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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

# Intelligence Memorandum

*Insurgency in Thailand*

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
30 October 1972

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

# Insurgency in Thailand

Twenty years have passed since the Thai Communist Party, over the objections of some of its leaders, chose the path of revolutionary warfare as a means of gaining power in Thailand. It has been seven years since the first ragged bands of insurgents in the northeast fired the opening shots of what some called the struggle for the next domino in Southeast Asia. Today the Communist insurgent effort remains small, vulnerable, and, for the most part, limited to the periphery of the Thai nation and society. During the past few years the Communists have been unable to end their dependency upon tribal people in remote areas of the north nor have they made any dramatic inroads among ethnic Thai who make up the great majority of the population. The Communists likewise have made only scant headway in coming to grips with some serious internal weaknesses. The leadership of the party remains shrouded in mystery; the group of faceless Sino-Thai at the top have never generated the charismatic leadership of a Ho Chi Minh, or for that matter a Souphanouvong. At the lower levels the organization remains plagued by a chronic shortage of young well-educated political cadre. On the few occasions the party has been subjected to sustained government pressure, it has not performed particularly well.

Nonetheless, the Communists have managed not only to survive within this seemingly bleak context of adversity, but also gradually to increase in both numbers and capability. Such persistence and progress can be credited in part to the assistance received from

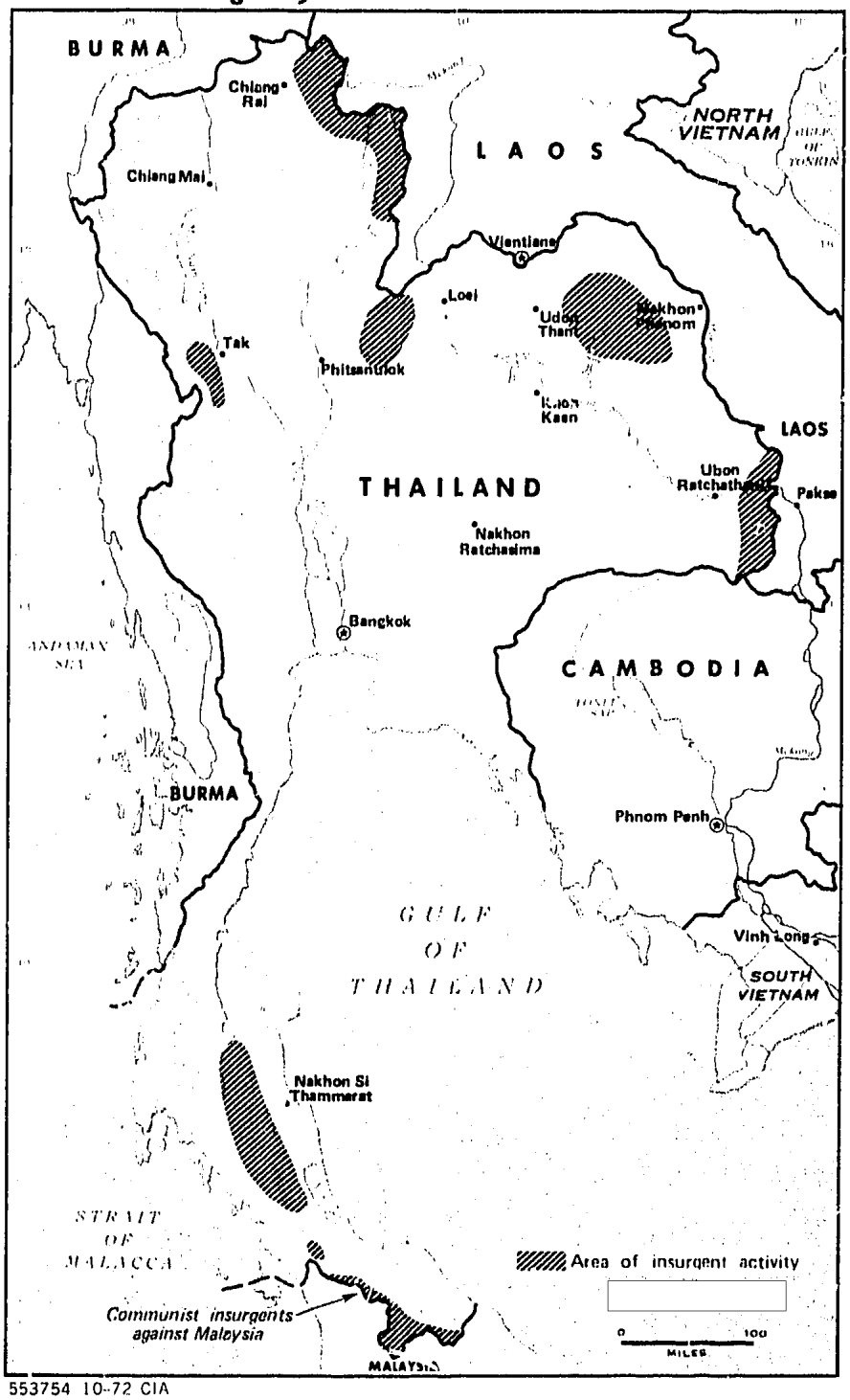
*Note: This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated within CIA. The Department of State and the Department of Defense concur with its general findings.*

China and North Vietnam; external factors will no doubt continue to have a major bearing on future insurgent capability and morale. Essentially, however, the success or failure of the insurgency has always rested in the hands of the Thai themselves. Moreover, insurgent momentum already developed can in large part be attributed to woeful neglect on the part of government leaders, who have found it difficult to credit the insurgency as a serious threat.

More recently, there have been signs of improvement in the government's attitude. Indeed, some elements in the army now appear convinced--as they were not a few years ago--that they have a real problem on their hands, but several key political leaders remain skeptical. The Thai Government has yet to demonstrate that it will abandon its sporadic and reactive strategy in favor of an aggressive, sustained campaign to deny the Communist insurgents the time they need to refit and recover from government operations.

This could change in the near future; the government appears to be on the threshold of implementing a new countrywide counterinsurgency program. If Bangkok does what is clearly within its capability to do, the insurgent apparatus will be hard-pressed to maintain its strength and initiative. If, on the other hand, the government does not measure up to this test of will and determination, the insurgency will gain time and opportunity to entrench itself further. This could easily happen, for example, if the current Thai leadership should become completely preoccupied with internal political maneuvering. Over the longer term, if the Thai insurgents are permitted to develop their capabilities relatively unhampered and can sort out their internal problems they will become a threat that Bangkok would find extremely difficult to contain.

