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Special Report

China's Current Intentions Toward Burma

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SECRET

25X1

CHINA'S CURRENT INTENTIONS TOWARD BURMA

Peking's increased involvement with insurgency in Burma's northeastern border region during the past year has underscored China's continued hostility toward Rangoon. Neither side has demonstrated a willingness to compromise on differences resulting from the anti-Chinese riots in Burma during 1967. China has continued its active propaganda support of the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) insurgents [redacted] and has resumed some political agitation in the Overseas Chinese community.

Although China has generally moderated its extreme foreign policy position held during the Cultural Revolution, Peking cannot back away from its anti - Ne Win posture unless Rangoon first makes a significant compromise. Ne Win has shown no willingness to cooperate while Chinese-supported insurgency continues, however, and Peking probably feels constrained to maintain active pressure in the hope of inducing Rangoon to adopt a more favorable policy over the long term.

The Chinese probably will continue to employ indirect means, focusing primarily on attempts to create a responsive revolutionary force centered on BCP cadre, while maintaining limited materiel support for minority dissidents along the frontier. The recent increase in Peking's activity in northeast Burma probably reflects a tactical Chinese maneuver and does not appear to represent a major departure in China's continued limited efforts to influence Rangoon.

POLITICAL SCENE

Before the summer of 1967, Peking maintained outwardly friendly ties with Rangoon, reflecting a working relationship developed since 1960. During this period the Chinese had obviously been annoyed with some of Ne Win's independent foreign and domestic policies, but were generally tolerant. Chinese efforts over the years to persuade Rangoon to support Peking's propaganda were almost completely frustrated by Burma's devotion to international noninvolvement. The Ne Win regime's nationalization of Overseas Chinese businesses and its attempts to suppress local pro-Peking Communists also angered China. Relations with Burma have been of secondary importance to Peking, however, and until 1967 the Chinese chose to overlook these affronts and maintain normal ties with Rangoon.

The breakdown in this relationship in 1967 should be viewed primarily as a by-product of the Cultural Revolution. It did not appear to signal a conscious, premeditated change in Chinese foreign policy, nor the beginning of a new step in Peking's presumed timetable for "people's war" in Southeast Asia. Rather, the disruption came about as a result of the irrational diplomacy that marred Peking's relations with most of the underdeveloped world after mid-1966.

The friction in Sino-Burmese relations was a direct result of political activity among the Overseas Chinese by the Chinese Embassy. Cultural Revolution proselyting and Maoist demonstrations led to nationwide anti-Chinese riots, to which the Burmese Government apparently gave tacit approval. The Chinese, clearly angered over

Special Report

- 1 -

29 August 1969

SECRET

Anti Ne Win Demonstrators at Burmese Embassy in Peking



Rangoon's unwillingness to satisfy their demands as a result of the riots, quickly launched a propaganda offensive against the "fascist Ne Win clique" and, most importantly, for the first time publicly supported the Burmese Communist insurgents. Since 1967, diplomatic representation in

each capital has consisted of only a few minor officials.

In 1968 sporadic diplomatic efforts by the Chinese and cautious approaches by Rangoon suggested that a working relationship might be

SECRET

25X1

re-established. Peking, through third-party diplomatic contacts, indicated its desire to improve relations to the Burmese Government. The Chinese followed this by virtually ending their public support for the Burmese Communist insurgency and their propaganda attacks against the Ne Win regime. In mid-August, however, the Chinese once again launched a series of rabid anti - Ne Win propaganda statements and resumed political agitation among the Overseas Chinese community in Rangoon. Although the Chinese undoubtedly were piqued at Rangoon's unwillingness to adopt a friendlier attitude, policy disputes in Peking may also have affected China's approach toward Burma. In any case, relations further deteriorated, and in late January 1969 a Burmese Foreign Ministry official told US Embassy officers that Burma could not re-establish normal relations as long as Peking continued its hostile activities against Rangoon.

On 5 March, the Burmese, apparently concluding that Peking's continued public support for the Communist insurgents ruled out prospects of improved relations, notified Peking of their intention to terminate the 1960 Treaty of Friendship and Nonaggression with China. Rangoon presumably had no incentive to continue a treaty, which, in the absence of formal action at that time, would have remained in effect indefinitely. Two weeks later, Peking broadcast a BCP statement denouncing the Ne Win government in the most violent terms used since the summer of 1967. While recognizing the importance of an understanding with China, the Burmese Government seemed to believe that a firm stance was needed to convince the Chinese that meddling in its domestic affairs was unacceptable.

