

**Keynote Address by H.E. Mr. Noppadon Pattama,  
Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand  
On Thai-U.S. Relations in the Changing Political-Economic Landscape  
of Southeast Asia  
20 March 2008 at 16.30 – 17.30 hrs**

March 21, 2008, 3:14 pm

Dr. John J. Hamre, President and CEO of the Center for Strategic and International Studies,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish first of all to thank Dr. Hamre and the CSIS for inviting me to address this distinguished gathering. I am delighted to visit the United States, and to be part of the CSIS's new Southeast Asia Initiative, which bodes well, I believe, for the future of our relations.

Eighteen months ago, the military intervention, or the so-called coup, that took place in Thailand cast doubt over the future of the Kingdom's democracy, and along with it the prospects for deeper Thai-US relations.

Today, I stand before you, here in Washington, as the Foreign Minister of Thailand's newly elected government to tell our American friends a short, but significant message – that is, Thailand is back on track.

We are back as a vibrant democracy – one based on respect for the rule of law, the will of the people, for individual and civil liberties, and for fundamental freedoms.

We are back as an open, business-friendly economy which is naturally integrating into the regional economy, and linked with the mainstream global economy, in support of free enterprise and corporate good governance.

Once again, Thailand is ready to work with the United States as partners in democracy as well as free and fair trade.

No other occasion is more appropriate for me to deliver this message than today. For on this very day, Thailand and the United States celebrate 175 years of friendship and alliance.

Also later this year, Thailand will assume the Chairmanship of ASEAN, for one and a half years from July 2008 – December 2009. As Chair, we will oversee the important transition period of Southeast Asia's principal organisation. It should be by the end of this year that we expect the ASEAN Charter to enter into force.

This is thus a year for renewed hopes as well as for great opportunity. Renewed hopes that our democracy and economy will continue to flourish, in partnership with the world's most well known democracy and largest economy. And great opportunity in the growing dynamism of our reinvigorated bilateral relationship.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would now like to touch on the changing political-economic landscape of Southeast Asia. When the United States first began to have a military presence in Thailand in 1964 as an ally, Southeast Asia was regarded as a theatre of the Cold War.

As the Berlin Wall crumbled, along came globalisation – the force that has realigned and redefined interstate relations. Political and military confrontation has become less important than economic integration. Accordingly, Southeast Asia has shifted its focus to economic integration and liberalisation. We are witnessing the rise of China and then India, and economically resurgent Japan. With it, East Asia has become a key engine in the global landscape, with Southeast Asia as an integral part of it.

Today, we also see more and more clearly another challenge that goes to the fundamentals of what we believe – a challenge of faiths and values. The need for interfaith dialogue and cultural sensitivity has become increasingly important.

America understands this reality well and seems to keep a step ahead of others. You recognise the challenges brought by the changing global and regional landscape. The difference, however, lies in how we address them. We have ideals and ideas. The difference lies in how we approach them. The challenge is therefore how to work together more effectively to turn these changes into our gains.

From a Thai and Southeast Asian perspective, I can say loud and clear that we regard you with high esteem as good allies should, and that we stand ready to work with you. We welcome your continued engagement with our region. Because the United States is an Asia-Pacific power, a global leader and a good friend and ally to many in Southeast Asia. I only hope that you know us and understand us well enough to appreciate our role in this alliance and cooperation to benefit both our peoples.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the regional level, ASEAN is also evolving and changing.

Over the past 40 years, ASEAN has been quite successful in managing relations among its members, despite their multiple diversities, and quite successful too in passing through geo-political and economic challenges.

Yet, ASEAN knows that it cannot afford to stand still. That is why it is now turning a new chapter in its evolution.

With the ASEAN Charter, ASEAN will become a more rule-based, people-oriented organisation, while remaining outward-looking. ASEAN is on its way to becoming an ASEAN Community by the year 2015.

