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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

THE THAI AUTONOMOUS AREA IN COMMUNIST CHINA

The Thai Nationality Autonomous Area, established by the Peiping regime in February 1953, is located in the southern part of Yunnan Province near the Burma-Indochina border (see map), with the capital at Cheli. The area includes the counties of Cheli, Fohai, Nanchiao and Chenyueh and parts of the counties of Ningchiang, Liushun, Ssumao and Chiangcheng, an estimated 7,720 square miles. The Communist press gives the population as 200,000, composed of numerous ethnic groups with a Thai majority.

This Thai Autonomous Area is one of more than 150 such governments for China's 40 million minority peoples. Following the Soviet model, these regimes permit the local peoples considerable participation in governmental affairs at a low level, while all major policies are formulated in Peiping and all important posts in the government are occupied by Peiping's appointees.

The Chinese Communists are known to be in complete control of other 'autonomous' governments in China, and probably have such control, or are working rapidly toward it, in this newest one. Although two persons familiar with the area believe that these primitive and isolated tribal peoples continue to exercise

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an informal autonomy, it is doubtful that they can resist Peiping's sophisticated and ruthless techniques of control.

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There has been considerable speculation in recent weeks as to the role of the Thai Autonomous Government in the Communist program in Southeast Asia. This speculation emphasizes the racial identity and cultural affinity of the Thai peoples in Yunnan, Laos, Vietnam, the Shan states of Burma, and northern Thailand. The Thai people in the 5th Century had a kingdom with its capital 300 miles north of the new regime in Yunnan.

Some observers have expressed fear of a Chinese Communist invasion of Thailand and/or Indochina from the Thai Autonomous Area. Aside from the unlikelihood of new military ventures while the Korea truce talks are in progress, it is doubtful that the Thai Autonomous Area will play a significant role in Peiping's military plans. The terrain of this region is extremely unfavorable for major military operations.

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The Thai Autonomous Area may be expected to serve as a base for Communist infiltration of surrounding areas, for the training and dispatching of agents, and for the dissemination of radio and leaflet propaganda. The Chinese Communists have been conducting such activity at several points along their western and southern borders.

The Thai prime minister has stated that Peiping's move was directed against Thailand and his government is apparently seriously concerned over the attractions that new regimes may hold for dissident Thai nationals.

The area may serve as a sanctuary for political refugees from Thailand and other neighboring countries. A few such refugees from Thailand, including two persons previously involved in separatist movements in northeastern Thailand and in plans to unite all Thai peoples in Southeast Asia, are reported to be in China now.

Reports of the visits of specific dissident leaders to the Thai Autonomous Area have not been confirmed. The rumor that one of them will be chosen as head of the Thai Autonomous Government is believed to be without foundation, as the Communist world has preferred that leaders of puppet governments be natives of the area rather than foreign nationals.

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Several observers have linked the Thai Autonomous Government to current Viet Minh operations in Laos. The TAG's value to the Viet Minh will probably be political rather than military. Viet Minh propaganda, pointing to the Thai Autonomous Area as an example of Communist benevolence to minority peoples, is expected to appear during the next few months.

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A popular conjecture is that the Communist world intends in the near future to proclaim a new state based on the Thai peoples in Laos, Vietnam, the Shan states of Burma, and north-eastern Thailand or even the entire area of Thailand. The press has ~~incorrectly~~ reported a Communist announcement of such an intention. A Greater Thai State of this type appears to be a long-range possibility. Such a development would logically be preceded, however, by a long period of infiltration and propaganda, along the above lines, to enable the Communist world to judge the feasibility of such a project.

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