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FROM : Amembassy BANGKOK

DATE: April 1, 1970

SUBJECT : Thanat Issues Vague Call for "Bandung-type" Conference

REF : Bangkok 2574 (sent Department only)

SUMMARY. In a recent speech, Foreign Minister Thanat suggested that the nations of Asia, and perhaps also the Pacific, hold a "Bandung-type" conference as the only way to develop fruitful contact with Communist China. If at such a conference the free nations of Asia present a solid front--Thanat's theory goes--they might be able to wrest from the Chinese some commitment of peaceful coexistence, or at least to establish a continuing dialogue with Peking. We have no indication, however, that Thanat plans to pursue his Bandung conference idea seriously in the near future.

This modest initiative with respect to a "Bandung-type" conference seems to be related to a slight shift by Thanat toward a more forthcoming position on relations with Peking, at least in the context of exploring possible means of inducing Peking to forego its aggressive ambitions in Southeast Asia. This shift does not, we feel, represent a basic change in Thanat's view of the danger posed by Communist China, but rather stems from Thanat's fear that U.S. withdrawal from Southeast Asia will create a power vacuum which Communist China will seek to fill.

Thanat's statements suggest that he hopes, or feels intuitively, that two trends--the developing strength of Southeast Asian regionalism and a hopefully less aggressive and hostile attitude on the part of Communist China--may ultimately converge and, with

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whatever residual U.S. presence there may be at the time, provide the conditions for stability and security in the area. Thanat is a realist, however, and probably considers his statements on improved relations with Communist China still to be primarily in the realm of "leaving no stone unturned", and "preparing for any eventuality". He and the Royal Thai Government appear clearly to recognize that Thai security will, during the course of the war, be inextricably tied up with the U.S. presence in the region, and after the war will be strongly--perhaps decisively--influenced by the nature of the settlement. END SUMMARY.

In his speech to the Asia Society in New York, February 24, 1970, Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman called for "a general meeting of the Bandung-type." Thanat had referred at least once previously (in his October 1969 speech at the East-West Center in Honolulu) to the applicability of the Bandung concept to the present situation in Asia. The Asia Society speech, however, marked the first clear public statement he has made in favor of holding such a conference.

The purpose of a new "Bandung-type" conference would be to bring Communist China into peaceful contact and, hopefully, toward peaceful coexistence with her neighbors. In Thanat's words, the problem of greatest concern to the peoples of Asia is "how to bridle....this petulant and too-often turbulent force so that it may become less truculent and less aggressive, and ultimately to harness it to the service of peace, harmony and cooperation in the region."

Thanat did not state explicitly which countries he believes should participate in such a conference. Instead, he referred to a variety of possible groupings: "Asian and Pacific nations", "free nations of Asia and the Pacific", "the interested nations", and Communist China's "neighbors and fellow nations in the area". These formulations suggest that the conference as he sees it would include the following participants: (1) the free Asian nations, (2) Communist China, (3) probably the United States, Australia and New Zealand, (4) possibly the Soviet Union, and (5) possibly North Viet-Nam and North Korea. African states, although represented at the 1955 Bandung Conference, would presumably not be included.

This modest initiative with respect to a "Bandung-type" conference seems to be related to a slight shift in Thanat's public stance on Thai relations with Communist China, which has become apparent over the past year. In early 1969 Thanat announced that Thailand was ready to hold discussions with Peking in the interests of peace in Asia. However, his statements at that time appeared designed primarily

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to record publicly the position that Thailand and not Peking is the injured party and the one which refuses to enter into normal peaceful relations, and were probably made with no expectation of a positive response from Peking. However, Thanat's more recent statements suggest that he now feels it advisable to assume a slightly more forthcoming public position on relations with Peking, at least in the context of exploring possible means of inducing Peking to forego its aggressive ambitions in Southeast Asia. Thanat pointed out in his Asia Society speech that although this may seem an impossible task at the present time, it must be pursued in the interests of peace in Asia.

