

**CENTER FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
(CSIS)**

**“THAI-U.S. RELATIONS IN THE CHANGING POLITICAL AND
ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA”**

**WITH
HIS EXCELLENCY NOPPADON PATTAMA,
FOREIGN MINISTER, THAILAND**

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JOHN HAMRE: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you. We've got a few more seats in the front and we will get some other chairs brought in I think because we've a stronger turnout, and it's wonderful. We're delighted to have you here, Foreign Minister.

First of all, let me just say welcome, and thank all of you for coming. I'm really delighted to have you here. This is an extremely important event for us at CSIS. We have had the honor and the privilege through Ambassador Krit's good offices to be able to initiate a program here at CSIS on Southeast Asia. I had the pleasure to speak briefly with the foreign minister. Washington, for being such a sophisticated and big town, really we can't handle more than one or two things at a time in our imagination. I said I'm so glad that he came because if he were not here, we wouldn't be thinking about all the important issues that are unfolding in Southeast Asia. So we need to have periodically somebody of importance needs to come to Washington to get our head back in the game. As I say, there are a lot of other things going on in the world other than Iraq or Afghanistan. We can't afford to let our focus become so myopic.

So I welcome you and thank you. I want to thank you not just for coming to CSIS, of course, but to thank you for coming to Washington so that we can re-engage with the world, Foreign Minister, and we've very delighted that you're here.

I had the privilege for the first time in my life of visiting Bangkok this summer. It was a personal vacation. My wife and I, like always we've seen the picture books of the temple complex downtown. It's just absolutely fabulous. It's this wonderful, wonderful thing. We had a fabulous stay in Bangkok. And I learned today, Foreign Minister, this is your first visit to Washington, which we can't offer the beauty and the glamour of Bangkok. We'll make up for it by having a lot of hustle and bustle. But we did remove all the protesters in your honor – (laughter). They were clogging the streets yesterday and I told them they can be here one day but they can't be here two. So we were able to clear them out so that you could get around.

These are very important issues unfolding in Southeast Asia. Some of them are burned into our image in our minds, what's happened in Burma recently, what's been happening in Tibet, et cetera. And it brings to mind the realization that there are very profound changes underway in this region, unbelievably profound changes, and it really does require an interchange with very thoughtful, sophisticated observers for us to understand that and to appreciate it. That's why I'm so grateful that you can come.

You've come the same week that we can celebrate the fact that Thailand and the United States have celebrated 175 years together. There aren't many countries that we can really say that. We're still a young and energetic and growing civilization and you are a proud and ancient civilization. So we come to this as a partnership where we hopefully can benefit from each other. I hope we're wise enough to realize that the good

Lord gave us two ears and one mouth. If we listen twice as much as we talk, we Americans would do better. So I think that's what we'll do today.

Derek Mitchell, my colleague, is the head of our Southeast Asia program and I'm going to let him moderate the discussion. The Foreign Minister is going to have prepared remarks and then he is going to interact with all of you. Of course the quality of any meeting is directly proportional to your involvement. So we turn it over to you later, but first we'll hear from the Foreign Minister. Sir, welcome, delighted to have you in Washington. (Applause.)

HIS EXCELLENCY NOPPADON PATTAMA: John 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'm delighted to visit the United States and to be part of the CSIS 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 military coup that took place in Thailand cast doubt over the future of the kingdom's democracy, and along with it the prospect for deeper Thai-U.S. 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 July of 2008, until December 2009, one and a half years. As chair, or as new chairman of ASEAN, we will oversee the important transition period of Southeast Asia's principal organization. It is the year that we expect that ASEAN charter to enter into force, which would be by the end of this year. This is 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.

I would like to touch about the changing political-economic landscape of Southeast Asia a little bit. When the United States first began to have a military presence in Thailand in 1964 as an ally, Southeast Asia was regarded as a theater of the Cold War. As the Berlin Wall crumbled, along came globalization, 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 liberalization.

We are witnessing the rise of China and then India, and economically resurging 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 faith 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 forward of others. You recognize 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, well enough to appreciate our role in this alliance and cooperation to benefit both our people.

