6

A Diplomatic Transformation: Chatichai, Kukrit and the Second Détente (1975–1976)

Our [foreign] policy changes considerably. Now, we can go to Red China and to Russia.

– Chatichai Choonhavan¹

On 14 October 1973, the military regime of Thanom and Praphas was replaced with a civilian government. The ‘democratic interlude’ (October 1973 – October 1976) that followed facilitated a more open political climate where new realities could be acknowledged and put to the people. At the same time, the changing international environment made it possible for a culture of détente to flourish. Furthermore, the fall of US-backed regimes in Indochina in 1975 reduced American commitment to Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the end of the Cultural Revolution and the deepening of the Sino–Soviet split saw China take a far less radical position in its diplomatic relations with Thailand. With the discourse of détente now deeply embedded in Thai politics, and with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs able to take a far more active role in shaping foreign policy, those who supported the shift in relations were able to act decisively. This culminated on 1 July 1975, when then prime minister, MR Kukrit Pramoj, and foreign minister, Major General Chatichai Choonhavan, established formal diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China.

¹ Quoted in ‘Charunphan and Chatichai on Thai-US relations’, 13 June 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO09673, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) online database.

This chapter elucidates how the normalisation of Sino–Thai relations and ongoing improvement in Thai–Soviet relations followed the same fundamental principle: that the communist powers could be friends rather than enemies. The first section argues that Thailand’s relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) continued to steadily improve, with ongoing petro- and sports diplomacy running alongside increasing trade. It closely examines a diplomatic revolution in Thai–Chinese relations, namely Kukrit’s visit to Beijing and the restoration of diplomatic relations, in detail. The second section suggests that while Thailand had maintained diplomatic relations with the USSR since 1941, better trade relations and a cultural agreement signposted a new approach to relations with Moscow.

The chapter also recognises that these changes created deep anxiety within Thai elite circles. As Benedict Anderson has explained, this period saw Thailand experience ‘withdrawal symptoms’.² US military withdrawal, changing class composition and ideological upheaval precipitated a crisis for the existing Thai elite in a topsy-turvy world. To this, I would add the ‘symptom’ of the changed diplomatic environment, in which détente with the communist powers gained momentum. On 6 October 1976, this anxiety would lead to mass violence and a subsequent coup, which led to the ultra-nationalist administration, underpinned by a radical anticommunist discourse.

6.1. Sino–Thai Rapprochement: Diplomatic Revolution

6.1.1. Building a Necessary Foundation: From Petro- to Trade Diplomacy

Following the ‘October revolution’ in 1973, King Bhumibol appointed the rector of Thammasat University, Sanya Dharmasakdi, as the new prime minister. To meet popular demands, Sanya, with a middle-of-the-road personality, pledged to promulgate a new constitution and set out a roadmap for elections within a year. In foreign affairs, he negotiated the gradual withdrawal of American troops and continued the détente strategy. In a speech to the National Assembly on 25 October, he made

2 Benedict Anderson, ‘Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup’, in *Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2014), 48–49.

clear that he would 'take steps to further good relations with all countries which are friendly towards Thailand, including countries with different political ideologies'.³ On the same day, the newly appointed Foreign Minister, Charoonphan Isarankhun Na Ayutthaya, stated that 'the government is opening the way for closer friendly contacts with the People's Republic of China'.⁴ This policy toward China was largely driven by Major General Chatichai Choonhavan, who remained in position as Deputy Foreign Minister.

Government policy was now constrained by both popular demands to distance Thailand from the US, and the changing international situation. Most pressing was the global oil crisis in October 1973, when the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) drastically raised the oil price. It quadrupled by January 1974 to nearly US\$12 a barrel. The oil crisis seriously hurt the Thai economy, not only due to the oil shortage, but also by pushing up domestic prices by up to 20 per cent.⁵ Yet this also provided new opportunities for improved Sino–Thai cooperation.

On 17 November 1973, the PRC approached the Thai Government with an offer to sell high-speed diesel oil to Thailand in return for Thai tobacco. By now, the Sanya Government was in urgent need of oil and welcomed the Chinese initiative. Subsequently, Anand Panyarachun, Thai Ambassador to the United Nations (UN), made direct contact with his Chinese counterpart in a bid to arrange the purchase of oil supplies.⁶ According to Anand, Huang Chen, head of the Chinese delegation to the UN, requested that Thailand end its aggressive attitude towards Cambodia's exiled government headed by Prince Sihanouk, in exchange for crude oil.⁷

3 Policy statement by Prime Minister Sanya Dharmasakdi to the National Assembly on 25 October 1973, *Foreign Affairs Bulletin* 13, no. 1 (August–October 1973): 28.

4 'Govt Sets Guidelines for Foreign Policy', *Bangkok Post*, 26 October 1973, 1.

5 Narongchai Akrasanee and Somsak Tambunlertchai, 'Thailand: Transition from Import Substitution to Export Expansion', in *Economic Development in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Seiji Naya and Akira Takayama (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1980), 108.

6 'Beijing Offers Oil for Tobacco', *Bangkok Post*, 17 November 1973; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 November 1973, in *120 Years Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (Bangkok: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995), 239.

7 'Sihanouk Comes with the Oil', *Bangkok Post*, 30 November 1973, 1.

In early December, the Chinese Ambassador to the UN informed Anand that his government had agreed in principle to sell 50,000 tons of oil to Thailand. The Thai Foreign Ministry saw this quick and affirmative reply as a 'particular sign of good will' and thought it showed a 'desire to broaden relations'.⁸ Chatichai's close confidante, Lengler Baiyoke, a prominent Sino–Thai business figure and managing director of Sapanpla Cold Storage Industry, then made a secret arrangement with Beijing for Chatichai and himself to visit China. According to Lengler, the main cause for Beijing's decision to open the door for Thailand was due to favourable reports to Premier Zhou Enlai about the friendliness of the Thai people during the Chinese ping-pong visit in 1973.⁹

Chatichai eagerly proposed that the Sanya Government abolish the controversial trade law of Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53. In the meantime, he accepted Beijing's invitation, and on 21 December 1973, departed for what was the first official visit by a Thai leader at ministerial level.¹⁰ At an airport press conference, Chatichai announced that the government had decided to rescind Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53 but that this would need approval from the National Legislative Assembly.¹¹

Upon his arrival in Beijing, Chatichai was welcomed by Chinese leaders at the airport. Over the next few days, he met with Wang Yao-ting, Chairman of the Council for Promotion of International Trade, and other prominent officials, including the Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade to negotiate the purchase of diesel oil. While the price of the oil remained in contention, Chatichai told the press later that 'all Chinese officials taking part in the negotiations ... welcomed us warmly and held talks as if we were relatives and members of the same family'.¹²

8 'Chatichai: January Date in Beijing', *Bangkok Post*, 13 December 1973, 1; 'PRC as Source for Oil for Thailand', 14 December 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO19363, NARA.

9 Lengler later told the press that China 'has changed its policy to one of seeking every way to promote friendship with Thailand', including sports, trade, and even politics. Lengler also claimed that the Chinese would not require Thailand to lift the anticommunist act, which they considered as 'an internal affair over which the Thai Government has sovereign right'. However, he also said they insisted on the abrogation of Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53, which had forbidden trade with the PRC since the late 1950s. 'Visits to China Under Review', *Bangkok Post*, 25 December 1973, 1.

10 'Chatichai in Beijing', *Bangkok Post*, 23 December 1973, 3.

11 'Readings of the Bangkok Political Barometer Through December 21', 21 December 1973, RG59, 1973BANGKO19786, NARA; 'China Team to Forge Official Trade Links', *The Nation*, 21 December 1973.

12 'Chatichai on Oil from China', 4 January 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO00192, NARA.

On the last day of the visit, 28 December, Premier Zhou Enlai spoke with Chatichai for two hours in the Great Hall of the People, where they discussed Thai–Chinese relations, as well as the world situation with particular reference to events in Southeast Asia. Zhou assured Chatichai of China's desire for friendly relations with Thailand. Chatichai said that trade would be conducted normally through the Hong Kong office of the China Resources Corporation and that the Thai Government would control commerce only through licensing via the Ministry of Commerce. In other words, only specifically licensed businesses would be permitted to trade with China.¹³ Zhou did not ask for a rapid withdrawal of American military forces from Thailand. According to Chatichai, Zhou was alarmed by Russia's expansionist strategy and naval presence in the Indian Ocean.¹⁴ The PRC's main concern was thus to counter Soviet efforts to fill the power vacuum in Southeast Asia, making the US military withdrawal less of a priority.¹⁵

Finally, Zhou and Chatichai reached an agreement for the sale of 50,000 tons of diesel to Thailand. According to Chatichai, the diesel purchase was equivalent to a six-month supply, and after lengthy negotiations on price, Zhou intervened to offer the price Thailand had asked for in November (1 baht per litre). Zhou described this as a 'friendship price', and argued that it showed willingness to 'help each other mutually'.¹⁶ Moreover, the Chinese did not require that Thailand recognise Prince Sihanouk's government or sever its relations with Taiwan.¹⁷ Rather, Zhou invited Air Marshal Dawee Chullasapya, Defense Minister and the President of the National Olympic Committee of Thailand, to visit China.¹⁸ For Chatichai, the visit demonstrated that the 'the People's Republic of China is a defensive nation and not aggressive'.¹⁹

13 'Beijing Throws the Door Wide Open', *Bangkok Post*, 29 December 1973, 1.

14 'Beijing Throws the Door Wide Open', 1, 3.

15 'China and Southeast Asia', 27 October 1973, RG59, 1973HONGK10771, NARA.

16 'Beijing Throws the Door Wide Open', 1; 'Chatichai on Oil from China', 4 January 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO00192, NARA.

17 'Beijing Throws the Door Wide Open', 3.

18 The Chinese leaders were impressed with Dawee's speech during the first Chinese ping-pong visit. Officials of the ping-pong team reported the statements to the Chinese government. Dawee reportedly said:

Communism is good for China. It has brought about unity of the largest nation in the world. It has brought about economic and social development. So long as the Chinese do not try to export this ideology by force or by subversion, they are welcome to it. I wish them well.

'Dawee Popular in Beijing', *Bangkok Post*, 5 January 1974, 1; 'Beijing Throws the Door Wide Open', 3.

19 'Zhou's Ideas for Southeast Asia', *Bangkok Post*, 30 December 1973, 1.

The visit provided reassurance that the Thai Government was committed to a policy of rapprochement with the PRC.²⁰ To show goodwill, shortly after the visit, the Thai Government for the first time officially advocated a 'One-China policy', reversing the long-term 'two-China policy' stance. As Chatichai reasoned, since the PRC was now the only member of the UN, Thailand thereby considered there to be only one China.²¹

This petro-diplomacy also provided a stepping stone toward the strengthening of Sino–Thai economic relations. The Sanya Government decided to allow imported goods from China to enter the country from 1 January 1974. In February, Commerce Minister Chanchai Leethawon announced that Thailand would allow the import of eight Chinese goods: machines and machine tools; chemicals for raw materials; steel and iron; raw silk; crude oil; petroleum products and coal; paper and newsprint; medicines and fertilisers.²²

At the same time, the government facilitated sports relations with China. Defense Minister Dawee led the most important of these, in his capacity as the President of the Thai Olympic Committee. Arriving in Beijing on 7 February 1974 for a week-long visit, Dawee met with Zhou and other government ministers such as Wang Meng, Minister of the All-China Sports Federation, Li Qiang, Foreign Commerce Minister, and Han Nianlong, Deputy Foreign Minister.²³ The discussions ranged from sports to trade, as well as political and security issues. They discussed the Indochina situation, as well as Chinese support for Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) insurgents. Zhou reportedly reassured Dawee that since

20 'Thailand–People's Republic of China Relations', 23 June 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/4, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), 7.

21 'Chatichai on his China trip', 4 January 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO00229, NARA.

22 'Rules on China Trade', *Bangkok Post*, 2 March 1974, 3.

23 At a banquet on 8 February 1974, Wang Meng spoke of the traditional friendship between the people of China and Thailand. He said that sports exchanges had been strengthened in the past few years, and this promoted the understanding and friendship between the sports teams and people of the two countries. Dawee said that Thailand and China should establish friendly relations and that these relations should be developed in the days to come. Speech by Wang Meng, at a banquet given in honour of a delegation led by Dawee Chullasapya, President of the Olympic Committee of Thailand, 8 February 1974, excerpted in *China and Thailand, 1949–1983*, ed. RK Jain (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1984), 196.

the Thai military regime had gone, China had no reason to support the Thai communists, and that the Voice of the People of Thailand Radio was not located on Chinese territory.²⁴ As Dawee said:

Zhou stressed that the PRC does not want to export Communism. He admitted that in the past, China had supported terrorists in Thailand to fight for freedom because the former (Thanom, Praphas) government was dictatorial and curtailed human rights.²⁵

Dawee also emphasised that the Thai Government had already agreed to abrogate Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53, and was just waiting for the National Legislative Assembly to approve the decision. For Zhou, this should be a step toward opening 'the door for brotherly relationships based on good intentions towards each other'.²⁶ During the talks with the Chinese leaders, the old saying, 'the Thais and the Chinese are none other than brothers' was also highlighted. Furthermore, Zhou told Dawee that the Chinese realised how difficult it was for Thailand to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC and did not wish to rush the Thai Government into it. According to Dawee, the Chinese were concerned about the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean, and Zhou asked him to 'tell your American friends' to 'watch the Russians'.²⁷

China also agreed, in principle, to sell an additional 75,000 tons of diesel oil to Thailand.²⁸ As Dawee put it:

[in] showing her goodwill, China is willing to buy all agricultural surpluses like rubber and gunny bags [burlap sacks] from Thailand in order to help us not to suffer heavy trade deficit from the purchase of diesel oil.²⁹

24 'An MFA official who accompanied Dawee to China', or in fact Tej Bunnag, told the American Embassy in Bangkok that he believed that there could have been a 'communications problem' during the private meeting between Zhou and Dawee, with no other Thai officials present. He doubted that Zhou would have given Dawee 'such a categorical assurance about future Chinese non-involvement in the Thai insurgency as Dawee thought'. 'Marshall Dawee's Views on China', 21 February 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO03050, NARA; 'Dawee's Meeting with Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping', 22 February 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO03050, NARA.

25 'China Ends Support for Local terrorists', *Bangkok Post*, 17 February 1974, 1.

26 'China Ends Support for Local Terrorists', 1.

27 Dawee recalled that in their private meeting, Zhou accused the Soviets of being 'liars', and of attempting to 'blackmail' China. The Chinese also stressed that the Soviets were no longer even Communists, but had become 'decadent capitalists', and regarded them as being far worse than 'US imperialists'. 'Marshall Dawee's Views on China', 21 February 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO02958, NARA.

28 'Thailand-People's Republic of China Relations', 23 June 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/4, MFA, Thailand, 8.

29 'China Ends Support for Local Terrorists', 1.

Shortly after his visit, Dawee himself admitted to the press that he 'spent more time discussing politics than sports'.³⁰ As he later told the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) at the American embassy in Bangkok, Edward Masters, while he was 'not likely to recommend any sudden foreign policy departures', Dawee was 'convinced Thailand should move ahead rapidly to permit trade with the PRC, particularly since Chinese goods [were] freely entering Thailand anyway'.³¹

Throughout 1974, further sports exchanges became normal. For example, between 7 and 18 April, a Thai basketball team, led by Colonel Anu Romayanon, the President of the Football Association of Thailand, attended a friendship match in Beijing. The team was accompanied by Kobsak Chutikul from the Foreign Ministry, who met with Cheng Rui-sheng, then Deputy Director of Southeast Asian Division of the Chinese Foreign Ministry. Between 15 and 30 May 1974, the Chinese badminton team, led by Chu Tze, attended the International Badminton Competition in Bangkok, while the Chinese football team arrived in Bangkok on 5 November. Between 4 and 10 December 1974, the Chinese basketball team returned the visit to Bangkok and played their Thai counterparts.³² Thailand saw the Chinese outstanding performance in sports as helping to establish an image of China as a sports power.³³

Underpinning this thawing of relations was an increased focus on improving trade links. On 6 December 1974, Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53 was finally lifted by the National Legislative Assembly. The Assembly also passed the State Trading Bill, which set up a state trading corporation under the supervision of the Ministry of Commerce to control direct trade with communist countries, including China.³⁴ Following the formal abrogation of Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53, Foreign Minister Charoonphan said, 'Thailand and the People's Republic of China will develop normal trade relations'.³⁵ In 1974, Thailand exported nearly US\$113,000 worth of goods (mainly rice) to China, and imported goods worth around US\$4.5 million (mostly crude and diesel oil).³⁶

30 'Thai Aide Reports China's Assurance on Red Insurgents', *New York Times*, 17 February 1974, 9.

