BAMBOO IN THE WIND:
UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY AND THAILAND
DURING THE KENNEDY AND JOHNSON ADMINISTRATIONS
1961-1969

by

Arne Kislenko

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of History
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Arne Kislenko, 2000
The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author’s permission.

L’auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L’auteur conserve la propriété du droit d’auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-49905-7
*CONTENTS*

Abstract ii
Acknowledgements iv
Research Abbreviations viii
Glossary of Terms ix
Note on Transliteration x
Introduction 1

PART 1: FROM ELEPHANTS TO ADVISERS, THE U.S. AND THAILAND TO 1962

Chapter One:
The Long River's Run; U.S.-Thai Relations to 1961 (17)

Chapter Two:
The Trouble With 'Little Brother': Laos and U.S.-Thai Relations, 1961 (66)

Chapter Three:
A Friend in Need; U.S.-Thai Relations, 1962 (101)

PART 2: PLAYING DOMINOES, 1963-65

Chapter Four:
Indecision and Fate's Intervention; U.S.-Thai Relations, 1963 (151)

Chapter Five:
Towards A New Beginning; Thanom, Johnson and U.S.-Thai Relations, 1964 (171)

Chapter Six:
The Bamboo Bends; Thailand, the U.S. and the War in Vietnam, 1965 (198)

PART 3: THE CROCODILE'S TEETH, 1966-69

Chapter Seven:
The Bigger War; U.S.-Thai Relations and Vietnam, 1966 (229)

Chapter Eight:
Swimming with the Whale; Thailand, the U.S. and the War in Vietnam, 1967 (262)

Chapter Nine:
A New Wind Blows; U.S.-Thai Relations, 1968 (287)

Conclusion (319)
Bibliographic Essay (331)
Note on Primary Sources (342)
Bibliography (345)
**ABSTRACT**

"Bamboo in the Wind: United States Foreign Policy and Thailand During the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, 1961-1969"

Ph. D., Arne Kislenko, Graduate Department of History, University of Toronto

This dissertation examines relations between the United States and Thailand from 1961 to 1969. During the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson the United States deepened its involvement in Southeast Asia, becoming embroiled in the Laotian and Vietnamese conflicts. At the time the spectre of communist expansion in the region seemed very real, and believing in the so-called "domino theory", Washington sought to contain this threat by increasing its military and economic support of states in proximity to Laos and Vietnam where a vulnerability was perceived.

Chief among these states was Thailand, which since the late 1940's had gradually become a major American ally. Thailand was the only country in Southeast Asia to have never been colonised, in part due to the traditional flexibility of Thai diplomacy. After World War II, developments in Thailand led to the entrenchment of military government, which the U.S. reinforced to gain anti-communist support in the region. This relationship intensified as the situations in Laos and Vietnam worsened, and by the mid-1960's Thailand was a vital centre of American military operations in Southeast Asia.

Using material from archives in the U.S., Britain, and Canada, including recently declassified American government documents, this study traces the dynamics of American policy towards Thailand during the 1960s. The factors affecting the formulation and implementation of American policy and the consequences of that policy are the principal focus of analysis. However, attention is also given to the nature of Thai political culture and foreign policy.

Although never Washington's focal point, and frequently lacking co-ordination between various government agencies, U.S. policy towards Thailand during the Kennedy and Johnson
administrations was ultimately successful. Thailand was a "domino" that did not fall, and while this owed more to the nature of Thai society itself than American actions, the connection to the U.S. was undeniably an important factor. Whereas U.S. policy in Indochina met with failure, Thailand remained out of communist hands, even after the withdrawal of American forces by 1975. The relationship between the U.S. and Thailand in the 1960s, while far from being ideal, proved to be mutually beneficial.
*ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

When I first began this project, I was naive about how long it would take, how much work was actually involved, and how difficult it would be to maintain my motivation. I also had little idea of the degree to which pursuing a Ph.D. would take over my life, and to how many people I would be indebted when (and if) I finished. Here I'd like to thank those who have helped me and my work in various capacities over the past few years.

Several organisations contributed financially to my research, and without them it would have been virtually impossible to complete this dissertation. The University of Toronto School of Graduate Studies provided me with several crucial open fellowships, as well as a travel grant, while the university's Centre for International Studies awarded me research moneys through the Sir Val Duncan memorial fund. I was also very fortunate to have received generous grants from both the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson presidential libraries to conduct research at those institutions.

Archival research can be an intimidating and difficult experience, but the staff at the Kennedy and Johnson libraries and at the National Archives made my task much easier. Their patience was endless, and their knowledge and advice were indispensable. I am particularly indebted to Marty McGann at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, whose extraordinary help led to several crucial research finds, including previously top-secret material that was declassified almost as I arrived there. This is not to overlook the invaluable assistance of others at the archives and libraries I used, and especially the staff at the University of Toronto libraries, who are no doubt relieved that I am finally finished.

I owe a tremendous debt to my dissertation committee, which I believe was the best for which any graduate student could hope. Professors Victor Falkenheim and Ron Pruessen deserve special mention for actually remembering me between rather infrequent meetings, in addition to thanks for
the advice they have offered. One of the leading experts in U.S. diplomatic history, Professor Gary R. Hess, kindly served as the external reader for this dissertation, and I am very grateful for his input. I have also been fortunate to receive the advice and direction of several other academics over the years without whom this dissertation would have suffered. Professors Jack Ogelsby and Charles Ruud at the University of Western Ontario were two of the finest teachers I have ever had, and they fed my love of history during both my formative undergraduate years and my Masters degree. Also at Western, Craig Simpson served not only as an adviser but as a mentor and friend. There are few people as passionate and caring as Craig, and to him I offer a special thanks.

Over the past few years I have gained invaluable teaching experience, with a great deal of help from others. At the University of Toronto I worked as a tutorial leader for Professor Robert Bothwell; an opportunity which provided me not only with much needed funding and time in the classroom, but also self-confidence thanks to his direction and support. My luck has continued at Ryerson Polytechnic University as both a tutorial leader and lecturer with the guidance of Margaret MacMillan. Margaret's skills as an historian and teacher are matched only by her patience and kindness. Her backing and friendship have helped me to grow both personally and professionally, and to her I owe a very special thanks. I would also like to thank all faculty with the History department at Ryerson, past and present, who have given their advice and support over the course of my years there. Special mention goes to Ron Stagg and Al Wargo, Chairs of the department during this time, and Des Glynn, Programme Director for the Continuing Education faculty, all who showed confidence in me as an educator, and gave great encouragement. It would certainly be remiss of me to neglect mentioning the never-ending help I received from the administrative and secretarial staff in the department of History at both the University of Toronto and Ryerson. For photo-copying to forms, and everything in between, thanks very much.

My work as a Senior Immigration Officer with Citizenship and Immigration Canada at Toronto's Lester B. Pearson International Airport has given me an additional source of funding and many
incredible, bizarre experiences. From the outrageous to the surreal, immigration officers deal with it all, and I shall always be proud of my association with them. A sage among them, Brent MacWilliam, deserves special mention not only for his philosophy, humour, and friendship, but also for serving as my proof-reader and editor.

There are a number of other people to whom thanks are owed for their support and kindness. Among them, Ilze Purmalis deserves mention. Thanks to her I enjoyed a countless number of meals, many good talks, a refuge in my own city, and a beautiful, therapeutic garden - not to mention a good friendship. Her extended family was also a great asset to me. Ivars Balodis and Kristen Lotto provided me with a home in the Washington D.C. area, while Ines and Talis Berzins gave safe haven and memorable Maryland-crab-eating vacations along the way. Paul and Francoise Cockburn were also very supportive, giving me the splendid isolation of their cottage, especially during the initial write-up phase of this project.

To my dissertation supervisor, Robert Accinelli, I owe a very great debt indeed. Over the years he has given me much direction and constructive criticism with respect to everything from research to structure. His command of U.S. foreign relations was a tremendous asset for me, and Bob's precision and dedication as an historian provided the foil I needed for my frequently haphazard and careless ways. His patience and temperament are remarkably solid, and although he had more than sufficient cause to doubt me and my abilities, Bob was always there. I feel truly fortunate to have had him as a supervisor, and while the weaknesses in this dissertation are exclusively mine, any strengths undoubtedly have Bob Accinelli behind them.

Finally, I'd like to thank my family and friends for their unfailing love and support throughout this long and often trying journey. These were years full of considerable personal tribulation, and I would not have been able to weather that and the storms of this undertaking without them. My mother never let me forget the value of education, and she was right. In case I've never done it properly before, now is a good time to say 'thanks mum'. My sisters, Annabel and Dora, and
brother-in-laws, Daryl and Tom, have been there for me through thick and thin with patience, love, and humour. A source of great pride and joy for me, my nephews Liam, David, Christopher, and Michael, made me want to hurry up with this dissertation to have kids of my own. My aunt, Nina Bourso, provided me with an unequalled friendship as well as a place to stay during trips to Boston. Her love of history is infectious, and I am grateful for all her wisdom and insight.

Without a question, my greatest fortune is in having so many other wonderful friends, too many to mention here by name. Let me just say thanks to you all, and now that it's over, I'll try to make good on those threatened visits. The love, respect, humour, and friendship of my best friend and partner, Christine McCullough, are essential ingredients in this dissertation, and are my most treasured gifts in life.

Lastly, a dedication of sorts. Although he did not live to see this finished, Dale Wesley Nelson was one of the people to whom I am most indebted. He gave me unconditional love, a critical ear, and some of the best memories I will ever have. Without his intelligence, kindness, and legendary humour the world is a colder place, but remembering his love and friendship will always give me strength.

AK, October 1999
*RESEARCH ABBREVIATIONS*

**Libraries and Archives**

HUA .......... Harvard University Archives (Cambridge, Massachusetts)
JFKL .......... John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (Boston, Massachusetts)
LBJL .......... Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (Austin, Texas)
LOC .......... Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.)
NSA .......... National Security Archive (Washington, D.C.)
USNA .......... United States National Archives (Archives II, College Park, Maryland)

**Collections and Papers**

ASFEA .......... Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Asia (BFEA, OSEAA)
BFEA .......... Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs (U.S. State Department)
CDF .......... Central Decimal File (U.S. State Department general records to 1963)
GUFA .......... Georgetown University Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
NSC .......... National Security Council
NSF .......... National Security files
OES .......... Office of the Executive Secretariat
OSANSA ...... Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs
OSEAA .......... Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (BFEA)
POF .......... Presidential Office Files
PPC .......... Policy Planning Council (NSC)
PPS .......... Policy Planning Staff (NSC)
SIG .......... Senior Interdepartmental Group
WHCF .......... White House Central Files
WHPO .......... White House Press Office
*GLOSSARY OF TERMS*

*Note: These terms are described in detail when first used in the text.*

AID ........ Agency for International Development (U.S. Department of State)
ARD ....... Accelerated Rural Development Programme
ARPA .... Advanced Research Projects Agency (U.S. Department of Defense)
BPP ....... Border Police Patrol (Thailand)
CINC PAC ... Commander In Chief, Pacific (U.S. Armed Forces)
CPT ........ Communist Party of Thailand
CSMC .... Counter-Insurgency Support Management Center (U.S. Embassy, Bangkok)
CSCOS ... Communist Suppression Operations Command (Thailand)
DIA ........ Defense Intelligence Agency (U.S. Department of Defense)
DCM ........ Deputy Chief of Mission (U.S. Embassy, Bangkok)
DOLA ...... Department of Local Administration (Ministry of the Interior, Thailand)
DRV ........ Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
GVN ........ Government of Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnam)
ISA .......... International Security Affairs (U.S. Department of Defense)
ISP ........ Internal Security Program (U.S. Operations Mission - Thailand)
JSC .... Joint Chiefs of Staff (U.S.)
JUSMAG ... Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group (Thailand), also cited as MAAG Thailand
KMT ...... Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist forces)
MACTHAI ... Military Assistance Command Thailand (U.S.), also cited as COMUSMACV
MACV ...... Military Assistance Command Vietnam (U.S.), also cited as COMUSMACV
MAP ........ Military Aid Program (U.S.)
MDU ...... Mobile Development Units (US A.I.D. economic/social works teams in Thailand)
PARU ...... Paratrooper Reconnaissance Unit (Thailand)
PRC ...... People's Republic of China
RLA ...... Royal Lao Army
RLAF ...... Royal Lao Air Force
RLG ...... Royal Lao Government
ROC ...... Republic of China (Taiwan, Nationalist China)
RTA ...... Royal Thai Army
RTAF ...... Royal Thai Air Force
RTG ...... Royal Thai Government
RTN ...... Royal Thai Navy
SEATO ...... Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation
SOF A ...... Status of Forces Agreement
TIM ...... Thai Independence Movement
TNP ...... Thai National Police
TPF ...... Thai Patriotic Front
USG ...... United States Government
USIA ...... U.S. Information Agency
USIS ...... U.S. Information Service (USIA)
USOM ...... U.S. Operations Mission (U.S. Department of State - AID)
VDC ...... Village Defense Corps (Thailand)
VOA ...... Voice of America
NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND THAI NAMES

There are several methods employed in transliterating Thai, which makes for considerable confusion. In this dissertation I have followed the "sound-based" system which is commonly used in English-language works. The reader should keep in mind some helpful points about this system. "Ph" is pronounced "P" as in "Peter", not as an "f" sound. The "h" in "Th" is silent, as in "Thomas" rather than "that". Thais refer to themselves by their first names, and in this dissertation I do the same. For example, Thanat Khoman is consistently referred to by his given name, Thanat, and never as Khoman. However, surnames and honorary titles will be given where applicable. In the past, transliteration based on spelling was in widespread use. Some United States government documents, for example, frequently refer to Sarit Thanarat as "Srisdi Dhajanarat". Where such variations occur I have provided the alternative reference in parentheses. Finally, before 1939 and from 1945 to 1949, Thailand was officially named "Siam". Throughout this dissertation I refer to Siam and the Siamese prior to 1939, and to Thailand and the Thais thereafter. However, direct quotations from sources may use the terms "Siam" and "Siamese" regardless of chronology.
*INTRODUCTION*

This dissertation will examine United States relations with Thailand during a tumultuous period of American involvement in Southeast Asia from 1961 to 1969. During the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, Thailand was more prominent in American foreign policy in this region than ever before or after. The relationship was still in its formative stage late in the Eisenhower administration, while Richard Nixon's presidency witnessed the disengagement of American forces from the region. However, during the 1961-69 period Thailand was a principal and invaluable ally, with significant bearing on political developments in Indochina, SEATO and the American war in Vietnam. The main purpose of the dissertation is to describe and analyse the U.S.-Thai relationship within the context of developments in Southeast Asia and the Cold War during these critical years.

The principal focus is on United States relations with Thailand, and not on Thailand itself or its foreign policy. Thus the dynamics and consequences of American foreign policy towards Thailand are of primary concern. However, this dissertation will seek to present the Thai perspective during this period wherever possible, drawing on the work of other scholars. A more balanced and objective account will hopefully result. This dissertation will argue that in many instances the Thais, despite their relative weakness vis-à-vis their super-power patron, were able to manipulate the United States and influence American foreign policy to their advantage. Furthermore, this study will contend that on the whole, in terms of economic development and national security, Thailand benefited enormously from its association with the United States. Since these benefits were by no means cost-free, this dissertation will also discuss the negative aspects of the U.S.-Thai relationship, particularly with respect to the entrenchment of Thai military rule.
The thesis examines the major role Thailand played in the development of U.S. foreign and military policy in Indochina during the 1960s. The stability of Thailand was a primary consideration in the American decision to intervene militarily in this area, and throughout the 1960's the Thais were considered very important regional allies. Both Washington and Bangkok wanted to contain the spread of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia, and so long as Beijing posed an expansionist threat, this convergence of interests remained the essence of the U.S.-Thai relationship.

The thesis will examine both overt and covert American operations to build up the Thai military so that it could at least temporarily hold off any Chinese or North Vietnamese advances, and so that it could fight the indigenous communist movement in Thailand. This study will also examine some of the major political and diplomatic issues that affected the U.S. and Thailand, and pay special attention to the role played by key government departments and figures on both sides of the relationship throughout the decade. In this regard, it will contend that U.S. policy toward Thailand was frequently carried out on an "ad hoc" basis, hindered by the preoccupation with Indochina and particularly Vietnam. Numerous disputes between U.S. government agencies over the direction of U.S. policy in Thailand and Southeast Asia made for an often difficult relationship with Bangkok.

Because U.S. government documents dealing with U.S.-Thai relations during this period have yet to be completely declassified, this study necessarily represents only a "first cut" at this topic. However, substantial official and other documentation is now available at the Kennedy and Johnson presidential libraries, at the National Archives, and at other depositories. By drawing on these newly declassified U.S. documentary material, this study attempts to cast new light on the complex and important relationship between the U.S. and Thailand from 1961 to 1969, and to
underscore the significance of this relationship in American foreign policy in Southeast Asia during this crucial period.¹

Existing scholarship from the American perspective on the post-1945 U.S.-Thai relationship is relatively thin. This is partly because, in comparison to other countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand's association with the U.S. has remained fairly amicable. For obvious reasons, the lion's share of academic attention has concentrated on Vietnam, and to a lesser degree, Laos and Cambodia. Even U.S. policy towards Burma, Indonesia, and the Philippines has attracted more interest than that towards Thailand. For the 1961-1969 period the dearth of historical scholarship on U.S.-Thai relations is even more pronounced, no doubt owing to the fact that until very recently the bulk of relevant American government documents remained inaccessible to scholars.

General studies of the U.S.-Thai relationship since World War II by American scholars such as R. Sean Randolph are very important, but they tend to focus almost exclusively on anti-communism as the main element in bringing the two sides together.² While national security considerations related to anti-communism were unquestionably strong factors in cementing U.S. and Thai interests and in shaping the relationship between the two countries, they by no means stand alone. The authors who employ this national security interpretation neglect the domestic political considerations that affected both Thai and especially American administrations. Moreover, as Daniel Mark Fineman points out in his study of the connection between American policy and the entrenchment of military authoritarianism in Thailand between 1947 and 1958, the national security approach ignores the undeniable link between Thailand's informal alliance with the United States and its internal

---

¹ A detailed discussion of archival materials used in this study can be found in the section entitled "Note on Sources" and in the bibliographic essay.
political developments. The majority of scholars on Thai domestic politics consider this connection to be indisputable, while American scholars tend either to marginalize or overlook the linkage altogether.

Another difficulty with the national security approach is that fundamental traditional aspects of Thai foreign policy, such as a concern with Chinese expansionism and the flexible nature of Thai diplomacy, are often neglected. Also, decision-making in Thailand involved much more varied and complicated dynamics than the national security approach allows. For example, Thai public opinion was a very important factor influencing relations with the United States, as this thesis will make evident. Most of all, the national security viewpoint does not recognise the effect that cultural perceptions had on the U.S.-Thai relationship. Mired in Vietnam, policy-makers in Washington paid little attention to the historical and cultural differences between Southeast Asian states. In the eyes of most American officials, Southeast Asia was a single entity. Few officials realised or cared that Thailand had its own unique culture and history. They tended to think that since it was geographically close to Vietnam, it must resemble Vietnam. Sadly, even key members of the Kennedy and Johnson administration seemed to share this misconception, and as a result the U.S. relationship with Thailand was handled largely as an extension of the American relationship with Vietnam.

The majority of works by Americans authors using other analytical approaches are either somewhat dated or deal primarily with economic issues. Writing during the 1960's and early 1970's, Frank Darling, Donald Nuechterlein, and David A. Wilson contributed greatly to earlier scholarship on U.S.-Thai relations, but many of their assumptions and conclusions have been eclipsed over

---

time.\(^4\) Robert J. Muscat and J. Alexander Caldwell, though writing more recently, have focused almost exclusively on economic aid to Thailand and its effects on the overall U.S.-Thai relationship. While these are very solid works, their scope is limited and much more inclined towards political science than history.\(^5\) Similarly, a series of studies on the U.S.-Thai relationship produced under the auspices of the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of California at Berkeley provide interesting and valuable analysis, but are lacking in historical context.\(^6\)

Not surprisingly, Thai scholars have paid far more attention to the relationship than their American counterparts, and there are several worthwhile English-language studies of U.S.-Thai relations from the Thai point of view.\(^7\) However, many of them also tend to rely on the national security model. In part this is because by emphasising the threat that communism posed to Thailand, uncomfortable questions about the roots of military authoritarianism in Thai culture can be skirted. Moreover, this model allows some more nationalistic Thais to stress the negative effects that the relationship with the United States had on Thailand's security and way of life. From this perspective, Americans used Thailand to fight communism in Vietnam, but once the war turned

\(^4\) Frank C. Darling, *Thailand and the United States* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1965); Nuechterlein, *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*; David A. Wilson, *The United States and the Future of Thailand* (New York: Praeger, 1970). Writing during the Vietnam War, these scholars tended to focus on Thailand as the "next domino", and advocated stronger U.S.-Thai relations as the key to an anti-communist defense of Southeast Asia. While these scholars recognised that Thailand and Vietnam were dissimilar in many regards, their general assumption was that the communist insurgency in Thailand represented an indigenous, potent, and immediate threat to the country; subsequent scholarship has disproven this assumption.


sour they abandoned Southeast Asia and left Thailand surrounded by enemies and with a legacy of prostitution, drugs and corruption.8

With few exceptions, Thai diplomatic historians have not engaged in intensive archival research in the U.S. They tend to treat American foreign policy as monolithic, and do not fully account for either the varied considerations or personalities that often moulded it. While Thai scholars have the advantage of access to Thai archives, huge gaps exist in the records of various key ministries. In addition to this, much of the decision-making process in foreign policy during the 1950's and 1960's went undocumented, given the Thai predilection for "back-room settings involving no note-keeping."9

Works on Thai political history are relatively more plentiful, and this field has attracted some excellent Western and Thai scholars. David K. Wyatt and John S. Girling offer the two most comprehensive accounts by Western authors of society and politics in Thailand, while Likhit Dhiravegan, Somsakdi Xuto, and Thak Chaloemtiarana are leading experts on the Thai side.10 All such works provided this dissertation with valuable historical and political insight regarding Thailand. Other studies on various aspects of Thai society and culture from both native and foreign perspectives have also been used in this thesis.

When communist forces took control of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in the spring of 1975, it seemed to many observers only a matter of time before the contagion spread elsewhere in Southeast Asia. For decades the "domino theory" had been in vogue among most U.S. government

---

8 This thesis was particularly popular among those Thais involved in protests leading up to the overthrow of military government in October 1973. Dominated by students and intellectuals, these protests sought political reform and the adoption of a new constitution. The military rulers were identified by many Thais with the U.S. presence in the country. Anti-Americanism was an effective tool for the leaders of the protest movement. See Surachart, United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule, 1947-1977. 167-180.


officials and academics, and now that Indochina was "lost", it followed that the remaining "free world" countries in the region were doomed. From this perspective, the next country to succumb to communism was surely Thailand.

Contrary to such expectations, Thailand did not fall. Despite the withdrawal of U.S. military power from the region, and although surrounded by hostile neighbours, Thailand was no domino. In fact, the country prospered in the aftermath of communist victories in Indochina. Although the struggle for democratic reform within the country was painful and occasionally bloody, by the 1980's Thailand emerged as both an economic and political power in Southeast Asia. Without question this development owed much to the security umbrella earlier provided by the United States, but the presence of U.S. forces in Thailand during much of the 1960's and early 1970's does not provide the only explanation. Unlike the rest of the region, Thailand was never colonized. Its independence intact, the country did not experience the emotional, divisive, and convulsive nationalism of its neighbours. While there was an indigenous communist insurgency during the 1960's and 1970's and occasional conflict with regional separatist groups, there was never a serious internal threat to Thailand's stability. Consequently the Thais enjoyed a comparative unity, reinforced by their ancient reverence for the monarchy and the Buddhist faith.

During the 1960's Thailand seemed to many observers in the U.S. to be more impervious to communist ideology than most countries in Southeast Asia. Still, no one imagined that the Thais could defend themselves alone, especially if communism triumphed in Indochina. Thus, the rationale for American intervention in Thailand was simple. Fearing the "loss" of all Southeast Asia, the United States had an opportunity to gain a strategic foothold and potentially valuable ally in a country that did not seem inclined towards communism. Officials in Washington saw in Thailand a chance to shore up the region against communist advances, without necessarily having to commit American military power to the extent required in Vietnam. Moreover, Thailand became the chief
base of covert operations and bombing missions throughout Indochina; it was indispensable to the American war effort there and a major player in United States foreign policy in Southeast Asia.

While Washington's motivations were simple enough, Bangkok's were somewhat more complex. The Thais guarded their independence jealously, and were rightfully proud of having avoided being absorbed into much more powerful colonial empires. Thai foreign policy was historically likened to the bamboo in the wind: always solidly rooted, but flexible enough to bend whichever way it had to in order to survive. This reflected not mere pragmatism, but rather a long-cherished, philosophical approach to international relations, whose precepts were very much enshrined in Thai culture and religion.  

Although the Thais had in the past entered into diplomatic pacts with foreign powers, they were extremely careful to avoid anything more than temporary arrangements. Formal alliances of any kind were infrequent in Thai history, and Thais considered the stationing of even friendly foreign troops on their soil a serious affront to their independence.

Consequently, the close association with the United States from the late 1950's through to the mid-1970's had a very dramatic effect on Thailand. Political, economic, and even cultural aspects of Thai life were greatly influenced by external relations. With the support of successive U.S. administrations, the military came to dominate government in Thailand after World War Two.

While military authoritarianism most definitely had its roots in Thai political culture, irrespective of American influence, the fact remains that U.S. economic and military aid after World War II solidified the position of the Thai armed forces in politics. Thus the American containment policy

---


12 Aside from periodic invasions throughout the centuries, the most notable example of foreign military presence in Thailand was from 1941 to 1945, when Japanese troops occupied positions throughout much of the country. This is further discussed in Chapter One.

and military authoritarianism in Thailand were inextricably linked, and as the 1950's and 1960's unfolded, mutually reinforcing.

Despite their success in avoiding European imperialism, after World War II the Thais were faced with an ever more challenging world order. Like the rest of Southeast Asia, Thailand now found itself part of the struggle for dominance between "superpowers." Its own stake in this rivalry were high. Communism threatened not only the country, but also the Thai way of life. In their advocacy of violence, revolution, and atheism, communists represented the antithesis of Thai cultural traditions; and while the internal communist threat was often exaggerated in Bangkok, this incompatibility was undeniably a crucial factor leading to the informal Thai-American alliance that developed after 1945.

The spread of communism in Indochina in the 1960's reinforced and intensified the U.S.-Thai relationship. Although communism never enjoyed more than a marginal following in the country, the Thai military was particularly adept at using this threat to its own advantage. Successful government propaganda convinced many Thais by the mid-1960's that communism elsewhere in Asia posed a real and imminent danger to them. However, the threat to Thailand was not simply a "bogeyman" created by Bangkok. With communism threatening in Laos, Vietnam, Burma, and Malaya, it seemed to many Thais that their country was next on the "timetable" for a communist take-over. Consequently, most Thais accepted military rule as necessary in protecting the country from communist aggression. Unquestionably this undermined the development of western-style democracy in the near term, but it also provided the stability that promoted the economic development upon which the motivation for democratic reforms which surfaced by the mid-1970's was contingent.

In the context of the 1960's, closer ties with the United States seemed only logical, and entirely consistent with the "bamboo" nature of Thai diplomacy. Thais believed that the Americans had
successfully fought the spread of communism in Korea, and that they were dedicated to the rejuvenation of Japan as an industrial and democratic power. In the late 1940's the U.S. stood firm in the face of Soviet machinations in Germany, Greece, Iran and elsewhere. Throughout the 1950's, Washington made it clear that the U.S. would protect Taiwan, and when the French withdrew in humiliation from Indochina, the Americans seemed willing and able to take over. Moreover, the American dedication to freedom and liberty was greatly admired by most Thais, who considered themselves "democratic" despite their military government.¹⁴ In a much less idealistic vein, the Thais also saw the United States as a land of inexhaustible wealth and opportunity. Many realized that their economic situation was likely to improve substantially in any closer association with such a prosperous and generous country. They believed that national security would facilitate prosperity, which in turn would allow for the development of a more pluralistic polity. In contrast, Thai military leaders were unconcerned with fostering greater democracy. Rather, they saw an association with Washington as a bulwark against communism, as a source of personal financial gain, and as a means of legitimising their authoritarian rule.

It was not just communism *per se* that concerned Thais. More than anything, Thai motivations were shaped by the fact that communist insurgency was inextricably linked to a familiar and formidable adversary. Like the rest of Southeast Asia, Thailand lived in the shadow of China. Ancient Siam had been a vassal to the Chinese Emperor up until the 19th century, and the spectre of Chinese domination was a very real part of Thai history. From the early 19th century until 1949, China was a sleeping dragon weakened by the domination of foreign powers and civil strife. The communist victory in China awakened the dragon. The communists were able to unify China

---

politicallv after decades of internal strife. More importantly, from the Thai point of view, Chinese communism appeared bent on expansion. Intervention in Korea seemed only the most glaring illustration of Chinese aggression. Most Thais believed it was the Chinese, and not so much the Soviets, who were behind supposedly indigenous communist movements throughout Southeast Asia. A large, closely knit and affluent ethnic Chinese community in Thailand only added to the fear that Beijing was acting out an ancient impulse to dominate the region. In this view, although communism was a dangerous commodity on its own, it was also considered a "banner" behind which the old Chinese dragon spread its wings.

The intimate relationship between Washington's struggle to contain communism in Southeast Asia and the entrenchment of military government in Bangkok is key to understanding U.S.-Thai relations since 1945. That successive American administrations actively supported a corrupt, undemocratic and frequently repressive Thai military is indisputable. So too is the fact that in return for extensive military and economic aid the Thais risked their traditional diplomatic flexibility, and in so doing exposed their society and culture to an unprecedented degree of foreign influence.

While few Thais would today deny that nearly three decades of close association with the United States from 1945 to 1975 laid the groundwork for much of the economic growth Thailand enjoys today, many also see American influence during this period as contributing to the erosion of their cultural values. While there is room for debate about the extent to which American influence is responsible for such problems as corruption or the sex and drug trade in present-day Thailand, there is little doubt that this thirty year span represents a watershed in Thai history.

---


The 1960's in particular stand out as a decade of considerable importance for the country. As the United States became more militarily entangled in Southeast Asia, Thailand entered into a de facto alliance with its superpower patron, and anxiously collaborated with the Americans in the fight against communism. For the Thais this meant risking the wrath of North Vietnam and especially China. It meant not only contributing to the defense of their own country with the aid of the U.S., but also assisting in the prosecution of the American war in Vietnam and Laos.

Throughout the 1960's the Thais were closely and extensively associated with the Americans in myriad ways. Thai military and police units actively supported covert CIA activities in Burma and Laos; the same units benefited from the training given by American advisers in conducting their own operations in Cambodia. As they did during the Korean War, Thai soldiers fought side-by-side with Americans in Vietnam. Newly constructed air bases throughout Thailand allowed the U.S. to carry out the majority of its bombing runs against the North with comparative ease. And even when large segments of the American people and the international community rejected Washington's policy in Southeast Asia, the Thai government remained a vocal supporter.

In this way, both Thailand and the United States faced great changes in the 1960's that were at least in part shaped by the conflict in Indochina. Just as Lyndon Johnson's political fortunes were contingent on success in Vietnam, the fortunes of the military government in Bangkok were heavily dependent on Washington's ability to effectively defend Southeast Asia. After all, the advance of communism throughout Southeast Asia was a principal justification for authoritarianism in Thailand. Moreover, so long as the U.S. maintained its high profile in the region, the Thai military and civilian elite profited from the massive infusion of American dollars.

While a close relationship with the U.S. became the predominant feature of Thai foreign policy during the 1960's, Thailand did not become an American vassal. In the early part of the decade Washington seemed uncertain how to combat the communists in Southeast Asia. The Kennedy
administration agonized over the deteriorating political and military situation in Laos, eventually opting for the so-called "neutralist solution." Thai leaders took this as a sign of weakness, and thus doubted American resolve in combating communism with force in Indochina. Consequently, the Thais took every opportunity to encourage more assistance from Washington. For its part, the U.S. needed Thailand's support if there was to be any lasting solution in Laos, which had become ravaged by civil strife and cold war conflict. More importantly, the U.S. needed a Thai commitment to uphold the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), which served as a multilateral framework to further American political and military power in the region.

Neither John F. Kennedy nor Lyndon B. Johnson was enthusiastic about entering into a formal security pact with Thailand. They foresaw considerable difficulties with congressional leaders and the American public, who were already concerned with the over-extension of U.S. commitments in the world and particularly Southeast Asia. The military government in Bangkok, while it pushed for a binding agreement, eventually recognized the contrary pressures that American decision-makers confronted, especially once U.S. troops were sent to Vietnam. So the Thais had to remain satisfied with less formal verbal security guarantees from Washington, realizing that whether or not a formal alliance existed, the U.S. would defend them. By the mid-1960's it was simply impossible for the U.S. to abandon Thailand without jeopardizing its overall military and political position in Southeast Asia. Knowing this, Bangkok acquiesced to virtually all American requests in preparing for military action in North Vietnam. In doing so, the Thais believed they were securing their country from a creeping invasion from China or Vietnam. Notwithstanding Washington's hesitancy to add its formal commitments in Southeast Asia, Thai military leaders realized that the United States needed them as much as they needed it. As a result, Thailand was able to exact a much higher price for its part in a reciprocal relationship with the U.S. than was usually the case for developing states. By pointedly reminding American officials of Thailand's strategic importance, or hinting that any
American withdrawal from Indochina might force a "re-evaluation" of their foreign policy direction, the Thais exercised considerable leverage on Washington. And what they did not get in the formal bilateral security commitment they desired, they more than made up for in military and economic aid.

At the end of 1968 Thailand remained a valuable U.S. ally, but Thai leaders, increasingly uncertain of the steadfastness and likely success of the American military commitment in Vietnam, displayed more frequent signs of reconsidering their one-sided pro-American orientation. By the end of the decade, when it became apparent that the U.S. military was losing in Vietnam, and would soon withdraw, the government in Bangkok changed course too; it bent its foreign policy with the new winds in Southeast Asia towards a peaceful accommodation with China and Vietnam.

Even though the U.S. had begun to withdraw from the region by the mid-1970's, Thailand succeeded in strengthening its defense against all but a massive invasion. Internal insurgency was more or less eradicated, and the economic progress of the country was virtually guaranteed thanks to American aid. Moreover, just as the Nixon administration sought a rapprochement with China, so too did the Thais, setting out on a path which eventually led to a remarkable unwritten alliance with their erstwhile foe against communist-controlled Vietnam. Thus, by the mid-1970's, while domestic political freedoms remained a question, Thailand had secured itself against the falling dominoes elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Despite the traumatic failures it suffered in Indochina, the United States succeeded in its relationship with Thailand. The U.S. military withdrew from Thailand altogether by 1975, and although the departure came amidst considerable anti-American sentiment, Bangkok remained on mostly friendly terms with Washington. Economic development became the national passion, and in this regard the Americans and their allies were once again to be fondly regarded. Therefore, the U.S. maintained an important friend in Southeast Asia, having paid less a price than in losing causes
elsewhere in the region. Thailand avoided the communism that swallowed up its neighbours, while the U.S. enjoyed one considerable foreign policy success among a string of disasters.
Part One

From Elephants to Advisers:  
The United States and Thailand to 1962
*CHAPTER ONE*

"The Long River's Run: Thai-American Relations to 1961"

With the Union Army bogged down in the Potomac Valley during the winter of 1862, Abraham Lincoln could have used all the help possible to bring the Civil War to a successful conclusion. Among the more curious propositions he received was an offer of war elephants from King Mongkut (Phra Chom Klao or Rama IV, 1851-1868) of Siam. While the beleaguered President may have happily contemplated the spectre of bull elephants in full armour crashing the Confederate lines, he graciously declined the Thai king's gift. It would be a problem, Lincoln said, because "our political jurisdiction does not reach a latitude so low as to favour the multiplication of the elephant."\(^1\)

Mongkut's offer is not just an amusing anecdote. In many ways it symbolizes the affinity many Thais then felt, and still feel, with Americans. Although it was not until the post-World War Two era that the two nations developed anything more than a casual relationship, there had traditionally been a friendship between the two people. Like a long river, U.S.-Thai relations meandered for more than a century before reaching a confluence of common interests in Southeast Asia. This chapter will examine the historic course of U.S.-Thai relations, and, in particular, the creation of an informal anti-communist alliance during the decade and a half after the end of the Second World War.

The Thai attitude towards Americans has never been exclusively based on admiration. For example, King Mongkut sensed that the United States represented a new political and military force, and that despite the agony of its civil war, it could emerge as a powerful and important nation in the world. Since his kingdom was caught between French and British spheres of interest in Southeast

---

Asia, such a friend could be a valuable asset. Mongkut was intent on building upon the commercial arrangements negotiated with the United States during the reign of his half-brother, Phra Nang Klao (Rama III), from 1824 to 1851. These were essentially the first formal contacts between the two nations, and represented a considerable departure from the self-imposed isolation of the kingdom. In 1834, diplomatic relations between the two countries were established - the first for the United States with an East Asian nation, ten years before formal relations were established with China and twenty before Japan.  

The success of the British in China during the Opium War (1839–42) demonstrated the strength of aggressive European expansionism, while simultaneously exposing the weakness of dynastic rule in Asia. Mongkut, who is often viewed as Siam's first "modern king", was convinced that the only way to protect Siamese independence against such pressure was to play upon the competition between Western nations. His approaches to the West, and particularly the United States, represented a major turning point for the country. Attempting to cultivate better ties with the British and to thwart the extension of French interests from Indochina, Mongkut agreed to the Bowring Treaty of 1855, which gave the British extraordinary economic and territorial rights in Siam. To create a counter-balance, Mongkut initiated overtures to the U.S., which culminated in a

---

2 Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 166-180. The Siamese were extremely wary of opening up their market to the West for fear of losing their independence. For nearly a year between 1832 and 1833, Rama III kept a British mission at bay, uncomfortable with the extension of British power in neighbouring Burma. Early in 1833, U.S. President Andrew Jackson sent Edmund Roberts to Siam at the head of an American trade delegation. Seizing the opportunity to offset British pressure, Rama III concluded a commercial treaty with Roberts in just a few weeks. See also Virginia Thompson, Thailand: The New Siam (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1941), 29-32.

3 Thompson, Thailand: The New Siam, 34.

4 Ibid, 37. After twenty-seven years as a monk, Mongkut came to the throne as the first monarch conversant in Western languages, including English. Despite a generally conservative bent, he is regarded by some scholars as a "reformer" in Thai history. Mongkut is best known as the main character in the book The King and I, by the English governess Mrs. Leonowens. By almost all historical accounts, the book is very loosely based on the actual relationship between the two. The movie version, released in 1960 starring Yul Brenner as the King, was banned in Thailand. The portrayal of Mongkut singing, dancing polkas and patting the Buddha's head was, as the U.S. Ambassador to Thailand at the time said, "the rough equivalent of spitting and trampling on the cross." See U. Alexis Johnson with Jef Olivarius McAllister, The Right Hand of Power (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1984), 311.
"Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Commerce and Navigation" signed in 1856. Although trade between the two countries flourished briefly in the late 1850's, it fell dramatically during the American Civil War, and remained relatively modest for nearly a century thereafter. But even in the absence of a strong commercial connection, Mongkut and his successor, Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910), still regarded the U.S. as a very good friend. American influence continued to affect Siam, mostly through the work of missionaries and volunteer medical teams. In 1880 the U.S. diplomatic mission in Siam was upgraded to a legation, again a first for American representation in Asia. Economic and even political advisers from the U.S. had a prominent place at the royal court, informally implicating the United States in the rivalry between France and Britain in the region.

Chulalongkorn is widely regarded as one of Siam's greatest kings. During his forty-two year reign he undertook substantial economic and bureaucratic reforms, centralized political authority, made Bangkok the administrative centre of the country, and developed a more modern and largely Western-trained military. But the defeat of France during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) stimulated Siamese nationalism, and encouraged Chulalongkorn to invade disputed territories held by the French but long claimed as part of his kingdom. War with the French in 1893 proved disastrous for the Siamese, quickly putting an end to their irredentism. Both France and Britain guaranteed Siam's integrity with an agreement in 1896 designed to establish a buffer between their respective Asian empires. However, after the clash with France a new sense of vigour arose in Siam which translated into an aggressive, and dangerous, nationalism. Japan's crushing defeat of Russia

5 Sunchart, United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule, 1947-1977, 18
6 Ibid, 19-20. This followed shortly after a visit to Siam by former U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant in 1879, an occasion marked by official celebration and rich pageantry.
7 Thompson, Thailand: The New Siam, 40-43.
8 Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 199-208. Throughout the 1870's and 1880's, Siam challenged French suzerainty in Laos, even discreetly backing Indochinese rebels in their fight against colonial rule.
during the Russo-Japanese War (1905) demonstrated that European powers were not invincible. Many Siamese came to regard Japan as a model to follow in the process of modernization.9

For nearly four decades during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Prince Devawongse (1858-1923) dominated Siamese external relations. He carefully adhered to the "bamboo in the wind" philosophy at a time when the western imperial powers and expansionist Japan were extending their spheres of interest and possessions in Asia. In these circumstances, he cultivated the goodwill of the United States, a nation whose interests in Asia were limited and whose objectives appeared relatively benign. Devawongse initiated numerous attempts to increase ties with the U.S. While the U.S. avoided a direct political role in the country, its informal influence increased. American advisors played an ever larger part at the royal court, while cultural and intellectual influence intensified.

The signing of the Entente Cordiale between France and Britain in 1904 ushered in an unprecedented era of cooperation between the two powers which had dire consequences for the Siamese. Both powers made increased territorial and economic demands on the kingdom, forcing Siam to cede nearly 500,000 square kilometres of land along the southern border with Malaya and in the east with Cambodia.10 This substantially decreased government revenues, while increasing the debt accrued through foreign loans. Moreover, European aggression stimulated more Siamese nationalism, dividing the leadership and challenging the existing domestic political order.

The situation worsened with the death of Chulalongkorn in 1910. His successor, Vajiravudh (Rama VI, 1910-1925), was not widely popular, nor was he as successful an administrator as Chulalongkorn. Nationalistic sentiments continued to flourish during his reign, and Siamese society became more polarized between the masses and the elite. Under Prince Devawongse's guidance, Vajiravudh was more successful in foreign matters. Although Siam had little to do with the affairs of

9 Thompson, Thailand: The New Siam, 44.
10 Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 206-208.
Europe and proclaimed itself neutral when hostilities broke out in 1914, it declared war on the Central Powers in July 1917 - shortly after the entry of the United States. Sensing an Allied victory and realizing that the risks involved were negligible, Siam saw its belligerency as an opportunity to demonstrate its modernity and to improve its standing with Britain and France, the two western nations which it viewed with the greatest anxiety. Entering the war also meant an opportunity to participate in the peace conference in Paris, where Siamese delegates lobbied extensively to end extra-territorial rights held by the British and French.\textsuperscript{11}

Although the Siamese delegates were unsuccessful at Paris, shortly after the conference U.S. President Woodrow Wilson renounced American extra-territorial rights in Siam. Moreover, he sent his son-in-law, Harvard professor Francis B. Sayre to Europe, to pressure the British and French to follow suit. Sayre failed in this mission (the British and French retained their extra-territorial rights until 1927), but afterwards became a legal and political adviser to the Siamese, as well as a formidable advocate on their behalf in the U.S. and Europe. The association of Sayre and other American lobbyists with their cause greatly enhanced U.S. prestige among the Siamese.\textsuperscript{12} During the inter-war period, there were numerous cultural and economic exchanges between the two nations, which deepened the influence of American ideas. Underscoring the importance of the Americans, King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, 1925-1935) visited the U.S. in 1930, becoming the first Siamese monarch in history to travel overseas.

Prajadhipok had succeeded Variratudth upon the latter's death in 1925. He was young, inexperienced, and heavily dependent on his advisers, particularly Sayre. Uncertain in his leadership, the King reacted slowly to a growing democracy movement that pressed for faster and more widespread reform. Leading the drive was a small group of influential Siamese who had studied

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 226-230.
abroad during the 1920's, mainly in Britain and France, and who formed part of a new intelligentsia in Siam. The world-wide depression of the 1930s shook Siam considerably. The government was left with no money with which to pay foreign creditors, and no purchasing power to obtain imports. The King slashed the size of the civil service, partly to reduce expenditures but also to undercut the strength of the bureaucracy. His action aggravated an already tenuous relationship between the monarchy and the elite. As a result of pressure from the bureaucracy, the King was forced to accept what essentially amounted to a "bloodless revolution" in June 1932. This effectively ended the absolute monarchy and began a new era in Siamese history.13

The revolution did little to bridge cleavages within Siamese society. With nationalism on the rise, these divisions precipitated a major crisis in 1933. In October, conservative royalists staged a coup aimed at emasculating the bureaucracy and the fledgling democracy movement. The "Boworadet Rebellion" was put down by the Siamese army, giving the military additional popular support while further diminishing that of the monarchy. Disgraced, Prajadhipok left Siam in 1934 and abdicated the throne the following year. The new monarch, Prajadhipok's nephew, Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII, 1935-1946), ruled in name only, living in exile in Switzerland during his tenure. The country was run by the regency of a new "civilian" government under the "People's Party", a reformist popular front coalition. In fact, the army was the power behind the scenes. Despite the fact that Ananda was no more than a symbolic leader during his eleven year reign, few Siamese wanted to end the monarchy or establish a republic.14

Despite its triumph, the People's Party could not remain united. Ideological and personal differences emerged almost immediately. Central to these divisions was the struggle between army

and liberal-civilian factions, headed respectively by Plaek Kittasangkha (*Luang Plaek Phibun Songkhram*, or Phibun) and Pridi Phanomyong. Their rivalry dominated Siamese politics into the late 1940's. The two men started out as friends, both studying in France during the 1920's and both part of the "radical" group that inspired the 1932 revolution. Phibun was a military officer by profession. Outwardly reserved and renowned for an unpretentious charm, he was also calculating and ambitious. His leadership skills were indisputable, and his popularity was enormous. Pridi, a lawyer, was the architect of much of the People's Party platform, but he soon appeared to many as being far too left-leaning for the Siamese polity.15 Gifted and articulate, he was sincerely committed to democracy, although frequently harsh in his methods. Older conservative elements within the bureaucracy and military were wary of Pridi's charisma and his considerable intellectual ability. Shadowy royalists attempted to portray him as a communist. However, he had the support of many Siamese, and so long as he maintained a working relationship with Phibun, Pridi survived the opposition to him.

Between 1935 and 1938 there was a shaky equilibrium between the two men. Pridi acted as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, while Phibun held the Defence portfolio. Despite their pretensions to the contrary, few Siamese leaders understood much about either democracy (*pracatthipatai*) or constitutionalism (*ratthabammanun*). In fact, many Siamese came to sympathize with authoritarian regimes in Europe and Japan. The extreme nationalism and anti-Western sentiment of the Japanese was particularly appealing to those who remembered British and French designs on Siam. Consequently, little in the way of democratic reform was accomplished. Instead, Siamese politics were in almost constant turmoil, aggravated by the Depression and the apparent weakness of Western democracies in the face of totalitarianism. The outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 meant

---

that French and British territorial pressures on Siam were greatly reduced, and the startling initial success of the German military only fostered more sympathy for authoritarianism. The Japanese advance in Asia after the start of the European war was at first seen by many Siamese as a victory over European colonialism. Nationalism in Siam reached a furious pitch, prompting Phibun to assume a dictatorial approach to government. In many ways he tried emulate the dictators of Europe, adopting a "new nationalism" (sang chat) under whose banner he consolidated his power. He renamed the country Thailand, asserting that Siam was too "colonial." He even proclaimed himself the "Thai Fuhrer." 16

Nationalism was by no means a new development in Thailand, but combined with the rise in anti-western sentiment and admiration for the militaristic powers, it signalled the start of a crucial new era in Thai history. Phibun skillfully played the nationalist card. He portrayed himself as the "defender" of Thai culture and built up a considerable cult following. 17 By mid-1940, he had arrested most of his political opponents, and assumed full control of the government. Surprisingly, Pridi stayed on with his friend. He even tacitly approved some of the Prime Minister’s brutal measures. 18 By 1940, Thailand’s relations with the Allied nations were badly strained. Phibun had established personal contacts with Japanese military officials, clearly anticipating, and even welcoming, the rise of Japan as an Asian power. Friendship with the Japanese meant that the Thais

16 Like Adolf Hitler, Phibun used a scapegoat to draw attention away from the economic and political problems of his country. Because of their historic domination of small business in the region, ethnic Chinese were an easy and popular target. Severe limits on Chinese language education and newspapers were followed by taxes on the commercial class, alien registration fees, and the restriction of certain occupations to Thais only. Phibun restructured several sectors of the national economy, forming state corporations which would compete more effectively with Chinese businesses. See Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 252-254.

17 Craig J. Reynolds, National Identity and Its Defenders (Thailand, 1939-1989) (Monash Papers on Southeast Asia #25) (Clayton, Australia Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1991), 7-13. Phibun’s "Twelve Cultural Mandates" defined Thai culture as he saw it, setting guidelines on everything from dress to language. Having survived several assassination attempts, there was also an aura of invincibility about him. Moreover, he adroitly manipulated the media, which portrayed him as a great leader.

18 E. Bruce Reynolds, "Ambivalent Allies: Japan and Thailand, 1941-1945" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawai‘i, 1988), 51. A good example of this was Pridi’s silence when Phibun had a group of eighteen royals and political opponents executed in 1939. Many more were imprisoned on remote Tarutao Island.
would have a powerful ally in their long-standing territorial disputes with adjacent British and French colonies.

The fall of France to German troops in the summer of 1940 sent Thailand down the path to war. Japanese forces took the opportunity to occupy parts of French Indochina, giving them a strategic foothold in Southeast Asia. Phibun saw a chance to redress border issues with the French colonies once and for all, and with the moral support of the Japanese, in November 1940 Thai forces invaded Laos and Cambodia. The French and British were furious, although they could not do much. Washington responded by halting the sale of aircraft to Thailand, an embargo which was extended in early 1941 to cover petrol. Not deterred, the Thai army advanced deep into the disputed territories, eventually gaining control of much of western Cambodia.\(^\text{19}\) The Thai navy was not nearly as successful against the French in action in the Gulf of Thailand, but with the intervention of Japan as "mediator" after a few months, hostilities with France quickly ended.

Thai-Japanese relations did not continue on such good terms, however. During 1941 many Thais came to view the Japanese as a potential threat. Japan's bloody campaign in China shocked and worried many Southeast Asians, who feared a similar fate if they opposed Japan. Prominent politicians such as Pridi had long favoured reconciliation with France and Britain, even if it meant negotiating concessions gained after the Franco-Thai War. The Japanese drive south was obviously headed towards British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, and the Thais knew that in the event of war between Japan and the West, their country was a likely battleground.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked the U.S. at Pearl Harbour, and simultaneously launched assaults on Allied positions throughout Asia and the Pacific. In Bangkok, Japan's Ambassador called upon the Thai government to allow passage of Japanese troops through the country, en route to operations against Malaya and Burma. With Phibun temporarily away, Foreign

---


25
Minister Direk Jayanama refused the demand, prompting the Japanese forces in Indochina to invade Thailand the next day. The British army in Malaya offered to help the Thais fight a defensive action, but when British troops moved towards the Thai frontier, disoriented border police opened fire. Inexperienced and confused, Thai forces were in no position to hold off the Japanese. Quickly returning to Bangkok, Phibun ordered them to stop fighting on December 9. In exchange, the Japanese promised that Thai independence would be recognized. Three days later, either believing that Japan would win the war or seeing very little alternative, Phibun signed a military alliance with Tokyo. On January 25, 1942, Thailand declared war on Britain and the United States.

Thai-Japanese relations during World War II remain a topic of considerable debate among historians. Some contend that Thailand was not simply a "little brown brother" to Japan, but rather a "co-participant" in the fight against western colonialism. After all, Thailand was the only independent state in the Japanese domain. Moreover, after spirited fighting against the British in 1941-42, the Thais were given four Malay states and the Shan provinces of northeastern Burma as a

---

20 Terwiel, Field Marshal Plaek Pibul Songkhram, 19.
reward. However, despite avoiding an outright occupation by Japanese troops, Thailand was hardly in a position to choose sides. Its course of action was severely limited, and the one chosen by Phibun was not very popular at all. Throughout the war, sympathy for the Allies intensified, and when the tide turned against Japan, so too did the Thai public against Phibun. In July 1944, less than a week after the fall of Hideki Tojo's government in Tokyo, Phibun was forced by the National Assembly to resign.

The new Prime Minister was Khuan Aphaiwong, a "neutral" selection who favoured attempts at reconciling the differences between the Phibun and Pridi/Seni factions. Most Thais realized that in fact the course of the nation would be set by the soon-to-be victorious Allies, and so both sides tried to win favour with the British and Americans even before the war was over. Based on his pre-war credentials and war-time conduct, Pridi was far more successful than Phibun. He and Seni enlisted the help of the Allies for the Free Thai. Not only were the Free Thai viewed as the de facto government of Thailand in exile, but the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) trained Free Thai troops in China. The Americans gave intelligence and logistical support for infiltration through Burma into Thailand, and when Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed the Free Thai movement one of liberation, it was evident which side international opinion favoured.

---

22 Ibid.
24 Charivat, *Thai Foreign Policy 1932-1946*, 280-330. To his credit, late in the war Phibun ordered his troops not to fight against the Free Thai. Phibun tried to distance himself from the Japanese, and by many accounts he quietly did all he could to oppose them. For Phibun's own defence of his war-time policies, see "Cooperation With and Resistance Against Japan During the War", in Thak, *Thai Politics: Extracts and Documents, 1932-1957*, 348-370.
26 Sogn, "Successful Journey: A History of U.S.-Thai Relations, 1932-1945", 9-11. Clarifying the U.S. position on Thailand, in August 1943 Secretary of State Cordell Hull stated that,"[T]he U.S. recognises Thailand as an independent state which is now under the military occupation of Japan...This Government... has continued to recognize as "Minister of Thailand" the Thai Minister in Washington, who has denounced his Government's cooperation with Japan." See also Adulyasak, "The Rise of U.S.-Thai Relations, 1945-1975", 17.
Despite the success of the Free Thai in getting Allied support, Pridi worried about post-war Allied plans for Southeast Asia. The British and French could be expected to demand much in light of Thailand's aggression. The Commander of British forces in Asia, Lord Louis Mountbatten, indicated that he would retake all the territories seized in Burma and Malaya. There were even suggestions that the British army might just take all of Thailand too. Pridi was thus dependent on the United States to keep Britain at bay. Public support in the U.S. for the Free Thai was strong, especially given the success of Seni Pramoj in convincing Americans that Phibun had acted "illegally." Pridi and Seni were determined to portray themselves as Thailand's only for hope for democracy, and insisted that they would deliver political reform if the country remained independent. In early August 1945, Pridi renounced all war-time gains and deals. He followed that up with an offer of 50,000 "guerillas" to help fight the Japanese elsewhere in Asia. Washington responded by categorising Thailand as "enemy occupied", and therefore needing to be "liberated", not punished.

The British were unmoved. They did not officially recognize the Free Thai movement as a government in exile, and essentially viewed Thailand as an enemy. Such a policy would allow the British to extend their influence in Southeast Asia through economic and territorial demands. However, at the end of the war it was quickly evident that the international order had changed dramatically, and that the British were in no position to challenge the dominance of their American allies. It was also clear that Washington had plans of its own for the region, and that the U.S. was determined to cultivate its renewed friendship with a "liberated" Thailand. American advisers in Bangkok counselled the Thais to avoid entering into any agreements with the British under

pressure, and the U.S. State Department actively championed Thailand in difficult negotiations.\(^\text{28}\) Without question, Washington's intervention to moderate British demands solidified the Thai view of the U.S. as their most trusted friend. Moreover, the position taken by Washington in the early post-war years demonstrated the importance that country had in U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. The Truman administration did not do much to oppose the return of European colonialism to the region, but it definitely sensed that in the Thais the U.S. could have a valuable and strategic ally in the future.

The external pressures on Thailand were by no means the only threat to its stability in the post-war era. Domestic political turmoil proved to be an even greater danger. Phibun was tried as a war criminal, but the Thai Supreme Court ruled that the charges were being applied retroactively under new laws, and were therefore unconstitutional. He was released in April 1946, with a surprising majority of public support in favour of the ruling. Phibun's exoneration would have significant consequences for Thailand's future. In January 1946 open, non-partisan parliamentary elections took place, followed by the promulgation of a relatively more liberal constitution. But Khuang resigned as Prime Minister just before another election to fill the remaining seats in parliament was held that August. This marked an open split with Pridi and his followers which led to the formation of distinct political parties. Despite his success in garnishing a majority of seats in the August election, Pridi's rift with Khuang had disastrous long-term effects by dividing those who opposed

---

\(^{28}\) Ibid, 26-32. In September 1945, Mountbatten presented Britain's "Twenty-One Demands" to the Thais. In addition to the right to station troops in Thailand, the British demanded full property restitution and the restoration of special legal rights. To ease food shortages elsewhere in the Empire, London also attached a claim for 1.5 million tons of Thai rice. With regard to such demands, the American Commissioner in India warned the State Department that "...U.S. prestige will be severely impaired and U.S. goodwill in Thailand sacrificed to the detriment of American overall policies toward Asia and the Pacific." (27) In turn, the State Department lodged several complaints with the British government. Assistant Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, even threatened that the U.S. would resume diplomatic ties with Thailand unilaterally if Britain persisted. In January 1946, an agreement was finally reached in which the Thais compensated for most British economic losses. In exchange, London agreed to support Thailand's territorial integrity and its bid for a seat at the United Nations. French demands for the return of territory in Indochina taken by the Thais during the war were met by early 1947. Paris also agreed to back admission of Thailand at the UN as a result. See also Hess, *The United States Emergence As a Southeast Asian Power, 1940-1950*, 254-261.
the return of a military government. Moreover, since Pridi himself was now at the forefront of Thai politics, he bore the brunt of criticism for the country's problems.

Economic difficulties, corruption, and personal animosities complicated the situation, but it took the mysterious death of King Ananda in June 1946 to shake the foundations of the Thai polity. Although the exact circumstances surrounding the incident have never been fully revealed, royalist forces at the time were quick to suspect that Pridi and his republican supporters had a hand in it. Following Ananda's death, conservative and royalist groups coalesced against the government, and managed to gain the crucial support of the military. Under such pressure, Pridi resigned as Prime Minister in August, and took an extended leave abroad. In the wake of his departure, the military began its move back to centre stage. The new coalition government under Luang Tamrong Nawasawat was weak, and unable to bridge widening political divisions. To many Thais, the only solution to the chaos and division in the country was a return to military rule.

Pridi returned to Thailand in the summer of 1947, but he did not fade into political oblivion. Instead, he was instrumental in the formation of the "Southeast Asia League", which served as a forum for regional, anti-colonial movements. Supporting nationalists in Laos, Vietnam, and Burma exposed the organisation and Pridi to charges of being pro-communist. Such allegations resonated with the conservatism of many Thais, who feared that the internal struggles enveloping neighbouring states would spread to their own. Moreover, the accusation against Pridi was an effective means of justifying a "purge" of Thai politics. The military made its move in a coup in November 1947, defending its action as necessary in order to "stabilize" the country. Realizing that

30 Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 263. The King was shot through the head. Investigations conducted by both Thai and foreign (American and British) examiners concluded that it was likely an accidental shooting, after the King's younger brother (and successor as monarch), Bhumipol, mishandled a weapon. For obvious political reasons, this information was withheld, unfortunately only adding to suspicions about Pridi's involvement. Although the government hurriedly executed three alleged suspects, the public widely assumed Pridi was to some degree responsible for the murder based on his previous disagreements with the monarchy under Prajadhipok.
31 Nuechterlein, Thailand and the Struggle For Southeast Asia, 50-59.
it would not receive international, and particularly, American support, the *khana ratthaparan* (or "Coup Group") set up former Prime Minister Khuang at the head of a puppet civilian government. Real control, however, clearly rested with the army's command corps.\(^2\) Fearing for his life, Pridi managed to flee Bangkok on a Shell Oil tanker with the assistance of American and British naval attachés. However his followers were not so fortunate, and many were imprisoned or forced into exile in the weeks following the coup. Even the heroes of the Free Thai movement were rooted out, suspected of being Pridi sympathizers.

Phibun was not actually involved in the coup, but the attention he received in the Thai press immediately before and after suggest that the military had him in mind when searching for a suitable alternative to civilian government. In fact, in the weeks preceding the coup, several statements by Phibun served as a "trial balloon" to gauge American and British attitudes towards developments in Bangkok. The lack of response from Washington in particular may have been interpreted by the Thai military as acquiescence on the part of the U.S. While it is true that the Truman administration did not necessarily approve of the return of military government in Thailand, Pridi was not exactly a favourite either, given his leftist leanings.\(^3\) In the days after the November coup, the Thais waited anxiously for an American response. No word of censure was heard from Washington. The State Department feared that a civil war would ensue if the U.S. did not endorse the new government. Although clearly not ideal, the military-backed government seemed to promise comparatively efficient and stable leadership. Moreover, with rumours circulating that Pridi was planning a counter move with the aid of local ethnic Chinese communists, Washington could ill afford to oppose the coup.

\(^2\) Fineman, "The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958", 46-47, 65. The Coup Group represented about 40 junior officers, but it was dominated by four senior commanders. At least part of the army's animosity towards Pridi was rooted in traditional rivalry between the army and navy. The latter service was generally the career choice of elite, well-educated Thais, while the army was staffed by more "ordinary" men. Between 1944 and 1946, Pridi increased the budget of the navy by 50 percent, while decreasing that of the army by about 40 percent.

In elections held in January 1948, Khuang's Democrat Party won a narrow majority in the National Assembly. Less than three months into his term, Khuang was forced to resign by the military after he interpreted his electoral victory as a mandate for a reformist agenda. Given the lack of response from Washington during the November crisis, the Coup Group was confident that they had the Truman administration's tacit approval for Khuang's ouster. Once again the State Department refrained from any challenge to the military's actions. On April 8, 1948, Phibun was again named Prime Minister.

The events of 1947-48 marked the return of authoritarianism in Thailand, ushering in over forty years of military-dominated government. American policy was unquestionably a major factor in the return of military rule. In part, Washington's acquiescence was the result of infighting within the State Department, but it was also the case that senior officials had little interest in Thailand. Given the dawn of the Cold War in Europe, attention was obviously focused elsewhere. The Southeast Asian Division was one of newest wings of the State Department, and occasionally lacked direction. Moreover, co-ordinating policy between Washington and the American mission in Bangkok was a daunting task. But nationalist movements elsewhere in the region also influenced the U.S. An anti-colonial surge swept across Asia after World War II, giving rise to fighting in Burma, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, Indochina, and the Philippines. While professedly in favour of dismantling the colonial system, Washington faced a major contradiction. Endorsing such nationalist movements meant honouring the principle of self-determination, but potentially weakening American interests in the new Cold War with the Soviet Union. Often there was a fine line, or no line at all, between nationalists and communists, and observers in Washington were not always proficient in determining which was which. This predicament was made worse by developments in China, where by the time of the November 1947 coup in Thailand, communist forces were on the road to

---

victory. Whereas doubts persisted about Pridi's political leanings, there were few about the Thai military. The Coup Group appeared adamantly anti-communist, and thus had the right qualifications for Washington's support.

Between 1948 and 1957 Phibun's second government significantly expanded the U.S.-Thai relationship. The external and internal threat of communism was, without question, the premise upon which military rule was established, and Phibun was always ready to play this card when necessary. In his rationale, military government was needed to "protect" the constitution and Thai way of life from the communists. While some Thais opposed the abandonment of democracy, most simply accepted the fact. Even those who had supported Pridi gradually gave in, especially after allegations that he was a communist seemed to be confirmed when he surfaced in the new People's Republic of China (PRC) in early 1950. Public apathy and the support of the United States were the fundamental basis for military rule, and throughout most of the tumultuous 1950's, Phibun could count on both.

Washington did not pay much attention to developments in Thailand per se, but it did to communism wherever it seriously threatened. The collapse of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang in 1949 brought Asia sharply into focus in the American policy of containment. Almost immediately Washington sought to extend the Military Defense Assistance Program (MDAP, and later MAP) to its Asian clientele. The urgency of developing anti-communist defences in Asia became all the more pressing when in January 1950, the Soviet Union and PRC recognized Ho Chi Minh's government in Vietnam. Washington saw this and simultaneous unrest in Malaya and the Dutch East Indies as evidence that a massive communist conspiracy led by the Soviet Union was afoot in Asia. In this light, the only course of action was to build up anti-communist bastions, and to resist the expansion of communism.

---

Phibun and the Coup Group were determined to take advantage of this more assertive American policy. Not only would U.S. military aid actually help defend the country from any communist adversary, but at the same time it would serve to solidify their own hold on power. However, there was a definite risk in wooing the U.S. Washington expected a firm anti-communist agenda, but following one could alienate Thailand from its neighbours. This may explain why, despite his reputation, Phibun did not initially appear a particularly "tough" anti-communist. Although he allowed French troops "hot pursuit" of Indochinese guerillas into Thai territory, he also permitted Vietminh diplomatic missions to remain, no doubt motivated by historic animosity toward the French. With respect to the ethnic Chinese, he labelled them the possible "Fifth Column" of the outlawed Communist Party, but at the same time refrained from openly attacking them.36 This "soft-peddling" of communism was designed to keep Thai options open. Phibun and the Coup Group seemed to realize that the insurgencies in Indochina could succeed, and that Thailand would thus face communism directly on its borders. Believing the PRC to be orchestrating communist expansion in the region, the last thing the Thais could afford was to anger the "dragon." So, while yielding to American pressure in recognizing Chiang Kai-shek's exiled regime in Taiwan as the "true" Chinese government, at the same time Bangkok ordered its troops to round up the remnants of the Kuomintang that had fled to northern Thailand.37

In February 1950, an opportunity for Thailand to show Washington its anti-communist resolve came at the Bangkok Conference. The U.S. assembled its Asian allies in the hope of coordinating policy against Moscow and Beijing, and the selection of Bangkok as the site of the gathering was a sign of how important Washington now considered Thailand. Phibun did not disappoint. Just as the conference began, he outlawed communism in Thailand, and began a nation-wide hunt against

37 Surachart, United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule, 1947-1977, 44-46.
"subversive" elements. This demonstration of anti-communist resolve was definitely needed to impress Washington. Ambassador Edwin Stanton and some other U.S. officials doubted Thailand's commitment to anti-communism, and, consequently, they were not in favour of extending military aid to Phibun's government. Their concerns were reinforced by two early coup attempts against Phibun, which revealed serious divisions in the Thai military. Phibun's decisive anti-communist actions in connection with the Bangkok Conference led some in Washington to conclude that his earlier hesitation was due to not having enough American backing. Consequently, U.S. policy began to change in favour of firmly supporting the Thai regime, reflecting a fear that not doing so would certainly force it to compromise with the enemy.

The Coup Group sensed a turning point in Thai foreign relations, and sought to quicken the pace of cooperative U.S.-Thai relations. Thailand began to move towards another partnership with a great power. However, the consequences for Thailand's relations with China were quickly apparent. Beijing was clearly not pleased when in March 1950 Phibun decided to recognize the French-backed government of Bao Dai in Vietnam. Nor was the PRC happy with Phibun's renewed campaign to restrict the Chinese community in Thailand. The military government in Thailand was shutting the door on accommodation with Chinese Communists, while it took definitive steps towards close collaboration with the U.S. The outbreak of war in Korea in June 1950 cemented this reorientation of Thai foreign policy toward to Washington. Prior to the North Korean attack, many Thais doubted the wisdom of drawing too close to Americans. However, after the start of the war and

38 Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 268.
39 The Shanghai newspaper, Ta Kung Pao, openly attacked Phibun as a puppet of Washington, stating that "[F]ollowing the resurgence to power of the war criminal, Phibun Songgram, the fascist government of Thailand has again changed from an enemy satellite to an imperialist lackey... [F]or selling out the interests of the Thai race and people, in looking on New China with scorn, in humiliating Chinese nationals, and in depending upon American imperialism to oppose the people of Southeast Asia, these Thai fascists shall ultimately end up being buried in the graves of their own digging... [T]he voice of the Fatherland shall further reach the ears of all overseas Chinese, telling them that they shall no longer be defenceless, for their Fatherland is now behind them." (January 28, 1950) as quoted in R.K. Jain, China and Thailand 1949-1983 (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1984), 6-8.
especially with the intervention of the PRC, the fear of aggressive communist expansion mounted. Opposition to the U.S. relationship dwindled, and Washington began stepping up aid.  

Phibun took advantage of the Korean War to further demonstrate his commitment to the U.S. containment policy. He offered shipments of rice to help South Korea, and followed that up with a pledge to contribute Thai troops to the multinational United Nations force. Washington responded by securing for Thailand the first ever World Bank loan to a Southeast Asian nation, and delivering unilateral assistance recommended by a number of fact-finding missions. Shortly thereafter, the Truman administration demonstrated its own resolve by dispatching a Military Advisory Assistance Group (MAAG) to Thailand. Between 1951 and 1953 military aid to Thailand rose from $US 4.5 million to over $US 56 million, making it a major recipient in the region. However, U.S. assistance was by no means restricted to military or economic aid. Operating largely through a dummy business firm, the "Southeast Asian Supply Company", the CIA (using former OSS agents with service in Thailand) undertook covert activities. By early 1951, American agents were training Thai police units in guerilla warfare. The Coup Group was heavily involved, garnishing considerable personal influence with Washington in the process. By 1953 there were some two-hundred CIA operatives in Thailand, training the Thais in everything from sabotage operations to parachuting. From bases in northern Thailand, the CIA even planned a coordinated attack by Kuomintang renegades against Chinese military positions in Yunnan province.

Affairs, Pote Sarasin. This and attempts to consolidate the Coup Group's hold on power in the National Assembly offended many Thais. Even the military commanders themselves were not immune to political victimisation. Considered the most liberal of the Coup Group, Kat Katsongkhram was forced into exile in Hong Kong following trumped-up treason charges. He had shown some reserve about abandoning a policy of neutrality.  


42 Ibid. The Jessup Mission (February 1950) and Griffin Mission (April 1950) led to a September 1950 economic and technical agreement. The Melby-Erskine Mission in June 1950 eventually produced the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement in October 1950, which served as the basis for U.S. military aid for several years.  


44 Fineman, "United States Foreign Policy and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958", 238-248. "Operation Paper" was actually opposed by CIA Director W.B. Smith, but Truman approved the project in January 1951, no doubt influenced by events in Korea. General Li Mi headed Kuomintang forces, which received crucial logistical and intelligence support from the Thai police and U.S. advisers. In June 1951, Li Mi managed to take an airfield in Yunnan.
The Interior Ministry responsible for the administration of the police was headed by Colonel Phao Siyanon, one of the Coup Group's leaders. The CIA's relationship to the Thai police was a major boost to Phao's position behind the scenes, and there is little doubt that he had ambitions to be Prime Minister. His ruthlessness was also renowned, so much so that the usually diplomatic Seni Pramoj once referred to him as "the worst man in the whole history of modern Thailand." With American aid flowing into the country, Phao and his associates in the Coup Group became increasingly divided, each with their own vested interest or connection. Such competition threatened the military's hold on government, and consequently, Phibun's position as Prime Minister. Despite his remarkable return to the forefront of Thai politics, Phibun was not nearly as personally powerful as he had been before the war. He had little to do with the success of the 1947-48 coups, and had been out of the military command's inner circle for almost ten years. He was named Prime Minister mostly because of his nationalistic credentials. In the early 1950's, this appealed to a great many Thais, who tended to view Phibun's war-time policies with more sympathy than they likely deserved. Behind the scenes, however, Phibun was clearly a subordinate. He did not trust the Coup Group, and particularly Phao. Moreover, Phibun faced other enemies, who although removed from the inner circle, were still part of the broader Thai polity. The spectre of Pridi's return always loomed large, especially given his new found friends in Beijing. Over the years Phibun had accumulated a number of political adversaries who, with the right connections, could plot against him.

In June 1951, exactly such a plot unfolded. Coup Group Army Colonel Kat Katsongkhram and former Prime Minister Kuang Aphaiwong were initially involved, but the plan was carried out.

but his troops were twice pushed back. Despite Thai efforts to cover for the Americans, virtually everyone knew that Washington was somehow involved, in what Fineman characterises as a "comic opera."

prematurely by junior navy officers during a ceremony marking the transfer of the U.S. dredge "Manhattan" to Thailand. The Thai Navy was dissatisfied under a government dominated by army officers. The so-called "Manhattan Coup" shook the foundations of Thai politics once again, and was suppressed with considerable force by the Coup Group, leaving Phibun in power. However, the consequences of the Manhattan Coup were dramatic. Sarit Thanarat, in command of the army, and Phao emerged particularly revitalized. Phibun believed that Phao was somehow involved in the plot, and thereafter considered him a real threat, but the quieter Sarit he came to trust. More importantly, the coup attempt resulted in the decimation of navy power, effectively ending the intense rivalry between services. As for relations with the U.S., the incident caused some bad feelings towards Washington. There was some suggestion that the sinking of the Thai gunboat Si Ayutthaya was caused by mortar fire launched by CIA agents offshore. Phibun certainly questioned the agency's role in the event, and resented its affiliation with Phao.

Convinced that he was now the real power in Thailand, Phao began a crackdown on dissidents and political opponents alike. Another plot, the so-called "Silent" or "Radio" coup of November 1951, was designed to eliminate the last vestige of civilian support Phibun had in the Thai Senate and legislature. For the next few years, Phibun, Phao, and Sarit jockeyed continuously for political power, and for favours from Washington. In the process, government in Thailand became progressively authoritarian, and Thai foreign policy moved even farther away from its traditional "bamboo" flexibility. In the meanwhile, the Thai economy boomed, in part because of the boost that the Korean War gave to commodity exports. Between 1951 and 1958, the gross national product increased annually by an average rate of 4.7%. Domestic manufacturing also rose, and the

---

46 Nuechterlein, Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia, 58-59. Phibun was captured at gunpoint by the plotters, who took him aboard the navy flagship. Thousands of troops were dispatched and street fighting between the Army and Navy ravaged Bangkok. In the end, there were nearly 1,200 casualties, mostly civilians caught up in the panic. Phibun escaped, dramatically swimming to shore after the Si Ayutthaya was hit.
47 Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 271.
balt remained stable. The key was undoubtedly the influx of American aid, which extended to a wide range of projects within the Thai economy in addition to the military establishment.

The 1952 election of Dwight Eisenhower as U.S. President was welcomed in Thailand. As a military man himself, Eisenhower was expected to fully support the Coup Group. The new president did undoubtedly put considerable emphasis on Southeast Asia. Right from the start, he was determined not to repeat elsewhere in Asia what many saw as the failure of Truman administration in China. He feared that if one of the countries in Southeast Asia was to be overcome by communism, the rest would fall like dominoes. In Thailand the Eisenhower administration saw a good opportunity to extend American influence in the region while stemming communist expansion. Burma was professedly neutral, while Malaya remained under Britain's direction. The French were mired in war in Indochina, which Washington came to see as the first acid test for the "domino theory." Eisenhower was convinced that Thailand was the "best friend" the U.S. had in the region.

During the 1950's, American aid was channelled to areas in Thailand deemed most important to its national security. An excellent example of this was the construction of the "Friendship Highway" between Saraburi and Korat, at a cost of over $US 20 million. Linking together other roads, the Friendship Highway was designed to greatly improve Bangkok's access to the geographically and

---

49 Fineman, "United States Foreign Policy and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958", 315-323. The most interesting of these studies was one conducted by the Psychological Strategy Board (PSB), entitled "U.S. Psychological Strategy With Respect to the Thai Peoples of Southeast Asia" (PSB D-23). In what Fineman describes as thirty-eight pages containing a "variety of truths, half-truths, misconceptions and outright falsehoods", the study concluded that Thais were ideally suited for guerrilla warfare, as opposed to "large-scale or conventional military forces" (323). Considering the Thais as "incorrigible individualists", and "gentle and light-minded... not given to ponderous philosophic thought... and military ambitions" (323), the report recommended making Thailand an anti-communist bastion in the region. In conjunction with heightened U.S. interest in Indochina, it is clear that the Eisenhower administration viewed Thailand as a potential base for anti-communist guerrilla operations even as early as 1953. See also Official Meeting Minutes (hereafter cited as OMM), National Security Council (hereafter cited as NSC) 144th Meeting, May 13 1953, OMM Box 5, 130-145, Records of the NSC, Record Group (hereafter cited as RG) 273, United States National Archives (hereafter cited as USNA); OMM, NSC 159th Meeting, August 17 1953, OMM Box 8, 158-159/OMM, NSC 189th Meeting, March 11 1954, OMM Box 10, 170-199, RG 273, USNA.
politically remote Northeast. The extension of rail lines from Udon to Nong Khai also facilitated this, as did the development of airports in several cities.\(^5\) Yet the main underlying reason for this construction was not hard to see. The Northeast was not just distant from the rest of the country, but also its most vulnerable area. From neighbouring Laos, Indochinese communists could easily make their way across the Mekong River into Thailand. Playing upon the regional tensions between the Northeast and Bangkok, communists could potentially stir up trouble.

A change in ambassadors also reflected the Eisenhower administration's focus on counter-insurgency. Replacing Stanton, who was seen as too stern and moralistic, was William Donovan, the former OSS Chief. Donovan's numerous connections to top Eisenhower staff thrilled the Thai military, and his appointment was taken as a sign of Thailand's importance in Washington's eyes. While Donovan was not well-liked by the Thais on a personal level, possibly because of his friendship with Pridi during the war, on a professional level the Coup Group could not have had a better advocate. Donovan was committed to the development of counter-insurgency capabilities in Thailand, and to increasing the level of U.S. economic and military aid. In addition to a joint U.S.-Thai Psychological Warfare Board, Donovan oversaw the establishment of new police programmes, guerilla training, and the ubiquitous "intelligence agency" (krom pramuan ratchakan phaen-din).\(^5\) When the U.S. inherited the role of protector in South Vietnam from the French in 1954-55, Donovan was key in drawing Thailand into talks about a mutual defence pact, which would allow the Americans access to Thai air bases in the Northeast.

\(^5\) R. Sean Randolph, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950-1985*, 22-24. Between 1954 and 1960, almost 47 percent of total U.S. assistance went to transportation, with 33 percent alone devoted to road construction. $US 350 million was spent on highways from 1951 to 1965, creating a network of all-weather roads all the way up near the border with Laos. By February 1960, American money had helped build large and medium scale airports at Korat, Takli, Udon Thani, Ubon, Chiangmai and Bangkok; all had facilities specifically geared for military use. See also Muscat, *Thailand and the United States: Development, Security and Foreign Aid*, 20-23.

\(^5\) Timothy Neil Castle, "At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955-1973" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1991), 96-98. Key among these new programmes was the creation of the Police Air Reconnaissance Unit (PARU), an elite paratroop division, and the Volunteer Defense Corps (VDC). PARU units were instrumental in training and organising Hmong tribesman during the "secret wars" in Laos.
Phibun welcomed American aid and attention. However, he was suspicious of the close relationship that developed between Donovan and Phao because of the latter's responsibility for internal security. Aside from the threats he faced through political infighting, Phibun once again confronted an openly hostile China. In January 1953, the quasi-official *New China News Agency* broadcast that the PRC had set up the "Thai Nationality Autonomous Area" in Yunnan province, where some Thai speaking people still resided. Most Thais took the message as a thinly veiled warning that Thailand was next on the agenda for communist expansion, especially if it continued its friendship with the U.S.

The broadcast coincided with renewed advances by communist forces in Vietnam and Laos. The vulnerability of the Northeast was compounded by the presence of almost 50,000 ethnic Vietnamese there, many with allegiances to Ho Chi Minh. By early 1954, the communist Pathet Lao posed a considerable threat to the already shaky government in Laos, and after the French defeat at Dienbienphu in May, it seemed that the Vietminh were unstoppable. The response in Thailand was near panic. A state of emergency was declared in the border provinces, with additional army and police reinforcements sent there. Government anti-communist propaganda intensified, and severe restrictions were placed on the media, as well as ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese.\(^\text{52}\) In short, Thailand braced itself for the worst, and turned even more to Washington for assistance.

Encouraged by the U.S., Thailand sought to "internationalize" the situation in Indochina by taking its concerns to the United Nations. In May 1954, the Thais formally requested the UN Security Council to investigate the threat to Thailand posed by Vietminh and Pathet Lao forces along the border with Laos. However, the Soviets vetoed the proposal on the grounds that teams from the Geneva Conference were already "checking" the area after the French withdrawal. A similar draft resolution in the General Assembly was also undermined by the Soviets. Thoroughly disgusted

---

with this outcome in the UN and the Geneva accords on Indochina, the Thais had even more reason to fear communist expansion, and even more cause to seek an alliance with the U.S.

