawat: Think, Speak, Write*, ed. Apiwat Wannakorn (Bangkok: Sukaparpjai, 1997), 100.

avoid reporters, choosing instead to report on his trip directly to Thanom and Praphas.⁸⁹ At a press conference at the NEC headquarters, Prasit announced the details of the meetings with the Chinese leaders, and provided his exotic and first-hand experiences of Beijing.⁹⁰ Some named Prasit 'Thailand's Kissinger'.⁹¹

In brief, Prasit's visit to China was perhaps the first, though informal, high-level meeting between Thai and Chinese leaders to begin exploring in earnest the possibility of improving relations since the 1955 meeting between Zhou Enlai and Prince Wan. Symbolically, it was a stepping stone to subsequent contacts and meetings between the Thais and the Chinese. However, no concrete agreements were concluded during the trip. As Henry Kissinger summarised for the US president:

In August, talks in Beijing between a senior Thai official who accompanied the Thai ping-pong team and Zhou Enlai indicated that the PRC is now sufficiently interested in getting relations with Bangkok onto a different track to allow Bangkok to set the pace in moving the relationship in that direction ... Thailand, however, intends to move slowly and prudently. The Government recently approved a small delegation to the Canton Trade Fair this fall.⁹²

5.3.2. Toward Trade Diplomacy

The reaction of the Thai military elite to ping-pong diplomacy was mixed. For the first time, General Praphas Charusathien referred to Communist China as the 'People's Republic of China'. As he put it:

89 'Prasit Opens New Era With China', 1.

90 At a press conference Prasit said that he had taken Thai silk neckties with him to Beijing, but had to bring these ties back home because 'the Chinese do not accept gifts and there is no use for ties in China'. The Chinese people, said Prasit, wore ordinary shirts of blue, white or black: 'There are no red or green dresses'. The shirts 'do not have creases – they don't use iron'. He also mentioned that the People's Republic of China was 'trying to make it possible for the people to eat well. They don't care at present about modernizing or decorating their buildings'. Asked whether he enjoyed any nightlife, he replied, 'There are no night clubs and no neon signs. Electricity is used mainly for industry, none for decorative purposes'. 'Not Ready for These Ties', *Bangkok Post*, 15 September 1972, 1.

91 'Prasit to Put Thailand's Case', *Bangkok Post*, 3 August 1972, 1; Prasit, 'Sumphantamaitri Thai-Jeen korn por sor', 14.

92 'Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) the President Nixon', 5 October 1972, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. 20: Southeast Asia, 1969–1972*, Document 181.

We accepted the invitation to send a ping-pong team to demonstrate that we are friendly to all who are friendly to us and that we do not want to have any enemy. Because we have had no communications for 20 years, we decided to send as adviser to the team someone who knows the Chinese language and culture and who has a sufficiently high position. [Prasit] was welcomed with honor and was received by Chinese leaders of top levels.⁹³

‘As a result’, Praphas said he was ‘satisfied’ not only on ‘the sports and cultural fields but also, unexpectedly, in the field of international politics. This is a good omen’.

We are thankful to the Chinese for their welcome but we have to think carefully of what we do now. After 20 years of separation, we should be sure that we make a good beginning.⁹⁴

However, Praphas pointed out that ‘it is difficult to understand’ Zhou’s statement that China did not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. He believed that ‘Beijing may have been changing its policy since its admittance into the United Nations and is reducing its intervention in other countries’. Regarding trading with China, Praphas said:

At present, Chinese goods are smuggled into this country but they are also being sold legally. This is because goods seized by the authorities are sold by auction and merchants resell them in the market ... In future, it is likely that we will permit legal import of China goods and collect duty on them.⁹⁵

In other words, despite the fact that the Thai military was taking a major step toward improving relations with China, it felt there was no rush to establish full diplomatic relations with China due largely to distrust of China’s role in supporting the CPT insurgency. Nevertheless, the government expressed interest in developing sports and cultural exchanges as well as economic relations.

The ping-pong trip to Beijing was followed quickly by attendance at the Canton Trade Fair in October 1972. With Thanom and Praphas’s approval, Prasit headed a 17-member delegation including Vicharn

93 ‘Trade Offer to Beijing’, *Bangkok Post*, 19 September 1972, 3.

94 Likewise, Pote Sarasin said that the Zhou–Prasit meeting was ‘a good beginning’ for future cordial relations with the PRC: ‘I welcome the information given by Mr. Prasit that China will not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries and I hope this will be carried out, both directly and indirectly, in our case’. ‘Pote to Continue China Dialogue at UN Meet’, *Bangkok Post*, 20 September 1972, 1.

95 ‘Trade Offer to Beijing’, 3.

Nivatwongse, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Pracha Gunakasem, Consul-General to Hong Kong, Wichian Pathommas, Trade Commissioner to Hong Kong, and key business representatives such as Ob Wasurat, the First Vice President of the Board of Trade, Kiat Srifuengfung (Thai Asahi Glass), Pongse Sarasin (Coca Cola Thailand), Kiat Vadhanavekin (Thai Sugar Producers Association), Thavorn Pornprabha (Siam Motors Group) and Prasert Prasart-thongsoth (Bangkok Mechanical Co.).⁹⁶ This time, Thanom clearly instructed the trade delegation to convey the message to Chinese leaders that the Thai people were not hostile towards China.⁹⁷

Before its departure, the team met Praphas at his Sukhothai Road residence. Praphas praised the trade delegation members as 'the first group of merchants to visit the China mainland': 'After the Second World War, contacts were severed because of different ideologies and conflicts'. 'We have to move with the changing world situation', he said.

With the easing of the world situation, we must adjust ourselves. We had made first contact with the Chinese through accepting an invitation of the Asian Table Tennis Union to participate in an international competition.⁹⁸

As Praphas pointed out:

We and the Chinese are turning our faces towards each other with peace as the prospect ... We felt that the atmosphere was good, and we saw the prospects of peace. The Chinese said that we could have peaceful coexistence if we have mutual trust and do not suspect or take advantage of each other. This is the way a dialogue should be.⁹⁹

Praphas specifically asked the trade delegation to 'study the conditions for trade'. However, 'it's not yet time for actual transactions. China's trade is conducted by the state'. He also felt that establishment of diplomatic relations was not an urgent task: 'We had been in touch with the Chinese for 800 years. Though we did not have diplomatic relations, we traded

96 'Prasit Chosen to Lead 17-Man Trade Mission', *Bangkok Post*, 11 October 1972, 1.

