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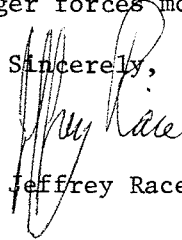
Thai-US Relations

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

My recent visit to the United States provided an opportunity to exchange views with a large number of people. Over the next few months I will be writing to you about my observations arising from these discussions, and let me begin with the following essay on Thai-US relations. I left Bangkok just at the beginning of the uproar over the "Mayaguez Affair"; this was thus a major issue both in Bangkok and the US at the time I was writing this essay. I want to suggest here though, that in the midst of temporary upsets, Americans should not lose sight of the larger forces moving about them.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey Race

I write this memo as a result of the shock felt in leaving Bangkok on the 22nd of May, carrying in my head the perceptions and images current there, and then entering into discussions in Washington starting the 27th. There has been a jarring lack of fit between perceptions and realities in Bangkok and the way these perceptions and realities, and the possibilities for creative statesmanship, are seen at senior levels in the American government. I believe this is a serious matter, and would like to share my observations on the issue.

I

Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy

As I have written in earlier letters, the Thai domestic situation has changed drastically, and probably irrevocably, with weighty implications for the decision-making process and, of course, for the substantive outputs of that process, including foreign relations. There have been two momentous domestic changes, the 1973 uprising, and the 1975 elections.

The upshot of the 1973 uprising was to eject Marshals Thanom and Prapat from power, to pave the way for a new constitution, and to permit new groups to enter the decision-making process. These groups are the members of the National Assembly, the labor movement, the students, and the media, intellectuals, and "informed public" in general. In short, Thailand has become much *Jeffrey Race is an Institute Fellow studying how the institutions of the past influence people's behavior toward one another today. His current area of interest is Southeast Asia.*

more like the United States in the openness of its society and in the sharing of power. That similarity should have made it easier for American officials to understand the behavior of the Thai government, but ironically the reverse has been the case.

A second momentous development has been the January 1975 National Assembly elections, which led to the formation of the present Kukrit government. The election was contested by 42 parties, of whom 22 obtained seats in a distribution which permitted no party or faction to obtain a clear majority. The result has been a coalition, largely of conservatives, but with enough diverse interests that the government necessarily lacks authority for fear that anything beyond "least common denominator" policies might result in the collapse of the coalition. This particular election outcome has greatly enhanced the power of politically active public groups and contributed to the inability of the present cabinet to take decisive action.

The impact on the substantive content of Thai decisions has been potent. Thai leaders must now, for the first time in their history, gain public support for their policies. They must make "Fourth of July" speeches. They are subject to public accountability. The best example of this was the project for a new commercial airport concocted in the Prapat days. While there were and are many valid arguments for a new airport, the project as proposed was a colossal swindle. This fact became apparent to everyone soon after October, 1973, and the project collapsed, much to the disadvantage of all involved. The lesson was well learned in Bangkok: policy, including foreign policy, must pass the test of public acceptability. Regarding foreign policy, there are widespread public fears on two counts: that it is no longer safe to be too close to the US, and that a policy of tight alliance with the US is another gigantic swindle, with the biggest benefits going to generals and their business associates.

The curious thing is that this domestic shift and its foreign policy implications seem not to be understood or even noticed by the top echelons of US officialdom. As the Thai (alone in Southeast Asia) move decisively toward an open, democratic regime of the type for which the US claims to have been fighting the Vietnam war, there has not been one word of encouragement, or even recognition: not from Mr. Kintner, not from Mr. Kissinger, not from Mr. Ford. This is apparent in other ways, too. American public officials appear genuinely to misunderstand Thai domestic politics, and the necessity to make anti-American 4th of July speeches. The entire Thai elite is pro-West at the least, many pro-American, and some pro-US base and pro-American troops (for noble reasons or otherwise). Public statements which suggest the contrary cannot be taken at face value. Yet many American officials seem impatient with Thai leaders, and upset that they are somehow no longer running a "tight ship" the way Prapat used to do, or Park does now.

There is a statement frequently heard in government offices in Washington, "Well, if they want us out, by God we'll get out." But "they" are just occupying those cabinet seats through the vicissitudes of a single election in a newborn parliamentary system that may experience new elections in a few months, with very different results. Furthermore, what "they" want and what it is prudent for them to do depends largely on what the US wants and does. When American leaders recover from the shocks which they have been subjected to in

recent months, they will surely realize this, but by that time it may be too late.

