

We Did Not Lose in Vietnam

Eugene W. Massengale

In the wake of what many see as an overwhelming American defeat in Indochina, East Asia is the scene of dramatic changes. There is unfolding a new geopolitical configuration that looks very much like an abdication to, and accommodation with, communism. There is, moreover, a pervasive consensus that the U.S. is suffering from a paralysis of power that will cause it to abandon its Asian allies in future crises. This consensus has grown in spite of the concerted efforts of the Ford Administration to convince the international community, including Communist powers, that America still has the will to abide by its obligations.

Was U.S. policy, and the withdrawal of American forces from Southeast Asia, responsible for the sudden collapse of the pro-Western governments of Indochina and the subsequent wave of reassessments and realignments that has swept over the area? Though these recent shifts would seem to confirm U.S. predictions made as early as 1950, they are in reality the result of replacing the policy of containing China with the policies of the Nixon Doctrine. Nevertheless, these shifts could have a profound influence on future U.S. policy toward Asia as the U.S. seeks to balance the interests of security against growing demands for further reductions of American overseas commitments.

China has overshadowed American policy toward Asia since Peking fell to communism. Dean Acheson set the forces of containment in motion, and hardened American anti-Communist attitudes, when he declared in 1949 that the U.S. did not intend to "permit further expansion of Communist domination on the continent of Asia, or in the Southeast Asia area." Once formed, the fundamental policy of containment remained in effect for over two decades, involved the U.S. in two unpopular land wars on the Asian continent, and brought it to the brink of war with China on several occasions.

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U.S. security interests in East Asia were first enunciated by the National Security Council in February, 1950, when it recommended that the Truman Administration extend military aid to the French in Indochina:

It is important to U.S. security interests...that all practicable measures be taken to prevent further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Indochina is a key area and is under immediate threat.

The neighboring countries of Thailand and Burma could be expected to fall under Communist domination if Indochina is controlled by a Communist government. *The balance of Southeast Asia would be in grave danger* (italics added).

The U.S. had assisted Ho Chi Minh on a limited but symbolically significant scale as early as 1944, and it would have been well advised to test Vietnamese nationalism and Ho's willingness to align himself with the West. Harry Truman nevertheless adopted the Council's recommendations and gave high priority to Indochina in applying containment to Asia. The first step on the road to South Vietnam was taken when he granted economic and military aid to the French during May, 1950. When war broke out in Korea a month later, he accelerated his aid program on the assumption that subversion in the region, as well as in Korea, was part of a general Communist conspiracy against the free world. American security interests in Asia have since been taken for granted.

The French war in Indochina nevertheless posed a dilemma for the U.S. In viewing the conflict as part of the overall strategy to contain communism both Paris and Washington ignored the facts of Asian nationalism and engaged in a hopeless struggle to keep an outmoded colonial empire in existence. The French, blind to the tide of history, were stubbornly determined to maintain their position. The Americans, equally blind then and later, failed to perceive that Ho had made himself and his Communist faction dominant in the basically nationalist

anticolonial movement by actively leading the Vietnamese struggle for independence from French rule. Notwithstanding Ho's staunch Communist leanings, there was the possibility that he could have become the Tito of East Asia, and a unified Vietnam the region's Yugoslavia. Though France alone could have made the decisions to achieve these objectives, the American failure to press for French withdrawal from Vietnam must go down in history as the most disastrous miscalculation in U.S. foreign policy since the turn of the century.

America's fundamental containment policy was strengthened by events in Korea. Whatever flexibility we exercised toward Communist China prior to its intervention on the side of the North Koreans gave way to rigid, unyielding policy that continued throughout the 1950's—containment was reinforced by the political and economic isolation of the world's most populous nation.

China's invasion of Tibet was seen as further evidence of its growing strength, causing considerable speculation as to where it would strike next. Without duly acknowledging that China had never ventured beyond its borders except to reclaim territory to which it believed it had an historical claim of suzerainty, Washington concluded that Southeast Asia would be the next target of Chinese aggression. This conclusion served to strengthen prior convictions that, in terms of containment, the region was strategically important.

