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Jan Bečka

**The Lands of the Free: Thailand in the Foreign
Policy of the United States, 1945–1975**

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Autor práce: PhDr. Jan Bečka

Školitel: doc. PhDr. Miloš Calda

Oponenti práce: doc. PhDr. Francis Raška, Ph.D., doc. PhDr. Miloš Mendel, CSc.

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Anotace

V období po druhé světové válce se Thajsko (dříve známé jako Siam) stalo jedním z hlavních spojenců Spojených států amerických v oblasti jihovýchodní Asie. Thajsko vyslalo své jednotky do korejské války, vstoupilo do paktu SEATO a opakovaně vyjadřovalo svoji ochotu podporovat Spojené státy v boji proti šíření komunismu v regionu.

Vztahy mezi oběma zeměmi se začaly utvářet již v době před druhou světovou válkou a následným postupným bipolárním rozdělením světa. Při zkoumání dynamiky vývoje spolupráce mezi Spojenými státy a Thajskem po roce 1945 je tak třeba brát v potaz jak okamžité zájmy Washingtonu a Bangkoku v poválečném období, tak dlouhodobé trendy a tendence v zahraniční politice, stejně jako faktory socio-kulturní. Studená válka sice nepochybně sehrála klíčovou roli při vytvoření a upevnění americko-thajské aliance, nebyla však zdaleka faktorem jediným.

Práce je věnována analýze vývoje vztahů mezi oběma zeměmi s důrazem na období mezi rokem 1945, kdy skončila druhá světová válka, a rokem 1975, kdy byl pádem Saigonu definitivně završen dlouholetý konflikt v Indočíně, v němž se Spojené státy i Thajsko angažovaly. Z důvodů zmíněných v předešlém odstavci jsou v práci zahrnuty i dvě kapitoly věnované událostem před rokem 1945, které napomáhají lépe proniknout do problematiky poválečných americko-thajských vztahů i americké politiky v jihovýchodní Asii obecně. Autorovým cílem je jednak zachytit zlomové okamžiky a předěly ve vývoji těchto vztahů, ale rovněž ukázat, pomocí analýzy zahraničněpolitických dokumentů i veřejného diskurzu zejména ve Spojených státech, jak se postupně utvářelo a měnilo vzájemné vnímání obou zemí a jak se tyto změny promítaly v praktické rovině do jejich zahraniční politiky.

Abstract

In the years following World War II, Thailand (previously also known as Siam) became one of the main allies of the United States in Southeast Asia. Thailand sent military units to fight in the Korean War, joined the SEATO pact and repeatedly declared her willingness to support the struggle against the spreading of communism in Southeast Asia,

which was the major objective of the policy of the United States in the region in this particular time period.

The relationship between both countries, however, had started to develop already before World War II and the subsequent emergence of the bipolar world order. When analyzing and assessing the dynamics of the relationship between the United States and Thailand after 1945, it is thus necessary to take into account not only the immediate concerns and priorities of Washington and Bangkok, but also the long-standing trends and underlying tendencies and currents in their foreign policy, as well as socio-cultural factors of this relationship. It is beyond any doubt that the Cold War has played a crucial role in forging and cementing the American-Thai alliance, but it could not be said that it was the only factor to have caused this development.

This thesis focuses on the analysis of the development of the relations between the two countries with the emphasis on the period between 1945, when World War II has ended, and 1975, when the fall of Saigon has concluded the lengthy conflict in Indochina, in which both the United States and Thailand have been involved. For the reasons already mentioned, two chapters are also included which deal with the period before 1945, allowing the reader to better grasp the essence and nature of the post-war Thai-American relationship and of the American policy in the region as such. The objective of the author is to identify and present the important moments and turning points in this relationship and also to show, by analyzing the foreign policy documents as well the public discourse (especially in the United States), how have the mutual perceptions and images of both countries gradually developed and changed and how have these changes and shifts affected the policy of the United States and Thailand on the practical level.

Klíčová slova

Thajsko – Spojené státy – studená válka – konflikt v Indočíně – komunismus – svoboda – demokracie

Keywords

Thailand – United States – Cold War – conflict in Indochina – communism – freedom – democracy

Prohlášení

1. Prohlašuji, že jsem předkládanou práci zpracoval samostatně a použil jen uvedené prameny a literaturu.
2. Souhlasím s tím, aby práce byla zpřístupněna veřejnosti pro účely výzkumu a studia.

V Praze dne 10. 7. 2011

Jan Bečka

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INTRODUCTION

The mutual interaction between the East and West, between the “Orient” on the one hand and the European countries and, later, the United States, on the other, is a topic which has for centuries fascinated historians, linguists, anthropologists, missionaries, travelers and many others. The differences between cultures (or, better said, sets of individual cultures), political systems, values, traditions, and what we could call the “shared historical experience” of people in the Euroatlantic world and Asia have stimulated an extensive research focusing on the development of the relations between Asian and Western countries, on the changing role of these actors on the global stage/within the international relations system, and also on the creation of socio-cultural images and stereotypes that have often survived for centuries and influenced the public thinking and mutual perceptions of each other.

In the course of the history of East-West relations, the 19th and 20th centuries certainly seem, from a historian’s perspective, as of special importance. During the 19th century, the European powers firmly established their control over vast portions of Asian territory and completed their transformation from “aliens” into “masters” and “protectors”. The exchange between the “metropolis” and the “fringes” of the empire involved not only goods, but also ideas and concepts flowing in both directions. In the 20th century, World War II and the subsequent disintegration of the colonial empires in Asia (and in the world) opened the way for yet another period of history when Asia played an important role in the Western political, military and geostrategic thinking and *vice versa*. The Cold War, especially in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, revealed once more the deep and firmly rooted differences between the West and Asia and in many cases, the futility of trying to apply Western principles, methods and precepts in trying to understand, and sometimes even worse, to change Asia and mould it according to the Western patterns. The defeat of the United States in Indochina had then cast a shadow over the studies of East-West interactions for a number of years and often led to a summary condemnation of all Western involvement in Asia as colonialist/neo-colonialist or imperialist/neo-imperialist.

The subject of this thesis forms a part of the larger debate, as described in the paragraphs above. The relationship between the United States and Thailand (formerly known as Siam) has been one of the most prominent features, from the American point of view, of Washington’s involvement in Southeast Asia (and in Asia in general) after World War II. This relationship, to a degree, was a product of the war and of the bipolar division of the world that began to emerge soon after the victory of the Allies in 1945. While there certainly

were contacts between both countries prior to this time, and the initial formation images and mutual perceptions dates back to the 19th century, the ties between Washington and Bangkok were indeed closest and their cooperation most intensive at the height of Cold War in Asia, in the three post-war decades. As such, it would be easy and tempting, and to a degree correct, to assess and study this relationship primarily through the prism of the Cold War – i.e. to judge the relations between the two countries primarily in the context of the struggle between the two ideologically opposed power blocs, each tied to one of the two superpowers. To do so, however, without taking into account the past experience of the two countries and of those of their objectives and goals that were not necessarily directly tied to the Cold War, would provide us at best with an incomplete and limited picture of this multifaceted relationship that carried with it a strong symbolism and legacy of the pre-World War II years. What the author of this thesis attempts to do, then, is to find a way to integrate both the Cold War approach and the more general historical and socio-cultural approach, into his assessment of the problem. The present thesis is the first scholarly work dealing with the Thai-American relations in these multiple contexts in the Czech (Czechoslovak) historiography.

It goes without saying that a topic such as a political, military, economic and cultural relationship between two countries over the period of three decades is extremely wide and it is beyond the scope of this thesis, or any single volume, no matter of its size, to cover all the aspects and details of it. The wealth of details and information of course gradually increases, as more and more previously inaccessible archival materials are made available to historians and the general public. An attempt to produce a detailed, comprehensive, all-encompassing study within the scope of this thesis would not only be impossible, but also, in the author's opinion, counter-productive, as a number of publications already exist that are devoted to a particular area of Thai-American relations or to a particular, more limited, time period (some of these publications will be mentioned specifically in the following subchapter of this thesis). The author aims at outlining some of the general trends and principles that formed the basis of this relationship and their transformation over the period studied. In other words, while the main landmarks and events that transpired in the mutual relations will certainly not be omitted, they will serve as an illustration of the nature and gradual changes of the relationship and also of the reflection of this nature and its changes in both the private and public discourse. In this respect, the question of deeply rooted stereotypes (both positive and negative) and of misunderstanding and misperceptions regarding the political culture and social fabric of the "other" again comes to the fore. The thesis will thus not try to describe what decisions each of the partners had made, but also why these decision were made, and

will try to seek the answer to the question why not only in the Cold-War-period thinking but also in a more long-term historical context. It is not the aim of the author to come up with general theories that would be applicable to similar relationship between the United States and other Asian countries. For one, while the Cold War factor and the general approaches derived from the perceived need to fight communism played a significant role in the post-war years, the nature of American relationship to each of her allies or, for that matter, adversaries, varied to an extent from case to case. While the author is convinced that no all-encompassing generalization that could sum up the American foreign policy in Southeast Asia after 1945 exists in reality, some of the more general findings about the Thai-American relationship could help in analyzing the approach to other countries in the region. In other words, while there were elements in the relations between Bangkok and Washington that were unique to this particular case, the analysis of some of the general trends that constituted and formed these relations could yield some parallels to the American approach to other Asian (and non-Asian) countries.

The author feels he should make another two remarks before moving forward to the brief survey of sources and theoretical and methodological approaches applied throughout the research of this thesis. The first of these remarks is related to the research objective of this thesis and the hypothesis that the author has formed in the incipient stages of his research. As already indicated, the thesis will deal with the roots of the Thai-American relationship, with its salient features, with the expectations of both partners as regards the outcomes and benefits of their cooperation and with the transformation of these factors over time. *The author believes that while the Cold War had contributed significantly to the establishment of “special relations” between both countries after World War II (and especially after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950), there is ample historical evidence to suggest that some sort of a closer cooperation with Thailand was on Washington’s agenda anyway as the United States had its own interests in the region and the weakening of the traditional colonial powers opened the way to secure these interests. In other words, the Thai-American cooperation would have evolved even in the absence of the Cold War phenomena. While the nature of such a relationship would of course be different, some of the older images of Thailand, such as the “land of the free” or, after 1932 and especially immediately after the end of World War II, as the country with the potential to “modernize” and “democratize”, would still play an important part in the American thinking as they in fact did during the Cold War years. The repetitive use of these stereotypes, whether purely pragmatic (to justify the American involvement) or idealistic, is one of the salient features of the American approach*

to Thailand. The problem here of course is that the terms such as “freedom”, “democracy”, or even “communism” have had very different meanings and interpretations in American and Thai socio-cultural context, which is evident in analyzing the historical documents of the period. These differences between the Thai and American thinking and perceptions are not the only interesting problem deserving our attention here, though. Another issue which the author attempts to address is how the publicly presented meaning of these concepts and political “catch phrases” was modified to reflect the changing political and military priorities as well as the realities on the ground. In other words, was it always that the stereotypes and fixed images influenced the policy thinking or was it also that these stereotypes and images were purposely “adjusted” and their intrinsic meaning shifted (with the “outer shell” remaining the same) in order to justify and explain major shifts in policy? The author believes that at least in the case of Thai-American relations, both of these phenomena are identifiable and traceable and can be illustrated by using specific examples.

Despite the author’s declared intention to look at the post-war Thai-American relations in a broader context than just the Cold War, it is hard to escape the impact of the “Vietnam syndrome” while evaluating and analyzing the American foreign policy in Southeast Asia in this particular time period. In this regard, an obvious question could arise: who benefited more from the close mutual cooperation after 1945 – Thailand or the United States? Here, it is absolutely vital to make a sharp distinction between the evaluation of the success or failure of American policy in the region as such and the success or failure of this relationship in particular. *While in general terms the American policy in Indochina and Southeast Asia as such was a failure, the relationship with Thailand, at least in the opinion of the author, had no clear “winners” or “losers”, at least if the initial sets of priorities and expectations of both sides were taken into account. In this regard, it could be said that both Thailand and the United States had in fact by and large achieved their main goals within the limited scope of their relationship. The author also believes that while the Thai policy is often criticized for being overly pragmatic and opportunistic (which is, in fact, a somewhat true assertion), a degree of pragmatism can also be found in the American approach to Thailand.* In this respect also, it cannot be simply stated, as is sometimes the case with some authors, that while Thailand opportunistically used the American need for an ally in the region where Washington had a traditionally weak power base, the American policy was based more on the ideological principles. The reality is, as is often the case, more complex.

It could thus be said that the two assertions, highlighted in the previous paragraphs (i.e. that the emergence of Thai-American relationship was not solely the result of World War

II and the bipolar divide and would have occurred anyway, albeit in different form; and that, judged purely on its own merits, the relationship could be considered a success as far as the initial expectations of both sides are taken into account) are the entry hypotheses of the author. Both of these questions will be treated extensively throughout the text of the thesis and its conclusion will offer a summary of arguments which will either support or question these hypotheses.

The second remark that the author would like to make here deals with the fact that the research that has preceded the writing of this thesis was done using mostly American sources. While the accessibility and reliability of sources in general played its role, the main reason for this disparity is the fact that the author's primary research interest was the American policy and its reflection in the American public discourse. While Thailand is definitely not relegated to a role of mere "object" or "dependent variable", the emphasis is placed on the American perspective and on the American perceptions of the mutual relationship, which to a large degree explains the selection of the sources used.

Remarks on Theoretical Approaches

The issue of bilateral relations between any countries, especially countries with a very different political and economic system and socio-cultural environment is by definition a complex one. Thus, it is extremely hard to adopt one specific methodological approach to fully grasp and analyze all the multiple facets of the problem under question. Instead, as is often the case, the author integrates various useful concepts and ideas into his research and tries to apply to them in order to gain new insights and develop new interpretations. The following pages deal, albeit briefly, with some of these concepts that the author had considered and applied, at least to a degree, when analyzing the Thai-American relations.

Perhaps no western research with an interest in modern Asian history and in the interactions between the East and West can escape the question of how our deeply ingrained concepts and ideas influence our thinking about Asia. The American professor of Palestinian origin Edward Said and his well-know monograph *Orientalism*¹, among others, had pointed out the stereotypes about "Orient" in western historiography and popular thinking, and in doing so, had basically put out to question some of the long assumed accounts of Asian history and precepts and theories regarding the Middle East (and, by extension, the "Orient" in general). Said argues that instead of perceiving the Oriental reality (or at least trying to

¹ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

perceive), the western authors deal with Orient through the prism of their own thinking and concepts, thus in the end not capturing the true essence and nature of Oriental history and society, but instead creating a largely fictional account, full of misinterpretations, misunderstandings, stereotypes and caricatures of Asia. Since its publication, *Orientalism* had found its supporters but also drew strong criticism from many quarters, both because of oversimplifying some problems and also because of the political nature of some of his work, which was intended to support the cause of Palestine².

The author of this thesis acknowledges some of the Said's arguments to be valid. Indeed, it is not possible to automatically and successfully apply the western mindset, political, social and cultural theories and mechanisms when studying the Orient (and, in fact, any region or country outside of the bounds of Euroatlantic civilization). The limitations, sometimes subconscious, that our mindset has on the objectivity of our research, despite our best efforts, have to be taken into account. On the other hand, it has to be said that not all western authors can be accused of misinterpreting the Orient, as Said was basically saying, and that many have genuinely attempted to "look through the eastern eyes" and integrate the eastern perspective into their work. One problem with Said and the *Orientalism* theory in general is thus the fact that it essentially labels all the previously published western historiography regarding the Orient as stereotype-ridden, inaccurate, and indeed in some cases, racist. The author of this thesis does agree that while these stereotypes and notions of western superiority are evident in some works of the western scholars, generalizations like those of Said and his supporters are not tenable. Besides, the eastern historiography and society (especially Chinese) also has had its own stereotypes, often negative, regarding the West and these stereotypes have repeatedly emerged in the works of eastern authors. It is thus not exclusively a problem of the western society, but a problem of human society in general, that it is often under the influence of distorted, inaccurate images of the "other", which so often are so much more attractive than the truth.

The other problem that the author of this thesis associates with the concept of *Orientalism* is that while it criticizes the current state of affairs, it offers a little in the way of redressing the "past wrongs". If the basic assumption that the western society is captive to deeply rooted and almost indestructible stereotypes, which prevent the western scholars from

² For some of the books that criticize, more or less vehemently, Said's concepts and his methods of research and writing, see for example: Bayly, Christopher A. *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996; Ibn Warraq. *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism*. Amherst (NY): Prometheus Books, 2007; Irwin, Robert. *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies*. London: Allen Lane, 2006 and many others.

conducting an “objective” research of the Orient, then the question is who in fact can carry out such a research. One obvious answer would be the Asian scholars themselves. While the contributions of the Asian scholars to this research have been notable, it is not possible to “close the door” to the Asian and Oriental studies to the western experts. These experts, if they wish to avoid the critique of pro-*Orientalists*, then try to claim that they are writing the history of Orient and Asia from the “Oriental perspective”, which is often associated with using sources in the original Asian languages and trying to adopt the Asian mindset³. For example, Stephen Lyon Wakeman Greene writes in his book about Thailand: “... Far too often the Western point of view dominated... I wanted to demonstrate my disdain for ethnocentrism by writing Thai history from what I considered to be Thai point of view. That meant concentrating on Thai resources...”⁴

Working with the original sources, especially if one deals with the internal developments of Asian countries, is indeed laudable and in many cases, of absolute necessity. While this thesis does so to a limited extent (for the reasons already explained) and while the author acknowledges the limitations that the Asian primary sources (especially those of earlier provenience) often exhibit in terms of both accessibility and reliability, their use in Asian scholarship is vital and indispensable. On the other hand, speaking from a personal experience of spending a number of years in Asia, the author finds it rather difficult to believe that, as some authors claim, it is possible to adopt, even to understand fully, the “Asian point of view”. The differences between the mindsets of both the East and West, between some basic concepts, which are often taken for granted, and between fundamental interpretations of the history of mankind make this task extremely difficult. The best that can be achieved, at least according to the author, is to *try* to understand the Asian point of view and on the other hand, to *try* to understand the boundaries of our western thinking and take this into account when writing a study which deals with the East-West interactions (which is what this thesis essentially tries to do). But, sadly to say, despite the best efforts, the “other” would always remain the “other”...

The second remark which the author would like to mention in this section on methodology is the relationship between history (or in fact, social science in general) and language. Indeed, in the last several decades, theoretical approaches, summed up by the term

³ For some of the works, which exhibit the influence of Said’s theories, see for example: Inden, Ronald. *Imagining India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; or Dirks, Nicholas. *Castes of Mind*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 2001.

⁴ Greene, Stephen Lyon Wakeman. *Absolute Dreams. Thai Government under Rama VI, 1910–1925*. Bangkok: White Lotus, 1999, p. xiv.

*linguistic turn*⁵, have increasingly grown in prominence. The *linguistic turn* encompasses many different influences and approaches – from the earlier structuralist theories of Ferdinand de Saussure⁶ through the philosophical considerations of Ludwig Wittgenstein⁷ all the way to postmodernism and deconstruction of Jacques Derrida⁸. The idea that language is not only a medium of communication, but a separate entity *per se*, which as a structural framework sometimes formulates the rules of social discourse and defines the perceived meanings of the individual words (i.e. building blocks of the framework) and their gradual shifts, is a fascinating one. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a detailed and comprehensive analysis of these philosophical and linguistic concepts. It also has to be noted that the author does not share the idea that every word used has to be thoroughly “deconstructed” before it can be used to describe historical reality – such an approach would lead to extreme subjectivism and relativism, as many different interpretations and thus different “deconstructed” meanings of these words could arise. This, in turn, would make the historian’s work extremely difficult as any conclusion, which he or she would finally make, would be immediately subject to criticism because of its alleged “narrow-mindedness” and ignorance of “alternative narratives”. On the other hand, even for a historian, it is important to always consider the role the language, especially the phrases and terms most important for his or her field of research, has played in the public discourse and in the historical developments. In case of this particular thesis, for example, it is quite interesting (and useful) to define how words such as “democracy”, “freedom” or “independence” were perceived in the United States and in Thailand and how have these perceptions fitted into the overall framework of the languages used and, in a broader sense, into the different socio-economic setting in each of these two countries. Such an analysis then confirms the difference between the mindsets of the East and the West, which have been discussed in the previous paragraph, and clearly shows how that the terms themselves can be sometimes compared to an empty shell, which is filled by an amalgam of local traditions and “imported” concepts which are often adjusted to fit the reality on the ground. It is also interesting to examine, even within the scope of one national

⁵ For an early anthology of articles dealing with the *linguistic turn*, which is often considered an important landmark in this field of study, see Rorty, Richard (ed.). *The Linguistic Turn: The Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967. For the impact of *linguistic turn* on historiography and on the perceptions of history, see for example: Clark, Elizabeth A. *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2004.

⁶ Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

⁷ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1967.

⁸ See for example: Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976; idem. *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973 and other works.

discourse (for example, in the United States) how do shifts in the actual and perceived meaning of words influence debate about certain issues like foreign policy. Once more, this thesis considers in particular the shifting meaning of the word “freedom” in Thai-American relations of the post-war period and the impact these shifts have had on the practical moves that the American and Thai government have made.

In this respect, the author would like to make one remark, which is based on his observations and which perhaps presents something of a challenge to one of the theories mentioned above. In the thesis, it becomes apparent that at certain important historical junctures, the political representation of the country as well as the media had managed to transform the *primary* meaning of some of the often repeated words and phrases, mainly to justify its existing policy or a change of this policy. In the American context, this could be the already mentioned “democracy” or “freedom”. In other cases, a word acceptable and expected from either the general public or the international community was used by the government, but was instilled with a new meaning, which was in fact opposite of the one usually attributed to this word. For example, the Sarit government in Thailand used the word *pattiwat* (revolution) to describe its policies, despite the fact that it was anything but a revolutionary regime, at least in the generally accepted meaning of such a word. In all of these cases, the political elites had been able, for some time, to shift or transform the meaning of individual words, and, to a degree, to transform the entire structural framework – the language. The question that needs to be asked in this regard is then whether it is the language always that controls the public discourse and society in general and from which even the sources of power and legitimacy are derived, or whether it is the elites and the influential segments of society who can manipulate this framework to their own uses.

The third remark deals with the approach to the events studied in terms of disciplines of history. The main subject of this thesis is the relationship between two states – the United States and Thailand – in the broader context of the post-war period, mainly the Cold War and related developments. As such, it could most likely be classified as “political history”, “diplomatic history” or “international history”. After the so-called *cultural turn*⁹ and the emergence of “new cultural history” and “new social history”, however, “political history” as usually defined has somewhat fallen into disrepute. As a recent article in the journal

⁹ For more on *cultural turn*, see for example Hunt, Lynn (ed.). *The New Cultural History*. Berkeley (CA): University of California Press, 1989.

Perspectives on History states, the “traditional political history is dead and is still dying”.¹⁰ The new emphasis placed on the role of social and cultural factors in the major historical developments has, indeed, shown that issues such as foreign policy or diplomacy can not be studied separately from these phenomena, in some sort of a “laboratory vacuum”. Ideas and ideology, economic situation, cultural influences and transfer, technological advances, changes in the hierarchy of social structure and in the traditional roles of different segments of population – all of these facets put together help to explain the multifaceted image that history beyond any doubt is. The author of this thesis is certainly aware of this fact. Whenever possible, especially in case of Thailand but also of the United States, he tries to show how the foreign policy decisions of the government were influenced by such factors and how, in turn, this foreign policy was justified by putting into the overall socio-economic context in both countries. The role of individuals, who had often been shaped by the economic, social and cultural influences of the period in which they had lived, has also been mentioned. These were not only the leading statesmen, but also ministry officials, military officers, researchers and experts. All of these people have had their share in forming the relationship between Washington and Bangkok, and though their role can not be mentioned in great detail, it is definitely not forgotten.

And yet, at the same time, the author would argue that relationship between two countries, especially when it involves close military cooperation, is an issue which stands and exists, at least in part, outside of the overall social framework and some of its aspects can and should be treated somewhat as a separate problem. Many of the proceedings between the two countries were done in secret, hidden from the oversight of the public, and even though anxieties about possible popular reaction were present, they were not a decisive factor. For example, during the Nixon Administration, perhaps more than ever before and after in American history, the foreign policy was viewed by the president as his personal domain, which neither the Congress nor the American people had the right to interfere with. In Thailand, while the popular engagement in politics was gradually growing throughout the 20th century, the voice of the public did not play a major role in foreign policy decisions. Economic and social factors were, of course, an important issue that had to be taken into account, but again, were not decisive for setting the course of Thai foreign policy. In other words, when studying the Thai-American relations of this period (and in fact, in doing this kind of research in general), a certain compromise between focusing solely on the diplomatic,

¹⁰ Pincus, Steven and William Novak. Political History after the Cultural Turn, *Perspectives on History*, 2011, vol. 49, no. 4, p. 19.

military and economic relations between the two countries on the one hand and between explaining these relations purely by social developments on the other, has to be established. The author of this thesis hopes that despite the limited scope of his paper, he was able to achieve such a compromise and to make use of other historical and social science disciplines as well to prove the words that “the field offers a model of how to make interdisciplinary scholarship a reality rather than an aspiration”¹¹.

A Survey of the Sources Used

In this part of the introduction, the materials used in writing this thesis will be presented and evaluated. Since both primary and secondary sources consulted by the author are too numerous to list here, only those considered most useful or relevant to his research are discussed in the following survey.

It was the intention of the author to expand the existing knowledge of the Thai-American relations in the post-war period and of the image of Thailand in the United States by analyzing mainly the primary documents reflecting these trends. In this respect, the U.S. Department of State offers two useful sources of information for this research. The edition of foreign policy documents, *The Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS), is one of these sources. As of the time of writing this thesis, documents related to Thailand have been cleared for publication all the way up to 1976, i.e. to the end of the Ford Administration¹². The diplomatic correspondence between Washington and Bangkok, minutes of the meetings between Thai and American officials, as well as estimates by American diplomats and experts on the situation in Thailand during the post-war decades offer an invaluable insight into the American (and to a degree, Thai) thinking and deliberations. Of course it has to be taken into account that the FRUS edition, while extensive in itself, does not contain all the documents from the period as not all of them have been declassified. Even primary sources such as those mentioned here have to be critically analyzed and assessed with a due respect to the context and purpose for which they were produced. Still, these documents as a whole enable us to reconstruct quite a multifaceted picture of how the relations between these two countries unfolded and of the major concerns and also shifts during the three post-war decades.¹³

¹¹ Zelizer, Julian E. *The Interdisciplinarity of Political History, Perspectives on History*, 2011, vol. 49, no. 4, p. 17.

¹² The last of these documents, related to the relations with Thailand in the years 1973–1976, have just been cleared for public access this summer (2011).

¹³ Another important asset of the FRUS edition is that it is available, in addition to the printed version by the United States Government Printing office, online, both at the website of the Department of State and also other websites, from which it can (in most cases) be downloaded. For example, the University of Wisconsin maintains

The other source provided by the Department of State is *The Department of State Bulletin* (DoS Bulletins), an official publication intended to express views of the Secretary of State and his subordinates on important foreign policy issues as well as to present to the public the most important policy developments. These bulletins were also widely used by the author, but for a different reason than the FRUS edition. They presented the official views of the American administrations during these decades, which often differed sharply from the secret negotiations and steps taken by the U.S. government. The comparison of the FRUS and DoS Bulletins enables us to see how certain policy moves, taken for reasons often unknown to the public, were presented (or, conversely, not presented at all) and justified by the American government. The bulletins while not primarily a source of information, which could not be found elsewhere, provide nonetheless an insight into the official foreign policy discourse of the period and into the image of American foreign policy in Asia that the Department of State, and more generally, each of the administrations tried to construct during the Cold War years.

In addition to the FRUS, there are number of other declassified or publicly accessible U.S. government sources which, in one way or the other, add to our knowledge of Thai-American relations. In this respect, the author would like to mention especially the materials deposited in the *National Security Archive* at The George Washington University¹⁴, which offer important and interesting information and insights on such topics as the American involvement in Indochina or the rapprochement with the People's Republic of China. While these documents do not necessarily deal directly with Thailand, they often provide the necessary overall context of the Cold War period and of the American foreign policy in Southeast Asia. The second such source which releases new and previously inaccessible documents on the Cold War foreign policy, is the *Cold War International History Project*, run by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars¹⁵. Again, these documents, while they in a vast majority of cases deal with problems other than Thai-American relations, can still be used to put some of the issues under discussion into a wider perspective.

The author attempts in his thesis to show how Thailand was viewed not only by the American politicians and statesmen, but also by the American general public. The images of

a digital database of the FRUS edition, going all the way to the 1958/1960 volumes. See: United States, Department of State, Office of the Historian. *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Available at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments> [last access 2. 6. 2011] University of Wisconsin Digital Collections. *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Available at <http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/FRUS> [last access 2. 6. 2011].

¹⁴ The George Washington University, The National Security Archive. *Electronic Briefing Books*. Available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/index.html> [last access 2. 6. 2011].

¹⁵ Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. *Cold War International History Project*. Available at http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=topics.home&topic_id=1409 [last access 2. 6. 2011].

“the land of the free” and their transformations over the period studied are often well recorded in the newspaper articles of the period. For this reason, a number of these articles have been used and quoted in the thesis mainly with the purpose to illustrate the influence the Cold War had on American perception of Thailand and on the developments in Southeast Asia in general. Most of these articles come from *The New York Times*, which the author considers to have been the one mainstream American newspaper with perhaps the most extensive and detailed coverage (including not only news but also editorials) of some of the events studied. Other articles are quoted from *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times* and other newspapers.

One other kind of primary source, consulted on a number of occasions in this thesis, is the accounts by participants. In this respect, there are two particular titles which the author would like to single out. One was written by the Thai diplomat and statesman Direk Jayanama¹⁶ and concerns mostly Thailand’s role during World War II and the negotiations with the United States, Great Britain and France that followed in the wake of the war. The author of this thesis is of course aware of the perils associated with using memoirs and of the caution with which these types of historical documents in general have to be approached. On the other hand, in Jayanama’s account, there is a number of interesting details which can not be found elsewhere. It can be said that no other publication that the author has had the opportunity to consult offers such a comprehensive and detailed account of the Thailand’s position on the international scene during and shortly after World War II. The other publication which would fall into this category is the book written by Edwin F. Stanton¹⁷, an American diplomat who served as the U.S. Minister and later Ambassador to Thailand between 1946 and 1953. Stanton, while on the one hand disappointed with the political developments in Thailand and the fall of the liberal government, had on the other hand significantly contributed to the establishment of the special relationship between Thailand and the United States. His autobiography, when combined with the cables he had been sending to Washington, clearly show the dilemma which the American politicians and diplomats, as well as the general public had to face in the years of emerging bipolar divide – did the threat of communism (alleged or real) justify the U.S. support for undemocratic regimes in various parts of the world? From this point of view, Stanton’s work provides an interesting insight into the thinking of the period and rationale behind Washington’s policy toward Thailand.

¹⁶ Direk Jayanama. *Thailand and World War II*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2008.

¹⁷ Stanton, Edwin F. *Brief Authority*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956.

Over the past decades, a number of scholarly monographs and publications have been produced on the topic of American involvement in Southeast Asia and in Thailand in particular. In general, it could be said that most of these publications fall into two categories – those that defend the American support for the military government in Thailand by pointing to the danger of communist aggression in Southeast Asia and those that reject these claims and condemn the U.S. for condoning the survival of a military, oppressive junta for a number of years. Valid arguments are offered to support both of these perspectives. The author of this thesis, as stated in the introduction, has offered his own hypothesis related to the true nature of the Thai-American relations, which tries to reflect these relations from different points of view and different angles, mostly using the primary sources. Thus, while the secondary sources were consulted on a number of issues, the author tried to dissociate himself from the biases present in some of these works and often springing from the fact that these publications were produced during the Cold War and the Cold War mindset is clearly present in them.

Quite logically, the authors of the earlier publications did not have access to the as yet unclassified primary sources and had to work with a more limited information base. Still, some of them have managed to provide interesting and useful accounts of the American strategy and policy in the region. In this respect, the author would mention for example *Thailand and the United States* by American historian Frank C. Darling.¹⁸ Although this book was published already in 1965, Darling had managed to outline, describe and analyze some of the most important long-term trend in Thai-American relations, which were to persist in the years to come. While the author of this thesis does not agree with Darling on a number of points (especially with his assessment of the American options to save Thailand's democracy in the late 1940s), it needs to be acknowledged that Darling's work, even after more than forty years, still remains valid and useful. It could also be said that some authors have since then built on Darling's foundations – in this respect, the publication by David Elliot *Thailand: Origins of Military Rule* can be listed as one of the examples.¹⁹ Elliot also shares Darling's critical attitude toward American role in establishing the supremacy of the Thai army in the political life of the country, a view that the author of this thesis finds rather unfair. To mention one title which offers a different perspective, a monograph by Donald Neuchterlein *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*²⁰ unambiguously and clearly defends the thesis that Thailand is a part of the global struggle against communism and that the American support of

¹⁸ Darling, Frank C. *Thailand and the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1965.

¹⁹ Elliot, David. *Thailand: Origins of Military Rule*. London: Zed Press, 1978.

²⁰ Neuchterlein, Donald. *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*. Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press, 1965.

the ruling military government is not an option, but a necessity. For the author of this thesis, it was interesting to be able to compare these different perspectives of the same problem, often reflecting different interpretations based on essentially the same facts. The question of how these facts, such as the presence of “leftist insurgents” in Thailand and the danger of communist subversion, were presented – sometimes belittled, more often exaggerated – and how these interpretations influenced the American foreign policy is also one of the topics that the author tries to tackle in his thesis.

In addition to the publications more specifically focused on the Thai-American relations, a number of other, more general studies related to the American foreign policy of the period were used throughout the research. The reader can find those in the bibliography appended to the thesis. The author would like to mention here, as a general observation, that in many cases the role of the American relationship with Thailand, if mentioned at all, is inevitably tied to the Vietnam War and to the ultimate American failure. The overall context of the American involvement in Indochina can not, of course, be left out and has to be taken into account; the shifts and changes in American foreign policy, often caused by domestic political developments, were also a significant factor which the author of this thesis did not fail to take into account. In this respect, just to provide one example of a publication which the author found helpful in his research into the American foreign policy in the 1970s, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine. American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969–1976* by Robert S. Litwak can be mentioned.²¹ The more general publications about American foreign policy are thus indeed useful, to a certain extent, in providing the overall context for the topic studied. In addition, in some cases, like the recently published book *The Icarus Syndrome: A History of American Hubris*²² by Peter Beinart, the author tries to provide reevaluation of the American foreign policy as such. These new interpretations can also be useful in broadening one’s horizons and gaining fresh insights into the problems studied, even though in this particular case the author of this thesis tends to rather disagree than agree with many of Beinart’s observations.

While the focus of the thesis is more on the Thai-American relations from the American perspective, it was necessary, as already mentioned, to include at least brief sections of text dealing with the political and social developments in Thailand itself. In general, there seems to be a problem with both the Thai and foreign historiography on Thai

²¹ Litwak, Robert S. *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine. American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969–1976*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

²² Beinart, Peter. *The Icarus Syndrome. A History of American Hubris*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010.

history in that even facts from the modern period are often presented differently by various authors, whether it concerns dates, names of persons involved in various events etc. The author of this thesis had tried to overcome this obstacle by confronting and comparing as many sources as possible. To provide some reference for the readers interested in general Thai history, two useful reference titles should be listed here: *Thailand's Political History: From the Fall of Ayutthaya to Recent Times*²³ by Barend Jan Terwiel and *Thailand: A Short History*²⁴ by David K. Wyatt. Both of these authors did an extensive research into this subject and their accounts are useful and concise narratives of the historical developments in Thailand. The problem with both of these publications (and some others, which are not specifically mentioned here), however, is that they tend to focus more on the medieval and early modern periods of Thai history and also on the 19th century and the pre-WWI years. It would almost seem as if the closer the text gets to the developments after World War II, the less detailed and informative it becomes. For some periods of Thai history after 1945, however, there exist other publications which are sometimes written in English (and thus accessible to a wider audience). In this respect, Thak Chaloemtiarana and his excellent study of Thai politics during the government of Sarit Thanarat (1959–1963)²⁵ proved invaluable in providing not only facts, but also insights into Thai political thinking, both in the post-war period and in the wider historical context. It should also be noted that the same author published a translated edition of the most important Thai domestic political documents from the period between 1932 and 1957²⁶, which are again helpful for those interested in political changes and developments in Thailand. For other periods of modern Thai history of concern to the author of this study, relevant sources in Thai were used, which can be found in the bibliography.

The works discussing various theoretical approaches employed by the author have already been mentioned in the previous chapter and will not be repeated here. One more remark should be made concerning the transcriptions of Thai names. The author decided to use the form adopted by most researchers in this field and to apply it consistently throughout the text. Only in cases of direct quotations from primary sources, the original version of the name is left in place. In such cases, if the transcription is too different from the standardized

²³ Terwiel, Barend Jan. *Thailand's Political History. From the Fall of Ayutthaya to Recent Times*. Bangkok: River Books, 2005.

²⁴ Wyatt, David K. *Thailand. A Short History*. 2nd Edition. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003.

²⁵ Thak Chaloemtiarana. *Thailand. The Politics of Despotism*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2007.

²⁶ Thak Chaloemtiarana (ed.). *Thai Politics, 1932–1957*. Volume One. Extracts and Documents. Bangkok: Political Association of Thailand, 1978.

version used elsewhere in the thesis as to make it hard to identify, brackets with the standard version of the name are inserted in the quotation. The issue of using terms “Siam” and “Thailand”, which the country has at various periods of time been referred to, is discussed in the following chapter (see f. 27).

CHAPTER I – PRELUDE: THE UNITED STATES AND SIAM²⁷ PRIOR TO 1942

“God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No! He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns.”

Senator Albert J. Beveridge, 1900²⁸

I.1. The Eagle Spreads Its Wings: American Foreign Policy in Asia in the 19th Century

The 19th century, and especially the decades after the end of American Civil War, witnessed the arrival of the United States on the Asian geopolitical scene. Emboldened by massive economic growth and territorial expansion, which had seen the United States incorporate vast territories in the west and ultimately reach the Pacific frontier²⁹, the young republic now set her eyes upon distant Asian shores. A mixture of pragmatism, imperial dreams, religious zeal, fascination by the little known and mysterious as well as beliefs in American exceptionalism and messianic mission all contributed to the rising interest in Asian countries. These varying interests, wishes and goals sometimes contradicted each other and even clashed, but as a whole they ensured that the Asian mission would remain on the American foreign policy agenda as one of the priority issues. It is, therefore, useful to be reminded, albeit briefly, what these motives were that drove the American policy in Asia and what practical impacts they had.

Much has already been said and written about the concept of “frontier” and its role in shaping the American public thought and foreign policy. The idea of exploring, colonizing and civilizing new lands had been an integral part of the American identity ever since the beginning. By 1890, however, this uncivilized, “savage”, frontier had all but disappeared. As

²⁷ For centuries, the country was known as “Siam” (สยาม) to the outside world. Its current name “Thailand” (ประเทศไทย [Prathet Thai] or เมืองไทย [Muang Thai]) was only adopted in 1939 by the government of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram as a result of a new wave of nationalism and of emphasis placed on building a unified nation-state. The latter name was once more dropped in favor of the former in 1945 and was only ultimately readopted in 1949. For the sake of accuracy, the appropriate appellation will be used in this thesis with respect to each time period discussed. Thus, in the opening chapter the country will be referred to as Siam. For more information on the name change and the etymology behind it, see for example: Rhum, Michael R. ‘Modernity’ and ‘Tradition’ in ‘Thailand’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 1996, vol. 30, no. 2, p. 331 (ff. 12).

²⁸ Quoted from a speech in favor of the annexation of Philippines as an American overseas possession. Beveridge, Albert J. Our Philippine Policy. In: Schirmer, Daniel B. and Stephen Roskam Shalom (eds.). *The Philippines Reader*. Boston: Southend Press, 1987, p. 26.

²⁹ By 1846, the Oregon Territory was established in the northwest. In 1848, after the Mexican-American War, the United States forced Mexico to cede 1.36 km² of land, area which was later divided among six states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah). The population growth was equally impressive, from less than 5.5 million in 1800 to approximately 50 million in 1880. For exact data on the American population, see: Porter, Robert P., Henry Gannet and William C. Hunt. Progress of the Nation. In: United States, Census Office. *Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890. Part I*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895, p. xi.

the Superintendent of the Census for the 1890 fittingly wrote: “Up to and including 1880, the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line.”³⁰ This development had clear ramifications for the American public. The republic was destined to grow and expand, to encompass new lands and new peoples within its borders, to overcome new obstacles and reach new frontiers. To the east, Europe with its old style politics, its rivalries and militant nationalism; to the south, Latin America, where the newly independent republics were jealously guarding their independence, fearing the United States perhaps even more than their former colonial rulers.³¹ To the west, however, was the vast Pacific Ocean with a number of scattered islands and archipelagos, which in many cases had yet not been claimed by any imperial power. Behind this ocean lay Japan, China with its fabled markets and countless other kingdoms and principalities, waiting to be explored by the American sailors, merchants and missionaries.

The attraction towards Asia had been a continuing trend in the American foreign policy at least since the beginning of the 19th century. The activities in this particular area became more intensive in direct proportion to the growing confidence of the United States. Already prior to the Civil War, Washington sought to establish itself in the Far East. The most outstanding success of the American diplomacy in this period is arguably the mission of Commodore Matthew Perry to Japan in the years 1852–1854 and the subsequent opening of Japanese markets by the Convention of Kanagawa³². With the growing industrialization of the country after the Civil War, the attraction and attractiveness of Asia grew even further. The United States was well aware that with its industrial output growing, the supply of goods would soon outmatch the demand, leading to potential economic difficulties and crises. The “overproduction theory” was addressed not only by factory owners and traders, but by

³⁰ As quoted in: United States, Bureau of Census. *200 Years of U.S. Census Taking: Population and Housing Questions, 1790–1990*. Washington, D.C.: United States, Bureau of Census, 1989. Available at <http://www.census.gov/mso/www/bkgrnd.htm> [last access 27. 2. 2010].

³¹ This mistrust is clearly seen when the original plans for Pan-American cooperation are examined. Simón Bolívar, one of the heroes of the anti-colonial struggle in Latin America, organized a meeting of the representatives of South and Central American states in Panama in 1826. He had a vision of creating a union of these states, which would provide for a common parliament and military force as well as mutual defense obligations. It was Bolívar’s intent that the United States was left out of this union, playing merely the role of an observer. The plan never materialized, but the suspicions lingered and it was not until the end of the 19th century that Washington began to be more deeply involved in the Pan-American cooperation.

³² Perry’s mission was probably the first significant occasion on which the United States made use of its military and technological superiority to force its will on a thus far independent Asian state. Yet, it was never the intent of Washington to assume any kind of control over Japan and once the commercial objectives of the mission were accomplished, the United States placed no further demands on Japan. For more on Perry’s mission, see: Perry, Matthew Calbraith. *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856.

thinkers such as Alfred Thayer Mahan³³, who linked trade relations and exports with the new role of the United States in the world. The almost constant fear of overproduction and its adverse impacts was thus one of the strong impetuses for the United States to enter the competition for Asian, mainly Chinese and Japanese, markets. The argumentation for acquiring new markets was growing more intense and persuasive with each passing decade. William Seward, Secretary of State under Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson, saw acquiring new markets as a way to world domination. For this reason, he sought to obtain Alaska and Midway Islands, “the drawbridge between America and Asia”³⁴. In the 1890s, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge claimed: “We must have new markets unless we would be visited by declines in wages and by great industrial disturbances, of which signs have not been lacking [...] Navy, coaling stations and ports in the East ... have become essential conditions of our time”³⁵. At the same time, William Day, who served as an Undersecretary of State in the McKinley Administration, talked about the potential of “vast, undeveloped fields of Africa and Far East”³⁶. In 1898, when Philippines were occupied by the United States, the “drawbridge” was complemented by the “stepping-stone” to the China market.³⁷

The United States, however, realized that its position vis-à-vis the European colonial powers was still rather weak. Despite its growing international role and strength, Washington could not directly confront London or Paris in cases when their interests clashed. During the 19th century, the colonization of the Asian mainland progressed at gradual, yet steady pace. The British advances in India, Burma and Malaya, the French attempts to establish protectorate over vast portions of Southeast Asia and the continued hold of Netherlands over present-day Indonesia were just some of the factors that limited the scope of American foreign policy activities in Asia. The obvious priority on the Washington’s foreign policy agenda was China, but even there the United States encountered the interests of other world powers. The weakening of the Chinese government, the gradual descent of the country into chaos and its *de facto* division into spheres of foreign influence were adverse to the American

³³ In his well-known work, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, published in 1890, Mahan argued for the building of a strong navy which would help solve the overproduction problem, while establishing the United States firmly on the world stage. See Mahan, Alfred Thayer. *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660 – 1783*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004.

³⁴ Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Barbarian Virtues. The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2000, p. 21.

³⁵ Henry Cabot Lodge quoted in: LaFeber, Walter. *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*. Volume II. *The American Search for Opportunity, 1865–1913*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 158.

³⁶ McCormick, Thomas. *China Market: America’s Quest for Informal Empire, 1893–1901*. Chicago: Quadrangle, 1967, pp. 37–38.

³⁷ Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, p. 31.

doctrine of free and equal access to Chinese markets³⁸. The United States realized this and also realized that without a power base in the region its position would always be inferior to that of its competitors. That was perhaps one of the main motivations behind the annexation of the Philippines after the war with Spain in 1898. Even after the archipelago had been annexed, however, the United States remained a minor power on the Asian stage compared to the likes of Britain or France, and its influence on the events transpiring there remained limited.

So far, trade and commerce were discussed as the driving force behind the American policy in Asia prior in the 19th and early 20th century. There were, however, other important factors at play which must be mentioned. Some of them can be tracked to the enormous changes that the American economy, society and political thought went through in the 1800s, especially after the end of Civil War. With the new factories, railroads and banks came new feeling of grandeur, of prestige and of “American exceptionalism”. The idea that the American nation was destined by providence to spread “civilization” and to conquer weaker races was not without parallels in other places in the West. Similar beliefs, often based on concepts of racial and social supremacy, were present in British, German or even Japanese thought of the time as well. Eugenics³⁹ and the study of human genetics and classification of races were prevalent at the turn of the century. On the one hand, the new emphasis on race led its most outspoken defenders to seek ways to better the genetic make-up of their own domestic population – often by opposing free immigration of inferior races to the United States. On the other hand, many people believed that it was a duty of the civilized nations to go out and help the “savages” and “primitives”, who were lagging so far behind the Western world, to enjoy at least some privileges of modern life. This help in many cases involved or even required a total domination of the “savage” nation. Teddy Roosevelt dealt with this topic at length in his famous essay “The Strenuous Life”. Roosevelt argued that even war was

³⁸ The “open door” policy that the United States pursued regarding China found its most precise articulation in the 1899 notes of the Secretary of State John Hay to governments of Great Britain, Japan, Russia, France, Italy and Germany. In these notes, the United States, while not asking for the special “spheres of influence” to be abolished altogether, asked that each nation concerned recognized the rights of citizens of other foreign nations in some key areas like levying of taxes, use of ports etc. While the “open door policy” was not flatly rejected by the world powers, its practical implementation had its considerable limitations. For the full version of one of the notes, see: United States, Department of State. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States with the Annual Message of the President, Transmitted to Congress December 5, 1899*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901, pp. 129–130.

³⁹ In the United States, eugenics was strongly defended and promoted by men such as Francis Amasa Walker or Charles Davenport. At the turn of the century and in the 1910s and 1920s, a number of organizations, associations and institutions were established, such as American Breeders’ Association (1903), Eugenics Record Office (1910), Race Betterment Foundation (1911) or American Eugenics Society (1923). Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, pp. 156–160.

justifiable when it sought to promote the cause of civilization: “The result of the last Turko-Russian war was an immense and permanent increase of happiness for Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. These provinces became independent or passed under the dominion of Austria, and the advantage that accrued to them because of this expansion of the domain of civilization at the expense of barbarism has been simply incalculable.”⁴⁰ He even went so far as to argue that the civilized nations could only survive and prosper by waging war on the “barbarians” and by overcoming them: “With a barbarous nation peace is the exceptional condition. On the border between civilization and barbarism war is generally normal because it must be under the conditions of barbarism. Whether the barbarian be the Red Indian on the frontier of the United States, the Afghan on the border of British India, or the Turkoman who confronts the Siberian Cossack, the result is the same. In the long run civilized man finds he can keep the peace only by subduing his barbarian neighbor; for the barbarian will yield only to force, save in instances so exceptional that they may be disregarded.”⁴¹ Roosevelt’s essay is a fine example of the imperialist American thought of the late 1800s, based partially on the notions of racial supremacy mentioned above, but also on the strong, firm belief in the future role of the United States and the white men in general in civilizing and modernizing the world.

The disdain for the indigenous populations, no matter how old their own civilizations was or how rich a culture they have created over the centuries, was quite apparent, for example, during the American occupation of the Philippines and during the brutal pacification war that followed. This disdain, however, was not only a distinguishing trait of the imperialists or expansionists. In fact, some of the staunchest opponents of these policies shared a similar view of the Asian peoples. Varina Jefferson Davis, widow of the late President of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis, warned against the incorporation of the Philippines, because of the racial inferiority of its inhabitants, even compared to the “negroes”.⁴² Samuel Gompers, a well-known labor union leader and a self-proclaimed liberal, when arguing against the annexation of the Philippines, remarked regarding the Filipinos: “... And such is the make-up of the eight millions of inhabitants of the Philippines – Malays, Negritos and Chinamen, the semi-barbaric people of the more than three hundred islands comprising the group in the Archipelago who are to come within the fold of our Union. What

⁴⁰ Roosevelt, Teddy. *Strenuous Life. Expansion and Peace, The Independent*, 21. 12. 1899.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Jefferson Davis, Varina. *Why We Do Not Want the Philippines, The Arena*, 1900, no. 23, pp. 1–4.

a wonderful achievement; what a marvelous gain to the civilization of America”.⁴³ He appealed for the lawmakers to act before it was too late. If the Philippines were to be annexed: “Can we hope to close the flood gates of immigration from the hordes of Chinese and the semi-savage races coming from what will then be part of our own country?”⁴⁴ Even many American missionaries, who were often sympathetic to the plight of Asian peoples living in poverty under oppressive regimes, held a negative, derogatory view of these peoples and their civilizations. Often, the missionaries believed that in order to facilitate the conversion of natives to Christianity and their remaining faithful to it after their baptism, it was necessary for these natives to adopt the Western culture and way of life. Conversely, politicians such as William Howard Taft held the conviction that “Christianity and the spread of Christianity, are the only basis for the hope of modern civilization [in China – J.B.]”⁴⁵ Either way, Christianizing went hand in hand with civilizing and “uplifting”, i.e. implanting the Western life-style in Asia, which was in turn expected to create large markets for the American exporters.

In all of these endeavors, the Asians were viewed as objects rather than subjects – they were to consume American products, embrace with open arms the Anglo-Saxon civilization and religion, or in some cases serve as the “imperial wards” to demonstrate to the rest of the world powers American abilities in governing and uplifting inferior peoples. At best, the Filipinos, Chinese or Hawaiians were seen as little children, naive and in need of protection and proper upbringing by the benevolent Uncle Sam; at worst, they were pictured as savages and barbarians, who must be subdued and civilized, even by force. Their own ideas, wishes and achievements were often dismissed as irrational and irrelevant.

In addition to this prevailing paternalism, combined with disdain and imperialistic tendencies, however, there was something else which influenced the American views of Asia. For many Westerns, the East still had a flavor of mystery, a remnant perhaps of the medieval dreams and fables inspired by such travelers as Marco Polo and those that followed in his steps. While the general feeling in the 19th century was that Asian countries are hopelessly backward and their populations are lagging behind the Euroatlantic civilization in all important aspects of life, there was still this fascination, if sometimes subconscious, with the

⁴³ Gompers, Samuel. An Address to the Chicago Peace Jubilee: Imperialism, Its Dangers and Wrongs (October 18, 1898). In: Kaufman, Stuart B., Peter J. Albert and Grace Palladino (eds.). *The Samuel Gompers Papers. Volume 5. An Expanding Movement at the Turn of the Century, 1898–1902*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996, p. 25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 28.

⁴⁵ Hunter, Jane. *The Gospel of Gentility. American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-century China*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984, p. 8.

ancient Asian culture and thought. As a result, many of those who traveled to Asia expected to find a fairy-tale country where people still lived the way they had lived thousands of years before. Such dreams and imaginations, however, were often deeply and irrevocably shattered when these travelers encountered the everyday reality of life in China, Siam or other Asian countries, with all its problems and shortages⁴⁶. Yet, for some, the fascination and the desire to understand the East persisted even after encountering the cultural shock of meeting the “natives” face to face and living among them. And for those that have never traveled to Asia, the Far East long remained a land of imagination full of vivid, picturesque images, possessing an unexplainable yet irresistible appeal.

This introduction to the American aspirations, objectives and policies in Asia is brief and can in no way fully present the complex reality. It should be sufficient to show, however, that despite the undeniable presence of the more “down-to-earth”, materialistic factors such as trade and imperial expansion, there were more factors at play that influenced the way Americans thought of Asia. The dichotomy between the intention to “civilize” and the desire to understand and respect, between the passion for spreading democracy and progress on one hand and sympathy for liberation struggles of the Asian nations on the other, has its roots in the late 19th century when the United States began to take up a more prominent position on the world stage. The differences and contradictions between these two general approaches account for many of the seemingly illogical, incomprehensible twists that have often accompanied U.S. foreign policy in Asia over the last hundred and fifty years; on the other hand, this dichotomy made the study of American interactions with Asia all the more interesting and intriguing.

I.2. Eagle and the Elephant: Siam and the United States before World War II⁴⁷

The United States and Thailand, as some could argue, were in a way predestined to become allies. A brief look at the historical developments in both countries in the 18th and 19th century would seem to support this assertion as some interesting matches and similarities could be quite easily pointed out. The United States, which owed its very existence to a successful anti-colonial struggle, was bound to look with sympathy on a similar struggle of Siam, which was desperately trying to preserve its independence and integrity from the

⁴⁶ Some of these experiences of the American missionaries in China are described in Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility*, pp. 1–2.

⁴⁷ The white elephant was a traditional symbol of the Thai/Siamese state and up to 1917 appeared on the country’s flag. The title of this section is inspired by a publication presenting an overview of Thai-American relations. See: Vimol Bhonghibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.). *The Eagle and the Elephant. 150 Years of Thai-American Relations*. Bangkok: United Production, 1982.

British and French encroachments. Conversely, the ultimate success of American revolutionary fight could provide a strong inspiration to the Thai leaders and intellectual elite. The United States was quickly becoming a symbol of modernity and modernization – at a time (especially after 1851) when Siam was becoming open and even hungry for Western technology and innovations. At the same time, the United States was looking for ways to access the China market and to gain a foothold in Asia and Siam could become an important piece in this play, being an independent country with traditional trade links to China, which were further strengthened in the early 19th century. Besides, Siam could be quite certain that, despite the rhetorical figures mentioned in the previous section, the United States would most likely not seek to occupy it or establish a protectorate over its territory, and thus could prefer cooperation with the Americans over that with British or French, where the danger of annexation was much higher.

These assertions, while true in a way, are of course rather simplified and abstract. The reality of the international relations of the period, as well as domestic situation in both the United States and Siam, was far more complex and the road to the ultimate alliance between both states was far more devious. As with many other historical events, the Thai-American relationship was influenced by more than just logical reasons – often personal sympathies and antipathies, political games as well as personal interests of the people involved played an equally important, if not a more decisive role. Yet, it is possible to trace the roots of the Thai-American relationship as well as certain trends, which have developed over time and which have had a last impact on the interaction between Bangkok and Washington.

I.2.A. The Relationship Begins to Emerge: Siam in American Foreign Policy prior to 1917

Unlike China, Siam itself was not a priority on the American foreign policy agenda in the 19th century. Compared to the markets of China or even Japan, it could offer too little to attract such attention. Its importance lied in its potential to help further the overreaching American objectives in Asia. The country itself was not so well known in the United States, although it wasn't completely unknown either. Siam was described by a number of travelers before and their accounts were available, although sometimes only in abbreviated form, even to the general public.⁴⁸ On the other hand, a number of changes had occurred in the kingdom

⁴⁸ Just to cite some examples, German physician Engelbert Kaempfer traveled via Siam in 1690 while accompanying a diplomatic mission of the Dutch East India Company to Japan. His account of the voyage was published in English shortly after his death in 1727. Even earlier, in 1691, French diplomat Simon La Loubère

during the late 18th and early 19th century – changes that were significant for the future of Siam’s relationship with the West.

Much of the above mentioned accounts were written during the time when Ayutthaya was still the capital city and center of Siamese kingdom. However, in 1767, the city was captured and destroyed by the invading Burmese army.⁴⁹ The centuries of Thai-Burmese rivalry ultimately brought about the end of one era of Thai history. As a result, the focal point of Thai kingdom shifted to the south, first to Thonburi and later to the village of Bang Kok, where a new capital was established, known in Thai as *Krungthep*.⁵⁰ The following years were spent mostly by solidifying the position of the new state and dynasty⁵¹, in restoring the boundaries and spheres of influence violated by the war, and by slowly regaining the prestige lost in 1767. The new Thai rulers from the house of Chakri and their advisors wanted to make sure that the fall of Ayutthaya would never again be repeated and that the Siam’s viability would be guaranteed. By planning and implementing the necessary domestic reforms, such as reorganizing of the administration and armed forces, instituting new tax system, or modernizing the Thai law system, they hoped to provide the desperately needed coherence and stability, while gradually creating a more tightly organized and controlled nation-state.

Historically, the strongest and potentially most dangerous rival of Ayutthaya was the neighboring Burma. The two kingdoms vied for power in the contested regions, such as the semi-independent Lanna Kingdom (today part of Northern Thailand) or areas along the Tenasserim mountain ridge. The fortunes of war were constantly changing, and while Burma gained an upper hand after 1767, the Thais could reasonably hope to turn the tide and defeat it in the next conflict (in fact, a number of smaller conflicts followed the fall of Ayutthaya, in which Siam was not always victorious, but never again so decisively defeated). Gradually, however, a stronger enemy than Burma began to emerge in the west. Since the 1820s, the

published his well-known *Du Royaume de Siam* (the English translation, Kingdom of Siam, appeared in 1693). A number of other travelogues appeared during the 17th and 18th century.

⁴⁹ For more details on the fall of Ayutthaya and the main reasons that contributed to it, see for example: Terwiel, Barend Jan *Thailand's Political History. From the Fall of Ayutthaya to Recent Times*. Bangkok: River Books, 2005, pp. 34–38.

⁵⁰ In Thai, the name *Krungthep* is still the official name of the city and is widely used by the general public. On the contrary, in English and other foreign languages, the city is chiefly known by the original name of the site it was built upon, i.e. Bangkok (town of wild plum trees).

⁵¹ After the reign of King Taksin (1767–1782), the Chakri dynasty, which still remains in power (although just as nominal heads of state) in Thailand today, established itself with the ascension of Rama I, former general and foremost advisor of Taksin, to the throne. The former king, who had abdicated after an attempted coup d’état, was executed. Rama I then proceeded with reoccupying territories formerly controlled by Ayutthaya, and by reasserting the position of the new state. A strong emphasis was also placed on promoting continuity with the Ayutthayan kingdom, although many aspects of life under the Chakri dynasty began to modernize. For more on the rule of Rama I and the period of transition in Thai politics, see: Wenk, Klaus. *The Restoration of Thailand under Rama I, 1782–1809*. Tucson (AZ): The University of Arizona Press, 1968.

British began to push into Burma from their power base in India. The Burmese, although they were valiantly defending their independence, in the long run did not stand much chance against the British forces. A series of three conflicts, known as the Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824–1826, 1852–1853 and 1885–1886)⁵², followed. After each of these wars, Burma had lost some of its sovereignty and territory, until it was completely annexed by Great Britain in 1886. This development was in many ways shocking for the Siamese court. For long centuries, Burma was considered the strongest local power and the most imminent threat to the security of the Thai state. China was of course seen as the mightiest nation, but its distance from the region and its unwillingness to meddle into the affairs of vassal states made its influence only imaginary or at best indirect. The Khmer state in the east⁵³, Laotian kingdoms in the north and the Malay sultanates in the south were all seen as inferior to the power of the Thai kingdom, and their leaders were often relegated to the second rank status of vassals of the Siamese monarch. The decisive defeat of Burma had serious and long-lasting ramifications for the Thai thinking. The fact that an Asian nation was defeated by a Western power showed that the weapons and tactics that the British used were much more effective than the traditional warfare employed by the Burmese. This was worrying for Siam, because essentially it was accustomed to fight wars in the same manner as the Burmese and, if confronted with the British, would most likely meet with the same fate. Besides, it was very likely that Britain would not be content just with occupying and annexing Burma, but that it would seek to gain significant concessions in Siam as well.

On the more general level, the traditional concept of Asian superiority over Western “barbarians”, which was traditionally prevailing in China, but shared in many other Asian countries, was quickly shattered by the colonial expansion of European powers. Great Britain was not the only new factor that Siam had to count with. France began to assert its dominance in Indochina, threatening to undermine the Thai influence in areas such as Cambodia or Laos. In the 1860s and 1870s, the French managed to overtake almost all of modern-day Vietnam⁵⁴,

⁵² For a detailed account of the Anglo-Burmese Wars, see for example: Bečka, Jan. *Dějiny Barmy* [The History of Burma]. Prague: Lidové noviny, 2007, pp. 106–135.

⁵³ In the Khmer kingdom (modern day Cambodia), Thai interests often clashed with those of Vietnam, and the two countries often struggled to bring the area under control, using local leaders as proxies. Vietnam, however, was too far to threaten Siam directly and its position in Thai strategic thinking of the time was nowhere near in importance to that of Burma.

⁵⁴ The French annexation of Vietnam came in two separate stages. Between 1858 and 1867, the French had taken over the southern part of modern-day Vietnam, which became part of their overseas empire as the Cochinchina colony. Paris then moved to establish a firm foothold in the north of the country as well. By the 1880s, French forces were stationed in the north, provoking a clash with China and part of the Vietnamese who rejected the European presence. The ensuing Sino-French War (1883–1885) resulted in France establishing a protectorate

laying the base for what was to become the colony of French Indochina. By 1887, they have established their protectorate over Cambodia and by 1904 Laos also became a part of their colonial empire. The position of Siam was becoming more and more vulnerable and precarious. During several decades it had lost almost all influence in areas where it was an important player for centuries; its kings and governments were humiliated as they could not assert their agenda and priorities against the military, industrial and commercial superiority of the Western powers. The siege mentality was taking hold as the country found itself in between the interests of two strong colonial powers, Great Britain and France. The developments described above had a profound impact on the relations between Siam and the West but also on the Thai society and political system.

The Western presence in Siam was growing increasingly important by the first decades of the 19th century. The gist of the mutual relations in the 1820s and 1830s was mainly commercial intercourse. The Western-based merchants pressed their governments to negotiate treaties that would make it easier and more profitable to trade with Siam. The issue of trade tariffs, extraterritoriality and rights for the foreigners living in Bangkok and other Thai cities often came to the fore. The “negotiations” were often backed by force of arms, as when in 1826, when the British diplomatic mission of Captain Henry Burney was backed by a fleet of sixty warships coming to the Gulf of Thailand.⁵⁵ Such demonstrations of power were humiliating to the Siamese government and in the early years prior to the colonial expansion were often counterproductive.⁵⁶ As the pressure began to increase, however, the Siamese government began to give in to these demands. Following the pattern that was common all over Asia at that time, if a certain Western nation gained specific advantages, the others were quick to follow with demands for the same privileges. Thus, the exploits of the British in Siam were emulated by the French, Dutch, German, Russian and American envoys.

In 1833, the American envoy Edmund Roberts arrived in Siam. Unlike other Western diplomats, he brought no significant forces with him and demonstrated his government’s interest in amicable relations, based on expanding trade. As a result, he was able to negotiate a treaty on slightly more advantageous terms than the representatives of Britain and France.⁵⁷

over all of Vietnam. Steinberg, David Joel (ed.). *In Search of Southeast Asia. A Modern History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986, pp. 178–179.

⁵⁵ Terwiel, *Thailand’s Political History*, p. 109.

⁵⁶ That was also the case of Burney’s mission. Although he was finally able to negotiate a new trade treaty, this treaty was far less advantageous to the British interests than he originally hoped for. The account of the negotiations is accessible in *The Burney Papers*. Volume 2, Part 4. Bangkok: Gregg International, 1971, p. 40 ff.

⁵⁷ These advantages concerned almost exclusively the mutual trade, or more specifically, the American imports into the country. Roberts was also able to secure a clause which stated: “If hereafter the Duties payable by foreign vessels be diminished in favour of any other nation, the same diminution shall be made in favour of the

The treaty, known as *The Treaty of Amity and Commerce*, was in fact the first such document that the United States ever signed with any Asian country. Under provisions of *Article X* of the treaty the United States gained the right to appoint a permanent representative to the Siamese court, in case the other Western nations decide to do so.⁵⁸ The Roberts mission can be considered the first important step in establishing the future relationship between Siam and the United States. On the one hand, the Siamese rightly perceived that the United States were much less of an imminent threat to their national security than any other of the Western powers. Even though the treaty Roberts negotiated was still an “unequal treaty”, the way the negotiations went and the conduct of the American envoy left much better impression in Bangkok than that of the British or French. It is possible that it was already at this time that the United States began to be considered by the Siamese a possible ally, who could help them with the modernization they sorely needed, but who would also speak for them if the other powers began to exert too much of a pressure. This hope, however, was rather misplaced as Siam did not play any important role by itself in the American foreign policy of this period. Besides, American political and military power was not built up yet and the position of the United States in Asia was still too weak to seriously challenge either the British or the French if the occasion called for it.

On the other hand, the Roberts mission raised the awareness of Siam in the United States, if mostly among diplomats, statesmen and merchants. He wrote an account of his diplomatic mission (which was sent to more countries than just Siam), in which he particularly noted the increase in Siamese foreign trade, the growth of the domestic market and the opportunities that could arise from these developments.⁵⁹ It is beyond any doubt that Roberts was aware of the political developments in Siam as well and the slow, yet gradual push, towards modernization. It is possible that he envisaged the country as a possible foothold for the United States in the area, the gateway to China that Washington sought. From

vessels of the United States.” Article IV, Treaty of Amity and Commerce between Siam and the United States, signed at Sia-Yuth’ia (Bangkok), 20th March, 1833. In: Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 163 (full text of treaty pp. 162–164).

⁵⁸ “If thereafter any foreign nation other than the Portuguese shall request and obtain His Majesty’s consent to the appointment of Consuls to reside in Siam, the United States shall be at liberty to appoint Consuls to reside in Siam, equally with such other foreign nation.” Article X, Treaty of Amity and Commerce. In: *Ibid*, p. 163.

⁵⁹ For example, he noted how the number of trading ships had increased during the reign of Rama III (1824–1851). Most of these ships were sent on annual trading voyages to China, which generated a generous income for the court and the businessmen involved. He also noted that the Siamese war navy was quickly being built up – by the time of his visit the number war boats and ships seemed to exceed 500, which was quite significant for a country that never invested particularly heavily into its naval forces. It is possible Roberts foresaw an opportunity for the American shipbuilders to participate in this endeavor. Roberts, Edmund. *Embassy to the Eastern Courts Cochin-China, Siam and Muscat. In the U.S. Sloop-of-War Peacock, David Geisinger, Commander, During the Years 1832 3–4*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1837, p. 311.

this point of view, it would have been crucial for the United States to show a continuous interest in the country even though the American possibilities in this respect were much more limited than those of the colonial powers. On the other hand, the image of the United States as the “land of free” could give the Americans a certain advantage when dealing with the Siamese court, if properly nourished and maintained. If Siam was to move toward a more modern political model of administration, the United States could offer the services of its citizens to act as advisors to the king and his ministers, which would again increase the prestige and influence of the US in the country. Siam still, however, remained only a means for the American policy to achieve other goals, rather than a priority in itself. This attitude was not going to change for much of the 19th and early 20th century.

As a consequence of the Roberts mission, more Americans came to Siam. Most of them were merchants and traders, but perhaps the most well-known one was physician and missionary Dan Beach Bradley. He arrived to Siam in 1835, two years after Roberts’ visit and eventually became an influential persona in the local political life, even earning the honor of being one of the advisors of the Siamese king Rama IV.⁶⁰ In addition to usher new inventions into the Siamese society and helping the country to modernize⁶¹, Bradley was a keen and diligent observer of the developments in Siam and of the change that had taken place during his long years in Bangkok. He was almost a perfect example of the Western attitude toward the Asian countries, as described in the first part of this chapter. On the one hand, he was enthralled and fascinated by the Siamese way of life, customs and habits. On the other, he was critical and even disrespectful at times of things that he saw as being contrary to modernization. Being a Christian missionary, this criticism was often targeted at the prevailing religion in the country, which was the Theravada Buddhism. One of the stories he jotted down in his diary illustrated this: “In the morning preached to a company of Siamese on a bridge over a canal out far from my house. The bridge had a cool cover and upon it comfortable seats. While preaching boatloads of priests [Buddhist monks – J. B.] came along in the canal and wished me to move off from the bridge so that they might pass under without contracting sin. It is one of the teachings of Buddhism that it is wicked to live or pass under any person, particularly if the person or persons are female. I kept my seat and told them that I

⁶⁰ Bradley did not only preach the gospel, but he offered the Siamese his medical expertise (for example, he participated in the inoculation drive against smallpox) and also opened a printing press in Bangkok. It was used for printing Christian materials, but on some occasions, also government propaganda, like in 1839, when he agreed to produce and distribute copies of royal edict against the sale of opium. Bradley was able to become one of the most trusted foreigners and his advice was often sought on a wide range of issues. Terwiel, *Thailand’s Political History*, pp. 116–121.

⁶¹ For example, he founded and edited the first two regular English magazines in Thailand, the *Bangkok Recorder* (1844–1845, 1865–1867) and the *Bangkok Calendar* (1859–1873).

did not believe in such foolishness – they replied. Then we cannot pass – Well, said I, be it so. I shall not humour such a notion as that. Presently they put their paddles in the water with unusual force and spray through with all their might”.⁶²

In the eyes of Bradley and other Westerners, the most important criteria for evaluating and judging the Thai monarchs and politicians was whether they supported rapid modernization of the country and its opening to the West. For this reason, for example, they viewed with favor and sympathy the activities of Prince Isaret⁶³ who was very fond of Western technological inventions and who often invited foreigners to his palace to hold discussions with them. On the other hand, many influential courtiers and advisors, who were capable administrators but refused to accommodate the wishes and demands of the Western nations, were criticized and dismissed by the foreign observers. This attitude led to many misunderstandings and failures in the contacts between the Americans, Europeans and the Siamese.

One such failure that can be attributed almost fully to the absolute disrespect for the local customs and traditions was the diplomatic mission of Joseph Balastier, American Consul to Singapore, who arrived to the Siamese court in 1850. His aim was mainly to negotiate a new trade agreement with Siam and to obtain permission for the establishment of a permanent consular office in Bangkok. Despite the generally positive attitude toward the Americans and the fact that he was sent personally by the American President Zachary Taylor, Balastier’s mission utterly failed. One reason was that he arrived only with one or two attendants when large retinue was expected by the Siamese court; also, he made very poor impression during the initial interviews with the King’s officials when he ignored all the conventions of protocol and demanded to be granted audience with the King immediately. As a result, he left Bangkok without accomplishing anything.⁶⁴ It is quite symptomatic that this failure was later interpreted by Balastier as the work of anti-Western reactionaries at the Siamese court and that this interpretation was widely accepted in Washington.

⁶² *The Bradley Diary*, entry for 31. 8. 1851. Oberlin College Archives, RG 30/5 – Dan Beach Bradley Family. Series 3 (Diaries and Journals, 1832–1873), box 5, vol. 2.

⁶³ Princ Isaret (1808–1866), later known as Phra Bath Somdet Phra Pinklao Chao Yu Hua, was the younger brother of King Mongkut (Rama IV). He was known to be fascinated by inventions such as the steam engine or railway and often sought to introduce them to Siam. His contacts with the Westerners made him well-known in the foreign community in Bangkok and he was often sought to make interventions for the Western interests at the court. This was rather paradoxical as he wielded very little real influence, despite the fact that he was officially crowned the Second King (*uparat*) of Rama IV.

⁶⁴ For more on Balastier’s mission and the Siamese reactions to it, see: Chotmai het ruang ballestier thut amerikan khaoma nai ratchakan thi sam mua pi cho ph. s. 2393 [The Mission of the American Envoy Balastier to the Court of His Majesty in the Year 2393], *Prachum Phongsavadan*, 1969, vol. 35, pp. 3–71.

