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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

25 February 1972

MEMORANDUM*

SUBJECT: New Challenges to Thailand?

There is increased concern regarding the security of Thailand. The domestic insurgency has grown more troublesome. In Laos, North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces have been making substantial territorial gains. And since early January, condemnation by the communists of Thai involvement in the Indochinese war has reached unusually high levels of vituperation. All this at a time when American resolve to continue the military struggle in Southeast Asia has seemed to diminish -- at least in Asian eyes.

After a discussion of the growing threat, this memorandum assesses communist attitudes and probable actions toward Thailand, and -- starting in paragraph 23 -- the prospect for any change in Thailand's view of the war and its alliance with the United States.

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* *This memorandum has been coordinated within appropriate offices of CIA.*

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The Threat to Thailand Grows

1. The Thai insurgency appears to become more of a problem each year: the estimated number of insurgents has tended to rise -- along with the number of recorded "incidents" and casualties -- and the areas of insecurity have tended to increase in extent. This year, as the various regional insurgencies enter their more active dry-season phase, does not appear to be an exception. In the northern and north-central provinces in particular, insurgent forces continue to strengthen their position, though they remain confined to remote and sparsely settled zones.

2. There may be as many as 2,500 to 3,000 armed insurgents in these northerly areas -- largely Meo tribesmen led by Thai and Sino-Thai communists; and while their numbers are not growing at a dramatic rate, their capabilities are more highly regarded than before. Their weaponry, for example, now seems to include AK-47 rifles and modern carbines, rocket-propelled grenades, and improved antipersonnel and antitank mines, as well as limited numbers of light mortars and light machine guns.

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Insurgent training and tactical organization may also be improving; because of their stiff resistance, recent government efforts to eliminate important base areas have been largely unsuccessful. Indeed, in many districts near the Lao border, government troops are presently on the defensive. There is evidence, too, of a developing network of communist support bases in this border zone, not far from Pak Beng, terminal of the Chinese-built road to the Mekong.

3. Elsewhere in Thailand, the situation seems much less serious. In the northeast, the 1,500 or so insurgents have felt compelled in recent years to avoid direct confrontation with government forces, and are focusing instead on improving the quality of their organization and the security of the existing village support base. In the other regions, the insurgencies are troublesome, but anti-government activity is small-scale and sporadic -- largely terrorism. The well-organized communist activity along the Malay border still seems to be targetted mainly against Kuala Lumpur.

4. In Laos, the threat to Thai interests and, potentially, Thai territory has increased. The communists are on the offensive as in the past three dry seasons,

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but this time NVA/PL forces moved to threaten Vang Pao's base complex at Long Tieng as early as December. But while the communists claimed the fall of Long Tieng over a month ago, this objective continues to elude them. In southern Laos, communist troops have gained almost complete control of the strategic Bolovens Plateau; and in this and other sectors, allied forces now seem to have their backs to the Mekong. There is not much doubt that, with relatively small additions to their ranks, the communists could move to threaten Savannakhet, Pakse, and the other major river towns.

5. The more threatening tone of recent communist propaganda attacks on the Thai government is another cause of concern. Hanoi and its Pathet Lao clients have been most outspoken. Hanoi has warned editorially of "punishment" for the Thai leadership, and at three successive Paris meetings has made a point of condemning Thai involvement in Laos and the presence of US air bases in Thailand. The Pathet Lao and Prince Souvannavong (in a letter to Souvanna Phouma) have given heavy play to the theme of Thai intervention and promised "annihilation" of Thai forces in Laos. Chinese media (NCNA) have celebrated "the defeat and extermination of Thai mercenaries"

