

## Communist defeat in the Second Indochina War

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Once I talked with them (his North Vietnamese captors) about captured soldiers at the front line. They asked me which front line? I was thinking of Plain De Jars and Sky Line Ridge, so I told them. They laughed and told me that's not the front line. They said their front line was Thailand. (Thai Forward Air Guide CROWBAR, captured by the North Vietnamese in Laos in 1972 and kept captive for over four years.) (Warriors Association 333 1987, 6) <sup>1</sup>

The nearly three-decade armed struggle on peninsular Southeast Asia between communist forces and so-called “Free World” forces was settled in 1975, when Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, communist North Vietnam) forces seized the southern Vietnamese capital of Saigon. The DRV and communist Pathet Lao forces, supported by the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), asserted their hegemony over Laos that same year. Meanwhile, the communist Khmer Rouge conquered Cambodia, driving them from Phnom Penh in late 1978.

The communist victories were total and the forces of democracy beaten, so said press accounts and the popular notion. The primary narrative of these wars—really one war composed of several campaigns—has portrayed the communist victories in Southeast Asia as absolute. The storyline has been fairly consistent: The United States, its Western and Southeast Asian allies lost the Second Indochina War and the communist forces prevailed.

There is another story that has not been popularly told, a successful one few talk about. The truth is that on the peninsula one country, Thailand, which the PRC and DRV intentionally targeted for communist expansion, failed to follow the domino path of its three neighbors. Given the feeble record of governments in defeating insurgencies since World War Two, this was a notable achievement, particularly since two of the defeated countries bordered Thailand. A recent empirically-based counterinsurgency study conducted for the U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense found that of 59 core

insurgencies world-wide since World War Two, host-nations lost in 31 of those conflicts. (Paul, Clarke, Grill, Dunigan 2013, 274-275)

History has largely overlooked the Thai victory over its insurgency and success in resisting external communist forces. In this article, I argue that Thailand triumphed over communism because of certain decisions, some risky, its leaders took and the determination of its king and population to fight communism both at home and abroad. Thai leaders in the 1980s and 1990s certainly portrayed the Second Indochina War as a victory for Thailand, as demonstrated through the war memorials they commissioned during this period. (Good 2014) As Richard Ruth observes:

These monuments illustrate a period of economic development and growing prosperity during the war years that appear intended to demonstrate to its people that Thailand, unlike the United States, can record its participation in the conflict as a national boon. They reflect a profitable and proud phase of modernization that not only transformed the kingdom from a largely agricultural developing nation into the most technologically advanced and wealthy mainland South-East Asian state. (Ruth 2014 , 42)

### **Evaluating the Communist insurgency**

It might confound the international visitor touring charming Thailand today to learn that communist violence racked the kingdom 50 years ago. By mid-March 1967, communist assassinations of Thai government and community officials in the northeast Isan region had increased from a long-standing average of about ten per month, to thirty. Armed clashes between government forces and insurgents were averaging one per day. (Kerdphol 1986, 27), (Braestruck 1967, 11) This alarming violence rarely made headlines outside Thailand because the Western press focused on the war in Vietnam. Assassinations ranged from provincial governors to village headmen (*puuyaibaan*). (Kuhn 1995, 100), (USOM 1967, 11) Aid workers were not immune, insurgents killing a three-man Thai team in Nan Province in 1970. (Blackburn 2002, 191) Even rural school teachers were targeted. As teachers fled, schools closed (USOM

1967, 17) By 1984 when the Thai state had defeated the insurgency, almost 22,000 Thai government officials had been killed or wounded and intellectuals assassinated. (Kerdphol 1986, 186)

A casual review of the *Bangkok Post* in the early 1970s vividly demonstrates commonly occurring communist violence. To give one example, in just a two-week period ending in January 1972, the newspaper reported the following violence in five articles over four days: (Bangkok Post 1972, 6; 10-12)

- Between December 29, 1971 and January 4, 1972, government clashes with insurgents resulted in 32 “communist terrorists” (*Bangkok Post* term for the insurgents) captured, six killed, ten wounded while six government authorities and one villager were wounded, with 122 insurgents surrendering to authorities.
- A communist group of unknown size attacked a work camp guarded by 20 soldiers, policemen, and volunteers in Ban Wang Pa, Hat Yai, using small arms and a M-79 grenade launcher. One assailant was killed.
- A Vietnamese “suicide squad” penetrated U-Tapao Royal Thai Air Force base, damaging aircraft. One raider was killed, another captured.
- After three days of fighting, Thai forces seized an insurgent training camp in the Phu Phan mountains, capturing three while others fled. The camp’s training capacity was 150-200 personnel, complete with agricultural lands, basketball and badminton courts.
- Insurgents attacked a Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP) unit in Udon Thani Province, injuring three soldiers and fatally injuring a policeman. Three assailants were killed.