As the incoming ASEAN Chair, Thailand has a unique role to play in promoting ASEAN as an effective, action-oriented and people-centred organisation – an ASEAN that is better able to tackle issues affecting regional security and stability;

an ASEAN that is outward-looking and capable of contributing more to the wider Asia-Pacific region; an ASEAN that is more integrated as a single market and production base; and an ASEAN that is more relevant for the ordinary people – in essence, an ASEAN of its people, by its people and for its people.

On ASEAN relations with other partners, we have seen China, Japan, the Republic of Korea and India actively compete to strengthen ties with Southeast Asia. Symbolic of these efforts are the Summits held between ASEAN and each of these countries, the annual summits of the ASEAN+3 countries and the East Asian Summit, which also include Australia and New Zealand. ASEAN also held one summit with Russia and is planning to hold another one.

In sum, in the not too distant future, Southeast Asia will no longer be only a highly dynamic region with stability amidst diversity. Southeast Asia will be an engine for regional dynamism, a foundation for broader regional stability and a model for regional integration.

How then do we envisage the role of our long time ally?

As a global leader with whom we share many fundamental values and interests, the United States is an important partner of Southeast Asia. And we do want to enhance our engagement with you.

However, from our side of the pond, the United States has been sending mixed signals at times. The perceived lack of U.S. enthusiasm to lend a helping hand in the critical initial stages of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis is one example – but one that is not easily forgotten and one that gave impetus to the invention of ASEAN+3 with high visibility for regional countries, particularly China.

Contrast this with the immediate and overwhelming reaction of the United States to the Tsunami of December 2004. The images of U.S. personnel and assets, working in tandem with Thai facilities and assets, helping save lives in Southeast Asia and beyond also cannot and will not be forgotten.

Soft power works. Its effectiveness and long-term appeal should not be underestimated. The increasing economic ties and the reservoir of goodwill that comes with assistance can affect the calculation of interests and influence perceptions and positions. China is a good example of a country that has utilised this policy well, enabling it to make inroads into Southeast Asia.

As friend and ally, I urge the United States to continue and enhance its engagement in our region. That is what I discussed with Secretary Rice this afternoon. You can count on Thailand and our open arms.

On the security front, the U.S. war on terrorism cannot be waged successfully without engaging the Southeast Asia that shares many values and determination with the U.S. Our partnership should not be measured simply by the number of terrorists or arms dealers we arrest, or by the number of prevention initiatives or training courses we organise. Our partnership should go deeper and address the actual root causes that add fuel to terrorism.

The differences in culture and faith as well as socio-economic grievances must be factored into our broader counter-terrorism strategy. Non-state actors have to be involved and taken into account. Let us not forget that in Southeast Asia, three major religions have managed to co-exist peacefully and satisfactorily, long before ASEAN was born in 1967. It reflects the region's embrace of the value of respect for diversity and tolerance. It is incumbent upon ASEAN member states to learn from it and build on it. Our region can become safer again and thus contributing to world wide war on counter terrorism.

On the economic front, the ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership should continue to complement the ASEAN Economic Community to ensure that it will be inclusive and outward-looking beyond Southeast Asia. The ASEAN-U.S. Trade and Investment Framework (TIFA) should also be further enhanced.

Nevertheless, as economic development is central to the region's future, we would like to see the United States invest in creating regional hubs for trade and manufacturing opportunities. We would like the United States to take advantage of the dynamic integration of ASEAN and the close friendship between Thailand and the U.S.

The United States should also engage in education and economic development to create conditions more conducive for people to adjust their norms and thinking. Ideological change needs to be driven by socio-economic changes. And the lack of development in some areas should not be allowed to cloud the broader picture.

As things now stand – we should be frank, the ASEAN-U.S. partnership has been kept from developing to its full potential in no small part by the issue of Myanmar. In fact, this issue has unfortunately even spilled over into the discussions on Thai-U.S. relations.

My question is: is this worth it for both of us?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thailand and Myanmar are neighbours. Like it or not, we have no choice but to live next to each other. That is why I have made clear after taking office my intention to pursue what I call “neighbour engagement” with Myanmar, as with all our other neighbours.

Simply put, we enjoy no luxury of distance, but are saddled instead with the burden of proximity.

