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The Last Stronghold: US-Thai Relations During the Vietnam War

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Abstract

This thesis examines the gradual decline of American power on mainland Southeast Asia during the years of American effort to contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia by participating in the Vietnam War from the perspective of the US-Thai relations. Throughout the Vietnam War, the relationship between the United States and Thailand was strengthened by their mutual anti-communist sentiments that led to Thailand becoming a facilitator of American military forces in Vietnam, chiefly through provision of airbases for the United States on Thai territory. It was these bases that enabled the fullest extent of American military power to be brought to bear all over Indochina, namely Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. By the mid-1960s, Thailand arguably became the primary hub for American operations in Southeast Asia. Thailand, in return, received an array of political, military, and economic aid packages that strengthened its economy, but also its successive military governments. What began as a bilateral political-military cooperation between the two nations, however, led to domestic changes in Thailand that resulted in a democratic transition towards a civilian government whose foreign policy initiative was to move away from its established alignment with the United States.

The dissertation follows a chronological structure that began with American interest in working with the Thai military government in the late 1950s and ended with the complete withdrawal of American personnel that had been based in Thailand in 1976. The first chapter explores the root of US-Thai alignment and the Nixon Doctrine. Followed by a chapter on the impact American bases had on Thailand, and the political transition in 1973. Chapter three explores the changes that resulted from the political transition, and the resultant attempts by both

the United States and Thailand to adjust to each other under the changing circumstance. The last chapter offers a narrative and analysis on how political turmoil in Thailand resulted in American departure. The dissertation concludes that ultimately the loss of American stronghold in Thailand, as a result of Thai politics, led to American containment arc against communism in Southeast Asia being shifted further southwards towards the maritime nations of the region. The methodology used in this study is rooted in archival research drawn from material in both Thailand and the United States.

By studying the course of the US-Thai relations, the eventual decline of American power in Southeast Asia could be seen through the scope of American engagement with a regional power other than Vietnam. Thus, further contribute to the landscape of literature on American Cold War in Southeast Asia.

Lay Summary

The Vietnam War was a military conflict that occurred in the mid-20th century that spanned from the early 1960s to April 1975 communist North Vietnam took control of Saigon, then capital of South Vietnam. In popular understanding the two opposing sides were North Vietnam and the United States, who was supporting South Vietnam. This, however, leaves out certain details. The United States fought in Vietnam with the support of other allied nations, although they might not have directly sent as many troops for ground combat as the US. Among them was Thailand. Another popular misconception was that the fighting was limited to the borders of Vietnam. In fact, the fighting spread to other countries next to Vietnam, mainly in Laos and Cambodia. The war was at the time understood by the United States as a fight to contain spread of communism in Asia. To do so successfully, the United States needed an ally in the region who would support its war effort through provision of military bases for its aircrafts and soldiers, as well as other logistical services. This led to a period of intensive American cooperation with Thailand.

My dissertation examines the cooperation between the United States and Thailand during this period. I argue that by the mid-1960s, Thailand became the main hub for American operations in Southeast Asia. However, due to the instability of Thai politics in the period of transition from a military government to civilian rule, Thailand could not come to an agreement with the United States on the issue of hosting American bases. This was despite the United States wanting to extend the length of their deployment in Thailand. This meant that by 1976, the United States did not have a suitable location on mainland Southeast Asia to conduct operations

to contain communism and had to shift its focus towards cooperating with countries in the maritime area of Southeast Asia.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters. It follows a timeline of American involvement in the region, beginning with the late 1950s when it became interested in working with the Thai military government in and ended when the US finally had to leave Thailand in 1976. The first chapter explores the root of US-Thai alignment and the Nixon Doctrine. Followed by a chapter on the impact American bases had on Thailand, and the political transition in 1973. Chapter three explores the changes that resulted from the political transition, and the resultant attempts by both the United States and Thailand to adjust to each other under the changing circumstance. The last chapter offers a narrative and analysis on how political turmoil in Thailand resulted in American departure.

Introduction

It was initially my intention to not do anything related to Thailand for my PhD. A colleague whom I spoke to about my research plan thought it was a silly idea. She asked me to change my mind because knowledge production in most fields today is still dominated by Western institutions and writers. A less well-known part of the world such as Thailand would almost certainly be where a gap in literature or knowledge could easily be identified. She did not say anything I was not already aware of, but I could not bring myself to agree with her. What purpose was there, really, to work on a Thailand-related topic, especially if I was applying to a program on American history? To my surprise, while browsing through potential sources for my research on American presidential history I inadvertently noticed that any mention of Southeast Asia, if at all, was usually brief or treated almost as an afterthought, even when the topic being discussed could benefit more from further discussion on the region. This ranged from American foreign policy in Asia and competition with China, to the anti-narcotics effort in The Golden Triangle under Presidents Ford and Carter. The exception to this was, of course, sources on Lyndon Johnson's presidency, which never fail to discuss Vietnam at length. Perhaps, I thought, there is room for Southeast Asia in the study of American history after all.

The United States under the Johnson presidency might have been heavily involved with the Vietnam War, but in the experiences of those in the region it was hardly a simple story of a war between the US and Vietnam. It was part of a larger American attempt to contain the spread of communism in Asia. As such, the war was a transformative experience for many countries of Southeast Asia as much as it was for both Vietnam and the United States. The popular use of the

term “Vietnam War” itself is reflective of how much the narrative around American post-war containment in Southeast Asia continues to be dominated by American experience of having fought a ground war in Vietnam, while the rest of the countries affected, the other “dominoes,” with less direct American warfighting like Laos and Cambodia were treated as appendages to the Vietnam War. The same could be said of Thailand. Though not a direct participant to the extent that Vietnam and the United States were, American containment effort in Indochina was a transformative experience for Thailand no less than it was for all other parties involved. What distinguished Thailand from the other countries in Indochina was perhaps its support and extensive cooperation with American intervention in the region.

Among American allies in Southeast Asia, and perhaps Asia-Pacific, the US-Thai bilateral relationship could be considered one of the oldest in Asia. The symbol of such close cooperation between the two countries stands tall in the central district of Bangkok in the form of what was once the second largest American Embassy in the world, and is currently one of largest US diplomatic missions.¹ American involvement in Vietnam, and Southeast Asia at large, in pursuit of their containment policy turned Thailand into an American strategic outpost in Indochina that fostered their seemingly close cooperation with the United States in the latter half of the 20th century. Thailand's close location to Vietnam made it an ideal country to provide American forces with airbases for the air war all over Indochina along with logistical support, and became a recreational hub for American troops, while benefitting from American security

¹ Parag Khanna, *The Second World* (London: Penguin Books, 2009); Puāngthong Pawakarapan, Kahn Tang Pratet Thai Nai Yuk Songkram Yen [Thai Foreign Affairs in the Cold War Era]. (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2018); “Policy & History.” *U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Thailand*, Department of State: U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Thailand, <https://th.usembassy.gov/> [accessed December 2020].

umbrella and aid packages. With Thai cooperation, the United States was able to prosecute its war in Vietnam. Thus, bringing the brunt of American power to bear on Southeast Asia in its quest to contain the spread of communism.

This had led to much of the study on US-Thai relations being centered on the period leading up to, and soon after, the Vietnam War, namely from the 1950s to 1975. The heavy emphasis on Thai-American cooperation in Indochina also tilted the focus of their diplomatic history disproportionately towards the 1960s. While justifiable on the rationale that a wartime cooperation tends to produce a fertile ground for academic inquiry, and indeed such rationale would be highly supported in this instance, it follows that a historiography on the US-Thai relations produced primarily from studying the 1960s offers only a limited insight into the nature of their bilateral relationship, namely the state of their relations at the height of the Vietnam War. By the early 1970s, following the introduction of the Nixon Doctrine in 1969, the circumstances that once directed the US-Thai relations were replaced by other dynamics and events that compelled both the United States and Thailand to reexamine their respective interests and roles within the relationship; divergent interests along with cultural, social, and economic differences that had been the general characteristics of their relations prior to 1945 began to re-emerge.

American reorientation away from the policy of containment towards a co-existence with communist powers through the introduction of *détente* and *rapprochement* with China signaled its willingness to withdraw from Southeast Asia, which threatened the security umbrella that Thailand had relied on to shield itself from their surrounding communist neighbours in Vietnam, China, and later in Laos and Cambodia.

Domestically, the anti-communist Thai military regime, closely allied to the United States since the late 1950s, was toppled by a mass protest in 1973. The new civilian democratic government that emerged as a result was convinced that Thai long-term domestic and international interests were increasingly ill-served by continuing to cooperate with the United States. Across the Pacific, President Nixon, and his successor Gerald Ford, faced a resurgent Congress invested in restraining the power of the executive office and having a stronger voice in foreign affairs, specifically to prevent presidents from further committing American troops and resources to more overseas missions.² Hence, much of the dynamics that had sustained the previously well-established relationship in the 1960s were in fluctuation and could no longer be taken for granted as foundational to the US-Thai bilateral relations. Additionally, in the period following the Paris Peace Accords of 1973 other conflicting interests that could erode their already weakening relationship continued to arise. A notable example of this was the demand for removal of American bases from Thailand by the Thai public, who had long been dissatisfied with having to bear the social costs of hosting American troops over the past decade. This issue was actively suppressed by the military government, but was actively pursued by the civilian government and civil society, both a new force in Thai politics in the aftermath of the 1973 protest.³ Thai demands, however, contradicted the larger American strategy that required maintaining bases in Thailand past the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam. As such, their long-established relationship became challenged by the need find a new *modus operandi* in their diplomacy. Their failure to do so, unfortunately, led to the departure of all American

² John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), pp.117-129; Jussi M. Hanhimaki, *The Rise and Fall of Détente* (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 2013), pp.77-80, 87-91.

³ Sudina Paungpetch, "Domino By Design: Thai-US Relations During the Vietnam War" (unpublished doctoral thesis, Texas A&M University, 2011)

personnel and bases in Thailand in 1976 and with it the end of American power projection on mainland Southeast Asia.

Overall, when examined in details, the story of US-Thai relations during the Vietnam War, appears to be shaped and directed by a complex blend of international and domestic factors that pulled them together through mutual interests and ideology as much as pushed them apart. Although the literature on the US-Thai relations during the Vietnam War is still relatively limited, there is certainly a greater amount available on the dynamics of American engagement with Thailand than there are on their gradual disengagement from Thailand and Indochina at large from the early 1970s onwards. As Barkawi and Laffey have argued, the study of inter-state relations has constantly been disproportionately dominated by the narrative of the more powerful, so-called “global North,” at the expense the weaker “global South,” thereby obscuring the fact that the history of international politics is often jointly created through interactions between both parties. This serves to further distort periodisation and locality.⁴ In this instance, the chronology used in the study of the US-Thai relations is often based on the American experience to mirror its progress in the Vietnam War, and does not necessarily represent the shared experience of both partners. Rather, it was that of the more powerful half of the US-Thai relationship, which meant that the years after 1973 leading up to complete American withdrawal from Thailand in 1976 have been largely ignored in much of the historiography. The emphasis on the American experience has also resulted in Thailand being treated as a passive location for American airbases and troops. Thus, obscuring the fact that rather than being just a location that

⁴ Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, “The Postcolonial Moments in Security Studies”, *Review of International Studies* 32, no.2 (2006): 333.

accommodated American war effort in Vietnam, Thai logistical support, only agreed to after Thailand calculated that it was within its interest to do so, made Thailand both the facilitator of American forces in Vietnam and the enabler of American power in Indochina.⁵

This dissertation, therefore, seeks to provide an account of American containment in Indochina through the scope of its relationship with Thailand. It argues that when viewed through the scope of their relationship, American intervention in the region was a story of the loss of American power in Southeast Asia resultant of American inability to retain their bases in Thailand after the end of the Vietnam War, which led to their regional containment perimeter being shifted from mainland to maritime Southeast Asia. This was due in no small part to the state of domestic Thai politics. Successive Thai military regimes enabled the maximisation of American intervention by importing American presence into mainland Southeast Asia through provision of airbases and logistical support for American forces. In the same vein, Thai civilian rule after the political transition of 1973 that rejected American basing in Thailand had the opposite effect of diminishing American power projection in the region. For this reason, it is also necessary to address the turbulent period in American diplomacy with Thailand between 1973 to 1976 that has so far been given limited scholarly attention.

Upon reviewing the literature on the US-Thai relations during the Vietnam War, the existing historiography frequently traces the root of the US-Thai relationship back to the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868) and Thailand's experience with Western powers at the height of European imperialism, with ethnographic commentaries aim at understanding the cultural

⁵ Arne Kislenko, "Bamboo in The Wind: United States Foreign Policy and Thailand During The Kennedy and Johnson Administrations 1961-1969" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 2000), pp.8-9.

characteristic of the Thais. This often takes the form of an anecdote on Rama IV's letter to President Lincoln offering to send a horde of war elephants to assist in the Civil War, others have mentioned the socio-cultural impact of their relationship through the work of American missionaries.⁶ This is particularly apparent in the literature written early on in the post-war period, which are often representative of knowledge production on the subject in its infancy, when American involvement in Southeast Asia and its relationship with Thailand was novel to the general American public. Consequently, while they can be highly informative, especially in their examination of the Thai polity vis a vis the United States, this group of literature are more useful as a general introduction to Thai history and policy prescription.⁷ Having been written closer to the time of the Vietnam War, Thailand was often portrayed as a passive object of American foreign policy, not unlike a piece of domino, needed to be saved from falling by a forceful American intervention.⁸

That Thailand's status alongside the United States may at times appear objectified in these accounts have not gone entirely unnoticed. There has been a genuine effort to rectify the uneven representation of the two partners with limited success. In the case of Robert J. McMahon's *The Limits of Empire* which was written with the stated goal of demonstrating

⁶ Thanet Aphornsuvan, "The West and Siam's Quest for Modernity: Siamese Responses to Nineteenth Century American Missionaries", *Southeast Asia Research* 17, no.3 (2009): 401-431; John Stirling, "Thailand and ASEAN in a Dangerous World", *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 6, no.5 (1979): 310-323.

⁷ For examples of this kind of policy prescription see Frank C. Darling, "American Policy in Thailand", *The Western Political Quarterly* 15, no.1 (1962): 101-107; Frank C. Darling, "America and Thailand", *Asian Survey* 7, no.4 (1967): 215-217; John D. Caswell, "The Changing Thai-United States Alliance: Implications for the Nixon Doctrine in Asia", *Naval War College Review* 24, no.2 (1971): 59-75.

⁸ Frank C. Darling, "American Policy in Thailand", *The Western Political Quarterly* 15, no.1 (1962); Frank C. Darling, "America and Thailand", *Asian Survey* 7, no.4 (1967).

that small powers were capable of manipulating and extracting benefits from the US, the author admitted to his limited ability to access records that were produced after the 1960s, and had to rely on secondary literature.⁹ The end result was a fine account of American engagement with Southeast Asia since World War II that fell short of providing the voices of small states. Where McMahon did succeed was in explaining and juxtaposing the motivation and willingness of the Thai leadership next to that of American decisionmakers to explain Thailand's reason for entering into a more committed relationship with the United States, thereby assigning a degree of agency to one of the small states that he had hoped would be represented in his work.

McMahon's account of Thai motivation for aligning itself closely with the United States has further been corroborated by Daniel Fineman. Fineman concluded that American success in turning an initially hesitant Thailand into an anti-communist outpost in Southeast Asia was not the result of American hegemonic drive alone, but in combination with Thailand actively courting the United States for reasons pertaining to its internal politics and willingness to cooperate of its own accord.¹⁰ Other studies by both Alexander Caldwell and Robert J. Muscat on American economic aid to Thailand seem to confirm the extent to which the relationship between the two nations became as deeply intertwined through domestic politics as they were through international politics.¹¹ These constant references to domestic Thai politics, though occasionally subtle, indicate that the root of modern US-Thai bilateral relations was strongly

⁹ Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia Since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp.x-xii.

¹⁰ Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), pp.259-264.

¹¹ Alexander Caldwell, *American Economic Aid to Thailand* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1974); Robert J. Muscat, *Thailand and the United States: Development, Security and Foreign Aid* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

influenced by the postwar regime of Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram¹² (1948-1957). Hence, by viewing domestic politics as an avenue that warrants further investigation, and not a realm separated from foreign policy, a clearer picture of the US-Thai relationship built on a stronger voice of the junior partner began to emerge.

Fineman's argument that the Phibun government cleverly engineered Thai foreign policy to attract support from Washington by endorsing the regime of Emperor Bao Dai and sending materiel and troops to the Korean War, the latter prompted by neither the US nor the UN but offered on Phibun's own initiative, paints an image of a proactive Thailand that was capable of exercising shrewd diplomatic maneuvers to secure its interests.¹³ While not within the scope of his study, Fineman's insight on Thai alignment with the United States raises an opposite question: if Thailand had enough agency to attract American engagement when it was in their interest to do so, did it also have the same agency and political will to push the United States away were it to consider such an alignment to no longer be beneficial, as was the case after 1973? Authors such as Benjamin Zawacki and R. Sean Randolph had shown awareness of this question, but did not make it a subject of their study. Most notably, this was reflected in the work of Benjamin Zawacki and R. Sean Randolph.¹⁴ Both former Department of State employees,

¹² There are multiple English-language variations to the name of Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram. Other well-known versions of his name are "Phibunsongkhram" and "Plaek Phibunsongkhram". All of them refer to the same person, and the use of different versions depends on the preference of the author. In this document, he is referred to as "Phibun."

¹³ Daniel Fineman, "The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958" (unpublished doctoral thesis, Yale University, 1993), pp.183, 212-214.

¹⁴ R. Sean Randolph, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950-1985* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies University of California, 1986); Benjamin Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the United States and Rising China* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2017).

Zawacki and Randolph wrote very insightfully on the issues of US-Thai relations. Randolph's "*The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics*" is an excellent study on the US-Thai relationship that has widely been consulted by other authors writing on the same subject. Yet, its chronological structure paid more attention to the overall course of the relationship from 1818 to 1984, with little more than a chapter dedicated to the period between 1973 to 1980, despite having recognized it as a troubled period.¹⁵ Zawacki, likewise, focused his effort on the overall course of the relationship, dedicated only a chapter to the same period.¹⁶

The dearth of further examination into the intricate details of the US-Thai diplomacy have also been compounded by the prevalent tendency to define Thai diplomatic alignment through two particular concepts: "bending with the wind" and "patron-client relationship."¹⁷ "Bending with the wind" is a metaphorical reference to Thailand's diplomatic practice of siding with multiple partners in times of international rivalry rather than fully aligning itself with one power, much like a bamboo tree tilting in the direction of a prevailing wind. The second term, "patron-client relationship," refers to Thailand assuming the status of a smaller nation seeking patronage from a stronger power. John D. Caswell best summarized this line of reasoning with his argument that through its troubled history of being encroached on by more powerful Western powers (including Japan, an Asian nation, during World War II) from the 1800s to 1945, Thailand has honed and refined these characteristics into a diplomatic craft it utilizes extensively for self-preservation. Therefore, in finding itself engulfed once more by superpower rivalry in

¹⁵ R. Sean Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, pp.167-222.

¹⁶ Benjamin Zawacki, *Thailand*, pp.45-62

¹⁷ John D. Caswell, "The Changing Thai-United States Alliance", pp. 61-63.

Southeast Asia during the Cold War, Thailand's behavior in its relationship with the United States would continue to be dictated by its diplomatic tradition.

This explanation was by no means inaccurate and would be supported by many instances in Thai diplomatic history. Nevertheless, this overarching, relatively culturalist, argument provides a convenient but overly simplified narrative of Thai diplomatic alignment with the United States at the expense of other complex details including, in this case, Thailand's position within the larger Cold War environment, pre-existing decade of vested American interests and its policy towards Thailand, or the fact that realignment, disruption, or initiation of any diplomatic relationship often cannot be done at one's behest as if "bending with the wind," but relies on multiple circumstantial factors. If the argument forwarded by Brett Ashley Leeds that alliance commitments are usually upheld because of "sunk costs," capital already invested into an alliance, were taken into consideration, one could wonder what these sunk costs were for the United States after having built numerous bases and spent a decade in Thailand.¹⁸ Did Washington have any interest in protecting these sunk costs? Why did the end of American engagement in Vietnam have to mean a withdrawal from other parts of Southeast Asia? Did American concern for containment of communism in Asia simply ended with Vietnam? These same questions could be asked of Thailand. Did the Thais not want to protect their sunk costs, and what agreements or disagreement occurred over the details of vacating bases in Thailand by the United States?

¹⁸ Brett Ashley Leeds, "Do Alliances Deter Aggression? The Influence of Military Alliance on the Initiation of Militarized Interstate Disputes", *American Journal of Political Science*, 47, no.3 (2003), pp. 427-439; Brett Ashley Leeds and Burcu Savun, "Terminating Alliances: Why Do States Abrogate Agreements?", *Journal of Politics*, 69, no.4 (2007), pp. 1118-1132.

The work of authors mentioned have consistently displayed a greater interest in the dynamics of US-Thai engagement over the dynamics and impact that American gradual disengagement and withdrawal might have had on the US-Thai relations and Southeast Asia at large. A notable example, additionally to Fineman's work that was centered on the early period of American postwar engagement with the Phibun regime between 1947-1958, could be seen in the case of Arne Kislenko, whose focus was on the US-Thai relations during the Kennedy and the Johnson administration from 1961 to 1969,¹⁹ Kislenko made his disinterest in tracking the engagement of the US-Thai relations after 1969 very clear with his claim that his study would end with the Johnson administration, since they were the critical years when Thailand was prominent to American policy in the region and that by the time Nixon took office it "witnessed the disengagement of American forces from the region."²⁰ The idea that American disengagement represents the closing chapter of the Indochina conflict, or at least the "critical years," disregarded the wider regional and Thai experience within their relationship with the United States. Considering that American withdrawal coincided with a new phase of heightened Indochina conflict with the fall of Saigon, Vientiane, and Phnom Penh, heightened insurgency in Thailand, and Thai rapprochement with China to balance against Soviet-aligned Vietnam, American disengagement in Thai experience represented a difficult chapter in its diplomatic relations with the United States, making those years after the Nixon administration the "critical years" to Thailand.

¹⁹ Arne Kislenko, "Bamboo in The Wind: United States Foreign Policy and Thailand During The Kennedy and Johnson Administrations 1961-1969" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 2000)

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1.

Literature produced by Thai authors have not provided remedy to these points. Although many of them do not share the same limitation on the issue of chronology as non-Thai authors, they often connect the US-Thai relationship to domestic Thai politics. This is both the strength and weakness of their work. On the one hand, similarly to Fineman, they do much to elucidate the connection between Thai politics and its foreign policy with regards to the United States. On the other hand, American relationship with Thailand during the Vietnam War became a perspective they used to examine Thai politics rather than the primary subject of their inquiry.

The work of Prajak Kongkirati on the impact of the Cold War on political consciousness of Thai students comes to mind in this regard.²¹ Surachart Bumrungsuk's work on the patron-client relationship between the United States and the Thai military governments, and the subsequent impact on Thai politics between 1947 to 1977, likewise, shares the same limitation.²² One other common characteristic shared by both Thai and non-Thai authors is to approach the US-Thai relationship strictly as a bilateral relationship without noting the implications that their relationship had for the region overall. This does not negate the contribution they have made to the field, but considering that the overriding rationale for the United States to form a strong relationship with Thailand during the Vietnam War was to project its power on to Southeast Asia to contain the spread of communism, there clearly is a regional component that has yet to be addressed.

²¹ Prajak Kongkirati, *Lae Laew Kwam Klue Wai Kor Prakot (And Then There Was Movement)* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2005)

²² Surachart Bumrungsuk, *United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule 1947-1977* (Bangkok: Duangkamol, 1988)

With so few of the literature having explored the regional dimension of the US-Thai relations, Wen-Qing Ngoei's *Arc of Containment* could be considered exceptional.²³ Ngoei contended that the historiography on the United States in Southeast Asia has been too focused on the Vietnam War. He sought to rectify this by providing an account of American containment that represents the experience of the region. Ngoei argued that post-war Southeast Asia was always going to become part of a pro-American anti-communist containment arc because of their trajectory from the days of decolonisation, regardless of whether the United States fought in Vietnam. There are a few issues stemming from this. Firstly, his choice of countries to explore to incorporate a regional experience were primarily those from the maritime area of Southeast Asia: Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The colonial and decolonisation experiences of these colonies, mainly British, were vastly different from that of French Indochina, and Thailand who was not colonised. Thus, like those he criticised for overemphasis on Vietnam, he prioritised the narrative of his chosen countries over the others. He also attempted to push whatever limited connection the maritime countries had to the Vietnam War, such as Indonesia's one-off weapons transfer to Cambodia, as proof that their experience was applicable to the overall region. Another issue was Ngoei's decision to ignore the fact that despite the maritime countries being pro-American, the object of American containment was mainland Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand) and the focus did not shift southwards until it was becoming clear around 1975 that maintaining ground in Thailand was becoming untenable. Despite its shortcomings, Ngoei's work is arguably one of the rare few that aimed to incorporate regional experience to the existing narrative of the Vietnam

²³ Wen-Qing Ngoei, *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anti-Communism in Southeast Asia* (United States: Cornell University Press, 2019)

War, encouraged readers to view American intervention in Southeast Asia as more than just a war in Vietnam.

Altogether, the literature surveyed for the purpose of this study have without a doubt served their intended purpose. Still, there is a discernable gap in the literature in terms of chronology, American disengagement from the region, and the regional implication of the end of American containment on mainland Southeast Asia. A study on the US-Thai relations during the under-studied period of American military intervention in the region should address some of the currently underexplored questions and issues that arose from these gaps in the literature. In doing so, I do not wish to make the same mistake I criticised Ngoei for by claiming that the US-Thai relations represented the true defining experience of the region. Rather, it is to my belief that this thesis benefits from his work by offering another step in the direction that Ngoei has partially paved by connecting the story of American intervention on mainland Southeast Asia to maritime Southeast Asia. Other than attempting to correct the problem of chronology by paying closer attention to the years between 1973 to 1976, it further contributed to the literature by showing the extent domestic politics of a smaller allied nation could have on a global hegemon. Essentially, I believe the merit of this dissertation lies in not only filling the gaps that have emerged from the literature but also in broadening the scope of the current scholarship on American Cold War intervention in Southeast Asia.

The methodology utilised for the purpose of this research was multiarchival research. In addition to secondary sources, this dissertation made use of material drawn from archives in both the United States and Thailand. On the American side, primary sources were drawn primarily

from archival material at the Nixon Presidential Library and Museum and the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. A portion of the research was also conducted during the Covid shutdown, online databases were included as part of the research. Material from the Ford Presidential Library were obtained online from the *Proquest* and *Archives Unbound* databases for this reason. Of particular interest was the Digital National Security Archive and its series "*The Kissinger Conversations*," which included verbatim transcription of Henry Kissinger's many conversations in meetings with the National Security Council, the State Department, and other officials in other countries during his overseas trip. These were very useful in providing an insight into American assessment of the situation in Thailand. It was from these conversations alongside policy papers from the NSC and diplomatic cables from the US Embassy in Bangkok that I was able to gauge the effects of Thai politics on American policy makers, and their plan to maintain residual force in Thailand after 1975.

On the Thai side, research was conducted at the National Archives of Thailand, and the Thammasat University library where a collection of journals such as "*Sangkomsat Paritat*" [The Social Science Review] that related to student protestors and activists were held. There were, however, several limitations to research conducted in Thailand. For one, the Thai military regimes at the time were adamant that Thai involvement in Indochina be kept from public knowledge and were overall not predisposed towards transparency. Such attitude was not necessarily much better with civilian governments that succeeded them. The legacy of military rule and Thailand's anti-communist effort in the Cold War, as well, remain a controversial topic. For this reason, Thai archival material is not as extensive as their American counterpart. This same problem seemed consistent throughout government associated offices. Material from the

Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs that I requested, which I believe could have provided greater understanding on Thai policymaking and their decisions at critical junctures in time, was not made available to me. In these instances, I turned to the Kissinger Conversations series and diplomatic cables from the US Embassy in Bangkok available through the presidential libraries to assist with reconstructing events in Thailand.

Other than official sources I made use of newspaper collection both Thai and American to supplement my research. *The New York Times* offers some coverage on certain important incidences such as the Thai coup of 1971 and reaction to Bangkok's renormalisation of relations with China. Thai journalistic sources were used more than American newspapers since official Thai sources were limited. Some of these newspapers are no longer in business, but are well kept at the National Archives of Thailand. Their coverage provided a great deal of knowledge on the state of Thai politics and how the ordinary populace related to American presence in the country. This also led to official Thai voices being presented in this thesis to stem heavily from certain figures such as Thanat Khoman, who had made many public interviews and statements during his time in and out of office, in contrast to his superiors like Thanom Kittikachorn and Prapas Charusatien who had less media presence. Their voices often came in the context of their contacts with the United States, such as meetings with the US Ambassador or letters to American officials in Washington.

My dissertation follows a chronological structure and is divided into four chapters. The first chapter begins by establishing the root and the roles of the US-Thai relations in American Cold War strategy in Indochina. It traces this root back to the early 1950s when the United States

entered the region more prominently after the French defeat in Vietnam, coinciding with a period when Thailand was undergoing political rivalry between three military figures at the top: Field Marshal Phibunsongkram, Sarit Thanarat, and Phao Siyanond. Thereafter, it follows the development of this relationship up to 1969 when the Nixon Doctrine was introduced to examine the impact on American relationship with Thailand, and the decision Thailand made in response to what appeared to be a faltering American commitment to containment. The chapter closes with the coup of 1971, which it argued was not a simple matter of internal politics but was partially driven by Thai determination to remain aligned to the United States.

Chapter two followed the first chapter by opening with the fall of the Thanom regime in 1973. The emphasis of this chapter moves away from the government-centric narrative of chapter one. It is an examination of the impact that American bases in Thailand had on the local populace. American direct and indirect cultural transfer to Thailand, particularly Thai students, during the Vietnam War years are examined. The chapter operates on the premise that 1973 represents a watershed moment in the US-Thai relationship as the change in Thailand resulted in a military regime that was a cooperative with the United States being replaced by a civilian government. Their rise to power being owed much to civil society whose participation in politics up until then was a rarity. The result was a new political direction in Thailand that disrupted Thai facilitation of American activities in Indochina. The chapter also argued for the contradictory nature of American power in Thailand, one political and militaristic, the other social and cultural. The former created a militaristic tendency in Thailand that supported the Vietnam War, the latter fostered liberal ideals and anti-Americanism, especially among students and intellectuals who wanted to end Thai involvement with the United States.

Chapter three returns to the inter-governmental narrative. This time with the emphasis on the government of Sanya Dhammasak, the new Prime Minister of Thailand appointed after October 1973. The Sanya government was a short-lived government that lasted only a little over a year in office. Little has, therefore, been written about his government, let alone its foreign policy. This dissertation contends that it would be a mistake to overlook the role that Sanya's government played in its short timespan to pave the way for Thailand to formally move away from its policy of alignment with the United States. For the United States, this was also a challenging time for their diplomacy with Thailand primarily for two reasons. In addition to having to face a less cooperative Thai government, it was a period not long after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, which ended American combat operations in Vietnam. Washington had to reconsider its remaining interest in Southeast Asia, and more importantly how to gain Thai cooperation that it lost with the previous Thanom government. The focus of this chapter involves American plan for post-Vietnam containment in Southeast Asia and roles it wanted for Thailand.

Chapter four concludes the dissertation by exploring the final stages of the US-Thai negotiation. The timeline of this chapter spans from January 1975 to the final quarter of 1976, when it was clear that the United States could no longer maintain its foothold on mainland Southeast Asia via its bases in Thailand. It also did not gain the re-entry right, the right for American forces to be rotated through Thailand in the future, that it had sought. Why was this the case? Attention is given to the rapidly changing circumstance in Thai politics that formed the backdrop for their final negotiation with the United States, with particular attention given to tension between the civilian and military component of the Thai government. The chapter argues

that Thai inability to balance the demands of its politics and its relationship with the United States compelled the US to explore options other than Thailand to keep its post-Vietnam containment arc in the region. Hence, as reflected in the title of this dissertation, Thailand was the last regional stronghold for the United States. To varying degrees, the non-communist nations of Southeast Asia had all been complicit to American containment in the region. It is time that another account of this period be written to incorporate a more regional perspective into the current historiography of American Cold War intervention in Southeast Asia. American Cold War in Southeast Asia did not simply end with its disengagement from Vietnam. There is more story to be told, perhaps one more entry from the perspective of American relationship with a regional partner, who facilitated its war in Indochina.

Chapter 1: All Eggs in One Basket: US-Thai Alignment and The

Nixon Doctrine.

The aim of this chapter is to establish the relevance of the US-Thai relations to American Cold War strategy in Southeast Asia. In doing so, it argues for the significance of domestic Thai politics in shaping the course of their relationship, as demonstrated by the connection between successive Thai military regimes from Field Marshal Phibunsongkram to Thanom Kittkachon, who directly oversaw Thai participation in, first, Vietnam, and later Indochina at large. The chapter argues in favour of the conventional historiography promoted by authors such as Daniel Fineman and Surachat Bamrungsuk, both of whom have demonstrated that there was a direct link between Thai military rule and American patronage that led to the intertwining of Thai and American foreign policy. For Fineman, the Thai military's "control of government and the movement toward closer relations with the United States – were intimately related."²⁴ Surachart have also contended that US-Thai relations in the post-war period from the time of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat onwards resulted from Sarit's interest in using resources the United States provided to Thailand to strengthen his own regime.²⁵ Nevertheless, while Surachart believed that security concern and anti-communist ideology also played a role, as per his argument that there were two pre-conditions to the US-Thai relations: Thanom's continuing belief in the United States as a security guarantor, and a common recognition by both the American and Thai

²⁴ Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p.2.

²⁵ Surachart Bamrungsuk, *United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule 1947-1977* (Bangkok: Duangkamol, 1988), p.116.

governments of the security threat posed by communism, Fineman by his own admission disregarded these reasons as sufficient explanation for the US-Thai relationship. He preferred instead to argue for American support and patronage of the Thai military regimes as the primary explanation.²⁶

Fineman was not alone in this regard. The historiography surrounding Thai alignment with the United States during the Vietnam War appears divided into two main camps between proponents of the “Cold War security” school of thought that recognised the role of mutual anti-communism security concern, and others like Fineman who promoted a “patron-client” view that portrayed Thailand as an American client driven by material gains through vast array of American aid packages. In examining this topic, however, this chapter further contributes to the literature by arguing that Cold War security and material gains as motives for long-term Thai cooperation with the United States in Indochina, a defining characteristic of the US-Thai relationship in this period, were not mutually exclusive. Moreover, these two seemingly different interpretations are complementary. It was necessary for American acquisition of Thailand as an ally that both of those factors were present. American patronage through material benefits was the diplomatic lever which the United States used to encourage the Thai leadership to act on their pre-existing anti-communist sentiment, and thereafter remained aligned to the US.

Additionally, this chapter aims to contribute to the literature by arguing that the correlation between American foreign policy and Thai politics, in turn, resulted in Thai politics, its authoritarianism, and anti-communist ideology, impacting both Thai and American foreign

²⁶ Ibid., p.156; Fineman, *A Special Relationship*, pp.3-5.

policy, which led to the maximisation of American power in Southeast Asia, reaching its peak after the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine. This warrants a deeper examination into how the Nixon Doctrine impacted their relationship. The historiography on the Nixon Doctrine has often neglected to mention Thailand. Yet, by acting as the regional staging ground for American power, Thailand was bound to be affected by the Nixon Doctrine no less than elsewhere, albeit it in different manners. By examining Thai reaction and adjustment to this change in American strategy within the context of their bilateralism, the question on the efficacy of the doctrine in Southeast Asia, rather than in Vietnam alone as had popularly been the case, could be explored.

It its final assessment, the chapter agrees with the view of Robert S. Litwak that the Nixon Doctrine made the United States more reliant on “middle powers” or its junior partners for power projection.²⁷ However, it takes issue with Litwak’s argument that the Nixon Doctrine was unsuccessful because the interests of those so-called middle powers were not aligned with American interests.²⁸ Instead, the argument presented here is that Thailand offers an alternative case study, where American interests aligned with Thai interests due to its co-option of the Thai regimes. Consequently, the Nixon Doctrine could be successful because of certain conditions such as the existence of an authoritarian government and a shared interest in militaristic solution against a perceived mutual enemy. Seen from this perspective, the Nixon Doctrine was overall a success in Thailand, as it encouraged Thanom directly and indirectly to deepen Thai commitment to the Indochina wars by adopting a larger share of warfighting, as well as going so far as to purge his own government of those who resisted such a policy.

²⁷ R.S. Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp.135-139.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.137-143.

Acquisition: American Coalescence of Thai Military Elites

American diplomatic relationship with Thailand in the early post-war years began on a discouraging note. Field Marshal Phibun Songkram, Thailand's war-time leader, seen by the United States as a Japanese collaborator managed to reclaim his premiership by ousting the incumbent civilian government in 1948.²⁹ The United States, however, had few options but to endorse Phibun's regime, as the spread of communism had become the primary concern for American foreign policy.³⁰ With Soviet expansion in eastern Europe and most of Southeast Asia undergoing anti-imperialist movements, Washington decided it was best to build a friendly relationship with a stable country in the region that had little leftist revolutionary impulse such as Thailand.³¹

American support for Phibun's government only grew stronger after France was defeated in Vietnam in 1954, officially ceding North Vietnam to communist rule. In addition to Vietnam, Laos was another country in Indochina that was engaged in a civil war of its own against a fledgling communist faction. There, the Royal Lao Government (RLG) was struggling to remain in power against its domestic communist faction, so-called "Pathet Lao" communists. The RLG was ill-prepared for its own defense. Laos was a remote land-locked nation, its poor infrastructure and geography limited American access to the country both in terms of personnel and materiel. Its proximity to China made it further susceptible to external interference by other

²⁹ Frank C. Darling, "American Policy in Thailand", *The Western Political Quarterly* 15, no.1 (1962): 99.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Frank C. Darling, "American Policy in Thailand", *The Western Political Quarterly* 15, no.1 (1962): 99; Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), pp.12-13.

communist powers.³² American ability to project their power onto mainland Southeast Asia was equally limited by the fact that it had no logistical hub or viable bases outside of the Philippines and its Pacific fleet. Nevertheless, these obstacles did little to dissuade President Eisenhower from salvaging the situation in Laos. Eisenhower was a supporter of the domino theory, who believed that Laos was a significant domino to the containment of international communism. His concern that the fall of Laos would render the rest of the Far East vulnerable to communism became an initial step to welding American Indochina policy to its relationship with Thailand.³³

Thailand offered an optimal position for the United States. Its location to the southwest of Laos with a long border could potentially become a regional stronghold where American power could be projected into Laos and the rest of the Southeast Asia, if necessary, both by land and air. This would altogether rid the problem of having to rely on a coastline or a developed system of paved roads for logistics, neither of which Laos possessed. Thai leadership, however, was reluctant to fully align Thailand with the United States in its Cold War design. They preferred their traditional diplomatic practice, so-called “bending with the wind,” striking a carefully crafted balance between major powers.³⁴ The United States was therefore compelled to heighten its effort to court Thailand. American aid both political and economic became the primary diplomatic lever the US exercised to achieve this goal, thus lending credential to the “material gains” argument promoted by authors such as Fineman and Surachart. While American aid had already been pouring into Thailand since the late 1940s, by the mid-1950s the amount and the

³² Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp.5-7.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.2.

