

Jan Bečka

Ph.D. Dissertation Evaluation

The Lands of the Free, Thailand in the Foreign Policy of the United States, 1945-1975

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Jan (Honza) Bečka has chosen to concentrate on Southeast Asia as his field of expertise. If anyone in the Czech Republic knows Thailand, it is Honza who had the privilege to attend secondary school in the country when his father was stationed there as a diplomat. Not only does Honza possess a deep knowledge of Thailand, but he also speaks Thai fluently. The dissertation analyzes the position of Thailand in United States foreign policy between 1945 and 1975. The structure of the treatise is superb and the English is nearly flawless. Honza has divided the work into an introduction, six main chapters, and a conclusion. The referencing is precise throughout and the bibliography is extensive.

In the introduction, Honza makes it clear what he wants to say in the body of the work and he addresses theoretical and methodological matters. I am pleased that Honza points out that the United States was interested in deepening ties with Thailand (Siam) before the emergence of the Cold War. I am also happy with the manner in which Honza deals with concepts such as “linguistic turn”, “cultural turn”, etc. He also addresses Edward Said’s theory of “orientalism” in a balanced and polite fashion. Honza’s words are music to my ears because, in my opinion, politically correct academics have basically made a deity out of Said, even though it does not require so much thought to recognize the inadequacies of Said’s argument. The evaluation of the sources is thorough and Honza’s analysis is fair-minded.

Chapter 1 deals with U.S.-Thai relations prior to World War II. Obviously, Honza (as an historian) goes back to the nineteenth century and carefully analyzes the changing nature of the relationship over time. Naturally, one has to observe matters in the context of European colonialism and the United States' desire to have influence of its own in the world. Anti-colonialism later brought the United States and Thailand closer together, but in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Thailand (Siam) was a tool of American foreign policy to achieve other goals in the region. The decision of the Siamese government to enter World War I (albeit late in the conflict) strengthened the country's position and, after the war, the United States was the first major Western power to sign a treaty with Thailand (Siam) in 1920. American commercial interests were safeguarded. However, one must keep in mind the fact that Thailand at this time was not a major priority for the United States. This was the isolationist period. In 1932, a revolution occurred in Thailand. The kingdom was transformed into a constitutional monarchy with the military as a crucial arbiter in politics. Asia was at this time a continent in turmoil largely due to Japanese aggression. The United States was busy preparing to grant the Philippines independence. The Thai government wished to revise the 1920 treaty with the United States and, after years of negotiations, the treaty was amended in 1937. Japanese expansionism in Asia added a security dimension to U.S.-Thai relations. The Japanese were eyeing French Indochina and Thailand was eager to remain neutral. As events unfolded, Thailand tried to gain territorially at the expense of French Indochina and the war situation was such that Thailand (the authorities, not the people) was moving towards agreement with Japan. Honza has done a good job analyzing the situation.

In Chapter 2, Honza tackles the issue of U.S.-Thai relations after the

American entry into the Second World War. Again, Honza's work is solid and precise. He discusses Thai-Japanese negotiations following the Japanese invasion of Thailand with meticulous detail and he discusses why the Thai authorities opted for a treaty of alliance with Japan. The opportunistic leadership wanted to cement its grip on power and wanted to close all doors to pro-Western political opponents. When a declaration of war was issued by Thailand, the Americans chose to ignore it rather than reciprocate with their own war declaration. The Americans instead helped organize the Seri Thai (Free Thai) resistance movement. Here, there was a difference of opinion between the American and British governments. The Americans had not declared war on Thailand, but the British had. The British lost certain territories to the Thais (thanks to Japan) and were thus more inclined towards harsher postwar treatment of Thailand than were the Americans. Thailand was in the British zone of operations, which limited American influence in the decision-making process. However, the United States, unlike the British, needed Thailand after the war as a gateway into Southeast Asia and this explains their lenient diplomacy. For Thailand, it was clear that the Americans were the best postwar guarantors of Thai independence. Honza's analysis demonstrates just how difficult it is for allies (United States and Great Britain) to agree due to differing interests.

Chapter 3 deals with the United States-Thailand relationship between 1945 and 1948. The first issue at hand was the negotiations between Thai and British authorities. The Americans were not convinced that the British truly supported a free Thailand and the initial round of British-Thai negotiations served to confirm the validity of American suspicions. Crafty American diplomatic moves prevented the British from gaining the upper hand. In the end, the Thai-British negotiations were concluded with an agreement that was

much more lenient on Thailand than the British initially had envisaged. Honza deserves credit for trying to be fair to both the British and American positions in his splendid analysis.

