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The DCM asked Counselor Stokes, on his reassignment after nearly six years of experience in coordination of our counterinsurgency support programs, to set out his personal observations. Those on the insurgency as an issue between Thailand and China are enclosed. They contain assessments and forecasts of the situation before us which are the reflections of an informed individual, not necessarily those of the Mission.

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THE THAI INSURGENCY AND THE "CHINESE CONNECTION"

by FSO William N. Stokes
Counselor for Development and Security

SUMMARY

The winds of change in Southeast Asia are blowing on the Thai insurgency, which must decide between the hard line of armed struggle it has been following for eight years and more pragmatic options. Bangkok has asked China to resolve the contradiction between Peking's overtures to SEA governments and continuing concrete support of the Thai insurgency, which is still dependent on its "Chinese connection".

The PRC can still equivocate, but the Chinese and Thai Communist Parties may perceive better prospects in the emerging regional context from a more political/clandestine, and less overt military, form of struggle than the insurgency has heretofore taken. There are signs that the Thai would accept continued insurgent military control of the base areas currently held by the Communists, in exchange for a reduction in visible Chinese support and cessation of initiatives by the "Thai Peoples Liberation Armed Forces".

Indeed, during the past year the regular insurgent and Thai forces have tended to avoid each other. Of the two significant engagements which did take place, one appears to have resulted from a Thai underestimation of insurgent strength in an area to which the latter had recently moved in force, and the other involved mainly the Chinese Irregular Forces employed by the RTG. Out of this situation, a form of military ceasefire without clear lines of demarcation could quietly develop by mutual forbearance (open negotiation would appear distasteful to both sides).

Meanwhile, all signs point to continuation of the bitter "village organization" struggle, regardless of the military situation. This "other war" involves -- in addition to political competition -- civil violence which is small in scale for each episode but cumulatively places serious pressure on the RTG administration of border areas -- disrupting rural education, social organization, marketing arrangements, and the traditional Thai value system. Mutual probes by small, irregular teams would also be an element of such lower level conflict.

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There is every prospect that the insurgency would, in this context, go on making local progress and obtaining covert and minimal foreign backing required, given its achievements to date and the heavy ideological commitment between the Thai and Chinese Communist Parties. In addition to long-term subversive goals within the Thai society, the insurgency is also potentially useful to Peking for affecting any new equilibrium in SEA, such as through the insurgent activity developing in the Thai provinces bordering on Cambodia, and insurgent control of areas along the Thai-Lao border that are near the Chinese military presence in Laos.

All in all, progress of the insurgent movement during the last eight years since open violence began must be somewhat disappointing to the Thai Communist leaders and their sponsors. The insurgency on the political side has not been an impressive demonstration of Maoist revolutionary doctrine, and the military effectiveness of the insurgency presumably is considered less crucial by a movement which teaches that politics must rule. The insurgency has been able to develop strong village clusters in the Northeast, but the nearby district administrations and lines of government communication appear even more secure for the government after eight years of struggle. The insurgency has little popular following in either the North or the South. Above all, the insurgency seems irrelevant to the country's most important vulnerabilities -- students, labor, and slumdwellers. From this we conjecture a possible broadening of Communist strategy to include more pragmatic, non-Maoist options -- for which we have as yet no evidence.

The "Chinese connection" continues to be vital to the Thai insurgency -- for training, ideological backing, and funds -- as well as for resupply of munitions in any renewal of heavy fighting. The first three elements of this relationship -- and even resupply of munitions used defensively -- if kept within reduced limits are probably within what the RTG would tolerate in a diplomatic relationship.

Conversely, the PRC has several options for escalating the armed conflict without foregoing the concept of insurgency. These options could serve as implicit bargaining counters for an end to Thai support of both the ex-Kuomintang units fighting the insurgency on the border of Chiangrai provinces and GRC (IBMND) actions in the Thai/Burma/China border area.

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The insurgency is also an indigenous movement, with an increasing proportion of native Thai members and tactical autonomy. While issuing public statements stressing foreign origin and support -- both to score PsyOps points and to discourage higher levels of Chinese involvement -- the government's National CI Program concentrates on reducing domestic vulnerabilities to the insurgency and strengthening RTG posture with the populace in remote rural areas.

