

POSTWAR THAILAND: INDOCHINESE DOMINO OR CHINESE CHECKER?

by Brewster Grace

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The American withdrawal from Indochina left Thailand disoriented, exposed, and compromised. For decades, hardline, corrupt, anticommunist Thai military generals had been building their political powers and financial fortunes from the American war effort and Thailand's communist phobia. Suddenly, in April 1975, Asia's image of an American umbrella was gone—crushed in the massive retreat from Saigon to Guam to Camp Pendleton—and Thailand found itself on the losing team.

A logical choice for Thai officials in April seemed clear enough: make new friends with former enemies and expect little from former friends. The Thais are finding, however, that making friends is almost as difficult as fighting enemies, especially when the potential new friends, the Vietnamese, have been Thailand's enemy on many occasions through many centuries. Historically, Thai mistrust of the Vietnamese is enormous.

Today Thailand faces the crucial problem of completely remodeling its foreign policy. The country must transform itself from an armed camp used as an airbase for United States bombers to a nation with peaceful and friendly interests and intentions with all its Southeast Asian neighbors, rich, poor, capitalist or revolutionary.

The present could not be a worse time in which to undertake this transformation; two crucial facts of Thai political life will tend to complicate their diplomatic efforts. The first is that in early 1975 Thailand once again opted for parliamentary democracy, letting loose conflicting interest groups in an increasingly complex political process. Leftist, nationalist, pro-American, and capitalist elements are now all equally active in national politics. And while the student rebellion of 1973 removed the three most onerous military leaders who formed the

ruling junta, many more are active in the political wings and able to obstruct and undermine civilian government. Inevitably, new Thai foreign policy initiatives in postwar Southeast Asia will be accompanied at home by far more public debate and outcry, and the opposition's barely concealed efforts at sabotage.

The second salient fact of Thai political life is the continued but substantially reduced American presence, influence, and political will. It was, after all, only two years ago that Thailand reached secret understandings and agreements with American generals and ambassadors. Yet, in spite of postwar United States pronouncements of a new posture toward Asia and asserted intentions of gearing its involvement to Thailand's invitation and desires, the long legacy of American paternalism as well as important American strategic and economic interests in Thailand still remain.

Continued American involvement is increasingly at odds with the newly surfacing though long-held Thai nationalist perceptions of their nation as democratic, peaceful, and independent. Perhaps no single event demonstrated this more clearly than the Thai anti-American outburst after the United States military, despite Thailand's declared opposition, used U-Tapao airbase for the Mayaguez operation in the Gulf of Siam.

Ironically, the person charged with transforming Thailand from an American client to an independent nation in this difficult time is Kukrit Pramoj, for years a good friend of the Americans and for long jokingly chided as being a kind of plenipotentiary for the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Thailand. A literary man of sharp wit, he has always embraced a hearty nationalism and an astute political cunning and cynicism, as well as an ability to talk himself in, out, or around any situation.



Wall posters at Bangkok's Thammasat University. The first two mock the sense of 'injustice' the Thai military felt after being kicked out of Laos. The two posters below satirize the United States effort to help solace the Thai military by supporting continued military activity against Laos.



There may be other politicians better suited to lead the country toward internal economic stability. But few appear to have political skill matching Kukrit, who must moderate between Thai military and American strategic interests, confront a strong revolutionary and potentially aggressive regime in Hanoi, and maneuver between emerging and conflicting Russian and Chinese interests throughout Southeast Asia. And he must do all this in the face of impervious and growing domestic political passions, themselves often actively influenced by these external forces. Kukrit Pramoj is at the forefront of Thailand's effort to build new relations within postwar Indochina. Whether he can achieve domestic stability and security and also deal with, use, and balance political friends and foes at home, as well as Thailand's near and small neighbors and its more distant and powerful would-be enemies and would-be friends, remains to be seen. Success or failure in achieving rapprochement and understanding with all of these may well determine whether peace in Southeast Asia is really at hand. Today Thailand most heavily feels the brunt not of peace but of the war's end.

Hanoi: Animosity or Rapprochement?

Perhaps the most critical need for Thailand, and Kukrit's most difficult challenge in postwar Southeast Asia, is to make peace with North Vietnam. Hanoi and Bangkok have been at war by proxy for a decade: Hanoi via communist insurgents in Thailand and Bangkok via collaboration with the Americans throughout Indochina. It is unlikely that peace will come easily between the two, but with the dramatic end of the Vietnamese, Laotian, and Khmer wars of liberation, the opportunity may have come for Hanoi and Bangkok to forget their differences and reach a new understanding.

Without question, the actors and the action in this proxy war have been extremely unbalanced. The United States financed Thailand to supply volunteers to fight in South Vietnam and Laos and built airbases for its destructive bombing operations throughout Indochina. Hanoi, on the other hand, has provided military supplies and training to the communist insurgency in North and Northeast Thailand.

The insurgency is not only undeniable but it also appears to be growing in strength. Most estimates place the number of active insurgents at about

8-9,000. Moreover, many of these are not ethnic Thais. There is room for argument, however, that the insurgency is based at least as much on economic and social grievances due to neglect as actual infiltration and support from North Vietnam through Laos.