97 'Prasit Chosen to Lead 17-Man Trade Mission', 1.

98 'Praphas: We Must Face Realities', *Bangkok Post*, 12 October 1972, 1

99 'Praphas: We Must Face Realities', 1, 3.

with each other'. Praphas highlighted Prasit's report in which Beijing said that 'diplomatic relations were not so very necessary at present. We should have contacts through sports, culture, education and trade first'.¹⁰⁰

Prasit also told reporters, who asked when actual trade with China would begin, that

it's too early to say. We have only been in contact with China for one month. The matter is under study. Whatever we do we must consider our national interest as more important than anything else.

Thailand, he cautioned, was 'a small country':

We must work for survival. We will be friendly to those friendly to us, no matter whether they are a big power or small nation, or whether they have a different system from us.

'If the Chinese have goodwill towards us', continued Prasit, 'the opportunity for friendship and trade is great. We should not worry about losing in trade with China. Trade will have to go through a government organization'.¹⁰¹ When Vicharn Nivatwongse was asked whether this trip to China would violate Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53 – which had banned trade with China since 1959 – he replied that the decree would be amended in the future so that trade could be carried out more easily.¹⁰²

On 15 October, Prasit and his trade team attended the opening ceremony of the Canton Trade Fair, presided over by Chen Jia, Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs. According to Prasit, the ceremony was marked by 'fire-crackers, with no speeches or ribbon-cutting', and the Thai delegation was given preferential treatment by the Chinese over other trade missions, including a banquet set up especially for the Thai trade members.¹⁰³ Prasit met with Cheng Su Fu, Assistant Minister of Commerce, and Peng Chin Po, Foreign Trade Director-General. The latter told him that 'the Chinese government is pleased to consider the purchase of Thai products available for export'.¹⁰⁴

100 'Praphas: We Must Face Realities', 3.

101 'Trade Mission off to China', *Bangkok Post*, 14 October 1972, 1.

102 Kim, 'The Politics of Thailand's Trade Relations', 315.

103 According to Prasit, when the Thai delegation arrived at Canton, the Chinese authorities sent a fleet of eight new Toyota cars with a red pennant on the leading car to receive them. At the Trade Fair, 'all food and accommodation is being provided free, while other trade missions have to pay for themselves'. The trade delegation stayed at the Tong Fang Hotel. 'China Fetes Thais, Promised Trade', *Bangkok Post*, 21 October 1972, 1.

104 'China Fetes Thais, Promised Trade', 1.

After that, Prasit returned to Bangkok and Vicharn Nivatwongse continued to lead the remainder of the team to Beijing. Here he met with Li Xiannian, Deputy Prime Minister, on 22 October. Li said that the Chinese understood Thai difficulties in restoring diplomatic relations with China and did not wish to rush the process. For the time being, he instead urged for a move toward informal relations, including trade. Li suggested that the obstacle in establishing mutual trade did not originate with the Chinese, but with the Thais, largely because Thailand had not yet abolished Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53. Li therefore indicated to Vicharn that it was up to the Thai Government to make a decision, while the Chinese were ready to trade with Thailand based upon the principle of 'equality and mutual benefit'.¹⁰⁵ During this visit, the Chinese apparently indicated an interest in purchasing many items such as sugar, jute, rubber, hard wood and rice. For their part, the Thais indicated their interest in purchasing light manufactured items, fruit and medicines.¹⁰⁶

After his trip to Canton, Prasit revealed that the Chinese were ready to trade with Thailand. But because China's government conducted its trade, Thailand would have to set up a counterpart government organisation for the same purpose. This would take at least two to three months to complete.¹⁰⁷ He acknowledged that trade with China would narrow Thailand's huge trade deficit, particularly with Japan.¹⁰⁸ Prasit also said in his conversation with the US ambassador in November 1972 that 'Thailand would begin trading with China as soon as arrangements for a formal mechanism could be worked out'.¹⁰⁹

In an interview with the *Bangkok Post*, on 23 January 1973, Deputy Prime Minister General Praphas said that Thailand was willing to trade with China. 'The Chinese can now place orders for any Thai product they require', Praphas went on. 'All they have to do is to contact the Ministry of Commerce and place their order and make their offers'. However, Praphas emphasised that Thailand would not ask the Chinese to 'buy this and that'. He expressed hope that the easing of tensions through trade and informal contacts 'would lead to reduction or elimination of Beijing's material aid for the insurgents'.¹¹⁰

105 Warnwai, *Zhou Enlai: Pupluak maitri Thai-jeen*, 198–99.

106 'Team Back with China Trade List', *Bangkok Post*, 29 October 1972, 1.

107 Central Intelligence Agency, *Central Intelligence Bulletin*, 10 November 1972, 5.

108 'China Trade "Would Narrow Deficit"', *Bangkok Post*, 22 October 1972, 1.

109 Central Intelligence Agency, *Central Intelligence Bulletin*, 10 November 1972, 5.

110 General Praphas Charusathien's interview with the *Bangkok Post*, 23 January 1973, in *China and Thailand, 1949–1983*, ed. RK Jain (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1984), 189–90.

With Praphas's endorsement, Commerce Minister Prasit encouraged applications from Thai firms to trade with China on 21 February. However, only two applications were submitted, largely because the private sector feared that, given the existence of the anticommunism act, they risked being accused of communist sympathisers. They also remained uncertain about the strength of the government's desire to establish commercial relations with China.

During a press conference on 22 March, Praphas asserted that the Thai Government was prepared to trade with Beijing and would consider amending Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53 in case the PRC made a request. However, he confirmed that, at this point, no proposal of this nature had yet been received from China: 'At present there is no trade between the two countries and thus no change in the law will be made'.¹¹¹

Praphas later admitted that:

we are carrying out our policy to be friendly to all who are friendly to us. We have no hostility towards China and we want to be friends with the Chinese people ... However, their unfriendly action announcing support for communist insurgency makes us cautious about the People's Republic of China.¹¹²

He also suggested that 'if the Chinese on the Mainland want to buy from us they may approach us and we will respond accordingly'.¹¹³

Other developments in early 1973 helped facilitate Thai–Chinese rapprochement. On 20 March, for example, a Chinese medical team led by Professor Jang Wei-chun of Beijing Friendship Hospital had a 50-minute stopover at Don Mueang Airport. The delegation was comprised of seven physicians and one interpreter, and was en route from the World Health Organization (WHO) Convention in Geneva to a three-day WHO meeting in Manila. They met a team of Thai officials headed by Dr Somboon Vachrotai, the Deputy Permanent Secretary of Public Health, and Dr Veekij Viranuvat, who was the team doctor who

111 'Thai/Chinese Relations', 25 May 1973, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), FCO15/1788, the National Archives, London.

