

Thailand opens the door to Indochina

by Linda de Hoyos

On Dec. 23, Thailand's Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, in a speech before the Foreign Correspondents' Club, announced a shift in Thailand's foreign policy with his public invitation to Kampuchean Prime Minister Hun Sen to visit Bangkok. Thailand has no diplomatic relations with the Vietnam-backed Phnom Penh regime, as it is one of the staunchest backers of the Cambodian resistance coalition and has abetted the supplying of the Khmer Rouge by the People's Republic of China.

The invitation to Hun Sen, which was immediately accepted in principle by the Kampuchean prime minister, culminates a series of steps Thailand has taken to advance relations with the countries of Indochina—Vietnam, Kampuchea, and Laos. According to informed journalist Jacques Beckaert, Hun Sen had already secretly met with Thailand's Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, when Chavalit had visited the Laotian capital of Vientiane in October 1988.

In explaining his initiatives Dec. 23, Chatichai declared that it was crucial to take steps for regional cooperation, and implied that Thailand's initiatives have the full imprimatur of the other ASEAN countries.

He also indicated Thailand's willingness to talk directly to Vietnam: "I also believe that Vietnam is in the process of adjusting itself to reality and reaching out in earnest to adversaries, both to extricate itself from the Kampuchean quagmire and to develop its ailing economy. For this reason, I would like to reaffirm my desire to visit Hanoi, when circumstances are appropriate." Chatichai also added two days later that he would like to visit Hanoi after Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savestila returns from his Jan. 9-12 visit to Vietnam.

Relations are also moving apace between Laos and Thailand. In the last six months, it would appear as if the negotiations forced upon the two countries in the aftermath of the Bon Rham Klao border war of last February have become the vehicle for renewal of ties between these two culturally and ethnically close neighbors. Laotian Deputy Foreign Minister Soubanh Salithilath arrived in Bangkok Dec. 27 for border talks. The negotiations reportedly resulted in agreement "satisfactory to both sides" for the resolution of the border issue.

As Soubanh arrived in Bangkok amid much fanfare, members of the Thai House Committee on Foreign Affairs, including former Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanan, left

to cross the Mekong River to Vientiane for a two-day visit and discussions on the Mekong River development project. In fact, on Dec. 29, Chatichai had asked Japanese ambassador Hisahiko Ikasaki to convey his request that Japan help finance the construction of a bridge across the Mekong River that would link the Laotian capital with the northeastern Thai city of Nong Khai. The concept for the bridge had been agreed upon when Chatichai himself visited Laos in November.

Adjustments to regional changes

That Chatichai's diplomacy toward Thailand's neighbors on the east is a departure from past practices there can be no doubt. In an editorial following the prime minister's Dec. 23 speech, the *Bangkok Post* noted that Thailand's "traditional foreign policy usually devolves on relations with the West and ASEAN. . . . In focusing our relations with neighboring countries, Chatichai shows his realism as well as pragmatism in rising to the challenges of the rapidly changing political and economic pace in this region."

Among the changes perceived in Thailand is the consistent pattern of American political and emotional withdrawal from Southeast Asia. Numerous Thai editorials and commentaries over the last year have called upon Thailand to shift its foreign policy to one that seeks to balance and maneuver among the superpowers—including the People's Republic of China—rather than basing policy upon reliance on the United States.

However, the United States has officially endorsed the shift. Richard Childress, director of Asian Affairs for the U.S. National Security Council, according to a Thai foreign ministry spokesman, told Siddhi Savestila that "the United States will stand behind the new initiatives of the Thai policy." Childress met with Siddhi just before the American himself was to visit Vientiane.

There is also speculation that the high publicity given in the *Washington Post* in late October to reports of alleged Thai skimming of U.S. funds designated for the non-communist factions of the Cambodian resistance coalition, was the State Department's not-so-polite way of pressuring Thailand to loosen its bonds to Beijing's backing of the Khmer Rouge. Such American pressure may have helped to prompt Thailand's new readiness to deal with Hanoi and Phnom Penh, in particular.

However, other sources warn that the shift in Thailand's foreign policy was crafted by the academics in the prime minister's private think tank, some of whom are known to have close ties to the leftist circles around General Chavalit. For his part, Chavalit has led the way in Thailand's efforts to forge relations with Beijing and Moscow. Various members of the think tank have been pressuring for a change in Thai foreign policy, and in the early days of Chatichai's prime ministership, had come out in open opposition to the more traditional policies of Foreign Minister Siddhi.