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Asia Speaks

Interview with Thanat Khoman

Reconfirming Thailand's Self-reliance

Dr. Thanat Khoman became Foreign Minister of Thailand ten years ago at the comparatively young age of 45. His appointment came after a distinguished academic and diplomatic career during which he collected no less than five degrees in France, and represented his country in Tokyo, Washington, New Delhi, and the United Nations.

TAM: *May we begin by asking you what you think has been the basis of Thailand's foreign policy in the past — a policy that has successfully kept your country out of war and controversy and free of many problems, like colonialism, which have plagued Southeast Asia?*

Thanat: Our foreign policy conforms with the status of our country. It has fortunately kept us free from colonial domination at a time when practically all of Southeast Asia fell under foreign powers. We have based our policy on the freedom and independence of the country and the people. We have succeeded in escaping the Western colonial yolk. That is why we do not want to succumb to attempts by the new imperialists to impose a similar kind of domination over the peoples and countries of Southeast Asia.

***TAM:** Is your Government's request and desire to have US troops in your country withdrawn part of this tradition? Why is your Government asking the US to pull out the bulk of its forces now in Thailand?*

Thanat: Well, the answer to your question is yes. Our present policy continues our policy of enhancing the freedom and independence of Thailand. We have accepted an exception to this by authorizing foreign troops to be stationed in Thailand because of the necessity brought about by threats from neighbouring Marxist countries. Otherwise we would not have agreed to foreign powers stationing their forces here. Recently, we have suggested to the US to discuss moving out its forces in Thailand and the US has agreed. Our Government suggested this proposal because the true situation has been misrepresented by certain quarters in the United States—political quarters as well as mass media which have misrepresehted the true nature, the true reasons and the true purpose of the American presence in Thailand. They have given the impression to the American public and the world that the American forces now in Thailand are there to repel Communist attacks against Thailand. This is completely false. Not a single American soldier has been engaged in fighting Communists in Thailand. The American forces are here to repel Communist aggression in Vietnam. So, because the true purpose of the American presence has been misrepresented and world opinion misled, we have come out in favour of withdrawing the American forces. This is a confirmation of our policy of self-reliance, of not calling on foreign forces to fight Communist activity and Communist attacks against Thailand by what the Communists call "people's wars" or, euphemistically, "wars of national liberation." We have repeatedly expressed our determination to fight Communist activity with our own resources, and especially our own manpower. But because there has been a misrepresentation, we have to bring about a renewed confirmation of the policy of our government and our people to be self-reliant—meaning that Thailand will not call on outside powers to send their manpower, their soldiers, to fight Communist activity in the country.



Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman: No insurgency in Thailand.

TAM: *What do you anticipate will be the likely effects of this pullout militarily, politically and economically?*

Thanat: If there were to be any effects they would stem from the fact that foreign forces have been introduced into Thailand. The effects will be the direct consequences of the presence of foreign forces on Thai soil. And both the Thai and the US Governments are aware of this. That is why the US has agreed to enter into talks with us to prevent or minimize any effects that may result from the withdrawal of foreign forces from Thailand. But personally I do not think that the effects will be far-reaching. Economically, the growth of our economy had been going well before foreign forces were brought into the country. So the withdrawal of foreign forces from Thailand will not cause any economic dislocation. If there were to be any effects, they will be rather minimal and I'm sure the Thai and the US Governments will take necessary measures to prevent harmful repercussions on the Thai, or even the American economy. Militarily, as I have said, the American forces have not been used in fighting Communist activity. Therefore, there will be no noticeable effect. Politically, however, both Thailand and the US stand to gain. In the recent past, especially, Communist propaganda has been giving the false impression that Thailand cannot undertake its own defence. This is not true. Because we are not only confident but certain of being able to defend ourselves, we have asked the US to consider withdrawing its forces from Thailand. Therefore Communist propaganda will lose its sting: that Thailand is not able to defend itself against Communist attacks.

