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**“To maintain the supreme power of the Thai people.”:  
Policy Practice of Foreign Policy by Khana Ratsadon  
from 1933 to 1938**

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**Abstract**

Generally, studies about Thai foreign policy after 1932 have focused on either the outcome after the change from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional regime or on the political struggle of factional politics within the People's Party (Khana Ratsadon). This paper aims at understanding the policy practice in Thailand from 1933 to 1938. The objective is to construct a narrative around the basic process which led to Thailand achieving independence for the first time according to the nation-state definition.

**Key Words:** Independence, Khana Ratsadon, Nation-State

**1. Introduction**

Thai foreign policy has received considerable recognition internationally. In particular, it plays a big role in advancing peace and initiating the integration of international cooperation organizations. This role came to prominence after World War II, since then Thailand has been an important force in promoting regional cooperation with organisations such as the United Nations (UN), The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), the Asean Economics Community (AEC) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), etc. However, with the highly volatile global political situation from the beginning of the 21st century to the present, countries have had to face new challenges, including economic crises, war problems and new security problems. The significant question is in which direction foreign policy will proceed so that it is adequately appropriate for countries to survive and maintain stability within their nations. Such an approach tends to be successful when applied with small states (Keohane, 1996, pp. 291-310).

The aforementioned points are in line with the viewpoint of Chinwanno (2018), who suggests that Thailand has a considerably large role in foreign affairs, both in the global and regional arenas. Its outstanding success in securing national interests in terms of security and economic development has also been recognized. Nevertheless, considering the course of history, relations between Thailand and its neighboring countries are not close or cooperative in various dimensions which reveals the complexity of the issues discussed above.

An analysis of modern foreign policy in Thailand can be broadly divided into 8 eras as follows.

1. From after the change from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy in 1932 until the World War 2 era (1933-1945)
2. During the civilian government under the leadership of Pridi Banomyong (1945-1947)
3. During the military government under the leadership of Field Marshal P. Pibulsongkhram (1948-1957)
4. During the military government under the leadership of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat and Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn (1958-1972)
5. During the period of foreign policy adjustment for neighboring countries in the democratic government (1973-1976) and the government of Prime Minister General

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Kriengsak Chamanan (1978-1980)

6. During the semi-democratic government under the leadership of General Prem Tinsulanonda (1980-1988)

7. During the democratic government under the leadership of Gen. Chatchai Choonhavan (1988-1991)

8. During the interim government under Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun (1991-1992)

This article, therefore, seeks to explore specific characteristics that serve as a model for Thai foreign policy. The focus is on the study of Thai foreign policy in the period after the change from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy in 1932, which is considered the beginning of Thailand's modern foreign policy. To be more precise, from 1933 to 1938 under the government of Phraya Phahonphonphayuhasena with Mr. Pridi Banomyong who was the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Thailand was facing two political challenges. The first challenge was having negotiations to enhance the country's status under democracy. In the past, Thailand's status was not recognized by the international community particularly among the superpowers.

Secondly, in the history of Thai foreign policy, this period is also the time when the Thai state adhered to the "Peace Policy" to proclaim itself as a neutral country. This is in accordance with Keohane's (1969) analysis which suggests that medium sized states, or "middle powers," have more physical capability than small states but not as much as the great or major powers which played an active role in proposing and initiating policy that sometimes-affected international politics at the regional or global level in some issues.

## **2. Literature Review**

In order to answer the question raised above, most scholarly work focuses on the consequences of changes in foreign policy that ultimately led to Siam's independence at that time and on external factors which affected the success of Thai foreign policy. The first group of academic work focuses on the outcomes of changes in foreign policy and external factors. For example, there are important textbooks such as "Siam and the League of Nations: Modernization, Sovereignty and Multilateral diplomacy 1920-1940" by Hell (2010) "Thai Foreign Policy 1932-1946" by Santaputra (2020). Academic work in the second group pays great attention to the study of internal factors.

Yet, they often put emphasis on factional politics among political groups within the People's Party after the peace policy was firmly established and highly successful. An example of academic work in this group is by Charoenvattananukul (2019) on "Beyond Bamboo Diplomacy: The Factor of Status Anxiety and Thai Foreign Policy Behaviors". For this reason, this article aims to study the practice of foreign policy between 1933-1938 to point out the fundamental process that has played an important role in helping Thailand achieve its' first complete independence as a nation state.

