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Thailand's Changing Strategic Outlook: Implications for Thai-US Security Relations

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An Intelligence Assessment

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November 1987

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Thailand's Changing Strategic Outlook: Implications for Thai-US Security Relations

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted] Office
of East Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are
welcome and may be directed to the Chief,
Southeast Asia Division, OEA, [redacted]
[redacted]

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**Thailand's Changing Strategic
Outlook: Implications for
Thai-US Security Relations** [redacted]

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 21 October 1987
was used in this report.*

After a period of nearly total dependence on the United States, we believe Bangkok now favors security cooperation with several partners, but with the United States anchoring defense policy. In our judgment, Thai officials calculate this strategy is more attuned to their defense needs and such political and economic realities as increased nationalism and limited budgetary resources. This view underlies Bangkok's expanding cooperation with China and efforts to cultivate other potential partners such as South Korea. [redacted]

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- We believe two factors will sustain this trend over the next several years:
- Reductions in US security assistance—an important gauge of commitment in Bangkok's eyes—highlight the limitations of US support and reinforce Thai doubts about Washington's reliability.
 - Changes in the views of the Army officer corps, which provides most of Thailand's leaders. The majority of younger officers are more self-confident, nationalistic, and independent-minded than their seniors, and, as a result, we believe they will view cooperation with the United States more objectively while being open to other options. [redacted]

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We believe Bangkok may become less responsive to US concerns or adopt policies that contradict US objectives, as a result. For example, Bangkok's increasing number of arms suppliers undermines the interoperability of Thai and US forces [redacted]

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Furthermore, because personalities play such a large role in decisionmaking, we believe handshake agreements such as the one permitting the United States to stage surveillance flights over the Indian Ocean from Thai facilities at Utapao are vulnerable to leadership changes. If General Chavalit succeeds Prime Minister Prem, as we expect, the agreement will remain viable, in our judgment [redacted]

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[redacted] Indeed, [redacted] almost certainly will remain an emotional issue, and thus we believe the agreement for use of Utapao could be jeopardized [redacted] no matter who is prime minister. Because of such sensitivities, we do not consider

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Thailand as a possible alternative for US bases in the Philippines. We believe Bangkok, at most, would permit only a small permanent contingent to service transiting military aircraft. [REDACTED]

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Nevertheless, the United States will remain the major factor in Thai national security policy. Both nations' interests remain largely parallel, including the desire to limit Chinese, Soviet, and Vietnamese influence in the region and to promote a strong Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Thai efforts to develop and expand other security partnerships, in our view, are intended to complement rather than replace US assistance and guarantees. [REDACTED]

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Thai Foreign Policy: A Historical Perspective

The Thai have long prided themselves on their skillful juggling of competing interests and their deft handling of vastly more powerful friends and foes through diplomacy. They have been guided throughout by a combination of opportunism, pragmatism, and an intense desire to preserve their independence; they have not hesitated to sacrifice relations with one nation to pursue what they believe are more attractive opportunities with another. For example, with British colonialism in Southeast Asia on the rise in the 1800s and posing an increasing threat to Thai sovereignty, Bangkok made major commercial concessions that satisfied London's search for expanded trade and influence in the region. It then forged similar arrangements with the United States, Britain's archrival, France, and several other nations that helped Bangkok avoid what one author called "such suffocatingly close bilateral relationships as those between British India and Burma or France and Vietnam." Thailand thus struck a delicate balance with Great Britain protecting Bangkok against the designs of other powers who, in turn, provided leverage against the British.

This approach often has required the Thai to do more than enter into unpalatable diplomatic arrangements or accept painful economic concessions. They also

have ceded valuable territories on several occasions, sacrificing various parts to preserve the smaller whole. For instance, Thailand in this century relinquished control over parts of modern day Laos and Cambodia to the French in return for their withdrawal from southeastern Thailand. In similar fashion, Bangkok won authority over British subjects in Thailand by granting London control of several of Thailand's Malay states. These concessions amounted to over 175,000 square miles of territory, but they preserved Thai independence.

