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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Washington, D.C. 20520

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February 5, 1971

TO : J - U. Alexis Johnson

THROUGH : S/S

FROM : S/PC - V. Rodger Digilio

SUBJECT : Mr. Spiers' Action Memorandum on U. S./Thai Relations of February 2, 1971
INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

I have read Ron Spiers' memorandum on the above subject with great interest. No one can deny that our relations with the Thai have entered a period of flux and that this presents certain problems for us. However, I am not yet convinced that these problems can be adequately dealt with by an initiative of the type Ron has proposed.

First, we must guard against a precipitate reaction based on a single cable describing Thai feelings and intentions. Bangkok 1359 which Ron has attached to his memo to you is only one out of a series of telegrams from Ambassador Unger in which he discussed the changing face of Thai/American relations. When one analyzes these cables, one sees that while Thanat is not alone in his views, he is well out in front of the rest of his cabinet colleagues as far as a realignment of Thai-American relations is concerned. Also, one develops the suspicion that his strident denunciations may be designed to trap us into concessions which we would not otherwise make, and which might be at variance with our long range plans for American presence in Southeast Asia. Ambassador Unger's cables provide a commentary and analysis of Thai thinking which should be reviewed in full before any decisions are taken.

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S/PC - V. Rodger Rigilio

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Second, the initiative which Ron proposes does not go to the heart of the grievances which the Thai feel against us. The Thai are not worried that the Executive Branch of the U. S. Government might fail to honor its commitments to Thailand. The line which Thanat expresses is that the Congress and American public opinion would tie the President's hands in honoring those commitments. It is difficult to see how an executive action (i.e., the stationing of a wing of air force tactical fighters in Thailand) would in any way assuage the Thai feelings of doubt. In fact, given the current mood of Congress and the current controversy surrounding the use of U. S. air power in Indo-China, any hint of our intention to permanently station a wing of aircraft in Thailand would be likely to touch off renewed Congressional debate which would only further convince the Thais of the unreliability of our commitment.

The current major irritant in U. S.-Thai relations concerns the sale of rice to Indonesia and other Asia nations under PL 480. The proposed disposition of our rubber stockpile is also another factor. If we desire to accommodate Thai feeling an initiative should be taken in the economic area rather than attempting to substitute a military measure for an economic one. I assume that our decision to increase Thai capability to prepare the Thai better for the defense of their own country will help to meet their apprehensions over the security problem.

Finally, I think there is great danger in approaching our post Vietnam air base posture on an ad hoc basis. Much of our discussion of our long term view of Southeast Asia indicates a feeling that movement towards a more neutral status for the states of the area might be desirable. The basing of U. S. aircraft in Thailand would, of course, make this course of action impossible for Thailand. Of course, there may be good reason for basing aircraft in Thailand, particularly to police an Indo-China settlement if one is ever achieved through negotiation or through a winding down of the war. However, the data which would allow us to make such a decision do not exist now, and we should be careful to keep our options open.

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Thus, I am not convinced as Ron is that a good political case could be made for stationing a wing of American aircraft in Thailand. Before any decision to discuss this with the Air Force is taken, I would hope that you would await the return of John Dexter, Thai Country Director, who is now in Bangkok and who will be able to give us shortly the most up to date thinking of the country team and of the Thai themselves.

cc: Ron Spiers
Jim Wilson

Drafted: S/PC:VRDigilio:2/5/71
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