That very month the governor of Nong Khai, a province on the Mekong River bordering Laos, implored Lao officials to help stop the insurgent gun running to Thailand. (Bangkok Post 1971) Thai government forces the previous week had seized large amounts of M-16 rifles, ammunition, anti-tank rounds, and other weapons. The request

did little good. One year later, the paper reported 150 heavily armed insurgents overran the Loei Post Office, murdering eight policemen. (Bangkok Post 1972)

The communist insurgency was centered in Thailand's impoverished northeast and parts of the north. The violence was real, the insurgents committed. Nan Province was a particularly remote northern area requiring aggressive government action over the years to root out insurgents. In May 1972, during an attack on a communist camp in Ban Huey Lak Lai, 25 kilometers southwest of the district capital, 14 Thai cavalymen were killed and 30 wounded in military operations lasting several days. (Bangkok Post 1972) The DRV was providing a pipeline of weapons to Thai insurgents through Laos, which shares a 1,700-kilometer border with Thailand. That same month, Thai forces captured smugglers in Kalasin transporting assault weapons from Nakhon Phanom province. The haul included M-79 grenade launchers and 257 grenades, assault weapons, and almost 40,000 rounds of assault rifle ammunition. (Bangkok Post 1972)

In 2016, Thai former communists offered vivid recollections of their fight against the Thai State. "The theories of Marx, Lenin and Mao Zedong helped me to see Thailand from a different angle. The Communist Party of Thailand's (CPT) goal was to build a party, a military, and mobilize the people to change Thailand's political system." (The Isan Record 2016) Another remembered, "In the scorching heat of March 1966, plagued by 'leeches that sucked all the blood out of our legs,' (she) trekked from Nabua, Thailand to a communist base in northern Vietnam, close to the Chinese border." She remained there for almost two years, receiving Vietnamese language and medical training to become a nurse before returning to Thailand in 1968. (The Isan Record 2016) One captured communist during the war said he trained for eight months in Vietnam with 100 young Thai men and 43 Thai women, with North Vietnamese and Thai instructors. (Mitchell 1967 ; Yatsushiro 1967, 4)

Communist recruiters were often subtle in their techniques, migrating into new villages and, after sometimes a year of gaining villagers trust, beginning recruitment. Other times, armed gangs of up to 100 would enter a village late at night, gathering villagers at a wat while searching for village leaders and teachers. The communist leaders would alternately

proselytize and threaten for hours, then present a tendentious form of *mohlam* (northeastern folk song story-telling) denigrating the Thai political, social and economic order, as one village abbot witnessed and outlined in a private letter to his superiors. (Yatsushiro 1967)

Some scholars have argued the communist threat to Thailand was insignificant, Thai military leaders using the theme of “communist threat” as means to prod the United States into providing Thailand increasing economic and military aid. Phimmasone Michael Rattanasengchanh argues that the premier, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, used anti-communism as a ploy incorporated into the idea of Thai nationalism to increase his and royalist power and that, “communism was too small to pose any danger to the country.” Phimmasone cites a 1963 U.S. Army assessment stating the communist movement in Thailand “was relatively small and its activities were manifested mainly in clandestine propaganda.” (Rattanasengchanh 2012, 41-42) Daniel Fineman argues the traditional Thai “cold war model” seeking to explain Thai leaders’ actions was flawed. This model attributes Thai military leader motives for internal activities and foreign policy to combatting a communist threat, when they actually used the communist threat to attack their opponents and consolidate political power. (Fineman 1993)

I do not disagree that Thai military leaders embellished the communist threat, used it to consolidate their domestic power and, on one occasion, even surreptitiously printed communist literature. (Tejapira 2001, 135) Sarit in particular used the threat to brutally attack opponents, sometimes by unlawful execution. Where I part company with their analysis is when they conclude that *because* Thai leaders used the threat for power consolidation, communism *therefore* was not a formidable threat. That communism was a significant threat to Thailand *and* that leaders conveniently used the threat to consolidate their power are not conditions in contravention. The assassination rates and daily armed clashes clearly establish that communist violence was a threat to Thailand’s governance and way of life, regardless of the domestic politics.

Perhaps there was an additional motive for Thai military leaders to embellish the threat? We will know never but, as I address later, their zealous desire for military action in Laos and dismay at the American catatonic response in the early 1960s poses the possibility. After all, it

was not until 1966 that U.S. intelligence recognized the significance of the threat previously emanating from Laos. We now know that communist activities inside Thailand were more robust in the 1950s and early 1960s than the U.S. estimate of activities previously cited.

### **The external threat**

After World War Two, peninsular Southeast Asian countries found themselves in a struggle between global powers. On the one side was the communist bloc led by the Soviet Union and the PRC. On the other was the Free World led by the United States. Complicating the geopolitical balance was France's attempt to re-colonize Southeast Asian territories it lost during World War Two. Communist and Free World conflict erupted almost immediately with the Korean conflict and the French versus Viet Minh struggle in the First Indochina War.

In the 1950s, Pathet Lao cadre, working with Vietnamese communists, first recruited Thai villagers to fight with the Pathet Lao inside Laos. In 1953, the communist Viet Minh invaded Laos, nearly capturing Luang Prabang, the royal capital, had they not over-extended their supply lines. This aggression clearly demonstrated their regional expansionist intent. One Thai veteran told me he remembered as a seven-year old the Vietnamese communists capturing Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and that event alarmed him, his parents, grandparents and many Thais. (Kalphavanich 2018) Anuson Chinvano states:

The events of 1953, especially the establishment of the T'ai Autonomous Area in Yunnan... the Vietminh's invasion of Laos, together with the signing of the Korean armistice, heightened the Thai leaders fear that the communists had now turned their attention towards Southeast Asia, and that aggression against Thailand was imminent. (Chinvano 1992, 121)

Satayut Osornprasop argues, "The Thai fear of 'Red' China was unquestionable; it was clear even before the establishment of the PRC." (Osornprasop 2003, 14)

Thai leaders had reason to fear. Only recently have we learned from empirically-based studies and counterinsurgency modeling just how lethal insurgencies are with outside sponsorship. Examining insurgencies since World War Two, researchers have found that external support to

insurgencies plays a greater role in insurgent victories than previously assessed. External support is such a powerful element in tipping the balance towards insurgencies, since World War Two “every case in which a major external power supported the insurgents and was not balanced by a major external power supporting the (host-nation), ended up being an insurgent win and a (host-nation) loss.” (Paul, Clarke, Grill, Dunigan 2013, 151 ; Paul, Clarke, Grill 2010) In Thailand’s case, two nation-states—the PRC and DRV with Pathet Lao—funded and trained the Thai insurgency.

