

## SOUTHEAST ASIA: DOMINOES OR GEOGRAPHIC REALITY?<sup>1</sup>

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The most remarkable thing about the so-called domino theory is that it is apparently taken seriously by so many otherwise intelligent people. To borrow a term popular with many domino-fanciers, the main thrust of this paper is to examine the bite of the theory in the part of the world to which it is currently most often applied, and to offer some alternative hypotheses based on an examination of actual circumstances rather than on imaginary analogy. In any kind of inquiry, there is no substitute for information and reasoning as the basis for theory or prediction. Problems simple or perplexing are not effectively solved by ignoring relevant data and depending instead on abstract formulae divorced from the reality at hand.

Briefly stated, the domino theory as it is most commonly asserted for Southeast Asia maintains that unless the allegedly expansionist drive of Communist China is blocked by military means, Chinese and/or Communist power will overwhelm Laos and South Vietnam and that this will automatically be followed in a cumulative causal chain by the similar overwhelming first of adjacent Thailand and Cambodia, then of the countries adjacent to them, and so on until the whole of Southeast Asia, and perhaps India, Pakistan, Ceylon, the Middle East, and Africa are struck down through the transmission of the first impulse, the first fallen domino of what is seen as an unbroken continuum leading spatially outward from it. We are obliged to examine this hypothesis, but only because a great many people, including those in high office, appear to subscribe to it, or at least to consider it among other hypotheses on which policy decisions may be based.

Much of the speculation about the future course of events in a conflict-torn Asia is, understandably, influenced by the memory of events in Europe between 1938 and 1946. The past however is rarely a reliable guide to the future when its supposed lessons are applied mechanistically and without adequate regard for inevitably altered circumstances. The alteration may be a matter of degree, but the differences between Europe and Asia in this matter and between the 1930's or 1940's and the present are fundamental. They do not, among other things, permit the applicability of a Munich analogy to contemporary Asia, nor do they leave much room for the support of a thesis of territorial conquest patterned on the events which followed Munich and Postdam.

The domino model for Southeast Asia may be seen to rest on two principal assumptions: that the present Chinese state is insatiably expansionist, through the export of its control by violence, and that each of the states of Southeast Asia lacks only the impulse provided by the fall of its neighbor to turn into a Communist pawn of China.

### I

Let us examine the first assumption to begin with, admittedly the more difficult of the two to accept or reject on the basis of solid evidence. It can however be stated at the start that the Chinese state has not yet been involved in expansionist actions. Its forcible reconquest of Tibet was a reassertion of traditional Chinese sovereignty, and probably as such less "expansionist" than for example the British re-occupation of Malaya or the French re-occupation of Vietnam after World War II. The Chinese intervention in Korea, condemned as aggression by the United Nations, can perhaps with better reason be interpreted as a defensive

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<sup>1</sup> This paper reflects the situation with which it deals as of April 1966.



action in a situation where Chinese fears of land and air attack were given every encouragement by the statements of MacArthur and the behavior of forces under his command operating in an obviously hostile posture within a few miles of the Chinese border. There was a Russian-installed Communist government in North Korea when the Chinese intervened, and since their withdrawal that government has remained in power; the status of North Korea was not changed. The Communist government of China inherited from its predecessors several unsolved boundary disputes, some of which (Burma, Mongolia, Pakistan) it has settled by negotiation and treaty and some of which remain contested. The dispute with India led to a small scale war, the origins of which are obscure but which clearly took place after prolonged attempts at negotiation over Chinese territorial claims which were at least as valid as the Indian counter-claims. The more significant aspect of the war was however the Chinese withdrawal after they had virtually destroyed effective opposition and when the road to the conquest of Hindustan lay open to them; this would suggest that the Chinese state is not bent on territorial expansion by force.

We have little basis to doubt and much to demonstrate that the Chinese leaders are rational in their perceptions and decisions, perhaps especially in matters of active external policy, as opposed to propaganda statements. They appear to be consistently and painfully aware of the severe limitation of Chinese military power beyond the immediate border zone.

Internally, the Chinese state is probably the most powerful in the world, but its military capability falls off extremely sharply beyond its own borders. It largely lacks both an airforce and a navy on any great-power scale, and is likely to continue to do so for many years to come. Its possession of an infant nuclear establishment does not change this overall situation. In addition, the Chinese leaders have made clear, despite their propagandistic statements about a continuing world revolutionary struggle, the value which they place on building a successful and industrialized economy at home, and by the really remarkable caution and restraint of their actions externally have also indicated their unwillingness to jeopardize their domestic goals. Recent events in the Gulf of Tonking and in the air over Hainan and south China, or rather the absence of a Chinese response, have made this doubly clear, in a pattern consistent with the past decade. There are also, after all, no Chinese troops in Vietnam.

China will certainly continue to support what it refers to as "wars of national liberation," especially in Southeast Asia, with advisers, organizers, and limited amounts of material, but is aware that such movements flourish in response to indigenous conditions in each country much more than as a result of Chinese assistance. Chinese invasion is not contemplated because it would not be an effective means of establishing a stable position either for communism or for Chinese interests.

Lin Piao, the Chinese Minister of Defense, issued a now famous statement in September of 1965 which has been variously interpreted in this country. Its significance can I think best be extracted only through some consideration of the larger context and some appreciation of the dual roles played in Communist China's external affairs by policy statements on the one hand and by policy actions on the other. No doubt Lin Piao meant what he said when he spoke of the inevitable victory of communism in the continuing world revolution. But it is surely of at least equal importance that he should have stated quite flatly: "Revolution cannot be imported."<sup>2</sup> Most students of the history of communism would agree. From the

<sup>2</sup> Peking Review, No. 36, Sept. 3, 1965, 9-31. "The socialist revolution is possible only after the completion of the national-democratic revolution." "Every revolution in a country stems from the demands of its own people...their role cannot be replaced or taken over by any people from outside. In this sense, revolution cannot be imported." (p. 25)



Chinese point of view, Lin's assertion appears to make clear that though his government welcomes and, short of full scale military intervention, will support, Communist revolutions wherever they may occur as a result of indigenous pressures and drives, China is not in the business of attempting to export its revolution or its sovereignty.