Despite such occasional setbacks, the relations with the United States were not severely affected and continued to develop. Balastier's failure was mended by another mission, which managed to secure the negotiation of a new agreement, *Treaty of Amity, Navigation and Commerce* of 1856⁶⁵. This treaty replaced the previous document, expanding some of the provisions of the old agreement and adding some new ones. On one hand, it could be seen as yet another unequal treaty, especially since it gave the American citizens residing or visiting Siam a *de facto* extraterritorial status and exemptions from Siamese jurisdiction. On the other hand, it was very significant for the future of the bilateral relationship because it directly provided for the exchange of diplomatic personnel between both countries. The United States named its first permanent consul in Bangkok, Rev. Stephen Mattoon and the consulate was eventually raised to the status of legation.⁶⁶

While commerce still largely dominated the relationship between Siam and the United States, other important issues began to come to the fore. The previously mentioned colonial expansion of Great Britain and France began to arouse more and more anxiety in Bangkok. Not only was the country becoming "surrounded" by European territorial possessions rather than by the traditional states, but encroachments on the Siamese territory could be expected as well. The significance of the United States as the "anti-colonial", freedom loving power was on the rise in the Siamese foreign policy deliberations. Better relations with Washington were seen by some, including King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851–1868), as a means to at least increase the chance of preserving Siamese sovereignty and territorial integrity. As a result, the Siamese began to develop more regular contacts with the United States, with the King himself taking the lead⁶⁷. Mongkut's successor, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868–1910) set out to greatly modernize the Siamese political system, economy, culture and way of life, and the United States continued to be an important source of inspiration in this endeavor.

Whatever hopes Siam placed in the United States, however, were largely misplaced and overestimated. The American foreign policy priorities remained elsewhere and Siam was still treated as a minor issue by the State Department. The United States would not have

⁶⁵ For the full text of the treaty, see. Vimol Bhonghibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, pp. 165–168.

⁶⁶ The first American envoy to Siam with the rank of Minister Resident was John A. Halderman, who arrived in 1880. In 1903, the legation was further raised in significance, as the American representative in Bangkok Hamilton King was promoted to the rank of Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary. For the list of American envoys to Bangkok, see *Ibid*, p. 180.

⁶⁷ An often cited example of these Siamese overtures is the letter sent by King Mongkut on February 14, 1861 to the American President James Buchanan. In this letter, he affirmed his interest in maintaining friendly relations between both countries and made an offer of sending Siamese elephants to the United States to help with the country's development. The letter was later answered by Abraham Lincoln, who replaced Buchanan in the White House. The letter of King Mongkut is still part of the collection of The National Archives in Washington, D.C.

probably viewed favorably an outright annexation of Siam by either Great Britain or France, but a mere loss of parts of Siamese territory or the strengthening of the British and French influence in the country did not bother them too much, as long as it did not seriously hamper American interests. Besides, even if the United States did want to directly intervene on Siamese behalf, it had very few available options to do so. Washington did not acquire a base of its own in Southeast Asia until 1898, when the Philippines were gained from Spain. The very idea of the United States exerting significant pressure on Paris or London over Siam or even threatening the colonial powers with possible military confrontation was out of question. The traditional moral appeals of the American foreign policy establishment had very little value in changing the policy of either Great Britain or France or any other country, as the experience with the Open Door Notes showed very clearly. Thus, both will and operational capacity was lacking on part of the United States in the last three decades of the 19th century to help Siam in any significant way.

The events of the 1880s and 1890s were critical for preserving the Siamese independence. The British, who now fully controlled Burma and asserted their influence in Malaya, made territorial demands in the west and also in the south. The French, firmly in possession of Vietnam and Cambodia, began to seek more and more concessions from Siam in the Mekong Delta. The king and his government attempted to resist this pressure by not giving away too much while playing London and Paris against each other. This policy did not bear much fruit, however. Instead, continuing disagreements with France led to the crisis of July 1893, when the French sent their warships to set up blockade of Bangkok⁶⁸. For a while, it seemed that Siam was on the verge of falling. In the end, by granting all French demands, Siam escaped being directly attacked and occupied, but at the cost of loss of territory and prestige. This humiliation was only made greater in the following years, when Siam gave up even more territory on behalf of the French⁶⁹. With Britain, the negotiations were less

⁶⁸ The disagreements mostly concerned rivaling claims of both countries in Cambodia and Laos. Prior to the crisis, a number of incidents occurred between the French and Siamese forces. As a result, the French demanded that the Siamese forces withdraw from the Mekong River, pay two million francs in war damages and another 3 million as a deposit and give up the trade revenue of Battambang and Siemreap provinces, which were still held by Siam (this would have de facto meant their occupation by France). For more on the July 1893 crisis, see for example: Terwiel, *Thailand's Political History*, pp. 206–209 or Tuck, Patrick J. N. *The French Wolf and the Siamese Lamb: The French Threat to Siamese Independence, 1858–1907*. Bangkok: White Lotus, 1995.

⁶⁹ In the first decade of the 20th century, Siam signed a number of conventions with France (e.g. 1902, 1904, and 1907). As a result of these conventions, Siam gave up all of its territorial claims on the Laotian bank of Mekong River, ceded all of the provinces it still held in Cambodia (e.g. Battambang, Siemreap) while getting back some strips of territory formerly occupied by France (for example, Dan Sai). The exterritoriality of French citizens living in Siam was also curbed. Overall, however, the treaties were a victory for Paris and a defeat for the Siamese government. For details of the conventions, see: Briggs, Lawrence Palmer. *The Treaty of March 23,*

dramatic but the results were almost equally dismal for Siam. By 1909, Siam had agreed to formally give up its suzerainty over large stretches of Muslim-inhabited territory on the borders of British Malaya, thus virtually ending centuries of Siamese political dominance in the region.⁷⁰ So, in less than fifty years, Siam lost its traditional status of a regional power and had to fight hard for its very survival. While the role of King Chulalongkorn, especially after 1893 when he frequently traveled to Europe and sought to improve the international position of Siam, has to be taken into account, it was not decisive for ultimately maintaining the country's independence. Neither had the Siamese hope of using the British against the French and vice versa yielded any significant results. Quite on the contrary, the crucial event which determined the Siamese fate was the emerging cooperation between France and Great Britain, which later formed the basis of *Entente Cordiale*. Both states came to the conclusion that it was in their own interest to create a buffer zone between their colonial empires in Southeast Asia. Neither of them was willing to risk a military confrontation over annexing Siam. On the other hand, a neutral zone would largely reduce the danger of clashes and conflicts between the French and British colonial administrations⁷¹. As a result, they had agreed in 1896 to maintain an independent Siamese state, though its territory was significantly reduced. This agreement was later included in the treaties of 1904 and was largely kept by both parties⁷².

The events described above did not have a direct connection to the relationship between Siam and the United States. They had, however, established certain patterns in Siamese political behavior which were to persist in the years to come. One important thing was that Siam realized it cannot withstand external pressures by itself. If a situation resembling the crisis of 1893 was to be repeated, the country needed a strong, committed ally to help her pass through the storm unscathed. For obvious reasons, France could not fill this

1907 between France and Siam and the Return of Battambang and Angkor to Cambodia, *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 1946, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 439–454.

⁷⁰ The bilateral convention of 1909 stipulated that Siam give up all its claims in the sultanates of Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis and Trengganu. Only Pattani, Narathivat and Yala remained under the control of Bangkok. Cady, John F. *Southeast Asia. Its Historical Development*. New Delhi: Mc-Graw Hill, 1964, p. 445. For the text of the treaty, see: *Treaty between the United Kingdom and Siam. Signed at Bangkok, March 10, 1909*. Treaty Series No. 19/1909. London: Harrison and Sons, 1909.

⁷¹ For a detailed account of the contemplations of Paris and London regarding Siam leading to the 1904 convention, see: Chandran, Joshua. *The Contest for Siam 1899–1902. A Study in Diplomatic Rivalry*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1977.

⁷² In 1904, London and Paris agreed not to annex any new Siamese territories (which did not include the Cambodian provinces still held by Siam). Both countries also outlined their spheres of influence in Siam, which were to be respected by the opposite party. Inside their spheres of influence, Paris and London grant each other "liberty of action". This convention became part of the so-called *Entente Cordiale*. Inclosure 3. Declaration concerning Siam, Madagascar and the New Hebrides. The Siamese government was not a part of the negotiations and was barely informed about their proceedings. In: *Despatch to His Majesty's Ambassador at Paris Forwarding Agreements between Great Britain and France of April 8, 1904*. London: Harrison and Sons, 1904, p. 26.

role – its conduct and its aggressive approach toward Siam made it a symbol of colonialism and object of hatred for many Siamese. Britain, while not so fervently hated as France, failed to provide assistance to Bangkok when it was needed the most and instead it colluded with the French in carving Siam into their spheres of influence. Imperial Russia, while it was interested in developing relations with the Siamese court, was not significantly involved in Southeast Asia at this particular time period. Besides, after 1917 and the Bolshevik revolution, all the ties to St. Petersburg were abruptly cut. The possible choices of strong allies were thus relatively limited. It could be argued that prior to World War II, some saw Japan as an ally and protector; in the post-war period, the United States assumed this role and held it for a number of years. As a consequence of this approach, the Siamese foreign policy changed as well. An independent foreign policy, characteristic for a regional power, was no longer an option. Instead, Siam had to adapt to the international and local situation, giving up some ambitions and setting others aside for times when they could be carried out⁷³. It could thus be argued that Siam no longer possessed the influence and power to significantly alter the local events. Its influence and power were now directly dependent on the influence and power of its stronger neighbors and on their relative position vis-à-vis Siam. Such a limitation of the country's sovereignty led to a number of internal changes, among other the rise of modern Thai nationalism and calls for a more rapid modernization of the country. Successive governments had also tried to make Siam more known on the international scene so that its case would have more defenders should the need for such a defense arise. The Siamese foreign policy became less based on ideals and long-term strategy and became characteristic by its “pragmatism” and ad hoc approach to solving problems.

Overall, the years before World War I can be characterized by as the era of establishment and gradual development of the relations between Siam and the United States. It would be tempting to argue that, as the United States was not a colonial power (at least when compared with Great Britain, France or the Netherlands), it would have been more inclined to support Siamese independence and treat it as an equal partner. While such an assertion is not completely untrue (again, especially in comparison with other Western powers), its practical manifestations were relatively vague. Washington mainly focused on securing the same rights and privileges for its citizens that the other foreign governments had obtained. The image of America as the freedom-loving, anti-colonial country with amicable

⁷³ This could be illustrated by Siamese territorial expansion in 1940 and 1941 at the expense of French Indochina and British colonies in Burma and Malaya. Although Siam never gave up on reclaiming the territories it had to previously cede to the colonial powers, it had waited until they had been weakened by war in Europe before striking back. The wartime alliance with Japan also played a key part in this endeavor.

foreign policy was a vital asset in promoting its objectives and priorities. Siam just by itself, however, did not hold much of an importance in the American foreign policy plans. While its plight and its fight for independence might have had roused sympathy and admiration in the United States, these feelings could have hardly been translated into significant material support. Washington was aware of its own weakness in Southeast Asia and of the fact that even if it did wish to carry out a pro-Siamese intervention, it did not possess the necessary means to do so. Besides, even in the United States, the doctrines of social Darwinism and western supremacy held sway in the late 1800s, especially among many leading politicians, statesmen and businessmen. For some of them actually, Siamese could be the “noble savages” (as absurd as such an appellation might appear in this particular context), admired for their bravery, but ultimately destined to be conquered and “civilized”. Certainly, like the Philippines, 19th century Siam would have hardly passed the criteria of fitness for democratic self-governance that the American politicians had used as an excuse for the annexation of the Philippines. Only when Siam began the ambitious program of political, economic and social reforms under King Chulalongkorn did its position begin to improve, though very slowly. In such a situation, the Siamese government was desperately looking for a chance to demonstrate to the world the great change the country went through in just a matter of several decades.

I.2.B. Winds of Change? The Interwar Period and the Transformation of the Siamese-American Relationship

The crisis in Europe, which was to develop into World War I, was viewed with mixed feelings in Siam. The country was not directly affected by the war and its own security was hardly threatened by it. The sympathies of the ruling class were divided between the belligerents, often based on personal experience and history.⁷⁴ Germany had a strong commercial influence on Siamese economy and their merchant navy had established almost a monopoly in providing shipping for Siamese export and imports⁷⁵. Some government ministers had studied in Germany and pressured the king, by now Rama VI (Vajiravudh, 1910–1925) to maintain neutrality. Other influential advisors, however, argued that by joining

⁷⁴ King Chulalongkorn was inclined to send his relatives, often brothers and later sons, to attend schools abroad. For example, in 1872, he sent a group of fourteen of his relatives to study at the Raffles Institution in Singapore. Later, some princes and other promising members of the elite were sent to France, some England, Russia and Germany. The crown prince Vajiravudh (who later became King Rama VI after his father's death) studied in Oxford. These members of the ruling class tended to support the cause of the countries where they had received their education and where they spent their student years. See for example: Wyatt, David K. *The Politics of Reform in Thailand. Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969, p. 70.

⁷⁵ Terwiel, *Thailand's Political History*, p. 242.

the war on the side of the Allies, Siam could finally achieve a breakthrough on the international scene and gain a good basis for the repudiation of unequal treaties of the past. These beliefs were apparently strengthened by the French, British and Russian diplomats in Bangkok, who promised greater recognition of Siamese sovereignty and statehood in exchange for the country's participation in the war effort⁷⁶. The example of Japan, which joined the war already in 1914 and with little cost attained its objectives and improved its prestige⁷⁷, might have also influenced Siamese thinking about the matter. Japan, however, was in a very different position than Siam. It was not directly threatened by colonial powers and by outside forces, having already undergone major modernization. Since its victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, it was already taken seriously by the Western powers. Japan's entry into the war, then, was more for the purposes of territorial expansion and further strengthening of Japanese influence in China as well as a show of Japanese military pride and strong nationalism and patriotism⁷⁸. Although Siam had much less ambitious goals and was in a much weaker position internationally, Japan could serve as a role model of emancipated Asian nation that could serve as source of inspiration for the other Asian states.

The Siamese decision to enter the war, which finally came in July 1917⁷⁹, was a combined manifestation of pragmatism (hopes of concessions from the western powers, immediate abrogation of unequal treaties with Germany and Austria)⁸⁰ and rising nationalism (an opportunity to show the bravery and fighting qualities of Siamese forces to the outside world). A small military contingent numbering 1,250 men was dispatched to France in the

⁷⁶ The question however remains to what extent these promises were given in earnest and to what extent they were meant to be kept once the war was over. With the benefit of hindsight, the behavior of the colonial powers in the years immediately following 1918 showed that neither of them was just by itself willing to significantly revise their policy toward Siam. Vella, Walter F. *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1978, p. 106.

⁷⁷ Japan, unlike Siam, lost no time in seizing the opportunity and entering the conflict. The Japanese government declared war on Germany on August 23, 1914. Hostilities were quickly commenced as Japan invaded and occupied previously German-held territories of Caroline Islands, Marianas and Marshal Islands in the Pacific. On the Asian mainland, the Japanese overran the German special zone on the Shandong Peninsula and laid siege to the German fort in Tsingtao, which surrendered on November 7, 1914.

⁷⁸ This nationalism and patriotism was one thing that Siam shared with Japan in this period, as King Vajiravudh was an ardent proponent of building modern Siamese nation. His activities were wide ranging, from reforming the Thai alphabet, writing patriotic theater plays, organizing a scout movement to reforming the armed forces and educational system. For more on Siamese nationalism of 1910s and 1920s, see Vella, *Chaiyo!*.

⁷⁹ King Vajiravudh declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary on July 22, 1917. It is quite symptomatic of the pragmatism of Siamese policy that the decision was postponed until it was perceived that the Allies were gaining upper hand. It seems likely that the factor that finally convinced Siam to enter the war was a similar decision made by the United States in April 1917.

⁸⁰ As the king himself put it, the war was "an excellent opportunity for us to gain equality with other nations". Stearn, Duncan. Thailand and the First World War, 22. 8. 2009. *firstworldwar.com*. Available at <http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/thailand.htm> [last access 26. 12. 2009].

summer of 1918⁸¹. The members of this expeditionary force served as pilots in the French air force and also as infantrymen and medical personnel on the western front. Although the Siamese arrived too late to take direct part in the decisive offensive of the end of the war, their presence had a deep symbolic meaning for their country. They took part in the victory parade in Paris in July 1919 and arrived back to Siam in September of the same year, being welcomed home as heroes with lavish celebrations and festivities. The latter of the two goals mentioned above being accomplished, the Siamese government now pressed for the accomplishment of the former – the tedious work to abrogate the unequal treaties with the Allied nations was about to begin. On part of Siam, these negotiations were largely carried out by Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Thewawong, who was himself an experienced diplomat, accustomed to dealing with the Western governments. An important part, again quite symbolically, was also played by an American advisor to the Siamese government, Francis B. Sayre⁸², who helped with preparing the drafts of new treaties to replace the unequal ones of the past.

Even with the Siamese participation in the war, however, it was rather difficult to persuade the Western countries to give up their extraterritorial rights.⁸³ Siam became a founding member of the newly established League of Nations, yet it still found that it was not treated equally by most of the Western powers. As the Siamese diplomacy looked for a suitable partner in the West, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson appeared to be the logical choice. His approach to foreign policy called for creation of a new, more just and equal system of international relations and he was often inclined to redress what he saw as grievances of the past. Already in his well-known Fourteen Points of January 8, 1918, there were conditions that Siam could relate to and wholeheartedly support, though they were expressed in general terms only⁸⁴. Wilson's appeals for the self-determination of individual nations, against territorial

⁸¹ Greene, *Absolute Dreams*, pp. 112–113.

⁸² Francis B. Sayre was an American diplomat and lawyer and son-in-law of President Wilson, who served as a foreign policy advisor to King Vajiravudh (Rama VI). For his services to the Siamese state, he was later awarded an honorary title Phraya Kalyana Maitree by King Prajadiphok (Rama VII). For more on Sayre, see: *Who Was Who in America*. Volume 5 (1969–1973). Chicago: Marquis, 1973, p. 636; or Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 65.

⁸³ Besides, Siamese participation was rather limited and did not significantly change the course of the conflict. For this reason, some historians tend to argue that the eventual renegotiation of the treaties was not directly linked to the war effort and would have occurred anyway. This argument is bolstered by the fact that it was not until mid 1920s that success was achieved by the Siamese government in this regard. Terwiel, *Political History of Thailand*, p. 244.

⁸⁴ For example, Point III stipulated the need for “the removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for its maintenance”. This could easily be applied to the question of import tariffs on Western merchandise to Siam and of the export tariffs on Siamese goods. Similarly, Point V which called for “a free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the

encroachments in China⁸⁵ and against unjust, imperialistic wars, had quite a positive response in Siam, where these general principles were automatically applied to the local issues as well. On the other hand, Siam still remained a minor issue for the United States at this time and the bilateral negotiations that eventually ensued took place on the sidelines of more important endeavors of the United States to shape the post-war world. The anti-colonial, anti-imperialist moralistic approach of Wilson was useful in bolstering the American image in similarly minded countries abroad; however, its practical impacts were often rather limited, especially after Wilson's position began to weaken both in the United States and on the world stage.

The talks between the American and Siamese diplomacy started in earnest only in 1920. The major issue for the Siamese was the elimination of extraterritoriality of American citizens living in Siam. The United States were willing to accommodate Siamese claims, hoping to obtain in return more favorable terms for its commercial and missionary activities in Siam. For the American diplomacy, it could thus be argued, recognizing Siam's sovereignty in judicial issues was mainly a means to secure its own interests.

The Department of State was aware of the fact that the two issues were closely linked. For example, in a dispatch dated February 24, 1920, Acting Secretary of State Frank L. Polk wrote to President Wilson: "... In connection with our surrender of extraterritorial privileges, Siam is willing to revise her commercial treaty and in the revision is willing to grant us effective favored nation commercial treatment, free privilege of travel throughout Siam, the right to own property and engage in business throughout Siam on the same footing as the natives, etc., none of which rights we enjoy at the present time. This in a sense is a *quid pro quo* for our surrender of extraterritoriality, as Siam is unwilling to revise the Commercial Treaty unless we make this concession...".⁸⁶ On the other hand, the United States had not put much at stake when giving extraterritoriality, because, according to Polk, "there are few Americans in Siam [in 1920 – J.B.], probably not much over two hundred, made up almost

principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined" could give Siam some hope of revising the new borders that were pressed on the country by Britain and France. Wilson, Woodrow. *The Fourteen Points*, 1. 1. 1918. Available at http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/President_Wilson%27s_Fourteen_Points [last access 2. 1. 2010].

⁸⁵ Especially in this regard, the United States stressed its moral superiority vis-à-vis the European powers. Wilson, for example, said in 1919: "For my part, my judgment, my moral judgment, is against the whole set of concessions. They were all of them unjust to China, they ought never to have been exacted, they were all exacted by duress, from a great body of thoughtful and ancient and helpless people. There never was it any right in any of them. Thank God, America never asked for any, never dreamed of asking for any." Wilson, Woodrow. *Final Address in Support of League of Nations*, 25. 9. 1919. Available at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/wilsonleagueofnations.htm> [last access 26. 12. 2009].

⁸⁶ United States, Department of State. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States 1921*. Volume II. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1936, p. 859.

entirely of Missionaries. I am advised by the representatives of the Missionaries that they are entirely favorable to the surrender of extraterritorial rights in Siam by the United States.”⁸⁷ The treaty, which provided for the giving up of the extraterritorial rights on part of the United States in exchange for the expanded freedom of commerce for the American merchants, was signed in December 1920 by Acting Secretary of State Norman H. Davis and Siamese Minister Phaya Prabha Karavongse, after less than one year of actual negotiations, and came into effect in October 1921. A special annex was added to the treaty which regulated jurisdiction issues of American citizens living in Siam.⁸⁸

The treaty is sometimes presented as a proof of friendly and budding relations between both countries. It is true that it was first such treaty to be concluded between Siam and one of the powerful Western nations after World War I – the negotiations with Great Britain and France, which had started at roughly at the same time as those with the United States, were far more arduous and complicated and thus the treaties were concluded several years later.⁸⁹ It would be appealing to attribute the relative swiftness of the negotiation process between Bangkok and Washington to the influence of Woodrow Wilson and his vision of new world order on American foreign policy. While this influence cannot be discounted, the above quoted documents show that the United States was expecting a pay-off from the treaty which was to be higher than the rights it had to “sacrifice”. With very little interests at stake compared to the colonial powers, Washington gained new trade privileges and at the same time managed to bolster its image of a progressive nation, so much different from the likes of Britain or France. The treaty definitely was one of the peaks of the inter-war bilateral relations between Siam and the U.S., but also because after the United States refused to join the League of Nations, its successive administrations (Harding, Coolidge and Hoover) began to pursue a generally isolationist, inward-looking policy. After the Great Depression started in 1929, relations with Siam and similar countries were allotted even less attention than in the relatively prosperous “thundering twenties”.

⁸⁷ On the other hand, it has to be mentioned that American commercial interests in the country were also quite limited by this time. Polk stated that “American commercial interests in that country [Siam – J. B.] are practically negligible, consisting of only two or three business concerns.” The treaty was mainly negotiated with a view toward possible future expansion. USDS, *FRUS 1921*, p. 860.

⁸⁸ The full text of the treaty can be found in *Ibid*, pp. 867–875.

⁸⁹ The treaty between France and Siam was signed in February 1925, a similar treaty with Great Britain in July 1925.

I.2.C. Shadows of War: Siam and the United States, 1932–1939

Before we discuss the relationship between Siam and the United States during World War II, and the enormous impact it had on their future collaboration after 1945, there is one issue which must be mentioned in some detail – the Revolution of 1932 and its impact on Siam.

The gradually increasing discontent of certain parts of Thai elite and military leadership with the way the country was governed simmered under the cover of relative calm already since the ascension of Rama VI in 1910. A number of abortive coups took place and even the heightened nationalism and emphasis on the national identity, supported by the king, could not fully placate the nation. The serious economic and social problems then continued during the reign of King Rama VII (Prajadhipok, reigned since 1925). Eventually a group of young intellectuals and military officials, who called themselves “Promoters”, formed the People’s Party⁹⁰ in Paris on February 1927. The main goal of the Party was to bring about a change in Siam that would establish a more progressive system of government. The leaders of the movement, some of whom (Pridi Phanomyong, Plaek Phibunsongkhram, Khuang Aphaiwong) later became important statesmen and politicians, were aware of the fact that the country was not ready for a democracy of the European or American type and instead opted for a constitutional monarchy with an expanded role of modernized bureaucracy and army in governing the state⁹¹. After some extensive preparations, a coup was staged on June 24, 1932 with elements of armed forces taking over the key positions in Bangkok and arresting top military and police commanders and some members of the royal family. Constitutional monarchy was instituted with King Rama VII as the head, who was not willing to suppress the revolt out of fear of bringing about a massacre and accepting instead the role of a constitutional monarch, albeit reluctantly.⁹²

The political change did not create a strong official response from the United States, although the American press reported on it quite extensively⁹³. The image that an average reader in the United States would get was that the revolution was long expected and that the

⁹⁰ Khana Ratsadon in Thai. The term „party“, however, might be somewhat misleading in this respect. As it was formed in secret and as a result had no popular following, the only member’s of the grouping were the actual founders and a few like-minded politicians and military officers who later used the name of the party to give a “recognizable face” to the force behind the coming political change. Besides, officially it was not legal to form political parties until a revised constitution was adopted in 1946.

⁹¹ Thak Chaloemtiarana. *Thailand. The Politics of Despotism Paternalism*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2007, p. 7.

⁹² For a detailed account of the coup, see for example: Thawatt Mekarapong. *History of the Thai Revolution: A Study in Political Behaviour*. Bangkok: Chalermnit, 1972.

⁹³ For example, *The New York Times* published no less than 10 articles in June 1932 alone dealing with changes in Siam. Similar space was devoted to the issue by *The Washington Post* and other leading newspapers.

king “cordially accepted ... the end of his absolute power and the establishment of constitutional monarchy by the leaders of the People’s Party.”⁹⁴ While the king chose not to oppose the coup, and he admitted he saw the need for change, he certainly did not “cordially accept” it. In fact, Rama VII’s relationship with the new leadership soon became sour to the point that he decided to leave the country and abdicate, which he eventually did in March 1935⁹⁵. The coup was also not exactly “expected” as the officials and the police learned of the preparations only on the evening before and most of the ordinary people were caught absolutely by surprise by these developments. Another article reported on the new Siamese constitution, taking note of the provision that “the temporary dictatorship of the People’s Party ... shall be replaced by suffrage when the people have been educated in the responsibilities of self-government”⁹⁶. This was true, yet it was somewhat at odds with the proclamations about setting up a fully democratic, liberal regime in Siam – even the coup leaders were aware of the fact that a full implementation of a western-style democratic system was something the population was not prepared for, as mentioned on the previous pages.

Another incorrect observation regarding the political change in Siam was that it was *mainly* caused by the unsatisfactory economic conditions, although these problems certainly did exist and caused some unrest among the population. *The Washington Post* reported on June 27: “Apparently there is no dissatisfaction with the king himself, but only with the economic conditions in which the country has found itself. ... The present revolt is an uprising of the army and naval officers, and not a popular revolution. ... Siam may learn to its sorrow that economic conditions can not be improved by transferring power to a military junta.”⁹⁷ Although this article might have correctly pointed out the nature of the political change (an uprising by a smaller number of the members of the elite), it created the wrong impression that only military was involved and that the poor state of economy and finances was the key driving force behind the uprising. In fact, the People’s Party had both a military and a civilian wing, which soon began to compete for dominance. Also, although improving the economy was one of the priorities of the new government, its main goal was to overhaul the political system in the country as such. The king also became a target of harsh criticism, and his rule as a whole was seen as unsuccessful by the coup leaders. Pridi Phanomyong, the leader of the

⁹⁴ King Had Expected Revolution in Siam, *The New York Times*, 26. 6. 1932. The article also reported that the Siamese Foreign Office assured all foreign legations that “all treaties would be kept and lives and property of all foreign residents were safe.”

⁹⁵ The King and his family then lived in exile in Great Britain.

⁹⁶ Siam Gets Constitution, *The New York Times*, 29. 6. 1932. It was also noted that new constitution gave voting rights to women, which was seen as a progressive move in times when the women suffrage was nowhere near universal even in the Western world.

⁹⁷ Revolt in Siam, *The Washington Post*, 27. 6. 1932.

civilian wing of the People's Party, said in his proclamation of June 24, 1932: "When this king [Rama VII – J.B.] succeeded his elder brother [Rama VI – J. B.], people at first hoped that he would govern protectively. But matters have not turned out as they hoped. The king maintains his power above the law as before. ... the government of the king has not governed the country for the people, as other governments had done. The government of the king has treated the people as slaves (some called *phrai*, some *kha*⁹⁸) and as animals. ... Therefore the people, government officials, soldiers and citizens who know about these evil actions of the government, have joined together to establish the People's Party and have seized power from the king's government."⁹⁹

This political change, although it did not directly influence American citizens and trade interest in Siam, did have a major impact on the relationship between both countries in the years to come. It is not possible to discuss here the political developments that have followed the revolution of June 1932 in detail. However, a few short comments are necessary to better illustrate the events that were about to follow.

The leaders of the 1932 revolution sought inspiration for their vision of government in the western world – mainly in France and Britain, where most of them had studied, but also in the United States. In one sense, such a revolution, if it did indeed bring democracy to a so far "backward" absolute monarchy, was to be welcomed in the western world. After all, it could be viewed as the confirmation of the theory that the western democratic style of governance was the ideal type and that it would eventually spread throughout the entire world. On the other hand, it might have caused some displeasure that Siam became a "democratic" country without direct outside interference. If the disparaging comments of many American statesmen regarding the Asian nations' ability to understand and effectively employ methods of self-government are recalled, it is possible to understand why some in the United States and other western countries viewed the change with suspicion. Siamese nation, in their eyes, had not undergone the tutelage necessary for the adoption of a democratic system, and an attempt to create under the existing conditions could only end in failure. Of course, it also has to be taken into account that behind these deliberations was the fear that if Siam was to become a democratic, "westernized" country, it would be even more difficult to treat in the unequal

⁹⁸ *Phrai* and *Kha* were the Thai words for commoners, who were not slaves but were obliged under the law to perform corvé duties to the crown and to his lord. Although reforms had been previously carried out to change the Siamese social and political system, much of the traditional structure still remained in place, especially in the rural areas.

⁹⁹ Announcement of the People's Party No. 1 (1932). In: Baker, Chris and Pasuk Phongpaichit (eds.): *Pridi by Pridi. Selected Writings on Life, Politics, and Economy*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000, pp. 70–72.

fashion of the past¹⁰⁰. Thus, the revolution had aroused a mixed reaction in the western world, and the events that followed only deepened the initial suspicion and fears.

The struggle for power between the military and civilian branch of the People's Party was gradually becoming more intensive. The military was traditionally a strong force in the Siamese politics and many of its leaders were not content with having to work with civilians and even obeying their orders. Shortly after the revolution and the adoption of the constitution, the military began to gain the upper hand. This development was facilitated by the fall of Pridi Phanomyong. After he had submitted a plan for national economic recovery in 1933, known as the *Outline Economic Plan*, he was immediately attacked as communist¹⁰¹ and dangerous radical and chose to voluntarily go into exile. Although he returned in 1934 already, he did not regain his former influence until the end of World War II. The political demise of Pridi, the leader of the civilian fraction, opened the door for the military to take over. Even though the actual facade of democracy was maintained¹⁰², it was the military that actually controlled the politics of Siam. Out of the numerous influential military leaders, Plaek Phibunsongkhram, one of the 1932 "promoters" and originally a close ally of Pridi Phanomyong, gradually came to the fore. In 1938, he became the prime minister, a post he held continually until July 1944.

The ascendancy of Phibun had significant repercussions for the domestic development as well as the international position of Siam. On the domestic scene, the new leadership sought inspiration in countries like Germany, Italy and more and more frequently, Japan. The authoritarian personality cult of Hitler and Mussolini seemed more appropriate to Phibun than the western-style democracy with its tiresome and intractable inner workings¹⁰³. On the other

¹⁰⁰ Even after the unequal treaties were abrogated, Siam still did not feel she was treated as an equal in negotiations with the west. Part of this, in the view of progressive Siamese intelligentsia, might have stemmed from the archaic political system in Siam and the prejudices against it in the Western world.

¹⁰¹ The *Outline Economic Plan* created a great controversy because it called for such novelties as government insurance for the citizens, establishment of various industrial and agricultural cooperatives and even nationalization of some factory and other sectors of industry. Pridi was not a communist, but during his studies in France he was deeply influenced by socialist ideas of economy and social welfare. In one place, Pridi argued that "... if the government is the owner of all economic activities, all of the people whether they are workers or government servants of any sort, when they work according to their strength and ability like other workers and government servants of other types, they will receive the same benefits in equal measure according to strength and ability. The government is a representative of the people. So this is equivalent to the people being owners of the whole economy." Siam in the 1930s, however, was nowhere near ready for such dramatic changes as the plan proposed, because majority of the population, including those that would be benefited by the changes, was still deeply conservative. For the full version of the *Outline Economic Plan*, see: Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *Pridi by Pridi*, pp. 83–123.

¹⁰² The parliament, which came into existence after the promulgation of the 1932 constitution, continued to exist and exercise its powers. Elections were regularly held and governments were formed after these elections.

¹⁰³ The slogan of his government which Phibun often presented to the people was: "Believe in the leader and the nation will escape danger." For more on the life and work of Marshal Phibunsongkhram, see: Charun Kuwanon.

hand, he did not want to abandon the “westernization” course set by his predecessors. The westernization, however, now consisted mostly of emphasis on wearing “modern” dress, behaving in “modern” way and embracing the “modern” inventions, i.e. on superficial implementation of the attributes of western society. For example, in one of his speeches Phibun argued: “... I have seen in our society today [something – J. B.] that has made me happy... proper dresses and correct manner are no different from other civilized countries...”¹⁰⁴ As in previous cases, the modernization and westernization was seen mainly as a way to demonstrate that Siam was a modern, developed nation, on par with the Western powers. Phibun stated in August 1939: “We must be cultured as other nations otherwise no country will come to contact us. Or if they come, they come as superiors. Thailand would be helpless and soon become colonized. But if we were highly cultured, we would be able to uphold our integrity, independence, and keep everything to ourselves.”¹⁰⁵ Consequently, Phibun sought to create a notion of a strong, unified Siamese nation, full of national pride and loyalty to the cause of the country and its leader. A number of specific ventures were made to achieve this goal, including the establishment of Ministry of Culture, dissemination of nationalistic propaganda, overhaul of the education system and also a change of the country’s name from Siam to Thailand¹⁰⁶.

While these changes were taking place in Siam, the United States grappled with the effects of the Great Depression. The revolution of 1932 coincided with the election victory of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the subsequent start of the New Deal. In the first years of the Roosevelt Administration, almost all government endeavors were focused on improving the economic situation – tackling unemployment, fixing the bank system, creating new privileges and rights for the employees. Foreign relations were priority only as long as they were related to the economic woes. The developments in Europe and the Far East, where authoritarian dictatorships emerged in Germany and Japan, however, started to require more attention from the United States. Continued tension between China and Japan was causing concern and anxiety in the Washington, as it could endanger American interest in the Asia-Pacific region

Chiwit kantosu khong chomphon P: Khunsuk phu rai phaending [Field Marshal P. – Warrior without a Country]. Bangkok: Phatthana Kanphim Press, 1964.

¹⁰⁴ Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 93.

¹⁰⁵ This quotation is taken from a minute of a cabinet meeting, chaired by Phibun on August 30, 1939. See: Numnonda, Thamsook. Pibulsongkhram’s Thai Nation-Building Programme during the Japanese Military Presence, 1941–1945, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 1978, vol. 9, no. 2, p. 234.

¹⁰⁶ The change took place on June 24, 1939, exactly seven years after the revolution of 1932. Terwiel, *Thailand’s Political History*, p. 271. The new name was to symbolize a break from the past and also the newly forged unity and patriotism of all the inhabitants of the country (including minority groups living within the country’s borders).

and weaken the American position there. In Europe, the rise of Hitler's Germany was also becoming alarming, and its bellicose nature and expansionist plans, though not threatening the United States directly, were prone to shatter the fragile post-World-War-I status quo.

Initially, these developments did not significantly alter American attitude toward Siam. After the revolution of 1932, the American political establishment was mostly concerned with the effect it could have on the US interests in the country. Once it became clear that nothing significant was going to change in the bilateral relations for the time being and that the American interests were sufficiently protected and guaranteed, Siam again became a minor issue in Washington's foreign policy. In the mid-1930s, both countries conducted a new series of negotiations to revise the existing bilateral treaty of 1920. As was the case after World War I, the initiative for this revision again came from Siam, which, after the revolution of 1932, felt even more emboldened to claim an equal status with the Western powers. In a memorandum dated October 16, 1933, Siamese Minister to Washington wrote to the American Secretary of State regarding the Treaty of 1920: "... The treaty with the United States was the first of a series of revisions of older treaties which imposed restrictions upon customs duties and granted extraterritorial rights to aliens. ... In order to secure the elimination of the restriction upon its fiscal and jurisdictional autonomy, His Majesty's [King Varijavudh's – J. B.] Government accepted in many of the new treaties certain provisions which it otherwise would have been unwilling to agree to. It has always been the intention of His Majesty's Government to secure the elimination or modification of such provisions."¹⁰⁷ The proposed changes mostly related to such issues as monopolies in certain economic areas, requisition of foreign property in case of war, or the conditions required for foreign nations to acquire a "favored nation status" in Siam.

The negotiations and the Siamese demands revealed clearly the continuous efforts of the government in Bangkok to finally remove all the vestiges of unequal treatment of Siam from the previous century and to finally attain an equal legal status with the Western powers. The Roosevelt Administration had, in essence, no major problems with the Siamese requests. As mentioned above, for much of the 1930s, Siam still remained somewhat on the fringes of American foreign policy agenda. Besides, the Siamese demands did not directly threaten American interests in the country – on the contrary, by making these concessions, the United States could further reinforce and bolster its quite favorable image in Siam.

¹⁰⁷ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers 1933*. Volume III. The Far East. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949, p. 767.

Still, the negotiations had dragged for almost four years. While there were no major obstacles on the American side, which mostly focused on the technicalities of the new treaty, the political instability in Siam made the entire process rather difficult. As the treaty was mostly related to mutual commercial activities, it was closely tied to the overall Siamese economic policy, which was much debated by the government at that time.¹⁰⁸ The almost constant in-fighting between the military and civilian wing of the People's Party, represented by Pridi Phanomyong and Plaek Phibunsongkhram, had made it complicated for the Roosevelt Administration to conduct sustained negotiations. For example, in August 1934 the American Minister to Bangkok James Marion Baker wrote to the Department of State in Washington: "As the various State Councilors have been unable to function because of disagreements among themselves, I am led to the conclusion that any changes in the treaty to which the Department is willing to assent... should be held in abeyance until the next session of the Assembly... is completed. At that time the Department will be in a position to know more definitely the policies of the Siamese government. ... Conditions here are such that I suggest the Department suspend treaty negotiations pending developments."¹⁰⁹ The situation only gradually calmed down with the increasing role of the military in politics and the emergence of Phibunsongkhram as the victor in the ideological and power struggle with Pridi Phanomyong.

While the negotiations with Siam slowly proceeded, it was becoming apparent that the situation was growing ever tenser in the Far East. Japan was quickly emerging as one of the dominant powers in this region and its military aggression in China was causing quite a concern in Washington. In 1932, Japan "legitimized" its de facto occupation of Manchuria by creating the "independent" Manchukuo state, a move sharply criticized by the United States. President Roosevelt was sympathetic to the cause of China, but due to the economic crisis and still prevalent isolationist tendencies in the United States, could do little more than provide Peking with moral support. For a while it seemed that these isolationist tendencies could perhaps be strong enough to force the United States to altogether abandon its long-term plans and strategic objectives in the Asia-Pacific region¹¹⁰. This feeling could be further reinforced

¹⁰⁸ The *Outline Economic Plan* of Pridi Phanomyong was submitted to the government around the time the negotiations with the United States were started. Although most of its provisions were flatly rejected, the future course of Siamese economy was still difficult to predict.

¹⁰⁹ The Ambassador also noted that there were at least four distinct groups within the government and the assembly (parliament) that had advocated different policies and had divergent goals in the economic sphere. United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers 1934*. Volume III. The Far East. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950, pp. 847–848 .

¹¹⁰ The isolationists argued that the American involvement in the area could bring the United States into direct confrontation with Japan, while on the other hand it could bring few potential gains. President Roosevelt had to

in March 1934, when the *Philippine Independence Act* (known also as *Tydings-McDuffee Act*) was passed. This act stipulated that the Philippines, the only American colonial possession in the Far East, would be granted its independence in twelve years. This move could be seen as fulfilling the pledge given by the United States at the acquisition of the archipelago from the Spanish that it would be eventually given independence; on the other hand, the isolationists could argue that once the Philippines gained their independence, the United States would no longer have any justification to get involved in potential conflicts which could arise in the area, except perhaps the defense of such general principles as the freedom of trade or freedom of seas. On the other hand, even though the United States was ready to relinquish direct control over the Philippines, the wording of the *Philippine Independence Act*¹¹¹ made it clear that Washington wished to remain a strong factor in the nation's future development. Roosevelt was also not ready to abandon American support to China, and was only waiting for the right opportunity to make his country more involved. Although he certainly hoped that some sort of a peaceful settlement with Japan could still be reached, he also counted with the possibility that the growing disagreements between both sides would eventually lead to a military confrontation, especially if the more militant wing of the Japanese ruling elite should prevail. The events were following in quick succession in the 1930s – in November 1936, Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany had signed the *Anti-Comintern Pact*, which laid foundations for a more extensive cooperation between both countries; in July 1937, the Marco Polo Bridge incident gave the Japanese a pretext for starting another war against China. With the Chinese forces collapsing under the Japanese onslaught, the United States and the Western powers realized that their colonial possessions and their own interests in the area were also threatened. It was becoming clear to the United States that isolationism, in Asia as well as in Europe, is no longer an option.

deal with the isolationists, and while he was personally inclined to take a more active role in stopping the Japanese aggression, his options to do so were restricted. As a result, the United States did not condone the Japanese actions in 1930s and was one of their most vocal critics, yet did little to practically oppose them. Iriye, Akira. *The Cambridge History of Foreign Relations*. Volume III. *The Globalizing of America, 1913–1945*. Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 143.

¹¹¹ For example, Section 5 stipulated that “All the property and rights which may have been acquired in the Philippine Islands by the United States under the treaties mentioned in the first section of this Act, except such land or other property as has heretofore been designated by the President of the United States for and other reservations of the Government of the United States, and except such land or other property or rights or interests therein as may have been sold or otherwise disposed of in accordance with law, are hereby granted to the government of the Commonwealth of the Philippine Islands when constituted.” The United States clearly wished to keep its naval installations and bases in the Philippines even after the country became independent. Section 5, *The Philippine Independence Act (Tydings-McDuffee Act)*, approved March 24, 1934. Chan Robles Virtual Law Library. Available at http://www.chanrobles.com/tydingsmcduffie_act.htm [last access 24. 1. 2010].

The menace of Japanese aggression had added a new dimension to the hitherto slumbering Thai-American relationship. The signing of the new bilateral commercial treaty, which was finally accomplished in November 1937, came under circumstances dramatically different than when the negotiations had started. From the American perspective, Siam was becoming more important, mainly due to its strategic location with a view to a possible confrontation with Japan. Thus, the previously commercially oriented relations now acquired the security aspect as well, even though the United States' overtures in this respect were slow at first. On the other hand, for the Siamese government, equal treatment was no longer the most important issue, as equality by itself could not guarantee the country's sovereignty and independence. Siam had no major conflicts with Japan¹¹² and, in a way, admired the fast Japanese modernization and transformation into a regional, if not a world, power. On the other hand, the government in Bangkok was aware of the Japanese expansionist plans which did not include just China, but most of Southeast Asia and the Pacific. It was not clear what the position of Siam would be should these plans materialize – for many leading military officers and civilian leaders, national sovereignty and territorial integrity were still the utmost priorities, and with the war looming ever closer, Siam was looking more and more desperately for ways to guarantee these priorities.

I.2.D. The War Is Looming: The Limitations of Thai¹¹³-American Relations in the Pre-War Years

The start of World War II in Europe in September 1939 had profound consequences for the Asia-Pacific Theater as well. The European colonial powers – Great Britain, France and the Netherlands – were preoccupied preparing their defenses in Europe and their grip on their overseas territories could be expected to weaken. Japan was still at war with China but even in these circumstances it eyed a new territory for conquest and territorial expansion – the French Indochina¹¹⁴. Apart from producing some invaluable resources needed for the war effort (mainly rubber), the French colony was considered a vital staging area for the Japanese

¹¹² In fact, the Siamese government and especially the military sought to maintain friendly relations with Tokyo after 1932. In 1934, negotiations were conducted between both countries on the expansion of mutual trade (mainly involving the exports of raw materials, such as tin and rubber, from Siam to Japan). In 1935, Siam sent the first group of officers to be trained in Japanese military schools. Terwiel, *Thailand's Political History*, p. 269.

¹¹³ As mentioned earlier, the traditional name of the country "Siam" was replaced in 1939 by "Thailand" as a part of the nation-building program of Marshal Phibunsongkhram. Although the country reverted to the old name once more after World War II, this change did not last long and "Thailand" became the official term for the country ever since. Thus, it would be used for the rest of this text.

¹¹⁴ Duus, Peter (ed.). *The Cambridge History of Japan*. Volume 6. The Twentieth Century. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 307–308 and passim.

forces in their fight against China, but also in their possible march further south. The Tokyo government thus began to prepare plans to overtake the area, preferably without having to resort to force.

The Japanese war aims were much facilitated by further developments in Europe. After the period of phony war, which followed Hitler's attack on Poland in September 1939, the German armies attacked Northern and Western Europe. After the fast and destructive *blitzkrieg* against French and British forces, France capitulated in June 1940 and was subsequently divided between the occupied zone and the semi-independent Vichy state in the south. The colonies in Africa and Indochina were to be administered by the Vichy government, headed by Marshal Philippe Pétain.

At about the same time when the German attack on Western Europe began in earnest, the Thai government entered into negotiations with France, Great Britain and Japan, seeking assurances regarding its neutral status. Marshal Phibunsongkhram still followed the traditional Thai policy of *keeping the feet on both sides of the boat* – neither alliance with Japan nor cooperation with the Allies guaranteed Thailand its independence by 1940, and so the safest way seemed to be a series of bilateral non-aggression pacts. The Japanese government was eager to show its amicable intentions toward Thailand and thus the negotiations proceeded swiftly. In the treaty, signed between both countries on June 12, 1940, it was stated that: “The High Contracting Parties shall mutually respect each other's territorial integrity and hereby reaffirm the constant peace and the perpetual friendship existing between them.”¹¹⁵ In exchange for granting Thailand's sovereignty and territorial integrity, however, Japan had its own demands. These concerned “exchange of information” but also the strict maintenance of Thai neutrality as stipulated in Article 3: “In the event of one of the High Contracting Parties suffering an attack from any third Power or Powers, the other Party undertakes not to give aid or assistance of the said Power or Powers against the Party attacked.”¹¹⁶ A similar treaty was also signed between Great Britain and Thailand on the same day, the British being mostly concerned with preventing closer collaboration between Japan and Thailand¹¹⁷. The negotiations with France were unsuccessful, however. Before the treaty could be concluded, France was defeated by Germany and the Thai government subsequently refused to ratify the

¹¹⁵ Article 1, Treaty between Thailand and Japan Concerning the Continuance of Friendly Relations between the Two Countries and the Mutual Respect of Each Other's Territorial Integrity (No. 4791). In: League of Nations. *Treaty Series, 1941–1942*. Geneva: League of Nations, 1942, p. 132.

¹¹⁶ Article 3, *Ibid*, p. 133.

¹¹⁷ For the full text of the treaty, see: Treaty of Non-aggression between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Thailand (No. 4782). In: League of Nations. *Treaty Series, 1941–1942*. Geneva: League of Nations, 1942, pp. 422–423.

original draft of the document unless certain border disputes were cleared. Thailand demanded that some border adjustments be made in her favor which was unacceptable to the French administration. In the end, the treaty did not come into effect and instead, border violations and subsequent skirmishes between both sides followed in the coming months¹¹⁸.

While the United States was not involved in these negotiations as it held no territory adjacent to Thailand, it was nonetheless watching the situation closely and with growing anxiety. The Japanese expansionist plans were becoming ever clearer, and even such territories as the Philippines or Dutch East Indies were increasingly in danger. The strategic importance of Southeast Asia was becoming more evident, and the United States only grudgingly accepted the Vichy administration of Indochina, deeming the Pétain government unprepared and unequipped for such a task. The priority of the security of the Philippines and the Pacific bases remained prevalent in American policy toward Japan, yet it was becoming clear that in return for honoring these American priorities, Japan would ask for concessions in other areas. For example, during a discussion between an American and a Japanese diplomat in Batavia in February 1940, the Japanese diplomat stated that: “the Japanese government had absolutely no territorial ambitions there [the Philippines – J.B.] and is prepared to give any assurances which we [the American government – J.B.] might desire”¹¹⁹. In exchange, Japan asked for “cooperation”, a broadly defined term which could encompass such things as a free hand for territorial expansion in China and French Indochina, the economic exploitation of these territories and the creation of puppet states there. Despite the wishes of Roosevelt Administration to avoid war in the Pacific, Washington was not ready to render such “cooperation” and the mutual relations with Tokyo grew increasingly tense.

The developments in French Indochina clearly betrayed the true nature of Japanese intentions there. In August 1940, a bilateral agreement between the Japanese government and the Vichy administrators, known as the Henry-Matsuoka Pact, was concluded. Among other things, it had given the Japanese Imperial forces the right to station troops in the territory and to use the naval facilities and bases in the south. It had also given specific economic privileges to Japan, mainly in connection to the export of raw materials produced in French

¹¹⁸ Initially, Thailand asked just for minor revisions on the disputed Mekong border with French Indochina. Marshal Phibunsongkhram, however, dreamed of reclaiming all of Laos and western parts of Cambodia, inhabited by “Thai peoples”, from France and bringing them under Thai control. The French government was no doubt aware of these plans and thus was leery of granting any concessions to Bangkok, fearing that these concessions would open the way for even more demands. For more on the Thai-Vichy relations prior to 1942, see: Direk Jayanama. *Thailand and World War II*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2008, especially pp. 24–45.

¹¹⁹ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers 1940*. Volume IV. The Far East. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955, p. 2.

Indochina.¹²⁰ Thailand saw the increasing pressure of Japan on French Indochina as a way to press its own demands. Japan tried to intervene and managed to secure some gains for Thailand, but these were not seen as sufficient by the Bangkok government. After another series of unsuccessful negotiations between Thailand and Vichy, the border skirmishes grew into a regular military conflict in January 1941, with the French troops crossing the border at Aranyaprathet and the Thai forces retaliating by striking deep into Cambodia. While the United States and Britain appealed to both governments to settle their differences peacefully¹²¹, Japan took active part in the actual negotiations that ensued. By exerting even more pressure on the Vichy administrators, Japan had forced them to accept the loss of territories in Laos and Cambodia, which Thailand had already *de facto* occupied. The final treaty between both belligerents was signed on May 5, 1941¹²². The humiliation of the Pétain government was then completed with the occupation of French Indochina by Japanese forces in July 1941. While the French administrative structure remained in place, the actual decision making now rested in the hands of Japanese government and military command in Tokyo. The United States protested sharply against this move. The Roosevelt Administration ordered the Japanese financial assets in the United States to be frozen and an embargo quickly followed on the exports of certain commodities to Japan¹²³. Negotiations with Japan, however, still continued.

The Japanese intervention in the Thai-Vichy war had its impact on the strategic thinking of the Thai government. It clearly showed to Marshal Phibunsongkhram that even though Thailand was important to the Allies due to its location, neither London nor Washington was willing to condone and support Thailand's annexation pursuits. As a result, the Japanese influence in the country was growing. Already in January 1941, the American Minister to Bangkok reported: "... there is a good reason to believe that Japanese propaganda in Thailand is being intensified and there are some indications that a Japanese fifth column movement is being organized for any eventuality that may arise in this area making it possible

¹²⁰ For the full text of the so-called Henry-Matsuoka Pact, see: International Military Tribunal (Far East). *Record of Proceedings, Exhibits, Judgments, Preliminary Interrogations, Miscellaneous Documents*. Tokyo: International Military Tribunal, 1946, pp. 6936–6939.

¹²¹ Both governments, however, refused to act as mediators in the dispute, offering only their support to direct negotiations between Bangkok and Vichy. The British and Americans clearly did not want to get involved in the partition of the French colony, which could create ill-will with the French allies. On the other hand, they were aware of the fact that Japan would use its intervention to further bolster its image of the defender of Asian nations against "colonial powers".

¹²² For full text of the treaty and related diplomatic communication, see: Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, pp. 356–372.

¹²³ The embargo mostly concerned raw materials – oil, petroleum and some metal products used in the Japanese war industry. It was meant mainly as a warning to Tokyo that the United States was not ready to tolerate the blatant Japanese aggression in the Far East. Iriye, *The Globalizing of America, 1913–1945*, p. 186.

for Japan to control this country in its own interest and for use as a base [for operations] against Singapore.”¹²⁴ The American legation also noted that as a result of the recent developments, “Thailand would thus be drawn definitely into the Japanese orbit. There is the other possibility of *coup d’etat* in Bangkok resulting in the absolute control of Thailand by Japan...”¹²⁵. These developments did not materialize but the Japanese influence was certainly growing. On the other hand, Tokyo expected Thailand’s loyalty in return for its support in the Indochina dispute. In 1941, Tokyo began to come out with specific demands regarding economic cooperation between both countries. The Japanese government asked that the entire annual production of tin and rubber be exported to Japan, a demand that was unacceptable to the Allied governments and the British even threatened Thailand with retaliation should Thai government accept the Japanese demands.¹²⁶ In this economic warfare, Japan definitely held a more advantageous position. Tokyo could point to its intervention on behalf of Thailand and to the amicable relations between both countries in the past years. It could also use the growing presence of its military in the region to bolster its demands. On the other hand, the United States and Great Britain could offer little, in terms of both gains¹²⁷ for Thailand and threats by military force, to sway the Thai leadership. Despite this situation, Marshal Phibunsongkhram still tried to maintain Thailand’s neutrality in World War II, but his endeavor was getting more and more difficult with every coming month.

While the economic warfare was raging, the actual opening of hostilities between the Allies and Japan was drawing near. The negotiations between the United States and Japan in the fall of 1941 did not yield any significant progress, mostly due to the intransigence of both parties on the key issues. The United States was not willing to tolerate Japanese territorial violations and demanded that Japan withdraw from China and the French colonies; Japan’s demands for the abrogation of American embargo on exports were tied by Washington to the Japanese willingness to withdraw its forces from the Asian mainland. For the Japanese leadership, these demands were unacceptable and it began to conceive plans for a coordinated military assault of the Allied positions in Asia-Pacific.

¹²⁴ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers 1941*. Volume V. The Far East. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1956, p. 1.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 2.

¹²⁶ Thailand produced more than 30,000 tons of rubber in 1941, 50 % of which was bought by Japan and the rest by the Allies. Two thirds of the annual tin production (6,300 tons) in 1940 was exported to Allied countries, while the rest to Japan. The Allies saw these resources as vital, especially after French Indochina and its rubber production were lost to Japan. Britain and France demanded that Thailand divide its exports between the Japan and the Allies on a roughly 50-50 % parity. Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 51.

¹²⁷ For example, when Great Britain tried to secure the Thai production of rubber and tin by offering to supply Thailand with oil, Japan immediately made the same offer. USDS, *Foreign Relations 1941*, p. 234.

From the perspective of Thailand, these developments meant that the Japanese forces would need to pass through its territory on their march south. It was quite clear that Thailand was in no position to resist Japanese intervention should it occur. The Japanese military command, no doubt under the influence of the civilian leadership, tried to avoid hostilities with Thailand if at all possible. During a meeting of the top Japanese military commanders and government ministers in November 1941, one of the points in the document *Essentials for Carrying Out the Empire's Policies* stipulated that “close military relations with Thailand will be established just prior to the use of force”.¹²⁸ The plan was to inform Thailand just before the planned assault south on the commencements of hostilities with the Allies and ask for its permission to cross the Thai territory. In the ensuing discussion, Prime Minister Tojo explained: “... With the idea of winning Thailand over to our side we have been working on [Prime Minister] Phibun Songgram to set up close military relations ever since the time of our advance into southern French Indochina. ... It is necessary from an operational point of view for us to make landings in Thailand. ... Therefore, we cannot do other than push the matter by force if they do not agree with us at the talks just before we act.”¹²⁹ On December 1, 1941, in another meeting, Tojo stated that “... It is uncertain which side Thailand will choose. ... It is our hope to bring her in on our side by peaceful means ... It is our plan to do everything to prevent her from resisting, even though we may have to use force *if worse comes to worst* [italics added – J.B.]”¹³⁰ These minutes from the Japanese government meetings show clearly that despite all the efforts on part of Tokyo, the Japanese still were not sure by December 1941 what the Thailand's position regarding the coming war actually was. It was also clear to the Japanese government, however, that despite the attempts to avoid conflict with Thailand, it would have to resort to using force if Thailand was unwilling to acquiesce with Japanese demands for free passage of troops.

The Thai government was still keeping both doors open. While engaged in talks with the Japanese, it also continued in secret negotiations with the Allies regarding a possible cooperation in case of Japanese attack. The United States and Great Britain realized the importance of Thailand but were unable to do more to bring it to the Allied camp. The American and British diplomats also did not fully understand the developments in the country. For example, on September 2, 1941, the American legation in Bangkok reported to the State Department that “... the ... elevation of Nai Direck Jaiyanama to the post of foreign

¹²⁸ Imperial Conference, November 5, 1941. In: Iriye, Akira. *Pearl Harbor and the Coming of the Pacific War. A Brief History with Documents and Essays*. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999, p. 15.

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 35.

¹³⁰ Imperial Conference, December 1, 1941. In: Ibid, p. 93.

minister and other recent Cabinet changes have been taken by experienced observers here to indicate a strengthening of those elements in the Thai government which have all along been pro-democratic and anti-Axis in sympathy and reflects a realistic appreciation on the part of both government officials and the public of the Japanese menace to Thailand following the occupation of southern Indochina.”¹³¹ While these changes did indeed take place, and while there were significant rifts within the Thai ruling elite, it did not necessarily mean that Thailand was tilting toward the Allies. Besides, concrete actions would have had to be taken on part of the British and American governments to convince Thailand to join the Allied camp. When a new American Minister Willys R. Peck, who was known as a supporter and friend of Thailand in Washington, arrived in Bangkok in September 1941, he could offer Thai government little else than moral support¹³² and a promise of continued oil exports to the country. Modern weapons, so badly needed by the Thai army, were not provided in sufficient quantities by either the United States or Great Britain. This was partly due to their lack of military operational capacity in the region, but also out of fear that in case of Japanese invasion, these weapons would eventually end up in the hands of the Japanese. As a result, the requests made by the Thai government during the secret negotiations were largely not met. The United States felt that its warplanes that Thailand had requested would better be used for the protection of the Philippines; Britain sent some airplane fuel, artillery pieces and ammunition but only in limited quantities.¹³³ This apparent lack of trust as well as of interest in the fate of Thailand did little to promote the Allied cause in the country.

Another problem which further complicated Thailand’s relations with the Allies was the obvious unwillingness on part of the Roosevelt Administration to accept the Thai annexation of parts of French Indochina. The respect for territorial integrity of French Indochina was a *conditio sine qua non* for the United States when dealing with Japan, but Bangkok was also included in the American demands for restraint. In November 1941, Secretary of State Cordell Hull drafted another agreement between the United States and Japan which he sent to the Japanese government. In Section II, point 2 of the document it is stipulated that “Both Governments will endeavor to conclude among the Americans, British, Chinese, Japanese, the Netherland and Thai Governments an agreement whereunder each of the Governments would pledge itself to respect the territorial integrity of French

¹³¹ USDS, *Foreign Relations 1941*, p. 284.

¹³² In August 1941, both the British and American governments issued a proclamation stating that any invasion of Thailand by Japanese forces would be viewed as a serious threat to their own possessions in Southeast Asia and subsequently treated with outmost concern by the Allies.

¹³³ Martin, James V. Thai-American Relations in World War II, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 1963, vol. 22, no. 4, p. 459.

Indochina...”¹³⁴ In discussion with the Thai officials in May 1941, the American Minister to Thailand Hugh G. Grant argued that if the United States provided significant amount of aid to Thailand, it would “amount to United States government recognition of Thailand’s right to recover its territories [in Indochina] through the aid of Japan.”¹³⁵

As the events deteriorated further in the fall of 1941, the American government began to realize that war was becoming a very relevant possibility. It was also clear to Washington that Thailand would not withstand the Japanese invasion without help from the outside. The new American Minister to Bangkok Peck reported on November 6 that “... Following the Japanese move into Southern Indochina in July, a policy of resistance was adopted [by the Thai government] – J. B.] ... This opposition is maintained despite of the admitted fact that without extraneous aid forcible resistance to the expected Japanese invasion could result only in making the country a battlefield in the destruction of cities and military centers by bombing and military occupation of a large area.”¹³⁶ Yet, any substantial military to Thailand failed to arrive and even the public declaration of support, planned by the United States and Great Britain, did not materialize. By December 7, when Japan was already making the final preparations to launch its invasion in Southeast Asia and its attack in the Pacific, the draft of this declaration was still not submitted by President Roosevelt to the Senate, out of anxiety that it might meet with a hostile reception by the senators. When the war did actually start, Thailand found itself facing Japan on its own...

I.3. A Changing Relationship or Changing Circumstances?

The American relationship toward Thailand went through a series of changes since its official inception in 1833 up to the beginning of World War II. It is possible, however, to point out certain salient trends and long-term characteristics. Thailand just by itself was never one of the priorities on the American agenda, even in times of crises. In the 19th century and early 20th century, the United States mainly cared about gaining equal rights for its citizens with those of other Western countries. While America could use her image of anti-colonial power, Washington did not feel strong enough or interested enough to intervene on Thai behalf in situation such as the French-Siamese confrontation of 1893. After World War I, the United States influenced by Woodrow Wilson and his policies set an example for other foreign powers by giving up its extraterritorial rights. A more equal treatment of Siam,

¹³⁴ Hull, Cordell. Outline of Proposed Basis for Agreement between the United States and Japan, November 26, 1941. In: Iriye, *Pearl Harbor and the Coming of the Pacific War*, pp. 75–76.

¹³⁵ Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 55.

¹³⁶ USDS, *Foreign Relations 1941*, pp. 335–336.

however, did not automatically mean a more profound interest in the fate of the country, even after Siam steered on the path toward democracy and more rapid modernization after the revolution of 1932. The military fraction of the revolutionary movement, which gradually took over the country, was highly nationalistic but not necessarily anti-Western or pro-Japanese. However, when the power and influence of Japan began to grow, and especially after 1939 and the beginning of war in Europe, Thailand found it more and more difficult (and perhaps not reasonable) to resist Japanese pressure for closer cooperation. While not going as far as becoming a Japanese ally, it used the Japanese support to fulfill its own territorial ambitions. The Western powers, mainly Great Britain, but also the United States, did little to bolster their position vis-à-vis Japan in Thailand. The limited military and economic aid, the constant scolding of Thailand over annexation of parts of French Indochina, and even the wording of the warnings to Japan (an invasion of Thailand would be considered a threat to the European and American colonies) inevitably made many Thais feel that they themselves are accorded no importance in the Western eyes. This feeling did not make the majority of the population fervently pro-Japanese or anti-Western; in fact, Japan was never highly popular in Thailand despite all the propaganda. The feeling of neglect, of being abandoned, which must have felt similar in 1893 as in 1941, only reinforced the feeling that the international system is broken and that in order to survive, Thailand would need to follow a strictly pragmatic foreign policy, and, if possible, to find a strong, capable ally or even a protector. By the end of 1941, the most likely candidate for this role seemed to be the Imperial Japan, but things were soon about to change.

CHAPTER II – THE FOUNDATIONS ARE BEING LAID: THAILAND AND THE UNITED STATES THROUGHOUT THE WAR YEARS, 1942–1945

“I am keeping the declaration in my pocket because I am convinced it does not represent the will of the Thai people. With the American help, I propose to prove it.”

Thai Minister to Washington Seni Pramoj on delivering the declaration of war to the Secretary of State Cordell Hull, January 1942¹³⁷

II.1 The Outbreak of War and the Two Competing Images of Thailand in the United States: The Government vs. the People

The Japanese invasion of Thailand, which finally came in the early morning hours of December 8, 1941, did not really surprise anyone. The hints of the coming war were obvious for some time already and the Thai government was no doubt aware of what was coming. The declaration made publicly by Marshal Phibunsongkhram on December 6: “I do not see why any foreign power should invade Thailand”¹³⁸, should be regarded mostly as an attempt to calm down the populace. On December 7, the same day when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and declared war on the United States and Great Britain, Japanese Ambassador to Thailand paid a visit to the Prime Minister’s office. Unable to get hold of Phibunsongkhram, who was not in Bangkok at the time (whether this absence was deliberately planned is still a matter of speculation), he spoke to the Foreign Minister Direk Jayanama, informed him that Japan had entered the war with the Allies and requested a permission for the Japanese forces to cross the Thai territory¹³⁹. Due to Phibunsongkhram’s absence, the Council of Ministers, which was hastily summoned on the same day, were presented with three plans by the Japanese envoys. One was to merely allow the passage of Japanese troops; the second was an offer of a defense alliance that could be established between Japan and Thailand; and the third would see Thailand enter the war on the side of Japan in exchange for the return of all the territories it had lost to the colonial powers in previous decades¹⁴⁰. Without the Prime Minister present, no other Thai leader felt competent to give a definite answer to Japanese demands, even though it was clear from the outset that Thailand would not withstand the Japanese attack and that no

¹³⁷ Haseman, John B. *The Thai Resistance Movement during World War II*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002, p. 22.

¹³⁸ It is, however, telling that in the same interview Phibunsongkhram advised people to stock up supplies of basic commodities and revealed his government’s plan for moving the capital out of Bangkok to a safer place. Thailand Trusts Treaties, *The New York Times*, 7. 12. 1941.

¹³⁹ Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 75.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 76–77.

Allied help was to be expected¹⁴¹. As a result, when the Japanese forces began to land on the Khra Isthmus in southern part of Thailand in the early hours of December 8¹⁴², no decision regarding the Japanese demands was yet taken. The Thai army and police forces put up resistance to the invaders in several places, but were quickly overrun by the numerically superior and better equipped enemy. When Marshal Phibunsongkhram returned to Bangkok early in the morning on December 8¹⁴³, he ordered immediate ceasefire and started negotiating with the Japanese envoys. Later on the same day, an agreement was signed with Japan providing for the Japanese troops to enter the country and pass the Thai territory without resistance from the Thai forces¹⁴⁴.

These developments were to a degree expected. Thailand never stood a chance of opposing the Japanese invasion without significant aid from the Allies, and it was clear that neither Great Britain nor the United States was either willing or able to extend such aid to Thailand. Marshal Phibunsongkhram now faced the difficult decision regarding the future policy of his government and its possible collaboration with Japan. Phibun was a Thai nationalist and as such, he definitely resented his country being *de facto* occupied by any foreign power. On the other hand, he feared that any further opposition to Japan might lead to repressions against the Thai people and to the installment of a harsh occupation regime. Besides, he also saw the possible advantages of collaboration with Japan, namely acquisition (or reclaiming) of the long-lost territories in Burma, Malaya and French Indochina. After all, the United States and Great Britain did next to nothing to help Thailand in its dire situation, and Phibun now probably felt he owed nothing to Washington and London. On the other hand, by colluding with Japan he could save his nation and even bring it more prosperity and prestige.¹⁴⁵ Thus, Phibun did not stop just by signing a cease-fire treaty with the Japanese. He

¹⁴¹ The British had originally planned an operation codenamed “Matador”, during which the forces from the northern Malaya would occupy southern Thailand in case the northern part of the country was invaded. Such a promise was given to the Thai government during the negotiations with Great Britain prior to the outbreak of the war (USDS, *Foreign Relations 1941*, pp. 336–337). Just before the Japanese invasion, however, the British command decided to abandon these plans due to fears of violating Thai sovereignty and also of overstretching the military resources available. For more on the war plans of the British, see for example: Percival, Arthur E. *The War in Malaya*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1949.

¹⁴² The attack began at approximately 2 a.m. The main invasion force landed in the Bang Phu, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Prachuab Khirikhan, Pattani, Songkhla and Surat Thani provinces. All these provinces are located in the Thai south, adjacent to British Malaya.

¹⁴³ The cease-fire was ordered starting from 7.30 a.m. The American Minister Peck reported that Bangkok was “quiet” and that “American citizens will concentrate in the legation in case of disorders”. USDS, *Foreign Relations 1941*, p. 375. Many of the American citizens still in Thailand were later arrested and put into custody by Japanese forces.

¹⁴⁴ Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 79.

¹⁴⁵ For a detailed treatment of this issue and the motivation behind Phibunsongkhram’s actions during the course of WWII, see: Charun Kuwanon. *Chiwit Kan To Su Khong Chomphon P. Phibulsongkhram* [The Fighting Life of Marshal P. Phibunsongkhram]. Bangkok: Akson Charoenthat, 1953.

went further and on December 21, after further negotiations with the Japanese, a “Treaty of Alliance” was signed in which both sides agreed to respect mutual independence and to provide each other with political, military and economic support in case of military confrontation with other countries. The treaty had a secret clause attached to it which stipulated that in exchange for Japanese assistance in reclaiming lost Thai territories, Thailand would support Japan in the war against the Allies¹⁴⁶.

Even without the knowledge of this secret clause, the Allies were watching the developments in Thailand with suspicion and a certain degree of dismay. It was rather hard to blame the Phibun government for allowing the Japanese forces to pass through the Thai territory¹⁴⁷, when there was no chance of stopping them by military means. The events that followed, however, were seen as an evidence of pro-Japanese tilt in the Thai policy, which could eventually result in Thailand becoming a full-fledged Japanese ally. Such a move would not have so much of a military impact, although Thai forces could be potentially used for local operations against Allied forces. The real significance of the Thai-Japanese alliance would be in its symbolism. Even after the *de facto* Japanese occupation, Thailand still remained a “sovereign” country and its decision to join Japan would thus have to be regarded as a “sovereign” decision made by a “sovereign” government. Tokyo was eager to enlist “allies”, especially Asian “allies”, to show the support among Asian peoples for the Japanese “co-prosperity sphere” plans. The “Treaty of Alliance” of December 21 was thus a symbolic victory for Japan and a loss for the Allies.

Marshal Phibunsongkhram went even further, however. On January 25, 1942, Thailand declared war on Great Britain and the United States and embassies in both countries were instructed to deliver the declaration of war to the Allied governments. The immediate reason and the motivation behind this act are still not fully clear, even with the benefit of hindsight. As described earlier, Japan wished Thailand to become Japanese “ally” and support Japan in its war effort, but this support was mainly to be economic and political – as a source of raw materials and a staging area where the Japanese forces could recuperate. Japanese command did not hold Thai military forces in high esteem, questioning their loyalty and dependability¹⁴⁸ and it seems unlikely that by January 1942 it planned to deploy them to fight

¹⁴⁶ Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 79.

¹⁴⁷ For some observers, however, it was disappointing that the Thai resistance to the invading Japanese forces was not more prolonged and resolute. For example, *The New York Times* had reported already on December 9 that “Thailand had virtually joined the Axis”. This was a rather exaggerated comment, as by December 9 Thailand only ordered its troops to give up resistance and allow the Japanese forces to pass. The negotiations about alliance with Japan came later. Malaya Thwarts Push by Japanese, *The New York Times*, 9. 12. 1941.

¹⁴⁸ Terwiel, *Thailand's Political History*, p. 275.

the Allies¹⁴⁹. It seems that the Japanese even tried to dissuade Phibun from declaring war, or at least did not encourage him to do so¹⁵⁰. Phibun's decision could perhaps be seen as an attempt to secure the territorial gains, made with the approval of Japan on the expense of Great Britain and France (it would be much difficult for Tokyo to take these territories away from Thailand in the future, since Thailand was now officially a Japanese ally). It could also be tied to the domestic power struggle, where certain segments of the political and military establishment were openly anti-Japanese and could threaten Phibun's position in the future¹⁵¹. It is possible that by declaring war, Phibun wanted to close all the paths leading to Great Britain and the United States and deny his political foes the opportunity to play the "Allied card" in the future.

