

The beginnings of a ‘Cold War’ in Southeast Asia: British and Australian perceptions

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The questions of how and when the Cold War manifested itself in Southeast Asia are here examined through the perceptions of Britain and Australia to regional and global events from 1945 to 1950. Both had major stakes in the eventual results of the local contentions in Southeast Asia, as well as in the global effects of great power rivalry. Yet even for these powers, determining when they believed the Cold War came to Southeast Asia is dependent on the definition adopted. By 1946, there was already recognition of entrenched ideological conflict in Southeast Asia, and that this threatened Western interests. In 1947, there was recognition of connections between the local communist parties and the ‘global designs’ of the Soviet Union. In 1948, there was the outbreak of armed violence in Burma, Malaya and Indonesia, though there was no evidence of direct Soviet involvement in these. Ultimately, however, it was the establishment of the PRC in 1949 (as a major regional communist power), in tandem with plans by non-communist states to coordinate policy against communism, which was seen as marking the arrival of fully-fledged Cold War in Southeast Asia.

1. Introduction

When did the ‘Cold War’ begin in Southeast Asia and how was this beginning manifested? As with all other investigations, definitions are key. The ‘Cold War’ itself remains an enigmatic category. The global contention between the superpowers constituted by the Soviet Union and the United States seems to be an accepted generic aspect of the Cold War. Was this the only, or a necessary, aspect of the ‘Cold War’ as manifested or created in Southeast Asia? Odd Arne Westad suggests that it was at least the major aspect. To his well-known work *The global Cold War*,¹ Westad assigns the subtitle ‘Third World interventions and the making of our times’, suggesting that a key element of the Cold War was great power rivalry through intervention in Third World countries. It is of course Westad’s aim to take the history of the Cold War beyond that of the usual Euro-American great power rivalries and to examine how this global contention through the second half of the twentieth century

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1 Odd Arne Westad, *The global Cold War: Third World interventions and the making of our times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

was to be manifested in the less powerful polities of the globe, but the structure is still premised on bipolar rivalry between the superpowers. He suggests both that ‘the United States and the Soviet Union were driven to intervene in the Third World by the ideologies inherent in their politics’,² and that ‘the Cold War was a continuation of colonialism through slightly different means’.³

But there are of course other angles from which to view the political events which marked the period of contention we know as the Cold War. In the study below, the views of two of the lesser global players in the Cold War period – Great Britain and its appendage (which grew increasingly independent during this period) Australia – will be examined as to what sort of ‘Cold War’ they observed and participated in in Southeast Asia during the period 1945 to 1950. This is a region where, during this period, American involvement was fairly minimal, and the degree of Soviet ‘intervention’ remains moot. It is hoped therefore to observe how the beginnings of the Cold War in Southeast Asia were manifested without discrete superpower involvement.

When and how, then, did Great Britain and Australia (only beginning post-WWII to play any substantial role in international affairs) view the ‘Cold War’ and its relationship with the armed violence occurring throughout Southeast Asia during the period 1945–50? And how did this affect the policies of Great Britain, which was committed to decolonising its Southeast Asian territories, and Australia, which was stepping into the breach left by this decolonisation through new engagement with the region, in some respects as the representative of Western interests?

2. British and Australian views of the Cold War in Southeast Asia

The Japanese occupation of British territories and other parts of Southeast Asia from December 1941 to August 1945 saw the representatives of ‘Western’ interests either driven away from Southeast Asia or incarcerated therein. It was not long after the beginning of the Japanese occupation, however, that the British began planning for the post-war reoccupation of the territories they had controlled pre-war. Less than a year into the Pacific War there were cabinet level discussions on post-hostilities arrangements, with it being recorded in September 1942, following a British cabinet meeting that: ‘Mr Eden said that the special features of the Far East was that besides the British there was a group of the leading countries in the Far East: The United States, China, Holland and to some extent Russia; whereas they had no such interest, for instance in Africa.’ ‘Mr Eden stressed that our aim was to secure collective defence in the Far East.’⁴ Here then, when Mr Eden spoke in 1942 of collective defence arrangement in post-war Asia, Russia was mentioned simply as a country which had some interests in the Far East, but with no implication of Soviet threat to, or rivalry with, Western powers in the area. During the latter war period, British planning in fact envisaged a general return of colonial powers and sought a pivotal role in coordinating regional defence and economic rehabilitation, and even considered a regional

2 Ibid., p. 4.

3 Ibid., p. 396.

4 ‘Post-war settlement in the Far East; Minute by G.E.J. Gent of a meeting of Ministers on 10 Sept to discuss the joint CO-FO memorandum’, CO 825/35/4 No. 53 (11 Sept. 1942), in *Malaya* (3 parts), *British documents on the end of empire*, ed. A.J. Stockwell (London: HMSO, 1995), Part 1, p. 25.

commission for Southeast Asia, as much to counter US intervention as facilitate administration.⁵ With the end of the war in the Pacific in August 1945, Britain's South East Asian Command under Louis Mountbatten was tasked by the allied nations with reoccupying all colonial Southeast Asia. Britain was committed to returning the French and the Dutch to their pre-war colonial territories, despite Indonesian nationalists having proclaimed independence on 17 August 1945. In Malaya, the centre of British interests in Southeast Asia, the British Military Administration was established to revive British control over the peninsula and restore basic services, including food provision. During this period, it was immediate reconstruction which appears to have occupied the British, but their global planners were still active. Late 1945 saw an 'Appreciation of future defence strategy policy in South East Asia' compiled under the auspices of Lt.-Gen. Sir Frederick Browning, but receiving mixed reception, with the Australians claiming that the report 'in fact makes the United Kingdom responsible for the defences of an area which should be an international responsibility'.⁶ British aspirations to control are thus suggested, as are Australian hopes to be further engaged in the 'international responsibility' that they saw developing in post-war Southeast Asia.

The Russians are (perhaps) not coming (1946)

With the establishment of the Malayan Union in March 1946, the despatch of Lord Killearn as British Special Commissioner to Southeast Asia in the same month and the appointment of Malcolm MacDonald as Governor General of Malaya and Singapore in May of that year, it was obvious that new plans for Britain's Southeast Asian colonies and protectorates, and indeed Britain's own role in Asia, were afoot. MacDonald appears to have been the key figure responsible for the reversal of the Malayan Union plans which had been implemented under Lord Mountbatten, the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces during the British Military Administration of Malaya. The degree to which this reversal was prompted by increasing fears of the Left remains a moot question.⁷ In June 1946, noting the increasing Malay opposition to the Malayan Union, HQ Malaya Command was to suggest 'The MCP has shown little interest so far in the agitation, but it will almost certainly try to use the political unrest and criticism of the Government to further its own ends.'⁸ Here then is a very pointed example of proto-Cold War sentiments, with the British military noting the potential and indeed likelihood of the Malayan

5 Karl Hack, *Defence and decolonisation in Southeast Asia: Britain, Malaya and Singapore 1941–1968* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), p. 58.

6 Secret Memo No. 7 from H.A. Stokes. Office of the Australian Commissioner for Malaya, Singapore, to External Affairs Canberra (6 Aug. 1946). NAA A1838 413/2/1/6 'BTSEA – Governor General Malaya Status, Functions Etc.'

7 While the generally posited reason for the reversal of the Malayan Union plans is Malay opposition to the plans (see for example, B. Simandjuntak, *Malayan federalism 1945–1963: A study of federal problems in a plural society* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 42–5), Karl Hack notes 'Other possible factors are: doubts about overseas Chinese loyalties, the apparent unwillingness of the MPAJA to disarm, or the realisation that the Chinese were unlikely to volunteer in numbers as infantry.' See Hack, *Defence and decolonisation in Southeast Asia*, p. 152, n. 22.

8 HQ Malaya Command, 'Weekly Intelligence Review (No. 17) on local reactions to White Paper' (23 Feb. 1946), Stockwell, *Malaya*, Document 72, p. 198.

Communist Party (still a legal body in this period) pursuing political actions antipathetic to British interests in Southeast Asia.

