The study of "Thailand, as a factor in the Foreign Policy of the Lao people's Democratic Republic 1975-1992" is a significant phase in the history of South-East Asia. Laos, a land-locked country and Thailand, which has never been colonised, inspite of some ideological differences, are similar in their culture, habits, language and historical background. Both countries follow the same foreign policy aiming at peace, freedom and non-violence.

Although, there may be ups and downs in the relations between Laos and Thailand due to border incidents, major conflicts like "the three villages" problem the three month war on Ban Rom Klao border area and refugees problem, the relations since 1975, i.e., from the establishment of LPDR, have not affected permanently and the fields of trade, commerce, economic and culture were not halted. Except for a brief period from 1979-1982 [during which period Laos followed the principles of Vietnam, being the member of 'Indochina Solidarity Bloc'], LPDR followed a traditional policy of friendship and acceptance of aid and assistance from Thailand throughout its regime. Because of its ethnic relations, Laos has been improving good relations with
Thailand even though there were anti-communist activities along the Mekong River border, for which Thailand was used as a base by the resistance powers.

During the first five years of LPDR's regime although the relations between Laos and Thailand deteriorated, due to closing of the border, resumption of hostilities and mutual acrimony, two joint communiques which became the basis for future cordial and cooperative relationship between the two countries, have been signed by the LPDR's Prime Minister Kaysone Phomvihane and Thailand's Prime Minister General Kriangsak Chamanand in January and April 1979. These landmark agreements stated that the Mekong river has been turned into a "river of genuine peace, friendship and mutual benefit". Both Prime Ministers also emphasised that the Thai and Lao people were "brothers in culture".

The LPDR's external policy programme, declared on 1-2 December 1975 has stated that LPDR wished to strengthen international solidarity, relation and cooperation for the reconstruction of their fatherland, to safeguard peace, to maintain and reinforce friendship and fraternity with the Thai people. Thailand's Prime Minister Mr. Kukrit Pramoj declared Thai's Foreign Policy towards LPDR in April 1976 that his government would strengthen ties with neighbouring countries including the newly established LPDR. Although
Thailand and Laos had strained relations during the anti-communist regime of Thanin Kraivixien in 1976 and 1977, substantial improvement was seen during the regime of General Kriangsak, due to his flexible and accommodative policy towards LPDR. He liked the relations of the brotherly countries to be based on "Panchashila" i.e., five principles of co-existence. Lao-Thai relations were climaxed in April 1979, when LPDR's Prime Minister Kaysone Phomvihane had paid a reciprocal visit to Bangkok after the three-day official visit to Vientiane by Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak on January 1979, during which time Kaysone pledged to make South East Asia a zone of peace, independence, neutrality, freedom, stability and prosperity.

Because of heightened tension along the Thai-Kampuchean border in March 1980, and the replacement of Kriangsak's government by Prem Tinsulanond's government the relations between Laos and Thailand once again deteriorated. As a result of closure of the border after a shooting incident in June 1980, Laos faced a critical food-shortage and it accused Thailand of sabotaging the new regime of LPDR by closing the border. Thailand, which closed the border in order to make Laos realise that it was more dependent on Thailand than Vietnam, blamed Laos as a "colony of Vietnam" and a "puppet to Vietnam" but reopened the border in August 1980. It had also reopened two more border points to reduce
the tension along the Mekong river and lifted the embargo. After this, the Lao-Thai relations were improved. Electricity agreements were signed in October and Thailand accepted to participate in trade fair. Laos also wished to have friendly relations with Thailand by reestablishing Kriangsak-Kaysone agreement of 1979.

The period from 1981 to 1983 was marked improvement in the relations between Laos and Thailand, during which period many agreements encouraging trade and cooperation were signed. Due to some border incidents, Lao-Thai border was sealed in the beginning of 1981, and Laos accused Thailand of border provocation. Thai Prime Minister who visited the border declared that Thailand had no time to quarrel and had concentrated on developmental activities of the people. When the border was reopened, the relations between the two countries had improved appreciably. Thailand changed its previous policy towards Laos and declared to maintain the Mekong river as "a river of peace" which resulted in signing of an agreement in November 1981, reaffirming their intention to implement the principles and contents of Joint Communiques of 1979, and to promote trade, economy and culture. As a result of this agreement trade delegations were exchanged and the relations were very cordial. In May and June 1983, the Lao-Thai relations were deteriorated and tension was increased in the border due to shooting
incidents. When Laos sent protest note to Thailand, it assured not to support subversive activities against Laos. Twenty four Laotians were killed on June 6 incident for which an aide-memorie stating that Thailand encroached upon Lao water was also sent to the Thai government. Thai Foreign Ministry in reply to the protest note accused Laos of serving as "a mouth-piece" of Vietnam. These incidents were occurred due to the defective demarcation of the border by the French, by which Laos was given powers to control all Islands in the Mekong river.

