7

Equidistance: Kriangsak and the Third Détente (1977–1980)

If we balance the big powers properly, everything will hopefully come out all right.

– General Kriangsak Chomanan, prime minister¹

After the 6 October 1976 coup, the new prime minister, Thanin Kraivichien, put a halt to détente with the communist powers. His doctrinal anticommunism, in turn, alienated many Thai elites – most of whom by then were détente proponents. A year later, Thanin was ousted by the military groups led by General Kriangsak Chomanan, then Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. Unlike the old military establishment, Kriangsak was a strong proponent of détente whose foreign policy position was not dissimilar to that of diplomats in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As Kriangsak stated, ‘I see nothing wrong with being friends with the Soviets and the Chinese ... I want to treat all friendly countries on an equal basis and not discriminate against any friendly country’.² Kriangsak went to Beijing in March 1978 and to Washington DC in February 1979. He also became the first Thai prime minister to visit Moscow in March 1979.

By the late 1970s, Kriangsak’s return to détente was an attempt to strike a balance between the great powers, or to develop what he described as equidistant relationships. The term became a buzzword in Thai foreign policy discourse.

1 *Bangkok World*, 7 October 1977.

2 Richard Nations, ‘Thailand: Back in the Game’, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 November 1978, 22.

This penultimate chapter argues that despite the rhetoric of strict neutrality, equidistant diplomacy was in fact an alignment with the great powers in a more balanced and equal way. Despite some difficulties in rebalancing the relationship between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC), Kriangsak's Thailand achieved equidistance. However, this diplomacy generated another series of discursive struggles within Thai politics between balanced *détente* and unbalanced *détente* that ultimately precipitated the fall of Kriangsak in early 1980. Yet, the discourse of *détente* in general, and that of 'friendship' with the communist powers in particular, continued intact thereafter.

7.1. Anticommunist Strike-back: Thanin's Inflexible Diplomacy

The year 1976 marked a watershed in world politics which rendered Thai *détente* difficult to achieve. Mao Zedong's death on 9 September was a significant turning point. He was succeeded by Chairman Hua Guofeng. After eliminating the Gang of Four on 6 October, Hua attempted to build his ideological credentials by supporting Southeast Asian communist parties, including the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). This was before Chinese foreign policy moved to a non-ideological or realist stance – culminating with the ascent of Deng Xiaoping as paramount leader from the end of 1978.³

For the USSR, 1976 marked the decline of *détente*, culminating with the deployment of SS20s, a medium-range missile, in Eastern Europe and expansion into Africa thereafter.⁴ At the same time, the Soviet Union sought to expand its influence in Southeast Asia, especially in Vietnam. Coupled with the Sino–Soviet rivalry, the regional rise of Vietnam had an impact on the peace and stability of Indochina. Furthermore, in the US, the newly elected President Jimmy Carter focused on human rights and

3 Chen Jian, 'China and the Cold War after Mao', in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. 3: Endings*, ed. Melvyn P Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 181–200.

4 Geoffrey Roberts, *The Soviet Union in World Politics: Coexistence, Revolution and Cold War, 1945–1991* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 80.

democracy promotion, which in turn complicated its own détente process with the Soviet Union.⁵ The Carter administration also reduced aid to Thailand and accused the Thai Government of human rights violations.

In late 1976, Thai détente was derailed not only by international but also domestic politics. The coup on 6 October 1976 ended the democratic interlude and installed an ardent anticommunist and royalist, Supreme Court justice Thanin Kraivichien, as prime minister (October 1976 – October 1977). His short-lived government was dominated by a form of civilian authoritarianism that attempted to re-establish ‘democracy with the King as the Head of State’. Thanin promulgated a 12-year democracy development plan, reinstated a tougher anticommunist strategy, suppressed progressive dissidents and censored the press.⁶ In foreign affairs, he yearned for Cold War certainties. Détente declined accordingly and Thailand’s relations with the communist countries returned to that of hostility. Trade decreased while state-sponsored cultural exchanges evaporated. This section provides a brief overview of Thanin’s inflexible diplomacy.

Upon taking office, Thanin denounced communism as one of the ‘major dangers’ to the Thai nation, and demonised ‘Communist imperialism’.⁷ His government launched a seminar on ‘national security’ aimed at indoctrinating bureaucrats on the dangers of communism.⁸ Thanin also advocated massive campaigns to suppress Thai communists, who had been joined by students in the jungle following the 6 October 1976 massacre. The all-out war against communism resulted in more confrontation, clashes and casualties. The CPT responded in kind, including by assassinating Princess Vipawadi Rangsit during her helicopter trip to the South in February 1977.

5 Daniel J Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 264.

6 See John LS Girling, ‘Thailand: The Coup and Its Implications’, *Pacific Affairs* 50, no. 3 (1977): 387–405; Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, ‘Thailand in 1976’, *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1977): 239–64; Frank C Darling, ‘Thailand in 1976: Another Defeat for Constitutional Democracy’, *Asian Survey* 17, no. 2 (1977): 116–32; Frank C Darling, ‘Thailand in 1977: The Search for Stability and Progress’, *Asian Survey* 18, no. 2 (1978): 153–63; Montri Chenvidyakarn, ‘One Year of Civilian Authoritarian Rule in Thailand: The Rise and Fall of the Thanin Government’, *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1978): 267–85.

7 Thanin had a long history of anticommunism, from his writings on anticommunism to the lectures he gave to the military institutes and universities on the subject. Together with Dusit Siriwan, Thanin also appeared on national radio preaching anticommunist narratives during 1975–1976. See Yos Santasombat, *Power, Personality and Thai Political Elite* (Bangkok: Thai Studies Institute, Thammasat University 1990), Chapter 3.

8 Kukrit Pramoj likened Thanin’s schemes to the Red Guards’ ‘Cultural Revolution’ in China. Kamol Somvichian, ‘“The Oyster and the Shell”: Thai Bureaucrats in Politics’, *Asian Survey* 18, no. 8 (1978): 835.

In foreign affairs, the Thanin Government pursued a more hostile diplomacy toward the communist regimes, including the USSR, the PRC and the neighbouring countries. Anand Panyarachun, Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Ministry, was relieved of his post, and accused of being 'pro-Communist' due to the role he had played in both establishing diplomatic contacts with communist countries and in negotiating the withdrawal of the American military.⁹ Thanin, meanwhile, sought to improve Thailand's relationship with the US and non-Communist world and asserted the status of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an anticommunist organisation. In his foreign visits, Thanin almost always lectured foreign leaders on the 'evils of Communism'. Thanin's orthodox anticommunism alienated many of them.¹⁰

As a consequence, Sino–Thai relations deteriorated rapidly. While the PRC sought to improve relations, it was frustrated by Thanin's anticommunist and pro-Taiwanese policies.¹¹ Thanin also prohibited Thai government officials from travelling to China. No Thai delegation visited Beijing until October 1977 when former prime minister Kukrit Pramoj made a private trip.¹² Cultural and sports exchanges were limited, with the exception of a Chinese martial arts troupe that visited in February and a football team in June.

The Chinese Ambassador to Bangkok, Chai Zemin, said that the PRC encountered a 'very difficult time' during the Thanin regime. In August 1977, he had one short meeting with Prime Minister Thanin, which he privately described as 'unproductive'.¹³ Chinese influence over the local Sino–Thai community was restricted, but Chai still maintained contact with several Thai military leaders, including General Kriangsak Chomanan, then Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. Chai also continued to promote visits to Beijing of Thai groups that did not require permission from the government.¹⁴

9 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), 20.

10 See Kobkua 'Thailand in 1976', 256–63.

11 Even ultra-rightist interior minister, Samak Sundaravej, attended an anticommunist meeting in Taiwan.

12 'Relations with Communist Countries', 17 November 1977, RG59, 1977BANGKO29844, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) online database.

13 'PRC Ambassador Chai Zemin', 10 May 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO13331, NARA.

14 'PRC Ambassador Chai Zemin', 10 May 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO13331, NARA.

Relations between Thailand and the Soviet Union also cooled. The Thanin Government denied entry to at least nine Soviet officials. The vacant positions in the Soviet embassy then became an obstacle to improved Thai–Soviet relations. Ambassador Boris Ilyichev continued to broaden contacts and influence within the Thai elite at all levels, and officially expressed concern and displeasure over what the Soviets viewed as inferior treatment compared with the PRC.¹⁵

Trade between Thailand and the USSR remained modest. The Soviets continued to export machinery to Thailand, including tractors, textiles and mining equipment while they mainly imported fluorite. The majority of the 25 Soviet ships visiting the port of Bangkok per month were loaded with fluorite and run by Thasos, a joint Thai–Soviet shipping agency. Large-scale financing, provided by the Moscow Narodny Bank office in Singapore, decreased. According to the US embassy in Bangkok, ‘the political climate during the past year did not favor growth, but neither was there any noticeable decrease’.¹⁶

While the Thai–Soviet cultural agreement had been accepted in principle, it had not yet been ratified, and was thus shelved following the 6 October coup. Moreover, there were no cultural or student exchanges during the Thanin Government. The absence of such exchanges meant the only outlet for cultural propaganda was the Soviet souvenir shop in Bangkok, which operated under the auspices of the Soviet Information Service.¹⁷

It is fair to say, therefore, that the processes of détente ceased under Thanin. Yet, his approach to diplomacy was to alienate many social forces in Thailand, including some factions within the military such as the so-called ‘Young Turks’.¹⁸ It was reported that top military leaders grumbled ‘that the civilian leaders, particularly Thanin and his Interior

15 ‘Relations with Communist Countries’, 17 November 1977, RG59, 1977BANGKO29844, NARA.

16 ‘Relations with Communist Countries’, 17 November 1977, RG59, 1977BANGKO29844, NARA.

17 ‘Relations with Communist Countries’, 17 November 1977, RG59, 1977BANGKO29844, NARA.

18 The ‘Young Turks’ military group was a group of young military officers and commanders, all of whom graduated from the Royal Chulachomklao Military Academy’s Class 7. The members included Colonel Manoon Rupekajorn, Colonel Chamlong Srimuang and Colonel Prajak Sawangjit. See Chai-Anan Samudavanija, *The Thai Young Turks* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982).

Minister Samak Sudaravej, are too inflexible and too dogmatically obsessed with anticommunism'.¹⁹ Thanin's programs were increasingly seen as short-sighted, counterproductive and detrimental to national security.

By now, important segments of the Thai elite – including both the military and civilians – saw the benefits of détente, particularly with the PRC. These détente proponents, the most important of which included Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces General Kriangsak and Foreign Minister Upadit Pachariyangkun, believed that the PRC occupied an important role as stabiliser in the region. This was due both to its influence in Cambodia and its strength as a counterbalance to Vietnamese expansionism. Following the coup, Kriangsak became good friends with the Chinese ambassador, Chai Zemin, and held numerous cordial talks with him, especially on the Vietnam problem.²⁰ While visiting Washington in March 1977, Kriangsak confirmed that anticommunism alone would not revive American aid.²¹ In other words, Kriangsak, as a new détente proponent, used détente to counter Thanin's anticommunist regime.

In August, many of the Thai military attended the 50th anniversary of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Day celebration in Bangkok. They sought to appear moderate in their attitudes toward the Chinese.²² In early October, Kukrit Pramroj went to Beijing on a 'personal visit'. Kukrit had meetings with Chinese leaders, including Chairman Hua Guofeng. In their 40-minute meeting on 12 October, Hua assured Kukrit that the PRC was committed to fostering 'firm' and 'friendly' relations with Thailand, and would seek to promote peace between Thailand and its neighbours, especially Cambodia. According to Kukrit, China wished to see a change in the direction of Thai foreign policy. If Thailand improved relations with the PRC, the problem with Cambodia could be easily solved. Kukrit claimed that this was because Cambodian leaders had a 'sensible talk with the Chinese leaders'. The latter strongly urged moderation on Cambodia, which could alleviate the Thai–Cambodian border conflict.²³ After his return to Bangkok, Kukrit revealed that Chairman Hua Guofeng

19 *Newsweek*, 10 October 1977, 11.

20 Michael R Chambers, "'The Chinese and the Thais are Brothers': The Evolution of the Sino-Thai Friendship", *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 45 (2005): 612.

21 Richard Nations, 'The Military Muscle In', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 November 1977, 14.

22 'Relations with Communist Countries', 17 November 1977, RG59, 1977BANGKO29844, NARA.

23 Nayan Chanda, 'The Two-year Solution', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 November 1977, 12.

‘was not too happy about the Thanin government’s management of the relationship with China’. China’s concern stemmed from Thanin’s militant anticommunist stance.²⁴ While Kukrit was in Beijing, Foreign Minister Upadit met his Cambodian counterpart, Ieng Sary, at the United Nations (UN). Later, Upadit said he and Ieng Sary had ‘frank and useful talks. We agreed our two countries should be friends and that the benefits would be immense’.²⁵

Such discursive tussles, between anticommunism and détente, deepened with the deteriorating civil–military relationship. For Thanin, civil–military relations were like an ‘oyster-and-shell’: if the government did not receive ‘the strong support and protection’ from the military, it would be like ‘an oyster living outside its shell’.²⁶ By mid-1977, the analogy proved correct as Kriangsak increasingly stopped hiding his criticism of the Thanin regime.²⁷ On 7 October, at a press conference he stated:

the military will not be a protective shell for any individual or group as it will become a worthless shell. In my opinion, the military will be a shell which protects larger things, namely, the Nation, Religion, Monarchy and the People.²⁸

Thus, Kriangsak concluded, ‘the general situation had deteriorated to the point that it necessitated the military to beef up its strength for security reasons’.²⁹

The final showdown came when the ‘Young Turks’ called on the Thanin Government to resign before making an ultimatum that he reshuffle the Cabinet. When Thanin rejected their demands, his government was overthrown on 20 October 1977.³⁰ The coup-makers, led by Admiral

24 Kukrit Pramroj, interview, in Chanda, ‘The Two-year Solution’, 10.

25 Derek Davies, ‘Thais Breathe a Sigh of Relief’, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 9 December 1977, 22.

26 Kamol, ‘“The Oyster and the Shell”’, 829.

27 According to the US Embassy in Bangkok:

at some point – probably around April or May 1977 – the dormant political ambitions of ... Kriangsak Chomanan became fully awake, and it was clear that Kriangsak saw himself as a much more capable prime minister than Thanin would ever be. By his careful cultivation of Thailand’s restive labour unions, beginning in October 1976, and through his growing and almost public criticism of Thanin to Thai and foreign visitors. Kriangsak steadily moved to establish himself as the logical successor to Thanin.

‘Change of Government in Thailand: Developments and Prospects’, 21 November 1977, RG59, 1977BANGKO30499, NARA.

28 *Bangkok Post*, 8 October 1977, 1.

29 *Bangkok Post*, 8 October 1977, 1.

30 Later, Thanin was appointed to the Privy Council on 16 December.

Sangad Chaloryu and Kriangsak, justified their action on a number of grounds. Politically, Thanin's 12-year democracy plan was unnecessarily 'long and not in accordance with the wishes of the people'. In terms of the economy, 'foreign investment has decreased and investors have been uncertain of the political situation'. Diplomatically, Thanin's approach was too rigid, and antagonised the communist states – both superpowers and neighbours.³¹ With the strong support of the Young Turks, General Kriangsak Chomanan became the new prime minister. He adopted more liberal policies at home and a *détente* strategy abroad.

In sum, Thanin's diplomatic approach returned Thailand to the pre-1968 anticommunism, and thereby demolished *détente*. One of the key *détente* proponents, Kukrit, made a post-coup comment that the overthrow of the Thanin Government was 'long expected' as it was 'the most unstable government in human history', and 'a serious mistake on the part of Thailand'.³² Kukrit said Thanin was 'so absorbed in fighting Communism that he does not know what he is doing. He has mixed up foreign affairs and foreign relations with doctrinal struggle'. Thanin had begun 'a Pinocchio of the army', but turned out to be 'Frankenstein's monster'.³³

7.2. The Return of *Détente*: Kriangsak and the Strategy of Equidistance

This section examines General Kriangsak Chomanan's pivotal shift toward *détente*. It argues that *détente* in this period was characterised as equidistance – a position whereby the country pursued more flexible and relatively even-handed relations with the great powers. This culminated in Kriangsak's official visits to three major countries: the PRC in March 1978, the US in February 1979 and the USSR in March 1979. The section begins with a discussion of Kriangsak's politics and diplomatic approach in general, and then elucidates Thailand's relations with the PRC and the Soviet Union, respectively.