TAM: *It has been suggested that Thailand is considering a "new" policy towards Communist China. May we have your comments on this, and ask you what constitutes the "China problem" to Thailand?*

Thanat: There again Asia and Southeast Asia, including Thailand, have been living under the false propaganda carried out not only by the Communists but also by Western mass media. They have been talking about Thailand and some other nations being anti-Communists, or anti-Chinese. This is false. The truth is that Communist powers and even the People's Republic of China are anti-Thai, anti-Burmese, anti-Indian, anti-Malay, anti-Cambodian, anti-Laotian, anti-Nepalese, and so on. So we have unmasked the truth by saying we are not anti-them, but it is they who are against us. This is not a new policy but an attempt to bring out the truth as it should be known to the outside world. And that is why the Government and I have come out to say that we are willing to talk with Peking in order to resolve our difficulties and bring about a better world, a more peaceful Southeast Asia, and to pave the way towards a more fruitful, more profitable coexistence of our nations or, better, cooperation between the people of Asia. This is not a new policy. It has been our policy of wanting to live in peace with all nations, with all our neighbours; of wanting to know them better, to work with them, to cooperate with them. But we have been threatened and, worse, we have been confronted with guerrilla warfare—as stated in the final communique of the ninth Chinese Communist Party Congress. In so many words Peking and some other Marxist powers in Asia have declared war on many free countries in Asia—Thailand, Laos, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, etc. We have only uttered words of conciliation, of friendship, of expressing our readiness to talk peace, to talk sense and to talk cooperation and friendship. So you can see the difference between the attitudes of the Marxist powers in Asia and the attitudes of non-Communist nations like Thailand. This is *not* a new policy, but an emphasis of our willingness to live in peace with all Asian nations and the world.

TAM: *Is there any continued relevance of foreign military bases and regional military arrangements, like* SEATO, *in the situation in which Thailand and Southeast Asia find themselves towards the seventies?*

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prepare new ground for Asian solidarity and cooperation. We have to face setbacks and obstacles. But talk to the leaders of Asia, especially in East Asia from Japan and Korea to Thailand, and go to Australia and New Zealand and ask them what is the alternative to Asian and Pacific cooperation. Do they believe that the best way is to go back and live in isolation? You will get a firm answer that isolation is a thing of the past. Nations in Asia cannot hope to play any useful role, and in fact may not be able to survive the pressure of confrontation and the expansionist policies of certain Asian nations unless they get together, close ranks and devise ways to work together to combine their strength. That is why if you ask all the leaders in Asia what other policy will serve their interests better than cooperation, you will get no answer. In other words, even those who are not ready to join in regional cooperation now are not against it, and those who are already in regional cooperation are not ready to forsake it. There is no other alternative.

TAM: *Finally, may we ask you for your views on post-Vietnam Asia. Do you think the sort of cooperation you have described will come about or will there will be fragmentation?*

Thanat: In a lecture I gave at the East West Centre in Hawaii not very long ago, I ventured to propose a blueprint for the postwar Asian and Pacific region. I suggested that the nations of the region must first of all strengthen their economic and social fabrics, because we Asians have a long way to go. We have to increase the productivity of our people. If we can suceed in reaching a reasonable level of productivity, then with the number of people at our disposal we can be very viable nations. And we have to strengthen the social fabric and remove the social injustices that unfortunately still exist.

Then we should insist specially on developing our youth because youth, now and in the future, will be playing an increasing role, not only in society but in the economy, technology and politics. So we have to imbue our present and future generations with a sense of purpose. We have to give them something to look forward to, something to be attached to—not to let them drift along like so many millions of youths in Europe who have turned into hippies and have joined nihilistic, anarchist and Marxist groups. We in Asia do not want anything like this. If they like it in Europe or the US they can keep it preciously—don't export it at all. But the youth of Asia should be aiming at something useful for themselves, their families and their societies, something constructive, something positive—not to destroy, not to negate but to build and to strengthen. So we have to do a great deal to instil worthwhile tasks into our youth.

Between nations we have to strengthen our cooperation to make it practically beneficial—not cooperation on paper, not treaties that can be torn up very easily and very quickly, but practical cooperation that will be beneficial to the region. And to foster mutuality of interest that will bind nations together—not because they have been bound by treaties. We should try to work with outside powers, especially the big powers. But we do not like them to dictate to us their solutions, nor to shape our destinies. We should be realistic enough to understand that large nations or world powers will continue to play a very important role in the world and we will have to work with them. But we would like to have them work with us in a mutually beneficial way, not to enhance their own interests to our detriment. We do not think it will be necessary for the world powers to guarantee our independence or freedom, but we would like them to work together with us on the understanding that they will not intervene in our national affairs. And we will pledge to respect their position as large powers, though we must be assured that they will also respect our freedom and our interest. I think it can be done—and I believe with patience it will be done—if not in our present generation then in future generations. That should be the goal for all Asian nations: to work towards a better understanding of their interests.