In spite of the border tension in May and June 1983, due to the visit of General Kriangsak, former Thai Prime Minister to Vientiane for five days in August, the relations were cordial and an atmosphere of friendship and mutual understanding was achieved and General Kriangsak even described the border incidents as "family squables" and "minor problems". This visit helped to increase trade. As a result a nine-member Thai trade delegation signed an agreement in August. Many more agreements were also signed between Laos and Thailand during September-December including setting up of direct communication links between provincial authorities of Nong Khai and Vientiane to prevent border incidents. By the beginning of 1984, Thailand and Laos boosted their ties in trade and both governments reiterated to follow the principles of 1979 communique.
The most serious issue that occurred in Lao-Thai relations since 1975, was the conflict of "the three villages", which was focussed as a "pre-meditated aggression of Thailand against Laos". The minor border incident was transformed into an international dispute. The three villages Ban Mai, Ban Kang and Ban Savan which had a population of not more than 1100 and an area of 19 square kilometers is situated where Sayaboury province of Laos and Uttaradit province of Thailand meet. Both LPDR and Thailand claimed that these three villages were belonged to their territory. Thai forces occupied the disputed villages on June 6, 1984. There were non-stop negotiations. The issue was also taken to the U.N. General Assembly and the Security Council. Both sides resorted to prolonged war of words, statements and counter statements. The dispute, which was described as "a little more than a storm in a tea-cup", "much ado about nothing" and "a quarrel between neighbours over their common wall", was alive, until a new conflict over Ban Rom Klao for which a fierce battle was fought in December, 1987. It may be analysed that the traditional special relationship between Laos and Thailand was concealed by the news media by covering Thailand's side and avoiding Laos side deliberately which is a serious one in the relations of both the countries. Moreover, the dispute has become a grist for Hanoi's propaganda and used it to delink
Laos with Thailand as Vietnam worried that too much friendly relations with LPDR and Thailand would hamper its interests. Although many diplomats accept the Vietnam's involvement in the dispute some called Laos as Vietnam's satellite country and about one third of Laos' nationalist feelings and two thirds Hanoi's manipulation, for which the resentment of Vientiane could not be ruled out.

Relations between Laos and Thailand during 1986-1987, were gradually improved. Despite some border incidents, and hostile exchanges, there were conciliatory developments in the fields of trade and cooperation. In October 1986, as a good-will gesture, Thailand reduced the list of "strategic goods" from 273 to 173, cutting more than 100 items which were banned for export to Laos. It also agreed to further reduce the list to 61. This act of Thailand was hailed by Laotian leaders as well as Thai business people. Therefore, trade was tremendously increased between the two countries. In spite of improvement in trade, the relations were affected in early 1987 due to an agreement on the establishment of a Joint-stock pile in Thailand between the United States and Thailand. Laos declared that the agreement was a violation of 1979 communique. Inspite of it some agreements were reached between Laos and Thailand to resume barter trade to improve cultural and educational cooperation. As Laos banned export of logs and closed its
borders in November, 1987, there was some tension temporarily in the Lao-Thai border. At the end of 1987, Laotian Ministers as many as twenty congratulated the King of Thailand on his 60th birthday which was a sign of improvement in the relations.

Another most unfortunate event that caused the relations between Laos and Thailand to reach to their lowest ebb was the three-month war on Ban Rom Klao border area, which dominated for more than three years from 1987 to 1991. Both sides fought over several disputed hills [less than 70 Km$^2$ of area] along with Lao-Thai border. The six-week fierce fighting costed about 2 billion Baht [US $ 80 million] and more than 500 dead and 1000 wounded on both sides. Both Laos and Thailand claimed that the disputed area belonged to their territory. In February 1988, both sides agreed for a cease-fire and stopped fighting. Negotiations were continued up to 1991. At last by March 1991, both sides agreed to withdraw their troops from the disputed area. In April, the local administration was put in charge of maintaining peace and order in the disputed area. As a result of this conflict, the relations had become bad to worse. There were statements and counter statements criticising each other's action. Even the LPDR issued a 26-page Memorandum entitled Thai nibbing attacks against the LPDR's Territory. After many rounds of talks, and Thai Prime Minister Chatichai's
visit to Laos, the conflict came to an end with the acceptance of withdrawal of troops from both sides.

