THAILAND AND SEATO: A TEN-YEAR APPRAISAL

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The year 1954 marked a turning point in postwar Thai foreign policy, just as it signaled a shift in the U.S. attitude toward defense commitments on the mainland of Southeast Asia. For five years Thailand had watched the deterioration of France's position in Indo-China and had felt the growing threat from China after the Communists had gained control of the mainland in 1949. When Viet Minh forces under Ho Chi Minh invaded Laos early in 1954 and occupied the strategic town of Takhek on the Mekong adjacent to Thailand, the Thai government mobilized its forces and prepared for an invasion. At the same time, Thailand began to search frantically for allies. The only non-Communist great power which had both interests in Southeast Asia and the military power to protect the area against Communist pressure was the United States. It therefore became a primary objective of Thai foreign policy in 1954 to obtain a military guarantee of Thailand's security from Washington and, if possible, to induce the United States to use its power to preserve Laos and Cambodia as non-Communist buffer states on Thailand's borders.[1]

When it became apparent in the spring of 1954 that a collapse of the French war effort in Indo-China was imminent, the Eisenhower Administration decided that the best way to prevent the Communist forces from gaining control of the whole of Indo-China, and then threatening Thailand, was for the United States to conclude a military alliance with Thailand and other interested countries and prepare to intervene against the Communists in Indo-China unless Ho Chi Minh stopped the fighting and agreed to a reasonable peace settlement. When Secretary of State Dulles asked the Thai ambassador in Washington what his country's attitude would be, the latter was able to reply within two days that the Thai government would accept a military alliance with the United States without reservation. For the Pibun Songkhram government, conclusion of the Manila Pact on September 8, 1954, was a major foreign policy achievement. Not only did the Thai government believe that its own security was insured by this treaty; it was also convinced that the Geneva Accords of July 20–21, 1954 (which created independent governments in Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam) would be honored by the Communists so long as the power of the United States was committed to preserving the integrity of these non-Communist states.

[1] The government of Pibun Songkhram had sought since 1950 to obtain a defense commitment from the United States, but the latter had limited its involvement on the mainland to military and economic assistance to Thailand, as well as to the French in Indo-China.

By the spring of 1964, Thai leaders were no longer convinced that their confidence of 1954 was well-founded. The Communists (Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese guerrillas) had gained control over two-thirds of Laos and were threatening to absorb the remainder momentarily; Cambodia had broken relations with Thailand in 1961 and had moved toward an accommodation with Hanoi and Peking; the South Vietnam government was fighting desperately against greatly increased Viet Cong insurgency, openly supported by Hanoi and Communist China. To make matters worse, France, Thailand's ally in SEATO, was advocating the neutralization of South Vietnam—a proposal which Thai Foreign Minister Tanat Khoman labeled a "sugar-coated form of surrender."[2] Looking back on the erosion which has taken place in the Free World's position in Southeast Asia since 1960, many Thai leaders concluded that SEATO as a defensive alliance had lost much of its meaning. To many Thais, the situation in 1964 seemed to be perilously similar to the threat which the nation had faced ten years earlier.

The basic problem of SEATO from its inception was the divergence of views among member nations over how to deal with the problem of subversion in the former Indo-China states. The Manila Pact was explicit with regard to an overt attack on the territory of any of the signatories, but was vague on the question of indirect aggression—subversion and armed insurgency. Article IV stated that if any member were threatened by means other than an armed attack, "the Parties shall consult immediately in order to agree on the measures which should be taken for the common defense."[3] This clause was interpreted to mean that SEATO could take no action to counter subversion or other actions short of open attack in the treaty area without a unanimous agreement among the member states. As Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam were not members of SEATO,[4] they had no vote and therefore less capacity to influence SEATO decisions even concerning threats to their own security. When the Laotian crisis of 1960–61 arose and Thailand called for SEATO action, French, and to a lesser extent, British opposition to intervention prevented the organization from taking measures which Thailand believed were essential to prevent Laos from being taken over by Communist forces.

During the first few years of SEATO's existence, the Pibun Songkhram government showed some disappointment that the alliance did not produce greater economic benefits for Thailand nor give it a larger voice in determining Western policy in Southeast Asia. For example, the Thai government strongly urged that SEATO establish a joint military command, similar to the NATO command, to which standing forces would be assigned.

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[2] *New York Times,* March 7, 1954, p. 5.

[3] For the text of the treaty, see *Department of State Bulletin,* Sept. 20, 1954, pp. 393–96.

[4] However, they were entitled to SEATO's protection under terms of a protocol to the treaty, provided their governments requested it.