112 'Thai/Chinese Relations', 25 May 1973, FCO, FCO15/1788, the National Archives, London.

113 'Praphas: We Aren't Tied to Taiwan', *Bangkok Post*, 30 March 1973, 1.

visited Beijing during the first ping-pong delegation in August 1972. The MFA suggested to the government that 'medical diplomacy' might facilitate a détente with China.¹¹⁴

Another good signal was a commitment to initiate satellite communications between Shanghai and Bangkok by September, approved by the Thai Government on 28 March 1973. This request had been made to the Thai Ministry of Communication by Beijing in January, and the rapid move to set it up was viewed in the press as a part of the progressive easing of relations with the PRC, albeit without the precipitous abandonment of Taiwan.¹¹⁵ Deputy Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan even stated that 'Thailand will do everything to have normal relations with the PRC short of diplomatic ties'.¹¹⁶ Chatichai also issued an invitation to the PRC to establish a permanent office at ECAFE in Bangkok.

At the same time, the Thai elite voiced a growing irritation with the new Taiwanese Ambassador Admiral Ma Chi-chuang, who arrived in Bangkok in August 1972. Ma persistently pressed both Thanom and Chatichai on the issue of whether Thailand was considering downgrading its level of representation in Taiwan (from ambassador to chargé d'affaires) and pursuing Thailand–PRC rapprochement.¹¹⁷ This annoyed Chatichai, who publicly rebuked Ma:

whether Thailand is going to establish relations with Mainland China or not is an internal affair of this country. Whether the Government will change ambassadors or transfer them from one post to another is also an internal affair. No envoy stationed here has the right to make any enquiry into such internal affair.¹¹⁸

114 'Thailand–People's Republic of China Relations', 23 June 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/4, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Thailand, 3–4.

115 'Phone Link with China Agreed', *Bangkok Post*, 28 March 1973, 3.

116 'Thai Intelsat Link with China', 29 March 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKOK05014, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) online database.

117 Ambassador Ma handed over a memorandum to Thanom and Chatichai expressing 'grave concern' over rumours suggesting that Thailand may downgrade the level of its representative in Taiwan in April 1973. In a press conference, Chatichai stated that he felt 'the Nationalist Chinese Ambassador was too anxious, active and over-concerned about the state of relations ... They should be well aware of the changing trends of international politics'. After the 1973 student revolution, Ma was down at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs almost every day drawing the attention of the Foreign Minister to 'provocative' articles in the newspapers, and on 30 October, he even staged a three-hour sit-in at Government House while the Cabinet was in session and refused to go away. 'Thai/Chinese Relations', 25 May 1973, FCO, FCO15/1788, the National Archives, London; 'Thai/Chinese Relations', 9 November 1973, FCO, FCO15/1788, the National Archives, London.

118 'Thai/Chinese Relations', 9 November 1973, FCO, FCO15/1788, the National Archives, London.

There was no doubt that Taiwan's days of full diplomatic relations with Thailand were numbered.

By late 1972, therefore, the movement towards some kind of rapprochement with China had gained momentum, and the Thanom–Praphas Government had concluded that peaceful coexistence with the People's Republic of China was attainable. During this time, contact with Beijing increased in the fields of sports and trade, but there remained a reservation in terms of establishing formal diplomatic relations. As Praphas put it in March 1973, Thailand should 'not plunge headlong' into a dialogue with Beijing:

It is like a case of a young boy and girl. The fact that the boy has sent one letter to the girl does not mean that the girl should give herself to him otherwise it would be too quick. The girl could be accused of being too easy. We have to maintain our posture.¹¹⁹

5.3.3. Behind Sports Diplomacy: The MFA Steps In

I would contact China through diplomacy rather than ping-pong – though I am not bad at ping-pong.

– Thanat Khoman, former foreign minister¹²⁰

This section examines the diplomatic practices of the MFA, especially in relation to sports diplomacy with China. This reactivation of détente led to the formation of personal relationships between Thai and Chinese diplomats that helped pave the way for the formal normalisation of diplomatic relations in July 1975, to be discussed in Chapter 6.

Before the 1971 coup, the MFA under Thanat Khoman had proactively sought rapprochement with Beijing through back-channel diplomacy. Specifically, Anand Panyarachun, the Thai Ambassador to the UN and the US, had made personal contact with the Chinese ambassador, Huang Hua, at the UN. After the coup, the Foreign Ministry was initially marginalised in Thailand's foreign affairs, and this was particularly true in relation to policy towards China. However, after ping-pong diplomacy commenced, the Ministry resumed duties. By late 1972, Thai diplomats reactivated their contacts with their Chinese counterparts at the UN and in capitals around the world. Among others, the recently appointed

119 'Thai/Chinese Relations', 9 November 1973, FCO, FCO15/1788, the National Archives, London.

120 'Thanat Urges Contact with China', *Bangkok Post*, 7 January 1973, 1.

