

Southeast Asia by Sophie Tanapura

Kissinger in Bangkok

The "China card" is on the table again, as the State Department tries to keep control over regional diplomacy.

When Henry Kissinger arrived in Bangkok Nov. 20, following a trip to China and Hong Kong, the capital was buzzing with questions and rumors. What is he doing here? Isn't he a has-been? Whom does he represent, if not the President? Why does he want to "eliminate" Gen. Kriangsak Chomanan, the former prime minister and U.S. ally, who is now sitting in jail for alleged involvement in the Sept. 9 coup attempt?

Some believe that Kissinger's trip was designed to give a boost to the old "China card" policy, the Nixon Doctrine declared by the President in Guam in 1969. Certainly Kissinger was interested in returning to Washington with more foreign policy clout than when he left; he did blurt out at the Oriental Hotel press conference in Bangkok that Secretary of State George Shultz would be among the first in whom he would confide upon his return.

Certain circles in Thailand believe that the Americans—at least some Americans—are talking out of both sides of their mouths. On the one hand, the Kissinger crowd at the State Department is encouraging the Thais to adopt hardline diplomacy vis-à-vis Vietnam on the Kampuchea question, insisting on conditions before any talks could take place. But at the same time, State is persevering at normalizing U.S. ties with the Vietnamese on the question of American soldiers missing in action (MIAs), which is handled out of the U.S. and Vietnamese embassies in Bangkok. The fear among analysts here is that Thailand will be led irreversibly into confrontation with Viet-

nam.

As we reported last week, Kissinger's privately spoken demand that General Kriangsak "is dangerous and should be eliminated" is now circulating widely in the Asian press. One of the main reasons for Kissinger's order was to quash the kind of policy orientation toward the Kampuchea question that Kriangsak represents. As head of the foreign policy commission in the Thai Parliament, Kriangsak has led many initiatives—independent of both Washington and Moscow—aimed at keeping negotiating channels open with the Vietnamese, including a trip to Vietnam.

Former Thai Ambassador to London Konthi Suphamongkhon, one of the former leading members of the Free Thai Movement and Kriangsak's former foreign policy adviser, had suggested that the heads of state of Thailand and Vietnam should meet, with no fixed agenda and no preconditions. The former Thai ambassador to Washington during the Kriangsak government, Anand Panyarachun, at a recent foreign policy seminar in Bangkok, also suggested "economic linkage" in dealing with Vietnam.

The Kriangsak line goes against the grain of the more "hawkish" policy profile that Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila would like Thailand to have. In reply to Ambassador Konthi, who had recently submitted a memorandum on the Indochina question to the foreign ministry, Siddhi uttered a polite "Thank you," and proceeded to place the memorandum at the bottom of a drawer. A comment from a source in the foreign ministry explains it all:

Siddhi meets Kissinger quite frequently, at least whenever the Thai foreign minister is in New York City.

Among the ASEAN countries, member states are lining up according to what each perceives as its national and practical interest. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad made his first trip to China Nov. 20-28, with trade and the Kampuchea question on the agenda. Indonesia, with deep mistrust of China dating back to 1965, when the Chinese Communist movement almost overthrew the government, prefers to keep channels open with Vietnam. Many contacts have been made on the military level, as well as among the intellectuals. Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, a close associate of Kissinger's, launched an overture to China just a few months ago. It is also known that Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi has certain leanings toward China in his foreign policy conduct.

According to *The Nation* newspaper of Nov. 19, Thailand will soon receive 24 Chinese-made tanks as part of the Peking military aid grant. A few months ago, the Peking government had already begun delivering 130mm artillery pieces, apparently sufficient for a battalion of troops. The Chinese tank known as Model 59 is a modified version of the Russian T-54 and T-55. This constitutes the first major military aid to Thailand from the Peking government. Apparently there are no strings attached.

Meanwhile, Commander of the First Army Region Lt. Gen. Pichitr Kullavanijaya predicts a fierce Vietnamese offensive against the Khmer resistance forces during the upcoming dry season. Military equipment was shipped from Vietnam to a southern Kampuchean port early in November, he said, and later moved closer to the border area.