

# ‘Second Colonial Occupation’: The United States and British Malaya 1945-1949

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## Abstract

This article examines the development of events after the World War II and how these events influenced the decolonisation process of British Southeast Asia. Britain returned to claim its colonial possessions in Southeast Asia after the defeat of Japan and proposed the Malayan Union plan to further consolidate its power in Malaya. However, Britain's plan was met with furious opposition from the Malays who demanded a better deal to protect their interest as natives of Malaya. This article also focuses on how the United States reacted towards the British policy in Southeast Asia. International events such as the Cold War, the fall of China to the Communists and the Korean War have deep impact on the policies of both Britain and the United States in Southeast Asia. The United States supported Britain to retain Malaya as one of its colonies and helped Britain in dealing with the Communists. The American and British policies of returning to their former colonies before World War II were also contrary to the Atlantic Charter formed by the allies during World War II. This article showed that the Western powers had no intention to immediately renounce colonialism at the end of World War II.

**Keyword:** Communists, British policy, Malaya, United States foreign policy

## 1. Introduction

The return of the British, Dutch and French to their former colonies in the Southeast Asia after the defeat of Japan is often referred as the ‘Second colonial occupation’. These Western powers tried to re-establish their sovereignty and return to the situation before World War II. World War II, however, had changed the perception of the natives towards their European masters. In Malaya, having seen the British defeat in 1942, the people had lost faith in British strength and wisdom. The natives in Indonesia and Indochina also strongly opposed the return of their colonial masters. The growth of nationalism and communism in Southeast Asia also affected the metropolises policies in their colonies.

In Europe, Britain emerged as a victorious nation at the end of the World War II in May 1945. However in the British colonies in Southeast Asia, the war still continued until mid-August. The war in the Pacific only ended with the Japanese surrender to the Allied forces on 15 August 1945. The Japanese surrender came just when the British and Indian troops gathered with their equipment at Indian ports for an assault upon the Japanese forces in Malaya.

## 2. Malaya, Sarawak and North Borneo

During the war years, British officials in London began preparing for the post-war reorganization of Malaya. The plan for Malaya aimed at maintaining British dominion over the territory which, apart from its economic significance, was vital for safeguarding Britain's influence in Southeast Asia. (Note 1) “We envisage the restoration of our sovereignty in both Hong Kong and the Straits Settlements and of our former treaty relations with the Malay States” declared the Colonial office in June 1942. (Note 2)

When the Japanese Army surrendered, a British Military Administration (BMA) was established under the Supreme Allied Commander to govern Malaya until civil government could be restored. The BMA administered

Malaya from early September 1945 until 31 March 1946. (Note 3) During this period, the British government prepared the new constitutional arrangements, which it proposed to introduce in Malaya.

Accordingly, the War Office and the Colonial Office established the Malayan Planning Unit (MPU) in the middle of 1943 to make the necessary preparation. Major-General H.R. Home was called from Cairo to take charge. (Note 4) The MPU was given the responsibility of drawing up directives covering all aspects of government, including a blueprint for the interim military government. It was announced that "the main aim of the government as regards the political future of Malaya after its liberation will be the development of its capacity for self government within the Empire." (Note 5) The proposal which was officially announced on 10 October 1945 by the Labour Government contained some radical changes in the country's administrative set-up. (Note 6) In this proposal the Federated Malay States and the Unfederated Malay States, two of the Straits Settlements (Penang and Malacca) were to be joined together in a Malayan Union while Singapore was to be treated as a separate colony.

The plan for Malaya showed no hints of any desire from Britain to abandon the colonial rule in this area. The plans drawn up in London during and immediately after the war revealed instead a determination to extend and strengthen British control of the peninsula. (Note 7) Malaya was to be transformed into a proper colonial state with an effective central administration that would accelerate its economic development and provide more effectively for its defence.

The plan also revealed two vital assumptions about Malaya's future importance to the British imperial system. Before the war, Malaya had produced one third of the world's tin and a very substantial share of its rubber. Most of these products had been sold to the United States for dollars. Malaya's trade was more valuable than that of New Zealand and more than half that of India. (Note 8) Economically, Malaya was a young and dynamic colony whose value to Britain was certain to increase; indeed its ability to earn dollars was likely to be critical after the war. Secondly, British did not intend to abandon their old commercial role in East Asia and China when the war ended. To guard their eastern sea routes they were determined to re-establish themselves firmly in Singapore with a stronger Malaya under British rule to protect its hinterland. Malaya was the vital strategic defence on the eastern side of British Asia, as well as its weakest and most fragmented unit. (Note 9) Now it was to be joined together for the better to serve the purpose of imperial policy.