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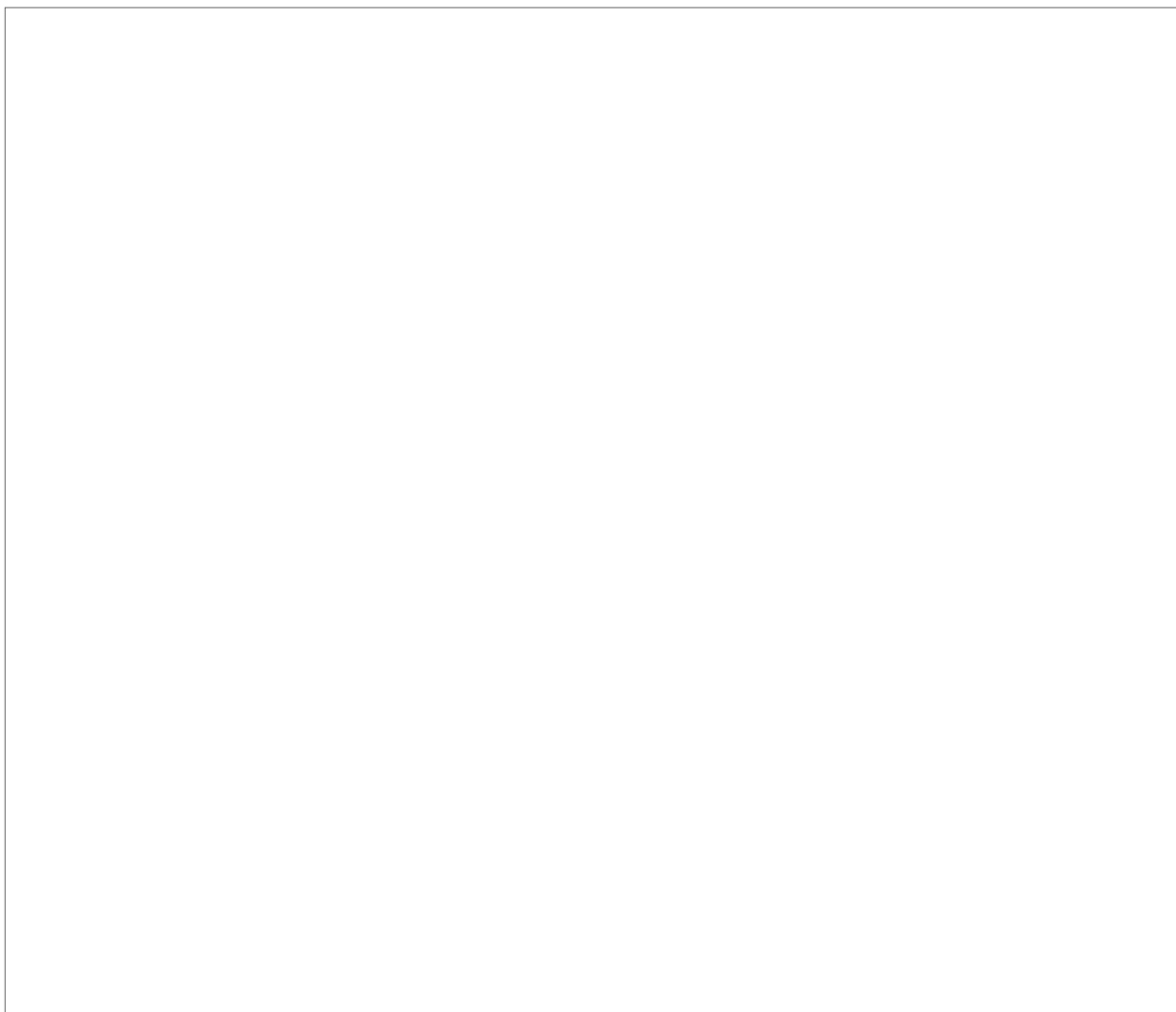
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in Laos, and have quoted Albanian attacks on Thailand as "a springboard for US aggression" in Southeast Asia. Sihanouk has followed along with denunciations of alleged Thai plans to invade Cambodia.

