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Pavin Chachavalpongpun (2010), *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy*, Silksworm Books, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

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Unfortunately, very few monographs dealing with Thai foreign policy have been published, representing a big gap in foreign policy research. Pavin Chachavalpongpun's 2010 book *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy* contributes to filling this gap. It concentrates on Thaksin Shinawatra's term in office (2001–2006) and analyses the relationship between culture (with the topos of “bending with the wind”) and foreign policy, as well as Thailand's numerous bilateral relations, Thaksin's multilateral initiatives and, most significantly, the influence of (the prime minister's) economic interests on the foreign policy of the kingdom. This analysis is embedded within the framework of Thai history and an epilogue cursorily outlining the foreign policy of Thaksin's successors up to the spring of 2010. As a result, *Reinventing Thailand*, which benefits from its author's vast expertise, is a book well worth reading.

As an overall impression, the monograph paints the picture of a prime minister who left a unique mark on Thai foreign policy. According to Pavin, Thaksin could always count on the support of the poor, as whose saviour he presented himself. Within the bureaucratic apparatus, though, he seriously limited the competence of the foreign ministry and shifted decision-making to the Government House.

Pavin then provides a range of examples of foreign policy initiatives: Within the framework of his “Forward Engagement Policy”, Thaksin made Thailand's relations with its immediate neighbours Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia the central focus of his foreign policy. According to the author, Thaksin's objective was to secure a leading position for his country in continental Southeast Asia, thus increasing its influence on the regional and international stages. Not only did he foster his claim to leadership by negotiating free trade agreements, but he also asserted it by founding new multilateral forums such as the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), the Ayeyawady – Chao Phraya – Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) and the “Bangkok Process” supporting the democratisation of Myanmar. It is therefore hardly surprising that Thaksin showed little interest in ASEAN.

Pavin does not keep his personal judgements to himself. On the contrary, his aversion to Thaksin Shinawatra's leadership style is quite clear and will certainly be understood by the attentive reader. The author describes a prime minister who used his office to reinforce his existing economic imperialism: “Thaksin [...] transformed 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” (53). Accordingly, Thaksin behaved complaisantly toward the leaders in Yangon so as not to jeopardise his companies’ activities in Myanmar. The “Bangkok Process” was thus nothing but the conscious use of a front to hide the prime minister’s real interests.

All in all, Pavin evaluates Thaksin’s foreign policy negatively. For one, he criticises the lack of an ethical dimension to the politician’s actions, in which no commitment to either democracy or human rights took priority. The author also points out that many of the foreign policy initiatives did not produce lasting effects; a good example of the lack of long-term thinking can be seen in the domain of multilateralism: “When the dust had settled, one realized that there was little left to see, or to be remembered” (220).

In September 2006, after more than five years, the military leaders of the country removed Thaksin by a bloodless coup d’état. King Bhumibol Adulyadej did not impose his veto on the coup, an action that can be interpreted as approval by the highest Thai authority. The kingdom nevertheless struggled to find peace in the following years, as the book’s epilogue (278-314) elucidates: General Surayud Chulanont remained in office as the representative of the military junta until 2008. As the military retreated from politics, he was succeeded by Samak Sundaravej – January to September 2008, “a self-proclaimed puppet of Thaksin” (285) – and Thaksin’s brother-in-law Somchai Wongsawat – September to December 2008, “another controversial figure” (292-293). On account of their political and personal proximity to the former prime minister, both of them were regarded as his mouthpieces and were – partly because of this – unable to retain their offices for long. Abhisit Vejjajiva’s term in office (December 2008 to August 2011) did not bring reconciliation either. Thai society therefore remains to this day deeply divided into the “Red Shirts” and “Yellow Shirts”.

Pavin’s book will provide the reader with profound insights. Minor flaws, however, are also to be found: Consisting of 62 pages, the introduction is far too long. It would have been more appropriate to present the idea underlying the book within the first 20 pages and to dedicate a whole new chapter to the remaining contents. There are also some deficits with regard to methodology and theory. The research questions are indeed clearly formulated: “Did Thaksin successfully construct a post-Cold War foreign policy strategy? If yes, was it effective?” (266). But Pavin does not establish any criteria for ascertaining a “successful” and “effective” foreign policy. The resulting lack of any evaluative standard gives the conclusions a certain arbitrariness. The book therefore lacks an explicit theoretical foundation. Instead, the author leaves it at a criticism of Western-oriented theories of international relations, which is admittedly convincing: If foreign policy is primarily influenced by the personal interests of a prime minister, rationalist

theories focused on the national interests of a state can hardly be applied (4). Unfortunately though, Pavin eschews suggesting a convincing alternative to the Western theories of international relations with which he finds fault.

Be that as it may, this criticism is not meant to belittle the accomplishment of Pavin Chachavalpongpun, whose analysis is captivating due to its many strong points, suffice it to mention the two most important ones: First, the book is grounded on a perspicuous thesis which is examined from different perspectives and thereby persuasively substantiated. Pavin illustrates to what extent Thaksin's personal interests were intertwined with, or even superimposed, the national interests of the kingdom. In this context, he emphasises that even past prime ministers had used their position to advance their personal interests. He then distils what was new about Thaksin's approach. Second, the book is concrete proof of the author's particular closeness to the topic. Not only did he once serve in the Thai foreign ministry, but he also conducted a whole host of interviews with high-ranking decision-makers. These personal connections enabled him to form judgments based on inside knowledge. Pavin is currently a fellow in the Regional Strategic and Political Studies Programme (RSPS) and the lead researcher for Political and Strategic Affairs at the ASEAN Studies Centre at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore.

Reinventing Thailand is an indispensable treatise when it comes to understanding Thai foreign policy during the era of prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. This monograph might henceforth even gain in importance. After the Thai opposition's parliamentary electoral victory in July 2011, Yingluck Shinawatra, one of Thaksin's sisters, was appointed the kingdom's new prime minister. Whether and to what extent she will be able to act independently of her exiled brother is doubtful. It is therefore very likely that some of Thaksin's ideas will – in a modified way – again shape Thai foreign policy. What the implications of such a development might be can be found in Pavin's book.

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