31 'Marshall Dawee's Views on China', 21 February 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO02958, NARA.

32 'Thailand-People's Republic of China Relations', 23 June 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/4, MFA, Thailand, 8-9.

33 'Medical Team goes to Beijing in April', *Bangkok Post*, 22 February 1974, 7.

34 'Revolutionary Decree No. 53 Repealed: Assembly Opens Way for Trade with China', *Bangkok Post*, 7 December 1974, 1.

35 *Beijing Review*, commentary on Thai Government's repeal of Decree No. 53 on trade ban, 27 December 1974, excerpted in Jain, *China and Thailand*, 196.

36 Norman Peagan, 'Thailand Joins Beijing Ensemble', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 July 1975, 21.

Shortly after the lifting of the law, Deputy Commerce Minister Prasong Sukhum and Ambassador Anand led the trade delegation to Beijing to negotiate and improve trade relations. Joining the delegation was Ob Wasurat, the pro-Beijing President of the Thai Board of Trade, and Tej Bunnag,³⁷ Director of the East Asian Division at the Foreign Ministry.

While there, Prasong and Anand met with the Chinese Deputy Vice-Premier Li Xiannian, who emphasised the importance of reciprocity and equality in Sino–Thai trade relations. Li made clear that the PRC intended to buy a substantial amount of rubber, tobacco and timber from Thailand,³⁸ while Prasong noted Thailand's decision to allow government-to-government direct trade, whereby private traders could trade with China after registering with the Commerce Ministry. This process was to 'assure that the good relationship established between the two countries is not destroyed by avaricious businessmen'.³⁹ As Prasong explained:

There will be no barter but parallel trade ... It will be to the mutual benefit of both countries, with each filling the other's needs. We will exchange lists of our exports and also of our import requirements.⁴⁰

The Thai state corporation, supervised by the Ministry of Commerce, would act as a channel for working relations with China, especially the Bank of China, and the China Resources Company in Hong Kong.⁴¹ According to Prasong, Chinese leaders also made it clear that a formal recognition of the One-China policy was a precondition for the PRC's diplomatic normalisation with Thailand.⁴²

37 According to the US Embassy in Bangkok, Tej Bunnag had been 'its key working level action officer for dealings with the People's Republic of China ever since Thailand began exploring the possibilities of eventual diplomatic relations'. In other words, Tej was another strong détente proponent. He was 'an extremely bright and articulate Thai foreign service officer, who by virtue of his skill, motivation, and family prominence will almost certainly rise to the highest positions in the Thai Foreign Ministry'. 'Thai Trade Delegation to Beijing and Pyongyang', 11 December 1974, RG59, BANGKO19331, NARA.

38 'Thailand–People's Republic of China Relations', 23 June 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/4, MFA, Thailand, 10; Shee Poon Kim, 'The Politics of Thailand's Trade Relations with the People's Republic of China', *Asian Survey* 21, no. 3 (March 1981): 320.

39 'Prasong on China Trade', *Bangkok Post*, 9 January 1975, 3.

40 Theh Chongkhadikij, 'China Trade: Parallel Basis, Not Barter', *Bangkok Post*, 13 January 1975, 10.

41 Theh, 'China Trade', 10.

42 'Thai Trade Delegation to DPRK and PRC', 16 January 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO00789, NARA.

In addition, Anand had a one-on-one hour-long conversation with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Qiao Guanhua. According to Anand, the Chinese were happy about the repeal of Revolutionary Proclamation No. 53, but remained reserved about the State Trading Bill. He reassured the Chinese that Thailand would treat all socialist countries equally.⁴³ Anand also stressed that his delegation was not empowered to negotiate the restoration of diplomatic relations. 'Whether the visit of the mission would lead to diplomatic relations', said Anand, depended on 'the attitudes of both governments'.⁴⁴ He defined his delegation as ostensibly a 'people-to-people mission'.⁴⁵

On 16 December, Deputy Prime Minister Prakorb Hutasingh proclaimed that the Sanya Government would not 'hurry' to open diplomatic relations with the PRC, and so it would be left to the elected government to decide after the general election, scheduled for 26 January 1975.⁴⁶

On 6 January, Chatichai led another Thai delegation to Beijing, primarily to discuss the further purchase of oil.⁴⁷ On this visit, he negotiated with Wang Yao-ting, Chairman of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade. An agreement was reached only on 8 January, the last day of the trip, when an additional 75,000 tons of diesel oil were promised to Thailand at the friendship price. The dinner, hosted by Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua, was followed by a meeting between Chatichai and Premier Zhou Enlai, who by then had been diagnosed with bladder cancer and therefore resided at Beijing Hospital. As he later explained to the press in Bangkok:

When the car stopped in front of the hospital, Premier Zhou Enlai was standing at the door to welcome me, before I had even time to take off my overcoat. He took us into a reception room, reserved especially for his guests. We exchanged views on developments in the world situation, especially in the Indian Ocean, in the Middle East, in Laos and in Cambodia. The withdrawal of American military forces by gradual degrees from Thailand was also mentioned ... Though I was informed beforehand that I would

43 'Thai Trade Delegation to Beijing', 7 January 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO00231, NARA.

44 'Team to China Will Initiate Trade Contacts', *Bangkok Post*, 12 December 1974, 3.

45 'Ambassador Anand's Interview with Dana Schmidt', 21 February 1975, RG59, 1975STATE032185, NARA.

46 'China "Ties" Left to New Govt', *Bangkok Post*, 17 February 1974, 1.

47 Quoted in 'Deputy Chatichai Choonhavan on his Trip to Beijing', 13 January 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO00596, NARA.

be able to meet Premier Zhou Enlai for about 10 minutes only, he was so kind as to hold a conversation with me that lasted as long as 45 minutes.⁴⁸

During their 45-minute discussion, Zhou and Chatichai agreed to support the Laotian Coalition Government, and leave the Cambodian people to solve their own problems. Zhou said that, in principle, China did not approve of foreign forces being based in Thailand, but expressed his understanding that it was necessary for Thailand to balance among great powers. Zhou also invited His Royal Highness Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn to visit Beijing.⁴⁹

In Chatichai's view, the visit was only about oil. 'Diplomatic relations', he made clear, should be considered 'a totally different matter, which must be kept separate'. Yet, he also made clear that petro-diplomacy would 'help make relations between our two countries closer and create good mutual understanding'.⁵⁰ Shortly after returning, and as a clear demonstration of how the diplomatic mood had shifted, Chatichai announced to the newly established Chart Thai Party, of which he was Secretary-General, that after the coming election, a government led by his party would quickly establish diplomatic relations with Beijing.⁵¹ Normalisation with the PRC thus became a foreign policy priority of Chatichai's political party.

To summarise, while the Sanya Government did not prioritise a diplomatic rapprochement with the PRC, it built a necessary foundation for the subsequent normalisation following elections. In other words, it pursued what Shee Poon Kim described as a 'slow thaw' in relations with Beijing.⁵² While sports diplomacy and trade continued to increase the communications between the two countries, oil became a clear focus that helped to lubricate the process. Led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and in particular by key détente proponents such as Chatichai, the change was normalised by emphasising the necessity of engaging in flexible diplomacy. As Chatichai explained in June 1974:

48 Quoted in 'Deputy Chatichai Choonhavan on his Trip to Beijing', 13 January 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO00596, NARA.

49 'Prince Gets Invitation to China', *Bangkok Post*, 12 January 1975, 1.

50 Quoted in 'Deputy Chatichai Choonhavan on his Trip to Beijing', 13 January 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO00596, NARA.

51 'Prince Gets Invitation to China', 1.

52 Shee Poon Kim, 'The Politics of Thailand's Trade Relations', 319. See also 'Quarterly Analysis of Developments and Trends in Thailand', 1 May 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO07023, NARA.

[Thai] foreign policy has always changed. It is not necessary to be inflexible. On the contrary, our foreign policy must be revised according to changes and developments in the world situation.

‘Our [foreign] policy’, continued Chatichai, ‘changes considerably. Now, we can go to Red China and to Russia’.⁵³

6.1.2. Normalisation: The Restoration of Sino–Thai Diplomatic Relations

A Prelude to Diplomatic Relations

A new constitution was promulgated on October 1974, paving the way for a general election on 26 January 1975. Following the vote, no political party gained a majority. MR Seni Pramroj, the leader of the Democratic Party, failed to gain a vote of confidence from Parliament. This was because of the political manoeuvring of his younger brother, the leader of the Social Action Party (SAP), MR Kukrit Pramroj, who had strong support from the military.⁵⁴ Shortly thereafter, Kukrit formed a coalition government and became the new prime minister on 17 March.

Détente began in earnest with Kukrit’s foreign policy statement to Parliament on 19 March. He announced that the objective of Thai foreign policy was ‘to safeguard the national interests’. His government would pursue an ‘independent policy’ by considering ‘national interests in line with the economic objective as well as the security of the nation’. Like his predecessors, Kukrit would promote ‘peaceful coexistence’ by befriending every country that demonstrated good intentions towards Thailand, regardless of differences in political ideology or governmental system.⁵⁵ What made him different, however, was that Kukrit indicated a strong endeavour (a) ‘to recognize and normalize relations with the People’s Republic of China’, (b) ‘to withdraw foreign troops from Thailand within one year through friendly negotiations keeping into consideration the

53 Quoted in ‘Charunphan and Chatichai on Thai-US relations’, 13 June 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO09673, NARA.

54 We now know that the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, General Kris Srivara, had initially given the army’s strong support to the Kukrit government. David Morell and Chai-Anan Samudawanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction and Revolution* (Cambridge: Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain, 1981), 258–60.

55 Quoted in telegram from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Phan) to all Thai diplomatic and consular missions, 21 March 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 191.

situation in this region', and (c) 'to strengthen relations with neighboring countries and foster in every way close cooperation within ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations]'. This was in order 'to arrive at a balance in its relations with the superpowers'.⁵⁶ Alongside maintaining good relations with the USSR, Thailand explicitly pledged to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC and to negotiate the withdrawal of American troops by 20 March 1976.⁵⁷

Chatichai, a staunch détente proponent and now foreign minister, continued to play a significant role too. In March, he gave an interview to *Newsweek*, confirming the Thai Government would seek the resumption of diplomatic relations with the PRC in the near future.⁵⁸ He asked Anand Panyarachun, Thai Ambassador to the UN and to the US, to contact the Chinese head of the delegation at the UN and inform him of these intentions. Also, Chatichai, through Anand, officially invited the Chairman of the International Trade Organization, Wang Yao-ting, to visit Thailand. He wished to conduct preliminary talks with the delegation, and regarded this invitation as the beginning of normalisation.⁵⁹ He also set up a task force at the MFA, chaired by Phan Wannamethi, the Permanent Secretary, in order to consider various problems which could arise. Of particular concern was the status of overseas Chinese in Thailand should normal relations between Thailand and Beijing be initiated.⁶⁰

These diplomatic developments were accelerated by two key international events. The first was the communist victories in Indochina, starting with Vietnam and Cambodia in April 1975. Specifically, the subsequent fall of the Laotian monarchy in December shocked the ruling elite of Thailand, who perceived the monarchy as an intrinsic part of the nation.

56 Quoted in telegram from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Phan) to all Thai diplomatic and consular missions, 21 March 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 192.

57 Upon taking power, Kukrit summoned a meeting of the National Security Council on 21 March, where he made the decision of setting a deadline for the withdrawal of the remaining 25,000 US soldiers and 350 planes before 20 March 1976. He also called for an end to the US military supply airlift to Cambodia via air bases in Thailand. See R. Sean Randolph, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950–1985* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1986), Chapter 6.

58 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), 140.

59 'Chatichai Invites China's Trade Chief', *Bangkok Post*, 6 April 1975, 3.

60 'Chatichai Told US Will Stand By Commitments', *Bangkok Post*, 29 April 1975, 3.

The idea that Thailand might be the ‘next domino’ and ‘frontline state’ became prevalent, with conservatives seeing the events as a direct ‘threat’ to Thailand’s security and survival. This drastically changing situation furthered the desire to embrace Beijing in the hope that the PRC might prove vital in containing Hanoi and safeguarding Thai sovereignty.⁶¹

The second event was the *Mayaguez* incident in May. Without consulting the Thai Government, the US used the U-Tapao Airport for an operation to retrieve the US-flagged container ship, *Mayaguez*, which had been captured by Cambodia.⁶² The Kukrit Government protested the US encroachment on Thailand’s territorial sovereignty by presenting a protest memorandum. They also summoned the Thai Ambassador to the US, Anand, back to Bangkok for an indefinite period.⁶³ While delivering the protest note to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Anand told him that Thailand had no objection to the results of the operation to free the *Mayaguez* but did object to the procedures. He said that Kukrit was very ‘upset’ with the *Mayaguez* incident.⁶⁴ The incident not only indicated the challenge for Thai–US relations but also provided an opportunity for the government to speed up the policy of détente.⁶⁵

In his session with a US National War College delegation on 1 May, Kukrit said that the Chinese were ‘not really hostile to Thailand’. He speculated: ‘China would not invade Thailand, but would prefer to revert to its historical role of “big brother” – having a ‘sort of influence in Thailand that the US exercised ten to fifteen years ago’. Moreover, he believed that

61 Sukhumbhand Paribatra, ‘Dictates of Security: Thailand’s Relations with the PRC since the Vietnam War’, in *ASEAN and China: An Evolving Relationship*, ed. Joyce K Kallgren et al. (Berkeley: University of California, 1988), 293.

62 We now know that the Gerald Ford administration, bypassing the elected civilian government, got permission from the Thai military to launch the attack from the U Tapao air base. Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947–1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 1.

63 ‘RTG Protest Memorandum Over the Mayaguez Affairs’, 17 May 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO08995, NARA.

64 ‘Delivery of Thai Protest Note Over Mayaguez Incident’, 18 May 1975, RG59, 1975STATE115940, NARA.

65 In fact, the *Mayaguez* incident was not the decline of Thai–US military relations. According to Cheng Guan Ang, US congressional investigator Brady was informed by General Kriangsak that he approved of the US *Mayaguez* operation wholeheartedly. Cheng Guan Ang, ‘Southeast Asian Perceptions of the Domino Theory’, in *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962*, ed. Christopher E Goscha and Christopher F Ostenmann (Washington DC and Stanford: Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Stanford University Press, 2009), 112.

the Chinese preferred the US presence in Thailand in order to balance the increased Soviet influence in the region as well as its military presence in the Indian Ocean.⁶⁶

Foreign Minister Chatichai asked Thai ambassadors around the world to contact their Chinese counterparts to explore possible ways to establish diplomatic relations. For example, on 5 May, Ambassador Anand had a conversation with the Chinese Ambassador to the UN, Huang Hua, in New York. The latter told Anand that the Chinese Government congratulated Prime Minister Kukrit on his statement to Parliament regarding his determination to establish diplomatic ties with Beijing. The Chinese leaders readily agreed to negotiate with the Thai Government.⁶⁷ The PRC had only one condition: that is, Thailand had to recognise one China and terminate its relations with Taiwan. According to Huang, the Chinese could not send the MFA officials to Bangkok to negotiate with their Thai counterparts, as requested from the Thai foreign minister, while the Taiwanese embassy remained in Thailand.⁶⁸

By early May, the Chinese Government formally advised the Thai Foreign Ministry of its readiness to establish relations with Thailand.⁶⁹ By then, Chatichai repeatedly told the Thai public that the PRC had informed him that it was agreeable to opening diplomatic ties with Thailand. In his 19 May press conference, Chatichai said that Thailand would recognise the PRC before the UN General Assembly meeting in September. In the meantime, the Foreign Ministry drafted a bill to abrogate the law that set up a state trading organisation to trade with the communist countries. Since Anand's visit to Beijing in December 1974, the Chinese had repeatedly informed Thailand that it considered the law to be discriminatory.⁷⁰

66 'Prime Minister Kukrit on RTG/PRC Relations', 1 May 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO07843, NARA.

67 A conversation between Thai Ambassador to the UN and the Chinese Ambassador to the UN in New York, 26 May 1975, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.1/112, the National Archive of Thailand (TNA), Bangkok, 86.

68 Anand told Huang Hua he thought that since the Chinese trade delegation was about to be in Bangkok, the Thais should grasp the opportunity to discuss the preliminary talks with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials who accompanied the delegation. However, as the Chinese Ambassador informed Anand, the trade delegation led by Wang Yao-ting would not be in Bangkok until by the end of the year. Anand said those preliminary talks would thus be unnecessary and too late. His Chinese counterpart agreed with this observation. A conversation between Thai Ambassador to the UN and the Chinese Ambassador to the UN in New York, 26 May 1975, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.1/112, TNA, Bangkok, 86.