The Changed Communist View of Thailand

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8. The air war in Indochina also appears to be taking on an increasingly Thai flavor. Relatively few US aircraft are now based in South Vietnam; the burden of the air effort in Indochina is divided between US carriers and the bases in Thailand. Moreover, B-52 attacks in the region are now mounted almost exclusively from the Thai base [redacted]

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9. Recent developments in Bangkok itself may have contributed to communist animosities. The November "coup" was, in important part, an effort by the top Thai generals -- General Praphat in particular -- to clear the decks for a more unified policy line on the war, on relations with Peking, and on Thailand's regional role generally. The generals had been disturbed by press and political carping about Thailand's "overcommitment" to the US, and were critical even of Foreign Minister Thanat's occasional efforts to open a dialogue with Peking. The "coup" may have confirmed communist suspicions that Thailand was firmly in the hands of the hardliners and likely to proceed even further down the line of involvement in the war.

10. As the communists observe these trends, they doubtless perceive some aspects of "Vietnamization" that might have been unclear to them even a year or two ago.

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[Redacted] that US military withdrawal from South Vietnam did not necessarily imply withdrawal from Thailand which, if the war continued, would probably

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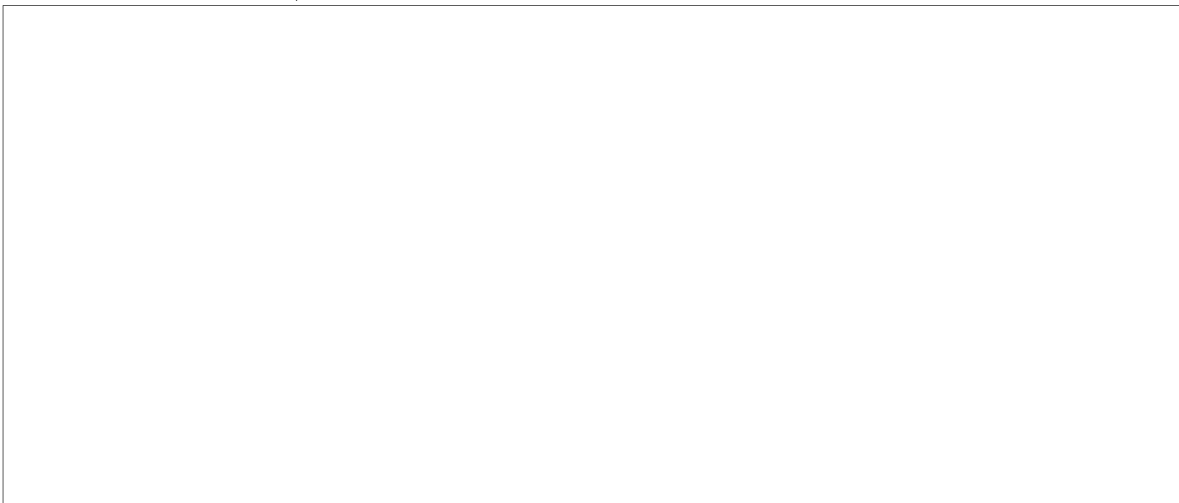
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become the linchpin of a continuing US military presence on the Southeast Asian mainland.

11. For Hanoi, all this must be frustrating -- a greater possibility of a lengthy military stalemate in Laos and even more difficulty in bringing Souvanna to terms; in Cambodia, potentially a similar hindrance to North Vietnamese ambitions. For Peking, there is no immediate concern, but it too has interests in the future of Laos and Cambodia, and of Thailand as well. More important, perhaps, Chinese expectations of a rapid US military drawdown in Thailand may have been disappointed. For both communist powers, assuming that they are thinking about Thailand along these lines, there is the question of how to respond -- other than rhetorically.