During World War II, Bangkok responded to the Japanese invasion of Thailand and a series of other military successes by concluding a military alliance with Tokyo. One noted historian speculates that Thai officials concluded Japan would win the war and decided their interests were best served by going with the tide. As this tide shifted, however, Bangkok reverted to the balancing act by maintaining good relations with Tokyo on the surface while working with the British and the Americans covertly. The Thai move away from Japan accelerated as allied forces prepared to go on the offensive and Bangkok began mending fences with nations it had declared war on a few years earlier.

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Thailand's Changing Strategic Outlook: Implications for Thai-US Security Relations

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Catalysts for Change

The past decade has seen important changes in Thailand that will set the tone of Thai foreign policy and Thai-US security relations over the next several years. Bangkok's international stature has increased substantially by virtue of its role in spearheading opposition to Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. This has caught the eye of China and the Soviet Union, for instance, and both have chosen Bangkok as the focal point for their efforts to expand their influence in the region, according to US diplomats. On the domestic front, a generational change in leadership is under way that, in our view, portends a period of political uncertainty. Prime Minister Prem, Deputy Prime Minister Siddhi, National Security Council Secretary General Prasong, and National Intelligence Agency Director Piya—who have shaped Thailand's moderate, strongly pro-US foreign policy—are moving toward the end of their respective careers.

A New Breed of Officers

Although the Army is among the most conservative elements in Thailand, [] points out that many up-and-coming junior officers have had markedly different experiences from those of their seniors and, as a result, have very different views about foreign and national security policy. Many entered the system as the Vietnam war was winding down and US forces withdrew. Their experience with the United States is much more limited than their mentors', who rose through the ranks when bilateral cooperation was at its height. At the same time, the younger officers were closely involved in Thailand's counterinsurgency effort against the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Although we believe factional rivalries and the abrupt cutoff of Chinese support were the CPT's undoing, these officers are convinced it was a stunning victory for the Army.

Because of such factors, young Thai officers exude confidence in their capabilities and are strongly nationalistic and independent-minded, []

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[] They already have left their imprint on Thai weapons procurement policy, according to the [] that they have pushed hard for domestic defense industries and more diverse external sources of weapons. As they assume senior leadership positions, we believe they will be somewhat less cautious in dealing with China than their seniors. Although many saw combat against CPT forces, memories of the Chinese supply link apparently have faded in the current era of close cooperation with Beijing. [] that they do not distrust China to the same degree as their seniors; some do not believe Beijing is a security threat at all.

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Limitations of US Support

Thai officials at all levels are increasingly critical of perceived shortcomings in US aid. Bangkok has long complained that US security assistance is inadequate to meet Thailand's needs, particularly in light of its self-styled frontline status and role as anchor of US interests in the region. Thai officials frequently draw comparisons with Vietnam, complaining that Hanoi receives everything it needs from the Soviet Union free of charge while Bangkok has to "pay for every shell." This analogy highlights the significance Bangkok attaches to material aid in gauging commitment, and thus this aspect of the relationship seems certain to be among the most contentious (see appendix).

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The 40-percent cut in US aid for FY 1987 renewed Bangkok's doubts about Washington's ultimate reliability, [] although increased grant aid, the logistic memorandum of understanding, and the war reserve stockpile buffered

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Key Elements of Thai-US Security Relations

Rusk-Thanat Communique. This 1962 agreement underpins the relationship. The United States and Thailand agreed to interpret the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty of 1954 also as a bilateral pact "binding" the United States to assist Thailand in time of need. The communique, however, leaves fuzzy the issue of a US commitment to use its forces to defend Thailand. [redacted]

Security Assistance. The focus of security assistance over the past several years has been to help modernize Thai conventional forces, thereby improving Bangkok's ability to meet external threats without direct US intervention. For years, this largely involved grant aid, but the Carter administration opted for the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program, which extended concessionary loans to help finance purchases of US equipment. Thailand's allotment of FMS credits topped \$90 million before the program reverted to grant aid in 1987 totaling about \$50 million. [redacted]