Early in September 1954, the U.S. sponsored talks in Manila aimed at the creation of a multilateral security arrangement for Southeast Asia. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles wanted to reach some security agreement with key Asian partners like Thailand, but he was wary about over-extending unilateral American commitments. The solution was the Southeast Asian Collective Defense Treaty, signed on September 8 by the U.S., Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand. The so-called "Manila Pact" established a regional alliance (the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, or SEATO), clearly aimed against Chinese and Soviet-inspired expansion. A proviso in the agreement extended SEATO's defensive umbrella to Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, which, by the Geneva accords, could not be members of the alliance. While the treaty was not as desirable as a bilateral security agreement with Washington, the Coup Group was nonetheless pleased. Continuing American involvement in the theatre was now insured. SEATO was also a success from the perspective of the Eisenhower administration. The treaty created a common front in the region with other allies, and established provisions for the use of multilateral military force, while avoiding a direct and unilateral U.S. commitment.

Bangkok was chosen as the headquarters for SEATO, and American military and economic aid continued to increase. In October 1954, Donovan left the foreign service, but his work was continued by his successor, John Peurifoy. Peurifoy's flamboyant and outspoken nature helped make him the "premier anti-communist" in the State Department. Peurifoy was able to build up a considerable "Thai lobby" in the U.S. through his myriad contacts. After leaving government service, both Stanton and Donovan worked as paid lobbyists for Thailand in Congress, drawing

considerable attention to that country as well as making a tidy profit. The "Thai lobby" was also instrumental in influencing U.S. policy towards the region as a whole. With France gone, the mantle of defender of South Vietnam fell to the Americans, and among the many ideas considered to stabilize the region was a proposal for regional economic development centred on Thailand. Washington drew Bangkok into several forums on problems in Indochina, and even hoped that Thailand would serve as a "model" for other countries in Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, the struggle for power among members of the Coup Group continued, with the Phao-Phibun rivalry especially intense. Washington viewed the situation with understandable apprehension. The CIA in particular had much at stake. So intimate was the CIA's relationship with the Interior Ministry that one private researcher hired to evaluate U.S. aid programmes commented that "the American official establishment in Bangkok had climbed into bed with General Phao." In public at least, ties between Washington and Phibun remained exemplary. On a tour of the U.S. in 1955, Phibun was even awarded the Legion of Merit, the highest honour possible for a non-citizen. Privately, however, American dislike for the Prime Minister was thinly concealed. In fact, for a while Phibun was convinced that Peurifoy was instructed to overthrow him in favour of Phao.

Phibun's battle with Phao led him to play a dangerous game. Throughout 1954 and 1955, Phibun showed signs of warming up to the PRC. While his exact motives remain unclear, it is likely that the move was more than simply an attempt to aggravate his opponent. Phibun was wary of drawing too close to Washington, and seemed willing to play both sides of the Cold War fence. Thai contacts with the PRC reached a head at the Bandung Conference of non-aligned states in April 1955.

__________

55 Ibid, 395.
56 Ibid, 384-399. Phibun's fears about Peurifoy were not entirely without basis. A long-time associate of the CIA, Peurifoy was in Greece during the civil war there, and he was behind the scenes in Guatemala, helping to bring down the leftist Arbenz government in 1954. So acute were Phibun's fears that, while at a party, Peurifoy felt obliged to assure the Prime Minister's daughter that there were no plans for the overthrow of her father.
Thailand was invited but so too was the PRC, despite their clashing superpower affiliations. The Thai delegate, Prince Wan Waithayakon, openly condemned the Chinese for setting up the Thai Autonomous Zone, manipulating ethnic Chinese in Thailand, and collaborating with Pridi. However, when by pre-arrangement Wan met privately with Chinese Premier Zhou En Lai, Zhou assured him that the establishment of the Thai Autonomous Zone was merely an "administrative" decision. Moreover, Zhou promised that Pridi would receive no special privileges in the PRC, and that his speeches broadcast on Chinese radio into Thailand would be stopped.57

A master of political intrigue, Phibun gained the upper hand over his rival Phao during the summer of 1955. While Phao was away on a trip to the U.S., the Prime Minister reshuffled his cabinet, taking over the Interior Ministry himself and making sure that the other Coup Group commander, Sarit, was well looked after. Phao was effectively neutralised. His supporters lost key portfolios, while Phao himself was relegated to Deputy Minister of Finance.58 Phibun even went after Phao's personal power, clamping down on opium trafficking and several other dubious "business" dealings.59

Still, Phibun was by no means secure. Many Thai police were loyal to Phao, and their power was considerable given the years of American aid. Moreover, early in 1956, Phibun went too far in his attacks on Phao's power-base. Moves against CIA front organisations produced a strong rebuff from the Acting Mission Chief, Norbert Anschuetz. Phibun quickly reached out to Phao in an attempt to make up. Not surprisingly, Phao was receptive to his overture. He cooperated with Phibun in continuing efforts to reach an accommodation with the PRC. During 1956 the Thai

59 Moshe Lissak, Military Roles in Modernization: Civil-Military Relations in Thailand and Burma (London: Sage Publications, 1976), 100-104. Involvement with prostitution, drugs, gambling and protection rackets were just a few of the well-known vices of senior military officials in the Coup Group. It is estimated that in 1954, 12 percent of Thailand's national wealth ended up in the pockets of Phibun, Phao, and Sarit alone.
government continued to flirt with an accommodation with the PRC even as it loudly professed anticomunism. Thai diplomatic feelers reached all the way up to Zhou and Mao Zedong. With such success, Phibun may have believed that the normalization of ties with Beijing was possible. In May 1956, diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union were upgraded to the ambassadorial level. The next month the embargo on trade with the PRC was partially lifted, and several exiled followers of Pridi were allowed home. By the end of the year it appeared that Thailand was again the "bamboo", this time bending away from the U.S. In this context, Bangkok's relationship with Washington soured.

That relationship took a distinct turn for the better, however, when Phibun and Phao were driven from power and fled into exile in early September 1957 and were replaced by Sarit Thanarat. Sarit seized the opportunity provided by widespread popular protests against the fraudulent results from parliamentary elections in February to undermine his two fellow Coup Group leaders and win public support for himself. His accession to power marked the start of a new era in Thai politics.

Despite serious and genuine reservations about the Americans, Sarit was also a strong anti-communist. He had no inclination to seek a rapprochement with Beijing, and he soon made efforts to win back Washington's confidence. Washington made it clear that it looked askance at any drift towards the left or neutralism. He realised too that American support was needed by the Thai Army, whose backing was required for his own political survival. Once he took power, Sarit gradually returned to the military authoritarianism of the Phibun era. In the summer of 1958, Sarit began a crackdown on the press, which in at least one instance included the use of the Thai Army. At the same time he pressured members of the National Assembly who had become openly critical

---

of the U.S. to quiet down. In June and again in August, Cabinet reshuffling undercut leftist and neutralist influence.

However, Sarit's hold on power was by no means certain as yet. While he was in England for medical treatment in the fall of 1958, some members of the National Assembly continued with their anti-Americanism, and several even ventured to Beijing in the hopes of rekindling the diplomatic warming with the PRC. While convalescing, Sarit considered how to remedy the division in Thailand. Given that he held no absolute ideological affiliation, Sarit reverted to what he considered to be a "Thai solution." The country was not inclined towards Western-style democracy, nor towards communism. Although tempting, neutralism would eliminate much-needed military and economic support from the U.S., and undermine his own power. So Sarit was convinced that the only answer for Thailand was a "Thai ideology" based on traditional cultural values, with himself as the "defender." Returning to Bangkok, he set about his patiwat ("revolution"). Parliament was dissolved, the Constitution abrogated, severe censorship restored, and political parties were banned. Dissidents and opponents were quickly jailed, and the ethnic Chinese community once again became a target and scapegoat for Thai hostility. Despite the repression and some clearly extrajudicial executions, Washington embraced Sarit. Thailand was a good friend once again.

With the return to absolute rule in 1958, Sarit instituted a wide array of social "reforms", aimed at "purifying" Thai culture. Under this guise, Sarit in fact instituted a harsh repression of political and social freedoms. The Laotian crisis, which will be discussed later in the chapter, produced fear

---

62 Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 278-281. These "values" included the principles of indigenous authority; a social and political hierarchy, paternalism, patronage, loyalty to the King and a devotion to Buddhism. See also Klausner, Reflections on Thai Culture, 206-217, 291-300. For Sarit's statement on the coup, see Thak, Thai Politics: Extracts and Documents, 1932-1957, 713.
64 Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 280. The CIA was concerned by Sarit's "personal preoccupation" with social reform and its questionable effects on the stability of his regime. However, CIA reports noted that he was "unusually adept" at the "judicious dispensation of funds and other favours." See also secret subsection report, "Current Intelligence Weekly Summary", January 14 1960, file 1-A.1, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs (hereafter cited as BFEA), Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (hereafter cited as OSEAA), Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 1 1960, RG 59, USNA.
among many Thais that the communist insurgency in the Northeast would spread throughout the country. Such sentiment effectively allowed Sarit to suppress not only communists, but also anyone who opposed his regime. Thai police and military sweeps seldom distinguished between real and imagined enemies of the state. Anti-communist hunts were, not surprisingly, often aimed at the Northeast, where the Thai insurgency was strongest and support for the government weakest. Moreover, anti-communist hysteria allowed the Thai government to once again scapegoat the ethnic Chinese. Like many Thais, Sarit disliked the influence which the Chinese had over the Thai economy, and by connecting communists in Laos and Thailand to the PRC, the government could insinuate that the all overseas Chinese might be agents of Beijing.

Washington did not seem to care much about Sarit's domestic repression. NSC reports concluded that he was a "firm but not very constructive autocrat." However, based on his virulent response to the threat of communism, the U.S. came to consider Sarit its best choice in Thailand. The Eisenhower administration's primary goal was clearly to promote the development of a stable Thai leadership. The fact that Sarit's regime was dictatorial, frequently repressive, and habitually corrupt was of little concern to Washington. Sarit was a reliable anti-communist, and this was the most important attribute a leader in Southeast Asia could have from the American point of view.

U.S. military aid to the Bangkok government was intended to assist it to maintain internal security and to make the Thai armed forces capable of withstanding an external threat at least long enough for

---

65 Charles F. Keyes, *Iranian Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, data paper 65, March 1967), 50-55. Although constituting less than ten percent of the Thai population at the time, the Chinese were dominant in many businesses, especially in Bangkok. Over centuries of emigration from China, they had blended well into Thai society, with the men often marrying Thai wives and adopting Thai surnames. Still, the Chinese presence in Thailand was very much in evidence. They maintained their own schools, newspapers and cultural traditions. Until Sarit's harsher restrictions, many also still had strong ties to relatives in the PRC.

66 NSC 5809, "U.S. Policy in Mainland Southeast Asia", Operations Coordinating Board, January 7 1959, NSC Policy Papers, Box 47 (5807-5812), RG 273, USNA. The State Department's biographical sketches of Sarit noted that he was a politically astute man, but with a "relatively limited knowledge of international affairs." Moreover, his "drive and enthusiasm" compensated for an "inadequate grasp of economics", and his "undue involvement in administrative details and questions of public morality." See also "Confidential Southeast Asia Notes", Rolland H. Bushner, Officer in Charge of Thai Affairs, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, July 2 1959, file 1-A.1, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 1 1960, RG 59, USNA.
an American, or SEATO, response. However, anxious about unilateral commitments and the over-extension of its own military presence in the region, Washington focused on SEATO as the vehicle for Thai defence. Collective defence, and not dependence solely on the United States, was Thailand's best guarantee. The Eisenhower administration also planned for the promotion of greater economic and even military cooperation between Southeast Asian states. Resisting communism, in the opinion of American officials, would take a concerted "team effort" in the region. The problem, however, was in convincing authoritarian and often precarious leaders to think in such broad terms.

From the Thai point of view, SEATO was little more than a "paper tiger." Almost from its inception, the Thai leadership considered SEATO an ineffective deterrent to communist expansion in Southeast Asia. The main problem was the voting structure, which was based on the rule of unanimity. Neither France or Britain seemed to favour using SEATO as a military alliance; both consistently distanced themselves from any suggestion that the organisation plan for the deployment of troops in Laos if the situation there deteriorated. The Thais deeply resented the British and French position on SEATO. They wanted, and expected, a show of resolve in Laos by the West, which SEATO was clearly not going to provide. Without the implicit threat of a multilateral commitment to oppose communism by force, the Thais believed that the Pathet Lao would eventually succeed in Laos. But Washington championed SEATO's role in Southeast Asia without backing a change in the unanimity rule that would have made the organisation more effective deterrent. As the civil war in Laos worsened, SEATO became inextricably linked to it, but differences over the role and effectiveness of the organisation became a major stumbling block in U.S.-Thai relations.

---

67 NSC 5809, "U.S. Policy in Mainland Southeast Asia", April 2 1958, NSC Policy Papers, Box 47 (5807-5812), RG 273, USNA.
Remote, land-locked and undeveloped, Laos nonetheless emerged as a major national security concern to the United States in the late 1950s. For the Eisenhower administration, Laos and Vietnam represented a "proving ground" for U.S. foreign policy in Asia. Washington's resolve in preventing the spread of communism was on the line, and following the tenets of the "domino theory", Eisenhower could not allow even tiny Laos from "falling." However, the Thais were not happy with what they saw as Washington's vacillation on Laos. Most Thais expected that the Americans would fully and openly commit themselves to fight the communists there, as they had in Korea. The communist advance in Laos menaced Thailand itself, as well as the rest of the region, which was the scene of other similar insurgencies. From the Thai point of view, Laos, even more than South Vietnam, was where the U.S. should stand to maintain its credibility in Southeast Asia.

As early as 1951 the CIA and the National Security Council (NSC) were covertly building an anti-communist paramilitary force in Laos, with close cooperation from Thailand. The Thai national police and PARU units were indispensable liaisons between the Americans and Lao.\(^6\) By the mid 1950's, U.S. support became more pronounced, with American military advisers scattered throughout northeastern Thailand to assist anti-communist forces in Laos, and Washington fully backing the Lao right-wing in international negotiations. The Eisenhower administration did not sign the agreements reached at the Geneva Conference on Indochina in 1954, but did indicate that the U.S. would abide by them. Laos was granted independence from France along with Cambodia.

---

\(^6\) Castle, "At War in the Shadow of Vietnam", 96-98. The Eisenhower administration had long been involved in the covert training of Royal Lao Army troops, mostly through the French. However, Washington was very careful to deny the presence of American military advisers in Laos. As the State Department's Legal Counsel, John Pender, suggested, "if at all possible, the arrangement should be handled on an oral basis so that no documents of the nature presently contemplated are exchanged or left as part of the record." See secret memo, John Pender to John Raymond (State Department Legal Counsel staff), June 8 1959, file 403.2, BFEA, OSEAA, Laos Files 1956-61, Box 3 1956-59, RG 59, USNA.
in 1954, but independence failed to resolve internal conflict. The Lao polity was fractured, and enormously complex.\(^6^9\)

The French withdrawal from Indochina after the Geneva Conference left the United States seemingly alone in the stand against communist expansion in the region, and John Foster Dulles welcomed the chance this presented to take an active containment role. Just after the Geneva Conference he remarked, "We have a clean base there now. Dienbienphu was a blessing in disguise."\(^7^0\) For Dulles and others in the Eisenhower administration, Laos, and not Vietnam, was the main focus in the region. The Pathet Lao were sponsored by the North Vietnamese, who in turn received support and direction from both Moscow and Beijing. The fate of Southeast Asia seemed to hang in the balance in Laos.\(^7^1\)

By 1955 the Eisenhower administration actively, although covertly, supported key elements of the Royal Lao Armed Forces which had taken up arms against the communist Pathet Lao. The armed forces were initially led by Phoumi Sananikone, whose right-wing sympathies disinclined him to negotiate with left-wing opponents. Phoumi also did not approve of the neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, adding even more confusion to the situation. Believing Souvanna to be a communist sympathizer, the United States suspended economic aid to Laos in 1956. When in 1958 Souvanna resigned in frustration amidst signs of growing Pathet Lao insurgency, Phoumi took over the job of Prime Minister. American aid resumed shortly thereafter, as did the intermittent civil war with the communists. In the fall of 1959, Phoumi unexpectedly shifted towards reconciliation with

---

\(^6^9\) W. Randall Ireson and Carol J. Ireson in Douglas Allen and Ngo Vinh Long, eds., *Coming to Terms: Indochina, the United States, and the War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 131-154. As a result of the Geneva Conference, the coalition "Government of National Unity" was formed. It consisted of three main factions; the Royalists, led by Souvanna Phouma; the "rightists", headed by Phoumi Sananikone; and the "leftists", coalesced around the Pathet Lao and nominally headed by one of their leaders, Prince Souphanouvong. However, within each faction were additional divisions, often changing with the political shifts.


\(^7^1\) Ibid, chapter one, *passim.*
the communists, and the United States became even more involved in Laotian politics. An internal coup toppled Phoumi that December, bringing Defence Minister Phoumi Nosavan to the forefront. Although Washington was not happy with Phoumi's volte face, the Eisenhower administration was reluctant to back Phoumi. He was the most anti-communist among the myriad of Lao leaders, but his rashness and hot temper did not instill much confidence. Moreover, Washington feared that Phoumi would launch an all-out assault on the communists, invariably requiring an even stronger commitment from the U.S. at precisely the same time Eisenhower was pursuing better relations with the Soviets. At the urging of the U.S. and several other western nations, the King of Laos removed Phoumi as Prime Minister. Phoumi, however, remained on as Defence Minister, and effectively became the "strongman" in the government of Tiao Somsaith, the new Prime Minister. National elections in April 1960 only confirmed that, returning a majority of seats for Phoumi's associates in what was widely believed to be a rigged vote. Notwithstanding their reservations about Phoumi, the Americans continued aid to Laos. Confident, Phoumi engineered renewed offensives against the communists, capturing some major Pathet Lao leaders and preparing to put them on trial as traitors. Chief among them was Souphanouvong, Souvanna's half-brother. However, he and others managed to escape with the aid of sympathetic guards, leading not only to great embarrassment for Phoumi, but also to a Pathet Lao resurgence.

For Thailand, Laos was not a pawn in the international struggle between the superpowers, or a remote battleground of the Cold War. Laos, and the spectre of communism, were right on the Thai doorstep. Linguistically and culturally, Thais and Lao are close, and prior to the era of European colonialism, Laos was effectively a Thai suzerainty. In many ways Thais regarded Laos as their "little

---

72 Dhanasarit Satawedidin. "Thai-American Alliance During the Laotian Crisis, 1959-1962" (Ph.D. dissertation. Northern Illinois University, 1984), 40-68. Comprised mostly of young nationalists and royalists, Phoumi's "coup group" had considerable popular support at the time, including that of the Lao King, Savang Vatthana. Phoumi's attempts to negotiate with the Pathet Lao came after military setbacks and frustration when a UN investigation turned up "no clear evidence" of North Vietnamese presence in eastern Laos.

73 Ibid, 70.
Ethnic Lao had long been the majority in several regions of Northeastern Thailand, and elsewhere they were closely integrated into the Thai mainstream. Sarit himself was part Lao in ancestry, and Phoumi was his distant "nephew".

Historically the buffer against China and Vietnam, Laos was of extreme importance to any Thai regime. By the 1950s, this was an even more acute concern, given the establishment of a strong and seemingly aggressive communist China and the insurgency unfolding in Vietnam. Thus in many ways Laos was the "dagger" posed at the heart of Thailand. Consequently, Pathet Lao gains by 1958 had significant bearing on the Thai domestic political scene, providing Sarit with more justification for a return to absolute military rule and a vigorous anti-communist campaign.

Sarit gave the U.S. an invaluable personal link to the convoluted world of Laotian politics. Kenneth Young, a career State Department official and later Ambassador to Thailand under John Kennedy, once remarked that the political culture of Laos was not understood by more than "one or two people." Sarit was clearly one. Not only was he valued for his insight into Laotian politics, he offered potentially important leverage over Phoumi. The problem for Washington was in getting Sarit to cooperate with a policy that placed little confidence in Phoumi. While many top officials in the Thai government also recognized Phoumi's weaknesses, he was still seen as the only viable choice. Thai suspicions of Souvanna Phouma were profound. Although he was the better leader in almost every sense, he was considered by Thais to be a naive neutralist and even a "crypto-communist" who didn't see the dangers of Pathet Lao infiltration.

---

74 Geoffrey C. Gunn, Political Struggles in Laos, 1930-1954 (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1988), passim. During the Indochinese rebellions prior to World War Two, the Thai government even gave sanctuary and support to the nationalist Lao Issara and its various subsequent manifestations. Ironically, the same group later formed the core of the communists.
75 Thailand is geographically exposed to external assault from Laos. The Thai border with Laos is essentially the Mekong River, which at crucial points along the frontier narrows to only a few hundred feet. Much of Laos is also a valley, with little in the way to impede an invasion launched from China or Vietnam.
77 Ibid. 56.
Towards the end of 1959 Sarit set about trying to get American support for Phouni, while the Americans tried to convince Sarit that perhaps he was not the best choice. Even without the Americans, Sarit was determined to aid the rightists in Vientiane, and when U.S. officials balked at the idea of escalating American military aid to them, he became very insistent. Thailand was used as a conduit for support for Phouni's forces, and thus the Thais became an American "associate" in defending Laos. But Thailand's own security was also at stake in Laos, and the Prime Minister did not hesitate to remind the Americans how important the Thais were to Washington's overall regional policy. Thus, the problem for the Eisenhower administration was not just that it risked "losing" Laos by not supporting Phouni, but also that it could lose credibility in the eyes of Thailand and other valuable Asian allies.

To discuss the Laotian crisis and coordinate their local policies, the mission chiefs at U.S. Embassies in Southeast Asia met in Baguio, the Philippines, in March 1960. Two months later, President Eisenhower took a tour of Asian capitals, further elevating the profile of the region. Due to time constraints, Bangkok was left off the agenda, which was not well-received by Sarit. In an effort to remedy this seeming slight and demonstrate how important Thailand was to American policy, Eisenhower then invited King Bhumipol and Queen Sikrit for a state visit in the summer of 1960. Profoundly monarchical, ordinary Thais took the invitation as a show of great respect for the royal family, and consequently, their country. Media coverage of the event in Thailand was extraordinary, and commentators made much of the fact that for the King it was a return to his birthplace. For Sarit, the visit was further indication that Washington endorsed his regime.

---

78 Memorandum of conversation between Julian Fromer (First Secretary of U.S. Embassy Vientiane) and Pheng Norindr (Staff Director, Presidency Council of Ministers, Royal Lao Government), January 19 1960, file 320, BFEA, OSEAA, Laos Files 1956-61, Box 10 1960, RG 59, USNA. The U.S. was well aware of Sarit's aid to Phouni. According to Fromer's account, over six million baht was dispensed in just a few months over late 1959. Thai generosity to Phouni was also very conspicuous. He was seen driving around Vientiane in a new Mercedes 190-SL convertible shortly after his return from Bangkok.

79 Memo, United States Information Agency (hereafter cited as USIA) to United States Information Service (hereafter
The royal tour gave the Eisenhower administration the opportunity to bolster sagging U.S.-Thai relations, and to "reward" Thailand with a number of aid packages. Yet the Thais were unaware that in fact much of the aid originally projected for them in 1961 had been significantly scaled back. The State Department's Office of Southeast Asian Affairs reported that it was "deeply concerned" by this reduction, and warned that the U.S. was "dependent upon Thai political cooperation in countless ways." Arguing that Thai support was usually forthcoming and prompt, the report cautioned that there was "no country which could even begin to replace Thailand in the key role it plays in our political and strategic position in the area."

In August 1960, the predicament in Laos worsened. An army coup restored Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister at the head of a professedly neutralist and unstable coalition government. Phoumi fled to Thailand, seeking even more assistance from his "uncle" Sarit. Royalists and rightists continued to battle with neutralists and the left-wing in Vientiane, resulting in a very shaky coalition government. The real struggle for power was in the jungles, with a full-fledged civil war erupting yet again. Buoyed by military and economic aid from the PRC and Soviet Union, the Pathet Lao continued to extend their control of northern and eastern Laos. Although observers from the International Control Commission (ICC) and United Nations Security Council turned up no hard evidence that Vietminh "volunteers" were fighting alongside the Pathet Lao, there is little doubt that

---

Cited as USIS Thailand, September 9 1960, file 20.1a, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 2, RG 59, USNA. The King was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he lived until early adulthood.

80 Briefing paper, State visit of King and Queen of Thailand to Washington, June 20 1960, file 1-A.1, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 1 1960, RG 59, USNA. This included proposals to Congress for an increase in fiscal year 1961 spending to $US 30.7 million in military aid, and an additional $US 22.5 million for defence support and technical assistance. In more concrete terms, this translated to aid for three infantry divisions, one regional combat team, one airborne battalion, five Marine battalions, twenty-six combat naval vessels and four air squadrons. U.S. Defense Department analysts argued that prior to large-scale U.S. aid, Thai forces had only a "motley collection" of Japanese equipment, supplemented with assorted European and American vehicles and weapons. In addition, the U.S. Development Loan Fund pledged $US 22.5 million for infrastructure, while Washington further guaranteed a $US 107 million loan from the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) for roads and irrigation.

this was the case. More contentious was a Thai charge that PRC irregulars were also involved. This claim, if proven true, could have justified and even necessitated a direct military response from Washington.

In September of 1960, Sarit outlined his policy towards the Lao civil war over Radio Thailand. Stating that the Laotian crisis seriously affected both internal and external developments in Thailand, he explicitly linked the Pathet Lao to Thai communists operating in the Northeast, and implicitly tied both to Hanoi and Beijing. While he pledged "non-intervention" in Laos, Sarit made it clear that the Thais were prepared to fight there if necessary. In a comment implicitly intended as a criticism of SEATO inaction, he said "we must protect ourselves from becoming slaves under communism."

The American military establishment wavered on Laos after the August coup. From a military standpoint, the situation in Laos did not look good given Pathet Lao strength and their control of the vital Plaines des Jarres region. Several top U.S. officials even began to doubt whether the administration's estimation of Laos' strategic importance was correct. The tiny country was a logistical nightmare for any conventional military plans. Pentagon officials were afraid that even a substantial commitment of U.S. ground forces to the area would not be enough to turn the tide. What's more, they feared repeating a debacle such as the French suffered at Dienbienphu. By the late 1950s American military leaders by and large favoured some sort of overt intervention in Southeast Asia. However, most believed that the best place to make such a stand was South Vietnam, which seemed much easier to defend given logistical and political conditions, and which was clearly threatened itself. Given the comparative weakness of its communist insurgency,

---

82 Cable, U.S. MAAG, Laos, 301515Z to State Department, April 30 1961, 751.100/4-2661, Central Decimal File (hereafter cited as CDF) Laos 1960-63, Box 1762, RG 59, USNA.
Thanat, the son of Phoumi, was educated as a diplomat. He characterized the region as a staging point for American military operations in Vietnam. In 1960, Admiral Herbert Riley (Chief of Staff, U.S. Navy, CINCPAC) and other American military commanders met with Phoumi and Thai Army heads at Ubon, where Phoumi sketched a proposal to consolidate positions in Laos with Thai support. Riley tentatively offered American help in planning and assisting any offensive action against the Pathet Lao, but cautioned that Washington’s final approval would be necessary. Sarit interpreted Riley’s hesitancy as further evidence of American indecision. Shortly thereafter, he and his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Thanat Khoman, voiced several uncharacteristically open criticisms of U.S. policy towards Laos, likening the situation to Czechoslovakia in 1948, when the Western powers did little to prevent a communist takeover. In a speech before the American Association in Thailand in November, Thanat Khoman characterized Western attitudes towards Laos as "Confusionism." He labelled Souvanna an "ineffective opportunist", and lamented that the world was apathetic to the Thai plight.

Showing disapproval of Souvanna’s attempts to negotiate with the Pathet Lao, in October 1960 Washington once again cut off aid to Vientiane, and the Thais followed suit with an embargo on

---

85 Report, "Reasons for Extending U.S. Aid to Thailand", October 2 1958, file 1-A.3, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 1, RG 59, USNA.
86 Cable, Bangkok 686 to State, October 18 1960, 751J.00/10-1160, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1756, RG 59, USNA.
87 Cable, Bangkok 828 to State, November 9 1960, 692.00/10-2660, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 1400, RG 59, USNA.

The son of a former Chief of Justice, Thanat was born into one of Thailand’s most important families. He was educated primarily in France, eventually earning a doctorate of law before joining the Thai diplomatic corps. During WWII he served at the Embassy in Tokyo, leaving in 1943 to join the Thai resistance against Japan operating out of Ceylon. After the war he served as Thailand’s first delegate to the UN before being assigned as Ambassador to India. In 1957 he was given the coveted post of Ambassador to the U.S., in which he served until 1959. Sarit then brought Thanat on as Foreign Minister, replacing the ageing Prince Wan. Although frequently maligned as overly emotional, nationalistic and egotistical, Thanat was considered to be a highly intelligent and gifted diplomat. See "Country Data Book, Thailand", no author, June 1959, file 1-A.3, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 1, RG 59, USNA.
trade. Sarit effectively sealed the Laotian border. Eisenhower sent his Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, J. Graham Parsons, to Laos to join the Ambassador, Winthrop Brown, for discussions with Souvanna. The intent was to convince the Lao Prime Minister to abandon any pretence of neutrality and cooperate with the anti-communists. At the same time, the Eisenhower administration was worried that Thailand would keep supporting and pushing Phoumi, thereby putting American policy towards Souvanna in jeopardy. Washington was willing to tolerate Phoumi only so long as he agreed to cooperate with Souvanna. If he thought he could stand alone, or that the U.S. would back him unconditionally, Phoumi would quickly become a liability.

Throughout the fall of 1960 Parsons and Brown were forced to do some "damage control" with Souvanna over reports that Thai forces were themselves actively engaged in skirmishes with the Pathet Lao. The most widely read paper in Laos, the Lao Presse, ran articles criticizing the U.S. for doing nothing to control the Thais, while exerting itself to ensure that the PRC and North Vietnam kept out of the situation. The State Department was itself concerned about Thai involvement, warning the Embassy in Bangkok that "ill considered acts of violence by Phoumi and supporters against Vientiane will not only build up Western opposition to his interests but also spill over on RTG (Royal Thai Government) to extent that Thai cognizance of or connivance in such acts is substantiated." Criticism of Washington's policy in Laos voiced by Sarit and Thanat worried the new U.S. Ambassador to Thailand U. Alexis Johnson, who correctly interpreted it as an indication that the

---

88 Cable, State 379 to Bangkok, September 20 1960, 751J.00/9-1960, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1756, RG 59, USNA. Parsons was by most accounts an unusual choice. He was definitely the most experienced senior U.S. official with respect to the Laotian problem, having served as Ambassador there from 1956 to 1958. However, his personal distrust of and dislike for Souvanna were widely known. Souvanna described him as "the ignominious architect of disastrous American policy", and "the most nefarious and reprehensible of men." Not surprisingly, the Parsons-Brown-Souvanna talks failed. Still, Brown managed to get Souvanna to think about accepting American military aid to Phoumi, provided that it was only used against the Pathet Lao. In exchange, Washington would resume economic aid to Vientiane, allowing Souvanna to continue the pursuit of a political settlement. See also, Satawedin, "Thai-American Alliance During the Laotian Crisis 1959-62", 233.

89 Ibid.
Thais were losing faith in U.S. leadership. Johnson was an experienced diplomat, who was highly regarded in Washington. His appointment was taken by the Thais as a sign that, once again, Thailand was considered important by the U.S. However, Thai fears about American policy towards the crisis in Laos undermined this sentiment. In a October 1960 meeting with his counterparts from other American missions in Southeast Asia, Johnson argued that without Thailand's firm support for Washington, the drift towards neutralism in the region would be inevitable. Consequently, Johnson and his colleagues advised the State Department that in their opinion the only way to prevent a further decline in U.S. prestige in Southeast Asia was to increase the scope of economic and military aid to countries like Thailand. Johnson even advocated establishing a formal alliance with Thailand, a position which was definitely not favoured by most top officials in the State Department. Their fear was that U.S. financial and military commitments were becoming over-extended, and that with so many bilateral obligations, American forces were very likely to get involved in conflicts. Moreover, the Eisenhower administration favoured informal, piecemeal commitments to key nations rather than comprehensive bilateral alliances. In effect, this way Washington could elicit support with certain "rewards" when it needed to, while at the same time distancing itself from trouble when necessary.

Still, Johnson warned Washington that it would be extremely difficult to bring the Thais onboard with American policy regarding Laos without offering them a more "concrete" security guarantee than SEATO provided. He requested permission to tell Sarit that the U.S. would "without delay

---

90 Oral history interview, Robert G. Cleveland (U.S. State Department economic counsellor on Southeast Asia) with Horace G. Torbert, June 8 1990, 26, diskette, Georgetown University, Foreign Affairs Diplomatic History Program (hereafter cited as GUDFA). For Johnson's own account of his tenure in Thailand, see Johnson with McAllister, The Right Hand of Power, 291-314.
91 Cable, Bangkok 674 to State, October 16 1960, 751 J.00/10-1160, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1756, RG 59, USNA. See paper, "Asia and the West in the Free World" (discussion of Far East Asia desk and counsellor officers), undated, microfilm roll 29, Confidential State Department Central Files, The Far East 1953-1959, RG 59, USNA. See also secret attachment, "Military Aid to Thailand", briefing paper "Mr. Parson's Talks with Prime Minister Sarit", March 31 1959, file 1-A.3, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 1 1960, RG 59, USNA.
take appropriate measures as may be required to meet the situation" if Thailand were threatened. However the State Department balked at the wording, instructing the Ambassador to omit the "without delay." The Eisenhower administration considered it "inappropriate to allow the Thai government to consider in making this statement that it is our intention to undertake any bilateral commitment to Thailand beyond our SEATO obligations."\textsuperscript{93} It was evident that by November 1960 the outgoing Eisenhower administration had no desire to offer the unilateral security guarantee sought by the Thais. Given the rapid decay of Phoumi's forces and the resulting anxiousness in Bangkok, Johnson had no easy task managing relations with Thailand in the waning months of Eisenhower's tenure. He met many times with Sarit and Thanat in November and December, awkwardly trying to convince them of Washington's support without actually promising anything.\textsuperscript{94} In the face of insistent pressure for a guarantee, Johnson would go no further than to unofficially confirm that the U.S. would unilaterally respond militarily in defence of Thailand if the need arose.

Meanwhile developments in Laos continued to heavily influence U.S.-Thai relations. In November, Souvanna accepted an unconditional offer of economic aid from the Soviet Union, and in early December, Russian military transports began an airlift of goods into Laos.\textsuperscript{95} This was a significant public relations success for Moscow, which appeared to be coming to the rescue of a beleaguered neutralist government. With international observers unable or unwilling to verify reports of violations on the communist side of the Geneva Agreements, Washington and Bangkok alone appeared responsible for undermining attempts at establishing a "neutral" peace in Laos.

During the Soviet airlift, Sarit tried to prod SEATO into military action by announcing that Thailand, Pakistan, and the Philippines were ready for immediate intervention in Laos. However,

\textsuperscript{93} Cable, Bangkok 768 to State, October 28 1960 and cable, State 624 to Bangkok, November 2 1960, 751J.00/10-2060, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1756, RG 59, USNA.
\textsuperscript{94} Cable, U.S. Embassy Vientiane 890 to State, November 9 1960, 751J.00/11-160, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1756, RG 59, USNA.
\textsuperscript{95} Hannah, The Key to Failure, 65.
France was opposed to military action, and Britain was decidedly reluctant. 96 The U.S. was lukewarm to the deployment of SEATO forces because this would inevitably raise Cold War tensions, and possibly provoke a military response from the Soviets or Chinese. The Eisenhower administration also knew that a SEATO deployment would effectively be an American military operation, given that none of the other members had the requisite forces ready for action in the theatre. 97 Once again the Thais openly grumbled about the West's indecision, and once again Sarit ominously warned that without firm support for its allies, Thailand would have to "reconsider" its options.

By the end of 1960, rightist forces were making some advances against the Pathet Lao in the heavily contested Plaines des Jarres region of north-central Laos. In mid-December, Phoumi marched on Vientiane, determined to take over the government once and for all. Sensing defeat, Souvanna fled to exile in Cambodia, and Phoumi entered the capital virtually unopposed. American advisers were indispensable in Phoumi's victory, as were logistical and intelligence facilities in Thailand. The Thai border town of Nong Khai was used as a launching base for the final drive into Vientiane, and reports by the Indian Ambassador in Laos indicated that Thai navy gunboats in the Mekong shelled Pathet Lao positions. Sarit himself was later spotted "on tour" in Vientiane shortly after Phoumi's successful occupation. 98 No doubt in response to American pressure, Phoumi

---

96 Cable, U.S. Embassy London to State, September 21 1960, 751J.00/9-1960, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1756, RG 59, USNA. See also cable, Bangkok 568 to State, September 28 1960, 751J.00/9-1960, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1756, RG 59, USNA.

97 Top secret report, "SEATO planning", to Chapman at the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, December 11 1959, file 320.1, BFEA, OSEAA, Laos Files 1956-61, Box 2, RG 59, USNA. The Eisenhower administration had developed top secret, detailed plans for SEATO and American military operations in Laos. SEATO forces would go in to Laos to prevent a communist takeover, but they would be restricted from approaching the Vietnamese or Chinese borders. The United Nations would then be called upon to mediate the situation. The main American undertaking would be the so-called "Plan 3B", which was designed to "deny insurgents vital areas such as their seat of government and main centres of population and communications" with Thai assistance. Johnson warned that the Thai Army was "woefully deficient in training, morale and leadership, and is by no means prepared for serious combat." See also letter, Johnson to Eric Kocher, Director OSEAA, June 5 1958, Foreign Relations of the United States (hereafter cited as FRUS), United States Department of State, Volume XV, 1958-1960, South and Southeast Asia, 1026.

98 Dhansanit, "Thai-American Alliance During the Laotian Crisis", 77.
decided not to seek the Prime Minister's office himself. Instead, he engineered the selection of Prince Boun Oum, also a relative of Souvanna and Souphanavong. The U.S. and Thailand were quick to recognize the new government, but, not surprisingly, Moscow and Beijing did not follow suit. Much to Washington's dismay, however, some American allies, most notably the French, also steadfastly refused to recognize Boun Oum. Instead they backed the exiled Souvanna as the legitimate leader. This greatly embarrassed the Eisenhower administration, and again made the U.S. look like an aggressor in Laos.

Phoumi soon discovered that taking Vientiane unopposed was one thing, but successfully holding off the Pathet Lao in the jungles was quite another. His troops were clearly inferior, lacking both the ability and will to fight in such difficult conditions. The best that Washington could hope for in Laos without a decidedly more concerted and overt involvement was a stalemate. Getting ready to leave the Presidency, Eisenhower was in no position to make a greater commitment, and so he bequeathed to his successor a most unfortunate and complicated foreign policy dilemma regarding Laos; one which inevitably involved Thailand as well.

Eisenhower also left behind related problems in the so-called "Golden Triangle" region overlapping the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Burma. U.S. intelligence reports in December verified that KMT irregulars operating out of northern Thailand had engaged Burmese and even communist Chinese forces in another attempted "invasion" of Yunnan province.\(^9\) American fears were that Sarit knew of, and perhaps condoned KMT action in the area. Taiwanese officials had even requested Thai assistance in aiding the irregulars. Burmese authorities already distrusted and resented the Thais for their inaction against the Shan, Karen, and other rebellious ethnic minorities seeking sanctuary in Thailand in their intermittent civil war with the regime in Rangoon.\(^10\) Such

---

99 Cable, State 830 to Bangkok, December 10 1960, 690.00/3-2961, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 1392, RG 59, USNA.  
100 Having fled China in 1949 with the Communist victory there, several thousand Kuomintang troops settled throughout Laos, Vietnam, Burma, and northeastern Thailand. The majority concentrated in the remote highlands where the Thai,
Thai complicity with the KMT further threatened regional stability, and risked a serious escalation of tensions with the PRC in Burma and in Laos.101

During the closing months of 1960, there was also some concern in Washington about the cohesiveness of the Thai armed forces, and consequently, Sarit's hold on power. American military opinion was at best divided as to whether the Thais could develop any degree of defence self-sufficiency, and among Thai forces in the Northeast this issue was compounded by questions of commitment and loyalty to the Sarit regime. Desertions from the Thai army in this region were not uncommon, and occasional defections to the Pathet Lao undermined morale.102 Sarit's less than solid support from the Thai military and rumours about his failing health raised the possibility of a coup. In February 1960 there had even been an attempt on his life, allegedly orchestrated from within the Thai military establishment.103 The fact that it came close on the heels of an apparent attempted bombing of the American Embassy in Bangkok fuelled the notion that Sarit's foreign policy ties

---

101 Throughout the summer and fall of 1960, the U.S. Consulate in Chiangmai regularly reported clashes between the Burmese army and ethnic insurgents along the frontier. On several occasions, fighting spilled over into Thai border towns, involving considerable casualties. Thai press reports claimed that it was the Shans and Karen who were responsible for much of the damage, burning and looting Thai villages while fleeing the Burmese. American intelligence suggested that such acts were motivated by revenge against Thai military and border police, who failed to deliver on promised goods usually linked with the drug trade. See Cables, Bangkok 3276 to State, May 16 1960 and Bangkok 3290 to State, May 17 1960, 690.00/3-2961, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 1392, RG 59, USNA. See also airgrams, Chiangmai 21 to State, May 20 1960 and Chiangmai 23 to State, June 8 1960, 690.00/3-2961 in Ibid. For an in depth look at U.S. intelligence reports on the drug trade and its connection to Thai foreign relations, see file 14-A.1, Narcotics, Thailand 1960, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 2, USNA.

102 Cable, Bangkok 4168 to United States Air Force Command (hereafter cited as USAF), CINCPAC, November 29 1960, file 16-A, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 2, RG 59, USNA.

103 Sarit also suffered from a host of ailments, including cirrhosis of the liver. He had occasional blackouts and periods of unconsciousness, although this was kept strictly secret. While he dispelled coup rumours as "jai sum khun" (a log that smoulders but shows no fire), he was apparently shaken by the uncovering of the assassination plot. See memorandum of conversation, John Reed (U.S. Embassy Political Officer) and unnamed Field Grade Officer, Thai Defense Ministry, February 10 1960, file 9-E, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 1, RG 59, USNA.
with the U.S. disagreed with some high-ranking officers. However, Sarit prevailed over his 
enemies and during the last few months of 1960 he secured his political base, particularly in the 
Army, with a combination of patronage and dismissals. His fortunes were also furthered in 
November by the death of his old Coup Group rival, Phao Siyanon. Johnson noted that although 
Phao had remained in exile in Switzerland over the past two years, he still represented a "rallying 
point for the dissatisfied military and politicians." Phao's sudden death by heart attack clearly 
removed one major source of opposition to Sarit.

As the 1950's came to a close it became apparent that the crisis in Laos was coming to a head. 
Viewing Laos as the litmus test for American credibility in Asia, the Eisenhower administration, 
despite obvious political and military problems in supporting anti-communist Lao factions, 
expanded its role in the civil war, while at the same time trying desperately to limit the extent of that 
involvement. The more that Washington staked its reputation on turning back the communist tides 
in Southeast Asia, the more important Laos seemed. Reflecting on the crisis, Senate Majority leader 
William Knowland (R-California) was not alone in his belief that the Geneva Agreements and U.S. 
hesitation over the Laotian situation constituted "one of the great Communist victories of the 
decade." Yet "winning" in Laos required a commitment that no U.S. president could make easily. 
Still, the price of abandoning it would also be steep in terms of American prestige and influence in 
the region.

---

104 Message, U.S. Army Thailand 070300Z to Army Chief of Staff Washington, June 8 1960, file 9-E, BFEA, OSEAA, 
Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 1, RG 59, USNA. The incident at the U.S. Embassy involved a dud grenade attached to 
TNT, found with a letter condemning American and Thai involvement in Laos. The grenade was of the type 
commonly used in the Laotian conflict, so the Pathet Lao were officially blamed. However, it was believed by some 
that disaffected members of the Thai army may have had a part in the attempted bombing. See also message, U.S. 
Army Bangkok 270830Z to Department of the Army Washington, May 28 1960, file 1 A5, in ibid.
105 Message, Bangkok 4168 to USAF CINCPAC, November 29 1960, file 16-A, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-
63, Box 1, RG 59, USNA.
Relations with Thailand were inextricably linked to the situation in Laos. Bangkok’s perception of its position in the Cold War hinged on how the U.S. responded to the Laotian conflict, and Thai leaders were very careful to remind Washington that this was the case. The Thais also wanted a unilateral security guarantee from Washington, something that Eisenhower was not prepared to offer for fear of over-extending U.S. military and economic obligations. Without American promises, the Thais hinted that their friendship would be tested, and, consequently, that U.S. policy in Southeast Asia would be threatened.

The Laotian crisis thus impacted very seriously on U.S.-Thai relations. Sarit and others in the Thai government believed that the communist advance in Laos was simply a precursor to communist infiltration into Thailand and beyond. Sarit understood the reservations Washington had about the efficacy of backing Phoumi, but he had difficulty understanding why the U.S. ever considered negotiating with the communists. Thailand’s own national security interests, and not any consideration of global factors or implications, motivated Bangkok’s policy towards Laos. The Eisenhower administration considered Thailand to be an invaluable component in the emerging struggle for Southeast Asia, and by most accounts, the State Department saw Thai foreign policy as being "mature and cautious." But Washington was simply not prepared to enter into a unilateral security agreement with Bangkok, and instead maintained SEATO as the vehicle for a U.S. commitment to Thailand’s security. Meanwhile the Thais were progressively disillusioned with SEATO, and came to view American reliance on it as a sign of weakness and hesitation. Needing Thai support for operations in Laos, Washington had to seriously consider Bangkok’s attitude towards SEATO. In this way Thailand exerted considerable influence on U.S. policy, as historian Arthur Dommen has pointed out, and contributed to a disproportionate American concern about Laos given its low intrinsic strategic value.107

Simultaneously, the situation in Laos allowed Sarit to strengthen his hold on power through the elimination of internal opposition and the reinforcement of military authoritarianism. Sarit's "revolution" ushered in one of the most authoritarian periods in the country's history. Thailand fully entered the Cold War, and risked its cherished independence in the process. Not only would the U.S. have to pay for developing and securing its ally, but frequently it would have to contend with the nuances of a culture most Americans did not understand. Despite Washington's efforts, Thailand always seemed slightly aloof, always wary of American plans and commitment. The 1960's would present monumental challenges to the informal alliance between the two nations that had coalesced in the 1950s. With the winds of another American war in Asia churning, U.S.-Thai relations faced a crucial turning point. The bamboo would bend, but it would not break.
*CHAPTER TWO*

" The Trouble With 'Little Brother': Laos and U.S.-Thai Relations, 1961 "

The day before he left the White House in January 1961, Dwight Eisenhower offered his Democratic successor, John F. Kennedy, two pieces of advice with respect to U.S. foreign policy. First and foremost, he cautioned him not to recognize the People's Republic of China. Doing so, he thought, would only give communism in Asia additional credibility and momentum. Secondly, Eisenhower warned Kennedy to watch out for Laos. It was in Laos that he believed the U.S. should stand against Asian communism, and there where he feared American military involvement was inevitable, "with others if possible, alone if necessary."¹

Eisenhower had ample reason to warn Kennedy about Laos. Over the preceding decade that country's complicated and tragic internal strife had steadily worsened, entangling Washington in it. The transition period between the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations coincided with Soviet aid to the Pathet Lao, and the consolidation of its military and political power throughout much of the Plaines des Jarres. Without decisive action from Washington, there was virtually no chance to turn the tide.

John F. Kennedy inherited a policy towards Southeast Asia from Eisenhower, but did not share his predecessor's conviction that Laos was so crucial to U.S. national security.² Even with a more concerted response from the U.S., the situation in Laos seemed intractable to Kennedy. Non-communist forces were weak and divided, while the Pathet Lao were well-organised and committed. Many in the Kennedy administration believed that U.S. policy in Laos under Eisenhower was guided by an obsessive anti-communism, blind to the political realities of that country and too

¹ Dean Rusk, As I Saw It (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990), 429.
fixated on its relationship to the developing crisis in South Vietnam. While Kennedy certainly did not dismiss the communist threat in Laos and its connection to the worsening situation in Vietnam, he also was keenly aware of the pitfalls of direct U.S. military intervention in the Laotian conflict. Journalist Bernard Fall once commented that Laos was a country by "geographical convenience" only, and Kennedy fully endorsed this view.³ Laos was home to at least five major linguistic and forty tribal divisions, and its politics were labyrinthine. Except for the Pathet Lao, few Lao showed much commitment to political ideals. The Lao were not known as valiant fighters, a fact amply demonstrated by Phoumi's men, and most of the troops in non-communist armies were concerned more with rivalries between factions than the threat that communism posed.⁴ In fact, ideological differences between some contending Lao leaders were virtually non-existent.

In this light, the Laotian crisis seemed to Kennedy to be the by-product of regional disintegration and ethnic conflict, more than the precursor to a communist take-over of Southeast Asia masterminded by Moscow or Beijing. Chester Cooper, an NSC Staff member from 1961 to 1967, later observed that in the opinion of Kennedy administration "Laos was not all that god-damned important."⁵ U.S. policy in Laos was fragmented, without a coherent framework to harmonise the actions of various agencies operating in the country and their superiors in Washington. The result was confusion, compounded by the fact that some departments like the CIA operated virtually independent of the White House. One senior American official stationed in Vientiane remarked, "[T]his is the end of nowhere. We can do anything we want here because Washington doesn't seem to know it exists."⁶

³ Ibid.
⁶ Ibid, 240.
While he had no desire to look "weak" by surrendering Laos to communism, Kennedy also had no intention of being drawn into war, especially over so indefensible a country. Even a negotiated settlement seemed unlikely given the extension of Pathet Lao control in the field. Consequently, almost immediately after taking office Kennedy developed a more conciliatory approach to the Laotian crisis, seeking avenues of international negotiation along the lines of the 1954 Geneva Accords. He hoped that talks would at least buy Washington much-needed time to develop a more comprehensive approach to problems in Indochina, and to reassure its allies in the region of the American commitment against communist encroachment.

Commitment was the centrepiece of Kennedy's world-view. Commitment established credibility, and American credibility was, to Kennedy, the key to winning the Cold War. He was motivated by the perception that U.S. influence and power were waning given the success of leftist movements in the developing world, especially after the Cuban Revolution. He was deeply affected by Nikita Khrushchev's call for "wars of liberation" in January 1961. He believed that Eisenhower's approach to international relations had been frequently "unimaginative and inept". Above all, as evidenced by the team of advisors with whom he surrounded himself, Kennedy was convinced that an intellectual "can-do" approach to foreign policy could restore American prestige. In this respect, Kennedy saw Indochina as a critical test for the U.S., not just in terms of regional interests, but on the world stage as well.

---


68
The Kennedy administration faced a decidedly grim situation in Southeast Asia in 1961. American support for South Vietnam was inexorably building, while the situation there was deteriorating. Even "neutral" Cambodia was in trouble, with a weak national government and a mercurial leader. In this foreboding setting Thailand represented a potential bastion for Washington, a citadel of anti-communism in the midst of regional instability. However, Thai dissatisfaction with the Kennedy administration’s conciliatory approach in Laos was a real problem. The dilemma for the administration was how to extricate the U.S. from the Laotian crisis without alienating the Thais. A neutralist settlement in Laos seemed to be the best outcome by early 1961, but such a settlement would require Thai approval. The Thais had been frustrated with American policy in Laos from the beginning of the conflict there, and they were not likely to easily embrace talks of any sort with the communists. But Thailand’s dissatisfaction with the American preference for a negotiated settlement was also an effective bargaining tool, because Bangkok could set a high price for its endorsement.

John Kennedy’s victory over Vice-President Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential election was greeted with some trepidation in Thai government circles. Sarit easily identified with Eisenhower, a fellow military man. Sarit believed that as an arch anti-communist, Nixon would also be easy to get along with. He hoped that the Vice-President’s reputation as a tough anti-communist would translate into more robust U.S. action in Laos, and that U.S.-Thai relations would strengthen as a result. About Kennedy, Sarit knew very little. His advisers did warn him that the Democratic party’s resolve to fight communism in Asia was not nearly as great as the Republican’s. Worried that the new President would not take the Laotian crisis seriously enough, Sarit believed that the insurgency in Thailand would certainly intensify if Laos was lost to communism. Sarit had a good appreciation of Thailand’s strategic value to the U.S., and an ability to make Washington listen. What he wanted Kennedy to understand was that without a more direct U.S. involvement to back up Phoumi,
whose position in Laos continued to deteriorate, the Pathet Lao would be sure to win, leaving Thailand with a serious communist threat on its border and within Thailand itself.8

The Kennedy administration favoured the idea of a coalition government in Vientiane headed by Souvanna Phouma. While Washington continued to have doubts about him, Souvanna appeared more and more as the "lesser of two evils." Phoumi was too volatile, and supporting him would invariably increase the likelihood of more American military involvement in Laos. Boun Oum's lack of popularity and his connections to Phoumi also made him an unattractive choice. Unlike Dulles and Eisenhower, Kennedy believed that Souvanna was not a communist, or even sympathetic to the Pathet Lao.9 However, the Thais did not share Kennedy's assessment of Souvanna and refused to consider him either as the head of a coalition government or as a participant in any government in Laos. Getting Sarit's his support for Souvanna became the primary goal in U.S. policy towards Thailand throughout 1961.

While Thailand could hardly be ignored by the Kennedy administration, it never became a major foreign policy focus. Whereas the Eisenhower administration struggled with an ad hoc and disjointed policy towards Southeast Asia, Kennedy at least initially tried to develop an overall plan. The State Department took stock of its assets and liabilities in the area, and attempted to form a relatively comprehensive and integrated foreign policy for the region. Getting out of Laos was the first step, and the Thais were essential in this. Making a stand elsewhere in the region was the next.10 Kennedy himself seldom intervened in U.S.-Thai relations, nor did most other top administration officials. The new president's foreign policy decision-making was more informal and decentralised

8 Cable. Bangkok 1925 to State, April 27 1961, 751J00/4-2661, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1762, RG 59, USNA.
9 Cable, Bangkok 1979 to State, May 5 1961, 751J00/5-161, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1762, RG 59, USNA.
10 Memo, State to General Maxwell Taylor, "Defensibility of Southeast Asia and U.S. Commitments", October 27 1961, file 9A, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 4, RG 59, USNA. In this top secret memo to CINCPAC, the State Department acknowledged that Thailand allowed the U.S. to "carry on an increasing number of operations... which we could not conduct from any other piece of real estate in Asia." In fact, Thailand had become the "unofficial and disguised" centre of operations for American policy in the region, without which the U.S. would be forced to rely solely on air and sea power from its Pacific island chains.
than his predecessor's. Management of U.S. foreign policy in Thailand fell primarily to the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs. While understanding Thailand's importance to U.S. regional interests, the comparative stability of Sarit's regime and the more sedate nature of the Thai polity allowed Kennedy and his top advisors to focus almost exclusively on Indochina. Thailand came to be seen more as a complement to U.S. policy in Vietnam and Laos, rather than as warranting its own unique relationship. In addition to U.S. involvement in the Laotian civil war, Eisenhower had also committed American economic and military power to the defense of Ngo Dien Diem's regime in Saigon, and Kennedy in many respects expanded that commitment.11 The Kennedy administration's preoccupation with Laos and Vietnam hampered the development of an integrated and coordinated regional policy in which Thailand would have figured more prominently.

During Kennedy's tenure, Thailand aligned itself more closely with American interests in Southeast Asia, while exacting a heavy price from Washington for its services as a staging ground and ally. But what the Thais wanted most was a bilateral alliance with the United States, and that was something the Americans were hesitant to give. As the U.S. moved down the road to conflict in Vietnam, Thailand provided everything from air bases to brothels for American servicemen, not to mention a strong Asian voice against communism. And in return Thailand got money, material and the continuing legitimization of military authoritarianism. Yet as Washington dug itself deeper in Indochina, the Thais found themselves amidst a region full of enemies.

In the first few months of its mandate, the Kennedy administration reviewed the overall U.S. position in Asia. Kennedy quickly came to a very negative estimation of his predecessor's Asian policy, which he characterized as "terrible."12 One of the first in-country reports the new President

11 Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975, chapter 3. For example, in the spring Kennedy increased the MAAG contingent in the South and sent an additional 400 Special Forces troops to train the South Vietnamese Army. This followed his approval of $US 48 million in military aid. (76-78)
received on Laos was from the American ambassador, Winthrop Brown. He warned that it was an "illusion" that the U.S. could unilaterally establish any degree of security in Laos, and that any military action would be "at best protracted", holding "little hope for the integrity of the country." The Southeast Asian division of the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs generally held a similar viewpoint, recommending a negotiated settlement in Laos and emphasis on regional economic development as the key to long-term solutions for Indochina. There were, however, some Asian experts who held close to the Eisenhower line. The Bureau's Kenneth Landon wrote Kennedy's Deputy to the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, Walt Rostow, that "it is as difficult for me to believe that Souvanna is not a communist as it would be to believe that a bride is still a virgin after a month of marriage to a healthy man." He also warned that Brown's view was biased, because he had been "inside a disturbed microcosm" for too long. Some of Brown's harsher critics referred to him as that "communist Ambassador.""14

Kennedy acknowledged that the situation in Laos was dire, and that only considerable, direct military action by the U.S. could ensure that the communists would not emerge victorious. Such military intervention, however, was never seriously entertained by anyone in the Kennedy administration. More and more the focus was on Vietnam, where key Cabinet members like Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara envisioned a much easier military and political defense against communism.15 This is not to say that Kennedy abandoned Laos altogether. In fact, there is ample evidence to suggest that he had a "two-track" policy. While outwardly pushing for a peaceful

---

13 Cable, Vientiane 1364 to State, January 18 1961, file Laos General 1956-1/19/61, #5a, NSF Country Files Laos, Box 130, JFKL.
settlement, Kennedy wanted to maintain the political leverage of non-communist forces. Moreover, while he appeared to concede that the best Washington could hope for in Laos was a "neutralist" settlement, Kennedy was determined to make a show of strength elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

The new President set about establishing a Southeast Asia "Task Force" in the hopes of developing a more cohesive foreign policy approach to this critical region. One issue with which the task force would have to grapple was the dissatisfaction of Thailand with American policy. In addition to concerns over Washington's policy in Laos, the Thais very much wanted to change the structure of SEATO, arguing that the principle of unanimity in voting on key decisions inevitably undermined the effectiveness of the organisation. Afraid that such a change would put greater pressure on the U.S. for a unilateral commitment, the State Department purposely dragged its heels on this matter.

Kennedy was anxious to achieve a settlement in Laos, but not at the expense of American interests or prestige. To this end, the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs developed several other alternatives to a negotiated settlement and neutralist government. One was a top secret, so-called "Federal Solution" to the situation, envisioning a "loose de facto association" of the southern three provinces in Laos with Thailand. While nothing ever came of the plan, it is clearly an illustration of Washington's concern over Bangkok's reaction to proposed negotiations. Furthermore, despite the reluctance to go into Laos alone, Kennedy did not discount the possibility of SEATO or even UN intervention. In the spring of 1961, the Secretaries of State and Defense considered the circumstances under which U.S. forces could be introduced into the theatre as part of a multinational force. By introducing the call for a cease fire into the UN Security Council through an

---

16 Memo, Walter McConaughy (BFEA) to Secretary of State, November 17 1961, file: SEATO 1961, BFEA, Assistant Secretary for Far East Asia (hereafter cited as ASFEA), Subject, Personal Name and Country Files 1960-63, Box 10, RG 59, USNA.
ally such as the British, Washington could force Moscow’s hand. Accepting the proposal would lend momentum to a negotiated settlement, while vetoing it would give the U.S. a public relations victory and a chance to bring the Laotian crisis to the General Assembly.

In the meantime, planning for a multinational SEATO contingent took place that featured Thailand as the logical base of operations. Although collective military intervention in Laos by SEATO members was viewed as a last resort, the plans for it again clearly illustrate the value Washington placed on Thailand. State Department estimates anticipated an initial deployment of approximately 13,000 combat troops from SEATO members, with the vast majority being U.S. and Thai forces. Longer term deployments under SEATO "Plan 5" estimated that nearly 17,000 non-American ground troops would be needed, of which nearly half would be Thai. In June 1961, the State Department addressed the deployment issue in a round of secret discussions with the Australian government. Perhaps anticipating a negative response to such overtures from the British or French, Washington dealt only Canberra. This obviously did not reflect well on the credibility of SEATO as a multilateral defense arrangement. The key questions in all SEATO plans involved the Chinese. If they intervened, both secretaries Rusk and McNamara cautioned that "prompt counter action" would be required, and that "there would be issues whether to attack

---

18 From a strategic vantage, the focus of any operations would be to maintain the faltering Royal Lao Army hold along the Mekong, rather than advancing into the Plaines des Jarres. American air operations were to be confined to Laos, although their extension against North Vietnam was not ruled out pending Viet Minh action. See draft memo, W.W. Rostow, "Military Intervention in Laos", undated, file Laos General 9/61, #9, NSF Country Files Laos, Box 130, JFKL. See also Memo, "Plan for Possible Intervention in Laos", May 30 1961, file Thailand General 1/61 to 5/61, #10, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL and report, Southeast Asia Task Force, "A Plan of Action for Southeast Asia Covering Thailand, Cambodia, South Vietnam and Laos", August 25 1961, file Task Force on Laos, January-August 1961, BFEA, OSEAA, Laos Files 1956-61, Box 12, RG 59, USNA.

19 Memorandum of conversation, "Possibility of Establishing a SEATO Force in Thailand", Alfred Jenkins (Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Asian Affairs) with Barry Dexter (First Secretary to the Australian Embassy, Washington) and Howard Jones (Australian Advisor to Special Assistant for SEATO Affairs), June 9 1961, file FE 5000-5599 "Top Secret", BFEA, ASFEA, Top Secret Files of the Regional Planning Adviser, Box 1, RG 59, USNA. See also cable, Bangkok 1925 to State, April 27 1961, 751.J00/4-2661, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1762, RG 59, USNA.
targets in South China and whether to initiate use of nuclear weapons."\(^{20}\) In the opinion of both the State and Defense departments a contingency plan to address possible Chinese intervention and the use of nuclear weapons required "urgent examination."\(^{21}\)

The State Department also contemplated a unilateral commitment of U.S. troops to Thailand. In March 1961, Deputy NSC Adviser Walt Rostow drafted a basic blueprint for the introduction of U.S. troops, ostensibly in the event of a total collapse in Laos. However, Rostow also believed that having such troops in Thailand during any negotiations on Laos could give Washington more bargaining power. Rostow's plan was, of course, kept secret, lest the Thais consider it a sign of

long-term military commitment.\(^{22}\) The American military establishment seemed to favour the introduction of troops in Thailand, believing that it would be a confidence builder for Asian allies and validate the considerable investment Washington had in equipping and training nearly 300,000 South Vietnamese and Thai forces.\(^{23}\) In March 1961, Ambassador U.A. Johnson approached Bangkok on the issue of U.S. troops in Thailand, discussing the potential deployment of U.S.

\(^{20}\) In fact, exactly such a scenario was envisioned in a top secret Defense Department report during 1958. It concluded, without much substantiation, that in the event of a nuclear strike against the PRC, Thailand could be expected to be in full support. See Report, Defense Department, "U.S. and Allied Capabilities for Limited Military Operations to July 1, 1961", May 1958, file Top Secrets S/P 5959 to OD-S/P-38151-6-A, BFEA, ASFEA, Top Secret Files of the Regional Planning Adviser 1955-63, Box 2, RG 59, USNA.

\(^{21}\) State-Defense top secret memorandum for the President, "Plan for Possible Intervention in Laos, together with Discussion for and against Such Action", May 4 1961, file 5/1/61 to 5/8/61, #7, NSF Country Files Laos, Box 130, JFKL. The State-Defense plan confidently estimated that the limited and "diplomatic" deployment of the SEATO force outlined in their report would likely not trigger a massive Chinese response. Moreover, it argued that without any show of resolve in Laos, the U.S. would need a "truly Herculean effort" to convince any Asian allies of Washington's commitment. The Secretaries conservatively estimated that an additional $US 250 million per year would be required to ensure the security of Thailand and Vietnam.


\(^{23}\) Memo, Harold Cleveland to Secretary of State, May 2 1961, 751J.00/5-161, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1762, RG 59, USNA. As the Intelligence Officer assigned to assess the military capacities of Southeast Asian states, Cleveland reported to Rusk that he was "appalled at the quality of military advice on the basis of which you and the President are expected to make the over-all national security judgements." He went on to point out that despite "full access" to Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand for many years, the U.S. was "quite limited" in its ability to train armed forces there. Cleveland said he "listened with a sense of shock to military advice that Americans of course were not trained to fight under these (jungle) conditions and would, therefore, find the going very tough."
Marines and Air Force squadrons in the Northeast for service in Laos. Although welcoming a more proactive stance from Washington, the Thais expressed concern over adverse reaction to any such deployments from their communist neighbours, particularly the PRC. Sarit was also apprehensive that the U.S. show of strength would be only temporary, leaving Thailand extremely vulnerable after the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

While U.S. civilian and military officials contemplated a possible American troop commitment to Thailand, the Kennedy administration extended covert operations in Indochina for which Thailand's support and cooperation were required. In April 1961, the CIA began funding "Project Ekamad", which involved the training of a whole battalion of Royal Lao troops at bases in northeastern Thailand. A month later the programme was extended to include officers, special artillery units and pilots in the Royal Lao air force - all under the auspices of American "advisers."

In addition to this, the Kennedy administration enlisted the active support of the Thai Army, which contributed its own advisers for "special training" exercises with the Lao. Sarit even agreed to implement a "volunteer program", wherein Thai technicians and even pilots were temporarily "discharged" from the air force, only to quickly reappear as special "consultants" to the Royal Lao Government - complete with Lao identification tags. By early 1962, nearly sixty such advisers were employed with Lao units, all on the CIA payroll. As for the American advisers keeping a low profile, the State Department's Director of Intelligence and Research (INR), Roger Hilsman, noted that "Aloha shirts, Cadillacs and free spending in the shops and night clubs of Vientiane... are scarcely calculated to minimize the impact of such a presence."

---

24 Cable, Bangkok 1671 to State, March 17 1961, 751.100/3-1061, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1756, RG 59, USNA.
26 Memorandum, "Background on Laos", Roger Hilsman at INR, April 13 1961, folder 2, Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 2, JFKL.
The secret camps in northeastern Thailand continued to train Phoumi's troops, albeit not so secretly anymore. PARU and even BPP patrols were frequently engaged in surveillance operations with more than the occasional rumour surfacing that they had even partaken in combat against the Pathet Lao. In the summer of 1961, the CIA enlisted PARU squads to help "convert" Hmong tribesmen in the central highlands of Laos and Vietnam. They were taken to Thailand for military training. Joint covert operations were in fact "formalized" with the establishment of the "Joint Liaison Detachment" (JLD) in late 1962. Through this body the CIA could orchestrate much of the training and logistics required for clandestine activities in Laos with full support and knowledge of Thai military authorities. The Thai Army even set up a special unit, HQ 333, to serve as the coordinator for such activities, enlisting some fifty special operations personnel.27

The Kennedy administration's support for covert military operations in Laos unarguably constituted a violation of the Geneva Agreements. Under Kennedy's direction U.S. policy in Southeast Asia became more, not less, involved. In this respect, Kennedy was much closer to the position maintained by the American military. Giving up Laos without any fight would be tantamount to surrender. Clandestine operations, especially when coordinated with those aimed against North Vietnam, were an effective, and less costly, means of engagement than outright American involvement. However, where Kennedy differed from the military was in his belief that a negotiated settlement to the Laotian crisis was both desirable and possible. While the Thais were

27 Castle, "At War in the Shadow of Vietnam", 277-280. There was considerable emphasis on U.S. covert activity in Southeast Asia throughout 1961, in part owing to Walt Rostow's concerns that the Washington needed a "conceptual framework" for counter-insurgency in the region. The State Department and Pentagon addressed the issue in an extensive memorandum in July. The emphasis was on establishing a clear and definable line of defense against communism, effectively sealing the borders of Thailand and South Vietnam. Arguing that the U.S. had "confused nuclear power with usable power", the report suggested creating small and "elusive" bands of specialized guerrillas, capable of both a military and political role in winning popular support. The report did not advocate the placement of conventional U.S. troops in the region as a long-term deterrence to communist subversion, suggesting that such deployment would be ineffective against insurrections and could provoke a more overt conflict with North Vietnam or the PRC. See memo, "Security in Southeast Asia", George McGhee (Counselor, State Department) for Rostow, July 28 1961, file Thailand General 6/61 to 7/61, #9, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
pleasantly surprised by the President's predilection for covert action, they could not easily accept the latter sentiment.

Throughout 1960 and 1961 several attempts at negotiations with respect to the Laotian civil war failed. Kennedy's State Department strategists clearly considered the PRC, and not the Soviet Union, to be the major obstacle to any negotiated settlement in Laos. Radio broadcasts from Beijing warned that no cease fire would be possible until all American advisers and equipment had been withdrawn. It was believed that owing to a shortage of arable land and a heavy dependency on Soviet oil exports, China faced "strong incentives to pull her into Southeastern Asia." In a top secret memo to the President, Acting Secretary of State George Ball warned that recent statements by Chinese officials "in language almost identical to that which we unhappily refused to take seriously in 1950 in Korea", underscored the probability of the PRC's intervention. Substantial American troops anywhere near the Mekong River could prompt a "massive Chinese Communist move into the area", which would necessitate the deployment of an American force upwards of 250,000. In this light, the Soviet Union was counted upon to be much more inclined to negotiations, and much easier to deal with.

At a TV news conference in March 1961, Kennedy called for a cease fire and negotiations with respect to the Laotian crisis. Two days later, the Joint Chiefs of Staff planned for CINCPAC

---

28 Dhanasarit, "Thai-American Alliance During the Laotian Crisis, 1959-1962", 84. Before the UN General Assembly in September 1960, the mercurial Cambodian leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, proposed the creation of a "neutral zone" in Southeast Asia, which would include Laos. That December, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharl Nehru called for the ICC in Laos to be reconvened. In January 1961, Sihanouk moved for a new international conference to be held, with invitations going to those represented at the 1954 Geneva Agreements, as well as Thailand and Burma. Finally, in February 1961, the King of Laos requested that Burma, Cambodia, and Malaysia form a commission to mediate between the Pathet Lao and Phoumi.

29 Memorandum for the President from the Acting Secretary of State, "The Developing Situation in Laos", April 26 1961, file 4/22/61 to 4/30/61, #6C, NSF Country Files Laos, Box 130, JFKL. Ball advised that the U.S. should cut its "immediate losses" and "secure the best possible agreement", while preparing a strong military position in Thailand and South Vietnam. Although noting that his conservative outlook was out of place "at a time when many people are hungry for action", Ball also cautioned that "a war with an increasingly powerful and expansionist China may ultimately be thrust upon us no matter what we do."

30 Statement by the President, notice by White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger, March 23 1961, file 3/22/61 to 3/24/61, NSF Country Files Laos, Box 130, JFKL. Kennedy implicated North Vietnamese "combat specialists" in
operations in the region as a show of force. By early April, both the British and Soviets responded favourably to the conference idea and presented themselves as co-sponsors for talks. However, there was considerable difficulty in determining exactly who would represent the Lao factions. Washington and London refused to have the Pathet Lao present, while the Soviets rejected Boun Oum's representation. Ironically, the Thais agreed with Moscow. Bangkok suspected correctly that the U.S. plan was to marginalize Phoumi by extending recognition to Boun Oum. Sarit disliked Boun Oum, and feared that he would be too quick to agree to a neutralist settlement at the behest of the Americans.

When it became apparent that neither of the superpowers would yield on the issue of Lao representation, it seemed unlikely that the proposed talks would even start. Moreover, even while Russian and American representatives tried to overcome their differences, Sarit gave clear indication that Thailand would not even attend any conference if the Lao representation did not satisfy him. A Thai refusal to participate would cause significant embarrassment for Washington. After all, Thailand was fast becoming a pillar of American policy in the region, and without Bangkok's support and its influence over Phoumi, it was unlikely that any peace settlement could be reached

aiding the Pathet Lao, warning that "no one should doubt our own resolution" to use necessary force in guaranteeing a neutral solution to the civil war.

31 Memorandum for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Top Secret Laos Situation Report 80-61", March 25 1961, file 3/25/61 to 3/31/61, NSF Country Files Laos, Box 130, JFKL. This included the deployment of a Marine battalion on station in the Gulf of Siam and the preparation of the "First Fleet Ready Strike Group" for deployment from the Thai west coast within 72 hours. A "Hunter-Killer" Strike Group was also formed in that area, while the Tactical Air Command Composite Air Strike Force was placed on DEFCON 4 alert.

32 Kennedy had few illusions about the Conference and the Lao representatives. Within two weeks of his inauguration, he received briefing on Laos from the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, which included an in depth assessment of the main Lao political figures. Souvanna was depicted as "weak", "impulsive", and as having an "over-weaning self-confidence." Still, it was believed he had a genuine interest in achieving a peaceful coalition, and that he was not a communist. Phoumi was seen as "energetic, tough, stubborn, and intolerant", and that "his personal ambition, authoritarian aims, and penchant for reliance on force have raised doubts as to his reliability." The popularity of Boun Oum was noted, but it was felt he was "not particularly able", and that he had "a reputation for corruption and immorality." He was also suspected of having "separatist aims." Souphanouvong was seen as the best Lao leader all-around, being an "able, intelligent and forceful leader." Phoumi Sananikone, the long-time American favourite, was also deemed "intelligent, realistic and skillful", although lacking in popular support. See report, "Informal Briefing Paper on Laos for the President", un-authored at BFEA, January 29 1961, BFEA, ASFEA, Subject, Personal Name and Country File 1960-63, Box 5, RG 59, USNA.

33 Ibid.
or maintained. The Thais saw a negotiated settlement in Laos as unworkable given the strength of the Pathet Lao. Therefore, for the Thais any talks were a concession to communism. Moreover, they vehemently opposed the composition of the International Control Commission (ICC), which was supposed to monitor and safeguard any settlement. Poland was a Russian satellite, while India was seen as opportunistic and untrustworthy. An old Thai proverb advised, "he who sees an Indian and a serpent should kill the Indian first." The Thais used Washington's support for India's membership as a vehicle to attack American aid to "non-aligned" states, such as Cambodia, despite the fact that they often distanced themselves from the U.S. and were even cordial with communists. Statements by all the major Thai leaders, and even the King, reflected tremendous anxiety, vulnerability and disappointment over American foreign policy in this regard. The Thais believed that, living in the shadow of Chinese communism, they had risked everything in support of the U.S., and were getting little in return.

The spring of 1961 was a tense period for both Washington and Bangkok. The U.S. needed the Thais to participate in a negotiated settlement on Laos, and to convince Phoumi to cooperate as well. During a cabinet meeting in April, the President made it clear that U.S. forces would not intervene in Laos, regardless of the consequences. However, Kennedy had already decided that in the event of a communist takeover there, "it would probably be essential, at a minimum, to place substantial U.S. forces in South Vietnam and Thailand." Therefore, Washington needed the Thais not just to obtain a negotiated peace but also to accept the presence of U.S. troops in their country if the communists triumphed in Laos. Conversely, Bangkok wanted a clear demonstration of Washington's resolve to stop communism in Laos and throughout the region, and a unilateral

---

34 Memo, Robert G. Cleveland and Edward E. Masters at BFEA/ OSEA, "Thai Questions on Southeast Asian Relations", February 6 1961, file Thailand General 1/61 to 5/61, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
35 Top secret memorandum on Laos, April 26 1961, file Laos General 3/13/61 to 2/15/61, #3, NSF Country Files Laos, Box 130, JFKL.
commitment to Thailand. Without that, it was possible the Thais would reassess their foreign policy options, with potentially dire consequences for American interests in Southeast Asia.

At the end of April, U.A. Johnson finished his tenure as Ambassador to return to Washington as Deputy Under Secretary of State for Far East Asia. The Thais were encouraged that his promotion would bode well for their relations with the new administration. Before his replacement, Kenneth Young, took over in May, the Embassy was headed by the Deputy Mission Chief, Leonard Unger; an extremely capable diplomat who had won considerable favour with the Thais as Johnson's "point man" on Laos. However, he faced the unenviable task of representing a new administration in Washington while the situation in the region deteriorated rapidly. Unger also faced the extremely difficult task of persuading the Thais to back the negotiations on Laos, which were scheduled to begin in May 1961.

Just before the conference began, the Pathet Lao made substantial gains against Phoumi's forces close to the Thai border, making Sarit and his government very anxious indeed. In fact, the Thai military seemed ready to act without consulting Washington, deploying its own troops to Thakhek near the border and sending Phoumi more "volunteer specialists" to operate "loaned" artillery. Unger believed that the Thais were genuine in their opposition to a negotiated settlement, but that their opposition to U.S. policy on Laos was not absolute. Through well-placed personal contacts in the Thai government, he knew that Sarit was open to concession, providing that Washington was willing to give something in return. Unger realized that the Thais were really not able to fight for

---

36 The crucial development in this regard was the defeat of Phoumi's forces at Muong Sai on April 24, 1961. This left the way to Luang Prabang virtually open for the Pathet Lao. Two Thai infantry battalions had already been called up to the border the week before, and additional forces were quickly deployed in anticipation of further communist advances. After the loss, Phoumi requested unilateral Thai assistance, realising that aid from the U.S. was not forthcoming. Although Sarit was restrained in intervening owing to pressure from Washington, it is clear that he seriously considered decisive action at this point. See file 751.J00/4-2661, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1762, RG 59, USNA.
37 Cable, Vientiane 1943 to State, April 26 1961, 751.J00/4-2661, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1762, RG 59, USNA. See also airgram, Bangkok 570 to State, April 18 1961 and cable, Bangkok 1901 to State, April 22 1961 in Ibid.
Phoumi in a prolonged conflict, and that they therefore wanted and needed a way to extricate themselves from Sarit's promises to support him regardless of American policy. Gradually throughout April and early May, key members of the Thai Cabinet gave calculated statements to the press, distancing the government from situation from Laos. Unger correctly saw this as the Thai way of letting Washington know that, with the right inducements, they would endorse Kennedy's Laotian policy.

On April 29, Thanat Khoman announced to the press the "minimum conditions" for Thai attendance at Geneva. The key sticking points involved the cessation of PRC and North Vietnamese aid to the Pathet Lao, and the verification of a cease fire agreement by the United Nations. Thanks to Unger's quiet efforts behind the scene, the Thais dropped their long-standing opposition to a coalition government in Vientiane. The announcement coincided with a tour of Southeast Asian capitals by Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Kennedy sent him to assure leaders in the region that the U.S. was not abandoning Laos. A visit to Bangkok, and a meeting with Sarit, was a top priority. Rusk's main objective was to convince Sarit to support the talks in Geneva on Laos, and to get him to pressure Phoumi to do the same. However, Rusk clearly felt the need to shore up the American relationship with Thailand, fearing that a "Communist Laos would simply transfer the struggle in Southeast Asia" and "persuade Asians to melt away on the thesis that the game is up." While he was adamantly against unilateral American military action in Laos, he considered U.S. national security to be very much at stake with the "collective interest" of nations like Thailand. Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles agreed, arguing that circumstances in the region constituted an "ugly situation...in large measure the creature of our own errors." However, like

---

38 Cables, Bangkok 1912 to State, April 25 1961; Bangkok 1930 to State, April 30 1961 and Bangkok 1945 to State, April 29 1961, 751.J00/4-1761, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1762, RG 59, USNA.
39 Cables, Rusk via Bangkok to State (Acting Secretary Chester Bowles), SECTO 11, April 28 1961 and SECTO 7, April 27 1961, 751.J00/4-2661, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1762, RG 59, USNA.
many in the Kennedy administration, Rusk and Bowles both feared that the introduction of American troops in Laos would precipitate Chinese intervention. Bowles warned that Washington needed to bring Thailand and other non-communist states in line with U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia, creating "the strongest possible moral, legal, political and military base from which to conduct this struggle... if we are going to face a major war with China." \(^{40}\)

In early May, Kennedy also sent his "roving Ambassador" and Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Asia, W. Averell Harriman, to Bangkok to convince the Prime Minister that Thai attendance at Geneva was needed. Harriman and his entourage then travelled to the Northeast, where they tried to persuade Phoumi to agree to a government headed by Souvanna. Harriman essentially threatened Phoumi, challenging and embarrassing him in a most "un-Asian" fashion. After the incident, the U.S. Embassy in Thailand was left with the unenviable task of asking an already unhappy Sarit to help them "smooth things over." \(^{41}\) In fact, throughout Asia the Harriman mission left a rather bad impression. The image conveyed was that Washington was "selling out" to communism in agreeing to the Geneva Conference. The Thai language newspaper *Kiattisak* ran an editorial warning that "[W]e Thais are willing to die for persons in whom we feel confidence and whom we love. All we ask is for our friends to keep their promises. But if any person breaks promises made to us, we can become their worst enemy." \(^{42}\)

In late May Kennedy sent Vice President Lyndon Johnson on a goodwill tour of Asian capitals to coincide with the start of the Geneva Conference. The tour included an important stop in Bangkok.