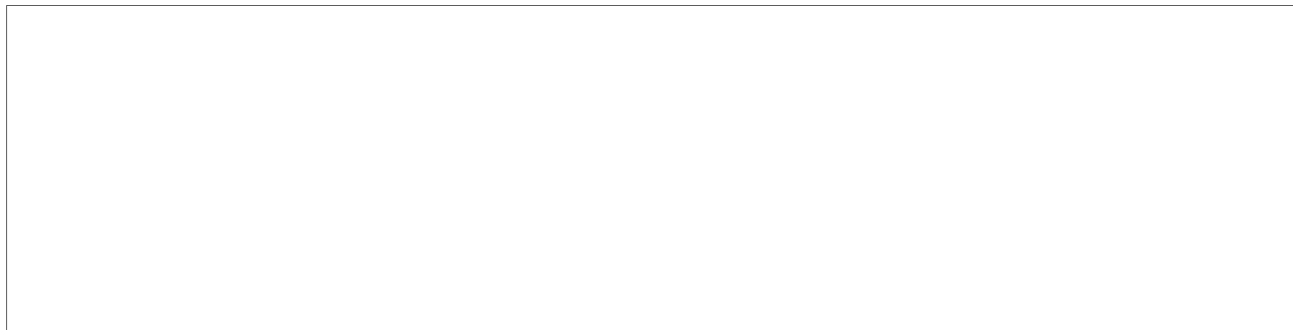
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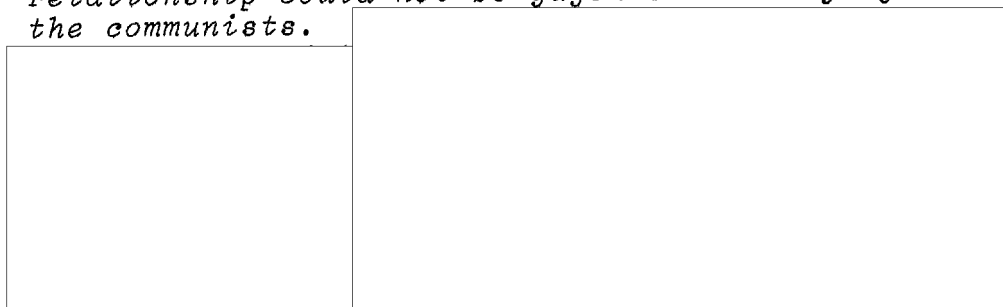


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13. [redacted] NVA/PL forces, in our view, are presently incapable of posing any immediate threat to Vientiane, much less taking it. Stalled in their effort to take Long Tieng, the odds are against the communists taking this complex or eliminating Vang Pao's defending forces in the next few weeks. Even if successful in both these efforts by late March or April, Hanoi would have relatively little time to extend its gains so as to threaten the Vientiane region directly this season. Moreover,

* *The impact of all this on the overall Thai-US relationship could not be gaged so clearly by the communists.*



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with the spring rains and consequent difficulties in resupply over vulnerable routes from North Vietnam -- and under allied pressure -- Hanoi would probably withdraw from any exposed outposts in the Long Tieng sector. In sum, the threat to Thailand from communist forces in northern Laos will probably not be greatly intensified during 1972 even if some defeats are sustained over the next few months.

14. Aside from its presently limited military capabilities in northern Laos, Hanoi may also be restrained by an unwillingness to press the war against Souvanna to a political showdown at this time. Hanoi has given no sign that it has abandoned hope of utilizing the Geneva/Zurich accords to secure the neutralization of Laos and a legitimate role for its Pathet Lao clients in a reconstituted Lao coalition. To advance boldly into the Vientiane plain carries the danger of dislodging Souvanna in favor of rightist military leaders who [] would probably elect to continue the war to the end; and Hanoi knows this. With its priorities clearly in South Vietnam, there would seem to be little reason for Hanoi to assume this additional military burden.

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The move might also antagonize Peking which apparently continues to favor holding the door open to Souvanna and a negotiated settlement in Laos.

15. As noted earlier, the communists have substantial capability for further advance in southern Laos. But in this arena, Hanoi is clearly concerned mainly to safeguard its corridors to South Vietnam and Cambodia. While attacks on -- or seizures of -- the Lao valley towns would be important psychological victories, they would not necessarily drive Vientiane out of the war and would be costly to the communists in manpower and materiel.