According to CPT documents, between 1948 and 1949 it, “sent cadre, students, and intellectuals ‘upcountry’ to organize the ‘peasants.’” (Jeamteerasakul 2003, 529) Thai communist training in Vietnam, Laos and probably China almost certainly began in the 1950s. (Yatsushiro 1967, 13) This is a timeline earlier than previously known. The threat was growing in Laos to Thai borders, at a magnitude Washington misinterpreted but Thai leaders almost certainly understood.

Thai military leaders’ aggressive intent and actions toward Laos at this time resulted from their fear of Vietnamese and communist expansion, motives that cannot logically be assigned to domestic power consolidation. As early as 1956, they wanted to send a Thai BPP contingent to northern Laos, against U.S., objections, to retake provinces lost to communists. (Conboy 1995, 27) They were appalled and angered with the American officials’ languidness towards the communist Lao threat. Pathet Lao troops pushed to the Thai border in 1961 without allied response, prompting Sarit to deploy Thai military units to the border and the first-ever Thai artillery deployment into Laos. The North Vietnamese meanwhile conducted an offensive in southeast Laos, capturing the strategic village of Tchepone. The U.S. negotiated the 1962 Laos agreement and created an ineffectual coalition government, placing Thai-U.S. relations at a low point. “Bangkok deployed a number of methods to sabotage the coalition government under Souvanna Phouma, including the blockade of Vientiane, withholding its recognition of (his) government, spreading false news reports and evacuating Thai nationals from Vientiane. The economic blockade of Vientiane, which was imposed shortly after the Kong Le coup, continued despite the formation of the coalition government.” (Osornprasop 2003, 45)

Thai leaders' exasperation over tepid allied responses to Viet and Pathet Lao activity in Laos obligated the United States to sign the Rusk-Thanat communique (assuring United States unilateral commitment to Thailand). So upset were Thai leaders that U.S. President Kennedy feared they might use the "agreement to intervene in Laos." (U.S. State Department 1962)

American failure to appreciate Thai leader concern over Vietnamese encroachment was to ignore almost 250 years of Siamese (Thai)<sup>5</sup> and Viet clashes over Laos and Cambodia. Siam at one time had almost complete suzerainty over most of territorial Laos, previously composed of several small kingdoms with overlapping frontiers that paid tribute to the Vietnamese and Siamese. With a fragmented Laos, the Siamese and Vietnamese asserted themselves territorially and it had been a bloody, violent affair that included the forced repatriation of tens of thousands of Lao and others, and the slaughter of Siamese as far south into Siam as Korat. (Jumsai 1971)<sup>6</sup> As the Thai leaders saw it and Thai people had lived it, the Vietnamese had once again crossed the Annamatic chain, but this time the challenge was not just for the Laos, but for Thai sovereignty.

I contend that while Thai leaders used the communist threat to fortify their positions, they also recognized the growing danger to Thailand emanating from Laos with greater precision than American leaders. It is quite plausible that their desire to convince Washington of this menace, which we now know was stronger than American leaders understood at the time, caused them to embellish its strength. Perhaps they thought they best could convince Americans of the actual threat by overstating it. Regardless, I fail to see how their aggressive actions towards Laos can be attributed to anything other than their legitimate concern over external threats to Thailand's borders.

The 1960s heralded an escalation not only in rhetoric but in conflict. With the signing of the International Agreement on the Neutrality of Laos in 1962, American forces left Laos. The North Vietnamese kept 7,000–9,000 troops there, violating the agreement.

The Third Congress of the CPT convened in or near Bangkok in 1961, passing a resolution declaring armed struggle the strategy for revolution<sup>7</sup> in Thailand. In March 1962, a foreign radio station,

the “Voice of the People of Thailand,” began broadcasting, calling for revolution. Thai villagers sympathetic to the communist cause keenly listened to it and, according to personal accounts, by 1965 thousands of Thai in the northeast had left the rice fields and joined the armed struggle. (The Isaan Record 2016)

In 1965, the year the CPT initiated armed clashes inside Thailand, the PRC foreign minister stated in a radio address that Thailand would be the next front for a guerilla-driven civil war. Also, that year, Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi told the French Ambassador in Beijing of the “formation of a “Thai Independence Movement,”” and stated “we hope to have a guerilla war in Thailand before the year is out.” (Osornprasop 2003, 204) Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman characterized the statement as amounting to a declaration of war. Shortly thereafter, Liao Cheng-chih, chairman of the PRC’s Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission, announced that it was “China’s unshirkable obligation ‘to support the struggle of the people of Thailand.’” (Warner 1965, 32) Thailand’s “government in exile” in China led by former Thai prime minister Pridi Banomyong called for the overthrow of the Thai government. (New York Herald Tribune 1965)

PRC officials matched their rhetoric with action, around this time, clandestinely sending a battalion-sized People’s Liberation Army unit into northern Thailand in the Hmong areas. (Tanham 1974,56)<sup>8</sup>

This was the battleground condition Thailand found itself in by the 1970s. Thailand was now one of four nations engulfed in a violent, armed struggle against communism which would eventually overtake three of its neighbors. Aggressive external armies were fighting near Thai borders, while the internal insurgency had grown to a level that Stanford University social scientists characterized in later studies of insurgencies as, “The Thai communist insurgency easily meets our criteria for a civil war.” (Fearon, Laitin 2005, 3)

Thai and American officials fortunately had the foresight decades earlier to take active measures to fortify Thailand against the growing Southeast Asian communist threat.

