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THAILAND ON THE PACIFIC RIM

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

We are gathered here today as members and alumni of Golden Gate University School of Law, peacefully settled on the shores of the Oriental side of the Pacific Rim, sometimes known as the West coast of the United States. As is generally known, the ocean is named “Pacific” to introduce calmness, or to reduce the degree of calamity of this widest and wildest expanse of salt waters on earth.

I have been specifically asked to tell a story, in my own words, about the thinking of Thailand some fifty years back, facing weather conditions and the unseasonal political storms within the seemingly endless ocean that we in the region have chosen to call “PACIFIC” to avoid any trace of its “stormy” propensity.

Amidst the threatening thunder over the width and breadth of this Pacific Ocean, Thailand found herself perched inevitably on one edge of the Pacific Rim. It is difficult to overlook the threat of harm and the risk of danger, lurking behind the back inland on the one hand, and floating or otherwise remaining superficially submerged under water from the Oceanside on the other.

As a free and independent nation and people of Asia, the Thais had to move southwards from the North-Eastern end of Asia to the South-Eastern region of the continent, as we are today, having to live and to co-exist peacefully with our neighbors on this Golden Peninsular (Suvarnabhumi), both on neighboring land and overseas near and far beyond and across the Pacific Ocean. My primary task is to present to you a meaningful picture of Thailand’s vision and perspective as an indigenous occupant of the Pacific Rim.

The Pacific Rim

The Key word is “The Pacific Rim”, meaning the edge of the coast of the continental land that meets the waters of the Pacific Ocean, which, interestingly enough, have served to separate as well as to unite peoples of various races and nationalities across and around as well as alongside the Pacific Basin.

An endeavor will be made in the pages that follow to help expose what may have been on the mind of the free people of Thailand and the independent Thai Nation, situated as we are on the ringside of the Pacific Rim, clearly forming an integral part and parcel of the endless distant shores adjoining the Pacific Ocean

It is not too difficult to imagine some natural and instinctive preoccupations of Thai leaders to use all means at their disposal to preserve and protect the political independence and territorial integrity of their land, the land that they and their ancestors have struggled to retain without losing any more grounds, or else to face the prospect of being pushed into the depth of the Pacific Ocean floor.

Thailand’s Perspective

From my personal perspective, which hopefully coincides with that of my native country or my fatherland, Thailand, the Thais are peace-loving and cherish the consequences of their personal

freedom and political independence, which they have been able to safeguard and to maintain from time immemorial and up until then, the mid fifties that the whole world tended to split up into different regions and sub-regions, each with its own economic, social and cultural developments to suit the pace of its population growth.

While in some respect, this essay: "Thailand on the Pacific Rim" may be viewed as a continuing episode of a recent publication, entitled "Thailand and ASEAN," the circumstances and events leading to the timely need to recall to memory the vivid impressions of some outstanding contemporaneous happenings, almost to the point of demonstrating with lucid clarity the mounting use of inter-locking relations.

Regionalism was in the air at that period. Regionalization for active cooperation in all walks of life, in particular, economic, social, political and cultural developments was simultaneously taking place at an ever-increasing pace of rapid progress in practically all directions within the Pacific Rim, no less vigorously than in any other part or region of the globe. These recurring concurrent trends of regionalism were widespread at the time over the entire length of the Pacific Rim. Positive and productive developments were indeed helpful, in several domains, especially by way of example, in the field of regional fishery management. In the North-West Pacific alone, there were at least two commissions, namely, the International North Pacific Fisheries (INPFC) and the North Pacific Commission (NPESC) that were multilateral in addition to at least three bilateral organizations, for instance, the Regional Pacific Halibut Commission (RPHC), the International Pacific Salmon Fisheries Commission (IPSFC) and the Russo-Japanese Northwest Pacific Fisheries Commission (RJNWPFC).

Thailand, a nation of South-East or East Asian origin had to face the living reality of other nations sharing the Pacific Rim, nearby or distant, yonder or even opposite on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, with different ways of life, different origins or civilization and cultural developments.

Thailand could not afford not to think of other neighbors on adjacent or far distant lands all around the Pacific Rim. Bilateral activities had to pave the way to multilateral and regional cooperation to preserve and maintain the existing territorial integrity and political independence of each single nation.

The time came when many Asian nations with only very few exceptions had to succumb to the imperial desire of Western colonial powers. Asian nations that survived barely managed to escape but only at the cost that would be hard to calculate. Of the Asian countries that survived could be mentioned: China, Japan and Thailand; China, after sacrifices such as Shanghai, Macao and Hong Kong; Japan, at the cost of basic reforms and sacrifices; and Thailand also not without territorial sacrifices and restrictions on fiscal regulations.

In such a world of competing and struggling Pacific nations, Thailand, sitting by herself on the Pacific Rim, had to wonder and ponder over her future and to learn from her first-hand experience how to co-exist with other Asian Pacific neighbors without impairing her dignity, integrity and managing to retain her independence intact.