With Myanmar, the reality is not only that many ordinary Thais living along the border depend on border trade. Thailand also needs Myanmar's cooperation to tackle transborder issues such as drug trafficking, communicable diseases, displaced persons and illegal labour. We believe that imposing sanctions, or putting pressure, would not work and will only hurt the victims of suppression or the target that sanction is intended to protect or help.

On the contrary, I believe that through economic engagement, we can help improve the livelihood of the Myanmar people themselves through more jobs and income.

I believe that through technical assistance, we can help them with institution- and capacity-building.

And I believe that through closer transportation networks of roads and rails, we can help Myanmar open up and link with others in the Greater Mekong Sub-region and beyond.

At the same time, as a friend, Thailand can give Myanmar neighbourly advice. And as friend, we will be in better position to persuade them to see the merit of democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law.

In fact, during my Prime Minister's visit to Myanmar last week, I conveyed to Myanmar the concerns of the international community, our wish to see continued momentum towards democratisation and national reconciliation; the need for credible and inclusive referendum and elections; and the importance of Myanmar's continued cooperation with the United Nations.

As a first step, the Myanmar authorities have been receptive to our offer to share Thailand's experiences on holding a national referendum for the constitution.

Indeed, if Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines could be taken as examples, democratic change has to come from within and not from outside.

Quietly, though slowly, we aim to turn this burden of proximity into pragmatic opportunity, for the sake of the people of Myanmar, our next door neighbour.

(Thai-U.S. Relations: Now and the Future)

I would now like to touch, Ladies and Gentlemen, on Thai-U.S. relations, now and the future.

On my part, I certainly would like to see Thailand and U.S. as a driving force for closer ASEAN-U.S. relations. Our relations have been built on the foundation of people who have stuck together through thick and thin, in war and peace. As the United States' oldest ally in the region, Thailand is among the first countries in Southeast Asia to join the struggle against global terrorism, with practical, concrete results. Thai police cooperated with U.S. authorities in arresting Mr. Hambali, a leading figure of the Jemaah Islamiyah in Thailand, two years after the 9/11 incident. And just two weeks ago, the so-called "Merchant of Death" Viktor Bout was arrested in Bangkok. We will spare no efforts in this endeavour against terrorism.

Meanwhile, the United States remains our major trade partner. American businesses continue to have strong presence in Thailand and the region, with benefits

flowing both ways. They are profitable, while our people gain from their investment and employment.

However, we must also recognise that those generations of Americans and Thais who have experienced first hand the mutual benefit of our alliance are gradually being replaced by new and younger generations.

It is thus a challenge for us to revitalise this alliance and keep our bilateral ties a key part of the U.S. strategic focus in the region.

This is why we strongly support the establishment of the Southeast Asia Initiative at the CSIS. The Thai-U.S. alliance is strong because it is built on mutual understanding and mutual trust. To maintain this strength, we want our academics and students to create new networks of dialogue and discourse, building on our longstanding friendship with new ideas to counter new and emerging challenges.

I am therefore pleased to see eminent institutions such as the CSIS pay greater attention to real policy opportunities in Thailand and ASEAN. We stand to gain from closer security cooperation, from greater economic interaction, and from further institutional development in ASEAN. Thailand and the United States can work together in new and creative ways to achieve these objectives through our unique alliance and partnership.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When the Thai-U.S. Treaty of Amity and Commerce was signed 175 years ago, it was done in four different languages: Thai, English, Portuguese and Chinese. We had to rely on other languages to assist in the translation because then we barely knew one another's languages.

We have come a long way since. But still, the words of our first Treaty remain significant and relevant now as they were then. For with it, our two countries and peoples are committed to a friendship "so long as heaven and earth shall endure" and that's a very long time indeed.

On this day, the twentieth of March 2008, the 175th Anniversary of Thai-US relations, and as we work together towards the future based on mutual interests and shared core values even in different circumstances and changing landscape, let us continue to remind ourselves of these words, and make it truly meaningful to this and future generations of Thais and Americans.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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Source :

National Identity Board and Office of Prime Minister Office, *Thailand into the 2000's*