

Nguyen Tien Dung*

THE SIAMESE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSES TO WESTERN FORCES AT THE TIME OF KING MONGKUT (1851-1868)

Amidst the strong wave of Western colonialist invasion in the East in the second half the 19th century, Siam was the only political entity in Southeast Asia which managed to avoid colonization. It is noteworthy that most Vietnamese and international scholars, while accounting for the success of Siam in the protection of its security and independence, believe that Siam was able to maintain its sovereignty because it was located in a “buffer zone” between British and French forces and took advantage of conflicts and fights for influence between imperialist countries on the Sino-Indian peninsula¹.

*The author is now a Lecturer at Faculty of Cultural Studies, Hanoi University of Culture (HUC) and also a Doctoral candidate at Faculty of History, University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU). The author would like to give deeply thank to Advisors: Prof. Dr. Nguyen Van Kim, Prof. Vu Duong Ninh and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hoang Khac Nam at Vietnam National University, Hanoi and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bruce Lockhart at Department of History, National University of Singapore (NUS). His email contact is dungnt.vhh@huc.edu.vn or nguyentindungls85@gmail.com.

¹ On Siam's foreign policies for Western colonialist forces in the second half of the 19th century in general and analyses of the “buffer zone” location of this country, please see: D. Wyatt: *Thailand: A Short History*, Yale University Press, New Haven, USA, 2003; M.L. Manich Jumsai: *History of Anglo – Thai Relations*, Published by Chalermnit, Bangkok, Thailand, 1970; P. Tuck: *The French Wolf and the Siamese Lamb-The French Threat to Siamese Independence 1858-1907*, White Lotus Co., Ltd, Bangkok, Thailand, 1995; W.F. Vella: *The Impact of the West on Government in Thailand*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, USA, 1955, pp. 317-350; T. Winichakul: *Siam Mapped-A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, USA, 1994; L. Dhiravegin: *Siam and Colonialism (1855-1909) – An Analysis of Diplomatic Relations*, Thai Wantana Panich Co., Ltd, Bangkok, Thailand, 1974; A.L. Moffat: *Mongkut: the King of Siam*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, USA, 1961, pp. 23-95; N. Tarling: *The Mission of Sir John Bowring to Siam*, “Journal of the Siam Society”, Vol. 50.2-1962, Bangkok, Thailand, pp. 91-118; R. Stanley Thomson: *Siam and France 1863-1870*, “Journal of the Far Eastern Quarterly”, Vol. 5, No. 1, (Nov., 1945), Columbia University

By consulting Thai annals² and works by some Western diplomats and intellectuals present in Siam in the second half the 19th century³ and based on findings of previous studies, this article gives emphasis to the awareness of King Mongkut, who reigned in 1851-1868, of sovereignty and national interests as well as smart, flexible responses of the Siamese administration to Western forces during the king's reign instead of arguments that the geographical location of Siam was the main factor helping it avoid colonization in this period.

Siam in the face of the expansion of Western forces in the 19th century

Like many Asian countries, Siam, in the second half of the 19th century, was under the pressure of increasing expansion of Western forces. Nevertheless, it was not until the 19th century that this kingdom had first contacts with Western people and civilizations. As a strong political entity in mainland Southeast Asia, as early as in the 16th century, the Ayutthaya dynasty gradually established diplomatic relations with many forces from outside. In addition to its traditional “partners” in the East like China and Japan,

Press, New York, USA, pp. 28-46; L. Palmer Briggs: *Aubaret and the Treaty of July 15, 1867 between France and Siam*, “Journal of the Far Eastern Quarterly”, Vol. 6, No. 2, (Feb., 1947), Columbia University Press, New York, USA, pp. 122-138; V.D. Ninh (Chief editor): *Phong trào cải cách ở một số nước Đông Á giữa thế kỷ XIX-đầu thế kỷ XX* (Reform Movements in Some East Asian Countries in the Period Between the Mid-19th and Early 20th Centuries), Vietnam National University Publishing House, Hanoi, 2007, pp. 200-236, 348-392.

² The annals of Siam at the time of Rama IV (or King Mongkut, who reigned in 1851-1868) was painstakingly translated from Thai into English in 1964 by Chadin (Kanjanavanit) Flood and was printed and distributed by the Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, Tokyo, Japan in 1965 and 1966. Please see: *The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era: The Fourth Reign (1851-1868)*, Translated by Chadin (Kanjanavanit) Flood, The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, Tokyo, Japan, Vol. 1 (1965) & Vol. 2 (1966).

³ Of the works by Westerners about Siam at the time of King Mongkut, we believe the memoirs by the British Ambassador John Bowring, who arrived in Siam in 1855, and those by British tutor Anna Harriette Leonowens, who was with the royal court in Bangkok for six years, are invaluable sources of reference. If J. Bowring: *The Kingdom and People of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855*, Oxford University Press, London, UK, Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints, Two vols, 1969, gives an account of rich, sophisticated Siam in many fields such as geography, history, demographics, languages, customs, economics, trade, literature and religions and especially Siam's trading and diplomatic relations with Western countries, A.H. Leonowens': *The English Governess at the Siamese Court: Being Recollections of Six Years in the Royal Palace at Bangkok*, Oxford University Press, UK, 1988, gives a relatively rich, lively description of life inside the palace.

Siam, in this period of time, developed foreign relations with Western countries, such as Portugal⁴, Spain⁵, the Netherlands⁶, Britain⁷ and France⁸.

However, the relations between Siam and the West were not only a linear flow characterized by friendly, peaceful diplomatic activities. The complexity and overlap of power between political entities on the Sino-Indian peninsula as well as conflicts and fights for influence between Western countries in the region made Siam introduce suitable countermeasures and diplomatic strategies. During the 16th and 17th centuries, Siam would not only have to fight a prolonged war with Burma (Myanmar), this kingdom would also have to cope with Western forces' growing ambitions of expanding their imperialist territories. After Dutch and British "adventurous" actions in Siam, Thais soon became aware of security and sovereignty threats and they designed their own strategies aimed at "balancing power" with Western entities. As a matter of fact, after "manipulative" acts by Constatine Phaulkon⁹, a Greek adventurer who was with the Siamese court in the 1680s, the Thai people, in more than 100 years later, terminated or "froze" relations with Western forces, except limited trade with

⁴ In 1511, Portuguese Admiral Affonso d'Albuquerque sent his envoy Duarte Fernandez to the Ayutthaya court to negotiate and sign a treaty on the residence and trade of Portuguese merchants in Siam. This was considered to be the first mission and marked Western presence in Siam. In Duarte Fernandez's trip to Siam in 1511, Portugal and Siam reached agreement and signed the treaty. Accordingly, Portuguese were allowed to trade in some places in Siam such as Ayutthaya, Nakhorn Sritammarat, Patani, Tenasserim and Mergui. For more, please see: D.G.E. Hall: *A History of South-East Asia*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK, Fourth Edition, 1981, p. 199.

⁵ After signing the treaty with Portugal, Siam in 1589 signed the friendship and trading treaty with Spain. Under the treaty, Spaniards were allowed to reside, trade and carry out missionary work in Siam.

⁶ Amongst the Western countries to Siam in this period, the Netherlands was considered to be a "strategic" partner, and trading activities between the two countries were smooth not only because the Netherlands had a lot of advantages in the regional market but also because they would offer the Siamese King and mandarins fat profits.

⁷ In 1612, mercantile ships of the British East India Company (EIC) sailed to Siam, where the British submitted the letter of credence and signed a treaty under which they were allowed to trade in Patani and Ayutthaya.

⁸ An outstanding feature of the French-Siamese relations in the second half of the 17th century is that trading activities would always follow missionary ones and French missionaries in Siam and would receive their strong support. If the official diplomatic relations between France and Siam was established in 1673 by Pallu, it was not until 1680 when, after many lobbying efforts, Siam would allow France to set up their shops in Ayutthaya.

⁹ Constatine Phaulkon served as an advisor and even a minister in charge of foreign relations for the Ayutthaya administration at the time of King Narai, and it was him who persuaded the king to be friendly with the French and "plotted" to put Siam under the administration of this country. Unfortunately, this plot did not unfold and soon after the death of King Narai, in 1686, Phaulkon was murdered by the kingdom's heir named Phra Phetraraja.

the Dutch in a certain place and allowing a few French missionaries to continue their work in the country¹⁰.

However, in the 1820s, there was a turning-point in the relations between Siam and Western forces in general and Britain in particular. After unsuccessful efforts by John Crawfurd's mission in 1821 to "open up" Siam¹¹, the second British mission led by captain Henry Burney in 1862 negotiated and signed the British-Siamese Treaty of Friendship and Commerce. According to the treaty, the two parties were unanimous in related issues such as ways to resolve disputes, if any, coordination in cracking crimes, definition of spheres of influence on the Malay peninsula, and free trade agreement¹². This treaty became a "model" for Siam to conclude a similar agreement with a U.S. mission led by Edmund Roberts in 1833.

