TECHNICAL COOPERATION’S SCHOLARSHIP IS THE TOOL TO REDUCE TENSIONS AND POLITICAL THREATS BETWEEN THAILAND AND LAO PDR.*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is aimed to study the development of technical cooperation’s scholarship between Thailand and Lao PDR. The study was conducted by the qualitative approach through the in-depth interviews. The units of analysis were samplings at organization level in Thailand and Lao PDR. Key informants including decision-makers 5 persons, practitioner 8 persons, scholars 7 persons and used qualitative description analysis.

The results indicated that Thailand and Lao PDR were using scholarship technical cooperation as a tool to build relationships because they were distant during the Cold War. As Thailand's economy was growing and had the great development of academic and technology, this results Thailand’s position from the recipient country to the donor country in international community.
Another reason that pushes Lao PDR to target on get the international cooperation that is Lao PDR is a low income country, they want to leave least developed countries (LDCs) by 2020. Lao PDR thus wants to develop in all areas. However, the international cooperation must be based on the National Socio-Economic Development Plan of Lao PDR. The technical cooperation’s scholarship between Thailand and Lao PDR is a Tool for foreign policy to achieve a good relationship for reduce tensions and political threats in the region.

**Key words**: International relations between Thailand and Lao PDR, Technical cooperation, Regionalism, Soft power, aid.

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Introduction

Thailand and Laos are very close in terms of culture, living, language and history. However, due to differences in political ideology during the Cold War, the two countries had the distrust (Phuangkasem K., 1984).

When the Cold War was ended, the relations between the two countries had more developed which was based on the condition of being a regional economic integration (Ojendal J., 2001). This situation had forced Laos to open country. Moreover, Thailand had adjusted the policy to open markets to Indochina during end of 1980s. For this reason, Thai had decided to interact with Laos for this first country (Oldfield, 1998).

Furthermore, Thai had focused on the technical cooperation between Thailand and Laos which officially began in the early 1990s. The technical cooperation between Thailand and Laos was based on the Laos’ s requirement and needs and potential capacity of Thailand mainly (Expert international relations between Thailand Lao PDR, interviewed , 14 Feb 2013).

Objective

The objective is to study the development of technical cooperation’s scholarship as the tool to reduce tensions and political threats between Thailand and Lao PDR.

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative approach through the in-depth interviews. The units of analysis were samplings at organization level in Thailand and Lao PDR. Key informants included decision-makers, practitioners, scholars, Lao citizens who graduated in Thailand. Qualitative description analysis was used in the study.

Findings

International relations between Thailand and Laos.

Thailand and Laos are neighbor countries which have the borders, language and similar culture, both Thai and Lao people living along the Mekong river and have the close relative (Keyes, F., 2009). When Laos gained independence from France in 1954, Thailand was the first country who have diplomatic relations with Laos (Osornprasop, 2012).

Due to the political argument between the two countries during the Cold War that began since the early of 1960s until the late 1980s the relationship of the two countries had conflicted. During this period, Thailand sent the army to intervene in the internal affairs of Laos, and supports U.S. military operations, in particular to allow American military to base in the country. The purpose was to resist communist which was expansion in Southeast Asia. After the political change in Laos in 1975, the conflict was increased more tensions, the battle is happened.
around the frontiers because Thailand and Laos have the long border over 1,754 kilometers and Thailand was very strict on product which was delivered to Laos called strategic goods. Geography of Laos was the Land locked that made Laos had a lot of trouble of living because Laos needed to pass Thailand to the way out to the sea (Jerndal, R. & Rigg, J. 1999, Osornprasop, 2012), however, the reason that Thailand had this policy because Thai didn’t want strategic goods to support military operations in Laos.

Thailand joined the Secret War in Laos because the French Indochinese countries, Laos is the most important in the history of Thailand in term of the history and strategy. Lao kingdom was small and fell under the influence of Thailand for a long time then Laos became a threat to Thailand (Siam) during the years 1893, 1904, 1907. The strategy which was very important made Laos as a buffer state between Thailand, China and Vietnam (Pholsena V, Banomyong R, 2006, Osornprasop, 2012).

