

Thailand's Foreign Affairs Achievements in the Past Four Years

Over the past four years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand has been conducting foreign policy aimed at promoting the interests of the nation and the Thai people. The Ministry has succeeded in connecting Thailand and the Thai people with the international community through the “5S Foreign Affairs Strategy,” which consists of (1) security; (2) sustainability; (3) standard; (4) status; and (5) synergy.

Security

In terms of security, Thailand has strengthened relations with her neighbouring countries at all levels and in all dimensions. As a result, Thailand's bonds with such countries are at the best stage in many years. Our borders are peaceful and a number of new border checkpoints have been opened. This has led to more people-to-people exchanges and significantly increased bilateral trade.

Thailand positions itself as a middle power in the current global context. That is, Thailand pursues its foreign policy in a multi-polar world, which is starting to resemble a new Cold War; in the age of globalisation, where diplomacy must be seen through both political and economic perspectives; and in a world in which our surrounding environment is uncertain and fragile.

Likewise, we need to pursue a balanced, constructive, and strategic engagement with the major powers. This means that there must be an overall balance in our relations with them, but strategic engagement with each major power may differ according to Thailand's interests and international principles. The core of Thai diplomacy is to maintain national and regional security, and to commit ourselves to the principles of mutual respect, mutual trust, and mutual benefits.

For instance, Thailand has continuously deepened cooperation with the United States of America, the People's Republic of China, Japan, India, and Australia, in all dimensions. The President of the United States extended an invitation to the Prime Minister of Thailand to pay an official visit to Washington in October 2017. Subsequently, in 2018, Thailand and the United States organised various activities to celebrate the 185th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

As for Japan, Thailand recently opened a Consulate-General in Fukuoka. The Ministry also organised a trip for more than 600 Japanese business persons to visit Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor project. Sino-Thai diplomacy similarly involves bilateral meetings at many levels to enhance relations in various fields.

Beyond the Asia-Pacific region, Thailand has been proactive in promoting relations with the European Union. The fruits of our diplomatic undertakings are clearly reflected in the European Union's Foreign Affairs Conclusions of December 2017 to resume political contacts at all levels with Thailand. This paved the way for Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha of Thailand's official visits to the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. The Prime Minister was accompanied by Thai businessmen and sought to open doors for the Thai private sector in Europe.

At the regional level, ASEAN has been the cornerstone for maintaining peace in the region for more than 50 years. Thailand is one of the founding members of ASEAN and has played a proactive role in pushing for ASEAN centrality in the regional architecture. It was involved in the creation of the ASEAN Community, the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the materialisation of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). During Thailand's ASEAN Chairmanship this year, Thailand will continue to consolidate the ASEAN Community and reinforce ASEAN centrality in the region, with a view to maintaining regional stability and achieving sustainable security.

When Thailand was the country coordinator for ASEAN-EU relations from August 2015 to August 2018, ASEAN-EU relations became closer. During that time, the Bangkok Declaration on Promoting an ASEAN-EU Global Partnership for Shared Strategic Goals was adopted to demonstrate the shared objective of ASEAN and the EU to build momentum in elevating ASEAN-EU relations towards a strategic partnership in the future.

In terms of new security threats, Thailand has promoted international cooperation to address transnational crimes, such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and international terrorism as well as cross-border environmental issues.

In combating human trafficking, the Royal Thai Government, has taken a holistic approach. For instance, in 2015, Thailand was placed in Tier 3 of the United States' Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report for the second consecutive year. Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai, who was then the Deputy Foreign Minister, paid an official visit to Washington to strengthen confidence and understanding in Thailand's efforts to combat human trafficking with government agencies in the United States. At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs carried out activities to promote greater understanding of Thailand's measures and progress in fighting this problem among relevant agencies and sectors in the United States.

Moreover, the Ministry also organised activities to raise awareness and promote strong partnerships between the government and other sectors, as well as brainstorming sessions with all stakeholders to find a sustainable solution to human trafficking. It facilitated the return of Thai people from overseas who risk being victims of human trafficking. The Ministry also consistently promoted international cooperation on capacity building for government officials.

Thailand worked closely with the United States and Australia in protecting victims of human trafficking through cooperation with the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) and the Australia-Asia Program to Combat Trafficking in Persons (AAPTIP) respectively. Thailand's successful initiatives led to its elevated status from Tier 3 to Tier 2 Watch List in the U.S. State Department's TIP Report for 2017, and Tier 2 in the TIP Report for 2018, which is Thailand's best ranking in the past nine years.

Sustainability

With regard to the second "S" on sustainability, Thailand's theme for its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2019 is "Advancing Partnership for Sustainability". This reflects the importance of driving forward three main strategies: connectivity, sustainability in all dimensions, and a future-oriented community.

Some examples of Thailand's commitment to sustainability are the initiatives to tackle marine debris and to set up an ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue (ACSDSD) to foster better coordination in areas concerning sustainable development. Thailand also seeks to establish an ASEAN Single Window, as this will facilitate trade between ASEAN member states and stimulate growth, both for ASEAN and Thailand.

