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Next domino's price is high

By Lynne Watson
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WASHINGTON—Thailand, with its 1,000-mile long border on Cambodia and its weak, left-leaning government, may be Asia's next "falling domino." If so, its loss to the Communists would hurt the United States more than losing Cambodia.

With the U.S. finally out of Indochina, the military support facilities, which account for most of the U.S. presence in Thailand, are being withdrawn.

A far more sophisticated — though less visible — network of military communications and electronic installations will stay. These installations are capable of monitoring anything from missiles fired in China to ships sailing on the Indian Ocean.

To security planners in Washington, America's technological investment in Thailand is invaluable. The U.S. can move its 26,000 combat units out of Thailand but the sophisticated satellite tracking station there is another matter.

Some \$3.7 billion was pumped into the U.S. military presence in Thailand, including four air bases, a port facility, and at one point, 50,000 men.

Thailand is hub for military communications in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. U.S. Ambassador Leonard Unger told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1969, "There is nowhere where we have anything like the kind of relationship we have in Thailand."

Those facilities include a \$20 million radar station, code named Pave Cobra, and an unknown number of "intelligence communications relay stations" linked to U.S. satellites.

Other radar tracking stations are located at a string of bases in Thailand's remote northeast. There is a highly sensitive electronic intelligence station at Ramasun, about five miles from the northeast air base of Udorn.

Unlike the conventional air bases which served as launching pads for U.S. bombing flights over Indochina and as takeoff points for the Cambodia airlift, these sophisticated satellite-linked stations have gone virtually unnoticed.

Typical of this low profile is Ramasun. From the road, one can see only a windowless cement building. American officials in Bangkok ignore questions about its functions. "No one is authorized to speak about it," one said.

During the Vietnam war, the radar tracking station at Nakorn Phanom was the command post for U.S. air attacks on Indochina and headquarters for detecting North Vietnamese troop and supply movements along the Ho Chi Minh trail.

If the Indochina war provided the reason for these sophisticated installations, there are strong indications at least some will remain to serve growing U.S. interests in the Indian Ocean.

For several years, reconnaissance flights over the Indian Ocean have originated from the U.S. air base at Utapao, and the huge U.S. naval base at Sattahip, considered by naval strategists as vital to any future Indian Ocean moves.

Pentagon officials are confident of retaining use of at least Utapao, Sattahip and, possibly, Korat.

If these officials are right, Thailand — nicknamed America's landlocked aircraft carrier in the 1960s — will clearly continue to play a strategic role for the U.S. long after the highly visible combat troops have been withdrawn.