Before the war, Britain had avoided a serious trade imbalance with the dollar area through a system of triangular trade. The British had been creditors to underdeveloped sterling nations, sending more in value of manufactured goods to these nations than it accepted in value of raw material from them. Britain was in debt to the dollar area, particularly the United States. A balance, however, was maintained by the third link in the system: the undeveloped sterling nations exported raw material to the United States, and, because their modest needs for finished goods were largely met by the British, they obtained American dollars in payment for their raw materials. The British then accepted these dollars as payment for their surplus exports to the other sterling nations. The entire sterling area was thus involved in balancing the British dollar deficit. (Note 10)

During the post-war period, while the Labour government imposed an austerity policy at home, the British generously spent money and effort on Malaya in an effort to reconstruct the triangular trade. First they attempted to revive rubber and tin production. Second, the government encouraged producers to increase exports of rubber and tin to the United States, the largest source of dollars. (Note 11) Between 1945 and 1949, the government spent £86 million on Malaya in grants and loans, and much of this was directed at rubber estates and tin mines.

In Sarawak the British which had minimal influence in its internal affairs, planned to establish direct rule in order to strengthen British position in Southeast Asia. In 1943, British began to plan its future relations with Sarawak. However, negotiations between the Colonial Office and the representatives of Sarawak state government broke down in February 1945 when the representatives of Sarawak refused to allow Britain a decisive voice in its internal administration. (Note 12) In October 1945, the talks were resumed with Rajah Sir Charles Vyner Brooke. The Rajah, who was faced with tremendous difficulties of rebuilding and modernizing the state, not only agreed with the British demand but he also proposed to transfer Sarawak to the British Crown. The British government agreed to accept the proposal on the condition that it was agreed by the population of Sarawak. It was the Malays, who strongly resented the proposed transfer because they were afraid to lose their position as the most privileged group in Sarawak's bureaucracy. The opposition from the Malays however, did not prevent Sarawak from being handed over to the British government. Sarawak became a Crown colony on 1 July 1946.

The status of North Borneo was renewed as Crown colony on 15 July 1946 when the British North Borneo Company transferred its power to the Colonial Office. This territory used to be administered by the British North

Borneo Company under directives of the British government. However, at the end of the war, the company was unable to cope with the difficulties in rebuilding and rehabilitation, leading to its president Sir Neill Malcolm, to ask the British government for assistance. The agreement was reached in June 1946 when the British government agreed to take over the possessions, interests and sovereign rights of the company against a provisional sum of £860,000. (Note 13)

### 3. The Malayan Union Plan

The plan for Malaya was revealed immediately after the British resumed its administration late in 1945. The plan was a Malayan Union, consisting of the Malay States and the Settlements of Penang and Malacca, to be established under a Governor, who was to have full powers over the civil service but would not be responsible to the Legislative Council. (Note 14) The council itself was to be reorganized in order to include an equal number of official and unofficial members. The unofficial members, who would represent a large section of the population, were to be appointed by the Governor, who was also to have the right to veto any law. The Sultans, who had previously been the Heads of their own States, were to become mere advisers, with the right to sit on the Council of Rulers, which would give advice to the Governor upon request. Singapore was to be treated as a separate Crown Colony with its own Governor. The British Governor-General was to be appointed over Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo Territories.

The new proposals involved a complete change in Malaya's political structure. First and foremost, the British Crown was to take over the powers of the Sultans, who were reduced to the status of Religious Heads of their States. (Note 15) Previously, the Sultans had exercised their administrative powers through the State Councils. A large measure of administrative authority was to be taken over by the Central Government under the Governor. The Governor would be advised by the Sultans, but was not bound by their advice. (Note 16) In short, the Sultans were to become figureheads without authority or power. The pre-war policy of ruling through the Sultans was to be abandoned and the British had evidently decided to take over the government themselves.

