

**No. 155**

**Thai-Chinese Relations:  
Security and Strategic Partnership**

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**Singapore**

**24 March 2008**

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## ABSTRACT

Strategic and security considerations played very important roles in Thai-Chinese relations. Thai elite in the past were suspicious of China after the Chinese Communist Party established the People's Republic of China in October 1949. The relationship afterwards was tense and antagonistic. Before the diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1975, Thai leaders especially the military used to perceive China as a security threat as China had supported the Communist insurgencies in Thailand. The diplomatic recognition in July 1975 was a strategic decision as Thai leaders were concerned with the change in the international strategic environment, global as well as regional, especially the normalization between the US and China, and the regional change of the Communist victory in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

The relations became warmer and closer in the 1980s as a result of the strategic convergence between Thailand and China over the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia since 1979. The security cooperation between the two governments and the armed forces brought about mutual understanding and trust. Thailand purchased military equipments such as tanks, APC and frigates from China and coordinated their assistance to the Cambodian resistance against Vietnamese occupation.

After the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in 1989, Thai-Chinese relations changed the focus to economic partnership as Thai entrepreneurs invested more in China. In the post Cold War period of the 1990s Thailand wanted to broaden the engagement with China into other areas by signing in 1999 the Joint Communique on the Plan of Cooperation in the Twenty-first century. The strategic consideration here was that China, with her rapid economic growth, was destined to play significant and active role in the regional and global politics. Thailand also deepened her relationship with China by signing the Proces Verbal of Joint Action Plan on strategic cooperation between Thailand and China in 2007. For the next five years Thailand and China would cooperate in 15 areas including the security and military ones.

The annual military consultation, the military educational exchange, the high-level visits and the military exercise observation as well participation would foster bilateral relationships and enhance the strategic relations between the two countries to a higher level. The closer strategic partnership would benefit not only both countries but also Southeast Asia region as China would need Thailand to alleviate fear of its rising power and to promote cooperative relations that it attempts to build in Southeast Asia.

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## **Thai-Chinese Relations: Security and Strategic Partnership**

The relationships between Thailand and the People's Republic of China have been transformed from cordial to close and closer since the establishment of the diplomatic relations on 1 July 1975. Through the past 32 years, Thailand and China have cooperated in many areas, especially in the security and strategic ones. Strategically, Thailand used to perceive China as a security threat before 1975. After the diplomatic recognition, antagonism and mutual suspicion changed to mutual trust and partnership. Strategic convergences during the Cambodian crisis in the 1980s brought about mutual understanding and confidence. China is now seen as Thailand's important strategic partner.

At the recent official visit to China on 28–29 May 2007, Thai Prime Minister Surayuth Chulanond witnessed the signing of a Joint Action Plan on Thailand-China Strategic Cooperation, which provided the blueprint for strategic partnership in 15 areas, including military and security cooperation. Over the next five years, from 2007 to 2011, Thailand and China will deepen and widen their cooperation so as to strengthen their bi-lateral relationship as well as to foster their strategic partnership.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the strategic relations between Thailand and the People's Republic of China in the past 32 years (1975–2007). Changes in the strategic landscape in the 1970s played important roles in pushing Thailand and China towards normalization in 1975. Strategic convergences over the Cambodian crisis in 1980s brought about security cooperation between the two countries. The post-Cold War world posed challenges to Thailand and China in finding strategic issues to strengthen their relationship.

### **The Establishment of Diplomatic Relations on 1 July 1975: Strategic Consideration**

Thailand's diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1975 was a milestone in Thai-Chinese relations. It reversed the policy of hostility towards the PRC of previous Thai governments. There were several factors influencing the leaders of both countries, especially the strategic considerations of changes in the

international landscape—global and regional—as well as their implication on national interests and regional stability.

Historically, China, a regional power with a huge population and at close geographical proximity to Thailand, has been a key factor in Thai elite security calculations. Siamese (Thai) leaders of the Sukhothai (1237–1350) and Ayudhya (1350–1767) Kingdoms decided to enter into tributary relations with the Chinese Empire under the Yuan and the Qing Dynasties for political as well as economic reasons(1). The tributary relation provided tacit recognition as well as the maintenance of friendly relations. Maritime trade between Siam and China brought enormous profits to the Siamese court of Ayudhya. Thai kings did not perceive themselves as tributary vassal of China as China did not threaten Siam and tribute was seen as a tool to open the trade door(2).

After Ayudhya was sacked by Burmese troops in 1767, Thailand moved its capital to Thonburi (1767–1782) and later to Bangkok (1782), and the traditional relations under the tributary system continued until the nineteenth century. The Thai king, Rama IV of Chakri Dynasty in Bangkok, sent the last tributary mission to China in 1853. One of the reasons for the suspension of tributary missions was economic, as the maritime trade no longer brought in much profit. China was in turmoil and the tributary missions were attacked several times as the Qing Empire confronted domestic uprisings and external challenges. The loss in the Opium War in 1842 revealed the weakness and decline of Chinese power. Another reason was political, as the Thai king did not want the Qing Emperor to misperceive that Siam was China's tributary state and could be sacrificed or given away. Moreover, Thailand was shifting toward the international capitalist system and had just signed the Bowring Treaty with Great Britain(3).

Although official and formal relations ended, informal and people relations continued and many more Chinese migrated from the impoverished Southern China to the more peaceful and fertile Thailand. These overseas Chinese played important roles in the trade relations between Thailand and China as well as the outside world until the World War II.

During World War II, Thailand was forced to side with Japan as Japanese troops landed in Thailand on 7 December 1941 and demanded passage. After some brief fighting, the Thai government yielded to the Japanese demand. As Thailand was de facto occupied, a Free Thai Movement was set up to sabotage the Japanese and

cooperate clandestinely with the Allies. After the World War II, the Thai government established diplomatic relations with the Chinese nationalist government in Nanking in 1945 and normalized relations with Western powers so as to prevent them from vetoing Thailand's request to join the newly established United Nations. The Thai elite believed that collective security under the UN would be sufficient to guarantee Thai security and other national interests.

After the Communist victory in Mainland China and the establishment of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949, Thai leaders—especially Thai military leaders—were concerned and became anxious over the possibility of threat from China. There were many reasons for the Thai elite to suspect China. In addition to size and proximity, Chinese Communist ideology was perceived to be incompatible with the Thai ideology of “Nationhood, Buddhism and Monarchy”. The creation of a Tai (Dai) Autonomous Region in southern Yunnan province was interpreted by the Thai elite as China's base for anti-Thai government activities. China's tolerance of double nationalities for overseas Chinese was another concern as Thailand feared Chinese interference, given that the Thai economy was dominated by Thai-Chinese.