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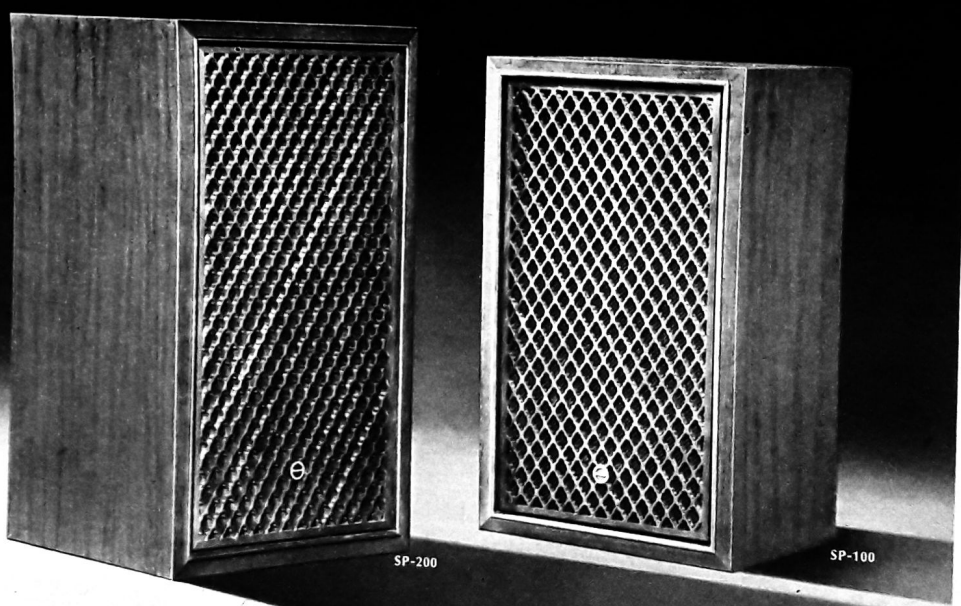
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Thanat: Well, in the future—I'm not able to say when—the collective military system will have to yield to better systems which we are now developing and which we call the "political collective defence system." The reasons are quite obvious. Because Asian nations have no military potential with the exception of perhaps the People's Republic of China, which has a measure of military power, and the Soviet Union if you include it as an Asian power. So to insist too much on a military collective defence system is talking about something that has no basis. Thailand and some other nations, realizing the situation, are trying to develop something that may be more effective than the collective military defence system, that is to say, regional cooperation and political cooperation in the broadest sense; namely, to try to consult with one another, to work together and to coordinate our activities in various fields, except the military, in order to increase our combined strength and enhance the effectiveness of our cooperation. The military aspect will be de-emphasized, because we have no military potential. Here and there you may find military cooperation, as between Thailand and Malaysia, to meet certain specific problems. Otherwise it is very difficult to conceive of an overall military collective defence system.

TAM: *In this context do you think the Soviet initiative in Asian defence matters is to be welcomed?*

Thanat: Well, I think that many leaders in Asia are inclined to look at the the so-called Soviet suggestion for Asian collective defence system as a move to replace various powers that have indicated their desire to withdraw from Asia. You notice that the Soviet Union has been very keen to fill the vacuum that is being left by the British withdrawal in the Middle East, particularly in the Persian Gulf area. And since there has been talk of withdrawal from Vietnam and Southeast Asia, and the whole of Asia, the Russians, who are methodical people and who realize that if the Western powers (Britain and the US) were to comply with the demands from a certain quarter of their domestic opinion and withdraw from Asia, then there would be a noticeable power vacuum. I think the Soviet Union realizes better than the West that such a vacuum would not be in its national interest, because there will be some other power that will try to fill the gap with its own authority, and if that were to happen the interests of the Soviet Union would not be served. That is why the Russians are methodical and farsighted enough to prepare to fill the power vacuum—if it were to materialize. Of course, the nations of Asia will have to look after their own interests and see who should fill the gap when the US withdraws from the region. And if it were to be a threatening power which showed itself to be hostile to nations in Asia they may find the Soviet move more in conformity with their interests, rather than allow that large Asian power to fill the gap. Of course, now all this is still hypothetical; so we cannot say for certain which is the best for Asia. But I hope that Asian leaders will be wise enough and clear-headed enough to see where their interests lie and, when the time comes, act accordingly.