³⁴ Apichart Chinwanno, *The Quest for Thai-US Alliance* (Bangkok: International Studies Center, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021), p.118.

impact of aid on Thailand increased dramatically. This in turn led to a major shift in both domestic Thai politics and foreign policy in the interest of American regional policy.

Phibun in the mid-1950s was in a precarious political position. He was part of a ruling triumvirate in Thailand that consisted of himself, the Army Commander-in-Chief Sarit Thanarat, and the Director-General of Police Phao Siyanond. Generous aid packages from the United States destabilized Phibun's grip on power by enabling each member of the triumvirate to enlarge their power base, the Army and the Royal Thai Police, under Sarit and Phao, respectively. American military aid to Thailand alone was over twice the Thai military budget. All the while up to two hundred CIA operatives were in the country training the Thai police in guerilla warfare and parachuting. The US also founded the "Southeast Asian Supply Company" (SEA Supply), a business cover that fronted the transfer of tanks, armoured cars, and aircrafts to the Thai police force. Sarit, the army chief, welcomed this influx of American capital with glee. He visited Washington in 1954 to request for more aid for his army and was promised a sum of \$25 million.³⁵ As a result, Thai ruling elites became willing clients of the United States.³⁶ When Sarit's army swelled to the size of 92,000 fully equipped men, due to American support, he staged a successful coup in 1957 against Phibun and sent his rival Phao into exile.

Sarit's recognition that American patronage had been a tipping point in his leadership contest was apparent in his attempt to retain American support after the coup by nominating Pote

³⁵ Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit. *A History of Thailand*, 3rd ed. (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.145-146.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.145.

Sarasin, former Thai Ambassador to the United States, as Prime Minister to avoid disrupting the relationship that Thailand had thus far developed with the US. Later in 1958, Sarit formally assumed office as the Prime Minister himself to ensure domestic stability. The benefits of staying aligned with the US were immediate, that same year Sarit was granted \$20 million in economic aid.³⁷ This also meant that Sarit had to align his foreign policy closer to the United States to continue receiving American aid packages that he had grown accustomed to. His strongman regime provided enough stability to convince the United States that Thailand could anchor an American regional stronghold. The Operations Coordinating Board in Washington issued a report emphasizing the need to deploy available American resources to “maintain Thailand as the hub of U.S. security in Southeast Asia,” and that the failure by the United States to maintain its credibility to Thailand would result in losing Thai cooperation altogether.³⁸

As a diplomatic gesture, Eisenhower invited the Thai royal family on a state visit to the United States. When the visit took place in June 1960, the Boston-born Thai king was paraded and later toasted for his friendship with the United States at a formal dinner. The decision to award a military decoration, the Legion of Merit, to the king emphasized the extent to which mutual US-Thai security interests were at the forefront of their diplomatic relations by this point in time. As per his award's citation, punctuated by Cold War references, the king was recognized for his status as Commander-in-Chief of Thailand, who “since his coronation on 5 May 1950, served as a symbol of unity and steadfastness in the free World. [...] a staunch supporter of the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

³⁸ Report Prepared by Operations Coordinating Board, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1958-1960, Volume XV, South and Southeast Asia, Document 548, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v15/d548> [accessed October 2020].

South East Asia Treaty Organization [...] and has significantly contributed to its growth and development.”³⁹ The royal visit was followed by more aid packages. Yet, the US State Department was still concerned that the already generous aid would not be sufficient to retain Thai support, asked for a larger package that would increase military aid to \$30.7 million and another \$22.3 million for other technical assistance, for the fiscal year of 1961. This amounted to funding at least three new infantry divisions, over twenty naval vessels, and four air squadrons.⁴⁰ Therefore, in the closing years of the Eisenhower administration, by working with the Thai military elites, the United States became both a political patron to the Thai ruling elites and that of Thailand.

It is important to note that Thailand’s willingness to adopt a client status vis a vis the United States was not merely driven by its appetite for American aid. Anti-communist ideology and genuine security concern as part of Thai consideration for aligning with the US should not be underestimated. In this regard, the Thai leadership found American regional interests to be complementary to their own. As Chris Baker and Pachit Pongpaisuk have argued, Thai ruling elites from the early 1900s onwards operated on an ideological assumption that Thailand was built on three pillars consisting of the nation-state itself, the Thai monarchy, and its traditional Hindu-Buddhist belief system, otherwise summarized neatly by the motto “Nation, Religion, King.”⁴¹ So prevalent was this motto that it can still be seen inscribed on many Thai military

³⁹ Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Dwight D. Eisenhower, Citation Accompanying Legion of Merit, Degree of Chief Commander, Presented to the King of Thailand,” The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/234990> [accessed October 2020].

⁴⁰ Arne Kislenko, “Bamboo in the Wind: United States Foreign Policy and Thailand During the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations 1961-1969” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 2000), p.54.

⁴¹ Baker, Chris, and Pasuk Phongpaichit. *A History of Thailand*, 4th ed. (Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p.118.

installations today. Communist teachings against class structure, nation-state, and religion were therefore a direct antithesis to the notion of modern Thai identity and nation. The advances made by “Pathet Lao” communists in Laos also raised serious security concern in Bangkok. Thai border with Laos was divided by the Mekong River, only several miles wide at its narrowest points. Laos was also a former vassal state of Thailand in its pre-colonial days and served as a buffer state between Thailand and its rival in Vietnam, and China in the 20th century. Centuries of migration from Laos into the Thai northeastern region, considered the most deprived and ripe for communist infiltration, meant that around a third of the Thai northeastern population either spoke Lao or had Lao ancestry.⁴² For these reasons, regardless of personal gains, the anti-communist Sarit had as much, if not more, stake in Laos as Eisenhower did in preventing the domino theory from materialising. Equally of importance was that the American client in Laos, Phoumi Nosavan, was Sarit’s nephew.

Thai anti-communism was flagrantly on display during its active involvement in the Lao Civil War. It was there that American investment in Thailand began showing dividends. Sarit had Thai paratroopers and an artillery unit, both trained and funded through American aid, on alert. The artillery unit was later sent to Laos to support his nephew Phoumi, leader of the Lao rightist faction against Kong Le, leader of another contending faction in Laos. Galvanized by Thai artillery and a contingent of Thai troops, Phoumi launched an offensive against the Lao capital, Vientiane. The city itself was subjected to indirect fire from mortar and machine gun from the Thai side of the border, and deprived of supplies, as Sarit had ordered a blockade on supplies bound for Laos from Thailand. This included American goods being delivered to Laos

⁴² Sutayut Osornprasop, “Thailand and the Secret War in Laos, 1960-1974,” in *Southeast Asia and the Cold War*, ed. Albert Lau (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2012), pp.190-192.

through aid programs; up to 10,000 tons were stored in Thailand.⁴³ Thai and American support aircrafts, particularly for transportation and reconnaissance, were operating over Lao airspace on Eisenhower's order. Sarit proved to be an asset through his connection with Phoumi. His relationship enabled him to influence Phoumi's decisions and provide insights into Lao politics to his American counterparts. Kenneth Young, later appointed US Ambassador to Thailand by the Kennedy administration, remarked that Sarit was perhaps one of the two people in the world who could understand the Lao political culture.⁴⁴ Sarit's willingness to act both in conjunction with the United States, and independently, including his willingness to blockade American supplies for Laos suggested that he was driven by more than simply facilitating American policy in exchange for material gains.

Although complementary, disagreement over how their respective Cold War anti-communist foreign policy should be implemented regionally also served as cause for conflict in this early stage of Thai alignment with the United States. Fundamental differences between the security interest of the US and its Thai client surfaced when Eisenhower was succeeded by John F. Kennedy, who planned to neutralise Laos by fashioning a coalition government out of the warring factions. The plan was accepted by neither Sarit nor Phoumi. The Thai Minister of Foreign Affairs, Thanat Khoman, was most critical. His point of contention stemmed from the issue of reliability among Thailand's existing anti-communist allies. Other than the United States, Thailand had signed the Manila Pact in 1954 that resulted in the founding of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in the hope that this would provide another layer

⁴³ Surachart, *United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule*, p.92.

⁴⁴ Kislenko, "Bamboo in the Wind", p.52.

of protection against external communist threat. Yet, Thanat did not believe that SEATO was an effective deterrent against communism. The most problematic aspect of SEATO was article iv of the treaty explicitly stating that member states will “act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.” Thanat, a lawyer by training, considered this article a legal loophole for member states to neglect treaty obligation when politically expedient by using their respective “constitutional process” as an opt-out clause.⁴⁵ This was a real possibility when considering that five out of seven signatories to the Manila Pact were outside of the treaty area. American neutralisation of Laos raised concerns that Thailand could lose another anti-communist power to rely on.

The United States was aware of Thai dissatisfaction. They responded through multiple diplomatic measures. Firstly, Kennedy urged Sarit to stop supporting Phoumi’s resistance against his plan, coupled with Robert Kennedy breaking from his Asia tour itinerary to meet with Sarit in Thailand to reaffirm American commitment.⁴⁶ Later, Secretary of State Dean Rusk met with Thanat Khoman in Washington to discuss the situation in Laos and signed what became known as the “Rusk-Thanat Communique” in March 1962, a joint statement pledging American assistance to Thailand in the case of external aggression without requiring a unanimous decision by SEATO. This was the first time Thailand achieved anything close to a bilateral security agreement with the United States. In practice, the communique did little for Thai security objectives. It did little to end the fighting in Laos, and did not obligate the United States to defend Thailand any more than SEATO did. It merely transformed SEATO’s consultation

⁴⁵ Thanat Khoman, “Which Road for Southeast Asia?”, *Foreign Affairs* 42, no.4 (July 1964): 637.

⁴⁶ Surachart, *United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule*, p.97; Kislenko, “Bamboo in the Wind”, p.111.

process into a bilateral one between the US and Thailand. Regardless, Sarit was ecstatic. He appeared on television and radio broadcasts in Thailand to declare the US a “true friend who is determined to help us, who worries for our happiness.” A little over two weeks after the communique was signed, Sarit was accompanied by an American representative, Averell Harriman, to meet with Phoumi in a Thai border town of Nong Khai to persuade him to accept American neutralization of Laos.⁴⁷

Thanat was less satisfied. He originally travelled to Washington in March 1962 with the intention of negotiating for a bilateral security umbrella. He argued in his meeting with Secretary of State Dean Rusk that Thailand was not against SEATO, but there had to be a more effective approach to implementing its objective of collective security. SEATO should not require a unanimous consent of its members to act, among all other problems; existing deficiencies could be eliminated were Thailand to have a bilateral defense agreement similarly to that between the US and other Asian countries such as Japan or South Korea. Rusk appealed to the problem of American politics to resist Thanat's proposal. He responded that the current mechanism of SEATO was the only viable option since the Senate had already approved SEATO, a separate treaty with Thailand would be opposed by Congress.⁴⁸ When Thanat met with Kennedy after his

⁴⁷ Surachart, *United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule*, p.98; Robert James Flynn, “Preserving the Hub: U.S.-Thai Relations During the Vietnam War, 1961-1976” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Kentucky, 2001), pp.73-75; Michael V. Forrestal, recorded interview by Joseph Kraft, July, 28, 1964, pp.96-98, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/sites/default/files/archives/JFKOH/Forrestal%2C%20Michael%20V/JFKOH-MVF-02/JFKOH-MVF-02-TR.pdf> [accessed October 2020].

⁴⁸ Arne Kislenko, “A Not So Silent Partner: Thailand's Role in Covert Operations, Counter-Insurgency, and the Wars in Indochina”, *Journal of Conflict Studies* 24, no.1 (2004): 6.; Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, March 2, 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XXIII, Southeast Asia, Document 433, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v23/d433> [accessed June 2024].

meeting with Rusk, the President insisted on his resolve to pursue neutralization in Laos, unwilling to expand American commitment to Thailand. Thanat's suspicion of SEATO's non-Southeast Asian members disregarding the interests of countries in the region was validated when Kennedy urged Thailand to follow his plan since it already gained support from two other SEATO members, Britain and France.⁴⁹ To reinstate Thai interest into the discussion, Thanat asked Kennedy to rally behind Phoumi. Kennedy rebuked that Phoumi's weak military would only lose and neither Thailand nor the United States could intervene effectively in Lao geography. Thanat lastly attempted to dissuade Kennedy from neutralization by suggesting that other avenues such as Phoumi's plan to form six councils under the King of Laos instead of a singular coalition government could be implemented. Kennedy responded that the time for that had past.⁵⁰ Thanat had tried all he could to no avail. There was only so much he could do in the face of American reluctance to be involved in Laos and its concern of over-extending itself in Southeast Asia. Thus, the Rusk-Thanat Communique, though an achievement, was a product of Thailand's inability to extract concessions it needed from the United States. In this first test of alliance commitment, the United States successfully blunted Thanat's dissatisfaction with SEATO without incurring further commitment at American expense while simultaneously enlisted Sarit's assistance in lobbying Phoumi for neutralisation.

⁴⁹ Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, March 5, 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XXIII, Southeast Asia, Document 435, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v23/d435> [accessed June 2024].

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

From Tet to Nixon

When Kennedy and Sarit died in 1963, only two weeks apart from each other, both were succeeded by their immediate second-in-command. Lyndon Johnson found in Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn a Prime Minister willing to continue with the blueprint of their predecessors. Under Thanom, American cultivation of Thailand as a client state paid dividend. Thailand fully embraced its role as facilitator of the Vietnam War. Diplomatically, it became an Asian voice promoting anti-communist policies within and out of the region. Thanat, retained as Foreign Minister, was consistent in his effort to draw international attention to communism in Southeast Asia at the many international forums and conferences he attended. When asked to speak on the role of culture in international affairs at a seminar in Austria in 1965, Thanat used the opportunity to warn of subversion through cultural exchanges in the hope of converting the “recipient nations to a certain ideological or political system.”⁵¹ Closer to home, Thanat relished the opportunity to promote his anti-communist views at forums held by non-communist Southeast Asian countries such as one in Manila in September 1965. Thanat portrayed Marxism as a product of European industrialisation that left “two disgruntled German thinkers, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels” miserable. Thus, in his assessment Marxism was intrinsically alien to Asian societies and “if Europe is so fond of these theories and found them to be beneficial, by all means let it practice them but leave us free to choose our own course.”⁵² His rhetorical emphasis

⁵¹ Thanat Khoman, “Cultural Role of Smaller Nations in International Affairs,” in *Collected Statements of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand*, Monograph (Bangkok: Department of Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014), p.54.

⁵² Thanat Khoman, “Address at the Opening Ceremonies of the Asian People’s Anti-Communist League at Phil-Am Life Auditorium,” in *Collected Statements of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand*, Monograph (Bangkok: Department of Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014), pp.57-58.

on the “European” nature of Marxism and the importance of “us”, Asians, having the freedom to choose was likely to have resonated well with his Southeast Asian audience, many of whom had just recently won their independence from European countries.

In other realms, Thanom’s Deputy Minister of Defense, Tawee Chullasapaya, spoke candidly to the American press that he slept better at night after the retaliatory strike on Vietnam was launched following the Gulf of Tonkin incident.⁵³ Militarily, anti-communist belligerency drove Thailand to become host to eight American air bases and one listening post, conveniently rented out to the US at no cost and no written agreement.⁵⁴ Six of these bases were dedicated to combat operations, and by 1968 up to 75% of all ordnance dropped on North Vietnam originated from air bases in Thailand. Thai pilots also flew reconnaissance flights over North Vietnam. The American position in Thailand also served other functions for the war such as combat rescue and provided training for Lao and Cambodian pilots, with training provided by both Thai and American advisors. Thanom had also been supplying a small amount of aid to South Vietnam as early as 1964. Thai pilots and team flew and serviced South Vietnamese transport planes, trained Vietnamese pilots, and furnished Vietnamese naval vessels. Its contribution peaked in 1968 when a full division of Thai combat troops, The Black Panthers, were deployed in Vietnam.⁵⁵ As

⁵³ Flynn, “Preserve the Hub”, pp.104-105.

⁵⁴ Prajak Kongkirati, *Lae Laew Kwam Klue Wai Kor Prakot (And Then There Was Movement)* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2005), pp.145-146; Surachart, *United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule*, p.124.

⁵⁵ For number of air operations and ordnances dropped please see R. Sean Randolph, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950-1985* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies University of California, 1986), pp.58-59; For other additional Thai contribution to Vietnam please see Lieutenant General Robert Larsen and Brigadier General James Lawton Collins, Jr., *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam* (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, 2005), Chapter II.

a result, by the mid 1960s the United States and Thailand became the facilitator of each other's foreign policy interests, with deeply intertwined roles in Vietnam.

Increased American activities in Vietnam led to further commitment to Thailand in other areas. At this matured state of the US-Thai cooperation, American aid became means of alliance maintenance. American economic aid to Thailand, excluding other indirect payments via construction or daily spending, between 1964 to 1970 ranged from \$15.1 million at the lowest to \$60.4 million at its peak in 1966.⁵⁶ That same year the "Treaty of Amity and Economic Relations" was signed to grant American companies regardless of whether incorporated in the US or Thailand the right to a full ownership stake, whereas other foreign investors may only hold a limited share.⁵⁷ With favourable investment laws, presence of American troops, and relative stability in place, the number of American companies in Thailand rose from eighty-eight in 1965 to two-hundred and forty in 1971.⁵⁸ American capital influx combined with other indigenous factors such as Thailand's first five-year development plan of 1961-1966, devised in tandem with American and World Bank advisors, led to a stronger private sector economy that resulted in an impressive economic growth averaging at 7% or more annually. These investments, though unrelated to the kind of commitment that Thanat had sought, were undeniably beneficial to Thailand.⁵⁹ With more Thai involvement in Vietnam, it was unsurprising that when Lyndon

⁵⁶ Surachart, *United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule*, p.150.

⁵⁷ Kittit Prasirtsuk, "An Ally at the Crossroads: Thailand in the US Alliance System," in *Global Allies: Comparing US Alliances in the 21st Century*, ed. Michael Wesley (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017), p.117.

⁵⁸ Surachart, *United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule*, p.155.

⁵⁹ Article by Richard M. Nixon, October, 1967, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, Document 3, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01.d3> [accessed June 2024].

Johnson visited Thailand formally in 1966, he took the opportunity to both visit the newly built seventy-five-million-dollar Sattahip naval base on the Gulf of Thailand, and applauded the Thais for their social and economic progress, and promised, as expected by now, more military aid.⁶⁰ Mutual alignment of American and Thai security interests strengthened their relationship greatly, much to Thailand's benefit, and through consistent American patronage of the Sarit and Thanom regime Thailand matured into the prized American home-base in Southeast Asia.

This mode of US-Thai cooperation, however, was contingent on Thailand playing the role of a facilitator to American warfighting burden in Vietnam. A shift in posture on either side could easily upset their well-established *modus operandi*. Such was the case when the United States made strategic changes in Vietnam in the late 1960s, signified by Johnson's bombing halt and the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine. Initially, the disagreement stemmed from the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, a major military campaign launched by North Vietnam against major targets in the south in January 1968. While American forces were able to repel the offensive to claim military success, American public opinion shifted against the war. Domestic opposition against the Vietnam War in the US grew steadily in strength occasionally resulting in violent clashes against the police that led to numerous deaths among protesters.⁶¹ In addition to the Tet Offensive, the war appeared to have spread to neighbouring Laos and Cambodia, contradicting the original purpose of fighting in Vietnam to contain communism. With much happening at home and abroad, Johnson thus announced a partial bombing halt of North Vietnam

⁶⁰ Frank C. Darling, "America and Thailand", *Asian Survey* 7, no.4 (1967): 213.; Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p.49.

⁶¹ James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p.224; William Hammond, "The Tet Offensive and the News Media: Some Thoughts on the Effects of News Reporting", *Army History*, no.70 (2009): 9.

and assigned Averell Harriman to conduct peace talks with Hanoi. As pressure mounted against his administration, Johnson decided to not seek re-election.

In Thailand, the Thai leadership had a very different reading of American progress in Vietnam. Thai leaders being mostly from the military attached primacy to the military outcome of the Tet Offensive. Thanom was convinced that the Tet offensive was proof of American victory in progress. It was, after all, the communist forces that were beaten back. Thanat, though a civilian, driven by his staunch anti-communist politics, was equally buoyed by the news of success by American and South Vietnamese forces in countering the North. He referred to the Tet campaign as the last tail swing from a dying crocodile during a conversation with the US Ambassador to Thailand, Leonard Unger.⁶² The Thais concluded that American power would eventually prevail in Indochina. Thanom further urged the US to take this opportunity to escalate its campaign to finally end the war.⁶³ Johnson's bombing halt and his decision to not run for re-election, therefore, left his Thai counterparts in shock. They could not fathom why the United States was easing pressure on the enemy now that North Vietnam appeared to be retreating.⁶⁴ The election of Richard Nixon, whose anti-communism endeared him to many in Thailand, temporarily boosted the sagging Thai confidence in American power. Nevertheless, when Nixon announced a plan to unilaterally withdraw 25,000 American troops from Vietnam in June 1969 followed by the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine during his stopover in Guam on his way to visit Asian capitals, including Thailand, only a month later in July, Thai confidence was dealt a concussive blow.

⁶² Flynn, "Preserving the Hub", pp.142-143.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp.144-146

Bifurcation

In the days immediately following Nixon's announcement of the doctrine at Guam it was unclear if the doctrine represented an entirely new direction for the United States or whether it would be applied only to selective areas, if so, where? Nixon understood that there was apprehension among his Asian allies. He was thoroughly briefed prior to his arrival in Bangkok on July 28, only three days after the Guam announcement, of Thai anxiety and concerns. Thanat was specifically mentioned in his brief as a particular member of the Thai leadership who "believed that the US commitment in the area will inevitably decrease over time, [...] seeking means to assure Thai independences in the changed context." With this very precise anticipation of Thai response in mind, the State Department informed Nixon that he should "encourage the trend towards self-confidence, self-help, and regionalism" in his talk with key government figures, and among other things, "avoid offering military aid except in general terms."⁶⁵ Hence, the president intended to use his visit to Asia to assuage concerns arising from his recent announcement.

On his second day in Thailand, Nixon gathered American ambassadors from Afghanistan to South Vietnam at the US Embassy in Bangkok to reassure them that the Nixon Doctrine did not mean abandonment of Asia. He emphasised that "Asia is where the action is and ought to be," and that countries will have to manage internal subversion themselves with American

⁶⁵ "President Nixon's Trip: Country Briefing Book - Thailand, July-August 1969," Collection Nixon Administration and Foreign Affairs, Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library. Online. Gale Archives Unbound [accessed November 2020].

assistance precluding ground troops, unless in case of invasion by conventional military.⁶⁶ Taken at face value, the doctrine introduced little change to the US-Thai foreign policy alignment. American assistance would remain, the fight against communism in Vietnam was ongoing, and American security promise outlined by the Rusk-Thanat Communique was not ruled out. The simple act of hosting ambassadors posted to countries along the containment perimeter on mainland Asia in Bangkok was itself a de facto recognition that Thailand continued to be a key American position in Southeast Asia. American strategy aside, this did little to address an important concern for Thailand. For one, how would this affect American troops already stationed in Thailand? Would a drawdown in direct American combat involvement pave the way for a full American departure from Southeast Asia, and more to the point, does this mean a decline in both aid and commitment to Thailand?

Other than security concern, potential economic consequence was an important factor for Thailand to gauge. American aid in various forms mattered a great deal to Thailand as much as the security cooperation. They were the source of the Thai government budget as well as of local economic growth, which in turn stabilised Thailand politically. Economic aid was also connected to Thai security in various ways. American economic assistance to Thailand for 1969 was estimated at 45 million US dollars, around two-third of which was spent on the northeastern region of Thailand bordering Laos, where insurgency was rife. The Military Assistance Program (MAP), another aid package that Thailand had been receiving, was usually larger than the economic assistance program, which for 1969 was estimated to be around 75 million USD.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Memorandum of Conversation, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, Document 31, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d31> [accessed June 2024].

⁶⁷ Astri Suhrki, "Smaller-Nation Diplomacy: Thailand's Current Dilemmas", *Asian Survey* 11, no.5 (1971): 432.

This package was largely responsible for keeping Thai forces functional. The significance of American aid to maintaining Thai armed forces and economy was a matter of public knowledge, as it was Thanom's second-in-command, Prapas Charusatien, who admitted in an interview that the Thai military would struggle to stay operational in the long-term if not for American assistance.⁶⁸ Ironically, Thanom's plan to strengthen Thailand's self-reliance in national defense further proved that Thailand needed to maintain American patronage. His five-year plan for national defense self-reliance, unveiled in 1969, was projected to consume almost 25% of the government budget, a marked increase from 15% in 1964. The bulk of this cost could only be covered by American MAP.⁶⁹ American funding was therefore fully intertwined with the running of the Thai government and keeping Thailand afloat in an uncertain time.

Against this background, on the morning of July 29th when Nixon met with Thanom in Bangkok both parties wasted little time to get to the crux of their message. Nixon emphasised that his goal was to make continuing American presence viable rather than leave Southeast Asia altogether, as the United States would remain supportive of its allies short of supplying ground troops. This of course was not the point of contention, since neither side expected American combat ground troops to be deployed in Thailand. Nixon made no indication that American aid in any form to Thailand would be reduced. When asked for his opinion, Thanom was also quick to reassure Nixon that Thailand would not be a security burden for the United States, as it determined to be responsible for its own security, but that it continued to need American support.

⁶⁸ Prapas's public comment can be found at Film Archive Thailand, "31 Meenakom 2509 Pon-Ek Prapas Charusatien Hai Sampas Nangsue Pim," [31 March 1966 General Prapas Charusatien Giving an Interview to Newspapers] March 31, 2014, video, 6:09, <https://www.youtube.com/> [accessed December 2020].

⁶⁹ Astri Suhrki, "Smaller-Nation Diplomacy: Thailand's Current Dilemmas", p.432.

Again, not a point of contention, since this aligned well with the scope of the Nixon doctrine and was perhaps what Nixon wanted to hear. The president signaled his approval of Thanom's view by stating that despite problems with Congress, the US public would certainly endorse providing material support for allies. Throughout the conversation Thanom was careful not to plunge Thailand into deeper commitment than necessary but struck a hawkish tone. He stated his willingness to use force to quell Thai insurgency in the northeast, which Nixon commended. Nixon then asked what Thanom think should happen in Laos. Thanom was pessimistic about the situation and was admittedly reluctant to be involved, but said that Thailand could provide volunteers for Laos if there was American support. Nixon then mentioned how helpful Thai forces in Vietnam had been for the US war effort, especially with easing American public opinion against the war. He expressed hope that Thailand would stay in Vietnam. Thanom responded positively that he would resist any call in Thailand to withdraw Thai forces from Vietnam.⁷⁰ It was a satisfactory meeting for the two leaders. Nixon's message was met with a positive response that indicated Thai support and willingness to adopt a heavier share of warfighting responsibilities. On the other hand, Nixon's reassurances of continuing American support were accepted in good faith by Thanom.⁷¹

There was a subtle but powerful dynamic that underlined their meeting. Although Nixon and Thanom met on equal ground as respective heads of their governments, American political

⁷⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 18, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d18> [accessed June 2024].

⁷¹ Flynn, "Preserving the Hub", pp.157-159; For more on Thanom's view on the matter see Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead, "The Cold War and Thai Democratization," in *Southeast Asia and the Cold War*, ed. Albert Lau (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2012), pp.221-223.

and economic aid made Thanom dependent on continuing American support. As a result, he entered the meeting from the position of a client with little leverage to voice any objection or demands, were he to have any. American patronage of the Thai military government arguably had a much stronger impact on Thanom than it did on Sarit. Most notable was the political assistance Thanom received through “Project Lotus.” Essentially, it was a project proposed by the US Embassy in Bangkok to Washington inspired by a request from an unnamed Thai official close to Thanom, possibly Pote Sarasin, in 1964 to provide financial support and other necessary support for the pro-Thanom “Saha Pracha Thai Party” (UTPP) political party to win decisively in the then unscheduled election.⁷² Graham Martin, then US Ambassador to Thailand, appeared sympathetic to the Thai request when he was first approached with the request. Martin argued that since elections in Thailand often entail proliferation of political parties, the underground and illegal Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) could “be expected to attempt to influence and penetrate some of these parties as well as to organize front groups to serve their own political interests. The result can be instability if not Communist influence.” Should this be the case, Thailand’s pro-American stance on the Vietnam War would be undermined by non-Thanom segments of Thai politics.⁷³

⁷² Memorandum Prepared for the 303 Committee, Washington, September 28, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Volume XXVII, Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs, Document 305, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d305> [accessed June 2024]; Later documents confirmed that the US Embassy in Bangkok was approached by Pote Sarasin with the same request again in 1971. This makes it possible that Pote was responsible for liaising with the United States both times, given that he was trusted by Sarit and Thanom, and had served as the Thai Ambassador to Washington D.C. Please see: Letter from the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Johnson) to Charge d’Affaires in Thailand (Newman), Washington, July 9, 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, 1969-1972, Document 129, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d129> [accessed June 2024].

⁷³ Memorandum Prepared for the 303 Committee, Washington, September 28, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Volume XXVII, Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs, Document 305, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d305> [accessed June 2024].

Martin also argued that Project Lotus could lead to Thai politics developing the “necessary popular base and political organizational structure,” though it did not seem to bother him that the popular base he envisioned would, at least for the moment, prolong Thanom’s longevity as an authoritarian leader.⁷⁴ His argument for Project Lotus was sufficient to gain endorsement from the State Department who further recommended that the “303 Committee,” created by President Eisenhower in 1955 to provide oversight and ensure coordination between Departments of State and Defense and the CIA on matters of American covert actions, approve the proposal for the creation of a political party in Thailand “using as a basis the current ruling group and secure the parliamentary election of leaders of this party.”⁷⁵ Martin further lobbied the 303 Committee heavily during his meeting with them in Washington by emphasizing the “importance of keeping together the [Thai] leaders who have established some cohesion in recent months” and that through this project the “reinsurance of a stable pro-Western regime in an anchor land in Southeast Asia was envisaged.”⁷⁶ The committee was receptive. The formal proposal for the project was later reviewed and endorsed by President Johnson in November 1965.⁷⁷ When the national election was finally held in Thailand in February 1969 after postponement, Thanom’s UTPP won a commanding majority in the parliament, as was intended by Project Lotus. The symbiotic patron-client character of Thanom’s relationship with the United States was, therefore, undeniable.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Memorandum for the Record, Washington, October 8, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Volume XXVII, Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs, Document 306, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d306> [accessed June 2024].

⁷⁷ Ibid.

While Thanom's client status beholden him to his American patron, his foreign minister, Thanat was not. The State Department was correct to have identified to Nixon that Thanat would be the most skeptical member of the Thai government. A shrewd, seasoned diplomat, Thanat interpreted the Nixon Doctrine differently than Thanom did. It was clear to him that the war Nixon inherited was vastly different from the war that Johnson prosecuted under the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964. Thanat had already witnessed SEATO's inability to act as a credible deterrent, due to its consultation process and members such as Britain and France being inactive in Southeast Asia. He had previously voiced his dissatisfaction with the inactivity of France in the press, though diplomatically, by stating that SEATO members "not willing or are unable to take those actions and to discharge their responsibilities, they may decide to leave" in response to a reporter's question on what Thanat thinks about the prospect of France withdrawing from SEATO.⁷⁸ Thanat also had to settle for the Rusk-Thanat Communique as a consolation prize for his failed effort to convince Kennedy for a more comprehensive security umbrella for Thailand. The Nixon Doctrine was the final straw that pushed him closer towards disillusionment with Thailand's pro-American alignment, for it represented the end to any hope of American security umbrella that Thanat had long sought since his meeting with Dean Rusk and Kennedy. As soon as Nixon left Thailand, Thanat took the initiative to reshape Thai foreign policy by announcing that Thailand wished to withdraw its combat division from Vietnam because Nixon had urged Thailand to rely on its own resources for national defense.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Thanat Khoman, "Excerpts from the NBC 'Meet the Press' Television Program on May 9, 1965," in *Collected Statements of H.E. Dr. Thanat Khoman Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand*, Monograph (Bangkok: Department of Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014), p.39.

⁷⁹ Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p.139.

The Nixon doctrine and Thanom's constant willingness to accept American reassurances, including one Thanat witnessed again during the meeting on July 29, where Thanom expressed his vested interest in hawkish solutions, demonstrated that the opportunity to withdraw Thai cooperation was waning. Ending Thailand's deepening commitment in Vietnam just as the United States was promoting a change in strategy could signal a gesture of good faith that would pave the way for negotiation with China, and hopefully North Vietnam, returning a neutralized Thailand to the path of non-alignment before any communist power could retaliate.⁸⁰ Thanat moved quickly by meeting with Ambassador Unger on August 3rd to ascertain the possibility of drawing down American force levels in Thailand. On August 23, the State Department confirmed that Thanat "had taken the initiative with our ambassador [Unger]" to begin discussion on troops reduction.⁸¹

American politics that summer provided Thanat with more justification to push for American withdrawal from Thailand. Senator Fulbright, who was working on the National Commitments Resolution in June 1969, discovered a joint US-Thai military plan called "Project Taksin." The plan was proposed and drafted by the United States in 1964 and approved in 1965. It called for the use of a joint US-Thai forces to repel North Vietnamese and/or Lao communist

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.137; Memorandum from the Under Secretary of State (Irwin) to President Nixon, Washington, June 9, 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 124, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d124> [accessed June 2024].

⁸¹ "A State Department Spokesman Said Friday Thailand Has Formally Asked for Talks with the United States", *AP World News*, August 23, 1969; Pramuan Rai Ngarn Kao Kiaon Kub Karn Ja Poed Jeraja Ton Kamlang Tahan Saharat Chak Pratet Thai. [Compiled News Reports on the Upcoming American Troops Withdrawal from Thailand] August 23, 2512.

forces that could cross into Thailand, as the situation at the time was deteriorating in Laos. It was intended to outline specific operational details should the circumstance arise, and did not formally extend American commitment beyond the existing SEATO commitment. The undisclosed nature of the plan gave Fulbright the impression that it was a secret war plan. He feared it would become another slippery slope leading the US into another war, not unlike the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Fulbright demanded that he be briefed and allowed to review details of the plan personally.⁸² His tug-of-war over the plan with the White House heightened in August 1969, when Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird settled the dispute by telling reporters that the plan did not have Nixon's approval, since he opposed committing American troops abroad without Congressional approval. Although there was an understanding when the plan was first drafted that it was merely a contingency plan of operation, the United States in 1965 had encouraged Thailand to view it as proof of American commitment similarly to the Rusk-Thanat Communique. Thanom was shocked by Laird's comment, as it amounted to an official disavowal of the plan.⁸³

Laird's disavowal of Project Taksin in less than a month after Nixon's visit to Bangkok, seems to have reignited doubts about American commitment even for Thanom. Throughout August, Thanom and his team tried to calm public anxiety by claiming to the media that Thailand would only be minimally affected both militarily and economically in case of American

⁸² Telegram from the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State, Bangkok, September 9, 1969, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 23, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20.d23> [accessed June 2024]; "The United States and Thailand Appeared At Odds Today", *Reuters International News Service*, August 23, 1969; Alessandro Casella, "US-Thai Relations", *The World Today* 26, no.3 (1970): 118.

⁸³ Flynn, "Preserving the Hub", pp.154-156.

withdrawal. They claimed that American forces had no obligation to defend Thailand in any way and that economic impact would be too gradual to be felt by the population. Simultaneously, Thanom denied his government's role in requesting troops withdrawal, told *The New York Times* on August 26 that there was no initiative on the Thai side for partial or full American troops reduction. Pote Sarasin, then Deputy Prime Minister and a long-term member of Thanom's inner circle, promoted a similar narrative in Thailand; the United States decided to withdraw because of the changing circumstance in Vietnam, not at the urging of the Thai government.⁸⁴ The same day Pote's story was published, another Thai newspaper ran a contradictory statement by Thanat who insisted that American withdrawal was a Thai initiative aimed at proving that Thailand had no desire to involve the United States in its national defense, and would not become another Vietnam.⁸⁵

Thanom's and Pote's backpedaling and confused public responses suggests they were caught unprepared by the chain of events and needed to regain control. Given Thanat's public statements and meetings with Unger, in addition to the State Department's confirmation from August 23, however, it was highly improbable that Thanom was unaware of actions taken by his Foreign Minister. More likely, Thanom was uncertain of the extent he was willing to distance

⁸⁴ "Ma Raksa Kwam Plodpai Nai Pumipak Mai Shai Kao Ma Hai Mee Karn Robb Nai Thai" [To Maintain Regional Security Not for Combat in Thailand], *Prachatiptai*, August 30, 2512; "Pote: Saharat Ton Tahan Chak Thai Mai Satuen Settakit Mak Nak" [Pote: American Withdrawal Does Not Heavily Affect the Economy], *Siam Rath*, August 29, 2512; For Thanom's comment see Henry Kamm, "Thais Ease View on US Troop Cut", *The New York Times*, August 26, 1969.

⁸⁵ Pote's comment can be found in "Rong Nayok Pote Sarasin Yuen Yan Ton G.I. Pen Rueng Saharut Eng" [Deputy Prime Minister Pote Sarasin Insisted G.I. Withdrawal an American Decision], *Kao Siam*, August 30, 2512; For Thanat's comment see "Pote Talaeng Roueng Ton Tahahn Thanat Wa Thai Kho Hai Pai Saharut Kho Yuu" [Pote's Statement on Withdrawal Thanat Said Thailand Asked Them to Leave United States Requested to Stay], *Daily News*, August 30, 2512.