The Chinese intervention in the Korean conflict in 1950 and the support given to Ho Chi Minh in his struggle to liberate Vietnam and Indo-China from French Imperialism also increased Thai suspicion of Chinese expansionist intentions. The Cold War had thus reached Southeast Asia as the United States actively pursued an anti-Communist containment policy. Thai Prime Minister Field Marshall Pibul Songkram, shifting to a collective defence led by the United States and its Western allies, signed the Manila Treaty with the United States and joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 to deter the perceived threat from China(4).

Thai-Chinese relations had a brief thaw after the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in April 1955 where Thai Foreign Minister Prince Wan Waithayakorn met his Chinese counterpart, Zhou Enlai, Chinese Premier and Foreign Minister(5). Zhou Enlai, assuring Prince Wan about China's peaceful intentions, tried to clear away many suspicions, including the Dai Autonomous Region as an internal administration. Zhou's accommodating posture and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence interested Thai Prime Minister Pibul Songkram. Moreover, the ongoing U.S. and China informal negotiations in Geneva made Thailand nervous and prompted the Thai government to seek reapproachment with China.



A secret mission was sent to China in December 1955 to probe the Chinese intention and to inform the Chinese that secret negotiations would take place in Rangoon with the Chinese ambassador if he was authorized(6). The secret negotiations paved the way to people-to-people relations as many Thais—politicians, writers and cultural troupes—visited China between 1956 and 1957, and were received by Zhou Enlai. This overture ended when the government was overthrown by a military coup led by General Sarit Thanarat. The anti-Communist policy of the new military government heightened the tense relations between China and Thailand. General Sarit issued many orders prohibiting trade and visits to China.

The Thai government decided to ally with the United States through the bilateral collective defence with the Thanad-Rusk Joint Communiqué (7) in 1962. China increased its support of the Communist Party of Thailand and encouraged insurgency activities. In late 1965 Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi was reported to have said: “We hope to have a guerrilla war going in Thailand before the year is out.” (8) A year earlier, China also sponsored the formation of two revolutionary movements, the Patriotic Front of Thailand and the Thailand Independent Movement. (9) Throughout the later part of the 1960s, China repeatedly called on the Communist Party of Thailand to step up its armed struggle to overthrow the rule of the reactionary Thai government. Armed clashes between Communist insurgents in the Northeast and the Thai Armed Forces drove Thailand to become a close ally of the United States and it supported the United States in the Vietnam War.

Changes in the international strategic landscape at the global as well as regional levels made Thailand reassess its relationship with China in the early 1970s. One of the most important changes was a realignment in the triangular relationship between the United States, the Soviet Union and China. The Sino-Soviet conflict escalated into armed clashes over Damansky or Zhen Bao Island in the Ussuri river in 1969. China came to the conclusion that the Soviet threat was more immediate than the U.S. one because the United States was not only exhausted from the Vietnam War but was also in the process of withdrawing from Vietnam according to President Nixon’s July 1969 announcement in Guam. The United States could be brought into a united front with China to deter Soviet hegemonism.

The Chinese initiated the normalization process by inviting a U.S. ping-pong team to play in China in April 1971. This was followed by the secret visit of Dr. Henry Kissinger, President Nixon’s National Security Adviser, in July 1971. Nixon’s

visit to China and the signing of the Shanghai Communique in March 1972 had a great impact throughout Asia. Thailand, no longer counting upon the United States to provide deterrence against China, had to adjust her foreign policy.

Second, the admission of the PRC into the United Nations in October 1971—replacing Taiwan—was another important change in the international arena. This signified the world community's acceptance of China and prompted Thailand to adjust and accommodate China. Its policy of containment against China was no longer viable and might be counter-productive to Thai national interests.

Third, the global economy was in turmoil as a result of the energy crisis. As the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) reduced the production to raise the oil price, oil became scarce and too expensive for many countries, including Thailand. This motivated Thailand to look for new sources of oil for the industrialization of its economy. China, with its abundant oil, could become a new source.

The fourth factor was the decline of U.S. influence in Southeast Asia. The Paris Peace negotiation between Henry Kissinger of the United States and Le Duc Tho from North Vietnam in 1973 contributed to the withdrawal of U.S. troops. The disengagement was later accelerated and Thailand had to come to terms with the changing realities in the region.

Another important factor was the political changes taking place in Indo-China. The victory of the Communist forces in the three Indo-Chinese states of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos affected the regional power relationship. Communist North Vietnamese troops defeated the South Vietnamese army and captured Saigon on 30 April 1975. Two weeks earlier, on 17 April 1975, the Communist Khmer Rouge conquered Phnom Penh and the Communist Pathet Lao entered Vientiane in May 1975. These changes brought hostile Communist states closer to Thailand's eastern borders. Thailand no longer had a buffer zone to protect itself and had to confront hostile Communist neighbours.

Domestic changes in Thailand as well as in China also contributed to the adjustment of foreign policies of the two countries. In Thailand, the 14 October 1973 student uprising brought down the Thai military dictatorship of Field Marshall Thanom Kittikajorn and Field Marshall Prapas Charusathien. A civilian government was installed to prepare for general elections. This was a democratic interregnum that provided the opportunity for Thailand to adjust its foreign policy to emerging new

realities<sup>(10)</sup>. The mass media, as well as academics, voiced their opinion and recommended an independent foreign policy as well as the diplomatic recognition of China. Thailand must carefully balance the interests as well as the power of major powers, including China, the United States and the Soviet Union.

China also experienced domestic changes as the Cultural Revolution came to an end and Zhou Enlai took control of Chinese foreign policy. The pragmatist faction within the Chinese leadership tried to return China to law, order and stability. China also tried to improve its state-to-state relations with the countries in Southeast Asia by promoting its peaceful coexistence strategy and accommodating posture. China toned down its criticism of the governments in Southeast Asia and would not mind military cooperation between these countries and the United States. China was considering the strategic united front with Southeast Asia against the Soviet Union.

