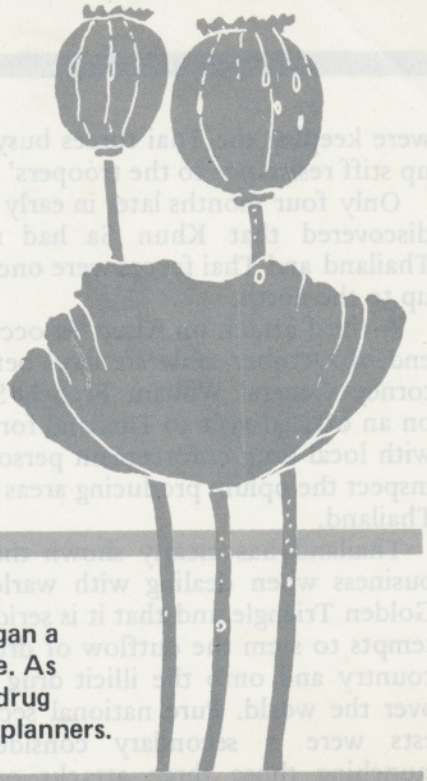


NEW YEAR NEW FEARS

In the early months of 1982, Thai BPP units were chasing rebel troops loyal to the opium warlord, 'Khun Sa'. Those battles began a year of policy changes and alliance shifts in the Golden Triangle. As Bertil Lintner reports, these will undoubtedly affect the area's drug traffic and hence are of vital importance to Thailand's security planners.



The Thai army and the Border Patrol Police mounted operations at Ban Hin Taek last year: But what about now?

Nineteen eighty-two saw drastic changes in the strength of the various groups along Thailand's northewestern frontier and subsequent shifts in the alliances between them — changes which could affect the balance of power in the region.

The year started with an all-out Thai attack last January on Ban Hin Taek, a small border village in Chiang Rai province which for the last few years has served as sanctuary and headquarters for one of the most notorious so-called opium 'kings' of the Golden Triangle, Chan Shee-fu alias 'Khun Sa'. The fierce rebel leader was — and still is — the commander of the outlawed Shan United Army (SUA), allegedly the best-equipped and most heavily armed narcotics organization in the world.

The Thai attack began just before dawn on 21 January when approximately 1,000 Border Patrol Policemen (BPP), backed by rangers and regular army units, surrounded Ban Hin Taek and tried to take Khun Sa by surprise. But despite heavy fighting as well as airstrikes by OV-10 counter insurgency planes and strafing from Huey helicopter gunships, the evasive warlord managed to quietly slip back into Burma while several hundred of his soldiers

were keeping the Thai forces busy by putting up stiff resistance to the troopers' onslaught.

Only four months later in early May, it was discovered that Khun Sa had reinfiltrated Thailand and Thai forces were once again sent up to the north.

A third attack on Khun Sa occurred at the end of October, only six days before US Attorney General William French Smith came on an official visit to Thailand for discussions with local drug enforcement personnel and to inspect the opium producing areas in northern Thailand.

Thailand has clearly shown that it means business when dealing with warlords in the Golden Triangle and that it is serious in its attempts to stem the outflow of drugs into the country and onto the illicit drug markets all over the world. Pure national security interests were a secondary consideration for launching those three attacks on Khun Sa within a year; there had been allegations of Khun Sa's having links with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which controls vast opium growing areas east of the Salween River in Burma's Shan State. The arrival of communist opium merchants at Khun Sa's camps along the Thai border had disturbed the Thai authorities and created the suspicion that Khun Sa also would act as a middleman to help forge ties between the CPB and its Maoist brethren here, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT).

Immediately after the fighting in January, US ambassador John Gunther Dean hailed the Thai attack as an "important blow to heroin production in Southeast Asia." An English language Hong Kong magazine said in an editorial in February that "governments and anti-drug organizations around the world will be grateful to the fighting men of Thailand for last week's attack on opium warlord Chang Shi-fu's private army. At least sixteen brave troopers died in the battle for Ban Hin Taek; they died not only for the kingdom but for men, women and children in foreign lands

THE ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

The Shan State of Burma produces an estimated 200-400 tons of raw opium annually or 70% of the total amount of opium harvested in the Golden Triangle. About half of this is smoked locally by opium addicts in the hills or used as medicine in tribal villages. The other half is converted into 10-20 tons of heroin, 70% of which will be consumed in Southeast Asia. An estimated 23-25% will end up in Europe, Australia and New Zealand and 5-7% in the US or Canada.

