

Pentagon's Pacific design 'pending'

By Tracy Dahlby

ope and Japan (as well as underdeveloped countries in the region) are dependent on seaborne imports and exports, much of which must pass through the waterways dominated by the US Navy. Despite the Pentagon-imagined spectre of the Soviet Navy, the latter-day version of gunboat diplomacy implicit in the Indian Ocean strategy seems not so subtly aimed at a growing African and Asian nationalism.

Defence Secretary Schlesinger has written: "Making access to American and other Western markets contingent on avoidance of overtly hostile acts, by providing a sanction, would alter the way in which underdeveloped nations perceived the environment."

This notion of a "carrot and stick" policy for those nations dependent on the US for trade may loom larger in the future. The US accounts for some 50% of the world's food exports alone, not to mention other items. Given the OPEC-inspired trend towards raw materials cartels in the Third World, the dependency of underdeveloped nations on imports and exports may well be a factor in future world politics.

To be sure, there are many weak spots in the Pentagon's strategy. First, in the Pacific, it is dependent on Japan to increase trade and "interdependency" among Southeast Asian nations. Greater Japanese autonomy in the realm of economic and military affairs could well upset the strategic balance. Additionally, Pentagon strategy entails US support for military dictatorships at both ends of the Indian Ocean, stretching from the Pacific (Park in South Korea, Marcos in the Philippines, Suharto in Indonesia), to unstable and potentially explosive situations in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa.

Senator Mansfield, who introduced the defeated resolution to halt funds for Diego Garcia, has asked: "Just what are our so-called strategic interests in the Indian Ocean?" Mansfield suggested that the Ford Administration's position on Diego Garcia was "an extension of a policy of the US trying to be the world's policeman in the face of our bitter experience in Vietnam." To many Senate critics, the Diego Garcia issue was a symbolic test of what will be the extent of US global commitments in the post-Vietnam era. Some observers suggest that the Pentagon's victory indicates that Congress does not want to be accused of retreating into isolationism after the Vietnam debacle.

Whatever the rationale, Diego Garcia represents a new commitment being forged in the midst of a reassessment of US foreign policy. This may well entwine the US into commitments that are more easily made than withdrawn, before Congress or the American public, have recuperated from the Vietnam trauma.

Agana (Guam): If US military strategists had their way, plans to turn Guam and Micronesia into a major fallback position in the Pacific would now be going ahead full steam. But opposition from the US Congress and local residents, plus the timing of recent events in Asia, have delayed action. The planners are having to trim their sails.

At the crossroads of east-west traffic, Guam and Micronesia now fall in the path of a developing north-south axis between industrial giants Japan and Taiwan in northeast Asia and resource-rich countries like Indonesia and Papua New Guinea to the south. In the centre, Guam is only 1,500 miles from Tokyo and Manila and 2,000 miles from the coasts of China and the Korean Peninsula.

The Nixon Doctrine commits the US to honouring its treaty pledges to Asian allies by providing a nuclear umbrella and economic aid while they prepare their own defences. By moving here, the US could avoid the political headaches of operating forward bases in Asia since Guam and Micronesia are likely to remain for the most part friendly and in the US fold indefinitely. Based here, naval and air forces could maintain regional security and the new "home port" would ultimately save money for the US, which spent US\$85,800 million last year on defence.

Guam is already home for about 18,000 military personnel and the headquarters for the largest communications and electronic surveillance centre in Asia, including a squadron of reconnaissance aircraft. Guam harbours Polaris submarine Squadron 15, a huge ammunition storage depot and ship repair facilities and Anderson Air Force Base is

