

National Democratic Party is one of four coalition partners in the cabinet, and of Deputy Premier Pichai Rattakul, who is known as a "soft liner," a former foreign minister who has good channels to the Hanoi regime and has met privately with Vietnamese leaders, including secret talks last year in Paris with Thach. Pichai, in an exclusive interview with this writer in Bangkok on May 27 (see below), confirmed that he will host Thach for a private dinner on the June 9, and implied that he will pursue Thach on the Kampuchea issues Siddhi may not be willing to touch.

The views of men like Kriangsak two of the parties in the government, are an important factor in determining the future of Thai policy and therefore whether a real breakthrough in negotiations is possible. The view of these circles is that a negotiated solution must include not only a guaranteed phased withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea, but also a total cutoff of Thai support for the Khmer Rouge and cutoff of Chinese arms, supplies, and backing for their operation. Such circles, sources say, would accept a face-saving gesture in the form of a Laotian 1975-type political coalition government in Phnom Penh, perhaps including Sihanouk along with Heng Samrin, while recognizing the reality of Vietnamese domination. As one source put it, "We don't scream about the presence of 40,000 Vietnamese troops in Laos, do we?"

However, the reality in Bangkok is that policy on these matters is being made not by civilians but by the military, and by quasi-military figures like Air Chief Marshal Siddhi. Siddhi is former head of the powerful national security council whose current head, troop Air Captain Prasong Soonsiri, is very close to him. Siddhi and Prasong are said to be the key policy makers on the Kampuchean issue; both men are very anti-Vietnam in their views and close to Chinese thinking. According to a Thai political source, General Prem, who went to school with Siddhi, relies totally on their advice and has little independent judgment on these issues.

However, the military is not completely unified in its support for the hard-liners. Army Commander-in-Chief Gen. Arthit Kamlang-ek, the power behind the throne of the Prem government, backs the hard-line view; but Thai sources say that other military figures, such as Supreme Commander General Saiyud Kerdphol and Fourth Region Commander General Harn Linanond, are more "open-minded" and "flexible." Those military circles are said to share concern with General Kriangsak over the dangers of the Chinese role in the region and of the increasingly close Thai-Peking link. Continued confrontation with Vietnam, which they oppose, would only aid Chinese influence in Bangkok.

The complexities of the Thai situation, not to mention difficulties with ASEAN, the uncertainty regarding U.S. views on a settlement, and the question of what degree of flexibility Hanoi will ultimately show, seem to point to this diplomatic season being insufficient for a negotiating breakthrough, but the momentum is beginning to go in that direction.

Interview: Deputy Minister of Thailand

'We must mend fences

Below are excerpts from an interview with Pichai Rattakul, deputy prime minister of Thailand, conducted on May 27 by Asia Editor Daniel Sneider in Bangkok. Pichai Rattakul was elected leader of the Democrat Party last year, and has won a seat in parliament from Bangkok in the past four elections. He served as foreign minister twice, in 1975 and in 1976, both times in the government of M. R. Seni Pramoj, who was formerly leader of the Democrat Party. Pichai Rattakul was born in 1926 in Bangkok.

Sneider: Some say that the new government has adopted a more flexible policy toward Vietnam and toward the Kampuchea question. Is this true?

Pichai: The stated policy of the prime minister regarding foreign affairs does not differ too much from the statements by the previous government. What people have been saying, that there seems to be some flexibility, refers to a remark made by the foreign minister. So it depends very much on one's approach. In writing it doesn't differ too much.

Sneider: Is the 30 kilometer proposal a change from the ASEAN or the International Conference on Kampuchea [ICK] position?

Pichai: First, one has to understand that this was mentioned by the foreign minister during the campaign. Secondly, I would say, personally, that there is some flexibility with regard to these remarks, because before, the foreign minister had never uttered such a word. He had always been insisting that the Vietnamese would have to pull out or to withdraw from Cambodia. But this time, he says that the Vietnamese troops can be withdrawn from the Thai border 30 kilometers. This could be interpreted as flexibility.

Sneider: What do you expect from Nguyen Co Thach's visit?