Late 1980s, when the Soviet Union collapsed, the Cold War began to improve, the influence of communism became weakness. Technical assistance which was received from the Soviet Union and East European groups had to fade away. According to the trend of regionalism, Laos had opened the country to support trade and investment from Western countries, donors and international organizations (Phraxayavong, 2009).

Policy of New Economics Mechanism-NEM of Laos was set up to delete regulations that were obstacles trade and for the investment to developing countries (Rigg, J., 2009).

According to new policy “New Economics Mechanism-NEM” that made the relationship between Thailand and Laos get better. In particular, in 1988 the General Chatchai as Prime Minister had announced the policy ”Transforming the battle fields of Indochina into a marketplace, the government had focus to Laos as the first country. Because of the crisis in Indochina, the way to approach to Cambodia and Vietnam may be difficult. However, access Laos may be easier and if they can build relationship with Laos, the relationship with Cambodia and Vietnam is easier accordingly (Oldfield, 1998).

Laos had contributed the policy Transforming the battle fields of Indochina into a marketplace more efficiency. The reason that Thailand can approached to Laos because of the attitude of Laos during the conflict in case of Ban Romkaow in 1988, although there was a battle in the area but Laos is still sold electricity to Thailand. Furthermore, Laos was the first country who responded to the policy Transforming the battle fields of Indochina into a marketplace (Oldfield, 1998). For these reasons, there had resulted in Thailand and Laos in term of international cooperation both trade and investment increased, the exchange visits of senior leadership, the establishment of a joint committee Thailand and Laos.
Among the neighbor countries: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam (CLMV), the Lao PDR is extremely important to Thailand in terms of political, economic, social and cultural, then Thailand is interested Laos as the first priority. However, in 1992, the government of Mr. Anand Punyarachun announced international cooperation as a tool for foreign policy. The budget was allocated to Laos is more than many countries in the CLMV group, especially the scholarship, budget for training (Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency, 2009).

After Laos was a member of ASEAN in 1997, At that time, Asia was faced the Economics Crisis which made the cooperation between Thailand and Laos has slowed down. However, when the crisis began to improve. Thailand and Laos have adapted to cooperate as normal for both the budget and the number of scholarships. As The Laos is a member of ASEAN in 1997 which has been very useful in the field of trade and investment. After that time, due to the economic crisis in Asian, Laos had effected same as many countries, and China can play an important role in Laos (Sirikrai, 2007).

Relations between Thailand and neighboring countries and countries in Indochina, including Laos both relations and international cooperation, are the bilateral and multilateral for example, in the area of the GMS through The Mekong River Commission and Greater Mekong Sub Region Dialogue (Robert, 2012) and was clearly evident again when Thailand under the leadership of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has proposed the establishment of Ayeyawady - Chao Phraya - Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), with leaders of Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar In 2003 Vietnam became a member, in 2004, the establishment ACMECS is to close the economic gap for CLMV group, it also contributes the benefit of ASEAN (ACMECS, 2013), although the government of Thaksin Shinawatra was stepped down, the Ayeyawady - Chao Phraya - Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) is still continued.

**Development of technical cooperation in scholarship between Thailand and Laos.**

Before Laos had changed politics, Thailand and Laos also has a technical cooperation under The Colombo Plan since the 1950s. The technical cooperation between the two countries has begun since 1973 by focus in the development in Laos. The branch cooperated most such as agriculture, education and health (Department of Technical and Economic Cooperation Foreign Ministry, Kingdom of Thailand, 1999).

The end of 1930, during period of Prime ministry General P. Phibulsongkram, Ministry of Education allowed Lao students to study in Thailand. Ministry of Health had facilitated Lao students to attend the course in the University of Medicine and offered an opportunity for public health officials of Laos to visit Thailand and also supported the education of monks from Laos (Chartprasert, 1997) found that in the period before 1975, the Lao students had studied at the Faculty of Engineering of the
University in the Northeast of Thailand (President of University, interviewed, 26 March, 2013).

