

Defeating an Insurgency—The Thai Effort against the Communist Party of Thailand, 1965–ca. 1982

By Bob Bergin

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Foreword

by Jay Watkins

This article analyzes the factors that led to the rise and fall of a communist insurgency in Thailand that took place 40 years ago. It is relevant to contemporary readers and intelligence professionals because, while terrorist acts dominate today's news, many current and recent terrorist groups were spawned in broader insurgencies: the Taliban in Afghanistan; FARC in Colombia; Lord's Resistance Army in Congo and the Central African Republic; Kosovo; Chechnya; Palestine; Syria; Yemen; Somalia; Nicaragua; El Salvador; and South Sudan, to name a few. Historical antecedents provide insights and a framework that can lead to better analysis and more effective counterinsurgency policy responses.

Insurgencies were not unusual in South East Asian politics after WWII. In the vacuum of the defeated Imperial Japanese Empire, British, Dutch, and French colonial empires succumbed to rising nationalism. Ideology played a role as Cold War protagonists solidified their spheres of influence.

Even in America's protectorate, the Philippines, the communist Huk rebellion in Luzon and Muslim separatists in Mindanao challenged

US counterinsurgency planners in the 1950s and 1960s. A notable counterinsurgency expert from that era, Colonel Edward Lansdale, and Philippine President Magsaysay were successful against the communists because they had true empathy for the Filipino people and a deep sociocultural understanding of their aspirations. The British also were successful in the Malay insurgency (1948–1960) by establishing a policy of inclusion in this multiethnic state, holding local elections, and granting Chinese residents citizenship.

You will find in this article that a small coterie of influential Thai leaders also devised a successful strategy aimed at the core discontent and aspirations of the insurgents, particularly the idealistic student followers. Instead of a brute-force military campaign, the Thai government offered amnesty, repatriation, and jobs to communist sympathizers, and freedom rather than detention.

This case study demonstrates that a keen understanding of the factors that underlie insurgencies leads to the development of means to address, directly and compassionately, the discontent that fuels insurrection.



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In early 1950s, Thailand was drawn into the Cold War and became a bastion of the free world's struggle against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia.

Introduction

No two insurgencies are alike. Each is distinctive in time and place: the means used to defeat one may not be effective with another. Marxist objective conditions of economic and social injustice will exist in each case, but the issues specific to each insurgency call for a unique approach.

In dealing with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) insurgency, the government of Thailand first looked to British success in the Malayan Emergency, but found that what worked in Malaya did not apply in Thailand. The Thai then turned to the US way of counterinsurgency they had learned in Vietnam, and found it counterproductive. Finally, the Thai devised their own approach and resolved the CPT insurgency in a Thai way.

The CPT Contradiction

A Chinese scholar described the Thai insurgency as “three vital, separate insurgencies” in the North, Northeast and South Thailand, with each set in the poorest rural border areas, “mainly populated by ethnic minorities, most alienated from and resentful of the Thai government, such as the Meo tribesmen in the North, the Thai-Lao and Vietnamese refugees in the Northeast, and the Malaysian Muslims in the South.”¹

From the start, the Thai themselves did not lead the insurgency in Thailand. When it began its armed

struggle, the CPT recruited among a diverse group of tribal people and refugees who were outside Thai society. Following the Bangkok student uprisings of 1973, ethnic Thai students streamed into the CPT, but they did not stay with the party long.

Before 1973, few ethnic Thai joined the CPT, and only one is known to have reached a position of leadership—Politburo member Pin Bua-on, who fell out with the party when he rejected the armed struggle. “The predominantly non-Thai composition of the CPT was a possible explanation for the Party’s failure to publish even a partial list of its central committee membership.”²

The hope that the intake of university students in 1976 could “contribute to changing the image of the party from Sino-Thai to Thai” did not materialize, and many students left because the party was dominated by Chinese.³ Many factors contributed to the CPT’s collapse, but the party’s major flaw was a contradiction: the Communist Party of Thailand was not a party for the Thai.

The CPT was one of Asia’s oldest communist parties, and the most secretive. Ho Chi Minh, as an agent of the Comintern,^a assisted at its birth. For most of its existence, the CPT was small and clandestine, its leadership unknown and hidden in the jungle, or in China. The party raised its own finances and sustained

a. The Comintern, or “Communist International,” was an organization of the communist parties of the world, founded by Lenin in 1919.

itself with little outside support. With few points of entry, the CPT was an exceptionally difficult intelligence target.

