

# A Not So Silent Partner: Thailand's Role in Covert Operations, Counter-Insurgency, and the Wars in Indochina

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## **A Not So Silent Partner: Thailand's Role in Covert Operations, Counter-Insurgency, and the Wars in Indochina**

by *Arne Kislenko*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Vietnam War era was without question the most significant period in the history of relations between the United States and Thailand. After World War II the two countries developed an extremely close relationship premised on containing the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. For Thailand, the US represented protection from the external threat of communist neighbors and the risk that an indigenous communist insurgency posed. For the US, Thailand represented a bastion of anti-communism in a region full of political uncertainty. It also represented a valuable Asian ally in the Cold War, a major "rest and relaxation" (R&R) destination for US servicemen in the region, a model of economic development in the so-called "Third World," and a strategic base from which to prosecute both overt and clandestine operations in Indochina. In fact, by the mid-1960s nearly 80 percent of all American bombing missions flown against North Vietnam and Laos were launched from air bases in Thailand.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, a great number of US covert operations were also mounted from Thailand, many with direct participation of Thai forces. In this context, Thailand played an integral role in the shadows of the Vietnam War.

Little scholarly attention has been paid to US-Thai relations during the Vietnam War era. There has been even less focus on the covert dimensions of this relationship. The classification of government documents on both sides is a primary obstacle, as is the fact that much of the decision-making process in Thai foreign policy during the 1950s and 1960s went undocumented, given Bangkok's predilection for "back-room settings involving no note-keeping."<sup>2</sup> Still, this article attempts to draw from a considerable volume of recently declassified material from US archives, as well as from an array of secondary sources. From this documentation it is clear that Thailand was absolutely critical to US policy in Indochina for nearly 20 years.

In exchange for its services, there is no question that Thailand benefitted considerably from American financial largesse during this period. Between 1950 and 1975 Thailand received from Washington approximately \$US 650 million in economic aid, nearly 75 percent of which was directed toward counter-insurgency activities. A further \$US 940 million was ear-marked for Thai defence and security, averaging annually over 50 percent of Bangkok's own expenditures on its armed forces. On top of this, an additional \$US 760 million was paid out by Washington in operating costs, including the purchase of military equipment for Thailand and the payment of Thai troops serving in Vietnam. For the construction of air bases in Thailand, the US paid out \$US 250 million, while American servicemen stationed in the country and those on leave from Vietnam pumped into the Thai economy another \$US 850 million.<sup>3</sup> With over \$US 2 billion in total assistance from Washington just between 1965 and 1975, Thailand was the second largest recipient of American aid in Southeast Asia next to Vietnam.<sup>4</sup>

## **Thai Foreign Policy**

However, these statistics overlook important factors in shaping Thai foreign policy. Thailand was much more than a simple mercenary. Security from the external threats that crises in Indochina represented was Thailand's primary motivation in seeking a closer relationship with the United States, not financial inducement. Most Thais wanted to fight communism beyond their borders, before it consumed their own country, and therefore supported American military efforts in the region. In its advocacy of violence, revolution, and atheism, communism represented the antithesis of Thai cultural traditions. Communism threatened not only the country, but also the Thai way of life. Moreover, it was not just communism per se that concerned Thais. Thailand's perceptions were shaped by the fact that its communist insurgency was sponsored by a familiar and formidable adversary. Like the rest of Southeast Asia, Thailand lived in the shadow of China. Ancient Siam had historically been a vassal to the Chinese Emperor, and the threat of Chinese domination was a very real part of Thai history. A large, closely knit, and affluent ethnic Chinese community in Thailand only added to the fear that Beijing was acting out an ancient impulse to dominate the region.<sup>5</sup> In this view, although communism was a dangerous commodity on its own, it was also considered a "banner" behind which the old Chinese dragon spread its wings.

Thailand risked a great deal in its association with the United States. Helping Americans to defend Thailand from invasion or insurgency was one thing, but assisting in wars elsewhere was quite another. First and foremost, the Thais risked antagonizing their neighbors, with whom they had an already difficult, violent history. If for any reason the United States did not succeed in Southeast Asia, Thailand would be left alone, surrounded by communist states. Secondly, joining the United States in any wars against communism necessitated considerable American intervention in Thailand. This would invariably expose traditional Thai culture and society to powerful foreign influences, which could have serious political implications. The Thais guarded their independence jealously, and were proud of being the only country in Southeast Asia to have avoided European colonization during the nineteenth century. Although historically the Thais occasionally entered into diplomatic pacts with foreign powers, they were extremely careful to avoid anything more than temporary arrangements. Formal alliances were infrequent in Thai history, and Thais considered the stationing of even friendly foreign troops on their soil a serious affront to their independence.<sup>6</sup>

However, as the Cold War dawned Thai fears about communist expansion outweighed any nationalistic sentiment. From Bangkok's point of view it appeared that China was bent on expansion. Intervention in Korea seemed only the most glaring illustration of Chinese aggression. Most Thais believed it was the Chinese, and not so much the Soviets, who were behind supposedly indigenous communist movements throughout Southeast Asia. American hostility toward Beijing brought the region sharply into focus for Washington, and almost immediately the US sought to extend the Military Defense Assistance Program (MDAP, and later MAP) to its Asian clientele. In this setting US-Thai relations came to the forefront.

## **A Convergence of Interests**

In the fall of 1950, the Truman administration concluded a series of economic and

military agreements with Bangkok, bringing Thailand into the MAP program. During the Korean War Thailand contributed troops and much-needed rice shipments to the US-led multinational United Nations force. Washington reciprocated by helping to secure for Thailand the first ever World Bank loan to a Southeast Asian nation, and by delivering unilateral assistance recommended by a number of fact-finding missions.<sup>7</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Truman administration demonstrated its own resolve by dispatching a Military Advisory Assistance Group (MAAG) to Thailand. Between 1951 and 1953 military aid to Thailand jumped enormously from \$US 4.5 million to \$US 56 million.<sup>8</sup>

Covert operations in Indochina were central to the development of this closer bond between Washington and Bangkok. Initially, they were predicated on the conflict in Laos, and its connection to the communist insurgency within Thailand. For the Eisenhower administration, Laos represented a "proving ground" for US foreign policy in Asia. Washington's resolve in preventing the spread of communism was on the line, and following the tenets of the "domino theory," Eisenhower could not allow even tiny Laos to "fall." It was in Laos, Eisenhower told his successor, John F. Kennedy, that the US should stand against Asian communism, and there where he feared American military involvement was inevitable, "with others if possible, alone if necessary."<sup>9</sup>

As the buffer against China and Vietnam, historically Laos was of extreme importance to any Thai regime.<sup>10</sup> By the early 1950s this was an even more acute concern, given a seemingly aggressive communist China and the conflict unfolding in Vietnam. In many ways Laos was the "dagger" pointed at the heart of Thailand. From Laos, Indochinese communists could easily make their way across the Mekong River into Northeastern Thailand. Bangkok's physical and political distance from the region left the people there isolated from the rest of the nation, something the CIA worried promoted "serious factional infighting" among Thai parties and politicians. The Northeast was economically disadvantaged, and it suffered the additional burden of an acutely corrupt local government and police.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, people in the area were considered passive and apolitical; qualities the CIA believed were conducive to the expansion of communist ideals. The Northeast was also considered the "wild frontier" of Thailand, rife with gangs, gamblers, smugglers, and drug addicts. For this and other reasons, the region was a difficult place in which to instill a strong sense of nationalism.<sup>12</sup> The vulnerability of the Northeast was compounded by the presence of almost 50,000 ethnic Vietnamese, many with allegiances to Ho Chi Minh. In the mid-1960s, American intelligence analysts confirmed North Vietnamese and Chinese sponsorship of communists in the Northeast, estimating that there were some 3,200 guerrillas operating in four battalions made up of mostly ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese Thai.<sup>13</sup>

The fragility of the Northeast and its proximity to the crisis in Laos became a major concern for both Bangkok and Washington. The communist *Pathet Lao* were linked to the North Vietnamese, who in turn received support and direction from Moscow and Beijing. The situation was worsened by Beijing's creation of the "Thai Nationality Autonomous Area" in China's Yunnan province in January 1953, where Thai speaking people resided. Some Thais interpreted the move as a paternalistic reminder of their ancestral connection with China. Others saw it as Beijing's attempt to assert Chinese influence in the region. But most Thais took the message as a thinly veiled warning that

Thailand was next on the agenda for communist expansion, especially if it continued its friendship with the US.<sup>14</sup>

Washington responded with increased aid channeled to areas deemed most important to Thai national security. An example of this was the construction of all-weather roads, railways, and regional airports to improve Bangkok's access to the Northeast.<sup>15</sup> The "Friendship Highway" between Saraburi and Korat, at a cost of over \$US 20 million, was a notable achievement in this regard. The road also facilitated Thailand's role as a conduit for covert CIA operations in Indochina. Largely through a dummy business firm, the "Southeast Asian Supply Company," the CIA (using former OSS agents with service in Thailand) began training Thai police units in guerrilla warfare by the end of 1951.<sup>16</sup> The Thai National Police (TNP) and Police Aerial Reconnaissance Units (PARU) were indispensable liaisons between the Americans and Laos, and helped the CIA develop an anti-communist paramilitary force in Laos. American agents also trained Thai police for top secret deployment in Laos.<sup>17</sup> By 1953 there were some 200 CIA operatives in Thailand, training the Thais in everything from sabotage operations to parachuting. From secret bases in northern Thailand, the CIA even planned a coordinated attack by *Kuomintang* renegades against the Chinese military in Yunnan province.<sup>18</sup>

The appointment of ambassadors also reflected the Eisenhower administration's focus on counter-insurgency and covert operations. In 1954, William Donovan, the former OSS chief, was sent to Bangkok to oversee the development of counter-insurgency capabilities. In addition to a joint US-Thai Psychological Warfare Board, Donovan helped to establish new police programs, guerrilla training, and the ubiquitous "intelligence agency" (*krom pramuan ratchakan phaen-din*).<sup>19</sup> When the US inherited the role of protector in South Vietnam in 1954, Donovan was instrumental in drawing Thailand into a multi-lateral defence pact, which allowed the Americans access to Thai air bases in the Northeast. In 1954, Thailand signed the Southeast Asian Collective Defense Treaty, which gave life to the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, or SEATO; it was squarely aimed against communist expansion. For the Eisenhower administration, the treaty created a common front in the region with other allies, and established provisions for multilateral military forces while avoiding a direct and unilateral US commitment. Bangkok was chosen as the headquarters for the new organization, and as American military and economic aid continued to increase, so did the scope of clandestine activities -- above and beyond the auspices of SEATO.

In October 1954, Donovan was replaced as ambassador by another former CIA man, John Peurifoy, who was widely regarded as the "premier anti-communist" in the State Department. So intimate was Peurifoy and the CIA's relationship with some Thai politicians that one private researcher hired to evaluate US aid programs commented that "the American official establishment in Bangkok had climbed into bed" with the Minister of the Interior, General Phao Siyanon.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Thai Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram was convinced that Washington sent Peurifoy to overthrow him in favor of Phao.<sup>21</sup> Thailand's relationship with the United States deepened even more after 1958, when Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat came to power. By consolidating the Thai military's hold on power, and co-opting key political rivals into his fold, Sarit ushered in a new era of harsh but stable rule which allowed for the expansion of US covert operations in Thailand.