---

\(^{40}\) Letter, Chester Bowles to Dean Rusk, April 29 1961, 751.100/4-2661, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1762, RG 59, USNA.

\(^{41}\) Oral history interview, Kenneth Todd Young with Dennis O'Brien, April 28 1969, HUG (FP) 26.3, folder 2, 85-94, Kenneth Todd Young Jr. Papers, HUA. Apparently the Thais did not like Harriman at all. According to Kenneth Young, Sarit and Harriman had an ugly private exchange over the Geneva Conference. In Thai, Sarit told Harriman to let Kennedy know that his policy was "a hell of a lot of shit." Young, who spoke Thai, was shocked, but Thanat, acting as Sarit's interpreter, translated the statement to Harriman as "he's very interested in what you are saying. He has some opinions of his own, but he will consider what you have said."

Johnson's visit was designed to boost the Thais' confidence in Washington, and at the same time, to persuade them to go to Geneva. In anticipation of Johnson's arrival, the Sarit regime tried to move Washington away from a neutralist solution in Laos. At almost exactly the same time that the Geneva Conference began, the Thais reported increased activity by their own insurgents in the Northeast and South that coincided with a Pathet Lao advance near the Thai border. Just days before Johnson's arrival in Thailand, the Thai Interior Ministry announced the discovery of a major communist plot, arresting 59 guerillas with alleged ties to the Pathet Lao. Beijing's New China News Agency added to the alarm by devoting an unusual attention to the "armed resistance... against U.S. imperialists and their running dogs" in Thailand. This was the PRC's first major reference to the conflict in Thailand, and ironically it could not have come at a better time for Sarit.

Sarit's intent was obvious. He wanted to demonstrate to Washington that the communists could not be trusted, and that a negotiated settlement on Laos would, at best, be a temporary arrangement. The Pathet Lao were, in his view, only players in a larger communist plan to spread throughout Southeast Asia, and they were already moving into Thailand. The State Department saw the arrests by the Interior Ministry as an obvious attempt by Sarit to look tough, in the hopes of extracting additional aid or promises from the Vice President. In typical Thai fashion, the crackdown on guerillas with ties to the Pathet Lao was coupled with renewed hints from key government officials that Thailand might attend the Geneva Conference. Sarit himself even told the Bangkok Post that not attending would be "unmannerly."44

Lyndon Johnson was received by the Thais in grand style. Sarit did not miss the opportunity to showcase both Thai culture and the economic progress the country had made under his rule. The

---

43 Cable, U.S. Consulate Hong Kong 1796 to State, May 19 1961, 792.00/5-1961, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2136, RG 59, USNA.
44 Cable, Roger Hilsman at INR in State 88 to Rusk at American Consul General Geneva, May 13 1961, 751.J00/5-1361, CDF Laos 1960-63 Box 1762, RG 59, USNA. See also cable, Bangkok 2007 to State, May 9 1961, 751.J00/5-1361, in Ibid.
visit also represented a further legitimization of Sarit's leadership, and to this end the Prime Minister was careful to be seen with Johnson at every stop on his tour of the country. In public, both men celebrated the Thai-American relationship as a model of cooperation and friendship. But in private meetings it was clear that Laos remained a tremendous, and potentially hazardous, obstacle to continuing cooperation. Thanat was always present for discussions, a clear indication that Sarit wanted the Vice President to face tough questions. Moreover, the Thais made it clear from the outset that they did not share the Kennedy administration's "world crisis view."\(^\text{45}\) Thanat contended that increased American involvement in Laos would not automatically provoke a military response from either the Chinese or Soviets. Such fears, he believed, were unfounded and seemed only a convenient reason to avoid forceful action.\(^\text{46}\)

Johnson tried to assuage Thai fears about the U.S. resolve to contain communism. He had been thoroughly briefed about the Thais and their importance to overall U.S. policy in the region, but was counselled to watch what he said.\(^\text{47}\) Johnson's only blunder may have been when he suggested that Washington was considering developing a "Pacific NATO", in which Thailand would no doubt be key. But Johnson stopped short of any suggestion that SEATO would be scrapped. Sarit told the Vice President that the Thais were ready to send 5,000 troops into Laos if the U.S. was prepared to act unilaterally, but that they would no longer rely on SEATO.\(^\text{48}\) No doubt sensing the depth of Thai animosity towards SEATO, Johnson did not attempt a vigorous defence of the

\(^\text{45}\) Cable, Bangkok 184 to State, May 19 1961, file Far East Trip, May 1961, #24d, Vice President's (hereafter cited as VP) Security Files, Box 1, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library (hereafter cited as LBJL).
\(^\text{46}\) Thanat Khoman, "Which Road For Southeast Asia?" in Foreign Affairs 42/4 July 1964, 632-639.
\(^\text{47}\) The State Department warned the Vice President that Thais were "closely scrutinizing" American policy, and that U.S. actions had "direct and vital bearing on Thailand's security." The briefing noted that Thailand's importance to Washington was "increased immeasurably" by the crisis in Laos, and that "without close Thai cooperation many U.S. diplomatic or military efforts in Laos would be much more difficult, if not impossible." Memo, "Tentative Schedule", April 21 1961, file Far East Trip, May 1961, #15, VP Security Files, Box 1, LBJL.
\(^\text{48}\) Cable, Bangkok 184 to State, May 19 1961, file Far East Trip, May 1961, #24d, VP Security Files, Box 1, LBJL.
organisation, but he did advise Sarit that open dissent from within would be an asset to the communists.

The Johnson visit was definitely a success in terms of Thai public opinion. Most Thais were greatly impressed by the Vice President's apparent interest in their country's culture and its people. The usually stolid Air Marshal Dawee Chulasappa conceded to having been won over by Johnson's charm too, despite his tendency to "talk too much about Texas."49 Kenneth Young acknowledged that the Vice President's visit was a "psychological" boost for sagging Thai morale, remarking that "Bangkok will never quite be the same." However, Young was also quick to point out that decisive "follow-up" action was needed to demonstrate Washington's commitment to Thailand. He noted that the "visit exposed but could not fill our gaping silence on Laos."50

While the Johnson visit may have been a hit with the Thai people, Sarit and his inner circle were certainly less impressed. Although gladdened by the visit and by the Vice President's assurance of U.S. military resolve in Southeast Asia, the Thai leadership had made few tangible gains. The only concrete proposal that Johnson came with was a suggestion that U.S. troops could be temporarily stationed in Thailand.51 Despite his disappointment, shortly before Johnson departed Thailand, Sarit made the decision to send representatives to Geneva. The Rusk and Johnson visits, together with persuasive work by Unger in Bangkok, no doubt influenced his decision. Perhaps, too, Thanat Khoman sensed that the Geneva Conference on Laos would unfold with or without Thailand, and that being part of the process was better than merely being an idle bystander. It is also possible that Sarit anticipated a challenge to his authority if Thailand abstained from participation in an

49 Cable, Bangkok 2042 to State, May 19 1961, file Far East Trip, May 1961, #29, VP Security Files, Box 1, LBJL.
51 Cables, Bangkok 1767 to State, May 12 1961, and 2085 to State, May 19 1961, 033.1100-JO/5-1361, CDF Southeast Asia Trips, Box 34, RG 59, USNA. Johnson and Sarit did discuss possible increases in U.S. MAP funding, including full American subsidisation of the Thai army. Both men agreed that the focus of military aid should be in counter-insurgency, as well psychological and jungle warfare capacities. See also message, Command Headquarters of the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group (hereafter cited as CHJUSMAG), Thailand, to Defense Department/CINCPAC, June 17 1961, file Thailand General 6/61 to 7/61, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
international conference of such vital concern. No doubt both men realized that support for the American position would put Thailand in a stronger position to extract additional aid from the U.S., and that, ultimately, they could not defy the will of Washington without serious repercussion.

In any event, despite their misgivings, the Thais did go to Geneva, ably represented by their Ambassador to the United Nations, Direk Janayanama, SEATO representative Konthi Sophanongkhorn and Thanat's personal Secretary, Anand Panyarachun. Thanat himself joined the Thai diplomatic contingent towards the end of May following Johnson’s departure from Bangkok.

No sooner had Thanat arrived than he promptly threw cold water on the negotiations by opposing both the Soviet Union's co-chairmanship and the composition of the ICC.52 After only a few sessions, it looked like Thanat was preparing to withdraw Thai participation altogether.

The task of keeping the Thais at Geneva fell to Kennedy's new ambassador in Bangkok, Kenneth T. Young. He arrived at his post in May, accompanying the Vice President. Young had a long career in both the State and Defense departments dealing with Asian affairs, as well as a serious personal interest in the Far East.53 Although he did not present his credentials to the King for over a month, Young immediately set about reversing with what he believed was the "sharp descent" of Thai confidence in the U.S. precipitated by the crisis in Laos. Young thought that the Eisenhower

52 Cable, American Consul General Geneva 30 to State, May 23 1961, and 55 to State, May 26 1961, 751J.00/5-2361, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1763A, RG 59, USNA.
53 Biographical manuscripts 1943-73, HUG (FP) 26.1, Kenneth Todd Young Jr. Papers, HUA. Young was well-versed in Asian history and culture, having obtained an undergraduate degree in Far Eastern studies at Harvard before travelling throughout Asia and living in China during the mid-1930's. After completing a Masters degree in Political Science and International Relations, also at Harvard, Young served as an intelligence officer with the Air Force in the Pacific during the last few months of WWII. He then went to work first with the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs and then the Defense Department, where he served as an Asian foreign affairs specialist with the Office of Foreign Military Affairs. After being promoted to Chief of the Far East section, Young was transferred back to the State Department to become Director of the division of Northeast Asian Affairs. He served as a principal adviser and negotiator during the Korean War at the Panmunjon talks. During 1952-53 and again from 1956-57, Young headed the American delegation to the United Nations General Assembly, with a stint in between as Director of the Office of the Philippines and Southeast Asia in the State Department. In 1958 he left the government to take up an executive position with Standard Oil, focusing on relations and investment in Asia. He returned to public service, somewhat unexpectedly, after being offered the Ambassadorship in Thailand. By most accounts, the appointment was engineered by Young's friend and Kennedy's Under Secretary of State, Chester Bowles.
administration had been a bit "colour oriented" in not sufficiently recognizing Asian fears, and in treating Asian allies as lesser priorities than Western allies. Young also worried that U.S. policy in Southeast Asia lacked coherency, and that conflict among American agencies in the region greatly weakened Washington's influence. He quickly earned the favour of the Thais because of his commitment to counter-insurgency, and he brought to his post a new sense of vigour.54

Young also set about restructuring the U.S. mission in Thailand, which he described as "unwieldy, autonomous, uncoordinated and uncorrelated in the action agencies." The MAAG for Thailand did "what they damn well pleased", while the CIA remained aloof and independent of the Embassy. Even the Agency for International Development (AID) was difficult to handle, trying at every turn to be "as autonomous as possible." Young saw a disorganized approach not just in Bangkok, but also in U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia as a whole. Laos, Thailand and Vietnam were often viewed in isolation, without much connection, and even their relationship to China was seldom or seriously considered.55 In his opinion, this had long been the central weakness in American foreign policy towards Southeast Asia.

Young also had to contend with the frequently sensitive Thai leadership. During the first few months of his tenure, the situation in Laos made many in Sarit's inner circle, and especially Thanat, very tense. Less than a month after his arrival in Bangkok, Young was confronted by the Foreign Minister about potentially adverse comments about Thailand made by some U.S. legislators, most conspicuously Senator Mike Mansfield, who had been one of a group of thirty Congressional

54 Cable, Bangkok 2149 to State, May 27 1961, 792.00/5-1161, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2136, RG 59, USNA. In a discussion of the roots of insurgency in Thailand, Young identified the Northeast as the key area of concern given its geographic, ethnic, political and economic dislocation from Bangkok. The hill tribes and large Chinese population in the Northeast were of particular importance in this regard, as were the "leftist, pseudo-intelligentsia" in Bangkok that supported them. With respect to problems in southern Thailand, a USIS report early that year warned that Islamic fundamentalism and Malay nationalism in the four provinces posed another potentially serious problem for Bangkok. See also USIS Bangkok report 49, "Muslim Thailand", March 31 1961, 792.00/2-160, in Ibid.
leaders who had toured Asia in April. The Montana Democrat's reluctance to expand the American military and political presence in Southeast Asia was well-known, and Thanat worried that he might persuade the Kennedy administration to abandon Laos, and Thailand. Young assured Thanat that this was not going to happen, and he was quick to point out that, notwithstanding Mansfield, the majority of Congressional leaders who had visited Thailand on their Asian tour favoured a stronger U.S. commitment there.

But above all, Young grappled with Thai anxiety about U.S. policy in Laos. The Geneva Conference dragged on inconclusively through the summer of 1961, and despite the tensions on the battlefield in Laos, the cease fire held with few incidents. The Thais remained acutely aware of the connection between Laos' fate and their own internal and external security. In June, an amateurish communist plot to kill King Bhumipol was uncovered in the Northeast, prompting Sarit to put the military on the second highest alert and to assume "emergency powers." The assassination plot was, he believed, further evidence that the communists were gaining strength, and using Laos as a launching pad for operations in Thailand. Moreover, as negotiations in Geneva dragged on, Sarit feared that Laos was gradually fading from the international limelight, and from the forefront of the Kennedy administration's attention. This perception made the Thais even more unsure about Washington's commitment to contain communism in Asia. To make matters worse, after the Rusk and Johnson visits, responsibility for dealing with Laos was left with Averell Harriman and his close

---

56 Mansfield was not convinced that Souvanna would necessarily be easy prey for communists in Laos, or even that a communist victory there would pave the way for an invasion of Thailand. He was particularly concerned that Washington would be "held ransom" by Thai threats not to attend the Geneva Conference. Mansfield wrote President Kennedy that the Thais were "undependable", and that they could quickly change their policy and seek an accommodation with the PRC or Soviet Union. They were "allies' only in a heavily dependent sense." Memo, Senator Mike Mansfield to JFK, May 1 1961, file VP's Visit to Southeast Asia, May 9-24 1961, #5, VP Security Files, Box 1, LBJL.

57 Cable, U.S. Army Bangkok CX-50, 230400Z, to State, June 23 1961, 792.00/5-1161, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2136, RG 59, USNA.
associate William Sullivan; neither was popular with Thanat or Sarit. Believing that the Washington was no longer focusing on Laos, the Thais once again tried their bamboo diplomacy.

After years of often cold and at best cursory relations, in the early summer of 1961 the Thais showed signs of warming up to the Soviet Union. Suddenly, and much to the shock and dismay of the Kennedy administration, Sarit went out of his way to attend the showing of Russian propaganda films, "The First Man in Space" and "Ballad of a Soldier." That he would attend any function with only the Russians present was unprecedented. That he did so with Thanat and Prince Wan was remarkable, and that he allowed the films to be shown in a government auditorium was extraordinary. But what bothered the Americans most was the fact that the event occurred on a Thai national holiday, when it was strict custom to avoid any receptions, especially with foreigners.  

Young warned that the episode might only be a symptom of the "trauma" Thais felt over U.S. policy, and that it potentially marked the first step in a "two-door diplomacy" playing off the superpowers against each other.

A Thai-Soviet rapprochement was not a particularly realistic prospect. Historically the Thais had little do with Moscow. Moreover, with their devout faith and reverence for the monarchy, most Thais were at odds with the precepts of communism. However, a significant improvement in the relationship was not out of the question, and it would have been very much in keeping with the fundamental approach of "bamboo diplomacy." Through the Soviets, Thailand could perhaps ward off the Chinese, and, as a result, the communist insurgents within. Better relations with Moscow might also prove to be a way to exact more aid and attention from Washington, or to influence negotiations with respect to Laos. Young considered it a very real possibility that the Thais were

Cable, Bangkok 4 to State, July 1 1961, 661.91/3-861, CDF Thai-Soviet Relations, Box 1366, RG 59, USNA.
starting to pursue such a policy, and he anxiously lobbied the State Department to act quickly with increased aid.\textsuperscript{59}

For several weeks in June and July 1961, the warming trend between the Thais and Soviets continued. Long stalled discussions over cultural and trade exchanges were renewed, and Young began to grow even more worried about the possibility of a \textit{rapprochement}. But just as suddenly as the romance blossomed, it abruptly wilted. The outgoing Soviet Ambassador, Anatoly Nikolayev, in a farewell call to Sarit, criticised the Thais for their friendship with the U.S. in a tone Thanat characterized to Young as "aggressive, menacing and even rude." Nikolayev "demanded" that the proposed cultural and commercial exchanges be finalized immediately, vaguely threatening that if they were not the USSR would support "national liberation" movements within Thailand. The Soviet Ambassador even went so far as to demand that the ailing Sarit seek medical treatment in Moscow, rather than the U.S. or Western Europe.\textsuperscript{60}

The still-born improvement in Thai-Soviet relations coincided with another episode that reflected the uneasy state of affairs between Bangkok and Washington. In June, Universal Pictures began production on the film version of William Lederer and Eugene Burdick's controversial novel \textit{The Ugly American}, which was set in the fictitious Asian nation of Sarkhan and presented an unflattering portrayal of American attitudes and foreign policy in the developing world.\textsuperscript{61} The movie was filmed

\textsuperscript{59} Cables, Bangkok 87 to State, July 19 1961 and State 75 to Bangkok, July 19 1961, 661.91/3-861, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 1366, RG 59, USNA.
\textsuperscript{60} Cable, Bangkok 50 to State, July 12 1961, 661.91/3-861, CDF Thai-Soviet Relations, Box 1366, RG 59, USNA.
\textsuperscript{61} Cable, Bangkok 112 to State, June 13 1961, file Thailand General 6/61 to 7/61, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. In the film Marlon Brando portrays the compassionate and well-meaning American Ambassador McWhite, who gets caught up in the political intrigue of Sarkhan. His long-time friendship with an influential Sarkhanese nationalist is destroyed by American suspicions that his friend is a communist, while a stable, though undemocratic, government is undermined by civil unrest. Although McWhite is generally depicted as caring, American policy is portrayed as rigid and unappreciative of Asian dynamics. Parallels to both Thailand and South Vietnam abound in the movie, and the inspiration for Brando's character has long been debated. After he left his post, Kenneth Young received many letters from ordinary Thais likening him, favourably, to McWhite. However, J. Graham Parsons believed that Edward Lansdale, military adviser to South Vietnam, was the model for McWhite. Some have argued that McWhite represents a "hybrid" of American diplomats, including Edwin Stanton, Max Bishop, Charles Bohlen, and George Kennan. Kurti's role as the authoritarian but philosophical Sarkhanese Prime Minister is particularly ironic, given that in real life he was one of the leading figures for democratic reform. See oral history interview, J. Graham
almost entirely in Thailand, with the full support of the Thai government, and starred popular newspaper editor (and later Prime Minister) Kukrit Pramoj. When Sarit's office called Young to inquire what the American position on the movie was, Young did not respond; nor did the Embassy offer any help to the production crew. The Embassy's aloofness from the film did not deter the Thai government from cooperating in its production. Young and others with an understanding of the Thai polity realized that Sarit's support for the film was intended as a further demonstration of his government's displeasure with the U.S.

Thai dissatisfaction with U.S. policy therefore became more open in the summer of 1961. The tension caused by the Laotian conflict was severe. The Thais resented Washington's insistence on talks with communists, eventually leaving the conference on June 6. Upon his return to Thailand, Thanat drew a bleak picture for the Thai press, declaring that it was a "fundamental mistake" to allow the Pathet Lao a seat at Geneva. Breaches in the May cease fire in Laos led to renewed Pathet Lao success, culminating in the fall of Padong on June 8. There was no response from the West, prompting Thanat to comment that "a country claiming to be Thailand's best friend" gave no

---

Parsons with Denis O'Brien, August 1969, Oral Histories, JFKL. See also, Robert C. Dean, "Masculinity as Ideology: John F. Kennedy and the Domestic Politics of Foreign Policy," Diplomatic History 22, No. 1, Winter 1998, 37-39. 62 USIA considered the issue important enough to recommend to the White House that no assistance be given to the project. Its report noted that the film "portrays the United States as a power imposing its will on others... [the American Ambassador] causing a bloody upheaval in an underdeveloped Southeast Asian nation." It was, therefore, "not in the interests of the United States Government or the Thai Government." See report, USIA Director to Pierre Salinger, May 26 1961, file PR 8-2/S/CO 291, General Correspondence, White House Central Files, Box 70, JFKL. 63 Dean, "Masculinity and Ideology: John F. Kennedy and the Domestic Politics of Foreign Policy," Diplomatic History 22 (Winter 1998), 37. In fact, Kennedy made reference to the book during the 1960 presidential campaign, giving rise to the belief it was instrumental in his decision to form the Peace Corps.

Kukrit essentially admitted to this, in typical indirect Thai fashion, shortly before the film's release in March 1963. Then Deputy Mission Chief at the U.S. Embassy, Alfred Puhani, found nothing amusing about Kukrit's characterisation of the American ambassador as "only a little stupid, and no more stupid than Marlon Brando." Kukrit added that Thais would see no resemblance at all to their country, given that riots and violence were so "un-Thai", even if the communist threat was real. See Memorandum of Conversation, Kukrit Pramoj and Alfred Puhani at the Italian Embassy, Bangkok, March 11 1963, file 16.1: U.S.-Thai Relations 1963, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 8, RG 59, USNA.
support at Geneva, and instead "supported and spread the news of communist proposals" by doing nothing. It was, he said, evidence that "our great friend likes its foes better than its friends."

In July Young warned Washington that Sarit was seriously considering a military occupation of the Laotian side of the Mekong River in the event of continued Pathet Lao gains, or that the Thais might even consider a cooperative effort with South Vietnam in recruiting "volunteers" for a fight in Laos. Meanwhile, Phoumi renewed requests for American support in forming a clandestine anti-communist guerilla force from demobilized elements of the Royal Lao Army. Young worried that if the Thais did carry out an occupation of the border area, the Chinese or North Vietnamese were sure to respond militarily. In that circumstance, anything less than large-scale American intervention would probably fail to save Thailand. Alternatively, the Thais might drift toward a "neutral" foreign policy, designed to accommodate the Chinese and North Vietnamese. Such policy change could precipitate a coup d'état, thus destabilizing Thailand.

In a speech before the American Association of Thailand in early July, Thanat gave credence to Young's concerns about Thai restiveness. The Foreign Minister suggested that Berlin and Laos were the world's two "hot spots", and that the latter was much more critical. After attacking Western "disinterestedness and unwillingness to assume direct responsibility", Thanat indicated that "those of us who wish to remain free" of communist expansion had to reevaluate their foreign policy options. First among his proposed new courses of action was greater self-reliance, including withdrawing from ineffective "collectivities." Although not mentioned, SEATO was clearly on his mind. Next he stressed the need to examine the "exposed position" one-sided obligations had

---

65 Cable, Bangkok 2233 to State, June 10 1961, 751J.00/6-861, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1763A, RG 59, USNA. See also, Darrell Berrigan, "Thailand on the Spot," The Reporter 24 (January 19 1961).
66 Cable, Bangkok 57 to State, July 14 1961, file Thailand General 6/61 to 7/61, #5, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. In fact, in mid-July Phoumi made a relatively low-key trip to Washington himself, meeting with both Rusk and JFK. He came away with nothing, except a rather clear warning to abandon hopes of an outright military victory. The State Department cabled Vientiane that Phoumi was a "distorted spirit", with "no real appreciation of political action." Moreover, his estimation of his power and abilities had "not been realistic." See cable, State 71 to Vientiane, July 18 1961, 751J.00/2-1861, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1764, RG 59, USNA.
produced. The relationship with the U.S. was the obvious target. Thanat also commented that outside aid should be seen as "supplemental rather than basic." But most ominously, he observed that "we must realize it was perhaps a mistake to cast our glance too far away; immediate neighbours should receive greater attention and be cultivated more closely." This statement reflected a time-tested Thai tactic. Thanat implied that without a greater commitment from the West, Thailand would seek an accommodation with communism, in what invariably meant a rapprochement with China. The bamboo would bend with the wind.

Thai-American relations were further strained in the fall of 1961 by disagreement over Cambodia. Historically, the Siamese and Khmer were mortal enemies. Their empires had clashed for centuries before arrival of European powers in the region, but even afterwards the contested boundaries between the two led to frequent and heated conflict. Bangkok recognised Cambodian independence in 1954, but relations declined sharply after that. Believing he was far too friendly with North Vietnam and the PRC, and too accommodating with communist guerillas in his own country, the Thais despised Cambodia's leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. The feeling was mutual. Sihanouk passionately hated the Thais, accusing them of being American dupes, intent on interfering in Cambodian affairs.

The enmity between Thailand and Cambodia erupted in a major crisis in 1958 over the disputed Phra Vihear (Preah Vihekar) temple. The next year the temple issue was referred to the International Court of Justice in the Hague, where deliberations continued inconclusively for three years.

Relations between Thailand and Cambodia rapidly spiralled downward, dragging Washington into

---


68 Deep in the jungles, the 10th century Khmer mountain-top temple straddled the Thai-Cambodian frontier. It was rediscovered in 1892 by French explorers. Thai troops occupied the temple area early in 1958, following Bangkok's claim that the border between the two countries extended further into Cambodia. See K.L. Singh, "The Thai-Cambodian Temple Dispute," Asian Survey 11 (October 1962): 19-26.
the vortex as well.⁶⁹ In January 1959, diplomatic relations between Bangkok and Phnom Penh were suspended. The Sarit regime alleged that Cambodia harboured communist insurgents from Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, and that its recognition of the PRC in July 1958 effectively made Sihanouk a communist puppet. Cambodia in turn accused the Thais of numerous and repeated border violations, and even attempts to overthrow and assassinate the royal family.⁷⁰ American military and financial aid to Thailand did not go unnoticed by Cambodians, and Washington was quickly linked to what they saw as Thai irredentism.

Both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations feared alienating Cambodia, thus making it more vulnerable to communism. Consequently, the U.S. had to somehow maintain an amicable relationship with Thailand without estranging Cambodia, and vice-versa. For three years the Thais and Cambodians continued to hurl allegations at one another, and by late 1961 the Kennedy administration was beginning to abandon any hopes of straddling sides. Despite American efforts to woo Cambodia, Sihanouk grew more friendly towards the PRC, and intensified attacks on the U.S.-Thai relationship. In October, he threatened to break off relations with Washington. Thanat warned Dean Rusk that Sihanouk's government was part of a larger communist plot to create problems in Southeast Asia, and that allegations against Thailand for its role in undermining

⁶⁹ Memo, OSEAA, "Suspension of Diplomatic Relations Between Cambodia and Thailand", January 7 1959, file 16.4, BFEA, OSEAA, Cambodia Files 1958-63, Box 6, RG 59, USNA. These and other files pertaining to Cambodia during the late 1950's were declassified in July 1995. They contain new and excellent information on Thai-Cambodian relations, and American policy with respect to them. See also files 16.4 (Thai-Cambodian Relations 1958) and 16.6 (U.S.-Cambodian Relations) in Ibid.

⁷⁰ There was apparently some validity to Cambodian allegations about Thai complicity in assassination attempts. The Thais were linked to several major Cambodian dissidents who opposed Sihanouk's neutralism and accommodation with communists. Son Ngoc Than and Sam Sary were suspects in masterminding a failed September 1959 assassination attempt against the Cambodian Queen (Sihanouk's mother), and both were known to operate inside the Thai border. So too was Dap Chhuon (Chhuon Mochulpich), the former Minister of Internal Security, who as Governor of Siemreap province strongly opposed the Sihanouk regime. He was linked with numerous coup rumours throughout 1958-60, collectively dubbed the "Bangkok Plot." Dap Chhuon was associated with Thanh, and had discreet Thai support. Fearing that Thai involvement with Sihanouk's enemies would force him even more towards the communists, Washington tried to dissuade Sarit from interfering in any way, to which of course the Thais took great offence. See letter, Hugh Cumming at INR to State, September 2 1959, file 1.1.1, BFEA, OSEAA, Cambodia Files 1958-60, Box 4, RG 59, USNA. See also memo, Joseph Mendenhall at OSEAA, November 18 1958, file 14.5, Box 6 in Ibid. For an in depth, recent analysis of these matters, see Milton Osborne, Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), chapter 8.
Sihanouk were "purely imaginary." Rusk acknowledged that Sihanouk’s personality was troublesome, but fearing an escalation of hostilities, he urged the Thais to show restraint. He assured the Thais that they, and not Cambodia, were the focus of American policy in the region. Keeping Thailand as a central ally in Southeast Asia was definitely a top priority, but by courting such favor with Bangkok, the Americans risked further alienating an already ill-disposed regime in Phnom Penh.

An additional problem for Washington was the deteriorating relationship between Thailand and Burma. Much like the Khmer, the Burmese were historic enemies of the Thais. Their rivalry was centuries old, and was even more bloody than that between Thailand and Cambodia. After World War Two, Burma struggled to gain independence from Great Britain, which it finally achieved in 1948. But from the outset, many of its ethnic minorities, making up nearly 40 percent of the population, opposed the new government. Dominating much of the remote north and east, hill tribes such as the Karen, Shan, and Lahu, began a guerilla war against the Burmese military that was fought along the frontier with Thailand. Assisted by the same tribes living on the Thai side, many of the insurgents sought refuge there, without much reaction from Bangkok.

---

71 Letter, Thanat to Rusk, October 26 1961, file 9A, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 4, RG 59, USNA. Sihanouk claimed that sporadic border clashes were inspired by Sanit, and warned that Thailand was "in the process of doing everything in order to force us into the socialist camp against our will." Sihanouk also blamed the U.S. for "drowning" Thailand in armaments and money. He suggested to the American Ambassador in Phnom Penh that Washington was "too stupid" to know that Thailand and South Vietnam were "parasite satellites of the free world", and that the U.S. was "the most unjust and unrighteous country in the world." See cables, Phnom Penh 294 to State, October 23 1961, file Cambodia General 9/24/61 to 10/23/61, #13, NSF Country Files Burma 1/61 - Cambodia 11/22/63, Box 16, JFKL. See also cable, Phnom Penh 312 to State, October 27 1961, file Cambodia General 10/24/61 to 10/28/61, #5, in Ibid.

72 Memo, U.S. Embassy Phnom Penh to Kenneth Young at OSEAA, "United States Foreign Policy Toward Cambodia", May 24 1957, file 16.6, BFEA, OSEAA, Cambodia Files 1958-63, Box 6, RG 59, USNA. Sihanouk was himself considered the "principal political difficulty" for American policy towards Cambodia. Described as a "dictator who operates by fits and starts", he was believed by Washington to have an "almost pathological sensitivity to criticism supplemented by a tropically luxuriant vanity." His government was plagued by the "habitual osmosis of Oriental squeeze and graft", and run by "stooges whom he unmercifully takes pleasure in booby-trapping at regular intervals." Cambodian foreign policy was characterized as "bizarre", "irresponsible and mischievous.

73 Liang Chi-Shad, Burma's Foreign Relations: Neutrality in Theory and Practice (New York: Praeger, 1990), 97-105.

74 Throughout 1961 the American Consulate in Chiangmai, Thailand frequently reported on Thai claims that the PRC was helping Burma fight the Shan resistance. Large parties of Lahu warriors, co-opted by the Burmese, raided Thai territory for plunder, and there is little doubt that their military supplies came courtesy of Beijing. See Cable,
In 1962 the military seized power in Burma, and ushered in a repressive era of self-imposed isolation from the international community. Headed by the mercurial General Ne Win, the new regime rejected negotiations in favour of increased military efforts against the insurgents. This only added to tension along the border with Thailand, particularly because Rangoon sought even more contact with the PRC in the hope that Beijing could bring pressure on Shan and Karen communist factions operating in the North. By 1963 there was a perpetual state of confusion inside the "Golden Triangle", complete with periodic clashes between combinations of tribal groups and the KMT, as well as Thai and Burmese soldiers.

Washington feared Burma's drift towards the PRC too, and thus did not want to appear in anyway connected to the KMT irregulars, the Shan, or even Thai policy with respect to the Burmese civil war. In fact, official U.S. policy was essentially sympathetic to Rangoon's situation, and the Embassy in Bangkok was directed to try to persuade the Thais not to intervene. Better Thai-Burmese relations would not only stabilize the volatile and vulnerable tri-border area with Laos, but also possibly woo the Burmese away from Beijing. The Thais did not deny that Shan insurgents received supplies in Thailand. The government simply maintained that such support came from private, not official, sources. The problem was with the Burmese, and their inability to prevent border crossings in the first place. With a sizeable Shan population in the geographically and politically remote north-west of Thailand, Bangkok was cautious. It could simply not afford to alienate the hill tribes. They were already susceptible to communist infiltration from Laos, and military action against the Shan in Burma might ignite a rebellion in Thailand as well. Therefore even though the Thais realized that better relations with Rangoon would be in their best interest,

---

Chiangmai 22 to State, October 9 1961, 690.00/3-2961, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 1392, RG 59, USNA. See also cables, Bangkok 232 to State, August 12 1961 and Chiangmai 29 to State, November 15 1961, in *Ibid.*

they could not appear too anxious or to committed to the process. As a result, the turmoil continued, accentuated by occasional clashes and sabre-rattling on both side of the border.76

So by the end of 1961, the Kennedy administration had reached few conclusions about how to manage affairs in Southeast Asia. Interdepartmental rivalry continued to hamper in-country management, while opinion about the necessity and efficacy of military involvement in the region continued to be divided. Although critical of Eisenhower's Asian policy, Kennedy did not fare much better after his first year in office. The situation in Laos looked as dire as ever, while Cambodia and Burma remained major question marks and tremendous irritants. The stability of South Vietnam became more an issue in Washington, particularly in relation to communist successes in Laos. And behind all these problems loomed the spectre of Chinese expansion, which had fundamental regional and global implications for American foreign policy. It is in this context that U.S.-Thai relations took on greater importance.

Thailand was not, however, a top priority for the Kennedy administration. Administration officials believed that Thailand was a solid ally, despite the friction over a variety of issues. Even though they recognised that Thailand viewed developments in Laos with the utmost concern, many assumed that the Thais would eventually come around to the U.S. position on a negotiated settlement. This was an assumption based on the strength of Washington's economic and military clout, but money and equipment alone would not completely alleviate Thai concerns about

76 A serious incident occurred in February 1961, when an armed, unidentified four-engine plane was shot down by Burmese fighters along the border. The plane crashed on the Thai side, near Mae Chan, as did one of its Burmese pursuers. Thai and U.S. Air Force investigators were quickly dispatched to the area, but a Burmese team was turned away at the border on the grounds that the planes had crossed into Thailand illegally, taking the matter out of Burma's jurisdiction. Rumours that the mystery plane was flown by KMT irregulars on a mission to drop supplies to the Shan brought a large and angry demonstration to the door of the American Embassy in Rangoon. Official Burmese reports even suggested that the plane took off from a "SEATO base." With tensions running high, the Thais announced the capture of two KMT pilots who parachuted out of the unidentified plane. But the Thais also reported that other KMT agents had unfortunately arrived at the crash site before investigators, and burned much of the evidence. Yielding to American pressure, the Thais eventually took Burmese officials to the site of the fighter's crash, but not the mystery plane. The situation slowly diffused with both sides quietly announcing that the other had "apologized." The official U.S. conclusion was that there was "strong evidence" the Thais were themselves involved in the mission of the
American integrity in the face of communist expansion. Based largely on American policy with respect to the crisis in Laos, as 1961 came to a close Thai leaders made it obvious that they expected the U.S. to develop a more vigorous containment of communism in Southeast Asia. Although they did not press the issue continuously, the Thais also made it clear that they wanted a more formal bilateral agreement with Washington as a guarantee of the American commitment to Thailand.  

To be fair, dealing with the Thais was certainly not easy for either Washington or the in-country mission. A British Ambassador to Thailand once remarked that "the Thais are like squid, with feelers in all directions, adept at shooting ink in your eyes if necessary and capable of retreating rapidly to the rear. Like the squid, the Thai have a great instinct for survival and are not hampered by principles." Thai foreign policy could be self-interested, evasive and inconsistent. Throughout 1961 the Thais complained about the lack of American resolve, but worried about provoking the wrath of Beijing and Hanoi. They demanded more in terms of U.S. aid, but then threatened to re-assess their options. And when American support was contingent upon supporting Washington's position, the Thais complained that they had always been a good and loyal friend, notwithstanding their threats to go it alone. Often moody, Sarit was frequently difficult to deal with, while Thanat's emotionalism did not help much either. In wanting a bilateral treaty with the U.S., the Thais expected a great deal, and they definitely risked a lot in order to get it. Thai foreign policy drew

unidentified plane. Multiple Cables, file 792.5443/2-1961, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2142, RG 59, USNA. See also multiple cables, Rangoon and Bangkok, files 792.5411/6-262 and 792.544/8-762 in Ibid.


78 Memorandum of conversation, Sir Barkley Gage and J. Graham Parsons, April 30 1957, file Thailand/Laos, BFEA, OSEAA, Laos Files 1956-61, Box 1, RG 59, USNA. Some academics and journalists agreed, and pointed out that U.S. support for such an authoritarian state was hypocritical. One prominent commentator noted with respect to Thailand that the U.S. "promoted a political system which uses methods to its own tradition and are similar in many respects to those used by the Communist." Frank C. Darling, "American Policy in Thailand," Western Political Quarterly 15 (March 1962), 107. See also, Darling, "Marshal Sarit and Absolutist Rule in Thailand," Pacific Affairs 33 (December 1960), 351-359.
progressively away from its ancient roots in non-alignment, putting the country in the middle of the Cold War and on course for conflict with its neighbours. Without a stronger commitment from Washington, many Thais, and Sarit himself, began to doubt the wisdom in this, and in their friendship with the U.S.

The U.S. valued SEATO, and relied upon it as a demonstration of the American commitment to the security of Thailand and the entire region. However, the Thais considered it to be little more than a facade. They wanted a bilateral alliance with Washington, something into which neither Eisenhower or Kennedy was prepared to enter. At the same time, neither administration could ignore the Thai position. Thailand was of growing importance to American policy in Southeast Asia, and Sarit was a much-needed anti-communist Asian friend. The Thais knew this, and made it increasingly clear that their cooperation with Washington was not without its price. Negotiating with the communists over Laos, and maintaining SEATO as the only military threat against communism in the region, greatly frustrated the Thais, and, in their opinion, left Thailand vulnerable. By the end of 1961, these became the principal aspects of the U.S.-Thai relationship, and major issues for both governments.
CHAPTER THREE

"A Friend In Need"... U.S.-Thai Relations, 1962

1962 was a pivotal year in the evolution of Thai-American relations. The Laotian crisis precipitated a serious foreign policy dilemma for both sides, and at points the resulting tension between them threatened their friendship. The question remained, how far was the U.S. willing to go in Southeast Asia? Laos was clearly a "lost cause" insofar as establishing a solid, anti-communist government was concerned. Vietnam, however, was another story. Many top officials in the Kennedy administration were convinced that South Vietnam was salvageable, and that with enough commitment from the U.S., communism could be contained.1 The insurgency there was steadily growing, and even from the most optimistic point of view, time was running out for the Saigon government. If Washington was going to intervene in Vietnam, it would have to be soon, and without hesitation.

Yet given the international and domestic ramifications of a such a commitment, hesitation was unavoidable. Not even the most hawkish analyst could dismiss the potential political and diplomatic difficulties such an investment would entail. Invariably the question arose as to whether or not a American military intervention in South Vietnam would be sufficient to stop the tide of communism, or if it was simply the prelude to even more commitments throughout the region.

While still claiming many adherents, the domino theory had its detractors.2 They questioned the

1 To this end, in February 1962 Washington established the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), to replace the MAAG. There was also a dramatic increase in the number of American advisers to the South.

2 Among those dubious of the "domino theory" in 1962 were Senators Mike Mansfield and William Fulbright, Under Secretaries of State Chester Bowles and George Ball, and American Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith. See Herring, America's Longest War, 91-93, 125. In an interview with NBC's Garrick Huntley in September 1963, Kennedy said of the domino theory, "I believe it. I believe it. I think that the struggle is close enough. China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Viet-Nam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerrilla assault on Malaya but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the communists. So I believe it." Senator Mike Gravel, ed., The Pentagon Papers (volume 2)(Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 828.
validity of open-ended American military and economic aid to South Vietnam, and were fearful that even if the U.S. could stop communism there, it would still spread elsewhere. Moreover, they worried that any show of force so close to the PRC would lead the U.S. to a greater regional or even global conflict.

For Thailand, the situation in Vietnam was the source of both great fear, and great hope. On the one hand, the prospect of a unified communist Vietnam terrified Thai leaders. It would leave them with another powerful enemy on their doorstep, and possibly give rise to a viable insurgency in Northeast, backed by the large Vietnamese populations there. On the other hand, problems in Vietnam meant more political leverage for Bangkok with Washington. The Thais knew that in the event of military intervention, the U.S. would need both a military staging ground and a strong Asian ally in the region. In this sense, Thailand could help its friend in need. In the process it could secure more financial and military aid, and possibly even the elusive bilateral alliance with the U.S. Given fears in Washington that without decisive action in Vietnam the whole region could succumb to communism, the Thais could ensure America's commitment to their own defense. Simply put, Vietnam's tragedy could be Thailand's best asset.

Clearly Thailand was not Vietnam. With a vastly different history and culture, it did not suffer from anywhere near the same division and instability. Although Washington anticipated that unchecked communist expansion in Southeast Asia would eventually envelop Thailand, few in the Kennedy administration believed that it was on the verge of collapse. Nonetheless, more and more Thailand was inextricably linked not only to Laos, but also Vietnam. Making a stand in Vietnam would constitute a major and difficult undertaking. Given the nature of the insurgency, U.S. military installations in the South could be vulnerable. In the event of a significant military commitment, Thailand's friendship, proximity and stability would be invaluable assets for the U.S.. The more
decision-makers in Washington thought about going into Vietnam, the more indispensable they considered the cooperation of the Thais.

But by 1962 Washington suffered from a credibility gap. The Thai leadership seemed on the verge of swinging back to its long cherished non-alignment out of sheer frustration with the U.S. Despite all the promises and aid Americans gave Thailand, Sarit and others were disappointed. They expected a full-scale military commitment to fight communism in Southeast Asia, and anything short of that would not be enough. The Thai leadership believed that they had already put a great deal at stake. Having any friendship with the U.S. aggravated relations with most of their neighbours. By assisting the Americans, Thailand risked being drawn into a conflict itself, where it could potentially face the spectre of invasion from China.

Sarit and his regime undeniably profited from their association with the U.S., not just in terms of aid, but also with respect to the legitimacy Washington provided for military authoritarianism. It is also true that Thailand as a nation benefited from the association, drawing in considerable investment and development which it otherwise would not have. To be sure, economic development in Thailand was neither without negative consequence nor regionally and socially equitable. Still, the American presence did benefit the country, and for the most part, this was clearly understood by the Thais. However, some quite rightly feared that in all this Washington was simply paying a "user fee", in order to conduct policy and operations in Indochina. Once the job was done, it was believed the Americans would go home, leaving Thailand surrounded by angry neighbours.

Many Thais were also anxious that a long term U.S. presence in their country would disrupt their culture and society. Sarit was living proof of the tremendous influence Washington had on the Thai polity in that his political career depended to a large degree on American largesse, but beyond that

---

many worried about the threat to Thai culture and society such farangs (foreigners) posed.

Communism was certainly likely to be worse, especially if it meant living under Chinese domination, but no matter how anti-communist they were, few Thais relished the notion of having American troops or advisers around permanently. That was considered an affront to their independence, even if it had already been compromised by every other aspect of American influence in the country. Consequently, Sarit could not welcome or accept U.S. forces in Thailand without appearing very "un-Thai." Doing so would also be an admission to his enemies, both within and externally, that his regime was not as strong as he claimed.

So what did the Thais want? How could they demand more from the U.S. without being willing to station American forces on anything more than a temporary basis? This dilemma was central to U.S.-Thai relations in 1962, and against the backdrop of failure in Laos, growing involvement in Vietnam and new heights in Cold War tension, the question of how to solve it was very complex. Without Thailand as a sure and loyal ally in Southeast Asia, American foreign policy lacked credibility in its efforts to promote the U.S. as a defender against communist expansion. Going into Vietnam would not only be logistically difficult without the Thais, but also politically tricky, given that Washington might appear as if it was only furthering its own interests by propping up a noticeably corrupt and weak Diem regime. By having other Asian friends, particularly so close to the trouble in Indochina, the U.S. could strengthen its case in terms of world opinion, and fight any potential fight there with considerably more ease and less expense. Wooing Sarit thus remained a top priority for those in the Kennedy administration involved with Thai affairs. It also remained a tough assignment.

---

4 Sulak Sivaraksa, Siam In Crisis (Revised Edition) (Bangkok: Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute and Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development (TICD), 1990), 115-150.
Over the Christmas season of 1961, Kenneth Young drafted several proposals with respect to American policy and Thailand. Most were essentially recommendations that involved tightening up the Embassy's affairs, and making sure it oversaw all the in-country agencies, rather than allowing them to run on their own. Young also suggested that he be permitted to deal with the Thais without too much intervention from Washington, given that the Thais were already sensitive about Kennedy's position on Laos. To earlier proposals that Washington increase MAP funding to Thailand in order to win it over, Young replied that "precise statements [on] Thai commitments and U.S. undertakings... not [the] most conducive approach to moving our program forward." Simply throwing more money at the problem would, he believed, arouse "excessive expectations" on the part of the Sarit regime. Instead, Young wanted to work on better utilizing existing funding. Many of the Royal Thai army units being built up by American money were only partially in place, and new money for new units exceeded both the Thai capabilities to absorb funding and their security needs.

Young lamented the superficial approach Washington had to U.S.-Thai relations. Money and equipment were certainly useful incentives, but he believed that by themselves they would not keep the Thais on side with American policy. Moreover, such an approach was costly, both in terms of finances and with respect to the image Washington conveyed as a result. "Even if our purpose is good", he said, "we have this style, or reputation in Asia for being unilateral, inconsiderate, and rather uncouth." The huge bureaucracy, the money, manpower and resources put into establishing a military mission were all wrong for Southeast Asia. Long term and effective development in Thailand or Vietnam required better orchestration at the civilian level, with an emphasis on coordinating all programs through the Embassy. Otherwise, those in touch with the country best-

---

5 Cable, Bangkok 999 to State, January 13 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, #1, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
the Ambassador and his staff - were just "lost in the shuffle" of decision-making by men in Washington who knew nothing about Asia, and saw it as a "strange place, far away."6

Young also resented the fact that the Bangkok mission had essentially become a backstop for the Vientiane section in the State Department. Thai issues seemed of secondary concern to the State Department. It was Laos that mattered most. The American Embassy in Bangkok provided not only much of Vientiane's equipment and supplies, it also acted as a refuge for non-essential U.S. mission personnel there who were periodically flown out when the fighting heated up. Young could not avoid Laos, nor could he make Washington listen to issues with Thailand that did not involve the crisis there. The problem was so obvious that on one occasion Sarit quipped to Young, "[Y]ou're not Ambassador to Thailand from the United States; you're Ambassador from Laos to Thailand. When are you going to do something about Thailand? You always come in and talk about Laos."7

Early in 1962 Young also worried about the development of what he called a "psychological fatalism" among Thais. Since it was apparent that the U.S. was reluctant to intervene forcefully in Laos, many Thais were coming to believe that communism would continue to expand in Asia. Kennedy's approach to the Geneva Conference on Laos, talks with Khrushchev in Vienna and the botched Bay of Pigs invasion disheartened the Thais, and many thought Chinese domination of Southeast Asia was just a question of time.8 With this in mind, many Thais began to doubt the efficacy of maintaining such a close friendship with the U.S., resulting in added pressure on Sarit to change course.

7 Ibid, 84-85.
Young continued to warn the State Department that urgent action was needed to save the U.S.-Thai relationship. He reported that "we are losing real ground in Thai official circles and in the public", suggesting that Washington's Laotian policy was seen by most Thais as "doubly negative", and an "unpalatable, dangerous course." The Thais waited "in silence and watch[ed] in dread" regarding U.S. decisions, fearing that their country was being abandoned to communism.9 In the summer of 1961 Young had submitted his "New Program" report recommending a comprehensive, long-term plan of economic aid for Thailand. Having been largely ignored by Washington, he again submitted his suggestions in early January 1962. Young's programme dealt with everything from growing corn to the production of jet fighters, and emphasized that the U.S. could win Thai hearts by treating the country as a friend and equal, rather than as a logistical coordinate. Central to Young's proposals was the development of an agrimetro system throughout villages in the Northeast, providing for better farming, roads and communications, and thereby linking the remote region more closely to Bangkok.10 This by itself would be a valuable counter-insurgency tool, but combined with a strengthening of Thai military capabilities, such a "grass-roots" plan would essentially eliminate the potential for communism to gain support.

Based on Young's report, the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs prepared a background paper on Thai foreign policy and security requirements later that month. It concluded that the chief determinant in Thailand's external relations was the leadership's assessment of the threat from the PRC. The disillusionment Thais had over SEATO and American policy regarding Laos stemmed from that assessment. The Bureau acknowledged that Young's plan was largely supported by the report of an independent fact-finding mission sent to Thailand during the early fall of 1961.11

---

9 Cable, Bangkok 978 to State, January 11 1962, 611.92/3-1160, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 1308, RG 59, USNA.
10 Report, "The Development of Thailand", Kenneth T. Young, August 1961, 792.5 MSP/8-161, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2141, RG 59, USNA. See also paper, "A Sketch of New Approach to Southeast Asia", Kenneth T. Young, April 19 1961, folder 3, Unpublished Papers 1949-72, Box 1, Kenneth Todd Young Jr. Papers, HUA.
11 The "Bowen Report" was submitted by an eight-member team of academics sent to Thailand under the leadership of Dr. Howard Bowen, President of Grinnell College. Their 200 page submission strongly recommended increased
Encouraged by the Bureau’s report, in February 1962 Young cabled Washington to stress the need for an improved counter-insurgency capability in the Northeast; a subject which usually got Washington’s attention. But Rusk made it clear he viewed the long-term economic aid Young envisioned in his plan separately from military matters. The Secretary feared that the Thais might use Young’s plan to highlight their own communist problem, and to pressure the U.S. at a crucial juncture in the negotiations on Laos. In a top secret cable to Young the Secretary of State advised avoiding any talk of expanded counter-insurgency operations. Rusk warned that such discussion might encourage Sarit to delay supporting any coalition government in Laos, and undo the hard work spent on getting the Thais anywhere near Washington’s position.12

Thai policy in the first few months of 1962 reflected the differences with Washington caused by the Laotian crisis. Unlike the U.S., Sarit was reluctant to give up on Phoumi. American intelligence reports confirmed that the Thais continued to provide Phoumi with money and arms, even aircraft given to them as part of MAP funding programmes.13 This was precisely what the U.S. wanted to avoid. But often Sarit seemed uncertain which direction to go. At times he would appear cordial, even supportive, towards American policy, while at others he and his top advisers would continue to leak critical statements to the press about Washington’s lack of resolve. Without doubt, to some degree this was all part of the usual Thai style, but by early 1962 it had become something more. Thai policy was showing signs of indecision, potentially forcing an earnest re-evaluation.

The Kennedy administration was no less uncertain. Negotiations on Laos dragged on interminably, while debate over South Vietnam continued to divide opinion. Plans for developing a more coherent policy towards Southeast Asia had not come to fruition during Kennedy’s first year.

---

12 Cable, State 1177 to Bangkok, February 10 1962, 792.5 MSP/8-761, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2142, RG 59, USNA.
13 Cable, Bangkok 1027 to State, January 18 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, #2, NSF Country Files Thailand, JFKL-
in office. Instead the U.S. looked uncertain, confused and vulnerable. The President was frustrated, chastising his top military advisers for not coming up with any real solutions to problems in Laos or Vietnam. At one meeting he told the assembled staff, "[G]entlemen, if you don't know what to tell me, go home and find out. Go back to your offices and come back with something that I can understand." The State Department could not do much better, with its top officials frequently at odds. Harriman and Rusk often disagreed over U.S. Asian policy in general, while the Thai Desk at the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs disapproved of Young's management on more than one occasion. In fact, Young's Deputy Mission Chief, Alfred Puhani, believed he was sent to Thailand to keep the "political Ambassador" in check. A Thai desk officer described reports by Young's Country Team as complete and factual, but "too condescending... glib in tone, and too divorced from the real world." He saw discussions on the social and political situation there as "naive", and reflections on institutions like the monarchy "so condescending as to be insulting." "I hope the Thais never, never see this," he added.

Laos continued to dominate U.S.-Thai relations in 1962. On January 21, Young met with Sarit, Phoumi and Boun Oum in Bangkok. According to Young, the meeting was "awkward, serious, but friendly." The Thais wanted the Laotian King to form a government in Vientiane, whereas Phoumi

14 Oral history interview, Kenneth T. Young with Denis O'Brien, April 28 1969, HUFI (FP) 26.3, folder 2, 117, Kenneth Todd Young Jr. Papers, HUA. Chester Bowles told the President that with respect to U.S. foreign policy in the area, "a search for elements of unity in East and Southeast Asia yields depressingly small results." He also noted that "our China policy is viewed as a peculiar obsession unworthy of a great power." Bowles was especially concerned about the scope of American military and covert operations in Southeast Asia, which he believed had "uncertain dimensions." He suggested to JFK that U.S. support of Sarit, Diem, Phoumi and Chiang Kai-shek did not reflect the "New Frontier" in Asia. See Draft Memorandum, Chester Bowles to JFK, March 20 1962, file DOS 60-66/C. Bowles 61-63, James C. Thomson Papers, Box 7, JFKL.

15 Oral history interview, Alfred Puhani with G. Lewis Schmidt, January 1990, pp-36-40, diskette, GUFA. Although he got along very well with Young, Puhani maintained that the Ambassador was "too friendly" with the Thais, and frequently not realistic enough about the limitations of his post. According to Puhani, Averell Harriman engineered his assignment personally, believing that Young was too headstrong and overly fixated on Asian affairs.

16 Memo, Sidney Weintraub to Robert Cleveland, "Comments on the Study Team report, August 1961, The Development of Thailand", January 3 1962, file 2, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 3, RG 59, USNA. After a tour of Thailand, Mike Forrestal (Special Assistant, NSC) confided to a friend about what he saw as a lack of direction in U.S. policy. He added that "it was especially depressing not to find a Thai or an American in Bangkok who appeared to have done any thinking on where the country was going." See letter, Mike Forrestal to Richard Neustadt (Oxford University), April 26 1962, file Thailand General 4/62-5/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
suggested that he himself would be best suited. Sarit bluntly told him "to drop that idea." Most of the four-language conversation revolved around the failings in U.S. policy, with Sarit being the most charitable. He indicated to Young that, despite appearances, he was actually very much in line with Washington, and that he was in fact "holding off" people within the Thai Government who wanted to move towards a more neutral foreign policy. Sarit even suggested there was pressure to accommodate with the Soviets and Chinese. Always with a flair for the dramatic, Sarit left the meeting warning, "[I]f the U.S. is wrong in Laos, Thailand is finished. We cannot afford mistake or regret."18

Uneasiness with respect to Thai policy on Laos even reached the White House, prompting the President to write Sarit a letter in January 1962. In what may have been intended as a swipe at Thanat, Kennedy asked for Sarit's "personal support and that of the Royal Thai Government" in helping to achieve a peaceful settlement at Geneva. He emphasised that the objectives of Thailand and the U.S. were clearly similar, and that any further hostilities in Laos would provoke a prolonged conflict with "both of us being involved." Kennedy acknowledged Sarit's hesitation with respect to a coalition government under Souvanna, but urged him to reconsider given the lack of any other realistic alternative. In closing, the President reiterated American determination "to fulfil our obligations as an ally and friend", assuring Sarit that Thai concerns were "continuing to receive our attention and we expect shortly to be discussing them more fully with your government."19 In a secret attachment to the President's letter, Rusk instructed Young to pressure Sarit to accept the fact that Phoumi would not get the Defense and Interior portfolios in any coalition government. Instead, those were to go to the "neutral centre." Rusk also warned that neither Sarit or Phoumi

17 Cable, Bangkok 1047 to State, January 21 1962, 751.J00/1-2162, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1769, RG 59, USNA.
18 Ibid.
19 Cable, State 1043 to Bangkok, January 20 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
"should be under any misapprehension that we will support any deliberate stalling or delaying tactics."

Sarit's reaction to the Kennedy letter was not so favorable. Young noted that Laos was Sarit's "personal precinct", which "top level Thais conspicuously avoid tangling with." Consequently, he was directly and intimately involved with the Laotian crisis, and he took Kennedy's letter personally. Sarit questioned how the President intended to guarantee that Souvanna would not turn the government over to communists, and rebuffed suggestions that he could persuade Phoumi not to demand the Defense and Interior posts in a new government. Sarit also questioned Kennedy's prediction that the Soviets could be expected to cooperate with any solution as they promised. More importantly, he wondered how the U.S. anticipated the Chinese and North Vietnamese to respond. Young reported that the Prime Minister "barely suppressed his anger and frustration in curt, hearty [sic], sarcastic language" throughout their meeting the day after he received Kennedy's letter, but that he also "seemed resigned to acquiescing in [the] President's policies and purposes."

Privately, to one of his top aides Sarit conceded that nothing was more important to Thailand than its relationship with the U.S., and so if forced to choose, Phoumi would be sacrificed. Much to Young's surprise, Sarit left the meeting saying "let's go ahead and try if that is what your President wants to do", warning "but let's not let history repeat itself." Even more surprising was Thanat's reaction to the letter. Young reported that the Foreign Minister said it was "full of wisdom", and that his disposition was calm, collected and welcoming. Thanat, whose main concern remained how

---

20 Ibid.
21 Cable, Bangkok 1059 to State, January 23 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
22 Cable, Bangkok 1057 to State, January 23 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
23 Cable, Bangkok 810 to State, January 16 1962, file 751J.00/1-1562, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1769, RG 59, USNA.
24 Cable, Bangkok 1057 to State, January 23 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
to protect Thailand, argued that whether or not Souvanna willingly turned the government over to the Pathet Lao, Chinese and North Vietnamese pressure would eventually overrun Laos.\textsuperscript{25}

Thanat's domestic and international prestige was a crucial aspect of both Thai foreign policy and U.S.-Thai relations. Moreover, his influence on Sarit was considerable. Although they had very divergent personalities and were from vastly different backgrounds, Thanat definitely had Sarit's ear. On occasion he managed to upset the Prime Minister, and more often some of his other advisers and Cabinet ministers, but generally Thanat enjoyed both government and popular support. In fact, during the 1960's he became synonymous with Thai foreign policy itself. While Sarit remained firmly in control of the final decision-making authority, Thanat's emotional and sometimes difficult personality typified Thailand's external relations, particularly with the U.S. Like him or not, he was a master at what the British Foreign Office described as the "tiresome technique of frightening the Americans... [responsible for] some of the elements of instability in Thai foreign policy which alarm Washington."\textsuperscript{26}

The question of SEATO was inextricably linked to Laos. In fact, from the Thai point of view the two issues were synonymous. Sarit and Thanat disparaged the organisation so vehemently during a meeting with Young in early January that the Ambassador frantically asked Rusk for a categorical statement of American policy towards Thailand. Young warned that the Thais were very anxious, trying to get him to "lay down the cards once again" on SEATO and Laos.\textsuperscript{27} A few days later, even the new Secretary General of SEATO, Thailand's influential former Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and Sarit's National Development Minister, Pote Sarasin, complained to Young. Pote was appointed to the office in 1960. He was well-liked and respected by just about everyone, especially

\textsuperscript{25} Cable, Bangkok 1058 to State, January 23 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. See also cables, Bangkok 957 to State, January 7 1962, 751J.00/1-162, and Bangkok 1009 to State, January 16 1962, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1768, RG 59, USNA.
\textsuperscript{26} Cable, British Embassy Bangkok to Foreign Office, September 21 1961, 160071 DS 1022/1, FO 371, PRO.
\textsuperscript{27} Cable, Bangkok to State, January 5 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
the Americans, and it was hoped that his appointment would enhance Thai confidence in the organisation. However, even with a Thai in the top position SEATO's credibility was impaired. Pote wrestled with Konthi and Thanat over Thai demands for a powerful SEATO declaration against communist activity in Indochina. Pakistan was also in favour of such a move, lest the group look like a harmless scarecrow. But neither France nor Britain supported the idea for fear of disrupting the negotiations, and Washington's non-committal position effectively ended any hopes the Thais entertained. Thanat, in particular, had been furious, and Pote warned that without the Foreign Minister's connivance, Thai foreign policy could become a serious problem for the Americans.  

Thanat's outlook on SEATO and Geneva was so bad that both Young and Leonard Unger were sent to talk to him in December 1961. In what Young described as several hours of "hard but not unamicable" discussion, the Thai Foreign Minister made his position clear. Without a declaration by SEATO linking North Vietnam and China to the insurgencies in Indochina, he would not budge. Both the Manila Pact and Geneva Conference accords had declarations against foreign powers interfering with the internal affairs of the region, but for the Thais this did not suffice. Thanat believed the communists in Laos would find some way to claim that Vietnamese or Chinese "volunteers" did not constitute internal meddling. Young and Unger left the meeting knowing they had touched "a very raw nerve" with Thanat. While they did manage to get him to yield on his demands that SEATO issue a declaration against communist activity in Indochina concurrent with any settlement on Laos, Young and Unger realised they faced a real problem in U.S.-Thai relations.

---

Cables, Bangkok 840 (December 7 1961), Bangkok 845 (December 8 1961), Bangkok 853 (December 9 1961) and Consulate Geneva 964 (December 15 1961) to State, 751.00/12-161, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1768, RG 59, USNA. See also cable, Bangkok to State, January 12 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. On the other hand, Pote told the British that Sati was in fact not considering any change in Thai policy, and that such talk, even by Thanat, was just that. See cable, British Embassy Bangkok to Foreign Office, September 21 1961, 160071 DS 1022/1, FO 371, PRO.

113
without Thanat’s full support. Getting Thanat to agree to this was, Young reported, "the most I can squeeze out of the Thais at this time."\textsuperscript{29}

By demonstrating Thai dissatisfaction with SEATO and linking it to the Geneva Conference, Thanat was clearly trying to exact a bilateral alliance from Washington. Calculated critical statements by Thai officials and periodic attacks from the government-run Radio Thailand were designed to stimulate negative public reaction over Laos and SEATO as well.\textsuperscript{30} Pote warned Young that nothing short of a total restructuring of SEATO would please the Foreign Minister. The Thais wanted an elimination of the veto power in order to prevent the French and British from blocking possible SEATO military action in Laos. While Young and Unger sympathised to some degree with Thanat, his adamancy was not well-received in Washington. The National Security Adviser, McGeorge Bundy, told Young that "Thanat cannot separate SEATO and our obligations thereunder. If Thailand destroys SEATO, it thereby also destroys the legal basis of our obligations."\textsuperscript{31} Dean Rusk called Thanat’s position "irresponsible and unwarranted", advising Young that Washington had no need for a bilateral agreement, and that any such deal would be extremely difficult to sell to Congress.\textsuperscript{32} Moreover, the Secretary asked what Thanat could want from an alliance given Thailand’s reluctance to base U.S. troops on its territory.

During late January and early February, Rusk took a much more active role in U.S.-Thailand relations. He wanted Thailand’s support for American policy in Indochina, and particularly at Geneva. Clearly losing patience, Rusk warned Winthrop Brown in Vientiane to "get ready for hard-

\textsuperscript{29} Cable, Bangkok 908 to State, December 22 1961, 751 J.00/12-2061, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1764, RG 59, USNA.
\textsuperscript{30} Cable, Bangkok 941 to State, January 4 1962, 751 J.00/1-162, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1768, RG 59, USNA. In one broadcast, Radio Thailand ridiculed statesmen who said Laos would be released from SEATO’s "security umbrella" if the new government there wanted. The piece noted that Laos had never really been under SEATO’s protection, and that the organisation was essentially selling out to communism. There is little doubt that most of the attack was aimed at the U.S., and in particular at Averell Harriman.
\textsuperscript{31} Cable, State to Bangkok, February 1 1962, file Thailand General 2/1/62 to 2/19/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
\textsuperscript{32} Cable, State to Bangkok, February 4 1962, file Thailand General 2/1/62 to 2/19/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.

114
ball" if Sarit did not convince Phoumi to cooperate. He indicated that "it has been concluded at the highest level that [the] final showdown with Phoumi can no longer be deferred", and that without his promise to follow the American line, Washington would see him as "no longer... acceptable for us to work with." As for the Thais, Rusk was prepared to go ahead without them too. He told Young that Sarit's attitude and his influence on Phoumi were of "most serious concern" in Washington. The administration had done all it realistically could to win his favour, and if Sarit still refused to support the U.S. position, further efforts to persuade him were useless. With or without Thailand, the Kennedy administration would move on the Geneva settlement.

However, as a final inducement Rusk did offer a rather strategically re-worded commitment to the defense of Thailand. Whereas Washington had previously reiterated its obligations to Thailand under the collective SEATO agreement, now it pledged full effect to Article IV(1) of the Manila Pact, providing for a military commitment by any signatory without prior unanimous consent of all members and "in accordance with its constitutional processes." Rusk was careful to stress that "no commitment under [a] bilateral [treaty] with Thailand could be stronger". Although in reality this "new" promise was in substance no different from previous American policy, to placate Thai concerns Rusk maintained this was "much broader" than prior understandings, with the operative language closer to that used in treaties with South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Moreover, Rusk acknowledged that in Laos the U.S. faced a dismal situation, "with large scale penetration, [a] poor logistic situation and doubtful will and capacity to resist." In South Vietnam, however, the people had the will to fight, and Washington was willing to make an enormous effort to maintain its

---

33 Cable, State 1090 to Vientiane, January 27 1962, 751J.00/1-2762, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1769, RG 59, USNA.
34 Cable, State 1055 to Bangkok, January 23 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. For a full account of the Manila Pact and SEATO charter as interpreted by the Kennedy administration, see file SEATO, Subject Series, Presidential Office Files (hereafter cited as POF), Box 106, JFKL.
integrity. There was, he suggested, "no reason to think [the] U.S. would do less in case of Thailand." 35

As it turned out, Rusk's more robust interpretation of the American commitment to Thailand under SEATO proved unnecessary to soften Thai resistance to the U.S. course of action in Laos. President Kennedy's earlier letter appears to have made an impression on the Thais. Young met with Sarit and Thanat just before Rusk's cable reached Bangkok. The conversation was "affable, talkative, business-like", and Sarit was "relaxed, in a good mood, with no bite or bitterness in what he said." 36 Young credited Thanat's presence and the President's letter with the transformation. The discussion focused primarily on the composition of the Lao government, with Sarit and Thanat generally endorsing the U.S. position. Sarit mentioned that the main difficulty would be in convincing Phoumi and Boun Oum to give up hopes of getting the Defense and Interior Ministries. But after Young explained once again that this was necessary for any agreement to take place, Sarit instructed an aide to radio Phoumi immediately; "I am sympathetic with you because I know this may mean death for you, but it looks like you will have to give in and hope for the best in the future." 37 This was hardly the strongest endorsement of American policy, but it did represent a considerable departure for Sarit.

After the call, Young brought up allegations that the Thais continued to supply Phoumi's men with bombs and fuses for his air force. Sarit weakly denied the accusation, saying that the alleged action was anyway not a serious intrusion. When Young disagreed, Sarit pointed out that the Vietminh had many combat battalions in Laos, with constant Soviet military supplies. Thanat remarked that the Americans were making a big issue out of few bombs while ignoring wholesale

35 Ibid.
36 Cable, Bangkok 1066 to State, January 24 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, Box 163, NSF Country Files Thailand, JFKL.
37 Ibid.
Communist violations of the cease-fire. The Ambassador left without replying, perhaps sensing that in that respect the Thais were right.

The new Thai position toward Phoumi was definitely a surprise, and struck a favourable chord in the State Department. Within a few days State tried to ease Thai concerns about Phoumi's fate. With Dean Rusk away at Geneva, Acting Secretary of State George Ball reassured Sarit that Phoumi and his followers would be cared for generously if worst came to worst in Laos. However, Ball was unable to specify U.S. policy in the event of Souvanna's collapse. Despite Sarit's turnabout, Phoumi remained intransigent. He refused to support any government that did not have him as a prominent member, and it appeared that not even the threat of being abandoned by the U.S. could budge him on that count. In this respect, the Thais were once again essential. Now on Washington's good side, Sarit found himself really the only one who could rein in the Lao right wing.

SEATO continued to be a problem with U.S.-Thai relations, despite the State Department's new interpretation of Article IV. The Thais did not let up on their demands for an entirely restructured voting procedure, with Thanat frequently warning that Thailand might withdraw from the organization altogether. It was, he said, a "deception" of the Thai people to maintain such a "useless" alliance. While Thanat appreciated SEATO's importance as the legal vehicle for extending American military protection throughout Southeast Asia, he did not consider its mandate or function sufficient for Thailand. No American President had ever made public a promise that the U.S. would unilaterally defend Thailand against communist aggression, something which had

---

38 Cable, State 1088 to Bangkok, January 27 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
39 ibid.
40 Cable, Bangkok 1098 to State, January 31 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
been done on several occasions with respect to India and others. The simple question was why not? Had not Thailand been a good and loyal friend? Was it not strategically vital for U.S. operations?

It was clear that the Thais linked the situation in Laos to their demands regarding a restructuring of SEATO, and even though Thanat denied the latter was essentially a *quid pro quo* for support at Geneva, Washington definitely believed this to be the case. However, it was equally clear that SEATO without Thailand would have virtually no value to the U.S. at all. What the Thais really wanted, however, was a bilateral treaty, and so long as Washington maintained that SEATO was the basis of its commitment to Thailand, the organisation would be unpopular with Bangkok. The U.S. would not enter into an alliance, and the Thais could just not accept SEATO by itself. The Laotian crisis exacerbated the dilemma, and, altogether, the problems seemed beyond resolve.

As a result of these problems, in February 1962 Young was finally instructed to stress to the Thais that the U.S. was prepared to act if necessary without consent of SEATO members under Article IV, as Rusk had earlier pledged. Somewhat surprisingly, they were not that impressed. Sarit continued to attack the organization's voting structure, and its domination by European powers. He suggested that perhaps Thailand would be better off outside of SEATO, like South Vietnam, and to receive assistance only from the U.S. When Young pointed out that the growing American military commitment to South Vietnam was evidence of Washington's resolve to fight communism, Sarit reacted angrily. He demanded that the U.S. stop comparing the two countries, because whereas Thailand had always been independent, Vietnam's troubles came from its colonial heritage. He was also annoyed by continuing reference to the Manila Pact, arguing that the name was erroneous, and that it should in fact be called the "Thailand Pact."  

---

41 Cable, Bangkok 1177 to State, February 12 1962, file Thailand General 2/1/62 to 2/19/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
To head off any further deterioration of relations with Bangkok over SEATO, Rusk sent Thanat a long letter in mid-February. In it he reiterated American support for Thailand and encouraged the Thais to see the organization as "greater than the sum of its parts." While championing the multilateral approach to defense in Southeast Asia, Rusk also implied that the U.S. would give full effect to the provisions of Article IV if required, reassuring Thanat that "our bilateral treaties in the Pacific area are expressed in precisely the same terms." Washington, Rusk wrote, understood the differences between Thailand and South Vietnam, and was no less committed to the security of the former than the latter. Rusk suggested a postponement of the SEATO Council meeting scheduled for April in Paris, pending further discussion between Washington and Bangkok on Thai proposals for restructuring.

However, figuring out how to deal with Phoumi could not be postponed. Young met with the Thais in late January specifically on this issue. Sarit offered his services if Phoumi agreed to come to Bangkok for a meeting, but warned Young that the Lao rightists would not give up the fight without concrete assurances in the event that Souvanna failed, or betrayed the new government to the communists. While Young tried to dodge that question, Sarit persisted, warning that Phoumi would hold out for American concessions which in his language were "pleines, valables, valides, et suffisantes." Young left the meeting wondering if in fact Sarit was all that genuine in his support of the American position, or was perhaps only masterfully dragging things out in order to exact more from Washington in exchange for his services in dealing with the Lao.

The Thais, however, did appear to genuinely want Phoumi to fall into line with U.S. desires. While Sarit may have frequently led Washington astray before with respect to his relations with Phoumi, on this occasion he seems to have been telling the truth. Once again, Thanat looms large behind

---

42 Cable, State 1230 to Bangkok, February 16 1962, file Thailand General 2/1/62 to 2/19/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
43 Cable, Bangkok 1079 to State, January 27 1962, 751J.00/1-2762, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1769, RG 59, USNA.
Sarit's position. He realized that the Kennedy administration was desperately in need of a foreign policy success, and after the Bay of Pigs and the Vienna Summit, even a flimsy settlement on Laos would seem like a significant victory. Also at stake over Laos was the heart of the U.S.-Thai friendship, without which friendship Thailand would undoubtedly suffer. Moreover, Thai support for the U.S. on Laos could potentially translate into a reorganisation of SEATO, and prove to be an important step towards a bilateral alliance. Even though the crisis in Laos was central to Thailand's security and foreign policy, Thanat saw that without a negotiated peace this neighbouring country would inevitably be lost to communism. Although he was frustrated by this prospect, he was heartened by the belief that Kennedy was not going to abandon Southeast Asia after all. The U.S. seemed to be ready to intervene more forcefully in Vietnam, while simply trying to cut its losses in getting out of Laos. Thanat began to think that Thailand should as well. That meant dumping Phoumi, something Sarit had always been reluctant to do. But Thailand's best interests far outweighed any loyalty or kinship felt toward the Lao, and Thanat no doubt persuaded Sarit that Washington's friendship did too. After all, dealing with Phoumi was an exhausting task, and the Thais were clearly tired of acting as both his mentor and an intermediary. Lastly, it seems Sarit took Phoumi's stubbornness personally, and felt it undermined the influence he was renowned to have over the right wing Lao. Given the American resolve to arrive at a negotiated settlement on Laos, Phoumi was now nothing but a liability for Thailand, and it was time for him to go.

Doubts that American officials may have had about the genuineness of Sarit's turnabout on Laos gradually began to fade. The Taiwanese Ambassador in Bangkok reported to Young that Sarit was ready to "give in." Thanat seemed particularly tired and tense, a sign that perhaps he was having a

---

44 Keyes, Isan: Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand, 39-60.
45 Thanat Khoman, "Which Road For Southeast Asia?" Foreign Affairs 42 (July 1964), 47.
difficult time with more hawkish colleagues now that Thai policy had reversed. In a particularly unguarded moment, Sarit told Young he was "fed up" with the whole mess in Laos, and that the U.S. would be better off dealing with Phoumi directly. Thailand should stay "neutral." Young asked the Thais to remain in the triangle, as "these matters are touchy and are outside our competence." To this, the State Department replied sharply that Washington was also "fed up", and that "U.S. patience [is] likewise sorely tried by Sarit's past encouragement [of Phoumi] to defy U.S. policy." Phoumi continued to reject a neutralist settlement discussed at the Geneva Conference, and he refused to give up the fight against the Pathet Lao, with or without the Americans. In fact, Phoumi even sent a scorching letter to Sarit, urging him to do whatever he wanted, but that it would make no difference to him and his men.

The Kennedy administration needed Thai support for the solution in Laos to work, and now that it seemed Sarit was at least onside, the U.S. could not afford to lose him again. With this in mind, Kennedy set about cementing the relationship with Thailand. White House aide Walt Rostow met on behalf of the President with the Thai Ambassador in Washington to give "full account" of the American position on Southeast Asia. An invitation from the State Department was also extended to Thanat to visit the U.S., and to have a private audience with the President. As a significant demonstration of Thailand's importance, the Attorney General and President's brother, Robert Kennedy, was sent to Bangkok as part of yet another goodwill tour of Southeast Asia.

---

46 Cable, Bangkok 1076 to State, January 26 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
47 Cable, Bangkok 1082 to State, January 28 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
48 Cable, State 1093 to Bangkok, January 28 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. See also cable, Bangkok 1441 to State, March 20 1962, 751J.00/3-1162, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1770, RG 59, USNA.
49 Cable, Bangkok 1089 to State, January 29 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
50 Cable, State to Bangkok, February 12 1962, file Thailand General 2/1/62 to 2/19/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
By all accounts Robert Kennedy's visit was of major importance to U.S.-Thai relations. It came at a crucial time, and RFK's selection was not accidental. The fact that he was the President's brother, and had an especially close relationship with him, had special significance for the Thais. They considered his visit a gesture of great respect, and believed, not inaccurately, that the younger Kennedy had the President's ear. Kenneth Young noted that the Thais were ecstatic when they found out about the trip, and even he conceded that it was the highlight of his tenure in Bangkok.51 Kennedy stayed only a few days, and his schedule was hectic and trying. In addition to meetings with various U.S. mission personnel and the Thai Government elite, he also had an audience with the King. In preparation for the latter, Young met privately with King Bhumipol, and found him to be surprisingly candid about the state of U.S.-Thai relations. Instead of discussing protocol, or the mandatory exchanges of friendship, the King focused on Laos. He warned Young that the President's brother would face tough questions, not least of which would come from him.

Bhumipol viewed the Geneva Conference with "utter scepticism", notwithstanding Sarit's new commitment to support it, and he cautioned the Ambassador that "Thais can no more get rid of traumatic worries over Laos than Americans could if half of Canada was controlled by hostile forces."52

On the other side of the coin, Robert Kennedy was prepared to get tough too. He was well-briefed on the situation in both Laos and Thailand, and quickly developed a keen understanding of the region in general. He was also a natural diplomat: intelligent, articulate, witty and mentally quick.53 More importantly, RFK had his brother's blessing to, as Averell Harriman put it, "hit back"

---

51 Oral history interview, Kenneth T. Young with Dennis O'Brien, April 28 1969, HUG (FP) 26.3, folder 2, 75, Kenneth Todd Young Jr. Papers, HUA.
52 Cable, Bangkok 1225 to State, February 17 1962, 751J.00/2-1562, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1770, RG 59, USNA.
53 Oral history interview, Kenneth T. Young with Dennis O'Brien, October 29 1969, HUG (FP) 26.3, folder 3, 146-148, Kenneth Todd Young Jr. Papers, HUA. According to the British Embassy in Bangkok, Sarit was "disgruntled" after his meeting with Kennedy. The Attorney General, he noted, asked far too many questions. See cable, British Embassy Bangkok to Foreign Office, February 22 1962, 166619, DS 103145, FO 371, PRO.
if Sarit got tough. The President warned he would be very upset if Thailand continued "advising and encouraging Phoumi behind our back to resist U.S. advice and counsel." Although pleased with his recent conversion, Washington considered Sarit "partly responsible for Phoumi's attitude", and thus "partly blamed for the present impasse." While the President and RFK seem to have viewed the trip to Bangkok as important, Dean Rusk may have seen it as more ceremonial. He advised the Attorney General to avoid discussions on Laos and SEATO, and cautioned that the Thais refused to see that the latter was the only real basis of any American commitment to Southeast Asia. Thanat would be coming to Washington in March, and Rusk was preparing to deal with the SEATO issue then. Knowing that Robert Kennedy had a predilection for counter-insurgency, Rusk indicated that this was an acceptable topic for discussion, but he advised that any talk of expanding U.S. operations in this regard was "politically undesirable."

Kennedy's trip went well. It had the desired effect of making the Thais feel important, and demonstrated that the President himself was paying attention to them. Despite the psychological benefits of Kennedy's trip, pressing issues still divided the U.S. and Thailand. No sooner had the Attorney General left Bangkok then Thanat renewed calls for a re-evaluation of SEATO's organisational structure. This was the main reason why he took up the invitation extended to him earlier to visit Washington and confer personally with the President.

---

54 Cable, State 1234 to Bangkok (Averell Harriman for Robert Kennedy), February 17 1962, 751.00/1-2762, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1770, RG 59, USNA. In a similar vein, Harriman urged that if Sarit got tough, Kennedy might remind him that Thailand, by imposing an embargo on Laos in 1960 against U.S. advice, "caused Souvanna to turn to the Soviets." See cable, State to Bangkok (Harriman for Robert Kennedy), February 18 1962, file Thailand General 2/1/62 to 2/19/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.

