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OFFICE OF
NATIONAL ESTIMATES

MEMORANDUM

Bangkok and Peking: Thailand Enters the Ping-Pong Sweepstakes

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14 September 1972

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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MEMORANDUM*

SUBJECT: Bangkok and Peking: Thailand Enters the
Ping-Pong Sweepstakes

NOTE

Thailand has now joined the ranks of those countries in East Asia seeking to work out some sort of better relationship with China. No basic shift in Thailand's pro-US orientation, however, is likely in the near term -- certainly not while Thailand is deeply embroiled in the Indochina war and there is a massive US military presence in Thailand. The opening to China, nonetheless, is important and suggests some possible changes in Thailand's longer term outlook. This Memorandum discusses the opening of the Sino-Thai dialogue and its possible significance.

* *This Memorandum was prepared by the Office of National Estimates and discussed within CIA.*

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I. THE SETTING

1. Thailand and Indonesia have been two notable exceptions to the recent drift in East Asia toward closer contact with China. Their reluctance to deal with Peking has been sustained by strong anti-Chinese and anti-communist sentiment, and a fear of local Chinese subversion. Though they made an exploratory move toward Peking last year and are likely to do so again, the Indonesian generals sense no particular requirement for speedy action: Indonesia's remote location affords relative immunity from any immediate or direct pressure from Peking.

2. The Thai leaders, however, are faced with a less comfortable situation geographically. They are quite concerned about Chinese intentions toward Thailand. They view Chinese support to the Thai communist insurgents as a major threat to Thailand's security. They also are much alarmed over the Chinese road construction in northwestern Laos; to the Thai, the primary, if not sole, purpose of the road to Pak Beng is to facilitate increased Chinese support to the insurgents in northern Thailand.

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3. With these concerns in mind, some Thai figures had long advocated opening some sort of dialogue with Peking. Former Foreign Minister Thanat led in pushing this line, and even General Praphat, the regime's major policy maker and certainly no soft-liner, was at least willing to consider the possibility. But as is often the case in Thai politics, personal rivalries and suspicions intruded. Thanat wanted to move quickly and publicly, and to use his supporters in the effort, while Praphat favored a restrained private approach utilizing, of course, his minions. Pulling and hauling on this issue was a factor behind the "auto-coup" in Bangkok last November; Thanat was removed from office and effectively silenced.

4. With Thanat out of the picture, the question of Bangkok dealing with Peking largely disappeared from public view. Praphat and other Thai leaders, however, continued to consider just how to approach the Chinese. The evidence about what exactly went on and who advocated what is exceedingly fragmentary -- the Thai make such important policy decisions in private and keep the results to themselves. But behind the scenes Praphat apparently was moving ahead with his own deliberate game plan. For example, the Thai

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toned down their public statements against China -- a gesture reciprocated by Peking in its pronouncements against Bangkok. Secret contacts were made with the Chinese, and once Praphat was satisfied that Peking was willing to engage in discussions, the stage was set for a demarche.

5. Thus, in August, Thailand followed up Peking's initiative and agreed to send a ping-pong team to China. And it is clear that the Thai have more in mind than table tennis. The "adviser" to the team, Prasit Kanchanawat, is a close confidant of Praphat and an economic specialist. Prasit is well chosen for his task.* In addition to being close to Praphat -- they are business associates -- he is also quite acceptable to the Chinese, who agreed to treat him as an "honored guest." He met with ranking Chinese officials and twice with Chou En-lai. Throughout his stay, Prasit was treated cordially and with ceremonial attention: a clear indication of the political nature of his trip as well as of the importance the Chinese placed on the discussions. He has now left China.

* *Prasit, a Thai of Chinese ethnic background, has like many overseas Chinese maintained contacts in China for many years.*

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II. WHAT NOW? . . . AND LATER?

6. Despite the Thai opening to China, we do not expect rapid forward motion on key bilateral issues between the two countries. What Thailand would like most from China -- assurance that Peking will cease supporting the Thai insurgency -- it almost certainly is not going to get. China does not acknowledge that it is giving aid and sustenance to the insurgents and will not agree to any statement that suggests that it is. Nor is Peking likely to offer any concrete assurances to the Thai concerning the use of the Chinese road in Laos.