Deputy Foreign Minister, Major General Chatichai Choonhavan, who was personally in favour of closer relations with the PRC, became an ardent advocate of détente.¹²¹

By mid-1972, the Chinese Government clearly signalled its intention to move toward a dialogue with Thailand. The Chinese ambassadors in many other countries began to contact Thai ambassadors in order to promote friendly relations and build mutual trust. Thai officials initially remained vigilant and aloof due to having received no clear instruction from Bangkok. In September 1972, the Chinese Ambassador to Copenhagen, Denmark, even invited Thai leaders to make a visit to Beijing. But Prince Prem Purachatra, Thai Ambassador to Denmark, did not respond.¹²²

On 5 October 1972, the Thai delegation to the UN, led by Deputy Prime Minister Pote Sarasin and Ambassador Anand, met Qiao Guanhua, Deputy Foreign Minister and head of the Chinese delegation at the Chinese Permanent Representative Office at the UN.¹²³ According to Anand, both sides were ready to progress in the realm of sport, trade and culture, with governmental visits to follow later. In their conversations, they laid out key issues that directly affected their relationship; namely the Vietnam War, the Kuomintang Army in Thailand and the communist insurgency in Thailand. Anand grasped the centrality of anti-Sovietism in the Chinese world view. By the end of the talks, they agreed that they would try to build a political atmosphere conducive to avoiding any verbal attacks on each other.¹²⁴

In 1973, the Thai MFA made a decision to convey Thailand's readiness to initiate discussions with the PRC. MFA order No. 0100/371 was issued on 5 January instructing Thai ambassadors around the world to

121 In fact, when Chatichai returned from his post to be the Director-General of the Political Affairs Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1972, he repeatedly emphasised contact with the PRC as a priority. Tej Bunnag praised the far-sighted Chatichai who would always remind his staff that the Communist world was not indivisible and monolithic, and Sino-Soviet tension was prevalent. Tej Bunnag, 'Satapana kwansumpan tai-jeen, 1 karakadakom 2518: prasobkarn kong nakkantud' [Establishing Thai-Chinese Relations, 1 July 1975: Diplomat's Experiences], *Warasan Asiatawanoak suksa* [East Asian Studies Journal] 3, no. 1 (July 1990): 28; Tej Bunnag, interview by author, 27 June 2016, Bangkok.

122 Anand Panyarachun, 'Pookmitr kub sataranaratprachachon jeen' [Befriending the People's Republic of China], in *Nayobai tangprated Thai bon tangpreng* [Thai Foreign Policy at the Crossroads], ed. Chantima Ongsuragz (Bangkok: Direk Jayanama Memorial Lecture Series, Thammasat University, 1990), 134.

123 Anand, 'Pookmitr kub sataranaratprachachon jeen', 133; Chulacheeb, 'Thai-Chinese Relations: Security and Strategic Partnership', 7.

124 Anand, 'Pookmitr kub sataranaratprachachon jeen', 133.

approach their Chinese counterparts and communicate a willingness 'to be friendly to every country that was friendly to Thailand'.¹²⁵ Thai diplomats in a variety of embassies including Stockholm, Tehran, Tokyo, Washington DC, Canberra, The Hague, Brussels and Madrid, and the Consular Office in Karachi, later telegraphed the MFA, reporting their various contacts with the Chinese diplomats. The Chinese Ambassador to The Hague announced that The Hague would be another contact point with Thailand and met with the Thai ambassador, assuring him of Chinese interest in expanding contacts and interactions, and expressing its wish to cooperate with Thailand at international economic conferences. The Chinese insisted that they would not interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries, and urged the overseas Chinese in Thailand to obey local laws.¹²⁶

Both sides also met occasionally at international meetings such as the UN ECAFE meeting in Tokyo in April 1973. On 16 April, the head of the Thai delegation, Dr Boonrod Binson, Minister of University Affairs, met the Chinese delegation led by the Director-General of Department of International Organization, Treaty and Law, An Chih-yuan. The latter expressed interest in establishing a permanent mission in Bangkok. According to Boonrod, the Chinese 'asked how the Thai Government would feel if they were to send a mission to Bangkok'. Boonrod replied that 'ECAFE is a United Nations organization – this is not simply a matter between China and Thailand alone'. After the discussion, the Chinese explained that a Chinese study team would arrive in Bangkok 'sometime before September' to commence establishing a permanent mission to ECAFE.¹²⁷ They also discussed the possibility of exchange visits by economists and technicians. Both parties agreed to contact each other through the Chinese and Thai embassies in Japan. The Japanese would act as intermediaries with Suphat Thiensunthorn, Thai Ambassador to Japan, facilitating informal meetings.¹²⁸

At that ECAFE meeting, Cheng Rui-sheng, then Deputy Director of the Southeast Asian Division of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, had a chance to meet Tej Bunnag, Director of the East Asian Division of the Thai MFA.

125 'Thai-PRC Relations', 23 June 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/4, MFA, Thailand, 3.

126 Anand, 'Pookmitr kub sataranaratprachachon jeen', 134–35.

127 'Red Chinese Team Due', *Bangkok Post*, 19 April 1973, 1.

128 'Red Chinese Team Due', 3.

Tej recalled: 'this is the beginning of friendship between Cheng and me, which led to a series of negotiations between both Ministries of Foreign Affairs in Sino-Thai rapprochement'. Tej called it 'corridor diplomacy'.¹²⁹

This so-called 'corridor diplomacy' duly paved the way for the diplomatisation of sports by the MFA, so as to achieve peaceful coexistence and détente with the PRC. Deputy Prime Minister Praphas allowed the sports exchanges between Thailand and China: 'We do not regard sports as politics. We keep sports separate from politics.'¹³⁰

The most important exchange was a Chinese ping-pong team led by Zhuang Zedong, a former three-time world table tennis champion who visited Bangkok between 17 and 24 June 1973. This was the first Chinese delegation to visit Thailand since 1949. Chinese high-ranking diplomat and Deputy Director of the Southeast Asian Division, Cheng Rui-sheng, accompanied the team as deputy head.¹³¹ The team stayed at the Indra Regent Hotel at Pratunam, which was owned by Lengler Baiyoke, the Chinese Thai business figure and close confidante of Chatichai's who would play a significant role as a liaison between Thailand and China over the next few years. The team was welcomed by members of the Thai Table Tennis Association, as well as the public, at Don Mueang Airport. Tej Bunnag also greeted Cheng Rui-sheng, who was said to be delighted to see his 'old friend'.¹³²

On the evening of 17 June, a welcome party for the ping-pong team was hosted by the Table Tennis Association of Thailand at the hotel. Its chairman, General Tem Homsetthi, said 'this is a truly historic day. I welcome you most cordially on behalf of the Thai people'.¹³³ MFA officials including Arsa Sarasin, Secretary to the Foreign Minister, and Suthee Prasasvinitchai, the Deputy Director-General of the Political Affairs Department, and Tej Bunnag attended this party and met with Cheng Rui-sheng. According to Cheng, Lengler Baiyoke informed him

129 Tej Bunnag, interview by author, 27 June 2016, Bangkok.

130 'Beijing Ping-Pong Trip Gets All Clear', *Bangkok Post*, 29 May 1973, 1.