TAM: *A little while ago you mentioned Malaysian-Thai cooperation on the common border. There has been considerable trouble in Southern Thailand and it has been suggested that much of it could be prevented if the border could be made more secure. Are you satisfied with the cooperation and results achieved so far?*

Thanat: I think both Thailand and Malaysia are doing everything they can to strengthen their cooperation and make the security arrangement between them work more effectively. But, mind you, the troubles along the border are not isolated cases. They follow the pattern that the Marxist powers are trying to create against nations in Asia. They try to stir up trouble. This is part of the so-called wars of national liberation which Marxist powers, particularly Peking, seek to wage against the nations of Asia. I would even say that these insidious attacks are not limited to societies in Asia. If anything, they are more pronounced and more effective in the West, in the US and countries of Europe. The student riots in France have hurt the flourishing economy and turned the surplus economy into a deficit economy. All these attacks were a result of activities which President de Gaulle and the then Prime Minister Pompidou characterized as activities staged by the totalitarian Communist powers. And in the US and in many Latin American countries we have seen many of these insidious attacks waged with vigour. Recently, the *Reader's Digest* published reports from institutes which conducted studies on Communist infiltration into the United States, and also reports by the FBI. So you can see that all societies in the world have become the targets of attacks by the Marxist movements and authority.

> 'We have repeatedly expressed our determination to fight Communist activity with our own resources'

TAM: *Why is it that the Communist movement has met with some success in other parts of Thailand, like the North and the Northeast?*

Thanat: I'm sorry I cannot agree with you. I would say that the Marxist threat has met with less success in Thailand than in many other countries. Certainly, with much less success in Vietnam or Burma or even India, and I would say with even less success than in the US and in Europe.

TAM: *But why is there any insurgency?*

Thanat: To use the word "insurgency" is not correct, because Communist activity in the Northeast or North or South consists of banditry—ambushes, terrorism and things like that. There is no insurgency movement in Thailand to speak of. There are some scattered incidents. The Communists try to seize control of an undefended village for a short time, but as soon as the authorities come with the necessary forces the Communists disperse. The Communists use tactics that are very costly for the defenders, and the Communists know that. They impose on the defenders a ratio of something like ten to one. In other words, to fight one Communist you have to use ten persons. This is nothing new. Even in Malaya, during the Emergency they had to have very strong forces to wipe out the small number of guerrillas. The Communists know that guerrilla warfare is advantageous to the aggressor. That is why after the Korean War they gave up the idea of conventional warfare and concentrated on guerrilla warfare. But guerrilla warfare can be successful only if guerrillas have the cooperation of the local people in getting food, weapons, medicine and intelligence. If the people do not cooperate, guerrilla warfare does not succeed, and this is the case with Thailand. Except for a very few who have been lured by gain, bribes or threats, people here do not cooperate with the aggressors. The majority of the people intensely dislike the alien aggressors coming from North Vietnam or Communist China. So guerrilla warfare is not succeeding in Thailand, although it has been waged against us for many years. The results have been rather discouraging for the Communists and rather encouraging for our side.

TAM: *Would you give us your views on why arrangements like* ASEAN *are not working out as well as hoped for?*

Thanat: We have to admit that changing the minds and habits of people who for centuries have been forced into living in isolated entities is not an easy task. During the colonial period the countries of Southeast Asia were all divided and the efforts of nations living in those colonial territories were channelled not towards working with one another but towards the metropolitan countries. It was easier for people from Java or Sumatra to go to Rotterdam than to come to Saigon or to Bangkok. So now we have to fight an uphill battle against the habit of division, of aloofness and of isolationism. We have to inculcate a new concept of regional solidarity and neighbourly cooperation among Asian nations and we have to face many obstacles, which are mostly carry-overs of the colonial period.

You ask why ASEAN doesn't do so well. It doesn't do well because it has been impeded in its development by a certain problem called Sabah. But where did the Sabah question arise except in colonial times? So you can see we have to start from scratch and

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