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THAILAND'S SECURITY PROBLEMS  
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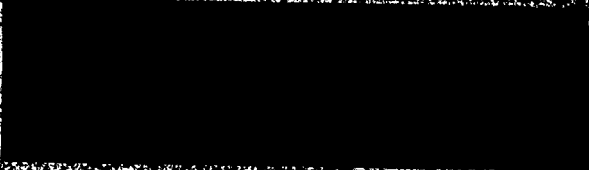
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# THAILAND'S SECURITY PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

## THE PROBLEM

To analyze Thailand's security problems and to estimate the trends in Thailand's security and foreign policies over the next year.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. Since the end of World War II, Thailand's foreign policy has been characterized by close and active alignment with the US. Recent events in Southeast Asia, however, have caused the Thai to question seriously the assessments underlying this policy. Although no longer convinced of the efficacy of their alliance with the West, the Thai have not yet come to believe that their interests would be served by withdrawing from it. (*Paras. 5, 8, 12*)
2. The Thai leaders are now seeking concrete evidence of US determination and ability to halt the Communist advance in Southeast Asia. At the same time, we believe that Thailand will soften the sharp outlines of its anti-Communist posture and examine the possibilities of some alternative to total reliance on the West. However, we do not believe that the Thai Government will undertake any far-reaching accommodation with the Communist Bloc or withdraw from alliance with the West at least within the next year or so. (*Paras. 11, 13, 15*)
3. A Chinese Communist or North Vietnamese overt military attack against Thailand is highly unlikely, at least for the period of this estimate. Communist policy toward Thailand will probably be directed at moving Thailand away from close association with the US and toward a neutralist position. To this end the USSR and Communist China will probably concentrate on political pressure, military threats, and economic inducements rather than on major guerrilla warfare. The Communists will, however, increase their subversive and organizational efforts in Thailand, and incidents of Communist terrorism will probably occur. The internal security situation in Thailand, particularly in the northeast provinces, is likely to deteriorate during the period of this estimate. (*Paras. 24-26*)

## DISCUSSION

### I. THAILAND'S FOREIGN POLICY REAPPRAISAL

4. The historic character of Thai diplomacy has been to balance one power against another, to seek a community of interest with the strongest power in Southeast Asia, to make a timely accommodation to changes in the area's power realities, and, above all, to avoid policies so rigid as to make likely a direct confrontation with the dominant power. This enabled Thailand to outlast the thrust of European colonialism and to emerge relatively unscathed from the period of Japanese imperialism.

5. Since the end of the Second World War, Thailand's foreign policy has been characterized by close and active alignment with the US. The Thai Government has generally supported US policies in the Far East and in the UN, and it has been outspokenly anti-Communist. The constancy of this policy is explained by the basic assessments made by the Thai leaders that the US was the dominant world power, and that alliance with the US would enhance Thai international prestige and would insure sympathetic consideration of Thai interests by the major powers.

6. Later, when the Chinese mainland had fallen to the Communists and Communist armed uprisings were raging in Burma, Indochina, and Malaya, the Thai leaders made further basic assessments which served to draw Thailand still closer to the US. They concluded that communism was an urgent threat to Thailand's independence and security, that open alliance with the West would deter the Communist aggression, and that the US had the ability and the will to defend Thailand. The Thai leaders also found that outspoken anticommunism opened the way to extensive US economic and military aid.

7. However, as Communist China's power in the Far East increased, as the position of the Western Powers in Southeast Asia declined, and as neutralism spread throughout South and Southeast Asia, the Thai Government began to feel isolated and dangerously exposed. It was, in part, to reassure Thailand that SEATO, with headquarters in Bangkok, was organized in 1954. Thailand has been very active in SEATO and has encouraged moves to strengthen the organization. However, the Thai Government has always looked to the US, rather than to SEATO as such, to prevent the expansion of communism in Southeast Asia and to protect Thailand against attack.

8. Recent events in Southeast Asia, particularly during the past year, have caused the Thai to question seriously the assessments underlying Thailand's post-World War II foreign policy. SEATO's impotence during the Laotian crisis has shaken Thai confidence in alliance with the West as the best means of deterring Communist aggression. The mounting Communist campaign of guerrilla warfare in South Vietnam has further intensified Thailand's sense of insecurity. The Thai leaders are fearful of Communist infiltration across their long borders. Communist subversive activity in the north and northeast provinces is increasing and constitutes a potentially serious security problem. The Thai leaders are fearful of a possible repetition in Thailand of the kind of guerrilla war the Communists have waged in Laos and South Vietnam. Thai feelings of vulnerability are enhanced by the presence in the northeast of a Communist-oriented Vietnamese minority and by the uncertain loyalties of the three million Overseas Chinese in Thailand.

