

CAN A SINGLE SPARK IGNITE A PADDYFIELD? THE CASE OF THAI INSURGENCY

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The recent formation of a Thai Peoples Liberation Army prompts a reevaluation of insurgency problems in Thailand. Insurgent activity since 1965 has caused considerable concern in Thailand and the United States with respect to its likely intensity and direction.

Evidence suggests that initial Thai insurgency has followed the classic pattern of guerrilla warfare. A period of clandestine preparation characterized the years immediately before 1965. In 1965 and 1966, the so-called "second stage," marked by an increased rate of insurgent incidents — political assassinations, hit and run attacks, propaganda meetings — was evident in the north and northeastern areas of Thailand. In 1967 the pattern of insurgency appears to have shifted from insurgent activity in the northeast, particularly among the North Vietnamese refugees located there, to an attempt to spread insurgent activities into several northern provinces. In the following year the level of insurgent activity remained the same or slightly declined. Thai communists decided to expend much of their energy on attempting to win the allegiance of the hill people in the north central provinces. Insurgent activity during 1969 fell from the previous year, although propaganda activities were as extensive, if not more intense, than at any previous time, perhaps indicating a shift toward political rather than military subversion. Should this trend toward reduced insurgent activity, primarily confined to the northern provinces, continue guerrilla activity may become a more manageable problem for the Thais.

HISTORY OF COMMUNIST INSURGENCY IN THAILAND

The history of communist insurgency in Thailand must go back to the birth pangs of the Chinese Communist Government. Since 1949 the People's Republic of China has exhibited meandering foreign policy lines of varying hardness in her unofficial relationship with the Royal Thai Government. At first Peking seemed little interested in Thailand and generally ignored references to that country in its propaganda. The "hard line" which tended to dominate the early years of Chinese Communist diplomacy intruded into Thai relations in 1953 when Peking revealed that the Thai Autonomous People's Government had been established in Yunnan. In their propaganda the Chinese indicated that

their "Government" would serve as a guide to Thai-speaking people throughout Southeast Asia who wanted autonomy.

A decided softening of Peking policy toward Thailand occurred in 1955 with the Bandung Conference and the attendant reduction of tension it engendered. At the Bandung Conference, Chou En-lai, then Foreign Minister, convinced the Thai Foreign Minister, Prince Wan, in informal discussion that China had no short term aggressive designs on Thailand. Despite Bangkok's continued recognition of the Nationalist Government on Taiwan, unofficial relations with Peking from 1955 to 1958 were increasingly cordial. Even an increasing anti-communist posture on the part of the Thai Government in late 1957 and 1958, as well as the introduction of greater restrictions on the Chinese minority in Thailand, did not significantly dampen relations.

However, a general stiffening of Chinese foreign policy in 1958-1959 was prelude to a change in Chinese-Thai relations. Deterioration in unofficial relations began with the Chinese characterization of the Thai regime as one dominated by "international monopoly capital."¹ Late in 1969, Thai criticism of China's suppression of rebellion in Tibet was blasted by Peking as constituting interference in Chinese internal affairs.

This deterioration of Sino-Thai relations continued through succeeding years into 1964. The period was marked by strident Chinese verbal denunciation of the Thai Government, but as yet there was little known support and direction for armed insurgency in Thailand.²

In late 1963 and 1964, Peking-Bangkok relations moved to a new level of tension and hostility as Peking increased its support to elements seeking to subvert the Thai Government. Sometime in late 1963 the "Voice of the Thai People," a Peking-supported radio station operating since 1962 from somewhere in northeast Thailand, southern China, or from a Pathet Lao dominated area of Laos, was given new prominence.

In 1964 the Thailand Independence Movement was created, affiliating with the newly organized Thailand Patriotic Front, and accepting its obviously communist political leadership. The Thai Independence Movement's manifesto called for a united front type of strategy to struggle against "reactionaries." Although no specific type of struggle was indicated, it seems clear that a call for guerrilla warfare was intended. Besides rallying dissatisfied political elements around the Communist Party, the Front was evidently designed to coordinate infiltration, subversion, propaganda campaigns, and later guerrilla activities.

Why did the Chinese adopt a more aggressive policy toward Thailand in late 1963 and 1964? Analysis of the tenor of their propaganda lines (as revealed in the communist-oriented "Voice of the Thai People," *Peking Review* and monitored radio broadcasts from mainland China)

¹ *Hsinhua News Agency* (London), No. 450 (March 25, 1959), p. 11."

