

Stunned Thais Prepare Shift To Socialism

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BANGKOK, April 23 — Thailand, the United States' most steadfast ally in Southeast Asia throughout the Indochina wars, is preparing to change into a socialist costume and offer an olive branch to North Vietnam.

Thai leaders believe the United States abandoned the Lon Nol government in Cambodia when the going got toughest and that South Vietnam's Nguyen Van Thieu has just been subjected to similar treatment.

As a result, the dominant thinking here is that Washington is an unreliable ally, that continued faith in U.S. support is counterproductive and that Thailand must quickly make serious efforts to appease regional and world Communist powers—North Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union.

The Thais see themselves facing a doctrinate Communist regime in Vietnam, a Communist-led government in Cambodia, a tripartite Laos which could be overtaken by the pro-Communist Pathet Lao at almost any time, and a socialist Burma.

"We cannot resist this kind of pressure," said a leading Foreign Ministry source. "We don't want to go to war with the Communists. We can't afford it. It's time to be flexible, not logical. We will become socialists. You'll see."

Congress has made it amply clear to the Thais that U.S. forces based in this country may not be used for retaliation against any invaders. Realizing that the five U.S. air bases and the 27,000 troops stationed on them are therefore more an embarrassment than an advantage, Prime Minister Mr.

R. Kukrit Pramoj has ordered them withdrawn by next March 17.

While there is some doubt that Kukrit really intends to adhere to this tight schedule—talks on the phasing of the withdrawal are to be held soon—there is no question that the order was intended as a broad signal to Hanoi that Thailand wants to be friends.

Whether the North Vietnamese will respond favorably is something else. A number of Thai and Western observers here believe that Hanoi will ignore the gesture. They recall that Thailand was the main staging area for U.S. bomber attacks over North Vietnam.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the nominal head of Cambodia's new Communist regime, has rebuffed Thailand's swift offer to recognize his government. But this has not stopped the Thais from continuing to flash signals to their Communist neighbors.

Despite this frantic gesturing, other observers believe that Thailand has no serious intention of cutting itself free of the United States and forming close bonds with the Communists. They note that the Thai economy is heavily reliant on the United States and Japan and that the Thais' allegiance to their king and the Buddhist religion makes the Communist link dubious.

But Thailand has a long history of pragmatic change, of doing what is necessary to survive, of bending with the dominant wind. The name "Thailand" means "land of the free," and Thailand alone in Southeast Asia remained free of colonial rule.

It did so though at a price to its morality. When Japan marched into the region during World War II, the Thais bent with the wind and became an ally of Tokyo.

When Japan lost the war, the Thais quickly did an about face and became staunch U.S. allies. By 1950 Thailand was receiving major economic and military aid from the United States. In 1954, it joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and SEATO headquarters was established in Bangkok.

Now SEATO is dead, or dying quickly, and the Thais are preparing to slip out of the U.S. bed and knock on the Communists' doors.

Most Americans in Bangkok, businessmen as well as U.S. embassy officials (although the latter say so only privately) find the Thai desire to change partners understandable. "Thailand is no longer in command of its own destiny," said an economist with a large American business firm. "The shots are being called elsewhere, in Hanoi, and if Thailand is to maintain any measure of independence it's going to have to change."

U.S. and other Western business organizations are preparing for the shift. Esso Standard Thailand, the largest U.S. investor in this country, has halted further

investment. Although Esso officials do not like to comment on the company's plans, for fear of starting a panic, sources said Esso would like to sell off its \$80 million holdings and get out of Thailand, as it has done recently elsewhere in the region. But the vastness of Esso's investment precludes local purchase.

A young woman of German extraction who was born in Thailand said her husband and father have transferred almost all of their money to Europe and the United States. "I've spent my entire life here and I've seen all kinds of scares over the years," she said. "But for the first time I really believe we're not going to be able to stay on much longer."

Under pressure from Communist-backed students and left-wing political organ-

izations, the shaky 14-party Kukrit coalition government is rapidly taking anti-American steps.

Yesterday, for example, the Cabinet decided to take over the profitable Thailand Exploration and Mining Co. (TEMCO) owned jointly by Union Carbide and Shell Oil. Even before the decision was announced, TEMCO's difficulties with the government had caused potential U.S. investors to rethink their plans.

At a different level, four U.S. servicemen who allegedly beat up a Thai are to be turned over to a local court for trial — even though the alleged victim has dropped his charges. The trial was demanded by students who conducted demonstrations outside the U.S. embassy in Bangkok.

Some Thai observers believe anti-Americanism is just beginning here and will rise to unprecedented levels in a short time. There are almost as many scenarios for the way Thailand will emerge from the current uncertainty in Southeast Asia as there are Thais who think about it.

The dominant thinking among government officials favors accommodation with the country's Communist neighbors and with Thailand's own Communist insurgents. "If we cling to the United States," said a Foreign Ministry source, "we'll lose whatever bargaining power we have in the region — and we've already lost most of it."

Officials like this one see the line of least resistance as the most sensible. "We can't defeat the insurgents," said another government source. "We're fighting a blind battle and we'll lose in the long run."

"The fact is that the army is going to turn its back on the insurgents. That is exactly what we're going to do. To do otherwise would show North Vietnam, Cambodia and the Pathet Lao

that we're hostile to them and before we knew what happened they'd escalate the insurgency to an all-out war. Our armed forces could hold out against that for one week before the Communists would be in Bangkok."

This blatant defeatist attitude may be more of a signal to Hanoi than an expression of Thailand's genuine fears. Some local and foreign observers believe that Thailand need not fear becoming the next domino in Southeast Asia.

These observers see this country acting as a buffer for the Indochinese Communists, or a filter between them and the West. They reason that once North Vietnam absorbs the South it will realize that it must deal with Western capitalists, just as the Soviet Union and China are now doing.

Furthermore, Thailand itself could become a major trading partner for Hanoi, providing such sorely needed goods as rice, corn sugar, tapioca and tin in return for manufactured goods, once North Vietnam cranks up its mills, mines and factories.

Thus, there are still great questions to be answered here: will North Vietnam, flush with fantastic military victories, turn headlong against Thailand? Will Hanoi prefer to consolidate its gains and simply choose to step up its assistance to Thai insurgents? Will the Thais be panicked into cutting their profitable ties to the West and become "socialists," at least in name?

The answers will emerge slowly, depending in large part on the Communists' responses to Thailand's overtures. But in the interim there is no doubt that the United States has seriously undermined Thailand's morale and that America's word here and throughout Southeast Asia will never be taken at face value again.