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## SOME MILITARY PROBLEMS IN THE FAR EAST

By GENERAL SIR NEIL RITCHIE, K.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O.,  
M.C., A.D.C. (GENERAL)

Lecture given on November 17, 1949, Lieut.-General Sir Adrian Carton de Wiart, V.C., K.B.E., C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: I have great pleasure in introducing Sir Neil Ritchie to you this afternoon. He started soldiering in 1914 and first served in Asia in the Middle East. He was in the Mesopotamian Campaign of the First World War as a lieutenant, and got the D.S.O. and the M.C. when serving as a captain in Allenby's forces in Palestine.

Following that war and after a period at home—I suppose engaged in regimental work—he was in India from 1933 to 1937. He was on the Staff in 1939, and commanded the 51st Highland Division, as acting Major-General, in 1940 and 1941, and the 52nd Lowland Division in 1942 and 1943.

In 1944, at Dunkirk time, General Ritchie was B.G.S. to Lord Alanbrooke, and I suppose I am not out of order in saying that, as we know very well, Lord Alanbrooke commanded much more than a Corps. So, during that period, no doubt General Ritchie had a certain amount to do with the direction of the 12th Corps in France and Germany.

After the war he went to the Far East as Commander-in-Chief of Land Forces until July, 1949. He is shortly due to go to Washington as Commander of the Army element of the Joint Services Mission from Great Britain.

THE subject, as the title "Some Current Military Problems of the Far East" implies, is somewhat outside the strict confines of the area in which your Society is most interested. But even so it marches with that area, and the trend of events in the Far East does now, and may even more in the future, affect happenings in Central Asia.

It will, I realize, be full well appreciated by an audience such as this that in considering to-day's military problems from the highest level, concerning as they do not only the three fighting Services, but the civil authorities too, one must impinge upon the sphere of international politics, economy, and other matters which might appear to be outside the sphere of a soldier. But if military problems are to be studied in a proper perspective, then it is necessary for the fighting Services to possess some insight into these matters. On this account I hope you will forgive me if I do touch on certain aspects which are outside the scope of purely military ones.

Lastly, I would like to make it clear that such views as I am expressing are purely my own and should in no way be looked upon as being those officially held in the War Office or elsewhere.

### THE BACKGROUND

The Far East is to-day a singularly unstable part of the world. If the military problems facing us there are to be reviewed in an understandable way, one must start probing into what is at the root of this instability. It is, of course, the spread of Communism, a doctrine that countenances the

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use of force, unrestricted force, as a weapon the use of which is fully justified in the Communist mind by the ends to be achieved.

While it is true to say that in the period immediately following upon the cessation of hostilities in the Far East a surge of nationalism made its appearance there, I would say that, over all, particularly now that Burma has got, and Indonesia seems about to get, independence, this nationalism is being engulfed by communism. The urge that nationalism engenders has been harnessed to serve the Communist ends. All the immediate military problems of the Far East spring from the advance of Communism there. They are merely "splinter problems" from this.

With this as my general background I would like to touch on the overall effects of the spread of Communism in the Far East before turning to some of the concrete problems that arise there as the consequence of it.

But I would stress at the outset that the employment of military force is not the counter to Communism. It is only an element that can be used to contribute towards the control of Military Communism. One can shoot Communists certainly, but not Communism.

#### THE BACKGROUND OF COMMUNISM IN THE FAR EAST

I suggest that the factor which affects most happenings in the Far East to-day is what goes on in China.

Look where you will in the Far East—to Malaya, to Thailand, to French Indo-China—there you will find enormous overseas Chinese populations who unquestionably possess, and exercise, a very great measure of control over trade, wealth, economy, and labour.

These Chinese have through the ages emigrated from their fatherland in search of wealth and fortune in conditions which offered them greater scope, and usually greater stability, than existed in their own land.