² The Editor, "The Dragon in the Hills," *Current Scene* Vol. IV, No. 17 (Sept. 26, 1966), pp. 1-4.

suggests that they were antagonized by the increased United States military presence in Thailand and aid to Thai counterinsurgency forces. Establishment of large United States bases and the increasing use of Thai facilities by United States aircraft for missions in Vietnam were additional sources of irritation. It is also possible that the Chinese saw an opportunity to create a situation that would force the United States to disperse further its troops and material resources, thus deflecting support from the war in Vietnam. In all probability, the Chinese also felt that an increased threat of forces in Thailand might cause the Thais to reconsider their defense commitments to the United States. Chinese society in 1964 was in the grips of another mass political education movement — so-called “socialist education” campaign. In part, Chinese foreign policy did not escape this influence.

The Thailand Patriotic Front's 1965 New Year message again called upon the Thais to eliminate United States imperialism from their country. Later in 1965, the “Voice of the Thai People” for the first time sought to link the situation in Vietnam directly with that in Thailand, warning that if “U.S. imperialism” were allowed to expand and invade North Vietnam, and if Thailand continued to collaborate with the United States:

then the other part (North Vietnam) has every right to fight beyond its territory in order to defend itself and resist aggression. Under such circumstances, the war in this region will not be confined to Vietnam alone, the conflagration would spread and no doubt burn as far as their own territory.³

This threat did not dissuade the Thais from expanding their aid to South Vietnam.

Throughout 1966 the Thailand Patriotic Front continued to demand armed struggle. Its New Year message to the nation parroted Lin Biao in declaring:

Only (sic) when the people's armed struggle is expanding to a people's war can we destroy the enemy's armed forces and win the final victory. The most urgent task confronting the patriotic brothers at present is, therefore, to take various kinds of action, give full support to the armed struggle waged by the patriotic brothers in the motherland...⁴

The “Voice of the Thai People” late in 1966 that “armed struggle of the people in northeast Thailand is an example to the people's struggle throughout the country.”⁵ Early in 1967, the Thai Communist Party, a pro-Peking faction, declared that the “domestic situation” in Thailand had reached an “important turning point” and the “state power must be seized by means of armed struggle.”⁶

³ *Hsinhua News Agency* (London), No. 2622 (March 12, 1965), pp. 35-36.

⁴ *Hsinhua News Agency* (London), No. 2924 (January 15, 1966), pp. 6-9.

⁵ *Hsinhua News Agency* (London), No. 3265 (December 30, 1966), p. 23.

⁶ *Hsinhua News Agency* (London), No. 3282 (January 16, 1967), pp. 18-20.

Insurgent incidents and activities indicated an upsurge in 1966 and 1967. It has been estimated that there were ten times as many incidents in 1966 as in the previous four years and that the incident rate in 1967 ran even higher.⁷ Moreover, in 1967 the insurgents showed an increasing boldness, wearing uniforms and holding forced daylight propaganda meetings in villages. In October, 1967, for example, it was reported that an armed communist propaganda team held an eight-hour forced assembly in a village located only four miles from the government's counterinsurgency forces in the northern Sakon-Nakhon Province.⁸

In 1966 and 1967, reports indicated that Laos and southwest China served as external sanctuaries from which the Thai insurgents were trained and supplied. Pathet Lao occupation of northern Laos facilitated transportation of Thai revolutionaries to Laos, North Vietnam or China for training, and permitted easier reinfiltration to Thailand. One training camp for insurgents was reported to keep at Mahaxay, a few miles from the Thai border in Laos.⁹ Other training camps have been located in the Yunnan Province of southwest China.¹⁰ China reportedly purchased \$1 million worth of Thai currency in Hong Kong for undisclosed purposes, and subsequent rumors have held that China was continuing its purchases of money.¹¹ However, to date there has been no evidence of large scale importation of Chinese weaponry. Rather, the Thai insurgents seem to carry weapons of varied national manufacture which can be purchased from the thriving local gun smuggling establishment.

