

Report from Bangkok by EIR Staff

Growing strain in Thai-U.S. relations

In the face of economic attacks from the United States, Thailand is looking for new options—and Moscow is ready.

We print here sections of an article published in the Bangkok Nation on Dec. 31, 1986, reviewing how U.S.-Thailand relations deteriorated during the last year, with Moscow picking up the benefits. The downward turn in ties between Thailand and the United States hinged on U.S. protectionist measures against Thai products. The U.S. Farm Act, while damaging U.S. farmers, has led to a collapse of Thai rice exports, and the U.S. Textile Production Bill, the "Jenkins Bill," would decimate Thailand's textile industry.

For Thailand, the tensions between Bangkok and Washington are a shock. Thailand has a long friendship with the United States. In the 19th century, King Rama IV offered elephants to President Lincoln to help fight the American Civil War. In this century, Thais were drawn to the United States during World War II, when the United States aided the Free Thai Movement against the Japanese and fought for Thailand's national sovereignty.

Both the U.S. and Soviet Union dominated the Thai foreign policy scene in 1986. It was a year when Washington lost out to Moscow after a better start at the beginning of the year. . . .

Throughout the year, the focus of Thailand's external relations was on the U.S. regarding protectionist moves and the endeavor of Thailand to understand the American political process—the complex and intricate system of the U.S. government. It was the year Thai leaders reminded the U.S. time and again that the country's

stability and economic well-being was crucial to the development of the democratic process here. . . .

But the Thai explanations fell flat as the U.S. lawmakers were more concerned with their constituencies, as U.S. congressional elections were due in November. . . .

For the first time, the Thai authorities realized that despite the traditional close ties between Thailand and America, when it comes to protecting one's interest, particularly the U.S.'s, no amount of friendship can alter a decision to accommodate the interest of the other. The Thais used to think that America would continue to help and be sympathetic to our needs. Most of all, America was our good friend for years and we took it that the country was bound to help us, no matter what. But that kind of illusion has disappeared. Of course, one could argue that this sort of uneasiness had gradually disappeared during the U.S. disengagement from the region, notably after the American troops left Thailand. But it wasn't until the past two years, more specifically this year, that Thailand truly came to grips with the harsh reality of the Thai-U.S. ties that we better save our own neck, come what may.

Thai-U.S. security ties in 1986 remained strong and showed no signs of wavering. . . . The U.S. decision to drop the foreign military sales credit for Thailand, as a result of the budget balancing Gramm-Rudman law, will certainly affect the Thai government, notably the Defense Ministry. It would

be wise for the leaders of the two countries to prevent any spillover from the outcome of future trade or economic conflict into efficient defense ties. Many Thai politicians have expressed their readiness to use Thailand's strategic importance and have threatened to do so as a trade off with the economic issues. If such an idea receives support in the years to come, it can jeopardize and eventually damage the security cooperation between Bangkok and Washington. . . .

Simply by virtue of the stalemate in Thai-U.S. ties emanating from the ongoing economic conflicts, Thai-U.S.S.R. ties took a new turn for the good in the latter half of 1986, and without any concession from Moscow. . . .

Foreign Minister Siddhi Savestila is scheduled to visit Moscow next May—something he has tried to avoid for the past two years. . . .

Let us face it, the Thai government and people spent 1986 worrying what the U.S. would do next. The whole nation was frustrated. In more ways than one, the trade conflict with the U.S. was used time and again by the opposition and the business community to attack the government; they thought that trading with the communist bloc would help ease the economic woes and help Thai farmers to release their farm surplus. With constant pressure from the two groups and the U.S. protectionist measures against its trade partners mounting, Thailand decided to respond to the Soviet call to improve relations.

Siddhi said recently that in the coming year, Thailand will focus on its relations with the Soviet Union and its East European allies with the aim to expand Thailand's overseas market there. Certainly it can be done, but Thailand has to pay some political price with what might come thereafter.