Combined Military Exercises. These are an important element of joint efforts to improve Thai conventional capabilities and a major demonstration of Washington's commitment to Thai security. From the US perspective, they also represent important opportunities to train US forces because of the environmental and tactical conditions. The exercise program has expanded from three events in 1980 to over 20 annually, the largest of which is Cobra Gold. For the first time in 1987, the Cobra Gold scenario involved defending against a simulated Vietnamese invasion across the Cambodian border. Although US budgetary restrictions are a limiting factor in the exercise program, Thai officials are pressing to expand the size and scope of these activities. [redacted]

War Reserve Stockpile. The 1987 War Reserve Stockpile Agreement provides for complementary stores of US and Thai reserve materiel on Thai soil.

The United States agreed to provide munitions matching Thai contributions up to \$10 million annually for five years. The supplies can be used by either nation in an emergency, although the rules governing withdrawals differ. The United States can use its stocks at any time for any purpose upon "appropriate notification" to the Thai Government, although Bangkok cannot draw US stocks unless the US President and the Thai Prime Minister agree that a "nation-threatening" crisis exists. Bangkok's limited control over US use of the stockpile clearly would be a contentious point in Thailand if it became widely known. [redacted]

Access to Utapao Airfield. Prime Minister Prem in late [redacted]

in the region, and for transiting US military aircraft. Prem several times has allowed Washington to expand the operations—for example, by increasing the number of surveillance flights to eight annually—and he is the only direct US contact in the Thai Government on this highly sensitive agreement. [redacted]

Logistics Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The MOU concluded in 1985 formalizes and reaffirms several separate arrangements under one umbrella agreement. It covers issues pertaining to US logistic support to Thailand, particularly the provision of supplies in an emergency. [redacted]

Economic Support Funds. Although part of the US security assistance package, this \$5 million fund is used for humanitarian projects in Thai border villages affected by Indochinese refugees. [redacted]

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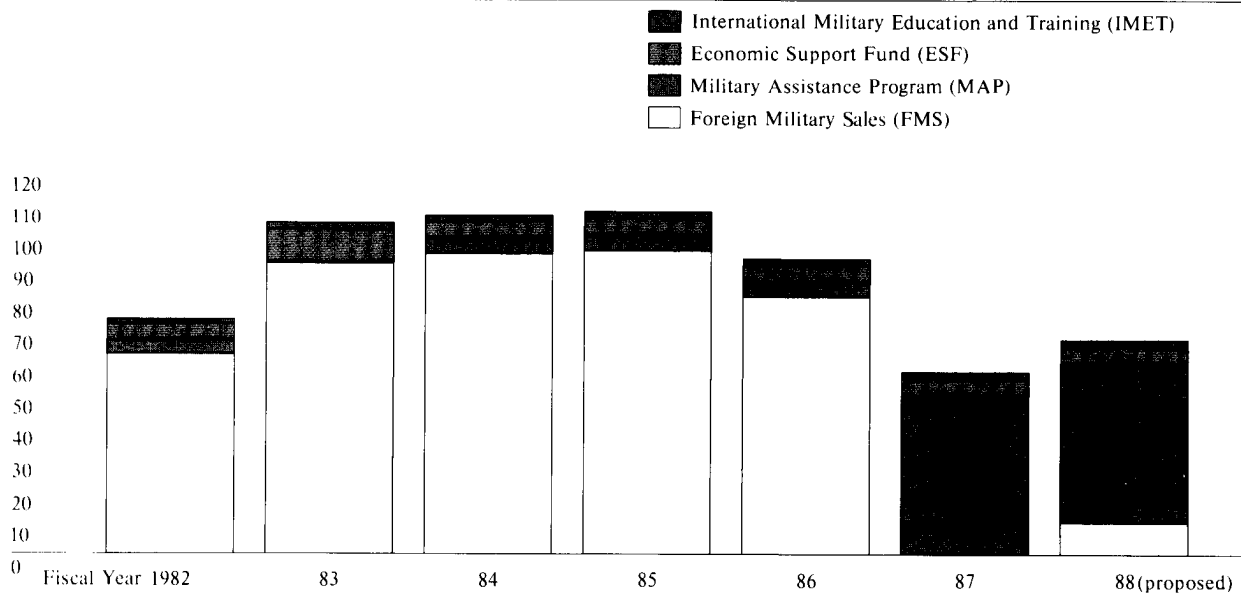
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US Security Assistance for Thailand (1982-88)

