

Background Briefing—Britain

It is the view of His Majesty's Government that two major issues are at stake in South-east Asia today. First, the war in Indochina must be halted before it ignites a larger conflict, potentially engulfing much of East Asia. Second, the tide of communist aggression in Southeast Asia must be turned back. If the war is not brought to a close, the British colonies of Malaysia and Hong Kong, as well as the states of the British Commonwealth of Nations in the area (Australia, New Zealand, and India) could be affected. The British government has neither the resources nor the desire to become involved in a land war in Asia. Nevertheless, it is necessary that concerted actions be taken to halt the spread of communism in Asia.

Great Britain has had vital national interests in Asia for more than one hundred years. Unlike our French allies, who seem incapable of shedding their outmoded colonial mindset, the British government has adjusted to the rising tide of genuine nationalism in Asia. India, the crown jewel of the British empire, gained its independence shortly after the last war. Where clear-cut aggression has taken place, as in Korea, the British people have taken their place alongside their American allies in defeating the forces of aggression. To protect and maintain its interests in the area, His Majesty's Government has recognized the necessity of dealing with governments with whom we do not share fundamental values. Unlike the Americans, we see no value in ignoring the obvious existence and power of the People's Republic of China and we have opened diplomatic relations with Beijing. We believe that conflicts between governments can best be resolved when the parties speak to one another. Thus, we have agreed to chair, with the Soviet Union, this conference in Geneva in the hopes that a settlement acceptable to the parties involved can be reached. We would like to see the U.S. government adopt a more constructive attitude in participating in the deliberations of the conference and in seeking a reasonable resolution to the crisis. We must all be willing to compromise for the cause of world peace.

U.S. attempts to continue the war and to expand its scope are, in the opinion of our government, unwise and dangerous. We will not join any military efforts to expand the war by sending British forces into the area, and we strongly urge the United States not to embark upon this road. The Vietminh, fighting under the banner of Vietnamese nationalism, have enjoyed widespread support among the people of Vietnam. Moreover, the Vietminh army has shown on the battlefield that it is a formidable opponent. On the other hand, the gains which the communists have achieved on the battlefield should, to the extent possible, be limited in the settlement to be negotiated. His Majesty's Government and the U.S. agree that an acceptable settlement should conform to the following principles: that the Vietminh forces evacuate Laos and Cambodia and that these countries be guaranteed their independence; that at least the southern part of Vietnam be kept non-communist; that no provisions be accepted that would substantially impair the ability of southern non-communist Vietnam to obtain military supplies and foreign advisers for its defense; that no political provisions permitting the extension of communist control over the southern part of Vietnam be included; and finally, that the possibility of eventual peaceful reunification of a free Vietnam be recognized. While we wish to see the temporary demarcation line dividing Vietnam be placed as far north as possible, we would agree to the 17th parallel. Elections should be held at least eighteen months in the future to allow the situation to stabilize.

The British government has already begun preliminary discussions with the Americans for the purpose of establishing a South East Asia Treaty Organization to act as an Asian counterpart of NATO in halting the expansion of communism. We intend to commit our military resources to this effort and to encourage the participation of Commonwealth states in the area. While a line must be drawn in Asia, it is too late to include all of Indochina on the side of the non-communist countries.

From the Historical Record

Memorandum by British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, April 30, 1954

“While we do not believe that a French collapse in Indo-China could come about as rapidly as the Americans appear to envisage, this danger reinforces the need to lay the foundations of a wider and viable defense organization for South-East Asia. We propose therefore that the United States and the United Kingdom should begin an immediate and secret joint examination of the political and military problems in creating a collective defense for South-East Asia.”

Letter by Prime Minister Winston Churchill to President Dwight Eisenhower, June 21, 1954

“I have always thought that if the French meant to fight for their empire in Indochina instead of clearing out as we did of our far greater inheritance in India, they should at least have introduced two years’ [compulsory military] service, which would have made it possible for them to use the military power of their nation. They did not do this, but fought on for eight years with untrustworthy local troops, with French cadre [officers] elements important to the structure of their home army, and with the Foreign Legion, a very large proportion of whom are Germans. The result has been thus inevitable, and personally I think Mendes-France [the French premier], whom I do not know, has made up his mind to clear out on the best terms available. If that is so, I think he is right. I have thought continually about what we ought to do in the circumstances. Here it is. There is all the more need to discuss ways and means of establishing a firm front against Communism in the Pacific sphere. We should certainly have a S.E.A.T.O. [South East Asia Treaty Organization], corresponding to N.A.T.O. [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] in the Atlantic and European sphere. In this it is important to have the support of the Asian countries. This raises the question of timing in relation to Geneva. In no foreseeable circumstances, except possibly a local rescue, could British troops be used in

Indo-China, and if we were asked our opinion we should advise against United States local intervention except for local rescue.”

Joint letter sent by Prime Minister Churchill and President Eisenhower to the French government, June 29, 1954

“The United States Government/His Majesty’s Government would be willing to respect an agreement which 1) Preserves the integrity and independence of Laos and Cambodia and assures the withdrawal of Vietminh forces therefrom. 2) Preserves at least the southern half of Vietnam.... 3) Does not impose on Laos, Cambodia, or retained Vietnam [South Vietnam] any restrictions materially impairing their capacity to maintain stable non-Communist regimes; and especially restrictions impairing their right to maintain adequate forces for internal security, to import arms and to employ foreign advisers. 4) Does not contain political provisions which would risk loss of the retained area to Communist control. 5) Does not exclude the possibility of the ultimate reunification of Vietnam by peaceful means... 6) Provides effective machinery for international supervision of the agreement.”

Joint declaration issued by the British and American governments, June 30, 1954

“We uphold the principle of self-government and will earnestly strive by every peaceful means to secure the independence of all countries whose peoples desire and are capable of sustaining an independent existence. We welcome the processes of development, where still needed, that lead to that goal. As regards formerly sovereign states now in bondage, we will not be party to any arrangement or treaty which would confirm or prolong their unwilling subordination. In the case of nations now divided against their will, we shall continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections supervised by the United Nations to insure that they are conducted fairly.”

Speech by Prime Minister Winston Churchill to Parliament, July 12, 1954

“It is hoped that should an acceptable settlement be reached on the Indo-China problem, means may be found of getting the countries which participated at the conference to underwrite it. We hope, too, that other countries with interest in the area might also subscribe to such an undertaking. This was

the basis on which the idea was put to the Americans and it is one of the problems to be examined in Washington by the Anglo-United States Study Group set up as the result of our talks.... The arrangements for collective defense in Southeast Asia will proceed whether or not agreement is reached at Geneva, though their nature will depend on the result of the conference.”