To Hanoi and Bangkok, the quantitative difference in the proxy war is of small consequence. Of critical importance is how the generals and Americans who ruled Thailand and the dedicated revolutionaries in Hanoi over the past two decades have viewed the seriousness of these threats in terms of national security. Both sides regard the qualitative, strategic difference as significant. In Hanoi, of course, the American bombings created such havoc that one might wonder whether the Vietnamese will ever trust the Thai again. In Bangkok, a decade of staunchly pro-American military political leaders reacted with paranoid conviction that every communist gain in Indochina and every weapon supplied to the Thai Communist Party brought the Thai domino to the brink of collapse. The fundamental questions now facing postwar Hanoi and Bangkok are whether Bangkok can trust Hanoi not to support the North and Northeast Thai insurgency, and whether Hanoi can trust Bangkok to extricate Thailand from American influence so that Indochina no longer feels threatened by United States belligerence via Thailand. Without this reciprocal trust the two countries will not be able to move in the direction of establishing peaceful and productive relations.

At least a year before the collapse of Saigon, the North Vietnamese began making overtures of reconciliation. Their message was simple: with the removal of American bases, Hanoi and Bangkok could sit down to resolve all outstanding difficulties. But at the time Thailand's domestic political situation was too unstable to allow it to respond. Although the military dictatorships of the 1960s had been toppled by the 1973 student rebellion, the caretaker civilian government of Sanya Dhammasak was too weak to challenge the vested interests the Thai military had in continuation of the American military establishment.

Two events in March and April of 1975 drastically changed the possibilities. First, a national election in Thailand brought Kukrit Pramoj to power (albeit not until his brother Seni's cabinet collapsed a very

short time after the national election) and revolutionaries prevailed in Cambodia and South Vietnam, bringing an end to these two Indochina wars and shattering American credibility.

Hanoi and Kukrit acted as might be expected. Kukrit announced on his election that American withdrawal from Thailand would take place within a year. And the Vietnamese revolutionary governments proclaimed their interests in sending missions to Bangkok to discuss diplomatic rapprochement between the two Vietnams and Thailand.

Kukrit's announcement came first, but his motive, or perhaps the mix of several motives, may have been more complex than the Vietnamese response suggests. His demand for total withdrawal could have been a political ploy to mollify a burgeoning, anti-American, largely student left wing. He may have wanted to strengthen his bargaining position vis-à-vis the Americans and to have the upper hand in determining how much of an American presence would remain five or ten years hence. Perhaps he wanted to test the Thai military for their political sensitivity and tolerance for a Thailand without American presence. Finally, Kukrit may have been genuinely interested in hearing what the North Vietnamese would have to say to a Thailand without American bases. Kukrit, with his skill as a politician, is capable of acting on all these intentions simultaneously.

The Vietnamese missions came within a month after the fall of Saigon in 1975. First, the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG) sent a mission whose significance and consequence are hard to judge. Their official concern was to discuss normalization of diplomatic relations on the condition that the aircraft flown out of South Vietnam by fleeing Vietnamese pilots be returned. Thailand, however, refused to do more than provide an inventory of what remained after the United States had left with most of the more sophisticated and expensive aircraft. After three days the PRG mission went home empty-handed.

The real intention of the PRG mission, however, may have been to test the water and warm the atmosphere for the North Vietnamese who followed on their heels. When the head of this mission, Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien, arrived at Bangkok's airport on May 22, he remarked, "the trend for peace, independence, and neutrality is strongly developing in many Southeast Asian countries."

Furthermore, reading the best intentions into Kukrit's withdrawal plans, he added that "The [Thai] people...are resolutely struggling for United States withdrawal from their countries and for United States noninterference in their internal affairs." And finally, to declare the mission's objective, he stated that "...conditions are now favorable for negotiations to normalize the relations between the democratic Republic of Vietnam and Thailand."

In retrospect it seems that conditions were not favorable. Vietnamese expected to stay for a few days and go home with promises of a turn to the better in Thai-Vietnamese affairs. Instead, they spent more than a week closeted in discussion and left without so much as a joint communiqué. Thai Foreign Minister Chatichai's optimistic interpretation of the mission was that 30 years of animosity cannot be overcome in a few days. The talks, he thought, had been only a prelude. American officials' pessimistic interpretation of the obvious failure was that the Kukrit government had rushed into it headlong and had to withdraw when they realized the enormity of the North Vietnamese demands. Although it was unclear at the time exactly what these demands were, it has at least become evident that the North Vietnamese were not satisfied with Kukrit's concept of an American withdrawal. Nor were they willing to accept Thailand's refusal to return the airplanes to South Vietnam.