9. Thailand again feels itself menaced by the irruption into Southeast Asia of powerful and expansive forces. The Thai are acutely conscious of the nearness of the mass armies of Communist China and Communist North

Vietnam, and they are convinced that Laos under a neutralist government can no longer serve as a protective buffer. They are convinced that their rich rice-surplus country offers a tempting target to Chinese aggression. In a period of such uncertainty a policy of accommodation carrying the sanction of historical experience has a strong appeal.

10. The Thai sense of national exposure and insecurity is increasing, while their confidence in US ability and willingness to defend Southeast Asia against Communist expansion is dropping. Moreover, the Thai are becoming increasingly dubious that alliance with the US produces any special advantages in regard to economic or military assistance not enjoyed by neutralist states, of which they regard Cambodia as the most immediate and galling example. At the same time, the USSR has, for the first time, exerted strong and explicit diplomatic pressure on Thailand to reduce its ties with the US.

11. *Foreign Policy Prospects.* The Thai leaders have undertaken a serious reappraisal of Thailand's international posture. They have criticized SEATO's failure to act in Laos and have blamed France and the UK for this failure. Implicitly, however, their criticism of SEATO is a veiled and indirect expression of Thai disappointment in the US. What the Thai leaders are seeking is some concrete evidence of US determination, and some convincing demonstration of US ability, to halt the Communist advance in Southeast Asia.

12. Although the Thai are no longer convinced of the efficacy of the alliance with the West, they have not yet come to believe that their interests would be served by withdrawing from it. The Thai harbor a deep suspicion and fear of Communist China, and view communism as irreconcilable with Thai identity and aspirations.

13. The Thai military, who dominate the government, recognize Thailand's near total dependence upon the US to deter Communist attack or to protect Thailand in the event of an attack. They are appreciative of their need for US assistance in the event of a serious Communist paramilitary effort against

Thailand. The Thai leadership group, and in particular Premier Sarit, is profoundly hostile to communism. Moreover, the government is hopeful of new US assistance programs. Thus, we believe it unlikely that the Thai Government will undertake any far-reaching accommodation with the Communist Bloc or withdrawal from the Western Alliance, at least for the next year or so.

14. However, if the Thai leaders are not reassured by the US response to their policy reappraisal, they will probably conclude that they must begin attempting to create a basis for a *modus vivendi* with the Communist powers. Such an effort would almost certainly not imply an immediate or abrupt redirection of Thai foreign policy. Any shift would be toward neutralism rather than communism and toward closer rapport with Moscow rather than Peiping, for the Thai would hope to hold the Chinese at arm's length in any move toward an accommodation with the Communist Bloc.

15. We believe that over the next year or so, Thai foreign policy will be characterized by a series of calculated ambiguities designed to soften the sharp outlines of Thailand's anti-Communist posture, to reduce Thailand's isolation from the uncommitted nations, and to increase the degree of flexibility and maneuverability in Thai foreign policy. The Thai will probably present these moves to the West as minimal responses to Communist pressures, or dismiss them as gestures of little real significance. To the Soviets, the moves will be presented as tentative but promising steps toward an accommodation to Communist interests. In the meantime, the Thai will seek expanded US military and economic assistance, while continuing the search for some policy alternative to total reliance on the West.

16. The pace and nature of events in Laos and South Vietnam will affect the balance between Thai reliance on the US and Thai inclinations to seek a neutralist *modus vivendi* with the Communist Bloc. Further serious deterioration of the security situation in South Vietnam would weaken the already faltering

Thai resolve to maintain an anti-Communist position. If the US were to commit troops in an effort to keep South Vietnam and all or part of Laos from falling under Communist control, the Thai Government would cooperate with the effort and would probably be willing to commit its own forces as well. The Thai would much prefer that their country be defended by fighting outside its borders. If, however, the Thai became persuaded that the US was not willing to make a commitment of sufficient size or duration to protect those countries, Thai doubts of the utility of the alliance with the US would be reinforced.

17. The death or incapacity of Premier Sarit, who has been in uncertain health for several years, would probably not have a significant impact on Thailand's international orientation. Political power would probably remain in the hands of the military, but it is unlikely that any single figure would dominate the junta as Sarit has done. Although Sarit's likely successors in the military junta are anti-Communist, they appear to be more opportunistic and might be somewhat more susceptible to Soviet pressures for expanded Thai-USSR contacts and for Thai neutralism.