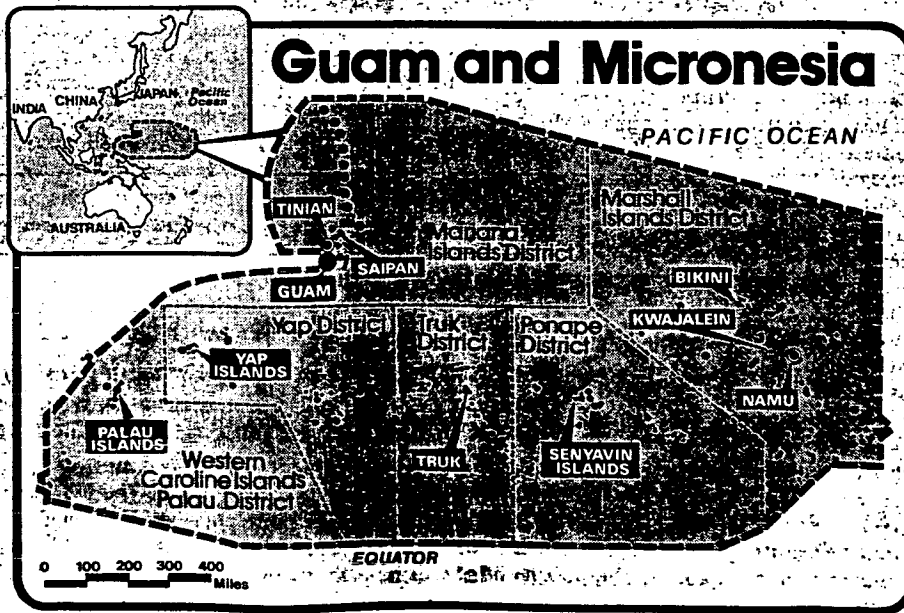
the centre of the Strategic Air Command's operations for Pacific Asia.

Consolidation would mean a naval build-up on Guam as the main Asian bases at Yokosuka (Japan) and Subic Bay (Philippines) are phased out. Air Force hardware now on Okinawa and at least some of the Marine 3rd Division would end up here. Tinian, in the Marianas, would absorb the overload with a proposed \$300 million joint air force and navy base.

Plans for the rest of the Marianas call only for improvements at Tanapag Harbour and upgrading of runways at Isley Field on Saipan. The only US military presence currently in Micronesia is a largely civilian-manned ABM (anti-ballistic missile) testing range on Kwajalein Island in the Marshalls. But the military has singled out Malakal Harbour at Babelthup Island in the Palau district as a port and marine training area. Palau is only 500 miles from Manila and two-and-a-half days steaming time closer to the Indian Ocean than Guam.

But soured by Vietnam spending, the US Congress has refused funding of the Tinian base and plans were shelved last December. In a swing through Guam in late August, Charles Wilson, chairman of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Installations, said that he does not support a unilateral withdrawal from foreign bases to this area. After the Tinian rebuff, "the military decided to reassess the entire strategic situation here," says Commander Bob Westlake of the Office of Naval Commander for Guam and Marianas, "and as of May 1 [after Vietnam] this reassessment was thrown into a tizzy."

He claims only \$1 million is on the books for minor repairs of the navy's



deep-water facility of Apra Harbour on Guam. But the military is likely to go ahead with the development of an "instant" emerging base on Tinian with funds from the navy construction budget until a larger chunk of cash is available.

Military planners have their hearts set on controlling Tinian's entire 39 sq. miles, actively using two-thirds and relocating the only village on what remains. Most of the 800 residents welcome the prosperity the military projects would bring, but are prepared to give up only one-third of their home island. Edward Pangelinan, chairman of the Marianas Status Commission that is negotiating the commonwealth deal, says the US military "is like a spoiled child" asking for more land than it needs. Spurred by the scarcity of land in Micronesia, the residents of the Palau district are also opposing military requests for 35,000 acres on Babelthup Island.

For now, Westlake says, the US will maintain its time-honoured policy of "denial capability" in Micronesia: "We want to make certain that what happened in World War II [when the Japanese used Micronesia to control the western Pacific] doesn't happen again."

Although plans for military expansion on Guam and in Micronesia have hit a temporary road-block, the US military is here to stay. Westlake foresees no reduction of forces on Guam, a long-established stronghold. And a disgruntled Micronesian official of the Congress of Micronesia says: "We don't know when or how much, but we do know for sure that they [US military] are coming our way."