### **Thai actions to combat Communism**

Successive Thai leaders and the monarchy (the Thai state) after World War Two made a series of calculated decisions regarding Thai State extension, economic expansion, and security development, to combat communism. In 2019, it is hard to imagine that in the early 1970s there were parts of Thailand's north and northeast so remote (not just among hill-area ethnic groups) that no Thai government existed, populations were unaware of the royal family, had never seen an automobile and some had no conception of government. These populations were vulnerable to the communist message. Thai leaders determined, therefore, that to combat communism the Thai state would have to extend into heretofore inaccessible villages, improve the Thai population's quality of life and enhance security. To Thai state leaders, allying with a powerful nation to assist in these efforts seemed prudent.

To ally with the United States in the Cold War was one of the first deliberate decisions that the Thai state made, reinforced under successive Bangkok military leaders. This placed Thailand on a distinct pro-western, anti-communist path. Thailand increasingly viewed a close alliance with the United States as its best guarantor against encroaching communism. It was a decision of significant daring when many nations were opting for non-alignment in the growing Cold War.

In 1950, the United States and Thailand signed two agreements, one economic and one military, setting the two countries on a binding path.<sup>9</sup> Thailand became the first Asian nation to send troops to fight in Korea against communist forces. Thailand then signed the Manila Treaty in 1954 establishing the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). This was "the fulfillment of the goal of Phibul's (Field Marshal, Premier Luang Phibunsongkram) foreign policy of searching for protection, from external powers as a guarantee against the growing communist threat. Symbolically, it was also the 'final act of public commitment' by Thailand to the Western side in the Cold War." (Maktara 2003, 8)

While in hindsight such an alliance made sense for the Thais and came with great benefit, an aspect often overlooked is the risk associated in siding with the United States. Arne Kislenko argues:

Thailand risked a great deal in its association with the United States. Helping Americans to defend Thailand from invasion or insurgency was one thing, but assisting in wars elsewhere was quite another. First and foremost, the Thais risked antagonizing their neighbors, with whom they had an already difficult, violent history. Secondly, joining the United States in any wars against communism necessitated considerable American intervention in Thailand. This would invariably expose traditional Thai culture and society to powerful foreign influences, which could have serious political implications. (Kislenko 2004)

The Thais had been guarded in their historic alliances, forging only temporary arrangements and shifting flexibly with changing conditions. They were quite proud to have been the only Southeast Asian country to thwart foreign colonization. To now commit to a decades-long American alliance with 50,000 foreign troops on their soil and expose their rural population to foreign cultural influences, many of them sullied, was a bold and perilous policy choice. Perhaps worse, the PRC and the DRV were intent upon militarily removing the last vestiges of U.S. influence on peninsular Southeast Asia and the road to achieve that goal now went through Thailand.

The Thai decision allowing the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to enhance internal security was another key judgment. For a government to allow a foreign intelligence agency to shape internal security operations is inherently a precarious decision. The CIA and Thai cooperation extended through the military, police and monarchy. By 1972, joint Thai and U.S. intelligence operations were so harmonized physically and functionally that they were virtually synchronous operations.

In 1951, a young CIA official named Bill Lair came to Thailand to establish a counterinsurgency training program for the Thai police. Lair eventually formed a personal bond with His Majesty King Rama IX. (Maxner 2001) Lair established a 60-90 day guerilla warfare and parachute training program at Lopburi for police trainees, later reshaping training with Thai approval into an elite special operations unit renamed the Police Aerial Reconnaissance Unit (PARU). The primary purpose of the specialized police unit was to deploy to Thailand's northeast and

provide counterinsurgency and law enforcement capability where none currently existed, extending the Thai state.

Lair with his CIA and Thai colleagues expanded the training to include the Royal Air Force, the Navy, the Army, and “Administrative Interior” personnel. The primary training audience however was the police because Lair believed if guerilla warfare was required in Thailand “...you had police present in every major village... so you had access to all of the people.” (Maxner 2001) By the end of 1953, Lair had trained 94 Thai BPP platoons, each averaging 45 men, deploying them along the Thai border. (Conboy 1995, 57) (Hyun 2014) <sup>10</sup>

Lair then moved training to a new camp, Camp Naresuan, near Hua Hin, as the area offered every kind of terrain desirable for training and was near the monarch’s summer residence. The CIA had been concerned with its ability to extract Southeast Asian royalty to safety in the event of an emergency and brought in small aircraft solely for that mission, according to Lair. The Thais made Lair a uniformed officer in the Royal Thai Police—probably unprecedented for a foreign official—and Lair married into a distinguished Thai family. (Fineman 1993, 133)<sup>11</sup> While at Hua Hin, Lair became close friends with King Rama IX, racing boats and shooting weapons together. (Hyun 2014, 318) The King granted Lair a private audience prior to his CIA retirement in 1975. (Warner 1996,373)

By the end of the 1950s, Lair and PARU commander Col. Pranet Ritreutchai had built the PARU into a four-hundred-man force. PARU officers trained at U.S. military bases and were deployed just inside Thailand’s border with Laos, performing police duties and training local villagers in self-protection. (Warner 1996, 31,41). The BPP greatly contributed to Thailand’s nation-building effort and was most instrumental in incorporating remote hill-area ethnic groups into the kingdom. The Thai decision to allow the CIA to enhance its security posture improved Thailand’s capability to fight internal and external communist threats.