55 Cable, State to U.S. Embassy Djakarta (Rusk for Robert Kennedy), February 16 1962, file Thailand General 2/1/62 to 2/19/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.

56 Cable, Bangkok to State, March 8 1962, file Thailand General 3/1/62 to 3/8/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. Upon his return to the U.S., Kennedy gave a TV interview on NBC with Robert Abemann in which he elaborated on the trip to Thailand. He suggested that Thailand was of extreme importance to the U.S. "because of the great difficulty we are having with the communists in Southeast Asia." See "transcript of NBC interview with RFK", March 4 1962, file MC/CO, #2, General Correspondence, White House Central Files (hereafter cited as WHCF), Box 515, JFKL.
In anticipation of Thanat's trip, MAAG Thailand submitted a report on the military situation in the country, which stressed the dangers of the insurgency and the need for additional money and material. The report suggested that Thailand was a "prime target of the Sino-Soviet bloc... manifest in political, economic, psychological and ideological actions by Sino-Soviet countries and bloc-dominated or influenced countries." The authors also estimated that military action by external communist powers, like the PRC, was likely, especially given the situation in South Vietnam, which they described as "bordering on chaos." As usual, the primary insurgent threat in Thailand was believed to come from the large, urban Chinese population, as well as the Northeastern hill tribes and communists operating along the border with Malaysia. Vietnamese refugees, supposedly sympathetic to Hanoi, were also considered a threat, as were KMT irregulars driven out of Burma, whose very presence "raises [the] possibility of CHICOM [Chinese communist] intervention." While the report gave a generally favourable account of the Thai armed forces and BPP in their efforts at counter-insurgency, it concluded that continued and expanded U.S. assistance was needed. Among its specific requests, MAAG Thailand requested expedited delivery of MAP equipment and construction of military air bases at Ubon and Udon Thani.

The State Department certainly wanted better relations with the Thais, but was reluctant to recommend any rapid build-up of the military or border police. H. L. T. Koren at the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs acknowledged that the Thai aid program suffered from a "feast or famine" predicament. He suggested that "[we are] all determined to avoid in Thailand a recurrence of the

58 Ibid. See also Special National Intelligence Estimate Report, "Communist Objectives, Capabilities and Intentions in Southeast Asia", SNIE 10-62, February 21 1962, folder: Southeast Asia, Record of the Policy Planning Staff 1962, Box 221, RG 59, USNA.
unhappy experience of South Vietnam." The problem was that "we can cajole, prod and encourage the Thai Government, but we simply cannot move in, completely take over existing or new programs, and ride roughshod over the Thai." At a meeting between MAAG officials and the Embassy in Thailand, Admiral Harry Felt clarified the military's position. It was not that the U.S. was designing to take over operations altogether, but rather that delays in Washington greatly affected the Thais' counter-insurgency capabilities.\textsuperscript{61}

A State Department paper written for Rusk prior to Thanat's arrival characterised the Thai friendship as constituting an "unequivocal alliance with the West and unremitting hostility to Communism." SEATO's apparent weakness and the crisis in Laos had seriously shaken Thai confidence in the U.S., and without an effort to bolster that confidence, their adherence would be judged "uncertain."\textsuperscript{62} In another position paper, the Department recommended against consideration of changes to SEATO voting structure, but acknowledged that "de-emphasizing the non-military aspects" of the organisation would appeal to Thailand. The paper contended that the Thai objective with respect to SEATO was not so much to destroy it, as to encourage the British and French to withdraw. A Thai departure from the treaty would be a "set-back of major proportions for Western policy and prestige in Asia", which Washington could ill-afford given its efforts to shore up South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{63} Also, restructuring SEATO meant potentially straining relations with London or Paris, which the U.S. could simply not risk. The papers and proposals

\textsuperscript{60} Letter, HLT Koren (Director, OSEAA) to Kenneth T. Young, April 3 1962, file 1-B.1, BFEA, OSEAA. Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 3, RG 59, USNA.

\textsuperscript{61} Memo, "The Communist Capacity in Thailand", no author, February 1962, file 1-B.1, BFEA, OSEAA. Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 3, RG 59, USNA. This report concluded that while "there are no serious political, economic, social or ethnic cleavages among the people which the communists have been able to exploit," Thailand could not be considered "as hardened in the crucible of sacrifice" with respect to a firm foreign policy stance. Indications of changes in Thai foreign policy were already evident, with U.S. policy towards neutral countries like Cambodia prompting Thais to think "like an old wife watching her husband respond to the coquetry of the less dependable but attractive females in view."


Rusk received recommended that something be done to restore Thai confidence, and though all his advisers toed the administration line against a bilateral agreement, it is clear that something very similar was the only viable alternative.\textsuperscript{64}

The Thanat trip was not coincidentally timed with the announcement of major SEATO military exercises, dubbed "Air Cobra", to take place in late April and early May, and to be based in Thailand. There had been some suggestion that the Thais would cancel the operation out of dissatisfaction with the organisation. While flexing SEATO's military muscles would serve a useful purpose in raising Thailand's confidence in the organisation, the "Air Cobra" exercise was designed to be a demonstration of U.S. and allied power in the region at precisely the same time that final agreements on Laos were being hammered out in Geneva.\textsuperscript{65} Cancellation by Thailand would be a tremendous set-back. This was undoubtedly another "ace" Thanat had up his sleeve. To head him off, Washington worked on proposals to create a SEATO counter-insurgency office headquartered in Bangkok.\textsuperscript{66} Thanks to such inducements, "Air Cobra" went ahead as scheduled in early April without any problems.

The Thai Foreign Minister arrived in Washington on March 1, accompanied by Ambassador Young and an extended party for a hectic four days with Washington's top officials, beginning with the Secretary of State. Rusk was well-briefed, but did not anticipate the momentous results Thanat's visit would produce.\textsuperscript{67} As expected, Thanat did not waste any time when he met with the Secretary.

\textsuperscript{64} File Thailand General 3/9/62 to 3/31/62, NSF Country Files, Box 163, JFKL, passim.
\textsuperscript{65} State Department Position Paper, "SEATO Exercise 'Air Cobra'", no author, March 1962, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. Senior Thai Army officials revealed to the \textit{Bangkok World} that some of the exercises included the simulated use of nuclear weapons in response to a Chinese invasion of Thailand via Laos. Curiously, this was the first news of such exercises for both the State and Defense departments, leading one to conclude that CINCPAC acted quite independently. See cables, Bangkok 1655 to State, April 25 1962 and State 1638 to Bangkok, April 25 1962, 792.521/2-1060, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2142, RG 59, USNA.
\textsuperscript{66} Cable, State 1549 circular, March 10 1962, file Thailand General 3/9/62 to 3/31/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
\textsuperscript{67} For an in depth illustration of the preparation involved, including positions papers on the anticipated Thai arguments over SEATO, see file 19.3a, "Thanat's Visit", BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 3, RG 59, USNA. See also file Thailand General 3/9/62 to 3/31/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. Two issues which Rusk was encouraged not to address "voluntarily" were the presence of KMT irregulars on Thai soil and Thailand's relations with
He suggested that Thailand and the U.S. were really not that far apart on SEATO, and that despite their reservations about the organisation, the Thais had not abandoned collective security. A bilateral treaty would supplement SEATO, not replace it. But Rusk was quick to point out that any treaty would create domestic problems for the Kennedy administration, with Congress almost certain to question the need for any additional foreign commitments above and beyond SEATO. Thanat requested that at the very least Washington agree to an open, public statement of American security assurances to Thailand. This would have a strong impact on Thai public opinion, and serve as a significant demonstration to the communists.68

After several more friendly meetings with Rusk and others in the State Department, Thanat met with the President for nearly an hour on March 6. At this pivotal meeting, Kennedy agreed to a public declaration of the U.S. security commitment to Thailand, clearly in response to the deteriorating situation in Laos.69 The same day the State Department issued a joint statement and the exchange of letters in support thereof between the President and Sarit. The letters dealt primarily with their mutual appreciation of the Thai-American friendship, but Sarit’s rather conspicuously omitted endorsement of the U.S. position on Laos. Thai Ambassador to Washington, Visut Arthayukti, assured the President that this did not necessarily mean Thailand did not agree.70

The joint communiqué represented a major development in U.S.-Thai relations. Issued publicly on March 6 and dubbed the "Rusk-Thanat Agreement", the statement reaffirmed the Kennedy...
administration's determination to maintain "the preservation of the independence and integrity of Thailand as vital to the national interest of the United States and to world peace." It also spoke about Washington's "firm intention" to aid Thailand in resisting communism. In what was clearly a major concession by Thanat, SEATO was recognized as "an effective deterrent to direct Communist aggression." In return, Rusk assured that the U.S. would give "full effect to its obligations under the [SEATO] Treaty to act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes." The U.S. would not, he said, depend on the prior agreement of other signatories, since the obligation was individual as well as collective. On Laos, the Thais agreed to endorse American policy, but maintained their hesitation over backing Souvanna Phouma. Similarly, while they promised not to back Phoumi, the Thais reserved the right to support "anyone who resists giving Laos over to the communists."

The agreement was a considerable success for the Kennedy administration. Although differences between the U.S. and Thailand remained, Bangkok promised to support Washington's position on Laos, which meant effectively cutting Phoumi off from Thai aid. Without this lifeline, the rightists in Laos could not fight, and would eventually be forced to accept a professedly neutral government under Souvanna. That was the only way the U.S. could extricate itself from the Laotian crisis without losing face, and it would allow the Kennedy administration to focus more on the situation in Vietnam. As well, Thailand seemed to be willing to stick with SEATO, which Washington considered to be an important symbol of the American commitment to Southeast Asia. Best of all, the price for securing Thai support with respect to Laos and SEATO was not very high. The Rusk—

71 State Department Circular, "Proposed Joint Statement to be Issued By His Excellency the Foreign Minister of Thailand and the Secretary of State", file Thailand General 3/1/62 to 3/8/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. For an excellent overview of U.S. policy towards SEATO after the agreement, see report, PD/FE-1, "Future of SEATO", no author, April 5 1962, file Policy Directives, BPEA, ASFA, Subject, Personal Name and Country Files 1960-63, Box 15, RG 59, USNA.
72 Memorandum of conversation, "Meeting with Foreign Minister of Thailand", March 5 1962, file Thailand General 3/1/62 to 3/8/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
Thanat Agreement was not a bilateral alliance, allowing the Kennedy administration to avoid much Congressional and public scrutiny of its relationship with Thailand. Instead, for the U.S. the agreement was a reiteration of existing obligations under the Manila Pact, and not much more than an exercise in public relations.

International attention to the agreement was not widespread. Beijing, however, reacted quite negatively. On March 31 the government-controlled daily newspaper Ta Kung Pao attacked the communiqué as a further indication that Thailand was used "as a base for aggression and subversion." The Thai people, the newspaper said, were "waging heroic struggle against U.S. encroachments... and against Sarit's government's submission to U.S. policies."73 The British government reacted positively to the agreement, although privately it was surprised. The Foreign Office had anticipated a more vaguely worded text given Washington's adamant position against a bilateral treaty. London had quietly helped the Kennedy administration win the Thais over on SEATO in recent months by appearing more committed to the organisation, and less opposed to its restructuring. As a result, the Foreign Office was surprised by the fact that the Rusk-Thanat agreement seemed to supersede that alliance.74 Still, the deal was beneficial from the British perspective, giving the Thais "less occasion and less incentive to vent their wrath on us as the laggards who have held SEATO back."75 The French made few comments, except to indicate their displeasure to the State Department at not having been consulted in advance.76

The Rusk-Thanat Agreement was, however, received with great enthusiasm in Thailand. Leonard Unger reported that upon his return from Washington, Thanat seemed very impressed with the U.S. and "more relaxed and satisfied than I have seen him for many months." That feeling was

73 Airgram, Consul General Hong Kong to State, April 4 1962, file Thailand General 4/62 to 5/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.
74 Cable, British Embassy Bangkok 105 to Foreign Office, March 1 1962 and Foreign Office Minutes, "U.S.-Thailand", March 7 1962, 166619, DS 103145, FO 371, PRO.
75 Cable, British Embassy Bangkok to Foreign Office, March 16 1962, 166619, DS 103145, FO 371, PRO.
76 Cable, British Embassy Paris to Foreign Office, March 14 1962, 166619 DS 103145, FO 371, PRO.
certainly encouraged by the quick delivery of twenty F86 aircraft and jet trainers the same week.\textsuperscript{77} Thai newspapers and even opposition politicians were generally supportive of the agreement, but surprisingly Sarit responded to it in a somewhat lukewarm way. He thanked the President in a letter for his efforts and reiterated most of the mutual exchanges of friendship in the communiqué, but he stopped short of fully endorsing the agreement. Perhaps he wanted to distance himself from Thanat's handiwork in case the more hawkish members of the government reacted unfavourably.

On the day the Rusk-Thanat Agreement was announced Sarit met with Admiral Felt and Leonard Unger, who found the Prime Minister uncharacteristically reserved and distracted. He seemed more, not less, unsure of the American commitment in Southeast Asia, and rather open in his criticism regarding inaction over Laos.\textsuperscript{78} An irritated Young reported to Rusk that Sarit's response to the agreement was "nothing but a gracious bread and butter thank you" and that "we can't do all the giving with the Thais."\textsuperscript{79}

For the Thais, the agreement was the next best thing to a bilateral alliance. In fact, they quickly came to see it as the equivalent of such an alliance. Far from being a question of semantics, this difference of opinion between Washington and Bangkok on the Rusk-Thanat Agreement would prove to be fundamental for U.S.-Thai relations in the years to come.\textsuperscript{80} Within just a few days of its signing, it was apparent that the Thai military establishment had clearly misunderstood the purport of the agreement. CINCPAC reported that the Thais were asking for the additional funding Vice

\textsuperscript{77} Cable, Bangkok to State, March 9 1962, file Thailand General 3/9/62 to 3/31/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{78} Cable, Bangkok 1341 to State, March 6 1962, file Thailand General, 3/1/62 to 3/8/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{79} Cable, Bangkok to State, March 14 1962, file Thailand General 3/9/62 to 3/31/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{80} The U.S. Historical Studies Division of the State Department later characterised the Rusk-Thanat Agreement as the culmination of Thailand's "persistent campaign of several years to pry out of the United States a firm, unilateral, public pledge." See report, "The United States Commitment to Thailand: Background, Formulation, and Differing Initial U.S. and Thai Interpretations of the Rusk-Thanat Communiqué 1962", research project 986, September 1970, folder: Research Project 986, The U.S. Commitment to Thailand, Historical Studies Division, Historical Office, Bureau of Public Affairs, Department of State, Executive Secretariat, Historical Office Research Projects, 1969-1974, Box 7, RG 59, USNA.
President Johnson had provisionally offered to shore up the armed forces the year before. Acting Secretary of State George Ball replied that the Thais were clearly putting the "cart before the horse" with respect to military aid now that they had the Rusk-Thanat deal. However, in some respects the Thais had good reason to presume more assistance was forthcoming. Despite some reservations, the U.S. military establishment generally favoured the expansion of aid to Thailand, and undoubtedly the Thais knew this from their many meetings with CINCPAC and MAAG officials. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was himself interested in broadening military operations in Southeast Asia to cover Thailand, and asked at a top secret CINCPAC meeting if the Thais could resist a communist assault. He worried that the Pathet Lao would likely control any government in Laos within the year, putting Sarit under increasing pressure to accommodate with communism. The trouble in Vietnam would also affect his disposition in the long term. For these reasons, McNamara argued that the Thais needed immediate and considerable attention, especially in regards to their counter-insurgency and border patrol capabilities. Additional logistics and training would provide the base for expanded aid to Thailand, and at the same build up the country as a nerve-centre for operations in Vietnam.

---

81 Message, U.S. Navy CINCPAC to JUSMAAG Thailand, March 15 1962, file Thailand General 3/9/62 to 3/31/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. Apparently, the Thais understood that the conditional offer was for $US 13 million to bring Washington's share of Royal Thai Army expenses to 100 percent, versus the 68 percent already existent. In fact, Johnson had only discussed the possibility of seeking an additional, shared $US 12.6 million pending submission of the Thai government's budget and Congressional approval. Washington believed the "misunderstanding" was purposeful - part of a power-play within the armed forces by Air Force Marshal Dawee and Army Commander Thanom Kittachakorn.

82 Cable, State (Ball) to Bangkok, March 17 1962, file Thailand General 3/9/62 to 3/31/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL.

83 Message, Department of the Navy, R260753Z, "Review of MA (Military Assistance) Projects for Thailand", March 26 1962, file Thailand General 3/9/62 to 3/31/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. USOM Thailand concurred with McNamara's position. In a report on the Thai National Police (TNP) and BPP, it was noted that the "Special Branch" for counter-insurgency assigned to the former was "largely untrained", and conducted itself "in less than a professional manner." Its interrogations left "much to be desired." The BPP was also unfavourably characterised, not just in terms of counter-insurgency but with respect to routine policing as well. See USOM report, "Thailand National Police Role in Counter-Insurgency, Counter-Subversive Effort", Colonel William R. Prince, General Secretary, Chief of Staff, February 1962, attachment to Foreign Service Despatch, Bangkok 397 to State, March 27 1962 in Ibid.
Young may also have indirectly encouraged the Thais in their expectations regarding increased aid. He lobbied for funding to develop a "civic action" programme in the Northeast, aimed at winning the loyalty of villagers through education, health care, better farming technology and propaganda. Young also argued that a better road system in the region and the construction of small air fields would facilitate easier access to the more remote parts, implying that such developments could also have a military application.\(^4\) Even the Ford Foundation contributed to the misperception, offering the State Department "substantial funds" for "projects of interest", about which the Thai military soon learned.\(^5\)

Additional military aid seems to have been Sarit's price tag for endorsing U.S. policy on Laos. In late March, General Wallop Chalermchai was sent at the head of a large mission to pressure Phoumi to agree to talks. Despite his efforts, the impasse remained, prompting Souvanna and others to blame Sarit for undermining the Geneva Conference.\(^6\) But Sarit persisted, no doubt expecting some reward from the U.S., and by early May he finally won over the troublesome Phoumi. In a private meeting, attended by only General Wallop, Sarit brought much pressure to bear, even resorting to vague threats in order to convince Phoumi that his fight was over. Summing up the situation to Young, Sarit quoted an ancient Thai proverb; "They came like frogs thinking their little pond was a big sea; now they return knowing the whole ocean."\(^7\)


\(^5\) Cable, State 1467 to Bangkok, March 24 1962, file Thailand General 3/9/62 to 3/31/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. For some reason, the resettlement of the KMT irregulars in the North was of particular interest to the foundation. Discussion in this document is of foundation money going toward rewarding Thai military chiefs for their cooperation.

\(^6\) Cable, London 3674 to State, April 5 1962, 751J.00/4-162, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1771, RG 59, USNA. For further information on the Wallop Mission, see file 751J.00/3-2162, Box 1770, in ibid. Wallop was disliked by both the majority of Thais and U.S. officials. The CIA characterised him as "avaricious and ambitious." See report, CIA Office of Central Reference, February 28 1962, file 19.1, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 4, RG 59, USNA.

\(^7\) Cable, Bangkok 1691 to State, May 1 1962, 751J.00/5-162, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1771, RG 59, USNA.
Thai pressure was, however, not the worst that Phoumi faced. On May 2, Pathet Lao forces scored a huge victory by taking the town of Nam Tha in renewed fighting throughout the Plaines des Jarres. Many of Phoumi’s men fled into Thailand. Sarit urged the Thai press not to be alarmist, but privately he was very worried indeed. He feared that the battle would prompt a deluge of refugees, and that like the KMT, the Lao right-wing would resume the fight from bases within Thailand.

Anticipating this, Sarit ordered the BPP on full alert, and prepared the Army for occupation of the border region.88 On May 10, the bulk of Phoumi’s army withdrew from its stronghold at Ban Hoeui Sai and retreated into Thailand. In a chaotic scene, they were haphazardly shipped by the Thai military to Chiangrai for airlifting back to Luang Prabang in Laos. Battalion strength Thai forces moved to Chiang Khanaung across the river from the Pathet Lao. The atmosphere was definitely tense. Young pointed out that the name of the village Nam Tha was also the Thai expression for falling water, analogous to their confidence in American policy.89

In Washington, Kennedy responded quickly and decisively to the dangerous possibility of collision between Thai and Pathet Lao forces. He ordered CINCPAC to prepare for possible intervention along the Thai-Lao frontier, ostensibly to prevent a communist incursion into Thailand. Within hours a battle group was being assembled. The question was what else needed to be done? How far would the communists go? At an emergency meeting with the President on May 6, various options to deter the Pathet Lao were considered, including the deployment of additional U.S. forces in Thailand and/or Laos. Roger Hilsman suggested that low-flying exercises by U.S. aircraft over Pathet Lao positions would be sufficient warning, but McNamara and others argued for more. Despite the innumerable frustrations American advisers had suffered working with Phoumi

88 Report, CIA SNIIE 58-3-62, “Implications of the Fall of Nam Tha”, file Laos General 5/1/62 to 5/9/62, #7a. NSF Country Files Laos, Box 130, JFKL. There were suggestions that Chinese troops had been involved in the Pathet Lao offensive. The CIA concluded there was no evidence to substantiate the rumours, but that the PRC “permitted the transit of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops through a salient of Chinese territory.”
89 Cable, Bangkok 1755 to State, May 12 1962, 751f.00/5-1162, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1771, RG 59, USNA.
and the fact that his force at Nam Tha had been numerically superior, some in the Kennedy administration still wanted to shore up the Royal Lao Army.\textsuperscript{90}

However, the President disagreed. A negotiated settlement in Laos was, he believed, still possible despite the lack of progress in talks at Geneva. The key was to dissuade the \textit{Pathet Lao} from further military action without having to reverse his policy and support Phoumi. For just over a week senior administration officials in Washington deliberated on how to respond to developments at Nam Tha, evidently well-aware that any decision could have significant consequences for American policy in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, in Bangkok, Young met hurriedly with Sarit and Thanat. A draft statement by Kennedy on May 10 regarding possible deployment of U.S. troops in Thailand was discussed in a long and tense session. The key sticking point was the wording. Washington wanted it to appear that the Thais had requested the support, while Thanat demanded that it suggest a mutual agreement.\textsuperscript{91} There was also disagreement over whether the deployment should be based on the Manila Pact or the Rusk-Thanat communiqué. Young maintained that the former demonstrated an allied front and was much more preferable to the President. Sarit, however, argued that SEATO was without clout in Thailand, and that only the latter would suffice. A visibly agitated Thanat abruptly demanded to know why the U.S. was afraid to base the deployment on the Rusk-Thanat Agreement, adding that without its inclusion in any announcement, the communiqué would be considered useless.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{90} Memo, "Top Secret Meeting with JFK", May 6 1962, folder 5 Laos 5/1/62 to 5/10/62, Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 2, JFKL. In response to an INR report on the matter, Walt Rostow argued that the U.S. needed to "put forces opposite Hanoi", and to threaten to hit North Vietnam "where it will hurt." Lest his point not be clear, he added that "Jungle Jim [codename for covert U.S. air strikes in Laos] ought to quietly go to North Vietnam and take out some rail road tracks... then plaster Tchepone [the \textit{Pathet Lao} stronghold in Laos]." See memo, Rostow to Hilsman, May 10 1962, in ibid.

\textsuperscript{91} Thanat Khoman, "Current Trends and Future Prospects for Thai-American Relations", in Jackson and Wiwat Mungkandi, eds., \textit{United States-ThaiLand Relations}, 306.

\textsuperscript{92} Memorandum of conversation, "President Kennedy's Proposed Statement on the Landing of U.S. Troops in Thailand", Young with Sarit and Thanat, May 21 1962, file 16.1 b, BFEA, OSEA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 3, RG 59, USNA.
Finally, on May 15 Kennedy made his decision. U.S. forces were ordered to Thailand. The White House Press Secretary released the President's short statement deploying the task force, "until further orders" because of recent communist advances in Laos and their "subsequent movement... toward the border of Thailand." In what clearly reflected a compromise between Washington and Bangkok, the announcement carefully noted that the decision was made after "joint consideration" by the two governments, and that the move fulfilled obligations under the Manila Pact, "to which the Secretary of State and Foreign Minister of Thailand referred in their joint statement of March 6, 1962." In order to minimize the political fall-out in the U.S., the announcement also stressed that Thailand had "invited" the Americans to send the forces. To back this up, Thanat sent a letter to UN General Secretary U Thant, reporting that "... some units of the United States force are invited to be stationed in this country for the purpose of co-operating with the Thai Armed forces in the defence of Thailand against external danger and in the preservation of the peace and security of the Kingdom." The deployment was depicted as a purely defensive act, wholly consistent with the UN recognition of the right to collective security. Despite the reference to the Manila Pact in the announcement, the Thais were quick to distance themselves from SEATO, and they were decidedly cool to contributions offered by other SEATO members, even in the face of considerable pressure from Washington to accept them.

The decision to send U.S. troops to Thailand was extremely important. The Kennedy administration wanted the troops there as a warning to the Pathet Lao and their backers in Beijing.

93 Statement of the President, Office of the White House Press Secretary, May 15 1962, file Thailand General 1961-1963, POF, Country Series, Box 124a, JFKL.
94 Letter, Thanat to U Thant, May 22 1962, file 611.925/7-860, CDF Thailand 1960-1963, Box 1308, RG 59, USNA.
95 Cables, Bangkok 1794 to State, May 17 1962 and Bangkok 1806 to State, May 19 1962, 792.00/5-1762, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2137, RG 59, USNA. Australia and New Zealand were quick to offer help, while the British delayed but then followed suit. The Philippines agonised over the issue, while Pakistan was anxious to make a big show of support. Although the Thais wanted "non-white" SEATO participation (if possible), they were not favourable to Pakistan's involvement. Not surprisingly, the French snubbed the SEATO deployment, indicating that such action was "premature." Eventually contingents from Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain took part in the action. See SEATO circular 1964, May 17 1962 in Ibid.
and Hanoi, and the President knew the deployment could also prove to be a valuable bargaining chip at negotiations in Geneva. However, Kennedy did not want to appear too anxious to intervene, and he did not want the move to be interpreted as an extension of American commitments in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, sending the troops was a clear demonstration of how important Thailand was to the U.S., and of the resolve John Kennedy had to intervene militarily against perceived communist expansion in the region if necessary.

On May 18 just over 6500 U.S. Marines from the carrier *Valley Forge* landed in Thailand. It was the first overt deployment of American combat soldiers in Southeast Asia since World War Two, and it marked the first time foreign combat troops entered Thailand for a purpose other than invasion or occupation. For many Thais, it was an historic and dramatic moment. Kenneth Young reported that the people saw this as a long-overdue demonstration of American friendship and power, and that now the Thais seemed "happy, reassured and confident." But there were still many unanswered questions. How long would the U.S. forces remain? What would the reaction be from the PRC? Would this be the precursor to other American action in Laos, or elsewhere in the region?

---

98 Initial deployment did not go smoothly. Uncertain about the plans, Roger Hilsman somehow managed to convince the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Lemnitzer, to temporarily stop the 7th fleet en route to Thailand. When JFK heard the ships were stopped, he screamed "what the Hell is going on over there?" (Oral history interview, William Sullivan with Denis O'Brien, June 16 1970, Oral Histories, JFKL). Within two weeks, U.S. forces in Thailand numbered 7330. A Marine Air Squad, 300 strong, was dispatched to Udon Thani, supplemented by a force of 1800 Marines and heavy artillery squads. The 510th Tactical Fighter unit (800) was moved up to Takhl, while the bulk (2200) of the 1st Army Battle Group, comprised mainly of the 35th Infantry (popularly known as CACCTI), was stationed forty miles west of Korat. MAAG Thailand was superseded by the creation of a central U.S. Military Assistance Command, Thailand (COMUSMACTHAI) See Director of Operations, JCS, top secret report 18-62, "Southeast Asia Situation Report", May 16 1962, file Top Secrets-FE 5000-5599, BFEA, ASPEA, Top Secret Files of the Regional Planning Adviser 1955-63, Box 1, RG 59, USNA. See also report, "U.S. Forces in Thailand", no author, May 26 1962, file 16.1 b, BFEA, OSEA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 3, RG 59, USNA.
The U.S. military feared not only a forceful response to their deployment from the *Pathet Lao*, but also that the Thais would make good on a threat to occupy Sayaboury province in southern Laos.\(^\text{100}\) This would dangerously escalate the tension and diminish American control of the situation. Intelligence reports suggested that communist strength in the Laotian panhandle neared twenty active battalions, much more than the Thais could take on alone. If they conducted military operations there without coordinating with the U.S., Washington would face an awful dilemma. It was not so much that the Americans ruled out expanded action in the theatre. In fact, Washington did entertain such thoughts. CINCPAC even planned for possible offensive operations in Laos. Primary attention in this respect was given to multilateral planning devised as part of SEATO.\(^\text{101}\) However, the Pentagon also anticipated unilateral American action to occupy the panhandle.

During an emergency meeting on May 29, the President ordered that such plans "be undertaken unilaterally by the United States without discussion at this time with the Thais or the Lao."

Washington was not anxious for such involvement. The main problem was that the U.S. had to maintain total control of any, obviously aggressive, operations. Kennedy could hardly afford to go into Laos with guns blazing, but he could also not afford letting the Thais be beaten if they did so.

---

\(^{100}\) The pros and cons of occupying territory along the Lao side of the Mekong, either with U.S. and/or Thai troops, was in fact given serious consideration by Washington. Sensing his seeming receptivity to such a deployment, the Thais sought McNamara's support for occupation of the north bank of the Mekong. However, the State Department made it very clear that the U.S. would not even discuss it, adding tersely: "Highest authority directs." See cables, Bangkok 1844 to State, May 24 1962 and State 1849 to Bangkok, May 25 1962, 792.00/3-2062, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2137, RG 59, USNA. See also memorandum for the President, INR 1-2577/62, June 4 1962, file Laos General 6/1/62 to 6/5/62, NSF Country Files Laos, Box 131, JFKL.

\(^{101}\) SEATO "Plan S", regarding a joint action in Laos, was re-evaluated with estimates that just over 40,000 combat troops were needed for offensive operations. The majority, not surprisingly, would be American, with the Thais making up the rest. It was not anticipated that other SEATO members would commit to such action. See top secret message, CJCS 4790 Washington to CINCPAC, "Coordinated Military Planning in Southeast Asia", May 25 1962, file Top Secrets FE 5600-5699, BFEA, ASFEA, Top Secret Files of the Regional Planning Adviser, Box 1, RG 59, USNA.

U.S. military operations in Thailand were based on OPLAN 32-59, which stipulated that the primary purpose was to defensive: to hold the border, maintain a cease-fire and integrate Thai and American forces. Nevertheless, it is clear that Washington had other objectives in deploying the troops. Developing better counter-insurgency operations in Northeast Thailand was a priority of OPLAN 32-59, but not only for defensive purposes. CINCPAC estimated that about six months was needed to establish a reasonable "encadrement" of the Thai Army; that is, organise it for possible offensive actions. OPLAN 32-59 maintained that, on their own, proposed air strikes by unmarked U.S. aircraft flown out of secret bases in Thailand would not seriously damage the Pathet Lao, a problem compounded by the fact that the wet season had begun, making the airstrips periodically unusable and degrading them quickly. Consequently, OPLAN 32-59 argued that the U.S. military needed to avoid unnecessary combat in order to buy valuable time for the development of a mobile Thai force capable of extended guerilla action in Laos. This would also give the Americans an opportunity to bring Thai air bases to their full capacity in the event large-scale, offensive operations were required against either Laos or North Vietnam. The trick was to keep all the work as invisible as possible from the enemy and Phoumi, while trying to keep the Thais on a short leash.

Building up counter-insurgency and offensive military capabilities in Thailand definitely became a chief aspect of the deployment. CINCPAC sent eighty-four top instructors, along with 156 Special Forces from Okinawa to Thailand. Training focused on the BPP based in the Northeast, and included guerilla and counter-guerilla operations, aerial raids, and demolition. But the real success

---

103 Top secret message, CINCPAC P310001Z to JCS Washington, May 26 1962, file Top Secrets FE 5600-5699, BFEA, ASF EA, Top Secret Files of the Regional Planning Adviser, Box 1, RG 59, USNA.

104 Fact sheet, "U.S. Counterinsurgency Forces to Thailand", W.B. Rosson, Major General, Director of Special Warfare, May 29 1962, file Thailand General 4/62 to 5/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. See also message, MAAG Thailand MAO 21107 to Commander, MACV (COMUSMACV), June 7 1962, in Ibid. Official American estimations of the Thais' counter-insurgency capabilities continued to differ. USOM Thailand reported that the Thai National Police were poorly trained, with insufficient and outdated equipment. But the NSC's team of internal security experts concluded after a tour of the Northeast in the fall that the BPP was "an effective force for border
of the deployment from the U.S. military's viewpoint was the augmentation of air bases and landing strips throughout Thailand. Korat quickly became an important nerve centre and "rumble seat" for secret air strikes against Laos, and even North Vietnam.\textsuperscript{105} Although the Thais were very sensitive about having any such missions originate there, they either did not object to or did not know about the base's use for logistical support. Nor did they refuse to participate in not-so-secret joint training programmes in South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{106} Thai-based aircraft regularly ran reconnaissance missions over Laos. In early June one such overflight confirmed PRC army units working on road construction across the Chinese-Lao border and into Phong Saly province. Air strikes against Pathet Lao and presumably North Vietnamese positions near the Cambodian border were also orchestrated out of Thailand.\textsuperscript{107}

It is clear from documentary evidence that the deployment was not purely defensive or unexpected. Northeastern Thailand was the ideal place from which to run counter-insurgency operations in both Laos and Vietnam, and the presence of several thousand American troops there, ostensibly protecting the Thais from possible communist invasion, provided an excellent cover under which such operations could take place. At the same time the deployment at least temporarily assuaged Thai fears about the strength of the American commitment to their country's defence, shoring up Washington's relationship with a valuable Asian ally. But most of all, it is quite likely that

\textsuperscript{105} For numerous examples of operations in Vietnam connected to Korat, see various messages, COMUSACV to CINC PAC/JCS, file Thailand General, Military Cables 6/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. The Thais also allowed deployment of monitoring equipment at Don Muang airport as part of "Project Clear Sky"; surveillance on high level altitude tests by the USSR. See cable, State 1835 to Bangkok, May 23 1962, 792.5411/6-262, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2142, RG 59, USNA.

\textsuperscript{106} Cable, CINC PAC to State, June 6 1962, file Thailand General 6/1/62 to 6/15/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. The Associated Press reported such an operation on June 4. CINC PAC urged Washington to take a "low key" approach to the revelation, suggesting a statement clarifying the programme as "orientation visits."

\textsuperscript{107} Report, JCS Director of Operations 23-63, "Southeast Asia Situation Report", June 6 1962, file Top Secrets FE 5600-5699, BFEA, ASFEA, Top Secret Files of the Regional Planning Adviser, Box 1, RG 59, USNA.
by deploying U.S. forces to Thailand, Kennedy did succeed in warning the Pathet Lao, Beijing, and Hanoi that he was prepared to intervene in Southeast Asia militarily if necessary. In doing so, he may have brought about a speedier end to the interminable negotiations on Laos in Geneva.

On July 23, 1962, fourteen nations signed a final declaration in Geneva, committing to the maintenance of a "peaceful, neutral, independent, democratic, unified and prosperous Laos."108 However, few believed the settlement would last. The Pathet Lao remained in control of much of the country, while isolated pockets of royalists and rightists threatened to continue a guerilla war. North Vietnamese, Chinese, and even Russian advisers were known to be in the country helping communist forces consolidate and expand their territory, while clandestine operations led or sponsored by the Americans merely paused for the negotiations.109 From Washington's perspective, the Geneva Conference was a way out of the quagmire in Laos, albeit temporary. President Kennedy was convinced that a military solution favourable to Washington was impossible; at the same time, he was one of the few hopeful that a neutralist settlement would last, and he was optimistic that the U.S. could prevent communist expansion elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Together with Cambodia, Kennedy believed that Laos could form a cordon sanitaire, protecting Thailand and the rest of the region.110 At the same time, the U.S. could focus its efforts on the defence of South Vietnam, which was threatened but still salvageable.

With the Geneva Conference on Laos concluded, Kennedy concentrated on Vietnam. Clearly he was wary of the consequences of escalating American military and economic aid to the South, but at the same time, he was also afraid of quitting. Kennedy could not afford to alienate the Pentagon, and its considerable Congressional support. Nor could he afford to appear weak to the communists

in the midst of the Cold War. Throughout 1962, U.S. military involvement in South Vietnam secretly increased, and Kennedy approved.111 Even so, Kennedy was determined to limit the American military role in Southeast Asia, and at least appear to be interested in honouring diplomatic settlements. To this end, the task force in Thailand quickly came under review.

When first deployed in May, Kennedy anticipated that the troops would remain in Thailand during the first few months of Souvanna Phouma's new coalition government.112 Most observers in both Washington and Bangkok expected them to be there even longer, and maybe even indefinitely. The notion to maintain American troops in Thailand on a permanent basis received serious attention in Washington.113 Secretary of Defense McNamara wanted nothing close to a "standing army" there, but worried that a total and rapid withdrawal after the Geneva Conference on Laos would adversely affect Thai morale. McNamara was also anxious not to disrupt counter-insurgency operations in the North, which he believed were crucial to future U.S. policy in Indochina. At the Honolulu Conference on July 23-24, the Chief of the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (MACV), General Paul D. Harkins, and Admiral Felt suggested to McNamara that the task force in the Northeast was not designed to deter small-scale communist infiltration from Laos, and that this was really the only immediate threat the Thais faced.114 The troops had served their purpose in deterring a more concentrated communist attack feared after the fall of Nam Tha, and counter insurgency was best left to smaller, more specialised operations.

113 Hilsman and even Averell Harriman suggested this might "offset any impression of U.S. supinuity in the face of another communist failure to live up to commitments." See memo, Roger Hilsman to W. Averell Harriman, file Laos General 9/62, #5, NSF Country Files Laos, Box 131, RG 59, USNA. See also top secret National Intelligence Estimate 58-5-62, Director of Central Intelligence, May 23 1962, file Laos General 6/1/62 to 6/5/62, #5d, NSF Country Files Laos, Box 131, JFKL.
114 See messages, Department of the Army 915036 DTG 02190Z, Harkins at COMUSMACVTHAI to McNamara at Defense, June 2 1962, folder 2, Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 2, JFKL and Navy Department P032205Z, Felt at CINCPAC to McNamara, June 5 1962 in Ibid.
On July 28, Young met with the Thai leadership to discuss Washington's plans for the withdrawal. It was very clear that the Thais were upset. Sarit accused the U.S. of using the deployment only to bring about an end to the Geneva Conference on Laos, but Young insisted that the withdrawal was necessary to ensure the "tactical flexibility" of the Seventh Fleet. Describing the Prime Minister's reaction to the news as "embittered and discouraged", Young could not convince the Thai leadership that the decision to withdraw U.S. troops was made purely out of military necessity. He reported to Washington that the "tone, attitude and expression" of all Thais there "was one of concern, reproachfulness, disappointment, defiance, and what I can only describe as peevishness personally taken out on me sarcastically and bitterly."115 Perhaps because of the strong reaction from the Thai leadership, in September 1962 President Kennedy met in Washington with SEATO Secretary General Pote Sarasin, and apologised for not consulting with the Thai Government about the withdrawal of U.S. troops. He wanted to assure the Thais that the failure to discuss the matter with them was "mechanical, and not a reflection of Thailand in U.S. esteem."116 However, it seems that Kennedy never really considered the possibility of leaving the task force in Thailand on a permanent basis. Wary of extended military commitments, and no doubt relieved by the settlement at Geneva, Kennedy wanted the task force out of Thailand, and set about doing it quickly.

The decision to withdraw American troops from Thailand was as a significant development in U.S.-Thai relations as the decision to go in the first place. Washington needed to get the task force out without insulting or alarming the Thais. As the first withdrawal began in late July, the U.S. began to step up support for Thailand's frontier defences, hoping to assuage fears in Bangkok with respect to American military commitment to Southeast Asia, and particularly the crisis in Laos. To this end, McNamara developed a full assistance package to build up the BPP via the Thai Army. At

115 Cable, Bangkok 167 to State, July 28 1962, file 792.00/7-162, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2137, RG 59, USNA.
another Honolulu Conference in October, McNamara's plans were implemented.117 Throughout
the rest of 1962, counter-insurgency in Thailand received heavy emphasis with the implementation
of several programs.118

The Thais were not so easily placated by such measures. By August 5, the withdrawal of American
troops from Thailand was well under way, and the Thais were furious. In meetings with Young,
Sarit sarcastically and bitterly attacked Washington for what he saw as an obvious concession to
communist pressure. With the Geneva Conference concluded, Sarit reasoned, Kennedy had his
excuse to pull out of Laos and maybe Southeast Asia as a whole. But the communists were still
there, and Thailand would be left alone. Young tried to convince the Thais that the withdrawal was
only for "practical flexibility" and not because of communist propaganda, but to no avail. Sarit's
reaction reflected "some of that psychic defeatism affecting many Southeast Asians which stems
from fear of Chinese take-over and American disengagement."119

Thai alarm over the withdrawal of U.S. troops illustrates Bangkok's fears about the situation in
Laos even after the Geneva Conference. Laos was never far from the forefront of U.S.-Thai
relations. American and Thai intelligence reports on the situation in Laos both confirmed that the
Pathet Lao were again on the move, consolidating their military position despite the Geneva

117 Report, "Summary of Discussions at the Honolulu Conference", Edward Masters at OSEAA, July 26 1962,
790.5/6-1662, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 2102, RG 59, USNA. The plans called for additional funding and training of
the BPP, bringing it up to 7000 strong by the end of 1963. The Defense Department also allocated 28000 M-1 rifles to
arm the Thai provincial police, and to equip airborne, psychological and engineering battalions. $US 21 million was set
aside for pipeline and airfield construction, with about 1500 U.S. personnel assigned to oversee construction. See file 1-
B.3, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 3, RG 59, USNA.

118 For example, a 50 kilowatt mobile radio transmitter, dubbed "Project TEAK", was implemented for Voice of
America broadcasts in Indochina. (file 7-C.1, "Voice of America, 1962", BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box
4, RG 59, USNA). The "Mobile Information Teams" were increased throughout the North and Northeast, and, in
conjunction with the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, a "Master Force Plan" projecting five-year aid to the Thai Armed
Forces was drawn up by CINCPAC. Most of all, a "Thailand Working Group" was commissioned "in response to new
emphasis placed on the U.S. program" and to "insure and expedite the coordination of all efforts." HLT Koren headed
the group, with Edward Masters acting as the "country expert." It worked under the auspices of Kennedy's Task Force
on Southeast Asia. See file 2-E.8, "Thai Working Group Minutes", BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 3, RG
59, USNA.

119 Cable, Bangkok 16 to State, July 28 1962, 792.00/7-162, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2137, RG 59, USNA.

143
Conference. Sarit smugly told Young, "I told you so." Pote took the opportunity of his meeting with the President in September to convey Sarit's dismay over the "abandonment" of Thai special forces in Laos, left behind without specific direction by U.S. advisers. Kennedy stressed the decision was only made in order to help support the political resolutions at Geneva.

In the aftermath of the Geneva settlement and the abrupt withdrawal of U.S. troops, Thai confidence in Washington reached a low ebb. The situation in Laos looked bleak, with communist advances against not only Phoumi's men, but also the neutralists. The extension of Pathet Lao influence militarily and politically was so fast that Souvanna himself went to the U.S. in search of assistance. In late September State Department intelligence estimated that between 7,000 and 9,000 Vietminh combat forces were still present in Laos, notwithstanding denials from Hanoi. It was evident that the North Vietnamese would not withdraw by the October 7th deadline established at Geneva for the removal of all foreign troops. In fact, there was little reason for them to leave at all. The border between Laos and North Vietnam was easily crossed without detection, and the areas under control of the Pathet Lao were sparsely populated, relatively remote and heavily forested, making it very difficult for the U.S. or international observers to prove the North Vietnamese were there.

120 Cable, Bangkok 311 to State, August 21 1962, 751J.00/8-1562, CDF Laos 1960-63, Box 1774, RG 59, USNA.
121 Memorandum of conversation, Sarit and Young, August 20 1962, file 16.1, BFEA, OSEA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 4, RG 59, USNA. See also, memorandum of conversation, Pote Sarasin and JFK, September 28 1962 in Ibid.
122 See file "Visit of Souvanna Phouma", BFEA, ASFEA, Subject, Personal Name and Country Files 1960-63, Box 17, RG 59, USNA. While the U.S. entertained Souvanna, contingency planning for military intervention in Laos continued behind the scenes. With or without Souvanna's cooperation, it was suggested that some 45,000 U.S. forces could deploy along the Mekong and "flush" the communists from the panhandle. If Souvanna protested, a top secret State Department report indicated that his ouster could be quickly arranged, followed by the succession of the Laotian King or even Phoumi. Anticipating a strong response from Hanoi and Beijing, the report concluded that full-scale intervention by either would be unlikely, especially if Washington made it evident it was willing to use its air superiority in the region. Top secret memorandum for the President, "Concept for Phase II of Intervention in Laos", revised edition, Usher at OSEA, July 24 1962, file Top Secrets FE 5700-5799, BFEA, ASFEA, Top Secret Files of the Regional Planning Adviser, Box 1, RG 59, USNA.
123 Memorandum, "Laos: The Troop Withdrawal Question", Roger Hilsman to Averell Harriman, September 24 1962, folder 9, Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 2, JFKL.
The Kennedy administration anticipated that Hanoi's strategy was to gradually and secretly consolidate its control of Laotian provinces adjacent to the Vietnamese border. Washington also knew that Laos was being used as a conduit by North Vietnam in infiltrating the South through the ubiquitous "Ho Chi Minh Trail". As a result, Kennedy continued to re-evaluate its position on U.S. troops in Thailand even as they were being withdrawn. On the one hand, the presence of American combat forces so close to Laos made it easy for the communists to accuse Washington of undermining the Geneva agreements. On the other hand, the U.S. military was clearly the only thing preventing the Pathet Lao and Vietminh from taking over the whole country. American troops in Thailand also reassured Bangkok of Kennedy's resolve to oppose communist expansion in the region. Covert operations were one thing, but a strong and clear demonstration of Washington's strength by way of regular forces was another. So, just as the troops sent during the crisis in May left Thailand, the Kennedy administration began to explore avenues to send them back in. Kennedy saw this as a necessary step not so much to save Laos, or even to protect Thailand, but rather to prepare for an expanded military involvement in South Vietnam.

Throughout 1962 U.S.-Thai relations continued to be affected by Bangkok's problems with Cambodia and Burma, as well as Laos. Despite the Kennedy administration's earlier resolve not to risk its relationship with Thailand over Cambodia, efforts continued to win the favour of the moody Sihanouk. The Phra Vihear temple dispute still raged, and in preparation for the last stage of hearings before the International Court of Justice, Cambodia hired former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, a lawyer by profession, to represent it. In January Acheson set off to Phnom Penh to consult with his clients. The State Department unofficially provided him with briefing material

125 Hilsman, To Move a Nation, 142-145.
for his trip.\textsuperscript{126} Washington was careful not to endorse Acheson, but there is little doubt that
Kennedy was thrilled to have someone of such stature trusted by Sihanouk. The Thais, not without
reason, were furious. The International Court of Justice decision, handed down on June 15, made
things even worse. Thailand lost its case by a vote of 9 to 3. Thanat called the ruling a "miscarriage
of justice", and openly attacked Washington for allowing an American official to support "a
neutralist, even pro-communist nation in a territorial dispute with an ally of the United States."\textsuperscript{127}
More importantly, Thai armed forces went on full alert, and refused to yield the temple. Defence
Minister Thanom told the \textit{Bangkok Post}, "as far as I am concerned, I would rather fight to keep
what is Thai."\textsuperscript{128}

The Thai-Cambodian dispute occurred simultaneously with the communist gains in Laos and the
withdrawal of U.S. forces from Thailand. The Thai reaction to the temple ruling was, therefore,
greatly amplified. Bangkok withdrew its Ambassador from Paris in protest against French support
for Cambodia. Thai newspapers devoted extensive coverage to every aspect of the issue for nearly
three months. Sarit even threatened to resign, citing an intolerable loss of prestige.\textsuperscript{129} In August the
situation threatened to get completely out of control, when a border clash erupted just fifteen
kilometres from the site.\textsuperscript{130} Although conflict was averted, the war of words continued. But even

\textsuperscript{126} Memo, Elden Erickson at OSEAA to Dean Acheson, December 26 1961, file 22.2, BFEA, OSEAA, Cambodia
Files 1958-63, Box 9, RG 59, USNA. See also secret briefing paper, "Cambodia's Relations with the United States", no
author, January 31 1962 in \textit{Ibid}.
Ministry sent an open letter to the Chicago Daily Tribune likening Dean Acheson's role on behalf of Cambodia to a
prominent Thai representing Fidel Castro. See letter, Foreign Ministry of Thailand, June 27 1962, \textit{Foreign Affairs
Bulletin} (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand) 1 (June-July 1962), 56-57.
\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Bangkok Post}, June 15 1962. For reports by other Thai newspapers see Airgram, "An Analysis of the Thai Press
Campaign Against U.S. Military Assistance to Cambodia", Bangkok A-302 to State, November 11 1962, 792.5/9-562,
CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2141, RG 59, USNA.
\textsuperscript{129} Top Secret report, JCS 23-63, "Situation in Southeast Asia", July 3 1962, file Top Secrets FE 5600-5699, BFEA,
ASESA, Top Secret Files of the Regional Planning Adviser 1955-63, Box 1, RG 59, USNA. Sarit pledged that Thailand
would comply with the ruling, stating that "even though Cambodia may have Phra Viharn, only the ruins and the piece
of land... will be theirs. The soul of the Temple... remains forever with Thailand. The Thai people will always
remember... the trickery of those who disregard honour and justice." See report, "Thailand Honours Obligations Under
\textsuperscript{130} Cable, JUSMAAG Thailand 131828Z to CINCPAC, August 13 1962, file Thailand General 8/1/62 to 8/15/62,
#54, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL.
more disturbing to the Thais was what appeared to be Washington's continued ambivalence in the whole matter. In fact, in September the Kennedy administration favourably considered the transfer of twelve unarmed T-28 aircraft to Cambodia. The State Department pushed the plan with the hope of winning some favour in Phnom Penh and proving to Sihanouk that U.S. support of Thailand was not aimed at Cambodia. Privately Sarit admitted he could appreciate Washington's motivations, but he warned that the Thai public would not be so understanding. Even while he remained surprisingly calm, Sarit made it clear that American policy towards Cambodia would dramatically affect U.S.-Thai relations, especially in conjunction with developments in Laos.¹¹¹

Continuing problems with the ethnic insurgencies and KMT remnants in Burma influenced U.S.-Thai relations as well. In January the Thais brought back up the issue of KMT irregulars living in the North. Thai Air Force Chief Dawee Chullasappa sent the Embassy a top secret letter indicating that he and Kennedy's personal military adviser, General Maxwell Taylor, had discussed the issue at a prior meeting, and that Washington would be funding those still remaining KMT irregulars as part of Thai "bulwark" against communist infiltration from Laos.¹¹² In October, reports circulated that PRC regular forces were engaged against the KMT and Karen on behalf of Rangoon.¹¹³ Not surprisingly, the Thais were alarmed. Some even believed that this was a sure sign that a massive communist attack on Thailand was being planned given simultaneous Pathet Lao gains in Laos and the temple dispute with Cambodia. But on this occasion, Washington actually benefited from the agitated Thai reaction. Bangkok stepped up the pace of its slow, diplomatic dance with the Burmese and moved for immediate negotiations with respect to border control. Despite a number of

¹¹¹ Cable, Bangkok 501 to State, September 16 1962, 792.5/9-562, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2141, RG 59, USNA. In response to the U.S. decision, the powerful Minister of the Interior, Phraphas Chansathan, openly called for "a policy that is all our own, peculiarly Thai, a Thai-ist policy, a policy based on Thai history, Thai culture, Thai interests... with Thai-ist policy, we will only be on the side of Thailand." He added that "the trouble with America is that she is trying to save face everywhere in the world... she is even willing to hurt the interests of allies." See cable, British Embassy Bangkok 415 to the Foreign Office, September 7 1962, 166619, FO 371, PRO.

¹¹² Cable, Bangkok 1039 to State, January 19 1962, file Thailand General 1/62, #3, NSF Country Files Thailand, JFKL.

¹¹³ Cable, British Consulate Chiangmai to British Embassy Bangkok, October 10 1962, 166617, FO 371, PRO.
mysterious plane crashes and continued tension along the frontier, Thai-Burmese relations quickly improved. Late in October, Defence Minister Thanom made an unprecedented visit to Rangoon, paving the way for an even more important trip by Burmese leader Ne Win to Bangkok in December.\textsuperscript{134} The Kennedy administration tried to help things along, instructing the CIA and Defense Department to join the Thais in planning for the resettlement of KMT irregulars.\textsuperscript{135}

But progress in Thai-Burmese affairs was really the only success Washington had in its relationship with Bangkok during 1962. The warm feelings generated by the Rusk-Thanat agreement quickly dissipated, and soon after U.S. troops left Thailand, the deteriorating situation in Laos once again frustrated and angered the Thais. Kennedy had obtained a negotiated settlement to the Laotian crisis, but the U.S. maintained a considerable, albeit clandestine, military presence there. American policy in the entire region seemed hesitant and confused. Thailand continued to be regarded as the essential backstop to any American operations in Southeast Asia, but at the same time Washington kept its distance from a formal alliance. To many Thai officials it appeared that the U.S. was taking them and their support for granted. Washington's apparent support for Cambodia in the Phra Viharn temple dispute seemed yet another American betrayal, just as the abandonment of Laos had been.

As Washington began to turn its attention more and more towards developments in South Vietnam, the Thais openly questioned their relationship with the U.S. There was concern not only that the Americans lacked the resolve to stand up to the communists in Asia, but also that even if they did, their commitment to Thailand was only temporary. Many Thai officials began to feel that the U.S. was a friend in need only of political and logistical support for planned operations with

\textsuperscript{134} Cable, Chiangmai 22 to State, October 29 1961 and Airgram, Bangkok A-493 to State, January 18 1963, 690.00/3-2961, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 1392, RG 59, USNA.

\textsuperscript{135} Memorandum, Edward Rice at BFEA to Hollis Chenery at AID, April 9 1962, file 15.8a, BFEA, OSEA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 4, RG 59, USNA. See also, secret memorandum of conversation, Col. Yukonthon Singhabhan (Office of the Supreme Commander, Vice Secretary to KMT Evacuation Committee) and Floyd Whittington (acting Deputy Mission Chief), August 7 1962 in \textit{Ibid.}
respect to South Vietnam. After that, it was feared, Washington would abandon them. Thailand, however, was willing to make an all-out commitment to a joint fight against communism in Southeast Asia. As 1962 came to a close, the question remained whether the U.S. was ready to do the same.
Part Two

*Playing Dominoes, 1963-1965*
Although by 1963 the Kennedy administration had extricated itself somewhat from Laos through the Geneva agreements, the situation there remained extremely important to Washington. South Vietnam increasingly became the focus of U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia, but Laos served as a supply conduit from North Vietnam and a refuge for communists forces seeking to overthrow the regime of Ngo Dien Diem. For Thailand, the apparent inevitability of Pathet Lao dominance meant that communism was literally on the doorstep, poised to potentially expand into the vulnerable and isolated Northeast. Consequently, developments in Laos remained as both the raison d'être and the bête noire of U.S.-Thai relations.

While it was evident in the aftermath of the Geneva settlement that the Kennedy administration had no intention of committing the U.S. to an overt and full-scale defence of Laos, it was also clear that it had not abandoned Southeast Asia as the Thais feared. The question, therefore, was what steps would the administration take to defend South Vietnam or other countries in the region threatened by communism? For the Thais, this question spawned other serious considerations. Where did Thailand fit into U.S. plans for the region? What role could the Thais play in any American military commitment to defend the rest of Indochina? What would the effects of continued cooperation with Washington be on the country and the people? Since the late 1950's Thai foreign policy had been unquestionably fixated on the situation on Laos, and by extension, on the American approach to the communist threat there. The issues of SEATO's effectiveness and Thailand's membership in that organisation were connected to developments in Laos and the U.S. response to them. By 1963, little had changed. Scepticism about the effectiveness of SEATO persisted, and although the Kennedy administration had tried to persuade the Thais otherwise, it
still had not convinced the Thai leadership about its own resolve to stand up against communism. Doubts about American resolve generated a debate within Thailand about its relations with the United States. Was it time to change course? Would a policy of neutrality and accommodation be best suited to safeguard Thai independence?

The Thais had often threatened to re-evaluate their foreign policy in thinly veiled attempts to exact more aid from Washington. But after the Geneva agreements on Laos and the withdrawal of American forces from Thailand, the threat seemed in earnest. The Thai leadership wanted security from what it perceived to be a very real and very immediate communist threat on its frontiers, which it believed would be best provided by a formal, bilateral alliance. The American posture with respect to SEATO and Laos angered and frustrated the Thais, and only further aggravated ill feelings caused by Washington’s refusal to acquiesce to a treaty. Sarit faced mounting dissension amongst members of his inner circle and the Thai public over the course that Thailand should take.

Continued cooperation with the U.S. only aggravated the North Vietnamese and Chinese more, while yielding no absolute guarantee that the Americans would defend the Thais at any cost. Once again, a bilateral alliance with the U.S. seemed the only reliable assurance. With such a commitment, Washington could secure Thailand’s continuing loyalty and support, while without it the Thais could once again flirt with Beijing. American military and economic aid, covert operations, and diplomatic pledges were certainly welcomed, but they could not take the place of an alliance.

An alliance was imperative from the Thai perspective, but undesirable from the American. The U.S. did not view the Rusk-Thanat agreement as the functional equivalent of an alliance. For Washington, an alliance raised uninviting political difficulties at home. It meant going to Congress and the people, and selling them the idea that American troops might some day have to fight and die in defense of Thailand. That was a political land mine Kennedy was just not prepared to detonate. But other than avoiding a bilateral alliance, U.S. policy towards Thailand seemed to lack a
clear direction. Of course maintaining the friendship of Thailand was key, but at exactly what cost? Progressively more absorbed by developments in South Vietnam, Washington's attention was never primarily on Bangkok, even though Thailand was of vital importance for any American plans in Southeast Asia. U.S. policy towards Thailand seemed *ad hoc*, and frequently haphazard. Throughout 1963 the Thais continued to doubt the reliability of U.S. commitment, while the Americans tried to woo them with a variety of inducements short of an outright alliance. It would take the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam, diplomatic personnel changes on both sides, and the death of both Kennedy and Sarit before the Thais finally decided to forego their primary objective, and settle for something less.

The Kennedy administration continued its covert operations in Laos throughout 1963, partly in order to reassure the Thais and to redress the ill-feeling from the decision to pull out U.S. forces so quickly. The decision to pursue this "second track" in Laos reflected not only Kennedy's concern about the Thais, but also the instability and ineffectiveness of his negotiated settlement there. The government of Souvanna Phouma was extremely precarious. Not only did the *Pathet Lao* continuously expand its control of the countryside, but some neutralists within his government increasingly drew closer to the communists.¹ As a result, the Kennedy administration decided to continue its efforts to strengthen the non-communist forces in Laos. That necessitated close cooperation with Thailand, and pursuing military activities "which will bend those [Geneva] Agreements or covertly violate them."² At a top-level meeting on Laos on June 18, Kennedy endorsed a three-phase approach designed to stabilize Souvanna's hold on power, or entirely reconstitute the Lao National Union Government. Phase one included the use of "non-US forces",

¹ To make matters worse, two prominent members of Souvanna's cabinet were killed early in 1963. Ketsana, a close aid to Souvanna, died in a plane crash in January, while Foreign Minister Quinim Pholsena was shot by his own body guards on April 1, apparently because he was too accommodating with the *Pathet Lao*. See folder: Pol - Political Affairs and Rel. Laos 4/1/63, CFP File 1963 (Political and Defense, POL), Laos, Box 3965, RG 59, USNA.
² Cable, State 11 to Bangkok, February 7 1963, folder: Political Affairs and Rel. Pol. 27 Military Operations Laos 8/1/63, CFP Files 1963 (Political and Defense, POL), Laos, Box 3966, RG 59, USNA.
supported by "stretching the Geneva Agreements." Phase two included the non-combatant use of U.S. forces, with only "certain violations" of the negotiated settlement. The final phase involved the use of U.S. combat forces in Laos, concurrent with plans to mine the Gulf of Tonkin, blockade Haiphong, and bomb North Vietnam.  

Expanded clandestine activities and contingency plans in the region also demonstrated that, notwithstanding political appearances aimed at those wary of U.S. military commitments, Kennedy had no intention of pulling the U.S. out of Southeast Asia. In fact, throughout 1962 the number of American advisers in South Vietnam swelled well beyond the limits on foreign military personnel established by the 1954 Geneva Accords. By early 1963, there were 11,500 U.S. military staff there, an increase of 9,000 over the previous year. In a television interview on July 17, Kennedy told CBS broadcaster Walter Cronkite that the U.S. would not withdraw from South Vietnam in the face of communist aggression. In a similar interview on September 9, the President told NBC's David Brinkley that an American withdrawal from Vietnam would lead to the collapse of Southeast Asia, and that he would not allow it. "[W]hat helps to win the war we support," Kennedy said, "what interferes with the war, we oppose." He added that "we want the war to be won, the Communists to be contained, and the Americans to go home... but we are not there to see a war lost." Although frequently hesitant, and despite the fact he never lived to make a definitive decision on the matter, Kennedy set the groundwork for the American war in Vietnam.  

---

3 Memo, "Meeting on Laos", State to JFK, June 18 1963, folder: Political Affairs and Rel. Pol. 27 Military Affairs Laos 6/1/63, CFP Files 1963 (Political and Defense, POL), Laos, Box 3967, RG 59, USNA. See also top secret cable, Joint Defense and State 1219 to Vientiane, June 22 1963, in Ibid.  
5 As quoted in folder "Personal Notes", Files of the Ambassador at Large Averell Harriman 1967-68, Box 10, RG 59, USNA.  
His policy with respect to Thailand was certainly part of that groundwork. Thai disappointment with American policy over Laos may have been an incentive for taking a stronger stand in Vietnam, and the relatively good relationship between Thailand and the U.S. certainly made Washington's military plans for Indochina easier to implement. Thailand's importance for political and logistical support remained key. Just as they needed the Thais in order to secure a settlement in Laos, the Americans also needed them if the U.S. was to make a military stand in Vietnam. With this in mind, during the first few months of 1963 there was increased attention to the Thais, especially with respect to building up counter-insurgency and developing covert operations.7 A comprehensive in-country report researched in the fall of 1962 was implemented, giving rise to the "Internal Security Program" (ISP). Military assistance, a strengthening of BPP, PARU, and VDC units and a "civic action" project designed to improve living conditions in the Northeast were the key components. Road construction and the enhancement of communications through to the Laotian border were a top priority, and became the personal responsibility of deputy mission chief, Alfred Puhan.8 USIS was charged with responsibility for developing a sense of "national cohesion" through the promotion of Sarit's government in areas where Bangkok was traditionally viewed with suspicion. The ISP also planned for the training and improved efficiency of government officials in the provinces, as well as the extension of capital for economic growth and social programmes. It even considered the impact of such efforts in relation to foreign policy issues, such as the nature of Thai-Burmese affairs, and Bangkok's disputes with Cambodia.9

---

7 A host of covert operations were run out of Thailand despite the Geneva agreements on Laos. Operation "Able Mabel" conducted multiple, unmarked daily reconnaissance flights over Laos, while the "Elint" missions were aimed at collecting electronic information from the PRC and North Vietnam. Ammunition and transportation runs for Meo tribesmen fighting covertly in Laos were also orchestrated from Thai bases, as were many Air America flights. See NSC memorandum, "United States Operations in Laos and the Geneva Agreements", no author, April 22 1963, file Laos General 11/22/63 to 4/30/63, NSF Country Files Laos, Box 132, JFKL.
8 Cable, Bangkok 1533 to State, April 9 1963, file Thailand General 1/63 to 4/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL.
CINCPAC developed a program of its own at the same time. This essentially complemented the in-country report, calling for the allotment of $US 700 million over six years to be focused on counter-insurgency. While the U.S. military admitted that the situation in Thailand was no where near as urgent as it was in South Vietnam, CINCPAC stressed the need to "beat the communists to the punch." It was anticipated that, left unchecked, the communist insurgency in Thailand would become a serious problem within a few years. The key, therefore, was to build up the Thais' resistance and their capacity to fight a guerrilla conflict in the Northeast. Young stressed the need to coordinate military, political, and economic aspects of aid, and to approach the program with a long term commitment in mind. While CINCPAC concentrated exclusively on the military and counter-insurgency, its endorsement of the ISP was a rare example of agreement with the ambassador.

Young studied tactics used by the British in fighting the communist insurrection in Malaya, and believed that their success was based primarily on a willingness to adopt what he termed "fluid village warfare." While the regular army was important, highly mobile unconventional forces trained specifically for jungle warfare were essential. Young told the State Department that the goal was "to beat Mao and Ho at their own game", noting that if the U.S. "lost" South Vietnam or Thailand, it would lose Asia. The main problem with the Thais was their traditional, "orthodox" military approach, and the U.S. military's tendency to be the "automat of autocracy" in supporting that. Whether it was the merit of Young's argument or the fact that he and CINCPAC essentially agreed, Washington listened. By late 1962 backlogged MAP funding for Thailand and even major items scheduled for the 1963 were expedited for delivery. The State Department noted that despite

---

10 Memorandum, "General Taylor and the Thai Internal Security Plans", Koren at OSEAA to U.A. Johnson at BFIA, September 10 1962, 792.5/9-562, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2141, RG 59, USNA. See also cable, Bangkok 586 to State, September 26 1962 in Ibid.

11 Cable, Bangkok 613 to State, September 29 1962, 792.5/9-562, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2141, RG 59, USNA.
congressional cutbacks to all other foreign aid programs, "the USG attaches such overriding priority to assistance programs for Thailand that we have maintained original proposed FY (fiscal year) 1963 program and made significant additions to it."12 In January 1963, the State Department also commissioned a comprehensive review of AID strategy in Thailand, and followed that up quickly with both a re-evaluation of MAP funding and renewed efforts to conclude an agreement on logistical and technical infrastructure, the so-called SLAT agreement (Special Logistical Agreement—Thailand).13

Together, Young and Sarit set about making a success of counter-insurgency efforts in the Northeast. A sizeable round-up of communists and their sympathizers around Nakhon Phanom was conducted during a visit by Sarit to the region in January. Seventy-four insurgents were netted in one day, demonstrating both the effectiveness of American-led counter-insurgency operations and the extent of communist support in Northeast. Sarit himself conducted some of the interrogations of captured communist infiltrators, noting that they were almost all from Laos.14

Young reported to Washington that Sarit and other top Thais were also impressed by the mobile development units (MDUs) that had been set up in late 1961 to win government support from the

12 Cable, State 747 to Bangkok, October 25 1962, 792.5/9-562, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2141, RG 59, USNA. Cutting many months off their targeted delivery date, Washington delivered 55 L-19 aircraft, along with 40 T-28s, 7 T-33s, 13 HUS-1s, and 27 F-86s. Twenty attack and reconnaissance helicopters were also sent, as were 34 M-41 tanks, 159 trucks and 64 trailers. The Thai Navy received 10 assault craft and 27 surveillance ships. The unexpected, additional shipments included 8 more HUS-1s and 8 C-123 ground attack fighters.

13 This agreement was designed pursuant to the terms of the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement of 1950, and under the umbrella of SEATO. It was designed to "provide logistical support of the United States and other SEATO forces in... the defense of Thailand." Washington furnished the Thais with ten train locomotives and 100 tanker cars, which the Thais would then maintain. The U.S. also committed to the construction of a permanent pipeline connecting fuel storage systems of commercial companies to those at Don Muang airport and another, mutually acceptable terminus. Upon completion the Thais would gain full title to the system, providing that they allowed the U.S. unfettered access. SLAT negotiations also covered the upgrading of air bases throughout Thailand, and the construction of a new airfield just west of Nakhon Phanom, very close to the Laotian border. Cable, Bangkok 1078 to State, January 23 1963, file Thailand General 1/63 to 4/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL. See also report, "Proposed A.I.D. Strategy Statement for Thailand", AID Washington AIDTO 707 to AID Bangkok, January 14 1963 and message, CINCPAC P130735Z, January 13 1963, in Ibid.

14 Cable, Bangkok 1027 to State, January 14 1963, file Thailand General 1/63 to 4/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL.
people in the area. This was, he believed, further indication that a comprehensive aid program was needed to secure Thailand from a communist threat.

Early in 1963, a CIA report underscored the potential seriousness of the communist insurgency in the Northeast and other parts of Thailand. The report warned that there was "increasing evidence to suggest that Thailand is in the classic phase one of insurgency development", with a "discernible increase in subversive activities... aided and abetted by the Pathet Lao and other hostile elements in Laos." Activity in the south along the Malaysian frontier was also noted, with suggestion that Muslim separatists, "Chinese terrorists", and Indonesian communists were aiding insurgents. The sizeable Vietnamese population in Thailand warranted special attention, given their relative isolation and proximity to Laos, as well as ties to northern hill tribes such as the Akha and Lahu. Communists in Thailand were definitely receiving aid and training through Laos from North Vietnam and the PRC, with an estimated 3,000 of them either residing in Laotian camps or serving with the Pathet Lao. The CIA's report warned that "all conditions for rapid development of a subversive mechanism" were present in Thailand, and that without considerable efforts by the Thais and U.S., "the situation will continue to deteriorate to the point of insurgency." Young suggested to Washington that Thailand was becoming "another Vietnam." Cutbacks in aid and careless policy decisions reminded him of South Vietnam in 1959-60, just before the Viet Cong campaign began. The only way to prevent such a recurrence was to commit fully to counter-insurgency in Thailand, and to avoid the "penny-wise, pound-foolish" mentality in aid assessments. "Special provisions" were needed to exempt the Thais from world-wide aid curtailment. Young also pointed out that only further "extraordinary efforts" designed to restore their confidence in

---

16 Ibid. See also cable, Bangkok 1477 to State, March 30 1963, file CSM - Communism T, CFP File 1963 (Political and Defense, CSM), Thailand, Box 3692, RG 59, USNA.
Washington could reverse the psychological damage done over the preceding few months.\textsuperscript{17} His position was supported by an 85 page detailed and comprehensive report submitted by AID in July 1963. In fact, it suggested that the insurgency in the Northeast was already underway, and that much more aid was needed for social programs as well as counter-insurgency.\textsuperscript{18} As a major controller of funds for operations in the region, AID had a vested interest in maintaining and expanding U.S. assistance, but even so it does appear that the communists were on the move in Thailand.

A number of public statements by U.S. officials raised questions about enhanced aid for Thailand and complicated the task of building confidence in the American commitment. After a tour of Southeast Asia in early February, AID Administrator David Bell remarked that Thailand was "near self-sufficiency" and could soon be cut off from American aid. The Thai language daily newspaper \textit{Siam Rath} suggested that Bell's comments were in keeping with Washington's disengagement from Laos, and implied that the time had come for Thais to stop depending on the U.S. for anything.\textsuperscript{19} A similar reaction was elicited by Congressman Otto Passman, who after a trip through Thailand in late 1962, pointed out that U.S. aid there was being siphoned off, ending up in the hands of a few wealthy Thais untaxed.\textsuperscript{20} But the biggest problem in this regard came with the release of the "Mansfield Report", submitted to Congress and the President in early January. The senator and other congressional members toured Southeast Asia in December 1962, and his unpopularity in Thailand, already widespread, became universal after the report was made public. In this report he accused the Thais of at best giving U.S. policy in the region "only a grudging tolerance." The costs

\textsuperscript{17} Cable, Bangkok 1477 to State, March 29 1963, file Thailand General 1/63 to 4/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL.
\textsuperscript{19} USIS translation of Siam Rath editorial, February 6 1963, file Thailand General 1/63 to 4/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{U.S. News and World Report}, December 17 1962, 3-4.
of aiding the Thais were therefore "preposterous", and he noted that Washington was "carrying virtually the entire burden of aid for Thailand's defense and other purposes which carry little in the way of tangible return." It was, Mansfield concluded, time to leave Thailand alone to fend for itself.

The press in Thailand generally assumed that Mansfield's report meant that the U.S. Senate was itself opposed to the extension of aid. Young tried hard to convince the Thais otherwise. Thanat accused Mansfield of interfering in Thailand's internal affairs through his criticisms of the government and administration. The Foreign Minister even considered the Senator's remarks to be "subverting the institution of constitutional monarchy", a capital offense in Thailand. In a long and heated exchange with Young, Thanat thoroughly repudiated the report, adding furiously that the U.S. Senate did not run Thailand. Young reported to Washington that Thanat's "vindictive and slanderous reactions" might colour those of Sarit and the Thai Cabinet, and that although the Foreign Minister had to appear tough for domestic political reasons, his reactions should not be ignored, since they confirmed the "underlying Thai fear expressed officially and unofficially that [the] USG has decided to cut back... aid and disengage from this area."

As a result of the flap over the Mansfield report, Bangkok became more difficult to deal with in the first few months of 1963. The Thais dragged their heels on signing the SLAT agreement. U.S. efforts to place V.O.A. radio transmitters in Thailand were hampered given sudden Thai concerns that American broadcasts would, as General Wallop suggested, "compromise Thai sovereignty."

---

21 Report, Mansfield to JFK, December 18 1962, FRUS, 1961-63, Volume II: Vietnam 1962, document #330, 786. Mansfield also questioned U.S. operations in South Vietnam; he was among the first to officially address the rumoured use of chemical agents there. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, William Bundy, assured Congress that the use of "weed killers" was consistent with "wholly normal procedure in CI [counter-insurgency]", and that in fact "local people have requested them." By Bundy's account, nearly 400,000,000 acres of forest in Vietnam had been exposed to the agents since 1947. See letter, William Bundy to Representative Robert W. Kastenheimer, March 16 1963, file ND19/CO 312, #3, WHCF, Box 636, JFKL.
22 Cable, Bangkok 1298 to State, March 4 1963, file Thailand General 1/63 to 4/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL.
23 Cable, Bangkok 1476 to State, March 29 1963, file Thailand General 1/63 to 4/63, NSF Country Files, Box 164, JFKL.
While Sarit promised Young that proposals for more powerful transmitters were receiving careful attention, he was quick to point out that Thailand also had to consider the reaction from Beijing. After all, the U.S. appeared to be disengaging from the region following the withdrawal of troops from the Northeast, and the Thais could ill-afford to provoke the Chinese in such an obvious manner.

It was apparent how upset the Thais were over Laos, SEATO, the 1962 sale of T-28 aircraft to Cambodia, and the withdrawal of U.S. troops. To make matters worse, the State Department instructed Young to confirm long-standing rumours that the U.S. would cut military consumable aid beginning in 1964. This meant that the Thais would have to pay for the oil and gas needed to maintain their arsenals, which could be a serious drain on the economy. In a major meeting between Young and several top Thai officials in February, Thailand seemed serious about re-evaluating its relationship with the U.S. Thai Air Force Marshal Dawee Chullasappa threatened to cancel Thai participation in SEATO exercises scheduled for later that year, arguing he would now have to conserve Thailand's resources for the future without American partnership. Sarit bluntly told Young he could not figure out American policy. In late 1962 Washington pushed Thailand for a pipeline to be built from the Gulf of Siam through Bangkok, but now indicated it would cut off the supplies needed to run the pipeline. The Prime Minister also complained that the F-86 aircraft given Thailand were noticeably inferior to the F-104s sent Taiwan. This was, he said, all indication that the Thais "could no longer rely on the United States." Thanat tried to moderate this remark, interpreting it to mean that now Thailand would have to look after its own interests more. But the

---

24 Cable, Bangkok 1243 to State, February 22 1963, file Thailand General 1/63 to 4/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL.
message was clear. The Thais were fed up, and American policy was "too inconsistent to give Thailand any security about the future."  

Not surprisingly, SEATO remained a major irritant in U.S.-Thai relations. Bangkok continued to consider the organisation useless, and persisted with demands for changes to the voting structure. Marshal Dawee's threat to cancel Thai participation in planned exercises was just the latest in a litany of Thai dissatisfaction with the organization. With increased operations in South Vietnam, and to demonstrate to the Pathet Lao that the Geneva agreements did not mean a total American withdrawal from the region, Washington was anxious to go ahead with a show of force under SEATO auspices. "Operation Sea Serpent", set for late April, was to take place in the South China Seas. "Operation Dhanarajata", scheduled for June, was to be conducted in Thailand with some 25,000 military personnel from all SEATO nations participating in land exercises from Ubol to Chiangmai. Guerrilla operations, psychological warfare, and defensive measures against a simulated nuclear attack were all incorporated into the latter.  

Young was careful to seek an audience with King Bhumipol shortly before Operation Dhanarajata, in the hopes of preventing a further slide in U.S.-Thai relations. It was also an opportunity to win the King's support for the SEATO exercise, and Young did not hesitate to mention that American troops from the exercise would stay on afterwards to work on several of the royal family's civic development programs. While the exercise went ahead as planned, with full Thai participation, SEATO was still viewed in Bangkok as an empty shell. What troubled many Americans now was that the Thais no longer regularly complained. It was as if they had simply resigned themselves to the fact that SEATO was not going

25 Airgram, Bangkok A-622 to State, February 27 1963, file Thailand General 1/63 to 4/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL. See also letter, Puhan to Lawrence Pickering at OSEAA, September 30 1963, file 1-B.1, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 5, RG 59, USNA.

26 For details on the SEATO operation, see JCS memorandum, "SEATO Forces in Thailand During June 1963", F.T. Unger (Director of Operations, JCS), June 4 1963, file Thailand General 5/63 to 7/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL. See also file 3-A.2 SEATO, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 6, RG 59, USNA.

27 Cable, Bangkok 1776 to State, May 24 1963, file Thailand General 5/63 to 7/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL.
to change, and were quietly seeking alternative arrangements. Wryly, Sarit told Young that many Thais did not even know what SEATO was. He pointed to numerous reports from along the path Operation Dhanarajata took in the Northeast that villagers thought _farang_ (foreign) soldiers were fighting the Thais.28

No doubt aware of Thai hostility to SEATO, CINCPAC had approached the Thais about a joint bilateral naval exercise to follow Operation Sea Serpent. That offer may have been a major reason why the Thais agreed to Operation Sea Serpent in the first place. In any event, the Royal Thai Navy was only too anxious to participate directly with the Americans in the proposed joint naval exercise, having felt distinctly like the poor cousin to the Army for nearly a decade. The U.S. Navy judged the exercise, held from June 18 to July 4, "undoubtedly the best planned and executed operation" by the Thais in years. But there was some suggestion in Thailand that the U.S. was purposely trying to drive a wedge between the armed forces and other elements in the country, hoping to keep Thai foreign policy from going astray.29

At least in part to counter the noticeable decline in the U.S.-Thai relationship, early in 1963 Robert McNamara again considered the deployment of American forces in Thailand, or at least having the Thais fully occupy the Mekong border region.30 Dean Rusk, who was usually the most hesitant on such matters, thought favourably of asking Thanat about sending SEATO forces back into the Northeast in April.31 Even JFK himself asked about the possibility of American troops in Thailand.32 By the summer, most top officials in the Kennedy administration seemed inclined

---

28 See file 13.1b Northeastern Thailand 1963, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 7, RG 59, USNA.
29 Message, CINCPAC 152138Z to Navy Department and JCS, July 16 1963, file 3-A.2 SEATO, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 6, RG 59, USNA.
30 Memorandum, "Contingency Planning for Laos", Hilsman to various department heads, June 12 1962, folder 7, Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 2, JFKL. See also memorandum for the President, "The Situation in Laos", June 17 1963, in Ibid.
31 Memorandum, "NSC Consideration on Laos", April 10 1963, folder 11, Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 2, JFKL. Also see report, "Some Thoughts on Bowles and the State Department", James C. Thomson, May 29 1963, folder DOS 60-66/C. Bowles 61-63, James C. Thomson Papers, Box 7, JFKL.
towards the placement of troops in Thailand. A presidential tour of Southeast Asia, focused on South Vietnam and Thailand, was even planned for early in 1964 with this in mind.33

Washington was troubled by Bangkok's apparent disillusionment with the U.S., and renewed consideration of the deployment of American troops in Thailand was unquestionably a response to this. But many questions remained. Precisely how should U.S. forces go in? How would the Thais react? It was apparent that Thailand was considered indispensable to any future military plans the Americans had in South Vietnam, whether they were unilateral or with SEATO. But while Washington deliberated, the Thais seemed to be drifting away. Although expert at playing on American anxieties about Thai loyalties, Bangkok's dissatisfaction with SEATO and American policy on Laos was real, and at the centre of its continued quest for a bilateral alliance with the U.S. From the Thai point of view, sporadic demonstrations of U.S. largesse and resolve hardly substituted for a concrete alliance, but Washington would offer little more. The redeployment of U.S. forces back into Thailand on a more permanent basis was therefore considered in the State Department as a strong demonstration of American commitment in lieu of an alliance. Washington simply could not decide about exactly how to deal with problems in South Vietnam, and, consequently, U.S. policy towards Thailand sputtered. Keeping Bangkok aligned with the U.S., and containing both the external and internal threat that communism posed to Thailand were clear objectives of American policy, but to what extent Washington would go to achieve those goals remained a question. Other than avoiding a bilateral alliance, U.S. policy towards Thailand was inconsistent, disorganised, and in trouble.