If the North Vietnamese demands were enormous, so is the extent of opposition to Thailand's reconciliation with the Vietnamese. Within the Thai military some leaders, supported indirectly by American refusal to deal with Hanoi, continue to see Hanoi primarily as a military threat. Even before the Phan Hien mission arrived, efforts were made to upset the talks. The most dramatic incident took place on the eve of the talks, when for no apparent reason "spontaneous" boycotts of Vietnamese shops occurred in Northeast Thailand.¹ The boycotts soon turned into looting and anti-Vietnamese

1. These shops were those of the 40-50,000 Vietnamese refugees who have lived in northern Thailand since the end of the first Indochina War following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. In the late 1950s effort was made by the International Red Cross to negotiate the refugees' repatriation to North Vietnam. But only a few actually were repatriated because of the uncertainty of their loyalties and because the second Vietnamese war was massively escalated by the Americans in 1965. On the one hand, the Vietnamese refugees' nationalist sentiment is reflected in their open

rioting, especially in the town of Nong Khai across the Mekong River from Vientiane. Blame for the riots has fallen on both the CIA (which is strong in the Northeast) and Deputy Prime Minister Pramarn Adireksarn (who is also Minister of Defense and noted for his opposition to accommodation with North Vietnam). Radio Sagion openly accused Pramarn of inciting the riots but either could have found political support and rioters among the right-wing military groups who dominate the Thai army's Northeast command.

The political staging of the Northeast riots reveals the depth of right-wing feeling against accommodation with the new Vietnamese government. Backed by Washington's uncompromising attitude toward the new communist regimes in Indochina, Thailand's military has continued to agitate Thai public opinion against the North Vietnamese, asserting that Hanoi's support for the insurgency is a threat to Thailand's national security. The seriousness of this threat, the potential impact of counter insurgency, and the extent to which the North Vietnamese are supporting the insurgency are all open to discussion. Nevertheless, the assertiveness of the right wing and the military brings Kukrit under constant pressure to assume a hard rather than conciliatory posture toward the North Vietnamese.

A typical example of the anti-Hanoi campaign appeared in the English language *Bangkok Post* on April 6, 1975. Entitled "How the Communists Get Their Support," the article attributed its information to an American document "released by U.S. sources" entitled "The 35th PL/95th NVA Combined Command External Support to the Thai Insurgency." Accompanied by a map depicting various supply lines emanating from Hanoi through Laos and Cambodia to the Thai North and Northeast, the article claimed that Thailand was "... fully embarked upon a perilous and arduous confrontation with the sinister forces and machinations of

international communist aggression—along her borders, around her villages and within her towns."

In this atmosphere it is little wonder that the only result of the May meeting was a joint statement that the talks had been "... held in an atmosphere of frankness" that "... the two sides had agreed on many important matters of mutual interest," and that Thai Foreign Minister Chatichai would visit Hanoi. One might have expected successful talks to lead at least to a joint communiqué pledging North Vietnamese respect for Thai internal security, Thai rejection of support for American aggression against Vietnam's territory, and establishment of a mechanism for further talks on diplomatic ties. Now, however, there is not even hope of Chatichai visiting Hanoi in the foreseeable future.

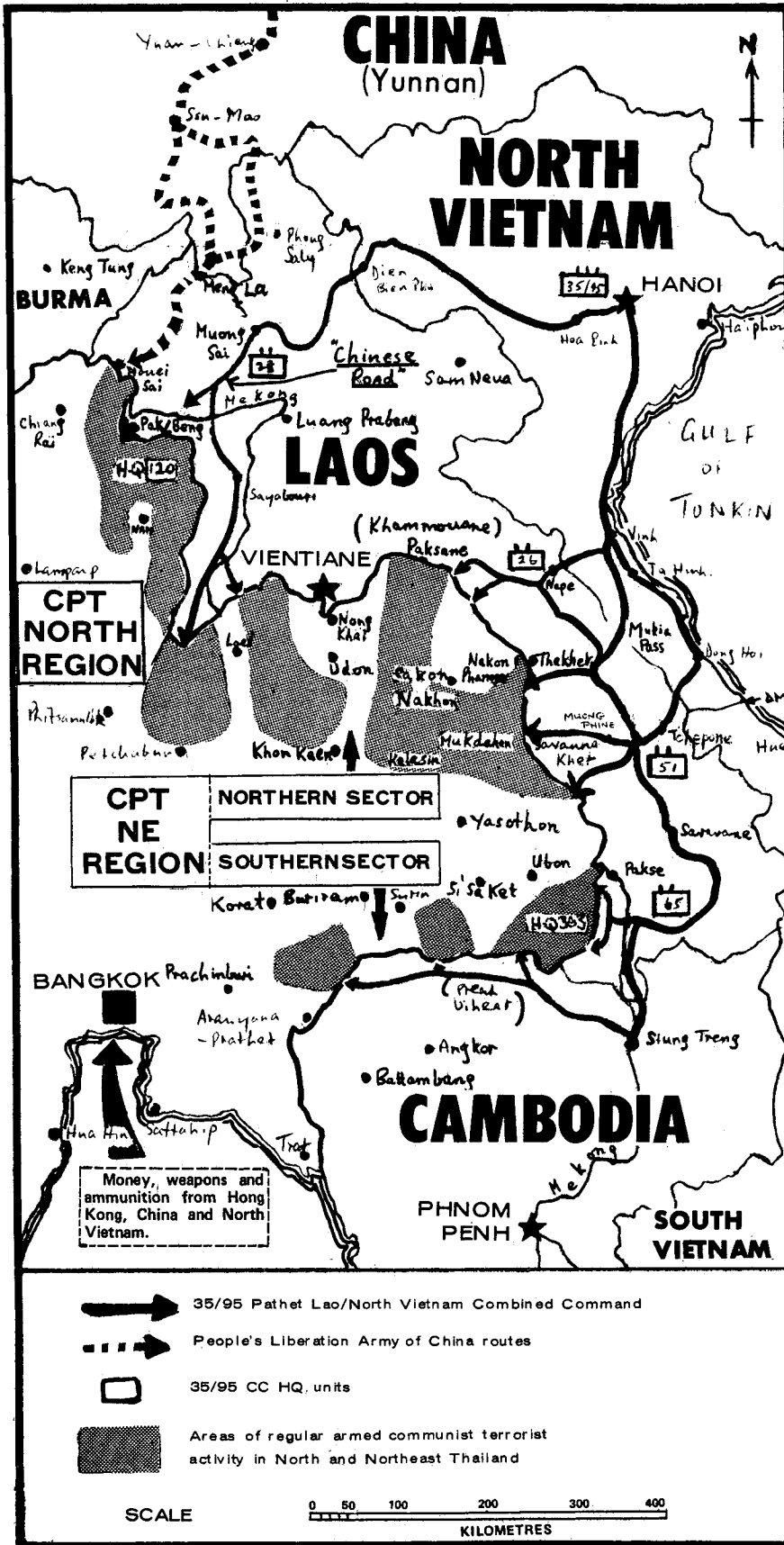
Relations between the two nations have deteriorated markedly since the end of May. The North Vietnamese have recognized with increasing bitterness that the Americans are not leaving Thailand altogether. Moreover, several circumstances indicate that Kukrit now appears to be hedging or allowing himself to be diverted from his initial assertions of American withdrawal. First, although pilots and planes are leaving, there remains intact an enormous communications and intelligence network, including U-2 planes. This has been generally acknowledged, although the size and intent of the network is unknown. Second, in August of 1975 Thailand and the United States carried out naval exercises in the Gulf of Siam under Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) auspices. And third, while noting that the presence of United States troops "brings sad results" for host countries, Kukrit has allowed a continued American presence "under the wing of the United States military at the American Embassy." Two thousand men, he added, "... scattered—ten here, five there, everywhere. It wouldn't create the idea of bigness."