The Thai declaration of war and the events that immediately followed it had a tremendous impact on the post-war relationship between the United States and Thailand (and, to a lesser extent, the relations between Thailand and Great Britain). In London, the Thai Ambassador duly delivered the document to the Foreign Office, as he was instructed; the British government immediately declared war on Thailand in response. The two countries were thus officially at war and the British viewed Thailand as a belligerent consistently throughout the war years. In the United States, however, the situation was very different. The Thai Ambassador, Seni Pramoj, was strongly opposed to the pro-Japanese tilt of the Phibun administration and horrified by the prospect of war with the Allies. Thus, on January 25, when meeting the American Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Seni was resolute in taking a different stance from that of the Phibun government. Rather than handing over the declaration of war, he "tapped his coat and said to Hull: 'I'm keeping the declaration [of war – J.B.] in my pocket because I am convinced it does not represent the will of Thai people. With the

¹⁴⁹ Japan also tried as hard as it could to maintain that Thailand remained a sovereign state, despite the Japanese military presence. On the other hand, Tokyo did not deny that it had strong influence on Thai foreign policy. When the British air force attacked military installations in Thailand, which were used by Japanese, the Japanese foreign ministry proclaimed on January 10 (just two weeks prior to the Thai declaration of war) that despite these attacks, "Japan had no intention of pushing Thailand into war with Britain." Won't Push Thailand into War, *The New York Times*, 11. 1. 1942.

¹⁵⁰ It will probably never be established with certainty what made Marshal Phibunsongkhram to declare the war and what pressure was there really coming from Tokyo. It has to be noticed, though, that the Japanese were reserved about the possibility of Thailand entering the war even in talks with the Nazi Germany. The diary of Joseph Goebbels contains an entry which seems to support the idea that even the Japanese were surprised by the unilateral Thai move. Lochner, Louis P. (ed.). *The Goebbels Diaries, 1942–1943*. Garden City (NY): Doubleday, 1948, p. 1.

¹⁵¹ One of the staunchest personal opponents of Phibun was Pridi Phanomyong, who was by this time one of the three members on the Council of Regents, appointed to administer Thailand on behalf of the absent monarch Rama VIII. Rather than adding his signature to the document (as did the other two regents), Pridi went into hiding and his signature was subsequently forged, making the validity of the declaration dubious even from the legal point of view. Haseman, *The Thai Resistance Movement*, pp. 12–13.

American help, I propose to prove it.”¹⁵² This show of defiance made a deep impression on the American officials. Already after Japan and Thailand had signed the mutual pact in December 1941, the possibility of war with Thailand was discussed by the Allies. On 19 January 1942, the Department of State wrote in a memorandum to the British embassy in Washington, DC: “The Department notes that the British Government considers that the conclusion of a Treaty of Alliance between the Thai government and Japan would normally justify a declaration of war upon Thailand. The British government has, however, ‘received convincing indications that the majority of Thai opinion is anti-Japanese if not pro-Ally’ ... The British government is inclined to consider, therefore, that it would be premature to declare that a state of war exists with Thailand ... Although information available to the Government of the United States would seem to suggest that the extent of anti-Japanese feeling in Thailand may not be so substantial as stated by the British Government, this Government is of the opinion that from a practical point of view it would seem preferable for the time being not to declare that a state of war exists with Thailand.”¹⁵³ It is evident that prior to the Thai declaration of war, neither Great Britain nor the United States was inclined to seek military confrontation with Thailand. London and Washington feared that the popular feeling, which was supposedly anti-Japanese and pro-Allied, could be swayed more in Phibun’s favor should the Allies declare on Thailand. The position of Allied supporters within the Thai political and military establishment would also be further weakened.

After the Thai declaration of war, the steps taken by Great Britain and the United States began to diverge, largely due to the different approaches of Thai ministers in both capitols to the matter of delivering the declaration. While the British were now at war with Thailand, the United States, due to Seni’s refusal to follow the Bangkok government’s policy, still held to the original argument that the declaration of war did not represent the will of Thai people and that it was opposed by the vast majority of Thai populace. Reports that “mass meetings throughout Thailand are protesting to the government in Bangkok against its declaration of war against the United States and Great Britain at Japan’s request”¹⁵⁴ were used to bolster these claims. The situation might have been a bit easier for the United States because its territorial possessions in Asia were not directly bordering Thailand and were not an object of Thai territorial revisionism (unlike the case of British colonial dominion in

¹⁵² Fitzmaurice, Walter. Thailand, Ally in Secret, Snooped under Japs’ Noses, *Newsweek*, 3. 9. 1945, p. 26.

¹⁵³ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers 1942*. Volume I. General, the British Commonwealth, the Far East. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960, p. 913.

¹⁵⁴ Thais Said to Protest against the War on U.S., *The New York Times*, 29. 1. 1942.

Burma¹⁵⁵ or that of the French in Indochina). As a result, there was only a minimum chance of actual military clashes between Thai and American forces. From the very outset, Thailand's declaration of war was presented in the United States as a result of Japanese pressure (which was dubious given the arguments summed up above) and as Phibun's unilateral decision. When it appeared that Thai forces participated in the Japanese invasion of Burma, it was emphasized that these were "Tokyo-controlled Thai troops."¹⁵⁶ Later, an American diplomat, formerly stationed in Bangkok, described the Thai military involvement as follows: "... No reports were heard that the Thai Army did any actual fighting either in Malaya or Burma but important assistance in transport and lines of communication probably were rendered ... The Thai 'conquest' of portions of the Shan States in May and June, where there could not have been opposing forces of any consequence, because Japan had already overcome British and Chinese resistance in Burma, appears to have been a Japanese inspired move to provide a quick Thai victory to bolster the morale of the Thai people and divert their thoughts from increasing economic difficulties at home".¹⁵⁷ The diplomatic correspondence of the period shows that within the Roosevelt Administration there was quite a consensus on ignoring the Thai declaration of war and that the President himself approved of this strategy. For example, on January 28, Assistant Secretary of State Berle wrote to Hull: "I telephoned the President today ... While on the telephone I told him that we had news that Thailand had declared war but that you [Cordell Hull – J. B.] had approved the policy of *ignoring* the matter, The President said he *cordially* agreed [italics added – J. B.]."¹⁵⁸

It was already mentioned above that Great Britain and the United States were convinced that the pro-Japanese tilt of the Phibun government was not approved of or even rejected outright by many Thais. It was quite logical, then, that the Allies would seek to use this discontent to weaken the position of Phibun, to help foster an anti-Japanese resistance movement in Thailand, and possibly use this movement for their military plans. Part of the activities to promote the resistance was carried out directly by the American government. For example, on January 19, the radio station KGEI, based in San Francisco, started broadcast in Thai in addition to those in other languages it was already producing (Chinese, Tagalog,

¹⁵⁵ The Thai territorial ambitions included the Shan States in the northeast of Burma and parts of British Malaya. The Phibun government sent an expeditionary force to the Shan States after the Japanese invasion of Thailand. The so-called *Northern Army* (Khongthap Phayap) met very little opposition in taking Kentung City and helping to proclaim Thai protectorate (United Former Thai States) over parts of the previously British-held territory. Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, pp. 25–26.

¹⁵⁶ In the same article, Thailand was referred to as a "puppet state", which was hardly the case in January 1942. Tokyo-controlled Thai Troops Open Drive on Southern Burma, *The Los Angeles Times*, 21. 1. 1942.

¹⁵⁷ USDS, *Foreign Relations 1942*, p. 919–920.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 914.

Japanese and others). The goal of these broadcasts was “to get the truth to these nations in the Far East, which Axis broadcasters are feeding with everything from lies to distortions of the truth.”¹⁵⁹ Largely, however, the government focused on supporting the resistance movement, organized by Thai activists in the United States and on helping to link this movement with sympathizers in Great Britain and in Thailand proper. These activists came to represent to the United States’ government the “true image of Thailand”, while the Phibun regime was increasingly portrayed as the “Japanese puppet”. The establishment of the resistance, known under the collective appellation of *Free Thai* (Seri Thai) did much to influence the relationship between Thailand and the United States during and after the war.

II.2 The Free Thai Movement and Its Impact on the Thai-American Relations

The Free Thai movement, its activities and the accounts of its members of their training and infiltration into Thailand during the war had been comprehensively described and analyzed by a number of authors. It is outside of the scope of this work to deal with the movement in detail. On the other hand, attention must be paid to the role of the *Free Thai* in shaping the American foreign policy toward Thailand.

In the United States, the Free Thai movement was organized largely by the Thai legation in Washington, D.C. Seni Pramoj and his staffers, Luang Dithakan Phakdi (first secretary) and Col. M. L. Khap Kunchon (military attaché) issued calls to the Thai community in the United States (mainly university students) to join in the effort to liberate their homeland¹⁶⁰. The meeting, organized by Seni and held at the Thai legation in May 1942, was attended by about 30 Thai students, who were informed that volunteers were sought for training for paramilitary and reconnaissance operations in Thailand. Subsequently, the structure of the Free Thai movement was set up with the organizing committee consisting of students and representatives of the legation. By June 1942, 23 Thai students were already being trained with the help of the American government (under the auspices of the Office of Strategic Services).¹⁶¹ Seni Pramoj also prepared a manifesto of the *Free Thai*, in which he stated that the Bangkok government was a puppet government, cooperating with the enemy against the will of the people; that the main objective of the *Free Thai* was to restore the independence of Thailand; and that the *Free Thai* would help restoring democratic

¹⁵⁹ The operations of the radio were presented as “the American short-wave radio offensive against Axis propagandists in the Far East”. KGEI, Short-wave Station on Coast, Lists Eight Tongues for Radio Offensive, Adds Broadcasts in Thai Language, *The New York Times*, 18. 1. 1942.

¹⁶⁰ Haseman, *The Thai Resistance Movement*, p. 23.

¹⁶¹ Wimon Wiriyawit (ed.). *Free Thai. Personal Recollections and Official Documents*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997, pp. 1–2.

government with a constitution in Thailand after the war was over. He also promised that those who cooperated with the Japanese would be investigated.¹⁶² The memorandum, while meant to appeal to the Thais living abroad, also reflected Seni's desire to meet the Allied expectations (for example, in stipulating the need for a democratic government in Thailand or in promising the punishment of "collaborators"). It was a further attempt to emphasize the pro-Allied, pro-democracy nature of the *Free Thai* in comparison with the "Fascist", militaristic nature of the "puppet" Bangkok government.

In Great Britain, organizing the Thai resistance was more difficult in the beginning. The fact that Thailand was officially at war with Britain made the British authorities view any activities of the Thai community with suspicion. The local movement also lacked a strong personality such as Seni Pramoj and besides, the relations within the community were complicated by the fact that many exiled royalists, who had to leave Thailand after the revolution of 1932, settled in England. By April 1942, however, Sano Tanbuyen and Puay Ungphakon, who coordinated the initial organization efforts in London, managed to convince Seri Pramoj to send over his representative, Mani Sanasen.¹⁶³ The British finally relented in the originally negative attitude toward the *Seri Thai*, but unlike the Americans, they did not view its importance as mainly political, but military. The British Special Operations Executive (SOE) was hoping it could use the *Seri Thai* members to infiltrate Thailand and gather valuable intelligence for the Allied forces, which eventually also happened.

In Thailand itself, the resistance was also slowly gaining ground. The *Seri Thai* there mainly consisted of military officials, disappointed with the Phibun regime, as well as government employees and democratic-minded politicians. Pridi Phanomyong, one of the regents, became a logical choice for the leader of the Thai branch of the movement. Although his activities were limited by the oversight of the Phibun government, he sought to establish contacts with the resistance movement in the West to better coordinate their efforts. In spring and summer 1943, he managed to send his envoys to China where they met with *Seri Thai* agents who were sent there from the United States. Contact was thus established which later played an important role during the war¹⁶⁴.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to describe the training of the *Seri Thai* agents and officers, their infiltration to Thailand and their activities there. What is however, important, is how the movement came to be viewed in the West and what was expected of it both by the

¹⁶² For the full version of the memorandum, see: Nai Samrej, *That Thailand May Be Free, Asia and the America*, 1945, no. 45, pp. 94–95.

¹⁶³ Haseman, *Thai Resistance Movement*, pp. 25–27.

¹⁶⁴ Wimon, *Free Thai*, p. 3.

British and American politicians and its own leadership. By August 1943, it was clear that Washington took the *Seri Thai* seriously and that it was aware of the fact that the movement was not limited only to the United States and Great Britain, but that it also operated in Thailand. On August 23, for example, the Secretary of State Cordell Hull wrote to the Deputy Director of the Office of Strategic Services Colonel Goodfellow: "... In reply to your oral inquiry of August 4 relating to possible American operations conducted in connection with a Free Thai movement, the position of Department of State is as follows: The United States recognizes Thailand as an independent state which is under the military occupation of Japan. This government does not recognize the Thai government as it is now constituted;... has continued to recognize as "Minister of Thailand" the Thai Minister in Washington [Seri Pramoj – J.B.] who has denounced his Government's cooperation with Japan, and has sympathetically regarded a Free Thai movement in which he is prominent... Available information indicates that there remain in the present Thai Government a number of officials who opposed the capitulation of that Government to the Japanese pressure. It is understood that Luang Pradist Manudharm (known also as Nai Pridi Bhanomyong), a member of the Council of Regents, is one of these officials and that he participated prominently in a secret movement which aims to restore the Government as it was constituted prior to the Japanese invasion. In the light of this understanding Luang Pradist Manudharm is presumed by the Government of the United States to represent a continuity in the Government of Thailand ... and to be one of the outstanding leaders in the movement for Thai independence. Accordingly, until this Government has indications to the contrary from the Thai people, it feels warranted, without in any way committing itself in respect to the future, in regarding Luang Pradist as one of the leading representatives in Thailand of the Thai nation..."¹⁶⁵

The Americans thus saw the main importance of the *Seri Thai* in two specific aspects – first, it was a means to demonstrate the Thai opposition to the cooperation with Japan and possible way to weaken the Phibun government in Thailand; secondly, the *Seri Thai* operatives, trained in the United States and Great Britain and dispatched into Thailand via China, could contribute vital military intelligence to the Allies and even conduct small scale sabotage operations behind the enemy lines. As the tide of war started to turn against Japan, both of these priorities grew in importance. The economic conditions in Thailand deteriorated, the relations with Japan started to sour and the discontent of the population grew. In July

¹⁶⁵ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers 1943*. Volume III. The British Commonwealth, Eastern Europe, the Far East. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1963, pp. 1118–1119.

1944, Marshal Phibunsongkhram got into a dispute with the House of Representatives (this dispute was related to the proposed move of the capital from Bangkok to the northern province of Petchabun¹⁶⁶ and to create “Buddhist City” – a center of Buddhist teaching) and to everyone’s surprise, resigned from his post of prime minister. The most prominent proponent of the pro-Japanese course was thus suddenly gone. It was widely believed that the dispute with the House was only a pretext and that Phibun was in fact aware of his weakened position vis-à-vis Pridi and the *Seri Thai*. By resigning “voluntarily”, he hoped to avoid the humiliation of being removed by the House or even overthrown by force. There were also speculations that he was already looking for ways to mend the fences with the Allies and that he now wished to distance himself from the Japanese as much as possible.¹⁶⁷ The new government was headed by Khuang Aphaiwong, a politician known to be close to the royal court and as an opponent of Phibun’s strongly pro-Japanese course. Khuang started to cultivate relations with the West, even though he still had to be careful about not doing it too openly – the fear that Japanese could take over the country and disarm the Thai forces was growing with each coming month as the Japanese forces suffered more and more defeats and their position was becoming desperate. Thus, Khuang had to apply his “ability to dissemble with the Japanese”¹⁶⁸. In August 1944, a new commander of the Thai military forces was also chosen – General Phot Phanon Yothin¹⁶⁹. This change was also in line with the tilt of the new government toward the Allies.

This change in Thailand was vital for the United States. During 1944, intensive discussions about the future status of the country were conducted with Great Britain. Both sides held to their differing views and the negotiations floundered. The main problem seemed to be the territories which Thailand had gained at the expense of Great Britain and France and which London wanted to gain back. There were also evident suspicions and ill feelings toward Thailand on part of the British. For example, in September 1944, the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden wrote to the American Ambassador in London Winant: “Our two Governments have, I think, the same *basic* objectives regarding Siam. We, like the United States, want to see the restoration of Siam after the war as a free, sovereign and independent State, subject

¹⁶⁶ Phibun later claimed that this move of the capital was proposed with the view of possible military uprising against the Japanese, but these claims could not be verified. Wyatt, David K. *Thailand. A Short History*. 2nd Edition. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 249.

¹⁶⁷ For the detailed account of Phibun’s fall and the political developments that surrounded it, see: Batson, Benjamin. A. The Fall of Phibun Government, 1944, *Journal of the Siam Society*, 1974, vol. 62, no. 2, pp. 89–120.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 110.

¹⁶⁹ This change was reported on, although briefly, by the American newspapers. See, for example: Thailand Names New Leader, *The New York Times*, 26. 8. 1944.

only to its acceptance of such special arrangements for security and economic collaboration as may be judged necessary within an international system... But at present we and the United States Government have not got our ideas coordinated and if we are to get this *problem* straightened out it is essential that we should recognize that we necessarily view it from *somewhat different* angles. The United States Government do not regard themselves as being at war with Siam. His Majesty's Government do. Moreover, while appreciating the possible advantages of the Siamese resistance to the Japanese, His Majesty's Government *does not rate its practical value very high*... We feel, in fact that if the resistance is to be encouraged it may need a *spur* rather than *sugar plum*. Again, we are bound to consider the effect upon neighbouring territories of any public declaration about Siam and it is here that any *reference to territorial integrity* presents *difficulties*. As declared at Cairo, 'we have no thought of territorial expansion', but it goes without saying that Siam cannot be allowed to keep the ill-gotten gains which she has accepted from her Japanese ally at the expense of Malaya, of Burma and of French Indo-China. Some *special strategic arrangements* may also be necessary in the Khra Isthmus within the framework of an international security system..." [italics added – J.B.]¹⁷⁰ The United States was rather worried by some of the British demands – especially the *special arrangements* that Eden note in his letter. Washington was of course aware that the territories gained by Thailand with the help of Japan would eventually have to be returned, but feared that this might be used by London and Paris to come out with new demands of border adjustments. As the Cordell Hull put in his reply to Eden's letter: "... With regard to territories acquired by Thailand while under Japanese domination... The American government fully concurs with the views expressed by Mr. Eden with regard to such territories. We do not recognize the lawfulness of such acquisitions and agree that such territories must in fact be restored to Indochina, Burma and Malaya from whom they were taken... Finally, we note that Mr. Eden's statement favoring restoration of Thailand as a free, sovereign and independent is, however, qualified by certain important reservations... It is not clear to the American Government precisely what is contemplated by these reservations... the American Government would appreciate an indication from the British Government at an early date as to what it has in mind in connection with these reservations..."¹⁷¹ The American fears were further exacerbated by the fact that Thailand lay in the British zone of operations

¹⁷⁰ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers 1944*. Volume V. The Near East, South Asia and Africa, The Far East. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965, pp. 1316–1317.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, pp. 1318–1319.

and any military activity there would likely be coordinated by the British (and in fact, Allied) commander in the area, Lord Mountbatten.

It was clear, even to the *Seri Thai* officials, that Great Britain was not favorably inclined to a lenient treatment of Thailand after the war. Thus, the new Thai government and the leaders of the resistance movement in the United States redoubled their efforts aimed at gaining support of the American officials. Seni Pramoj and others were informed about the differences between Washington and London and were ready to make use of them for the benefit of Thailand. They looked for any sign of sympathy on part of the Americans and were ready to use it to expand their influence base in Washington. The hints that were coming to Seri clearly showed that despite the British objections, the United States was committed to restore independent and sovereign Thailand as soon after the end of war as possible.¹⁷² In the spring of 1945, a small delegation headed by Direk Jayanama, former Thai ambassador to Japan and one of the leaders of the Thai branch of *Seri Thai*, managed to reach the United States via Colombo, New Delhi and Karachi. The goal of his mission was “to inform the American people about Thailand and its position in the war, and to seek their understanding, explaining that Thailand was friendly to the United States, but had been swayed by a few people to join the Japanese”¹⁷³. Jayanama stayed in the United States for the rest of the year, trying to solicit support for Thailand among Congressmen, members of the State Department and influential *personas* in Washington’s business circles.

Pridi Phanomyong and other *Seri Thai* leaders were not satisfied with the idea that the future of Thailand should be decided merely by negotiations between the United States and Great Britain, which Thailand could influence only in a limited, indirect way. By the spring of 1945, Pridi was convinced that the *Seri Thai* forces are strong enough to attack the Japanese and he repeatedly sought the permission to stage an uprising. The Allied Command, however, called for restraint. There were several reasons. From the purely strategic, military perspective, the Allied commanders feared that such an uprising would lead to bloodshed and

¹⁷² For example, in November 1944, an article was published by Kenneth P. Landon, a former Presbyterian missionary in Thailand, who joined the Department of State in 1942 as an expert on Southeast Asia. In the article, Landon seems to defend Thailand’s tilt toward Japan in the 1930s and early 1940s, arguing that it reflected “Thailand’s acceptance of Japan as the power in Southeastern Asia which the Thai felt they had to balance against Western powers”. He also stated in conclusion to the article that “it is probable that the Thai are now sharply observing and are preparing to meet the post-war world as resolutely as possible in order to attempt to re-establish Thailand as an independent member of the family of the nations of the world”. It is likely that the somewhat benevolent attitude displayed by Landon toward Thailand in his article was shared, if not directly encouraged and sanctioned, by his superiors at the Department. Landon, Kenneth P. Thailand’s Struggle for National Security, *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 1944, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 5–26 (both quotations in the note above are from p. 26).

¹⁷³ Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 186.

immense loss of civilian life. They were also afraid that should intense fighting occur within Thailand, they would not be able to assist the *Seri Thai* forces in time. Such a decision, however, must have been disappointing for Pridi, especially because there was a danger that the Japanese would move first and disarm the *Seri Thai* as well as the regular Thai units¹⁷⁴. As *The New York Times* reported after the war: “The Regent of Thailand, Luang Bradit [Pridi Phanomyong – J.B.], spoke in the name of the King and was the leader of the Government¹⁷⁵, a Government that was ostensibly a satellite of Japan. He was at the same time leader of the resistance against Japan... He had made repeated offers to bring his movement [the *Seri Thai* – J. B.] into the open to fight the Japanese, but for military reasons the Allied Military Command urged him to remain underground, and he reluctantly agreed to do so.”¹⁷⁶ It was obvious that Pridi and other Thai leaders were keen to demonstrate their devotion to the Allied cause and a military uprising would be a potent sign of where the country’s loyalties truly lay. It could also draw some attention away from the Allied bombings, which caused a lot of damage in Bangkok and other areas and which started to create a negative impression of the Allies¹⁷⁷.

The decision of the Allied Command not to start the uprising was of course not based on purely strategic concerns. As mentioned before, the British did not trust the *Seri Thai* as much as the Americans. They saw the movement as rather opportunistic, last-minute attempt to save the country from being punished for collaborating with the Japanese. In the words of Anthony Eden: “His Majesty’s Government feel that it is in any case of doubtful wisdom to encourage the comfortable view that the Siamese can count on an easy and assured future regardless of their attitude toward the Japanese and the efforts which they make to help themselves and us.”¹⁷⁸ Britain was clearly determined to reassert its influence in the region and an uprising by a local armed force could potentially complicate London’s plans. Since the military operations in this theater were conducted largely by the British, Washington had no

¹⁷⁴ The Japanese command was beyond any doubt aware of the existence of the resistance movement but did not want to intervene because of the fears of alienating the population. By the summer of 1945, however, the Japanese forces started to conduct moves around the country and build new supply depots and air bases. Pridi feared that it was ultimately the Japanese intention to detain the members of Thai government, declare martial law, disarm all Thai armed forces and assume direct control of the control. Similar scenario took place in Indochina in the spring of the same year. Secrets from Siam, *Saturday Evening Post*, 12. 1. 1946.

¹⁷⁵ This is obviously an incorrect statement, as Pridi was never a leader of the government during the war years. He assumed a more preeminent role, however, after Phibun resigned in 1944.

¹⁷⁶ Secret Thai Role in War Detailed, *The New York Times*, 8. 9. 1945.

¹⁷⁷ For a graphic, even though partially fictional account of the life in Bangkok during World War II, see: Kukrit Pramoj. *Si Phaendin* [Four Reigns]. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998, here especially chapters 43–48.

¹⁷⁸ USDS, *Foreign Relations 1944*, p. 1317.

choice but to comply. The United States, however, started to make its own arrangements in Thailand for when the war would be over.

II.3. Wartime Allies or Foes?

It is rather difficult to assess Thailand's role during World War II from the point of view of the United States. On the one hand, the country was officially an ally of Japan, it declared war on both Great Britain and the United States and it gained a number of territories with the help of Tokyo. On the other hand, from the very beginning, there was a vocal opposition to the alliance with Japan, both among people in Thailand proper and among Thais living abroad. The *Seri Thai* movement, despite the fact that it had not gotten its chance to demonstrate its loyalty to the Allies in combat, was a vital political asset for the future negotiations about the post-war status of the country.

It soon became apparent that the American and British view of Thailand's role during the war and its treatment after the war would end differed substantially. The reason for this was not only the grievances on part of Britain and the fact that the two countries were officially at war. Britain was an old colonial power which already had domains in the region and it was interested to retain these domains and restore them to their original state, possibly with the supplies and reparations from Thailand as a defeated country. Britain did not need Thailand for its strategic plans and did not need to earn the gratitude of Thai government. On the other hand, the United States had no power base in the region prior to the war except for the Philippines, but the archipelago was on its way to independence. Washington no doubt felt some sympathy for the plight of Thai people, also because of the fact that neither the United States nor Great Britain was able to render Thailand any effective assistance which would help it withstand the initial Japanese invasion. On the other hand, Washington also viewed Thailand as a possible stepping stone for the United States to gain a foothold in the mainland Southeast Asia, as an important piece in its new Asian policy. It was the future intentions and interests of both the United States and Great Britain that clashed in Thailand and the Thais were quite strongly aware of this clash. The traditional strategy of *keeping the feet on both sides of the boat* was no longer applicable to the postwar situation. If the Thai leadership wanted to preserve a strong and sovereign Thailand, it had to choose a strong protector – and in 1945 there was hardly any other choice than the United States.

CHAPTER III – THE RELATIONSHIP TAKES SHAPE: THE UNITED STATES AS THE “CHAMPION” OF THAI INDEPENDENCE AND SOVEREIGNTY, 1945–1948

A consideration of the nature of the sanctions (military, financial and otherwise) to be imposed upon Siam when the time comes would lead me into a premature discussion of details which I wish to avoid. But, both on merits and as a measure of precaution, the establishment of some form of tutelage over Siam for a period following upon the termination of the war is even now sufficiently indicated.

Sir Josiah Crosby on the post-war settlement in Southeast Asia, July 1944¹⁷⁹

III.1. The Intermediate Period: The United States and the Reestablishment of Thailand on the International Scene

The abrupt end of World War II, which followed in a quick succession to the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 of August and 9 of August 1945, respectively, came as a rather unwelcome surprise to the Thai government. For the reasons stated in the previous chapter, the underground movement in Thailand did not get a chance to stage an anti-Japanese uprising and so could not demonstrate the “true feelings” of the Thai people. It was now left to the government to do its best and guide the country through the perilous times of post-war negotiations. It was clear to the Thai leaders that the role of the United States in securing acceptable terms for Thailand would be vital and it was thus one of the main Thai objectives to keep Washington involved in the process as much as possible. With all the other challenges facing the Truman Administration in the wake of the war, this proved to be a formidable task.

III.1.A. The Negotiations with Great Britain

The very first issue to be solved was the matter of the surrender of Japanese forces still on Thai soil. The British government expected that the Japanese would surrender to the representatives of Lord Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander of South East Asia Command, and it wished to make use of this opportunity to dispatch British forces into the country to serve as sort of an “occupation force”. The United States was suspicious of the British intentions. Already in February 1945, the American Ambassador to China (Hurley) wrote back to Washington: “I am not convinced by Eden’s statement ... that the British want to see Thailand after the war restored as an independent, free and solid state. I feel that if we

¹⁷⁹ Crosby, Josiah. Observations on a Post-War Settlement in South-East Asia, *International Affairs*, 1944, vol. 20, no. 3, p. 362.

do not move forward in this matter, the British will succeed in *out-maneuvering* us and the Chinese and in gaining some measure of *control* over Thailand [italics added – J.B.]”¹⁸⁰ This feeling was shared by many officials and experts at the State Department in Washington. The disputes between the United States and Great Britain regarding the treatment of Thailand were not stemming only from their different views of the true role played by Bangkok during the war, but also from their rivalry and their attempts to secure a power base in Thailand after the war. The British, however, had initially a stronger position, as their forces were in the area, and they wished to make use of this stronger position as soon as possible. The United States scored an early diplomatic victory when it managed to secure that the Japanese surrendered to the American undercover agents in Thailand rather than to British officials who had yet to arrive¹⁸¹. Immediately after the Japanese surrender, the Thai government issued a declaration stating that “any hostile actions carried out against the Allies had been carried out in opposition to the wishes of Thai people, and in violation of the Constitution”. The declaration of war on the United States and England was proclaimed to be null and void¹⁸². This move was consulted with the State Department and was supported by the Truman Administration as a necessary step to cut all ties with Japan. *The New York Times* reported at the time: “Wars are seldom ended by simple proclamation, but Thailand, with the blessing of the Secretary of State Byrnes, has managed to bow herself out of the global conflict as adroitly as that. *A few troublesome wrinkles* may have to be ironed out in the future treaties, but for all practical purposes we are again at peace with a little kingdom which *never wanted to take up arms against us...* It is a rich country, and under wise and enlightened guidance once more should rapidly recover from the effects of *unsought war* [italics added – J.B.]”¹⁸³ In addition to rescinding the declaration of war, Thailand had also returned the territories in Malaya and Burma to Great Britain. The name of the country was changed, albeit temporarily, from Thailand back to Siam. A victory parade was held in Bangkok to mark the official end of the war in which the *Seri Thai* guerilla forces marched together with the political leaders to show their support to the Allies.

This development had further convinced the British government that speed is of essence if it wants to gain anything from the weakened state of Thailand. The British

¹⁸⁰ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers 1945*. Volume IV. The British Commonwealth. The Far East. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1969, p. 1247.

¹⁸¹ The surrender took place on August 15, both in Bangkok and in the provinces. Haseman, *Thai Resistance Movement*, p. 129.

¹⁸² Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 152.

¹⁸³ Peace Comes to Thailand, *The New York Times*, 26. 8. 1945. The reader is certainly not left in much doubt about who should be the “wise” and “enlightened” guide...

authorities began to prepare a draft of agreement with Thailand which would place significant restraints on its sovereignty and which would also stipulate for reparations to be paid to Britain. The negotiations started in early September 1945 in Kandy, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and the British presented the Thai delegation with a set of 21 proposals. Among them were some that had direct impact for Thai economy. The British, for example, demanded that “[Thailand agrees] not export rice, tin, rubber and teak for a period of time. The Allied authorities felt such a prohibition to be necessary because of present economic circumstances. Exception might be made only at the direction of a committee of Allied representatives”.¹⁸⁴ The British also demanded that Thailand increase its rice production and make the rice surpluses available to the Allies at a price determined by them. In addition, the Allies were to control Thai ships, naval military and air forces, and even Thai press and other media which would be duly censored. “War criminals” had to be handed over to the Allies and all military, para-military and political organizations “conducting propaganda hostile to the United Nations” were to be disbanded. It was the aim of the British, among other things, to reduce the influence of military in Thai society and politics and so curbs were proposed on the size of Thai armed forces. In fact, the British demands would have placed Thai military under *de facto* control of London. Lord Mountbatten pushed the Thai delegation to sign the treaty as fast as possible, threatening sanctions otherwise.

The Thai government was put in a difficult position. The newly appointed Prime Minister, Tawee Boonyaket (in office August 31–September 17, 1945) had been previously assured that the United States would not allow Britain to exert too much pressure on Thailand. He saw the United States as the main ally of Thailand in these difficult times, which was clear from the letter he wrote to the Department of State, where he stated, among other things: “... As far as the United States of America is concerned, I also sincerely wish to emphasize that Thailand always remembers the warmest sympathies and the perfect understanding the United States has extended to her since the very beginning of the relations between our two countries; and more especially in the hour of international difficulties in which, by force of circumstances, Thailand has been compelled to be involved... Now *more than ever* my country needs the precious assistance and support of the United States of America and now more than ever we feel so much *confident* that our expectation will meet with *favorable response*... [italics added – J.B.]”¹⁸⁵. It was thus natural for the Thai government to plead for help in the United States once the negotiations with Britain started to get tough.

¹⁸⁴ Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 211. For all 21 proposals and annexes, see, pp. 210–213.

¹⁸⁵ USDS, *Foreign Relations 1945*, p. 1304.

In the United States, the British actions had caused considerable anxiety and even anger. The American suspicion that Britain wanted to turn Thailand into her protectorate were further exacerbated by the fact that U.S. representatives were allegedly not invited to the Kandy negotiations. The American commissioner in India wrote to the Secretary of State on September 6: "Mountbatten gave Thai 48 hours to sign sweeping economic agreement under guise of military agreement... Agreement makes obvious British intention treat Thailand as an enemy country to be occupied and controlled. OSS and War Department have details proposed agreement which does not conform to US policy. If US cannot effectively oppose such harsh terms by Allied Commander [Mountbatten – J. B.], US prestige would be seriously impaired and US goodwill in Thailand sacrificed to the detriment of American overall policies toward Asiatics and the Pacific".¹⁸⁶

It was clear that by this point, the United States considered the issue of Thailand also a matter of its own prestige. The problem was that it was preoccupied with other problems and its ability to intervene in the Thai-British negotiations was limited. On the American advice, the Thai delegation in Kandy refused to sign the "21 proposals" on the grounds of it only being authorized to sign a military agreement, not an economic one. The British, however, did not relent and on September 25, they presented the Thai government with an even more harsh set of conditions. Among other things, the demand was placed on Thailand to supply 1.5 millions tons of milled rice free of charge to the British¹⁸⁷. The Thai government, headed now by the former minister to the United States and *Seri Thai* leader Seni Pramroj, still counted on the American support and did not want to give ground to the British. The negotiations stalled until December, when the British government requested that a Thai delegation be sent to Singapore for a new round of talks. The Department of State closely followed the negotiations between the two countries. Washington was afraid that prolonging the talks without reaching successful conclusion, acceptable for Thailand, could lead to political instability and the loss of popular support for the ruling *Seri Thai* leaders. The Truman Administration also feared a scenario when the British would use this instability in Thailand to help create a government that would be more pro-British than pro-American. As a cable from US diplomat Charles Yost, who served as Political Advisor in Bangkok, to Washington in November 1945 stated: "The growing dissatisfaction among Siamese with present Government under control of the Revolutionary Party¹⁸⁸ arises from 1) its long tenure in office, 2) its failure to reestablish

¹⁸⁶ USDS, *Foreign Relations 1945*, pp. 1305–1306.

¹⁸⁷ Terwiel, *Thailand's Political History*, p. 279.

¹⁸⁸ The Revolutionary Party was a political organization set up by the *Seri Thai* adherents.

normal relations with Britain and United States¹⁸⁹ and 3) to solve internal problems of inflation and corruption among civil officials... Siamese believe that British are attempting to achieve their ends by pressing harsh terms on the Siamese while making unofficial promises that if a government is set up which is satisfactory to the British the actual implementation of terms will be mild... It becomes increasingly clear that Britain is using peace terms to strengthen its already preponderant political and economic influence in Siam... continued delay by U.S. to resume diplomatic relations is likely to be increasingly interpreted by Siamese as U.S. support of British terms and to contribute to forcing Siam into British hands.”¹⁹⁰ The popular discontent with the government was indeed growing, mainly due to economic problems, the above mentioned corruption and generally shared feeling of uncertainty about the future. It was, however, quite unlikely that any significant tilt toward Britain in Siamese domestic and foreign policy was to be expected, if only because of the animosities from the past which were by 1945 far from overcome. In spite of this, the fear of growing British influence at the expense of the United States was a major factor in the American deliberations. It is important in this context to keep in mind the overall post-war strategic plans of Washington, which had no doubt counted on Siam as one of the American power bases in the region.

To prevent “forcing Siam into British hands”, the United States exerted both direct and indirect pressure on its British ally. For example, the United States Congress at one point threatened to put a loan of several billion US dollars, earmarked for Great Britain, on hold until the dispute with Siam is settled¹⁹¹. The Department of State regularly called on the British government to ameliorate its stance toward Siam and to rescind some of its harshest demands. It also repeatedly advised Siam not to sign a treaty which would be too disadvantageous to Siamese, and presumably American, interests. In order to relieve pressure on the Siamese delegation, the Department of State even informed the British that the Siamese were delaying the signing of the document *based on recommendation of the United States*¹⁹². In addition to political and economic pressure¹⁹³, the United States also started a media

¹⁸⁹ Washington was waiting for the treaty between Great Britain and Siam to be signed before reestablishing full diplomatic relations with Bangkok.

¹⁹⁰ USDS, *Foreign Relations 1945*, pp. 1375–1376.

¹⁹¹ Darling, Frank C. *Thailand and the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1965, p. 43.

¹⁹² Direk Jayanama recalls that such was the information he received from the American political advisor in Bangkok, Charles Yost, and such was the information that was sent to Siamese delegation in Singapore during the final round of talks in December 1945. Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 218 and f. 43.

¹⁹³ The details of these interventions on various levels can be found for example in: Isorn Pocmontri. *Negotiations between Britain and Siam on the Agreement for the Termination of their State of War, 1945: An Instance of Intervention by the United States in British Foreign Policy*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, 1982.

campaign in support of Siam. The traditional anti-colonial attitude was reflected in some of the newspaper articles' headlines, which were often very critical of the British actions. For example, in November 1945 *The Washington Post* criticized the British occupation policies in Siam and stated very bluntly: "It is shocking to get reports that the British occupation forces are not only treating Siam as a conquered country, but also to all intents and purposes, as a British colony... It tends to give substance to the charge that, under the cloak of occupation, Britain is pursuing an imperialistic course in southeast Asia"¹⁹⁴. It seems very likely that many of these articles were inspired by comments of State Department officials, who wished to put more pressure on Great Britain and to force to make concessions. For example, the British government had to deny charges of the American newspapers that it wishes to "enslave Siam"¹⁹⁵. In response to accusations in American media of "victimizing Siam", the British Under-secretary for Foreign Affairs had to resort to make the following proclamation: "In view of the very misleading and tendentious statements which have recently appeared in the foreign [i.e. American – J. B.] press, I welcome the opportunity of stating that the Government's policy toward Siam is based on a desire to renew as soon as possible the friendly and cordial relations which existed before the war and to see Siam resume her place as a sovereign, independent and prosperous country"¹⁹⁶. Such assurances, however, hardly worked for the American journalists who had very different view of the Siamese-British relations after the proposed agreement: "... Siam, nominally independent, but under heavy pressure from Britain to sign an agreement which would put her under virtual mortgage to the British Empire"¹⁹⁷. *The New York Times* also reported that the British proposals regarding Siam were unacceptable for the US government, claiming that "as originally drafted, the British terms were thought here to impair the economic and political independence of Siam and to project a closing, perhaps permanently, of the 'open door' that the United States has long enjoyed in Siam"¹⁹⁸. In fact, the United States had hardly ever enjoyed "open door" in Siam, but this overstatement and the sheer number of articles devoted to Siam in the closing months of 1945 showed how important the issue was for the American government. By December 17, the same newspaper published the news that the British have "modified considerably the demands originally presented to Siam... the latest proposals meet the major

¹⁹⁴ Britain and Siam, *The Washington Post*, 10. 12. 1945.

¹⁹⁵ Enslaving of Siam Denied by Britain, *The New York Times*, 14. 12. 1945.

¹⁹⁶ British Deny Charge of Victimized Siam, *The New York Times*, 20. 12. 1945.

¹⁹⁷ Iron Fist, After Fancy Phrases, Is Losing Peace Fact in Asia, *The Washington Post*, 9. 12. 1945.

¹⁹⁸ US Presses British on Siam Proposals, *The New York Times*, 12. 12. 1945.

objections of the United States Government”¹⁹⁹. Since *The New York Times* claimed it did not have the details of either the original proposals or the modified proposals, this could have been just another attempt to exert more pressure on the British government by presenting something which had not yet been agreed upon as *fait accompli*. Is it possible to say that the United States government actively directed or at least supported this campaign? The fact that Charles Yost mentioned to the Siamese delegation specifically that “all the newspapers in the United States came out with articles accusing Great Britain of oppressing Thailand”²⁰⁰ seems to lend some credibility to this theory.

The negotiations between Siam and Great Britain in Singapore finally came to conclusion in late December 1945, with the treaty between both countries officially signed on 1 January 1946. Views of this treaty and its harshness on Siam varied. The British presented the final document as proof of their leniency and good-will, stating in the communiqué that in light of the Siamese resistance efforts during the war, “Great Britain generously” decided not to treat Siam as defeated country²⁰¹. The Siamese still saw it as foreign dictate and oppression, even though they acknowledged that some of the unacceptable British demands of the past had been either withdrawn or modified. The treaty laid provisions for the restoration of British property in Siam, prepared the groundwork for resuming commercial relations between both countries and stipulated that Siam should be involved in defending the territorial integrity of the neighboring British colonies under the guidance of the United Nations. The demand for 1.5 million tons of rice, which were to be made available to the British government free of charge, was retained in the treaty²⁰²; the rice, however, was never obtained by the British government, largely because of the American pressure not to do so and partly because of the rice shortage that such a transfer would have generated in Siam herself²⁰³.

Immediately following the signing of the treaty between Britain and Siam, the United States officially reestablished diplomatic relations with Siam, noting on this occasion with

¹⁹⁹ Siam Pact Near, British Believe, *The New York Times*, 17. 12. 1945.

²⁰⁰ Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 218.

²⁰¹ For the full text of the agreement, see: *Formal Agreement for the Termination of the State of War between Siam and Great Britain and India, and Exchange of Notes between the Siamese Government and Australia with a View of Terminating the State of War, Signed at Singapore on 1st January 1946*. Bangkok: s. n., 1989. See also Thak Chaloemtiarana (ed.). *Thai Politics, 1932–1957*. Volume One. Extracts and Documents. Bangkok: Political Association of Thailand, 1978, pp. 461–471.

²⁰² Article 14, *Ibid*, p. 468.

²⁰³ The demand was later renegotiated and under the new conditions, Siam was to sell 1.2 million tons of rice to Great Britain for 12 pounds and 14 shillings/ton. Later, this amount of rice was further reduced to just 600 000 tons and eventually by September 1947, when the rice was originally to be delivered, it was virtually dropped. The British were no doubt aware that rice shortages that would occur in Siam would undermine the position of the liberal government of Pridi Phanomyong and strengthen militarism and anti-British attitudes in the country. Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, p. 21.

satisfaction that the negotiations between both countries had been successfully concluded: “As we [the United States – J. B.] had not recognized Siamese declaration of war we did not participate in the negotiations in Kandy and Singapore... This abstention by no means signified, however, that the US was not interested in this settlement... On the contrary we engaged in prolonged and friendly conversations with the British Government concerning the proposed terms of the agreement and made known our views on number of points which we considered either of direct concern to the US or of general concern to those nations interested in the stability and prosperity of Southeast Asia. The British Government found itself able to concur [with] our views on a number of these points...”²⁰⁴

The conclusion of the negotiations and the official termination of the state of war did not mean, naturally, that all the problems between Siam and Great Britain disappeared. During 1946 and 1947, the United States still had to actively intervene on a number of occasions, for example to solve the disputes concerning the British military forces still in Siam or in economic matters such as the rice, rubber and tin exports. Gradually, however, the relations between London and Bangkok began to normalize, also because Britain became preoccupied by far more serious problems in the region than the issue of Siam. With the gradual British withdrawal from the area of South Asia and Southeast Asia²⁰⁵, the United States was inalterably becoming the dominant player in dealing with Siam.

It has been suggested that the American pressure on Great Britain regarding Siam in the months following the end of World War II had an adverse impact on the future political developments in the country. Some authors argue that the British were more prone to push for the institution of significant reforms and changes in Siam, namely the curbing of the role of military in the society and politics and the punishment of those responsible for the rise of pre-war militarism and cooperation with Japan. Frank Darling notes, for example, that the British were better informed about the situation in Siam, that their policy toward Siam was more “realistic” and “far-sighted” than American policy and that the British proposals were intended to “assist the country in the long run”.²⁰⁶ These arguments definitely are valid, to a degree. The American leniency toward Siam helped the perpetrators of the Siamese wartime policy to escape virtually without any punishment. On the other hand, it has to be noted that a civilian government was installed after the end of the war, with British and American support, and that this government had a chance to institute major reforms on its own. The role of the

²⁰⁴ USDS, *Foreign Relations 1945*, pp. 1414–1415.

²⁰⁵ India became independent in August 1947, Burma in January 1948, in Malaya the British were preoccupied with fighting the communist insurgency and thus the country became officially independent only in 1957.

²⁰⁶ Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, p. 44.

military was weakened, if only because its leaders were discredited in the eyes of many Siamese for their erroneous predictions of how World War II would end and what course of foreign policy was best for Siam. The liberal government's weakness and its ultimate failure and the return of the military, discussed later in this chapter, would have probably occurred regardless of the American foreign policy toward Siam, mainly due to some inherent features of Siamese political life and culture which could hardly be altered by pressure from the outside. Thus, it can hardly be argued that in the long run, either the British or American policy could have had a significant, lasting impact on Siamese politics, especially in this particular period of post-war uncertainty and growing fears of communist danger.

It also has to be noted that behind the facade of the official American and British proclamations, which were intended to justify and embellish their foreign policy objectives in Siam, was often hidden the true motivation for their actions and moves. The British in 1945 and 1946 still could reasonably hope to retain at least parts of their Asian empire, despite their weakened position. It was thus in their interest to eliminate any potential security threat from Siam toward their territories (thus the curbs on the military strength) and to make use of the relatively undisturbed Siamese economy and of her natural resources (thus the demands of rice supplies and the limitations regarding the rubber and tin trade) to replace the losses sustained in the war and to kick-start economic recovery in the colonies. In short, it was in British interest to keep Siam weakened and dependent on trade with Britain and her empire. On the other hand, the United States, in its push for a new Asian policy and perhaps a new Asian "empire", needed Siam as a strong, stable and loyal partner that could serve as an American base of operations in Southeast Asia. Thus, Washington was not interested so much in weakening Siamese military or leaving its economy in shatters. Instead, it sought to improve the situation in Siam which could in the long run serve the American objectives in the region while gaining the gratitude of the Siamese government. While the *realpolitik* aspect was of course not the only factor at play, it can't be ignored when considering some of the American (and of course British) foreign policy moves toward Siam²⁰⁷ in the post-war period. As the bipolar division of the world began to emerge, the *realpolitik* began to play an even more prominent part in the American foreign policy thinking.

²⁰⁷ One such example of an issue that the United States later used to demonstrate their interest in well-being of Siam and which did not cost Washington anything was the earmarking of part of gold reserves seized in Japanese banks for the Siamese government. Siam was included in the group of recompensed countries even though it was not a *de facto* occupied country during the war and was not exploited as much as the British, French or Dutch colonies. Gold Loot Found in Bank of Japan, *The New York Times*, 1. 10. 1945.

III.1.B. The Negotiations with the French, the Siamese Application to join the UN and the Role of the United States

The Siamese relations with Great Britain were normalized, with the help of the pressure from the United States, by the end of 1945, although some problems had persisted. The negotiations with the French were far more complicated and would require a much more intensive involvement of the Truman Administration. The issue of settlement between France and Siam was at the same intrinsically tied to the admission of Siam to the United Nations and thus was of major importance to both Bangkok and Washington. For most of 1946, the United States was involved in mediating between the two countries and seeking a solution that would be acceptable to both parties.

The French government for its part felt humiliated by the fact that Siam used its wartime weakness to occupy territories in Cambodia and Laos. The return of these territories was a *conditio sin que non* for France to resume relations with Siam. In September 1945, during the negotiations between Siam and Great Britain in Kandy, the French informed the government in Bangkok that they considered France still at war with Siam and that unless a treaty similar to that with Britain was drafted and signed, they would not reestablish relations with Siam²⁰⁸. Both Great Britain and France supported the French demand for the territories to be reverted under the administration of French Indochina. As for the US Government, it made it clear that it “cannot admit the validity of transfer [i.e. the Siamese occupation – J. B.] because [it – J.B] was made in course of Jap aggression and believes territories should be returned”²⁰⁹. The United States admitted that historically, these territories were part of the Siamese sphere of influence. Besides, President Roosevelt was a staunch opponent of French colonialism and even after he passed away, this negative feeling still persisted in Washington for some time, although it was gradually weakening.²¹⁰ The American support for the French demands thus stemmed mainly from the fact that it became clear that unless the territories were returned, France would block Siam’s admission to the United Nations, a step seen in Washington as the ultimate reestablishment of Siam on the international scene. The anxiety of the United States to solve the bilateral dispute was obvious from the repeated statements such as: “US anxious for French-Siamese accord which, after restoration legal *status quo ante*, will

²⁰⁸ Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 266.

²⁰⁹ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1946*. Volume VIII. The Far East. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971, p. 979.

²¹⁰ For more on the changing American attitude toward French colonial rule in Indochina, see for example: Gardner, Lloyd C. *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II to Dienbienphu*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1988.

settle border on merits and on desires of peoples concerned.”²¹¹ In other words, the United States insisted that the territories be returned to France but did not oppose a possible readjustment of the borders, which would likely be decided by the United Nations or the International Court of Justice in the Hague.

The Siamese government was initially opposed to the idea of returning the disputed territories to France. One of its arguments, which was beyond any doubt raised with the American audience in mind, was that “in the territories Thailand had *reclaimed*, the inhabitants had been rendered *free* and *independent*. If they were returned to French rule, they would be *deprived* of these freedoms [italics added – J. B.]”²¹². Statements such as this were intended to play on the anti-colonial string in the American foreign policy thinking. Apart from that, however, they were rather demagogic as the inhabitants of the “reclaimed” territories, who were not ethnic Thais, were subjected to treatment not dissimilar to that practiced by the French and the Thai occupation was certainly not supported by the local population²¹³.

The Siamese government soon became aware through consultations with American officials both in Bangkok and in the United States that Washington was not going to support Bangkok in this struggle. Following this realization, Siam seemed to have adopted “the-wait-it-out” tactic. Serious negotiations between both governments only started in April 1946 and did not yield any immediate results, both sides holding their ground and not willing to make compromises. The situation was further complicated by the pro-independence movements in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, which were gaining strength during that period. France accused Siam of harboring anti-French elements on her soil and allowing them to prepare attacks on French forces from beyond the Siamese border. In May 1946, there were a number of border clashes between France and Siam in areas close to the border with Laos (Nakhon Phanom and Nongkhai). These clashes were mainly provoked by the French with Siamese forces not returning fire, but instead appealing to the United States, Great Britain and the United Nations. Subsequently, Washington intervened in Paris, “expressing concern [of – J.B.] US Govt and hope French Govt will act immediately to take all necessary steps [to –

²¹¹ USDS, *FRUS 1946*, p. 979.

²¹² Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 268.

²¹³ The tension was high especially in the Cambodian provinces, occupied by Thailand. This was largely due to the efforts of the Bangkok government to stamp out the Khmer character of the local population and to make the inhabitants learn to live the “Thai way”. The Khmer had naturally resisted these “reeducation” efforts and the wartime occupation of their territory was a source of concern even after Cambodia became independent. See for example: Gordon, Bernard K. Cambodia: Where Foreign Policy Counts, *Asian Survey*, 1965, vol. 5, no. 9, pp. 433–434.

J.B.] prevent further such incidents which involve danger [of – J.B.] additional bloodshed²¹⁴ and can only make more difficult satisfactory Franco-Siamese settlement and restoration [of – J.B.] friendly relations.”²¹⁵ The French government denied any border violations, but had nevertheless ordered its forces in Indochina to exercise more restraint.

The clashes and escalation of tensions between Siam and France could not come at a less opportune time for Bangkok and Washington. By May 1946, Siam was seriously contemplating finally submitting her application to join the United Nations, which had so far been postponed at the advice of Washington. The problem was that according to the Charter of the United Nations, the “admission of any such state to membership in the United Nations will be effected by a decision of the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council”²¹⁶. With the French-Siamese dispute still unresolved, and with the fresh incidents in mind, the French government was prone to raise objections to Siamese membership. The United States was anxious to make sure that the application would not be rejected as it would have had cast a negative light on Siam and complicated its reestablishment as a fully respected member of the international community. The matters were further complicated by the fact that Pridi Phanomyong, President of the Council of Ministers of Siam²¹⁷, had sent a protest to the United Nations’ Secretary Trygve Lie following the border incidents. Pridi stated in the telegram: “... On 24, 25 and 26 May²¹⁸ French troops crossed the Mekong River and forcibly seized Siamese territory which they continue to hold. These attacks must be considered concerted action against Siamese sovereignty and preservation of peace. Against this unjustified aggression Siam is steadfastly and patiently adhering to its policy of non-resistance. The population in the attacked and adjacent areas are abandoning their homes and rice fields at a time when my Government are striving to the utmost to fulfill their obligation to produce and deliver the maximum quantity of rice to the famine-stricken areas. The dislocation and disturbance of my people for which French aggression is solely responsible compromises in the most serious manner the efforts of my country to assist in feeding the famine-stricken areas...”²¹⁹ On June 13, the Secretary General informed the Siamese Prime Minister’s Office that he informed the members of the Security

²¹⁴ Less than 10 people died but there was considerable damage to property after the French bombardment. In late May 1946, the French troops crossed the Mekong river and occupied certain territories.

²¹⁵ USDS, *Foreign Relations 1946*, p. 999.

²¹⁶ Article 4, paragraph 2. *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice*. New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 2002, p. 8.

²¹⁷ Equivalent to the office of prime minister.

²¹⁸ This was a reaction to the second set of border incidents from late May 1946.

²¹⁹ *Telegram from the President of the Council of Ministers of Siam to the Secretary-General Dated 27 May 1946*. United Nations Security Council, S/70 (NL460070), 28. 5. 1946.

Council about the whole matter²²⁰. This development further strengthened the negative attitude of France toward Siamese membership in the UN and toward Siam in general.

The position of the United States at that moment was rather precarious. It had received a long memorandum²²¹ from France about Siam's behavior which made it clear that the French government would oppose placing the Siamese complaint on the agenda of the Security Council. While the Truman Administration did not agree with the French aggression in the border, it was not ready to openly challenge its wartime ally. As the Secretary of State summed up for the American representative in Bangkok Charles Yost: "...French Embassy at the direction of FonOff has informed Dept that France would oppose any examination of Siamese complaint by Security Council; that support of such examination by US even if complaint placed on the agenda by other country or by Siam under Art 35 (2)²²² would create unfavorable reaction [in – J. B.] France; that Siam has different status from other countries appealing UN because of existence [of – J. B] state of hostilities with France; and that consideration of "tendentious" Siamese complaint would endanger UN prestige. For your info US has no present intention [to – J. B.] place Siamese communication on Council agenda under Art 35 (1)²²³ but would of course support Security Council discussion if matter is placed on the agenda"²²⁴. In other words, the United States was only willing to open the whole matter if some other country brought it up, and even then its support would have probably been limited, meaning that its role of the champion of Siamese rights had its own clear limits.

This cautious stance of the Truman Administration should have been enough to warn the Siamese government that it was indeed time for making concessions to France. Instead, Bangkok made a rather surprising move and on 3 August 1946, submitted together with eight other countries its application to join the United Nations²²⁵. The United States was not entirely happy with the timing of the application, but nevertheless was prepared to approve the admission of Siam. The Department of State expected opposition from France, but in this

²²⁰ Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 276.

²²¹ USDS, *Foreign Relations 1946*, p. 1010–1013.

²²² "A state which is not a Member of the United Nations may bring to the attention of the Security Council or of the General Assembly any dispute to which it is a party if it accepts in advance, for the purposes of the dispute, the obligations of pacific settlement provided in the present Charter." Article 35, paragraph 2. *Charter of the United Nations*, p. 25.

²²³ "Any Member of the United Nations may bring any dispute, or any situation of the nature referred to in Article 34, to the attention of the Security Council or of the General Assembly". Ibid.

²²⁴ USDS, *Foreign Relations 1946*, p. 1014.

²²⁵ The other countries to submit their applications at this particular time were Afghanistan, Albania, Iceland, Ireland, Mongolia, Portugal, Sweden and Transjordan.

particular case, was initially prepared to “support Siam regardless of French position”²²⁶. The French indeed protested against the Siamese application and announced that without the return of disputed territories in French Indochina and the signing of a peace treaty between Paris and Bangkok²²⁷, France would not support the Siamese entry into the UN.

The negotiations proved even more complicated than Washington had expected, however. It soon became apparent that not only France, but also the Soviet Union was opposed to the Siamese membership, arguing that the main obstacle was the fact that Siam still did not officially recognize the USSR and that no effective diplomatic relations were existent between both countries at the moment. The attitude of the United States to the Soviet opposition, compared to that of France, is quite revealing. The Soviet delegation announced that “they cannot support but reserve the right to consider again Transjordan, Portugal, Ireland and Siam”²²⁸. In response, the United States and Great Britain “... agreed that if the Russians should veto Trans-Jordan and/or Siam but not oppose the others [i.e. mainly Portugal and Ireland – J. B.] we would probably cast our vote in favor of all applicants. However, if we knew that the Russians were going to veto any one or more of the four European neutrals [Portugal, Ireland, Sweden, Iceland – J. B.], we would probably take the position that we could not vote in favor of Albania and Outer Mongolia [whose membership was strongly supported by the USSR – J. B.]²²⁹. In other words, in dealing with the Soviet Union, the membership of the European countries was more much more important for the United States at the moment than the membership of Siam and Washington was not going to confront Moscow about the issue.

The Siamese delegation and the government in Bangkok, which saw the UN membership as one of the ways to increase its popularity at home and strengthen its position abroad, were no doubt aware of the fact that they could not count on a strong American support. However, their tactic was to convince the Secretary General and the Security Council that the objections of France and the Soviet Union were irrelevant, because both their complaints were either already solved or were being addressed. Regarding the Soviet Union, the Siamese representative argued that diplomatic relations between both countries were already in place since 1940. Regarding the French demands, he wrote to the Secretary General on August 19: “... I have the honour to confirm the statement of the representative of France

²²⁶ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1946*. Volume I. General; The United Nations. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972, p. 424.

²²⁷ Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 301.

²²⁸ USDS, *FRUS 1946 I*, p. 426.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

that talks are at present under way and to state that the Siamese delegation, who has already arrived in Washington [for the negotiation with France, which took place under the auspices of the State Department – J. B.] is confident that an agreement will be reached very soon on the procedure for the settlement of the territorial dispute. Under these circumstances, therefore, I trust that favorable reception will be given by the Security Council to Siam's application for membership..."²³⁰ This was a very optimistic statement as the negotiations between France and Siam, despite the American efforts, got to a very slow and shaky start in Washington. The first problem was that neither of the two parties was ready for direct talks at first – the negotiations took place with the United States as a mediator. The situation was further complicated by yet another uprising in Cambodia (Siem Reap area) of which the French Administration blamed the Siamese government. The French of course used this opportunity and informed the American and British observers who arrived on the scene that "4[00] to 500 'rebels' composed of Cambodians, Annamites, Japanese and *Siamese* attacked and occupied the town of Siemreap two days ago [*italics added* – J. B.]"²³¹, a claim that the United States found impossible to "determine veracity"²³² of. During the following weeks, the negotiations in Washington stalled as both countries continued accusing each other of provocations and border violations. On August 26, in talks between the Secretary of State Acheson and the French Ambassador to Washington Bonnet, Acheson again inquired regarding the French attitude toward Siamese membership in the UN and was given the reply that the French "Government was adamant on the question of Siamese admission to the United Nations at this point"²³³. It was again rather symptomatic that the United States did not really press France to change her attitude but rather than that, proposed that the Siamese application was temporarily withdrawn until the Franco-Siamese dispute is settled. The Siamese delegation was then presented with this suggestion and realizing it had few other choices than to accept it, agreed to postpone the discussion of the application by the Security Council for at least one month. Thus, on August 28, the Siamese representative wrote to the Secretary General, stating that "...with reference to my letter...in which I informed Your Excellency that a settlement of territorial dispute between Siam and France might be reached soon, I regret to state that such a settlement had not yet been arrived at. Under these

²³⁰ *Letter from Konthi Suphamongkon to the Secretary General*. United Nations Security Council, S/132 (NL460867), 20. 8. 1946.

²³¹ USDS, *FRUS 1946*, p. 1057.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 1069.

circumstances ... I have ... to request that the consideration of Siam's application by the Security Council be adjourned...”²³⁴

Following these developments, the negotiations were briefly transferred to Paris, where a part of the Siamese delegation from Washington was dispatched on September 7. In the meantime, Siam had tried once more to ascertain the position of the United States and also of Great Britain to the French demands. In both cases, the recommendation was given to return the territories to France and to seek a quick solution to the mutual dispute. Both London and Washington made it clear yet again that any territorial gains which Siam had made with the help of Japan will not be recognized and sanctioned. In a memorandum from the Department of State to the Siamese government, the US made it clear that “clearly this [United States'] Government could not urge the French Government to accept any proposal which would condition the restoration of the territories upon the cession of a part of the territories to Siam. That would have meant American support of the thesis that a nation having committed an *international wrong* may utilize such wrong to bargain for some gain it desires and refuse to rectify such *wrong* until it gains its end [italics added – J. B.]”²³⁵ The United States did not rule out the possibility that Siam might seek border realignment in the future by peaceful means, but for the time being, advised the Siamese government unequivocally to accept the French proposals and return to the *status quo ante*, i.e. before the Siamese annexation of the border provinces in 1941. The Department of State also made it clear that any further delay would be detrimental for Siam, both in terms of its reestablishment on the international scene and in terms of restoring its economy and trade relations.

Having exhausted all possible means of recourse, the Siamese government concurred with signing of the Franco-Siamese treaty based on the draft prepared by the French. The signing took place in Washington on November 17, 1946. *The Settlement Agreement* provided for the restoration of diplomatic relations, the setting up of a Conciliation Commission which was to settle lingering disputes between both parties and, mainly, for the return of the occupied territories to France (this issue was addressed in a special protocol annexed to the agreement)²³⁶. On the advice of the United States²³⁷, both the French and the Siamese

²³⁴ Letter Dated 28 August 1946 to the Secretary-General from the Siamese Representative in the Matter of Siam's Application for Membership in the United Nations. United Nations Security Council, S/139 (NL460139), 28. 8. 1946.

²³⁵ USDS, *FRUS 1946*, p. 1086.

²³⁶ For the full text of the agreement and annexes, see: France and Thailand. Settlement Agreement (with Protocol, declaration and exchange of letters). Signed at Washington on November 17, 1946 (No. 4093). *Nations Unies – Recueil des Traités*. New York: United Nations, 1959, pp. 68–93.

government presented the agreement with an introductory letter to the Security Council in preparation for the resumption of the admission process of Siam to the United Nations. France now agreed to support Siamese membership and in exchange, Siam had withdrawn the complaint regarding the alleged French border violations. As the letter of the Siamese representative to the Secretary General stated: "... I now have the honour to inform Your Excellency that... contact was established in Washington between the representatives of Siam and the representatives of France and as a result of the negotiations thus undertaken an Agreement of Settlement and Protocol have been concluded on November 17, 1945... I have therefore been instructed by my government to withdraw... the complaint before the Security Council. Trusting that this happy settlement of the dispute, calculated, as it is, to promote the peaceful and friendly relations and close cooperation between the two countries, will meet with the approval of the Security Council..."²³⁸. At the same time, the Siamese representative informed the Secretary General that "settlement [of the dispute between Siam and France – J.B.] has been affected" and asked "that the consideration by the Security Council of Siam's application be proceeded with its due course"²³⁹. The United States, together with Great Britain, sent their observers to the actual process of reverting the territories back to France and these observers played an important role in making sure that the tensions were kept as low as possible. The American Minister to Siam Edwin Stanton reported back to Washington that both the Siamese and the French expressed their gratitude for the presence of the Americans and the British and that the "[their – J. B.] presence... was a factor which contributed materially to the relatively smooth transfer of these territories"²⁴⁰.

With the French issue solved satisfactorily, the main problem that now blocked the entry of Siam into the United Nations was the attitude of the Soviet Union. The United States was fully aware of this, as it had been in the past months, and was still not quite ready to confront the Soviets on the issue, fearing that putting too much pressure on Moscow might lead to an opposite reaction, i.e. Soviet veto. On 5 December 1946, the Acting Secretary of State Acheson wrote to the American Ambassador at the UN: "As you know the Department is prepared to support prompt consideration by the SC of the Siamese application for membership so that Siam's admission can be accomplished by necessary SC and GA action

²³⁷ USDS, *FRUS 1946*, p. 1101–1102. The Secretary of State Dean Acheson was "anxious" that the United States could be helpful in this regard and that the presentation and the acceptance of the solution of the dispute by the Security Council be done fast and in proper fashion.

²³⁸ *Letter to the Secretary-General from HRH Prince Wan Waithayakon, Representative of Siam, Dated 28 November 1946; And Attached Agreement.* United Nations Security Council, S/199 (NL460199), 28. 11. 1946.

²³⁹ *Letter to the Secretary General from HRH Prince Wan Waithayakon, Representative of Siam, Dated 29 November 1946.* United Nations Security Council, S/201 (NL460201), 29. 11. 1946.

²⁴⁰ USDS, *FRUS 1946*, p. 1105.

during the present GA session... Favorable action by SC on Siamese application appears now to depend largely on Soviet attitude. Should Soviet representative indicate that he will support or not oppose Siamese application, you should endeavor to bring the application to a vote following discussion in SC... in event it is learned that Soviet representative will oppose Siamese application or in event that Soviet position is undecided or unknown to you, application should probably be referred to Membership Committee in order to postpone immediate SC action.”²⁴¹ The Department of State was aware that negotiations were going on between Siam and the Soviet Union and that it was highly probable that they would be concluded with an official establishment of the diplomatic relations between both countries. It was therefore proceeding carefully, leaving much of the responsibility for the proper timing and procedure within the Security Council with the Siamese delegation. In another set of instructions to the American Ambassador at the UN Johnson, Acheson wrote on December 6: “... Department believes that the position you take with respect to the timing of the decision by the Council on the Siamese application should be guided by wishes of Siamese application and your opinion... We do not wish to do anything which would embarrass or prejudice Siamese opportunity to become a member of the U.N. Accordingly, unless Prince Wan wishes, US should not press for immediate SC consideration if it is anticipated that admission will be blocked by a veto.”²⁴²

In the end, the Soviet opposition proved to be less stiff and vigorous than originally expected. This might have been because the Soviet Union feared it would place itself in isolation as it was now the only major power opposing Siamese admission; it also has to be noted that it might have truly been the Soviet intention solely to force Siam to establish diplomatic relations with Moscow and once this had been achieved, there was no compelling reason to block the Siamese admission any longer. Whatever the case, the Soviets, after negotiating with the Siamese in Stockholm, agreed to establish the diplomatic relations, stating vaguely that Siam should “announce it intends to carry out friendly policy” toward the Soviet Union and that “it regretted the hostile attitude former Thai governments had shown toward U.S.S.R.”²⁴³ The Siamese government found it difficult to condemn the actions of the former governments (the Soviets demanded that the words “repudiate the anti-Communist

²⁴¹ USDS, *FRUS 1946 I*, p. 456.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 457.

²⁴³ Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, p. 309.

attitude”²⁴⁴ be used) and asked the Soviet government to allow for a compromise formula to be used. After more negotiations with the Soviets, this request was granted and subsequently, the Soviet Union announced it would not oppose the Siamese entry into the U.N. Following this, the Siamese application got on the agenda of the Security Council, where it was approved unanimously on December 13²⁴⁵ and referred to the General Assembly. The Department of State, seeing that now the procedure was almost at its end, wrote to Ambassador Johnson: “Dept. [is – J. B.] most anxious that Siam be admitted to membership in UN at this session [of the – J. B.] GA. Please make every effort [to – J. B.] expedite procedure to this end.”²⁴⁶ As the General Assembly was still in session, the application was then placed on the agenda of the last meeting on December 15, where it was also unanimously approved²⁴⁷. The reestablishment of Siam on the international scene and its integration into the most significant international organization was thus achieved.

The case of Siamese application to the United Nations and the negotiations with France had clearly shown the limits of American support of Bangkok as well as the perils this support created for the US. As mentioned earlier, it was desirable for the United States to have Siam established as a full-fledged member of the international community and thus a reliable, “respectable” ally. On the other hand, Washington was not ready to confront either France or the Soviet Union over the issue and put an undue pressure on either Moscow or Paris. Unlike the previously discussed negotiations between Great Britain and Siam, where the American role was much more significant and active, in dealing with the French and Russian demands toward Siam the Truman Administration assumed a low-profile role of an “advisor”. In case of the Franco-Siamese negotiations, the situation was complicated by the fact that Siam refused for a long time to return the disputed territories to France. The United States, while perhaps secretly opposing this transfer as well (after all, it basically meant supporting a colonial power, something the United States had long stood against), could not publicly express its support for Siam, mainly because it would cast a negative light on the United States’ image. The last thing Washington needed at a time of increasingly tense relations with the Soviet Union was to give an impression that it sanctions violations of international law and gains made with the help of fascist and militaristic nations, defeated in

²⁴⁴ USDS, *FRUS 1946 I*, p. 459. This included the abrogation of anti-communist law, adopted by Siam in 1933. For the full text of this law, officially entitled *Act Concerning Communism*, see: Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thai Politics 1932–1957*, pp. 236–237.

²⁴⁵ *Security Council Resolution 13 (1946) [On Admission of Siam (Thailand) to Membership in the United Nations]*, United Nations Security Council, S/RES/13 (1946) (NR003676), 13. 12. 1946.

²⁴⁶ USDS, *FRUS 1946 I*, p. 460.

²⁴⁷ *Admission of Siam to Membership in the United Nations*. United Nations General Assembly, A/RES/101(I) (NR003352), 15. 12. 1946.

World War II. These deliberations, along with the desire not to offend France, a wartime ally, had in the long run led the United States to convince Siam to accept France's demands. The American suggestions that borders between Siam and French Indochina might later be submitted to the International Court of Justice for revision were largely symbolic and were meant mainly to satisfy the Siamese government and to provide it with a convenient argument it could present to its people.

The American involvement in Soviet-Siamese negotiations was even more limited. The United States left the initiative for starting these negotiations and for successfully concluding them almost fully with the Siamese government, making it clear on a number of occasions that it would not intervene on Siamese behalf. There were definitely far more contentious and important issues in the relations between Washington and Moscow and the United States (as seen from the decision not to push the Siamese application against Soviet wishes) clearly did not see the Siamese UN membership as important enough to challenge the Soviets. In the long run, this approach proved to be right, but it showed the Siamese government clearly the limits of American support on the international scene.

The United States' government of course tried to present its support for Siam in the post-war years as something indispensable for Bangkok and also as something natural, as a continuation of a long-standing American commitment to defend Siamese freedom. Anti-colonial rhetoric of the past was often brought up to justify the claims that the United States is defending Siam because of sympathy for plight and because of a sense of justice, inherent in the American foreign policy. In the light of this chapter, however, assertions such as that "the Americans could support the Thai nation without ... risking a serious break with a European ally"²⁴⁸ seem rather absurd and hardly credible. On the other hand, despite the limits of American involvement on Siam's behalf, the government in Bangkok realized that for the time being it had few other choices than to cooperate with the United States and to pursue a pro-American course in its foreign policy. This course only intensified after the political changes in Siam, which would be discussed in the following part of this chapter. The Siamese political leadership, after all, managed to steer the country through the most difficult months after the end of the war with far fewer losses than originally expected and this could be, in part, attributed to the American help, or at least benevolent view of the wartime Siamese actions. It was also clear to many far-sighted Siamese leaders that the time when this relationship would become truly profitable for their country was yet to come.

²⁴⁸ Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 89.

III.2. The Power Struggle: Political Developments in Siam 1946–1948 and the American Reactions

While the examination of the post-war developments in Thailand is not a primary objective of this thesis, certain aspects of the political situation of this time period are important as they have had a significant impact on the foreign policy course of the country in general and on the relationship with the United States in particular.

The United States had, in the wake of World War II, certainly hoped that the government which would be established in Siam would be a democratic one. The American political establishment as well as the public now also believed, perhaps more than in pre-war years, that due to its history of the only independent, sovereign nation in Southeast Asia prior to the war, Siam might be able to achieve the democratic transition by herself, with little or no interference from the outside. For the reasons already stated, Washington feared undue British influence on Siamese political life and thus the need for the Siamese to be allowed to handle their own affairs was repeatedly stressed. As *The New York Times* reported in September 1945, “...In brief, Siam, lodged in the midst of Britain’s Asiatic possessions, is regarded in Washington as the forerunner of the new political order in Asia, freed of colonialism, which it would be in keeping with the tenets of the United Nations Charter to bring into existence...”²⁴⁹ While the “Siamese road to democracy” was no doubt an argument which was used in the struggle for influence with Great Britain, as described earlier in this chapter, it certainly also reflected the conviction of at least some American officials that Western-style democracy can indeed gain ground in Siam.