Next, the Thai had decided that security was a matter too important to be left to the police and military. Therefore, the Thai State deftly employed two decisive strategies to combat the insurgency: economic expansion in support of security development; and extension of the Thai

state. It was a prescient determination that improving Thai quality of life would make villagers more loyal to the kingdom. Such economic progress later was measured in counterinsurgency models to show that government improvements in local economic conditions resulted in greater chances of success against insurgencies.<sup>12</sup> Government studies conducted during decades of Thai development (anthropologists living among villagers) show just that: Thai government officials conducting economic development in rural areas and demonstrating care for villagers won villager loyalty for the Thai state.

The problems these measures addressed were that parts of Thailand which were remote and linked only by ox-cart paths, were very poor and lacked a Thai government presence. Villagers in some areas of the northeast only knew of the Laos king, and were more aware of events in Laos than Thailand. In a Nong Khai Province village in 1964, a Thai team provided villagers pictures of the Thai king “to replace old faded shots of the late King Srisawangwong of Laos.” (USIS 1964, 7) (USIS 1962, 5)

To bring a sense of “thainess” (*khwam pen Thai*) into remote populations so that villagers felt they belonged to the kingdom, the government in the 1950s began dispatching Mobile Information Teams (MIT) into rural villages. The MIT consisted of Thai government officials, medical personnel and an American observer. The Thai evaluated needs, selected projects for village improvement, provided health care and showed films about Thailand to villagers. The films’ purpose was to educate and promote loyalty to the Thai state.<sup>13</sup> In two districts of Nakhon Phanom Province in 1964 when a Thai government team distributed pictures of the King, they found some villagers did not understand what the picture represented. If the pictures were distributed the day following a night of movies, then the Thai officials would link the pictures with the movie about the royals and “comprehension was noticeably greater among those who had seen the films.” The team remarked that, incredibly, a few villagers “seemed not to know what the government is.” (USIS 1964 ,8;11) Some critics have called these MIT teams pure propaganda platforms. I proffer that unknowing citizens should be educated on their citizenship and kingdom, and it was incumbent upon the government to present a message, just as the communists were doing.

To conduct economic development, roads first had to be built so that government and development officials could reach rural villages. Development projects began immediately in 1951. Hospital construction increased their numbers in Thailand from 20 to 71 by 1955, at least one in each province, with modernized equipment. (USOM. 1959, 54)<sup>14</sup> The malaria eradication program, with U.S. assistance, cut the malaria death rate (a leading cause of death) in half between 1950 and 1954 and, by 1968, over 90 percent. Smallpox was still a menace post-war. An intensive vaccination program began in the early 1950s and officially eliminated the disease by 1962. (Fenner 1987, 34-48)

The Fulbright education exchange program agreement in 1950 opened U.S.-funded public libraries in Thailand, educated students in the United States and brought American educators to Thailand to teach, train and study. United States Operations Mission (USOM) also began to fund Thai agriculture, health, science and technology, banking and commerce and infrastructure development training. (USAID 2019), (Hill 1973, 32)<sup>15</sup>

By 1956, U.S.-sponsored agricultural experimentation had resulted in 50 different rice strains producing a 13 to 32 percent yield increase, reducing the long-term trend of declining yields. Assistance to the fisheries sector resulted in a 25 percent fish catch increase between 1953 and 1955, developing a domestic fish meal industry and establishing the first wholesale fish market in Thailand.

In the early 1960s, the Thai government created departments to execute development in support of security. The first formal, large-scale program the government established was the Department of Community Development (CDD) in 1962, falling under the Ministry of Interior. The department created dialogue between the government and villagers, trained local leadership and brought development. CDD workers going into the villages to work and live considered themselves “change agents.” In the early 1970s when CDD worker Mr. Sansonthi Boonyothayan went to work in rural villages in southern Thailand (Satun) and later the northeast Sakon Nakhon Province, there was no local Thai administration for support. He said:

In Satun, cattle were roaming free, eating gardens and other areas. My first task was to convince the people to work with me. Not all people had private land, so they wanted to use public land for grass. I had to convince both the *Puuyaibaan* and local Imam that fences were needed. Convincing them of that, my next task was to teach them to grow green fodder to support them, finally to use rice straw—which they were throwing away—to feed cattle. I later got them to make mineral blocks for the cattle by using sea salt and ground-up bones.

The U.S. Peace Corps placed its volunteers in the CDD. One such volunteer, Tony Zola, worked in three separate villages over several years developing agricultural enterprises for Thai villagers, increasing their income.<sup>16</sup> Efforts such as these were the most basic, building block tasks to modernize remote peoples and increase their quality of life.

