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Thailand has historically emerged on the prevailing side throughout a long succession of political and military struggles in Southeast Asia and, as such, has served as a bellwether of emerging political realignments in the area. In this article the author discusses the prospects for successful implementation of the Nixon Doctrine in Asia—after the withdrawal of large numbers of U.S. military forces from South Vietnam—in view of recent indicators emanating from Bangkok.

THE CHANGING THAI—UNITED STATES ALLIANCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NIXON DOCTRINE IN ASIA

An article

by

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I

A little publicized but significant event in Southeast Asian politics surfaced during the Laotian incursion of March 1971. The Thai Government of Premier Thanom Kittikachorn, which had played the role of Washington's most vocal anti-Communist cheerleader throughout the Vietnamese conflict, curiously refused to issue any public statements in support of the U.S.-sponsored South Vietnamese drive against Communist supply lines along Route 9. Although Thailand has continued, and in some ways increased, its participation in the Indochinese war, it has come increasingly to feel that Thailand's interests are best served by a minimum of public statements identify-

ing its interests with those of the United States.¹

To even the most casual observer of Southeast Asian affairs, such a shift in what had been regularly predictable statements emanating from Bangkok must have come as a mild shock—one which should raise questions about the overall efficacy of Mr. Nixon's call for a reduced American military profile as a part of the so-called Nixon Doctrine. One must feel compelled to ask why one of America's staunchest allies would be motivated to ease away from close association with Washington. Devising the most effective means of protecting American interests abroad and maintaining the closest of working relations with allied countries who share some of these interests in common are among

60 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

the goals of any foreign policy. Thus, Thailand's drift away from the United States must be considered as a possible sign that the Nixon Doctrine may be inappropriate under contemporary Asian conditions.

Indications point to the fact that the Thai Government feels as though it has been left in a dangerously exposed position as a result of its longstanding intimate relations with the United States and Washington's current desire to disengage from Vietnam. Clearly the generals in Bangkok have come to view President Johnson's political demise, the Paris peace talks, continued American domestic political dissent, and now the Nixon Doctrine as omens foreboding that the United States will never again fight in an Asian land war for an ally. Elements of bitterness and a feeling that Thailand is being sold out have characterized some recent statements issued by Thai leaders. Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman in a *New York Times* editorial observed:

In fact, as we in Asia have seen it, the decision to help save a victim of aggression and nip in the bud a vicious war of conquest is a far-sighted and commendable policy. It truly serves the enlightened interests of the nation which endeavors to carry it out. For that the U.S., as also other countries which cooperate with it, deserve the highest credit . . . instead by confusing the issues and by stirring up violent dissention, those aberrant elements [political, academic, and media liberals] robbed their country, and those working with it, of the moral and other benefits which would otherwise accrue to them. Moreover, as the struggle did not yield the expected results, unsteady elements began to pour their bile to avenge their frustration on allied nations, such as Thailand. They crucified them for no other crime than that

of faithfully cooperating with their country.²

Whatever Mr. Thanat might think of Mr. Nixon's plans for American policy in Southeast Asia, *per se*, they obviously are not the sole basis for his concern. The "aberrant elements" he refers to, both in and out of Congress, who might succeed in hamstringing Mr. Nixon's policies are what have spurred on the current policy reevaluations in the Thai Government. Thus the key element in this entire situation is its fluidity; that is, neither the leaders in Washington nor those in Bangkok can truly foresee with any certainty the nature of power relations in Southeast Asia after Vietnam. It would appear that Thailand is simply no longer willing to restrict her freedom to maneuver diplomatically by remaining in close association with the United States when the advantages of doing so are in doubt. Indeed, some in Bangkok hold that such policies have even worked to the manifest disadvantage of Thailand in the past.³

There are observers who characterize the Thai as a strange race owing to their Government's sometimes remarkable ability to quickly change sides in international disputes when it appears that it may have chosen the losing side.⁴ An example of this would be Thailand's deft maneuvers to avoid being too closely associated with its nearly defeated Japanese allies in the final stages of World War II. While some might cite such inconstant behavior as immoral or treacherous, others would simply point out that every government should regard its citizens' welfare as being the single most important factor to be considered in reaching policy decisions and, consequently, should pursue whatever means available to secure these ends. Clearly, such a formula thrusts a most difficult burden on the governments of small powers like Thailand who must struggle for survival among competing superpowers. As a result, hard questions are being asked in

Bangkok as U.S. participation in the Vietnamese war is gradually wound down. For if the end result of the American role in Vietnam is a galvanization of public opinion against any future involvement in Southeast Asia, the continued utility to the Thai Government of an alliance with the United States would no longer be apparent. Other means of safeguarding Thai security would then have to be devised by the Thai leadership.

Although this essay is primarily concerned with the current evolving relationships between Thailand and the United States on the one hand and Thailand and the Communist States on the other, an overview of selected diplomatic policies characteristic of the role Thailand has played in Southeast Asian politics over the past 100 years is first necessary to properly understand Bangkok's view of the current situation. Our goal, then, is to give the reader insights into the several different courses of action that could possibly be pursued in the near future by both the Thai and American Governments.

II

In recent history Thai Government policy has reflected the belief that Thailand's independence and territorial integrity could be better preserved by flexible diplomacy than by a large standing army. Despite an ancient and proud history marked by intermittent and recurring wars against the Khmers to the east and the Burmese in the west, the Thai Kingdom turned to greater reliance on the diplomatic arts in the 19th century.

