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SUBJECT : Interview with Foreign Minister Thanat

REF :

As an enclosure to this airgram we are forwarding the text of an interview with Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman that appeared in the Bangkok Post October 6. The interview, which touched superficially on a wide range of issues in Southeast Asia contains little that is new. It does not show Thanat at his best, perhaps because of the quality of the interview (a women's section features writer rather than a political reporter.)

The topics covered and Thanat's response include:

- Reduction of American presence: Thanat downplayed the economic impact of the reduction in U.S. military spending, and emphasizing disruption caused by "non-commercial sales of commodities like rice."

- Narcotics program (and threatened cut-off of U. S. aid to non-cooperating countries): Thanat stressed the international character of the narcotics traffic, especially that "a certain non-Thai but foreign airline operating in Laos and Thailand has been used to carry those drugs -- I think the name of the airline is Air America and the American Ambassador has admitted its role in this business."

Enclosure:
1. Text of Interview with FM Thanat

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- Reliance on sub-regional defense pacts: Thailand is working pragmatically, on a bilateral basis, with nations sharing the same interests in security. It will continue to support SEATO "because we have nothing better to replace it."

NEWMAN

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- Reliance on sub-regional defense pacts: Thailand is working pragmatically, on a bilateral basis, with nations sharing the same interests in security. It will continue to support SEATO "because we have nothing better to replace it."

NEWMAN

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Times change attitudes

An exclusive interview with Dr Thanat Khoman, the Foreign Minister, before his departure for the United Nations, covering the impact of the American disengagement from Indochina, narcotics, security pacts and the problem of Vietnamese refugees in Thailand.

Q: It appears that American presence in Southeast Asia will be different in character and quantity in the future. American presence contributes from $500 to 600 million a year to Thailand. Will a change in policy affect the Thai economy?

A: I think the figure you quoted is the figure of the past, 1967, 68, or 69. Since then things have changed a great deal, but I think I can say that when American forces were admitted into Thailand they created certain repercussions and certain disruption in the economy.

All military expenditures ceased two years ago or so and of course there has been a certain disruption of the Thai economy but I think we have taken adequate measures to prevent disruption by either PX or the withdrawal of foreign elements.

But, I think the disruptions have been caused more by the non-commercial sales of commodities like rice or the disposal of rubber and this kind of thing. So I think we can, by working together with the US Government, plan and devise measures to prevent any unfavourable disruption of the economy.

You may recall that the Thai Government instituted the negotiation for the talks for the withdrawal of American forces. If we were so deeply fearful of the consequences why would the Thai Government start the negotiations?

We realise that the situation has changed a great deal in Southeast Asia and the situation in the United States has also changed and therefore we'll better face the new conditions more realistically and try to prepare a new basis for negotiations and for working together.

Q: How do you plan to fill the gap left by the American withdrawal?

A: Well, I think this is a matter for discussion and agreement between Thailand and the United States. I think this is the proper way because the contributing country has much to gain from the contribution, as much as the recipient country. Therefore, I think both sides should try to understand each other and work out a situation that will be mutually beneficial and advantageous.

This should not be a unilateral decision either by the United States or by Thailand because then, of course, we couldn't call it co-operation, it would become a disruption.

Q: What is your opinion on the drug traffic in Thailand and do you agree with some US officials who allegedly advocate cutting off US financial aid to Thailand and other countries who do not co-operate with proposed US policy on narcotics?

A: Your Congressmen and Senators can say anything they want. They have been saying a lot of things which are true and a lot which are not so true.

For instance certain Congressmen, I think by the name of Steele and Murphy, have said that drugs go through Thailand and Vietnam to the US. We know that! We know that a certain amount of drugs have been going through Thailand although they have not originated in Thailand.

But even the American Ambassador to Thailand, Mr Leonard Unger, has acknowledged that among the peddlers of drugs there are certain international agents who take part in the drug traffic. And when I say international I mean what I say. I think the American Ambassador knows exactly the nationality of the drug peddlers. Also, a certain non-Thai but foreign airline operating in Laos and Thailand has been used to carry those drugs. I do not know whether Congressmen Steele and Murphy know about that. Maybe they know but they choose not to talk about it. I think the name of the airline is Air America and the American Ambassador has admitted its role in this business.

But personally, I don't care a damn about what Congressmen Steele and Murphy say!

Q: How will Nixon's announcement to go to Communist China affect Asian nations?

A: I don't think that the Asian nations will stampede after this momentous announcement. Of course, it is a bombshell. It's big news for public opinion in the US, and it's a big piece of news in Asia, too, and we shall have to study all the implications for domestic politics in Asia, domestic politics in America and international politics.

Q: How much reliance do you place on the sub-regional defence pacts with apparent disengagement, or de-escalation of US forces in the area?

A: At the present time we are working bilaterally with those nations which share the same interests in the field of security as Thailand-Malaysia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and I think we will continue to adopt that pragmatic and practical attitude.

As I have said repeatedly, we continue to support SEATO because we have nothing else better to replace it, and because SEATO can still serve the interests of the nations of the area as well as nations outside the area.

Therefore, because of that community of interests Thailand and other members of SEATO continue to lend support.

Q: What are the intentions of the Thai Government in regard to the Vietnamese refugees?

A: The Government intends to repatriate them but North Vietnam has not been able to accept the repatriation. Perhaps North Vietnam knows that most of the Vietnamese dissident persons in Thailand do not want to go to North Vietnam, they want to stay here.

I think that is the principal reason why the agreements between the Thai and North Vietnamese Red Cross societies cannot be implemented.

Q: Will you continue to keep the Vietnamese refugees separated and watch them or will you integrate them into Thai society?

A: Of course, we will have to keep them separated but I think we have treated them very humanely. They know that they can live and prosper and take care of their living. They are reasonably happy and that is why they don't want to go anywhere else.

Q: Do you feel that ASPAC (Asian and Pacific Council) serves any useful purpose?

A: The recent ASPAC meeting in July was very useful and I think we have achieved a certain realisation that the nations in the Asia Pacific area have to stick together.

—JERRY COFFEY

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