The process of strategic adjustment of Thai foreign policy towards China started before the student uprising of October 1973. In fact, the signal to the Chinese and the probe of Chinese response were made in early 1971. Thanad Khoman, the astute Thai foreign minister, was reportedly interviewed by Columbia Broadcasting Corporation (CBS) on 13 January 1971 saying that “Thailand wants to live peacefully with China”.<sup>(11)</sup> Through a third country in Scandinavia, Thailand communicated her interest to contact and negotiate with China.<sup>(12)</sup> At the United Nations General Assembly meeting in October 1971, a Thai delegation headed by Thanad Khoman asked permission from the Thai government of Field Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn to vote with the majority. He was denied and had to “abstain” on the vote that replaced Taiwan with People’s Republic of China. Nevertheless, Thanad instructed the Thai representative in the UN, Anand Panyarachun, to have contacts with the Chinese representative.

The military and the security apparatus were not happy with the changing strategic landscape and disagreed with the overture of its foreign minister. In November 1971 Prime Minister Field Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn staged a coup against his own government and took the foreign ministry portfolio himself. Meanwhile, the Thai business community also urged the government to permit trade with China.

Through various contacts and channels of communication, China realized that Thailand was serious about normalization. The most important breakthrough was the Chinese invitation to Thailand to send a ping-pong team to the Asian Table Tennis

Union Championship held in Beijing in September 1972. After a long debate at its National Security Council, the Thai government accepted the invitation and appointed Police Lt. General Chumpol Lohachala, Deputy Police Chief on Special Affairs, as the head of the delegation and Prasit Kanchanawat, a Thai-Chinese businessman and a confidante of Field Marshal Prapas Charusathien, as the adviser whose role was to probe the Chinese intentions and conditions for negotiation.

Prasit Kanchanawat, through his contacts, made known his objectives to the Chinese. At Beijing he was accompanied by Cheng Rui-sheng, Director of Southeast Asia Division of the Chinese Foreign Ministry (12). During his meetings with Chinese leaders, including Vice Foreign Minister Han Nianlong and later Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, he was told that China wanted peaceful relations with Thailand, and if Thailand was not ready, China could wait until then. In the meantime, any contacts should be on trade and cultural exchanges.

Prasit Kanchanawat also discussed with Zhou Enlai various issues of Thai concern, including the double nationalities of overseas Chinese and the alleged Chinese support of the insurgencies. Zhou said that China did not support double nationalities but instead wanted the overseas Chinese to take the nationality of the country they resided. The Chinese also assured Prasit Kanchanawat that they would not interfere in the internal affairs of Thailand. Concerning the Chinese support of the insurgencies, China replied that the insurgency was a Thai internal affair, to be resolved by the Thais themselves and that China respected sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference. If the Communist Party of Thailand sought the inspiration of the Chinese Communist Party, China would provide moral and political support (13).

The Thai military government was not ready to develop formal diplomatic relations with China because they still suspected and did not trust China but they would permit sports, cultural and economic relations. China later invited Thailand to visit the Canton Trade Fair and Prasit Kanchanawat led a delegation of Thai business group to Canton (Guangzhou) in October 1972. Two months earlier, in August, Revolutionary Decree No. 53, which had banned trade with China since 1959, was amended to permit trade through a government body (14). At the same time, the Thai delegation to the United Nations, led by Pot Sarasin, met Qiao Guan-hua, Deputy Foreign Minister and head of the Chinese delegation at the UN—the first meeting between Thai and Chinese officials from their respective foreign ministries.

Many more meetings followed, including the ECAFE meeting in Tokyo in April 1973 where Cheng Rui-sheng, Director of the South East Asian Division of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, met Dr. Tej Bunnag, Director of the East Asian Division of the Thai Foreign Ministry. In June 1973 a Chinese ping-pong delegation, whose deputy head was Cheng Rui-sheng, visited Thailand. Thai diplomats continued informal discussions with Cheng Rui-sheng, who was later invited to have dinner with Chatichai Choonhavan, Thailand's Deputy Foreign Minister. The next round of negotiation was between Phan Wannamethi, Director-General of the Political Affairs Department, who accompanied the badminton delegation to China in August 1973, with his counterpart, the Director General of the Asia Department of the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

Although they agreed on many issues, they realized that the time was not ripe for normalization. Thai military leaders were still suspicious of Chinese intentions while the Chinese continued to be concerned with Thailand's alliance with the United States. The student-led demonstration in October 1973 brought about the downfall of the military government and the return of civilian rule with a more open attitude towards normalization with China.

The oil crisis of 1973 opened another opportunity as the Thai delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan visited Beijing in December to negotiate the purchase of oil. China agreed to sell 50,000 tons of oil at a friendship price. The positive response improved the Chinese image among the Thai public. The civilian government also abolished Revolutionary Decree No. 53 to facilitate more trade with China. Further contacts and exchanges were also made in 1974 and 1975.

After the Thai general elections of 1975, a new civilian government headed by Prime Minister M. R. Kukrit Pramoj announced that his government would seek to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. The process of Thai-Chinese normalization accelerated in the spring of 1975 as Communist forces came to power in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in April. The Communist Provisional Government of South Vietnam sent a delegation to Thailand demanding that the Thai government pay compensation for the war as well as returning vessels and planes brought to Thailand by the fleeing Vietnamese forces.

The regional strategic changes in Southeast Asia as the Communist took over power in neighbouring Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam and the withdrawal of the

United States from mainland Southeast Asia, as well as the confrontational attitude of Vietnam, made the Thai government decide to normalize relationships with China. One of the most important reasons was the external security concern. Thailand perceived that a unified Communist Vietnam and its military power might become a security threat. Moreover, Vietnamese influence in Laos and connection with the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia could also affect Thai security. Thus normalizing relations with China was a way to counter the potential threat and aggressiveness of Vietnam.

Another important reason for normalization was the concern for internal security. Thai leaders wanted China to end its support to the Communist insurgencies in Thailand. The Chinese always invoked the principle of dual tracks—separation between state-to-state and party-to-party relations. Beijing argued that the Chinese Communist Party could maintain relations with and provide moral and political support to the Communist Party of Thailand but China would not let such party-to-party relations to affect state-to-state relations. Nevertheless, Thai leaders were not satisfied with the Chinese argument but believed that the formal government-to-government relations could induce the Chinese to reduce its support of the Communist Party of Thailand, thus enabling the government to defeat the Communist insurgency.

The third reason was economic benefits. Thailand expected to export more agricultural products such as rubber, sugar and rice to the Chinese market and to import oil and machine tools back to Thailand. The economic reason seemed to complement the strategic consideration for normalization.

