

THAILAND *and the*  
STRUGGLE *for*  
SOUTHEAST ASIA

*By* Donald E. Nuechterlein

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clear that the Pathet Lao was a political force to be reckoned with in the future of Laos. It was a nasty and very dangerous situation that President Kennedy inherited when he took office.

During the last days of the Eisenhower administration the United States decided to make a show of force in Southeast Asia in an effort to dissuade the Soviet Union from continuing its airlift of military supplies into Laos. United States forces in the Pacific were alerted, and an urgent meeting of the SEATO Council was called in Bangkok to take up the question of Soviet intervention in the Laotian war. The State Department issued a lengthy statement on Laos, which served as the basis for any subsequent action the United States might take there. Stating that "it is obvious to all that Laos is not a military threat to any of its neighbors, least of all to the strong military regimes in north Viet-Nam and Communist China," this paper declared that the United States was not engaged in building any military base in Laos and that it had never sought to persuade Laos to enter into a military alliance. Asserting that the real problem in Laos was the determination of the Communists to take over control of the country, the State Department listed three ways in which the United States might contribute toward a solution: first, by exposing "the true nature of communist intentions and actions in Laos"; second, by "continuing clearly to show that it has no intention and no desire to establish a Western military position in Laos"; and third, by "joining with other free nations to support and maintain the independence of Laos through whatever measures seem most promising."<sup>2</sup> The SEATO Council met on January 4, 1961, and issued a communiqué that indicated its concern over the deteriorating situation caused by the Soviet airlift and declared that "the continu-

<sup>2</sup>*Department of State Bulletin*, January 23, 1961, pp. 115-17.

ance of such intervention could only serve to promote diversion and civil war in Laos and lead to a situation which would imperil not only the integrity of the Kingdom of Laos but also the security of neighboring countries." The council called for a solution to the Laotian problem by peaceful means but warned that "all SEATO member countries remained determined to continue to develop and maintain their readiness to fulfill anywhere in the treaty area their obligations under the Manila Pact."<sup>3</sup>

In early January 1961, therefore, the United States had taken the preliminary steps to prepare for more decisive action in Laos if the situation continued to deteriorate. The government of Thailand strongly concurred in these moves, for it was convinced that the Boon Oum government offered the best insurance of keeping the Communist menace away from its own border.

Despite strong American support of the Boon Oum government, it was clear in January 1961 that there was a deep division within SEATO on this matter, and that the Soviet Union found considerable sympathy among the uncommitted nations for its support of a government headed by Prince Souvanna Pouma. When the government of Laos approached the Secretary General of SEATO about the possibility of sending a SEATO observation team to determine the extent of Communist intervention in Laos, only the United States and Thailand supported the proposal. Although several other members later gave their approval, the two European powers—Britain and France—opposed it, so nothing further came of this first modest effort to establish SEATO presence in Laos.<sup>4</sup> The stumbling block to American efforts to find a

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>L. P. Singh, "Thai Foreign Policy: The Current Phase," *Asian Survey*, November 1963, pp. 536-7.

Within a few days the latter, with strong Viet-Minh support, launched a heavy offensive against the Laotian government forces. The United States, in the face of the continued Soviet airlift of arms to the Pathet Lao troops and in anticipation of renewed fighting, had also greatly increased its supply of arms and equipment to General Poumi's forces. Despite their large numerical superiority and excellent equipment, however, Poumi's troops were no match for the Communist forces. When the Pathet Lao and the Neutralists launched their offensive, Poumi's forces retreated all along the line without offering real resistance. The consensus was, even among Thai leaders, that Poumi Nosavan's troops were not willing to fight the Communists, and that the Boon Oum government could not be counted on to resist Pathet Lao pressure without foreign intervention. This was the hard fact of the situation in Laos at the end of March 1961.

As the military situation began to deteriorate, President Kennedy was forced to consider armed intervention to stabilize it. It was clear that the Soviet Union, which at that time appeared to be the decisive influence on the Communist side, was willing to enter into negotiations for a settlement in Laos only on the basis of Souvanna Pouma's return to the premiership and of a coalition government that would include the Pathet Lao. Since the United States was not prepared to accept such a solution, a military confrontation seemed inevitable. On March 23, President Kennedy addressed a televised news conference and spelled out the dangers in the Laotian situation. He strongly reaffirmed that the United States wanted a "neutral and independent Laos, tied to no outside power or group of powers, threatening no one, and free from any domination." In order to dispel any possible doubt about the policy of his administration, the President said that "if in the past there has been any possible ground for misunder-

