Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, E. Bevin, on United Kingdom policy in South-East Asia and the Far East, 18 October 1949

SECRET

THE UNITED KINGDOM IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND THE FAR EAST

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4. Nationalism is rampant today from Afghanistan to the China Sea; only in Japan is it dormant under American occupation. In Asia, which has lingered behind Europe in the development of nationhood, it is not surprising that nationalism is regarded as something to be fostered and encouraged. But, whereas intense nationalism is considered by Asiatic races to be both necessary and desirable to achieve national solidarity in newly created States, it is liable to lead to friction in international relationships. South-East Asia and the Far East are new in the sense that nationhood has only recently impinged upon the local consciousness. We are faced, therefore, with an intense nationalism which is prickly in its international relationships. Though the idea of pan-Asia, sponsored originally by the Japanese, creates the danger of a cleavage between East and West, there is, in fact, little or no cohesion between Asiatic countries, and it is probably true to say that there is greater fear, distrust and even dislike between Asiatic neighbours than there is between Asiatic and Western nations. Nevertheless, Asiatic nationalism is abnormally sensitive to anything which savours of Western domination or dictation. Since domination came from the West, there is still a tendency to regard the West with suspicion. Domination by Russia, on the other hand, is something of which South Asia is unconscious; it has yet little meaning or reality. To this extent Russia enjoys a certain advantage over the Western Powers.

5. It is unfortunate that the countries of South-East Asia and the Far East should be passing through this stage of their development at a time when the Soviet Union is seeking to obtain domination over the whole Eurasian continent. The political immaturity of these countries and their economic distress render them particularly susceptible to Communist tactics: of this China presents an almost classic example. It is doubtful whether even Communist China will be able or will attempt to extend direct political control over the area. The existence of large Chinese communities in the countries of South-East Asia, however, presents dangerous possibilities for disruption from within, since all these Chinese must be regarded as potential agents of their Government whatever its political complexion. On the other hand, the unpopularity of the Chinese settlers with the local inhabitants may be considered to be a factor which will encourage resistance to the spread of Communist doctrines propagated from China. Again, India may one day seek to dominate the area politically, but there are few signs at present of the South-East Asian countries willingly accepting a lead from the Indians, who are unpopular and whose expansionist aims are feared. It is, therefore, fair to say that from the Persian Gulf to the China Sea there is no single Power capable of dominating the region nor any combination of Powers which by its united strength could successfully resist Russian expansion. Nor is there at present any one Asiatic Power capable of bringing about unity and cooperation throughout the region. The dangers of the situation are thus manifest and manifold.

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CONCLUSION

14. The conclusion is that the influence of the United Kingdom in South-East Asia and the Far East is an important factor in the preservation of world peace and of direct benefit to the United Kingdom itself. We are led to the further conclusions that the aim of the United Kingdom should be to build up some sort of regional association in South-East Asia in partnership with the association of the Atlantic Powers. Not only are we in the best position to interest the United States in active participation in maintaining the stability of the area, but our relation with the Commonwealth provides a means of influencing and coordinating the policies not only of the Asiatic Dominions, but of Australia and New Zealand, whose strategic interest in the area is, in fact, equal to our own. The immediate object of a wider association of the West, including the Pacific members of the Commonwealth and the South-East Asian countries, would be to prevent the spread of communism and to resist Russian expansion; its long-term object would be to create a system of friendly partnership between East and West and to improve economic and social conditions in South-East Asia and the Far East. The difficulties to be overcome, the methods whereby these objects may be attained and the particular problems of individual countries, whether in the area or with interests involved, will be discussed in the second part of this paper.

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PARTICULAR FACTORS

*(a) India*

19. India is the key to the whole problem of South-East Asian regional cooperation. Without India we can achieve little, but India is at present in no mood to cooperate in any joint move to establish an anti-Communist front in South-East Asia and the Far East. Her attitude can be summed up as: -

(1) A mistrust of the West based on the legacy of imperialism.

(2) A fear that she may be embroiled by the West in a struggle with Russia, and hence an avowed desire to remain clear of entanglements with either of the Great Power blocs. Subsidiary to this is the fear that we may exploit the Commonwealth relationship to draw her imperceptibly into our own policies.