Anand Punyarachun, the Thai representative at the UN and ambassador to the United States, was sent to China in June with a delegation to negotiate diplomatic recognition. On 1 July 1975 Thai Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj went to Beijing and signed a joint communique with Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai to establish diplomatic relations. Both agreed to adhere to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and China confirmed the rejection of dual citizenship for overseas Chinese by allowing them to choose their nationality for themselves and by encouraging them to assimilate into Thai culture. Thailand also acknowledged the “one China” policy and Taiwan as a part of China.

China’s main interest in normalizing relations with Thailand revolved around regional strategic considerations. China expected that friendly relations with Thailand

would help to normalize relations with all members of ASEAN, especially Indonesia. China also intended to draw Thailand and other friendly countries of Southeast Asia into a united front against Soviet expansion. The establishment of diplomatic relations in 1975 opened a new page in Thai-Chinese relations and ended almost three decades of hostility and antagonism.

### **The Security Cooperation over Cambodia, 1978–1992: Strategic Convergence**

After the normalization of diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China in July 1975, Thai-Chinese relations changed from enmity to friendship. The relationship at the beginning of normalization was not close as the Thais were still apprehensive over continued Chinese support for the Communist Party of Thailand. Thai leaders pressed for the cessation of assistance but the Chinese kept giving the same answer over and over again—that party-to-party relations would not affect state-to-state relations.

The turnaround in the Sino-Thai relations came after December 1978 when Vietnamese troops invaded and occupied Cambodia. The occupation brought Vietnamese troops closer to the Thai border for the first time. The subsequent Vietnamese incursion into Thai territory at Non Mark Moon in Prachinburi province in July 1980 enhanced the Thai leadership’s perception of the Vietnamese threat to Thai national security. Thailand now faced a hostile and aggressive enemy across the border.

The Vietnamese incursion was an attempt to warn and pressure Thailand to accept the Cambodian occupation as a “fait accompli”. Thailand, however, viewed the Vietnamese action as unacceptable, since Vietnam violated the UN Charter and international law. Moreover, the Vietnamese occupation not only affected Thai security but also destabilized the regional security of Southeast Asia. Subsequently, Thailand mobilized ASEAN support by jointly calling for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Cambodia. Thailand, together with ASEAN, pursued a strategy of pressuring and isolating Vietnam. Diplomatically, Thailand and ASEAN were building a coalition of international forces and international public opinion in the United Nations to put political pressure on Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia.

However, Thailand also realized that international political pressure might not be sufficient. Thailand saw the value of China after the Chinese in February 1979 attacked Vietnam along the border in order to teach the Vietnamese a lesson. Although Vietnam suffered a lot, China also paid a heavy prize (15). The willingness to use force as well as military pressure from China might complement and render international political pressure effective.

China viewed the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia as an expansionist move to dominate the whole Indo-China. Moreover, the close relationship between Vietnam and the Soviet Union made the Chinese suspect that their intention was to encircle China. Both Beijing and Bangkok recognized their mutual interest in resisting the expansion of Vietnamese influence in Indo-China. In fact, Deng Xiaoping warned Thailand about the impending Vietnamese attack when he visited Thailand in early November 1978. He told the Thai leaders: “The hegemonists have stepped up their expansionist activities in Asia, particularly in South East Asia. It is only natural that some Asian and South East Asian statesmen and men of vision should have perceived...the attempts of the hegemonists to reach out toward Southeast Asia and taken positive measures to counter them.” (16)

Deng also proposed that Thailand cooperate closely with China over the Cambodian conflict with Vietnam. General Kriangsak Chomanand, the Thai Prime Minister, did not want to get involved directly in intra-Communist conflict or provoke Vietnamese hostility. Kriangsak only agreed to allow over-flight rights to the Chinese, enabling China to supply the Cambodians without flying over Vietnamese-dominated Laos(17).

The Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia in December 1978 brought about a convergence of security interests between Thailand and China that resulted in strategic cooperation. Strategically, China wished to contain Vietnamese power and control in the region, which would also limit the Soviet Union influence. Therefore, China would need Thailand’s cooperation in providing military support to Cambodian resistance forces, especially the Khmer Rouge. China wanted to supply the Khmer Rouge with arms in its struggle against Vietnamese occupation and there was no better place for a logistic network than through Thailand(18).

The collapse of the Khmer Rouge’s Democratic Kampuchea made the Chinese turn to Thailand to negotiate strategic cooperation. On 13 January 1979 CCP Politburo member Geng Biao, Vice Foreign Minister Han Nianlong and several senior



members of the PLA General Staff flew to Thailand—probably to Utaepao airbase—to meet Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanand, who agreed to allow the use of Thai territory to supply the Khmer Rouge, to provide transport and transit facilities for Cambodian personnel and materials, and to help Khmer Rouge leaders make foreign trips via Thailand(19).

General Kriangsak then asked the Chinese to cease their support for the Communist Party of Thailand and close its propaganda radio, which was allegedly broadcasting from Yunnan. The Chinese complied by closing down the Voice of Thai People Radio in July 1979 and reduced material support for the CPT(20). The Thai government used this opportunity to grant amnesty to Thai Communists who laid down their weapons. By 1985, the Communist Party of Thailand, reduced to a few hundred old Sino-Thai members, ceased to be an internal threat to Thai security.

The logistics deal also created a concrete operational basis for closer cooperation. In providing supplies to the Cambodian resistance and overseeing their activities, Thai military officers found it necessary to coordinate their actions with the Chinese, who continued to have direct access to Khmer Rouge leaders. There had developed a close working relationship between some members of the Chinese Embassy staff and some military officers under the command of Col. Chaovalit Yongchaiyuth, who oversaw the logistic operation and later rose to become Army Commander-in-Chief. This relation not only created strong personal relations but also mutual trust and confidence between the two militaries.

In addition to logistic coordination and support, Thai-Chinese strategic cooperation also covered other areas, including strategic consultation, arms transfer and arms sales. Strategic exchanges and consultations at the highest levels also increased in the 1980s. Thai Prime Ministers always visited China after their formal appointment. Prime Minister PremTinsulanond visited China twice in October 1980 and again in November 1982. The following Prime Minister, General Chatichai Choonhavan, also travelled to China twice in November 1988 and again October 1989. On the Chinese side, after the historic visit of Deng Xiaoping to Thailand in November 1978, Chinese Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang visited Bangkok in February 1981, President Li Xiannian in March 1985 and Prime Minister Li Peng in November 1988, his first trip overseas as Chinese Premier.