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 geopolitical 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 ASEAN charter, ASEAN will become a more rule-based, people-oriented organization, 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-centered organization, 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 a sense, 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 summit held between ASEAN and each of these countries. The annual summits of the ASEAN Plus Three countries, and the east ASEAN summit, which also includes 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 outside 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 ASEAN financial crisis is one example, but one that is not easily forgotten, and one that gave impetus to the invention of ASEAN Plus Three, 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 under-estimated. The increasing economic ties and the reservoir of good will that comes with assisting can affect the calculation of interest and influence perception and position.

China is a good example of a country that has utilized this policy well, enabling it to make inroads into Southeast Asia. As friend and ally, I urge the United States to continue to enhance its engagement in our region. That's what I talked to Secretary of State Rice this afternoon. You can count on Thailand and you can count on 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 erased, or by the number of prevention initiatives or training courses we organized. Our partnership should go deeper and address the actual root cause that adds fuel to terrorism.

The differences in culture and faith, as well as social-economic differences, 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 worldwide 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. created 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 hopes 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 to 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 event spilled over into the discussion on Thai-U.S. relations. My question is, is this worth it for both of us?

Ladies and gentlemen, Thailand and Myanmar are neighbors. 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 neighbor engagement with Myanmar, as with all other neighbors. Simply put, we enjoy no luxury of distance, but saddled instead with the burden of proximity. With Myanmar the reality is not only that many ordinary Thais living along the border depend on broader trade, Thailand also needs Myanmar's cooperation to tackle trans-border issues such as drug trafficking, communicable diseases, displaced persons, and illegal labor. 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 true economic engagement will help improve the livelihood of Myanmar people themselves through more jobs and income. I believe that through technical assistance we can help them with institution and capacity building. I believe that through closer transportation networks of roads and rails we can help Myanmar open up a link with others in the greater – (unintelligible) – and beyond.

At the same time, as a friend Thailand can give Myanmar neighborly advice, and as friend we will be in a 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 democratization and national reconciliation, the need for credible and inclusive referendum and election, 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 neighbor.

I would like to touch, ladies and gentlemen, on the 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 cooperate with U.S. authorities in arresting Mr. Hambali, a leading figure of the Jemaah Islamiyah in Thailand two years ago 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 endeavor 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 recognize that those generations of Americans and Thais who have experienced firsthand the mutual benefit of our alliance are gradually being replaced by new and younger generations. It is thus a challenge for us to revitalize 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 long-standing 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 people are committed to a friendship so long as heaven and earth shall endure. That is a very long time indeed.

On this day, the 20th of March 2008, the 175th anniversary of Thai-U.S. relations, and as we work together toward 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 listening. (Applause.)

DEREK MITCHELL: Thank you very, very much, Minister Noppadon, for an eloquent and quite candid, I think, exploration of both Thai-U.S. relations and Thai relations in the region and ASEAN as a whole. So we are very, very grateful for that exposition. I think it leaves a lot of space for questions and we have a lot of time for questions as well.

He of course is operating on Thai time, so be somewhat gentle. It's about 4:00 in the morning for him. But let's go with questions. Please wait for the microphone and name an affiliation when you do ask your question.

Q: Mr. Minister, Jim Wolf, Reuters. Further to your meeting with Secretary Rice, you said that you told her that United States could count on Thailand and you can count on us with open arms. This was in response to what kind of request from Ms. Rice, if any? What did she ask you, what did you discuss, what did you tell her?

MIN. NOPPADON: Thank you. The speech was prepared before our meeting actually. (Laughter.) That's my first answer. Secondly, we had a very fruitful discussion with her. She is very kind, very charming. I wish she could play piano for us. We had a very fruitful discussion. We talked about our collaboration and cooperation. We talked about Myanmar. I said to her that the USA has a greater role to play in Southeast Asia. We talked about our personal issue, Thai-Saudi Arabia relations. We hope that the U.S. will lend us a hand in normalizing our relations. We talked about our collaboration in arresting certain terrorists. In all, our relations are extremely good and very cordial.

Q: Did she request that Thailand send any troops to Iraq or Afghanistan?

MIN. NOPPADON: No.

Q: Or contribute –

MIN. NOPPADON: She hasn't mentioned that issue.