The Scholarship from Thailand to Laos had allocated the budgets from Thai’s government and cooperation with the great power to assist the Royal Lao Government. Since from the year 1967 to 1974, Thailand offered 71 scholarships and sent 60 experts in various fields to Laos, in that time, there had many Laos students in Thailand (Kongtaewthong, M., 1996).

In 1973 there have 114 Lao students in Thailand and Thai still gave cooperation in terms of money and material goods to Laos. Although Laos had regime change in 1975 but Thai continued to work with Laos as believed that the policy of economic and technical cooperation between Thailand and Laos can represented that Thailand want to be a good neighbor to Lao (Kongtaewthong, M., 1996).

The economic and technical cooperation with the Lao People's Democratic Republic is based on agreement or cooperation (Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency - TICA, 2008)

**Graph No : 1** Value of Thailand cooperation with Laos from 1991 to 2007 are as follows: Year

![Graph showing cooperation between Thailand and Laos](image)

Data from Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency – TICA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, 2007
However, the government has allocated a special budget for Indochina countries since 1987, a total 17.40 million, in the year 1988 total 18.35 million, in the year 1989 total 19.70 million, in the year 1990 total 21.45 million, in the year 1991 total 33.25 million and 25.30 million, plus a number of extra statements and year 1992 in amount 43.58 million, plus 175 million special statements (Sunthornpipit., P., 1992), the value of the collaboration has begun to officially since 1992, with budget continuously. Nevertheless, the economic crisis in 1997 that made Thai adjusted the budget of cooperation, total budget had remained as agreed, but in 1998 it decreased until 2004, has gradually increased continuously (Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency, 2009).

Graph No : 2 The Thai government has set up scholarships for Lao students as follows


The technical cooperation between Thailand and Laos is the cooperation in terms of scholarships and grants for training. The grants is based on the potential of Thailand. In each year, Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (TICA) will offer the postgraduate PhD scholarships and grants, job training under the Technical Cooperation Thailand - Laos Year 2006-2011. Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (TICA) provided 247 total scholarship support and capital funds for the training of 1,270 jobs, in the year 2011 provided 3 PhD Scholarships, Master degree Scholarship 40 scholarships and grants, job training 25 programs, 160 grants and scholarships for
further study 186 grants (Diplomat of Thailand Foreign Affairs Ministry The Kingdom Of Thailand, Interviewed, 8 December 2012).

In early of 1992, The government had provided undergraduate scholarships but after the National University of Laos had enough skilled to transfer knowledge to Lao students, they stopped to obtain undergraduate scholarships and Laos had a partnership with the international to develop the staffs of education, especially in teaching. When there had enough potential staffs that can produce their own undergraduate students and want to know that domestic education will be efficiency as expect or not (Laos diplomat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Laos, interviewed, 25 April), although there didn’t have the technical cooperation in term of bachelors scholarship, but it appears that Laos were interested to send their children to study in undergraduate private university in Thailand (Former diplomat of Thailand Foreign Affairs Ministry The Kingdom Of Thailand, Interviewed, 1 May 2013).

Technical cooperation between Thailand and Laos is a tool to reduce tensions and political threat.

Technical cooperation between the countries, partly to erase the guilty of Thailand and Laos in the past and to build trust (Expert international relations between Thai and Lao PDR, interviewed, 14 Feb 2013) and found that the attitude of a major contributor both Thailand and Laos in the technical cooperation as follow:

The opinion of technical cooperation between Thailand and Laos.

Economic:

The cooperation under the framework of ASEAN, particularly the cooperation between Thailand and Laos is a interdependence because the two countries are neighbors language and culture are similar. Moreover, Thailand is Lao partner countries both export and import, especially in 2010 Thailand is the first trading partner of Laos. Laos exports to Thailand 1.31 %t and Laos imports from Thailand 65.6 %, Thailand buy hydropower from Laos and is the country's crucial investor and provider of development assistance to Laos, each year found that the value of trade and investment between Thailand and Laos increased, moreover, Thailand get benefit from trade surplus Laos (Robert, 2012).