Accelerated Rural Development (ARD), created in 1964, placed development money, equipment and workers in the hands of provincial governors. By 1971, ARD operated in 56 provinces and had constructed 3,763 kilometers of all-weather roads, connecting 3,000 villages. By 1974, ARD provided health care in 27 provinces with at least one and sometimes two mobile medical teams led by a medical doctor in each province. Each team was capable of treating 4,000 patients per month and had treated over 5,000,000 villagers in the recent years leading up to 1974. Additionally, there were “139 youth groups with over 10,000 members working on developmental projects. Twenty-eight district farmers groups with 42,000 members had been established to conduct farm supply, storage and marketing activities.” (Scoville and Dalton 1974, 64) The Thai government through ARD had spent approximately \$100 million in targeted rural areas totaling 10 million inhabitants. (Scoville and Dalton 1974, 53)

Conducting development in dangerous, unsecure areas where the insurgency threatened was a problem. The government developed an effective response with the Mobile Development Units, MDU. These were military units with Thai government workers from various departments (agriculture, health, and others) under the military security

umbrella. The MDUs combined civic action and security functions into one organization for unity of effort and were very effective in bringing both security and development to rural Thailand. MDUs built roads, schools, wat, irrigation systems, improved villages and provided medical care. Some scholars have criticized MDUs, citing an initial evaluation of their problems.(Huff 1963, 7) Often new programs the Thai implemented were so radically progressive and new in their approach, it required time, effort and lessons-learned to adjust and improve their operations.

MDUs were such an operation and these authors failed to cite the same evaluator's follow-up evaluation the next year where he concluded the initial MDU problems had been overcome, providing a resounding endorsement of MDU operations. He captured the essence of MDUs that made them a unique, effective, counterinsurgency tool that no nation before or since has replicated. "No nation had succeeded in combining its civil and military resources under a single command in an organization designed to focus them in an integrated fashion on the problem of preventing the growth of insurgency situations and alleviating those which existed."(Huff 1964, 1-2)

The Thai government also began training government officials in how to better treat villagers and more effectively execute their administrative functions. The government instituted the *Nai Amphur* (district chief) Academy in 1963, with a nine-month training program to better equip Thai officials, both in their attitude and skills, to service the Thai people. A specific goal was to change officials' authoritarian attitudes to a more public-service mentality.

The Thai government also reversed its policy of sending its least qualified officials to the northeast. Academy graduates were disproportionately assigned to the northeast and it became a competition "among students to be assigned to difficult areas." Thai and American officials agreed based on evaluations and their observations that the academy had made a difference in officials' attitudes towards the population and strengthened this key office. (Caldwell 1974, 110) For the Thai government to even attempt to reverse such a trend and change a governmental culture's attitude towards commoners was a paradigm shifting development.

Thai state extension and economic development in support of security proved successful. In the 1950s, Thailand's economy grew on average by 5 percent per annum, increasing to a 1960s average of 8.4 percent, and 7 percent for the 1970s, despite oil "shocks" and inflation. Counterinsurgency models show Thailand passed a Gross Domestic Product "cap point," above which insurgencies are less likely to succeed. Per capita income in Thailand rose in all regions, particularly between 1962 and 1969, reducing the ability of an insurgency to foment a civil war. (Fearon and Laitin 2005, 2)

The World Bank assessed in 1976 that Thailand's poverty rate had been cut from 57 percent of the population in 1962 to 31 percent in 1975, and during that period per capita income grew steadily at about 3 percent per year and "a wide cross section of Thais enjoyed substantial real income growth throughout the period." (Muscat 1990, 228), (World Bank 1980, ii)<sup>17</sup> Thailand, unfortunately, has a large wealth disparity gap, something this development could not address.

USOM commissioned extensive surveys from the 1960s through the 1980s through its Research and Analysis Division, outside research companies and Thai professionals to study villager attitudes towards development and the Thai government. Almost every survey categorically reflected villagers' positive attitudes towards development and the government. These were not casual surveys, rather intensive scientifically-based research to determine which programs were working, which were not, and how to better conduct development and address villagers needs.<sup>18</sup> One series of surveys USOM commissioned from October 1966 to May 1967, as one example, consisted of the USOM Thai research staff, the National Statistical Office, the National Research Council, CDD and Chulalongkorn University (USOM 1967).<sup>19</sup>

Next, the actions of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX, in rallying the population to oppose communism cannot be overstated. He was an active leader in motivating the Thai population, dressing in battle fatigues when traveling outside Bangkok, often with a pistol at his side. He began to openly advocate military action against regional communist forces by the late 1960s.

In 1966, he called upon his nation to defend itself against external enemies. In February 1967, a public announcement came for 1,000

volunteers to fill a new unit, the Queen's Cobra Regiment, for deployment to Vietnam. In Bangkok alone, 5,000 men arrived at recruiting centers on the first day of application. (Ruth 2011, 22) The Buddhist Sangha gave their support to the war, blessed departing troops in public ceremonies, while growing numbers of monks volunteered to fill the ranks. (Ruth 2011, 23)

The Royal Thai Army (RTA) doubled the size of the regiment to 2,000 because of the overwhelming number of volunteers. In just the first few days, 40,000 young Thai men volunteered for these positions. Later that year as casualties from the war mounted, the very public war funerals Thai leaders and the King attended cemented in the public's mind the very noble nature of the war. As Ruth noted:

The grandeur of the ceremonies and the collection of revered individuals who oversaw them provided a strong incentive to potential volunteers to overcome their fear of possible death. For some volunteers who served in Vietnam, the risk of death was a small consideration against the abstract honor of being remembered by the King and the Prime Minister. (Ruth 2011, 71)

Later in 1967, the call came for recruits for the next unit deploying to Vietnam, the Black Panther Division, and once again young men flocked to recruiting centers. The King continued his very public stance by visiting hospitalized soldiers and attending funerals. In January 1969, he presided over a cremation ceremony for almost 400 Thai who had died inside Thailand fighting "communist terrorists." Queen Sirikit also visited wounded Thai soldiers, setting the example for future visits by other leaders and cultural celebrities. (Ruth 2011, 76-77) In June 1970, when Bangkok publicly announced it would send volunteers to Cambodia to help defend cities, Thai volunteers flocked to recruiting centers. (Conboy 1995, 284)

This public enthusiasm for military service and the Sangha support for the war effort did not occur automatically. The king's leadership and ability to galvanize public support almost certainly shaped Thai attitudes against communism.