A Malay advisory Council was to be established in each State to deal only with religious matters. Local and State government were to be established through State and Settlement Councils. The real ruler in each of the States and Settlements was the Resident Commissioner who, as chairman of the State or Settlements Council, was responsible not to the Malay Rulers, but to the Governor. The ultimate power rested with the Governor-in-Council. (Note 17) It was he who delegated powers of purely local nature to the State and Settlement Council; and in the Union Legislature he had the ultimate power to alter, repeal or declare void any State or Settlement laws, if they were repugnant to Union Legislation. It was also proposed that laws should henceforth be signed and ratified not by the Sultans but by the Governor. (Note 18)

Throughout the Union, citizenship was to be opened to the immigrant races. (Note 19) Malays, Chinese, Indians and others if linked with Malaya by local birth or a prescribed period of residence were to be eligible for Malayan Union citizenship. A residential qualification of ten out of the previous fifteen years would automatically entitle a person to citizenship. Citizens could enjoy full political rights but still, if they wished, retain their status as British, Chinese or Indian nationals. (Note 20) The whole conception of the Malay Rulers' sovereignty and the Malays as the privileged indigenous community was to be replaced by a system of equal rights for all. (Note 21) The immediate significance of this proposal was that all the new citizens would be eligible for membership of the Malayan Union Legislative Council and of the State or Settlement Councils, and for positions in the public services. (Note 22) It was very clear that the British government had chosen to abandon its pre-war pro-Malay policy. To complete this policy of political equalization of the Chinese, Indians, and Malays, it was further proposed that the members of any Council, other than those of the Council of the Sultans and of the Malay Advisory Council, should take an oath of allegiance to the British monarch instead of to a Malay Ruler. (Note 23)

The setting of these institutions required that the British Government should acquire *de jure* jurisdiction in the Malay States. Sir Harold MacMichael was accordingly appointed as His Majesty's special representative to visit Malaya and to conclude with each Ruler on behalf of His Majesty's government, a formal agreement by which he would cede full jurisdiction in his State to His Majesty. (Note 24) MacMichael arrived in Malaya with very important powers. Not only was he to get the treaties signed, but he was also to inquire into the conduct of the Sultans during the Japanese occupation and to decide whether or not they were fit to rule. (Note 25) This task had been delegated to Brigadier H C Willan, Deputy Chief Civil Affairs Officer Malaya, who toured the Malay States from 8 to 29 September 1945 and interviewed each Malay ruler in order to assess their roles during the Japanese occupation, their allegiance to the British and the credentials of those who had ascended their thrones during the Japanese occupation. Willan extensive reports prepared the ground for MacMichael's mission to

conclude new treaties. (Note 26) Whatever the intentions of the British the additional power in MacMichael's hands might well be regarded as a threat to the position of the Sultans – either they signed the new treaties or they would be branded as collaborators and removed. (Note 27)

At this time Malaya was in a state of political ferment and social unrest. The sufferings inflicted by the war that had just ended were aggravated by a countrywide rice shortage. The disbanded Malayan Peoples Anti Japanese Army (MPAJA) had gone underground where it affected liaison with the Malayan Communist Party. MPAJA's members joined the Chinese dominated Malayan Democratic Union (MDU), formed in December 1945, and the General Labour Union. They fomented strikes, and staged a celebration to commemorate the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1946, without the government's approval. Amidst these chaotic conditions MacMichael fulfilled his mission and took back to London the documents of surrender signed by the nine Malay Rulers. (Note 28)

The Malay Rulers felt that the British had failed to appreciate their awkward position following the long period of Japanese domination, and because they had been pressed for an urgent reply; they had had little time for consultation. They were also afraid that the British Government might not recognize them as worthy Rulers if they refused to sign the Malayan Union Agreement. As for the Malay people, the more they examined the treaties the more they were convinced that they were being politically degraded to a mere colonial status and that their Sultans were being made to descend to the level of 'serf in a crown bureaucracy'. (Note 29) In the idea of common citizenship they saw that the Chinese, numerous and prolific as they were, would acquire political supremacy over the Malays as a race and that the rights of the Malays as the 'sons of the soil' would be jeopardized. It was this feeling of insecurity that prompted the Malays to form political associations all over the country.

The most powerful organization was Dato Onn's national movement of Peninsular Malays. Inspired by the widespread spirit of patriotism, Dato Onn called upon all Malay political associations to consolidate their strength in a United Malays Organization to fight against the imposition of the Malayan Union. (Note 30) In March 1946 a delegation from 41 Malay associations met in Kuala Lumpur and they resolved that the new all-Malay political association be named 'United Malays National Organization' (UMNO) instead of the originally 'United Malays Organization'. Dato Onn was the organization's first President and UMNO rejected unanimously the Malayan Union Treaties.