Inter-agency rivalries were a main cause of the problems in U.S. policy towards Thailand. Young was forever battling agencies like the CIA and USOM, which through their independent actions undermined his authority. To reassert his authority, Young had set up the "Working Group" on

33 See various reports, folder "Presidential Far East Trip Plans, 1963", Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 5, JFKL.
Thailand in mid-1962, which was designed to coordinate agency activities under his auspices. The U.S. military represented by far the greatest challenge, given its influence in Washington and its close relationship with its Thai counterpart. Though Young and CINCPAC had seen eye to eye on the Internal Security Program, he and the military were soon again at odds. By April 1963 Young questioned the "marginal utility" of much of the military hardware being sent to the Thais. He told MAAG Thailand that he had "certain reservations" about the need for such expensive equipment such as tanks, given that the focus of aid should be counter-insurgency. Young feared that Thailand would become just a military depot for U.S. operations in South Vietnam, and that Washington would come to see its relationship with Bangkok simply as an extension of its plans there. He also worried that if the U.S.-Thai relationship was dominated by the military authorities of both countries, efforts to encourage political reforms in Thailand would be useless. Supporting authoritarian regimes was not, Young believed, in Washington's best interests.

Young's relationship to the other agencies working in Thailand was frequently worse than with the military. USOM was particularly difficult to handle for Young given its control of most non-military aid, media reports, and even some intelligence work. The ambassador portrayed the agency as inefficient, or "overly fat" as the U.S. Inspector General concluded in early 1963 after a tour of Thailand. After his tour of Southeast Asia, AID Administrator Bell agreed that operations in Thailand were poorly run, but in what was clearly a shot at Young, he "considered it a reflection of the shortcomings of a weak Country Team." The Director of the Peace Corps, Sargent Shriver,

---

34 Oral history interview, Edward E. Masters with Charles Stuart Kennedy, March 1989, diskette, 41, GUFA.
35 Memorandum, Young to Major General Ernest Easterbrook (Chief, MAAG Thailand), April 25 1963, file 1-B.2a, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 5, RG 59, USNA. MAAG Thailand maintained that such equipment was a "capital weapon", useful both for military and political reasons. See also memo, "JUSMAAG briefing for Ambassador on FY 64", April 24 1963, in Ibid.
36 Oral history interview, Kenneth T. Young with Denis O'Brien, April 28 1969, HUG (FP) 26.3, folder 2, 118.
37 Memorandum, Robert Barnett at BFEA to Harriman, January 21 1963, file 2-A.1, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 5, RG 59, USNA. Bell commented that the Country Team was in fact the "weakest" of all he saw on his tour of Asia, with the A.I.D. Director in Thailand "spinning his wheels" and the MAAG Chief being "the least
complained to Averell Harriman that his volunteers in Thailand were being poorly treated by other U.S. agencies, and that Young and the Embassy staff frequently proved especially difficult.38 The ambassador also had problems with Washington. The NSC pointed out that reports from the Embassy and CINCPAC were "completely inconsistent", suggesting that the State Department "get Young straightened out."39 Averell Harriman blamed the ambassador for the fact that the Thais were being so "hard-nosed", and in part for their thinking that the Rusk-Thanat agreement was an alliance. With respect to Young and Thailand, he cautioned that "we musn't become slaves to our satellites."40 Roger Hilsman was more sympathetic to Young, noting that "the Ambassador does not have nor is he able to exert full authority to insure that necessary actions are taken in the military, economic and social areas of assistance in a coordinated manner."41

Although some officials in Washington were dissatisfied with Young's performance, nothing was done to replace him. In the meanwhile, he continued his unsuccessful battle to assert his overall authority in Thailand. Young was clearly a good Ambassador, notwithstanding personal and agency rivalries, and he had a solid understanding of the Thais. Young made an effort to see the Thai side of things. Indeed, one of the biggest criticisms levied against him was his tendency to do so too

---

38 Memorandum of phone conversation, Sargent Shriver and Averell Harriman, January 8 1963, file Thailand 1963: January through June, BFEA, OSEA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 8, RG 59, USNA.

39 Memorandum, Mike Forrestal at NSC to HLT Koren at OSEA, July 30 1962, file Troops in Thailand 1962-63, BFEA, OSEA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 8, RG 59, USNA.

40 Oral history interview, William Sullivan (BFEA 1960-64) with Dennis O'Brien, Washington, June 16 1970, 30, Oral Histories, JFKL. Young clearly did not care for Harriman either, believing him to be narrow-minded and "uncaring." In fact, similarly negative or critical opinions about Harriman abounded amongst those who worked with him on Asian affairs. See oral history interview, Young with Dennis O'Brien, New York, October 29 1969, HUG (FP) 26.3, folder 3, 170, Kenneth T. Young Jr. Papers, HUA. See also oral history interviews, Ben F. Dixon (CIA adviser, Southeast Asia 1960-65) with Charles Stuart Kennedy, December 1990 and Leonard Unger with Charles Stuart Kennedy, May 1989, diskettes, GUFA.

41 "Talking Paper", Hilsman regarding recent trips to Southeast Asia, March 22 1962, folder 2, Country Files Thailand, Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 3, JFKL. Hilsman indicated that there was in fact an intense rivalry brewing between the State and Defense departments in Thailand. In one report, he suggested that the State Department's intelligence gathering was much better, and that "we therefore have an opportunity to get ahead of the Defense Department." On the inadequacy of some in-country agency operations, Hilsman noted that "some important things are just falling between the stools, between USOM and MAAG", just as in South Vietnam. As a top State Department official, Hilsman had a vested interest in championing the Ambassador. See untitled paper, Hilsman, undated, in Ibid.

166
much. It is also possible that he failed to appreciate the limitations of an ambassador's authority, especially in a country where U.S. military and national security interests were so prolific. In any event, Young played an important role in developing U.S.-Thai relations, which made his sudden departure from the post of major consequence. Suffering from acute amoebic hepatitis, Young was admitted to the USAF hospital at Clark air base in the Philippines in early July 1963. He tendered his resignation shortly thereafter and returned to the U.S. While he did not return to the diplomatic corps, Young continued to be regarded as an expert on Asia and spoke widely on the subject. In Thailand, his departure was deeply felt, with many believing he was the best American Ambassador the country ever had.

Young's successor was Graham Martin, a career government official with little experience in Asia. He would later earn dubious distinction as the last American Ambassador to South Vietnam, fleeing before the North's triumphant advance into Saigon in April 1975. Described by those who worked with him in Thailand as tough, cool, secretive, and elusive, Martin was the antithesis of Young. Martin believed he was chosen to go to Thailand "to make sense of it," the implication

---

42 Oral history interview, Phillip D. Sprouse (U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia 1962-64) with Dennis O'Brien, December 19 1969, 5, Oral Histories, JFKL.
43 Letter, Sanya Dharmasakti (Chief Justice and later Prime Minister of Thailand) to Young, May 20 1968, HUG (FP) 26.10, folder 13, Kenneth T. Young Jr. Papers, HUA. For an account of Young's illness and resignation see also file Thailand General 5/63 to 7/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL.
44 After several years as a journalist, Martin began his government service in 1934 as an aide to then Division Administrator of the National Recovery Administration, Averell Harriman. By 1941 he was Southeast Regional Director of the Federal Security Administration. During WWII Martin served in various capacities with the Military Intelligence Division of the War Department, and later as a member of the JCS Intelligence Sub-Committee. After joining the Foreign Service in 1947, Martin was assigned as an attaché in Paris, eventually becoming Assistant Chief of the Mission. His specialisation was economic and military aid coordination. Between 1955 and 1957 he was the State Department's adviser to the Air War College, before returning to Washington to serve as a Special Assistant to the Under Secretary. From 1960 to 1962 Martin was the U.S. representative to the European Office of the UN, and in April 1962 became the Deputy Coordinator of the Alliance for Progress. See "Biographic Sketch - Graham Martin", file Thailand General 8/63 to 11/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL.
being that Young had been unable to do so. He did not know much about Thailand or its people, and he did not really seem to care. He was there to do a job, and for Washington only.

U.S.-Thai relations were also affected by other personnel changes in 1963. The long-time Thai Ambassador to the U.S., Visut Arthayukti, resigned from the post in the spring. There were suggestions that he was encouraged by to do so by Sarit himself, who wanted a less qualified and more malleable representative in Washington during a period of foreign policy re-evaluation. Visut's replacement was Sukich Ninamheminda, the former Thai Ambassador to India. Sukich fit Sarit's new job description perfectly. His career in New Delhi was remarkably undistinguished, and it was widely known that he suffered severe depression as the result of his wife's recent death.47

But the most important changes came right at the top. At the end of 1963, sudden changes in leadership occurred in Saigon, Washington, and Bangkok, which would dramatically alter the course of U.S.-Thai relations. On November 1, Ngo Dien Diem was assassinated in Saigon following an American approved military coup. In the following months, problems in South Vietnam worsened, creating pressures for escalated military intervention. Three weeks later John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, bringing to the White House a new President, Lyndon Johnson, who would be less hesitant than Kennedy to apply U.S. military power in Indochina. Most significant for U.S.-Thai relations was the death of Sarit on December 8. His death came as little surprise. He had suffered for many years from cirrhosis of the liver, and his health had rapidly deteriorated throughout 1963. Kenneth Young pointed out that Sarit's infamous "money-chasing and women-having" were hardly therapeutic.48 Sarit left behind a tarnished and paradoxical legacy for Thailand.

47 Memorandum of conversation, Alfred Puhan with Ruang Ninamheminda (ex-mayor of Chiangmai and Sukich’s cousin), U.S. Consulate Chiangmai, June 22 1963, file 1.4, BFEA, OSEA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 5, RG 59, USNA. See also memorandum of conversation, Albert Seligman (First Secretary U.S. Embassy Bangkok) with H.S. Grewal (First Secretary Indian Embassy Bangkok), June 14 1963, in Ibid.
He unified the country and oversaw tremendous economic growth, but simultaneously quashed democratic reform, and instituted several decades of military rule. His personal popularity was undeniable, but so too was his enormous personal fortune - estimated to have exceeded 1,000 million Baht, or some twelve percent of the Thai national income.\(^4\) In what is unquestionably the greatest irony, through economic growth and a restored nationalism, Sarit incidentally gave rise to increased political awareness, a burgeoning middle class, and progressive Westernization, all factors that would ultimately undermine military authoritarianism in Thailand.\(^5\)

Sarit left behind an uncertain foreign policy legacy. The potential drift towards neutrality had always been present during his tenure. Although for the most part this represented nothing more than a threat aimed at securing more support from Washington, by 1963 it was beginning to look more serious. Thai patience seemed to be wearing thin, and despite the fact that Sarit and other top officials appeared to have favoured continued friendship with the U.S., frustration over American half measures Indochina and fear of the PRC made this more difficult. In many ways, towards the end of his life Sarit may have reverted to his frame of mind when he first swept to power in 1958.

The hesitation and indecision he saw in U.S. policy may have made him think twice about the Americans and their commitment to fight communism. Moreover, being Thai by necessity dictated that he take into consideration not only what could frequently be a difficult domestic polity, but also the ingrained tendency to seek constant balance, especially in foreign relations. The "prevailing wind" in Southeast Asia certainly did not seem to favour the U.S., and Sarit seems to have begun a reconsideration of which way the bamboo should bend.

Although Thanat Khoman remained at the helm of the Thai Foreign Ministry, Sarit's passing meant that the strongest voice in Thailand's external relations was silenced. He was by no means

\(^4\) Cable, Chiangmai 180900Z to Bangkok, November 18 1963, file Thailand General 8/63 to 11/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL.
alone in his reservations about Washington, but he was clearly the key figure in this respect. Even as the question of who would succeed Sarit raged in Bangkok, it was evident that none of the likely candidates had either his political stature, or his understanding of foreign relations. It was also clear that none was as disposed as he to question the direction Thailand should take in the Cold War. Thus, as 1963 came to an end it seemed that fate had intervened. Both Thailand and the U.S. grappled with the loss of popular leaders. Both faced difficult foreign policy decisions. But despite the national traumas the deaths of Sarit and Kennedy caused, as 1964 unfolded it seemed that the leadership in both countries might finally share convergent interests and approaches in Southeast Asia.
*CHAPTER FIVE*

"Towards a New Beginning: Thanom, Johnson and U.S.-Thai Relations, 1964"

1964 was an important watershed in U.S.-Thai relations. The year ushered in an unprecedented era of economic and military development in Thailand, which was to fundamentally change the country forever. Just as the "Vietnam era" represents a period of tremendous change and considerable trauma for Americans, so too for Thais. As Washington headed towards a war in Vietnam, Bangkok followed. Changes in leadership in both Washington and Bangkok contributed to a lessening of the tension caused by disagreement over SEATO and the continuing conflict in Laos. Sarit's eventual successor, Thanom Kittachakorn, seemed less intent on securing for Thailand a formal bilateral alliance with the U.S., and less apprehensive about drawing too close to the Americans. At the same time, Lyndon Johnson seemed more favourably disposed to the possibility of U.S. military intervention in South Vietnam than his predecessor, which demonstrated to the Thais a willingness to commit to the defense of the region. Therefore, as the year progressed, Thailand became more flexible in its expectations of U.S. foreign policy, and moved away from its previous insistence on the alliance. Simultaneously, the U.S. appeared more resolute about defending Southeast Asia from communist expansion, and more appreciative of Thailand's importance in any plans to do so. Personnel changes within the Johnson administration and in the U.S. Embassy in Thailand greatly affected the day-to-day handling of U.S.-Thai relations, but it was events in South Vietnam during 1964 that had the most bearing on this convergence of interests and attitudes between Washington and Bangkok.

Sarit's death definitely left a political void in Thailand. Although the armed forces had a prominent role in government predating his tenure, he unquestionably redefined military authoritarianism in that country. His political skills, charisma, and adept manipulation of a corrupt
system of political patronage made for a reasonably solid dictatorship; over the years Sarit had himself essentially become the Thai government. The question of succession was therefore crucial. It was clear even before Sarit's death that no leading political figure in the country had his credentials, ability or power base; nor had he himself anointed any successor.

Within hours of Sarit's death, speculation began not just about who would emerge as the new leader, but also about how the transfer of power would take place. Coup rumours were a fact of life in Thailand, even under Sarit, and suggestions circulated in Bangkok that factions of the armed forces, each with a political favourite, were moving to usurp the government.\footnote{1} As 1964 began, three main contenders were in the proverbial ring. The dark horse was Dawee Chullasappa, the strong willed, devious, and by all accounts ruthless, Commander in Chief of the Air Force. The two leading contenders were Praphas Charusathian, the powerful Minister of the Interior, and Thanom Kittachakorn, the Minister of Defense. Praphas was undoubtedly the more politically astute. He was intelligent, and had an excellent grasp of the Thai polity. After years of running the assorted police forces, he certainly had the requisite power base and financial assets. However, Praphas had more than his share of enemies. In his efforts to secure more authority and money for the police forces, and despite being a General himself, Praphas had frequently crossed swords with the Army's top command. For example, he frequently battled with the Army for jurisdiction over the growing counter-insurgency operations. The general public opinion of him was also not very favourable, given that virtually all the police were notoriously corrupt and abusive. The King too disliked him.

\footnote{1} CIA Report, TDCS-3/565,750, "Probabilities of Succession to Prime Minister Sarit", November 26 1963, file Thailand Volume I 11/63 to 11/64, #2, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 282, LBJL. See also cable, Bangkok 831 to State, November 27 1963 in \textit{ibid.} Years of financial attention under Sarit left the Royal Thai Army largely satisfied and, consequently, united. The Navy had long suffered relative to the Army, but in the past two years it had enjoyed a considerable upswing courtesy of U.S. military aid and a renewed emphasis on naval power. Moreover, during the Sarit years the political ambitions of Thai Navy leadership had been emasculated through calculated appointments. As for the Air Force, it was a relative newcomer to the political arena, lacking both the infrastructure and financial connections to make a serious leadership bid. This, however, did not deter its Commander in Chief, Dawee Chullasappa, from entertaining grandiose dreams.
making it clear that he would be hard pressed to give his blessing to a new government under Prphas.²

Thanom was therefore the favourite. He had been a long-time, faithful ally of Sarit's, serving briefly as Prime Minister before becoming both his Deputy and the Defence Minister. It was because of his loyalty and lack of political ambition that Thanom had become Sarit's most trusted friend. But his quiet demeanour, occasional timidity, and almost awkward public persona detracted from his leadership potential, and, despite their friendship, Sarit hesitated in naming Thanom his successor. Still, he was clearly more palatable to most Thais than Prphas or Dawee, and so within a few weeks of Sarit's death, Thanom gradually secured the Prime Ministership. He was, as Seni Pramoj later noted, the "least distinguished" Thai ever to hold that office.³

Thanom quickly moved to consolidate his authority. He reached out to Prphas, retaining him as the Minister of the Interior and making him his Deputy.⁴ Together the two then began to distance themselves from Sarit's legacy. Almost immediately Thanom implemented cabinet reforms aimed at curtailing the most obvious forms of government corruption. The move was not inspired by genuine conviction, but rather designed to crack down on Sarit cronies who could potentially challenge the new leadership. However, those at whom the reforms were aimed were generally well-entrenched inside the Thai polity and business world.⁵ Moreover, Thanom and Prphas were

² Ibid. A biographical sketch of Prphas by the U.S. State Department noted that "[E]ven in an environment where a certain degree of corruption by government officials has been traditionally accepted as normal, Prphas [sic] has, in recent years, developed a reputation for being excessively involved in corrupt activities." The same sketch portrays him as "intelligent, astute, and decisive, as well as ambitious, opportunistic and ruthless." See airgram, Bangkok A-1090 to State, June 12 1964, folder: Pol 6 People Biographic Data Thai 1/1/64, CFP Files 1964-66 (Political and Defense), Thailand, Box 2697, RG 39, USNA.
⁴ Washington believed that Prphas was positioning himself to eventually become Thai leader. Graham Martin noted that Prphas had changed his more sinister ways, and was "definitely trying to walk the straight and narrow", gaining respect as an able administrator. In June, Prphas went to the U.S. for an eye operation, but stayed on to meet with top American officials, including Johnson, on whom he made a good impression. See cable, Bangkok 2079 to State, June 5 1964, file Thailand Volume I 11/63 to 11/64, #44, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.
⁵ Bamrungsuk. U.S. Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule, 1947-1977, 116. Among the more constructive efforts to reform the system was the appointment of Pote Sarasin as Minister of National Development. Overseeing a huge department entrusted with a large budget, Pote was widely considered an honest, thorough and adept administrator.
themselves caught up in the intricate web of corruption, and so the reforms were not effective enough to make any real change. There were now even more potential enemies lurking in the shadows as a result of the attempted reforms, and although Prapas was on his side, Thanom seemed critically dependent on his main rival. Within just two months of Sarit's death Thanom looked weak, indecisive, and in trouble.6

In another attempt to consolidate his position, Thanom planned a coup de force in March, reshuffling his cabinet in sweeping changes designed at eliminating potential enemies.7 But again he only made things worse. He could not escape the coup rumours, and well into the summer his hold on power was shaky. In late July the machinations of yet another coup group came to light courtesy of the CIA. Embattled with the so-called "Sarit Estate Case", in which disputes over the late leader's financial fortunes brought to the forefront corruption among the Thai elite, Thanom prepared a counter-attack. Charging that "Phibunites" were involved in an attempt to overthrow him because of his reforms, Thanom went public with the revelation and the fact that the information was received in part from the Americans. The Thai Army went on high alert again, and the unnamed plotters were denounced as "monkeys with two faces."8 Sensing that Washington did not endorse any coups, and revealing more than a passing interest in the plot, Air Marshall Dawee

See also cable, Bangkok 958 to State, December 21 1963, file Thailand Volume I 11/63 to 11/64, #12, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.


7 Ibid, 117. Within days of his being named Prime Minister, Thanom faced a coup attempt launched by long-time Sarit associates at whom the reforms were aimed. They were nominally headed by Sarit's widow, Wichitra Thanarat. American intelligence operatives in the country played a major role in quashing the plot, giving Thanom a much-needed vote of confidence from Washington. His revenge came on March 21; he purged his cabinet, with only Prapas, Pote, and Thanat retaining their posts. Apparently still unconfident, Thanom waited out the aftermath of the failed coup secured in the headquarters of his own secret base camp, with the military and police on high alert. See CIA info cable, TDCS-3/576,277, March 20 1964, file Thailand Volume I 11/63 to 11/64, #36, NSF Country Files, Box 282, LBJL.

8 After his death, the Thai government tried to seize nearly 630 million baht (roughly $US 35 million) from Sarit's estate under Article 17 of the Thai Constitution. Most of the money had been scattered in at least 27 banks around the world, and in accounts under the names of family members. See airgram, Bangkok A-381 to State, November 30 1964, folder: Pol 15 Government Thai 1/64, CFP Files 1964-66 (Political and Defense), Thailand, Box 2698, RG 59, USNA.

9 CIA info cable, TDCS-314/01150-64, July 31 1964, file Thailand Volume I 11/63 to 11/64, #51, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.
and Admiral Siri Kranchangnet were quick to make public statements of their loyalty to Thanom. Appearing to have the support of Washington proved to be Thanom’s best political asset.

Thanom clearly saw that the key to his political survival was the United States. Phibun and Sarit had needed Washington to justify their military authoritarianism, and Thanom realised that the need to legitimise his rule through the connection with the U.S. was even more urgent given his uncertain domestic support. But there is no question that Thanom also held much different personal views on Thai-American relations than previous leaders. Both Phibun and Sarit had their doubts about the reliability of the U.S., and both frequently voiced concerns about becoming too close to the Americans. Thanom, however, did not seem to have any such anxieties. He saw Washington as the guarantor of Thai security, both internally and externally. He was profoundly anti-communist, believing firmly that the threat Beijing and Hanoi posed to Thailand was real, immediate, and unyielding. Trying to accommodate communism was useless, and so too was a return to a more neutral foreign policy. For these reasons, Thanom had emphatically, albeit quietly, opposed Sarit’s recent move away from Washington. Now that he was in charge, Thanom would take Thailand even closer in its relationship with the U.S., and even further away from its communist neighbours.

The new American president welcomed a closer relationship with Thailand. Lyndon Johnson was well aware of the dangers of escalating the American presence in Vietnam too quickly, but he was determined to make a military stand in Southeast Asia if necessary. After the assassination of Ngo Dien Diem in late 1963, the North Vietnamese stepped up their campaign in the South, trying to take advantage of the leadership void. The Vietcong were ordered to intensify their operations, while Hanoi committed substantially more resources and even regular army units to the effort. But this

10 Ibid.
escalation backfired. Increased communist pressure on Saigon made it easier for Johnson to increase U.S. involvement. Whereas John Kennedy agonised over the gradual decline of South Vietnam, a sense of urgency allowed Lyndon Johnson to rapidly expand American involvement. Within a week of his becoming president he made the defense of South Vietnam "a central objective" of U.S. foreign policy. He told the American Ambassador in Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., that "you must have whatever you need to help the Vietnamese do the job, and I assure you that I will act at once [to] eliminate the obstacles or restraints wherever they may appear."

This is not to say that Johnson favoured massive American military involvement in Southeast Asia. To the contrary, he shared with both Eisenhower and Kennedy a profound hesitation to engage the U.S. militarily in the region. Still, Johnson did not want to shy away from the situation either. He was determined to help the South Vietnamese, and especially to help themselves. Keenly aware of the political risks of getting involved too quickly, Johnson did not fundamentally alter American policy in the region right away. Instead, he wanted to continue along the lines of Kennedy's approach, with just more effort and more efficiency.

In fact, Johnson's overall world view was in many ways a continuation of Kennedy's. He rather uncritically accepted the major American ideological tenets of the Cold War to which Kennedy, Eisenhower, and Truman subscribed. But with the influx of new, developing nations, and the widening Sino-Soviet split, by the mid-1960s relations between the superpowers were becoming increasingly complex. Power was more diffused, and earlier assumptions of the Cold War were being steadily eroded. Johnson was slow to grasp this change, and was often unclear about the new realities in international relations. Still, he continued with the "can-do" spirit of Kennedy's Cold War vision, and considered it essential for the U.S. to make its position known "loud and clear and

---

12 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 110.
13 Memorandum, LBJ to Lodge, April 4 1964, NSF Country File Vietnam, Box 3, LBJL.
over and over, and by deeds rather than words." Johnson also uncritically accepted much the same advice Kennedy had received on foreign affairs, retaining most of his predecessor's staff and relying heavily on those, like Robert McNamara and Walt Rostow, who shared his vision of America and the Cold War. That vision included maintaining a firm resolve against communist expansion in Southeast Asia, with which Johnson gradually became obsessed as his presidency unfolded. Vietnam even eclipsed Johnson's cherished programme for domestic reform, and his dream of building the "Great Society".

Johnson knew that he had inherited a very difficult situation with the crisis in Vietnam. To his press secretary, Bill Moyers, he said he felt like he "just grabbed a big juicy worm with a right sharp hook in the middle of it." Despite this, Johnson was determined not to be the president who "lost" Vietnam like Harry Truman "lost" China. He wanted to win against communism in Vietnam, even if it meant a greater combat role for the U.S. The decision to intervene militarily in Vietnam was not made quickly or without thought, but Johnson was far more inclined than Kennedy to make it. Whereas Kennedy avoided an emphatic decision over three years, Johnson took only half that time to decide the U.S. would commit to a war in defense of South Vietnam. In a series of discreet decisions beginning in 1964, Johnson took the U.S. down that perilous path.

Johnson's first decision involved style and leadership in decision-making. He disavowed the more informal style Kennedy had adopted, in which authority was diffused, and crucial decisions

15 Waldo Heinrichs, "Lyndon B. Johnson: Change and Continuity" in Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, eds., Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy 1963-1968 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 28-29. Heinrichs argues that Johnson's political skills and personal demeanour were much better suited to domestic affairs, and that he had a shallow, circumstantial appreciation of foreign relations. His limited experience with and interest in world affairs prior to becoming president hindered his understanding of diplomacy, which he conducted based largely on the "personalities of heads of state he had met" (26).


18 As quoted in McNamara, In Retrospect, 101.

continuously held over for more debate. Johnson preferred a more systematic process, in which he took personal responsibility for making the decisions. He expected a cooperative, team effort from those around him, and, above all, he expected results. He blamed "bickering" and "division" among Kennedy's staff for previous failures in Vietnam, and let it be known very quickly into his presidency that such disunity would not be tolerated any more. Just two days on the job, at a November 25 meeting in Washington, President Johnson made it plain, in characteristically unambiguous terms, what his objective in Vietnam was: "Win the war."

Within two weeks of that first meeting on Vietnam, Johnson considered his next, crucial decision. U.S. intelligence reports suggested that communist strength in South Vietnam was growing, and that interdiction efforts by the Saigon government were failing badly. In December 1963, Robert McNamara told the President that, unless reversed, this trend would lead to a communist-controlled South Vietnam within three months. Johnson knew that only a sustained bombing campaign against the North could turn the tide, and to this end he ordered careful study of the matter. In early March 1964, McNamara submitted the Defense Department's analysis of the situation in South Vietnam, complete with a detailed list of bombing targets in the North.

But Johnson was hesitant to order immediate bombing, fearful of igniting a larger war. Instead, he authorised increased covert operations directed at the North Vietnamese under the codename "OPLAN 34-A". Ostensibly a programme for air and naval surveillance of the North, OPLAN 34-A was in fact calculated to pressure and punish Hanoi. Commando raids against bridges, railways,

---

28 Johnson considered Kennedy's complicity in the overthrow of Ngo Dien Diem to be the worst mistake made by the U.S. during its involvement in Vietnam. He believed that Diem's removal led directly to American military intervention. Washington had to take greater responsibility for successive regimes, which were even weaker than Diem's, and incapable of fighting the communists themselves. In particular, Johnson blamed Roger Hilsman for the coup against Diem, believing that he took advantage of the permissive decision making authority within the Kennedy administration to engineer the overthrow. See also, Hunt, Lyndon Johnson's War, 79.
21 Hunt, Lyndon Johnson's War, 78-79.
22 Ibid.
roads, and coastal fortifications were designed to disrupt the North's supply of the Vietcong, while clandestine bombing raids against communist sanctuaries in Vietnam and Laos were aimed at discouraging Hanoi's support for the Pathet Lao. Authorised in January 1964, OPLAN 34-A operations were implemented by the end of March. In doing so, Johnson hoped that he could convince North Vietnam of his resolve to defend the South, without having to commit the U.S. to a bigger intervention. Increased covert activity definitely contributed to an escalation of tensions in Southeast Asia, but it also demonstrated that the Johnson administration viewed the region as vital to American national security interests.

Having made this determination, it followed that Thailand's importance to Washington was even greater. While Vice-President, Johnson had toured Thailand, and come away with a favourable impression. He understood Thai reservations about American policy and their hostility towards SEATO, telling John Kennedy that the organisation "is not now and probably never will be the answer." Johnson also firmly believed that Thailand was essential to U.S. policy interests in Southeast Asia. Reports on Thailand he received in the first few months of 1964 reinforced this conviction. Roger Hilsman, who had been appointed Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Asia in June 1963, called Thailand the "keystone" for U.S. policy, urging an even greater build-up of the Thai military. White House Adviser (and later Johnson's National Security Adviser) Walt Rostow warned Johnson that the Thais were "waiting to see whether their future fate rests with the U.S. or with Hanoi, backed by Peiping". He suggested quick action to secure their support. Johnson's Special Assistant on Vietnam, Robert Komer, advocated a flexible, broad-based policy for the

---

24 Ibid., 113-115.
25 Memorandum, LBJ to JFK, May 23 1961, folder Southeast Asia Memos, Volume I 12/63 to 4/64, #21a, NSF Country File Vietnam, Box 52, LBJL.
26 Memorandum, Hilsman to Rusk, March 14 1964, file Southeast Asia cables, Volume I 12/63 to 4/64, NSF Country File Vietnam, Box 52, LBJL. However, Hilsman cautioned that in such a policy the build up of Thai Armed Forces be seen as an "instrument", not an objective for its own sake.
27 Memorandum, Rostow to LBJ, June 6 1964, file Southeast Asia memos, Volume II 5/64 to 6/64, NSF Country File Vietnam, Box 53, LBJL.
whole region, centred on Thailand and South Vietnam; he added that other Asian allies such as South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines were anxiously awaiting action from the President, "all nervous as cats."

A top secret State Department report concluded that without Thai support, American objectives in Vietnam would be greatly hindered, and called for increased aid to Bangkok and sincere efforts to clear up "minor sources of friction" in U.S.-Thai relations.

The NSC essentially concurred with such an estimation, warning that there was no "fall-back" in the region after Vietnam. A report by the NSC Working Group Project in November 1964 adhered to the "domino theory", concluding that Thailand, Cambodia, probably Burma, and possibly Malaysia would fall to communism if it succeeded in Vietnam. In fact, the NSC held little hope for the Thais at all, noting that "since we are convinced Thailand would indeed go, this underscores the especially grave concern relative to SVN (South Vietnam) on the part of the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

While the same group submitted a later report indicating the "domino theory" was over-simplified, it held to the belief that Thailand would be lost soon after Vietnam, if not to direct communist influence then due to its "historic tendency to make 'peace' with the side that seems to be winning."

Although Johnson was apprehensive about a formal alliance with Bangkok, he was less hesitant than his predecessor to enter into a more intimate relationship. If Washington was going to save South Vietnam, it would need all the friends it could get, and that invariably meant securing political and military support through increased aid. In fact, Johnson was determined to co-opt the Thais as

---

28 Memorandum, Komier to LBJ, March 11 1964, file Komier Memos Volume I(2), NSF Name File, Box 4, LBJL.
29 State Department report, October 15 1964, file Southeast Asia memos, Volume IV 8/64 to 8/65, NSF Country File Vietnam, Box 54, LBJL.
partners in the defense against communism. Johnson expected Bangkok to make an unequivocal stand with the U.S. in return for American assistance. He was not given to patient consideration of the Thai tradition of flexible diplomacy, or the nuances of their cultural dynamics. The new President wanted Thailand fully and completely onside, and he was willing to pay the price to secure that goal.

Thanom's willingness to accommodate an expanded American military profile in Thailand surprised many observers in Washington. They anticipated that, like Sarit, he would hesitate to get involved too deeply with U.S. operations in Indochina for fear of domestic or international reaction. However, throughout 1964 this was not the case. In fact, the Thais seemed much more intent than Washington in pursuing military options in Southeast Asia. Thanom frequently told Martin that Chinese activity in Laos or North Vietnam was only for show, and that U.S. operations against communist positions would not provoke a wider regional conflict. The Thai leadership feared only that Washington would stop such activity at the first sign of Hanoi's willingness to talk. On more than one occasion, Thanom even suggested that the U.S. carry out direct attacks on North Vietnam in order to suppress the insurgency in the South. Praphas was even more intent on beating back the communists. With coup rumours still haunting Thanom during the year, Praphas moved to harden not only the Thai approach to Indochina but also internal domestic policy.

Thus Thanom and Johnson converged in their understanding and estimation of the U.S.-Thai relationship. Thanom did not share the full extent of Sarit's more traditional foreign policy views, and therefore he was less inclined to be aloof. Johnson did not have Kennedy's trepidation over

---

32 Blackburn, Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags", passim.
33 Cable, Bangkok 703 to State, November 27 1964, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #59, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.
34 Cable, Bangkok 353 to State, September 10 1964, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #34, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.
American intervention in South Vietnam, and therefore appeared more committed to the defense of Southeast Asia. These approaches were to prove mutually reinforcing. The more Johnson escalated U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the more comfortable Thanom felt in drawing closer to Washington. The more Thanom did so, the more Johnson was willing to reward the Thais. The more intimate relationship that resulted would dramatically affect not just the Thai polity and foreign policy, but also Thai culture. The Thais would discover that this relationship was frequently difficult and not without its costs, and that ultimately, the basic interests of the U.S. and Thailand would diverge.

Still, early in 1964 the U.S.-Thai relationship was definitely on the upswing. Thanom demonstrated his commitment to Washington by allowing for increased U.S. operations run out of Thailand. In February, the 173rd U.S. airborne brigade at Okinawa conducted top secret "Exercise Backpack" near Korat, which involved special warfare training. Thanom permitted U.S. bombing of Vietcong sanctuaries and supply routes in Laos with planes launched from Thai bases. In April, Thanom offered the virtually open-ended service of Thai Special Forces Ranger units in Laos. At a strategy conference with the Thais in Honolulu in May, U.S. officials even discussed the possibility of air strikes against North Vietnam. Excited at the prospect,
Thanom worked carefully to secure political support for an expanded American military presence in Thailand, which he assumed would follow such air strikes. Thanom and Dawee also decided to commit PARU and air force units to "Operation Triangle", a top secret plan involving Thai participation in American covert activities.40 Most significantly, shortly after the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August, Thanom lifted all restrictions on U.S. combat sorties originating in Thailand, subject only to "plausible denial" of Thai connivance. This decision reversed Bangkok's long-standing insistence that it be informed of every mission. It reflected Thanom's commitment to the U.S., and gave Washington exactly the sort of leeway it needed to expand both covert and overt operations against North Vietnam and in Laos.

Both the official and popular reaction in Thailand to Washington's "retaliatory" bombing of North Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin incident was overwhelming favourable. In fact, most Thais felt that the U.S. had finally seen the light about communism in Southeast Asia, and was now going to take forceful action. Although there was some concern about Beijing's response and the chance of a wider war in the region, most Thai papers welcomed the demonstration of American military power, glad that the U.S. was not a "paper tiger" after all.41 In view of the positive impression the bombing of North Vietnam made on the Thais, some State Department officials suggested the time was ripe to bring Bangkok fully onside U.S. policy with respect to Laos, and that the Thais might even support another international conference on Indochina. However, Graham Martin urged restraint. Rushing to negotiations would only alienate the Thais, and prematurely forfeit

40 Cable, Bangkok 157 to State/JCS/Defense, August 7 1964, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, NSF Country Files Thailand, #13, Box 282, LBJL.
41 Although the Chinese did not forcefully retaliate in the aftermath of the U.S. air strikes against North Vietnam, Beijing was definitely worried. For an interesting and recent account of Chinese actions in Vietnam and Laos just before and after the Gulf of Tonkin episode, see Qiang Zhai, "Beijing and the Vietnam Conflict, 1964-1965: New Chinese Evidence," 235. See also cable, State 201 to Bangkok, August 8 1964, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #15, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 282, LBJL and CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate, "Communist Reactions to US Actions Taken With Regard to Laos", June 18 1963, file Laos General 6/16/63 to 6/30/63, NSF Country Files Laos, Box 132, JFKL.
Washington's obvious military advantage over North Vietnam. Such considerations also extended to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who viewed the prospect of intensified and extended aerial assaults against Hanoi with enthusiasm. In fact, by the fall of 1964 virtually everyone in the Johnson administration supported a more aggressive tack with the North, no doubt confident that U.S. air superiority would be the key determinant in influencing any future political settlement. Moreover, in view of the wave of public support after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, looking tough on Vietnam was a valuable asset going into the 1964 Presidential election.

Johnson's leadership style favoured consensus, and was not particularly tolerant of dissent. Key figures like Robert McNamara wielded considerable influence on the President, while others, like George Ball, began to lose favour. Running up against McNamara's line could have serious and painful consequences. In late March, Roger Hilsman resigned, having made many enemies in the Defense Department and U.S. military establishment. Hilsman's departure was in the long term a set-back for U.S.-Thai relations. He believed that viewing Thailand separately from events in Vietnam was the key, and he advocated a more comprehensive, regional foreign policy. His successor was William Bundy, McGeorge Bundy's brother, who had served with the CIA and then

---

42 Cable, Bangkok 197 to State, August 10 1964, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #21, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.
43 Young, The Vietnam Wars, 115.
44 Hilsman had numerous personal disputes with officials other than McNamara. For example, William Bundy intensely disliked him. Bundy later observed that efforts to by-pass Hilsman led to the creation of the position of Special Assistant on Vietnam, and to his own appointment as Hilsman's successor. Admitting Hilsman was a good administrator, William Sullivan believed that he simply "rubbed people the wrong way... a little too convinced of his own infallibility", while J. Graham Parsons regretted that Hilsman "didn't leave office earlier." James Thomson pointed out that, despite pretences, Hilsman was essentially fired for disagreeing with the Defense Department position on Vietnam, especially after Dean Rusk had himself come around closer to McNamara's point of view. Although not opposed to U.S. military intervention in Southeast Asia, Hilsman had serious reservations about whether or not South Vietnam was the best place to make a stand against communism in the region. Hilsman himself later conceded to personal difficulties, but maintained that his disagreements with other administration officials stemmed from his conviction that McNamara and Rusk were not serving the president well as advisers. Hilsman declined an offer to become ambassador to the Philippines, believing that he would have been a "prostitute" by remaining in the Johnson administration. Believing Hilsman to be behind the decision to remove Ngo Dinh Diem, Johnson readily accepted his resignation. See oral history interviews, William Bundy with Paige Mulhollan, May 26 1969; William Sullivan with Paige Mulhollan, July 21 1971 and James Thomson with Paige Mulhollan, July 22 1971 in Oral Histories, LBJL. See also oral history interviews, William Sullivan with Dennis O'Brien, June 16 1970 and J. Graham Parsons with Dennis O'Brien, August 22 1969, in Oral Histories, JFKL.
as an Assistant Secretary of Defense under Kennedy. William Bundy was of the opinion that there was no strong line of defense in Southeast Asia after South Vietnam, and that Thailand would be in "desperate shape" if it were to become the primary battleground against communism. Moreover, Bundy was convinced that the Thais were untrustworthy, and that they would "cash their chips" and seek an accommodation with Hanoi and Beijing if that became easier than standing with the U.S.  

Graham Martin also favoured American military intervention in Southeast Asia, and, despite some reservations about the government in Saigon, he supported the introduction of U.S. troops there. However, he and William Bundy differed sharply in their views on Thailand. Martin was not particularly interested in Thai culture, or the subtleties of their polity as Kenneth Young had been. He was also generally unswayed by Thai emotionalism, and theatrical attempts to exact more aid from the U.S. Still, he was convinced of Thailand's importance to Washington, especially in assisting any military operations the U.S. planned in Vietnam. Yet such broad considerations were not Martin's primary concern. His overriding objective was to control his post, and with that in mind, he set about restructuring the role of U.S. ambassador in Bangkok.

Martin quickly moved to establish his own pre-eminent authority in the midst of intra-agency competition in Thailand. Thai officials voiced concern about the multiple channels they had to deal with in the U.S. government. Martin was sympathetic, frequently being frustrated by exactly the same problem. Within months of beginning his tenure, Martin's personal and professional conflicts with other American officials became legendary. The Embassy was habitually opposed to USOM

---


47 Cable, State 2206 to Bangkok, June 4 1964, file Thailand Volume I 11/63 to 11/64, #43, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.
and AID, and the CIA continued to operate in Thailand virtually independent of the Mission. Known for his candour, Martin told AID Director David Bell that his auditors were "plainly slow and clumsy," adding that their reports were full of "inept wording." After reading AID's 1964 report for Thailand, Martin scolded Bell, telling him, "I did not know whether to laugh, cry, or in a blaze of white hot anger yield to the temptation to make some extremely intemperate observations." The ambassador's reputation reached Washington, where trips to Southeast Asia through Bangkok were feared because "Martin always lies in wait."

Like his predecessor Kenneth Young, Martin found that the best way to exercise his authority was to get Washington's attention on matters pertaining to Thailand's involvement in U.S. military plans for the region. To this end, he lobbied for additional MAP funding and early delivery of hardware already in the pipeline. But unlike Young, Martin seems to have been less motivated by genuine interest and concern for the Thais than Young. He did not care much about Thai culture, and developed only rudimentary Thai language skills. Moreover, Martin did not report on every aspect of Thai politics, and did not push for a comprehensive re-evaluation of American policy. In fact, in August Martin told Walt Rostow that the formulation of a policy for all of Southeast Asia was premature. South Vietnam was the focus, even for the Thais, making a more regional approach difficult to devise. Martin did lament Washington's tendency to view Thailand as an "island sanctum unaffected by events", but at the same time wanted to run a tight ship, independent of the military, CIA and even State Department policy analysts.

48 Thompson, Unequal Partners: Philippine and Thai Relations with the U.S., 1965-1975, 42-43.
49 Cable, Bangkok 1076 to David Bell at AID, January 15 1964, file Thailand Volume I 11/63 to 11/64, #18, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.
50 Memorandum, Mike Forrestal to William Bundy, January 12 1965, file Forrestal Memos, #2a, NSF Name File, Box 3, LBJL.
51 Cable, Bangkok 261 to State, August 29 1964, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #28, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL. See also Thompson, Unequal Partners: Philippine and Thai Relations with the U.S., 1965-1975, 42-43.
Washington was anxious to coordinate military and clandestine operations in Southeast Asia, especially in Thailand and South Vietnam. The State Department believed that there were "many opportunities for strengthening the free world" in the region, primarily with respect to Thailand and South Vietnam.\(^{52}\) As early as 1961 there had been plans for joint covert "hit and run" guerrilla attacks by Thais and South Vietnamese against Pathet Lao positions.\(^{53}\) Throughout 1964, the American embassies in Bangkok and Saigon drafted proposals for further coordination between the two U.S. clients. Thai officers went to South Vietnam to observe counter-insurgency exercises, but there were considerable difficulties in doing much more. In Saigon, Ambassador Frederick Nolting lamented the "almost complete lack of interest in regional cooperation which now exists in Viet Nam", pointing out that the Vietnamese never really saw themselves as part of the region. Nolting considered military coordination the only reasonable avenue given the vast political and cultural differences between Thailand and Vietnam, but found that even in that respect Saigon proved troublesome.\(^{54}\) For their part, the Thais resented being treated as an appendage of South Vietnam, lobbying hard for clarification of the U.S. command structure. The MAAG Thailand had become virtually dormant, and was now subordinate to MACV. Thanom and Dawee preferred a separate, and independent, Military Assistance Command for Thailand (MACTHAI), but only if the chain of command was directly to CINCPAC.\(^{55}\) MACTHAI had in fact been created during the 1962


\(^{53}\) Memorandum, Maxwell Taylor to JFK, October 11 1961, FRUS, Volume XXIV, 1961-63, Laos Crisis, document 204, 391.

\(^{54}\) Report, "Possible Areas of Cooperation Between Thailand and South Vietnam", Frederick Nolting to Alfred Puhan, July 16 1963, file 1963 Thailand July thru December, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 8, RG 59, USNA. Among Nolting's specific proposals was the exchange of visits by heads of state, expanded economic contacts, joint planning on the development of the Mekong River Project and the coordination of policy with respect to Cambodia. He pointed out that one of the greatest obstacles in getting the two nation's to cooperate was the Thai Ambassador in Saigon, Thipkomut. Denying him as "totally ineffectual on nearly every count", Nolting considered him "little more than a cipher", who had to be replaced.

\(^{55}\) Cable, Bangkok 120 to State, August 2 1964, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #2, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL. The U.S. Defense Department favoured placing MACTHAI under control of the directorate for all American operations in Southeast Asia, COMUSSEA (Command, U.S., East Asia). COMUSSEA was dominated by

187
Laotian crisis, but after that was largely superseded by the MAAG Thailand again. Bangkok did not want to be lost in the shuffle of U.S. aid to Saigon.

Although the primary focus of the U.S.-Thai relationship was fast becoming Vietnam, Laos was by no means forgotten. By the end of 1963, there were essentially two governments in Laos. Souvanna Phouma continued to struggle with a fragile coalition in Vientiane, while the Pathet Lao consolidated their hold of the northern provinces with a government based at Xam Nua. Souvanna Phouma's reconciliation with right-wing forces throughout 1963 continued into 1964, and the U.S. maintained military aid to neutralists and even Phoumi through Thailand. Meanwhile, both Hanoi and Beijing stepped up their support of the Pathet Lao, allowing them to gradually extend their control in the strategically vital Plaines des Jarres region. Although there were few major battles, it was apparent that the communists in Laos were winning the prolonged civil war, and that they had no intention of abiding by the Geneva Agreements of 1962.

In June 1963, Souvanna broke an earlier agreement he made with the Pathet Lao and publicly attacked the group's military collusion with North Vietnam. He also halted government funding of Souphanouvong's neutralist faction. In January 1964, Souvanna and Souphanouvong met to discuss the possibility of establishing a de-militarised zone near Luang Prabang, and then in April Souvanna travelled to both Beijing and Hanoi in the hopes of furthering the chances of an accord with the communists. Disappointed by the cool reception he received in both capitals, Souvanna returned to Laos to meet with Souphanouvong again, this time joined by Phoumi. The idea of a "neutral zone" near Luang Prabang failed to materialise, and shortly after the meeting Souvanna was arrested in a

---

MACV interests. See also cable, State 502 to Bangkok, October 8 1964, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #44, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LB/L.
56 Ireson and Ireson, "Laos", in Allen and Ngo Vinh Long, Coming to Terms, 135-137.
coup by right-wing forces. Once again the government in Vientiane fell, and once again an escalation in the civil war threatened.

The U.S. was not pleased with the escalating civil war. Leonard Unger, the ambassador in Laos, worked hard to get Souvanna released and restored as Prime Minister, albeit with a substantially revised cabinet. Neutralist and Pathet Lao factions were effectively excluded, prompting Souphanouvong to denounce Souvanna. The leaders of the right wing faction responsible for the coup were not Phoumi supporters, and they pressured Souvanna to oust him as well. The resulting political turmoil led to renewed hostilities, with the Pathet Lao striking out against both neutralists and the right wing. Bangkok responded by beefing up the presence of combat troops throughout the Northeast, strongly urged on by the Americans. Washington intensified covert operations in Laos, most organised in Thailand. In August 1963 the USAF shipped six T-28 aircraft to Souvanna, following that up in March 1964 with the deployment of a training detachment based at Udon Thani under the code name, "Project Waterpump." This deployment was designed to build up both Lao and Thai air capabilities, especially through combat experience. Thai pilots flew many reconnaissance and even bombing missions over Pathet Lao territory, all in unmarked planes and without any other means of being identified.

In July 1964, Lao neutralist and right-wing forces attacked Pathet Lao positions near Muong Soui. The operation, code-named "Triangle", involved CIA-operated Air America transport, along with cover provided by USAF and Thai strike forces. In October, reconnaissance missions over

57 Castle, "At War in the Shadow of Vietnam", 162.
58 Stevenson, The End of Nowhere, 195-197.
59 Washington considered giving Souvanna's forces napalm for use against the communists. Leonard Unger was largely in favour of doing so, but Harriman felt they were "inexperienced" in its usage and opposed the idea. Dean Rusk took a "wait and see" approach. See Summary of Record of NSC Meetings NO536, July 28 1964, file NSC Meetings, Volume II, Tab IX, 7/28/64, #5, NSF NSC Meetings, Box 1, LBJL.
60 Message, CINCPAC 200015Z to MAAG Thailand, July 11 1963, file 13.7 Laos: July-September 1963, BFEA, OSEAA, Box 7, RG 59, USNA. One of the biggest missions was "Operation Pierce Arrow", involving T-28 and artillery action against communist positions in the Laotian Panhandle. See cable, "Next Courses of Action in Southeast Asia", CINCPAC to JCS, August 17 1964, as quoted in Gravel, ed., The Pentagon Papers, 542-543.
northern Laos were increased. These so-called "Yankee Team" operations had begun the preceding spring, but growing evidence of Chinese and North Vietnamese presence in the country necessitated more observation. After the Thai government lifted restrictions on U.S. combat sorties originating in Thailand in August, Yankee Team missions were escorted by Thai and American fighters based in the Northeast. Supposedly acting in self-defense while flying search and rescue, U.S. T-28s flown by Thai and Lao pilots sometimes engaged communist positions which had been targeted by the CIA. On one occasion, Thai and Lao pilots flying T-28s with Royal Lao markings attacked a Pathet Lao headquarters near Khang Khay without American authorisation, damaging the Chinese economic mission. At a background briefing for the media in Washington following this incident, William Bundy confirmed that the pilots were Lao and Thai, adding "I'd rather not see that in print, but there are some Thai who are flying."

Despite occasional problems like the Khang Khay incident, both Thailand and the U.S. had great faith in covert operations, convinced that they would at least prevent a wholesale takeover by the communists in Laos, if not eventually turn the tide against them. The so-called "secret war" in Laos thus developed as a vital appendage of the growing conflict in Vietnam, drawing Thai and American interests ever closer. But U.S. and Thai involvement in covert activities in Laos were no secret in either Beijing or Moscow. In May 1964, when Johnson's roving Ambassador, Averell Harriman, met with Soviet premier Alexei Kosygin to discuss the possibility of a new conference on Indochina, Kosygin gave him a note from his government, accusing the U.S. of numerous violations of the 1962 Geneva agreements, mostly through or with the Thais. The Soviets were

---

62 Cable, CINCPAC PAF266 to JCS, October 2 1964, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #43, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL. By December 1964, the eleven Thai pilots at Udorn Thani had over 100 missions to their credit. The Thai Air Force detachment in Savannakhet was well above this rate, but Martin cautioned about "overusing" them. Thais also served in search and rescue missions in conjunction with Air America operatives. See cable, Bangkok 807 to State, December 22 1964, #65 in Ibid.

63 Castle, "At War in the Shadow of Vietnam", 175.

64 Transcript, State Department background for press and radio news briefing, June 17 1964, file CF Oversize Attachments Southeast Asia - General 1/4/67 #4, WHCF, Confidential Files, Box 177, LBJL.
well-aware that Thai troops were still in Laos, and that thousands of Lao received training and support from Thailand. In fact, the note maintained that Thai policy towards Laos was the greatest obstacle to a lasting peace in Laos, not the communists. Naturally, Washington did not share this view.

Throughout the fall of 1964, the U.S. extended its collaboration with Thailand in Laos. Originally discussed at the joint talks in Honolulu during the summer, bilateral military planning was officially implemented under the auspices of "Project 22" in November. Defined as "a bilateral capabilities plan to defend against Communist action in Laos threatening the security of Thailand", Project 22 gave CINCPAC control over the logistics, planning and training of covert operations. Meanwhile, Thanom was named Commander in Chief of U.S.-Thai forces, a position created specifically for him. Contingency plans attached to Project 22 anticipated joint U.S.-Thai occupation of key spots along the Mekong River, and the seizure of cities, airfields, and bridgeheads in Laos. Virtually all Thai combat forces figured in the calculations, along with one division and two brigades of American troops under "effective field command" of U.S. officers. Defense Department analysts considered Project 22 of "special political significance" for the Thais, because it at least appeared quite bilateral in character even if in fact the U.S. was essentially in charge.

Even after Thanom's assumption of power, differences remained between Bangkok and Washington over SEATO. Thanat frequently attacked SEATO's inaction after Pathet Lao gains in Laos, accusing "some European powers" of "not [being] willing to accept or discharge any responsibility, except to make a joint demarche and play the role of big powers." The advance of communism in Southeast Asia could, Thanat said, "be ignored on the banks of the Thames, or the

---

65 Note, no date, no author, file Laos 2, Averell Harriman Papers, Box 483, LOC.
67 Ibid. Project 22 was officially designated COMUSTAF Plan 1/64. CINCPAC endorsed the plan in February 1964, with JCS approval coming in May.
Seine or the Potomac, but not in Bangkok." At a SEATO military conference in October, Thai concerns about the organisation were again the topic of much discussion. Representing Thailand, Dawee appeared to lead the Pakistanis and Filipinos in a concerted drive for substantial changes, designed to end what some considered to be domination by the "white man's club" of Great Britain, France, and the U.S. The Thais tried to take advantage of Washington's fixation on South Vietnam, and hoped that the unilateral nature of that commitment meant that U.S. opposition to changes in SEATO was diminishing. Thanom was also confident that reinvigorated Thai-American relations would translate into a bilateral alliance, making SEATO redundant. But no one in Washington was considering anything of the sort. SEATO was necessary to maintain at least the facade of a multilateral front against communism in Southeast Asia, and a formal alliance with Thailand was at no time even discussed by the Johnson administration. In fact, the State Department envisioned making SEATO the umbrella for counter-subversion throughout the region, hoping to "imaginatively handle" Thai dissatisfaction and keep SEATO "a living and vital mechanism." For Johnson, SEATO remained the foundation for the U.S.-Thai relationship.

Throughout 1964 Cambodia also continued to greatly affect U.S.-Thai relations. Diplomatic relations between Bangkok and Phnom Penh remained suspended over the Phra Vibarn temple dispute. Moreover, Thailand was still linked to rightist guerrillas, the Khmer Serei, who were fighting against Sihanouk's army along Cambodia's frontiers with both Thailand and Vietnam. Sihanouk's war of words with Thailand over these issues became a near constant feature of Cambodian foreign policy, making it very difficult for Washington to deal with Phnom Penh. In December 1963,

---

69 Message, Defense 1512552, CINCPAC to JCS, October 15 1964, file SEATO, #33, NSF Agency File, Defense Department, Box 42, LBJL. Pakistan was intent on broadening the SEATO definition of "threat" beyond communism, obviously in the hope of gaining support in its disputes with India. The Philippines had a similar objective because of its problems with Indonesia over contested islands in the Celebes Sea.
70 Cable, State 959 to Bangkok, January 2 1963, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #69, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.
Johnson sent Dean Acheson back to Phnom Penh, hoping to woo Sihanouk away from a neutrality that heavily favoured communists. Many Cambodians were fearful that their country would become the next battleground in Southeast Asia, and worried that communist strength in the country was rising, largely through assistance given by North Vietnam and the Vietcong. Some Cambodian officials were therefore anxious to mend fences with the U.S., but Sihanouk feared angering both Beijing and Hanoi. As a result, Cambodia fluctuated wildly between warming up to the Americans and condemning them. The U.S. relationship with Thailand made the latter much easier, and by denouncing the relationship Sihanouk could appear truly neutral, and thus hope to avoid conflict with the communists.

Sihanouk sometimes seemed to go out of his way to antagonise Thailand and the U.S. In January 1964, he ordered the public execution of Khmer Serae rebels linked to his old adversary Son Ngoc Thanh, whom the Thais had supported. After having his police extract confessions from those condemned that they received support from both Thailand and the U.S., Sihanouk had their executions filmed, and shown at Cambodian cinemas. On the occasion of Sarit's death in December 1963, Sihanouk decided to publicly vent his anger against the Thais. Speaking on Radio Phnom Penh, he rejoiced in the Thai leader's passing, and called upon Cambodians to pray for Thanat's death too, promising a three day holiday if he did. Sihanouk went on to welcome the deaths of Ngo Dien Diem and John Kennedy too, referring to the late president as the "great

---

71 Memorandum, Roger Hilsman to Mike Forrestal, December 4 1963, folder 2, Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 1, JFKL.
73 The Khmer Serae leader, Son Ngoc Thanh, was, in fact, in South Vietnam. In July 1964, White House staffer Mike Forrestal told the Saigon government to tell Thanh "flatly that if he desires to remain in Viet-Nam he must eschew all political activities." See cable, State 190 to Saigon, July 20 1964, folder: Pol Thai u-z 1/1/64, CFP Files 1964-66 (Political and Defense), Thailand, Box 2701, RG 59, USNA.
75 Selected transcripts, Sihanouk speeches August 1963-December 1963, file Cambodia 1962-1968, W. Averell Harriman Papers, Box 551, LOC.
boss" and hoping the three would "all meet in hell."

When the State Department sharply protested, Sihanouk recalled the entire Cambodian mission from Washington, and threatened to break off diplomatic relations completely.

But the Thais did not help matters either. Thanom continued to support the Khmer Serai living in the jungles along the border. Although denying their connection to the Khmer Serai, the Thais gave the group financial assistance, and even radio transmitters for broadcasts into Cambodia. When Washington pressured Bangkok to stop the aid, Thanom was very bitter. He and Thanat accused the U.S. of once again favouring those who did nothing to deserve American friendship. Still, getting the Thais to moderate their Cambodian policy was a major goal for Washington, and with that in mind, Ambassador Martin was instructed to do all he could to secure Bangkok's cooperation. The orders came from the President himself, who told his advisers, "I just don't understand why we can't get along with that little Prince... He runs a wonderful country, he's a great little man." 78

The issue of Cambodia was much more than a minor irritant in U.S.-Thai relations. Thailand saw Cambodia as the U.S. did Cuba because of its proximity and strategic sensitivity. The Thai leadership expected Washington to understand that. Thanom was willing to give the Americans essentially all that they wanted, but being told how to deal with Sihanouk was too much for him to stomach. Not only was Cambodia a long-time enemy, but the country represented another Laos for the Thais. A weak, erratic government in Phnom Penh denied the existence and growing strength

76 Osborne, Sihanouk, 163. Sihanouk had always maintained that the U.S. knew about Thai support for the Khmer Serai, and in fact endorsed it. Kennedy had always denied any knowledge about the matter, but he was informed in November 1963 by Roger Hilsman that the Eisenhower administration had "played footsie" with the group, and that "there was money involved." See also Chandler, The Tragedy of Cambodian History, 134.

77 Memorandum, Lawrence Pickering at OSEAA to HLT Koren, December 20 1963, file Thailand July thru December, BFEA, OSEAA, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 8, RG 59, USNA. See also cable, Phnom Penh 106 to State, August 16 1963, file CSM-Communism 2/1/63 Camb, CFP File 1963 (Political and Defense, CSM), Cambodia, Box 3688, RG 59, USNA.

78 Oral history interview, James C. Thomson with Paige Mulhollan, July 22 1971, 36, Oral Histories, LBJL.
of communists within, while openly courting the favour of international communist powers under a thin veil of neutrality. The Thais saw in Sihanouk frightening parallels to Souvanna Phouma. But what made matters even worse was that, unlike Laos, the Thais did not have the same cultural or "family" connections to Cambodians. Thus Bangkok's influence was not as great, and instead of being able to play sides as it did in Laos, Thailand was limited in Cambodian affairs to being little more than the villain. Whereas in the Laotian crisis Thailand played a major and potentially positive role, in Cambodia it served only as the object of Sihanouk's political diatribes, the antagonist to his defender, and an external target to distract attention away from internal weaknesses. 9

Washington did not fully appreciate the dynamics of the Thai-Cambodian relationship. The Johnson administration tended to view all of Southeast Asia within the context of the burgeoning Vietnam conflict. In this context, Cambodia (along with Laos) was seen as a weak link in the Indochinese chain, vulnerable to developments in Vietnam. Keeping Cambodia as isolated as possible from Hanoi would deny the communists sanctuary and support in the event of an even wider conflict. In spite of Sihanouk's difficult personality and hot-cold relationship with the U.S., the Johnson administration placed ever greater importance on keeping Cambodia out of communist hands as its own involvement in Vietnam increased. For this reason, the administration wanted Thailand to soften its stance toward Phnom Penh.

But American pressure on Bangkok to do so was not very persuasive or effective. Thai animosity towards Cambodia was more encompassing than their filial attitude towards Laos, so Bangkok's line on Phnom Penh was even harder than its policy towards Vientiane. U.S. persuasion also lacked the clout it had in 1962 during the Laotian crisis. It was clear by 1965 that Washington was gearing up for a concerted military action in Vietnam, and so the Thais may have thought they had from the U.S. precisely what was lacking in the late 1950's and early 1960's when Laos was the focus - a

commitment to the defense of Southeast Asia. Creeping communism in Cambodia was not likely to be tolerated by the Americans, once Sihanouk was shown to be the scoundrel Thais knew him to be. Cambodia was too close to Saigon, and too easy for the communists to use as a centre of operations. Unlike Laos, the strength of an indigenous communist force was not yet insurmountable either.

Moreover, the Thais believed that they had in turn shown Washington their willingness to listen, reason and act. However reluctantly, Thailand followed U.S. policy on Laos for the most part. It remained within the nearly dysfunctional SEATO family. And when the Americans elected to do something in Vietnam, Thailand was right there to help. So it followed that with respect to Cambodia, the Thais could not fathom the American position at all. Was Thailand just an extension of Vietnam in American eyes? Did the U.S. really care about the Thais, or was it just interested in securing much-needed support? Just as it seemed Washington was coming to its senses and readying to fight communism in Southeast Asia, the U.S. once again seemed to blame its friends, and coddle its enemies. For the Thais, despite a dramatic improvement in relations with the U.S. over the first year of Thanom's rule, the Cambodian issue was a significant and troubling reminder of how far away Washington could be.

On the whole, however, 1964 marked a significant watershed in the U.S.-Thai relationship. Prime Minister Thanom and President Johnson saw more eye to eye on common interests than had Sarit and Kennedy, and both were anxious for even closer ties between their two countries. Thailand's involvement in U.S. covert operations in Southeast Asia steadily increased, as did its importance to Washington when considering possible American military intervention in Vietnam. Although Bangkok remained unhappy with the situation in Laos, frustrated by SEATO, and angry about

---

80 Bamrungsuk, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule*, 158.
Cambodia, it was encouraged by what it perceived to be the American resolve to defend South Vietnam. During 1964, the crisis in Vietnam allowed for a new departure in the U.S.-Thai relationship, complete with new leaders, new avenues of cooperation, and a new vigour in the fight against communism.
*CHAPTER SIX*

"The Bamboo Bends: Thailand, the U.S., and the War in Vietnam, 1965"

U.S.-Thai relations began on a positive note in 1965. Bangkok was confident that Lyndon Johnson was committed to the defence of Southeast Asia, and that the bombing of North Vietnam during the Gulf of Tonkin attacks would be renewed and intensified. The Thai leadership was also pleased by American recognition of the important role Thailand had in supporting U.S. military power in the region. Increased economic and military aid to Bangkok accompanied the expansion of covert operations launched from Thailand, and as Washington stepped up the air war against Hanoi with Operation Rolling Thunder, Thai bases became a critical asset. Throughout the year, Thailand became progressively embroiled in the Vietnam conflict as both a staging ground for the U.S. military, and as a political ally for the Johnson administration.

This close association with the Americans was far from untroubled. Assisting the U.S. in its military operations against North Vietnam ran the risk of alienating Thailand even further from virtually all its neighbours. Trying to avoid being too conspicuous in its support of the U.S. became an obsession in Bangkok. Nonetheless, the more the Thais became involved with the conflict in Vietnam, the more dependent they were on having the Americans fight and win there. As a result, the Thai leadership worried about political pressures in the U.S. that seemed to restrain Johnson's prosecution of the war. Moreover, 1965 witnessed the first signs of a communist insurgency emerging in Thailand, evidently with Beijing's support, which only deepened the critical, mutual dependency between Bangkok and Washington. Added to these problems for both governments were continuing difficulties with Cambodia, disagreement over military funding, and fears about the costs of having a growing number of U.S. military personnel stationed on Thai soil. But the central issue in 1965 was the war in Vietnam, and how far the U.S. would go to defend the South. For the
Thais, this was the new litmus test of American commitment to Southeast Asia, and after the settlement on Laos, many remained wary of bending the bamboo too far.

The first few months of 1965 witnessed a significant escalation of the American war in Vietnam. On Christmas Eve 1964, the Vietcong bombed a U.S. officers' billet in Saigon, killing two Americans and wounding thirty-eight. Then, on February 6, the Vietcong attacked the U.S. Army barracks and a nearby helicopter base in Pleiku, killing nine.1 President Johnson responded by ordering operation "Flaming Dart", a series of air strikes against North Vietnamese military installations. When the Vietcong attacked again on February 10, this time at the U.S. Army depot in Qui Nhon, Johnson upped the ante. The next day he ordered implementation of "Rolling Thunder", a programme for the graduated bombing of the North. Although the administration denied there was any change in American policy, the Pleiku incident was the pretext Washington was looking for to intensify its military actions in Vietnam. National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy later remarked, "Pleikus are like streetcars."2 In fact, Rolling Thunder had been planned for some time by the JCS and Defense Department, and almost immediately there were pressures to expand it. Thus, despite the administration's claim, the U.S. was clearly beyond the cross-roads, and now underway along the road to its war in Vietnam.

Within a few months Johnson realised that the war in Vietnam would never be won solely by American air power. North Vietnam proved to be incredibly resilient, and showed no signs that it was prepared to suspend its sponsorship of the insurgency in the South. In fact, as the Pleiku incident suggests, Hanoi was anxious to test the President, and see how far the U.S. would go in its defence of South Vietnam.3 But Johnson remained hesitant to pursue any military avenue other

---

1 Herring, America's Longest War, 127-128.
2 Ibid, 129. The day after the Pleiku incident, McGeorge Bundy wrote the President, outlining his view on the situation: "The prospect in Vietnam is grim. The energy and persistence of the VC are astounding. At its very best the struggle in Vietnam will be long." See memorandum, McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, February 7 1965, file NSC Meetings, Volume III, Tab 29, 2/8/65, "Situation in Vietnam", NSF NSC Meetings, Box 1, LBJL.
3 Berman, Planning a Tragedy, 34.
than bombing of the North. Not only would the introduction of American ground troops in Vietnam be a potentially volatile political issue in the U.S., but it represented a much bigger commitment to the government in Saigon, which Johnson feared was too unstable.4

The President was increasingly dependent on an ever narrower circle of advisers on Vietnam, and this reduced the flexibility of American policy. He started to turn away from the orderly, multi-channel review of information and instead relied almost exclusively on the estimation of Robert McNamara, McGeorge and William Bundy, Dean Rusk, and later Walt Rostow.5 The consensus among this group was that military force was key, a presumption that greatly oversimplified the situation in Vietnam and did little in terms of developing a comprehensive American policy in the region.

Developments in Vietnam greatly affected this consensus among Johnson and his closest advisers, and the debate about whether or not to send in American combat forces. Since the overthrow of Ngo Dien Diem in November 1963, South Vietnam had teetered on the verge of a political collapse. General Nguyen Khanh had been at the center of power in the country since January 1964, but never enjoyed the support of either his people or Washington. A corrupt and inefficient administrator, Khanh's reliability as a professedly ardent anti-communist was also in doubt. During the war against the French, he had associated with the Vietminh, and rumours were pervasive that he still had contacts with the communists.6 It was exactly such rumours that precipitated his downfall in mid-February 1965. The CIA reported that Khanh had been in contact with the Vietcong for several months, presumably to discuss any avenues of cooperation.

---

4 Young, The Vietnam Wars, 132.
Washington quickly helped engineer his removal through a series of coups and counter-coups that lasted until early March, when a military junta finally seized power.7

Khanh's departure had great impact on U.S. policy towards Vietnam. Just one month before his removal, Khanh was seen by Washington as the only viable leader in the South, notwithstanding previous reservations. Sent to meet with him in Saigon, McGeorge Bundy cabled the President that Khanh was "the most impressive personality", and that despite U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell Taylor's total lack of confidence in him, the General was "able, energetic, perceptive and resilient."8 The "commitment" Bundy suggested that Washington make to Khanh revealed how far the Johnson administration had strayed from its original, more hesitant position on Vietnam. Prior to the Vietcong attacks at Pleiku and Qui Nhon, the President worried about the efficacy of supporting a regime in Saigon that was so inherently unstable. A viable and meritorious government for South Vietnam was Johnson's original objective, but by February 1965 he seemed willing to commit to any government, so long as it would fight against the communists.9

The new government in Saigon was a triumvirate, led by Army Generals Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Chan Thi, and Air Force General Nguyen Cao Ky. In its first public statement the new government pledged not to negotiate with the communists. This simple announcement was, as the New York Times suggested, "[a] guarantee... that the war would continue."10 That was precisely the kind of resolve Lyndon Johnson wanted. Cabling Taylor in Saigon, the President said he wanted to "make it clear to all the world that the U.S. will spare no effort and no sacrifice in doing its full part to turn back the Communists in Vietnam."11 With the new government in the South, and the bombing of the North well under way, Johnson made still another critical decision on Vietnam. At

---

7 Young, The Vietnam Wars, 138.
8 Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, "The Situation in Vietnam", February 7 1965, as quoted in Berman, Planning a Tragedy, 40-41.
9 Berman, Planning a Tragedy, 42.
the request of General William Westmoreland, commander of the U.S. military mission in Saigon, the President ordered the deployment of 3,500 marines to the American air base at Da Nang. In early April, Johnson sent more marines to Vietnam, and authorised offensive operations. The American ground war in Indochina had begun.

Shortly after a speech defending his decision at Johns Hopkins University on April 8, Johnson set about increasing the deployments. By mid-May, there were already 47,000 U.S. combat troops in Vietnam, and, after the South Vietnamese Army suffered a series of defeats at the hands of the Vietcong in June and July, many of Johnson's advisers recommended that even more were needed right away. General Westmoreland asked for 150,000, which the Joint Chiefs of Staff endorsed along with a request for expanded air strikes against the North. After a hurried trip to Saigon in mid-July, Robert McNamara recommended sending 100,000 more, with plans to dispatch an additional 100,000 if necessary. Moreover, McNamara suggested intensifying the bombing, calling up the National Guard, enacting conscription, and expanding the defense budget.

Despite pressure for bold action, Johnson was more cautious. In the speech at Johns Hopkins, he offered North Vietnam economic assistance in exchange for its support to seek a negotiated settlement to the crisis. That offer included participating in a regional project based on developing the Mekong River area. Johnson's offer was enthusiastically received in most Southeast Asian

---

12 Berman, Planning a Tragedy, 52-53.
13 Hunt, Lyndon Johnson's War, 92.
14 Herring, America's Longest War, 138. Before a closed session of the Senate Appropriations Armed Services Committee on May 5, McNamara requested an immediate $US 700 million and an additional $US 1.7 billion in FY 1966 for a special Southeast Asia "Emergency Fund". At least $US 9 million was tabbed for Thailand. Citing Thai national security concerns and "political sensitivities", McNamara did not disclose specific details about how the money would be used. At the committee's insistence, a more specific shopping list was provided with respect to Vietnam. McNamara's request was approved. See "United States Security Agreements Abroad: Kingdom of Thailand", Hearings before the Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 91st Congress, First Session, Part 3, November 10-14 and 17 1969, microform 1970-9912, card 4, 733, Robarts Library, University of Toronto.
capitals, including Bangkok, but was rejected by Hanoi. Johnson still feared that massive air strikes against North Vietnam could provoke a wider war with the Chinese, and he was anxious to avoid the economic and political costs inherent in any larger-scale military intervention. More than anything, Johnson wanted to maintain plans for his programme of wide-sweeping domestic reforms in the hope of building the so-called "Great Society". Opposition to the deployment of more U.S. ground troops in Vietnam from within the administration also weighed on the President. Under-Secretary of State George Ball was clearly the most vocal opponent to plans for a military escalation, warning the President that "no one has demonstrated that a white ground force of whatever size can win a guerrilla war - which at the same time is a civil war between Asians- in jungle terrain in the midst of a population that refuses cooperation." Ball believed that U.S. ground troops in Vietnam would "take heavy casualties in a war they are ill-equipped to fight", and that once involved, Washington would be caught in "a well-nigh irreversible process... so great that we cannot - without national humiliation - stop short of achieving our complete objectives." Once on the tiger's back", Ball cautioned, "we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount."

Rather than Vietnam, Ball believed that Washington should focus on Thailand as the place to stand against communism in the region. Not only was the country more defensible militarily, but its political cohesion was far greater. Other advisers agreed. White House aide Horace Busby told the President he believed that it was hard to define an "acceptable objective" in Vietnam itself, and that

17 Gardner, Pay Any Price, 255-256. See also Hunt, Lyndon Johnson's War, 72. After he left the Presidency, Johnson reflected on the conflict in Vietnam as "that bitch of a war on the other side of the world", who had driven away "the woman I really loved - the Great Society."
the only solid rationale for expanded American involvement there was in terms of the whole region, the Pacific and "even the broad East-West relationship." In this light Thailand was the logical place to concentrate U.S. efforts. However, McNamara's view prevailed, and both he and Dean Rusk expressed doubt to the President about the Thais' ability to withstand a concerted insurgency directed from Hanoi or Beijing. Vietnam remained the line of defense.

George Ball was by no means alone in doubting American policy in Vietnam. Dissension in the administration ranks was made evident as early as January 1965 when John McCone tendered his resignation as CIA chief, frustrated that he no longer had the President's ear. The American Ambassador in Saigon, Maxwell Taylor, was himself a former military man and a personal friend of Johnson's. But by initially opposing the introduction of U.S. ground troops in Vietnam, Taylor found himself out of the inner circle too. Even amongst those who supported and expanded U.S. military presence, there was considerable disagreement. McGeorge Bundy had profound concerns about the McNamara plan, questioning the "upper limit of U.S. liability" and doubting the clarity of "fragmentary evidence" regarding communist tactics, the stability of Ky's government in Saigon and the overall effectiveness of American forces. The new CIA Director William Raborn echoed such doubts, as did William Bundy, although neither favoured a negotiated withdrawal like Ball.

---


22 McNamara, In Retrospect, 192.

23 Randolph and Thompson, Thai Insurgency: Contemporary Developments, 119. McCone's replacement was Vice Admiral William Raborn, who Randolph and Thompson characterise as a bumbler. Among his more infamous gaffes were comments like "[Who's this fellow Oligarchy anyway?];" and a belief that Kuwait was a codename. His Deputy Director of Plans, Richard Helms, became the first professional CIA officer to hold the post of Director when he succeeded Raborn in June 1966. Helms was effectively recognised as the CIA chief even before Raborn's departure, but faced a difficult job when it was made official. The CIA continued to have a generally negative view of the American war effort in Vietnam, but Johnson expected the agency to be fully onside despite field reports and intelligence estimates that the military was fighting a losing case. See also Ranelagh, CIA: A History, 119-125.

24 Young, The Vietnam Wars, 138-139. Taylor was instrumental in implementing plans for Rolling Thunder, and was by no means adverse to the use of American military power in Vietnam. He was, however, concerned about the ability of U.S. soldiers to fight a guerrilla-style war in the jungles of Southeast Asia, and worried that once long-standing policy against the introduction of troops was breached, it would be difficult to limit Washington's commitment to Saigon.

25 Memorandum for the President, McGeorge Bundy, June 30 1965, as quoted in Berman, Planning A Tragedy, 82-84 and Appendix B. As Berman points out, despite his opposition to McNamara's plan, Bundy should not be viewed as a dove. In some respects he represented the most hawkish of Johnson's advisers, urging that the "prospect of nuclear
Therefore it was apparent that by July 1965 considerable division existed in the decision-making process on Vietnam. Johnson was unquestionably influenced by McNamara and the military establishment, primarily because they optimistically predicted a victory in Vietnam. However, the decision to expand American efforts was not easy. By all accounts the President agonized over the dilemma, ever wary about the political repercussions at home and the effects U.S. military forces so close to China would have internationally. After top-level meetings throughout the latter part of July, the President made still another fateful decision on Vietnam. At a press conference on the 27th he announced the immediate deployment of 50,000 more troops, bringing the total to 125,000. He also announced an increase in the draft quota from 17,000 to 35,000, making casual reference to the possible need for more. Secretly, Johnson had already authorised the deployment of an additional 175,000 men by the end of 1965. The U.S. was on its way down the road to a much bigger war in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Thailand prepared to go along for the ride. The Thanom regime saw the war in Vietnam as an opportunity to consolidate the U.S.-Thai relationship, and thus its own legitimacy. More importantly, many Thais welcomed the conflict, relieved that Washington was finally acting in earnest against the spread of communism. Their belief was that sooner or later military action was necessary, and they were glad it was on Vietnamese soil rather than Thai. It was apparent that the fight against communism had finally come, and Thailand braced itself in preparation. In solidly tying itself to the U.S. and to the anti-communist struggle in Vietnam, Thailand risked a great deal. Unless the Americans were totally successful in defending South Vietnam and eradicating the Vietcong... it is available to us for communication to Hanoi." His criticism of McNamara’s plan was primarily based on the fact that it didn’t provide enough answers to vital questions, not that American engagement was necessarily flawed. 26 Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson’s War*, 98. During his decision-making on the sending of troops to Vietnam, Johnson considered the possibility of sending U.S. forces to Thailand, worried about the “ripple effect” communist subversion in Southeast Asia might have. See Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 247-248.

Thailand could find itself in a very delicate position. An American defeat, withdrawal, or even a neutralist settlement would likely result in an eventual victory for the communists. In the Thai view, such an outcome would inevitably result in the fall of Laos and Cambodia to communism, and perhaps Burma as well, leaving Thailand totally isolated.28

Alignment with the U.S. in Vietnam therefore appeared to be an "all-or-nothing" proposition, and that is essentially how Bangkok approached the situation. Thanom decided to commit the Thais in exchange for even more aid, hoping to build up Thailand militarily and economically against the threat of communism both internally and externally. He realised that the U.S. needed Thai support, not just in terms of air bases and staging grounds, but also with respect to political credibility and world opinion. It was certainly in Thailand's interests to support the U.S., as the Thais were as anxious as anyone to fight off communist encroachment. In addition, the conflict in Vietnam also gave the Thais considerable leverage in exacting more assistance from Washington. In this, Thailand shrewdly won a good price for its services.

Although flush with American military hardware, advisers, and huge air bases, the Thais denied any complicity in the Vietnam war, fearful of the repercussions their role would have, especially if and when the Americans went home. Being left alone surrounded by aggravated communist neighbours was a fate Thailand desperately wanted to avoid. Leaders in Bangkok were also concerned about domestic security and their hold on power, and did not want to be portrayed by Thai communist insurgents as American lackeys. But Thanom and his inner circle were concerned more with immediate matters, and in 1965 it seemed like the wind was in full force behind the Americans' back. The bamboo bent, and Thailand began its own Vietnam experience.

