

**Yingluck Shinawatra's Foreign Policy**  
**January 20, 2012**  
**By Pavin Chachavalpongpun**

*Taking over where Thaksin left off*

It has been six months since the July election that brought the first woman into Thailand's top political position—Yingluck Shinawatra.

During this period, Prime Minister Yingluck has encountered several difficult issues, ranging from the devastating floods, the attempt to provide amnesty for her fugitive brother Thaksin, and the increasing cases of *lèse-majesté*.

But there is one area in which Yingluck has appeared to be doing well so far—foreign affairs. It is fair to say that since Thaksin's downfall in 2006, Thailand has had no tangible foreign policy. The Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat governments were short-lived. And the Abhisit Vejjajiva period was marked by conflicts with neighbouring countries, especially Cambodia.

It is therefore a real test for Yingluck to reinvent Thai diplomacy, the one that departs from antagonism toward neighbouring countries. In terms of Thai-Cambodian relations, Yingluck paid a high-profile visit to Cambodia, as the first country in her introductory tour. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen was gleeful to roll out a red carpet to receive the Thai female premier. For now, relationship between the two countries has returned to normalcy. And the secret to this success is that issues in this bilateral relationship have simply become less politicised, particularly on the Thai part.

Yingluck then went on to visit a number of countries which are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), including Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Laos, Myanmar and recently the Philippines. Symbolic as they were, these visits signalled Thailand's recovery from political illness at home and its eagerness to take a role in ASEAN. But a question must be asked: How realistic is the Thai eagerness?

During her visit to Naypyidaw in December 2011, Yingluck demonstrated that her government wanted to diversify Thailand's policy options towards Myanmar, by reaching out to both the government as well as the opposition. Yingluck held a discussion with President Thein Sein and also paid a visit to Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the opposition National League for Democracy. At the end of her tour, Yingluck offered her support for national reconciliation in Myanmar, wishing to see further political reforms in the country long governed by the military.

Can Thailand, despite these bold moves initiated by Yingluck, expect a shift in its foreign policy which was traditionally seeking to achieve national interests at the expense of promoting universal values, such as democracy and human rights protection? My answer is rather pessimistic.

Ultimately, both Yingluck and her foreign minister, Surapong Tovichakchaikul, have no experience in diplomacy. And one must not forget that Yingluck is indeed Thaksin in disguise. Accordingly, it is likely that she will restore the Thaksinized foreign policy which

was essentially commerce-driven without any respect for principles.

From 2001-2006, Thailand under Thaksin was so ambitious that it thought it could conquer the world. Thaksin, a successful businessman himself, was confident that he could transform Thailand into a hegemon dominating smaller and weaker states in the region.

Thaksin then bypassed Asean, once a cornerstone of Thai foreign policy. He perceived Asean as a representation of an “old politics”—the kind of politics sullied by rigid bureaucratic processes. Instead, Thaksin invented a myriad of business-centric cooperative frameworks, including the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) and the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). He also strengthened Thai economic cooperation with major trading partners through the conclusion of many free trade agreements. Undoubtedly, the Thaksin period witnessed the most colourful and innovative foreign policy Thailand ever had had in decades.

The remapping of Thailand in the age of globalisation put Thaksin’s foreign policy on the spotlight—he was tipped to become Asia’s next leader. Thaksin endorsed diplomatic activism; and in this, he wanted to place Thailand at the core of the regional order through which the Thai influence was wholly felt. In the latest reinvention of Thailand as a regional leader, Thaksin also turned the kingdom into a company, run by a CEO prime minister whose task was to evaluate economic costs and benefits in the conduct of diplomacy.

Not only did the content of foreign policy change. The operational mode within the foreign ministry also underwent an extreme makeover. Representatives of the nation and the monarch were now becoming CEO ambassadors who would visit their customer for products demonstrations. While CEO ambassadors were dressed with more power, the role of the Foreign Ministry in the formulation of foreign policy diminished.

The prime minister, his advisory team, and his chosen foreign ministers all sidelined the Foreign Ministry’s officials. And the House of Government became enormously influential in the making of foreign policy.

The radical transformation of the Foreign Ministry has left a deep scar of conflict between those who agreed and disagreed with Thaksin’s approach. And the immense polarization in politics in this post-coup period has further intensified such conflict within this state agency. Yingluck and Surapong must not attempt to politicise foreign policy issues, as seen in the previous administration.

If Thaksin is indeed behind the formulation of Thailand’s foreign policy in this Yingluck era, then he has to learn the mistakes he made while he served as prime minister. Thaksin’s past foreign policy initiatives might have provided his government with a channel to secure Thailand’s supposed national interests. But along the way, he and his family members were accused of stoking their wealth by using state mechanisms.

Yingluck needs to open up the foreign policy decision-making process, making it transparent to the public to avoid any controversy. More importantly, her foreign policy for the next few years, if she will ever serve the full four-year term, will have to be based proportionally on economic interests and good governance. This is because her government has received a popular mandate through democratic means and also because Thailand cannot run away from a new international environment that has become more democratic.

Copyright © 2005 - 2012 Asia Sentinel.

Source: [http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=4156&Itemid=185](http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4156&Itemid=185)