## II

### The Southeast Asian Power Game

The Thai leaders have two constituencies in their present situation: the domestic (whom they must satisfy to stay in office) and the peninsular, whom they must satisfy to ensure peace; the peninsular constituency consists most importantly of the communist states to the east, and especially Vietnam. The urgent need to satisfy these two constituencies structures the Thai leaders' perception of their world and determines their foreign and domestic policies. I have discussed the domestic constituency above. Let me now speak to the peninsular one.

The history of the last thousand years in peninsular Southeast Asia has been one of marches and countermarches among the contending empires, kingdoms and petty principalities, and this millenium has seen the rise of some major actors (Thailand), the disappearance of others (the Chams and Mons), and the enfeeblement of yet others (the Burmese, the Cambodians, the Lao). While in earlier times the conflicts were understood as, and carried out as, struggles for local advantage, more recently, and particularly about the middle of the 19th Century the local struggles became blended with, and finally submerged in, the larger struggle for world power centered in Europe.

The tools in this conflict have shifted dramatically in recent years. In former times the conflicts were waged with massed armies led by kings on elephant-back. The modern instruments are subversion and insurgency: the game which China has been playing in Burma, which Hanoi has been playing in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, and which Thailand has been playing in Laos and Cambodia. The reasons for this shift are apparent: with the elaboration of extra-regional alliances, it is no longer safe to make overt attacks; and furthermore, the goal of the struggle is no longer to take over the resources of the opponent (slaves, treasure) but to handicap him in the regional struggle for dominance. If your opponent is busy repressing rebellion at home, he can hardly support your internal enemies or contest your own adventures abroad.

At this point, the long-range process of consolidation has left but two contestants facing each other: Thailand and Vietnam. In the last twenty years, Thailand has waxed, while Vietnam has been wracked by internal conflict. Thailand, logically, has acted to exacerbate Vietnam's internal problems, through its assistance to the U.S. in bombing the territory of the DRV, and in sending ground combat forces to support the southern contestant to the claim for Vietnamese national leadership. Thailand also benefited handsomely from American military spending. At the same time, Thai leaders were little hindered by domestic constraints, due to the dictatorial nature of their regime. The U.S. helped to perpetuate this useful domestic structure by means of assistance to the police and other internal security elements.

This Thai "forward strategy" was remarkably successful for a long period: Vietnam, potentially one entity, did continue to be fragmented, and the Thai

leaders were able to perpetuate a similarly fragmented regime in Laos and, in cooperation with South Vietnam, to harass Cambodia. The Vietnamese authorities in Hanoi attempted, in their own way, to use the now obligatory means against Thailand: aiding an ongoing insurgent movement. The evidence for Vietnamese interest in and support of this movement in Thailand's North and Northeast is clear, and reveals that ever since 1960, or perhaps a bit earlier, Hanoi has maintained with steady purpose a design to sap Bangkok's energy, attention and national resources, by advising and supporting rebellions among hill tribes in the North and disaffected ethnic Thai in the Northeast.

It is now plain that the domestic upheavals of the last two years in Thailand, the re-unification of Vietnam, and America's flagging interest in the area, will force a major change in the course of the action. The game will obviously continue, but a time of uncertainty and troubles lies ahead for Thailand.

### III

#### The Unseen Triangle

The Thai leaders - both military and civilian - must now somehow adjust to the new realities of increased Vietnamese and decreased U.S. power. They know that not only the national interest but also their own politically active public demands this.

We are now seeing the re-emergence of specifically local conflict after a century of partial submergence. If the transition were clear, if we had suddenly emerged into the sunlight of pure regionalism, an understanding, painful as it might be, would unambiguously emerge to reflect the local power balance. But that cannot be the case now, because the U.S. is half in and half out. This is what makes the problem so difficult for all parties, and the outcome so indeterminate.

As it stands, Thailand's evaluation of how close it can afford to be to the U.S. depends on the commitments which the U.S. is willing to make to Thailand; at the same time, America takes the attitude of "we'll get out if they want us to," and waits to see how Thailand will jump. Yet also, Thailand's calculation of safety must include an estimate of the relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam: if Vietnam perceives that the U.S. still threatens it, and might, as in past years, use its local allies to effect American designs on the peninsula, then obviously Thailand must exaggerate its independence in order to keep uncocked the gun which Vietnam has to Thailand's head.