Q: Dennis McNamara, Georgetown University. Thank you for your talk today. I know the FTA with Japan was concluded recently and would like to hear your reactions to that, what you see as sort of the prospects for that FTA, and whether or not there is any possibility of moving towards an FTA with the United States.

MIN. NOPPADON: Thank you, Professor from Georgetown. I wish to study at your university some time during my retirement. J-taper (ph) the FTA between Thailand and Japan, I think would benefit both countries, although in Thailand there has been criticism, but it happens in democratic societies. We think we shall stick to the FTA the J-taper and make it work to the benefit of the peoples of Thailand and Japan.

Regarding the FTA with the USA, I understand the negotiation hasn't started yet. We have to talk – we are a newly elected government. We will discuss among the cabinet members whether we are going to go ahead with the FTA. But I understand the negotiation stops for the time being.

Please, feel free to ask questions. I am yours.

Q: Thank you, Mr. Minister. I am Lionel Rosenblatt, of Refugees International. In 1975 the Thai and U.S. governments had a fine collaboration in addressing the Indochinese refugee exodus. It was really one of the great humanitarian accomplishments since World War II. There are some final chapters still to be written. You may be aware that there are 8,000 Hmong refugees in Phetchabun, a small group in Long Cai (ph). I wanted to hear about the Thai foreign ministry's position, but also I know it's not just your ministry that has an interest in this. The military and the NSC and even the prime minister's office have an involvement.

So I wanted to ask you about this and ask you to follow up on it, not to block the final chapter in this great humanitarian accomplishment.

MIN. NOPPADON: Thank you so much. The final chapter is always exciting, isn't it, when you read a novel. Thailand have to endure or to receive about 2 million undocumented workers from Myanmar. We shelter about 160,000 displaced people from Myanmar. There are about 7,800 Hmong in Phetchabun, and 152 in Long Cai, okay. I have to tell our honorable audience here is that the displaced people are not our own making. Because of some reason, they moved to Thailand, for fear of persecution or economic opportunities.

We would love to cooperate with Laos, and at the same time we would love to honor our international commitment, our international treaty. We will handle this issue very delicately. I can assure you that there will be no forced repatriation. We have to thank the American government that financially supports the building of bigger shelter in Long Cai so that the 147-plus-five (?) – (inaudible) – and their offspring – children that have a better quality of life with a large shelter.

So to answer your question, we have put in place a screening process that screens in those who are economic migrants or who for some reason have been persecuted in the past. And we will act accordingly. Thank you.

Q: Lex Rieffel, from the Brookings Institution. Mr. Minister, I'd like to return to the painful subject of Myanmar. The evidence that sanctions are working is very, very small. Your comment about democracy having to come from within I think is very important. What troubles me is that as I see Thailand's role in this process, I see a country that doesn't seem to be really bothered by the suffering of the Myanmar people, and maybe in some respects is profiting from the instability and the turmoil there. I wonder how this perception can be changed.

MIN. NOPPADON: Thank you so much for your question. I think you are entitled to your comment. And in democratic society, sometimes we agree to disagree.

Anyway, let's put it this way. We would love to see democracy in Myanmar. We don't want to host 2 million undocumented workers in Thailand because of security matter, because of security concern. But the approach is a little bit different. I can see that the sanctions hardly works. What should we do? If you impose more sanctions, those who will suffer is ordinary people. We believe that by engaging with Myanmar, by encouraging them to change from within, or by engaging them on humanitarian front, we can help the ordinary Myanmar people or Burmese people. We are not a country who would steal their natural resources. But we would love to see the political development or the credible referendum to be held in May, inclusive one, credible one.

As a member of ASEAN, we really cannot interfere with our member states' internal affairs. There is a line that we cannot cross. But we will ask the new chairman of ASEAN work actively, engage more actively with Myanmar. I do offer to share our experience regarding the holding of the referendum, as I just said in my speech. But I am pragmatist and optimist. I hope that one day there will be change in Myanmar. This is my belief.

To add some point, we believe that India and China have important role to play in what you call convincing, persuading, or pressuring Myanmar to change. I think India and China, even the United States, has a great role to play.