The Thai government had little interest in the CPT until 1965, when the party embraced armed struggle as the way to social and political justice. In early 1950s, Thailand was drawn into the Cold War and became a bastion of the free world’s struggle against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia; by 1953, US military aid was equivalent to two-and-a-half times the Thai military budget.⁴ The establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in Bangkok in February, 1955, drew Thailand deeper into the US-led anti-communist collective.

China’s Role

*“The entire Chinese effort was really a form of exotic communication....”*⁵

The CPT first proclaimed its “commitment” to the doctrine of armed struggle in 1952, but its insurgency did not get under way until 1965. China had paid scant attention to the progress of communism in Thailand until the early 1960s. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) supported the CPT, but as a senior Thai intelligence official noted, that support was minimal:

The Chinese provided some financial support, and some arms and ammunition, but the CPT was a self-reliant party, collecting its own finances, and relying on arms captured from the Thai police and army. The biggest element of Chinese support

was ideological training for the leadership which was done at the Marxist-Leninist Institute in Beijing and later enabling the VOPT (Voice of the People of Thailand) to broadcast from Kunming.⁶

Insurgent strength in 1965 was estimated at 1,200 and the growth of the insurgency seemed almost painfully slow.⁷ It was only when the United States became deeply involved in Vietnam and started to use Thai airbases to support its Vietnam effort that the PRC stepped in to support the CPT and the insurgency grew. The US Air Force presence in Thailand would expand to the use of seven Thai airbases and over 40,000 American personnel in-country.

China's propaganda organs had been pointing to the threat posed by the US presence in Thailand from the early 1960s. David Tsui observes that, according to *People's Daily*, US imperialism would use Thailand as "a springboard to attack China;" and the *Peking Review* asserted, "A major aim of US imperialism in Thailand is to maintain a nuclear bomber base there for attacks against China."⁸

In 1965, the Thai government created the "Communist Suppression Operations Command" (CSOC) under Gen. Saiyud Kerdphol, whose background "included covert operations in Laos against the communists."⁹ The Royal Thai Army (RTA) opposed Saiyud's classical counterinsurgency methods.¹⁰ The RTA measure of success was reflected in body counts. More insurgents were being created than destroyed. In Bangkok, another approach was being formulated.

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The "Peace-Line" and the Role of the Intelligence Agencies

Police Special Branch (SB) was also called on to help find a solution to the communist problem. Police Special Branch Col. Ari Kaributra headed the effort. To get a better grasp of the problem, Ari started talking with communist detainees held at Lard Yao prison near Bangkok. He found them very open in their discussions of communist theory and its application to Thailand. Among them was former member of Parliament and former secretary general of the CPT, Prasert Sapsunthorn, who had fallen out with the CPT when it moved to armed struggle.

He agreed to help SB develop a political strategy to defeat Thai communism. Over time, other arrested CPT members were recruited for this effort, which became known as the "peace-line." Peace-line thinking would have great significance in the future fight against the insurgency, but for many years there was little support in the Thai establishment for a strategy that used political rather than military means to resolve the communist problem.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Thai insurgency was the province of the Royal Thai Army. The RTA made the decisions, and counterinsurgency was essentially the US model used in Vietnam. The RTA had primary responsibility for collecting intelligence on the insurgency—the tactical information that was useful to the army's counterinsurgency operations.

The intelligence services outside the military—Police Special Branch and the Directorate of Central Intelligence (DCI—now the National Intelligence Agency (NIA))—focused on the CPT leadership. Both organizations were tasked with collecting intelligence on the party's structure and capabilities, and its plans and intentions. This was an exceptionally difficult task, given that the Central Committee members were mostly anonymous and hidden in the jungle or living in China.

The party itself was small (at its peak, actual party members probably never exceeded 2,500), and it was composed of small, tight cells. CPT members were well-versed in—and exceptionally strict about—employing basic tradecraft. Aliases were used as a matter of course, and little was ever committed to paper, which meant that documents seized during arrests were essentially propaganda and worthless for intelligence purposes. A senior intelligence official recalled:

Working against the party's leadership was difficult and tedious as even the rank and file members practiced strict security discipline. Technical operations were generally not fruitful. When success came, it was usually only after painstaking investigations and lengthy surveillance of individuals we could identify as party members—and it always required a bit of luck.¹¹

The unpopular war in neighboring Vietnam was going badly, a weakening Thai economy was exacerbated by increased labor unrest and strikes, and public discontent with the government had grown strong.

As a result, the civilian intelligence organizations did not seem to have much of a line on what was happening, and consequently did not look very good. But then the situation changed dramatically.