Connectivity has been pursued through regional cooperation frameworks. Apart from ASEAN, Thailand also gives priority to other regional and sub-regional frameworks. This is reflected in Thailand's active role in hosting the 2nd Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) Summit in Bangkok in 2017 and the 8th Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) Summit in 2018, as both meetings attached special attention to the issue of connectivity and human security.

Connectivity is the foundation for sustainable prosperity in ASEAN. Thailand acknowledges this and initiated the formulation of an ACMECS Master Plan on Connectivity during her Chairmanship of ACMECS. The Master Plan, which was adopted at the ACMECS Summit in 2018, visualises an ACMECS Community that is seamless, synchronised, sustainable and smart. These qualities are all essential to the long-term development of the sub-region.

To expand regional connectivity and implement the Thailand 4.0 policy, Thailand has promoted outward investment among Thai entrepreneurs, and encouraged the exchange of knowledge in areas such as science, technology and innovation among Thailand's regional partners. Thailand has been steadfast in its commitment to hone the country's technological capabilities, especially with regard to the development of smart cities and the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), which would serve as Thailand's and the region's innovative economic powerhouse for years to come.

Additionally, Thailand is an avid player in development diplomacy that offers the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) as an alternative approach to realise the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This "SEP for SDGs Partnership" is especially appealing to developing countries that wish to combine SEP principles with their vision for national development. Currently 24 countries around the world have cooperated with Thailand on SEP projects.

In 2016, Thailand, as Chair of the G77 grouping, played an important role in bridging differences and protecting the interests of developing countries, as well as putting forward the SEP for SDGs Partnership in an effort to raise awareness that developing nations would be better placed to realise their potential if they embraced sustainable development. The United Nations has praised Thailand for its outstanding role in promoting sustainable development through the South-South cooperation framework.

Thailand has a proud diplomatic track record in terms of humanitarian diplomacy as it has been instrumental in providing medical personnel and mobile clinics to aid vulnerable groups, including those in Rakhine state. This stems from the belief that assistance extended to friends benefits not only them, but also the security and safety of Thailand and our regional partners, as we are all interconnected. Thus, this gesture of goodwill and compassion is ultimately mutually beneficial and is the best way to build trust and foster cross-border understanding.

Standard

The third tenet of Thailand's foreign policy is standard. The country's sustainable development must be in line with international standards, with existing deficits taken care of. In particular, the Government has started a campaign to crack down on human trafficking and IUU (Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated) fishing, and to develop the country's civil aviation industry in accordance with the standards set by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO).

The fishing industry is one of the most important sectors in Thailand. Thus, the yellow card issued by the European Union in 2015 due to IUU, was a concern to the Government, which in turn assigned the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be one of the focal points in coordinating with the European Union to tackle the problem. Ambassador Virachai Plasai was appointed as Thailand's chief negotiator, working closely with the Thai Mission to the European Union in Brussels, successfully communicated Thailand's positive progress towards becoming an IUU-free country to European Union counterparts.

Over the past few years, the Thai Government has carried out various legal reforms and on-the-ground measures to protect workers within the industry, eradicate human trafficking, and establish a surveillance system to regulate fishing vessels in the long term. In recognition of Thailand's achievements, the European Union has supported Thailand in sharing success stories and best practices with other ASEAN member states during Thailand's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2019. Thus, Thailand has the potential to be the foremost agent of change in the region, not just for the illegal fishing issue, but also for numerous others, especially those under the United Nations' SDGs.

Civil aviation was another area of concern for Thailand. After the ICAO red-flagged Thailand for its aviation industry's alleged failure to comply with international standards, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs assigned Ambassador Pisan Manawapat, then heading Thailand's working group that would hold several discussions with the United States' Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the European Commission from 2015 to 2017. The discussions were platforms to coordinate and exchange views on the Thai civil aviation standard, as well as to keep both the United States and the European Union informed of Thailand's positive progress. The Government's efforts were rewarded by the ICAO's lifting of the red flag in 2017 and the European Aviation Safety Agency's (EASA) removal of Thailand from its Air Safety List in June 2018. These developments have undoubtedly fostered growth and strengthened confidence in Thailand's civil aviation industry.

Status

The country's status is another prong of our foreign policy strategy. We believe that Thailand's national interests are best served through the concept of soft power, which would in turn enhance Thailand's image and reputation abroad. To this end, Thailand has supported cultural diplomacy to promote Thai food, arts, sports and tourism, which has resulted in a significant surge in Thailand's popularity and considerable uptick in tourism revenue.

Thailand is also of the view that one of the most effective ways to elevate our international status is to transform the country into the “Geneva of Asia”, or the home of numerous United Nations organisations and regional offices. Not only will this bolster the number of foreign expats living in Thailand, but it will also contribute greatly to the economy and society, by generating income from convening international Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) events, and by raising Thailand’s position in influencing international and regional policies.

So far, the Government has initiated numerous policies and legal reforms in efforts to realise this ambition. It should also be noted that Thailand has always attached high priority to multilateral diplomacy since one of the country’s longstanding goals is to nurture international partnerships for cooperation, development, and support for multilateralism, especially amidst the recent trend where unilateralism has clouded many countries’ foreign policy-making.