Thailand from the United States, but understood the benefit of partial withdrawal. As Astri Suhrke once observed, the Thai government was not going to discard their alliance with the United States but would remove certain aspects to preserve other parts deemed most beneficial. In this instance, a partial removal of American troops could ease pressure on the Nixon Administration from the likes of Senator Fulbright, who were concerned that Thailand would drag the United States into another conflict, so that long-term gains for Thailand such as aid packages both military and economic could remain.⁸⁶ Thus, despite Thanom's differences with Thanat, especially his continuing commitment to a military solution in Indochina over diplomacy that Thanat promoted, Thanom tolerated Thanat.

It remains unclear whether Thanom had prior knowledge or approved of the action and statements Thanat had been making since Nixon left Bangkok in July. Even so, it was clear by August of 1969 that the introduction of the Nixon Doctrine unexpectedly disturbed internal Thai politics by dividing Thanom and Thanat on the question of managing US-Thai relations in the aftermath of the changing American policy in Vietnam. Thanat's conduct began to diverge more sharply from Thanom and Prapas in the months that followed, reflected in his reaction to another round of Congressional pressure on the Nixon administration. This time led by Senator Stuart Symington of the Senate Subcommittee on US Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad. The so-called "Symington Hearing" was convened in November 1969 to determine the extent and parameters of American obligation to Thailand and vice versa to pre-empt the possibility of the United States extending its involvement to other parts of Southeast Asia. This hearing resulted in the fullest extent of Thai roles in Indochina, beyond passive participation through

⁸⁶ Suhrke, "Smaller-Nation Diplomacy", pp.430-432.

provision of bases, and American quid-pro-quo dealings with Thailand over the past decade, being scrutinized publicly much to the chagrin of Bangkok.

On the first day of hearing Leonard Unger confirmed Thanat's worst doubt about American commitment by stating before the committee that the United States does not in any way regard the Rusk-Thanat Communique as "altering or extending our commitment under SEATO."⁸⁷ Further, details of many private agreements between the United States, often conducted through the US Embassy, was forced to be made public. Senator Fulbright, during the hearing, was particularly frustrated that many agreements and their details he considered important to American interests had been made without any public knowledge or acknowledgement by the Senate, and was determined to challenge this apparent attempt at secrecy by compelling the witnesses to provide as many insights into the agreements between the two governments as possible. In Fulbright's words to Unger: "There has grown up a practice that these matters are simply for the military representatives to negotiate with foreign Prime Ministers. This is a practice that the Senate looks upon with a rather dim view."⁸⁸ Fulbright used the Taksin plan as proof such secrecy, asserted officially that it never came "to this committee, and no one ever knew about it except by chance."⁸⁹ Throughout the hearing, Thailand bore the brunt of the Senate's criticism. One of the more damaging comments came from Senator Javits who stated that it was the duty of the Committee to ensure the public "know everything that is

⁸⁷ Testimony of Leonard S. Unger, United States Ambassador to the Kingdom of Thailand, *United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad*, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 91st Congress; Part 3 – Kingdom of Thailand, p.677. (*Symington Hearings*, hereafter).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.656.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.653-655.

knowable [...] as to what we have been doing under these various agreements in Thailand on the theory that Thailand could very likely become another Vietnam.”⁹⁰

In one broad stroke, though unintentional, Javits put Thailand into the same category as Vietnam, whom the Thais for most decades during the Cold War considered an existential enemy, in addition to implying that Thailand would bring hardship to its ally with whom they have sided with loyally for over a decade. Not even one of Thailand's biggest contribution to the Vietnam War, that was the sending of the Black Panthers division to Vietnam, was spared from the Senate's criticism. It was revealed in the hearing that the Thai government demanded a heavy price from the United States in return for their cooperation. The US had to supply, equip, and underwrite all costs for Thailand's Vietnam-bound troops, at the estimated cost of \$50 million per year, additionally to other non-financial military requests.⁹¹ This led Senator Fulbright to accuse Thai soldiers of serving as mercenaries rather than “volunteers.” He spent a significant portion of the hearing later that day on a heated exchange with Unger to determine why the United States had been bearing the brunt of burden in Southeast Asia, if SEATO was meant to be a cooperation.⁹²

⁹⁰ Ibid., p.672.

⁹¹ *Symington Hearings*, Part 3: Kingdom of Thailand, p.657; Tawee, negotiating on behalf of the Thai Government, also demanded that the new American Hawk Missiles be installed in Thailand to prevent retaliation from Communist neighbors, among other armament requests.

⁹² Ibid., pp.660-663. The Thai Government, along with members of the public, and the soldiers on the ground were very proud of their participation in Vietnam. Many Thais viewed it as a matter of national pride and a test of national resolve to be cooperating with a global power such as the United States. The characterization as mercenary became interpreted as a national insult. For further reflection on the matter please see Richard A. Ruth, “Why Thailand Takes Pride in the Vietnam War,” *New York Times*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/opinion/thailand-vietnam-war.html> [accessed June 2019].

Ambassador Unger attempted rebuke to Fulbright did not salvage the situation for Thailand. Unger argued that from the Thai perspective, Thai demand was commensurate with the risk it incurred by contributing. Up to 14 percent of active-duty Thai forces were in Vietnam and a quarter of their budget had already been spent. Thai geography made them an asset to the United States, but a threat to themselves. In the event of any retaliation, an increased domestic insurgency, or both, Thailand would be a prime target and must prioritize homeland defense over foreign expedition. These facts notwithstanding, compared to the 40 percent of the armed forces deployed in Vietnam by the United States, Senator Fulbright was correct to say that it was a disproportionately small amount.⁹³ Thai contribution might have been constructive to the war effort in Vietnam, but it was not sufficient, at least in the assessment of the Senate, to constitute anything more than providing a Thai face to an American War.⁹⁴

When the findings of the Symington Subcommittee were made public in 1970, diplomatic damage to the US-Thai relationship was all but done. The incensed Thanat ignored his usual diplomatic etiquette and later said the following of the Symington Hearing to his audience at the American Chamber of Commerce in Bangkok: "Thailand refuses to recognize the jurisdiction and competence of the United States Foreign Relations Committee over the foreign policy of this country."⁹⁵ Two particular points reiterated in the hearing made headlines in American media. One was the analogy between Thailand and Vietnam, the other was the extortionate cost the United States had to pay Thailand. *The New York Times* ran the headline

⁹³ *Symington Hearings*, Part 3: Kingdom of Thailand, p.706.

⁹⁴ A more detailed study of the impact that the Thai contingent made in Vietnam can be found in Richard A. Ruth, *In Buddha's Company: Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010).

⁹⁵ Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p. 135.

“U.S. Pays Thailand 50-Million A Year for Vietnam Aid.” Other international reports opted for a more adversarial headline: “The King and US”, wrote the *South China Morning Post*, and *Newsday*: “Senate Acts to Bar Any New ‘Vietnam’.”⁹⁶ Still recovering from the evisceration he felt Thailand unduly received, Thanat’s open display of discontent with the United States and SEATO became more palpable to the public. Reported under the headline “Rogers and Thai Clash in Manila” in *The New York Times*, Thanat was quoted as having said at a SEATO meeting that he knows “SEATO better than to expect collective action”, and expressed displeasure for the Symington Hearing, branding it “ludicrous.” When offered an explanation by the US Secretary of State, William P. Rogers, that it was Nixon and not the Thais who the Symington Subcommittee targeted, Thanat refused to compose himself. Their exchange became so heated another diplomat present at the meeting described the scene as Rogers having “chewed out” Thanat.⁹⁷

“Middle Power”

In contrast to Thanat’s multiple episodes of public outrage and seemingly antagonistic stance towards the United States since the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine, Thanom not only remained cooperative with the US but was willing to deepen Thailand’s roles in the Vietnam War. In March 1970, Cambodia under a new leader, Lon Nol, ended its neutrality to begin an anti-Vietnamese campaign. This provided the United States with an opportunity to

⁹⁶ John W. Finney, “U.S. Pays Thailand 50-Million A Year For Vietnam Aid,” *New York Times*, June 8, 1970; John Finney, “The King and US,” *South China Morning Post*, July 5 1970; Marilyn Berger, “Senate Acts to Bar Any New ‘Vietnam’,” *Newsday*, December 16, 1969.

⁹⁷ Tad Szulc, “Rogers and Thai Clash in Manila,” *New York Times*, July 4, 1970.

launch an incursion into Cambodia to eradicate North Vietnamese sanctuaries that had been operating out of Cambodia. Nixon soon endorsed the Pentagon's plan to support a South Vietnamese offensive into Cambodia with American air power, supplies, and ground troops. Their combined action was in full steam by April. Escalated American use of force in the form of a joint American-ARVN incursion into Cambodia excited Thanom greatly. He sent a personal message extolling the campaign to Nixon, crediting it with saving lives and making Asia safer from communism much to the gratification of "the Thai Government, and people, and undoubtedly the people in the rest of Asia" before signing off by offering his "good wishes for your [Nixon's] continued success."⁹⁸

Thanom's sentiment was well received by Nixon. In return, the president wrote a message to Thanom thanking him for Thailand's contribution and expressed hope for continuing cooperation. Washington's approval of Thanom's attitude was reflected in the manner they chose to deliver the letter. Instead of the usual diplomatic channel, Nixon's National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, suggested to him that this letter be personally delivered to Thanom on behalf of the president by the Vice President, Spiro Agnew, during his trip to Bangkok in August.⁹⁹ This was very clearly a deliberate gesture designed to signal the diplomatic significance Washington attached to its relationship with Thailand, and perhaps to Thanom. Moreover, the fact that Thanom's non-urgent letter containing simply a congratulatory message went to the attention of

⁹⁸ Holdridge, John H. Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger. Letter from President to Prime Minister Thanom of Thailand. 18 August 1970. National Security Council Files (Box 762). Richard Nixon Library and Museum (hereafter RNLN), Yorba Linda, California; Eliot, Theodore L., Jr. Memorandum for Mr. Henry A. Kissinger. Message to the President from the Prime Minister of Thailand. 7 May 1970. National Security Council Files (Box 762). RNLN; Eliot, Theodore L., Jr. Memorandum for Mr. Henry A. Kissinger. Thai Prime Minister's Message to President Nixon. 12 May 1970. National Security Council Files (Box 762). RNLN.

⁹⁹ Kissinger, Henry A. Memorandum for the President. Letter to Thai Prime Minister Thanom. 21 August 1970. National Security Council Files (Box 762). RNLN.

the National Security Advisor, whose office was not normally responsible for managing diplomatic correspondences, rather than, perhaps, the Secretary of State, in cases when high-level attention was warranted, suggests a degree of centralization at the top-level in the Nixon White House where it was not unusual for Thailand-related matters to be filtered through the national security apparatus.

This also raises the question whether much of Thanat's recent action was fed back to Washington. It seems that at the highest level, American policymakers were certainly agitated by Thanat, who Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird referred to in a meeting with Nixon as "the principal problem in Thailand." However, they believed that it was the Symington hearing that was damaging the US-Thai relations, therefore, believed that their source of friction with Thailand was rooted in the United States not Thailand. Nixon's subsequent instruction to Secretary Laird and Kissinger to bring Senators in "to talk about the importance of Thailand and the need to avoid future hearings such as those conducted by Senator Symington" was indicative of this attitude.¹⁰⁰ The White House, as a result, concentrated more on what could be achieved on the American side to address the problem, as opposed to expecting Thailand, or at least Thanat, to change their attitude. Some ideas on how to remedy their relationship with Thailand included, as per Nixon's suggestion, diplomatic gestures such as hosting a state visit by the Thai king to the US, and to reassure Thailand through other concrete means such as continuing to provide necessary aid packages.¹⁰¹ Thus, demonstrating that the United States sincerely intended to uphold its promise of continuing support for Thailand under the Nixon Doctrine, and the

¹⁰⁰ Haig, Alexander M. Memorandum for the President's File. Meeting between the President, Secretary Rogers, Secretary Laird, Admiral Moorer, Director Helms, and Dr. Kissinger. 18 January 1971. National Security Council Files, Vietnam Subject Files (Box 83). RNLM.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

political will to sustain good relationship was present. These conversations and planning, however, took place in 1971, a year after the Symington hearing was made public. Hence, while Thai sentiments and Thanat's agitation mattered, they did not assume great importance when compared to what the United States was facing in 1970, with the war expanding into Cambodia.

Unlike Laos, where official neutrality was maintained, the Thai government relished the opportunity to push communist perimeter further away from Thai border. Thanom's shared sentiment with Nixon and Kissinger on Cambodia encouraged Bangkok to initiate its own military solution in Cambodia. Prapas Charusatien personally visited Phnom Penh to assess the situation and recommended urgently sending armaments, equipment, and logistical trucks to Cambodia.¹⁰² This enthusiasm was in sharp contrast to when they decided to send the Black Panther Division to Vietnam, which was a decision they only agreed to after being persuaded by Washington.¹⁰³ Plans were made on Thai initiative to send Thai volunteers into Cambodia for combat. Kissinger loved the idea. It went beyond American expectation, which originally hoped for Thailand to hold its border using Thai troops and provide air support for Cambodia with American funding and material support.¹⁰⁴ Kissinger believed this proved that American policy was successful in Thailand, despite the setbacks of 1969, and described the plan to Unger as one of the obsessions he had developed about Thailand. Both agreed it was best to support and

¹⁰² Status Report on Military and Diplomatic Activities Related to Cambodia, 1 June 1970. NAC Vietnam Subject File (Box 88) Military Planning Book for Cambodia. RNLN.

¹⁰³ Flynn, "Preserve the Hub", p.131.

¹⁰⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, December 15, 1970, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 102, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d102> [accessed June 2024]; Letter from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the Ambassador to Thailand (Unger), Washington, October 27, 1970, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 95, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d95> [accessed June 2024].

facilitate Thai involvement in Cambodia. They discussed at length possible sources of funding for Thai troops to operate in Cambodia, performances of Thai soldiers, and the type of unit most suitable for deployment. Kissinger stressed to Unger that Nixon “wouldn’t care about an additional \$10 million if success was assured. There was a school here [Washington D.C.] which interpreted the Nixon Doctrine as favoring a semi-neutralist Thailand. [...] The President did not want to encourage a semi-neutralist Thailand, or a defeat in Laos.”¹⁰⁵ Nixon had, in fact, instructed US ambassadors in both Thailand and Cambodia that contingency planning by the Governments of Thailand and Cambodia be given the highest authority.¹⁰⁶

What was being attempted was essentially what R.S. Litwak argued was an attempt to create a regional “middle power” to whom American power could be devolved.¹⁰⁷ In this instance, by increasing Thai participation in Indochina with American support, Thailand could fulfill the role of such middle power. For reasons other than Cambodia, American strategy needed Thailand to perform this role: the air war in Vietnam and Kissinger’s ongoing negotiation with the North Vietnamese. Kissinger was convinced that a successful American withdrawal from Indochina should be underwritten by military force.¹⁰⁸ After consultation with Generals Earle Wheeler and Creighton Abrams, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and commander of the US forces in Vietnam respectively, they advised Nixon that withdrawals from Vietnam be done in phases: an initial reduction of 150,000 troops, followed by a smaller portion withdrawn

¹⁰⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, December 15, 1970, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 102, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d102> [accessed June 2024].

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*; Letter from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the Ambassador to Thailand (Unger), Washington, October 27, 1970, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 95, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d95> [accessed June 2024].

¹⁰⁷ Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*, p. 135.

¹⁰⁸ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (New York City: Simon & Schuster UK, 2011), pp. 441-442, 478.

in the next ninety days. The rest of the planned withdrawal to be delayed to 1971, with B-52 planes held in place to provide a military option in support of the remaining troops. These planes were a vital part of the plan, as per Kissinger's suggestion to Nixon, the gains from Vietnamization were "fragile" and Saigon's forces were being stretched to the limit. Air support was required to compensate for limited ground troops, and ground capabilities. In Abrams' and Wheeler's assessment the B-52 sorties should "be held at the highest possible level, particularly in the first half of 1971 when troop reduction would be rapid and large."¹⁰⁹ These B-52 sorties had been operating out of the U-Tapao airfield in eastern Thailand, since 1967, and up to 80 percent of American bombing raids on North Vietnam were estimated to have been launched from Thai bases.¹¹⁰ The decreasing burden on American troops in Vietnam had, as a result, paradoxically increased American reliance on Thailand, leaving the success in executing their withdrawal contingent on the continuation of Thai cooperation. For the G.I.s to return home, Thailand must at least maintain, if not outright increase, its military investment in Indochina, at least until 1971.

Before the plan for Thai volunteers came to fruition, however, domestic politics in both Thailand and the United States intervened. The Cambodia campaign prompted Congress to adopt a harsh measure against Nixon to prevent further widening of the war. Senator Frank Church and Senator John Cooper introduced the so-called "Cooper-Church Amendment" in the Senate aimed at forbidding funds for an American war in Cambodia. In that time, the debate on deploying ground troops raged in Thailand. The Thanom-Prapas faction supported by the Thai military was

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pp.479-480.

¹¹⁰ Prajak, *Lae Laew Kwam Klue Wai Kor Prakot*, pp.146-147.

strongly opposed by the civilian faction led by Thanat in their decision to deploy ground troops. Their differences were no longer confined to newspaper coverage and foreign press. This time it was publicly displayed at a debate on Thai foreign policy held at Chulalongkorn University that year attended by Prapas and Thanat. Prapas argued that using force to support the Lon Nol regime was the most appropriate option to pre-emptively keep communism away from Thailand, especially since the US was reducing its commitment. Thanat, in contrast, argued that Thailand must avoid unnecessarily making itself a target of communist aggression, especially now that the US was withdrawing.¹¹¹ The shortage of American funding prevented Thailand from having to decide, as it could not fund an expeditionary unit on its own. However, this did not end the mutual US-Thai interest in using Thai troops for ground campaigns in Indochina.

The United States did not have long to wait before their plan for Thai ground troops could be revisited, partly accelerated by their frustration with South Vietnam. In February 1971, an offensive campaign known as Operation Lam Son 719 was launched in Laos. It was the first time since American involvement in Vietnam that the ARVN was made responsible for the entire ground operation, with US rear support. Undoubtedly, the operation became a test of concept of Vietnamization. Despite American planners believing that “Vietnamisation will work without this operation,” they hoped that it would maximise the chances of South Vietnam surviving after American withdrawal and simultaneously increase American credibility.¹¹² Within a month of

¹¹¹ John D. Caswell, “The Changing Thai-United States Alliance: Implications for the Nixon Doctrine in Asia”, *Naval War College Review* 24, no.2 (1971): 69.

¹¹² Haig, Alexander. Memorandum for Henry A. Kissinger. Meeting with the Vice President, Governor Connally, Attorney General Mitchell at 4.15pm, Monday, February 1, 1970. 29 January 1971. NSC Vietnam Subject File (Box 83). RNLM.

launching the offensive into Laos, the campaign became an abject failure by March 1971.

President Thieu wanted to withdraw the ARVN from Laos. The alarmed and angry Kissinger prodded Abrams and the US Ambassador to South Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker, to pressure Thieu against retreating. Thieu was to be warned that Lam Son was his last chance to receive major American support, he withdrew the ARVN anyway. Washington concluded that they overestimated South Vietnam and that Saigon could not and should not be trusted with a complex military operation. Nixon and Kissinger developed a palpable disdain for Thieu and his regime afterwards. Kissinger laid the blame squarely on South Vietnam calling them “those sons of bitches” lacking resolve for their own country, who the United States could not save because “it’s their country, and we can’t save it for them if they don’t want to.”¹¹³

As South Vietnam’s star in Washington was falling, the United States leaned more heavily on Thailand to manage its woes in Laos. The robust facilities for American air war, not forbidden by the Cooper-Church Amendment, remained intact in Thailand. The Lao government had been besieged by the Pathet Lao communist, assisted by the NVA, since late 1969. The fall of strategic positions in Sayaboury and Moung Soui, left the area of Long Tieng exposed. It was considered the final pass before communism reaches Thai border. Prapas aggressively lobbied and offered the Lao government to accept Thai reinforcement, Nixon seeing the dire situation in Laos throughout 1970 concurred.¹¹⁴ Impressed by the initial Thai intervention, both the United States and Laos felt that Thai ground troops in Laos after the failure of Lam Son was the best

¹¹³ George C. Herring, “Nixon’s ‘Laotian Gamble’”, *Army History* Spring 2021, no.119 (2021): 15-17.

¹¹⁴ Sutayut Osornprasop, “Thailand and the American Secret War in Indochina, 1960-1974” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2006), pp.195-196.

option available.¹¹⁵ These Thai forces were designated “Speical Guerilla Unit” (SGU). The unit was composed of irregular soldiers trained to serve as a reinforcement in Laos, supervised by a cadre of non-commissioned officers and officers drawn from active-duty Thai Army (RTA), who upon assignment to the unit must officially resign from the Thai Army so their involvement could be denied. They were under the command of General Witoon Yasawat, who was involved with the CIA planning and operations, based in the Thai border town of Udon-Tani.

The SGU provided Nixon with a legal loophole to circumvent the Senate's barring of ground troops. The legal justification for the SGU in Laos, as U. Alexis Johnson, former US Ambassador to Thailand, argued before the Senate was that members of the Thai SGU were merely Thai citizens who volunteered to serve with the Royal Lao military, meaning they could not be considered a mercenary unit or foreign military, which would violate Lao sovereignty. Their Thai nationality, according to Alexis Johnson, was no different from the Canadians and Americans who volunteered to serve in the British Air Force during World War II.¹¹⁶ Thai success in Long Tieng, backed by air power out of bases such as U-Tapao, proved the significance of Thailand-based air and ground elements to achieving American retreat from Indochina.¹¹⁷ American reliance on Thailand became such that, by September 1971, Washington had asked for up to thirty-six SGU battalions for Laos, and agreed to fund all the expenses,

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p.196; Kissinger, *White House Years*, p.501.

¹¹⁶ Sutayut Osornprasop, “Thailand and the Secret War in Laos, 1960-1974,” in *Southeast Asia and the Cold War*, ed. Albert Lau (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2012), p.207.

¹¹⁷ Memorandum from the Under Secretary of State (Irwin) to President Nixon, Washington, June 9, 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 124, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d124> [accessed June 2024]; Sutayut, “Thailand and the American Secret War”, pp. 194-196.

bringing the projected number of Thai troops in Laos to over 10,000.¹¹⁸ Therefore, in this challenging time for the Nixon Administration with the spread of the war into Laos and Cambodia and battle with Congress over funding and ground troops in Indochina, Thailand became a regional middle power who willingly co-opted itself into direct American warfighting effort, enabling the United States to continue exercising its power in the region.

Washington took notice of Thai adjustment to the changing conditions of Indochina and held its contribution in high esteem. Optimistic attitude was present among the administration's staff. John N. Irwin, the Under Secretary of State, provided Nixon with a positive assessment of the Nixon Doctrine in his report stating that his [Irwin] visit to Asia strengthened "my belief in the value of the Nixon Doctrine, not only as the best means of pursuing U.S. policy objectives in Asia, but also as a formula for developing self-reliance and determination in the Southeast Asian nations." Therefore, the United States should continue to encourage Thai action in Laos, due to the effectiveness of their joint SGU-American air power operation.¹¹⁹ Others within the National Security Council urged Kissinger to make more resources available to the Thais to meet the increasing burden that the United States would offload to Thailand.¹²⁰ These reports reflect a firm understanding of the growing American reliance on Thai troops and facilities, and the belief that progress was being made. The Thai government, likewise, believed they had proven their

¹¹⁸ Sutayut, "Thailand and the American Secret War", p.206.

¹¹⁹ Memorandum from the Under Secretary of State (Irwin) to President Nixon, Washington, June 9, 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 124, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d124> [accessed June 2024].

¹²⁰ Memorandum from K. Wayne Smith of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, June 9, 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 125, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d125> [accessed June 2024].

value to the US by participating in Laos. It was within this context that Prapas asked Kissinger during their meeting in Bangkok in July 1971 that the United States make no reduction to current aid packages for Thailand. Prapas cited Thailand's consistent cooperation with the United States and diligent effort in maintaining good relations with the US, despite the challenges that they had been facing from domestic politics and the media to substantiate his plea. Kissinger appeared to accept his argument and told Prapas that Thai requests should not be difficult to work through in Washington because he and Nixon both agreed that there should be maximum aid for Thailand.¹²¹ Thus, towards the final months of 1971, despite American withdrawal and force reduction underway in both South Vietnam and Thailand, the United States and Thailand had forged a new *modus operandi* that strengthened their cooperation.

There was a political cost to Thanom's foreign policy adventurism. Since winning the election in 1969 with the help of Project Lotus, Thanom struggled to keep the parliament under control. While ultimately successful in strengthening his alignment with the United States, Thanat's discontent with Thanom's direction gained traction among many Thai MPs who questioned the direction of Thai foreign policy. These MPs sent a congratulatory message to the Chinese Premier Zhou En Lai in October of 1971, soon after the UN passed a resolution to admit the PRC into the United Nations.¹²² This, in addition to other issues such as resistance to passing Thanom's budget, and internal problems within the ruling UTPP party, prompted

¹²¹ Memorandum of Conversation, Bangkok, July 5, 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 126, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d126> [accessed June 2024].

¹²² David Morrell, "Thailand: Military Checkmate", *Asian Survey* 12, no.2 (February 1972), p.156.

Thanom to stage a coup d'état against his own government on November 17 to regain control.¹²³ He abolished the parliament and the constitution, replaced the government with the National Executive Council (NEC), composed of himself and most of his long-term colleagues like Prapas, Pote, and Tawee, but when the new list of cabinet members was announced one name was missing: Thanat Khoman.

Although the immediate cause of the coup was precipitated by internal matters, especially budgetary in-fighting, Thanat's removal from the cabinet clearly indicates that foreign policy matters, particularly Thanom's desire to maintain his militaristic alignment with the United States was certainly a part of the coup's calculation. This is further confirmed by the fact that on the night of November 17, as soon as the coup was successful, Thanom quickly arranged to meet with Leonard Unger to brief him personally on the situation, assured Unger of Thai commitment to the United States, and told him that the US Ambassador was the only ambassador in Thailand that he [Thanom] was speaking to about the coup.¹²⁴ Following Thanat's removal, security cooperation between the United States and Thailand experienced a resurgence. The Takhli airbase, closed in 1970, was reopened to American bomber planes that doubled from forty to eighty B-52 planes. A new airbase, Nam Phong, began its operation as part of the US Marine Aircraft Group in 1972, in addition to the overall number of American troops in Thailand having

¹²³ Ibid.; Iver Peterson, "Thanom Gives His Reasons for Seizing Power by Coup in Thailand," *New York Times*, November 20, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/11/20/archives/thanom-gives-his-reasons-for-seizing-power-by-coup-in-thailand.html> [accessed December 2020]; Memorandum of Conversation, Bangkok, November 18, 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 144, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d144> [accessed June 2024].

¹²⁴ Telegram from the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State, Bangkok, November 17, 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 142, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d142> [accessed June 2024].

risen from 32,000 to around 49,000. All of this to accommodate the resurgent air war in Indochina.¹²⁵

Kullada Kesboonchu-Mead had argued that Thanom's heightened militaristic stance after November 1971 should be interpreted as indicative of American complicity in Thanom's coup. She believed the United States had prompted Thanom to act in order to remove Thanat's disruptive and pro-neutralisation element from Thai politics.¹²⁶ While this was plausible, evidence from American archives revealed little that point to prior knowledge or involvement in the coup. Based on Unger's assessment and other reports made to Nixon, the United States were themselves unsure of Thanom's exact motive. In his conversation with Unger, Thanom's multitude of reasons for the coup that ranged from budgets to social unrests and national security appeared eclectic enough for Unger to have responded that he was "aware of the conditions they were describing but was surprised that they [Thanom and colleagues] found them so critical as to oblige them to take this action."¹²⁷ The CIA, likewise, on the morning of November 18, reported to Nixon that the coup did not appear to be the result of "arguments over substantive policies, either domestic or foreign."¹²⁸

Prior to the announcement of the new cabinet list, American awareness of Thanat's dismissal was speculative at best. Unger's suspicion that Thanat was removed was entirely

¹²⁵ "There to stay: The US Build up in Thailand," *Newsweek*, p.18, July 3, 1972.

¹²⁶ Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead, *Southeast Asia and the Cold War*, pp.226-227.

¹²⁷ Telegram from the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State, Bangkok, November 17, 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 142, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d142> [accessed June 2024].

¹²⁸ "The President's Daily Brief," Central Intelligence Agency, November 18, 1971, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005992980.pdf [accessed June 2024].

circumstantial, based on the simple fact that Thanat was not referred to by his usual title when he appeared before the local foreign correspondents. Even then, Unger warned Kissinger that judgement on Thanat's position should be reserved for now and any changes in Thanat's position could be temporary.¹²⁹ As for Kissinger, he reported to Nixon that Thanat was a "possible leadership casualty" because Prapas had grown intolerant of his disruptive pro-neutralisation stance, especially Thanat's plan to promote neutrality in Southeast Asia at the next ASEAN meeting scheduled for November 25. Kissinger was also uncertain if the coup meant a change of leadership from Thanom to Prapas.¹³⁰ On this latter point, while Kissinger's speculation was not difficult to ascertain given Thanat's very public resistance against continuing cooperation with the United States, it did demonstrate that American policymakers were aware of the ongoing divide within the Thai leadership. This awareness, however, was understandably limited to semi-public appearances at most, in this instance, their knowledge of Thanat's plan to promote neutrality at the next ASEAN meeting. Personal politics which was an integral part of Thai politics proved to be too unpredictable and elusive to American planners. The White House, nevertheless, was satisfied that the outcome of the coup did not affect their ongoing policy in Indochina.¹³¹ Thanom's militarism had prevailed over Thanat's diplomacy.

¹²⁹ Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, November 17, 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 143, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d143> [accessed June 2024].

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ "The President's Daily Brief," Central Intelligence Agency, November 18, 1971, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005992980.pdf [accessed December 2020]; Telegram from the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State, Bangkok, November 17, 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 142, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d142> [accessed June 2024]; Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, November 17, 1971, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, Document 143, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v20/d143> [accessed June 2024].

Conclusion

In conclusion, although the United States began its early post-war relationship with Thailand on an unpromising note with the regime of Field Marshal Phibunsongkram, the use of economic and military aid as instruments of American diplomacy was successful in improving the state of their relationship. By leveraging these instruments, the United States was able to co-opt Thailand under Sarit and later Thanom into its Cold War strategy. Strong anti-communist ideology among the Thai leadership, seen in their constant belligerent attitude towards Vietnam and Laos, further made them amenable to joining a militaristic alliance with the United States in the hope of eliminating their mutual regional threat embodied by North Vietnam. Therefore, American relationship with Thailand during this period was undeniably intertwined with that of the Thai military regime, who successfully capitalized on their alignment with the United States to retain power and later cloak their rule under a democratic robe. This was apparent through Project Lotus, when Washington favoured Thanom's regime at the expense of Thai democracy to service their foreign policy objectives in Vietnam. American complicity further reflected their recognition and acceptance of the military as the central force in Thai politics, whose viability was needed for domestic stability and necessary for facilitating and continuing American power in Southeast Asia.

Throughout the 1960s Thailand faithfully adopted the role of a junior partner to the United States, facilitating the war in Vietnam primarily through the provision of airbases from where American military force could be projected against regional communist powers. Such an arrangement became a defining feature of the US-Thai relations in this period. The introduction

of the Nixon Doctrine threatened to disrupt this dynamic by demanding that Thailand adopt a larger warfighting role in Indochina, essentially compelling Bangkok to decide whether it was willing to transform itself from a facilitator to a combatant. Thanom's decision to deepen Thai participation from 1969 onwards, from the deployment of the SGU to allowing a new airbase in Nam Phong to operate with more American troops deployed in Thailand, was a clear indicator that he firmly chose to bind Thai security with American victory in Vietnam, resulting in Thailand becoming what R.S. Litwak termed a "middle power" through whom American power could be dispensed. In this regard, the Nixon Doctrine proved to be a success in Thailand. The fact that it was Prapas who lobbied for Thai forces to enter Cambodia and Laos, without any prodding from the United States, suggests that the aim of the doctrine to encourage Asians to manage Asia was fulfilled.

Nevertheless, there was a limit to how much Thailand could contribute to de-Americanising the war in Indochina in its capacity as the middle power. In Laos, Thai participation prevented the Royal Lao Government between 1970-1972 from falling to communism and prevented the United States from the quagmire of having to deploy ground forces there to suppress the Ho Chi Minh Trail and defend the Lao government, in addition to the Saigon regime they were already supporting. Any success the United States hoped to have in Vietnam, however, would have to be achieved by the South Vietnamese, which as Operation Lam Son demonstrated was unlikely.

In recognising the success of the Nixon Doctrine in Thailand, it is equally important to note the influence of domestic politics on foreign policy, since the direction of the US-Thai

relationship in this period was bounded to the survival of the Thai military regime. Thanom's support for the hawkish vision of the Nixon-Kissinger White House alone would not have led to a more active and militant Thailand, had he not won the internal policy debate against his Foreign Minister, Thanat. Neither Thanom nor Thanat disagreed that North Vietnam was a threat to Thailand, but their respective interpretation of the Nixon Doctrine caused a divide within the Thai leadership. Unlike Thanom who felt it necessary to continue alignment with the United States in pursuit of military victory, Thanat believed the Nixon Doctrine signaled the need for Thailand to shift towards diplomacy. This was further exacerbated by diplomatic slight that Thanat felt stemmed from within the United States; attests to a fundamental difference in conducting foreign policy in a democracy and an authoritarian regime, where a democracy like the United States had to tolerate public opinion and oversight such as the Symington Hearing. These factors, then, pervaded the course of their relationship at an already testing time.

Although Thanom did tolerate Thanat's plan to approach North Vietnam and push for American withdrawal from Thailand for a time, he ultimately did not agree with diplomacy. A return to a complete authoritarian rule after the coup of 1971 resecured Thailand's place firmly within the American Cold War orbit and ensured that Thai parliamentarians could not act any further to neutralize Thailand, as their congratulatory message to China seemed to indicate. Hence, Thanom could exercise his absolute authority to stay aligned with the US without opposition. For this reason, the coup could be seen as a drastic measure to rectify an internal bifurcation resultant of the Nixon Doctrine. Moreover, the fact that Thanat had to be removed, and that parliamentarians felt sufficiently emboldened to contact China, indicates that Thanat's argument for non-alignment with the United States was slowly, but very firmly, gaining grounds

and perhaps could have had a larger impact had it not been disrupted. All of this meant the success of the Nixon Doctrine in Thailand was contingent on the United States building a relationship with an authoritarian leader, who was willing to increase Thai commitment in pursuit of a military solution. This begs the question: what would happen to the US-Thai relations without Thanom's regime? This was the question that Thailand and the United States struggled to answer in the autumn of 1973, as domestic politics on both sides of the Pacific continued to shape the course of their relationship.

Chapter 2: Political Transition.

The course of US-Thai relationship so far has been heavily confined to intergovernmental politics. As the previous chapter have demonstrated, the highly personalized structure of authoritarian Thai politics made it convenient for the United States to advance its relationship with Thailand by co-opting only a few key members of the Thai regime. This relationship was vital to facilitating American war effort in Indochina, which by the early 1970s had transcended the borders of Vietnam into neighbouring Laos and Cambodia. This well-refined *modus operandi* between the US and Thailand would be disrupted in 1973 when Thailand made a transition towards democracy under a civilian rule after the unexpected fall of Thanom's government at the hands of the least probable political actor: university students. In the years that followed, what could have been a smooth path towards troops withdrawal became plagued by confusion, uncertainty, and miscommunication, unlike anything the United States had hitherto experienced in its diplomacy with Thailand.

The historiography surrounding the 1973 political transition in Thailand rarely makes a direct connection between the influence that Thai domestic politics had on its foreign policy, especially with regards to the relationship with the United States. While much has been made about the role of the United States in strengthening domestic authoritarian regimes in Thailand and its subsequent impact on Thai foreign policy, which led to a close Thai alignment with the US, less has been discussed about how such an alignment was affected by a regime change in Thailand. Prajak Kongkirati's account on student activism and political transition in Thailand during the Vietnam War is, perhaps, one of the most extensive accounts available on the

subject.¹³² In spite of this, the emphasis of his study was on the rise of student movement in Thailand, consequently shied away from commenting on foreign policy. Nevertheless, one of his major contributions was to highlight the impact that popularly disseminated Thai thought-leadership journals, whose material were drawn heavily from American literature, had on shaping Thai students' views on government, politics, and the Vietnam War. Additionally, there have been, though relatively few, authors who have sought to tell the story of Thailand's Cold War experience, and by extension its relationship with the United States, during the Cold War through the perspective of culture. Notably, Matthew Phillips who argued that the US-Thai relationship during the Cold War was as much a cultural experience as it was political.¹³³ Another interesting work in this area was "*Cold War Monks*" by Eugene Ford, unique in its attempt to provide a narrative of the United States in Thailand through the scope of cultural programs that began with its involvement with Buddhist monks.¹³⁴

The work of these authors demonstrated that while cultural exchanges are often subtle, and have often been neglected in the historiography of American Cold War in Thailand, their ability to shape the course of the US-Thai relationship was rather significant. This chapter, therefore, examines the social impact that years of American basing in Thailand had on its host country to elucidate the social dynamics that will bring their pressure to bear on the new democratic government in the twilight years of the American-era in Thailand. It argues that American bases in Thailand was as much a cultural relationship to the ordinary Thais as it was

¹³² Prajak Kongkirati, *Lae Laew Kwam Kluen Wai Kor Prakot (And Then There Was Movement)* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2005).

¹³³ Matthew Phillips, *Thailand in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹³⁴ Eugene Ford, *Cold War Monks: Buddhism and America's Secret Strategy in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

political to the ruling elites of the Thanom regime. While politically Thailand's relationship with the United States resulted in support for authoritarianism and Thai participation in Indochina, the same relationship socially had the opposite effect of facilitating a new political culture that encouraged resistance, pro-democracy, anti-Vietnam War, and most importantly, promoted student activism. The transition from a military regime to a civilian government, whose rise to power was owed to the activism of university students, led to a change in its politics and foreign policy direction; political power in Thailand long concentrated in the top few diffused to different segments of the masses down below ranging from students to news media, who then vied for a voice on the direction of their country in both domestic and international matters. Thus, allowed for interference in interstate politics between the United States and Thailand by members of Thai civil society.