In discussion of Chinese support for the insurgency, the Thai have shrewdly focused on "Voice of the Thai People" broadcasts, which serve as the ideological link from China to the insurgency, coordinate the thinking of regional insurgent groups, and give the insurgency important political status. If relocated outside PRC-controlled areas, to escape diplomatic onus, the transmitters would be an inviting, traceable target. As a possible compromise the broadcasts might cease personal invective against the Thai leaders and emphasize positive propaganda for the insurgents. This would be a considerable gain for the RTG, since life in the collectivist "liberated areas" is no bargain; the people of the North and South know this from direct experience and defectors.

The RTG realizes it has little means of inducing more than nominal change in the intimate relationship of the Thai and Chinese Communist movements. These partners may have a common interest in exploiting greater urban opportunities than the rural insurgency offers in its present form, and/or to lower the profile of insurgency in hope of reducing Thai vigilance and counter-pressure.

Vulnerabilities in the Thai society are too obvious at this stage to permit anticipation that China would forego essential stimulus to (and resultant control of) the subversive movement within Thailand. An hypothesis that China sees in the ageing RTG military leadership a counterweight to North Vietnam (and Soviet influence there) -- and therefore would seek full detente with the present government -- appears less plausible than a judgment by Peking that urban discontent in Thailand will grow, producing a new radical opposition and instability that a Party friendly to China should be in a position to dominate -- as the insurgency today clearly is not. All told, it seems likely that Peking will try to have the best of both alternatives, by continuing support of the Thai Communist Party in a low key way while endeavoring to affect crisis developments in Cambodia through the somewhat broader options in Thailand that a more flexible Chinese policy would afford.

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I. NATURE OF THE "CHINESE CONNECTION"

Foreign support of the insurgency derives its seriousness from three main considerations:

A) Chinese Inspiration

The key leaders of the Thai Communist Party, closely linked by origin and ideology to the Chinese Party (from which it sprang), are Sino-Thai formed by long political indoctrination in China. For instance, they rigidly follow Maoist revolutionary principles, foregoing local growth opportunities (such as urban mass organization and coalitions with other groups) which a more pragmatic approach would afford. With the aim of sinking deeper roots into Thai society without diluting its control, the Party is organizing a substantial village cluster in one section of the Northeast: about half the Party members (mainly at the base) now are Thai. Last August the Police again captured several Party cadre (mainly Sino-Thai) in Bangkok, seizing financial records (including transfers from Hong Kong), codes and a great body of communications in Chinese. There is reason to suspect links from China to an underground in the Thai capital and thence to the rural insurgency. Similarly, the insurgency began under TCP leadership sent from Bangkok to the rural areas.

These ties supplement the more direct channel from China through Laos along the line of Chinese military presence there, thence via Sayaboury Province into Thailand. Munitions and trainees flow along this route, under the guidance of Sino-Thai, Chinese and Vietnamese staffed control groups, as affirmed by numerous defector reports and documents.

The sum of these connections indicates not only sponsorship and support, but also such identity of origin, interest and doctrine as to imply strategic control by the Chinese Party. (Tactical authority is more decentralized). The Thai insurgency is so opposed in principle to all the cherished symbols of Thai nationalism, still so Sinic in tone and symbolism for a countryside where Chinese are not adored, and with so meager a program for solving the social problems on which it feeds, that as yet it is neither a fully "home grown product," nor a movement generating its own progressive momentum. Even among the hilltribes of the North, restiveness at the rigors of imposed, collective farming and taxation is turning off support of the insurgency.

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Mao calls for such movements to/self-reliant and self-sufficient, but despite considerable progress the Thai insurgency has not reached such a stage -- either psychologically or materially: its bases in the countryside still are remote, parochial and poor. If China were to end unconditionally its operational support -- in money, training, munitions, and broadcasts -- the insurgency would be a dubious struggle tactic for the Thai Party. Rural violence would doubtless continue in the mountain and jungle borders, but its threat to the Thai nation would be marginal. Thailand has no fear of communal strife; while rural discontent in Thailand is widespread, and incomes very disparate, the insurgency in eight years has been able only to start a smoldering in this mixture, not to explode it. The Chinese connection is still essential, and we expect it to continue, possibly with less emphasis on military resupply.