69 A conversation between Thai Ambassador and the Chinese Ambassador in Tokyo, 26 May 1975, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.1/112, TNA, Bangkok, 87.

70 'FM Pledges China Ties by September', *Bangkok Post*, 19 May 1975, 1.

Subsequently, Chatichai asked recently returned Ambassador Anand to handle the process in detail.⁷¹ During his talks with Chinese counterparts, Anand recalled that ‘the Chinese do not mention the term “*kanperd kwamsampan*” or “establishment of diplomatic relations” but use “*kanfeunfu kwamsampan*” or “restoration of diplomatic relations” because ‘they consider formal diplomatic relations with Thailand had never disappeared’.⁷² Thus, the Thai term, ‘*kanfeunfu kwamsampan*’, was promulgated in official language, though in general ‘restoration’ and ‘establishment’ were used interchangeably.

In his 21 May discussion with the US Ambassador to Thailand, Charles S Whitehouse (1975–1978), Chatichai was asked about Thailand’s recognition of Communist China. He told Whitehouse that the PRC was ‘agreeable to a visit by him at any time, but Thailand was not yet ready’ because of the problem of resolving the status of the more than 310,000 Chinese with Taiwanese passports. ‘These people must decide whether they want to become citizens of Thailand or Mainland China’, Chatichai said. He stated further that the Thai Government was speeding up the process of the Chinese minority and would definitely recognise the PRC in the near future. Pracha Gunakasem, Director-General of the Information Department at the MFA, who accompanied Chatichai, said that one reason for Thailand’s recognition of the PRC was to counter ‘Sathorn Road [the site of the Soviet embassy in Bangkok]’.⁷³ For Chatichai, the search for Beijing ties was to counterbalance the North Vietnamese threat, and, possibly, the increased Soviet presence in the region.⁷⁴

By the end of the month, Chatichai made public the fact that he officially received notice from the Chinese delegation to the UN that the PRC was willing to establish diplomatic relations with Thailand immediately. He planned to pay an official visit to Beijing probably in late June, and optimistically told reporters that if all went as planned, the establishment

71 Anand, ‘Pookmitr kub sataranaratprachachon jeen’, 140.

72 Anand Panyarachun, ‘Patakata pised’ [Special Lecture], in *Kwam sampan thai-jin* [Sino–Thai Relations: Past and Future Prospect], ed. Khien Theeravit and Cheah Yan-Chong (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 2000), 16.

73 ‘Ambassador’s Call on Foreign Minister Chatichai’, 23 May 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO09394, NARA.

74 ‘The Uncertain State of Thai/PRC Relations’, 7 June 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO10586, NARA.

of diplomatic ties would be announced during his visit.⁷⁵ The Thai chargé d'affaires in Taiwan, Khanit Sricharoen, was recalled back to Bangkok and on 26 May, Chatichai told Ma Chi-chuang, Taiwan's Ambassador to Bangkok, that he should prepare his embassy for departure in view of the imminent PRC arrival.⁷⁶

In late May and early June, there was a flurry of further visits to Beijing, including a Democratic Party goodwill mission led by Pichai Rattakul, MP (Bangkok), followed by a parliamentary delegation led by Speaker of the House of Representatives, Prasit Kanchanawat, who had previously visited China twice. At the farewell banquet, Prasit said the visit 'had enhanced the friendship and mutual understanding' between the two peoples, and that 'Thailand was willing to live in friendship with China and all other countries in the world on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence'. The Chinese Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua expressed his wish that the two peoples would 'remain friends for generations to come'.⁷⁷

To mid-June, the question of who would go to Beijing remained unclear. At first, it seemed that Chatichai would head the delegation, scheduled to begin on 27 June.⁷⁸ Initially, Prime Minister Kukrit was reluctant, wanting not to upstage Foreign Minister Chatichai, who had worked so hard for the opening of relations. However, Chatichai felt that he had done his bit and that the prime minister should now take the lead, similar to leaders of Japan, Malaysia and the Philippines.⁷⁹ According to reports, Kukrit made the decision to go having been persuaded by both pro-government and opposition MPs. He also consulted with Air Chief Marshal Dawee Chullasapya, the former Defense Minister who had visited China and met with Premier Zhou. Dawee strongly urged Kukrit to go.⁸⁰ At a press conference on 16 June, Kukrit hinted that the prime minister should go to China himself, but that the visit was still the preparatory stage, during which necessary steps were required at the level of officials.⁸¹

75 'Beijing Ties Likely on Chatichai Visit', *Bangkok Post*, 31 May 1975, 1. Anand Panyarachun called Chatichai's policy 'cha-cha-cha' diplomacy, and considered him as an idealist, rather than a realist. He observed that 'I think Mr. Chatichai had a romantic idea about China. He was not farsighted in seeing that regional geopolitics had changed'. See Anand, 'Patakata pised', 14.

76 'The Uncertain State of Thai/PRC Relations', 7 June 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO10586, NARA.

77 'Delegation of Thai National Assembly Members Visits China', *Beijing Review* 18, no. 26 (June 1975), 3.

78 'Anand Off to Speed China Ties', *Bangkok Post*, 14 June 1975, 1.

79 Quoted in 'Kukrit on Thai/PRC Relations', 20 June 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO11928, NARA.

80 'Kukrit on the Road to Beijing', *Bangkok Post*, 30 June 1975, 1.

81 Quoted in 'Kukrit on Thai/PRC Relations', 20 June 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO11928, NARA.

In the meantime, Chatichai assigned Ambassador Anand Panyarachun to lead a five-man working group to travel to Beijing and negotiate the details of resumed diplomatic ties, and to prepare the arrangements for the visit. Before his departure to Beijing on 16 June, Anand told reporters:

We are taking our own draft with us and we will study the Chinese draft in order to formulate a joint communiqué ... Then, should a satisfactory agreement be reached, the Minister of Foreign Affairs [Chatichai] will go to sign the treaty.⁸²

Anand arrived in Beijing on 17 June. Key issues to be resolved included China's reservations over the Thai State Trading Corporation, the status of the 310,000 Chinese with Taiwanese passports in Thailand, the anticommunist law and the matter of how to handle large Taiwanese-controlled investments in Thailand. The stickiest issue was the dual nationality of the overseas Chinese in Thailand.

Anand had meetings with the Chinese Foreign Ministry officials led by Ko Hua, Director-General of Asian Affairs, and Cheng Rui-sheng, Deputy Director-General. The first informal meeting was held on 18 June at the Chinese Foreign Ministry. Thailand presented its draft joint communiqué to the Chinese, which had already been telegraphed prior to the visit.⁸³ The second meeting was on 20 June. This was the negotiation in detail. At China's insistence, the joint communiqué had an 'anti-hegemonic' clause, clearly directed toward the Soviet Union. The final draft was agreed upon by both sides.⁸⁴

After that, Anand sent a cable to Bangkok asking whether and when the Thai delegation would go to China. In the cable, Anand reported that initial negotiations had been 'successful'. He also asked for details of the planned visit, including the duration of stay, and the number of

82 Quoted in 'Thai/PRC Relations', 19 June 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO11750, NARA; 'A Plea to Beijing Before Ties', *Bangkok Post*, 16 June 1975, 3.

83 The joint communiqué followed the language of the Malaysian and Philippine joint communiqué in its recognition of the One-China policy, which required the termination of diplomatic relations with Taiwan. However, the Thai-Chinese communiqué contained a more detailed treatment and clarification of the status of overseas Chinese, which was also part of the Sino-Malaysian communiqué that was signed on 31 May 1974. It omitted the explicit pledge (included in the Sino-Philippine communiqué of 9 June 1975) for the two governments to cooperate to achieve certain expressed objectives. Following the Manila model, the document noted that China and Thailand would exchange ambassadors 'as soon as practicable'. It also included a long section on brotherhood and friendly relations between the two countries. 'Weekly Review of the People's Republic of China No. 27', 2 July 1975, RG59, 1975HONGK07399, NARA.

84 Anand, 'Pookmitr kub sataranaratprachachon jeen', 141.

people in the delegation, so that programs could be drawn up with the Chinese leaders. Chatichai replied that Prime Minister Kukrit would go to Beijing, and sign the official agreement, which could be made on 1 July as originally planned.⁸⁵

On the last day, 21 June, Anand met with Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua. The latter informed Anand that Premier Zhou formally extended an invitation to Thai Prime Minister Kukrit to visit Beijing between 30 June and 5 July 1975.⁸⁶ The joint communiqué was scheduled to be signed on 1 July. The exchange of ambassadors would be arranged later. Sunthorn Sathirathai, Deputy Director-General of the Protocol Department, who accompanied Anand from 17 June, remained in Beijing to continue planning.

Anand returned to Bangkok on the evening of 22 June, and reported on his trip to Chatichai. The following day, Chatichai and Anand presented the draft joint communiqué to the National Security Council (NSC) meeting, the first time that the MFA officially informed the Council regarding the issue. On 24 June, after receiving approval from the NSC, Kukrit presided over a Cabinet meeting, which approved the wording of the draft and the establishment of diplomatic relations.⁸⁷

The full delegation consisted of Prime Minister Kukrit, Foreign Minister Chatichai and 38 high-ranking government officials and business representatives. These included Prakaipet Indhusophon, Secretary-General to the Prime Minister, Air Marshal Siddhi Savetsila, Secretary-General of the NSC, and six under-secretaries from the departments of Commerce, Defence, Finance, Agriculture, Interior and Industry. Foreign Ministry officials included, among others, Ambassador Anand Panyarachum, Nissai Vejajiva (Ambassador attached to the Foreign Ministry), Kosol Sindhvananda (Director-General of the Department of Political Affairs), Manaspas Xuto (Consul-General in Hong Kong) and Tej Bunnag (Director of the Asian Division). The team also included

85 'Kukrit Will Lead Team to Beijing', *Bangkok Post*, 21 June 1975, 1; 'PM Ready to go to China Soon', 21 June 1975, *Daily News*, in Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/1, MFA, Thailand, 140.

86 'Zhou Enlai Sends Letter to Kukrit', *Bangkok Post*, 23 June 1975, 1; 'Delegation of Thai National Assembly Members Visits China', 3.

87 'Cabinet Approves China Ties Draft', *Bangkok Post*, 25 June 1975, 1.

a non-official 'China expert', Sarasin Viraphol from Faculty of Political Science at Chulalongkorn University.⁸⁸ Lengler Baiyok also joined the team in Hong Kong.⁸⁹

On 25 June, Chatichai summoned Admiral Ma Chi-chuang, Taiwan's Ambassador to Bangkok, to the Foreign Ministry where he informed him that after the signing of the joint communiqué with Beijing, formal diplomatic relations between Thailand and Taiwan would come to an end. The Taiwanese ambassador said he would leave Bangkok before 30 June.⁹⁰ In turn, the Thai chargé d'affaires in Taiwan, Khanit Sricharoen, would fly back to Bangkok before 1 July 1975.⁹¹

Prime Minister Kukrit met with US ambassador Charles Whitehouse on 27 June. In their discussion, Kukrit noted the increasing importance of China in regards to the security situation in Southeast Asia. He believed that the Sino-Soviet rivalry, which was one of the main reasons Beijing wanted to 'make friends' with Thailand, provided opportunities for manoeuvring by the countries in Southeast Asia including Thailand. The role of China would be significant in maintaining the balance with Hanoi, and perhaps the USSR.⁹² Kukrit told Whitehouse that while he would sign the joint communiqué with Beijing in his upcoming visit, he had no intention of opening a Thai embassy in the near future. According to Kukrit, the Chinese may buy rice from Thailand for shipment to Cambodia where China was supporting the Khmer Rouge regime, which had come to power in 1975. He realised that 'China is a fact of life and Thailand must deal with it'. 'We don't', however, 'have to go to bed with them', he claimed. Kukrit presented the developments as part of a nuanced and pragmatic foreign policy. He did not believe that China would stop supporting the Thai communist insurgency merely because Thailand and China had diplomatic relations. For the US embassy,

88 'Memorandum from Foreign Minister to the Prime Minister on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations with the PRC', 23 June 1975, in *120 Years Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (Bangkok: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995), 244–48.

89 'Odd Guest at Beijing Banquet', *The Nation*, 1 July 1975, 1.

90 'Thai Note to Republic of China', 27 June 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO12578, NARA.

91 'Establishing Thai-Chinese Relations in the First Week of July', *Prachathipatai*, 21 June 1975, in Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/1, MFA, Thailand, 142.

92 'Prime Minister Kukrit's Comments on his China Trip', 27 June 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO12593, NARA.

Kukrit had 'a realistic assessment of Beijing': 'He is not about to rush into things but can be expected to approach Thailand's new relationship in a measured way'.⁹³

On the evening of 28 June, the night before his departure, Kukrit explained in a televised speech to the nation the nature of the trip. 'In establishing ties with China', he said, 'we will not be at any disadvantages or suffer any adverse consequences'. He continued:

It is only normal ... that with the recognition of Beijing, Thailand's official ties with Taiwan will have to be broken. But this does not mean that all relations will stop because we still have trade relations with Taiwan.⁹⁴

Kukrit asked the overseas Chinese in Thailand 'to choose whether to take up Thai or Chinese nationality'. He emphasised that under 'the changing world political situation', Thailand vitally needed 'more friends'.⁹⁵

In short, by the end of June, Thai détente proponents such as Kukrit and Chatichai were ready to go to Beijing and establish diplomatic relations with the PRC. Although he realised that the establishment of diplomatic relations did not mean that the Chinese would stop supporting the Thai communist insurgency, Kukrit wished to promote 'friendly relations and good understanding' and strengthen trade relations with the PRC.⁹⁶ The next episode began with Kukrit's historic visit to Beijing.

Kukrit's Visit to Beijing and the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations

On Monday 30 June around 11:00, Kukrit and his entourage arrived by Thai Airways International flight TG5501 at Beijing airport, where the Chinese Government rolled out the red carpet to welcome him and his entourage. Deng Xiaoping, first vice-premier, Qiao Guanhua, foreign minister, and other high-ranking officials, welcomed and shook hands with the Thai delegates amid a crowd of several thousand ordinary people. A grand welcome ceremony took place at the airport, which flew the

93 'Prime Minister Kukrit's Comments on his China Trip', 27 June 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO12593, NARA.

94 'Kukrit's Message: Stay Cool', *Bangkok Post*, 28 June 1975, 1.

95 'Kukrit's Message: Stay Cool', 1; 'Kukrit Asks Public for Good Wishes', *Bangkok World*, 28 June 1975, 1.

96 'Prime Minister Kukrit's Comments on his China Trip', 27 June 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO12593, NARA.

national flags of China and Thailand. Big white posters were displayed from tall buildings saying 'A warm welcome to the Distinguished Guests from Thailand', 'Long live the friendship between the people of China and Thailand', and 'Long live the great unity of the people of the world'.⁹⁷

On behalf of Premier Zhou, Deng extended a welcome to Kukrit, saying:

The People of China and Thailand, which are close neighbours, enjoy a traditional friendship and have been widening the scope of friendly contact in recent years. Prime Minister Kukrit's official visit will see the normalization of the relations between the two countries and promote the traditional friendship between the two peoples.⁹⁸

Accompanied by Deng, Kukrit reviewed a guard of honour from the Chinese People's Liberation Army, and the national anthems of Thailand and China were played.⁹⁹ As Kukrit recalled later:

the reception was very grand indeed. I think they put on one of their grandest shows for us. It was so big that when I saw it from the airplane, it was quite frightening. [Deng Xiaoping] was there to meet me. Mr. Zhou Enlai at that time was in hospital. Of course, the Chairman [Mao Zedong] wasn't in a position to come to meet anybody.¹⁰⁰

Upon his arrival in Beijing, the *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*) published an editorial entitled 'A Warm Welcome to the Distinguished Thai Guests'. It extolled Thailand's changing foreign policy as one that had 'won widespread appreciation', and reassured Thailand that China would not interfere in its internal affairs in the future.¹⁰¹

97 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 June 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 174–75; 'What a Welcome!' *Bangkok World*, 30 June 1975, 1.

98 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 June 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 175.

99 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 June 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 190.

100 Kukrit Pramoj, interview by Vilas Manivat, 17 February 1980, in *M.R. Kukrit Pramoj: His Wit and Wisdom – Writings, Speeches and Interviews*, ed. Steve Van Beek (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1983), 151–52.

101 'A Warm Welcome to the Distinguished Thai Guests', *People's Daily*, 30 June 1975, in *News Bulletin*, The Embassy of the People's Republic of China, 2 July 1975, no. 117, 3–4.