The North Vietnamese have reacted bitterly to such developments, claiming "the spying by Thai-based U-2 planes on the Indochinese countries and the Indian Ocean, last month's joint United States-Thai naval exercise, the building of a major United States radar station on Inthanorn mountain... are all proofs of the continued collusion between the Thai reactionaries and the United States against the aspirations to independence and peace of the Thai people."²

affection for Ho Chi Minh as their leader, but on the other hand, many have settled into profitable commercial activity throughout Thailand's Northeast and are content to stay there. Their commercial success—perhaps not quite rivaling that of the Chinese merchant and middlemen—undoubtedly enabled those political forces interested in embarrassing Phan Hein's mission to turn anti-Vietnamese sentiment into riots and looting. It was a sad scene and an inauspicious beginning for the effort to reconcile two old and proud cultures.

2. In North Vietnam's official newspaper, *Nhan Dan*, September 8, 1975, Hanoi.

The external logistics apparatus of the Communist Party of Thailand



Operation Eagle Pull

PEOPLE OF THE WORLD
UNITE DEFEAT



STUDENTS yesterday kicked off an eleven-day 150,000 baht campaign in protest at what they term "US imperialism" by pasting up a caricature of the American eagle at strategic spots throughout the Metropolis. Rallies are scheduled to culminate in a mass protest on July 4 — American Independence Day.

Vocational students have announced they will join the campaign.

Student poster used in anti-American campaign on July 4, 1975.

A Thai (American?) view of North Vietnam's support for the northeast insurgency. *Bangkok Post*, April 6, 1975.

Seen from the Thai perspective, the fear of North Vietnamese intransigence and duplicity has been aroused to equally alarming proportions as a result of the dramatic political changes in Laos. The thought of losing Laos as a neutral buffer is as threatening to the Thais as "the reactionaries" and the American presence in Thailand are to the North Vietnamese.

Laos: Viennese Vientiane or Vietnamese Domino?

Laos was often conceived as a neutral buffer between Vietnam and Thailand during the Vietnam War. In reality, the impoverished landlocked country was used as a bitter battlefield of the North Vietnamese and Chinese-aided Pathet Lao liberation army against the Laotian army and, to a lesser extent, against Meo hill tribes, both supported variously by the CIA, thousands of Thai "volunteers," and American bombing.

Laotians have felt the impact of another use of their nation, that is as a province of Thailand to be treated condescendingly and exploited by generations of Thais. Until recently, virtually all Laotian foreign trade passed through Thailand, and was taxed heavily at Thai entrepôts. Thai merchants traded and smuggled consumer goods across the Mekong. Thai timber companies literally ravished Laotian timber reserves. And Thai spies acted even as senior aides to Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. While the enormous American presence dwarfed all this activity, Thailand nonetheless had both benefited from and participated in the "neutrality" of Laos.