## Deepening Involvement: Kennedy and Laos

President Kennedy inherited a policy toward Southeast Asia from Eisenhower, but he did not share his predecessor's conviction that Laos was so crucial to US national security. Even with a more concerted response from the US, the situation in Laos seemed intractable to Kennedy. Countering the extension of the *Pathet Lao* would involve a dramatic military commitment, and this could only come from the Americans. Chester Cooper, a National Security Council (NSC) staff member from 1961 to 1967, later observed that for the Kennedy administration, "Laos was not all that god-damned important."<sup>22</sup> While he had no desire to look weak by surrendering Laos to communism, Kennedy also had no intention of being drawn into war, especially over so indefensible a country. He was optimistic that Laos, together with Cambodia, could form a *cordon sanitaire* protecting Thailand and the rest of the region.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, Kennedy developed a conciliatory approach to the Laotian crisis, seeking out international negotiation along the lines of the 1954 Geneva Accords. However, the Thais saw negotiations as a sell-out to the communists, convinced that even if a settlement was achieved in talks, it was untenable in the field. US-Thai relations were dramatically and adversely affected by Kennedy's decision to pursue negotiations on Laos, and Thai dissatisfaction became a real problem for Washington. Only after months of difficult discussions did the Thai government agree to endorse the American position on Laos in January 1962, but not without grave reservations.

Yet, while American representatives pursued international negotiations on Laos, the Kennedy administration simultaneously pursued a "second track" policy with Bangkok toward the crisis, clearly designed to demonstrate the US commitment to Thailand. In spring 1961, the new American ambassador, U.A. Johnson, approached Sarit about placing US troops in Thailand for possible service in Indochina. The Kennedy administration also continued, and in some cases, extended covert operations throughout the region, many based in Thailand.<sup>24</sup> In April 1961, the CIA began funding "Project Ekarad," which involved the training of Royal Lao troops and pilots at bases in Northeastern Thailand under the auspices of American advisers. In addition, the Kennedy administration enlisted the active support of the Thai Army, which contributed its own advisers for "special training" exercises with the Lao. Sarit even agreed to implement a "volunteer program," wherein Thai technicians and pilots were temporarily "discharged" from the air force, only to quickly reappear as special "consultants" to the Royal Lao Government -- complete with Lao identification tags. By early 1962, nearly 60 Thais were employed with Lao units, all on the CIA payroll.<sup>25</sup> As for Thai and American advisers keeping a low profile in Laos, the State Department's Director of Intelligence and Research (INR), Roger Hilsman, noted that "Aloha shirts, Cadillacs and free spending in the shops and night clubs of Vientiane . . . are scarcely calculated to minimize the impact of such a presence."<sup>26</sup>

Secret camps in Northeastern Thailand were critical to US support of anti-communists in Laos. Thai PARU units and Border Police Patrols (BPP) ran surveillance operations, with more than the occasional rumor surfacing that they had partaken in combat against the *Pathet Lao*. In the summer of 1961, the CIA enlisted PARU squads to help "convert" Hmong tribesmen in Laos and Vietnam through military training in Thailand. Joint covert operations were in fact formalized with the establishment of the "Joint Liaison

Detachment" (JLD) in late 1962. Through this body the CIA orchestrated much of the training and logistics required for clandestine activities in Laos with the full support of Thai military authorities. The Thai Army even set up a special unit, HQ 333, to help coordinate covert operations, enlisting 50 special operations personnel.<sup>27</sup>

Still, unhappy with international negotiations on Laos, the Thais pressed for a unilateral security guarantee from Washington, something that no American president was prepared to offer for fear of over-extending US obligations in Southeast Asia. For the Thais, SEATO was little more than a paper tiger. The Thai leadership considered it an ineffective deterrent to communist expansion. To prevent the deterioration of relations with the Thais, the Kennedy administration, therefore, considered alternatives to SEATO.<sup>28</sup> After much deliberation, in March 1962 the State Department publicly issued a joint communiqué during a visit to Washington by Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman. Dubbed the "Rusk-Thanat Agreement," the communiqué reaffirmed American determination to maintain "the independence and integrity of Thailand as vital to the national interest of the United States and to world peace." It also spoke about Washington's "firm intention" to aid Thailand in resisting communism. Most importantly, the agreement specified that the US commitment to Thailand was not exclusively based on SEATO.<sup>29</sup> It remained unclear, however, exactly how far the Americans would go in the defence of Thailand, and how the agreement would be interpreted in both Bangkok and Washington.

The Rusk-Thanat Agreement soon faced its first challenge in May 1962, when *Pathet Lao* forces scored a huge tactical victory by taking the town of Nam Tha in Northwestern Laos. Fearing that this was the precursor to a communist invasion of Thailand, Sarit deployed several thousand troops along the Mekong River. The resulting stand-off was very tense, especially given Sarit's threat to occupy the Lao side of the river if need be. In Washington, Kennedy responded decisively to the possibility of a collision between Thai and *Pathet Lao* forces. He prepared for US intervention along the Thai-Lao frontier, ostensibly to prevent a communist incursion into Thailand. Within hours a battle group was assembled. After considering a number of options, including shoring up Lao anti-communists with US forces and bombing *Pathet Lao* strongholds, Kennedy decided to send troops into Thailand.

The Kennedy administration wanted troops in Thailand as a warning to the *Pathet Lao* and their backers in Beijing and Hanoi, and the president knew the deployment could be a valuable bargaining chip at negotiations on Laos in Geneva.<sup>30</sup> Sending the troops was also a clear demonstration of how important Thailand was to the US, and of Kennedy's resolve to intervene militarily against communist expansion in the region. On 18 May 1962, just over 6,500 US Marines from the transport *Valley Forge* landed in Thailand. It was the first overt deployment of American combat soldiers in Southeast Asia since World War Two, and it marked the first time foreign combat troops entered Thailand for a purpose other than invasion or occupation.<sup>31</sup>

US military operations in Thailand during the 1962 deployment laid much of the groundwork for American and Thai involvement in Vietnam. The mechanism for both overt and covert US-Thai cooperation was strengthened with the replacement of MAAG Thailand by a new command structure; the Military Assistance Command Thailand, or

MACTHAI. The Marine task force in Thailand was directed by OPLAN 32-59, which was designed to hold the border, maintain a ceasefire, and integrate Thai and American forces. Washington also had other objectives in deploying the troops. Developing better counter-insurgency operations in the Northeast was a top priority of OPLAN 32-59. Accordingly, the US military sent 84 instructors, along with 156 members of the Special Forces, from Okinawa to Thailand. Training focused on Thai units capable of extended action in the Northeast and Laos, and included guerrilla and counter-insurgency operations, aerial raids, and demolition.<sup>32</sup> Thai units even engaged the *Pathet Lao* near Muong Soui, Laos, in what the US Embassy in Bangkok referred to as "covert harassment."<sup>33</sup> American technicians and engineers also arrived to bring Thai air bases to full capacity in the event that large-scale, offensive operations were required against either Laos or North Vietnam.<sup>34</sup> The augmentation of air bases and landing strips throughout Thailand was in fact the real success of the deployment. Korat quickly became an important nerve centre and "rumble seat" for secret air strikes against Laos and North Vietnam. Takhli, code-named "Pepper Grinder," became one of the most vital and secretive bases for reconnaissance as the home for U-2 and SR-71 missions, as well as regular CIA funded *Air America* transports.<sup>35</sup> By the end of 1962, Thai-base aircraft regularly ran reconnaissance missions over Laos, as well as air strikes against *Pathet Lao* and North Vietnamese positions near the Cambodian border.

Most observers in both Washington and Bangkok expected the American troops in Thailand to remain indefinitely. In fact, the notion of maintaining US forces in Thailand on a permanent basis received serious attention in Washington.<sup>36</sup> However, after signing the final declaration on Laos in Geneva on 28 July 1962, Kennedy made the decision to withdraw US forces from Thailand. Wary of extended military commitments, and relieved by the negotiated settlement, Kennedy removed the task force quickly.<sup>37</sup> The Thai government was very upset. Although Kennedy apologized personally to Sarit, reassuring him that Congressional pressure in the US was the reason for the quick departure, both Sarit and Thanat Khoman resented the decision, and began to increase their criticisms of American foreign policy in Asia.

In the aftermath of the Geneva settlement and the abrupt withdrawal of US troops, Thai confidence in Washington reached a low ebb. The situation in Laos looked bleak, with communist advances throughout the country. In September 1962, State Department intelligence estimated that between 7,000 and 9,000 North Vietnamese combat forces were in Laos, notwithstanding denials from Hanoi. The Kennedy administration anticipated that Hanoi's strategy was to secretly consolidate its control of Laotian provinces adjacent to the Vietnamese border. Washington also knew that Laos was being used as a conduit by North Vietnam to infiltrate the South through the ubiquitous "Ho Chi Minh Trail." In response, the Kennedy administration re-evaluated its position on US troops in Thailand. A strong military presence in Thailand would reassure Bangkok of Kennedy's commitment, and send a strong message to Hanoi and Beijing. So, just as the troops sent during the crisis in May left Thailand, the Kennedy administration began to explore avenues to send them back in. Kennedy saw this as a necessary step not so much to save Laos, or even to protect Thailand, but rather to prepare for expanded military involvement in South Vietnam if necessary.<sup>38</sup>

## Toward Vietnam

During much of 1963 the Kennedy administration tried to repair the damage the Geneva Conference on Laos had caused to Thai confidence, but only fate's intervention at the end of the year helped improve matters. Within two weeks of Kennedy's assassination Thai Prime Minister Sarit died, leaving a void in Thai politics. The new prime minister, Thanom Kittachakorn, did not share his predecessor's reservations over American commitment to Southeast Asia. In March 1964, Thanom demonstrated his trust by formally permitting US bombing of Vietcong sanctuaries and supply routes in Laos with aircraft from Thai bases. He even discussed supporting systematic American air strikes against North Vietnam.<sup>39</sup> Thanom also worked carefully to secure political support for an expanded American military presence in Thailand. Most significantly, shortly after the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August, Thanom lifted all restrictions on US combat sorties originating in Thailand, subject only to "plausible denial" of Thai connivance. This crucial decision reversed Bangkok's long-standing insistence that it be informed of every mission. It reflected Thanom's commitment to the US, and gave Washington the leeway it needed to expand both covert and overt operations in Indochina.