31 *Bangkok Post*, 21 October 1977, 3.

32 Kukrit, interview, in Chanda, 'The Two-year Solution', 11.

33 Kukrit, interview, in Chanda, 'The Two-year Solution', 12.

7.2.1. Politics and Diplomacy During the Kriangsak Administration: A 'Sigh of Relief'³⁴

Within the military, the sudden and mysterious death of the powerful General Kris Srivara in April 1976 brought about a leadership crisis, and the mercurial rise to power of General Kriangsak Chomanan, Supreme Commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces. While Kriangsak had a weak power base in the Army, he held key positions in the Supreme Command, which had worked closely with the US military leadership throughout the Vietnam War.³⁵ After Kris died, Kriangsak increasingly became the primary military 'power broker'.³⁶ Yet, he nevertheless remained on the periphery of the military establishment, while a part of the bureaucratic polity.³⁷

Kriangsak was a key détente proponent, and thereby challenged Thanin's ultra-rightist anticommunism. With strong support from the Young Turks, Admiral Sangad Chaloryu and Kriangsak staged a coup on 20 October 1977. Sangad remained the chair of the National Policy Council, but was abruptly sidelined.³⁸ Kriangsak was his own prime minister, promoting liberalism at home and détente abroad.

In domestic politics, the Kriangsak administration consisted of technocrats that advocated more liberal policies.³⁹ Declaring himself a true believer in democracy, Kriangsak quickly scheduled elections for April 1979, and engaged in social and economic reforms. His first priority was to restore stability and order. He reinstated freedom of the press, adopted a more moderate and conciliatory position toward political dissidents, students

34 Davies, 'Thais Breathe a Sigh of Relief', 18.

35 According to *Newsweek*:

Kriangsak has had a long working experience with the Americans. He served as a key link in such overt activities as the expansion of US bases facilities in Thailand and also in CIA covert activities, such as the use of Thai mercenaries in the 'secret war' in Laos.

Michael Hudson and Holger Jensen, 'Power Broker', *Newsweek*, 31 October 1977.

36 Marian Mallet, 'Causes and Consequences of the October '76 Coup', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 8, no. 1 (1978): 87.

37 Girling, *Thailand: Society and Politics*, 219.

38 On the inter-military rivalry during the Thanin and Kriangsak administrations, see Krittin Suksiri, 'Political Conflict under the Government of General Kriangsak Chomanan' (MA thesis, Thammasat University, 2002).

39 Key technocrats included, inter alia, Sunthorn Hongladarom, the 'economic czar' as Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, Kasame Chatikavanij, Industry Minister, and Prok Amaranand, Deputy Commerce Minister. Sunthorn was a former Ambassador to the US and Secretary-General of SEATO.

and labour unions, and broadened his political base into rural areas.⁴⁰ Importantly, Kriangsak introduced an amnesty bill on 16 September 1978 to free 18 defendants, or the 'Thammasat 18', on charges of communist subversion and *lèse majesté* during the 6 October 1976 demonstrations at Thammasat University. He also granted amnesty to students and activists who went into the jungle to join the CPT.⁴¹ As Kriangsak put it:

I am convinced that most of [the students] have good intentions towards their country. We have opened the door and invited them all back. I hope they will accept that we have the same ideals, but experience has made us realize that it takes time.⁴²

Nevertheless, the government inherited chronic problems from the Thanin Government. These included rising inflation, rising prices, trade deficits and declining foreign investment that haunted Kriangsak's prime ministership in the latter half of 1979.⁴³ With a more relaxed and pragmatic personality, Kriangsak sought to establish a more open society in Thailand.

In foreign affairs, Kriangsak's priority was to reverse Thanin's rigid anticommunist diplomacy. He instead promoted *détente* with the great powers, and sought a return to normalisation with communist neighbours. He declared that Thailand's goal was to be on good terms 'with all countries, regardless of ideology'.⁴⁴ 'Frustration with Thanin's evident inability to improve relations with Thailand's Communist neighbors', according to US Ambassador to Bangkok, Charles Whitehouse, was 'among the motives leading Kriangsak to advocate replacement of the Thanin government'.⁴⁵ As the prime minister put it, 'the government will adhere to a friendly policy toward neighboring countries and will not allow anyone to use Thailand's territory to harm our neighbors'.⁴⁶ The 'goal', explained Kriangsak, was:

40 See Khien Theeravit, 'Thailand: An Overview of Politics and Foreign Relations', *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1979): 302–4.

41 Ansil Ramsay, 'Thailand 1978: Kriangsak – The Thai who Binds', *Asian Survey* 19, no. 2 (1979): 110.

42 'An Optimistic Kriangsak', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 21 April 1978, 31.

43 See Vichitvong na Pombhejara, 'The Kriangsak Government and the Thai Economy', *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1979): 312–22.

44 Nations, 'Thailand: Back in the Game', 21.

45 'Kriangsak Government Rounds Out First Six Months in Office', 19 April 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO11275, NARA.

46 Quoted in Girling, *Thailand: Society and Politics*, 245.

to discourage the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) from clinging to the Khmer Rouge as their resort. If we could isolate the CPT and make them lose their backing, border problems would be diminished.⁴⁷

Kriangsak believed that friendly relations between communist and non-communist states would not only 'stop the flows of aid to the Communist movement in Thailand', but also 'weaken the Communist united front'. With peace at the frontiers, the government could concentrate its armed forces on communist suppression at home.⁴⁸ Kriangsak reassured the public that 'we combat Communists in our country. We are not fighting Communism in Vietnam', or other neighbours.⁴⁹

Once in office, Kriangsak sent letters to the leaders of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, inviting them to visit Bangkok. A series of exchange visits between the leaders of Thailand and the neighbouring countries followed. In January 1978, Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister, Nguyen Duy Trinh, visited Bangkok. On 31 January, Foreign Minister Upadit held a long meeting in Phnom Penh with Ieng Sary, Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister.⁵⁰ Lao Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Phoun Sipaseuth, visited Bangkok in late March. On 14–17 July, Ieng Sary paid a visit to Bangkok.⁵¹ In early September, during his tour of five ASEAN countries, Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong visited Bangkok, and promised that 'Vietnam would not support Communist insurgents in Thailand directly or indirectly'.⁵²

47 *Bangkok World*, 1 February 1978, 1.

48 Khien, 'Thailand: An Overview of Politics', 306.

49 *Bangkok Post*, 26 October 1976.

50 Drawing from Chinese sources, Christopher Goscha convincingly explains that the Khmer Rouge began to improve its relations with Thailand only in early 1978, as the confrontation with Vietnam was approaching: 'Presumably, the Khmer Rouge understood the need to have peace on their western flank in order to concentrate on the Vietnamese in the east'. Goscha, 'Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the Meltdown of Asian Internationalism', in *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972–1979*, ed. Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 175.

51 Richard Nations, 'Only a Morsel from Sary: An Offering, But Little Substance from Bangkok's Visitor', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 28 July 1978, 11–12.

52 We now know that shortly after his return to Hanoi, Pham told the East German ambassador that he was not bound by pledges given to the Kriangsak Government that he would stop the Vietnamese support to the CPT. As Pham announced, Vietnam would continue 'to contribute to the cause of revolution ... in Southeast Asia and the world'. Lorenz M Luthi, 'Strategic Shifts in East Asia', in *The Regional Cold Wars in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East: Crucial Periods and Turning Points*, ed. Lorenz M. Luthi (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2015), 226.

Kriangsak also asked Thai diplomats to make bilateral contact with their counterparts in neighbouring countries.⁵³ A Vietnamese embassy was opened in Bangkok on 28 February and the first Vietnamese Ambassador to Thailand, Hoang Ban Son, arrived in Bangkok in April.⁵⁴ The Kriangsak Government now began to view its communist neighbours as promising markets. Bangkok and Hanoi signed a trade, economic and technical cooperation agreement in January 1978 and Thai trade delegations visited Laos and Vietnam in June. During the visit, Thailand and Laos signed a trade treaty and an overland transit agreement. In Hanoi, a Thai trade delegation worked out trading details with the Vietnamese. As well as offering a US\$5 million credit line, Thailand signed a communications agreement restoring telephone and telegraph links with Hanoi.⁵⁵ Overall, Thai delegates hoped that increased trade would provide an incentive for neighbouring countries to seek friendly relations.⁵⁶

With the great powers, the Kriangsak Government pursued what it described as an equidistant relationship. That is, while it often described its posture as neutral nonalignment,⁵⁷ equidistance was in fact a more flexible, balanced and even-handed diplomatic engagement and alignment with the US, the USSR and the PRC. Referring to the US, Kriangsak said: 'we cannot forget old friends, but we do not anticipate the return of American troops'. Contrary to Thanin, he argued that Thai policy toward the USSR and China had not changed from the period prior to the 1976 coup.⁵⁸ Foreign Minister Upadit Pachariyangkun stated:

Thailand doesn't balance one power off against another ... Our policy is simply to contribute to the conditions for peace and stability in which both our country and the region can prosper.⁵⁹

53 Khien, 'Thailand: An Overview of Politics', 305.

54 'Kriangsak Government Rounds Out First Six Months in Office', 19 April 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO11275, NARA.

55 Richard Nations, 'The Makings of Friendship', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 September 1978, 29.

56 Richard Nations, 'The Indochina Initiative', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 9 June 1978, 32.

57 For example, Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian claims that the policy of equidistance was 'a more flexible stand on neutrality', which was 'the key in Thailand's dealings with the three great powers'. 'Implicit in the policy of equidistance', she continued, 'was the nonaligned pose which rejected any military pact with any power and the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Thai soil'. See 'Thailand in 1976', 256–57.

58 *Bangkok Post*, 26 October 1976.

59 Richard Nations, 'At Home to an Old foe', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 15 September 1978, 23.

Kriangsak's equidistance was constituted by the changing situation in the region. The late 1970s marked a watershed in global and regional politics: The Cold War was fought not only between the democratic and communist regimes but also among the communists themselves. From 1978, conflict in Indochina between Cambodia and Vietnam precipitated skirmishes along the Thai–Cambodian border and fuelled a subsequent refugee crisis, especially at Aranyaprathet in Thailand. This deteriorated into the so-called Third Indochina War when Vietnam invaded Cambodia on Christmas Day in 1978. Within weeks, Vietnamese forces ousted Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge from power and installed the Heng Samrin regime in Phnom Penh. Khmer Rouge guerrillas continued to fight jungle warfare along the Thai border.⁶⁰

This Indochina tragedy was fuelled by a change in the international balance of power. On the one hand, the PRC and the US supported the Khmer Rouge, while, on the other, the Soviet Union backed the Vietnamese. Shortly before the Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia, Hanoi became a member of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) in June 1978. The Soviet–Vietnamese treaty of friendship and cooperation was signed in November shortly before Hanoi's intervention into Cambodia.⁶¹ Vietnam's January 1979 occupation of Phnom Penh infuriated China, which in turn launched a punitive war against Hanoi a month later. Although the US under Jimmy Carter, who promoted a human rights policy, appeared neutral, its ultimate aim was to contain Vietnam. In so doing, the US prioritised closer relations with China, culminating with the establishment of diplomatic relations on 1 January 1979.⁶² At the same time, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan

60 See Goscha, 'Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the Meltdown of Asian Internationalism', 152–86; and Sophie Quinn-Judge, 'Victory on the Battlefield; Isolation in Asia: Vietnam's Cambodia Decade, 1979–1989', in Westad and Quinn-Judge, *The Third Indochina War*, 207–30.

61 We now know that the treaty with the Soviet Union was a limited agreement. As Sergey Radchenko asserts, 'the assumption that the Soviet Union blessed or even encouraged Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia had no factual basis'. The evidence indicates that 'the Vietnamese leaders did not share their plans with Moscow'. Sergey Radchenko, 'Vietnam's Vietnam: Ending the Cambodian Quagmire, 1979–89', in *Unwanted Visionaries: The Soviet Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 127.

62 See Enrico Fardella, 'The Sino-American Normalization: A Reassessment', *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 4 (September 2009): 545–78; Cecile Menetrey-Monchau, 'The Changing Post-War US Strategy in Indochina', in Westad and Quinn-Judge, *The Third Indochina War*, 65–86; R Sean Randolph, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950–1985* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1986), Chapter 7.

on 25 December 1979 fundamentally damaged US–Soviet détente, and accelerated Sino–US normalisation.⁶³ Thailand was thus caught in the middle of this changing global security complex.

More generally, Jimmy Carter's shifting policy toward Southeast Asia was initially driven by the situation in Indochina, including the refugee humanitarian crisis. Thailand now became a focal interest of the US. In early May 1978, US Vice President Walter Mondale paid an official visit to Bangkok to guarantee continued US commitment and military aid. The US also appointed Morton Abramowitz, a China expert and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, as the new Ambassador to Thailand. He arrived in Bangkok in August.⁶⁴

Further US focus on Thailand was fuelled by the Vietnamese military intervention in Cambodia. During Kriangsak's visit to Washington in February 1979, Carter confirmed America's security commitment to Thailand and extended military aid as well as assistance for refugee relief programs. In mid-1979, Kriangsak opened Thai borders to Indochinese refugees on humanitarian grounds. However, the US remained reluctant to become militarily involved in Southeast Asia. Only after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 did the US begin to feel that the Soviet Union, which threatened to gain strategic predominance in the Indian Ocean, had to be contained and isolated. As a result, the US under President Carter sought to normalise relations with Hanoi. This was a departure from the previous US position and placed the administration at odds with Kriangsak's diplomacy of equidistance, which will be discussed below.

In sum, Kriangsak was a prime minister who, as US Ambassador Whitehouse summed up, was 'a less vocal opponent to Communism', and 'willing to adopt a more flexible approach in dealing with internal dissent as well as external relations'.⁶⁵ Kriangsak's diplomatic strategy was thus driven by equidistance as a balanced form of détente with both the Western and communist powers. According to political scientist Khien Theeravit, Thailand now entered a 'new age of enlightenment in foreign affairs'.⁶⁶

63 See Odd Arne Westad, ed., *The Fall of Détente: Soviet-American Relations During the Carter Years* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997).

64 See Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, Chapter 7.

65 'Kriangsak Government Rounds Out First Six Months in Office', 19 April 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO11275, NARA.

66 Khien, 'Thailand: An Overview of Politics', 311.

7.2.2. Thai–Chinese Relations: Toward Tacit Alliance

China has become cooperative, more friendly – especially with Thailand – and we regard this as a stabilizing role.

– Upadit Pachariyangkun, foreign minister⁶⁷

Unlike the Thanin regime, Kriangsak deepened détente with the PRC, culminating with a visit to Beijing in March 1978 and a return visit by Deng Xiaoping in November. Trade and technical cooperation were expanded and relations were strengthened through a realisation of shared security interests in Indochina. This closeness became a priority to contain the Soviet-backed Vietnamese regime, particularly following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978. By then, the Chinese leadership under Deng had even ended their support to the CPT. While Thailand formally upheld a policy of strict neutrality, it developed a Sino–Thai quasi-alliance, which was part and parcel of an equidistant policy.