B) China's Role in the Application of Force

The armed insurgency has at its core the "Thai Peoples Liberation Armed Forces," which has developed into a small but very effective military organization since its announcement by radio from China in January 1969. It is well-trained, well-led, adequately armed, and highly motivated. The TPLAF is strictly an instrument of the Party, charged with defending base areas and protecting the extensions of Party influence. This force has firmly established local control along 250 miles of the central mountainous axis of Thailand, from the Thai borders near the Chinese-occupied road in Laos southward (by recent advances) to the edge of the vital Central Plan. Repeated major campaigns by the best elements of the RTARF against insurgent bases in this mountain chain have been severely repulsed each year. (The ex-KMT elements used by the RTG in the far north have been more successful, but were themselves mauled in April). These failures undermine the prestige of the Thanom administration's power base, the Army, and correspondingly aggrandize the prestige of the insurgency.

Moreover, escalatory options are open to the Communist side within the ostensible context of insurgency:

i) the insurgency can be reinforced at will along the mountain ridges, drawing upon Meo elements in the Chinese Army (200 such reinforcements were identified last year), and;

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ii) modern light weaponry, demolitions and ammunition from China, now plentiful in TPLAF hands, could easily be supplemented (for example) by mortars and rockets able to disrupt Thai lowland communications and installations at a distance. However, the insurgency has failed to establish itself among Thai lowland populations in this region. For instance, only one of 26 insurgent leaders is a Thai native to the North. Consequently, any such escalations would entail a raw power countenance contrary to the political aims of the insurgency, possibly promoting national unity behind the government.

A more consistent option for the insurgency would be to extend itself into parallel mountain chains on either side of the central axis it already controls, thus extending the pressures upon Thai forces and populations. In the absence of adequate, reliable native hilltribe support (some have fled the rigors of enforced collective farming, and the local hill population is relatively small), such an extension would be even more dependent upon out-of-country support, in funds, training, arms and even leadership, though in forms which could be comfortably discreet.

What the Chinese have told the Thai affords them wide latitude -- while they claim not to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, they allege an obligation to assist "fraternal socialist parties struggling for just causes." The Thai are aware that the Chinese have a number of ominous, covert options for strengthening the insurgency, and have stated their intention of taking a number of measures (particularly with respect to curtailing GRC clandestine activity in the North) designed to induce the Chinese toward a "live and let live" arrangement. Senior Thai leaders of the CI effort have no expectation that Chinese support for the insurgency will decline from present levels, and in the North are concentrating on confining the insurgency to the mountains and tribal elements the Communists presently influence.

C) Intervention in Thai Politics

The self-asserted enemy of the insurgency is the "Thanom/Praphat clique" -- that is, the present government leaders and all their works. Daily invective against the RTG from the clandestine radio in China (Voice of the People of Thailand) cleverly assails (in many local dialects) real and

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alleged malfeasance of the government, exploits local grievances and misrepresents RTG remedial initiatives. VOPT transmissions are timely, professional propaganda, which Thai media have been unable to match in effectiveness. These broadcasts give the insurgency status as a political movement and provide the daily motivational fare of rank and file insurgents, serving both as the doctrinal link from China and providing a common body of thought to regional Party elements in Thailand. Since the government has clamped down on all political party activity and most forms of critical expression, the extreme views of VOPT have much less public competition. We know these broadcasts have an audience of sufficient dimension for the government to make them an issue in contacts with the PRC.

However, the remote rural base of the insurgency is well outside the focus of those discontented elements having potential power at the seat of government authority -- students, labor, urban slumdwellers and the like. Communist Party leaders may well begin to doubt the relevance of strict Maoist doctrine to the main present problems of the country, and fear that radical leadership could pass into other hands if the CPT leadership remains in the rural insurgency -- which, despite its moderate growth in numbers, is still limited to the 60 or so rural districts (under 10 percent of those in the country) in which it began.