Early in 1964, the new US ambassador in Bangkok, Graham Martin, approached the Thais about expanding the United States Air Force (USAF) F-100 detachment nearby Korat. He also felt them out about stationing American ground troops near the Laotian border. Contingency plans attached to so-called Project 22 were drawn up in 1965, anticipating joint US-Thai occupation of key spots along the Mekong River, and the seizure of cities, airfields and bridgeheads in Laos. Virtually all Thai combat forces figured in the calculations, along with one division and two brigades of American troops under field command of US officers. Defense Department analysts considered Project 22 of "special political significance" for the Thais, because it at least appeared quite bilateral in character even if in fact the US was essentially in charge.<sup>40</sup>

Thanom responded to the overtures by authorizing a CIA training detachment based at Udon Thani (Udon) under the code name, "Project Waterpump."<sup>41</sup> This was designed to build up Lao and Thai air capabilities through combat experience. Thai pilots flew many reconnaissance and even bombing missions over *Pathet Lao* territory, all in unmarked planes and without identification.<sup>42</sup> Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman followed this up by offering the open-ended service of Thai Special Forces Ranger units in Laos.<sup>43</sup> In July 1964, Lao anti-communist forces attacked *Pathet Lao* positions near Muong Soui in operation "Triangle," involving *Air America* transport, with cover provided by USAF and Thai strike forces.<sup>44</sup> In October, "Yankee Team" reconnaissance missions over Laos were increased, escorted by Thai and American fighters based in the Northeast.<sup>45</sup> Supposedly acting in self-defence while flying search and rescue, US T-28s, flown by Thai and Lao pilots, sometimes engaged communist positions targeted by the CIA. On one occasion, Thai pilots flying with Royal Lao markings attacked a *Pathet Lao* headquarters near Khang Khay without American authorization, damaging the Chinese economic mission.<sup>46</sup> At a media briefing in Washington following the incident, Assistant Secretary of Defense William Bundy confirmed that the pilots were Lao and Thai, adding "I'd rather not see that in print, but there are some Thai who are flying."<sup>47</sup> The "secret war" in Laos thus developed as a vital appendage of the growing conflict in Vietnam, drawing Thai and

American interests ever closer. By early 1965, US aircraft based in Thailand were also critical to US bombing in Vietnam. The majority of planes for Operation FLAMING DART and ROLLING THUNDER were launched from Thai bases. In fact, over half of the all such missions during 1965 originated in Thailand.<sup>48</sup>

Many Thais welcomed an expanded American military role in Vietnam, relieved that Washington was acting in earnest against the spread of communism.<sup>49</sup> However, in solidly tying itself to the US and to the anti-communist struggle in Vietnam, Thailand risked a great deal. Unless the Americans were completely successful in defending South Vietnam, Thailand could find itself in a very delicate position. The Thais believed that an American withdrawal, or even a neutralist settlement in South Vietnam, would likely result in an eventual victory for the communists. Such an outcome would inevitably result in the fall of Laos and Cambodia to communism, and perhaps Burma as well, leaving Thailand totally isolated. Despite all the money and aid the US could lavish on Thailand, the Americans might one day go home, leaving the Thais surrounded by potentially hostile neighbors.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, being inconspicuous in its support of the US became an obsession in Bangkok that frequently took on comic proportions.

Despite vigorous denials by Ambassador Martin and the Thai Government, by 1966 it was common knowledge that US planes based in Thailand were being used against North Vietnam. Martin characterized his own efforts to conceal the fact as "a useful facade, but an absolutely necessary concession to Thai sovereignty."<sup>51</sup> The American public affairs officer in Bangkok, John R. O'Brien, described Thai efforts to limit press coverage of air bases "as elaborate as the Japanese tea ceremony."<sup>52</sup> By early 1966, over 200 American combat aircraft were based on Thai soil, with a complement of over 9,000 USAF personnel. By the end of the year, there were over 400 planes and nearly 25,000 men. The capstone of this rapid build-up was the construction of the supposedly secret B-52 air base at Utapao, near Sattahip, south of Bangkok. Completed in spring 1966, it was the sixth base built by the US military in Thailand since 1960. It was also the most important and expensive. Construction of the base cost nearly \$US 40 million, and required the labour of 25,000 American servicemen and 2,000 Thais. Utapao was a self-sustaining community, complete with night-clubs staffed by local Thais. A cluster of shanty towns sprang up around the base, offering servicemen everything from souvenirs to prostitutes.<sup>53</sup> For Washington the deployment of B-52s in Thailand meant a savings of \$US 8,000 per round trip for each plane, compared to costs for a round trip from Guam, nearly 2,000 miles away. Utapao quickly became the work-horse of US air bases in Thailand, responsible for the majority of the 1,500 weekly bombing runs flown between December 1965 and November 1968. Considering that Thai-based US aircraft accounted for nearly 80 percent of all ordnance dropped on North Vietnam and Laos during this period, Utapao's military importance is very clear.<sup>54</sup>

The lack of secrecy surrounding Utapao's construction marked a turning point for Thanom's government. Bangkok purposely did little to deny the existence of the base, effectively making Utapao an open symbol of Thailand's commitment. Thailand was now a self-acknowledged partner in the US fight against North Vietnam, with all the risks inherent in such a stance. This was well-received by the Johnson administration, which wanted as many foreign flags as possible to fly in Vietnam, particularly those of Asian

allies, in order to avoid the perception that this was an exclusively American or "white man's" war.<sup>55</sup> While officials in the Johnson administration denied it, Bangkok's more open commitment to the US war effort was likely motivated by promises of more assistance. No official agreements were signed to this effect, but there is little question that the Thai granting of bases and other rights was on a *quid pro quo* basis.<sup>56</sup>

Any reservations the Thai leadership might have had about the expanded US presence were evidently overcome. In January 1966, Thanat Khoman made the first public government statement on the bases in an interview with *Newsweek* magazine. Acknowledging that Thailand's role in Vietnam had become "more or less an open secret," Thanat maintained that the United States did not in fact have bases in Thailand. Rather, he insisted that Thailand was allowing the US to "make use of certain military installations and facilities because we are partners in SEATO's collective defense." Thanat pointed out that the establishment of American bases in Thailand required a formal alliance, and that no such bilateral agreement existed.<sup>57</sup> Later in the year, Thanat conceded to the *Washington Post* that Thailand did not need 11,000 foot runways in the Northeast just for its own air force, effectively admitting to Thai involvement with American air operations in Vietnam.<sup>58</sup>

Bangkok continued support for the US when in early 1966 Prime Minister Thanom announced that Thailand could send its own troop contingent to South Vietnam. So popular was the idea with the Thai public that within a few months nearly 5,000 men volunteered in Bangkok alone.<sup>59</sup> After months of negotiations with American representatives, in October 1967 the Thai government pledged an additional 10,000-man force. Washington agreed to cover all of the contingent's training and supplies. More importantly, Washington agreed to increase MAP funding for 1968 from \$US 60 million to \$US 75 million, and to maintain that level for 1969. Unquestionably, economic factors were part of the Thai decision-making process. The Thanom regime clearly anticipated that sending Thai troops would produce even more military and economic largesse from Washington. But money alone was not the only factor concerning Thailand. Security and survival in the face of communist expansion greatly outweighed any mercenary tendencies the Thais may have had. Fighting in Vietnam was far better than waiting to fight on Thai soil. By 1971, almost 11,000 Thais were serving in Vietnam, representing fully 15 percent of the Thai Armed Forces. Many more, perhaps as many as 22,000, served as "irregulars" in Laos. Official statistics claimed 350 dead with over 1,000 wounded -- next to South Korea, the highest losses of any foreign troops assisting the Americans.<sup>60</sup>

Graham Martin understood the Thai's bottom line, and had little problem coming to terms with what some historians see as a kind of extortion, or even prostitution.<sup>61</sup> Martin argued that the Thai contribution to American operations in Indochina was invaluable. Thai air bases were the "pivotal factor" in the success of bombing missions, and the Thais also figured heavily in "hard-nose" operations in Laos, giving logistical support and even men to "a long list of extraordinary, sensitive activities."<sup>62</sup> Thus, they deserved favourable treatment, and that meant more money. Martin told Washington that "Thailand is, in effect, presently at war as an ally of the United States and that as the pace of that war increases, the risks to Thailand become greater."<sup>63</sup>

## **The Danger Within: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Thailand**

One of the risks was a growing communist insurgency in Northeast Thailand. Guerrillas there were inextricably linked the *Pathet Lao*, and in turn to North Vietnam. As Bangkok's involvement in the war against Hanoi increased, so did communist attention on Thailand's frontier. Since 1963 the US Embassy's "Internal Security Program" (ISP) had been the basis of counter-insurgency operations in Thailand. American military assistance, the strengthening of police and border patrol units, and a "civic action" project designed to improve living conditions in the Northeast were the key components. Road construction and enhanced communications through to the Laotian border were top priorities, and became the personal responsibility of deputy mission chief, Alfred Puhon.<sup>64</sup> The US Information Service (USIS) was given the task of developing a sense of "national cohesion" through the promotion of the Thai government in areas where Bangkok was traditionally viewed with suspicion. The ISP also planned for the training and improved efficiency of government officials in the provinces, as well as the extension of capital for economic growth and social programs.<sup>65</sup>

The US Military Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) developed a separate counter-insurgency program for Thailand in 1963, allotting \$US 700 million over six years. While admitting that the situation in Thailand was not as urgent as it was in South Vietnam, CINCPAC stressed the need to "beat the communists to the punch." It was anticipated that, left unchecked, the communist insurgency in Thailand would become a serious problem within a few years. The goal, therefore, was to build up the Thais' capacity to fight a guerrilla conflict in the Northeast.<sup>66</sup> A March 1963 CIA report underscored the seriousness of the communist insurgency, warning that there was "increasing evidence to suggest that Thailand is in the classic phase one of insurgency development," with a "discernible increase in subversive activities . . . aided and abetted by the Pathet Lao and other hostile elements in Laos."<sup>67</sup> Activity in the south along the Malaysian frontier was also noted, with suggestions that Muslim separatists, "Chinese terrorists," and Indonesian communists were aiding insurgents. The sizeable Vietnamese population in Thailand warranted special attention, given their relative isolation and proximity to Laos, as well as ties to such hill tribes as the Akha and Lahu. Communists in Thailand received aid and training through Laos from North Vietnam and the PRC, with an estimated 3,000 of them either residing in Laotian camps or serving with the *Pathet Lao*. The CIA's report warned that "all conditions for rapid development of a subversive mechanism" were present in Thailand and that without considerable efforts by the Thais and US, "the situation will continue to deteriorate to the point of insurgency."<sup>68</sup>

Counter-insurgency efforts confronted a number of groups in Thailand. In 1961, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) formally proclaimed an armed struggle, and followed that up with establishment of four regional branches. In March 1962, just after the announcement of the Rusk-Thanat agreement, another communist group, the Voice of the People of Thailand (VOPT), began radio broadcasts from a secret location in Laos, strengthening Bangkok's conviction that the insurgent threat was external rather than indigenous in origin.<sup>69</sup> In December, another clandestine radio transmitter, this time in Northeastern Thailand, proclaimed the "Thailand Independence Movement" (TIM), whose manifesto was published five days later by the New China News Agency.<sup>70</sup> On 23

January 1965, the "Patriotic Front of Thailand" (PFT) was announced by the VOPT. Although the relationship between these groups was not fully known, the presumption in Bangkok was that they represented a multi-pronged attack by foreign communist powers.<sup>71</sup>

By the mid 1960s this seeming proliferation of communist groups caught Bangkok off guard, since the Thais had grown somewhat complacent with their counter-insurgency efforts in the Northeast. The few communist attacks that had occurred were attributed to guerrillas from Laos, and officials in Bangkok doubted that groups like CPT had the organizational capabilities to warrant Beijing's direct attention. Even more disturbing was the fact that the radio transmissions coincided with a rash of assassinations in remote areas of Nakhon Phanom province. This alarmed local officials and embarrassed counter-insurgency efforts. But more than anything, Bangkok was troubled by evidence of the PRC's backing for the insurgency.<sup>72</sup> On 31 July 1964, the *People's Daily* in Beijing published an article by two Thai dissidents. Then, in October 1964, CPT representatives addressed the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on the occasion of China's National Day. In January 1965, Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi told the French Ambassador in Beijing that "within a year, we will have a war going in Thailand." The focus would be on the Northeast, and was designed to "shake US faith in the Thai stability."<sup>73</sup> Late in 1965, former Thai prime minister and exiled leftist Pridi Phanomyong re-emerged in Beijing at a well-publicized meeting with Mao Zedong. Thai leaders feared that Pridi was still popular in Thailand, and that the Chinese would use him to lead the insurgency. Other senior Chinese officials, such as Liao Cheng-chih, Chairman of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission, added to Bangkok's anxiety by voicing support for the insurgency. A key person in directing communist activities abroad, Liao proclaimed that Beijing had an "unshirkable obligation" (sic) to support "the struggles of the people" of Thailand. The news that the PRC was bank-rolling large purchases of Thai currency in Hong Kong made many in Thailand fear the worst.<sup>74</sup>

