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The origins of the Southeast Asian Cold War

Karl Hack and Geoff Wade

How and when did the Cold War manifest itself in Southeast Asia? More particularly, how are we to understand the connections between global great power rivalry and the specific regional problems and tensions which marked Southeast Asia in the five years after the end of the Second World War? What were the connections, if any, between the global powers and the nascent political forces of the region during this period? These are some of the issues which the five contributors to this collection address as they explore the origins of the Southeast Asian Cold War.

These contributions challenge existing interpretations of the origins of the Southeast Asian Cold War. They employ new evidence gleaned from party archives and memoirs, and from Soviet, British, Australian, Dutch, Indonesian and Vietnamese state archives. They use this evidence to suggest that Southeast Asian communist parties, far from being totally autonomous on the one hand, or pliant tools of larger powers on the other, interacted with changing international communist lines as proactive agents. This interaction is the key to understanding why a regional pattern of increasing violence, and of decreasing cooperation with non-communist parties and democratic politics, emerged in 1948; while also allowing us to understand the uniqueness of the individual parties' paths to revolution.

Discussion of the origins of the Southeast Asian Cold War inevitably involves examination of the policies pursued by the colonial powers returning to the region post-World War II, their relations with the great powers, as well as the agendas pursued by the local nationalist forces and communist parties of the region. One of the key issues which has exercised scholars minds in this area has been the switch to armed conflict by communist parties in 1948. The switch was rapid. In 1947 communist parties in this region were generally engaged in broad united fronts, and with the exceptions of China and Indochina, were mostly committed to participation in open political activity and trade union work. Then, in 1948 almost every regional communist party abandoned the broad united front policy and the emphasis on trade union work and legal political activity, and began pursuing a policy of armed revolt. Communist revolts occurred in India, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia and the Philippines in this year, and there were key changes to communist party policy in Indochina. Not surprisingly, people have long asked: Was this a calculated policy of extending the Cold War in Europe to a new front?

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It is suggested both here and in the papers comprising this collection that existing answers to this question, and explanations of this change, have failed to fully capture the complex interactions between international and local communisms, offering instead ‘one hand clapping’ explanations which emphasise either international directives, or very local and national factors. Orthodox Cold War historiography held that Moscow issued instructions, which were disseminated at two 1948 conferences held at Calcutta in India: the South East Asia Youth and Student Conference hosted by the World Federation of Democratic Youth, a Moscow-controlled movement (19–24 February 1948); and the Second Congress of the Indian Communist Party (28 February–6 March). According to the orthodox interpretations written in the late 1940s to 1950s, these instructions sparked revolts in the following few months of 1948.¹

Revisionist scholarship soon challenged the orthodox position. By the late 1950s, some academics were already arguing that there had been no clear instructions from Moscow, that the Calcutta Conferences were of debateable significance, and that the revolts were above all locally motivated and uncoordinated. The classic expression of this line was Ruth McVey’s *The Calcutta Conference and the South-East Asia uprisings*.² This re-examined the impact of the ‘two camp’ line being promoted by Moscow and the newly formed Cominform in late 1947 to 1948. This line proposed that the world was divided into two camps – the imperialist, headed by the United States and the democratic, headed by the Soviet Union – and that conflict between the two camps was inevitable. McVey argued that this line was not disseminated mainly at Calcutta, but had already been disseminated before the two conferences there. In addition, McVey considered that this line was not the main motive force behind subsequent events. According to McVey, ‘the opportunity and incentive for Communist rebellion were already present in the countries where revolt occurred. It thus does not seem likely that the two camp message lit the revolutionary spark in Southeast Asia, though it may well have added the extra tinder which caused it to burst into flame’.³ McVey’s revisionist line has subsequently remained the predominant one, with recent restatements by Deery in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* as late as 2007,⁴ and on various occasions by Stockwell.⁵

1 J.H. Brimmell, *Communism in South East Asia; A political analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 255–63, concluded that the conferences prepared the stage for the coming revolts. Milton Sacks, ‘Communism and regional integration’, in *South Asia in the world today*, ed. Phillips Talbot (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), pp. 208–9, concluded Moscow’s coordination was probable. See also, *Marxism in Southeast Asia; A study of four countries*, ed. Frank N. Trager (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959), pp. 263–8. For a detailed empirical account which resists imposing patterns on events, see Nicholas Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the onset of the Cold War, 1945–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

2 Ruth McVey, *The Calcutta Conference and the South-East Asia uprisings* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1958).