The third problem that caused irritation between the LPDR and Thailand was the Laotian refugees problem. Thousands of refugees crossed Laos and entered Thailand soon after the establishment of the LPDR due to economic hardships and expecting bright future in third countries. During the first five years, more than 300,000 i.e., 10 per cent of Laos' population left to Thailand. Though the LPDR Government appealed the refugees not to leave their native land, the flow did not stop. It created economic hardships to Thai Government which always extended hospitality to refugees on humanitarian grounds. The services of UNHCR also were appreciable in tackling the problem. The repatriation programme was implemented from the beginning of 1982. Thai government increased screening measures in order to discourage the arrival of the refugees. As a result, the rate of new arrivals fell by 50 per cent. But the flow of refugees was increased in the second half of 1986 and the relations between the countries were again affected. Direct talks to resolve the problem were successful in February 1989 and both sides agreed to settle the repatriation of 80,000 refugees and displaced persons remained in Thai camps. An agreement was reached in March 1993 and accordingly Laos accepted to take back refugees at the rate of 150 a
month. In June 1991, Laos agreed to take back all the 64,000 refugees remained in Thailand and the repatriation was expected to be completed by the end of 1994. Thus, the refugees problem between the two countries has been settled once for all. Though it appears to be settled, the policy of Thailand "to push for return of all Laotian asylum seekers to Laos within the next four years", eventhough resettlement places are not identified is to be avoided. The asylum-seekers should be guaranteed with safeguards against abuses. The voluntary repatriation should be maximised and they should be given access to information about Laos, respect for human rights, reintegration and assistance should also be guaranteed. In order to bring confidence in the minds of refugees and settlement of the issue in an effective manner, the tripartite committee which consists of LPDR, Thailand and UNHCR should also be included by representatives of refugees. It is expected that the burden of Laotian refugees to Thailand, the land of free, which treats Laotians as brothers would be relieved and the problem would be settled by th end of 1994.

In spite of above problems which caused for deterioration of Lao-Thai relations, and dominated until 1991, the relations in the fields of trade, commerce and economic cooperation were not affected. By the end of 1991, the relations have improved well due to Thai policy towards
Laos which was undergone a significant change. The policy of Thailand towards Laos was of Ban Pee Muang Nong which means similar customs and language of neighbouring countries. The LPDR government adopted a seven-point proposal on establishing a zone of peace, friendship and cooperation in Southeast Asia in July 1988, which promoted cooperation and peace between Laos and Thailand. Another reason for fostering friendship towards Laos was the election of General Chatichai as Prime Minister in Thailand in October 1988, who declared that Laos would be turned into Thailand's friend and Indochina would be transformed from the battlefield into a market place. Another event that encouraged Lao-Thai friendship was a seminar conducted in October 1988 in Bangkok which was participated by eminent personalities who advised Thai government to pursue a policy of developing trade and cooperation with Laos. The visit of General Chatichai to Vientiane at the invitation of Kaysone in November 1988, the Joint Statement issued at the end of the visit, and the return visit by Kaysone in February, 1989 to the annual PharaThat festival, have also strengthened the relations between the two countries. In another development, the strategic goods list has been reduced to only 20 in December 1988 and the ban was lifted for even these 20 strategic goods in January 1990. To promote trade relations, both countries also accepted to allow Australian's finance
and assistance to build a "peace-bridge" over the Mekong river.

In a move to improve relations between Laos and Thailand, both governments established Thai-Lao and Lao-Thai cooperation committees, accepted the visits of students and women associations. Boat races, cultural programmes, tourism, investments were encouraged. Laos also reduced the taxes from 50 per cent to 25 per cent of the foreign investment profits and assured special treatment to the investors. Agreements to have Joint Ventures in setting up of commercial banks in Laos, to open more border-points to lift ban on the export of logs and to suppress smuggling in the border areas were signed and these agreements helped for improved relations.

