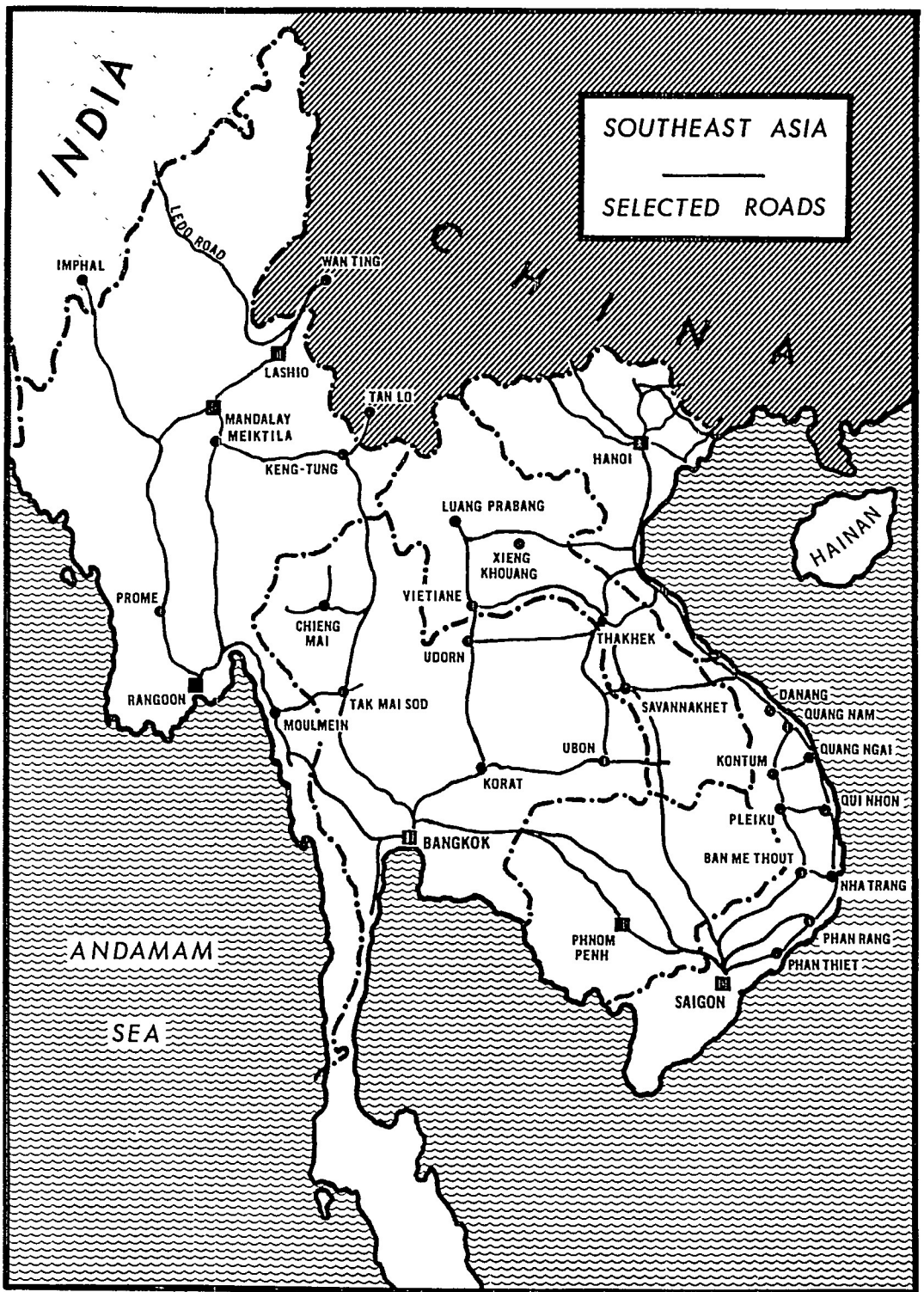


# The Peninsula of Southeast Asia

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*The Road to Mandalay is only one route of march in SE Asia*



# The Peninsula of Southeast Asia

By Col Victor J. Croizat

**I**N INDOCHINA Communist military activity was on a modest scale until 1949. Then China fell to the Communists and substantial support for the Vietminh became available. From this time on in the words of Gen Vo Nguyen Giap, the top Vietminh commander, "... our peoples revolutionary armed forces increasingly intensified and extended guerrilla activities while without cease carrying on the work of ... building up regular units ... we went gradually from independent companies operating separately, to mobile battalions, then from battalions to regiments and divisions."