The defeat of Japan and the discrediting of those who proposed the alliance with Tokyo, mainly Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram and segments of the army, opened the way for a new political leadership to take over the administration of the country. The leading role in this new political arrangement initially fell to the leaders of the *Seri Thai* movement, and especially Pridi Phanomyong and Seni Pramoj, who became prime minister in September 1945 following his return to Siam. By December 1945, the young king Rama VIII (Ananda Mahidol) returned to Siam and Pridi was relieved of his role of regent, being instead given a position of an “elder statesman” with advisory powers on many key matters²⁵⁰. Meanwhile, the government of Seni, who was well known in the west and represented the “democratic face” of Siamese politics to the British and American governments, realized it did not have enough support to handle the numerous problems the country faced after the war. As a result,

²⁴⁹ Siam Seen as Key in Policy for Asia, *The New York Times*, 15. 9. 1945.

²⁵⁰ *Ratchakitcha* [Royal Thai Government Gazette], 11. 12. 1945, vol. 62, p. 62.

and also due to the fact that he himself did not have political ambitions, Seni resigned²⁵¹ after the negotiations with Great Britain were concluded and opened the way for a change of prime minister, which was to follow after elections in January 1946.

The Siamese political life of the period was characterized by chaotic instability as well as lack of underlying ideology and long-term visions. The newly founded parties were rather very loosely-knit groupings, often associated with a particular person or a particular interest group, some of them being also organized on regional principles but with little popular support²⁵². In 1946, most of the new six new political parties²⁵³ officially either backed Pridi Phanomyong, or Khuang Aphaiwong, who was a prime minister already during the last months of war. The elections of 6 January brought victory to the parties supporting Pridi, but he felt he should not assume the office of prime minister for the time being and instead asked Khuang Aphaiwong to take the position, which Khuang did on January 31. Pridi's decision was probably motivated by several factors. He was aware of the fact that the economy of the country was deteriorating, that the general population was not happy with the political situation and that assuming prime minister's position at this particular moment was particularly risky. He could also have had some reservations since his political involvement before World War II was not as successful as he had hoped (see chapter I) and he might have feared similar situation would now be repeated.

The political changes in Siam attracted little attention in the United States at the moment²⁵⁴. The American efforts were now focused on settling British demands regarding reparations from Siam and military annex to the British-Siamese treaty and also on matters such as economic recovery of the country and prosecution of war criminals. After the British-

²⁵¹ Thak Chaloermthiarana, *Thailand: Politics of Despotism Paternalism*, p. 18. Seni was not considered to be a "politician" and his base of support, due to the fact that he spent a number of years abroad, was extremely limited.

²⁵² Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 252.

²⁵³ These were the Progressive Party (supported Khuang Aphaiwong), the Unionist Party (supported Pridi Phanomyong), the Democratic Front Party (supported Pridi Phanomyong), the Democrat Party (lead by Khuang Aphaiwong), the Prachachon Party and the Labor Party. One should be reminded here that the names of the parties did not necessarily represent their ideological emphasis and, as the author of this thesis is led to suspect, were sometimes chosen only as "good selling brands". This could typically be seen on the case of Progressive Party (which later became the Democrat Party), which was anything but progressive – it was actually a very conservative, royalist party, opposing major changes in Siamese political system. For a detailed study of the Siamese political parties of the period, see for example: Aphinya Charunphon. Kwam mai mankhong khong phakkanmuang thai [The Lack of Stability of Thai Political Parties]. In: Chai-anan Samutwanit, Setthaphon Khusiphithak and Sawaeng Rattanamongkhonmat (eds.). *Sat Kanmuang* [Political Animal]. Bangkok: Thai Watthanaphanit, 1971, pp. 179–209.

²⁵⁴ The designation of Khuang as prime minister does not even appear in the U.S. diplomatic correspondence of the period. *The New York Times* reported briefly on this change, withholding any comments on the transition. Siam Names New Premier, *The New York Times*, 1. 2. 1946.

Siamese treaty was signed, the United States pledged to provide a loan of USD 10 million²⁵⁵ for the acquisition of railroad equipment²⁵⁶ and reconstruction of the Siamese transportation system, in addition to signing agreements with Siam on the exports of rice, rubber and tin²⁵⁷. These economic measures were no doubt meant to bolster the stability of the country and of the government as such, but in the long run, did not have the desired effect. Inflation continued to soar, corruption was rampant and shortages of basic goods became a chronic problem. Besides, the political infighting between Khuang, who was a prime minister but did not have the support of parliament, and Pridi, who stayed in the background but was actively pushing his agenda through the legislature, further destabilized the political situation in the country. Khuang represented the conservative segment of Siamese politics, while Pridi was more on the radical wing, although he was definitely not a “communist”, as some of his opponents would call him. The final showdown between the two men came in March 1946, only a few weeks after Khuang’s government officially came in power. Pridi’s allies in the parliament brought on its agenda a bill, which would have instituted a government control over the prices of basic commodities, such as rice. Khuang considered this provision as socialist and “impossible to enforce”²⁵⁸ and he vigorously opposed it. In the end, however, the bill was approved by the parliament, albeit by a very narrow vote²⁵⁹. Almost immediately after this defeat, Khuang resigned. He officially did so in protest against being asked to carry out a policy which he did not agree with. The reasons behind his resignation were, however, probably more complex. Like Pridi two months earlier, he realized it was politically risky to hold the position of prime minister at such a volatile time and that being an opposition leader could be more profitable and definitely safer for his political career. On March 24, Pridi became a prime minister²⁶⁰ for the first time in his life, amid a very tense situation from both the international and domestic perspective. The economic problems continued and even worsened, the dispute with France was still not resolved, blocking the Siamese entry into the

²⁵⁵ The sum was advanced to Siam in April 1946, with the possibility of being doubled in the future. It was expected that the Siamese government would use it to buy surplus American equipment, located on the Philippine islands, which were about to become an independent state. U.S. Advances Siam \$10,000,000, *The New York Times*, 15. 4. 1946.

²⁵⁶ In June 1946, for example, the American War Assets Administration (WAS) sold eighteen locomotives to the Siamese government. 18 Locomotives Sold to Siam by U.S. Agency, *The New York Times*, 10. 6. 1946.

²⁵⁷ Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, p. 46.

²⁵⁸ Thak Chaloermthiarana, *Thailand: Politics of Despotism*, p. 18.

²⁵⁹ *Raingan Prachum Saphaphutahen Ratsadon* [Minutes from the Meetings of Parliament], 18. 3. 1946, no. 14/2489.

²⁶⁰ *The New York Times* against reported briefly on this political change, calling Pridi the “reputed brains of the 1932 revolution”. New Premier Chosen in Siam, *The New York Times*, 25. 3. 1946.

United Nations, and the political opposition to Pridi and his policies was growing ever stronger.

From the perspective of the United States, the rise of Pridi to the position of prime minister had both its positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, the new prime minister was definitely a man renowned for defending and promoting democratic values. His goal was to modernize the country, to bring its political culture and institutions closer to those in Western Europe and the United States. Already when Khuang was prime minister, Pridi headed a special advisory group of the National Assembly, tasked with drafting a new constitution. During the process, he reportedly asked the employees of the American legation in Bangkok, namely Charles Yost and Kenneth Landon, to provide him with constitution of western democracies and literature, related to the democratic system of government²⁶¹. The new Siamese constitution²⁶² was then based on divergent models from Western Europe and the United States. It provided for a bicameral house (Parliament consisting of House of Representatives, which was elected by a direct vote, and Senate, elected by the House) vested with legislative power, cabinet headed by a prime minister and a semi-independent judiciary, which had a limited power to assess the constitutionality of various laws and provisions. The constitution also legitimized the existence of political parties. The constitution, while having its flaws and shortcomings²⁶³, was definitely a shift toward a more democratic, western-style type of government, something which the United States had hoped would come into existence in Siam and should have served as a way to prevent the return of military dictatorship. As Pridi himself declared in May 1946 when presenting the constitution to the Assembly: “Do not confuse democracy with anarchy... Anarchy is a major danger to society and nation... Let me take the example of Italy. Before the time of Mussolini, Italy’s democracy had no rules. It was chaotic. This created the cause – or allowed the fascists to claim as cause – for the establishment of dictatorship in Italy. I do not wish to see dictatorship in Siam... I chose a route of setting up a government in accordance with the current constitutional system.”²⁶⁴ For

²⁶¹ It seems, however, that no foreign advisors were asked to participate directly in the process of drafting the document. Pridi was definitely inspired by the American political model though. Interview with Kenneth Landon, December 1959. Quoted in Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, p. 48.

²⁶² For the full text of the constitution, see: *Ratchakitcha* [*Royal Thai Government Gazette*], 10. 5. 1946, vol. 63, pp. 318–358; for the English translation, see: Thak Chaloeontiarana, *Thai Politics 1935–1957*, pp. 504–523.

²⁶³ Some contemporary American observers viewed the changes as necessary and positive, but felt, for example, that the Senate, which was not to be directly elected, was a way for the old style, conservative politicians and persons to retain their power and influence. Spitzer, H. M. Siam’s Political Problems, *Far Eastern Survey*, 1946 (April), vol. 15, no. 7, p. 109.

²⁶⁴ Speech of Nai Pridi Banomyong in the Assembly on May 7 1946. In: Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *Pridi by Pridi*, p. 232.

these reasons, the United States showed signs of supporting and trying to stabilize²⁶⁵ the government after Pridi took over, even though the relations were not as cordial with him as with Seni Pramoj, who was better known in Washington.

The outlook for the future development in the country must have been made even brighter by the return of King Rama VIII (Ananda Mahidol) to the country in December 1945. The young ruler was considered to be very democratic and liberal-minded, having lived for many long years in Western Europe and completing his studies in Switzerland. His arrival to Siam sparked a spontaneous wave of celebrations in Bangkok and other cities and the optimism persisted for some time²⁶⁶. In early June 1946²⁶⁷, it was announced that the king would visit the United States, a significant step for him to affirm the new relationship with the United States and to put it on an even stronger foundation. Some observers expected democracy to take hold and develop in Siam, under the auspices of a king who was “brought up by democratic parents, is a genuine supporter of democracy and will defend it” and prime minister, recognized as Siam’s flaming liberal and an unswerving son of democracy²⁶⁸. While these expectations and deliberations were definitely a bit too optimistic and overstated even at the time they were made, the fact was that the overall political climate and situation in Siam in 1946 seemed to be much more suitable for the development of democratic rule than in 1932, when the first revolution took place.

Pridi was not only a positive figure from the American perspective, though, despite his pro-democracy leanings and his wartime actions. There were two major worries that could have been on the mind of American officials and diplomats when approaching the new Siamese government. The first was the foreign policy orientation of Pridi. For the reasons already stated, it was essential for the United States that Siam would pursue a pro-American policy, or that it would at least be loyal to Washington’s policy line in the area. While initially after the war the United States might have struggled with the British for influence in Southeast Asia, it was soon becoming apparent that communism, sponsored by the Soviet Union, would become the primary rival. With the communist or communist-inspired independence movements in the neighboring countries (especially French Indochina, but also Malaya and Burma) growing stronger, Siam was becoming even more important as it could

²⁶⁵ For example, on April 7 it was announced that the United States was ready to immediately forward to Siam the assets which were previously frozen by the American government and which amounted to approx. \$ 30,000,000. Such an announcement could no doubt strengthen Pridi’s positions vis-à-vis domestic opposition. U.S. to Free Siamese Assets, *The New York Times*, 8. 4. 1946.

²⁶⁶ Again, for a fictional but a very well written account of these events, see: Kukrit Pramoj, *Si Phaendin*, chapter 50.

²⁶⁷ Siam’s King Coming to the U.S., *The New York Times*, 4. 6. 1946.

²⁶⁸ Chun Prabha. Siam’s Democratic King, *Asia*, 1946 (March), p. 117.

serve as a base to thwart the looming communist threat. While it might have been proposed by some that “Siam would ally herself with other Asiatic countries, ranging perhaps from the Indian frontier to the Philippines...”²⁶⁹. This could hardly satisfy the policy makers in Washington. Pridi’s ideas of creating a sort of non-aligned Asian solidarity movement, which came into existence much later in 1955 and which was criticized and belittled by the U.S., were even less satisfying. The United States would rather have wished to see a person, or a faction, in a power that would demonstrate gratitude to the United States and willingness to cooperate with the American designs in the future, and it was not sure whether it could count on Pridi in this respect, despite the respect they felt toward him personally and his moral integrity.

The second aspect of Pridi’s personality, which caused anxiety in certain circles in Washington, was his allegedly leftist, radical attitude. His pre-war attempts at nationalization and social welfare policies were already briefly discussed in the previous chapters. Now, as elder statesman and later prime minister, he had even greater influence and it was suspected by some that he would use to promote his “leftist” agenda, often being accused of “anti-royalism”, of trying to establish a republic or even of outright “communism”²⁷⁰. Pridi of course denied these charges, but was unable to silence his opponents, and the opposition instead mounted. From the American perspective and the perspective of international relations in general, the whole issue was even more problematic because of the anti-colonial uprisings in the surrounding countries. As already mentioned, during the height of the Franco-Siamese crisis in the summer of 1946, the French repeatedly accused the Siamese government of harboring and aiding the rebels in Indochina²⁷¹, who were often automatically branded as “communist”, although the use of this label was questionable in many cases. In fact, it was very likely that many of conservative elements of the Siamese army, who saw the return of the territories to France as humiliation and a blow to the national honor, were among those assisting the rebels, rather than just “communists”. Some of the contemporary French reports would seem to justify this assertion, for example: “These incidents are only most recent in

²⁶⁹ Spitzer, *Siam’s Political Problems*, p. 109.

²⁷⁰ Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, p. 50.

²⁷¹ For example, on June 3, 1946, the French embassy in Washington wrote to the Department of State on the situation in the disputed provinces, clearly blaming Pridi’s government for the deterioration of mutual relations: “The acts of these bands, which are well armed and organized, and certain of which have radio sets at their disposal, are possible *only* because of the *complacency* of the Siamese government, which does not limit itself to giving them refuge, but has never made any attempt to disarm them, or disperse them, or make them leave the border. What is more, it permitted them to recruit new contingents on its territory, and to establish training camps in the vicinity of the Indochinese territory, and numerous duly confirmed facts show that its benevolence with respect to them does not stop there [italics added – J. B.]” USDS, *FRUS 1946*, p. 1012.

series of innumerable provocations... which Annamite and Laotian elements that have revolted against the native authorities of their country as well as against French authority have been committing for several months, frequently accompanied by Japanese and even by Siamese, sometimes belonging to the regular Siamese Army (... when the French forces reoccupied the town of Thakhek, a Siamese colonel in uniform was found among the slain)²⁷². Whatever the real situation was, Pridi was faced with the difficult job of convincing the Siamese people of the necessity to relinquish the territories, albeit with a slight chance of possibly getting parts of them back later by court decision, and at the same time of convincing the French, and also British and Americans, that he was not supporting the rebels. His chances to fully control the conservative elements within the country and especially the army were extremely limited, as he was seen as a dangerous radical and the military still felt humiliated by being separated from power and replaced by the Pridi clique. On the other hand, Pridi probably personally believed in anti-colonialism and his support for the liberation of Asian nations still under colonial rule was evident²⁷³. It is unlikely though that he would resort to achieve his visions and dreams by force and by illicit support of rebel groups in the neighboring states. In the end, Pridi's government did not survive long enough to see the dispute with France resolved, and neither did it survive long enough to implement any of its more radical economic and social plans.

The first major setback for the Pridi government, and one that certainly soured the relations with the United States and especially with Great Britain came already in April 1946. The prosecution of war criminals, including the former Prime Minister Marshal Phibunsongkhram, had been stopped by the Siamese high court (Dika). The major argument used by the court for this ruling was that the law (*War Crimes Act*²⁷⁴) that was applied in the process of prosecution was used retroactively, which went against the basic principles of justice. This surely wasn't the main reason for the prosecution to be stopped as the court was under intense political pressure from various angles. On one hand, Pridi was acutely aware of the fact that Phibun and his followers had a much stronger popular support than he had previously thought²⁷⁵, and going against this opposition could prove dangerous for a prime minister who's own standing was weak. There was also some doubt regarding the veracity of Pridi's resolve to punish Phibun and other collaborators with Japan during the wartime years.

²⁷² USDS, *FRUS 1946*, pp. 1011–1012.

²⁷³ Terwiel, *Thailand's Political History*, p. 281.

²⁷⁴ *The War Crimes Act* was approved by the Assembly in early 1946, mainly thanks to the efforts of former *Seri Thai* leaders such as Seni Pramoj and Pridi himself.

²⁷⁵ Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 253.

On one hand, some authors point out that there was an intense rivalry between both men and that Pridi would have surely preferred at least some form of punishment for Phibun.²⁷⁶ Besides, the success of the war crime trials was important from the international perspective (especially from the British and American point of view) and thus it was desirable that it would result in at least verdicts of guilt for the representatives of Phibun clique. On the other hand, it could be pointed that Phibun and Pridi were comrades from the 1932 revolution and as some would argue, had even taken a so-called “blood oath” never to shed each other’s blood²⁷⁷. Yet others see the relationship of Phibun and Pridi as essentially cooperative for a long time, and argue that this former cooperation made Pridi extremely leery of having Phibun sentenced²⁷⁸. Anyway, in the end, Phibun and the other tried “war criminals” were allowed to retire to their homes and wait for the right opportunity to come back and seize the initiative.

In the United States itself, this failure to prosecute the war criminals went largely unnoticed, despite the fact that previously it was one of the demands placed on Siam by the Allies. Even the diplomatic correspondence between Washington and the legation in Bangkok leaves this question entirely out of discussion, focusing mostly on the final details of settlement between Siam, Great Britain, Australia and the United States, as well as on resolving the dispute with France. The fact that the US saw the developments in Siam proper as no reason to downscale the mutual relations was attested to by the appointment of new minister to Siam, Edwin Stanton, on April 17²⁷⁹. It was clear that the United States could not directly interfere in Siamese politics, because it would then have no ground to criticize the British or the French of such undue infringements on Siamese political liberty. It is also true that at the time when the trials had been stopped, there were more pressing matters to be solved and so the issue did not command as much attention in Washington as it should have probably had. Yet, since it foreshadowed the dramatic political changes in Siam that were

²⁷⁶ On the relationship between both men and on their personal rivalry, see for example: Brailey, Nigel. *Thailand and the Fall of Singapore. A Frustrated Asian Revolution*. Boulder (CO): Westview Press, 1986.

²⁷⁷ Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, p. 51.

²⁷⁸ Terwiel, *Thailand’s Political History*, p. 280. It is especially important to remember in this respect that despite that already mentioned labels, such as “socialist”, “communist” and “reactionary”, Siamese politics was still largely a matter of interpersonal rivalries, cliques and personal interests rather than ideology. Thus, the argument that Phibun represented the “right” while Pridi the “left” would not be easily applicable in the setting of 1946 Siam.

²⁷⁹ Edwin Stanton worked for the State Department since 1921 and was considered one of its best specialists in the Far East and Southeast Asian problems. Prior to becoming the minister to Siam, he served as a consul general in Vancouver. *The President’s News Conference, April 17, 1946*. Public Papers of the Presidents. Harry S. Truman (1945-1953). Harry S. Truman Library & Museum. Available at http://www.trumanlibrary.org/public_papers/index.php?pid=1526&st=Siam&st1= [last access 1. 8. 2010]. The appointment was also announced in the media. Truman Tells Press of Appointments, *The Washington Post*, 18. 4. 1946; Stanton Appointed Minister to Siam, *The New York Times*, 18. 4. 1946.

soon to follow, it would have been advisable to the United States to pay more attention to Siamese internal situation at this point.

It has already been mentioned that the return of young King Ananda back to Siam sparked off hopes of better future and development of democracy in the country. It was therefore shocking and disastrous to learn that the king had been found dead in his bed in the royal palace on June 9, 1946. The circumstances of this mysterious death had never been fully resolved²⁸⁰, but very soon, rumors began to circulate that Pridi was behind the assassination plot. The government had to act quickly to ward off attacks by the opposition, resorting to a censure and even arrests of those who blamed the prime minister of the deed²⁸¹. The rumors could not be completely rooted out, however, and Pridi was aware that his position was further weakened. Besides, he could not resort to an outright, ruthless repression of the opposition as such a move would be contrary to the “democracy-loving leader” image he chose to cultivate. Even though it is true that these rumors by themselves would not have been enough to force Pridi from office²⁸², they did definitely make his position even more difficult than before. He tried to clear himself of the blame by establishing a special investigation committee on June 18, composed mainly of judges, members of the Assembly and Senate, and representatives of the royal court and the armed forces. Even this move did not pay off, though, because the commission’s conclusion, released by October 1946, was not conclusive. Although it pretty much ruled out accident, assassination and suicide remained viable explanations, and it seemed that the assassination theory got more support from the committee members²⁸³. In addition, a board of medical experts, which included one American, two British, one Indian and sixteen Siamese doctors, was assembled to investigate the matter. On

²⁸⁰ Much later, in 1955, the king’s secretary Chaleo Patomroos, and two pages, Chit and But, were executed after a lengthy trial which started in 1948. The exact circumstances surrounding the incident have never been uncovered, however.

²⁸¹ Some of those arrested and charged were journalists, some were even members of the parliament (from the opposition Democrat Party). Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 24.

²⁸² Thompson, Virginia. Governmental Instability in Siam, *Far Eastern Survey*, 1948, vol. 52, no. 16, p. 186. The author contended in her article that “domestic political events alone, played as they are in Siam almost wholly over the heads of the masses, would have probably not have produced another coup d’état. In this case, this argumentation is not entirely valid, because the person of the king and the institution of monarchy were and still are so important to the Siamese people that any accusation of being disloyal to the monarch or even conspiring against him would ensure that the populace would turn against the accused.

²⁸³ *Railalat lae khvamhen khong khanakammakan sobsuan prutikan nai kan thi prabatsomdet phraporamen maha Ananthamadion sadet savannakhot* [Details and Opinions of the Committee to Investigate the Passing Away of King Ananda]. Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 1946, p. 51.

July 1, a majority of the board (13 members) announced they came to a conclusion that the king “probably was assassinated”²⁸⁴.

Again, the death of the king did not attract sufficient attention abroad, although it was the major turning point which led to the fall of Pridi and his followers. As the popular support for the prime minister declined, and the attacks of the opposition grew ever stronger, Pridi decided to resign on August 23, 1946. His close ally, Admiral Thamrong Nawasavat²⁸⁵ replaced him as prime minister. Pridi then used this respite to travel to Western Europe and the United States, probably in order to minimize the damage done to his own standing and to that of his supporters in the eyes of the Western politicians²⁸⁶. Although he remained respected in both Great Britain and the United States, he could draw little actual help from either government. The United States especially was placed in a difficult position after the death of King Ananda, who was in fact supposed to visit the US the same month. Even if President Truman wanted to support the liberal government, the ongoing investigation of the king’s death meant he had to be very cautious.

Meanwhile, the new Prime Minister Thamrong Nawasavat was quickly losing popularity as well despite Pridi’s attempts to bolster his government. Thamrong²⁸⁷ lacked Pridi’s charisma and standing and besides, for the opponents of the government he was just a Pridi’s puppet, while the “elder statesman” ruled the country from the behind the scenes. The economic difficulties of the country continued to exacerbate. The shipments of rice to Britain continued, although at much lower volumes than originally demanded. The harvest of 1947, despite the efforts of the government, the rice exports have fallen far short of expectations to only a third of the usual amount, while huge quantities were smuggled illegally to Malaya and China²⁸⁸. The corruption of the government officials, many of them high ranking²⁸⁹, and state employees became even more rampant after Pridi left, leading to many people calling for the return of the military to power. Inflation began to soar, raising the cost of living above the pre-war levels. The implications for the government were devastating. In elections held to fill

²⁸⁴ Siam’s King Slain, Investigators Say, *The New York Times*, 2. 7. 1946. Again, accident was almost certainly ruled out and suicide, while remaining a possibility, was questioned because of a lack of any motive or immediate cause.

²⁸⁵ Thamrong Nawasavat became a minister of justice in a previous reshuffle of the cabinet, done by Pridi on June 12. It is possible that Pridi already expected his resignation and started to groom his close friend for the role of his “successor”. Siam Premier Reforms Cabinet, *The New York Times*, 13. 6. 1946.

²⁸⁶ Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, p. 54.

²⁸⁷ For more information on Thamrong, see for example: Siri Premchit. *Chivit lae ngan khong phonruatri Thawan Tamrongnawasawat* [Life and Work of Rear Admiral Thawan Thamrongnawasavat]. Bangkok: Sannakphim Saengtham, 1977.

²⁸⁸ Thompson, *Governmental Instability in Siam*, p. 186.

²⁸⁹ Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 253.

new seats in the Assembly (these were created by the adoption of the new constitution), the Pridi-Thamrong fraction suffered a defeat in August 1946²⁹⁰ and some of the lawmakers of the government parties later defected to the opposition.

Internationally, the Thamrong government also was not faring well. The fall of 1946 saw the end of protracted negotiations with France (discussed earlier) and the final signing of the mutual treaty and the return of disputed territories under French control. Although the government lacked any other viable choices to solve the dispute (given the minimum support it got from the United States on this particular issue), it was blamed by opposition for giving away traditional Siamese territories. The government began to be associated with weakness and inability to govern. Another serious blow to the prestige of the government and its standing among the conservatives was the repeal of the *Act Concerning Communism* of 1933²⁹¹ on November 11. Although this move was again made in relation to the admission into the United Nations and was seen as necessary to remove objections from the Soviet Union, it was again presented by the opposition as a sign of government's ineptness and giving in to pressure from abroad.

As mentioned earlier, the United States' involvement in these developments was very limited. President Truman and his advisors were no doubt aware of the weakness of the struggling liberal government, but there was little it could have done to directly bolster its position. Besides, the president's mind and attention was now almost fully occupied by the worrying signs of growing Soviet power and the constitution of Soviet bloc in Eastern and Central Europe. The danger of communism and its spreading into other parts of the world was becoming ever more imminent. The gradually starting Cold War²⁹² had begun to take its toll on the strategic thinking of the American policy makers and started to set the angle from which they perceived various events. A Siam that was desired by the United States now was a stable, anti-communist Siam, not a Siam beset by political instability and economic troubles, which could breed (and did breed) discontent and play into the hands of the communists. The Communist Party of Siam, founded in 1942, was still relatively weak compared to communist movements in other countries, and was pretty much on the verge of illegality, but its ranks

²⁹⁰ The government still kept a majority in the Assembly, but it was now only 54 % and not all those elected could be counted upon.

²⁹¹ *Ratchakittha* [Royal Thai Government Gazette], 11. 11. 1946, vol. 63, p. 561. See f. 243.

²⁹² It is beyond the scope of this thesis to relate exactly the events that led to the increase in tension between the United States and the Soviet Union and subsequently to the start of the Cold War. For a succinct, but well-written account of these developments, see for example: Cohen, Warren I. *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*. Volume IV. America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1991. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, here especially chapter 2, "Origins of the Cold War", pp. 21–57.

could swell as a result of the unstable political situation and its possible cooperation with the communist parties in surrounding countries was also a threat which could not be ignored.

This is definitely not to say, however, that the United States had withdrawn its support from the liberal government or even that it was actively seeking a return of the military rule. The Truman Administration continued to maintain friendly relations with the government in Bangkok and provided some economic and financial support to Bangkok, although in rather limited amount. In March 1947, it took a step to expand the mutual diplomatic relations between both countries by agreeing to elevate the legations in both countries to the rank of embassy, with Edwin F. Stanton officially presenting his new credentials to the Siamese government in May.²⁹³ It was on this occasion, while receiving the credentials of Siamese ambassador to the United States, Prince Wan Waithayakon Worawan, that President Truman noted: "... A democratic and *stable* Siam can make a great contribution to the peaceful progress of mankind, especially in Southeast Asia... Although since the war there have been *frequent changes* in administrative responsibility in your country [Siam – J. B.], *it is hoped* that as the war period becomes more remote there will be *fewer occasions* requiring governmental changes [italics added – J. B.]..."²⁹⁴ It seems quite clear from these remarks that while the president felt the need to praise Siam for the democratic reforms it had undertaken, the governmental instability was a major concern for Washington. This instability grew even more turbulent in the spring of 1947, when the president uttered these words. One worrying sign of change in Siamese politics was the quiet return of Marshal Phibunsongkhram to political life. In March, the Marshal and his supporters formed a political party of their own (the Thammathipat Party), which was supposedly "dedicated to democratic principles"²⁹⁵. It was rather strange to hear the word "democracy" from a man who was an admirer of the dictatorship regimes in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. It should not be surprising, though, given the already discussed ideological emptiness of Siamese politics of this time and the use of various labels and words, often without applying or even comprehending their true meaning, just to attract attention of the voters. It also has to be noted that the public acceptance of "democratic principles" might have also been intended for the Western governments, even though it would have been hard for Phibun to convince Great Britain or even the United States that he was a liberal, democracy-loving politician.

²⁹³ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947*. Volume VI. The Far East. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972, p. 1127.

²⁹⁴ Truman Receiving Envoy, Links Siam to Democracy, *The New York Times*, 19. 4. 1947.

²⁹⁵ Thompson, Governmental Instability in Siam, p. 188.

For the Thamrong government, this was another in a series of bad news, as Phibunsongkhram enjoyed widespread popularity and had proven in the past that he was a skilful politician and strategist. And the things were to get even worse. With the economic situation still unsatisfactory and the corruption still rampant, the opposition Democrat Party led by Khuang Aphaiwong used its constitutional right in May 1946 and submitted the government to a questioning session in the Assembly. The opposition had outlined eight major issues on which it grilled the Thamrong cabinet, namely “peace and order, the currency crisis, bad economic policies, weak foreign policy, corruption, neglect of livelihood of civil servants, failure to promote national education and the death of King Ananda.”²⁹⁶ Although the government managed to withstand the non-confidence vote that followed²⁹⁷, it emerged from this process even weaker than before. The only solace to Thamrong could have been that the opposition was also having its own problems as the Democrat Party splintered and a new political grouping, known as the Prachachon Party (the People’s Party) came into existence. The Democrat Party accused Pridi and Thamrong of orchestrating this split, and as a result, it tilted more toward Phibun and Thammathipat grouping.

It was already noted that Pridi’s anti-colonialism, often labeled as “communism”, was viewed with antagonism by the conservative circles at home and with anxiety and concern by the Truman Administration and especially the British and French governments. These feelings of mistrust and even open hostility continued to grow in 1947, as the Thamrong government still followed Pridi’s line on a number of issues. Following the signing of the treaty with France, a Franco-Siamese Conciliation Commission was established in Washington to settle the remaining disputes and to continue the talks between the two governments²⁹⁸. One of the recommendations of this commission was that a Pan-Southeast-Asia Union should be sponsored by France and Siam. It was to be an organization which would enable both parties to settle their future disputes and arguments. It would also present a way for France to put more pressure on Siam regarding her support for the nationalist movements in Indochina. The United States, while still doubting France’s ability to maintain its Asian empire, saw some potential in this union, since it could be eventually transformed into an anti-communist body and used to fight the growing influence of local communist and communist-affiliated groups. The Siamese government, however, announced in July 1947 that it would only join the union

²⁹⁶ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 25.

²⁹⁷ The final vote was 86 to 55 votes in favor of the government. *Raingan Prachum Saphaphutahen Ratsadon* [Minutes from the Meetings of Parliament], 27. 5. 1947, no. 11/2490.

²⁹⁸ The commission was composed of two representatives of both Siam and France and three neutral experts. Its main objective was to “examine the ethnic, geographic and economic arguments” of Bangkok and Paris regarding the disputed territories in Indochina. USDS, *FRUS 1946*, p. 1084.

if France granted independence to Laos and Cambodia²⁹⁹, a demand which was at the moment unacceptable to France. The government cited domestic opposition as the main reason for its decision³⁰⁰, but it was generally blamed on Pridi and his anti-colonial leanings. These suspicions were only deepened when Pridi founded the Southeast Asia League in September 1947. The League openly supported nationalist movements especially in Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia or Vietnam. Soon, rumors began to spread that Pridi wants to establish Siamese republic and murder the king; that he is actively collaborating with communists in other countries; that he has received a supply of weapons from the Soviet Union and is planning a communist revolution in the country. By this time, the situation in Siam got extremely tense and many had predicted the military was on verge of taking over the country³⁰¹. Pridi and Thamrong were also aware of these developments, but they had inaccurately assessed their strength and the ability of the commander-in-chief, Luang Adul Aduldejcharat, to control the armed forces³⁰².

The widely-expected coup finally came on November 8, 1947. The military took over Bangkok and declared that Thamrong government was overthrown. The *Khana Ratthaprahan* (Coup Group) was led by a number of military officers (most prominent of them being probably a retired general Phin Chunnahawan), but the main force behind the move was Phibun and this fact was clear to everyone. The manifesto, issued by the *Khana Ratthaprahan*, stated that among other objectives, the new government would set up efficient administration of the country, free of subversive communist influence and founded on the traditional platform of Nation, Religion and King³⁰³. Pridi managed to leave the country with American and British help³⁰⁴, while some of his supporters retreated to the provinces and started to prepare counter-measures. The army was aware of the fact that Phibun could not immediately assume the office of the prime minister – this would have been a bitter pill to swallow for the western governments, even the United States, and the army needed recognition of its move. Thus, it asked Khuang Aphaiwong to become premier and, perhaps surprisingly, he accepted, starting his third term in office on November 10, 1947, with the mandate to govern until new elections could be held. It was clear from the onset, however, that it would be the military that was going to run the country, and Khuang's role was merely

²⁹⁹ Siam Rejects Plan for a Regional Union, *The New York Times*, 5. 7. 1947.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Coast, John. *Some Aspects of Siamese Politics*. New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1953, pp. 40–42.

³⁰² Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 28.

³⁰³ W. Ch. Prasangsit. *Phaendin Somdet Phrapokklao* [The Reign of King Rama VII]. Bangkok: Aksonsang Press, 1962, pp. 170–171.

³⁰⁴ Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 254. Pridi left on board of a Shell oil tanker and eventually made his way to Singapore.

to provide a respectable facade for the new establishment. If Khuang really hoped that the military would stay out of politics and allow him to run the country, he would have been rather naive to say the least. In the end, his last term in office was the least successful one, as he presided over the demolition and dismantling of the liberal government in Siam.

The reaction to the coup in the United States was rather ambivalent. Officially, the Truman Administration and the media in general expressed dismay and outrage that the government had been overthrown and that the coup was instigated and orchestrated by Phibun. *The New York Times* reported on November 9 that “A group of Siamese military officers led by Field Marshal Luang Pibul Songgram [Phibunsongkhram – J. B.], wartime puppet dictator under the Japanese, seized control of Bangkok early today...”³⁰⁵ In an editorial of November 11, it was noted that “The Field Marshal [Phibunsongkhram – J. B.] has tolerated few democratic processes in his previous years of command. There seems little hope that he has changed his way of thinking, although his first action in setting up a Privy Council of which he is not a member might indicate a decision to maintain at least *an outward semblance of democracy*. That move, however, may have stemmed more *from a fear of adverse British and United States reaction* rather than from any conversion to constitutional rule. His collaboration with the Japanese has not been forgotten in London and Washington... [italics added – J. B.]”³⁰⁶ The coup was ever more unfortunate, the newspaper argued, because “Siam has made better progress than most countries of Southeast Asia. It is to be hoped that the present *setback* will only be *transitory* and that with the *aid of the United States*, the peace-loving Siamese people can again turn to the task of making their country a *going democracy* and a prosperous country [italics added – J. B.]”³⁰⁷ In private, the American officials also expressed their disapproval of the coup. For example, the American Ambassador to Siam, Edwin F. Stanton, feared that it would lead to many complications, possibly including a civil war³⁰⁸.

The question, however, was how to deal with the situation at hand. While neither the United States nor Great Britain were enthusiastic about the change of government in Siam, they had no option than to accept it for the time being, resorting only to verbal criticism of its undemocratic actions. While the Khuang cabinet was not immediately diplomatically recognized, breaking off relations with Siam was not in American interest, as the country

³⁰⁵ In the article, it was also noted that “... the attitude of American officials in Washington would be of supreme importance to the revolt as Siam leans heavily on the United States in financial matters and in dealing with other nations”. Japan’s Ex-Puppet at the Helm of Siam after Armed Coup”, *The New York Times*, 9. 11. 1947.

³⁰⁶ Setback in Siam, *The New York Times*, 11. 11. 1947.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Stanton, Edwin F. *Brief Authority*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956, p. 209.

remained the only viable ally of the United States in the region. The often proclaimed and strongly emphasized anti-communist attitude of the coup group was also to be taken into account. In this respect, it was widely felt that the sincerity of Phibun and his associates could be trusted, because their anti-communist credentials and their conservative, although nationalistic, leanings had been made obvious long time before the coup. As in some other cases at this particular time period³⁰⁹, the long-term strategic concerns overweighed the scruples Washington might have felt about cooperating with non-democratic regimes. The “red danger” and the bipolar world thus came as a blessing to Phibun, who had used this phenomenon to his advantage. While initially remaining in the background and allowing Khuang to take over, he used this time to eliminate some of his more dangerous opponents, among them many of the former *Seri Thai* leaders and liberal politicians, the fact which was even noted in the United States³¹⁰. The decision to make Khuang prime minister had one additional advantage, which Phibun might not even have foreseen. Khuang was so respectable and his choice of ministers so conciliatory that even Pridi and his followers decided not to take action and refrained from staging a counter-coup, which would still have been in their power in the fall of 1947³¹¹. The years following his resignation in 1944 had taught Phibun to be patient. He was only waiting for the right moment to seize power, but he was sure that such a moment was eventually to come.

The Khuang government was initially able to achieve some successes, the most notable being the solution to the rice shortages that had plagued the country since the end of the war³¹². The tension between the *Khana Rattaprahan* and the government soon began to surface, especially when Phibun insisted on appointing his loyal followers to important positions in the army and police force. At the same time, the Khuang government still

³⁰⁹ For example, the case of Franco’s Spain comes to mind, even though there the rule of the nationalistic, authoritarian regime went on without disruption.

³¹⁰ The moves against the opposition were often justified by thwarting counter-coups attempts against the *Khana Rattaprahan*. For example, on November 22, Phibunsongkhram announced that a coup by “800 revolutionaries from Northwest Siam” was discovered and foiled. He claimed these revolutionaries cooperated with China, which would clearly indicate their communist affiliation. He also implicated the *Seri Thai* leaders in the plot, saying “I have no resentment against the Free Thai movement... but some of their leaders [this would be most likely Pridi, although he is not named – J. B.] used their powers improperly after the war – for instance, arming the wrong element [this wrong element would be the communist sympathizers and adherents – J. B.]. Siamese ‘Plot’ Thwarted, *The New York Times*, 23. 11. 1947. Many of these plots were purely fictional and were intended just to justify and defend Phibun’s undemocratic actions.

³¹¹ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 33. Thak quotes private memoirs of one of the participants of the secret meeting of Pridi’s followers. This participant, Dr. Thongplaew Cholaphum, recorded that after seeing the list of ministers, Pridi and his allies agreed that “these were the superior candidates; based on that assessment, they decided it would be inadvisable to seek power.”

³¹² This solution was largely based on allowing the free sale of rice from one province to another. The previous governments put restrictions rice sales, because they felt such a step was necessary to prevent the rice from ending on the black market.

struggled to gain full international recognition. For example, at the end of November 1947 the Siamese delegates left the conference of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, after the legitimacy of the new Siamese government was questioned by other conference members³¹³. The ironic part of this particular episode was that the final vote about Siam's full membership of the commission, which was the reason why the delegation was present, ended overwhelmingly in Siam's favor, with the only country voting against being the USSR (the United States and Great Britain voted in favor, France abstained)³¹⁴. The hasty decision to leave the conference was a reflection of the lack of confidence on part of the Khuang government. The prime minister was now looking forward toward the coming elections, which were to be held in January 1948 and which he hoped would strengthen the legitimacy of his rule.

The elections brought a setback for Phibun, a major victory for Khuang and a slim, temporary glimmer of hope that at least some vestiges of the democratic government would be preserved. The Democrat Party won 53 seats in the 100-seat Parliament, the Independents occupied 30 seats, the Prachachon Party 12 seats; the Thammathipat Party, backed by Phibun, won only 5 seats. The new elections gave Khuang a much stronger mandate even though only 22 percent of voters made it to the polling stations³¹⁵. In Bangkok, Khuang's party won all four seats, defeating all the opposition parties³¹⁶. The Democrat Party saw the opportunity to grasp the power more firmly and attempted to draft and ratify a new constitution, which would enable the continuation of a democratic rule, although in a slightly modified and watered-down version. It is quite certain that the results took the *Khana Rattaprahan* by surprise and its members decided to act. Shortly after the new government was recognized by the United States³¹⁷, Phibun sent a group of his aides to Khuang with a request that the prime minister "reconsiders his government", meaning that he resigns, in the next twenty-four hours³¹⁸. With little power left to oppose the demands of the army, Khuang had no means of resisting this demand and his government resigned on April 8, opening the way for Marshal Phibunsongkhram and the army to return to power after nearly four years of waiting. The

³¹³ Siam's Delegates Quit Asia Parley, *The New York Times*, 27. 11. 1947. The two delegates had argued that they have "lost face" as a result of the actions of some members of the commission and especially of the commission's secretariat.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, p. 63.

³¹⁶ Democrats Win in Siam, *The New York Times*, 1. 2. 1948.

³¹⁷ The exchange of notes took place on March 6, 1948. United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*, 14. 3. 1948, vol. XVIII, no. 454, p. 360.

³¹⁸ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 34.

experiment with democracy and liberal government was over, at least for the time being. On the same day that Khuang resigned, Phibun became prime minister and formed a new cabinet.

It is difficult to fully assess the impact of American policy on the Siamese political development in the 1945–1948 period. As mentioned earlier, it would be possible to argue that the American unwillingness to pursue a more hard-line, punishing policy toward Siam after the war had enabled the army and the former power structures to stay intact, using the intermezzo of the liberal government to regain its full strength and restore its former position within the political life of the country and the society. Had the British plans for weakening and reforming the army been adopted, and had the Allies been more consistent in the matter of punishing the collaborators with Japan, the return to the military rule might not have come as swiftly. On the other hand, the liberal government of Pridi and later Thamrong would have had serious problems in any case. Similarly to 1932, when the change to constitutional monarchy took place, the Seri Thai leaders were just a small group of people, often educated in the West, and without broad popular support. Unlike Phibun, who often proclaimed he was a man of the people, Pridi found it hard to establish a strong base of supporters, despite his moral integrity and political skill. Democracy was still a relatively unknown concept to most Siamese in the post-war years. Despite the initial enthusiasm that the first elections in 1946 might have created, and despite the efforts of the Pridi government to promote and explain its vision of governance to the people, the fact that it was not able to solve some of the pressing problems (inflation, rice shortages, corruption) made its position untenable. Many people who probably voted for Pridi in the beginning soon became disillusioned with the unsatisfactory situation in the country and started to look for other solutions, such solutions, as Phibun and the army ostensibly offered. The Communist factor and the open support of Pridi for the anti-colonial movement might have been another factor which influenced the public opinion against him, although the accusations of this kind were mainly made by Phibun to justify his actions in the eyes of the Western governments.

While the United States might have perceived the return of Phibun as a failure of democracy and as a setback for the Siamese politics, there was little it could do about it. As discussed previously, by 1948 the Cold War was already becoming the major factor in American foreign policy and Phibun's anti-communist credentials gave him a very strong advantage in Washington. With the situation in Indochina becoming more and more unstable, and with Malaysia in a state of virtual civil war between the British and their supporters and the communist guerillas, preserving a non-communist, stable and pro-western Siam became an utmost priority to the Truman Administration. Even the American media seemed to have

adopted that pragmatic attitude – when referring to the coup and to Phibun becoming prime minister, he was no longer a “puppet” or a “war criminal”, but just a “strong man”³¹⁹ – a label he might have actually liked. It is fitting in this context to quote the official publication on Siamese-American relations which very neatly expresses the American position: “...Still, difficult economic conditions, corruption and the mysterious shooting death of King Ananda Mahidol caused many Thais to welcome the change in government and, after some delay, the United States extended recognition. With communist strength waxing in China, insurgencies flaring in the neighboring colonial states and the Cold War getting colder in Europe, Pibul’s [Phibun’s – J. B.] regime at least offered some hope of stability”³²⁰. In fact, as the following chapter will show, the return of Phibun ushered in an era of unparalleled strengthening of mutual ties between the two countries, with Siam becoming one of the most important American allies in Asia.

³¹⁹ Siam’s “Strong Man” Is Picked as Premier, *The New York Times*, 9. 4. 1948.

³²⁰ Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 90. The paradox that it was Phibun who caused much of the previous instability by undermining and eroding the position of the liberal government, seems to have (perhaps intentionally) escaped attention of the authors of this publication.

CHAPTER IV – EMBRACING THE “ENEMY”: THE THAI³²¹-AMERICAN PARTNERSHIP DURING THE PHIBUN YEARS, 1948–1957

“We are clear in our minds as to what kind of life we want, just as you are clear in your mind that the American way of life is what you cherish. Let there be no mistake about our intention to belong to the free democratic nations.”

Thai Prime Minister Phibunsongkhram during his visit to the United States, May 1955³²²

IV.1. The Foundations of Thai-American Alliance: Common Goals, Common Enemy, Common Values?

IV.1.A. The International Situation and Its Impact on the American Views of Phibun’s Return

By April 1948, when Marshal Phibunsongkhram returned to power after nearly four years, the international situation seemed rather bleak from the American perspective, and the outlook for the coming months and years was not much brighter. In Europe, the communist takeover in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 had largely completed the division of the “old continent” between the Western and Soviet blocs. The countries of Western Europe, which had accepted the American reconstruction offer in the form of the Marshall Plan, were naturally seen as the American sphere of influence; the Central and Eastern European countries, which had declined, under pressure from Stalin, to take part in this American-funded enterprise, were now considered lost for the time being³²³. The situation in Germany, where the relations between the administration of Soviet and Allied occupation zones deteriorated rapidly, became even tenser after Moscow imposed the blockade of West Berlin in June 1948. At the same time, Washington was worried about communist influence in some of the western European countries, for example Italy, and the “red menace” was rapidly becoming the main issue in American foreign-policy and strategy planning.

The American anxiety about the spread of communism was also fueled by the developments in Asia. The greatest worry here, obviously, was the situation in China, where the Kuomintang government of General Chiang Kai-shek was losing its war with the communist forces of Mao Zedong. While some of the American foreign policy experts, for

³²¹ By 1948, the name Thailand was ultimately readopted as the official appellation of the country. For the history of these changes and the underlying motivation behind them, see Michal R. Rhum, “Modernity and Tradition in Thailand”, 331 or Charnvit Kasetsiri. *Siam to Thailand – A Historian’s View*, *Bangkok Post*, 23. 6. 2009.

³²² War Inevitable, Thai Chief Says, *The New York Times*, 11. 5. 1955.

³²³ George Kennan had predicted this development and to a degree, the United States could consider this result their propagandistic victory, because the USSR could be blamed now for creating the tension and the barriers between the East and the West. The practical results of this “victory”, however, were rather limited and the tension was prone to increase further. Cohen, *America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1991*, pp. 40–41.

example George Kennan or John Paton Davies, urged President Truman to accept the inevitable and to start thinking about reaching out to Mao and building a functioning, if not friendly, relationship with the new regime, these ideas did not ultimately prevail³²⁴. Instead, a much more expanded and inclusive version of Kennan's original limited containment policy was now adopted and the United States which called for the countering of communist aggression pretty much anywhere where it threatened to occur. Part of this strategy, of course, was to form alliances with states opposed to communism and thus to form barriers which could prevent communism from spreading further.

In Asia, the situation in this respect was more complicated than in Europe, where much clearer lines were drawn by the spring of 1948. Especially in Southeast Asia, the loyalty and foreign-policy orientation of some of the newly established or to-be-established countries were rather unclear and subject to question. In Indochina, the communist guerillas and independence groups were gradually becoming more and more powerful, making French attempts to secure pro-western governments in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam extremely difficult. The French desperation could be clearly seen when Bao Dai, the former Vietnamese emperor and official head of the Vietnamese state during the Japanese occupation, was chosen to lead "independent" Vietnam, which would form a part of the French Union. It was becoming clear to the Truman Administration that the French government would not be able to win the struggle for Indochina and that there was a danger of the former French colonies slipping into the Soviet orbit. Although Ho Chi Minh tried to publicly dispel those fears by stating that "Vietnam will not fight in the Cold War on Soviet side", that Vietnam "could remain neutral or quasi-neutral" or that even the American help to France could not "make Vietnam join the ranks of American opponents in Asia"³²⁵, these assertions were (quite correctly) rejected by Washington as not sincere. The situation in Indochina became one of the formative influences on the American foreign policy in Asia in the coming months and years.

Another problem for the United States was the fact that some of the newly independent Asian states, such as India or Burma, although not being hostile to Washington, were simply not willing to embrace its anti-communist crusade and its foreign policy aims

³²⁴ Beinart, Peter. *The Icarus Syndrome. A History of American Hubris*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010, pp. 117–119.

³²⁵ These statements were made by Ho Chi Minh in an interview given to the American journalist Andrew Roth in 1949. The interview is quoted from: Kudrna, Ladislav. *Bojovali a umírali v Indočíně. První vietnamská válka a Čechoslováci v cizinecké legii* [They Fought and Died in Indochina. The First Vietnam War and the Czechoslovaks in the Foreign Legion]. Prague: Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů/Naše vojsko, 2010, pp. 312–314.

and objectives. The former colonies were for obvious reasons not ready to support American policies, which would prevent other Asian countries from gaining independence or would at least make this process much more difficult and protracted. This unwillingness was viewed with suspicion and disappointment in Washington and was attributed to various causes – anti-Western feelings of the newly established regimes, their leftist leanings or even their open sympathy for communism, or, in some cases, naivety and inexperience of the Asian political leaders. For example, in January 1948, George Marshall wrote concerning the attitude of India toward the situation in Indochina: “As frequently expressed by Nehru, India has deep sympathy for efforts [of the – J. B.] southeast Asian countries [to – J. B.] fulfill national aspirations and improve their peoples living standards. Notwithstanding this India will hesitate [to – J. B.] submit [the – J. B.] question [of – J. B.] Indochina [to the – J. B.] UN because (1) France as permanent member SC could veto any section contrary French interests and (2) GOI [Government of India is – J. B.] not convinced Vietnam exercises de facto authority [in – J. B.] Indochina or, in contrast [to – J. B.] Indonesia, it represents viewpoint [of the – J. B.] majority [of – J. B.] Indochinese. For [the – J. B.] time being India’s sympathy [to – J. B.] Indochinese aspirations will take *negative* forms such [as – J. B.] refusing [to – J. B.] permit India to be used as base French operations in Indochina and GOI will not take *positive* steps toward intervention... This attitude [is – J. B.], however, subject to reversal in case Nehru becomes imbued with feeling that French [are – J. B.] oppressing Indochinese in view [of – J. B.] his frequent *emotional* approach [to – J. B.] such problems... [italics added – J. B.]”³²⁶ The United States did not quite appreciate the bond of solidarity, which still existed at this time between the already independent Asian countries and those that still struggled to free themselves from the colonial rule. This bond was not necessarily an expression of support or even approval for communism. It was also not necessarily a sign of a negative attitude toward the United States. In fact, many former colonies looked up to America at the time when Washington was still a champion of anti-colonialism, at least in the verbal proclamations of its leaders. It was difficult for states such as India to accept the shift in American foreign policy and the apparent abandoning of anti-colonialism in favor of containment policy and power struggle with the Soviet bloc. The differences with the United States could be bridged over, but unfortunately, due to the rising hysteria over the “red menace” and the danger it posed, Washington was in no mood for long negotiations and explanations of its stances and policies. Instead, it began to seek loyal, stalwart allies in its fight against communism, allies

³²⁶ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1948*. Volume VI. The Far East and Australasia. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1974, p. 19.

that would not question American motives and methods but that would be willing to accept them and defend them right away. This policy was rather short-sighted and created misgivings which lasted for the decades to come, but from the American perspective through the lens of the Cold War, it absolutely made sense. In Southeast Asia of 1948, however, there was a sore lack of such stalwart, loyal allies. With the exception of the Philippines, the United States again saw, as it did in 1945, basically only one other partner – Thailand.

Marshal Phibunsongkhram was well aware of these tendencies in American foreign policy. It was already noted in the previous chapter that in the months prior to the coup of 1947 and to his ultimate return to power, he sought to display his conservatism and anti-communism while accusing his political opponents, mainly Pridi, of being communists themselves or at least of supporting them. He knew that this was the surest way to obtain American support and to finally overcome his wartime past, which had previously made him odious in the eyes of Western governments. To stay in power, and to bolster his position, he in fact needed the American support and thus he immediately started to work on securing it as soon as possible.

In one of the first interviews given after he became prime minister in April 1948, Phibunsongkhram stated that “I am now a constitutional monarchist... [the Government would be] neither left nor right, but *I am personally anti-communist* [italics added – J. B]”³²⁷. Words such as these were meant to show that Phibun’s dedication to anti-communism was firm and unflinching. Since he himself decided who would be in the government (though he could not admit it openly in the interview to preserve at least a semblance of democratic rule), it was clear to everyone that he would choose people of similar political creed to join the cabinet. This way he would create the stalwart and loyal anti-communist ally the United States was so desperately looking for.

As mentioned previously, the American reaction to the political developments in Thailand was rather muted already in November 1947. Now, with Phibun back in the office of prime minister, the criticism from Washington was even less audible, if there was any at all. While the approach to the Phibun government was initially cautious and reserved, it was apparent that the United States was not going to take any significant repercussions in response to the *de facto* military takeover. The official press release of the Department of State from 23 April 1948 tersely stated: “In connection with the resignation of the Aphaiwong Government of Siam on April 8 and the forming of a new Government by Phibun Songgram, the United

³²⁷ Course for Siam Planned, *The New York Times*, 12. 4. 1948.

States Government will watch carefully the manner in which Siam's international and other obligations are carried out and how American citizens and their interests in Siam are treated. In this connection, the United States Government is for the time being suspending its consideration of what action, if any, it might take in response to the Siamese Government's desire for favorable consideration of various matters of a financial nature."³²⁸ The "carrying out of international obligations", in this particular respect, could easily be interpreted as Thailand's willingness to follow American foreign policy in Asia, a request that Phibun was eager to fulfill; in the same manner, it was not likely that the new Thai regime would discriminate against American citizens and their property, as the American support was a key to Phibun's political survival. The last sentence which signaled a possible reevaluation of American financial aid programs to Thailand could worry Phibun, but he correctly surmised that this "suspension" would only be temporary. In the meantime, he needed to demonstrate again and again the indispensability of his country and of himself to the United States and its struggle with communism. He also needed to make it clear that Thailand was in fact threatened by communism and that without American aid, it might well fall under the onslaught of the "reds". In the coming months and years, he proved to be more than successful on both counts.

IV.1.B. The Trade-Offs: The Fundamental Aspects of the Thai-American Relationship, 1948–1954

In October 1950, in a paper on the American strategy in Thailand, the Department of State summed up the American priorities as follows: "The principal US objectives in Thailand are: to strengthen ties of friendship and trust between Thailand and the US; to include Thailand, as a supporter of US policies, wherever possible in the various organizations of the UN; and to help Thailand establish itself against Communist forces in the Far East by encouraging it in *every feasible way* to achieve (1) *internal political stability*, (2) *a strong and solvent economy*, and (3) a situation wherein the average Thai citizen might have the maximum benefit possible for *modern technological advances* [italics added – J. B.]"³²⁹. These three priorities themselves, as well as the order in which they were listed, illustrate in a very good way the nature of Thai-American relationship in this period and provide a clue to

³²⁸ United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*, 23. 5. 1948, vol. XVIII, no. 164, p. 686.

³²⁹ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1950*. Volume IV. East Asia and the Pacific. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976, p. 1529.

an understanding of the expectations that both Washington and Bangkok had regarding the mutual cooperation.

It was probably no accident that stability was listed as the first achievement that the Thai government should attain. The assumption was that only stable societies and political system were resilient against communist aggression and subversion. Phibun's own position after the coup, however, was rather precarious. He was the leader of the armed forces, but even he could not quell or resolve the bickering between various branches of the army and between the army as such and the police. This internal dissension was to plague his government for the years to come. Besides, not all military officers had been happy with his return. In October 1948, a group of retired and lower ranking military officers planned to stage yet another coup, arrest Phibun and other leaders of the *Coup Group* and restore a democratic government in the country³³⁰. The coup was foiled by the government before it could take place and its leaders arrested. It was a clear sign for Phibun, though, that he had to be cautious even about the army, which was the main pillar of his government. Maybe for this reason, the accused in the October 1st rebellion trial received only mild sentences³³¹, in order not to exacerbate the tension and to show that the *Coup Group* was willing to show clemency as well. Phibun also used this opportunity to implicate the *Seri Thai* and its former leaders in the plot. He claimed that "the plot was an attempt to stop the trial of three men, including Nai Pridi Phanomyong in absentia, for the murder of the 21-year-old king Ananda of Siam in 1946"³³². Although this claim was not substantiated, and the accused never admitted that they actually wanted to overthrow the government, this coup gave Phibun another excuse to clamp down on the *Seri Thai*, dissenters in the armed forces, and, in fact, on any dissenters. Again, he might have been encouraged by the American reaction, which seemed to accept his insinuations of *Seri Thai* involvement – *The New York Times*, despite the fact that the plotters had no direct control over any military units and that the coup was foiled before anything could happen, surmised that the "incident was more serious than was first believed"³³³. The siege mentality seemed to be working well for Phibun.

³³⁰ These officers were later accused of building up arms caches and supplies and of trying to foment discontent with the Phibun government among the ranks of the army and of the civil servants. For more on the abortive coup, known also as the "October 1st rebellion", see for example: Udom Utthaphalin. *Kabot 1 Tula* [October 1st Rebellion]. Thonburi: Prayarawong Press, 1950.

³³¹ Only nine out of 22 defendants were actually convicted; the rest was acquitted and released. Those that were convicted received incarceration penalties of three years, a minimum penalty for this type of offence under standing Thai law. Thak Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand*, p. 36.

³³² Leaders of Siamese Coup Surrender to Loyalists, *The New York Times*, 3. 10. 1948.

³³³ *Ibid.*

While the October 1 rebellion might be considered a mere trifle, another coup attempt in February 1949 proved to be far more dangerous. It was staged by supporters of Pridi Phanomyong, who actually came back to Thailand to oversee the coup in person. On February 26, the *Seri Thai* adherents, supported by certain elements in the army and the navy, captured the Thammasat University and the royal palace in Bangkok and begin to circulate news over the radio that the government had been overthrown. While the initial situation looked quite promising for Pridi, the reinforcements expected from the provinces never arrived, mainly due to the preventive arrests and other steps taken by the government. The army then suppressed the rebellion in Bangkok, killing and arresting many of Pridi's men in the process. Pridi himself managed to escape and flee Thailand, leaving behind many of his supporters who now faced criminal prosecution³³⁴. The coup, although dangerous for the government, presented another welcome opportunity for Phibun to denounce Pridi as a communist and to tarnish his image in the eyes of Washington. *The New York Times*, which by now in its articles from Thailand largely relied on government press releases, reported on March 17, without further commentary, that the coup "to overthrow the Government had been led by former Premier Pridi Phanomyong"³³⁵. The effort to denounce Pridi and strip him of all of his remaining support proved to be quite successful as many Americans, even those who previously admired Pridi, now released sharp criticism of his actions. Alexander MacDonald, an American journalist who spent many years in Bangkok, later wrote: "Pridi himself lost incalculably by the plot's failure. His attempt to come back by force led many who had admired his vision and his statemanship [sic] to class him as a political adventurer; and the death, imprisonment and torture of so many of his followers badly damaged his political machine"³³⁶.

Finally, in June 1951, the final attempt was made by the navy to remove Phibun and to restore the fading prestige of the naval forces took place. A group of young and radical naval officers, known as the Restoration Group, claimed its main objective was "to overthrow Marshal Phibunsongkhram's corrupt government" and that their actions were not carried out for "the benefit or the instrument of any individual"³³⁷. On June 29, Phibun was taken hostage while overseeing the transferring of a dredge ship Manhattan, donated by the United States to the Thai navy, while the naval units prepared for combat with the armed forces. This coup, known as the Manhattan Rebellion, was, however, also rapidly suppressed and the remaining

³³⁴ For more on the Palace Rebellion, see: Samut Surakhaka. 26 kanpattiwat thai lae rattaprahan 2089–2507 [26 Revolutions and Coups d'etat in Thailand, 1546–1964]. Bangkok: Sue Kanphim, n.d., especially pp. 445–469.

³³⁵ Siam Reports New Plot, *The New York Times*, 17. 3. 1949.

³³⁶ Quoted in Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, p. 72.

³³⁷ Anon Puntharikapha. "The Manhattan Incident". In: Thak Chaloemtiarana (ed.), *Thai Politics, 1932–1957*, pp. 600–601.

strength of the navy and its opposition to Phibun and the *Coup Group* were broken. Phibun escaped unharmed, but the fact that the army did not hesitate to attack the naval ship where Phibun was held showed that his allies from the *Coup Group* did not see him as either indispensable or irreplaceable.

These political developments and struggles, while in reality attesting to Phibun's weakness and lack of control over the armed forces and the *Coup Group* itself, had in fact, rather ironically, enabled the Marshal to improve his standing with the United States. One reason was that the very existence of abortive coups gave him the opportunity to present his government as the legitimate political representation, while his opponents were now being portrayed as those who tried to destabilize Thailand. The fact that he himself and the army seized power in a coup and that their own legitimacy is very questionable, to say the least, was gradually being forgotten as the Phibun government continued in office. In an interesting twist of events, those who seized power by violent means were now seen as the legitimate, stabilizing force; those that were overthrown by violent and their supporters who sought to redress this wrong were portrayed as "insurgents", "malcontent elements" and "anti-democracy forces".

The other aspect of these coups that Phibun made frequent use of was the fact that they were allegedly orchestrated, or at least sponsored and condoned, by the communists. The direct participation of Pridi, who was earlier falsely accused of communist leanings, gave these insinuations even more weight. The communist threat, both internal and external, was repeatedly flaunted by Phibun, as he sought to play on American fears and anxieties. By 1949 and 1950, these efforts began to yield their fruits. Even if Washington initially adopted the "wait-and-see" attitude toward Phibun's regime, the Truman Administration was gradually convinced of two things: that the Phibun government was in Thailand to stay, at least for the time being; and that, despite its obvious undemocratic character and brutal repression of some of the most vocal political opponents, it was obviously staunchly anti-communist and thus naturally allied to the American cause. It is a matter of question whether, and if, to what extent, were the American officials aware of the fact that for Phibun, anti-communism was not only a personal conviction and creed, but also a convenient way to stay in power and bolster his position with the aid of the United States. It would seem plausible that at least some of the experts at the Department of State or Pentagon knew how things really were, but since at the moment, it was convenient for the United States to keep Phibun in power, they decided to play along.

Already in early 1949, in accordance with American priorities outlined above, the Truman Administration began working on getting Thailand involved more in international organizations and thus raising its prestige and standing on the world scene. In May of that year, Thailand joined the International Monetary Fund³³⁸ and the World Bank³³⁹. While this step fell in line with the American desire to “to include Thailand, as a supporter of US policies, wherever possible in the various organizations of the UN”, it also opened the way for the Thai government to apply for international loans and financial assistance programs. This had not been enough for Phibun, however, and especially after the already mentioned Palace Rebellion of June 1949, he began to pile even more indirect pressure on the Truman Administration to provide aid to Thailand. In August 1949, for example, in an interview for *The New York Times*, he said that “Communist pressure on Thailand (Siam) had become so ‘*alarming*’ that he [Phibun – J. B.] was *urgently* considering ways to get modern weapons from abroad [i.e. from the US – J. B.]. Coinciding with the threat of external pressure, internal Communist activity had ‘*vigorously increased*’ [italics added – J. B.]”³⁴⁰. These emotional appeals, often substantiated by dubious evidence or no evidence at all, but presented in the western media and in talks with American diplomats and officials, were meant to heighten the apprehension that the United States might have felt about the fate of Thailand. While there was in fact not much external danger for Thailand in August 1949, and even within the country the communist movement was hardly as strong as Phibun would have Washington believe, the Marshal was ultimately successful of convincing the Truman Administration that the situation was indeed dire. In addition to pleading for American military assistance, he was also anxious to expand the bilateral trade and to secure more American investments in the country. For example, in a press release dated August 9, 1949, the Department of State informed that “in response to a *request by the Government of Thailand*, a mission composed of three American geologists will be recruited by the Department of the Interior to assist in a survey of Thailand’s mineral resources... The assistance... further instances the desire of the United States Government to contribute to a solution of Thailand’s problems of economic rehabilitation and development... it is expected that as a result of this survey Thailand will be able to expand the volume and variety of its mineral exports to the United States and other

³³⁸ Thailand became a member of the IMF on May 3, 1949. International Monetary Fund. *List of Members*. Available at <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/memdir/memdate.htm> [last access 2. 6. 2011].

³³⁹ The Articles of Agreement between Thailand and the IBRD were signed on May 3, 1949, making Thailand the 47th member of the World Bank. World Bank Historical Chronology: 1944–1949. *The World Bank*. Available at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/EXTARCHIVES/0,,contentMDK:20035657~menuPK:56307~pagePK:36726~piPK:437378~theSitePK:29506,00.html> [last access 19. 9. 2010].

³⁴⁰ Red Pressure Alarms Thailand, *The New York Times*, 31. 8. 1949.

countries. With the proceeds of these exports, Thailand should also be able to enlarge its imports of capital and consumer goods required for the *development of its economy*, upon which a *rise in the standard of living of the Thai people* depends [italics added – J. B.]”³⁴¹ Again, the priorities, albeit in different order, are clearly visible here – stronger economy, higher living standards of the population, greater stability, enhanced resiliency against communism...

The year 1950 meant a watershed for the Thai-American relations. Already in February of that year, things began to unfold as a special mission of American Ambassador-at-large, Phillip C. Jessup, arrived to Bangkok. Jessup had been sent by the Truman Administration to determine the needs of Asian countries in face of communist aggression³⁴². As a result of his visit to Thailand, and of another fact-finding mission of R. Allen Griffin in April, the Truman Administration agreed to provide at least USD 10 million in military assistance alone, with more funds coming through the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA)³⁴³.

While these developments in themselves were certainly positive from Phibun’s perspective, they still did not satisfy the Marshal, who wanted his country and himself personally to occupy a special position in American foreign policy strategy. He was also worried, as were many other pro-American Asian leaders, by the speech of Dean Acheson from January 1950, which had clearly delineated American defensive positions in the Far East. In this speech, the American Secretary of State described the US line of defense as going from the Aleutians to Japan, south to the Ryukyus and further south to the Philippine Islands³⁴⁴. Thailand was thus not included in the American defensive perimeter, meaning not only that the country would have to defend itself against communist attack (which was not very likely), but that it was still not seen as indispensable by the United States. Phibun reacted to this speech in a manner which was typical of him. In another interview, given to *The New York Times* in May 1950, the Marshal stated that he “intended to seek military alliances with the United States, Great Britain and France... The fundamental formula proposed will be for a bilateral mutual assistance pact with each country...”³⁴⁵. Phibun also used this opportunity to again emphasize the communist danger by saying: “Our people cannot accept a Communist

³⁴¹ United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*, 22. 8. 1949, vol. XXI, no. 329, p. 277.

³⁴² Vimol Bhonghibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, pp. 91–92.

³⁴³ Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, p. 70.

³⁴⁴ For the full text of the Acheson’s speech, see: United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*, 23. 1. 1950, vol. XXII, no. 551, pp. 111–118 (the defensive perimeter is delineated on page 116).

³⁴⁵ Thailand to Seek Western Pacts in Move to Forestall Communists, *The New York Times*, 6. 5. 1950.

regime or foreign dominance willingly. Under existing circumstances the only threat to us could come from the Communists... If Thailand were attacked from abroad, we will fight to the best of our ability –even if China is behind the aggressors.”³⁴⁶ Such statements from the Marshal would not have been anything out of ordinary – after all, he was saying the same thing over and over since his coming to power in April 1948. What made them special this time was their timing, although inadvertent – in June 1950, less than two months after the interview was given, the communist North Korea invaded the southern part of the peninsula. The communist attack that Phibun had talked about for so long had finally come, and his words and warnings now looked much more prescient. The war itself, though far from Thailand, had a tremendous impact on the Thai-American relationship and the way it unfolded in the coming years.

IV.1.B.1. The Korean War as Major Factor in the American-Thai Relations

The specificity of the Korean conflict played into the hands of the Phibun government. The United States, although being the largest contributor of military forces and equipment to defend South Korea, fought the war (or the “police action”, as President Truman would put it³⁴⁷), under the umbrella of the United Nations. Due to the Soviet boycott of the Security Council meetings³⁴⁸, the Council was able to pass a resolution recommending that “the Members of the United Nations furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area.”³⁴⁹ Thailand was among the first nations to offer help, both in terms of military units to be sent to the battlefield and also in terms of supplies. On July 20, the Thai National Defense Council met and decided to commit Thailand to the UN war effort.

Marshal Phibunsongkhram again used this opportunity to warn against the communist danger and the possible attack on Thailand. When asked about the role of American military assistance in defending Thailand, he made sure he, yet again, asked for more: “Q. Do you feel that American aid in sufficient quantities could insure Thailand permanently against

³⁴⁶ Thailand to Seek Western Pacts in Move to Forestall Communists. In the same interview, Phibun also talked about his gratitude for the American aid that was offered to his government and about his hopes that it would soon arrive (thus putting additional pressure on the Truman Administration).

³⁴⁷ Dvorchak, Robert J. *Korejská válka 1950–1953* [The Korean War, 1950–1953]. Brno: Jota, 1996, p. 11.

³⁴⁸ It has to be mentioned in this respect that recently some arguments have appeared which would support the idea that Stalin had deliberately allowed the resolution to pass (the boycott could easily have been broken this one time) with the hope that the United States would get caught in a bloody, difficult conflict in Korea.

³⁴⁹ *Security Council Resolution 83 (1950) [On Assistance to the Republic of Korea]*. United Nations Security Council, S/RES/83/1950 (NR006496), 27. 6. 1950. The resolution was passed by 7 votes to 1, with only Yugoslavia voting against.

communism? A. If we are given enough aid in the way of arms and equipment, we will be able to control the borders against anything short of a major invasion. But a major invasion could not successfully be resisted without outside equipment and troops. With enough arms we could withstand perhaps three divisions, but for anything above that we'd need help. Q. What American aid specifically and how much does Thailand need most? A. *The more the better*. The more we can develop our country both *militarily* and *economically* the thicker our armor against communism will be [italics added – J. B.].³⁵⁰

Whatever the true motivation of Thailand and Phibun was, the Thai offer was valuable and welcome to the United States, especially at that juncture. The Truman Administration was anxious to present the Korean conflict as a struggle of the “free world” against communist aggression, and thus it was important to enlist as many members of the anti-communist alliance as possible, even if they were to offer merely a token assistance. It was even more important to secure the support of some of those Asian countries, which were potentially directly threatened by the spread of communism throughout the continent and thus should have had exhibited interest in facing this threat. In the end, Thailand, together with the Philippines, remained the only Asian country³⁵¹ to be involved directly in the conflict, which again reaffirmed the special position of these two allies in the American geostrategic framework in Asia. Despite the relatively small size of the Thai contingent³⁵², which was ultimately dispatched to Korea, the very presence of Phibun's units in the field added yet another argument to those American officials that supported the expansion of US military and economic aid to Thailand. For these officials, the involvement in Korea, along with other steps taken by the Phibun government, were a clear sign that Thailand was firmly on the side of the United States.

This line of thinking was neatly summed up in a policy statement, drafted by the Department of State and dated 15 October, 1950. In this document, its authors, among other things, argued: “... It has been traditional Thai procedure to balance the political forces which beset Thailand in order to remain independent. If one force became strongly dominant, Thailand in the past has *opportunistically* made terms with that force *in order to survive*. Until

³⁵⁰ Thailand Plans to Send Troops to Korea; Material and Food Aid Also Is Proposed, *The New York Times*, 21. 7. 1950.

³⁵¹ The third Asian country which offered its troops to the United States was the Republic of China (ROC) or Taiwan. The deployment of the Nationalist units on the battlefield, however, was deemed to be a too blatant provocation of People's Republic of China and was thus rejected.