3 Ibid., p. 24.

4 See Philip Deery, ‘Malaya, 1948: Britain’s Asian Cold War’, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 9, 1 (2007): 29–54, and review of the same by Karl Hack, last accessed on 31 Oct. 2008 at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/Hack-Deery.pdf>. The parent URL for both pieces is: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/jcws/jcws2007.html>.

5 A.J. Stockwell, ‘A widespread and long-concocted plot to overthrow government in Malaya’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 21, 3 (1993): 66–88; Anthony Stockwell, ‘Chin Peng and the struggle for Malaya’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 6, 1 (2006): 279–97.

The truth is that both schools mislead. It has become increasingly apparent, and this is underlined in the article by Larisa Efimova in this collection, that no explicit instructions were issued by the Soviet Union in 1947–48 to Southeast Asian communist parties directing them to open a new Cold War front by violent revolt. Nor did Moscow envisage its new line resulting in revolts in any direct way. Rather, it appears clear that the changed international communist line (the Zhdanov or two camp line of the newly formed Cominform from late 1947) helped to tip the debate in many South and Southeast Asian communist parties away from a united front with bourgeois parties, and instead to a ‘united front from below’, and in most cases towards violence. It did this despite some local parties being aware that local conditions were either ambivalent, or else clearly did not favour immediate revolt. The influence occurred at different times and in different ways. There were obvious connections in Malaya and Indonesia (Harry Poeze’s paper in this issue shows the Indonesians actively seeking Soviet and Dutch communist guidance if not ‘instructions’), and more subtle impacts in Indochina. The arguments that pressure from colonial or other forces further helped to tip the balance towards violence also need to be assessed in this light. The resulting chain of changes from 1948 drew great and secondary power involvement into what were essentially local ‘civil wars’. It can be argued that it was the local parties’ interaction with the changed international communist line which started to draw these greater powers into the region, rather more than great powers actively seeking out local ‘Cold War’ or proxy allies.

We thus suggest that the ‘Southeast Asian Cold War’ was constituted by local forces drawing on outside actors for their own ideological and material purposes, more than by great powers seeking local allies and proxy theatres of conflict; and that the ‘international line’ was at times a more crucial transmission belt between locality and great powers than orders or direct involvement. We may therefore need to look at other regions and periods of the Cold War with these approaches in mind, with more emphasis on local forces, and on the international communist line. We may also need to pay more attention to the ‘Cold War’ as a factor in local ‘civil wars’ and, of course, as a factor in shaping the structure of politics and civil society in postcolonial states. For the impact of 1948 was as much about the increase in state power, damage to non-communist left parties and unions, and vitiation of legal safeguards and approaches, as it was about violence *per se*.⁶ Above all though, for the postwar period, more attention needs to be paid to individual communist parties’ reception of, and reaction to, changing communist international lines emanating from Moscow and, from 1949 onwards, also from Beijing.

This argument unfolds through five papers following this one. The first is by Larisa Efimova, of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. Her ‘Did the Soviet Union instruct Southeast Asian communists to revolt?’ employs high-level Soviet correspondence which suggests that there were almost certainly no specific ‘instructions’ from Moscow to Southeast Asian parties urging revolt. Indeed, in early 1948, Moscow was more than a little uncertain on how to interpret the situation

⁶ The theme of the ‘lost’ left, and of alternative liberal and civil society paths vitiated by the Cold War and the authoritarian approaches and legislation it encouraged, is, for instance, explored in *Paths not taken: Political pluralism in post-war Singapore*, ed. Michael Barr and Carl Trocki (Singapore: NUS Publishing, 2008).

in the individual countries of the region, and particularly Indonesia, and about what if anything to advise. The Soviet Union consequently was, according to Efimova, surprised by the degree and speed of change and the eruption of violence in Southeast Asia in 1948. While Moscow's newly-formed Cominform of late 1947 supported a line of two camps and increasingly inevitable conflict, the Soviet Union was apparently not yet ready to translate this thesis into country-specific suggestions, let alone directives or orders.

