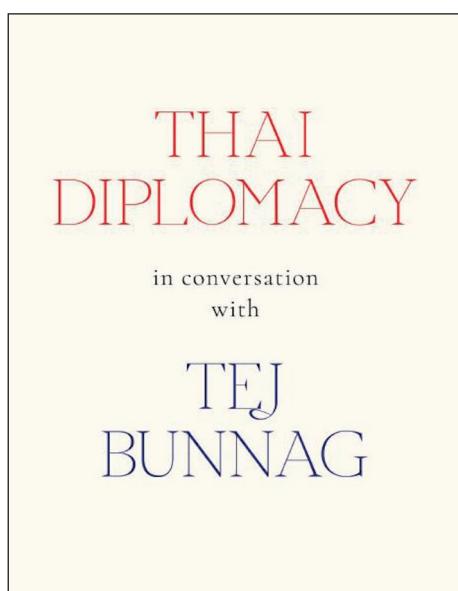


in violence, but this is almost irrelevant as a strategy for how they encounter their actual situations. Veeraporn does not proclaim Buddhist evanescence, a noble and transcendental indifference of the characters to their attachment to desires which have caused them pain in the world, but is no doubt aware how this ideal has been inculcated by the Thai education system to force obedience and un-thinking-ness on the 'educated'.

Of course, Veeraporn is writing a novel and creating thereby an imagined world, not a sociology tract. But her mode of articulation through this Sino-Thai family and the very messiness of their lives indicates an order which, in hiding itself, produces its own demise.

John Clark

*Thai Diplomacy: In conversation with Tej Bunnag*, interviewed and edited by Anuson Chinvanno (Bangkok: International Studies Center, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). ISBN: 978-616-341-087-0 (hardback and e-book). Free download at <https://isc.mfa.go.th/en/content/thai-diplomacy-in-conversation-with-tej-bunnag?cate=5f204a5928600c531517cb75>.



As both a historian of Thailand and one of its leading former diplomats, Tej Bunnag should be familiar to anyone with more than just a casual interest in the kingdom. After graduating with a doctorate from Oxford University, Tej started his long and distinguished diplomatic career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in 1969. Over the course of forty years, he held a number of important positions within the ministry and was ambassador to China, France and the United States of America, culminating in his appointment as Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs in 2001. He also served briefly as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the government of Samak Sundaravej during the start of the border conflict with Cambodia over land surrounding the temple of Preah Vihear in 2008. Given his diplomatic experience and knowledge of Thai history, Tej makes an ideal commentator on the past, present and future of Thailand's foreign affairs.

This volume collects a series of conversations between Tej and Anuson Chinvanno, the director of the International Studies Center of the MFA, into six chapters covering the underlying principles and processes of Thailand's foreign policymaking, and the kingdom's relations with its Southeast Asian neighbours, China, the US, and regional and international organisations, principally the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations (UN). Interestingly, following the suggestion of

Anuson, all the conversations were conducted in English in order to avoid any problems in translating Tej's ideas from Thai. The conversational nature of the book makes it highly readable and also accessible to those who might have no specialist knowledge of foreign policy and international relations.

Following the designation given to Siam at the Versailles Peace Conference at the end of the First World War, Tej characterises Thailand as a "power with limited interests" rather than being a major power with global interests (pp. 15 and 36). For countries in such a position, survival is paramount and this has been the purpose of Thai diplomacy since the mid-19th century (p. 16). Indeed, Tej sees Thai diplomacy as being "unique" and "special" because it succeeded in defending the country from both colonialism and communism (p. 19). Later on, however, he notes wistfully that, given the current size of Thailand's economy and its status as an upper middle-income country, the kingdom punches below its weight on the international stage (pp. 186-187).

One of the strengths of the conversational format is that it gives Tej the freedom to uncover the workings of Thai diplomacy through recounting his own experiences and anecdotes about other Thai diplomats and statesmen, some of which are quite amusing. For instance, he claims one of the greatest examples of Thai diplomacy was when, during a fierce debate at the UN on disarmament, Prince Wan Waithayakon, the kingdom's foreign minister and permanent representative to the UN in the mid-1950s, wittily countered the Soviet representative's assertion that the prince agreed with the USSR's stance because he was smiling by replying that he always smiled (p. 46). Such anecdotes and recollections reveal the personal and human side to the otherwise secretive and sometime abstract nature of international relations and diplomacy.