The peninsula of Southeast Asia has been the scene of conflict for more than two decades. This has ranged from guerrilla warfare by individuals, to pitched battles between modern armies equipped with armor and heavy artillery, and provided with all forms of air support. To a significant degree many of these actions can be explained in terms of the physical characteristics of the area. And since geographical factors change but little, an appreciation of them can serve as a useful basis for estimating possible Communist moves in the future.

The northern part of the peninsula is dominated by mountains and deep forested valleys oriented generally north to south. Here tortuous routes have for centuries served the immigrants and invaders whose successors today populate large areas of the peninsula. Towards the central portion of the peninsula the forests open, the valleys broaden and the mountains divide into three roughly parallel systems. The Naga and Chin

Hills and the Arakan Yoma stand as a barrier along the western border of Burma. The boundary between Burma and Thailand weaves through the second major mountain area which eventually narrows to form the backbone of Malaya. In the extreme east, the Annam cordillera walls the narrow coastal plain of Viet-Nam. In the southern part of the peninsula are the lush rain forests and the vast fertile deltas of the Irrawaddy, the Chao Phya, the Mekong, the Red, and lesser rivers. These deltas, the centers of population, commerce and agriculture are the prime Communist targets.

Major commercial airlines link the larger cities, while lesser centers are served by local airlines using numerous secondary airfields. Surface transportation facilities are, however, less than adequate. Roads are regional rather than national, and east to west communications particularly in the mountains is virtually nonexistent. There are few international through-routes and international rail travel is possible only between Thailand and Malaya although all countries of the peninsula, except Laos, have meter gauge rail systems (see p. 37). Construction of new roads or railways is difficult and costly whether in the mountains or swamp delta areas. In addition, existing communications require frequent and extensive maintenance because of the destructive monsoon rains.

These gross geographical factors reveal that there are only three main approaches which would facilitate the movement of large forces from the north towards the critical objectives concentrated

### *The Japanese Legacy*

The German military victories of 1940 had immediate and far reaching consequences in the Far East. The dust of the blitzkrieg across France had scarcely settled when Japan demanded that the Haiphong-Kunming railroad in French Indochina be closed to military traffic. This was promptly followed by demands to station troops in Indochina, and to use port and airbase facilities there. The French tried to delay negotiations in the hope that some external assistance could be provided. But there was none available, and the Japanese moved in.

Fighting on the peninsula broke out twice during 1940: Once in September when impatient units of the Japanese Army crossed the border at Langson and were bloodied by the French; and again in December along the Thai-Indochina border where the Thais were seeking to satisfy claims to areas on the right bank of the Mekong River.

The Thai-Indochina War carried over to January 1941 when the Japanese forced the governments involved to come to terms. The Japanese then turned to the task of building up Indochina as the springboard for operations against the remainder of the peninsula. These began on 8 December 1941 as two simultaneous moves: one, an overland advance into Thailand; the other, an amphibious assault astride the Thai-Malay border. Seventy days later, Gen Yamashita had smashed all resistance in Malaya and had captured Singapore. The Thai government had long since capitulated to Gen Ida's 15th Army which had crossed the mountains into Burma and was then approaching Rangoon. By May 1942 all of Burma was in Japanese hands, and the conquest of the peninsula was complete.