AID TO INSURGENTS

Peking's growing hostility toward the Ne Win government has been clearly reflected in China's increased support for antigovernment insurgent forces inside Burma. Prior to 1967, China's support was limited to discreet ideological and tactical guidance to the BCP, which consists of a group of ethnic Burman dissidents operating in central Burma. Since the anti-Chinese riots, however, when the Chinese issued their first public statement of support for the BCP, they have extended full propaganda backing as well as limited financial aid and paramilitary training. Over the past two years Peking has continued to stress the need for developing the BCP, and Chinese propaganda has consistently emphasized the BCP's leadership position in the Burmese "people's war." The Chinese apparently view these rebels, operating in Burma's agricultural heartland astride vital links of communication, as the most reliable and ideologically responsive force in the country.

Chinese support, however, has not alleviated the BCP's recent setbacks caused by factional infighting and effective Burmese military action. During the past two years, continuing purges have disrupted the party's central committee, while the Burmese Army has successfully whittled away at the BCP's base of operations. Party membership has fallen to 2,500 from an estimated 4,000 in 1968, and its headquarters has been overrun by government forces twice in the past year. China is well aware of the current disarray in the BCP and has tried to reunify it. Last spring, Peking announced the "selection" of a new BCP chairman and vice-chairman—an apparent effort to quash the factional disputes and to support reliable pro-Peking leaders within the party. Factionalism persists, however, and the Burmese Army continues to press the Communist insurgents.

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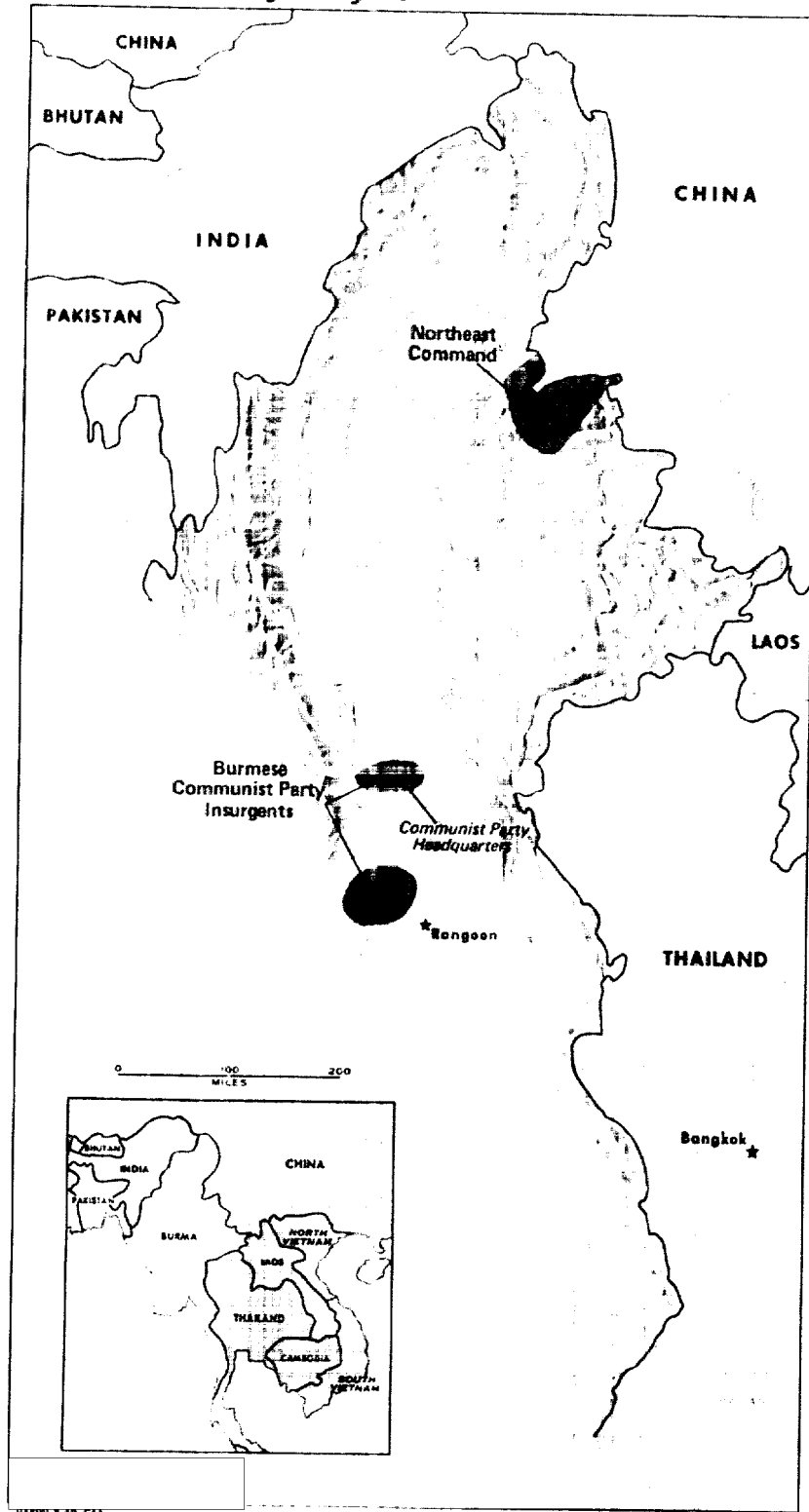
Special Report