7. The Thai seem to realize that their basic objectives will not be satisfied by Peking. China might be willing to make a general statement about its "peaceful intentions" in an attempt to assuage Thai fears about Chinese objectives in Southeast Asia. The Chinese might also reassure Bangkok that they have no plans to foment trouble within the large Chinese community in Thailand; they have done so in several other countries in East Asia. This would give the Thai something to show for their efforts and would cost Peking nothing. Beyond this, however, the

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Thai probably view the talks largely as a way to probe Chinese intentions toward Thailand.

8. From Peking's point of view, there are two major obstacles in the path to improved relations with Thailand -- Bangkok's relations with the Nationalist Chinese and the heavy Thai involvement in the war in Indochina. On the latter issue, the Thai might be willing to concede something, probably in private, to Peking in the way of some vague formulation which appeared to promise a reduction of the US role in Thailand at some unspecified date. It is doubtful that Peking would push very hard for more than this. The Chinese leaders take a long range view of their interests and objectives in Southeast Asia, and their prime concern at this time is to enhance their status in the region. As a result, they see value simply in having leading figures from other countries make a pilgrimage to Peking. In this sense, the fact of the Thai visit is probably as important to Peking as its substance.

9. On the Taiwan issue, Bangkok, once convinced of Peking's interest in substantive discussions, appears willing to go at least part way in meeting Peking's position on the

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Taiwan question. Although there have been few public hints that Thailand has changed its stand on the Taiwan issue,

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leaders are ready to acknowledge that Taiwan is part of China and that Peking is the sole legitimate government of China. Though perhaps de rigueur for any country wanting to deal with Peking, such a shift in Bangkok's position would be a marked departure from its previous stance as one of Taipei's staunchest friends. But Thai relations with the ROC stemmed as much from hostility toward Peking as from affinity to Taipei. (Financial considerations were also involved to some extent.) With the US opening to China and the rush of other nations to follow suit, the Thai leaders, who are known for their ability to "bend with the wind," probably have reasoned that it behooved them not to be last past the gate. Any decision to move away from the ROC was probably made easier by the realization that Taipei's status and value as an ally was rapidly diminishing.

10. Even if the Thai decide to let their ties with Taiwan lapse, they still would probably attempt to do so in a gradual and seemly fashion. Initially, this might include a reduction in number and rank of Thai personnel assigned to

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Taipei, concurrent with a similar reduction of Nationalist Chinese officials stationed in Bangkok. Peking is not likely to press for more than this at the moment; it has not demanded more from other countries. But if the Thai start in this direction, it would strongly suggest that in time Bangkok would be prepared to abandon Taipei entirely.

11. In any event, the Sino-Thai dialogue represents an important development in the two countries' relationship. Although diplomatic relations do not appear to be in the cards any time soon, there is a possibility of a trade protocol being arranged between Thailand and China.* Moreover, no matter how limited, the discussions represent the first overt, high level contact between the countries in many years. The talks may serve to stimulate more open discussion in Bangkok about Thailand's longer term policy

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toward China. More important, the talks provide the basis for more meaningful exchanges when and if the situation in Indochina quiets down.

12. Implications for the US. Over the near term, Bangkok's dialogue with Peking is unlikely to have much effect on US-Thai relations. Praphat and the present Thai leadership prefer to stick with the US so long as there remains a communist threat near Thailand's borders. Reliance on US commitments (e.g., the Rusk-Thanat understandings of 1962) has been the linchpin of Thai foreign policy, and they are not presently contemplating any shift from this position. So long as Washington remains willing to stand by Laos and Cambodia and to assist Thailand itself against the threat of insurgency, the present Thai leadership will more or less continue to hew to a pro-US course. The course may be rough at times, but for the moment at least, the Thai consider that they have no other viable alternative.

13. The Thai leaders, however, have begun to weigh the possible long term consequences of their close identification with the US. The prospect of an end to US military

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involvement in Indochina coupled with the nagging fear that the US might withdraw from all of Southeast Asia causes concern in Bangkok. The Thai are apprehensive that in time Thailand could find itself over-exposed and under-supported in facing China in the area. As a result, the Thai are concerned to chart a course whereby they can stay close to the US, while at the same time leaving room for a shift in direction should future events so dictate. In sum, the Thai initiative probably represents an attempt to begin hedging its bets against the time when the Indochina struggle is not paramount and when the US role throughout Southeast Asia may be greatly reduced.

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