The second paper, by Karl Hack, of the United Kingdom's Open University, 'The origins of the Asian Cold War: Malaya 1948', develops the argument that what mattered in the eruption of violence in Malaya was the interaction of the international communist line, international events and local communist party decision-making. It shows that the Malayan Communist Party felt itself under enormous pressure from the British Malayan government by early 1948, but – crucially – it was still acutely aware that objective conditions did not favour revolt. Despite constitutional and labour law changes, and the exposure of its previous Secretary General as a traitor, the MCP felt contradictory pulls for and against revolt. This was particularly the case in that much Malay opinion had become suspicious or hostile towards any Chinese political activity, following racial riots in 1945–46, and Chinese support for an abortive 'Malayan Union' Plan of 1946–48. As late as December 1947, the Malayan Communist Party confirmed its previous united front policy of political and union work. When the party did finally turn towards violence, it couched its critical March 1948 decisions to prepare for armed revolt in the language of the 'two camp' international line, and used that language to justify launching a revolt despite the unsupportive local conditions. This paper uses MCP documents and memoirs, as well as British Foreign Office and intelligence files to try and decipher the relationship between the shifting 'international line' and Malayan communism. It also draws links between what was happening in Malaya during these years, and what was occurring in Burma and India at the same time.

The third paper details an even more dramatic impact of the changed line on a Southeast Asian country. In his 'The Cold War in Indonesia, 1948', Harry Poeze, of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), shows how international advice and lines, issued by both the Dutch and Soviet communist parties, affected the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI). They helped to settle it into a broad united front policy in 1945, and then to spark it into revolt at Madiun in September 1948 (after Amir Sjarifuddin, who was privately communist, had withdrawn from a coalition government). The account Poeze provides is illuminating both in examining why armed revolt came later to Indonesia than elsewhere, and because of the way it was influenced in particular by the return of veteran PKI leader Muso from Prague in August 1948. It seems that the Indonesian communists positively sought out Dutch and Soviet guidance, which was channelled through Muso. In the Indonesian case, the subsequent turnaround from overt political participation to revolution was all the more startling, as the PKI enjoyed influence in government until early 1948, when differences over Republican willingness to make concessions to the Dutch persuaded Sjarifuddin to resign as Prime Minister. This paper uses new documentation on Muso's speeches and their impact on PKI policy, making documents and arguments previously available only in Dutch and Indonesian accessible

in English. It underlines the critical importance of the international line of the CPSU, and the ways in which that influenced policy and events in the region.

Tuong Vu of the University of Oregon, with his “It’s time for the Indochinese Revolution to show its true colours”: The radical turn of Vietnamese politics in 1948’ shows that non-communist participation in the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was more significant in the period up to 1948 than many have realised, and that it was in that year that the Indochina Communist Party really started down the path to limiting such non-communist influence. The paper explains how this shift came about through a complex combination of: changes in French–Vietnamese relations; the shifting relationship between non-communist and communist leaders within the Viet Minh state; increased links with the CCP; and changes in the international communist line. Through the radicalisation of the ICP and increasing pressure on non-communist elements within the government, the nationalist coalition that established the DRV was effectively destroyed in the years following 1948, a development that would eventually give rise to full civil war. The study utilises memoirs of non-communist members of the Vietminh government, and also communist party documents of the period to delineate this party’s process of sidelining the liberal intellectuals. Tuong Vu declares 1948 the pivotal year in the DRV’s metamorphosis from a polity led by a nationalist united front coalition to a communist state aiming at ‘socialism’.

The fifth and final paper is by Geoff Wade, a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. His article – ‘The beginnings of a “Cold War” in Southeast Asia: British and Australian perceptions’ – builds on the previous papers by examining how far 1948 was considered a key year for Britain and Australia in their observation of, and engagement with, the polities of Southeast Asia. Asking how we might date the beginning of a Cold War in the region, the paper concludes that the answer to this question depends on your definition of ‘Cold War’. Using British and Australian sources, it shows that different kinds of potential threat were perceived by these two powers at various times, notably including: underlying and irresolvable ideological rivalry with local communist parties in 1945–46; perceived connections between the local communist parties in Southeast Asia and the global designs of the Soviet Union in 1947; Moscow-instructed violence in 1948; and an Asian communist party actually assuming state power in China in 1949. Wade suggests that it is the latter, in tandem with plans by non-communist states to coordinate policy and build counter-blocs to the forces of communism, that can be seen to mark the beginning of a true Cold War in Southeast Asia.