131 Cheng Rui-sheng wrote later that at first the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs had no plan to send him or any other officials with the ping-pong delegation. Yet when Zhuang Zedong was appointed as a team leader, he called Qiao Guanhua, Deputy Foreign Minister, and asked for Foreign Ministry official who had background knowledge about Southeast Asia to accompany the team. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs then assigned Cheng Rui-sheng. Cheng, 'Karntoot ping-pong thai-jin', 110.

132 Cheng, 'Karntoot ping-pong thai-jin', 111.

133 'Cheering Crowds Greet Chinese Team', *Bangkok Post*, 18 June 1973, 1.

that Major General Chatichai Choonhavan, Deputy Foreign Minister, wished to meet Cheng. Cheng readily agreed but stated he wanted the meeting to be informal, insisting that he should not go to the MFA itself.¹³⁴

The following day, the ping-pong team visited a crocodile farm at Samut Prakarn. Cheng Rui-sheng did not join them, but instead met with Arsa Sarasin, Suthee Prasasvinitchai and Tej Bunnag at the Hotel. They had an informal working lunch, which lasted for three hours.¹³⁵ Both parties openly exchanged points of view, identifying key problems in Sino–Thai relations as well as discussing the general situation in Southeast Asia. The Thais said that Thailand and China had maintained good relations since ancient times, and the Thai Government was glad to restore and improve Sino–Thai relations. Cheng replied that in the past, Sino–Thai relations were interrupted due to the international and regional situation, but the contemporary international situation had rapidly changed. He hoped that both sides would grasp this opportunity to develop contacts, and gradually restore relations, step by step. Cheng also emphasised the Bandung five principles of peaceful coexistence, which respected territorial integrity, sovereignty and noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries. He suggested that while China and Thailand held differing views about the situation in Southeast Asia, rapprochement would be beneficial for both. Cheng recalled that the informal meeting was held in a ‘friendly and sincere atmosphere’.¹³⁶

That evening, Air Chief Marshal Dawee Chullasapaya, Minister of Agriculture and Vice President of the Thai Olympic Association, hosted a formal dinner for the Chinese delegation at the Indra Hotel. He said that sports exchanges between the two countries would lead to friendly relations. Deputy Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan was at the dinner and greeted Cheng Rui-sheng. According to Cheng, Chatichai was ‘a diplomat with a military background, who was military-like open, straightforward and generous, and at the same time diplomat-like prudent with good humour’.¹³⁷

The 18-member team did not meet Prime Minister Thanom, allegedly because he held no position in the sports associations. Yet, on 19 June, they did meet General Praphas, who was the President of the Thai

134 Cheng, ‘Karntoot ping-pong thai-jin’, 111.

135 Cheng, ‘Karntoot ping-pong thai-jin’, 112.

136 Cheng, ‘Karntoot ping-pong thai-jin’, 112.

137 Cheng, ‘Karntoot ping-pong thai-jin’, 112.

Olympic Association, at his Sukhothai Road residence. Praphas reiterated the Thai Government's position that ties with the PRC would begin if Beijing ended its support for communist insurgency as well as its radio attacks in Thailand.¹³⁸ However, Praphas said that the visit of the Chinese ping-pong delegation brought about closer relations between the two countries, and 'we will exchange other types of sports teams with China, if Beijing desires'.¹³⁹

On 21 June, Cheng Rui-sheng was invited to a dinner with Deputy Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan at his Soi Rajkru residence where they exchanged points of view. Chatichai put forward alleged Chinese support for the Thai insurgency, and Cheng Rui-sheng promised to take the issue back to the Chinese leaders.¹⁴⁰ Cheng also invited Chatichai to visit Beijing. Overall, 'the informal meeting', as the Thai MFA described it, was held in a 'friendly and understanding atmosphere'.¹⁴¹

This ping-pong visit was particularly significant for the MFA because this was the first time the ministry and its Foreign Deputy Minister were allowed to get to grips with the Chinese. For the Chinese leaders, relations were improving relatively fast, as there had been merely 10 months since the inaugural visit to Beijing.¹⁴² The head of the Chinese delegation, Zhuang Zedong, told the *Bangkok Post* that the PRC and Japan took more than two decades to establish diplomatic relations. However, 'this does not mean that it will take such a long period of time to have ties between China and Thailand'. 'Far from it', he added.

But we cannot forget the fact that first things come first. Through sport exchanges, we learn about each other. Cultural exchanges bind us in closer friendship and trade enables us to help each other. Once we have known each other well then we will be in a position to establish diplomatic ties.¹⁴³

Thanom gave an interview in which he said:

Thais and Chinese have had good relations since ancient times. My government is glad that the Chinese indicate friendliness towards us. Our policy calls for us to be friendly to every country [that was] friendly to us.

138 'Thai-Chinese Relations', 29 June 1973, FCO, FCO15/1788, the National Archives, London.

139 'China Policy Unchanged, But Relations Possible', *Bangkok Post*, 21 June 1973, 5.

140 Cheng, 'Karntoot ping-pong thai-jin', 113.

141 'Thai, Chinese Links Explored', *Bangkok Post*, 22 June 1973, 1.

142 'Thai-Chinese Relations', 29 June 1973, FCO, FCO15/1788, the National Archives, London.

143 'China Press Hails Ping-Pong Visit', *Bangkok Post*, 24 June 1973, 5.

He went on to lay out the closer links between Thailand and China:

Last year the Chinese invited us to send a ping-pong team and then a trade mission. This year we permitted a Chinese ping-pong team to come and play here. The exchange of sports delegations will improve understanding, beneficial to future relations.

