THAILAND -- 1962

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1962 was the year of the northeast in Thailand. The course of public affairs was dominated by the shifting winds to the east in the successor states to French Indochina. Within these affairs the possibility of profound changes in both the internal and external politics of the kingdom may be perceived.

The authoritarian regime of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, established in early 1959, continued to maintain firm control over the country. The tendency to centralize many of the important institutions of information, propaganda, education and control under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister continued. The sum effect was to hold political conflict in a state of suspense. The deliberations of the appointed constituent assembly proceeded at a measured pace and it is only by the logic of passing time that a new permanent constitution drew any nearer.

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INTERNAL SECURITY

The alarm of friends collapsing in Laos aroused considerable concern in the Thai government about the problem of internal security. The concern was centered principally on the question of the susceptibility of the population in the northeast region to Communist directed subversion. The conception of the threat was that of a build-up of a cadre structure for the organization of a guerrilla war against the government. The leadership of this effort was presumed to be based in areas of Laos controlled by the Pathet Lao. The fundamental appeal of the subversive movement is alleged to be a call to separate the northeastern provinces from Thailand and join them to Laos.

A case lending substance to these fears was the arrest of Ruan Wongphan and others in Suphanburi Province during February. The men were said to be leading cadres in the Communist organization of the country. The matter was sufficiently alarming to lead to the summary execution of Ruan under Field Marshal Sarit's emergency authority. Evidence captured with these men, together with that found in 1961 in a similar case in the Northeast, was said to document the fact that Communist efforts have shifted from urban groups such as workers, students, and intellectuals to farmers. Such a shift would indicate an effort aimed toward rural rebellion.

The response to this has been the formulation of plans designed to tighten the relationship between the people and the government, to improve police techniques, and especially to secure the border areas of the north and along the Mekhong River. An attempt to make the rural population more conscious of the national state as a political symbol and to fill the symbol with a sense of benevolence and justice is implicit in the efforts to improve internal security.

A number of specific programs aimed toward this end were instituted and others have been discussed at some length. For example traveling teams have been organized by the government to contact a large number of villages, to survey their problems and needs, to give medical aid, to provide small but critical tools and supplies for construction work, and to make a general display of governmental interest in the rural population. Another program has brought a substantial portion of
village and commune headmen together for meetings. These meetings have been designed to enlarge the sense of responsibility and participation of these low-level officials whose practical role has been marginal up to the present.

One strong trend has been an enthusiasm for community development schemes of various types. The spirit of community development has for at least a decade played a small role in several ministries including Interior, Education, Agriculture and Public Health. "Pilot projects" have been numerous although the demonstration effect has fallen short of sensational. Now community development has been brought to the status of a separate department in the Ministry of the Interior and has received substantial funds and personnel. Under the impetus of concern about internal security the work of the Community Development Department is being concentrated in the Northeast.

The concept by which the allocation of resources toward the fundamental development of the Northeast is to be controlled is the agrimetro. These institutions are devices aimed to concentrate investment in selected areas with the purpose of a coordinated increase and diversification of agricultural production, expansion of the provision of irrigation, power, communications and transportation facilities, management of marketing and distribution, and general improvement of health and education. Each agrimetro will, as the name suggests, be centered on a principal town with good access to Bangkok. A survey of potential sites was started this year. Other plans arising from the internal security problem call for the improvement of provincial police personnel and facilities and the consideration of possibilities for Volunteer Defense Corps in villages.

The over-all pattern is ostensibly one of combined short and long range efforts which will move toward a higher standard of living combined with a higher standard of governmental services and control of the area and the population. While there is a certain patina of panic about the activities, there is at the same time some appreciation of the longer range -- a need for fundamental investments in both productive and control facilities.
The pattern for economic development established in the plan adopted in 1960 has been pressed forward in 1962. This plan stresses investment in basic facilities such as communications, transportation, power, and irrigation coupled with the encouragement of both domestic and foreign private investment in production. The kingdom has had substantial success in negotiating foreign loans for capital investment purposes as well as technical assistance from U. S. and European sources.

In the field of communications the signing of an agreement with the United States to construct a national telecommunication network was a notable achievement of 1962. The first three of a total of five zones in the network are to be completed in 1963. Also an eight year highway building program to result in about 5400 kilometers of all weather roads to supplement the rail system was announced.

Investment in school building has been increased to extend the effectiveness of the new seven year compulsory education scheme. A notable change in the pattern of education in the country was the beginning of a university in the northern city of Chiengmai, the first institution of that level to be located outside of the Bangkok area.

The internal logic of these various policies and programs is to build a bridge over the "traditional" gap between the government and the rural population. Such an effect would assault the classic structure of Thailand's politics and therefore could autonomously stimulate a chain of new difficulties without the help of Communist cadres. One of the most striking features of the regime of Field Marshal Sarit amounts to a change of style in government operations. Previous regimes have been content with fiat but Sarit seems to insist on efficiency. If there is substance to this appearance, then results may flow and changes occur. The leadership of the regime, while proclaiming itself revolutionary, probably is but dimly aware of the revolutionary potential of its industrious policies and the troublesome consequences that may flow therefrom.
FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Thailand's relations with both its eastern neighbors -- Laos and Cambodia -- were sources of deep disturbance during 1962. In both cases the distress was sufficiently profound to raise questions about the kingdom's alliance with the United States which is the foundation of its present foreign policy.

