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U.S. Military Withdrawal Gives Thailand War Jitters

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Thailand is rapidly becoming one of the crisis spots of Southeast Asia. It is the largest country of the region, yet so far the horrors of the Indo-China conflict have not reached Thai territory.

Today, however, there are fierce political debates in Bangkok over whether or not Thailand can avoid deeper involvement in the war.

Several factors are causing concern among Thai leaders. The first of these is the gradual military withdrawal of the United States from the region and the inevitable demise of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization as a protective shield.

Secondly, Communist infiltration in a number of Thailand's border provinces is on the increase. The obvious acceleration of the subversion process has been noted by diplomats in every Southeast Asian capital.

And finally, the Thais do not enjoy seeing their traditional enemies, the Vietnamese, playing such a dominating role in neighboring Cambodia.

After all, until the British and French colonialists began competing for territory in the region, Cambodia at one stage had fallen entirely under Thai or Siamese rule and influence following a series of wars lasting 400 years.

But around the turn of the century, the Siamese were forced to surrender to Britain its suzerain rights over four states in southern Siam which became part of British Malaya, and the French grabbed several Siamese provinces in Cambodia.

Thailand became a buffer state between the British and French empires in Asia, and ever since has been remarkably adroit in avoiding outright war with any of its neighbors.

When the triumphant Japanese armies arrived at Thailand's frontiers on December 3, 1941, the Siamese fought for precisely five hours.

Then they permitted the Japanese troops to pass



THAILAND
Largest country in region

through Thailand, thus enabling Japan to invade and occupy British Malaya.

In the postwar years, with the disintegration of the British and French colonial empires, Thailand threw in its lot with the United States as the power most likely to succeed in halting any Chinese and North Vietnamese drive for influence.

The Thais, of course, were not to know that Washington's dominance in Southeast Asia would be relatively short-lived because of the public outcry in the United States and around the world over the slaughter in Vietnam.

Former President Lyndon Johnson's decision to fight the Communists in South Vietnam by dispatching an army of more than half-a-million men, and to bomb North Vietnam, lost him a second full term in the White House, and cost the United States a great deal of prestige.

When the Pentagon built six huge air bases in Thailand, partly as a deterrent to possible Chinese aggression but also to bomb Communist positions in Vietnam, the leaders in Bangkok could not possibly have foreseen that the conflict would create the deepest division in the United States since the civil war.

And so their nervousness has been growing ever since July 28 last year when President Richard Nixon flew into Bangkok to tell them that in the 1970's Thailand must rely on its own security forces to combat internal subversion. Mr. Nixon also explained why some of the 45,000 U.S. troops in Thailand, most of them airmen, would be withdrawn.

The United States had to cut back its overseas commitments everywhere, largely for internal political and economic reasons, and Thailand would be no exception.

The Thai leaders prepared to adjust their economy, which will suffer serious setbacks if the United States reduces its military presence in the country.

Today, U.S. military spending in Thailand totals about \$800 million, and at least 100,000 Thais are employed directly or indirectly by the Pentagon. If and when these U.S. expenditures are cut or possibly even halted altogether in the years ahead, the standard of living in Thailand is expected to drop sharply.

Thailand may have avoided the crisis it faces today if Cambodia had managed to stay out of the war. The Communist troops, after all, were concentrated in northeastern Cambodia and along the frontier with South Vietnam.

Cambodia, therefore, served as a very useful buffer. But now that Communist forces have spread right across the country and control large areas, Thailand is suffering from war jitters.

The pessimists in Bangkok even predict that large-scale Communist attacks from Cambodia and Laos are inevitable. But this assessment is not shared by most diplomats in Asia.

Rather, they believe that the Communists will first attempt to increase their rate of infiltration and ensure that far more extensive subversive activities are carried on in the eight provinces where the Communists already have a foothold.