The Japanese next turned to consolidating their gains. Included in this effort was the improvement and development of the transportation system, particularly that into Burma where the ground force strength was built up to 250,000

### **PENINSULA OF SE ASIA**

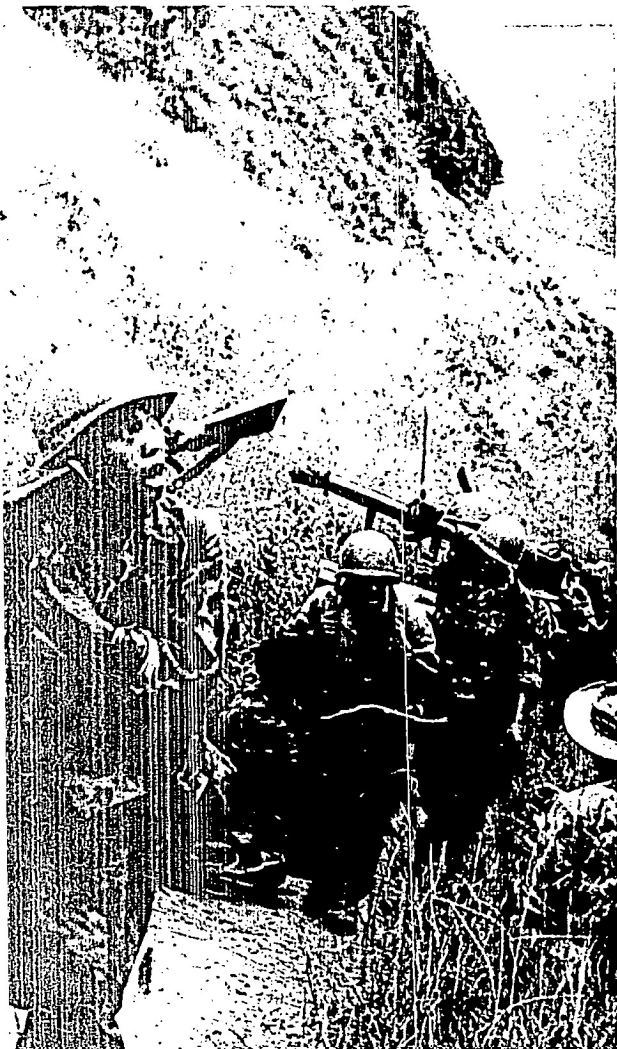
in the southern part of the peninsula. Two of these approaches originate in North Viet-Nam, the Communist base area linked to Red China by several roads and two rail lines. The third main axis leads directly from Red China into northern Burma.

The easternmost axis of advance is along the coast of Viet-Nam and is within reach of many landing beaches. It includes a good all-weather road which, below the 17th parallel, is doubled by a railway all the way to Saigon some 700 miles to the south. The second axis leads from North Viet-Nam over the mountains to the Mekong River. From Vientiane, the administrative capital of Laos to the Mekong River, a road and associated rail line leads 400 miles to Bangkok. Alternatively, it is possible to follow the Mekong to the south and enter South Viet-Nam either by swinging around the Bolovens plateau or passing through Cambodia. From Cambodia there are several roads leading to Saigon, and one to Bangkok. This last, used by the Japanese Konoe Imperial Guards Division in its invasion of Thailand in December 1941, is paralleled for 241 miles by the Cambodian Railway which has over 170 bridges and tunnels on its run to the Thai border.

The last major avenue of approach is in the

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*Vietnamese soldiers en route to Black River—Asia's difficult mountain terrain, says the author, tends to canalize advancing formations.*



men. The Allies, whose forces had been driven north into India and China, were, during this same period, gathering new strength and improving and extending their base and communications facilities. In early 1944 the Japanese launched 155,000 troops in a major offensive against India. The weight of this effort came as a surprise. However, the Japanese thrusts were defeated, largely because by that time the Allies could move and supply major forces by air. From then on the initiative on the Burma front passed to the Allies.

During these years of large scale military operations, there was also much clandestine activity. The Japanese were encouraging the development of national movements which they hoped to be able to control; the natives in the colonial areas were busy forming nationalist movements supposedly independent of external influence; while the Allies were recruiting and supplying irregular forces whose mission was to harass the Japanese. It was in this much-disturbed atmosphere that Communist organizations such as the Viet-Nam

Independence League (the Vietminh) and the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army came into being and indeed received Allied support.