Thailand expected Bangkok to be selected as the headquarters, and it offered to permit the stationing of SEATO forces on its territory. Secretary of State Dulles, however, rejected this proposal at the first meeting of the Council of Ministers in Bangkok in February 1955, in favor of the concept of a mobile striking force in the western Pacific capable of attacking anywhere on the Asian mainland. Thai leaders were deeply disappointed at the American attitude, and wondered whether SEATO would turn out to be only a paper organization.

Another source of concern to Thailand was the willingness of the United States to grant both economic and military assistance to neutral countries, such as Cambodia and Indonesia, while turning down requests for greatly increased economic aid from Thailand, its staunch ally. Finally, the Pibun government was annoyed and apprehensive when the United States commenced discussions with representatives of the Peking government in Geneva in the summer of 1955, without prior consultation with the SEATO Council. Following on the heels of the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in which Chinese Premier Chou En-lai enhanced the stature of his government among the Asian states, Thai officials became concerned that the United States was on the verge of altering its policy toward Communist China. Since Thailand's foreign policy was based on a strongly anti-Chinese attitude, the viability of this policy depended greatly on the U.S. position. As one observer noted: "If that position were suddenly reversed and accommodation reached with China, Thailand would be left out on a limb."[5]

Despite its frustrations, however, Thailand remained loyal to SEATO. This was particularly true after Field Marshal Sarit Tanarat ousted the Pibun regime in a bloodless *coup d'état* in September 1957 and established closer relations with the United States and gave firmer support to SEATO. Thailand's confidence in the United States as an ally was enhanced by the latter's determined stand in Berlin and in the Taiwan Straits in 1958–59, and by its strong diplomatic action in Laos in the summer of 1959 when Pathet Lao forces sought to gain control of the eastern section of the country. By 1960, therefore, Thailand's confidence in SEATO had reached its zenith as Thai leaders were convinced that the organization, with strong U.S. backing, would take whatever steps were required to prevent the Communists from upsetting the pro-Western government in Laos. With Laos in friendly hands, Thailand felt secure against the Chinese Communist menace.

The military *coup d'état* staged by Captain Kong Lae in Vientiane in August 1960 completely upset the situation in Laos and precipitated a crisis in SEATO whose repercussions have been felt ever since. Although Kong Lae's coup began as a purely internal political affair, its impact on Thailand and on the rest of Southeast Asia was profound. Kong Lae ousted the strongly pro-Western government, in which General Poumi Nosavan

[5] George Modelski, *SEATO: Six Studies* (Melbourne, Australia, 1962), pp. 87, 88.

was a key figure, and replaced it with a neutralist regime headed by Prince Souvanna Pouma. Soon Radio Vientiane began broadcasting anti-Western propaganda and it became evident that a coalition between Prince Souvanna and General Poumi could not be realized. In this situation, the Sarit government became alarmed that the Pathet Lao was infiltrating the Laotian government and would be able to subvert it completely unless SEATO intervened. Thailand appealed to SEATO to support General Poumi in his plan to oust Kong Lae and Prince Souvanna from Vientiane before it was too late; but SEATO was sharply divided and did not take any action on Laos at that time.

The Laotian crisis went to the heart of the problem SEATO member nations had failed to resolve during the negotiations in 1954 leading up to the Manila Pact. Britain and France were opposed to intervention in Laos because there had been no overt military attack on the country and also because they believed that a return of the pro-Western government would provoke a strong Soviet reaction which might lead to a large Far Eastern war. On the other side, the three Asian members of SEATO—Thailand, the Philippines and Pakistan—favored some kind of SEATO action in Laos to prevent that country from being taken over by the Communists and used as a springboard for the subversion of Thailand and South Vietnam. The United States, the key member of the alliance and previously a strong supporter of a pro-Western government in Laos, had no firm policy at this critical juncture; for there was sharp disagreement in Washington between those who believed that a non-Communist but neutral government headed by Prince Souvanna Pouma was the best long-term solution to the vexing political instability in Laos and those who were convinced that only a strongly pro-Western regime headed by a staunch anti-Communist such as General Poumi Nosavan could prevent the Pathet Lao, with Viet Minh support, from taking control of the whole country by political means.

The dilemma for the United States and SEATO was solved, for the moment at least, by General Poumi's successful counter-coup against Vientiane in December 1960 and the establishment of a pro-Western government headed by Prince Boon Oum. Thailand was greatly relieved at this turn of events; but its joy was short-lived. The Soviet Union soon began to airlift arms to the Pathet Lao and Neutralist forces, which had teamed up against the Boon Oum regime. Diplomatically, the Soviet Union continued to recognize the Souvanna Pouma government, despite the fact that the prince had fled to Cambodia when Vientiane was under siege by General Poumi's army.