In the belief that Southeast Asia was a strategic key to control of the area the Eisenhower Administration perpetuated the containment policy handed down by Truman. National Security Council papers during the fifties repeatedly stressed the importance of the region to U.S. security interests. One such paper, approved by President Eisenhower in 1954, predicted that the "loss of any single country in Southeast Asia would ultimately lead to the loss of all Southeast Asia, then India and Japan, and finally endanger the stability and security of Europe." Underlying this view was the philosophy that the fall of any nation in the region to Communist aggression would have "critical psychological, political, and economic consequences," as well as the relatively "swift submission to or an alignment with Communism by the remaining countries." Shortly thereafter President Eisenhower first mentioned the "falling domino" theory when he argued that if Indochina fell, the other states of Southeast Asia would, in inevitable dynamism, likewise fall.

In retrospect the Eisenhower Administration set the stage for ultimate American intervention in Vietnam when it negotiated a cease-fire in Korea. The Korean cease-fire not only constituted a breach of faith by the U.S., which had agreed with France that neither country would conclude a separate peace, but it also permitted Peking to place the bulk of its warmaking capacity in support of the Viet Minh. President Eisenhower acknowledged as much when he said later that "toward the end of 1953, the effect of the termination of hostilities in Korea began to be felt in Indochina—the Chinese Communists now were able to spare greatly increased quantities of materiel in the form of guns and ammunition

(largely supplied by the Soviets) for use in the Indochina battlefield. The domestic political necessity of ending the war in Korea outweighed the military risks involved in remote Vietnam, however, and the French suffered a massive defeat.

In spite of Robert F. Kennedy's persistent and unsatisfied demands for a clarification of U.S. security interests in Southeast Asia, the Kennedy Administration, unable to find suitable alternatives, permitted the momentum of containment and the internecine war in Vietnam gradually but inexorably to increase U.S. involvement. In each of the Asian developments of 1961-62—the Laotian crisis, the Sino-American confrontation in the Straits of Formosa, and the clash between Indian and Chinese troops—the U.S. consistently took the view that China was bent on expanding its sphere of control throughout the whole of East Asia. In a memorandum typical of the Kennedy era Secretaries Rusk and McNamara advised the President that the "loss of South Vietnam to Communism would make pointless any further discussion about the importance of Southeast Asia to the Free World; we would have to face the near certainty that the remainder of Southeast Asia and Indonesia would move to a complete accommodation with Communism, if not a formal incorporation within the Communist bloc."

It fell to the Johnson Administration to make the most disastrous American policy decision of this century when, in an attempt to substitute American power for local weakness and incapacity, it committed U.S. military forces to the defense of South Vietnam. Notwithstanding the sharp division of opinion among his advisors and the American public's growing disenchantment President Johnson was convinced that the U.S. must intervene to put a halt to the expansion of Chinese communism.

President Johnson, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Maxwell Taylor were firmly committed to the domino theory and the U.S. role in containing China. They believed that all of the countries of Southeast Asia, from Cambodia to Malaysia, would automatically succumb to Communist domination, and that the U.S. position in the rest of the Far East, from Indonesia through the Philippines to Japan and Korea, would be damaged irrevocably if South Vietnam were to fall. As early as January, 1964, General Taylor warned that the loss of South Vietnam would erode America's influence in the subcontinent. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara extended this thesis when he argued that, unless the U.S. established an independent non-Communist Vietnam, "almost all of Southeast Asia [would] probably fall under Communist dominance (all of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), accommodate to Communism so as to remove effective U.S. and anti-Communist influence (Burma), or fall under the domination of forces not now explicitly Communist but likely to become so (Indonesia taking over Malaysia). Thailand might hold out for a

period with our help but would be under grave pressure."