In 1851 King Mongkut was faced with a difficult situation. European, and more particularly British, influence had expanded in the area to the point where the Thai Government came to fear that the West might employ force to attain goals not willingly granted. Educated in the English language and influenced by

Western science and technology, the King became convinced that Thailand must accommodate to the Western Powers or be subdued.⁵ Surely the examples of China's and Burma's defeat at the hands of the British made a significant impact on Mongkut, for if these Asian powers could be so handily subdued by Western military might, it was assured that Thailand too would be subjugated if she chose to fight rather than accommodate to the increased Western presence.

Thus Thailand's tradition of flexible diplomacy—in lieu of reliance on the military to safeguard her independence—can be attributed to a realistic view of relative power relationships in Southeast Asia by King Mongkut. It should be noted, however, that Thailand's success in preserving her independence through several difficult periods is not due simply to the fact that her leaders were clever enough to pursue an astute foreign policy. Luck in the form of Thailand's geographical position between British Burma and French Indochina and competition among the great powers played no small part in the success of these policies.⁶

Since the days of King Mongkut, Thai diplomacy has manifested itself in two different forms, both of which, though employing diverse means, are aimed at the same goal, i.e., preservation of the Thai state. The two approaches can be roughly described as (1) playing two or more foreign powers off against each other and (2) seeking to establish a patron-client relationship with the strongest power in the region. The best historical example of the first diplomatic strategy is Thailand's relations with Britain and France in the 1890's; while Japanese-Thai relations in the late 1930's and early World War II and United States-Thai relations more recently serve as the best examples of the latter course.

As noted above, the British had, by mid-19th century, become the pre-

62 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

eminent power in Southeast Asia, a fact which left King Mongkut uneasy lest the English should decide to expand their influence already centered in Malaya and Burma. While resisting British pressure for further trade concessions and extraterritorial rights for British citizens residing in Thailand, Mongkut sought the assistance of other powers, most notably France and the United States, to guarantee Thai independence. Despite both French and American unwillingness to be drawn into any commitment to defend Thailand, the King was successful in entering treaties with several other European countries thereby limiting, if not entirely canceling out, British preeminence.⁷

This policy, along with a policy of greatly accelerated modernization of Thai society, was not without its risks. Such a policy depends for its success on mutually exclusive interests to be perceived by the competing foreign powers who, in turn, must be equally willing to back their positions with military force if necessary. Even though Thailand did survive as an independent nation in colonialized Asia, the Thai policy of playing foreign powers off against each other was less than totally successful as it did not prevent the French from seizing from Thailand what is now Laos and Cambodia; nor did it prevent the establishment of extraterritorial privileges for foreign nationals in Thailand which only served to erode Bangkok's sovereignty.

France, to whom Thailand had originally turned to counter British power, had by the last quarter of the 19th century become the greater threat to Thailand—making ever increasing territorial demands on Bangkok. While the Mongkut strategy relied on active British support to refuse French territorial demands, Britain felt that her interests in a viable buffer state between British Burma and French Indochina were sufficiently met by France's promise to respect Thai independence and, there-

fore, did not hold any particular boundary line to be of great significance.⁸ It is evident that while Thai diplomacy was effective in protecting Thai territorial integrity, it could only do so under certain specialized conditions whereby British interests backed by military power might coincide, however imperfectly, with Thai interests. Such conditions historically have proved to be fleeting, however, and thus suggest that such a policy pursued over long periods of time is fraught with danger.

The second theme of Thai diplomacy which, until recent times, has predominated is the patron-client relationship judiciously established with the single most powerful force in the region. This type of policy has been utilized either when a single great power could be found that held closely shared interests with the Thai Government (the case of Thai-American alliance immediately after World War II and during the cold war) or simply when no other foreign powers exist on the scene to challenge the predominant power (the case of the Thai-Japanese alliance in the immediate prewar and World War II period). Clearly the advantages accruing to Thailand from such a policy begin to break down once the patron power either ceases to be the most powerful in the region or no longer is willing to exercise the power it still possesses. Once such a situation is reached, a graceful means has to be devised by Thailand to gradually disassociate herself in the eyes of others from the waning power.

The Thai-Japanese alliance of the thirties and early forties first grew out of the old "playing-off" policy. Japanese friendship seemed a fine means of countering British and French influence; some even saw the Japanese invasion of China as a sign that Japan would someday support Thailand in regaining the Cambodian and Laotian territories lost to the French.⁹

Thai-Japanese relations were further strengthened by the military faction led

by Phibun Songkhram which came to power in Bangkok in 1938. Despite Phibun's proclivity to back Japan diplomatically at this time in return for Japanese support of Thai claims to parts of Laos and Cambodia, any allegation that he planned to join the Tokyo generals in their expansionary schemes is insupportable. Rather, it appears that Phibun would have preferred to regain the lost territories and then be left alone. However, with the defeat of France in 1940 and the inability of Britain and the United States to project sufficient power into Southeast Asia, Thailand had to deal with Japan by itself. By the summer of 1941 the Thai leaders were beginning to have second thoughts about their close cooperation with Japan. This same concern by fall had grown into a desperate fear of Japanese aggression, but by this time Phibun's frantic calls for Anglo-American assistance were too late.¹⁰ The Thai found themselves caught in a power vacuum into which the Japanese were hurriedly moving. When Bangkok received Tokyo's ultimatum on 7 December 1941 to allow Japanese troops to transit the country and attack Burma, there was little else to do but accede to the demand.