The British Government was shocked by the strength of the opposition to the Union plan. After some hesitation, the Government suspended the citizenship clauses, but decided to go ahead with the other proposals. (Note 31) On 1 April 1946, the British Military Administration came to an end and a Malayan Union was established with Sir Edward Gent as Governor. As a mark of protest, the Malays boycotted the Advisory Councils and the Sultans did not attend the Swearing-in Ceremony of the new Governor.

It did not take the new Governor long to realize that the Union was a failure and that without the Malays support it could not work. As far as the Chinese and the Indians were concerned, the proposals were in their favour. But their leaders did not give the Union the strong backing that the Government might have expected from them. If the Chinese and the Indians leader had shown their sympathy and support for the British proposal, the British Government would have got something to hold on to. But this they did not do. The only supporters of the Malayan Union were members of the Malayan Nationalist Party, which contained Communist reactionary elements. On the recommendations of the Governor, the British Government had no option but to withdraw the Malayan Union proposal in favour of a Federation, as proposed by Dato Onn.

#### **4. The Federation of Malaya, 1948**

On 1 February 1948, the Federation of Malaya, comprising the nine Malay States and the Settlements of Penang and Malacca, was established to replace the Malayan Union. Singapore remained a separate Crown Colony outside the Federation in deference to the fears of the Malays that the Malayan Chinese would dominate them if Singapore's one million Chinese included to Malaya. (Note 32) The Malays distrusted or feared the Chinese because of their numbers, their wealth and commercial power, and also their potential political power. This is why Singapore was excluded from the Federation. (Note 33)

With the establishment of the federation, the Federal Government was set up under a High Commissioner. (Note 34) The High Commissioner would be advised by a Federal Executive Council. Besides this, Council of Rulers, or the Majlis Raja Negeri Melayu would also advised the High Commissioner on Immigration.

The citizenship proposals of the Malayan Union plan were dropped and a more restricted arrangement was taken. All people born in the Federation and their children were granted automatic citizenship. Fifteen years residence

out of the proceeding twenty years, knowledge of English or Malay, and a Citizenship Oath were required of all others. (Note 35)

The Federation was more than a compromise. The powers of the Sultans and the States, threatened by Malayan Union, were not only restored but also strengthened. The Mentri Besar replaced the British Resident. (Note 36) Unofficial members enjoyed an improved position in both State and Federal Councils. In addition, the Malays were in a majority position at all times.

In the meantime, the Federation of Malaya was formed against a background of unrest. The Communists bid to establish control of the country after the Japanese surrender had been defeated by the resumption of British rule and disbandment of the Malayan Peoples Anti Japanese Army (MPAJA). However, the communists by no means abandoned their objective. They sought to exploit fresh opportunities after the legalization of the Malayan Communist Party; and the post-war revival of trade unions. In the political field, the Communists participated in a Chinese-dominated group known as the All Malayan Council for Joint Action (AMCJA). (Note 37) The AMCJA was also partly based on the trade unions, through which a series of strikes were launched. There was a clear attempt to disrupt the economy through labour and political agitation. The Communists then turned increasingly to armed violence especially in the form of intimidation by murder and armed destruction. This was applied at economic installations such as roads, railways, tin mines, plantations and police stations, so as to cause maximum chaos and disruption.

### 5. The Emergency

The increasingly violent armed uprising by the Communists had alarmed the government. On 18 June 1948, the British authority declared the state of Emergency. (Note 38) The government believed that the Communists in Malaya rose after the anti-imperialist directive of the Belgrade Cominform in September 1947. (Note 39) Cominform or Communist Information Bureau was formed in 1947 as a response to the intensification of the Cold War situation in Europe especially after the announcement of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. In February 1948, the Southeast Asian Youth Conference, organized by the communist-oriented World Federation of Democratic Youth and the International Union of Students was held in Calcutta. This conference was widely believed to be the occasion where Moscow's command to create confusion was passed on to the local communist parties. (Note 40) At this conference verbal attacks were made against the policies of the United States and the colonial powers. The conference also ruled out any co-operation with the 'bourgeois nationalists' as these nationalists tend to make bargain with the imperialist powers, so they claimed.