## Thailand: Insurgency Areas

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## The Current Situation

Communist insurrection does not by any stretch of the imagination represent an immediate threat to the viability of the Bangkok regime. At the same time, it is no longer possible to dismiss the danger out of hand. There is no question but that at this juncture the insurgents are making relative gains vis-a-vis the government. As imprecise and unsophisticated as they may be, all the statistical indicators in Thailand point to higher levels of Communist-initiated attacks, ambushes, assassinations, and propaganda inroads than two years ago. Because of regional differences in topography, population, Communist leadership, and government administration, the growth of the insurgency in Thailand has been uneven, varying considerably between the north, northeast, and south. Over all, there are estimated to be between 5,500 and 6,000 armed insurgents, about 2,000 more than in 1969. In addition, the insurgents' military capabilities have grown as a consequence of better training, more experience, and, above all, the acquisition of better weapons.

## Tribal Insurgency in the North

Most of the insurgent gain has occurred in the north--the only region in the country where the Communists have never lost the initiative and where they have chalked up a steady record of victories over government forces. The difficult terrain--dense forest and rugged mountains--and proximity to Laotian base areas provide ideal conditions for guerrilla operations; the lack of an adequate road system offers the insurgents an added measure of security.

The ethnic character of the insurgency in the north also distinguishes it from that in other areas of Thailand. Although an integral part of the country-wide Thai Communist movement, the insurgency in the north is based on people not ethnically Thai, the Meo hill tribesmen. Traditionally neglected and treated with disdain by the Thai, the Meo were flattered by, and quickly responded to, Communist blandishments. Contacts with the hill tribesmen date

from the early 1960s; young recruits were sent to training schools in Laos and in some cases North Vietnam. Encountering little opposition from the government, the Communists began to extend their influence from the Laos border into the adjacent ridges in Thailand. By 1966 they were organizing and recruiting in earnest on the Thai side of the border.

The insurgency in this area is directed by the Communist Party of Thailand's (CPT) Northern Regional Committee, which reportedly has its headquarters in northwestern Sayaboury Province in Laos. The growing military strength of the insurgents in the north is distributed in three distinct areas--along the eastern border of Chiang Rai and Nan provinces (where the Communists have proclaimed a "liberated area"); in the "tri-province area" straddling Phitsanulok, Phetchabun, and Loei provinces; and in Tak Province along the Burma border. The insurgents have managed to push the government out of most of its lightly defended border posts between Chiang Rai and Loei provinces.

In the least secure region, the so-called "liberated" area along the border in Nan Province, government authority has been severely eroded by systematic Communist terrorism and propaganda. District officials rarely leave the confines of the towns for fear of being ambushed; when the army moves, it travels in convoys, and these have been attacked on a number of occasions. To date the insurgent grip in this area has not been seriously challenged; the government judges that the costs of a sustained campaign to clear the border area of insurgents would far exceed the possible benefits. On the few occasions when the army has conducted small-scale forays, the insurgents' firepower, aggressiveness, and tactics have proved too much to handle.

Aside from the obvious necessity of keeping Thai security forces at arm's length, the Communists have two basic missions to fulfill if the tribal insurgency in the north is ever to serve as a springboard for nationwide revolution. First, a solid base

of popular support must be created among the Meo population of the northern highlands. Second, the insurgent movement must somehow be extended to the ethnic Thai population dwelling in the adjacent lowland areas. To date, the insurgents have not achieved significant successes in either of these endeavors. In the mid-1960s, the CPT attracted Meo support by offering rudimentary medical services, education, and above all the prestige of carrying sophisticated weapons and using it against a traditional enemy--the Thai Government. These appeals proved popular and within a five-year period insurgent ranks swelled from 250 to over 3,000 armed regular and part-time guerrillas.

Over the past year, however, signs have begun to mount that the Communist political base in the Meo areas is both shallow and vulnerable. Disaffection with the Communists appears to have grown out of the CPT's insistence upon imposing its political regimen on traditional tribal village life. Travel restrictions, confiscation of surplus food stocks, and forced drafts into the insurgent army have combined to undermine the villagers' support of the Communist movement.

Unrest within the tribal base areas is extremely inopportune for the CPT at this time, when the Communists are intensifying their efforts to shift the emphasis of their activities into the adjacent lowlands. To this end the Communists have broadened their propaganda themes to include topics they hope will appeal to lowland Thai. The Communists are evidently still experimenting with various approaches to the Thai villagers. Although some of the villagers and village headmen have been executed, the insurgents still hope to win the confidence of the Thai by good deeds rather than intimidation. Propaganda and civic action teams, usually composed of ethnic Thai accompanied by a tribal security force, enter remote Thai villages from time to time to offer medical treatment, help with farm work, and spread antigovernment propaganda. The Communists' tactic of purchasing foodstuffs at prices far above the market value has developed into a flourishing trade between some lowland villages and the insurgents. To date, however, there is nothing in this limited intercourse that suggests

anything more than a natural accommodation to economic opportunity and military force. The most that can be said at this point is that the Communists are attempting to move into the lowlands and that they have established friendly contacts and some cooperation from a handful of villages. They still have not reached the crucial stage of political organization in such areas.

The military capabilities of the northern insurgents have grown in correspondence to an increase in external support. Over the past several years the insurgents have come to rely almost completely on weapons and other equipment manufactured in the Communist nations. The qualitative improvement in armament, which has made the insurgents a more formidable military threat, includes the B-40 rocket, AK-47, 60-mm. mortar, light machine guns, and plastic anti-personnel mines. Most of this equipment is of Chinese origin, but it is not known whether the weapons entering north Thailand are drawn from North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao stockpiles already in northwestern Laos or are shipped directly from China to the Thai border.

The construction of a Chinese-built road in northern Laos, which now terminates at Pak Beng on the Mekong, has enhanced the Communists' ability to resupply the insurgents in northern Thailand and to respond more quickly to unforeseen insurgent needs. Any reasonable projection of the northern insurgency's manpower growth based on local recruiting, however, makes it reasonably clear that the road will not be essential to support insurgent requirements for many years.

Some five years ago the arms moving across the border amounted to little more than a trickle--an estimated eight tons in 1968. Today, estimates based on insurgent expenditure of ammunition suggest that the guerrillas are consuming about 100 tons of Communist-produced materiel a year. This is a relatively small amount--it could all be moved in one 25-truck convoy--and the insurgents can easily move far more than this amount by horse caravan over the existing trail system. Whatever its logistic importance to the development of the northern insurgency, the road

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has served to raise Thai fears of large-scale Chinese-supported insurrection in Thailand, thus further contributing to Thai thinking on the future direction of their foreign policy. In the next few years, at least, the road's primary impact on Bangkok seems likely to remain in this realm of psychological warfare.