During the first three months of 1961, it became increasingly clear that Rightist forces in Laos, even with large quantities of American arms and materiel, were no match for the combined strength of the Pathet Lao and Neutralists, reinforced by tough Viet Minh cadres. By March, the Communists were strong enough to launch a broad offensive in central Laos

which threatened to push General Poumi's ill-trained troops into the Mekong unless outside help was soon forthcoming. Thailand became alarmed and called for SEATO intervention to prevent the collapse of the Boon Oum government. On March 23, 1961, President Kennedy publicly warned the Soviet Union that unless the Communist offensive against the Laotian government was halted, the United States would be forced to consider what action to take to deal with the situation. "We are faced with a clear threat of a change in the internationally agreed position of Laos," the President said, expressing confidence that "every American will want his country to honor its obligations to the point that freedom and security of the free world and ourselves may be achieved."[6]

Thailand interpreted President Kennedy's words to mean that the United States was prepared to intervene militarily in Laos to prevent the Communists from ousting the Boon Oum government through military action. When the SEATO Council of Ministers convened in Bangkok at the end of March, Bangkok fully expected that some kind of action to deal with the erosion in Laos would be adopted by the organization. However, the schisms which had been apparent within SEATO six months earlier were even more pronounced in the spring of 1961; and without unanimity among the members, the organization could not decide on any action in Laos. The final communique of the meeting merely stated that SEATO might act unless a cease-fire was agreed upon by the Pathet Lao. But to the Thai government, it was painfully clear that SEATO would not agree on intervention to preserve the Boon Oum government, largely because of French and British opposition. As a result, Thai leaders concluded that only the power and determination of the United States could halt the Communists before they overwhelmed Laos and then turned against Thailand. If SEATO was to mean anything in the face of Communist aggression in 1961, the Thai government believed, the United States would have to take a decisive lead.

During April, the Communists renewed their offensive, and President Kennedy was then faced with the prospect of sending U.S. forces into Laos, but by the end of the month it was clear that the U.S. was not prepared to risk a large war to preserve a pro-Western government in Laos. Instead, it accepted the British view that negotiations with the Soviet Union might produce an acceptable solution and avoid a head-on collision between the great powers. Many factors went into the President's decision in this matter, a primary one being uncertainty over whether the use of American forces in Laos would be effective in solving the problem. Another factor may well have been the Bay of Pigs episode in Cuba, which occurred at the same time and which may well have made the U.S. government more cautious in dealing with another crisis, half-way around the world. For Thailand, the U.S. decision was nearly catastrophic because it under-

[6] *Department of State Bulletin,* April 17, 1961, pp. 543–44.

mined the whole basis of Thai foreign policy. If the United States would not be firm in resisting Communist pressure in Laos, what certainty was there that it would be firm when and if Thailand were faced with a similar threat of indirect aggression?

When President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchev met in Vienna in June 1961 and agreed to work for a neutral and independent Laos, Bangkok was convinced that this was a prelude to the surrender of Laos to the Communists. Neither Vice-President Johnson's assurances from President Kennedy during his May visit to Thailand nor the subsequent promise of a large increase in American military and economic assistance could offset the disillusionment felt in Bangkok. As the Thai leaders saw it, their country was now "on the firing line" since Laos could no longer serve as the vital buffer upon which the Thais had put so much faith. There was private talk of the desirability of a neutral foreign policy; some leaders favored an improvement in relations with the Soviet Union to counterbalance the influence of China; and the more moderate elements argued for a policy of "Thaism"—of retaining the alliance with the United States but placing much greater emphasis on relations with Asian countries and assuming a more independent position on many international issues. The most prominent proponent of the latter view was Foreign Minister Tanat Khoman. Tanat deplored the "apparent lack of interest felt by the West and its unwillingness to assume direct responsibility" for the safety of Southeast Asia. Speaking to the American Association of Thailand on July 19, 1961, the Foreign Minister painted a gloomy picture of the current situation which he said had been aggravated "by those who want to be friendly but whose lack of interest and responsibility, indecisiveness, and even unwitting detractions" had contributed to a deterioration of the Free World's position in Asia.[7]

The failure of SEATO or the United States to take decisive action to prevent the collapse of the Boon Oum government in Laos caused Thailand to reevaluate its foreign policy during the latter half of 1961 and early 1962. Criticism against the United States, as well as against France and Britain, became increasingly vocal. As Thailand's relations with Cambodia deteriorated, the United States was charged with aiding an enemy of Thailand. Early in 1962, however, two events occurred which helped to restore the confidence of the Thai government. The first of these was a joint declaration by Secretary of State Rusk and Foreign Minister Tanat Khoman on March 6, 1962, in which the United States pledged itself to defend Thailand against armed attack. Significantly, Secretary Rusk "reaffirmed that this obligation of the United States does not depend upon the prior agreement of all other parties to the [SEATO] Treaty, since this

[7] See Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs special publication, December 1962, containing the principal speeches of Foreign Minister Tanat Khoman (p. 66).