Million US \$



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its reaction. Press commentaries often echo these concerns. Indeed, the warnings against overreliance on the United States and involvement in US issues that do not directly affect Thailand become more shrill whenever new elements of bilateral security cooperation, such as the sale of F-16 fighters, become public.¹ Although these measures are obviously intended to demonstrate Washington's commitment to

¹ The Air Force's proposed purchase of US F-16 fighters became a hotly debated public issue in Thailand in 1984. Military officers were divided over the wisdom of the purchase in light of Thai requirements and budget limitations while politicians and economic policy makers argued that Thailand did not need and could not afford the aircraft. Proponents finally won approval for the purchase in 1985, but the total number of planes was reduced from 16 to 12, and the payment plan adopted will severely restrict Air Force resources for years to come. The first delivery is scheduled for 1988.

Thai security, they apparently heighten the fears of many who believe Thailand is better off keeping the United States at a comfortable distance (see inset).

Thailand Diversifies

Bangkok believes some distance from Washington is appropriate, and we expect the Thai to seek a more independent course over the next several years by

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developing greater balance in their defense relationships. In our view, the Thai calculate that this strategy:

- Is more attuned to domestic sensitivity regarding sovereignty and independence.
- Reduces Thai exposure to broken commitments.
- Enhances Bangkok's flexibility in the conduct of foreign policy.
- Provides a degree of leverage in dealing with the United States.
- Improves the military's ability to modernize within budget constraints.

[redacted] for example, that Thailand is moving toward a logistic partnership with South Korea. A Thai Supreme Command delegation visited Seoul in August 1987 to negotiate the purchase of equipment, spare parts, and ammunition. We are not aware of any final agreements, but the

[redacted] an attractive supplier because it can provide hardware compatible with US-made equipment more cheaply and often more quickly than the United States. Senior Thai officers also have developed extensive contacts with several West European suppliers whose sales to Thailand are increasing somewhat. In addition, military exercises with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) partners have increased markedly during the 1980s, although defense cooperation within the group is unlikely to grow much beyond the current limited level (see appendix). [redacted]

By far the most striking example of Thai diversification efforts is the budding relationship with China. Although parallel policies opposing Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia underpin the relationship, Beijing now is a coguarantor of Thai security along with the United States. From Bangkok's perspective, China offers assistance that Washington either cannot or will not provide, such as a bankroll for the Cambodian resistance and a regional counterweight to Vietnam and the Soviets. The Thai consider China's policy of exerting limited military pressure along the Vietnamese border, for example, as an important show of support for Thailand and the resistance. They also are looking toward Beijing as a major source of inexpensive weaponry (see inset). [redacted]

Chronology of Selected Developments in Thai-Chinese Relations

- 1975 *Formal diplomatic relations established.*
- 1978 *Thai Prime Minister, Chinese vice premier exchange visits.*
- [redacted]
- 1981 *Thai Princess Sirinthon visits China.*
- 1982 *Chinese naval delegation visits Thailand for first time.*
- 1984 *Beijing unveils strategy of "a thousand thorns" involving limited pressure on Vietnamese border to show support for Thailand and the Cambodian resistance.*
- General Arthit becomes first Thai Army commander in chief to visit China.*
- 1985 *China provides "gift" of field and antiaircraft artillery and counterbattery radar, marking first receipt of major Chinese weapon system by Thai military.*
Chinese President Li Xiannian visits Thailand at King Bhumibol's invitation.
- 1986 *Both nations decide to add naval attaches to their diplomatic missions.*
- 1987 *Crown Prince Vajirilongkorn visits China.*
- Thai announce first major purchase of Chinese hardware. Package includes tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery, and other equipment. Deliveries begin in September.*
- China stations two military advisers in Bangkok to help Thai assimilate new equipment.*
- Both nations agree in principle to open new consulates.*

