Colonial Office Memorandum on UK policy in South-East Asia and the Far East, undated

SECRET

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

In considering our policy in South-East Asia and the Far East, it is first of all necessary to decide whether the political and economic influence of the United Kingdom in that part of the world is –

(a) an important factor in the preservation of world peace; and

(b) of direct benefit to the United Kingdom.

2. The United Kingdom has a particular position in Asia which is not enjoyed by other Western Powers; unless this position of advantage is used to bring about closer collaboration between East and West, there is a very real danger that the whole of Asia will become the servant of the Kremlin. The influence of the United Kingdom in South-East Asia and the Far East is therefore an important factor in the preservation of world peace.

3. The benefit to the United Kingdom of its relationship with South-East Asia and the Far East has not yet been measured in terms. Economically we are dependent upon the area for items such as rubber, tea and jute. The dollar pool of the sterling area derives very substantial earnings from Malaya. It is probable that, if the standard of living of the peoples of Asia can be improved, trading potentialities will vastly increase. More than half the population of the world lives in the area; its resources are by no means fully developed, and in the short term it will probably produce a dividend more quickly than the continent of Africa. What Asia has in labour it lacks in skill; a combination of Western technology and Eastern man-power might be welded into a formidable partnership.

THE NEW ASIA

4. Nationalism is rampant today from Afghanistan to the China Sea[[1]](#footnote-1); 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 [sic] 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 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 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.

THE ROLE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

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11. Our interests and commitments in Asia, as can be seen from the above, are greater and more varied than those of any other Western Power. The question arises whether they are not in excess of our post-war strength. We have, however, already substantially reduced our political and military commitments in the Indian sub-continent and Burma since the war, and our economic ties are too valuable to us to be severed without serious consequences. In war we could not afford military commitments of a size which would enable us to offer effective resistance against a full-scale attack. Such military commitments as we can afford in peace should be for the purpose of maintaining internal security within our own territories, encouraging confidence in the adolescent nations of the region, and supporting local efforts to place defence establishments on a sound footing. In the long run it will be for the Asian countries themselves to preserve their national integrity and, given guidance on the right lines, there is no reason why, in the event of a world conflict, they should not be able to offer effective resistance to any possible aggression from Russia, whose major commitments will most probably lie in the West and the Middle East.

12. We must accept the fact that there are also positive disadvantages in the United Kingdom position in Asia. Our imperialist past is by no means forgotten; the suspicion lurks all too frequently that we are seeking by more subtle means to re-establish our domination, and this suspicion is exploited by our enemies. In the areas overrun by the Japanese in the war, the recollection has not yet faded of our early and ignominious defeat. The fact that we were on the winning side in the end does not obliterate the thought that an Asiatic Power was demonstrably able to inflict crushing military defeats upon us. As a result our actions today are regarded more critically and with less confidence than before the war.

13. Certainly the advantages which the United Kingdom enjoys outweigh the disadvantages. Equally there is no other power capable of undertaking the formidable task of trying to link South-East Asia with the West and to create some kind of regional association which will be capable of effective resistance against communism and Russian expansion. If we fail, the threat to Western preponderance will be serious; if we succeed, there will be undoubted benefit to the United Kingdom and to the association of Western Powers.

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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REGIONAL CO-OPERATION IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND THE FAR EAST

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*(b) The Commonwealth and South-East Asia*

21. The defence of South-East Asia is of vital concern to Australia and New Zealand. In addition, three other fully independent members of the Commonwealth (India, Pakistan and Ceylon), the economically important colonies of Malaya and Hong Kong, and Burma in a special treaty relationship with ourselves, all lie in the area under consideration. Thus seven out of the nine fully independent Commonwealth countries are directly interested in safeguarding against Communist inroads the defence line stretching from Afghanistan to the China Sea, while Burma has recently looked to the Commonwealth for help in her military and financial crisis. There is therefore a nucleus upon which to build any system of regional cooperation. Two immediate obstacles must, however, first be overcome before any practical steps are taken to build on this nucleus – the Kashmir dispute and India’s fear that the regional strength of South-East Asia is to be exploited for the sake of a war in the west between the Western Powers and Russia. Other dangers are the racial policies of South Africa and Australia. The present South African Government’s attitude is provocative of anti-European sentiment, and her membership of the Commonwealth tends to involve us in an accusation of “Colonialism”. Despite Australia’s professions of sympathy for the struggling nationalisms in Asia there has been evidence recently that the execution of the “White Australia” policy has begun to cause resentment in Asiatic countries, and there is a danger that this policy may ultimately embitter relations between Australia and Asia.

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*(g) Indo-China and Indonesia*

30. Economically important to the whole of South-East Asia as sources of food, neither country has been able to assist in providing appreciable amounts to deficit areas owing to the unsettled conditions brought about by the struggle between Nationalist elements and the French and Dutch. There is now some hope of a settlement which will not only lead to better relations with France and Holland, but will remove the remaining causes of East-West friction generally. Time will, however, be needed before any stabilisation of the position in either country can be expected, and it is unfortunate that Indo-China, where the French feel that at least another nine months to a year will be needed to set the country on its feet again, will be more directly threatened than any other South-East Asian territory, should China fall under Communist control. If the Bao-dai regime succeeds, this may persuade India to abandon her partisan attitude towards the Communist Ho Chi Minh, but it is as yet too early to foresee the outcome of the present French experiment. It is certain that Ho Chi Minh, whether with Chinese Communist help or without, will not abandon his position without an intensification of the struggle. Against this, however, the presence of French troops and the retention of bases by France, which form part of the present agreement, should act as a reasonably effective counter to infiltration or direct aggression from China, although here again charges of “imperialism” may be the price to be paid for greater security.

*(h) Malaya*

31. Malaya is of the utmost importance strategically and economically to the United Kingdom and is the major dollar earner of the sterling era. There is a growing Malay nationalist movement which, but for the promulgation of the new constitution, might have become anti-British. But owing to the Malay fear of the Chinese, coupled with an appreciation of our liberal policy, this movement is not directed against the British connection. The campaign against the Communists is proceeding satisfactorily, although the danger of the large Chinese community acting for a Communist China will remain a constant threat to be watched. On the other hand nothing succeeds like success in the Orient, and the final liquidation of the Communists in Malaya and the assurance that we are not prepared to abandon the area and are taking effective steps to safeguard it from external aggression may do much to encourage the local Chinese to believe that reinsurance with a Communist China is not an absolute necessity. There are indications that if we pursue our present course in Malaya the Indian Government would prefer us to retain a stake in the country rather than push their views on “colonialism” to the lengths of condemning our presence.

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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.

[TNA, Colonial Office (hereafter — CO) 967/84]

Keywords: Post-war order, France, Post-war South East Asia, China

1. As in the document. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)