Distribution of poppy fields inside Shan State:

Kokang and Hsenwi states	40%
Wa states near the Chinese border	15%
Kengtung state	10%
Mong Yai state	15%
Mong Pan, Mong Hsu, Mong Nong, Mong Nai and Hsi Hseng in south and central Shan State	20%

Almost 50% of the poppy fields are located in areas controlled by the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and the rest in regions dominated by Shan insurgents from the SSA, the SURA and the SUA. No poppy fields are under the Burmese government's control.

Western narcotics officials in Bangkok predicted recently that, despite a slump in prices, the Golden Triangle this year is expected to produce the largest crop of opium in four years, and as always, the bulk is expected to come from Eastern Burma. It was predicted that Thailand would yield about 57 tons of raw opium, which is seven tons more than last year. But despite its good quality, Southeast Asian heroin is expected to face stiff competition in US and European markets this year from the ripening crops in the Golden Crescent of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Offi-

– for lives that will be spared the pain and horror of heroin abuse."

But after nearly one year of fighting and the loss of altogether more than 40 Thai servicemen, what has actually been achieved? The truth is that the drug scene in the Golden Triangle remains depressingly normal. "What is clear is that most international narcotics organizations, including the Americans' Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), have severly misjudged the situation up here," said one local observer in Chiang Mai. He quoted a speech made in May 1979 by prominent Chiang Mai personality Kraisri Nimmanahaeminda to conference representatives of the Asia Foundation who included the Governor of Chiang Mai. "Regarding the opium problem, what strikes me as the most unbelievable is that we outsiders do not know what is really going on. It seems that all we can do is arbitrarily accept or reject whatever is being put forward by the opposing sides, which is rather a sad and inadequate way of looking at



Half the annual opium production used locally.

cials believe the situation could lead to a price war between the two Triangles. Observers maintain that the prospect of a new 'opium war' was the reason US Attoney General William French made an extensive tour of both areas late last year to examine the drug trafficking problems first hand.



Outside powers have so far showed little, if any understanding of the Thai position. Joint border patrols with Burma appear unlikely and impractical.

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Khun Sa may be very much in evidence with his more than 1,000-man strong army and he is easy to pinpoint as 'the spider in the web' to anyone who is inclined towards fast and easy explanations of a problem as complex as the Golden Triangle opium trade. It is, however, argued in the north that Khun Sa's role in the drug trade has been confined to taxing convoys and providing protection to a number of heroin refineries strung along the Thai-Burmese border.

"Do the drug cops think that Khun Sa controls the heroin trade?" Asked one Shan source in northern Thailand. "The heroin trade is an international trade involving millions and millions of dollars just to operate, and it is not Khun Sa who finances the purchase of opium, who hires chemists, who bankrolls factories and peddlers, who pays couriers, and who has contacts in Bangkok, Hong Kong, Amsterdam, Paris, New York etc. Khun Sa just taxes the caravans and the agents of the drug syndicates, who operate refineries in areas controlled and protected by the SUA."

Khun Sa's role as a middleman along the border – and not as the organizer of the international drug trade – is emphasized not by the fact that the heroin trade still continues unabated, but that the local opium merchants and the international drug rings have chosen other routes and areas, where protection and safety can be more easily provided by other armed bands along the border. It seems that certain factions within the Chinese Irregular

Forces (CIF) – previously known as the Kuomintang (KMT) – have regained from Khun Sa what they lost to him during the 70s, sources in Chiang Mai claim.

Furthermore, because of the Thai government's tough policy, several opium traders from the Shan State are reported to have altered their routes down through Burma instead of across the border into Thailand. Large quantities of opium are being transported more or less openly by truck down to Rangoon and Moulmein, where some of it is refined into morphine and heroin and then shipped out from the Tenasserim coast to southern Thailand, Penang and Singapore, the same sources claim. They say that bribes are lighter in Burma, the possibility of being caught practically nil and no outsiders are able to check what actually is going on in Burma's sealed off border areas – as opposed to Thailand, which has an open-door policy towards all outside interested parties.

