

New diplomacy: gentler but firmer

TH TN 21/9/92.
Kavi Chongkittavorn writes about the priorities and approaches of the foreign policy of the incoming government headed by Democrat leader Chuan Leekpai.

The foreign policy of the coalition government under prime minister designate Chuan Leekpai will not be dissimilar to that of the Chatichai and two Anand administrations.

The policy will be pragmatic and economic-oriented and also reflect the desire to keep up with the global trends moving toward increased inter-dependency.

Discussions with senior officials of Palang Dharma and Democrat parties last week revealed a strong wish to improve on the approaches toward neighbouring countries, especially Burma, and major powers. Palang Dharma's adviser Sqd Ldr Prasong Soonsiri is expected to become the country's new foreign minister and Democrat's executive member, Surin Pitsuwan, deputy foreign minister.

Although they agreed the policies toward Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia are generally good and display the sensitivity Thailand has for its neighbours, they still think concrete international economic policies and programmes are still missing in forging closer economic relations with Indochina.

In addition, the new government will concentrate on bringing to fruition plans to turn Thailand into a regional financial centre, particularly for doing business with Indochina.

They said the country's policy towards Burma needed reappraisal, with emphasis on legalizing border trade and opening more check points between Thailand and Burma and improved treatment of Burmese students living here in exile.

One of them, who is likely to take a top post in the Foreign Ministry, said while the policy of "constructive engagement" with Burma, which was adopted by Asean and spearheaded by Thailand, would be maintained, the new government would continue diplomatic efforts to increase Rangoon's contacts with its neighbours, especially Asean countries.

By adopting such an attitude, it was hoped positive changes would take place at a faster pace in Burma. Otherwise, it would be difficult for Thailand to maintain this kind of policy," he warned.

The Thai government had to ensure Burma's future generation would remember its positive role in helping to democratise their country instead of helping the current regime to further suppress the pro-democracy elements.

Regarding policy toward Cambodia, the Chuan administration would not stand "idle" on the Khmer Rouge's



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continued intransigence on the United Nations-brokered peace plan, he said. The incoming government wants to see the Marxist group cooperate in implementing the peace plan. Strict controls on the Thai-Cambodian border will be gradually lessened, with less ambiguous and surreptitious control exercised by



Surin

unchanged. For example, Thailand's excellent ties with Japan are likely to be continued.

Last Wednesday, five former Thai ambassadors to Washington — caretaker Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, caretaker Foreign Minister Arsa Sarasin, former foreign minister Thanat Kho-

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special task forces.

With Chuan at the helm, Thailand will enjoy a better image in the international community because of public recognition for his impeccable record. His strong parliamentary background is a big asset for the country as it moves towards strengthening its democracy. He would be able to foster closer ties with the democratic West.

Changes are likely to take place in Thailand's handling of relations with the United States and China. Relations with other nations generally will remain

man, the caretaker Minister Attached to PM's Office M.R. Kasem S. Kasemsri and former deputy foreign minister Arun Panupong — held a seven-hour closed-door brain-storming session at the Foreign Ministry trying to pinpoint the real nature of Thai-US relations.

According to a Foreign Ministry official who attended the session, their conclusion, which will be passed on to the next government, was stark as well as enlightening.

The official said the group agreed there was no such thing as "a special

relationship" between Thailand and the United States. They shared the same view that Bangkok, in dealing with Washington, must be firmer and speak with one voice.

They also recommended that in order to have respectable and healthy relations with the United States, Thailand must quickly improve and strengthen its national resilience and increase coordination among government organizations.

"That's the only way to avoid being victimized by growing US trade pressure," said the official.

The new government would continue to intensify its efforts to meet unrelenting US demands for the protection of intellectual property rights. At the same time, it would adopt a "business-like" attitude to the United States on defence cooperation, including arms purchase, that has existed for four decades.

During the Cambodian conflict, Sino-Thai relations were considered the main pillar of Thailand's bilateral ties. That time has passed. In the post-Cambodian era, Thailand is expecting painful adjustments to its friendship with China.

The country's top security, defence and intelligence officials have prepared a new, confidential report assessing security threats to Thailand in the next five years. They identified China as Thailand's main threat. In the past, Vietnam was considered the country's arch enemy because of its military occupation of Cambodia.

Apart from the renewed fear of China, Sino-Thai ties could face a new problem on the influx of illegal Chinese immigrants to Thailand. According to a conservative estimate, more than 100,000 Chinese illegal immigrants, including labourers, are living throughout Thailand. "Over time, these people could be a destabilizing factor," a senior security official warned.

Although the Chuan administration will see China as a good friend, it does not expect the intimacy of the past. The government will encourage the private sector take advantage of the economic boom in southern China. Huge arms purchases from China, as in the past, are out of question.

In summing up, the foreign policy of the new government will be "gentler" toward neighbouring countries while it will be "firmer" towards major powers, particularly the United States and China. While economic cooperation with Asean members and other countries will remain a top priority, it will be aimed at increasing the nation's economic and political resilience.

OA/1938/94/0002