Enter the Students

“Military engagements with communist forces were reduced during the 1970s as political events took center stage, particularly in Bangkok.”¹²

In early October 1973, 13 members of the National Student Center of Thailand (NSCT) were arrested while distributing anti-government leaflets in Bangkok. The government announced that a communist plot had been uncovered, and that the 13 were charged with treason. The government’s credibility was low.

The unpopular war in neighboring Vietnam was going badly, a weakening Thai economy was exacerbated by increased labor unrest and strikes, and public discontent with the government had grown strong. Over the next week, “hundreds of thousands of students and others gathered . . . in massive demonstrations against the government.”¹³

On 13 October, the 13 students were released. After the king granted an audience to a group of student leaders, the latter declared victory and told the protesters to go home. Most did, but a large group stayed overnight. As they started to disperse

at daybreak on 14 October, a clash with the police occurred. It may have been accidental, but fighting broke out and police and soldiers began shooting. Soon there was fighting all over the city and government buildings were burning.

To add to the chaos, RTA colonel Narong Kittikachorn—son of the prime minister and son-in-law of the deputy prime minister—“directed foot soldiers and tanks to fire into the crowds. Narong himself shot into the crowds from above in a helicopter.”^{a, 14} Seventy people were reported killed and over 800 wounded. The exact number was never determined.^b “The shedding of young blood on Bangkok streets undermined any remaining authority of the junta, and allowed the king and other military factions to demand that the ‘three tyrants’ . . . go into exile.”¹⁵ Praphat and Narong fled to Taiwan; Thanom to the United States.

In the days and weeks following 14 October 1973, Bangkok descended into chaos. The military and police disappeared, and boy scouts directed traffic. Students commandeered busses and careened through city streets as protests became daily events. A semblance of order gradually returned, but protests expanded

a. From long before these events, the three together were popularly known as “sam thorarat: the three tyrants.” (Ettinger, 667.)

b. The next day, the government announced that “insurgents and terrorists had slipped into the ranks of the demonstrators, necessitating drastic action by the military and police.” (Morell and Chai-anan, 147.)

as factory workers joined in and farmers came from the countryside. An alliance of students, workers, and farmers was formed—“a political coalition, unprecedented in Thailand.”¹⁶

The CPT Role

When the events of October 14 were later reviewed, there was much speculation about the CPT role in fomenting the “student uprising,” but there was no evidence that the CPT was in any way involved.^c A senior Thai intelligence officer noted: “The CPT was caught off guard by the events of 14 October as was everyone else—although later the party would take advantage of the situation that 14 October created.”¹⁷ The party’s already limited capabilities in Bangkok had been virtually demolished on 10 August 1972, when Police Special Branch undertook a mass roundup of CPT cadre in the city and “nearly all of the CPT’s urban cadre were arrested.”¹⁸

It is uncertain how much of what occurred in the months following the “uprising” could be attributed to CPT manipulation. Prior to 14 October, the party “viewed students as soft-minded intellectual bourgeois,” and ignored them.¹⁹ After the upris-

c. “Prior to October 1973, the CPT had virtually no influence on university, secondary, or vocational students. . . . Most university students . . . come from middle-class or lower middle-class backgrounds. Their principal (and often only) ambition has been to obtain a higher education to qualify them to enter the government and advance through a subsequent bureaucratic career. This pervasive middle-class norm captured the aspirations of nearly every student.” (Morell and Chai-anan, 286.)

ing, the CPT reassessed the students, saw fresh potential, and moved in to take advantage. Party assets in Bangkok were limited, but perceptions of the extent of CPT influence were amplified by what became a public debate between party members over revolutionary strategy. Former Politburo member Pin Bua-on was a “peace-line communist” in contact with police Special Branch.^a

Under the pseudonym Amnat Yuthawiwat, Pin wrote books arguing against the armed struggle; the CPT responded with pamphlets, articles, and a book justifying it.^b This open intellectual confrontation between communists had mixed results. It brought attention to the CPT and put pressure on the party to explain itself, but it added to an atmosphere in which revolution became fashionable among the young.

But the young overplayed their hand, and set the stage for a response from the political right. “The students, at least some of the extreme leftist groups, have done some very stupid things,” said Dr. Puey Ungphakorn the rector of Thammasat

a. Pin cooperated with Special Branch when his interests coincided with theirs. The highest-ranking ethnic Thai in the CPT, Pin was trained at the Marxist-Leninist Institute in Peking and considered the CPT’s theoretician. Ettinger writes that Pin was “smarter by at least half than the brightest of the CPT leadership.” (Ettinger, 668.) Those who knew Pin believed his strong political views could not be shaken. (See also Morell and Chai-anan, 288.)

b. *Rebutting Thai Revisionism* by central committee member Atsani Phonlachon attacked Pin directly as a revisionist. In 1976, Pin was denounced as a traitor to the CPT on VOPT, the party’s clandestine radio station. (Ettinger, 673.)