Transition and Power Transfer

Thanom's coup of 1971 cemented the long-running trend of military involvement in Thai politics that had been ongoing in various forms since 1947. From the time of Phibun and Sarit to Thanom, the United States had rarely seen any other forms of government in Thailand, and it was these authoritarian regimes that they had grown accustomed to working with. Yet, by the summer of 1973, this trend would be challenged by university students. In an incident known as the "Thung Yai Scandal," officials with connections to the Thanom regime were accused with photographic evidence of having been on an illegal hunting trip at the Thung Yai National Reserve. To many, Thung Yai, was representative of systemic corruption enabled by the Thanom government. The timing of the scandal coincided with the government's decision to extend

Thanom's and Prapas's terms in office for another year past their mandatory retirement age. Students led by a leader named Thirayuth Boonmee and a group of like-minded activists staged a protest that eventually grew into a mass protest. Tension between the regime and the public reached its peak on October 14th 1973, when state forces used force to subdue the tens of thousands of student protestors who gathered in the capital city. When the dust finally settled on October 16, an estimated 77 protestors have died and 857 injured.¹³⁵ Thanom, Prapas, and the leading figures of his government understood that they could not hope to retain power in the aftermath of such a public carnage. That same night, Prapas and his son-in-law, Narong, fled the country to Taiwan, and Thanom left the following night under the alias "Smith" on a flight to Boston. Overnight, military rule in Thailand collapsed as abruptly and unexpectedly as the protest that brought it down.

In the aftermath of the October protest, Thanom was replaced by a new civilian government headed by a civilian jurist, Sanya Dhammasak, who was not as beholden to the military as much as he was to the king, by whom he was appointed. Thanom's departure also left a power vacuum within the military that was quickly replaced by another crop of general officers, led by General Kris Sivara, who were sympathetic to the students and had contributed to the success of the protest by refusing to deploy troops against them on the fateful day of October 14, despite being given the order to do so. Only three out of thirteen government portfolios were headed by military men. Among Sanya's cabinet members were also three university rectors, and one university faculty dean. This gave university students unprecedented level of access to the highest echelon of government, much to the surprise of the students. One of them spoke with a

¹³⁵ Achara Ashayagachat, "Few Crisis Lessons Learned," *Bangkok Post*, October 3, 2016, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/1100897/few-crisis-lessons-learned> [accessed November 2021].

hint of candid disbelief and humility: “We are finally being listened to. But if our ideas get too radical, then the government should stop listening. We don’t want the government to recognize to us too much.”¹³⁶

Cultural Exchanges

American experience with successive military strongmen as part of their post-war diplomacy in Thailand might have led Washington to underestimate the significance of the October protest. The Royal Thai Army (RTA) had, after all, been the pre-eminent domestic political actor in Thailand. On October 15th, Kissinger submitted his original analysis of the uprising to Nixon as an urgent memorandum, advised that the collapse of Thanom’s government “portends no likely adverse effects on U.S. interests.”¹³⁷ His analysis was built on the belief that any Thai government must inevitably “secure the support of the Army, which remains the source of real power — and which continues to be controlled by Thanom and the top leadership of the recent government.”¹³⁸ Thus, he expected no change in Thailand’s relationship with the United States or its presence and basing in Indochina. In the aftermath of the October protest, however, this proved to be a misreading of the situation. The students and their fragmented coalition of various sections of society did not quietly disappear after the October uprising. Their sudden success against Thanom transformed them into a de facto actor in Thai politics. The events of

¹³⁶ Ruth-Inge Heinze, “Ten Days in October – Students vs. The Military: An Account of the Student Uprising in Thailand”, *Asian Survey* 14, no.6 (1974): 505.

¹³⁷ Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, October 15, 1973, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume E-12, Documents on East and Southeast Asia, Document 375, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve12/d375> [accessed November 2021].

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

October represented a fundamental shift in both Thai politics and society that would eventually affect Thai policies towards the United States.

The students and activists who toppled Thanom were far from being a sudden reactionary movement. The rise of student-led civil society was a by-product of the social and intellectual changes that slowly grew out of these inter-cultural exchanges between Thailand and the United States throughout the 1960s. In addition to hosting American bases, Thailand experienced a surge in cross-cultural contacts with the US both through the media and other inter-personal means. Thai alignment with the United States, as Matthew Phillips have argued, expanded into other arenas outside of politics. The influx of American cultural medium such as popular culture, fashion, tourism, and many other forms adopted by urban Thai population served to integrate Thailand into American-led economic and cultural sphere as much as it did politically.¹³⁹ The local impact of the US-Thai relationship in this regard was subtler, not as immediate, and less discernable than Thailand's direct political-military cooperation with the United States, but equally powerful in its ability to shape the course of their relationship during the period of civilian transition.

Under military rule public political participation was sedated and deliberately stifled by leadership figures like Thanom to ensure not only formal control of government but also the flow of information. By using national security as a pretext, the Thai government was able to introduce pervasive government control over daily life, which indirectly encouraged political passivity among the population. A notable example of such a practice was the use of Article 17,

¹³⁹ Phillips, *Thailand in the Cold War*, pp.200-203.

a law first passed by Sarit and continued under Thanom, which granted legal right to the Prime Minister to undertake any measure necessary to protect public well-being from communist threat, including acts of censorship. Consequently, the government became the only authoritative source of information that treated dissidence as state enemy.¹⁴⁰ Official deflection of negative press as a communist plot and associating dissident voices with communism often led to members of the public exercising self-censorship.¹⁴¹ Therefore, state manipulation and control of information, including the narrative on Thailand's relationship with the United States, became a vital part of politics throughout the 1960s. The pre-1973 Thai public was deliberately kept ignorant of current events, semi-informed at best and uninformed at worst, even within the ranks of government. Only the limited few at the top of officialdom like Thanom, Prapas, Pote, or Tawee were truly informed.

Nevertheless, Thanom's government exercised limited control over personnel and information from abroad. The sheer number of American personnel and bases in Thailand exacerbated the import and broadcast of American media through multiple facets that appealed to the Thai youth. Bars and night-life establishments that were usually built around American bases brought American music into the daily lives of ordinary Thais, with local Thai musicians either playing or learning to play American music. Popular magazines started including a column for learning English from songs in their publications by printing the lyrics and translation to songs from artists such as Simon & Garfunkel.¹⁴² These were important portals that introduced the students to less superficial aspects of American life. Through their interest in American

¹⁴⁰ Prajak, *Lae Laew Kwam Klue Wai Kor Prakot*, pp.115-205.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Sudina Paungpetch, "Domino by Design: Thai-US Relations During the Vietnam War" (unpublished doctoral thesis, Texas A&M University, 2011), p.54.

music, they became familiarized with protest songs emerging from the era of civil rights movement and Vietnam War. Lyrics to “Where have all the flowers gone,” which later became an anti-Vietnam song, was published in a popular student journal, while the song itself received airtime along with many other American records. Bob Dylan’s “Blowing in the wind,” likewise was published and gained local traction. The cynical lyrics of these protest songs inspired the younger generation of Thais to create their own brand of protest music. A prime example of these was the case of Weerasak Soontornsri, who spent his teenage years around American bases in the northeast of Thailand, founder of an iconic Thai folk music band known for their equally cynical take on working class life and current affairs. He later credited American protest songs from his younger days as a source of inspiration.¹⁴³

Additionally, pop culture generated genuine public interest in American lifestyle and education. The English language became simultaneously fashionable to the younger generation with the hype of pop culture. Cultural diplomacy through organs such as the United States Information Service (USIS) propelled its popularity by promoting English language programs through funding for libraries, and provision of English-language books and classes, which in conjunction with the then growing university student population in Thailand, was able to reach an even wider audience. USIS also actively promoted American education and sought to approach students and professors for study grants and exchange opportunities.¹⁴⁴ With such initiatives and other scholarship opportunities like those offered by the Fulbright Program, higher education in the US, once limited to government officials, became accessible to the wider public.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p.364.

¹⁴⁴ Sudina, “Domino by Design”, p.344.

Up to 10% of the estimated 1,000 Thai students in the US in 1973 were recipients of scholarships from the US government.¹⁴⁵

Once abroad, Thai students stayed connected with their counterparts at home, and exercised disproportionate influence on public consciousness in Thailand. They acted as suppliers of alternative information to state-regulated media, often by providing Thai publications with information on the Vietnam War and American activities in Indochina from American media. Some spent their time abroad attending anti-war protests and send posters, pop culture mediums, and anti-war literature back to Thailand to be translated and published domestically.¹⁴⁶ Many Thai students were introduced to social issues other than Vietnam such as segregation, that inspired them to reflect on social issues at home. Three of these students, Charnwit Kasetsiri, Pramote Nakornthap, and Warin Wongharnchao, became active in a Thai student group, "Thinking of Thailand," that regularly wrote analytical pieces reflecting on current issues influenced heavily by what they witnessed in the United States. The pieces were published weekly in a Thai newspaper between 1968 to 1971. They introduced domestic readers to stories of American and European student activism, demonstrations not only against social and political issues but also against university regulations and governance, and protest tactics from sit-ins/sleep-ins to university occupation. Often, they challenged Thai readers who they criticized for political apathy to be more activist. One of the writers wrote: "I hope our students will express more opinions whether it is through demonstrations or other peaceful means. I hope you will agree with some far-sighted individuals in the West who said that student protests are a positive sign, for they will be playing a vital role in the future. Though disagreements may be a

¹⁴⁵ *Sangkomsat Paritat /The Social Science Review* 1, no.3 (2507): 12, 17.

¹⁴⁶ Prajak, *Lae Laew Kwam Klue Wai Kor Prakot*, pp.224-225.

cause for concern today, a greater concern would be if students disagree with nothing at all.”¹⁴⁷

Their articles and messages were a refreshing read for Thai audience who were used to being told sanitized pro-government and pro-American messages. The “Thinking of Thailand” articles garnered enough popularity to later warrant being released in compiled volumes.

The impact of American influence was not limited to students overseas. Their contacts with students in Thailand extended to in-person interactions. Intellectual suppression and censorship throughout the 1960s left Thailand with a shortage of full-time academics and an intellectual vacuum that by the early 1970s had to be filled by returning students from abroad. In this way, the gradual effects of American funding for education were amplified. Overseas students often visited Thailand intermittently during their years abroad, and eventually returned to Thailand by 1973 to take up academic positions at some of Thailand's most prestigious universities. This new generation of academics dominated full-time faculty positions.¹⁴⁸

The lasting impact of American contribution to domestic intellectual landscape could be seen in the production of a popular academic journal, *Sangkomsat Paritat*, or “The Social Science Review.” This seminal journal complemented the contribution by overseas students in raising political consciousness among Thai students. The journal itself was a product of American attempt to promote American ideals and positive image through print media, with the USIS responsible for the disbursement of funding. It was first launched in 1963 under the editorship of Sulak Siwaraksa, a British-trained law graduate, whose study abroad was funded by an American organization with later exposed connection to the CIA, The Asia Foundation. Sulak

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., pp.225-228.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p.229.

welcomed the foundation's support for the journal, since it provided him with a vital source of funding that he might not have been able to secure from state-run universities. To ensure the viability of the journal, USIS promised to buy 500 copies of the original 1,000 copies printed.¹⁴⁹ USIS funding for the publication might have also provided another layer of protection for the journal from state suppression by providing it with a veneer of official American support in the eyes of Thai officials, though there is no evidence to suggest that the United States government was aware of or paid particular attention to this one publication in Thailand.

The difficulty Sulak faced when launching the journal was neither from government censorship nor lack of funding. Rather, it was the lack of content, as the aforementioned intellectual vacuum in Thailand was not yet replenished, there was very little Thai content available. Sulak had to rely on translating material from foreign books and news reports, mostly American, which he obtained through three primary channels: an American Peace Corps volunteer that Sulak befriended; American print media available locally such as *Rampart*, *Evergreen Review*, and *Rolling Stone*; and lastly, material submitted to him by overseas Thai students.¹⁵⁰ Thus, *The Social Science Review* allowed for direct consumption of American perspectives and ideas by Thai audience, particularly students who did not have the benefit of overseas education. It became a sustained outlet for critical material such as those supplied by sources abroad to be published prolifically and popularly disseminated. In fact, it was the *Kawee Tang Dan*, "Overseas Poet," section of this journal that published translations and lyrics of the famous protest songs that Thai youths learned from. The journal became unexpectedly popular with all of its 1,000 original copies sold. Sulak had to plan for another 5,000 to 8,000 copies or

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p.94.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pp.223-224.

more for later issues. The second issue covered North Vietnamese history and politics with China, British constitutional monarchy, the role of universities in national development, and studying abroad in Oxford.¹⁵¹ Between these pages was an advertisement of a well-known American corporation, Caltex, and its Cold War influenced tagline, “maintaining services to over 70 countries in the Free World”, while touting the benefits it provided to Thailand's growing industries.¹⁵² By 1969, the journal was being sold widely at universities throughout the country, with distribution agents abroad in locations such as the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Laos, and India, mostly through their network of Thai students.¹⁵³

Although *The Social Science Review* did not create mass political awareness alone, it became instrumental in breaking new grounds for fostering domestic political consciousness, and built a strong foundation for other journals to follow suit, some also helmed by Sulak, thereby rebuilding the once depleted intellectual landscape on the foundation of the 1960s anti-Vietnam activism and youth movement.¹⁵⁴ Examples of these journals are *Chaoban*, *Jaturat*, and *Lomfang*. Their emergence encouraged students to develop their own political outlook, and reproduce their views for wider public consumption. Students began producing the so-called “one-baht books,” a small paperback independent publication, they would sell cheaply in person for a baht or two. The books gave students an informal mean of sharing and communicating their political opinions with each other without coming under state suspicion. The contents of one-

¹⁵¹ *The Social Science Review* 1, no.2 (2506): 57, 72, 83, 117.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p.81.

¹⁵³ *The Social Science Review* 7, no.3 (2512).

baht books were light-hearted at times and, especially by the late 1960s, often included reprints of articles they found interesting from other intellectual journals previously mentioned.¹⁵⁵

Beginning in the mid-1960s, *The Social Science Review's* editorial choices progressively tilted towards critical, sometimes directly anti-Vietnam, commentaries. The casual promotion of American image, like the earlier Caltex advertisement, or the generic coverage of studying abroad, were displaced by contents such as a report on the Symington Hearing and the release of the Pentagon Papers in full details. It was from these volumes that the Thai public first learned of Thailand's intimate involvement in the Vietnam War, the Thai SGUs in Laos, and the extent of bomb raids by American planes via Thai airbases. These revelations contradicted official Thai narratives that often portrayed the Vietnam War as an American activity with little reference to Thai complicity. In one instance, when Thai journalists asked Prapas in April 1965 for his comments on a North Vietnamese newspaper report that Thailand was the base of operation for American planes, Prapas responded firmly that "there is not any American base in Thailand, but airbases could be used jointly among allies, since this is in accordance to international convention."¹⁵⁶ His vague response, while alluding to the possibility that American planes could be flying in and out of Thailand, significantly downplayed the fullest extent of American basing and activities, as well as the degree of Thai facilitation.

In other instances, official secrecy and ambiguity extended to internal communications between government agencies, which meant that even candid statements by officials and press reporting could lead to half-informed stories that prevented their audiences, both within

¹⁵⁵ Prajak, *Lae Laew Kwam Kluen Wai Kor Prakot*, pp.107-109.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.166.

government and public domain, from forming a coherent view or factually accurate narrative.

This could be seen in an official memorandum between the Thai Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Office of the Prime Minister on June 9th 1965 regarding an American plane crash during training in Thailand. The MoD informed the Prime Minister that there were criticism and comments about Thailand serving as an American base against North Vietnam “due to American planes being stationed in Thailand for the purpose of defending the nation.” It further stated that other agencies without clear facts could provide misleading news detrimental to government affairs.¹⁵⁷ Given that Thanom was both Minister of Defense and Prime Minister at the time, he was undoubtedly aware that American planes were not for defending Thailand, yet this was the official narrative that had to be maintained even in a memorandum between his ministry and his own office. Such a memorandum also raises the question of how much lower-ranking employees within the MoD, like those responsible for creating and distributing official memorandums, truly knew about Thailand's roles and the nature of its relationship with the United States. With limited access to information, factually inaccurate stories were not uncommon in the press. For example, in May of that same year a Thai newspaper mistakenly reported that there had been multiple instances of mysterious planes, likely communist, dropping bombs on Thailand, perhaps to test Thai defense; these were, in fact, accidents that occurred around American bases being overheard by locals.¹⁵⁸

Some officials did speak more frankly in public than others. In comparison to Prapas, Thanat was more forthcoming about Thai roles in Vietnam. Although Thanat upheld the same official narrative that there was no American base in Thailand, he stated in an interview with

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., pp.154-157.

¹⁵⁸ Prajak, *Lae Laew Kwam Kluen Wai Kor Prakot*, pp.156-157.

Newsweek magazine in 1966 that Thai involvement with the Vietnam War was an open secret. He later hinted at Thai complicity in a separate interview with *The Washington Post* by stating that an 11,000-foot run-way constructed in the northeast was beyond the need of the Thai air force.¹⁵⁹ However, these comments were limited to foreign press. Thus, revelations about the Vietnam War drawn directly from sources overseas by *The Social Science Review* that connected these gaps did much to provide many Thai students with more factually accurate information and commentaries they were not previously exposed to, enabled them to develop alternative views.

Over time, the tone of these influential journals turned more strongly critical of not only the Vietnam War, but of Thailand's involvement. When Senator Fulbright spoke at the 89th Congress to chastise the secrecy surrounding American activities in Thailand and accused Thailand of being responsible for creating its own insurgency problems, Sulak translated the speech in full.¹⁶⁰ Readers of *The Social Science Review* welcomed his effort. Their attitude differed greatly from state officials such as Thanat who, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, was very sensitive towards any criticism Thailand received, especially from the likes of Senator Fulbright and his committee. In this case, Sulak received encouragement from a reader who wrote to commend him for his courage to present views from outside: "in our country it seems we're only informed of what is in agreement with the government, as the Foreign Minister [Thanat] have said, anyone who dissented is either a communist or insane. Over in the US there are many who disagreed with their government who are neither communist nor insane."¹⁶¹ The

¹⁵⁹ Kislenko, *A Not So Silent Partner*, p.10.

¹⁶⁰ Original transcription can be found in "Building Up in Thailand," *Congressional Record*, United States Senate, 89th Congress, October 3, 1966; The translated text was printed in *The Social Science Review* 4, no.3 (2509): 51.

¹⁶¹ *The Social Science Review* 4, no.4 (2509): 95.

reader then asked *The Social Science Review* to reprint an article he found from *The Times* newspaper in England that expressed its support for Senator Fulbright, and the journal did.¹⁶² Other intellectual Thai journals such as the *Jaturat* Journal took a similar approach, defended Fulbright's speech, argued that Fulbright was right to fulfill his senatorial duty. *Jaturat's* editorial stated plainly that Thailand have earned those criticisms, and that "Thais should stop being ignorant of the truth."¹⁶³

As a result of a decade spent learning from examples of student activism from overseas, having had their political views broadened on both issues at home and abroad, especially on the Vietnam War, the students who deposed Thanom in 1973 were, therefore, possibly the most activist generation Thailand had ever witnessed until that point. The outcome of the October protest turned them into a new political force, as well as reversing the relationship between state and society. Whereas under Thanom state authority was supreme and demanded obedience, the Sanya Dhammasak government that came to power directly because of student activism found it difficult to ignore their voices. How the students exercised their influence became a problem for the US-Thai relations in the years that followed.

Letter to the Prime Minister

The first major opportunity for the students to vent their frustration against Thailand's relationship with the United States was provided unwittingly by the US soon after the October protest. In December 1973, a letter from a Thai communist insurgent leader named "Jumrat" was

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Prajak, *Lae Laew Kwam Klue Wai Kor Prakot*, pp.238-239.

sent to Prime Minister Sanya Dhammasak. It asked for a cease-fire with the Thai government in return for an official recognition of communist liberated area. The letter became a test of resolve for Sanya, who had to demonstrate that a civilian Prime Minister was as firm on security as the military, and a trial by fire for the new US Ambassador to Thailand, William Kintner, who arrived in Thailand only two months prior to replace Leonard Unger. Sanya passed the letter to his new Army chief, General Kris, for further action. Kris and his colleagues were not convinced the letter originated from an insurgent leader.¹⁶⁴ They concluded that the letter was forged and traced its origin back to a CIA station operating out of the Thai northeast in the province of Sakon Nakhon. General Witoon Yasawat, with his intimate knowledge of CIA operations in Thailand from having served with the SGU, revealed further that the forgery was done by a CIA agent codenamed "Lion."¹⁶⁵ The revelation led to an official protest from the government against the CIA's interference into domestic affairs. Ambassador Kintner was called in to meet with Sanya and his foreign minister, Charunphan Isarangkun Na Ayutthaya, to explain the debacle. Kintner claimed that the scheme was plotted with benign intention to sow discord among communist insurgents to encourage their surrender. He apologized unreservedly and reiterated that he had issued an instruction against future interferences.¹⁶⁶

However, with the surge in public activism and lack of both self and state censorship in post-Thanom Thailand, the students were no longer satisfied with leaving American matters in government hands alone. Thai students, along with local press, had an alternative explanation for

¹⁶⁴ "Plom Jodmai Por.Kor.Kor. Teung Nayok Ang Wa Wang Dee" [Forged Letter to the Prime Minister Claimed Good Intention], *Siam Rath*, January 6, 2517.

¹⁶⁵ *Thai Rath*, January 7, 2517; "U.S. Says A CIA Agent Sent False Message to Thai Premiere," *New York Times*, January 6, 1974.

¹⁶⁶ James F. Clarity, "Thailand Officially Chides US Over CIA Interference There", *New York Times*, January 18, 1974; "U.S. Says A CIA Agent Sent False Message to Thai Premiere," *New York Times*, January 6, 1974.

the motive behind the CIA letter; rather than to sow discord among insurgents, it was meant to test the direction and commitment of the new civilian government to combating communism. They believed it was both a gross interference and an attempt to keep Thailand bound to American anti-communist policy of the Thanom years.¹⁶⁷ The National Student Center of Thailand (NSCT) laid a wreath in front of the US Embassy that said “Go home, abhorrent CIA.” Another student group, the Thammasat University Student Union, issued a formal letter addressed to Richard Nixon demanding a withdrawal of the CIA station from Thailand.

The real significance of the letter was that it led to a proliferation of anti-American paranoia. Thais developed their own conspiracy theories about the CIA. Everywhere they looked they wondered if more had been covered up after years of lenient treatment of the US by Thanom. Anti-CIA articles became a staple in the press. The *Siam Rath* newspaper printed an image of an opium field cultivated by rural hill tribes with a caption suggesting that the cultivation was part of a larger CIA plot to obtain intelligence on communist insurgents by winning the hearts and minds of the tribes.¹⁶⁸ At a time when narcotics and trafficking had become a nascent problem in Thailand, an implied involvement in the drugs trade by the CIA did little to salvage public opinion on the United States. Other newspapers kept up the trend, the *Daily News*, for instance, published a series of exposé on the CIA with one titled “CIA in Thailand” detailing CIA activities at the Namphong Airbase and Thailand’s role in Cambodia,

¹⁶⁷ “Hai Rattaban Pongkan Kan Saksang Kitjakan Pai Nai Jak Rattaban Saharat Lae Poey Panta Kub CIA” [The Government Must Prevent Interference by the United States Government and Reveal Its Involvement with the CIA], *Chao Thai*, January 7, 2517; “Mor Thor Yuen Nangsue Pratuang Nixon Hai Ton Ongkon Lub Okpai” [Thammasat University Submitted a Letter of Protest Against Nixon Demanding Their Secret Organisation be Withdrawn], *Siam Rath*, January 9, 2517; “Sia Jai Taonun Eng Rue?” [Sorry Is Enough?], *Thai Rath*, January 7, 2517.

¹⁶⁸ *Siam Rath*, January 8, 2517.

followed by another article accusing the CIA of airlifting contrabands worth over millions of dollars via Air America, an air logistics company covertly owned by the CIA for transporting passengers and cargo throughout Southeast Asia. The latter story was again taken up by the NSCT, which demanded that the Thai government take firm stance against Air America.¹⁶⁹

Public suspicion of the CIA, and the United States by extension, was not limited to low-level whispers among disgruntled youth and hard-hitting headlines in newspapers. Public attention soon turned on the new Thai government, especially members of the new government who had previously served with Thanom such as Witoon Yasawat, a police general and commander of the SGU, and Tawee Chulasapaya, now Defense Minister in the Sanya government. Witoon was accused by student groups of being a CIA spy planted in high office to spy on Thailand through his police network, and rumours swirled that Thailand's own police were CIA agents acting against Thai interests. There was a growing belief among the protesters that much of the "American problem" could have been mitigated had Thailand not been so acquiescent to the United States. They demanded more accountability from the government. This was reflected clearly in the NSCT's official statement of protest, which while expectedly condemned the CIA with a call for the "people of Thailand to acknowledge the danger that CIA intervention presents", concluded with issuing four demands for the Thai government to act on "in the interest of the nation": to reveal all CIA operations in Thailand, enact policies to prevent future intrusion into Thai affairs by the United States, reveal all obligations Thailand has to the United States such as sending Thai soldiers to war in Laos, and for the government to act as a

¹⁶⁹ "CIA Nai Mueng Thai" [CIA in Thailand], *Daily News*, January 10, 1974; "Poedpong CIA Kon Kong Pid Kodmai 40 Laan!" [CIA Exposed Trafficking 40 Million's Worth of Contraband], *Daily News*, January 19, 2517; "Soonnisit hai jatkan Air America" [National Student Center Demands Action Against Air America], *Thai Rath*, January 22, 2517.

representative of the Thai people in protesting against the CIA.¹⁷⁰ All of these demands firmly assigned responsibility on the shoulders of the Sanya government, in a manner that they could not under Thanom.

Thai officials decided to ease the pressure on them by pandering to public sentiments. Speaking to a journalist in an article named “Behind the Scenes of Goddamned CIA,” Tawee told a story about his resistance to CIA demands, and his determination to uphold Thai sovereignty. He downplayed the CIA as a minor concern for Thailand. Witoon adopted a stronger tone, claiming that he personally loath Americans but accepted working with them as a matter of patriotic and professional duty to protect national interests.¹⁷¹ Witoon later broke from protocol by publicly revealing the name of the CIA head of station in Thailand, a man named Hugh Tovar, believed to have left the country for Laos after the incident.¹⁷² Witoon’s action together with his and Tawee’s comments were significant in that not only were they both holdovers from the Thanom regime and part of his decision-making circles that did much to take Thailand closer to the United States, but they were also American clients who benefitted immensely from American patronage. Witoon was paid by the CIA. His command of the SGU, which was trained, equipped, and funded by the CIA, provided him with the professional prestige needed to propel his career. Tawee, for his part, amassed his wealth with his membership on the board of the ELO, a company that was contracted for logistical services to

¹⁷⁰ “Hai Rattaban Pongkan Kan Saksang Kitjakan Pai Nai Jak Rattaban Saharat Lae Poey Panta Kub CIA” (The Government Must Prevent Interference by the United States Government and Reveal Its Involvement with the CIA), *Chao Thai*, January 7, 2517.

¹⁷¹ “Kao Ma Saksang Kitjakan Tamruad Pol Tamruad To Witoon Wa Tamngan Hai Rath” (Intrusion into Police Affairs Police Lt.Gen. Witoon Claimed to be Working for the State), *Chao Thai*, January 5, 2517; Thai Rath “Langshak CIA Heng Suay” (Behind the Scenes of Goddamned CIA), *Thai Rath*, January 12, 2517.

¹⁷² “A Bangkok Paper Named A CIA Aide”, *New York Times*, January 12, 1974.

American bases throughout Thailand. Yet, with domestic outrage so palpable in the air, the US-Thai relations that buttressed their careers had sunken to such a level of disrepute that it became a burden for these powerful officials, who now wanted to be disassociated from it.

As a large crowd of students gathered in Bangkok to protest at the US Embassy, students at Chiang Mai University in the north of the country staged another rally of their own. Their protest against the CIA and the United States had become a national event. Ambassador Kintner himself became a target, due to his previous work in the US Army and the CIA during the Korean War.¹⁷³ While Kintner was attending a welcome dinner as a guest of Chiang Mai University, students who were led to believe that the ambassador was there to answer their questions about CIA activities surrounded the auditorium hall in anticipation of an audience with Kintner. When the expected session did not materialise they delivered a speech on the loudspeaker attacking Kintner's handling of the problem and his association with the CIA, before starting a commotion by lighting firecrackers and burning the American flag. They threw the ashes inside the dining hall while shouting "Kintner, get out!" Kintner was reportedly displeased and startled, he left his seat directly for his car and departed as a crowd chased after him jeering and booing along the way.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ James F. Clarity, "US-Thai Relations Expected to Survive the CIA Blow," *New York Times*, January 21, 1974.

¹⁷⁴ "Nak Sueksa Chiangmai Pao Tongshat Saharat Toot Pid Kammun" [Students in Chiangmai Burned American Flag Ambassador Broke Promise], *Thai Rath*, January 10, 2517.

Non-American Home Front

Although the anti-American and anti-CIA protests were primarily participated and led by students, it was apparent that their success was spurred on by a sympathetic public, especially the Thai media, whose anti-American headlines and coverage amplified the impact student protestors had on the Thai public. In comparison to the students, local Thai experiences with the United States had not been as positive. Cultural exchanges that benefitted the students both intellectually and professionally, meant little to the local population whose contacts with the United States were neither as recreational nor intellectual, and at times conflictual. As Sarah Kovner has argued in her study of American bases overseas, the presence of American troops stationed abroad often led to unwanted friction with local communities.¹⁷⁵ This, however, was not inevitable. In the case of Okinawa, Kovner argued that the Japanese government successfully shielded the populace from the effects of American bases by “soundproofing” their presence. They paid for soundproofing of houses to prevent residents from hearing American planes taking off, enabling them to ignore the noise pollution and on-base activities.¹⁷⁶ Other visible signs of American presence such as street prostitution was curtailed by passing legislations that pushed sex workers to move indoors.¹⁷⁷ By contrast, official pretense by the Thanom government that there were no American bases in Thailand meant that there was no measure in place to soften the impact of American bases on Thai communities. Thus, Thai foreign policy that was contingent on developing close ties to the United States by hosting American troops compelled local communities to bear the social costs of the US-Thai relationship. It was within this context that

¹⁷⁵ Sarah Kovner, “The Soundproofed Superpower: American Bases and Japanese Communities, 1945-1972”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no.1 (2016).

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.89.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.45.

they developed their anti-American sentiments, later to be expressed in solidarity with student-led protests.

American bases in Thailand were often situated in provincial towns where they became the most urbanized part of the province they were in, sometimes attracting local economies and became a source of employment. Thais often found themselves in direct contact with American bases without any of the buffers afforded to their European or Japanese counterparts. The garishness of street prostitution in brazen display along American-themed bars and clubs that were built around those bases became an increasingly common feature of provincial life. With that came other social concerns like the spread of STDs and children born out of wedlock to servicemen, so-called “red-hair children.” Joint efforts were made by the Thai government and in-country American representatives to curb these problems on an ad hoc basis, and though they achieved moderate success, the spectacles of roadside sex workers, red-hair children, and drunken servicemen had already been pressed into local perception of what life with American bases brings.¹⁷⁸

Joint effort to curtail problems was not a standard protocol. Lack of accountability by both American and Thai officials often allowed crimes involving American servicemen to go unpunished or treated lightly for fear of damaging relations. In one incident, a speeding vehicle driven by an American serviceman was spotted halting in the middle of a fledgling Bangkok

¹⁷⁸ Sudina, “Domino by Design”, pp.219-223; “Wa G.I. Ton Kamlang Chak Thai Panha Sangkhom Ja Lod Noi Long” [Social Problems Will Decrease Once G.I.’s Withdraw from Thailand], *Siam Rath*, September 26, 2516; Siripan (pseudonym), “Wijai Wijarn: Sing Tee Na Pen Huang Yingkwa” [Research and Critique: More Concerning Issues], *Chao Thai*, September 6, 2516.

neighbourhood; a Thai woman ran out from the vehicle and screamed for help. She was chased by the American driver who grabbed and proceeded to beat her in front of onlookers, among whom was the head photographer for the popular *Thai Rath* newspaper that once boasted the widest circulation in the country. The photographer captured the image. *Thai Rath* reported that the “Yankee” punched the photographer, smashed his camera on the ground, then dragged the woman back to the car before driving away.¹⁷⁹ The license plate revealed that the vehicle was registered to the Joint United States Military Advisory Group (JUSMAG). Despite the photographer pressing charges, however, the culprit never appeared to formally face the charges at the police station. The next day, three officials from JUSMAG visited *Thai Rath*'s office to apologize, promising to keep their men in line, and pay for the damages, but asked the photographer to withdraw charges. He did. The name and rank of the “Yankee” involved was never made public.¹⁸⁰ In another incident in 1968, where an American serviceman was suspected of having murdered a local woman in Takhli, a provincial district that hosted an American base, American authorities in Takhli requested that the Thai police conduct their investigation and interrogations inside American base away from public eye, concerned that public scrutiny would provoke hostility from the community. A similar concern about crimes negatively affecting the US-Thai cooperation was privately expressed to the Ministry of Interior by the US Ambassador. Thanom tacitly echoed the same view when he shied away from publicly commenting about the Takhli murder but said that the American authorities were cooperating with the Thais on the case.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Sudina, “Domino by Design”, pp.235.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

Consequently, while urban Thai students learned through American examples of youth activism, pop culture, and intellectualism, ordinary Thais were treated to crime stories and less than noble American examples. Personal experiences were further compounded by friction stemming from formal interstate politics like the Symington Hearing, or one that stirred a nationalist response like in September 1973. Barry Goldwater, a US Senator from Arizona, was reported in the Thai press to have said that President Nixon may consider bombing Thailand if it were overrun by a communist attack like Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, due to Thailand's strategic importance.¹⁸² Although his comment was a carefully worded discussion of a hypothetical scenario, the specter of American bombs raining down on Thailand as it had in Vietnam seems to have promoted a feeling of betrayal and exploitation by the United States that Thais have been feeling as of late. Once again, the media sprung into action condemning Goldwater's comment as a violation of Thailand's sovereignty and indicative of American arrogance. *Baan Mueng* newspaper asked if "we" have had more than enough with the United States, while another columnist under the pseudonym Siripan, penned another article titled "Goldwater's Senselessness" accusing him of treating Thailand like an American colony to be subjected to American prerogative, and that he should "let go of such evil thoughts if he hopes to continue relations with Thailand as a friendly nation."¹⁸³ In Thai politics, with its modern identity and national pride constructed on never having been colonized, being accused of treating Thailand as a colony is most politically damaging. The National Student Center of Thailand (NSCT), though this incident predated their successful October uprising, decided to act out of

¹⁸² Bumrung Komolwattana, "Pratet Thai Nai Saita Kong Saharat" [Thailand in the Eyes of the United States], *Thai Daily*, September 3, 2516.

¹⁸³ Mod Kansai, "Lang Kao: Thai-Saharat" [After the News: Thailand-United States], *Baan Mueng*, September 6, 2516; Siripan, "Wijai Wijarn: Kwam Rai Sati Goldwater" [Goldwater's Senselessness], *Chao Thai*, September 7, 2516.

indignation. They lodged a formal letter of protest to the US Embassy that outlined similar arguments about sovereignty and condemned the US. They promptly received a public response that the embassy was still in the process of acquiring the full transcript of Goldwater's comments, but was certain that the senator's opinion does not reflect the official policy of the United States.¹⁸⁴

Like previous scandals and outcries that preceded, the Goldwater incident passed by as soon as the uproar dissipated, but many did not forget. To Washington, Thailand was a distant country hosting its bases to fight another distant war in Vietnam. To the Thais at home, the distant realities of Indochina was unravelling right on their doorsteps. Their experiences, rather disappointingly, had shown repeatedly after years of personal contacts that the United States and their troops were not the noble defender of freedom, nor were they ideal friends and brothers-in-arms that many Thais were led to believe. American foreign policy became a domestic matter for them, a rather personal one. A torrent of negative and ambivalent opinions expressed in the increasingly vocal press notwithstanding, local surge in anti-American sentiments did not lead to a mass movement when Thanom was in power. The students, through the NSCT, could at most lodge a complaint against Goldwater's comments with the US Embassy and waited for their response. It was implicitly understood that public gathering, including mass protests were disallowed. The dramatic transition to a civilian government afforded an opportunity for the public, both laypeople and students, to release their years of frustration against the US-Thai relations in full.

¹⁸⁴ "Stantut American Wa Kwam Hen Kong Goldwater Pen Kwam Hen Suan Tua Maishai Nayobai Rattaban Saharat" [American Embassy Claimed Goldwater's Comment was Personal Not the Policy of the United States], *Chao Thai*, September 6, 2516.

American Response

With the undercurrent of anti-Americanism swelling to the surface after years of repression, how did this impact the US-Thai relations beyond the level of street politics? How did the United States perceive and reacted to the situation in Thailand? In examining official responses and communications, American response to the growing tide of anti-American movements was minimal. It amounted to little more than formal apologies that the embassy had offered over the years. Washington in early 1974, about three months after Thanom's fall, was unphased by the situation in Thailand. Although developments on the ground had gone from bad to worse, American policymakers paid little attention to the demands and frustration of the Thai public. Their primary concern was the state of formal politics in Bangkok. Repeated assessments in Washington over the course of these three months, from the fall of Thanom in October to January 1974, maintained this same position. The initial report Kissinger submitted to Nixon on October 15, possibly less than a day after October 14th in Thailand, understandably assumed that Thanom's faction or associates would eventually retain control of government. A follow-up memorandum to Nixon submitted on October 29th, however, continued to make similar assumptions. It provided a more detailed observation on the changing landscape of Thai politics, and attributed the causes of Thanom's overthrow to dissatisfaction among the urban population with sluggish economy and corruption.¹⁸⁵ As such, student activism was only understood in terms of its relevance to domestic politics. Hence, in this revised assessment Nixon was informed that the students would remain relevant but "probably on the issues of Thailand's internal

¹⁸⁵ Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, October 29, 1973, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume E-12, Documents on East and Southeast Asia, 1973-1976, Document 377, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve12.d377> [accessed November 2021].

political future posed by the drafting of the new constitution.” As for implications for the United States, Kissinger remained convinced that it would be politics of continuity, since the main institutional players in Thai politics, the King, the Army, and the Sanya government had not indicated any change in attitude.¹⁸⁶

Additional assessment submitted to the Deputy National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, by the Executive Secretary of State, Thomas Pickering, a month later in November paid more attention to domestic upheaval by advising that it would be beneficial for American basing in Thailand to enter into a discussion with the Sanya government on troops reduction sooner than later, as Sanya might in due course be pressured politically by the students.¹⁸⁷ This was, nevertheless, a caveat rather than attention given to domestic situation as it was only one of the issues discussed within a longer memorandum on the subject of overall American force posture in Southeast Asia. Around this point in time, Washington’s overall attitude towards the Sanya government was, perhaps, best summarized by Kissinger in a separate conversation with the Chinese premiere Zhou En Lai, when he was asked by Zhou about the Sanya government in Thailand. Kissinger responded that “I frankly think he will be a transitional figure.”¹⁸⁸

The most detailed reporting of the Thai situation came from the US Embassy in Bangkok. What is interesting about this report is the conclusion drawn by the embassy. Their telegram to

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ Memorandum from the Executive Secretary of State (Pickering) to the Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft), Washington, November 29, 1973, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume E-12, Documents on East and Southeast Asia, 1973-1976, Document 378, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve12/d378> [accessed November 2021].