Already in April 1980, Thai police sources maintained that the drug syndicates had moved most of their heroin refineries from the Burmese border area in the north down to the Thai-Malaysian border, where opium and morphine from the Golden Triangle were refined into pure, No. 4 heroin and smuggled out to various destinations in the world. UN personnel, affiliated to Burma's anti-narcotics authorities, have not been able to confirm these reports, but they complained bitterly about their lack of freedom of movement: "We are not allowed to go anywhere, except for on occasional and strictly controlled tours, organized by the Burmese government", admitted one Rangoon-based UN source. "Our duties are confined to signing pay checks and putting together facts, provided by the Ministry of Information and there's no way we can cross check these reports."

But even if last year's fighting has not reduced the outflow of drugs from the Golden Triangle, it has certainly had far-reaching affects on Thailand's other consideration – the question of national security and political stability in Southeast Asia. Arguments have been put forward by some foreign governments in an attempt to persuade the Thais into closer cooperation with the Burmese; they are of the opinion that joint military drives by Thailand and Burma would eliminate the rebels ensconced along the common border, and hence put an end to the heroin traffic as well.



Chan Shee-fu alias 'Khun Sa': In a new deal with the Burma Communist Party

The Thai government is faced with a dilemma of classic proportions and outside powers have so far showed little, if any, understanding for Thailand's delicate situation. Experienced observers in the north argue that any joint military manoeuvres with the Burmese are unlikely and impractical – and could prove disruptive to Thailand's internal security situation. This is not only due to the centuries-old mutual distrust between the Thais and the Burmese, which goes back beyond the Burmese sacking of the old Thai capital of Ayutthaya but also the traditional role played by the highland minority peoples living in the border areas. The Karen, the Karenni, the Pa-O and the Shan have, since ancient days, been living in what is now eastern Burma. Throughout this time they have been at peace with Thailand and served as a sturdy buffer between the two countries. The situation of the

Shans (Thai Yai) is especially crucial – they regard themselves as being of the Thai race and the historical and other bonds between the Shans and the Thais have, for several hundred years, been strong and cordial. Closer cooperation with the Burmese government – or even an end to the sympathetic Thai attitude towards these minority peoples – would inevitably mean antagonizing them and thus creating severe instability along the 1,314 mile border with Burma.

Many people in the north fear that should Thailand turn its back on these minorities, who all have their own well-armed and dedicated liberation armies, it would push them into the arms of Chinese or Vietnamese backed communist groups. The Communist Party of Burma (CPB, see box) would willingly provide them with arms, ammunition and other necessities in exchange for political or military alliances. Liaison between the CPB and the CPT could, in that case, easily be established, in, for instance, Tak or Mae Sariang districts where intelligence sources say a number of meetings between the Thai and the Burmese communists already have taken place. This would undoubtedly threaten Thailand's sovereignty – and signs are already evident that such a development is under way.

For the minority groups, the problem is that most of them are too weak to stand on their own feet: "if the situation along the border were to deteriorate, we would have no choice but to join forces with the CPB," admitted one spokesman from the 4-5,000 man strong, non-communist Karen National Union (KNU) recently. The KNU is, however, still economically stronger than other groups and should be able to maintain its independence for some time to come. But further to the north, in the strategically important Shan State, the militarily powerful but economically weak Shan State Army (SSA) has already been forced to revive its old defence treaty with the CPB. As early as 1975, the SSA went into its first alliance with the Burmese communists for the purpose of getting arms and ammunition. That this happened in 1975 was hardly a coincidence. In that year, the Indochina war was over and it was no longer possible to buy guns, bullets and military hardware in Laos, where previously there had been Southeast Asia's largest and most lucrative black market for arms.

In addition, Shan leaders were becoming increasingly disappointed with the outside world's lack of interest in their attempts to win international understanding for their struggle and their pleas for cooperation in the battle against narcotics flowing from the Golden Triangle. "The efforts made by Shan leaders to present the realities of the opium question were swept aside by the Carter Administration's pronouncement which stated that the only possible solution to the heroin and opium trafficking was to increase support to Rangoon, which ironically doesn't control any poppy fields in Shan State," said one ex-SSA source in Chiang Mai. He was one of the initiators of the 1973 and the 1975 Shan proposals to the US government concerning control of the opium market in the Golden Triangle. "We made proposals, we were willing to talk to people if they were really interested. We were even willing to let people in to see for themselves. No one was interested, they dismissed us as a bunch of crooks."