. . . if Thailand lost the fight, the whole peninsula would fall to the communists. Thailand’s situation had suddenly become critical. . .

University: “They have pushed too hard, demonstrated indiscriminately on too many issues . . . This strategy had turned off many in the center. As for the public support they had after October 14? It’s gone.”^c, 20

Government authorities and members of the public began to see the students as a potential fifth column that would link urban protest groups with the CPT insurgents.^d “Our situation looked so bad that the rich Thai started leaving the country—they were expecting the CPT to win.”²¹

The Right Wing Responds

As the fight against the communists in neighboring Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia was being lost, “the sense of panic in the Thai elite and middle class” increased: “When the Americans departed Southeast Asia in 1975, Thailand was alone. We were the single front-line country

c. Dr. Puey, rector of Thammasat University and advocate of progressive reform, was admired by many students and their leaders. His words are from an interview with Morell and Chai-anan, p. 174.

d. A survey conducted in Bangkok in April 1976 showed that “a broad segment of the population perceived a serious communist threat,” and that 78 percent of respondents believed “there may be communists or communist supporters within the various groups seeking justice at present.” Of this data, Morell and Chai-anan observe, “The leftist literature that appeared after October 1973 and the actions of the leftist movement during 1973–1975 had much to do with the emergence of such attitudes on the part of the Bangkok middle class.” (Morell and Chai-anan, 172.)

standing against all of the Communists in Asia. The only assurance of help came from Malaysia and Singapore, who understood that if Thailand lost the fight, the whole peninsula would fall to the communists. Thailand’s situation had suddenly become critical.”²²

Attacks on the Thai left began in mid-1975. Newspapers and leaflets denounced student activists and leftist politicians as communists who wanted to destroy the nation. Large patriotic organizations were brought into the fight. The Village Scouts Movement, founded in 1971 by the paramilitary Border Patrol Police (BPP) as a village auxiliary, was now turned against the urban threat.^e

New groups were created, the most significant of which was the Red Gaurs^f, formed by CSOC-successor, ISOC—“a vigilante movement composed of vocational school students.”²³ Senior military and government officials supported Nawaphon,^g which in 1975 claimed a million members.

Forty-five political parties competed in the January 1975 general election; Kukrit Pramoj became the prime minister of a very shaky

e. Over 2,000,000 people had attended recruitment sessions. (Baker and Pasuk, 192.)

f. Red Gaurs refers to “a very large and testy native Thai forest ox.” (Handley, 224.)

g. “Nawaphon,” meaning “New Force” or “Ninth Power,” was a propagandist campaign to rally support for the army around the symbols of nation and monarchy. (Baker and Pasuk, 192.)

Thousands of students were arrested on the Thammasat campus and around the city. That evening, the military took over the government and proclaimed martial law.

multi-party coalition.^a In January 1976, a no-confidence vote brought the Kukrit government down and a new election was called for 14 April 1976.

The 1976 election campaign would go down as the most violent in Thailand's history. The Red Gaurs provoked fights at student events, grenades were thrown into crowds, political activists and campaign workers were murdered. The Socialist Party of Thailand leader was assassinated. Military-controlled newspapers and radio stations denounced any suggestion of political or social change. Even members of the Buddhist clergy joined in. A leading Buddhist monk preached that killing communists was no sin.^b

The election was a victory for conservatives and moderates and, for a brief moment, it seemed that a return to political stability was possible. Then elements of the political right aligned with military factions decided to create a crisis: "Knowing it could cause an explosion in the streets, they moved to bring the former leaders Thanom and Praphat back

to Thailand."²⁴ Praphat was the first to return, but left after four days of student demonstrations. On 19 September, former PM Thanom arrived in Bangkok, was ordained as a monk, and met with the king and queen.^c

His presence set off massive demonstrations. On September 25, in Nakorn Pathom city, two student activists were hanged, and on 5 October, students at Thammasat University dramatized the event by staging a mock hanging—"the makeup applied to one actor left him with a startling resemblance to the Crown Prince." This was perceived as *lèse majesté*, and radio and newspaper accounts fed the outrage felt by many ordinary Thai. That night, thousands started gathering around the university, among them large groups of Village Scouts.