The CIA, surprisingly, did not agree with the President and his closest advisors. In early June, 1964, President Johnson directed the CIA to examine the question of whether the rest of Southeast Asia would fall if South Vietnam and Laos came under Hanoi's dominion. On June 9 the CIA challenged the domino theory, reporting that "with the possible exception of Cambodia, it is likely that no nation in the area would quickly succumb to communism as a result of the fall of Laos and South Vietnam. Furthermore, a continuation of the spread of communism in the area would not be inexorable, and any spread which did occur would take time—time in which the total situation might change in ways unfavorable to the Communist cause." The CIA did concede that the loss of both countries would be damaging to the position and prestige of the U.S. in the Far East, while that of China would rise significantly. Even under a worst-case scenario, however, where the two nations fell as a consequence of an overwhelming Communist victory, the Agency believed that the U.S. would retain sufficient leverage to influence the outcome as it applied to the region as a whole. The extent to which individual nations moved away from the free world toward communism would depend in the long run on the substance and manner of foreign policy. Unfortunately, President Johnson did not heed this lone voice in the wilderness and made the ill-fated decision to defend South Korea.

Richard Nixon entered the White House on campaign promises to end the Southeast Asian war, and substituted détente with the Communist superpowers for the policy that had dominated U.S. diplomacy for over two decades—the policy of containment. The policy of détente has brought about a dramatic change in America's attitude toward China and set in motion the forces of realignment under way in Asia today.

Acting on the premise that world order could not be stabilized with China remaining outside and hostile to it, President Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, sought to engage China more fully in international affairs. The forces of nationalism that had dissolved Communist unity into diverse power centers during the sixties helped to create a multipolar order to replace the bipolar alignment that had existed since the end of World War II. American diplomacy showed signs of maturing by differentiating between Communist nations as the U.S. began to deal with nation-states on the basis of their actions instead of their abstract political ideologies.

Once a new relationship had been established with China, the Nixon Doctrine of shared responsibility began to take form. The basic purpose of the new philosophy was to invoke greater efforts on the part of America's allies in their own behalf. Increasingly they would be required to "man their own defenses and furnish more of the funds for their security and economic development.

The corollary would be the reduction of the American share of defense or financial contributions."

The Nixon approach alarmed America's European and Asian allies, because it had all the appearances of a retreat to "Fortress America" and an abrogation of U.S. treaty commitments. Under the Nixon Doctrine, however, the U.S. not only intended to fulfill its overseas obligations, but also to continue to provide a shield if a nuclear power threatened an ally or a nation whose survival was judged vital to U.S. interests. In cases involving other types of aggression the U.S. would furnish military and economic assistance in accordance with its treaty obligations when requested, but would expect the nation directly threatened to provide the manpower for its defense. The message was clear—the U.S. would no longer fight another nation's war for it.

The U.S. carried out its new policy by withdrawing the bulk of its forces from Southeast Asia once a cease-fire had been negotiated in Vietnam, increasing concern abroad as to its credibility. Withdrawal, in turn, created a power vacuum that placed the unsteady pro-Western governments of Indochina in untenable positions. This factor, together with the instability of the locally unpopular Thieu regime and the refusal of the American Congress to continue pouring funds into a bottomless pit, hastened the downfall of South Vietnam. When Cambodia and Laos fell in inevitable dynamism, a wave of speculation, reassessment, and realignment engulfed the region as the nation-states on China's periphery reacted to the new realities of Asia's shifting politics.

If nothing else, this discouraging review of the containment policy as it was applied to Southeast Asia demonstrates that our influence in the region has been, and continues to be, far less than originally supposed. Moreover, the U.S. overestimated the threat of China and the value of Indochina as a dominant factor in the Asian power equation. Furthermore, the bitter lesson of Vietnam is that the nations of Southeast Asia can, and should, resolve their political problems in their own fashion and without outside interference. The Nixon Doctrine reflects this lesson, as well as America's present perception of communism today vis-à-vis that of a quarter century ago. We no longer view communism as the monolith it was thought to be in the late forties, and now approach the Communist states, as well as those closely associated with communism, on the basis of their actions, not their political leanings. It is against this backdrop that we should view the reconfiguration under way in East Asia, and not in the dismal light of a so-called American defeat in Indochina.