- 3 -

29 August 1969

SECRET

Burma: Pro-Peking Insurgents



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25X1

Special Report

29 August 1969

SECRET

SECRET

25X1



A Guerrilla Force Led By the Communist Party of Burma

Meanwhile, in late 1967 the Chinese began actively supporting some ethnic minority bands in the remote Sino-Burmese border area where governmental control has always been weak. The rugged terrain is inhabited primarily by Kachin and Shan tribesmen who are traditionally anti-Burmese, and much of the territory has been under the de facto control of minority dissident bands.

The only major group in the area that has received substantial Chinese arms and training is the "Northeast Command." This band is principally under the leadership of Naw Seng, an ethnic Kachin whom Peking returned to Burma in late 1967 after 18 years in China. Naw Seng's group of pro-Peking minority tribesmen and Burmans, which reportedly now numbers 2,000 to 3,000, has ties with the BCP. Although Naw Seng fre-

quently crosses into China to regroup and re-supply, he has apparently solidified his position in a remote area along Burma's northeastern frontier.

In addition, a few elements of other, basically non-Communist, minority groups have occasionally accepted limited Chinese arms aid.

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Special Report

- 5 -

29 August 1969

SECRET

SECRET

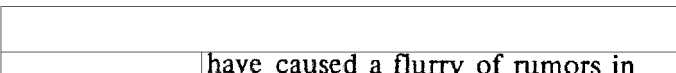
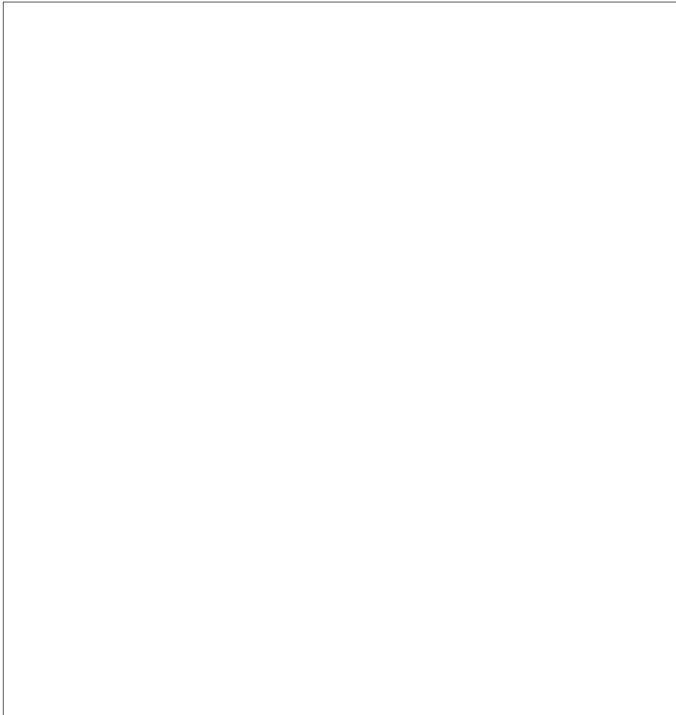


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Minority Insurgents
on the March
in Rugged Northeast Border Area

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have caused a flurry of rumors in Rangoon, leading to various assessments of Peking's intentions. Some observers have assumed the existence of a grandiose Chinese plan for the immediate "take-over" of Southeast Asia, and have depicted recent actions against the Ne Win government as the latest manifestation of this plan. They imply that Peking deliberately sabotaged relations with Rangoon in 1967 as part of this scheme. Such an assessment, however, fails to consider fully the conditions surrounding the course of recent Sino-Burmese relations.