Pichai: He will be having a meeting with the foreign min-

with our neighbors'

ister, but I do not anticipate that there will be any *deep* confrontation regarding Kampuchea on this trip—*deep enough*, let's put it that way. But I think the time is not right to go very deeply into the Kampuchean problem. He will be having dinner with me on the 9th as well. I will talk to him about the points which we left in Paris, the proposals I had made in Paris with him.

I will also touch on the government's policy of foreign affairs, which has added one point: that the Thai government is willing to cooperate in the economic field and trade with any country. This has never been mentioned before. On the basis of the statement made by the Prime Minister, I think this should be a good initiative. Probably we could not be in a position to solve the Kampuchean problem right there, but at least the new initiative could take place.

Sneider: Could you describe your Paris proposals?

Pichai: I told Nguyen Co Thach very frankly—although at that time I was not in the government—that I could not agree with him in sending his troops into Kampuchea. . . . He has given many reasons—the Chinese threat, and so on. But as I told him, I cannot accept, the Thai people cannot accept this reason. So first and foremost, this matter of withdrawing their troops from Kampuchea will have to be taken into consideration, and I don't mind if there is a timetable for partial withdrawal. That was the first time the partial withdrawal was mentioned, and a few months later, he did say that publicly. As you know, according to intelligence reports, the latest withdrawal of troops was quite significant, not like the previous few. I think that he was quite sincere in keeping his word, I mean the latest one. This is a good gesture from the Vietnamese. What timetable, then? I will have to ask him: "What is your timetable?"

Sneider: Is there some relationship in your mind between a timetable for withdrawal and a political solution as far as the

composition of the government in Kampuchea is concerned?

Pichai: This has also been mentioned, but I would say that the first gesture the Vietnamese could use is to show good will. This could be done only through a timetable for withdrawal. At that time, while they are withdrawing, then we could touch on other problems as well—elections, composition of the government, the China threat, and so on. But the Vietnamese will have to take the initiative in setting up at least a tentative timetable of withdrawal.

Sneider: Do you regard as positive the proposals that have been made from their side for negotiations between ASEAN and the Indochinese countries without the presence of the Heng Samrin government and without preconditions regarding the agenda?

Pichai: This has also been mentioned in Paris when I met with him. Thach was ready to meet with ASEAN, or representatives of ASEAN, without Heng Samrin's participation. But on this, I do not know the line of approach of the Thai government as yet. I have not been able to consult on this matter with the foreign minister yet. The Vietnamese were trying so hard for a regional conference; we were trying so hard for the international conference [laughs]. . . .

Sneider: Are you saying that under conditions of some guaranteed withdrawal that the question of an international conference can possibly be dropped?

Pichai: Not entirely dropped. You see, Thach has never mentioned dropping the whole ICK.

Sneider: No, he is saying only that a regional conference should convene.

Pichai: Yes, but in order to convene a regional conference, to my mind you have to show some good will by setting up a timetable of withdrawal. Then the ball would be in our court.

Sneider: Some say that the Vietnamese position in the long term will get weaker and weaker due to the burdens of Cambodia and other factors, and ASEAN should hold fast to its negotiating position, since it will become stronger. Do you agree with that viewpoint?

Pichai: I agree to some degree, and I think that this is a reality, that Vietnam is suffering a great deal. But the policy of bleeding Vietnam, I do not agree to that for the mere reason that I do not believe—I have never believed that they cannot stand the bleeding, if one wants to bleed them. They have had such an experience, which all of us know so well, and trying to bleed them to death, to my mind, will not work—although they *are* bleeding, I know that. Vietnam is not a nation which cannot bear the torture or the bleeding. I don't think that this is the right way to come to a political solution. On the contrary, I would say—and as I said I'll be talking to Thach—that in the long run, Thailand and ASEAN, and even the U.S., I think, would like to see that Vietnam is on our side. Through us, they would be able to revitalize their ener-

gies. So why should we bleed them, in that case, if one looks at the long run?

Sneider: It's no secret that the Chinese have the view of bleeding Vietnam. Is there a difference between the interests of China vis-à-vis Vietnam, and the interests of the ASEAN countries?