Asian leaders began reacting to the realities of political change some months before the fall of Indochina, which most regarded as inevitable once the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam. Capitalizing on the schism between Peking and Moscow, they are turning to Communist diversity instead of American military power as a source of security, and cautiously forming or reaffirming ties with China, the Soviet Union, and the

now formidable Hanoi. An overriding regional concern influencing these maneuvers is the billions of dollars in usable U.S. equipment and weapons in Vietnam's hands. Not only do the Vietnamese have the potential for creating a modern, powerful army, there is the danger that they could become arms brokers to insurgent groups in neighboring nations. The region's political heads consider the latter option to be potentially more damaging than any spreading political-ideological infection. The continuing threat of subversion, together with pervasive political instability, constitutes a dangerous threat to regional and world peace.

Thailand, ever sensitive to the direction of Asia's political winds and quite adept at bending with them after eight hundred years' experience, seems to be entering the Communist sphere of influence in exchange for its non-Communist independence. The shaky Thai government, faced with mounting pressures from insurgents in the nation's northern provinces, appears to be ever closer both to China and the new Communist masters of Indochina. To this end the Thais are demanding the withdrawal of U.S. forces, which may not necessarily conform to Peking's long-range objectives. Bangkok's strong objections to the U.S. may therefore be motivated more by the need to accommodate the region's Communist powers than by genuine anti-American attitudes.

Nevertheless, certain elements within the Thai government are eagerly adjusting to the new political conditions in Asia. Arguing that Thailand can no longer ignore the power of communism, Prime Minister M.R. Kukrit Pramoj has established relations with Peking and appears to be receptive to Hanoi's overtures in spite of ancient rivalries between the two nations. Inasmuch as the normalization of relations with Peking appears to be more in the form of insurance against an overly aggressive Hanoi than a complete accommodation with communism, these ties could work to Washington's advantage in the long run.

The Filipinos, who are also becoming quite adept at shifting with the changing direction of Asia's political winds, broke with a quarter century of opposition to recognizing Communist regimes to establish diplomatic relations with Peking. Though China looms large in President Marcos's new approach to regional politics, this again is not necessarily detrimental to U.S. interests. The new Filipino foreign policy stresses regional ties, abandons vocal anticommunism, and embraces Communist China. The Philippines was among the first Asian

nations to establish diplomatic ties with China in the aftermath of the Indochina disaster, and placed special emphasis on the de-Americanized nature of their new approach to foreign relations. In a joint communiqué issued after the signing of a diplomatic accord in Peking, both China and the Philippines pledged their opposition to foreign aggression and subversion. Senior Vice President Ten Hsia-ping, China's third-ranking official, declared after the signing that the normalization of Manila-Peking relations was an "important contribution to the advancement of the Asian people's cause against imperialism."

In spite of a tendency in the U.S. to construe such statements as evidence of new Asian anti-Americanism, such remarks can be applied equally to the Soviet Union. Peking does not want to see the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Asia for fear that Russia would take advantage of the resultant vacuum to dominate Southeast Asia and complete China's encirclement.

It is because of China's fear of Russia that Peking persuaded President Marcos to change his stance regarding American use of Clark Field and Subic Bay. Whereas he originally seems to have had thoughts of reclaiming these bases for exclusive Filipino use, he is now willing to assist the U.S. in its role of a counterbalance to Russia to maintain an effective presence over the air and sea lanes of the Pacific. Though Marcos said on July 7, 1975, that the Philippine Government planned to assume control over the bases, he assured the U.S. it would be allowed to use them subject to negotiated agreements. "As a tested ally," Marcos said, "there is no reason why the Philippines should deny these facilities which an historical ally might need in fulfilling its assigned role for the maintenance of peace in the region."

Taiwan, which has been virtually abandoned by its Asian neighbors, many of whom have conceded that the island nation is an integral part of China proper, is stressing self-sufficiency rather than reliance on the strength of others—an obvious result of American preference for Peking. Though its 500,000-man military establishment has the capability of defending the island from conventional invasion, Taiwan must continue to look to the U.S. nuclear shield to deter the mainland from launching an unlikely strike against brother Chinese. The Taiwanese appear, moreover, to be preparing themselves for an uncertain future—absorption by the mainland or continued autonomy with the risk of economic strangulation by Peking. Speculation is high that, with

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the passing of Chiang Kai-shek, Taiwan will become an integral part of China within five years. Again, this is not necessarily harmful to U.S. interests as long as it maintains a meaningful relationship with Peking.