## **3. Problems in studying Thai foreign policy from 1933-1938**

In order to understand the international political status of Siam during post-World War I to pre-World War II periods, this article examines "Siam and the League of Nations: Modernization, Sovereignty and Multilateral Diplomacy, 1920 – 1940" written by Hell (2010). Hell revised his writings from his doctoral dissertation at the University of Tubingen in Germany. This work reflects the global context tied to the efforts of great nations to turn conflicts into peace. The result was the creation of a type of international regime known as "the league of nations". Nevertheless, the emergence of this organization existed in parallel with the four great currents which occurred at the same time. The first current is the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany, which gained high popularity within the country. After which the

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nation that used to be great with its "iron and blood" policy was defeated and mired in massive war restitution costs that made it difficult for the country to become great again.

The second current is the conversion to communism. The dream of Karl Marx was first realized in the cold land of Russia, when the Revolutionary Red Army overthrew the Romanov dynasty in 1917, before the establishment of a communist regime. The third current is nationalism enthusiastically adopted to liberate countries from their former colonial powers especially in the nations in Southeast Asia. The last current is the economic crisis called the Great Depression in western capitalist countries especially in the United States.

In such winds of change, it was necessary for Siam itself to stand firm in its position. After the change of government from an absolute monarchy in 1932 to a constitutional monarchy, multilateral organizations were established. They were intended to create a new world order to ensure security between states by establishing international law to turn conflicts into open dialogue and increase cooperation between states. Siam became part of this order (Hell, 2010, p.12). The People's Government effectively exploited this opportunity even though it was only for a short period of time.

Siam's foreign policy during this period was highly successful despite extensive challenges. What is interesting is how the factors and processes of the government at that time proceeded until Siam was able to amend unequal treaties. The most critical point was when Siam gained judicial independence and the People's Party government enthusiastically organized a ceremony to glorify this honor (Prakitnonthakarn, 2015).

Nevertheless, this situation did not proceed smoothly. The country also faced challenges posed by the volatility of the new world order. The first challenge was faced in 1933 when Siam decided to abstain at the League of Nations meeting from condemning Japan's invasion of Manchuria. Hell's conclusion clearly suggests that Siam's foreign policy and domestic modernization in the 1920s - 1930s followed the framework of multilateral negotiations (Hell, 2010, p.237). This corresponds to the set of documents entitled "Siam Peace" or "LE SIAM PACIFISTE" in which Pridi Banomyong revealed that Siam carried out such policy since the government of King Chulalongkorn and King Mongkut. During those times, Siam chose to negotiate with the great powers peacefully.

When world politics became increasingly stressful in the late 1930s, Siam was still able to maintain its neutral status. According to Pridi, this was meant to maintain the "balance of power", considering the neutrality of the People's Government. In order to be in line with the historical period, on the one hand, we must differentiate the non-military approach. Such an approach was highly popular in African countries and it became even more popular among the new nation-states of Asia when each nation's nationalist movements achieved liberation from their colonial states after World War II. They maintained their distance from the western powers while maintaining their status as neutral countries. The hypothesis of this article is that Siam aimed to maintain its neutral status during pre-World War II. It adopted ad hoc neutrality which is a policy that the majority of small states chose to implement. However, this kind of neutrality was destroyed when smaller states were invaded.

As Pridi once described Siam's diplomacy during World War I, "Siam declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I because it perceived that both countries initiated a brutal invasion and persecution of human beings" (Banomyong, 2015, pp. 49-50). This occurred in many countries in the past, such as the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, and more recently, in the case of Finland and Sweden, who wanted to take part in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or "NATO," because of their perception of being insecure when Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022.

Therefore, if we are to consider the principle of neutrality of Siam in the pre-World War I era, it is necessary to closely consider the conditions that caused transition in each period. An example of such considerations was presented in the important writing of Peera

Charoenvattananukul's "Beyond Bamboo Diplomacy: the Factor of Status Anxiety and Thai Foreign Policy Behaviours" which suggests that the policy of Siam was in this direction. However, his focus on the period during the transition from the government of Phraya Phahonphonphayuhasena to the Royal Government of Pibulsongkram, is different. There were significant factors involved in establishing a prominent international recognition status, especially, when France, as the colonial ruler of Indochina, began to provoke Thailand more forcefully between the end of 1940 to the beginning of 1941. Hence, this article aims to shorten the study period by considering foreign policy from 1933 to 1940 when Siam remained adhered to the policy of peace.

This is different from most academic papers that often determine Thailand's first foreign policy from 1933-1945, which is too broad to understand the turning point in diplomatic history. On the one hand, this article aims to avoid the influence of external factors on one-sided policy formulation, but focuses on the practical aspects of foreign policy putting emphasis on the key actions of policy makers. This research's objectives are two-fold. First, it aims to study the foreign policy practice of the People's Government from 1933 to 1938. Second, it aims to explain the foreign policy practice during that period and how it affected Thailand's political success in the early days of modern foreign policy.