Wade’s description of the internal debates within government offices in Whitehall, Phoenix Park (Singapore) and Melbourne on the degree and types of ‘threat’ these powers faced in Southeast Asia and their possible responses, suggests that setting up simplistic ‘straw man’ assertions to knock down in analysing the Southeast Asian Cold War prevents more sophisticated analysis. Hence, if we ask ‘Did the Southeast Asian Cold War begin in 1948?’, the answer would tell us more about our definition of ‘Cold War’ than about the processes at work in Southeast Asia and around the globe in the late 1940s.

If we agree with Arne Westad’s thesis, that a Cold War necessarily required active involvement by the great powers, then this came to the Southeast Asian region

relatively late.⁷ Based on this criterion, the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 looks a more persuasive start date for the Cold War in Southeast Asia. The CCP were active supporters of the ICP, with bases established in southern China. This allowed increased help for the Viet Minh from across the border, which consequently induced increased American help for the French, notwithstanding doubts about French policies towards nationalism. Hence in February 1950, Washington recognised the French-created Bao Dai government in Indochina, and by March 1950 was ready to support the French war effort there. These interventions followed the US National Security memorandum 48/1 ('The position of the United States with respect to Asia') of December 1949, which placed Indochina in the context of a global struggle of communism versus democracy, thus downplaying the previous overriding emphasis on persuading the Europeans to concede further to the demands of anti-colonial nationalism.

Indeed, if the Cold War really did require actual great power intervention — then in a sense Britain was still aiming to *avoid* Southeast Asia becoming a 'Cold War' theatre as late as 1949, when together with Australia it helped set up the Colombo scheme (including India as well as Southeast Asian powers) to provide and coordinate economic and social assistance across Asia. In January 1950, Britain also recognised the People's Republic of China (much to American annoyance) in an effort to preserve both its Asian colonies and the hope of some influence in the region. There was a tension, in British eyes, between their increasing desire to see the Americans bolster the French, and a fear that American involvement would harden Cold War lines and destroy what the British hoped might become an alternative policy of getting Asian polities to achieve self-development more through Western-backed regionalism.⁸

But let us return to the issue of the mechanisms of policy change among Southeast Asian communist parties in the post-war period. In 1945, the regional post-war need for peace and reorganisation meshed with the international communist line of forming 'united fronts' with bourgeois nationalists. By contrast, in 1948 the new Soviet line of two irreconcilable camps was attractive to various Southeast Asian communists who felt they were losing ground in local politics. We argue that in 1948 the combination of changing international circumstances, a revised international communist line, and local communist party needs, persuaded various Southeast Asian parties to radicalise and militarise. In turn, these decisions tended to draw Cold War players — the United States (as seen in NSC 48/1 and its successors), and much later the Soviet Union — into Southeast Asian engagement. This phenomenon was manipulated by leaders such as Phibun Songkram of Thailand, who from 1948 courted American

⁷ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World interventions and the making of our times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For Southeast Asia itself, an imminent publication is: *Imperial retreat and the Cold War in South and Southeast Asia, 1945–1962*, ed. Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center; Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

⁸ See Karl Hack, *Defence and decolonisation in Southeast Asia* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), pp. 56–71; and Tilmann Remme, *Britain and regional cooperation in South-East Asia, 1945–49* (London: Routledge, 1995). In 1949 Britain still favoured regional coordination — including participation by India — to bolster local nationalists, and increased French and Dutch concessions to these.

support by clamping down on Thai communists and restricting Viet Minh activities in his country.⁹

It might be too dogmatic to claim that the actions of Southeast Asian communists forced great power involvement in the region. But it is undeniably true that the decisions which Southeast Asians took in 1948 – based on the conjoining of the international communist line and local needs – sowed the seeds for increasing great power involvement.

There are, in summary, four key points in the historiography of the Southeast Asian Cold War which the papers collected in this special issue illuminate.

First, as suggested by the Soviet archival materials cited in Larisa Efimova's paper, there were indeed no specific orders from Moscow to Asian parties to revolt in 1948. It is always possible that other documents may show even more secret layers of discussion, but that appears relatively unlikely.