16. A second potential communist lever on Thai behavior is the domestic insurgency. Indeed, it seems clear that the active phase of the Thai insurgency was initiated by Peking and Hanoi in 1965 (in northeastern Thailand) mainly to warn Bangkok against involvement in US military operations in Indochina. There was little

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expectation that the frail, Peking-dominated, Thai communist movement could quickly develop into a viable threat to Bangkok's authority on the model of communist guerrillas in South Vietnam, or even Laos.

17. The communist "warning" to Thailand has failed over a seven-year-period to do the job; and it is our view that Peking and Hanoi are still at least several years away from any significant dividend on their insurgency investment. There are many reasons. For one thing, the present military leadership of Thailand -- and almost any foreseeable leadership -- is not disposed to believe that Peking (or Hanoi) would cease supporting the insurgencies simply as part of some bargain for Thai "neutrality" in the war. Moreover, anti-communism and suspicion of communist intentions run strong in the conservative military elite that has run Thailand for forty years. And while the occasional public and private feelers to China from Bangkok invariably refer to negotiation of the insurgency issue, in our view this is not being done with any real expectation of favorable communist response.

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18. In any event, until recently at least, most Thai leaders have not been particularly impressed with the threat posed by the domestic insurgency. The government has consistently viewed it with less concern than have its American advisers and, in general, has undertaken aggressive countermeasures only in response to US prodding. This attitude may have resulted in part from the relatively rapid suppression of the more active phase of the northeastern insurgency in 1966 and 1967. It certainly rests heavily on traditional Thai disdain for the highland tribesmen who comprise the bulk of the communist-directed combat force in the northern and north-central provinces. Viewed more broadly, this relatively relaxed attitude is also a function of Bangkok's belief that the insurgency is almost wholly a foreign import -- its leadership and objectives alien to Thailand -- hence unlikely to attract or hold the allegiance of many ethnic Thai. Experience does indicate that, in Thailand, trained and loyal insurgent manpower simply cannot be expanded rapidly on the basis of local recruitment.

19. This brings us to the issue of what Peking or Hanoi might do to pump up the Thai insurgency. One concern

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has been the possibility of experienced Chinese or North Vietnamese personnel entering Thailand in numbers sufficient to galvanize the movement into more effective action at some early date. We think this an unlikely prospect, though a few political cadre or technical specialists might well slip over the border from time to time for a season of campaigning or some special mission -- e.g., a rocket attack on a US air base in the northeast.

20. Supporting this point of view is the fact that no substantial number of Chinese nationals (as distinct from Sino-Thai, the ethnic Chinese resident in Thailand) or Vietnamese nationals (or for that matter Vietnamese resident in Thailand -- there are some 30,000-40,000 in the northeast) has been reliably identified in any Thai insurgent force. Secondly, at least for Peking, such action would be out of phase with observed policy in the Burmese, Lao, and Cambodian insurgencies, as well as with established Maoist doctrine on revolutionary self-reliance. Hanoi, however, has often integrated its forces with those of its Lao and Cambodian clients. It might act this way in Thailand, though in view of Peking's established position as mentor of the Thai Communist Party, Hanoi might see little advantage in any additional sacrifice of its already depleted military manpower pool.

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21. There is a stronger case to be made for the possibility of wholesale infiltration of Pathet Lao forces into adjacent areas of Thailand. PL personnel include Meo and other tribal elements, and "Thai-Lao" -- the lowland peoples of the middle Mekong region. The highland tribes are spread across China's southern rimlands from Burma to North Vietnam; in a sense, they know no boundaries, and it would not be difficult for Meo insurgents from Laos to operate in the Thai highland environment. Nor do the "Thai-Lao" on opposite shores of the middle Mekong differ greatly in appearance, language, and customs. The real issue, of course, would be the availability of any substantial number of PL for duty in Thailand at this stage of the intensive communist effort in Laos itself.*

22. On the basis of the foregoing, we would conclude that the range of actions open to the communists in any short-term effort to intimidate Thailand is quite limited.

* *An obvious conclusion is that Thailand does have a legitimate concern regarding external subversion once the war in Laos is ended; in the Thai view, communist control of Laos would open the floodgates to subversion by such "foreign" elements.*

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Winning the war in northern Laos would be most effective but seems unlikely to occur in 1972. Any dramatic upsurge in insurgency in Thailand itself appears beyond communist capabilities for a few years, possibly longer.