By 1966, both Bangkok and Washington perceived that a major insurgency was underway, and that it had direction and support from Beijing. A CIA report in September 1965 pointed out that the Chinese were actively infiltrating hill tribes in Laos and Thailand, as well as sponsoring the CPT. There was even a suspected Chinese connection to the Muslim insurgency in Southern Thailand and Malaysia.<sup>75</sup> The CIA concluded that the communists in Thailand posed a real, immediate, and growing threat, despite their relatively low numbers.<sup>76</sup> Not surprisingly, the Thai government adopted severe domestic measures to curb dissent. By the end of the year, Bangkok and Washington also placed a renewed emphasis on counter-insurgency. In December 1965, the Thai government, with US assistance, created the "Communist Suppression Operations Command" (CSOC), which was designed to oversee the frequently unconnected activities of the BPP, TNP and PARU. CSOC immediately requested training and technical support from US Special Forces, and in order to provide this the Joint Chiefs of Staff implemented a separate program for Thailand given constraints on operations in Vietnam.<sup>77</sup>

Despite CIA contentions that the communists in the Northeast were "generally ineffective," their connection to Beijing was a source of anxiety. In February 1966, Minister of the Interior Praphas Charusthian urgently requested advance shipment of

helicopters scheduled for delivery in 1967. He argued that communist activity in the Northeast was on the upswing, and that helicopters would give a boost to reconnaissance and search-and-destroy operations. Ambassador-at-large Averell Harriman agreed, and after a meeting with Thai officials later that month he advised Washington that \$US 71 million in 1967 MAP funding for Thailand was needed to provide even more helicopters than already authorized.<sup>78</sup> Graham Martin also stressed the urgency of the situation in the Northeast. He warned the State Department that the Northeast was "too much like Vietnam" for comfort, and that immediate, concerted efforts were needed to prevent this vulnerable region of Thailand from suffering the same fate as South Vietnam.<sup>79</sup>

Bangkok responded to the expedited funding by agreeing to the deployment of the US 606th Air Commandos squadron, designed to further train the Thai forces in counter-insurgency operations. Three Thai Special Forces detachments were paired with a 128-man team from the US 1st Special Forces Group based in Okinawa. By the fall six joint squads were in place, most of them in the Pitsanulok area. They immediately saw action against insurgents in both the Northeast and South.<sup>80</sup> In early May, Operation BUNNAM commenced, with over 1,200 air sorties being launched in a one week period against communist positions in Indochina, while joint US and Thai Special Forces conducted 30-day "suppression activities" in remote, undisclosed locations.<sup>81</sup> Martin reported that evidence from the operations confirmed not only Laotian but also Cambodian aid to Thai communists in the Northeast.<sup>82</sup>

Though unable to offer conclusive proof, the Thais maintained that PRC agents were active in the area running guns and other supplies. Waiting for incontrovertible evidence of the Chinese role was, Thanom said, "no different from waiting for a conflagration to spread and reach our house."<sup>83</sup> Making matters worse, VOPT broadcasts in early 1966 called for a "people's war" against US imperialism in Thailand, and claimed that Communist China would soon help "save" Thailand from the Americans.<sup>84</sup> In fact, a USIS field report linked Beijing to virtually all insurgents in the Northeast: the CPT and TIM, as well as lesser groups, such as the Patriotic Teacher's Group, the Thai Monk's Group, and the Federation of Patriotic Workers. The CIA obtained further proof of the Chinese connection to the insurgency in October 1966 after captured communists were found carrying Chinese weapons and documents, indicating that they had been trained in Laos, North Vietnam, and Communist China.<sup>85</sup> However, it may be that this information was not passed on to Bangkok. As one CIA report noted, absolute proof linking Beijing to the insurgency would only give the Thais added ammunition in demanding more aid from Washington.<sup>86</sup> Clearly, the State Department did not agree with such an assessment. Dean Rusk repeatedly drew attention to Chinese involvement in his public statements, announcing on a NBC Today program in January 1967 that a training camp for Thai guerrillas had been confirmed in North Vietnam, and telling USIA reporters in October that both North Vietnamese and Chinese regulars were assisting insurgents in Thailand.<sup>87</sup> Despite the different approaches by the CIA and the State Department, it was increasingly clear to Washington and Bangkok that Beijing was taking a more active role in the training and organization of the cadres.

In April 1968, communist guerrillas overran a BPP centre at Ban Huai Khu in Chiang Changwat, with only two of the 17 defenders surviving.<sup>88</sup> During that spring Thai troops

suffered a relatively high number of casualties, victims of well-executed ambushes throughout the region. Then, in July, a small band of guerrillas penetrated Udorn air base, destroying several US C-141 and F-4D aircraft as well as HU-43 helicopters. It was the first serious attack against US forces in Thailand. Five Americans and Thais were wounded in the incident, while four of the invaders were killed, including a North Vietnamese regular army officer.<sup>89</sup> A senior American official in Thailand with prior service in South Vietnam noted afterwards that "things look far worse here today than they did in Saigon in 1960."<sup>90</sup> Thanom suggested that communist numbers were on the rise, totalling 3,000 in the Northeast alone. Some, he claimed, were Chinese and Vietnamese agents.<sup>91</sup> In November 1968, American intelligence services estimated that just slightly over 2,000 communist insurgents were present in the whole country, but agreed that the numbers were growing.<sup>92</sup> Even US Ambassador Leonard Unger, who took over for Martin in Bangkok in spring 1968, was apprehensive that expanded covert operations in Laos had provoked the communists into stepping up infiltration of the Northeast, which could have serious repercussions for Thanom's stability.<sup>93</sup>

Following these attacks further counter-insurgency measures and covert activities were adopted. In July 1968, three full complements of Thai troops were sent to Laos to conduct special operations. Under special project "Folder Mark," US Special Forces designed long-range reconnaissance missions for the Thai Army, as well as BPP and PARU units.<sup>94</sup> The "College Eye Task Force" ran advanced radar relay flights over the Gulf of Tonkin and Laos, while "Igloo White Task Force" ran in-country electronic sensor operations throughout the Northeast.<sup>95</sup> American-led psychological operations, requested by the Thai government, expanded dramatically. By early 1968 USIA Thailand had a staff of 52 running projects in 13 districts. Its budget for that year topped \$US 15.5 million, making it the third largest USIA field bureau in the world after South Vietnam and Japan.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, Thai Special Forces saw expanded field service in both Vietnam and Laos.<sup>97</sup> In fact, it was revealed during 1969 Senate hearings on US military activities in Indochina that Thais, dressed as Lao and Hmong tribesmen, made up a good portion of *l'armée clandestine* operating throughout Laos. It is estimated that as many as 21,400 Thais served in that country by 1973.<sup>98</sup> Not revealed was the fact that the Thai Special Forces were, like American soldiers in Vietnam, occasionally prone to savage excess. In February 1968, the US Embassy reported to Washington that Thai Special Forces had massacred 72 Hmong villagers at Chong Pai village in the Northeast on 16 October 1967. No formal investigation was ever held, and Bangkok dismissed the episode as communist propaganda.<sup>99</sup>

### **China's Backing**

Despite fear about increased communist activity in the Northeast, the PRC actually refrained from pushing its intrusion in Thailand too far. Its material support for Thai communists was limited, and political backing for the insurgency was kept at the party level, rarely coming from the Beijing government itself. Even in their rhetoric the Chinese were noticeably reserved toward Thailand. There was little criticism of the Thai king or the Buddhist faith. Instead, the focus was almost exclusively on regional and ethnic differences within the country, and on Bangkok's cosy relationship with the US. All in all, Beijing approached the situation in Thailand with extreme caution.<sup>100</sup> The

Chinese seem to have realized that, unlike Vietnam, Thailand could serve as a secure base for long-term US operations in the region. Beijing apparently worried that the Americans would entrench themselves in Thailand once they were beaten in Vietnam. In such circumstances, China would face a permanent and threatening US presence along its frontier.<sup>101</sup>

Perhaps Beijing also realized that the CPT lacked adequate leadership and substantial issues, and that its approach was "too Chinese" to appeal to most Thais.<sup>102</sup> In any event, Chinese support of insurgents in Thailand appears to have been an exercise in propaganda and limited military pressure, and not the prelude to more far-reaching intervention aimed at toppling the government in Bangkok. There were in fact no confirmed communist attacks on US or Thai military installations in 1966, only a few assassinations of local Thai leaders, and occasional skirmishes in five Northeastern regions.<sup>103</sup> Again, during 1967 no military installations came under attack, although the number of deaths linked to the insurgency substantially increased. There were 138 people in the Northeast confirmed killed by guerrillas, including 78 government officials. American intelligence estimates in 1967 put the number of insurgents in the whole country at only 2,500 and growing, with 1,500 of those in the North.<sup>104</sup> It is also clear that the upswing in insurgent activity was primarily a response to the growing influence of the United States in Thailand and its increased efforts in Vietnam, rather than a reflection of widespread domestic dissatisfaction in Thailand itself. Economic growth, although uneven, continued virtually unabated. Reverence for the Thai monarchy and Buddhism remained a profoundly important aspect of Thai society, reinforcing a basic conservatism throughout most of the country that contributed to the stability of the government.<sup>105</sup>

## **Cambodia**

While issues relating to Laos, Vietnam, and counter-insurgency dominated the US-Thai relationship, there were yet other dimensions to Thailand's role in covert operations. Much to Washington's dismay, Bangkok supported the *Khmer Serei* rebels in Cambodia, who opposed the government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk.<sup>106</sup> The enmity between Thailand and Cambodia dated back centuries, but flared up during the 1950s against the backdrop of rising conflict in Laos and Vietnam. In January 1959, diplomatic relations between Bangkok and Phnom Penh were suspended. The Sarit regime alleged that Cambodia harbored communist insurgents from Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, and that its recognition of the PRC in July 1958 effectively made Sihanouk a communist puppet. Cambodia in turn accused the Thais of numerous border violations, and even attempts to assassinate the royal family.<sup>107</sup> Washington was dragged into the vortex. American aid to Thailand did not go unnoticed by Cambodians, and Washington was quickly linked to what they saw as Thai aggression and irredentism.