Although both Britain and the United States managed to "open up" the Siamese market and win some rights from this kingdom, the British, like Americans, were not completely satisfied with the results of the negotiation and signed articles of the Burney Treaty. The main cause originated from the monopoly of the Thai royal court in some trade items, especially sugar, and from their ban on the trade of teak with the British. Moreover, the British were faced with fierce competition from Chinese, who were not bound by any treaties, so they could trade in items on which the British had to pay taxes according to the treaty of 1826. At the same time, Chinese received lots of trade incentives from Siamese officials¹³.

¹⁰ Like the "nation blocking" policy the Japanese carried out 50 years earlier, "every effort by Western mercantile ships to open trade was considered by successive kings of the Ayutthaya administration to be a big threat to totalitarianism and a danger to Siam's security and national sovereignty". For more, please see: F.C. Darling: *Thailand and the United States*, Public Affairs Press, Washington DC, USA, 1965, p. 12.

¹¹ Although failing to negotiate and sign a treaty with the Siamese administration, John Crawfurd said respectfully about Siam, "The Siamese are one of the most considerable and civilized of the groups of nations inhabiting the tropical regions, lying between Hindustan and China". For more, please see: J. Crwafurd, *A Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin-China*, London, UK, 1828, p. 310, according to H.R.H. Prince Chula Chakrabongse: *Lords of Life: A History of the Kings of Thailand*, Alvin Redman Limited, London, UK, 1960, p. 138.

¹² W.A. Graham: *Siam*, Vol. II, A. Morning Ltd, The De La More Press, London, UK, Vol. I, p. 215, according to L. Dhiravegin: *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹³ In one his noticeable notes, W.A. Graham wrote about unequal competition in trade between British and Chinese merchants: "All obligations and limitations which the treaty imposed upon the British merchants were rigidly enforced by the officials in authority, whereas the corresponding privileges that were supposed to have been secured were, as often as not, totally ignored by the officials. Meanwhile the Chinese traders having no treaty, were bound by no obligations, and secured all the privileges they wanted by the simple process of buying every official who had anything to do with the matter. Thus while British were bound by treaty not to build ships, not to occupy houses or land, not to export rice and not to travel in the interior, the Chinese did all of these without hindrance. On the other hand, the government though pledged by the treaty to allow no monopolies and to give equal chance to all and no favour to any, ignored this obligation and, by farming the trade in most articles to the influential class who

Obviously, as a large colonial force with constant ambitions of expanding its influence in the Far East, the British were not satisfied with their limited access to profits in Siam. Therefore, the British Ambassador Jame Brooke was sent to Siam in 1850 for the purpose of amending the articles of the Burney Treaty in such a way as to bring more benefits for Britain. A U.S. mission led by Ballestier also arrived in Siam with a similar purpose. However, their bitter failure to amend their respective signed treaties of 1826 and 1833 caused “both Brooke and Ballestier advised their governments that in their opinion only a warlike demonstration would move the Siamese”¹⁴. This means that British and American desired to adjust their respective treaties with Siam reached a climax by the mid-19th century.

In the wake of the increasing pressure from Western colonialist forces, King Mongkut, as the country's heir and head of state in 1851, was forced to make choices and policies for his people, which could have a profound effect on the survival and development of Siam in the future. As a matter of fact, he was a Buddhist intellectual who had been a monk for 27 years and deeply influenced by Buddhist thoughts and philosophies and who inherited Siam's two-centuries-old diplomatic traditions and its flexible responses to Western forces, so it was understandable that King Mongkut had an acute political vision and outstanding thinking compared with Siamese politicians of this period¹⁵. Having learnt from neighboring countries' lessons, especially China's failure to resist Western colonialist forces' attacks during the Opium War (1840-1842), King Mongkut was clearly aware of Western outstanding power and technical prowess as well as the danger of foreign invasion. Because of that, as soon as he was crowned, King Mongkut as head of state introduced suitable responses and policies, i.e. flexible foreign policy and national modernization, which were considered to be two critical factors behind successful protection of Siam's independence.

immediately sub-let to Chinese merchants, effectually barred the British from obtaining cargoes except on payment of ruinous prices to the very persons against whom they were in competition. Attempts on the part of the Hon. East India Company to improve matters by a revision of the treaty were frustrated by the interest which the Chinese were able to make with the King and the chief of officials of State. Efforts made by the United States Government to revise the treaty of their nation with Siam met with no better results”. For more, please see: W.A. Graham: *Siam*, Vol. II, pp. 95-97, according to L. Dhiravegin: *op. cit.*, quotation 22, p. 11.

¹⁴ L. Dhiravegin: *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁵ When Mongkut was crowned in 1851, a Singaporean newspaper made remarkable comments: “The new monarch is a man of liberal sentiments, and far in advance of the generality of his countrymen... We think the present sovereign will make great improvements in the country, will be very liberal to foreigners and their trade”. *News of the beginning of the 4th Reign in a Singapore newspaper* (in Thai and English), Bangkok, Thailand, 1932, pp. 9-19, according to H.R.H. Prince Chula Chakrabongse: *op. cit.*, p. 179.

His awareness of national sovereignty and interests, survival of the country and ways to protect national independence as well as his foreign policy throughout his reign were expressed in his letter to the Siamese ambassador to Paris in 1867:

Being, as we are now, surrounded on two or three sides by powerful nations, what can a small nation like us do? Supposing we were to discover a gold mine in our country, from which we could obtain many millions of catties¹⁶ weight of gold, enough to pay for the cost of a hundred warships; even with this we would still be unable to fight against them, because we would have to buy those very same warships and all the armaments from their countries. We are as yet unable to manufacture these things, and even if we have enough money to buy them, they can always stop the sale of them whenever they feel that we are arming ourselves beyond our station. They only weapons that will be of real use to us in the future will be our mouths and our hearts, constituted so as to be full of sense and wisdom for the better protection of ourselves¹⁷.

So, because of their awareness of the critical situation of the nation in the face of the pressure of increasing expansion of Western forces, King Mongkut and his progressive mandarins, in fact, opted for suitable policies for their country, i.e. a flexible foreign policy combined with westernization and self-reliance. Most remarkable was Siam's responses to British and French colonialists and some other Western nations.

Siamese responses to British threats

Of the relations between Siam and Western colonialist forces, those between Siam and Britain were considered to be the most important ones. It is easily noticed that under the increasing pressure of Western forces, of which the British were the most powerful,

it is perhaps not too much to say that Siam owed to Mongkut more than anyone else the fact that she preserved her independence when by the end of the nineteenth century all the other states of South-East Asia had come under European control. For he almost alone among his people could see clearly that if China had failed to maintain her isolation against European pressure, Siam must come to terms with the external forces threatening her and begin to accommodate herself to the new world, in which Asian traditionalism appeared outworn and inefficient¹⁸.

Looking back at Siamese responses to Britain in this period, the British-Siamese Treaty of Friendship and Commerce of 1855, also known as Bowring Treaty, was considered to be a turning-point and a new beginning for Siam's "open door" policy

¹⁶ Catties were a common unit of mass in China and Southeast Asia in the 19th century. The catty is equivalent to 500-600 grams.

¹⁷ Translation of King Mongkut's letter to Phraya Suriyawongse Vayavadhana, Siamese ambassador to Paris, dated 4/3/1867, printed in Pramoj MS, pp. 179-186; quotation p. 186; according to Abbot Low Moffat: *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

¹⁸ D.G.E. Hall: *op. cit.*, p. 707-708.

towards Western countries. On the treaty, there have been controversial opinions amongst Vietnamese and international scholars¹⁹. In our opinion, if Siam's Britain foreign policy was considered to be an essential factor behind this country's responses to Western forces, the Bowring Treaty was a deciding factor to the diplomatic relations between the two countries throughout the second half of the 19th century. Therefore, when evaluating the different effects of the treaty on the two sides, we should approach the issue from various perspectives and take a close look at the historical context, negotiation process and views and objectives of both Britain and Siam, instead of only analyzing the articles and contents of the treaty.

Looking back at the entire process of negotiating and signing the treaty, we see that the ultimate goal of John Bowring in Bangkok in 1855 was to remove trade barriers. This is partly reflected in his memoirs: The most visible problem is dealing with Siamese monopoly, which has caused major obstacles to trade, and it is necessary to remove these obstacles so trade will not encounter any problems²⁰.

