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Inside Thailand's Foreign Policy

An Interview with Air Chief Marshal Siddhi Savetsila
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand

ACM Siddhi Savetsila was Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand between 11 February 1980 and 27 August 1990, under Prime Ministers Gen. Kriangsak Chomanan, Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda, and Gen. Chatichai Choonhavan. Before then, he had served his country as a member of the Free Thai Movement during World War II when he studied at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. After the War, he served in the Royal Thai Air Force (1946-1975). Concurrently as Secretary-General of the National Security Council (1975-1980) he was appointed Minister Attached to the Prime Minister’s Office (1979-1980). He was elected Member of Parliament for Bangkok in 1983 and Leader of the Social Action Party in 1986, positions he retained until his resignation from both on 14 September 1990. ACM Siddhi is a man of principle who successfully blended international principles with national interests during his tenure as Foreign Minister. That may well have contributed to his being awarded honorary LL.D. degrees from the prestigious University of the Philippines and National University of Singapore, in 1983 and 1985 respectively. He also received highly distinguished decorations from more than ten countries. A modest man of great integrity, he was — shortly after his retirement from politics — characterized as a “swan among the crows” (Hong Nai Moo Ka) by the Thai reporters covering the Government House, in the annual dubbing of cabinet members at year-end. The following are transcripts of interviews given by ACM Siddhi to Professor Khien Theeravit, Director of the Institute of Asian Studies and Acting Editor of the Asian Review journal on January 16, 1991:
Ques: 1) Your Excellency, during your tenure as Foreign Minister for over 10 years, under three administrations, Thailand was involved with many external problems, some of which required courage, wisdom, and tremendous effort to deal with. In your view which particular issue was most challenging to you?

Ans: 1) In my view, I would pick the Cambodian problem as the most challenging issue since it affected Thailand’s vital security interests.

Ques: 2) Why should Thailand be involved so heavily in the Cambodian problem?

Ans: 2) The Cambodian problem affected Thailand’s vital security interests in several ways. First, the Vietnamese troops in Cambodia threatened Thailand’s territorial integrity. These troops made repeated incursions into Thailand, the most serious of which at Non Mark Mun, where they dug in and fought against Thai troops for a long period. Second, the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia engendered a war of national resistance. Consequently, Thailand suffered from spill-over of fightings and influx of several hundred thousand refugees and displaced people, incurring enormous humanitarian problems for the Thai government. Third, for the first time in history, as a result of the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia, Vietnam transformed the Thai-Cambodian border into a de facto Thai-Vietnamese border, thereby posing grave strategic threat to Thailand.

Ques: 3) What was the Thai perception of the Vietnamese threat? Was the Thai policy toward Cambodia based on the fear that Vietnam might invade and occupy certain parts of Thailand through Cambodia?

Ans: 3) Our perception of the Vietnamese threat was based on our intelligence collection which indicated that Vietnam was targeting Thailand after it had successfully dominated Laos and Cambodia. In 1980, Nguyen Co Thach, the Foreign Minister of Vietnam, made a veiled threat that only Vietnam could guarantee Thailand’s sovereignty and independence, thereby implying that Thailand must bow to Vietnam’s will or else. Our intelligence also reported that Vietnam’s leaders who encountered some high ranking CPT members promised to help liberating
parts of the Northeast if the CPT would accept some Lao troops disguised as CPT insurgents. As for the Cambodian War, if and when Vietnam could control all of Cambodia, Vietnam would have been likely to use Cambodia as a base or a springboard for actions against southeastern provinces and some parts of Thailand’s eastern provinces.

Ques: 4) What were the main interests and objectives of Thailand in Cambodia? Was it true that your government was as ambitious as Vietnam in seeking domination over Cambodia?

Ans: 4) The main interests and objectives of Thailand regarding Cambodia are and have always been to help Cambodia becoming a free, neutral and non-aligned country, posing no threat to its neighbors. We wish the Cambodian people to have the right of self-determination, and Cambodia to be our friendly neighbor. We ourselves never wish to dominate Cambodia and we do not want to see her being dominated by any other country.

Ques: 5) In what ways did you try to realize the said interests and objectives?