Military exchanges also started in the early 1980s as the two countries developed their strategic cooperation. Thai Armed Forces Supreme Commander

General Serm Nanakorn visited China for the first time in May 1981. By 1983, with reciprocal visits of PLA Chief of staff General Yang Dezhi and Supreme Commander of the Thai Armed Forces General Saiyud Kerdphol, the two countries were regularly exchanging visits of their top military commanders. General Saiyud's successors followed his example of visiting China soon after taking command and General Yang Dezhi visited Bangkok again in 1987. Defence Minister Qin Jiwei visited Bangkok in January 1989. Throughout these high-level military exchanges, the subjects discussed included regional security as well as strategic cooperation and military assistances. These exchanges of senior military officials not only enhanced the familiarity and friendship of the two military leaderships but also demonstrated the strategic cooperation as well as the strategic commitment between them.

Chinese civilian and military leaders made clear Beijing's willingness to support Thailand if its security would ever be threatened. PLA Chief-of-Staff Yang Dezhi warned during his 1983 visit to Thailand: "If Vietnam dared to make an armed incursion into Thailand, the Chinese army will not stand idle. We will give support to the Thai people to defend their country." (21) Deng Yingzhao, the widow of Zhou Enlai and also Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, told a visiting Thai Parliamentary delegation that if Thai security was threatened, China would stand side by side with the Thai people (22).

It was not quite clear what the Chinese would do in this circumstance and the Thai military had some understanding that China would apply some military pressure, artillery shelling or troop movement. China continued to maintain a large number of troops—some 12 divisions—along the borders with Vietnam in order to tie down Vietnamese troops so that they could not be used inside Cambodia or along the Thai-Cambodian border. It was reported in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* that a radio-telephone link had been established between the Thai Supreme Command in Bangkok and the Yunnan Military Region Headquarters in Kunming. The arrangement was that Thailand could report Vietnamese attacks or shelling and expect Chinese troops along the Vietnamese borders to activate some form of military pressure (23).

In addition to strategic promises and verbal assurances plus military pressure along the Vietnamese borders, China started to provide some military assistance. In 1982 small arms, including AK-47s, RPG grenade launchers and ammunition, were delivered to the Thai military. Later, during the visit of General Yang Dezhi in 1983, the Thai military requested 130-mm artillery guns to match those that the Vietnamese

were using across its border. The Chinese took two years to decide on the request and delivered 16 130-mm artillery guns, ammunition and some 24 T-59 main battle tanks to the Thai Armed Forces for testing and inspection(24). This grant-in-aid beefed up Thailand's eastern border defence against the Vietnamese incursion.

In March 1987, Thai Army Deputy Chief-of-Staff Lieutenant General Suchinda Kraprayoon announced that Thailand would conclude a large arms deal with China.(25) This was confirmed two months later when General Chavalit Yongchaiyut, Supreme Commander of the Thai Armed Forces, returned from Beijing with an agreement to acquire the following armaments from China: 30 T-69-II main battle tanks, 400 armoured personnel carriers (APC), 10 anti aircraft gun batteries and ammunitions.(26) Thailand also expressed some interest in buying Chinese HY-5 portable heat-seeking anti-aircraft missiles and long-range artillery guns. The arms transfer complimented the growing Thai-Chinese relationship marked by strategic convergence over the Cambodian issues, mutual concern for regional security and frequent high-level official exchanges.

In March 1988, a second major purchase was reportedly made by the Thai military. General Chavalit Yongchaiyut approved the purchase of 23 T 69-II, 360 APCs and 130-mm artillery ammunitions(27). Later in the year, the Royal Thai Navy announced its intention to acquire four Jianghu-class frigates from China (produced by Hu Dong Shipyard in Shanghai), two of which were modified to include helipads. China delivered the first of these frigates in April 1991, another one by the end of the year and the last two by 1992. In 1990, the Thai Navy also ordered two more Jianghu-class frigates with helipads and they were delivered in 1993. A large supply ship was also ordered in 1992 from the same shipyard and was delivered in 1995(28). Moreover, Thailand also expressed interest to buy a number of missiles from China, including the HY-5 portable surface-to-air missiles, the HQ-2J mobile surface-to-air missile, mobile multiple-rocket launchers, a ship-to-ship missile system and air-to-air missile . The Royal Air Force in 1987 ordered 30 units of 37-mm anti-aircraft batteries with radar guidance systems. China also offered F-7 fighter jets (an upgraded Chinese version of Soviet MIG-21) but the Thai Air Force in 1989 declined the offer after some consideration. In August 1990, the Ministry of Defence approved the purchase of 50 C-801 ship-to-ship missiles that were capable of sinking destroyer-sized vessels. The Jianghu frigates delivered to Thailand were equipped with these C-801 missiles as well as anti-submarine torpedoes(29).

These weapons were sold by Beijing to Thailand at a very low “friendship” price. General Chavalit reportedly said that China sold arms to Thailand at only four to five per cent of their actual value, and the terms of repayment were said to be quite generous. In fact, Thailand was reportedly given a ten-year grace period before repayment in instalments and this could be made in cash or in kind, such as agricultural products.

Although the Chinese arms were very cheap, they were not up to the standards that the Thai were used to with American equipment. Most of arms were delivered without manuals. Moreover, the Thai military encountered many problems with the mechanical unreliability of Chinese tanks, failure in communication equipment of the APCs and lack of spare parts. Therefore, to meet the maintenance and the re-supply needs of the Thai Armed Forces equipped with Chinese arms, Thailand signed an agreement with NORINCO, a company affiliated with the Chinese PLA, in January 1989 for the creation of a joint repair and assembly deal for the APCs supplied by China. It was expected that the facility could be expanded to maintain and repair the Chinese tanks as well(30).

The strategic cooperation not only provided Thailand with military equipment but also consolidated the relationship between Thailand and China, especially that between the Thai military and the Chinese PLA. The strategic cooperation also provided the opportunity for Thailand to play the role of an intermediary between China and ASEAN. While ASEAN and Thailand supported the Democratic Kampuchea of the Khmer Rouge to retain its UN seat and prevented the Vietnamese-backed regime in Phnom Penh to gain the legitimacy of worldwide recognition, they also realized that the support in the UN might not hold for long as many countries could not accept the murderous Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime.