It is true that many of them have been settled overseas from China for generations, but the majority are first or second generation settlers. However, it does not appear to me that they have ever been really absorbed—the vast majority of them—in the country of their adoption. While there are naturally exceptions, as a rule they are looking back to China, watching what is happening there, and setting their sails accordingly. Many have carried their home politics overseas with them. A visible sign was, at least till quite recently, the amazing number of Chinese Nationalist flags one saw displayed all over Malaya, Thailand, and French Indo-China on any Chinese national occasion. These are now starting to change to Chinese Communist emblems.

Thus there exists a ready-made organization *in situ* throughout the Far East whereby the rapid spread of the doctrines adopted by China can be passed on. It is an exceedingly difficult problem to keep this in control and in check if by chance one does not agree with those doctrines. It is, of course, a quite wonderful opportunity for Communist-inspired ideas to be spread via China throughout the Far East with the least possible effort. It may, indeed, well be the case that it is for this very reason that the "tempo" of Communism has been hotted up in that part of the world rather than elsewhere—for instance, in India and Persia.

### THE TECHNIQUE

It has been interesting to observe the technique employed in the spread of militant Communism into South-East Asia. It has followed pretty closely that adopted elsewhere—for instance, in Greece.

In my view, the course pursued is as follows. The Communist forces attempt first to dominate an area by banditry and terrorism, and, once control is gained by these methods, the area so dominated is held as a firm base while the population is indoctrinated and impressed into Communist service. Military training is started, and in due course the advance is continued. But it is noticeable that such advances are not commenced until the next "objective area" has first been softened up and the populace undermined. It is not a new technique in itself, because such methods have been employed in the past in nearly all revolutionary efforts, but what is new is the scale to which undermining the loyalties of the population is carried out, and the great advantage that modern firearms give to the employment of underground forces in these days. I would remind you that there are masses of weapons in unauthorized hands in the Far East—an evil result of the war. This technique to-day is normally termed "cold war," in contradiction to the more usual practice of the past, where pitched battles have been fought between regular armies. We British have experienced it before in pursuit of what used to be termed "imperial policing," but not on the scale we now have to face.

### RICE AND EUROPEAN PRESTIGE

There are just two other background matters I would like to touch upon. The first is rice and the second European prestige.

The standard of living basically depends on the availability of rice at a reasonable cost. Rice, of course, is the staple diet of the people there, but, looking further afield, it is also the primary diet of something like a quarter of the world's population. Some 60 to 70 per cent. of the available world's exportable rice comes from the three Far Eastern countries of French Indo-China, Thailand, and Burma. There, surely, is a really worth-while objective, for whoever controls the major area of surplus rice must be in a strong position to influence the peoples of large areas of the world, especially the Far East.

For this reason of rice alone I believe that we may see the arm of militant Communism, in the guise of the Chinese Communist armies, reaching out westwards through Kwangsi and Yunan towards French Indo-China, Burma, and Thailand. Indeed, the advanced guards of militant Communism are already there operating below the surface.

### EUROPEAN PRESTIGE

While we are still held in high respect in the Far East, it would be folly to imagine that European, and especially British, prestige stands as high there to-day as was the case before 1941. One cannot shut one's eyes to the fact that we suffered defeat in battle at the hands of Orientals.

It is, of course, true that we inflicted most smashing defeats on our opponents there in the end, but at least among the vast majority of the peoples of China, and in the countries of South-East Asia, we were not seen actually fighting victorious battles. In China, French Indo-China, Thailand, and Malaya our reoccupation was to all intents and purposes unopposed. One finds all sorts of excuses conjured up in the Oriental mind to excuse the overthrow of the Japanese. In Malaya, with the cessation of hostilities, the Communist underground movement, which we had sponsored, at once claimed that they had been largely responsible for the Japanese defeat, a story which was believed by a lot of people who knew no better.