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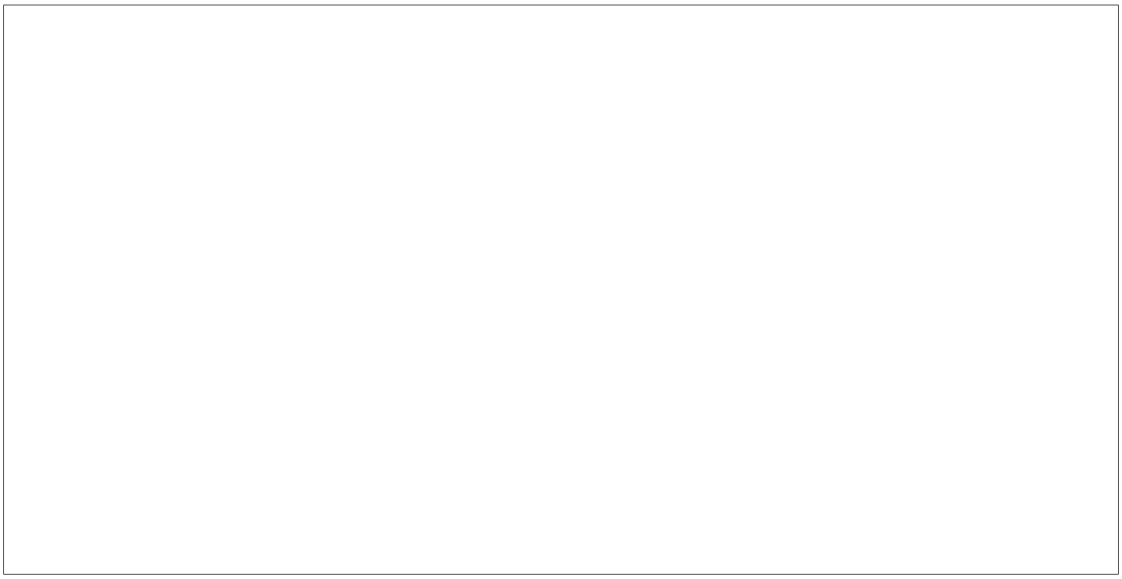

## The Northeast: A Political Challenge

While the Communists have been making military gains in the north, they have continued to emphasize political action in the northeast, a relatively impoverished area that until recent years was isolated both physically and psychologically from Bangkok. The northeast has a long history of political dissidence, and much of Thailand's leftist heritage, such as it is, is rooted there. The northeast was the first area in which the Communists became militarily active. The Communist Party of Thailand apparently decided on armed struggle in the northeast as early as 1952, and organizational work, although periodically disrupted by government repressive operations, proceeded during the 1950s. The Communists claim the first shot in the revolutionary armed struggle was fired in the northeast's Nakhon Phanon Province in August 1965.

Since 1964 the Communists have located most of their important base camps in the Phu Phan hills. These hills stretch intermittently from Laos south and east through Udorn Province and western Sakhon Nakhon and then east into Nakhon Phanom. Although covered in part by heavy vegetation, the hills are by no means impenetrable. The Communists have sought to extend their influence over the villages in the Phu Phan



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hills and thence into the outlying areas. They have been most active in Nakae District of Nakhon Phanom Province, which consistently has had the greatest number of violent incidents in the country. The government has admitted that armed insurgents have established considerable influence in over 100 of the district's 115 villages.

In the past year the Communists have focused on effecting tighter control over villages already under some form of Communist influence, primarily through setting up village military units and political committees. The establishment of village militia represents a change in emphasis from the days of 1964-67 when villagers were usually brought directly into the ranks of guerrilla units. The emphasis now is to recruit villagers and use them, initially at least, in place, after the pattern used effectively in Indochina. Although the evidence is still sketchy on the magnitude of this effort, there are at least 4,000 villagers organized into such units in the provinces of Kalasin, Sakhon Nakhon, and Nakhon Phanom. It is the goal of the CPT to upgrade the capabilities of these militia units to the point where they can fight alongside the regular guerrilla soldiers, who now number around 1,800. This is being accomplished by integrating the militia with full time soldiers on limited operations such as short-range patrols, assassinations, and propaganda discussions. There is recent evidence that militia elements have begun to assume greater military responsibilities, including executing attacks against government defense posts.

Although the primary purpose of the militia is to serve as an auxiliary force, the CPT has not ignored their political potential. For example, they have been used to organize public demonstrations against the Royal Thai Government in Khao Wong Sub-District of Kalasin Province and in Na Kae District of Nakhon Phanom Province. More important, however, has been the party's use of the militia to form the backbone of its newest manifestation of political control--the village committee. These organs are replacing or supplementing the covert

cell structure that served as the initial source of Communist influence in the villages. The establishment of these committees, which are now in evidence in the provinces of Nakhon Phanom, Sakhon Nakhon, and Kalasin at the village, district, and province level, is meant to be the forerunner of a future local Communist administration. District committees have also been established in western Udorn Province but to date there is no evidence of village-level political control.

Since the committees by their very nature are more sophisticated and less clandestine political instruments than the cells, their formation marks a significant step forward by the CPT in its attempt to create a political following in the northeast. A conservative estimate [redacted] indicates that a nascent Communist political apparatus, ranging from covert cells to full-blown committees, has reached into some 200 villages affecting a population base of some 100,000 people. As impressive as those figures might seem, they represent less than one percent of the total population of the northeast and the apparatus remains confined to the more remote areas of Nakhon Phanom, Sakhon Nakhon, and Kalasin provinces. The only other area in the northeast that has seen a hint of Communist progress is western Udorn Province, where a revitalized party leadership appears to be pressing hard to establish village-level committees. The Communists have been singularly unsuccessful in building either a viable military or political apparatus in the neighboring provinces of Ubon, Korat, Buriram, and Prachinburi, despite years of effort.

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Insurgent failures to expand significantly beyond their traditional base areas of the northeast can be attributed to a fundamental weakness of the Thai Communist apparatus--a chronic shortage of ideologically motivated and experienced political cadre. This shortage, coupled with the Communist Party's rigid ideological approach to its propaganda

campaigns, has been a major factor behind the Communists' inability better to exploit the needs and grievances of the local populace. Although the Communists have addressed themselves to some local issues, they still tend to focus their propaganda against US "imperialism" and the Thanom-Praphat government, both of which have little relevance to illiterate Thai farmers.

