

Thailand's 'Semi-Domino Effect'

BANGKOK—Ugly backstage bickering over more than 8,000 refugee Meo tribesmen from Laos is aggravating inflamed U.S.-Thai relations as Thailand seeks survival in post-Vietnam Southeast Asia by frantically embracing its Communist neighbors.

The Thai government blames Washington for the exodus to Thailand of the Meos, trained as anti-Communist guerrillas by the American CIA, and feels they are a U.S. responsibility. Some high officials want the Meos forcibly returned to a grim fate in Communist-controlled Laos, generating shocked American disbelief. Acknowledging they may have to keep, the Meos, the Thai government fears this will antagonize Indochina's new Communist masters.

Thus, using traditional tactics developed over 800 years of independence, Thailand is adjusting to new power realities. Believing the U.S. has abandoned this region, the Thais seem willing to enter a Communist sphere of influence in exchange for their non-Communist independence—amounting to a semi-domino effect following the Indochina debacle. But that requires painful adjustments in the once sturdy U.S.-Thai alliance. Demands for U.S. abandonment of air bases and the Mayaguez uproar are only the most obvious strains.

Nothing better typifies the deteriorating relationship than what followed Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, the great Meo guerrilla leader, fleeing into Thailand with 200 supporters aboard a U.S. air transport following the Communist takeover in Laos. Arranged by the Royal Thai army with U.S. help, his escape most unpleasantly surprised the Bangkok government—fueling suspicions that Washington still regards the military as Thailand's legitimate rulers.

Vang Pao and his entourage last week left for eventual American exile, but 8,000-plus mountain tribesmen who followed him across the Mekong River remain in Thailand. "Why don't you settle them in the Colorado hills?"

one high official asked us sarcastically. Knowing that won't happen, the Foreign Ministry would like to herd them into Laos. Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj told us, "We're not going to do a Nazi stunt of driving them back at gunpoint." Still he wants the Meos gone, expressing fear their presence "would be a constant source of misunderstanding between the Lao government and us."

This fear is put concisely by a foreign ministry official: "We don't want to give Hanoi excuse for aggressive action against us." Considering five years of Meo guerrillas and Royal Thai troops fighting side by side in Laos, this attitude astounds U.S. officials. But Thai policymakers reply that Thai troops were dispatched to Laos and Vietnam not by them but by the military regime which was toppled by rioting students in October 1974.

That change of government caused original demands to close down U.S. air bases. But the demands became more insistent after the Indochina collapse, which profoundly influenced Thai foreign policy. "We cannot neglect the Communist powers anymore as we have done before," Kukrit told us in an interview. "We've got to make accommodations. We've got to readjust ourselves to new conditions. We must accept facts; we must accept the march of history."

Although Kukrit will soon travel to Peking to establish diplomatic relations, talks with North Vietnam are stalemated. The unpublicized stumbling block: Hanoi's demand for U.S. aircraft flown into Thailand by fleeing South Vietnamese pilots. Here again, the Thais are bitter over American disruption of their diplomatic grand design.

The U.S. would like to give the planes to the Royal Thai Air Force, but Kukrit indicated to us he would then turn them back to Hanoi. It "would be the gift of all gifts," he said, if the Americans would "just be gracious and give them all to us

and say, "oh, do anything (with the planes) you like." Realizing Washington never would permit that, the Prime Minister feels the aircraft will slowly rust on Thai runaways—not helping him with the Vietnamese.

U.S. lack of help on this problem, say Thai officials, reflects Washington's refusal to accept the new Southeast Asia. "It was you Americans who abandoned Indochina," one policymaker told us. "Now you must live with it." Outspoken Foreign Minister Chatchai Chunhawan's repeated complaint to Assistant Secretary of State Philip Habib on his recent visit: "You just didn't understand us."

U.S.-Thai tension had been heightened by non-communication between Washington and the U.S. Embassy here, which had no prior warning of the Mayaguez operation. When alarmed Thai officials asked about reports of marines arriving in Thailand, charge d'affaires Edward Masters honestly replied he knew nothing about it. The Thai cabinet seriously considered declaring Masters, a highly competent diplomat, persona non grata before deciding he was telling the truth.

Nor does the embassy today know exactly what Washington wants done about the bases, except for vague desires to hold onto some for a while. But with crime incidents among 20,000 U.S. servicemen rising alarmingly, some Americans here believe the sooner the bases are abandoned, the better for U.S.-Thai relations. Besides, fiddling with the March 1976 abandonment deadline would ignite leftist students. In our interview, Kukrit said the deadline is firm.

Barring a highly unlikely military coup, the Thai policy change seems immutable, posing this question: Will this historic Thai accommodation to strength effectively restrain revolutionary communism? The expansion here of Communist insurgency suggests it may not—the subject for a future column.