(3) A belief, based on a failure to realise that the Soviet Communist threat is world wide and not directed solely against the West, that it is, in fact, possible to sit on the fence. This leads to a disinclination to believe that the Chinese Communists are willing to follow direction from Moscow, or that a Communist China may threaten Asian National Governments.

(4) A belief in India’s destiny as leader of the Asian peoples.

While something can be done on these lines in the political field, concrete help of a technical, financial and economic nature is likely to be of the greatest influence in achieving the first two points of policy mentioned above. This aspect will be examined later in the paper. Further there are signs that Communist expansion, just as it served to bring about the greater cohesion of the West, is bringing the leaders of the countries of Asia to a more realistic frame of mind with regard to regional cooperation in the face of the common danger. Unless the Communists are very much more skilful than in the past, their future actions and successes are likely to accelerate this process.

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*(c) Pakistan*

24. In the event of a world war Pakistan would represent a secure base from which immediate retaliatory air action could be taken against certain important Soviet industrial centres in Central Asia. Economically Pakistan is self-sufficient in food supplies and should eventually become a surplus area with the development of hydro-electric schemes at present planned. At the moment Pakistan is smarting from what she considers Commonwealth “favouritism” towards India, and until the Kashmir dispute is settled her relations with the United Kingdom and the West are liable to be vitiated by waves of emotionalism. It must therefore be a major point in our policy to bring about as soon as possible a complete and equitable settlement between India and Pakistan. Even when normal relations are achieved, however, it is doubtful whether Pakistan, in view of her fears of India mentioned in paragraph 17, would willingly enter any regional scheme in which India was cast for the leading role. Present bad relations with Afghanistan are a danger in a potentially strategic area, and if allowed to continue would probably cause Afghanistan to remain aloof from any regional scheme. The formation of a common front against Communism by the Middle East countries would undoubtedly have an effect in encouraging Pakistan to follow an anti-Communist line.

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*(d) Afghanistan*

25. Apart from the quarrel with Pakistan over the frontier areas, Afghanistan, despite a real and persistent hostility to Russia, would be unlikely to enter any regional scheme without very strong guarantees, in view of her exposed northern boundary with the Soviet Union. Difficulties of communication southward would probably rule out any attempt to come to Afghanistan’s aid in the event of war. Afghanistan is in urgent need of economic assistance and any regional system giving mutual economic aid would be welcome to her and would not necessarily face her with a strong Russian reaction.

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CONCLUSIONS

63. Assuming that the political and economic stability of South-East Asia and the Far East is of prime importance to the West, that this can best be brought about by greater regional collaboration and that it is for the United Kingdom to play the major role in bringing this regional collaboration into being, the following conclusions are reached on the course to pursue: -

(1) For the present our policy must confine itself to South-East Asia. Only if some stable system emerges there, will the countries of the Far East later attach themselves to it.

(2) In the Far East our main problem lies not with the inhabitants or Governments of the area, but with the United States whose policies we must endeavour to influence along lines acceptable to ourselves.

(3) In China we must try to keep a foot in the door in the hope that we shall be able to maintain China’s contacts with the West and that we may be able to take advantage of any rift between Communist China and the Soviet Union.

(4) In South-East Asia, greater measure of regional cooperation is at present only practicable in the economic field. Though its own resources are insufficient to meet the large demands likely to be made, United Kingdom has the major role to play in promoting regional economic cooperation which, in turn may lead to regional collaboration in other fields. But she should play this role as unobtrusively as possible and encourage Asian countries to assume the initiative where this can safely be done.

(5) In all fields – political, economic and military – the Commonwealth countries of Asia, with the United Kingdom and Australia and New Zealand, present a nucleus on which to build.

(6) South-East Asia is not yet ripe for greater political collaboration either internally or with the West. Much can, however, be done along the lines suggested in paragraph 40.

(7) The security of the area is the most pressing problem, but for the time being we can only work with individual countries. Our general policy is laid down in paragraph 55.

(8) Only if we show our willingness and ability to bring about greater Asian solidarity, will the Americans be prepared to assist or to come into any regional arrangement. Convincing planning and some interim successes may, however, persuade the Americans to give practical interim aid which would further our ultimate aims.

(9) No plans will, however, be really successful without American participation and our main object must be to secure this.

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