

[From the Washington Post, Aug. 19, 1966]
U.S. POWER MACHINERY TURNS THAILAND INTO
A BRISTLING BASTION OF THE EAST

(By Stanley Karnow, Washington Post
foreign service)

BANGKOK.—The burly American engineer squinted in the tropical sunlight as he scanned the construction site at Nam Phong on the plains of central Thailand nearly 400 miles northeast of here.

Like huge mechanical insects, bulldozers, graders, tractors and trucks were moving earth for a new United States airbase whose first runway, more than 11,000 feet long, will be in operation next February.

"That runway is only the beginning of this job," the engineer explained. "There'll be other runways, roads, fuel depots, hangars and the lot. We're expanding so fast that we don't know today what new project they'll throw at us tomorrow."

Indeed, except for secretive contingency planners in the Pentagon, nobody quite knows where the current U.S. military expansion in Thailand is headed.

How far it goes, some American officials here suggest, will depend on the course of events in Vietnam and elsewhere in Asia. Others submit that this multi-billion-dollar U.S. base-building scheme could significantly shape those events, perhaps into a wider conflict.

Whatever the future holds, the United States with crash-program rapidity and a minimum of fanfare, has already turned this Southeast Asian kingdom into a bristling bastion, altering the dimensions of military power in the Far East.

From the Thai bases of Takhlil, Udorn,

Ubon, and Korat, U.S. Air Force RF-101s, F-105s and F-4Cs fly more than 1,500 bombing and reconnaissance missions each week against North Vietnam and the Communist-controlled Laos corridor.

At present, there are more than 200 of these aircraft in Thailand, grouped into 12 squadrons. Four other squadrons are expected to arrive before the end of the year. Accordingly, the number of U.S. servicemen in the country, 65 percent of them Air Force personnel, will increase to more than 32,000—almost three times as many as were stationed here last January.

In addition, the United States is accelerating a variety of other operations inside Thailand, or using the country for covert activities nearby.

From an airstrip at Nakorn Phanom, on the Mekong River bordering Laos, U.S. helicopters swing out on risky flights to rescue American pilots shot down over North Vietnam. In Lopburi Province, 100 miles, north of Bangkok, and near the Mekong River town of Mukdahan, green-bereted U.S. Special Forces instructors are setting up camps to train Thai guerrillas, possibly for harassment of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.

At the same time, U.S. military men are increasingly becoming involved in civic action efforts to counter a smoldering Communist insurgency in northeastern Thailand. Teams of American Army medics have been roaming rural regions, treating peasants for everything from pregnancy to dysentery. Equipped with 15 helicopters, U.S. "Air Commandos" based at Nakorn Phanom are launching a program to distribute medicine to remote areas.

Against the possibility that American ground troops might be needed in Thailand, the U.S. Army's Ninth Logistical Command has stockpiled its warehouses at Korat with enough vehicles, weapons and ammunition to equip a 17,000-man infantry division.

Meanwhile U.S. military engineers and civilian technicians of the Philco Corp. are stringing Thailand together in a network of radio communications and radar screens. Academic experts on U.S. Government contracts are covering the country assessing social conditions, and Central Intelligence Agency operatives are training hill tribesmen long neglected by the Bangkok authorities.

But the biggest and most dramatic part of the U.S. military buildup in Thailand are two giant bases yet to go into full operations. They are Nam Phong, scheduled for final completion in three years, and the enormous air-sea complex at Sattahip on the Gulf of Siam, whose first runway was inaugurated last week.

BASES TO BE LINKED

About 500 miles apart, these bases will be linked to each other and to other U.S. airfields by highways and pipelines now under construction. Both will have KC-135 tanker aircraft, which refuel the jets that strike at North Vietnam and Laos. Both will be capable of handling B-52 bombers, which now fly 5,000-mile round trips from Guam to fulfill their missions over South Vietnam.

With its 11,500 foot runway already open, the Sattahip base—whose airfield is officially called U-Tapao—will soon receive 30 KC-135 tankers as well as units of troop carrier and cargo aircraft.

When its second, 10,500-foot runway is finished, U-Tapao will also have the capacity for three squadrons of fighter-bombers.

Being built by the American firms of Dillingham, Zachry and Kaiser at a cost of more than \$500 million, the whole U-Tapao setup will be the largest complex of its kind in Southeast Asia. It may well become, after Bangkok, the second largest city in Thailand. According to current estimates, its maintenance should require at least 15,000 Americans.

When completed, the Sattahip naval station, six miles from the airfield, will have, rock breakwaters, deep-water piers and 70 bunkers for storing ammunition. It will also be connected to a neighboring oil refiners.

Inaugurating the runway last week, U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin said that "this field could be made fully operational within a matter of weeks, or even within a matter of days, depending upon the urgency of need."

At the same ceremony, Thai Premier Thanom Kittikachorn stated that the Thais had cooperated with the United States in constructing the base "because we realize that our intentions are the same."

In a curious way, however, the sensitive Thai, the only Southeast Asians to avoid colonial domination, are extremely reluctant to give public recognition to the enlarging U.S. presence in their country.

Though built by Americans to U.S. specifications—and with American funds—the airbases are technically Thai. They fly Thai flags and are guarded by Thai soldiers. The U.S. Air Force must advise the Thai government of each mission flown from the fields.

Nor is formal mention ever made of the fact that more than half the U.S. bombing attacks against North Vietnam originate at Thai bases. As one Thai official put it: "Hanoi doesn't admit to sending troops into South Vietnam, so why should we concede to the role we play in the Vietnam war?"

NO SPECIFIC AGREEMENT

Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman likes to point out that, juridically, there are no foreign bases in Thailand because no specific agreement for their establishment was ever signed with the United States. "We are partners in collective defense," he has explained.

The basis of this collective defense is the Southeast Asia treaty of 1954, signed by eight nations, including the United States and Thailand. The treaty was reinforced in May, 1962, by a U.S. pledge to defend Thailand against Communism.

Despite these documents it was no easy matter for the United States to persuade the Thai to agree to the bases. Ambassador Martin's success in winning accord for the fields, in the words of one American official here, was "nothing short of a diplomatic miracle."

Even so, the Thai like to display their independence from time to time. Early this year, for example, they stalled on a U.S. request for permission to put more aircraft into the country.

Pointing to the Thais' refusal to publicize the bases, some Americans familiar with the country stress that Thailand has retained its sovereignty through history because of its ability to accommodate itself to shifting

power balances. During World War II, for example, the Thais sided with Japan, then leaned to the West when an Allied victory approached.

SOME DOUBTS CAST

Past performances of that sort, therefore, have cast doubts on Thailand's reliability as the keystone of an American defense system in Southeast Asia.

But it has been argued, in contrast, that the Thais have even more reason to question the reliability of the United States. In particular, the Thais are chronically concerned that a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam war would give the Communists an edge.

For that reason, perhaps, they are anxious to keep their options by maintaining the legal fiction that they are not harboring American bases. Understanding this outlook, a local editor here said: "The Americans can always go home, but we have to live very close to Communist China."

At the moment, however, there is no sign that the Americans are going home. On the contrary, the bases are building up, and the bars and night clubs are proliferating. Bangkok already has nearly 130 brothels disguised as "massage parlors," and Udorn features such spots as the "Friendship Club," where the girls do a topless twist.

In areas near the bases, old traditions are crumbling and business is booming—or as a Korat hotel owner put it: "The Americans are good for our economy but bad for our culture."