Moreover, if ever challenged seriously, recent Communist political gains in the northeast could prove ephemeral. During the past year, for instance, sustained government pressure against the Communists' political and support apparatus in northeastern Kalasin Province seriously eroded their influence at the village level. This may be only an isolated case, but it does raise questions about the viability of the Communists' village-level political base in the northeast. It may be more impressive on paper than in reality. If the insurgents' political apparatus is left unchallenged, however, the situation can only worsen.

The vigorous, but short-term, suppression campaigns that have characterized government counter-insurgency in the northeast have had only a temporary effect on the situation. Persistent military patrolling has led to a marked decline in insurgent-initiated incidents in Sakhon Nakhon Province, but the Thai have not brought themselves to apply this lesson to the insurgent core area in Nakhon Phanom. Insurgent organizational work, aimed at the eventual resumption of a "liberation struggle," goes on there largely unimpeded except during the government's sporadic suppressive operations. In these areas the villager often faces the simple choices between accommodation to Communist political control, abandonment of his home, or death. For years villagers in the Na Kae District of Nakhon Phanom Province who have refused to cooperate with the insurgents have been routinely shot.

Communist forces in the northeast continue to be armed primarily with weapons of US origin. The use of Communist-bloc weaponry has been increasing,

however, and the limited and tenuous evidence available suggests a small but consistent trickle of Chinese-manufactured arms from southern Laos into the northeast. An increasing number of small insurgent units have been sighted armed with AK-47s, and this past summer B-40 rocket launchers and 60 mm. mortars were used in attacks against village defense posts--the first use of these weapons in the northeast. Nevertheless, the northeastern insurgents, unlike their comrades to the north, are in a poor geographic position to draw on external sources of weapons and other material support. Their major problem is that the main base area, the Phu Phan hills, does not border on Laos. The land between the Phu Phans and the border is flat, open, and heavily populated. This makes it difficult for the insurgents to operate a major clandestine supply system from Laos. Nevertheless, some infiltration across the Mekong River (even if patrolled) is quite easy, as the increased availability of Communist weaponry suggests.

Local procurement has never been a problem. Weapons are readily available on the Thai and Laotian black markets at reasonable prices. The northeast insurgents also seize arms from village security units and, less frequently, capture them during armed engagements.

The relative self-reliance of the insurgents in the northeast is beginning to extend into the area of training. Although [redacted] 25X1
[redacted] the training of recruits in Laos, North Vietnam, 25X1
and China is continuing, (as is the case in the north), the insurgents now appear to be receiving much of their basic training in schools in the Phu Phan base area. It is not known how long these facilities have been in existence--perhaps as early as 1970--and none has a permanent location, but within the past year eight have been identified in Nakhon Phanom Province. Six of these schools offer courses in politics, one concentrates on military subjects, and the other offers a course in combat medical training. The creation of training installations in the northeast has undoubtedly strengthened the party's recruitment capabilities. In the past, potential

recruits were reluctant to leave their homes for the long and arduous trek into Laos and North Vietnam for training.

The Mid-South and Far South

Insurgency in the Kra isthmus--or "mid-south" region--is growing slowly. It is much less significant than that in the north or the northeast. Because the region is far removed from Laos and other supply areas and because the Communists have devoted neither the time nor the energy they have expended in these other areas, their prospects for continued growth are not very substantial. Indeed, evidence indicates that the party has withdrawn some of its most promising cadre from the southern provinces to serve in the north and northeast. Moreover, within the past year the Thai Government under the able leadership of General San Chitpatima (the regional military commander) has so disrupted the Communist organization in the mid-south that unless a significant number of experienced political and military cadre are injected by the CPT, its chances for any sort of rapid recovery are extremely bleak. Nevertheless, the jungle and mountain terrain of the region is well suited to insurgent activity, as is the south's traditional popular disaffection caused by corrupt government officials. If the government fails to cripple the movement while it is still small, serious problems could develop on the narrow isthmus in the coming years.

Farther south, the Malayan National Liberation Army, the armed, jungle-based branch of the Communist Party of Malaya--commonly called the Communist Terrorist Organization--has used the southern border provinces of Thailand as a refuge and support base since the early days of the Malayan emergency in the 1950s. The organization operates against Malaysia, rather than Thailand, and its members are not considered a threat to Thailand itself. The terrorist organization maintains only limited contact with the Thai Communists. Some Thai insurgents have been trained in Malaysian camps near the border, and there have been indications of mixed bands operating in southern Songkhla Province. The recent

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southward movement of some small Thai Communist groups into the periphery of terrorist-controlled areas in southern Songkhla Province suggests that cooperation between the two groups may grow. Until Bangkok sees some greater threat to Thailand in these terrorist activities, however, it is unlikely to join Malaysia in coming to grips with the problem.

The View From Bangkok: Thai Perceptions and Strategy

What the government can do and intends to do about insurgent inroads in Thailand is, of course, conditioned by its perception of the problem. In the past, at least, the Thai leadership seems to have held the view that Communism could never establish roots in the Thai soil--that, while insurgency has become a bothersome problem, religion and Thailand's unique homogeneity and sense of nationalism would prove decisive factors in the struggle.

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It must be borne in mind that from Bangkok's vantage point, there are higher priorities than the insurgency. First, the army views a North Vietnamese encroachment into the Mekong Valley in Laos or the Chinese military presence in the Nam Beng Valley (in northern Laos) as a far greater potential threat to the nation than the insurgency. This, rather than concern for the insurgent situation in the north, is the basis for much of the Thai concern being expressed over the Chinese road network under construction in Northern Laos. The Thai leadership has always tended to see the insurgency more as a manifestation of some foreign threat than as a well-rooted domestic movement with a life of its own. Hence, the Thai strategic approach to the insurgent problem has called first and foremost for



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thwarting North Vietnamese and Lao Communist ambitions in Laos, and more recently for seeking a degree of rapprochement with a newly conciliatory Peking. If successful, such policies could--in the Thai view--reduce the Thai insurgency to easily manageable proportions.

Bangkok, of course, remains suspicious of Chinese intentions and is well aware of the uncertainties involved in coming to terms with Peking. Nevertheless, the diplomatic probing now under way between Bangkok and Peking suggests that this skepticism has in no way dampened Thai interest in pursuing the option of accommodation with the Chinese or Bangkok's hope or belief that over the long term a broad post-Indochina war accommodation in Southeast Asia will make an energetic counterinsurgency effort in Thailand unnecessary.