Treaty obligation is individual as well as collective."[8] The joint statement also pledged U.S. military and economic assistance to Thailand to help it meet the threat of indirect aggression. This clear pledge to stand by its ally, regardless of what other SEATO countries did, produced an outpouring of good will and praise for the U.S. from the Thai government. Prime Minister Sarit, in a nationwide radio and television address, hailed the United States as a true friend: "All of you will agree with me that it is not so easy to find such a sincere friend who is concerned about our own well-being as the United States. Such an assurance, I am confident, will certainly put the minds of those who are concerned with the safety of our nation at rest."[9]

Two months after the Rusk-Khoman statement was made, the U.S. pledge was put to the test when Pathet Lao troops, strongly supported by Viet Minh cadres, captured the strategic town of Nam Ta in northwestern Laos and sent General Poumi's Rightist forces fleeing southward in disorder and across the Mekong into Thailand. In Thailand it was feared that the Communist forces would occupy all of northwestern Laos and then threaten Thailand from that direction. Following consultations between the Thai and American governments, President Kennedy in mid-May dispatched some 5,000 marine, army and airforce personnel to Thailand to be prepared for action in case the Pathet Lao troops approached the Mekong River and threatened Thai territory. Shortly thereafter, Great Britain, New Zealand and Australia also sent military units to assist in the defense of Thailand. Within a few weeks the Pathet Lao offensive was halted. It was clear that SEATO's determination to protect Thailand's borders had caused the Communists to stop short of occupying territory along the Mekong River and to negotiate instead. After several weeks of negotiations, it was agreed that Prince Souvanna Pouma would head a coalition government including Rightist, Neutralist and Communist factions. The Thai government was not pleased by this solution, but it acquiesced in the U.S. view that Prince Souvanna was the only Laotian leader who had any chance of bringing peace to this troubled land. Despite its misgivings, Thailand signed the Geneva Agreements of July 23, 1962, which guaranteed the neutrality and independence of Laos. An important factor in this decision was Thailand's new confidence that the United States would not permit the Communist forces to take over all of Laos, regardless of the view of other SEATO countries.[10]

By 1964, SEATO had become largely an anachronism to most Thai leaders, although they continued to support it publicly, because of French

[8] *Department of State Bulletin,* March 26, 1962, p. 498.

[9] Thailand, *Foreign Affairs Bulletin,* February–March 1962, p. 8.

[10] U.S. forces were withdrawn from Thailand later in 1962, after the signing of the Geneva Agreements and a lessening of tensions in Laos. The Thai government had made it clear earlier that it did not wish to have American forces permanently stationed in Thailand.

recognition of Communist China and President DeGaulle's plan to neutralize South Vietnam. The Thai view was stated with exceptional frankness by Foreign Minister Tanat at the SEATO Council of Ministers meeting in Manila last April. Citing the experience of Laos in trying to preserve its neutrality in the face of Communist pressure, Tanat said that to apply the same kind of arrangement to South Vietnam "would be tantamount to delivering that country, with hands and feet bound, to its northern aggressors." In obvious reference to DeGaulle's proposal for neutralization of South Vietnam, Tanat declared: "The time is long past when nations, especially the smaller ones, may be moved as pawns up and down the international chess board. Thailand on its part is not willing to accept decisions by others in regard to its destiny, and it will not agree to apply similar treatment to others."[11]

Despite its disillusionment with SEATO and the continuing Communist pressure against Southeast Asia, the Thai government has retained confidence in the ability and determination of the United States to prevent the area from being absorbed into the Chinese sphere of influence. Thai leaders believe that if the United States uses its power and influence to deny the Communists control over Laos and South Vietnam, the chances are good that the other nations of Southeast Asia will be able to retain their freedom and independence. On the other hand, if the U.S. exhibits weakness in this area, as the Thai government believes it did in Laos in 1960–61, these leaders have no doubts that the Communist powers in Asia will take full advantage of the situation and bring all the countries of the area under their domination. To the pragmatic Thais, who were the only Southeast Asian people to maintain their independence during the nineteenth century, the decisive factor in Asian politics in the foreseeable future is the power of the United States and its willingness to use it to contain a resurgent and aggressive China. If the United States remains firm over a period of years in dealing with the Chinese problem, the Thais are convinced that the Chinese will be forced to modify their aggressive policy in Asia, as the Russians have done in Europe because of United States firmness.

The key question for the Thais, as for many other Asian peoples, is whether the United States will find it in its own interest to be steadfast in its firmness toward Chinese aggressiveness. After ten years of alliance with the United States, the Thai government in mid-1964 was prepared to wager that its powerful ally would not abandon its responsibilities in Southeast Asia.

[11] Excerpt from the text of the Thai Foreign Minister's address at the SEATO Council of Minister's meeting in Manila on April 15, 1964.

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