#### 4. Concept of New Institutionalism

In order to understand the practice of Khana Ratsadon's government and the outcomes of foreign policy during that period, this article adopts the concept of historical neo-institutionalism as the main approach of this study. This approach is partly influenced by the neo-institutionalism (Skocpol, 1985). Such an approach is used to study the ways in which state institutions and social institutions define the political interests of actors as well as the institutional structure of power relations between groups rather than considering only one individual or organizational dimension, which has been of interest to previous studies. In this sense, historical neo-institutionalism is an approach that lies in the middle between rational alternative neo-institutionalism and sociological neo-institutionalism.

The hypothesis of historical neo-institutionalism is to study human political interactions in two ways: the study of interactions in the context of the structure of human-made rules and in the manner in which human life exists, rather than looking at these interactions over time. They superficially view human beings as independent from the existing institutions (Sanders, 2008, p.39). Hence, the form of the definition of historical institutionalism encompasses both formal and informal forms. In conclusion, it can be said that historical neo-institutionalism is primarily interested in two things: the temporal origin of political institutions or the application of the historical method as a whole to consider the historical development of institutional structures and political processes, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: comparison of institutional approaches compiled by Siwapol Chompupan (2022)

<b>Traditional institutionalism</b>	<b>Neo- institutionalism</b>
Study the institute as an organization	Study the structure and rules of the institutions
Study official institutions	Study both formal and informal institutions
View institutions as static	View institutions as dynamic and changing
Perceive that the institutions have some hidden value dimensions.	View institutional values as colliding with social values.
View institutions as a whole or as a harmonious unit.	Perceive institutions as consisting of various subunits
View the institution as independent of other factors	View institutions as rooted in other social contexts.

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## 5. Discussions of the study results

This article relies on the concept of historical neo-institutionalism using the study of primary documents. Therefore, it is a historical and documentary research emphasizing content analysis of primary documents such as the minutes of cabinet meetings, diplomatic records, newspapers and government statements from 1933 to 1938. The study led to two important conclusions. First, Siam aimed to maintain its neutral status in order to achieve the principle of independence; as it was the top priority of the People's Government under the new regime. Second, Siam's foreign policy during this period did not deny or refute the foreign policy of the former regime.

To elaborate on the first conclusion, it was found that Siam aimed to maintain its neutral status in order to achieve independence as it was the top priority of the People's Government under the new regime focusing on “maintaining the balance of power”. It became an approach that the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pridi Banomyong emphasized to ensure that the policy was in accordance with the peace policy under the leadership of Prime Minister Phraya Phahon Phonphayahasena. During this time, Pridi was in charge of traveling and negotiating with great powers. With careful consideration, we will find that the unity of government bodies yields extensive benefits, even though the majority of the actors seemed very immature as they cooperated with a number of progressive civil servants. One of them was Prince Wanwaitayakorn Worawan, who was an adviser to the government.

Pridi once mentioned in the official document entitled "Siam Peace" that the Prince's ability affects international negotiations. One of the reasons is related to the Thai parliamentary system which was also the new regime of Siam. When Siam decided to not accept any negotiations, they would reason that the House of Representatives did not allow ratification. Such negotiations have yielded many favors to Siam. At one time, some countries believed that if they had negotiations with Prince Wanwaitayakorn Worawan, he would utilize his art to facilitate them in compromising negotiations with the House of Representatives. However, when having negotiations, Siam only consulted foreign consultants from certain countries and on certain matters which shows that it gained benefits from this type of negotiations.

The above corresponds to peace policy which always emphasized “peace guaranteed by the wisdom and resoluteness of the governors which is not a cowardly and dishonorable surrender but peace and the reward of peace, which is infinitely valuable” (Phra Chao Chang Phueak, pp. 72-73). Another highly talented and important group of people with regards to negotiations are State Department officials in addition to the elected “representatives” of the people who served actively in parliament to defend the principle of independence.

Pridi revealed that the process of negotiations is not merely about taking part in meetings, but it also includes developing friendships with international diplomats to gain their trust that we are their allies who keep promises and are always truthful. The people who played an important role in this aspect were civil servants ranging from clerks to high-ranking officials of the ministry.

"With the acquisition of sovereign rights and full equal rights from all nations in this new treaty, the government will actively preserve and maintain them to the best of our abilities under international relations with the principle of reciprocity, fairness and mutual benefits in the same way and consistently with every country. We will not allow any powers or obstacles to destroy what is regarded as an inheritance that will be passed on to our descendants later."