Apart from the Calcutta Conference, the armed opposition was also decided upon by the local communist leaders on the grounds of purely local political and social conditions. The central executive committee of the Malayan Communist Party decided in March 1948 to launch a campaign of violence. Britain's withdrawal from India and Burma apparently led the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) to believe that the British would be forced to withdraw from Malaya if sufficient strife was fomented and a state of economic chaos created. The plan for this campaign could have been made earlier. As early as March 1947 some thirty Chinese Communists were sent from Malaya to Indochina for training in guerrilla warfare.

According to the Colonial Office's assessment, the MCP was exclusively Chinese dominated. The MCP was not popular among the Malays probably because the Malays viewed Communism as a Chinese movement directed from the Chinese mainland. (Note 41) The American Vice-Consul in Singapore, Robert J Jantzen, reported that in February 1947 the total strength of MCP was about 12,400 of which 90% were Chinese and the remainder mainly Indian. This number represented less than 0.5% of the total population of Malaya. (Note 42) The tactics of the communists in Malaya, as well as Burma and Indonesia were broadly based on the Chinese communists' example involving guerrilla warfare, the destruction of capitalist economy and the establishment of communist-controlled areas as bases for expansion. The success of the communists in China, and the influx of more efficient leaders from that country, led to a renewed of violence early in 1949 and a further reorganization of the terrorist forces. (Note 43)

One of the British administration's first measures to deal with the emergency in Malaya was to ban all potentially subversive associations, especially those with communist affiliations. The Malayan Communist Party itself and its allied organisations were declared illegal organisations five days after the declaration of the Emergency. (Note 44) Police and military forces were sharply increased. There were about 20,000 regular troops, 60,000 police and 40,000 home guard.

In 1950, Director of Operations, General Sir Harold Briggs, initiated a system for isolating the communists. (Note 45) The Briggs Plan involved removing the Chinese squatters from the jungle fringes to new resettlements in New Villages where they could be controlled and defended. This plan was carried out in order to cut the

channels of communication, recruitment, and supply between the squatters and the communist guerrillas. The resettlement program was immensely difficult but it had to be done because the overseas Chinese in Malaya are a potential 'fifth column'. The British authority tended to see an enemy in all Chinese because it faced a Chinese enemy during the Emergency. Besides this, the overseas Chinese communities formed one of the most important elements in the strength of the Communists in Asia. The Communists were able to work on these communities without encountering resistance by employing the threat of reprisals against their relatives in China. (Note 46)

The first phase of the Emergency ended in October 1951. In that month the British High Commissioner, Sir Henry Gurney, was murdered in a communist ambush on his way to Frasers Hill with his wife. General Sir Gerald Templer who had recently been Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff was appointed as the new High Commissioner of Malaya in February 1952. The new High Commissioner's 'primary task' in Malaya was "the restoration of law and order, so that this barrier to progress may be removed". (Note 47) By April the new measures in force included the destruction of rice corps that were likely sources of supply for the terrorists and the punishment of villages (such as 22 hour curfew and the curtailment of rice rations) whose representatives would not co-operate with the authorities. Supplies were further denied to the Communists by the complete banning under the severest penalties of the carrying of food in certain areas. Other areas where the situation had been brought under control were declared 'White areas'. In these areas normal life was resumed.

Throughout the period of Emergency, Britain saw the Cold War in Asia in a global perspective. Though critically important, in the global context this region was not vital to Britain's survival. In the defence planning, Southeast Asia had a lower priority than Western Europe and the Middle East. (Note 48) In Southeast Asia, especially in Malaya, the British had taken efforts to build up the local security forces and civil administrations to a point at which, only a minimum of external assistance needed.

The Emergency operation was also expensive. The estimated cost for 1951 was £56,900,000 of which £900,000 was borne by Australia. (Note 49) The cost of the Emergency was divided into the Malayan Treasury and British Government Treasury. The Malayan Treasury financed the Federation Army, which consisted of eight battalions whereas the British Government financed the seven British Battalions, six Gurkha, one Fijian and one Rhodesian. In 1953, the Emergency cost the Malayan Treasury £24 million, a figure that dropped to £20 million in 1954. In short, the gross cost to the British Government and the Malayan Government together of the military, police and home guard forces engaged in Emergency duties and of measures designed solely to combat militant Communism in Malaya, was not far short of £100 million a year. (Note 50)