Thanom was aware that ‘there are some outstanding problems between the Chinese and ourselves. However, time, stability and mutual understanding will solve them’.¹⁴⁴ ‘If informal relations are good’, Thanom said pointedly, ‘they may lead to official relations in the future’.¹⁴⁵

Sports exchanges increased, particularly in 1973. For example, between 7 and 21 August 1973, a Thai badminton delegation led by the Deputy Minister of Interior, Police Lieutenant General Chumpol Lohachala, who had headed the first ping-pong visit the year before, went to Beijing. Now however, he was accompanied by two high-ranking diplomats from the Foreign Ministry, Phan Wannamethi, Director-General of the Political Affairs Department, and Tej Bunnag, Director of the East Asian Division.¹⁴⁶ On 13 August, Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping and Deputy Foreign Minister Han Nianlong received the Thai delegation.¹⁴⁷ Deng said that relations between China and Thailand had existed for as long as 2,000 years and that contact therefore ought to be continued in the future.¹⁴⁸

Later, Tej Bunnag disclosed that Thai Foreign Ministry representatives had nine hours of cordial high-level conversations with Chinese Foreign Ministry officials in Beijing. The Chinese officials included Lu Wei-Jao, Director-General of the Asian Department, Cheng Rui-sheng, now Deputy Director-General of the Asian Department, Liu Yung-Chen, the desk officer for Thailand, and Li Mok from the Foreign Affairs Friendship Association as an interpreter.¹⁴⁹ Their talks were considered a ‘presentation of points of views’, rather than negotiations.¹⁵⁰ When the Thais brought up Chinese support for the Thai insurgency, the Chinese responded

144 ‘Closer Links with China Soon – PM’, *Bangkok Post*, 21 June 1973, 1.

145 ‘China Policy Unchanged, But Relations Possible’, 5.

146 Tej, ‘Satapana kwansumpun tai-jeen, 1 karakadakom 2518’, 25.

147 ‘China-Thailand’, 15 August 1973, RG59, 1973HONGK08184, NARA.

148 Warnwai, *Zhou Enlai: Pupluek maitri Thai-jeen*, 213.

149 According to the Thai delegation, Liu Yung-Chen could ‘read Thai but spoke it poorly’. ‘Comments on Recent Visit to China’, 6 September 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO13889, NARA.

150 ‘Thai-PRC Relations’, 23 June 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/4, MFA, Thailand 6.

that the Chinese Communist Party, not the Chinese Government, dealt with the insurgents. The latter then raised the issue of Thai support for Kuomintang operations against China in the northern part of Thailand, indicating that both sides were even.¹⁵¹

The Chinese brought up the alleged Thai Government order to Nationalist China to close down their 10 kilowatt radio station at Mae Jan in Chiang Rai in North Thailand, and what they presumed was an intelligence operation headquartered there. They then asked the Thais whether there might be a quid pro quo for the Chinese cessation of aid to the Thai insurgents. The Thai officials appeared unaware of the order, and said that they knew of no such intelligence operation.¹⁵² The Chinese also reassured the Thais not to worry about a road construction that the Chinese had constructed in northern Laos.¹⁵³

With regard to Thai–Chinese trade, Chinese officials noted that while they were interested in trading with Thailand, Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53 still hindered bilateral trade, and strongly urged that the law to be rescinded completely.¹⁵⁴ However, Thailand refused, claiming that they would be able to amend the law to permit China to trade with Thailand.

The Chinese informed Thai officials that the arrival of the PRC representative at the UN ECAFE in Bangkok in September, as originally discussed, would be delayed because of a shortage of qualified personnel at the Chinese MFA, many of whom were busy with other UN duties. According to the Chinese, the representation would be in the form of a study mission to be followed by the establishment of a permanent office in Bangkok. The Thai officials stated that they would use this office like an embassy, to establish direct communication with China.¹⁵⁵

151 'Discussions of Thai Foreign Ministry Officials in China', 28 August 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO13423, NARA.

152 'Comments on Recent Visit to China', 6 September 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO13889, NARA.

153 According to Ross Terrill, a close confidante of the Australian prime minister on détente with the PRC and an Australian professor at Harvard who made various trips to Bangkok, Thai leaders no longer saw the Chinese road complex in North Laos as directed against Thailand, but rather as a way to achieve influence and bargaining leverage for China in Laos. 'Terrill comments on East Asia', 10 September 1973, RG59, 1973CANBER04986, NARA.

154 A rumour that 'secret' Sino–Thai trade negotiations were held in Hong Kong between the chief of the China Trade Office and a delegation of Thai businesspeople representing the Thai government was reported by the *Nation* on 25 August. However, it was a false report: the correspondent missed the badminton team and then fabricated the 25 August story after noticing several Thai business representatives in Hong Kong. 'Comments on Recent Visit to China', 6 September 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO13889, NARA.

155 'Comments on Recent Visit to China', 6 September 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO13889, NARA.

The Thais were generally unimpressed with Chinese understanding of Thailand. According to them, the Chinese appeared to form their opinions from reading some newspapers such as *Phim Thai*, *Siam Rath* and *The Nation*. They suggested that the Chinese at least began reading *Prachathipatai* as well.¹⁵⁶

Neither side raised the subject of the US military presence in Thailand.¹⁵⁷ After the trip, Thai Director-General Phan Wannamethi disclosed to the press that China had not expressed any uneasiness over the American military presence in Thailand.¹⁵⁸ Asked by the press whether Beijing objected to the US presence or indeed welcomed it as a counterweight to Soviet influence in the region, Phan said that such conclusions were unsubstantiated.¹⁵⁹ He also emphasised Thai diplomacy, which supported peaceful coexistence with all countries regardless of ideology.¹⁶⁰ According to Tej Bunnag, this meeting was ‘the most comprehensive exchange of points of view between Thai and Chinese MFA officials, and the basis for a rapprochement with the PRC in 1975’.¹⁶¹

Shortly thereafter, between 26 August and 7 September 1973, another ping-pong team went to Beijing. The team was led by General Tem Homsetthi, Chairman of the Table Tennis Association of Thailand. He was accompanied by Suthee Prasasvinitchai, Deputy Director-General of the Political Affairs Department, and Kosol Sindhvananda, first secretary at the Foreign Ministry.¹⁶² Both diplomats met Cheng Rui-sheng, Deputy Director-General of the Asian Department as well as Liu Yung-chen, and Zhang Jiuhuan, desk officers for Thailand. They further discussed a variety of international problems.¹⁶³ In Bangkok, meanwhile, on 26 August, General Pong Punnakanta, Minister of Transport, formally opened satellite communications services between Thailand and China. Via satellite services, Thai correspondents had an opportunity to interview General Tem Homsetthi, who was in Beijing.¹⁶⁴

156 ‘Comments on Recent Visit to China’, 6 September 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO13889, NARA.