From the Thai perspective, another problem demanding a higher priority than counterinsurgency is the potential domestic threat to the regime. The first consideration for a leader such as General Praphat is to protect his own position. This is not an unreasonable proposition in a military government lacking a constitutional process.

Most important, Praphat tends to dole out troop commands only to those deemed politically trustworthy--military energy and competence are secondary considerations. Unfortunately, Praphat, who heads the government's counterinsurgency effort, is preoccupied with high-level political maneuvering in Bangkok and has paid little attention to the security situation in the provinces.

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As noted earlier, the Thai inclination to view insurgency as a tolerable problem that can be contained has produced a counterinsurgency program characterized by fits and starts. The government's operations have been largely reactive; its strategic philosophy is one of letting the punishment fit the crime. This has been illustrated best in the northeast. When Communist insurgency broke out in 1965, an aroused Thai leadership responded with the creation of the Communist Suppression Operations Command. CSOC utilized its sweeping powers quickly, mobilizing and deploying appropriate operational elements of the Thai armed forces. The situation began to improve after a series of arrests and defections had left the embryonic insurgent organization reeling. But rather than pursuing the campaign to its logical conclusion, General Praphat ordered most of the army units involved back to their garrisons. Consequently, the Communist organization in the northeast was ignored long enough to permit it to recover.

Following the government's abortive campaign in the northeast, the army confined its counterinsurgency efforts to short-term, sporadic forays into Communist base areas. These efforts, which have been supported largely by training funds, have done little more than demonstrate two of the army's fundamental weaknesses--lack of aggressiveness and inadequate leadership at all levels. The government's tactics produced little real shooting and even less serious damage to either side. The army gained what it believed to be valuable field experience without risking significant casualities, while the insurgents, aware of the brief time frame of government operations,



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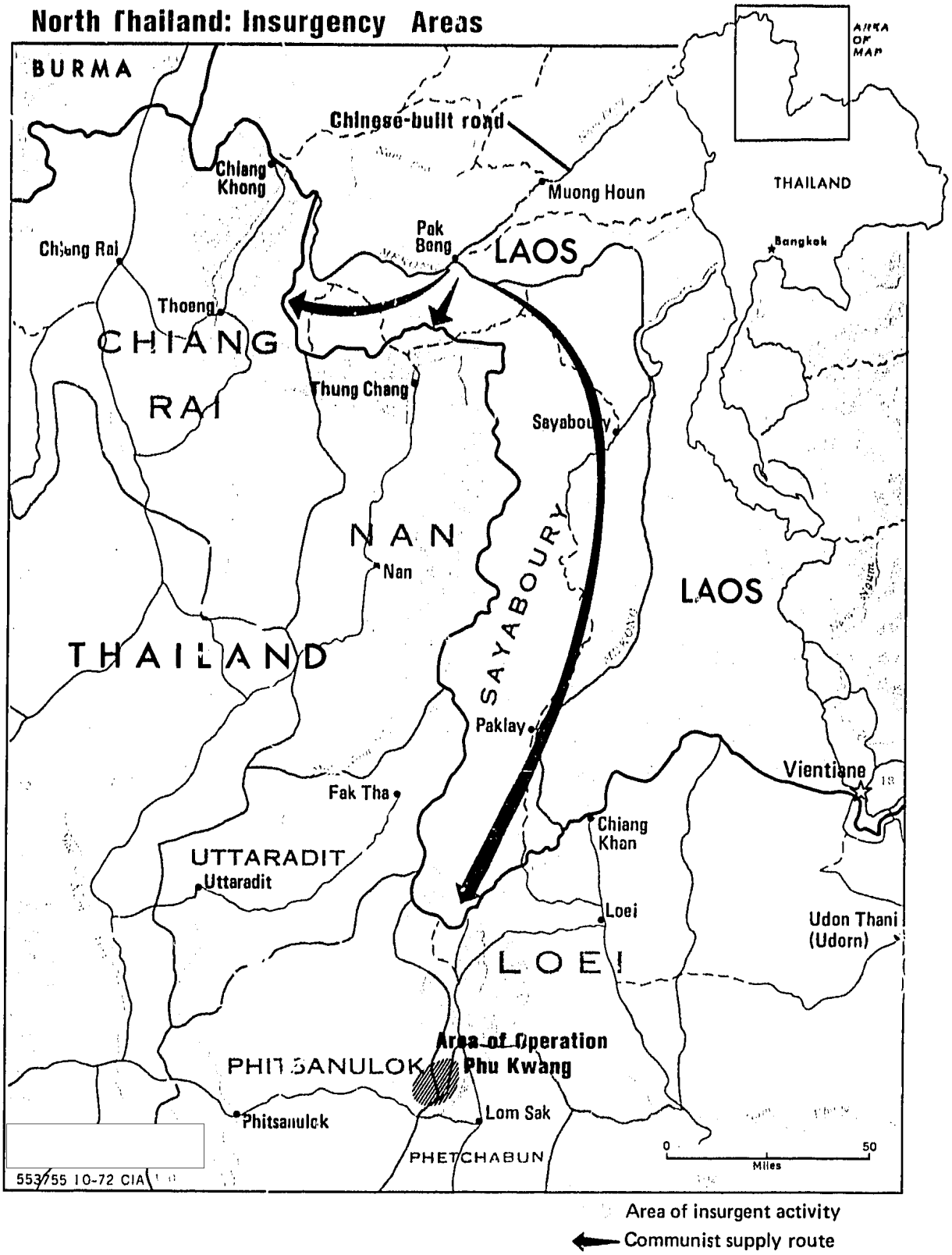


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usually chose to melt into the jungle and avoid contact. Since after-action reports usually reflected the lack of enemy contact, the net effect of Thai counterinsurgency operations in recent years has been to encourage an atmosphere of complacency in Bangkok. In such a milieu, the Communist movement in the northeast has survived and grown.

Operation Phu Kwang: Some Good News and Some Bad

Operation Phu Kwang in January of this year could represent a long overdue turning point in the Thai approach to counterinsurgency. 25X1

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alarmed by the growth in armed violence initiated by insurgents throughout the country, Bangkok decided to move upwards of 12,000 troops to the tri-province area in January 1972 in a major effort to clear the Phetchabun Mountains of some 500 well-armed, predominantly hill-tribe guerrillas. The tri-province area was chosen for this major thrust because of the geographical proximity of the Phetchabun Mountains to the central plains--the heartland of the country. The army reasoned that if it could arrest the insurgent movement in the tri-province area first, it could deal with the more remote base camps farther north at its leisure.