Sihanouk's war of words with Thailand over these issues became a constant feature of Cambodian foreign policy, making it very difficult for Washington to deal with Phnom Penh. In fact, Sihanouk seemed to go out of his way to antagonize Thailand and the US. In January 1964, he ordered the public execution of *Khmer Serei* rebels linked to his old adversary, Son Ngoc Thanh, whom the Thais had supported.<sup>108</sup> On the occasion of Sarit's death in December 1963, Sihanouk publicly vented his anger against the Thais. Speaking on Radio Phnom Penh, he rejoiced in the Thai leader's passing, and called upon

Cambodians to pray for Thanat Khoman's death too, promising a three day holiday if he did.<sup>109</sup> Sihanouk also welcomed the deaths of Ngo Dinh Diem and John Kennedy, referring to the late president as the "great boss," and noting that he, Sarit, and Diem would "all meet in hell."<sup>110</sup> When the State Department protested, Sihanouk recalled the entire Cambodian mission from Washington and threatened to break off diplomatic relations completely.

The Thais did not help matters either. Thanom continued to support the *Khmer Serei* despite pleas from Washington to stop. Getting the Thais to moderate their Cambodian policy was a major goal for Washington, which saw a solid, non-communist government in Phnom Penh as essential for regional stability. With that in mind, successive US ambassadors were instructed to do all they could to secure Bangkok's cooperation. President Johnson considered improving the relationship between Thailand and Sihanouk a top priority in Asia, commenting to his advisers, "I just don't understand why we can't get along with that little Prince . . . . He runs a wonderful country; he's a great little man."<sup>111</sup>

Fear of rising Chinese influence in Cambodia added to Thailand's hatred of Sihanouk. In his meeting with the commander of US forces in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, in October 1968, Minister of the Interior Praphas stated that Beijing's influence in the Khmer kingdom was rapidly increasing, and that the Chinese were using the country as a conduit for weapons into South Vietnam. He claimed that Sihanouk even had an agreement with the PRC to permit the transportation of weapons across Cambodian territory into South Vietnam. Noting that there were over 10,000 members of the Khmer Serei along the Thai-Cambodian frontier, poised for action against Sihanouk, Praphas argued that it was "timely to give the group encouragement and support." Anxious to avoid more complications in dealing with Phnom Penh, Westmoreland told Praphas that the US did not condone Thai support of the *Khmer Serei*, suggesting that numerous rebel raids against Cambodian government positions just inside the border were not in Washington's, or Bangkok's, best interests.<sup>112</sup>

The issue of Cambodia was much more than a minor irritant in US-Thai relations. Thailand saw Cambodia as the US did Cuba because of its proximity and strategic sensitivity. The Thai leadership expected Washington to understand that. Bangkok was willing to give the Americans essentially all that they wanted, but being told how to deal with Sihanouk was too much to stomach. Not only was Cambodia a long-time enemy, but the country represented another Laos for the Thais. A weak, erratic government in Phnom Penh ignored the growing strength of communists within, while openly courting the favor of international communist powers under a thin veil of neutrality. What made matters even worse was that, unlike Laos, the Thais did not have the same cultural or "family" connections to Cambodians. Whereas in the Laotian crisis Thailand played a major and potentially positive role, in Cambodia it served only as the object of Sihanouk's political diatribes, and an external target to distract attention away from internal weaknesses.<sup>113</sup>

## **Burma**

Thailand's covert activities also extended to the "Golden Triangle" region overlapping the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Burma. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Kuomintang (KMT) irregulars operating in northern Thailand periodically engaged both Burmese and

communist Chinese forces.<sup>114</sup> America feared that the Thais knew of and condoned KMT actions. Taiwanese officials even requested Thai assistance in aiding the irregulars. Burmese authorities already distrusted and resented the Thais for their inaction against the Shan, Karen, and other rebellious ethnic minorities seeking sanctuary in Thailand from their intermittent civil war with Rangoon.<sup>115</sup> Such Thai complicity with the KMT further threatened regional stability, and risked a serious escalation of tensions with the PRC in Burma and in Laos. By 1963, there was a perpetual state of confusion inside the "Golden Triangle," complete with periodic clashes between combinations of tribal groups and the KMT, as well as Thai and Burmese soldiers.

Washington feared Burma's drift toward the PRC and thus did not want to appear in anyway connected to Thai policy toward Rangoon. In fact, official US policy was sympathetic to the Burmese situation, and the Embassy in Bangkok was directed to persuade the Thais not to intervene. From an American perspective, better Thai-Burmese relations would not only stabilize the volatile tri-border area, but also possibly woo the Burmese away from Beijing. The Thais did not deny that tribal insurgents received supplies in Thailand. The government simply maintained that such support came from private, not official, sources. The problem was with the Burmese, and their inability to prevent border crossings in the first place. With a sizeable Shan and Karen population in the remote northwest of Thailand, Bangkok was cautious. It could not afford to alienate the hill tribes. They were already susceptible to communist infiltration from Laos, and military action against them in Burma might ignite a rebellion in Thailand as well. Therefore, even though the Thais realized that better relations with Rangoon would be in their best interest, they could not appear too committed to the process. As a result, the turmoil continued, accentuated by occasional clashes and sabre-rattling on both sides of the border.<sup>116</sup>

Problems in the Golden Triangle were complicated by the struggle for control of the lucrative opium trade. This "Opium War" resulted in frequently serious fighting along the Thai-Burmese-Lao corridor among the hills tribes and KMT. Making matters worse was the fact that many prominent Thai leaders were well-connected to the drug trade. Sarit had been deeply involved, and although Thanom was more discreet, the opium trade still reached all the way to the prime minister's office. Praphas was particularly important to the trade in his role as "an adept manager of an illicit economy that ranged from opium to arms trading."<sup>117</sup> To prevent disclosure of the Thai leadership's links to the drug trade, Bangkok ordered the Thai Army to keep a close eye on KMT villages, while at the same time remaining in a position to protect them and secure a cut of the profits from the trafficking. Purportedly in defence of their border, in 1966 the Thai Army occupied villages adjacent to the Shan states.<sup>118</sup> But the Army caused more problems, occupying Hmong villages in Chiangrai province and extorting opium profits from them too. In May 1967, after several such incidents, the Hmong retaliated, attacking Thai troops northeast of Nan. The Thais responded with force, razing villages and, under the direction of CSOC, even napalming Hmong positions.<sup>119</sup>

### **Congress and Questions**

Just as Bangkok's activities in Burma and Cambodia could not escape American attention, Congressional scrutiny on the covert dimensions of US-Thai relations was a

constant factor throughout the Vietnam War era. In 1966 and 1967, hearings by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee probed the exact nature of American commitments to Thailand, focusing on what Senator William Fulbright (D-Arkansas) called a suspiciously close relationship.<sup>120</sup> From the Thai perspective, Congressional inquiries cast doubt on the two countries' friendship, renewing Bangkok's concerns about a US withdrawal from Southeast Asia. Faced with such scrutiny and a growing anti-war movement in the US, by the end of 1968 Thailand began to re-evaluate its relationship with Washington. Some observers in Washington considered the change in Thailand to be disloyal; as if the Thais were classic fair-weather friends abandoning the US during a difficult time. Many in Washington took changes in Thai attitudes to be typical "Siamese talk," giving the appearance of disillusionment only to elicit more aid.<sup>121</sup> While the latter tactic had definitely not been uncommon in US-Thai relations, by the end of 1968 it was a thing of the past. Many Thais were beginning to realize that the US was likely going to pull-out of Southeast Asia, no matter what Americans said to the contrary, and the communists were going to win. A negotiated settlement in Vietnam would only delay the inevitable, and in this respect the Thais seemed to anticipate the end well before the Americans.

Accepting this fact, Thai foreign policy exercised its traditional flexibility. Surviving in the post-Vietnam war era became the priority, and this meant accommodating communism.<sup>122</sup> As early as 1966 Thanat Khoman anticipated US disengagement from the region, testing the winds with Hanoi and Beijing by arguing that Thailand was "not necessarily anti-communist, nor for that matter anti-Chinese, anti-Russian, anti-North Korean or anti-North Vietnamese."<sup>123</sup> Shortly after Lyndon Johnson's decision not to run in the 1968 presidential election, Thanat said that "Thailand should not be blamed if we were to seek an accommodation with Communist China." At a Tokyo press conference in February 1969, the foreign minister stunned the audience when he announced "[T]o show that Thailand is not anti-communist and anti-Chinese we are prepared to sit down and talk -- and have meaningful discussion -- with Peking to establish peaceful coexistence." Just a few days later, Thanat suggested that he was willing to meet Chinese representatives to "help draw China out of her isolation so that she could become a member of the Asian family."<sup>124</sup> The old sage of Thai politics (and twice prime minister of Thailand), Seni Pramoj, was even more succinct, warning Thais that "we have let the US forces use our country to bomb Hanoi. When the Americans go away, they won't take that little bit of history with them."<sup>125</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although Thailand continued to play an important role assisting US policy in Indochina, by 1969 the end was definitely clear. In August, President Richard Nixon went to Thailand to discuss the war in Vietnam. Nixon did not consider Thailand nearly as important as any of his predecessors, but he still needed Thai support for American military operations in the region. Much to Washington's surprise, the Thai government seized the occasion to launch a diplomatic first-strike. Thanom announced that Thailand would end its participation in clandestine operations with the US, and he asked the president to disengage American troops from Thailand. The communist insurgency in the Northeast was, Thanom pointed out, under control, and he warned that the large American military presence did more harm than good by encouraging Hanoi and Beijing

to continue their support of insurgents.

Nixon managed an honorable withdrawal of the nearly 48,000 US troops from Thailand beginning in September 1969. However, the use of Thai air bases, as well as covert and counter-insurgency operations, continued in gradual decline for six more years until 1975. Throughout this period relations with the United States were centre stage in Thai politics. In 1971, public disclosure that Bangkok was conducting secret talks with Hanoi stimulated divisions within the government over the direction of Thai foreign policy. After a bloodless internal coup that November, an even more authoritarian regime was reconstituted by Thanom. However, the success of the Nixon administration's *rapprochement* with Beijing in 1972, and official peace talks with Hanoi the following year effectively undermined Thanom's credibility. Unable to accommodate either development, Thanom was in the unusual position of being more committed to a military solution in Indochina than the US president. A groundswell of public support for domestic reform and foreign policy change in Thailand culminated in the fall of 1973, when protests against the Thanom regime turned violent. Only after intervention by the revered King Bhumipol was a major conflict averted. The Thai military supported the king, and many top government officials, including Thanom himself, fled the country.<sup>126</sup> Military rule in Thailand was by no means ended, but the events of 1973 demonstrated the desire for greater democratic reform and changes to the long relationship with the US.<sup>127</sup>

Despite communist victories in Indochina by 1975, Thailand was no domino. Even with the withdrawal of US military power from the region, and although surrounded by hostile neighbors, Thailand emerged as a relatively stable economic and political power in Southeast Asia. Without question this development owed much to the American security umbrella, but the presence of US forces in Thailand throughout the 1960s and early 1970s does not provide the only explanation.<sup>128</sup> While there was an indigenous communist insurgency in the Northeast, it was never a serious threat to Thailand's stability. Thais did not experience the emotional, divisive, and convulsive nationalism of their neighbors, but instead enjoyed a comparative unity, reinforced by their ancient reverence for the monarchy and the Buddhist faith. With the departure of the American military from Indochina by the mid 1970s, traditional flexibility in Thai foreign policy managed to help accommodate the external communist threat, while at the same time maintaining fairly solid relations with Washington.