Negotiations with the French were rather tricky because of Thai reluctance to return territories taken from France with the help of the Japanese. After long and complex dealings, Thailand returned the territories to France and France approved Thailand's accession to the United Nations. Thailand then entered into negotiations with the Soviet Union, established mutual diplomatic relations, and the Soviets too agreed to support Thailand's accession to the United Nations. It deserves to be noted that the Americans were much less inclined to become involved in Thailand's negotiations with France and the Soviet Union than had been the case with Britain. The reasons were mainly practical and the United States (though friendly to Thailand) were not willing to upset their relations with the French or Soviets, who could raise objections on more strategically important matters. The rest of the chapter deals with U.S.-Thai relations during the period. It is logical that American policymakers desired stability even at the cost of the return of the wartime leader Phibun to power. I like the way that Honza links geopolitical concerns and the threat of Communist takeover to practical American policy. His analysis is both accurate and brilliantly presented.

Chapter 4 discusses American-Thai relations between 1948 and 1957. During this period, a number of countries gained their independence and their governments were not eager to join unequivocally the American anti-Communist cause. As Honza rightly states, Phibun did his best to portray himself as a conservative anti-Communist in order to carry favor with the Americans. The Americans were particularly concerned with events in French Indochina where Communist guerrillas were gaining the upper hand over French military forces. Though there

was dissension inside Thailand and a number of attempts were made to forcibly oust Phibun, the Americans moved closer to him. American support secured Thailand's entry into international organizations and American security and economic assistance to Thailand was substantial as were academic exchanges. The Korean conflict and its outcome indicated that the Americans under President Eisenhower had no desire to involve themselves militarily elsewhere in Asia. In Indochina, however, the Americans supported the division of Vietnam and established close relations with the anti-Communist South Vietnam. The Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) was established, but was a flawed organization from its inception. Phibun's unpopular regime and unsuccessful attempts by Phibun to reform resulted in his overthrow in 1957 and the Eisenhower administration hoped that his successor, Sarit, would foster "stability, security, and continuity." Honza has successfully analyzed the thinking of American policymakers here and deserves to be commended.

Chapter 5 demonstrates the solidification of American-Thai relations under Sarit. Unlike previous Thai leaders, Sarit never pretended to be a supporter of democratic principles. When John F. Kennedy became president, he involved the United States further in Southeast Asia. The Communist advance in Laos resulted in the introduction of American troops in Thailand. An effort by the United States was made to portray this as a SEATO move. However, this did not stabilize the region and the deaths of Diem (Vietnamese president), Kennedy, and Sarit in 1963 were a harbinger of what was to come. Honza's fruitful analysis reads like an action-packed thriller.

In Chapter 6, Honza analyzes the role of Thailand in the Vietnam War. The change of leadership in the United States, Thailand, and Vietnam also signified increased

American involvement in Southeast Asia. In Thailand, Sarit's successor, Thanom, promised to adhere to Sarit's policies. For the Americans, security and continuity proved more important than any democratization of Thai politics. Following the Gulf of Tonkin incident of 1964, the American military presence in Thailand increased dramatically. President Johnson was determined to win in Indochina and he backed his words with escalation. However, it became clear to both the Thai and American authorities that the issue of American bases in Thailand was sensitive because of a growing resentment by certain elements inside Thailand. By 1968, Johnson was looking for an exit strategy, but failed to find one. In fact, the Tet Offensive persuaded Johnson not to run for a second term. It is true that U.S.-Thai relations reached a high point during the Johnson years, but the Thais were nervous about the attitude of a future American administration. The so-called Nixon Doctrine called on Asian countries to do more to defend themselves and the Americans began making plans to scale back their involvement in Indochina through the process of "Vietnamization." What worried the Thais was that the Americans seemed willing to lessen their involvement without achieving their stated goals. Nixon stated his desire to keep American bases in Thailand, but this did not assuage the Thai government. In fact, the Thanom government was overthrown in a popular uprising in 1973. American reaction was muted and lacked any mention of a Communist takeover in Thailand. Thailand then abandoned its focus on the United States and, for example, established a rapprochement with China. Basically, what came to light was that U.S.-Thai relations had always been pragmatic in nature and when the Americans moved on to other regions of the world, Thailand was not so important after all.

In the conclusion, Honza recapitulates his view of the pragmatic nature of U.S.-Thai relations between 1945 and 1975. He points out that there were no winners or losers in the relationship, which was portrayed differently to the American and Thai populations at different times. Honza also rightly discusses the failure of collective defense in Asia as being the fault not of Thailand, but rather of other SEATO members who proved unwilling to involve themselves deeply in the Vietnam War.

Honza Bečka has produced a highly original and thought-provoking analysis of the relationship between the United States and Thailand over the course of three decades. Both the description and the analysis are superb. I believe that Honza will have no problem defending this work successfully on 13 September 2011. I recommend that he should make arrangements for the volume to be published as soon as possible.

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