During 1977, Kriangsak's détente with the PRC was accelerated by the transformation of Chinese diplomatic practices in Indochina. The Sino–Vietnamese alliance broke down for reasons including increased clashes along their border where Vietnamese maltreatment of ethnic Chinese, or Hoa, in northern Vietnam saw many flee Vietnam. This precipitated a regional refugee crisis, largely composed of the 'boat people'. In response, China terminated aid to Vietnam in mid-1977, which in turn pushed the Vietnamese toward Moscow for economic and military assistance.⁶⁸ More broadly, Beijing was increasingly convinced that the Soviet Union intended to move into the power vacuum in the region and seek dominance. This appeared evident by the Soviet–Vietnamese treaty of 3 November 1978. As Chairman Hua Guofeng told the Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot, on 30 September 1977, the worsening of the Sino–Vietnamese alliance was due to the 'hand of the USSR' and 'connivance' between the USSR and Vietnam.⁶⁹

67 Davies, 'Thais Breathe a Sigh of Relief', 23.

68 Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

69 Goscha, 'Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the Meltdown of Asian Internationalism', 174.

Worried about Sino–Soviet rivalry and the rising Vietnamese threat in Indochina, Chinese leaders led by Deng Xiaoping decided to protect the Khmer Rouge regime at all costs. In so doing, it was necessary for China to strengthen its relationship with Thailand, which had a long border with Cambodia. By then, the Cambodian question – of how to support the Khmer Rouge and block Vietnam’s tentative occupation of Cambodia – was central to Chinese foreign policy, and by extension, to Sino–Thai relations.

On 8 December 1977, the PRC officially invited Kriangsak to visit Beijing; the visit took place a few months later, between 29 March and 4 April 1978. In Bangkok, Kriangsak told Chinese ambassador Chai Zemin that ‘while Thailand makes its own sincere efforts to be friendly with Cambodia, China could also make a valuable contribution’.⁷⁰ He told Chai that the Chinese could play a significant role in smoothing Thai–Cambodian relations.

Before the visit, the Kriangsak Government set a clear agenda for discussions with Chinese leaders. First, Cambodia was the top priority in negotiating with China. As Kriangsak told US Ambassador Whitehouse, China was ‘very helpful and friendly’, but would try to get clarification regarding Chinese policy toward Thailand.⁷¹ Second, Kriangsak intended not to press the insurgency matter or directly raise the question of China’s two-tier policy on foreign relations: while maintaining friendly government-to-government relations, the Chinese Communist Party maintained party-to-party relations with communist parties in Southeast Asia.⁷² Kriangsak later told the press that the ‘question of Communist insurgency’ was an ‘internal problem’ for which Thailand ‘did not look to other countries for a solution’.⁷³ Third, the Thai Government wished to strengthen its economic relations with Beijing in order to manage the unbalanced payments, and find an alternative source of oil. They wanted the Chinese to buy more products from Thailand and sell crude oil at

70 ‘Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak to Visit China and Soviet Union’, 9 December 1977, RG59, 1977BANGKO33681, NARA.

71 ‘Discussion with Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanan’, 13 March 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO07547, NARA.

72 Memorandum, Department of Political Affairs, 20 March 1978, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL2/PRC2521/2, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Thailand, 199.

73 Quoted in ‘Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanan’s Visit to PRC’, 4 April 1978, RG59, 1978SINGAP01507, NARA.

a favourable price (see Table 7.1). The drafts of the trade agreement and the agreement on scientific and technical cooperation had been discussed by the two sides in detail.⁷⁴

Table 7.1: Thailand's trade volume with the People's Republic of China (million baht).

Year	Volume	Export	Import	Trade balance
1972	0.0	0.0	0.0	–
1973	0.0	0.0	0.0	–
1974	94.4	2.5	91.9	–
1975	735.3	391.4	343.9	+
1976	2,728.0	1,266.0	1,462.0	–
1977	3,452.0	2,082.0	1,371.0	+
1978	3,201.0	1,498.0	1,704.0	–
1979	6,511.0	1,572.0	4,939.0	–
1980	11,066.0	2,531.0	8,535.0	–

Source: Thai Ministry of Commerce.

In general, Kriangsak's diplomatic aim was to preserve Thailand's sovereignty and promote a more even-handed approach toward the three superpowers. He announced that following his trip to Beijing, he would pay visits to both Moscow and Washington. Kriangsak also authorised the stationing of a Chinese military attaché in Bangkok, following his approval of a Soviet military attaché several months ago.⁷⁵ As a goodwill gesture to the Chinese Government, Kriangsak permitted two Chinese-language newspapers, namely *Chung Hua Jit Pao* and *Hsin Chung Yuan*, previously banned during the Thanin regime, to reopen.⁷⁶

For Foreign Minister Upadit, the main objective of the trip was 'to strengthen the good relationship between Thailand and the People's Republic of China'. 'We just want', he continued, 'to exchange views with the Chinese leaders on the general political situation around the world and the region'. Upadit characterised Sino–Thai relations as 'excellent'.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Memorandum, Department of Economic Affairs, 20 March 1978, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL2/PRC2521/2, MFA, Thailand, 204.

⁷⁵ 'A Bridge to China', *Asiaweek*, 14 April 1978, 30.

⁷⁶ 'Weekly Highlights – March 24–30, 1978', 30 March 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO09427, NARA.

⁷⁷ 'Proposed Schedule for Thai Prime Minister Visit to China', 29 March 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO09217, NARA.

On 29 March, Kriangsak was greeted by Chairman Hua Guofeng and Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping as he arrived at Beijing airport. His 27-member delegation included, *inter alia*, his wife, Khunying Virat Chomanan, Foreign Minister Upadit Pachariyangkun, Industry Minister Kasame Chatikavanij, Secretary-General of National Security Council Air Marshal Siddhi Savetsila, and Director-General of Political Department of Foreign Ministry, Opart Suthiwart-Narueput. Chinese newspapers reported on Kriangsak's visit positively. In its editorial, the New China News Agency praised Thailand's independent foreign policy and its 'friendly exchanges with Third World countries'. Xinhua also noted the improvement in relations with neighbouring countries, adding:

These policies, and the righteous stand taken by the Thai government, are beneficial to the common cause of the peoples of Asian countries in uniting against hegemonism, and they have received wide support and admiration.⁷⁸

After the welcoming ceremony at the airport, Deng accompanied Kriangsak on a car journey to Beijing, where they engaged in erudite repartee. Deng mentioned their historical relationship and the greatness of the ancient Thais. In his first formal speech, Kriangsak decided to focus on the historical relationship that Deng had begun. It went on for almost an hour, most of it off-the-cuff. At the end, the Thai prime minister described Deng Xiaoping as not only a great leader but also a great historian, who mastered the knowledge of history.⁷⁹ He also urged for the recognition of each nation's institutions. In the Thai case, he meant the monarchy. For Kriangsak, true peace and stability 'can be obtained only if the traditional institutions of each country are respected'.⁸⁰

At the banquet in the Great Hall of the People that night, Deng gave a speech praising the Kriangsak Government for his 'determination to pursue an independent foreign policy'. He expressed that the Chinese supported ASEAN's aims to achieve a 'zone of peace, freedom and neutrality' (ZOPFAN), and opposed hegemonism in the region. He stressed the friendly relations between China and Thailand. 'Since

78 'A Bridge to China', 30.

79 At one point, Kriangsak mentioned that the Thais and the Chinese long ago fought a common enemy, namely the Mongols. That did not please the Mongolian ambassador, who was present. 'A Bridge to China', 27.

80 'A Bridge to China', 26–27.

the establishment of diplomatic relations', Deng went on, 'our traditional friendship has been enhanced'. He concluded that Kriangsak and his visit had made 'positive efforts' in strengthening closer ties.⁸¹

Kriangsak replied by highlighting 'an opportunity' in bilateral relations while praising the Chinese Government for 'adhering to the principles of equality among nations, whereby the big shall not bully the small nor shall the powerful impose its will on the weaker states' as well as its 'stand against interference in internal affairs and violation of sovereignty of others'. Emphasising that ASEAN was not a 'military organization', he believed that Thailand and China had 'common aspiration' with regard to 'peace, stability, and other major issues' in Indochina.⁸²

The following day, Kriangsak had his first formal meeting with Deng, who repeatedly emphasised his support for ASEAN and readiness to discuss the establishment of full diplomatic relations with Singapore and Indonesia. Regarding Indochina, their main agenda was the Vietnamese threat to the region. Deng wondered why Vietnam had developed a closer relationship with Moscow, despite its historic ties with Beijing. He then complained that some 90 per cent of Chinese supplies sent to Cambodia via Vietnam 'never turned up'. In their discussions, both leaders agreed on their mutual interest in peace and stability in Indochina, especially their opposition to Vietnamese expansionism.⁸³ Kriangsak asked Deng to persuade the Khmer Rouge to halt armed incidents on the Thai border. The Chinese vice-premier agreed to help because the security of China, Thailand and Cambodia was interrelated and 'whatever happens to one will affect the others'.⁸⁴ When Kriangsak raised the question of Thailand's concern over communist insurgents, Deng reassured him that Beijing would not interfere in Thailand's internal affairs.

On 31 March, Kriangsak had a friendly talk with Chairman Hua Guofeng. Hua appreciated Kriangsak's foreign policy and stressed that the Sino-Thai relationship had broad prospects for development and friendly relations.⁸⁵ After that, Kriangsak held a second meeting with

81 'State Council Gives Grand Banquet for Thai Prime Minister', *Xinhua General News Service*, 30 March 1978.

82 'State Council Gives Grand Banquet'.

83 Chambers, "'The Chinese and the Thais are Brothers'", 612.

84 'A Bridge to China', 26.

85 'Chairman Hua Meets Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanan', *Xinhua General News Service*, 1 April 1978.

Deng, which lasted for one and a half hours. The Chinese leader noted his displeasure for hegemonism in the region, by which he meant the Soviet Union, and defined the US as a 'defensive' superpower and the Soviet Union an 'offensive' one. For Deng, the US adopted a weak posture following the Vietnam War, while the Russians became more expansionist. He described the Americans as 'tolerable' while the Russians were 'intolerable'.⁸⁶ Concerning the overseas Chinese in Thailand, Deng, according to Kriangsak, reaffirmed that:

- 1) overseas Chinese should adopt the nationality of the country of their residence; 2) if they are not willing or unable to do so, they should strictly adhere to the local laws and customs; and 3) the Chinese government does not, and will not, recognize dual nationality.⁸⁷

On the same day, Kriangsak and Deng signed two agreements: one on trade and the other on scientific and technical cooperation. For trade, they agreed to expand their relations. China would export petroleum products, chemicals, machinery, metal products, agricultural implements, construction materials and general merchandise. In return, Thailand would export sugar, rubber, maize, kenaf (also known as ambary), chemical fibre, fabrics, medicinal herbs, tapioca products, tobacco and mung beans to China. Importantly, Beijing promised to sell 60,000 tons of high-grade diesel fuel at 'friendship' prices.⁸⁸ On scientific and technical cooperation, the two countries agreed to exchange know-how and technicians and set up a joint Thai–Chinese committee under ministerial level co-chairmanship to facilitate cooperation.

After the signing ceremony, Kriangsak made remarks at a press conference. His visit to Beijing, he believed, would 'lead to expansion of the base of cooperation and good understanding', and marked 'the start of a new era of cooperation and close and warm friendship' between Thailand and the PRC. The two agreements were, according to Kriangsak, 'a symbol of our firm intention to further develop and expand our bilateral relations'.⁸⁹

86 'A Bridge to China', 27.

87 'Kriangsak Comments on China', 10 April 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO04411, NARA.

88 'An Optimistic Kriangsak', 31; Nations, 'The Makings of Friendship', 30.

89 'Thai Prime Minister Speaks of Success of Visit to China at Beijing Press Conference', *Xinhua General News Service*, 1 April 1978.

That night, the Thai Government hosted a return banquet for the Chinese. Premier Kriangsak gave a speech deeming this visit a 'complete success'. Kriangsak stressed that both sides concurred in 'several important matters relating to peace and stability in our region' and their mutual cooperation and continued dialogue at the policy level.⁹⁰

Deng asserted that Kriangsak's visit to Beijing was 'a major event in the history of Sino-Thai relations'. He highlighted that Thailand and the PRC shared 'identical views on a number of important international issues', and supported 'one another in the task of combatting hegemonism and building up their countries'.⁹¹ The Chinese leaders, including Chairman Hua Guofeng and Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping were invited for reciprocal visits to Bangkok. The Chinese leaders also extended their invitation to the King and Queen of Thailand to visit Beijing.

On 1 April, Kriangsak and his entourage left Beijing for tours in Shanghai, Guilin and Guangzhou, before catching the train to Hong Kong on 4 April. The following day, Kriangsak addressed the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club. He said that 'the horizontal base for cooperation' between Thailand and the PRC 'has been expanded and consolidated' and sought to build 'permanent vertical structures in the form of concrete and substantive exchanges and joint efforts'.⁹² Through his 'frank and sincere' and 'straight-forward' talks with the Chinese leaders, he believed that they would support Thailand's diplomatic approach, especially its efforts to normalise relations with Indochinese neighbours.⁹³ For Kriangsak, the PRC was a 'peace-loving country' as 'the Thai and Chinese peoples have been in contact with each other for centuries', and 'never been at war with one another'. Both countries shared 'similar interests' in the region.⁹⁴

Regarding relations with the great powers, the Thai prime minister said he welcomed the constructive participation of the great powers if their aims were beneficial to the region. As he put it:

90 Speech by H.E. General Kriangsak Chomanan at the banquet in honour of H.E. Chairman Hua Guafeng, Premier of the People's Republic of China, March 1978, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL7/PM2521/1, MFA, Thailand, 26–30.

91 'Thai Prime Minister and Mrs. Chomanan Give Grand Banquet in Beijing', *Xinhua General News Service*, 1 April 1978.

92 'Kriangsak Comments on China', 10 April 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO04411, NARA.

93 'Kriangsak Addresses Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club on China Trip', 7 April 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO10242, NARA.

94 'Kriangsak Comments on China', 10 April 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO04411, NARA.

We cannot prevent rivalry among the major powers, but we hope that for Southeast Asia, this rivalry will be in the nature of who can do more to better the lives of the peoples of this region and not who can gain military or strategic advantage.⁹⁵

Kriangsak said he was also prepared to visit both the US and the USSR. The Thai prime minister reiterated that the government 'will establish good and friendly relations with all countries, irrespective of their economic, social or administrative systems'.⁹⁶

After returning to Bangkok, Kriangsak hosted a dinner for the Chinese ambassador, Chai Zemin, who was seen by the Thai Government as a key person in fostering Sino-Thai relations.⁹⁷ Chai was subsequently promoted to head the Chinese Liaison Office in Washington and replaced by Chang Wei-lieh, former Ambassador to the Mongolian People's Republic in Ulan Bator.⁹⁸

Following Kriangsak's eight-day visit to the PRC, the Thais and the Chinese had thus moved toward a sort of tacit alliance. For its part, China envisioned Thailand as a pivotal state both to check Soviet influence in the region and improve relations with ASEAN. The Chinese hoped that the Thais would encourage Indonesia and Singapore to establish full diplomatic ties with Beijing. On the other hand, Kriangsak's heavy tilt toward Beijing was built upon the aspiration for better relations with Cambodia, and to contain Soviet-backed Vietnam. Over the long term, warmer Sino-Thai relations would isolate the domestic communist insurgents. In order to alleviate pressing economic problems, the Thais also strived for stronger trade relations, especially the import of Chinese oil. Above all, both countries shared common concerns, namely the possibility of the Vietnamese domination of Cambodia, and Soviet-Vietnamese collusion in Southeast Asia.

95 'Kriangsak Addresses Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club on China Trip', 7 April 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO10242, NARA.

96 'Kriangsak Comments on China', 10 April 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO04411, NARA.

97 Chai also presented the formal invitation for the Thai king and queen to visit Beijing, but Kriangsak indicated that the king would not visit the PRC in the foreseeable future. 'PRC Ambassador Chai Zemin's Return to Thailand', 17 April 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO10979, NARA; and 'Sino-Thai Relations', 8 May 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO13097, NARA.

98 'PRC Ambassador Chai Zemin', 10 May 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO10979, NARA.