Shooting started in the morning, as the mob—led by Border Patrol Police—forced its way onto campus. "Armed with M-16s, M-79 grenade launchers, carbines, and even recoilless rifles, the BPP and other armed individuals cut loose with a withering volume of fire . . . the carnage was almost unbelievable. Some students were burned alive or lynched from

nearby trees; others were simply shot at point-blank range. . . . Official government reports listed 46 dead, but other observers believed the toll was much higher."²⁵

Thousands of students were arrested on the Thammasat campus and around the city. That evening, the military took over the government and proclaimed martial law. Students and others who survived the massacre started leaving the city, and called on the CPT for help. "During the following weeks, the CPT's urban cadre worked day and night to exfiltrate this group to the jungle."²⁶

The CPT Leaps Forward

"This single event represented a great leap forward for the CPT, which gained over 3,000 of Thailand's brightest and best left-leaning student, teachers, labor leaders, and politicians . . . the number of armed insurgents rose to well over 10,000, sufficient to challenge the RTA as a conventional force."²⁷ The students "who did not actually join the CPT in 1976–1977 remained a latent base of new recruits once the party was ready for them."²⁸

When those who fled Bangkok reached the jungle, "party members were carefully segregated from the united front and from those who merely fled out of fear for their lives. The Party recognized that RTG military and civilian elements had taken advantage of an opportunity to infiltrate intelligence assets into the jungle."²⁹

There was another reason as well: among all the "unorganized progressives" were the seeds of a national

a. Kukrit, the great-grandson of King Rama II, was the founder of the newspaper *Siam Rat*, and a number of political parties. He was also a novelist and supporter of traditional Thai arts, and acted with Marlon Brando in the 1963 film, *The Ugly American*.

b. "It is the duty of all Thai. . . . It is just like when we kill a fish to make curry to place in the alms bowl for a monk. There is certainly demerit in killing the fish, but when we place it in the alms bowl of a monk, we gain much greater merit." (Morell and Chai-anan, 237.)

c. "It is easy to understand how the king, in 1975 and 1976, could have become increasingly convinced that the political conflict in the system of open politics was threatening the very foundation of the monarchy. The palace began to see student, labor, and farmer leaders as communist agitators, or at least as deeply influenced by such elements. Frightened people began for the first time to consider the demise of the Chakri dynasty as a distinct possibility." (Morell and Chai-anan, 271.)

united front, a goal which had eluded the CPT's organizational efforts in the past.^a And now the CPT also had the means it had previously lacked that would make a united front possible—the VOPT clandestine radio would be the link between the remote party leadership and the united front organizations.

Seeking a Way to Defeat the Insurgency

Everything seemed to be going well for the party. The unexpected intake of new members represented great potential for expansion. The end of war in Vietnam and neighboring Laos assured safe areas for the Thai Peoples Liberation Army and an almost unlimited supply of weapons and ammunition, as well as training and other support. The stage seemed set for growing CPT success. But some observers started to see internal contradictions. A senior Thai intelligence officer recalled, "By 1978, the CPT could not absorb all the arms and ammunition it was receiving from the Vietnamese and Lao. In addition, the CPT's record of success was dismal—and prospects for the future were not good. The Vietnamese faction in the party was growing, and the influx of students—which was welcomed initially—did not revitalize the CPT, but was creating new rifts in it."³⁰

a. "Although the party did set up two front organizations in the mid-1960s, these organizations remained relatively inactive. Their membership remained small, at least partly because of the lack of contacts between front leaders and their potential supporters." (Morell and Chai-anan, 296.)

Thai military and civilian elements concerned with the insurgency understood that it was a dangerous time for their country; they were trying to understand the threat and find ways to deal with it.

Thai military and civilian elements concerned with the insurgency understood that it was a dangerous time for their country; they were trying to understand the threat and find ways to deal with it. Among those was Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, a Royal Thai Army officer who had been involved with the anti-communist wars of Indochina, and who now found himself confronted by the communist threat in his homeland.^b Pervasive American influence affected the Thai military and the way it dealt with the CPT insurgency. Chawalit recounted his experiences:

American influence was in everything I did. My first assignment after graduation from the Thai military academy was Korea, where I was first exposed to the American way. Then I went to Laos, where the RTA fought for one year—under US sponsorship. A year later, I was selected for the Queen's Cobra Regiment, the first Thai unit to go to Vietnam. We operated in Two Corps, fought side by side with the Americans. After that, I was involved with Cambodia for 10 years. In that time, everything the Thai military did was done the American way.