In many ways Thailand was a success story for American policy, amidst a sea of failures in Southeast Asia. The United States clearly failed to "save" Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia from communism, but did succeed in helping Thailand. Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Burma also successfully resisted communist insurgencies with direct and/or indirect assistance from the United States. The price in all of these countries was high. Military dictatorships and autocracies ruled for decades with the full collusion of successive presidential administrations in Washington. This, of course, was a pattern that developed in many parts of the world during the Cold War. In many respects it was the collateral of containment theory. In Thailand democratic reforms were encouraged throughout the long relationship with the United States, but few took quick root. American policy in Southeast Asia was for more than 20 years fixated on combating communism. Democracy took a back seat. In this respect the United States perpetuated

authoritarianism, and delayed the onset of political reform.

However, perhaps ironically, the United States can claim victory on this point too. The economic prosperity that such a long and extensive US military presence in Thailand brought ultimately gave rise to a more developed political consciousness. By the 1970s this consciousness manifested as Thai nationalism, which was framed in part by anti-Americanism against the backdrop of communist advances in Indochina. This ultimately displaced military rule in Bangkok, and led to a more balanced and multilateral foreign policy. Thailand remained at the centre of regional security and development through organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). With a more established economic infrastructure, again courtesy of American assistance, Thailand enjoyed continued prosperity in the 1980s as one of the "new dragons" of Asia. Political reforms followed, and although Thailand's journey is by no means finished, the country has embarked on a new chapter in its democratization.

Thailand risked a great deal by assisting the United States in its fight against communism in Southeast Asia. In addition to military authoritarianism, many Thais lamented the negative cultural consequences of such a large American presence in their country. Increased prostitution, the expanded drug trade, and the erosion of traditional Thai values have all been blamed on the US military during its stay. However, Thailand also benefitted considerably and ultimately survived the Cold War far better than many of its neighbors. Similarly, the United States benefitted from its involvement with Thailand too. Without Thailand the United States would have had an even more difficult experience in Indochina. The financial costs, particularly for bombing missions, would have been far higher. Politically, Washington's claim to be fighting on behalf of its Asian allies would have been severely undermined. Militarily, the prosecution of both overt and covert operations would have been dramatically complicated. Without Thailand's support the ways and means of American involvement in Indochina would have been entirely different, and the *raison d'etre* even more doubtful. In this respect, from covert operative to post-war ally, Thailand was critically important to the United States; a not so silent partner in the shadow of Vietnam.

## Endnotes

1. R. Sean Randolph, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics 1950-85* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California Berkeley, 1986), p. 59.
2. Daniel Mark Fineman, "United States Foreign Policy and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1993, p. 11.
3. Robert J. McMahon, "What Difference Did it Make?: Assessing the Vietnam War's Impact on Southeast Asia," in Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger, eds., *International Perspectives on Vietnam* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), p. 202. See also John L.S. Girling, *Thailand: Society and Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 96.
4. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 February 1977, pp. 42-43.
5. William F. Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958), passim. See also Sukhumbhand Paribata, *From Enmity*

*to Alignment: Thailand's Changing Relations With China* (Bangkok: Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1987).

6. Aside from periodic invasions by neighbors throughout the centuries, the most notable example of foreign military presence in Thailand was from 1941 to 1945, when Japanese troops occupied positions throughout much of the country. Thailand's role in World War Two, and particularly its association with Japan, remains the subject of considerable historical controversy. For an excellent account of this topic, see Edward Bruce Reynolds, *Thailand and Japan's Southern Advance, 1940-1945* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994).

7. Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, pp. 14-15.

8. Background briefings, "Visit of Prime Minister of Thailand," with Marshall Wright, White House, 7 May 1968, file BB #32 - Background Briefings etc. 7 May 1968-28 June 1968, #1437, Background Briefings, Box 83, White House Press Office Files, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (hereafter cited as LBJL). MAP aid reached a yearly high of \$US 130 million in 1968.

9. Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: WW Norton, 1990), p. 429. See also Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Towards Laos Since 1954* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 1-4.

10. Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Political Struggles in Laos, 1930-1954* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1988), passim. Thailand is geographically exposed to external assault from Laos. The Thai border with Laos is essentially the Mekong River, which at crucial points along the frontier narrows to only a few hundred feet. Much of Laos is also a valley, with little in the way to impede an invasion launched from China or Vietnam.

11. State Department Report, "Counterinsurgency in Thailand," no date, Thailand file 2, #41-42, National Security Files (hereafter cited as NSF), Country Files Thailand, Box 286, LBJL.

12. CIA Memorandum 1595/66, "Communist Insurgency in Thailand: Strengths and Weaknesses," 11 August 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 10/66, #105, NSF, Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL. See also Charles F. Keyes, "Ethnic Identity and Loyalty of Villagers in northeastern Thailand," *Asian Survey* 6 (July 1966), pp. 85-90.

13. United States Army, Chief of Staff, memorandum of conversation, General William Westmoreland and General Praphas Charusthian, 16 October 1968, file Thailand Memos Volume 8, 7/68 to 12/68, #96, NSF, Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.

14. Adulyasak Soonthornrojana, "The Rise of United States-Thai Relations, 1945-1975," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Akron, 1986, pp. 87-89. For an interesting discussion on China's policy regarding Thailand, see Yang Kuisong, Working Paper #34: Changes in Mao Zedong's Attitude Towards the Indochina War, 1949-1973, Cold War International History Project, <http://cwihip.si.edu>, pp. 1-29.

15. Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, pp. 22-24. Between 1954 and 1960, almost 47 percent of total US economic assistance went to transportation, with 33 percent alone devoted to road construction. \$US 350 million was spent on highways from 1951 to 1965, creating a network of roads from the Bangkok region all the way up near the border with Laos. By February 1960, American money had helped build large and medium scale

airports at Korat, Takli, Udon Thani (Udon), Ubon, Chiangmai, and Bangkok, all with facilities specifically geared for military use.

16. Fineman, "United States Foreign Policy and Military Government in Thailand," pp. 238-48.

17. Timothy Neil Castle, "At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: US Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955-73," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1991, pp. 96-98. See also Official Meeting Minutes (hereafter cited as OMM), National Security Council (hereafter cited as NSC), 144th Meeting, 13 May 1953, OMM Box 5, pp. 130-45, Records of the NSC, Record Group (hereafter cited as RG) 273, United States National Archives (hereafter cited as USNA), and OMM, NSC 159th Meeting, 17 August 1953, OMM Box 8, pp. 158-59, and OMM, NSC 189th Meeting, 11 March 1954, OMM Box 10, pp. 170-99, RG 273, USNA.

18. Fineman, "United States Foreign Policy and Military Government in Thailand," pp. 238-48. "Operation Paper" was actually opposed by CIA Director W.B. Smith, but Truman approved the project in January 1951, no doubt influenced by events in Korea. General Li Mi headed *Kuomintang* forces, which received crucial logistical and intelligence support from the Thai police and US advisers. In June 1951, Li Mi managed to take an airfield in Yunnan, but his troops were twice pushed back. Despite Thai efforts to cover for the Americans, virtually everyone knew that Washington was somehow involved in what Fineman characterizes as a "comic opera."

19. Castle, "At War in the Shadow of Vietnam," pp. 96-98.

20. Fineman, "The United States and Military Government in Thailand," pp. 384-95.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 384-99. Phibun's fears about Peurifoy were not entirely without basis. A long-time associate of the CIA, Peurifoy was in Greece during the civil war there, and he was behind the scenes in Guatemala, helping to bring down the leftist Arbenz government in 1954. So acute were Phibun's fears that, while at a party, Peurifoy felt obliged to assure the prime minister's daughter that there were no plans for the overthrow of her father.

22. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, p. 5. For an interesting account of Kennedy's policy towards Laos, see Noam Kochavi, "Limited Accommodation, Perpetuated Conflict: Kennedy, China, and the Laos Crisis, 1961-1963," *Diplomatic History* 26, no 1 (Winter 2002), pp. 95-135.

23. Leonard Unger, "The United States and Laos, 1962-1965," in Joseph J. Zasloff and Leonard Unger, eds., *Laos: Beyond the Revolution* (London: MacMillan, 1991), pp. 274-78.

24. Castle, "At War in the Shadow of Vietnam," pp. 96, 277-80.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

26. Memorandum, "Background on Laos," Roger Hilsman at INR, 13 April 1961, folder 2, Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 2, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (hereafter cited as JFKL).

27. Castle, "At War in the Shadow of Vietnam," pp. 277-80. See also memo, "Security in Southeast Asia," George McGhee (Counselor, State Department) for Rostow, 28 July 1961, file Thailand General 6/61 to 7/61, #9, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163,

JFKL.

28. In fact, many officials in the Kennedy administration also considered SEATO to be an ineffective organization. Then-Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, characterized SEATO as "absurd," noting that despite official pretenses, it was widely regarded in Washington as "not so important." Telephone interview by author with Robert McNamara, 5 April 2002.

29. US State Department Circular, "Proposed Joint Statement to be Issued By His Excellency the Foreign Minister of Thailand and the Secretary of State," file Thailand General 3/1/62 to 3/8/62, National Security File Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. For an excellent overview of US policy towards SEATO after the agreement, see report PD/FE-1, "Future of SEATO," no author," 5 April 1962, file Policy Directives, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Asia, Subject, Personal Name and Country Files 1960-63, Box 15, RG 59, USNA.

30. National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) #157, "Presidential Meeting on Laos, May 24 1962" (National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy), 29 May 1962, as quoted in Senator Mike Gravel, ed., *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. 3 (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), Document #114, pp. 672-73. See also Roger Hilsman, *To Move A Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy In The Administration of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 163-65.

31. See top secret report 18-62, "Southeast Asia Situation Report," Director of Operations, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 16 May 1962, file Top Secrets - FE 5000-5599, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Asia, Top Secret Files of the Regional Planning Adviser 1955-1963, Box 1, RG 59, USNA.

32. Fact sheet, "US Counterinsurgency Forces to Thailand," W.B. Rosson, Major General, Director of Special Warfare, 29 May 1962, file Thailand General 4/62 to 5/62, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 163, JFKL. See also message, Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) Thailand MAO 21107 to Commander, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV or COMUSMACV), 7 June 1962, in *ibid.* Official American estimations of the Thais' counter-insurgency capabilities often differed. USOM Thailand reported that the Thai National Police were poorly trained, with insufficient and outdated equipment. But the NSC's team of internal security experts concluded after a tour of the northeast in the fall that the Border Patrol Police were "an effective force for border surveillance," while the Thai Army was "well disciplined and reasonably well trained." See survey report, "The Thai National Police and Provincial Police," Public Safety Division, USOM Thailand, 25 June 1962 and report, "Orientation Trip Thailand: 10 September-26 October 1962," R.H. Williams for McGeorge Bundy, in file 3.1, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, Thailand Files 1960-63, Box 3, RG 59, USNA.

33. Report, "Southeast Asia Situation Report," Joint Chiefs of Staff Director of Operations 23-63, 6 June 1962, file Top Secrets FE 5600-5699, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Asia, Top Secret Files of the Regional Planning Adviser, Box 1, RG 59, USNA.

34. Top secret message, CINCPAC P310001Z to Joint Chiefs of Staff Washington, 26 May 1962, file Top Secrets FE 5600-5699, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Assistant

Secretary of State for Far East Asia, Top Secret Files of the Regional Planning Adviser, Box 1, RG 59, USNA.

35. John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations From World War Two Through the Persian Gulf* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1986), pp. 276-78.