Thai–Chinese relations continued to broaden with an increase in both Thai delegations to Beijing, and Chinese counterparts to Bangkok. This included, for example, a 24-member private trade delegation led by Major General Pramarn Adireksarn, President of the Association of Thai Industries, which left Bangkok on 2 June to attend an organising meeting for the eighth Asian Games, to be held in Bangkok in December 1978. Also in June was an 18-member Thai press delegation, headed by Phongsak Phayakkawichian, President of Reporter's Association and a 24-member trade delegation led by Commerce Minister Nam Phunwatthu.⁹⁹ The group of Thai–Chinese Friendship Association, presided over by former foreign minister Major General Chatichai Choonhavan,¹⁰⁰ met with Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping on 15 June. In the evening, Chatichai, who was in Beijing, telephoned Prime Minister Kriangsak to report his meeting with Deng, and confirmed that Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Ieng Sary would visit Bangkok in July.¹⁰¹

The first Chinese trade delegation to Thailand, headed by Hu Fusheng, arrived in Bangkok in early August 1978. They went to the rice demonstration station in Rangsit, where they observed the assembly and demonstration of two paddy planting machines, given to Thailand by China during the Kriangsak visit.¹⁰² On 31 August, a Thai National Assembly delegation, headed by General Tawit Seniwong Na Ayuthaya, met with Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping in Beijing. While Deng emphasised Soviet expansionism in Southeast Asia and Vietnam's role as a Soviet pawn, Tawit raised the issue of Chinese support for Thailand's communist insurgency. The latter said he understood China's two-tier policy between state and party policies, but found it unconvincing. Deng replied that Chinese support for the CPT was rooted in history, and was a complicated question. It was part of the international communist

99 Royal Thai Embassy in Beijing to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 15 May 1978, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL2/PRC2521/3, MFA, Thailand, 83; 'Sino-Thai Relations', 7 June 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO16246, NARA.

100 The Thai-Chinese Friendship Association was established on 22 December 1975. It was intended to promote friendship and mutual understanding between the peoples of the two countries. It served as a focal point for cultural exchanges. Former Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan was the first president.

101 'Thai-PRC Relations and Ieng Sary Visit', 16 June 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO17347, NARA.

102 'Sino-Thai Scientific and Technical Cooperation Treaty Ratified', 21 August 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO24054, NARA.

movement in general, and could not be treated simply as a bilateral matter. He particularly focused on the competition between the PRC and the USSR for loyalty of communist groups throughout the world.¹⁰³

As relations between China and Vietnam worsened, and following the signing of the Soviet–Vietnamese treaty in November, Thailand became increasingly central to China’s regional strategy. In private talks with Thai leaders, the Chinese now referred to the possibility that the Khmer Rouge may be forced to resort to guerrilla warfare against the Vietnamese.¹⁰⁴ Yet they remained cautious about becoming involved militarily and instead settled on offering support to the Khmer Rouge. With the prospect of a Vietnamese conquest of Cambodia looking ever more likely, the Chinese increasingly anticipated supporting the Khmer Rouge in a campaign fought from the western mountain ranges. In such a case, it would be unavoidable that the Chinese would wish to send weapons and food via Thailand.

Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping began his ASEAN tour by arriving in Bangkok on 5 November for a five-day official visit. Coincidentally, his visit occurred two days after the Soviet–Vietnamese treaty was signed in Hanoi. At Don Mueang Airport, he was received by Kriangsak and representatives of the Chinese community. In his arrival statement, Deng stated that the purpose of the visit was:

[to] strengthen and develop the traditional friendship between our two peoples and the cooperation between the two governments and to learn and benefit from the experiences of the Thai people in building up their country.¹⁰⁵

Accompanying Deng were his wife, Jjo Lin, and a total party of 40 including Foreign Minister Huang Hua.

Following a warm and friendly reception at the airport, Deng went to meet with King Bhumibol, Queen Sirikit and Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn at the Royal Palace. He asked for and was given royal permission to attend the 7 November ordination ceremony for His Royal Highness Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.¹⁰⁶

103 ‘Deng Xiaoping Meeting with Thai General: Thai Insurgency’, 1 September 1978, RG59, 1978BEIJING02759, NARA.

104 ‘Deng Meeting with Thai Journalists’, 6 October 1978, RG59, 1978BEIJING03225, NARA.

105 ‘Vice-Premier Deng Visits to Thailand’, *Beijing Review*, 10 November 1978, 3.

106 See ‘The Marxist and the Monarchy’, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 17 November 1978, 10–12.

This gesture indicated Deng's sensitivities towards the symbolism of both the Thai monarchy and Buddhism, which the Thai Government believed demonstrated his support for the key institutions of the country.¹⁰⁷

The following day, Deng held a meeting with Kriangsak. Besides bilateral relations, the Cambodian question was central to their discussion. According to Kriangsak, Deng admitted in private talks that 'China was giving moral, political and strong material support to the present Cambodian government to maintain its stability in fighting against Vietnamese invasion'. Deng felt that Cambodia was 'fighting against Soviet-Vietnamese ambitions in the area, which will contribute to peace and security to this region and serve our national interests as a whole'. He said that every country including the US, 'should give Cambodia at least moral support'. The Chinese vice-premier also urged Thailand and other ASEAN countries to make 'some political gestures' if Vietnam launched a military invasion.¹⁰⁸ For Deng, the Chinese response would be 'guided and gauged by steps which Vietnam is taking'. While the Chinese would 'not be afraid to lose some of her manpower for Cambodia', Deng refused to 'say definitely at present how China would use her manpower or commit her troops to the fighting'.¹⁰⁹

Kriangsak supported 'the idea to keep Cambodia independent and free from outside influence'. He asked Deng to pass his 'assurance to Pol Pot or Ieng Sary that Thailand will not allow anyone to use our territory to create troubles for Cambodia'. Kriangsak asked that Cambodia send its ambassador to Thailand 'as soon as possible', and wished to 'help Cambodia economically'.¹¹⁰ According to Kriangsak, Deng also made a strong criticism of the closer Soviet-Vietnamese relations. 'Vietnam will be more ambitious and aggressive after signing the new pact with the USSR', and become the 'Cuba' of Asia.¹¹¹

107 'Arrival of PRC Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping', 6 November 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO32603, NARA.

108 These quotations are from Prime Minister Kriangsak's written debrief on the Deng Xiaoping visit, prepared for his 14 November meeting with US Ambassador to Thailand, Morton Abramowitz. 'Ambassador's Call on Prime Minister – Discussion of Refugees and Visit to the US', 15 November 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO16246, NARA.

109 'Ambassador's Call on Prime Minister – Discussion of Refugees and Visit to the US', 15 November 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO33743, NARA.

110 'Ambassador's Call on Prime Minister – Discussion of Refugees and Visit to the US', 15 November 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO33743, NARA.

111 'Ambassador's Call on Prime Minister – Discussion of Refugees and Visit to the US', 15 November 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO33743, NARA.

Both leaders reached an agreement on the sale of Chinese crude oil and high-speed diesel oil to Thailand at the friendship price. Thailand granted permission for the Chinese to overfly Thailand on a weekly Kunming–Rangoon–Phnom Penh flight. Deng also suggested the establishment of a direct Bangkok–Beijing civil air link. Kriangsak said his government would take the proposal into consideration. Thailand asked for Chinese assistance in getting permission to fly to Angkor Wat. Deng told Kriangsak that a delegation of a Civil Aviation Authority of China would be dispatched to Bangkok to discuss the civil aviation agreement in detail later.¹¹²

In the evening, the Kriangsak Government hosted a banquet for Deng and his entourage at Government House. Kriangsak said that during Vice-Premier Deng's stay in Bangkok, he

will have an opportunity personally to see and learn about Thailand and her people, thus increasing your understanding of our country. This understanding is an important foundation for the further development of relations and cooperation between our two nations.

The steadily growing bilateral relationship, for Kriangsak, would contribute to 'the maintenance of peace, stability and progress in this region'.¹¹³

Vice-Premier Deng appreciated the Thai policy of independence and its interest in developing friendly relations with countries regardless of their sociopolitical systems. Deng highlighted a 'highly turbulent' international system with 'hegemonism' that posed 'a serious threat to world peace and security'. These hegemonists, he continued, had 'stepped up their expansionist activities in Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia'. He praised ASEAN, which was 'farsighted when it adheres to the proposal for establishing a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality', and Thailand, which had an increasingly important role in the region.¹¹⁴

On 7 November, Deng held informal talks with former prime minister Kukrit Pramoj, and former foreign minister Chatichai Choonhavan, now the President of Thai–Chinese Friendship Association. Then he attended

112 'Deng Xiaoping's Visit to Thailand – An Overview', 11 November 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO33207, NARA.

113 'Vice-Premier Deng Visits to Thailand', 3.

114 'Vice-Premier Deng Visits to Thailand', 3.

a religious ceremony to witness Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn enter into the monkhood for a fortnight. Being allowed into this intimate ceremony signified to the Thai people that the relationship with China was going to a new level.¹¹⁵ After that, Deng, together with Kriangsak, went to watch the final game of the First World Badminton Championships, organised by the World Badminton Federation. Kriangsak then hosted and cooked a dinner at his residence.¹¹⁶

The next day, Deng gave a speech to a press conference expressing his satisfaction with his visit, and stressed the accelerating development of diplomatic, political, economic, scientific and cultural ties with Thailand. He also reiterated the Chinese Government's stance toward the overseas Chinese, maintaining that they should adopt Thai citizenship and respect Thai laws, while reaffirming China's two-tiered policy, which made the distinction between state-to-state and party-to-party relations. Referring to Chinese support for the CPT, he recognised that the problem had historical antecedents and could not be solved overnight. The vice-premier assured the Thais that the Chinese would be frank and sincere in discussing this problem with Thailand.¹¹⁷

Deng directly criticised Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong's pledge of noninterference during his September visit in Bangkok. As he put it, 'if the Chinese people do just what Pham Van Dong said, it will bring disaster to Asia and the Pacific'. 'If anyone tells a lie, deceives, or sells out his soul', continued Deng, 'he will not win friendship. Therefore, I will not learn from Pham Van Dong'. He denounced Vietnam as the 'Cuba of the Orient', involved in 'hooliganism' in Southeast Asia.¹¹⁸ Deng strongly opposed the 'hegemonists', including the 'big hegemonist', and the 'small hegemonist', which demonstrated ambitious aggression against Southeast Asia, in particular against Cambodia: a clear reference to the Soviet Union and Vietnam. He went on, 'we are waiting to see how far they advance into Cambodia before deciding on countermeasures'.¹¹⁹

115 See Chambers, "The Chinese and the Thais are Brothers", 599–629.

116 'Deng Xiaoping's Visit to Thailand – An Overview', 11 November 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO33207, NARA.

117 'PRC Deputy Premier Deng Xiaoping's Press Conference', 9 November 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO33056, NARA.

118 'PRC Deputy Premier Deng Xiaoping's Press Conference', 9 November 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO33056, NARA.

119 'PRC Deputy Premier Deng Xiaoping's Press Conference', 9 November 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO33056, NARA.

After his press conference, Deng flew to the Thai military centre at Lop Buri where he was given a two-hour demonstration by the Thai military. The live-fire show included mock attacks by Thailand's newly acquired F5-Es, delivering Thai manufactured ordnance, helicopter-borne infantry assault and artillery bombardment. In a show of friendly relations, Thai parachutes exploded in a shower of Chinese-language banners stating Thai–Chinese friendship and welcoming the vice-premier.¹²⁰

On 9 November, the two foreign ministers, Huang and Upadit, signed three protocols, the first of which was the establishment of the joint trade committee. This provided for annual meetings to decide on trade schedules, to review implementation of the trade agreement, to study and explore measures to expand bilateral trade, to seek solutions to problems, and to make appropriate recommendations. The second protocol was on the importation and exportation of commodities. The third referred to technical and scientific cooperation, providing a total of 29 projects. There were 12 Chinese projects, such as research into potash deposits, sugar manufacture, rubber planting and processing, aquaculture of fish and prawns, horticulture, grape development, rice seed hybridisation, prevention and control of disease, and Thai language training for three students. The 17 Thai projects included education in herbal medicine, rural health service, silk production, petrochemical industry, reforestation, irrigation, pig rearing, flower planting and hydrological data from the upper Mekong.¹²¹

Deng's five-day visit to Bangkok marked a significant turning point in Thai–Chinese relations amid the deteriorations of Sino–Vietnamese relations and Vietnamese–Cambodian relations. In early December, Hanoi publicly announced its aim for regime change in Phnom Penh and on 25 December, its troops intervened in Cambodia. On 7 January 1979, the Pol Pot regime collapsed, and a guerrilla war commenced along the Cambodian–Thai border. The international community, including ASEAN, condemned Vietnam.¹²² After his visit to Washington to meet

120 'Deng Xiaoping's Visit to Thailand – An Overview', 11 November 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO33207, NARA.

121 'Deng Xiaoping's Visit to Thailand – An Overview', 11 November 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO33207, NARA.

122 'ASEAN Unites in Anger', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 19 January 1979, 12–14. See Lee Jones, *ASEAN, Sovereignty and Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), Chapter 4.

with President Jimmy Carter in late January, Deng assumed he had been given a green light from the US to launch punitive attacks against Hanoi in mid-February.¹²³

Wishing to avoid the attention of the Soviet embassy in Bangkok, Deng led a secret military delegation to Thailand, landing at U-Tapao Airport on 13 January. He was accompanied by Deputy Foreign Minister Han Nianlong and an interpreter. Deng met with Kriangsak the following day. While the meeting did not last long, it laid the foundations for a Sino–Thai quasi-alliance during the Third Indochina War. Kriangsak agreed to provide the Chinese with logistic support and transport facilities to supply the Khmer Rouge, and to allow Khmer Rouge leaders to cross the Thai borders.¹²⁴

During their meeting, Deng told Kriangsak that the Chinese were going to support the Khmer Rouge at all costs. He also asked the Thai Government to cooperate with the Chinese, and allow them to use Thai territory to supply the Khmer Rouge forces. The Chinese vice-premier also asked Thailand to use its influence in ASEAN not to recognise the Vietnam-installed Hang Samrin regime in Cambodia. According to Deng, Kriangsak replied that ‘currently we do not recognize them’.¹²⁵

In return for any sort of Thai help, Kriangsak insisted that the Khmer Rouge halt supporting the Thai communist insurgency. Deng replied that the Chinese had already instructed Ieng Sary while he was in Beijing. He reassured Thai leaders that from now on, the communist insurgency would be an internal affair rather than an inter-communist one. Also, Deng asked Kriangsak to help Ieng Sary to transit through Thailand on his return to Khmer Rouge zones, and to meet with Ieng ‘to discuss or negotiate directly the problems of your two countries’. ‘Ieng Sary’, said Kriangsak, ‘can come. I’ll do all I can to get him back through’. However, Kriangsak said he would not meet with Ieng Sary once he arrived in

123 Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*.

124 Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War – A History of Indochina since the Fall of Saigon* (New York: Collier Books, 1986), 348–49. The Deng–Kriangsak secret meeting was discussed in details when Deng met with Ieng Sary in Beijing on January 15, 1979. See Goscha, ‘Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the Meltdown of Asian Internationalism’, 178–80.