## **6. The United States' Intentions in Southeast Asia**

The spread of Communism in the Southeast Asia region was one of the important factors paving the way for a closer United States and Malayan relations. Due largely to American fears over the spread of Communism in the region, the US government set up an American consulate in Kuala Lumpur on 6 October 1947. (Note 51) The American consul in Kuala Lumpur, William L. Blue believed that Kuala Lumpur was an important reporting post and to monitor the "communists power drive" in Southeast Asia. He also stressed that Malaya was bound to be affected by the development in China due to the fact that half of its population was of the Chinese race. (Note 52)

The United States throughout the 1946-1949 period continued to view Malaya as being under British sphere of influence as Britain remained the ruling power and the United States appreciated many of the problems the British faced in counterinsurgency. One of the American responses to the Emergency was by shipping limited supplies of small arms and ammunition to Malaya. These supplies were delivered by air mainly to American tin mines and rubber plantations to protect their personnel because many of these managers had been the targets of assassinations. (Note 53) The sending of these arms could be interpreted as a token of support for the British struggle in Malaya. The United States also encouraged the Thais to cooperate with Great Britain against Communist guerrillas who were trying to evade British forces and moved into the Thai jungle for refuge and recruitment. (Note 54)

The United States paid special attention to the situation in Thailand because the problems in Thailand and Malaya seemed to be related. Internally, Thailand was threatened by Chinese Communists who were attempting to gain control of the more than three million Chinese. In northern Malaya to the south of Thailand, there were strong Chinese communist-led guerrillas who were in revolt against the British authorities. This guerrillas' principal sphere of action lay along the Malaya-Thailand border. The Department of State felt that if Thailand should be lost to the communists, then it would be unlikely that Malaya could be held. This would mean that from Korea to India, there would be no place on the Asian mainland where the United States would have an open friend and ally. (Note 55) Furthermore, the United States would be unable to secure such strategic materials such

as tungsten, tin and rubber in their present quantities. It was clear that these two states were of considerable political and economic importance to the United States.

The Truman administration's policy making was undertaken in the context of the then existing Soviet-American hostility. (Note 56) The Administration believed that the post war world was frozen into two irreconcilable blocs and that the Communist Bloc, under the control of the Soviet Union, sought to extend its rule throughout the world. Following the advice of the Soviet expert George F. Kennan, the administration had since early 1947 pursued a policy of containment of the Soviet bloc. The United States offered a combination of political, economic and military support to its allies in the non-Communist world to inoculate these countries against Communists expansion or subversion and to help rebuild their economies in order to assure a high volume of open, multilateral trade. American policy, in short, was designed to ensure the success of liberal capitalism. (Note 57) It was vital that Southeast Asia become productive, exporting, as it had before the war, rice and raw material, and importing from Japan and Western Europe the finished goods it needed. The United States was also aware that if Southeast Asia was to fall within the Soviet orbit then America would be denied raw materials and that its military, naval and air positions in the East would be further jeopardised. (Note 58)

The United States loans and grants to assist in the economic recovery of the United Kingdom indirectly helped her to make various contributions to Malaya after World War II. Besides the US loans to the United Kingdom, the United States through its 'Program of Assistance for the General Area of China', allocated \$5 million to the Malay States from overall allocation of \$75million. (Note 59) The Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that from a military point of view, the program of assistance were to be conducted simultaneously in Indochina, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaya. This program aimed to deter or prevent the further encroachment of Communism in the Far East.

With regard to Malaya, most of the State Department officials believed that Malayan communists were in league with the Kremlin. (Note 60) The United States minister in Thailand, Edwin Stanton, mentioned that "there was real possibility that the disturbances in Malaya were organised from the Soviet Legation in Bangkok". Apart from Stanton, the American vice-consul in Singapore, Robert J. Jantzen also believed that the United States was fighting the Soviet Union in fighting Malayan Communism. Jantzen stated that "MCP activities may well tie in with International communist policy rather than have exclusively local aims." In addition, the violent crimes in Malaya were charged due to attempt by the Soviet to create political chaos. The United States also accused that the Kremlin sought to replace the Western powers in Southeast Asia by posing as the champion of colonial peoples in the struggle for independence. (Note 61) British officials in London tended to agree with the American and believed that Moscow was behind the efforts to reduce the production and export of raw materials from Malaya and other Southeast Asian countries because it sought to prevent the recovery of Western Europe. (Note 62)