It is true that on one side, Siam's ambition was to be accepted by the civilized nations. As we can see from the quote above, complex laws were updated and equal political

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rights between women and men were acknowledged, etc. Some of the precise principles above allowed Siam to be involved in many negotiations over a long and continuous Reciprocity is therefore not arrogance, unlike insisting only on one's own proposals. However, the reciprocity must be endowed with sincerity and truthfulness based on Pridi's policy as Siam was extremely determined to change in order to be recognized internationally.

“When the nations have made good relations with us on equal terms, with so much trust and respect, it was the great desire of the new Siam to gain complete foreign sovereignty which is our great success. All citizens of Siam should be proud of this honor.”

Pridi Banomyong's speech to the people on February 15, 1938 under the approval of Luang Pibulsongkram, the prime minister at that time shows both the unity of the People's Party and the continuous implementation of foreign policy according to the six principles of the People's Party before World War 2 commenced.

On the one hand, we do not deny the competence of the government leaders of that time. However, what is interesting is to study the awareness that Thai foreign policy in the specific context of each superpower opened a window of opportunity to Thailand and allowed negotiations to resolve an unfair treaty that benefited Siam immensely and brought a change in consciousness at the level of mass politics within Siam itself. Understanding this will help us understand that government leaders do not have monopoly on our success.

Another important point is that Siam's foreign policy during this period did not deny or refute all foreign policy in the former regime. For example, the appointment of foreign advisors was normalized under an absolute monarchy because the knowledge of modern science of the Thai people had not passed on to the common people. The government in the old system had to select knowledgeable and capable foreigners to act in advising on the administration of state affairs especially in the implementation of treaty policies with many superpowers to support the fiscal situation. However, relying on foreign consultants benefitted Siam as the negotiation's skills of the foreign consultants prevented Siam from becoming anyone's puppet. As Pridi mentioned, in some cases of policy implementation of the governments of King Mongkut, King Prajadhipok and Krom Muen Thewawong WaroThai benefitted Siam.

Unfortunately, considering the renegotiation of Thailand's treaty with the United States in 1920 and despite Thailand being a United States ally in World War I, this was not always the case. The United States' extraterritorial rights were not abolished through the negotiations, while Turkey, a country that lost the war, did have the United States' extraterritorial rights abolished. The foreign consultant in the of the American diplomat Phraya Kalayanamaitri or Francis B. Sare, who was Woodrow Wilson's son in law, did not play a sufficiently supportive role in the negotiations of the Siamese government.

Pridi corrected several misunderstandings of the role of the American advisor, Francis B. Sare, or Phraya Kalayanamaitri. First, there was a rumor that President Woodrow Wilson's son-in-law amended the Treaty for Siam. There is misconception on this issue. First, Woodrow Wilson's presidency ended in 1921, but most of the treaties that Siam made were after Phraya Kalayanamaitri's "father-in-law" retired. Examples are the treaty with the United States in 1920, the treaty with Japan in 1924, the treaty with France, the Netherlands and England in 1925. Secondly, Pridi explained that those who study US politics acknowledge that a retired or deceased president cannot influence following American governments. The emphasis on the effect of being the "son-in-law" to facilitate negotiations may be an incorrect assessment of his status and the treaty of Siam with the United States in 1920 is a good example of this.

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Ultimately, when the People's Party governed the country based on the six principles in 1933, Pridi was assigned by Phraya Phahon, the Prime Minister, to travel to negotiate a reduction in interest on the loan that the King Rama VI government had made with England. Negotiation guidelines were therefore carried out by insiders. Other consultants were consulted on other matters. The negotiation was aimed to reduce interest rates from 6 percent per year, to 4 percent per year. He also approached governments in other countries to amend various unequal treaties beginning with the treaty with the United States in 1920. Although the peak rate of customs duties that Siam could collect was still set for 10 years. Until the Buddhist year 1933 the new treaty contributed to Thailand's fiscal independence.

The peace policy based on the model of the government of Phraya Phahonphon Phayuhaseana was also implemented in the government of Luang Phibunsongkhram. Although under the new government, Pridi Banomyong did not hold the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs. This is because some ministers resigned; he had to assume the position of Minister of Finance. However, it was an opportunity for Pridi to use his ability to further push forward the six principles of the People's Party since during his tenure as Minister of Finance he gradually amended the taxation system to be fairer. For example, government taxes which were the remains of "tribute money" that the people had to pay to the feudal lords were abolished. Additionally, he abolished the rice duty to make the collection of taxes fairer and helped the establishment of the Revenue Code. Furthermore, Pridi initiated the cancellation of holding the currency pound sterling which devalued and switched to buying gold instead and saving it in the vault of the Ministry of Finance which has become the national reserves until today.

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