In the field of electricity, Thailand which has been depending on Laos for generating its electricity in the northern states got many more projects approved by the Mekong committee, including a Joint Hydro-Electric Project. In November 1990, an electricity agreement was signed by Lao and Thai delegations in Vientiane and both sides agreed to cooperate to develop the Mekong river and its tributaries. Thailand also agreed to contribute 370 million Baht for construction of the Mekong bridge.
The eight-day official visit of Thai princess, Her Highness Sirindhorn at the invitation of LPDR's acting President Phoumi VongVichit in March 1990, was a historic event for the Laotian people. It provided them age-old kinship and affection besides improving relations between both the governments. In a joint statement issued in August 1990, the Lao and Thai military delegations, agreed to set up a Joint Thai-Lao Task Force for suppression of illegal cross-border activities and agreed to make full use of their potential to promote relations between the two countries. In an agreement signed by Foreign Ministers of both the countries, both countries agreed to encourage investments, which would be valid for ten years. The "Policy of opening up" of Laotian Government, which has been adopting from 1988, also encouraged foreign investment which is a sign of "a good outlook" for future economic development of Laos. In November 1990 an agreement was reached between the two Prime Ministers of Laos and Thailand. Accordingly both sides agreed to foster regional cooperation to develop the Mekong Basin and to arrive at a bilateral cooperation. Thai Prime Minister General Chatichai who arrived in Vientiane along with a 40-member delegation, at the invitation of Kaysone attended the Annual Buddhist ceremony at That Luang stupa and donated 100,000 Baht for the renovation of the stupa. The visit of Gen. Chatichai is a remarkable event in the Lao-Thai relations.
The relations between Laos and Thailand by March 1991, reached to their zenith when both sides agreed to withdraw their troops from the disputed area of Ban Rom Klao and the three disputed villages in Uttaradit province. The agreement signed by both the military delegations in Vientiane in the presence of Laotian Prime Minister Kaysone, was soon implemented by both the army chiefs and by March 1991, the military troops were withdrawn from the disputed areas. Both sides settled amicably all the sensitive issues, which include, refugees problem, border problems of three villages, and Ban Rom Klao area. Thailand's foreign policy towards the LPDR was also remarkably changed by March 1991. It declared its policy that top priority would be given to Laos in all fields to promote closer ties.

In a gesture in April 1991, the Laotian government presented "the Gold Medal of Honour", the highest decoration of LPDR, to Thai Princess, Her Majesty Maha Chakri Sirindhorn for her contribution to peace, cooperation and solidarity to promote Lao-Thai relations. Both sides exchanged delegations in May and June 1991 and signed agreements to cooperate in tourism, electricity, trade, joint investments and tax reduction from 60 per cent to 20 per cent on Lao agricultural products.
In January 1992, Kaysone Phomvihane visited Bangkok along with a 50-man delegation and discussed with his counterpart in Thailand on various bilateral issues and issued decrees recognizing the Thai King and Queen for the highest order of distinction Proxay Lan Xang as a token of LPDR's appreciation for the royal recipients' deeds in furthering good relations of both the countries. This event is a landmark in the history of Laos and Thailand relations.

The Lao-Thai treaty of Amity and Cooperation signed in February 1992 by the Prime Ministers of Laos and Thailand which contains 10 articles to promote peace, friendship, and cooperation between the two neighbourly countries is the most memorable treaty ever signed by Laos and Thailand. The joint communique of both Prime Ministers given on February 21, 1992 declared that due to exchange of visits between the governments, military, economic and trade delegations and due to ethnic nearness of both the peoples, the Treaty of Amity and cooperation was materialised.

By the beginning of 1992, Lao-Thai relations have been remarkably improved because of the following developments: First, the Foreign Policy of Thailand, was shifted from the policy introduced by General Chatichai who followed the policy of improving relations with Vietnam, making Indochina battle field into a market place and to bring about a
solution to the Kampuchean issue. The present foreign policy of Thailand is to provide the highest priority to LPDR among the Indochinese countries and it does not want to give overriding priority to the Kampuchean issue.

Second, the dynamic trade and economic links of Laos with Thailand, more than with any country in South East Asia, can not be under-estimated because, Laos always depends on Thailand for consumer goods and exports of timber, electricity etc. Where as Thailand depends on Laos for electricity, raw-material and trade. Moreover, Laos is a land-locked country. Hence it has more access to the sea through Thailand only.

Third, the burning problems of refugees, the insurgent activities of anti-communist and among resistance forces, have been settled to the entire satisfaction of both the countries after prolonged negotiations by 1992.