### THE MAIN MILITARY PROBLEMS

Against this background I will now deal with certain of the current military problems in the Far East. First, Hong-Kong; then Malaya; after which I will touch very briefly on French Indo-China, Thailand, and Burma. I will leave Indonesia, because the movement there is really nationalist, and at least for the moment the Communist hold is not sufficiently serious to cause grave anxiety. The British Borneo Territories do not present any immediate problems, and Japan, while controlled by the United States, need not enter into our military calculations. The Philippines I also place in the latter category.

#### HONG-KONG

The defence problem at Hong-Kong is twofold: disruption from within and attack from without.

The test is, therefore, I should say, can we adequately control the dangers of disruption from within while we still leave ourselves with sufficient strength in hand successfully to see off external attack? I do not say that the external form of attack will ever come, but we must have sufficient force at Hong-Kong, deployed on the ground, to make it abundantly clear to all that we are determined to see off all comers, that anyone who chances his arm in an all-out attack will be faced with an all-out defence. Should this be clear, then I must doubt the external attack ever materializing.

Till recently the danger was that, with the arrival of the Chinese Communist forces on the frontier of the Hong-Kong Leased Territory, flushed as they undoubtedly would be with empty victories over the Chinese Nationalists, these Communist armies might just have flowed on over the border unless we had *in situ* sufficient forces to prevent this. By the timely reinforcement of the colony I believe that this danger has now been averted.

It is difficult to assess the real fighting value of the Communist Chinese Army. It would be foolish to underrate their battle worthiness. They have made a good impression with their strict discipline and soldierly bearing so far, and from our own recent experiences in the Burma campaign we know that, properly led, organized, trained, and equipped, the Chinese can and do make good troops. But all the same we cannot say

that the Communist forces in China have yet proved their qualities in battle. So far they have only fought other Chinese, who have, at all events in the past couple of years, been badly led, badly trained, and whose faith in their cause has been, to say the least, pretty shaky. We have seen, too, how readily the Nationalist troops have changed sides. There have been few, if any, recent instances of staunchness displayed by the Nationalists in battle.

Thus the Chinese Communist forces cannot yet, in my view, be considered first class, and I believe, therefore, that we can withstand successfully any form and scale of attack on the colony that is within the bounds of reason at present.

In Hong-Kong there is great scope for disruptive elements to stir up trouble. Prior to the last war the population was half a million; to-day it is rising two millions, and the vast majority have no allegiance to Hong-Kong. Their ties are, if anything, to China herself, but probably first of all to their own personal self-interests. Most of the inhabitants have come there to try to find conditions for work and trade, which offer better security than in China.

#### MALAYA AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA

To turn now to Malaya. Here we find ourselves facing for the first time actual militant Communist revolt.

First of all, the movement is sponsored almost 100 per cent. by Chinese, mostly recent immigrants at that. There are, of course, a few Malays and Indians mixed up in it too, but by and large we have the great advantage of the vast majority of the Malays being on the side of law and order. Without this large reserve of loyal man-power, who have readily volunteered for service, and upon whom we can draw for the needs of the civil police, both regular and special, and for the Malay Regiment, our task in keeping order would have been most difficult.

The task of bringing the bandits to book would be difficult enough if one considered it only against the background of the terrain. Some three-quarters of the country is virgin jungle, in parts mountainous at that. But the complexity of the problem is far worse. There are in Malaya upwards of half a million Chinese Squatters, who exist on small holdings all over the country, producing vegetables and food. Upon these Squatters the bandits can, and do, base themselves. There have for a long time been Squatters in Malaya, but prior to the Japanese occupation they were adequately controlled. During that occupation the number of Squatters increased greatly, largely, I understand, because thousands of town-dwellers took to the wilds of the country to escape Japanese persecution. The consequence has been that they have become very difficult to control, and the problem now facing the civil administration, to police and protect them, is a colossal one. It will take a long time before it really becomes effective.

Another major problem from the military angle is that of controlling movement across the Thailand border. This border is some 280 miles in length, at least half is mountainous, and the major portion jungle-covered.

