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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Washington, D.C. 20520

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MR. GREEN HAS SEEN

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TO : EA - Mr. Green

FROM : EA/TB - John B. Dexter

SUBJECT: Thoughts on US-Thai Relations

As Vietnamization proceeds, and as the US military presence and capability in East Asia declines in the coming years, Thailand's role in regional affairs will become increasingly important as an issue in United States policy. The "Nixon Doctrine" enunciates some general principles that are relevant to Thailand but the Doctrine is compatible with a wide range of policy options and needs more precise definition.

We have in essence a choice between two general roles that we might want Thailand to play in Southeast Asia. In one, Thailand would serve as an agent of the United States, while also defending its own security interests, through a primarily military posture of defense and deterrence against further Communist expansion in the region. This role would envisage a line drawn somewhere in Indochina which would represent the perimeter of US balance of power interests and would correspond with our assessment of what we could expect to hold, relying in part on Thai manpower resources and probably also on our use of Thai bases for supportive US air operations. That line would also represent a Thai forward defense perimeter, though it would lie well beyond the vital zone that the Thai would be willing or capable of attempting to hold without US subsidy and support. The line would of course contain within it other political regimes (e.g. non-Communist regimes in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) which we felt it essential to back indirectly, without U.S. ground combat forces, and which the Thai could be persuaded to support directly, with our aid, in its own security interests. This role for Thailand would be consistent with those portions of the Nixon Doctrine which emphasize US fidelity to our security commitments, US willingness to support the defense capabilities of friends

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and allies, and US interest in promoting regional cooperation -- in this case military cooperation involving Thai assistance to its neighbors.

A major argument in favor of US support for Thailand in the role sketched above is that, if Thai forces proved effective, it would help to keep the Communist threat away from Thai borders and therefore would reduce the risk of armed attack that could bring into play our SEATO commitment. While we are pledged to uphold that commitment, we obviously do not want to have it tested because we wish to avoid the choice between further US fighting in Southeast Asia and reneging on the commitment.

On the other hand, it is questionable whether this militant role for Thailand is feasible in the current political atmosphere in the United States and in light of the proclivities and capabilities of the Thai themselves. Successful implementation of this concept would be heavily dependent upon the willingness of Congress and the US public to back it, both in funding Thai military forces (and associated economic assistance requirements) and in the security reassurances that the Thai would seek if they were asked to continue exposing themselves in this fashion to Communist military power in areas forward of their own vital security zone. It would also be dependent on Thai confidence that US promises of support and US commitments would remain firm over a relatively long period of time. It could have serious consequences if the Thai should be ineffective in their military role or if the U.S., because of political and legislative developments at home, should have to have to cut off support for the Thai after starting them down this path.

As an alternative to this role for Thailand, we could see that country confining its security attention to Thailand itself, though with due concern for certain adjacent border areas of truly vital interest to Thailand, and seeking to settle its affairs with both North Vietnam and Peking by political rather than military means. In this role, the Thai might use the possibility of their intervention in support of neighboring non-Communist regimes (and the fact of their current presence in Laos) as a bargaining tool in attempting to reach an understanding with North Vietnam.

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The US security commitment and the actuality or possibility of Thai bases being used by the United States could also be helpful for this purpose and to strengthen Thai hands in working for accommodation with Peking. The US would confine its assistance to developing Thai strength economically and militarily for defense and internal security. We would terminate as soon as possible our subsidization of Thai mercenaries in Laos and desist from further planning on U.S. support of Thai forces in a regional role.

This alternative role for Thailand would, like the first, be compatible with the Nixon Doctrine, especially with the Doctrine's emphasis upon local initiative and a reduced American "profile" in Southeast Asia. It would, on the other hand, call for us to downplay the security commitment element of our relationship with Thailand and to reduce Thai dependence upon that commitment. It could lead to a "neutral" Thailand, with SEATO eventually reduced to a dead letter. This alternative would be consistent with present trends in US public opinion and legislation which do not favor subsidizing Asians to fight Asians in support of US interests -- or in support of our SEA friends' interests as we see them. This alternative would also be compatible with traditional Thai methods of dealing with the outside world and with a strong current of opinion within RTG political circles which is pressing for moves to accommodate with Hanoi and Peking.

While it may be argued that the first alternative role for Thailand would have the advantage of insulating the US SEATO commitment, the same argument can be made for this second alternative. There is little evidence today that either North Vietnam or the PRC have any intention in the foreseeable future of attacking Thailand. There is little reason to suppose that they would expand their ambitions and develop such an intention if North Vietnamese forces should come nearer to Thai borders. On the other hand, should Thai military forces, at US behest and with heavy US subsidy, become a major obstacle to North Vietnamese objectives within Indochina, North Vietnam and the PRC could well be provoked into a more hostile attitude toward Thailand and even into military threats. Such threats would probably cause the Thai to turn to the United States for further reassurances, possibly including [redacted] deterrent military

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actions to support our SEATO commitment. The second alternative would probably be preferable to the first in reducing the risk of having our SEATO commitment put to the test in this manner as a result of Thai provocation.

There are of course limits to the degree the United States can determine Thailand's role in the region and further limits to what the Executive Branch in the United States can do in the face of current American political trends. To the extent that we can rationally plan US policy and exert influence on Thailand however, our interests would be best served by a policy which pushed Thailand in the direction of the second alternative described above. The first alternative would lead, without real hope of success, toward continuation of the Cold War divisions in Asia of previous decades. The second alternative would contribute to a more flexible US diplomatic posture that will be appropriate to the multi-power system that we now see emerging in East Asia. Most important, this role for Thailand would be compatible with current US assessment of our real interests in Southeast Asia, with our national reluctance to become involved again in ground combat in that theatre and with our desire to expand and normalize relations with the Peoples Republic of China.

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