Fourth, the dispute of "the three villages", which flared and dominated for more than three years from 1984 to 1987 and another dispute over Ban Rom Klao area of 70 square kilometers of hilly and unusable land, for which a worst battle was fought at the end of 1987, and lost more than 500 soldiers on both sides, were also smoothly negotiated and accepted for an amicable solution by both the governments in March 1991 and accordingly, the army of both the countries
were withdrawn from the above disputed areas. The three disputed villages were left to local administration and the inhabitants of the villages were allowed to move freely without discrimination of nationality. This development is also a significant one in the fraternal relations of both the countries.

Fifth, Laos' policy on liberalized investments, joint-ventures and monetary policy for which Thailand also agreed, encouraged investors and enterpreneurs to start innovations in Laos. This policy of both the countries also helped for improved relations, between the two countries.

Sixth, the most significant step in improved relations is the end of Express Transport Organisations monopoly on cross-border transport.

Finally, the external factors also influenced the growth of Lao-Thai relations. Vietnam, China and the US avoided interfering in Lao-Thai relations.

However, both Laos and Thailand may consider the following recommendations and guidelines for their future relations and smooth functioning of brotherly relations.

First, although the relations between Laos and Thailand have been fostered, both countries have tasted colonial legacy and suffered a lot. As the French could not provide a
clear border demarcation, Laos and Thailand had to involve in many border conflicts. An ideal method of identifying the demarcation line in the Mekong river is the use of Thalweg i.e., deeper part of the water way. The French used the Thalweg in the Mekong river bed, which is nearer to Thai territory. In the dry season, Thais transgress into Lao side and use the river for transport of teakwood because the Mekong river channel is too shallow on the Thai side. Moreover, there are number of Thalwegs in the river. Therefore, the identification of Thalweg and demarcation of the border is a sensitive issue. It should be tackled in an amicable manner. The demarcation near the disputed three border villages in Phitsanulok province has not been clearly settled by the French. This issue also is to be settled by both the governments without any fuss.

Second, generally, border conflicts between two countries involve their respect, pride and nationalistic sentiments. The ethnically akin Laos and Thailand are no exception in such sentiments. So, both governments should settle their border conflicts in a friendly manner, using their diplomatic tact, tolerance, patience and treating each other equally. "Forget and Forgive" should be the motto in settling sensitive issues. Therefore, Laos and Thailand should forget the past bitterness and exchange of unhealthy war-of-words and should aim at future development and well-
being of the people of both the countries. In future both
governments should avoid in giving room for misunderstanding
and mutual suspicions. They should not be encouraged by a
third power. Both should have trust and confidence and give
respect to each other's ideologies and policies in political
and economic systems of their respective countries.
Moreover, both Laos and Thailand should not interfere in
each other's internal affairs which is one of the five
principles of Panchasheela, the traditional policy of both
the countries.

Third, Laos depends on Thailand on economic assistance
and foreign investment. It depends on Thailand more than any
other country, because of its affinity and ethnic relations.
Thailand also wishes to intensify its economic assistance to
its brotherly country in various fields because of its
traditional friendship and closity. Without good relations
and understanding this problem cannot be tackled. Therefore,
both Laos and Thailand should continue their affection,
sympathy and understanding and try to cooperate for each
other's development both economically and culturally.

Fourth, Laos should not forget its strategic importance
in South East Asia. While, accepting close relationship with
Vietnam, which has protected for years, it should develop
friendly relations with Thailand in view of its economy, as
Thailand provides assistance and investment as well as access to the sea which reduces transportation charge far higher on goods coming via Vietnam. Thailand also provides peaceful co-existence by suppressing guerrilla activity and anti-LPDR movements and help promoting the national goals of national integration and economical construction. At the same time Laos can also improve the relations between Vietnam as well as Thailand and promote peace and progress among the countries in South East Asia.

Finally, it is a universal truth that the Thais and Laotians are brothers across the Mekong. Ethnically, culturally, linguistically and religiously the two countries cannot be separated and their ethnic relations cannot be faded out. The people of LPDR and Thailand, the present and future generations, should lead their countries along the brightest path of independence, and help to build a "golden land" basing on mutual respect, sympathy, understanding, fraternity, equality and good-will and maintain peace in the South East Asian region as a whole. To conclude, it is emphasised that both the people of Laos and Thailand cannot forget that "the width of the Mekong does not serve to distance the two brotherly countries but it cements them with nam-Chai, meaning Water of the heart", and to lead a happy and prosperous life with mutual cooperation and understanding.

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