II. COMMUNIST POLICY ALTERNATIVES

The Chinese and Thai Parties appear to have three main options with respect to the insurgency:

a) Maintain the movement basically along current lines, giving evasive replies to Thai proposals that China terminate VOPT broadcasts and curtail aid to the insurgents. (This course would minimize damage to insurgent morale and influence, as well as maintain best the Chinese connection to the Thai Communist Party).

b) China might play a two-handed game, toning down VOPT invective and claiming to "help control illegal arms traffic," in the interest of better relations with the RTG, while otherwise carrying on with substantial secret backing of the insurgency as heretofore -- the latter maintaining its hard line against the government, and priority for the rural struggle.

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c) The PRC, on behalf of both Parties, might seek with the RTG some understanding which -- in exchange for a reduction in overt Chinese support (such as broadcasts) and an end to armed confrontation by the TPLAF with the Thai forces (thus reducing the requirements for arms supply) -- could lead not only to closer PRC/RTG relationships but also to some scope for the Communist Party of Thailand as a "peaceful activity," carried on through front groups. In any case, a more pragmatic strategy would enhance Party prospects of exploiting current discontent in towns and universities, which afford substantial opportunities for a Communist Party less fettered by Maoist preconceptions. The Thai Party may also feel impelled to move in this direction to forestall formation of a "New Left" from which it might be excluded.

The Thai Government leadership -- under considerable domestic fire and budgetary pressure -- would be tempted by a PRC offer on behalf of the armed insurgents ostensibly to "obey the laws" and cease offensive ambushes of RTG forces, possibly permitting the RTA to "plant the flag" on summits it has repeatedly failed to attain by combat. The condition, presumably, would be to allow de facto insurgent control to continue in the mountain redoubts. The Communists could cleverly point out that they would be asking what the RTG has afforded the ex-Kuomintang (CIF) elements -- namely, armed settlement in areas which the RTG has, in fact, never really controlled. In effect, this would be the "cease fire in place" scenario which is sought in Indo-China.

III. THE RTG PERSPECTIVE

Some recent trends in the insurgency may already tend in this direction:

a) There have been markedly fewer spectacular ambushes of professional RTG forces in lowland areas by the TPLAF during the last several months; military casualties are down by half this year over the corresponding period a year ago. (Meanwhile, however, assassinations and intimidation of local militia, village chiefs and school teachers that mark spreading organizational work have increased in the Northeast).

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b) The RTA has foregone the direct, bloody (for the RTG) confrontation with the TPLAF this year that characterized Operation Phu Kwang of early 1972. Indeed, it has undertaken cautious, peripheral probes in the North and a well-heralded march into the Northeastern base area that -- while capturing supplies, documents and destroying campsites -- yielded few serious clashes or casualties and, in the end, permitted the TPLAF to return to its previous posture.

c) The RTG is stressing, in the National CI Program, strengthened administrative, police/militia and development activity around the Insurgent base areas. Instead of a "body count" approach it aims at "increasing the friendly count", by breaking the insurgent hold on Thai village populations where they have been organized by the CPT and by filling the social vacuum in areas which would be logical next targets for the insurgency. A substantial program of this type, coordinated throughout the seven districts affected by the insurgency in North Central Thailand (CSOC Plan 16/17) is being readied for implementation next October.

d) The insurgency is finding it difficult to administer hill population control; in the South, the insurgents have had to leave several populated areas in which they had formed an infrastructure. In effect, the subversion of Thai rural society is serious only in the Northeast -- where, however, it is spreading.

The Prime Minister recently has rebutted press statements that the Northeast areas in question are under Communist control. He has publicly claimed "a reduction in clashes" (which we cannot confirm) and casualties as favorable results of the new Government's National CI Program. This is an unfortunate overstatement. Nevertheless, the RTG with some justification feels that it is finding the right approach to limiting the insurgency as a political movement and -- given effective implementation -- can eventually control it. Possibly the insurgency feels enough disappointment at its rate of progress to agree to a political diversion which Peking might suggest for its own foreign policy purposes. Similarly, the RTG might be willing to forego military probes into insurgent hard-core areas. We would expect it to go ahead with the civil/police/military containment aspects of its National CI Program; a deceleration of this CI effort now would be to "lose the key" at a hopeful stage. Realistically, this program in the next few years could hope to slow Communist expansion, not halt it against determined initiatives.