At the same time, British planning for potential military competition with the Soviet Union on a global scale was already well in train. April 1946 saw the distribution of a paper on Far East policy by Britain's Far East (Official) Committee incorporating a Joint Planning Staff study of Southeast Asia. It 'assumed containment of the Soviet Union along a line of bases running from the Aleutians, through Taiwan to the Philippines, making the United States primarily responsible for defence North of the Tropic of Cancer while Britain would predominate South of the Tropic of Cancer'.⁹

However, British representatives within the Soviet Union suggested that the Soviet Union was not a particular threat to Southeast Asia in this period. In a report from Frank Roberts, British minister in Moscow, to the Foreign Minister Mr Bevin in August 1946, Roberts noted:

By contrast, South-East Asia, including the Philippines and Burma, is fortunately outside the immediate scope of Russian expansionism, which is strictly limited to neighbouring or virtually neighbouring territories. On the other hand, these rich lands play an important part in the economies as well as the strategic dispositions of the Western powers, and in their present discontented state offer excellent opportunities for disruptive activities whose effect on the West could be serious. Soviet official policy and propaganda, and that of Communist parties throughout the world, is directed to securing the evacuation of European and American troops from all these areas, followed by the severing of all political and eventually economic ties with the 'Imperialist exploiters'... There is not enough evidence available at this post to give a clear picture of these connexions, but the tone of the Soviet press when dealing with the Indonesian extremists, the Filipino Hukbalahap and similar organisations suggests that they fit into the familiar pattern of 'genuinely democratic' and 'anti-imperialist' movements sponsored, or at least encouraged, by the Kremlin. The same applies to the Burmese 'Anti-Fascist Front' with its hard core of Communists; though for some reason Burma has hardly been touched on as yet in the Soviet press. A similar silence has reigned about Malaya.

The report later noted: 'Despite Soviet sympathy, genuine as well as tactical, with the "oppressed colonial peoples" of South-East Asia, the areas of the Far East which most directly interest Russia are those furthest removed from British vital interests.'¹⁰ Here then, as seen from Moscow, British global Cold War concerns are not considered as being particularly relevant to Southeast Asia because of lack of Russian intent, except in the USSR capacity as a passive supporter of anti-imperialist movements.

However, within Southeast Asia, the concerns were building. The Australians had appointed a political liaison officer – Mr H.A. Stokes – to Singapore in June 1946 to keep informed of the ongoing changes in the region. He watched in Singapore as Lord Killern – the British Special Commissioner to South East Asia – appointed his staff

9 Hack, *Defence and decolonisation in Southeast Asia*, pp. 109–10.

10 Extract from UK Despatch F.12910/12653/23, Mr Roberts to Mr Bevin, dated Moscow, 30 Aug. 1946. NAA A1838 3004/12/5 Part 1 'South East Asia - USSR - Representation policy & interests – General'.

(mainly officers who had served with him in Egypt), and noted the arrival of Malcolm MacDonald, the new Governor General of Malaya and Singapore, together with the resultant 'further impetus to political activity'. 'It will have been seen ... that much of the responsibility for furthering regionalism in South East Asia resides with Mr MacDonald.'¹¹ The British had by this time produced a 'Survey of Co-ordination within the Territories of South East Asia', setting down British aspirations for alliances or integration within the region, which would facilitate or even require a continued British presence. The survey noted that the Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia had been responsible for an area which comprised Ceylon, Burma, Siam, southern Indo-China, Malaya, Borneo and the Netherlands East Indies and that 'This area will continue to be a bastion of vital political, strategic and economic importance to the British Commonwealth.' It warned that 'the Soviet Union might become active in the area in the future', and that other possible threats included: the collapse of law and order in any given area; an increased revival of trouble in the Netherlands East Indies; difficulties with Nationalist movements; and 'trouble with the inhabitants of the southeast area of Chinese race'. It urged 'closer co-ordination both within the area and in London', and also noted that 'if the general relations of H.M.G. with China become bad, and still more if (however remote this prospect) China and the Soviet Union were working together against us, the threat might become extremely serious'.¹² Here then, the potential of Cold War violence – involving Russians, nationalists and Chinese or a combination of these players – is being recognised and reacted against in British colonial planning.

While watchful, by the end of 1946, the British Special Commissioner was mildly sanguine *vis-à-vis* potential Soviet threats. In a report to the foreign secretary in early December 1946, Lord Killearn expressed the view 'that Soviet activities in South-East Asia had not yet developed on any formidable scale and that our task in this area was not so much to counter them directly as to encourage conditions in which they would be unable to prosper'.¹³

In a more detailed report to British PM Attlee of 4 December 1946, entitled 'Soviet activities in South-East Asia', Killearn noted:

Of communism as a whole in the area a great deal can and has been written. There are Chinese and indigenous Communist parties in the Philippines, in Indo-China, Malaya, Burma, Siam and in the Netherlands East Indies, with fluctuating degrees of influence. That they are in contact with each other there is no doubt, nor is there much doubt that the contacts extend to Sydney. There is a Communist courier service through Java and Malaya, for example, which oddly enough, passes through Bangkok. There are contacts between Java and Manila. And so forth. ... But it is exceedingly hard to secure reliable evidence that the contacts extend to Moscow, or that the activities of the Communist parties in the area are influenced, save in a general way, by instructions or policies

11 Secret Memo No. 7 from H.A. Stokes. Office of the Australian Commissioner for Malaya, Singapore, to External Affairs Canberra (6 Aug. 1946). NAA A1838 413/2/1/6 'BTSEA – Governor General Malaya: Status, Functions Etc'.

12 NAA A1838 413/2/1/6 'BTSEA – Governor General Malaya: Status, Functions Etc'. Also CAB 21/1954 (17 June 1946). See Stockwell, *Malaya*, vol. 1, Document 95.

13 Lord Killearn to Mr Bevin, 'South-East Asia: Growing communist strength' (No. 163 Secret) (24 July). NAA A1838 383/5/1 Southeast Asia: Communism in South East Asia.

prescribed by Russia ... Absence of proof, however, does not rule out the possibility of Soviet activities in this area ... As I reported in my telegram under reference, 'the Soviets can, if they so choose, exert considerable influence in this part of the world:' but there is at present no reliable evidence that they are doing so ... I am asking the Joint Intelligence Committee here to prepare a paper 'Communism in South-East Asia'. Meanwhile I shall continue to watch for any signs of Soviet activity which may become visible.¹⁴

By the end of 1946, then, the Soviet Union was being seen by the British as a European-Atlantic rival, with potential for activities of destabilisation in Southeast Asia, but not as an immediate threat in the region. The local communist parties were also seen as potential, albeit minor, threats.

The Russians are probably coming (1947)

As requested by Lord Killearn, the Head of British Security Intelligence Far East (SIFE) produced in May 1947, for the information of the Joint Intelligence Committee (Far East) a report entitled 'Communism in South East Asia'.¹⁵ Suggesting that 'the function of communist parties in the present situation is tending to change from the straight revolutionary role to that of being the tool of Soviet foreign policy', the report examined communist parties in India, Burma, Malaya, Netherlands East Indies, Siam, French Indo-China, China and Japan. It noted: 'There is evidence that the Malayan Communist Party is in contact with Communist Parties in the N.E.I, Siam, P.I.C and China. There are indications that at least one of the leaders was trained in Moscow...The establishment of the Soviet Embassy in Bangkok may also have an influence on the growth of the Party in Malaya.' It concluded that 'Communism is international, revolutionary and in the ultimate issue directly or indirectly controlled by the U.S.S.R.' and that 'Communist Parties will foment nationalism in Colonial countries so that the latter may achieve independence and begin the first stage of their journey toward Communist internationalism.'¹⁶ Here the connections between the local communist parties in Southeast Asia and the global designs of the Soviet Union were becoming more explicit in British perceptions, or at least representations. The Russians were probably coming! The United States, however, remained unalarmed, with their European and Asian experts opining in response to Dutch concerns of communist influence in the Netherlands East Indies: 'With respect to the Communist domination of the Netherlands East Indies, we feel that Communist influence at the present is neither widespread nor effective.'¹⁷

14 Secret Despatch No. 87 (F. 18057/87/61) from Lord Killearn to Mr Attlee, dated Singapore 4 Dec. 1946. 'Soviet activities in South-East Asia', NAA A1838 3004/12/5 Part 1 'South East Asia - USSR - Representation policy & interests - General'.