Historical facts show that John Bowring encountered a lot of difficulties when negotiating the treaty, which would "open up" trade in Siam. The signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between Britain and Siam signed on 18 April 1855 was no easy process for either side. Instead, it came as a result of very complicated, prolonged

¹⁹ When the Bowring Treaty is discussed, there are certain differences in opinions about foreign policies and issues related to the Siamese economy. As far as foreign policies are concerned, it is noteworthy that historians agree that Siam made major concessions to the. As a matter of fact, after the signing of the treaty in 1855, some Thais expressed their views that they had made more concessions to the British than what the Japanese and Vietnamese did in similar circumstances. For more, please see: N. Tarling: *Harry Parkes's Negotiations in Bangkok in 1856*, "Journal of Siam Society", Bangkok, Thailand, Vol. 53, Part. 2, 1965, p. 168. Meanwhile, in one of his remarkable monographs, B.J. Terwiel re-evaluates the Bowring Treaty of 1855 and makes different comments on the consequences of the treaty on Siam. He highlights three issues. *First*, Terwiel re-examines the economic consequences of the treaty. He argues that the treaty did not have much impact on the Siamese economy. *Second*, he points out that Bowring's remarks cannot be considered to be reliable or grounded criteria for doubts about British negotiators' predictions about possible consequences of the treaty, so local economic points of view are presented. *Third*, from existing doubts, Terwiel recommends re-evaluation of the consequences of the treaty on the Siamese economy. For more, please see: B.J. Terwiel: *The Bowring Treaty: Imperialism and the Indigenous Perspective*, "Journal of Siam Society", Bangkok, Thailand, Vol. 79, Part. 2, 1991, pp. 40-47. In addition, based on valuable archives, scholar Nicolas Tarling in some of his monographs makes convincing remarks about multifaceted consequences of the Bowring Treaty on Siam. He believes that the treaty, through a new import-export taxation system, did not only deny Siamese aristocrats and mandarins privileges but also opened up rice trade and allowed the British to establish their consulate and gave them jurisdiction in Siam. The treaty makes little mention of the political relations between Siam and the British authorities in Myanmar and small kingdoms in the North of the Malay peninsula. For more, please see: N. Tarling: *British Policy in the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago, 1824-1871*, "Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society", XXX, Part. 3 (October 1957), pp. 34-36; 39-41, 43.

²⁰ J. Bowring: *The Kingdom and People of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855*, Part. II, pp. 258-259.

negotiations despite the fact that the personal relations between King Mongkut and the British ambassador John Bowring were very good and friendly. According to the annals of Chakkri at the time of King Mongkut, John Bowring, before arriving in Siam in March 1855, wrote the king a letter expressing his good will. The letter goes, briefly as follows:

The sovereign of Sir Bowring had commanded him to proceed to Siam to negotiate a treaty of friendship, relating to trade as well as to many other matters, which would in fact render the country of Siam more prosperous. Sir John Bowring would inform the Siamese later as to how many ships and how many men he was bringing with him. The letter said that at this time there were a large number of British warships on the China Sea, but since Sir John Bowring's coming would be friendly visit, and was not intended to alarm the Siamese, he would bring with him only a small number of ships. It was hoped that the fact that he would bring only a small number of ships would not create any misunderstanding on the part of the Siamese ministers which might hamper the negotiations for the treaty of friendly and trade. The letter continued that, if given a friendly welcome, Sir John Bowring would treat Siam as a great country. It said that there was not the slightest wish in Sir Bowring's heart to employ force²¹.

In response to Bowring's goodwill, King Mongkut expressed more than once in his works his soft and respectful attitude, as in a letter written in early 1855: "My respected gracious friend... I have informed your Excellency's arrival to all members of our Government: they are all very glad, and trusting that the visit of your Excellency is peaceful, and your Excellency is my intimate corresponding friend, from whom they expect favourable discussion of treaty"²². Another letter goes, "My gracious friend, it give me today most joyful pleasure to learn your Excellency's arrival here... Please allow our respects according to Siamese manners. Your Excellency's residence here was already prepared. We are longly already for acceptance of your Excellency"²³.

Documents from both British and Siamese sides say that ships *Rattler* and *Grecian* carrying British negotiators led by the ambassador John Bowring arrived at the security barrier at Paknam at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River on 24 March 1855. According to Siamese official historical records,

On Sunday, the seventh day of the waxing moon in the fifth month, three persons, Sir John Bowring, the Ambassador, Harry Parkes, a second envoy and John C. Bowring²⁴, a third envoy, arrived aboard the steamers *Rattler* and *Grecian*. The steamers came up to the mouth of the Chao Phraya

²¹ *The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era – The Fourth Reign (1851-1868)*, Vol. 1, translated by Chadin (Kanjavanit) Flood., p. 120.

²² S.P.P.M. Mongkut: *Letters from the King of Siam*, No. 38, is in Bowring's *The Kingdom and the People of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855*, Vol. II, p. 422

²³ A facsimile of the letter is in Bowring's *The Kingdom and the People of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855*, Vol. I, attached to p. I, according to D.G.E. Hall: *op. cit.*, p. 707.

²⁴ John C. Bowring was one of the sons of the British ambassador to Siam John Bowring in 1855.

River and anchored beyond the river bar... Sir John Bowring, Harry Parkes, John C. Bowring and 24 other British noblemen and commoners up to Bangkok, where they arrived on the first day of the waning moon in the fifth month. They were to stay at the residence arranged for the foreign envoys in front of the Prajuurawon temple²⁵.

However, after a rather long wait, official negotiations between the two sides did not begin until 9 April 1855, or more than a fortnight later. The British negotiators were led by John Bowring, Harry Parkes and John C. Bowring. On the Siamese side,

a royal command was issued appointing a committee to represent the King in the negotiation of a treaty with Sir John Bowring. The members of the committee were: the King's younger brother (Prince Krom Luang Wongsa), the elder Somdet²⁶ (Somdet Ong Yai, father of Kralahom and Phraklang), the younger Somdet (Somdet Ong Noi, uncle of Kralahom and Phraklang), Kralahom (Minister of Military Affairs)²⁷, and Phraklang (Minister of Finance)²⁸, making a total of five persons. The Chief Minister of Civil Service, was then old and debilitated and could not go anywhere; he therefore was not appointed to the committee²⁹.

It is noteworthy that during negotiations between Britain and Siam difficulties and complexities arose not only because of differences in points of views between the two sides but also of "conflicts" of views and perspectives amongst Siamese aristocracy and mandarins. This means that in the face of such important difficulties and challenges, the Siamese "elite" distinguished between national rights and interests and interests of classes or groups. If Kralahom (Minister of Military Affairs) and Phraklang (Minister

²⁵ *The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era – The Fourth Reign (1851-1868)*, Vol. 1, translated by Chadin (Kanjanavanit) Flood, p. 127.

²⁶ When studying names and titles of mandarins of the Siamese feudal court, we were faced with a lot of difficulties because a Siamese mandarin usually had a full name which was tens of words long. His first name would normally disappear when he was offered his first position. Every time he got promoted, he added a new name. Therefore, of the five Siamese negotiators, we have only been able to identify the exact full name of elder Somdet being Somdet Chao Phraya Borom Maha Prayurawongse (or Dit Bunnag); the full name of the king's younger brother was Krom Luang Wongsa Dhiraj Snid and that of Phraklang was Chao Phraya Tipakornwongse (Kham Bunnag – or the son of elder Somdet). The full name of younger Somdet, or Somdet Ong Yai, has not been identified yet. In the case of Kralahom (Minister of Military Affairs), we believe that at the time of King Mongkut a highest ranking mandarin of the Siamese court who held this position was Chao Phraya Sri Suriyawongse (or Chuang Bunnag, son of elder Somdet and elder brother of Phraklang).

²⁷ According to some documents, Kralahom was also the title of the Siamese Prime Minister at the time of Kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn. For the sake of consistency of titles, in this research article, we use the translation Minister of Military Affairs.

²⁸ According to *The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era – The Fourth Reign (1851-1868)*, the fifth member of the negotiators' council is the man in charge of the Habor Ministry. However, given the context of Siam in the second half of the 19th century, we believe this title should be understood as Ministry of Finance.

²⁹ *The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era – The Fourth Reign (1851-1868)*, Vol. 1, translated by Chadin (Kanjanavanit) Flood, p. 128.

of Finance)³⁰, who were high-ranking mandarins at the Bangkok royal court with progressive ideas, their father Somdet Ong Yai, who was Kralahom and Phraklang in previous periods, was seen as a conservative man who would like to maintain the privileges of the old system. Harry Parkes clearly explains this in related documents, “Although no longer holding a high and most influential position in the kingdom, Somdet still followed and imposed many old rituals. He remained more loyal to the old system than his sons who had progressive ideas and who held important positions which used to be their father’s”³¹. Moreover, Somdet thought his power had weakened in this new era and he was really worried because he was considered to be one of the protectors of the old time and a man who has many interests in the old monopoly system³². In fact, at many moments of time, in addition to differences in

³⁰ In his memoirs *The Kingdom and the People of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855*, John Bowring usually uses the term Minister of Diplomatic Affairs for Phrakalang. This title is sometimes used to refer to the man in charge of the royal treasury, tax collection, collection and spending of other ministries, domestic and international trade and in fact, the country’s entire diplomatic sector. For the sake of consistency, in our opinion, this noun should be translated as Minister of Finance.