¹⁸⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, Beijing, November 13-14, 1973, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume XVIII, China, Document 60, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v18/d60> [accessed November 2021].

the Secretary of State, by now Kissinger who replaced Rogers in September 1973, via the State Department was dated January 30th 1974, roughly 20 days after Kintner was chased down by students in Chiang Mai. It provided a list of conspiracy theories Thais developed and warned the US government of the rising tide of anti-Americanism in Thailand. Yet, rather than taking a stronger tone in conveying the urgency of the situation or need to remedy public discontent, as Kintner himself had just recently experienced the kind of anti-American sentiment described in the telegram, the conclusion drawn was that unless there were additional scandals “we [the United States] ought to be able to ride out the current storm and allow the strong institutional factors favouring close bilateral cooperation to reassert themselves.” Institutional factors referenced here were, of course, the King, the Army, and the government.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, streams of reports and assessments received by Washington only reinforced their deeply entrenched outlook of Thai politics, built on their long experience with successive Thai military governments and formal institutions over public participation. The Sanya government, and the situation in Thailand were only a temporary storm to be waited out before it subsided.

On the strategic level, Thai democratic transition came at a convenient time for the United States, especially considering the state of the US-Thai cooperation in Indochina. By the time Thanom was overthrown in late 1973, the Paris Peace Accords was already signed and the last of American ground combat troops had left Vietnam earlier in the year. Thai SGUs were still operating in Laos and continued to provide support for combat functions in Cambodia. On paper, the battlefields of Indochina had become de-Americanised, rather successfully. There was little

¹⁸⁹ Telegram 1667 from the Embassy in Thailand to the Department of State, Washington, January 30, 1974, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume E-12, Documents on East and Southeast Asia, 1973-1976, Document 379, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve12/d379> [accessed November 2021].

to indicate that Thai public pressure could affect what the Nixon White House had worked for in Southeast Asia, be they Vietnamisation, troops withdrawal from Vietnam, or the Paris Peace Accords. The only possible threat Thai domestic affairs could have posed to American policy was, perhaps, that Sanya would be pressured into demanding American withdrawal from Thailand prematurely, as Pickering had raised strictly as a matter of possibility in his memo. All in all, American position in Southeast Asia along with Thailand's role as an American strategic partner were safe from the outrage of the Thai public. The broader perspective on American regional interests allowed Washington to stay at ease.

In spite of this, Thai political transition was already changing the way the United States engaged with Thailand by introducing new actors to their relationship, which prior to this had been heavily conducted on a government-to-government basis. Less than six months after Sanya came into power, public political participation continued to grow in strength. Protestors did not settle for voicing their discontent to formal institutions such as the US Embassy or the Thai government so that these institutions could act on their behalf. Rather, they wanted to have a direct involvement. A prime example of this was the case of Boonsong Lekakul, a Thai conservationist and activist, who wrote directly to Nixon in February 1974 to ask that the United States halt the construction of its radar station on a Thai mountain, Doi Inthanon, which was a nature reserve.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ Springsteen, George S. Memorandum for Major General Brent Scowcroft. Letter to the President Concerning the U.S. Assistance in the Construction of a Radar Facility in Thailand. 3 April 1974. White House Central Files, Subject Files, CO (Countries) (Box 68). Richard Nixon Library and Museum (hereafter RNLN), Yorba Linda, California.

Aside from asking the United States to prioritise environmental concern over strategic interest, the demand was unprecedented in the history of American base construction in Thailand in that American basing had hitherto been conducted under the prerogative of the Thai military government not open to public questioning. Now, a layperson like Boonsong was aiming to insert himself into the formulation. Boonsong's letter was also written with a hint of veiled threat, though it might not have sounded threatening to the United States, indicating his awareness of the growing potency of student politics and intention to leverage it. He urged that it was in American interest to cease construction, since the media was holding the United States responsible, and angry students could resort to violence; a potentially dangerous scenario that the US could prevent by ending their construction.¹⁹¹ Boonsong was able to meet with Kintner in Bangkok, as well as gaining Washington's attention, albeit briefly. Boonsong received a courteous, but passive, response from the State Department telling him that they had nothing useful to add further to Boonsong's meeting with Kintner, and that it was best he takes up the issue with the Thai government.¹⁹² Boonsong was unsuccessful but a fragmented, currently student-led, Thai civil society was beginning to emerge as a new actor in Thai foreign policy within a few months of Thanom's fall.

Conclusion

Under the Thanom regime in Thailand between 1963-1973, the United States benefitted much from his pro-American foreign and security policy alignment. This was not only due to

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Baxter, John B. Department of State. Correspondence to Boonsong Lekagul from the Association for the Conservation of Wild Life, Thailand. 1 April 1974. White House Central Files, Subject Files, CO (Countries) (Box 68). RNLM, Yorba Linda, California.

Thailand's anti-communist Cold War foreign policy, but also the state of its domestic politics.

Thanom's authoritarian control over Thai government and society enabled him to enact his policies, especially those pertaining to the war in Indochina, without resistance or scrutiny of the kind that the US government faced from Congress or the public. The collapse of his regime was, therefore, a watershed moment both in Thai politics and the course of the US-Thai relationship.

Although the root and the immediate cause of regime transition towards the civilian-led Sanya government was domestic, Thailand's close relationship with the United States was a significant contributory factor. American presence in Thailand over the years had impacted multiple layers of Thai society. Their intimate involvement in Thailand ultimately led to direct and indirect cultural learning and knowledge transfer to its Southeast Asian host. American examples and propagation of its ideals of freedom and democracy captured public aspiration, while its other mediocre examples of appalling conducts excited local xenophobic impulses. This has been most apparent in the youth mostly represented by the students who became a new proponent of anti-American movement. Arguably, as a demographic group, students were one of the biggest benefactors of Thailand's relationship with the United States. As part of a younger, more educated generation, they were able to absorb, interpret, and internalize multiple layers of American cultural products. Their formative years were shaped ubiquitously by the music of Bob Dylan, the fashion of Woodstock, and stories of American student protests. They disparaged American debauchery and official interference, but did not dislike American presence. They disliked American troops but not American products, education, or perspectives. They embraced the United States socially but not politically.

With limited negative experience from direct contact with Americans of their own, unlike local Thais such as those in base town communities, students and youth grievances towards the United States was largely intellectual. Imported American examples and anti-Vietnam ideas made familiar to them by the likes of *The Social Science Review* journal encouraged them to indigenize these lessons by formulating questions about their own relationship with their government and their country's place in the wider world. American sources of learning became a catalyst for actualizing their own political aspirations. For students who went abroad this meant higher education and individual freedom guaranteed under a constitution such as the right to free speech and freedom of assembly. For the students at home, this ranged from popular culture to inspiration drawn from their counter-parts primarily in the US, and to a limited extent, Europe, whose stories of student protests provided them with examples of how students can be a force for change. Much of this, however, was kept brewing under the surface through Thanom's suppression of domestic political participation. His overthrow allowed much of the political frustration that Thanom had suppressed to come to the foreground resulting in such energy being directed against both the status quo in Thailand and the United States. Thus, as the students angrily chased down Ambassador Kintner's car, they were doing so on the back of years of cultural learning, knowledge transfer, and built-up political frustration over the past decade.

This was, nevertheless, insufficient on its own to warrant much interest from the United States who considered these changes to be temporary, and waited to return to the status quo arrangement of the US-Thai relations, that was not only government-to-government, but personally connected to the top Thai decisionmakers who could be reliably trusted to enable American policies. Yet, within the first few months of 1974, there were already signs to indicate

that the political transition was more than temporary. Student-led movements continued to grow in strength and was slowly maturing into a new actor on the Thai political scene. Their political influence created space for other actors from civil society such as the press, now uncensored, and activists like Boonsong to participate in the previously sedated Thai polity, extending their roles into foreign policy, albeit in a minor capacity at this point. Taken together, these developments had been gaining momentum steadily since their initial Thung Yai campaign that toppled the Thanom government.

Hence, upon coming to office as a government that owed its ascent to a student movement without the same means of controlling public pressure as their military predecessors, the Sanya government was saddled with an obligation to navigate the mounting public pressure. For the remainder of 1974, Ambassador Kintner would have to figure out whether both Thailand and the United States were still as eager to remain as interested and invested in each other as they once did. Sanya, for his part, had to forge a new path for Thai foreign policy that would not attract the wrath of the now engaged public as much as the policies of his predecessor, as the tide of the war in Vietnam moved closer to home. The fall of Thanom in October 1973, thus marked a transition not only in Thai politics, but a transition away from the foreign policy of the Thanom years that had long been the cornerstone of the US-Thai relations.

Chapter 3: Policy Re-adjustment.

After having discussed the social aspect of the US-Thai relations in order to familiarise readers with the fomented pressure from “down below” pushing its way to the forefront in the previous chapter, this chapter will resume its intergovernmental narrative to demonstrate the continual impact that the political transition towards a democratic government had on the course of the US-Thai relationship. In much of the scholarship, the years between 1973 to 1975 has often been treated as a monolithic timespan representing the final days of American presence in Indochina. This is particularly true to the case of Thailand in the immediate period following the fall of Thanom under the new civilian government of Sanya Dhammasak. The Sanya government, possibly because of its short term in office of only a little over a year, has been either undiscussed or given cursory treatment in the literature with much of it unrelated to foreign policy. Authors such as Clark D. Neher, and Jeffrey Race, who were writing close to the time were more interested in what the transition meant for Thai politics. Neher, for instance, was more interested in post-Thanom structure of Thai government such as a new bicameral parliament and the new constitution.¹⁹³ Jeffrey Race, likewise, was interested in the new post-Thanom constitution.¹⁹⁴ For those that wrote on foreign policy during Sanya’s term, a similar approach persisted. Leszyk Buszynski, for instance, examined Thai attempts to balance its foreign policy against changing circumstances, with minimal attention to the Sanya government as an actor in state affairs.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Clark D. Neher, “Stability and Instability in Contemporary Thailand”, *Asian Survey* 15, no.12 (1975).

¹⁹⁴ Jeffrey Race, “Thailand in 1974: A New Constitution”, *Asian Survey* 15, no.2 (1975)

¹⁹⁵ Leszek Buszynski, “Thailand: The Erosion of a Balanced Foreign Policy”, *Asian Survey* 22, no.11 (1982)

Upon closer examination, however, the American final exit from Thailand in 1976 was a culmination of incremental changes that occurred gradually, in which the Sanya government, in its short tenure, contributed to in considerable ways. The reverberations from the displacement of Thanom's rule with a civilian government could be felt beyond the domestic level and inevitably affected Thai foreign policy. The new Prime Minister, in a sharp break from his predecessor, was willing to entertain the pro-withdrawal view that had been promoted by Thanat Khoman, and adopted a direction that clearly deviated from what the United States had grown used to in Thailand by taking a more neutralist stance in Indochina through calculated reduction of Thai roles and involvement. His direction added another layer of difficulty to an already challenging time for American policymakers, as the Thai transition coincided with another significant event for the United States in Indochina: the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, which brought an end to direct American combat responsibilities in Vietnam. It was a time when the United States had to evaluate the purpose of its position in Thailand and Southeast Asia at large, as the two were inevitably intertwined. The year following the signing of the peace agreement and the Thai civilian transition, thus became an important period for both the United States and Thailand to reevaluate their foreign policy interests and priorities.

To this end, the United States wanted to expand Thai roles beyond Indochina so that it could become better integrated with the larger part of American Cold War containment effort in Asia-Pacific. This was not without problems. Beginning in early 1974, the US Embassy in Bangkok, particularly Ambassador Kintner, came to recognise that the dynamics that once underwrote the US-Thai bilateralism were slowly slipping away from underneath them. He grew anxious over the urgent need to address the situation by proactively engaging with Thailand.

Their attempt to do so was a time-consuming process rife with internal debates and uncertainties over the direction and priorities of American relationship with Thailand. It was also here that the divide between the top and ground-level management of American foreign policy emerged, due to their differing interpretation of Thailand's value to American strategy.

Altogether, the findings of this chapter argue that the United States continued to have long-term security interests in Thailand after it had officially ended active combat involvement in Vietnam. The challenge was, then, to persuade Bangkok to accept more responsibility than it was willing to shoulder, especially when the pro-American Thanom had been replaced by a civilian government built on a torrent of popular anti-American sentiment. It will also argue that the Sanya government as a foreign policy actor was largely responsible for repositioning Thailand away from the United States through three policies it implemented, which were to decrease American presence in Thailand, seek reconciliation with neighbouring communist countries, and initiate resumption of relationship with China. This chapter will cover the period of 1974, and begins by establishing respective views and interests of Thailand and United States.

New Direction/Old Constraints

The October uprising disrupted the US-Thai cooperation as much as it raised anti-American sentiment internally. There were important residual issues from the days of Thailand's close alignment with the United States under Thanom that was left to the Sanya government to resolve. During Thanom's time in power, the United States had signed the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973. The accords served as a peace treaty between the United States and North

Vietnam. It promised, among other things, withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam, which left Thanom greatly concerned for Thailand's own safety, since he had attached Thailand's Cold War strategy to American military solution in Vietnam. Thanom wrote to Nixon in September 1973 to remind him of the spread of the conflict from Vietnam into Laos and Cambodia, which could be taken as Thanom's acknowledgement that Thailand had become endangered by the fighting that had reached closer to the Thai borders. He closed his message by asking that American support for Thai anti-communist campaigns continue unhindered by the Paris peace deal.¹⁹⁶

As a sign of Thanom's anxiety about the US-Thai cooperation after the Paris Peace Accords, the Thai embassy in Washington was instructed to arrange a meeting between Thanom's representative, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Chatchai Choonhavan, and President Nixon via the State Department. Simultaneously, to ensure the success of such meeting taking place, the Thai ambassador in D.C., Anand Panyarachun, wrote to General Haig to ask that he "intercede towards this end."¹⁹⁷ Thanom intended for Chatchai to personally deliver his letter to Nixon during Chatchai's visit to Washington between the 5th-8th of October. The planned meeting did not materialize. Thanom's letter was left undelivered until it was received on October 10th.¹⁹⁸ When Thanom was overthrown a mere four days later, the United States decided

¹⁹⁶ Kittikachorn, Thanom. Letter to the President of the United States of America from the Office of the Prime Minister, Thailand. 14 September 1973. White House Central Files, Subject Files, CO (Countries) (Box 68). RNLN, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁹⁷ Panyarachun, Anand. Letter to Alexander M. Haig from the Royal Thai Embassy, Washington D.C. 14 September 1973. White House Central Files, Subject Files, CO (Countries) (Box 68). RNLN, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁹⁸ Pickering, Thomas R. Memorandum for Major General Brent Scowcroft. Letter to the President from former Prime Minister of Thailand. 17 October 1973. White House Central Files, Subject Files, CO (Countries) (Box 68). RNLN, Yorba Linda, California.

not to respond due to his departure from office.¹⁹⁹ There was also another related matter of American troops reduction in Thailand that had already taken place since it was first negotiated between Thanat and Leonard Unger, but remained unsettled on if or when American forces would leave Thailand. What should happen to these forces after the last of American combat troops had left Vietnam by mid-1973 was not yet discussed. The new Royal Thai Government (RTG) under Sanya was, therefore, met with two divergent directions in its policy towards the United States: to continue with the status quo established under Thanom, whereby Thailand was the main base of American operations in Southeast Asia, or jettison its involvement with the United States in favour of an alternative policy to be decided on later. Both options posed a considerable risk to Thai security, especially now that American combat forces had already left Vietnam after 1973.

Thai decision-making process was often not documented, difficult to ascertain whether there was a clear plan for resolving this dilemma. However, Thai policy towards the US during Sanya's tenure reacted heavily to multiple domestic circumstances. For one, Sanya had no prior experience in politics before being appointed Prime Minister. Foreign policy, was even more alien to him. To compensate for his lack of expertise, Sanya looked to members of the previous government for assistance by appointing Thanat Khoman as his foreign policy advisor. Thanat brought with him a wealth of experience and in-depth familiarity with the state of the US-Thai relationship, along with his public clout that had remained over the years since his dismissal in 1971. Thanat had a long history of engaging with the student community during his time as foreign minister, and arguably was one of the few government figures that contributed to

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

rejuvenating the intellectual atmosphere among university students by reviving their interest in politics. During the Thanom years when public debates and discussions on domestic politics and government was a taboo, interest in politics among students shifted towards foreign policy. Thanat was often invited to speak at Thailand's major universities. These forums frequently drew large crowds and encouraged students to form their own debate sessions on Thai foreign policy. It enabled Thanat to communicate his ideas to the masses outside of government. As the popularity of *The Social Science Review* was soaring by 1973, its commentaries and articles commonly cited in other newspapers, Thanat also used the journal as a venue to promote his pro-withdrawal view to the masses outside of government.

Printed between May to August of 1973, Thanat's article detailed the course of US-Thai relations from the days of Sarit and Eisenhower to the time of signing the Paris Peace Accords. His writing demonstrated that Thanat's view on the need for Thailand to detach itself from the United States had not changed. There is little reason to believe that his foreign policy advice to Sanya should deviate from this view, particularly now that the Thanom-Prapas faction had been removed. Thanat argued that American use of the U-Tapao Airbase, the largest of its kind in Asia, breached the original agreement that limited its use to supporting Vietnam operations. He reasoned that the signing of the Paris Accord should result in ending American use of the base.²⁰⁰ Thanat also took this opportunity to distance himself from successive policies that took Thailand closer to the United States. He was firm that he only supported American presence in Thailand for as long as it was in Thai national interest, namely the defense against communism. At times this took an accusatory tone to suggest that the US had been dishonest about their relationship

²⁰⁰ Thanat Khoman, "Neung Natee: Panha Tahaan Tangdao Nai Pratet Thai Lae Nayobai Tang Pratet Kong Thai" [One Minute: Problems with Foreign Troops in Thailand and Thai Foreign Policy], *Pim Thai*, May 5, 2516.

with Thailand to mislead public opinion. In one example, he insisted that Sarit initially approved deployment of American forces to Thailand to deter communist aggression from Laos, a matter of Thai interest, the US was to announce that “Thailand approved the United States’ request.” However, the White House disregarded their agreed statement and announced that American deployment was done “upon the request of Thailand.”²⁰¹ He concluded that “the biggest benefactors of the Vietnam War are Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore. Thailand benefits the least but shoulders the heaviest burden and bears the most disgrace from the moral degradation, especially around American bases.”²⁰²

The direction that Thanat would like to pursue during his time with Sanya was, therefore, clear from the message of his article. Equally of importance, was that he had been promoting his views to the masses during his time away from politics, and therefore could trust that he would find support from the now politically engaged public. Thanat used his new position to address the National Assembly twice in 1974, to call for withdrawal of foreign troops. He also submitted a bill to the assembly to cement this goal legislatively. Fortunately for the United States whose forces were still in Thailand, the bill did not go further to vote.²⁰³ The inclusion of Thanat, further implicated other structural changes within the Thai government. Sanya’s civilian leadership was not dependent on American patronage such as those given to Thanom via aid packages and Project Lotus. This offered them relative freedom in considering alternative policy options. Additionally, civilian rule also emboldened civilians within the bureaucracy, which led to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) regaining initiative in policy-making ahead of the

²⁰¹ “Wa American Bidbuen Nak Ang Thai Korong Hai Kaoma” [American Distorted Truth Claimed Thailand Asked for Their Entry], *Pim Thai*, May 2, 2516.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Lydia S. Na Ranong, “Thai Foreign Policy Since October 1973”, *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1975): 197.

military.²⁰⁴ As John Funston argued in his analysis of Thai policy-making in the age of civilian leadership, the MFA did not view foreign policy merely as means to achieve national security like the military once did. In fact, they resented such formulation, as it forced them to surrender policy initiatives to their military counterparts. The ministry believed that it was this attitude from the outset that welded Thailand so tightly to the fate of the United States in Vietnam.²⁰⁵

The revitalised MFA was free to broaden the scope of their policy. They began by separating economic cooperation from security-driven political cooperation. Although the United States had been the single largest source of foreign aid and assistance to Thailand, throughout the period of the Vietnam War Thailand was also a benefactor of a range of other non-American assistance from Japan, West Germany, Singapore, the Netherlands, and the UK. A bulk of development assistance also came via members of the Colombo Plan, who offered assistance in areas such as education, urban planning, and housing.²⁰⁶ Thailand had also maintained economic relations with communist bloc countries such as Poland and Yugoslavia. Thus, capitalising on these ties was a glaring possibility. The new Thai Foreign Minister, Charunphan Itsarangkun Na Ayutthaya, alluded to this as “balance of interests,” to offset Thailand’s overemphasis on politico-military cooperation with the United States by strengthening other areas of cooperation with countries other than the US, particularly in Southeast Asia and China.²⁰⁷ A new priority for Thailand was, therefore, to actively engage more proactively with the aforementioned countries

²⁰⁴ John Funston, “The Role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Thailand”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 9, no.3 (1987): 234-236.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.236.

²⁰⁶ *Kwam Chuay Leua Chak Tang Pratet* [Foreign Assistance]. MT 3.1.5.9, Box 25. National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand.

²⁰⁷ Leszek Buszynski, “Thailand: The Erosion of a Balanced Foreign Policy”, *Asian Survey* 22, no.11 (1982): 1040.

and Thailand's communist neighbours, especially China, for as long as these countries do not constitute immediate or existential threat.²⁰⁸

Officially, Prime Minister Sanya announced in June of 1974 that his government would seek friendly relations with any country “regardless of their ruling ideology and despite economic and social differences. To come to an understanding with countries with whom there may be conflicts to pave the way for normalised relations. And lastly to adjust already established relationships to suit the current situation for the sake of fair and mutual benefits.”²⁰⁹

Sanya's carefully worded announcement did little to veil over his overarching message that Thailand would no longer confine itself to anti-communist, pro-American, foreign policy.

Bangkok began implementing this new foreign policy approach by making overtures to China, albeit tentatively. The reason for this was again partly domestic. While the Thai military as an institution had been pushed aside, military officials within the Sanya government could still voice their concern through formal state security apparatus such as the Ministry of Defense and the Thai National Security Council. These officers retained their suspicion of China, feared that closer relations could become another means for China to subvert Thailand internally, so the RTG acted with caution. It would take another year before Thai relations with China became normalised, but under Sanya the effort to build a bilateral rapport was made, and China reciprocated. Beijing was well aware of Thai distrust, but countered it by both reassuring Charunphan that they would not act against Thai security, and sold 50,000 tons of diesel oil to

²⁰⁸ Lydia S. Na Ranong, “Thai Foreign Policy Since October 1973”, *Asian Affairs* (1975): 199.

²⁰⁹ Dhammasak, Sanya. Policy Declaration to the National Legislative Assembly. 7 June 1974. Thai National Assembly Library, Bangkok, Thailand.

Thailand at a discounted price to assist with Thailand's fuel shortage as a gesture of good will. The discounted oil price was often referred to in Thai as "friendship price."²¹⁰ It was a grand gesture by China and certainly a positive signal for Thailand, but re-building relationship with China would require more time and did not take precedent over the immediate security environment in Indochina that was closer to Thailand.

Along with making overtures to China, Bangkok went on a diplomatic offensive to neutralize threats from across its borders. Firstly, Thailand sought to improve its working relationship with allies in Southeast Asia to enhance its international position. To achieve this, the Thai government began by looking to Thanat's brainchild, the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN), that he had founded in 1967. Thailand became engaged in active consultation with other ASEAN member states on ways to manage the conflicts in Laos and Cambodia. Together, the ASEAN bloc voted in solidarity in the United Nations against recognizing the Cambodian government in exile under Norodom Sihanouk that was supported by both the USSR and China.²¹¹ Thai success in voting against China in the UN with the ASEAN bloc without jeopardizing its newly improved economic relationship with China proved the viability of the Thai approach to decouple Cold War politics from the wider scope of foreign policy. Hence, within a year of coming into office, the Sanya government had steered Thailand closer towards a path of diversified foreign relations that was far less dependent on the United States than it had been in the preceding decade.²¹²

²¹⁰ Surachai Sirikrai, "Thai Perceptions of China and Japan", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 12, no.3 (1990): 250; National Security Council. Memorandum of Conversation, October 1, 1974. National Archives. Digital National Security Archive (DNSA): Kissinger Transcripts: A Verbatim Records of U.S. Diplomacy [accessed July 2022].

²¹¹ Na Ranong, "Thai Foreign Policy Since October 1973", p.199.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p.200

Thailand's own security assessment also changed drastically by 1974. Rural revolts and insurgency in Thailand had been growing steadily over the years and worsened during Sanya's tenure. From 1973 onwards there was a trend of sustained and growing scale of attacks by domestic insurgents against infrastructure, workers, and military units in their areas of influence.²¹³ Official intelligence estimates suggested that the number of insurgents operating in Thailand increased by 3,000 within a single year as of 1973, totaling at 8,000 fully armed and operational insurgents. The northeastern region bordering Laos where movements of men and materiel between Thailand, Laos, and North Vietnam were prolific had been the most vulnerable. Thai officials firmly believed, based on intelligence cooperation with the Lao government and debriefing of communist defectors, that this was resultant of consistent and systematic support for Thai communists by the Pathet Lao Communist and North Vietnam.²¹⁴ These developments ran counter to the long-held Thai assumption that cooperation with the United States was the best means of stifling regional communism. It was difficult for the RTG to ignore the situation, as it was an assessment brought to their attention by Thailand's own intelligence establishment and had been one of Thanat's public criticism against cooperation with the United States: whatever damage American military power could inflict on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, had little impact on Thailand's own domestic insurgency.²¹⁵

²¹³ Race, "Thailand in 1974: A New Constitution", p.164; "Phu Kokarnrai Kukkam Nak Ti Changwat Nan" [Heavy Insurgent Attacks in Nan], *Siam Rath*, January 4, 2516; "Ti Pulomlo Ket Changwat Loei Laew Nawikkayotin Ying Kranam" [At Pulomlo in Loei Province Where Marines Fired Salvos], *Chao Thai*, January 20, 2516.

²¹⁴ Ekkasan Rai Ngarn Kao Pratet Lao Rueng Vietnam Nuea Sanubsanun Phu Kokarnrai Communist Nai Thai. [Intelligence Report on Laos. Subject: North Vietnam's Support for Thai Communist Terrorists] September 9, 2517.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

What proved to be an effective remedy to the threat presented by domestic insurgency was a policy so-called “politics ahead of the military” (Karnmueng Nam Tahan), a policy developed by the Thai 2nd Army located in the northeastern region of the country. This primarily included abstaining from using force and engaging with the local populace through development programs and introducing democracy as an alternative ideology to communist revolution. The guiding principle behind this policy was derived from having learned from communist defectors that these were the exact tactics insurgents had used to gain local sympathy, but with communism rather than democracy serving as an alternative ideology to the status quo.²¹⁶ The success by the 2nd Army convinced Bangkok that their communist problem had a domestic root, as opposed to being an external subversive movement exported by the likes of China and North Vietnam. Much of the progress Thailand made in this regard, be they intelligence gathering or policy implementation were done with little American involvement. It provided Thailand with a lesson in the importance of looking inwards rather than for external aid. Whereas Thanom had treated relationship with the United States as an ultimate solution to Thailand's communist problems, the departure of American ground troops from Vietnam and the increasing insurgent attacks in Thailand compelled the Sanya government to adopt the political will necessary to execute a new policy that contrasted sharply from what had been done during the Thanom years.

Additionally, close cooperation with the United States was becoming an obstacle to Thai counterinsurgency. Since the RTG attributed much of the growing insurgent strength to support

²¹⁶ Sibadi Nopprasert, “*Anurakniyom Thai Kub Karn Tang Pratet B.E. 2516-2521*” [Thai Conservatives and Foreign Affairs, 1973-1978] (unpublished doctoral thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2017), pp.65-68.

and infiltration to neighbouring countries, particularly Laos and North Vietnam,²¹⁷ they sought to improve relations with those countries in a bid to cut off Thai insurgents from their supporters.

This was achieved relatively easily with Laos, once the last of the Thai SGUs were withdrawn from the country by June 1974. The end to Thai participation in the Lao conflict culminated in the return of Thai prisoners of war and a visit by Charunphan to Vientiane later that year.²¹⁸

North Vietnam, on the other hand, presented a bigger diplomatic demand. Hanoi originally welcomed the overthrow of Thanom, and signaled its willingness to normalise relations with Thailand by publishing a statement in the state-run newspaper that called for an end to US-Thai collusion against North Vietnam, but did not make any specific demands as pre-conditions to restoring diplomatic relations with Thailand.²¹⁹ Nevertheless, by the summer of 1974, statements from Hanoi adopted a harsher tone, calling for repatriation of Vietnamese nationals who had escaped the war into Thailand, and that it was the RTG's responsibility to ensure that Thai territory shall not be used in support of the US military, thus Thai rapprochement with Hanoi became conditional on the withdrawal of American bases in the country.²²⁰

Hanoi's condition became a major obstacle for Thailand to continue its diplomatic effort towards North Vietnam, for as much as Thai strategy was to develop stronger relationships outside of the current one with the United States, these newly cultivated relationships were still in their infancy. None of them could, at least not in 1974, provide Thailand with the kind of

²¹⁷ Ekkasan Rai Ngarn Kao Pratet Lao Rueng Vietnam Nuea Sanubsanun Phu Kokarnrai Communist Nai Thai. [Intelligence Report on Laos. Subject: North Vietnam's Support for Thai Communist Terrorists] September 9, 2517.

²¹⁸ Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p. 171.

²¹⁹ "North Vietnamese Relations with Thailand: Evolution of DRV Policy since the Paris Peace Agreement," Central Intelligence Agency, March 20, 1975.

²²⁰ Ibid.; Race, "Thailand in 1974: A New Constitution", p.164.

assistance and security that the United States had been providing Thailand. Yet, Hanoi had made an ultimatum for Thailand to choose between continuing to host American forces or renormalising relations with North Vietnam. To compound the problem, American air assets and personnel from South Vietnam were transferred to bases in Thailand, thus further enlarged American presence in Thailand when hostilities between the US and North Vietnam were supposed to have ended after the signing of the Paris peace deal. According to Thanat, the transfer of American assets resulted in Thailand becoming host to one of the largest American air and land power in the region.²²¹ Consequently, while the RTG could not accommodate Hanoi's demand in its entirety, it did attempt to readjust its basing arrangement with the United States, if at least to prove Thai resolve towards coexistence to Hanoi.²²² The MFA was a key proponent of this effort. Throughout 1974, Bangkok pushed for an accelerated pace of American troops reduction in Thailand. By the end of the year the amount of American personnel stationed in Thailand was reduced to 25,000 and 350 aircrafts. Though the numbers were still considerable, this was a far cry from the over 45,000 personnel and seven airbases that were originally in the country.²²³

It is worth noting that the RTG's action should not be taken to mean they did not want to remain close to the United States, although much of their policies were by default done either without needing American assistance like their "politics-ahead-of-military" counter-insurgency tactics, or done at the expense of the United States like removing American assets to appeal to

²²¹ Thanat Khoman, "Neung Natee: Panha Tahaan Tangdao Nai Pratet Thai Lae Nayobai Tang Pratet Kong Thai" [One Minute: Problems with Foreign Troops in Thailand and Thai Foreign Policy], *Pim Thai*, May 8, 2516.

²²² Buszynski, "Thailand: The Erosion of a Balanced Foreign Policy", p.1040.

²²³ Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p.178.

North Vietnam. Rather, their action indicates the seriousness of the Sanya government to implement what foreign minister Charunphan announced as “balance of interests,” which meant they could not jeopardise their ongoing relationship with the United States until Thailand could successfully normalise relations with its neighbours. Kissinger referred to this more bluntly in private as an attempt to “establish ties with others before they break ties with us.”²²⁴ This resulted in Thailand trying to play two sides at the same time, its policies led to no decisive outcome. On the one hand, this was not entirely the fault of the RTG. It was dealt with a difficult international environment after the Paris accords that saw American combat forces leaving Vietnam, and communism moving closer to the Thai borders. On the other hand, the Sanya government was structurally built so that decision-making on issues of great importance was discernably slow and indecisive.

Sanya's premiership, as argued by Clark D. Neher, was appointed to serve as an interim transitional government whose purpose was to reintroduce domestic stability. It was imperative for them to balance the interests of many domestic groups from the students and the press to the recently sidelined military and resurgent civilian agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²²⁵ All of these actors held strong opinions on the future direction of Thailand's relationship with the United States. Thai opening to China and compromise with Hanoi were prime examples of how the need to balance the interest of domestic players affected Thai foreign policy. In the first instance, Sanya was careful not to dismiss the concern voiced by the Ministry

²²⁴ The Secretary's 8:00 a.m. Regional Staff Meeting, Thursday, November 14, 1974. 15 November 1974. National Archives. Digital National Security Archive (DNSA): Kissinger Transcripts: A Verbatim Records of U.S. Diplomacy [accessed July 2022].

²²⁵ Neher, “Stability and Instability in Contemporary Thailand”, pp.1103-1104.

of Defense and the National Security Council about rapprochement with China, and was only willing to go as far as resuming trade. In the latter case with Hanoi, Sanya allowed the MFA to take the lead in pursuing further American troops reduction in Thailand, against the complaints of the Ministry of Defense, and by extension the Thai military, who had heated arguments with the MFA that such a level of reduction was too excessive and could amount to pivoting away from the United States. In the age of civilian rule, however, the MFA prevailed.²²⁶ Overall, the Sanya government was juggling between reacting to international circumstance by balancing Thailand's place in Indochina against communist neighbours as well as balancing its government domestically against powerful stakeholders in government. Under Sanya, therefore, Thailand adopted a series of reactionary measures that were reactive to domestic circumstance, half-hearted in its diplomatic conduct from trying to appease multiple sides. Nevertheless, it was a successful effort in paving a new direction for Thailand, away from the path that Thanom had led Thailand towards.

Lasting Interests

It becomes necessary to ask how the United States interpreted the policies of the RTG, and what interests the United States believed it had in Thailand, since agreeing to an end to hostility with Hanoi. Washington's attitude towards Thailand after having withdrawn American troops from Vietnam was noticeably colder. Dialogue between the US government and their Thai counterparts that were often frequent with relative ease of access to the highest authority became infrequent, and were often through formal bureaucratic channels rather than expedited access

²²⁶ Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p.178.

between top officials. The case of ambassador Anand having to ask General Haig to intervene to arrange a meeting between Chatchai and Nixon represented a stark contrast to the multiple meetings that Thanom, Thanat, and Prapas could previously secure with the President. The widening gap between the two sides was becoming apparent to Ambassador Kintner. Having personally experienced anti-American protests by student protestors, and as Washington's primary representative in the country, few understood the urgent need to improve relations with Thailand more than Kintner. By early 1974, despite the Paris agreement, Kintner was convinced that Thailand still held an important place in American Indochina strategy.

Throughout the summer, Kintner became restive over what he believed was Washington's inactive stance on Thailand. It was around this time that he sent several diplomatic cables back to the United States in the hope of alerting them to what was at stake in Thailand. One of these messages was Kintner's strongly-worded lengthy telegram to Kissinger on June 7 to express concern and urged action. The telegram opened by alerting Kissinger of potential danger that American disinterest in Thailand could pose to Kissinger's own diplomatic achievement in Indochina, including the Paris Accords:

“You should become personally aware of trends potentially averse to U.S. interests in Thailand [...]

Your Paris Accords could become unstuck if the Thais become disenchanted with our

lackadaisical response to what they perceive to be legitimate requests levied on the U.S.”²²⁷

²²⁷ US Embassy Bangkok. The Dilemma In US-Thai Relations: Continued Demands But Dwindling Resources. 7 June 1974. 032400326, Box 17, Thailand (11). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library (Hereafter GRFPL), Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Kintner further lamented that he had been meeting with principal policymakers including Brent Scowcroft, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Larry Eagleburger, Counselor of the US Department of State Hal Sonnenfeldt, and the Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger; anyone who could steer Washington's policy, to convince them of the difficulty his embassy was facing, and that he needed more support to conduct business in Thailand, as the situation there had gotten more challenging. Kintner felt this problem was exacerbated by American inability to recognise the difference between pre- and post-1973 Thailand, that is "the operating style developed in the pre-1973 environment in Thailand was one which officially believed that Americans could do no wrong."²²⁸

In reading Kintner's series of telegram it became clear that the "institutional factors," the trifecta of the king, the military, and the Thai government, that the United States and Kintner himself once thought would intervene in favour of the US-Thai relations after the fall-out from the October protest had died down did not materialise. Sanya's government was reacting to a multitude of actors and circumstances that led them to take measures that by default deviated from the status quo of the US-Thai cooperation, and by the summer of 1974, a little more than six months after Sanya had been appointed, Kintner had to revise his assessment of the situation in Bangkok. Furthermore, the ambassador's communication with Washington provided an insight into Thailand's residual roles in Indochina that had by then transcended facilitation of the Vietnam War, and thus, as Kintner argued, should remain the focal point of American strategy in Southeast Asia even after the Paris peace deal. For one, years of American investment and effort to turn Thailand into an American regional stronghold for the Vietnam War also led the United

²²⁸ Ibid.