## Conclusion

The factors I have outlined above were not the only determinants in Thailand's defeat of communism, rather the ones I judge key over several decades. The Thais fought a bloody war in Laos against the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao in the late 1960s and early 1970s with approximately 17,000 combat troops at its height. Additionally, the Thai government was nimble in undercutting the insurgency by establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC in July 1975, effectively severing the PRC's support for the insurgents by 1979. The Sino-Viet split after 1975 also splintered the CPT. These two events severely degraded the CPT. By this time, the RTA had learned valuable lessons in its decades-long counterinsurgency fight, tactics sponsored by forward-thinkers General Saiyud Kerdphol and General Prem Tinsulanonda. The final death knell came when the Thai government, based on its counterinsurgency plan, offered general amnesty to CPT members in 1982.

Development and able government administrators made a significant difference in strengthening villager allegiance to the Thai state. (USOM 1967, 112) Ultimately, villager acceptance and adoption of development changes required their belief in Thai officials who proposed the changes. (Klausner 1983, 67)<sup>20</sup> In 1987, villagers said the most significant contributions to their quality of life in the previous five to ten years were roads, electricity, water supply and public health. (USAID 1987, 284) Villagers surveyed in 1966 in six Isan provinces noted more frequent visits of government officials (which villagers favored). Leaders and villagers in several remote Maha Sarakham Province villages in 1967 stated the government was definitely "doing more" for them than in the past and was trying to improve the villagers' lives. They stated they were "very satisfied" with the government efforts. (USOM 1966, 2), (Yatsushiro 1967, 26-27), (Yatsushiro 1967, 11) While these efforts had been successful against the insurgency, political inclusion was one element Thai governments failed to address.

A southern *puuyaiwaan* probably best captured the development effectiveness. He pointed to the next village on a hill and said, "See there? They have electricity," pointing to the lights. He knew he would get electricity next. Then he said, 'last night, I told the communist

insurgents that only an established government could give me and my village electricity and the paved road the government had recently put in, and you cannot.” (Yatsushiro 1967,199)

Equally important, King Rama IX led from the front in rallying his population against communism. It is too simplistic to argue that naturally the Thai people would follow their king. The love of a monarch is not automatic. When Rama IX assumed the throne in 1946, the monarchy was in a weakened state. The king earned the love of his people over time through his actions and demonstrable care for his subjects. Had he not become such a forceful proponent for his people and strident critic of communism, the outcome for Thailand may have been different. After all, Cambodia and Laos jettisoned monarchs.

Some have argued the Thai collectively would never have embraced communism because of Buddhism and Thai cultural traits. Certainly, Buddhism is inconsistent with Marxist teachings, yet Buddhist Cambodia and Laos fell to communism. It is also true that Marxism is a philosophy which conflicts with Thai cultural characteristics. Kasian Tejapira argues that one should not dismiss these Thai cultural traits as so antithetical to Marxist thought that the traits themselves would serve to defeat Marxism. He rejects the “complacent, anti-communist, essentialist view that uses the political defeat of Marxism to claim the incompatibility between what is presumed to be the ‘natural cultural essence’ (of Thailand) and Marxist-communist ideology.” (Tejapira 2001)<sup>92</sup> As Kasian rightly observes, national culture is not an immutable essence that rigidly remains in place but changes and its nature is vulnerable to dynamic internal and external influences.

It is also important to understand that an insurgency did not have to be on the kingdom’s palace steps to have debilitating effects. Had a simmering insurgency continued, tourism would have faltered, poverty, disease, and crime would have increased, crop yields and jobs decreased. Even if an insurgency does not expand, these conditions cause suffering, dissatisfaction, and imperil local government control. Several scholars argue that insurgencies can win simply by not losing, what they call “continuation and contestation,” supported by empirical study. (Metz, Millen 2004) (Cohen 2006) (Christopher, Colin, Beth, Molly 2013, 78)

Bangkok did more than just contain an insurgency, it defeated it, modernizing a nation and improving the quality of life for the Thai people. While foreign investment into Thailand soared and tourism surged, images flashing across television and newspapers around the world showed hundreds of thousands of its neighbors risking their lives to escape harm in the postwar period. As Ruth astutely observed, Thailand, “can legitimately claim, as it does in its monuments, command histories and veterans’ memories, that it came out of the Vietnam War a winner.” (Ruth 2017)

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*Footnotes*

1. Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, U.S. Foreign Service, *Thailand Country Reader*, <https://adst.org/oral-history/oral-history-interviews/> with Paul P. Blackburn, interview November 18, 2002, p. 191; Richard A. Virden, interview 2011, pp. 248-250; G. Lewis Schmidt, interview 1988, p. 257

2. Father Michael Shea interview with the author, January 17, 2019, Don Wai, Nong Khai, Thailand

3. Kasian Tejapira, *Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture, 1927-1958* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2001), p. 135. Field Marshal and Premier Phibun Songkhram and Phao Siyanon, Director General of Thailand's national police, secretly paid for the printing of a previously published Maoist class analysis of Thai society to raise the specter of communism. An early example of embellishment was in February, 1955 when Phibun, prior to the opening of the first SEATO Council meeting held in Bangkok, claimed the Chinese were massing 20,000 "Free Thai" troops near the northern Thai border.