Then, suddenly, we found ourselves fighting in our own country—contending for Thailand with the CPT. Thirty-six

b. Chavalit became Thailand's "intelligence tsar" in the early 1980s and the commander-in-chief of the RTA. He was elected prime minister in 1996.

of Thailand's 73 provinces were under strong communist influence. I was sent to the Command and General Staff school, where I taught and wrote field manuals on the new counterinsurgency tactics we learned from the Americans. But it was evident that trying to fix the CPT problem in the American way was not working—it was making the problem worse.

I found the answer in Mao Tse-tung's little red book; Mao wrote, "Dictatorship will be overthrown by communism, and communism will be defeated by democracy." Thailand would have to find a democratic solution to the communist insurgency. We didn't understand then what the red book meant when it said that this kind of war must be fought in a political way. We learned that from the CPT members who defected to us."³¹

Events elsewhere in the region had a profound effect on the CPT's future. In December 1978, the Vietnamese Army invaded Cambodia, unseated the regime of the communist Khmer Rouge, and settled in to occupy the country. The invasion shifted the balance of power in Southeast Asia: the Khmer Rouge was Peking's ally. In addition to the chaos it created throughout the region, Vietnam's invasion "led to a tremendous fissure within the CPT, between the factions associated with the Peking and Soviet approaches to revolution."³² Other consequences of the invasion would,

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China Changes Course

After the Vietnamese Army replaced the Khmer Rouge regime in Phnom Penh with the People's Republic of Kampuchea, a large number of Vietnamese troops were moved up near Cambodia's border with Thailand. It looked like the Vietnamese Army was headed for Bangkok. The Vietnamese Army encamped in Cambodia became a huge problem for Thailand. The Royal Thai Army could not freely employ its units against the insurgency while the Vietnamese Army threatened its border.

Then Major General Chavalit was tasked with resolving the problem. He had been instrumental in the 1978 creation of the Thahan Phran—"hunter troops," specially trained to use guerrilla tactics against the CPT insurgents—and remained committed to using political means against the insurgency when it was possible. He explained:

Thailand was confronted by nine Vietnamese divisions across our border with Cambodia, which affected our commitment of military force we could use against the insurgency. I went to China to talk with Deng Xiaoping. My position was that it would seem better for China to side with the majority of Thai people rather than the small number that made up the CPT. Thailand could be a good friend.

Deng agreed. He said that decision was already made. That was our luck: it cleared the way for the RTA to attack CPT strongholds in north Thailand. China ended its support of the CPT. It shut down the radio transmissions of the Voice of the People of Thailand [VOPT].^a So what we did outside Thailand helped open the way for our attempt to defeat the CPT.^{b, 33}

The Beginning of the End

The change in China's Southeast Asia strategy affected its support to the CPT. Shutting down the VOPT was only the first step that led to the party's unraveling. According to a senior Thai intelligence official:

The Chinese stopped their support because the CPT had outlived its usefulness. Beijing's country-to-country relation-

a. The VOPT was "temporarily" closed down on 11 July 1979, but never went back on the air again.

b. The change in China's Southeast Asia strategy went beyond Thailand and the CPT. According to a senior PLAAF officer who commanded an air division during the Sino-Viet border conflict, "In order to distract the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, China decided to escalate the level of conflict that already existed along its southern border with Vietnam. . . . Our confrontation with the Vietnamese was a major shift in Sino-Vietnamese relations. . . . [the] Chinese Army tied down 11 Vietnamese divisions along the China-Vietnam border, making it impossible for the Vietnamese to deploy any more troops to Cambodia." (Yang Guoxiang, author interview, 2011.)

ship with Thailand grew more important than its party-to-party relationship with the CPT. When the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia, China needed Thailand to support its Khmer Rouge ally, and then to hold back the Vietnamese.³⁴

Loss of the VOPT was a real disaster for the CPT. The VOPT broadcasts were not simply exhortations of ideology, but the channel through which policy and information was passed. The VOPT also helped maintain the morale of isolated insurgent units and individual CPT members. It was most important to sustaining the united front effort.

The CPT's problems were converging. Support from China had been lost, and cracks in the party's façade were starting to show: "By early 1980, the CPT was in severe disarray, a victim of the Sino-Soviet struggle, which led to conflict within the party between the dominant Chinese armed struggle line, and the Soviet-oriented Vietnamese faction. The party was torn by factionalism and confusion over competing revolutionary ideologies."³⁵ And then there were the students . . .