Q: (Off mike) – for Center for Strategic and International Studies. I wonder if I could approach that problem from a slightly different way and ask you to think about where you see ASEAN going in the next 10 years and what role Thailand will play. Will ASEAN be a community of politically similar countries? Will it just have trade agreements, which is how it sort of started out? How do you see ASEAN continuing? And if it becomes a politically more homogeneous place, how does that affect relations of the core five, original five countries with Vietnam, with Cambodia, and with Burma, or Myanmar?

MIN. NOPPADON: Thank you, sir. I am a doer, not a talker, actually. And I am a result-oriented man. So sometimes people are very frustrated about ASEAN. Some people say that it is just a talk shop. Or a very loose alliance. Whatever you would like to label that organization, we think as the chairman of ASEAN, and after the entry into force of ASEAN charter some time in January next year, we will have a stronger ASEAN, a rule-based ASEAN. From that onwards, we can make ASEAN work for the benefit of ASEAN people.

I'm sure ASEAN free trade agreement with certain countries is under negotiation and ASEAN will be a stronger organization and make ASEAN relevant to ordinary people in ASEAN, a people-centered ASEAN, stronger ASEAN, forward-looking

ASEAN, action-oriented ASEAN. I still have my hope in ASEAN. And as the chairman of ASEAN, we will do our best to achieve that goal.

Q: Foster Klug (ph). I work for the Associated Press. The Bush administration has about a year left and hasn't seemed particularly interested in changing its Myanmar policy. What are you hoping or encouraging the Bush administration to do in the last year, or what do you hope from the next administration as far as that policy?

MIN. NOPPADON: Thank you so much. I don't want to interfere with internal politics of the USA. (Laughter.) But I wish that the USA would play a greater role or more active role in Southeast Asia. I would like to see the USA as the moral leader of the world, stand up for democracy when there is a coup around the world. I think the USA should take a stronger position regarding that issue.

I would like to see the USA taking a stronger position regarding climate change. Kyoto Protocol has been brought into effect because of the ratification by certain superpower, namely Russia, for example. I would like to see USA as the leader who is a champion for democracy and human rights throughout the world. I don't want to touch or comment on internal politics, that general field that I think the USA should take.

Q: Did you express your concerns about Myanmar to Secretary Rice?

MIN. NOPPADON: A few. Yes, I told her that the USA should play a more active role in Southeast Asia and

Q: Hello, Mr. Minister. I'm Kay Floyd. I work for the International Institute for Strategic Studies and quite heavily on the Asian security summit. I wanted to build on your comments on ASEAN issues. You referenced several regional issues, and of course maritime piracy, trafficking, and all its variations. Where do you see Thailand being able to take a leadership role on the numerous ASEAN issues that they're trying to have a regional approach to?

MIN. NOPPADON: The Institute under the ASEAN charter – sorry.

Q: All the issues over the past that ASEAN has identified, whether it be trafficking or piracy or arms deals. Where can Thailand lead the ASEAN efforts?

MIN. NOPPADON: Thank you. Actually we cooperate closely with the U.S. regarding terrorism, as put in my speech, that we arrested a few terrorists. On piracy, maritime piracy, we cooperate closely with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore regarding the patrol in the Strait of Malacca. We agreed to take part in the patrol, but we need some money to finance the operation.

Regarding what else – terrorism, drug trafficking. The present government attaches great importance to drug trafficking. We think the future of younger generation, future of our children should be without drugs. So we announced a policy to our

parliament to suppress drug trafficking, and channels of cooperation among ASEAN members. And after the entry into force of ASEAN charter we will have a few more organizations that will deal with this issue. We will have a human rights body under the ASEAN charter, for example, let alone drug or other issue, social issues. We will deal with that every effectively after the entry into force of the charter. But thank you for your observation.

Q: Thank you, Mr. Minister. My name is Naomi Steinberg, and I'm from the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, and we seek to empower Americans with histories from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. And if I may, I would like to return to the issue Mr. Rosenblatt raised a few moments ago. I was very encouraged to hear your response in response to his question about the state of the Lao Hmong in Thailand.