It presents little of a problem for bandits to move over the border in either direction in small parties undetected. Thus the tired, hunted gangs have only to cross over it to rest, recuperate, and retrain. So unless we can get the active co-operation of the Thailand authorities we must inevitably be working at a great disadvantage. It might be a situation very similar to that facing the Greek Government, where rebels marched over the border of adjoining States and found asylum there. But on the whole the Siamese are really trying to give a hand.

The Malayan situation is bettering, but it will be a slow process. The complete answer does not lie in Malaya itself, but in the failure of Communist endeavour in all other countries adjacent to it. By this I would not have you think that I advocate our sitting back in Malaya itself. Not at all. We have always to be on the move there, for ever active, alert, and never let pass a chance of being offensive. To thrive, militant Communism of the type we have there to-day needs to be static, to have time to spread its doctrines, to terrorize the people, to train the followers. Constant offensive action is needed by us to prevent the Communist bandits getting the static conditions they need. It calls for great effort and doesn't show spectacular results. It must be done by the civil police closely supported by troops. I would like to say how essential it is for the civil and military Services to work together in complete co-operation and to possess confidence in each other. This state of affairs has been built up, with most satisfactory results.

Next I wish to turn to French Indo-China, Thailand, and Burma. These I group together because of the fact that they lie astride the land routes between China and South-East Asia to the south and towards India to the west, also because of the rice-exporting potential of these three countries, to which I have already referred.

French Indo-China has been, ever since the reoccupation, in a state of turmoil and strife. Here a firm policy, astute statesmanship, and the necessary resources are needed to meet the danger.

The present direction of Thailand's affairs is reasonably firm and straightforward, and the trend is definitely anti-Communist. But the Siamese are notoriously anti-Chinese, so it is sometimes difficult to disentangle anti-Communism from their age-long attitude towards their Chinese overseas population.

Whatever one may feel about Thailand's performance in the war and actions since, she has so far, I believe, stuck scrupulously to her rice export commitments, sometimes in very difficult circumstances.

Further, as I have already said, she has to the best of her ability co-operated over the Malaya problem.

It is difficult, in my view, to give any really useful brief review of Burma and the sorry spectacle she presents to-day—a country rift by internal dissent, where since the granting of independence two years ago security of any sort has utterly disappeared.

Yet it is a land that should, by virtue of its considerable population, its great natural wealth, and its geographical position, be giving a lead in Far Eastern events.

Militant Communism has raised its ugly head there, and I think that Burma is very prone to Communist intrigues.

What I have said about these three countries goes to show that, in my view, they present a good target for Communism. Nevertheless, it is there that the advance of those doctrines from the north should, in my view, be halted. It is there that we should build up the buffer against that advance.

That may be the answer. Indeed, I think it is; but to achieve it is a very complex problem. First of all, I believe that we must get these countries to look to us—by us implying the Western Powers—as their supporters and friends and build up their confidence in us and our intentions.

#### CONCLUSION

In closing I would say that, while our military problems in the Far East are being complicated by the advance of Communism there, particularly by the recent course of events in China, there is no need to despair.

I believe our position can be maintained. I am sure that action such as the decision to show a bold front in Hong-Kong has had a first-class effect throughout the Far East in general.

I don't pretend the problems are easy. I don't say all will be plain sailing in a short time. It won't be.

What I do say is this: The position is nothing to compare in graveness with that which existed in the Far East in 1942 and 1943. Yet we won through, and I for one have sufficient confidence to feel convinced that we will do so again.

Colonel H. E. Fooks: General Ritchie, when talking of Burma, mentioned the Karens. Would he tell us whether the Karens and the Shans were up against the Burmese Government because they were Communists or pro-Communists, or because they wished to return to the old British control?

General Sir NEIL RITCHIE: I do not feel qualified to answer that question. Giving my own view, I would say that the Karens were not opposing the Burmese Central Government because they were Communist-inspired. As to the second question, I should personally doubt if that was so. The Karens and Shans have always been up against the men of the Burman plains; it is inbred in them, and whenever they see an opportunity of having a crack at them they take it. That is, however, my own view; I do not claim that it is worth very much.