Thus we have a structure in which each party's behavior depends on the behavior of the others, a dangerous situation of multiple reciprocal influences in which the least shock may send the system reeling. In ordinary times stable domestic systems serve as flywheels to prevent this from happening, but these are no ordinary times. The Thai leaders, in a fragile coalition, must now satisfy a wider domestic constituency; but the power plays, real and alleged, over the American military presence, the Vietnamese planes, and the Mayaguez affair, have so blasted their credibility that they must avoid even the appearance

of country-selling in the Prapat tradition. Concurrently, the firm grasp over foreign policy by the American Executive is also slipping, under the same impact of allegations of deception and suspicions about the identities of the real beneficiaries of past policies. Congress, responding to a new arrangement of American constituencies, is beginning to insist on substantive participation in policy-making -- just as is happening in the Thai case.

The situation in Vietnam differs in structure, but promises (or threatens) the same fluidity in outcome. We know less about the structure of decision making in Vietnam, but if there were ever to be a time of reappraisal, this must surely be it. The existence of two centers, one in Hanoi and another in Saigon, offers a further source of fluidity.

Thus, the local mainland Southeast Asian system is in a state of great fluidity, with the possibility of profound and rapid shifts. Anything might emerge. More specifically, it seems clear that the future type and intensity of Thai-U.S. relations is crucially related to the emerging relationship between the United States and Vietnam. If that relationship remains cold, hostile, and threatening, the Thai leaders will have to follow one course despite their preference for another. If the U.S. can demonstrate that it no longer poses a threat to Vietnam and that it sympathetically understands Vietnam's problems and regional role (even if it can't do much, say because of Congressional or popular limitations) then another set of Thai responses will ensue. Precisely because of the structural indeterminacy of the situation, the possibilities for creative statesmanship are broad. But time is short.

#### IV

#### Closing the Books

What we are speaking of is the final settlement of the last century of Western intervention in Southeast Asia. The region had its own autonomous international relations for a long period, until the tide of Western intervention came in to swamp the indigenous structure. Now, a century later, this tide is receding, and it is obviously leaving many contours changed, and many relics lying on the beach. Southeast Asia can never again be a closed system, but at the same time the kinds of relations which outside powers have must undergo significant shifts in kind, intensity, and style. And these dimensions will determine the degree of strain which will continue on the peninsula.

It is in this context that current American policy toward Thailand should be viewed, contrary to the tendency to see things in bits and pieces -- a negotiation over a base here, an aid agreement there. Policy makers must work to see the linkages, and the most important of these is the historic antagonism between Thailand and Vietnam. To be more specific, the future of any U.S. rights to the use of Thai territory for U.S. interests elsewhere in the world is crucially contingent on the Washington-Hanoi-Saigon axis.

There is not much time to act upon this perception, even if it can be incorporated into the bureaucracy's perception of the world. The Thai leadership is under extreme pressure from its domestic constituency, as a result both

of events in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and of the gratuitous shocks which the U.S. has administered in recent weeks. The Vietnamese, similarly, are at a crossroads. They are a pragmatic and methodical people (this should be clear by now) and they are evaluating right now the options open to them. They are looking at the U.S. and they are looking at Thailand. They have their own bureaucracies to coordinate, their own constituencies to mobilize.

As I mentioned earlier, because the structure of the present situation is such that each actor is homing on the perceptions of the others, and because the domestic systems have all suddenly become unhinged from the stability of past years, the system as a whole has a great indeterminacy, out of which almost anything might emerge in the relatively short term. But once the perceptions begin to gel, once the bureaucratic coalitions become mobilized around some particular policies (whatever they might be), a mutually reinforcing chain of events will ensue. The system will suddenly lock on a course which will govern the politics of the whole area for the foreseeable future. Countless bureaucrats, in diverse capitals, will then form their images and perceptions, make their predictions, and commit plans to paper, and the system will acquire a rigidity much like it had in the late '60s - and which it took so much human sacrifice to turn around.

V

The Implications for America

What is to be the stance of the United States in this complex situation? The goal, plainly, should be to modulate the interaction between multiple domestic constraints and the structure of Southeast Asian sub-regional politics, so as to produce an outcome which is consistent with long-run U.S. interests. Doing this implies both a sensitivity to the nature of the problem and a willingness to move on the limited leverage points which our careful study of the situation shows are available. We cannot do this if we are victims of 1) short-run thinking, 2) subjectivity, and 3) an attitude of aggressive followership. Whatever, and however limited, the possibilities for action may be, they can only be uncovered and exploited if we adopt the widest possible angle of vision, control our (perfectly understandable) feelings of rejection and hurt pride, and lead, as they must be led, both bureaucratic and public opinion.