In 1968 the level of insurgent activity showed no increase, although incidents spread to thirty or thirty-one provinces in Thailand.¹² The northeast declined as the locus of insurgent activity and greater activity centered on the hill tribes of the northern part of Thailand — Phetchabun, Phitsanulok, Loei, Uttaradit, and Chiang Rai provinces.¹³

The Thai Communist decision in 1967 to expend a large amount of their limited resources in arousing the Meo, Yao, and other hill tribes in the north against the Thai Government partially explains the shift. The communists found fertile soil for their propaganda among the hill tribes which had long been abused and treated as inferior by Thai Government officials. Further, the hill tribes' sense of cultural separation from the Thai people, as well as their grievances over their

⁷ *Washington Post*, October 16, 1967, p. A 19; Peter Braestrup, "How the Guerrillas Came to Koh Noi," *New York Times Magazine*, December 10, 1967, pp. 31ff; Radio Peking, New China News Agency International Service in English, October 8, 1967.

⁸ *Washington Post*, October 16, 1967, p. A19.

⁹ *New York Times*, April 15, 1966, p. 38.

¹⁰ The Editor, "Dragon in the Hills," *Current Scene*, Vol. IV, No. 17 (September

¹¹ *U.S. Department of State Bulletin*, Vol. LII, No. 1345 (April 5, 1965), p. 490.

¹² *Peking Review*, No. 51 (December 20, 1968), p. 16.

¹³ Analysis of *Hsinhua News Agency* "Voice of the Thai People" broadcasts, and monitored radio reports from Mainland China indicate a shift in locus of guerrilla activity.

failure to preserve some local autonomy, made them a suitable target for communist propaganda. The "Voice of the Thai People" began broadcasting in Mung, a Meo dialect, in late 1968 to complement its daily broadcasts in Thai and Lao. Government attempts to suppress communist insurgents in the north by dropping high explosives or napalm on "dissident" villages tended to drive the mountain people right into the arms of the communists. In the long run the Thais may have made a fundamental error in taking such harsh and punitive action against the hill aborigines.

The lessening of incidents in the northeast can be attributed, in part, to the growth of the Royal Thai Government's counter-insurgency forces and sweeps of the area, as well as to greater economic aid. The use of Mobile Development Units, commanded by military officers, sought to bring depressed villages much needed advice on possible improvement programs in education, agriculture, general economic development, public transportation and communication. The units strove to enlist the aid of the villagers in these projects as much as possible.¹⁴ Moreover, village security forces in the northeast began to reach a new level of combat effectiveness.

In July of 1968, the American airbase at Udorn (along with all other American installations), previously immune from attack, was attacked by guerrillas who penetrated the base and placed satchel charges before being driven away. The attack represented a departure from insurgent activities—prior to this time no American facilities were ever attacked. It was felt that this immunity was occasioned by a desire to avoid any retaliatory counter-insurgency activities which might follow an attack on United States property. One argument proposed for the apparent change in policy was that the insurgents felt strong enough to undertake the attack, regardless of any intensification of counter-insurgent activities. A more probable reason for the attack was the departure only a short time before of the vanguard of the Black Panther Division headed for South Vietnam. The fact that other United States facilities were not attacked in the subsequent half of 1968 would indicate that the insurgents wished to embarrass the United States by showing American facilities that they could be attacked at will and reminding Thais that their troops were needed at home.

Reports in mid-1968 placed some 1,700 to 2,000 guerrilla personnel in some 80 groups in the north and northeast and numbered about 10,000 village sympathizers, supporters, food suppliers, and part-time terrorists. In the mid-south, some 250 guerrillas were said to be active in 17 groups. In the Central Plains about 200 terrorists were organized in some 18 groups. There was further evidence that the northeast and

¹⁴ Colonel Charyo Krasin, "Military Civic Action in Thailand," *Military Review*, January, 1968, pp. 73-77.

central areas had regular contact with each other. In the extreme south guerrillas were estimated at 800-1,000 in an undetermined number of groups.¹⁵ All reports seem to indicate that this force level has remained constant since 1968.

Thai reaction to the continued guerrilla activities in 1968 took the form of increasing the number of police personnel in the affected areas and funneling limited economic aid to the areas. Village security units have been strengthened by improving the training of rural leaders and supporting the units with better equipment. The Mobile Development Units expanded to some 26 in 1969. In addition, early in 1969 the General Secretary of the National Economic Development Board recognized the need to deal with the aboriginal problem by proposing a bureau to consolidate the affairs of the hill tribes into one unit.