When reflecting back on these events, it appears that the Thai leadership was neither pro-Japanese nor pro-British, but simply tried to secure the maximum benefit for their small country under circumstances almost entirely beyond their control. Given the advantages of historical perspective, we can see that Prime Minister Phibun's mistake was not in accommodating to Japanese power in 1941, but in his decision to pursue that accommodation too far. Rather than keep open several alternatives to guard against any change in the military situation, Phibun went beyond the point probably necessary to demonstrate his usefulness to the Japanese and thus inexorably cast his lot with Japan.

However, Phibun's personal mis-

judgment did not turn out to be fatal for either Thailand or himself, due largely to the efforts of other officials associated with the Thai Government. While official Government policy emanating from Bangkok was of a decidedly pro-Japanese coloration, anti-Japanese elements, most notably Pridi Panomyong in Bangkok and Seni Pramoet (Ambassador to Washington), formed a Free Thai movement which collaborated with the Allies, thereby establishing a case for those who argued that Thailand should not be regarded as a defeated enemy at the end of the war. Despite the Thai Government's "patron-client" relationship with the Japanese, the net effect produced—when the activities and Pridi and Seni were taken into account—was one of hedging bets once a viable alternative to the Japanese alliance became available in the form of Anglo-American military power.

How much Prime Minister Phibun knew of Pridi's activities is uncertain. Apparently he had no objections, though, since he could have taken steps against the underground had he chosen to do so.¹¹ However, since Pridi did not make his move to work with the Allies until early 1943, when American successes in the Pacific were beginning to turn the tide of the war, it seems likely that Phibun saw Pridi's activities as the best way for Thailand to be able to make at least some claims to be on the victorious side, no matter who won.

With the eventual defeat of Japanese forces and the conclusion of World War II, Thailand found herself in a situation somewhat analogous to prewar times but one even more conducive to establishing a patron-client relationship with a superpower. In 1945 the United States by far possessed the greatest influence in Southeast Asia not only by virtue of the American forces in the immediate vicinity, but also because of the great damage that Britain and France had suffered at home. Clearly then, the wisest policy for Bangkok to pursue

would be one of establishing and maintaining the closest of relations with America. The wisdom and suitability of such a course of action can be borne out in its durability over the past 25 years.

The United States was a logical ally for Thailand. In addition to American power and influence, the United States was willing to use its resources in support of many of the same projects that the Thai leaders favored. Largely the result of Ambassador Seni's efforts, Thailand did maintain a favorable image in Washington and was able to remain an independent nation rather than undergo allied occupation. This was important to Thailand, for both Britain and France had suffered from Thai actions during the war and wanted retribution. More so in the case of Britain than with France, U.S. support was a significant factor in restraining the European powers' demands on Thailand after the war and facilitated the task of working Thailand back into the world community.¹²

Another factor in making a Thai-American alliance natural was the fact that historically America had been sympathetic and friendly toward Thailand. Although the United States had signed trade treaties with the Thais in the 19th century as had the Europeans, Washington never went to the lengths other Western nations did in extracting special privileges for their nationals living in Thailand. It was President Wilson, at the Paris Peace Conference after World War I, who first initiated a campaign to persuade the European powers to fully recognize Thai sovereignty without reservation. By 1920 these efforts led to a new treaty with Thailand in which the United States agreed to grant the Thai Government jurisdiction over American nationals living in Thailand and allowed Thailand to levy duties on imported American goods provided other nations similarly agree to waive their special treaty rights.¹³ Following this American lead,

the Thai Government was able, with the assistance of Professor Francis Sayre of the Harvard Law School, to successfully renegotiate all unequal treaties with the European powers.

The prestige which the United States enjoyed in Thai eyes as a result of these policies was reinforced after World War II by the American stance in opposition to the reimposition of European empires in Asia. If Thailand were simultaneously occupied by the colonial powers as a defeated enemy, while Britain and France regained their colonial possessions in Asia, the leaders in Bangkok feared Thailand might eventually find itself incorporated permanently into somebody's empire, without hope of quickly regaining independence.

Finally, America turned out to be an ideal ally for Thailand after 1950 because of Washington's fervent anti-Peking policy. Despite the brief period of Pridi Panomyong's rule in the late forties—when the Thai Government flirted with anticolonial national liberation movements involving Communist elements (particularly the Viet Minh in Indochina) and prejudicial laws aimed at Thailand's Chinese minority were abolished—Thailand's governments during the early stages of the cold war were virulently anti-Communist and deeply suspicious of Bangkok's large Chinese minority. Thus, Washington's desire to build a ring of anti-Communist alliances around China and Bangkok's own brand of xenophobic anticommunism combined to form a community of interests strong enough to withstand minor irritations which occasionally developed between the two over approximately the next 20 years.

Without actually discussing in detail Thai-American relations since World War II, we can say that the governments which have ruled in Bangkok, with the exception of Pridi's, have all demonstrated hard-line opposition to communism (homegrow, Chinese, and North

Vietnamese) and have repeatedly striven to secure a written American commitment to prevent a Communist takeover in Thailand. While the United States other staunch anti-Communist allies in Asia had received our explicit commitment from Washington in the form of mutual defense pacts (e.g., individual treaties between the United States and Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan), Thailand had to rely on the vaguely worded assurances of the SEATO pact which merely guaranteed that the members would *consult* to determine what action should be taken in the event of aggression launched against any SEATO member or designated country. Furthermore, Thailand, the only SEATO member physically located on the Asian landmass, could take little comfort in the policies of Britain and France who repeatedly seemed unwilling to assume a firm stance against the Communist subversion in Laos and South Vietnam which the Thai feared so much.