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The arms relationship has been one of the most dynamic aspects of increasingly close military ties over the last two years. China's aggressive marketing strategy with its highly concessionary terms, together with Thai financial constraints and a growing reservoir of experience dealing with Beijing, apparently have helped the Thai overcome some of their trepidations about acquiring Chinese equipment. So far in 1987, for example, [] the Thai have contracted for tanks, armored personnel carriers, antiaircraft artillery, and other equipment. In addition, []

[] to help the Thai assimilate new hardware and Thailand has expanded its diplomatic mission in Beijing to include a naval attache.² [] the next step could include combined planning—for example, for force modernization—or contingency planning for emergency logistic support (see table 1). []

We believe this relationship with China could well produce Thai policies in conflict with those of the United States. For instance, the transfer of US and other NATO military technology may become a contentious issue in the years ahead, in our view, as this is one way Bangkok could compensate China for equipment it provides nearly free of charge. [] three instances of illegal diversion may already have occurred:

- [] a Thai Exocet surface-to-surface missile reported lost at sea may have been delivered to China.
- [] may have acquired a West German Leopard tank from Thailand even though Bonn prohibited the transfer.
- [] China has asked the Thai to transfer an Italian Aspide surface-to-air missile. Beijing apparently hopes to develop a similar system through reverse engineering. []

In any event, we believe several factors will limit the growth of bilateral cooperation at least in the near term. [] the Thai still view

² There are 32 military and five civilian US advisers stationed at the Joint US Military Advisory Group in Thailand. []

China with suspicion, and many officials in Bangkok, including Prime Minister Prem and Deputy Prime Minister Siddhi, consider Beijing a long-term threat (see inset). In addition, while Thai officials apparently believe they can manage anxieties within ASEAN, particularly those of Indonesia and Malaysia, the balancing act also will incorporate concerns over the potential impact on relations with these skittish partners who consider China their major long-term security threat. [] some officials in Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta believe the relationship has already become too close, although they are not pressing the Thai to change course. []

United States Retains Central Role

Despite Thailand's considerably broadened outlook, in our judgment, the United States will remain the core of Thai foreign policy and the ultimate guarantor of national security. We believe Bangkok views Chinese security assurances and Thai efforts to cultivate other weapon suppliers as ways to overcome shortcomings in the US relationship rather than as a move to supplant it. Moreover, the Thai have strong motivations for maintaining this central US role. They recognize, for example, that US capabilities for rapid resupply and direct intervention are unique. Previous rush deliveries of US equipment in response to clashes between Thai and Vietnamese forces along the Thai-Cambodian border and large-scale deployments for combined military exercises such as Cobra Gold have reinforced this view. []

In addition, Thailand's heavy reliance on diplomacy to offset perceived security threats depends on having the US counterweight for leverage. As Bangkok tries to manage an increasingly complicated diplomatic agenda with far more powerful nations such as China and the Soviet Union, we believe the Thai foresee a key role for the United States. For example, Bangkok is certain to lean heavily on Washington to balance cooperation with China. It also seeks to limit the growth of Soviet influence and activities in Southeast

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Table 1
Thai Alternatives: A Comparison of Selected Weapons

	United States ^a	China
Tanks		
Model	M-48A5	Type 69 II
Price	\$625,000	\$500,000
Weight	54 metric tons	37 metric tons
Power/weight	16 horsepower/ton	16 horsepower/ton
Road range	500 km	435 km
Road speed	48 km per hour	48 km per hour
Armament	One 105-mm main gun; one 7.62-mm coaxial and two 7.62-mm antiaircraft machineguns	One 100-mm main gun; one 7.62-mm coaxial, one 7.62-mm bow, and one 12.7-mm antiaircraft machineguns