Phu Kwang was encouraging, if only because it indicated a new Thai willingness to devote significant resources to counterinsurgency. No artificial termination date was set for the operation; it ran for five months and cost the government well over $30 million and 500 casualties, including 100 killed. This seemingly energetic approach, however, was matched neither by the Thai Army's staff planning nor the troops' performance in the field.

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Since the Phetchabun Mountains are a hard-core Communist base area, the insurgents had too much to lose by simply pulling up stakes. They

had built a hospital, school, and several semi-permanent base camps, and had come to rely upon the food they were growing in their mountain plots. The civilian population--an important resource for the Communists--was evacuated by the insurgents to the fringes of the operational area where they reasoned, correctly, the army would not go. The insurgents did not plan to fight to the last man, but did intend to make the operation as costly to the Royal Thai Army as possible. They were successful beyond their wildest expectations. In fact, the army totally failed to achieve its principal objectives. Contrary to government press releases, the insurgent headquarters at Hin Long Kla was never captured; instead, the army became preoccupied with holding a terrain feature of only limited value to the Communists. Not one insurgent corpse was found during the entire period of the operation. When Bangkok's patience with this state of affairs was finally exhausted in early June, the troops were abruptly pulled out; today, the insurgents are doing business as usual in the tri-province area.

How is it possible that in five months this large force could not close with a relatively small insurgent group that had chosen to stand its ground and fight? Why did the army fail to seize the base camps and secure the area? Essentially the operation failed because it proved to be an enormous mismatch--inexperienced [redacted] lowland Thai troops from a road-bound, conventionally trained army against well-conditioned Meos who operate at their best in their own rugged terrain. The Thai Army made matters worse by choosing the First Division to be the cutting edge of the operation, even though the division had never been used for anything more strenuous than garrison duty in Bangkok. [redacted] the green Thai troops in many instances simply avoided contact with the insurgents and in at least one case refused to enter an insurgent camp for fear of taking casualties.

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Elements of the Thai Third Army, which is based in the north and is more familiar with the terrain and with insurgent tactics, were kept at arm's length

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by the First Division and contributed little to the over-all operation

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It would be a mistake, however, to cite this inept performance to dismiss Thai counterinsurgency capabilities out of hand.

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We now know that the Communists had counted on a campaign lasting no more than two months--a judgment that, based on past experience, seemed safe enough. By the end of May their stocks of food and ammunition were nearly depleted, and the insurgents were on the verge of abandoning the area for sanctuary in Laos or farther north along the border. More important, a significant portion of the civilian hill tribe population was prepared to rally to government forces if given the chance. In this sense, Phu Kwang resembled a microcosm of the government's abortive 1964-67 counterinsurgency campaign in the northeast. The insurgents once again proved vulnerable to sustained pressure.

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Phu Kwang spotlighted other glaring inadequacies of the Thai Army in a counterinsurgency role. The army command has continued to consider its primary mission to be defense of the country against overt foreign aggression of a conventional nature. When it takes the field against insurgents, it brings this mentality along, together with tanks, armored personnel carriers, and a whole array of other inappropriate equipment and tactics. Although the Thai have proven they can handle the intricacies of long-range artillery and aerial bombardment, Phu Kwang demonstrated that the capability to sustain truly effective infantry operations against mobile guerrilla forces in remote and rugged terrain is not yet in sight.



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At the moment the only ground elements within the armed forces that have received special counter-insurgent training are one Special Forces battalion, one joint army-police battalion, and a handful of US-trained reconnaissance patrols and hunter-capture teams. These units, in the past, have been stretched too thin to have had much impact. Phu Kwang has put the Thai Army on notice that tribal guerrillas cannot be scared off by air strikes, artillery barrages, and the mere presence of large numbers of troops from the Thai lowlands. Indeed, senior officers are now talking of the need to reorient the army's training and tactics and develop smaller but more effective ground operations employing better prepared troops. Until the money is spent and such talk translated into action, it would be premature to say that Bangkok has, in fact, digested the lessons of Phu Kwang.

A Broader Problem

The government's inability to deal effectively with the insurgency problem goes much deeper than the army's military failings. The other side of the coin has been the absence of a meaningful counterinsurgency program incorporating the civilian, police, and military resources at the government's disposal. It is a truism that bureaucrats jealously guard their prerogatives, and Thailand is no exception. Bangkok's initial, halting efforts to come to grips with the insurgency placed enormous strains on various heretofore sacrosanct and autonomous government agencies in the sense that they were called upon to put aside their own narrow interests to deal with a threat that many still do not fully credit.