³⁵² Thailand sent a contingent of infantry (a total of approximately 6,500 Thai soldiers served in Korea), five frigates which helped patrol the Korean waters, as well as additional transport ships and planes. Rottman, Gordon L. *Korean War Order of Battle. United States, United Nations and Communist Ground, Air and Naval Forces, 1950–1953*. Westport: Prager Publishers, 2002, pp. 120–121.

overt Communist aggression in Korea on June 25, 1950, it was believed that Thailand had continued her traditional policy for survival... Thailand's government, however, undertook a departure from its traditional policy of balancing political forces, when on February 28, 1950, it officially recognized the Government of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam³⁵³, thus aligning Thailand against the Communist forces in Indochina. Thailand has also resolved not to recognize the Chinese Communist Government and is prepared to resist its entry into the United Nations. *An even more decisive move* was made by Thailand on July 21, 1950, when it became the second nation (China was the first) [see ff. 325 on the previous page – J. B.] to offer ground troops to the United Nations in support of UN forces in Korea. Thailand had thus *irrevocably severed* its ties with Communist countries and committed itself *positively* to the cause of the *free nations* [italics added – J. B.].³⁵⁴

There are certain issues in this report worth noting. The first is related to the assumption that Thailand had left its opportunistic policy and thus made a clean break with the past when it sought to balance forces and survive by joining the “dominant force”. The authors of the policy statement were indeed correct in identifying this salient feature of Thailand's foreign policy. What was rather ironic was that Phibun was actually credited with not being “opportunistic” and with committing Thailand “to the cause of the free nations”. The Marshal himself was almost an epitome of political opportunism. Before the conflict in Korea started, it was alleged that he proclaimed that Thailand “would cooperate with any power that would win in any international conflict”³⁵⁵. Clearly, by June 1950, Phibun assumed that the United States was actually the “dominant force” or at least was on its way to that point. So, in order for Thailand and for himself personally to survive, it made sense to “make terms with that dominant force”. There was nothing idealistic about Thailand's decision, nothing which was in serious disagreement with the country's national interest. Even though Phibun was criticized by some Thai politicians for veering too far in the direction of the United States, the coming years had proven that his assumption was correct.

With these factors taken into account, the line about “irrevocable severing” of Thai relations with the communist countries was also a questionable statement to make. If the communist powers proved to be dominant in the end, or at least influential enough in Southeast Asia to threaten the very survival of Thailand, it was possible that Thailand would

³⁵³ These were the governments set up in these three countries by the French as a means to counter the communist insurgency. These governments had the support of the United States, but their position was not easy, as they often lacked a strong base of support among the local populations.

³⁵⁴ USDS, *FRUS 1950*, pp. 1529–1530.

³⁵⁵ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 68 (f. 104).

attempt to settle her differences with these powers. Phibun tried to pose as a staunch anti-communist, but for him, his own political survival as well as that of his nation was always in the first place. From the United States' point of view, then, it was necessary to prove to Thailand that the ultimately, the "free nations" are going to prevail in this struggle; it was also important to make sure that Thailand was getting enough out of its commitment to the United States' cause and that it was assured it would not be abandoned by Washington. Even the authors of the policy statement quoted above were, to a certain degree, aware of this, since they had written: "The Thai government is apprehensive of the mounting Communist threat in the Far East and has generally cooperated with the efforts of the western powers to block Communist expansion. The *degree to which these efforts are successful* in checking Soviet imperialism will be a *determining factor in shaping the pattern of Thailand's foreign relations...* A continuation of present US policies [meaning support of Thailand on the international scene and providing of aid – J. B.] toward Thailand should help it remain free from Communist domination and should strengthen the bonds of friendship between Thailand and the US [*italics added* – J. B.]"³⁵⁶. In the months following the outbreak of the Korean War, the US policies towards Thailand had indeed not only continued, but experienced a major expansion and intensification.

In July 1950, the first of three bilateral treaties between Thailand and the United States was signed – *The Academic Exchange Agreement*, which provided for Thai students to receive Fulbright scholarships in the United States and also for American scholars and lecturers to come to Thailand. The agreement, signed by the American Ambassador Edwin F. Stanton and the Thai Minister for Foreign Affairs Nai Vorakarn Bancha, also established the United States Educational Foundation in Thailand, which officially came into existence in September 1950³⁵⁷. The move was made with the view of building new American educated elite, which would ensure that the country would remain pro-American in the future. By making the United States the main destination for Thai students who wished to receive schooling overseas, Washington was also trying to replace in this role Great Britain, France and Germany, where most of Thai students studied prior to World War II. The agreement formed a part of a wider effort of the United States to influence the public opinion in

³⁵⁶ USDS, *FRUS 1950*, pp. 1538–1539.

³⁵⁷ United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*, 14. 8. 1950, vol. XXIII, no. 580, p. 274. The Foundation was actually a commission consisting of four Thai and four American experts and its main responsibility was to select the recipients of the Fulbright scholarships. The American ambassador in Thailand served as an honorary president of the Foundation. For more details on *The Academic Exchange Agreement*, see also: Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 94.1–94.3.

Thailand. As the Department of State put it: “In order to *help the Thai public form a broader view of the world situation and of the US actions*, we are using the instruments of press and radio, a library, educational films and study materials, and pamphlet and magazine distribution. The US is *encouraging* the exchange of students and technical experts; and the US and Thai governments have signed a Fulbright Agreement [italics added – J. B.]”³⁵⁸ While the educational exchange and scholarship effort was in general very well received in Thailand and supported by the Phibun government, it was to have some unintended consequences which the Marshal did not quite realize in 1950.

The academic exchange in itself was important, but it was only a prelude to what was soon to follow. On 19 September 1950, a second bilateral treaty, known as *The Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement*, was signed by both governments. The underlying motivation for signing this agreement was clear and in line with the overall American objectives: “Thailand, the oldest independent country in southeast Asia, also faces economic and military difficulties. Here again the United States is standing by with an assistance program *designed to enable the Government to main [sic] its territorial integrity*. American economic aid to Thailand has been *instrumental* in restoring that nation to a *relatively healthy* economic and financial condition [italics added – J. B.]”³⁵⁹

The State Department experts later elaborated: “We [the United States – J. B.] have a specific interest in the further economic development of Thailand because it has a *politically stable* and *friendly* government. We are particularly concerned to assist its efforts to increase the production of rice, in view of the continued rice shortage in the Far East. To this end, it is necessary for Thailand to develop its technical agricultural services, to improve and extend its control over water supply and to improve its internal transportation system as well as its port facilities [italics added – J. B.]”³⁶⁰. While these measures were designed to help the Thai economy, they also had a strategic and political, if not military, significance. It was in the American interest that Thailand, a traditional producer of rice, would further increase its output of this commodity, which could then be exported to neighboring states and improve the situation there. This in turn could help quell discontent and radical tendencies among the local populations, threatened with the prospect of starvation or at least of rising prices of rice, which is a staple of the diet in most of Southeast Asia and sections of the Far East. The importance of Thai rice production for the United States was evident from the repeated

³⁵⁸ USDS, *FRUS 1950*, pp. 1531–1532.

³⁵⁹ United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*, 9. 10. 1950, vol. XXIII, no. 588, p. 577.

³⁶⁰ USDS, *FRUS 1950*, p. 1533.

remarks on this subject made by American officials. For example, in 1952, when President Truman asked the Congress to extend the aid to Thailand, he defended these appropriations in the following terms: “The basic objective of the United States in Thailand is to support a friendly government which has unreservedly committed itself to the cause of the free world in maintaining stability in this country situated not far from China’s Red Army, and bordering on unsettled areas in Indo-China and Burma. It is *one of the world’s greatest rice producers and exporters, on whose supply many countries of the free world depend*, and it is also a source of a number of critical materials [italics added – J. B.]”³⁶¹

The improvements in agricultural techniques, as well as in water supply system and infrastructure, were also motivated by the desire to improve the lives of Thai farmers, who represented the largest segment of Thai society in the post-war years. By improving their living conditions, it was believed they would become even more resistant to communist propaganda and would not join in any anti-government insurgency. Besides, the improvements in infrastructure also had the added value that this infrastructure could potentially be used for military purposes, both by the Thai armed forces, but also by the United States if the situation called for it.

The funding for the economic aid to Thailand was provided partly by the United States and partly by loans from the IBRD, which Thailand had joined earlier the same year. On October 31, the IBRD approved a loan of over USD 25 million to help Thailand fund improve its railroads, ports, other infrastructure as well as to build new irrigation projects³⁶². This loan was no doubt secured with the help of Washington – the Department of State stressed that the costs for improving Thai infrastructure will be funded “largely through the loan from the IBRD, *which we have supported and will continue to support* [italics added – J. B.]³⁶³. The United States provided USD 8 million in initial aid, distributed by the Economic Cooperation Administration; in 1951, a new organization, the Mutual Security Agency, took over management of the aid³⁶⁴. Between 1951 and 1957, over USD 138 million was provided to Thailand in support of various economic and development initiatives³⁶⁵.

Finally, on 17 October, Thailand had come closest to securing the cherished bilateral defense treaty with the United States when the *Agreement Respecting Military Assistance* was

³⁶¹ Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 96.

³⁶² Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, pp. 79.

³⁶³ USDS, *FRUS 1950*, p. 1534.

³⁶⁴ Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, pp. 79–80.

³⁶⁵ The respective amounts for the individual years were as follows (in millions USD): FY 1951 – 7.2; FY 1952 – 6; FY 1953 – 5.9; FY 1954 – 11; FY 1955 – 38.5; FY 1956 – 35; and FY 1957 – 34.5. United States of America Operations Mission to Thailand. *People in Progress. A Report on Thai-American Economic Cooperation 1950–1957*. Bangkok: United States of America Operations Mission to Thailand, 1957, p. 6.

signed. The concluding of this treaty was arguably the most important issue of the American fact-finding mission of January 1950. The United States had defended the treaty, which was designed mainly to upgrade the Thai military and was free of commitments to come to the aid of Thailand in case of an attack, mainly by using the familiar and often repeated phrases about promoting security and world peace in face of the threats of communist aggression. The American Ambassador to Thailand Edwin F. Stanton commented on the signing of the agreement as follows: "... The signing of the agreement is a practical expression of the willingness of the American people to help Thailand's people when they need help to *maintain their traditional rights, liberty and independence*. By assisting them in the preservation of these rights, we shall advance a cause in which our two countries have a common stake – *the cause of peace, and freedom*. This agreement is *not a military alliance nor is it a defensive pact*. ... This agreement follows the request by the Government of Thailand for arms and equipment to strengthen Thailand's forces with a view of enabling them better to defend Thailand and Thailand's people from any aggression which may threaten the peace and tranquility of this country. This request was made in the knowledge that *aggressive forces are rampant* in the Far East today and appear to be looking hungrily toward Thailand and her neighbors... By preserving peace, Thailand's armed forces will not only insure progress and prosperity for the people of Thailand but will also be making a definite contribution to world peace [italics added – J. B.]".³⁶⁶

The Truman Administration went a long way to assure the Congress and the public that this was indeed not a mutual defense pact. Even though by late 1950, the original idea of containment, as formulated by George Kennan, was beginning to expand, both in terms of the scope of American commitments and also in terms of geographical boundaries of the sphere of American interests³⁶⁷, Washington was still wary of overextending its military capabilities. It was obvious, however, despite the purposely vague and ambivalent wording of Stanton's press release, that the treaty was signed with the aim of making Thailand a bulwark against communism. It was also very clear that in this bilateral relationship, Thailand was to be the recipient of the American aid while giving Washington little in return, other than its "solidarity" with the cause of the "free nations", i.e. its loyalty to the foreign policy goals of

³⁶⁶ Stanton also did not fail to mention that it is the desire of both countries to "foster international peace and security within the framework of the Charter of the United Nations through measures which will further the ability of the nations dedicated to the purposes and principles of the Charter to develop effective measures for self defense in support of those purposes and principles." United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*, 30. 10. 1950, vol. XXIII, no. 591, pp. 701–702.

³⁶⁷ For a summary of the original intents and purposes of the containment, as formulated by Kennan, and of its further expansion and "inflation", see: Beinart, *The Icarus Syndrome*, here especially pp. 109–125.

the United States. The reference to the “request by the Government” is a modest summary of the pressure by Phibun on the Truman Administration, which had characterized the last three years of the relations between both countries.

The American military assistance was a vital asset to the Thai government. Between 1946 and 1957, the funding provided by Washington in military grants to Thailand reached more than USD 200 million³⁶⁸. The signing of the agreement was, beyond any doubt, a major success for the Phibun government, as it had put the provision of American aid on a more solid base and enabled it to expand greatly in the coming years. The military grants were not the only source of funding for the Thai defense forces. In 1955, for example, another USD 29.7 million was allotted to Thailand’s defense as a part of the economic aid³⁶⁹. For Phibun, whose political survival depended largely on the securing of American support and aid, the maintenance of this assistance, both military and economic, was absolutely vital. And yet, even after the treaties of 1950, the Marshal was still not satisfied – the mutual defense pact he would have preferred seemed to be farther than ever. Phibun, however, was a tenacious man and he was not yet ready to give up.

IV.1.B.2. Towards the SEATO: One Enemy, One Aim, Two Motivations?

In January 1951, the situation on the Korean battlefield appeared particularly grim from the American perspective. After the dazzling success following the battle of Inchon in September 1950 and Mac Arthur’s drive north to the Chinese border, the intervention by Chinese “volunteers” threw the UN forces into disarray. By 5 December 1950, the North Korean and Chinese forces had retaken Pyongyang; by 5 January 1951, the UN had lost Seoul for the second time. General MacArthur repeatedly called for the use of nuclear bomb against the Chinese supply routes in Manchuria³⁷⁰ and the disagreements over the proper strategy for Korea and over his competence as the commander-in-chief finally led to his dismissal in April 1951.

While the fighting was raging most fiercely on the Korean battlefield, a meeting took place at the Department of State in Washington between the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Dean Rusk and the Thai Ambassador Wan Waithayakon. The subject of the meeting was, as usual, the defense of Thailand against communist aggression. During the

³⁶⁸ The exact figures for this military aid are as follows (in USD): FY 1946–1954 – 111,200,000 (85 percent of the military aid in this time period was provided by the United States in 1953 and 1954); FY 1955 – 40,800,000; FY 1956 – 43,400,000; FY 1957 – 26,200,000. Montgomery, John D. *The Politics of Foreign Aid*. New York: Praeger, 1963, p. 283.

³⁶⁹ Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, p. 103.

³⁷⁰ Dvorchak, *Korejská válka 1950–1953* [Korean War 1950–1953], p. 186.

course of the conversation, the Thai Ambassador said “he had been instructed by his government to ask what United States policy would be if Chinese communists attack Northern Indochina, i.e. would the United States give air support or navy support or ground support or simply provide military equipment as at present. Furthermore, if Thailand were attacked would the United States come to their support while they were fighting the enemy or would Thailand have to do as it did in the last war when overrun by the enemy [World War II – J. B.] – establish an underground which would cooperate with the United States and work toward liberation with us. The Ambassador reaffirmed his government saw eye to eye with the U.S. Government and wanted to know how to lay its own plans in order to meet the potential threat.”³⁷¹ It was rather ironic that Phibun had now made references to World War II, when his own involvement in the anti-Japanese resistance was virtually non-existent. The gist of the Thai argumentation, however, was clear – Thailand, even with the American arms and equipment, would not be able to withstand a major attack by the communist forces. Thus, if such an attack was to occur, Thailand would require a direct military intervention of the United States in order to repel it. Dean Rusk understood the Thai arguments very well, but he was not authorized to make any concessions in this respect. He informed the ambassador “that any attack by the Chinese Communists on Indochina or Thailand would be regarded by the United States a very serious matter and as part of our world-wide fight against Communism” but also “that in fact Thailand’s immediate neighbors such as Burma, India and Malaya, would probably feel equally involved in such an attack by the Chinese Communists and would doubtless be prepared to consider coincident action in such an event.”³⁷² As to the direct intervention by the United States, he argued that “it was exceedingly difficult to give a practical reply to a hypothetical question; that the President of the United States in fact was the only person who could reply to such a question; that if he [the President – J. B.] were requested to make a reply at this time it would become a problem between the Executive and the Legislative branches of government...”³⁷³

Phibun could have hardly been satisfied with such an answer. In certain respects, this negotiation could have reminded him of the talks with Washington and London prior to World War II. The United States, however, was now much more engaged in the affairs of South East Asia than it was in 1941, and there was no danger of Washington abandoning Thailand altogether. Phibun realized that in order to keep Thailand high on the list of

³⁷¹ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1951*. Volume VI. Asia and the Pacific (in two parts). Part 2. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1977, p. 1594.

³⁷² *Ibid*, p. 1595.

³⁷³ *Ibid*, pp. 1594–1595.

American priorities and among the top recipients of American aid, one of the surest ways would be to keep up and even intensify the “siege mentality tactics” and exaggerate the danger of the communist attack and/or subversion that his country was supposedly facing. This tactic was also useful in his continuing intimidation of any domestic political opposition. Anti-communism could also be used to promote Thai nationalism, which was an old political device of Phibun – this time the chauvinistic attacks would be directed against the Chinese minority, which was implicitly accused of being disloyal to the state. As *The New York Times* reported in January 1951: “Thailand... can claim to have been the most stable, prosperous and peaceful of all Southeast Asian territories during the last twelve months... Thailand looks forward – barring Communist-instigated disturbances to a still more prosperous year in 1951... Growing pro-Communist sentiment, based mostly on a chauvinistic attraction for the Peiping Government’s nationalism, developed among the 3,000,000 Chinese of Siam, but Communist agitation was not serious during the year. Intensified Communist manifestations were expected during 1951, however.”³⁷⁴

In a situation like this, when the Phibun government was desperate to exaggerate the danger it faced in order to remain indispensable to the United States, it would have been important for Washington to receive a more objective information from its official in Thailand. Ambassador Stanton, however, seemed to agree with Phibun on the seriousness of the situation, even though he personally disliked the prime minister. In a long commentary on the State Department Policy Statement on Thailand, quoted earlier in this chapter, he wrote in March 1951: “On many occasions the Embassy has reported to the Department on the following *possible, specific and fairly immediate threats* to Thai independence: 1) The possibility of a Vietminh conquest of Indochina and consequent reaction in Thailand. 2) The possibility of ‘peaceful’ takeover in Laos by Vietminh and Chinese Communists through the method of infiltration, subsequently *threatening Thailand* through its north and northeast provinces. 3) The possibility of Communist victories in Burma and/or Indochina, followed by sudden diplomatic and political pressure *forcing a reversal* of Thai policies. 4) The possibility of Communist capture of certain dissident political groups and their use in an effort to topple the regime by *coup d’état*. 5) The *possibility of direct* Chinese Communist invasion in force. 6) The possibility of a Communist-organized series of sabotage and guerilla movements supported by the *Communist-controlled* Chinese minority. The Embassy cannot of course predict, which, if any of these steps will be adopted by the Communists. But there is no

³⁷⁴ Thailand Enjoys a Year of Prosperity; Fears Red-Inspired Agitation During 1951, *The New York Times*, 3. 1. 1951.

evidence in the Policy Statement to show that U.S. policies toward Thailand have been weighed in terms of such threats in an effort to determine to what extent these policies are likely to meet these threats... It may be that because Thailand is in a relatively low priority area it is impossible for the United States to go any further. It may be that we must reconcile ourselves to the *ultimate writing off* of Thailand... [italics added – J. B.]³⁷⁵

Although Stanton was aware of Phibun's personal interest in Thailand staying anti-communist, he painted the picture of Thailand's future political development as very uncertain and even bleak. Some of the threats he outlined in his commentary were, however, rather dubious. For example, a direct invasion of Thailand by Communist forces was hard to imagine even in 1951. The Chinese minority was also not as a whole controlled by the communists – in fact, here Stanton used the same chauvinistic rhetoric that Phibun was so fond of. Overall, while there were some valuable points in his report, it basically led to only one conclusion – unless the American policy toward Thailand was shaped by all these potential threats and equipped to meet them, Thailand could fall to communism almost anytime. This trend continued even after Stanton left Thailand and was replaced by Major General William J. Donovan in 1953. Donovan, who was picked by Eisenhower and who previously served as the head of the O.S.S. during World War II, had been allegedly selected because of his ability “to prepare the country for an eventual Communist assault”³⁷⁶.

On the other hand, it has to be noted that from the international perspective, the situation was indeed getting tenser in Southeast Asia in the early 1950s. Domestic developments in Thailand aside (these will be discussed in the last section of this chapter), it became quite clear in late 1952 that France was losing its struggle with the communist-led anti-French movement in Indochina. The United States now openly supported the French – as Warren I. Cohen put it, “American anticommunism proved stronger than American anti-imperialism”³⁷⁷. If the communists were to win in Indochina, the impact on the situation in Thailand could be very serious. The policymakers in Washington were especially anxious about the extent of involvement of the Peking government in the insurgency in Indochina, perhaps even more than about the role of the Soviets. This was in part because the United States still had not fully overcome the shock it experienced in 1949 when China was lost to the victorious communists. The creation of communist, China-controlled regimes in Indochina was a nightmare for Washington, a scenario that was to be prevented at all costs.

³⁷⁵ USDS, *FRUS 1950*, pp. 1602–1603.

³⁷⁶ Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, p. 103.

³⁷⁷ Cohen, *America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1991*, p. 94.

This determination grew even more resolute when Dwight Eisenhower became president in January 1953.

Phibun was of course following the international developments as well as the changes in Washington. The election of Eisenhower was an important moment from his perspective – the “domino theory” could be well applied to the situation in Indochina and could provide the rationale for further expansion of aid to Thailand and perhaps even for the signing of the long sought defense pact. Phibun thus resumed his propagandistic offensive. He was aided in January 1953 by a step made by the Peking government, which had established a so-called “Thai Autonomous People’s Government” among the Tai tribal population³⁷⁸ in the Yunnan province of Southern China. Although this move was largely propagandistic and meant no direct threat to Thailand’s security³⁷⁹, it heightened the apprehension that Thailand as an American ally is in the midst of a psychological warfare by the communists and might become the next objective of their planned aggression. Writing in 1954, the former ambassador to Thailand Stanton commented on this issue in the following words: “This important development in an obscure part of the world escaped the attention of most Westerners at the time, but we may expect to hear a lot more about it... The designation of this ‘autonomous’ government as ‘Thai’ *unquestionably* indicates the existence of plans aimed at other Thai in Southeast Asia... the creation of this bogus “Thai” regime in Yunnan has seriously disturbed [the Thai government and other leaders – J. B.]. They have no doubt that it is a calculated move not only to foster a rival Thai state, but also to seduce the Thai of Thailand and adjoining areas. They feel Sibsongpanna [the area in Yunnan where the ‘Thai government’ was established – J. B.] will be the focal point to which the disaffected and pro-Communist Thai within Thailand will gravitate, and from which the agents will be sent on missions of *propaganda and intrigue*. In fact, these activities *had already commenced*.”³⁸⁰ The fact that the former Thai Prime Minister Pridi Phanomyong, who was living in China at that time, was involved in this effort, might have been worrying for Phibun personally, but

³⁷⁸ The Thai people belong to the Tai ethnic and language group, which also includes the Lao, Shan and others. It is believed that the Tai peoples migrated to Southeast Asia sometime during the 6th and 7th centuries A. D. Some of the Tai remained in China and have been living there up to modern day. For more information on the evolution of the individual Tai language and ethnic subgroups, see for example: Luo Yongxian. The Subgroup Structure of the Tai Languages: A Historical Comparative Study, *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, 1997, Monograph Series, no. 12.

³⁷⁹ Thailand was later assured by China at the conference in Bandung that the establishment of this government had no “international implications”. Fifield, Russel H. *Southeast Asia in United States Politics*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963, p. 246. The Chinese claimed that the move was a part of domestic administrative reform.

³⁸⁰ Stanton also mentioned that this government would be used to start guerilla warfare in Thailand and Laos, and possibly even in the Shan State of Burma. Stanton, Edwin F. Spotlight on Thailand, *Foreign Affairs*, 1954, vol. 33, no. 1, p. 80.

from a larger perspective, this attempt had no practical consequences. Phibun, however, thankfully used it in his “siege mentality” tactics.

Throughout 1953 and 1954, the American interest in Southeast Asia grew as the situation in Indochina began to deteriorate. While Eisenhower was leery of committing the United States to any military interventions in the area, he was anxious about the apparent inability of the French to contain the communist insurgency in its former colonies. Washington now began pondering on the establishment of a regional defense pact, modeled on NATO, which would provide the necessary barrier against the communist tide, with American backing but hopefully without the need for direct intervention by the United States. In February 1953, the Administration announced it “is planning a long-range program to train and equip the ground forces of those Asian countries that wish to participate in the common defense of the area against Communist aggression... From a strategic point of view, it is believed that the Administration realizes that in the event of a general war in Asia the United States would have difficulty in supplying the large number of ground troops that would be required, while at the same time maintaining a sufficient force to deter a Soviet aggression against Western Europe”.³⁸¹

The main driving force behind the plans for this regional alliance was the American realization that it did not have enough military strength, and domestic support, to wage an all-out war against communism anywhere in the world. Already during the war in Korea President Eisenhower had clearly indicated his unwillingness to expand the conflict beyond the peninsula (his public remarks about the use of the nuclear bomb against China were a bluff designed to give Mao a convenient excuse to start ceasefire negotiations) and he was determined to end the fighting as soon as possible. In a similar fashion, he did not want to commit any more resources than was absolutely necessary to stop the communist threat. A direct military intervention in Indochina to assist the French, for example, was something absolutely out of question. On the other hand, it was not feasible for him because of the political climate in the United States and relentless attacks from the right on any public official who appeared “soft on communism”, to “sell Vietnam” or any other country “down the water” as China was allegedly sold several years before. At an April 1954 news conference, the President tried to walk the fine line between commitment and “softness”: “Q: Do you favor bringing this Indochina situation before the United Nations? A: ...This was the kind of the thing that must not be handled *by one nation trying to act alone*. We must have a

³⁸¹ Taiwan, Japan, Thailand and the Philippines were mentioned at this point as interested in taking part. U.S. Plans to Arm the Asians for Defense in Long-Range Aim, *The New York Times*, 7. 2. 1953.

concert of opinion, and a *concert of readiness* to react in whatever way was necessary... Q: Mr. President, would you mind commenting on the strategic importance of Indo-china to the free world...? A:... First of all, you have the specific value of a locality in its production of materials that the world needed. Then you had the possibility that many human beings passed under a dictatorship that was *inimical to the free world*; and, finally, you had broader considerations that might follow what you might call the ‘falling domino’ principle. You had a row of dominoes set up, and you knocked over the first one, and what would happen to the last one was the *certainty* that it would go over *very quickly* [italics added – J. B.]³⁸².

While these words in themselves did not mean a sudden change of mind and a pledge to defend any country threatened by the “red menace”, they did indicate that Vietnam and Indochina in general were one of the areas of interest of the American foreign policy. And yet, at the same time, the Eisenhower Administration and the military leadership had only very superficial understanding of the situation there³⁸³, despite the fact that some Americans, like George Kennan, had warned against accepting any commitments in the area³⁸⁴. The decision to become more involved was ultimately fatal for the United States, but for Thailand, it presented another opportunity to display its loyalty to Washington’s cause and to get rewarded for this loyalty.

In the spring of 1954, the situation in Indochina finally deteriorated to the point that France had accepted a proposal to attend a peace conference in Geneva to solve the issue by negotiations. The conference, which started on 26 April 1954, was attended by delegates from the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France and the People’s Republic of China, as well as various representatives from the states in Indochina and from both Koreas. The United States publicly showed very little willingness to compromise – John Foster Dulles repeatedly claimed the United States “would not accept the legitimacy of communist control in any part of Southeast Asia”³⁸⁵ and he urged the American allies to stand firm. Even after May 8, when the French fort of Dien Bien Phu was taken by the Vietminh forces, the United States was contemplating whether the French, with the American and “international” help, would be able to continue the struggle. For example, on 12 May 1954, the American Charge

³⁸² Transcript of President Eisenhower’s Press Conference, With Comment on Indo-china, *The New York Times*, 8. 4. 1954.

³⁸³ Hook, Steven W. and John Spanier. *American Foreign Policy Since World War II*. Eighteenth Edition. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010, p. 93.

³⁸⁴ Already in August 1950, George Kennan wrote to Dean Acheson: “In Indochina, we are getting ourselves into the position of guaranteeing the French in an undertaking which neither they nor we, nor both of us together, can win.” Beinart, *The Icarus Syndrome*, p. 125.

³⁸⁵ Nálevka, Vladimír. *Světová politika ve 20. století II*. Prague: Aleš Skřivan ml., 2000, p. 144.

d'affaires wrote to the Department of State: "... if Vietminh were as badly hurt as French hope and believe they were at Dien Bien Phu and if the rainy season comes on in full force on time or early, Viet Minh will not be able to mount their offensive in delta until October. Should this prove to be the case, Cogy [the French commander – J. B.] believes that he will be able to prepare defenses Hanoi and Haiphong and perhaps connecting link with some confidence withstand Viet Minh attack provided, he underscores, reinforcements are made available to him..."³⁸⁶ Dulles even offered the French the "use of armed forces of US in area to support friendly and recognized governments against aggression or armed subversion fomented from without" if a formal request was made by the French government and the French-appointed governments of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos and if Thailand, Philippines, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom were given a similar request [these were the future members of the SEATO – J. B.]³⁸⁷ These hopes of internationalization of the conflict and of preventing a "communist victory", however, were futile as Britain was not ready to get involved in another protracted struggle and France was on the verge of humiliating defeat. If the United States wanted to maintain its presence in Indochina, and did not wish to stand alone, it needed other allies.

When the Geneva conference was in full swing, Thailand resumed its attempts to secure more assistance and support from the United States. In a meeting with the Secretary of State Dulles in June 1954, the Thai Ambassador to Washington Pote Sarasin warned that "the Communists were pressing forward in Indochina while some of the Western Allies argued that they should do nothing until the outcome of the Geneva conference on Far Eastern Affairs was known. Unfortunately... the Communists are not waiting."³⁸⁸ During the same meeting, he also urged the United States to meet the "aggression of the Communists in Southeast Asia with a sharply stepped-up flow of arms to *threatened Thailand*" while complaining that Thailand and the Philippines were not invited to the five-nation military talks on the security in Southeast Asia (the participating nations were the United States, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and France)³⁸⁹. An apparent shift in Thai policy could be observed here. While previously Thailand did not pursue a multilateral defense treaty and preferred a bilateral pact with the United States, now it started to act like one of the most ardent supporters of the future SEATO. There was more than just one reason behind this

³⁸⁶ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952–1954*. Volume XIII. Indochina (in two parts). Part 2. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982, p. 1536.

³⁸⁷ Ibid, pp. 1535–1536.

³⁸⁸ Thailand Bids U.S. Send More Arms, *The New York Times*, 6. 2. 1954.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

change. Phibun would still have much preferred a bilateral pact, but he realized that in the existing conditions, such an arrangement would not be accepted by the United States. So, he sought to make as much use of the SEATO as possible, by once more volunteering Thailand's loyalty and support in exchange for yet another increase in military and financial aid. Even though at this juncture, the Marshal started to face more criticism from those Thai politicians that felt he went too far in his support³⁹⁰ of the United States, he was willing to take this risk in order to cement his ties with Washington.

The establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in September 1954 represented the immediate American response to the Geneva conference. It was an embodiment of the American desire to stay involved in Southeast Asia and to fight communism there, but not on its own but with local and other allies. Secretary of State Dulles, when leaving for Manila where the treaty was to be signed, summed up the American objectives and expectations in the following manner: "... We shall consider the desirability of a security treaty... We hope to find and develop a genuine meeting of minds as to what should be done to halt Communist expansion in that area [Southeast Asia – J. B.]. I also hope that ways and means can be found to enable Cambodia, Laos, and Southern Viet-Nam to become free, vigorous, and liberty-loving nations, and that the whole area can be strengthened by a sense of solidarity".³⁹¹

The preamble to the *Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty*, which was finally signed on September 8, was written in the usually employed vague terms, which invoked a feeling of mutual cooperation and responsibility yet carried little practical significance: "The Parties to this Treaty, Recognizing the sovereign equality of all the Parties; Reiterating their faith in the purposes and principles set forth in the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all governments; Reaffirming that, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, they uphold the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and declaring that they will earnestly strive by every peaceful means to promote self-government and to secure independence of all countries whose people desire it and are able to undertake its responsibilities; Desiring to strengthen the fabric of

³⁹⁰ Vimol Bhonghibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 103. This criticism also spanned from the fact that the Chinese rather restrained approach to the Geneva conference seemed to indicate Beijing was ready for more compromises. That could have been an opportunity for Thailand to improve her relations with China rather than following the hard-line policy of the United States. On the other hand, it soon became clear that one of the main reasons for the Chinese restraint was not a desire for accommodation with the West and with the non-communist countries in general, but its dislike of Ho Chi Minh and of the idea of unified Vietnam.

³⁹¹ United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*, 13. 9. 1954, vol. XXXI, no. 794, p. 364.

peace and freedom and to uphold the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law, and to promote economic well-being and development of all peoples in the treaty area; Intending to declare publicly and formally their sense of unity, so that any potential aggressor will appreciate that the Parties stand together in this area, and; Desiring further to coordinate their efforts for collective defense for the preservation of peace and security...”³⁹²

Viewed from the overall perspective in the context of its declared purpose, the SEATO had very serious flaws from the very beginning. The major problem of the organization was that India and Indonesia, considered by some experts to be the two most important nations in South and Southeast Asia, rejected the offer of membership³⁹³. From the psychological point of view, it was important that such countries as Great Britain and France, as well as Australia and New Zealand, had joined the pact, but especially in the case of the former two, it was highly unlikely that they would participate in any major military intervention in the area, given their previous experiences. Besides, the SEATO, unlike the NATO after which it was largely modeled, lacked mechanisms and the organs to make it truly effective. At *The New York Times* editorial noted: “... The Southeast Asian-Southwest Pacific set-up has none of the automatic action provisions of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; the alliance is far looser. None of the member states is really obliged to do anything against aggression against any of them except to ‘consult’ and to ‘act... in accordance with its constitutional processes’ which it would do anyway. Moreover, there is, as yet, no provision for any unified military command, any pooling of strength, the maintenance of standing forces or indeed any military measures whatsoever... The present principal strength of the alliance, in other words, is *political* and *psychological*, and *secondarily economic* [italics added – J. B.]”³⁹⁴ It has to be added that this psychological importance was mainly for the United States. President Eisenhower did not wish to spend more American lives to fight communism than was absolutely necessary, especially if this fight was to take place somewhere on the “periphery” of American interests; on the other hand, he could not afford abandoning containment because he would be immediately attacked as “soft”. The establishment of SEATO, funded largely by Washington but representing a collective, multilateral defensive effort, if only of very limited

³⁹² *Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (Manila Pact); September 8, 1954*. The Avalon Project. Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy. Yale Law School. Available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/usmu003.asp [last access 10.10. 2010].

³⁹³ Cohen, *America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1991*, p. 96. Members of the SEATO were: Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Pakistan, the Philippines and the United States, with South Korea and South Vietnam as associated members.

³⁹⁴ SEATO’s Impact Now Mainly Psychological, *The New York Times*, 12. 9. 1954.

practical use, could help save the American lives while at the same time appeasing the critics at home with some concrete anti-communist initiative.

For the Asian allies, such as Thailand or Pakistan, however, this attitude was a problem. The ambiguous wording of the treaty meant it hardly had any real significance for them. Bangkok and Islamabad felt threatened by the developments in the neighboring countries, and to avert this threat, they expected something more than just phrases such as *fabric of peace and freedom* or *sense of unity*. The problem was also with the fact how the treaty defined and dealt with the potential danger to the individual members. Article IV stated: “1. Each Party recognizes that aggression by means of *armed attack* in the treaty area against any of the Parties or against any State or territory which the Parties by *unanimous agreement* may hereafter designate, would endanger its own peace and safety, and agrees that that it will in that event act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes. Measures taken under this paragraph shall be immediately reported to the Security Council of the United Nations. 2. If, in the opinion of any of the Parties, the inviolability or the integrity of the territory or the sovereignty or political independence of any Party in the treaty area or of any other State or territory to which the provisions of paragraph 1 of this Article from time to time apply is *threatened* in any way *other than by armed attack* or is affected or threatened by any fact or situation which might endanger the peace of the area, the Parties *shall consult* immediately in order to agree on the measures which should be taken for common defense. 3. *It is understood that on action on the territory of any State designated by unanimous agreement under paragraph 1 of this Article or on any territory so designated shall be taken except a the invitation or with the consent of the government concerned* [italics added – J. B.]”³⁹⁵ This clause represented the heart of the problem – while open attack on the territory of member states, and especially Thailand, was unlikely, communist subversion and guerilla attacks from the neighboring countries represented a much more substantial threat. Any action taken to counter such subversion, however, would require unanimous agreement by all the member states and even then the actual measures that would be taken were only vaguely defined. The differences between the member states on the proper response to the communist subversion, especially in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, constituted a major limitation on the organization’s effectiveness from the very beginning.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁵ *Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (Manila Pact)*; September 8, 1954, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/usmu003.asp [last access 10.10. 2010].

³⁹⁶ Neuchterlein, Donald E. Thailand and SEATO: A Ten-Year Appraisal, *Asian Survey*, 1964 (December), vol. 4, no. 12, p. 1175.

The other problem regarding the organization's effectiveness was that SEATO often created a very weak popular response in the states that it was created to protect. Unlike the situation in Europe, where NATO was largely seen as an attempt to protect the American allies and their freedom and independence from the Soviet threat, many people in countries such as Philippines or Thailand saw the SEATO as a way to guarantee American, rather than their own, interests. The fact that by joining SEATO, regimes such as that of Phibun in Thailand were *de facto* further legitimized in American eyes, did little to improve the image of the alliance.³⁹⁷

The fact that the SEATO represented a thinly veiled American attempt to shift more responsibility for the defense of South and Southeast Asia to the local allies of course did not escape Phibun. For the reasons already stated, however, he felt Thailand did not have any other choice but to join the pact and to again demonstrate its loyalty to Washington, which it did for example by offering bases on its territory for the future use of SEATO's military forces³⁹⁸. Instead of bilateral pact with the United States, he expected in return the expansion of aid to Thailand, which was in fact named as one of the key measures to be taken to strengthen the SEATO: "There are four immediate measures and one long-range measure that must be taken if the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty is to prove other than words... (3) The strengthening of Thailand with the United States arms aid and advice must be expedited, and that country bolstered against subversion and an internal coup aided by Communist Thais across the frontier..."³⁹⁹ In this respect Phibun was not to be disappointed.

Already before the SEATO was signed, the Eisenhower Administration had acknowledged the need to expand the aid to Thailand. This expansion was mainly to strengthen the country against communist subversion, to further develop its infrastructure and to prepare it to play a more significant and active role in the defense of the region. For example, in a memorandum prepared for the National Security Council in July 1954, the following objectives were outlined: "...a. The construction of the Saraburi-Ban Phai⁴⁰⁰ highway; b. The improvement of certain air navigation facilities in Thailand and the improvement and construction of air base facilities therein; c. The inclusion of substantially the entire present Thai Army strength under MDAP [Major Defense Acquisition Program – J. B.] for the purpose of creating a reinforced corps of three divisions plus an additional

³⁹⁷ Hook, Spanier, *American Foreign Policy Since World War II*, p. 72.

³⁹⁸ Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, p. 108.

³⁹⁹ SEATO's Impact Now Mainly Psychological, *The New York Times*, 12. 9. 1954.

⁴⁰⁰ This highway was strategically important as it linked Saraburi in Central Thailand with Ban Phai in the Khon Khaen province in Northeastern Thailand, close to the Laotian border. It could thus be used to transport ground troops to intervene in Laos should the situation require it.

independent division and support arms; d. Aid and training in the development of an improved Volunteer Defense Corps; e. Certain assistance to the operating costs and improvement of the Thai Navy; f. The improvement of and assistance in certain intelligence... in Thailand”.⁴⁰¹

The New York Times concurred with the feeling of the Eisenhower Administration that aid to Thailand should be expanded. On 16 July 1954, it wrote: “It was *inevitable* that deteriorating military situation in Indochina should speed up the plans for the strengthening of Thailand. The staff talks that have just been concluded in Washington were devoted, therefore, to details of a new military assistance program whose need had been recognized both in Bangkok and here... Government in Thailand has been and is *strongly anti-Communist*. But militarily, Thailand is *not yet strong enough* to be a bridgehead that can be held against a southward and westward communist advance [from Laos and Cambodia – J. B.]. The need for our help, therefore, is *plain*. Fortunately, we are dealing with a *people* and a *Government* to which it can be given with *confidence* [italics added – J. B.]”⁴⁰² The American aid to Thailand was now presented as something inevitable, implying that without such an aid, Thailand was ready to fall to the Communists at any given time. While such statements were sometimes made by Administration officials, who saw the provision of funds as a better way to fight communism than committing American troops, the influence and impact of the propaganda of Phibun’s regime on American thinking cannot also be ignored.

The aid did arrive. In 1954, the United States provided a USD 13.6 million loan to build the highway (later called the “Friendship Highway”) between Bangkok and Nakhon Ratchasima (also known as Korat); further loans were provided for the development and expansion of airports in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Nakhon Ratchasima, Phitsanulok, Udon Thani and other places⁴⁰³. While the American motivation for financing such projects was mainly to bolster Thailand’s defense capabilities, the nature of these construction works made it possible to present them as investments to “improve people’s lives”. In addition, the military grants, provided to Thailand to build up its army and police force, began to grow yet again.

It could seem, based on the quotations and facts stated above, that the rationale of the need to help Thailand, and other Southeast Asian states, was widely accepted and supported in the United States in the early 1950s. While that was in general the case, there were some doubts about the effectiveness and meaningfulness of this aid from the very beginning. The

⁴⁰¹ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952–1954*. Volume XII. East Asia and the Pacific (in two parts). Part 2. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1987, pp. 729–730.

⁴⁰² Strengthening Thailand, *The New York Times*, 16. 7. 1954.

⁴⁰³ Vimol Bhonghibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 105.

criticism of the aid fell into several categories: how the aid was spent, whether it had any effect at all on the defensibility of Thailand and, last but not least, what impact it had on the political situation in the country.

IV.1.B.3. The American Aid: Criticism of Its Justification and Distribution

As already explained, the main American objective behind providing help to Thailand was to make the country less vulnerable to the communist threat, both internal and external. Thus, while building up Thai military capabilities was one of the top priorities, it could not be the only priority – in what would much later be called “winning the hearts and minds” of the population, the American government also tried to convince the Thai people of the benefits of rejecting communism and embracing the western style of life. When referring to population here, it has to be realized that in the early 1950s, the majority of the Thai people still lived in rural areas. It was thus these farmers that the aid should have logically focused on. If their situation did not improve, the supporters of the aid argued, the farmers could look up to the communist movement as an alternative – something that was already happening in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. In addition to the already mentioned transportation projects, which should have improved the access of the farmers to the cities, and thus markets, a special program was funded by the United States to improve rice cultivation⁴⁰⁴ as well as to improve other agricultural techniques and eradicate certain diseases, notably malaria. While the actual results of some of these programs were quite encouraging, it was sometimes questioned whether the rationale behind them was valid or not.

What was the actual attitude of the farmers towards communism, the Phibun government and how did they see their political and socio-economic situation in general? The Cornell University conducted a field research study in 1948 and 1949 in a Thai village of Bang Chan to answer precisely this question. The results of this survey showed that while the farmers were discontent with the central government and its performance, they exhibited no apparent pro-communist leanings. Their major complaints were related to the fact that the government was not too attentive to their needs and that the local authorities were not as effective as they should have been. The research found that “Bang Chan favors the incumbent Pibul [Phibun – J. B.] regime over the other possible contenders, while at the same time earnestly condemning (and often exaggerating) the inflation-bred theft, the widespread bureaucratic inefficiency and cynicism, and the arbitrary police actions of the government.

⁴⁰⁴ Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 93.

The stock of Pibul's [Phibun's – J. B.] chief rival, Nai Pridi [Pridi Phanomyong – J. B.], is at low ebb, not only for his alleged role in the futile and bloody 1949 coup, but also because of the wide acceptance of the regime's allegation that he was somehow involved in the mysterious shooting of King Ananda... China and the USSR are blanks, although there is an awareness of the revolution in the former. 'Communism' to all but two or three villagers [out of approximately 1600 – J. B.] is a meaningless bad word, heard constantly these days over the government radio..."⁴⁰⁵ In other words, the farmers were not victims of massive communist propaganda and were seemingly barely aware of its existence. They had no intention to topple the government, but they felt that the Bangkok authorities were not doing enough for them. The problem was not so much in expanding the aid, although it could certainly be helpful, but largely in its distribution. As the author of the study concluded: "These rural Thai, who represent the future as well as the present, have started upon a new and irreversible way, having been stirred particularly during the past decade by the varied and often intangible influences of modernization. Yet they have not been reached by international, national, or any other agencies with an effective program of economic and political development."⁴⁰⁶ The reason for this was not necessarily that the aid was not available, but that the government was not doing a particularly good job in getting it to the farmers. Another problem, of course, was corruption – the leading figures of the Phibun government embezzled much of the funds from the United States⁴⁰⁷ or used them to strengthen their own political standing and to build a supporter base. Although the situation of the farmers was slowly improving throughout the 1950s, it was still not an improvement equivalent to the amounts of money that were being spent.

The findings of the Cornell University regarding the limited influence of communism in Thai countryside and society in general were shared by other experts and researchers. At about the same time, two American scholars, Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, published their work titled *The Left Wing in Southeast Asia*, in which they stated, among other things, that in Thailand, compared to the neighboring countries, the communist party was absolutely powerless and the number of its adherents and supporters (including those in the Chinese community) numbered in hundreds rather than thousands⁴⁰⁸. Even at the height of the Indochina crisis, in 1954, when Phibun's propaganda and the use of the siege mentality tactics

⁴⁰⁵ Sharp, Lauriston. Peasants and Politics in Thailand, *Far Eastern Survey*, 1950 (September), vol. 19, no 15, p. 160.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 161.

⁴⁰⁷ Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 262.

⁴⁰⁸ Thompson, Virginia and Richard Adloff. *The Left Wing in Southeast Asia*. New York: William Sloane Associates, 1950, pp. 50–59.

were at its highest, the American experts and even some government officials tacitly acknowledged that the communist danger in Thailand was exaggerated. For example, in November 1954 John Kerry King wrote: "... The greatest potential threat to the security of Thailand has its roots in Communist China... In Thailand, control of the military and police forces is the basis of political strength, and Communist efforts to win them over may be expected to increase. But there are other groups or institutions in Thailand which may be especially inviting targets... the Buddhist priesthood, the masses, and the bureaucracy... The Thai people are often said to be noted for their general political apathy. Thailand possesses a number of political and economic characteristics which render the Thai population *less vulnerable to Communism* than is the case with populations in some neighboring countries... The usual bases for the popular appeal of Communism common in Southeast Asia *are not found* in Thailand... [italics added – J. B.]".⁴⁰⁹ At approximately the same time, the Department of State in its *National Intelligence Estimate* on Thailand reached virtually the same conclusion: "Thailand is relatively stable politically, with power closely held by top military and police leaders. Although inefficiency and corruption limit governmental effectiveness the Communist movement is *weak* and *no undercurrents of serious unrest or dissatisfaction* are apparent in the population. Thailand's future stability and orientation will be largely determined by external developments... [italics added – J. B.]".⁴¹⁰ In short, throughout the 1950s there were occasional reminders, even from American government officials, that the danger of communism, especially from an internal subversion or insurgency, was not as grave as Thai government would have had the United States believe. The threat of external aggression of course could not be ruled out, but this threat in itself was not imminent and was definitely not strong enough to justify the political repression in Thailand.

And yet, the Truman and later Eisenhower Administrations did not seem to take these considerations into account. In November 1951, the Phibun government staged another coup, later known as the Radio Coup or Silent Coup⁴¹¹. Its main goal was to further curb political freedom of the country and concentrate even more power in the hands of the ruling military junta. The parliament, which had officially existed until then, was dissolved and the constitution was suspended. The true reasons that lead the military to carry out this move were obvious – Phibun and his allies wanted to make sure that even the slightest opposition to their rule was quashed and silenced. This must have been obvious not only to most people in

⁴⁰⁹ King, John Kerry. Thailand's Bureaucracy and the Threat of Communist Subversion, *Far Eastern Survey*, 1954 (November), vol. 23, no. 11, pp. 169–171.

⁴¹⁰ USDS, *FRUS 1952–1954 XII*, p. 741.

⁴¹¹ More on this coup in the following subsection of this chapter.

Thailand, but to the Truman Administration and observers in Washington as well. Yet, when announcing these changes to the Thai people on radio, it was stated by the government that communists were infiltrating the parliament and even the government itself (!) and that the only solution to this problem was the suspension of the constitution and the dissolution of the parliament⁴¹² – a somewhat absurd and unbelievable argument by 1951, given the previous political development in the country and the purges in the government sector and political life.

In November 1952, the government passed the *Anti-Communist Activities Act*, which further suppressed certain political freedoms in Thailand. The act made membership of the Communist Party of Thailand illegal and set strict penalties for supporting the party and even for attending its meetings. Some of the provisions of the law were very broad, for example section 5 stated: “Whoever incites, advises, encourages, conducts a propaganda, holds any secret meeting, joins any association, allows, enters into any agreement with others or makes any preparation with an intent to carry on Communist activities or knowingly of any commission of offence against this Act, present or future, assist in keeping it secret shall be punished with imprisonment from five to ten years.”⁴¹³ The “Communist activities” were defined as follows: “(a) The overthrow of the democratic form of government with the King as the Head of State or (b) The changing of the national economic system whereby private ownership or means of production is expropriated to the State by forfeiture or otherwise without payment of just compensation, or (c) Any act of intimidation, sabotage or deceitful means such as to foment hatred among members of the public if calculated to enforce, assist, support or prosecute the object described in (a) or (b)”⁴¹⁴. It was rather paradoxical, in a way, because according to this definition, the Phibun government itself was guilty of communist activity, since it overthrew a democratically elected government in 1947. The need for the adoption of the bill was again justified in the usual way. *The New York Times* quoted the Thai police chief, Phao Sryianond, who stated that the bill was necessary because “...plotters had planned to seize control of the country at the end of this year [1952 – J. B.] after forcing the King to abdicate or killing him in case of refusal... Russia and Communist China were involved in the plot which... had been hatched recently in Peiping [Beijing – J. B.] when delegates of the Southeast Asian countries had decided at a conference that the time was ripe

⁴¹² Pla Thong. *Phak kanmuang thai* [Thai Political Parties]. Bangkok: Kaona Press, 1965, p. 190.

⁴¹³ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thai Politics, 1932–1957*, p. 820.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 819–820.

for a coup here... Soviet Russia had been ready to recognize the new regime and possibly give air support during the coup attempt...”⁴¹⁵

Such allegations, especially regarding the possible direct Soviet intervention, were incredulous even in the early 1950s. The Communist Party of Thailand was nowhere near as strong to succeed against the Thai military and police force and its infiltration of the army and police ranks was minimal. The adoption of the *Anti-Communist Activities Act* was at best redundant. Yet, for some of the hardliners in American foreign service, it was still not enough. The American ambassador in Thailand Stanton exemplified this view. When informing his superiors about a wave of arrests of suspected communist in November 1952, he remarked that these arrests were “a blow” for the “real left-wing” and “pro-Commies” elements in Thailand and stated that this might have been “... first *important* instance of *genuine strong anti-Commie program* after four years of *hollow promises* [italics added – J. B.]”⁴¹⁶ The arguments that there was a real danger of communist takeover in Thailand and that the government was adopting the restrictive measures primarily to counter this danger were clearly accepted in Washington, despite the contrary evidence mentioned in the previous pages. One of the reasons might have been the anti-communist hysteria which erupted in the United States and which was best illustrated by McCarthyism and the allegations about communist infiltration of American government, public sector and virtually every segment of American society. In such an atmosphere, it was quite hard to publicly state that the communist danger anywhere was exaggerated or basically made up – people who tried to make such arguments were often sidelined, or even openly accused of pro-Communist sympathies. After “losing China”, nobody wanted to be accused of assisting in “losing Thailand” or any other country. Some experts thus tried to find a compromise, the “middle road” between the two conflicting interests: desire not to ruin one’s carrier and intellectual honesty.

An illustration of this approach might be, for example, John Kerry King, quoted on the previous pages. Even though he stated that the danger of communist takeover in Thailand was nowhere near imminent, he also warned that the communist threat did exist and that it should not be underestimated. King, however, also made another important point which somehow undermined the assertions about the determining influence of American aid on the future of Thailand. In his article, he wrote: “...the contribution which the United States can make to Thailand’s preparation to meet intensified Communist efforts of infiltration and subversion

⁴¹⁵ Stiff Anti-Red Bill Adopted in Thailand, *The New York Times*, 14. 11. 1952.

⁴¹⁶ USDS, *FRUS 1952–1954 XII*, pp. 655–656.

can be at *most marginal*. The *initiative* and *substantive measures* must come from the Thai people and government⁴¹⁷. In other words, no matter how much American money was poured into Thailand, it was the Thai government and the Thai people who had to exhibit the willingness to fight communism. The United States could help in this effort, but it could not secure its successful outcome.

Such a conclusion was not unusual. Even the authors⁴¹⁸ of the *National Intelligence Estimate*, who supported continued expansion of American aid to Thailand, had to admit that: “Thailand’s security forces are adequate for maintaining internal security under present conditions [December 1954 – J. B.]. Even with *a large increase* in foreign financial and technical assistance, Thailand *will not be able* to develop security forces adequate to *discourage* a major Communist invasion or to *delay* more than briefly such an invasion if launched... We believe that during the next few years the Communists are unlikely openly to invade Thailand with Chinese Communist or other identifiable Communist forces...”⁴¹⁹ The importance of the aid, according to these experts, lay in countering the infiltration by communist agents and the incursions of communist guerillas from the neighboring countries.

If the pieces of information were put together, the rationale behind the increase of military and technical aid to Thailand was barely justified. From purely military perspective, no matter how much aid was provided to the country, it would not withstand an open communist attack, at least not without direct American military intervention. In this respect, although it can not be quite called a parallel, the situation was similar to that of 1941, when Thailand faced the threat of Japanese invasion, with even the same prime minister, Marshal Phibunsongkhram, in charge of the country. While at that time, the United States refrained from aiding Thailand, now it decided the aid was justified even though in both cases, Thailand would be lost if attacked. The argument about countering the communist subversion sounded logical, but the question remained how much of a threat this communist subversion really was. While there certainly existed a danger of communist incursions from Laos or Cambodia, the communist movements there were mainly interested in controlling their own countries, not in invading Thailand. Besides, given the inherent conservatism of the Thai society in general, its intrinsic immunity against communism, and the limited influence of communism, which many western observers noted, the chances of a successful armed insurgence or

⁴¹⁷ Kerry, *Thailand’s Bureaucracy*, p. 173.

⁴¹⁸ Since these were experts from the CIA, the Army, Navy, Air Force and The Joint Chiefs of Staff, it can be assumed that their estimates were relatively accurate and based on concrete information.

⁴¹⁹ USDS, *FRUS 1952–1954 XII*, pp. 741–742.

subversion, not to mention a successful coup against the Phibun government, appeared extremely slim.

In addition to these arguments against the expansion of the aid, there was one other argument – how was the aid actually being spent? It was already mentioned that corruption was rampant and that many times the money intended for certain purposes never made it to the designated recipients. There were other problems as well. In a report dated 12 August 1952, Assistant Director for Program Office of the Director of Mutual Security John H. Ohly, summed up his views on the aid: “... I have for a long time had considerable doubts concerning (a) the precise objectives of, (b) the wisdom of maintaining, and particularly, (c) the wisdom of maintaining at such high levels, the military assistance program for Thailand [this was even before the expansion of the aid by the Eisenhower Administration – J. B.]. Recent reports to the effect that arms were being delivered from Thailand to the Karens [an ethnic group in Burma fighting the government – J. B.] in exchange for wolfram and that certain Thai military authorities were in touch with Chinese Communists in Hong Kong, together with the recurrent participation over the past two years of the several Thai services in military coups in support of different political factions, have strengthened these doubts at least to the point of believing that we should make a thorough reassessment of the purpose of this program and desirability, and if so, at what level, of continuing this program in FY 1953 and FY 1954.”⁴²⁰

Ohly’s grievances were, at least to a degree, justified. Certain Thai officials did maintain contact with the People’s Republic of China, and Phibun’s anti-Chinese policy was not well accepted in some quarters. That weapons were sold to ethnic minorities in Burma was also very likely, given the animosity between Bangkok and Rangoon and the desire to support “anti-communist” organizations in Burma. While these reasons were probably not convincing enough to lead to the abandonment of the aid program as such, they could have triggered at least a debate about control mechanisms regarding the actual use of the aid. Instead, Ohly’s remarks were abruptly dismissed as “unconfirmed reports”⁴²¹. It seemed that if there were any doubts, and there certainly were, the government did not want to hear too much about them and came to see those who doubted as troublemakers. As a result, the flow of aid continued pretty much undisturbed throughout the time Phibun was in office and even after his fall in 1957.

⁴²⁰ USDS, *FRUS 1952–1954 XII*, p. 649.

⁴²¹ *Ibid*, p. 650.

IV.2. A “Democracy-loving Dictator”? Constructing and Deconstructing the Image of Thailand in the United States during the Phibun Years

So far, the domestic political situation in Thailand has only been mentioned in relation to the foreign policy of the country, especially to its strong anti-Communist stance. There is one other dimension, however, that ought to be discussed when analyzing the American-Thai relationship during the Phibun years and beyond.

As stated previously, Thailand was viewed, in the early 1930s and again in the immediate post-World War II years, as a liberal, although fledgling, democracy, a model country which could show the way to the newly liberated Asian nations. This view, shared by many American scholars and government officials, was somewhat inaccurate, as it reflected both the actual political changes in the country and also the American interpretations of these changes and idealized unrealistic outcomes they could have. Yet, the events of 1947 and 1948, when the liberal government was overthrown and Marshal Phibun Songkhram came back to power, had definitely shattered this image of Thailand. While it could be argued that with the Cold War gaining momentum, the American emphasis on democracy was gradually giving way to an emphasis on anti-Communism, it was still rather difficult for Washington to accept an authoritarian regime as an ally. In case of Thailand this was made even more difficult by Phibun Songkhram’s past, his pre-war attempts to make himself a dictator and his collaboration with Japan. The Marshal was no doubt aware of this. While he tried to win the American favor by posing as a strident anti-Communist, he, rather paradoxically, tried to appear as a “democrat” as well. He realized that by doing this, he could, if nothing else, make it easier for the Truman and later Eisenhower Administrations to defend their support for his regime. It could also help him to mollify possible opposition from the Thai people, who in the post-war years had gotten used to a certain measure of political freedom and could protest when that freedom was being taken away. The following chapter will discuss some of the attempts Phibun’s government made to look more liberal and democratic and analyze how the attempts were received in the United States.

IV.2.A. “A Façade of Democracy”: The Phibun Government, 1948–1957

After taking power in April 1948, Phibun declared that “the Siamese people can remove him from office whenever they want to do so”⁴²². He also denied that he had plans to become a dictator and instead claimed that he would leave his post of prime minister if he

⁴²² Siam Premier to Follow People’s Will, *The Washington Post*, 12. 4. 1948.

failed “to lower the cost of living, if the people do not want him or if the military ask him to resign”⁴²³. This statement was designed to make it appear as if Phibun returned because *the people* wanted him to return and not because he staged a military coup to remove a properly elected government. The claim about leaving office in case of losing popular support was also a lie – public opinion played little importance during the Phibun government until the very last year in 1957. The only part of the statement which could be considered relevant was that about his need for the support of the military – indeed, without this support he would not have become prime minister in the first place and he needed to maintain it to stay in power. That meant that he had to allow the army and police to make the important decisions while still preserving some of the democratic institutions to substantiate his claims about the nature of his government.

The original idea that Phibun might have in 1948 was that the Parliament, while remaining in existence, would transform into a forum which would only approve the decisions and steps taken by the government without challenging them. In this way, multiparty system would be preserved but it would remain only an empty shell as any real opposition to the government would be silenced. The constitution would remain in place, but would be subordinate to the government⁴²⁴. The King, whose person and interests the military claimed to protect, would be the ceremonial head of the country and a symbol of unity of the Thai people, but his role would be very limited when it came to politics or even engagement with the public – in fact, the relationship between Phibun and the court was rather strained for all his time in office with the prime minister trying to occupy the place in the spotlight⁴²⁵.

Not everything went as smoothly as Phibun had expected, however. For one, his government had to deal with the already mentioned abortive coups in October 1948 and in February 1949. These coups had shown Phibun clearly that his position was not impenetrable and that he needed to focus on concentrating power. These coups had also emboldened the Democrat Party, which by now remained as the major political opposition to Phibun’s regime and which still controlled both houses of the Parliament. Even though he was forced to resign as prime minister, Khuang continued his work on the drafting of a new constitution and this constitution was finally ratified and promulgated in March 1949⁴²⁶. The document, which reflected Khuang’s royalist sentiments and his mistrust of the military, strengthened the role of the King and of the Parliament. What was the greatest complication for Phibun and the

⁴²³ Siam Premier to Follow People’s Will, *The Washington Post*, 12. 4. 1948.

⁴²⁴ Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 256.

⁴²⁵ See for example: Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, pp. 66–68.

⁴²⁶ For full text of the constitution, see: Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thai Politics 1932–1957*, pp. 822–858.

military, however, was probably Section 93 which stated: “A person under any of the following disabilities may not stand for an election... (5) being a permanent Government official; (6) Having served as a permanent Government official and a period of one year has not expired from the day of retirement to the day of election, excluding persons placed under the compulsory service by provisions of law.”⁴²⁷ The term “permanent government official” included any military or police officers, meaning that Phibun could not just simply get his allies from these forces elected into the House of Representatives and thus control it more easily. Since the Senate was by provisions of the new constitution appointed by the King (section 82), whose relationship with Phibun was strained, it could be expected that even the upper house of the Parliament could create further problems for the government. It was rather surprising then that the promulgation of the new constitution was in general ignored by the Truman Administration and the American media. It was an indication of the ebbing American interest in the political development inside Thailand and of accepting Phibun’s return. Although American support for the constitution would most have likely produced no tangible results as far as the democratization of the country was concerned, once more, purely from the psychological point, the United States missed a chance to voice its concern about democracy in Thailand.

At the same time when the constitution was promulgated, Phibun intensified his campaign against the real and alleged opposition to his rule. The abortive coup in February had given Phibun the pretext he needed to get rid of anyone who could be even distantly connected to the plotters and who could potentially pose a threat. In the following weeks, a number of former government officials and politicians⁴²⁸ were arrested, some of them killed by police, allegedly while trying to escape – Phao Sryianond as the chief of police doing the dirty work for Phibun. Censorship was instituted which made it difficult to openly criticize the government⁴²⁹. At that particular moment, with the repressions and intimidation in full swing, the constitution seemed to be a direct attack against the military power by Khuang and the Democrat Party. Even though the enforcement of the constitution would have been extremely

⁴²⁷ The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1949, Part 3. The House of Representatives, Section 93. In: Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thai Politics 1932–1957*, p. 838.

⁴²⁸ These included, among others, the Mayor of Bangkok, former minister of finance and former minister of industry, American media were covering these arrests, but withheld comments on their true nature and on the probability that all those arrested were really plotting to overthrow the government – only in some cases it was noted that many of the arrested were members of the *Seri Thai* and were active in the underground movement during World War II. See for example: Bangkok Mayor Jailed, *The New York Times*, 3. 3. 1949; Four Ex-leaders of Siam Slain While under Arrest, *The New York Times*, 5. 3. 1949.

⁴²⁹ Even the major English newspaper in the country, *Bangkok Post* (owned by an American, Alexander MacDonald, had problems in the beginning with obtaining the permission to publish although this problem was soon resolved. Censors Delay Bangkok Paper, *The New York Times*, 12. 3. 1949.

difficult for the Democrats given the backing of the government by the military and police, Phibun did not dare to openly challenge the opposition and discard the constitution – instead he sought to manipulate the existing political system and to ensure that the remaining vestiges of democracy, now entrenched by the new constitution, would actually lose their meaning. For this reason, an organization called *Sahaphak* (United Front) was created, which brought together the parties that supported the government. In exchange for this support, these parties were granted a certain number of ministerial positions in the cabinet. This move helped ensure that the elections played only a minor role in the creation of governments. For example, in June 1949, by-elections were held for the House of Representatives. Again, despite the propaganda of pro-government parties, the Democrats managed to win. Khuang's party won 40 seats, the Prachachon Party 31 seats, the Issara Party 14 seats, the independents 24 seats, while the Thammathipat Party, which officially supported Phibun, gained only 12 seats. In the new government, however, the Democrats were only offered two positions, while the Thammathipat Party took five⁴³⁰. Phibun was reappointed prime minister, in what *The New York Times* very fittingly called “a routine Government shift”⁴³¹.

The military was still not satisfied with the political situation, however. Even though it regained much of its power and prestige, and in many ways actually ran the country, it still had to deal with the Parliament and political opposition. Phibun's tactic, which could be compared to a slow peeling of an orange and which gradually stripped Thailand of its political freedom, was considered to be too slow by many military hardliners. As a result, in November 1951, the military carried out another coup, the so-called *Radio* or *Silent Coup*. While officially the coup was justified by the need to avert the communist danger, its true purpose was to suspend the constitution and clip the influence of the Democrat Party and political opposition as such. Following the coup, the constitution of 1949 was replaced by the 1932 version, which was far less liberal, and political parties were banned to run in the elections – only individuals could now contest seats in the House, which favored pro-government candidates who received financial support from Phibun and the army. The restriction on military officers running for seats in the Parliament was also dropped.

This time, the American media reacted critically to these developments. *The New York Times*, while assessing the coup and its impacts, wrote: “Recent political developments in Thailand are viewed with considerable misgiving by analysts of the affairs in that country...

⁴³⁰ Samut Surakhaka, *26 Kanpattiwat thai lae rathaprahan 2089–2507* [26 Revolutions and Coups d'etat in Thailand, 1546–1964], p. 498.

⁴³¹ Thailand Premier Reappointed, *The New York Times*, 26. 6. 1949.

Thailand is now under virtual military rule. The liberal 1948 [1949 – J. B.] Constitution has been replaced by the 1932 Constitution, which restricts royal prerogatives and facilitates the curtailment of the press and political freedoms and authoritarian control... The coup group has pledged a more vigorous policy against internal communism, but some observers fear that new regime may breed rather than check communism by squelching genuine democratic opposition and running a corrupt and oppressive government. The internal Communist threat is not considered grave in Thailand... But the life of the Thai masses goes on without much disturbance, and barring inter-service strife⁴³² Thailand's new Government may turn out to be no worse than its predecessors. Indeed, some Thais see the possibility of a stronger and more effective administration."⁴³³

It did not escape notice of the American observers that Phibun's position was weakened by the November coup. That Marshal's influence slowly weakened was already evident from the previously mentioned Manhattan incident of June 1951. The question to be answered now remained how much influence Phibun still wielded and what the Thai foreign policy would be were he removed from power. Different opinions appeared regarding this issue. *The Washington Post* saw the events of November 1951 essentially as a coup against Phibun: "A group of generals and admirals overthrew Premier Pibul Songgram [Phibunsongkhram – J. B.] yesterday, only to restore him to power a few hours later at the head of a new anti-Communist regime. Leaders of the Thai army, navy, air and police forces announced yesterday that Pibul [Phibun – J. B.]... had been deposed because 'he failed to suppress communism and corruption'... It was the second time in less than six months that military rebels had risen against Pibul [Phibun – J. B.]..."⁴³⁴ This view, however, was rather inaccurate as it compared a genuine effort to remove Phibun (the Manhattan Rebellion) with a move by the army to consolidate power, which Phibun was informed of beforehand. *The New York Times* offered a much more precise evaluation of Phibun's actual standing: "Marshal Pibul's [Phibun's – J. B.] status in the new regime is ambiguous... The one-time dictator of pre-Japanese war days is known to have opposed the Nov. 29 coup when it was in the planning stage and to have agreed reluctantly to participate in the new Government following the coup. It appears likely that his power at present is limited and that he is dominated by the coup group... However, the coup group needs Marshal Pibul's [Phibun's – J. B.] international

⁴³² Between the army and the police as well as among various branches of the military.

⁴³³ Rule of Thailand in Military Hands, *The New York Times*, 11. 12. 1951.

⁴³⁴ Thai Premier Is Overthrown, Restored in Military Coup, *The Washington Post*, 30. 11. 1951.

and domestic prestige and his practiced ability at balancing off political elements and mediating political squabbles...”⁴³⁵

Especially the last sentence quoted above is telling. The coup group might have been unhappy with Phibun’s apparent inability to deal with the Democrat Party and with the Parliament. On the other hand, they needed the Marshal who acted as a mediator between different factions in the army and police force and who, perhaps even more importantly, represented a vital asset for the relationship with the United States. No other leader of the military or police could at this particular moment replace Phibun with his charisma and experience, and the coup group might have been afraid that if Phibun was removed, the American aid could be curtailed or temporarily stopped.

For the State Department and the Truman Administration as such, the important thing about the November coup was how the Thai foreign policy would be affected and whether the Thai leadership would remain committed to its anti-Communism. While, like the American media, the administration officials might have shared the misgivings about the undemocratic nature of the political changes in Thailand, the main issue that was discussed was the future of Phibun and the relationship with the US. In one of the earliest analyses of the coup written on November 30, the American chargé in Bangkok Turner cabled the Department of State: “... 6. Foreign relations. Govt [government – J. B.] announced Coup [is – J. B.] *purely internal* and foreign policy will remain *unchanged*. Probably true inasmuch as mil [military – J. B.] leaders desire *foreign recognition* and *continuance US aid*. First impression [is that the – J. B.] new govt under Coup party [coup group – J. B.] less stable than previous, however, [it is – J. B.] necessary *not to underestimate* Phibun’s political acumen [italics added – J. B.]”⁴³⁶. Turner and many others did not even consider the possibility that American aid to Thailand should be suspended or limited because of the trampling of democracy – the watchword of the day was now “stability” rather than “democracy”. When the Director of the Office of Northeast Asian Affairs, Cyrus Peake, suggested that the United States should step in to defend democracy in Thailand, he was rebuffed in the following terms by the Director of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs Lacy: “...As far as Thailand is concerned, the Government *has always been authoritarian*... Even though Thailand had developed a *certain amount of democratic equipment* during the past twenty years, it has not yet *learned to use it in a democratic way* and *apparently prefers* a more authoritarian form of Government... Those forces that brought about the changes were also those who have been in charge of the government since 1947

⁴³⁵ Rule of Thailand in Military Hands, *The New York Times*, 11. 12. 1951.

⁴³⁶ USDS, *FRUS 1951*, p. 1640.

without interruption. Furthermore, they are the very elements which have identified themselves in purpose with the free nations of the world opposing Communism... It is expected that very shortly the Thai Government will take a stronger and public stand against Communism and will enact anti-Communist legislation while reaffirming its intention to fight with the free world against Communists [italics added – J. B].”⁴³⁷

While Lacy’s assessment was to a degree correct, it betrayed a certain lack of interest, or perhaps resignation, concerning the state of democracy in Thailand, which was perhaps shared by more and more officials in the Truman Administration.

Despite these undemocratic changes, the Marshal still tried to maintain the façade of democracy, although very few Thais or foreign observers could believe his proclamations. The events of November 1951, a *de facto* coup, were presented in a more favorable light – as a way to prevent the country from becoming communist and as a way to protect the traditional aspects of the Thai society. The measures adopted were claimed to be only temporary. In April 1952, for example, when Phibun had to defend the military government against criticism, he “asked for patience regarding Thailand’s democracy. He said the process of establishing democracy had taken generations in other countries, even in Britain.”⁴³⁸ While it could easily be seen that the army and police were in fact dismantling democracy, Phibun blamed the politicians, especially the Democrat Party. And, symptomatically for such cases, the argument that the Thai people were not ready for democracy was often used to justify the government’s actions. The American Ambassador Stanton later wrote in his book about a meeting he had with the Marshal in the spring of 1952. When he confronted him with what had taken place in the country, Phibun argued “that the country was not yet ready for *full democratic* government and that some of the *elected* members of the Lower House had been *obstructive*. [Phibun and his friends – J. B.] professed to be supporters of democracy but asserted that dangers surrounding the country called for a strong leadership.”⁴³⁹ It is perhaps interesting to note that democracy was put in contraposition to strong, i.e. effective, leadership. This view was by no means unusual but it was rather ironic that Phibun at the same time claimed the United States, a democratic state, to be the strongest nation in the world and the bulwark of the struggle against communism...

⁴³⁷ USDS, *FRUS 1951*, pp. 1641–1642. The stronger anti-Communist stance and anti-Communist legislation came less than a year later, as discussed in the previous chapter.

⁴³⁸ It was rather interesting, or perhaps telling, that the Marshal mentioned Great Britain in this respect. Had he mentioned the United States, his argumentation would immediately appear rather hollow. Thailand’s Regime Shows Its Defects, *The New York Times*, 6. 4. 1952.

⁴³⁹ Stanton, *Brief Authority*, p. 270.