In early February Thanom extended Washington the offer to use Thai air bases for bombing sorties in Vietnam and Laos, without prior consent from Bangkok. Thanat Khoman followed that

---
up with notice that the Thai Government would not restrict that usage to reprisals for attacks on U.S. positions in South Vietnam. Any reason was acceptable to the Thais, and in fact Thanat encouraged Washington to escalate military efforts even more. He assured Graham Martin that neither Moscow or Beijing would likely respond in any significant fashion, and that short of an American invasion of the North, U.S. operations would not provoke a wider war in the region.\(^{29}\)

Nonetheless, the Thais insisted that U.S. military operations in their country remain officially secret, so that Bangkok could maintain its policy of "plausible denial." Martin agreed. He gave strict orders to Embassy staff that in the event of reports on any incident in either Vietnam or Laos involving aircraft flown from Thailand, no one was to comment at all.\(^{30}\)

U.S. aircraft based in Thailand were crucial to both Flaming Dart and Rolling Thunder. Although both the Johnson administration and the Thai Government vehemently denied the fact, many bombing runs against North Vietnam were orchestrated in and launched from Thailand from the start of the bombing campaign. Over half of all such missions during 1965 originated in Thailand.\(^{31}\) Following the specifications of MACV’s plan OP-01, U.S. aircraft out of Ubon were given the responsibility of striking the so-called "choke points" between Laos and Vietnam at the Nape and Mu Guia passes.\(^{32}\) F-4 tactical fighter squadrons based at Nakhon Phanom were urgently ordered to accompany bombers on Rolling Thunder missions because Chinese MIGS from Hainan Island and the Kuantung peninsula scrambled in response to the attacks.\(^{33}\)

\(^{29}\) Cable, Bangkok 1246 to State, February 17 1965, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #89, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.


\(^{31}\) Cable, Bangkok 1409 to State, December 23 1965, file Thailand Volume III 4/65 to 12/65, folder 1, #43, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.

\(^{32}\) Cable, Bangkok 1290 to COMUSACV, March 8 1965, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #100, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL. This also included strikes against positions suspected to be part of the Ho Chi Minh trail into South Vietnam. See also Randolph, The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics 1950-1985, 54-55.

\(^{33}\) Cable, State 1580 to Bangkok, March 27 1965, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #109, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.
The escalation in Vietnam also intensified covert operations run out of Thailand. Under the guideline of Project 22, the plan for joint U.S.-Thai covert operations in the *Plaines des jarres* initiated in November 1964, Thai units continued to engage the *Pathet Lao* near Muong Soni, Laos, in what the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok referred to as "covert harassment." Along with American Special Forces based in Thailand, elite Thai troops took "parallel or complimentary" action in support of Operation Shining Brass, aimed at communist positions along the eastern Laotian panhandle. At Washington’s request, the Thais even hosted a top secret mission sent by the Indonesian military to discuss aid and operations against the *Partai Kommunis Indonesia* (PKI) and its supporters.

But while Thanom not only allowed but welcomed the use of Thai territory by the U.S. for the "secret war" in Laos and the escalating conflict in Vietnam, he did have his concerns. Thailand needed to appear uninvolved in both conflicts, and that meant keeping the American presence in the country at a reasonable level, and as inconspicuous as possible. As a result, both he and Dawee wanted the U.S. to concentrate its air operations at Udon Thani, near Vientiane and the center of the Thai military's stronghold in the Northeast. The JCS, however, preferred to disperse the USAF throughout the country, primarily for better security. This required the retention and expansion of air operations out of Takhli, Korat, and Ubon, as well as Udon Thani. Martin worried that the JCS position would aggravate Thai concerns about the American presence. The Thais, he warned Washington, resented the fact that the USAF in Thailand did not have an independent command structure, and that it was simply an extension of operations in Vietnam. Other than Martin, the Thais were not certain about with whom they should deal in matters concerning the air force or any other U.S. military service in Thailand. Martin told Washington, "[W]hat is missing in this process is

---

34 Cable, Bangkok 2041 to State, June 15 1965, file Thailand Volume III 4/65 to 12/65, folder 2, #87, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
35 Cable, Bangkok 149 to State, July 24 1965, file Thailand Volume III 4/65 to 12/65, folder 2, #105, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
36 Cable, Bangkok 920 to State, November 5 1965, file Thailand 4/65 to 12/65, folder 2, #135, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
a definitive request from [a] competent authority to clear with the RTG as a program... to indicate to the Thai in general terms the magnitude of the deployments we may be seeking."

MACTHAI was still in existence in 1965, but it was inactive. It had been created in 1962 to oversee operations at the height of the Laotian crisis, but once that dissipated, MACTHAI was largely superseded by MAAG Thailand. As an advisory group, MAAG Thailand dealt with all kinds of issues connected with the U.S. military there, including mundane, day-to-day affairs. As a result, it tended to be more like a bureaucracy than a command centre. The Thais preferred MACTHAI, and wanted it to have its own, separate authority under CINCPAC, rather than being subordinate to the U.S. military command in Vietnam, MACV. However, in the summer of 1964, the Joint Chiefs of Staff placed MACTHAI under the control of COMUSSEA (Command, U.S. Forces in East Asia), which was dominated by MACV interests.

The Defense Department rejected ideas about creating a separate authority for the USAF, or any other American military service in Thailand. It worried that doing so would fragment "the current doctrine in the use of U.S. air power." MACV chief General William Westmoreland wanted command of operations in Thailand to remain under his umbrella, arguing that a fully independent structure would be disruptive. Martin countered that maintaining the connection between MACV and operations in Thailand put Bangkok in a difficult spot, giving it the appearance of an American puppet. While the Thais respected Westmoreland, and had no objection to assisting in the American air war, they were not anxious to appear openly belligerent towards Hanoi. Martin warned the State Department that treating Thailand as an appendage of Vietnam would mean

---

37 Cable, Bangkok 1439 to State, March 28 1965, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #110, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.
38 Stanton, Green Berets At War, 274-276.
39 Cable, State 502 to Bangkok, October 8 1964, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #44, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.
40 Top Secret Message P301040Z, General William Westmoreland (COMUSACV) to Admiral Sharp (CINCPAC), March 31 1965, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #114, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.
"permanently alienating a presently friendly populace, thereby increasing our extent of the ocean in which Mao's guerrillas are now swimming so well."  

Another dispute relating to the military command structure in Thailand involved in-country diplomatic authority over MACTHAI. Martin insisted that MACTHAI report to him, as the President's representative in Thailand. CINCPAC maintained that it was in control of all military commands in Southeast Asia, and vehemently opposed the ambassador's interference. When Army General Richard Stilwell succeeded Air Force General Ernest Easterbrook as MACTHAI chief in August, the tension increased. Stilwell and Martin personally disliked each other, and almost immediately Martin made overtures to Washington to get the terms of MACTHAI's command clarified. He wanted an emphatic declaration pursuant to the 1950 MAAG agreement that MACTHAI ultimately fell under the ambassador's jurisdiction. He also wanted Stilwell replaced.  

MACTHAI's organisational structure added to the confusion. While CINCPAC was run by the U.S. Navy, MACTHAI was chaired by the USAF and largely staffed by the U.S. Army. Inter-service rivalry was therefore a very real problem in the chain of command, undermining MACTHAI's effectiveness. Most of all, MACTHAI was its own worst enemy. Its officers resented having to consult with the Thais on some in-country operations, and thus frequently conflicted with Bangkok. MACTHAI also resisted sharing responsibility with the both the Thais and the U.S. Embassy for counter-insurgency and special operations. When Martin managed to secure his own Special Assistant for Counter-Insurgency in early 1966, MACTHAI proved difficult. The ambassador's "Tuesday Group" was designed to coordinate all in-country agencies and their operations, but

---

41 Cable, Bangkok 1456 to State, March 31, 1965, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #115, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL.  
MACTHAI quite often opposed the dissemination of information to the group, jealously trying to maintain its control of its operations.\textsuperscript{44}

The difficulty the U.S. had in coordinating its efforts in Thailand was compounded by frequently contradictory positions by the Bangkok government. One the one hand, top officials advocated the expansion of American military efforts in Vietnam. On the other, they feared linking Thailand too openly or closely to such an expansion. Despite this fear, after the first American ground troops went into South Vietnam in March, Thanom made it clear that Thailand would be willing to send its own contingent. While the Prime Minister stressed that he would prefer that Thai forces were used to occupy the Mekong Valley in Laos rather than being deployed in South Vietnam itself, he did not insist on it. All he asked for was American help in covering deployment costs, and a favourable consideration when it came to MAP funding for 1966.\textsuperscript{45}

Dean Rusk telexed Martin that Lyndon Johnson was excited about the possibility of Thai troops being sent to Vietnam, and encouraged the ambassador to pursue the matter. The President wanted tangible support for the U.S. war effort from Asian allies, a notion that later developed into the "many flags" plan in 1967.\textsuperscript{46} Martin, however, was less than thrilled by Thanom's suggestion, and he cautioned Washington that the Prime Minister would risk the stability of his own government if he followed through on the idea. Not everyone in the Thai military command favoured such close cooperation with the U.S., and this could be enough to spark a coup attempt from lower echelons of the officers' corps.\textsuperscript{47} There was clearly a linkage between Thanom's offer of Thai troops for

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. 132-133.

\textsuperscript{45} Cable, State 168 to Bangkok, July 29 1965, file Thailand Volume III 4/65 to 12/65 folder 1, #21, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL. MAP funding for FY 1965 was $US 38.3 million, which the Thais were anxious to expand given their vigorous support of American operations. The State Department noted that the U.S. could offer the Thais more for 1966, primarily because Thanom "does not know regular program or what would be add-ons."

\textsuperscript{46} See Chapter 8.

\textsuperscript{47} Cable, Bangkok 102 to State, July 21 1965, file Thailand Volume III 4/65 to 12/65, #27, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
Vietnam and MAP funding. Although worried about being associated with the conflict in Vietnam too closely, Thanom was apparently willing to risk it all for more American aid.

Why Thanom made the unexpected offer of Thai troops to the war in Vietnam was not entirely clear at the time. Washington had not prompted the offer itself, and no additional MAP funding was forthcoming for Thanom from the U.S. More information on Thanom’s motives surfaced at Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearings on assistance to Thailand in 1969, when it was disclosed that, unbeknownst to the American Embassy, General Stilwell had drafted a secret "military contingency plan" for discussion with the Thais in the spring of 1963. Although details of that plan were not disclosed (and remain sealed today), it was almost certainly a quid pro quo for the deployment of Thai troops as well.48

Graham Martin saw the Thai’s bottom line, and had little problem coming to terms with what some historians see as a kind of extortion, or even prostitution.49 Martin argued that the Thai contribution to American military and covert operations in Indochina was invaluable. Thai air bases were the "pivotal factor" in the initial success of bombing missions under Rolling Thunder and subsequently Barrel Roll. But the Thais also contributed heavily to "hard-nose" operations in Laos, giving logistical support and even men to "a long list of extraordinary, sensitive activities."50 Thus they deserved favourable treatment, and that meant more money. Martin told AID Director David

---


49 For example see, Sulak Sivaraksa, Siam In Crisis (Revised Edition) (Bangkok: Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute and Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development (TICD), 1990), 115-122. See also, Blackburn, Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson’s 'More Flaps', passim.

50 Ibid.
Bell that "Thailand is, in effect, presently at war as an ally of the United States and that as the pace of that war increases, the risks to Thailand become greater."51

As Martin knew, 1966 MAP funding for Thailand was to be scaled back, primarily because the budget for operations in South Vietnam required significant and rapid expansion. The Defense Department forecast mandated that Thailand increase its own domestic military budget by 7.5 percent. Martin derided the idea, saying such an increase represented not only millions of dollars the Thais did not have, and certainly could not come up with virtually overnight. He warned Washington not to forget the Thais in its preparation for Vietnam. Without their help, "U.S. military posture in Southeast Asia would be so seriously degraded that the U.S. position would become untenable." He also pointed out that "since we have given up the illusion that ordinary MAP appropriations are capable of financing U.S. support of SVN, honesty and common sense should dictate that such costs in Thailand should be similarly funded from extraordinary sources."52

Despite his frequently luke-warm personal attitude towards the Thais, Martin was definitely their champion when it came to MAP funding. Unquestionably, part of the reason for this was that an increase in funding would enhance his own personal prestige and influence in Thailand. In a strong appeal to Washington in June Martin pointed out that Thailand, not South Vietnam or any other Southeast Asian country, had been the most cooperative and valuable to the U.S. He attacked the notion held by William Bundy and others in Washington that Thailand was only a "fair-weather" friend, and was likely to seek an accommodation with Hanoi and Beijing if that was expedient.53

51 Cable, Bangkok 1636 to State (for AID), April 26 1965, file Thailand Volume III 4/65 to 12/65, folder 1, #68, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
52 Cable, Bangkok 269 to State, August 12 1965, folder: Def 19 U.S.-Thai 1/1/66, CFP Files 1964-66 (Political and Defense), Thailand, Box 1746, RG 59, USNA.
53 Memo, William Bundy to LBJ, "Holding On in South Vietnam", June 30 1965, as quoted in Gravel, ed., The Pentagon Papers (Volume 3), 614 Bundy did not view the Thais with much esteem. He told the President that the Thais simply did not understand the difficulties Washington faced in Vietnam, and that they were "extraordinarily ignorant of the basic military and political problems we have faced there." Bundy said the Thais believed American power could do anything, and that, if it wanted to, Washington could end the war there quickly. The dilemma for the U.S. was that once Thailand realised this was not the case, it would seek accommodation with Hanoi and Beijing, as was its "long tradition."
Martin believed the Thais were "practical and proud", and that while they were not "in our pocket", they were committed in their anti-communism. In his opinion, the Thais were more ideological than usually presumed, and not likely to be "indulging in soul-searching about moral justification" when it came to fighting for what they believed.\textsuperscript{54} Martin carried his appeal for additional funding directly to the President, blaming MAP cutbacks for Thailand on "inter-agency squabbles" and warning that the issue in Southeast Asia was "not primarily a military affair but a vastly complex political and psychological battle", in which Thailand was absolutely indispensable.\textsuperscript{55}

The Defense Department's Intelligence Agency (DIA) underscored the need to add muscle to Thailand's military forces, but, unlike Martin, maintained that Bangkok should foot the bill. In a top secret report on Thailand, prepared in June, the DIA noted that "in the context of the rising scale of hostilities in Vietnam," the prospect of more Thai military involvement in Indochina was real. Without external assistance, Thailand was considered "hard pressed" to stand up against a threat from North Vietnam or China. In fact, according to the DIA, the Thais were not even capable of warding off a concerted insurgency from within. The Royal Thai Navy was "very vulnerable", while the Air Force remained "totally dependent" on the U.S., lacking its own strategic air capability.

While BPP and PARU units were given a generally good rating by the DIA, it was acknowledged that decreases in MAP funding would almost certainly undermine them too. But in the DIA's view, corruption, mismanagement and poor prioritization were the Thais main problems, not a lack of aid. After all, since the late 1950's Thailand had enjoyed economic growth "substantial and impressive by any measure." Bangkok's unwillingness to increase the domestic military budget was at the heart of the matter, prompting the DIA to report that "[I]f the Thais expect to remain a

\textsuperscript{54} Cable, Bangkok 2004 to State, June 10 1965, file Thailand Volume III 3/65 to 12/65 folder 2, #86, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
\textsuperscript{55} Letter, Martin to LBJ, February 9 1965, file CO 291 T 11/23/63 to 11/22/66, WHCF, Country File, Box 291, LBJL.
dignified, independent and sovereign ally of the United States, they must accept their share of
sacrifice and stringency in the present uncertain situation, and bear their fair share of the burden."56

Martin shrewdly played another card in arguing for more MAP money. In early July he reported
that dissatisfaction among the Thai military elite was reaching dangerous levels. The Army Chief of
Supreme Command Headquarters, Lt. General Lek Naemmalee, told his staff to "[G]ive no hope to
U.S. military aid from now on." Army General Saiyood Kerdpol attacked Washington for treating
Thailand as a beggar, not a friend, adding that the Thais were not "babies needing candy", but
rather needed real help. Army Deputy Chief of Staff Surakij Mayalorp was even more scornful,
telling reporters "[I]t looks like the U.S. wants to see Thailand commit suicide or be murdered by
the communists."57 Martin relayed the comments with little comment, save to warn the State
Department that such rumblings, especially in the Royal Thai Army, were usually indication of a
coming coup.

Partially to lobby for increased MAP funding, Thanat Khoman paid a visit to Washington in May.
In an unguarded moment upon his return to Thailand, Thanat told the press he favoured the
bombing of Hanoi, and had so informed the Americans. This comment prompted a flurry of media
attention to rumours of Thai involvement with U.S. military missions. Even American journalists in
Thailand reported the rumours, despite admonitions from the Embassy not to.58 Ever wary about
reaction from Hanoi and Beijing, Thanat and other senior officials did their best to deny the

Reappraisal, Defense Department, NSF Agency File, Box 20, LBIL. For this report, the DIA utilised the services of the
RAND Corporation, whose September 1964 study of Thailand was the analytical base. The DIA report noted that as a
proportion of Thailand's gross national product, the military actually received a declining share of domestic revenue,
down in 1965 from the 1958-62 average of 6.8%. Overall MAP funding had been cut from a high of $US 81 million in
1962 to $US 42.8 million in 1964. The forecast for 1966 was $US 27 million.
57 Cable, Bangkok 2041 to State, July 2 1965, file Thailand Volume III 3/65 to 12/65 folder 2, #91, NSF Country File
Thailand, Box 283, LBIL.
58 Cables, Bangkok 1917 to State, June 1 1965 and Bangkok 1940 to State, June 2 1965, file Thailand Volume III 4/65
to 12/65 folder 2, #83 and #84, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBIL. Associated Press reporter Robert Williams
was chief among those trying to expose the use of Thai air bases by the U.S. air force. His investigations annoyed
MACHAI staff so much that they officially "encouraged" Williams to leave the country. Bangkok took it one step
rumours once again, but the Thai media would not let the issue die. Most major papers raised questions about the extent of Thailand's military role with the U.S., and what policy Bangkok would adopt in the event of a wider war. Phim Thai warned that if the U.S. did bomb Hanoi, the conflict in Vietnam would "explode in a major war." The Bangkok Post pointed out that recent crackdowns on suspected dissidents in the Northeast met with Prapas's approval, and were indication that Thailand was preparing for an expanded conflict with communists.59 In October Thanat Khoman was again in the United States. At the annual dinner of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City, Thanat gave an interesting interview to Robert Eastabrook, chief foreign correspondent of the Washington Post. Although he was critical of SEATO, Thanat acknowledged that the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam represented a strong commitment to the defense of Southeast Asia. In comments obviously made with Laos and Cambodia in mind, he attacked those who advocated a policy of neutrality, suggesting it was essentially a concession to communists. But most of all, surprisingly Thanat conceded that Thailand did not need 11,000 foot runways in the Northeast just for its own air force, effectively admitting to Thai involvement with American air operations in Vietnam.60 It was a very Thai way of announcing Bangkok's commitment to Washington, and given the emphasis placed in plausible denial, it was clearly designed to elicit more support from the U.S.

Throughout 1965 the insurgency in the Northeast drew more and more attention in Bangkok and Washington. In January, Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi told the French Ambassador in Beijing that communists in South Vietnam sensed victory, even if the arrival of U.S. troops delayed it. He then announced confidently that "within a year, we will have a war going in Thailand." The Chinese

---

59 Cable, Bangkok 1787 to State, May 14 1965, file Thailand Volume III 3/65 to 12/65 folder 2, #14, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
60 Memorandum of conversation, Thanat Khoman with Robert Eastabrook, October 11 1965, RH Eastabrook Papers, Box 1, JFKL.
plan was to emphasize "outward manifestations of insurgency" throughout Indochina while combating the Americans. Such plans included Northeastern Thailand, in order to "shake U.S. faith in the Thai stability." In Bangkok the reaction was muted, but clearly there was concern. In conjunction with scheduled MAP cutbacks, senior Thai military officials doubted they had the capabilities to deal with a vigorous communist insurgency. There was also considerable anger. Thanat fumed that Chen Yi's statement amounted to a declaration of war.

The communist movement in Thailand had never enjoyed much more than a marginal following, but the possibility of Beijing's sponsorship made it considerably more of a threat to Bangkok. The movement traced its origins back to 1929, when the Chinese Communist Party of Thailand was formed. This organisation was succeeded in 1935 by the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), which was banned by the government. The party's following was never accurately gauged, primarily because of its clandestine nature, but its membership before the 1960's is thought to have been no more than a few hundred. The return of Phibun to power in 1947 and a new even harsher anti-communist law in 1952 certainly helped to keep the numbers down, as did periodic sweeps of the Northeast aimed at rounding up dissidents. But not even Sarit and his usually vigorous American-assisted counter-insurgency campaign could eradicate communism in Thailand.

Encouraged by developments in Indochina, the CPT in 1961 felt confident enough to formally proclaim its intent to pursue an armed struggle. The following year it established four regional branches for this purpose. In March 1962, within days after the announcement of the Rusk-Thanat agreement, the Voice of the People of Thailand (VOPT) radio broadcasts commenced from a secret location in the jungles of Laos, strengthening Bangkok's conviction that the insurgent threat was growing.

---

61 Report, John Sylvester at BFEA to Peter Swiers (Secretary for Averell Harriman), "The Insurgency Situation in the Northeast of Thailand", May 23 1967, file Thailand, W. Averell Harriman Papers, Box 514, LOC.
was external rather than indigenous in origin. Following the successful conclusion of the 1962 conference on Laos, the CPT was essentially dormant, except for an infrequent ideological diatribe.

The revival of the insurgency coincided with heightened support from the PRC. On July 31, 1964, the *People's Daily* in Beijing published an article by two Thai dissidents. Then, in October 1964, CPT representatives addressed the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on the occasion of China's National Day. In December another clandestine radio transmitter, this time in Northeastern Thailand, resumed the broadcasts of the VOPT. It proclaimed the "Thailand Independence Movement" (TIM), whose manifesto was published five days later by the New China News Agency. On January 23, 1965, the "Patriotic Front of Thailand" (PFT) was proclaimed by the revived VOPT. Although the relationship between the TIM and PFT was not fully known, the presumption in Bangkok was that they represented a two-pronged attack by the CPT. These twin announcements caught Bangkok offguard, since they had grown somewhat complacent with their counter-insurgency efforts in the Northeast. The few communist attacks that had occurred in recent years were usually attributed to guerrillas from Laos, and few officials in Bangkok imagined that the CPT had anywhere near the organisational capabilities to warrant Beijing's direct attention. Even more disturbing was the fact that the radio transmissions coincided with a rash of assassinations in remote areas of Nakhon Phanom province in the Northeast. This alarmed local officials greatly and embarrassed the BPP and other counter-insurgency groups. But more than

---

64 *Ibid.*
66 The manifesto attacked "U.S. imperialists who deceptively force Thai soldiers to fight and die on their behalf in Laos and South Vietnam." It also accused the Americans in Thailand of torture, rape, and undermining Thai culture and tradition. See Donald Weatherbee, *The United Front in Thailand: A Documentary Analysis* (Columbia, S.C: Institute of International Studies, University of South Carolina, 1970), 38.
67 Arthur Dommen, "How Secure is Thailand?" *The New Republic*, May 1 1965, 8, in file Thailand General A-Z, Bernard Fall Papers, Box 18, JFKL.
anything, what troubled Bangkok was the PRC's backing for the insurgency. Late in 1965, Pridi Phanomyong re-emerged in Beijing at a well-publicized meeting with Mao Zedong, worrying Bangkok greatly. Thai leaders feared that Pridi was still popular in Thailand, and that the Chinese would use him to lead the insurgency. Other high Chinese officials such as Chen Yi and Liao Cheng-chih, Chairman of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission, added to Bangkok's anxiety by voicing support for the insurgency. Liao, a key person in directing communist activities abroad, proclaimed that Beijing had an "unshirkable obligation" to support "the struggles of the people" of Thailand. The news that the PRC was bank-rolling large purchases of Thai currency in Hong Kong made many in Thailand fear the worst.

It is clear that the upswing in insurgent activity was primarily a response to the growing influence of the United States in Thailand and its increased efforts in Vietnam, rather than a reflection of widespread domestic dissatisfaction in Thailand itself. Economic growth, although uneven, continued virtually unabated. Like Sarit, Thanom continued to successfully portray the military government as the defender of the Thai monarchy and Buddhism. Reverence for the monarchy and Buddhism remained a profoundly important aspect of Thai society, reinforcing a basic conservatism throughout most of the country that contributed in no small way to the stability of the government.

The Northeast was an exception to this pattern. The hill tribes there had little ethnic or cultural relation to the Thais, and they were increasingly susceptible to communist influence. Economic programs and road construction implemented since the mid 1950's alleviated some of their isolation, but suspicion and resentment towards Bangkok remained endemic in the region.

Moreover, the high concentration of ethnic Lao and Vietnamese in the Northeast represented a potential problem of major proportions.70

The perception by 1965 in both Bangkok and Washington was that a new insurgency was underway, and that it had direction and support from Beijing. A CIA report in September 1965 pointed out that the Chinese were actively infiltrating hill tribes in Laos and Thailand, as well as sponsoring the CPT. There was even a suspected Chinese connection to the Muslim insurgency in Southern Thailand and Malaysia.71 The CIA concluded that the communists in Thailand posed a real, immediate and growing threat, despite their relatively low numbers.72 Not surprisingly, the Thai government adopted severe domestic measures to curb dissent. By the end of the year, Bangkok and Washington also placed a renewed emphasis on counter-insurgency. In December 1965, the Thai government, with U.S. assistance, created the "Communist Suppression Operations Command" (CSOC), which was designed to oversee the frequently unconnected activities of the BPP, Thai National Police and PARU. CSOC immediately requested training and technical support from the U.S. Special Forces, and in order to provide this the Joint Chiefs of Staff implemented a separate program for Thailand given constraints on operations in Vietnam and the heavily taxed unit based at Okinawa.73

By 1965 the PRC had emerged as America's number one enemy in Southeast Asia. The Johnson administration saw the dark shadow of Chinese communism looming behind the insurgencies in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, and Laos, not to mention Hanoi's aggression against South Vietnam.74 Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had alluded to the American fixation on China as

---

70 Peter A. Poole, "Thailand's Vietnamese Minority," Asian Survey 7/12, December 1967.
72 Tanham, Trial In Thailand, 36.
74 Herring, America's Longest War, 114.
early as the spring of 1963 when, after three hours of inconclusive discussion on Laos and Vietnam with Averell Harriman, he threw up his hands and said "... you and the Chinese can fight over it. I give up. We give up. We don't want any of it!" Johnson himself pointed out that Beijing was the real enemy in Vietnam, telling reporters in May 1965 that "Communist China apparently desires the war to continue whatever the cost to their allies. Their target is not merely South Viet-Nam; it is Asia, their objective is not the fulfilment of Vietnamese nationalism; it is to erode and to discredit America's ability to help prevent Chinese domination over all Asia."

For their part, by 1965 the Chinese were very worried about the increasing American military presence so close to their borders. In April, Zhou En Lai relayed a stern message to Washington through Pakistani President Ayub Khan. China would support any resistance to "aggression by the imperialists", and it was ready to risk a direct conflict with the U.S., even if it was nuclear. Washington did not take this warning lightly. Johnson had little intention of repeating the mistake the Truman administration made when U.S. forces crossed the 38th parallel in Korea, ignoring Chinese warnings. U.S. pilots on missions against North Vietnam took extreme care to avoid bombing too near the Sino-Vietnamese border. As is well known by scholars, Johnson's approach to fighting the war in Vietnam was conditioned by vivid memories of China's intervention in the Korean conflict. He was anxious to keep military activities in Vietnam below the threshold that could provoke direct involvement by Beijing.

---

78 Qiang Zhai, "Beijing and the Vietnam Conflict, 1964-1965: New Chinese Evidence", 236-237. Although the dynamics were not fully evident, China's split with Moscow and eventually Hanoi was of paramount importance to Thailand. In 1969 Norodom Sihanouk recalled a meeting he had with Mao in Beijing some years before, during which he received a stern warning about how to handle the Thais. Mao allegedly told him to "ask us for whatever you like in order to crush Diem and the other American puppets in Saigon, but spare the Thai; do not ask us for anything against them." The reason, Sihanouk explained, was that the Chinese knew very well the alignment of Bangkok on the American side was temporary, and that it could reverse itself quickly. (Likhit, Thai Politics: Selected Aspects of
In 1965 the perception in both Bangkok and Washington was that the Chinese were firmly behind Hanoi's bid for dominance in Vietnam. This belief prevailed in the Johnson administration, greatly affecting American policy in all Southeast Asia. Some officials conceded that eventually China could be expected to exercise a considerable degree of influence in the region by virtue of its size and force, but that the U.S. could delay that inevitability and, in the interim, strengthen political and economic situations in neighbouring countries so that they were more resistant to communist control. As Michael Forrestal put it, Washington could "delay China's swallowing up Southeast Asia until a) she develops better table manners and b) the food is somewhat more indigestible." 79

In the course of 1965 the Johnson administration came to view Thailand more and more in the context of the war in Vietnam and the struggle against communist China in Asia. Instead of pursuing a solid relationship with Bangkok because of Thailand's intrinsic importance, Washington was increasingly inclined to view the country as a kind of mercenary, whose services in Indochina required occasional attention and frequent payment. By the end of 1965, the CIA joined Graham Martin in criticizing such an approach, arguing that military and counter-insurgency operations in Vietnam were simply not effective, and that the best strategy was to focus on Thailand, which stood a much better chance of fending off communist encroachments. Thailand, not Vietnam, was the

79 Memo, Mike Forrestal to William Bundy, November 4 1964, as quoted in Gravel, ed., The Pentagon Papers (volume 3), 592.
best place to make a stand. For Johnson and his principal advisors, however, Vietnam remained the first and last line of defense in Southeast Asia.

During 1965 Laos and Cambodia continued to play a significant role in U.S.-Thai relations. In February, the Thai Embassy in Vientiane was shelled during artillery exchanges between government troops and the Pathet Lao.\(^8^0\) Thai forces in Laos continued to take an active role in fighting there alongside Lao rightists, albeit covertly. U.S. and Thai Special Forces in Thailand trained Lao, as well as Meo and Hmong tribesmen, for service as guerrilla fighters with the so-called Armee Clandestine in Laos and Vietnam. Thai "trail watchers" reported on Pathet Lao movements to CIA stations in the Northeast from secret bases in Laos.\(^8^1\) And bombing missions against communist sanctuaries in the Laotian panhandle continued to run daily from bases in Thailand.

In March, Prince Sihanouk renewed an old proposal for a conference on Indochinese neutrality. The Thais opposed the idea, convinced that Sihanouk was acting at the behest of Beijing in the hopes of getting Washington to scale back its military action in Vietnam. Martin cautioned that the Thais would not only refuse to attend the conference, but also do all they could to undermine it. Thai obstruction would include increased support to the Khmer Seri, which Washington had worked long and hard to stop.\(^8^2\) But just as the Johnson administration was deciding on whether or not to endorse the Prince's proposal, strange events in Phnom Penh greatly worsened U.S.-Cambodian relations. In April, Sihanouk reversed his long-standing policy barring the admission of journalists working for Western organisations, and allowed Newsweek reporter Bernard Krisher to tour the capital. Why Sihanouk did this is still not fully known, and speculation about the decision has

---

\(^8^0\) "Current Notes", Foreign Affairs Bulletin, Volume IV, Number IV, February-March 1965, 1039.


\(^8^2\) Cable, Bangkok 1581 to State, April 19 1965, file Thailand Volume III 4/65 to 12/65, folder 2, #58, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBIL. In March 1965, Sihanouk did host the "Indochina People's Conference", but it was attended only by communists or communist supporters, who opposed calling for an end to the fighting in Vietnam.
become part of his capricious legacy. What is clear is that the article Krisher wrote upon his return to the U.S. infuriated the Prince and many Cambodians. It was a sensationalist account of the Cambodian royal family's private affairs, and although it contained many truths, Sihanouk apparently saw it as yet another example of corrupt American morals.\(^3\) No doubt encouraged by their government, thousands of Cambodians took to the streets of Phnom Penh in late April and early May, demonstrating against what they perceived to be a serious insult to their culture and nation. A few days later, on May 3, Sihanouk officially broke off diplomatic relations with the U.S. They would not be restored for four years.\(^4\)

The Krisher affair was likely not the main reason Sihanouk decided to break-off relations with the U.S. The timing was probably just coincidental, but it gave Sihanouk a dramatic excuse to take that final step on what had been a long, rocky road of relations with the Americans.\(^5\) Washington's delay endorsing his conference on Cambodian neutrality infuriated Sihanouk, and coupled with continuing U.S. support for Thailand and South Vietnam, reinforced his belief that the Americans could never be trusted. The decision to break off relations was also part of Sihanouk's programme for lessening Cambodian dependence on the West, and particularly the U.S. Since 1962 he had instituted various economic reforms aimed at reducing foreign aid and stimulating Cambodian-owned businesses in an effort to consolidate his own rule through a reinvigorated nationalism.\(^6\) However, the break in relations with Washington had grave consequences for both Sihanouk and

---

\(^3\) Osborne, *Sihanouk*, 164-165. It was rumoured at the time that Sihanouk allowed Krisher in only after a personal appeal from Indonesia's President Sukarno, for whom the reporter apparently once arranged a romantic liaison. As Osborne points out, this explanation is far from satisfactory, especially considering that by the spring of 1965, Sihanouk held quite a negative view of Sukarno. It is, however, clear that during his tour of Phnom Penh, Krisher met Sihanouk's English-language secretary, Donald Lancaster, who inadvertently let it slip that the Prince's mother, Queen Kossamak, owned most of the land on which the capital's brothels were built. Krisher used this as the centrepiece for a sensationalist article which described the Queen as "money mad", and portrayed Sihanouk as a womaniser. In an even more bizarre twist, years later Krisher helped collaborate with the Prince on a book, *Charisma and Leadership*.

\(^4\) Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, 146.


\(^6\) Osborne, *Sihanouk*, 165-169. Interestingly, Queen Kossamak opposed the decision to break relations with the U.S.
Cambodia. The reforms destabilised the country's export markets, and adversely affected much of the Cambodian elite upon which the Prince's rule really depended. Moreover, the U.S. provided nearly one-third of Cambodia's armed forces budget, so the break in relations with Washington came as a terrible shock to the military. Although France, the Soviet Union, and the PRC increased their military sales to Phnom Penh after the break, the Cambodian armed forces were devastated without continued American assistance. With disaffected elites, and an a disgruntled military, Sihanouk's hold on power was anything but sure.

Rumblings of discontent within the Cambodian military worsened during the rest of 1965. Many top army officials opposed the break with the U.S., the economic reforms, and Sihanouk's friendship with Beijing. The effective authority of Sihanouk's government also seemed questionable given reports that Vietcong and even North Vietnamese regular army units were using Cambodian territory to infiltrate into South Vietnam. Likely in response to that threat, towards the end of the year Sihanouk began to distance himself from communist support. In the fall Sihanouk took steps to improve his relationship with Washington and Bangkok. He toned down his familiar rhetoric and went to great lengths to appear more conciliatory to the Thais and Americans, even stating publicly that many in the Cambodian officer corps would welcome a rapprochement with both Thailand and the U.S.

Then, on November 30, Sihanouk did the previously unimaginable in making an unofficial visit to the Thai capital. There he met with Martin who assured him that the U.S. did not pose a threat in any way to Cambodia. While anxious to make amends with the Americans, Sihanouk made it clear he did not care about the fate of South Vietnam, but only wanted to protect Cambodian sovereignty. When Martin warned him about communist activity in the jungles of eastern

---

87 Ibid, 168.
88 Cable, Bangkok 1102 to State, December 1 1965, file Thailand Volume 3 4/65 to 12/65, folder 2, #142, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
Cambodia, Sihanouk, who was aware of top-secret U.S. operations aimed at destroying North Vietnamese sanctuaries along the border with South Vietnam, demanded that the U.S. stop bombing Cambodian territory. Sihanouk did not seem to know which way to turn. He was sandwiched between seeking an accord with the U.S., thus risking the wrath of Hanoi and ending much-needed Chinese aid, or continuing in a friendship with Beijing that alienated the Cambodian military and opened the country to domination by communists. Always volatile, Sihanouk continued to waver. Bangkok continued to oppose him. The U.S. tried to court him. And, consequently, Cambodia remained a major issue in U.S.-Thai relations.

By the end of 1965, Thailand was essentially at war alongside the U.S. in Vietnam. Although both Bangkok and Washington publicly denied this reality, the American effort in Vietnam was increasingly dependent on Thai help. Not only was Thailand instrumental in the prosecution of the war and covert operations throughout Indochina, but progressively it became more important to Washington politically and diplomatically. Having a staunch Asian ally lent credibility to the American policy in Vietnam. Moreover, Thailand was seen as the "model" for the region. Its stability and economic progress were held out as examples to follow in a region plagued by communist activity and political uncertainty. Unquestionably the Johnson administration hoped that the Thais could help thwart Indonesia's drift towards the left, as well as assist in Cambodia's rescue from disastrous confusion. Burma too remained a question mark, and nobody was better qualified or in a better position to affect that than the Thais, given Bangkok's unique relationship with the isolated regime in Rangoon. In short, despite the growing tendency to see all of Southeast Asia as an extension of Vietnam, Washington remained critically dependent on Thailand, just as the Thais needed the U.S. As the war in Vietnam worsened, their relationship deepened. At the same time,

---

99 Ibid.
90 Osborne, Sihanouk, 170-171.
however, differences in expectations, approaches, and demands began to take their toll, seriously testing the two countries’ friendship.
Part Three

The Crocodile’s Teeth, 1966-1969
*CHAPTER SEVEN*

"The Bigger War: U.S. - Thai Relations and Vietnam, 1966"

In the January 17, 1966 edition of *Newsweek*, renowned journalist Walter Lippmann warned that as 1966 began the Johnson administration faced a serious dilemma in Vietnam. The choice was between a "bigger war and an unattractive peace." There would simply be no quick solution. Although the United States clearly commanded a huge military advantage over Hanoi, it was becoming evident that American technology and strategy were not achieving the desired results. The insurgency in South Vietnam continued, and the quagmire for U.S. forces deepened. As it did, the relationship between the U.S. and Thailand came under more scrutiny from the press, the American Congress, and decision makers in both Washington and Bangkok. For the Johnson administration this was yet another headache. Thailand’s association with American military operations in Indochina was a tremendous asset without which the prosecution of the war in Vietnam would be much more difficult. But keeping the connection quiet was imperative given the Thai leadership’s concerns about communist insurgents in Thailand and their patrons in Beijing and Hanoi. So as the war in Vietnam expanded, and Bangkok’s role in it drew more attention, the U.S.-Thai relationship entered a new stage, with new, and difficult, challenges.

By 1966 the war in Vietnam was unquestionably the major foreign policy problem for Washington. Lyndon Johnson was convinced that the defense of South Vietnam was fundamental to American national security interests in Southeast Asia, and that if the communists won there, they would quickly sweep throughout the region. In this respect, Johnson did not differ from any of his predecessors, or from the prevailing view of most advisers at the time. Opposition to this view existed in Washington, although few individuals in the administration openly challenged the

---

1 As quoted in McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 228.
President, and the voice of dissent from other quarters, inside or outside the capitol, remained muted. Johnson was convinced that a moderate application of American military power was sufficient to crush the Vietcong, and he anticipated that the whole affair would be over soon after Washington's resolve was made apparent. The decision he made in July 1965 to deploy additional troops to the defense of South Vietnam was the most crucial in the history of American involvement in the region. By early 1966 it was clear that the President had made an open-ended commitment in Vietnam, and given his military commander, General William Westmoreland, a virtually free-hand. Johnson had shifted the burden of fighting against the communists from Saigon to Washington, and from South Vietnamese to American ground forces.

While he refused to adopt full-scale bombing of North Vietnam for fear of provoking the Chinese, through the July decision Johnson effectively brought the U.S. into a limited war. American policy with respect to Vietnam had irrevocably changed, though Johnson tried to conceal the import of his decision to escalate from the Congress and people. Johnson would simply not entertain plans to withdraw from the region, viewing retreat as a demonstration of impotence which he felt would "shatter my Presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy."

The deployment of American troops and military power, as Johnson saw it, was calculated to be the middle ground between defeat and total war. The escalation was, he believed, entirely manageable and consistent with his plans for domestic reform and the creation of a "Great Society" at home.

---

2 Hunt, Lyndon Johnson's War, 106-107. Hunt argues that opposition to Johnson's military escalation in Vietnam was fairly common in the administration and Congress, but not open. The President chose not to heed the warning of dissenters, instead accepting the assurances of hawkish advisers such as McNamara, Bundy, and Rostow that the war could be, and would be, won. Public support for the President's position was high, and even knowledgeable journalists such as Bernard Fall believed that American military might would eventually prevail. See also McNamara, In Retrospect, 208-209.


4 Herring, America's Longest War, 141.
The objective in Vietnam was to do enough to defend the South, but not so much that the conflict expanded into a broader war. The problem was that the administration could not definitively gauge how much would be enough, and few forecast the tenacity and fighting ability of the communists. More importantly, nobody anticipated the political and social trauma in America that the war in Vietnam would engender, or that the human and material costs of intervention would make this the longest and most divisive foreign conflict in American history.5

While Johnson and his civilian advisers sought to limit the application of American military power for political and strategic reasons, Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs of Staff struggled with strategy. Resenting the restrictions placed on it, the military establishment was careful not to openly challenge the President, but it did exert efforts to undermine the restrictions. At the same time, it neglected to devise a coherent plan of attack. The result was an often confused and ambiguous approach, costing more and more with little tangible success.6 For example, the reliance on air superiority was consistent with traditional military doctrine, but in a country with few crucial targets, heavy bombing accomplished very little. Undeniably the damage to North Vietnam's industrial and transportation systems was great, as was the suffering of the civilian population. But the Johnson administration's gradualist approach and periodic suspensions in the bombing allowed the North Vietnamese to reorganise, and thus encouraged them to resist further. Nonetheless, Washington pursued a massive air war against North Vietnam even after it was apparent that the gain was minimal. Bombing was simply cheaper in terms of American lives as a way of fighting the enemy, and was much more saleable to the public at home. Trained for a conventional war ill-suited to

\[5\] McNamara, *In Retrospect*, passim.

conditions in Vietnam, the U.S. Army found itself in a quagmire almost immediately, and again bombing seemed like an easy answer to a complex problem.\textsuperscript{7}

The American ground war in 1966 was based on a strategy of attrition, dominated by search and destroy operations designed to locate and destroy enemy positions. Westmoreland and the JCS were convinced that this "pacification", when combined with heavy bombing, would eventually eliminate North Vietnamese regular army units, which they felt constituted the backbone of the communist forces.\textsuperscript{8} The search and destroy strategy had serious drawbacks and was less successful than Westmoreland and the JCS anticipated.\textsuperscript{9} Moreover, the strategy adopted necessitated steadily increasing commitments of American troops. McNamara supported requests from Westmoreland and the JCS for ever larger numbers of troops in the hopes of drawing the communists into a more conventional war, and better utilizing the American firepower advantage. Johnson rather uncritically accepted the approach of his generals. In early January 1966 he endorsed Westmoreland's November 1965 request for an additional 200,000 men - more than twice the estimate given the past July.\textsuperscript{10}

Bombing and an expanded military effort on the ground were also thought by Washington to be effective bargaining tools, designed to force Hanoi into negotiations. With this in mind, the Johnson administration intermittently, and cautiously, pursued a political solution to the growing crisis. During the 1965 Christmas season, the President ordered a pause in the bombing as a conciliatory gesture to Hanoi as part of his "peace offensive." Ambassador-at-Large Averell Harriman and other officials were sent on trips around the world to convince U.S. allies that Washington was prepared to negotiate. The Johnson administration even drafted its own "Fourteen

\textsuperscript{7} Buzzanco, \textit{Masters of War}, 270-273.


\textsuperscript{10} Herring, \textit{LBJ and Vietnam}, 150. See also Berman, \textit{Planning a Tragedy}, 79-82.
Points" as a platform for discussion with the North Vietnamese. In January 1966, Johnson accepted an offer from Canada's newly appointed special representative to North and South Vietnam, Chester Ronning, to use his offices for negotiations with the communists. However, Ronning's meeting with North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong in March did not generate any negotiations. The communists refused to go to the conference table until the U.S. permanently stopped the bombing, something Washington was not prepared to do. By November 1966, another diplomatic operation (dubbed "Marigold") involving the Polish delegate to the International Control Commission (ICC), Janusz Lewandowski, had failed, largely because of Johnson's decision against another bombing halt as an inducement to the North Vietnamese.

The American "peace offensive" of 1966 was definitely lacking. Johnson's frustration over North Vietnam's unwillingness to negotiate mounted as the year wore on with no clear solution in sight. By the end of 1966 even Johnson had developed doubts about the course of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. In a particularly revealing episode in Manila during his late October tour of Asian countries (which will be discussed later), he sharply chided Averell Harriman for not having come up with more imaginative and productive ideas for a peaceful solution in Vietnam. When Harriman asked for direction on exactly what to do, the President replied angrily, "you know what I want -- peace -- and you can quote me in any way that you think would be useful. I will support anything you say. Has any President given you more sweeping authority than that?"

---


14 Memorandum of Conversation, Averell Harriman with LBJ, Manila, October 26 1966, file Trips and Missions: Manila Summit Conference Meetings, October 24-25 1966, The Papers of W. Averell Harriman, Box 551, LOC.
The failure of diplomatic initiatives in 1966 underscored the intransigence of both Washington and Hanoi. North Vietnam was simply not prepared to negotiate a solution to the crisis that would exclude the Vietcong, and communist leaders remained confident that the U.S. would soon lose its will to continue the fight. \textsuperscript{15} Lyndon Johnson simply could not accept the prospect of a unilateral withdrawal, and convinced of the invincibility of American power, he invariably swung back to military action when attempts to negotiate fell apart. Without a comprehensive and decisive military-political strategy and ill-prepared for growing domestic opposition, he took the U.S. further down the "slippery slope" in Vietnam.

Thailand's connection to the war in Vietnam hinged primarily on the American air campaign. At the beginning of 1966 there were over 200 American combat aircraft based on Thai soil, with a complement of over 9,000 USAF personnel. By the end of the year, there were over 400 planes and nearly 25,000 men. \textsuperscript{16} Despite vigorous denials by Ambassador Graham Martin and the Thai Government, it was common knowledge that the Americans were in Thailand in large numbers, and that U.S. planes based there were being used against North Vietnam. The Indonesian Herald referred to the attempt to keep the bases in Thailand secret as "one of the greatest follies of war in the 20th century." \textsuperscript{17} Martin characterised it as "a useful facade, but an absolutely necessary concession to Thai sovereignty." \textsuperscript{18} Even Thai newspapers, usually pressured to tow the government line, began to discuss Bangkok's role in the war more openly. \textsuperscript{19}

The Thanom regime fully supported a vigorous prosecution of the war in Vietnam. Taking a tough stand in Vietnam made sense from Bangkok' perspective. Not only did it convey the message that Washington was serious about containing communism in the region, but the fighting was

\textsuperscript{15} Young, \textit{The Vietnam Wars}, 89n.
\textsuperscript{16} Randolph, \textit{The United States and Thailand}, 58.
\textsuperscript{17} As quoted in Adulyak, "The Rise of United States-Thai Relations, 1945-1975", 163.
\textsuperscript{18} Randolph, \textit{The United States and Thailand}, 77.
taking place on someone else's soil, involving relatively little direct participation for Thais.

Simultaneously, the American presence in Vietnam meant that Thailand remained an integral part of Washington's security umbrella in Southeast Asia, with an essential part to play in its regional strategy.\footnote{Elliott Kulick and Dick Wilson, \textit{Thailand's Turn: Profile of a New Dragon} (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 153-154.}

Many in the upper echelons of the Bangkok government felt, however, that the American fixation on Thailand's connection to the struggle in Vietnam meant that U.S. officials lost sight of Thailand's intrinsic value. It seemed that Bangkok's requests for additional aid were entertained by Washington only if they were related to the war next door.\footnote{Cable, Bangkok 2682 to State, June 7 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 10/66, #11, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.} The Thai government's efforts to deny Thailand's role in U.S. military operations was motivated by traditional foreign policy concerns. By participating in the war Thailand was making a huge political commitment to Washington, for which there were few guarantees. Despite all the money and aid the U.S. could lavish on Thailand, the Americans might one day go home, leaving the Thais surrounded by potentially hostile neighbours.\footnote{Thanat Khoman, "Which Road For Southeast Asia?", \textit{Foreign Affairs} 42/4 (July 1964), 663.}

But the plausibility of denial became virtually impossible to maintain with such a rapid and obvious increase in American military activity. The capstone was the construction of the supposedly secret B-52 air base at Utapao, near Sattahip, south of Bangkok. Completed in the spring of 1966, it was the sixth base built by the U.S. military in Thailand since 1960, and it was easily the most important and expensive. The construction of the base cost nearly $US 40 million, and required the labour of 25,000 American servicemen and 2,000 Thais. Utapao boasted its own self-contained community, complete with nightclubs staffed by local Thais. A cluster of shanty towns sprouted up around the base as it was being built, its residents offering servicemen everything from souvenirs to

---

\footnote{Elliott Kulick and Dick Wilson, \textit{Thailand's Turn: Profile of a New Dragon} (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 153-154.}
Utapao represented a significant development in U.S.-Thai relations. The deployment of B-52s in Thailand meant a savings of $US 8,000 per round trip for each plane, as compared to costs for a round trip from Guam, nearly 2,000 miles away. Utapao quickly became the work-horse of U.S. air bases in Thailand, responsible for the majority of the 1,500 weekly bombing runs flown between December 1965 and November 1968. Considering that Thai-based U.S. aircraft were responsible for nearly 80 percent of all ordnance dropped on North Vietnam and Laos during this period, Utapao's military importance is very clear.

The lack of secrecy surrounding Utapao's construction marked a turning point for Thanom's government. Bangkok purposely did little to deny the existence of the base, effectively making Utapao an open symbol of Thailand's commitment. Thailand was now a self-acknowledged partner in the U.S. fight against North Vietnam, with all the risks inherent in such a stance. This was well-received by the Johnson administration. Johnson wanted as many foreign flags as possible to fly with the stars and stripes in Vietnam, particularly those of Asian allies, in order to avoid the perception that this was an exclusively American or "white man's" war. Making the conflict in Vietnam an international crusade against communist expansion was a major objective for Washington, and in this regard, Utapao was definitely helpful. While officials in the Johnson administration denied it, Bangkok's decision to make a more open commitment to the U.S. war effort was likely motivated by promises of more assistance. No treaties or official agreements were signed to this effect, but there is little question that the granting of bases and other rights led the Thais to certain expectations on a *quid pro quo* basis.

---

Utapao also heightened reservations some Thais had about such an expansive American presence, and in this respect the air base raised problems for U.S.-Thai relations. In June, Thanom was greatly disturbed by reports that American servicemen were fraternizing with Thai women in public. In response, he suggested that Bangkok consider a law limiting and regulating foreign troops in Thailand. But Praphas intervened, noting that "if people come here to help wash the dishes and drop and break a dish, it would not be proper to ask them to pay for it." Dissension in the Thai Cabinet was kept quiet and Thanom eventually backed down, but it was evident that the issue would not go away. Thais simply had no experience hosting foreign troops, and the inevitable clash of cultures proved a challenge to amicable bilateral relations. More and more the sanctity of "Thai morals" was perceived to be under siege from Western influence, prompting traditional Thais to lament the American connection.

Tension between Thai and American officials over military objectives and aid came to the surface at the same time Thanom voiced his concerns over the expanding number of U.S. military personnel. There were rumours that Bangkok would send Royal Thai Army units for service in Vietnam, and that the U.S. would deploy them in some of the worst combat areas in order for them to gain battlefield experience. Praphas disagreed. He believed that the Americans wanted Thai troops only for their political value, and wouldn’t risk them suffering heavy losses. Praphas also took a more pragmatic and accommodating view of the expanded U.S. presence in Thailand than did Thanom and Thanat. Praphas quickly became Washington's most important agent in Thailand. As Minister of the Interior, his power base was unquestionably strengthened by the myriad opportunities for profit presented by the large number of U.S. forces. American service men

28 Sulak Sivaraksa, Siam In Crisis, 116-118.
29 Cable, Bangkok 2682 to State, June 7 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 10/66, #11, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
spent an estimated $US 22 million a year on R&R in Thailand. Prapas' police often ignored and occasionally even ran prostitution and drug rings catering to American troops, while his Ministry in part controlled the distribution of construction and labour contracts for U.S. bases.30

Any reservations the Thai leadership might have had about the expanded U.S. presence were evidently overcome. In early January, Thanat Khoman made the first Thai government public statement on the bases in an interview with Newsweek magazine. While he acknowledged that "the whole thing [Thailand's role in assisting the U.S. military in Vietnam] has become more or less an open secret", Thanat maintained that the United States did not in fact have bases in Thailand. Rather, he insisted that Thailand was allowing the U.S. to "make use of certain military installations and facilities because we are partners in SEATO's collective defense." Thanat pointed out that the establishment of American bases in Thailand required a formal agreement, and that no such bilateral agreement existed.31

Revelations about Utapao and the expanded American military presence in Thailand drew attention in the U.S. The exact nature of the U.S.-Thai relationship came under congressional scrutiny in early 1966, and became a political volleyball in Washington in the debate over the larger issue of American policy in Vietnam. Opposition in Congress to the expansion of U.S. military operations in Southeast Asia was becoming a thorn in the side to the Johnson administration, and much of it came from within the Democratic Party. Some dissenting voices like those of Senator Wayne Morse (D-Oregon), and Senator George McGovern (D-South Dakota) were heard early and often. Morse cast one of the two votes against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964, and had been a vocal critic of Johnson's policy on Vietnam ever since. Others were more reserved, and refrained from publicly criticizing the President's policy, but by 1966 they were becoming

30 Randolph, The United States and Thailand, 59-63.
31 Interview, Thanat Khoman with Peter Karr McCabe, January 6 1966, "Current Notes", Foreign Affairs Bulletin, Volume 5, Number 3, December 1965-January 1966, 308-310. Given that Washington was well aware of Thanat's
increasingly disturbed.\footnote{Hunt, \textit{Lyndon Johnson's War}, 101-102. Among these were Senator Frank Church (D-Idaho), Senator William Fulbright (D-Arkansas), and Senator Mike Mansfield (D-Montana).} In particular, the October 1965 mission of Senators and Congressmen led by Mike Mansfield to Southeast Asia intensified concerns about the over-extension of American military and economic aid to the region, and brought into question the Johnson administration's program vis-à-vis Thailand. When top administration officials declined to respond to discreet congressional enquiries on the U.S.-Thai relationship, Mansfield engineered a more formal investigation through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee beginning in mid January 1966 to clarify the rationale of existing U.S. commitments in Southeast Asia, as well as the Johnson administration's plans for the future.

The hearings, which were held in executive session from January 18 through February 18, had as their stated purpose an examination of the Johnson administration's request for an additional $US 415 million in aid to Southeast Asian countries, particularly South Vietnam and Thailand.\footnote{Frank M. Robinson and Earl Kemp, eds., \textit{Report on the U.S. Senate Hearings, "The Truth About Vietnam"} (San Diego: Greenleaf Classics Inc., 1966) (US Senate Foreign Relations Committee), preamble.} The escalation of the war in Vietnam was the primary focus of the hearings, but the deepening involvement with Thailand was also a major issue. The proceedings of the secret hearings reached the public through leaks to the press. For the most part, the hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee throughout 1966 went unnoticed by the American people. However, the hearings demonstrated increasing concern among some legislators with U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia. Testimony by members of the Mansfield mission set the tone for the hearings, and revealed significant dissatisfaction with Washington's policy in Southeast Asia within Congress. Senator George Aiken (R-Vermont) told the Foreign Relations Committee that he was asked by MACTHAI officials to keep quiet about the U.S. air bases in Thailand for national security reasons, only to see the \textit{New York Times} run an article detailing the length of runways and the progress of

---

\textsuperscript{32} Hunt, \textit{Lyndon Johnson's War}, 101-102. Among these were Senator Frank Church (D-Idaho), Senator William Fulbright (D-Arkansas), and Senator Mike Mansfield (D-Montana).

construction. Reading about it in the paper, he said, "makes me completely disgusted with these pledges of secrecy which we are supposed to make." After a negative portrayal of the Thai government as authoritarian and undemocratic, Aitken offended the Thais even more by commending Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk as "the most able, hard-working, and effective non-communist leader" in the region, with legitimate grievances against both the Thais and Americans. Summing up his opinion of Thailand's efforts in supporting U.S. policy in Southeast Asia, Aitken said, "they are afraid we may leave them in the lurch, and they are afraid the war may not end before they are drawn fully into it." Senator Mansfield told the Committee that while he was in Thailand, insurgents launched an attack on the base at Thak Phanom in the Northeast, leaving him with the impression that the situation in the region was grim. He also talked about the air bases, openly discussing their use against North Vietnam.

George Ball and Dean Rusk were the first administration officials called before the committee hearings. Testifying in late January, both were asked to discuss the connection between insurgencies in Thailand and South Vietnam and Chinese expansionism. Senator Burke Hickenlooper (R-Iowa) asked Rusk about reports that the Cambodian military had shelled a Thai army camp, presumably in retaliation for supporting Khmer Serei attacks just inside Cambodia's border. Rusk assured him that the Johnson administration was doing all it could to get Bangkok to distance itself from the Khmer Serei, and to "keep Cambodia out of this all." Senator Stuart Symington (D-Missouri) then asked Rusk about the Gavin Report, a secret position paper put together by former U.S. Army Lt. General James M. Gavin which advocated a cessation of bombing in North Vietnam and a shift

34 Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (hereafter cited as SFRC), Historical Series, Volume XVIII, 89th Congress, 2nd Session, 1966, microfiche 19992, slide 1 of 11, Robarts Library, University of Toronto, 9.
36 Ibid, 23-34.
from offensive "search and destroy" operations in the South to a more defensive "enclave" strategy. Although critical of the administration's military strategy, the Gavin Report seemed to support U.S. objectives in Vietnam. It contended that a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam to Thailand would be disastrous given the latter's huge border with Laos and the lack of sea access. Rusk insisted that the Gavin Report agreed the administration was pursuing the right policy in Southeast Asia, and that the war in defence of South Vietnam was winnable.

When Lt. General Gavin was himself called before the hearings on February 8, he seemed to contradict his own report. He told the committee that Thailand was in fact a better place than Vietnam to make a stand against communist expansion in the region in the event of a massive military intervention by the Chinese or North Vietnamese. Gavin also said that the U.S. should "forget Vietnam", and that it was only valuable strategically in the event a war to defend Thailand was necessary. Ominously, Gavin predicted that the U.S. would have to prepare for a conflict in Thailand before too long. When asked for his opinion on what the United States should do in Vietnam, Gavin replied, "I recommend that we bring hostilities... to an end as quickly and reasonably as we can," adding that "we should devote those vast expenditures of our national resources to dealing with our domestic problems."

The differing interpretations of the Gavin Report and the future direction of American policy in Southeast Asia alarmed many members of the Senate committee. More hearings on U.S. commitments to the region, and particularly Vietnam, were ordered after the initial sessions, and in

---

38 Ibid. 155-173. Interestingly, Robert McNamara suggests that a strategic withdrawal to Thailand was in fact a real possibility as early as 1966. In April, President Johnson himself suggested it, at precisely the same time that McNamara says he began to have serious doubts about the war and American policy in Asia as a whole. See McNamara, In Retrospect, 261-262.


fact they went on intermittently for most of the year. Additional funding for Thailand and South Vietnam, and especially military aid, was of particular interest in the hearings. Before the committee on February 11th, AID Director David Bell warned that the insurgency in the Northeast was very serious, and very similar to the problems in Vietnam although not as yet developed. Dean Rusk reiterated Bell's comments during a speech at Boston University in March, arguing that "Thailand has already been designated by Peiping as the next target. And I would emphasize that Thailand is contributing much more than eloquent words to the security of Southeast Asia. Its military forces help guard the heart of the Southeast Asia peninsula - and the flank of Viet-Nam." However, Senator Morse was unmoved, claiming that "it is the United States that has spread the war to Thailand by stationing large numbers of troops and the construction of huge bases on its territory." It was, he said, ironic that the Johnson administration expected Americans to defend Thailand "without mentioning that the threat to her is one we created ourselves by making her into one vast military base."

In early March Vice-President Hubert Humphrey appeared at the hearings to answer questions about administration policy towards Thailand. He faced a tough interrogation from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Senator William J. Fulbright (D-Arkansas) on a supposed pledge the vice-president made to the Thais for increased military funding under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 during a February 1966 trip to Bangkok. Fulbright pointed out that the Foreign Assistance Act was similar to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, inferring that it presaged an even greater U.S. role in Thailand. Humphrey left the hearing in an angry mood, claiming that he had been "interrogated about negotiations which I don't conduct, national policies which I don't

---

41 Ibid., 174.  
make, and aid programs which I do not administer." On March 13 Humphrey appeared on NBC's Meet The Press, where he denounced the PRC as "the militant aggressive force" in Asia with North Vietnam as its agent. Regarding Thailand, Humphrey argued that U.S. policy was designed solely to contain communist expansion, and he claimed that evidence existed that North Vietnamese regular army units were operating in the Northeast.

In August, when the first American B-52 bombers arrived at Utapao, the committee once again turned its attention to Thailand. Although they earlier admitted the existence of the base, neither Washington or Bangkok would confirm that the planes at Utapao were B-52 bombers, or even that they were bombers at all. Security around the base was tightened, and a flock of curious reporters kept at a distance. On September 4th, Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Asia William Bundy gave a brief statement to the press in Washington on U.S. assistance to Thai counter-insurgency efforts in an attempt to quell the B-52 rumours and avoid further congressional scrutiny. For the first time, he officially confirmed that there were "about 25,000" U.S. personnel in Thailand, most belonging to the Air Force. However, Bundy emphasised that they were there only in accordance with the "complete treaty relationship" Washington had with Thailand under SEATO. He insisted that "[T]here is really no secret about the basic relationship we have with Thailand or about the basic measures we have taken there", adding that everything about U.S.-Thai relations had been "fully discussed" with Congress and its leaders. Bundy was not asked directly about the B-52s, but he did field several questions about the kinds of assistance Washington was giving the Thais. He

44 "Discussion with Vice-President Humphrey", March 2 1966, Executive Sessions of the SFRC, Historical Series, Volume XVIII, 89th Congress, 2nd Session, 1966, microfiche 19992, slide 5 of 11, Robarts Library, University of Toronto, 440-454. See also, Washington Post, February 15 1966, for information on Humphrey's trip.
45 Transcript, NBC "Meet The Press", March 13 1966, folder Vice President, Volume I, NSF Name File, Box 4, LBJL.
declined to give specifics, telling those assembled only that "we give equipment and assistance and that kind of thing, but it's their job to deal with it as they see it, and surely I think we would all agree it is much sounder." 48

Both the U.S. and Thai governments tried to ignore the B-52 issue altogether. The media, however, did not. Two days after Bundy's press conference, the New York Times carried several reports about U.S. operations run out of Utapao and other "secret" bases in Thailand, prompting debate at the hearings as to whether or not Thailand was "another Vietnam". 49 The same day Senator Fulbright announced his intention to further investigate the "semi-secrecy" shrouding the U.S.-Thai relationship. He accused the administration of broadening American commitments to Thailand without consulting Congress, implying that Washington may have concluded a secret bilateral treaty with Bangkok. 50 Ambassador Graham Martin did not help matters when he publicly conceded that "the people of America do not fully understand the extent of cooperation between the two nations." 51

No doubt as a result of continuing press reports about Utapao, on September 20th the Senate committee questioned William Bundy about the nature of the U.S.-Thai relationship. From a prepared statement he pointed out Thailand had become a key ally for Washington, extremely helpful and instrumental in the execution of American policy throughout Southeast Asia. While Bundy did not acknowledge covert operations and stayed clear of detailed discussion of military matters, he did admit that Thailand was assisting with the prosecution of the war in Vietnam. He went so far as to admit that Thai troops had engaged North Vietnamese Army regulars in Laos in

48 Ibid.
November 1965, but only as "advisers" to Royal Lao forces. Bundy assured the committee that the secrecy surrounding the U.S.-Thai relationship was entirely because of Thai hesitation, and not because the Johnson administration wanted to hide from congressional inquiry. But Bundy faced difficult questions about the exact nature of the relationship, and whether or not it presaged a commitment comparable to the one in South Vietnam. He insisted that the two situations were not at all analogous. Unlike South Vietnam, Thailand had a popular monarchy, a strong religious base, and a relatively homogeneous population. While not ideal, the Thanom regime was improving and could no longer be considered "tyrannical." Thailand's economic progress was impressive and involved many multinational and non-government sources of aid, including the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Mekong Development Program, and the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE). In short, Bundy argued, Thailand was not and never would be another Vietnam.

Bundy again stressed that SEATO remained the formal basis for the relationship, but that the Rusk-Thanat agreement and other understandings had further cemented ties. When pressed as to whether or not a bilateral treaty was in the cards, Bundy was emphatic that no such arrangement would even be considered by the Johnson administration. The American military was present in Thailand only because of the threat posed by communists in neighbouring countries. "When the threat diminishes", Bundy said, "we will reduce our forces, and in due course look to removing them entirely." According to Bundy the real issue was not the U.S. military forces in Thailand, but the external threat Thailand confronted. Behind the insurgency in the Northeast, he asserted,

53 Ibid.
54 Statement by Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William Bundy before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on U.S.-Thai Relations, September 20 1966, file Thailand General Volume IV, Memos and Misc, 1/66 to 10/66, #90a, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283.
loomed the far graver threat from China. It was Chinese belligerency that endangered Southeast Asia in Bundy's estimation, and in this respect Thailand and South Vietnam faced similar challenges. Referring to incontrovertible evidence from the CIA that proved that the PRC was directing local communists in Thailand, Bundy asserted that Bangkok had good reason to base its foreign policy on the assumption of a Chinese threat.55

Congressional attention on U.S.-Thai relations was definitely troubling for both Washington and Bangkok. At the conclusion of the hearings on Southeast Asia, which ended in late September, Senator Fulbright called for renewed open hearings on American assistance to Thailand, arguing that the insurgency in the Northeast was "trumped up" by Thais as an excuse to get more money from the U.S. Fulbright also questioned whether Thailand could be considered as a trustworthy ally, and whether support for an undemocratic military regime was consistent with American political objectives. Suggesting that Thailand was already a "U.S. colony", Fulbright charged that the Johnson administration wanted to avoid public examination of this suspiciously close relationship.56

Fulbright's comments angered the Thais. Although Fulbright's comments were made in the privacy of the executive sessions, Thanat somehow learned of them. In Bangkok, he told reporters that the Thais "would rather go down fighting Communism by ourselves than be a pawn for Senator Fulbright. We are not the 51st state."57 Privately, Thanat's reaction was even more livid. Graham Martin cabled Washington that he had tried to restrain the Foreign Minister from "playing the race card." Thanat told Martin that he was prepared to point out publicly the fact that Fulbright's "legislative record did not establish his credentials to pose as a champion of full participation in

---

55 Ibid.
56 Report, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Executive Session on Thailand, September 20 1966, file Thailand Volume IV, Memos and Misc., 1/66 to 10/66, #100, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.

246
parliamentary democracy for constituents of a color other than his own," and that there were many "presently disenfranchised people of color" in the Senator's home state.58

Thanat had vehemently attacked the Senate hearings from the start. During an interview with foreign correspondents in January 1966, he lambasted the hearings and a report written by Mansfield after his trip to Southeast Asia. The Montana senator was well-known to the Thais, and thoroughly disliked for his previous criticism of American policy towards Bangkok. Thanat sneered that the report, which was entitled "The Viet-Nam Conflict: The Substance and the Shadow", "shows less substance and a great deal of shadow." In his report Mansfield accused Thailand of manipulating Washington in order to get more money, and he objected to the secret air bases. Dismissing Mansfield's grasp of the real situation in Southeast Asia, Thanat observed that the senator had "whitewashed" the role Cambodia played in allowing the Vietcong sanctuary and transit.59 Moreover, Thanat was convinced that the Mansfield and others who opposed American escalation in Vietnam were being duped by the communists into believing the conflict was a civil war, when it was essentially a war of aggression by the North and its agents against the South. In this regard the Foreign Minister represented prevailing opinion in Thailand.60

The timing of the start of the Foreign Relations Committee hearings was particularly bad from Bangkok's point of view. Thanom at this time was still not sure how to handle public discussion of the B-52 base and such large numbers of U.S. military personnel. Praphas was pressing for even more counter-insurgency aid. And Thanat continued to lobby for a more formal security guarantee from Washington, not yet abandoning hopes for a bilateral alliance.61 In late January Thanat urged

58 Cable, Bangkok 3046 to State, September 8 1966, folder: Def 15 Thai-U.S., CFP Files 1964-66 (Political and Defense), Thailand, Box 1686, RG 59, USNA.
61 Ibid, 84.
Dean Rusk to arrange for a postponement of further hearings. The secretary did instruct George Ball to talk to Fulbright about toning down his criticism of Thailand.\textsuperscript{62}

In September, Thanat was in New York to address the 21st session of the United Nations General Assembly. He and Pote Sarasin met with Rusk to voice concern over congressional scrutiny of the U.S.-Thai relationship. Pote said he understood the difficulty the president had in dealing with Congress, but that Thais needed reassurance that the administration did not share the negative opinions expressed by some lawmakers.\textsuperscript{63} Thanat told Rusk in no uncertain terms that what Thailand wanted was a bilateral treaty, even knowing full well that the Senate was extremely unlikely to endorse it.\textsuperscript{64} Afterwards, Thanat met privately with U.A. Johnson, the former U.S. ambassador to Thailand and under secretary of state, who was now the deputy mission chief in Saigon. Johnson later wrote Graham Martin that Thanat was in "the foulest mood I have ever seen him", and that the two men had "the most acid conversation." Thanat launched "long, bitter tirades" against the U.S. Congress, the American press, and Washington's refusal to sign a bilateral treaty. He had also dismissed SEATO as useless "old furniture", and sharply criticised American policy towards Cambodia, which, he considered one of Thailand's "principal enemies".\textsuperscript{65} U.A. Johnson told Martin that he was seriously worried about the U.S. losing Thanat's friendship. He feared that Thanat was grooming himself as a possible "neutralist" national leader in anticipation of an American military withdrawal from Southeast Asia, and wondered whether Washington had

\textsuperscript{62} Memorandum of phone conversation, George Ball with Dean Rusk, September 9 1966, file Thailand 5/19/64 to 9/13/66, #4, Papers of George W. Ball, Box 6, LBJL.

\textsuperscript{63} Memorandum, Nicholas Katzenbach to LBJ, October 6 1966, file Thailand Volume IV, Memos and Misc, 1/66 to 10/66, #99a, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.

\textsuperscript{64} Memorandum of Conversation, Thanat Khoman with Dean Rusk, September 22 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 12/66, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.

\textsuperscript{65} Letter, UA Johnson to Martin, September 23 1966, folder Pol Thai u-z 1/1/64, CFP Files 1964-66, Political and Defense, Thailand, Box 2701, RG 59, USNA.

248
forgotten that Thanat "is a valuable man for both Thailand and Asia, and we need to do everything possible to preserve him if that can be done."

Thanat's personal view of the U.S.-Thai relationship could not be brushed aside by Washington. While on a tour of South Korea several months before his visit to Washington in September, the Foreign Minister had given a less than ringing endorsement of U.S. policy in Vietnam, adding that Thailand was "not necessarily anti-communist, nor for that matter anti-Chinese, anti-Russian, anti-North Korean or anti-North Vietnamese." In a *Fortune Magazine* interview that October, Thanat was even more succinct. "We here in Thailand", he said, "have no place to retreat to. No place to withdraw to. So we will make our first stand here - and our last." 68

Graham Martin shared U.A. Johnson's concerns, and sympathised with Thanat's frustrations. During the course of 1966 Martin became a progressively more insistent advocate of a bilateral treaty. In a particularly emotional cable to Washington in October, he lamented that Thailand's support of U.S. policy had never been adequately rewarded. The Thais had never wavered in their support of the U.S., and never made that support conditional on American aid. Martin insisted that Thailand was a key Asian nation which acted to prevent Chinese hegemony in Southeast Asia. 69 He also warned that "glib, over-simplified" characterizations of Thailand had the "same perverse tendency" as views that the Vietnamese were "merely a genuine, indigenous revolt." 70 Martin's reports generated considerable debate over increased MAP funding for 1967 at the top levels of the U.S.

---

66 Letter, U.A. Johnson to Martin, September 23 1966, folder Pol Thai u-z 1/1/64, CFP Files 1964-66, Political and Defense, Thailand, Box 2701, RG59, USNA.
68 *Fortune Magazine*, October 1965 as quoted in file 10/17/66 to 11/2/66 Background - Thailand Speeches, Statements of LBJ - LBJ Miscellaneous Papers, Box 217, LBJL.
69 Cable, Bangkok 0733 to Bill Jorden at the White House, October 14 1966, file Thailand Volume V 10/66 to 2/67, #110, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283. Martin's uncharacteristic emotionalism may have been due to personal circumstances. In November 1965 he lost his own step-son in Vietnam, after which he became a vocal supporter of U.S. policy there. See also cable, Bangkok 1087 to Dean Rusk for LBJ, November 27 1965, file Thailand Volume III, Memos and Misc 4/65 to 12/65, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
70 Cable, Bangkok 3051 to State, September 8 1966, folder: Def 15 Thai-U.S., CFP Files 1964-66 (Political and Defense), Thailand, Box 1686, RG 59, USNA.
government. Normally detached from the issue, Dean Rusk became extremely concerned that counter-insurgency funding was insufficient. He and White House Adviser Walt Rostow found themselves opposing Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, who believed that 1966 levels were adequate to meet the challenge. In November, Martin’s frustration with Washington reached a crescendo. Throughout the year he had lobbied for $US 70 million in MAP funding for Thailand over the next three years, but in October McNamara rejected that amount as excessive in view of other appropriations priorities. A disappointed Martin told Rusk that he felt "profound discouragement" as a result of the decision, and that he resented the fact that all his hard efforts were seemingly ignored. He pointed out that he had protected the Department of Defense by exercising "strict discipline" over his Embassy staff "to prevent their telling the truth to some perceptive and persistent American reporters and legislators" about secret military operations in Thailand. Martin observed that he himself had "resisted the temptation to set the record straight, which could so easily be done with devastating effect."

In a talk at the National War College in April 1966, former ambassador to Thailand Kenneth Young urged greater understanding of the Thai perspective. China was once again, he asserted, trying to re-establish a kind of tributary system in Southeast Asia. Living in the shadow of the dragon was something Thais historically had to face, but the stakes were now much higher given American involvement in their country. Young agreed that corruption and political mismanagement in the Thai military bureaucracy were major problems in dealing with the Northeast insurgency, and suggested that the U.S. encourage democratic reforms in Thailand. He cautioned against the

---

71 Memo, Rostow to LBJ, October 13 1966, file Thailand Volume V 10/66 to 2/67, #125a, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJ

72 Cable, Bangkok 6625 to State, November 21 1966, in Ibid. McNamara originally proposed $US 35 million in MAP funding for Thailand, with a possible "extingency surplus" of another $US 10 million. McNamara argued that cuts by Congress in overall FY 1967 MAP funding necessitated the reduction. Dean Rusk contended that $US 60 million was needed to maintain "political support" in Thailand. In the end, however, McNamara prevailed. See also memorandum, Dean Rusk to LBJ, "Attached Joint Memorandum from Secretary McNamara and myself on FY 1967 MAP Level

250
tendency to view Thailand simply as an extension of Vietnam, and he warned that Washington could lose Bangkok's political support because of such shortsightedness. Young also noted that the Chinese were unlikely to "let the Thais off easily" for allowing American access to bases for bombing North Vietnam "right up against China's very sensitive southern border." Thailand had good cause to worry about the outcome of the war, and to demand a bilateral treaty with the U.S.  

The insurgency in Northeastern Thailand increasingly worried both Washington and Bangkok in 1966. Despite a September 1965 report by the CIA that the communists in the Northeast were "generally ineffective", the connection between the Thai Independence Movement (TIM), the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), and Beijing was a source of anxiety. In February 1966, Prahas urgently requested advance shipment of helicopters scheduled for delivery in 1967. His rationale was that communist activity in the Northeast was on the upswing, and that helicopters would give a much-needed boost to reconnaissance and search-and-destroy operations. Ambassador-at-Large Averell Harriman agreed, and after a meeting with Thai officials later that month he advised Washington that $US 71 million in 1967 MAP funding for Thailand was needed to provide even more helicopters than already authorised. Graham Martin too stressed the urgency of the situation in the Northeast. He warned the State Department that the Northeast was "too much like Vietnam" for comfort, and that immediate, concerted efforts were needed to prevent this vulnerable region of Thailand from suffering the same fate as South Vietnam.
Despite such arguments, the State Department advised Martin in April that the additional requested helicopters would not be sent, primarily because the Thais had failed to demonstrate they could be trained to use them effectively. 76 An additional factor influencing the State Department's decision may have been reports by several U.S. government agencies in 1965 and early 1966 indicating that the Thais were not making full use of the military and economic aid they had already received. 77 While the State Department gave consideration to Martin's "forceful reports" in support of more aid, its view was that the Thais first be encouraged to work with what they already had. 78 Nonetheless, two weeks after rejecting additional helicopters for Thailand in April 1966, the department reversed itself, advising Martin that the Defense Department would give the Thais ten of twenty helicopters requested right away, along with additional moneys for the training of pilots. 79

The problem of the insurgency in the Northeast was inseparable from the larger communist threat in Thailand and neighbouring countries. As the war in Vietnam escalated, so too did the secret war in Laos, involving the CIA and U.S. Special Forces. By 1966 almost 30,000 Hmong and Meo tribesmen were being trained and deployed by American operatives for use in guerrilla attacks against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnam. 80 Covert operations also included the bombing of Laos, with most of the air strikes carried out from bases in Northeastern Thailand. Thai and American Special Forces worked side-by-side in the Shining Brass and Tiger Hound missions conducted

---

76 Cable, State 1950 to Bangkok, April 28 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 10/66, #37, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
77 Ibid.
78 Cable, State 1950 to Bangkok, April 28 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 10/66, #37, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL. In an article published in the Atlantic in December 1966, Maynard Parker, a retired U.S. Army officer and former Public Information Officer in the Bangkok Embassy, accused the American military contingent at Korat of being complacent and lazy, working one-hour days and more interested in playing volleyball, frequenting brothels and playing a curious popular local game with dead bugs. See Maynard Parker, "The Americans in Thailand," The Atlantic 218 (December 1966): 29–40. See also oral history interview, Frederick Z. Brown (civilian staff, Intelligence Information Officer, SEATO, Bangkok 1962-1966) with Charles Stuart Kennedy, February 2 1990, 17-23, diskette, GUFA.
79 Cable, State 2032 to Bangkok, May 7 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66/ to 10/66, #73, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
80 Ranelagh, CIA: A History, 110-115. For an excellent analysis of this aspect of the war, see also Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic Mountains.
primarily in Laos. In February 1966, the Bangkok government agreed to the deployment in
Thailand of the U.S. 606th Air Commandos squadron, designed to help train the Thai Air Force in
counterinsurgency operations. Although the government refused to officially acknowledge the
arrival of the squadron, it did little to conceal its presence. In April, three Thai Special Forces
detachments were paired with a 128 man team from the U.S. 1st Special Forces Group based in
Okinawa. By the fall six joint squads were in place, most of them in the Pitsanulok area. They
almost immediately saw action against insurgents in both the Northeast and South. In early May,
"Operation Bunnam" commenced, with over 1,200 air sorties launched in a one week period
against communist positions in both Laos and Vietnam, while joint U.S. and Thai Special Forces
conducted thirty day "suppression activities" in remote, undisclosed locations. Martin reported
that evidence from the operations confirmed not only Laotian but also Cambodian aid to Thai
communists in the Northeast.

A CIA report compiled in August suggested that while the insurgents in the Northeast lacked a
cohesive Thai cadre, foreign involvement kept the communist threat alive. The CPT and TIM were
"embryonic" in the opinion of the CIA, but because of the assistance of Laotian, Vietnamese, or
Chinese communists, they represented a growing problem. The CIA report discussed other
troubling aspects of the insurgency. Not only was the Northeast geographically isolated and
politically distant from Bangkok, it lagged behind the rest of the country economically and in almost
every other aspect of development, and it suffered the additional burden of an acutely corrupt local

---

81 Shelby L. Stanton, Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia, 1956-1975 (London: Arms and
Armour Press Ltd., 1986), 278-280. Stanton was a U.S. Army Special Forces Captain who served in Vietnam and
Thailand. The joint Special Forces teams fought numerous skirmishes with communists in the Phu Phan Mountains of
Laos in September and October 1966. Special Forces Company D from Fort Bragg was specially trained for action in
Thailand, and led the training and deployment of hill tribes recruited for operations in the Bolvans Plateau. In
November, a parachute assault team headed by Americans established a jungle base near Trang, close to the Malaysian
border. There they actively pursued southern insurgents and Malay communists, frequently across the boundary.
82 Cable, Bangkok 2339 to State, May 3 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 10/66, #110a, NSF Country Files
Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
83 Cable, Bangkok 1469 to State, January 25 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 10/66, #51, NSF Country Files
Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.