125 Goscha, ‘Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the Meltdown of Asian Internationalism’, 178.

Thailand because of his public stance of strict neutrality. According to Deng, Ieng Sary could contact the Thai Government via the Chinese embassy in Bangkok or through Chatichai Choonhavan.¹²⁶

Finally, Deng asked how the Chinese could transport material assistance to the Khmer Rouge areas. Deng said that Kriangsak suggested three ways. First, the Chinese could send arms to Koh Kong, a Cambodian island close to the Thai border, and then transport them to Khmer Rouge areas by small boats flying foreign flags. Kriangsak recommended that the Khmer Rouge should defend these areas, so as to receive Chinese aid. Second, the Chinese could supply arms and merchandise camouflaged as commercial goods in large boats flying foreign flags. When they arrived in Thailand, the Thai Army would unload them and the Chinese could parachute these arms by plane into northern Cambodia. Third, Beijing could sell oil to Thailand at favourable prices and during the shipping to Bangkok, the Chinese could stock arms in the cargo. Upon arrival, the Thai Army would unload them, and later transport them by truck from Bangkok to Cambodia.¹²⁷

From the secret meeting with Deng, Kriangsak, while still maintaining a façade of neutrality, committed to help Chinese resupply operations to the Khmer Rouge. As Han Nianlong put it:

the most important problem is to maintain links to Thailand based on a common matter: oppose [Vietnam]. When it comes to the [Vietnamese] occupation of Cambodia and its threat to Thailand, the Thai support Cambodia. They say they are neutral, but it is only officially so. In reality they intend to aid Cambodia.¹²⁸

Particularly following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the Cambodian question became the focus of closer Thai–Chinese relations. The Thais viewed China's punitive war against Vietnam in neutral or positive ways. Yet, in public Kriangsak maintained strict neutrality. At a press conference on 18 February, Kriangsak stated that 'we would rather see them negotiate than use force against each other. We don't want

126 Goscha, 'Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the Meltdown of Asian Internationalism', 178–79.

127 Goscha, 'Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the Meltdown of Asian Internationalism', 179.

128 Quoted in Goscha, 'Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the Meltdown of Asian Internationalism', 180.

the war to intensify because we want to have peace and stability in the region'. 'There is only one thing I must say', he continued, 'just don't get us involved. It's a matter for other people to fight about'.¹²⁹

In addition, Thailand and the PRC also deepened trade and technical cooperation, which can be seen from the surge in visits between the two countries. Between 10 and 15 January 1979, Deputy Prime Minister Sunthon Hongladarom led a Thai delegation to Beijing to negotiate additional oil supplies for Thailand.¹³⁰ On 14 January, both Thai and Chinese leaders signed a five-year protocol on the purchase of crude oil at favourable prices. According to Prok Amaranand, Deputy Minister of Commerce, the PRC would sell Thailand 600,000–800,000 tons of crude oil in 1979, 800,000 tons in 1980 and 1,000,000 tons per year between 1981 and 1983. The Thais would use Chinese crude oil to produce high-speed diesel fuel, which had been in short supply.¹³¹

The Chinese also dispatched seven trade-related visits, culminating in the March visits by Minister of Foreign Trade, Li Qiang, and Minister of Communications, Zeng Cheng. Out of five cultural delegations to Thailand, the highlight was a tour by the Eastern Music and Dance Ensemble between 19 December and 29 January, and a visit by the Chairman of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, Wang Pingnan, during March.¹³²

As the US Ambassador to Bangkok, Morton Abramowitz summed up, Thailand's objective was 'to enlist PRC support for easing of tension with' Cambodia, while China's intention was to 'strengthen its influence with Thailand', especially as the Soviet Union and Vietnam attempted to extend their influence over Indochina. The Thais, according to Abramowitz, seemed 'more and more willing to accommodate the PRC'.¹³³ Thailand's main objective was to get Vietnam out of Cambodia.¹³⁴

129 Thai newspapers expressed much the same line. *The Nation* presented a more favourable editorial, noting that 'however much we may want the tensions to ease, there is inevitably a certain warmth in our heart that there is somebody who is not allowing Vietnam to run amuck in Southeast Asia'. *The Nation*, 19 February 1979, 'Thai Reaction to Sino-Vietnamese Hostilities', 19 February 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO13097, NARA.

130 See also Krajang Phantumnavin, 'Negotiating to Buy Sheng Li Oil', in *Learn from the Teacher, Know from the Boss, and Gain from Work* (Bangkok, 2016), 182–99.

131 'Thailand and China Sign Oil Protocol', 19 January 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO002188, NARA.

132 'Trends in Sino-Thai Relations', 20 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO009309, NARA.

133 'Trends in Sino-Thai Relations', 20 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO009309, NARA.

134 See Gregory V Raymond, 'Strategic Culture and Thailand's Response to Vietnam's Occupation of Cambodia, 1979–1989 A Cold War Epilogue', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 4–45.

As Sino–Vietnamese hostilities increased and Soviet military activities in Cambodia swelled, it seemed natural for China to move closer to Thailand in many ways. First, the Chinese leaders sought to offer a certain form of security commitment to Thailand. On 4 April, the new Chinese Ambassador to Thailand, Chang Wei-lieh, made a statement saying the Chinese would support the Thai people should the Vietnamese ‘hegemonists’ attack.¹³⁵ In May, Deputy Foreign Minister Song Zhiguang reportedly said that the Chinese would support Thailand in the face of any acts of aggression by the Vietnamese over the Cambodian conflict.¹³⁶

The Chinese moves prompted Kriangsak to inform the press on 9 May that Thailand would not accept any military aid from China in the event of Vietnamese aggression. He stressed his policy of equidistance by saying that ‘neither do we want Russian or American troops to be rushed to our country to our rescue’. That, he claimed, would be an embarrassment:

The Thai were capable of defending themselves, and Thailand would not allow itself to be pushed or dragged by other countries into the Cambodian conflict.¹³⁷

While it was necessary for the prime minister to publicly deny any military cooperation with the PRC, Kriangsak began to take this option seriously. In early June, he asked his close confidante, Lieutenant General Tuanthong Suwannatat, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Supreme Command, to convene a small meeting, later known as the ‘War Council’, to discuss this option in detail.¹³⁸

After the meeting, Kriangsak dispatched a secret military mission to Beijing to raise the issue of China’s military commitment to Thailand. The delegation included three military officials, including Lieutenant General Phin Gaysorn, Colonel Pat Akkaniput and Colonel Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. On 24 June, they provided Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping with briefings on the situation in Thailand and Thai concerns over the

135 Kriangsak found the current Chinese Ambassador to Thailand ‘inflexible’ and ‘difficult to deal with’. He told the US Ambassador to Thailand that he wished he could have got back Chai Zemin, who now led the Chinese Liaison Office in the US. ‘Ambassador’s Meeting with Kriangsak’, 28 September 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO39760, NARA.

136 ‘Chinese Commitment to Thailand’, 10 May 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO15682, NARA.

137 The US Embassy in Bangkok did not take Kriangsak’s words at face value. It was believed that they were merely rhetoric in order to reassure the public. ‘Chinese Commitment to Thailand’, 10 May 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO15682, NARA.

138 Pat Akkaniput, interview, in *Cremation Volume In Honor of General Pat Akkaniput* (Bangkok, 2016), 43; *Biography of General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh* (Bangkok, 2004), 112.

Vietnamese strategy. Deng first promised that, in the event of a Vietnamese invasion of Thailand, the Chinese Army would launch military operations against Hanoi. Second, the PRC would gradually decrease its support to the CPT. Both sides agreed to establish military cooperation.¹³⁹

Although this Sino–Thai military cooperation was covert, the Chinese leaders reassured the Thai leaders of their security commitment on several occasions. For example, when Deputy Prime Minister Dawee Chullasapya led a delegation to Beijing in June, he said he was convinced that China would attack Vietnam if Vietnamese forces made any serious incursion into Thailand.¹⁴⁰

The second Chinese move was to deal with the refugee crisis, both the boat people from Vietnam and the Cambodian refugees. Initially, the PRC had failed to respond to the refugee crisis. Kriangsak said he had sent messages to the Chinese Government asking them to take 8,000 ethnic Chinese refugees from Indochina, but received no response.¹⁴¹ On 20 July, the Chinese Red Cross gave 200,000 renminbi (approximately US\$130,000) to the Thai Government to aid Indochinese refugees in Thailand. This was the first donation the Chinese made toward the refugee relief program in Thailand. Chinese chargé d'affaires, Wang Buyun, presented the donation to Prime Minister Kriangsak. Wang later told reporters that he expressed sympathy with the Thai Government for carrying the burden of the refugee problem. He regretted Hanoi's expulsion of its people, and reiterated that the root cause was Vietnam's expansionism. Wang also called for the Vietnamese to withdraw from Cambodia, and halt mistreatment of its own people. He said that the Chinese had already accepted more than 250,000 refugees.¹⁴² By November, the PRC decided to take more refugees from Thailand, up to an overall limit of 10,000.¹⁴³

Third, the inter-Communist war brought about the de-ideologisation of the Cold War in Indochina. Some even argue that this marked the end of Cold War antagonism in the region.¹⁴⁴ Emblematic of this was the

139 Pat, interview, in *Cremation Volume In Honor of General Pat Akkaniput*, 45–46; *Biography of General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh*, 116–17.

140 'RTG Deputy PM Comments on PRC Intentions Re SRV', 12 July 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO23877, NARA.

141 'Discussion with Prime Minister', 16 June 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO20696, NARA.

142 'China Donates Dols 130,000 to Aid Refugees in Thailand', 24 July 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO25321, NARA.

143 'Thai Comments on Sino-Thai Affairs', 23 November 1979, RG59, 1979BEIJIN08459, NARA; 'PRC Refugee Program for 10,000', 28 November 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO48817, NARA.

144 Luthi, 'Strategic Shifts in East Asia', 223.

PRC's move to cut support for Southeast Asian insurgents in order to focus on the Cambodian question, which necessitated support from non-Communist Southeast Asian countries. This was largely due to a shift in Chinese foreign policy, spearheaded by the paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping. Deng not only had informed the communist parties in the region, including the CPT, that they were now on their own, but also relayed this changing policy to the Kriangsak Government.¹⁴⁵ The Chinese subsequently terminated the CPT's Voice of the People of Thailand radio station. Together with internal disagreement within the CPT, aggravated by the Sino-Soviet split, the lack of Chinese support put a final nail in the coffin of the communist insurgency in Thailand. During Deputy Prime Minister Dawee Chullasapya's visit to Beijing in June, the Chinese told Dawee that the insurgents were a Thai internal affair, which did not have anything to do with the Chinese Government.¹⁴⁶ This was confirmed when in late October Thai parliamentarians went to China and met with Ji Pengfei, Vice-Premier. The latter told them that the Voice of the People of Thailand had stopped broadcasting.¹⁴⁷

Fourth, the Chinese attempted to conclude a civil aviation agreement with Thailand. This topic had been raised during Deng's visit in November 1978. On 21 June 1979, Shen Tu, the President of the Civil Aviation Administration of China, met with the new Thai Ambassador to the PRC, Sakol Vanabriksha, in Beijing to ask about the progress of the air agreement. Shen informed Sakol that the Chinese had signed a similar agreement with the Philippines, and began negotiations with Singapore. He said this agreement would be a stepping stone for further economic and cultural cooperation between the two countries.¹⁴⁸

When Deputy Foreign Minister Arun Panupong visited Beijing in late August, he met with Vice Foreign Minister, Han Nianlong, who pushed for a Sino-Thai air agreement. As Arun later told the American Ambassador to Thailand, the Thai Government would not move very

145 'China Further Reduces Support for Southeast Asian Insurgents', 24 July 1976, RG59, 1979BEIJIN04839, NARA; Goscha, 'Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the Meltdown of Asian Internationalism', 176.

146 'China Further Reduces Support for Southeast Asian Insurgents', 24 July 1979, RG59, 1979BEIJIN04839, NARA.

147 'Chinese Comments on Relations with Thai Communist Party', 5 November 1979, RG59, 1979BEIJIN07897, NARA.

148 Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Ministry of Transport, 'Negotiation of Aviation Agreement with the People's Republic of China', 23 July 1979, Library and Archives Division, MFA POL2/PRC2521/3, MFA, Thailand, 4.

fast on this agreement because of the lucrative Taiwan air connection and because Thai Airways International did not have enough planes for the China route.¹⁴⁹ A Thai delegation led by the Permanent Secretary of Communications arrived in Beijing on 26 November to negotiate the second round of a civil aviation agreement, though with little progress.¹⁵⁰

Last but not least, Chinese leaders were increasingly dependent on Kriangsak's leadership. As the Chinese military attaché to Thailand, Mao Xianqi, told a senior US embassy official, the Chinese considered Thai cooperation essential to Chinese aims in the region, and in particular, to the survival of the Pol Pot forces. Deeming Kriangsak's political survival strategically important, they became concerned over his position in Thai politics. This was largely because the Chinese leaned on Kriangsak and his tacit support for Chinese supplies to the Khmer Rouge. As the US embassy in Bangkok reported, 'the PM runs the Chinese assistance operation out of his hip pocket with few of his advisors aware of it'.¹⁵¹ In other words, the Sino-Thai quasi-alliance was built on Chinese understandings with Prime Minister Kriangsak. US Ambassador Abramowitz even claimed that 'Thai cooperation with the Chinese could diminish significantly should Kriangsak fall from power'.¹⁵²

Amid the political decline of Kriangsak in early 1980, the Chinese stepped up their pressures on the Thai Government to publicly side with China and the Khmer Rouge regime. During her visit to Bangkok, Deng Yingchao, the National People's Congress Vice-Chairperson and Zhou Enlai's wife, gave a speech reassuring Kriangsak of Chinese support for Thailand against Vietnam in the event of the latter's attack on Thailand. Her speech, given at a lunch attended by senior Thai officials, caused some uneasiness and embarrassment to Kriangsak.¹⁵³

Overall, while not all Thai leaders were enthusiastic about military cooperation with Beijing, the Third Indochina War undoubtedly rendered Sino-Thai relations ever closer. In short, Thai-Chinese relations during the Kriangsak administration were developed and strengthened through

149 'Ambassador's Meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister', 8 September 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO35310, NARA.

150 'Thai Comments on Sino-Thai Affairs', 23 November 1979, RG59, 1979BEIJIN08459, NARA.

151 'PRC Military Attaché Comments Further on Indochina', 20 September 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO37975, NARA.

152 'Sino-American Relations in Cambodia', 2 December 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO49427, NARA.

153 Nayan Chanda, 'A Bid to Hold the Middle Ground', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 March 1980, 27.

economic and technical cooperation. Although the Third Indochina War contributed to an unlikely alliance between Thailand, China, the US and the Khmer Rouge, the closer ties between Thailand and China were a part of Kriangsak's equidistance, which sought to rebalance all the great powers.

7.2.3. Thai–Soviet Relations: Correct but Distant?

I see nothing wrong with being friends with the Soviets ... I want to treat all friendly countries on an equal basis and not discriminate against any friendly country.

– Kriangsak Chomanan¹⁵⁴

While behind the scenes, Kriangsak was working ever closer with the Chinese, his government nevertheless attempted to maintain a semblance of equal and balanced relations with both communist powers. Compared with Sino–Thai relations, Thai–Soviet relations were correct but distant, especially following the Soviet-backed Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in late 1978. However, both countries continued functioning relationship, culminating in Prime Minister Kriangsak's visit to Moscow in March 1979. Despite the difficulties, discourses of détente remained intact.

Since entering office, Kriangsak's aim was to maintain a policy of even-handedness with both the USSR and the PRC. In his speech to Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand in 1978, Kriangsak said:

we want to have friendly relations with China [and] the USSR ... I hope for expansion of trade with these countries. Regarding the USSR, we need their friendship. It is important to any concept of neutrality in Southeast Asia.¹⁵⁵

As he put it, 'I see nothing wrong with being friends with the Soviets ... I want to treat all friendly countries on an equal basis and not discriminate against any friendly country'.¹⁵⁶ However, Thai diplomacy toward Moscow was constrained by Sino–Soviet rivalry and the Soviet aspiration to consolidate its relations with Hanoi.¹⁵⁷

154 Nations, 'Thailand: Back in the Game', 22.

155 'Prime Minister Kriangsak Speaks to Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand', 20 January 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO02150, NARA.