With the postwar collapse of the "neutralist" Souvanna Phouma regime and the emergence of the Pathet Lao, all of this began to change. The most dramatic transformation came in July and August when more "hard-line" or reportedly "pro-Hanoi" and anti-Thai leadership emerged within the Pathet Lao. Within months the American presence in Laos was reduced from 1,200 to a small embassy staff of 20. Thai activity also has been curtailed (see page 8). The key policy judgment confronting Thailand is whether Laos under the Pathet Lao is now or will become a province of Hanoi, the first domino before Thailand. Will Laos serve the same buffer function post-World War II Vienna served for spies and diplomats in East-West relations in Europe? If, indeed, North Vietnamese influence in

Laos is as large and entrenched as some believe, then Laos has already lost its neutrality and Thailand's worst domino fears will be strongly reinforced. If, on the other hand, a spirit of nationalism enables the Pathet Lao to maintain sufficient independence from North Vietnam, Thailand, and the great powers, it may well be that Vientiane could become the Vienna of Southeast Asia and perhaps a channel for Bangkok-Hanoi efforts at reconciliation. Such a prospect, however, appears unlikely at the moment. Thai-Lao relations have deteriorated severely, posing as great a problem as the Bangkok-Hanoi failure to achieve rapprochement.

Along 1,200 miles of the Mekong River, many Thais look into Laos and see the frightening specter of a North Vietnamese-dominated nation feeding arms and cadres to the insurgents in northeast Thailand. Regardless of the degree to which this is happening in reality, suspicions of support for the insurgents are easily expanded into xenophobia by Thailand's right wing. Furthermore, the Pathet Lao are equally suspicious of Thai intentions, and Laotian memories of Thai economic domination are as fresh as those of Thai collusion with the Americans. In this atmosphere of fear and suspicion, the portent of several events has become so magnified as to strain diplomatic ties between the two countries to the point of rupture.

Among the more dramatic events exacerbating Thai-Lao relations was the recent flight of 35,000 Meo hill tribesmen from the mountains of central Laos into the northern hills and army camps of northeast Thailand. Having fought or supported the war against the Pathet Lao, they feared harsh retribution at the hands of the new Pathet Lao regime. Vang Pao, their leader and the general of their army, has reportedly fled to the United States, although there is no confirmation of his whereabouts.

Thailand officially claims the Meo soldiers have been unarmed and demands their return to Laos, and the Pathet Lao officially claim that they would be welcomed back. But the Meo are wary and only a few have chosen to return. They seem to fear that the agrarian social revolution the new regime is implementing will bring an end to their cherished tribal ways. Whether their fears are unfounded or would be borne out is a question to be answered by time and further investigation.

Official claims about the Meos, however, are in all likelihood concealing a more covert affair, evidenced by the accusations that fly back and forth across the Mekong. The Laotians, the North Vietnamese, and left-wing groups in Thailand assert that Thai military elements, especially the 333 Command at Udorn in the Northeast (with a long history of clandestine military activity in Laos and collaboration with the Laotian right against the Pathet Lao) are harboring 4-5,000 of General Vang Pao's soldiers. There is also a persistent rumor that they are being supported by CIA funds. Thai generals have argued that Meo soldiers should be trained to assist Thai anti-infiltration campaigns and create a buffer area in the North and Northeast along the Mekong.

The controversy over the Meo is only part of the evidence of deteriorating relations with Laos. Several thousand wealthy and politically active Laotians have fled to Thailand, about 30 of them senior military officers and politicians in the former Laotian regime. Having been dubbed "the Laotian rightists," their self-imposed exile in Thailand has raised a storm in Vientiane and Bangkok.

Of the 30, to date only six reportedly have been forced to leave Thailand and one of these may have returned. Others remain in Bangkok or in touch with the 333 Command in Udorn. A socialist member of parliament from the Northeast queried the government about the continued rightist presence in northeastern cities, adding that mercenaries were being recruited in the Northeast to fight in Laos and Cambodia.³ He made no allegation connecting the recruitment with the presence of Laotians, but he

3. *Bangkok Post*, August 18, 1975.

did suggest a picture of continued Thai-Lao covert military collusion.

These activities are rendered more credible by the constant public statements by Thai officials (including Kukrit) that the rightists will not be allowed to interfere in Lao affairs from Thailand. Officials claim that either they will be sent to Songkhla in southern Thailand (where they will presumably be less harmful) or they will be kicked out of the country. So far neither has happened. Nevertheless, mere allegations of continued Thai-Lao-CIA plots in the forms of espionage and harassment are enough to provide fodder for the current North Vietnamese anti-Thai campaign and to arouse Pathet Lao suspicion. The Pathet Lao have closed down four Thai consulates in Laos, charging that they were centers of espionage activity.

They arrested two Thai diplomats in Vientiane on charges of spying. Though the evidence was convincing, the arrests touched off such a fury that Thailand recalled their ambassador and Thai longshoremen refused to handle Laotian cargo in Bangkok, virtually strangling landlocked Laos, until the diplomats were released and sent back to Thailand two weeks after their arrest. Laos also has been extremely sensitive about Thai patrols on the Mekong. The Laotians suspect the Thai patrols were chasing smugglers or infiltrators, harassing or carrying on espionage. The Thai navy claims they were merely entering Laotian waters to avoid sandbars. In any case, there have been enough shooting incidents between Thai patrol boats and Pathet Lao shore troops to anger the Thai Navy to the point of threatening to take "tough reprisals."