Throughout the long negotiations leading to the establishment of a government in Laos under the premiership of Souvanna Phouma the Thai government supported the so-called right wing of Boon Oum and Phoumi Nosavan. It was with the utmost dismay that the Thai government received the American decision to swing to the support of a neutral coalition regime. Such a policy was assessed as a weakening of American determination to hold the line on the Southeast Asian mainland with rather obvious and unfortunate implications for Thailand.

The anxieties of the government on the question of United States' policy reinforced doubts as to the meaning and effectiveness of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. The latter had fallen into low repute as a result of inaction on Laos as well. The situation was eased, at least for the time being, by a joint statement of the United States and Thailand on their relations.

The declaration of Secretary of State Rusk and Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman was issued in Washington on March 6. The key paragraph in the statement was:

[The Foreign Minister and the Secretary of State agreed that the [Southeast Asia] Treaty provides the basis for the signatories collectively to assist Thailand in case of Communist armed attack against that country. The Secretary of State assured the Foreign Minister that in the event of such aggression, the United States intends to give full effect to its obligations under the Treaty to act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes. The Secretary of State reaffirmed that this obligation of the United States does not depend upon the prior agreement of all other parties to the Treaty, since this treaty obligation is individual as well as collective.]

1 The Department of State Bulletin XLVI, No. 1187, March 26, 1962, p. 496. Italics added.
This reaffirmation of the so-called Rusk formula, which appears to have been first stated at the SEATO council meeting of 1961, amounts to the transformation of SEATO into a collectivity of bi-lateral mutual defense pacts of which the most significant is that between Thailand and the United States. This procedure encouraged greater confidence on the part of the Thai in American support.

Such confidence received further sustenance in May when U. S. troops flew into the Northeastern region of the country in the face of Pathet Lao military pressure in northern Laos. The emplacement of these troops may properly be interpreted as a move in the negotiations over Laos going on in Geneva. But the willingness of the United States to make a concrete display of its armed strength was welcome to Thailand. Other members of SEATO also contributed token forces at the same time.

Nevertheless, earlier hopes that SEATO might become the basis of some sort of regional grouping (if there ever were any) have clearly disappeared. In their place, Thailand has been investing the Association of Southeast Asia with some care and resources. This explicitly anti-communist but non-military association of Thailand, Malaya, and the Philippines is presumably designed to attract other states of the non-aligned persuasion into closer cooperation with its three present members. Its activities are explicitly of a functional kind such as post and telegraph, tourism, transportation, education and the like. The Thai government appears to regard it with some optimism although altercations between the Philippines and Malaya over North Borneo bode little good for future relations between them. Thailand is seeking to moderate this dispute.

Moreover, persistent tensions between Thailand and Cambodia are both substance and symbol of the obstacles in the way of Southeast Asia regional unity. This dispute has focused in the past several years on the issue of Khao Phra Viharn, a ruin of religious significance located more or less precisely on the Thai-Cambodian border. Cambodia took the question to the World Court which decided in favor of Cambodia in June. The decision created a great stir of consternation in Thailand which after some delay agreed to abide by the ruling without accepting its validity.
The Cambodia difficulties date at least as far back as 1958 when one of the precipitating causes of the Revolutionary Group coup was the recognition of the Peking government by Cambodia. A deeper root may lead to the embarrassing (to Thailand) flight in 1953 of (then) King Norodom Sihanouk to Bangkok in an effort to pressure France. The trouble has also been traced to the traditional wars between Thai and Cambodian kingdoms which marked the history of Southeast Asia for centuries. In any case the scope of the tension between the two kingdoms is broader than the disposition of Khao Phra Viharn and the settlement of the case has merely served to diffuse it. Changes of plots, territorial violations, kidnappings and what not have enlivened the airwaves and press of the two countries. Diplomatic relations between the two remain broken. There seems to be justification for the Thai position that the source of much of the difficulty lies in Cambodia but at the same time Sihanouk's anxiety about Thailand, as well as the rest of the world, is perhaps not irrational even if ill founded.

Nevertheless, tension is self multiplying and the combination of the various sources of anxiety facing Thailand -- the crumbling of Laos; uncertainty about the permanence of U. S. policy of stonewalling in Southeast Asia; Cambodian irritations, exacerbated by U. S. aid to Cambodia -- have apparently stimulated a groping for some new direction to Thai policy. This quest has taken the slogan of "Thai-ist" and has been described by its most ardent spokesman, General Prapart Charusathien, as "a policy that is based on Thai history, Thai culture, Thai interests." He has also characterized it as "not-pro-West,... not pro-Communist,... also not neutralist." The description is neither informative nor threatening. It does represent an awareness -- the acuteness of which is difficult to assess -- that the kingdom of Thailand must find its own way.

For the past decade and more Thailand's international policy has stood on the foundation of cooperation with the United States in its hostility to the Communist and particularly Chinese aspirations.

\(^2\) Bangkok Post, September 6, 1961.
So long as U. S. policy continued to be steady, no matter how obtuse, the Thai government found it convenient, even advantageous, to use the opportunity for protection from Chinese ambition. But when the foundation trembles, the roof rocks and the occupants become alarmed.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