Thus it was that at the end of the Second World War the peninsula of Southeast Asia had suffered extensive damage to its political institutions as well as to its physical assets and its resources.

When the Japanese surrendered, the British were already in Burma and had forces immediately available to move into other areas. This made it possible for them to thwart the plans of the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army to take over Malaya. The French, however, were unable to return to Indochina before Ho Chi Minh and his Vietminh party established an independent government in Viet-Nam. Prolonged negotiations ensued, but these were unsuccessful and the Indochina War broke out. At about the same time, the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army, which had gone underground, emerged to begin the campaign of terrorism which was to plague Malaya until 1959.

west and extends from Kunming in Red China to Burma. It includes the famous Burma Road which crosses the border at Wanting and continues on to Mandalay and thence to Rangoon. A second road, crossing the border at Tan ho leads to Kentung and thence into northwest Thailand.

Communist forces using any of these major avenues of approach into the peninsula would be liable to detection, and vulnerable to counteraction once away from Communist controlled areas. The coastal road from North Viet-Nam is particularly easy to interdict since it is accessible for most of its length to naval and air forces. Moreover the narrow coastal plain is barred by a series of terrain features which can be readily developed into defensive positions. The more important of these are to be found just north of Danang; at the level of Quang Ngai; above Quinhon; in an area centered on Nhatrang; and near Phan Thiet. Defense positions in these areas could also be extended west towards the mountains and would be served by the existing branch roads.

Ideally the defense of Laos should be conducted along the defiles through which the roads from North Viet-Nam must pass. However, these areas are for the most part already in Communist hands. The military problem in Laos now is to retain control of the outlets from the Plain of Jars and deny the towns along the Mekong River to the Communists. Moreover, the backdoor to South Viet-Nam and the approaches to Cambodia will have to be barred by retaining control of the Bolovens plateau area. In Burma and northwest Thailand the defense problem is similar to that of Laos; deny the roads to Communist forces by

defensive operations in the mountains where the difficult terrain tends to canalize advancing formations. In northeast Thailand the first line of defense is the Mekong River which should be defended by retaining control of the towns on the Lao side.

The pattern of possible military operations which emerges from a consideration of the main roads, railroads and airfields is relatively simple. However, the actual situation is far more complex. There are thousands of miles of trails throughout the peninsula, many capable of being used by wheeled vehicles. There are some 15,000 miles of navigable waterways which range from the Irrawaddy River, open to regularly scheduled boat service for 900 miles, to the small canals which spin a web over the deltas. There are numerous grass strips which can accommodate light aircraft or can be quickly improved to accept medium transports. This whole secondary transportation system is well suited to all forms of clandestine movements, and can also be used to vary the possible scope, range and direction of large scale overt operations. The impact of the sum total of all these geographical factors may perhaps best be appreciated in two historical examples; one drawn from "conventional warfare" sources, the other from guerrilla type operations.

As December 1941 approached, British Empire forces included the equivalent of 13 brigades for the defense of Malaya, and two brigades of fortress troops plus sixteen battalions of volunteers for the defense of Singapore. In the air, 582 aircraft had been requested but only 158, of which

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24 were obsolete models, had arrived. For the whole of Burma there was only the single Burma Division plus one squadron of aircraft. At sea, however, the situation was more reassuring. *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* had just arrived to reinforce the two cruisers, nine destroyers and smaller vessels already in the Far East.

Plans for the ground defense of Malaya were still uncertain. The British had the "Matador" plan which called for an advance into southern Thailand to establish defenses at the narrow waist of the Kra Isthmus. But this plan had never been fully accepted; no less a person than Winston Churchill held that the defense effort should best be concentrated on the island of Singapore.

Burma was believed to be most difficult of access except by sea. Along its eastern border there was only one road over which a military force could pass in strength. Thus the bulk of the Burma Division was deployed in the northern Shan states while one brigade was to cover the Tenasserim in the south and meet any forays into that area. In an emergency it was thought possible to reinforce the meager air resources with the American Volunteer Group which was then supporting the Chinese Armies.

