

(Comment) Chapter 2. Diverging Interests and Responses to Regional Cooperation of ASEAN Countries: 3. Thailand's Perception and Response to Regional Cooperation

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# Comment

Tsutomu Murano

The commentator specializes in studies on Vietnam, so is not knowledgeable about the situation in Thailand and does not have sufficient knowledge regarding trends in regional economic organizations such as ASEAN and APEC.

For such a non-specialist, this was an interesting report which described in depth the perception of Thailand of the need for regional cooperation and the actual ways in which it participates regional cooperation. The first quarter of the report discussed the way Thailand views regional cooperation and the remaining three quarters talked about the way Thailand has engaged with three levels of regional cooperation, that is, from the top, APEC, ASEAN, and subregional cooperation.

1. According to the author, Thailand's policies, whether domestic or foreign, have been influenced by security motivations. The same applies to regional cooperation. This has been influenced less by economic issues than by security ones. There were changes after the end of the Cold War, but this point remains unchanged. Mention may be made specifically of the 1991 coup d'état and the support by General Wimon for the current Chuan government. In the conclusion, it is stated that even though the government is not stable due to party politics, this has had almost no effect on the participation of Thailand in regional cooperation schemes. If the government becomes destabilized due to military seizure of power, this would not lead to a withdrawal from regional economic organizations, but cooperation with regional cooperative organizations might stop.

What outsiders are interested in are the seizures of power by the military. This commentator believes that if Thailand engages deeper in regional cooperation in the future, in particular, cooperation in economic matters, then even if the military assumes power, it will have to accord proper respect to foreign relations or that progress in regional economic cooperation will affect the domestic politics in Thailand and lead to a reduction in the number of opportunities for the military to seize power. What does the author think about this optimistic perspective?

## 2. Relations with ASEAN

Here, the author discusses the history of relations between Thailand and ASEAN from the two viewpoints of security motivations and economic motivations. The threats to the region including Thailand after the Cold War include (1) the power vacuum after the pull-back of American forces, (2) the demands by the advanced nations regarding freedom, democracy, political pluralism, the rule of law, and

protection of human rights, (3) regional conflicts such as the delineation of the border with Malaysia and the issues of Sabah and Sipadon, and (4) the Spratly issue. Thailand has proposed regarding these that the parties involved cooperate closer so as to improve regional cooperation and work to form the ASEAN Regional Forum. The commentator would like to point out that the establishment of an expanded ASEAN, that is, the inclusion of Vietnam and Laos in ASEAN, might lay the seeds for new conflicts and, further, that Thailand might become embroiled in these since it is directly related to them. For example, there is the issue of usage of the water of the Mekong river. Six countries have interests in the river. If dams or irrigation facilities are built at the upstream Thailand or Laos, the amount of water available to the downstream Cambodia and Vietnam would be drastically reduced. This would have a major impact both economically and environmentally. Right now, this is not considered a problem within ASEAN, but Vietnam considers this issue to be extremely important. Further, China has interests in the matter as well. There are chances for this developing into a problem involving other regions as well.

3. According to the author, Thailand considers that APEC would be economically advantageous to it and has taken a stance supporting its activities. On the other hand, when it comes to the EAEC propounded by Malaysia, while Prime Minister Chuan expressed approval of EAEC during his visit to Malaysia in January 1993, Thailand's attitude to the proposal has since been unclear and the suspicion is that it is not that enthusiastic over it. This report touches on this only in brief. Therefore, I would like to know the position taken by the Thai government regarding the EAEC at the present time or the opinion of the author.

4. For Thailand, the idea of sub-regional cooperation has particularly important meaning. The reason is, as pointed out by the author, that Thailand has a long border which puts it in contact with several countries and enables the formation of several triangular or rectangular regions. The "Northern Growth Triangle" or "Growth Quadrangle" now under consideration in particular have previously suffered from security problems. If they become the focus for economic development, then there will be great benefits in the area of security as well.

The commentator, however, feels that the "Growth Hexagon" concept among the concepts of subregional cooperation mentioned by the author differs in nature from the rest. The reason is, first, that the scope of this is too great and the area cannot be said to be a sub-region. The only thing in common is the Mekong river, but use of the river, as already mentioned, is fraught with problems of opposing interests and might lead to conflict. The second reason is that the area includes places like Cambodia where ensurance of security will be difficult for the time being. In the end, the sub-regional cooperation which can be realized in this area will be with the east of Thailand and Laos (Savannakhet) and the middle of Vietnam (Danang). The middle of Vietnam is backward in development and is said to be eager for this concept to be materialized. The stability of Indochina will indeed be based on good relations between Vietnam and Thailand, but the question is how Thailand will go about building up trust with Vietnam.