4. CIA, *Communist Insurgency in Thailand*, "National Intelligence Estimate Number 52-66," (Washington: July 1, 1966), p. 5. After communist violence erupted in 1965 in Thailand, the CIA acknowledged that events in Laos probably were the impetus for the growing threat to Thailand: "The Communist subversive campaign in Thailand is a longstanding one but first became significant in 1961 when Pathet Lao territorial gains in Laos opened the way for the Communists to establish guerrilla bases in the Northeast."

5. Siam became Thailand in 1939 and has remained so except for a brief period in 1946-1948.??

6. In 1824 the King of Vientiane Laos, Prince Anouvong (Xaiya Setthathirath) allied with the Vietnamese, conducted a three-pronged surprise attack into northeast Siam; the King of Champasak leading one thrust through Sisaket onto Korat, Viceroy Tisa through Kalasin, and Anouvong charging towards Korat where all the forces would link up. In 1826 he was defeated, but it was not until January 1828 when betrayed by the Lao Prince Noi, was he captured and taken to Bangkok, exposed and publicly shamed, dying seven days later. The Vietnamese king, upon learning of Noi's betrayal of Anouvong, executed Noi. For a modern reading of this account, see M.L. Manich Jumsai, *A New History of Laos* (Bangkok: Chalermnit 1-2 Erawan Arcade, Second Edition, 1971).

7. Initial broadcasts were from Yunnan, China, with later transmissions probably from Vietnam.

8. George Tanham, *Trial in Thailand* (New York: Crane, Russak, and Company, Inc. 1974), p. 56. "There was one report of a People's Liberation Army platoon in the Northeast and the Thais claimed to have one defector from this platoon but this report is still questionable and not fully accepted as being factual." A current Hmong researcher who spends time with the group in northern Thailand told me that according to the Hmong, the PLA sent a military unit of 250 soldiers into Thailand and at least one defected. The researcher spoke on condition of anonymity due to national and ethnic sensitivity. The unit's exact mission remains unknown, but it was possibly related to countering the activities of its enemy, elements of the *Kuomintang's* 93rd Division, China's Nationalist Army which fled China after the communist takeover in 1949 and moved into Thailand.

9. The Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement signed on September 19 and the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement, signed on October 17.

10. For a definitive account of the BPP, PARU, and their nation-building efforts see Sinae Hyun, "Indigenizing the Cold War: Nation-Building by the Border Patrol Police of Thailand, 1945-1980," Ph.D. Diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2014.

11. According to Daniel Fineman (p. 133), Lair married the sister of Siddhi Savetsila, former Thai Air Chief Marshal, Foreign Minister, Seri (Free), and Privy Council member. Siddhi's mother was from the influential Bunnag family, his paternal grandfather Henry Alabaster the British consul in Siam during the reign of King Rama IV, later advisor to King Rama V. According to the Air America Lair Interview (which I believe to be in error), Lair's brother-in-law

was PARU commander Col. Pranet Ritreutchai. University of Texas Archives, Special Collections, date incorrectly listed as July 3, 1933, p. 2, <https://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/notebooks/sepcop65.pdf>

12. Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency, previously cited; Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies, previously cited; Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War, previously cited; Thailand (ThailandRN1.2), Thailand, Random Narratives, 2005, previously cited.

13. Some film titles were Mohlam (message of Thai government assistance to villagers); *Railroads of Thailand*; *The King's Ordination*; *The Royal Tour of the Northeast*; *Thai Buddhist Customs*; *Chaiya Camp (provincial police training)*; *A Day in the Life of a Nai Amphur*; *The Trooping of the Colors*; *Agricultural Extension*; *Friendship in the Northeast*; *American Field Service Student*; *New Aircraft* (warplanes U.S. gave Thailand); Women of the Northeast (showing midwives, teachers, housewives and others in various activities).

14. The USOM Hospital Improvement Project also assisted the Thai government in constructing 20 X-ray buildings for provincial hospitals, 11 surgical buildings and 22 other buildings such as nurses' dormitories, physicians' houses, laundries, generator plants, and hospital wards across the country. It also provided special training in the United States for 123 Thai doctors and nurses. (See USOM, *U.S. Economic and Technical Assistance to Thailand, 1950-to date*, Bangkok, May 1959, p. PD-54).

15. Through USOM, by 1996 more than 11,000 Thais had trained in the United States and more than 100,000 Thais had received in-country training, according to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

16. Tony Zola multiple interviews with the author, Bangkok, 2018-2019.

17. Comparatively, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam did not begin to reduce poverty rates until the early 1990s, and still maintain rates higher than Thailand.

18. Of note, USOM employed famed anthropologist Dr. Toshio Yatsushiro from 1962 to 1969 as a researcher for villager attitudes towards development and the Thai government. Yatsushiro developed a specialty working with local indigenous peoples from research projects at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cornell University, the Canadian Government, the U.S. Department of Interior, and the University of Hawaii. He and his research teams spent months at a time living among the locals conducting his research.

19. See USOM's study *Impact of USOM Supported Programs in Changwad Sakon Nakorn* (Bangkok, May 1967), Thailand Information Center,

Chulalongkorn University call number 00032, consisting of three studies, (1) conversations with seventy officials in Sakon Nakhon, (2) a survey among 1200 respondents in the three provinces and, (3) a four-month intensive village study in Sakon Nakhon and Maha Sarakham provinces.

20. As ethnographic researcher William Klausner observed in Thai villages, if villagers viewed government officials as trustworthy, “the chance of his program being accepted will be greatly enhanced, though the villagers have no real understanding or appreciation of its significance and relevance.” See Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1983), p. 67.