Ans: 5) Our strategy was to bring about an international coalition based on ASEAN and its friends to put political and economic pressure on Vietnam through isolating it politically and denying it international economic assistance. By doing this, we hope to maximize the political and economic costs to Vietnam in occupying Cambodia. I let you be the judge whether our strategy has been successful or not. I am content to let the result speak for itself.

Ques: 6) The unity of ASEAN with regard to the Cambodian issue was quite remarkable. How could that happen?

Ans: 6) The unity of ASEAN with regard to the Cambodia issue was attained as result of a common threat perception. All ASEAN member countries were of similar view that if Vietnam were to succeed in its aggression against Cambodia, Thailand and other ASEAN member countries would likely be the next victims.
Ques: 7) The US was regarded as Thailand’s old ally. How much did it contribute to enhance the Thai national interests on the Cambodian problem?

Ans: 7) The US government repeatedly reaffirmed her commitment to Thailand’s security in accordance with the Thanat-Rusk Joint Communiqué whenever a situation warranted it. Furthermore, the US supported Thailand’s and ASEAN’s stand on the Cambodian issue. In times of emergency, the US sent arms supplies by air. Moreover, the US regularly joined the Thai Armed Forces in joint military exercises and supported the building of a “War Stockpile” in Thailand for contingencies. The US also contributed non-lethal assistance to the NCR in the Cambodia conflict.

Ques: 8) How about China, your new friend, or ally? To what extent did China prove to be a reliable friend?

Ans: 8) China supported ASEAN’s stand on the Cambodia issue. Moreover, to relieve Vietnam’s military pressure in Cambodia, China at times applied military pressure at the Chinese-Vietnamese border, thereby tying up most of the elite Vietnamese troops there. Furthermore, China provided military assistance to all the three factions fighting a war of national resistance against the Vietnamese troops in Cambodia.

Ques: 9) Did you or your government try to lure the Soviet Union to your side? In your contacts with the Soviet leaders in several occasions, did you detect signs of change in the Soviet policy toward Hanoi-Phnom Pehn?

Ans: 9) We did try to persuade the Soviet Union to play a constructive role in resolving the Cambodian problem by linking their desires for normal relations with Thailand and other ASEAN countries with their movements towards a more balanced position on the Cambodian problem. The Soviet Union initially supported the Vietnamese fully on the Cambodian problem. However, the Soviet Union lately has contributed positively to the PICC and Perm-5 meeting in trying to bring about a comprehensive solution to the Cambodian problem. This is a welcome trend.
Ques: 10) So much effort you have spent to the Cambodian problem, how would you assess your success and failure? Now the battlefield is still not yet a market place. Who should be blamed?

Ans: 10) Let us look at the following facts:

First, there are no more significant threats to the security of Thailand due to the withdrawal of the Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, although no objective verification has yet been made. Doesn’t that indicate the success of our aforementioned strategy? Second, we succeeded year after year in the UNGA to gain more votes supporting our resolutions. Doesn’t this show that the international community agreed with the rightness of our stance? Third, the peace process for solving the Cambodia problem in a comprehensive manner has begun. There is still a long and difficult road ahead before the Cambodian battlefield becomes a market-place. But the initial steps have been taken and have been possible because of the success of our strategy. At this stage, we must be careful not to undermine the efforts of the Perm Five and the PICC process, lest we discredit ourselves in the eyes of the international community.

Ques: 11) Are you optimistic about the future of Cambodian peace and independence?

Ans: 11) I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic about the future of Cambodia’s peace and independence. I take a realist’s position. I believe that for peace to come to Cambodia, there must first be national reconciliation to create trust among all Cambodian factions. As long as the Khmer Rouge are still excluded, the fighting will go on. As for the independence of Cambodia, I believe that Vietnam will continue to maintain some sort of control over the conduct of a future government if Hun Sen were to be allowed to play a major role in a forthcoming administration. However, if Sihanouk emerges as a winner in a general election, there is a possibility of a free and independent Cambodia.

Ques: 12) On the question of the Khmer Rouge, you and the Thai people, including the ASEAN, were not much disturbed by its bad image -- unlike the West. Are you still firm that your approach is more congenial to peace in Cambodia?
Ans: 12) I believe that the Khmer Rouge has changed from the past policies and practices otherwise they could not have recruited new members and continued to receive local support in their fighting. If we try to exclude them and allow no change for them to be integrated into the mainstream of the Cambodian society they will have no alternative but to stay in the jungle and continue their guerilla activities. I therefore feel that to exclude the Khmer Rouge is impractical.

