

A Hypothetical Question

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, March 19—All over Southeast Asia, it is as if long-contained pressures for change were suddenly bursting out. That feeling comes not only from the military developments in South Vietnam, dramatic as they are, and Cambodia. The political trend is also significant, especially in Bangkok.

Thailand's new Premier, Kukrit Pramoj, has taken office with a pledge to seek the withdrawal during the next year of all American forces stationed there: 25,000 soldiers and 350 planes. And he said his Government would try to open talks with North Vietnam and establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China.

That is astonishing news. Thailand has been at the center of American military policy in Asia for a generation. U.S. planes flew from there for eight years to bomb Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Premier Kukrit is himself a right-wing figure, heading a coalition of mostly conservative parties with links to former Thai military governments.

Or consider the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, formed in 1954 primarily as a bulwark against feared Chinese Communist expansionism. Five of the eight SEATO countries now have formal and good relations with China, and the United States has its special liaison. Philippine President Marcos's wife has just made a notable visit to China, and that relationship is warming up. Now Thailand, last of the eight, is moving in the same direction.

In short, the premises are changing in Southeast Asia. That fact poses questions of the first importance for the United States: Can we, will we change our policy to meet the new circumstances? Are we going to be realistic and rational in our reaction to events, or rigid and irrational?

There is a curious contrast between American policy in Europe, over the years, and in Asia.

In Europe we are not stuck in the language of Adenauer and Dulles. We have adjusted, however unhappily, to the fact of Soviet control in Eastern Europe. Even as Portugal comes under increasing Communist influence, we have so far reacted calmly, at least on the surface. And all this in Europe, where U.S. interests are fundamental.

In Southeast Asia, where this country's interests are marginal, the policy has been marked by extreme rigidity. It has relied on massive military intervention and aid to prevent any political change.

Two years ago, for example, the Paris peace agreement called for political compromise in Vietnam. But the Thieu Government in Saigon, supported by Washington, refused to carry out the political terms—and staked its future on aggressive military action.

Congressman Paul N. McCloskey Jr., Republican of California, has just made a fascinating analysis of that period in a report on his recent trip to Vietnam. "Commencing shortly after the cease-fire," he said, the Saigon Government "began to try to expand their areas of control"—with great initial success. "Captured documents reveal that [the North Vietnamese] felt they had been naive and idealistic in hoping for compliance with the Paris accords by the South Vietnamese and the United States."

If they had "naive" hopes, the North Vietnamese are making up for their resulting losses now. A new balance of forces in Southeast Asia is likely

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to emerge—an indigenous balance, not controlled by a distant external power. That is why the reaction in Thailand is so interesting. The Thais want to remain friends with America, Mr. Kukrit said. But they know they must live with their neighbors.

The political result, in much of Southeast Asia, is likely to be left of American desires. But there will be strong nationalisms, too—not a Communist monolith. For example, there is deep mutual distrust, historic and present, between Hanoi and Peking.

At this crucial moment American policy should be moving from its military fixation in Southeast Asia to political accommodation. We should be helping to arrange a cease-fire in Cambodia. We should be picking up the hints being heard in South Vietnam about talks with the other side. A first symbol would be replacement of our fanatically rigid Ambassador in Saigon, Graham A. Martin. But alas, Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford give us only the old talk of more arms.

At the President's latest press conference, Helen Thomas of United Press International asked whether he still supported the 1970 invasion of Cambodia—a decision that has led to the wasting of that country and its virtual loss to Communism. "That's a hypothetical question," the President replied. In terms of whether our leaders have learned anything from the tragic mistakes in Southeast Asia, the question could not have been less hypothetical—or the answer sadder.