After the welcoming ceremony, Deng led Kukrit and the Thai delegation to the *Daioyutai* State Guest House, where special foreign guests were received. Kukrit said that 'I think it was the same house that all the other heads of state including Mr. Nixon were taken to stay'.¹⁰² The 30-member Thai press corps stayed at the Nationalities (*Minzu*) Hotel next to the Government Guest House. When Kukrit's motorcade passed the Nationalities Hotel, a Thai journalist from *The Nation* was asked: 'Is that your prime minister? He should have come here a long time ago'.¹⁰³

In the afternoon, Kukrit, Chatichai and other delegates¹⁰⁴ held the first official talks with Deng Xiaoping and Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua at the Great Hall of the People. The meeting started around 15:30 and lasted for an hour. They discussed a wide range of issues and challenges, including the Thai insurgency, US forces in Thailand, the situation in Indochina, trade and a return visit to Thailand. They focused more specifically on the joint communiqué to be signed the following day.¹⁰⁵

After that, Kukrit and Chatichai went to meet Premier Zhou Enlai at Beijing Hospital. They had friendly talks for half an hour and discussed a wide range of issues. Later, Chatichai reported that Premier Zhou was very pleased that China would now have diplomatic relations with Thailand. Chatichai also said he was reassured that China would no longer interfere in Thailand's internal affairs by supporting the CPT. Zhou told Kukrit and Chatichai that his government would urge the overseas Chinese in Thailand to adopt Thai nationality. Zhou also congratulated Thailand on its decision to seek withdrawal of foreign troops within the definite deadline. In his opinion, there was no need for Thailand to have foreign troops for its defence.¹⁰⁶ Throughout the discussions, Chatichai felt that the Chinese leaders were concerned about the Soviet Union's increased influence in Southeast Asia. Lastly, Zhou sent warm regards to Prince Wan Waithayakon, a former Thai foreign minister.¹⁰⁷ According to one

102 Kukrit, interview by *Vilas Manivat*, 152.

103 'Thai Anthem Played Before Vast Parade', *The Nation*, 1 July 1975, 1.

104 They included Anand Panyarachun (Ambassador to the UN), Air Marshal Sitthi Sawetsila (Secretary-General of the National Security Council), Tej Bunnag (Director of the Asian Division), Nissai Vejajiva (Ambassador attached to the Foreign Ministry) and Prakaipet Indhusophon (Secretary-General to the Prime Minister).

105 Banyat Tasaneeyavej, 'Kukrit, Zhou Make History Today', *Bangkok Post*, 1 July 1975, 1.

106 'Beijing Wants Chinese Here to Turn Thai', *The Nation*, 2 July 1975, 1.

107 'Chinese PM Advised Thai PM that Foreign Troop Unnecessary', *Prachathipatai*, 2 July 1975, 1 found in Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/1, MFA, Thailand, 77.

high-ranking official, the talks with Zhou, who looked 'healthy but slightly pale', were 'very encouraging': 'We got many points clarified. The meeting was ... very important to Thailand'.¹⁰⁸

On 30 June, in the evening, Deng hosted a welcome banquet for Kukrit and the Thai delegation. After expressing a warm welcome, Deng began his speech by praising Thailand's long history and struggle to safeguard its national independence during the imperial era. Thailand's 'friendly relations with other Third World countries' and determination to stand for 'a peaceful and neutral Southeast Asia' and oppose 'power politics and hegemonism' was also noted. Then he blamed postwar tensions in Southeast Asia and the 'extremely abnormal' relationship with 'one of the superpowers' that 'persisted in a war of aggression in Indochina'. However, at present 'very favorable conditions' had been created because 'this superpower has finally suffered irrevocable defeat under the counterblows of the Indochinese peoples and has to withdraw from Indochina'.¹⁰⁹

While not mentioning the USSR directly, Deng also pointedly said that 'the other superpower with wild ambitions' sought 'new military bases in Southeast Asian countries' and sent 'its naval vessels to ply the Indian and West Pacific Oceans'. The 'specter of its expansionism', warned Deng, 'now haunts Southeast Asia'. It not only posed a 'menacing threat to the peace and security of the Southeast Asian countries' but also sought to convert 'this region into its sphere of influence some day'. Deng continued:

Countries with different social systems ... can develop state relations on the basis of the five principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, noninterference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence ... Foreign aggression and interference are impermissible and are doomed to failure.¹¹⁰

Deng condemned the 'unfortunate' interruption of contacts between Thailand and the PRC due to 'imperialist obstruction and sabotage'. However, he stressed that this should be seen as a 'brief interlude' in a 'long history of friendship between our two peoples', which were more than two thousand years old. Their friendship was a kind of traditional kinship.

108 'Kukrit Meets Zhou – Talks "Very Encouraging"', *The Nation*, 1 July 1975, 1.

109 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 131.

110 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand 132.

He also highlighted the process of détente that led to the normalisation of relations: 'in recent years the traditional friendship of our two peoples has resumed and developed at a rapid pace. Cultural, athletic, scientific and commercial exchanges ... have increased rapidly'. Kukrit's visit, he made clear, had turned 'a new page' in the history of Sino-Thai relations.¹¹¹

Kukrit thanked the Chinese leaders and people for their hospitality, stating that it was a great pleasure to have 'the opportunity to take part in the revival and further strengthening of the traditionally close and friendly ties'. He also noted how this visit to Beijing was 'the result of efforts that had progressed step by step over the recent years'. All exchanges of sports teams, doctors, scientists, trade delegations and the visit by members of the National Assembly 'played an important role in drawing our two peoples close together'. In this process, 'both sides have cooperated with sincerity in the creation of mutual understanding'.¹¹²

He went on to state that his democratic government, which was 'elected by the Thai people and represents all the people of Thailand', would now pursue an 'independent course' in the conduct of its foreign policy, and that the normalisation of relations with the PRC was a 'high priority'. He reaffirmed that the people have the right to choose their own political, economic, and social system 'free from outside interference' and that the Southeast Asian nations would have to oppose 'all manner of subversion from outside'.¹¹³ Referring to ASEAN, Kukrit defined the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality (ZOPFAN) as an effort to free the region from great power rivalry, and welcomed PRC statements of support for ASEAN and its concept of ZOPFAN.¹¹⁴ The banquet had a friendly atmosphere, and lasted until 21:30.

On Tuesday 1 July, from 8:30, Kukrit and his entourage were taken on a tour of Beijing, visiting the Central Institute for Nationalities, and then the Summer Palace. Wu Teh, Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, accompanied the Thai delegation. At the Central Institute for Nationalities, which was set up in 1951 by

111 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 133.

112 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 123.

113 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 123–24.

114 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 123.

Mao to train cadres of minority nationalities, they met with teachers and students from a variety of nationality groups. The students gathered on the campus and waved bouquets, streamers and the national flags of China and Thailand amid the beating of drums and gongs.¹¹⁵ Kukrit enquired about the study and life of the students, and had a cordial conversation with students of Tai nationality from the southern province of Yunnan, who entertained the guests with Tai dances. A Tai student and a student of Chingpo nationality played a violin duet, 'I Love the Frontier'. Both the hosts and the visitors expressed their wish that the traditional friendship between the two peoples continue to grow.¹¹⁶

While at the Central Institute for Nationalities, Kukrit later recalled he was 'sitting in the hall looking at the entertainment and somebody came up to my chair and whispered in my ear: "The Chairman [Mao] will see you now"'. The Thai prime minister realised he was 'utterly unprepared'. Wearing a blue Thai-style *moh-hom* shirt, Kukrit went back to the Guest House to change and pick up the gift, a mirror box, 'a big one presumably to put cigars in though I don't think the Chairman smoked'.¹¹⁷

Just before noon, Kukrit, together with Chatichai, went into Chairman Mao's famous study in the Zhongnanhai compound: a room 'in a rather large round building with a dome', as Kukrit remembered.¹¹⁸ When Kukrit arrived, the 81-year-old Chairman was already sitting prepared. Mao shook hands with Kukrit, and members of his party including Chatichai, Ambassador Anand and Prakaipet Indhusophon, Secretary-General to the Prime Minister. Kukrit later recalled that Mao got up all by himself and shook Kukrit's hand, while making 'a lot of noises'. Kukrit said he did not know what to do because he did not understand. Then, Chatichai 'went to him and he did the same thing, but he shook ... Chatichai's hand with less noise'.¹¹⁹ According to Chatichai, Mao greeted him, asking how many times he had visited China.¹²⁰ Then, Mao had a friendly conversation

115 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 104.

116 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 104.

117 Kukrit, interview by *Vilas Manivat*, 152.

118 Kukrit, interview by *Vilas Manivat*, 152.

119 Kukrit, interview by *Vilas Manivat*, 152.

120 *Prachathipatai*, 3 July 1975 found in Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/1, MFA, Thailand, 40.

with Kukrit and Chatichai, while Anand and Prakaipet waited outside. The meeting with Mao was scheduled to last for 10 minutes, but went on for an hour.¹²¹

They sat down and the interpreters came in. The main Chinese interpreter was Nancy Tang, but there were other interpreters because sometimes Nancy Tang could not catch everything Mao said. Mao suffered from undiagnosed Lou Gehrig's disease, which left his mental faculties intact but caused a gradual deterioration of the nerve cells controlling his muscles, leaving him with a speech impediment. As Kukrit put it:

You had to watch the movement of his mouth to know what he was trying to say. There were very few people who could understand him. Sometimes they had to call in his nurse and sometimes even she didn't understand it all. When she didn't understand, they had to call in the old amah, the old lady who had served him personally. She would be the final authority.¹²²

In an hour-long conversation, Mao sometimes got up and walked around while talking. Kukrit admired him greatly, commenting that 'there was no sign of physical weakness except for this speech impediment'.¹²³ First, Mao told Kukrit that he liked the interview the Thai premier had given in Hong Kong the night before the visit. The comment referred to Kukrit's response to a journalist who had asked why the visit was happening despite Chinese support for the communist insurgents in Thailand. Kukrit had claimed he didn't see the connection. 'I represent the Thai government and I was merely going to China to make friends with the government of a sovereign state.' Kukrit regarded communist support to Thai insurgents as party affairs, rather than a government affair, and therefore, he said he had nothing against the Chinese Government.¹²⁴ Mao's observation impressed Kukrit who 'knew what was happening all around'.¹²⁵

Satisfied with Kukrit's answers, Mao wondered whether the Thai prime minister still wished to talk to him who was branded by the West as an aggressor. 'Aren't you afraid of me', asked Mao, 'since Chiang Kai-shek and the West have called me a bandit, a murderer?' Kukrit affirmatively

121 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 127.

122 Kukrit, interview by *Vilas Manivat*, 152.

123 Kukrit, interview by *Vilas Manivat*, 153.

124 Kukrit, interview by *Vilas Manivat*, 153.

125 Kukrit, interview by *Vilas Manivat*, 153.

replied, 'No, not at all'.¹²⁶ The conversations went on, ranging from the world situation, to the Indochina crisis to the situation in Thailand. Mao also advised Kukrit what to do with the insurgency in Thailand:

First of all, don't you go and condemn them. Don't say rude words about them, because they like it. They won't listen to you, they are thick-skinned, these people. Secondly, don't kill them, because these people want to become heroes, make martyrs of themselves. As soon as you kill one, another five will come. So there's no purpose in killing them. Third, don't send any soldiers against them because they'll run away. Soldiers can't stay in the jungle forever. They've got to go back to barracks. And when they do, the Communists come back again. There's no use. You waste time and money.¹²⁷

Mao mocked, 'That's what I've been doing to Chiang Kai-shek, and look where he is now!'¹²⁸ Kukrit asked Mao, 'What to do?' He said:

Do what you're already doing. Make people in the countryside happy. See that they are well fed, that they have work to do, they are satisfied with their work and their station. They won't join the Communists. Then the Communists cannot do anything.

He demurred disappointedly, 'I've been Chairman here for, well, so many years, and in all that time not one Thai Communist has come to see me'. Kukrit teased him back, 'Why didn't you say so at the beginning, Chairman! I'll send five of them over right away!'¹²⁹

Following this, Mao complained that he was getting old and that he was not long for this world. Kukrit reassured him that, 'No, you can't be serious. You can't die at all, Chairman. The world cannot afford to lose its number one bad man as you know you are yourself'. Kukrit recalled how these words tickled him: 'He roared with mirth, he banged on his armchair and got up and shook hands all around. He liked that very much'.¹³⁰

126 Kukrit, interview by *Vilas Manivat*, 153.

127 Kukrit Pramroj, interview by *Asiaweek Magazine*, 20 October 1976, in Van Beek, *M.R. Kukrit Pramroj: His Wit and Wisdom*, 143.

128 Kukrit, interview by *Asiaweek Magazine*, 143.

129 Kukrit, interview by *Asiaweek Magazine*, 143.

130 Kukrit, interview by *Vilas Manivat*, 153.

Mao: Really, I'm getting old. Nowadays, I can do no work; I merely serve as a civil servant. I draw my salary and that's all.

Kukrit: Are you really serious about that? Do you really work as a civil servant?

Mao: Yes, or else how could I get any money to spend. I've got to have some salary.

Kukrit: In that case, God save the Chinese civil servant.¹³¹

Kukrit's impression of Mao was that despite his old age, Mao could switch on and off. Sometimes, he was like an ordinary old man. But then he could turn on a switch and become 'very active', 'very intelligent, very well informed, [and] very powerful, at any moment'. Finally, Deng Xiaoping told Mao that it was time we should leave. When Kukrit got up to say goodbye, Mao had already switched off: 'When I shook hands he didn't even look at my face. He looked at the ceiling and was obviously ga-ga. He went back to his old age quite suddenly'.¹³²

Overall, Kukrit was highly impressed by Chairman Mao: not only of his well-rounded knowledge about the world but also his kindness and good humour. As Kukrit put it, Mao 'knew everything, not only about Chinese affairs but about the world as well', and 'was a very, very kind, good-humored old gentleman who could talk with younger people and give them enjoyment in the conversation'.¹³³

In the afternoon, around 15:30, Kukrit, Chatichai and other senior officials held another round of talks with Chinese leaders led by Deng. Deng was invited to visit Bangkok, and he readily accepted the invitation. During the discussions, Deng suggested that all overseas Chinese in Thailand should be allowed to take up Thai nationality because they had been living in the country for a long time, and had no intention of moving elsewhere.¹³⁴ The communist insurgency was not directly mentioned during the talks.

131 Kukrit, interview by *Vilas Manivat*, 154.

132 Kukrit, interview by *Vilas Manivat*, 155.

133 Kukrit, interview by *Vilas Manivat*, 155.

134 Telegram from Beijing Guest House to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 134; Banyat Tasaneeyavej, 'Kukrit Meets Mao as Relations Normalized', *Bangkok Post*, 2 July 1975, 1, 3.

Deng assured Kukrit that the China-built road in Laos near the Thai border would not threaten Thai security as it was being constructed for economic purposes only. Kukrit replied: 'We never questioned the road project. In fact, we think it could be useful for us'.¹³⁵ The Chinese vice-premier also described the Vietnam War as a 'bad mistake'. As he put it, 'the principle of solving a conflict is a three-step method of courting (talking), fighting, and killing. But the Americans reversed the process and started by killing first'. In Vietnam, Deng expressed discontent that a superpower was trying to impose hegemony in that country: 'it is highly possible that that superpower may request the use of bases in South Vietnam'.¹³⁶

Deng told Kukrit that China was opposed to the stationing of American troops in Thailand. He dismissed claims by some in Thailand that Beijing would like Thailand to keep the American troops to deter Russian influence.¹³⁷ Throughout his talks on the world political situation, Deng mentioned Soviet expansionism several times. He reportedly warned the Thais to beware of the tiger (the Soviets) coming from the back door while pushing the wolf (the US) out of the front door. Deng also emphasised that China was a developing country and part of the Third World, rather than a part of any 'tripolar' superpower game.¹³⁸

In the evening, Kukrit went to meet with Zhou at Beijing Hospital. At 19:00 on 1 July, Kukrit and Chatichai sat on the right-hand side of a long table while Zhou sat on the left. In the middle of the table was a small flag-stand with miniature Thai and Chinese flags, while other Thai and Chinese officials stood behind them. Beside Kukrit and Chatichai, there were 15 other Thai delegates, including Anand, Prakaipet, Nissai Vejjajiva and Tej Bunnag.