Speaking to the first problem of time horizon, short-term advantage and long-term durability are in conflict here. Whether we see it or not, this is the instant in history when the final settlement of a century of Western intervention in Southeast Asia is being hammered out. That vision must guide our day-to-day activities; and whatever agreements are made, for example regarding bases, must be consistent with the flow of these larger processes in order to be durable. It is perfectly conceivable - but very dangerous - that we should seek short-term advantage by making commitments to the legal government, which neither we nor they will have the capacity to honor, or side deals with the Thai military. Mr. Kissinger was recently supposed to have said (according to the Far Eastern Economic Review) that the anger of the Thai prime minister over the Mayaguez incident was of no consequence, because the Thai military were

happy. Whether Mr. Kissinger really said this on the occasion he is reported to is immaterial: he holds this view, and so do many other senior American officials. Making a "separate peace" with the Thai military remains a live option for these men, and we cannot even exclude an American-encouraged coup a la Laos in 1960.

A related point is that we must not view Southeast Asia simply as the residual, what is left over after accommodating to interests elsewhere, or to US domestic politics. The character and content of our relations with peninsular Southeast Asia have important implications for our interests elsewhere, for example, Japan, China, and the Middle East.

The second point is subjectivity, a word I hesitate to use, but there is no other way to describe the affliction. We have all suffered powerful shocks, not only the American people, but also high-level officials with a large personal stake in certain policies. Were there not a subjective reaction, we should be surprised. But we must not permit this reaction to becloud the tasks and the opportunities at hand.

In this regard, two statements frequently come up at the highest levels. One is, "Well, if they don't want us, we'll just get out." This kind of impulsiveness, in the present situation of high indeterminacy, can have the most profound consequences, because the domestic constraints on over-reaction which operate at both ends in ordinary times have broken down. Once we are set on certain tracks, we'll start rolling, and it will be too late to switch.

The second statement we frequently hear is, "They need us more than we need them; let them come to us." That "they" need us more than we need them may be true in some abstract sense, or it may not. Saying it may help our dignity, pride, sense of power, and feeling of self-importance. The question remains, though, whether this is the proper way to conduct the affairs of a great nation. I suggest that it is not, because it overlooks the most fundamental fact of international relations, which is that the powerful only remain so by forming relationships with the less powerful. So while it is true (by definition) that there is a difference in power, both gain from the association. This is another way of saying that the now fashionable "let them crawl" attitude is a perspective hardly conducive to exploring common interests, which are the stuff of international relations, and it certainly doesn't help one to fathom or even search for the domestic motivations of Thai leaders, which we must do in order to make it easier for them to do some things they may prefer but have difficulty with due to a particular domestic configuration.

The third issue is leadership. Another statement frequently heard (usually in the middle of someone else's sentence) is, "There's no point in pursuing this point because X will never accept it," where X may be Vietnamese or Thai leaders, one's own boss, the Congress, or the man in Muncie. This statement is usually offered as an irrefutable justification for doing nothing. Doing nothing is, I suppose, a policy, but doing nothing about our relations with Vietnam is going to have serious consequences for our relations with Thailand, and the interests we have there and elsewhere. We may arrive at a decision to "do nothing" out of considered judgment, but hopefully not out of stand-pattism, hurt pride, a custodial mentality, or a liking for passivity.

The meshing of complex independent processes, against the opposition or apathy of public opinion and a host of bureaucratic interests, is the function of leadership. Constituencies can be created, groups can be persuaded, positions can be prepared; I need not dwell on this since the methods are known. The point is that strong leadership will most likely produce one outcome in Southeast Asia; aggressive followership will produce another. We may consciously choose to continue our present stance of aggressive followership, but this choice will have costs and we should be clear what they are.

## VI

### Conclusion

I have tried to do two things: one, to describe the actual structure of politics in Thailand and the peninsula; and two, to offer, not answers, but an attitude, a way of thinking about the problem. I have done this because of my conviction that our troubles of the last decade have come about not due to lack of information, though there have been lacks, but due to our attitudes and assumptions. If, in this vein, I can offer any final thought, it is that in our routine, day-to-day activities, we must make a persistent effort to understand the larger flow of events (and this is frankly difficult) in order that we may accede graciously to the inevitable -- or better, anticipate it. Only in this way will we preserve to ourselves freedom of action where we truly have it, avoiding the traumatic experience of the last decade, of being bludgeoned through the portals of a new world.