253
government and police. Officials in Bangkok also regularly skimmed large amounts of aid money earmarked for the Northeast for their personal use, taking to heart the old Thai edict *kin muang*, or "eat the country." Moreover, most people in the area were considered extremely passive and apolitical, qualities the CIA believed were conducive to the expansion of communist ideals and support. The Northeast was also considered the "wild frontier" of Thailand, rife with gangs, gamblers, smugglers and drug addicts. For this and other reasons, the region was a difficult place in which to instill a strong sense of nationalism.85

The underlying consideration for Washington in confronting the communist threat to Thailand and its neighbours was ultimately the Chinese connection. Though unable to offer conclusive proof, Praphas maintained that PRC agents were active in Laos and even the Northeast, running guns and other supplies. Waiting for incontrovertible evidence of the Chinese role was, he said, "no different from waiting for a conflagration to spread and reach our house."86 Spewing Maoist and pro-Chinese rhetoric, "Voice of the People of Thailand" (VOPT) broadcasts in early January 1966 called for a "people's war" against the Thanom regime and U.S. imperialism in Thailand, and claimed that Communist China would soon help "save" Thailand from the Americans.87 A USIS field report in early 1966 linked Beijing to virtually all developments among insurgents in the Northeast. According to USIS, the Chinese were behind TIM and the CPT, as well as lesser groups such as the Patriotic Teacher's Group, the Thai Monk's Group and the Federation of Patriotic

---

84 State Department Report, "Counterinsurgency in Thailand", no date, Thailand file 2, #41-42, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 286, LBJL.
85 CIA Memorandum 1595/66, "Communist Insurgency in Thailand: Strengths and Weaknesses", August 11 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 10/66, #105, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL. The foremost expert on the Northeast, anthropologist Charles F. Keyes, disagreed with the CIA. While he conceded that "localism" did prevail in the region due to its physical and political isolation from Bangkok, Keyes was not convinced that the people felt more akin with the Lao as the CIA and others believed. His studies showed that the majority of Northeasterners readily identified themselves as Thais when asked their citizenship. See Charles F. Keyes, "Ethnic Identity and Loyalty of Villagers in Northeastern Thailand," *Asian Survey* 6 (July 1966): 11-21.
86 Cable, Bangkok 8773 to State, January 4 1967, file Thailand Volume V 10/66 to 2/67, #23, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
Workers. Based on analysis of Radio Peking and Radio Hanoi broadcasts and other intelligence, USIS concluded that the head of the Thai insurgency was Lt. Col. Phayom Chulant, an Army defector who went by the nom de guerre of Mongkhom na Nakhon, and who, as the "liaison representative" from Thailand on the Chinese Committee for Afro-Asian Solidarity, had travelled to Ghana, Cuba and North Vietnam along with Chinese government officials. The CIA obtained further proof of the Chinese connection to the insurgency in October 1966 after interrogations of captured communists in the Northeast. However, it may be that this information was not passed on to Bangkok. As one CIA report noted, absolute proof linking Beijing to the insurgency would only give the Thais added ammunition in demanding more aid from Washington. 

While issues relating to Vietnam and counter-insurgency dominated the U.S.-Thai relationship, the familiar problem of Cambodia continued to create difficulties. The expanded war in Vietnam threatened to destabilise Sihanouk's regime, and spurred renewed efforts in Washington to win over the mercurial Prince. However, Sihanouk continued to deny the presence of both Cambodian and Vietnamese communists in the eastern provinces, while criticising the U.S. troops for frequently violating the Cambodian border during their operations against the Vietcong. At the same time, Sihanouk maintained that Thailand was a mortal enemy, committed to undermining both himself and Cambodia through aid to the Khmer Serres.

Sihanouk was losing his grip on power by 1966. He was exhausted, and seemed unable to keep his mind on Cambodian politics. More and more, he spent time pursuing his hobby of film-making, while he and the country were increasingly surrounded by political enemies, both domestic and

---

90 Osborne, Sihanouk, 168.
foreign. Within Cambodia, the communist Khmer Rouge gained strength in the jungles, while the Thais and South Vietnamese continued to support the Khmer Seri along the country's frontiers. The Cambodian economy continued to decline, while unrest in the armed forces intensified. General elections in September 1966 confirmed that Sihanouk's command of Cambodian politics was failing. Several of the most prominent anti-Sihanouk politicians in the country were elected to the national assembly, and, in part to avoid direct confrontation with them, the Prince supported the appointment of Army Commander General Lon Nol as Prime Minister. However, soon afterwards Sihanouk announced that he had decided to form a "counter-government" made up of leftists opposed to Lon Nol, thereby only compounding problems in the already highly fractional Cambodian polity. Pro-Sihanouk demonstrations against the new Prime Minister were staged in Phnom Penh soon after the elections, clearly engineered to show that the Prince was still in command.

But in reality Sihanouk was in trouble. Realising this, the Southeast Asian desk of the State Department cautioned that while the Cambodian leader was difficult, he had reason to be justifiably worried about his country's predicament. The presence of massive numbers of American troops to the east in South Vietnam and a unfriendly neighbour to the west in Thailand made it hard for Phnom Penh to maintain any sense of neutrality. On top of that, Cambodia lacked a strong advocate in Washington, with the result that "views of Bangkok, Saigon and the Department of Defense are seldom effectively counterbalanced." In the view of the Southeast Asia desk, Washington had an important stake in addressing Sihanouk's concerns, but in doing so it would

---

92 Ibid., 156-158.
inevitably run up against the Thais, who were actively engaged in the subversion of Cambodia. As Thailand assumed a larger role in U.S. regional policy, this dilemma would only grow more serious.93

One of the Johnson administration's principal objectives in Thailand was to encourage and spotlight Thailand's role as a regional model and leader.94 Developments on several fronts in 1966 served this goal. Bangkok helped to mediate disputes between Malaysia and Indonesia, and it was instrumental in the revival of the dormant Association of Southeast Asia (ASA). Early in the year Thailand joined the Asia Pacific Council (APC), a forum for multilateral economic cooperation. On a more secretive level, in the latter part of 1965 Thai officials acted as go-betweens in Washington's overtures to the Indonesian military following the defeat of a communist coup and the overthrow of President Sukarno. Wanting to establish its credentials as a professedly non-aligned nation, the new regime under Suharto was reluctant to turn to the United States for assistance. Bangkok supplied the Indonesian armed forces with military equipment from the U.S., officially made Thai property to save face for Jakarta. In addition, over 200,000 tons of Thai rice were shipped to Indonesia, most of it free of charge.95

Thailand was featured prominently at the Seven Nation or Manila Conference during the last week of October. The U.S. and Thailand were joined at the conference by heads of state from the Philippines, South Korea, South Vietnam, Australia, and New Zealand. The purpose of the conference was to drum up Asian support for American policy in Vietnam, and to assure Asian leaders of Washington's commitment to the region. Moreover, the conference gave President Johnson an opportunity to portray the war in Vietnam as more of a multilateral effort with strong Asian backing. To this end, Thailand's participation in the conference was essential. The Manila

93 Memorandum, Thomson and Ropa at SEA to William Bundy, "The New Year in Asia", January 7 1966, file This Week in Asia Reports, NSF Country Files, Reference File Vietnam, Box 1, LBJL.
94 Ibid.
95 Cable, Bangkok 1604 to State, February 17 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 10/66, #44, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
Conference provided a showcase for Thai leadership and the U.S.-Thai relationship. Thanat and Thanom both went to the conference to represent Thailand. Thanat spearheaded efforts to have the Asian representatives issue a firm declaration of anti-communist solidarity.\textsuperscript{96} While the declaration finally agreed upon was short on substance, it did give the desired impression of a unified stand against communist aggression in Asia. During the conference Thanom openly attacked Beijing, accusing the Chinese of "ruthless attempts to bring back the shackles of the past" and "waging an imperialistic war of... expansion."\textsuperscript{97} Thanat appealed for regional cooperation in the fight against communism, pledging a further $US 20 million in rice credits for South Vietnam. On every occasion Thai officials went out of their way to appear as pro-American as possible, clearly placing greater priority on courting public and congressional opinion in the U.S. than on maintaining "plausible deniability" about Thailand's involvement in the war in Vietnam.

President Johnson left the Manila Conference and conducted a whirlwind tour of key Asian countries. In addition to the Philippines, he travelled to Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, and, of course, Thailand, with an unscheduled and very brief stop-over to visit U.S. armed forces in South Vietnam as well. Although primarily a public relations exercise to further show Washington's commitment to its allies, the trip was also designed to smooth over rough spots in several bilateral Asian relationships. Just a little more than a year before such a tour was unimaginable. Malaysia and Indonesia were on the verge of war, as were India and Pakistan, while Burma remained firmly anti-American. By late 1966 however, much had changed. With American encouragement, Japan and South Korea formalised a series of economic and political accords.

\textsuperscript{96} Pamphlet from the Manila Summit Conference, file FO7/10/24/66 to 10/31/66, WHCF Foreign Affairs File, Box 67, LBJL.
\textsuperscript{97} Royal Thai Embassy in Manila press release, Statement by Thanom Kittachakorn, October 25 1966, file FO7/10/24/66 to 10/31/66, WHCF Foreign Affairs File, Box 67, LBJL.

258
Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur had established diplomatic relations, while Rangoon appeared anxious to come out of its isolationist shell.  

Johnson's visit in Thailand from October 27-30 was the longest and the last of his official stopovers en route home. By most accounts, the visit was a major success. Press reaction in Thailand was overwhelming favourable. Everywhere the President went he was met by huge, enthusiastic crowds, and he himself apparently felt a genuine warmth for the Thais. As he was quick to point out, he was the only American president to have made two visits to Thailand in official capacities, something he believed gave him a unique understanding of the country and people.

Johnson went to Thailand not just as a goodwill gesture, but to deal with substantive issues. Dean Rusk warned him that his visit would be "more serious and emotion-ridden than at any other stop." Even before he left Washington, Johnson anticipated Thai demands and authorized a

---

58 Memorandum, "Matters of Substance for Your Country Visits", Dean Rusk to LBJ, October 14 1966, #31a, Volume 2, Tab E, NSC History, Box 45, LBJL.
59 USIA Report, "Foreign Media Reaction to the Manila Conference/President Johnson's Asian Tour", no date, file FO7/12/1/66, WHCF Foreign Affairs File, Box 67, LBJL. Press and public reaction to Johnson's tour elsewhere in Asia was, however, less favourable. In the Philippines and Japan the response was surprisingly cool and while it was warmer in Malaysia, the press there questioned Washington's commitment to Vietnam in light of the increasing opposition from the American public and Congress. Not surprisingly, in the U.S. reaction was divided. Journalist John Chamberlain applauded the President's criticisms of Fulbright and other "electioneering Senators" who decried U.S. efforts to build up regional cooperation. Special praise was reserved for Thant Khoman and the Thais, who came out of the conference looking like lynchpins in American foreign policy in Asia Others saw the entire trip as a farce. Pete Hamil of the New York Post called the Manila Conference and the rest of the tour a "disgusting charade". Senator Fulbright denounced it as "a meeting of the clan", with "such a cosy little group of our boys" gathered to put an Asian face on an American dilemma, while Walter Lippmann pointed out that the seven nations visited represented less than 6 percent of the entire population of Asia, compared to China's 50 percent which "rightfully and practically" dominated Southeast Asia. See USIA Report, "Media Comments on the Seven Nation Conference and President's Asian Tour", October 16 1966, and article, "These Days", John Chamberlain, King Features Syndicate, October 7 1966, in file FO7/ Asian Countries, Meetings with Leaders 10/1/66 to 10/23/66, WHCF Foreign Affairs File, Box 66, LBJL. See also World News Digest, "Facts on File", October 6 to October 12, 1966, 390 as quoted in #70, Volume I, Tab C, NSC History, Box 45, LBJL, and report, Ben Wattenburg (State Department speech writer), "Asia Reflective", December 1966, file TR100 11/22/66 to 12/7/66, WHCF Papers of LBJ - Executive Trips, Box 29, LBJL.
60 Newly declassified top secret documents from the Johnson Library show that American intelligence in Thailand uncovered a plot to assassinate the President during his trip. A five-man Vietnamese hit team supposedly prepared for the mission in the Northeast, near Nakom Phathon, planned an attempt on Johnson's life along the route he would take between Don Muang airport and his hotel in Bangkok. See cable, CIA Bangkok to White House Situation Room, October 16 1966, file TR100, WHCF Confidential File, Box 95, LBJL. For further information on Johnson's trip to Thailand, including general background information and speeches/meetings, see "Thailand Scope Paper", no date, file Background Papers - Johnson Trip, WHCF Overseas File, Box 170, LBJL.
61 Memorandum, "Matters of Substance for Your Country Visits", Dean Rusk to LBJ, October 14 1966, #31a, Volume 2, Tab E, NSC History, Box 45, LBJL.
dramatic increase in MAP funding for 1967, from the planned $US 35 million to $US 60 million.\textsuperscript{102} Despite objections from McNamara and the likelihood of resistance from Congress to the big-jump in appropriations, Johnson realized he could not go to the Thais with just empty promises. He concurred with Rusk's opinion that "despite the serious overall funding situation, Thailand must be accepted as having such a high priority that its needs should be met even at the expense of additional reductions in other major programs."\textsuperscript{103}

Sent to Bangkok in advance of the president, special adviser on Southeast Asia Clark Clifford told Graham Martin in "colourful language" that Johnson expected nothing short of full support from the Thais, and from the ambassador too.\textsuperscript{104} Eager to have "more flags" join the stars and stripes on the battlefields of Vietnam, what Johnson wanted from Thailand was a contribution of Thai troops to the war. During his stay in Bangkok, the President pressed Thanom for such a commitment, but received no definite answer. The Thai leadership was not surprised by Johnson's request. In fact, they had expected it for some time. While the issue was extremely sensitive and troubled several key members of Thanom's government, considerable support for the idea existed within the Thai leadership. Praphas was strongly in favour, as was Air Marshal Dawee. Most senior officials in the Thai military were also supportive, anticipating that combat experience in Vietnam would be an invaluable test of their mettle. Even Thanat seemed favourably disposed, perhaps hoping that this final demonstration of friendship would be rewarded with a bilateral treaty.\textsuperscript{105} In contrast, Thanom appeared hesitant about a troop commitment. As Minister of Defense and head of the government, he had the most to lose if the Thai public opposed sending troops to Vietnam, or if the Thai military performed poorly there. Even though Thailand's participation in the war was already

\textsuperscript{103} Memorandum, "FY 1967 MAP Funding", Rusk and McNamara for LBJ, October 13, 1966, #15a, Volume 3, Tabs H and J, NSC History, Box 46, LBJL.
\textsuperscript{104} Hannah, The Key To Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War, 231-232.
\textsuperscript{105} Phuangkasem, Determinants of Thailand's Foreign Policy Behaviour, 112.
extensive and masked by only the thinnest of facades, actually engaging in the fighting in Vietnam was an entirely different matter. It would mark the point of no return for Thailand's pro-American orientation. The decision also represented a dramatic personal turning point for Thanom. Long viewed merely as the unspectacular successor to Sarit, Thanom had never really distinguished his leadership from his predecessor's. Thus the question of whether or not to join the Americans in Vietnam loomed large on Thanom's mind, and fast became the major question mark in U.S.-Thai relations.106

106 Ibid. 185-187. See also Phuangkasem, Thailand's Foreign Relations 1964-80, 80-85.
*CHAPTER EIGHT*

"Swimming with the Whale: Thailand, the U.S. and the War in Vietnam, 1967"

An old Thai proverb likened dealing with the French and British to having a choice between living with the crocodile or swimming with the whale. Based in Indochina, the French prowled along the Mekong, ready to pounce upon ancient Siam like a crocodile. With the world's strongest navy, the British were like the biggest whale at sea, pressuring the Siamese from Burma and Malaya. Although the influence of both powers in Southeast Asia dramatically waned in the 20th century, the metaphor was still applicable in the 1960s. However, then the crocodile was China, while the whale was the United States, not so much a threat but the mortal enemy of the crocodile, and a difficult partner with which to swim. During 1967 the war in Vietnam intensified, dragging the U.S. ever deeper into the quagmire. Despite that, Thailand continued and even expanded its support of American policy. In short, the Thais chose the whale - even as it tired and began to flounder.

In his State of the Union address on January 10, 1967, President Johnson spoke guardedly about the war, cautioning Americans that he could not promise the conflict was almost over. "We face more cost", he warned, "more loss, and more agony. For the end is not yet." Johnson added that he could not promise an end in 1967 or even the next year, only that the U.S. was prepared to stand by its allies and to oppose communist expansion. In his memoirs, *The Vantage Point*, Johnson would later concede that he had grave doubts about the war, but that he had gone too far to pull out. Instead he maintained a "middle course", fighting the war without committing the U.S. entirely to it.

---

1 Charles JV Murphy, "Thailand's Fight to the Finish," *Fortune* (October 1965): 123, in file Thailand General A to Z, Bernard B. Fall Papers, Box 19, JFKL.
This was, he hoped, enough to defend South Vietnam, while simultaneously allowing him to build the "Great Society" at home.3

Johnson chose to ignore gloomy official reports coming out of the war, preferring to listen to Westmoreland and others who told him that with just a little more commitment the U.S. would prevail. By mid-1967 American forces in South Vietnam numbered 431,000, with an additional 110,000 scheduled to arrive by the end of the year. Despite the increase in American manpower, the CIA warned that Westmoreland's strategy of attrition was simply not working. While communist forces were frequently set back by American operations, they were seldom eradicated entirely, and usually returned to action quickly. There were no evident signs of diminished communist strength, and in fact throughout the South there appeared to be significant increases. The nature of the ground war and the environment in which it was fought allowed the communists to dictate the fighting. When they were not striking at American positions, they were melting away into the jungles not just in Vietnam, but also Laos and Cambodia. The political structure and leadership of the insurgency remained intact despite American efforts to destroy it, and unlike the South Vietnamese Army, the Vietcong were a dedicated and disciplined fighting force.4

Following the advice of MACV and his Special Adviser on Vietnam, former CIA and NSC agent Robert Komer, Johnson increasingly favoured the "pacification" programme begun in 1965. By the summer of 1966, pacification had become a major component of American military strategy. However, pacification required considerable money and manpower in the field, which were for the most part insufficient.5 It also required the support of the South Vietnamese armed forces, not to mention the cooperation of the people. The South Vietnamese government and Army lacked basic

3 Ibid., 27.
5 Young, The Vietnam Wars, chapter 10.
management skills and were rife with ineptitude, complacency, and corruption. Moreover, pacification did little to address the fundamental economic and political concerns of the average South Vietnamese and, consequently, the roots of communist insurgency.\footnote{Herring, \textit{America's Longest War}, 157-160.}

During 1967 the United States stepped up its air war against the North. Johnson expanded the list of North Vietnamese targets, as well as the number of sorties against them. More and more, industrial and transportation facilities were targeted, even those in the previously restricted areas adjacent to the Chinese border.\footnote{Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff, eds., \textit{The Air War in Indochina} (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1972), 39-44.} Despite the physical damage and loss of life caused by the bombing, it did not curtail the North's will or ability to fight. Infiltration of the South continued, and the North recouped some of its material losses in aid from both the PRC and Soviet Union.\footnote{Ilya V. Gaiduk, "The Vietnam War and Soviet-American Relations, 1964-1973: New Russian Evidence", \textit{Cold War International History Project Bulletin}, Issues 6-7, Winter 1995-1996, 253. Throughout 1966 and 1967 Moscow gradually usurped Beijing's role as Hanoi's chief ally and benefactor. Between 1966 and 1968 Moscow gave about 122 million rubles in economic assistance to North Vietnam. In 1968 alone that number increased four-fold. The widening Sino-Soviet split and tensions between Hanoi and Beijing contributed to this shift.}

The costs for the United States were also high, both in terms of aircraft losses and the death or capture of American pilots.\footnote{Herring, \textit{America's Longest War}, 149. Aircraft losses between 1965 and 1966 exceeded 500, while by 1968 950 planes, totalling nearly $US 6 billion had been destroyed.} As well, the North exploited the bombing for propaganda gain, depicting the U.S. as a ruthless aggressor. The pace and scope of the air war in the South also increased in 1967. By late in the year nearly one million tons of bombs had been dropped in the South; this was more than twice the tonnage unloaded on the North.\footnote{Littauer and Uphoff, eds., \textit{The Air War in Indochina}, 46-50.} In addition, the U.S. sprayed more than 100 million pounds of chemical agents on South Vietnamese jungles in an attempt to deny the communists safe haven.\footnote{For an interesting and personal account on the use of chemical agents in Vietnam, see George Ewalt Jr., "Agent Orange and the Effect of the Herbicide Program" in Salisbury, ed., \textit{Vietnam Reconsidered}, 192-196.}

In spite of its tremendous technological advantage, the United States was unable to turn the tide of battle in its favour. Military and political leadership at the top levels struggled in vain to come up
with an effective strategy for prosecuting the war or negotiating a peace. Johnson faced a growing division between hawks and doves in his administration. In November Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who had become convinced the war was unwinnable, resigned from his post to become head of the World Bank. By the end of 1967 the beleaguered president also faced deepening divisions within the country at large over the war, including a vociferous anti-war movement. Although he agonised over the war, Johnson clung to the conviction that if the United States stayed the course it would ultimately succeed in Vietnam.

Throughout 1967 the Thai leadership watched the war in Vietnam and the political developments it engendered in the United States with great interest. Bangkok feared that the growing domestic opposition in the U.S. to the war would force Johnson to pull American forces out of Vietnam, and perhaps out of Southeast Asia altogether. Thai leaders realised that such a move would likely result in the destabilisation of the Thai economy, encourage the guerrillas in the Northeast to intensify their insurgency, and leave Thailand alone with hostile communist neighbours. Without its American benefactor, the military government’s hold on power in Thailand would be severely threatened, and without the war in Vietnam, Thanom’s regime would lack the justification for its authoritarian rule.

The Thai leadership was very much aware that the war in Vietnam was not going well for the United States. Consequently, its decision to contribute Thai troops to the ground war there in 1967 is of critical importance in fully understanding the scope and nature of the U.S.-Thai relationship during the 1960’s. Since the summer of 1965, the Johnson administration had suggested to Bangkok that a manpower contribution to the war in Vietnam would be most welcome, and by the end of 1966 the president had come to view participation by Thailand as a key element in his "many flags" programme. However, as was apparent during the President’s trip to Thailand in October 1966,

---

12 McNamara, In Retrospect, 233, 260.
Thanom and some other top officials remained hesitant on the troop issue. Congressional scrutiny into Washington’s commitments to Bangkok, a frequently negative American press, concerns over effects the U.S. military in Thailand were having on Thai society, and fear about the ramifications of its role in the air war against Vietnam, all made the Thai leader very anxious.13

Still, in early January 1967, Thailand committed ground troops to the war. Thanom announced the decision at a press conference on January 6, having notified Washington just three days before. The Prime Minister stated that his country would dispatch a ground force of about 1,000 “to take an active part in the fighting in South Vietnam.”14 Cabinet support for the decision appears to have been strong, and it is doubtful Thanom would have acted without the endorsement of Praphas or Thanat.15 Even with the support of Praphas, Thanom remained concerned about the reaction of the rank and file in the Thai Armed Forces, and particularly the junior officer corps. To his relief several Thai newspapers carried stories about the possibility of such a commitment prior to the announcement, eliciting widespread public support for the idea and dissipating any negative reaction from the Army. So popular was the idea of sending troops to Vietnam that by the end of January nearly 5,000 men had volunteered for the contingent in Bangkok alone.16

While the exact motivation for the decision to contribute troops remains in question, it is likely that Bangkok saw the move as a political necessity. Denying involvement with the U.S. was now totally unrealistic given the burgeoning American military presence and public disclosure about the Utapao B-52 base. Moreover, the Thai military and the entire Thai economy was dependent on the American connection. Military assistance in 1967 from Washington totalled $US 59 million, while economic aid stood at just over $US 60 million.17 The legitimacy and stability of Thanom’s regime

13 See chapter 7.
14 Message, Bangkok to State, January 6 1967, file Thailand Volume V 10/66 to 2/67, #20, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283-284, LBJL.
15 Bamrungsup, United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule 1947-1977, 121.
17 Wilson, The United States and the Future of Thailand, 144.
were reliant on Thailand's relationship with the U.S. and the war in Vietnam. To maintain and possibly expand U.S. aid programmes Thailand needed to show its resolve as an American ally, especially since some sceptics on Capitol Hill had expressed doubts about its reliability. Also, Thai leaders as well as the vast majority of the Thai public were devoted anti-communists. The perception of a growing communist threat in Vietnam, Laos, and even Cambodia unquestionably affected the readiness of Thai leaders to expand their nation's contribution to the U.S. anti-communist effort in the region. They wanted to curb this threat before their own territory became a main battlefield.  

In Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War, Robert M. Blackburn argues that the Thai contingents sent to Vietnam constituted "a mercenary force bought and paid for by the United States." This simplistic conclusion assumes that the Thais had no legitimate political, strategic, or ideological concerns of their own with respect to the conflict in Vietnam, and that the Thanom regime cared only for the money it could extract from Washington. This explanation likewise ignores the artful complexity of Thai diplomacy, which for centuries had helped to secure the country's independence, and which since the late 1940's had dealt effectively with the Americans to the country's overall benefit. Unquestionably, the Thanom regime anticipated that the sending of Thai troops would produce even more military and economic largesse from Washington. But this was almost certainly neither the only nor the most important motive for that decision. Security and survival greatly outweighed any mercenary tendencies the Thais may have had, and swimming with the whale seemed the best course to take.

In The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950-1983, R. Sean Randolph suggests that the overriding factor in the Thai decision was fear of China. Randolph argues that Bangkok was

---

18 Randolph, The United States and Thailand, 78-80.
19 Blackburn, Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags", 95.
primarily motivated by the belief that Beijing was behind developments in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and that Thailand was next on the Chinese expansionist agenda. Thanom may have also believed that by sending troops Bangkok could have more say in the conduct of the Vietnam War. Furthermore, sending troops would permit the Thai military to gain front-line combat experience, as well as demonstrate Bangkok's allegiance to the U.S. in the best way possible. The Thais understood the symbolic significance of the troops as an affirmation of friendship and commitment between the two countries.

Soon after Thanom's announcement, the Royal Thai Army Volunteer Regiment (RTAVR) was established. Despite the regiment's name, its troops were anything but volunteers. Almost all the men assigned to it were already army personnel, some even serving with the Special Forces. Although they had previous military training, the troops were not immediately sent to Vietnam. Some time was needed to organise them into a cohesive fighting unit. But the delay in sending the contingent to Vietnam probably owed more to Thai politicking than to the state of its preparedness. The Bangkok government anticipated that the promise to send men would open the way for more troop requests from Washington, and some key government officials worried about the long term effects such additional contributions would have on Thailand's own defense. Moreover, in the process of working out the details of the troop contribution with the U.S., Thai enthusiasm for the idea began to wane. The question of who would pay for what immediately arose and remained unresolved through the spring. Thanom and others may have worried that the popularity of the troop contribution would drop once the RTAVR began to suffer casualties.

20 Randolph, The United States and Thailand. 78-80.
21 Ibid.
While Thai officials wrestled with these issues, the RTAVR was sequestered to top secret training locations throughout Thailand.23 Swollen by volunteers, by the late spring the regiment numbered nearly 2,500 men, twice as many as Thanom had originally pledged. But there was little movement towards actually deploying the troops. In July President Johnson sent two of his "wise men", Clark Clifford and Maxwell Taylor, at the head of another mission to Asia, ostensibly to exchange views with American allies on the war in Vietnam. Clifford and Taylor were instructed by the president to obtain more tangible support from Asian allies. The topmost priority was to get "more flags" in Vietnam, especially Thailand's. Although by this time seven months had passed since Thanom's announcement, no Thai troops had yet set foot in Vietnam, and the president had grown impatient. Not even a visit by King Bhumipol and his Queen to the U.S. in June had persuaded the Thai government to speed up the deployment.24 Johnson told his emissaries that he expected the Thais to make good on their promise quickly. More importantly, he directed them to push for even more troops. Johnson believed that he had done everything possible for Thailand, and now it was time for Thailand to do everything possible for him.25

The Clifford-Taylor mission toured South Vietnam, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and Thailand from July 22 through August 5. At every stop the two emissaries stressed that American allies in Asia needed to make concrete and considerable contributions to the war effort in Vietnam, particularly in the form of ground troops. The war was costing the United States a great deal financially, adding to an already sizeable $US 20 billion deficit and requiring a tax increase of nearly

23 Stanton, Green Berets At War, 280. Coordination for training fell to Special Forces Lt. Colonel Zoltan Kollat and his "Task Force Slick". Infantry units trained at Chonburi, while the artillery was sent to Khekthiem and the cavalry to Saraburi. The combined regiment passed its official field tests near Kanchanaburi in July and was readied for deployment in September under the command of American Special Forces officers.
24 For information about the King and Queen's June visit see file Thailand 6/27 to 29/67, "Visit of King Adulyadej and Queen Sikrit", NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 285, LBJL.
Moreover, public and congressional support for the war had sharply declined, making it all the more difficult for the administration to continue the fight in Vietnam alone.

The leaders of all the countries visited by Clifford and Taylor endorsed American objectives in Vietnam, and they expressed little criticism of the war effort. They supported the bombing campaign against the North, despite the fact that its effectiveness was now widely debated. Several leaders even favoured an Inchon-type landing above the 17th parallel to cut infiltration routes if North Vietnam expanded its role in the conflict. While Clifford and Taylor were quick to point out that the current political climate in the U.S. made such an undertaking unlikely, they were encouraged by allied support for action against communist routes in Laos.

Less encouraging was that the leaders consulted were not eager to extend the contributions of their countries to the war effort. In Thailand Clifford and Taylor had two meetings with Thanom and top officials lasting almost eight hours. In addition, Clifford met privately with Pote Sarasin, the influential Minister of National Development. Thai leaders claimed that the 2,500 men already designated for service were the most that could be spared without jeopardising counter-insurgency operations at home, particularly in the Northeast. Clifford and Taylor urged the Thais to add 10,000 more troops to their Vietnam contingent, confident that with time and increased financial support, the number could be raised without any dire effect on domestic security.

Thai leaders had other reservations about expanded troop contributions. They could not understand how a few more thousand Thai soldiers would make any real difference to the war considering the massive U.S. involvement. They also believed that Thailand's existing contributions such as air bases, covert operations, and political support exceeded those of any other nation, and

---

26 "Clifford-Taylor Report to the President", August 5 1967, file SD1(1) Allies: Troop Commitments 3/67 to 1/69. #44a, NSF Country Files Vietnam, Box 91, LBJL.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid. The Thais objected not so much to the number of additional troops requested as the fact that invariably they would be drawn from the army elite, which would have a serious impact, particularly on the officer corps.
that Washington did not give these contributions due credit.\textsuperscript{29} Several high officials, such as Praphas, worried that a troop commitment beyond the numbers already pledged would detract from Thailand's self-defence capability. Clifford and Taylor countered that in the minds of Americans, those closest to the trouble had to risk the most, and that meant more men.\textsuperscript{30}

The Thais were not surprised by Clifford and Taylor's request for additional troops. Although they had serious reservations about increasing their contributions, they had anticipated Washington's request for more help and prepared in advance to negotiate with the emissaries over a long list of conditions. Again it appears that the Thai leadership realised the importance of demonstrating its commitment to the U.S. Deputy Mission Chief Norman Hannah noted that the Thais undertook extensive analysis of their overall military objectives before Clifford and Taylor arrived.\textsuperscript{31} One condition on which the Thais insisted for an additional troop contribution was a Hawk anti-aircraft missile battery. The Hawks were necessary from the Thai point of view for protection against a communist air attack. In February, clandestine communist radio broadcasts denounced Thailand for participating in "Operation Arc Light" by allowing B-52s from Utapao to bomb North Vietnam. U.S. Intelligence reports on Chinese and North Vietnamese discussions in the summer indicated that aerial attacks against Thai bases were a very real possibility.\textsuperscript{32} Even though U.S. officials assured the Thais that their air defenses were adequate without the Hawks, the Thais remained extremely nervous about the threat of air attack. In addition to the Hawks, Bangkok expected more helicopters for added mobility in the Northeast and to assist in the deployment of

\textsuperscript{29} Cable, Bangkok 3320 to State, September 15 1967, file Thailand Volume VII 8/67 to 7/68, #74, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.

\textsuperscript{30} "Clifford-Taylor Report to the President", August 5 1967, file 5D(1) Allies: Troop Commitments 3/67 to 1/69, #44a, NSF Country Files Vietnam, Box 91, LBJL.

\textsuperscript{31} Cable, Bangkok 3320 to State, September 15 1967, file Thailand Volume VII 8/67 to 7/68, #74, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.

\textsuperscript{32} Cable, State 145114 to Bangkok, February 27 1967, file Thailand Volume V 10/66 to 2/67, #56, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL. See also cable, Bangkok 9901 to State, February 2 1967, #6, in \textit{ibid}.
any additional Thai troops there. Increased MAP funding was also anticipated, so that Thailand could put on a "respectable show" in the event an external attack.33

The fact that talks about an additional troop contribution took place even before the first contingent of troops was deployed in Vietnam strengthened Bangkok's bargaining position. As well, South Korea and the Philippines had been persuaded to contribute their first contingents, and the Thais were aware of what they got in exchange. Moreover, Thailand's major role in other aspects of the war such as bombing and covert operations increased its leverage. Thanom knew full well that Washington needed Thailand's support for political and military reasons even more than it needed the backing of other Asian allies.34 Thai officials were, as Deputy Mission Chief Hannah observed, "acutely aware of the political urgency in the U.S." with respect to the war in Vietnam.35

Hannah advised Washington that Thai aid requests were not excessive. They were essentially old requests revamped and combined in a single package. Given that, it was in the best interest of the U.S. that negotiations proceed as quickly and amicably as possible. Otherwise, Bangkok's cooperation with U.S. policy would be irreparably undermined, and the Thais would conclude that American interest in their country had already passed the "high water mark". In a discussion with Hannah, Dawee had quipped "it is increasingly clear from my reports... that your policy is to progressively withdraw from the minimal support you are not giving."36 If Washington appeared miserly at this juncture, this would also have negative impact on Thanom and his hold on power. National elections were scheduled for December, and even though few observers expected them to be entirely fair, they were demonstrative of Thanom's willingness to at least tolerate the idea of domestic opposition. More importantly, a new constitution, heavily influenced by the U.S., was set

---

33 Memo, William Bundy to Rusk, February 27 1967, folder DEF 15 THAI-US 1/1/67, CFP 1967-69, Thailand, Box 1548, RG 59, USNA.
34 Oral history interview, Leonard Unger with Charles Stuart Kennedy, May 10 1989, 58-70, diskette, GUFA.
35 Cable, Bangkok 3320 to State, September 15 1967, file Thailand Volume VII 8/67 to 7/68, #74, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
36 Ibid.
for promulgation by the end of the year. On the regional front, early in the year Thanom committed Thailand to the new Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), designed to promote greater economic and political integration among member states. Hannah noted that without a strong Thanom, not only was ASEAN endangered but so was the stability of the Bangkok government.37

Negotiations on additional troops continued through the fall, with the Thais sticking firmly to their demands. Finally, on October 5 an agreement was reached which essentially met those demands. The Thais would send an additional 10,000 man contingent to South Vietnam, but the U.S. would pay for it, as Hannah said, from the "skin out". Washington would cover all of the contingent's training, supply all the military equipment, give overseas allowances to the men above their normal salaries, and provide training for rotational troops. The Thais also received the long-desired Hawk missile anti-aircraft battery and the training costs for military personnel to man it. More importantly, Washington agreed to increase MAP funding for 1968 from $US 60 million to $US 75 million, and to maintain that level for 1969. In addition, as was the practice with other allied troops in Vietnam, the U.S. agreed to provide the Thai soldiers with the food and sundry supplies they would need.38

37 Cable, Bangkok 3319 to State, September 16 1967, file Thailand Volume VII 8/67 to 3/68, #76, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
38 Memorandum, Rostow to LBJ, October 6 1967, file Vietnam 5D(3) Allies: Troop Commitments; Other Aid, 1967-69, #124, NSF Country Files Vietnam, Box 91, LBJL. For a detailed account of U.S. concessions see cable, Bangkok 3319 to State, September 16 1967, file Thailand Volume VII 8/67 to 3/68, #76, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL. See also Blackburn, Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags", 110-111. Blackburn points out that, on the surface, in comparison with the Koreans and Filipinos the Thais did not get much of a deal. However, he argues that if one takes into account American pledges to equip both the Thai contingent and its rotation, the Thais did very well for themselves. Implicit in this concession was that Thai troops would retain all their equipment after service in Vietnam. This meant that in addition to bilateral aid already in place, the Thai military received constant and considerable upgraded military supplies for its contingent. With almost 14 percent of the Thai armed forces serving in Vietnam at the height of Bangkok's commitment, this translated into a significant underwriting of the entire military. The American agreement to provide overseas allowances for these troops also proved to be a boon for the Thais. In subsequent agreements the U.S. agreed to cover death and disability benefits, bonuses, special payments based on individual educational qualifications, flight pay, parachutist pay, incremental combat pay, medical and education allowances for dependents, and various housing and transportation costs. Thais who served in Vietnam were promised combat pay for the duration of their military careers, while every day served there counted as two for retirement purposes.
The head of MACTHAI, General Richard Stilwell, opposed the whole deal, believing the Thai commitment was "too small and unsophisticated." But the president and the Joint Chiefs disagreed. More flags were the priority, even if the price was high. The first 1,000 Thai troops arrived in South Vietnam in September, renamed the "Queen's Cobras" and assigned to the Bear Cat region east of Saigon between U.S. units at Bien Hoa and Long Binh. After the agreement on additional deployments was signed in October, U.S. Special Forces began training a 10,000 man force nick-named the "Black Panthers". Thailand had become a full and open protagonist in the Vietnam War.

With their own troops now in the fight, Thai officials took the liberty to criticise American policy more openly. Thanom, Praphas, and Dawee believed that the air war against North Vietnam was simply too timid. While they did not advocate the mass bombing of the capital region, they did feel that attacks against the Red River Valley dike system were needed to "bend Hanoi's will." In addition, the Thais were insistent that Haiphong should be closed once and for all through either bombing or blockade, strangling Hanoi and putting more economic pressure on the North. The bombing pauses puzzled Bangkok, and although the Thais did not totally discount the possibility of a negotiated settlement of the war, the rationale for a policy that periodically gave the enemy a respite from bombing simply escaped them. The Thais likewise found it hard fathom Washington's fixation on the threat of Chinese intervention; they saw such intervention as unlikely given internal problems in China and the widening split with Moscow. With respect to Cambodia and Laos, the Thais not surprisingly strongly favoured robust bombing and covert military action. Thanat asserted that communists in Cambodia could be cleared out by "dropping a few bombs." 39

39 Randolph, The United States and Thailand, 78.
40 Stanton, Green Berets At War, 281.
41 "Clifford-Taylor Report to the President", August 5 1967, file SD(1) Allies: Troop Commitments 3/67 to 1/69, #44a, NSF Country Files Vietnam, Box 91, LBJL.
Perhaps to divert attention from the unresolved issue of additional Thai troops for Vietnam, in March Thanom agreed to the stationing of more B-52s at Utapao. For the first time, moreover, he publicly acknowledged that U.S. aircraft were using Thai bases for offensive operations in Vietnam. The Thais even allowed a team of ABC reporters headed by John Scali to tour the bases at Takhli and Udom. Media interest in the air bases had been virtually constant despite the Embassy's efforts to dissuade reporters from commenting on the operations. Dean Rusk praised Thanom's public disclosure as "another great contribution which Thailand has made to the allied war effort in Vietnam." In response to questioning from the press about the American position in Thailand, and what it meant for future policy in the region, Rusk stated emphatically that "no country has been stronger in its support for the concept of collective security, and no country has been quicker to recognize that collective security carries obligations as well as benefits." Still the Thais were not totally comfortable with the new openness. For this reason, when in December Associated Press reporters were the first to arrive at the crash sites of two American planes shot down in the Northeast, Graham Martin himself intervened, warning the journalists to ignore the episode in order to protect national security interests and bilateral relations with the Thais. The USIA public affairs officer in Bangkok described Thai efforts to limit press coverage of the crash "as elaborate as the Japanese tea ceremony".

In November the State Department instructed Martin to explore with the Thais another increase in the number of B-52s at Utapao. Martin warned the department that the timing for such a request

---

42 Cable, State 6593 to White House, March 17 1967, file Thailand Volume VI 3/67 to 8/67, #21, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
43 Memorandum, Rostow to George Christian, March 7 1967, file CO 291 Thailand, #7, LBJ Confidential File, VP Files, Box 11, LBJL.
44 Cable, State 158322 to White House, March 20 1967, file Thailand Volume VI 3/67 to 8/67, #27, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
46 Cable, Bangkok 3176 to State, December 11 1967, file Thailand Volume 7 8/67 to 7/68, #45, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
47 Oral history interview, John R. O'Brien with Hans Tuch, February 1988, 9, diskette, GUFA.
was not particularly good. The October decision to send the 10,000 Thai troops to Vietnam had been difficult and divisive. Although the Thais had eventually consented to send the troops, negotiations had dragged on for over two months, and the Thais remained anxious about any additional contributions that might tax their military. Martin feared that a request to increase the number of B-52s would trigger a new round of demands from the Thais, particularly for more Hawk anti-aircraft missiles.48

Martin also reported to the State Department his "impression that we are beginning to experience a longer-run unfavourable period in [the] Thai attitude regarding the American military presence." Although generally muted, criticism by the Thanom regime of the large U.S. presence grew more frequent, and the government was sensitive to concerns that so many Americans were adversely affecting Thai society and culture. In late December, the influential politician and intellectual Kukrit Pramoj wrote a scathing editorial about U.S. forces in Thailand in the Thai language newspaper Siam Rath. He fumed that Americans were "too base" to understand Thai reverence for their King, and that they "threw money around, destroying Thai culture." Martin characterized the editorial as a "long, abusive and vulgar attack on the U.S. and Americans of a type unprecedented in Thai journalism."49 Even the Thai military voiced its concerns about the American presence, claiming that U.S. bases with better jobs and pay drew scarce skilled workers away from the mainstream economy. The diversion of American goods into Thai markets was another worrying aspect of the American presence, as was the inadequate housing and services available to people who flocked to the bases for jobs.50

48 Cable, Bangkok 6269 to State, November 20 1967, file Thailand Volume 7 8/67 to 7/68, #53, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
49 Cable, Bangkok 8083 to State, December 29 1967, folder: Pol 2-1 Thai 1/1/67, CFP Files 1967-69, Thailand, Box 2315, RG 59, USNA.
50 Ibid.
Conservative Thais feared the contaminating effect of the American influx on their culture and customs, while Thanom began to worry how it reflected on his government. Within a few years, several Thai cities had been dramatically transformed by American money and culture; hotels, nightclubs, massage parlours, and neon signs proliferated.\textsuperscript{51} Bangkok was particularly changed in this regard, and in the shadow of its ancient temples emerged a "sin district" that one U.S. Embassy staffer characterised as a "pig heaven" for a young, single American with a few dollars.\textsuperscript{52} Bowing to conservative pressures, early in 1967 Thanom began a campaign to combat the ill-effects of the large American presence. The Thai Cabinet toughened public morality laws, and Thanom publicly urged young Thais to preserve their heritage, and avoid contact with \textit{farangi}.\textsuperscript{53} However, little came of the campaign. Attempts at restricting contact between U.S. servicemen and Thai bar girls failed dismally, in part because Americans spent a great deal of money on "recreation" in Thailand. By 1967, U.S. personnel based in Thailand and U.S. servicemen based in Vietnam who came on "R&\textit{R}" leave injected approximately \$US 22 million annually into the Thai economy.\textsuperscript{54} It may have been hard for the Thai government to ignore the clash of cultures, but it was even harder for it to ignore that kind of money. Martin and the Embassy staff worked on various proposals to minimise the impact of the U.S. presence on the Thais, such as eliminating off-base housing for Americans, improving base recreational facilities, spreading out troop deployments, and encouraging the servicemen to participate more in local civic action programmes. Still, the clash of cultures persisted, slowly changing public opinion in Thailand about the desirability of the large-scale American presence.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{52} Oral history interview, Frederick Z. Brown with Charles Stuart Kennedy, February 2 1990, 16, diskette, GUFA.
\textsuperscript{54} Randolph, \textit{The United States and Thailand}, 62.
\textsuperscript{55} Cable, State 1291 to Bangkok, December 1967, file Thailand Memos 3/67 to 8/67, #112, NSF Country Files, Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
Another issue relating to the larger American presence in Thailand was the absence of a formalised agreement on the deployment of U.S. forces. Towards the end of 1967 the Johnson administration tried to secure a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) for American troops in Thailand. The Thais vehemently objected to the negotiation of a SOFA, believing that it would result in a loss of control for them. Unquestionably, another obstacle was the fact that the Thais had no formal system or mechanism for dealing with such matters. While the troika of Thanom, Praphas, and Dawee was clearly the power base in Thailand, a myriad of lower ranking officers and officials usually handled matters en route to the top, almost always trying to benefit themselves politically or financially in the process. Tiers in the chain of command and decision-making apparatus were extremely complex, and consequently most serious bilateral issues were dealt with on a case by case basis, frustrating Americans used to working within a more consistent and structured process. Even the matter of U.S. troops and air bases was handled with an informal understanding, and with virtually no written record. For the Thais this was the traditional way of doing things. The belief that one's word was all that was needed between friends was a well-entrenched cultural trait. In international diplomacy this tradition allowed the Thais to maintain their independence, giving them an easy way to back out of informal agreements if problems arose.

The management of counter-insurgency in the Northeast was another contentious issue in U.S.-Thai relations in 1967. While the CIA and American military intelligence unquestionably had a considerable influence on Bangkok's handling of counter-insurgency, they were by no means supreme. In fact, MACTHAI lamented that in many regards the Thai government's Communist Suppression Operations Command (CSOC) excluded Americans from major decision-making. This made evaluating Thai counter-insurgency operations very difficult. Where judgements could be

56 SOFA agreements dealt primarily with legal issues involving the deployment of U.S. troops in foreign countries, such as criminal and civil procedures with respect to American soldiers charged under local laws.
57 Randolph, The United States and Thailand, 74.
rendered, MACTHAI reported that in almost every respect Thai operations in the Northeast were undermanned and suffered from poor leadership or inadequate lines of communication. MACTHAI also complained to CINCPAC and the JCS that Embassy officials in Bangkok frequently undermined its efforts, demanding that it coordinate all reports with the Ambassador's staff and omitting its opinions from mission cables to Washington. The rivalry and tension between MACTHAI and the Embassy was so acute that counter-insurgency activities in the entire Northeast were negatively affected. Martin's personal relationship with General Stilwell was notoriously bad, and unquestionably compounded the problem. However, Martin helped to engineer Stilwell's departure in July. Nonetheless, the problems of CSOC's ultimate control of the counter-insurgency programme remained. CSOC yielded far too much power to local Thai commanders who were often notorious for their ineffectiveness and corruption.

Given these problems, it was fortunate for both the Bangkok and Washington that communist activity in Thailand remained minimal. The CIA noted that there were no confirmed attacks on U.S. or Thai military installations in 1966, only assassination hits aimed against local Thai leaders and occasional skirmishes in five Northeastern regions. Again, during 1967 no military installations came under attack, but the number of deaths linked to the insurgency substantially increased. There were 138 people in the Northeast confirmed killed by guerrillas, including 78 government officials. Intelligence estimates in 1967 put the number of insurgents in the whole country at 2,500 and

58 Cable, MACTHAI 14371 to CINCPAC, May 5 1967, file Thailand Volume 6 3/67 to 8/67, #15, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
59 Randolph, The United States and Thailand, 70-71.
62 Ibid.
growing, with 1,500 of those in the North. Captured guerrillas commonly carried Chinese weapons, and documents indicating that they had been trained in Laos, North Vietnam, and Communist China. It was becoming increasingly clear to Washington and Bangkok that Beijing was taking a more active and direct role in the training and organization of the cadres. Dean Rusk repeatedly drew attention to Chinese involvement in his public statements, announcing on a NBC Today programme in January 1967 that a training camp for Thai guerrillas had been confirmed in North Vietnam, and telling USIA reporters in October that both North Vietnamese and Chinese regulars were assisting insurgents in Thailand.

Thailand also had another serious problem on its northern frontier with Burma, where Shan and Hmong tribesmen battled amongst themselves and with remnants of the KMT for control of the lucrative opium trade. The so-called "Opium War" resulted in sporadic and frequently serious fighting along the Thai-Burmese-Lao corridor, eventually drawing in most of the hills tribes. Purportedly in defense of their border, the Thai Army occupied towns and villages adjacent to the Shan states. Careful not to incite their own hill tribes, the Thais blamed problems in the North on the KMT irregulars and local, independent warlords. The KMT had in fact served a useful purpose for Bangkok over the years, acting as a conduit for drugs and money which the Thai Army skimmed and providing some degree of security along the Burmese and Lao frontier. They knew the area well, operated in small, guerrilla bands suited to the mountainous terrain and could communicate in virtually all the tribal languages in addition to Thai and Chinese. The KMT were so successful that they managed to gain the support of some of the smaller hill tribes in the conflict,

63 "The Department of State During the Administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, November 1963-January 1969", Volume 6, Chapter 7, East Asia, Tab H - Thailand, Historical Reports Relating to Diplomacy During the Lyndon Johnson Administration 1963-69, Office of the Executive Secretariat, Box 4, RG 59, USNA.
65 Airgram, Bangkok A-12 to State, October 31 1967, folder: Pol 2 Thai 1/1/67, CFP Files 1967-69, Thailand, Box 2314, RG 59, USNA. In September, the Thai Army deployed nearly 1600 soldiers to the border area near Chiangrai, after Thai intelligence reported over 600 KMT irregulars crossing into Thailand from Burma and Laos.
including the Lisu, Lahu, and Akha. However, after having spent so many years denying the presence of armed KMT factions in the region, Bangkok was now in an awkward position. Acknowledging their presence would be tantamount to admitting past complicity in conflicts between the KMT and both the Burmese and Chinese governments. Denying their existence would expose the KMT to the better armed and organised hill tribes, who were also potential recruits for the communists, and thus jeopardise Thai control of the region.

What made matters worse was the fact that many prominent Thai leaders were well-connected to the drug trade. Sarit had been deeply involved, and although Thanom was more discreet, the opium trade did reach all the way to the Prime Minister's office. Praphas was particularly instrumental in facilitating the trade, in keeping with his role as "an adept manager of an illicit economy that ranged from opium to arms trading." To prevent disclosure of the Thai leadership's links to the drug trade, Bangkok ordered the Thai Army to keep a close eye on KMT villages, while at the same time remaining in a position to protect them and secure a cut of the profits from the trafficking. But the Army caused more problems, occupying Hmong villages in Chiangrai province and extorting opium profits from them too. In May 1967, after several such incidents, the Hmong retaliated, attacking Thai troops northeast of Nan. The Thais responded with great force, razing villages and, under the direction of CSOC, even napalming Hmong positions.

Other clandestine activities in Thailand also broadened as the war in Vietnam continued. Sensitive to Thai concerns about autonomy and their general dislike of everything Vietnamese, the American

---

65 Ibid.
66 Ibid, 415.
67 Zasloff and Unger, eds., *Laos: Beyond the Revolution*, 297. See also Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, passim. Hamilton-Merritt details extensive abuses of the Hmong by the Thais throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. Extortion, assault and rape were common even in those villages not involved with the armed factions and drug trade. The Thais also used the Hmong as part of their security forces, particularly in intelligence gathering operations in Laos (199).
Embassy carefully broached the idea of periodically stationing South Vietnamese troops in the Northeast on routes to and from covert operations in Laos and North Vietnam. The Defense Department wanted the South Vietnamese and Thais to work together in so-called "Spike Teams" from special bases near Nakhon Phanom. Top secret American documents on the issue indicate that at some point Dawee had suggested such the idea was acceptable.70 The plan was part of preparations for operation "Illinois City", in which communist infiltration routes into South Vietnam through Laos would be identified and targeted by dye markers set by the Spike Teams, prior to air or ground attack by American and South Vietnamese forces. In August, Graham Martin hosted a meeting at Udorn with the U.S. Ambassador in Laos, William Sullivan, and both MACTHAI and MACV officials to discuss the project. Martin was cautious about the Thai reaction, but was equally concerned about the operation's overall effectiveness. He did not agree with most intelligence reports on the infiltration routes, believing that accurate detection of the communist routes on a regular basis was virtually impossible. Even though he favoured the dye marker project, Martin feared that unrestricted operations in Laos would ultimately threaten the government of Souvanna Phouma, which in turn would jeopardise American foreign policy in the region and irreparably damage Washington's international image.71

At the same time, Martin worried that Washington did not take communist infiltration of Cambodia seriously enough. He anticipated that any effort to block routes through Laos would simply divert the flow through Cambodian territory, and that notwithstanding the lack of hard evidence, Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces already enjoyed sanctuary there. Martin pointed out

70 Cable, Bangkok 647 to State, July 18 1967, file Thailand Volume 6/67 to 8/67, #8, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
71 Cable, Bangkok 1664 to State, August 14 1967, file Thailand Volume 6 3/67 to 8/67, #1, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL. From Martin's cable it appears that Sullivan favoured the expansion of U.S. covert operations in Laos to effectively embrace the whole country, regardless of the political consequences. Martin, however, cautioned that operation Prairie Fire, already underway in the Bolovens plateau immediately adjacent to South Vietnam, was sufficient.
that by waiting for absolute confirmation of communist trails in Cambodia, Washington was making
exactly the same mistake it made in 1963-64, when delays in interdiction allowed the Pathet Lao to
gain valuable ground. The solution to Martin was clear: air and Special Forces strikes from Thailand
against communist positions in Northeastern Cambodia were the only way to prevent the need for
much larger and more expensive operations later.\textsuperscript{72}

The situation in Cambodia continued to have important implications for U.S.-Thai relations.
During the spring and summer a series of local protests in the north-western province of
Battambang turned into the so-called Samlaut Rebellion, which was ruthlessly suppressed by the
Cambodian government.\textsuperscript{73} Sihanouk blamed leftists and their foreign communist agents, promising
to be as relentless against them as he was against the Khmer Serei and other right-wing groups. But
after crushing the rebellion, Sihanouk worried that he had appeared too reactionary. To temper that
impression, he once again launched into diatribes against the U.S. and Thailand. He then did little to
prevent large demonstrations against his Prime Minister Lon Nol, who sought better relations with
the U.S. Lon Nol's resignation in May 1967 effectively neutralised the rightists in Cambodia,
allowing Sihanouk to lean once more towards the left. Sihanouk's decision in June 1967 to upgrade
diplomatic relations with Hanoi and to give quasi-official recognition to the Vietcong also did not
bode well for the U.S. The fact that Cambodia had taken little action to secure its eastern provinces
bordering with South Vietnam from external communist infiltration further contributed to the
impression in Washington that Sihanouk was fast becoming another one of Beijing's dupes.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Michael Vickery, "Cambodia", in Allen and Ngo Vinh Long, eds., Coming to Terms, 99.
\textsuperscript{74} Chandler, The Tragedy of Cambodian History, 163-168. Cambodia's quasi-official recognition of the Vietcong
appears to have been in exchange for public statements by Hanoi (and later both Moscow and Beijing) promising not
to violate Cambodia's sovereignty. The recognition was, Chandler points out, an indication that Sihanouk was
convinced the communists would win in South Vietnam, and thus represented a naive attempt at remaining neutral in
order to avoid communist take-over of Cambodia. The Samlaut Rebellion unarguably demonstrated that there was
widespread dissatisfaction in Cambodia and, more importantly, that there was an indigenous communist movement
underway.
However, the State Department had not totally given up on the Prince. A special report by the department observed that Sihanouk was in a very difficult position, and that his attempts to accommodate the communists in Vietnam were designed only to protect his country and his own rule. The report suggested that with international attention focused on Cambodia, the Prince could be expected to either fully declare his allegiance to the communists or admit to his inability to control them. In the first instance, very little would be lost. U.S.-Cambodian relations were already at their lowest ebb, while the country's military strength and political stability rendered it rather inconsequential in relation to any outcome in Vietnam. In case of the latter, by abandoning the pretense of neutrality Sihanouk would invariably seek foreign, and likely American, military assistance; in this instance the interdiction of communists in the eastern provinces could be earnestly undertaken by U.S. forces.\(^75\)

As always, the Thais took special interest in Washington's approach to Cambodia. So great was the animosity between Thailand and Cambodia that despite the solidification of the U.S.-Thai relationship through the war in Vietnam, the Thanom government still tended to view American attitudes towards Phnom Penh as a litmus test of overall U.S. policy in the region. While official Thai support for the *Khmer Seri* and other non-communist anti-Sihanouk forces was kept quiet, it no doubt continued.\(^76\) Thai officials were concerned when, in late October, Washington decided to improve relations with Cambodia once again. In an event rich with irony, this time the olive branch was carried by Jacqueline Kennedy, the widow of the former President in whose death Sihanouk had publicly rejoiced.\(^77\) To enlist Sihanouk's services as a go-between with Hanoi to secure the release of American prisoners of war, she went to Phnom Penh in early November, well-briefed by

\(^76\) Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, 134.
\(^77\) Osborne, *Sihanouk*, 195-196.
the State Department. Sihanouk received her with great courtesy, but took the opportunity to complain about expanding U.S. support for Thailand and South Vietnam, countries he felt were determined to destroy Cambodia. Although the Kennedy trip was short on substance, it and another visit headed by Chester Bowles in January 1968 reflected subtle changes in Sihanouk's demeanour towards the U.S. However, with its growing military prowess and continued hostility towards Cambodia, Thailand remained a big obstacle to any improvement in Washington's relationship with Phnom Penh.78

In November 1967, Graham Martin left his post as Ambassador to Thailand, having completed his four-year rotation. Martin would, however, return to Southeast Asia in April 1973 as ambassador to South Vietnam.79 He would be best remembered not for his long and successful public career, but for being the last U.S. Ambassador in Saigon, fleeing from the Embassy rooftop as the communists advanced into the city. When he left Bangkok Martin was confident that his tenure in Thailand had been a success, and by most accounts it was. Despite his often difficult personality, Martin adeptly managed the U.S.-Thai relationship. He secured Thailand as an invaluable ally, helping to gain use of Thai soil for U.S. military operations, and eventually helping to get troops for the war in Vietnam. At the same time he pursued Washington for a stronger commitment to Thailand, which he believed was fundamental to an effective American policy in Southeast Asia. While the issue of a bilateral alliance remained contentious, Martin did his best to solidify U.S.-Thai relations and to focus Washington's attention on Thailand. Convinced that developments in Thailand had as much significance for the war in Vietnam as was true of the reverse, Martin took comfort that he had made a considerable contribution to regional cooperation and the success of

78 Cables, Bangkok 5748 to State, November 8 1967 and Bangkok 5749 to State, November 8 1967. file Thailand Memos Volume VI 3/67 to 8/67, #135 and #134, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
American policy in Southeast Asia. But that success proved to be as elusive as ever in Vietnam. As 1967 ended the war was becoming more and more a national trauma for the United States as the situation in the South continued to deteriorate, leaving Americans deeper in the quagmire. Now fully a partner in the fight, the Thais began a difficult process of adjustment themselves, and the relationship between Bangkok and Washington remained the focus. On the surface U.S.-Thai relations looked strong, but behind the scenes troubling issues remained unresolved. The U.S. wanted Thailand to commit even more to the war, while the Thais remained hesitant that the U.S. could stay the course in Vietnam, and worried what would happen if the Americans went home and left them alone in a communist dominated Southeast Asia. As 1967 came to a close, the Thais were discovering just how difficult it was to swim with the whale, and avoid the crocodile.

---

* Cable, Bangkok 1664 to State, August 14 1967, file Thailand Volume VI 3/67 to 8/67, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
In December 1967, the Prime Minister of Australia, Harold Holt, disappeared while swimming off the coast of his country. Lyndon Johnson decided to attend the memorial services himself, and set out for Canberra just before Christmas. South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu also attended the funeral, using the occasion to discuss U.S. policy towards Saigon with Johnson. Following several hours of talks, the two leaders issued a joint declaration reiterating their mutual commitments to defend the South, but it was clear that significant problems existed. Thieu interpreted any diplomatic overtures to the communists as an admission of weakness, while Johnson was anxious to extricate his administration from what was becoming a progressively more frustrating and painful war.  

En route home from Australia, Johnson stopped at the U.S. military base at Cam Ranh Bay in South Vietnam and the air force base at Korat, Thailand. It was his second visit to both in just over a year, and it came as a welcome surprise for American troops. At Cam Ranh Bay, Johnson forcefully endorsed his top commanders in Vietnam, dispelling any notion that Washington was losing faith in them. He was also quick to commend U.S. forces fighting there, declaring that the communists had "met their master in the field" and that his administration was "not going to yield. And we're not going to shimmy." Privately, however, Johnson's doubts grew. He had admitted to

---

1 Berman, Lyndon Johnson’s War, 123.
2 Johnson arrived at Korat at 22:30 hours on December 22. He addressed the troops at 05:30, leaving for Pakistan and Rome en route home at 05:50. Such quick visits prompted journalist Frank Comer to note that "Johnson keeps dropping out of the sky at mysterious locations." The stopover at Korat, however brief, showed how important Johnson considered the U.S. military facilities in Thailand. See memorandum to the President, C. Maguire, December 23 1967, file Appointment File - December 22-23 1967, Korat, Thailand RTAF base, The President's Appointment File (Diary Back-Up), 12/14/67 - 12/26/67, Box 85, LBJL.
3 As quoted in Berman, Lyndon Johnson’s War, 123.
the Australian cabinet that the enemy was getting stronger, and that the U.S. and its allies faced even more difficult days ahead.

In just four days Johnson travelled over 43,000 kilometres, returning to the U.S. in time to deliver his Christmas 1967 message from the White House. There is little doubt that at least in part the President's whirlwind tour was calculated political theatre. 1968 was a presidential election year, and Johnson needed to instill a sense of optimism both in the field and at home about American efforts in Vietnam. But his success was very short-lived. By the end of January U.S. forces appeared fully on the defensive, losing the war despite everything the administration claimed. Clark Clifford, who replaced Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defense in March, later observed that 1968 was the hardest and longest year of his life. Dean Rusk recalled that most of the year was a blur, and that he survived on a regimen of cigarettes, aspirin, and scotch.¹ By the end of the year the war in Vietnam had decisively changed course. Lyndon Johnson and the Democrats were on their way out of the White House, and American society was more divided than it had been since the civil war. Such manifest change dramatically affected U.S. foreign policy in just about every regard, and Washington's relations with Thailand were no exception. As 1968 came to a close, a new wind blew in Southeast Asia, testing the bamboo once again.

On January 31, 1968 the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong guerrillas launched the Tet Offensive. Some 80,000 NVA and Vietcong, roughly one-quarter of the total combined communist forces, struck simultaneously in 100 cities and major towns, hoping to demonstrate widespread communist support in the South. Hanoi also wanted to show how ineffective nearly four years of American military action had been, and that despite all the bombing, it was capable of coordinating a major offensive below the 17th parallel. U.S. intelligence anticipated an offensive, but was surprised by its timing and scope. In fact, rumours of an offensive were widespread, and in the

¹ Herring, LBJ and Vietnam, 165.
weeks before American and Vietnamese operatives had even captured documents suggesting something big was underway. But Washington was in a difficult dilemma. Admitting that the offensive had surprised the U.S. military, or acknowledging its scope belied the notion that the Vietcong were not very popular in South Vietnam, which in turn fundamentally undermined justification for the American presence there. Instead the Johnson administration maintained that Tet was an act of desperation, a last-ditch attempt by Hanoi to conquer South Vietnam. In keeping with the portrayal, mention of the Vietcong was kept to a minimum.\(^5\)

The Tet Offensive was a military disaster for the communists. By some accounts almost one-half of committed Vietcong forces were lost. No major territory was gained and the anticipated insurrections of Southerners never materialized. However, while from a strategic standpoint Tet proved to be a colossal failure for the North and Vietcong, its success politically and in terms of American public opinion was tremendous. Television images of the siege at Khe Sanh, fierce street fighting in Hue, and Vietcong guerrillas on the lawn of the American Embassy greatly undermined the administration's credibility. That was followed in March by more hearings on U.S. troop increases in Vietnam, which would reveal embarrassing details of government machinations.\(^6\)

With the Tet offensive Johnson's advisers were even more divided over what course of action to take. In late February, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle Wheeler, went to Saigon to report on the Tet Offensive. His report, submitted to the President on February 27, was deeply pessimistic. While he backed Westmoreland's request for additional troops, Wheeler had never been very optimistic about an American military victory. The February report was a reflection of that uncertainty, and a gloomy assessment for the future which shocked the President.\(^7\) Outgoing

\(^5\) Ibid. See also Berman, Lyndon Johnson's War, 162-164. Westmoreland's deputy commander, General Bruce Palmer, later compared U.S. intelligence failures with respect to Tet to those at Pearl Harbour. George Kennan observed that there really were no comparisons; Tet was the worst intelligence debacle in American history.

\(^6\) Berman, Lyndon Johnson's War, 165-175.

\(^7\) Gétégéman, et al, Vietnam and America, 382-385. See also Herring, America's Longest War, 194.
Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, believed that the Vietcong were not acting out of desperation at all, but were in fact growing in popularity. He and Dean Rusk opposed requests from the Joint Chiefs to expand air attacks against the North and reduce the number of targets off-limits to U.S. planes. While McNamara's replacement, Clark Clifford, backed the military on this issue, he stood against troop increases secretly requested by Westmoreland in late February. Moreover, he argued that it was time for a comprehensive review of U.S. military planning. He recommended the creation of a new task force to give the beleaguered General guidance, clearly encouraging the President to finally abandon his steadfast support for Westmoreland. Even McGeorge Bundy, the hawkish former National Security Adviser, recommended pursuing negotiation instead of retaliation for Tet. It was time, he said, to stop the bombing.

With mounting political opposition to his policy at home, and mounting casualties in the field, Johnson privately contemplated a change in strategy. But publicly he stood by his Vietnam policy, and refused to accept the possibility of failure. He was determined to stay what he saw as the middle course in Vietnam, deeply and personally committed to achieving military victory or a respectable peace. Johnson felt alone, abandoned by some of his closest advisers. He was emotional and clearly depressed, drawing more towards religion than ever before. He was frequently angry, lashing out about those who had turned their backs on him, and he was acutely sensitive to his public portrayal, aware that this war had in many ways become his own war, that he

---

8 Rusk, As I Saw It, 477-485. See also Hunt, Lyndon Johnson's War, 116.
9 Gentleman, et al, Vietnam and America, 385-393. Clifford claimed that at this point he turned against a military solution to the conflict. The JCS was unable to specify exactly how many troops would be needed and for how long, prompting Clifford to abandon his long-standing support of military action. Clifford's detailed report on Vietnam, submitted on March 4, suggested calling up 262,000 reserves to active service, but deploying only 22,000 in Vietnam. His concerns were kept private, although others such as White House aide Harry MacPherson joined in the growing chorus against the war. See also, Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) television documentary, Vietnam: A Television History, episode "Tet 1968", PBS and WNED (Boston), 1996.
10 Hunt, Lyndon Johnson's War, 116.
12 Berman, Lyndon Johnson's War, 148.
was being held responsible for a bloody and costly struggle in which victory appeared more elusive than ever. Johnson lashed out at the press for distorting the war, and turning the American public against him. He accused liberal academics and activists who called for a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam of being naive about communism, and misleading the youth of America. He mocked dissenters in Congress, like Senator William Fulbright, to whom he referred as "Senator Halfbright", and a "frustrated old woman." And the President struck out at his own party, which, like the nation, was becoming sharply divided over Vietnam.

Johnson wanted out of the Vietnam quagmire, but not at the price of capitulation to the enemy. He felt that a bombing halt now would only encourage the communists. He wanted to maintain the so-called "San Antonio" formula, which took its name from a September 1967 speech in San Antonio, Texas in which the President offered an end to the bombing once Hanoi demonstrated it would "lead promptly to productive discussion." Johnson wanted to defend American prestige and honour through a military victory, but realized that his cherished domestic programs and reforms were jeopardized by the tremendous costs the war was incurring. He wanted to remain President, but knew that division and protest at home were inextricably linked to Vietnam, and that he was rapidly losing public support. On February 27, reporting from South Vietnam on the aftermath of Tet, CBS broadcaster Walter Cronkite told viewers that the U.S. was "mired in stalemate", adding that "to say we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past." Normally even-handed in covering the war, Cronkite's unusual editorial reflected the depth of discontent and dissent over the war in so-called "middle America". Even the President is said to have acknowledged, "Cronkite was it."

---

13 As quoted in Hunt, Lyndon Johnson's War, 114.
14 Levy, The Debate Over Vietnam, 76-84.
17 Young, The Vietnam Wars, 226.
On March 10 the *New York Times* broke the story of Westmoreland's secret troop request.\(^{18}\) Public reaction was swift and severe. A Gallup poll taken shortly thereafter showed that fully 50 percent of Americans now disagreed with the President's policy on Vietnam, while another 17 percent were undecided, and only 33 percent still believed in a military solution.\(^{19}\) Combined with the doubts expressed from within his administration, this helped confirm Johnson's decision to remove Westmoreland from field command on March 23. While Westmoreland was promoted to Army Chief of Staff, it was readily apparent that he had been "kicked upstairs". The strategy of attrition which the U.S. had followed since 1965 was a failure, and the President had lost his faith both in it and his Generals.

Johnson's direction with respect to Vietnam after the Tet Offensive was equally shaped by concerns for his own political future. It was clear by early 1968 that the economic costs of the war in Vietnam threatened the "Great Society", and risked building up a massive foreign trade deficit that would burden the U.S. economy for generations.\(^{20}\) Business leaders, as well as "middle America" were beginning to doubt the President's leadership.\(^{21}\) A steep decline in public support for Johnson's Vietnam policy was evidenced by his narrow margin of victory over anti-war candidate Senator Eugene McCarthy (D-Minnesota) in the New Hampshire Democratic primary on March 13, and the decision soon after by Robert Kennedy to enter the nomination race. Having lived in the shadow of the slain President Kennedy, Johnson was not anxious to openly lock horns with his extremely popular younger brother.\(^{22}\)


\(^{19}\) Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 190.


\(^{22}\) Gardner, *Pay And Price*, passim. Gardner argues that Johnson was obsessed with the Kennedys, and that this contributed to his inflexibility with respect to Vietnam. In an attempt to protect himself for being held responsible for the war, Johnson tried to convince others in the administration that John Kennedy was committed to the defense of South Vietnam, and would have pursued the same course of military action. After Robert Kennedy's assassination, Johnson lamented how "the Kennedys could do this to me... one getting killed at the beginning and another at the end of my term." (473).
Two weeks later, on March 31, Johnson addressed the nation on television in one of most important and moving speeches in American history. Clearly tired and sad, the President called for an immediate partial bombing halt, and for negotiations towards a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Without actually saying it, Johnson was admitting that he and his administration had failed in nearly four years of war. Then, he surprised his listeners by announcing his decision not to seek re-election. Ironically, following the speech, public opinion polls revealed that support for Johnson increased. Johnson's decision not to run in the 1968 presidential election opened up major divisions in the Democratic Party, which widened throughout the year. The assassinations of charismatic civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in April, and Robert Kennedy in June dealt the party a severe blow. Anti-war demonstrations outside the Democrat National Convention in Chicago in August exploded into riots, and shocked the American public. The Democratic Party, and the nation, looked weak and divided, only adding to problems half a world away in Vietnam.

In the midst of such tumultuous domestic events, Johnson continued to face the war. Despite the conciliatory tone of his speech on March 31, he remained very sceptical about any negotiations with Hanoi. Consequently, while American and North Vietnamese representatives met officially for the first time in Paris on May 13, Johnson maintained maximum military pressure in Vietnam. But the North Vietnamese would concede to nothing without first securing an unconditional end to American bombing. Frustrated and angered by their intransigence, Johnson stepped up military operations in South Vietnam throughout the spring and summer of 1968, tripling B-52 bombing missions and conducting the largest search-and-destroy missions in the history of the war. In June, Johnson rejected an offer by Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin to secure Vietnamese cooperation in

---

the Paris talks in exchange for an end to the bombing, fearing another attempt to distract Washington while the enemy consolidated positions in the field.  

By the fall of 1968 it was clear that despite its desire for peace in Vietnam, the Johnson administration had not abandoned its original goals. It wasn't until October 31, on the eve of the presidential election, that Johnson finally called for an end to the bombing of North Vietnam, in one of his last major acts in the war.  

It was, however, not enough to help secure the White House for his party. In one of the closest elections in U.S. history, the Republican candidate, Richard M. Nixon, defeated Humphrey by less than half a million votes. In part Nixon's success was owed to the belief that peace in Vietnam would be secured with his leadership.

The war in Vietnam and the tremendous political developments that took place in America during 1968 had a great effect on the course of U.S.-Thai relations. Thailand's military participation in the war continued, and in fact increased throughout the year. But the anxiety of Thai leaders about the steadfastness of their American ally also grew. Bangkok watched with concern the growing anti-war movement in the U.S., fearing that it would force the Johnson administration to abandon Southeast Asia. Now that Thailand was a full and open protagonist in the war, an American withdrawal from the region would spell disaster for it. Thailand would be left alone, surrounded by enemies. Moreover, the Thais continued to face their own communist insurgency, and without American assistance, it was bound to grow. In 1968, Thai leaders were still prepared to stand firm with the Americans, but at the same time, they once more tested the changing political winds in Southeast Asia.

26 Herring, LBJ and Vietnam, 164.
28 Ibid., 583-584. Kamow points out that the difference in terms of popular vote was less than 1 percent, but that by itself such results are deceiving. Based on his domination of key states, Nixon won 301 electoral college votes to Humphrey's 191. Moreover, support for the Republicans was divided by the independent candidacy of Alabama Governor George Wallace, who garnered nearly 10 million votes.
Johnson's decision not to run in the 1968 election sent major shock waves through the Thai government. The new American ambassador in Bangkok, Leonard Unger, reported that when he delivered the news to Thanat Khoman, the Foreign Minister "went through the roof." The Thais were worried that a new administration might not keep the recent promises made by the president with respect to military and economic aid. In fact, Prime Minister Thanom worried that Robert Kennedy would win the White House, and that he would withdraw from Southeast Asia altogether.

At a news conference on April 1, Thanom told reporters that under Kennedy "American policy would be greatly changed. We might be deserted. I am afraid that America's prestige as the leader of the free world will vanish and nobody will feel any trust and confidence in it, at least in this part of the world." No doubt worried about the impact on Thailand of Johnson's decision not to run, Thanom and an extended party visited the U.S. in early May. A State Department paper on the visit advised the President to bear in mind Thai sensitivities, and especially those of Thanat, who was characterised as "the most authoritative Asian statesman." Johnson was also advised to stay away altogether from the Thai Generals accompanying Thanom, whom the report described in very unflattering terms.

At the top of the agenda for the U.S. was the negotiation of a final Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), something Bangkok had become increasingly reluctant to do given the apparent American shift in fighting the war in Vietnam. With respect to U.S. troops in Thailand, in order to assuage Bangkok's concerns over sovereignty, the President was counselled to reaffirm that the air bases

29 Randolph, The United States and Thailand, 130.
30 Cable, Bangkok 6308 to State, April 1 1968, file Thailand Volume 7, 8/67 to 7/68, #32, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LB/3L. Thai leaders followed the 1968 party nominations and the election carefully. Most favoured Richard Nixon. He had been to Thailand, and had always spoken of the Thais as being important allies. Hearing the election results in November, Thanom was pleased, and he predicted that Nixon would not abandon Asia.
31 Scope paper, MJ Spear, May 8-9 1968, file Thailand 5/8-8/68 PM Thanom Kittichakorn Briefing Book 1 of 2, #9, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 285, LB/3L. After twenty-one formal meetings reviewing the draft SOFA agreement drawn up by American officials in November 1967, Washington had withdrawn the proposal for further revision in February 1968.

295
were Thai "in every sense of the word", and that there were "no Americans in field operations of a counter-insurgency nature and never have been."32 In his meeting with Thanom, the President did his best to reassure him that the friendship between their two nations would not be affected by the anti-war movement in the U.S. and that critics in the American press and even Congress did not represent popular opinion.33 Nothing substantial came of the Thanom trip. There was no progress toward a SOFA agreement, nor was there for remainder of Johnson's term. In briefing the press afterwards, NSC Staffer Marshall Wright reiterated the administration's commitment to the SEATO agreement and the Rusk-Thanom letter. When asked if there were any qualms about supporting Thailand's less than democratic leadership, Wright characterised the military junta as a "collegiate group", "collegial in the classic sense."34

Thanom did not pursue a bilateral alliance during his trip to the U.S., despite continuing Thai displeasure with SEATO. At the organisation's annual meeting in New Zealand in April, Thanat made it clear that Thailand had essentially given up hopes of reforming or replacing the organisation. "We will have to seek new friends", he said, "we must take account of the changing situation and protect our interests." Exactly who the new friends were, Thanom did not say, but there was no doubt that the comment was directed towards "old friends" in the SEATO family.35 The New York Times reported that the New Zealand meeting yielded the "strongest evidence yet that the [SEATO] anti-communist alliance in Asia has virtually ceased to exist, except as a flossy forum for statement-making."36 Washington, however, still championed SEATO's role in Southeast

32 Background briefing, Marshall Wright (NSC Staff) to LBJ, May 7 1968, file Thailand 5/8-8/68 PM Thanom Kittichakom Briefing Book 1 of 2, #36, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 285, LBJL.
33 Memorandum of conversation, 7632, Thanom Kittichakom with Lyndon Johnson, Washington, May 9 1968, file Thailand Memos Volume 7, 8/67 to 7/68, NSF Country Files Thailand, #167a, Box 284, LBJL.
34 Background briefings, "Visit of Prime Minister of Thailand", with Marshall Wright, White House, May 7 1968, file BB #32 - Background Briefings etc. May 7, 1968 - June 28, 1968, #1437, Background Briefings, Box 83, White House Press Office Files, LBJL.
35 Memo, "Thailand and SEATO", no author, no date, SEATO file, Tom Bellinger Files, Box 14, LBJL.
Asia. On the 14th anniversary of the organisation in September, Dean Rusk extolled the contribution by SEATO members of 50,000 troops to the war effort in Vietnam. 37

Keeping the Thais calm and securely in the American camp in the months between Johnson's March 31 announcement and Nixon's November election was a major task for officials in Washington. Fortunately, they could call upon the very capable Leonard Unger to assist in this task. Unger had been deputy mission chief in Bangkok from 1958 to 1962, and then Ambassador to Laos until the end of 1964. From 1965 to 1967 he served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East, a key position on the Johnson administration's decision-making team for Asia. With such experience, Unger was an excellent selection to succeed Martin. He spoke good Thai, which was a particularly useful asset given Thanom's difficulty with English. Moreover, Unger had earned the respect of all major political players in Thailand for his work as Deputy Chief during the tumultuous crisis in Laos in 1962. It was he who had smoothed over matters when Averell Harriman insulted Lao strongman Phoumi in May 1961, driving him away from cooperation with the U.S. It was likewise Unger who had helped convince Sarit to attend the Geneva Conference on Laos in May 1962, and then to allow American troops into Thailand during the Nam Tha crisis later that month. As Ambassador in Vientiane, Unger had always kept the Thai perspective in mind, which his predecessors in that post seldom seemed to do.

In taking Unger from his senior position in the State Department, the Johnson administration showed how much importance it attached to the Bangkok post. Washington also viewed with some urgency the need to fill the vacant ambassadorship, arranging for Unger to be sworn in as ambassador after his arrival at his post, which was very rare. 38 The Thais were extremely pleased

37 Department of State press release #201, September 8 1968, file IT 45 SEATO, International Organizations, Box 9, WHCF, LBJL. Contingents from Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and Thailand constituted SEATO forces in Vietnam.