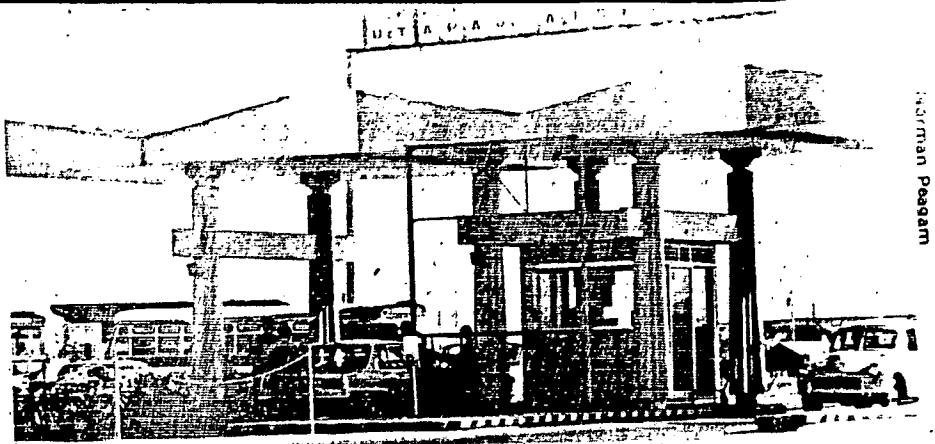
THAILAND

The US presence: A subtle blend

By A Correspondent

Bangkok: Thai Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj is continuing to push — through domestic political necessity rather than demands from neighbouring communist countries — for a visible American military withdrawal from his country. Yet there are indications Thailand will continue to play host to many Americans long after the Stars and Stripes has been lowered in various parts of the country.

Originally, Kukrit wanted the US bases closed by March next year and all American military personnel out of Thailand. Now, working to an unofficial schedule, Nakhon Phanom in the north-east is all but closed; Udorn in northern Thailand should cease operations in December; Korat, in central Thailand, in January; and Utapao, in the south, in



Utapao: Base might "go civilian."

centre for air strikes on the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the Vietnam War, has outlived its role and is thus the first base to go under the Kukrit plan. (The Ubon base in eastern Thailand was already closing when the Prime Minister made his announcement.)

However, at Udorn the word is that the base will not close in December; instead, it will see another 18 months of US military life. There is also talk that it will become a Thai training base with US Air Force advisers.

Ramasun Research Field Station, a US Army listening post 12 miles outside Udorn, will remain open (Intelligence, Oct. 31). If there is Thai pressure on the US to close it, the officers at Ramasun will take off their uniforms and the base will become a "civilian" operation. Apparently, US and Thai officials believe Ramasun, which monitors North Vietnamese and Chinese communications, remains useful. However, Ramasun does not have the same status as other American installations in Thailand, which are formally Thai bases, as it was leased from the Thai Government in 1968 for 99 years.

The Korat base, according to recent reports, will become a repair facility for both military and civilian aircraft. Bangkok has already asked the US to leave the base intact and provide the Thai armed forces with equipment and advisers. There is also talk of a US-sponsored arms industry there.

Utapao might also "go civilian." It is believed the US wants to retain Utapao more than any other base in Thailand. It is a link between American bases in the Philippines, Guam and installations in East Asia and on the newly-acquired Diego Garcia island in the Indian Ocean.

Then there is the army base at Samae San, adjacent to Utapao and close to a deep-water harbour which the US Navy evidently finds interesting — again with Diego Garcia in mind. The Thai Government wants to develop Samae San since Bangkok harbour is too small and cannot be expanded easily because of silting and other problems. So there could be an arrangement between Washington and Bangkok whereby US Navy ships will be able to use Samae San in return for US expertise and funds being

used to convert it into a modern commercial port.

Of course, labour problems and wider-ranging economic factors remain high on Bangkok's list of considerations as the US-Thai military links are reviewed. According to a recent report by the National Economic and Development Board, there are nearly 50,000 Thais directly employed by the US military. Many more are totally dependent on the Americans for a living. In some cases, towns near the bases rely almost exclusively on the Americans for their economic health.

And while the US had some 40,000 military personnel in Thailand at the height of the Indochina War against the approximately 20,000 today, the US forces remain the second largest employer in Thailand (after the Government).

These are figures to bring worried frowns to the faces of Thai politicians charged with downgrading the US involvement while promising the average Thai a better deal. For other sectors of the economy are distinctly ragged. The tourist industry, for instance, upon which Thailand depends for much of its foreign exchange, has shown an alarming decline since the communist take-overs in neighbouring Indochina.

Thus, a number of top Thai officials are suggesting that Thailand offers a positive response to US Defence Secretary James Schlesinger's comment that his country should keep a "residual force" in Thailand. Some propose 10,000 as a reasonable figure. However, the problem is making it appear that Washington is undertaking a total withdrawal while, in reality, a number of US personnel will remain.

Recently, the Thai Government said all US "combat forces" would leave Thailand by March next year. That is quite different than all US military personnel. This may satisfy Thais who are far from happy to see so many foreigners in their country while, at the same time, preventing unemployment from reaching serious proportions. The American public, apprehensive about another Southeast Asian war, has also to be mollified. So some "papering over" is necessary. It seems that is what is now being done.