Citing the experience of the United States, the Soviet Union, Japan and Canada, Thanat said that individual nations--including the great powers--stand little chance of negotiating successfully with the Chinese Communists. His conclusion is that the free nations of Asia (and perhaps also the Pacific) must "close their ranks" and combine their "moral, political and diplomatic resources and ingenuity" to persuade Peking to "alter its militant inclinations and follow a more peaceable course of coexistence with fellow Asian and Pacific nations." He is suggesting, in other words, that the Chinese Communists may find it possible and in their interests to attend a Bandung-type conference which would include the full spectrum of political systems in the area, whereas they would presumably find it both purposeless and ideologically difficult to meet on a bilateral basis with "reactionary" Asian regimes such as the Royal Thai Government. If at such a conference the free nations of Asia present a solid front--the theory goes--they might be able to wrest from the Chinese some commitment of peaceful coexistence, or at least to establish a continuing dialogue with Peking. However, we have no indication that Thanat plans to pursue his Bandung conference idea seriously in the near future. He may just have intended, like Brezhnev, to float an idea with the hope that others will talk it up.

Thanat also said in his Asia Society speech that regional economic, cultural and social cooperation may ultimately contribute to a normalization of contacts with Communist China: "As the benefits of regional cooperation become more and more apparent, the Chinese leaders on the mainland may be attracted or tempted to abandon their hard line and militant attitude for a more profitable course of neighborly cooperation. At the same time, Peking may come to realize that its aspirations toward a great power status will have a better chance to be fulfilled within the framework of regional cooperation than through aggressive and truculent actions against smaller nations of the area."

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This nuance of change in Thanat's statements on Thai relations with Peking does not, we feel, represent a basic change in his view of the danger posed by Communist China, but rather reflects his assessment of the new realities which must be taken into account in the search for security in Asia and the options which are open to Asian leaders in that search. With the mounting evidence, during 1969, that the United States presence in Asia will be significantly reduced, and the growing fear among the Thai that U.S. assistance to combat aggression may not be forthcoming if and when needed, Thanat began to speak in terms of a developing power vacuum in Asia. According to this line of reasoning, the withdrawal of British and American military forces from Southeast Asia will create a power vacuum which Communist China will seek to fill. The Brezhnev proposal for Asian collective security, Thanat implied in the Asia Society speech, was advanced for the very purpose of preventing Peking from filling that anticipated vacuum. Late in 1969 Thanat told several audiences that, faced with these alternatives, Thailand and Southeast Asia would choose the Soviet Union as the lesser of the two evils. That might be true in extremis, but Thanat obviously would prefer a non-Communist solution.

Thanat has suggested that the free nations of the area could, by combining their efforts, constitute a political and moral force strong enough to fill the power vacuum which he foresees. We do not interpret this as meaning that Thanat is convinced that regional cooperation in and of itself, without the participation or underwriting of one of the major powers, can soon play a significant role in the security of Southeast Asia. He may see it merely as the only straw which, after the withdrawal of U.S. forces, will be within the grasp of the small non-Communist nations of the area. His statements, however, would suggest something slightly more positive than that: the hope, or perhaps intuitive feeling, that two trends--the developing strength of Southeast Asian regionalism and a hopefully less aggressive and hostile attitude on the part of Communist China--may ultimately converge and, with whatever residual U.S. presence there may be at the time, provide the conditions for stability and security in the area.

We doubt that Thanat now is any more sanguine about the imminent possibility of luring Communist China into peaceful dialogue with Thailand and her other non-Communist Asian neighbors than he was when he first suggested contact with Peking early in 1969. He probably considers his statements in this vein to be primarily in the realm of "leaving no stone unturned", and "preparing for any eventuality". In the meantime, Thanat and the RTG appear clearly to recognize that Thai security will, during the course of the war, be inextricably tied up with the U.S. presence in the region, and after the war will be strongly--perhaps decisively--influenced by the nature of the settlement.

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