States to rely on Thailand for an array of vital activities outside of Vietnam. Thailand's diminishing role in the Vietnam War was boosted by its roles in Cambodia and Laos. In addition to Thai SGUs in Laos that was not withdrawn until June 1974, Thailand became an integrated network for ammunition and supply lines in the region that supported thousands of American service personnel and air squadrons that had not left Southeast Asia. Thailand remained the only supply route to Laos to keep the beleaguered Laotian government reinforced. The Udon Tani airbase in Thailand's northeast continued to provide pilots, training, and maintenance for the Lao Air Force. American support network for the Cambodian republican government, so-called "SCOOT" (Support Cambodia Out Of Thailand), was still operating out of Thailand. Materiel, food, and ammunition for Cambodia had to be either shipped or flown out of Thai ports and bases. Though efforts were made to find an alternative route, none proved to be more viable than routing such large volumes of supplies through Thailand.²²⁹

More importantly, Thailand had assumed roles for American interests extending beyond Indochina. In Kintner's assessment, Thailand was the most suitable location for establishing a line of communication with American assets in the Indian Ocean. American Navy patrol flights performing surveillance on Soviet submarine and surface ships in the Indian Ocean were often scheduled out of U-Tapao. The Bangkok-based US Navy construction headquarters was also expected to supervise construction and maintenance of American facilities on Diego Garcia.²³⁰ In a partially declassified section of his communication with Washington, Kintner also reminded Nixon via his communique to Alexander Haig, Nixon's Special Assistant, that Thailand had been

²²⁹ Kintner, William R. Re US-Thai Relations. 10 June 1974. 032400326, Box 17, Thailand (11). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²³⁰ Ibid.

providing “support for US objectives vis-à-vis communist superpowers.”²³¹ While it is not clear what he might have been referring to in this regard, this could possibly be alluding to clandestine activities such as those carried out at the Ramasun station, the largest listening post outside of Berlin, intercepting communications from China and the Soviet Union. With much more than just support for South Vietnam being at stake in Thailand, a disruption to American presence induced by the lack of or discontinuation of active Thai support for American strategy would jeopardise American sunk costs in the region, especially considering that the war in Cambodia was in its critical phase. Thus, the ending of American combat operations in Vietnam should not be equated to an end to the need for American power in the region, nor should it be taken to mean an end for the politico-military cooperation between the United States and Thailand.

Out of all the points outlined, the most important aspect of the US-Thai cooperation at this time was arguably the issue of residual force. The core of Kintner’s argument for the United States to remain committed to Thailand was that since the US had no combat troops left in Vietnam, it would need the Thailand-based air armada to uphold the Paris Peace Accords. It stands to reason that Thailand became “the main residual U.S. operating base in Southeast Asia.” To this end, the United States must continue to show the same kind of regard for Thailand as it did in the years prior, if not more, now that the roles Thailand would be playing in American strategy had expanded, which came with heightened risks of becoming targeted by its communist neighbours.

²³¹ Ibid.

Peace in Vietnam, for Kintner, meant more commitment to Thailand by the United States not less. Therefore, the conventional wisdom in the United States that Thailand's indirect participation in Indochina did not merit American attention and aid as substantially as those given to direct participants in Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia was longer true.²³² Kintner further noted that the RTG was of the opinion that American commitment was incommensurate with the risks and roles that Thailand was expected to shoulder even after the Paris peace agreement. For instance, in 1974 alone, the US was expected to provide up to \$400 million and \$200 million in aid to Cambodia and Laos respectively. Meanwhile economic and military aid earmarked for Thailand that same year was only \$45 million, and expected to decline. His suggestion to Washington on how to prevent Thailand from further drifting away from the United States was a moderate one: the United States should concentrate on placating sentiments of the Thai leadership through diplomatic gestures that signal continuing American recognition of Thai importance and commitment to their security, in order to persuade Sanya to withstand pressures from within his own government and other actors such as the students and the local press to see the value in remaining firmly in American orbit. Such measures included ensuring that the low level of aid offered be maintained and offer additional means to assist Thailand in areas they needed assistance with other than security such as providing trade quotas for the sugar and textile trade that Bangkok had long been interested in.²³³

However, through Kintner's multiple telegrams to different policymakers in Washington during this period, a gap between the ambassador and his superiors in the White House began to emerge. As ambassadors are meant to do, Kintner could grasp realities on the ground more

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

acutely than his colleagues in Washington could. His passionate plea for action could directly have been resultant of having been in direct and constant contact with Thai students, media, and government, while his colleagues on another continent could afford the time and distance to intellectualise Thailand issues. This was apparent in one of his messages to Kissinger where Kintner reported that he was trying to cultivate relationship with Thanat who regained his political relevance under the Sanya government. A particular meeting with Thanat provided an example of the pressure that Kintner was facing in Bangkok other than popular anti-American sentiments among the public. Kintner began his report by admitting to dreading the thought of having to face questions that would be raised in Bangkok after Kissinger announced his aid pledges to Egypt and Syria: "I had lunch with Thanat Khoman [...] Thanat, who is very intelligent, extremely well-informed, and an abrasive critic to many, but not all U.S. policies [...] shortly after we had exchanged pleasantries, he commented sarcastically, 'and what has Egypt done for you recently?' soon I will hear, 'and what has Syria done for you, Mr. Ambassador?'"²³⁴

Taken together, the perspective closer to Thailand in the Bangkok US Embassy was fueled by anxiety about retaining Thailand as a Southeast Asian hub, and as a result, believed one of the keys to reversing this trend was to win the hearts and minds of the new Thai government. Much of Kintner's message to Washington, therefore, argued for Thai sentiments as strongly as it did for American interests in Thailand, with emphasis on how slighted and unfairly treated the Thais have felt comparatively to other American allies. It could easily be read as

²³⁴ The Dilemma In US-Thai Relations: Continued Demands But Dwindling Resources. 7 June 1974. 032400326, Box 17, Thailand (11). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan

though the US Ambassador was advocating for Thai sentiments through the rationale of American interests.²³⁵ Although Kintner kept his request to Washington moderated, it appeared that at times his suggestions did not align with the views of the White House. One of Kintner's charges was that Thailand felt aggrieved by repeated American failure to deliver on their military aid promises due to arrays of constraints, when the same constraints did not prevent the US from delivering the same aid to South Vietnam or Cambodia, especially with "SLAT" stocks, military materiel supposedly to be transferred to Thailand as replacements for the gear left to South Vietnam. A month after his series of messages to Kissinger, Haig, and other principals, Kintner received a joint telegram from the Department of State and Department of Defense in July refuting his charge. In their view, the Thais seemed to have been confused by their terms of equipment transfer. Washington was certain they had acted in accordance with their legal obligation to Thailand and in good faith.²³⁶ Be that as it may, the response ameliorated neither Thai sentiments nor numerous concerns raised by Kintner.

Possibly unknown to Kintner, building a rapport with Thanat also weakened his political capital to some in Washington. Thailand in the summer of 1974 was well under civilian rule that came with a clear divide in its government between the civilian and military establishments. Kintner's decision to establish a working relationship with Thanat proved to be diplomatically sensible in light of Thai civilian policymakers, primarily the Sanya cabinet and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, gaining the upper hand in government. However, this assessment was not

²³⁵ Re US-Thai Relations. 10 June 1974. 032400326, Box 17, Thailand (11) National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Michigan.

²³⁶ Secretary of State. Slat Stocks. Telegram. July 1974. 032400326, Box 17, Thailand (11). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

entirely clear to Washington. For a mix of reasons that continually changed depending on circumstance, some in Washington were more interested in working with the Thai military. The repercussion of their differing preference rose to the surface when Thailand wanted to enact another one of its policies that appeared to further neutralise Thai roles in Indochina: to suspend American P-3 reconnaissance flights for the Indian Ocean from being launched from Utapao. Thai reluctance to continue facilitating American policy was apparent. Nevertheless, Bangkok presented their reason officially to the United States as an attempt to save the US from further criticism for their use of bases in Indochina.²³⁷

Richard L. Sneider, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, displayed a clear ambivalence towards the civilian government. Sneider was concerned that Sanya was paying too much attention to the students, which could lead to more restrictions on American activities. He, then, hinted at circumventing the Thai government, “it may be that the military would welcome a little stiffness on our part – the Thai military.” Kissinger’s interest was piqued, the military was always accommodating to the United States. When he was told that the US was not having regular contacts with the Thai military except at the lower levels, attention turned to Kintner. Sneider qualified that Kintner was “reluctant to go back to them, because one of the complaints of the [Thai] Foreign Ministry is that we have had too much contact with the military in the past.” Kissinger trivialised the foreign ministry’s concern by claiming that the Thais were always complaining anyway. Sneider concurred referring to the incumbent government as a “bad customer” in Bangkok who are “trouble makers.” In a revealing

²³⁷ Department of State. The Secretary’s Principals and Regionals’ Staff Meeting, Tuesday, July 16, 1974. 17 July 1974. National Archives. Digital National Security Archive (DNSA): Kissinger Transcripts: A Verbatim Records of U.S. Diplomacy [accessed July 2022].

exchange, Kissinger asked that Kintner be told to engage with the military more actively, but was told by his Assistant Secretary, Robert Ingersoll, that Kintner “is not with the military”, Sneider quipped “no. He’s Thanat’s protégé.”²³⁸

Strategic position

Despite valid points raised by Kintner, why did Washington appear unreceptive to his messages? Could the ambassador had been too close to the scene that he was overreacting? Were American policymakers truly ignorant of Thailand’s significance to their strategy, or genuinely felt that the United States no longer needed to stay engaged with Thailand as actively as it once did after American combat responsibilities in Vietnam had ended? Upon closer examination, Washington and the Bangkok US Embassy seemed to differ less on these points, but more on how Thailand’s residual roles could best serve American strategic interests after Vietnam. As had been demonstrated in the previous chapter, by November 1973, a change in posture by the Thai government was largely anticipated. American policymakers were not unaware of Thai sentiments and local sensitivity for national sovereignty. They accounted for them in their plan for future discussions with the Sanya government and understood that a civilian leadership would have to be far more receptive to popular dissent than its predecessor. Thomas Pickering, Kissinger’s Special Assistant, concluded that American position should be to proactively court the Thais for a continuation of force reduction discussion, to pre-empt the Thai government from forcing their terms on the US to placate domestic pressure. A suggestion that Brent Scowcroft

²³⁸ Ibid.

did not object to.²³⁹ The action taken by the RTG since then might have been drastic and accelerated than expected by taking Thailand closer to a neutralist position, as opposed to simple reduction of American presence, thus frustrated the likes of Sneider and Kissinger, but a less cooperative Thailand could not be said to have surprised the United States.

From the vantage point in Washington, the United States had been actively executing its plan in Thailand. Between August to December 1973, a total of 157 combat aircrafts and 7,360 personnel were withdrawn. Sporadic withdrawals continued in the first five months of 1974 with 201 American aircrafts and 10,255 personnel withdrawn. Additionally, on March 23rd 1974, Kissinger officially directed the Department of Defense to withdraw non-essential aircrafts by June 1st 1974 and to withdraw US combat forces in phases from between May 15th to December 31st 1974. All long-term American support components: MACTHAI, JUSMAGTHAI, and the US Army Support Command, to reduce their presence by 30% of their total personnel by August 1974 and eliminate all non-essential offices and support units. The Department of State was instructed to consult with the Thai government to determine precise dates of other withdrawals, how to best implement the planned reduction, and to best mitigate the economic repercussions from these withdrawals.²⁴⁰ This is clearly an indication of their willingness to continue working with Thailand and consideration for the broader dimensions of their relationship. Other more

²³⁹ Memorandum From the Executive Secretary of State (Pickering) to the Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft), Washington, November 29, 1973, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume E-12, Documents on East and Southeast Asia, Document 378, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve12/d378> [accessed July 2022].

²⁴⁰ Secretary of Defense. Southeast Asia "Wild Weasel" Capability. 27 September 1974. 032400317, Box 16, Thailand (2). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

proactive plans such as the transfer of valuable equipment and assets to the Thai government were being discussed between senior American officials, which Kintner was party to. Already in March 1974, six F-5A and AU-23 planes, the latter for use in counter-insurgency, had been transferred to the RTG, with an American destroyer escort vessel on loan to the Royal Thai Navy, and potentially be transferred. Up to 39 other aircrafts were suggested as potentially transferrable, and the United States planned to initiate discussions with the Thai government on possibly transferring an advanced communication system, the Single Integrated Military Telecommunications System (SIMTS), to Thailand.²⁴¹

Therefore, Kintner appeared to have done little beyond reiterating already known facts about Thailand in a more sentimental manner. What the United States had been doing and had planned for Thailand since October 1973 could hardly be termed “neglect” or “indifference” as he had described to Haig in one of his telegrams, where he warned Haig that American indifference in its diplomacy with Thailand would be damaging.²⁴² Yet, this might be precisely why Kintner felt the need to sound an alarm in Washington. Much of these plans implemented were simply following plans that were already made before Thailand had shown its willingness to move closer to neutralism. The complacency stemming from the knowledge that American policy in Thailand was being implemented was compounded by Washington’s firmly entrenched belief that the Thai status quo would favour the United States by default, despite some difficulties presented by the civilian government. This was reflected in the fact that the

²⁴¹ Turnover of U.S. Equipment to Thailand. 1 March 1974. 032400326, Box 17, Thailand (11). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²⁴² Re US-Thai Relations. 10 June 1974. 032400326, Box 17, Thailand (11) National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

possibility of the US losing formal Thai support, and contingency planning for such an event, was largely absent, if at all mentioned in any of the discussions among Washing-based policymakers. Whereas Kintner appeared to have readjusted his outlook by June 1974, it proved difficult for a larger, more distant, policy-making apparatus in Washington to do the same.

In contrast to the bilateral assessment of the situation that Kintner was offering, Washington's assessment adopted a larger strategic outlook. One would recall that in 1969 when President Nixon hosted a group of American diplomats and ambassadors at the US Embassy in Bangkok to brief them on the Nixon Doctrine his choice of attendees included dignitaries whose connection to Southeast Asia was not immediate such as the US Ambassadors to Ceylon and Afghanistan.²⁴³ Nevertheless, considering American strongholds in Afghanistan, Ceylon, Thailand, and South Vietnam, these countries would altogether form a semi-circular geo-strategic arc of containment that stretches westwards from Southeast Asia through the Indian Ocean into the Middle East. In fact, if one were to draw another line eastwards from South Vietnam to the Philippines and up north to Okinawa, the two lines would form a larger semi-circular sphere that stretches from Japan into Afghanistan, forming what amounts to nothing less than an American geo-strategic line of containment in Asia. Its point of connection between the westward arc and the eastward arc was none other than Southeast Asia.²⁴⁴ With this in mind, it was clear why Thai plan to suspend P-3 flights from Utapao became a primary concern for American officials, and greatly frustrated both Sneider and Kissinger. Suspension of American

²⁴³ Memorandum of Conversation, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, Document 31, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d31> [accessed July 2022].

²⁴⁴ Kintner, William R. Southeast Asia in a Global Context. Telegram. 14 October 1974.

flights from Thailand to the Indian Ocean would leave the connection of American perimeter limited at best.

The strategic circumstance in Indochina throughout 1974 might have added another dimension to American consideration of their policy towards Thailand by connecting American presence in Thailand to the question of preserving American credibility and test of American will. As Kintner opined in his cable to Kissinger “a North Vietnamese victory in Indochina would seriously destroy the stability of Thailand [...] These states would then view U.S. support for Thailand as an even more crucial index of our interest in the independence and security of these remaining Southeast Asian states.”²⁴⁵ Moreover, with Thailand looking increasingly like the lone outpost on mainland Southeast Asia, it became vital for the United States to secure official support for residual American presence in Thailand to prevent the loss of American power in the region that would be brought about by the loss of Laos, Cambodia, and at the time uncertain but probable, South Vietnam.

There was a noticeable absence of Vietnam being discussed from many of the US-Thai dialogues during this period of policy uncertainty. As the war in Vietnam was simmering down, Cambodia became the focus of cooperation between the United States and Thailand. American outlook towards Indochina vis-à-vis Thailand from around mid-1973 became increasingly dominated by the war in Cambodia and American global strategic interests. The Cambodian government was steadily ceding control of the countryside to communist insurgents closing in on the capital. Salvaging what was left of Cambodia became a mutual interest for both the United

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

States and Thailand. Other than logistical support and training that Thailand had been providing to Cambodia, Thailand was also at one point loaning their equipment to the Cambodian military. Now, there was plan to shift more responsibilities from the US Air Force to Thailand by ending direct American operation in Cambodia in favour of sub-contracting a number of civilian contractors, including Thai Airways, and launching American C-130 planes from the Utapao base, where the P-3 flights used to be launched from.²⁴⁶

Thai roles in Cambodia had expanded to include other non-military objectives such as hosting Cambodian dignitaries and becoming a staging ground for evacuees from Cambodia and refugees from both Cambodia and South Vietnam.²⁴⁷ Some of these functions were previously performed in Laos or South Vietnam, and there were considerations of continuing to do so. Yet, in the face of sporadic aggression from the North after the Paris Peace Accord was signed, and Laos no more stable than Cambodia, Thai roles in American policy was expanded. Any responsibilities that could have otherwise been shared by regional allies or were previously managed by the United States were transferred solely to Thailand. Thus, although the NSC had previously informed Kintner that they had yet to decide the extent they should expand the functions of Thai bases, Thailand was already the only viable conduit of American policy by default.

²⁴⁶ Kintner, William R. Letter. 3 August 1974. 032400316, Box 16, Thailand (1). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²⁴⁷ US Embassy Bangkok. Activities of Sihanouk's Son in Bangkok. Telegram. 26 February 1975. 032400342, Box 18, Thailand - State Department Telegrams: To SECSTATE - EXDIS (1); Secretary of State. Cambodian Evacuees in Thailand. Telegram. April 1975. 032400340, Box 18, Thailand - State Department Telegrams: To SECSTATE - EXDIS; US Embassy Bangkok. Staging Areas For Evacuation of Refugees From South Vietnam. Telegram. April 1975. 032400346, Box 18, Thailand - State Department Telegrams: To SECSTATE - NODIS (1) National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific.; Secretary of State. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

For these reasons, the United States was not yet willing to call an end to their time in Thailand. On the contrary, action taken by the US indicated that despite Bangkok's and Kintner's speculation about Washington losing interest in Thailand, there was a long-term plan to maintain American presence in the country so that American power could remain in the region via existing foothold in Thailand. Amidst the ongoing withdrawal and base turnovers in Thailand, a plan to "insure the capability for rapid reintroduction of our [US] forces into Thailand" was already planned for in case of a deteriorating situation in Indochina, and thus, Kissinger was informed at least as early as March that "it is desirable that, if necessary, we be able to reacquire the facilities which we turn over to the Thai."²⁴⁸ Additionally, the Secretary of Defense was instructed to coordinate with the Director of the CIA and the Deputy Secretary of State to submit, by the end of June 1974, recommendations on long-term American force levels in Thailand for Fiscal Year 1976 onwards.²⁴⁹

To this end, much of the withdrawn American air assets from Thailand that the Sanya government had pushed for were removed due to being deemed outdated or least essential, Washington did not consider them a permanent removal. The withdrawn F-105 "Wild Weasel" planes from Thailand, for instance, were based entirely on the assessment that they were outdated, troublesome to maintain, and their absence from Thailand could easily be replaced by another squadron from Okinawa with prior notice.²⁵⁰ Thus, force levels reduction in Thailand

²⁴⁸ Turnover of U.S. Equipment to Thailand. 1 March 1974. 032400326, Box 17, Thailand (11). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²⁴⁹ Southeast Asia "Wild Weasel" Capability. 27 September 1974. 032400317, Box 16, Thailand (2). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

was conducted in a manner that ensured the existing US air power would remain operational and unimpeded by the progress of withdrawal from Thai bases; a withdrawal on paper that did little to conform with the principle of disengaging from Thailand, and Southeast Asia at large. The plan to supplement Thailand-based air power with assets from Okinawa also marked a departure from an earlier period when Thailand was strictly a facilitator of American warfighting in Indochina. This, along with Kintner's recognition of Thailand's growing role for American power projection into the Indian Ocean, demonstrated that Thailand, as far as Washington planners were concerned, in the foreseeable future would become a more integrated component of the larger American security architecture in the Far East, whose resources and locations are complementary to one another.

American Decision

For reasons aforementioned, it remained vital for the United States to actively court Thailand, especially in the waning days of the Vietnam War. By September 1974, policymakers in D.C. began to approach Thailand more actively, just as Kintner had suggested. However, in trying to do so it was clear that the lack of political will was not the heart of the issue, rather it was the difficulty American decisionmakers faced in attempting to come to an agreement among themselves. Thus, contributing to Washington's lull in activity. A handful of policy options and possibilities were discussed at the highest levels through a series of back-and-forth memos, including the new White House incumbent, Gerald Ford, with very little of the issues resolved. There were two questions that needed answer. First, was a matter practicality: how to adjust American forces in Southeast Asia to suit the current strategic outlook. Second, was diplomatic:

what would a less American-centric Thai government agree to? On the matter of practicality, three concrete issues were raised. One was the scale of force reduction for MACTHAI, the topic of turning the Udon airbase over to Thailand, and the resumption of the reconnaissance flights to the Indian Ocean. Both the Department of State and Defense, W.R. Smyser and William Stearman in the National Security Council (NSC), and the CIA, found themselves in a contested debate where they could not agree on the finer details of these issues.

Kintner, as the primary American representative to Thailand, was also privy to these debates. He submitted a proposal to eliminate certain components of MACTHAI and its logistics detachment, which the NSC objected to but expressed their willingness to compromise by suggesting that a study on the viability of Kintner's proposal could be done at the end of next year so that reduction maybe implemented by 1976. The NSC, then, informed Kintner not to do anything until then. On the subject of the Udon airbase, Kintner proposed that it be turned over to the Thais, but the NSC resisted on grounds that "this is one of our best maintenance facilities in Southeast Asia", and that "Kintner probably wants to turn over more Udon equipment than does DOD."²⁵¹ However, Kintner's plan for the Udon base found an audience. Erich Von Marbod, a representative from the Department of Defense, believed that turning over the Udon base was possible if the United States were to insist on retaining their equipment. The NSC was taken by the idea, but was not yet willing to make a conclusive decision. There was also concern raised about the high costs associated with the Udon base in comparison to the Don Mueng airbase that had to be resolved. Once more, the decision was that it was "a very complicated

²⁵¹ Smyser, W.R.; William L. Stearman. Reply to Ambassador Kintner's Letter. 6 September 1974. 032400316, Box 16, Thailand (1). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

matter and requires an interagency study with recommendations before an intelligent decision can be made.”²⁵²

On the final issue of recommencing the reconnaissance flights to the Indian Ocean, a vital component of American strategic design for Southeast Asia containment arc and one that was important to the Department of Defense, Kintner and the NSC found themselves in agreement due to the diplomatic nature of the topic. Both advised the Defense Department to temper their enthusiasm because recommencing the flights would require rushing Thailand's NSC for a decision, which according to the NSC “to press the Thai on this issue, as some in Defense would have us do, could seriously risk not only our chances of resuming P-3 reconnaissance flights out of Thailand but also our larger military basing rights in Thailand.”²⁵³ Their rationale for not rushing the Thai NSC was purely out of diplomatic concern for maintaining Thai goodwill, indicating that the US began to tread more carefully, perhaps convinced that their requests might not be heard or enabled as quickly or enthusiastically as they used to be in light of Sanya's policies. Most importantly, it was done to avoid running afoul of the host nation's government, in the hope that they may secure their long-term presence in Thailand at later stage.

The topic of residual force in Thailand was, in fact, discussed in some details, but once again, no conclusion was reached. Kintner had been diligently preparing the diplomatic groundwork necessary for future redeployment of US forces and maintaining a foothold in Southeast Asia via Thailand by persuading the Thai government that long-term US basing for use outside of supporting Indochina operations was mutually beneficial to both nations. He also proposed that

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

the RTG maintains the existing bases in Utapao, Sattahip, and Samaesan as stand-by facilities for future use to potentially establish American long-range re-entry rights into Thailand. Washington was enthusiastic and endorsed Kintner's effort in this regard. They informed the ambassador that they "endorse his educative effort with the Thai, welcome additional information on his proposal for seeking re-entry rights" and that he should be reassured of effort on their end to find a solution to "the question of US military equipment transfers to Thailand."²⁵⁴ Once more, Washington could neither keep up with nor capitalise on these initiatives, due to their own uncertainty on the practical aspects of stationing a residual force. This time it was a squabble between the Department of Defense and the CIA over the size of residual force in Thailand. The department wanted around 5,000-7,000 personnel, while the CIA argued that this number was an insufficient deterrent against Hanoi, which prompted the NSC to admit that there was a persistent confusion over long-term policy for Southeast Asia. They could not decide on the optimal length of time to maintain a deterrence against Hanoi, and the extent of missions beyond Southeast Asia that American bases in Thailand would officially support.²⁵⁵ Kintner, again, was told to await further review of their Thailand policy.

Of all the topics raised, residual force seems to be the most thoroughly debated issue, suggesting its significance to American policymakers. There were up to four fully devised options being discussed between various agencies, notably between the Department of Defense, State, and the CIA. All the options were meant for "Fiscal Year 76 and beyond," confirming that it was to be the long-term direction for American forces in Southeast Asia. Option one was to maintain highest possible force level with a possibility of resurging. Options 2 and 3 were to

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

make necessary reductions but leave behind a robust American presence capable of performing vital functions, with certain aspects being supported by the Thais. The two options differ in the details of precise equipment and functions to perform. Option 2 emphasised aircrafts to retain as deterrence to North Vietnam, and option 3 focused on communications and intelligence activities. Option 4 contrasted the first option by reducing US forces to the bare minimum, but continuing their intelligence activities, with the possibility of re-entering Thailand at a later date should force be needed.²⁵⁶ These options viewed deterring North Vietnam as an important criterion for force levels reduction; intrinsically contingent on North Vietnamese aggression, American force reduction in Thailand evidently became reactionary to North Vietnam's initiative. This also meant that to successfully implement any of the four options the United States must maintain a continual presence in Thailand so that its forces in the country can be flexibly reduced and reintroduced whenever necessary.

All agencies rejected options 1 and 4. The State Department favoured a flexible approach in which option 2 would be implemented, but move to option 3 if the situation changes. The Secretary of Defence, on the other hand, recommended to Kissinger that option 3 be taken. As the key agency for American diplomacy, the Department of State appeared the most sensitive to Thai domestic politics. They argued that everything be treated tentatively, since the looming Thai national election scheduled for early 1975 could lead to a populist government even more enthusiastic about reducing American presence, which means "neither Option 2 nor Option 3 should be viewed as the final answer to the question of our [US] military presence and activities

²⁵⁶ Secretary of Defense. Long-Term U.S. Military Force Levels in Thailand (FY 1976 and Beyond). 11 October 1974. 032400320, Box 16, Thailand (5). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

in Thailand.” The State Department was willing to entertain this possibility to the point of suggesting that ultimately the United States might have to pursue Option 4, that was to reduce their forces down to a minimum presence, or lower.²⁵⁷ Their argument raised a fundamental issue inherent to all of the available options: the authority to decide on American residual presence and the exact number of troops allowed in the country, rested solely with Thailand as the host nation. While this was implicitly understood by many, as it was admitted that the options assumed “that any Thai government which comes to power during the period under discussion will remain basically friendly to the US,” no contingencies were discussed in the event that Thailand should drastically lose confidence in the United States, or adopt neutralism.²⁵⁸

To ensure continuing Thai cooperation during a period when Thai support appeared to be declining, as frequently vented in many of Kintner’s earlier messages, some American policymakers believed they could rely on the time-tested methods of offering quid-pro-quo arrangements and aid packages to Thailand to induce support for the United States. This belief was prominent in the analysis of CIA Director, William Colby: “we would not anticipate serious problems with the Thai government in retaining a U.S. force level in Thailand in excess of 7,000 during FY 76 [...] Indeed there is a general acknowledgement within the Thai government, especially among military leaders, of the value of U.S. presence and a concern that it may be reduced too quickly.” He further explained that “the Thai want to know what the quid pro quo is for permitting U.S. forces to remain on Thai soil, but its cost would not necessarily be high. [...] Thai-US activities (such as assistance on highway and railroad modernization projects, joint

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

intelligence operations, etc.) would help to make a continued U.S. presence more palatable to the Thai.²⁵⁹

Colby's suggestion followed the accepted *modus operandi* between the United States and Thailand's previous military regimes that dated back to Sarit's rule when American assistance often consisted of infrastructure development programs. These programs were greatly important in the early 1960s to Thai leaders who often used infrastructure development as means of garnering public support, and perhaps more precisely, when most of the seven American airbases were under construction and needed to be connected to each other via roads and highways. Few of these were applicable to mutual US-Thai interests in 1974, with some American bases already closed, and American troops withdrawal appealing more popularly to the public than infrastructure programs. Another noteworthy aspect of Colby's assessment was that he pointed to the sentiment of the Thai military to substantiate his argument for Thai acceptance of American presence, when the military had not been in power for over a year, their ability to voice their concerns to Sanya through formal channels notwithstanding. The Secretary of Defense, James Schlesinger, shared a similar view that a quid-pro-quo offer by the United States was all that was needed to maintain a long-term presence, though unlike Colby, he noted that it was uncertain what exact offer it would take.²⁶⁰ Notably, Schlesinger concluded in his recommendation to Kissinger that the State Department should be given appropriate time to "gain Thai acquiescence" for Option 3 and retaining American facilities needed to facilitate Option 3.²⁶¹ Thus, the prevalent attitude in Washington that Thailand was mainly interested in a bargain,

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

particularly among high-level policymakers, remained largely unadjusted. There was a persistent inertia to accept a new status quo in Thailand as anything more than a temporary arrangement.

When presented with an obstacle or uncertainty, American officials repeatedly found themselves either entertaining the thought of working directly with the Thai Generals as they had done or turn to the views of the military as representative of official Thai stance.

With many ideas debated without a conclusion on Thailand, American interaction with their Thai counterparts became noticeably awkward however cordial. Both parties achieved little in deciding the future direction of their alliance other than expressing their official intention of continuing their bilateralism. Although Thailand continued to harbour genuine concern for its security and that of Indochina's, their gestures signaled that Thai policymakers no longer accepted close cooperation with the United States as a necessary solution. When the Deputy Secretary of Defense Bill Clements met with the Thai Defense Minister, a military man, General Khruan Sutthanin, in late 1974 in Bangkok, against the backdrop of the ongoing debates on residual force levels in Washington, Clements did his best to press for Thai acceptance of US global strategic interests. He tried to persuade Khruan of the interconnectedness between Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Middle East, citing this as a reason that "US presence had to be maintained."²⁶² In doing so, Clements was selling future American strategy on the same blueprint used in Indochina: Thailand as an American staging area. Khruan acknowledged Clements' concern but claimed there was not much he could do since the Thai public disagreed with maintaining American presence before quickly reversing their conversation away from

²⁶² US Embassy Tokyo. Deputy Secretary of Defense Clements Meeting with Thai Secretary of Defense. Telegram. October 1974. 032400326, Box 17, Thailand (11). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

American global interests to Thailand's domestic and regional problems in Indochina. Khruan asked for a continuing supply of American equipment and support for counter-insurgency, but offered no real feedback on issues raised by Clements other than words of encouragement.

Clements, then, acknowledged Khruan by mentioning that they would see could be done before turning the subject back to P-3 surveillance flights.²⁶³

Khruan's apprehension for involving Thailand in another American global venture with little relevance to Thai interests and potentially facing another public outrage should his government commit itself to such a scheme was easily understandable, if not expected, but his constant reference to domestic sentiment revealed how convenient it became for Thailand to decline American approaches without jeopardizing its official ties with the United States. This was compounded by American indecision on their Thailand policy, which prevented the Deputy Secretary from offering any concrete reassurances or incentives as an attempt to encourage continued Thai cooperation. In short, Clements met Khruan with little he could say other than reiterating how much the United States valued Thailand and what American interests were. Both sides diplomatically paid lip-service to each other's concerns and attempted to coopt the other into their national concern, without any incentive to offer as was the norm during the Thanom regime. Though not much resulted from their meeting, it did end on a positive note. Clements did his best to present a firm message of American support for Thailand by stating that the United States would assist Thailand in the case North Vietnamese aggression. Satisfied, Khruan informed Clements that "the new social and political forces in Thailand might have soured the US-Thai relations," but "the attitude of the Thai military would remain constant."²⁶⁴

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

Similar dynamics reemerged when Clements met with the Acting Foreign Minister Chatchai Choonhavan. Clements spent much of their conversation on P-3 flights and the Indian Ocean, perhaps more so than in his previous meeting with Khruan. Chatchai, like Khruan, justified resisting American requests on grounds of Thai public pressure and steered the conversation towards the issue of American support for self-sufficiency and force modernization of the Thai military.²⁶⁵ Chatchai repeatedly mentioned the importance of US presence to Thai security. His expressed concerns for Soviet expansionism, North Vietnam, and instability in Indochina, would give the impression that Thailand continued to align its interests with that of the United States, yet he was “non-committal to the P-3 flights.” Chatchai went as far as expressing interest in officially visiting Diego Garcia so he could “educate the Thai people about the Soviet threat to Southeast Asia from the west,” prompting Clements to respond that the purpose of his trip would be defeated, since the British would not allow any publicity around his visit.²⁶⁶ Once more, there was much good will and enthusiasm expressed for the US-Thai bilateralism without any commitment to a set policy between both sides. A clear divergence between what each party identified as pertinent to their national interests emerged, Thailand was only interested in its regional security and survival while the United States had to concern itself with a larger Cold War strategy outside of Southeast Asia, though not without making the region a part of its design.

²⁶⁵ US Embassy Tokyo. Deputy Secretary of Defense Meeting with Acting Foreign Minister Chatchai. Telegram. October 1974. 032400326, Box 17, Thailand (11). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

An opportunity to resolve much of the difficulty the United States had in gaining Thai cooperation presented itself in November. Kissinger was informed that Thanom, who had been staying in Boston since being ousted, was planning to return to Thailand. If Washington had mused sporadically about working with an accommodating client state that Thailand once was under the military, Thanom's return could be their solution. It was expected that Thanom would seek American opinion, if not an approval, prior to making his move. However, an American backing for his return could have irreversible repercussions to its already sensitive relationship with Thailand; the United States was compelled to reflect on whether it was willing to accept such consequences. At the highest level, this debate took place chiefly between Kissinger and his Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Philip Habib. It was fundamentally a debate on whether the United States could and should continue to work with Thai civilian leadership, perhaps an alternative to civilian rule would better serve American interests. Habib was convinced that Thanom's planned return coincided too conveniently with an upcoming election in Thailand for it to be a coincidence. He argued that American interests in the region was buttressed by Thai stability, anything that amounts to a coup against it would shake that very foundation.²⁶⁷ Habib wanted the US to be clear to Thanom that the US does not approve of his trip. Kissinger, on the other hand, recognised that Thai stability matters but believed Southeast Asia was so inherently unstable that a military rule would not necessarily worsen the situation. He asked Habib "why is it so violently against American interests to have the army takeover?" Habib, who compared Thanom's return to putting "the cat among birds," replied that he does not believe the military could govern, prompting Kissinger to ask rhetorically "well, have we seen if

²⁶⁷ Department of State. The Secretary's 8:00 a.m. Regional Staff Meeting, Thursday, November 14, 1974. 15 November 1974. National Archives. Digital National Security Archive (DNSA): Kissinger Transcripts: A Verbatim Records of U.S. Diplomacy [accessed July 2022].

anyone else can govern?”, Habib replied firmly that the Sanya government had been doing so for over a year. Once more, Kissinger replied “well, how do you know the army can’t govern? They governed for 10 years and more.”²⁶⁸

For Kissinger, the form of government mattered little, as long as policy agendas can be satisfied. It was this guiding principle that drove his support for a potential return to military rule rather than a strict desire to install a military government in Thailand. Therefore, his preferred course of action was to give Thanom neither an approval nor caution against his return to politics. Kissinger would passively accept the consequences of Thanom’s return, especially if American policy could benefit from such consequences. In his words to Habib, “I’d like to talk to you at some point about that whole perception of the problem. I just don’t think we’re in the business of installing governments around the world; it is just not our job. We’re in the business of conducting foreign policy; we’re not a social reform school.” Habib, again, appealed for the need to maintain a stable Thailand:

“yes, but we have certain objectives in Thailand. And those objectives would include at least the motive of a stable government with which we could deal. [...] the people would say the best way to achieve it would be to deal with the government they had. That government was no longer able to govern. There’s a new evolution in Thailand which could fit our objectives just as well.”

Kissinger reluctantly agreed.²⁶⁹ It was Habib’s argument for prioritizing Thai stability that prevailed. Thanom did not receive any American opinion or approval for his trip. He returned to

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

Thailand briefly and quietly, met with a public uproar that forced him to leave again. In the end, the United States chose stability of its strategic location and a continuing cordiality with Thailand over upsetting the course of relations in favour of a minority military government that could grant them short-term policy fulfilment. There was a cost to staying with the civilian government, as the Thais were becoming difficult to bargain with, but the challenges they presented were much preferable to having no stable position in Southeast Asia at all. It was a crucial decision however tangential to the immediate questions of Cambodia, force levels, and residual American presence. There was, at last, one major decision on Thailand that the US could settle on.

Conclusion

The year immediately following a civilian transition in Thailand and the Paris Peace Accords was a time of reevaluation for both the United States and Thailand. For the United States, it was to ponder on the limits of its power, to ask what it could realistically achieve in Southeast Asia, and where Thailand would fit into its designs. Thailand, likewise, was compelled to do similarly by questioning the wisdom of American security umbrella and benign hegemony that was becoming undone after witnessing communist forces spreading closer to its borders than ever before. It had to reevaluate whether remaining so deeply welded to the United States in the international arena was still the most effective way to prevent Thailand from becoming the next domino. These changing dynamics were made more complicated by Thailand's democratic transition under a civilian government that wanted to undo the legacy of the Thanom-era foreign policy. Its attempt to do so resulted in a struggle for primacy in policymaking between the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the military, and the search for a more effective counter-insurgency policy. The success it began to have in the latter came at the expense of its relationship with the United States. Thailand slowly developed the confidence to pursue a more independent foreign policy built on multi-directional relations with other communist nations through becoming more neutralist in Indochina, and decoupling security issues from foreign policy at large, seen in the case with China. Thus, in the closing days of its role as a facilitator to America's war in Indochina, Thailand became more convinced it had found a new path for its relationship with the United States.

Bangkok's willingness to deviate from the status quo of the US-Thai alignment that had shaped their relationship in the previous decade compelled the United States to adjust to a less compliant, and less cooperative Thailand. This was a situation that was not unexpected by the United States, yet was unprecedented in its diplomacy with Thailand. Up until then, it had been sufficient to retain Thai alignment through American patronage in the forms of quid-pro-quo agreements and aid packages to ensure Thai facilitation of the Vietnam War in the forms of airbases, SGUs in Laos or Cambodia, and other logistical supports. As a result, American policy in Thailand were usually an ad hoc reaction to changing regional circumstances without a longer-term direction. That this mode of engagement was functional throughout most of the Vietnam War period could be attributed to a few factors. For one, the United States was working with a willing client embodied by the Thai military who turned Thailand into a compliant client state. Successive American Ambassadors were competent in their management of relations from Eisenhower and Kennedy appointees, who dealt with difficult figures in Phibun and Sarit, to Leonard Unger who had to defend American policies in Thailand in the Symington Hearing

while simultaneously fending off Thanat's temperamental attacks on the United States in Thailand. In this regard, Kintner's tenure was markedly different from his predecessors. As the first US Ambassador appointed after October 1973, he could not rely on the same dynamics that were foundational to American relations with Thailand.

