

In memoriam: ACM Siddhi Savetsila

China was Thailand's enemy No 1 – but we had to go with the flow at the UN, Foreign Minister ACM Siddhi Savetsila disclosed recently about the decision to recognise China in 1975.

Before his death on December 5, 2015, at the age of 96, Siddhi granted an interview to the Mae Fah Luang University on October 28 to be broadcast on January 15, 2016 at a seminar to mark the 40th anniversary of Sino-Thai relations. The 12-minute dialogue was candid as well as historic, providing unusual insights in understanding the past and current dynamic cooperation and friendship between the two countries.

In the video clip, Siddhi said after the UN vote in October 1971 to admit China as a UN member, increased support at home was calling for similar recognition for Beijing, especially under the administration of MR Kukrit Pramoj. Siddhi did not see eye to eye with General Chatichai Choonhavan, the foreign minister who fervently backed the rapprochement. Another reason for a shift in attitude, he pointed out, was the growing influence of the Soviet Union and its adversarial ties with China, which prompted the US to recognise China and create a new geopolitic involving the major powers.

Siddhi did not mince words in his staunchly anti-communist China

stance as the country's security chief at the time. However, he changed his mind after China pledged not to interfere with the estimated 400,000 overseas Chinese in Thailand.

He also made a promise to stop clandestine radio operations by the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in Kunming. China's radio support, he explained, was a show of solidarity with the CPT, which shared a similar ideology with communist China. After the establishment of diplomatic ties with Beijing in July 1975, Siddhi became one of the strongest supporters of China relations throughout the four decades until he passed away.

As foreign minister from February 1980 to December 1990, he worked through one of the most turbulent times in Thailand's diplomatic history with neighbouring countries and major powers.

The Cambodian conflict was at its height and external threats to the country's security were real. Indeed, with his humility, straightforwardness and honesty, Siddhi saved the country from the scourge of war and prevented the much-feared 'domino effect' from crossing the eastern frontier.

During the Cambodian conflict, Siddhi played an instrumental role in mustering support and coordinating assistance – especially from Asean, China, US and other major powers –



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for the Cambodian resistance groups and maintaining their seat at the United Nations. His no-nonsense style of diplomacy and personal integrity – a rare quality today – imbued trust and confidence for Thailand, as a frontline state, at regional and international level. Together with his Asean colleagues, Siddhi used his trusted personal relations with them to help shape the settlement of the Cambodian conflict, which came with the Paris peace talks in 1991, shortly after he resigned and quit politics.

Even his arch rival, Vietnam's Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach came to like him. During a first encounter with Thach at the Saranrom Palace after Siddhi took office, he was not on good terms with Thach because of his intimidating views on Thailand and its role in the

region. However, after more meetings later, the two established good rapport and working relationships. Throughout the quagmire in Cambodia, one leader stood out in his relationships. Singapore's Foreign Minister Suppiah Dhanabalan was Siddhi's closest and most trusted friend, who often stood side by side and backed him up on Thailand's security views and Asean positions on Cambodia.

As a journalist covering Siddhi nearly every day during his tenure, his sincerity and honesty impressed me the most. Whatever comments he made, nobody questioned his motives. With journalists, it must be noted here that he was never evasive answering their questions and most of the time, he called a spade, a spade. He was kind and accessible to me, particularly when I was on deadlines. When he did not have an answer, he would say he did not know – no posturing as ministers these days often do. He would look into the eyes of a journalist asking questions as he conveyed his message.

In retrospect, it was refreshing to hear Siddhi discuss his concerns for and reasons behind the recognition of China. I have heard them several times before. But this time, they resonated so well with the current state of Sino-Thai friendship. In the earlier decades up to the 1990s, the cooperation was mainly focused on security

and strategic matters to engage China, both in the regional and global context. Siddhi was able to shape Sino-Thai relations at the time in a well-balanced way based on current geopolitics. He was a strategist with engineering and intelligence backgrounds, so he could set a healthy pathway for the two countries. Nobody accused Thailand of tilting towards China – as is often the case now.

As these ties enter their fifth decade, the economic dimension has emerged as a decisive factor, consuming Thai policy towards China. Beijing joined the World Trade Organization in 2000 and a decade later, China replaced Japan as the world's No 2 economic power. Its growing economic clout, coupled with numerous infrastructure and connectivity projects, has prompted Thailand to take advantage of these new opportunities.

At the seminar, all Thai and Chinese panellists, including keynote speaker Chinese ambassador Ning Fukui and his predecessor Guan Mu, praised the extraordinary progress of Sino-Thai relations. The gist of their exchange was concentrated on economic benefits and Thailand's urgency to take up these early harvests.

Unfortunately, they did not discuss possible strategic implications – something Siddhi, as foreign minister, would have done first and foremost.