³¹ In fact, the power and prestige of the Bunnag family of Somdet lasted until the late 19th century. For more, please see: H.R.H. Prince Chula Chakrabongse, *op. cit.*, p. 186. Their power and benefits were attributable to the monopoly system and stern taxation. As a matter of fact, Siam’s traditional taxation system did not only cause discontent for British mercantile ships but it also encountered relatively fierce opposition from Siamese mandarins and aristocracy, especially Kralahom, Siamese Minister of War. Harry Parkes’ memoirs give a clear account of that: “The system of taxation at present pursued in the country falls most oppressively on the poorer and producing portion of the population. Scarcely an article of consumption could be named that does not bear a high tax – and not only one tax, but in many cases several – as for instance Sugar, which is taxed in the course of its cultivation, after the Canes are reaped, on its way to Market, and upon its Exportation. What renders these taxes more burdensome than they otherwise would be is the manner of collecting them through a farmer – that is by transferring the Government interest in the tax to the person who pays the highest sum for the privilege of collection, and who of course retains a considerable profit for himself over and above the amount paid by him, to the Government. ... “Under this system the country”, observed the Phrakralahom, “grows poorer daily, and is losing its commerce through having so little produce to export; what therefore is chiefly needed is, that the people should be relieved of their burdens, their industry encouraged, and a market provided for their produce. But who has the power to effect this great change? Dare any of the ministers propose it, and brave the clamour that would immediately be awakened by those in high places, and by the numerous nobles, monopolists, etc., who are all interested in the preservation of the present pernicious system?” – “Your Excellency”, continued the Phrakralahom, “should well weigh the matter, and if it be the benefit of the Siamese people that you have at heart, your influence should be exerted with the King to bring about that radical and necessary change which can not otherwise be accomplished”. For more, please see: *The “Parkes” journal*, according to N. Tarling: *The Mission of Sir John Bowring to Siam*, pp. 98-99.

³² J. Bowring: *The Kingdom and People of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855*, Part. II, p. 278. Besides, according to unpublished British archives, Somdet Ong Noi’s conservatism came in for strong opposition from progressive mandarins, and “on account of his mercenary measures having lately been openly condemned by Kralahom, whereupon a quarrel had ensued between them which was scarcely yet healed”. For more, please see: *The Unpublished journal*, according to N. Tarling: *The Mission of Sir John Bowring to Siam*, p. 101. Obviously, this would cause more difficulties for

customs, traditions and rituals between Britain and Siam, it was the opposition of the conservative members of the Bangkok royal court led by Somdet Ong Yai and Somdet Ong Noi that caused John Bowring to feel that he did not have much faith in fruitful negotiations and to think that his team would leave Siam without being able to sign the treaty³³.

After ten days of negotiating (9-18 April 1855) and with a lot of issues being discussed and deliberated on multiple times, the treaty was officially signed on 18 April 1855. It was called *the British-Siamese Treaty of Friendship and Commerce*, also known as *the Bowring Treaty*. On the negotiation and signing of the treaty, Siamese official historical records write,

The meetings for the negotiation of the treaty took place at the former palace. The treaty consisted of 12 articles concerning relations between the two countries, six articles on civil laws, three articles on import and export taxes, making a total 21 articles³⁴. On the day the treaty was signed and the seal imprinted on it, 21 salutes were fired from the Wichajeenprasad Fort. The British gunboat also fired 21 salutes³⁵.

Unlike the Burney Treaty of 1826, the Bowring Treaty was considered to be an unequal one consisting of 12 articles in total. Because of the limited length of this research paper, we cannot quote all the 12 articles here, and the content of the treaty can be summarized as thus:

First, British citizens in Siam are subject to British jurisdiction. If they commit crimes in Siam, they will be tried with the British law rather than the local one. Second, British citizens are free to buy, sell and possess land in areas within a radius equivalent to 24 hours' sailing from the center of Bangkok. Third, the previous taxation is now cancelled. Import and export taxes are levied as follows: 1. An import tax of 3% is imposed on all kinds of goods; 2. The export tax is imposed only once. This type of tax can be called domestic, transport or export tax. Fourth, British merchants are allowed to trade directly with any Siamese without being hindered by anyone. Fifth, the Siamese administration has the right to ban the export of salt, rice and fish whenever they see that the export of these goods may pose a threat to local authorities. Sixth, a most favored nation clause is attached³⁶.

the negotiation of the British-Siamese treaty, as Prince Krom Luang Wongsā said to Bowring: Somdet Ong Noi will cause more difficulties when all incomes from agriculture or privileges are under his control. If the ambassador wishes to remove obstacles and receives freedom to trade, he needs to be "humble" and follows Somdet's instructions. For more, please see: John Bowring: *The Kingdom and People of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855*, Part. II, *op. cit.*, pp. 280-285.

³³ N. Tarling: *The Mission of Sir John Bowring to Siam*, p. 101.

³⁴ According to sources from both Britain and Siam, the Bowring Treaty consists of 12 articles. However, the annals say 21. This might be a mistranslation from Thai into English.

³⁵ *The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era – The Fourth Reign (1851-1868)*, Vol. 1, translated by Chadin (Kanjanavanit) Flood, p. 128.

³⁶ John Bowring lists the 12 articles of the treaty in his memoirs published in Britain in 1857. Because of the limited length of this research paper, we do not quote them in full here. For the entire

So it can be seen that the Bowring Treaty was an important milestone marking a turning-point in Siam's foreign policy and its response to Western nations during this period³⁷. As far as the consequences of the treaty, a question is whether it was a totally unequal treaty, an act of "humility" and a complete failure of the Siamese administration led by King Mongkut in the face of increasing expansion of Western forces in general and British colonialists in particular. This is a large question and it is difficult to give a final, correct answer. Historically, there were differences in the way Britain, which was led by John Bowring, and Siam perceived and evaluated the treaty of 1855. There were also differences in the way local and international researchers accounted for it later on. In our opinion, in order to make a comprehensive evaluation of the treaty and Siamese responses to British threats at the time of King Mongkut, it is advisable to avoid a linear perspective. Instead, this issue needs to be approached from multiple perspectives, which means that it is possible to avoid excessively negative and superficially or one-sided positive perceptions of the consequences of the treaty on Siam.

It can be easily seen that the treaty of 1855 with Britain was Siam's efforts to prevent the invasion and intervention of capitalism in its market. In political terms, one of Siam's major compromises with Britain was consular jurisdiction, which was considered to be one of the most unusual clauses of the treaty. According to the treaty, Siam did not have the right to manage British citizens and when these people committed crimes, Siamese courts would have no right to try them. Meanwhile, in economic terms, Siam made the most concessions to Britain compared to any other superpower later on. The 3% import tax on British merchants, duty-free import of drugs (although subject to limited quantities) and a one-time levy on export accord-

content of the treaty, please see: J. Bowring: *The Kingdom and People of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855*, Part. II, pp. 214-222.

³⁷ An important reason why the signing of the British-Siamese Treaty went so smoothly was that: "Bowring's task was rendered easier by the simple fact that his plenary powers had been conferred on him by Queen Victoria, whose sign manual was affixed to his documents. But his greatest asset came from the fact that he liked and respected the Siamese and won the personal friendship of the king. The overriding fact was that Mongkut was particularly anxious for the friendship of Britain". D.G.E. Hall: *op. cit.*, p. 709. In fact, great personal feelings John Bowring had towards Siam had a certain effect on the result of the negotiation of the treaty: "having perfect confidence in Sir John Bowring's friendly feelings towards Siam, and the full assurance that in his negotiations he sought the benefit of their country equally with that of Great Britain, they had trusted that he would be the pioneer of the new relations to be opened between them and the West, as they could then count upon such arrangements being concluded as would both be satisfactory to Siam, and sufficient to meet the demands that might hereafter be made by other of the Western Powers...". For more, please see: N. Tarling: *The Mission of Sir John Bowring to Siam*, p. 97.

ing to the approved list of the 1856 Convention obviously limited Siam's income and had an indirect effect on its treasury and national resources³⁸.

By signing the Bowring Treaty, Siam suffered considerable economic and political damages. However, when looked at from another perspective, the treaty ensured Siam great success on its protection of national sovereignty and independence. As head of state, King Mongkut, more than anyone else, was aware that Siamese economic and military potential was insufficient to cope with superior power of Western colonialists. Also by signing the treaty, Siam was able to avoid direct military or violent confrontation with Britain. Despite his good feelings for Siam, John Bowring admitted more than once in his memoirs that he would not exclude negative measures against Siam, which was similar to what his predecessor Jame Brooke and U.S. ambassador Ballestier recommended earlier. He wrote: If the treaty is not signed, I will have no excuse to delay and I can firmly announce that I cannot spend more time carrying out my mission. I will return to Siam after discussing with my French and American associates and the British admiral³⁹. This means if the treaty was not signed, John Bowring would leave and could return with warships and French and American allied troops. Then it would be difficult for Siam to avoid a direct military conflict, and given the balance of power at the time, it is not difficult to predict the outcome of such conflict.