Thai textiles for sale in central Vientiane market. Now most of them are smuggled.

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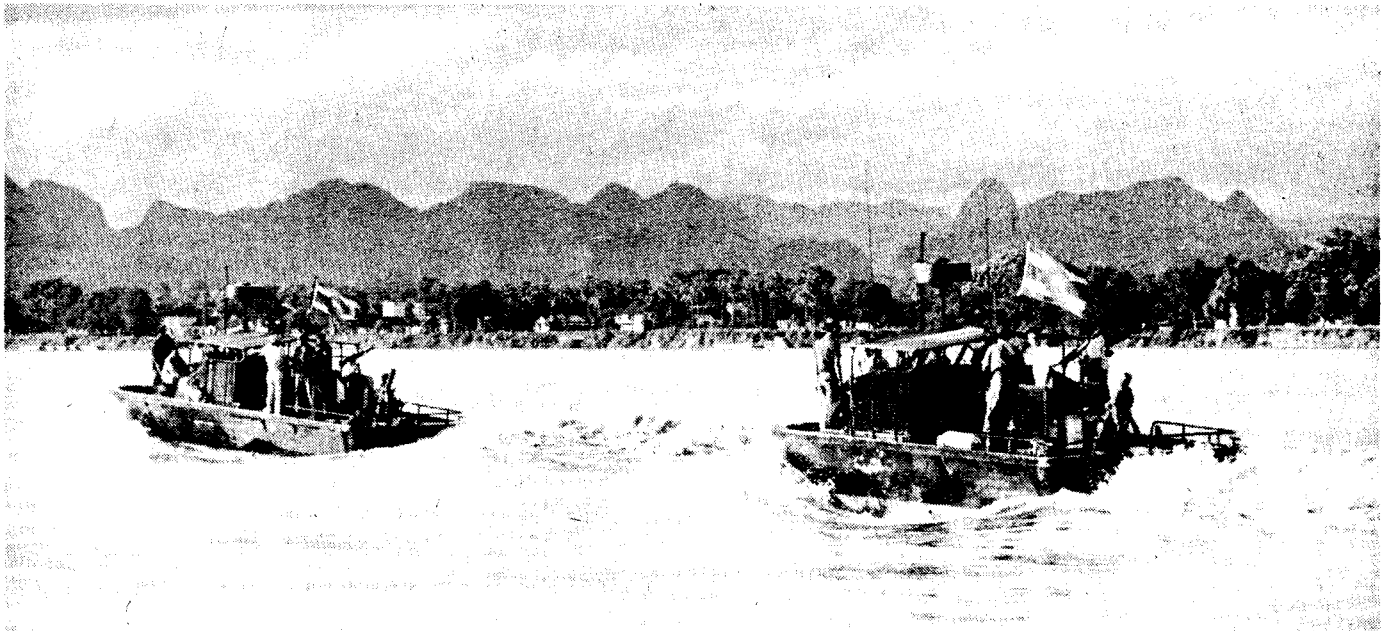
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GUNS ALONG THE MEKONG



Thai patrol boats on the Mekong last week. In the background is Laos.



Courtesy: *Bangkok Post*,
August 9, 1975.

may serve the cause of rapprochement with Thailand.

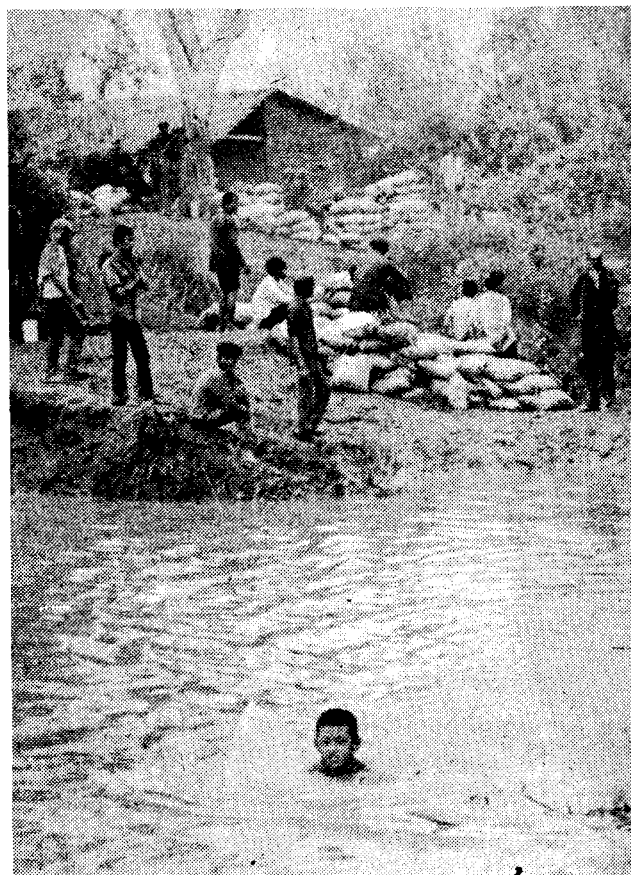
Khmer Rouge leadership was and still is badly split following the fall of Phnom Penh. The faction headed by Khieu Samphan (Deputy Prime Minister and former Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces in Sihanouk's exiled government) has remained loyal to Sihanouk, who had been befriended by Peking. Welcoming Sihanouk's government-in-exile was an investment on which China now expects returns. And now Sihanouk has been welcomed back to Phnom Penh as the titular Head of State and widely beloved symbol of unity of the Khmer people. The other faction, headed by Ieng Sary (Vice-Premier for Foreign Affairs), is firmly supported by the North Vietnamese, who had given enormous support for the Khmer Rouge revolutionary struggle against the Lon Nol regime.