	United States	China	South Korea
Artillery			
Model	155-mm M-198 howitzer	152-mm Type 66 howitzer	155-mm KH-179 howitzer
Price	\$592,000	\$125,000	\$115,000
Rate of fire	4 rounds per minute	6-8 rounds per minute	4 rounds per minute
Range	24 km ^b	18 km	23 km
Cost of high-explosive shell	\$400 to \$500	\$300	\$195

^a Prices quoted for US-made equipment are for end items only. The United States, however, generally offers the weapons as part of a total package that includes spare parts, ancillary equipment, technical manuals, and other support. This is not always the case with other suppliers.

^b Maximum range increases to nearly 30 km with a rocket-assisted projectile. China is trying to develop a similar shell.

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Asia exemplified by Moscow's presence at Cam Ranh Bay and higher profile in the Gulf of Thailand. Prime Minister Prem's repeated requests for appropriate US responses, such as a more visible naval presence in the Gulf of Thailand, underscore this concern. []

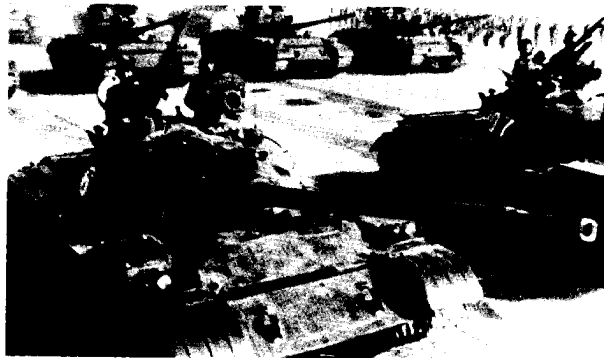
Although a political solution to the Cambodia problem presumably would ease Thai concerns by removing a major source of regional instability, we believe Thailand also would look to the United States to help deal with the uncertainties that a settlement would

generate. We believe bilateral relations with China have sprouted roots deep enough to outlive the Cambodia problem, but the ground rules for cooperation would be changed markedly without this key common policy interest. Thai fears probably would intensify that Beijing may revert to the disruptive policy of the 1960s and 1970s, when it supported Thai Communist insurgents. They also would worry more about the

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US M48A5 tank



Chinese Type 69II tank



US M-198 155-mm howitzer



Chinese Type 66 152-mm howitzer



South Korean KH-179 155-mm howitzer



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General Chavalit: Playing All Sides



security threat it poses. Chavalit says that in October 1987 he plans to become the first Thai Army Commander in recent history to visit the Soviet Union. He plans discussions on a wide range of topics, according to press reporting, but says he will not raise sensitive issues that would make his hosts uncomfortable.

[redacted]

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Chavalit accords the United States top billing over China in Thailand's security scheme, distinguishing them as ally and friend respectively, according to US diplomats. He is a leading proponent of closer relations with China—a policy he is certain to pursue if he becomes prime minister.

[redacted]

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[redacted] we rank

Army Commander Chavalit Yongchayudt as the front-runner to succeed Prime Minister Prem. Although Chavalit is generally pro-United States, his accession to the premiership would portend continued diversification of Thai defense arrangements and a more open approach to traditional adversaries, in our view.

[redacted] Chavalit considers China and the Soviet Union the major powers in Southeast Asia, and he argues that Thai policies should reflect this. He also believes Thailand has much to gain from both nations. For example, the Soviet Union and Bloc countries offer attractive trade opportunities for Thailand, in Chavalit's view, and he advocates dealing directly with Moscow to manage the

[redacted] We find it noteworthy that, during his tenure as commander, the Army has made its first major purchase of Chinese weapons and Beijing has stationed its first military advisers in Bangkok. Nonetheless, Chavalit intends to maintain balance in Thai defense relationships, and, by all accounts, he plans on continued close ties to the United States. Under his direction, the Army also has pressed for a jointly owned war reserve stockpile in Thailand and for more combined exercises with the United States as well as long-term commitments of emergency logistic support.

