Introduction

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The issue of Thailand’s relations with its neighbors has assumed growing importance and saliency during the past two decades. The country’s expanding economy has made it imperative that certain neighbors, especially those rich in natural resources and labor force, provide crucial supports for its further growth. Successive governments since the end of the 1980s, most notably since General Chatichai Choonhavan declared his government’s policy “to turn the Indochina battlefield into a marketplace,” have sought to widen and strengthen Thailand’s contacts and cooperation in trade, investment, tourism, and other economic activities, especially with the countries in the lower Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), namely, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

The end of the Cold War, which in Southeast Asia resulted in the settlement of the Cambodian conflict in 1991, provided the spur to this unique “love-thy-neighbor” pursuit. The Chuan Leekpai and Thaksin Shinawatra governments, in particular, initiated numerous development cooperation projects running from the GMS in 1992 to ACMECS in 2003.

The post-Cold War atmosphere has definitely brought with it a greater collaborative spirit among countries in the region. However, the winding down of political and ideological antagonisms that characterized the Cold War period seems, ironically, to have made Thai relations with the neighboring countries more fragile. With the end of Cold War conflict, ethnic, cultural, and historical issues, which were “eclipsed” by the seemingly more urgent political and ideological conflicts, have come to the fore. Old wounds have been reopened, as in the case of Thai-Cambodian relations, and the “brotherly” ties between Thailand and Laos have become more “sensitive” than ever before, when a seemingly harmless cultural activity like movie production prompted a damaging political

dispute. The problem is even more serious with Myanmar that, since about 1988, has turned against Thailand with growing antagonism.

Hence, the seemingly trouble-free relations between Thailand and the neighboring countries are not really healthy. Chulalongkorn University's Institute of Asian Studies has initiated several projects to study the development and the current state of these relationships. Two recent projects, of which one has been completed and the other still in progress, represent an attempt to gauge the perceptions of the people on both sides of the borders: how Thai stakeholders perceive the other countries in the lower GMS, on the one hand, and how the people in these countries perceive Thailand, on the other.

The first four articles in this issue of *Asian Review* represent a collective effort by researchers affiliated with the Institute of Asian Studies to identify Thai stakeholders' perceptions of four neighboring countries—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. This project benefited from funding support by the Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia (IRASEC). The four articles were first presented to a workshop at Chulalongkorn University in November 2007. The research findings show that Thai stakeholders have highly positive attitudes towards the country's neighbors, but their unmistakable underlying concern for economic interests and profits have quite telling implications.

The other five articles have been included to add to the Institute's growing body of knowledge and expertise on Southeast Asia. They represent a combination of work by well established scholars along with new findings by new students of regional affairs. They also represent a diversity of both substantive contents and ethnic backgrounds of their authors. Hence, in all, it is believed that this issue of *Asian Review* presents a good balance between a thematic focus and a diversity of subject matter.

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Guest Editor