The 1975 defence pact between the CPB and the SSA was terminated during the SSAs second congress in August 1981. Shan leaders complained bitterly about the way they had been treated by the Burmese Communists and for almost a year, they tried to survive on their own. They failed completely. In June last year, the SSA's brigade commanders and frontline officers were once again obliged to appraoch the CPB for an alliance and military aid. The same fate has befallen the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in Burma's northernmost Kachin State and the alliance between the CPB, the Shans and the Kachins means that the communists have gained an extra 9,000 experienced and tough jungle fighters. More significant is the fact that the SSA and the KIA enjoy a wide popular support in their areas, thus these alliances make it possible for the CPB to move freely in nearly the whole of Shan and Kachin States.

The reason why the CPB is eager to forge these alliances with basically non-communist nationalist groups is obvious. The CPB's military base area has for the last fifteen years



Shan rebels: a more tactful diplomatic approach?

been the wild hills in the Wa country adjacent to China in northeastern Shan State – but its political future, if any, lies in the Irrawaddy plain and Burma proper. Despite heavy military and financial aid from China, the CPB has so far been unable to push through the Shan plateau down to the lowlands. During 1982, for instance, CPB's first vice-president Thakin Pe Tint stayed for several months in southern Shan State. He tried to establish contacts with his old comrades-in-arms in his native Pyinmana, a traditional communist stronghold in Burma but failed and had to retreat to the CPB's headquarters at Panghsang. Now, however, with an understanding reached between the CPB and the SSA, it will certainly be a lot easier for the communists to send their troops down to the Burmese lowlands.

The recently forged alliance between the CPB and the SSA must also be seen in its broader perspective. Apart from being a main source of arms and ammunition for the ethnic insurgents in Burma's border provinces the CPB also controls some of the most important opium growing areas in Southeast Asia. Not one armed group in Shan State can survive under present circumstances without having to deal – in one way or another – with the CPB. Even when Khun Sa and the SUA were fighting CPB forces at Doi Lang in a series of fierce clashes last August, it was considered highly unlikely that he would be able to run the show independently along the border for any length of time without close cooperation with the Burmese communists. Doi Lang has for many years been the refining centre for opium transported down from the CPB-area east of the Salween. By fighting the CPB, Khun Sa would only like to show that he, alone, was going to be the middleman along the border and that the CPB would have to deal through him and not directly with foreign opium buyers.

The battle of Doi Lang in August illustrated clearly the complexities of opium politics and the resultant anarchy that has created the instability along the northwestern border,

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which in turn continues to foster the illicit drug trade.

On one side, the alliance consisted of Khun Sa's SUA; the non-communist forces of Lahu chieftain Kya U; and a breakaway Kuomintang (KMT) faction led by Yang Wei-kang.

On the other was the bizarre line-up of the CPB and its crony A Bi (Kya U's rival); plus fugitive Chinese drug kingpin Lao Su, who was backed by Gen Lee Wen-huan of the 3rd KMT regiment; plus the staunchly anti-communist SURA (see box); plus the smaller Wa National Army (WNA), led by Mahasang, a princeling from the Wa state of Vingngun and a long-time ally of Gen Lee.

Sorting out this confusion and forseeing an outcome would make even the famous London bookmakers, Ladbroke's throw in the towel. With the SUA fighting and cooperating with the CPB at the same time, the SSA in a renewed military alliance with the CPB, the 3rd KMT and the SURA siding with the CPB in the battle for Doi Lang and the traditional rivals SSA and SURA engaged in heavy fighting over control of areas inside Shan State, the situation in the Golden Triangle appeared, at the close of 1982, to be more confused than ever before, and totally bewildering to any but the most expert outside observer.

If the deadlock along the northwestern frontier is ever to be broken – and if the outflow of drugs from the Golden Triangle to be halted – it is clear that a completely new approach to the problem is needed. More fighting can only make the vicious circle spin faster and thus make it even more difficult to solve the interrelated problems of opium and national security. Negotiations and a more tactful diplomatic appraoch to the parties concerned could, on the other hand, be a big step forward towards a lasting peace settlement in one of Thailand's and hence, Southeast Asia's most troubled areas. ●



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