As was already mentioned, after the coup of 1951, the Marshal's position grew somewhat weaker and he was no doubt aware of it. The role of the armed forces further increased – there were only four civilians in the new government and many of the new members of the Parliament were also military or police officers.⁴⁴⁰ The branching of the military into politics was viewed rather negatively by the United States, although its primary concern, as we have already seen, was not always the fate of Thai democracy. The American military officials were rather concerned about the fact that too many army officers were getting involved in politics, thus devoting less attention to military matters and to the expansion of Thai defense capabilities. The Chief of the Joint Military Mission to Thailand Gillmore summed up these deliberations in his September 1953 memorandum to the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "... a. The Thai armed forces at present have a low overall effectiveness... 5. The present government of Thailand is completely controlled by a group of military officers who seized control of the government in 1947. This group holds all the principal positions within the Army, Navy and Air Force. In order to ensure their retention of control of the civilian government these same military officers have in all cases assumed civilian responsibilities which include cabinet positions. In addition, these persons have used their position of power to assume many and varied commercial interests to enhance their financial status. 6. *The end result* is that the principal military commanders and their staffs *can devote but a small portion* of their time and energy *solely to the military situation*. Further, they are reluctant to delegate any authority for fear the delegation will result in usurpation. *This state of affairs constitutes one of the greatest obstacles to creating an efficient military establishment in Thailand* [italics added – J. B.]."⁴⁴¹

Thus, it could be seen that the primary American concern was to make the Thai government and military establishment as efficient as possible. This was hardly surprising given the overall American priorities in the area and the ever increasing amount of financial aid pouring to Thailand. In addition to the above-mentioned worries about the preoccupation of Thai military officers by the politics rather than military issues, there was the continuing strife between the various branches of the armed forces and especially between the police and army, represented by Phao Sryianond and Sarit Thanarat, respectively. Both of these men tried, in a way, to ingratiate themselves with the United States, as they could possibly hope to replace Phibun one day. While Sarit worked on modernizing and "Americizing" the Thai army and on fostering strong relations with his American counterparts, Phao relied on the

⁴⁴⁰ Thailand's Regime Shows Its Defects, *The New York Times*, 6. 4. 1952.

⁴⁴¹ USDS, *FRUS 1952-1954 XII*, pp. 692-693.

anti-communist campaigns and on his image of a conservative.⁴⁴² Neither of these two, however, were seen at the moment as ideal Thai leaders by the US. Phao was too corrupt and the excesses of his police force in eliminating political opponents and manipulating elections were too widely known. Sarit, on the other hand, was even less of a democracy-loving leader than Phibun and could hardly provide the much-needed façade for the government. He was known to have claimed on several occasions that western democracy was not proper for Thailand and he advocated the return to the political model of the early Thai Sukhothai kingdom.⁴⁴³ Neither of these two possessed the flair and charisma of Phibun and could not represent Thailand so well on the international scene. Thus, despite Phibun's weakened position, there were still enough reasons to support him. Not only did he represent the middle ground between Sarit and Phao, but he could also be presented, compared to these two or other hard-line military and police figures, as a "democrat". While virtually all of the leading Thai politicians could at the moment call themselves anti-communist and conservative, which was the basic American requirement of the period, Phibun's self-professed "love of democracy" gave him something of an added value or cutting edge over the others, at least for the time being.

Phibun's continued importance for the United States was well reflected in the American estimate of the political situation in Thailand, which concluded in December 1954 that "...1. Thailand's political strength depends upon strong who control power and not party politics⁴⁴⁴. 2. The present Thai government depends principally on the personal power and influence of three men: Prime Minister Phibun Songgram, General Srisdi [Sarit Thanarat – J. B.] and General Phao... 4. The Prime Minister *is not a helpless puppet in the hands of his military supporters* as has been alleged continually since 1940, but *is in real control* and with his followers form a *political team* [italics added – J. B.]."⁴⁴⁵ While this estimate is somewhat inaccurate and the extent of Phibun's *real control* over Thailand at this moment could certainly be disputed, it reflected the views of some segments of the Eisenhower Administration and the American military, which above all desired to see a stable Thailand. This was probably also the reason why the authors of the document obviously downplayed the rivalry between Sarit and Phao and stated: "...6. Generals Phao and Srisdi [Sarit Thanarat – J.

⁴⁴² Elliot, David. *Thailand: Origins of Military Rule*. London: Zed Press, 1978, p. 117.

⁴⁴³ This model entailed a strong leader (father, *pho* in Thai) caring for his the people (children, *luk*) and having basically an absolute authority over their lives. Sarit had later tried to apply this model, with some success, during his years in office as the prime minister. Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 94.

⁴⁴⁴ This was a very obvious assumption, given the political development in Thailand since 1932. See previous chapters for more details.

⁴⁴⁵ USDS, *FRUS 1952–1954 XII*, p. 747.

B.] are not implacable enemies waiting to destroy each other to become Prime Minister, but are joint stockholders in most of their ventures, both licit and illicit. 7. There is recognizable competition between Generals Phao and Srisdi [Sarit Thanarat – J. B.] but such business and political vying is natural in their relations and is not self-destructive nor inimical to the stability of the Thai government or its policies toward international Communism.”⁴⁴⁶ Thus, at the moment, Phibun could still count on American support and his role in the government was still seen as vital in Washington.

Phibun, however, was a skilful politician and tactician and realized that in order to remain in power he would have to take active steps to ensure continuing American support. He thus conceived a double-forked plan, which was meant to bolster his image of a “democracy lover” in the eyes of American public and the Eisenhower Administration, while at the same time it could potentially weaken the standing of his main rivals at home by presenting them as “enemies of democracy”. He thus began to duly emphasize the need for Thai people and for himself to study how the government works in the United States and Western Europe and to learn these experiences “first hand”. This was the main rationale for his trip to the United States, which the Thai government had virtually asked for despite initial American objections. The Thai Ambassador to Washington Pote Sarasin explained the reasons for this trip to the Deputy Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Murphy in the following manner: “... the Prime Minister had not been out of Bangkok for twenty-seven years since his student days’ in Paris and ... he felt it necessary to become familiar at first hand with the governments in Asia and Europe with whom he had aligned himself in the United Nations against Communist aggression... the Prime Minister would like to come directly to Washington in early April [1955 – J. B.] for a few days visit and then spend several weeks traveling informally to the principal points of interest in the United States. The Ambassador stated that this travel would be at Thai expense. He [Phibun – J. B.] would subsequently visit friendly Asian and European nations...”⁴⁴⁷ These arguments were hard to refute, and thus, despite the already mentioned American objections to this trip, Murphy had to finally give in: “I said that of course in view of these circumstances we would want to do

⁴⁴⁶ USDS, *FRUS 1952–1954 XII* pp. 747–748. While the authors were correct in stating that the rivalry between Phao and Sarit did not influence Thai anti-communist standing, the rift between the two men was far more serious than presented here and did have its impact on the stability of the government, as was seen clearly in the coming years. On the other hand, it has to be kept in mind that the major objective of this estimate was to conclude whether it was safe for the United States to supply Thai army and police with weapons and the Phao-Sarit rivalry certainly posed no significant threat in this respect.

⁴⁴⁷ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957*. Volume XXII. Southeast Asia. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1989, pp. 807–808.

everything possible to arrange to receive the Prime Minister. In view of the heavy schedule of the President [Dwight Eisenhower – J. B.] and the Secretary of State [John Foster Dulles – J. B.] the matter of timing is important. Under the circumstances, *we have little recourse but to welcome the Prime Minister in view of the reasons given by the Ambassador...* [italics added – J. B.].”⁴⁴⁸

The Department of State had probably realized that the true motivation behind Phibun’s desire to come to Washington lay elsewhere than in studying and learning democracy. Marshal’s primary concern was to remind Washington of his indispensability and to find ways to strengthen his political standing at home. Yet, at the same time, the Eisenhower Administration saw potential benefits in Phibun’s visit, as it could be, if properly presented, used for propaganda purposes. Thus, once more, as in many previous instances in the past, pragmatism on both sides of the relationship contributed to reaching a common ground.

IV.2.A.1. Phibun’s Visit of the United States, “Democratic Reform” and the Fall of the Phibun Government, 1955–1957

Phibun’s visit to the United States in the spring of 1955 had no significant impact on the Thai-American relations. Yet, it is worth mentioning in more detail for two particular reasons. First, Marshal’s rhetoric while in the United States and his presentation of both himself and his country helped the American propagandistic purpose of portraying Thailand as a bastion of democracy in Southeast Asia, an image which for reasons already mentioned was rather hollow and inconsistent with reality. Second, the “reforms” the Marshal had tried to implement as a result of the “experiences” of his trip showed how he tried to use democratic elements for his own political purposes and how this strategy backfired and finally led to his removal in 1957.

For the Marshal personally, the trip could well be considered the apex and the greatest foreign policy success of his post-war career. While in the United States, he was received by President Eisenhower, who “cited his efforts in supporting the United Nations in Korea and in strengthening Thai defensive forces in conferring the Legion of Merit on the Thai leader at a Washington ceremony.”⁴⁴⁹ Phibun was given a chance to speak in both the House and the Senate, where he was especially warmly received by the anti-communist and hard-line

⁴⁴⁸ USDS, *FRUS 1955–1957*, p. 808.

⁴⁴⁹ Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 103. Again, an association with a similar meeting between Eisenhower and Franco comes to mind...

members of the Congress. In a speech before the House and subsequently on the floor of the Senate, he stated that “Thailand had sent soldiers to Korea to fight side by side with the United States and the United Nations against aggression”⁴⁵⁰. The Thai involvement in Korea and the 1950 decision to side with the “free nations” played an important role in Phibun’s portrayal of Thailand. He also told the Senators that “We, in Thailand, are still young in the parliamentary form of government which we have had for only 25 years, but *our love of freedom* is rooted in our history and traditions and *is as strong as the love of liberty* which has made the United States the great Nation it is today... The people of Thailand shall continue to persevere with all their strength and energy in the course we have taken, for we believe *freedom, democracy, and righteousness* will ultimately prevail [italics added – J. B.]”⁴⁵¹ On the occasion of his visit to New York, he stated that “Thailand was dedicated to *democratic world*... We are clear in our minds as to what kind of life we want, just as you are clear in your mind that the American way of life is what you cherish. Let there be no mistake about our intention to belong to the *free democratic nations* [italics added – J. B.]”⁴⁵² In Phibun’s discourse, the words *democratic* and *free* often seemed to complement or even substitute for each other. The image of Thailand as a *free nation* was bolstered not only by its history free of colonial rule, but by the very simple fact that the name *Thailand*, which Phibun himself coined in the 1930s, could be translated as “land of the free”⁴⁵³. The American public, drawing on its own historical experience, could very well associate the term *free* with the term *democratic*, which was perhaps one of the reasons why the two words were used together so often. The fact, however, was that from the Thai historical perspective, the concept of freedom was different than in the West and had no longstanding attachments to democracy.

Despite the obvious inconsistency of Phibun’s proclamations with reality in Thailand, he was presented by the Eisenhower Administration and many other officials as a truly democratic leader, dedicated to the interests of the “free world”. President Eisenhower himself called him a person “who had done so much to stand by our side as all of us attempt to defend *human freedom, dignity, and liberty* in the world... a resourceful and inspiring leader... [italics added – J. B.]”⁴⁵⁴ The Mayor of New York Robert F. Wagner Jr. said that Phibun was a “representative of a nation making its mark as a firm ally against communism...

⁴⁵⁰ House and Senate Hear Thai Premier, *The New York Times*, 5. 5. 1955.

⁴⁵¹ United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*, 23. 5. 1955, vol. XXXII, no. 830, p. 842.

⁴⁵² War Inevitable, Thai Chief Says, *The New York Times*, 11. 5. 1955.

⁴⁵³ The American media did not fail to mention this to the readers, e.g. House and Senate Hear Thai Premier, *The New York Times*, 5. 5. 1955.

⁴⁵⁴ USDS. *DoS Bulletin*, 23. 5. 1955, p. 841.

[his] outspoken friendship for the United States and the United Nations has made him one of us.”⁴⁵⁵ It is rather telling that in the private meeting with the Secretary of State Dulles no mention of democracy or freedom was made and the discussion focused largely on the communist danger to Thailand and Southeast Asia in general and on exchanging courtesies.⁴⁵⁶ The Department of State was well aware of the true nature of Phibun’s regime, but most likely felt indebted to him for his resolute pro-American stance and for his involvement in the Korean War. It was also in American interest to promote the Marshal as a defender of the *free world*, as this portrayal justified his continued support by the United States. For the Marshal, this was a way to prove to his potential rivals at home that he still played an important role in the American plans and that it would not be wise to replace him.

As already mentioned, Phibun had a two pronged plan associated with his trip to the United States and other countries. The first part of this plan, that is, to gain international recognition for his anti-communist efforts, had worked rather well, as seen above. The second part of this plan – implementation of a “democratic” reform in Thailand – had largely failed. While it is beyond the scope and purpose of this paper to analyze in detail the aspect of this “reform” and the reasons for their ultimate failure, and, consequently, Marshal’s removal from office, it would perhaps be of interest to note at least their key elements and the motivation that Phibun had for “democratization”.

Upon his return to Thailand, Phibun decided to opt for a more open style of politics. This entailed, in his view, regular conferences held for the press, a relaxed censorship of the media and even the setting up of what could be called “Thai Hyde Park”, a section of the Sanam Luang area in central Bangkok where people could come and publicly voice their grievances without fear of being arrested.⁴⁵⁷ While these signs might have looked promising, in fact they were Phibun’s attempts to discredit his rivals, especially Phao Sryianond. Phibun had rightly suspected the police general of plotting against him and trying to become prime minister. Phao did indeed have this ambition – in July 1955, for example, he told the American Ambassador to Thailand John E. Peurifoy that “the coup party [Coup Group – J. B.] was very dissatisfied with Phibun... that Thailand should become a *full democracy* which he [Phao] indicated was in line with US objectives... that move of some sort to oust Phibun was imminent and that he [Phao] had a strong backing to remove or replace Phibun [italics

⁴⁵⁵ War Inevitable, Thai Chief Says.

⁴⁵⁶ See the Memorandum of Conversation, Department of State, Washington, May 3, 1955 in USDS, *FRUS 1955–1957*, pp. 821–822.

⁴⁵⁷ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 71.

added – J. B.]”⁴⁵⁸ It was rather ironic that Phao, the man with probably the worst human rights record within the Coup Group, would propose a coup to institute full democracy. Again, it is very interesting, however, to look at the reply of the American Ambassador: “I also said that... I really doubted that he [Phao – J. B.] wanted the burdens of prime ministership and believed he preferred role of king maker to king; that I frankly did not think he was now qualified for job. I *emphasized* that US government supported *present Thai Government* and its *recognized head*; that, while internal politics a Thai affair, if government reconstituted by force US would have to *reconsider* its relationship with Thai Government and that US *strongly supports goal of democracy but coup would be a poor start*; moreover, that Thailand *probably not yet ready for full democracy which should be developed gradually* [italics added – J. B.]”⁴⁵⁹ It was apparent that these remarks about gradual development of democracy were mainly intended to dissuade Phao from taking action against Phibun, who was still seen as a more capable and fitting head of state than the police general. On the other hand, Washington did not wish to antagonize him, as clearly seen from the treatment he received while visiting the United States in August 1955.

Whether Phibun was aware of the intentions of Phao to their full extent is hard to ascertain. It is clear, however, that the main function of “Hyde Park” was for people (many of them actually hired) to attack Phao publicly and further tarnish his image with allegations of corruption and abuse of power. Phao got under pressure for a time, but soon found a way to respond by hiring his own speakers to attack Phibun and as a result, the “Hyde Park” experiment with free speech was abruptly terminated.⁴⁶⁰ The relaxing of the controls on media and reporting about government activities, however limited it was, had given Phibun’s critics a window of opportunity to criticize him and his leadership. This was a trend that Phibun did not foresee and was not able to handle effectively. The situation was made worse by the fact that, ironically, the students who were sent to the United States under the agreements signed by Phibun were now coming back and joining this criticism. One of them, a Fulbright exchange student, had publicly stated: “I came back from America full of ideas and enthusiasm to help my country. But every day I see that nothing is being done except by personal influence and favoritism. Every bit of policy is controlled by the people put into their jobs by political friends, regardless of their ability. They are always making promises but

⁴⁵⁸ USDS, *FRUS 1955–1957*, p. 827.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 827–828.

⁴⁶⁰ Pla Thong, *Phak kanmuang thai* [Thai Political Parties], pp. 223–229.

never fulfill them...’’⁴⁶¹ Phibun’s close alignment with the United States was also coming under criticism, as many Thais considered the costs paid by the country (mainly the abandonment of the traditional balanced foreign policy) outweigh the benefits that this cooperation had so far brought. This criticism was especially poignant when it came to the question of relations with China. Phibun’s Thailand had followed the American line of non-recognition of the Beijing government and this policy was gradually becoming more and more unpopular among Thai educated middle class, especially after the Geneva Conference.⁴⁶² Phibun’s rivals, in this case mainly Sarit Thanarat, picked up this point quite well, and, although no major departure from the pro-American policy was made even after Phibun’s downfall, steps were taken by the Sarit government to make the Thai foreign policy look more independent and balanced⁴⁶³. On the other hand, the Thai leaders were careful not to go too far in this respect as any signs of “relaxed anti-communist posture” were bound to be received negatively in Washington.⁴⁶⁴

The free speech experiment further weakened Phibun, but was most likely not central to his political demise. Far more serious were the ramifications of the *Political Party Act* of 1955, which had once more allowed formation of political parties and their participation in the elections. Section 3 of the law stated: “500 or more persons possessed of the right to vote for members of the Assembly of People’s Representatives or 10 or more members of the Assembly of People’s Representatives may form a political party through registration at the Office of the Undersecretary, Ministry of Interior.”⁴⁶⁵ Ironically, despite its commitment to the gradual development of Thai democracy, the adoption of this law was considered by some in Washington as a further sign of Thai government’s backtracking on its anti-communism: “In recent months Bangkok authorities have also tolerated the formation of political parties whose programs have been avowedly neutralist...”⁴⁶⁶

Initially, Phibun was probably hoping to bolster the position of his government by adding to its legitimacy through further “democratization” of the election process. He might have also hoped to weaken the influence of the military and the police over politics. Again, this attempt had largely backfired. Opposition began to mount against the prime minister,

⁴⁶¹ Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, p. 129.

⁴⁶² Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 103.

⁴⁶³ Neuchterlein, Donald. *Thailand and the Struggle for Southeast Asia*. Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press, 1965, p. 1.

⁴⁶⁴ For example, a memorandum from the Director of CIA Allen Welsh Dulles dated 18 November 1955 mentions Thai officials talking of “independent foreign policy” and states that “there are also indications that the USSR and Communist China are actively encouraging Thai neutrality...” USDS, *FRUS 1955–1957*, p. 841.

⁴⁶⁵ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thai Politics 1932–1957*, p. 881.

⁴⁶⁶ USDS, *FRUS 1955–1957*, p. 841.

whose government was more and more incapable of solving serious problems of the country, such as corruption or drought, which afflicted the Northeastern Isan region in 1957. The army began to dissociate itself more and more from the troubled Phibun regime, as Sarit Thanarat was slowly preparing the stage for his succession to power. Phibun's final blunder came in February 1957, when he called "free elections". The Marshal, in the last desperate bid to keep his grip on power, stated: "In the past I came into power through coup d'état. From now on I shall not seek power through a coup. I shall seek election."⁴⁶⁷ Given the fact that elections were held even in the previous years, this Phibun's statement (although most likely inadvertently) provided a candid assessment of the state of democracy in Thailand and the importance the democratic institutions have had during his rule...

As soon as the election results were announced, it became apparent that once more, the election process was seriously flawed and the elections were marred by corruption and voter intimidation. Overall, the ruling Seri Manangkhasila gained 83 seats, while the Democrat Party (still led by Khuang Aphaiwong) only 29. The other seats were divided as follows: Thammathipat 10, Seri Prachatipatai 10, Economist Party 8, National Democrat Party 3, Hyde Park 2, Independence Party 2, independents 13.⁴⁶⁸ Since Thammathipat was a pro-Phibun party as well, it was obvious that the coup group could easily control a comfortable majority of at least 93 seats out of the total of 160. The opposition was strongly disappointed by these results and almost immediately began to criticize the government. The leader of the Democrat Party, Khuang Aphaiwong, accused the government of cheating in Bangkok, where the Democrats were traditionally the strongest party, but where Phibun was now leading the vote⁴⁶⁹. The pressure on the government mounted and in the face of growing protest, the embattled Phibun finally declared martial law on March 3 and entrusted the army led by Sarit⁴⁷⁰ with maintaining order. Sarit, however, now openly dissociated himself from the government and, building his image of popular and "clean leader", went to meet the

⁴⁶⁷ Thai Rule Facing an Election Test, *The New York Times*, 25. 2. 1957.

⁴⁶⁸ Pickerell, Albert and Daniel E. Moore. Elections in Thailand (II), *Far Eastern Survey*, 1957 (July), vol. 26, no. 7, p. 106. Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 72 lists the results with a slight variation – 85 seats for Seri Manangkhasila, 28 for Democrats, 11 for Seri Prachatipatai, 10 for Thammathipat, 8 for Economic Front (Economist Party), 3 for Chatnyiom (National Democrats), 2 for Hyde Park, 2 for Issara (Independence Party) and 13 for independents. The election results provided by the US Embassy in Bangkok stated that Seri Manangkhasila won 82 seats with the Democrats winning 28. According to the US diplomats, Hyde Park, the Economist Party, the Independence Party and Seri Prachatipatai were "leftist" parties – this claim was based on the stress on "anti-Western themes" in their campaigns. USDS, *FRUS 1955–1957*, p. 913.

⁴⁶⁹ Khuang accused the government of forging the election ballots. These accusations were given even more weight by the news that the Governor of Bangkok offered to resign, claiming he "was unable to maintain order in the election situation by pure and rightful means." Premier Leading in Bangkok Vote, *The New York Times*, 27. 2. 1955.

⁴⁷⁰ While the involvement of the army could seem logical, many saw it as Phibun's attempt to make sure that Sarit would also have blood on his hands should major clashes with the protesters occur.

demonstrators and told them that “everybody cheated” in the elections⁴⁷¹. The final break of Sarit with the regime, amidst fierce debates in the Parliament and government’s inability to deal with the effects of the already mentioned draught in the Isan Region and of the newly discovered scandal related to the sale of lumber (the so-called “lumber swindle”) came on August 20, when he resigned as the minister of defense, together with many other high-ranking officers in the cabinet.⁴⁷² Phibun’s days as prime minister were soon to be numbered...

Throughout these events, the American approach was guided mainly by the overall priority of maintaining political stability and pro-Western orientation of Thailand. The American Embassy dispatch of April 22 anxiously reported that the events following the declaration of martial law were “the most serious political crisis in Thailand since November 1951.”⁴⁷³ Washington began to understand that Phibun was not in a position to handle the crisis and the pressure that he was under. After a meeting with him late May 1957, the American Ambassador Max Waldo Bishop commented: “Prime Minister seemed at ease and not unduly disturbed. At the same time failed give impression he has at hand clear decisive plan of action counteract present trends. Undoubtedly Sarit is causing his greatest worry at this time... Believe Prime Minister doing all he can to restore stability Thai politics but unable to yet predict with confidence outcome...”⁴⁷⁴ With very few means to directly intervene, and operating with the premise that Thai politics is an entirely Thai matter as long as the overall American political, strategic and military priorities are secured, the Eisenhower Administration could do little but to watch the developments. Especially since Sarit’s resignation from his cabinet post, Thailand was rife with news of an imminent army coup. In mid-September, after Sarit and the military publicly demanded government’s resignation and Phibun had unsuccessfully tried to arrest him, this coup finally came. In the early morning of 17 September 1957, the army overthrew the government and forced Phibun and Phao to leave the country.⁴⁷⁵ While for Thailand this meant a change of leadership and political style, the impact on the Thai-American relations, while it could not be totally discounted, was to prove only marginal. Phibun, for all his “friendship for the United States and for the United Nations” and other excellent qualities, was soon to be forgotten as the United States adapted

⁴⁷¹ Bečka, Jan (Jr.). Ramkhamheng Veliký: thajský ideál krále a vladaře [Ramkhamhaeng the Great: The Thai Ideal of King and Ruler], *Nový Orient*, 2010, vol. 65, no. 2, pp. 14, 17.

⁴⁷² Thak Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand*, p. 78.

⁴⁷³ USDS, *FRUS 1955–1957*, p. 913.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 921.

⁴⁷⁵ Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 265. Phibun spent the rest of his life in exile in Japan, while Phao left for Switzerland, where he died in November 1960.

to the new political situation in Thailand. In fact, in the coming years, Thailand's importance in the American strategic plans for Southeast Asia was about to increase significantly, as the danger of communist penetration and ultimate victory in Indochina was becoming more urgent. While the United States was later criticized for allowing the Sarit coup to pass without any major objections (as it was criticized earlier for a similar approach in 1951), it was simply following its own interests in the region. The Eisenhower Administration certainly harbored no hopes that Sarit would be a more democratic leader than Phibun had been; in fact, given his statements made in public he was likely to dismantle even the feeble attempts of Phibun to "democratize" the country. On the other hand, the events of 1957 and the popular support Sarit managed to muster following his open criticism of the February elections and of the government seemed to be a guarantee that his rule would provide more stability and internal security than Phibun would be able to provide. And as mentioned repeatedly on the previous pages, it was exactly this stability, security and continuity that mattered in the eyes of Washington in the 1950s and 1960s. Through such a government economic growth and improvement of the lives of ordinary Thais could be better achieved (even with the rampant corruption) and this could in turn lead to the population being more resistant to the danger of "communist subversion". It would be easy, from our modern perspective, to blame the US for sacrificing Thai democracy; it is important to be reminded in this respect that "democracy" as such, though this term appeared so often in the public discourse of the period, was not very high on the agenda when it came to Thailand – after all, it seemed, after all the coups and countercoups and chaotic development of the previous decades, that the Thai people were not prepared for it anyway...

CHAPTER V – THE EAGLE AND “THE RED EAGLE”⁴⁷⁶: THE UNITED STATES AND THAILAND DURING THE SARIT YEARS, 1957–1963

Nam lai, fai sawang, thang dee, mee nam ngam tham, bandan suk [The water flows, the lights are bright, the roads are good, people have work, such is happiness].

One of the mottos of Sarit Thanarat’s political platform⁴⁷⁷

The coup of September 1957 and the replacement of Marshal Phibunsongkhram by General Sarit Thanarat had little impact from the overall perspective of Thai-American relations. Rather than “reconsidering” its relationship with Thailand (see previous chapter), the scope of mutual cooperation was to increase significantly in the coming years the United States started to become engaged in the conflict in Indochina. This gradual development saw Thailand growing in importance in American strategic plans once more, both as a base for the American forces in the region but also, in later years, as one of the allies fighting communism alongside the United States in Indochina. The mutual relations of this six-year period took place against the backdrop of increasingly conservative Thailand, where Sarit openly abandoned all attempts on “democratization” and instead reverted to what he saw as traditional and proper way of governance. Sarit’s popularity and the genuine interest he had in the well-being of the Thai people, combined with his devotion to the king and to the Buddhist religion, further strengthened his position. The United States played an important role in propping up the Sarit regime, both by helping to finance big development projects in the country but also by helping to train and equip the Thai army, one of the main pillars of the Sarit regime. In exchange, they expected Sarit to maintain stability in the country and to preserve it from the danger of communist subversion, a task he had managed to handle relatively well. The following chapter will focus on some of the main events in the Thai-American relations of this period, as well as on the image of Thailand in the eyes of American politicians and public, an image which had experienced yet another transformation.

⁴⁷⁶ The Red Eagle [*Insi daeng* in Thai] was a Thai fictional cartoon and movie character in the late 1950s and 1960s. His part was acted by the famous Thai actor Mit Chaibancha. The character, modeled after American superheroes Batman, Superman and others, fought against dangers threatening his country, including the threat of communism. His name was later changed to Golden Eagle [*Insi thong* in Thai] to better demonstrate his anti-communism. See Harrison, Rachel V. The Man with the Golden Gauntlets: Mit Chaibancha’s *Insi Thong* and the Hybridization of Red and Yellow Perils in Thai Cold War Action Cinema. In: Day, Tony and Maya Ht Liem. *Cultures at the War. The Cold War and the Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*. Ithaca (NY): Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2010, pp. 195–226.

⁴⁷⁷ Quoted in Bečka, Ramkhamheng, p. 15.

V.1. “Paternalistic Despotism”⁴⁷⁸: The Basic Political Tenets of the Sarit Regime and Its Usefulness as a “Bastion” against Communist Subversion in the Eyes of Washington

V.1.A. Anti-communism as an Inherent Part of Conservatism: Sarit as a Father and *Pho Khun*

As already observed, the self-presentation of Thailand was an important asset for the United States in its attempt to construct an image of a united anti-communist front in Asia, and for that matter, in the world. Phibun had understood that need quite well, and despite the obvious deficiencies of his regime, he used the words “democracy”, “freedom”, “free nations”, “free world” etc. as often as possible. While skilful in shaping the image of Thailand as part of the “free world”, and in presenting this image abroad, Phibun himself, although a conservative politician, could not match the conservatism of Sarit. Phibun’s ambivalent stance toward the monarchy, his wartime past, and his fascination with the leadership style of Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy, along with his early attempts to “modernize” Thailand clearly showed that at his very core, the Marshal desired to launch something new rather than return to the old ways and traditions. His emphasis on conservatism and anti-communism only came in the late 1940s, and was, as described earlier, mainly an expression of pragmatism and a tool to survive various political pressures. For this reason, he never fully gained the trust of the hardliners in the American administration, who questioned his true devotion to anti-communism and frequently interpreted his balancing maneuvers as signs of weakness and backtracking.

Sarit, on the other hand, could be seen as a true conservative in the Thai sense of the word. Unlike Phibun, Pridi and others, he had not obtained his education in the West, and in spite of his short visits to the United States after World War II, was not influenced by the western political, social and cultural thought. Sarit was in general much more devout in his relationship to the monarchy, which was apparent from his motto “nation, religion and king”⁴⁷⁹. The monarchy also started to play a much more important role in the politics of the government, which added popularity to Sarit’s regime while at the same time enhancing its legitimacy abroad.⁴⁸⁰ At the same time, Sarit was strongly influenced by the work of Thai thinker, philosopher and patriot Luang Wichit Wathakan, for example his nationalist play

⁴⁷⁸ This term was used by Thak Chaloemtiarana in his book *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* to describe Sarit’s political style.

⁴⁷⁹ *Chat, satsana, phramahakasat* in Thai. The motto was originally developed by Thai king Vajiravudh (Rama VI.), who had apparently used the English motto “god, country and king” as an inspiration. Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 253.

⁴⁸⁰ Terwiel, *Thailand’s Political History*, p. 283.

“The Power of Pho Khun (King) Ramkhamhaeng”⁴⁸¹ or by his political pamphlet “Strategy to Achieve Greatness”⁴⁸². Luang Wichit had emphasized traditional Thai values, especially of the Sukhothai Period, and saw strong leadership as one of the prerequisites for achieving national greatness. While Sarit respected the role of the monarchy and that of the Buddhist religion, he saw himself as that strong leader, “father” to the Thai people whom he often called “children”. The concept of “ruler-father”, *pho-khun*, was seen by Sarit and Luang Wichit as the most proper model of governance for Thailand and the former had tried to implement it during his years in office. Sarit was also greatly inspired by the Ramkhamhaeng Stele, a stone inscription discovered in 19th century which reportedly dated back to the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai and which described his noble deeds and his good rule.⁴⁸³

The position of “father” gave Sarit the authority to “educate” and “chastise” his children while at the same time caring for their well-being. Those who did not respect the authority of the government and of Sarit himself were automatically branded “communists”, sometimes without any solid evidence, and held for long periods in prison without a trial being official opened against them.⁴⁸⁴ In addition to communists, who represented the main threat to the stability of the Thai society, Sarit also prosecuted arsonists (often interrogating in person those accused of starting a fire), petty criminals and “hooligans” [*anthaphan* in Thai], often simply people who wore “untraditional” clothes, sang “untraditional” songs, listened to “untraditional” music etc., many times the very things that had come to Thailand from the United States⁴⁸⁵. This was rather paradoxical, as the United States was at the moment the closest ally of Thailand and cultural and educational exchange had greatly expanded in the post-war years. While moves against the “hooligans” could be viewed rather ambivalently by the American officials, they considered these policies to be entirely a matter of Sarit’s government and felt no need to intervene as long as more essential American interests were not directly threatened by government’s actions. The “hooligans” were usually sentenced to

⁴⁸¹ Luang Wichit Wathakan. *Anuphab Pho Khun Ramkhamhaeng* [The Power of King Ramkhamhaeng]. Bangkok: Rungruangtham Press, 1954. For English translation, see Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thai Politics 1932–1957*, pp. 744–794.

⁴⁸² Luang Wichit Wathakan. *Kusolabai Sang Khwam Yingyai* [Strategy to Achieve Greatness]. Bangkok: Niyomwithaya Press, 1952.

⁴⁸³ The authenticity of the stele had since been disputed by many scholars, who claim that the language used in the inscription does not match that used during the Sukhothai period. For a discussion on this topic, see for example Chamberlain, James. F. (ed.). *The Ramkhamhaeng Controversy: Selected Papers*. Bangkok: Siam Society, 1991.

⁴⁸⁴ Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 271.

⁴⁸⁵ For example, people could be arrested for wearing tight pants, for listening to rock and roll music or for dancing twist. Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 121.

detention centers and to compulsory reeducation in reformatory institutions where they were to learn the basic of “proper” behavior [*riaproy* in Thai]. Sarit also encouraged people to report to him any problems or grievances that they might have had – again in line with the legendary bell of Ramkhamhaeng which any subject in the kingdom could ring and the king would come, hear his case and make a just and righteous decision.⁴⁸⁶ He often made trips into the provinces to inspect the lives of the Thai people whom he called “brothers” and “sisters”, to ask them what needs they had and to listen to what they had to say. What was important in this respect was that Sarit’s family had lived in the Northeast of the country for a time and this connection to the poorest Thai region, close to the volatile borders with Laos and inhabited by Lao-speaking people, made him popular even outside of Bangkok – popularity Phibun had never enjoyed to such an extent. This popularity was further enhanced by the development projects, which the Sarit government supported and which brought improvements in transportation and farming opportunities to the remote areas, although the change was still coming slowly and sometimes had unintended consequences. These development projects, especially in regions such as the Northeast (Isan), were seen as vital in the fight with communist insurgency and it thus became a government priority to use these projects as a means for projecting its power and influence in the rural areas.⁴⁸⁷

As many authors have noted, the Thai people were rather weary of political instability and weak leadership in the post-war years. With the core of the population remaining more on the conservative side, and with the communist danger being ever-present in the minds of most Thais (though this danger was intentionally exaggerated by the government), the people were bound to prefer strong, decisive and stable, though undemocratic, leadership. This was one of the reasons for the fall of the liberal government in the post-war years, and also an explanation for the fact that most people were content to see Sarit depose Phibun (who was now seen as weak) in 1957 and eventually become prime minister in February 1959⁴⁸⁸. Sarit was well aware of this and he often emphasized his willingness to act and even adopt harsh

⁴⁸⁶ The Ramkhamhaeng inscription says of the king: “He has hung a bell in the opening of the gate over there: if any commoner in the land has a grievance which sickens his belly and gripes his heart, and which he wants to make known to his ruler and lord, it is easy: he goes and strikes the bell which the King has hung there; King Ram Khamhang, the ruler of the kingdom, hears the call; he goes and questions the man, examines the case, and decides justly for him”. For the full text of the inscription in English, see for example: Griswold, A. B. and Prasert na Nagara. *The Inscription of King Rama Gamhen of Sukhodaya (1292 AD)*. Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 9. *Journal of the Siam Society*, 1971, vol. 59, no. 2, pp. 179–228.

⁴⁸⁷ For this reason, the projects were also supported and co-financed by the United States. Jakkrit Sangkhamanee. *Hydraulics of Water Projects. The Flows of Powers and Waters in Northeastern Thailand*. Research paper, Mekong Program on Water, Environment and Resilience. Ubon Ratchathani: Ubon Ratchathani University, 2009, p. 22.

⁴⁸⁸ The reasons why Sarit did not become prime minister immediately in September 1957 and the political development during the intermediary period will be discussed below.

measures for the sake of the people. As he stated on the occasion of the execution of arsonists and other criminals in November 1958: “I have no alternative but to act in the manner that I have described to you before. I will do anything to achieve happiness for the people, regardless of consequences... Again, I would like to inform my Thai brothers and sisters that decisiveness [*chiep khat* in Thai] is the only instrument that can help nation achieve progress. Whether it is just or not [the execution – J. B.], I do not fear. I only hold on to the thought that with every breath I take, I think only of the happiness of all Thais. This is my highest wish which has led me to make this drastic decision. I will assume sole responsibility if there is any.”⁴⁸⁹ This willingness to make resolute steps and to bear the responsibility⁴⁹⁰ for them was exactly what many people were looking for and what they expected of a leader.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the language of Thai politics and some of the terms as used in the Thai context often have a very different meaning from that which is common in the West. Words such as “freedom”, “democracy”, “political party” and “party politics”, even the word “politics” itself, although they had become relatively common in the Thai public discourse since 1932, had taken a distinctive meaning influenced by the local conditions. This is also the way to explain how Sarit, a conservative, traditional politician, could integrate the terms “revolution” (*pattiwat* in Thai) and “modernization” (*phattana* in Thai) into his political platform without endangering his vision of the society based on traditional values. While the western concept would in general see “revolution” and “modernization” as inherently dynamic processes, implying a change, often sweeping or even violent, of the existing political order and its possible replacement by a new system. The meaning of these words ascribed to them by Sarit was, however, almost exactly opposite – the “revolution” consisted of readopting a modified version of a political system used in the past, while “modernization” implied changes which were meant to conform the society to this political model. While changes in the lives of the people such as electrification, transportation development or new farming techniques were generally supported by the government, these were seen as falling into the category of ruler’s responsibility for the wellbeing of his subjects and did not imply any change toward liberalization or democratization of the political system. This fact soon became clear to the Eisenhower Administration as well, and Washington thus did not need to feel anxious about such occurrences on the Thai political scene as

⁴⁸⁹ Chakrawan Chanuwong. *M. 17 kap 11 nakthod prahan* [Article 17 and the 11 Executed Prisoners]. Bangkok: Chaichana Press, 1964, pp. 47–49. Translated in Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand*, pp. 123–124.

⁴⁹⁰ In this particular case, it was not so much a responsibility before the law or even before the people (who, after all, had no authority to question the leader’s decisions nor to judge him for his acts), but the responsibility for taking the lives of others, which could have accumulated bad karma for the person involved.

“revolutionary council” (*khana pattiwat* in Thai). The council led by Sarit, which could be likened to the previously existing Coup Group, sought, instead of “revolution”, to “guarantee stability for the [Thai] nation” and “secure its survival” vis-à-vis the communist danger⁴⁹¹.

While Sarit posed as a simple and modest leader, who took pains to work for the people and who led a very ordinary life (during his trips out of Bangkok, for example, he and his entourage often stayed in military tents), he grew enormously rich from taking part in various business endeavors and by embezzling state funds. Already in 1954, the estimate of the political situation in Thailand correctly stated that “...3. The leading politicians in the Thai Government [Phibun, Phao and Sarit – J. B.] control not only the Armed Forces and the Police Force but also have stronger control over and derive more benefit from alien business interests than any previous governments.”⁴⁹² Sarit himself at one time occupied 22 seats on control and advisory boards in different companies.⁴⁹³ The personal life of Sarit, carefully hidden from the public eyes, was also very far from the orderly and proper manner he so often called for in his speeches and proclamations. Sarit was known to have numerous affairs and to be a heavy drinker, with especially the latter undermining his health and leading to his premature death in December 1963. After his death, it was estimated that the wealth he had managed to accumulate exceeded two and half billion Thai Baht⁴⁹⁴, an enormous amount in 1963. While these discoveries had somewhat tarnished his image, he still remained popular with many Thais who saw the short period of his regime as that of relative prosperity, stability and order. None of Sarit’s followers proved capable to maintain the political system instituted by him and so, in the years after 1963 Thailand faced fresh instability and political upheavals.

V.1.B. An “Effective Strong Man” or “Anti-American Despot”? Sarit and the Eisenhower Administration, 1957–1961

V.1.B.1. Democracy, Anti-Communism, Anti-Americanism and Continuity: Reconstructing the Image of Thailand after the Coup of 1957

By 1957, the American political representation as well as the general public had already become used to the frequent military coups in Thailand. In September 1957, as a change was somewhat expected due to Phibun’s weakened position, the coup was accepted

⁴⁹¹ Prakat khong khana pattiwat [Proclamation of the Revolutionary Council], no. 4, 20. 10. 1958. In: Sathien Wichailak (ed.). *Ruam prakat khong khana pattiwat chabab thi 1 thung chabab sutthai* [Collection of the Proclamations of the Revolutionary Council from Number 1 to the Last One]. Bangkok: Nitiwet Press, 1967, p. 12.

⁴⁹² USDS, *FRUS 1952–1954 XII*, p. 747.

⁴⁹³ Riggs, Fred W. *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity*. Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966.

⁴⁹⁴ Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand*, p. 224. This would have corresponded to roughly \$140 million in 1963.

pragmatically and matter-of-factly. Thus, *The New York Times* wrote on September 21: “What has been happening in Bangkok is in no sense a popular revolution... There has been no bloodshed and no major change in government structure... There have been previous struggles for power, largely behind the scenes, and they have been based on personalities, not issues...”⁴⁹⁵ It was apparent that the American media and public had gotten used to the idea that has already been mentioned repeatedly, that is, the fact that the Thai politics of the period was still largely in the hands of a number of individuals/interest groups vying for power, rather than in the hands of general public, which had usually played the role of a mere witness these developments. It also became apparent that such changes were unavoidable and in some cases even desirable. Field Marshal Sarit was described as “... a dour, stocky, hard-faced professional soldier who maintains he does not like politics and high civil position. Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat certainly lacks the supple temperament and easy manners that usually characterize political leaders... He continues to say that he does not want to be Premier. His friends think he would find the unending daily office and social routines uncongenial and regard Field Marshal Sarit as more suited to the role of supporting a cabinet without having to head it.”⁴⁹⁶ If the key word of the day from the American perspective was “stability”, than the change that ensued after the coup was rather a welcome one as Sarit could deliver much better in this respect than Phibun. Democratization, where Sarit offered no major improvements, was no longer mentioned in the official reaction of the State Department, and in fact, such an official reaction to the change was virtually non-existent. In the September 23 issue of *The Department of State Bulletin*, rather ironically (although the timing was inadvertent), the Secretary of State John Foster Dulles congratulated Thai diplomat (and soon-to-be prime minister) on his appointment as the first Secretary General of SEATO and added: “It is fitting that the headquarters of SEATO should be in Thailand, *whose name means free land*... Under the protecting shield of SEATO, Southeast Asia has been able to make substantial *political, economic, and social* progress. During SEATO’s existence all the free nations of the area have conducted *orderly free elections* based upon universal suffrage⁴⁹⁷ [italics added – J. B.]”⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁵ Coup in Thailand, *The New York Times*, 21. 9. 1957.

⁴⁹⁶ Thailand’s Strong Man, *The New York Times*, 19. 9. 1957. The caption below Sarit’s picture in the article stated that he is “an effective, though unwilling, politician”...

⁴⁹⁷ The hollowness and insincerity of this remark stands out especially when the elections of April 1957 in Thailand are taken into account.

⁴⁹⁸ United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*, 23. 9. 1957, vol. XXXVII, no. 952, p. 488.

Criticisms of Sarit's political style did appear occasionally in the United States, but they were rather muted. Writing in 1962, for example, Frank C. Darling complained about the new Thai constitution, promulgated in 1959 under the direct guidance of Sarit. Darling wrote: "In preparing a new constitution Sarit indicated that for the first time since 1932 Thailand was rejecting the values of Western constitutional democracy [although this assertion is debatable – J. B.] and the new political system would be adapted to meet the current 'needs' of the Thai people...The Thai political system in effect has returned to absolutism..."⁴⁹⁹ For obvious reasons, however, these and other similar critical remarks did not find their way into the official proclamations of the Eisenhower Administration and did seldom appear even in private conversations with the Thai officials. While the United States did not change into a country which approved or even supported authoritarian regimes, the emphasis was placed elsewhere than on democracy at this particular time period. The American officials were also leery of criticizing Thailand out of fear that such criticism could cause a rift in mutual relations and weakening of American position in the country. And, added to this fear, was the wish to achieve and maintain stability in the country by all possible means – for stability, rather than democracy in itself, was seen as the most effective defense against communism.

If anything else than stability was important from the American point of view, it was continuity. The American journalists had speculated extensively about the future course of the Thai foreign policy, but their assessments were in general positive. Written shortly after the coup, one article emphasized Sarit's pledge that "[the government – J. B.] would not swerve from the pro-Western policies of Marshal Pibul [Phibun – J. B.]..."⁵⁰⁰ Three days later, in yet another reassurance offered to the American public, it was stated that "...*there is no reason to believe that any of these basic facts or attitudes [the pro-Western stance of the government – J. B.] will be changed by a shift in administration in Thailand... No Thai Government can possibly disregard this menace [the danger of communism – J. B.] to its own existence.* Similarly, the commitment to Southeast Asia Treaty Organization is something that is *clearly dictated* by the hard facts in the situation. If and when the Chinese Communists make their move south – and they have already made their force felt in northern Vietnam and Laos, close to Thailand's borders – the people of Thailand can repose their hope of freedom *only in collective action* in their defense. *They have been realistic in this respect and there is every*

⁴⁹⁹ Darling, Frank C. American Policy in Thailand, *The Western Political Quarterly*, 1962, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 104–105.

⁵⁰⁰ Thailand Is Calm after Army Coup, *The New York Times*, 18. 9. 1957.

reason to believe that they will continue to be so [italics added – J. B.]”⁵⁰¹ It is interesting to note that the Thai support for SEATO and its relationship toward the United States is cast here in purely pragmatic terms of defending the country against communism. While such an assessment was largely accurate (despite the fact that the communist danger was often rather overrated), it stood in a contrast to the previously emphasized “friendship” of Thailand toward the United States and the love of the Thai nation for the “free world”. Finally, there was an attempt to dispel the possible anxiety regarding Sarit himself and his views: “He [Sarit – J. B.] has not always been in agreement with the United States military group that has been training and equipping Thai military forces, but is on a *personally friendly basis* with the United States officers. His occasional criticism of Americans is *not taken* by observers here [in Thailand – J. B.] as indicative of *any disagreement with Thailand’s anti-Communist position and alliance with the United States in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization* [italics added – J. B.]”⁵⁰²

The American government had in fact made immediate attempts to insure that Thailand will continue to pursue its pro-American course. In spite of the previous warnings given to Phao that the United States would not tolerate a change of government in Thailand and that its policy toward Bangkok would be reconsidered, no steps in this regard were taken by Washington. On September 20, in the wake of the coup, the American Ambassador Bishop met with Sarit. The Thai leader informed him that Thailand “would strictly observe old foreign policy and adherence to UN and SEATO... King would shortly make choice of Prime Minister... he would be a person of high caliber, having respect of country. *Added choice would be pleasing to US and to me personally*... They [Sarit and the King – J. B.] desired *closest* cooperation with US and had the *same* principles [italics added – J. B.]”⁵⁰³ After this reassurance, Bishop hastened to make assurances of his own. He told Sarit that “US policy based on interests, and attitudes world problems and on personality or individual, which was entirely internal matter.”⁵⁰⁴ From Sarit’s perspective, the continued American aid and support for Thailand was certainly the priority. Although he was not dependent on American assistance the way Phibun had been in the previous years, he most certainly felt that the United States was still the key ally of Thailand and should not be antagonized. This was reflected also in the choice of the prime minister, which was indeed “pleasing to the US” – the choice fell on Phote Sarasin, the former ambassador to the US and Secretary General of the SEATO. A man not tainted by the political scandals of the previous years, he was personally

⁵⁰¹ Coup in Thailand, *The New York Times*, 21. 9. 1957.

⁵⁰² Thailand’s Strong Man, *The New York Times*, 19. 9. 1957.

⁵⁰³ FRUS, *USDS 1955–1957*, p. 933.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

rich (meaning less inclined to be involved in corrupt behavior), not overly ambitious (so he would not threaten Sarit) and well known abroad (which would help to keep the relations with the Eisenhower Administration in a good order).⁵⁰⁵ While Sarit clearly remained the single most important player on the Thai political scene, he shied at that moment from becoming prime minister. There are several possible explanations and all of them carry some weight – it might have been his ill health which dissuaded him from assuming office at that time; or Sarit might have genuinely preferred the role of “king maker” and did not want to be involved in politics; or, which was also very likely, he wanted someone who was presentable on the international scene to take over for a time⁵⁰⁶, while Sarit further developed his contacts and consolidated his position – once that was accomplished, he would step out from the shadow and take over....

In any case, Phote’s appointment, although provisional, was in general received favorably in the United States. The new prime minister publicly proclaimed that “his Government intends to ‘investigate and expose’ subversive Communist activities in Thailand... His statement confirmed reports that the military group which overthrew the Government last week intends to adopt a firm line against pro-Communist Thai-Chinese organizations here.... Pote said he was opposed to recognition of Communist China and added that he did not think that trade with China would benefit Thailand...”⁵⁰⁷ The Secretary of State Dulles called Phote’s appointment “good for United States-Thai relations” and added that the premier was “a very good friend of the United States”⁵⁰⁸. The National Security Council acknowledged that “Sarasin, the new Premier, was perhaps not a very strong figure, but he was a good man and very pro-Western in his sympathies... The new government insisted that it was even more strongly anti-Communist than its predecessor. Despite all these assurances... there is still much in the situation in Thailand which will bear careful watching...”⁵⁰⁹

This warning about the need to watch the situation in Thailand sprang from a certain dichotomy that developed during the Phote administration. On the one hand, the prime minister and his cabinet were decidedly pro-Western. This policy was officially supported by

⁵⁰⁵ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 86.

⁵⁰⁶ This would have been the role that Phibun played for a time after the coup of 1951. It was true that Sarit was still not very well known in the United States and needed more time to prepare the ground for a full takeover that would be sanctioned by the United States. On the other hand, if Sarit decided to become prime minister right after the coup, there would have been very little that the United States could do to prevent this development (and in fact, it would not have opposed such a move in the first place).

⁵⁰⁷ Thai Premier Says He’ll ‘Expose’ Reds, *The Washington Post*, 24. 9. 1957.

⁵⁰⁸ Dulles Praises Premier, *The New York Times*, 22. 9. 1957.

⁵⁰⁹ USDS, *FRUS 1955–1957*, p. 934.

the Parliament, which approved Phote and his policy vision by a unanimous vote of confidence.⁵¹⁰ On the hand, however, it did not escape the attention of American officials that the anti-Americanism, which begun to develop in the later years of Phibun's role, was intensifying, and even more worryingly, it seemed to be supported by Sarit himself. These allegations sprang from the fact that the most vocal anti-American voice seemed to be the Thai newspaper *Sarnseri*, which was supposedly owned by Sarit. The American Ambassador Bishop approached Phote about this problem very soon after the coup: "During call on Prime Minister ... made know informally continued serious concern with which I view provocative and irresponsible press campaign against SEATO and the US... Pointed out until September 16 coup there was explanation that campaign was tool in opposition attack on Phao and Pibul [Phibun – J. B.]. I emphasized, however, that continued attacks after the coup could in no sense be explained same basis..."⁵¹¹ The Prime Minister acknowledged the situation, but made it clear he was unable and unwilling to confront the press directly, as he knew that the all-powerful Sarit was behind it. The United States was aware of this, judging from the Bishop's remark that "I had clear impression Prime Minister under some stress in attempting give picture he normal head of government but knowing that another (Sarit) held real power. I believe his intentions are of best in this matter, but progress will depend on extent to which he can convince Sarit of danger of allowing newspapers and some government officials to continue unwarranted attacks on US, SEATO and constituted Thai Government."⁵¹² While the anti-American campaign naturally caused worries in Washington in 1957, with the benefit of hindsight it would be possible to say that at least from Sarit's perspective, it was a tool to gain more prestige with the Thai people rather than a serious expression of his preferences and desired actions. As mentioned before, Sarit was trying to present himself as a man of the people and since he knew that SEATO and U.S. became less popular with the middle class due to their identification with Phibun, he found it convenient to ride on the wave of public discontent. As the future months and years had shown, however, he undertook no steps which would have seriously undermined the Thai-American relationship.

Phote's government was, among other things, facing the task of organizing new, "fair" elections. The results of these elections, which finally took place on December 1957, and the events that followed in their wake, clearly demonstrated the nature of the new regime. Sarit made numerous appeals for the elections to be free and indeed, though the Sahaphum Party,

⁵¹⁰ Bangkok Backs West, *The New York Times*, 25. 9. 1957.

⁵¹¹ USDS, *FRUS 1955-1957*, p. 937.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

which supported the government, won most seats, it did not gain control of the parliament.⁵¹³ The military was thus again faced with the prospect of having to deal with an intractable assembly which it did not fully control, a prospect that had in the past ultimately led to the military coup of 1951 and the subsequent anti-democratic measures. For the time being, however, Sarit adopted a strategy similar to that of Phibun by creating the so-called Chatsangkhomniyom Party (National Socialist Party), which he personally headed and which moved to lure the independents into its ranks.⁵¹⁴ Again, like in previous cases, it has to be noted that Sarit's party had absolutely no connection to national socialism in the European/Western sense and, as a matter of fact, no connection to socialism as such.

While the election results were no as satisfactory as the military would have hoped, the decision of Phote not to continue as prime minister was an even more serious complication. Phote was an experienced politician and he might have realized that his chances of acting as an independent prime minister were extremely slim even after the elections, given the influence of Sarit and the army. He might have also felt that the policies he pursued were not so popular with the general public and that he would soon become a scapegoat for failures and shortcomings that might have ensued, while Sarit would keep or even increase his popularity and prestige. While some observers might have expected that Sarit would now end this interlude and step forward, the opposite was true. A new government was formed under the leadership of Sarit's close ally, Thanom Kittikachorn, while Sarit went to the United States to undergo a major surgery. He only came back to Thailand in June 1958 to support the Thanom government, which, like its predecessor, was facing problems in the parliament and criticism from the press. After another leave in England, Sarit finally returned in October 1958, and after conferring with his associates including Thanom, took power through another coup on October 20. In February 1959, he made the last, although rather formal step, and assumed the post of prime minister, which he held until his death in 1963. The "Saritization" of Thailand, widely expected since the events of 1957, had finally been fulfilled.

In fact, unlike the September 1957 coup, which had created, for a time, anxiety in Washington over possible consequences of political instability and over the future course of the Thai government, Sarit's take over was approved and even welcomed by many American officials. In an analysis of the coup, the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research of

⁵¹³ The Sahaphum Party won 44 seats, the Democrat Party 39, a number of other smaller parties won a total of 18, with 59 seats taken by independents. Many of the independents were former supporters of Phibun and Phao. Withetkorani. *Khwampenma haeng rabob prachathipathai kong thai* [The Historical Development of Thai Democracy]. Bangkok: Phanfa Phitthaya Press, 1968, pp. 1428–1438.

⁵¹⁴ Thak Chaloeintarana, *Thailand*, p. 88.

the Department of State Cummings wrote: “The formation of a ‘Revolutionary Council’ in Thailand announced today [20 October 1958 – J. B.] *does not represent a coup d’etat*. Although the Council has declared martial law, abrogated the constitution and dissolved the National Assembly, the arrangement, in fact, *is an orderly attempt* by the present ruling group to solidify its position... It is likely that the new constitution will be drafted so as to permit the ruling group to exert a more direct control, and that either Thanom or Sarit will form a new government *excluding leftists and other undisciplined elements*... Thai leaders... have become concerned over the dangers of Communist subversion, especially since Cambodia’s recognition of Communist China last July. The resignation of the Thanom government will provide the ruling group with the opportunity to form a new cabinet *without leftist presentation* and to institute *more vigorous anti-Communist measures, particularly against elements of the press* [italics added – J. B.]”⁵¹⁵ While Cummings acknowledges that there were other factors leading to the coup than fear of communist subversion – namely, the inability of the military group to control the parliament and opposition as such – he nevertheless again paints the familiar picture of a country threatened by the “red menace”. This threat is then used to justify such moves as “more vigorous anti-Communist measures” (i.e. censure and even criminalization of journalists and newspapers) or abrogation of the constitution and dissolution of the parliament, which was elected less than a year earlier. The very claim that the takeover of October 20 *was not a coup* speaks for itself in this regard... In a similar fashion, the Department of State described the effects of the coup as follows: “Resolute action by the Government brought Communist subversive activities – particularly among the press, political parties, students and labor unions – to a standstill in *Thailand*. A number of extreme left-wing newspapers which were suspected of receiving outside aid were closed. A ban was placed on the importation and sale of goods from Communist China.”⁵¹⁶

Similar arguments, though in a modified form, appeared in the press coverage of the coup. Thus, *The New York Times* noted, among other things: “...It has been made plain, also, that this new regime proposes to be continuingly anti-Communist. There is no change in Thailand’s orientation.”⁵¹⁷ While the newspaper conceded that the change was in fact a coup, it stated that “... a change of rulers in Bangkok does not mean a cause for the *vast majority* of the Thai. They wish merely to be safe and to be left at peace. *We are in accord with that*

⁵¹⁵ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960*. Volume XV. South and Southeast Asia. Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1992, pp. 1045–1046.

⁵¹⁶ United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*. 27. 4. 1959, vol. XL, no. 1035, p. 611.

⁵¹⁷ “Revolution” in Thailand, *The New York Times*, 25. 10. 1958.

sentiment and if we can help we should [italics added – J. B.].”⁵¹⁸ On another occasion, it ventured so far as to call Sarit a “dictator” but again reminded its audience: “... While the Marshal underwent treatment abroad for liver trouble, the Government was weakened by squabbling among its supporters and *Communist agitation* [italics added – J. B.].”⁵¹⁹

The approach of the Eisenhower Administration and of many (although certainly not all) Americans to the events in Thailand is perfectly understandable and even somewhat justifiable by the perceived threat of communism and the need to stop it at any cost. The fact that arguments of similar sort appeared in declarations intended for public consumption as well as private documents shows that there was a genuine concern in Washington over the danger of communist infiltration and possible takeover. This concern certainly sprang from the development in neighboring countries, such as Cambodia and Laos, but was also caused by a somewhat inaccurate, distorted view of the events taking place in Thailand. While there certainly were communist activists in the country and some of the newspapers were left-leaning, to say in 1958 that leftist elements were part of the Thanom government was certainly misinformation. The extent to which such proclamations were caused by erroneous understanding of the situation in Thailand and to which extent they were sought as a justification for the continued support of an undemocratic regime is, as usual, hard to discern. For the critics of American policy, such as Frank Darling or David Elliot, the fact that vaguely defined freedom and security replaced democracy in the foreign policy discourse toward countries such as Thailand clearly indicated the double-faced nature of American foreign policy and propaganda (Darling mentions President Eisenhower’s words to the new Thai Ambassador to Washington in June 1959: “The historic friendship which has developed between Thailand and the United States forms a lasting foundation for our common endeavors to preserve freedom and security in Southeast Asia and the world at large.”⁵²⁰). It is true that developments such as those that took place in Thailand in September 1957 and October 1958 would have received much less favorable comments from Washington had they taken place in a country of the Soviet bloc or even a “neutral” state. On the other hand, the American policy must always be judged in the context of the period and the propaganda war between the Western allies and the Communist bloc. In this respect, the American proclamations and actions, while certainly hypocritical in nature, were nowhere near to what the Soviet Union had to offer.

⁵¹⁸ “Revolution” in Thailand, *The New York Times*, 25. 10. 1958.

⁵¹⁹ Thailand Dictator to Set Up a Cabinet, *The New York Times*, 24. 10. 1958.

⁵²⁰ Darling, American Policy, p. 106.

V.1.B.2. “Friends”, Images and the Sharing of Ideas: The Personal and Cultural Exchange between Thailand and the United States in Late 1950s and Early 1960s

As already mentioned in the previous chapters, the Thai leaders such as Pridi or Phibun, had been exposed to Western ideas prior to their assuming a political role back home. Not only that, but due to their studies abroad and their subsequent visits, they had managed to make contacts in the Western countries and make themselves known to the Western leaders. In this respect, Sarit had a certain disadvantage, as his visits to the United States prior to 1957 were rather limited and confined mostly to technical and organizational matters. It was important for him, then, to make a similar visit to the one Phibun made to the United States and to present himself to the top officials of the administration. Such a visit was important also from the American perspective – in the early months after the coup there was still considerable anxiety about Sarit’s true intentions and a personal meeting could help to dispel it.

An opportunity for such high-level meetings presented itself very early. After undergoing surgery in the Walter Reed Hospital in early 1958, Sarit and his wife stayed in the United States and the Marshal eventually returned to D.C. On May 7, he met President Eisenhower and in the following days, other members of his administration, including the Secretary of State Dulles or the Director of the United States Information Agency Allen, and of the military.⁵²¹ These talks, especially with the Secretary of State and the representatives of the armed forces and the Pentagon, did most likely help to clear up some misunderstandings and assuage some of the American fears. During the conversation with Dulles, for example, Sarit made it clear that “while Thai Government and majority of the Thai people appreciate United States aid, perhaps some criticism may arise because aid is not applied where it would benefit the people most. He indicated that he feels some readjustment in the programs is needed”.⁵²² This criticism was most likely shared by many American officials, who had in previous years pointed out that the aid was not used efficiently. On the other hand, it was important to hear Sarit himself say that while readjustments were needed, the Thai government was interested in continued cooperation with the United States. The Secretary of State Dulles also used this opportunity to reiterate American adamant refusal to recognize the People’s Republic of China and even indicated that the United States was ready to leave the

⁵²¹ United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*. 2. 6. 1958, vol. XXXVIII, no. 988, pp. 912–913.

⁵²² USDS, *FRUS 1958–1960*, p. 1002.

United Nations if Communist China replaced Taiwan in the Security Council⁵²³ – these comments might well have been made to dissuade Sarit from any opening to Beijing. This opening did not eventually materialize until after Sarit's death and even then it reflected a change in the American policy. Another aspect of Sarit's visit, which should probably be mentioned, was that he was most likely impressed by the standard of living and technological advancement of the American society. While he did not find inspiration in the political system or freedoms of that country, he came back home with a strengthened resolve to speed up and enhance the development of his own country, using the aid received from the United States more efficiently in this respect.

The nature of Sarit's visit was of course very different from that of Phibun – as Sarit was not yet officially a prime minister, and his visit was not a state event, it received much scantier coverage in the mainstream media⁵²⁴ and consequently, much less publicity. This might have actually suited Sarit very well, since, as was already mentioned, he lacked the charisma and flair of Phibun and as a “man of the people” he did not feel at ease meeting with the leaders of other countries, and for that matter, even with the politicians of his own country. On the other hand, he was well aware that these visits on the highest level were important for maintaining the importance of Thailand in American foreign policy and, also, for the creation of a more positive image of Thailand and for covering up some of the uglier aspects of his regime. Sarit, however, could count on one advantage that Phibun could not – his ties with the royal court were much better and the King was a supporter of the Sarit regime. Sarit soon realized that the young, western-educated, intelligent and progressive monarch could play a very important role in improving the image of Thailand abroad. This was the main consideration behind the visit of King Bhumibhol and Queen Sirikit to the United States in June and July 1960 and also behind a number of other visits that the royal couple had made during the Sarit years⁵²⁵.

From the propaganda and image-creation point of view, this visit was one of the high peaks of the Thai-American relations during the Sarit period. The Eisenhower Administration

⁵²³ “He [Dulles – J. B.] commented that the President, when asked recently what the United States would do if the Chinese Communists were seated in the United Nations, remarked that first, the United Nations would be asked to leave the United States; and second, the United States would leave the United Nations.” USDS, *FRUS 1958–1960*, p. 1002.

⁵²⁴ For example, both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times* mentioned Sarit's meeting with Eisenhower just once, in the short section of the paper describing the president's daily program. President's Appointments, *The Washington Post*, 7. 5. 1958; The Proceedings in Washington, *The New York Times*, 8. 5. 1958.

⁵²⁵ During the Sarit years, the royal couple visited over 23 countries, a stark contrast to the role the King played earlier when Phibun was in power. Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 207.

had in fact pondered on inviting the King already after the coup of September 1957⁵²⁶. Due to the instability in Thailand, the visit was postponed until 1960. The effect of this tour was impressive. Frank C. Darling called it, quite correctly in the author's opinion, "perhaps the most remarkable tour to the United States by guests from Thailand".⁵²⁷ The American government spoke of a "significant contribution to the close relationship between the two countries".⁵²⁸ On arrival to Washington, where he and the Queen were greeted by some 75,000 people, the King "remarked that he felt at home. 'I was born here in this country'⁵²⁹, so I can say the United States is half my motherland".⁵³⁰ Such remarks were sure to receive warm reception, as well as the King's speech in the Congress, where he said that "in giving generous assistance to foreign countries the United States was applying the old Thai principle of family obligations" and that "time was ripe for even closer cooperation between the United States and his Southeast Asian kingdom in view of the present world tension".⁵³¹ In that same speech, the King elaborated on the often repeated topic of freedom: "Although the Americans and the Thai live on opposite sides of the globe, yet there is one thing common to them. It is the love of freedom. Indeed, the word 'Thai' actually means free."⁵³² These words were fitting exactly into the discourse on Thai-American relations typical for this period. In addition, the King had made some other comments which deserved attention. Quoting the preamble of the Thai-American treaty on economic and technical cooperation, he said: "American assistance is to enable the Thai to achieve their objectives through *their own efforts*. I need hardly say that this concept has our complete endorsement... We are grateful for American aid; but we *intend to one day do without it* [italics added – J. B.]."⁵³³ This comment was welcome not only from Sarit's perspective, because it underscored his assertion that Thailand is not a puppet state dependent on American aid; it also reflected Eisenhower's policy of not involving the United States too deeply in Asian affairs and of providing the aid with the ultimate goal of developing the recipient states to such an extent that they would be able to do without it. The establishment of SEATO, as already mentioned, was another attempt of the Eisenhower Administration to initiate such "Asiation" of Asian affairs.

⁵²⁶ USDS, *FRUS 1958–1960*, p. 934.

⁵²⁷ Darling, *Thailand*, p. 177.

⁵²⁸ Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p.106.2.

⁵²⁹ The King was born in the United States during the time his father attended his studies there.

⁵³⁰ Thai King and Queen Are Welcomed by Eisenhower, *The New York Times*, 29. 6. 1960.

⁵³¹ Thai King, in Congress, Hails U.S., *The New York Times*, 30. 6. 1960.

⁵³² United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*. 25. 7. 1960, vol. XLIII, no. 1100, p. 144.

⁵³³ *Ibid*, p. 145.

Throughout his stay in the United States, the King, while attending the traditional ceremonial duties of such a visit, displayed an ability to talk about specific problems in great detail. For example, during his meeting with President Eisenhower, who conferred the Legion of Merit on him, he discussed not only general problems, but specific economic issues, such as rice surpluses, fiscal policy, rubber and tin production and foreign investments in Thailand.⁵³⁴ All in all, the Thai king had done a great service to the Sarit regime by presenting an image of Thailand that the United States was eager to see – a country friendly to the United States, but not a satellite of Washington; a country where modernity, proved by the King’s upbringing abroad, mixed with traditional values, such as his reference to family obligations or his advice to the Americans to “go slow and relax a little more”⁵³⁵. In a way, he must have reminded many Americans of his brother, who was seen in a similar fashion as the symbol of progress and hope for the future democratization of Thailand, despite the dismal conditions at present. By maintaining friendly relations with the monarchy and by asking the King to go on such trips, Sarit had achieved much greater diplomatic successes than he would ever be able on his own.

The Thai king had indeed charmed the United States. The fact that he, and many Thais, received their education in the West was also encouraging. The problem, however, lay in the practical effects these factors had (or should have had) on Thai political life and society. It was already mentioned that the students returning from the United States were in the forefront of the protest against Phibun. While these returnees might have applauded his fall, they certainly had different ideas about the future course of Thailand than Sarit with his views of traditional society. As in many similar cases, he was mostly fascinated by the economic prosperity and technological advancement, without taking into account the political factors and freedoms which have enabled such prosperity and progress. A clash between conservative leadership and a growing progressive, western-educated middle class was likely to grow ever sharper. For the United States, this was an unpleasant scenario. On the one hand, as part of the development aid to Thailand, it had supported the education of the Thais, both in Thailand and in the United States, both by the Fulbright exchange program and by other activities. In 1955, for example, an Institute of Public Administration was created in Thailand with the funding of the U.S. government and help from the University of Indiana; the University of

⁵³⁴ USDS, *FRUS 1958–1960*, pp. 1132–1133.

⁵³⁵ Appearing on a TV program, the King said: “Happiness is the goal of every human being. So if you go so fast you don’t have time to be happy”. He added that the since Thai people lived slower, “there certainly was less need for psychiatrists in Thailand than here [in the United States – J. B.]” Thai King Advises U.S. to Go Slow, Relax More, *The New York Times*, 4. 7. 1960.

Illinois in 1962 started to build a modern faculty of medicine in Chiang Mai in the north of Thailand.⁵³⁶ A framework for scholarly, cultural and educational exchange was also established within the SEATO, to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and ideas between the member states.⁵³⁷ While many of these programs were focused more on technical sciences and fields such as medicine, it was unavoidable that some of the Thai students attending universities in the United States would observe the situation there and would demand similar changes at home. It was rather ironic, and unwelcome for Washington, that some of these students, who obtained their degrees in America, later became anti-American, “leftist” elements because of disillusionment with the situation in Thailand and with the apparent support of the United States for the ruling regime.

The key objectives of American cultural, informational and educational policy at this period, however, lay elsewhere than in democracy promotion. The *Operations Plan for Thailand*, drafted in early 1960, summed up the current situation and the goals of these policies as follows: “Information and Cultural Activities. U.S. informational, cultural and educational activities in Thailand are conducted against the background of difficulties in communication and lack of adequate media of expression common to most underdeveloped Asian countries. However, they are greatly facilitated by the cooperative attitude of the Thai Government and by the fact that the orientation of Thai government policy, both foreign and domestic, continues to be firmly anti-Communist and favorable to the free world... We should continue to strengthen U.S. informational, cultural and educational activities, as appropriate, to expose Communist aims and techniques and to deepen the sense of community of interest and purpose which binds Thailand to the free world. We should encourage and, as feasible, unobtrusively assist the Thai Government to publicize the benefits of cooperating with the free world in general and specifically to give appropriate recognition to its use of American aid as evidence of American concern for Thailand’s welfare...”⁵³⁸ It was of course hoped that eventually, a new generation of pro-Western, usually American-educated leaders, would arise and bring Thailand further on the road to democracy. For the time being, however, the current leadership and its methods had to be accepted so as to maintain stability. The informational and cultural exchange thus mainly focused on anti-Communist propaganda, often in the form of contrasting the communist failures with the prosperity of the “free

⁵³⁶ Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 106.

⁵³⁷ USDS, *DoS Bulletin*, 27. 4. 1959, p. 611.

⁵³⁸ USDS, *FRUS 1958–1960*, p. 1128.

world”, and on emphasizing the importance of American aid in Thailand’s development and prosperity.

One particular area of the anti-Communist propaganda, inspired though not directly disseminated by the U.S., was the Thai movie industry of the 1960s and of the 1970s. A number of films with anti-Communist undertone were shot then, often with the popular actor Mit Chaibancha as the main character. These movies often drew inspiration from the superhero stories of the American provenience. One particular example is the series of movies about the Red Eagle (*Insi daeng* in Thai) which were shot between 1962 and 1970 – namely, *The Venomous Snake* (1962), *The Fall of the Red Eagle* (1963), *The Black Devil* (1966), *The King of Eagles* (1968) and *The Golden Eagle* (1970).⁵³⁹ Other movies, as well as cartoon and adventure books, were also produced with a similar theme. Their effect on the population is debatable – while the movies had a wide audience, it was mostly because of their adventurous character and of the popularity of the starring actors, rather than because of their underlying theme. Besides, the Thai population was already intrinsically more resistant to communism than the population of many neighboring countries – the propaganda played its role, but had the Thai people been more radical and the communist infiltration stronger, it would hardly have had a significant impact on the popular mind. It also has to be noted that much of this propaganda, while in some respect influenced by the United States, stressed the importance of traditional values – community, Buddhist faith, loyalty to the monarchy, opposition to “radical”, “alien” ideas. Thus, while Thailand was closely allied to the United States in many areas, the reflection of American and western culture in general was intentionally suppressed in many of the Thai cultural acts of the 1960s. The United States saw this dichotomy as necessary for the achieving of the overall objective of stopping Communism. It was clear, however, that in the long run, the banned and suppressed “untraditional” western ideas would be gaining more and more popularity and even the government would have to find some way to reconcile them with its “traditional-value-based” platform.