What is more, when re-evaluating the system of jurisdiction, which is considered to be the biggest inequality in political terms when Siam signed the treaty with Britain, it can be seen that this was not a totally new thing in the relations between Siam and European powers. At the time of King Narai in the 17th century, the Ayutthaya administration made similar concessions to the Netherlands although the wording was not exactly the same⁴⁰. Therefore, it can be affirmed that despite concerns over the control of consuls, who had absolute power to manage foreigners' communities, King Mongkut chose to carry out a traditional diplomatic policy in a conscious, far-sighted

³⁸ Historically, due to the Siamese administration's "open door" policy for Britain at the time of King Mongkut (1851-1868), British trade in Southeast Asia in general and Siam in particular achieved great success. The relations between Singapore and British Hong Kong and Siamese port towns saw dramatic development. British company Bombay – Myanmar dominated the exploitation of teak in forests in the north of Siam. Most international trade in Bangkok was organized by British companies, and Britain soon became a country with the most investment in Siam. For more, please see: D.G.E. Hall: *op. cit.*, p. 710.

³⁹ J. Bowring: *The Kingdom and People of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855*, Part. II, pp. 211-212.

⁴⁰ "In the days of the great chartered companies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries rulers in South-East Asia had preferred that each community of foreign merchants – and this included the Chinese as well – should be under the control of chief, with whom the ruler could deal directly in all matters concerning them". For more, please see: D.G.E. Hall: *op. cit.*, p. 710.

and timely manner. He would sacrifice short-term interests and make compromises in order to achieve his ultimate goal being national sovereignty and independence⁴¹.

Although there are debates about the real economic impact of the new tariffs on Siam⁴², we believe the clauses of the British-Siamese treaty, to some extent, brought about a relatively comprehensive revolution in the Siamese administration's financial system. Such clauses gave rise to a big change in the taxation system, helping to get rid of a lot of "toxic" taxes, which would make producers feel secure, thereby increasing productivity across the country⁴³. In addition, the treaty annulled a large number of long-standing privileges and monopolies of aristocrats with the greatest influence and highest-ranking officials of Siam⁴⁴. Nevertheless, John Bowring expressed a few concerns over the "absolutely" positive economic impact of the treaty on Siam in his works: There are special taxes on sugar, black pepper, tobacco and all other essential goods. In general, they are subject to very heavy taxes, making it difficult to collect them because agricultural establishments tend to abandon farming. The new treaty stipulated that there was only one kind of tax on all goods, which reassured producers, thereby encouraging production on an industrial scale⁴⁵. However, we agree with the view which says that the treaty, in economic terms, promoted free trade and encouraged agricultural production.

In addition, as far as Siamese responses to Britain at the time of King Mongkut are concerned, it is noteworthy that although Siam made concessions in political and economic terms and although the king and his patriotic mandarins tried to include border and sovereignty issues in the treaty to no avail, they never failed to realize the importance of these issues⁴⁶. In fact, at the time of King Mongkut, although the Siamese administration carried out a flexible foreign policy, they still took tough

⁴¹ Vũ Dương Ninh (chief editor): *op. cit.*, pp. 211-212.

⁴² For differentiating views on the impact of the new taxation system on Siam, please see: D. Wyatt: *op. cit.*, p. 184; D. Elliot: *Thailand: Origins of Military Rule*, Zed Press, London, UK, 1978, pp. 80-81; H. Lysa: *Thailand in the Nineteenth Century: Evolution of the Economy and Society*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1984, pp. 79-80; B.J. Terwiel: *op. cit.*, pp. 40-47.

⁴³ B.J. Terwiel: *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁴⁴ D.G.E. Hall: *op. cit.*, p. 710.

⁴⁵ J. Bowring: *The Kingdom and People of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855*, Part. I, p. 264. Besides, when evaluating the positive effects of the treaty, John Bowring said: "The Anglo-Siamese treaty has brought most beneficial fruits. The number of vessels engaged in foreign trade has been centupled, the sides of the Menam (the Chao Phraya River) are crowded with docks, the productive powers of the land have increased, and with them the natural augmentation of property, and the rise of wages... Siam is a country of progress, and is sending forth her youth to be educated in the best schools and colleges of Europe". For more, please see: J. Bowring: *Autobiographical Recollections*, London, UK, 1877, p. 250, according to N. Tarling: *The Mission of Sir John Bowring to Siam*, p. 93.

⁴⁶ Siam made Britain acknowledge its sovereignty over Laotian land in Chiang Mai as well as over Cambodia and Siam and Britain agreed on border demarcation in Peguans và Menam Kra.

measures when necessary and were willing to conduct negotiations in order to define sovereignty of the border between this country and British territories along the Burma border or on the Malay peninsula in the 1860s⁴⁷.

Although Siam had a great respect for Britain in general and John Bowring in particular, Siam tended to avoid complete reliance. In his remarkable monograph, Abbot Low Moffat points out that during the 1860s John Bowring was so trusted by Siam that he represented it in trade talks with France and other Western countries. However, King Mongkut never appointed Bowring to take part in talks related to politics, such as those about Siamese relations with France concerning the Cambodia issue, because he was afraid Siam would be too dependent on Britain⁴⁸. This means that King Mongkut was aware that national sovereignty was a sacred, permanent value and his top priority.

At the same time, King Mongkut was well aware of the country's backwardness compared to Western forces. Therefore, in order to increase its capabilities and resistance power, besides a flexible foreign policy, he would strongly encourage innovation in Siam. The king promoted the digging of canals, building of roads and ships, teaching of foreign languages and construction of European style houses. He also began to reorganize the army. It can be easily seen that Siam's treaties with Western countries in general and Britain in particular proved to play important roles in bringing new goods to Siam and creating a lot of new connections. However, as far as the modernization of the country and protection of its independence were concerned, these treaties were not valuable as King Mongkut's new policies of using Europeans to transform official organizations⁴⁹. It was his careful preparation of the plan for national modernization that enabled his successor Chulalongkorn to carry it out comprehensively later on.

Thus, Siam's response to Britain at the time of King Mongkut was characterized by flexible policies and compromises of some short-term interests for successful protection of national sovereignty and interests. Mongkut and his mandarins with progressive ideas, particularly Krom Luang Wongsa and Minister of War Kralahom, introduced tough measures and a select foreign policy which took into consideration Siam's conditions and others'. All too often they would sacrifice some short-term interests including economic benefits of their clans and class and their personal interests and

⁴⁷ On negotiation and border demarcation between Britain and Siam along the Myanmar border and on the Malay peninsula, please see *The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era – The Fourth Reign (1851-1868)*, Vol. 2, translated by Chadin (Kanjanavanit) Flood, pp. 316-317; 330-334; 359-362.

⁴⁸ On the process of negotiating and signing treaties between Siam and other Western countries, please see: Abbot Low Moffat: *op. cit.*, pp. 117-124.

⁴⁹ W.F. Vella: *The Impact of the West on Government in Thailand*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, USA, 1955, p. 334; D.G.E. Hall: *op. cit.*, pp. 710-711.

were brave enough to confront conservative aristocrats in order to achieve the ultimate goal being protecting national sovereignty and interests.

Siamese responses to French threats

France was behind Britain and the United States in “opening up” Siam. However, it can be affirmed that France was considered to be one of the important countries in Siam’s foreign policy during the reign of King Mongkut. Although unable to compete with Britain as far as trade was concerned, France received right at the beginning great respect from the Siamese administration. King Mongkut established close relations with this country. In 1856, France’s Napoleon III sent his envoy to Siam to re-establish diplomatic relations and negotiate a treaty. Siamese annals point this out:

In the eighth month (Siamese calendar), His Majesty Napoleon III, Emperor of France had appointed M. Charles Louis Nicholas Maximilian de Montigny as French envoy to Siam. The latter’s party made the voyage in three ships, the steamship Catinat, the steamship Marceau and a sailing ship named the Capricieuse. The commandant’s name was Dooddooliwce... On Thursday, the eighth day of the waxing moon in the eighth month, the King dispatched a boat to escort Montigny and the other French noblemen up to Bangkok. They arrived, on their own small steam launch, the Marceau, on Monday, the twelfth day of the waxing moon in the eighth month. Both sides fired 21 salutes in honor of the other’s national flag⁵⁰.

