

Report from Bangkok by Sophie Tanapura

Weinberger encourages friends

During his short stay in Thailand, the U.S. Defense Secretary presented a welcome counterpoint to State Department abuse.

On a tour to strengthen ties with key U.S. allies in Asia, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger stopped over in Bangkok for two days June 18-19, after having visited Sydney, Australia, as he headed for Hong Kong and Tokyo. Both the Philippines and South Korea were conspicuously absent from his tour.

Weinberger's visit encouraged the Thai military, just at the point that Thai troops were engaged in intensive combat with Vietnamese troops on Thai territory at the Chong Bok pass along the Kampuchean border. The Thais were forced into direct confrontation with the Vietnamese after the Khmer Rouge proved incapable of holding its own at the pass.

Weinberger met both with Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond and Army Commander-in-Chief Gen. Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh. Emphasizing Thailand's crucial role as a front-line state, Weinberger expressed concern that the result of Soviet support for Vietnam has forced Thailand to extend so much of its resources and strength in repelling aggression and potential invasion. Weinberger also noted that if the Soviets were in any way serious about world peace, then "in this part of the world, they should be withdrawing support for Vietnam."

Weinberger's castigation of the Soviets is, however, somewhat at variance with the current trend in Thai diplomacy. Last April, Foreign Minister Siddhi Savestila became the first Thai foreign minister to visit Moscow, and returned more determined than ever to walk on the realpolitik

track of nodding to Moscow. The Soviets, he had reported, showed signs during his one-hour discussion with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, of wanting to negotiate a settlement. However, as former Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj remarked, a conflict as important and complicated as Kampuchea cannot be properly addressed in a one-hour diplomatic discussion.

For the moment, of course, the Soviets enjoy easy access to port facilities in Cam Ranh Bay, the first warm-water port ever available to them in the Pacific. Since last year, the U.S.S.R. has also been building port facilities at Kompong Son, Kampuchea, for amphibious landing and is reconstructing the main railway line to the Thai-Kampuchean border, among other improvements in transport and communication infrastructure.

Aware of this Soviet threat to Thailand as well as to U.S. strategic interests in the region, Weinberger came to Thailand to finalize the creation of a war reserve stockpile in Thailand. It is expected that the U.S. Congress will approve legislation for the stockpile by the end of this year's session and that the first weapons shipment could arrive in Thailand by fiscal 1989, giving Thailand the capability to meet emergencies.

Weinberger's concern for Thailand is far different than that projected by the State Department and the Social Democrats in Washington. In 1985, Jeane Kirkpatrick announced in Bangkok that Thailand was no longer

viewed as part of the U.S. security responsibility.

Weinberger's views on the Thai economy also contrasted with those coming from State. In answer to a question on the Kra Canal from this correspondent at his press conference, Weinberger replied that he had not discussed the great infrastructure project with Thai leaders, but "I think we would tend to be very sympathetic to requests for things that we believe would strengthen the country economically or from the point of view of security."

Weinberger also expressed concern that "Congress is preoccupied at the moment with reducing deficits and that seems to be their only priority, and I am worried that national security considerations, both our own, as well as those of our friends, may be neglected in that process. We are trying our best to persuade the Congress to increase the amounts of military assistance to good friends such as Thailand . . . as well as to good friends such as our own Defense Department."

Weinberger's commitment to Thailand's security and economic growth was a welcome breath of fresh air from the United States. The Commerce Department and Congress have been waging a one-sided war against Thai exports to the United States. The 1986 Farm Act has hurt Thai rice exports; the Congress voted up the Jenkins Textiles Act which would have decimated Thailand's budding industry in that department; and now the Copyright Amendment is being used to force Thailand to restrict production of competitive products such as computer software, pharmaceuticals, and video and cassette tapes. The Commerce Department is threatening to remove Thailand's Generalized System of Preference (GSP), thus limiting cost reductions for Thai imports in the United States.