In Malaysia, where increased Communist-supported insurgency along the Thai border has raised new doubts concerning Thailand's stability and its capacity to deal with the situation, government officials publicly assert that the domino theory is invalid. Privately, they are deeply concerned that the recent chain of events in Indochina could have serious repercussions for Malaysia.

Ghazali Shafil, Malaysian Minister for Home Affairs, reflected the official position of the government in a recent radio broadcast when he said that the concept of spreading communism was never valid except in the minds of American politicians and policy-makers. He did concede, however, that the domino theory could well become a self-fulfilling prophecy in a period of national despondency. This concession is rooted in the deep concern all Malay officials feel regarding Thailand's stability and the potentially damaging consequences of major changes in Thai policy regarding surviving members of the Malaysian Communist Party. Numbering about 1,700, they are based in jungle and mountain camps along the Thai border. The possibility that these insurgents could obtain more powerful and more numerous arms from captured American stocks in Vietnam is particularly frightening to the Malaysians. Such weapons could encourage the insurgents to extend their activities to lowland and urban areas, well beyond their previous zones of operation.

Malaysian officials are equally concerned and upset by Peking's ideological support of insurgents, which is behind the current strained relationship between the two countries. When Kuala Lumpur formalized diplomatic ties with Peking over a year ago, it received the usual assurances from Chairman Mao and Premier Chou En-lai that China would not interfere in Malaysia's internal affairs. The Chinese, who do not consider it contradictory to maintain friendly relations at the government-to-government level while simultaneously maintaining fraternal party-to-party affiliations with Communist guerrillas, broadcast a congratulatory message to the Malaysian Communist Party this year. Though Chinese support to regional Communists has been largely ideological and Peking has assured the governments of the region that it will not furnish arms to the guerrillas, the Malaysian prime minister was so upset by the incident that he felt obliged to rebuke the Chinese ambassador over the incident.

This dichotomy between government-to-government and party-to-party relations in China's approach to Southeast Asia could significantly reduce its influence. The governments of the region will no more condone meddling in their internal affairs than they will tolerate Communist-inspired, externally supported, insurgency movements. China's loss of influence could encourage the Soviets to extend their control

over the area, exacerbating the potential for a Soviet-American confrontation.

Singapore, likewise concerned with the buildup of Communist-inspired insurgents in Thailand, has not yet joined the other Southeast Asian nations in establishing diplomatic relations with Peking. Moreover, Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's tough prime minister, in spite of his recent loss of faith in Washington, consistently advocates a strong American presence in the Western Pacific to balance both China and Russia. He continues to do so even though he is perplexed and troubled by the lack of unity in America's foreign policy, and considers this division to be disastrous.

The single greatest worry of government officials is the inadequate response their neighbors have made in coping with Communist guerrillas. They recognize that the Communist movement could not allow Singapore to remain free, since it is anathema to their cause in Asia, but are disinclined to believe that the establishment of diplomatic relations with China will inhibit insurgency. Indeed, Prime Minister Lee believes that Peking-orchestrated insurgency has become stronger, not weaker, with the increase in the number of Asian nations that have established diplomatic ties with Peking. *Peking's strategy, which underlies its recognition of contrary regimes and the seeming abandonment of fraternal Communist parties in the region, is to give pro-Peking insurgencies the appearance of independent strength.* If these insurgents were to be armed from the massive supply of American weapons now in the hands of the Vietnamese, they could, according to Lee, become the source of incalculable mischief for Southeast Asia and the rest of the world.

Indonesia, counting on the U.S. to remain in Asia indefinitely, was badly shaken by the Communist takeover in Indochina. Behind the firmly fixed, inscrutable mask of Third World neutralism, Indonesia reflects the ambivalence prevailing throughout Asia over the decline of American influence. Concomitant with public accommodation to the now dominant Communist power are the private pleas for balance through continuing U.S. military presence in the far Pacific. Foreign Minister Adam Malik articulates the public view with a finesse derived from long years of service in diplomatic affairs. Advocating that Southeast Asia be turned into an area of peace, freedom, and neutrality free of great power influence, Malik favors the withdrawal of foreign forces from the region and the establishment of diplomatic relations with Peking to counter growing Soviet influence and to minimize the need for U.S. military aid to Indonesia.