Ques: 13) How broad was your base of support among the Thai public with regard to the Cambodian problem?

Ans: 13) Though we were questioned at times, the results of voting in the parliament showed that our policy had firm support. The increased support for our resolution on the Cambodian problem year after year buttressed the confidence of the Thai public in our policy on Cambodia.

Ques: 14) How was your working relationship with Prime Minister Chatichai’s personal advisors?

Ans: 14) Our working relationship could be considered as “correct”. They kept me informed in the later stage about what they tried to do and what results had been achieved. The then Director General of the Political Department also kept them up-to-date on what we did.

Ques: 15) Some observers believed that if you cannot work with your premier in harmony you should resign. Why should you hang on for so long?

Ans: 15) If I were merely a member of Parliament, I would have resigned a long time ago. However, as the then leader of the Social Action Party I must put my party’s interests above my own feelings.

Ques: 16) Myanmar is another close neighbor of your country. Its rulers have been condemned world wide. Yet Thailand maintains good relations with Myanmar. What were the main considerations for Thailand in maintaining good relations with Myanmar.
Ans: 16) Our objective is and has been to have Myanmar as a friendly neighbour. We therefore have tried to foster good relations with any Myanmar government that has effective control over that country. We also wish to keep open our communication channels with Myanmar in order to prevent the fighting between Burmese troops and some ethnic insurgents from spilling over into our territory. We have tried to persuade the Myanmar government of the benefits of democratization. However, we do not believe that the isolation of Myanmar will lead to peace and democracy in that country.

Ques: 17) When you were Thailand’s Foreign Minister, your government was often criticized by the mass media that it was too soft toward your Southern neighbor, Malaysia. You helped Malaysia reduce the strength of the CPM. Yet Malaysia continued to support the Thai Muslim separatists and to arrest a large number of the Thai fishermen, some of whom were said to have streamed their fishing boats through Malaysian economic zone, not its territorial waters. What made Thailand adopt such a soft stand toward Malaysia?

Ans: A) Thailand and Malaysia regard each other as special neighbor. Of course, there are problems as natural between two countries with adjoining territories. However, we have always managed to sort out our differences. In this connection, we have established a mechanism called the Joint Commission dealing with economics, trade, development, joint investment and cooperation. As to the fishery problem we agreed to have joint ventures between our two countries. We also have agreed upon measures regarding the passage of Thai fishing boat, early warning, and judicial arrangements if Thai fishing boats are arrested and captured. As to the problem of Thai Muslim separatists in Thailand, there are standard operating procedures on how to deal with such incidents. Furthermore, we have the General Border Committee which has successfully managed our mutual security concerns along our common borders. If pursuing this kind of good neighbour policy that has successfully turned Malaysia into Thailand’s closest immediate neighbour is considered “too soft,” then so be it. I stand by this policy because it has protected and enhanced Thailand’s national interest.
Ques: 18) The American government has also often created difficulties to Thailand on issues such as intellectual property rights and GSP. There have been signs that Thailand and the US may not be able to maintain traditional friendly relations. How could that happen? And how do you foresee the future trend?

Ans: 18) First of all, I would like to point out that Thailand and the U.S. have been friends for more than a century and a half. Throughout this period, the ties between the two countries have developed gradually and positively. Our bilateral relations have now become multidimensional.

On political and security aspects, we have maintained close contact and excellent cooperation with the U.S. on various issues, in particular defence coordination and the Cambodian problem. I believe that this political and security partnership will continue to develop further to the mutual benefits of our two countries.

On economic aspect, if we look at the U.S.’s economic problems with its close allies like the EC, Japan and Korea, we would see similar problems that have occurred in Thai-U.S. economic relations. The challenge we are facing, therefore, is how to manage these trade conflicts in such a way as to minimize the damages to Thailand’s economic interests and the overall excellent bilateral relations. Considerable progress has been made as seen in the settlement over the tobacco issue and our cooperation in the Uruguay Round. However, we must be aware that right now the U.S. is having serious budget and trade deficits, thereby increasing the protectionist mood. This portends difficult negotiations ahead between our two countries. However, I am convinced that the friendly relations between Thailand and the U.S. have been built on strong foundations and will withstand temporary disagreements.