The differences between these two factions are complex and involve long-standing Indochinese and international suspicions and rivalries. First, the Khmer deeply distrust the Vietnamese. This was made clear by the execution of many Vietnamese living in the Khmer Republic when Lon Nol came to power. There were reports of clashes between North Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge soldiers during the liberation campaign, and of South Vietnamese and Khmer fighting after the liberation of Phnom Penh and Saigon.

Second, North Vietnam is keeping a wary eye on the Khmer Republic's growing relationship with the Chinese. (Japanese sources in Peking, for example, have reported a one billion dollar loan from China to the Khmer Republic.) Hanoi's fear, based on ancient Chinese hegemony over Indochina, accounts for North Vietnam having accepted the Soviet Union's involvement in Indochina (most notably in Laos with its 1,500 Soviet-aid personnel).

And third, the developing Hanoi-Moscow controversy, China perceives the growing Soviet influence in Indochina as a threat. It is this rivalry that accounts for China's concern for the Khmer Republic and contributes to continued regional division.

The delicate jockeying for power and influence in Phnom Penh gives Thailand some room to maneuver. While Khmer leadership must be careful not to arouse Hanoi's ire by being too friendly with



Small boy dragging gasoline across river for sale in Cambodia. *Bangkok Post*, August 11, 1975.

Peking, a door to Thailand can remain slightly ajar and through it the Khmer leadership can reach for a third option, especially if and as Hanoi's dominance becomes too great. It is through this door that Kukrit and Foreign Minister Chatichai are seizing their first opportunity to establish friendly relations with a new Indochinese regime. That Kukrit recently asked the Chinese to convey to Sihanouk his interest in establishing closer ties with the Khmer Republic is highly suggestive of a Sino-Khmer-Thai accord. Peking has recently announced its intentions to help Phnom Penh and Bangkok restore diplomatic relations.

The second Khmer preoccupation of potential benefit to Thailand involves the immediate problems of food production and distribution, and in this Thailand has been able to provide timely help. During the weeks after the fall of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Republic was in almost total economic collapse. American bombing in the countryside had swollen the population of Phnom Penh from its prewar size of 600,000 to nearly 3,000,000. Other

cities were reportedly proportionately enlarged and their life-sustaining services hopelessly overburdened. With the collapse of the cities, air-lifted American food supplies had come to an abrupt and total end. Fuel was virtually nonexistent.

The new regime could rely to a certain extent on Chinese and Vietnamese aid, but ultimately they had to mobilize their own resources without delay because the 1975 rice harvest depended on planting with the start of the annual monsoon—only weeks after the fall of Phnom Penh. This absolute necessity brought about the fast and in some instances forced return of the refugees to the countryside. Simultaneously, and as a critical stop-gap measure, the door to Thailand that had been only slightly ajar opened and through it smugglers slipped across the Thai-Khmer border. Border guards merely turned their backs to allow vital supplies of rice, fuel, and other foodstuffs to leave Thailand. While the Thais reaped good will and friendship, the smugglers made substantial profits. The Khmers paid hard cash for all purchases, with United States dollars captured in the fall of Phnom Penh.

This “natural” process of rapprochement has yet to be sanctified by formal ties between the two countries. Nevertheless, the spirit of the relationship is markedly different from that which has existed recently between Bangkok and the two Vietnams and Laos.

Thailand, Indochina, and the Big Powers: New Alignments or Old Animisities?

The one clearly resounding diplomatic success Kukrit and Thailand have had since the end of the Vietnam War has been with the People's Republic of China. Although the makings of this rapprochement have been under way for a number of years, reactionary regimes in Bangkok, the American military presence and activity in Thailand, and the presence of an extreme wealthy Nationalist Chinese community in Bangkok has in the past been enough to keep the brakes on any effort to establish ties with the Peking government.

With Nixon and the Malaysians breaking the bamboo curtain in recent years, however, and with the end of the Indochinese war, it was only a matter of time before the rest of Southeast Asia began to follow suit. Although the Philippines came first,

Thailand followed soon after; it was largely Kukrit's initiative that led to formal establishment of Sino-Thai diplomatic ties.