This further exposed another problem with American engagement in Thailand, the divide between top and ground-level policymakers. Since American policies were reactionary to regional circumstances and often left to management by officials no higher than the Ambassador, there was a persistent gap in perception and understanding between local agencies and Washington-based policymakers. In this regard, the ambassador's role in trying to bridge the gap came to the fore at this time of policy uncertainty. Kintner was able to witness the deteriorating situation in Thailand and attempted to work speedily to remedy the situation, although this did not always produce result, as demonstrated by Washington's inability to capitalise on the groundwork laid by Kintner to gain Thai support for re-entry rights and residual force. On the Thai side, the role of personnel was no less important. Sanya's decision to bring Thanat, who held firm to his pro-withdrawal idea, back into government as his foreign policy advisor and the fact that the MFA became a key driver of policy in this period was doubtless a contributory factor to Thai decision to become more neutralist. Thereby, making it more difficult for the United States to decide on their force levels from having to consider the diplomatic implications with Thailand, which unlike the time of Thanom could be easily enabled.

Having examined the policy in the immediate year following the end of active American combat, it also became clear that the United States remained interested in Thailand. The waning

days of American war in Indochina, therefore, led to the end of direct American participation without diminishing American interest in Thailand. Although originally meant to facilitate the Vietnam War, Thailand's relevance to the United States in the early 1970s transcended its original purpose to become a hub for American regional policy with implications for American power projection into the Indian Ocean and beyond. Just as the import of American presence into Thailand under previous military regimes enabled the maximisation of American power in Southeast Asia as demonstrated in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, a more neutralist stance under the Sanya government had the opposite effect of minimising American power. The Sanya government in its short time in office had laid an alternative path for Thai foreign policy, while the United States wanted to halt this trend, so much so that Kissinger and some of his deputies would welcome the chance to work with Thanom again at the expense of the Thai civilian government. Thus, by the end of 1974, very little of the foundation that bonded the United States and Thailand together before October 1973 remained. For the remainder of its time in the region, the United States would become preoccupied with resolving these issues so that Thailand could continue to perform its strategic function as part of the containment arc in Southeast Asia.

Chapter 4: Divergent Crescent

This chapter tracks the final years of the American basing in Thailand between January 1975 to the end of 1976. During this period, the United States continued to implement its plan for securing a residual force and re-entry right in Thailand as part of its larger strategy to form an arc of containment in the Pacific. Their relationship with Thailand that was crucial to this strategy, however, was progressively in decline.

The temporary stability in Thailand during Sanya's tenure, once more hung in the balance by the time of his departure. In early 1975, when a new government came into power after the national election, Thai governmental politics fell into a state of chaos again, with serious repercussions for the US-Thai relations. Thai foreign policy and its domestic agenda became so deeply intertwined that Thai engagement with the United States were often a product of reacting to domestic pressure, with limited regard for external consequences. Therefore, the departure of the Sanya government at an already sensitive juncture in the US-Thai relations, was followed by the emergence of a new government whose unstable position compelled them to prioritise their survival. The new Prime Minister, Kukrit Pramoj, followed the foreign policy blue print that had been set by Sanya, especially on Thailand's relationship with China. Kukrit's biggest contribution, in this regard, however, may be in the fact that rather than following in Sanya's footsteps, he accelerated the process. Most notably, he introduced a one-year deadline for American forces to withdraw from Thailand. His action also intensified the rift that began to emerge as the Thai military was regaining their prominence in politics, and thus contributed further to political turmoil that fed into Thai diplomacy with the United States. Under these

circumstances the United States was compelled to reconsider its options in Thailand, as well as reacting to unexpected diplomatic setbacks. This dynamic led to much confusion and miscalculations. In the end, just as Thailand reconsidered its strategy of decoupling from the United States, the US decided to move on from Thailand.

It is noteworthy that although the Kukrit government was the first fully elected civilian government, it was not particularly more transparent than previous military regimes. Little internal record on the Thai government's decision to issue a very demanding term on the United States in its final negotiation to maintain American basing is available. R. Sean Randolph is, perhaps, one of the few authors who have provided an answer on why in the final days, as the withdrawal deadline approached, the United States and Thailand could not come to a middle ground. His work, however, relied heavily on interviews with American foreign policy officials because of the lack of archival material. With material that have now been declassified, this chapter may further contribute to the historiography on the final days of American basing in Thailand by incorporating them into its argument.

Kukrit's Deadline

The Sanya government had done well by surviving over a year in office, but Sanya's appointment by the king was only meant to rebuild domestic stability after the fall of Thanom. In January 1975, Thailand held its first national election to form its first fully elected civilian government. The election following Sanya's departure yielded a highly fractious result. Seni Pramoj, the former Thai ambassador to Washington often seen as having close relations with the

United States, became Prime Minister after forming a coalition government. Nevertheless, Seni was unable to gain a vote of confidence in the parliament after formally declaring his government's policies. His government collapsed within a matter of 27 days after coming to power. Seni lost his premiership to a member of the opposition party, a conservative nationalist, and his own brother, Kukrit.

In contrast to Seni who made his mark mostly in government, Kukrit had a strong presence outside of politics and had amassed a popular following prior to assuming office. He was an accomplished writer of an aristocratic background, an editor of a popular conservative newspaper, *Siam Rath*, and even starred in a Hollywood film opposite Marlon Brando. His royal lineage, penmanship, and popular appeal gave him the necessary political and social clout to become a rally point for other parties seeking to form their own government. Thus, with only 18 seats in parliament, Kukrit's party was able to form the next coalition government with 12 other parties. By the middle of March 1975, the new government was active. Coalition parties were keen to extract concessions for their participation in government, fully aware that any dissent from one of the parties was enough to doom the coalition. For the government to remain viable, it would need more than having an agreeable leader in Kukrit. Politically, this was first achieved by awarding important cabinet portfolios to allies. Kukrit's own party, though he was Prime Minister, held only four out of twenty-five portfolios, while some of his allies held up to nine cabinet positions.²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ Neher, "Stability and Instability in Contemporary Thailand", p.1106.

The students and other social actors like the Labour Union who remained important political actors in 1975, however, could not be won over as immediately as political parties. Kukrit's coalition was overwhelmingly conservative with ties to past military regimes, though now less political. Many students who had supported the October movement of 1973 feared their effort had been in vain. The government had to prove that it could satisfy the many demands of these public actors in the long-term to win their support, or at least to avoid a surge of mass discontent that had become the norm in Thai politics. Thailand in 1975 had no shortage of issues that needed attention: post-oil crisis economic recovery, rural development, social unrests, to name a few, but few issues other than the state of Thailand's relationship with the United States was of interest to the public across political and social spectrums. Furthermore, the circumstance of Kukrit's rise instilled the importance of foreign policy to sustaining his government in this period. During his very short tenure, one of Seni's shortcomings that left him vulnerable to scrutiny was his inability to articulate a clear vision for Thai foreign policy. Given his credential as a former ambassador, he was often pressed on the question of foreign policy especially on the question of American withdrawal. He performed poorly.

Seni vacillated between discussing American force reduction and Thailand's relationship with China and North Vietnam, usually without a clear answer. His choice of Defense Minister, who occasionally handled these matters with the media, General Tawich Seni Wongse Na Ayutthaya, did not perform much better. He had a tentative outlook on normalising relationships with China and North Vietnam, believed that diplomatic effort should continue without rushing into establishing a formal relationship until it was certain that Thailand would be safe from aggression. Therefore, from the public view, the Seni government was neither going to ask the

United States to leave nor would it be actively seeking accommodation with its communist neighbours. Although Seni did later attempt to rectify his position, it was too little too late to salvage his image from media barrages. Kukrit had an indirect role in damaging Seni's public image, as his *Siam Rath* newspaper was one of the major publications who kept up fierce coverage and commentaries on American withdrawal.²⁷¹ With the course of domestic politics, the survival of his own government, and the conflict in Indochina heightening, foreign policy became a hallmark of Kukrit's government.

The Kukrit government, however, had to decide whether they would continue down the path that Sanya had laid a foundation for. In between Kukrit coming to office and the departure of Sanya the situation in Indochina had deteriorated so significantly that in December of 1974, Sanya began to display reluctance about demanding further American withdrawal from Thailand. On all three frontlines, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, it appeared the communists were making inroads towards victory with their forces inching closer to taking control of non-communist territories in their respective countries. The signs of hesitation by the RTG under Sanya to pursue further reduction of American forces became undeniable by the beginning of January 1975, mere weeks before the end of Sanya's term in office, when no further negotiation on American withdrawal took place. This was despite Charunphan, the Foreign Minister, having publicly stated that he would like to conduct the talks before Sanya leaves office.²⁷² Other signs of Thai hesitation emerged that same month when General Kriangsak Chomanan, Chief of Staff of the

²⁷¹ Krai, "Siam Sommut" (Siam Hypothetical), *Siam Rath*, February 21, 2518; "Wa Mee Yu Nai Pratet Nai Tue Wa Pratet Nan Sia Ekarat" (Wherever They Are That Country Loses Sovereignty), *Chao Thai*, 28 February 2518.

²⁷² "Karn Ton Tahaan American" (American Troops Withdrawal), *Siam Rath*, January 21, 2518.

Royal Thai Army, in charge of overseeing American force reduction in Thailand, announced that further progress on American troops reduction should be halted given the deteriorating situation in Indochina. Kriangsak's, and by extension the Thai military's, preference for American presence was on public display when he stated clearly that the remaining 27,000 US troops and their facilities should be an effective deterrence to enemy aggression, as well as stating that a complete withdrawal should only be done once the situation in Indochina is resolved. His latter point, up until then, was never an official Thai precondition for American withdrawal.²⁷³

Charunphan candidly admitted that plans for American force reduction should be carefully reconsidered, since it was initially decided before the situation in 1975 began to worsen.²⁷⁴

Again, it was Kukrit's *Siam Rath* newspaper that went on the offensive against Sanya by adopting a populist tone. They expressed disappointment at what they believed was the RTG's weakened stance on the US , and hoped that a new government "as the real government elected by the people [...] would listen to the will of the majority and appropriately adopt the policy that the public demands."²⁷⁵ Therefore, it was important to the Kukrit government that they distinguish themselves from their predecessors whom they disparaged. Kukrit chose to be decisive. Upon formally assuming office, he publicly and unilaterally announced that the goal of his government was to remove American bases in Thailand within one year. Prior to this, Thailand had been careful not to impose a strict deadline on the United States, let alone declaring its intention in a manner that would bound it to those words in plain view of their electorate. In

²⁷³ "Ra-ngub Ton Tahaan Saharut Laew Ang Robb Baan So Taa Runraeng" [Troops Withdrawal Suspended Claimed Situation in Neighbouring Countries Increasingly Serious], *Thai Rath*, January 23, 2518.

²⁷⁴ "Ra-ngub Ton Kamlang Tahaan American" [American Troops Withdrawal Suspended], *Daily Times*, January 23, 2518.

²⁷⁵ "Karn Ton Tahaan American" [American Troops Withdrawal], *Siam Rath*, January 21, 2518.

fact, during the period of hesitation in the final moments of Sanya's term, General Kriangsak admitted to the press that no explicit deadline and further troops reduction was being discussed with the United States, and he would not do so without considering the situation in Indochina.²⁷⁶

In mere weeks following the inauguration of Kukrit's government amidst domestic political turbulence, Cambodia fell in a brutal fashion to the Khmer Rouge in April. Concurrently, North Vietnam was advancing rapidly towards Saigon, and would take the city by the end of that same month. The Royal Lao Government was also on the verge of defeat to the Pathet Lao communists. Why, other than internal politics, Kukrit believed insisting on removal of American bases from Thailand was an appropriate measure to safeguard the country from communist threat at such a critical time is difficult to ascertain. However, a clue could be found in the comments Kukrit would later make to the new US Ambassador to Thailand, Charles S. Whitehouse, in June of 1975, that was he [Kukrit] "realized that China was a fact of life and Thailand must deal with it."²⁷⁷ In his assessment, Kukrit believed that China would not dominate Thailand and might at most exercise similar influences on Thailand the way the United States had a decade earlier, which was not in any way an existential threat to Thailand. Additionally, in contrast to North Vietnam, that blunted Thai diplomatic overtures because of American basing issues, Kukrit believed China would not refuse Thai rapprochement because of the then remaining American bases on Thai soil. He reasoned that, if anything, China might prefer it as a good counter-weight to the Soviet Union.²⁷⁸ Developing a relationship with China to balance

²⁷⁶ "Ra-ngub Ton Kamlang Tahaan American" [American Troops Withdrawal Suspended], *Daily Times*, January 23, 2518.

²⁷⁷ Quoted in Jittipat Poonkham, *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2022), p.192.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.186-187.

against North Vietnam was, therefore, an important component of Kukrit's plan, which could provide Thailand with an alternative layer of security until it could renormalise relations with North Vietnam in a year's time once American bases were gone.

In practical terms, this meant Kukrit had to accelerate diplomacy with China. He was fortunate in this regard as Sanya had already established a limited relationship and contacts with Beijing. Kukrit went another step further than Sanya and sent cables to Thai diplomatic missions globally to inform them that his government planned to recognise and formalise relations with mainland China.²⁷⁹ Domestic political instability was also a silver-lining for Kukrit's foreign policy. Political bargaining among Kukrit's coalition parties resulted in Chatchai Choonhavan, Deputy Foreign Minister under Sanya, being promoted to Minister of Foreign Affairs. Chatchai's view on China aligned with that of Kukrit's, he became instrumental in Kukrit's China policy. Chatchai already had a good rapport with Zhou Enlai from the Sanya days when he negotiated the sale of the "friendship price" oil. This became another asset for the RTG to capitalise on. It is important to note that even though Kukrit publicly declared his intention to approach China and had discussed the matter with his diplomats, there was still reluctance, if not resistance, within his own establishment, including the military. Kukrit was so cautious that he kept the exact details of his plan for China a closely guarded secret even from his own National Security Council. It was, therefore, politically vital to have a powerful figure like Chatchai who could pursue the policy, while Kukrit continued to moderate the discontent from within his own ranks.

²⁷⁹ Jittipat Poonkham, *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2022), p.184.

Chatchai's attitude towards the NSC, composed primarily of military men, was even more blunt. Although a former army general himself, Chatchai differed drastically from his military peers on Thailand's best option against the communist powers. The Sino-American détente proved the viability of diplomacy to him. He sensed a rift between China and Vietnam much earlier than others in the Thai government, and did not believe that a militaristic solution was effective against communist insurgents and external invasion by neighbouring countries. Thus, negating the need for continual American military aid that the military insisted was necessary. He reasoned that if Vietnam invaded, the Thai military could at best hold Bangkok for up to 48 hours before a complete collapse; Thailand's best defense was to ensure that this scenario does not happen at all. This meant the need for increased diplomacy with neighbouring countries, and perhaps, with Thailand's own insurgents was the only viable solution.²⁸⁰ When asked by Anand Panyarachun for a detailed plan on China, Chatchai laughed and admitted that he had not even broached the subject with the National Security Council, because "if you did, all they would do is ask to conduct further study. The NSC loves to conduct a study *ad nauseum* nothing will be done. We don't have to talk to them."²⁸¹ Kukrit visited Beijing to sign a joint communique establishing formal diplomatic relations between China and Thailand on July 1st 1975, making Thailand the third Southeast Asian country to do so after Malaysia and the Philippines. The speed of the process surprised other Western diplomats stationed in Bangkok who had been observing the situation, one of whom referred to the signing as "really unseemly,

²⁸⁰ Benjamin Zawacki, *Thailand Shifting Ground between the US and Rising China* (London: Zed Books, 2017), p.52.

²⁸¹ Khian Thirawit, *Kwam Sampan Thai Cheen Liew Lang Lae Naa* [Sino-Thai Relations: Looking Back and Forward] (Bangkok: CU Press, 2000), p.15.

this pell-mell dash to recognise Peking.”²⁸² Kukrit had turned a foundation laid out by Sanya to its final completion.

Mayaguez Affair: Who Were You Talking To?

The United States continued to observe Thai politics very closely. Although many of the functions that Thailand had been performing in Indochina had ceased after communist forces had emerged victorious in much of Indochina, Thailand was still vital to maintaining a regional containment arc in Southeast Asia through hosting American residual force, or at least granting American forces the right to re-enter Thailand should the need arise in the future. Washington was inevitably interested in Thai political stability. With American client states in Indochina all but fallen, Thailand's stability relative to their neighbours became a rare commodity in the region, without which continuing a basing right would be difficult. To achieve its goal, the US wanted to do what it could to maintain a viable government in Thailand to prevent the possibility of an unrest, although they considered Kukrit's government to be unstable and populist, used American withdrawal to pander to the media, left-leaning students, and intellectuals, to sustain itself.²⁸³ To this end, Kissinger was encouraged by the NSC in April 1975 to propose that Ford increases American military assistance to Thailand for 1976 from the budgeted 30 million dollars to 45 million dollars. The moderate increase was intended to be a gesture of American commitment and morale booster to pro-American elements in the Thai government, especially

²⁸² David A. Andelman. “*Thailand and China Establish Relations, Widening Peking Links With China and South Asia*,” The New York Times, July 2, 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/07/02/archives/thailand-and-china-establish-relations-widening-pekings-links-wide.html> [accessed January 2023].

²⁸³ Kissinger, Henry A. Memorandum for the President. Need for Increased Military Assistance to Thailand. 15 April 1975. Thailand (10). National Security Advisor's Files. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan

the Thai military who have lost their grounds in the foreign policy contest.²⁸⁴ American support for the military at this point was not necessarily driven by a sinister motive of encouraging their return to power. Rather, it was hoped that maintaining the military's morale would simultaneously encourage them to stay committed to defending future communist threat, and more importantly, "reduce their temptation to oust the newly-elected government."²⁸⁵

The rationale for increasing military aid to Thailand clearly demonstrated that the United States was fully aware of the growing rift between the Foreign Ministry and the military, and continued to view the Thai military as a favourable component to their relationship with Thailand. The United States was not entirely at fault on this matter, for the Thai military was also engaged in its own form of diplomacy with the United States throughout Kukrit's tenure. They repeatedly attempted to present themselves to the US as the real, but currently silent, power in Thailand, whose interest in working with the United States had not waned but made quieter by the dominance of civilian in politics and disturbingly loud voices of students and the press. This sometimes led to questioning official Thai policies when discussing matters with American diplomats. In one instance, Kukrit wanted to suspend the then ongoing joint US-Thai operations in Cambodia, General Kris Sivara, the Royal Thai Army Commander-in-Chief, and General Kriangsak, who were working closely with the US Embassy expressed their shock and disbelief that their "government was considering such an action." Kriangsak, then promised Edward

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

Masters, US Charge d'Affaires, that he would do his best to impress American views on to the Thai Defense Minister.²⁸⁶

On another occasion, the two generals might have been responsible for signaling to the US that circumventing the official authority of the RTG via the Thai military was an acceptable conduct. During the planning stages of Operation Frequent Wind, an American-led mission to evacuate remaining Americans out of Saigon in April 1975, concerns were raised that evacuation flights might include some Vietnamese nationals who would be routed through US bases in Thailand, thus negating Thai immigration process in place. Rather than rejecting the idea, Kris and Kriangsak suggested a list of air bases that the US could use to execute the mission without alerting the Thai public. Kriangsak insisted that for this reason the Thai Supreme Command should be the only one handling the operation on the Thai side. They “emphasised that it should not be taken up with civilian departments of the RTG.” Accordingly, the US Embassy informed Kissinger that the US should follow Kris’s and Kriangsak’s advice “and hold no discussions of Frequent Wind with other elements of the RTG at this point.” Exception was to be made if there happened to be a substantial amount of Vietnamese nationals needed to be processed in Thailand, in which case “we will at that time find a way to inform RTG civilian leadership of details of humanitarian evacuation.”²⁸⁷ Therefore, the Thai military continued to facilitate American activities in ways that Thailand under the civilian RTG was no longer willing.

²⁸⁶ US Embassy Bangkok to Secretary of State. Department of State Telegram. General Kriangsak’s Views on U.S. Support of Cambodia. March 1975. Box 18, Thailand – State Department Telegrams: To SECSTATE – EXDIS (1). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²⁸⁷ US Embassy Bangkok to Secretary of State. Department of State Telegram. Frequent Wind. April 1975. Box 18, Thailand – State Department Telegrams: To SECSTATE – EXDIS (2). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Other Generals, such as San Chitbatima, were less subtle. San explicitly told Masters in their meeting that the Thai military only tolerated Kukrit because his cabinet had a conservative leaning. Nevertheless, a return to military rule was to be expected. San characterized the military as now being in solidarity, unlike in 1973 when the Thai Army was internally divided between the Thanom-Prapas faction and those outside of it. To demonstrate his point, San boasted that he was responsible for organizing counter-demonstrations against anti-establishment protestors, and that it was he who sold the concept to Witoon Yassawat, who replicated this tactic successfully against student demonstrators by pitting them against counter-demonstrators recruited from vocational schools.²⁸⁸ These examples are significant not only for their explicit admission by a high-ranking Army officer of an active undercurrent in the Thai establishment, but also in explicit references to Kris and Witoon. The two generals who were once sympathetic to the students in 1973, were now displaying signs of disagreement with civilian politics, especially the latter point on Witoon's use of vocational school students, well regarded for their use of violence. At the least, it could be inferred by the United States that the current state of Thai civilian politics, characterized by domestic unrest, that promoted government decoupling from the United States was a temporary arrangement counting down its days. San also revealed that he had been sending newly graduated military cadets to villages and campuses to gather information, and planned to form a band of student informers to counter dissidents, before ending his meeting by expressing sympathy for the US in having to face obstacles to remaining in Thailand. He reassured Masters that with the right support the Thai military would be ready to

²⁸⁸ US Embassy Bangkok to Secretary of State. Department of State Telegram. General San On Thailand's Future. March 1975. Thailand (10). National Security Advisor's Files. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan

stem the communist tide. Masters concluded in his cable to Kissinger that San's comments agreed with what he had learned before, thus was overall a "good weathervane of current RTA [Royal Thai Army] thinking, since he [San] is very close to top leadership."²⁸⁹

The constant encouragement from the Thai military and the ease of working with them reinforced American attitude that there were two Thailand. Although the US was able to get away with it during Frequent Wind, in critical situations when decisions and communication between the United States and Thailand had to be clear such an attitude could directly harm American diplomacy through direct, if not blatant, disregard for Thailand as a sovereign nation. An incident later dubbed the "Mayaguez Affair" was a prime example of American diplomatic transgression and continual disregard for the official sovereign authority of Thailand. On May 12th 1975, an American naval vessel, the *SS Mayaguez*, was captured by a Khmer Rouge patrol and held captive in Cambodia. The United States, therefore, authorised the use of American force to rescue the crew. The details of the rescue operation proved to be difficult. The *Mayaguez* and its crew had already been brought on land, was unreachable without ground troops, which the US did not have any left in Indochina. The US Air Force security police stationed in multiple bases in Thailand was considered the best option. The security police were to be reinforced by marines from Okinawa to be assembled in Thailand before moving out to their main target.

Kukrit was not informed of the rescue operation but understood implicitly that Thai involvement was highly probable. He was determined not to have any Thai resources or its territory involved in any American action against Cambodia. The Prime Minister knew that Thai

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

position had just become more precarious. The fall of Cambodia and Laos in April, not more than a few weeks before the *Mayaguez* incident, added those two countries on Thailand's immediate borders to a list of states that Kukrit had to refine Thai *modus vivendi* with. As such, Kukrit was very sensitive towards anything that could jeopardise his plan, since improved relations with communist neighbours was vital to his foreign policy strategy and fulfilling his pledge to achieve full American withdrawal within a year. Much of his political survival and career rested on this platform. Therefore, Kukrit made it a point by inviting Edward Masters, to the Government House to insist on having no Thai involvement. Neither Masters nor his colleagues at the embassy had been informed of the plan for American rescue. They reassured Kukrit that the United States would not act against Thai wishes. When Masters returned from the Government House he asked Washington for the development on the *Mayaguez* and was told of the rescue plan with an instruction not to inform the Thai government.²⁹⁰

Officials in Washington wanted to make a strong statement. A Pentagon official reportedly told *Newsweek* at the time that Kissinger was particularly determined to “give the Khmer Rouge a bloody nose.” Kissinger had also reminded Ford that the seizure was an opportunity for the US to prove to others that they “will be worse off if they tackle us, and not that they can return to the status quo. It is not enough to get the ship's release.”²⁹¹ Once the decision to use force was made, the US had to appear resolute, which meant they had to disregard Kukrit's wishes. American marines were transported to Thailand from Okinawa and

²⁹⁰ Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p. 180.

²⁹¹ Peter Maguire, “Leave No Man Behind: The Truth About The Mayaguez Incident,” *The Diplomat*, June 19, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/leave-no-man-behind-the-truth-about-the-mayaguez-incident/> [accessed December 2022].

the rescue operation was launched from the U-Tapao base in Thailand. Kissinger made a courtesy call to General Kriangsak at the Supreme Command on the morning of the operation to inform him of the marines being moved into Thailand for an impending rescue operation. Kriangsak treated the call as a *fait accompli* and did not inform Kukrit or the Foreign Ministry, fearing their negative responses.²⁹² It was yet another clear attempt to circumvent the Thai government by exploiting the relationship that the United States had developed with the Thai military. Not only was it a breach to national sovereignty, but also a diplomatic insult to the RTG and Kukrit personally, when Masters had personally reassured him of the opposite a day earlier. Kukrit had already taken Masters reassurance to the media, and was quoted in an American news outlet that Thailand would not be involved in any capacity.²⁹³ As a result, Kukrit lodged an official protest and demanded that the marines from Okinawa be withdrawn immediately.²⁹⁴ The marines promptly moved from Thailand to Cambodia to conduct their original operation anyway. By May 15 the situation was resolved. The *Mayaguez* and its crew members were successfully rescued.

The United States got the successful rescue via strong show of force that they wanted. President Ford was jubilant when he announced the success of the operation in Washington. The US had turned what could have been the final humiliation to American departure from Indochina into a final victory. Others on Capitol Hill echoed a similar mood. Congressman Carroll Hubbard, for instance, congratulated Ford on his “decisive and courageous decision in sending

²⁹² Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p.184.

²⁹³ “Ford: Cambodians’ Seizure of a U.S. Vessel is Piracy,” *Newsday*, May 13, 1975.

²⁹⁴ Text of Diplomatic Messages, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 94th Congress; First Session Part 2, p.109. (Mayaguez Hearings, hereafter).

U.S. Marines to recapture the American merchant ship [...] It's good to win one for a change."²⁹⁵

Despite the Congressional hearing that followed, the Ford administration and its prestige survived the incident without much damage. The opposite was true for its diplomacy with Thailand. The RTG was most displeased. They informed the United States formally in a letter of protest that Thailand would immediately review all aspects of its current cooperation with the United States, including its basing rights, as well as reaffirming that it would not yield on the one-year deadline for a full American withdrawal. To emphasise their message, Thailand recalled its ambassador from Washington. Thai territory was used to facilitate an offensive operation in a neighbouring country against the expressed will of their government and the reassurance the US Charge d'Affaires personally gave to Kukrit. A protest was held in Bangkok at the US Embassy, where an effigy of President Ford was burnt. American presence and its connection to Thailand became a liability for Kukrit's domestic standing and his foreign policy with Indochina.

Within a month after the incident, John J. Brady, a senior staff member of The House Committee on International Relations, was dispatched to Thailand at a special request by the committee's chairman to study the *Mayaguez* Affair. Brady was given two divergent Thai narratives on the issue. First, was Kriangsak who refused to comment on any civil-military split, but stated that he wholeheartedly supported the operation with no regret. He dismissed public outrage as being inconsequential. In contrast, the Foreign Ministry, chastised the United States for bringing in the marines, calling it an unnecessary show of force. They accused the US of

²⁹⁵ U.S. Congressman Carroll Hubbard. Press Release. May 15, 1975. Box 3, Cambodia-Seizing of the Mayaguez (3). National Security Advisor's Files. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

knowingly exploited Thai civil-military rift to find loopholes for their action, without openly naming Kriangsak and Kissinger. On this point, although they did not directly comment on the civil-military divide, the MFA's argument amounted to no less than an implicit admission of a growing chasm. Considering that American withdrawal was still a lingering issue, the Foreign Ministry felt compelled to warn Brady firmly that Thailand now had "an elected government and that only the Prime Minister, not the military, could speak for the RTG."²⁹⁶ The US Embassy was equally aware of what Brady had learned and the potential damage it could do to US-Thai relations if made public. They asked Brady not to emphasise the Thai civil-military split in his report to be submitted to the committee chairman. Brady agreed and ensured the embassy that the report would be classified.²⁹⁷

The conflicted state of Thai civil-military institutions, therefore, presented the United States with contradictory versions of "Thailand." One led openly by strong personalities like Kukrit and Chatchai, the other without formal authority but equally powerful under the military vying to restore their political dominance, undercutting Kukrit's authority and direction. This schism then diffused into formal US-Thai interactions, as revealed by official communications between the US Embassy and the State Department during Frequent Wind where the "Royal Thai Government (RTG)" was often referred to as "civilian departments" as if they were a separate set of actors rather than the official authority of Thailand.²⁹⁸ In this regard, it is sensible

²⁹⁶ US Embassy Bangkok to Secretary of State. Department of State Telegram. Staff Delegation Interest in the Mayaguez Incident. June 1975. Thailand - State Department Telegrams: To SECSTATE - EXDIS (3). National Security Advisor's Files. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ US Embassy Bangkok to Secretary of State. Department of State Telegram. Frequent Wind. April 1975. Box 18, Thailand - State Department Telegrams: To SECSTATE - EXDIS (2). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

to believe that as far as Kissinger was concerned, American conduct during the *Mayaguez* mirrored the precedent set by the likes of Frequent Wind. His courtesy call to Kriangsak deviated little from an established, albeit unofficial, practice in the post-1973 Thailand where acceptable arrangements could be made and facilitated by the military at the expense of uninformed Thai civilian actors. In contrast to earlier incidents where Kris and Kriangsak worked quietly with the US away from the knowledge of the RTG, however, Kissinger's decision to inform only Kriangsak during the rescue operation of the *Mayaguez*, against Kukrit's personal insistence, was essentially a *de facto* acknowledgement of the military's informal authority in politics.

The United States seemed officially penitent in the aftermath, although this might have been spurred on by the drastic official Thai protest and American domestic reaction to the news. In the Congressional Hearing that followed, Congress and members of the American media appeared empathetic towards Thai position. Congressman Donald Riegle, for instance, expressed concern that the US might have damaged its long-term relationship with Thailand by using them as a staging ground for the operation. His concern was almost identical to Kukrit's, particularly on the matter of potentially exposing Thailand to hostility from neighbouring countries.²⁹⁹ In a separate interview, Schlesinger was asked bluntly by a reporter whether consideration had been given to potential impact on the US-Thai relations since Thailand is "our only remaining ally in Southeast Asia," who could perceivably undermine American power in Asia by accelerating the pace of withdrawal.³⁰⁰ American *mea culpa* was forthcoming, culminating in an official statement issued on May 19th that reads:

²⁹⁹ Mayaguez Hearings, part 1, p.59.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., p.109.

*The United States regrets the misunderstandings that have arisen between Thailand and the United States [...] The United States Government wishes to express its understanding of the problem caused the Royal Thai Government by these procedures and wishes to repeat its regret. The policy of the United States continues to be one of respecting the sovereignty and independence of Thailand. The unique circumstances that have led to the recent turn of events do not alter this traditional relationship, and are not going to be repeated; the Government of the United States looks forward to working in harmony and friendship with the Royal Thai Government.*³⁰¹

The message complemented Kissinger's earlier response to reporters, in which he said "I repeat: we are prepared to discuss in a spirit of friendship and cooperation all the concerns that the Thai Government has, and we do regret any embarrassment we may have caused them."³⁰² These texts demonstrate clearly that all relevant parties from Congress, the media, to top American officials were acutely aware of Thailand's difficult position, American need for Thai bases, and the fragile state of the US-Thai relations, and were eager to mitigate risks of jeopardising their continued presence in Thailand via public statements couched in diplomatic language of friendship and cooperation.

More importantly, statements given to both Congress and the media following the rescue reveal another insight into American outlook on Thailand. If Thai reaction, both in the form of recalling their ambassador and reviewing existing cooperations with the United States, was more drastic than anticipated, what did the US assume was going to be Thai response when it acted.

³⁰¹ Mayaguez Hearings, part 2, p.242.

³⁰² Mayaguez Hearings, part 1, p.94.

directly against Kukrit's demand? The clue could be found in one of Kissinger's more candid answers at a press conference the day after the rescue operation, where he cited the SEATO framework as proof of long-term US-Thai cooperation. He admitted, however, that "in the course of this decade, it may be that a pattern of action has developed that made us assume that our latitude in using these bases was greater than the current situation in Southeast Asia would permit the Thai government."³⁰³ It was on this basis, described as being "within the traditional relationship" that he assumed sending in the marines against Kukrit's wishes "would be a measure that would be understood."³⁰⁴ Additionally, he was certain that the United States was indispensable to long-term Thai interests regardless of circumstance: "I believe that relations with other countries must always be based on a mutuality of interest [...] And, therefore, I am assuming that the Thai Government will look at its long-term interests as we will." For these reasons, Thai support was taken for granted. American relationship with Thailand continued to operate on the same basis that it did pre-1973, where Thailand played the role of an accommodating junior partner, despite the changes in government and official policy that have taken place. Thus, the US had only limited concern for Thai reaction.

Thai Uncertainty

Events by the end of Summer 1975 soon validated Kissinger's speculation of American indispensability to Thai interests in the long-term. Once the *Mayaguez* quarrel subsided, Thailand began to soften its tone towards the United States. Kukrit's strategy for Thai survival against communist powers was built on renormalising relationship with communist neighbours.

³⁰³ Ibid., p.90.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., p.91.

Bangkok had been successful with China, Laos, and potentially, Cambodia, but tension with Hanoi did not subside. Throughout 1975, North Vietnam, kept up its critical rhetoric towards Thailand with little signs of letting up. Its harsh comments led to Chatchai stating publicly that he would not be holding talks with Hanoi until Vietnam moderates its criticism of Thailand.³⁰⁵ Hanoi had accused Thailand of sheltering Vietnamese dissidents, demanded that South Vietnamese assets transferred to Thailand be given to North Vietnam, and in response to Chatchai's statement, further accused Thailand of being insincere in its diplomacy with Hanoi.³⁰⁶ Thai strategy, then, was met with a stonewall in Hanoi. On the other hand, its success with China did not yield the optimal diplomatic outcome.

China played a supplementary role to Thai interests by providing it with what the United States could not. This was especially true to Thailand's effort to develop relations with Cambodia, where China acted as a liaison in fostering ties between the RTG and the new Khmer Rouge regime. Kukrit recalled that "Cambodia was handed to us on a silver tray, with ribbons, by Mr. Zhou En Lai."³⁰⁷ Kukrit only had to mention to Zhou that he wished for friendly relations with Cambodia. Zhou was pleased with what he heard. Anand Panyarachun then followed up Kukrit's effort by expressing willingness to supply Cambodia with food aid on a government-to- government basis to Ieng Sary, Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister, at the UN in September 1975. Within a month, Ieng met with Kukrit in Bangkok. Chinese complicity was apparent, China informed Thailand that Ieng would make a stop in Thailand on a Chinese plane to meet with Kukrit. To a smaller extent, this too concerned the US-Thai relationship, as it was through

³⁰⁵ Relations Between The Two Vietnams and Thailand. KT 18.2.1/5 Bundle 4, Box 2. National Archives of Thailand (NAT), Bangkok, Thailand.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Jittipat, *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy*, p.211.

improved Thai-Cambodian relations that Kissinger, a month later in November, asked Chatchai to tell the Cambodians that the US was willing to be “friends with them. They are murderous thugs, but we won’t let that stand in our way.”³⁰⁸ Other than international politics, the Sino-Thai relationship was mostly commercial. Thai interest in this area was to bolster its economy by expanding trade with China and halting Chinese export of rice to countries that were traditionally Thai clients to protect Thailand’s own rice trade.³⁰⁹ As such, rather than supplanting the United States, Thai pivot to China complemented its existing relationship with the US by providing it with what the US could not.

Furthermore, Bangkok felt that for Thai reorientation away from the United States to be successful, its relationship with the Soviet Union must be developed in tandem with its growing ties to China.³¹⁰ Although Kukrit and Chatchai were active on the matter, fostering a stronger relationship with the Soviet Union required great time and effort that Thailand could ill afford, given the quick collapses of its neighbours to communism. By late 1975, a few months had passed since all three capitals in Indochina had fallen, regional repercussions were beginning to be felt. Thailand found itself hosting 23,000 refugees from Laos in addition to the Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees already present. This was a burden that the Thai government could not shoulder without continual American humanitarian assistance, which had made it possible thus

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p.212; Memorandum of Conversation. Secretary’s Meeting with Foreign Minister Chatchai of Thailand. November 26, 1975. Digital National Security Archive (DNSA), The Kissinger Conversations: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977 [accessed January 2023].

³⁰⁹ David A. Andelman. “*Thailand and China Establish Relations, Widening Peking Links With China and South Asia*,” The New York Times, July 2, 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/07/02/archives/thailand-and-china-establish-relations-widening-peking-links-wide.html> [accessed January 2023].

³¹⁰ Jittipat, *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy*, p.218.

far.³¹¹ Despite Kukrit's outrage and committed effort to distance Thailand from the US, it became more apparent that the US was going to be indispensable for Thailand, at least a while longer than the deadline he had announced for American withdrawal.

The United States, likewise, understood that the Sino-Thai rapprochement could not upset the status quo of the US-Thai relations. This left room for the US to continue its attempt to retain Thailand in its orbit. The focus was on expanding and deepening other areas of cooperation such as economic and non-security cooperation to entice Thai interest, without neglecting the existing military-security cooperation.³¹² Ambassador Charles S. Whitehouse was firmly instructed to use his tenure to affirm American commitment to Southeast Asia, even when the fighting in Indochina had ended. In addition to reassuring the RTG that American aid would continue, though in reduced amount, Whitehouse was to acknowledge that the US was willing to transfer "a substantial volume" of American ships and aircrafts that escaped from South Vietnam and Cambodia to Thailand.