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prospects for a Sino-Soviet or Sino-Vietnamese rapprochement that may further reduce Chinese motivations to cooperate with Thailand and upset Bangkok's efforts to manage relations with all three. Along with seeking renewed assurances from the United States, Bangkok probably would work to shore up aspects of the China relationship unrelated to Cambodia—such as fledgling economic ties—to ensure Beijing's interest in continued cooperation.

Rough Times Ahead?

Nevertheless, we believe the changes under way in Thailand will complicate Thai-US security relations. This does not necessarily portend rising anti-US sentiment, but Bangkok almost certainly will view bilateral relations more objectively, and it certainly intends to deal with the United States as a partner,

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not a patron. We believe the Thai will not necessarily accept current levels of cooperation as a given and will assess more critically the costs and benefits. Moreover, because the Thai have become more creative in meeting their security needs, they will seek sharply defined US commitments—for example, for emergency logistic support—in order to assess and fill perceived gaps. [REDACTED]

We also expect Bangkok to continue manipulating US guarantees to come to Thailand's defense. This is intended partly for public consumption and deterrence value, but, more important, we believe it represents an effort to maneuver Washington into explicit commitments. Should direct US intervention be necessary—which we believe is unlikely—the task will be complicated by Bangkok's more diverse sources of weapons that undermine the interoperability of Thai and US forces. This procurement policy also works against efforts to improve Thai self-sufficiency in national defense by worsening severe logistics and maintenance shortcomings. [REDACTED]

Finally, because personalities are a critical factor in Thai politics, handshake agreements that lack an institutional foundation—such as the one permitting US access to Utapao for surveillance flights over the Indian Ocean—are vulnerable to leadership changes, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Although Army Commander Chavalit—the current front-runner to succeed Prem—is among them and probably would maintain the agreement, we are less certain that another prime minister would

Thai sensitivities to a highly visible US military presence are unlikely to abate soon, in our view, and thus Thailand is not a realistic alternative for US military bases in the Philippines. US diplomats believe Bangkok, at best, would permit a small permanent contingent to service transiting military flights using Thai facilities. Even this would be subject to close scrutiny by Thai officials, who are certain to drive a hard bargain and require substantial financial and other rewards. Moreover, we believe public revelation of such an agreement could be explosive. US diplomats expect that students and intellectuals would spearhead the opposition. They would argue that the reestablishment of a US military presence in Thailand would infringe on national sovereignty, bolster the Army's role in domestic politics, complicate regional and international issues, and increase the chance that Bangkok would become involved in conflicts where it had no direct interests at stake. [REDACTED]

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Appendix

Thailand:
Equipment Modernization Programs

Comments	
Army	
Armor modern- ization	The Army in September 1987 took delivery of 30 Chinese Type 69 II tanks and it has bought roughly 80 US-made M-48A5 tanks over the last three years. Bangkok also is considering the US-made Stingray light tank, and press reports indicate the Thai Cabinet has ap- proved the purchase of 100 Stingrays. The Army's plan to modernize its fleet of M-41 tanks remains shelved. [redacted] the Thai also are buying several hundred Chinese armored personnel carriers, but none have been delivered so far.
Air Force	
F-16 fighter	This remains the Air Force's only major aircraft acquisition program. Twelve F-16s are to be delivered by 1989, and the military has postponed plans to buy six more aircraft. Air Force officials remain uninterested in Chinese aircraft.
Air defense system	The Air Force in 1985 won approval for the first phase of this three-phase program to construct a modern, integrated air defense system. If Bangkok follows through on all aspects of the program, construction will con- tinue well into the next decade.
Navy	
Fleet expansion	The Navy is adding two new US-made cor- vettes and two minesweepers made in West Germany. The Chinese have offered frigates and submarines to the Thai Navy, but no deal has been struck so far.
[redacted]	

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