36. See messages, Department of the Army 915036 DTG 02190Z, Commander in Chief, US MAAG Thailand to Secretary of Defense, 2 June 1962, folder 2, Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 2, JFKL; and Navy Department P032205Z, Admiral Harry Felt at CINCPAC to Secretary of Defense, 5 June 1962 in *ibid.* See also top secret National Intelligence Estimate 58-5-62, Director of Central Intelligence, 23 May 1962, file Laos General 6/1/62 to 6/5/62, #5d, NSF Country File Laos, Box 131, JFKL.

37. Recently released Russian documents suggest that the withdrawal was based in part on a secret promise made by Kennedy to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev following his private appeal through the president's brother in June 1962. See document, "Telegram from Soviet Ambassador to the USA A.F. Dobrynin to the USSR Foreign Ministry, 30 October 1962." Cold War International History Project, <http://cwihip.si.edu>, 1. See also document "Coded telegram from Soviet official Gregory Zhukov, 01 November 1962," in *ibid.*

38. Memorandum, "Laos: The Troop Withdrawal Question," Roger Hilsman to Averell Harriman, 24 September 1962, folder 9, Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 2, JFKL. See also memo, "US Troops in Thailand," Hilsman for Harriman, 26 July 1962, folder 14 in *ibid.*

39. Memorandum, McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, "Basic Recommendation and Projected Course of Action on Southeast Asia," 25 May 1964, file Luncheons with the President Volume I, McGeorge Bundy Files, Boxes 18-19, LBJL.

40. *Ibid.* Project 22 was officially designated COMUSTAF Plan 1/64. The Commander in Chief of US Armed Forces in the Pacific (CINCPAC) endorsed the plan in February 1964, with Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) approval coming in May.

41. Summary of Record of NSC Meetings NO536, 28 July 1964, file NSC Meetings, Volume II, Tab IX, 7/28/64, #5, NSF NSC Meetings, Box 1, LBJL.

42. Message, CINCPAC 200015Z to MAAG Thailand, 11 July 1963, file 15.7 Laos: July-September 1963, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, Box 7, RG 59, USNA. One of the biggest missions was Operation PIERCE ARROW, involving T-28 and artillery action against communist positions in the Laotian Panhandle. See also cable, "Next Courses of Action in Southeast Asia," CINCPAC to JCS, 17 August 1964, as quoted in Gravel, ed., *The Pentagon Papers*, pp. 542-43.

43. Cable, US Embassy Saigon to State, 19 April 1964, as quoted in United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter cited as FRUS), Vietnam 1964-1968, Volume I, p. 247.

44. Timothy N. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: US Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government 1955-1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 73-74.

45. Cable, CINCPAC PAF266 to JCS, 2 October 1964, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #43, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL. By December 1964, the 11 Thai

pilots at Udon Thani had over 100 missions to their credit. The Thai Air Force detachment in Savannakhet was well above this rate, but Martin cautioned about "over-using" them. Thais also served in search and rescue missions in conjunction with *Air America* operatives. See cable, Bangkok 807 to State, 22 December 1964, #65 in *Ibid*.

46. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, pp. 71-72.

47. Transcript, State Department background for press and radio news briefing, 17 June 1964, file CF Oversize Attachments Southeast Asia -General 1/4/67 #4, White House Central File (hereafter cited as WHCF), Confidential Files, Box 177, LBJL.

48. Cable, Bangkok 1409 to State, 23 December 1965, file Thailand Volume III 4/65 to 12/65, folder 1, #43, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL. See also cable, Bangkok 1290 to COMUSACV, 8 March 1965, file Thailand Volume II 8/64 to 3/65, #100, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 282, LBJL. Following the specifications of MACV plan OP-01, US aircraft out of Ubon were given the responsibility of striking "choke points" between Laos and Vietnam at the Nape and Mu Guia passes. F-4 tactical fighter squadrons based at Nakhon Phanom accompanied bombers on Rolling Thunder missions to defend against Chinese MIGS scrambled from Hainan Island and the Kuantung Peninsula.

49. CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate, "Communist Reactions to US Actions Taken With Regard to Laos," 18 June 1963, file Laos General 6/16/63 to 6/30/63, NSF Country Files Laos, Box 132, JFKL.

50. Thanat Khoman, "Which Road For Southeast Asia?," *Foreign Affairs* 42, no. 4 (July 1964), p. 663.

51. Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p. 77.

52. Oral history interview, John R. O'Brien with Hans Tuch, February 1988, diskette 9, Georgetown University Association of Diplomatic Studies Oral History Program.

53. Surachart Bamrungsuk, *United States and Thai Military Rule, 1947-1977* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1986), p. 153.

54. Randolph, *The United States and Thailand*, p. 59.

55. R.B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, vol. 3 (New York: St. Martin's, 1991), pp. 110-135. See also Robert M. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's 'More Flags': The Hiring of Korean, Filipino and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 1994), *passim*.

56. Comment by Thanat Khoman to press, Bangkok, July 11 1969, as quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger, ed., *The Dynamics of World Power: A Documentary History of United States Foreign Policy 1945-1973*, vol. 4, The Far East (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1973), p. 672.

57. Interview, Thanat Khoman with Peter Karr McCabe, January 6 1966, "Current Notes," *Foreign Affairs Bulletin* 5, no. 3 (December 1965-January 1966), pp. 308-10.

58. Memorandum of conversation, Thanat Khoman with Robert Eastabrook, 11 October 1965, RH Eastabrook Papers, Box 1, JFKL.

59. Adulyasak, "The Rise of United States-Thai Relations," p. 201.

60. "Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam: April 1973," Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (93rd Congress, 1st session) (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1973), pp. 620-22.
61. For example, see Sulak Sivaraksa, *Siam In Crisis*, rev. ed. (Bangkok: Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute and Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development (TICD), 1990), pp. 115-22. See also, Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's 'More Flags'*, passim.
62. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's 'More Flags'*, p. 117.
63. Cable, Bangkok 1636 to State (for AID), 26 April 1965, file Thailand Volume III 4/65 to 12/65, folder 1, #68, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
64. Cable, Bangkok 1533 to State, 9 April 1963, file Thailand General 1/63 to 4/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL.
65. Report, "Action Program for Thailand," 25 October 1962, file Thailand 1962, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Asia, Subject, Personal Name and Country Files 1960-63, Box 13, RG 59, USNA.
66. Memorandum, "General Taylor and the Thai Internal Security Plans," Koren at Office of Southeast Asian Affairs to U.A. Johnson at Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, 10 September 1962, 792.5/9-562, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2141, RG 59, USNA. See also cable, Bangkok 586 to State, 26 September 1962 in *ibid*.
67. CIA Report, "Security Situation in Thailand," TDCS-3/541, 493, 25 March 1963, file Thailand General 1/63 to 4/63, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 164, JFKL.
68. *Ibid*. See also cable, Bangkok 1477 to State, 30 March 1963, file CSM - Communism T, CFP File 1963 (Political and Defense, CSM), Thailand, Box 3692, RG 59, USNA.
69. *Ibid*.
70. The manifesto attacked "US imperialists who deceptively force Thai soldiers to fight and die on their behalf in Laos and South Vietnam." It also accused the Americans in Thailand of torture, rape, and undermining Thai culture and tradition. See Donald Weatherbee, *The United Front in Thailand: A Documentary Analysis* (Columbia, SC: Institute of International Studies, University of South Carolina, 1970), p. 38.
71. Arthur Dommen, "How Secure is Thailand?," *The New Republic*, 1 May 1965, 8, in file Thailand General A-Z, Bernard Fall Papers, Box 18, JFKL.
72. Daniel D. Lovelace, *China and "People's War" in Thailand, 1964-1969* (Center for Chinese Studies, China Research Monograph #8) (Berkeley, CA: University of California Berkeley), p. 51.
73. Report, John Sylvester at Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs to Peter Swiers (Secretary for Averell Harriman), "The Insurgency Situation in the Northeast of Thailand," 23 May 1967, file Thailand, W. Averell Harriman Papers, Box 514, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as LOC).
74. Denis Warner, "Thailand: Peking's New Front," *The Reporter*, 17 June 1965, 32, in file Thailand General A-Z, Bernard Fall Papers, Box 18, JFKL.

75. Report, CIA Special Memo 22-65, 10 September 1965, file Thailand Volume III 4/65 to 12/65, folder 2, #162, NSF Country File Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
76. George K. Tanham, *Trial In Thailand* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1974), p. 36.
77. Shelby L. Stanton, *Green Berets at War: US Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1986), p. 276.
78. Cable, State 1500 to Bangkok, 21 February 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 10/66, #15, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
79. Cable, Bangkok 2314 to State, 29 April 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 10/66, #20, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL. See also report, "Comprehensive Army Study of Thailand," no date, file Thailand number 1, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 286, LBJL.
80. Stanton, *Green Berets at War*, pp. 278-80. Stanton was a US Army Special Forces captain who served in Vietnam and Thailand. The joint Special Forces teams fought numerous skirmishes with communists in the Phu Phan Mountains of Laos in September and October 1966. Special Forces Company D from Fort Bragg was specially trained for action in Thailand, and led the training and deployment of hill tribes recruited for operations in the Bolvens Plateau. In November, a parachute assault team headed by Americans established a jungle base near Trang, close to the Malaysian border. There they actively pursued southern insurgents and Malay communists, frequently across the boundary.
81. Cable, Bangkok 2339 to State, 3 May 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 10/66, #110a, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
82. Cable, Bangkok 1469 to State, 25 January 1966, file Thailand Volume IV 1/66 to 10/66, #51, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
83. Cable, Bangkok 8773 to State, 4 January 1967, file Thailand Volume V 10/66 to 2/67, #23, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
84. Weatherbee, *The United Front in Thailand*, p. 3.
85. "The Department of State During the Administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, November 1963-January 1969," Volume 6, Chapter 7, East Asia, Tab H - Thailand, Historical Reports Relating to Diplomacy During the Lyndon Johnson Administration 1963-69, Office of the Executive Secretariat, Box 4, RG 59, USNA.
86. CIA Memo 1693/66, "Situation in Thailand," 12 October 1966, file Thailand Volume 5 10/66 to 2/67, #126, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.
87. Transcript of interview, Rusk with Hugh Downs on NBC Today, 12 January 1967 and transcript of interview, Rusk with USIA, October 16 1967 in Gravel, ed., *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. IV, pp. 662 and 683-84.
88. Cable, Bangkok 14795 to State, 20 May 1968, folder: Pol 23-1 Thai 1/1/68, CFP Files 1967-69, Thailand, Box 2319, RG 59, USNA.
89. Administrative History of the United States Information Agency - Volume 1: Administrative History, 2 of 2, 5-43 to 5-55, USIA Volume 1, Administrative History; Narrative, Box 1, Administrative Histories, LBJL.