Thailand and the US Alliance

23. Peking and Hanoi are well aware of their limited leverage over Bangkok in the short term, though they may feel justified in a certain measure of confidence regarding the longer term prospects. Peking, as noted earlier, can afford to take the longer view. Its basic objectives in Thailand are the removal of US bases and securing Bangkok's acknowledgement of China's primacy among the powers in Southeast Asia. Current tidal movements in Asia favor achievement of these goals. Hanoi may have no positive program regarding Thailand other than to discourage any resurgent Thai ambitions in Laos or Cambodia. The outcome of the Indochinese war is likely to decide that issue; but the war outlook, particularly in Laos, seems generally unfavorable to longer range Thai interests.

24. Faced with such problems, it might seem surprising that the Thai generals have become so heavily committed against the communist side. Perhaps their

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current policy is a result of diplomatic inertia, a hold-over from the more promising fifties when the Thai saw considerable advantage in cultivating a close relationship with the US. More likely, it is still based on cool calculations of Thai national interests -- as viewed by the military elite, whose continued direction of the nation seems assured even though shifts might occur in the top echelon.

25. The generals' view of the world is not immutable; they have grown conscious of Thailand's excessive dependence on a single patron and, since the 1968/69 shift in US Asian policy, have initiated a cautious search for options. But they have found few meaningful alternatives to their close alliance with the US. The war, especially their preoccupation with the security of the Mekong frontiers, prevents any Thai approach to the Hanoi regime. The "neutrality" which seems to intrigue the Malaysians would also become viable only in the context of a broad Indochina settlement. There is no appetite for seeking security in China's orbit; the Thai leadership fears the impact on the domestic scene of the radical ideas that might be spread, particularly among Thai youth and the

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local Chinese community. Thus, despite growing anxiety over ambiguities in US policy, Thailand still views the alliance as offering the most security; and it is willing to continue to do its part to maintain US interest in the relationship. And, so far at least, Thailand sees US aid to them continuing and US military posture in Indochina still firm despite the withdrawals from South Vietnam.

26. This is not to say that the Thai will not persist in the search for alternatives. But key elements in the equation -- the outcome of the war and the course of Sino-American relations -- are beyond Bangkok's ability to control. At this juncture, the generals are certainly asking themselves whether they are helping or hurting Thai chances for a modus vivendi with the communists by assisting the US effort in Indochina. If the war goes well for the allies, Thai leaders can take satisfaction in their decision to stay the course; Peking and Hanoi can be dealt with in a relatively relaxed manner. If the war goes badly, adjustments would come sooner and be much less favorable to Thailand, moreso because of its increasingly prominent role in the battle.

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MEMORANDUM FOR: LSI

This is the paper you requested for Under Secretary Irwin. I would give it additional distribution if you approve.

John Huizenga
Director
National Estimates

JH
please go ahead.
JH

Attachment:

Memorandum, dated 25 Feb 72
"New Challenges to Thailand?"

(3 COPIES)

2 cpy sent to Irwin by Oct 25 Feb 72
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FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101
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MEMORANDUM FOR: **Mr William Sullivan**
Deputy Assistant Secretary for
East Asian and Pacific Affairs

This piece on Thailand responds to certain questions raised by Under Secretary Irwin in a recent conversation with Mr. Helms. A copy has also gone to Ray Cline.

JOHN HUIZENGA
Director
National Estimates

28 February 1972
(DATE)

FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101
1 AUG 54 WHICH MAY BE USED.

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**MEMORANDUM FOR: M. Ray Cline, Director
Bureau of Intelligence and
Research**

**This paper was done in response to certain
questions on Thailand raised by Under Secretary
Irwin in conversation with the DCI. Bill Sullivan
also has a copy.**

**JOHN HUIZENGA
Director
National Estimates**

**28 February 1972
(DATE)**

FORM NO. **101** REPLACES FORM 10-101
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