Kukrit staged a formidable show while visiting China in July 1975. He created such an image of an historic reunification of Sino-Thai friendship that even the Nationalist Chinese in Thailand barely protested. The Mainland Chinese reciprocated: Mao was reported in the Thai press to have said that a healthy democratic government in Thailand would go a long way toward ending the insurgency in the Northeast. Thai generals nodded approval. And the Chinese leaders and Kukrit together called on Chinese residents of Thailand (some 350,000 of whom do not hold Thai citizenship) to become good Thai citizens. This, Kukrit promised, would be facilitated by relaxed citizenship regulations for all Chinese residents in Thailand. Finally, the Chinese agreed to buy 200,000 tons of Thai rice—a key export for Thailand—at a time when its international price was falling dangerously. All Thailand approved.

The Chinese were also using Kukrit's visit to play their own international politics. In extending a warm welcome to the Thais, China seized the opportunity to reinforce its anti-Soviet stance via the “Voice of the People of Thailand,” the Thai Communist Party's radio station in southern China. As quoted by the New China News Agency, the radio broadcasts welcomed the establishment of Sino-Thai diplomatic relations, then accused the Russians of practicing “socialist imperialism” in Thailand. The broadcast went on to warn Thailand not to be swallowed by another imperialist power while disengaging themselves from North American imperialism.

In one sense the Thais need not take such warnings too seriously; the Soviet Union has little direct influence in Thailand. Soviet bruited of a collective security pact in Southeast Asia has fallen on deaf ears, since the Southeast Asians are busily engaged in building their own regional pacts. Most notable of these is ASEAN (Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines) which currently appears aimed at consultations to produce mutually acceptable guidelines for the neutralization of Southeast Asia and to bring about great power recognition of this neutralization, a posture ASEAN prefers to the forming of security alliances with big powers. In addition, ASEAN seems open to

seeking accommodations with the revolutionary governments of Indochina, and has potential for handling its own security arrangement. China has supported neutralization, a stance more likely to win friends than is the Soviet concept of collective security which brings with it an unacceptable "anti-China" ring.

Thailand's own relations with the Soviet Union have remained politically limited—even to the point of excluding a military attaché at the Soviet Embassy in Bangkok. Economically, however, relations have been active and such activity brings Thailand benefits. The KGB is reportedly active in Thailand, although the CIA, with its years of experience there, is much more extensive and effective. And what impact the KGB does have is probably exaggerated by the Thai military and right-wing groups, who use it as a straw man in their own reactionary politics.

The United States remains as the single most important external political influence in Thailand. Its size and prestige there have been diminished by the defeat in Indochina, American troop withdrawal, and the new Thai political situation allowing for a broader spectrum of domestic political activity, including the left. Nevertheless, the continued American presence and its hard line on Indochina, especially Vietnam, has had its influence in Bangkok. The Mayaguez operation, the joint sea exercise, the continued intelligence and communications operations, and the alleged covert support for Thai and Laotian rightists have all limited Thai options in Indochina.

End Game

In fashioning a new foreign policy, Thailand and Kukrit in 1975 will have to decide which postwar games—Indochinese dominoes or Chinese checkers—will be played in Southeast Asia. If dominoes, Kukrit can decide to put his efforts in building armed resistance to insurgency in the Northeast while risking escalation from Laos and Hanoi. Or he can attempt to isolate the Northeast insurgency through extensive political reforms within Thailand and political accords with the Vietnamese—both at the expense of arousing domestic right-wing reaction.

If postwar relations in Southeast Asia are to be a game of Chinese checkers, Kukrit's move is to jump, possibly with ASEAN and possibly via Phnom Penh, over Vietnam to Peking. The Chinese seem ready for this, while the Soviet Union clearly is not. Moreover, while the United States remains silent, its growing rapprochement with Peking, support for ASEAN, and withdrawal from Vietnam all have facilitated the Chinese checker game.

No matter which type of postwar relations prevails, there is not much likelihood at the moment of any broad-reaching accords bringing peace to Southeast Asia. Years of war and years of foreign intervention have rigidified fundamental political and economic postures.

First, new nationalisms have clearly and forcefully emerged in Southeast Asia—especially in Indochina. These are based on ancient fears of domination by neighboring powers and the recent horrors of foreign military intervention in national strife. This new nationalism finds forms in anti-Americanism in Thailand, anti-Vietnamese sentiments in Phnom Penh, and anti-Thai feelings in Laos.

Second, the big powers have retained their interest in the region, if not increased them in the case of China and the Soviet Union. And while the United States military presence may be diminished, American soldiers and airplanes remain in Thailand, its political interests are active, and its economic relations continue to thrive.

Third, Thailand's search for political accords with the revolutionary regime in Hanoi and, to a lesser extent, in Laos, is still severely limited by the Thai military and right wing, now all the more anxious and irritated since the "loss" of Indochina.

It may be that Thailand is already engaged in playing both dominoes and checkers, but in either case Kukrit's initiatives in Indochina must contend ultimately with the above factors. They may facilitate the building of ties with the Khmer Republic, but they tend to hinder rapprochement with Hanoi. This may be most unfortunate, since peace between Bangkok and Hanoi would vastly increase the unity and peace of Southeast Asia, while animosity will only prolong ancient and contemporary hostilities.

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