At this point it should be noted that Laos is probably more important in Thai diplomacy than any other country and, as such, disputes which center around it can be regarded as being of the greatest significance to Thai politics. This is true for several reasons, but for our purposes the most important are historic, geopolitical, and ethnic. Historically, Thailand ruled Laos until the latter part of the 19th century when France annexed it. Since that time some sentiment has always existed in Thailand for its return to Thai rule. Geographically, Laos is located between Thailand and Vietnam—historic rivals and two of the most vigorous competitors for leadership in Southeast Asia. But even more significantly, Laos is a weak, disorganized fiction of a nation located across the Mekong River from the poorest, most backward part of Thailand, the Northeast, an area inhabited by people of Laotian, not Thai, origin with little reason to feel allegi-

ance to Bangkok. Long a backwater region, the Northeast has been poorly governed or ignored by Bangkok. Assignment to this area is considered to be punishment among Government personnel which has served merely to guarantee that the Northeast would continue to be misgoverned and have little voice in central Government circles. If Thailand is vulnerable at all to Communist subversion, it is in the Northeast where the exception to the general Thai pattern of historic freedom from foreign rule, respect for the monarchy, respect for authority in general, and lack of any deep-seated grievances with the Government is the rule. If all Laos should fall to the Communists, the Thai Government clearly fears that it would be most susceptible to Laotian agents infiltrating into the Northeast who could play both upon ethnic ties and the grievances of the Northeasterners against the “foreign” government in Bangkok, thus transforming the region into a guerrilla base.

This concern of the Thai leadership has been reflected by its actions in SEATO since 1954. Through the first 6 years of the organization's existence, the United States supported the Thai view that Laos and South Vietnam must be preserved as non-Communist buffer states at all costs, while Britain and France preferred to concentrate on the defense of Thailand, Malaya, and Singapore.¹⁴ The Laotian crisis in the summer of 1960 proved to be a test of Thai-United States relations and demonstrated that future Thai foreign policy will likely be governed by Bangkok's estimate of America's determination to prevent a Communist takeover of Laos and South Vietnam.

While it may logically appear that the falling of Laos into the Communist orbit would no more lead to the inevitable communization of the rest of Southeast Asia than did the Czech coup of 1948 augur the fall of Western Europe, this fear has been foremost in

66 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

the minds of Thailand's leaders since the early fifties. It was only with the greatest difficulty that Washington was finally able to convince Thailand to go along with the 1962 Geneva agreement designed to neutralize Laos, as the best means of preventing a Communist takeover, as opposed to continued support for the right-wing government of Phoumi Nosavan. It was natural for the conservative generals in Bangkok to prefer a Laotian Government under General Phoumi, who shared their political leanings, rather than the neutralist Souvanna Phouma whom they regarded as weak and naive. Ultimately, however, Thailand believed its vital interests required that Laos be capable of resisting Communist pressure, and this clearly demanded that the United States firmly support Laotian independence militarily as well as economically.¹⁵ In that this view was not heartily supported by the European members of SEATO and the United States appeared to be vacillating and indecisive on just whom to support in Laos, doubts among the leadership arose over the advisability of remaining in SEATO. If the United States were unwilling to risk war to preserve an anti-Communist Laos, which Thailand felt to be one of the principal reasons for the existence of SEATO, what assurance was there that the United States or anybody else would do any more for Thailand if she were threatened?

The major flaw in Thai foreign policy at this juncture was its assumption that U.S. support for a pro-Western Laos existed under *all* circumstances and that it considered the defense of Laos to be inseparable from the defense of Thailand. Such wishful thinking was bound to lead to disappointment, for no great power will allow its actions to be guided by another country's national interests.¹⁶ This line of thinking also led Bangkok to the erroneous conclusion that Laos could be accurately read as a barometer of Western intentions throughout all of Southeast Asia. More

specifically, if the United States would not stand up to the challenge of piecemeal subversion in Laos, *ipso facto*, Washington would not stand up to any Communist challenge anywhere in Indochina under any circumstances.

It is instructive to note here that at this time of disenchantment between Thailand and the United States the Bangkok regime began to take steps similar to some of the policies now being pursued. Thanat Kboman publicly complained that Thailand was being less favorably treated by the United States than some uncommitted nations. Trade and cultural exchange negotiations with the U.S.S.R. were resumed in Bangkok. Even talk of Thailand pursuing an independent foreign policy and neutralism instead of retaining SEATO membership began circulating around the capital. The Thai generals' anxiety in 1961 was further magnified by the growing problem of Communist subversion in South Vietnam which seemed to the Thais to provoke only weak-kneed reactions from Washington.

The strained relations between Thailand and the United States were quickly resolved by early 1962, however, with the decision of President Kennedy to send advisers, pilots, and supporting personnel to South Vietnam and the joint communique signed in Washington by Dean Rusk and Foreign Minister Thanat on 6 March 1962. These two events pleased the Thai leadership and served as turning points, both in the resolution of the Laotian crisis and in Thai-American relations. Thailand finally achieved what her leaders had been struggling for since the early 1950's—a written pledge of American determination to meet any Communist attack on Thailand without requiring the prior agreement of other SEATO members. What, in effect, had been granted to Thailand was a bilateralization of the SEATO guarantees (thus removing the chance that Britain or France might block American support

for Thailand channeled through SEATO), and in return Thailand gave reluctant support to the U.S.-sponsored plan for a tripartite coalition government in Laos under Souvanna Phouma.