V.1.B.3. The Reassessment of Threats in the Area, New American Priorities and Political Considerations as Reflected in Aid Programs for Thailand

In the late 1950s, President Eisenhower was becoming increasingly reluctant to spend more funds on foreign aid to countries such as Thailand, fearing an overstretch of the American resources and also commitments which could ultimately prove to be too entangling.

⁵³⁹ Harrison, *The Man with Golden Gauntlets*, p. 217.

In case of Thailand, this was combined with the uneasy political situation and the fears about the future course of the country. Already in October 1957, the American Embassy in Thailand expressed the following opinion about the desirability of the continuance of American aid: “... For present consider we should proceed with aid programs on basis of good faith discharging our prior commitment in a normal manner under normal procedures. At same time we should give ourselves *all possible freedom of action* by making no new commitments and *taking no actions* that we could temporarily hold up... We will lose no opportunity to impress on Thais that while *basic friendship* US for Thailand unchanged by recent events and our planning of aid programs *so far* not affect, we are nevertheless observing with keen interest developments and actions of TG... Aid to Thailand *clearly based* more on political than economic or military factors. Thus if political instability continues for substantial period or new government after elections unfriendly *or neutralist*, reappraisal policy basis assistance will become a necessity and we shall probably want to be in position to *exert maximum pressure* should our interest dictate such action [italics added – J. B.]”⁵⁴⁰

It would have seemed that the heyday of the American military and development aid to Thailand was indeed over. After 1957, the annual amount of funds provided to Thailand dropped to approximately USD 24 million⁵⁴¹ and some of the more ambitious development projects were threatened by lower aid appropriations. On the other hand, the Eisenhower Administration was aware that a major disruption or even discontinuation of the aid would not be desirable and could weaken the American position in the country. That the aid, especially the funds that went into the development of infrastructure, could be used for propaganda purposes, was a fact that Washington was certain to use. One such project that was presented in this way was the Friendship Highway between Bangkok and Nakhorn Ratchasima (Korat), finished in July 1958⁵⁴². In total, the construction of roads, bridges and other facilities, which were also intended for the purposes of the military, received a funding totaling USD 97 million between 1954 and 1962.⁵⁴³ Social welfare development, agriculture development and investments into the development industry and mining facilities were also funded, at least partially, by the United States at that period.⁵⁴⁴ Hand in hand with such development projects came investments of American private companies in Thailand, although these investments were still coming rather slowly despite the American interest in the country – as late as 1970,

⁵⁴⁰ USDS, *FRUS 1955–1957*, p. 938.

⁵⁴¹ Darling, *Thailand*, p. 170.

⁵⁴² Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 105.

⁵⁴³ United States Senate. *United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad. Kingdom of Thailand*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1969, p. 613.

⁵⁴⁴ Thak Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand*, p. 170.

American investments only amounted to a total of 5.7 % of total foreign capital invested in the country.⁵⁴⁵ The mutual trade exchange also gradually grew – the American exports to Thailand were at this time mainly industrial products, while Thailand exported raw materials (such as rubber and tin)⁵⁴⁶ and agricultural commodities, mainly rice.

Of course the majority of aid to Thailand was still used for strictly military purposes. In the later years of the Eisenhower Administration, however, Washington started to emphasize more and more that a direct attack on Thailand by communist forces was not likely. The main danger was seen in communist subversion and insurgence tactics, which could occasionally evolve into guerilla warfare. These conclusions were confirmed by the American observers in Bangkok. For example, Ambassador Bishop wrote in December 1957 that “... it appears... more likely that any military operations in Thailand would be of a guerilla-type rather than of mass armed invasion...”⁵⁴⁷

These arguments were then used to justify possible curtailing of the military and even development aid to Thailand. President Eisenhower and the members of his administration made it clear on a number of occasions that they considered the aid levels to be too high. They were, however, aware that the issue was a very sensitive one, one from the security viewpoint but from the political viewpoint – for Sarit, the continuance of American aid was a matter of personal prestige and, in a way, also of bolstering his position against his rivals. The Department of State noted in 1958, prior to Sarit’s meeting with Secretary of State Dulles, that “...Because of much publicity in the Bangkok press regarding Sarit’s alleged intention of asking for more aid to help Thailand out of the present budgetary difficulties, *his reputation is involved in this matter to a considerable extent. It will be necessary to handle him most tactfully* if his trip – so far successful in terms of his personal health⁵⁴⁸ – is not to lay the foundation for doubts and criticism regarding the U.S. *which his leftist confidants undoubtedly wish to promote* [italics added – J. B.]”⁵⁴⁹ While the assertion that Sarit’s *leftist confidants* would misuse the curtailing of American aid for their anti-American propaganda was largely inaccurate, these remarks clearly revealed the concern that was felt in Washington over the possible political repercussions of a policy change. Thailand was, despite all the initial doubts about Sarit and his government, a steadfast ally of the United States and one of

⁵⁴⁵ Vichitvong na Pombhejara (ed.). *Readings in Thailand’s Political Economy*. Bangkok: Bangkok Printing Enterprise, 1978, p. 249.

⁵⁴⁶ By 1958, the United States imported most of the tin and rubber produced in Thailand. *The Happy Kingdom, Fortune*, 1958 (April), pp. 132–133.

⁵⁴⁷ USDS, *FRUS 1955–1957*, p. 945.

⁵⁴⁸ This was the time when Sarit came to the United States to undergo surgery at the Walter Reed Hospital.

⁵⁴⁹ USDS, *FRUS 1958–1960*, p. 1001.

the most important components of Washington's foreign-policy strategy in the region. While with the benefit of hindsight it is possible to say now that Thailand was extremely unlikely to turn away from the United States, these fears existed in Washington in 1957 and 1958. While on the one hand the aid could be used as a leverage to make sure the Thai government honored its agreements, on the other it could not be completely stopped or even significantly curtailed because then this leverage would have been lost.

The "tactful handling" of this matter, which was hinted at in the previous quotation, could be observed in the Secretary of State's and his deputy's remarks during his meeting with Sarit on May 14, 1958: "... Mentioning the limited funds Congress provides for programs to fight Communism abroad, the Secretary indicated a likelihood that appropriations for this purpose would be considerably less than requested this year. He stated that we ration these funds on the basis of the best judgments we can make in the light of the world situation. In this connection he explained that the United States gives substantial aid to India and some other neutrals because their loss to the Communists would be a disaster for the United States *and its allies including Thailand. We think the failure of the neutral nations to join collective defense measures and to alert their peoples to the Communist threat is wrong*, but it is important that we try to preserve their independence. Assistant Secretary Robertson noted that on a per capita basis, economic aid to Thailand, exclusive of more than \$225 million military assistance, has amounted to over six times that given India [italics added – J. B.]."⁵⁵⁰

There are several lines of argumentation that can be observed in these remarks. First, the principle of Eisenhower's domino theory of 1954 was apparently used to justify giving aid to India and other "neutrals", which were not reliable and steadfast in their opposition to communism, but the loss of which to the communist aggression could tip the scales in favor of the Soviet Union and China. It was almost as if the United States was apologizing to Thailand at this point for not being able to provide the same amount of aid because it had to finance other, less precious, allies at the same time. On the other hand, however, Thailand was made to feel important and privileged, because, as emphasized, India was receiving a much lower per capita aid. So it was a combination between stoking Thailand's pride and explaining that despite its important position, it could actually receive less aid, because it was in fact in Bangkok's own interest.

One more thing is worth mentioning in this respect, and that is the remark that it is actually the Congress which provides the limited (it was actually indicated in a footnote to

⁵⁵⁰ USDS, *FRUS 1958-1960*, pp. 1001-1002.

another document that Dulles might have used the word “inadequate” rather than “limited”) funds for the fight against communism abroad. This remark was indeed true, because Congress approved the appropriations and the budget. However, in dealing with the allies, especially in Asia, the Congress, and in fact the entire American political system, often served as a convenient excuse and sometimes as a scapegoat for the American failure to fulfill their allies’ demands. This was a general trend, apparent in many cases, for example later during the Nixon-Kissinger years and their attempts on triangular diplomacy. While they often promised the Chinese leaders certain concessions in private, they were often unable to push these concessions through the Congress, and in turn, were losing credibility with Mao Zedong and Chou En-lai who took these promises at face value⁵⁵¹. Especially for those leaders, who were accustomed to a completely different type of government and were not acquainted with western politics, arguments such as these often seemed like hollow excuses. This might have been the case of Sarit as well. While “acknowledging the difficulties of the United States Government in obtaining sufficient appropriations, Field Marshal Sarit stated that it is his duty to emphasize the urgent problem arising from external and internal Communist pressures on Thailand... He stated that United States aid would assist the stability not only of Thailand but of the whole region...”⁵⁵² Clearly, Sarit saw the continuation of the aid as one of the priorities of his government and the justification for it remained the same as before – the danger of communist aggression and/or subversion. This card, even though by 1958 the American officials doubted that Thailand would be one of the primary communist target, still carried a lot of weight and was to carry even more in the years to come.

Once more, it was the developments on the international scene that had ensured Thailand would receive a continuous flow of aid and keep its place as one of the most important American allies. By 1960, the situation in Indochina was deteriorating, with the Diem government in South Vietnam proving to be more and more unpopular and incompetent. Since 1959, the military attacks of Ho Chi Minh’s North against the South were increasing, and while President Eisenhower tried to avoid military involvement in the country, his successor John F. Kennedy eventually sent in some 16,500 American advisors.⁵⁵³

The situation was even more critical in Laos, where the government of Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone was under increasing pressure from the Pathet Lao forces, supported by the

⁵⁵¹ For more on this problem and the use of domestic policy problems to justify foreign policy “failures”, see for example: Bečka, Jan. *The Full Generation of Peace and the Sino-American Rapprochement, 1969–1976. The Domestic Factors and Influences on the American Foreign Policy during the Nixon and Ford Administrations* (M.A. Thesis, unpublished). Prague: Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, 2007.

⁵⁵² USDS, *FRUS 1958–1960*, p. 1002.

⁵⁵³ Hook and Spanier, *American Foreign Policy*, pp. 93–94.

Viet Minh. By the summer of 1959, the situation grew so grave that the Laotian government asked for a United Nations intervention⁵⁵⁴. The United States had approved additional aid to the Lao army and militia in August⁵⁵⁵ and in September the State Department had openly accused the communist governments of supporting the Pathet Lao: “It is now clear that the Communist bloc does not intend to permit the sovereign Lao Government to remain at peace... That outside Communist intervention exists is demonstrated by (1) the assistance evidently being received by the Communist forces within Laos, including supplies and military weapons that could be provided only from Communist territory; (2) the false – and ridiculous – Communist propaganda emanating simultaneously from Hanoi, Peiping, and Moscow to the effect that the Lao Government has been instigated by the United States to ‘stir up a civil war’ within its boundaries; (3) the continuing flow from Moscow, Peiping, and Hanoi of propaganda and false information about [sic] the situation in Laos aimed at confusing world opinion and stating that the U.S. is using Laos as military base; and (4) the fact that the military outbreak in Laos has followed conferences in Moscow and Peiping between Ho Chi Minh and Soviet and Chinese Communist leaders and also conferences in Moscow between two members of the north Viet-Nam Politburo and Deputy Prime Minister Anastas Mikoyan.”⁵⁵⁶

Despite increased American aid, the crisis in Laos continued in 1960 and 1961. In March 1961, during the premiership of Prince Boun Oum, President Kennedy became convinced of the need to send a contingent of marines to Thailand to be deployed close to the Laotian border and sent *USS Midway* to the Gulf of Thailand, with forces deployed in Japan being readied for possible action.⁵⁵⁷ While Thailand had advocated a more forcible approach to the crisis in Laos, and even called for SEATO intervention, the deployment of American troops (mostly stationed in Udon Thani close to the Laotian border) was rather unexpected

⁵⁵⁴ For the original of the letter to the UN Security Council, see *Note Dated 59/09/04 to the Secretary-general from the Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Laos to the United Nations*. United Nations Security Council, S/4212 (N5920911), 5. 9. 1959. In response, the Security Council decided to send a special investigation team composed of members from four countries (Argentina, Italy, Japan and Tunisia) to check the veracity of the allegations of communist subversion of the government. *Security Council Resolution (1959)*. United Nations Security Council, S/RES/4216 (1959) (N5921016), 8. 9. 1959.

⁵⁵⁵ The announcement was made to the press on August 26. Blaming the communist forces for creating unrest in the country, the Eisenhower Administration announced: “The United States has... responded to specific requests from the Lao Government for improving its defense position by authorizing sufficient additional aid to permit temporary emergency increases in the Lao National Army and in the village militia which provides local police protection.” United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*. 14. 9. 1959, vol. XLI, no. 1055, p. 374.

⁵⁵⁶ United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*. 21. 9. 1959, vol. XLI, no. 1056, p. 414.

⁵⁵⁷ Cohen, *America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1991*, p. 153.

and according to some sources, could have been negotiated directly with the Thai military without consulting the government.⁵⁵⁸

In any case, the Kennedy years clearly showed the limits of the Eisenhower policy in the previous years as well as the role that Thailand was to play in the American plans in the future. First, it became apparent that SEATO was not an effective organization which could deal with communist aggression, especially if this aggression took on the form of guerilla warfare, and Thailand became acutely aware of this problem.⁵⁵⁹ In May 1958, the Secretary of State Dulles stated that "...while the military situation is much better than it was eight or ten years ago, at present the greatest danger is infiltration, such as has taken place to some extent in Laos... except in case of open military aggression, Communist pressures must be stopped by the vigilance of local governments and the dedication of their peoples to freedom."⁵⁶⁰ The basic tenet of Eisenhower's policy that the local governments could withstand the communist attacks if given sufficient American aid was unraveling very fast in the early 1960s. Developments in Laos, Cambodia or Southern Vietnam instead demonstrated the weakness of the local governments and the hollowness of such phrases as "dedication to freedom". The Laotian crisis also demonstrated that even limited direct American intervention and the threat of force did not necessarily lead to a successful outcome.

President Kennedy was no doubt aware of these problems. While stopping short of leading the United States into an open war with the communist forces in Indochina, he started to expand the American military presence in the area. And, once more as in the past, Thailand was to serve as the main American base of operations, being the most stable and reliable of its Asian allies and being located close to the threatened areas. These priorities were well reflected in an article written by Frank C. Darling in 1962. Listing options for the future American foreign policy toward Thailand, he argued that what should follow was "... a gradual reduction of military aid unless there is *convincing evidence* that an invasion of Thailand is imminent. The present Thai army of 92,000 men *would have little effect* if Communist China were bent on aggression... The security of Thailand like that of most small countries depends *primarily on the protection provided by the United States rather than its own limited military power* [italics added – J. B.]."⁵⁶¹ Even though Darling's main priority was to underscore the need for the United States to help democratize and liberalize Thailand,

⁵⁵⁸ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 163.

⁵⁵⁹ Nuechterlein, D, Thailand and SEATO, p. 1175.

⁵⁶⁰ USDS, *FRUS 1958–1960*, p. 1002.

⁵⁶¹ Darling, American Policy in Thailand, p. 109. The author instead advocated the expansion of non-military aid aimed at raising the standard of living of the Thai population and making it less vulnerable to communist subversion.

his arguments were shared by the American military officials and members of the administration, and, in fact, were already stated by some years earlier. The fact that Thailand would not be able to defend itself against an open communist attack was obvious, but such an attack was not expected in 1961 or 1962. The problem was, however, that the United States found it difficult to utilize Thai forces in fighting the local insurgencies in the neighboring countries as well, especially since these countries were not members of the SEATO. It was from these countries, however, that the danger of communist infiltration could spill over into Thailand. Already in fall of 1961, the JCS observed that “the fall of South Vietnam would lead to fairly rapid communization of neighboring countries” and called for “a deployment of a strong U.S. military force rather than a gradual entry of units.”⁵⁶² While Kennedy initially resisted this pressure, it became more and more apparent that without the introduction of American units, Indochina would be lost, something Eisenhower had warned him about when leaving office. This introduction of units would, among other things, place more demands on providing adequate infrastructure and logistical support in Vietnam but also in the neighboring countries.

For Thailand, the new American approach was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, Sarit’s regime realized that Thailand was no longer a real partner in defending the freedom of Southeast Asia. Instead, it was becoming a staging area for American troops with a limited say in shaping or even influencing American policy in the region. Under the existing circumstances, Thailand would become more and more dependent on American aid and on the support of the United States to defend its sovereignty. Once more, the old dilemma between guaranteeing the country’s security at the expense of tilting too much toward one strong power and thus closing other policy options came to the fore. The Laotian crisis of 1960–1962 and the inefficiency of SEATO, blamed mostly on the British and French unwillingness to act, represented a turning point in the Thai thinking. Some politicians, like the Minister of Foreign Affairs Thanat Koman, argued that “Thailand should rely less on outside powers and look to its own resources and cooperation with Asian neighbors.”⁵⁶³ Such statements did not escape attention of the Kennedy Administration and of the American public. *The New York Times* reported in May 1961 that Thailand’s anti-communist resolve is weakening due to the inability of SEATO to effectively intervene in Laos in order “to prevent

⁵⁶² Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara called for about 200,000 soldiers, including reserve units, which could successfully deal with the communist attempts to take over the country. USAF Historical Division Liaison Office. *USAF Plans and Policies in South Vietnam 1961–1963*. K 168.01.01, p. 11.

⁵⁶³ Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 108.

a Communist takeover” there and that “drift toward neutralism in Thailand... was to be expected”.⁵⁶⁴

Despite the apparent disappointment in Thailand with the way the crisis in Laos was handled and growing disillusionment with the limits of the collective defense in the region, however, it would be an exaggeration to say that the Sarit government as such harbored any serious thought of abandoning its cooperation with the United States. While Bangkok might not have been happy with the developments, there was no other viable alternative than to continue the current course, as neutralism was not an option by 1961. On the other hand, Washington was aware of the uncertainty and irritation in Thailand and sought to allay its fears by publicly pledging its support for Thai independence and sovereignty. This was exactly the mission of Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, who was dispatched to Thailand and other Asian countries by Kennedy in May 1961. While in Bangkok, he promised more military aid in the “face of intensified Communist pressure from the direction of Laos” and assured the Thais in a televised speech that “... nothing is more important to the United States than protecting the integrity of your great country”.⁵⁶⁵ While holding talks with Sarit, Johnson “stressed that the President of the United States had sent him on this mission to inform the Prime Minister personally and directly of the United States Government’s complete understanding of Thailand’s concern over the threats to peace and security in Southeast Asia, and conveyed the President’s intense interest in the preservation of independence and political integrity of Thailand and other free countries of Southeast Asia.”⁵⁶⁶ In a joint communiqué issued by both sides, Johnson extended the American assurances to Thailand by stating that “(3) The United States Government expressed its determination to honor its treaty commitments to support Thailand – its ally and historic friend – in defense against subversion and Communist aggression. (4) Both Governments recognize the utmost importance of preserving the integrity and independence of Thailand.”⁵⁶⁷

These assurances went further than the previous American commitments to Thailand, but were still short of what Phibun had tried to achieve several years earlier – that is, a bilateral defense pact that Washington was previously trying to avoid. Even now, the Kennedy Administration was initially leery of entering into such a commitment, even though it was convinced that Thailand was vital for its plans in Southeast Asia. It might have hoped

⁵⁶⁴ Reappraisal in Thailand, *The New York Times*, 12. 5. 1961.

⁵⁶⁵ Johnson and Thais Agree to Increase in U.S. Military Aid, *The New York Times*, 18. 5. 1961.

⁵⁶⁶ United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*. 19. 6. 1961, vol. XLIV, no. 1147, pp. 958–959.

⁵⁶⁷ USDS, *DoS Bulletin*, 19. 6. 1961, p. 959.

to avoid such an agreement by intensifying the aid to Thailand and indeed, in 1963 \$42.9 million was spent on construction works alone (in the previous nine years, this sum amounted to just \$97.5 million).⁵⁶⁸ More aid was provided by the USAID for social welfare and development projects, especially in the underdeveloped and vulnerable Northeast of Thailand close to the Laotian border. It eventually became apparent, though, that the aid itself would not be enough to satisfy Thailand especially since the situation in other countries in Southeast Asia was clearly deteriorating. In 1962, the United States had 180 dead, wounded or missing soldiers in Vietnam; in 1963 it was already 601; the number of sorties made by some of the American aircraft units in Vietnam had more than doubled between the same two years.⁵⁶⁹ Some of the leading Thai politicians might have feared that the United States was not unwavering in its commitment to defend South Vietnam, where more and more charges against the weak and corrupted Diem government began to appear⁵⁷⁰, or Laos and Cambodia, where the communist-backed forces were gathering strength. Sarit also might have felt that under these circumstances, when the traditional Thai neutralist policy was abandoned, more could be obtained from the United States than just assurances of friendship and aid. On the one hand, he knew that by siding with Washington, like Phibun had done in the past, he risked being attacked by the pro-neutralist fractions of the Thai society, politics and army. He was willing to take this risk, but in exchange he was expecting a clear-cut American commitment to defend his country. Sarit was also aware that the United States was more open to such concessions now and was anxious to preserve the pro-western orientation of Thailand, as apparent from the visit of Lyndon Johnson and other important American politicians⁵⁷¹.

Finally, Sarit had gotten what he and some of his predecessor had wanted. In March 1962, after Thai Minister of Foreign Affairs Thanat Khoman traveled to Washington and met with the Secretary of State Dean Rusk, a joint statement was issued, which, among other things, stated: "... The Foreign Minister and the Secretary of State reviewed the close association of Thailand and the United States in the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty and agreed that such association in an effective deterrent to direct Communist aggression

⁵⁶⁸ United States Senate, *United States Security Agreements*, p. 621.

⁵⁶⁹ For example, the United States Air Force C-123 unit had made 11,689 sorties in 1962 and 24,429 sorties in 1963. USAF, *USAF Plans and Policies in South Vietnam 1961–1963*, pp. 102, 106.

⁵⁷⁰ For example, already in May 1961 the Secretary of State Dean Rusk was asked during a press conference about the need to reform the "reactionary" and "corrupt" South Vietnamese government. His answer to this question was rather evasive, but it was apparent that there was growing concern in Washington about the inability of Diem to make his rule more popular. United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*. 22. 5. 1961, vol. XLIV, no. 1143, pp. 759–760.

⁵⁷¹ Among these visitors was, for example, U.S. Attorney General and President's brother Robert Kennedy. He stopped by in Bangkok on his way from South Vietnam and met with the King and with Sarit. Robert Kennedy Talks with Thailand Premier, *The New York Times*, 20. 2. 1962.

against Thailand. They agreed that the Treaty provides the basis for the signatories collectively to assist Thailand in case of Communist armed attack against that country. *The Secretary of State assured the Foreign Minister that in the event of such aggression, the United States intends to give full effect to its obligations under the Treaty to act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional process. The Secretary of State reaffirmed that this obligation of the United States does not depend upon the prior agreement of all other parties to the Treaty, since this Treaty obligation is individual as well as collective.*⁵⁷² The joint statement also affirmed American willingness to help Thailand battle the indirect Communist aggression. Overall, while Khoman and Rusk used the SEATO framework as the basis, it was clear that Thailand had gotten assurances that went further than what SEATO could normally offer. Although direct communist attack on Thailand was not very likely, it was the psychological aspect that mattered. For one, Thailand had, perhaps for the first time, concluded what amounted to a bilateral defense pact with the United States. And, as a result, it could feel somewhat privileged compared to the other American allies who lacked such a “special treatment”. As stated above, if Sarit was to be criticized for following Phibun and abandoning the traditional policy of balancing out foreign influences, than this statement could be presented as an achievement to justify his decision. In response to the Rusk-Khoman statement, Sarit publicly thanked the United States for being a true friend of Thailand and underscored the fact that the statement covered both external and internal threats to Thai sovereignty.⁵⁷³ This again showed that internal subversion was viewed with much greater concern than any possibility of open attack on Thailand.

The United States understood the rationale behind Sarit’s thinking. While he remained opposed to a settlement in Laos which would establish another “neutralist” government, he would accept it if the United States resolutely demonstrated its willingness to prevent a communist takeover in Vientiane and to, first of all, prevent something similar from happening in Thailand. President Kennedy preferred the compromise solution in Laos, but to satisfy the Thai leadership, agreed, upon the request of the Thai government, to dispatch American military units to Thailand in May 1962. This move followed a SEATO military exercise, which had failed to slow down the Pathet Lao advance in Laos. Thus, on May 15, it was decided that a detachment of 4,000 troops would be sent to Thailand.⁵⁷⁴ In announcing this decision, Kennedy stated that “... These forces are to help insure the territorial integrity

⁵⁷² United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*. 26. 3. 1962, vol. XLVI, no. 1187, p. 498.

⁵⁷³ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 164.

⁵⁷⁴ Troops Sent to Thailand Drawn from a Far-flung Pacific Force, *The New York Times*, 16. 5. 1962.

of this peaceful country [Thailand – J. B.]. The dispatch of United States forces to Thailand was considered desirable because of recent attacks in Laos by Communist forces and the subsequent movement of Communist military units toward the border of Thailand. A threat to Thailand is of grave concern to the United States... There is no change in our policy toward Laos, which continues to be the reestablishment of an effective cease-fire and prompt negotiations for a government of national union.”⁵⁷⁵

Even though the Pathet Lao were gaining upper hand in Laos, it was unlikely they would have threatened Thailand. Their main objective was to win the struggle in their own country and the Pathet Lao leaders did not wish to draw Bangkok into the conflict. Even if the communist forces did cross the Mekong at some point, it was likely that the Thai army would be able to stop their advance and drive them back. The decision to send troops was thus mainly intended as a sign to the Thai government that the United States takes the Rusk-Khoman statement seriously and, also, that it would actually be able to intervene in Thailand if the situation *really* called for it.⁵⁷⁶ The United States was, however, at the same time trying to present this move as a collective action and pressed the other SEATO states to join in – as *The New York Times* reported: “According to a reliable source, the ambassadors here [in Bangkok – J. B.] of Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines and Britain, who with the United States and Thailand constitute the member nations of the anti-Communist defensive pact, have sent urgent messages to their governments asking whether it is possible for them to send *even token forces* to Thailand [italics added – J. B.]”⁵⁷⁷ The United States was apparently still not ready for a unilateral commitment in the area and at the same time, saw this as an opportunity to revive the SEATO and show that it was able to act. It was, however, clear that in case of need, it would be the United States who would carry the burden, although grudgingly. President Kennedy, when asked how long would the American troops be deployed in Thailand, answered that “we’re out to make a judgment on what the situation is in those areas... I quite agree that when you put troops in, they become difficult to

⁵⁷⁵ United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*. 4. 6. 1962, vol. XLVI, no. 1197, pp. 904–905.

⁵⁷⁶ Another reason for sending the units was of course to put pressure on the Soviet Union, which the United States believed could make the Pathet Lao leaders accept the neutralist government solution. As many other times in the future, the United States had somewhat overestimated the Soviet influence in the region, as the rebel movements in Indochina had skillfully maneuvered between Moscow and Beijing and neither of the two communist powers had a decisive influence over their decisions.

⁵⁷⁷ 1,800 U.S. Marines Reach Thailand, *The New York Times*, 17. 5. 1962.

take out, unless the situation is stable, so that I've not ever said that the troop movement into Thailand could... its end could be predicted."⁵⁷⁸

Kennedy's statements were clearly an attempt to satisfy both the domestic audience, wary of long-term commitments overseas, especially in Asia, and the Thai (and Asian) leaders anxious to see the United States resolutely determined to oppose communist aggression. In the long-run, however, such statements could not satisfy either of these audiences, especially if the situation deteriorated further, and the Kennedy approach would have had either to change or would have failed. For now, however, it seemed to have worked. In July 1962, *The Declaration of the Neutrality of Laos*⁵⁷⁹ and an attached protocol were agreed on in Geneva, and a neutralist government was formed in Laos under the leadership of Prince Souvanna Phouma⁵⁸⁰. The American units in Thailand, ready to stay "as long as they were needed"⁵⁸¹, began to withdraw.⁵⁸² The situation in the area seemed to have calmed down, but serious problems remained in Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam, where the Diem government was becoming and more troublesome. It remains largely a speculation, of course, how President Kennedy would have approached these problems and what role Thailand would have played in his plans. His assassination in Dallas on 22 November 1963, coming only twenty days after the coup in South Vietnam and the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem on November 2, and preceding only by several days the death of Marshal Sarit Thanarat on December 8, put Lyndon Johnson into the Oval Office. The death of these three men, although unrelated to each other, had symbolically sealed one era of the American involvement in Southeast Asia and more particularly of the Thai-American relationship. The years that followed put this relationship under test and brought little positive from both the American and the Thai perspectives.

⁵⁷⁸ The President also noted, however, that the obligations in Southeast Asia were not the same as in Europe. The article stated that "an attack upon one country is not automatically considered an attack upon all members of the Southeast Asia alliance." President Says Removal of Troops from Thailand Would Be Difficult, *The New York Times*, 24. 5. 1962.

⁵⁷⁹ For the full text of the declaration, see: Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos. Signed at Geneva, on 23 July 1962 (No. 6564). *Nations Unies – Recueil des Traités*. New York: United Nations, 1963, pp. 302–357.

⁵⁸⁰ Souvanna Phouma, who already held the post three times before, then remained prime minister until the ultimate takeover by the Pathet Lao in 1975.

⁵⁸¹ 1,800 U.S. Marines Reach Thailand, *The New York Times*, 17. 5. 1962.

⁵⁸² Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 110.

**CHAPTER VI – “AMERICA’S LONGEST WAR”⁵⁸³: THAILAND’S ROLE IN
AMERICAN STRATEGY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA DURING THE SECOND
INDOCHINA WAR AND ITS TRANSFORMATIONS AND LIMITS, 1964–1975**

The Death of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in December 1963 occurred at a particularly unfortunate time for Thailand and its Western allies of the increasingly dangerous political situation prevailing in Southeast Asia... For the West, the death of Marshal Sarit meant that the one country in Southeast Asia, which seemed capable and determined to withstand the southward push of Chinese influence would enter a period of political uncertainty whose outcome was difficult to predict...

Donald E. Neuchterlein (Thailand after Sarit, May 1964)⁵⁸⁴

The events, mentioned in the closing paragraphs of the last chapter, had profound implications for the course of American involvement in Southeast Asia in general and for the role of Thailand in American foreign policy in particular. The deaths of John F. Kennedy, Ngo Dinh Diem and Sarit Thanarat had led to a leadership change in all of the countries involved. In the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, a man of shrewd political acumen but certainly with less charisma and much less interest in foreign policy, became president. In South Vietnam, a succession of weak leaders followed Diem as various factions and influential personas vied for power, further adding to the instability of the country and to its vulnerability. In Thailand, Thanom Kittikachorn, one of the closest aides of Sarit, became prime minister and promised to continue the same course that Sarit had charted – a strong executive and major government involvement in developing the country and raising the living standards of the people.⁵⁸⁵ Of all these three changes, the one in Thailand thus seemed the least disturbing even though some observers had feared that Thanom would not prove as capable as Sarit in protecting the country from the dangers of communism. And especially after 1964, this danger seemed to be growing almost by the hour.

The following chapter seeks to summarize some of the major trends and developments in the Thai-American relations of this turbulent and dramatic period. As the events of the Vietnam War are very well known and researched, they will only be mentioned as far as having direct influence on this relationship. It will also be necessary to mention the political

⁵⁸³ The term “America’s longest war” referred for a considerable period of time to the American involvement in the Second Indochina War (1965–1973). It can no longer be applied in this context, however, as the conflict in Afghanistan after 9/11 has already exceeded the battle commitment to Vietnam. For the purposes of this thesis the term was adopted from Cohen, *America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1991*, chapter 6 (pp. 147–181).

⁵⁸⁴ Neuchterlein, Donald E. *Thailand after Sarit*, *Asian Survey*, 1964 (May), vol. 4, no. 5, p. 842.

⁵⁸⁵ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 227.

developments in both countries, especially in the United States, where the election of Richard M. Nixon in 1968 ushered in the “golden years of détente” and an attempt at a major reassessment of the Asian (and for that matter, global) foreign policy strategy of the United States.

VI.1. – “The Most Willing Allies”: The Johnson Administration and Thailand, 1963–1968

Despite the above mentioned anxiety about the death of Sarit, the United States did not expect a major change of policy course in Thailand. The very amount of finances invested in Thailand’s infrastructure and military installations, which was increasing already during the Kennedy years, should have been enough to ensure the loyalty of Thai army. In fiscal year 1963, for example, almost USD 7.5 million was committed to military camps and communications construction, while approximately USD 8 million was spent on improving airports and related facilities mainly in Northern and Northeastern Thailand, which could be used both by the Thai Air Force but also by the U.S. military.⁵⁸⁶ The deteriorating situation in Indochina made it increasingly likely that the deployment of American troops on Thailand’s soil, which was previously only a temporary measure, might become permanent.

As in the past years, “stability” and “continuity” prevailed over other concerns in the American foreign policy toward Thailand. Sarit’s rule was now presented by some American officials as that of a “benevolent dictator” who succeeded in “providing both external and internal security for Thailand without transforming it into a police state (!)”, “a kind of government welcomed by the Thai people”.⁵⁸⁷ This was surely an exaggeration, but it has to be noted that in comparison with Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, the Thai government did definitely seem more capable of mustering public support and maintaining stability while at the same time keeping the communists at bay. It is again interesting to note the transformation of the public discourse and image created by the American administration and media – while in 1957, Sarit was viewed with suspicion and even accused of pro-communist/leftist sympathies, now in his obituary he was called “a strong friend of the United States and an implacable foe of Communism”.⁵⁸⁸

To promote the much desired stability and continuity, it was logical that the Johnson Administration did not seek to interfere in Thai politics as long as the government continued

⁵⁸⁶ These included facilities in, for example, Udon Thani, Chiang Mai or Nakhorn Ratchasima. United States Senate, *United States Security Agreements*, p. 614.

⁵⁸⁷ Neuchterlein, *Thailand after Sarit*, p. 843.

⁵⁸⁸ Premier Sarit, 55, Dies in Thailand, *The New York Times*, 9. 12. 1963.

to fulfill its obligations in this respect. The continued Thai dedication to fighting communism was taken almost for granted by now and Thanom further reinforced this notion when he stated publicly that the friendship for the West and the combat against communism would continue. Like his predecessors, he made sure that this assurance of Thailand's commitment reached the American audience as well⁵⁸⁹. Thus, even more than in 1957/1958, the personal changes in government were considered irrelevant to the American interests in the area – also due to the fact that this time, there was no coup but an “orderly succession of power”. The fact that the death of the “benevolent dictator” could lead to at least some democratization of the Thai political system was not seriously considered. Not only was any disturbance undesirable, but the Johnson Administration was more and more absorbed by the developments in the countries of former French Indochina and paid attention to Thailand only when the fight against communism was involved. The attitude of the Johnson Administration was summed up well in a letter from the Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman to the American Ambassador in Thailand Graham Martin dated March 2, 1964: “As you can readily imagine, the coup rumors emanating from Thailand recently have us all feeling a bit uneasy. Given the situation in the rest of Southeast Asia, a coup d’etat in Thailand at this time ‘is all we need’. Quite seriously, we are concerned about the impact on American public opinion of such an event, which would undermine the present faith in Thailand as *the only stable country in the area*, thus adding to the growing feeling of pessimism about the future of Southeast Asia and our ability to influence favorably the course of events there. *Thai stock is exceptionally high here at present* as a result of their role in the Malaysian dispute, the relative restraint they have shown in the Cambodian dispute, and the smooth transfer of power to Thanom and Thanom’s good beginning.”⁵⁹⁰ Even the more liberal contemporary analysts, who previously criticized the developments in Thailand, now praised Thanom for being “honest” and “selfless” while at the same time worried about his “not as powerful and aggressive personality” (compared to that of Sarit).⁵⁹¹

The Johnson Administration made its continued support for Thailand apparent when defending the requests for foreign aid appropriations in December 1963. In a testimony before the Congress, Secretary of State Dean Rusk stated that “... Supporting assistance will largely be provided to a *few key nations* on the borders of Communist bloc – Korea, Viet-Nam, Laos,

⁵⁸⁹ Thailand's New Premier Promises to Honor Pacts, *The New York Times*, 20. 12. 1963.

⁵⁹⁰ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*. Volume XXVII. Mainland Southeast Asia. Regional Affairs, Document 266. Available at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d266> [last access 26. 3. 2011].

⁵⁹¹ Thanom's experience with governing and the fact that he had already established some contacts abroad were seen as another asset. Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, pp. 212–213.

and to Jordan, the Congo and Bolivia. If we do not provide support, these nations would soon be subverted or overrun, with *severe repercussions for our own security*. Two examples are Viet-Nam or Thailand – *vital to our position in Southeast Asia* [italics added – J. B.]”⁵⁹² Again, while the imminent danger of losing Thailand was rather an overstatement, intended to support the Administration’s plea in the face of proposed budgetary cuts by Congress, it was certainly reassuring for the Thanom government that Thailand was considered a key nation, vital to the American security interests. In this respect, the Johnson Administration had clearly adopted the policy of its predecessors.

President Johnson soon found himself facing a major crisis in Southeast Asia. In early August 1964, after two incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin (August 2 and August 4) involving American and North Vietnamese war ships, the President had decided to drastically upscale American involvement in Vietnam. This decision had been considered and expected for some time, as many American military officials and members of the Johnson Administration felt the need to demonstrate the American resolve and to bolster the weak and ineffective South Vietnamese government.⁵⁹³ The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed by the Congress on August 10, 1964, authorized the president “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent any further aggression.”⁵⁹⁴ It gave the president even wider mandate, however: “The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia... the United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state⁵⁹⁵ of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in the defense of its freedom”.⁵⁹⁶ It is perhaps telling that in the wording of the resolution the national interest of the United States was placed ahead of the world peace – the Johnson Administration now considered Southeast Asia one of the crucial battlegrounds, if not the most important, in the fight against communism. It was not only a matter of securing military and economic interests, but also a matter of prestige. Even Johnson himself, who was not among the most hawkish members of his administration, would not condone any move that he would consider

⁵⁹² United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*. 30. 12. 1963, vol. XLIX, no. 1279, p. 1003.

⁵⁹³ Cohen, *America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1991*, pp. 163–164.

⁵⁹⁴ *H.J. Res. 1145, Public Law 88-408. Joint Resolution of the Congress*. Available at <http://www.footnote.com/image/#4346698> [last access 25. 3. 2011].

⁵⁹⁵ This was a reference to South Vietnam, which was not a member state of SEATO and as such, was not covered fully by its provisions.

⁵⁹⁶ *H.J. Res. 1145, Public Law 88-408. Joint Resolution of the Congress*, <http://www.footnote.com/image/#4346698> [last access 25. 3. 2011].

irresolute or weak. Clearly, the past experiences of McCarthyism and of the need to manifest one's resoluteness and determination weighed heavily on the president's decisions. Peter Beinart mentions a quote from Johnson's interview with his biographer, which perhaps explains this feeling in the best possible way: "I would see myself tied to the ground in the middle of a long, open space. In the distance, I could hear the voices of thousands of people. They were all shouting at me and running toward me: 'Coward! Traitor! Weakling.' They kept coming closer. They began throwing stones. At exactly that moment I would generally wake up... terribly shaken."⁵⁹⁷ While such fears alone could not explain why President Johnson went along with the decision to expand American involvement in the area, they do shed some interesting light on some of the moves he had undertaken and on the motives behind these moves, in comparison with, for example, Richard Nixon.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident and the subsequent intensification of American military operations in Southeast Asia had profound implications for Thailand and its role. For one, it now seemed obvious that despite the official proclamations, SEATO is not going to play a major part in this fight. Instead the fighting was to be done by the United States, with the (somewhat questionable) support of the governments of Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam. This development in a way confirmed Thailand's doubts about the effectiveness of SEATO in confronting the communist threat. Second, Thailand's role as a staging area for American troops was to increase in proportion with the escalation of American military activity, especially the airstrikes. Some American units were deployed in Thailand already in the first half of 1964. After the first clash in the Gulf of Tonkin on August 4, the US command began sending more military planes to the area. In addition to other reinforcements, 4 KB-50 and 4 F-100 planes were deployed in the Takhli base and 18 F-105 jets moved to Korat (Nakhorn Ratchasima).⁵⁹⁸ Since then, the number of American planes and also troops in Thailand rose continually – by the end of 1964 there were 77 planes and 4,283 military personnel stationed in the country⁵⁹⁹. By the end of 1965, one and half years after the Gulf of Tonkin incident there were 14,107 American soldiers and 205 jets in Thailand.⁶⁰⁰ By December 1968, when President Johnson's time in office was about to end, these numbers rose to 47,800 military

⁵⁹⁷ Beinart, *The Icarus Syndrome*, p. 163.

⁵⁹⁸ Most of these planes were originally deployed in Japan. USAF Historical Division Liaison Office. *USAF Plans and Policies in South Vietnam and Laos 1964*. K168-01-3.1964, p. 55. Other reinforcements followed in the coming weeks and months.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 95–96.

⁶⁰⁰ USAF Historical Division Liaison Office. *USAF Plans and Operations in Southeast Asia 1965* (October 1966), pp. 90, 92.

personnel and 595 jets at seven different air force bases.⁶⁰¹ This deployment was accompanied by more military aid to Thailand. Between 1965 and 1969, the U.S. government spent USD 370 million to make improvements to the bases used by the U.S. army and the in 1968 alone, the annual amount of military aid reached the record sum of USD 75 million.⁶⁰²

These developments were a mixed blessing for Thailand. On the one hand, its importance for the United States had grown enormously during these years – without Thailand’s bases and staging areas, air force sorties in some parts of Vietnam and in Laos would have been much more difficult, if not impossible. The investments the United States made, while mostly for military purposes, helped to kick-start the manufacturing and also tourism industry in Thailand, which ensured the country’s economic growth and in turn, the much coveted “stability” and “prosperity”. Some scholars argue quite convincingly that as long as this prosperity was continuing and the middle class, which slowly began to emerge, could make use of the new options offered to it (improvements in economic status of the families, new products on the market, opportunities to send children to study abroad), the government was safe from any serious challenges coming from the civil society.⁶⁰³ Even in the rural areas, where the progress was still coming rather slow and was often accompanied by corruption and misuse of funds, the government was able to demonstrate, again with the major help of American aid and American experts that the things were changing for better. The official figures speak for themselves. Between 1967 and 1972, the American government spent \$59.2 million on “public safety”⁶⁰⁴ programs, \$58.8 million on community and social development, \$22.4 million on health care improvements, \$17.9 on agricultural projects and \$13.5 on education development.⁶⁰⁵ It could perhaps be said that a new paradigm could be observed in the relationship between the United States and Thailand during the Johnson years – while in the past the United States was seen as the guarantor of Thailand’s “sovereignty”, “freedom” and “integrity”, now it provided for Thailand’s “progress” and “development”, generating “stability” in the country. While the emphases may have shifted, the role of the United States remained virtually the same. And, once more, the intensive continued American involvement depended largely, if not solely, on Thailand’s strategic importance in the American plans and on Thailand’s willingness to help achieve the American foreign-policy

⁶⁰¹ The numbers for the jet deployments were as follows: 12 in Bangkok, 88 in Korat (Nakhorn Ratchasima), 137 in Nakhorn Phanom, 87 in Tahkli, 86 in Ubon Ratchathani, 110 in Udorn Thani and 75 in U-tapao. Office of Air Force History. *The Air Force in Southeast Asia: Toward a Bombing Halt. 1968* (September 1970), pp. 77, 79.

⁶⁰² Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 112.

⁶⁰³ Thak Chaloehtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 232.

⁶⁰⁴ These programs were designed to help fight “the communist insurgency” in the country.

⁶⁰⁵ Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 113.

and security objectives. While the Vietnam War in general terms was hardly considered a positive development even in Thailand (especially when it began to grow more intensive in the countries directly bordering Thailand – Cambodia and Laos), from the purely pragmatic and materialistic view it was an asset rather than threat to the government in Bangkok.

On the other hand, the issue of Thailand's indirect and direct involvement in the war remained rather sensitive. Despite the fact that the danger of "communist subversion" in Thailand was again rather exaggerated, the fact was that the war was not popular with the Thai public. In November 1964, for example, Thanom warned against the danger of neutralism. According to the Thai Prime Minister, there was "a growing underground movement in Thailand toward neutralism... Government acceptance of such a policy would amount to surrender to Communist China... the Government was combating a tendency toward neutralism that had become manifest in the press and in agitation among students, teachers and Buddhist priests... Most active supporters of neutralism have been members of the outlawed Communist party or are leftists sympathetic to Peking. Other simply believe that a policy of nonalignment would afford their country better protection from Communist China than the present military alliance with the United States. If Thailand accepted neutralization and failed to resist Communist encroachment, she would be forced into the Chinese orbit and eventually lose her identity..."⁶⁰⁶

The United States was aware of the sensitivity of the issue and was still anxious about the survival of the Thanom Government. Thus, it was considering various scenarios of the future developments in Thailand. In September 1964, for example, the Joint Chiefs of Staff wrote a memorandum to the Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara about the possible courses of action the United States should take: "1. Recent reports from Bangkok indicate that we cannot rule out the possibility that a coup d'etat might be directed against the Thanom government in Thailand... 3. A principal US objective for Thailand is to insure that it remains a stable nation, allied to the United States, and available as a forward base for the projection of US power into Southeast Asia. Militarily, Thailand is the only secure mainland base for US operations in that area at this time... 4. The character of a Thai Government which might come into being as a result of a coup will probably be pro-United States unless the US position in Southeast Asia erodes seriously. In the latter event, we can expect the Thais to accommodate themselves to whatever new power situation exists in the area. Regardless of what the nature of the coup may be, the United States should take steps to insure continuance

⁶⁰⁶ Neutralist Drive Reported in Thailand, *The New York Times*, 14. 11. 1964.

of the status quo ante insofar as US military forces and operations are concerned... An anticommunist, pro-United States, cooperative, and stable Thailand is critical to maintenance of the US military posture in Southeast Asia... If a pro-Western coup does take place, immediate steps should be taken by the United States to insure reaffirmation of US military operating rights in Thailand and continued Thai military cooperation and support... If a neutralist or procommunist coup takes place, the United States should attempt to reinstate the Government or an acceptable substitute by supporting it or any prospective counter-coup group which would lead to that end. Where such measures fail against a procommunist coup, the United States should be prepared to take appropriate military action to protect specific US security interests in the area and/or to restore a pro-US Thai Government to power...⁶⁰⁷

In the end, no coup materialized at the time. The Thanom government, however, was aware that as was the case with Phibun and Sarit, tying the fate of Thailand too close to that of the United States was seen by many as the abandonment of the traditional balanced foreign policy. It was not necessarily true that the supporters of neutralism were leftist or communist. Many Thais found it hard to reconcile claims about losing Thai identity by cooperating with China with statements like this made by Thailand's Foreign Minister Thanat Koman in May 1966: "Our relationship [between Thailand and the United States – J. B.] stands out as a remarkable example of how a small nation can work with a great power without being dominated or indeed losing its identity".⁶⁰⁸ While communism was definitely a graver threat to Thailand's independence than American "neo-imperialism", Thais in general preferred to stay out of war – but at the same time continue to receive economic aid, which, however, was impossible to attain (at least not in the same quantities) without the Thai involvement in the U.S. war efforts.

The anxiety of the Thai government to speak openly about the involvement in the Indochina War can be illustrated by the issue of the air bases in Thailand. The fact that the American bases in Thailand were used for sorties against North Vietnam and Laos already since February 1965⁶⁰⁹ had for the longest time possible been kept out of public discussion at

⁶⁰⁷ USDS, *FRUS 1964–1968*, Document 284. Available at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d284> [last access 26. 3. 2011].

⁶⁰⁸ Quoted in United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*. 6. 2. 1967, vol. LVI, no. 1441, p. 198. The American Ambassador to Thailand Graham Martin emphasized the same point in May 1966, when he stated at the occasion of the signing of a new treaty of amity and commerce that "cooperation between great and small nations could be 'mutually fruitful provided there is mutual respect and equality'". U.S. and Thailand Conclude New Treaty of Friendship, *The New York Times*, 30. 5. 1966.

⁶⁰⁹ This decision came after the attack on the U.S. military facility in Pleiku by Viet Cong forces on February 7. The attack claimed seven American lives and more than a hundred soldiers were wounded. Cohen, *America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1991*, p. 165.

the request of the Thai government. Thailand continued to make only general statements such as that of Thanat Koman: “We profoundly realize that nowadays, as in the past, no ‘peace in our time’ can be bought by sacrificing a free nation, be it South Viet-Nam or Southeast Asia or, for that matter, any other nation in the world. On the contrary, the chances for an enduring peace will become greater if *we can see to it* that aggression against free nations, either in overt or cover form, shall not be profitable.”⁶¹⁰ The government, however, was not ready to publicly reveal the use of American bases for the sorties even though it was quite clear that these developments were taking place. The reason for that was rather obvious – as the Department of State correctly predicted: “The Thais have responded remarkably well to our series of requests for facilities use and military personnel, without a scrap of paper to back it up. There will be many more requests and Thailand—within and without the government—will come under increasing pressure and wariness about Thais being American puppets, pushed around by Americans without any guarantees, infesting Thailand...”⁶¹¹

In April 1965, the North Vietnamese government officially denounced Thailand for allowing the use of its bases. The Hanoi radio broadcasted a statement by the foreign ministry, which blamed Bangkok for “... complicity in the United States aggressive war in South Vietnam and for having let the United States use bases on Thailand territory to attack the Democratic Republic of [North] Vietnam... the Thailand authorities must bear full responsibility for all consequences arising from their acts.”⁶¹² A similar statement was made by the Soviet Union a month later, when it warned Bangkok that “permitting United States planes to use Thai military bases for raids on North Vietnam and Communist-controlled areas of Laos” could have “‘possible dangerous consequences’”.⁶¹³ The Thai prime minister, however, immediately denied the North Vietnamese charge⁶¹⁴ and in the coming months Thailand continued to be silent on the use of the bases on its territory despite the mounting protests from the communist countries and the growing awareness of the Thai involvement.

It was not until January 1967 when the existence and actual use of these bases in the American bombing campaign in Indochina were *officially* revealed. Speaking to the American Chamber of Commerce in Bangkok, the American Ambassador Graham Martin, while referring to the state of Thai-American relations and to the Thai efforts in fighting communism, made the following remarks: “As you know, the Royal Thai Government has

⁶¹⁰ United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*, 4. 4. 1966, vol. LIV, no. 1397, p. 518.

⁶¹¹ USDS, *FRUS 1964–1968*, Document 290. Available at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d290> [last access 26. 3. 2011].

⁶¹² North Vietnamese Denounce Thais on ‘Complicity’ in War, *The New York Times*, 26. 4. 1965.

⁶¹³ Soviet Warns Thais on U.S., *The New York Times*, 20. 5. 1965.

⁶¹⁴ Thailand Denies Hanoi Charge, *The New York Times*, 27. 4. 1965.

permitted the use of its bases by elements of the United States Armed Forces engaged in carrying out defensive measures under the obligations both Governments had assumed under the SEATO treaty. These bases at Korat, Ubon, Nakom Phanon, Udorn, Takhli, and U-Tapao have been a major contribution to the Allied war effort... One needs only to sample the enraged stream of propaganda protests beamed at Thailand by Peking and Hanoi to conclude that our concerted actions hurt them greatly. The Thai facilities which have played such a critical role in the defense of South Viet-Nam did not appear miraculously or mysteriously, simply because of the free world's need for them. Those installations were put in place by Thailand much earlier, in the course of long-term military preparedness efforts undertaken in its own defense and in response to its obligations as a highly conscientious member of South East Asia Treaty Organization".⁶¹⁵ Shortly after this speech was made, Thanom had also publicly acknowledged the existence and the use of the bases for the bombing of communist forces. The ministry of foreign affairs stated that this involvement of Thailand was a "contribution that Thailand is making... toward bringing the war to a speedier end."⁶¹⁶

It would perhaps be interesting to discuss, just briefly, what the main reasons behind this announcement and the official acknowledgment of Thailand's involvement in the war were. By early 1967, the U.S. commitment to the Vietnam War was increasing steadily, while the victory still seemed rather elusive. Optimistic news about the situation on the ground, coupled, however, with still increasing demands for more men and air power, clearly testified to the fact that the United States found itself in a protracted and difficult conflict. From the purely military/material point of view, it was clear that Washington would always remain the main force of the anti-communist camp, despite limited involvement of the SEATO allies. Yet, in a move that had started with Johnson and was later consummated with Nixon and his "Vietnamization" policy, the United States wished to achieve a more committed and effective involvement of the "local" forces. This, of course, applied especially to South Vietnam, but to a lesser extent, as will be discussed below, to Thailand as well. There was an even more portentous reason, however. The United States was coming under increased propaganda pressure because of its involvement in Vietnam. The governments in Hanoi, Beijing and Moscow as well as other communist countries had a very easy job attacking the American actions as imperialistic, unilateral and arrogant, in fact directed against the Asian peoples and their interests – peace, liberty and development. It would seem, at least to the author of this thesis,

⁶¹⁵ The speech was originally made on January 18 and released to the press on January 23. USDS, *DoS Bulletin*, 6. 2. 1967, p. 198.

⁶¹⁶ Thailand Acknowledges Her Bases Are Used for U.S. Vietnam Raids, *The New York Times*, 10. 3. 1967.

that the United States never found an effective counter-strategy to face this propaganda. One way, however, to at least blunt the sharpness of these attacks was to demonstrate that at least some Asian countries (such as Thailand or the Philippines) were *willing to openly identify* with the war and to *openly support it*. The Thai government tried to avoid this move for quite a long time, offering instead vague statements about “defending the free world”. Those statements, however, could no longer satisfy the demands of the propaganda war by the late 1960s. It was not enough to provide bases or even troops or to talk about the need to fight the communist danger in general terms – the time had come to openly declare that Thailand was a part of the Indochina War, not as an object but as a participant. Such a move would give the United States at least some justification which it could use in its own public opinion campaign. At the same time, however, the United States was aware of the fact that Thailand’s increased involvement in the war and a more vocal support for it would make it more vulnerable to the propaganda attacks from the communist bloc. For example, while discussing the issue of using Thai military bases and of sending more Thai troops to Vietnam in February 1967, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs William Bundy stated: “We must reckon that, as a practical matter, both the Thai contribution of forces and the U Tapao agreement [agreement about the bases – J. B.] are already exposing, and will increasingly expose, the Thai to major propaganda attack by the Communist nations.”⁶¹⁷ And, after Thanom had publicly admitted the existence of the bases and the above mentioned U-Tapao agreement was about to be concluded, Walt Rostow, a special assistant to President Johnson, wrote to the president: “My own feeling is that the U-Tapao decision was not an easy one for the Thai. It is going to open them up to strong attack from the Communists. The kind of warm reception by us of their decision that has been proposed is not out of order. If we handle the matter otherwise, we can expect trouble from Foreign Minister Thanatat [sic – J. B.] the Troop Contributors meeting here next month.”⁶¹⁸

The deployment of Thai units in South Vietnam was perhaps even more sensitive than the issue of air strikes. The numbers listed below demonstrate the changing nature of this development and reflect the developments on the battlefield. By the end of 1965, there were 20 Thai military personnel in South Vietnam; 1966 – 240; 1967 – 2,200; 1968 – 6,000; 1969

⁶¹⁷ USDS, *FRUS 1964–1968*, Document 341. Available at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d341> [last access 26. 3. 2011].

⁶¹⁸ USDS, *FRUS 1964–1968*, Document 342. Available at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d342> [last access 26. 3. 2011].

– 11,570; 1970 – 11,570; 1971 – 6,000; 1972 – 40.⁶¹⁹ These figures indicate that the Thai deployment had reached its height during the Nixon years, the reasons for which will be discussed later in this chapter. At the same time, however, it must be noted that the decision to expand the Thai contingent in South Vietnam was made in 1968 already and was probably influenced by the Tet Offensive of NLF (Viet Cong) forces in January–February of that year and by the follow-up offensives of the communist forces which took place in May, June and August.⁶²⁰ By the end of 1968, the number of Thai troops in South Vietnam had nearly tripled. Yet the Johnson Administration remained aware of the limits of the Thai ability and willingness to combat the communist insurgency in the neighboring countries. In August 1968, the Department of State commented on the Thai attitude towards deployment: “At present the Thai Government is very prudent about forward deployment of its land forces. Washington is well aware of the limitations of the Thai armed forces which prevent the RTG [Royal Thai Government – J. B.] from assuming a major share of any contingency role in Laos in response to an NVN [North Vietnamese – J. B.] attack.”⁶²¹ Perhaps even more telling is the fact that even the ability of the Thai army to effectively deal with the domestic insurgency was sometimes questioned. The National Intelligence Estimate of May 9, 1968, for example, praised the Thai government for “increasing competence in dealing with the insurgency” but added that “many problems remain, including bureaucratic rivalries and the failure of the government and the army to make the most effective use of the resources already at their disposal.”⁶²²

The chance that Thailand or any other SEATO country would assume a major role in the Indochina conflict seemed to be doomed from the very beginning. The Bangkok government, as stated above, was not willing to commit major forces to fighting communism, both because of fear that such a move would lead to a backlash from the communist bloc, but also because of the unpopularity such a decision would carry at home. There was, however, one other aspect of the problem which, in the opinion of the author, should be at least briefly mentioned here. It was already noted that during the Laotian crisis, Thailand was rather disappointed at the approach of the Kennedy Administration in allowing an appointment of a

⁶¹⁹ Stanton, Shelby C. *Vietnam Order of Battle: A Complete Illustrated Reference to U.S. Army Combat and Support Forces in Vietnam, 1961–1963*. Mechanicsburg (PA): Stackpole Books, 2003, p. 333.

⁶²⁰ For more on the Tet Offensive and its effects both from the military and psychological perspective see for example Schimtz, David F. *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion*. Westport (CT): Praeger, 2004 or Willbanks, James H. *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

⁶²¹ USDS, *FRUS 1964–1968*, Document 403. Available at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d403> [last access 26. 3. 2011].

⁶²² USDS, *FRUS 1964–1968*, Document 390. Available at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d403> [last access 26. 3. 2011].

neutralist government. In Laos, Thailand had its own particular interests, which were often not directly compatible with those of the United States. Similarly, relations with Cambodia and especially with Prince Sihanouk were gradually deteriorating in the 1950s and 1960s and some of the problems from that period, like the Preah Vihear dispute, are still unresolved even today⁶²³. The Thai government often justified its particular preferences in those countries by the overall priority to fight communism. For example, Prince Sihanouk was repeatedly accused of abetting the communists, a charge that became especially weighty after his visit in Beijing in August 1958 and his decision to recognize the communist government of the People's Republic.⁶²⁴ In November 1964, Thanom went as far as to publicly state that Sihanouk "had become a mouthpiece for the Communists" and that he "hoped through cooperation with Peking to take over several Thai provinces he claims for Cambodia".⁶²⁵ The United States shared the Thai mistrust of Sihanouk whom it called an "undefinable"⁶²⁶. The government in Washington, however, did not realize that the Thai concern and sometimes interference in the affairs of Cambodia and Laos was not always driven by the desire to stop the communist advance but sometimes by personal sympathies/antipathies and also by the traditional notion of these countries being in Thailand's sphere of influence. With the colonial powers like Great Britain or France gone, and the United States focusing largely on the anti-communist crusade, Thailand began to reassert (or at least attempted to do so) its historical role in the region. While both Bangkok and Washington shared the overall anti-communist agenda, their individual preferences and objectives sometimes differed. The old concepts of regional hegemony and of the Thai state being one of the power centers of mainland Southeast Asia were then clearly demonstrated even during the years after the Vietnam War, especially in relation to the situation in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge victory.

By 1968, as seen from the preceding pages, the Vietnam War came to dominate the bilateral relations between the United States and Thailand. The role of Bangkok at the end of the Johnson Administration became more vital and crucial than ever before. This was demonstrated not only by the unprecedented increase in American aid, but also in the symbolic arena. In October 1966, Lyndon Johnson became the first American president ever

⁶²³ In this particular case, both Thailand and Cambodia claimed the ancient Preah Vihear temple, which is located on the disputed border between the two countries, and the area immediately surrounding the temple complex. For a short summary of this dispute, see for example Bečka, Jan (Jr.). Chrám Phra Vihár: Dědictví rozdílné minulosti, nebo výzva pro společnou budoucnost? [The Preah Vihear Temple: The Legacy of a Divided Past or the Challenge for a Common Future?], *Nový Orient*, 2008, vol. 63, no. 4, pp. 12–16.

⁶²⁴ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, p. 166.

⁶²⁵ Neutralist Drive Reported in Thailand.

⁶²⁶ USDS, *FRUS 1964–1968*, Document 403. Available at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d403> [last access 26. 3. 2011].

to visit Thailand. Against the backdrop of the exotic scenery, he made sure to thank Thailand for her aid in fighting communism and to proclaim that she was not “a new or slavish satellite of the United States”.⁶²⁷ In line with the established pattern observed on so many occasions before, Johnson stated his admiration for the “free spirit” of Thai people: “The very name of your great nation means, in my own language, ‘Land of the Free.’ These words are very familiar to every American, for they are part of our national anthem. That anthem celebrates our homeland as ‘the land of the free and home of the brave.’... The truth is that Thailand and the United States are going down the same road together. We did not start our journey together. But we met on the road which leads, ultimately, to peace and independence for all nations. We of America are proud to march beside you, who began the journey before we did.”⁶²⁸ Johnson’s visit was returned by the Thai royal couple and Thai Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn in June 1967 and May 1968, respectively. The King expressed strong support for the Johnson Administration during his trip to the United States, which was especially important as Johnson was struggling with the growing anti-war movement. While receiving an honorary law degree at the Williams College, the King said that the United States should be admired for its “pursuit of excellence” and for bearing “the very heavy burden of leadership in the free world”.⁶²⁹ In an unusually sharp tone, he reproached the anti-war activists: “... The efforts of American soldiers in Vietnam were being undermined by antiwar activity at home... The United States is involved in Vietnam because its national security requires the advance of countries that would conquer the world be checked... There is another kind of war going on in the United States... ‘it is a kind of war of brainwashing – mass brainwashing’... ‘A soldier fighting wants support from the home front... This is sapping his efforts and it is not very nice for him’”.⁶³⁰ For his part, Johnson wanted to reassure the Thai King that “the United States will persist in Vietnam until we are sure that South Vietnam is safe from aggression. Our defense commitment to Thailand through SEATO is clear – and America keeps its commitments.”⁶³¹ Even after the Tet Offensive, the United States sought to

⁶²⁷ Bangkok Visit a Success, *The New York Times*, 30. 10. 1966. Johnson was awarded a doctorate in political science by the Chulanongkorn University and he also signed the International Education Act in Thailand – a first instance in history when any president of the United States signed a bill outside of the U.S.

⁶²⁸ The president was referring here to the fact that while Thailand was never colonized, the US only ceased to be a colony at the end of 18th century. United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*. 21. 11. 1966, vol. LV, no. 1430, p. 767.

⁶²⁹ Thai King Praises U.S., *The New York Times*, 12. 6. 1967.

⁶³⁰ Thai King, Here, Says War Foes Hamper U.S., *The New York Times*, 14. 6. 1967.

⁶³¹ USDS, *FRUS 1964–1968*, Document 347. Available at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d347> [last access 27. 3. 2011]. It is particularly revealing that the Acting Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach, who drafted the preparatory memorandum for Johnson, stressed the importance of the King, stating: “All of these objectives can be most effectively furthered through your direct communication with the King, who

reassure Thailand that in no case would she be abandoned. In conversation with the Thai prime minister in May 1968, the Secretary of Defense Clifford specifically stated that “As concerns our future intentions in Southeast Asia... it was the President's firm intention to protect the investment we had made in that area. In short, we would not pull out and write off the investment of 21,000 military personnel killed in action and the billions we have spent in our efforts to insure self-determination for the Vietnamese people. He stated further that the Paris talks would not affect our goals in other areas of Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand. We were willing to try for peace at Paris but if these diplomatic efforts failed, we would have to go the military route.”⁶³² The negotiations in 1968 did ultimately fail, despite Johnson’s efforts, but not without causing considerable anxiety in Thailand and other Asian allies of the United States.

The exchange of high-level visits between 1966 and 1968, and the reassurances that Thailand received of its continued importance for the American strategy in Southeast Asia, clearly demonstrated that by the end of Johnson Administration, Thailand was indeed firmly established as the most important American ally in the region. From this point of view, the Johnson years have clearly demonstrated a high point in the mutual relations between the two countries and their cooperation in some respects had reached unprecedented levels. This intensification, however, was largely attributable to the American involvement in Vietnam and to the continued American military and political presence in the region. With the elections of 1968, a new president, Richard Nixon, came to office, with a completely new outlook on foreign policy and with an ambitious plan to redefine America’s position in the world. Despite all the previous talk about Thailand and the United States being equal partners in defending the “free world”, Bangkok (and for that matter, all other Asian allies of the United States) now had to wait anxiously for the practical impact of the Nixon doctrine on their countries.

has many times reiterated (including during the present visit to the United States), his great personal respect and admiration for you as a man who understands well the problems of Asia and the sensitivities of Asians. The King has but a limited role in the government. However, his prestige, as a Monarch of a long and proud dynasty in a country where the Monarch is deeply revered and as a person highly admired for his exemplary personal life, makes him a significant political force. He frequently exerts a useful behind-the-scenes influence on events in Thailand. Finally, he can communicate perhaps more effectively than any other person with the people of Thailand.” Ibid.

⁶³² USDS, *FRUS 1964–1968*, Document 388. Available at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d388> [last access 27. 3. 2011].

VI.2. “The Golden Years of *Détente*” in Asia: Vietnamization, Peace with Honor and Their Impact on the Thai-American Relations, 1969–1975

VI.2.A. Basic Principles of the Nixon-Kissinger Foreign Policy and Their Objectives in Asia

The coming of Richard Nixon to the White House in January 1969 ushered in the period which sometimes has been referred to as the “golden years of *détente*”. A sworn conservative with extensive experience in foreign policy, together with his National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Nixon set out to reform the international relations system which he saw as broken and damaging to American interests. Asian policy was to play an important role in these plans, both because of the opening to China and also of the need to end the conflict in Vietnam and disentangle the United States from this engagement.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyze in depth various aspects of the Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy. A number of scholarly publications have been written on this topic, both in general and/or related to particular problems of this era.⁶³³ For the purpose of assessing the impact of the new foreign policy course on Thailand, however, it is necessary to mention at least some of these aspects.

Nixon’s plans concerning Asia and Asian policy could already be discerned from an article he published in *Foreign Affairs* in October 1967, one year before he was elected president. For the countries which had come to depend on the promise of American military support in case of an open communist aggression, Nixon’s words must have sounded rather unpleasant. Nixon bemoaned the fact that Vietnam had sapped the American energy and resources and warned an intervention of a similar kind might not be possible in the future: “I am not arguing that the day is past when the United States would respond militarily to communist threats in the less stable parts of the world, or that a unilateral response to a unilateral request for help is out of question. But other nations must recognize that the role of the United States *as world policeman is likely to be limited in the future*. To ensure that a U.S. response will be forthcoming if needed, machinery must be created that is capable of meeting two conditions: (a) *a collective effort by the nations of the region to contain the threat for*

⁶³³ See for example: Bundy, William. *A Tangled Web. The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1998; Go Ito. *Détente and the Sino-American-Japanese Triangle*. New York: Routledge, 2003; Hanhimaki, Jussi. *Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; Litwak, Robert S. *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine. American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969 – 1976*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984; Thorton, Richard C. *The Nixon-Kissinger Years. Reshaping America’s Foreign Policy*. New York: Paragon House, 1989.

themselves; and, if that effort fails, (b) a collective request to the United States for assistance.”⁶³⁴

While Nixon was careful not to rule out future interventions, his message was quite clear – the American allies in Asia were now expected to do much more than in the past to ensure their defense. For Thailand, which felt much more secure after the Korman-Rusk agreement, this was a bitter pill to swallow. Was the United States going to keep its commitments if Nixon was elected? The anxiety which Bangkok and other allies⁶³⁵ in Asia might have felt in this respect was further deepened by the fact that Nixon hinted at a possible change of American policy toward China. While rejecting immediate recognition of the Beijing government (such a promise would surely cost him the support of the still powerful China lobby), he nevertheless stated that “... Taking the long view, we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people living in angry isolation...”⁶³⁶ Thus, another longstanding precept of the American postwar policy – isolation of the People’s Republic of China – seemed to be up for consideration now. This was a very sensitive issue for many Asian governments, including the one in Bangkok. As already mentioned, Phibun and later Sarit were under pressure from certain elements of their own administrations and power establishments to adjust Thailand’s relationship with China, but they always refused, citing, among other reasons, loyalty to the American policy. Hints about possible changes in this policy naturally made these governments uneasy about their own future course.

After Nixon got elected, this uneasiness and uncertainty got even worse. This was in part caused by the extremely secretive Nixon-Kissinger foreign-policy style. Many key decisions and negotiations were kept secret even within the administration, as neither the president nor his advisor trusted the State Department or the Pentagon. This unimportance of the Department of State can be briefly illustrated by Nixon’s remark that “no Secretary of State is really important; the President makes foreign policy”⁶³⁷ and in contrast his statement that “from the outset of my administration... I planned to direct foreign policy from the White

⁶³⁴ Nixon, Richard M. *Asia after Viet Nam*, *Foreign Affairs*, 1967 (October), vol. XLVI, no. 1, p. 114.

⁶³⁵ For example, Japan could hardly be pleased about the vision of its remilitarization and the expansion of Japanese role in guaranteeing the security of the region. Not only would such a change be highly unpopular among the Japanese people, but the financial resources necessary for building up the Japanese forces would have to be diverted from elsewhere, thus slowing the impressive economic growth of the country.

⁶³⁶ Nixon, Richard M. *Asia after Viet Nam*, p. 121.

⁶³⁷ Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*, p. 49.

House. Therefore I regarded my choice of a national security advisor as crucial.”⁶³⁸ While the secrecy was initially justified as indispensable for the success of some of the planned bold foreign policy moves, it later grew into paranoia and became a hindrance for the smooth running of the policy-making process. The interpersonal rivalries between the National Security Council and the Department of State and between Henry Kissinger and Secretary of State William Rogers further fueled the fire of discord. Kissinger’s unprecedented influence and his unlimited access to the president meant that the importance of the Department of State diminished considerably. This presented a problem also for the “weaker” states (which applied to vast majority of countries including many American allies). Since these countries often did not have direct access to Nixon and Kissinger – unlike, for example, the Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin⁶³⁹ – they mostly had to rely on meeting with the Department of State and Pentagon officials, who were not informed about many key foreign-policy decisions and their influence was very limited. Countries like Japan, for example, were very strongly irritated at being left out in the dark about Nixon’s Asian policy and found the Administration’s approach insensitive. For example, Kissinger’s visit of China in July 1971 was only announced to the Japanese government several minutes before this announcement appeared publicly on TV. The Prime Minister of Japan Sato was shocked and complained Japan was now put in “difficult international conditions” and felt “uneasy” about the news⁶⁴⁰ – surely a bit of an understatement as the opening to China send shockwaves throughout Japan and other Asian countries including Thailand.

The last issue which could be mentioned here about the Nixon-Kissinger Asian policy in general was the fact that, at least in the opinion of the author, this policy was doomed to fail from the very beginning because it was based on flawed premises and because it hoped to achieve unrealistic goals. While Nixon hoped to put more pressure on the Soviets by opening to China, his other pragmatic objective was to end the war in Vietnam by achieving the “peace with honor” with the help of the Chinese. Nixon and Kissinger incorrectly believed that Beijing was so influential in Hanoi as to be able to convince North Vietnam to make concessions and that it was willing to risk its influence to do so. China also initially saw Vietnam as a quagmire where the U.S. troops were caught and thus could not threaten

⁶³⁸ Nixon, Richard M. *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978, p. 25.

⁶³⁹ Dobrynin describes some of his experiences with the “backstage” diplomacy of the period in his autobiography. See Dobrynin, Anatoly. *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents*. New York: Times Books, 1995, here especially pp. 191–315. Dobrynin’s account, though somewhat skewed by his own biases, illustrates well the conditions under which foreign policy was made during the Nixon Presidency.

⁶⁴⁰ Go Ito, *Alliance in Anxiety*, p. 54.