Kukrit and Zhou signed a 10-point joint communiqué, which formally established diplomatic relations between Thailand and the PRC, and agreed to exchange ambassadors 'as soon as practicable'. Endorsing the anti-hegemonic clause, the communiqué stated that the two countries opposed 'any attempt by any country or group of countries to establish hegemony or create spheres of influence in any part of the world'. It also endorsed the principle of noninterference by both countries in each other's internal affairs. The communiqué stated that Thailand

135 'China-Built Road in Laos Poses No Threat', *The Nation*, 3 July 1975, 1.

136 'China-Built Road in Laos Poses No Threat', 1.

137 'China-Built Road in Laos Poses No Threat', 1.

138 'China-Built Road in Laos Poses No Threat', 1.

‘recognized the government of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal government of China’, and had therefore decided ‘to remove all its official representations from Taiwan within one month from the date of signature of this communiqué’.¹³⁹ In return, the PRC urged all 310,000 Chinese nationals living in Thailand ‘to abide by the law of the Kingdom of Thailand, respect the customs and habits of the Thai people and live in amity with them’.¹⁴⁰ In Bangkok, the text of the joint communiqué was announced on Radio Thailand that very evening. Thailand became the third ASEAN nation and 102nd country to establish relations with the PRC.

During their toasts, Zhou apologised to Kukrit that he could not drink champagne to celebrate the signing of the official joint communiqué. ‘My doctor forbids me to take any liquor so I will have to drink tea instead’, as he told the Thai leaders who all broke into broad smiles.¹⁴¹ ‘I have to get Deputy Premier Deng Xiaoping to work on my behalf’, he continued.¹⁴²

With a cup of tea in his hand, Zhou clinked glasses with other Thai delegates. He praised the achievements and hard work of Chatichai and the Thai Foreign Ministry officials in opening the way for diplomatic relations:

I am very happy over the signing of the joint communiqué. We have worked very hard. This is the result of the hard work of Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan and his party.¹⁴³

In a toast, Kukrit wished Premier Zhou a ‘long life’, and gave a carved bronze cigarette case to him, telling him in English: ‘although this is not very valuable. I am still very proud to give it to you’.¹⁴⁴ The entire ceremony lasted for seven minutes.

139 Taiwan issued a statement terminating diplomatic relations with Thailand, citing the ‘most unfriendly act’ by the Thai government, on 1 July 1975. ‘GROC Statement on Establishment of RTG/PRC Relations’, 2 July 1975, RG59, 1975TAIPEI03941, NARA.

140 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 107–09.

141 ‘Almost Late for Mao’, *Bangkok Post*, 2 July 1975, 1.

142 ‘Sihanouk Ready for Ties with Thailand – Zhou’, *Bangkok Post*, 3 July 1975, 1.

143 ‘Zhou Sips Tea as PM has Champagne Toast’, *The Nation*, 2 July 1975, 1.

144 ‘Almost Late for Mao’, 3.

After the signing of the joint communiqué, the Thai delegation immediately went back to the Great Hall of the People to attend a *soirée*, in the company of Wu Teh, Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. The *soirée* was arranged by the Beijing Municipal Revolutionary Committee. The Thai delegation was entertained with a tour of the Great Hall of the People and a program of music and dance performances by Chinese musicians. The items were warmly received, and the performance of the Thai composition, 'Beautiful Moonlight', drew warm applause from the audiences. At the end of the performance, Kukrit and Wu Teh walked up to the stage, shook hands with the performers and presented them with a bouquet of flowers.¹⁴⁵ After the *soirée*, Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua hosted a dinner for the Thai delegation at a famous Beijing restaurant, specialising in Beijing duck.¹⁴⁶

On 2 July, Kukrit and the party left the Guest House at round 9:00 to visit the Great Wall at Ting Ling, which was an 80-minute ride by car. They were accompanied by Li Qiang, Minister of Foreign Trade, and Han Nianlong, Deputy Foreign Minister. This time, Kukrit wore a blue '*moh-hom*' shirt to symbolise the dress worn by Thai farmers. Amid drizzling rain, the Thai delegates spent only 15 minutes at the Great Wall. Then they toured the Ming Tomb, and proceeded to the Summer Palace, which Kukrit had missed the previous day due to his impromptu summons to meet with Chairman Mao. They had lunch at the Summer Palace and in the afternoon toured the Forbidden City in Beijing.¹⁴⁷

Meanwhile, Chatichai was relegated to dealing with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Qiao Guanhua, to arrange the finer details of the countries' diplomatic exchange. They held another meeting in the afternoon.¹⁴⁸ According to Deputy Foreign Minister Han Nianlong, Qiao asked Chatichai to help find a location for building the embassy in Bangkok and said their diplomatic staff would be less than 150. The Chinese Foreign Ministry would send an advance diplomatic mission, led by a *chargé d'affaires*, to Bangkok only one month after all staff of the

145 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 103.

146 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 113.

147 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 64.

148 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 64.

Taiwanese embassy had left Thailand.¹⁴⁹ Chatichai also held talks with Wang Yao-ting, Chairman of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade.

In the evening, Kukrit conducted a live radio broadcast with Akom Makaranont, a spokesperson of the press.¹⁵⁰ Kukrit said that Sino–Thai relations would be closer in the future despite the differences between the two countries. He added that 1 July 1975 would be written in history as a ‘special and important day’ in relations between Thailand and China. He told the Thai people that Chairman Mao had talked to him for an hour and that Mao had emphasised that the Communist Party of Thailand was small and no serious danger to Thailand.¹⁵¹ Kukrit also noted that the Chinese completely denied having aided the Thai insurgents or supported the Voice of the People of Thailand Radio.¹⁵² Mao, he said, was:

very kind to me. We had a long talk for about one hour and I learned a great deal from the Chairman and I don’t think I’ll ever be the same person again after that experience. It was such an outstanding experience to meet Chairman Mao.¹⁵³

Kukrit noted that the Chinese were ‘neutral’ regarding the withdrawal of US forces and bases from Thailand, while the subject of increased Soviet influence in the region had not come up. He said the Chinese admitted they had sent soldiers to Laos ‘to make roads’ to assist the Laotian people, but that they had withdrawn when the projects were completed. On Cambodia, he said he had asked Zhou to convey a message to Sihanouk that Thailand would be happy to make friends. Kukrit also said a trade protocol would be signed in the next few months, and Deng had agreed in principle to make a return visit to Thailand.¹⁵⁴ Asked what the benefits of diplomatic relations with the PRC were, Kukrit replied, ‘normal relationship, that is a benefit. People can come and go to see each other’.¹⁵⁵

149 ‘Fewer than 150 Embassy Staff’, *The Nation*, 4 July 1975, 1.

150 ‘Mao Tells Kukrit Not to Worry’, *Bangkok Post*, 3 July 1975, 1.

151 ‘Mao Tells Kukrit Not to Worry’, 1.

152 Quoted in ‘Beijing News Conference of Kukrit Pramoj’, 3 July 1975, RG59, 1975BEIJING01233, NARA.

153 Quoted in ‘Beijing News Conference of Kukrit Pramoj’, 3 July 1975, RG59, 1975BEIJING01233, NARA.

154 Quoted in ‘Thai Prime Minister Kukrit’s Visit to the PRC’, 3 July 1975, RG59, 1975BEIJING01232, NARA.

155 Quoted in ‘Beijing News Conference of Kukrit Pramoj’, 3 July 1975, RG59, 1975BEIJING01233, NARA.

At the Great Hall of People on the evening of 2 July, Kukrit hosted the return banquet for Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping and other Chinese leaders. The Thai football delegation led by Prachoom Ratanapien, which had just arrived in Beijing, and other diplomatic envoys of various countries to China were also present. On this evening, the national flags of China and Thailand were hung side by side in the banquet hall.

Both Kukrit and Deng gave speeches at the banquet. Kukrit called his conversations with the Chinese leaders 'straightforward and frank', but said they took place in a 'friendly atmosphere'. While there might have been differences of opinions, the 'close affinity' between the two countries would 'smooth out' and 'solve' these differences.¹⁵⁶ In his remarks, Deng Xiaoping rendered the talks rewarding on issues of common concern, and claimed that the visit to China by 'our Thai friends' had helped to increase 'our mutual understanding'. He called for friendly relations between the two countries to grow stronger and develop continuously. Deng also reiterated that the superpowers that wanted to assume the role of hegemon would be eliminated 'if we unite'.¹⁵⁷

After their speeches, the band played the Chinese National Anthem and the Royal Anthem of Thailand. Xinhua News Agency reported on the friendly atmosphere of the banquet:

The banquet was alive with a warm atmosphere of friendship. Hosts and guests warmly hailed the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Thailand. They sincerely hoped that the Chinese and Thai people would live in friendship from generation to generation. Over the course of the banquet, the band played Chinese and Thai music.¹⁵⁸

According to a telegram to the MFA from the Thai Consulate-General in Hong Kong, Kukrit's visit to China and its concomitant establishment of diplomatic relations between Thailand and China marked a 'new chapter of friendship'.¹⁵⁹

156 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 59–61.

157 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 51–53.

158 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 56.

159 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 29–30.

The visit ended on 3 July when Chinese leaders, led by Deng Xiaoping, gave a farewell ceremony for Kukrit and his entourage at Beijing airport. Kukrit went to tour other provinces including Shanghai, Kunming and Guangzhou for the next four days.¹⁶⁰

Kukrit returned to Bangkok on 6 July at around 14:00, and stated in his televised interview that, right from the start:

the Chinese and ourselves made an agreement that despite different ideologies and systems ... we can still get along together, can still be understanding friends with mutual respect, and can still talk to each other on an equal basis.¹⁶¹

He reported that the success of the establishment of diplomatic relations merely marked 'a first step': 'both sides must exchange various missions, such as military, educational, sports, and cultural'. Only this cooperation could pave the way to 'closer ties of friendship and good understanding'.¹⁶²

He explained that was why 'political success must come first'. During this visit, Thai leaders had made personal acquaintance and built trust with Chinese leaders. Now, both sides would hold talks and negotiations on various subjects, especially economic relations, in a 'friendly and intimate manner ... they will not be far apart as in the past'. Praising the Chinese leaders as 'sincere', Kukrit felt 'certain that China will have a much better attitude toward us than in the past, [and] that it will be friendly'.¹⁶³

In retrospect, Kukrit's one-week trip to China marked a key turning point in Thai diplomacy in general and in Thai–Chinese relations in particular. Not only was this a diplomatic breakthrough: the process of normalisation also strengthened the narrative of *détente*. Thailand's discourse concerning 'China' shifted from enmity towards friendship. In the process, Hanoi was constructed as the common enemy and became the subject of Sino–Thai conversations thereafter. This emerging discourse

160 Telegram from the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 57–58.

161 Press release, Department of Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 74–78.

162 Quoted in 'Kukrit on China', 7 July 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO13247, NARA; Press release, Department of Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 74–78.

163 Quoted in 'Kukrit on China', 7 July 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO13247, NARA; Press release, Department of Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/3, MFA, Thailand, 74–78.

was of utmost importance because it not only symbolised the end of an era of confrontation, but also represented the advent of cooperation between the two countries. This historic event was described by *The Washington Post* as Thailand's policy of 'bending with the wind', a 'process that has been made even more urgent by the recent fall of the American-backed governments of South Vietnam and Cambodia'.¹⁶⁴

Thai-Chinese Relations Thereafter: A 'Follow-up'

This is only the beginning. There has to be a follow-up.

– Anand Panyarachun, Ambassador to the UN¹⁶⁵

The visit of Kukrit, and the resumption of Thai-Chinese diplomatic relations, paved the way for greater cooperation in a variety of spheres. First involved the expansion of trade. The Chinese made a friendly gesture by immediately buying 200,000 tons of Thai rice to help alleviate the rice crisis in Thailand. An official Thai trade delegation led by Commerce Minister Thongyot Cittawira went to Beijing between 17 and 21 August 1975 and completed a 50 million baht barter trade deal, exchanging Thai rice for Chinese oil. The Thais would supply the PRC with 200,000 tons of rice, while China would export 251,237 tons of gas and 312,129 tons of crude oil to Thailand at a 'friendly price'.¹⁶⁶ The delegation indicated that there would be follow-up trade discussions with the Chinese regarding other commodities, such as maize, tapioca, kenaf and tobacco.¹⁶⁷ Following Kukrit's visit to Beijing, this barter trade represented the first major deal between the two countries.

In December, Wang Yao-ting, the President of the China Council for International Trade Promotion, visited Thailand as a guest of Foreign Minister Chatichai. They agreed to hold a trade exhibition on the second floor of the Bangkok Bazaar, a new shopping centre complex behind Rajdamri Road, in March 1976.¹⁶⁸ Kukrit presided over the opening of the Chinese trade exhibition.

Second involved the conclusion of important diplomatic formalities. Upon their return, Kukrit and Chatichai sent messages of thanks by telegram to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, and Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua,

164 'Bangkok "Bends with Wind" in Beijing Ties', *The Washington Post*, 2 July 1975.

165 'Kukrit Appeals for Trust, End to Fears', *Bangkok Post*, 7 July 1975, 1.

166 'Thai-PRC Rice-Oil Barter Trade', 25 August 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO17760, NARA.

167 'Thai-PRC Rice-Oil Barter Trade', 25 August 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO17760, NARA.

168 'Thai-PRC Trade', 5 February 1976, RG59, 1975STATE028179, NARA.

respectively. As the Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Ministry, Phan Wannamethi, said, this was the first time official messages were sent by telegram direct from Bangkok to Beijing through the ordinary telegraph service.¹⁶⁹ The Thais and the Chinese also agreed that before setting up embassies, they would make contact via the Thai and Chinese embassies in Laos. The Thais who wished to visit China could apply for a visa at the Chinese embassy in Laos.¹⁷⁰

On 23 September, the Thai Foreign Ministry nominated MR Kasemsamosorn Kasemsri,¹⁷¹ Thai Ambassador to Jakarta, to be the first Ambassador to Beijing, while the Chinese appointed Chai Zemin to be the Chinese Ambassador to Thailand.¹⁷² Chai was an experienced Chinese diplomat whose previous posts included Hungary, Guinea and Egypt. According to Edward Masters, DCM of the American embassy in Bangkok, Chai's appointment as Ambassador to Thailand signified the importance that the PRC attached to its relationship with Bangkok:

An interesting thread that runs through Chai's previous assignments is the presence of a strong and influential Soviet mission at each of his previous posts. This is also the case in Bangkok.¹⁷³

In October, a 16-person advance team, led by Lu Tzu Po as chargé d'affaires, went to Bangkok to prepare for the establishment of the Chinese embassy in Bangkok. The advance party stayed at the third and fourth floors of the Ambassador Hotel. At the same time, the Guangzhou acrobatic troupe opened a performance in Bangkok. Lu also greeted King Bhumibol at the premier performance of the acrobats.¹⁷⁴ On 21 October, he met with Chatichai at the Foreign Ministry with a letter of introduction from the Chinese foreign minister, Qiao Guanhua. Chatichai officially welcomed the party, telling them that both countries had maintained good ties for

169 Telegram from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Thai Consulate-General, Hong Kong, 9 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/4, MFA, Thailand, 286.

170 Telegram from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Thai Embassy in Vientiane, 9 July 1975, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2518/4, MFA, Thailand, 316.

171 MR Kasemsamosorn Kasemsri was a veteran diplomat. Before assuming his position in Jakarta in 1973, he had served as first secretary in the Philippines, chargé d'affaires in Canada, Thai representative on the SEATO Council, and Counsellor to the Thai Embassy in London. See 'PRC Ambassador to Thailand, Thai Ambassador to Beijing', 22 September 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO19855, NARA.

172 'Memorandum from Foreign Minister to the Prime Minister on the Opening of the Chinese Embassy in Beijing', 2 October 1975, in *120 Years Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 260–61.

173 'PRC Ambassador to Thailand, Thai Ambassador to Beijing', 22 September 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO19855, NARA.