15 'Communism in South East Asia (Top Secret)' SF. 50/1/1 in NAA A1838 383/5/1 'South East Asia - Communism in South East Asia'.

16 Appendix A: 'Communism and its bearing on the colonies' (27 May 1947) in 'Communism in South East Asia (Top Secret)' SF. 50/1/1 NAA A1838 383/5/1 'South East Asia - Communism in South East Asia'.

17 Memorandum by Chief of the Division of Northern European Affairs (Cumming) and the Chief of the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs (Moffat) in United States' State Department, 17 Apr. 1947, *Foreign relations of the United States 1947*, vol. VI, Far East, pp. 917-8.

This idea of potential threat and necessary response was elaborated in a further report submitted in July 1947 by Lord Killearn in Singapore to Foreign Secretary Bevin. In this report, entitled 'South-East Asia: Growing Communist Strength',¹⁸ Killearn noted that it was still the case that 'Soviet activities in South-East Asia have not yet developed on any formidable scale'. 'I have received no reports on visits to South-East Asia by Soviet officials since Colonel Dubrovin's mission to French Indo-China last October and the visit to Malaya of M. Sizov and M. Plakhine in January this year ... Soviet broadcasts, of course, continue, but they are the only overt Soviet activity in South-East Asia apart from that of local Communist parties.'¹⁹ Killearn noted that:

We are thus witnessing in South-East Asia a simultaneous emergence on the one hand of growing Communist strength indirectly by or in the interest of Russia; and on the other hand of slowly returning economic and political stability. Provided that the return of reasonably prosperous conditions is not too long delayed we may hope that the Communist plant will not flourish, but in the meantime, the ground suits it all too well ... Next to the return of prosperity and security, the best antidote to the spread of communism is, of course, the speedy development of self-government on truly democratic lines ... The awakening political consciousness of South east Asia, therefore, presents an opportunity no less to ourselves than to the instruments of the Soviet Union ... The task of reorienting the opposition into the establishment of a truly democratic tradition is going to be one of the most important functions of the British Commonwealth in this part of the world.²⁰

The sphere of ideas and economic systems was thus being seen as where the battleground with the Soviet Union lay.

Later in 1947, however, concerns about a more global nature of the struggles in Southeast Asia began to be apparent. The Australian Embassy in Washington reported to Canberra that the meeting of the North Korea Democratic Youth league in Pyongyang on 21 October had passed a resolution, including the text: 'Following the report of the Chairman which lasted for 2 hours and a half, the meeting discussed and adopted a decision on the meeting to be held in India in January 1948 of youths of the dependent countries of Southeast Asia.' The resolution continued on how these youths were to be supported. The Australian Embassy noted that 'the point of view expressed is entirely in line with that taken by the Soviet delegation at the present session of the United Nations General Assembly.'²¹ There were also, from late 1947, reports from a variety of quarters that a Far East Cominform (Communist Information Bureau) had already been established in Asia,²² while Mao Zedong, in a 25 December 1947 speech ('The present situation and our task'), appears to have

18 Lord Killearn to Mr Bevin, 'South-East Asia: Growing communist strength' (No. 163 Secret) (24 July 1947). NAA A1838 383/5/1 'Southeast Asia: Communism in South East Asia'.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Memorandum Australian Embassy Washington to External Affairs Canberra (27 Oct. 1947). NAA A1838 383/5/1 'South East Asia - Communism in South East Asia'.

22 See reports from UPI despatch of 16 Nov. 1947, Reuters despatch of 23 Nov., and *Akahata* (Red Flag, JCP journal) of 6 Dec. 1947.

still been calling for the establishment of such a body. However, investigations on all sides by the Australian Embassy in Nanking in January 1948 revealed no solid evidence or information as to the existence of an Asian Cominform.²³ Asian Communists were coming to assume increasing importance in the eyes of British Asian policy. The United States policy-makers were also becoming concerned about Soviet plans in Asia by December 1947. State Department officers noted: 'Primary Soviet objectives Far East: (a) Communist domination Korea, Manchuria, secondary objectives: Communist control "democratic" regimes Indo-China and Indonesia, and of India. Tertiary objective: Communist dominated Japan.'²⁴ It further suggested that 'unrest in Southeast Asia, fully exploited, particularly through Chinese Communist organisations, will grow continuously and eventually result in Communist dominated regimes'.²⁵ Likely in direct response to the perceived increased threat, British Foreign Secretary Bevin is reported to have concluded after discussions with George C. Marshall, Truman's Secretary of State, on 17 December 1947 that: 'We must devise some Western democratic system, comprising the Americans, ourselves, France, Italy etc and of course the Dominions. This would not be a formal alliance, but an understanding backed by power, money and resolute action.'²⁶

The year of living dangerously (1948)

By early 1948, Asia was beginning to become a major factor in British global security considerations. The Australians (who had not even possessed a diplomatic corps until the 1940s) were also learning the ropes of international observation and engagement. The Australian Commissioner for Malaya based in Singapore reported to Canberra in January 1948 in a departmental despatch entitled 'Communism in South-East Asia' that while 'it is very difficult to evaluate the strength of orthodox Communism in South-East Asia', 'recent evidence suggests that the tempo of communist activity throughout the Far East generally is rising'. The despatch suggested that 'Reasons for this acceleration in communist activity include notably the bitterness of the conflict in China.' It noted that the Malayan Communist Party had held a conference of its subsidiary New Democratic Youth League in Singapore over the period 15–19 October 1947 at which reports showed a total of 114 propaganda units. The report concluded that 'The outcome of the K.M.T.-Communist struggle is very important to South-East Asia.'²⁷ This foregrounding of the Chinese civil war as a component of the local political struggles in Southeast Asia, the stress on the growing strength of the MCP and the implications of the global ramifications of such struggle, were new.

23 Memorandum (No. 27) from Australian legation Nanking to External Affairs Canberra (16 Jan. 1948). NAA A1838 383/5/1 Part 1 'South East Asia: Communism in South East Asia'. See also Confidential memorandum entitled 'Far Eastern Cominform', dated 25 Feb. 1948 in same file.

24 Telegram from chargé in the Soviet Union (Durbrow) to the Secretary of State, 2 Dec. 1947, *Foreign relations of the United States 1947*, vol. VI, Far East, p. 583.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Nicholas Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the onset of the Cold War, 1945–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 263.

27 Departmental Despatch (8/48) from Australian Commissioner for Malaya in Singapore to External Affairs in Canberra 'Communism in South-East Asia' (28 Jan. 1948). NAA A1838 383/5/1 Part 1 'South East Asia: Communism in South East Asia'.

In February 1948, the South-East Asia Youth Conference, which Pyongyang radio had advertised in October 1947, was convened in Calcutta. During this meeting, young Asian men and women were called upon to fight imperialism, and a motion was adopted which condemned British, French, Dutch and American imperialism and called for the unity of the youth of Southeast Asia.²⁸ The significance of this gathering became more obvious to the British later in the year.

By April 1948, following a revolt by the Communist Party of Burma in March, British press reports were reflecting an increasing disquiet among British government departments relating to growing communist activities throughout Southeast Asia. In June of that year, a shooting war began in Malaya. A declaration of Emergency by the British administration was followed by the gazetting of new government powers, widespread arrests and the banning of a range of organisations, including the Malayan Communist Party and various satellite organisations.²⁹

The Australians were also immediately reactive to events in Malaya, with newspapers noting the need to 'frustrate the Communist objectives to run the great rubber and tin industries' and warning that 'should Communism win, the iron curtain may reach down to Timor'.³⁰ Reports of a 'well-known Australian Communist' directing intelligence for Southeast Asian communist parties from Bangkok began to appear in June 1948, the same month that the Malayan Communist Party initiated violence.³¹ This was an obvious reference to Alexander Brotherton, who was based in Bangkok at this time, and on whom the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation held a thick file.³² Responding to a Singapore report that Malayan communists expected to declare a Soviet republic in August, Conservative Australian parliamentarian P.C. Spender³³ urged the Australian government to consider making 'a show of force'. Noting that 'Australia has a greater stake in Malaya than Great Britain has', Mr Spender claimed that well-organised communist insurrectionists were making a bold attempt to gain control of Malaya. This was, he suggested, part of the pattern which Russia was weaving to dominate the whole of Asia. Mr Spender said: 'Western influence has almost been removed from this part of the world, leaving the field open to the machinations of the Kremlin.'³⁴ Here we see very direct claims that the revolutions initiated in Southeast Asia were part of a global Soviet strategy. The Australian Labour Prime Minister Mr Chifley was not, however, particularly perturbed, describing the situation as 'a great upsurge of nationalism',³⁵ advising that the Malayan government had been able to handle the situation without calling for aid, and then flying off to Britain for discussions with the British Prime Minister on other matters. His interpretation of the events won Mr Chifley praise from *Der Morgen*, a Soviet-licensed German paper in Berlin.

