

Battlefield to Marketplace: Responses to Thailand's Major Foreign Policy Change by Salinee Phonprapai. (Bangkok: International Studies Center, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). ISBN: 978-616-341-100-6. Free download at <https://isc.mfa.go.th/en/content/battlefield-to-marketplace-saline-phonprapai>



Dr. Salinee Phonprapai's *Battlefield to Marketplace: Responses to Thailand's Major Foreign Policy Change* is a comprehensive study of the sudden shift in Thailand's policy towards the Cambodia conflict shortly after the Chatichai government assumed office in August 1988. She asks whether Thailand's abandoning of its previous hardline policy towards Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia since 1978, in order to befriend Vietnam and the Phnom Penh government and "turn the battlefield into a marketplace", was a crucial element in the subsequent course of events which ultimately led to the Paris Peace Conference in October 1991. Her conclusion is that Chatichai's utter failure to consult and inform within his own government (MFA, the military and the NSC), not to mention with key allies (China, ASEAN, the U.S.), doomed his initiative to be at first an irritant, albeit

tolerated, and ultimately a sideshow to an international process that was about to unfold despite the Chatichai initiative.

Why was this? Dr. Salinee points out several times that Chatichai and his advisors believed that the risks of radically changing Thailand's policy were low because of "the changing international situation." But aside from the shock of the overnight shift in Thai policy (epitomized in the January 1989 visit to Bangkok by Hun Sen), the overall state of play in Cambodia and internationally remained on the face of it unchanged from the years since Vietnam initially invaded in December 1978. After all, just weeks before Chatichai unexpectedly became prime minister, a promising Indonesian initiative to bring the four Cambodian factions together in Bogor had fallen short. Later in 1988, *after* Chatichai assumed office, Vietnam still had some 100,000 PAVN troops in Cambodia and the Soviet Union, its principal external supporter, was still intact. The Vietnamese withdrawal only took place subsequently, beginning in April 1989 and concluding in late September that year. The collapse of the Soviet Union followed in December 1991.

At that point, what did the Chatichai initiative have to show for itself? The August 1989 meeting in Paris of the four Cambodian factions and the relevant international players broke down in complete failure and actually derailed what limited success had been made to date in getting the Cambodian factions together. In the aftermath of the Paris collapse, Chatichai and in particular his advisors briefly had the field to

themselves. Their primary initiative, in June 1990, was to convene in Tokyo (with the help of sympathetic officials in the Gaimusho or Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan) a hastily organized and poorly prepared conference which attempted yet again to get all the Cambodian factions to sit and reason together. The result? Another debacle. But that did not dissuade the Thai peacemakers. In September of that year, they organized yet another conference, this time in Bangkok, the location of which was none other than the abandoned Cambodian embassy, which had to be spruced up in a matter of hours, using the Thai military, who deeply resented being ordered by the PM to be part of the circus. The result? No result.

Dr. Salinee repeatedly returns to the important role of the Thai military, one of the key actors which she points out should have been intimately engaged in the Chatichai initiative were it to have any hope of success. Over the years of the Vietnamese occupation and the hardline Thai policy in opposition to it, the Thai military had been a major player. Arguably most important of all the players had been General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, the army commander and acting supreme commander during the late 1980s. For complicated reasons that Dr. Salinee artfully conveys, Chavalit saw himself not only as the top military figure in the country, but also as a skilled negotiator with, and manager of, Thailand's relations with all three of the Thailand-based Cambodian resistance groups. She suggests that Chavalit may well have agreed with the Chatichai initiatives, perhaps seeing such support as useful for his own hopes to retire and assume a major political role as a civilian. Chatichai and his advisors thus saw him as an ally on Cambodia and a means to keep the military under control. When Chavalit retired in early 1990, he was brought into Chatichai's cabinet as deputy prime minister and defense minister (its only non-elected member). When the Tokyo conference started to go off the rails, the advisors summoned Chavalit to use his magic powers to bring the factions together. That he was unable to do so was compounded by his subsequent resignation from the government over an unrelated domestic political matter.