By 1965 the Thai Government could feel that indeed it had pursued a policy well suited to the realities of world politics at the time. The Thanat-Rusk joint communique of 1962 provided security guarantees to Thailand which equaled those given to South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. The United States was actively involved in preventing the demise of a pro-Western South Vietnam—a policy which Bangkok had long advocated. The 1962 Geneva accords appeared successful in preventing the Pathet Lao from controlling all of Laos—particularly the sensitive area along the Thai border. Finally, the Thai economy was booming as a result of increased U.S. economic aid and military spending associated with the Vietnamese war.

This happy state of affairs for Thailand began to change in 1968 with the halt in American bombing of North Vietnam and the first signs of the American Government's intent to withdraw militarily from the Vietnamese war before its final resolution. Regardless of the promises the United States made on paper to Thailand and irrespective of actual American military power, should the United States become unwilling to use this power in support of Asian allies then, Bangkok's policy of alliance with the United States would have proven to be bankrupt.

The Thai Government's past anti-Communist record, while popular at home and in the United States, had done little to endear itself to Peking. In January 1965 Radio Peking announced that the People's Republic of China was supporting a newly formed Thai Patriotic Front whose objective was to overthrow the Thai Government and eradicate American influence in Thailand. In addition to regular propaganda blasts

coming from China, the Thai leadership is quick to point out that approximately 2,300 Thai and Meo insurgents have been trained in China, provided with arms, and returned to the Northeastern sector of Thailand since 1954.¹⁷ Of even greater possible long-term significance to the security of Thailand, however, is the network of roads being constructed in northern Laos by the Chinese, one part of which runs from Yunnan Province in southern China across Laos to within a few miles of the Thai border. While the first roads were built as a part of a contract freely entered into by Laos in 1963, road construction has continued beyond the original contract period, and it is difficult to tell whether these more recent road spurs were part of the first agreement or not.¹⁸ What is clear, however, is that Thailand has publicly associated itself and its interests with the United States since the early 1950's in the hope of guaranteeing its security based on the assumption that the United States would remain the strongest force in the area. Thus any hint of American withdrawal which would leave the Thai alone to face their avowed enemies is sure to cause talk of major policy shifts in Bangkok.

The current state of Thai foreign policy can perhaps best be described as being in a state of flux. There are signs of continuity with the past policy of close cooperation with the United States, but at the same time several steps have been taken which might foreshadow a more neutral policy or one more accommodating to Hanoi, Moscow, or Peking. This anomalous approach is probably due as much to the internal debate within the governing elite of Thailand over the wisest course to follow as it is to the very real uncertainty felt about what the Nixon Doctrine will eventually come to mean in practice. Perhaps the best way to characterize Thailand's present policy is to say that it is a twofold policy which

68 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

(1) tries to maintain the political status quo while (2) preparing for a partial transfer of allegiances if unavoidable.¹⁹

It should be relatively clear that the present leaders of Thailand have little reason to be anxious to reach an accommodation with Peking or Hanoi as a substitute for an American guarantee of Thai independence. After all, the Thai generals have long been branded as "running dogs of U.S. imperialism" by Hanoi and Peking. Consequently, a climate of trust between the Communists and the present Thai leaders would be most difficult to establish as the Thai leaders would always have to fear that their new allies might be fomenting plots aimed at their overthrow. Nor does the path of neutralism offer great security. The example of Burma, which has maintained strict cold war neutrality for many years, would prove to be of little comfort to the leadership in Bangkok. Burmese neutrality did not prevent China from encouraging Naw Seng's insurgents in the Kachin state nor did it keep China from sending uniformed elements across the Chinese-Burma frontier in 1969-70 in obvious violation of Burmese sovereignty.²⁰ Surely the Thai Government which vocally supported the United States in Vietnam and provided land for American airbases could expect no better treatment.

While it is evident that Bangkok will gain few, if any, political advantages from closer relations with Hanoi and Peking in lieu of a workable American alliance, it is also undeniably true that many of the economic benefits derived from the close relationship with the United States will disappear if the American presence is removed or replaced.

For all the above reasons, Thailand's leaders probably would prefer to remain in the American camp. After recovering from the original shock of the American bombing halt proclaimed by President Johnson in 1968 without Bangkok's prior notification, the Thai Government

appears to have embarked on an effort to influence American leaders and voters as well. The implications of the Paris Peace Talks which in 1969 were felt in Bangkok to clearly point to an American sellout are no longer as "obvious."²¹ The assurances of President Nixon that his doctrine means that America will live by its treaty commitments and Secretary of State Rogers' reaffirmation of the Rusk-Thanat joint communique have been taken by Bangkok as signs of the American Executive's good intentions and suggest that all hope for an active American role in Southeast Asia is not lost. An editorial by Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman which appeared in *The New York Times* of 7 January 1971 is evidence of the Thai Government's efforts to support Mr. Nixon and undercut critics of the Vietnam war whom it fears would end America's military role in Southeast Asia. Similarly, the Bangkok *World* on 10 April 1969 quoted Premier Thanom as saying that Thailand was trying to persuade the United States to resume bombing of North Vietnam.²²

Further evidence of the Thai Government's desire to maintain a close working relationship with an active American presence in Asia can be gleaned from the Thai response to the Cambodian and Laotian situations. Despite the strains on United States-Thai relations since March 1968, the Thai Government has continued to support the American Government's actions in Cambodia and Laos—at times publicly but more recently only covertly.