THAI PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY—1969

On January 1, 1969, the Thai Patriotic Front announced the establishment of a "Supreme Command of the Thai People's Liberation Army" intended to "exercise unified and effective command of the fighting." The Thai People's Liberation Army acknowledged the leadership of the Thai Communist Party, but also sought allies as part of a united front program in its opposition to "United States imperialist aggression against Thailand" and "fascist dictatorial rule of the traitorous Thanom clique." The Supreme Command moved to study the "Thought of Mao Tse-tung," establish a politicized army, and extensively develop "people's war." In founding a Thai People's Liberation Army, the motives of the Thai Patriotic Front remain unclear. Certainly the doctrinal need, in terms of the "Thought of Mao Tse-tung," was apparent, for Mao has stated that "without a people's army, the people have nothing." Perhaps more important than ideological motivation was the decline in the general level of insurgency in Thailand.¹⁶ The growing effectiveness of the Thai counterinsurgency operations, economic counter-measures, growth of the reliability of intelligence operations, and better village security have contributed to the decline of insurgency. In part, to cover this decline, a propaganda device was needed to give the appearance of a revolutionary upsurge. Also the claim of a united front military force reinforced the Chinese propaganda theme that Thai troops are needed to suppress a growing insurgent threat in Thailand, and should therefore stay out of the war in Vietnam.

¹⁵ *Bangkok Post*, March 1, 1968, p. 1; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, No. 42 (October 16, 1969), pp. 187-191. See also The Editor, "Dragon in the Hills," *Current Scene*, Vol. IV, No. 17 (September 26, 1966), pp. 1-13; *New York Times*, October 20 and 23, 1967; *Washington Post*, October 16, 1967, p. A19; *Christian Science Monitor*, October 24, 1967.

¹⁶ The number of incidents reported in *Hsinhua News Agency* releases, broadcasts of the "Voice of the Thai People" and monitored radio reports from Mainland China seems to have dropped significantly.

The "Voice of the Thai People" showed increasing bellicosity in 1969. One broadcast stated that the Thai Communist Party had a "profound understanding" of Mao's adage that "the seizure of the issue by war, is the central task and the highest form of revolution." Besides some exaggerated year end claims of success in 1969, an analysis of broadcast reveals an emphasis on undertaking propaganda work and the raising of peasant revolutionary attitudes rather than on active insurgency. The reported discovery, for the first time, of Chinese-made AK47 automatic weapons seems to be an isolated occurrence.

Available evidence for 1969 reveals an improved insurgency situation for the Thai Government. The insurgent incidents in the northeast continued to decline, and incidents in the north and central plains regions also apparently dipped, probably as a result of the increased efficacy of the Thai counterinsurgent forces and improved economic and social services being directed toward those areas.

In the provinces bordering Thailand and Malaysia, a slight upsurge in incidents was reported, primarily because of an increased governmental presence and more aggressive patrolling by Thai troops. In addition, the number of insurgents surrendering to Government forces during 1969 was the largest to date and measured a "substantial" increase from the previous year.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Thai insurgency has never presented a genuine threat to the power of the Royal Thai Government. The recent establishment of a Thai People's Liberation Army has signalled a decline in insurgency. It appears that the Thai communists are once again attempting to subvert by emphasizing political agitation rather than military activity. The insurgency in Thailand exists where the Thai Government is least present, indicating substantial weakness in the insurgency movement. It has been suggested here that the Thai insurgency was essentially curtailed by improving government counterinsurgency forces and expanding the methods of fighting the communist insurgents. It is also important to note that North Vietnam and Communist China have not noticeably increased their support for the Thai insurgents since 1968, possibly indicating that both countries are attempting to accomplish their political objectives more in a political way rather than in an intensified military manner at this point in time. Communist China's apparent turn toward a more "normal" state of international relations, as illustrated by the return of several Chinese ambassadors to their posts abroad, suggests that for the time being the Chinese also wish to achieve their objectives by political rather than military means.

¹⁷ *Bangkok World*, January 6, 1970, p. 8.

The pattern of insurgency in Thailand in 1969 suggests that the problem of communist insurgents will remain a troublesome irritant to the Thai Government into the 1970's. Moreover, external forces, particularly China and North Vietnam, could in the future step up insurgency to suit their political objectives.