28 *The Statesman* (New Delhi), 28 Feb. 1948; and *People's Age* (New Delhi), 29 Feb. 1948.

29 'Australia worried over situation in Malaya', *Ceylon Observer*, 24 July 1948.

30 'Australia has vital interests in Malaya', *Melbourne Age*, 7 July 1948.

31 'Communist warfare against British in Malaya; Burma Republic endangered by Reds'. AAP-Reuters, *Canberra Times* (Canberra), 21 June 1948.

32 NAA, A6126/25 Brotherton, Alexander (aka Brotherton, Archibald aka Van Tan).

33 Percy Spender (Liberal Party) went on to become Minister for External Affairs under Robert Menzies (1949–51).

34 'Spender warns on Malaya', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 July 1948.

35 'P.M.'s views resented', *Daily Telegraph*, 4 Sept. 1948.

The Americans, while not greatly involved in the events in Southeast Asia at this time, were meanwhile expressing their concerns. In a July 1948 interview with Leighton Stuart, the US Ambassador to China, the Australian chargé d'affaires in Nanking recorded Stuart's view that:

the U.S.S.R. is finding what he described as 'her gamble in Europe' somewhat troublesome and not a little risky, and that a change of Soviet concentrated effort in the direction of Asia might be considered tactically wise and profitable, for, in Asia, there is an empire for the taking. He went on to say that the key to Communism's future in Asia lay, of course, in the situation in China, where any complete Communist victory, followed by, for example, a militant advance of Communism in India, would make Asia a 'Red' continent ... So far as Malaya is concerned, he said that the situation there appeared to bear all the 'hall-marks' of a carefully prepared Communist technique – a small band of highly-trained 'Red' operatives directing terrorist war aimed at the complete subjugation of the country to Communist influence.³⁶

A more formal statement from the US State Department later in the same year noted:

The department has watched closely the rapid increase of Communist activity which has taken place in Southeast Asia since early this year and has naturally taken the development into consideration in determining its course of action ... However, little attention has been directed toward one major stratagem employed by the Communists in dependent areas of Southeast Asia. To win support and allies in their drive for power, Communist leaders have consistently pretended to champion the cause of local nationalists and have attempted to identify communism with nationalism in the minds of the people of the area.³⁷

The United States was thus beginning to draw the events in Southeast Asia into the broader global Cold War framework in which its other international engagements around the globe were located. The United States had started to see the rivalry and struggles in Southeast Asia as part of the global Cold War, but seemed loath to attempt to engage itself directly in this struggle.

The British were however increasingly engaged in dramatic statements. By August 1948, the Commissioner-General for South-East Asia Malcolm MacDonald was urging that 'the Governments and peoples of South-East Asia who wish to preserve their religions and their own characteristic ways of life must co-operate to resist the Communist menace'. Speaking to members of the Malayan Press Club, he opined: 'Communist Russia is endeavouring to conquer the world. Her weapons are not armies and navies, so much as agitators and propaganda ... They now threaten the peoples of South-East Asia with a fate similar to that already suffered by the small nations of Eastern Europe.'³⁸ Such statements can also be considered to mark Britain's acceptance (or at least promotion) from mid-1948, of the idea that

36 Ministerial Despatch (no. 13) from Australian Embassy Nanking to Minister for External Affairs Canberra (17 July 1948) 'Interview with U.S.A. Ambassador', NAA A1838 383/5/1 Part 1, 'South East Asia: Communism in South East Asia'.

37 Press Release of Department of State (Sept. 16, 1948), NAA A1838 383/5/1 Part 1, 'South East Asia: Communism in South East Asia'.

38 *Straits Times*, 13 Aug. 1948.

Southeast Asia was a new front in the global Cold War, that Soviet Russia was the prime threat, and that religion was a useful tool with which to counter the communist threat.

By October 1948, the Australians were also taking a strong (but somewhat less dramatic) interest in the Malayan Communist Party and producing memos on its likely affiliations. In one such memo, entitled 'Malayan Communist Party and the Political Theories of the Chinese Communists', the author O.N. Smyth suggested that the political theories of the MCP:

have little in common with those of Mao Tse-tung and the leading Chinese Communists who claim to have adopted the principles of Marx-Leninism to the particular case of China ... Their inspiration is probably from India (the Calcutta Communist Conference in February), England, Australia (Mr. Sharkey's visit) and the Soviet Union rather than China ... It is therefore tentatively suggested that the Communist movement in Malaya has few links with the Chinese Communists ... They seem to be following the Moscow line slavishly and basing their policy on Zhdanov's review of the international situation.³⁹

Disagreeing, an officer in the Australian Embassy in Moscow responded that:

It is difficult to believe that the Central Committee of the M.C.P. and the Central Committee of the C.C.P. do not maintain fairly close links, since Marxism-Leninism in the Stalinist era is fundamentally a conception in which national independence can only be guaranteed by a higher international loyalty to the world proletarian movement.⁴⁰

The possibility that the M.C.P. was collaborating with a party which was looking likely to take power in the most populous nation in East Asia was obviously an issue engaging many minds in the Western world in this period.

Two major British reports related to communism in Southeast Asia were completed in late 1948. The first, entitled 'Communism in the Far East' [JIC (FE) (48) 12: Secret] was a Joint Intelligence Committee report, aimed 'at assessing the present position and future trends of Communism in the Far East on the basis of information received up to September 30th, 1948'. The British Foreign Office also completed a report on regional communist strategy in November 1948. Entitled 'Communist Strategy in South-East Asia', the report was intended as a briefing for Malcolm MacDonald's Bukit Serene meeting of British diplomats engaged with Southeast Asia. It began by setting down why the report was compiled. 'Communist developments in South East Asia are of concern to the Foreign Office, not only because they present an immediate problem in the defence of our vital interests but because they fit in to the general strategy of the Kremlin in the cold war against us.'

39 Memo (No. 138) from O.N. Smyth to Mr McIntyre (25 Oct. 1948), 'Malayan Communist Party and the political theories of the Chinese communists', NAA A1838 383/5/1 Part 1, 'South East Asia: Communism in South East Asia'.

40 Memo (No. 375/48) from Australian Embassy Moscow to External Affairs Canberra (16 Nov. 1948), NAA A1838 383/5/1 Part 1, 'South East Asia: Communism in South East Asia'.

Contrasting communist strategy in China with that in Southeast Asia, the report suggested:

But the areas to the south, dislocated and otherwise ravaged by war, and dominated by a nationalist struggle against colonial governments which is often also a social revolt against economic exploitation, are in a different position. They offer a classic example of a potentially revolutionary situation. For this opportunity the Kremlin was perhaps not fully prepared, but it has nevertheless done its best to exploit the situation.

The report then went on to detail the revolutionary situations in Malaya, Indochina, Burma and Indonesia, and then continued: 'Thus nationalism is seen by the Kremlin as a force capable of rendering good service, but only within certain limits. As soon as it begins to run counter to the over-riding interests of the Kremlin, it becomes a dangerous heresy.'