Bangkok openly welcomed the 1970 United States-South Vietnamese incursion into Cambodia and even seemed about to send Thai forces into the fray. Ultimately, however, the decision was made to limit Thailand's assistance to Phnom Penh to certain kinds of direct and indirect assistance—particularly material support, troop training, and some air support.²³

This issue of Thai support to the Lon

Nol regime in 1970 offers an interesting insight into the internal politics of the present Thai regime. This foreign policy "debate" was highlighted by a public discussion at Chulalongkorn University between General Prapas (Deputy Premier), Foreign Minister Thanat, and the editor/publisher of the influential paper *Siam Rath* Kukrit Pramoj. Such an event in Thailand, aside from being unusual, clearly delineates for us the foreign policy alignments involved at least on this particular issue. The Thai military apparently favored some sort of armed intervention on the part of Thailand to help assure the survival of Lon Nol while the civilian leaders advocated a more cautious approach, fearful that Thailand might find herself more deeply involved in the Indochinese war at just the time the United States was about to withdraw.²⁴ Although it appears that the United States favored some sort of action along the lines proposed by the Thai military, congressional unwillingness to finance Thai troops in Cambodia together with U.S. determination not to stay in Cambodia and a lack of international endorsement for Thai military intervention persuaded the Thai Government to rely on diplomacy and bilateral assistance alone to bolster Phnom Penh.²⁵ Clearly the Thai Government, which is dominated by the military, wanted to take more direct action in support of Lon Nol but refused to take such a risk in the absence of firm American resolve. It is obvious that more cautious counsel within the Government, claiming that such a venture could not succeed without the active participation of the United States, prevailed.

A year later and despite the changed public stance noted at the beginning of this essay, the Thai Government continues to support any American steps to crush indigenous and/or North Vietnamese Communist forces in Laos and Cambodia. While no longer praising anti-Communist military campaigns by the

United States and South Vietnam, Foreign Ministry officials in Bangkok will not deny that Thai soldiers have been fighting the Communists in Laos and that the Thai planes have been engaging in an air war over Cambodia.²⁶ The primary goal of this *de facto* fighting is to keep the parts of Laos and Cambodia which border on Thailand free of Communist troops. Following the maxim of international relations that a nation's actions are a better indicator of its intentions [or desires] than are its words, we can fairly well conclude that Thailand will remain a close ally to the United States if at all possible.

But it is this question of what is possible that throws a cloud of doubt over future Thai policy. The practicability of Thailand continuing in her anti-Communist role depends largely on the future role of the United States—an issue far from resolved today. Thus the best the Thai rulers can hope to do is to assume a more neutral stance and thereby improve their chances of accommodating to the major regional power of the future, whoever it may be.

To implement this policy of "hedging bets," Thailand has begun to take a series of steps designed to open contacts with Peking and Hanoi as well as retaining most ties with the United States and expanding conversations with the Russians.

Perhaps the most significant move that has been made by Bangkok in this direction has been the renewed negotiations with Hanoi for the repatriation of 40,000 Vietnamese currently residing in the Northeast of Thailand. The talks which Bangkok understandably would be anxious to see successfully concluded have been stalled since 1965 when Thailand granted airbases to the United States. These Vietnamese, who were supporters of Ho Chi Minh have lived in Thailand (principally in the area around Sakon Nakhon) since the return of the French after World War II when they were granted sanctuary by the sympa-

70 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

thetic regime of Pridi Panomyong. After Saigon's repeated refusals to take these people, whom Thailand regards as a potential fifth column in an already sensitive area, Bangkok clearly would like to strike some sort of bargain with Hanoi. Some observers have noted that an ample basis for agreement exists on both sides. In return for repatriation of the Vietnamese, Bangkok might agree to an implicit standdown of its efforts in Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam.²⁷ The regime in Hanoi, which has more than had its hands full since the Cambodian and Laotian incursions, might well see the advantage to such an agreement. Hanoi has seen fit to utter some kind words to Bangkok recently, thus encouraging the Thai leaders to believe that they might just reach a quick solution to at least some of Thailand's internal security problems.²⁸

Bangkok has also shown a greater willingness to talk with China. In the February 1969 issue of its *Foreign Affairs Bulletin*, the Thai Government said that "Thailand has met with Red China several times" and "would be ready to have a dialogue with Red China if that could help lessen the danger of communist subversion in the country."²⁹ While any serious dialog on substantive issues between China and Thailand would probably necessitate a prior termination of propagandist blasts on both sides, the first step of at least saying such talks are desirable has been taken.

In addition to saying that they no longer oppose "in principle" the seating of Peking in the United Nations, the Thai leaders have taken several other steps which could be considered to be pleasing to the Chinese. Despite Bangkok newspaper editorials, which as late as the beginning of this year have continued to follow the old anti-Communist line, the Foreign Ministry has publicly stated the need for a flexible foreign policy in a world of constantly shifting alliances where

"enemies become the best of friends, and allies the worst of enemies."³⁰ In this light Thanat has made it clear that he is not interested in sponsoring any more military pacts or in revitalizing SEATO. Clearly such a statement is addressed to the Chinese as well as the Americans since these pacts are aimed primarily against China. Given Thailand's uncertainty about its SEATO allies' willingness to help defend Thailand and Chinese hostility to the pact, it might well be from Thailand's point of view in her best interests to let the organization just wither away. Such a position was outlined by Mr. Thanat at the 1969 SEATO Conference in Tokyo when he said:

There must be recognition and perhaps acknowledgement of the fact that the intervention of outside powers in dealing with Asian problems may not be the most effective nor the most desirable device for their settlement. Either those powers may become tired of the exacting ordeal or their domestic public opinion may find the burden of responsibility too heavy for their taste. . . . We would do well, therefore, to acknowledge this new mood and prepare ourselves accordingly.³¹

Similarly, Thai moves to withdraw their troops from South Vietnam and the Thai-American discussions which are resulting in the phased withdrawal of American air forces from Thai bases can be seen either as methods of pressuring the United States or as efforts to cut away from a faltering American alliance in hopes of currying favor with Peking. Put in the context of all that has occurred since March 1968, I think we can say that such moves accomplish both objectives and thus serve the Thai policy of wait and see.

Another instance of Thailand's current policy of keeping all channels open in order to achieve greater diplomatic maneuverability has been the Pridi

Panomyong case. Mr. Pridi, a former Prime Minister who has lived in exile for some 20-odd years because of his open sympathy with Peking and Hanoi, was recently granted a passport by the Thai Government, thereby allowing him to travel freely. Stories have appeared about him in the Bangkok press and even high Government officials such as Dr. Puey Ungakorn of the Bank of Thailand have visited him.³² By recognizing Pridi's existence after long years of exile in Peking (and more recently Paris) and even giving his name an air of respectability, the Thai Government may very well be thinking of using him as a bridge to Peking in the same fashion as he was used, together with Ambassador Seni, as a bridge to Washington in the last days of World War II.

We should also note that the Thai Government does not see the struggle for power in Southeast Asia as simply between the United States and China, but also has begun to court the Russians as well. While trade agreements have recently been reached with the U.S.S.R., Rumania, and Bulgaria, the ambivalence which has characterized all the Government's recent actions is present here as well. Two weeks after the trade agreements had been concluded, the *Bangkok Post* attacked the U.S.S.R. trade mission in Thailand. Even though the *Post* is not a Government publication, the nature and timing of such an attack is significant, given the Government's control over the press and the close connections between the Government and newspaper elites in Thailand. Such editorials are probably indicative of a rift within the Government over the wisdom of pursuing a pro-Soviet policy vis-a-vis a pro-American or pro-Chinese policy. Nevertheless, it is evident that the possibilities of replacing receding American power with Soviet power are being studied in Thai Government circles as the following quotes indicate. Mr. Thanat Khoman said in his

speech to the Asian Society on 24 February 1970:

Brezhnev's proposal for Asian collective security, in our opinion, seems to envision the departure from the scene of Western powers and the eventual occurrence of a power vacuum which may be filled by a large nation presently inimical to Russian interests.³³

Similar sentiments were expressed by the *Bangkok Post* in the following:

If the Soviet Union is merely trying to broaden the base of its cooperation with countries in the region on all matters, not excluding defense, and is not planning to set up an anti-Peking front for its own reasons, the Soviet moves deserve careful consideration.³⁴

Throughout this paper we have emphasized the fluidity of current Thai-American relations owing largely to the uncertainties of future American policy in Southeast Asia. To be completely accurate, however, one must point out the fact that the direction taken by Thai diplomacy in the future will depend as much on political shakeups in Bangkok as well as in Washington. As significant as the defeat of President Nixon in 1972 or the election of George McGovern would be to future Thai policy, clearly the removal of Premier Thanom or Foreign Minister Thanat would be of no less impact. While this author is in no position to speculate about such possibilities, rumors reported to be circulating in Bangkok stress a split between Thanat and the Deputy Premier, General Prapas Charusathira—particularly over the issue of Cambodia.³⁵ General Prapas, a staunch anti-Communist who advocates vigorous moves to militarily crush the Communist threat in Southeast Asia, commands considerable political support where it counts in Thai politics (i.e., the army), and may therefore be able to force the aging Premier

and his temperamental Foreign Minister out of office if they pursue a policy of accommodation with the Communists too far. Reiterating the fact that this all remains speculation, one cannot over-emphasize the fact that the Thai-American alliance today is at a crossroads and can either easily be torn asunder or remain strong. Everything depends on so many imponderables at this point in time that it is impossible to predict with any accuracy future relations.

III

Having noted historic Thai interests and operational methods on the international scene, some of the reasons behind the enduring Thai-American alliance, as well as current causes for concern among the leaders in Bangkok, we must also raise the question of what *are* the American interests in retaining a close relationship with Thailand today. Essentially we must ask ourselves, Is it really a cause for concern if Thailand slowly drifts away from the United States into a neutral or even a pro-Peking stance?

A spokesman for the Nixon administration, Ambassador Unger, testifying before the Symington subcommittee in November 1969, listed four American interests in Thailand: (1) its strategic location, (2) Thailand's role in containing China, (3) its importance to the Vietnamese conflict as a base for communications, transportation, and "things of a security nature," and (4) Thailand's potential leadership role in regional plans for economic cooperation.³⁶ Hopefully this emphasis on military reasons is largely the result of the Vietnamese conflict and will change substantially as the war is wound down. Without disputing arguments which link U.S. interests with Thai security, over-emphasis on purely military aspects while neglecting other facets of Thai-United States relations will, in the long run, jeopardize the very security we

wish to safeguard.