I'm wondering if you could elaborate a little bit more on the situation of those in the Long Cai detention center, and those in Phetchabun. For example, we know that those in Long Cai have been recognized as refugees by UNHCR, so I was wondering if you could elaborate on what the plans are for perhaps their third country resettlement. And for those in Phetchabun who are found in need of international protection, what steps will be taken. Thank you.

MIN. NOPPADON: Thank you for your question. Regarding Hmongs in Long Cai, the so-called 147-plus-five, I understand the UNHCR issued a POC, person of concern, status. Not refugee but POC status. I can assure you that there will be no forced repatriation to Laos. And I did talk to the Laos, Thongloun, Laos foreign minister, that Laotian government position is getting more flexible. I hope that in the future they might agree, in the future they might. I can't speak on their behalf. They might agree for the repatriation to the third country, the Hmong in Long Cai.

Regarding the situation in Phetchabun about 7,800 Hmongs, we have put in place a screening process handled by our national security council. I understand other ministries as well. We will follow up and monitor the result of the screening and act accordingly. In any case, I can assure you that Thailand will honor our international commitment and will not force people to be repatriated.

Q: I'm Emma Chantlett-Avery from the Congressional Research Service. Thank you for your comments. If I could, I'd like to ask you about Thailand's domestic politics, and specifically about the role that former Prime Minister Thaksin plays in the current government. Do you think that he has a political future in Thailand, and do you think that Prime Minister Samak has asserted himself independently of Thaksin's position?

MIN. NOPPADON: Thank you. Dr. Thaksin quit politics already. He will not re-enter political scene in Thailand, or in the United Kingdom, where he is the chairman of Manchester city football club.

Regarding Samak, he is the real prime minister, de facto and de jure prime minister. Dr. Thaksin has never ordered or instructed Samak to do anything. And if you know Samak well, he is not the guy who takes any instruction lightly.

Regarding other political issues in Thailand, I think our government is quite stable and should be able to manage or to run our country for a few years. We hope to complete our four-year term, but in politics, one day is too long. So I'm not a fortune-teller. I can't predict my own future. But about Thaksin, I can assure you that he has not been involved in day-to-day or even month-to-month politics.

Q: Paramuey Swaran from – (inaudible) – Express. Mr. Minister, could you please highlight some of the priorities which Thailand would give when it takes over the chairmanship of ASEAN? And how it would go about doing its duties as chairman when many within ASEAN itself feel that the ASEAN charter has got no teeth? And in fact, some parliamentarians have also said from several countries that they would not endorse or ratify the charter. How confident are you that this would take place?

MIN. NOPPADON: Thank you. Without teeth we don't need a dentist. Okay, Thailand is going to ratify the charter I think by June, and Philippines is the only country that quite reluctant to ratify. But I talked to Mr. Alberto, the foreign minister of Philippines. They hope that they can ratify by the end of the year. Ratification shouldn't be any problem.

There will be rule-based ASEAN and several organs or bodies to be set up under the new charter, such as the ASEAN human rights body. The ASEAN human rights body and the coordinating committee, committee of permanent representatives, so many organizations that I don't want to bother you about. We will – you asked me how should we do or act as ASEAN chairman. We will do our best in accordance with the charter and we will make it effective.

For example, the Myanmar issue we can discuss under the ASEAN charter. During our foreign minister retreat we can discuss very freely and frankly about Myanmar issue, so we hope that having a stronger ASEAN we should pass resolution or we should come up with concrete result in the context of ASEAN. That's the hope that I have at the moment.

Q: Good afternoon, Foreign Minister Noppadon. My name is John Brandon. I'm with the Asia Foundation. I agree with you about the need for India and China. I would even add Japan, in terms of calibrating the effort with trying to encourage change in Burma. My question is, with ASEAN, with Thailand as the chair, how might that be done? It doesn't seem that there has been a calibrated effort by all these countries, and I think as a consequence Burma-Myanmar has been allowed to continue in the way that it has.

MIN. NOPPADON: Thank you for your question. Actually I toy (?) an idea with Christopher Hill yesterday, and even today, your Secretary Condoleezza Rice, regarding

the six or seven parties talk – depends on how many countries that you are going to invite – to solve the problem in Myanmar, on Myanmar issue. We really need Indian and Chinese participation. I agree with you, Japanese participation should be encouraged as well.