156 Nations, 'Thailand: Back in the Game', 22.

157 Leszek Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy and Southeast Asia* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

Bilaterally, the Soviet Union sought to strengthen its ties with Vietnam and, to a lesser extent, Laos. Moscow also echoed Vietnamese criticism of the Khmer Rouge regime in Phnom Penh, and regarded the Chinese as the source of Vietnamese–Cambodian border conflicts.¹⁵⁸ It publicly condemned the Chinese role in the regional communist insurgency. Mikhail Kapitsa, head of the Far Eastern Department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, criticised China for cultivating relations with the smaller nations in Southeast Asia, and in particular Thailand, at the state-to-state level while continuing to support communist insurgencies against these governments at the people-to-people level.¹⁵⁹

At the regional level, the Soviet Union did not develop close relations with ASEAN. Brezhnev's idea of Collective Security in Asia was largely ignored by the non-Communist states in ASEAN. Rather than endorsing ASEAN's zone of peace, freedom and neutrality, the Soviet Union expressed support of the Vietnamese proposal for 'a zone of peace, independence and neutrality'.¹⁶⁰

In Thailand, the Russian embassy in Bangkok sought to play a more proactive role within the détente environment. Bilateral relations improved, while trade continued at a steady pace. Shortly after the Chinese invitation of Kriangsak to Beijing on 8 December 1977, Soviet Ambassador in Bangkok, Boris Ilyichev, extended an invitation to the Thai prime minister to visit Moscow, and Kriangsak agreed in principle.¹⁶¹ In the same month, the position of the Soviet military attaché, Colonel Anatoli Gouriev, who was suspected of belonging to GRU (Soviet military intelligence), was approved by the Thai Government. Later, the Thai Government appointed Colonel Wanchai Chitchamnong as Thai military attaché to Moscow.¹⁶²

158 'Background Information for Prime Minister Kriangsak', 23 March 1978, RG59, 1978STATE075406, NARA.

159 'MFA's Kapitsa Discusses East Asian Issues', 7 March 1978, RG59, 1978MOSCOW03846, NARA.

160 Soo Eon Moon, 'Importance of ASEAN in Soviet Foreign Policy: An Evaluation of Soviet Policy toward Southeast Asia in the Post-Vietnam War Era' (PhD thesis, Claremont Graduate School, 1984).

161 'Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak to Visit China and Soviet Union', 9 December 1977, RG59, 1977BANGKO33681, NARA.

162 'Thailand Selects Military Attaches for Beijing and Moscow', 22 May 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO14463, NARA.

Ilyichev also pushed the Thai Government to sign the pending cultural agreement, which had been drafted during the Kukrit era and left unsigned under Thanin.¹⁶³ At the same time, cultural and sports exchanges increased. For example, the Soviet sports delegation led by Vladimir L Avilov visited Bangkok in early November 1978 and met with the Sports Organization of Thailand. They agreed in principle to conclude protocol on sports cooperation for 1979.¹⁶⁴

There were also high-level visits, the most important of which were Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Nikolai Firiyubin's two visits to Bangkok in March and October, respectively. Prior to the Vietnamese invasion, in March 1978, Firiyubin called on Foreign Minister Upadit at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The purpose, according to a Soviet embassy official, was to 'establish friendly relations with present Thai leadership'. Upadit asked Firiyubin about the Soviet position on ASEAN's principle of a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality (ZOPFAN). The Soviet counterpart replied that the Soviet Union supported any proposals for peace in Southeast Asia and similar proposals in other parts of the world. He did not say directly that the USSR supported the ASEAN concept of ZOPFAN. However, his response was not negative.¹⁶⁵ He went on to thank the Thai Government for supporting Soviet actions for peace such as nuclear nonproliferation and other UN resolutions.

According to the Soviet embassy official, both sides agreed that a settlement to the Vietnamese–Cambodian border conflict was desirable. The Soviet Union desired a ceasefire, 'something along the lines of the Vietnamese proposal, although it doesn't necessarily have to follow their exact points'. Firiyubin also observed that the Thais were nervous about the fighting in the region. The long-pending Thai–Soviet cultural agreement was not brought up during Firiyubin's visit. However, the Soviets wanted it ratified.¹⁶⁶

163 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 March 1978.

164 Sports Organization of Thailand to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'The Soviet Sports Delegation in Thailand', 30 November 1978, 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), 24–27.

165 'Visit of Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Nikolai Firiyubin', 20 March 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO08261, NARA. According to one of Soviet Embassy official, the Thai newspaper misunderstood Firiyubin's comments. See, for example, 'Russia "Evasive" on ASEAN Peace Zone Scheme', *The Nation*, 14 March 1978.

166 'Visit of Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Nikolai Firiyubin', 20 March 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO08261, NARA.

In June, the incoming Soviet Ambassador to Thailand, Yuri Kouznetzov (June 1978 – October 1984), arrived in Bangkok. It was reported that he was under orders from the Kremlin to take a tougher line with the Thai Government. He held a press conference even before his credentials ceremony with the king. Press releases were sent to local newspapers, and Soviet officials asked the editors to publish the Soviet viewpoint.¹⁶⁷

On 27 September, Kouznetzov met with Deputy Foreign Minister, Wongse Polnikorn, at the MFA to discuss Kriangsak's state visit to Moscow. He asked the Thai Foreign Ministry to support the Soviet initiative on nuclear nonproliferation, the 'International Convention on Strengthening of Guarantee of Security of Non-Nuclear States', at the UN General Assembly. Kouznetzov expressed the Soviet intention to expand embassy activities by increasing personnel at the embassy. Wongse requested that the Soviet ambassador help to facilitate other official visits to Moscow.¹⁶⁸

In late October 1978, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister, Nikolai Firubin, visited the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand. He met with Prime Minister Kriangsak. After his talks with Firubin, Kriangsak disclosed that the possibility of opening a formal dialogue between the Soviet Union and ASEAN had not been discussed. During the visit, the Soviet Ambassador to Thailand, Yuri Kouznetzov, told the press in an interview that the Soviet Union was 'on the Vietnamese side' and 'ready to render not only economic but also military aid to Vietnam'. This aroused concern in the region.¹⁶⁹

The Soviets signed a treaty with Vietnam on 3 November, just two days before Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping visited Bangkok. At both receptions for Deng, at the airport and at Government House, Soviet Ambassador Kouznetzov was noticeably absent.¹⁷⁰ During Deng's visit, the Soviets were active in Thailand. Two delegations of Soviet tennis and basketball players came to Bangkok. Kouznetzov also asked the Kriangsak Government to

167 John McBeth, 'Suspicion and Non-involvement', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 24 August 1979, 28.

168 Record of conversation between Thai Deputy Foreign Minister and Soviet Ambassador to Thailand, 27 September 1978, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volumes of Declassified Documents on Thai-Russian Relations, 1970–1991*, Vol. 3, 20–23.

169 'Soviet Vice-Foreign Minister Visits ASEAN Countries', *Xinhua General News Service*, 3 November 1978.

170 'Arrival of PRC Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping', 6 November 1978, RG59, 1978BANGKO32603, NARA.

go on live television and mark the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution on 7 November. The Thai authorities unsurprisingly turned down his request.¹⁷¹ Shortly after Deng left Bangkok, the Soviet ambassador presented a strong verbal protest to the Thai Foreign Ministry, claiming that there were unwarranted attacks in local Chinese-language newspapers against Soviet interests in the region.¹⁷²

At the end of the year, Soviet-backed Vietnamese forces intervened in Cambodia. The Vietnamese deployed troops along the Thai–Cambodian border, having a direct impact on Thailand. The Soviets repeatedly reassured the Thais that the Vietnamese would neither attack Thailand nor cross the Thai border. The Soviet Ambassador to Bangkok, in his talks with the US Ambassador Abramowitz, said ‘I can guarantee Vietnamese forces will not go into Thailand’.¹⁷³ In his interview with the Thai-language *Daily News* in January 1979, Soviet Deputy Chief of Mission, Olek Gershov, denied press reports that the Soviet Union had 4,000 military personnel in Cambodia supporting Vietnamese forces. He insisted that the Soviet Government considered the new Heng Samrin regime the legal government, and only helped it politically and diplomatically. Gershov argued that Thailand was not endangered ‘because of its wise policy towards Cambodia’.¹⁷⁴

Despite the Vietnamese military intervention in Cambodia in December 1978 and corresponding Soviet support of Hanoi, Kriangsak continued to pursue a friendly relationship with the Soviet Union, and emphasised his commitment to an equidistant strategy. His state visit to Moscow was a major turning point. In his dinner remarks at the Dutch embassy in late January 1979, Prime Minister Kriangsak reiterated Thailand’s stance on Indochina. Underlining his position, he said that following his visit to his ‘good friend Jimmy Carter’, he would visit the Soviet Union in March.¹⁷⁵ While détente proponents such as Foreign Minister Upadit supported the trip, some factions within the military, including Interior Minister, General Lek Naeomali, Commander of Royal Thai Army, General Prem

171 ‘The Marxist and the Monarchy’, 11.

172 McBeth, ‘Suspicion and Non-involvement’, 28.

173 ‘Vietnamese Incursion into Thailand’, 5 January 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO00653, NARA.

174 Quoted in ‘Soviet Diplomat’s Remarks on Cambodia’, 31 January 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO03368, NARA.

175 On the following day, Thailand presented a plan to visit Moscow in March. This was confirmed during a conversation between General Phon Thanaphum, Secretary-General of the Prime Minister and one of Kriangsak’s closest aides, and the American chargé d’affaires to Bangkok. ‘Possible Kriangsak Visit to Soviet Union’, 31 January 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO03389, NARA.

Tinsulanonda, and National Security Council (NSC) Secretary-General, Air Marshal Siddhi Savetsila, disagreed with Kriangsak's decision.¹⁷⁶ According to the American documents, they urged the US ambassador to advise the prime minister to call off the Moscow visit. They reasoned that Thailand would gain nothing from the trip, and it was unnecessary for the prime minister to call on the Soviet Union as it supported the Vietnamese expansionism in Indochina.¹⁷⁷ The Chinese also viewed Kriangsak's visit with discomfort. The Chinese Ambassador to Moscow mildly complained to his counterpart, Sathit Sathian-Thai, about the timing of the visit.¹⁷⁸ However, Kriangsak publicly and privately insisted that his Moscow visit was important in order to sustain a more even-handed Thai diplomacy toward the great powers.¹⁷⁹

Shortly before Kriangsak's visit to the USSR, Moscow vetoed an ASEAN resolution on the Indochina conflicts, which proposed the withdrawal of foreign troops in Cambodia, at the UN Security Council. This had a negative impact upon Kriangsak's upcoming trip. In his conversation with the US Ambassador to Thailand, Kriangsak said that he had no illusions about his Soviet visit. He would grasp this opportunity to clarify ASEAN views on Indochina situations, and emphasised Thai diplomatic ties with ASEAN and the US.¹⁸⁰

Upon the departure of the Kriangsak delegation to the Soviet Union, the Soviet embassy in Bangkok placed a paid advertisement in *The Nation* newspaper to present its alternative picture of Thai–Soviet relations. The lengthy article, written by A Olenin, suggested that talks between the Thai and Soviet leaders would ‘play a major role in promoting friendship and mutual understanding’. It went on to compliment the Kriangsak Government for taking steps to extend relations with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. It praised the wisdom and realism of Thai leaders. According to Olenin, Thai–Soviet relations were based on principles of peaceful coexistence, regardless of the different sociopolitical

176 For example, Air Marshal Siddhi Savetsila, Secretary-General of National Security Council, said that ‘he disagreed’ with the visit to Moscow and what he called Kriangsak's strategy of ‘balance of power with the three major powers. Siddhi Savetsila, *Pan Rorn Pan Nao* [Through Thick and Thin] (Bangkok, 2013), 78.

177 ‘Pressures to Postpone Visit by PM Kriangsak to USSR’, 13 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO08520, NARA. See also ‘Call Off Visit to Russia’, *Bangkok Post*, 8 March 1979.

178 ‘Kriangsak Visit to USSR’, 10 April 1979, RG59, 1979MOSCOW08847, NARA.

179 ‘Pressures to Postpone Visit by PM Kriangsak to USSR’, 13 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO08520, NARA.

180 ‘Conversations with Prime Minister Kriangsak’, 19 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO09194, NARA.

systems. Highlighting trade, cultural and sports cooperation, the article concluded that these relationships would gain new impetus during the Kriangsak trip.¹⁸¹

Kriangsak arrived in Moscow on 21 March, and was warmly greeted by the Soviet leaders led by Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko at the airport. Kriangsak's party included, inter alia, his wife, Khunying Wirat Chomanan, Deputy Prime Minister Sunthorn Hongladarom, Foreign Minister Upadit Pachariyangkun, Interior Minister General Lek Naeomali, Deputy Commerce Minister Prok Amaranand, and NSC Secretary-General Air Marshal Siddhi Savetsila. Kriangsak stayed in Moscow for three nights, and spent another three days in Leningrad before returning to Bangkok.

In the afternoon, Kriangsak met with Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin for two hours and 40 minutes at the Kremlin. The Indochina situation was the central issue. After greetings, Kriangsak asserted that Thailand pursued a policy of independence and self-reliance, and wished to be friends with any country regardless of sociopolitical differences. Kosygin asked in an aggressive manner whether, in the event that one country invaded another, Thailand would be friends with it. Kriangsak responded with a firm exposition of Thai attitudes. He said that Thailand was neutral in relation to the Indochina conflicts.¹⁸² As Kriangsak put it, 'Thailand will adhere to its position of strict neutrality and will not incline toward any side of the present conflict'.¹⁸³

While Thailand would not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, Kriangsak told Kosygin that Thailand would not fear defending itself against foreign aggression. Domestically, Thailand would continue to fight communist terrorism. Despite Thailand's respect for the monarchy and Buddhism, Kriangsak said the Thai Government could be friends with communist states. Kosygin reacted by asserting that 'the Communist terrorists were Chinese', which, for him, were the genuine threat to Thailand.¹⁸⁴

181 A Olenin, *The Nation*, 22 March 1979; 'Soviets Advertise Thai-Soviet Relations', 22 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO09559, NARA.

182 Record of conversation between General Kriangsak Chomanan, Thai Prime Minister, and Alexei Kosygin, Soviet Prime Minister, 21 March 1979, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volumes of Declassified Documents on Thai-Russian Relations, 1970-1991*, Vol. 3, 98-104.

183 *Pravda*, 22 March 1979.

184 'Conversation with Prime Minister on Soviet Trip', 30 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO09194, NARA.

The Thai prime minister stated that his government strongly supported the ASEAN peaceful principle, and the principle of inviolability of international frontiers. Thailand was opposed to any violations of the principle, and asked aggressors to withdraw their troops. He asked whether Vietnam had violated the Thai frontier. Kosygin assured the Thai prime minister that it was impossible that Vietnam would invade Thailand. On the contrary, it was very possible that the PRC, which had invaded Vietnam, would someday decide to 'teach Thailand and the other ASEAN states a lesson'.¹⁸⁵

Throughout their meeting, Kosygin strongly condemned the Chinese. According to Kriangsak, the Soviet prime minister told him that 'in fact, President Carter sanctioned the Chinese aggression against Vietnam'. Deng Xiaoping had announced his intentions in the US, and the US was aware of Chinese plans to launch a punitive attack on Hanoi. The Soviet leader stressed that the Soviet Union would supply the Vietnamese anything they needed militarily.¹⁸⁶

Maintaining a firm distinction between the Chinese invasion of Vietnam and the situation in Cambodia, Kosygin did not deny that Vietnamese troops were in Cambodia but treated the issue as settled. He encouraged the Thai Government to recognise the Heng Samrin regime. He said the Pol Pot regime was finished, and contended that Thailand should recognise the new government which stood for neutrality and peaceful relations with its neighbours. Kriangsak reacted by commenting that he heard only two persons, Heng Samrin and Hun Sen, and two persons could not constitute a government. He told the Soviet premier that he did not consider the Heng Samrin group a legitimate government. His government would have to consult with the ASEAN leaders, he went on, but in the meantime, Thailand would not recognise any regime. Commenting on Pol Pot's murderous regime, Kriangsak said that neither Thailand nor his ASEAN partners supported Pol Pot personally. However, he emphasised that there was a clear difference between the nature of a regime and a regime change by external forces.¹⁸⁷ On this matter, their interests and opinions diverged,

185 'Conversation with Prime Minister on Soviet Trip', 30 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO09194, NARA.