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IV. RTG STIPULATIONS

The RTG leadership has publicly identified termination of VOPT radio attacks and Chinese material support for the insurgency as conditions for closer relations with the PRC. If it can secure some form of acquiescence from Peking, the RTG can at least hope to sow confusion and doubt among lower-level supporters and potential recruits of the insurgency. Termination of VOPT broadcasts could be an important psychological gain for the government, and would weaken the insurgency's stature and cohesion. Moreover, these broadcasts cannot be readily disavowed by the PRC, as their point of origin is easily fixed.

It would, of course, be difficult for the RTG to "prove a case" with respect to future PRC materiel support, which has established clandestine channels. Aid could continue though blandly denied by Peking. Here again, however, public indication that the PRC -- at RTG instance -- claims not be furnishing such support would tend to undermine insurgent status with the local populace in rural areas (and possibly the morale of rank and file CT). The inference of great power backing is obviously a factor in determining how much of a long-range future the insurgency can look forward to, and thus to the force of its recruitment appeals.

V. THE VIETNAMESE ROLE

Although the insurgency charges the RTG with subservience to the U.S., and cites the presence of U.S. forces as evidence, it has not undertaken armed action against U.S. forces or supply lines in the vicinity of insurgent base areas (although small outposts offer easy opportunities). Moreover, a VOPT broadcast in February rejected a suggestion in the Thai press that withdrawal of U.S. forces might lead to an end of the insurgency. In sum, the insurgency is directed against the Thai polity, in the long term, and is not an ad hoc reaction to the U.S. presence.

This attitude, maintained during the height of the U.S. air war in Vietnam and Laos from Thai bases, is much more reflective of Peking's posture than Hanoi's. Indeed, the five small scale sapper attacks on U. S. tenanted bases are clearly attributable to North Vietnamese Army elements operating without cooperation from the insurgency. (Indeed, they were instructed by Hanoi to avoid contact with insurgent bands lest they be exposed!)

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We have identified no serious connection between the North Vietnamese refugee settlements in the Northeast and the nearby insurgency. Indeed, the Vietnamese are so thoroughly hated in Thailand that their visible presence in the insurgency would be a serious political handicap. The main infiltration and supply routes to the insurgency in the Northeast also imply greater insurgent dependence on China: they come circuitously from Northwest Laos, thru the Chinese road and thence into North Central Thailand and Sayaboury, across Udorn Province, finally to arrive in the Phuphan Hills. The much shorter and safer route across the Mekong direct from North Vietnam is much less used. While facilitative, mutual help has frequently occurred, especially in the form of supporting operations by NVN Pathet Lao units in the border areas, there appears to be a general understanding that Indo-China is largely Hanoi's, and Thailand primarily Peking's, sphere of influence among the Communist Parties.

Thus far, there has been an apparent community of interest (apart from NVN attacks on U.S. bases), as North Vietnam has had its hands full in Indo China. However, the fact that the USSAG headquarters in Nakhon Phanom is only 70 miles from the Mu Gia Pass dramatizes the reasons for North Vietnamese direct concern over growing RTG strength on Thailand's Northeastern frontier. Historically, this concern was shown in Vietnamese encouragement of the Separatist movement in the Northeast, which the present insurgency -- emphasizing unity of the Thai national liberation movement -- has supplanted. Vietnamese-led Pathet Lao units often cross the Mekong into remote parts of the Northeast, and Vietnamese are reported to lead a mixed Cambodian/Thai/Lao battalion in the Tri-Country border area, which conducts frequent cross-border operations into Thailand. North Vietnam has the means to increase its irregular threat to the Thai Northeast at will, either in support of the insurgency or in pursuit of unilateral Vietnamese purposes.

One of the most interesting places to watch for signs of PRC/NVN differences will be in observing their respective actions affecting armed violence in the Thai/Laos border areas, and -- for the future -- along the Thai/Cambodian border.

The program implications for the U.S., and an appreciation of the U.S. CI assistance programs, are the subject of a study to follow.

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