Pichai: Oh yes, but lately, I think from the news one gets from Peking, it seems that Peking is also in favor of more flexibility toward Vietnam.

Sneider: So you think there would be no strong objections from the Chinese, if ASEAN were to open direct political negotiations with Vietnam?

Pichai: I would not think that the Chinese would openly object. The Chinese are also a people of deep thinking, and I don't think they would do anything openly to obstruct us. I think it depends on us and ASEAN, how to deal with the Chinese. If we set our goals, then we will have to solve the obstacle. Probably China is one of the obstacles, I don't know.

I know that it is up to us to try to overcome the obstacles. Only a few years ago, China was spending money like anything to help Vietnam fight against the United States. Who knows? One of these days very soon, China might change. Who would have thought that China would become such a bitter enemy against the Vietnamese? Anything can happen. I went to Peking in 1975, before diplomatic relations were established, and I was accused of being a communist. I thought China would be a good balancing power in Southeast Asia, and then when I came back home I went to Hanoi in 1976 on a return trip, because Hanoi is our neighbor as well as Cambodia and Laos; and here again I was accused of being a communist. We had very good relations with the United States, but at that time Carter had no policy whatsoever regarding Southeast Asia, and we were very concerned about that. We had to depend on China by establishing diplomatic relations. But what about our neighbors, whom we used to fight against? We have got to mend our fences.

Sneider: Do you think that the foreign policy of the United States under certain circumstances could be an obstacle as well?

Pichai: No. The United States' policy toward this matter will not become one. I think the U.S. policy toward this region does not mean the U.S. goes the whole way with China all the time. Therefore, I think the United States will go along with us if we set our target very clearly and very distinctly. Without any split with China, the United States will support our policy.

Sneider: What do you do with the Khmer Rouge under conditions of a settlement that may or may not include them?

Pichai: That's a big question mark. Prince Sihanouk is thinking about that. Everybody is thinking about that.

Sneider: Are you concerned that the Khmer Rouge might initiate or aid communist guerrilla activity inside Thailand?

Pichai: No, I have no worry at all about that. I have no concern whatsoever about that.

Sneider: So what is the problem?

Pichai: I think Sihanouk continues to play a very vital part in the future of Kampuchea. Now, things might happen in such a way that Sihanouk will come to a point where he will have to decide regarding Khmer Rouge participation in solving the Kampuchea question. That is a big problem.

Sneider: Could you envisage a situation in which Sihanouk entered into a political coalition government with Heng Samrin?

Pichai: There is a possibility.

Sneider: Is that something which you might discuss with the Vietnamese foreign minister?

Pichai: Frankly speaking, I have already discussed that with him.

Sneider: And can you say what his response was?

Pichai: Thach's response was neither negative nor positive. He only mentioned to me that he looks at Prince Sihanouk as a man who he thought could cooperate with him—let's put it that way. Especially when Pol Pot put Sihanouk under house arrest during the Khmer Rouge period, and the Vietnamese government thought that when they liberated Kampuchea, let's put it that way, Sihanouk might be the key figure to unite Kampuchea. But he was really disappointed when Sihanouk went to the United Nations and condemned Heng Samrin, and at the same time said, "I'm not going back to Kampuchea ever again, I hate the Khmer Rouge, I hate Pol Pot most of all."

Sneider: Now he's allied with them—

Pichai: Exactly, exactly. Thach never says anything negative or positive regarding Sihanouk, so that's why I would say that Sihanouk still continues to be a very important factor in uniting Kampuchea.

Sneider: There is some urging on the part of the Malaysian government that Sihanouk should change his residence from Peking and Pyongyang. Some people have interpreted that offer as an effort to give him a little more independence from China.

Pichai: Well, it is quite logical and I think it's quite practical also, it's not only logical.

Sneider: Do you think it's possible he might accept?

Pichai: Then it depends on the influence of China again [both laugh]. That's where Sihanouk gets the money right now.

Sneider: You were the last Thai foreign minister to go to Hanoi. Do you think it's possible that Mr. Siddhi will make a second visit?