174 'Activity of the PRC Advance Team in Thailand', 10 November 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO23600, NARA.

more than a thousand years and the sudden stoppage of relations for 25 years in the recent past was a 'passing cloud'. After a half-hour meeting, Chatichai disclosed that China would be free to make their choice on the location of their embassy in Bangkok.¹⁷⁵

The advance team played a visible and active role in the diplomatic circles in Bangkok during their three-week visit, attending the official opening of the ESCAP building (the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, formerly the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, or ECAFE), and the Austrian, Iranian as well as Soviet National Day celebrations. On 8 November, a picture of the Chinese chargé and the Soviet ambassador shaking hands and smiling appeared on the front page of the *Bangkok Post*.¹⁷⁶ The new Chinese ambassador, Chai Zemin, arrived in Bangkok on 26 January 1976, while Thai ambassador MR Kasemsamosorn Kasemsri went to Beijing on 16 March. After presenting his credentials to King Bhumibol at Bhuping Palace in Chiang Mai on 21 March, Chai Zemin paid a courtesy call on Premier Kukrit.¹⁷⁷

Third was in relation to clandestine radio broadcasts. In the weeks following the visit, the Voice of the People of Thailand shifted its propaganda towards a more anti-Soviet tone. For example, in a 29 July 1975 broadcast, it accused 'the Soviet social-imperialists' of 'rapidly expanding their aggressive influence in Thailand'. It charged the KGB with increasing its clandestine activity in Thailand and claimed that there were 100 KGB officers in Bangkok supported by another 150 Soviet officials.¹⁷⁸

Fourth involved people-to-people contact. Aside from the trade delegation in August, various Thai leaders, groups and private individuals travelled to China, including a group of Thai journalists from the provinces, a group of high-ranking Thai nobility headed by Princess Siriratna Diskul, and a group from the Socialist Party of Thailand, led by its party deputy leader, Khaiseng Suksai, in October. All these parties were official guests of the PRC, and were escorted and hosted by its representatives.¹⁷⁹

175 'Chinese Envoy Brings Message', *Bangkok Post*, 22 October 1975, 1.

176 'Activity of the PRC advance team in Thailand', 10 November 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO23600, NARA.

177 'China Envoy Presents Credentials', *Bangkok Post*, 25 March 1976, 3.

178 Quoted in 'Stance of the Voice of the People of Thailand', 31 July 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO15696, NARA.

179 'Thai Delegations to the PRC', 8 October 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO21302, NARA.

Last but not least, the resumption of diplomatic relations paved the way for normalisation with Thailand's communist neighbours, the most notable of which was a rapprochement with Cambodia. As Kukrit said, 'Cambodia was handed to us on a silver tray, with ribbons, by Mr. Zhou Enlai'.¹⁸⁰ During his visit to Beijing, Zhou asked Kukrit of Thailand's policy toward Cambodia, Kukrit replied that Thailand would like to be friendly.

Zhou: Even if Prince Sihanouk were to come back as Head of State?

Kukrit: Yes, especially if Prince Sihanouk were to come back as Head of State.

Zhou: Are you quite serious?

Kukrit: I am very serious.

Zhou: May I tell Prince Sihanouk that?

Kukrit: Yes, by all means.¹⁸¹

According to Kukrit, Premier Zhou was very pleased with this conversation. Chatichai disclosed that on 3 September, Ambassador Anand Panyarachun met with Cambodian Vice Premier Ieng Sary at the UN, and said that Thailand was 'ready to supply Cambodia with necessary foodstuffs and other commodities on a government-to-government basis'.¹⁸² Then in late October, the Kukrit Government received word from China that Ieng Sary would be landing at Don Mueang Airport in a Chinese plane, on his way to China on a goodwill mission. After the visit, Kukrit said that 'we were very friendly. And since then, very good things have been happening between Cambodia and this country ... We are really very friendly toward Cambodia'.¹⁸³

Overall, the formal normalisation of Sino-Thai relations marked a diplomatic revolution in Thai foreign policy. For Chatichai this had three important outcomes: 'One – mutual confidence. Two – noninterference in each other's affairs. Three – mutual benefits'.¹⁸⁴ Such a transformative event was also widely discussed during the meeting between Foreign Minister

¹⁸⁰ Kukrit, interview by *Asiaweek Magazine*, 144.

¹⁸¹ Kukrit, interview by *Asiaweek Magazine*, 144.

¹⁸² 'Historic Thai-Khmer Meeting in New York', *Bangkok Post*, 9 September 1975, 1.

¹⁸³ Kukrit, interview by *Asiaweek Magazine*, 144.

¹⁸⁴ 'Chatichai: We Need Strong Independent Neighbors', *Bangkok Post*, 31 July 1975, 3.

Chatichai and US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on 26 November 1975. Kissinger told Chatichai of the forthcoming presidential visit to Beijing and asked Chatichai about his visit to Beijing:

Secretary: Do the Chinese support the insurgents [in Thailand]?

Foreign Minister: They follow a two-track policy. The insurgents have moral support from the Chinese Communist Party.

Secretary: Mao does not like foreign Communists at all. I am not sure that he likes Chinese Communists either. Did he form words when you met with him in Beijing?

Foreign Minister: They used interpreters. There was a very nice-looking girl, Nancy Tang. When we came into the room, we did not see Mao at first. He was sitting in a chair. Then he stood up and greeted Prime Minister Kukrit. During the conversation, there was interpretation from Chinese to Chinese to English. Sometimes he would write things.

Secretary: It was the same way when I saw him.¹⁸⁵

They also discussed the situation in Indochina, and the role of China there. They agreed that 'the biggest threat in Southeast Asia at the present time is North Vietnam'. Chatichai added that the Chinese talked a lot about Vietnamese 'hegemony'. Kissinger said that US strategy was to 'get the Chinese into Laos and Cambodia as a barrier to the Vietnamese'. Chatichai told Kissinger that he 'asked the Chinese to take over in Laos. They mentioned that they had a road building team in northern Laos'. Kissinger said that 'we would support this'. He also asked Chatichai to 'tell the Cambodians that we will be friends with them. They are murderous thugs, but we won't let that stand in our way'. 'We are prepared to improve relations with them.' 'Tell them the latter part, but don't tell them what I said before'. Kissinger said that 'we bear no hostility towards them. We would like them to be independent as a counterweight to North Vietnam'. Also, the Secretary of State firmly noted, 'the Chinese fully support the Cambodians'.¹⁸⁶

To sum up, Sino–Thai rapprochement was an integral part of a broader geopolitical realignment within the region, underpinned for the Thais by the changing discourse of friends and enemies. With the Chinese now

185 'Secretary's Meeting with Foreign Minister Chatichai of Thailand', 26 November 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO24619, NARA.

186 'Secretary's Meeting with Foreign Minister Chatichai of Thailand', 26 November 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO24619, NARA.

framed as a 'new friend', the Thais were able to offer help to the Cambodian 'thugs' (the Khmer Rouge) while the new arrangement helped reinforce their view of the Vietnamese as a threat and an aspiring subregional 'hegemonic power'.¹⁸⁷ This discursive change was to fundamentally shape the practices of diplomacy in the late 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, the shift also reflected the wish among some factions of Thai officials for greater balance or equilibrium in relations with the major powers, including the US, the USSR and the PRC. For Chatichai, Thailand's foreign policy was 'not to overemphasize relations with any single country'.¹⁸⁸ Rather, it necessitated a three-pronged and balanced strategy: 'we must stand out of balance, neither too close to one power nor too far from another power'.¹⁸⁹

6.2. Thai–Soviet Relations: Resilience of Détente

6.2.1. Thai–Soviet Relations under Sanya

Under the Sanya Dharmasakdi Government, détente with the Soviet Union remained largely intact. One of his aims was to sustain the Thai–Soviet friendship. On the one hand, Sanya wished to develop closer trade and cultural exchanges between the two countries. On the other, he sought to achieve a balance of interests with the great powers in the region, thereby eschewing the Soviet Collective Security in Asia proposal.¹⁹⁰

On 16 January 1974, Foreign Minister Charoonphan Isarankhun Na Ayutthaya explained to foreign correspondents that, for Thailand, the Soviet Union was

[in] a strong position to contribute to the restoration of peace and harmony in the long suffering people living there (Indochina) and thereby contribute positively to the stability of the entire region.¹⁹¹

187 'Secretary's Meeting with Foreign Minister Chatichai of Thailand', 26 November 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO24619, NARA.

188 'Chatichai: We Need Strong Independent Neighbors', 3.

189 'Chatichai: I Will Change the Image of Thailand', *Prachachatrainwan*, 13 July 1975, 2.

190 'Thai–Soviet Relations', 30 April 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO07008, NARA.

191 Quoted in Leszek Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy and Southeast Asia* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 80.

It was a point he reiterated in a televised interview on 28 February:

We would like to promote closer relations with [the Soviet Union], but we must create trust and confidence, mutual good understanding must exist, and there must be no interference. This is not meant for the Soviet Union or any other country, we do not want any interference in the internal affairs of our country ... The Soviet Union has the opportunity to play a role in finding a way to help restore peace and quiet to Southeast Asia, and especially to Indochina, since it desires to see peace restored.¹⁹²

While Thailand under Sanya was not clear about how the USSR should contribute to the peace and stability of the region, it did not want the USSR to fill the power vacuum. In his speech to the Association for Asian Studies in Boston on 1 April, Ambassador to the US and the UN Anand Panyarachun endorsed Thailand's increased friendliness with Russia but confirmed that Thailand did not accept the Soviet proposal on Collective Security in Asia. As Anand stated:

the Thai government rejects the Soviet Security Proposal as inappropriate and unnecessary, either to fill what some Thai see as a vacuum caused by an American withdrawal from Asia, or an anti-Chinese alliance.¹⁹³

Despite Thailand's disapproval of the Soviet proposal on Asian Collective Security, there were key developments in three main areas. First, a series of people-to-people exchanges commenced. In November 1973, a ballet company of the Leningrad Opera and S Kirov Ballet Theater gave guest performances in Thailand. In February 1974, an education delegation visited Moscow to study the educational system in the USSR, and visit universities and institutions.¹⁹⁴ In the same month, Vladimir Promyslov, the Mayor of the Moscow City, visited Thailand. During his three-day visit, Promyslov met with Adth Visutyothapibal, the Governor of Bangkok. The latter voiced interest in expanding trade between the two countries, but raised 'domestic political sensitivities' as an impediment to improved political relations. Promyslov also invited Adth to visit Moscow.¹⁹⁵

192 'Thai Foreign Minister on SEATO, Thai-US Relations, the USSR, and North Vietnam', 6 March 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO03725, NARA.

193 'Thai-Soviet Relations', 30 April 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO07008, NARA.

194 'A Diary of Soviet-Thai Cooperation', *Bangkok Post*, 7 November 1974, 1.

195 According to a diplomat at the Soviet Embassy in Bangkok, the Bangkok stopover was originally intended to be unofficial in order to provide the Promyslov party with an opportunity to rest following its busy schedule in Hanoi. The Thais requested it receive official status. 'Visit of Moscow Mayor', 15 February 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO02586, NARA; 'Moscow's Lord Mayor Visits', *Bangkok Post*, 8 February 1974, 1.

In April, two Thai scientific officers of the Thai Industrial Standards Institute attended a four-month UN seminar for standards and metrology, organised by the State Committee of the USSR Council of Ministers for Standards in cooperation with the UN Industrial Development Organization in Moscow.¹⁹⁶

The most important was a visit to the Soviet Union made by Princess Galayani Wattana, King Bhumibol's elder sister, in May 1974. She was received as a guest of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet. In Moscow, she called on a raft of Soviet leaders: Ivan Grushetsky, Vice-President of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, Mikhail Georgadze, Secretary of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, Alla Shaposhnikova, Deputy Ministry of Higher and Specialized Secondary Education, and other Soviet high-ranking officials.¹⁹⁷ As the head of the foreign languages department at Thammasat University, the Princess was interested in cultural exchanges and the Russian language. In her meeting with Vice-President Grushetsky, she said that Thammasat University would soon open Russian language as a major course, and that the instructors would be the two daughters of Yuad Lertrit, Thai Ambassador to Moscow. Yingboon and Yodboon Lertrit studied at Moscow State University.¹⁹⁸ Both started teaching Russian at Thammasat University on 1 August 1974.¹⁹⁹

During her stay in the USSR, the Princess went to Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. She observed the Soviet system of higher education and its achievements in the fields of science, technology and culture. When interviewed by a correspondent of the Novosti Press Agency, Princess Galayani pointed out that her visit to the USSR had been useful in many respects.

This trip has convinced me [she said] of the Soviet people's friendly feelings for Thailand, its history and culture. Our countries are very different, and cultural exchanges between them would be

196 One scientist, Chalit Homhual, told a correspondent of the Novosti Press Agency:

The USSR has accumulated a wealth of theoretical and practical experience in the field of standardization, metrology and quality check-up. And, what is very important, it shares this experience with the developing countries. As far as we are concerned, the many things we have learnt while attending the course will be useful for the work done by our Institute.

'A Diary of Soviet-Thai Cooperation', 3.

197 'A Diary of Soviet-Thai Cooperation', 3.

198 'Visit of Thai Princess to Moscow', 17 May 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO08082, NARA.

199 Yodboon Lertrit, interview by author, Bangkok, 23 June 2015.

very interesting ... I hope that contacts between our two countries in the field of culture and education will become closer with each passing year.²⁰⁰

Shortly after Princess Galayani's visit, Bangkok governor Adth Visutyothapibal paid a return visit. His delegation acquainted itself with the municipal economy of Moscow and the activities of the Moscow City Soviet, the legislative and executive organ of power in the city. They also visited Leningrad. In an interview with a correspondent of the Novosti Press Agency, Adth pointed out that he was impressed by the efficient functioning of Moscow's municipal economy, by the cleanliness and order prevailing in the streets of the city, by the rate of housing construction and by the Moscow public transport system. He hoped that 'friendship between Moscow and Bangkok will be strengthened and deepened'.²⁰¹

Three further visits were made by Thai writers and women's organisations between August and October.²⁰² In August, a group of Thai women arrived in the Soviet Union to present a gift of a sitting Buddha statue to the Soviet Buddhist community. Between August and September 1974, Ladda Thanathathankam, Vice-President of the Writers' Association of Thailand, and Subhat Sawasdivak, the editor of the *Sakulthai Weekly* magazine, met Russian journalists at the Novosti Press Agency. A delegation of the Women's Movement of Thailand, led by Mom Dusdi Boripat na Ayutthaya, visited the USSR between 26 September and 8 October. It was clear that by the mid-1970s, Thai-Soviet relations broadened to a series of people-to-people exchanges.

The second development came with increased cultural cooperation. The new Soviet Ambassador to Bangkok, Boris Ilyichev (February 1974 – June 1978), proactively supported further cultural exchanges and initiated a cultural agreement with Thailand, of which he claimed, there were no strings attached. As Ilyichev put it, 'One thing is certain, we will not export revolution anywhere'.²⁰³ His chargé d'affaires, Stanislav Semivolos, had a meeting with the Director-General of the Information Department of the MFA on 5 February 1974. In that meeting, he presented the Soviet proposal of a cultural agreement to the Thai Foreign Ministry. He said this agreement would help to promote good relations between Thailand

200 'A Diary of Soviet-Thai Cooperation', 3.

201 'A Diary of Soviet-Thai Cooperation', 3.

202 'A Diary of Soviet-Thai Cooperation', 3.

203 'Thai-Soviet Cultural Agreement', 8 May 1974, RG59, 1974BANGKO07468, NARA.

and the Soviet Union.²⁰⁴ The Soviet proposal included a wide range of cultural exchanges, including musicians, students and professors, football players and scientists. The Thai Foreign Ministry took the draft of the cultural agreement into consideration.

Ilyichev also broadened contacts with various groups of students, specifically offering scholarships – though this was never approved by the Thai Government. In March 1974, an exhibition on the Soviet Union was organised by students and faculty of Phrasanit College, Bangkok. The exhibition included about 1,000 photographs showing the most diverse aspects of life in the USSR. Alexander Karchava, a staff member of the USSR embassy in Thailand, delivered a lecture, 'From the History of Russo-Thai Relations' on the occasion.²⁰⁵

In May, an exhibition was held at Thammasat University in connection with the International Day of Working People's Solidarity. The exhibition included photographs on the USSR: on the activities of Soviet trade unions, on the position of women in Soviet society and on working conditions in the USSR. Students who arranged the exhibition provided detailed texts to explain the photographs.²⁰⁶

The third development was in trade relations. After the trade agreement had been signed in December 1970, Thai–Soviet mutual trade relations gradually developed mainly due to increased Soviet purchases of rubber and fluorites from Thailand. In October, the Soviet Union informed the Thai Government that it wished to buy 50,000 tons of maize from Thailand. However, Thailand was not able to meet the Russian demand because of its prior commitments to supply Japan and Taiwan.²⁰⁷

Nevertheless, the Soviets remained concerned about the new State Trading Bill, which set up a state trading corporation to control direct trade with the communist countries. They felt that this law was 'discriminatory'.²⁰⁸ Thai Ambassador to Moscow, Yuad Lertrit, said that a state trading organisation would 'prove useful in promoting commerce with Soviet Russia and East

204 Memorandum between the Director-General of the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Soviet chargé d'affaires to Bangkok, 5 February 1974, in Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volumes of Declassified Documents on Thai–Russian Relations, 1970–1991*, Vol. 3 (Bangkok: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017), 9–11.

205 'A Diary of Soviet-Thai Cooperation', 3.