Chinese interests elsewhere. As Mao Zedong had put in 1970 in talks with the North Vietnamese, "...Every Chinese province is now a fortress, ready in case of an American attack. But even in such a case, we still continue to help you because you are also in difficulties. Any one who says that we do not help you because we are also in difficulties is a reactionary. We have held the provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan, [and] Guangzhou responsible for helping you as well as the rest of the Southeast Asian region. The entire production by these provinces is for you. Cadres from these provinces will visit Vietnam to prepare for an American attack on China. Because you pin them down, they have not attacked China yet. In short, what I want to say is: You are fighting very well on the battlefield. Your policy for the diplomatic struggle is correct⁶⁴¹. We must give you what you want."⁶⁴² Even though China was not particularly happy about the prospect of unified and strong Vietnam on its borders, especially when the historical animosity between both countries as well as the Soviet intentions in the area are taken into consideration, Peking was not willing to put extensive pressure on Hanoi because of fears that such a move would strengthen the influence of Moscow at the expense of Chinese interests. During the talks between Kissinger and Chou En-lai in July 1971, for example, Chou was very cautious about offering mediation between the United States and Vietnam. As Kissinger described in his memo to Nixon: "Chou En-lai was as forthcoming as we could have hoped. His attitude throughout reflected the ambivalence of Peking's position. For ideological reasons, he clearly supported Hanoi. On the other hand, it was apparent that he did not wish to jeopardize the chances for an improvement in our relations, especially after I explained the positions we had taken in Paris and warned of the danger of escalation if negotiations failed.... He criticized American aggression but stressed Chinese interest in an 'honorable exit' for the US... He warned that we should pull out completely and not leave a 'tail' behind in the form of advisers since these would be entering wedge for a new involvement...He hoped our negotiations in Paris would be successful and wished me luck."⁶⁴³

Such attitude was typical for the Chinese involvement in the negotiations about Indochina. Especially the last sentence of the quotation above is telling. The Chinese hoped that the tensions in Indochina would calm down, because the war was exhausting their

⁶⁴¹ At this time, secret negotiations were already going on between the United States and North Vietnam in Paris.

⁶⁴² *Document 5034CE5A-96B6-175C-9BC4C5BA204F4662. Discussion between Mao Zedong and Pham Van Dong* (23. 9. 1970). Cold War International History Project. Available at http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=5034CE5A-96B6-175C-9BC4C5BA204F4662&sort=Coverage&item=Vietnam [last access 2. 4. 2011].

⁶⁴³ *Kissinger to Nixon: My Talks with Chou En-lai* (14. 7. 1971). Box 1033, Miscellaneous Memoranda Relating to HAK Trip to PRC, July 1971, pp. 14–15. National Security Archive (George Washington University). Available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/ch-40.pdf> [last access 2. 4. 2011].

resources as well and because they wished to appear sympathetic to the American strategy in the region to facilitate the rapprochement. On the other hand, they were not ready to stop their support of North Vietnam or to dissuade Hanoi from seeking reunification as they did in 1954. While encouraging the negotiations, the Chinese view of these was extremely pragmatic. As Chou En-lai stated in early January 1973: “The US strategy of using bombing to put pressure on you has failed. Nixon has many international and domestic issues to deal with. It seems that the US is still willing to get out from Vietnam and Indochina. You should persist in principles while demonstrating flexibility during the negotiations. The most important [thing] is to let the Americans leave. The situation will change in six months or one year.”⁶⁴⁴ Even more clear-cut was the statement that Chou made after the negotiations in Paris were concluded. When talking to the North Vietnamese Ambassador in Beijing, he stated: “Please accept my congratulations. The victory is easily won. As Prime Minister Pham Van Dong says, it is important to continue the struggle. The important [thing] is that the Americans have been driven away.”⁶⁴⁵

The peace with honor did not materialize in the end as the fall of Saigon in 1975 clearly demonstrated the failure of Nixon’s and Kissinger’s plans. The rapprochement with China, while it carried enormous symbolism with it, also did not have the impact that was originally expected. One problem was that Nixon, weakened by the Watergate scandal, was unable to fulfill some of his promises, mainly that of normalizing the relations between both countries. The issue of Taiwan also remained unresolved, as it would not have been possible to sacrifice a long-term American ally to the new foreign policy doctrine. In a way, it could be said that Nixon’s visit to China in February 1972 was the highest point of the rapprochement process, but also a one which clearly demonstrated its limits – the *Shanghai Communiqué*, the main issue of this visit, was vague and ambiguous as it reflected persistent disagreements on a number of issues. This vagueness and emptiness was perhaps well reflected in one of the provisions of the communiqué: “There are essential differences between China and the United States in their social systems and foreign policies. However, the two sides agreed that countries, regardless of their social systems, should conduct their relations on the principles of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states, non-aggression against other states, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, equality and mutual benefit, and

⁶⁴⁴ Document 5034CEE7-96B6-175C-973E6797AAD6C9E1. Discussion between Zhou Enlai and Le Duc Tho (3. 1. 1973). Cold War International History Project. Available at http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=5034CEE7-96B6-175C-973E6797AAD6C9E1&sort=Coverage&item=Vietnam [last access 2. 4. 2011].

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

peaceful coexistence.”⁶⁴⁶ The desired impact on the Soviet Union was also less dramatic than expected and Moscow soon realized the limits of Sino-American rapprochement. Overall, the opening to China gradually came under fire in the United States as more and more people began to criticize the fact that China is the main beneficiary of this process rather than the United States. Besides, the way this turnabout in American foreign policy was executed caused enormous problems in relationships with the American allies such as Japan, Taiwan and, to a degree, Thailand. The realignment in Asia did not automatically mean that the United States would abandon its commitments, but the trust between the allies and Washington was badly shaken by Nixon’s policy.⁶⁴⁷ For Thailand in particular this was a signal that its importance for the United States might diminish in the coming years. It was also a sign of a possible weakening of the American influence and interest in the region, which could lead the Thai government to the decision that the time had come for a reappraisal of the foreign policy orientation on Washington and for a return to traditional balanced policy. Not that the United States would no longer play a part in Thai foreign policy deliberations, but other factors now entered these deliberations as well.

VI.2.B. A Retreat from Glory? Thai-American Relations during the Nixon and Ford Administrations

As already mentioned, the Thai government watched the developments in the United States in late 1960s with some apprehension. Nixon’s comments about American policy in Asia, as well as the ultimately unsuccessful attempts by the Johnson Administration to negotiate the end of war in Vietnam naturally made Bangkok anxious about future developments in the area. Nixon’s election victory was thus received rather positively in the sense that he opposed Johnson’s plan to end the war immediately, but also with anxiety regarding his own plans for the future. When the American Ambassador in Bangkok Leonard Unger met with Thai leaders in January 1969, the Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Koman made these feelings obvious: “... The latter [Thanat Koman – J. B.] first went through his familiar recitation about American journalists, senators, professors and others who obviously wanted

⁶⁴⁶ *Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (Shanghai Communiqué)* (28. 2. 1972). Available at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/china-us/26012.htm> [last access 2. 4. 2011].

⁶⁴⁷ Some authors went so far as to argue that after 1972, the relationship between the United States and Japan was never restored to its previous level of trust and cordiality. Bundy, *A Tangled Web*, p. 240. The author of this thesis does not share this view, but would rather argue that the rapprochement showed to the allies clearly that the American foreign policy as well as its presence in Asia-Pacific was not immutable and that in the future they would have to pursue a more independent policy of their own. This was reflected for example in establishing diplomatic relations between China and Japan in September 1972.

no part of any American presence or activity in this part of the world. Contrary to earlier comments, *he did not express confidence about the new administration in this regard...* the Thai Government was not in a position to comment on these matters until the new US administration was able to provide some kind of a picture of what will be its security policy for Southeast Asia, and Thanat emphasized that given all the uncertainties of the past many months, the RTG *hopes that clarification on this matter will be available soon* [italics added – J. B.].⁶⁴⁸

For Thanat Koman, who previously negotiated the Rusk-Koman memorandum concerning the American commitments to Thailand, any signs that these pledges might not be fulfilled were extremely disconcerting. The Nixon Administration was certainly aware of this. While in secret it implemented its own “grand strategy”, in public it sought to calm down its allies and dispel their anxieties. In case of Thailand, this was particularly important as Thailand was one of the states that were to play a major part in the events leading to the final conclusion of Vietnam War (as a military base for the intensification of attacks Nixon hoped would force the North Vietnamese to negotiate and make concessions) and also after the planned scaling down of the American presence in the region. At the same time, however, Nixon continued to make public statements which differed substantially from the signals sent to Bangkok through bilateral channels, which made the Thai leadership even more uneasy. This was quickly becoming a problem especially in relation to security questions. Nixon was undoubtedly made aware of this – for example, in June 1969 Kissinger wrote a memorandum for him before meeting with the ambassador in Thailand Unger which, among other things, stated: “...Unger suggests that there is a need for fuller consultations with the inner circle of the Thai Government on both withdrawals from Vietnam and U.S. military deployments in Thailand after Vietnam conflict. He believes *this can be done with minimal risk of public leakage...* [italics added – J. B.].”⁶⁴⁹ The president, as already mentioned, was obsessed with secrecy, which explains the emphasis here on the minimal risk of public leakage...

One of the most obvious examples of the discrepancies between various Nixon’s proclamations could be observed in July 1969. En route to Asia, the president made a stop-over in Guam, where he made a speech in which he defined what later became known as the Nixon Doctrine. Among many observations on the situation in Asia and in the world in general, Nixon told the reporters that “the time had come when the United States, in its

⁶⁴⁸ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*. Volume XX, Southeast Asia, 1969–1972. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2000, p. 2.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 25.

relations with all of its Asian friends, should be quite emphatic on two points: one, that we would keep our treaty commitments; our treaty commitments, for example, with Thailand under SEATO. And, two, that as far as the problems of international security are concerned, as far as the problems of military defense, except for the threat of a major power involving nuclear weapons, that the United States was going to encourage and *had a right to expect* that this problem would be increasingly handled by, and the responsibility for it taken by the Asian nations themselves [italics added – J. B.].”⁶⁵⁰ At the same press conference, a lot of attention was paid to the future status of military forces deployed to Thailand and to the nature of security relationship between the two countries. The president made it clear that “there is no secret defense agreement with Thailand. We, of course, have the SEATO treaty. We will keep our commitments under that treaty. We had the Rusk-Thanat communiqué, which *simply spelled out the treaty*. Bu as far as any secret commitments are concerned, we not only have none in any of these nations, we will make none...”⁶⁵¹

The interview, which covered a large variety of subjects, clearly indicated president’s decision to limit American role in Asia. While he claimed that many of the measures he had talked about had been pre-discussed with Asian leaders, it was not necessarily the case and to many, Nixon’s public announcement of these planned moves came as a very unpleasant surprise. Following the stop-over on Guam, Nixon headed to a number of Asian countries, where he tried to somehow minimize the damage his previous remarks might have made. In Thailand, however, his attempts were rather unconvincing. At a reception in the Government House, for example, Nixon followed the usual pattern of talking about “the land of the free” but in a rather different context than his predecessors: “This is truly the land of the free; and it *is this same sense of self-reliance, of freedom, of willingness to fight for freedom both at home and abroad*, that we wish to develop *all over the world* as something we are very proud to be associated with, with our friends from Thailand [italics added – J. B.].”⁶⁵² When arrived to Bangkok, he claimed that “United States will stand proudly with Thailand against all those who might threaten it from abroad or from within”.⁶⁵³ Yet, in a written statement issued to the press on July 28, Nixon added: “Our determination to honor our commitments is fully consistent with our conviction that the nations of Asia *can and must* increasingly share the responsibility for achieving peace and progress in the area. The challenge to our wisdom is to

⁶⁵⁰ Excerpts from Unofficial Account of President Nixon’s Meeting with Reporters, *The New York Times*, 26. 7. 1969.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid.

⁶⁵² United States, Department of State. *The Department of State Bulletin*. 25. 9. 1969, vol. LXI, no. 1579, p. 155.

⁶⁵³ Nixon Asserts U.S. Stands with Thais Against All Foes, *The New York Times*, 29. 7. 1969.

support the Asian countries' efforts to defend and develop themselves, without attempting to take from them the responsibilities which should be theirs. *For if domination by the aggressor can destroy the freedom of a nation, too much dependence on a protector can eventually erode its dignity.* What we seek in Asia is a community of *free nations able to go their own way and to seek their own destiny* with whatever cooperation we can provide – a community of independent Asian countries, each maintaining its own traditions and yet each developing through mutual cooperation. *In such an arrangement,* we stand ready to play a responsible role in accordance with our commitments and *basic interests* [italics added – J. B.].”⁶⁵⁴

The implications of these remarks were clear. The United States was now only willing to honor its commitments if the Asian allies stepped up their involvement in defending themselves. Also, it is interesting to note the transformation of the word “free” in the American foreign policy discourse. While in the past it usually referred to those countries that joined their forces with the United States in its efforts to stop the communist advance, now Nixon was implying it meant that these countries determined their own destiny and took responsibility for it. For Thailand this was particularly challenging because of the American forces deployed on her soil – previously, it could be tacitly believed that these forces would defend Thailand in case of an attack, but now it seemed, in the light of Nixon’s words about the threat by a major power involving nuclear weapons, that this option was no longer considered. The Thai government had realized that by serving as a base and staging area for American troops, it was no longer significantly enhancing its own security, and began to weigh the negatives of the presence of American troops (propaganda attacks from communist countries, increasing popular discontent with the American presence) against the benefits of economic and military aid. It tried to ensure the continuation of American aid while the American forces were gradually withdrawn.

Accordingly, the Thai officials stressed the importance of this aid in a meeting with Nixon in Bangkok on July 29: “Thanom said that the communiqué of the 9th Party Congress [Communist Party of China – J. B.] shows that Peking has reaffirmed its intention to carry on war with its neighbors. Thailand will be under pressure. Many countries in Southeast Asia are not strong enough to resist. Thailand does not want ground forces—but not having an industrial base, it does need assistance with matériel. It would need help with ground forces in a general war. As long as it is an unconventional revolutionary type war, however, the Thais want to depend on their own ground forces. The Thai government wants to pursue a vast

⁶⁵⁴ USDS, *DoS Bulletin*, 25. 9. 1969, p. 154.

program of civic action. The Thai government wants, (1) to work to create a viable grouping of non-Communist nations, (2) to receive matériel assistance, (3) to repel force with force—but with its own men, and (4) to continue to pursue economic reforms to supplement other means of defense.”⁶⁵⁵ The president tried to demonstrate his frankness by revealing some information about American plans and by asking Thanom his opinion on a number of issues, including his view of American policy in Vietnam. To this, Thanom replied that “...if a decisive step had been taken, the will of the enemy would now be broken. Because of the importance of public opinion, one must take measures to meet its demands. He hoped the other side would respond. If the other side does respond, the war can end. But so far the other side has not responded. What does the U.S. intend? If concessions are made by only one side, we have cause for concern. He hoped the U.S. wouldn't go too far...”⁶⁵⁶

Despite Nixon's efforts to appease the Thai leaders, the relations between the two countries began to deteriorate over the course of the coming months and years. Already in the late summer of 1969, when the U.S. Congress and some officials of the Nixon Administration (Secretary of State Rogers, Secretary of Defense Laird) began to examine and question the Taksin Military Contingency Plan for the Defense of the Mekong Valley, drafted during the Johnson Administration, the situation appeared particularly tense. The Thai leaders felt that the Nixon Administration was backing out of Indochina and out of Thailand specifically, and that Bangkok was being betrayed. As the CIA analysis of August 25 stated: “The events of the past several weeks have not only largely dissipated the good will and the sense of congruent interests that President Nixon engendered during his short visit of Bangkok, but they have also placed Thai-U.S. relations under the greatest strain since the Laotian crisis in 1961 and 1962. Much of the difficulty involves Thai sensitivity to being treated as something less than a full partner in the struggle for Southeast Asia, and the displeasure that its contribution to the Vietnam effort has not been fully appreciated.”⁶⁵⁷ The CIA correctly noted that the Thai leaders were viewing with growing anxiety, as was already mentioned previously, the voices in the United States calling for a complete withdrawal from Indochina. As a way to counter what they saw as a dangerous trend in the American public opinion, they had proposed to start negotiations on withdrawal of American troops⁶⁵⁸. These talks were indeed proposed and to

⁶⁵⁵ USDS, *FRUS 1969–1976*, p. 36.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶⁵⁸ “Thanat asserted that only in this way could Bangkok demonstrate that U.S. forces were in Thailand for the sole purpose of supporting the war in South Vietnam and that the Thai had no need nor desire for direct U.S. support in fighting their insurgency. Thanat argued that this would undercut the position of those elements in the U.S. who were warning against additional commitments to Thailand. It also seems likely that Thanat had other

the public, they had seemed to be a sort of vengeance for the Taksin plan controversy, which was not necessarily the case: “Well-placed diplomatic sources said that the Thai Government had evidently decided to press for early talks because of irritation over the controversy in Congress over the 1965 military-contingency plan with Thailand and expressions of concern in the Senate that the plan might be used to involve American combat troops in ‘another Vietnam’.”⁶⁵⁹

By late 1969 and 1970, the contours of the American policy in Southeast Asia, which the Thai government wanted clarified in January 1969, began to come out quite clearly. Nixon’s plan to scale down American involvement in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia in general was not in itself a major problem for the Thais. The problem was that Bangkok felt such a scale-down, or a complete withdrawal, could come even if a satisfactory conclusion to the war had not been reached. By this time, even more worrying than Vietnam was the situation in Laos and Cambodia. In both of these countries, but especially in Laos, Thailand was already involved in fighting the communist forces. The developments in Laos were seen to affect Thailand directly as the success of the insurgency in Laos could inspire similar efforts in Thailand as well. For example, in January 1970, in a meeting between the Thai King and the American officials, the King “indicated that the Thais were very concerned that a possible settlement in South Vietnam would not include a satisfactory requirement that the North Vietnamese withdraw entirely from Laos.”⁶⁶⁰ Thai forces already played an important part in the combat operations in Laos and the Bangkok government was naturally afraid that their sacrifice might come to nothing should the United States choose to withdraw. Thailand grew extremely anxious about the situation in Laos after the Lam Son 719 offensive in February–April 1971, which involved roughly 20,000 South Vietnamese troops and 10,000 American forces in support. The operation, intended to destroy communist bases in Laos, ended in disaster and disorganized retreat of the South Vietnamese forces, which according to some sources had a casualty rate of 50 %.⁶⁶¹ While the South Vietnamese government⁶⁶²

purposes in getting troop withdrawal talks. What better way to demonstrate to the U.S., the contribution Thailand has made to the war effort, and at the same time, that such support could not necessarily be taken for granted.” USDS, *FRUS 1969–1976*, p. 43.

⁶⁵⁹ U.S. and Thailand Agree to Discuss Troop Reduction, *The New York Times*, 23. 9. 1969.

⁶⁶⁰ USDS, *FRUS 1969–1976*, p. 98.

⁶⁶¹ For more on the operation, see for example: Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam*. New York: Viking, 1983, here especially pp. 629–630.

⁶⁶² South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu, for example, rejected the claims that there was a disorderly retreat or even a rout and called the operation “the biggest victory ever for the armed forces of South Vietnam”. He even claimed that the South Vietnamese army “has the capability to attack North Vietnam under some form whether or not the United States provided air support.” Thieu Terms Laos Drive Saigon’s ‘Biggest Victory’, *The New York Times*, 1. 4. 1971.

sought to present the operation as a success and Nixon used it justify its “Vietnamization” policy and further reduction of U.S. troops⁶⁶³, most military observers and the general public viewed it as a defeat. Thai Deputy Prime Minister Praphat Charusthein remarked that “the poor U.S. support made retreat inevitable. He is generally worried about what he sees as *evidence of uncertainty in US about concrete support to strengthen Thailand and other SEA countries* [italics added – J. B.]”⁶⁶⁴ The Thai stance clearly reflected fears that as the U.S. withdrew its forces, it would become Thai responsibility to stop the communist advance if the fall of Laos was to be avoided.

The situation was becoming even more complicated in Cambodia. King Sihanouk, who never had the support or trust of the United States, was overthrown on March 18, 1970 and replaced by the Lon Nol government. American forces started to carry out intensive bombing raids in Cambodia⁶⁶⁵ and in May the ground troops even invaded Cambodian territory in an attempt to destroy the communist bases there, leading to massive protests in the United States⁶⁶⁶ and to a slowdown in the secret talks with the Chinese⁶⁶⁷. For Thailand, the developments in the spring of 1970 were both encouraging and disconcerting. As mentioned previously, the Thai-Cambodian Relations were rather strained and the Thai government often accused Sihanouk of being too soft toward the communists. On the other hand, by 1970 this view might have changed a little. In January 1970, for example, the Thai King remarked that “he felt Sihanouk was playing a dangerous game, but that he was virtually the captive of a nearly impossible situation. The moment that Sihanouk ceases to cooperate *marginally* with the Communists... he would be faced with widespread and effective insurgency which would probably result in his overthrow. Moreover... so long as Sihanouk closed his eyes to the flow of Communist materials through his country he was in a better position *to at least allow some American observation*. He [the Thai King – J. B.] indicated that the Thailand-Cambodia ill feeling had receded to some extent and he appreciated the difficulty of Sihanouk’s position

⁶⁶³ Nixon did not call the operation a success but he stated that “the South Vietnamese had shown that they could fight effectively without American advisers in their midst, that they could inflict heavier casualties than they took and that they could disrupt and consume enough of the enemy’s supplies to damage seriously his ability to sustain any major offensives against South Vietnam”. He simultaneously announced withdrawal of 100,000 U.S. troops from Vietnam by the end of 1971. Nixon Promises Vietnam Pullout of 100,000 More G.I.’s by December; Pledges to End U.S. Role in War, *The New York Times*, 8. 4. 1971.

⁶⁶⁴ USDS, *FRUS 1969–1976*, p. 235.

⁶⁶⁵ The operation codenamed “Menu” saw the U.S. military planes drop 100,000 tones of bombs. Initially, the attacks were carried out without the approval of the Congress and were only made public in April 1970, when the president announced the upcoming ground incursion of American troops into Cambodia. Buckley, Roger. *The United States in Asia-Pacific since 1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 147.

⁶⁶⁶ Protests on campuses led to deaths in Kent and Jackson, while the president was virtually besieged by protesters inside the White House. Any escalation/spreading of the conflict were at this point extremely unpopular with the American public. Cohen, America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1971, pp. 176–177.

⁶⁶⁷ Hanhimaki, *Flawed Architect*, p. 79.

[italics added – J. B.]”⁶⁶⁸ In other words, by early 1970, when the situation in the Indochina battlefield was not improving significantly and the U.S. involvement was weakening, the destabilization of Cambodia caused by the overthrow of Sihanouk was not in Thai interests. This was also because the Thai government correctly feared that the United States would pressure Thailand into providing more support to the Lon Nol government. This support was not so much in sending combat troops (in fact such a step was discouraged⁶⁶⁹) as it was psychological and symbolic. In April 1970, when this subject was discussed in Washington, some of the possibilities included: “Issuing as statement recognizing the Cambodian border along the present frontiers. This is something which Sihanouk never got from the Thai, and issuance of such a statement now might help to give Lon Nol Government extra credit in the eyes of Cambodian people. The Cambodians have long wanted the Thai to accept the existing frontiers, since Thailand has maintained a traditional claim to large areas of Western Cambodia... Offering military aid to Cambodia. Cambodia still possesses sizeable stocks of US-supplied weapons, and the Thai might be able to provide (or act as transit point for) ammunition, spare parts, and additional arms in the event that the Lon Nol Government finds it necessary to draw upon its US-supplied stocks to supplement the Communist arms with which the FARK [the Cambodian Armed Forces – J. B.] is now mostly equipped. Conceivably, Thai LOCs [lines of communications – J. B.] to Cambodia could become very important in sustaining the Lon Nol Government.”⁶⁷⁰ The Thai government was not particularly happy about becoming a transit point and supplier for the Cambodian forces; the recognition of Cambodian boundaries would mean surrendering areas which Thailand still considered hers (including the already mentioned Preah Vihear temple) and would be a very bitter pill to swallow for both the government/army and some segments of the public.

Various disagreements about the conduct of the Indochina War had to a degree accompanied the Thai-American relations ever since the 1950s and could not in themselves erode the foundations of this partnership. The thing that worried the Thai officials the most after the Nixon Administration came into office was the apparent ease with which the U.S. seemed to be ready to give up its position and its interests, which it had so far vigorously defended. In November 1964, when “neutralist” tendencies appeared in Thailand, the Johnson Administration showed considerable interest in making sure Thailand remained part of the “free world” and strongly opposed to communism. In February 1970, when the Thai leaders

⁶⁶⁸ USDS, *FRUS 1969–1976*, p. 99.

⁶⁶⁹ This was mainly because of historic animosities between the Thai and Khmer people and because of fears that the deployment of Thai units would not be well accepted by the public.

⁶⁷⁰ USDS, *FRUS 1969–1976*, p. 128.

started to express serious doubts about the future of Thai-American relationship, the reaction of Washington was rather different. As Kissinger wrote to Nixon following a report of meeting in Bangkok: “U.S. posture in east Asia in the 1970’s will be different and inevitably affect U.S.-Thai relations... U.S. intentions *will not require* a relationship with Thailand as close and dependent (on Thailand’s part) as in the past. *Some loosening of our relationship would be healthy...* In the process of moving to a more independent stance Thailand could become less closely aligned with the U.S. and more involved with the Soviets, *which would not necessarily be an undesirable development*. Thai initiatives to the Soviet Union are *viewed without alarm*. If the Thai relations became less one-sided the Soviets might be willing to contribute to multi-lateral institutions. The U.S. *should no longer expect* the degree of *exclusiveness* in U.S.-Thai relations that grew from the early cold war period and special conditions of the Vietnam War. More flexibility in Thai foreign policy *is desirable*.”⁶⁷¹

Such a shift in the American foreign policy was remarkable. It made absolutely perfect sense from Nixon’s and Kissinger’s perspective, as their focus was on *realpolitik* and on salvaging American position in the world. Commitments that were no longer advantageous and were too costly had to be gradually loosened. Nixon and Kissinger spoke of the need to remove “ideology” from foreign policy and to conduct the policy on purely realistic/pragmatic terms.⁶⁷² The problem with this approach was twofold. On the one hand, Soviet Union and China, while willing to accept some degree of accommodation, were not ready to follow suit and completely remove the ideological element from their own world outlook and foreign policy. On the other, relationship with countries like Thailand was built, at least in the post-WWII years, almost exclusively on the ideological (anti-communist) foundation, which was accompanied by American aid and support of the ruling regimes. When the ideological segment was removed and the aid tied to it was stopped or curtailed, the relationship suddenly became somewhat devoid of meaning and in a way, seemed to lose its main *raison d’être*. It was logical and correct to assume that Thailand (and other countries) would begin to reorient their foreign policy and seek to improve their ties with countries such as China or the Soviet Union; it was far less safe to assume that they would still be willing to help secure American interests and objectives. Nixon’s and Kissinger’s policy seemed to many statesmen in Thailand as a retreat from Southeast Asia with all the consequences this would imply. The Nixon Administration, however, still insisted that despite the scaling down

⁶⁷¹ USDS, *FRUS 1969–1976*, p. 107.

⁶⁷² This was clearly seen on the example of dealing with the Chinese, where the “ideological barriers” were blamed for the lack of progress in the previous years. Mann, James. *About Face. A History of America’s Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, p. 17.

of American involvement in Vietnam and Indochina in general, Thailand must remain a base for American interests in area. In January 1971, in a meeting with Kissinger, Laird, Rogers and others, Nixon stated clearly that “he wanted our bases retained in Thailand... the U.S. was on a razor’s edge with respect to the Nixon Doctrine in Southeast Asia. While we made our policy clear, the press has consistently distorted it to our disadvantage. The President stressed we must retain our presence in Thailand, and in all Southeast Asia, to include the Philippines, South Vietnam and Korea. The idea that the Nixon Doctrine constituted a formula for reducing our presence to zero was neither true nor in our interest.”⁶⁷³ The problem with this reasoning was again twofold – the assurances given to the Asian allies were not sufficient to convince them about the validity of the American pledges, especially due to the anti-war movement in the United States and moves such as the opening to China; and, even if the allies were convinced, the question was what they would get in return for retaining American bases since the United States was no longer willing to guarantee their security.

The focus on the “big picture” and on securing of the American interests on the global scale also meant that the United States no longer followed the political developments in Thailand so closely. In a memorandum from the CIA Director Richard Helms to President Nixon dated 23 October 1970, Helms commented on Thai politics only briefly: “Barring a North Vietnamese victory in the Indochina struggle... U.S. officials believe that Thai politics will probably continue on their current course without radical change. Thanom is planning to retire, but the path to a reasonably smooth succession by Praphat [Deputy Prime Minister – J. B.] appears to be well paved. If Praphat should disappear from the scene, all bets are off.”⁶⁷⁴ In a meeting between the Thai Prime Minister Thanat Koman and Secretary of State Rogers earlier the same month, Thai politics was discussed only very briefly, with Thanat “wryly commenting on the Parliamentary Opposition’s desire to ‘overthrow the Government’”.⁶⁷⁵ The previously exaggerated danger of communist subversion still remained a concern, but was not considered to be as grave as previously. When discussing the problem of insurgency in January 1971, it was obvious that for Nixon and Kissinger tackling this particular problem was not a priority: “Thai officials were not as concerned about the counterinsurgency problem in Northeast Thailand as Secretary Laird thought they should be... The President remarked to Secretary Laird that his past discussions with the Thais suggested that they were very much concerned about internal insurgency. Secretary Laird replied that the threat had actually

⁶⁷³ USDS, *FRUS 1969–1976*, p. 218.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

increased over the past 12 months and that the Thais had few forces involved in this role... Dr. Kissinger added that an additional problem was the fact that the Thais have forces in Laos and that while the insurgency in the Northeast *may be a problem*, the viability of Laos and Cambodia is *the decisive factor* in terms of Thailand's future. *It is essential* that they not pull their forces out of Laos [italics added – J. B.].”⁶⁷⁶ There was a clear disagreement between the military, which tended to view the insurgency as more a problem, and the White House, which had a holistic view of the situation in Southeast Asia and considered the threat to Thailand to be directly related to the situation in other neighboring countries.

This was thus the picture that characterized the relations between both countries for much of the Nixon and Ford Administrations. By 1972 at the latest, the United States realized that the victory in Vietnam was not attainable. By March, the intensity of communist attacks in the South had greatly increased and the South Vietnamese forces, even with U.S. support, were losing ground. On May 8, the president broadcasted a major speech to the nation in which he announced mining of the North Vietnamese ports and intensification of air raids but in which he also said: “... These actions I have ordered will cease when the following conditions are met: First, all American prisoners of war must be returned. Second, there must be an internationally supervised cease-fire throughout Indochina. Once prisoners of war are released, once the internationally supervised cease-fire has begun, we will *stop all acts of force throughout Indochina*. And at that time we will proceed with *a complete withdrawal* of all American forces from Vietnam within four months. Now these terms are generous terms. They are terms which would not require surrender and humiliation on the part of anybody. They permit the United States to *withdraw with honor*. They would end the killing. They would bring our P.O.W.'s home... They *deserve immediate acceptance* by North Vietnam. [italics added – J. B.]”⁶⁷⁷

Despite the military actions announced by Nixon, this statement amounted to the acceptance of American defeat, as the words *withdraw with honor* had clearly indicated. Even the mining and bombing, although it saved Saigon from immediate defeat, could not solve the situation in the long-run.⁶⁷⁸ In the spring of 1972, the shadow of defeat began to hang more and more ominously over Washington. Nixon, who knew that elections were coming in several months, also wanted to make sure that he demonstrated again and again his

⁶⁷⁶ USDS, *FRUS 1969–1976*, pp. 216–217.

⁶⁷⁷ Transcript of President Nixon's Address to Nation on His Policy in Vietnam War, *The New York Times*, 9. 5. 1972.

⁶⁷⁸ As some historians argue, without this increased American intervention, the North Vietnamese forces were close to achieving complete victory. Cohen, *America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1991*, pp. 177–178.

determination to end the war, a “war without victory” but with “honor”: “... And finally, may I say to the American people: I ask you for the *same support* you’ve always given your President in difficult moments... I know how much you want to end this war. I know how much you want to bring our men home. And I think you know, from all that I have said and done these past three and half years, how much I too, want an end to the war – to bring our men home. *You want peace, I want peace.* But you also want honor and not defeat...[italics added – J. B.]”⁶⁷⁹ While honor was certainly important, it was the hope that the Nixon kept stressing that peace was coming which counted in the elections. The effect of the May announcement was immediate. The Gallup Poll numbers showed a dramatic increase in president’s popularity which could certainly be at least partially attributed to this development: between April 27 and 30, the president’s approval rating stood at 54 %; between May 25–28, it jumped to 62 %, an increase of 8 %.⁶⁸⁰ Nixon was desperate to get re-elected and to be seen as the most successful president ever when foreign policy was concerned, and he was aware of the discontent in the American society with the war that he promised to end already in 1969. The domestic politics played perhaps a more important role for him now than the security of South Vietnam and his other Asian allies, although he was not so ready to sacrifice them as Kissinger was.⁶⁸¹

As the negotiations with North Vietnam dragged on in the second half of 1972, Nixon was becoming more desperate. He was afraid that the Congress would use its power to withdraw all American forces from Indochina without reaching a deal with Hanoi. That would not only definitively seal the fate of the Saigon government, but undermine the American prestige in the region and that of the president as well. The president’s struggle to keep the “American honor” and to save his own face while also securing what he saw as a vital American interest (retreat from Vietnam and from Indochina in general) was probably most apparent in these weeks and months. The South Vietnamese government proved to be the greatest obstacle in the entire process as Thieu was unwilling to accept any plan that he saw as disadvantageous to his regime. Nixon’s and especially Kissinger’s frustration with Saigon grew. On December 15, for example, the American Ambassador to Saigon told Thieu that “the President is greatly disturbed by what he construes to be Thieu’s negative attitude toward the negotiations; that if it continues it will force him to reconsider our whole relationship. I

⁶⁷⁹ Transcript of President Nixon’s Address to Nation on His Policy in Vietnam War, *The New York Times*, 9. 5. 1972.

⁶⁸⁰ Gallup. *Presidential Job Approval Center*. Available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124922/Presidential-Approval-Center.aspx> [last access 10. 4. 2011].

⁶⁸¹ These fears were growing in the minds of South Vietnamese officials who voiced their anxieties more and more often to their American counterparts. Bundy, *A Tangled Web*, p. 361.

said that the President had asked me to stress this point because he wants to be completely frank about his position and wants to make it clear that if this attitude continues it cannot but threaten the fundamental character of our future relationship.”⁶⁸² The extent to which these comments reflected Nixon’s or Kissinger’s views is debatable but it would seem that it was Kissinger who put more pressure on South Vietnam. After all, it was Nixon who despite the opposition of the Pentagon and Henry Kissinger ordered massive bombings of North Vietnam in December 1972 to appease the Thieu government⁶⁸³. After these raids, the negotiations moved forward and on January 27, 1973, the *Paris Peace Accords* were signed by the United States, Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and the Provisional Revolutionary Government [of South Vietnam]. Far from being an American victory, these accords could not even be considered “a peace with honor”. The United States was aware of that and tried to appease its Asian allies by making promises it knew it would most likely not be able to keep. In conversation with Thieu of February 1, for example, The Vice President Spiro Agnew assured Thieu “that the President is fully aware of the need to assist the Vietnamese economy as the government undertakes the tasks of rehabilitation and reconstruction as well as the need for development in order to provide jobs for the demobilized military personnel. *He assured Thieu that the U.S. has no intention of withdrawing its presence from Asia or retreating on its commitments and cited the continuing presence of our air power in Thailand, the B-52’s in Guam and the Pacific Fleet* [italics added – J. B.]”⁶⁸⁴

Despite such assurances, January 1973 was a clear turning point in the American involvement in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia in general. For the Asian leaders, the *Paris Peace Accords* clearly signaled the American intention to withdraw – in fact, by March 1973, the American forces did complete their withdrawal from South Vietnam. Already in February, a new comprehensive reappraisal of the U.S. strategy in the region was commissioned by Nixon and Kissinger, which clearly reflected the weakening U.S. position: “... The study should consider... Alternative goals of U.S. security assistance programs in terms of the size and type of threat allied forces could be structured to meet. Economic and political constraints should be considered... This study should also evaluate U.S. military basing postures for the Asian mainland and Western Pacific Islands for the FY74 to FY75 period in terms of... Allied

⁶⁸² United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*. Volume IX. Vietnam, October 1972–January 1973. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2010, pp. 684–685.

⁶⁸³ For more on these bombing raids, known as the Operation Linebacker II, see for example: Ambrose, Stephen. *The Christmas Bombings*. New York: Random House, 2005.

⁶⁸⁴ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*. Volume X. Vietnam, January 1973–July 1975. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2010, p. 22.

reactions to alternative basing postures including the phasing from our current deployment posture to the alternative considered. Particular attention should be given to an evaluation of how various deployment postures would impact on Allied perceptions of U.S. capability and willingness to support strategy objectives.”⁶⁸⁵

The allies were indeed worried by these developments and a complete American withdrawal from Southeast Asia was hardly acceptable for them. Thailand and other countries were most of all afraid that the U.S. would lose all interest in the region as a result of the Vietnam debacle. Thus, they sought ways to ensure that at least some American presence would be preserved. For example, already on January 10, the Thai Prime Minister publicly announced that his government “has agreed to keep American troops and aircraft in Thailand after a Vietnam cease-fire.”⁶⁸⁶ For Thanom, this was also a matter of personal prestige. With the cease-fire in Vietnam, a number of Thais, including the Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Koman, began to criticize the continued American military presence in the country. Thanom, who felt himself the successor of Sarit and his foreign policy, still saw the U.S. presence as crucial. In May 1973, he reconfirmed this stand by saying that “United States military forces were still necessary in Thailand for the security in Indochina and of Thailand as well. Although cease-fire agreements have been signed in Vietnam and Laos, the Communists are still violating the agreements, the Premier said, and ‘the situation in Cambodia still appears to be unstable politically and militarily’. Without Americans in Thailand... the Communists could push quickly through Laos and Cambodia into Thailand...”⁶⁸⁷ As discussed previously, the communist threat to Thailand, at least in the opinion of the author, was very often exaggerated, both by the Thais and by certain segments of the American administration and public. Now the continued presence of American troops constituted not only a barrier against potential communist attack (even though this reason was officially given) but also a means of internal Thai political struggle between the staunchly pro-American and more moderate wing. Thanom, who represented the more moderate wing, made his views about the American forces in Thailand also very clear: “We accepted foreign forces as a partner in a military alliance, namely SEATO, and we sent troops to Vietnam because we thought it would also be beneficial to Thailand if Vietnam were to be taken over by hostile forces, they would threaten the well-being of Thailand, too. But since the war in Vietnam has come to an end, at least

⁶⁸⁵ United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*. Volume E-12. Documents on East and Southeast Asia, 1973–1976, Document 2. Available at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve12/d2> [last access 10. 4. 2011].

⁶⁸⁶ Thais to Allow U.S. Force to Stay after Cease-Fire, *The New York Times*, 11. 1. 1973. It was originally agreed that these forces would leave after the war in Vietnam was over.

⁶⁸⁷ Thai Chief Says U.S. Presence in Country Is Still Necessary, *The New York Times*, 11. 5. 1973.

officially, there are no further reasons for a foreign power to shift its forces from another country to Thailand, and to use our territory for war purposes because that would involve Thailand in a war without its consent, without a decision by the Thai people to become involved, and to become a belligerent... That is why we have objections now. This is not anti-Americanism at all.”⁶⁸⁸ In fact, there were elements of anti-Americanism behind these arguments, perhaps not with Thanom himself, but with many of his supporters, especially among the students, intelligentsia etc.

Unfortunately for Thanom, President Nixon could pay little attention to what was going on in Thailand – in 1973, he was already absorbed by the Watergate scandal, which was consuming more and more of his time and energy. The weakened president could no longer offer any guarantees to his Asian allies. On June 29, 1973, the Congress by its decision virtually put halt to all future military operations in Indochina.⁶⁸⁹ The *War Powers Resolution* of November 1973 tied the president’s hands even more, as it stated that “the President shall in every possible instance consult with Congress before introducing United States Armed Forces into hostilities or into situation where imminent involvement in hostilities is clearly indicated by the circumstances, and after every such introduction shall consult regularly with the Congress until United States Armed Forces are no longer engaged in hostilities or have been removed from such situations.”⁶⁹⁰ With the passing of such resolutions and acts, which basically made American military involvement in Indochina impossible, the rationale for the continued deployment of American forces in Thailand was further weakened. The financial and material support that the United States was providing its Asian allies was also in great danger, which in turn undermined the support for the Thanom government and fueled anti-government protests. Although the prime minister tried to stave off these challenges by pointing to the communist danger and threatening the protesters with arrests and trials, this no longer worked. In October 1973, after some student activists had been arrested, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to demand a change of government.⁶⁹¹ It should be noted that among these protesters, there was a number of left-leaning students and academics who envisaged a new, socialist future of Thailand. It should also be noted, however, that there was apparently no organized movement which prepared to stage a coup as Thanom had warned. In fact, in opposition to these left-wing activists there were organizations such as the

⁶⁸⁸ Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn (eds.), *The Eagle and the Elephant*, p. 128.

⁶⁸⁹ Litwak, *Détente and Nixon Doctrine*, p. 160.

⁶⁹⁰ *50 U.S.C. 1541-1548 (War Powers Resolution)*, 7. 11. 1973. The Avalon Project. Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy. Yale Law School. Available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/warpower.asp [last access 10. 4. 2011].

⁶⁹¹ Terwiel, *Thailand’s Political History*, p. 284.

Village Scouts or the Red Gaurs, which rejected communism and even violently attacked the left.⁶⁹² In any case, it could be said that the revolution of 1973 was not a communist uprising and that the discontent with the Thanom government had deeper and more diverse roots than leftist agitation. By October 13, Thanom resigned and fled the country and one day later, Sanya Thammasak was appointed new prime minister who was to lead the country until elections could be held.

Only several years earlier, such a development would be seen as nearly tragic from the American perspective. We might recall how the United States deliberated active involvement in Thai affairs should the pro-American government fall and any other regime, even a neutral one, should take its place. Even now, of course, there were concerns about developments in Thailand, but the overall disillusionment with the American engagement in Indochina and the discrediting of the long-term American anti-communist foreign policy had played their role in viewing the Thai revolution. These views, at least of part of the American public as well as segments of the Nixon Administration, were very well summed in a *The New York Times* article, which shall be quoted here in full: “The resignation and flight of Premier Thanom Kittikachorn, after a decade as Thailand’s military strongman, *appear to signal* major changes in the internal politics and external policies of a nation that *has been the keystone of lingering United States military interests in Southeast Asia*. Some *drastic adjustment* in Thailand’s long-standing close association with the United States *has seemed inevitable* ever since American forces began withdrawing from neighboring Indochina. *The Thais have traditionally attuned their allegiances to power realities in their region*, as when they sided first with the Japanese, then with the West, in response to the shifting fortunes of battle during World War II. With the possibility of any fresh American intervention in Indochina steadily receding and with relations between Washington and Peking growing more cordial, *any new government* in Bangkok can be expected to accelerate efforts already begun to achieve a reconciliation with the Chinese. Among the early steps in this direction will probably be moves to speed up the recently interrupted withdrawal of American forces from Thai soil. These trends *should not be unwelcome to the majority of Americans, who desire complete United States military disengagement from Southeast Asia*. It will not be easy for the new civilian Premier to establish genuine civilian rule in Thailand or to deliver the democratic constitution he has promised. In the past, through cosmetic changes at the top, the military elite has always managed to retain real power in the face of repeated attempts to introduce

⁶⁹² Wyatt, David K. *Thailand*, p. 291.

effective parliamentary government. Nevertheless, the surprising show of strength with which *the student demonstrators* brought Marshal Thanom's sudden downfall stands as a warning to the military in Thailand – *and to military regimes elsewhere* – that *efforts to suppress rising pressures for more popular rule cannot succeed forever* [italics added – J. B.].”⁶⁹³

There are several important points in this text which are worth mentioning. There is no accusation of communist subversion, only news of student demonstrators and desire for popular rule. As already mentioned, there certainly were leftist elements involved in these protests, which would have been enough to provoke a much more anxious and forceful reaction in Washington just a few years earlier. There is also no mention of the “free world”, of the common struggle against communism – in fact, the old argument about Thai opportunism and also of the undemocratic nature of the Thai military governments is again brought to light. Change and hope for democracy is lauded rather than “stability and order”. In this respect, it would almost seem as if this text was written in 1945 or 1946. The danger that Thailand would be lost like China was lost in 1949 and like Indochina was likely to be lost soon (although it is not mentioned explicitly in the article) does not even surface here – most likely because this danger would not provoke any reaction any more, as majority of Americans really desired to disengage from Indochina and to end the long and largely unsuccessful American presence there. The ease with which the possible Thai detachment from the American sphere of interests is presented and accepted here is, however, still sharply at odds with official documents and newspaper articles from several years before. One similarity with the past is that again there is not the slightest hint of sympathy with the deposed dictator – the same approach as when Phibun was removed from power in the 1950s, despite the fact that both men, even though because of selfish motives and reasons, loyally followed the American political line in the region.

In 1974 and early 1975, little has changed in this overall attitude. In the United States, President Nixon did not survive Watergate and finally resigned on August 9, 1974. His successor Gerald Ford retained most of the foreign policy establishment, meaning that the attempts at *détente* and realpolitik supported by Kissinger largely continued. Thailand played no major part in these deliberations and its security and future destiny seemed no longer to be an American priority, especially in the light of U.S. withdrawal from the region. It cannot be said, however, that all of a sudden all American officials involved stopped caring about Thailand. Especially the military officers and Pentagon experts, but also scholars and

⁶⁹³ Thailand Adjusts, *The New York Times*, 18. 10. 1973.

academics, still tried at least to predict the future developments in the country. It is interesting, however, that even the insurgency in the North and Northeast, for a long-time the major perceived threat to Thai security and stability, was now seen by some authors in a rather different light. For example, in an article from 1974, Jeffrey Race argued that this insurgency was not so much the result of communist subversion (in fact, he openly challenges this view held in the past by the Thai and American governments), but of latent conflicts between different ethnic groups and of inadequate response of the central government to the poor living conditions in the area. In the conclusion to his article, Race wrote: "In summary, then, three elements stand out in the evolution of the war in northern Thailand: first, a series of latent distributive conflicts between Thai and upland peoples; second, catalytic activities among the tribal peoples, led by the CPT from bases in Laos, and assisted to the extent of training by fraternal parties in Laos, Vietnam and China, which provoked Thai authorities to a suppressive response in the North; and third, the counterproductive nature of the suppressive response, which led to a rapid escalation of violence in the North, and to a far greater number of armed opponents than had existed prior to the suppressive response. The second element of this triad, the continued ability of the CPT to operate from bases in Laos with assistance from nearby countries, is a geopolitical fact which cannot be undone. The prognosis for the future then, depends on the wisdom of the Thai response in focusing on the first and third elements: the distributive inequalities maintained by the current system, and the counter-productive nature of the suppressive response inherent in current military doctrine and organization. Should the policies of the 1960's be continued, an escalatory spiral may lead to a situation such as that in Laos today: intensive bombing, violent disruption of traditional life ways, mass population resettlement, establishment of a permanent state of dependency by the resettled tribal peoples, and continuous warfare in what could otherwise be an area of peaceful and productive cooperation between lowland and upland peoples."⁶⁹⁴ Such articles like these clearly reaffirmed the fact that not all insurgency in Thailand was "communist" and that some of the policies of the Thai government, which were partially devised and supported by Washington, were in fact counterproductive. To a degree, these articles might have demonstrated better and less ideological understanding of the realities in Southeast Asia. On the other hand, they may also be taken as a justification for the change of American policy toward Thailand and Southeast Asia in general. In either case, those experts and scholars who predicted that Thailand would not become communist in the future definitely proved more

⁶⁹⁴ Race, Jeffrey. The War in Northern Thailand, *Modern Asian Studies*, 1974, vol. 8, no. 1, p. 112.

correct than those who claimed that Thailand was potentially “another Vietnam” or that a major political instability and insecurity would follow⁶⁹⁵.

Overall, it can be said that the Nixon years brought yet another redefinition of the Thai-American relationship. The fall of Saigon in April 1975 is often viewed as the event which carries a tremendous meaning from the point of view of American presence in Southeast Asia. While there certainly was a very strong symbolism attached to this event, from the point of view of Thai-American relations it was, at least in the opinion of the author, not as important as some other events that had preceded it. Already since 1969, and definitely since 1973, Thailand realized that the American influence in the region would gradually diminish. The policy of unilateral orientation on Washington was no longer viable, but that did not mean that all connections to the United States would be severed. In fact, such a move would not have even been possible and would not have served Thai national interests. Instead, Thailand, under new government, returned to its traditional pragmatic policy of balancing its ties to different regional powers, which could be seen, for example, by its rapprochement with China⁶⁹⁶. In a certain sense, the brutal *realpolitik* of Nixon and Kissinger, though it largely failed in securing the American interests on the global level, had one positive effect for the Thai-American relationship. It somehow “unmasked” its true nature – pragmatic calculations in both Washington and Bangkok, which had formed the basis of this cooperation at least since World War II, but which were covered under layers of ideological justifications, which did not in most cases reflect the existing realities on the ground.

⁶⁹⁵ Even Kissinger seemed to hold this view. In a memorandum for President Ford, written in June 1975, he said concerning Thailand: “... With the exception of Thailand, the regimes in ASEAN countries are relatively stable, and remain so over the next several years. Thailand could surprise us, and Khukrit [Khukrit Pramoj, Thai Prime Minister from March 1975 to January 1976 – J. B.] – a man whose sophistication and political sense are increasingly impressive – *may survive the odds against him longer than we anticipate* [italics added – J. B.]” United States, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*. Volume E-12. Documents on East and Southeast Asia, 1973–1976, Document 16. Available at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve12/d16> [last access 10. 4. 2011].

⁶⁹⁶ This move was seen by many Thais as long overdue and was thus popular with the majority of the population. Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 290.

CONCLUSION

The Thai-American relationship in the post-WWII years is often presented as one of the cornerstones of the American foreign policy in Southeast Asia, at least up to 1975 and the end of the fall of South Vietnam. This relationship has indeed played a very important role in shaping the American foreign policy, though it has to be mentioned that its importance is, at least according to the author of this thesis, sometimes rather overrated. Both the United States and Thailand entered their new era of partnership with a certain set of priorities and expectations and also with a certain view of their counterpart. Many of these basic tenets and premises of Thai and American thinking had changed over the three decades that were analyzed in this study, but some major trends and underlying principles could be traced throughout all these years. It was not only the relationship and the transformations it went through that the author has found interesting, however. Another, very important aspect that should be mentioned and that has been mentioned repeatedly in the preceding pages is the actual portrayal of and the presentation of the image of the United States in Thailand, but even more importantly, the image of Thailand in the United States. The dichotomy between the actual situation and the various issues of the multifaceted cooperation between the two countries and the way this cooperation was justified and presented to the American public is especially interesting because it, too, helps to show how the American and Thai priorities and expectations changed over time. For those interested in the analysis of public discourse in the United States, the portrayal of shifting meanings attached to such commonplace words as “freedom”, “responsibility” or “democracy” in this particular context of Thai-American relations might offer some interesting insights into the public use (or misuse) of these terms by the American government and media during the Cold War in general. For those interested in studying the political and socio-cultural differences between the West and the East, a brief survey of the different interpretation of these same terms in Thailand and in the United States might show the unsuitability of applying western political and cultural thinking and concepts on the reality in Asia (or, for that matter, in any part of the world outside of the western civilization sphere).

The relationship between the United States and Thailand during the post-war years is a rather complex and intricate issue and the author of this thesis does not claim to have described and analyzed all the aspects of it in full. Instead, its main purpose, as already mentioned, was to identify some of the basic tenets, practical and ideological considerations and expectations on which the relationship was primarily built, and to show how these factors

shaped the actual cooperation between the two countries and how they had gradually transformed. It has to be mentioned here that while the relations between Washington and Bangkok started to expand significantly only after World War II, there was a tradition of mutual relationship that dated all the way to the 19th century. While this relationship played only a minor role in the foreign policy of both countries prior to 1941 and the outbreak of the World War II in Asia, it could not be omitted and had to be mentioned at least briefly in the opening chapter of this thesis. History is, after all, in general a continuous chain of events and it is always important and necessary to look for causes and roots of specific developments in the past. The Cold War was indeed a major event without which the Thai-American relationship would most likely not have played the role it did in the 1950s and the 1960s; on the other hand, as the author mentions in the thesis, some sort of closer cooperation between the two countries would most likely have appeared regardless of the absence of the Cold War, but its priorities and practical manifestations could have been entirely different. While the American foreign policy in Southeast Asia after 1945 is often judged and evaluated predominantly within the contexts and through the paradigm of Cold War and the fight against communism, this paradigm fails to explain certain important aspects of the American approach and strategy that have their origins in the pre-Cold War years.

In conclusion, the author would like to sum up the main findings of his thesis. While offering interpretations of the problems he has chosen to study, he is aware of the fact that different explanations and answers to these questions might be suggested by other scholars. The author is convinced, however, that by doing his research into materials, which have previously been little explored and used, he has made a contribution to better understanding of the Thai-American relations in the post-World-War-II period which further research can build upon.

The first observation that the author would like to emphasize here concerns the issue of the foundations, both ideological and practical, of the Thai-American relationship in the post-war years and the image of Thailand in the United States. It has been argued that the origins of this relationship can be traced all the way to the 19th and early 20th century. Thailand was seen in the United States as the “land of the free” (as suggested by its very name) – it was still a “backward”, “underdeveloped” Asian country but compared to other Asian nations, it seemed to have the potential to develop political institutions and modern society similar to that of Western countries. The fact that Thailand (previously Siam) had never become a colony of European powers beyond any doubt helped to create the image of the “land of the free”. However, while in the western thinking the word “freedom”, at least in

the modern usage of the terms, entails not only sovereignty of the state, but also individual freedoms and, as an extension, democratic form of government, in the Thai mindset it is much more narrowly defined and does not necessarily include the western-style political system. While there definitely were attempts in Thailand to transform the government and society and to “westernize” it, for example in 1932 and especially in the years immediately following the end of World War II, these attempts did not, at least in the opinion of the author, have the necessary support of the Thai public and the political mechanisms such as a functioning system of political parties, elimination of the army from politics etc., were also lacking. In fact, it became apparent, both in the pre-war years after the political change of 1932 and in the late 1940s that the Thai society was often negatively predisposed toward changes it perceived as radical and “alien” in nature. This does not mean that there was no support for democracy and political change in Thailand in the post-war period – it just means that this support was not been sufficient to promote and sustain this change. While on the one hand, this casts some doubt on the American belief in the devotion of Thai people to “freedom” (i.e. including democracy), which was so often stressed in the public proclamations of American officials and in the media, it also somewhat refutes the arguments of some authors that the United States could have significantly changed the political status quo in Thailand after 1945 and facilitate democratic change. While it is true that the United States could have reacted with more condemnation to the return of the military and Marshal Phibunsongkhram to power, such a reaction would most likely not have produced any significant shift in Thai politics. The exigencies and pressures of the Cold War and the perceived need to keep Thailand from becoming communist of course led the United States to stress other Thai virtues such as “freedom” in the narrow sense of the word and even more importantly, “stability”, at the expense of “democracy”. This, however, was in a way a reaction to the situation in Thailand itself and to the failure of the pro-democratic forces led by Pridi. It must be admitted that this transition in American approach to Thailand and the acceptance of the undemocratic government there went perhaps far too smoothly and that the portrayal of Pridi and some of his associates as “communists”, which began to appear in the American diplomatic notes and even in public media, was rather incorrect. Yet, it is not possible to speak about a “betrayal” of Thai democracy by the United States (as some authors have done) as by 1947 or 1948 there was very little to betray in any case. The American reaction to the events in Thailand was pragmatic, but this pragmatism largely reflected the realities on the ground.

The “red menace” and the danger of the spreading of communism, as previously discussed in the thesis, had a great impact on American political and geostrategic thinking on

the global scale, but even more in Asia, where mainland China became communist in 1949. The American priorities in preventing other countries from succumbing to the communist danger were obvious and in many cases, these fears about the communist threat were entirely justified (as was the case of Vietnam). Thailand was to play an important role in the American plans, and as such, along with other American allies, was presented as a part of the “free world”. In this respect, the American approach to the mutual relationship was more ideological than the Thai approach. The financial and military aid given to Thailand, even the aid for economic, social and educational projects, was motivated mainly by the desire to eliminate the danger of communist takeover in Thailand. The question, however, still remains as to how realistic the threat of such a takeover was. While there certainly were communist guerillas in Thailand, especially in the North and Northeast, the author of this thesis maintains that the danger was often purposely overrated by the Thai military and government officials, both to justify the anti-opposition sweeps and their requests for more aid. There exists evidence, as discussed in this thesis, that at least certain members of successive American administrations were aware of this, but the aid was not discontinued or significantly reduced as a result.

There are several possible explanations for this phenomenon. Presidents such as Truman or especially Johnson might have feared the reaction of American conservatives, who were still accusing the Democrats of “losing China” and who would see the curtailment of aid to an anti-communist ally as yet another sign of betrayal and softness on communism. In the general atmosphere of fear-mongering and anti-communist hysteria, it was difficult to openly challenge those who spoke of the communist danger, though some government officials were bold enough to do so. There was also the fear that if the aid was curtailed, Thailand would start loosening its tight bonds with the United States and diversify its foreign policy. While this did not necessarily mean it would become communist, even the prospect of Thai “neutralism” referred to in contemporary American sources was unacceptable to many American military officials and politicians in the 1950s and 1960s. Such a “neutralism” could have serious consequences for the American military interests in the area, especially regarding the American bases in Thailand and their use in the Vietnam War. Moreover, on the psychological level, it could be seen as yet another failure of the American efforts to “win the hearts and minds” of the local population in Asian countries. The bipolar mindset of the Cold War period often recognized only “allies” and “enemies” and the neutral states were often considered “enemies” or at best unreliable and fickle. Also on the psychological level, the curtailment of aid would imply that the United States was not the all-powerful protector and

friend of Thailand, an image Washington was trying to cultivate in the eyes of the Thai government and public ever since the end of World War II. This, in turn, could be a blow to American prestige and could undermine its position in Southeast Asia in general as its credibility would be questioned.

It has often been asserted that the decision of Thai government to seek closer cooperation was based on purely pragmatic considerations and that once the United States began to withdraw from the area Thailand began to change its policy and turn away from Washington. While it is true that the Thai foreign policy has traditionally been pragmatic, the author of this thesis would like to point out that the Thai motivations and considerations behind the Thai-American cooperation were more complex and that views such as the one stated above are rather oversimplified. After World War II, Thailand certainly needed a “protector” to help safeguard Thai interests and escape British and French revenge for Thai involvement in the war. The United States seemed to be the only power willing and capable to protect Thailand against Britain and to help the Bangkok government to reestablish its position on the international scene. With these objectives met, however, Thailand could have reverted to its traditional balanced foreign policy. Once more, it is difficult to establish one single reason why it did not do so and instead chose to pursue a policy of close cooperation with the United States. The communist danger no doubt played its role, and Thailand had demonstrated its willingness to battle communism by sending its military units to Korea and later also by joining the SEATO and getting actively and passively involved in the war in Vietnam and the rest of Indochina. Yet, while the communist guerillas supported by China and the Soviet Union threatened Thailand to some extent, the author of this thesis would argue that this threat alone is not sufficient to explain Thai policy.

With the return of the military rule in 1947/1948, the Thai leadership, discredited by its actions during the war, looked for possible sources of legitimacy, not so much for the domestic consumption (although this factor played its limited role as well), but for the international audience. Marshal Phibunsongkhram and his successors skillfully used the American need for a reliable ally in the region and had managed to occupy this position and make themselves “indispensable” in the American eyes. Not only did they receive military and economic aid in return, but with the American support the Thai leadership consolidated its hold on power. The government justified most of its moves against the opposition by the mantra of “fighting communism”, which was a very powerful tool to influence Washington in the 1950s and 1960s. Phibun and later Sarit and Thanom still had to contend with legal opposition parties and groups, which criticized the government for its undemocratic nature,

corruption and its one-sided foreign policy, but the military made sure that these opposition parties and groups were virtually powerless to change anything by themselves. When the situation got critical, such as in 1957 after the rigged elections and corruption scandals plaguing senior figures of the government, the army staged a coup and replaced the least popular leaders with new ones who continued the policies of their predecessors. The military knew that as long as it kept the orientation of Thailand pro-American, the United States would not interfere with Thai domestic affairs and would downgrade its criticism to a minimum level. The fact that the American aid was distributed by the Thai government helped the Thai leaders (for example, Sarit) to influence the opinion of the general public and to present themselves as those who care for the well-being of Thai people. From the material, but also from the psychological point of view, it could be argued that it was the American support that made the military leaders more self-confident and that facilitated their rule.

With the American help, Thailand was gradually reasserting its position as one of the regional powers that it had somewhat lost in the late 19th and early 20th century. While battling communism in Cambodia and Laos, the Thai government also pursued its own policy interests and supported its own protégés and sympathizers in these countries. This could be clearly seen in the early 1960s during the crisis in Laos. While the United States had its overall priorities in the region, which mainly consisted of ensuring the countries did not become communist, it did not understand or care about these power plays so much and sometimes left the initiative to the Thais. In some cases, like the overthrow of Sihanouk, the American and Thai interests even mirrored each other, as both countries, for their own specific reasons, disliked the king and wished to replace him with a different leadership, although the Thais were more wary of the potential consequences of such a move. It could perhaps be argued, with a degree of exaggeration, that the situation in Southeast Asia has somewhat returned to where it was in the 19th century. North Vietnam and Thailand, as the two regional powers, were vying for control of Laos and Cambodia via different political factions and groups. The difference of course was that now this regional conflict had become part of the global struggle – the Cold War – as both North Vietnam and Thailand had their powerful supporters in Moscow/Beijing and Washington, respectively.⁶⁹⁷

And yet, it should be noted that besides these rather selfish and pragmatic considerations, there were most likely genuine bonds developing between the Thai and

⁶⁹⁷ The situation was of course complicated by the fact that China and North Vietnam had different, sometimes conflicting interests and that despite the Chinese support for Hanoi during the Vietnam War, the old animosities still remained.

American leadership, not only because of the shared ideals of “freedom”, as the official propaganda repeated over and over, but also because of the existence and constant expansion of a net of interpersonal contacts between the various military and government officials in both countries. The educational and cultural exchange programs also definitely played their part to enhance the relationship between the two countries, though it has to be noted that these did not prevent segments of Thai public from becoming anti-American in the 1970s. Yet again, this wave of anti-Americanism was rather short-lived and did not mean that America was discredited and forsaken by most Thais. After 1973 and 1975, when the role of the United States in the region became much less prominent, Thailand did diversify its foreign policy, normalized its relations with China. Yet, it did not become “another Vietnam” like some American officials had predicted and it did not turn away from the United States, although the bilateral relationship was somewhat loosened and its nature had been transformed. Thailand did return to its balanced foreign policy approach, but the United States still remained the most important partner of Bangkok and it could probably be said that it remained so for the next several decades and has remained so to this day.⁶⁹⁸

Finally, in assessing a relationship like this, it is often tempting to try to determine which side has benefited more from the mutual cooperation. Once more, it is rather difficult to find a definitive answer to this question. As the thesis has demonstrated, both Thailand and the United States had their own set of initial priorities and goals, which they expected the cooperation to help achieve. From the point of view of political science, it could probably be argued that the two countries were playing a cooperative non-zero-sum game. If we analyze the practical results and benefits both sides managed to achieve, then it could be said that Thailand has been able to successfully reach its primary objectives. In the first stage of the relationship, it used the American support to reestablish itself on the international scene and avoid being ostracized and isolated. In the second phase, it managed to secure the position of one of the most important American allies in Asia and obtain security guarantees from Washington as well as a steady inflow of military and economic aid. With the help of this aid, Thailand was not only able to modernize its military, but also to improve its infrastructure and start a number of development projects, especially in the underdeveloped rural areas. In this sense, the United States fulfilled its role as a “protector” and “friend”, at least until 1973, when it began to scale down its presence in the region. From the viewpoint of the Thai leadership, the United States provided Thailand with the necessary source of legitimacy on

⁶⁹⁸ Recently the Thai government has to deal with the rise of China and has to react to this phenomenon, but that is a general trend that most Asian (and not only Asian) countries have to face.

the international scene and did not interfere in Thai domestic politics, which seemed to be an ideal combination.

As for the United States, such an assessment is harder to produce as the evaluation of the American policy is inevitably influenced by the defeat in Vietnam. Yet, it has to be noted that the failure in Vietnam (and, as some historians would say, the failure of *détente* as such during the Nixon and Ford years) was caused by various complex factors that were often not directly related to the Thai-American relationship. If the overall context of the Vietnam War is left out of this assessment, then it would again seem that the relationship with Thailand met the American expectations. Thailand became a loyal ally of the United States, both from the point of view of the Cold War and struggle against communism, but also from the perspective of providing Washington with a power base in the region which it previously lacked. The American objective (again, related to Thailand) that the country should not become communist was also fulfilled, even after the fall of the Thanom regime in 1973. It is of course debatable as to what extent the American involvement and support caused this, but the fact that the American objective was achieved cannot be denied. The failure of the collective defense system, which the United States wanted to build in the area by the establishment of SEATO, was not caused by Thailand, which belonged to one of the more active members of the organization, but rather by the other states that did not wish to get involved in the conflict in Indochina. It would be easy to blame the United States for failing to support democracy in Thailand, and thus to condemn the relations between the two countries in the three post-war decades and label them unsuccessful from the American perspective. Such an assessment, however, would not be valid because at least after 1950, when the Korean War began, but presumably even earlier, the support of democracy was not a major American priority so far as Thailand was concerned. As the matter stands then, in the author's opinion, there have been no "losers" or "winners" in this relationship and, in general, the priorities of both sides have been fulfilled.

RESUMÉ

Disertační práce mapuje a analyzuje vývoj vztahů mezi Spojenými státy americkými a Thajskem v období mezi roky 1945 a 1975. Jejím cílem je především zachytit, jaké byly vstupní priority obou těchto zemí při vytváření vzájemného spojení, jak se tyto priority v průběhu času měnily a jak se tyto změny následně projevovaly ve vztazích mezi Washingtonem a Bangkokem.

Americká zahraniční politika (nejen) v jihovýchodní Asii v období po roce 1945 je neodmyslitelně spjata s bipolárním rozdělením světa a se snahou zabránit šíření komunismu a sovětského vlivu do dalších částí světa. V tomto kontextu bývá často posuzováno i americké spojení s Thajskem, jehož hlavním deklarovaným cílem bylo zabránit vytvoření protiamerických, komunisty ovládaných režimů v zemích regionu. Je nepochybné, že studená válka zde sehrála klíčovou roli, a že pro americko-thajské vztahy byly zásadními momenty například angažmá Thajska v korejské válce v roce 1950, vstup do paktu SEATO v roce 1954 a role, kterou Thajsko hrálo v americké politice vůči Indočíně. Zároveň je možno vysledovat v těchto vztazích určitou sinusoidu, která, vcelku logicky, kopíruje sinusoidu amerického zájmu o oblasti jihovýchodní Asie a intenzitu americké angažovanosti v tomto regionu. I přes tyto skutečnosti by však nebylo správně tvrdit, že americko-thajské spojení je výhradně výsledkem poválečného vývoje a že bylo vytvořeno pouze s cílem boje proti nebezpečí, které v amerických očích představovalo šíření komunismu a komunismem inspirovaných národně-osvobozeneckých hnutí v Asii.

První dvě kapitoly této práce poměrně jednoznačně ukazují, že ačkoliv Spojené státy nebyly před druhou světovou válkou v jihovýchodní Asii dominantní silou, již v devatenáctém století a v první polovině století dvacátého se o dění v Thajsku (tehdejším Siamu) zajímaly. Tento zájem byl ostatně oboustranný – pro mnohé Američany bylo Thajsko, jakožto jediná země v jihovýchodní Asii, která se nestala kolonií, symbolem touhy po svobodě i po modernizaci dle západního vzoru, o níž thajská vláda dlouhodobě usilovala. Pro Thajsko byly Spojené státy rovněž symbolem svobody – jednak proto, že samy byly bývalou kolonií, která si vybojovala nezávislost na Velké Británii, jednak proto, že se profilovaly, i po získání Filipín v roce 1898, jakožto odpůrce kolonialismu a imperialismu. Byť byly v praktické rovině vztahy mezi oběma zeměmi až do vypuknutí druhé světové války omezené a v zemi nadále převládaly zájmy Velké Británie a Francie, vnímání a obraz Thajska ve Spojených státech, který vznikl v těchto desetiletích, se přenesl i do poválečné doby a ovlivňoval vzájemné vztahy i během studené války. Nesmírně významný pro další osud

americko-thajských vztahů byl i rok 1942, kdy se Thajsko po vypuknutí druhé světové války v Asii přidalo na stranu Japonska a vyhlásilo Spojencům válku. Ve Spojených státech však tamější thajský velvyslanec odmítl vyhlášení války předat a naopak začal organizovat odbojovou organizaci Svobodní Thajci (Seri Thai). Tento krok dále zvýšil sympatie americké veřejnosti i části politického establishmentu vůči Thajsku a posílil představu o lásce thajského lidu ke svobodě. Zároveň umožnil Thajsku, aby se po porážce Japonska v roce 1945 víceméně vyhnulo přísným sankcím, které na něj chtěly uvalit Velká Británie a Francie, s nimiž Thajsko narozdíl od Spojených států bylo ve válečném konfliktu.

Těžištěm práce je období po konci druhé světové války. V americké politice vůči Thajsku je v této době možno vysledovat několik zajímavých obrátů a změn. V letech těsně po skončení války, kdy byla v Thajsku u moci liberální vláda, kladly Spojené státy důraz především na posílení thajských demokratických institucí a rozvíjení hospodářských vztahů. Americké priority se však vzhledem k již zmiňovanému vzrůstajícímu napětí ve vztahu k SSSR postupně měnily a začala převládat spíše hlediska bezpečnostně-politická. Strategický význam Thajska, které se zdálo být odolnější vůči „rudé hrozbě“ než některé jiné asijské státy, z pohledu Washingtonu vzrůstal. I když situace na thajské politické scéně se nevyvíjela uspokojivě a liberální vláda byla již v roce 1947 svržena vojenským pučem, Spojené státy tento vývoj neodradil od další podpory Thajska. Pokračovaly v ní i poté, kdy se již v roce 1948 vrátil k moci maršál Phibunsongkhram, který byl premiérem během druhé světové války a pro mnohé byl symbolem thajské spolupráce s Japonskem.

Pro Thajsko byly Spojené státy v poválečné době logickým spojencem a „ochráncem“. Bangkok očekával od spolupráce s Washingtonem garanci své suverenity a teritoriální integrity. Ve snaze posílit svůj vztah ke Spojeným státům začalo Thajsko zejména po roce 1948 stále silněji akcentovat protikomunistické směřování své politiky. Tento vývoj vyvrcholil v roce 1950 vysláním thajských jednotek do korejské války na straně sil OSN. Tímto krokem Thajsko dosáhlo značné zvýšení hospodářské a vojenské pomoci ze strany Spojených států. Thajsko bylo zařazeno do „svobodného tábora“ a začalo být považováno za spolehlivého amerického spojence, což se potvrdilo v roce 1954 i jeho vstupem do paktu SEATO. Ani další politické změny v zemi, zejména pád maršála Phibunsongkhrama v roce 1957 a jeho nahrazení Saritem Thanaratem, na vztazích obou zemí nic nezměnilo. Naopak, v souvislosti se vzrůstajícím angažmá USA v Indočíně, byla thajská aktivní i pasivní součinnost důležitější než kdykoli předtím. Teprve v sedmdesátých letech, kdy se za vlády prezidenta Nixona Spojené státy z oblasti pomalu stahovaly, začal být zpochybňován i další smysl „zvláštního vztahu“ mezi USA a Thajskem. Ukázalo se však, že byť po roce 1975 již

vzájemné vztahy nedosáhly podobné intenzity jako v předešlých desetiletích, k jejich zásadnímu narušení a k přeorientování thajské zahraniční politiky nedošlo. Tato skutečnost do jisté míry vyvrací argument, že důvodem existence spojení mezi Thajskem a Spojenými státy byl výhradně boj proti komunismu v oblasti a zejména v zemích bývalé francouzské Indočíny.

Vedle roviny čistě zahraničněpolitické se práce, jak již bylo naznačeno, věnuje i analýze veřejného diskurzu a vnímání Thajska ve Spojených státech a Spojených států v Thajsku. Zajímavé je zejména sledovat, v jakém kontextu užívaly obě strany slova jako „demokracie“, „svoboda“ či „revoluce“, jaké konotace měla tato slova pro Američany a jaké pro Thajce a jak se reálný obsah těchto pojmů v průběhu doby měnil. Způsob, jakým zejména thajská politická reprezentace využívala nebezpečí komunismu, často záměrně zveličovaného, k prosazování vlastních zájmů a požadavků, je dalším z důležitých aspektů vzájemného vztahu, kterým se práce věnuje. Třebaže některé z těchto problémů a otázek jsou specifické pro americko-thajské vztahy, dá se říci, že na jejich příkladu je možno identifikovat i obecné trendy a principy, které charakterizovaly přístup Spojených států ke svým spojencům v prvních třech dekadách po druhé světové válce a které, byť v modifikované podobě, lze v některých případech sledovat i dnes.

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