The second point concerns the dissemination of a new 'communist international line' (the Zhdanov/two camp line), and the role this played in 'tipping' debates in Southeast Asian parties. In Malaya probably and in Indonesia almost certainly this helped give rise to revolts, and in India and Burma it seems to have also played a strong role in this respect. Its role in each case was not just that it gave major ideological weight to those arguing for action, but also that it overcame otherwise severe objections that the objective conditions were not ripe for revolt. Truong Chinh in Indochina, Muso in Indonesia, and the communists in Malaya and Singapore, all echoed the ideas that the changed international climate made it time for the communists to take the lead, and where necessary, to more openly confront both bourgeois 'allies' and international enemies such as the Dutch, French and British.¹⁰ How, without the clarion call of international communist events and policy, could an Indian, Malayan or Indonesian communist have thought that 1948 was a good time for revolt? Indian communism faced nationalists fresh from winning independence. Indonesian communists would be undermining a broad nationalist struggle against the Dutch. The mainly Chinese Malayan communists could scarcely have forgotten the serious Sino-Malay racial clashes of 1945. Even for Vietnam, the radical shift in 1948, at a time when the United States was still ambivalent about aiding French colonialism, might be seen as hasty. In each case, the changed communist international line was not just noted, but written into key debates and used to validate decisions.

The international communist context was thus an important factor in ensuring a loose but obvious pattern across southern Asia and Southeast Asia around 1948 – one of multiple communist parties radicalising, and in particular militarising – their policies. In short, the combination of the local and international is the explanation for the pattern of revolt, even if its precise status in each individual revolt is more difficult to

⁹ Ang Cheng Guan, '1948: The beginning of the cold War in Southeast Asia: The Vietnamese dimension', paper at the Asian Research Institute (National University of Singapore) Roundtable on the Sixtieth Anniversary of 1948: 'Reassessing the origins of the Cold War in Southeast Asia', 10–11 July 2008, pp. 6–7. The pioneer work on regional communist links (with a focus on Thailand) was Christopher Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian networks of the Vietnamese revolution, 1885–1954* (Richmond: Curzon 1999).

¹⁰ The Czech example was fresh in people's minds, and the themes of 'New Democracy' and a united front from below were far more satisfying than muddy compromises with bourgeois nationalists and increasingly frustrating negotiations with Dutch, British and French.

divine. We would thus reverse McVey's formula, and argue that the two camp formula and emphasis on a united front from below (rather than with elite 'bourgeois' parties) provided a spark at a time when the tinder across much of Southeast Asia was dry and ready to burn. Moscow had carelessly tossed the match down, apparently with limited understanding of the likely result.

This leads to our third point. In terms of the Cold War as great power involvement, previous interpretations have been somewhat naive. The great powers did not simply instruct or manipulate local partners as orthodox accounts suggested. Nor did local parties merely react to local events, and use the international line as a convenient dressing, as revisionist accounts have suggested right up to the present. Rather, local parties' interpretations of international Cold War contexts and lines were important and sometimes key. In turn, it was local parties' responses to international Cold War events and lines which eventually dragged the great powers, together with Britain and Australia, into an increasingly deep involvement in the region. It seems that while the great powers could shape their own declaratory policy, they were by no means in control of the impact this had on others.

Our fourth point is about 1948 as the date at which a Southeast Asian Cold War began. Wade's paper makes it clear that how we answer is as much a matter of semantics as of evidence. If we believe that origins should be traced to irreconcilable ideological difference, then the Southeast Asian Cold War was already alive in 1945–46. If we require evidence of violence, then 1948 is more convincing. If we demand the active involvement of leading Cold War powers, then 1949–50 seem more important.¹¹

These debates about 1948 and about the origin of the Asian Cold War are not mere academic exercises. Katherine McGregor has argued, for instance, that debates about the causes of the Madiun revolt became embedded in Indonesian politics up to and beyond the fall of Sukarno and the massacres of 1965–66,¹² and they are still very much with us today. In Malaysia and Singapore, there is the continuing question of how far the launching of revolution there, and state reactions to it, seriously undermined leftwing politics and civil society. In Burma, the threat of communism continued to be used to validate the necessity of military rule. As such, the Cold War remains with us and gaining an understanding of its origins, its processes and its effects are important for our understanding of the modern history of Southeast Asia.

¹¹ There is an additional unanswered question of when and how people perceived a 'Cold War' 'from below', as opposed to seeing primarily nationalism, anti-colonialism and so on. The debate has traditionally been framed very much 'from above', from the perspective of communist and Western policy-makers, rather than from the perspective of different groups.

¹² Katherine McGregor, 'The 1948 Madiun Affair: Reverberations for the Indonesian Communist Party', paper read at the Asia Research Institute (National University of Singapore) Roundtable on the Sixtieth Anniversary of 1948: 'Reassessing the Origins of the Cold War in Southeast Asia', 10–11 July 2008.