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NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

RESISTANCE OF THAILAND, BURMA, AND
MALAYA TO COMMUNIST PRESSURES
IN THE EVENT OF A COMMUNIST
VICTORY IN INDOCHINA IN 1951

NIE-20

The intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Joint Staff participated in the preparation of this estimate. All members of the Intelligence Advisory Committee have given their concurrence to the estimate. This paper is based on information available on 15 March 1951.

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RESISTANCE OF THAILAND, BURMA, AND MALAYA TO COMMUNIST PRESSURES IN THE EVENT OF A COMMUNIST VICTORY IN INDOCHINA IN 1951

THE PROBLEM

To assess the will and ability of Thailand, Burma, and Malaya to resist Communist political and military pressures or outright invasion in the event of a Communist victory in Indochina in 1951.

CONCLUSIONS

1. A Viet Minh victory in Indochina in 1951, if accomplished without the intervention of Chinese Communist forces, would result in increased intimidation and subversive activity directed against Thailand and Burma, but it would not necessarily lead to the early establishment of Communist or Communist-dominated governments in these two countries.
2. A Viet Minh victory in Indochina in 1951, if accomplished through Chinese Communist military intervention, would increase the susceptibility of Thailand and Burma to Communist pressures and we believe that, in the absence of effective internal countermeasures and outside support, these two countries would be obliged to seek an accommodation with the Communist powers.
3. Communist domination of Thailand and Burma, as well as Indochina, would greatly increase British security problems in Malaya. We believe that the British under these circumstances would not be able to maintain even their present degree of control in Malaya without a very considerable increase in their military and economic commitments.
4. It is most unlikely that the Viet Minh, without Chinese Communist participation, would attempt to conquer Thailand and Burma in 1951.
5. If the Chinese Communists, after establishing control over Indochina, continued their military advance into Burma and Thailand, we believe that both those countries would rapidly fall to the Communists, unless the UN or the Western Powers interposed their own forces. A Chinese Communist invasion of Malaya would be more difficult, but would probably succeed unless Malaya were greatly reinforced.
6. It is most improbable that a regional defense of Southeast Asia could be organized in time to stop the Chinese Communists if they followed up the conquest of Indochina in 1951 with a military advance into other countries of the area.

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DISCUSSION

7. In the event that the Viet Minh should succeed in conquering Indochina during 1951 without large-scale intervention by Chinese Communist forces, the prestige of Ho Chi Minh would be greatly enhanced throughout Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the defeat of the French Union forces despite US support would intensify the feeling of insecurity in the neighboring countries and facilitate the spread of Communism in the area.

a. Initially, if the Viet Minh did not demonstrate the intention, either alone or in collusion with the Chinese Communists, to embark on further military aggression, the governments of Burma and Thailand would continue to oppose Communism internally and would not align themselves with the Communist powers. Burma would probably recognize the Viet Minh Government and attempt to cultivate friendly relations with it. The Government of Thailand, although it also might recognize the Viet Minh Government, would attempt to build up its own defenses against Communist forces and undoubtedly would request increased US aid.

b. A Viet Minh victory, nevertheless, would expose Burma and Thailand to increased subversion and intimidation which, in the absence of effective internal countermeasures (which they might not be capable of taking) and outside aid, might well lead to the eventual overthrow of the present non-Communist governments. Under such circumstances, the British security problem in Malaya would be greatly magnified.

8. Large-scale participation of Chinese Communist military forces in a Viet Minh victory would cause far greater repercussions in Southeast Asia than a victory by the Viet Minh alone. It would be interpreted as a success for Chinese arms rather than a victory for Indochinese nationalism. Throughout Southeast Asia, where there is already a strong antipathy for the Chinese, it would intensify fears of Chinese invasion and domination. In view of the general weakness of the countries in the area, however, Chinese Communist military intervention in Indochina would undermine the will of Thailand and Burma to resist and

would increase the probability that they would accommodate with the Communist powers.

a. Thailand would probably conclude from the failure of the US-backed French military effort that the present type of US aid would not be sufficient to provide protection. In these circumstances, the Thai would be likely to yield to military and political pressure combined with Communist offers of apparently reasonable political terms in exchange for a "friendly" government. Initially, the Phibul regime would probably attempt to counter Communist pressure by calling for full UN or US military protection. Should it fail to obtain such protection, the present Thai Government would probably be superseded by one acceptable to the Communists.

b. Burma would not be likely to yield to external military threats or political pressures. Within Burma itself, however, there remain rebel forces potentially capable of overthrowing the government. If the Communists should secure control of Thailand, with consequent access to the Thai-Burma border, they would be in a better position to reinforce those dissident elements. Sufficient outside support for the dissidents, combined with external pressures, would make it unlikely that Burma could retain an anti-Communist government.

9. In Malaya, the British, with some 39,000 regular troops and 100,000 regular and auxiliary police, have not succeeded in suppressing about 5,000 local Communist guerrillas. The Malays, although forming the bulk of the present police force and generally supporting the British out of fear of the Chinese, would continue to contribute little to the British military effort if opposition were increased. The aggressive and economically powerful Chinese element has generally failed to cooperate with the British in suppressing the guerrillas, and a considerable number of them could be expected to turn against the British if Malaya were seriously threatened by Communist China. Furthermore, Communist control over Indochina, Thailand, and Burma would facilitate transborder aid to the Malayan rebels and deprive Malaya of its essential rice supply. In these circumstances, the

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opposition to the British would become increasingly unmanageable, and the British would not be able to maintain even their present degree of control in Malaya without a very considerable increase in their military and economic commitment.

10. We believe that an attempt to conquer Thailand or Burma by the Viet Minh without Chinese Communist participation is most improbable in 1951, although border incursions of northeast Thailand cannot be excluded.

11. If the Chinese Communists, after a victory in Indochina, continued a military advance into Burma and Thailand and if the UN or the Western Powers did not interpose their own forces, we believe that both these countries would rapidly fall to the Communists because they do not possess the military strength to resist such an invasion. Thailand, perhaps after a token resistance, would soon install a government acceptable to the Communists in the hope of retaining at least a semblance of autonomy. Burma, if directly attacked, would probably fight but would soon be defeated. A Chinese Communist invasion of Malaya would be more difficult because of the terrain and the presence of British military

forces, but it would probably succeed unless Malaya were greatly reinforced.

12. Present or planned outside military aid to Burma and Thailand, although it will eventually strengthen these countries, will not in the predictable future enable either of them to defend itself successfully against a Chinese Communist attack. Military aid to Burma—which has been chiefly British—has been of limited effectiveness owing to lack of Burmese cooperation, and because it has been largely expended in the Burmese internal conflict. The US aid planned for Thailand, when completed, would help Thailand to maintain internal security, but would not enable it to do more than fight a delaying action against a Chinese Communist invasion. The Thai, however, would probably not fight even a delaying action unless previously assured of support by outside military forces.

13. In view of the limited capabilities of the countries of Southeast Asia and their wide divergencies of interest, it is most improbable that a regional defense of Southeast Asia could be organized in time to stop the Chinese Communists, if they followed up the conquest of Indochina in 1951 with a military advance into other countries of the area.

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