Trade between Thailand - Laos

Year of 2010 Thailand is No. 1 trading partner of Laos, Laos is a partner in No. 26 of Thailand and No. 7 of Thailand's ASEAN, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines, and Myanmar. With total trade value of $ 2,885.4
million., or 0.8 percent of Thailand's total trade value. Classified as an export value of $2,135.9 million. And imports of $749.4 million. Thailand is the surplus with Laos about 1,386.5 million in 2012 (Royal Thai Consulate- General Suwannakhet, 2013)

As Thailand had advantage on trade s continuously, then Thailand had allocated the budget for technical cooperation in scholarship with Laos as the first priority. Moreover, the technical cooperation was supported by the policy makers both Thailand and Laos. In order to continue this cooperation, Thailand must to support the scholarship even more.

"Thailand's trade with Laos had very huge amount, but in each year, the budget had allocated does not much. "If I had power, I will make a statement to Laos even more"( Diplomat of Thailand Foreign Affairs Ministry The Kingdom Of Thailand, interviewed, 15 February, 2013).

And technical cooperation between Thailand and Laos, Thailand is considering based on National Socio-Economic Development of the Lao PDR.

"In order to support technical cooperation or technical assistance to Laos always consider the National Socio-Economic Development of the Lao PDR and it is in the framework of the National Economic and Social Development Plan of Thailand which will be win win for both countries " (Officer of Neighboring Countries Economic Development Cooperation Agency, interviewed, 13 February 2013).

Laos announced the policy “New Economic Mechanism” was used in 1986, then Laos had to get the international cooperation. Exposure to a variety of international cooperation in Laos, then the Western scholars and diplomats think that Laos was in difficult circumstances due to the balancing act's their country with the great power which were coming into the region (Robert, 1 May 2013) but this topic was answered by senior diplomats ministry of foreign affairs of Laos as:

"it’s not true Laos wanted to send theirs student to study in the countries that use an English-speaking, but the grants of this country was very less, such as Australia sometime, it has only two scholarships. Laos is willing to send to all countries that provided the grants, but it must not have the restrict condition. (Laos diplomat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Laos, interviewed, 25 April, 2013)

Laos is a country located in group "Lower middle - Income" (Robert, 2012) County donors and international organization willing to cooperate because Laos has a potential. “Laos is a country which is closed to Thailand and that’s impossible to ignore the neighbors who want to develop the country” (Thailand diplomat to Vientiane, interviewed, 12 July 2012, Former Lao PDR diplomat to Thailand,
From the interviews found that the groups of decision making of both countries are ready to give the cooperation.

**International politics: Laos is a historical buffer state of Thailand between China and Vietnam.**

Thailand had announced the policy Transforming the battle fields of Indochina into a marketplace in the late 1980's, Thailand was the first country who had approached Laos, because if Thailand can access to Laos, that means that they can access Vietnam and Cambodia as well. These will help reduce tensions in the region (Oldfield, 1998).

Once the economic cooperation between the two countries occurred, the technical cooperation began more systematically, particularly in the years 1992, Thailand announced that international cooperation as a tool of foreign policy. From that time found that there had the exchange visits of senior leadership in the head of the country and the establishment of a Joint Commission, Thailand - Laos Common multiple (Chatprasert, 1997).

The technical cooperation in scholarship between Thailand and Laos PDR.

The technical cooperation in scholarship between Thailand and Laos officially began in the year 1992, The groups of decision making Thailand and Laos have coordinated closely, between the Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (TICA) and the Department of Asia Pacific and Africa, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lao PDR and Ministry of Education, universities and agencies in Thailand and Lao PDR showed a willingness to continue cooperation by the allocation of funds continuously, set up staff team as the administrator to take care Laos students. Then the students can study and graduate efficiency. Open communication channels such as the phone line or a Facebook group to provide a simple and easy way to communicate and set up the Alumni Association has established the Lao students who graduated from a university in the Northeast. Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (TICA) had an idea to establish the Alumni Association of Laos students. This is to create a network of cooperation in the future (Diplomat of Thailand Foreign Affairs Ministry The Kingdom Of Thailand, interviewed, 15 February, 2013, President of University, interviewed, 26 March, 2013).