The Communist onslaught in China brought the problems of South and Southeast Asia into focus, and by late 1948 American policy makers were beginning to show more interest in these areas. The implications of the victory of the Chinese Communists on Mainland China for the United States in Southeast Asia began to be studied by American officials in 1949. With the belief that Southeast Asia was a likely potential victim of communist expansionism, American policy makers actively considered enlisting the United States in battle to stabilize Southeast Asia. In June 1949, Secretary of Defence Louis Johnson had requested that the staff of the National Security Council (NSC) undertake a study of American security policy towards Asia in view of communist advances. He wanted a comprehensive plan in terms of long-range interests instead of a country-by-country and day-to-day approach. The Mutual Defence Assistance Act, as finally approved on 6 October, added impetus to the consideration of a broad approach to East Asia. (Note 63) Although the implementation of this policy would necessarily be on a country-by-country basis, the goals would be regional. The goals were stated in specific policy papers on Southeast Asia, which revolved around the containment of Communism. (Note 64)

The United States also offered 'support and guidance' for the British in Malaya which were found to be advantageous not only to the Anglo-American relationship but to American interests. (Note 65) With reference to the Communists, the British viewed Indochina to be the key area as far as the Communist movements were concerned. The second area of greatest danger was Burma. Malcolm MacDonald, Commissioner General for the United Kingdom in Southeast Asia also informed Ambassador Jessup that the British acknowledged Malaya's 'vulnerability' but still believed that they could hold Malaya politically and militarily even if Thailand and Indochina fell into Communist hands. (Note 66) In rounding up the whole situation, MacDonald suggested the necessity of the United Kingdom and the United States laying down a line, which both countries were prepared to hold.

The British also suggested that the United States appoint a single official such as a High Commissioner to deal with the Southeast Asian area as a whole. (Note 67) Besides this, in a Conference at Bukit Serene, Johore Bahru, on 6 February 1950, MacDonald also proposed a UK-US Conference. This Conference was suggested as a means of giving assurance to the Asian states that the UK and US were prepared to back them up against the Communists. He believed that this was the only way in which the Siamese in particular and also the other Southeast Asian states in general could be stimulated to resist Communism. (Note 68) MacDonald added that the proposed US-UK Conference should be limited only to the UK and US since the inclusion of France and The Netherlands would have had repercussions because the Asian states would feel that the Western powers were ganging up on them. To avoid Asian suspicion, MacDonald thought carefully planned advance statements as to the nature and extent of the Conference should be made known to all Asian leaders. MacDonald however, did not commit himself to the desirability of a meeting with the Asian states.

Late 1949, the situation was considered serious with Mainland China in Communist hands, the Communist guerrillas were very active in many countries of Southeast Asia, and with Peking calling for the liberation of the overseas Chinese in the region. After surveying the impact of Communist China on the countries of Asia, the Americans considered what the United States could and should do to assist their friends to help them meet the Communist threat. With respect to Southeast Asia it was agreed that the cornerstone of American policy must be the independence of the countries in the area; the importance of nationalism in the struggle against colonialism and the need to prevent Communism from influencing nationalism were fully recognized. The Bangkok Conference in mid-February 1950 favoured American economic and technical aid and in some cases military assistance to countries in Southeast Asia seeking to maintain their independence in the face of communist threats. (Note 69)

The Department of State believed that the whole of Southeast Asia was in danger of falling under communist domination. This was mentioned in a paper prepared by the State Department which stated that “the countries in the area of Southeast Asia are not at present in a position to form a regional organization for self-defence, nor are they capable of defending themselves against military aggression without the aid of the great powers.” (Note 70) Immediate military assistance for Indochina was recommended because of the Communist threat to the newly created States of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. French Indochina consisted of four territories – Kingdom of Laos, Kingdom of Cambodia, Republic (formerly colony) of Cochinchina, and Republic of Vietnam. French policy was to federate the four territories and then to link the Federation to the French Union, embracing metropolitan France and the French territories overseas. (Note 71) The United States extended diplomatic recognition to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia on 7 February 1950.

On 22 to 26 February 1950, the Chief Public Affairs Officers of 11 United States missions in Asia held a meeting in Singapore to consider the implementation of the recommendations of the Bangkok Conference of Chiefs of Mission. (Note 72) In this conference a few British officials including Malcolm MacDonald were invited to participate in the discussions on Southeast Asia. The discussions were focussed mainly on evaluation of the United States Information and Educational Exchange Program and on how to determine ways to create a favourable climate for United States foreign policy in Asia and to devise means to combat the spread of Communism.