157 ‘Comments on Recent Visit to China’, 6 September 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO13889, NARA.

158 ‘Phan Reports: US Military Bases Don’t Worry China’, *The Nation*, 28 August 1973.

159 ‘Phan Reports: US Military Bases Don’t Worry China’.

160 Vitthaya Vejajiva, *Phan Pheua Phandin* [Phan for the Kingdom] (Bangkok: Post Publishing, 2014), 232.

161 Tej Bunnag, interview by author, 27 June 2016, Bangkok.

162 ‘Thai-Chinese Relations’, 9 November 1973, FCO, FCO15/1788, the National Archives, London.

163 ‘Thai–PRC Relations’, 23 June 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/4, MFA, Thailand 6–7.

164 Warnwai, *Zhou Enlai: Pupluek maitri Thai-jeen*, 216.

In short, between 1972 and 1973, sports exchanges became more frequent and normal. This sports diplomacy was accompanied with regular informal meetings between Thai and Chinese diplomats. The development of close working relationships helped further progress towards an easing of relations. As Thanom said in a press conference in late 1973, 'when people are able to visit one another, it creates good understanding, mutual sympathy, and compromises being reached in various matters both sides have joint interests in', and 'trade with the China Mainland will most probably be started in the near future'.¹⁶⁵

5.3.4. Amending the Law

Following the trade and sports delegations to Beijing, the next step in improving Sino–Thai relations was to start trading with the PRC. The main technical obstacle was Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53, issued by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in 1959 to ban trade with communist countries, especially China. The Thanom Government repeatedly proclaimed its intention to revise or rescind this law, but by mid-1973 it had failed to act. In general, the benefits of trade with China seemed to be mutually recognised by leading power elites as well as by the Thai public. Charoon Sibunruang, former President of the Board of Trade, for example, said 'I welcome trade with China and I don't foresee any problems if trade is resumed'.¹⁶⁶ Likewise, Ob Wasurat, the current President of the Board of Trade, said in August 1973 that Thailand should have established trade relations with China much earlier. If Thailand traded directly with the country, Ob believed, Thailand would reduce its dependence on Hong Kong and Singapore.¹⁶⁷

Within the business community itself, there was an internal debate between two factions over the best way to conduct trade with China. On the one hand, an idea described as state corporatism was spearheaded by Charoon Sibunruang and asserted that trade with China needed to be run by a state corporation. This idea was also represented by various factions within the government, including the military and the Ministry of Commerce. Prasit Kanchanawat, Commerce Minister, proposed that

¹⁶⁵ 'Prime Minister Thanom on Trade with China', 24 September 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO14918, NARA.

¹⁶⁶ 'China Trade Move a Big Surprise: Business Community Welcomes Decision', *Bangkok Post*, 24 January 1973, 13.

¹⁶⁷ Kim, 'The Politics of Thailand's Trade Relations', 317.

such a corporation should be set up with a budget of 2 million baht.¹⁶⁸ On the other hand, those who supported the idea of free trade liberalism saw a significant role for the private sector. The Thai Chamber of Commerce, headed by Ob Wasurat, wanted free enterprise and to open trade links with the PRC.¹⁶⁹

However, further improvement in Sino–Thai trading relations was delayed largely because of the reluctance to trade with the PRC on the part of the military government. This was caused by the persistence of an anticommunist discourse within military thinking. The Thanom Government continued to favour caution in establishing trade with the PRC.¹⁷⁰ By 14 August 1973, the Thanom Government agreed in principle to amend, rather than abolish, Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53, only permitting government-to-government trade relations with China.¹⁷¹ In his speech to the National Legislative Assembly on 6 September, Thanom briefly outlined government policy. While his government wished to trade with the Chinese Government, he insisted that only when his government was convinced trading with China posed no security danger to Thailand would he allow free trade to go ahead. Now, however, Thanom realised that it was inappropriate to trade freely with a country with which Thailand had no diplomatic relations. Scepticism of China had decreased, but remained intact due to China's alleged support for the CPT. Thanom felt that a cessation of Chinese assistance to communist subversion and insurgency, and an end to clandestine radio broadcasts from China against the Thai military government, would be necessary before formal relations between the two countries could be established.¹⁷² By then, however, the idea of establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC had been tabled within the MFA.¹⁷³

168 'Prasit to Query Cabinet on China Trade Policy', *Bangkok Post*, 27 February 1973, 13.

169 'Thai-Chinese Relations', 9 November 1973, FCO, FCO15/1788, the National Archives, London.

170 According to the British telegram, one cause of delay was in particular the reluctance of some members of the Cabinet, including Thanom himself, due to a security imperative: 'Thanom still felt anxious about the security implications and was strongly backed up by Sawaeng [Senanarong]', who was Secretary-General to the Prime Minister. The Thai Government would 'strictly control trade with China so as to minimize the risks of political "infection"'. Also, it showed the power plays in the government between two factions, namely the Praphas-Narong faction and the Sawaeng faction. Sawaeng, who had links with the Chinese and always thought that contact with China would benefit the faction, opposed efforts by Praphas and his group to 'monopolize the trade contacts'. Praphas occasionally used his influence with Thanom in favour of delay. The National Archives, London, FCO15/1788, 'Thai-Chinese Relations', 9 November 1973.

171 'Cabinet "Yes" to China Trade', *Bangkok Post*, 15 August 1973, 1.

172 *Bangkok Post*, 7 September 1973.

173 Tej Bunnag, interview by author, 27 June 2016, Bangkok.

In his meeting with US Deputy Secretary of Defense, William Clements, in Bangkok in September, Thanom said that Thailand must develop its relationship with China very carefully, and not 'jump in all at once'. He also permitted government-to-government trade relations with China, but emphasised that the government must avoid a situation in which the PRC could directly trade with individual Thai firms. Thanom made it clear that everything entering Thailand would be carefully checked, including financial transactions, to make sure that no funds went to the Thai communists.¹⁷⁴

The Thai Government proposed three laws to establish the legal basis for trade with the PRC and communist countries in general, such as North Vietnam and North Korea. In order to permit goods from China to enter Thailand, the first law was to amend the decree by adding the words 'except as approved by the Ministry of Commerce' and to change 'the Land of the Chinese Communists' to 'the People's Republic of China'. The second law was to establish a state trading company with capitalisation of 2 million baht within the Ministry of Commerce, to trade directly with China.¹⁷⁵ The final law was to permit Thai civil servants to administer foreign trade with the People's Republic of China.