The report suggested that the Kremlin was caught by surprise by the revolutionary events in Southeast Asia, which it agrees were caused by local factors. While accepting that the conference of representatives of the Southeast Asian parties which was held in Harbin in 1947, and the two Calcutta conferences were Soviet controlled, it notes without comment the claims of the Burmese Foreign Minister that both Burma and Malaya, and probably most of the rest of South-East Asia, received direction through the Communist Party of India. As an overall explanation, it posits:

It may well be that, after achieving a tightening of central control, the grand strategists in the Kremlin decided that the world international situation required a more active campaign of open violence and disruption in South-East Asia than the local situation would seem to justify, with a view to the very adverse effect which this would have on the Marshall Plan and the encouragement that will be given the subversive elements in other colonies. Moreover, it must have felt that a policy of subterfuge and penetration behind a façade of the United Front against the colonial was beginning to pay diminishing returns in those areas where nationalist aspirations had begun to be satisfied in one way or another ... The result of the Calcutta Conference was that violence directly organised by the Communists broke out throughout South-East Asia...

After noting aspects of the uprisings in Vietnam, Madiun, Siam and Malaya, the report concludes with some overall thoughts on armed rebellion and communism:

The main value of armed revolt, as has been demonstrated with especial clarity in Greece, is that a small group of resolute and well-armed men can, at a comparatively trifling cost to the Soviet Union, make progressive and democratic government impossible ... the moral is that counter action must be taken before the plans of the Committee reach the stage of direct action.

In studying Communism in South East Asia, it would seem to be especially important not to over-estimate the strength of the armed communism in the field, or the extent to which it is controlled or commanded by the Kremlin. The controls are often tenuous or remote; the advice often inappropriate; and the picture complicated by local rivalries. Organised Communism in Southeast Asia is not yet in a position to do more than

exploit the national social and economic unrest in the area. But its influence is growing and is disproportional to its members (as is, for instance, that of the Stern Gang in Israel). Organised Communism will exploit, in turn, first nationalism against imperialism, and then economic misery against the nationalist governments.⁴¹

Here then, we observe something of a drawing back from the earlier assessments which saw all Southeast Asian revolutions as being directly controlled by and serving the Kremlin. But, as this report was being produced and read in British embassies around the world, the Soviet Union opened a new embassy in Bangkok in November 1948, headed by Ambassador Sergei Neimchina.⁴²

In the diplomatic realm, at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' conference held in October 1948, British Foreign Secretary Bevin urged Commonwealth countries to assist in pacifying the countries in Southeast Asia and proposed that there should be some regular means of consultation between Commonwealth countries interested in the area. At the end of 1948, as the power of the CCP in China grew, the Far East Official Committee admitted to Bevin that nothing could be done about the growing power of the party in China, but that there was a need to strengthen resistance in surrounding countries. A committee prepared a paper for the cabinet on the position of China and its implications for British interests. It noted that a communist victory in China would make communists in Southeast Asia more supported and daring. Thus there was a need to 'clear up the situation' in Malaya. It urged consultation with Commonwealth countries, France, the Netherlands, Burma and Siam on 'the best method of dealing with the situation' and keeping the United States informed. On 13 December 1948, the cabinet approved this policy: 'Was it not time to extend to the Far East the same sort of concerted arrangements for economic and military defence measures as were being drawn up against Soviet aggression in Western Europe through the European Recovery Programme and the policy of Western Union.' The Foreign Secretary was asked to consult the United States in the first instance on 'means of containing the Communist threat to Anglo-American interests in Asia'.⁴³ Thus by the end of 1948, we observe both an increasing British concern about the power of the CCP and its likely assumption of power in China, and the consequent need for an allied alliance to counter the effects in Southeast Asia of this new power. A new type of Cold War situation was evolving, one where Britain would have to deal with the major polity in East Asia going 'Red'.

The Chinese are coming (1949)

Concerns about the Communist Party's military gains in China were obviously mounting in Whitehall in early 1949. The assumption appears to have been that once the Chinese state had been brought under their control, CCP forces would continue on into Southeast Asia. In January 1949, a letter from the Foreign Office to the British High Commission in Rangoon, noted: 'I would like you to take an early opportunity to sound the Burmese government out on their ideas as to ways and means of

41 'Communist strategy in South East Asia' (Nov. 1948).

42 NAA A1838 3004/12/5 Part 1, 'South East Asia - USSR - Representation policy & interests - General'.

43 Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the onset of the Cold War*, pp. 270–2.

containing the Communist threat in South East Asia.’ The letter urged the High Commissioner to draw the Burmese government’s ‘attention to the situation in China’, and ask for the views of the Burmese government on ‘what further steps might usefully be taken to check the communist drive into South East Asia’. In an interesting aside, perhaps intended to place a little positive spin on the situation, the High Commissioner was also advised that: ‘Meanwhile the State Department are keen to discuss the whole problem with us in Washington as a result of Sir O. Frank’s approach.’⁴⁴ A similar telegram with a similar request was sent to the British Embassy in Bangkok on the same day, and by 19 February, the response indicated that the Thais were willing to collaborate with Britain and the United States against communist forces. A British secret *aide-memoire* dated 21 January 1949 and entitled: ‘The political situation in China and the communist threat in Southeast Asia’ was clear that it was merely a matter of time before the communists took China:

As regards the effects of these likely developments on the countries of South East Asia, it may be expected, in general, that Communist successes in China will stimulate Communist movements throughout the area. If the Chinese communists succeed in over-running the whole of China, the possibilities of contacts with the Communists in Siam and adjacent territories will be greatly facilitated, and it may be expected that Communist agitation in various forms will be increased to a marked degree.⁴⁵

The worries about both the CCP’s march to power in China and the increasing strength of communist forces in Southeast Asia saw various efforts by the non-communist powers to develop blocs or alliances. A conference of non-communist forces in New Delhi in January 1949, including Australia and New Zealand, was seen by TASS as the beginnings of an Asian military alliance in response to the potential menace of a ‘Red’ China.⁴⁶ Following the conference, it became clear that Nehru was quite enthusiastic about the Indian Republic leading such an alliance or grouping. In a British message to Sir W. Strang, Permanent Under-Secretary of the British Foreign Office on 29 March 1949, it was noted:

It appears that Pandit Nehru wants to take the lead in building up a ‘united Asia front’ on lines which may not be entirely dissimilar from our own ideas on the subject. Personally, I rather doubt if Nehru’s scheme will succeed, firstly because he has cast the net too wide (Australia appears to be of this opinion) and secondly because India is not very much loved in Asia.⁴⁷

The regional grouping Nehru envisaged included the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand. The British, as inferred, were, by early 1949, already preparing their own Southeast Asian colonies for alliance into a non-communist bloc. In February 1949, the British Under-Secretary for the Colonies

44 Foreign Office to British High Commission Rangoon, Jan. 15 1949, FO 371/76003.

45 FO 371/76003, ‘Communism in South East Asia’, f. 34.

46 ‘Reds predict Asian alliance: Counter to communism’, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 Jan. 1949.

47 Top-secret message to Sir W. Strang, Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office (29 Mar. 1949), FO 371/76031 – ‘Combating communism in South East Asia: Proposed South East Asian regional cooperation’, f. 3.

David Rees-Williams confirmed that Britain's Southeast Asian colonies were slated to jointly become a self-governing dominion.⁴⁸ This was in some ways the germ of the later Malaysia. Msr Guibaut, the French Consul-General to Singapore in this period, was apparently an early advocate of some sort of alliance among powers in Southeast Asia. Malcolm MacDonald noted in February 1949 how at a social event, Guibaut:

reverted to his favourite theme of the desirability of concerting the policy of the 'colonial' powers in South East towards their respective dependencies ... His idea was that a set of principles – economic as well as political – a sort of colonial 'charter' as he described it, should be drawn up and agreed to by the powers concerned as well as by the Asian countries. His final idea was that, if as a result of the individual approaches now being made by H.M.G. to interested governments in regard to the possibility of cooperating their resistance to Communism, a conference of South East Asian governments were to be convened to crystallise the results, the opportunity should be taken of exploring the possibilities of seeking general acceptance of such a set of principles.⁴⁹