186 Record of conversation between General Kriangsak Chomanan, Thai Prime Minister, and Alexei Kosygin, Soviet Prime Minister, 21 March 1979, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volumes of Declassified Documents on Thai-Russian Relations, 1970-1991*, Vol. 3, 98-104.

187 'Conversation with Prime Minister on Soviet Trip', 30 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO09194, NARA.

Kriangsak: We consider any invasion of another country wrong.

Kosygin: What about the government killing its own people? Is it right? The Cambodian people did not kill each other, but it results from the Chinese influence.

Kriangsak: I do not accept that action either, but they are different stories.

Kosygin: They are much interrelated.

Kriangsak: But I consider that it is unacceptable for any country to invade another country.¹⁸⁸

Kosygin mentioned the charges by Hun Sen, foreign minister of the Heng Samrin regime, that Thailand was permitting Chinese resupply operations to Pol Pot's forces. Kriangsak replied that Pol Pot's forces supplied themselves by seizing them from their opponents. Showing the Soviet leader with maps, Kriangsak pointed out the Cambodian coastline from Koh Kong to Kompong Som, and suggested that the Chinese could resupply very easily by the sea. Kosygin did not press the issue further.¹⁸⁹

Kosygin moved to the existence of large ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, which, he claimed, posed a serious threat to their security. He informed Kriangsak that in its borderland areas, the Soviet Union had been forced to expel those ethnic Chinese. He recommended that Thailand and other ASEAN states should do the same, especially the approximately 310,000 stateless Chinese in Thailand. Kriangsak objected to the Soviet proposal.¹⁹⁰

Kriangsak mentioned the behaviour of the Soviet embassy in Thailand, claiming that for many years it had acted like a security force. Kosygin expressed surprise but promised to look into the matter. The Soviet leader also offered Thailand weapons, such as tanks. Kriangsak responded by saying he had supply relationships with the US, Britain, France and Italy, which he planned to maintain. He told Kosygin that prior to his Moscow trip, he held talks with Suharto of Indonesia, and Hussein Onn of Malaysia, and they had mentioned difficulties dealing with the Russians.

188 Record of conversation between General Kriangsak Chomanan, Thai Prime Minister, and Alexei Kosygin, Soviet Prime Minister, 21 March 1979, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volumes of Declassified Documents on Thai–Russian Relations, 1970–1991*, Vol. 3, 98–104.

189 'Conversation with Prime Minister on Soviet Trip', 30 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO09194, NARA.

190 'Conversation with Prime Minister on Soviet Trip', 30 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO09194, NARA.

While Malaysia experienced the Soviet failure to finance Malaysian electrical projects, Indonesia could not acquire necessary spare parts from the Soviet Union. Kriangsak said he advised Kosygin to follow through better.¹⁹¹ They discussed the expansion of trade, cultural, scientific and sports exchanges. Although Kosygin said at the outset that the Soviets would not push or impose any agreements on the Thais, one of Thai diplomats revealed that at lower levels, the Soviets tried very hard to obtain Thai approval for an economic and technical agreement.¹⁹²

In the evening, the Soviet premier hosted a formal dinner for Kriangsak. Speaking on behalf of Vietnam, Kosygin said that Hanoi came 'out actively for developing peaceful and friendly ties' with its neighbours. Kriangsak replied that Thailand was 'seriously concerned over the situation that has developed in Indochina'. He said that Thailand's policy was one of 'strict neutrality', and would not be swayed into supporting anyone's side in any conflict. He denied that Thai territory was used to transport arms or material to the Chinese-backed forces of Pol Pot in Cambodia.¹⁹³ After the dinner, Kosygin escorted Kriangsak and his entourage to the Bolshoi ballet performance.

On the following day, 22 March, Kriangsak met with Soviet Secretary-General, Leonid Brezhnev, whom Kriangsak described as a 'good man, healthy, but not strong'. He occasionally slurred his speech, and appeared to have difficulty swallowing.¹⁹⁴ According to the Russian News Agency, Tass, Brezhnev told Kriangsak that Moscow fully supported Vietnam. Referring to China, he said that 'reliable security' in Asia must be based on the absence of force or the threat of force. In other words, Brezhnev reiterated the threat to peace posed by Chinese ambitions. He called for a 'deepening of the process of détente' in Asia.¹⁹⁵ Kriangsak informed Brezhnev that the Chinese did not use Thai soil to supply Pol Pot's force. He stressed that Thailand did not recognise the newly installed Heng Samrin regime, and did 'not want the presence of foreign troops' in neighbouring countries.¹⁹⁶ He also brought up the matter of the Soviet

191 'Conversation with Prime Minister on Soviet Trip', 30 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO09194, NARA.

192 'Kriangsak Visit to USSR', 10 April 1979, RG59, 1979MOSCOW08847, NARA.

193 Miles Hanley, 'All Smiles from the Soviets', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 April 1979, 34.

194 'Conversation with Prime Minister on Soviet Trip', 30 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO09194, NARA.

195 Hanley, 'All Smiles from the Soviets', 34.

196 'Kriangsak Visit to USSR', 10 April 1979, RG59, 1979MOSCOW08847, NARA; 'Thai Prime Minister Ends Visit to Soviet Union', *Xinhua General News Service*, 29 March 1979.

veto in the UN Security Council against the ASEAN resolution, proposing the withdrawal of foreign forces from Vietnam and Cambodia. According to Kriangsak, 'on this matter, we have differences of opinion'.¹⁹⁷

In his single 55-minute session with Brezhnev, Kriangsak urged the Soviet leader to recognise ASEAN and deal with the organisation as a grouping. He noted that failure to do so would create suspicion in ASEAN countries. According to Kriangsak, Brezhnev listened attentively, and asked Kriangsak whether there were military features of ASEAN. Kriangsak replied that ASEAN was not a military pact. Brezhnev promised that 'a dialogue between the Soviet Union and ASEAN would take place in the future'.¹⁹⁸ However, the Soviet leader warned that ASEAN should avoid association with the Chinese, who would endanger regional cooperation. According to Kriangsak, Brezhnev also stressed the importance of reaching the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) II agreement with the US for Soviet domestic economic reasons.¹⁹⁹

On the same day, there were other meetings at the ministerial level. For instance, Deputy Prime Minister Sunthorn Hongladarom held talks with Soviet Deputy Prime Minister, Vladimir A Kirillin. They discussed a proposed agreement covering full economic and technical cooperation, including an exchange of technicians. The Soviets suggested that the Thais should negotiate separate technical agreements on specific issues. The Thais also requested academic cooperation on oil shale development. Soviet expertise on energy, especially on nuclear power plants, hydro energy, gas and coal, would benefit Thailand. Sunthorn suggested that both sides should exchange their technicians.²⁰⁰

At the same time, Deputy Minister of Commerce Prok Amaranand and his Soviet counterpart, MP Kuzmin, Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade, discussed future trade cooperation. They noted how, in 1978, the trade balance between the two countries was in favour of the Soviets. The value of Thai imports from Moscow was 222.8 million baht, while exports were 148.3 million baht. The leading exports from Thailand were rubber

197 'Thai Prime Minister Ends Visit to Soviet Union'.

198 *Bangkok Post*, 24 March 1979.

199 'Conversation with Prime Minister on Soviet Trip', 30 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO09194, NARA.

200 Conclusion of negotiations between Sunthorn Hongladarom, Thai Deputy Prime Minister, and Vladimir A Kirillin, Soviet Deputy Prime Minister, 22 March 1979, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volumes of Declassified Documents on Thai–Russian Relations, 1970–1991*, Vol. 3, 52–53.

and fluorite. In 1978, Thailand earned 115.9 million baht from rubber sales to Moscow. Prok suggested that the Soviets could cut the Thai trade deficit by buying canned pineapple, but Kuzmin was reluctant because of alternative supplies from Cuba and Vietnam. The Thai Deputy Commerce Minister also complained about unpredictable rubber purchases from the Soviets. Prok said that the Thais wished to sell more rubber and textiles to Moscow, and buy products such as fertiliser, paper and cement. They signed no agreement on trade because they believed a trade agreement signed on 25 December, 1970 provided sufficient basis for cooperation. Both sides agreed to increase trade between the two countries, and to exchange more trade delegations.²⁰¹

On 23 March, Kriangsak gave a press conference. Referring to the situation in Indochina, Kriangsak said that 'we wish to see all sides cease hostility and withdraw to their former boundaries'. He repeatedly emphasised Thailand's strict neutrality in Indochina conflicts. 'We wish to preserve peace and neutrality in this region of the world', he continued.

We do not think we should take sides. We cannot sit idly by while the situation is getting serious in this region. We expressed our concern over the settlement of this region's disputes by force. We do not wish to see a state invade others.²⁰²

The Kriangsak party spent three days negotiating the joint communiqué. Kosygin called on Kriangsak for three additional half-hour unscheduled meetings on 23 March. For Kriangsak, Kosygin was 'very tough'.²⁰³ Thai Foreign Minister Upadit assigned Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Ministry Arun Panupong to the negotiations on the wording of the communiqué. Arun was a former Thai Ambassador to Moscow and knew how to deal with the Russians. His Soviet counterpart was Deputy Foreign Minister Nikolai Firubin. He became indignant when Arun insisted on deleting huge chunks from the Soviet-proposed draft. At one point, Firubin threatened to abandon the communiqué altogether, to which the Thai side responded by showing their willingness to do the same. The Soviets however resumed negotiations.²⁰⁴ In the end, they agreed on

201 Record of conversation between Prok Amaranand, Deputy Commerce Minister, and MP Kuzmin, Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade, 22 March 1979, in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Collected Volumes of Declassified Documents on Thai–Russian Relations, 1970–1991*, Vol. 3, 54–61.

202 'Thai Prime Minister Visits Soviet Union', *Xinhua General News Service*, 25 March 1979.

203 'Conversation with Prime Minister on Soviet Trip', 30 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO09194, NARA.

204 'Kriangsak Visit to USSR', 10 April 1979, RG59, 1979MOSCOW08847, NARA.

a compromised version of a joint communiqué. Kriangsak did not yield at all on the Indochina-related questions and as a result, the communiqué did not mention Vietnam, Cambodia or China.²⁰⁵

The communiqué was promulgated on the last day of the visit, 27 March, during Kriangsak's visit to Leningrad. It began by saying that 'a broad exchange of views on various aspects of bilateral relations and on major international problems of mutual interest was held' during talks between Thai and Soviet leaders. The communiqué continued:

The Prime Minister of Thailand expressed the determination of the Thai Government to carry through an independent foreign policy, based on the principle of peaceful coexistence and aimed at strengthening friendly relations with all countries, irrespective of their political, economic and social order, for the sake of peace, progress and prosperity ... The Thai side gave an account of ASEAN [which was] aimed at the development of regional economic, social and cultural cooperation of its member-countries.

'The Soviet sides', on the other hand, 'emphasized that it consistently opposed mutually exclusive military-political and economic blocs', and 'expressed its readiness to deepen mutually advantageous contacts' in relations with the ASEAN member states. On this matter, the Soviet Union did not go beyond its earlier positions on ASEAN. As indicated in the communiqué, it stated its readiness to deal with the member states bilaterally.²⁰⁶ Lastly, the communiqué indicated the intentions of Thailand and the Soviet Union to maintain mutual contact, hold consultations and continue to develop relations 'as extensively as possible'.

Symbolically, Kriangsak's visit to Moscow marked the first time that the Thai prime minister visited the Soviet Union. Despite the warm Soviet welcome and cordiality, it was not an easy visit. Nevertheless, Kriangsak characterised his visit as a 'pleasure trip'. He was pleased with the visit, having given nothing and maintained firm positions protecting Thai and ASEAN interests. There was no treaty signed between the two countries during this visit.²⁰⁷ Kriangsak was assured by the Soviet leaders that the Vietnamese would not invade Thailand. Overall, the trip represented Kriangsak's strategy of equidistance toward the contending powers.

205 'Kriangsak Visit to USSR', 10 April 1979, RG59, 1979MOSCOW08847, NARA.

206 'Kriangsak Visit to USSR', 10 April 1979, RG59, 1979MOSCOW08847, NARA.

207 'Conversation with Prime Minister on Soviet Trip', 30 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO09194, NARA.

Following his trip, Kriangsak attempted to maintain a good friendship with Moscow. First, the Thai Government allowed Soviet cargo flyovers from Bombay to Hanoi. This was partly because of the criticism that the Thais had supported Chinese resupply operations to Cambodia. The Soviets presented these flights as 'innocent' air traffic in conformity with international conventions. During March and May, reports of 79 Soviet flyovers to Vietnam were intercepted. Kriangsak told reporters that Thailand had permitted the Soviet Union to increase its flyovers on a temporary basis, but he said he had no idea what the aircrafts were carrying to Vietnam.²⁰⁸ In September, the Soviets incessantly asked Thai permission that Soviet flyovers increase to 20 per day.²⁰⁹ The Thais reportedly suspected that the heavy Soviet cargos contained components that assembled T-45 tanks, MiG-21s and helicopters at the former American airbase at Danang.²¹⁰

Kriangsak asked the Thai NSC, chaired by Air Marshal Siddhi, to review the flyover issue, and take steps to reduce the number of flights. Thai authorities told the Soviet ambassador that from now on all flyover requests would be handled by the NSC.²¹¹ In September, the Soviet Union also requested permission for a 'goodwill visit' by two military vessels to call at Bangkok's port, including the 4,000-ton guided missile destroyer *Gnevny*, and the 7,000-ton training ship *Borodino*. Thailand refused to grant Soviet warships permission. Requests by Aeroflot, the Soviet airline, to increase the number of flights to Bangkok, were turned down, too.²¹²

Second, mutual visits increased. Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin was invited to Bangkok. In late May, Soviet Ambassador to Bangkok, Yuri Kouznetzov, invited Thailand to send an observer to the Genny Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) meeting in Moscow.²¹³

208 'Soviet Airlift Reported', *The Washington Post*, 25 May 1979; *The Associated Press*, 24 May 1979.

209 'Soviet Overflights across Thailand', 4 May 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO14913, NARA.

210 Richard Nations, 'Bangkok Tries a New Tack', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 28 September 1979, 12.

211 'Ambassador's Meeting with Kriangsak', 28 September 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO39760, NARA; Victoria Butler, 'Soviets Irk Thailand in Sport and Politics', *The Globe and Mail*, 1 November 1979.

212 General Prem Tinsulanonda told visiting US Commander-in-Chief in the Pacific that the Thai military would not support Soviet warship visits. 'Soviet Fleet Visits to Thailand', 20 September 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO38115, NARA; 'Asians Reject Soviet Ship Visits', *The Washington Post*, 19 September 1979.

213 It was reported that the communist states in Eastern Europe wished to broaden their trade relations with Thailand. However, it seemed this was not approved by the Soviet government. According to Somporn Faichampa, MFA chief of the European Division, 'three days later, the [Soviet] ambassador told us to forget about [the invitation letter]; that it was a mistake'. 'FORMIN Upadit Explains COMECON Invitation', 13 June 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO20291, NARA; McBeth, 'Suspicion and Non-involvement', 28.