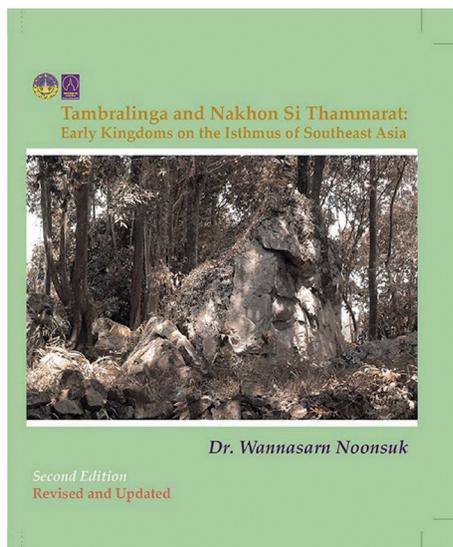
As a result, by late 1990, Chatichai was no longer able to rely on Chavalit, not only for support on Cambodia, but more importantly to keep the military on side. Everyone assumed that Chavalit would leave the military in the safe hands of his allies. In fact, the rise of General Suchinda and his Class Five cohorts brought about months of increasing tension with Chatichai, culminating in his overthrow in the coup of February 1991.

With Chatichai and his advisors out of the picture, little remained of the "major foreign policy change" cited in the title of Dr. Salinee's book, but at this point much was changing in the international environment. From the ashes of the mid-1989 collapse in Paris came the "Evans Initiative", named after the Australian foreign minister but in fact the brainchild of U.S. congressman Stephen Solarz. The idea was to have the United Nations essentially take over the administration of Cambodia for an interim period to allow for all the Cambodian factions to prepare for an internationally supervised election. With stunning speed and consensus, this proposal was implemented and subsequently vouchsafed by a second Paris Conference in October 1991 and a national election in May 1993. Essentially the battlefield was transformed by a ballot box. Meanwhile the much-touted marketplace was not achieved, as Dr. Salinee's conclusion makes clear and as even Chatichai's own advisors now concede.

At the outset of her book, Dr. Salinee asks whether a lesser power could introduce a major foreign policy change independent of regional and greater powers having important and contradictory interests of their own. She goes on to suggest that this could only happen if the lesser power anticipates significant change in the international environment. In Chatichai's case, despite the drama of unilaterally reversing years of Thai policy to the surprise and dismay of partners both domestically and internationally, it was not the actions of Chatichai's team, but rather major changes in the international environment that either took place regardless of the Thai actions, or in many cases, after Chatichai and his advisors had left the political stage altogether.

Skip Boyce

Tambralinga and Nakhon Si Thammarat: Early Kingdoms on the Isthmus of Southeast Asia, by Wannasarn Noonsuk (Nakhon Si Thammarat Province: Academic Committee under the Committee Nominating Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan as a World Heritage Site, Second Edition, 2018). ISBN: 9789748244297. US\$29.99.



This ambitious work on Peninsular Thailand or the Isthmus of Southeast Asia attempts to address three all-encompassing aspects of the ancient polity of Tambralinga: development, material culture and cultural geography

While keeping its regional context in view, this work focuses primarily on the portion of Peninsular Thailand between the Tha Sak River in the north and the Khu Phai River in the south and between the geographic spine of the peninsula, the Nakhon Si Thammarat Mountains, and the coast of the Gulf of Thailand. It covers the evidence of the area's prehistoric cultures such as the Dong Son bronze drums and evidence of the area's participation in the earliest maritime trade in

the region between the Roman Empire, the Middle East, India (including Sri Lanka) and China. The focus is, however, on the period when a participant in this network was known as Tambralinga, particularly the 5th to the 11th century. Tambralinga was replaced by Nakhon Si Thammarat circa 13th/14th century, ending a history of about 1,500 years (p. 271), after which the peninsula was dominated by Ayutthaya.

Dr. Wannasarn Noonsuk relies on historical studies, his own archaeological surveys and new excavation, ethnographic interviews, and historical records such as inscriptions and chronicles. The majority of new data provided for dating leans toward evidence