Thailand used to offer a Bangkok process. I don't know whether you are familiar with that idea. A process or a forum that several countries come together to offer their views how to solve or how to encourage Myanmar to change. Only by dialogue and active engagement or participation that we can move or keep the momentum going or make Myanmar change one way or the other. But we cannot interfere or we cannot use force or we cannot do more than as a friend or as a strategy partner, or as a member of ASEAN. We hope that we – upon my return to Thailand I will think about a strategy and come back and tell all friends, including India and China and Japan and also the United States, how Thailand is going to play its role as Myanmar's next-door neighbor to make change in Myanmar peacefully and democratically.

Q: Mr. Minister, thank you. Steven Flenagan (ph) from CSIS. Could you share with us a bit your vision for the future of the U.S.-Thai alliance, and how it fits with also your thinking about the future of regional cooperation in Southeast Asia?

MIN. NOPPADON: Thank you. Yes, the relations between – as I said, the U.S.-Thai relations are extremely good, but the USA should not take Thailand for granted. I think we could do more to cooperate in other issues. I'm sure there are ample opportunities for us to discuss in other forum and fora. I mentioned to Secretary Rice that the USA should play a greater role in that region, including cooperating with ASEAN more actively.

The ARF, ASEAN Regional Forum, is working well in terms of security issues, as you mentioned. And the USA is a staunch member of this organization. We still want to keep the EAC, but ASEAN would be a smaller organization in a bigger picture. We still see the role of India in that part of the world to keep peace and bring peace and stability to that region. This is my general view.

I think after the entry into force of the ASEAN charter we can reassess the success of ASEAN or the success of the charter and we can go from there.

MR. MITCHELL: I wonder if I might assert the prerogative of the chair to extend on that question a bit. On the issue of the U.S.-Thai military-military relationship, and on the day that relations were reestablished with the new government coming in, the military-military relationship was re-established. But what is the vision? How do you view the mil to mil relationship and what is the potential there? What is happening and how do you think that can develop over time?

MIN. NOPPADON: The return of military system to Thailand?

MR. MITCHELL: Yes, military-to-military relations and assistance and cooperation.

MIN. NOPPADON: The military cooperation between USA and Thailand is really good. We sent several people to be educated in West Point or in military institution in USA. The return of military assistance to Thailand after the formation of new government is well received by Thai people. The Cobra Gold exercise, joint exercise is still going, is very good. We still buy arms, lots of arms from USA. F-16, for example. And there shouldn't be any problem. Even after the coup the military of both sides still cooperate. Without military assistance.

Q: I ask your forgiveness in advance for a rather direct question. On the point you made about a six-party talk type of process, if all the parties agree that there should be no interference in the internal affairs of Burma, what would a six-party talk talk about? Walter Loman with Heritage Foundation.

MIN. NOPPADON: Yes, thank you so much. I think it depends how you define interference. I differentiate between interference and persuasion. In North Korea, for example, do you think – if we continue to enforce sanctions on North Korea, it will work? I beg to disagree. I think by engaging, by talking, by opening dialogue, by engagement we will be able to come to positive result. Only by talking or by negotiating, by persuading, that will produce some kind of result.

I don't think Myanmar situation you can force or you can impose any terms upon Myanmar. After a few years of sanctions, the junta in Myanmar still survives because of certain countries are prepared to cooperate with Myanmar. So in that case I think it's about time that we reassess the effectiveness of sanctions and adopt a different approach to force democratic change in Myanmar. That's my personal feeling.

MR. MITCHELL: Sir, we've run out of time. You said that you would not tell Americans how to deal with their internal affairs. Americans are pretty good at doing that to others, and we expect that friends do tell friends straight talk, and you have provided us straight talk today on a number of different issues, and we thank you for that.

My first opportunity in Thailand was 20 years ago as a back-packer. I'm probably not the only one here whose first experience in Thailand was a back-packer. That was 20 years ago. Your first experience in Washington, I imagine you have not seen much of Washington. But we welcome you back, we hope you can come back to CSIS. You've honored us today. Please join me in thanking the minister. (Applause.)

(END)