

*The following article by Pavin Chachavalpongpun
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Yingluck needs to Invent a New Kind of Thai Diplomacy

Yingluck Shinawatra will soon emerge as Thailand's first female prime minister. Her election victory clearly indicates that the majority of Thais disapproved of politics à la Abhisit Vejjajiva. The past 30 months under Abhisit's rule were marked by bloody protests and brutal crackdowns on demonstrators. Yingluck surely wants to get her priorities right so as to avoid the mistakes made by the previous regime as well as her own brother, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Yingluck's top priority will be to heal the rift in Thai society. She is expected to concentrate on the ongoing reconciliation process. But this focus must not overshadow other equally significant priorities, including the necessity to promote Thailand's role on the international stage. Yingluck will need to exercise her leadership both within and outside the country. It is now time for Thailand to reinvent itself and to regain a deserved global stature. In other words, she urgently needs a new kind of diplomacy.

When Thaksin served as prime minister from 2001-2006, Thai diplomacy underwent a series of overhauls. Some of these changes were cosmetic, while others were substantial. Thaksin launched a number of unambiguous foreign policy initiatives. He obviously wanted to conquer the world with his ambitious programmes, ranging from the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), the Ayeyawady-Mekong-Chao Phraya Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), and the conclusion of several free trade agreements.

Inside the walls of the Foreign Ministry, Thai ambassadors were appointed as CEOs of their embassies. They could still sip a glass of champagne under an opulent chandelier, but they also had to perform as the country's salesmen. The overwhelming power in the hands of Thai envoys along with the business-centric diplomacy reflected Thaksin's troubling view of

governance. He was accused of exploiting diplomacy to enrich his family business. The soft loans offered to Burma exemplified how foreign policy could be used for accumulating personal wealth, and not national interests.

During the early days of the Abhisit administration, it seemed that the Foreign Ministry under the leadership of Kasit Piromya, an anti-Thaksin figure, was keen to steer away from the flawed Thaksin system. I was led to believe that the Abhisit regime would recognise the benefit of promoting principles, rather than just pure profit as far as Thai diplomacy was concerned. As it turned out, Thailand under the Abhisit-Kasit axis lost both principles and profits. Diplomacy was this time employed to undermine political opponents. The Preah Vihear issue was testimony to how diplomacy was hijacked by the narrow interests of Thai power-holders.

This is an opportunity for Yingluck to repair the tainted image of Thai diplomacy. As Yingluck has no prior experience in the field of diplomacy, we are unlikely to see any grandiose foreign policy initiatives under the Pheu Thai government. But this fact does not necessarily prevent Thailand from acting as a responsible nation or a responsible member of regional society.

First, Yingluck could look into rejuvenating the Thai position in Asean. Asean used to serve as a cornerstone of Thai foreign policy. Yet, both the Thaksin and Abhisit regimes paid little attention to this regional organisation. During the Thai chairmanship of Asean (2008-2009), regional affairs were eclipsed by domestic violence in Thailand. The Abhisit government failed to stop the red-shirt protesters from interrupting the Asean summit in Pattaya in April 2009. That embarrassing incident showed the extent to which both sides of the Thai crisis expressed their disrespect for Asean.

Let's assume that the Yingluck administration will complete its full four-year term. She will then witness Asean achieving its community-building goal in 2015. Yingluck is therefore obliged to ensure that Thailand fulfil all the requirements necessary to meet that goal. To strengthen the political and security community, for example, Thailand under Yingluck may

want to rebuild a meaningful dialogue with Cambodia on the conflict over Preah Vihear both through bilateral and regional mechanisms.

Yingluck must restore Thai faith in Asean, and in particular, its existing dispute-settlement mechanisms. Abhisit's insistence on a bilateral approach was surreal. Thailand and Cambodia are not the only two nations in Southeast Asia. Conflict along the Thai-Cambodian border has impacted negatively on the whole region, particularly on regional peace and security.

Indeed, Thai-Cambodian relations have been erratic over the past few years. In 2008, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) politicised the Preah Vihear dispute so as to undermine the Samak Sundaravej government. The PAD stirred up a sense of nationalism to achieve its political objective, at the expense of worsening Thai ties with Cambodia. Kasit then launched a personal crusade to tarnish the dignity of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen. As a result, the Thai-Cambodian relationship has been left in a messy, and somewhat dangerous, state.

Yingluck must mend these ties, bearing in mind the fact that we can choose our friends but not our neighbours. The so-called elitist regime under Abhisit found it hard to be nice to its next door neighbour; perhaps this was a part of playing to the snobbish Thai elite. A responsible nation, however, will not jeopardise foreign relations to satisfy its domestic agenda. Yingluck has two choices here: either being another snobbish elite or a responsible nation that deserves respect from its Cambodian neighbour.

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