The proposal of these laws received an automatic first reading. The laws were then referred to the Legal Committee. In a press conference on 19 September, Thanom proclaimed that the amendment was readily passed in all stages by the National Assembly:

The Ministry of Commerce is making preparations and this might take about 2–3 months, because it is necessary for preparations to be made in full to ensure smooth and satisfactory operation of trade when it is started.

'We must set up an organization or a unit to carry on trade at the government-to-government level'. As Thanom said, in order to preserve a proper balance of trade with China:

174 'Secretary Clements Discussing With Thai Prime Minister', 17 September 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO14495, NARA.

175 Thailand followed the models of state trading corporations in the region, such as Malaysia's PERCAS and Singapore's INTRACO. NARA, RG59, 1973BANGKO15000, 'Thailand Decides to Trade Directly with the People's Republic of China', 25 September 1973.

under no circumstances must anybody be allowed to buy or sell anything as he pleases. All goods China offers to sell us will have to be considered by the Minister of Commerce first in order to decide whether we really need those respective goods quoted, as well as whether we could buy them elsewhere at lower prices. After the Minister of Commerce considers that any goods are suitable, of good quality, and at lower prices than quoted by other countries, as well as necessary for use in our country, then he will submit a report to the Cabinet for consideration and approval. He will not possess the authority to make any decision or reach any agreement on his own initiative. We are making all preparations in a careful and thorough manner; therefore, this will take time.¹⁷⁶

This cautious road to trade with China aroused Chinese frustration. It was widely reported in the Thai newspapers that Chinese leaders were annoyed by the 'inadequate' amendment of decree 53. The amendment of the decree was 'not sufficient' since it continued to emphasise the requirement to be 'hostile' to Chinese communists.¹⁷⁷ According to Thai MFA staff, the Chinese wanted the Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53 abolished. The Thai Government desired to 'avoid giving in to every Chinese request without obtaining anything in return'. In short, 'the PRC had asked the [Thai Government] to abolish decree 53, the RTG compromised by merely amending it'.¹⁷⁸

The Chinese Government was also annoyed by an incident that took place at the Dusit Thani Hotel in Bangkok on 19 September, when Thai representatives walked out of an Asian Games Federation executive committee meeting in protest against the expulsion of Taiwan. While the Thai Government had announced its support for the PRC admission, the Thai delegation, led by Luang Chattrakankson, staged a walkout just before the Iranian vote which admitted the PRC and terminated Taiwan's membership.¹⁷⁹ It was clear that the Thai delegation was instructed by the government to vote for PRC admission to the organisation and abstain on any resolution that admitted the PRC but expelled Taiwan. However, during his discussion with Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Qiao

176 'Prime Minister Thanom on Trade with China', 24 September 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO14918, NARA.

177 Theh Chongkhadikij, 'Beijing Détente Threatened', *Bangkok Post*, 2 October 1973, 1.

178 'Thailand Decides to Trade Directly with the People's Republic of China', 25 September 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO15000, NARA.

179 'Sports and TRG Policies Toward China', 24 September 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO14922, NARA.

Guanhua at New York a few months later, Chatichai was informed that the Chinese had taken no offence at the action of Thai sports administrators. The talks were going ‘very well’.¹⁸⁰

To sum up, by 1973, laws facilitating trade relations between Thailand and China were in the making, and the prospect of establishing diplomatic relations was now firmly on the radar of Thai leaders, or at least on the radar of the MFA. Rather than posing a ‘go-slow’ diplomacy, the Thanom Government to an extent continued the détente strategy with the communist powers that had been initiated by Thanat Khoman. Still locked in a Cold War mindset, Thanom, Praphas and the conservatives remained sceptical of Chinese motivations and pursued a cautious road to détente. Tej Bunnag, then a senior MFA official, recalled later that ‘we [the Thai Foreign Ministry] spent nearly three years trying to convince security officials to agree to build normal ties with the People’s Republic of China’.¹⁸¹

However, on 14 October 1973, the military regime under Thanom and Praphas fell following student-led demonstrations and internal conflict within elite circles.¹⁸² The discourse of détente did not end. Rather, as the next chapter indicates, the process of democratisation expedited the process of détente and the normalisation of Sino–Thai relations, while the discourse of anticommunism appeared to fade away. At the same time, the tension between these two discourses persisted throughout the democratic interlude between 1973 and 1976.

5.4. Conclusion

‘The crisis’, as Gramsci put it, ‘consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’.¹⁸³ In Thailand, the ensuing crisis of democracy and diplomacy, during the brief period of 1969 and 1971 brought about

180 The National Archives, London, FCO15/1788, ‘Thai-Chinese Relations’, 9 November 1973.

181 Tej Bunnag, interview by author, 27 June 2016, Bangkok.

182 Prajak Kongkirati, *And Then The Movement Emerged: Cultural Politics of Thai Students and Intellectuals Movements before the October 14 Uprising* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2005); 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), 215–40.

183 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 276.

an interregnum of full-fledged authoritarianism between 1971 and 1973. Thanom and Praphas launched a coup against their own government, dissolved Parliament, dismissed Thanat from the position of foreign minister and deferred flexible diplomacy. At first, they appeared to pursue a ‘go-slow’ diplomacy with the communists. Subsequently, the changing dynamics of international politics, especially Nixon’s historic visit to China in 1972, rendered the process of opening discussions with Beijing inevitable. This chapter has argued that there remained a persistence of the *détente* discourse with the PRC during this period of interregnum. Following the extraordinary ping-pong diplomacy, Thailand began the processes of negotiating trade links and developing other contacts. Throughout these processes, the MFA played an important role in negotiating with the Chinese, generating the increasingly close working relationship and acquaintance between the two ministries and diplomats. While the foreign policy of *détente* was deepening and the prospect of Sino–Thai rapprochement was nascent, the legitimacy of the military regime drastically waned. The student-led demonstrations of 14 October 1973 marked the end of the military regime and its role in foreign affairs. The old discourse of anticommunism was fading away, yet a new discourse of *détente* had not yet matured.

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