206 'A Diary of Soviet-Thai Cooperation', 3.

207 'Soviets Turn to Thailand for Maize', *Bangkok Post*, 10 October 1974, 10.

208 Sarasin Viraphol, *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1976), 28.

European countries'. He explained: 'at present our merchants are afraid of police surveillance if they trade with Socialist countries. If trading is done through a governmental enterprise then there is no such problem'.²⁰⁹

Between 2 and 22 December, a Soviet trade exhibition was held at Lumpini Hall in Bangkok. V Kulikov, trade representative of the Soviet Union in Thailand, expressed hopes that it would help expand trade between the two countries, and improve already good relations. At the exhibition, 12 foreign trade organisations from Soviet countries exhibited their products, such as new models of agricultural trackers, passenger cars, trucks, pumps and hydrofoil boats.²¹⁰

All in all, Thailand under Sanya, while retaining closer military and economic linkages with the US, maintained friendship with the Soviet Union. Mutual trade, cultural and people-to-people exchanges were fostered, which became the basis for Kukrit's détente between 1975 and 1976.

6.2.2. Thai–Soviet Relations under Kukrit

Under Kukrit, with Sino–Thai rapprochement in the spotlight, changes to Thai–Soviet relations were relatively less radical. This was partly because of the changing geopolitical landscape in Southeast Asia, reflecting Sino–Soviet strategic competition, which in turn shaped the way in which the Thais sought to balance between the two powers. It culminated in equidistant diplomacy.

This section argues that despite these limitations, Thai–Soviet relations remained resilient. While an increase in the Soviet political and intelligence activities in Thailand raised scepticism, Thailand's discourse of détente with the USSR remained intact. It culminated in their mutual exchanges at various levels and the approval of the aforementioned cultural agreement.

Upon taking office in March 1975, Prime Minister Kukrit proclaimed that there were no issues of dispute with Moscow, and looked forward to closer ties between Thailand and the Soviet Union. As he remarked, 'we will maintain our friendship with the Soviets'.²¹¹ As a superpower, the Soviet Union, Kukrit said:

209 Theh Chongkhadikij, 'Cultural Agreement Reached with USSR', *Bangkok Post*, 15 August 1974, 3.

210 'USSR Expo Boosts Hopes of More Trade', *Bangkok Post*, 30 November 1974, 10.

211 Quoted in Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy and Southeast Asia*, 104.

obviously has interests here in this region as elsewhere around the globe. The great potential is there for the Soviets to play a significant role that would be consonant with interests of the regional countries themselves.²¹²

One Soviet role, for example, could be to induce Vietnamese restraint. In the process of détente, the Thai Government regarded the USSR, like the PRC, as a friend, and Vietnam as an emerging threat that needed to be contained.

Ivan Shchedrov, the *Pravda* correspondent to Thailand, wrote his commentary praising Kukrit's new course of Thai foreign policy.²¹³ On 12 May, Shchedrov called upon Chatichai at the Foreign Ministry. They discussed Brezhnev's proposal for Collective Security in Asia, which had little traction in the region. Shchedrov also requested the establishment of a *Pravda* office in Bangkok, which Chatichai approved in principle. Later, on 25 June, Soviet ambassador Boris Ilyichev, in his speech at the Foreign Correspondent's Club in Bangkok, also highlighted Brezhnev's idea of Collective Security in Asia. He said that the proposal would benefit the countries in the region, including Thailand, due to the fact that it stood for:

(1) the renunciation of force in orderly state relations (2) the respecting of each other's sovereignty and the principle of inviolability of national frontiers (3) noninterference in the state's internal affairs and (4) broad economic and other forms of cooperation on a basis of full equality and mutual benefits.²¹⁴

Brezhnev's proposal came up again during an interview Shchedrov conducted with Kukrit in late June. Kukrit said that Thailand endorsed the neutralisation of Southeast Asia without military bases or blocs. As he put it, 'peace and security can only be established through the collective efforts of all countries of the region'. However, Kukrit stressed that Thailand's interest in the ZOPFAN resolution was a way of rejecting the Asian Collective Security proposal. Regardless of the proposal, the Thai premier strongly urged closer ties with the Soviet Union.²¹⁵

212 Quoted in Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy and Southeast Asia*, 104–05.

213 'Pravda on Thailand', 23 June 1975, RG59, 1975MOSCOW08708, NARA.

214 Quoted in Sarasin, *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy*, 26.

215 'Pravda on Thailand', 23 June 1975, RG59, 1975MOSCOW08708, NARA.

However, Sino–Thai normalisation deeply concerned Moscow. On 1 June, when the Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister, Nikolai Firiyubin, hosted a luncheon meeting for the new Ambassador to Moscow, Arun Panupong (1974–1977), he raised the Soviet concerns. Firiyubin warned that Thai relations with other countries should not affect Thai–Soviet relations in a negative way or discriminate against the Soviet Union. According to Arun, Firiyubin emphasised the anti-Soviet Chinese policy. He claimed that China never stopped intervening in the internal affairs of other countries, and threatened to annex the territories of Vietnam in the South China Sea. At the same time, the Chinese leaked news that the Soviets wished to build a naval base there. For Firiyubin, these Chinese attempts to discredit the Soviet Union were merely to conceal their own intentions in seeking influence in Cambodia, and in attempting to attack Vietnam. He also said that the Soviet Union was satisfied with Thailand’s policy of American withdrawal.²¹⁶

In bilateral relations, Firiyubin stressed that the USSR wished to upgrade its relationship with Thailand. He told Ambassador Arun that despite their ‘normal’ relationship, the actual content of Thai–Soviet relations was at a ‘standstill and too limited’. Firiyubin suggested that there were effective technical and professional institutes that the Thai Government could consider sending students to as part of a student exchange or straight study (without being part of an exchange) in the Soviet Union. If Thailand had any problems or concerns, it was possible to have a straightforward and frank discussion. The Soviets would be pleased to listen and find a solution to alleviate scepticism. Arun replied that the Soviet Union, as one of the great powers, was of utmost importance to Thai foreign policy. He assured him that both countries did not have any significant problems or obstacles. Unlike Sino–Thai rapprochement, there was no exciting news in Thai–Soviet relations because the latter were normal. In his view, the Soviets were anxious that the Chinese were successfully establishing diplomatic relations with countries in Southeast Asia, and were dominating the headlines at the expense of the Soviet Union. They sought influence in the region, and therefore struggled with China’s greater alignment with countries such as Thailand.²¹⁷

216 Discussion between Thai Ambassador and Soviet Deputy Minister, 1 June 1975, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.1/112, TNA, Bangkok, 215.

217 Discussion between Thai Ambassador and Soviet Deputy Minister, 1 June 1975, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.1/112, TNA, Bangkok, 215–16.

When Kukrit returned from Beijing to Bangkok in early July 1975, he was asked by Thai reporters whether he would visit the Soviet Union anytime in the near future. Kukrit replied, 'No, not now. One play at a time'. He said that it was generally agreed that a visit to Moscow after the Beijing visit would be 'most disappointing' to the Chinese, who repeatedly spoke of their fear of Soviet expansionism. According to Kukrit, Thailand would consider closer, though more cautious ties with the Soviet Union in order to keep foreign policy options open.²¹⁸

On 17 July, Thai Ambassador to Moscow Arun had a discussion with S Nemchina, Director of the Southeast Asian Department at the Soviet Foreign Ministry. While he understood that Thai rapprochement with the PRC was a readjustment to the regional reality, Nemchina warned that Mao and Chinese leaders had interfered with the internal affairs of other countries. He did not believe that in the event of Sino-Thai normalisation, the communist insurgency in Thailand would disappear. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, adhered to the principle of peaceful coexistence and détente and sought to promote peace in the region via the Asian Collective Security proposal, which, he felt, many Southeast Asian countries misunderstood. Adopting an anti-Soviet stance, the Chinese in particular deemed this proposal an anti-Chinese scheme. Nemchina praised Kukrit's diplomacy of independence and good neighbour policy. He also said that Thai-Soviet relations were normal, but wished to see an extension of the relationship based upon friendship and equality.²¹⁹

Subsequently, the Soviet embassy in Bangkok directly complained to the Thai Foreign Ministry that the anti-hegemonic clause in the Thai-Chinese joint communiqué of 1 July was directed towards the Soviet Union. The Thais replied that they understood it differently, and that it meant hegemony by any power including the Chinese themselves.²²⁰ It seemed that one of the Soviet aims was principally to counter increased Chinese influence in Thailand.

218 'Kukrit Appeals for Trust, End to Fears', 3.

219 Opinions of Soviet Director of Southeast Asian Department, 14 July 1975, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, (2) MFA 1.1/112, TNA, Bangkok, 179.

220 'The Soviets in Bangkok: Undercover Diplomacy', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 26 September 1975, 8.

Following Thailand's formal diplomatic relations with Beijing, Thai Foreign Ministry officials noticed a sharp increase in Soviet diplomatic activities.²²¹ Soviet Ambassador Ilyichev apparently broadened his contacts and influence at all levels of the Thai Government and bureaucracy. As Phirat Itsarasena, a press division chief of the MFA, observed, the Soviets were 'pushing very hard now, not only on the cultural exchange, but across the board'.²²²

First and foremost, the Soviet Union attempted to conclude the Thai–Soviet cultural agreement, which had originally been drafted by the Russians. By June, the Thai Foreign Ministry had taken the agreement into serious consideration. It found that the original draft was different from other cultural agreements that the Soviet Union had with other countries, and suggested some changes, such as the inclusion of a noninterference clause.²²³ This revised draft was sent back to the Russians during the meeting between Soviet Ambassador Boris Ilyichev and Pracha Gunakasem, Director-General of the Information Department in the Foreign Ministry on 25 June. It was reported that a Thai mission would be dispatched to Moscow to work out the final details.²²⁴

By the end of July, Foreign Minister Chatichai reaffirmed the fact that Thailand did not 'have any dispute with Soviet Russia. We will soon sign a cultural agreement'.²²⁵ On 1 August, at the Swiss National Day reception, Edward Masters, the US DCM, observed that Pracha Gunakasem carried an envelope to the Soviet ambassador with the remark, 'this is approved from our side'. Masters assumed that this referred to the cultural agreement.²²⁶

On 18 August, Soviet Ambassador Ilyichev held a meeting with Chatichai at the Thai Foreign Ministry. Chatichai told Ilyichev that the cultural agreement would be approved by the Cabinet on the next day, and if the Soviets wished to sign the treaty in Bangkok, he would like to invite the Soviet foreign minister to visit Thailand. No formal invitation would be issued until it was known that Gromyko could accept. Chatichai said

221 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 August 1975, 5.

222 'Thai-Soviet Relations', 19 August 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO17326, NARA.

223 'Thai Cultural Censorship Board', 18 June 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO11545, NARA.

224 Discussion between Director-General of the Information Department and Soviet Ambassador to Bangkok, 25 June 1975 in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volumes of Declassified Documents on Thai–Russian Relations, 1970–1991*, Vol. 3, 15–16.

225 'Chatichai: We Need Strong Independent Neighbors', 3.

226 'Thai-Soviet Relations', 19 August 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO17326, NARA.

that if the treaty could be signed sooner, the rumour of increased KGB activities would decrease. By the end of August, a draft had been approved by both countries.²²⁷

In September, Chatichai publicly announced that he would invite Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to Thailand for the formal signing of a Thai–Soviet cultural agreement.²²⁸ He commented that ‘we don’t want the Soviets to feel that we are closer to China and the US than the Soviet Union’ and that ‘since we have established diplomatic ties with China, we should increase our contacts with the Soviet Union’.²²⁹ The invitation was envisioned as a symbolic balance to the establishment of diplomatic relations with the PRC, with which the USSR had a heated political dispute. In general, Chatichai’s ultimate aim was to deal with the USSR without offending Beijing. Although Gromyko did not plan to visit Thailand, the cultural agreement was approved by both sides.

Second, the Soviet Union stepped up its diplomatic and intelligence activities in Thailand. It increased its official presence from 70 officials in 1974 to 81 in 1975, working at the embassy, at the trade representation office and at ESCAP.²³⁰ In July, a *Pravda* office was officially opened, and the Soviet embassy requested approval to station a Russian military attaché in Bangkok. While Chatichai denied any knowledge of such a Soviet request during his 31 July press conference, Nissai Vejajiva, the Director-General of the MFA Information Department, stated that the request had been received from the Soviet embassy and forwarded to the Ministry of Defense for a final decision.²³¹

227 Record of conversation between Thai Foreign Minister and Soviet Ambassador to Bangkok, 18 August 1975, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volumes of Declassified Documents on Thai–Russian Relations, 1970–1991*, Vol. 3 (Bangkok: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017), 17–18.

228 ‘Gromyko to Get Thai Invitation’, *Bangkok Post*, 9 September 1975, 1. However, this invitation was a complete surprise to the Soviet Embassy in Thailand. Yuri Kuznetsov, Deputy Director of the Southeast Asia Division at the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dismissed Chatichai’s reported invitation for Gromyko to visit to Thailand as ‘not serious’, and portrayed Thai foreign policy as confused and uncertain about its direction. ‘Invitation to Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko to Visit Thailand’, 5 September 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO18721, NARA; ‘Soviet View of Indochina and Thailand’, 25 October 1975, RG59, 1975MOSCOW15406, NARA.

229 Quoted in Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy and Southeast Asia*, 105.

230 ‘Reporting on Host Country Relations with Communist Countries’, 15 November 1976, RG59, 1976BANGKO31296, NARA.

231 In late July, Foreign Minister Chatichai had directed a ‘Russian Section’ within the MFA, which was staffed with selected officers and designed to cultivate contacts with Soviet diplomats, to ‘watch their activities and see what they want and how they see their prospects in Thailand’. It was reported that Chatichai wanted an organised effort ‘to hold them off without seeming negative’. ‘Thai–Soviet Relations’, 19 August 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO17326, NARA.

According to US Ambassador Whitehouse:

the Soviet military attaché question appears a ploy to fend off the Soviets without bruising their feelings overmuch. The Thai military establishment remains overtly suspicious of the USSR, and the MFA can blame the Ministry of Defense in the event of a negative ... decision.²³²

However, by the end of 1975, the Thai Government agreed to accept a Soviet military attaché, while sending a Thai military attaché to Moscow too.

Third, following trade and aviation agreements in the early 1970s, the volume of Thai–Soviet trade increased through the 1970s, although it remained marginal. The Soviets focused their exports to Thailand on the sale of both fixed and moveable machinery, and provided large-scale financing to local purchases, through the Moscow Narodny Bank in Singapore.²³³ They imported some Thai products, the most important of which was fluorite. However, the purchase of fluorite in 1975 decreased due to Soviet conditions that required Thai exporters to accept Soviet machinery as payment. In September 1975, Foreign Minister Chatichai accepted the Soviet offer to send a technical team of energy experts to Thailand to explore shale oil.²³⁴

Throughout 1975, the Russian Government repeatedly submitted formal complaints to the Thai Foreign Ministry regarding the State Trading Bill. The Soviets charged that the State Trading Bill targeted trade with both the USSR and the Eastern bloc, and would considerably affect the smooth functioning of trade relations. From the Soviet sides, the bill would hinder the original Thai–Russian trade agreement that facilitated free trade between the two countries. They said they would consider the abolishment of their trade agreement if Thailand insisted on implementing the State Trading Bill. According to an unnamed high-ranking Thai official, the Kukrit Government described this Russian intervention as a ‘political issue’, and it was believed that the Soviet move was aimed at checking the

232 ‘Thai-Soviet Relations’, 19 August 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO17326, NARA.

233 ‘Reporting on Host Country Relations with Communist Countries’, 15 November 1976, RG59, 1976BANGKO31296, NARA.

234 *New York Times*, 28 September 1975. However, this acceptance of the Soviet offer was strongly opposed within the Cabinet, and the matter was dropped later.

growing Chinese trade influence in Thailand. In mid-September 1975, the Kukrit Government finally decided in principle to drop the law in order to maintain détente with Moscow.²³⁵

Fourth, the Soviets steadily increased their influence within Thai civil society, and in particular, with some labour leaders and students. On the one hand, they sponsored the visits of several Thai labour leaders to the USSR. For example, Soviet Ambassador Ilyichev invited five Thai labour leaders to visit industrial areas in the USSR in March 1976.²³⁶ On the other hand, the Soviets sponsored Russian language courses offered at Ramkhamhaeng University. Also, Soviet cultural information officials, and in particular Mikhail A Romanov, a Second Secretary for Cultural Affairs, became frequent visitors to Thammasat University.²³⁷ The Soviets attempted to offer scholarships to Thai students to study in the USSR and promote educational exchanges between Thailand and the USSR. However, these attempts were not particularly successful.²³⁸

Fifth, the Soviet Union sought increasing influence in mainland Southeast Asia. This was largely due to the Sino–Soviet rivalry, which, according to Prasong Suntsiri, Assistant Secretary-General of the Thai National Security Council, was ‘intensifying since the normalization of relations between Thailand and China’.²³⁹ The Soviets increasingly supported communist regimes in neighbouring countries. In particular, they began to provide Laos with advisors and material assistance.

