

# Book reviews

**Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2010, 352 pp.**

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Pavin Chachavalpongpun is a former Thai diplomat who has commented extensively on Thai foreign policy. He has now produced a book that focuses specifically on the foreign policy of Thaksin Shinawatra during the time he was Prime Minister from 2001 to 2006 and when Thaksin's foreign policy *was* Thailand's policy. The book is full of interesting detail. The more one reads it, the more it becomes apparent that Thaksin's approach is a lot easier to describe than to analyse.

As Duncan McCargo states in his foreword, 'Thaksin's political career has been widely documented and discussed, but this book . . . is the first extended study of the controversial premier's foreign policy'. Or should that be 'the premier's controversial foreign policy'? For Thaksin not only launched a whole series of initiatives, but executed them in a radically new way. In a sense, his approach to foreign policy was all of a piece with his approach to domestic policy in which, drawing on his business background, he sought to run the country as if he were the CEO of a company called Thailand plc.

Needless to say, when this radical 'CEO' approach was applied to foreign affairs, the traditional foreign policy elite was shaken up more than a little. Not only was policy largely made in Government House, not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but Thaksin also sought to introduce a 'people-centred' foreign policy. Mirroring his populist approach to domestic policies, he tried to find ways to involve the people directly in foreign policy, particularly those living close to Thailand's borders with its immediate neighbours. Significantly, Thaksin would speak of 'the people's interests' rather than 'the nation's interests', a form of words that might also seem to presage a diminished role for those

experts, both civilian and military, accustomed to think in terms of the interests of the nation.

Pavin provides us plenty of information about Thaksin's style and his policies. For Thaksin's style was very personal, quite literally. He put a great deal of emphasis on personal links with other leaders, both in the region and further afield. As if to emphasize this point, at the very beginning of the book are 32 colour photos, almost all of Thaksin with the leaders of other countries. (It might have been worth making the point that there are systemic disadvantages to a foreign policy based on personal links with other leaders, at least if they are elected. Few of the democratic leaders courted by Thaksin are still in power, though most of the autocrats remain.)

In terms of policy, Thaksin focused above all on Asia, especially China and Thailand's immediate neighbours in South East Asia. While relations with the USA remained important and he was supportive of the 'war against terror', he paid less attention to Europe and more general Western concerns over such issues as democracy in Burma. Then there was his lack of concern for human rights, evidenced domestically in his policy towards the far South and his savage 'war on drugs'. Although he claimed to wish to reinvigorate ASEAN, a traditional pillar of Thai foreign policy, in fact the organization represented 'old politics' for him. In the main, his initiatives sought to create new structures, or at least to bypass old structures. Among the more significant were:

- the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS): this was Thaksin's top priority, an attempt to establish an economic grouping of Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia – a 'baht zone';
- the Chiangmai Initiative, to try to create an Asian bond market – an idea with its roots in the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis;
- the Asia Co-operation Dialogue (ACD), which consisted of a rather free-form dialogue with no need for a fixed agenda or consensus; and
- a push to negotiate a series of bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) with Thailand's major trading partners.

But all too often these initiatives were more remarkable for their presentation than for their sustainability – McCargo notes in his foreword that Pavin's book lays out 'both the boldness and often the hollowness of Thaksin's numerous international initiatives'.

Pavin starts by posing some sensible questions: Thaksin says that he made changes in Thailand's foreign policy for the benefit of Thailand and its people. Is that true? In particular, did he change the fundamental principles, or did he just switch the emphasis? There are various different ways of answering the question, and in Chapter Two, Pavin attempts to distil some basic principles from a review of Thai diplomacy over the centuries, from the long period of subservience to China, through the colonial period to the 'periodic opportunism' of the post-war period, in which a relationship of 'strategic clientelism' with the USA gradually evolved into 'equidistance'. He seems to conclude, like many before him, that over the centuries the essential aim of policy has always been to preserve Thailand's independence, and to that end to bend pragmatically with the wind, whatever its direction – another confirming instance of Lord Palmerston's famous dictum, 'Nations have no permanent friends or allies, they only have permanent interests'. On this basis, the increased emphasis given by Thaksin to Asia, and particularly China, could be considered as no more than a necessary response to an evident change in the direction of the economic wind.

But many believe that Thaksin sought to bend the wind rather bending with it, and that what made his policy qualitatively different was his evident use of diplomacy to promote not just Thai commercial interests, but his own personal business interests, especially with the near neighbours. And the most substantial and most revealing aspect of the book is the detail Pavin provides on the policy of 'forward engagement' with Burma, Laos and Cambodia in terms of Thaksin's personal business interests. This ACMECS initiative was his top foreign policy priority. It was presented as an attempt to counterbalance Vietnamese and Chinese influence and to set up a baht zone. But Thailand's GDP was 91% of the GDP of the whole zone, and the initiative was increasingly seen by the neighbours as insincere and exploitative, based on hegemonic objectives of domination.

Pavin takes us through the detail. While for the Thais the Burmese are the long-established 'other', resource-rich Burma has traditionally held great commercial attraction for the Thai business elite. Under Thaksin, who had personal interests in projects such as the IP Star satellite and the upgrading of the telecoms network, business links prospered and Thailand was Burma's top trading partner in 2005, when gas constituted 80% of Burmese exports to Thailand. But the political aspects of the relationship did not prosper. The so-called 'Bangkok Process', which was launched ostensibly as a way to promote

democracy in Burma, never achieved any sort of momentum. The Burmese junta never bought into it and the reality of Thaksin's business links ultimately led him to be the principal apologist for the Burmese.

Cambodia is another neighbour with a historic hostility towards Thailand, and for that reason the Thai military have been accustomed to playing a central role in policy towards Cambodia. But Thaksin based his policy on business. He already had extensive commercial interests in Cambodia (Cambodia Shinawatra was the second largest mobile phone operator and the fifth largest Internet provider) and he tried to establish a business relationship between the two countries via his personal links with Premier Hun Sen. He seems to have got on well with Hun Sen, but the ransacking of the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh in 2003 showed the depths of resentment at Thai economic imperialism. It is not so easy to dispel a deep-seated historic animosity, as is shown by the continuing problems over Khao Phra Wihan (Preah Vihear).

For rather different historical reasons, the Lao have always seen Thailand as a threat, yet the business-led approach to Laos prospered and there was real progress in hydroelectric projects of benefit to both countries. Thailand, with 42% of all FDI, was the largest foreign investor in Laos (Lao Shinawatra held 49% of the government telecoms company). But relations were complicated by the considerable number of refugees from Laos living in camps in Thailand and the attacks on Laos allegedly mounted from Thailand by the Hmong.

To reduce foreign relations to economic relations is already an oversimplification, but these details bring out clearly the extent to which Thaksin's efforts were contaminated by his vested interests, which crucially made it difficult to say hard words to customers. Pavin is right to emphasize this aspect of Thaksin's policy because that is what sets him apart from other Thai foreign policy practitioners. But we should not forget that internationally Thaksin started well. Initially, his energy and drive led some people to suggest that he might eventually have a role to play as the unofficial spokesman of the ASEAN countries. But, always attracted by new horizons, he did not put in the sustained and consistent effort required. And, leaving aside the additional complications of his business dealings, there is a sense in which his undoubted talents led him to overplay the hand. For ultimately, Thailand did not have the resources and the standing in the world community to support and sustain the leadership role implicit in his initiatives.