In March 1949, Malcolm MacDonald, Governor General of Malaya, reported that Commonwealth discussions on Southeast Asia should be held in the 'near future', in view of communist victories in China and their influence.⁵⁰ The following month, having been informed by the Foreign Office that high-level British considerations and decision-making on Southeast Asia would have to wait until later in the year or even 1950, MacDonald wrote back to the Foreign Office, powerfully stressing the importance of at least coordinated policy. MacDonald declared that it was impossible to leave the issues relating to Southeast Asia till the autumn or the following year. 'The sooner we can demonstrate that the Democratic powers have an agreed and coordinated policy in South East Asia, the stronger will be our influence on all the governments and populations in S. E. Asia who wish to resist Communism.'⁵¹

In Australia, a concern about communism in Southeast Asia was not particularly apparent. The Labour Prime Minister Mr Chifley, in a parliamentary debate, responded to parliamentarian Mr Abbott on connections between Southeast Asian and Australian communists, as follows: 'Briefly, I am not aware of any evidence to indicate any collaboration between the Communists in South East Asia and the Communists in Australia, or any definite connexion between Communists in South East Asia and Communists in other parts of the world.'⁵² However, Australian diplomats based in Asia were not quite so sanguine. Frank Keith Officer, the Australian Ambassador to China noted in a Top Secret letter dated 7 March 1949 to Foreign Minister H.V. Evatt, that:

48 'Real blow to Communists', *South China Morning Post*, 19 Feb. 1949. NAA A1838 383/5/1 Part 1, 'South East Asia: Communism in South East Asia'.

49 Malcolm MacDonald to M.E. Dening (head of Southeast Asia section at Foreign Office) (3 Feb. 1949), FO 371/76031 – 'Combating communism in South East Asia: Proposed South East Asian regional cooperation', f. 22.

50 Letter from MacDonald to Foreign Office (22 Mar. 1949), FO 371/76031 – 'Combating communism in South East Asia: Proposed South East Asian regional cooperation', f. 92.

51 Letter from Malcolm MacDonald to Sir William Strang (3 Apr. 1949), FO 371/76031 – 'Combating communism in South East Asia: Proposed South East Asian regional cooperation', f. 48.

52 Australian House of Representatives Hansard, 15 Mar. 1949, FO 371/76004 [f. 35].

There seems little doubt that there will be in the not too far distant future a Communist or Communist-dominated Government in China. This will create a new situation in South-East Asia and give, probably, a great impetus to Communist movements in that area. This will be the more so because of the large Chinese communities in Indo-China, Siam, Burma and Malaya and, though not quite as large, in Indonesia. For this reason, though it might appear to be somewhat outside our competence, the situation has been the subject of discussion with my United States, United Kingdom and Indian colleagues, and we have set out our views in a joint memorandum.⁵³

The memorandum proposed, in the light of the ultimate aim of a confederated South-East Asia, the establishment of a 'permanent Consultative Council of the states and territories in the area which could elaborate and apply common policies and provide for an economy capable of resisting Communist economic doctrines'. Recognising the unstable situations in Indo-China and Indonesia, it suggested 'that the states most interested in the area, viz. the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia and India should take the lead and appoint a Committee of, say five, such experts to set to work to without delay to assemble the necessary facts and prepare a programme on the lines suggested in the memorandum'.

In some ways, it was the early 1949 planning by non-communist states to coordinate policy, and to build counter-blocs to the forces of communism, particularly in response to a communist party imminently coming to power in a major Asian polity, which could be said to mark the beginning of coordinated response to perceived communist threats and thus the beginning of a true Cold War in Southeast Asia.

The British Joint Intelligence Committee's April 1949 report on 'Communism in the Far East' noted:

During the past six months the communist strategic plan for the creation of a militant communist front throughout the Far East has continued to develop. The Chinese communist successes have brought this design a long step nearer to completion ... Although no proof is available, there are strong indications that Russia must have delegated to the Chinese Communist Party (C.C.P.) at least some measure of responsibility for building what Mao Tse-tung has termed 'a bulwark of world Communism in Asia.' It therefore seems that Russia has no doubt about the present loyalty of the C.C.P. to the first communist state. Certainly the C.C.P. with its overseas branches or cells in Siam, French Indo-China, Malaya, Indonesia, the Philippines, Burma and Hong Kong is in a unique position to assist the rapid spread of Communism ... So far there is little detailed information regarding direct assistance by the overseas branches of the C.C.P. to indigenous Communist parties, but this must be expected to develop on an increasing scale. There are already signs that it may have begun in French Indo-China, Malaya and the Philippines ... Indications that India might attempt to form a neutral Asian bloc have produced an immediate and strong reaction from both Moscow and the Indian communists ... New trends now developing include an increase in the communist activity in the China/French Indo-China/Burma border areas, and a possible new line of attack by the communist-dominated international fronts, including the World

53 Top Secret Despatch 11/49 Australian Embassy Nanking to H.V. Evatt, in NAA A4145/RC2, 'Communism in China (particularly SE Asia) and affiliations of Chinese Communist Party'.

Federation of Democratic Youth, the international Union of Students and the Women's International Democratic Federation. It appears that these will endeavour to continue their proselytising activities through large Chinese communist fronts now in the process of formation.⁵⁴

The British were, during 1949, reflecting concerns about these events to their major Atlantic partner, with the aim of gaining at least tacit support for the creation of a united front in the region. M.E. Dening, the top Asia aide to British Foreign Secretary Bevin wrote to H.A. Graves, at the British Embassy in Washington, in early 1949, indicating that Britain had 'decided to consult with all the interested powers about the menace of Communism likely to result from the China situation'. The despatch continued: 'The first task as we see it is for the Asiatic countries concerned to take the Communist menace seriously and try to set their own houses in order ... I think that it would be helpful to be able to mention that both the Americans and we are firmly wedded to the principle of self-help in the first place ... It is not going to be easy for Asiatic countries to set their houses in order, and for various reasons it is equally not going to be easy to induce them to adopt a common front.'⁵⁵ Likely not coincidentally, it was also in this year that we began to see the development of anti-communist police and intelligence links between Britain and India, Pakistan and Ceylon.⁵⁶

But the Americans were less than forthcoming in terms of willingness to engage themselves in Southeast Asia at this time. Commenting on the representations made to Washington, R.H. Scott of the Foreign Office noted to its Bangkok Embassy in May: 'The Americans, with whom this problem of help for Siam had been discussed in Washington, have told us that they consider Siam to be primarily our responsibility and they have hinted strongly that, having had their fingers burned in China, they are unwilling to risk burning them further in South East Asia.'⁵⁷ The British were thus left to row their own boat in the Southeast Asian Cold War. It was a Cold War in which the Americans were initially not involved. By mid-1949, however, the US State Department's Policy Planning Staff was urging renewed engagement with Southeast Asia to overcome the perception that United States policy towards Asia was 'suffering from an acute case of negativism'.⁵⁸

At the same time as concerns about communist victories in China begin to appear in British official documents, so do comments on the possible connections between the Chinese Communist Party and the 1948 Southeast Asian uprisings. The Commissioner-General's Office at Phoenix Park in Singapore noted to the Foreign Office: 'We also entirely agree with SIFE's view that the decision to embark

54 'Communism in the Far East', JIC (FE) (49) 9 (Final) (1 April 1949), NAA A1838 383/5/1 Part 2, 'South East Asia: Communism in South East Asia'.

55 FO 371/76003, 'Communism in South East Asia'.

56 See CO 537/2651 'Security Arrangements – Far East: Communism in South East Asia'.

57 R.H. Scott of Foreign Office to Bangkok (5 May 1949) FO 371/76004, 'Communism in South East Asia'.

58 Memorandum by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Kennan) submitted to Under Secretary of State (Webb) and Deputy Under Secretary of State (Rusk), 'Suggested course of action in East and South Asia', *Foreign Relations of the United States 1949*, vol. VII, The Far East and Australasia, pp. 1147–51.

on a policy of open violence was taken before the Calcutta Conference of February 1948 not least because the view advanced in the paper appears to ignore Mao Tse-tung's statement of Dec 25th, 1947.⁵⁹ Later in the same year, the Colonial Office was expressing concerns that 'the M.C.P. intend to send personnel to China to organise banishees from Malaya and build up an M.C.P. organisation in China'.⁶⁰ The British Foreign Office was particularly attentive to a speech by Liu Shao-qi (Liu Shao-ch'i) in Beijing in late 1949, which encouraged liberation movements in Malaya and elsewhere. In the speech Liu emphasised 'that armed struggle was the only way of colonial liberation, that this armed struggle should be aggressive not defensive, and that it should everywhere be organised on the Chinese model'.⁶¹

The middle of 1949 also saw the publication of a key statement on how the British viewed communism and the successive uprisings in Southeast Asia. Entitled 'Coordination of communist strategy in South East Asia' (SEA/9/1949),⁶² it was compiled by the South East Asia Department of the Foreign Office, at the request of the I.R.D. It set out its thesis as follows:

An examination of the marked increase in Communist activities in South East Asia in the last 18 months leaves little doubt that the Communists in the region do indeed conform to a general plan of action. It appears also that the origin of this increase in activities is to be found in Europe, and not in Asia.