Pichai: Well, Thach was here as the foreign minister of Vietnam. So the next time should be foreign minister Siddhi, which he has already said in principle.

Sneider: General Kriangsak has expressed some criticism of previous Thai policy as being perhaps too inflexible regarding Vietnam. Your views are also said to be different than those of others in the Thai government.

Pichai: That's right.

Sneider: The differences between the views that you and General Kriangsak may hold, and those of the Thai minister—are these strong differences?

Pichai: General Kriangsak's foreign policy when he was prime minister was exactly the policy I started in 1976. The way of approaching the various problems regarding Vietnam, Kampuchea, and Laos was almost identical. We thought that, being neighbors, we cannot afford to confront each other. And our neighbors can't afford to confront us either. So while one has looked after one's own national interests, one also has to be more sincere in solving the many problems that confront the two countries. The approach therefore differs. I was also a very severe critic of the performance of the previous government.

Sneider: Some say that the problem in this area is that everything is a subset of a larger strategic confrontation between China, the Soviet Union and the United States. Another view is that these problems are more determined within the region itself, and not by the outside powers. Do you think these two views define different approaches?

Pichai: Quite true. What Kriangsak did, and what I did in 1976, to put it very frankly and into simple words, was to act on a very free-handed, independent basis. I did not bother to think about the strategy or the interest of the superpowers. I was thinking only of my own interest. But the previous government might think otherwise, that one has to think about the superpowers as well as to consider our own interests.

Sneider: I have heard a lot of talk that the Vietnamese would be in a weaker position as a result of a Sino-Soviet reconciliation.

Pichai: Well, Vietnam might have some concern over the dialogue between Peking and Moscow, there is no doubt about that. But I think that will not induce them to change their attitudes and policy. This also applies to ASEAN. But probably Thailand thinks otherwise. I do not know about the previous government.

Sneider: Do you see a possibility that Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia could cooperate in something like the Mekong River Development Project?

Pichai: Very much so. I envisage that and I have every reason to believe that cooperation with Laos and Cambodia, and Vietnam to a great degree, regarding the lower Mekong Basin project, is going to take place.

Sneider: Do you think that would provide the basis for a different kind of relationship?

Pichai: Exactly. That is what I hope. I am talking with Thach about this, as well as trade. This could be a good start, as I have mentioned earlier.

Sneider: Doesn't it seem that the Cambodia problem is standing in the way of other possibilities which could or should be realized in the interests of all the countries involved?

Pichai: That's a very big question to answer. I can't answer that right away. But since our government stand was and still is that we cannot recognize Heng Samrin, with Heng Samrin's participation we would be put in a very awkward position indeed.

Sneider: If you leave aside the presence of Vietnamese troops, do you consider the Heng Samrin government to be a legitimate political force?

Pichai: Oh, yes; they staged a coup d'état, let's put it that way. They themselves, Heng Samrin, staged a coup d'état and toppled Pol Pot. Then I have got to face the reality, the real politics, the fact that it's Heng Samrin who staged a coup d'état and took over the administration of the country.

Sneider: Let's extend that argument and say that they staged a coup d'état and exercised the right of any country to ask—

Pichai: Invite.

Sneider: —to invite the presence of foreign troops.

Pichai: Well, that will have to come later on. But as I have told Thach, we cannot accept the reality that you have marched in your troops and toppled Khmer Rouge and put up Heng Samrin as the president of the country. I told Thach, very frankly, if you could only have left the situation as it was for another six months or one year, Pol Pot would have gone automatically. The situation was almost ripe at that time.

Sneider: But what if another half a million people had died in that six months or a year?

Pichai: Well, people had already died before that. Pol Pot took charge for three years.

Sneider: One Thai diplomat told me that if the Vietnamese had only stopped at the eastern bank of the Mekong river, that would have been okay.

Pichai: No, no. I wouldn't agree with that. You're not sticking to your principles then. I had mentioned that to Thach. Another gesture would have been to withdraw. If you don't have any timetable for a total withdrawal, at least withdraw all your troops to the east bank of the Mekong river.