Amnesty, the Students and the Intelligence Community

Life in the jungle was difficult for the city-bred students. The party tried to make the transition easier by putting them into CPT-controlled "liberated villages." That eased the hardships of daily life, but there was another problem:

The students had looked up to the CPT cadre as heroes. In

the jungle, they were appalled to find their CPT heroes were actually coarse and uneducated. The students knew they could do a better job than the old cadre, but felt they were never given a chance.^{a, 36}

The Thai intelligence agencies had a good sense of the difficulties the students were encountering. To take advantage of their disillusionment, an offer of amnesty was made to the students in late 1978, and several hundred came out of the jungle. Use of amnesty as a tactic against the insurgency reflected the approach of the new RTA commander-in-chief, Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda. His aide-de-camp was Maj. Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who had become the chief proponent of the “peace-line” approach.

The Thai intelligence community had become divided between those who supported the peace-line—which was not many—and those who supported more conventional counterinsurgency tactics. The latter looked upon peace-liners as dupes of the communists. Both Prasert Sapsunthorn and Pin Bua-on were seen as highly intelligent; it did not take much imagination to see that they could easily manipulate policemen and soldiers who had very little political experience. “Chavalit was called a communist—and there are people who call him that today.”³⁷

Within the RTA there was never any debate whether use of politi-

a. Others note: “The students who entered the jungle chafed under CPT discipline. [Student leader] Seksan Prasertkun complained that they ‘had to fight for democracy all over again in the jungle.’” (Baker and Pasuk, 196.)

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cal warfare might have some value against the insurgency. Chavalit had converted a fair number of working-level military officers to his peace-line thinking, but those were not the people who made the decisions within the RTA; the generals did that, and once made, the generals did not debate their decisions.

Chavalit’s peace-line got traction only after General Prem became the prime minister. Then Chavalit was recognized as the man who would make the decisions about the insurgency. The generals did not like that, but it came down to political power: they called Chavalit a communist, but they fell in line.

Countering the Insurgency with Amnesty

As the PRC turned its back on the CPT, the Thai military moved in to destroy insurgent troops and deny them safe areas. General Prem became prime minister in 1989, and events moved very quickly. He had his team in place, as a senior Thai intelligence officer noted:

Prem had a brain trust that dealt with the insurgency. The five members were known as “The four Ps and a C.” The Four Ps were Deputy Prime Minister Prachuap Suntharongkun, National Intelligence Agency Director-General Piya Chakkaphak, National Security Council head Squadron Leader Prasong Sursiri, and Deputy Director-General of the

National Police, Police Lt. General Phao Sarasin. The C was Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. These five men, Prem’s Privy Council, were the real chiefs of the Thai intelligence community during Prem’s tenure.

*When Prem was commander of the Thai Army, Chavalit functioned as his chief of staff; when Prem became Prime Minister, Chavalit became Thailand’s Intelligence Tsar. The amnesty program initiated under Prem is credited for ending the insurgency. The idea was Chavalit’s, and it was Chavalit who saw the plan carried out. Chavalit’s genius was not just seeing that the peace-line approach could be used to bring down the CPT, but in turning his ideas into Thailand’s counterinsurgency policy.*³⁸

General Chavalit explained the implementation of the amnesty program:

As we started having military success, it was evident that we would also have to start moving politically: military power could not be our primary focus. I drafted Prime Minister Office Order number 66/33.^b

The emphasis in 66/33 was on freedom. The old law precluded CPT members from rejoining Thai society. Now the communists could return to society; if they came out of the jungle,

b. The 66th order is the year 2533, or 1980.

At the end it went quickly. The insurgency was over; the CPT was gone.

the government would help them settle back into Thai society.

The principle we worked under was to consider CPT members as you would a friend or family member. Those who became communists had made many sacrifices for what they believed in. Now we were asking them to come out of the jungle—and in their minds—they were possibly facing death.

In 1980, there was a major success in the Northeast when over 1,000 insurgents surrendered. The surrender was negotiated by former CPT Politburo member and Peace Line advocate, Pin Bua-on. “This mass surrender marked the beginning of a quick end to the CPT’s armed struggle.”³⁹

The entire amnesty process took about two years. About 80,000 CPT and family members came in. Forty senior level cadre surrendered, about half of the CPT leadership. The remaining

*senior cadre were ashamed to show themselves. They are still out there. We know where they are.*⁴⁰

At the end it went quickly. The insurgency was over; the CPT was gone. The offer of amnesty was well-timed. The pressure on the Thai communists was immense: Chinese support was gone, and what was being offered by the Vietnamese was not acceptable to the party’s Sino-Thai leadership. The students had fled, and with them went the party’s hope of expansion. The validity of the armed struggle doctrine had been questioned and discredited in the struggle with the peace-line advocates. And all the while the Royal Thai Army was in hot pursuit and shutting down insurgent safe havens. Amnesty was a way out at the point where the CPT had run out of options.