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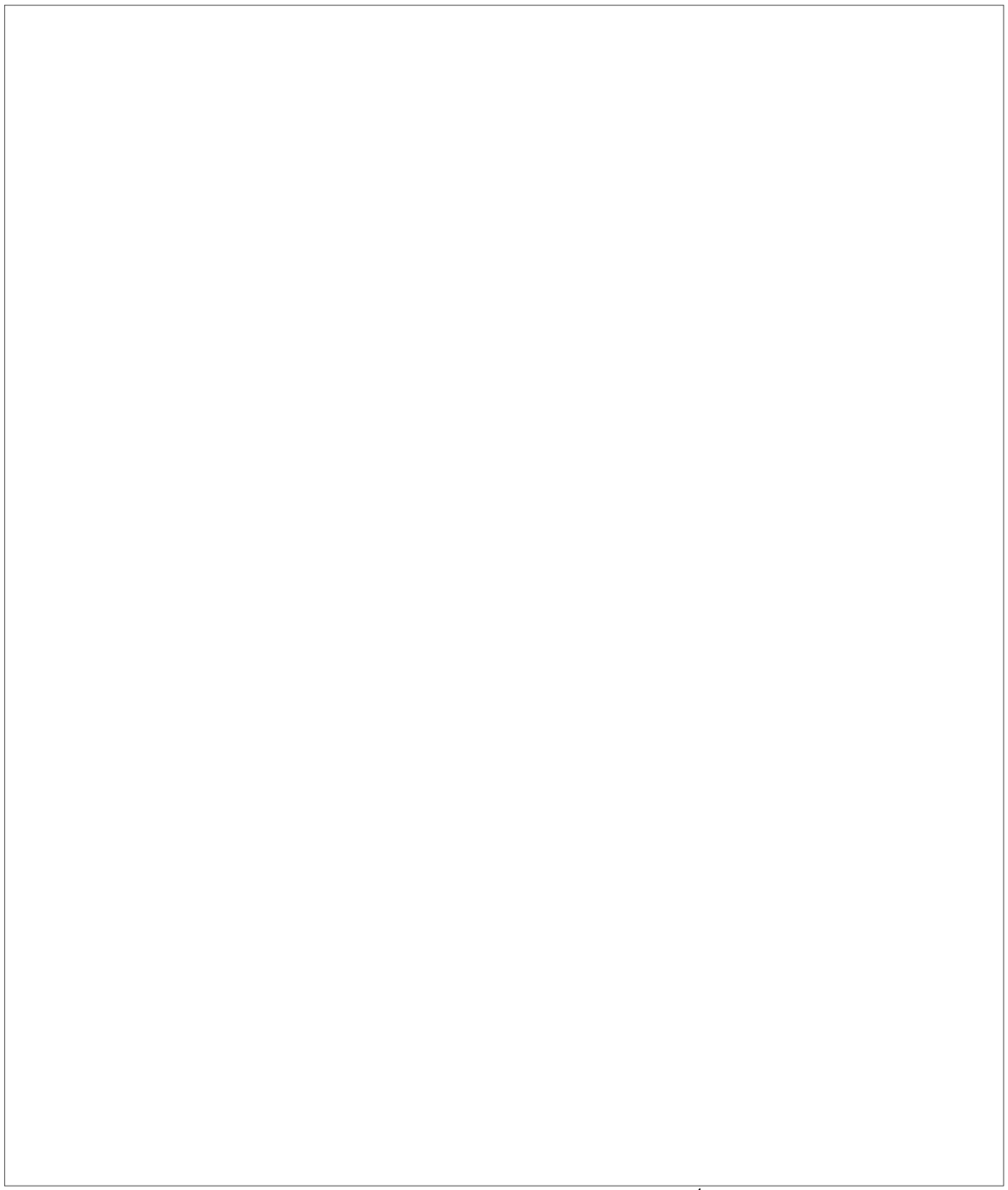

In terms of training, the 9,100-man Border Patrol Police is probably better prepared than the army to assume a counterinsurgency role, but it is so undermanned for its mission of border security



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that it has little time or opportunity to devote to counterinsurgency. Bangkok appears to have recognized the shortsightedness of this policy, albeit belatedly, and has earmarked the 1972 and 1973 graduating classes of the police academy for the Border Patrol Police. The Provincial Police, tasked with breaking up the Communist political infrastructure in the countryside, is currently so bereft of talent that it plays virtually no significant counterinsurgency role.

In short, the Thai have made little progress in developing a workable institutional framework for a balanced and coordinated counterinsurgency program. This has left local and provincial authorities on their own to deal with the problem as they see fit. In most cases, this has meant that nothing has been done. Police are often venal and unpopular with the people. District officials, without any pressure or inspiration from upper echelons, become passive and understandably reluctant to venture into the more remote and less secure areas under their jurisdiction. In the north, where the security situation is particularly bad, rural school teachers are transferring to the more secure towns, thus greatly reducing the government's presence in the countryside.

The encouraging exception to this rule has been in the south, where important progress has been made over the past 18 months in dealing with the insurgent threat. Primarily because of the forceful personality and the ability of General San Chitpatima, commander of the Fifth Military Circle, local officials have been able to orchestrate a counterinsurgency strategy that has the insurgents on the run for the first time in years. The key ingredient has been a command structure improvised by General San that directs and coordinates civil, police, and military elements through a system of personal relationships--a uniquely Thai concept, very different from Western organizational theory. It has worked so well because San brings several special advantages to the job: he is from the south and speaks the local dialect; his brother is the Region IX police commander and the Region VIII commander is (along with many other local government authorities) an old friend.

San kicked off his program in the south in 1971 by conducting sustained and effective combined army-police operations against identified Communist base camps. As the insurgents were flushed out and began to turn to local villages for food and protection, General San used similar joint teams to ferret out the Communist infrastructure in the villages. This was complemented by a fairly energetic civic action program involving projects such as road repairs and well digging. Pressure was placed on local government officials to improve often neglected government services such as medical assistance and land registration. The net result has been a greatly eased security situation in an area that traditionally suffered from governmental neglect and had a history of popular disaffection.

It is at least theoretically possible to envisage similarly successful local programs on a nationwide basis. The fact that no more has been done cannot be laid to a lack of resources. General San's program was financed largely out of his training budget. The raw materials available to him are at the disposal of every provincial military figure in the country. The key, and usually lacking, ingredient is leadership. Men of San's drive and talent are a rare commodity in an army more political than professional. Add in the requirements of political reliability and close connections to the powers that be in Bangkok (the sine qua non for a significant command) and the number of men with the position, know-how, and determination to get things done dwindles to a precious few. Until this situation is remedied by a reordering of priorities at the highest level in Bangkok, progress such as that achieved in the south will be the exception rather than the rule.

Outlook

Operation Phu Kwang may have shaken the Thai Army out of its doldrums. Having licked the wounds received last spring, it is now preparing to launch a series of new operations in the north and northeast which, if sustained, would mark the most intensive military pressure exerted against the insurgents since 1967. In the northeast the army intends

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to push into the CPT's political heartland--Nakhon Phanom Province and areas contiguous to the Phu Phan Mountains ranging from Udorn Province in the north to Ubon Province in the south. The army is also planning another thrust into the tri-province area in an attempt to avenge itself for the humiliation suffered at the hands of the insurgent force during Phu Kwang.

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Farther north, the key word is containment, rather than elimination. Emphasis will be put on disrupting insurgent access to supplies in the lowlands rather than on penetrating base areas. The army also has designated "free-fire" zones in insurgent-controlled portions of Chiang Rai, Nan, and Phitsanulok provinces in anticipation of more active patrolling and sweeps in these areas. In conjunction with the army's efforts, civilian officials in the north have been directed to work toward better population and resource control, including crop destruction in insurgent-controlled areas, arrest of urban supporters, psychological warfare to induce more defections, and organization of local militia in contested districts. Such activities while conceivably damaging to the insurgent apparatus, obviously run the risk of alienating the tribal population that the government must eventually win over. The government says it has ordered the civilian populace to evacuate northern insurgent areas temporarily, but there undoubtedly will be a significant number of hill tribe people remaining under Communist control who will have no choice in the matter.