Synergy

In all the five pillars of Thailand’s foreign policy, synergy is the most crucial. Fruitful policy undertakings and national strategic goals could not be achieved without synergised efforts by all parties involved. Domestically, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs works with various agencies, ministries and civic groups to realise an international strategy that is inclusive and takes into account the concerns of every stakeholder. Internationally, we continue to cooperate closely with diplomatic missions as well as other Thai agencies represented abroad to drive forward and realise our foreign policy in a concerted manner. Along the Thai borders, we work hand in hand with local agencies and Thai provincial governors in order to draw up policies that tackle issues at the grassroots level and take local context into account.

Another key aspect of synergy is people-centred diplomacy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is committed to ensuring the protection of Thai citizens and their interests overseas, both in terms of protection of their rights and privileges while traveling or living in other countries and protection from exploitation. In recent years, we have redoubled our efforts to rescue Thai citizens who have been lured into the illicit human trafficking business. Moreover, Thais who are interested in applying for jobs overseas are encouraged to seek advice and counsel from our consular services.

Last but not least, in this digital age, it is essential to digitalise diplomacy. The Government has taken advantage of the power of the Internet, new communications technologies and social networks in making valuable information

and services easily available to the public and more fully integrated. Using digital tools would help achieve synergy among Thai agencies and diplomatic missions by facilitating seamless communication and coordination across continents, to help serve Thai citizens more efficiently and make foreign policy more synchronised than ever.

The Royal Thai Government's Achievements

It came as no surprise that this Government would be met with initial scepticism from various countries. To restore faith in the Government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs embarked on numerous tasks to help solve economic and social problems, as well as those relating to Thailand's compliance with international standards, which were of great interest to the international community. These tasks have been widely successful, as demonstrated by Thailand's achievements in civil aviation standards and the crackdown on IUU (illegal, unreported, and unregulated) fishing, to name but a few.

With regard to the future of Thailand's fishing industry, the Government wishes to emphasise that the policies put forward in recent years to curb unsustainable fishing habits are by no means political. Rather, they are part of the Government's efforts to foster long-term sustainability, lawful practices and balanced utilisation of marine resources. What Thailand has achieved so far is the culmination of joint efforts by all stakeholders, especially those who work in the industry. Hence, the yellow card issued by the European Union served as a warning that we must redouble our commitment to improve Thailand's fishing sector in line with international standards, not just to lift the yellow card but also to create a sustainable fishing industry for the good of future generations, as well as working towards becoming an IUU-free country.

This is why we are confident that reforms implemented by the Government to promote sustainable fishing practices will continue regardless of who is in charge, as every Government must seek to protect the country's interests based on the concept of sustainability. Furthermore, Thailand also wishes to share and to expand its achievements onto the ASEAN stage. Towards this goal, Thailand-EU cooperation in the future will not only be bilateral, but will also involve other ASEAN member states in order to build sustainability in the blue economy for the entire region, and to demonstrate Thailand's constructive role, both in ASEAN and the world.

These success stories, coupled with Thailand's continuous commitment, are proof that the government is determined to pursue policies that are both grounded in Thailand's national interests and people-centred. This has not gone unnoticed by the international community and our friends around the world. The Prime Minister has been honourably received in all of his more than 20 official visits, and Thailand has exchanged high-level visits with numerous partners to foster mutual benefits.

Thailand also plays a leading role on the international stage, especially in areas such as sustainable development, connectivity, and regional security. Thus, it could be concluded that Thailand, at present, has attained a respectable reputation among the international community. As Thailand assumes the Chairmanship of ASEAN this year, under the theme “Advancing Partnership for Sustainability,” the country is well placed to deliver outcomes that would position ASEAN as a supporter of development and comprehensive sustainability in the Asia-Pacific.

With this strength, we stand ready to face contemporary challenges. The current international landscape, shaped by the multipolar power structure dominated by the United States and China, has had profound influence on policy decisions, especially when considering prospective cooperation and competition. Notwithstanding the fact that the situation has compelled many countries to take sides, Thailand remains committed to its long-standing stance to preserve amicable relations with all countries and to pursue balanced strategic engagement, especially with regard to the major powers.

To this end, the Government has maintained friendly relations with all partners, and enhanced cooperation with countries such as the United States, Russia, China, India, Australia and Japan, as well as the EU. Moreover, Thailand aims to utilise the opportunity as ASEAN Chair to promote regional stability, despite challenges stemming from competition among the major powers, while also seeking to establish links between the major powers for future cooperation, peace, stability and sustainability, both in Asia and beyond.

In recent months, there has been much discussion surrounding the upcoming general elections in Thailand. Thailand is fully aware that the only acceptable form of elections is one that is free, fair and inclusive. To this end, the independent Election Commission will be the main authority in facilitating and ensuring a smooth election process, both in the run-up to elections and during the elections. Most importantly, the outcome of the elections will determine Thailand’s future. Past grievances must be overcome so that Thailand can emerge as a stable country, which can play a leading role in regional developments and international platforms.