Thailand then promoted the creation of FUNCINPEC under Prince Narodom Ronrit and Prince Sihanouk as well as the KPNLF under Son Sann, the former Cambodian Prime Minister. In 1980 Thai leaders tried to convince Chinese leaders, Deng Xiaoping in particular, to consider an ASEAN proposal to create a coalition government that would include non-Communist forces as well as the Khmer Rouge. ACM Sithi Sawetsila, the Thai Foreign Minister, was interviewed regarding his role there and said that he spent about 10 hours discussing the issue with Huang Hua, the Chinese Foreign Minister, as well as a few hours convincing Zhao Ziyang and Deng Xiaoping(31). Finally, Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang gave Beijing consent to a

coalition government led by Prince Sihanouk when he visited Thailand in 1981. After several months of negotiations, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea was formed with Sihanouk as President, Son Sann as Prime Minister and Khieu Samphan of the Khmer Rouge as Vice President and Foreign Minister.

Thailand played an important strategic role not only in convincing the Chinese to broaden the Cambodian resistance by creating the CGDK but also in convincing other ASEAN members to continue supporting the Khmer Rouge. Thailand and China realized the importance of the Khmer Rouge in fighting the guerrilla resistance against the Vietnamese occupation and wanted to maintain their ability to continue their struggle. While ASEAN called for a political settlement to the conflict, they also realized the important role that military pressure would have in forcing the Vietnamese to accept such a settlement. Thailand's ability to convince ASEAN to continue supporting the Khmer Rouge and the combination of military and political strategies was appreciated by the Chinese.

The close strategic cooperation between China and Thailand made many ASEAN countries concerned that the Thai dependence on Chinese arms would make Thailand a strategic client of China, which would increase Chinese influence in the region. Thailand calmed down its ASEAN friends and tried to persuade ASEAN members to see that what China really wanted was friendly state-to-state relations with Southeast Asian nations and that it had given up using Communist insurgencies to threaten these governments. The Thai experience had helped to alleviate such concern and suspicion. ACM Sithi Sawetsila was asked by Chinese Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian to convey the message of friendship<sup>(32)</sup> and hope of normalization to the Indonesian leaders. In many ways, Thailand has assisted China in its relations with ASEAN. Thailand's efforts bore fruit later as China had normalized and established relations with all ASEAN members by the early 1990s.

The convergence of strategic interests against the Vietnamese occupation in Cambodia has forged closer ties between Thailand and China and transformed a friendship into a partnership. The strategic cooperation between the two militaries also brought mutual trust and confidence. In 1989, Vietnam started troop withdrawal from Cambodia and the security threat from Vietnam subsided. In 1991 the conflict over Cambodia ended with the Paris Peace Agreement and the informal collective defence arrangement between Thailand and China became inoperative since Thailand no longer needed Chinese armament and strategic deterrence. Thai-Chinese strategic

cooperation needed to be developed and transformed but Thailand still remained China's most important friend in Southeast Asia.

### **Thai-Chinese Strategic Relations in the Post-Cold War, 1993–2007: Broadening Strategic Partnership**

The demise of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the fragmentation of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s had great impact on the strategic landscape globally as well as regionally. The subsequent end of the Cold War brought about the opportunity and challenges to Thailand and China as well as to their relations. Vietnam had changed and was no longer the security threat because it was weak and isolated. Vietnam had to adapt to new realities by reforming her economy and pursuing an accommodating foreign policy.

During his visit to Vietnam in 1992 Thai Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun invited Vietnam as well as Laos and Cambodia to join ASEAN so that they would have to abide by the same norms, the ASEAN norms—one of which was the peaceful settlement of conflict by negotiation. Vietnam became an observer and later joined ASEAN as full member in 1995, followed by Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999.

The peaceful atmosphere among the states of East Asia in the post-Cold War period set this region apart from the rest of the world. The emerging new world order after the end of the Cold War has opened up possibilities for new approaches to regional security arrangements. As threats from external sources receded, Thailand and ASEAN attempted to establish a new security framework in the region. At the fourth ASEAN Summit in Singapore in 1992, ASEAN leaders agreed to set up a forum for regional security discussion and consultation. Thailand enthusiastically supported the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and hosted the inaugural ARF meeting, which convened in Bangkok in July 1994(33).

The ARF became the only regional security framework covering the whole Asia-Pacific region, and the only one in which all major powers of the region—including the United States, Russia, China, Japan and India—are involved. Thailand recognized that constructive engagement among these major powers was desirable and important for a stable security environment in East Asia. The ARF became a

forum not only for socializing the ASEAN norms to other participants but also for setting new norms so as to promote security and stability in the region through confidence-building measures and preventive diplomacy as well as conflict resolution. At first, China was reluctant to join the ARF because it was not sure about the multilateral regional arrangement and preferred bilateral negotiations. Thailand persuaded China to join and familiarize itself with regional multilateral dialogue. China later became an active member of the ARF and used the experience in setting another regional multilateral security arrangement, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The ARF has thus become an important forum for engaging, socializing as well as sensitizing China.

Moreover, the Chinese economy in the 1990s expanded at an average of seven to eight per cent a year and provided the opportunities for increasing economic interactions between Thailand and China. Thai companies that belonged to the Thai-Chinese families, such as the Charoen Pokpan Group (CP), continued to invest more and more in China. Thai-Chinese relations during this period shifted the focus from strategic cooperation to economic partnership. The bilateral trade increased as the Thai economy continued to boom. However, Thailand was confronted by the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 and had to devalue the baht. The financial crisis spread to other countries in Southeast Asia. China contributed US\$1 billion in the IMF-led rescue plan, which was much appreciated by Thailand.

During the 1990s China also increased its defence budget and modernized its armed forces after witnessing U.S. military superiority in the Gulf War of 1991. China's economic expansion and the defence modernization created the image of the "rise of China" as well as the potential "Chinese threat" in Southeast Asia

The majority of Thai leaders perceived the rise of China as an opportunity for economic cooperation. They believed that the economic growth in China should be encouraged not only because it created valuable trade and investment opportunities but also because it kept China stable and facilitated its integration into the regional community and the world, giving China a stake in the international status quo. The bilateral trade between Thailand and China increased from US\$3.8 billion in 1996 to US\$6.2 and US\$11.6 billion in 2000 and 2003, respectively. Thai exports to China also expanded from US\$1.8 billion in 1996 to US\$2.8 billion and US\$5.6 billion in 2000 and 2003, respectively. Thailand suffered a trade deficit with China as its imports from China increased faster, with a US\$313 million deficit in 2003.