Japanese plans for the conquest of the remainder of the peninsula of Southeast Asia by Field Marshal Terauchi's Southern Army had been completed by November. The Japanese estimated that their 617 Army and Navy aircraft would provide a comfortable margin of superiority and would compensate for the modest size of the Navy's Southern Squadron built around one cruiser, ten destroyers and five submarines. The one glaring disparity was in ground forces. LtGen Yamashita, commanding the 25th Army, was to carry out the campaign in Malaya with 60,000 men against a defending force known to be twice as large.

Gen Yamashita nevertheless was confident. Once ashore, his axis of advance would follow the general relief of the peninsula. He could expect reasonably good roads and the use of a rail system linked to Thailand to his rear. His flanks would rest on waters which would assuredly come under Japanese control; an assumption which became reality when *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were sunk by air action on 10 December. His assault force, built around the 5th and 18th Divisions, was adequate for the initial landing, and the later addition of the Imperial Guards Division coming down from Thailand would help ensure the reduction of Singapore. Moreover Yamashita undoubtedly knew what Winston Churchill was to learn only just before 19 January 1942 when he wrote:

"I must confess to being staggered by Wavell's telegram . . . it never occurred to me . . . that

the gorge of the fortress of Singapore . . . was not entirely defended against attack from the northward. . . ."

LtGen Ida while no less confident than his colleague was faced with quite a different problem. His principal enemy was terrain. First he had to march across Thailand where lateral communications are few. Then, to advance into Burma, he had available only one all-weather road which would require him to move to the far northwest corner of Thailand and cross the border at Mae Sai. Alternatively, if he were willing to accept serious difficulties, he might be able to use another route which clings to the heights rising out of Tak and crosses the border at Mae Sod. Finally, there are several tracks crossing into Burma which could be used by light forces; one over the Three Pagoda Pass; another coming in behind Tavoy; and the last being the old 17th Century trade route which in part follows the Terrasserim River and reaches the Andaman Sea at Mergui.

As it turned out, Gen Ida pushed the bulk of his 55th Division across the Burma border at Mae Sod and seven weeks after entering Thailand captured Moulou. At about the same time, Gen Yamashita flanking strong points and road blocks which might have otherwise delayed his advance, reached the Strait of Johore facing Singapore Island. By mid-February 1942 the Malayan campaign was over. In Burma, Gen Alexander commanding the defending forces issued a final statement; . . . at 1800 hours on the 20th of May . . . my task came to an end." Gen Stillwell stated to the press somewhat more colorfully, "I claim we got a hell of a beating."

The advance of the Japanese 15th Army had required a great preparatory effort. Initially everything had to move overland from Thailand. Later when Rangoon was taken, Japanese shipping did carry some of the burden. However, the Bay of Bengal was never to be completely controlled by the Japanese. Thus, since the Japanese intended to make Burma into the western anchor of their defense perimeter, its internal communications had to be linked to those of Thailand. This was the genesis of the Thai-Burma Railway.

### The Railroads

The British had, before the war, looked into the possibility of linking the Burmese and Thai rail systems. But costs appeared high and nothing more had been done. When Japanese engineers looked into the problem their first estimates were that it would take about five years to push a line the 260 miles from Bang Pong, up the valley of the Wae River, over the Three Pagoda Pass, and down to Thanbyuzayat. As it turned out the job was finished in 13 months! This was a magnificent engineering achievement, but the human cost was appalling. Of the 45,000 Allied POWs engaged in the effort, 16,000 died. And it is estimated that

about two-thirds of the 750,000 Asiatic laborers who also worked on the "death railway," perished. It is tragic to add that today most of this rail link has disappeared, and only three military cemeteries remain to mark this incident of the Second World War.

### Dien Bien Phu

Another example is drawn from more recent times. During early 1954, the French airlifted a force of 12 infantry battalions reinforced with artillery and armor into Dien Bien Phu. The latter element, an M24 tank company, was brought in piecemeal and assembled on the spot.