The French negotiators received great respect and solemn reception in Bangkok from the Siamese administration. According to Siamese annals,

At that time, the brick building for the use of foreign envoys was occupied by the British consul. The other house for the use of foreign envoys, made of and covered with palm strips, situated at the mount of the Phadunkrunkaseem Canal, was considered unsuitable, since it was a palm house. It was therefore arranged that the French envoy would be housed at a certain reception hall in the compound of the elder Somdet⁵¹.

After regular diplomatic rituals,

on the thirteenth day of the waning moon in the eighth month, the King appointed a consultative committee to represent him in the negotiation of a treaty with Montigny. The committee members were: the Prince Krom Luang Wongsa (King’s younger brother), the younger Somdet, the Kralahom (Minister of Military Affairs), the Phrakalang (Minister of Finance) and Minister of the Royal Treasury, for a total of five persons⁵².

⁵⁰ *The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era – The Fourth Reign (1851-1868)*, Vol. 1, translated by Chadin (Kanjanavanit) Flood, pp. 135-136.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 137.

Within only a few days, the French-Siamese treaty was concluded. As a matter of fact, "the negotiations concerning the treaty were conducted at the former palace. The treaty contained 32 articles. On the day of the signing and the affixing of seals to the treaty, 21 salutes were fired from the Widchajeentharaprasid Fort, and the French also fired 21 salutes from their gunboat"⁵³. The French-Siamese treaty of 1856 had nearly three times as many clauses as the British-Siamese treaty of 1855. However, they had basically similar content. According to the treaty, Siam allowed France to establish its consular office in Bangkok and French nationals to enjoy consular jurisdiction and reside in, and possess, land of similar sizes as the British. French imports to Siam would be taxed only once at a maximum rate of 3%⁵⁴.

Although there were similarities in the content between the two treaties, while the British-Siamese relationship was more of a trading one, *the French-Siamese relationship was characterized by issues related to religious freedom*. In fact, "French missionaries were given much freedom to build schools, seminaries and churches, though the king and his Court remained fervently Buddhist"⁵⁵. Interestingly, at the time King Mongkut was crowned, there were already about 7,000 Catholic followers in Siam, and what the king admired them most was their institution of strict moral laws although one of the clauses of such laws launched a direct attack on polygamy in his kingdom. Catholic missionaries' efforts to convert Buddhists never worried Mongkut. He realized that the Catholic followers' faith was not really strong, and he expected Buddhists to convert Western missionaries. He talked about Western missionaries' efforts to convert him: "Though you should baptize all Siam, I shall never be baptized"⁵⁶.

Siamese responses to French threats at the time of Mongkut were not only characterized by religious policies. An outstanding feature of the bilateral relations between the two countries was issues related to sovereignty of the border along the left bank of the Mekong River in Laos and especially Cambodia. In 1860, after the end of the Second Opium War (1856-1860) and China was forced to make lots of concessions while Britain increased its influence in the western side of the Sino-India peninsula, France intensified its expansion in Indochina. Conflicts between France and Siam were bitter when France and Cambodia signed a treaty on 11 August 1863. Accordingly, Cambodia acknowledged French protectorate over its territory. As a country which

⁵³ *Ibidem*, pp. 137-138.

⁵⁴ To date, we have not been able to get access to the full copy of French-Siamese treaty of 1856. Official Siamese historical records *The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era – The Fourth Reign (1851-1868)* provide information about the signing of the treaty but does not give a detailed account of its clauses.

⁵⁵ D.G.E. Hall: *op. cit.*, p. 711.

⁵⁶ J. Blofeld: *King Maha Mongkut of Siam*, The Siam Society, Bangkok, Thailand, 1987, pp. 72-74.

had dominating power over Cambodia for a long time, it is understandable that Siam almost immediately responded in order to protect its interests.

Siam's immediate reaction to the signature on 11 August 1863 of the French treaty of protectorate over Cambodia was formally to protest to Drouyn de Lhuys in Paris and Admiral de la Grandière in Saigon, but by December it appeared as if she were reconciled to the *fait accompli*. The strategy of Phraklang's was no longer to contest the protectorate but rather to diminish its importance. To this end he presented to accept it as the means by which France sought to guarantee Cambodia in the future in a state of equilibrium between herself and Siam. In a letter to Grandière he said that no one would deny that Cambodia was an independent state⁵⁷.

Besides, as Siamese ambassador to France, Phraya Montri Suriyawongse met Napoleon III and learnt important information about disagreement among the French royal court concerning issues related to Cambodia and especially information about parties opposing the policy by the French governor in the South of Vietnam. There is a very interesting detail about Siamese diplomatic "skills". Taking advantage of disagreement among the French, Phraya Montri Suriyawongse confidently made a speech in Siamese at the royal court of Napoleon III in Paris to reaffirm Siamese sovereignty over Battambang and Angkor (Siem Reap) in Cambodia⁵⁸.

No sooner was the French-Siamese treaty signed than Siam signed with Cambodia a secret treaty with similar content on 1 December 1863. According to the treaty, Cambodian king Norodom acknowledged Siamese protectorate over Cambodia, just the same as what they gave France. In this secret treaty, Cambodia was considered to be Siam's vassal and Norodom was appointed Viceroy. Siamese also confirmed that Battambang, Angkor and other parts of Cambodia were under Siamese control. The provinces of Pursat and Kompong Svai were also ruled by Siam⁵⁹. This treaty was a calculating, surprising move by Siam in its responses to France concerning the Cambodia issue. Interestingly, a very long time after the treaty was signed, i.e. 20 August 1864, France was aware of its existence when the famous Singaporean newspaper *Straits Times* printed the text in full.

In order to abrogate the treaty between Siam and Cambodia, France appointed Gabriel Aubaret its ambassador and sent him to Bangkok to negotiate a treaty. Gabriel Aubaret was a young navy officer and was knowledgeable about the languages and cultures of some Oriental countries such as China and Vietnam. He agreed with Phraya Montri Suriyawongse's statements about Siamese sovereignty over Battambang

⁵⁷ *Ministères des Affaires Étrangères, Asia XXIX, 1864-1866, Indo-Chine III, Phraklang sent to Grandière, December 11, 1863, pp. 84-85; according to R.S. Thomson: Siam and France 1863-1870, "Journal of the Far Eastern Quarterly", Columbia University Press, Vol. 5, No. 1 (November 1945), p. 28.*

⁵⁸ L.P. Briggs: *op. cit.*, p. 128.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

and Angkor and encouraged a mixed French-Siamese protectorate over Cambodia. Therefore, it is understandable that negotiations between Aubaret and Siamese representative Kralahom quickly reached mutual agreement and the two sides signed a new treaty on 14 April 1865⁶⁰. This was a controversial treaty as it received differentiating feedback from France and Siam⁶¹. The treaty consisted of the following articles.

Article I: His Majesty the King of Siam recognizes and affirms solemnly the Protectorate of His Majesty the Emperor of France over the kingdom of Cambodia.

Article II: The treaty concluded in December 1863 between the King of Siam and the King of Cambodia is declared null and without value, and the Siamese government will not invoke it in the future under any circumstance.

Article III: The Emperor of the French, wishing that the kingdom of Cambodia should in the future be free and independent and disengaged of all vassality, engages not to seize the territory of this kingdom to incorporate it into his possessions of Cochin China.

Article IV: The frontiers of the provinces of Battambang and Angkor, as well as those of Siamese Laos adjoining Cambodia, are accepted and recognized by France as they exist on the day of signing the present arrangement. The exact delimitation of these frontiers will be made, with the aid of makers and posts, by a commission of Siamese and Cambodian officers under the supervision of French officers. This delimitation has for special end to prevent any vexatious incursion of Cambodians into Siamese territory or of Siamese into Cambodian territory.

Article V: The kingdom of Cambodia is recognized free and independent. This kingdom is not subjected to any suzerainty and remains thus placed between French possessions on one side and the kingdom of Siam on the other.

However, and in consideration of ancient customs, his Majesty the King of Cambodia will have the right to render homage to His Majesty the King of Siam at the same time as to His Majesty the Emperor of the French, but it is well understood that this homage is only a mark of respect, which does not affect in any way the perfect independence of Cambodia.

If His Majesty the King of Cambodia desires, as in the past, to send presents to His Majesty the King of Siam, the French government will not interpose any obstacle. This government will not oppose in any way the friendly relations Cambodia may desire to entertain with Siam.

Article VI: The princes of Cambodia being accustomed to reside in the kingdom of Siam, the French government will not prevent it in the future; and if these princes wish to live in French territory, the Siamese government will not oppose it in any fashion.

Article VII: The French government engages to make the Cambodians observe all the clauses contained in the various articles of the present arrangement⁶².