It proceeded to suggest that the Southeast Asian revolutionary activities resulted from a grand Soviet plan aimed at opposing the Marshall Plan in Europe and that this required offensives in both Europe and its colonies. It suggests that the spirit of the new offensives was included in the Conference of the Nine Communist Parties held in Poland in September 1947, at which the decision was made to establish a Communist Information Bureau and at which Zhdanov made his two-camps speech. On the basis of this, in December 1947, the communist parties of India⁶³ and Burma decided to reorient their policy. Apparently also in response to this need, the study notes, in December 1947 Mao Zedong said that all anti-imperialist forces of the East must unite against imperialism. This spirit was carried on in the February 1948 Youth Conference held in Calcutta alongside the Conference of the Indian Communist Party, where the Foreign Office report claims, a South East Asian communist bloc was 'possibly discussed'. There was a marked increase in communist activity in South East Asia soon thereafter.

59 Letter from Commissioner-General's Office at Phoenix Park Singapore to the South East Asia Department, Foreign Office, 11 Feb. 1949. FO 371/76003, 'Communism in South East Asia'.

60 O.H. Morris of Colonial Office to R.H. Scott of the Foreign Office, noting concerns in *Pan-Malayan Review*, no. 21 (12 Oct. 1949). FO 371/76005, 'Communism in South East Asia'.

61 FO 371/76005, 'Communism in South East Asia'.

62 'Coordination of communist strategy in South East Asia' (SEA/9/1949). FO 371/76004 [f. 77 onwards].

63 The report further expands this statement noting that the return to India from Moscow in late 1947 of S.A. Dange of the Communist Party of India was a key factor in the changes which took place in the party, the Central Committee of which went on to approve a paper 'On the Present Policy and Tasks of the Communist Party of India', which urged reorientation of the party. The party then 'engaged in disorder' and was banned by the West Bengal government, but the party still shifted its headquarters from Bombay to Calcutta (which the FO report notes is closer to Southeast Asia).

Citing a Burmese report by Than Tun, leader of the Communist Party of Burma, claiming that advice to communist insurrection had been given during discussions between Burmese and 'foreign representatives' in Calcutta, the report also notes that plans for revolution in Southeast Asia could have been made earlier, as 30 Malayan Chinese communists had been sent from Malaya to French Indo-China 'for training' in March 1947.

The report then chimes in with other expressed British concerns in this period about the growing role of China in these revolutions. 'A highly significant factor is the growing influence of the Communist Party of China in South East Asia during the period under review.' A Chinese directive supposedly issued on 1 January 1948 said: 'Today is the start of victory for proletarian revolution ... The Chinese Communist party will use their whole strength to build up and develop all the Communist parties in the South Sea Islands and will unite all those parties closely, so that they may become the stronghold of Asia and a vanguard of world revolution.' The Foreign Office authors of the report then note: 'The growing influence of Mao Tse-tung in South East Asia is remarkable', and continue:

It would thus appear that the Chinese are now serving as the main instrument for encouraging Communist action in South East Asia. They are, indeed, in an advantageous position for such a purpose owing to the presence of numerous Chinese immigrants in all the countries of the area for whom the South China Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party serves as a medium of contact. The Bureau does not, so far as is known, exercise any executive function, but it acts as a channel of communication between the party in China and the Chinese communities in South China Asia.

There is thus a discernible pattern in the events of the last 18 months. The general picture which emerges is that late in 1947 in pursuance of the line prescribed by the Cominform in Europe, the Communist parties throughout South East Asia resolved to accelerate the pace, to abandon their previous policies of giving limited support to the national governments and to go into active opposition. Doubtless advantage was taken of the meetings in Calcutta in February and March 1948 to discuss policy and methods, but the decision to act had already been taken at least by the leaders in India and Burma. It appears also that there is a growing tendency to look to China as the source of immediate assistance and inspiration.

As not all uprisings occurred simultaneously, the situation would thus appear to be that all the various parties adopted the same line of policy, but that the precise form and timing of rebellion were left to local decision in each case. The evidence also indicates that the failure to act promptly in Indonesia led to the application of additional stimulus through Moeso.

That the adoption of violence was inspired from without is also suggested by another consideration. In most of the countries of the area where Communist disorders occurred in 1948, the Communists were prior to these outbreaks already in a strong position *vis-à-vis* the national governments ... It is hard to believe that they would have abandoned their advantageous positions and that they should have entered into a life-and-death struggle with the national authorities without some very strong stimulus, and that they adopted the same rash line of action, can only be by the assumption that they were responding to some inspiration applied to them all. It would therefore be

incorrect to speak of any coordination of Communist strategy within South East Asia itself ... Whether this situation will continue is open to question. The growth of Chinese Communist influence in South East Asia may be the prelude to an imposition of control through the Chinese.⁶⁴

This is possibly the most concise description of how the British saw the Cold War threat against them in Southeast Asia in 1949. The impetus to violence was seen as deriving from the Soviet Union through Cominform, being transmitted through the Calcutta meetings and being manifested in diverse ways locally in accordance with individual situations. The potential for the Chinese Communist Party to coordinate communist policy throughout Southeast Asia was now seen as an obvious threat. The great threat at this time, thus, derived not from the Soviet Union but from the soon-to-be communist China. The People's Republic of China was indeed proclaimed in Beijing on 1 October 1949.

British intelligence on Asia from this time on tended to concentrate on the Chinese and their potential threat. A report by the Joint Intelligence Committee Far East of 10 November 1949, entitled 'Forecast of possible military and political activities of the Chinese communists in South East Asia 1950–52' illustrates this well. The report noted that the Chinese communists would likely 'give active encouragement to subversive movements in South East Asia countries, dispatching small groups of specialists and quantities of arms in support of them'. It set down the threats which existed in respect of Indo-China, Burma, Malaya, Borneo and Indonesia, further recording the concern that: 'The Chinese communities form a potentially dangerous fifth column in all countries in Southeast Asia', but suggesting that the danger was not so significant in Indonesia and Burma.⁶⁵

By the end of 1949, there was a strong feeling of the need for an alliance of powers in Southeast Asia (or South and Southeast Asia), which, if not anti-communist, was at least not allied to the communist camp. Initially, India was active in pushing itself as the appropriate nation to lead this battle. When President Romulo of the Philippines held discussions with the British Secretary of State for the Colonies in New York in November 1949, his stand was reported as follows:

There had always been among Eastern people a fatalistic tendency and just now when America had been more or less defeated in China, and was cutting her losses, countries such as his own were having the greatest difficulty in countering the line which their local Communists are putting out. They argue that since America is defeated and since Britain is taking no interest, why not accept the inevitable and make terms with Soviet Russia and other Communist governments. He thought that there was a great need for a 'Union of South East Asia' – the Philippines, Burma, India, Pakistan, Siam, Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand. The Union would not, he stressed, be an anti-Communist one. He had discussed the proposal with Nehru.⁶⁶

64 'Coordination of communist strategy in South East Asia' (SEA/9/1949). FO 371/76004 [f. 77 onwards].