38 Oral history interview, Leonard Unger with Charles Stuart Kennedy, May 1989, 37, diskette, GUFA.
with Unger's appointment, and took it as a demonstration of Washington's commitment to sustaining their friendship. But Unger's mission went beyond maintaining Thailand's goodwill. Unger quickly set about establishing greater personal control over all missions launched from Thai bases, and especially the conduct of American personnel on them. He worried about the effects U.S. troops in Thailand were having on bilateral relations, pointing out that there was a fundamental difference in the way the two sides viewed the stationing of military personnel. Bangkok accepted and even welcomed American troops, but traditional concerns about cultural impact and political independence continued to bother the Thai government.³⁹

Unsavoury matters, such as prostitution and the drug trade, were the usual source of problems involving U.S. troops and Thais, but on occasion an overly intrusive press corps caused more embarrassment. Such was the case in August, when United Press International reporter Robert Kaylor published his story about the "unconventional war" in which Thailand was taking part. Kaylor somehow managed to gain access to the U.S. air base at Nakhon Phanom, and despite the Embassy's efforts to keep him silent, he insisted on telling about operations "shrouded in secrecy." Referring to "mystery planes" without insignia, Kaylor suggested that Americans and Thais were flying missions into Laos, despite vehement denial from both Washington and Bangkok. He noted in an unsubtle allusion that many of the planes he saw were A-26s, used in Cuba during the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Kaylor's story and accompanying photos thoroughly upset the Thais, who quickly moved for his deportation. Even though Bangkok had previously admitted the existence of the bases, such unflattering publicity was unwelcome, and came at a time when U.S.-Thai relations were

³⁹ Cable, Bangkok 18214 to Bill Bundy, July 1968, file Thailand General Volume 8, 7/68 to 12/68, #69, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
clearly ebbing. Commenting publicly for the White House on the Kaylor story, Walt Rostow referred to it as a "tale of woe."\(^{40}\)

The State Department made it clear to Unger that his role as ambassador included the oversight of Thai involvement in the Vietnam War. This meant that he co-ordinated various operations in Indochina that used Thailand as a base, and was charged with the responsibility of obtaining more assistance from Bangkok, including combat troops for Vietnam.\(^{41}\) Haggling over the Thai contribution to the "many flags" programme in Vietnam continued to complicate relations in 1968. Washington insisted that at least one-half of all troops sent from Thailand be combat ready, because it was not cost-effective to maintain non-fighting contingents in Vietnam in a period of greater fiscal restraint. U.S. negotiators told the Thais that they expected across the board MAP reductions of between 20 and 40 percent in 1969.\(^{42}\) Delivery of promised troops was also an issue. During Thanom's visit to the U.S. in May, President Johnson made it plain that the entire 10,000 man force pledged by Thailand in November 1967 was expected soon in Vietnam. Following negotiations with the Thais adeptly handled by Unger, 5,500 men from the Queen's Cobras arrived in August. By the end of the year, there were just over 6,000 Thai combat troops in Vietnam, making up one-tenth of all foreign contingents.\(^{43}\)

Thailand's cooperation remained fundamental to the prosecution of the war in Vietnam during 1968. Top secret "Operation Prairie Fire" along the Lao panhandle was conducted primarily by U.S. aircraft based in Thailand. There is strong evidence that Thai Special Forces participated in ground

---

\(^{40}\) Cable, Bangkok 19730 to State, September 2 1968, file Thailand Volume 8, 7/68 to 12/68, #76a, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Cable, Department of Defense 62177 to Bangkok, October 12 1967, file Thailand Volume 7, 8/67 to 7/68, #125, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.

\(^{43}\) U.S. Department of State Administrative History, Volume 1, Chapter 7-9, Section H, Thailand, Box 3, Administrative Histories, LBJL. In addition to troops the Thais supplied jet training facilities for South Vietnamese pilots, a 35 man operations team for transport within South Vietnam, a $US 20 million rice credit to Saigon and a $US 242,000 donation in cement and iron. See also State air gram CA 11392 to all diplomatic posts, October 7 1968, file Vietnam 5D(1), Allies: Troop Commitments; Other Aid 3/67 - 1/69, NSF Country File Vietnam, Box 91, LBJL.
incursions as part of the same plan.\textsuperscript{44} In one of the most secret operations of the Vietnam War, Thai bases and personnel were instrumental in the USAF “Project Heavy Green”, which was fully implemented by October 1967. The project involved the stationing of an advanced ground-directed radar bombing system, the MSQ-77, at “Lima Site 85” on Phou Pha Thi mountain in north-eastern Laos, just twelve nautical miles from the Vietnamese border.\textsuperscript{45} Thai Special Forces “volunteers” served with nearly 1,000 Hmong tribesmen to guard the perilous base, while a seven man team of Thai radio operators and interpreters complimented a small detachment of American technicians and CIA personnel. The Thai air base at Udorn acted as the construction, transportation, and support facility for Site 85. Udorn was also the headquarters of the USAF 7/13\textsuperscript{th}, which, in conjunction with the CIA and U.S. Embassy in Vientiane, commanded the ill-fated project. In March 1968, after less than five months in operation, Site 85 was overrun by communist forces. In the single largest ground combat loss of USAF personnel during the Vietnam War, twelve Americans were either killed or unaccounted for. An unknown, but almost certainly higher number of Thais and Hmong were also lost.\textsuperscript{46} Washington and Bangkok acted quickly to cover the whole affair up.\textsuperscript{47}

Counter-insurgency operations within Thailand also continued to flourish during 1968. In December 1967 the U.S. Special Forces 46th company was relocated to a new warfare centre at

\textsuperscript{44} Cable, State 148183 to Bangkok, April 1968, file Thailand Volume 7, 8/67 to 7/68, #99, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284.

\textsuperscript{45} Timothy N. Castle, \textit{One Day Too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 1-23. The MSQ-77 had been used successfully since 1965 to guide U.S. aircraft flying out of both South Vietnam and Thailand. It supported beacon-equipped aircraft in all weather conditions over a 200 mile nautical mile range, which with respect to Site 85, just 125 miles from Hanoi, gave “heretofore unavailable radar coverage of high-priority targets” in North Vietnam (30).

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, \textit{passim}. Castle points out that the Thais attached to Project Heavy Green did not perform well at all. They did not cooperate with the Hmong, whom they regarded with contempt. The Thai Special Forces at Site 85 were “mostly undistinguished” in combat (88). They failed to detect the advance of communist sappers (3). And many ran away during the communist attack (132).

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, chapters 11-17. Immediately following the evacuation of personnel from Site 85, U.S. bombers out of Udorn destroyed the facility, possibly killing some of those now listed as missing in action. With tragic irony, a new radar site, code-named “Nancy”, was built immediately afterwards at Phou Mano in north-eastern Thailand. Just 125 miles from Vietnam, this base was capable of providing exactly the same coverage as Site 85 (73-74).
Lopburi, where it trained Thai units in guerrilla warfare. By July 1968, three full complements of Thai troops were put in service to conduct special operations, primarily in Laos. Under special project “Folder Mark”, U.S. Special Forces designed long-range reconnaissance and ranger missions for the Thai Army, as well as BPP and PARU units. Most of the units were deployed along the Lao border, where the Thais were essentially engaged in a full-scale counter-insurgency campaign. The “College Eye Task Force” ran advanced radar relay flights over the Gulf of Tonkin and Laos, while “Igloo White Task Force” ran in-country electronic sensor operations throughout the Northeast. American-led psychological operations, requested by the Thai government, expanded dramatically. By early 1968 USIA Thailand had a staff of fifty-two running such projects in thirteen districts. Its budget for that year topped $US 15.5 million, making it the third largest USIA field bureau in the world behind South Vietnam and Japan.

In 1968 the guerrilla movement in Northeast Thailand for the first time appeared to represent a viable threat. In April the communists overran a BPP center at Ban Huai Khu in Chiang Changwat, with only two of the seventeen defenders surviving. Thai Special Forces gave chase and swept the area for several days afterwards, but they were unable to catch the perpetrators. During that spring Thai troops suffered a relatively high number of casualties, victims of well-executed ambushes throughout the region. Then, in July, a small band of guerrillas penetrated Udorn air base, destroying several U.S. C-141 and F-4D aircraft as well as HU-43 choppers. It was the first serious attack against U.S. forces in Thailand. Five Americans and Thais were wounded in the incident.

---
48 Stanton, Green Berets At War, 281. As part of the Muscle Shoals project, aerial units out of Nakhon Phanom also took part as Task Force Alpha in interdiction campaigns against the Pathet Lao. See various messages, Department of Defense to JCS, December 1967 through February 1968, file Muscle Shoals, Walt Rostow Files, Box 7, LBJL.
49 See folder: Def 15 Thai-U.S. 1/1/68, CFP Files 1967-69, Thailand, Box 1549, RG 59, USNA.
50 Administrative History of the United States Information Agency - Volume 1: Administrative History, 2 of 2, 5-43 to 5-55, USIA Volume 1, Administrative History, Narrative, Box 1, Administrative Histories, LBJL. In terms of relative growth over the period from 1964 to 1968, USIA Thailand led all other missions. It accounted for fully 20 percent of moneys in USIA’s total foreign assistance budget. See also oral history interview, Willis J. Sutter (USIA Thailand officer 1967-71) with Jack O’Brien, February 1988, diskette, GUFA.
51 Cable, Bangkok 14795 to State, May 20 1968, folder: Pol 23-1 Thai 1/1/68, CFP Files 1967-69, Thailand, Box 2319, RG 59, USNA.
while four of the invaders were killed, including a North Vietnamese regular army officer. The U.S. Air Force demanded that American Special Forces units guard the base, and that they help train local Thai troops do the same.

Although communist activity in the Northeast never reached the critical stage for Bangkok, there was a substantial increase in guerrilla attacks between 1968 and 1970. In fact, at the time it appeared to some that conditions similar to those at an earlier stage of the insurgency in South Vietnam were developing. In early 1968, a senior American official in Thailand with prior service in South Vietnam noted that "things look far worse here today than they did in Saigon in 1960." In March Thanom suggested that communist numbers were on the rise, totalling 3,000 in the Northeast alone. Some, he claimed, were Chinese and Vietnamese agents. In November American intelligence services estimated just slightly over 2,000 communist insurgents in the whole country, but agreed that the numbers were growing. Even ambassador Unger was apprehensive that expanded covert operations in Laos would provoke the communists into stepping up infiltration of the Northeast, which could have serious repercussions for Thanom's stability.

In light of the heightened insurgency in the Northeast, American training and assistance was key for the Thais in maintaining security. American advisers generally held the Thai Special Forces they trained in high regard. In November, a fairly large guerrilla assault on an outpost at Ban Huai Sai Tai

---

52 Administrative History of the United States Information Agency - Volume 1: Administrative History, 2 of 2, 5-43 to 5-55, USIA Volume 1, Administrative History; Narrative, Box 1, Administrative Histories, LBJL.
53 Memo, Walt Rostow to LBJ, July 26 1968, file Thailand Memos Volume 8, 7/68 to 12/68, #108, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
54 J.L.S. Girling, "Northeast Thailand: Tomorrow's Vietnam?" Foreign Affairs 46 (January 1968): 391. In a February 1969 article, Kenneth Young questioned the strength of communists in the Northeast. Citing testimony from a Vietcong officer who defected, Young noted that Thai farm boys in the region made "very poor revolutionary prospects", being "so under-motivated and under-educated that they did not become disciplined, dedicated or competent guerrillas." See Kenneth T. Young, "Thailand's Role in Southeast Asia," Current History 56 (February 1969): 98.
56 Airgram, Bangkok A-1584 to State, November 20 1968, folder: Pol 27-3 Thai 1/1/68, CFP Files 1967-69, Thailand, Box 2320, RG 39, USNA.
57 Cable, Bangkok 12150 to State, March 1968, file Thailand Volume 7, 8/67 to 7/68, #27, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.

302
near Phitsanulok was repulsed by a newly assigned unit comprised mostly of hill tribesmen. Here and in countless top secret incidents kept secret from the Thai public, counter-insurgency operations proved invaluable. Moreover, Thai Special Forces saw considerable field experience outside Thailand, serving in varied duties in both Vietnam and Laos. It was revealed during 1969 Senate hearings on U.S. military activities in Indochina that Thais, dressed as Lao and Meo tribesmen, made up a good portion of l'armée clandestine operating throughout Laos. Not revealed was the fact that the Thai Special Forces were, like American soldiers in Vietnam, occasionally prone to savage excess. In February 1968, the U.S. Embassy reported to Washington that Thai Special Forces had massacred seventy-two Meo villagers at Chong Pai village in the Northeast on October 16, 1967. No formal investigation was ever held, and Bangkok dismissed the episode as communist propaganda.

Adding to American and Thai concerns about the insurgency was the undeniable Chinese role in Northeastern Thailand. All major Thai communist organizations were linked to Beijing, and the Chinese media frequently served as their international mouthpiece. The CPT took China's side in its competition with the Soviet Union, denouncing the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and proclaiming its adherence to the principles and objectives of Mao Zedong. The special counter-insurgency group attached to the American Embassy reported to Washington that the CPT, which

58 Stanton, 283-285.
59 "United States Security Agreements Abroad: Kingdom of Thailand", Hearings before the Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 91st Congress, First Session, Part 3, November 10-14 and 17 1969, microform 1970-9912, cards 1-2, 620-622, Naval History and Heritage Command Library, University of Toronto.
60 Cable, Bangkok 10570 to State, February 20 1968, folder: Pol 23-7 Thai 1/1/68, CFP Files 1967-69, Thailand, Box 2320, RG 59, USNA.
61 Lovelace, China and "People's War" in Thailand, 1964-1969, 56-60. For example, a September 1968 broadcast by the CPT urged supporters to "creatively study and apply" Mao's teachings on a "more widespread and intensive scale." The Chinese leader was characterized as an "inexhaustible source of material strength", and "the decisive factor" in winning a "Thai revolution." See also Central Committee of the Communist Party of Thailand, "Integrating Mao Tse Tung's Thought With Revolutionary Practice in Thailand", Peking Review 42, (October 18 1968): 20-21.
was directed by cadres in Bangkok and other cities, was "basically going by the Mao book".62 Outside experts on China who advised the president confirmed the Chinese role. Not only did Beijing support North Vietnam and the Vietcong, but it was also orchestrating other insurgencies throughout the region, including Thailand's.63 The Thais themselves stressed the linkage between China and the insurgency in the Northeast. In October, the Thai Minister of the Interior, General Praphas, met General Westmoreland while in Washington to discuss his country's contributions to Vietnam and counterinsurgency. Praphas reported that communist support in the Northeast was declining due to the rainy season and the psychological impact of political developments in China, where the Cultural Revolution was in full swing. Praphas claimed that Chinese advisers were commonly attached to communist guerrilla units along the Lao and Cambodian borders, and, that some 3,200 guerrillas operated in the Northeast, divided into four battalions of mostly ethnic Chinese Thai.64

The PRC carefully refrained from pushing its intrusion in Thailand too far. Its material support for communists in the Northeast was limited, and political backing for the insurgency was kept at the party level, rarely coming from the Beijing government itself. Even in their rhetoric the Chinese were noticeably reserved towards Thailand. There was little criticism of the Thai King or the Buddhist faith. Instead, the focus was almost exclusively on regional and ethnic differences within the country, and on Bangkok's cozy relationship with the U.S. Although attacks on American personnel did occur in 1968, there had been virtually none in the previous four years since the creation of the CPT and its united guerrilla front. All in all, Beijing approached the situation in Thailand with extreme caution. The Chinese seem to have realized that, unlike Vietnam, Thailand

62 Cable, Bangkok 17527 to George Tanham (Special Operations for Counter-Insurgency in Southeast Asia), July 1968, file Thailand General Volume 8, 7/68 to 12/68, #41, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
63 Meeting notes, "Meeting with China Experts" (Edwin O. Reischauer, Robert A. Scalapino, Lucian Pye and A. Doak Barnett), February 2 1968, file 44a, Meeting Notes File, Tom Johnson Notes of Meetings, Box 2, LBJL.
64 United States Army, Chief of Staff, memorandum of conversation, General Westmoreland and General Praphas, October 16 1968, file Thailand Memos Volume 8, 7/68 to 12/68, #96, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
could serve as a secure base for long-term U.S. operations in the region. Beijing apparently worried that the Americans would entrench themselves in Thailand once they were beaten in Vietnam. In such circumstances, China would face a permanent and threatening U.S. presence along its frontier. Perhaps Beijing also realised that the CPT lacked adequate leadership and substantial issues, and that its approach was "too Chinese" to appeal to most Thais. In any event, Chinese support of insurgents in Thailand appears to have been an exercise in propaganda and limited military pressure, and not the prelude to more far-reaching intervention aimed at toppling the government in Bangkok.

Fear of rising Chinese influence in Cambodia added to Thailand's antagonism to Sihanouk. In his meeting with Westmoreland in October 1968, General Praphas stated that Beijing's influence in the Khmer kingdom was rapidly increasing, and that the Chinese were using the country as a conduit for weapons into South Vietnam. He claimed that the Royal Khmer Government even had an agreement with the PRC to permit the transportation of weapons across its territory into South Vietnam. Noting that there were over 10,000 members of the Khmer Serei along the Thai-Cambodian frontier, poised for action against Sihanouk, Praphas argued that it was "timely to give the group encouragement and support." Anxious to avoid any more complications in dealing with Phnom Penh, Westmoreland emphasised to Praphas that the U.S. did not condone Thai support of the Khmer Serei, suggesting that numerous Khmer Serei raids against Cambodian government positions just inside the border were not in Washington's, or Bangkok's, best interests.

For the past several years Washington had struggled with the Thai leadership over their support of anti-Sihanouk forces. The U.S. acknowledged Thailand's traditional rivalry with Cambodia, and

65 Lovelace, *China and the "People's War" in Thailand*, 75-78.
66 CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate 52-68, "Counter-insurgency in Thailand", May 9 1968, file 52 - Thailand, NSF NIE Files, Boxes 6-7, LBIL.
67 United States Army, Chief of Staff, memorandum of conversation, General Westmoreland and General Praphas, October 16 1968, file Thailand Memos Volume 8, 7/68 to 12/68, #96, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBIL.
the Thais' profound hatred for Sihanouk, but it needed Bangkok to abandon the Khmer Serei if Washington had any hopes of improving relations with the Prince. Numerous diplomatic missions had been sent to Cambodia by both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to pull Sihanouk away from an accommodation with the communists. However, the missions had achieved very little. Sihanouk continued to pursue a supposedly neutral policy with respect to the war in Vietnam, which in reality allowed North Vietnamese forces and the Vietcong sanctuary in Cambodia. Fearing Vietnamese influence and the growing power of the communist Khmer Rouge within his country, Sihanouk turned more and more to Beijing for help, which only further strained his relationship with Bangkok and Washington. The more Sihanouk appeared to accommodate communism, the more determined the Thai leadership was to support those Cambodians who opposed him. And so long as the Thais meddled in Cambodian affairs, Washington's attempts to improve its standing in Phnom Penh were doomed to fail.

Still, the U.S. tried again. In January 1968 it endorsed a mission to the Cambodian capital by United Nations special envoy Herbert De-Ribbing. De-Ribbing's principal objective was to discuss with Sihanouk means to secure his country's neutrality in the midst of the Vietnam war, but he also commented on the poor state of Thai-Cambodian relations, and particularly Bangkok's connection to the Khmer Serei.68 In April the Johnson administration sent out its own mission to Phnom Penh led by special envoy Hamilton Fish Armstrong and Bangkok Deputy Chief Norman Hannah. Sihanouk welcomed the mission warmly and seemed genuinely interested in re-opening formal diplomatic channels. However, he accused Washington of disregarding the Cambodian frontier by bombing suspected Vietcong sanctuaries "too close" to the border, or pursuing communists into Cambodia itself. When Hannah pointed out that the Vietcong and Chinese communists regularly disregarded Cambodian sovereignty, Sihanouk did not deny it. Instead he argued that the whole

---

68 See folder Political Aff. and Rel. Camb-Thai, CFP Files 1967-69, Cambodia, Box 1805, RG 59, USNA.
situation was "complicated", and quite different from American actions. He acknowledged the growing strength of the Khmer Rouge and their connections to Beijing. When Hannah commented that the President wanted to keep a more permanent presence in Thailand, Sihanouk's reaction was anything but predictable. Expecting a tirade against the U.S.-Thai relationship, Hannah instead was surprised when Sihanouk supported the idea. "It would be good for Cambodia", the Prince told him. Even when Armstrong mentioned the Khmer Serai, Sihanouk remained surprisingly calm, saying only that he held Washington responsible for the "good behaviour" of the Thais.  For the first time it seemed that the Prince was more concerned with the communists than the Thais, and possibly willing to improve relations with both Washington and Bangkok.

The Johnson administration needed Cambodian cooperation for other reasons than limiting sanctuary to the communists. In April a mission headed by the President's Special Adviser Eugene Black went to Phnom Penh to gain Sihanouk's support for the long-anticipated Mekong development program proposed by John Kennedy in 1962. The plan was to promote cooperative regional economic development in Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and South Vietnam, based along the Mekong River. The hope was that such development would make the area less vulnerable to communism. Washington pledged to cover 50 percent of initial anticipated costs ($US 200 million), and lobbied other powers, notably Canada and Japan, to provide the other half.  

The centrepiece of the Mekong River development programme was a proposed twenty billion kilowatt hydroelectric dam along the Lao-Thai border. In addition to producing power for all the Mekong countries, the dam would help irrigate 2.5 million acres and provide flood and navigation benefits. The dam would be one of the largest in the world at two and one-half times the size of

---

69 Ibid.
70 Meeting notes, "Meeting with Members of Congress on Asian Bank legislation", September 13 1967, Meeting Notes File, Tom Johnson Notes of Meetings, Box 2, LBJL. See also Gardner, Pay Any Price, 191.
Aswan, and nearly double that of Grand Coulee.71 Preliminary construction was not expected for another three years, giving donors time to come up with the anticipated $US 800 million needed for the first stage alone. For their part, the Thais endorsed the Mekong River development project, although leaders in Bangkok privately doubted it would come about given the war in Vietnam and the communist threat in both Cambodia and Laos.72 They were right. By 1970 the project was permanently shelved.

U.S-Thai relations faced additional challenges throughout 1968. Congressional enquiries about the exact nature of U.S.-Thai relations above and beyond SEATO continued to trouble the Johnson administration and have serious ramifications for Thai politics. In the wake of Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on Vietnam in March, Senator Stuart Symington (D-Missouri) introduced an amendment to a foreign aid bill which placed considerable limitations on expenditures for all recipients, especially for technologically "sophisticated equipment." The administration maintained that in the case of Thailand there was no need for such limitations. The Thais did not receive "sophisticated" equipment, but rather surplus goods. Requests from Bangkok for advanced missile systems, destroyers, and a better air defence network did not make the job of selling this argument to Congress easy. The State Department told Unger to quiet the Thais down, noting that the administration was already in an "impossible position", and that the amendment was likely to be approved by Congress.73 The Department of Defense warned Bangkok that threatening

71 Memo, Thomas C. Niblock (Special Assistant to Eugene Black) to James R. Jones (Deputy Special Assistant to the President), April 25 1968, file Walt Rostow, April 24-30, 1968, Volume 73, 2 of 2, #72a, NSF Memos to the President, Box 33, LBJL. The size and costs of the project were compounded by the fact that the Mekong was one of the least known river systems in the world. It had never been accurately gauged or mapped, and so surveyors started almost from scratch. The aerial survey of the river, conducted between 1966 and 1968, was the largest ever done, costing over $US 6 million. It was also dangerous work. Several team members were killed in plane crashes, shot down by communist guerrillas operating in the area. See also oral history interview, Floyd E. Dominy (U.S. Bureau of Reclamation) with Joe B. Franz, November 14 1968, Oral Histories, LBJL.

72 Folder "Political Aff. and Rel. Camb-Thai", CFP Files 1967-69, Box 1805, RG 59, USNA.

73 Cable, State 188956 to Bangkok, June 1968, file Thailand Volume 7, 8/67 to 7/68, file NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL. See also cable, State 192423 to Bangkok, June 1968, in Ibid. The Thais submitted requests for Benson, Fletcher, and Dealey class vessels, which under the Symington amendment were not available without Congressional approval. Submarines were also out of the question, particularly the Balao class sub which Bangkok wanted. In addition

308
to buy the equipment elsewhere was no solution. A special provision of the amendment would jeopardize existent funds for Thailand in such a scenario, costing the Thais nearly $US 40 million.\textsuperscript{74} The amendment never passed, but it was the source of considerable anxiety for both Washington and Bangkok in 1968.\textsuperscript{75}

In June, U.S.-Thai relations faced a considerable problem regarding the scheduled Thai purchase from Great Britain of a surplus destroyer escort with missile equipment at a cost of $US 18 million. The fact that Thailand could afford such an expensive purchase would call into question the need for continued American financial assistance at precisely the same time that Congress was debating foreign aid programs. The matter was considered so serious that Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford wrote personally to the Thai Prime Minister, urging him to delay any such purchases.\textsuperscript{76} Unger delivered the letter personally to Thanom in Bangkok. Although he eventually agreed to hold off on the purchase of the destroyer escort, Thanom insisted that Thailand needed the best vessels it could get. It was evident that the Thais did not like congressional interference in military matters to being relatively advanced and costly, the Balao class sub had a depth range of 4000 feet which was far beyond Thai needs. With a maximum depth of 1000 feet, the Gulf of Thailand could be patrolled more effectively by the older PCES sub, which the U.S. Department of Defense subsequently offered Bangkok at reduced price.

\textsuperscript{74} Cable, State 192590 to Bangkok, June 1968, file Thailand Volume 7, 8/67 to 7/68, #91, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.

\textsuperscript{75} "United States Security Agreements Abroad: Kingdom of Thailand", Hearings before the Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 91st Congress, First Session, Part 3, November 10-14 and 17 1969, microform 1970-9912, cards 1-4, 620-774, Robarts Library, University of Toronto. Symington’s endorsement for such a measure serves as a barometer for change with respect to Congressional support for Johnson’s policies in Southeast Asia. As a member of both the Senate Armed Services Committee’s Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he was a staunch supporter of American military involvement in Vietnam, and a valuable counter-balance to administration critics like Senators Fulbright, Mansfield, and Morse. However, by 1968 Symington was becoming increasingly critical of what he perceived to be the mismanagement of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. By the time of Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on Thailand in November 1969, which he chaired, Symington opposed the extension of any military commitments to the region. He attacked Washington’s inability to get "more bangs" in Vietnam, and criticised the Thais for not doing as much as they should in Vietnam. He was particularly vocal about the lack of formal agreements involving U.S. property and equipment on air bases in Thailand, pointing out to Leonard Unger that "[I]f you do not make a prenuptial arrangement, the chances of having a successful annulment are rather dim, are they not?" (737). See also McNamara, \textit{In Retrospect}, 284 and Rusk, \textit{As I Saw It}, 536.

\textsuperscript{76} Letter, Clark Clifford to Thanom, June 24 1968, file Thailand General Volume 7, 8/67 to 7/68, #177, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
involving them, or the Johnson administration's seeming acquiescence to it. It was also clear that whereas the U.S. focused on fighting the insurgency in the Northeast, the Thais were more interested in building their conventional military. Moreover, the insistence on such extravagant purchases for the navy suggested an internal power-play within the Thai military. Marshal Dawee, who was seen as the top political champion of the long-suffering Royal Thai Navy as well as the relatively new Air Force, seemed to be making a move up the hierarchy. And, taken together with Thanom's support for Dawee, the entire incident was considered by some American officials to be further indication of rumblings within the Thai leadership.\footnote{Cable, Bangkok 16811 to State, June 29 1968, file Thailand General Volume 7, 8/67 to 7/68, #32, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.}

The question of Thailand's political future became a serious concern in Washington during 1968. Responding to years of subtle pressure from the U.S. to reform the Thai government system, in February Thanom finally yielded to the promulgation of a new constitution and the creation of a bicameral legislature, with an elected House of Representatives and an appointed Senate.\footnote{Dawee's political standing definitely benefited from a timely boost to the power and prestige of the Royal Thai Navy. On May 30 the large naval base at Sattahip was opened. Under construction for two years, it cost over $US 40 million. Sattahip boasted a 1 million square foot pier with four 600 foot berths, cargo staging areas, transit sheds and various storage facilities. A military pier was specially constructed, as were a mobile pier and bulk fuel discharge jetties. With 3.5 million cubic metres dredged during the construction, Sattahip became one of the largest and best equipped naval bases in Asia. See Foreign Affairs Bulletin 7 (April-May 1968): 517.} The constitution had little effect on party structure, patronage, or widespread political corruption.

Although the King under the new constitution had the authority to dismiss the government, the Prime Minister had the power of appointment to the upper chamber, thus guaranteeing the dominance of the Thai military. Still, the fact that such measures were taken in the first place irritated some top Thai military officials. Praphas cautioned that constitutional change would "open the back door of Thailand to the communists waiting at our fence", making it possible for them to

\footnote{Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 298.}
use legitimate political means to gain power. Ominously, he warned the Thai people not to "hurry things up." 80

Praphas' opposition to political reform was indeed important. He was the most capable, and most feared, military leader in Thailand. His ambition and ruthlessness were well-known, and it was expected that eventually he would succeed Thanom, with or without his predecessor's blessing. Powerful but unpopular with the King and public, Praphas had remained largely behind the scenes, but he was never far from the minds of Thai politicians. Factionalism within the ruling oligarchy was becoming obvious to U.S. officials. Civilian "liberal" politicians like Thanat and Pote Sarasin increasingly opposed old-guard military leaders like Praphas and Dawee. 81 And, within the military, the potential for a split between Praphas and Thanom was ever present. A special CIA report in October speculated that Praphas was possibly preparing to move against Thanom, whom he felt had bowed to the Americans too much. 82

The implementation of constitutional reform did little to alleviate the Johnson administration's concerns about Thai political stability. The CIA special report characterised the new constitution as "a crazy quilt of parliamentary and presidential systems", pointing out that the majority of Senators were army generals, thus "removing any doubt about the purpose or political complexion" of the constitutional reform. Stating that a coup was not out of the question, the report described Thanom’s government as plagued by "indecisiveness, disunity and apparent complacency." 83

Although the CIA confidently predicted that there would be no fundamental reorientation of the

81 In fact, Washington had taken notice of increasing factionalism in the Thai government much earlier. In May 1966, Graham Martin noted that Praphas saw Thanat as his "implacable enemy", and that both men thoroughly distrusted Dawee. See cable, Bangkok 2365 to State, May 4 1966, folder: Def 1 Thai, CFP Files 1964-66 (Political and Defense), Thailand, Box 1685, RG 59, USNA.
82 CIA Special Report, "Thailand: The Present Political Phase", October 18 1968, file Thailand Memos Volume 8, 7/68 to 12/68, #93, 5, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
83 Ibid.
Thai polity away from its traditional conservatism, it did acknowledge that Thailand was in transition. It had been ten years since Sarit seized power, and after a full decade of uninterrupted military rule, many Thais had begun to look at future political development. Perhaps against its better instincts, the military appeared to be taking its case to the people, apparently seeking legitimacy now not through the relationship with the U.S., but with the vote.84

Municipal elections in Bangkok in September served as a barometer of political change. The opposition Prachathipat (Democrat Party) won 22 of 24 seats in the city assembly, soundly defeating the government party, Saba Pracha Thai (United Thai People’s Party, or UTPP), in the first meaningful election in Thailand since 1958. While Bangkok was traditionally the bastion of the Democrats, their total dominance shocked nearly all Thais. Voter turnout was low, but many observers saw the results as indicative of growing regionalism in Thailand. Local grievances clearly dictated the outcome, but in just about every area of the country similar anti-government feeling was spreading.85 Disappointed, and fearful of the effect the results would have on national elections slated for February 1969, Thanom and his party began to prepare for a new era in Thai politics.86 However, with division between civilians and military, and amongst the generals themselves, the question was whether Thanom had the ability to lead Thailand through the transition towards being a more democratic country.

85CIA Special Report, "Thailand: The Present Political Phase", October 18 1968, file Thailand Memos Volume 8, 7/68 to 12/68, #93, 5, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL. The CIA report projected that the government "may well fail to secure a clear-cut majority" in the 1969 elections, facing an invigorated and powerful Democrat Party. While the leftist parties remained fragmented and dispirited, the Democrats could also be expected to draw upon the "amorphous center". Independents and individual splinter parties would be far more likely to support the Democrats in any coalition. Domestic issues, especially local ones, would dominate the election, and despite Thanom’s relatively good reputation, he would be haunted by the spectre of corruption and the unsavoury character of generals like Prapas.
86The general elections in February 1969 proved the CIA right. Amidst charges of widespread corruption, the UTPP managed only 76 seats in forming a minority government. The Democrats won 56, including all 21 seats in greater Bangkok. Independents won an astonishing 72 seats, reflecting an even greater regional vote than expected, while lesser parties made up the remaining fifteen. Thanom retained the Prime Ministership, but without the massive vote of confidence he anticipated and needed. See Xoomsai, Thailand’s Policy Towards the U.S. 1950-1976. 20. For an excellent analysis of the 1969 election see Girling, Thailand: Society and Politics, 160-162.
While foreign policy was not considered to be the major factor in Thailand's domestic political environment, it was important. Most opposition parties, including the Democrats, supported the general direction of Thai foreign relations, and even the Thanom regime's support of the war in Vietnam. However, at issue were what the CIA referred to as the "unfortunate by-products of the American presence." Close to 48,000 U.S. military personnel were based in Thailand by 1968, a dramatic increase in just three years. Many Thais suffered from a sense of culture shock, especially considering that in the remote areas few had ever been in contact with large numbers of Westerners. Even those who had been exposed to foreigners often resented the impact of the American personnel. Increases in prostitution, the drug trade, and other social ills were, not surprisingly, blamed on U.S. troops. Stories about American soldiers and their socially offensive behaviour were often exaggerated in the Thai media, and more and more openly anti-U.S. attacks appeared regularly in some of Bangkok's most respected newspapers. Taken with the increasing Thai scepticism about America's ability to win the war in Vietnam, and the obvious resentment of some members of the ruling elite towards political reform, the cultural impact of American personnel became a major factor in bilateral relations. Together they pointed, the CIA concluded, to a "nascent anti-American sentiment in the country."\(^8\)

When talks with North Vietnamese officials opened in Paris during the summer of 1968, the Thais had even more cause to question their commitment to American foreign policy. Meeting with William Bundy in July, Thanom asked bluntly if the U.S. would pull out of Vietnam. Bundy assured him emphatically that it would not, and that negotiations did not mean surrender.\(^9\) However, Leonard Unger cautioned that the Thais were not convinced. They sensed that American power

---

87 In January 1965 there were 6,500 U.S. troops, which more than doubled within a year. By January 1967, the number was 34,500, rising to 44,500 by January 1968 and peaking at 48,000 by October. See U.S. Department of State Administrative History, Volume 1, Chapter 7-9, Section H, Thailand, Box 3, Administrative Histories, LBJL.

88 Ibid., 9.

9 Cable, Bangkok 18042 to State, July 1968, file Thailand General Volume 8, 7/68 to 12/68, #32, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
and will were waning, and they were already looking towards a new order in Southeast Asia without a strong U.S. presence. Senior officials in the Thai government were disillusioned with the bombing halt and talks with North Vietnam, and began to openly question Bangkok's ties with Washington. Having such doubts expressed by Thanat was to be expected. He had long been the mouthpiece and an effective agitator for the Thai military, from whom, as a civilian, they could distance themselves when necessary. But by the fall of 1968 serious dissatisfaction was evident within the military. While no top generals lobbied openly for better relations with Beijing, few fully endorsed keeping the status quo with Washington. The CIA reported in December that senior Thai Army officers were convinced the U.S. would withdraw from Vietnam, leaving Thailand extremely vulnerable. They had no faith in SEATO, and even began to doubt the unilateral American commitment to their defence. The CIA noted that a military withdrawal from Southeast Asia would have many varied effects on Thailand, possibly leading to a radical shift in the government's policy.\(^9\) In the worst case scenario, it was implied that an American departure from the region would seriously undermine the stability of Thailand, and give rise to a new era of coups.

In August Unger warned Washington that the Thai leadership was already seriously planning for the reorientation of its foreign policy after the American withdrawal from Vietnam. He noted that some Thai leaders were convinced that a new balance of power was emerging in Asia, and that an accommodation with the PRC would be necessary. Unger believed that pulling ground troops out of Vietnam was certainly a worthwhile objective, but that a total collapse of the American role in the entire region was not. To prevent this he argued that the U.S. should focus on retaining its air power in the area, based in Thailand. That would give Washington an effective means of watching

---

\(^9\) CIA Information Cable, December 4 1968, file Thailand Memos Volume 8, 7/68 to 12/68, #90, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
over the region and provide a tangible buffer against further communist expansion. At the same time, it would lend to the stability and importance of Thailand, and serve as a kind of reward for that country's years of valuable service as an ally. Treating the Thais as equals, not accessories to Vietnam, was the key to a new U.S.-Thai relationship. In a similar vein, deputy mission chief Norman Hannah suggested that the U.S. approach Thanat Khoman about the possibility of heading a special multinational forum for regional cooperation once the war in Vietnam ended.

Unger and Hannah sensed correctly that because of the perception that U.S. forces would be withdrawing from Southeast Asia, many Thais worried about the long-term implications of having allowed American forces on their soil. Stress in the U.S.-Thai relationship was increasingly evident throughout 1968 at the official level. Change was definitely underway. Though still vehemently anti-communist in his rhetoric, Thanat Khoman stepped up his criticisms of Johnson administration policies. Before embarking on a seven nation tour in April, the Foreign Minister admitted he had "longstanding uneasiness about U.S. constancy of purpose and effectiveness of action in combating communist aggression in Asia." In a televised speech on April 13 he opposed any possible negotiations with North Vietnam, referring to American efforts along this line as "careless" and "impotent". South Vietnam, Thanat said, was a "sacrificial goat" for Washington, and any talks with the communists would at best establish only a "pseudo peace". After the Thanom-Johnson meeting in May, Thanat spoke at a Council on Foreign Relations dinner in New York, where he offered a less than glowing characterisation of U.S. policy. Admonishing reporters who referred to his country as a "second Vietnam," he dismissed the possibility of a "hypothetical war" in which the U.S. would become involved, and scoffed at charges that the Thais were drawing Americans into...

91 Cable, Bangkok 18940 to State, August 1968, file Thailand General Volume 8, 7/68 to 12/68, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
92 Cable, Bangkok 14253 to State, May 8 1968 (Hannah for Unger), folder: papers, summaries, agendas, Files of the Ambassador at Large Averell Harriman 1967-68, Box 8, RG 59, USNA.
93 Cable, Bangkok 13608 to State, April 1968, file Thailand Volume 7, 8/67 to 7/68, #17, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
another conflict. In fact, he pointed out, it was the U.S. which had involved Thailand in the Vietnam War: "[T]he truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth is that the United States will involve itself only if it finds it to be in the interest of the American nation to involve itself in Thailand or in Southeast Asia, not otherwise." Most alarming for Washington, Tham concluded his speech by warning that "Thailand should not be blamed if we were to seek an accommodation with Communist China."

By the end of 1968 the changing and unsettled mood in Thailand was obvious. There appeared to be confusion within the Thai leadership about what course to steer, compounded by Tham's inability to provide strong, personal leadership. Thai officials often contradicted one another in statements on foreign policy; on some occasions they sounded like unyielding anti-communists, and at others they offered olive branches to Beijing. In February, Thanat likened communists in Asia to a crazed crocodile that had been stabbed by a spear, thrashing with its tail in the Tet offensive and Pueblo incident. In November, Thai Ambassador to the United Nations, Anand Panyarachun, accused the PRC of being warlike in its sponsorship of revolutionary movements throughout Southeast Asia, adding that it had "no place in the community of civilized nations nor, for that matter, in the conscience of mankind." However, just three months later, in February 1969 at a Tokyo press conference, Thanat Khoman took a decisively different tack. Famous for his diatribes against the PRC, the Foreign Minister stunned the audience when he announced, "[T]o show that Thailand is not anti-communist and anti-Chinese we are prepared to sit down and talk - and have meaningful discussion - with Peking to establish peaceful coexistence." On television just a few days

---

95 Ibid., 419.  
later, Thanat suggested that he was willing to meet Chinese representatives at any place and time to "help draw China out of her isolation so that she could become a member of the Asian family."98

Despite an apparent indecision about what course to steer, Thailand by the end of 1968 appeared to be re-evaluating its relationship both with Washington and Beijing. It is no coincidence that this process occurred simultaneously with fundamental changes in the American prosecution of the war in Vietnam. Some observers in Washington no doubt considered the change in Thailand to be disloyal; as if the Thais were classic fair-weather friends abandoning the U.S. during a difficult time. Many in Washington took changes in Thai attitudes to be typical "Siamese talk", giving the appearance of disillusionment only to elicit more aid.99 While the latter tactic had definitely not been uncommon in U.S.-Thai relations, by the end of 1968 it was a thing of the past. Many Thais were beginning to realize that the U.S. was likely going to pull-out of Southeast Asia, no matter what Americans said to the contrary. The communists were going to win. A negotiated settlement in Vietnam would only delay the inevitable, and in this respect the Thais seemed to anticipate the end well before the Americans.

Accepting this fact, Thailand considered reverting to its ancient ways. Surviving in the post-Vietnam war era became the priority, and this meant accommodating communism.100 After all, an old Thai proverb advised that "there are no genuine friends nor permanent foes in politics."101 Although Thailand continued to support American efforts in Indochina, its commitment significantly and quickly weakened after 1968. The wind was changing fast, and the bamboo slowly turned to face it.

98 As quoted in Ibid, 155.
99 See various cables, file Thailand Volume 7, 8/67 to 7/68, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL. See also Kenneth T. Young, "Thailand's Role in Southeast Asia," Current History 56 (February 1969): 90-94.
100 Likhit, Thai Politics, 547-548.
101 Ibid, preface.
Although Thailand was beginning to re-evaluate its relationship with the U.S., American policy towards Bangkok did not change in any significant way by the end of 1968. The war in Vietnam dominated Washington's foreign policy agenda, and as vital as the Thais were to the prosecution of that war, the Johnson administration did not give relations with Thailand top priority. This is not to say that U.S. officials ignored Thailand. They did not. In fact during 1968 Thailand's contribution to the war effort was never more recognised in Washington. But as 1968 ended there were simply too many other more pressing concerns in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Thailand's political and social stability allowed Washington to focus on more urgent matters, such as the rapidly decaying situation in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Moreover, the Johnson administration was in its final few months in the White House, and was in no position to undertake any additional foreign policy initiatives. Instead, U.S. policy towards Thailand continued to rely on the fact that much of the Thai economy was dependent on American aid, which would make any radical revaluation in their foreign policy very difficult for the Thai leadership. As well, U.S. policy counted on the close relationship between Washington and the Thai military, which owed its position as the dominant player in Thai politics to American largesse. As 1969 began and the administration of Richard Nixon took office, the question remained as to how long Washington would stay the course in Vietnam, and continue the status quo with respect to Thailand.
CONCLUSION

Between 1961 and 1969 the United States and Thailand forged an important and mutually beneficial relationship premised on the anti-communist defence of Southeast Asia. During the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, Thailand figured prominently in American foreign policy in the region, and became an invaluable ally for Washington as the U.S. deepened its involvement in Laos and Vietnam. For Thailand, the U.S. offered protection from the external and internal threat that communism seemed to pose. For the U.S., Thailand represented a bastion of anti-communism in a region full of political uncertainty. Viewed as a key domino by successive presidential administrations from Truman to Nixon, during the tumultuous 1960s, Thailand was of especially critical importance to the U.S. and had significant bearing on political developments in Indochina, SEATO, and the American war in Vietnam.

Having never been colonised, Thailand did not endure the painful and divisive nationalism that ravaged so many of its neighbours. Moreover, Thai cultural traditions, dominated by a profound reverence for the monarchy and deep religious conviction, helped to insulate the country from the ethnic and political conflicts endemic in Southeast Asia. Although the Thais had to cope with an indigenous insurgency in the remote Northeast region, communism never enjoyed anything more than a marginal following in Thailand. As a result, it was a relatively stable country around which the U.S. could plan its regional foreign policy. Infused with considerable American economic aid, Thailand came to be seen in Washington as the model for development, and an anti-communist bulwark, in Southeast Asia.

Thailand played an integral political and military role for Washington in Southeast Asia. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s it was a base from which the U.S. orchestrated a wide array of both overt and clandestine military operations. Thailand's relationship with the U.S. during the
1960s is important in understanding the full regional dimension of the conflict in Vietnam. This dissertation has argued that although Thailand's military contributions to the war in Vietnam were heavily subsidised by Washington, the Thais were not simply "mercenaries". They had a tremendous stake in stopping the perceived spread of communism in Southeast Asia, and were motivated by real ideological and national security considerations much more than the lure of American money. As well, the close relationship that Thailand forged with the U.S. was not a fundamental digression from its traditional and renowned foreign policy flexibility. In fact, the conflicts in Laos and Vietnam forced Thailand to adhere to the ancient Siamese proverb which stressed the need for foreign policy to be like the "bamboo in the wind" - always solidly rooted, but flexible enough to turn whichever way the winds blew. With the emergence of the PRC in 1949, the threat of communist expansion in Asia loomed large. A strong and unified China also renewed fears in Thailand about more traditional Chinese expansionism, with which the Thais had lived for centuries. Thus diplomatic flexibility was the key to national survival, and, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the United States appeared willing to fight communism in Southeast Asia. Washington was Thailand's best bet for surviving in the shadow of the Chinese dragon.

John Kennedy was determined to prevent Chinese expansion and the spread of communism in Indochina, but anxious to avoid entangling the U.S. in open-ended commitments. Following the tenets of the "domino theory", he saw the necessity of making a forceful stand in the region, but feared an over-extension of U.S. military and economic power, and the domestic political ramifications that could have. As he took office in January 1961, the crisis in Laos intensified, and Kennedy faced a major foreign policy dilemma. Given the geographic and logistical problems the country posed, military action in defence of non-communist forces there would be ill-advised. As well, the communist Pathet Lao were well-entrenched both politically and militarily. Fighting them
would have almost certainly necessitated direct participation by U.S. forces, which was something Kennedy was not prepared to order.

Kennedy's decision to pursue "two-tracks" with respect to Laos brought Thailand to the forefront of American foreign policy in the region. The first track pursued a peaceful settlement to the Laotian conflict through international negotiations held at Geneva throughout much of 1961 and 1962. The second track involved the expansion of American military and economic assistance to South Vietnam and Thailand, and the extension of covert operations in Laos aimed at preventing the further consolidation of communist power. For both tracks the U.S. depended considerably on Thailand.

Thai Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat's personal influence on the leading figure of the Lao right-wing, Phoumi Nosavan, gave Washington invaluable political access to the confusing world of Laotian politics. Phoumi's refusal to co-operate in any negotiations with the Pathet Lao threatened Kennedy's programme for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Sarit and the Thai leadership did not believe that a negotiated settlement to the crisis in Laos was possible or desirable. Adjacent to Thailand's geographically and politically remote Northeast, Laos was the "dagger" posed at the Thai heart. The Thais feared that a communist victory in Laos would encourage the insurgency in the Northeast, and expose Thailand to a possible invasion from China or North Vietnam. Given its proximity and historic relationship with Thailand, the situation in Laos was a primary concern for the Thais, much more so than Vietnam. American policy in Laos thus became the litmus test for U.S.-Thai relations, and as the Kennedy administration pursued its first track, Thailand questioned Washington's resolve to fight communism in Southeast Asia.

During 1961 and much of 1962 Sarit's reluctance to endorse American policy in Laos posed significant problems for Washington. After all, Thailand was a key American ally in the region, on which the U.S. depended for political support and many of its clandestine operations. Without
Thailand's backing, any negotiated settlement in Laos would likely fail. Controlling the volatile Phoumi became the top priority, and this meant convincing the Thais to stop giving him military assistance. Even more difficult for Washington was the task of convincing the Thais to endorse the neutralist leader Souvanna Phouma, whom they considered to be a communist agent.

In this light, Thailand's decision to support Kennedy's policy on Laos in the spring of 1962 was important. Although the exact motivations for Sarit's reversal are not yet known, it is likely the Thais realised that the situation in Laos was beyond remedy without military intervention by the U.S., and that no such commitment would be forthcoming from Washington. As well, it appears the Thais were hopeful that the U.S. was preparing for a more forceful anti-communist defence of Southeast Asia in South Vietnam. The second track of Kennedy's two-track policy reinforced this perception, significantly increasing American covert operations throughout Indochina, and particularly expanding those based in Thailand. Additional military assistance to the Thais was no doubt an incentive for them in supporting the negotiations at Geneva, but given the importance Laos had for Thailand's security, it is unlikely that this aid by itself motivated Sarit's decision.

Without a firm commitment from Washington to send U.S. troops to Thailand in the event of a communist invasion, military assistance would not alone protect the Thais.

The attempt by Bangkok to obtain a bilateral alliance with Washington is a central theme in U.S.-Thai relations from 1961 to 1969. Hesitant to over-extend U.S. military commitments in Southeast Asia, neither Kennedy nor Johnson favoured a bilateral alliance with Thailand. Instead, both administrations consistently maintained that SEATO was a sufficient guarantee of Thai security from a communist invasion. The Thais, however, did not agree. They despised the organisation, almost from its inception, and considered it nothing more than a "paper tiger". Thai leaders felt slighted that the U.S. favoured SEATO over a bilateral alliance with them, especially given the fact that Washington had exactly such arrangements with South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan; all
were countries that Thailand considered not nearly as supportive of U.S. policy in Asia as it had been.

Bangkok’s pursuit of a bilateral alliance was inseparably linked to its dissatisfaction over SEATO, and, in turn, the dire situation in Laos. American reluctance with respect to a treaty, the inadequate deterrence that SEATO represented, and Washington’s hesitation to commit militarily to the defence of Laos, all reinforced the recurring perception in Thailand that the U.S. lacked the will to combat communism in Southeast Asia. The Rusk-Thanat Agreement of March 1962 was designed to alleviate Thai doubts, but it was clearly not the same as a bilateral alliance. The introduction of American troops into Thailand during the Nam Tha crisis in Laos in May 1962 temporarily abated Thai fears about the American commitment to their defence, but their quick withdrawal two months later only emphasised the perception that Washington lacked resolve. Even with its expansion of covert operations in Indochina and increasing commitment to South Vietnam, the Kennedy administration did not convince the Thais that it was prepared to fight communist expansion in the region. Consequently, throughout 1963 U.S.-Thai relations suffered, and Sarit began to re-evaluate the direction of Thailand external relations. He wondered about the effects that such a close association with the U.S. would have on Thai society, and more importantly, on Thailand’s relationship with its neighbours should communism succeed in Indochina, and the Americans go home.

However, events towards the end of 1963 conspired against a reorientation of Thai foreign policy. The deaths of Kennedy in November and of Sarit in December led to important leadership changes in both the U.S. and Thailand. In Washington, Lyndon Johnson took office determined to uphold the American commitment to the defence of Southeast Asia. In Bangkok, Thanat Kittachakorn assumed the prime ministership with less concern about the long-term consequences of Thailand’s role alongside the U.S. in the region. Johnson considered Thailand’s friendship key to
any regional policy, and quickly set about cementing that relationship through expanded military
and economic assistance. More importantly, the Johnson administration dramatically increased aid
to South Vietnam, and seemed intent on preventing a communist victory there at almost any cost.
This was exactly what the Thailand wanted and expected of the U.S., and throughout 1964 and 1965
the relationship between the two countries significantly improved.

As the Johnson administration expanded its support of the Saigon government, Thailand became
an even more central player in U.S. regional policy. Between 1966 and 1969, U.S. air strikes
launched from bases in Thailand accounted for nearly 80% of all ordnance dropped on North
Vietnam and Laos.1 The U.S. constructed six major military air bases in Thailand, the biggest and
most important of which, Utapao, was specifically designed to field the American B-52 bombers
that carried out the lion's share of bombing strikes against the North. By 1969 over 45,000
American servicemen were based in Thailand, along with 600 aircraft.2 Thailand also continued to
serve as the primary centre for covert operations in the region, particularly in Laos. And when
domestic and international public opinion of the American war effort in Vietnam turned against
Washington, Thailand offered one of the few voices in support of U.S. policy. In 1967 Thailand
also supplied troops to the fight in response to Johnson's "Many Flags" programme. More than
11,000 Thai soldiers eventually fought in Vietnam - representing nearly 15% of Thailand's armed
forces - and almost double that served in Laos as part of both overt and clandestine operations on
behalf of the Royal Lao government.3

1 Randolph, The United States and Thailand, 59.
2 Wyatt, Thailand: A Short History, 288.
3 Ibid. The official number of Thai troops killed in the Vietnam War was 350, with over 1,000 wounded. In
comparison to other foreign allies, these Thai losses were considerable. Between them, Australia and New Zealand lost
475 men. Only South Korea, which lost over 4,400, endured more casualties in Vietnam. However, the number of
Thailand's unofficial dead most certainly brings the total up dramatically. CIA recruitment of Thai "volunteers" for
service in clandestine operations was heavy, and is believed to have enlisted many more than the nearly 22,000
eventually acknowledged by the U.S. Senate after hearings on Indochina in 1973. Thai irregulars were enormously
beneficial to U.S. programs and comparatively cost-effective. At only $US 75 per month, their salaries were
considerably lower than American soldiers, but higher than those paid to Thai regular army. At the end of their service,
It is true that in exchange for its assistance Thailand received considerable economic and military aid from Washington. From 1950 to 1975 the U.S. provided Thailand with 13.5 billion baht in economic and technical assistance, and 35.4 billion baht for defence and security. The total amount of U.S. aid for the 1965-1975 period alone exceeded $US 2 billion, which equalled Thailand's entire official foreign currency reserves. Overall, Thailand was the second largest recipient of American aid in Southeast Asia throughout the 1960s next to South Vietnam. It is also true that military authoritarianism in Thailand was dependent on the connection with the U.S., and that by participating in the fight against communism, the government in Bangkok was able to justify its habitually undemocratic ways. Similarly, it is true that Thai leaders demonstrated some reluctance to commit the troops for fear of weakening their own internal defence and further aggravating Hanoi and Beijing. However, the notion that Thailand was simply a mercenary in Vietnam is simplistic. This line of argumentation overlooks very crucial aspects about Thailand. Buffering Thailand from both Vietnam and China, the fates of Laos and Cambodia had historically been principal factors in shaping Thai foreign policy. Security from the external threats that crises in Indochina represented was Thailand's key motivation in seeking a closer relationship with the U.S., volunteers received an attractive bonus from the Thai military, but even with this figured in the overall cost to Washington was comparatively cheap. Senate investigations revealed that nearly $US 4 million was paid to each Thai special forces battalion each year, bringing total costs to almost $US 100 million annually. Not even accounting for the inherent benefit in having other soldiers die in place of Americans, this was a worthwhile endeavour. The Thais proved effective in combat. Many spoke Lao and tribal dialects that allowed them to operate among rural populations. And, when they died, the U.S. did not have to worry. Without identification or insignia, the Thais looked just like another Asian fighting and dying in the jungle. See Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic Mountains, 199-213, 244-245. See also Adulyasak, "The Rise of United States-Thai Relations, 1945-1975," 124-128.

4 Girling, Thailand: Society and Politics, 96. According to Girling, nearly 75% of the economic and technical assistance Thailand received was directed towards counter-insurgency activities. American military assistance to Thailand during the 1960s averaged annually over 50% of the Thai government's expenditures on its armed forces.

not financial inducements. As well, the Thais were motivated by a traditional fear of China, and a
desire to fight communism far from home before it consumed their own country.

Therefore, rather than being "hessian" in its contributions to the American war in Vietnam,
Thailand is best considered an active and important co-participant.

Reinforcing this argument is the fact that the U.S.-Thai relationship was far more equitable than
some perceive it to have been. The Thais frequently pursued foreign policy goals of their own that
were not necessarily consistent with American objectives. Thailand's continued support to the Lao
right-wing, even when Washington pressured Bangkok to abandon Phoumi, is a good illustration of
this point. So too is Thailand's persistent meddling in Cambodia through its sponsorship of the
Khmer Serei guerrillas opposed to Prince Sihanouk, which greatly complicated American attempts to
better relations with Phnom Penh. The Thai government's nefarious relationship with ethnic
insurgents, Kuomintang irregulars, and drug-trading warlords in Burma were also troubling to
Washington. Moreover, Thailand's long-standing position on SEATO, its desire to obtain a bilateral
alliance with the U.S., and its pressure on the Kennedy administration for a military commitment to
Indochina must be viewed as demonstrations of Thailand's independent decision-making.

There were other difficulties which had significant bearing on the relationship between the U.S.
and Thailand. Maintaining the friendship of the Thais and avoiding a binding, bilateral agreement
were clear objectives of American policy towards Bangkok during both the Kennedy and Johnson
administrations. Other than that, however, U.S. policy towards Thailand was basically *ad hoc*. Top
officials in Washington dealt directly with the Thais only sporadically, leaving day-to-day affairs in
the hands of the Embassy, U.S. military, and CIA. Disagreements between major departments in

6 Thomas A. Marks, "Thai Security During the 'American Era'," Issues and Studies 15/4 (April 1979): 61-73. See also
Randolph, The United States and Thailand, 78-80 and R. Sean Randolph, "Thai-American Relations in Perspective," in
Jackson and Wiwat Mungkandi, eds., United States-Thailand Relations, *passim*.


8 Ibid, 287.
Washington were reflected by rivalries between various U.S. government agencies operating in Thailand. This presented difficulties controlling and co-ordinating American policy towards Bangkok, a problem compounded by Washington's tendency to view everything in Southeast Asia in relation to Laos and Vietnam. Fortunately for Washington, affairs in Thailand were left to a succession of ambassadors who skilfully managed these problems, as well as dealing with the frequently trying Thais.

The Thais presented American diplomats with many challenges. Thai leaders, such as Sarit and Thanat Khoman, could be mercurial. Decision-making and the structure of power within the Thai polity was murky. The Thais frequently reversed themselves without much notice, as was the case with public revelations about Utapao after years of insisting on "plausible deniability" with respect to U.S. aircraft in Thailand. Simply put, the Thais were hard for the Americans to figure out, which made relations between the two countries more difficult. The Thai government objected to the fact that the U.S. was unwilling to enter a bilateral alliance, and that its military command in Thailand, MACTHAI, was simply an appendage of operations in South Vietnam under MACV. At the same time, the Thai government worried about the effects that such a large number of American troops in Thailand would have on country's culture, and feared angering Hanoi and Beijing by drawing too close to the U.S. Negotiating a mutually acceptable Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) was a problem for the U.S. and Thailand, in part because of Thai concerns about maintaining sovereignty. Thai sensitivities were also the issue when the members of the U.S. Congress scrutinised the nature of Washington's commitment to Bangkok, and questioned the legitimacy of economic and military assistance to such an "undemocratic" regime. Thai leaders deeply resented being characterised in this fashion, and were angered by suggestions that they were not doing enough in defence of their country. The Thais were quick to point out their assistance to U.S. policy in Southeast Asia, and to
remind anti-Vietnam critics moralising in Washington that Thailand's national security was staked on the containment of communism in Indochina.

What Thailand feared most in fact came true. By 1975, communist regimes controlled Cambodia and Laos, as well as Vietnam, dominating the territory adjacent to most of Thailand's borders. American military power in Southeast Asia was dismantled, and after nearly two decades of supporting U.S. policy objectives against its neighbours, Thailand found itself alone, surrounded and confronting manifest change from within. As Seni Pramoj, the old sage of Thai politics warned in 1969, "we have let the U.S. forces use our country to bomb Hanoi. When the Americans go away, they won't take that little bit of history with them." Still, the domino effect did not occur. Thailand did not succumb to communist expansion in the region as many had feared. The economic and military infrastructure provided by the U.S. certainly helped to prevent Thailand's collapse, but more important, if less obvious, factors were also at work. After a generation in an alliance with Washington, Thailand sought a reconciliation with Beijing, and in the process diffused the threat communism in Southeast Asia presented. Moreover, this reorientation in Thai foreign policy in the post-Vietnam war era was accompanied by dramatic domestic change. The legitimacy of the military dictatorship in Thailand was undermined as the era of anti-communist partnership with the U.S. came to an end. A new period in Thai politics and society began, marked by the struggle between democratic reform and military authoritarianism.\textsuperscript{10} It is a struggle which continues today, and which constantly shapes the country and its place in the world. But exactly how the Thais survived in the post-Vietnam war era deserves examination. The diplomatic adroitness of the Thai leadership in

\textsuperscript{9} Thompson, Unequal Partners, p. 161.  
\textsuperscript{10} For excellent coverage of post-Vietnam War political developments in Thailand, see Randolph, The United States and Thailand, chapters 5-7, and Neher and Wiwat Mungkandi, U.S.-Thailand Relations in a New International Era, chapters 8-9.
this period was remarkable. Thailand succeeded in quickly adjusting its relations with communist neighbours without sacrificing its independence, economic prosperity, or western inclination.

Thailand had never been the chief focus of American foreign policy in Southeast Asia, but during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations it was very important. Thailand was prominent in Washington's overall view of the region, and a key consideration in the development and implementation of U.S. policy from 1961 to 1969. Neither administration dwelled on relations with Thailand, primarily because bilateral affairs with that country were comparatively easier to deal with than the difficult crises the U.S. faced elsewhere in the region. So long as the United States maintained an aggressive posture against communism in Southeast Asia, and provided financial and military assistance to Bangkok, the Thai government was largely content. And so long as Thailand remained a stable ally and provided a base for military and covert operations in the region, Washington was happy to pay. The Thais continually pushed Washington for more commitment and assistance, never completely giving up on securing a bilateral alliance. However, short of that, Thailand extracted a great deal from the U.S., not so much in exchange for, but as part of its support for American policy in Indochina.

By extension, Thailand's role in American foreign policy on the whole was also considerable during this time frame. Laos, and to a lesser extent Vietnam, posed a significant problem for John Kennedy, and Indochina as a whole was unquestionably Lyndon Johnson's major foreign policy crisis. For both Presidents, relations with the Soviet Union and the PRC were greatly influenced by events in Southeast Asia, and given that these were the two principal players in U.S. foreign relations during this era of the Cold War, Thailand's importance should not be overlooked.

While they were certainly not without problems and ultimately faded in their intensity, U.S.-Thai relations during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were on the whole successful and mutually beneficial. Thailand insulated itself with American help from much of the turmoil that
consumed Indochina, achieving considerable economic progress in the process. The United States gained an invaluable ally in Southeast Asia, and a base from which to prosecute its overt and covert wars in Indochina. While the U.S. lost the wars in Indochina, it did help to prevent the collapse of the entire region under pressure of communist expansion. For this Thailand is indebted in part to its long relationship with the United States, and especially to the close ties that developed during the 1960s, in the shadow of the Vietnam War. Long held to be the next domino, Thailand did not fall; and in this regard U.S.-Thai relations from 1961 to 1969 proved to be effective and important. The bamboo bent, but it never did break.
*BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY*

This essay discusses a wide range of the secondary sources that have been used in researching and writing this dissertation. The essay is intended to survey existing scholarship on U.S. relations with Thailand, and to a lesser extent, American foreign policy elsewhere in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War era. It also serves to introduce to the reader some of the available secondary English language sources dealing with Thailand's history, foreign relations, politics, culture.


Among the many excellent texts relating to American involvement in Vietnam, George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975* (1979) remains one of the most concise and readable. Along with his more recent *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (1994), it has proved to be an invaluable resource in setting the "backdrop" for this thesis. Also very useful has been Michael Hunt's *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968*
(1996), which goes beyond the more traditional emphasis on national security developments in analysing the complex chain of events leading to U.S. involvement. Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (1991) is comprehensive and integrates many personal accounts of the wars from both the American and Vietnamese perspectives. *Light at the End of the Tunnel: A Vietnam War Anthology* (1991), edited by Andrew J. Rotter, offers an interesting collection of essays on a wide range of topics, including presidential decision-making, military policy, and the war at home.


Examinations of presidential decision-making regarding Vietnam in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations are plentiful, and have been extremely useful in understanding the broad context of U.S.-Thai relations. John Newman, JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power (1992) portrays a reluctantly interventionist President, who desperately searched for a peaceful solution. Less convincing, however, is Newman's speculative contention that Kennedy would have pulled the U.S. out of Vietnam altogether. William J. Rust, Kennedy and Vietnam: American Foreign Policy, 1960-1963 (1985), offers a more balanced analysis, and agrees that Kennedy was at least preparing for American military disengagement from Vietnam. On the other hand, two excellent essays on Kennedy and Vietnam - one by Lawrence J. Bassett and Stephen E. Pelz in Kennedy's Quest for Victory; American Foreign Policy, 1961-63 (1989), edited by Thomas Paterson, and the other by Gary R. Hess in Anderson, Shadow on the White House - contend that JFK was more of an interventionist. Additional worthwhile assessments of the Kennedy administration with considerable discussion of

Two seminal works that pay close attention to decision-making with respect to Vietnam during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations are George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (1986), and Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (1979). The latter is particularly useful in establishing the domestic political and social context in which decision-makers worked. In *Paying Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (1995), Lloyd C. Gardner avoids addressing the question of what Kennedy might have done in Vietnam had he lived, and instead focuses on the legacy he left Johnson. Gardner contends that Johnson was always mindful of comparisons between himself and Kennedy, especially with respect to foreign policy, and in this way was often obsessed with the idea that JFK would have avoided the quagmire in Vietnam. Johnson stressed the continuity in Vietnam policy between himself and his predecessor in an attempt to combat perception that he was solely responsible for the U.S. intervention. However, the more he struggled to make the connection between his own policy and JFK's, the less room he allowed himself to change course. In this way, Gardner argues, JFK contributed to the tragedy in Vietnam even more than he did in life.

Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, offers a collection of interesting essays on Johnson’s foreign policy with respect to other countries and regions in the world, as well as Vietnam.


Existing scholarship on U.S.-Thai relations since 1945 is relatively thin, no doubt mainly owing to the preoccupation with Vietnam. Still, very valuable studies do exist. *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950-1985* (1986), by R. Sean Randolph, is certainly at the forefront. Arguing that national security interests were at the heart of both countries’ policies throughout the Cold War, it focuses on Washington and Bangkok’s anti-communist efforts. Three other works, also published by the University of California at Berkeley’s Institute of East Asian Studies, adopt a similar approach. All are collaborations by Thai scholar Wiwat Mungkandi with American political scientists: *Thailand-U.S. Relations: Changing Political, Strategic, and Economic Factors*, with Ansil Ramsay (1988); *U.S.-Thailand Relations in a New International Era*, with Clark D. Neher (1990); and *United States-Thailand Relations*, with Karl D. Jackson (1986). Despite sometimes ahistorical analysis, all are essential reading, and complement the Randolph text well. A number of earlier studies on U.S.-Thai relations, though now superseded, are still worth examining. Frank Darling, *Thailand and The United*


Daniel Fineman's 1993 Yale doctoral dissertation, "The United States and Military Government in Thailand 1947-1958," and his subsequent monograph, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (1997) offer an excellent in depth analysis of the dynamics of the relationship between the U.S. and Thailand during a crucial formative period, and in doing so also provide interesting insight into both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations' decision-making with respect to all of Southeast Asia. Fineman's work, which draws on Thai as well as American sources, has been ground-breaking and has significantly contributed to this thesis, particularly in establishing major themes and in providing historical background.

Surachart Bamrungsuk, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule 1947-1977* (1988), is less detailed and broader in chronological scope than Fineman's book, but presents a similar interpretation; it too has been important in setting some of the themes of this dissertation. T. Nok Xoomsai, *Thailand's Policy Towards the U.S., 1950-1976* (1984), deals with similar themes, but from a different, occasionally nationalistic, perspective. By dealing with Thai decision-making in the context of the
Cold War as a whole, he skirts the issue of military authoritarianism and its entrenchment through the American relationship. He supports the view that the United States "used" Thailand to prosecute the war in Vietnam, and that its withdrawal from the region left a legacy of drugs, graft, and prostitution. Adulyasak Soonthornrojana's doctoral dissertation, "The Rise of U.S.-Thai Relations 1945-1975" (University of Akron, 1986), is more balanced. However, it covers a much broader time frame and, consequently, lacks detail on the period covered in this thesis. Still, it offers a scholarly Thai perspective, and in this regard is an important overview.

Richard Randolph Sogn's dissertation, "Successful Journey: A History of U.S.-Thai Relations, 1932-45" (University of Michigan, 1990), identifies major aspects of the relationship that remained pertinent to the 1960's. Dhanasarat Satawedin's thesis, "Thai-American Alliance During the Laotian Crisis, 1959-62" (Northern Illinois University, 1984), gives an interesting account of how developments in Thailand's "little brother" shaped relations between Washington and Bangkok. Written from a political science perspective, it is a "case study" of small-state leverage with a superpower. In Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War (1994), Robert M. Blackburn argues that Thailand's contribution to American efforts in Indochina depended upon considerable military and economic aid from the U.S., and that without such aid, its participation in any anti-communist front would have been nearly impossible. As this thesis has contended, obtaining U.S. military and economic aid was not Thailand's sole or primary motivation for siding with the U.S.. Nonetheless, Blackburn offers an interesting and well-written comparative analysis of Asian contributions to the American war effort, among which Thailand's was the most important.

Works written during the 1960s and early 1970s about Thailand, and in particular about the insurgency there, are worth close examination. Donald E. Weatherbee was among the first to study the origins and structure of the communist movement in his The United Front in Thailand: A
Daniel Lovelace investigated the connections between Beijing and the Thai insurgency. *Thailand: The War That Is, The War That Will Be* (1967), by Louis E. Lomax, concluded that Thailand might be the next "domino" after Vietnam on the basis of an interesting, though superficial, comparison of the political situations in the two countries. Studies of Thai history, culture, and politics have been extensively used in this dissertation, and surely one of the best among them is David Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (1982). Detailed and comprehensive, Wyatt's work traces the central themes in Thai political history from the 19th century, with ample attention to developments in the post-World War II era and particularly the country's role in the Cold War. Wyatt makes a convincing case that Thai culture has shaped, and continues to be integral to, the country's foreign relations, but he does not overlook other factors, such as national security and economic considerations. Another informed overview is *Thailand: Society and Politics* (1981) by John S. Girling, whose nearly thirty year academic association with the country ranks him as the dean of Thai studies. He is perhaps rivalled only by Charles Keyes, *Isan: Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand* (1967), and William Skinner, *Leadership and Power in the Chinese Community of Thailand* (1958), both of whom pioneered sociological research on Thailand. Keyes focused on Buddhism, ethnic identity, and regionalism in the Northeast, and Skinner on the Chinese in Thai society. The contributions of both are essential to understanding the complex dynamics of Thai society, which has direct bearing on the threat that communism posed to the country during the 1960s.

The perspective found in Richard West, *Thailand: The Last Domino* (1991), is somewhere between that of an academic and an intrepid backpacker. It is a melange of sound historical analysis and recollections gleaned from personal travels throughout the country. Central to West's thesis is that Thai culture has endured as the primary dynamic in the country's external relations, and that for this

Two works by Corrine Phuangkasem, *Determinants of Thailand's Foreign Policy Behaviour* (1986), and *Thailand's Foreign Relations 1964-80* (1984), provide a good starting point for understanding Thai foreign policy. Written from a political science perspective, they include pertinent historical discussion. Less useful is Gangnath Jna's *Foreign Policy of Thailand* (1979). A very good study on the early relationship between Beijing and Bangkok is Anuson Chinvanno, *Thailand's Policies Towards China 1949-54* (1992), which pinpoints some of the enduring themes in Sino-Thai relations right up to the present. Sukhumbhand Paribatra, *From Enmity to Alignment: Thailand's Evolving Relations with China* (1987), covers the period after 1954. These two works are required reading, not only on Thailand's relations with China, but on Thai foreign policy in general. R.K. Jain, ed., *China and Thailand, 1949-1983* (1984) is an interesting documentary history, and useful in exploring this crucial topic. Thailand's experiences in World War II were extremely important in laying the groundwork for its post-1945 foreign policy. Charivat Santaputra offers a good overview of this period in *Thai Foreign Policy 1932-1946* (1985). However, the best study is Edward Bruce Reynolds's doctoral

English language studies of Sarit Thanarat, Thanom Kittachakorn, or Pridi Phanomyong are regrettably scarce. However, in *Field Marshal Plaek Phibun Songkhram* (1980), B.J. Terwiel presents a well-researched and even-handed, sometimes even sympathetic, assessment of Thailand's most controversial leader. Phibun and his legacy are also addressed by both Edward Bruce Reynolds and Daniel Fineman in their works. Another commendable biography is David Van Praagh, *Alone on the Sharp Edge: The Story of M.R. Seni Pramoj and Thailand's Struggle for Democracy* (1989), which covers over a half-century of developments in Thai politics.

An understanding of the Laotian crisis is vital to an understanding of U.S.-Thai relations in the late 1950s and 1960s. One of the best works on the crisis is Norman B. Hannah, *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War* (1987) which, as the title suggests, puts the crisis in a much larger context. Hannah's analysis benefits from his own personal experiences while serving in the American diplomatic missions in Laos and Thailand. Another work worth consulting is *Laos: Beyond the Revolution* (1991), edited by Joseph J. Zasloff and Leonard Unger, the former Deputy Mission Chief and later Ambassador in both Vientiane and Bangkok.

the Americans and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992 (1993), should be compulsory reading for any student of modern Southeast Asia. For a solid general history of Laos, see Martin Stuart Fox, A History of Laos (1997).

The best introductions to Cambodia's painful and complex history are A History of Cambodia (2nd Edition, 1992), and The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War and Revolution Since 1945 (1991), both authored by David Chandler, a leading academic expert on that country who once served in the American diplomatic corps there. Chandler's Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot (1992) is also essential in comprehending a tortured period in Cambodian history. So is Arnold Isaac, Pawns Of War: Cambodia and Laos (1987), which also offers an illuminating overview of Indochinese history since 1945. Milton Osborne, Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness (1994) is an excellent biography, which gives a useful perspective on Cambodia's relations with the U.S. during the Vietnam War.
* NOTE ON PRIMARY SOURCES *

This dissertation relies mainly on research at several major archives in the United States. I conducted research at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston, Massachusetts periodically over four years from 1992 to 1996. I examined materials at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas in 1994 and 1995, and at the National Archives (Archives II) in College Park, Maryland during the summers of 1995 and 1996, and early in 1998. Archival research also included visits to the British Public Records Office in London, England and the Library of Congress in Washington, as well as to a number of other depositories in Canada and the United States. While regrettably many official U.S. records dealing with U.S.-Thai relations during the 1961-1969 period remain sealed, ample research material exists for this study. In some instances I have been among the first researchers to examine newly declassified documents relating to the subject of this thesis.

Much of the research in primary materials for this study has focused on the U.S. State Department. The General Records for the Department of State, RG 59, for the period 1961-1968 that are available to researchers include the "Lot Files" for the period prior to 1963; the Alpha-Numeric series for 1963; and the Subject-Numeric, central foreign policy series for 1964-66 and 1967-69. Documents in RG 59 for the 1964-66 and 1967-69 periods were examined early in 1998, shortly after they opened to researchers, but many duplicated materials were already available at the Johnson Library. The records of the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, also at the National Archives, proved invaluable. Several other series at the National Archives, including the top secret files of the Regional Planning Adviser, were declassified and opened virtually as I arrived in the summer of 1995.
A good deal of military and intelligence information is in the latter collection, which to a large extent compensates for the dearth of records available from the Defense Department and the CIA. The country files of the State Department were indispensable for information not found in the decimal and alpha-numeric files, while the subject and name files shed some light on the nature of decision-making. National Security Agency files open to researchers are heavily censored, and deal with the U.S.-Thai relationship only infrequently.

The Kennedy and Johnson presidential libraries contain much useful material for this study. The Johnson library has a fairly comprehensive record of telexes and memoranda between Washington and Bangkok up to 1969 in the National Security Files, country series. Both the Kennedy and Johnson libraries have a variety of departmental and personal staff collections which offer valuable insight into the nature of the U.S.-Thai relationship throughout the decade. Roger Hilsman's papers at the Kennedy library are particularly helpful in this regard.

The presidential libraries also contain a wide range of oral histories, mostly for notable figures who served Kennedy and Johnson in senior appointments. Georgetown University's Foreign Affairs Programme has compiled a valuable collection of oral transcripts from lesser-known but more directly involved career diplomatic corps personnel. Similarly, the personal papers of Kennedy's Ambassador to Thailand, Kenneth T. Young, located at Harvard University's Pusey Library, offer an interesting perspective on the U.S.-Thai relationship, particularly with respect to decision-making dynamics on the American side, as do Averell Harriman's papers at the Library of Congress.

I conducted research in the British Public Records Office (P.R.O.) primarily in the Fall of 1993, and again briefly in the summer of 1996. Especially informative for my purposes was material for the 1961-1963 period. The country file on Thailand offers revealing perspectives, especially on the Laotian crisis in which Great Britain played an important role as mediator.
While never garnering the attention given to events in Vietnam, the U.S.-Thai relationship occasionally made the headlines in major American newspapers. The New York Times and Washington Post offered the most frequent coverage, and the former has been particularly useful to this study. English-language Thai newspapers have also been consulted, as have a wide array of periodicals and scholarly journals from the period. The Thai Foreign Ministry's publication during the 1960's, Foreign Affairs Bulletin, is especially useful in establishing the official Thai viewpoint on developments.

*BIBLIOGRAPHY*

**ARCHIVAL SOURCES:**

**Association for Diplomatic Studies, Georgetown University (Washington, DC)**
- Foreign Service Officer oral histories (select - Thailand, Laos, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, Bureau of Far East Asian Affairs)

**Harvard University Library Archives, Pusey Library (Cambridge, Massachusetts)**
- Kenneth T. Young papers

**John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (Boston, Massachusetts)**
- Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs Files
- President's Office Files
- White House Central Files
- Robert Estabrook papers
- Bernard Fall papers
- Roger Hilsman papers
- James Thomson papers
- Oral History interview collection

**Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library (Austin, Texas)**
- Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs Files
- White House Central Files
- White House Press Office Files
- George W. Ball papers
- Cecil Bellinger papers
- S. Douglass Cater papers
- Bill Moyers papers
- LBJ Administrative Histories
- LBJ President's Appointment File (Diary Back-Up)
- LBJ Statements Files
- LBJ Vice-Presidential Security Papers
- LBJ Vice-Presidential Papers
- Reference File - Vietnam
- Tom Johnson Meetings Notes File
- Oral History interview collection

**Library of Congress, Manuscript Library (Washington, DC)**
- W. Averell Harriman papers
- Declassified Documents Reference System
General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59

- Decimal File 1960-63 (political affairs/international relations - Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, SEATO)
- Central Foreign Policy Files 1963 (political affairs/international relations - Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, SEATO)
- Central Foreign Policy Files 1964-66 (political affairs/international relations - Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, SEATO)
- Central Foreign Policy Files 1967-69 (political affairs/international relations - Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, SEATO)
- Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (country desk files, Thailand, Laos, Burma, Cambodia)
- Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of East Asian Affairs, Central Files 1950-63
- Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of the Assistant Secretary, Subject, Personal Name and Country Files 1960-63
- Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of the Assistant Secretary, Subject files of the Regional Planning Adviser, 1955-64
- Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of the Assistant Secretary, Top Secret files of the Regional Planning Adviser
- Records of the Policy Planning Staff, 1962
- Records of the Policy Planning Council, 1963-64 and 1965-69
- Records of the Special Assistant to the Under-Secretary for Political Affairs, 1963-65
- Presidential and Secretary of State Official Correspondence and Exchanges, 1961-66
- Senior Interdepartmental Group, 1968-69
- Executive Secretariat (Historical Office Research Project)
- Office of the Executive Secretariat (NSC Meeting Files)
- Office of International Security Policy and Planning
- Records of Ambassador at Large Llewellyn Thompson
- Records of Ambassador at Large Averell Harriman, 1967-68
- microfilm records for Far East / Southeast Asia / Indochina 1955-59

Records of the National Security Council, Record Group 273

- National Security Council Action Memorandums
- National Security Council Meeting Notes


- Foreign Office Records, FO 371

George Washington University, Gelman Library (Washington, DC)

- the National Security Archive
**PUBLISHED DOCUMENTARY SOURCES:**


-------- *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee* (Volume XVIII, 89th Congress, 2nd Session, 1966) (microfiche).


NEWSPAPERS and MAGAZINES:
- New York Times
- Washington Post
- Bangkok Post
- U.S. News and World Report
- Far Eastern Economic Review

VIDEOS, TELEVISION, AND INTERNET:
- "The American Experience: Vietnam" (multi-series television account), Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and WNED TV (Boston), 1996
- "Hello, Mr. President" (documentary of Lyndon Johnson's presidency with excerpts from his taped conversations), BBC Television Productions, 1997.
- WNED@pbs.org

ARTICLES, BOOKS, AND DISSERTATIONS:


Central Committee of the Communist Party of Thailand, "Integrating Mao Tse-tung’s Thought with the Revolutionary Practice in Thailand is Decisive Factor in Winning Thai Revolution", *Peking Review* 42 (October 18, 1968): 14-21.


__________. "Thailand's New Course," Pacific Affairs 17 (Fall 1969): 131-140.


Nitaya Kanchanawan, "Elvis, Thailand and I," Southern Quarterly 18 (Fall 1979): 159-165.


Phuangkasem, Corrine. Determinants of Thailand's Foreign Policy Behaviour. Bangkok: Monograph Series 12, Research Center, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, 1986.


Thanat Khoman. "Which Road For Southeast Asia?," *Foreign Affairs* 42 (July 1964): 42-49.