Peking's current hostile posture stems directly from the largely unforeseen Sino-Burmese confrontation in 1967, which itself resulted from China's irrational world-wide diplomacy during the Cultural Revolution. The Maoist demonstrations that provoked the anti-Chinese riots and the subsequent impasse were the result of the unpredictable but profound impact of the Cultural Revolution within the Foreign Ministry in Peking and on Chinese missions abroad. There were no signs the demonstrations were a premeditated action directed specifically against the Rangoon government.

25X1

PEKING'S POSSIBLE MOTIVATIONS

The continued deterioration in Sino-Burmese relations 

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A variation of this assessment suggests that Sino-Burmese relations have become so hostile during the past year that Peking has decided to foment insurgency along the border to topple the current government and establish a pro-Peking regime. Although this would explain China's blatant calls for the overthrow of the Ne Win regime, the Chinese probably have a more realistic view of the currently limited capabilities of the insurgents in Burma.

Insurgency has been endemic in Burma for 20 years, and Rangoon has traditionally had little control over the independent minority bands along the border. Rangoon, reflecting the general unimportance of the remote border area, has been content during the past two years to contain the minority rebels in that region while concentrating effective military pressure against the potentially more disruptive Communist insurgents in central Burma, where 85 percent of the population lives and where the government's control and its chances of success are greater.

Peking appears well aware that increased aid to these factional dissidents poses no overriding threat to the Ne Win regime. Chinese public statements and propaganda have underscored the "difficulties ahead" for the Burmese insurgents, as well as the "twists and turns" in revolutionary struggle, and have urged them to be "self-reliant."

It has also been suggested that the Chinese are not primarily concerned with overthrowing the Ne Win regime, but in fact want to use the minority insurgents to establish a major "liberated zone" in eastern Burma along the Chinese border. Such a base of operations presumably would facilitate the flow of men and supplies to Peking-directed minority rebels in northern Thailand—an area which has received increased Chinese propaganda attention during the past year. Peking's continued difficulties in controlling for-

eign minority groups, however, appear to rule out this assessment. Peking probably views the various parochial and factional groups it now supports along the frontier as something less than effective or reliable revolutionary instruments. Moreover, the Chinese already have adequate infiltration routes into northern Thailand, and it is doubtful that Peking believes that a "liberated zone" in eastern Burma is necessary for the very limited assistance it now provides to the rebels there.

CHINA'S PROBABLE OBJECTIVES

China's current objectives in Burma probably are more modest than those projected in these assessments. Peking's overtures during mid-1968 demonstrate that China probably would be willing to establish more normal relations with Rangoon and to end active support for antigovernment insurgents provided the Burmese adopted a less hostile attitude. During the past year Chinese foreign policy has softened markedly from its strident character during the Cultural Revolution, but Peking cannot openly back away from its anti - Ne Win posture without a substantial public gesture from Rangoon. Because Ne Win has exhibited no willingness to cooperate while the "people's war" continues, the Chinese probably believe that active pressure should be maintained, hoping thereby to induce a more favorable Burmese attitude over the long term toward China.

In furthering this limited objective, the Chinese have continued to resort to indirect means, granting highly vocal propaganda support and limited military assistance to the few, generally ineffective pro-Peking revolutionary groups in Burma. Peking has apparently focused its prime attention on continued attempts to develop the BCP into a well-organized, responsive revolutionary force. Thus far, however, the Chinese have had little success, and the BCP's position has continued to deteriorate in the face of strong Burmese military pressure.

SECRET

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It appears likely, therefore, that the recent increase in Chinese assistance to the minority insurgents along the border during the past year probably has been an attempt to divert Burmese military attention away from the BCP in central Burma in the hope of giving the Communists a much-needed respite for consolidation and regrouping. Moreover, it is possible that the Chinese have become gravely concerned over the unfavorable turn of events for the BCP in the past year and may be attempting to build up a small base of

operations along the border to which the BCP could retreat in order to continue its antigovernment activities and receive closer support from China. In any case, it appears clear that China's support for the BCP and the minority insurgents in Burma is tactical in nature, designed to underscore China's current opposition to the Ne Win regime, harass the Rangoon government and, over the longer term, press the Burmese to adopt a more pro-China policy.

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Special Report

- 8 -

29 August 1969

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