These are signs of Thai energy, if only in the planning stage, but the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. The army is now more aware of its shortcomings--progress in itself--but shortcomings nevertheless remain: planning is poor; tactical intelligence is inadequate or badly used; training programs are still not orientated toward fighting guerrillas; leadership is neither aggressive nor



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imaginative; and rivalry between commands remains prevalent. Moreover, the determination of the Thai political leadership in this situation remains questionable.

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Regardless of just how much is substance and how much shadow, in the government's new plans, dramatic changes in the insurgency situation are unlikely in the coming months. In a military sense, the north will almost certainly continue to be the most difficult problem for the government. First, the rugged mountainous terrain is ideal for guerrilla warfare and not at all suited to a Thai Army that has been trained to conduct conventional warfare in open country. Second, the Communist bases there are contiguous to a porous and insecure Laotian border, reached by lines of communication from China and North Vietnam. Third, the Communists have managed to co-opt a belligerent tribal fighting force whose members know the terrain and harbor long-standing grudges against the Thai Government. Many of these tribesmen are distantly related to the Meo fighting for Vang Pao in Laos.

On the other hand, the insurgents appear to be increasingly bogged down by unrest among a tribal population that also resents the imposition of a Communist regimen, and they are making little if any progress in exporting their movement to the adjacent ethnic Thai population. The pragmatic use of tribal warriors for years has been a prominent



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feature of both insurgent and counterinsurgent strategy in Southeast Asia. There is, however, little in either Maoist ideology or practical experience to suggest that tribal insurgency is a particularly suitable springboard for nationwide Communist revolution. Unless the Communists can somehow make more significant inroads among the ethnic Thai--the great majority of Thailand's people--it is likely that the insurgency will evolve into something approximating the situation in Burma, where the government has struggled indecisively for 25 years against border dissidents and insurgents of predominantly non-Burman stock.

Over the longer term, both the government and the Communists probably have far more at stake in the northeast, where the insurgents are making progress in developing a very real political challenge to Bangkok. Military efforts, such as the approaching government campaign in the Phu Phans, may tie down or scatter the jungle insurgents temporarily, but Bangkok has still not addressed itself to establishing a credible and permanent security presence in the northeast. Much of the region remains a political and security vacuum, untouched by government personnel or services. According to a recent study by a leading Thai social scientist, there are still large numbers of village youth in the key provinces of Ubon and Nakhon Phanom who are ripe for Communist recruitment. Until Bangkok begins to focus on the need for a comprehensive and well-coordinated counterinsurgency program in the northeast, the pace of the gradual deterioration in security and government control will be determined primarily by the Communists' own talents and shortcomings.

External factors and developments are not likely to produce a dramatic enlargement of the insurgent threat; nor, for that matter, can they be counted on to provide a happy and inexpensive solution to the problem. Many Thai officials are enamored of the idea that without North Vietnamese and Chinese support, insurgency would go away. They point to the predominance of ethnic Chinese

in the senior levels of the Thai Communist Party, that party's slavish devotion to Maoist doctrine, and the training of ethnic Thai in North Vietnam and China as evidence of the external nature of the threat. Nevertheless, the fact is that Thai insurgency is basically a local phenomenon under the leadership of cadre who are more Thai than Chinese. Armed Communist adherents in the lowlands are almost exclusively ethnic Thai. With the probable exception of the north, where Communist Chinese weaponry appears to have become standard issue, the Thai insurgency might well continue to exist at a troublesome level without external support.

In the past, the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists have apparently been moved to supply only as much assistance as the Thai insurgency, with its limited needs, could readily absorb. The current diplomatic dialogue between Peking and Bangkok and the clear prospect of some measure of Sino-Thai rapprochement suggest that even this limited flow might stabilize or decline in the coming months. Thailand is a prime Asian target of a worldwide Chinese diplomatic campaign based on the establishment and improvement of state-to-state relations and a corresponding de-emphasis of Peking as a revolutionary source. In Thailand's case this has already produced friendly exploratory discussions in Peking between the Chinese Communist leadership and an emissary of the Thai leadership and, since late August, an unprecedented cessation of attacks against the Thai Government by Chinese propaganda organs.

The precise impact of all this on Thai insurgency will remain unclear, at least during the early stages of the dialogue now beginning between Bangkok and the Chinese Communists. Certainly Peking cannot be expected totally to disown its Thai comrades or to shut off its contributions to the insurgent effort as long as it continues to see value in the insurgency as a stick behind the Chinese diplomatic carrot. Indeed, in Burma the Chinese have improved their diplomatic relations with Rangoon in concert with a steady but limited amount of support to the Burmese Communist insurgency. At a minimum, an improvement in Sino-Thai relations will have a deleterious impact on Thai Communist morale.

The flow of Vietnamese Communist assistance, currently less significant than that provided by the Chinese, is similarly subject to possible political developments, such as a cease-fire in Vietnam, a broader Indochina settlement or a drawdown of US military presence in Thailand. Any one, or combination, of these possibilities could cause Hanoi to lose interest in supporting the insurgency.

In sum, the future direction and eventual outcome of the insurgency is going to rest in large part with the regime in Bangkok and the insurgents in Thailand. The Communists are making gains, but their headway, for the most part, has been the result of government neglect--both of the insurgency and the needs of the rural population. Its continued growth depends largely on being left alone. In this regard, at least a measure of tentative encouragement can be gained from the government's Operation Phu Kwang of last spring and its current planning for future military campaigns. Despite the deficiencies in implementation that are sure to be revealed, the scheduled operations, no matter how ineptly carried out, should have an inhibiting effect on the insurgents' plans for expansion. Over the course of the next year the best the insurgents may be able to achieve is retention of their present strength in the face of increased government pressure.

Bangkok would probably be content with such a stalemate in the northeast and certainly would be in the north. This lack of ambition is a major part of the long-term problem. If the current wave of government activity falls into past patterns of sporadic action and relaxation, the insurgent apparatus will remain intact. As long as the Thai leadership perceives the insurgency more as a nuisance than a life-or-death threat, as long as the leadership makes no deeper commitment to eradicate the insurgent apparatus, the gradual nourishment of the insurgent movement will, in all probability, continue.

Such a change in Thai attitude may never come, barring a series of drastic government setbacks--which are not likely to occur in the near future. The Thai Communists, for their part, probably have no intention of engaging in spectacular but counterproductive acts of violence and sabotage that might lull Bangkok out of its false sense of security. This scenario of undramatic, barely visible Communist growth and only sporadic government reaction is disturbing. The situation is by no means irreversible, but unless fundamental changes, particularly in the government's attitude and approach to the insurgency, occur within a few years, the day will come when an all-out government effort will be necessary to handle a more menacing insurgent challenge.