A close read of the articles of the Aubaret Treaty shows us that this treaty is full of controversies and that it seems to be Aubaret's compromise with Siam. A quick read of the first article shows that Aubaret seems to accomplish his mission assigned by the French government. This means he went to Siam and managed to abrogate

⁶⁰ Siamese representative who signed this treaty was Phraya Montri Suriyawongse.

⁶¹ Because of the limited length of this research paper, we do not quote all the clauses of the treaty. For a full text of the Aubaret Treaty, please see: F. Bernard: *A L' école des Diplomates: La Perte et le Retour D' Angkor*, Paris, 1933, pp. 44-45; according to Lawrence Palmer Briggs: *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131.

⁶² F. Bernard: *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45; according to L.P. Briggs: *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131.

the secret treaty between Siam and Cambodia of December 1863. However, a closer read of all articles shows that they seem to contradict or overlap each other. We can make a list of contradictions as follows: The first article acknowledges French rule in Cambodia, but Article 5 acknowledges the independence of Cambodia and allows the country to pay tribute to Siam in the traditional way. In Article 4, France recognized Siamese sovereignty over Battambang and Angkor and different parts of the Cambodian territory.

An interesting question is why Aubaret as the French ambassador agreed to sign a treaty detrimental to his country's interests? A few explanations have been offered, but perhaps the main reason why Gabriel Aubaret boldly put forward his point of view by signing the treaty was that he had received strong support from his allies in the Paris administration or he might have wanted to avoid possible trouble coming from Britain. Whatever reason it was, the truth is that the French government never approved this treaty and the treaty was rarely quoted or cared about later on⁶³.

Obviously, because of a treaty which would only be of benefit to Siam, France would soon make moves to sign a new treaty. Historically, after some negotiations, a new treaty was signed in Paris on 15 July 1867 between Marquis Léon de Moustier, French Foreign Minister, and two Siamese ambassadors led by Phraya Montri Suriyawongse. The treaty consisted of the main points as follows. *First*, Siam recognized French protectorate over Cambodia and abrogated the treaty between Siam and Cambodia of 1 December 1863. In exchange, France acknowledged Siam sovereignty over Battambang and Angkor and appealed Article 4 of the Aubaret Treaty. *Second*, Siam had to refuse all tribute, stop considering Cambodia as a vassal and remove ambiguous articles in the Aubaret Treaty on the freedom and independence of Cambodia. *Third*, France ensured Cambodian respect for the treaty. *Fourth*, the Mekong River and all of its branches on the Siamese territory were open to French ships and trade. *Fifthly*, Cambodians in Siam were subject to Siamese jurisdiction and vice versa⁶⁴.

Clearly, the French-Siamese Treaty of 1867 offered Siam much less benefit than the Aubaret Treaty of 1865, which accepted and, at the same time, French protectorate over Cambodia. The nature of the 1867 treaty was a "deceitful" agreement between France and Siam concerning the division of influence and interest on the Cambodian territory. By signing this treaty, Siam abandoned its dominion over Cambodia and handed over its protectorate over Cambodia to France in exchange for the admin-

⁶³ Some American scholars such as Landon believe the Aubaret Treaty was signed in 1867. However, in fact, the French government never approved the treaty and it is, therefore, hard to find it in any document.

⁶⁴ We have not been able to get access to the full text of the French-Siamese Treaty of 15 July 1867. For the content of the treaty, please see: P. Tuck: *op. cit.*, pp. 28-31; L.P. Briggs: *op. cit.*, p. 137.

istration of the provinces of Battambang and Angkor. This concession helped Siam avoid a violent confrontation with French colonialists and protect its sovereignty and independence.

Siamese responses to other Western colonial forces

In the mid-19th century, besides Britain and France, the United States was one of the first Western nations which would like to “open up” Siam and establish relations with it. After Ballestier’s unsuccessful efforts in 1850, a diplomatic mission led by Townsend Harris was sent to Siam to resume negotiations and sign a new treaty. On 12 April 1856, the U.S. mission arrived at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River. According to official Siamese historical records,

The President, the sovereign of America, had appointed Captain Townsend Harris as royal envoy, together with a number of American noblemen, to come and negotiate a treaty. The Americans came by a steamboat, named the *San Jacinto*. The commodore of the vessel was Jim Armstrong. They arrived at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River on Monday, the eighth day of the waxing moon in the fifth month. The ship was too large to enter the mouth of the river, and the Siamese at the capital city arranged for a Siamese steam launch named the *Rasumphom* to pick up the Americans. When Captain Townsend Harris reached the city of Samuddpraakaan, the soldiers at the fort fired 21 salutes in honor of the national flag. Afterwards, Captain Townsend Harris and the 46 American noblemen came up to Bangkok on the first day of the waning moon in the fifth month. They stayed at the house built for the use of foreign envoys in front of the building known as the former Roonjuuaan at the mouth of the Phadunkrunkaseem⁶⁵.

According to common diplomatic rituals, King Mongkut appointed a council of negotiators to negotiate a treaty with the the U.S. mission. The council was composed of five people, the King’s younger brother (Prince Krom Luang Wongsa), the younger Somdet, the Kralahom (Minister of Military Affairs), the Phrakalang (Minister of Finance) and the Mayor of Bangkok. There were five people in total⁶⁶.

However, unlike negotiations with the British mission led by John Bowring a year earlier, negotiations between the United States and Siam were delayed or interrupted several times. The reason was that at the same time the Siamese administration was also negotiating a supplementary treaty with Britain represented by Harry Parkes. Siam could not afford to rush while negotiations with Parkes took a lot of time, and, in fact, they could only negotiate with the United States after they had concluded negotiations with Britain, which really annoyed Harris, who more than once expressed his anger in his memoirs:

⁶⁵ *The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era – The Fourth Reign (1851-1868)*, Vol. 1, translated by Chadin (Kanjanavanit) Flood, p. 132.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 133.

I hope this is the end of my troubles with this false, base and cowardly people... To lie is here the rule from the Kings downward. Truth is never used when they can avoid it. A nation of slaves... I never met a people like them, and hope I may never again be sent here. The proper way to negotiate with the Siamese is to send two or three men-of-war of not more than sixteen feet draft of water. Let them arrive in October and at once proceed up to Bangkok and fire their salutes. In such a case the Treaty would not require more days than I have consumed weeks⁶⁷.

After a delay of days, the treaty between the United States and Siam was finally signed on 19 May 1856. According to official Siamese historical records: "The meetings for the negotiations for the treaty took place at the former palace. The treaty contained 21 articles. At the moment of the signing and affixing of the seals on the treaty, 21 salutes were fired by royal order at the Widchajeenthaprasid Fort...⁶⁸ Basically, the American-Siamese treaty had a similar content to the British-Siamese one of 1855.

The American-Siamese treaty of 1856 marked a new stage in the bilateral relations between the two countries. However, in fact, except purely diplomatic exchanges of letters and notes between King Mongkut and U.S. President Abraham Lincoln later on, the relations between the two countries in this period of time never played an important role worthy of their positions, which only really occurred at the time of the Second World War.

Not only did it establish diplomatic relations with Britain, France and the United States, Siam, during the reign of King Mongkut, continued to "diversify" its foreign relations by signing treaties with other Western forces such as the Treaties of Friendship and Commerce with Denmark and Hanseatics in 1858, one with Portugal in 1859, one with the Netherlands in 1860, one with Prussia in 1862, and ones with Sweden, Norway, Italy and Belgium. Also, Siam established diplomatic relations with Western colonized countries such as India, Hong Kong, Macau and Singapore. On the one hand, the fact that Siam signed a series of unequal treaties with Western forces shows that no single country was able to impose its influence on Siam. On the other hand, this is manifest of the Mongkut administration's "internationalization" efforts and its flexible responses in this period of time.

Concluding remarks

In the mid-19th century, in the face of growing expansion of the West, as soon as he was crowned, King Mongkut as head of state had to introduce policies and make dif-

⁶⁷ J.V. Martin: *A History of the Diplomatic Relations between Siam and the United States of America 1833-1929*, Microfilmed by the Library of Congress Photoduplication Service, p. 86, according to A.L. Moffat: *op. cit.*, p. 81; L. Dhiravegin: *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁶⁸ *The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era...*, p. 133.

difficult choices concerning his country's destiny and survival. As a Buddhist intellectual with 27 years on an austere retreat and opportunities to receive Western civilization, King Mongkut apparently had outstanding thinking and vision compared with contemporary Siamese politicians. At the same time, based on the tradition of flexible foreign policy of a nation with a practical way of thinking and used to adaptation and integration as well as his own vision and profound thinking, King Mongkut chose to design smart, suitable policies and responses for Siam. Most remarkable of them were the Siamese administration's responses to Britain, France, the United States and some other Western powers.