On 20–26 August, Air Marshal Harin Hongsakul led an eight-member delegation of the Thai National Assembly to the Soviet Union. He gave an interview to the Russian News Agency, Tass, stating that ideological differences were not an obstacle to friendly Thai–Soviet relations. The Soviets sent their sports delegation to Bangkok, including boxing and tennis teams.²¹⁴

Third, Thai–Soviet trade relations increased significantly. In April, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration bought trucks from the Soviets costing 13 million baht. The Soviets also opened a trade exhibition in Nakornprathom province, close to Bangkok. The organiser, Min Sen Machinery, which acted as an agent for importing machinery from the Soviet Union, sold a number of tractors.²¹⁵ In July, a newly elected President of the Board of Trade and the Thai Chamber of Commerce, Kijja Vadhanasindhu, led a five-man delegation to Moscow. He signed a private sector agreement on trade, economic, scientific and technological cooperation. The Soviets placed an order with Thai Hua for 50,000 tons of maize worth about 176 million baht to be shipped to Vietnam.²¹⁶ Under the International Trade State Corporation Act of 1974, requiring trade with the communist countries to have official approval, Thai exporters applied to the Commerce Ministry for a routine export license. The ministry supported their sales to Moscow. It was reported that Thai exporters regularly met with trade representatives in the Soviet embassy on Sathorn Road. In December, the Soviets started lining up 100,000 tons of high-quality Thai rice, due to be shipped in January 1980.²¹⁷

However, Thai sales of grain to the Soviets were viewed by the Americans with disapproval, because it was inconsistent with President Jimmy Carter's partial grain embargo against Moscow, imposed in January following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The US embassy in Bangkok privately warned Kriangsak that the US would retaliate if Thailand went ahead with its sales. Prok Ammaranan, Deputy Commerce Minister, said 'we have never had any commitment with the US that we would have to fall in line with its embargo'. He stressed:

214 Alexander A Karchava, *Kaewsip pee kwam sampan tang karntoot Russia–Thai* [Ninety-Year Russian–Thai Diplomatic Relations] (Bangkok: Bapith Printing, 1988), 119.

215 Karchava, *Kaewsip pee kwam sampan tang karntoot Russia–Thai*, 136.

216 K Sonsomsook, 'Goodwill Has Its Limits', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 September 1979, 51.

217 Ho Kwon Ping, 'The Thais Defy the Grain Embargo', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 15 February 1980, 9.

We are not a satellite of the US ... The US is trying hard to get Thailand to fall in line as far as rice exports to the Soviet Union are concerned ... If a grain embargo became a United Nations resolution, we would certainly abide by it.

‘But until then’, Prok explained, ‘we are friends with both sides’.²¹⁸

While Kriangsak condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he approved the sale of grain to the Soviet Union. He declared that the Soviet action was ‘considered a threat to the security, peace and stability of Asia and the world’. He asked ‘the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops and stop infringing on the sovereignty of Afghanistan so that the Afghan people can determine their fate by themselves’.²¹⁹ With regard to Thailand’s grain sales to Moscow, Kriangsak said his government would make its own trade decisions. ‘We are an independent country’, he said, ‘and no one can tell us what to do’.²²⁰

In short, the Kriangsak administration to a certain extent pursued *détente* with the Soviet Union. Thai–Soviet relations were friendly to the extent that they had a stable, yet distant relationship. They were not merely bilateral relations but, more importantly, part and parcel of the broader strategy of equidistance, based on the balancing of the Sino–Soviet rivalry in the region. It can be argued that Kriangsak’s equidistance policy was a discourse of balanced *détente*. On the one hand, it was fairly successful in maintaining flexibility and even-handedness with the great powers. On the other, this policy generated discursive disagreement with the military and security forces within Thai politics: a fact that eventually led to the fall of Kriangsak.

218 Ho, ‘The Thais Defy the Grain Embargo’, 9, 11.

219 ‘Thai Prime Minister Denounces Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan’, *Xinhua General News Service*, 3 January 1980.

220 *The Associated Press*, 8 February 1980.

7.3. The Fall of Kriangsak: Intra-Discursive Struggle?

The existing literature explains the fall of Kriangsak as related to either endemic economic problems, a legitimacy crisis or the lack of support from the monarchy and military, especially from the Young Turks.²²¹ It also pinpoints the year 1979 as the turning point in the gradual decline of the Kriangsak administration. According to this argument, the promulgation of the Constitution in December 1978 and a subsequent parliamentary election on 22 April 1979 served to weaken rather than strengthen Kriangsak, who decided not to run in the election. The reason was twofold: first, the election was won by a group of opposition parties led by Kukrit Pramoj. Second, Kriangsak was able to remain prime minister, largely due to the votes of the appointed Senate. He therefore lacked support in the elected House of Parliament and his Cabinet consisted largely of non-elected technocrats. The government was further delegitimised by pressing economic problems, including high inflation, widening deficits and price rises, in particular of oil. Amid the global oil crisis, Kriangsak's decision to raise energy prices was the final straw, sparking a series of anti-government demonstrations. Economic mismanagement not only made it difficult for Kriangsak to broaden his support but also exacerbated military factionalism. The Young Turks finally shifted their support from Kriangsak to the new Army Commander-in-Chief and Defense Minister, General Prem Tinsulanonda.²²²

However, this economic explanation is flawed. As Vichitvong na Pombhejara has pointed out, 1979 was in fact a year of 'relative stability'. The Thai economy was not doing 'too badly' and despite the persistent inflation and trade imbalances, Thailand maintained economic growth. 'On the macro level', observed Vichitvong, the economy was 'satisfactory':

221 David Morell and Chai-Anan Samudavanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution* (Cambridge: Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain Publishers, 1981), 280; Krittin, 'Political Conflict under the Government of General Kriangsak Chomanan'; Larry Niksch, 'Thailand in 1980: Confrontation with Vietnam and the Fall of Kriangsak', *Asian Survey* 21, no. 2 (1981): 223–31.

222 Ansil Ramsay, 'Thailand 1979: A Government in Trouble', *Asian Survey* 20, no. 2 (1980): 112–22.

Trade deficits are not expected to adversely affect the rate of economic growth as long as export expansion continues satisfactorily. Also, as long as the economy continues to grow at a high rate, the investment climate is likely to remain favorable. Investment, in turn, helps sustain economic growth.²²³

More importantly, this approach largely ignores the diplomatic dimension. This chapter argues that the fall of Kriangsak can be understood through the lens of the discursive struggles over détente. By the end of the 1970s, it was no longer a struggle between the discourses of anticommunism versus détente, but between détente proponents about how détente should work. In other words, it was the intra-discursive struggle between balanced détente and unbalanced détente. In this version, it was the latter's proponents that brought down Kriangsak. The major turning point was Kriangsak's visit to Moscow in March 1979.

The intra-discursive struggle that set the stage for Kriangsak's downfall was fought on two fronts. The first was the domestic struggle between those balanced and unbalanced détente proponents. As was clear during the militant anticommunist regime of Thanin, most factions within the military had by then become détente proponents or sympathisers. The same was true of civilians, especially those based at the MFA. It was not surprising, therefore, that both groups supported the coup in October 1977, and subsequently endorsed Kriangsak's policy of equidistance toward the contending powers, and détente with the communist powers in general. Key détente proponent Upadit remained foreign minister in the Kriangsak Government.

However, the Soviet-backed Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in November 1978 gradually changed the perception and identity of military elites. They became sceptical of the policy of equidistance and many disagreed with Kriangsak's decision to visit the Soviet Union – particularly security and military détente proponents.

Generally, military and security elites supported détente, believing that Thailand should bend with the emerging Sino–American relationship or quasi-alliance. In turn, they advocated a set of policies in neighbouring Indochina, including (1) explicitly denouncing the Vietnamese threat or expansionism; (2) implicitly supporting the Khmer Rouge forces along the

223 Vichitvong na Pombhejara, 'Thailand in 1979: A Year of Relative Stability', *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1980), 321. See also Vichitvong, 'The Kriangsak Government and the Thai Economy', 312–22.

Thai border; and (3) distancing from the Soviet Union, which politically and militarily supported Hanoi. We can call those who followed this course 'unbalanced détente proponents'.

As noted earlier, these unbalanced détente proponents such as Interior Minister General Lek Naeomali, Commander of Royal Thai Army General Prem Tinsulanonda, and NSC Secretary-General Air Marshal Siddhi Savetsila, disapproved of Kriangsak's decision to visit Moscow, and even asked the US ambassador to encourage Kriangsak to call off the visit.²²⁴ In his interview, Siddhi said that he totally 'disagreed' with the Soviet visit.²²⁵ Despite their support for détente in general, their stance was unbalanced in the sense that they promoted détente with the PRC, while remaining aloof with the Soviet Union.

Even the *Bangkok Post* newspaper, which had advocated détente, printed an editorial on 8 March entitled 'Call Off Visit to Russia'. It urged that rather than making an unproductive Moscow trip, the Thai prime minister should remain in Thailand to protect national interests, and exert strong and sensible leadership in dealing with urgent domestic problems, such as oil shortages. The editorial pointed to the lack of Soviet interest in Thailand, noting that Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin departed for India at the same time as Kriangsak's visit was initially scheduled.²²⁶

Those proponents of unbalanced détente formed a new power configuration, leading to a struggle within the Thai military, and it was this that saw Kriangsak begin to lose control of the Army. After the April 1979 election, Prem became a new locus of power, succeeding Kriangsak as Defense Minister, and retaining his position of Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army. Through his dual positions, Prem also consolidated power within the military. Kriangsak's power base was limited to the Supreme Command, while his supporters, such as General Tuanthong Suwannatat, were marginalised from commanding battalions.²²⁷

Despite their continued support for Kriangsak, the Young Turks started to raise concerns over the situation in Indochina, and Kriangsak's equidistance policy. Its key member, Colonel Prajak Sawangjit said:

224 'Pressures to Postpone Visit by PM Kriangsak to USSR', 13 March 1979, RG59, 1979BANGKO08520, NARA.

225 Siddhi, *Pan Rorn Pan Nao*, 78.

226 'Call Off Visit to Russia', *Bangkok Post*, 8 March 1979.

227 Ramsay, 'Thailand 1979', 112–13.

we are the class of 1960. At the outbreak of the war in Laos in 1961, we went to fight in Laos and [later on] in the jungle with the [Thai] communist terrorists. Our feelings while fighting in the jungle were that the country was decaying and degenerating because the mechanisms in the city were bad. We therefore decided to get together and do something so that our union can survive. We were closely united, all of us determined in our pursuit of the same objective: to solve the nation's problems ... We don't want anything more than to save the Nation, the Religion, and the Monarchy.²²⁸

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 confirmed that the rhetoric of strict neutrality was not a viable option. In January 1980, the radical right-wing Red Gaur movement, which had massacred students outside Thammasat in October 1976, staged a demonstration outside the Soviet embassy to protest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and to attack Kriangsak's foreign policy.²²⁹ In mid-January, General Prem began to distance himself from Kriangsak. He gave an address to a students' debating club at Chulalongkorn University on the security situation in Thailand. On 22 February 1980, he opened an economic seminar at Thammasat University by saying 'if people suffer, the government should do something to solve the problem'.²³⁰

The situation worsened when, in early February, amid the global energy crisis, Kriangsak made the decision to raise energy prices. This brought about mass urban unrest, spearheaded by rightist political forces, and sparked political manoeuvring within the military.²³¹ With few options, Kriangsak reshuffled his Cabinet on 12 February in an attempt to balance the internal struggle. He replaced balanced détente proponents with those anti-Soviet or unbalanced détente proponents. Air Marshal Siddhi took the portfolio of Foreign Minister, while Upadit and Prok Amaranand, Deputy Commerce Minister, were dismissed. Yet it was too little, too late and Kriangsak was forced to resign on 29 February. General Prem, with the king's support, was made the new prime minister on 3 March, and formed what he called 'the government of His Majesty'.²³²

228 Chai-Anan, *The Thai Young Turks*, 35–36.

229 John McBeth, 'The Government under Siege', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8 February 1980, 15.

230 John McBeth, 'Enter Prem, the Reluctant General', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 March 1980, 11.

231 Niksch, 'Thailand in 1980', 229.

232 McBeth, 'Enter Prem, the Reluctant General', 10; John McBeth, 'Kriangsak Government – Mark III', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 February 1980, 8–9.

On the second front, US policy shifts exacerbated the discursive struggle. While there are no documents that directly point to US involvement in the downfall of Kriangsak, the US policy shift towards Indochina, and a corresponding disapproval of Kriangsak's policy, did help those unbalanced détente proponents oust Kriangsak from power.²³³ The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan encouraged a shift in American policy toward Vietnam. Carter's close advisors, in particular Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor, and Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, believed that a normalisation with Vietnam would diminish Soviet influence in the region, weakening its control of the Indian Ocean. American and Thai interests diverged. This became obvious during a meeting in Bangkok on 13 February 1980 between Kriangsak and Holbrooke. US Ambassador to Thailand Abramowitz, and Admiral Robert J Long, a new US Commander-in-Chief in the Pacific, also attended the meeting. It ended with tense discussions and disagreement.

During the meeting, the Americans emphasised the paramount importance of the Indian Ocean to their geopolitical interests, and underlined their anxiety that the Soviet Union sought access to Vietnamese port facilities such as in Cam Ranh. They thus wished to adopt a policy of normalising relations with Hanoi in order to distance Vietnam from Moscow. For Kriangsak, any Western attempt to concede to Vietnam would jeopardise ASEAN's regional diplomacy, rather than weaken the Soviet position in the region. Kriangsak reportedly stated that 'after that, ASEAN could never stand up to Hanoi with the strength and determination of the past year'.²³⁴ For Kriangsak, Thailand's objective was to secure a withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia. Kriangsak criticised the US for its failure to provide for the security needs of Thailand, and said he believed that US security in the region was dependent on a strong ally like Thailand. The Americans told Kriangsak that building up Thailand militarily would only aggravate regional tensions and obstruct US normalisation with Hanoi.²³⁵ In his view, Kriangsak believed that one of the reasons his government fell two weeks later was the withdrawal of American support.²³⁶

233 Richard Nations, 'Thai Sources say Washington's Disfavor Helped Kriangsak's Ouster', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 April 1980, 8.

234 Nations, 'Thai Sources say Washington's Disfavor Helped Kriangsak's Ouster', 9.

235 Nations, 'Thai Sources say Washington's Disfavor Helped Kriangsak's Ouster', 10.

236 Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, 220.

In sum, Kriangsak's downfall fundamentally emerged from the intra-discursive struggle between the balanced détente discourse and emerging unbalanced détente discourse, which shaped the way in which military elites and commanders shifted their support away from Kriangsak. An increase in energy prices was merely a pretext that precipitated the mass demonstrations against the Kriangsak Government. While Washington's disfavour did not directly cause Kriangsak's downfall, the former rendered the latter possible.

7.4. Conclusion

By the late 1970s, a 'fear of communism', said Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, was 'no longer the glue that holds our foreign policy together'.²³⁷ So too was the case in Thailand. Prime Minister's Order No. 66/2523, which was promulgated by Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda in April 1980, was just such an example. It has become conventional wisdom that the order marked the end of communism in Thailand. It not only used political means to defeat communism but also pardoned the former Thai communists, thereby allowing them to return from the jungle.

This conventional wisdom is problematic. Strictly speaking, the prime minister's order was not the move that ended communism, but rather one of the products of the détente discourse. Resulting from a long discursive struggle between anticommunism and détente in the long 1970s, détente ended communism in Thailand. The end of the Cold War in Thailand was thus marked by closer Sino–Thai relations, normal Thai–Soviet relations, Chinese withdrawal of support from the CPT, and the CPT's anticipated decline.

'Whether or not there is peace in this region', as one Thai military officer close to Kriangsak put it, 'depends entirely on how Beijing reacts to what it sees as direct or indirect Soviet threats', and perhaps vice versa.²³⁸ Kriangsak recognised these changing power realities in the midst of the emerging Third Indochina War in the late 1970s. His policy of equidistance was a flexible and equal approach to diplomacy with the ultimate aim of balancing the intense Sino–Soviet rivalry in the region. Equidistance

²³⁷ Quoted in Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed*, 263.

²³⁸ Nations, 'The Makings of Friendship', 29.

could be a *de jure* policy but proved to be extremely difficult to execute in practice. By that time, anticommunism was no longer a viable discourse, partly because of the de-ideologisation of the Cold War, and partly because of the establishment of Sino–American diplomatic relations. Yet it was also fading because of the simultaneous construction of Thai *détente* as the decisive characteristic of Thai foreign policy.

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