Group-Captain H. STCLAIR SMALLWOOD: I hope I am not asking a quite impossible question of Sir Neil, but he referred to the fact that in Hong-Kong he thought we had more or less got the military situation in hand. My view is that the situation there is much more endangered by infiltration into Hong-Kong and the leased territory by the Communists. Can Sir Neil make any suggestion as to how we can cope with this very insidious method of advance of the Communists?



The LECTURER: I agree entirely with you; I believe infiltration to be the main danger. I think it can be coped with, because the matter has been studied for a very long time, and we have the necessary arrangements made, arrangements which we hope will prove to be sufficient to avert the danger. However, I am now speaking out of turn, because I handed over responsibility for that part of the world about three months ago. At any rate, I think I can say we have ensured control of the movement; it is the thing coming up from underneath that has to be met and kept within limits. I believe everything has, to the best of our ability, been worked out.

Mr. C. CHENEVIX TRENCH: Why did we allow one and a half million Chinese to enter Hong-Kong in the last two years? Could not they have been kept out, or can we not deport them now?

The LECTURER: I look upon the question in much the same way as the speaker, but the whole of the commerce and trade of Hong-Kong has, I think—I stand open to correction by our Chairman—been built up on free trade and free movement. Once you cut that down you are going to impair the economy of Hong-Kong almost beyond restoration. Until aggression does arise it is, naturally, the policy not to interfere with that flow that takes place not only by junks by sea—and there is a terrific floating population—but also there is much movement over the frontier. All the fresh vegetables used in Hong-Kong come in daily across the frontier. It is difficult to stop that sort of movement because it will severely affect the trade and commerce of Hong-Kong.

Mr. E. J. NATHAN: Does the lecturer think the military situation in China is irretrievably lost and that the Communists have got the country for good and all?

The LECTURER: I would not say "for good and all." I think it is dangerous to say anything definite about China; one never knows what might happen there. After all, many movements of a militant nature have started from South China and eventually overrun the whole country. At the moment a stage has been reached in which the Communists have gained more or less complete control.

The CHAIRMAN: Well, Sir Neil, I would like to thank you, on behalf of all the members of the Society, for being so kind as to come and talk to us. It is of enormous value to listen to one who comes fresh from a country; sometimes, if a period elapses, speakers find themselves talking of a country in which the situation has changed since they knew it. That is rather the position I should be in if someone asked me to talk now about China.

I would like to add one or two comments. You were asked, Sir Neil, why we could not keep the Chinese out of Hong-Kong during the last two years. Those who know the Chinese well realize that they cannot be kept out of anywhere. I very firmly believe that. And not only that, but I remember when I was in Hong-Kong there was an enormous cable there, probably the biggest in the world; we could not move it, although we tried hard. Some Chinese bandits came one night and took it away, and it has never been found since! When you are dealing with people of that type it is hard to turn them out of anywhere.

I did not see much fighting with the Chinese, though I was with them for a fair amount of time. Their great effort was marching and counter-marching. Occasionally one man gets in a corner, and then he can fight very hard; but you have to get a Chinaman into a corner first. As the Chinese are very quick thinkers, that is not at all an easy matter.

As to the whole of China being under the Communists now, one cannot question that. But there are men like Chiang Kai-Shek. He has been ousted now, and we have forgotten the debt we owe him. I am a great friend of his and admire him enormously; he is a man. If the Communist régime were to fail, he or his like might return. It is an economic question, to a great extent, with the peasants; much more economic than political. Matters had got to such a pitch that nobody could go on. If the Communists fail, a man such as Chiang Kai-Shek will come again; you cannot completely wipe such men out. Otherwise I think there is no question that the Communists are there, and there to stay for the present.

Forgive me for speaking as I have, Sir Neil. It has been very nice to have you address us, and we appreciate that greatly and thank you for what you have told us.