Ques: 19) During your tenure as Thailand’s Foreign Minister, your government was elected UN security council member. In your own opinion what were the main factors contributing to that effect?
Ans: 19) We were proud to be elected as a non-permanent member in the UN Security Council in 1985-1986. We campaigned very hard for the seat, sending lobbying teams to every continent. We timed the opening of our campaign to coincide with the Conference on Namibia which we hosted in Bangkok in 1984. We neutralized the attempt to raise the issue of conflict with Laos as a barrier to our UNSC membership. However, the most important factor in my opinion is the support of our friends in the UN. In this connection, I am proud that during my tenure as the Foreign Minister, Thailand established diplomatic relations with fifty countries.

Ques: 20) There have been criticisms against your Foreign Ministry that the bureaucrats are elitists; they were even dinosaurs. Do you agree with those criticisms? What did you do to improve or upgrade the performance of the foreign policy mechanisms?

Ans: 20) Those criticisms were motivated mainly by policy differences. People who made such criticisms were men of small minds who deluded themselves into thinking that they had the monopoly of truth. In my experience, I have found the Foreign Ministry officials to be highly competent and dedicated. Moreover, as Thailand’s frontline in the international arena, these foreign service officers have been very sensitive to changes in the international environment and have offered objective and valuable advices to policy makers to adjust our foreign policy accordingly.

During my tenure, I tried to offer the opportunity to the foreign service officers to enhance their diplomatic skills and to expand their horizons. In this connection, my principal means was the Institute of Foreign Affairs of the Ministry. I increased the operating budget for the Institute so that it could improve its training courses for the Thai diplomats at all levels. A modern language laboratory was set up and foreign language instructors were hired to enhance the communication skills of our diplomats. Diplomats at all levels were required to take training courses or to participate in intensive seminars in order to polish their skills or to expand their perspectives. In particular I emphasized to them the need to prepare themselves to be economically competent in order to defend and promote Thailand’s national interests in the world in which economics is becoming more and more a dominant issue. For this pur-
pose, I also held annual meetings of the Thai Ambassadors in every region of the world. If this meeting was held in Thailand, the ambassadors would be briefed by relevant economic agencies and taken on tours of the projects which the government is trying to promote such as the Eastern Seaboard project. If the meeting was held abroad, I would take with me representatives of the economic agencies to provide our ambassadors with in-depth briefings about the current economic situation of Thailand and the government’s plan to promote particular exports or foreign investments.

I also undertook an initiative to broaden the perspective of the foreign service officers and to facilitate the coordination in security-related matters with the Ministry of Defence by authorizing the setting up of an Office of the Political-Military Coordinator in the Ministry, staffed by high-ranking military officers seconded from the Ministry of Defence. This office was useful in providing the Ministry with up-to-date intelligence on matters affecting the nation’s security and served as a conduit for coordination of diplomatic and military moves in the implementation of Thailand’s foreign policy. The smooth coordination between the Foreign Ministry and the Defence Ministry during my tenure owed much to the effectiveness of this office.

In order to enable the Institute of Foreign Affairs to effectively realize the aforementioned objectives, I divided it into training and research branches. The training branch was expanded to provide training to all levels of diplomats and now also offers an orientation course to other Ministries’ officials and wives who will be posted abroad. The research branch became Center for International Studies, which conducts seminars, bringing together academicians and foreign service officers to interact with each other. The outcomes of this process become foreign policy inputs, integrating theories and practices together. This process opens the foreign policy process and enriches the minds of the foreign service officers.
Que: 21) Finally, what made you resign from the post as Foreign Minister while the Cambodian problem has not yet been resolved?

Ans: 21) I had been thinking of retirement for a long while because I had been Foreign Minister for nearly a decade. When I felt that the situation was ripe, I resigned and a short while later also voluntarily retired from politics altogether.

With hindsight, perhaps I should have resigned in September 1989 when the Vietnamese announced the withdrawal of their troops from Cambodia, but there was no internationally acceptable verification. As time passed and my role in achieving a comprehensive political solution to the Cambodian problem became more and more circumscribed due to tactical and strategic differences over Thailand's approach on the Cambodian problem, I thought it was high time for me to retire. However, I left with a conviction that Thai foreign policy has been moving in the right direction and its executions are in the capable hands of able officers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.