90. J.L.S. Girling, "Northeast Thailand: Tomorrow's Vietnam?" *Foreign Affairs* 46 (January 1968), p. 391. In a February 1969 article, Kenneth Young questioned the strength of communists in the Northeast. Citing testimony from a Vietcong officer who defected, Young noted that Thai farm boys in the region made "very poor revolutionary prospects," being "so under-motivated and under-educated that they did not become disciplined, dedicated or competent guerrillas." See Kenneth T. Young, "Thailand's Role in Southeast Asia," *Current History* 56 (February 1969), p. 98.
91. *Foreign Affairs Bulletin* 7 (April-May 1968), pp. 500-03.
92. Airgram, Bangkok A-1584 to State, 20 November 1968, folder: Pol 27-3 Thai 1/1/68, CFP Files 1967-69, Thailand, Box 2320, RG 59, USNA.
93. Cable, Bangkok 12150 to State, March 1968, file Thailand Volume 7, 8/67 to 7/68, #27, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.
94. Stanton, *Green Berets at War*, p. 281. See various messages, Department of Defense to JCS, December 1967 through February 1968, file Muscle Shoals, Walt Rostow Files, Box 7, LBJL.
95. See folder: Def 15 Thai-US 1/1/68, CFP Files 1967-69, Thailand, Box 1549, RG 59, USNA.
96. Administrative History of the United States Information Agency - Volume 1: Administrative History, 2 of 2, pp. 5-43 to 5-55, USIA Volume 1, Administrative History; Narrative, Box 1, Administrative Histories, LBJL. In terms of relative growth over the period from 1964 to 1968, USIA Thailand led all other missions. It accounted for fully 20 percent of monies in USIA's total foreign assistance budget. See also oral history interview, Willis J. Sutter (USIA Thailand officer 1967-71) with Jack O'Brien, February 1988, diskette, GUFA.
97. Timothy N. Castle, *One Day Too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), passim. In 1968, top secret Operation PRAIRIE FIRE along the Lao panhandle was conducted primarily by US aircraft based in Thailand. There is strong evidence that Thai Special Forces participated in ground incursions as part of the same plan. In one of the most secret operations of the Vietnam War, Thai bases and personnel were instrumental in the USAF "Project Heavy Green," which involved the stationing of an advanced ground-directed radar bombing system, the MSQ-77, at "Lima Site 85" on Phou Pha Thi Mountain in northeastern Laos, just 12 nautical miles from the Vietnamese border. Thai Special Forces "volunteers" served with nearly 1,000 Hmong tribesmen to guard the perilous base, while a seven-man team of Thai radio operators and interpreters complimented a small detachment of American technicians and CIA personnel. The Thai air base at Udorn acted as the construction, transportation, and support facility for Site 85. Udorn was also the headquarters of the USAF 7/13th, which, in conjunction with the CIA and US Embassy in Vientiane, commanded the ill-fated project. In March 1968, after less than five months in operation, Site 85 was overrun by communist forces. In the single largest ground combat loss of USAF personnel during the Vietnam War, 12 Americans were either killed or unaccounted for. An unknown, but almost certainly higher number of Thais and Hmong were also lost. Washington and Bangkok acted quickly to cover up the whole affair. Castle points out that the Thais attached to Project Heavy Green did not perform well at

all. They did not cooperate with the Hmong, whom they regarded with contempt.

98. "United States Security Agreements Abroad: Kingdom of Thailand," Hearings before the Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 91st Congress, First Session, Part 3, 10-14 and 17 November 1969, microform 1970-9912, cards 1-2, pp. 620-22, Robarts Library, University of Toronto. See also Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, pp. 289-92.

99. Cable, Bangkok 10570 to State, 20 February 1968, folder: Pol 23-7 Thai 1/1/68, CFP Files 1967-69, Thailand, Box 2320, RG 59, USNA.

100. Yang Kuisong., Working Paper #34: Changes in Mao Zedong's Attitude Towards the Indochina War, 1949-1973, Cold War International History Project, <http://cwihip.si.edu>, pp. 17-18.

101. Lovelace, *China and the "People's War" in Thailand*, pp. 75-78.

102. CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate 52-68, "Counter-insurgency in Thailand," 9 May 1968, file 52 - Thailand, NSF NIE Files, Boxes 6-7, LBJL.

103. Special NIE 52-66, "Communist Insurgency in Thailand," CIA report, 1 July 1966, file 52 "T," NIE Files, Boxes 6-7, LBJL. For a detailed report on communist activity in Northeast, see CIA Report, "Organization, Activity, and Current Situation of Insurgents in Phanna Nikhom District, Sakon Nakhon Province, February 1966 - April 1967, 24 July 1967, file Thailand Volume VI 3/67 to 8/67, #81, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.

104. Ibid.

105. Peter A. Poole, "Thailand's Vietnamese Minority," *Asian Survey* 7, no. 12 (December 1967).

106. Milton Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p. 168. The historical enmity between Thailand and Cambodia erupted in a major crisis in 1958 over the disputed Phra Vihar (Preah Vihear) temple, which, with international mediation, lasted for over three years. Thai troops occupied the temple in 1958, following Bangkok's claim that the border between the two countries extended further into Cambodia. See K.L. Singh, "The Thai-Cambodian Temple Dispute," *Asian Survey* 11 (October 1962), pp. 19-26.

107. There was some validity to Cambodian allegations about Thai complicity in assassination attempts. The Thais were linked to several Cambodian key dissidents who opposed Sihanouk. Son Ngac Thanh and Sam Sary were suspects in masterminding a failed September 1959 assassination attempt against the Cambodian Queen (Sihanouk's mother), and both were known to operate inside the Thai border. So too was Dap Chhuon (Chhuon Mochulpich), the former Minister of Internal Security, who as governor of Siemreap province was linked with numerous coup rumours throughout 1958-60, collectively dubbed the "Bangkok Plot." Dap Chhuon was associated with Thanh, and had discreet Thai support. Fearing that Thai involvement with Sihanouk's enemies would force him even more toward the communists, Washington tried to dissuade Bangkok from interfering in any way, to which of course the Thais took great offence. See letter,

Hugh Cumming at INR to State, 2 September 1959, file 1.1.1, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, Cambodia Files 1958-60, Box 4, RG 59, USNA. See also memo, Joseph Mendenhall at Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, 18 November 1958, file 14.5, Box 6 in *ibid.* For an in depth, recent analysis of these matters, see Osborne, *Sihanouk*, chap. 8.

108. Cable, State 190 to Saigon, 20 July 1964, folder: Pol Thai u-z 1/1/64, CFP Files 1964-66 (Political and Defense), Thailand, Box 2701, RG 59, USNA.

109. Selected transcripts, Sihanouk speeches August 1963-December 1963, file Cambodia 1962-1968, W. Averell Harriman Papers, Box 551, LOC.

110. Osborne, *Sihanouk*, p. 163. Sihanouk believed that the US knew about Thai support for the *Khmer Serei*, and in fact endorsed it. Kennedy denied any knowledge about the matter, but he was informed in November 1963 by Roger Hilsman that the Eisenhower administration had "played footsie" with the group, and that "there was money involved." See also David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War and Revolution Since 1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 134.

111. Oral history interview, James C. Thomson with Paige Mulhollan, 22 July 1971, 36, Oral Histories, LBJL.

112. United States Army, Chief of Staff, memorandum of conversation, General Westmoreland and General Praphas, 16 October 1968, file Thailand Memos Volume 8, 7/68 to 12/68, #96, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL.

113. David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991), pp. 192-97.

114. Cable, State 830 to Bangkok, 10 December 1960, 690.00/3-2961, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 1392, RG 59, USNA.

115. Several thousand *Kuomintang* troops settled throughout Laos, Vietnam, Burma, and northeastern Thailand. The majority concentrated in the remote highlands of the tri-border Golden Triangle. For several years they retained a fairly unified structure, avoiding much contact with locals and particularly government representatives where they lived. Many of the soldiers married into the local population, adopting tribal names and customs. Some left the region to join Chiang Kai-shek in "exile" in Taiwan. Some remained with KMT settlements, but gradually abandoned the struggle against communism in China in favor of the narcotics trade. With the problems in Burma, particularly after the military coup there in 1962, most of these KMT joined forces with ethnic minorities in the guerrilla war against Rangoon. See Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991), pp. 349-60.

116. A serious incident occurred in February 1961, when an armed, unidentified four-engine plane was shot down by Burmese fighters along the border. The plane crashed on the Thai side, near Mae Chan, as did one of its Burmese pursuers. Thai and US Air Force investigators were quickly dispatched to the area, but a Burmese team was turned away at the border on the grounds that the planes had crossed into Thailand illegally, taking the matter out of Burma's jurisdiction. Rumors that the mystery plane was flown by KMT irregulars on a mission to drop supplies to the Shan brought a large and angry

demonstration to the door of the American Embassy in Rangoon. Official Burmese reports even suggested that the plane took off from a "SEATO base." With tensions running high, the Thais announced the capture of two KMT pilots who parachuted out of the unidentified plane. But the Thais also reported that other KMT agents had unfortunately arrived at the crash site before investigators, and burned much of the evidence. Yielding to American pressure, the Thais eventually took Burmese officials to the site of the fighter's crash, but not the mystery plane. The situation slowly diffused with both sides quietly announcing that the other had "apologized." The official US conclusion was that there was "strong evidence" the Thais were themselves involved in the mission of the unidentified plane. Multiple Cables, file 792.5493/2-1961, CDF Thailand 1960-63, Box 2142, RG 59, USNA. See also multiple cables, Rangoon and Bangkok, files 792.5411/6-262 and 792.544/8-762 in Ibid.

117. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, p. 415.

118. Airgram, Bangkok A-12 to State, 31 October 1967, folder: Pol 2 Thai 1/1/67, CFP Files 1967-69, Thailand, Box 2314, RG 59, USNA. .

119. Zasloff and Unger, eds., *Laos: Beyond the Revolution*, p. 297. See also Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, passim. Hamilton-Merritt details extensive abuses of the Hmong by the Thais throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. Extortion, assault, and rape were common even in those villages not involved with the armed factions and drug trade. The Thais also used the Hmong as part of their security forces, particularly in intelligence gathering operations in Laos, p. 199.

120. Report, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Executive Session on Thailand, 20 September 1966, file Thailand Volume IV, Memos and Misc, 1/66 to 10/66, #100, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 283, LBJL.

121. See various cables, file Thailand Volume 7, 8/67 to 7/68, NSF Country Files Thailand, Box 284, LBJL. See also Kenneth T. Young, "Thailand's Role in Southeast Asia," *Current History* 56 (February 1969), pp. 90-94.

122. Likhit Dhiravegin, *Thai Politics: Selected Aspects of Development and Change* (Bangkok: Tri-Sciences Publishing House, 1995), pp. 547-48.

123. As quoted in *ibid.*, p. 546.

124. As quoted in R.K. Jain, ed., *China and Thailand, 1949-1983* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1984), p. 155.

125. W. Scott Thompson, *Unequal Partners: Philippines and Thai Relations With the United States 1965-75* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1975), p. 161.

126. *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30.

127. Despite the clamor for reform, in elections following the communist victories in Indochina right-wing parties with close connections to the military dominated the Thai government. Thanom returned to the country in October 1976, welcomed by thousands of Thais and very much a symbol of the right's resurgence. Demonstrations by students opposing his return quickly turned bloody, and led to a massive, violent clampdown by the Thai military and police. Thousands of Thais were killed in what is easily one of Thailand's darkest moments in history. See David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*

(New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 300-03. For an interesting account of the dynamics surrounding both the 1973 and 1976 crises, see Ross Prizia, *Thailand in Transition: The Role of Oppositional Forces* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1985).

128. For an engaging discussion on the Vietnam War and the development of Thailand and other non-communist nations in Southeast Asia, see McMahon, "What Difference Did it Make?: Assessing the Vietnam War's Impact on Southeast Asia," in Gardner and Gittinger, eds., *International Perspectives on Vietnam*, pp. 190-203.