Technical cooperation in scholarship between Thailand and Laos has begun since 1992 from the interview with students who come to study in Thai, the first group found that nowadays, many people have to work with international
organizations, work in a group of NGOs and government agencies that do not think history of the past will be effect to the present, but want to look forward. Many people understand the relationship between Thailand and Laos as well. It was very impressive with the staff from Thailand especially officers from the Department of Technical and Economic Cooperation, currently in the name of Thailand International Cooperation Agency Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kingdom of Thailand (TICA) and universities in Thailand (Former Laos student who graduated from Thailand, interviewed, 3 December, 2012) and found that some graduate Laos students, had sent their children to study in Thailand with their former-advisors that made the relationship that from just only teacher and a student been in advance to the level relative (The director of the agency in Vientiane, interviewed, 12 December, 2012).

In the past, Laos gave priority to the areas of education, health, agriculture. In the early 2000, Laos has supported business administration, economics, management and law (Diplomat of Thailand Foreign Affairs Ministry The Kingdom Of Thailand, Interviewed, 8 December 2012).

Currently, Laos is looking to develop human resources in the field of natural resources, the environment, science and technology (Laos diplomat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Laos, Vientiane, 25 April, 2013).

The attitudes of the officers presented that the technical cooperation in scholarship is more friendly than ever, such as

**Groups of policy making of Thailand and Laos.**

Sincere attitude towards international cooperation are most considering needs of Laos by the National Socio-Economic Development Plan of the Lao PDR and the importance of cooperation between them. Laos is a neighbor and continues to support international cooperation and must be in the framework of National Economic and Social Development Plan of Thailand as well.

Moreover, must consider of the potential availability of Thailand in terms of budget and availability of each university in Thailand to support international students.

For the history of the conflict that may affect the perceptions, the groups of policy making in Thailand think that technical cooperation with each other, in particular, the role of Thailand will be able to heal the feelings between them that may be used by technical cooperation.

"To realize that the assistants must be filled with sincerity, do not expect or hope to get any benefit from those countries " and "emphasize the sincerity on mutual benefit. Sometimes we need to give more benefits to Lao PDR, Thailand's 40 percent, Laos 60 percent, etc " (Officer of Neighboring Countries Economic Development Cooperation Agency, interviewed, 13 February 2013).
For the technical cooperation between countries: The study found that the policy of the two countries agreed on the issues that this cooperation is important for both countries to cooperate to bring benefits to both Thailand and Laos.

A senior diplomat from the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, "The important thing for Laos need to develop human resource and technology and want to study development in all branches of the Thailand’s experiences which can be used and action accordingly"

and “ It is very important for Thailand to get the support and contribution the foreign policy, as a former prime minister of Thailand said (researcher - Anand Punyarachun 1992). In the past, Thailand was an aid recipient country and changed to be the donor country then Thailand has a obligation to help neighboring countries. Thailand seemed to have been the love and closeness of Laos. The technical cooperation in scholarships benefits both sides, Laos got an experts and got academic knowledge " (Laos diplomat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Laos, interviewed, 25 April 2013).

For the groups of policy makings in both Thailand and Laos found that they need for cooperation between the two countries and don’t want to have any conflict.

"As Thailand and Laos are very similar in language and culture, it can be the strengths and weaknesses at the same time. That is, when Thailand say anything, Laos will understand immediately which may sometimes cause misunderstanding. For Thailand, the media has been very popular in Laos that may cause the impact from the sensitive then cause problems. So Thailand must be very careful. When present any international cooperation, it should be in the form of collaboration not present too much as donor or receiver countries " (Thailand diplomat to Vientiane, interviewed, 12 July 2012)

The groups of practitioner

Sincere attitude towards technical cooperation found that the officers in officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand and Laos are willingness to work and need to see the successes that come from the number of Lao students who come to study in Thailand, the increased activity, agenda has been held between the two countries.