Thailand was not as densely populated as China, nor as geographically unreachable as Japan. On the contrary, Thailand was relatively small, sizeable with open friendly inhabitants. Half a century ago, approximately by 1965, Thailand had to face a new kind of challenge; not only new trends in regionalism, but how to greet newly emerged Asian Pacific nations after the wave of decolonization. One by one, each of Thailand's neighbors which had been under

Western domination regained independence: Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore from the United Kingdom; Laos, Vietnam after re-unification; and Cambodia or Kampuchea from France; Indonesia from the Netherlands; and the Philippines from the United States after Spain. Korea was still divided, with North and South, not dissimilar from Vietnam, then also North and South, while we saw in Europe, Germany was divided into East and West, with similar contrast of political dichotomy between socialism and the Free World.

Amidst this confusion, Thailand not only had to manage her own internal national affairs, but also had to sail through this rough and stormy sea of turmoil with relative calm and could begin to serve as a practically useful member of the regional community of the Pacific Rim.

Perhaps, our immediate task in this episode could be limited to Korea and Japan before moving on to other nations on the Pacific Rim, such as China, Canada, United States, Australia and New Zealand.

The Adventure of the Republic of Korea

We may thus begin by giving an account of the encounter by Thailand with Korea, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the year was 1965. We should first refer to the visit to Bangkok of President Park Chung Hee of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), apparently to invite Thailand to attend the Summit Meeting of Heads of State and/or Heads of Government within the Asian Pacific region, as it were, to celebrate their independence and hard-won freedom after the Korean War, involving the United Nations intervention and the Allied Forces fighting on the Korean Peninsular, resulting in a cease-fire and the agreement on the 38th Parallel as dividing line between North and South Korea, not much dissimilar from the Vietnamese 18th Parallel, dividing at any rate for the time-being, North from South Vietnam.

The following year in 1966, the Republic of Korea hosted a Summit Meeting for Heads of Government and Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Asian Pacific nations to consult and see how to preserve peace and calm within the region.

While such a move could be viewed as a threat to North Korea and China or Russia, Japan was reluctant to react, not being reassured whether Japan's participation could be seen as taking side or viewed differently, judging from Japanese desire to maintain neutrality as in any case Myanmar would be equally hesitant if not reluctant.

For Japan, after Prime Minister Ikeda and Prime Minister Tanaka, Foreign Minister Shiina would be equally shy, although reluctantly Minister Shiina did attend, with hesitation, but with affirmative voices of cheers and approval by other Asian Pacific Nations which did not hesitate to attend the Summit in Korea. Thus, there are compelling reasons for us to concentrate at this point on Korea (the Republic of) and Japan, before moving on to other sections to complete our lengthy story about Thailand on the Pacific Rim.

The 1966 Rendez-Vous at Seoul (ROK)

President Park Chung Hee was prepared to receive his guests from Asia Pacific. For this purpose, Korea had built a large area, filled with bungalows and houses to entertain their invitees from the Asian Pacific, including Japan. Other invitees were less familiar with Korean culture than Japan. Guests were given Ginseng parties with interpreters and partners to be socially entertained.

Korean hosts included, not only the President himself, but also his Ministers, such as Lee Tong Won, a Doctor of Philosophy graduate from Oxford University and former Ambassador to Thailand. There were also Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs Kim, and certainly the then Korean Ambassador and Korean Minister Counselor to Thailand.

In terms of playing host, it would be hard to imagine a warmer and more intimate atmosphere. Yet, comparatively little or no documentation was prepared in terms of the high expectation of participants. We all came from far away land, not only to meet and be entertained, but hopefully also to achieve something at this valuable meeting place, in Seoul, Republic of Korea.

To initiate the inauguration of a regional organization in the Asian Pacific as a continuing cooperation and not merely to celebrate the occasion as a one-shot affairs, Thailand submitted a draft joint communiqué for the consideration of participants. The Korean Under-Secretary Kim was interested. He produced another draft based on the Thai first draft. He was asked not to do that, nor to divide attention, but we should all join hands and both drafts could merge as a joint Thai-Korean draft and it was introduced as co-authored by Thailand and Korea. This was done after some persuasion and after some discussion, the joint draft was finally adopted. The end result was that a new organization was born as the ASIAN PACIFIC COUNCIL (ASPAC). Foreign Minister Narcisso Ramos of the Philippines gave it the name and his blessings, almost in the same way as ASEAN being named by Foreign Minister Adam Malik of Indonesia in Bangkok the following year (1967)

Thus the meeting in Seoul, Republic of Korea, concluded with the successful creation of yet another regional organization with Korea and Japan in it, to ensure non-isolation of Japan and to provide a place of significance for the Republic of Korea among the free and independent nations of the Region of Asia and the Pacific, worthy of notice by other members of the Pacific Rim on the opposite side, such as Canada and the United States of America.

ASPAC may count as a fore runner of APEC or Association for Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation with the United States as an active member. Thus ASPAC continued to meet periodically at various capitals or cities of its members, such as Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and Wellington.

Many regional organizations for active economic and cultural exchanges and cooperation have thus come into existence. They may come and they may go as required by timely adjustments of their members who are ready and willing to recreate, re-introduce or replace regional organizations according to their needs and their usefulness to the region and its members.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge my deep gratitude to the Host, Golden Gate University School of law, for its generous hospitality and bounteous liberality of warmth and friendship for all its guests.

Professor Dr. Sompong SUCHARITKUL
San Francisco, March 27, 2015.