65 FO 371/76005, 'Communism in South East Asia'.

66 Telegram New York UK delegation to the United Nations to Foreign Office (26 Nov. 1949), in DO

Concurrently, the United States was beginning to pursue a policy of Cold War engagement with Southeast Asia. In December 1949, a National Security Council report to the US President set down a range of conclusions which were to condition United States' policy *vis-à-vis* Asia. It urged that 'the United States should act to support non-Communist forces in taking the initiative in Asia' and that 'the United States should make known its sympathy with the efforts of Asian leaders to form regional associations of non-Communist states of the various Asian areas'. As an overall guide to U.S. Cold War policy, it was stated that 'Active consideration should be given to means by which all members of the British Commonwealth may be induced to play a more active role in collaboration with the United States in Asia ... Recognizing that the non-Communist governments of South Asia⁶⁷ already constitute a bulwark against Communist expansion in Asia, the United States should exploit every opportunity to increase the present western orientation of the area and to assist, within our capabilities, its governments in their efforts to meet the minimum aspirations of their people and to maintain internal security.'⁶⁸ The United States had entered the Southeast Asia Cold War — at least in spirit.

The Cold War burgeons (1950)

The exigencies deriving from Britain's possession of the colony of Hong Kong and concerns about British Southeast Asian interests determined that Great Britain would quickly recognise the new People's Republic of China, and this it did in January 1950. But this action certainly did not restrain the British from pursuing Cold War strategies and anti-communist alliances. The Commonwealth Meeting on Foreign Affairs held in Colombo in January 1950 moved in the direction of thinking about a pact to combat communism. Noting that, as the West had become strong enough to resist Soviet aggression in Europe, the gathering observed that 'Russia had turned her attention to the East.' It was thus that 'There had been suggestions that the best way to meet the new threat was by concluding a Pacific Pact along the lines of the Atlantic Pact.'⁶⁹

This year of 1950 was to see a full explosion of Cold War phenomena in Asia, with the beginning of the Korean War, the Formosa Straits crisis, Dutch New Guinea issues and concerns over Nepal. It was thus that the United States was pulled back into the Asian theatre of the global Cold War, and there can be no doubt that from 1950 there was a true Cold War situation in Southeast and East Asia. How Britain saw these events is possibly best explained by the British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, who was interviewed on 23 December 1950 by the Australian Defence Minister Eric John Harrison⁷⁰ in London. Bevin noted:

35/2962 'Communism – Measures taken to combat the spread of communism in South East Asia', ff. 51–2.

67 Including the states of what we today call Southeast Asia.

68 A Report to the President by the National Security Council (NSC 48/2), 'The position of the United States with respect to Asia' (30 Dec. 1949), *Foreign Relations of the United States 1949*, vol. VII, The Far East and Australasia, pp. 1215–20. My thanks to Karl Hack for drawing my attention to this document.

69 Telegram from Colombo to Foreign Office. DO 35/2962 'Communism – Measures taken to combat the spread of communism in South East Asia', f. 31.

70 Eric John Harrison (1892–1974) Australian Minister of Defence was resident in Britain from April 1950 until March 1951.

that while he did not know what was going to happen in the Far East, he was coming to the conclusion as Dean Acheson had that there were two global strategies at work although it was not clear if they would come into direct conflict. So far as the Oriental Communists were concerned, it was clear that they were bent on driving every western power and influence out of Asia. He was not even sure that India was not included in the communist programme particularly in view of its western institutions and close relations with the west and accordingly took a very serious view of Kashmir. He thought that the Communists might seek to make this situation flare up when it suits them. The attempts to get Chinese into conflict with the Americans and bog down American troops had not, however, been successful and the Americans had escaped a very ugly situation ... In the West, the Russians were trying to neutralise Germany where it was obvious that fighting would have to take place in the first instance if Russian aims in Europe were to be achieved. ... I asked him to explain further his comments on India. He said that the Kashmir dispute left the Indian Frontier open and this might be a temptation to the Chinese ... In view of the possibility of a joint effort by the Communists in East and West the next six months were likely to be the most critical in the world's history.⁷¹

3. Conclusion

How then are we to assess when and how the Cold War came to Southeast Asia, or at least when the British considered that the Cold War had come to Southeast Asia? It can certainly be affirmed that the period between 1947 and 1950 did see the beginnings of a Cold War in Southeast Asia and indeed in the broader East Asia. But what criteria are we to utilise in determining when and how this occurred?

If we simply adopt the definition of the recognition by the British of rival political forces in a Left-Right conflict, with the Left pursuing political actions antipathetic to British/Western interests in Southeast Asia, then even by June 1946, the Cold War was in train. Locally the Malayan Communist Party was being seen as a potential rival for power in at least the Malay Peninsula, while the Far East policy paper drafted in the same year was premised on containment of the Soviet Union along a line of bases running from the Aleutians, through Taiwan to the Philippines. The Soviet Union was being seen by the British at this time as a European-Atlantic rival, with potential for activities of destabilisation in Southeast Asia, but not as an immediate threat in the region. The local communist parties were seen only as potential local threats.

The recognition of connections between the local communist parties in Southeast Asia and the 'global designs' of the Soviet Union might also be considered a marker for identifying the presence of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. In this case, we could assign the beginning of the Cold War in Southeast Asia to 1947, when the British saw these local communist parties as ultimately controlled by the Soviet Union. This date is supported even more by the fact that the British saw the awakening political consciousness of Southeast Asia as presenting an opportunity to themselves no less than to the instruments of the Soviet Union, underlining the political rivalry which so marked the Cold War.

71 NAA A11536/1 Top Secret – In CFCs [Cable File Copies], London, 1948 to 1950, 23 Dec. 1950.

If efforts to create an alliance or bloc of anti-communist, or at least non-communist forces, are used as a marker to confirm the existence of a Cold War, then the Southeast Asian Cold War would have commenced in late 1947, but it was only in 1948 and particularly 1949, with the burgeoning of communist power in China that we saw intense consideration and planning of non-communist alliances against the common threat. An actual body to manifest this sentiment was not however created until 1954, with the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO).

If the outbreak of armed violence led by Communist parties is to be used as a marker of the Cold War in Southeast Asia, then obviously 1948, with armed uprisings in Burma, Malaya, Indonesia and the Philippines must be seen as a key year. This year also saw increased understanding of the effects of CCP-KMT rivalry in China on the politics of Southeast Asia, as well as the rhetoric of Malcolm MacDonald, assuring Malayan radio listeners that 'Communist Russia is endeavouring to conquer the world' and 'now threatens the peoples of South-East Asia with a fate similar to that already suffered by the small nations of Eastern Europe'. But the subsequent recognition by British intelligence that the Soviet Union was caught by surprise by the violent uprisings in Southeast Asia undercut to some degree the claims of Soviet orchestration. Did these local uprisings in themselves constitute a Cold War in Southeast Asia?

The relative insignificance of Soviet activities in Southeast Asia meant, at least in 1948, that the various uprisings therein could be construed as local, almost entirely unconnected, hostilities, even though they did involve combat between communist parties and opponents who were generally associated with Western interests. But there needed to be an Asian Communist party in power to truly create the environment for the 'Cold War' to assume a presence and some significance in Southeast Asia. It was the Chinese Communist Party assumption of power in China that was to provide this impetus. Through 1949, the growing British attention to events in China – and concurrent downplaying of Soviet intentions – showed their increasing concern about the CCP which was building what Mao Tse-tung termed 'a bulwark of world communism in Asia'. As the Foreign Office report of 1949 noted with some trepidation: 'The growth of Chinese Communist influence in South East Asia may be the prelude to an imposition of control through the Chinese.' With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, thereby creating a powerful 'communist state in Asia, there was suddenly a regional focus for Asian (including Southeast Asian) communists, a focus for British fears and a potential rival for power and influence throughout Asia'. It was the other side of the Cold War equation necessary to balance and rival Western powers in Asia. The U.S. National Security Council's December 1949 report to the President on U.S. policy in Asia, which drew a sharp line between the communist and non-communist polities of Southeast Asia, and set policy by which to assist the latter, also suggests that the United States had entered a Southeast Asian Cold War in this year.

As such, the establishment of the PRC in late 1949 might well be termed the real beginning of the Cold War in Southeast Asia for the British, Australians and their allies around the globe, with this event giving rise to a situation where major global powers – diametrically opposed politically – pursued their rival political and economic agendas among Southeast and East Asian societies and provided foci around which the diverse political players and parties could gravitate.