Thai leaders also recognized that China is destined to be a major military power and could upset the regional balance of power. This did not mean that China would pose a threat or come into conflict with countries in Southeast Asia. The feel instead was that China mainly wanted to be recognized and respected as a major power. Also, Thai policymakers saw China behaving as a status quo power that was playing a constructive role in Asia as well as in the world. Thus, Thai policymakers did not subscribe to the view that the rise of a great power like China would cause conflict within the international system.

A few observers had cautioned that China could become a potential threat in the future only if one thought it would be and acted likewise. Other had voiced concern over the spillover effect of the conflict in the Taiwan Straits, which might involve the United States and Japan. However, Thai leaders tended to have a positive view of China and its role in the region.

In order to bring about the peaceful rise of China, Thailand pursued a policy of engagement with China. The aim of engagement is to draw China closer to Thailand and ASEAN so as to integrate China into the regional community at the political, economic and security levels, thereby sensitizing and socializing the Chinese government and officials into accepting the regional norms and principles. The most important regional norms include respecting national sovereignty and territorial integrity, the non-use of force and the peaceful settlement of conflict through negotiation.

Political engagement would increase the dialogue and consultation between China and Thailand and ASEAN at both the bilateral and multilateral levels, allowing both sides to increase cooperation and discuss mutual concerns. Economic engagement—especially with ASEAN—would link and integrate China into a complex web of interdependence, thus increasing the costs on China in the event of any conflict with ASEAN. Security engagement would involve China in a multilateral cooperative security arrangement through the ARF.

At the bilateral level, Thai-Chinese relations had in the past been based on common security interests, especially military ones, but relations in the post-Cold War period have been broadened towards shared strategic interests encompassing political, economic and other interests. These widened interests could be seen from the Joint Communique on a Plan of Cooperation for the twenty-first century that was signed between Thai Foreign Minister Dr. Surin Pitsuwan and Chinese Foreign



Minister Tang Jiasuan in 1999, which laid out the plan for cooperation in various fields.

Both countries agreed to continue their annual consultation between high-ranking officials of their respective foreign ministries. They also agreed to strengthen security cooperation through various confidence-building measures such as promoting cooperation between security agencies, joint studies on strategic and security issues, promoting consultations on security affairs among their military officers and diplomats, sharing experiences between the military of both countries on humanitarian rescues and on disaster prevention.

Thailand is the first country in South East Asia to approach China to sign such a Joint Declaration because Thailand realized that China, with her rapid economic growth, is destined to play important role in the Asia-Pacific region in the twenty-first century while Thailand was still recovering from the 1997 financial crisis. Thailand wanted to broaden its engagement with China so that the relationship could continue to be cooperative and attractive. China later signed similar joint declarations with other members of ASEAN.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Thailand experienced a new political phenomenon. A new political party, Thai Rak Thai Party, by Thaksin Shinwatra, a former policeman and a successful businessman in telecommunication, won a landslide victory in the 2001 general elections. Thaksin Shinwatra became Prime Minister and set up a one-party cabinet. After visiting ASEAN neighbours, Thaksin went to Beijing for an official visit before going to Washington, signalling his preference. He later visited China four more times, in late 2001, 2003, 2004 and 2005.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinwatra often expressed the need for Thailand to have good relations with China because of its growing economic power. China could offer great opportunities for economic interactions and benefits. The rising purchasing power of the Chinese could absorb raw materials, agricultural products and other manufactured goods from Thailand.

Economic engagement was crucial as Thaksin tried to promote more trade with China as well as support free trade negotiations between China and ASEAN and between China and Thailand. At the China-ASEAN Summit in November 2002 in Phnom Penh, China and ASEAN signed an agreement outlining the General Free Trade Agreement framework, under which trade in meat, fishery products and vegetables would be liberalized in 2004. Tariffs on other products would be cut and

abolished in stages and the FTA could be realized as early as 2010. However, Thaksin lobbied Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao for an early harvest on tariffs reduction for Thai fruits and vegetables earlier than the official implementation and the Chinese reluctantly agreed to implement it on 1 October 2003. Thaksin expected Thai fruits such as longans, mangosteens, mangoes and durians to penetrate the Chinese market to bring in more income to the impoverished agricultural sector. Although more fruits were exported to China, they still encountered many non-tariffs barriers at the provincial level. Chinese fruits such as apples and pears and vegetables like garlic were flooding Thai markets at low prices. Fortunately the Chinese demand for rubber and tapioca helped Thailand to create a surplus trade with China in this category.

Prime Minister Thaksin wanted to broaden the strategic relations with China into many areas of cooperation so as to strengthen the relationship but he was overthrown by a coup d'état on 19 September 2006. Nevertheless, China and Thailand continued to negotiate the Joint Action Plan and identified 15 areas of cooperation. In May 2007, Surayuth Chulanond, the new Prime Minister installed by the military, visited China and witnessed the signing of Procès-Verbal to launch the Joint Action Plan on Thailand Strategic Cooperation between Thailand and China. The strategic cooperation, to be implemented for five years, from 2007 to 2011, would cover 15 areas, including: political cooperation; military cooperation; security cooperation; trade and investment; agriculture; industry; transportation; energy; tourism; culture; education and training; health and medical science; science, technology and innovation; information and communication technology; and regional and multilateral cooperation.

In order to achieve the objectives of military cooperation, which are to increase mutual trust and strengthen cooperation for peace and stability of the two countries and the region as a whole, the joint action plan is to maintain dialogue and exchanges of visits at all levels between the militaries of the two countries, encourage combined military exercises focused on countering non-traditional threats and further promote cooperation in the fields of military training, logistics, personnel training, academic exchanges, defence consultation, mutual observation of military exercises, disaster relief and rescue, as well as the defence industry.

Thailand and China agreed on the objective of security cooperation, which is to enhance cooperation in the area of non-traditional security, including prevention and suppression of terrorism, illicit drug trafficking, people-trafficking (including

illegal immigration), money laundering, arms smuggling, sea piracy, armed robbery at sea and other crimes against the safety of navigation, international economic crime and cyber crime.

The joint action plan is expected to enhance capacity building through training and study visits and the sharing of experiences that each has expertise in, accelerate the conclusion of the establishment of the Thailand-China Joint Working Group on Non-Traditional Security Cooperation (Thailand-China JWG) as a mechanism to exchange views, share information and strengthen cooperation on non-traditional security issues among relevant agencies and promote close cooperation among law enforcement agencies.