Tej also displays a welcome magnanimity and balance when discussing Thailand's former enemies and controversial political figures. He praises Vietnam, for example, for its positive approach to relations with its neighbours and its active role in ASEAN since the end of the Cold War (pp. 95 and 144). Similarly, while lauding establishment figures such as Prince Wan, Thanat Khoman and Anand Panyarachun, he also calls Thaksin Shinawatra "an outstanding Prime Minister" (p. 202). In particular, Tej recalls his pride at how well briefed on the world sugar trade Thaksin was when Pascal Lamy, the then Director-General of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), called on the Thai PM during the Doha Round of negotiations (pp. 68-69).

Another strength is Tej's willingness to highlight shortcomings and problems in Thai foreign policymaking. Throughout the book, he laments Thai parochialism and nationalism for limiting and sometimes harming the country's relations with neighbours and the wider world (see, for instance, pp. 73, 131, 188). Here, it is hard to disagree with his argument that Thai nationalism has just encouraged Thai cultural chauvinism towards Laos and Cambodia and has inflamed bilateral relations through promoting the narrative of those countries being "lost territories" sacrificed to Great Britain and France in order to preserve the kingdom's independence during the 19th century, most obviously in the border dispute over Preah Vihear (pp. 151-152). He does not even spare himself from criticism, noting how he had the wrong attitude when he turned down the opportunity to run for the leadership of UNESCO because he did not want to be an international civil servant (pp. 187-188). According to Tej, only a select few Thai statesmen, including

Prince Wan, Thaksin and Surin Pitsuwan, have had an “internationalist” outlook in contrast to the inward-looking nature of the Thai government and the general population (pp. 73 and 188-190).

This heavy focus on the personality and achievements of the Thai statesmen and diplomats mentioned above highlights perhaps the greatest flaw of the book, however. While it may be true that Thailand’s political system and diplomacy have been, and remain, centred on key personalities rather than institutions and systems, Tej’s insistence that the good “instincts” of Thailand’s leaders and statesmen, going back as far as King Rama III (r. 1824-1851), have been responsible for ensuring the kingdom’s independence and survival (pp. 21-23) only reinforces the ‘great man theory of history’, which is so prevalent in Thai nationalist historiography and that ignores structural factors or the impacts of other actors. Similarly, he doubles down on the well-worn trope of ‘bamboo diplomacy’ in accounting for the success of Thai foreign policy by taking up a statement attributed to Lee Kuan Yew that “Thai diplomacy bends BEFORE the wind, not just WITH the wind” (p. 17, emphasis in the original). Such claims about the sound instincts and farsightedness of Thai leaders lack real explanatory power and end up mystifying the foreign policymaking process. To be fair, Tej does recognise that Thailand’s fortunate geopolitical location has also helped ensure the country’s survival and success on the international stage (p. 23). But devoting so much attention to the role of ‘great men’ ultimately, and ironically, reinforces the sense of exceptionalism that underpins the Thai nationalism that Tej so virulently denounces.

Tej’s solution for dealing with the corrosive effects of nationalism, whether Thai or that of any other nation, upon international relations is harder to fault, however. To break down nationalist barriers and encourage better relations between the countries of Southeast Asia, he stresses the need to build an ASEAN consciousness and identity that highlights what its members share in common through educational programmes (pp. 96-97). As an example of the type of initiatives he has in mind, Tej highlights a project in which he is involved that brings Thai and Cambodian schoolchildren together to help with archaeological digs in each other’s countries and, thereby, learn about their shared heritage (pp. 96 and 157). Moreover, he observes how Khmer culture covered much of what is now central and north-eastern Thailand until at least the 15th century and infused the high culture of the former Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that the people of Ayutthaya at the time spoke Khmer rather than Thai (p. 152). Similarly, he notes how Thailand shares elements of both Mon and Shan culture with Myanmar, along with a belief in Theravada Buddhism and common pilgrimage sites (p. 166).

Despite its flaws, therefore, this book not only serves as an illuminating discussion about the principles and practice of Thailand’s foreign affairs, but it also exemplifies Tej’s desire to enhance the country’s relations with other countries and its position in the world through promoting understanding. Overall, the collected conversations form a useful supplement to the academic literature on Thai foreign policy by shedding light on the personal dimension of diplomacy.

James A. Warren