With most American combat elements already removed from Thai bases by mid-1975, a key component of US-Thai military cooperation at this stage centered on American signals intelligence facilities, particularly the Seventh Radio Field Research Station so-called *Ramasun*. During the Vietnam War, Ramasun was a high-end communication interception post that not

³¹¹ Kissinger, Henry A. Memorandum. Indochina Refugees in Thailand. August 5, 1975. Box 17, Thailand (12). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

³¹² Secretary of State to US Embassy Bangkok. Department of State Telegram. U.S. Force Reductions in Thailand. April 1975. Thailand (7). National Security Adviser's Files. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

only intercepted and decrypted messages, but also supplied American planes with almost instantaneous intelligence on locations and formations of enemy Mig fighters.³¹³ Ramasun was arguably the last bastion of American Cold War containment effort present on Thai soil. Its ongoing operation after combat operations had ended was an asset to American intelligence and kept Thailand relevant to American containment arc. Thailand was disinterested in becoming part of American security architecture that does not directly concern its own national security, as seen in its suspension of P-3 flights earlier during Sanya's tenure, but implicitly concurred that there was merit to retaining Ramasun. The nascent Vietnamese hegemony in Indochina gave Thailand, the United States, and China, a common cause for concern by turning Vietnam and its Soviet supporter into a mutual focus of their containment effort. Both Kissinger and Chatchai agreed that Vietnam was the biggest problem, and having China more involved in Cambodia was a good counter-balance. It was also their impression that the Chinese, too, were uneasy about an expanding Vietnam and its potential as a conduit for Soviet influence south of China's border.³¹⁴ For this reason, non-combat American presence was a tolerable option for the RTG.

At a time when the United States was trying to gauge the exact expectation of the Thai government, Thailand's tentative approach resulted in mixed signals to the US.³¹⁵ Chatchai, for

³¹³ Michael Morrow, "GIs at a Secret Base – Plenty of Time to Worry," *The Washington Post*, September 14, 1972.

³¹⁴ Michael Leifer, *ASEAN and the Security of South-East Asia* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.97; Memorandum of Conversation. Secretary's Meeting with Foreign Minister Chatchai of Thailand. November 26, 1975. DNSA, The Kissinger Conversations: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977 [accessed January 2023]; Memorandum of Conversation. The Soviet Union. September 28, 1975. DNSA, The Kissinger Conversations: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977 [accessed January 2023].

³¹⁵ Smyser, W.R. Memorandum for Henry Kissinger. Your Meeting with Ambassador Whitehouse on May 2 at 5.00 P.M. May 1, 1975. Thailand (7). National Security Advisor's Files. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

instance, entered a discussion on force reduction by indicating that the one-year deadline for American withdrawal was “subject to security situation in Southeast Asia.” He considered it an escape clause that the Thai government could use to ultimately allow American presence, and suggested that this might ultimately be the case. Meanwhile, he would also inform the US that certain withdrawal gestures had to be made to alleviate public pressure on his government. This gave the initiative on force withdrawal talks to the United States, which the US was no longer willing to take since it suspected that Kukrit’s coalition government was too unstable to achieve a long-term agreement. Force withdrawal negotiations at this stage then became directionless. Neither party objected to the withdrawal of 7,500 personnel proposed for the summer of 1975, but in contrast to the Vietnam days when the number of bases and personnel were determined by a defined objective, this was force reduction for the sake of reduction.³¹⁶ In June, months after Chatchai had spoken to the US Embassy, Smyser aptly summed up the situation to Scowcroft as “despite having been put on official notice that all US forces should be gone by next March, we really have only an imprecise idea of what the Thai really want.”³¹⁷ Thailand would not let the US stay, but it would not let the US leave. The United States, on the other hand, was caught in an uncertainty regarding its post-Vietnam power projection. Such uncertainty around this period began to encourage the US to seriously re-examine the long-term direction of its Thailand

³¹⁶ US Embassy Bangkok to Secretary of State. Department of State Telegram. U.S. Force Reductions in Thailand. April 1975. Thailand (7). National Security Advisor’s Files. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

³¹⁷ Smyser, W.R. Memorandum for Brent Scowcroft. Further Telegram to Bangkok Regarding U.S. Troop Withdrawal. June 24, 1975. Box 17, Thailand (9). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

policy.³¹⁸ And so, as Kukrit demanded a review of existing cooperation with the United States, the US began to do the same for Thailand.

Confusion among American policymakers regarding Thai wishes and demands percolated to the top when as late as October 1975, less than six months away from Kukrit's deadline for American withdrawal, Kissinger was still under the impression that American combat forces could perhaps be stationed after the March 1976 deadline as part of a residual force. He was nevertheless informed the contrary by the CIA, who Kissinger had instructed to prepare an intelligence memorandum on the subject, that the Thais believed the issue of stationing US combat aircrafts is settled long ago. To prolong or request any future stationing of those aircrafts would be a shock to the RTG.³¹⁹ As such, to mitigate potential loss of American combat and non-combat presence, since the latter's stationing in Thailand was not yet guaranteed officially, the last half of 1975 witnessed the strengthening of relations between the United States and maritime Southeast Asian nations. Other than Thailand, the Philippines was another regional American hub, though it did not play extensive roles during the Indochina wars. Indonesia also played limited roles during the same period, but was increasingly receptive to American overtures, making it another maritime country that the US could potentially shifted its weight to. The American relationship with Indonesia had been growing since the Nixon years. Like

³¹⁸ Smyser, W.R. Memorandum for Henry Kissinger. Your Meeting with Ambassador Whitehouse on May 2 at 5.00 P.M. May 1, 1975. Thailand (7). National Security Advisor's Files. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

³¹⁹ Barnes, Thomas J. Memorandum for Henry Kissinger. Probable Thai Reaction to U.S. Request to Retain Combat Presence Beyond Next March. October 20, 1975. Box 17, Thailand (15). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Thailand, Indonesia was a recipient of American military assistance program (MAP). Its president, Suharto, a staunch anti-communist, believed a closer relationship with the United States was a suitable vehicle for propelling Indonesia towards a leadership position in Southeast Asia.³²⁰ These countries was reported to President Ford as “a potential loose mechanism for security cooperation – imperfect but relatively safe and possibly useful.”³²¹

There were many high-level meetings held between the US and the maritime countries, not least because the US was also engaged in an ongoing base negotiation with the Philippines. Should that falter as well as the Thai negotiations, American power projection and its containment arc would be in jeopardy. Yet, should negotiations with the Philippines be successful additionally to Indonesia being brought into closer cooperation with the United States, the US could bypass Thailand as the Southeast Asian hub altogether. It was a sensible contingency plan for the United States, that would by default relegate Thailand to irrelevance in American Asia-Pacific strategy. Such a possibility was too extreme even for neutralist elements in Thailand, and certainly to the Thai military. Hence, closer ties between the US and the maritime countries were closely watched by the Thais. In November, Chatchai, Anand, and a team of Thai national security officials, wholly composed of military officers, went to Washington. Chatchai stated diplomatically that the only purpose of his visit was to reaffirm the spirit of the US-Thai relationship, but the true purpose seems to be his concern that the United States was redrawing its defensive perimeter in Southeast Asia “so that it does not include

³²⁰ Wen-Qing Ngoei, *Arc of Containment* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2019), p.163.

³²¹ Memorandum From Secretary of State Kissinger to President Ford Washington, June 13, 1975, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Volume E-12, Documents on East and Southeast Asia, Document 16, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve12.d16> [accessed January 2023].

Thailand.”³²² He raised this point with Kissinger and Habib during lunch by pointing specifically to Kissinger and Ford flying directly to the Philippines and Indonesia on their return trip from China without stopping in Thailand, making Ford the first Vietnam-era US President to not visit Thailand. Kissinger blamed time constraint, and promised to send the Vice President to Thailand early next year.

The growing rift between the parties emerged throughout their conversation, with Thailand now actively trying to court the United States. When told that it was a time-constraint issue, Chatchai asked if they could at least refuel in Bangkok on the way from Beijing to Indonesia. Kissinger replied vaguely that it sounded like a good idea, told Habib to consider it, and reiterated that “it would be very difficult, but I am sure we can send the Vice President in March.” Outside of pleasantries, requests on substantive issues were likewise met with vague responses. When asked if American planes from South Vietnam could be transferred to Thailand and that Thailand would be interested in American assistance in establishing a regional ammunition factory for ASEAN countries, Habib and Kissinger commented that the new Congress was impossible to work with. Habib then used this opportunity to promote American interest in retaining residual non-combat and intelligence stations in Thailand by telling Chatchai that some of “the information produced by some of our residual activities will be very useful to you.” Chatchai agreed, responded that Thailand was happy with the current arrangement, but American press and the Thai press were making everything more difficult. He also interestingly said that this was the result of Thailand having “too much democracy.” Kissinger and Habib

³²² Secretary's Meeting with Foreign Minister Chatchai of Thailand. November 26, 1975. DNSA, The Kissinger Conversations: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977 [accessed January 2023].

happily concurred that the press was their problem. Kissinger then ended the conversation by promising to do what they could within their constraints to assist Thailand. The three of them agreed to inform the media officially that they had a useful conversation on all things related to US-Thai relations and Thai security, when they in fact achieved little more than non-committal comments from both sides on matters ranging from small symbolic gestures of a plane refuel to larger questions that Chatchai raised.³²³

The official Thai position also became amenable to American requests. US Embassy reports from Bangkok that November showed encouraging signs that the United States might be able to maintain a residual force in Thailand as planned. This included transit and refueling rights in addition to stationing its non-combat personnel and intelligence stations. The foreign ministry and Chatchai himself were discernably accommodating. They agreed to almost everything that the United States asked, except to stationing and launching of the U-2 reconnaissance planes. The US became so confident in its gains that it wanted to meet with Kukrit again to push for approval on the U-2 planes.³²⁴ Thus, by the end of 1975, the US appeared to have restored a semblance of its Vietnam-era US-Thai alliance, whereby Thailand would continue to facilitate American power in the Pacific and beyond. Washington believed it could now station an estimated 3,000 personnel in Thailand at intelligence installations such as Ramasun, Doi Inthanon, and Kokha, in addition to US Air Force personnel at U-Tapao base. The latter most likely to be responsible for handling both landing and transiting American aircrafts supporting “airlift missions, linking the Pacific with the Middle East.”³²⁵ The containment arc was going to

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ The Secretary's 8:00 A.M. Staff Meeting, November 5, 1975. DNSA, *The Kissinger Conversations: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977* [accessed January 2023].

³²⁵ Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p.187.

be secured. However, a little over a month later in January 1976, Thai politics disrupted what could have been a smooth path to American residual force.

Although American diplomatic gains could also be construed domestically in Thailand as a gain for the RTG in securing Thailand's international security, it was not enough for Kukrit to maintain his coalition government. Decreasing American economic aid began affecting Thai economy, his unwieldy eighteen-party coalition was becoming restive, but most importantly the military was dissatisfied with Kukrit's détente policy. They would rather that Thailand be closer to the United States than at an equidistance between the US, China, Vietnam, and the Soviet Union. This equation could produce Thai neutralism, but not a security guarantee or an umbrella that the US could. Kris, a relatively moderate general up until then, confronted Kukrit at his home with a group of military leaders and demanded his resignation. The next day on January 12, Kukrit responded defiantly by dissolving the parliament and scheduled an election for April, hoping to emerge with a stronger electoral mandate to continue his brand of détente.³²⁶ The ongoing negotiation consequently became seen as central to Thai politics, rather than a matter of foreign policy and national security. Kukrit was convinced that it was the decisive factor for his political survival, and perhaps decisive to whether Thailand would remain under civilian rule.

³²⁶ Jittipat, *A Genealogy of Bamboo Diplomacy*, p.227.

The Final Stage

In the United States, the sudden dissolution of parliament and an election under such a contentious circumstance was understood to represent a hardening of Thai negotiation stance. Thailand was unlikely to be as accommodating as it had been just a month prior. As the previous election that brought Kukrit to power have shown, Thai parliamentary politics often leads to neither a decisive result nor majority rule; coalition government is to be expected. Kukrit himself was a Prime Minister with minority seats in the parliament. Additionally, the emergence of student voices, the press, and a more lenient attitude towards left-leaning politics meant that there were now more actors in the parliament than there were in 1973. For instance, the socialist party and others aligned with them, as well as other right-wing elements opposing them, all of whom could conceivably form their own coalition. In the wings, of course, was the military eagerly anticipating the result of the election. This signaled to the United States that the election could lead to a complex mix of interests, groups, and ideologies. Not only would this threaten Thailand's stability, a primary factor that had so far made it a viable option for American basing, but also a real possibility that the election would produce an eccentric government who might not feel the obligation to honour arrangements already made with the Kukrit government.³²⁷

Washington's concern came true on February 4th when Anand submitted a proposal, so-called The Seven Principles, to the US Embassy: a list of seven conditions that must be met for

³²⁷ Interagency Intelligence Memorandum. The Thai Election and Its Implications for the US. February 4, 1976. Box 17, Thailand (16). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL; Barnes, Thomas J. Memorandum. Thai Election and Its Implications for the U.S. February 20, 1976. Box 17, Thailand (17). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

future American basing in Thailand. The US was so disturbed by recent developments that then CIA director, George H. W. Bush, considered issuing a study on Thailand as an alert memorandum and warned that their decision to not do so in the end should not be misinterpreted as diminishing the gravity of the situation there.³²⁸ At the core of The Seven Principles was the issue of extraterritoriality, whereby Thailand sought to subject all American bases and personnel to Thai courts and jurisdiction, which had never been the case for the entirety of American basing in Thailand. Further, extraterritoriality was a pre-requisite to American basing globally under the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that the United States conclude with every country its bases are stationed in, except with Thailand. Since, national sovereignty was always at the heart of Thai public dissatisfaction with American troops, Thai decision to reverse what is regarded as a norm in American basing could only be regarded as electioneering, and perhaps Kukrit having sided with a particular faction of his bureaucracy who felt strongly about this issue, most likely the Foreign Ministry. Thus, the US had to negotiate on an issue that neither itself nor the Thais could compromise on.

This dynamic finally reached a boiling point during the negotiation on Ramasun and the remaining US personnel, then estimated at 4,000. Contrary to the historiography put forward by Randolph that the Ramasun negotiation represents American inability to adjust to domestic circumstances in Thailand and finally conceded to an impossible demand by the Thais as a result of this inability, it appears that the United States did understand Thai domestic circumstance very well. It was, however, Thailand's internal chaos that made it difficult for the US to adjust.

³²⁸ Barnes, Thomas J. Memorandum. Thai Election and Its Implications for the U.S. February 20, 1976. Box 17, Thailand (17). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Moreover, American action in the autumn of 1975 and throughout 1976, during and after the final phase of withdrawal from Thailand, demonstrated their refusal to concede American position in Southeast Asia. Arguably, they advanced their own goal of consolidating American presence in the region, despite their losses on mainland Southeast Asia.

Out of the seven principles presented, principles 1 and 6 were the cause of most contention.

They were:

(1) American facilities and personnel shall be subject to Thai jurisdiction unless exempted by specific agreements between the Royal Thai Government and the United States;

(6) These authorised personnel shall enjoy such privileges as are accorded to technical experts from other countries.

The first principle demanded a break from the standard practice of SOFA, while the sixth principle does not state exactly the terms and conditions of “privileges as are accorded to technical experts from other countries”, leaving room for further debates and arguments.

American policymakers understood they had to tread very carefully since any concession to principles (1) and (6) could lead to a legal precedent for other countries to slowly dismantle SOFA they already had in place, particularly with regards to the Philippines and Spain. It would be ironic, even, that a legal precedent undermining SOFA could result from attempting to

achieve something resembling a SOFA in a country that had seven American bases without a SOFA.³²⁹

Once more the difference between local agency, the US Embassy, and the more distant policymakers in Washington emerged. Ambassador Whitehouse wanted a prompt response from the State Department on the matter. He originally believed that the seven principles were possibly a stunt by the Thai government that would not alter agreements already in place and that the private views, that Kissinger once spoke of during the press briefing after the *Mayaguez*, would prevail. By March, Whitehouse changed his view. He was convinced by Thai persistence that the US yield to the principles especially points (1) and (6). Nevertheless, while Washington could appreciate the seriousness of the situation, they were unsure of how to gauge Thai intention. Past experiences have demonstrated that Thai civilian governments often held private views that were contradictory to their public posture out of political necessity. Chatchai had just visited Washington to express Thai eagerness for continuing US-Thai cooperation. His Foreign Ministry and Prime Minister also recently concluded an agreement to give the United States all that they requested. To the US, it was worth questioning whether Thailand would actually be willing to reverse the entire process. Subsequently, in early March, a few weeks before the deadline for complete withdrawal lapses, Thomas J. Barnes, a senior member of the NSC, suggested to Brent Scowcroft that the US try to draw out “real” Thai intention. Barnes believed Whitehouse had “insufficient basis for concluding that Thai negativism is this extreme.” Among suggestions for drawing out Thai intention was to have Ambassador Whitehouse enter his next

³²⁹ The Secretary's Staff Meeting, March 5, 1976. DNSA, The Kissinger Conversations: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977 [accessed January 2023].

meeting with the Thais while both Anand and Kukrit are present together, ensuring that Anand had not been lying to them about the instructions coming from Kukrit.³³⁰ Habib expressed a similar sentiment, telling Kissinger in a meeting that the Thai bureaucracy had been stern in demanding that the US accept the Thai principles or they must leave by March 20th 1976, but “now, the Prime Minister [Kukrit] – we can’t believe they mean it. The Prime Minister is saying that.”³³¹

Habib’s skepticism was the result of the United States having a firm grasp of Thai politics, rather than the inability to adjust to reality on the ground. He understood the roles that many factions in Thai politics played, and that such an important decision should only be made with the “real” authority. The question was who? Thailand previously chastised the US for speaking to the military over the RTG, however, at this point the RTG was apparently divided between what Habib referred to as “Thai bureaucracy” and Kukrit. As far as Kissinger was concerned the US Embassy had already contacted Kukrit about the Seven Principles, and the Prime Minister appeared to agree with American concern. Now, Habib was informing Kissinger otherwise. According to Habib, this particular group of Thai bureaucrats, whose membership was not discussed, were dissatisfied with Kukrit’s American policy and opportunistically pushed for a tougher stance, knowing that Kukrit was unlikely to resist them to avoid giving an appearance of a divided government or a weak management of relationship with the United

³³⁰ Barnes, Thomas J. Memorandum to Brent Scowcroft. U.S. Residual Forces in Thailand. March 4, 1976. Box 17, Thailand (18). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

³³¹ The Secretary’s Staff Meeting. March 5, 1976. DNSA, The Kissinger Conversations: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977 [accessed January 2023].

States during an election season. The “leader of the bureaucratic group” went as far as contacting the Thai ambassador in Washington to lobby for their cause. It was, therefore, sensible for Washington to wonder if Kukrit had been turned into a lame duck Prime Minister by his own structure.³³²

Added to the difficulty in fathoming Thai intention and their true representative was that American basing in Thailand had never been done with written agreements. Habib once summarized the state of American bases in Thailand to Kissinger as being on a foundation so shaky “it’s like quicksilver – it consists of a whole series of letters and notes and verbal agreements [...] very, very ambiguous, in many respects; they’ve never been formalised in a mutual security treaty the way they are in other countries.”³³³ This enabling character of US-Thai diplomacy under the Sarit-Thanom regime that benefitted the United States so immensely, especially in granting them a foothold in Thailand without the formal obligation to defend it, now returned to haunt them.

With many questions unanswered, Washington’s responses were slow. They could do little more than responding to minor, trivial, points such as American duty-free privileges. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs grew agitated over delayed American response. On March 9th, they decided to act by announcing the ongoing negotiation over the seven principles to the public. Their message stated clearly that the only avenue to continuing American presence was if the

³³² Ibid.

³³³ The Secretary’s Principals’ and Regionals’ Staff Meeting, May 16, 1975. DNSA, The Kissinger Conversations: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977 (accessed January 2023).

United States acquiesce to these principles.³³⁴ The delicate negotiation suddenly became the subject of close public scrutiny. They successfully forced American hands at the cost of pushing Thailand into a corner. For Kukrit to prevail, his government must secure nothing less than a full concession from the US on a matter that they had already insisted on not yielding. For a brief moment, the US had to restrain impulses among its own agencies to be involved in Thai politics. Coup rumours were swirling around Thailand. The US Embassy received an instruction from Washington to avoid any involvement in a potential coup. Although the Thai military were staunchly pro-American, the US had to prioritise Thai stability over the military. Habib warned that given the US agencies at stake in Thailand, the US Embassy, Department of Defense, NSA, DIA, and CIA, “don’t think some of those guys wouldn’t be happy to see a military coup. It’s easy to deal with Generals.”³³⁵ In the second week of March, the United States decided that reaching out to Kukrit remained the best option, factional politics notwithstanding. He was the official authority of the country whose approval the US required to retain its bases. A successful coup, however, would remove the Prime Minister they were still trying to court, and upset an already precarious state of Thai politics.

After navigating through the difficulties, the US met the Thai proposal with a final draft position of its own: the United States would accept all seven principles, if Thailand would accept changes to the legal language of principle 6. The US contended that the Thai formulation of Principle 6 was too vague in its reference to “foreign technical experts”, and that it allows much

³³⁴ Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p.190.

³³⁵ The Secretary’s Staff Meeting. March 15, 1976. DNSA, *The Kissinger Conversations: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977* [accessed January 2023].

of the interpretation to be decided by the RTG alone. Ambassador Whitehouse informed Kukrit in their meeting on March 19, one day before the withdrawal date on March 20th, that these issues could be resolved with the American draft, which stated clearly that the exact details of immunity and privileges for American personnel would be negotiated between the United States and Thailand.³³⁶ Another American proposal was to attach a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to the revised draft proposal, proclaiming that the follow-up negotiation be concluded within three months. Neither Kukrit nor Anand were receptive to American counter-proposal. Anand countered that the American draft did not provide any guidelines on the eventual level of privileges and immunities that the US could gain. Kukrit felt there was a loophole in the time-limit of the negotiation, allowing the United States to prolong the negotiation for as long as they could. American personnel in the meantime could use this to enjoy their diplomatic immunity in perpetuity until the negotiation is finalised. The ambassador responded that this was not the case, since the MOU would state a clear three-month limit.³³⁷

What Anand and Kukrit said next were revealing of their motive in rejecting the draft. Kukrit said that his government must be able to “defend its policy to the public [...] It would be very helpful in this respect if it could be seen, in writing, that the United States was not demanding extraterritoriality for its personnel.” Anand concurred in a harsher tone adding that “the government could not afford to conclude secret understandings.” Whitehouse rebuked that the US was not looking for a secret arrangement, but that this was to be a negotiation done in

³³⁶ Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p.192.

³³⁷ US Embassy Bangkok to Secretary of State. Department of State Telegram. U.S. Residual Forces in Thailand. March 1976. Box 18, Thailand – State Department Telegrams: To SECSTATE – NODIS (2). National Security Advisor’s Files. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

good faith to be concluded in three months. Kukrit returned to his original point that the US proposal would allow for the negotiation to go on without a finite timeframe. Whitehouse, again, reaffirmed that the US was determined to settle the matter in 90 days, since failing to do so would also affect American personnel rather seriously. Kukrit replied that he needed to be able to “show the Thai that the Seven Principles were not a ‘put-up’ job, a suspicion that would arise if the US approach were adopted.”³³⁸ In these exchanges, it was clear that whenever Thai official reasons were met with a commensurate response from the ambassador, Thai responses reverted to the RTG’s fear of not obtaining public approval. Towards the end of their meeting when both parties appeared exasperated, Kukrit was even more forthcoming on this motive. He told Whitehouse that he did not have any problem with the American proposal but “there were ‘other people in the game’ who would see it as an indefinite prolongation [...] loud voices of dissension would be raised.”³³⁹ Given the context the “other people in the game” could be understood broadly as a grouping of the Thai public, the military, and even Kukrit’s own bureaucracy and government. Official American speculation included Kukrit’s Deputy Prime Minister, Pramarn Adireksarn, on a list of prominent people seizing the withdrawal issue for political gains against Kukrit.³⁴⁰

Whitehouse pleaded with his Thai interlocutors to no avail. The negotiation then shifted to whether the American draft could be accepted by the public. The ambassador asked directly if

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Barnes, Thomas J. Memorandum for Henry Kissinger. Probable Thai Reaction to U.S. Request to Retain Combat Presence Beyond Next March. October 20, 1975. Box 17, Thailand (15). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL; Barnes, Thomas J. Memorandum. Thai Election and Its Implications for the U.S. February 20, 1976. Box 17, Thailand (17). National Security Adviser. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

nothing else, even with a pledge to complete the negotiation in three months, can satisfy the public. Anand and Kukrit suggested that anything less than an acceptance of the Thai proposal would be interpreted as American extraterritoriality on Thai soil by the public.³⁴¹ With that, the negotiation concluded with neither party able to break their impasse. The United States was to begin its withdrawal process to be completed by summer 1976. Thailand would not continue to be an American base in the region or a part of its containment arc. Chatchai's fear that American defensive perimeter was being redrawn without Thailand became a self-fulfilling policy with his own ministry playing a leading role in the process.

In one of the most detailed accounts of what transpired in the final stage of the US-Thai negotiation, R. Sean Randolph argued that while Thailand was responsible for presenting such a rigid deadline and politicising the negotiation, the United States shouldered the blame for its inability to adjust to Thai realities, rigid adherence to legal principles, and the lack of trust resulting in lethargy and disinterest in retaining Thailand as a client.³⁴² However, a closer examination of the chain of events, as presented above, leading up to the final moment reveals that much of Thai decision were influenced by its domestic situation beyond American control. Short of a direct American intervention, which Washington had made clear repeatedly since 1973 that they were unwilling to do out of concern for Thai stability, there was little the United States could have done to rectify the situation. The US was subsequently compelled to adopt a reactionary approach to Thailand. Despite this, the United States was careful to set up a contingency should negotiation with Thailand falter, as demonstrated in its approach to maritime

³⁴¹ US Embassy Bangkok to Secretary of State. Department of State Telegram. U.S. Residual Forces in Thailand. March 1976. Box 18, Thailand – State Department Telegrams. To SECSTATE – NODIS (2). National Security Advisor's Files. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

³⁴² Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p.194.

Southeast Asia. This could hardly be seen as what Randolph described as “a general malaise with Southeast Asia [...] and a desire to terminate American involvement in that area”, which in his assessment was responsible for the lethargic responses by Washington to Thai demands.³⁴³ On the contrary, when seen in a broader context of American containment in the Pacific, credit should be given to the United States for continuing to pursue the maintenance of its containment arc against a very challenging situation developed in Thailand.

Randolph's argument that American counter-proposal was responsible for a failed negotiation, due to its failure to submit to Thai jurisdiction also warranted reassessment.³⁴⁴ For one, Whitehouse had already conceded to all principles except the wording of Principle 6, including Principle 1, which stated that American facilities and personnel shall be subject to Thai jurisdiction, unless exempted by specific agreements. Yet, throughout the entire process Kukrit and Anand rejected the ambassador's offer on political rather than legalistic reason. The author further argued that American failure to accommodate Thailand was resultant of their inability to understand and adjust to the Thai civilian rule that was equally concerned with public appearance as it was with substance of the negotiation. Randolph believed that the phrase “unless exempted by specific agreements” in Principle 1 was a Thai way of providing an opt-out clause for the US, whereby if the US would acquiesce to every principle for the sake of public appearance thereafter the precise details could be negotiated to American satisfaction. In other words, accept the principles first, then make amendments later. Randolph argued that the Thais already went to great lengths to convince the US to do so, but American bureaucracy failed to capitalise on this because their decisions were made by Washington legal experts both at the Department of State

³⁴³ Ibid., p.199.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., p.192.

and Defence, who were insistent on having the right legal text. They could comprehend neither the significance of “accept and amend” as a legal practice nor how necessary it was to placate Thai sentiments, and ultimately any mutual trust that had been characteristic of the Vietnam-era US-Thai relations had already evaporated.³⁴⁵

It is important to note that American so-called “trust” in their US-Thai bilateralism was never a simple abstract concept, but was rooted firmly on the stability of Thai politics. For 12 out of 15 years that its troops were based in Thailand since 1961, the United States dealt with the autocratic regimes of Sarit and Thanom. These men could guarantee stability through their grip on government and society, and could guarantee any outcome of a negotiation that the US might seek. No civilian Thai government had displayed that level of strength, especially Kukrit’s tenure that was tenuous at best. By mid-March 1976, it was reasonable to assume that Kukrit’s government would not return after the election. Equally, their return was not in itself a guarantee that any amendments the United States was seeking could be guaranteed in the same manner that Sarit and Thanom had previously done. More importantly, Kukrit had shown his inclination for reversing decisions out of political necessity once before when he reneged on the agreement reached in late November 1975. In which case, agreeing to the Seven Principles as the Thais had wanted for reason of appearance could result in a *fait accompli* for Washington. Furthermore, during their negotiation, Whitehouse specifically asked Kukrit to view American request for an extended three-month negotiation “against principle 1.”³⁴⁶ This was essentially an attempt to

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p.196-199.

³⁴⁶ US Embassy Bangkok to Secretary of State. Department of State Telegram. U.S. Residual Forces in Thailand. March 1976. Box 18, Thailand – State Department Telegrams: To SECSTATE – NODIS (2). National Security Advisor’s Files. Presidential Country Files For East Asia And The Pacific. GRFPL, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

reach the kind of “specific agreements” that Principle 1 referred to. Again, his plea was rejected for political reasons. Randolph’s claim that the US failed to recognise and capitalise on this opt-out clause was, therefore, not entirely supported. This, in combination with many observations that the United States had made about Kukrit’s own bureaucracy and instability, suggests that Washington was compelled to side with their legal experts, a strictly written legal text was the best available option to ensure that the United States would have any hope of continuing its negotiation with any future government. It was, therefore, a decision derived from a considered and experienced view of Thailand rather than an unadjusted view that led to rigid adherence of the letters of the law.

Conclusion

The last of American personnel left Thailand in July 1976. His departure was not the end of the US-Thai relationship that endured to this present day, but was the closing of a storied chapter of that relationship that spanned over two decades. The final footprint of the American era in Thailand made its presence felt in October 1976 when Thai political convulsion reached its conclusion. Kukrit lost the April election, with Kukrit himself failing to regain his seat in his constituency of the Dusit District in Bangkok; a district where the electoral base largely drew from military personnel in the area. This was taken as a sign of the military’s disapproval of his government. General Kris, still considered a largely moderate general, died in the few weeks that followed the election. The official explanation for his cause of death, a heart failure, was not well accepted by the public, and to this day is sometimes described as suspicious.³⁴⁷ Kris’s death

³⁴⁷ Paul Chambers, “Under the Boot: Military-Civil Relations in Thailand Since the 2014 Coup”, *Southeast Asia Research Center Working Paper Series No. 187*, August 2016: 6.

paved the way for other right-wing factions of the military to rise to prominence. With Thailand seeming slide to the far-right and a potential military takeover loomed large, the ousted former authoritarian leader Thanom returned to Thailand from Boston.

Students immediately took to the streets to protest his return. The coup de grace came in October when the government public radio broadcast declared that the protest was a communist plot staged by communists, sympathisers, and Vietnamese agents. Government forces composed of the Border Patrol Police (BPP), Village Scouts, and other government-sponsored right-wing paramilitary groups such as the "Red Gaurs" converged on the university campus where the students had been holding their protest. These originally American trained, funded, and inspired, units for the purpose of suppressing communism were unleashed on the students in full force. Some, like the Village Scouts were modelled after American-sponsored grassroot self-defence units in South Vietnam, while the Red Gaurs were modelled to be a counter-protest unit that San Chitbatima had told Masters about in their earlier conversation. The relics of the US-Thai Cold War cooperation was indirectly on display through the military-grade weaponry and equipment used to massacre the protesters on that day. The use of sophisticated military equipment for its time such as the M-16 rifles and walkie-talkies, the former supplied to the Thai Army by American military assistance, the latter illegal to possess in Thailand but were often seen utilized by the Red Gaurs in their numerous counter-demonstrations, left little doubt that decades of American aid to the Thai police and military have been diverted towards buttressing authoritarianism.³⁴⁸ On the evening of October 6, the military took control of the government. The election of Jimmy Carter a month later in November signaled the end to American interest in

³⁴⁸ Surachart, *United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule*, p.180.

seeking further basing rights in Asia. Thus, at the end of 1976, with no American bases remaining in Thailand, a relationship with maritime Southeast Asia prospering, and the Thai struggle against communism becoming largely domestic, American containment arc on mainland Southeast Asia ended.

The last years of American basing in Thailand was nothing short of turbulent. Thai civilian rule in its infancy from Sanya to Kukrit was too immature to achieve the level of sophistication needed to effectively manage the many challenges arose from being a regional American hub that ranged from foreign relations with other countries, social impact of foreign troops on the economy and community, to government factionalism. The US-Thai diplomacy in this period was therefore heavily driven by Thailand's own politics. It was domestic instability that led to Kukrit's premiership, a weak coalition government that needed to co-share power with many of its own political rivals, which in turn led to a hardened stance towards American basing, and the United States in general, to maintain its survival. First, was their unilateral setting of an arbitrary one-year deadline. Then came the announcement of the Seven Principles to the public, allowing their diplomacy with the United States to be subjected to the whims of domestic political turmoil. Under these circumstances, American engagement with Thailand could not be expected to operate on the basis of implicit trust, as Randolph argued. Kukrit's Thailand did little to uphold their credibility. Anand's charge that the US was looking for a "secret agreement" was revealing of Thailand's own contradiction. By asking the United States to accept the Seven Principles for public appearance and expected them to be satisfied later if allowed to make amendments to an already agreed upon legal principle based on a loophole, Thailand built its

negotiation stance intrinsically on the belief that it could reach such a secret agreement with the US.

The question of who was speaking for Thailand also plagued American decision-making, as the struggle to locate the real center of power in Thailand did much to erode American confidence in Thai leadership. The domestic nature of civil-military relations and government factionalism, however, meant that the responsibility of presenting an official front rested more on the Thais, leaving the US with no other choice than to navigate the options that Thailand dealt them. To this, credit should be given to the United States for its ability to successfully pursue its goal of maintaining presence in Southeast Asia. Despite finding itself on a diplomatic backfoot in Thailand, the US was able to regain its posture and retain its position by alternatively deepening their links to maritime Southeast Asian nations, especially Indonesia. Ironically, just when the United States finally accepted that it had to move on from Thailand, it dawned on the Thai Government that perhaps they needed a closer relationship with the United States after spending most of the previous year growing that distance. Thailand's poor management of its American policy in the final years ultimately removed itself from the American orbit, but American containment arc remained in place, stretched from Okinawa to the Middle East albeit diverted from Thailand to Indonesia, forming a divergent crescent.

Conclusion

From the moment the United States entered Indochina to fill the vacuum that was left by the departure of European colonial powers, it found an ally in Thailand. Thailand's unique position by way of its geography and lack of post-colonial convulsion that erupted around Southeast Asia made it an attractive stronghold for American containment of communism in Indochina. This does not mean that American relationship would be easy to manage. In contrast to the popular "bending with the wind" outlook on Thai foreign policy that expected Thailand to bend to the prevailing sides, successive Thai leaders proved that they were compliant but never willing to bend to the wills of others. Phibun, first seen by the United States as a Japan collaborator, only became more convinced of merit in working with the US after the tide of communism began to rise. Sarit, likewise, benefitted immensely from American support for the Thai military, but was more than willing to challenge Kennedy on his plan to neutralise Laos, if it meant protecting his interests. With the exception of Thanom, who was particularly accommodating towards the United States, Thai leaders from Phibun to Kukrit while cooperative and diplomatic with the US had repeatedly displayed subtle degree of rebelliousness towards Washington. Regardless, the United States needed Thailand for its war in Vietnam. Whatever difficulty the Thais presented the US had to persevere to retain its warfighting facilitator.

Consequently, American foreign policy became inevitably intertwined with the state of domestic Thai politics, especially considering the significance of the role of personality. A compliant authoritarian leader like Thanom could be trusted to fulfill American wishes quickly and without resistance, even through verbal agreements. It is inexplicable in hindsight that seven

airbases and over 40,000 foreign troops could be stationed on foreign soil without so much as a treaty in place, and much less written down on paper, as revealed by Ambassador Unger in the Symington Hearing. One could hardly think of any other countries that could facilitate American power on its shore so efficiently. By the same token, when this power was removed, as was the case when military rule was replaced by civilian rule, the diffusion of power to other institutions, civil society, and public participants, made such a facilitation a challenge to achieve. On this note, there is something to be said about the willingness of the United States to betray its values when such a challenge appears insurmountable. Throughout its time in Indochina the US consistently proved itself adept, willing, and perhaps even enjoyed working with authoritarian leaders who stood for everything that was against professed American liberal values of individual rights, freedom, rule of law, transparency, democracy and so on. Even after the military was out of power, Kissinger and his deputies, flirted with the fantasy of how much easier their time with Thailand would have been had the military remained in power, and continued to look for every opportunity to work with them. Operation Frequent Wind, and the *Mayaguez* affairs were a prime example. The US might not have actively promoted or installed a dictatorship in Thailand, but it certainly had, at least, a passive preference for them.

This made the United States, as far as ordinary Thais were concerned, friends of dictatorship and illiberal forces. American military might and power was something to be feared and hated not celebrated. It was for these reasons that Thai students, activists, and the press wanted the United States out. They did not see a security umbrella protecting them from the evils of global communism. American close identification with the Thai military government costed them support they could have had. It was a great irony, that in a country where American cultural

policies through the promotion of American media, values, and education were a great success it turned the population against them.

The American relationship with Thailand during this tumultuous period has also demonstrated the extent American power, often regarded as overwhelming in relation to smaller nations, was in fact, reliant on those lesser powers to remain powerful. There could be no American air power if there was no runway, and no American troops without a base to be stationed in. The loss of Thailand as American stronghold, therefore, resulted in the loss of American ability to project itself in Southeast Asia at large. The move towards maritime Southeast Asia was the second-best option the United States could achieve in the face of such challenge. In the final analysis, the Vietnam War was not just a story about the United States fighting a war in far-flung locations against lesser enemies. It was as much a story of the United States needing those smaller nations to maintain and project its power; the loss of it, in this case through not being able to come to an agreement with Thailand as a result of Thai politics, led to the loss of that power.

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