Key military officers, some close to President Suharto, are articulating the private view. They want continued U.S. aid to modernize Indonesia's 200,000-man army, huge by Southeast Asian standards, but poorly trained and miserably equipped. They also want the maintenance of American naval strength permanently in Southeast Asian waters to counter growing Soviet power and spreading insurgency. Fearful that Camranh Bay in South Vietnam might become a major

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Soviet base, the Indonesian generals particularly want the U.S. to retain Subic Bay in the Philippines regardless of the position taken by the Associated Southeast Asian Nations. They also want continued U.S. defense pacts with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Australia to form a protective girdle around Indonesia.

But it is in Northeast Asia, where the pressures of Communist victories in Indochina have brought about new tensions, that the U.S. has been forced to focus its attention. It is here that détente between Washington and Peking is being put to the test, the outcome of which will determine in large measure the viability of future U.S. policy toward Asia.

Kim Il Sung, the aggressive megalomaniac President of North Korea, has openly warned that war could break out between North and South Korea at any time. Pyongyang, according to its press, is of the view that an aggressively imperialistic U.S. might seek to reassert its role and influence in Asia by attacking North Korea. In a recent visit to Peking and North Africa Kim repeatedly warned the U.S. against such action. Though his trip has been variously interpreted as either a quest for Chinese assistance should war break out, or for diplomatic support for the forthcoming United Nations vote on the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea, it is being interpreted in Seoul as a prelude to war.

Accordingly, President Park Chung Hee of South Korea has increased his demands that the U.S. demonstrate by deeds and military aid that it will not permit his nation to suffer the fate that befell South Vietnam. Park is not convinced that Washington can be relied upon in the long run, and has threatened to develop a Korean nuclear capability if the American shield is withdrawn. Moreover, South Korea has intensified its mobilization in response to rising concern over the possibility of renewed hostilities with the North, thereby increasing the potential for war because of a miscalculation by either side. Though there is no present indication that renewed hostilities are imminent, the situation is, and will remain, tense. Such reaction to events in Southeast Asia has prompted the Ford Administration to reaffirm repeatedly its policy vis-à-vis South Korea, thereby compounding the basic American problem of credibility abroad.

The problem of American credibility is particularly relevant in economically powerful, militarily weak Japan, which had anticipated the fall of South Vietnam

considerably in advance of the actual event. Tokyo's willingness to accommodate to the new political realities of Asia became apparent when it negotiated a normalization of relations with Hanoi, extended aid to North Vietnam, and expanded its trade with the North while simultaneously reducing economic ties with Saigon.

The Japanese viewed the confrontation between the executive and legislative branches of the American government over support for Vietnam more as domestic political positioning than as rational but different perceptions of the reconfiguration of East Asia set in motion by the Nixon Doctrine. Nevertheless, unspoken but pervasive post-Indochina doubts about the U.S. military posture in the Western Pacific is forcing the Japanese to reconsider their own weak military forces—a realization with ominous implications for East Asia and the rest of the world.

Japan's economic importance and strategic location make it certain that it will figure as a great nation in power disputes in the future. Equally important, Tokyo is vitally concerned over the prospects of a new war in nearby Korea which, though it presents no danger to Japan's security, could have internal repercussions. These factors, together with such considerations as Tokyo-Washington competition for influence in Peking, the need for access to foreign oil and raw materials to support its industry, and the potential withdrawal of American forces from the far Pacific, will bear heavily on future Japanese policy and the strategic decisions to support such policy.