## II. THAILAND'S SECURITY PROSPECTS

18. *Security Situation.* There has never been a significant indigenous Communist movement in Thailand. From time to time there have been upsurges of leftist and pro-Communist activity in the Thai universities, and parts of the press have played up anti-SEATO and anti-American themes, seeking to stimulate neutralist sentiments. There has also been evidence of some Communist subversive activity directed against government elements. The Sarit regime, however, has kept Communist and pro-Communist activity at a minimum. More important threats to Thailand's security are posed by the possibility of Communist military aggression or, more likely, subversive and guerrilla activities by Vietnamese or other ethnic minority groups now in Thailand or which may be infiltrated into the country.

19. Thailand's long borders pose serious security problems. Thailand and its neighbors are unable to seal their thinly populated boundaries against the infiltration of agents and guerrillas. Large parts of the borders are in mountainous or heavily forested areas similar to the terrain along the Laotian/Vietnamese frontier. Many tribal and ethnic groups straddle the border and have traditionally moved freely to and fro. Even the Mekong River provides no effective barrier to infiltration.

20. Thailand's chronically depressed north-east provinces provide the best target for Communist infiltration, agitation, and subversion, and one in which the Communists have recently become increasingly active. These provinces comprise about one-third of Thailand's total area and about one-fourth of the population. The northeasterners are aware of and resent the economic difference between themselves and the central Thai. This discontent gives leftist agitation a congenial climate in which to function. The political vulnerability of the northeast is enhanced by the considerable ethnic and linguistic difference between the central Thai and the northeasterners, who are more closely related to the Lao. This relationship makes Thailand particularly sensitive to Communist advances in Laos.

21. The vulnerability of the northeast is intensified by the presence of a Vietnamese minority which crossed into Thailand from Laos as refugees during the 1946-1954 Indochina War. From a group originally estimated at about 75,000, some 27,000 have been repatriated to North Vietnam under a Thai-North Vietnam Red Cross agreement, but it is significant that most of the repatriates are either very young or very old. Repatriation will probably continue, but we believe that substantial numbers of able-bodied and well-trained Vietnamese, wholly responsive to Hanoi, will remain. They will pose a continuing threat to Thai security.

22. Thailand's unassimilated Overseas Chinese community of about three million is a potential security problem and a source of

concern to the Thai Government. There is a hard-core Communist element operating among the Overseas Chinese. However, the interests of the Chinese are primarily commercial, and so long as commercial opportunities remain, the great majority of them will probably not risk the heavy government oppression which would almost certainly follow if they were to associate themselves with the Communist cause.

23. The Thai Armed Forces, with a current total strength of 123,000 and operating in conjunction with the 45,000-member National Police, would be hard pressed even to maintain internal security in the face of sustained guerrilla activities supported and directed by Chinese Communists or North Vietnamese. Major Thai Army units are concentrated in the vicinity of Bangkok, with the result that the army's capability to defend the country from either invasion or subversion is severely limited. In addition, deployment of Thai military units to outlying regions to defend the border would be extremely difficult because of the almost total inadequacy of the rail and highway networks.

24. *Security Prospects.* A Communist Chinese or North Vietnamese overt military attack against Thailand is highly unlikely, at least for the period of this estimate. The Chinese leaders almost certainly estimate that such action would result in military involvement with the US on a major scale, and in view of the current tension in Sino-Soviet

relations the Chinese may be uncertain as to the willingness of the USSR to support them in such a conflict. Moreover, an overt invasion would be out of character with Communist China's efforts to project an image of "reasonableness" and to win increased support for its policies among Asian and African nations.

25. Communist policy toward Thailand will probably be directed at moving Thailand away from close association with the US and toward a neutralist position. To this end the USSR and Communist China will use political pressure, military threats, and economic inducements, but a major guerrilla war or "national liberation" struggle in Thailand is not likely during the period of this estimate. The Communists probably consider that the "objective conditions" in Thailand must be further prepared before the phase of overt action can be initiated.

26. The Communists probably will, however, increase their subversive and organizational efforts, particularly in the northeast provinces. Infiltration of agents to work among the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Laotian minority groups, as well as among the Thai will probably increase. Communist activity among the Vietnamese minority will probably be stepped up, and incidents of Communist terrorism will probably occur. The internal security situation in Thailand, particularly in the northeast provinces, is likely to deteriorate during the period of this estimate.