standing of our support for a truly neutral Laos, there should be none now." But, Mr. Kennedy asserted, a peaceful solution could not come about until the armed attacks, supported externally by the North Vietnamese Communists, had ceased. "If these attacks do not stop, those who support a genuinely neutral Laos will have to consider their response." This matter would be carefully considered, he said, at the SEATO ministerial council meeting in Bangkok the following week. The President favored negotiations among various powers to find a peaceful solution to the Laotian problem, but he insisted that negotiations could not take place while military action was in progress. "No one should doubt our own resolution on this point," he declared. "We are faced with a clear threat of a change in the internationally agreed position of Laos," he said, and the threat of military operations directed from outside Laos had to stop if peace was to be maintained in Southeast Asia. The President concluded by expressing confidence that "every American will want his country to honor its obligations to the point that freedom and security of the free world and ourselves may be achieved."<sup>7</sup>

This statement was understood in Bangkok, and in most other world capitals, as a sharp warning to the Soviet Union to stop the Pathet Lao advance and start negotiations to settle the conflict, or to risk American and SEATO military action to preserve the position of the Boon Oum government. To back up his words, the President ordered all United States forces in the Pacific on the alert and began a build-up of American military strength in the area of Southeast Asia. Also, two days after this statement some 250 United States Marines were dispatched by air to Udorn in northeast Thailand near the Laotian border to set up a helicopter maintenance facility for ferrying supplies to rightist forces in Laos.

<sup>7</sup>*Department of State Bulletin*, April 17, 1961, pp. 543-4.

are most concerned with developments in Laos. There is no cease-fire. The Laotian government may go at any time." He said he was not so much concerned about the Communists capturing Vientiane, which he thought Poumi Nosavan could hold, as he was about Takhek, whose capture would pose a real threat to Thailand. "If it is captured by the Communists, we are in trouble," he declared. Asked his opinion about a coalition government in Laos, Sarit said he believed it would lead to "the eventual takeover by the Communists." Sarit also revealed that he had sent a personal letter to President Kennedy expressing Thailand's view of how the Laotian problem should be settled.<sup>17</sup>

By April 20, Communist forces had approached to within ten miles of Takhek, and Sarit declared that Thailand's armed forces were prepared to go into action immediately if the city was attacked. Sarit declined to elaborate on when and where Thai forces would be used, but he left the impression that a Communist attack on Takhek would be considered a direct threat to Thailand's security, and that he might then take military action regardless of what other SEATO countries were prepared to do.<sup>18</sup> The week of April 17, therefore, saw the acid test of the SEATO alliance, insofar as the long Laotian crisis was concerned. By this time it was clear to nearly all observers that the Pathet Lao were capable of toppling the Boon Oum government and imposing a settlement by military force unless strong counter action was taken by SEATO, particularly by the United States. British efforts to bring about an early ceasefire had produced no agreement with the Soviet Union, which seemed content to delay a ceasefire as long as the Pathet Lao were gaining more territory. The Thai government was convinced that SEATO would

<sup>17</sup>*Bangkok Post*, April 11, 1961, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup>*Bangkok World*, April 21, 1961, p. 1.

not agree on joint action to defend Laos, because of the unanimity rule and because of French and possibly British opposition to any intervention. Thailand therefore looked to the United States as the only nation that had the military power to preserve the independence of Laos against Communist domination.

It is significant that when President Kennedy was forced to make the critical decision whether to support the Thai view and send American troops into Laos, he was preoccupied with an entirely different crisis much closer to home—in Cuba; for the week of April 17 was also the week when the Bay of Pigs invasion by Cuban exiles failed so miserably and brought down on the new administration in Washington much world criticism for supporting it. When President Kennedy turned to the difficult problem of Laos, he was not inclined to risk another political and military failure in an area much farther from home. Instead, the United States decided to support British efforts to work out the best arrangement possible with the Soviets to end the fighting.

When the Thai leaders became aware of America's decision not to intervene, they were astonished and even angry because they could not believe that the United States would adopt such a course in Southeast Asia after the previous strong stand of the Eisenhower government and also after the recent warning of President Kennedy to the Soviet Union to help stop the fighting. This decision, the Thais thought, effectively immobilized the SEATO alliance and opened up all of Southeast Asia to Communist subversion and military pressure. If the United States was not prepared to accept its responsibilities by defending Laos against a Communist takeover, Thai leaders concluded, what reason was there to believe that it would be any more prepared to defend Thailand when it was faced with a similar threat? This was a moment of truth