In the end, the CPT’s ethnic composition was not a factor. Amnesty was for all, and they came out in droves; Sino-Thai and tribal people,

even the hard core—“the true believers”—and even from safe havens like Kunming in China, where life was not unpleasant. It was time to end the exile and go home. The students who had started the departing stream of party exiles fared particularly well after they came out of the jungle.

Many had broken the hearts of the traditional families they came from, but there would be no punishment. They were encouraged to take up offers to study abroad that many had received; it was thought that, “once they saw how others lived their lives in democratic countries, communism would no longer appeal.”⁴¹ The idea came from Prem’s intelligence advisers, and it appears to have worked well.

A small group of men still meets secretly in Bangkok—the true believers—among them the senior cadre who refused to accept amnesty. The intelligence service informants who monitor them report that these old men still have Marxist dreams, but they do nothing that might cause concern.



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Interviews

Chawalit Yongchaiyudh, commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Army, deputy prime minister and minister of defense, prime minister 1996–1997; considered the architect of the CPT's defeat. Author interview, February 2012.

Piya Chakkaphak, director general of the National Intelligence Agency 1980–1987. Author interview in Bangkok, February 2006 and March 2010.

Bhumarat Jongkit, director general of Thai National Intelligence Agency, 1987–2004. Author interview in Bangkok, March 2012.

CPT Politburo member. Author interview in Bangkok, March 2012.

Nantiwat Samart, former senior officer, National Intelligence Agency. Author interviews, February and March 2012.

Yang Guoxiang, senior People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) officer. Author interview in Kunming, China, 2011.

Endnotes

1. David Chak Wing Tsui, *China and the Communist Armed Struggle in Thailand* (Sangam Books, 1995), 48.
2. *Ibid.*, 36.
3. David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution* (Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain, 1981), 294.
4. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 146.
5. Chalmers Johnson, in foreword to Daniel D. Lovelace, *China and the "People's War" in Thailand, 1964–1969*. After analyzing the status of the CPT insurgency in 1969, Lovelace on page 74 concludes, "regardless of the intensity of its commitment to the support of the Thai guerrillas at the propaganda level, Peking was never really serious about creating an insurgency strong enough or well enough led to overthrow the government of Thailand, or even to disrupt American military activities in the country."
6. Bhumarat Jongkit, former director general of Thailand's National Intelligence Agency (NIA), author interview. In March 1962, a clandestine radio station calling itself the Voice of the People of Thailand (VOPT) started broadcasting into Thailand. It was allegedly located in a liberated area of Thailand, or in communist Pathet Lao-controlled North Laos, but Thai government direction-finders placed the radio transmitter in Kunming, the capital of China's Yunnan province. For the next 17 years, the VOPT broadcast news and disseminated party doctrine, policy, and propaganda to mobilize the masses and denounce the US occupation of Thailand.
7. Tsui, *China and the Communist Armed Struggle*, 48.
8. *Ibid.*, 11–12. U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy Airfield became a forward operating base for B-52 Stratofortress bombers. Although used to drop conventional bombs on both North and South Vietnam, the B-52 had been designed to carry nuclear weapons.
9. Thomas A. Marks, *Making Revolution—The Insurgency of the Communist Party of Thailand in Structured Perspective* (White Lotus, 1994), 99.
10. Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, 87.
11. Piya Chakkaphak, former director general of Thailand's National Intelligence Agency, author interview, February 2006 and March 2010.
12. Glenn Ettinger, "Thailand's Defeat of Its Communist Party" *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 20, no. 4 (August 2007), 661–677.
13. Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, 147.
14. Paul M. Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (Yale University Press, 2006), 211.
15. Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, 187.
16. Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, 160.
17. Piya, author interview.
18. Ettinger, 667.
19. Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, 287.
20. *Ibid.*, 174.
21. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, author interview.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, 192.
24. Handley, *The King Never Smiles*, 233.
25. Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, 275.
26. Ettinger, 669.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, 293.
29. Ettinger, 675.
30. Bhumarat Jongkit, author interview.
31. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, author interview.
32. Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, 304.
33. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, author interview.
34. Bhumarat Jongkit, author interview.
35. Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, 305.
36. Bhumarat Jongkit, author interview.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. Ettinger, 670.
40. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, author interview.
41. Piya, author interview.

