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*Royal Thai Embassy
1024 Wisconsin Avenue, N.W., Suite 601
Washington, D.C. 20007
<http://www.thaiembdo.org>
e-mail: thai.won@thaiembdo.org
Tel. (202) 944-3600 Fax. (202) 944-3611*

6 February B.E. 2562 (2019)

Dear Dr. Searight,

I write to express our appreciation for CSIS' continued interest in Southeast Asia and the Kingdom of Thailand, and in particular with regard to the Center's latest article "Southeast Asia in 2019: Four Issues to Watch" published on January 15, 2019. In this connection, I wish to offer some comments on behalf of the Royal Thai Government.

In analyzing Thailand's 2019 ASEAN Chairmanship, observer with adequate knowledge and understanding of Thai history and culture, and Thailand's centuries-long foreign policy tradition, would not fail to recall the country's legendary resilience, both from internal and external shocks, and its central role, long before the end of the Cold War, in advancing regionalism in Southeast Asia. As a founding member of ASEAN, all Thai Governments, regardless of who was in power, have always considered this grouping to be a national agenda and a cornerstone of their foreign policy. For this reason, Thailand is known to be one of the most progressive advocates for ASEAN. A historical review of the evolution of ASEAN - from an Association of five nations in 1967 to a Community of all ten Southeast Asian nations today - underlines the fact that, as a constant in its foreign policy, Thailand has always been at the forefront of efforts to push ASEAN to the next levels of integration and to strengthen the pivotal role of the grouping in the promotion of peace, security and prosperity in Asia.

Indeed, ASEAN and Thailand have come a long way together, and it is worth noting that all this has been achieved regardless of Thai domestic politics. Among other things, history shows that holding of elections has never had an impact on this Thai foreign policy constant, in particular the Kingdom's commitment and ability to play a constructive role in moving ASEAN forward. In the current Thai political context, there is no reason to believe – and no indication from any party, for that matter - that the upcoming March 24, 2019 election will be an exception to the rule in this regard.

Dr. Amy Searight,
Senior Adviser and Director,
Southeast Asia Program,
Center for Strategic and International Studies.
WASHINGTON, D.C.

It is also important to emphasize that the coronation of His Majesty the King of Thailand in May this year – a joyous celebration for the Nation and all Thai people – is purely of ceremonial nature. The event, to be conducted in accordance with long-standing royal tradition and protocol, has nothing to do with politics or foreign policy. One would therefore fail to understand why and how – as it has been suggested – this royal celebration can have a bearing on, or even be related in any way to, Thailand's ability to conduct its 2019 ASEAN Chairmanship and to bring it to a successful conclusion.

In fact, it is worth recalling that it was under the Thai ASEAN Chairmanship in 2008-2009 – a time of domestic political difficulties – that the ASEAN Charter entered into force, transforming ASEAN into a full-fledged intergovernmental organization and a truly rules-based and people-centered community. During the same period, Thailand laid down a solid foundation for an ASEAN Community with a series of actions to guide Community-building efforts in all three pillars of the Organization. The Roadmap for an ASEAN Community was adopted with all three Community Blueprints put in place. The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) was established. Interfaces between the ASEAN Leaders and representatives from the civil society, youth, and Parliaments of member states were initiated in order to ensure participation of all stakeholders in the Community-building efforts. All these important steps forward were successfully accomplished despite domestic situation at the time.

This year, Thailand is, once again, honored and well-prepared to take up the responsibility of the ASEAN Chairmanship. The Theme "Advancing Partnership for Sustainability" was carefully chosen to reflect our commitment to work in partnership with friends and stakeholders, both within ASEAN and the international community, to pursue sustainability in all dimensions and lay down the foundation for a dynamic ASEAN. In order to come up with ASEAN's priority areas for this year's Chairmanship, we engaged in two years of preparations in building consensus internally, with the private sector, civil society, and the general public and with our friends and partners in Southeast Asia and beyond. We are therefore pleased with a strong support for what we are trying to accomplish during our Chairmanship this year from all ASEAN Member States and Dialogue Partners, including the United States.

Far from avoiding challenges and problems, Thailand is tackling them – but through quiet diplomacy and trust-building within ASEAN and with the international community. This unassuming style of diplomacy, more suitable in the ASEAN context, should not be misconstrued as inaction or problem avoidance. We thus saw at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat in Chiang Mai between 17-18 January 2019, the first ASEAN Ministerial Meeting under the Thai Chairmanship this year, ASEAN's resolve in addressing pending problems such as the humanitarian situation in Rakhine State, where an enhanced ASEAN role centered on the ASEAN Secretary-General and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre), with a roadmap of cooperative actions, has been endorsed, with the support of Myanmar. The goal is to build an atmosphere conducive to, and an infrastructure to support, repatriation.

We also saw the resolve to accelerate negotiations on the Code of Conduct between ASEAN and China, combined with cooperative activities "on the ground" such as in marine environmental protection, in order to strengthen the momentum for the building

of strategic trust in the region. ASEAN and China are committed to working together to complete the first reading of the Single Draft COC Negotiating Text by 2019, which should be considered an important achievement, considering initial discussion on this was not even possible only a few years ago. Thailand's ultimate goal is to transform the South China Sea into a sea of peace, stability and sustainable development.

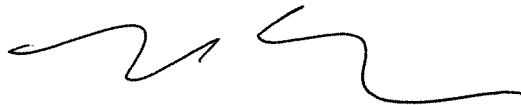
On the ASEAN-U.S. front, it will be under Thailand's ASEAN Chairmanship that we will see the first ever ASEAN-U.S. maritime exercises being conducted which will be a strong boost to our maritime cooperation, contributing to regional peace and security. We also expect to see the realization of the ASEAN-U.S. Smart Cities Partnership Initiative this year which will enhance smart cities links across the Pacific.

On the economic front, Thailand together with our ASEAN friends and relevant Dialogue Partners recognized the importance of giving strong political impetus to RCEP negotiations, with a goal of concluding the negotiations within this year. We also aim to build synergies amongst the different connectivity strategies in the region through the 'connecting the connectivities strategy'. To prepare the region for future economic and social challenges, Thailand has also initiated the launching of ASEAN institutions in Thailand in areas such as sustainable development, cyber security, disaster response, and innovation.

These are just among some of the many priorities that Thailand is working on with all partners, through careful but proactive consensus building, to strengthen an ASEAN Community that is people-centered and leaves no one behind, and to reinforce the ASEAN-centered regional architecture. And it is undertaken with the commitment to ensure continuity and sustainability of ASEAN policies well beyond 2019.

To successfully meet all these challenges ahead, we hope that we can count on support from all our friends, including non-governmental entities with constructive mandate such as CSIS.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of fluid, connected loops and strokes, representing the name Virachai Plasai.

Virachai Plasai

Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of the Kingdom of Thailand to the United States of America