A staff study enclosed in a policy statement of the National Security Council approved by President Truman on 17 May 1951, called for the United States to coordinate its operational planning with Britain with regards to “Malaya and adjacent areas”. (Note 73) Another staff study on 13 February 1952, pointed out that the control of the sea around Malaya by the Western powers would offer a ‘defensible position’ even in the face of a ‘full-scale land attack’. This defence, it was indicated, would protect Indonesia against “external communist pressure”. (Note 74) The Joint Chief of Staff on 3 March stated that “it may be possible for the United States to provide those reinforcements which are essential for a successful defence of Malaya at the Isthmus of Kra, thus insuring the retention by the British of Singapore while concurrently decreasing the danger of a successful communist invasion of Indonesia.” (Note 75)

Moscow’s first nuclear explosion in September 1949 added another dimension of concern. The National Security Council completed its review of America’s strategic position in the world and handed the document, known as NSC-68, to the president in 1950. (Note 76) The basic assumptions were exceedingly pessimistic. The planners believed that Russia was bent on world domination and that by 1954 the Soviets would have neutralized the American atomic advantage and upset the military balance in the world with their larger conventional forces. The outbreak of the Korean War the following June gave emphasis to the evaluations and precipitated further policy actions. Indeed, the year 1950 could be established as the beginning of several concrete steps in Southeast Asia that would develop into major commitments. (Note 77) In that year both the United States and the People’s

Republic of China began to view the area as an arena of potential confrontation. Instead of relative disengagement from Southeast Asia, Washington slowly started down the road of engagement unable, of course, to see the end of it.

## 7. Conclusion

This article has shown that the British government were committed to retain Malaya and introduced the Malayan Union plan in 1946 in order to strengthen its position in Malaya. Malaya was economically important to the British as it was rich in natural resources such as rubber and tin. As one of the largest exporters of these resources, Malaya contributed significantly towards British economy through its dollar earnings from the export to the United States. The plan for Malayan Union was however, faced with strong opposition from the Malays who boycotted the British, staged demonstrations and issued non-cooperation threats. The British government later changed the Malayan Union with the Federation of Malay States in 1948 and gave a very limited chance to the Malays to be involved in the administration of Malaya.

The Emergency declared by the British authority in 1948 was the response to the alarming threat by the Malayan Communist Party. The United States rallied behind the British in dealing with the Communists in Malaya. A closer Anglo-American relationship was formed during this period as both the US and Britain were fighting the same enemy. The US provided Britain with loans and grants to help Britain recover from the war and rebuild British economy. These loans indirectly contributed to the British efforts to fight the Communists in Malaya.

The uprising of the Communists in Malaya was seen by the United States as part of the worldwide communist threat to dominate the world. With Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh, and later, China under Mao Tse-tung, the Western powers had already lost two important places in the east. Britain and the United States became much closer as a result of their efforts to contain the Communists from infiltrating into other adjacent areas. The United States agreed with the British that Malaya was vulnerable to the Communists because of its sizeable Chinese population. Efforts had been taken by the authorities in Malaya to prevent its Chinese population from becoming the 'fifth column' in Communist uprisings.

The US administration began to study the implication of the Communist victory in China in order to prevent the same situation from happening in different places. This study concluded that the United States should take all measures to prevent communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Recommendations such as the one urging for a close cooperation with the British, extending assistance for economic recovery were among the top priority for the US. The Mutual Defence Assistance Act was one of the forces in consideration of a broad approach to the region of East Asia.

The threat of Communism also drew the United States close to Malaya. The US Consulate was set up in Kuala Lumpur to emphasise the importance of Malaya. The US believed that the communist insurgency in Malaya was an attempt by the Soviet to create political chaos and they also suspected the involvement of the Soviet Legation in Bangkok. The Truman administration then pursued a policy of containment of the communist bloc. Loans and grants were provided for the allies to reorganize their economies and to fight the communist subversions. Besides these loans, the US also sought to coordinate its operational planning with British authority regarding the defence of Malaya. Due to the importance of Malaya, the British government was more than willing to cooperate with the United States to contain the communist advancement and subversions.

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