The United States does have an important role to play in Thailand, as it does in the rest of the developing world. Surely it is in the enlightened interests of the United States to play a continued role in the development of Thailand, and this continued interest must not be overshadowed by the shorter termed military interests the United States has in Thailand as a base for the Vietnam war or any other war for that matter. The essential point is, however, that much of what we say about the proper role for the United States in Thailand is also true when we talk about the United States in the underdeveloped world as a whole.

Justifications for foreign aid are many and varied. In addition to humanitarianism, which has often been cited as a reason for giving aid, several very "practical" arguments can be advanced for continued and increased foreign aid. The United States in the future will probably need greater access to raw materials, many of which are abundant in developing countries. The utilization of these resources can prove to be beneficial to both the United States and the host country if developed in accord with the needs and desires of all concerned. Foreign aid, in many ways, is a subsidy to the U.S. economy, encouraging the purchase of American goods by aid recipients. Furthermore, successful development of the aid recipient is the best guarantee for its continued independence which, after all, is the stated goal of our policy toward Thailand as well as the rest of the Third World.

At this point we must address ourselves to the problem of what role the United States should play in the developing world—marked as it is by conflict. President Nixon in his 1970 state of the world message delivered before Congress spoke of the Nixon Doctrine as seeking to strike a balance between doing too much to help defend our

Asian allies and doing too little. By doing too much we promote dependence on American military power, but too small a commitment would merely erode our allies' confidence in America's concern for their welfare.³⁷ While the evidence presented here may suggest that the U.S. Government has thus far failed to even strike the proper military balance envisioned by the Nixon Doctrine as far as Thailand is concerned, not nearly enough public concern has been given to the larger issue of balancing the proper military commitment with necessary economic and political developmental efforts in order to achieve the desired end of stability and independence for the region. Put another way, the extent to which the Government or we as a people see the problems of Thailand (and in a larger sense, those of the entire Third World) as being solved by simply striking a proper balance between too much American military commitment and too little, to this extent we will have failed to meet the challenge of development. Thus, while the Nixon Doctrine implies a lowered military profile abroad, it should not be taken to mean that American interests overseas are correspondingly diminished, nor should it be too eagerly seized upon as a panacea for correcting all the ills of past U.S. policy in Southeast Asia by a war-weary public.

President Nixon himself notes that the partnerships we seek with our Asian allies involves economic as well as political and military cooperation.³⁸ To read the newspapers, however, one might reach the impression that the question of military priorities—that is, the Nixon Doctrine as it is commonly understood—is receiving disproportionate emphasis. The reasons for this lie in the media as well as in the executive and legislative branches of Government.

Our preoccupation with the military aspects of our alliances continues. In the early sixties Vietnam was thought to be a military problem—one which could be

solved by American armed might. When a military solution seemed to prove illusory for several reasons, not the least of which being the fact that the problem was more than merely stopping external aggression, we continued to concentrate on the military side of the picture—while at the same time trying to devise new policies to keep the Army out of future Vietnam-type conflicts. The Nixon Doctrine and all its attendant debate are addressed to such issues.

Put in the context of this paper, the question which should be seriously discussed now is not "How do we keep American boys out of a combat role if and when Thailand becomes another Vietnam?" but rather "How do we work to minimize the chances of Thailand becoming another Vietnam?" We ought to be striving more vigorously to achieve a coordinated program of military assistance and increased developmental aid to Thailand so as to minimize its susceptibility to guerrilla war, particularly in the sensitive North-eastern region.

Political power does not come solely from the barrel of a gun. To take Mao's famous maxim out of context is to misunderstand the nature of the problems faced by Thailand and other underdeveloped countries. Political power depends primarily on what we might call popular allegiance. Thus, the extent to which future U.S. policy in Asia is characterized by the military aspects of the Nixon Doctrine *alone*, it will fail because it simply provides American guns to be fired by Asian soldiers rather than helping our Asian allies develop the kind of popular political base necessary to achieve stable and viable governments capable of resisting aggression or subversion. Surely this would include working with the government to design a concrete political program meeting the needs of daily life in the countryside and then reaching the people by every means possible to sell the government's objectives. Such an approach started

74 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

early enough would preempt precisely the political support subversive forces find necessary for success. And, as such, the importance of these types of political and economic aid programs cannot be stressed enough at a time when foreign aid and commitments abroad in general are coming increasingly under fire in Congress.

On the other hand, economic and political assistance alone would prove to be an inadequate policy for the United States in Southeast Asia. Without some military assistance to back it up, American economic aid could scarcely give Bangkok or any other government the confidence to remain receptive to an American role in Asia. The reality of this point should be evident enough from the fact that Thailand has not turned to Japan in any real way to hedge against the possibility of American withdrawal from Asia, but has sought accommodation with Russia or China. Economic power alone is not sufficient. Clearly the United States must achieve a balance between economic and military assistance to these countries if either form of aid is to be truly effective.

Great powers like the United States have a role to play in the world which they must play wisely if every nation is to benefit. Simply by virtue of possessing great power and wealth, the United States is obliged to use it, but in a

constructive manner. The issue of how to best design a policy to pursue such a role confronts us all as one of the principal questions of our age. While the elimination of poverty and want in the world would not in and of itself guarantee an end to conflict, such an achievement is a necessary step in this direction. Just as the world is too small to allow aggression to go unchecked, even in the most distant lands, the far-reaching consequences of abject poverty in any part of the globe and the conflicts which it inevitably engenders threaten everybody's well-being and security.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



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FOOTNOES

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The responsibility of the great states is to serve and not to dominate the world.

Harry S. Truman: Message to Congress, 16 April 1945