In October, a series of border clashes along the Mekong River complicated relations between Thailand and the USSR further. The most notable border incident occurred when a Thai patrol boat was crippled and a Navy man killed by the Laotians on the Mekong River on 17 November. In response, the Thai Government ordered the closure of the border to 1 January 1976. Vietnam immediately announced its full support of Laos, while the USSR regarded Thailand’s blockade as an act of intimidation. A *Pravda* commentary stated that an ‘unnamed’ country attempted to

235 ‘Russia Objects to State Trade Law’, *Bangkok Post*, 16 September 1975, 1.

236 ‘Five Labor Leaders in Russia’, 17 September 1976, RG59, 1976BANGKO25959, NARA.

237 ‘The Soviets in Bangkok: Undercover Diplomacy’, 9.

238 ‘Reporting on Host Country Relations with Communist Countries’, 15 November 1976, RG59, 1976BANGKO31296, NARA.

239 ‘Russians Vie for Control of Thai Reds’, *Bangkok Post*, 26 February 1976, 1. Prasong even claimed that the Russians, working closely with Hanoi, sought to finance the activities of the CPT, while the PRC decreased its support. However, there was no evidence supporting this assertion. ‘Soviet Relationship with the CPT’, 26 February 1976, RG59, 1976BANGKO04354, NARA.

use Laos to expand its own influence or to interdict the process of social transformation in that country.²⁴⁰ Moscow supplied Laos with basic needs such as fuel and rice through an airlift until the border closure was lifted.

Face-to-face diplomacy was used to manage the border conflict. On 23 November, Ilyichev had a luncheon meeting with Foreign Minister Chatichai at the latter's Soi Rajakru residence. In their three-hour meeting, they discussed the Thai–Laotian border incident. Chatichai told the Russian envoy that Thailand was very disappointed with Vietnam's action. He said that while Thailand had attempted to ease tension with Laos, Vietnam had intentionally made the situation worse. Chatichai also explained to Ilyichev that he did not mean to refer to the Soviet Union when he earlier mentioned a 'third country' that had prodded the Pathet Lao into taking aggressive action against Thailand. He emphasised that Thailand did not want the USSR or any other country to intervene in the incident 'which is strictly a Thai–Laotian affair'.²⁴¹ Lastly, citing the rapprochement with Cambodia as an example, Chatichai assured the Russian ambassador that Thailand was not an expansionist nation, but sincerely intended to coexist peacefully with neighbouring countries.

In conclusion, compared with Sino–Thai rapprochement, Thai–Soviet relations were relatively less transformative. Despite Soviet suspicion about the closer Thai–Chinese ties and the border conflicts along the Mekong River, the discourse of détente with Moscow remained intact during the Kukrit administration. A cultural agreement was signed while the business-as-usual relations in both trade and cultural exchanges continued. Further, the Kukrit Government eliminated the State Trading Bill, which the Soviets considered to be an obstacle to the bilateral trade, and approved a new position of Soviet military attaché and the opening of a *Pravda* office in Bangkok.

6.3. 'Withdrawal' or Diplomatic Symptoms? 'The Tiger Coming in the Back Door'?

By the mid-1970s, discursive anxiety that Thailand would become the 'next domino' in Southeast Asia dominated Thai politics. In his birthday speech on 5 December 1975, King Bhumibol observed:

240 Quoted in Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy and Southeast Asia*, 106.

241 'FM Sees Russian Ambassador', *Bangkok Post*, 23 November 1975, 1, 3.

some people predicted that, by the end of this year, Thailand will not appear on the world map any more ... Next year 'Thailand' would become 'Dieland' ... It is a deliberate plan [he continued] to obliterate our country from the world map. We will not allow that to happen. I think that is a kind of intimidation plan. But if we all remain united and help each other, we will not die. And the proof is that everyone who is standing here is not yet dead. This is not yet 'Dieland'.²⁴²

This section discusses the deep anxiety within Thai elite circles and society following détente with the communist powers, especially the restoration of diplomatic relations with the PRC. It argues that the outburst of mass violence in 6 October 1976 and the return of dictatorship should be explained not only by what Benedict Anderson called 'withdrawal symptoms'²⁴³ but also by diplomatic symptoms, or a clash of diplomatic discourses. Once again, the coup was symptomatic of a discursive tussle between anticommunism and détente.

Despite his diplomatic success, the Kukrit Government faced a domestic crisis. His coalition partners were restive, and a drastic cut in US economic assistance to Thailand and a drop in foreign direct investment caused an economic recession. The fall of Kukrit can be explicated by the discursive struggle. His détente strategy lost the support of the military, which were strongly anticommunist. In particular, General Kris Srivara, the powerful Commander-in-Chief of the Army, started to shift his support to the opposition Democratic Party.²⁴⁴ Kris's protégé and the new Commander-in-Chief, General Boonchai Bumrungpong, hinted that 'a military coup could occur or other violence before the scheduled March 20 deadline for US withdrawal'.²⁴⁵ On 11 January 1976, military leaders led by Kris called on Kukrit at his residence and sought his resignation. The following day, Kukrit dissolved Parliament and a new general election was announced to be held in April. At that election, Kukrit himself failed to get re-elected in Dusit, the military-dominated constituency in Bangkok, making the election a disaster for Kukrit.²⁴⁶

242 Quoted in Nicholas Grossman and Dominic Faulder, eds, *King Bhumibol Adulyadej: A Life's Work* (Bangkok: Editions Didier Millet, 2016), 133.

243 Anderson, 'Withdrawal Symptoms', 48–49.

244 Some also argue that Kukrit's negative policy toward the US resulted in his downfall. Marian Mallet, 'Causes and Consequences of the October '76 Coup', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 8, no. 1 (1978): 88.

245 Quoted in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 February 1976.

246 See Morell and Samudawanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, 262–66.

With the endorsement from General Kris, Prime Minister MR Seni Pramoj headed the newly formed Democrat-led coalition government (from April to October 1976). Pichai Rattakul was his foreign minister. Following the discourse of *détente*, Pichai, together with Anand Panyarachun, Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Ministry, maintained cooperation with the USSR and China, and sought rapprochement with Thailand's communist neighbouring countries. Although US Ambassador Whitehouse had presented Pichai with a proposal requesting continued American operations at Ramasun with a partial involvement of Thai technicians, the deal went nowhere and all US troops were eventually withdrawn from Thailand by the end of Seni's government.²⁴⁷

Meanwhile, General Kris, who was appointed as the new Defense Minister, died suddenly on 23 April. His mysterious death brought about tremendous instability within the military. The other faction within the military decided to invite two exiled 'tyrants', Field Marshals Thanom Kittikachorn and Praphas Charusathien, back to Bangkok. This incident precipitated mass demonstrations. Since the October 1973 uprising, right-wing and ultra-right movements, such as the *Krathing Daeng* (Red Gaur), *Nawaphon*, and the village scouts, had emerged and increasingly used violence against students' and left-leaning movements. Several peasant leaders and intellectuals were assassinated, such as the socialist leader Boonsanong Punyodyana.²⁴⁸ The most symbolic and spectacular event was the mass violence on 6 October 1976, when the rightists massacred students at Thammasat University. A military coup stepped in and the king appointed a staunch anticommunist judge, Thanin Kraivichien, as new prime minister (October 1976 – October 1977).

How can we explain these crises from within? In his provocative article, Benedict Anderson rendered this new kind of violence as 'nonadministrative, public and even mob character', and argued that violence and the concomitant U-turn back to dictatorship were 'symptomatic of the present social, cultural, and political crisis', which

247 Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 200, 204.

248 See Katherine A Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Thongchai Winichakul, 'Remembering/Silencing the Traumatic Past: The Ambivalent Memories of the October 1976 Massacre in Bangkok', in *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*, ed. Charles F Keyes and Shigeharu Tanabe (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 243–83; Tyrell Haberkorn, *Revolution Interrupted: Farmers, Students, Law, and Violence in Northern Thailand* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).

he described as ‘withdrawal symptoms’.²⁴⁹ Anderson elucidates two structural setbacks, namely the process of class formation and ideological upheaval. On the one hand, Thailand’s integration in the American world economic system and its involvement in the Vietnam War had brought about a period of rapid economic growth, which in turn produced a new stratum in Thai society. In particular, he pointed to the expansion of the education system, which had created a more self-aware bourgeoisie or middle class. Then, the mid-1970s saw a range of crises hit the country, ranging from the oil crisis and the prospect of American withdrawal, to the collapse of the Indochinese regimes amid the spectre of communism. These precipitated growing anger and anxiety among the emerging yet insecure middle class, which, in turn, targeted the radicalised students, their demonstrations and democracy itself. The latter were scapegoated. Anderson suggests that these explained why ‘many of the same people’, who ‘sincerely supported the mass demonstrations of October 1973’, provided ‘the social base for a quasi-popular right-wing movement’ that welcomed the return of a military dictatorship three years later.²⁵⁰

On the other hand, during the democratic interlude, between 1973 and 1976, an ideological polarisation emerged that pitted popular and democratic left-leaning ideas against the established conservative Thai ideology of nation–religion–king. The former questioned the legitimacy and authority of the latter, including the centrality of the monarchy.²⁵¹ Anderson traced the weak descent of so-called ‘radical-populist, if not left-wing’ nationalism in Thailand to the absence of a historical legacy of anti-colonialism. As Anderson puts it:

A whole concatenation of crises in Thai society began to crystallize around the symbol of the monarchy. The end of the long economic boom, the unexpected frustrations generated by rapid educational expansion, inter-generational estrangement, and the alarm caused by the American strategic withdrawal and the discrediting of the military leadership – these linked crises were experienced most acutely of all by the insecure new bourgeois strata.²⁵²

These withdrawal symptoms set the stage for mass violence by the right-wing movements, which culminated in the orchestrated mob massacre on 6 October 1976.

²⁴⁹ Anderson, ‘Withdrawal Symptoms’, 48–49.

²⁵⁰ Anderson, ‘Withdrawal Symptoms’, 49, 62.

²⁵¹ Anderson, ‘Withdrawal Symptoms’, 76.

²⁵² Anderson, ‘Withdrawal Symptoms’, 73.

In this book, I add one more setback that fuelled the return of dictatorship: a diplomatic symptom. This diplomatic symptom can be understood within the framework of a discursive clash linked to contestation over who should hold the hegemonic position over Thai foreign policy. During the democratic interlude, the MFA played a pivotal role in the decision-making process in the realm of foreign and security policies, thereby marginalising the role of the military, which had dominated this field for so many years. For instance, the MFA's leading role in forbidding reconnaissance flights from U-Tapao airbase over the Indian Ocean was 'the salient episode' in its marginalisation of Supreme Command's former monopoly on Thai-US security relations.²⁵³ More profound disagreements existed in relation to both the withdrawal of US forces and détente with the communist powers.

A telegram to the State Department written by US Embassy Minister Edward Masters captured this clash of discourses very well. According to Masters, Thailand in 1975 was in the midst of a foreign policy debate between two 'diverse tracks': 'quick accommodation' and 'heightened defense'.²⁵⁴ On the one hand, those who supported 'quick accommodation', or what I call détente proponents, included 'some officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs'. They argued that 'Thailand must work out an arrangement with Communist Indochina' and the communist powers in general to 'permit peaceful coexistence without surrendering to the North Vietnamese'. 'Increasingly referring to their history books', détente proponents recalled that the Thais had been:

forced to deal with hostile regimes ... on several occasions over the last 700 years. They have coped with the situation in the past and expect to do so in the future.

Highlighting continuity in Thai diplomacy, détente proponents strongly urged a rapid accommodation with the communists. They also found the US military presence in Thailand to be a 'hindrance'.²⁵⁵

253 'Changes in Thai Foreign Policy and their Effects on the US', 8 April 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO05946, NARA.

254 'Changes in Thai Foreign Policy and their Effects on the US', 8 April 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO05946, NARA.

255 'Changes in Thai Foreign Policy and their Effects on the US', 8 April 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO05946, NARA.

On the other hand, those who favoured 'heightened defense', or what I call *détente* opponents, included 'senior generals in the Thai defense establishment'. They claimed that Thailand should 'strengthen itself enough militarily to withstand pressures from Hanoi and Beijing without giving them major concessions'. In other words, *détente* opponents favoured 'a more militant stand toward Hanoi and Beijing'. This position presupposed increased military spending, and a 'slowdown in the diplomatic approach' to Beijing and Hanoi. Enough military capability as a deterrent would 'convince' the communists of the military 'seriousness' and readiness of Thailand's posture. Thus, these groups rendered a continued US military presence in Thailand advantageous, both strategically and tactically. US presence benefited Thailand twofold: first, their presence served as a hedge against those communist countries. Second, the US presence helped guarantee continued military assistance for the Thai military, which was essential to strengthening the armed forces so as to address the communist insurgency and the growing external threat.²⁵⁶ In brief, leading military leaders hoped for US military forces to 'stay, preferably indefinitely and preferably with enough force to do some good'.²⁵⁷

The military and conservatives viewed *détente* with China, and Kukrit's visit to Beijing in July, with scepticism. They recognised that 'rapprochement with the PRC' was 'advisable', but questioned 'the haste with which MFA is plunging ahead'. They feared that *détente* proponents, particularly the MFA, 'endangered' Thailand by 'making deals that are ill conceived and giving away too much in the bargaining process'.²⁵⁸

Views of Air Marshal Siddhi Savetsila, Secretary-General of the National Security Council, demonstrated the discourse of those *détente* sceptics. In his interview with Theh Chongkhadikij, the editor-in-chief of the *Bangkok Post*, on 7 September, Siddhi, who also accompanied with Prime Minister Kukrit to Beijing, said that the Chinese behaved like a 'mature adult'. He believed that 'the present leaders intend to let us solve our

256 'Changes in Thai Foreign Policy and their Effects on the US', 8 April 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO05946, NARA.

257 'New Perceptions and Dilemmas in Thailand's Foreign Policy', 25 June 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO12351, NARA.

258 'New Perceptions and Dilemmas in Thailand's Foreign Policy', 25 June 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO12351, NARA.

internal problems. The Communist insurgency is a domestic problem'. However, he could not say what the situation would be like if the leadership in Beijing changed.²⁵⁹ Like Deng Xiaoping, Siddhi warned that

while we drive the wolf away from our front door, we should be careful about the tiger coming in the back door. The tiger is not entering as an invasion force but is using subversion and other forms.²⁶⁰

Unlike Deng, the metaphor of 'tiger' left it unclear whether it referred to the USSR or China, or both.

We cannot explain the crisis only from exogenous or endogenous forces but must also consider the changing discourses and practices of Thai diplomacy. Once again, a clash of diplomatic discourses – between those of diplomats and those of the military – ended in a power contestation, which was ultimately expressed in the military coup after the 6 October 1976 massacre.²⁶¹ We can read the coup, and its concomitant ultra-conservative government under Thanin, as a last attempt to reinstate the anticommunist discourse.

6.4. Conclusion

In Thailand, what Chatichai once described as 'too much democracy'²⁶² gave way to a right-wing authoritarian government and a highly controlled society. Simultaneously, too much diplomacy was now replaced with a brief return to the discourse of a strict anticommunism, as espoused by the military and civilian conservatives. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how the change in government left détente in disarray, only to be recovered under the guidance of General Kriangsak Chomanan.

259 *Bangkok Post*, 7 September 1975, quoted in 'Views of Air Marshal Siddhi', 8 September 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO18841, NARA.

260 *Bangkok Post*, 7 September 1975, quoted in 'Views of Air Marshal Siddhi', 8 September 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO18841, NARA.

261 In his New Year speech in 1977, King Bhumibol referred to the 6 October coup as 'a manifestation of what the people clearly wanted', and stated that 'such a manifestation leads us to our mutual understanding and helps us to construct what we desire and surmount all obstacles that might arise'. *Bangkok Post*, 1 January 1977. Quoted in Mallet, 'Causes and Consequences of the October '76 Coup', 91.

262 'Secretary's Meeting with Foreign Minister Chatichai of Thailand', 26 November 1975, RG59, 1975BANGKO24619, NARA.

This text is taken from *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy: The Politics of Thai Détente with Russia and China*, by Jittipat Poonkham, published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/GBD.2022.06