China adamantly opposes the resurgence of a militant Japan. As the largest power in the region, but one relatively weak when compared militarily with either the U.S. or the USSR, Peking considers friendly relations with Washington vital to regional stability. A continued U.S. presence in the Western Pacific is fundamental to Peking's long-range aims. China has planned since 1971 that the U.S. would play a stabilizing and counterbalancing role, and there are no present indications of change in this strategy. In Peking's view Hanoi's victory has forced one superpower to withdraw in defeat while providing the other with an opportunity to expand. China is clearly worried that Hanoi's takeover will result in increased Soviet influence in the region. In this regard, Deputy Premier Ten Hsiao-peng referred to the U.S. withdrawal in a recent speech, and then said that the “other superpower...insatiably seeks new military bases in Southeast Asia and sends its naval vessels to ply the

Indian and West Pacific Oceans."

Peking, in using distant America to counterbalance nearby Soviet power, obviously looks upon the U.S. as the lesser of two evils. This was essentially the view established by Chou En-lai at the Ninth Communist Party Congress in 1973, when he observed that though the U.S. and the USSR were contending for world hegemony, the U.S. is a decadent, declining power, while the Soviets are still fierce and aggressive.

In spite of this view the U.S. is still a vital link in Peking's strategy. It is important to the Chinese that American forces remain in the West Pacific, and they are willing to concede, for the moment at least, that American bases in Southeast Asia are essential to counter the growing Soviet threat. It is therefore reasonable to expect that China will prevent the more radical insurgent groups in the region from taking steps calculated to encourage Washington to disengage entirely from Asia.

As East Asia enters a period of delicate readjustment, American steadfastness, based on policy decisions deriving from the Nixon Doctrine, is crucial to regional peace. To be effective, however, American policy toward Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular must be based on the premise that the U.S. will establish diplomatic relations with a nation, irrespective of its political leanings, if such relationship will further U.S. national interests. This requires that we refrain from social and political experimentation in our dealings with other nations. It also requires that we acknowledge the existence of the forces of nationalism in Asia, and the desire of peoples of the region to fix their own destiny without outside interference. If this includes temporary alignment with communism as a means to an end, then our policy must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate regional political realities.

It is fallacious to presume that the U.S. can stem the tide of communism in Southeast Asia if the peoples of the region are bent on accommodation with, or abdication to, some form of communism. Nor is this inconsistent with the Nixon Doctrine and the *détente* the U.S. is seeking to establish with major Communist powers. To achieve *détente* the U.S. must establish a working relationship with all nations having a capacity to shift either regional or international power balances. In addition,

American policy toward Asia must be sufficiently flexible to take advantage of Sino-Soviet hostilities, which prevent either power from preempting the area notwithstanding China's advantage over Russia because of its territorial proximity to the affected nations. Moreover, the emergence of Vietnam as a potentially powerful Southeast Asian nation, with its traditional antipathy toward China, reduces even further the possibility of either Communist superpower establishing exclusive dominion over the region.

Though appearances seem to indicate otherwise, the United States has not suffered a "massive defeat" in Southeast Asia. Rather, its withdrawal and the subsequent shifting of alliances and allegiances in Asia are direct consequences of changes in U.S. policy. The substitution of the Nixon Doctrine for containment enabled the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians to determine their own future. This is difficult for most Americans to accept because, in the words of George F. Kennan, "we have a tendency to view any war in which we might be involved not as a means of achieving limited objectives in the way of changes in a given *status quo* but as a struggle to the death between total virtue and total evil." Throughout our involvement in Southeast Asia there flowed a reluctance on the part of American statesmen and military leaders to entertain the notion that there could be considerations of a political nature overriding those of military efficiency and advantage.

We now grow alarmed at the natural geopolitical reconfiguration taking place in East Asia, and fear for the worst, even though such a realignment is not necessarily detrimental to U.S. interests. Having abandoned containment as a policy, the United States has established diplomatic ties with both Russia and China, thereby creating a multipolar world order. China, for its part, is extremely anxious for the U.S. to maintain a military presence in the Western Pacific to counterbalance growing Soviet influence. In return, Peking should suppress radical guerrilla movements that might endanger regional peace. With respect to the remaining states of the area, U.S. policy should be based on their actions rather than on any abstract political ideologies they might embrace. This is essential to the restoration of world confidence in Washington, without which the U.S. cannot possibly achieve a lasting world peace.