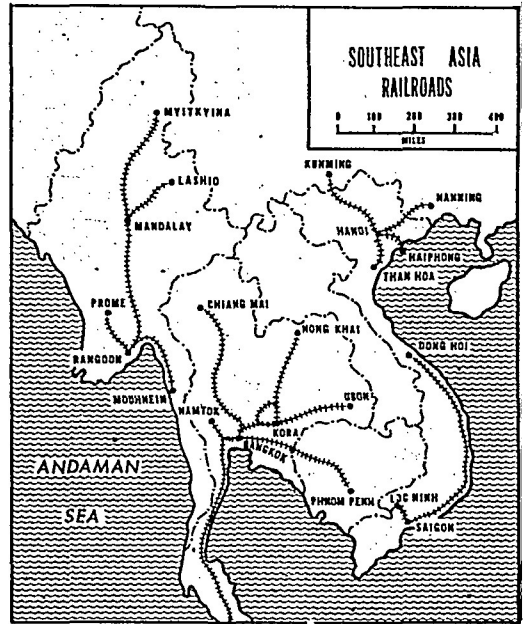
To reduce the French position required a two-month siege during which the Vietminh brought into action 40,000 combat troops with several regiments of artillery. The Vietminh general, Vo Nguyen Giap, speaks of this effort as follows:

"On the Dien Bien Phu front the supply of food and munitions was a factor as important as the problems of tactics; logistics constantly posed problems as urgent as those posed by the armed struggle. . . . The imperialists and traitors could never appreciate the strength of a . . . people. This strength is immense. It can overcome any difficulty; defeat any enemy. . . . Truck convoys valiantly crossed streams, mountains and forests . . . thousands of bicycles from the towns also carried food and munitions to the front. . . . Hundreds of sampans of all sizes, hundreds of thousand of bamboo rafts crossed rapids and cascades to supply the front. . . . Convoys of pack horses from the Mea highlands or the provinces headed for the front. . . . Day and night, hundreds of thousands of porters and young volunteers crossed passes and forded rivers in spite of enemy plants and delayed action bombs. . . ."

### Present Situation

Today in South Viet-Nam, Communist guerrillas continue their campaign to disrupt the economic and administrative organization of the country. The Viet Cong control numerous villages and are able to deny large areas to government forces. These successes are due in part to the Communists' ability to exploit the secondary transportation system. This advantage is now being offset by the increasing numbers of helicopters and other transport aircraft available to government forces. These provide the flexibility needed to defeat the Communists in their own areas.

In Laos the Communists hold the mountain passes from North Viet-Nam and are currently attempting to complete their domination of the Plain of Jars. This area is the communications hub of northern Laos. In addition, the Communist Pathet Lao are extending their control over the lateral roads leading to the Mekong River. Finally, in southern Laos there are Communist



probes being made in the direction of Saravane and Attopeu on the approaches to the Bolovens Plateau. This is the area which guards the back entrance into the High Plateau of South Viet-Nam where Viet Cong forces are active.

From this brief review of the geography and the events which it has helped to shape since 1940, it is evident that all forms of warfare can be waged on the peninsula of Southeast Asia. Clandestine or guerrilla type operations are possible throughout its length. Large scale military operations can be supported in many areas by the existing system of motor roads, railroads and airfields. In more primitive areas the systematic utilization of trails and other secondary communications to assemble forces and supplies can also permit relatively large scale operations. Moreover, the transportation systems in a number of countries in the peninsula are being improved. In South Viet-Nam this is an important part of the government offensive against the Viet Cong. In Thailand, the United States and other SEATO nations are joining in an impressive effort to improve the whole logistic base of the country. On the Communist side, comparable activities have been underway for some time in North Viet-Nam, Laos and in the border areas of southern China.

The struggle on the peninsula of Southeast Asia is not over. The area is difficult and the enemy formidable. Yet great difficulties were overcome during World War II; the Communist terrorists were defeated in Malaya and now the Viet Cong are being brought to heel. Impossible problems were resolved in the past; those of today are no more insurmountable.

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