In fact, the strategic cooperation has started to broaden after General Chaovalit Yongchaiyut's visit to China as Defence Minister in June 2001. Chaovalit, in attempting to institutionalize high-level military relations, proposed annual defence meetings to his Chinese counterpart, General Chi Haotian, who agreed to the idea. The formal defence security consultation by the Ministries of Defence of both countries have become an annual event since 2002. The purpose was to streamline Sino-Thai military cooperation as well as to help further develop military ties. The consultation usually included exchanges of views on global and regional strategic conditions as well as planning for military cooperation between the two countries.

Later, Thailand also extended China an invitation to observe the annual Thai-U.S. military exercise—the Cobra Gold. In May 2002, China participated for the first time as an observer by sending six military personnel. China has been sending military teams to observe the Cobra Gold military exercise from 2003 up to the present.

In 2003 China invited Thailand to observe Chinese military exercises. Thailand was one of the 15 countries to observe the military exercise—codenamed Northern Sword 0308U—in Inner Mongolia, which involved tank, armored vehicles, artillery, combat helicopters and about 5,000 soldiers. Thailand was also invited to a live ammunition exercise codenamed Iron Fist 2004 along with 60 other foreign observers in September 2004. In September 2005, Thailand again observed Northern Sword at the Chinese tactical training base in Inner Mongolia.(34)

China also proposed joint military exercises but Thailand was reluctant, citing language difficulties and different military doctrines. Thailand, however, eventually agreed to hold a joint naval exercise. In December 2005, the Chinese Navy carried out

a search-and-rescue exercise with the Thai Navy, the first-ever joint exercise between China and Thailand. The Chinese vessels involved, including destroyers and supply ships, also made port visits.

On 16–29 July 2007, Thailand and China also participated in a joint military exercise codenamed Strike 2007 in Guangzhou. The focus of the training exercise was counter-terrorism. About 30 special-forces officers from the Royal Thai Army and the PLA practised jungle warfare, marksmanship, martial arts, climbing, helicopter assault and anti-terrorist and hostage-rescue drills(35). The training exercise also included a simulated assault on a drug smuggler's base.

In addition to security consultation, military exercise cooperation and joint military training and exercises, Thailand and China also cooperated in military educational exchanges. Each year Thai military officers were sent to the National Defense College in China to learn about Chinese strategic thinking and military plans. Now there are many Thai military personnel who can speak and write Chinese. More and more military officers will be sent to learn the Chinese language in China so that the military cooperation between China and Thailand can be further advanced.

Thai-Chinese relations in the post-Cold War period have continued to be friendly and close. Military leaders of the two countries have agreed to expand their activities and cooperation into new areas to strengthen the relationship. Thailand seeks to benefit from the increasing prominence of its partner while China needs a close friend in the region to alleviate fears of its rising power and facilitate cooperative relations that it attempts to build in Southeast Asia. The non-traditional security threat has become the focus of the strategic partnership of the two countries. Thailand and China will continue to cooperate strategically so as to maintain the close friendship, mutual interest and comprehensive partnership.

## **Conclusion**

The close cooperation between Thailand and People's Republic of China has been influenced by strategic considerations and interests of both countries. After the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between Thailand and China in July 1975, the relationship at the beginning was cordial but not close because Thai leaders especially the military and security elite, continued to suspect Communist China. China did not stop supporting insurgency activities of the Communist Party of Thailand, which was the source of suspicion and antagonism since China became

Communist in 1949. China kept on telling the Thai leaders during the negotiation for formal diplomatic relation that the party to party relations would not affect the state to state relations. The civilian leaders seemed to accept the argument as they were more concerned with the global strategic shift among the three major powers, especially the normalization between China and the US, and the regional change of the Communist victory in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in April 1975. The recognition of China was a strategic decision to ensure external security and to minimize internal challenge as well as to promote economic interests.

Relations made a sharp turn after Vietnam in December 1978 invaded and occupied Cambodia, Thailand's neighbour and China's client. The Vietnamese occupation in Cambodia threatened Thai national security and regional stability. Thailand and China came closer strategically as their interests converged in opposing Vietnamese influence in Cambodia. The security partnership between Thailand and China strengthened the political and economic relations. The two governments consulted their strategies and the armed forces coordinated their assistance to the Khmer resistance against Vietnamese occupation, subsequently bringing about mutual understanding and trust. Thailand also played an important mediating role between China and ASEAN, convincing ASEAN about Chinese sincerity and friendship. Thailand purchased Chinese military equipments for the first time in mid 1980s at a friendship price. Vietnamese troop withdrawals in 1989 signalled the end of security cooperation phase and the beginning of the new economic partnership, as more and more Thai entrepreneurs invested in China during the post Cold War of the 1990s.

The financial crisis of 1997 made Thailand aware of its vulnerabilities and decided to expand the cooperation with China by signing in 1999 the Joint Communiqué on a Plan of Cooperation for the twenty-first century. The rapid expansion of Chinese economy contributed to the rise of China, destined to play significant role in regional and global politics. Thailand wanted to broaden its engagement with China so that the relationship continued to be relevant and attractive. In 2001, Thaksin Shinwatra, the new Prime Minister of Thailand, was keen to expand the cooperation into the strategic partnership with China. The Thai armed force institutionalized the annual defense consultation in 2002, followed by observation of Chinese military exercises in 2003 and joint military exercise in 2005.

In addition Thailand and China also cooperated in military educational exchanges and Thai military officers were sent to study in the Chinese National Defense College every year.

The October 19, 2006 Coup d'état against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinwatra did not affect Thai-Chinese relations. China, unlike the West, did not criticize the change, and stated only that this was the internal affair of Thailand. The military installed Prime Minister, Surayuth Chulanond later visited China in May 2007 and witnessed the signing of Joint Action Plan on Thailand Strategic Cooperation with China, which covered 15 areas in the next five years. The broadening and deepening engagement with China would expand the cooperation between the two countries in other areas in addition to the security and military cooperation.

The deep engagement with China in security and defense as well as other areas would draw China into a complex network of relationships and partnership so as to maintain mutual interests. Thailand would continue to keep close relationship with other major powers, maintaining security alliance with the US, promoting economic relations with Japan, and forging new relationship with India. Thailand has pursued a balanced engagement policy with extra-regional powers so as to be in a position of importance and relevance to all.

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