"Thailand and Laos have trust each other, noted from the activities together, most of the activities shared by two countries but sometimes the third country joined for the reasons that third countries, most of them are the former donors of Thailand and now become a partnership. When the Thailand's economic growth, then turn to be the donors country, the join of the donors just want to maintain a friendship that has come before, "

and " I don’t know about cooperation in other area but in technical cooperation in scholarship, I found the sincerity, in each training, the trainer give a
lot of knowledge than specified in the schedule and officer from Laos always said that Thai trainer is enough, they don’t want a native speakers. " (Diplomat of Thailand Foreign Affairs Ministry The Kingdom Of Thailand, Thailand, 15 February, 2013).

From the observation of the researchers found that when Lao students get some problem, the officer from Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (TICA) will give special attention to prevent the spread of problem when they have a chance to talk or make it clear, they will not hesitate to solve that problem (Diplomat of Thailand Foreign Affairs Ministry The Kingdom Of Thailand, Thailand, 15 February, 2013).

For the groups of practitioner in Laos, found the positive attitude among officials of the two countries. Laos officials said that when a problem occurred, they will call immediately or if anything troubles, Thailand Development International Cooperation Agency-TICA will fix it quickly.

"Working together has been very flexible, smooth and has very good cooperation, especially during the year 2007. The current cooperation is now better than the past. Focus on pushing all projects and help each other (Senior officials of the Ministry of Education of Lao PDR, interviewed, 12 December 2012).

Laos’s students graduating from Thailand.

Students graduate from Thailand may need to be divided into two levels, that is an undergraduate and graduate level. It was found that students who come to study and graduate, especially in the first group in 1992, some people going to work with the agency of government and will be those who can work effectively in the development and may become a to understand the problem of minority groups. Some part had worked with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are often the ones that have wide vision, open and may have a critical and analytical approach to the question of the conditions around them. Could be due to study abroad, especially Laos’s students must have the opportunity to use one's own life and it is an opportunity to take care of themselves in the environment, economic, social, political different. Moreover, they have an opportunity to learn and have a freedom. We found that these former students continue to have contact with the instructors and fellows in Thailand regularly. It is the understanding of the behavior of the state as well. They encourage Lao government support to students to study undergraduate in Thailand (Former Laos student who graduated from Thailand, interviewed, 13 December, 2012).

Former Laos’s student who graduated from Thailand had been enrolled in master's and doctoral levels, most of them will work as the government officers or as the level of management organization. When they graduated found that most
individuals have become a mediator in the relationship and help coordinate the cooperation between Thailand and Laos. These groups will understand the system in Thailand very well and can be the cooperation in various fields and can be an intermediary collaboration as well (Former Laos student who graduated from Thailand, interviewed, 25 April, 2013 and Senior officials of the graduate school, Thailand, 15 March 2013).

Conclusion

As Laos is very important to Thailand both historical and strategic, that made Thai always give priority to Laos. The technical cooperation is the tool that contributes to the understanding and good attitude towards each other, reduce tensions and political threats. From the Cold War, the relationship between the two countries do not have the characteristics of mutual trust, when the Cold War was collapsed, every countries in the region began to focus in term economic regionalism, then Laos must accelerate human resource development to support the development and growth within the country, furthermore, sending students to study abroad is a major factor in the development of Laos.

Within the area of technical cooperation between Thailand and Laos found that the closed cooperation of a group of policy makers, leaders of the two countries who will act according to policy, beside, it was also found that students who come to Thailand, after graduated, most of them still have contact with Thailand both a personal and professional level.

The technical cooperation between Thailand and Laos can be considered successful if we consider on the number of students who come to study in Thailand continuously, technical cooperation projects, meetings that occur regularly, Student network and the strength of Laos such as the Alumni Association of the Lao students who graduated from a university in the northeastern region of Thailand. This is a very well known university and very popular in Laos.

What could be causing the problem may be caused by the policy of international cooperation that is unstable, or can be caused by the internal politics of both countries. Moreover, the agency in Thailand have freedom to cooperate with international cooperation or negotiations on the MOU sometimes unable to pursue as agreement set. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, know if there are complaints from neighbors, however The agencies in Thailand can cooperate in different ways but finally can achieve the same goal, cooperation of the independence of each agency in Thailand will make thing better as well.

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