The pressure of expansion British colonialists put on Siam was the earliest and strongest of that from Western forces. Most remarkable of the Mongkut administration's responses to Britain was its major concessions on political and economic interests so it could avoid a direct military confrontation and maintain national independence and sovereignty. Of all forces, Britain was the country received the most benefit in Siam. This can be seen from the large number of British politicians, experts, advisors and merchants in the country and especially the fact that the British controlled about 90% of Siam's trading, import and export activities. Although King Mongkut and his patriotic mandarins with progressive ideas made major concessions to British colonialists, they were never unaware of sovereignty issues. Historically, Siam was willing to sit down at the negotiating table with British colonialists and use tough measures against them on issues related the demarcation of the border and national sovereignty.

Meanwhile, the relationship between France and Siam during this period was characterized by religious issues, the fight for influence in Cambodia and border sovereignty over the Siamese Laotian land. In the face of French colonialists' ambition of expansion on the Indochinese peninsula in the 1860s, Siam carried out flexible activities and responses in order to protect its interests. Its quick, proactive responses concerning the French protectorate over Cambodia was manifest in its signing a secret treaty with Cambodia in 1863 and the Aubaret Treaty with France in 1865 and ambassador Phraklang's assertive, surprising statements about sovereignty at the Paris royal court in 1864. Finally, due to the French-Siamese Treaty of 1867, Siam had to cede its protectorate over Cambodia to French colonialists in exchange for the rule of Battambang and Siem Reap, the two Cambodian provinces on the eastern Siamese border. Some researchers believe this treaty was Siam's major failure in its efforts to cope with Western forces and was conducive to the "land for peace" policy. We do not quite agree with this belief although Siam, in fact, for its national independence and sovereignty, ceded its protectorate over a relatively large area of Cambodia being 124,000 square meters to France out of the 513,000 square meters which Siam ceded

to Britain and France at the times of Kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn⁶⁹. However, the history of the Siamese-Cambodian relationship shows that Cambodia was not directly ruled by Siam. Rather, the relationship was based on payment of tribute; in a sense, it was similar to the relationship between a master and his servant. More than anyone else, King Mongkut was aware of the need to “sacrifice” his country’s interests in foreign territories such as Cambodia, and he once admitted this, “It is sufficient for us to keep ourselves within our house and home; it may be necessary for us to forgo some of our former power and influence”⁷⁰.

As far as Siamese responses to the United States and other Western colonialist forces are concerned, although Siam signed a number of unequal treaties with similar content such as those with Britain and France, the relations between Siam and those forces, in fact, seemed to be of a pure diplomatic nature.

Thus, it can be seen that Siam at the time of King Mongkut managed to develop appropriate policies and suitable strategies for each of its Western partners. *In developing diplomatic relations with Western forces during this period of time, the Siamese leadership maintained an “alert” differentiation between primary and secondary interests and had flexible responses to each colonialist force. The greater the pressure, the more concessions it made and vice versa. Some concessions only existed on paper.* Obviously, although it had to sacrifice some short-term interests, Siam basically managed to protect its national independence and sovereignty. King Mongkut played a key role in shaping Siamese responses, policies and strategies for Western forces. Mongkut’s awareness of the nation’s sovereignty, interest and survival was the decisive factor to the Siamese administration’s responses to Western forces. On the important role of King Mongkut in the protection of Siamese independence and sovereignty, to conclude this small monograph, we would like to quote a comment on him by Harry Parkes, the British envoy to Siam in 1855 and 1856: “I was fortunate in securing and maintaining throughout the friendship of the First King (King Mongkut), he listened to several of my propositions even against the wishes of his Ministers. He is really an enlightened man”⁷¹.

⁶⁹ A.L. Moffat: *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁷⁰ Translation of the letter King Mongkut sent Phraya Suriyawongse Vayavadhana, Siamese ambassador to Paris, dated 4 March 1867, printed in Pramoj MS, pp. 179-186; quotation p. 186; according to L. Dhiravegin: *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁷¹ Letter to Mr. W. Lockhart, June 28, 1856, p. 215; according to A.L. Moffat: *op. cit.*, p. 82.

References

- Blofeld J.: *King Maha Mongkut of Siam*, The Siam Society, Bangkok, Thailand, 1987.
- Bowring J.: *The Kingdom and People of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855*, P. I & P. II, Oxford University Press, London, UK, Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints, 1969.
- Briggs L.P.: *Aubaret and the Treaty of July 15, 1867 between France and Siam*, "Journal of the Far Eastern Quarterly", Vol. 2, Columbia University Press, New York, USA, 1947.
- H.R.H. Prince Chula Chakrabongse: *Lords of Life*, Alvin Redman, London, UK, 1960.
- Darling F.C.: *Thailand and the United States*, Public Affairs Press, Washington DC, USA, 1965.
- Dhiravegin L.: *Siam and Colonialism (1855-1909). An Analysis of Diplomatic Relations*, Thai Wantana Panich Co., Ltd, Bangkok, Thailand, 1974.
- Elliot D.: *Thailand: Origins of Military Rule*, Zed Press, London, UK, 1978.
- The Dynastic Chronicles Bangkok Era – The Fourth Reign (1851-1868)*, Vol. 1, Vol. 2, Translated by Chadin (Kanjanavanit) Flood, The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, Tokyo, Japan, 1965, 1966.
- Manich Jumsai M.L.: *History of Anglo – Thai Relations*, Published by Chalermnit, Bangkok, Thailand, 1970.
- Hall D.G.E.: *A History of South-East Asia*, Palgrave Macmillian, UK, Fourth Edition, 1981.
- Leonowens A.H.: *The English Governess at the Siamese Court: Being Recollections of Six Years in the Royal Palace at Bangkok*, Oxford University Press, UK, 1988.
- Lysa H.: *Thailand in the Nineteenth Century: Evolution of the Economy and Society*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1984.
- Moffat A.L.: *Mongkut, the King of Siam*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, USA, 1961.
- Ninh V.D. (Chief editor): *Phong trào cải cách ở một số nước Đông Á giữa thế kỷ XIX – đầu thế kỷ XX* (Reform Movements in Some East Asian Countries in the Period between the Mid-19th and Early 20th Centuries), Vietnam National University Publishing House, Hanoi, Vietnam, 2007.
- Tarling N.: "British Policy in the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago, 1824-1871", *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. Vol. XXX (3), 1957.
- Tarling N.: *The Mission of Sir John Bowring to Siam*, "Journal of the Siam Society", Bangkok, Thailand, Vol. 50.2, 1962.
- Tarling N.: *Harry Parkes's Negotiations in Bangkok in 1856*, "Journal of Siam Society", Bangkok, Thailand, Vol. 53 (2), 1965.
- Terwiel B. J.: *The Bowring Treaty: Imperialism and the Indigenous Perspective*, "Journal of Siam Society", Bangkok, Thailand, Vol. 79 (2), 1991.
- Thomson R.S.: *Siam and France 1863-1870*, "Journal of the Far Eastern Quarterly", Columbia University Press, New York, USA, Vol. 5 (1), 1945.
- Tuck P.: *The French Wolf and the Siamese Lamb-The French Threat to Siamese Independence 1858-1907*, White Lotus Co., Ltd, Bangkok, Thailand, 1995.
- Vella W.F.: *The Impact of the West on Government in Thailand*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, USA, 1955.
- Winichakul T.: *Siam Mapped-A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, USA, 1994.
- Wyatt D.: *Thailand: A Short History*, Yale University Press, New Haven, USA, 2003.

S u m m a r y

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Europeans with their gunboats appeared in almost every corners of Asian waters, the sovereignty of many countries in the region was put under the serious threats. Yet, Siam is the only country in Southeast Asia which successfully safeguarded its national independence and sovereignty. Most scholars have explained the success of Siam in terms of its unique positions as “a buffer zone” between two competing colonial powers, namely the French and the British. This article examines the King Mongkut’s consciousness of national sovereignty and interests and his wise response to Western Forces. It argues that instead of the geographical position, decisions made by the King Mongkut in response to foreign challenges were the main reason behind the success of Siam.

Keywords: Siam, King Mongkut, Response, Western Forces.

POLITYKA RZĄDU SYJAMSKIEGO WZGLĘDEM ZACHODNICH SIŁ W OKRESIE PANOWANIA KRÓLA MONGKUTA (1851-1868)

S t r e s z c z e n i e

W prezentowanym artykule opisano politykę rządu syjamskiego względem zachodnich sił w okresie panowania króla Mongkuta (1851-1868). Skoncentrowano się na wysiłkach władz syjamskich, które dzięki elastycznym zabiegom politycznym, w tym zrzekaniu się swoich dawnych wpływów w regionie, zdołały uniknąć konfrontacji zbrojnej z zachodnimi kolonistami – głównie Brytyjczykami i Francuzami – a tym samym zachować niepodległość państwa. Podkreślono przy tym ważną rolę króla Mongkuta w kształtowaniu polityki rządu.

Słowa kluczowe: Syjam, król Mongkut, odpowiedź, siły zachodnie.