Any powerful state will almost by definition seek to strengthen its friends and confound its enemies; it will also seek to ensure that states which border on it are if possible friendly and are at least not actively hostile, even if this may require the use or threat of force, as in the case of the American response to Cuba. China's interests as an undoubted great power require the establishment of non-hostile regimes in Korea and Vietnam as in Laos and Burma, regimes which furthermore do not harbor the forces and bases of an alien enemy. This does not distinguish China from most other great powers, nor in my view does it establish China as expansionist.

## II

Examination of the second assumption of the domino theory may begin by returning to Lin Piao on the impossibility of importing revolution. We know enough about the history and spread of communism, especially in Asia, to discount any assertion that external pressures, or the fall of a neighboring domino, are likely prime causes. Communism has spread where it has been able to feed on socio-economic distress and political ineptitude or oppression. Where these elements have been lacking, communism has notably failed to establish or maintain itself. In some situations where communism had gained a foothold, as for example the post-war success of the Hukbalahaps in the Philippines, the advent to power under a charismatic leader of a reformist government which made a significant impact on economic and political as well as military problems cut the ground out from under the revolutionaries and destroyed their threat. In Malaya, a relatively prosperous and responsibly administered state, the determined effort at Communist subversion with Chinese support won few adherents and was completely eliminated.

The circumstances are unfortunately different in Thailand, not because it borders on Cambodia and Laos but because its government is not fully effective, tends often to be oppressive, and appears insufficiently concerned with the economic welfare of its northeastern provinces, where Communist subversion with Chinese support is already gaining ground. The domino-like response of the United States: to establish greatly expanded American military bases in Thailand, seems more likely to accelerate this tragic development than to check it. The population of much of northeast Thailand, essentially the Korat plateau, includes large proportions of Lao and Khmers and its agricultural and other resources are meager, notably its thin infertile soils whose low productivity results also from the difficulties of irrigation. This is an area to which the Thai government should clearly give maximum attention and developmental investment; instead, the Northeast has often been treated in the past like a Cinderella; it is a fateful pattern.

It may well be that part of the Philippino and Malay success in combatting communism resulted from the absence of direct American intervention, unlike Vietnam; these were national rather than alien efforts. In Indonesia one may trace a pattern of rising Communist power during the period when American pressures and support for the anti-Communist rebels in the outer islands were at their greatest, and of the recent purge of Communists once the American presence was largely withdrawn. As in so many other situations, including Vietnam, it would appear that indigenous nationalism is the only effective instrument of resistance to communism or to Chinese pressures. The Djakarta-Peking honeymoon, at its height during the American support of the Indonesian rebels, has now collapsed into divorce,



and even the policy of Confrontasi with democratic Malaysia has faded as Indonesian nationalists see the "imperialist" threat of Anglo-American pressures receding.

Very few parts of Southeast Asia, if any, offer attractive rewards to a would-be Chinese conqueror. Indeed it is little short of fantastic to think even of Thailand and Malaya, Southeast Asia's most prosperous states, as material prizes from the Chinese point of view.

The domino theory rests in part on the assumption that the Chinese state has motives of economic gain which impel it to put the process of overthrow in train. All of Southeast Asia is predominantly agricultural, as is China. Apart from a modest development in North Vietnam, already within the Communist sphere, there is no significant industrial complex anywhere in the entire area, and its chief mineral resource, tin, is one with which China is already abundantly supplied. Even in petroleum, the relatively small total of Southeast Asia's proven reserves and present production does not rival China's and would not make a critical contribution to China's needs. It is argued that China wants and must have control over the rich rice-producing areas to the south in order to solve its own food problems. Such assertions are apparently made in ignorance of some simple pieces of information. Current Chinese food grain production (neither we, nor the Chinese government, it would seem, can get accurate figures) is approximately 200 million tons. Thailand, the largest food grower (almost exclusively rice) in mainland Southeast Asia has a total rice production of between 9 and 10 million tons, of which of course only a small part is in excess of the needs of its own rapidly growing population. Burma's total production, and even more its surplus, are considerably smaller. South Vietnam has, primarily as the result of a war which has now lasted over 25 years on Vietnamese soil, a small net food deficit. Malaya has a much larger one, and imports about 40 per cent of its total food needs. The Philippines and Indonesia have chronic and mounting food deficits.

Rubber, it is true, is a major Chinese need and a major Southeast Asian resource, principally in Malaya, secondarily in Indonesia (where production has fallen sharply in the recent chaotic years), and on a minor scale in South Vietnam and Thailand. South Vietnam once had fairly sizable rubber exports, but both production and export have been reduced to a trickle in the course of the war and have been especially hard hit recently because the rubber plantations, with their thick leaf canopy and relatively open ground under the trees, have been used as ideal staging areas for the Vietcong, shielded from observation from the air. As a result they have been heavily bombed, defoliated, and burned out with napalm. But the Chinese need for rubber does not alone seem an adequate motive for an otherwise notoriously unrewarding conquest of Southeast Asia, which would clearly bring more problems than rewards to the Chinese economy and the Chinese state. Rubber needs have been satisfactorily met for many years now through international trade channels, especially the barter arrangement with Ceylon in which Chinese rice is exchanged for rubber while the rice exports are replaced by cheaper wheat imports--it is a rational and mutually profitable trade pattern which is a good deal more sensible, and more beneficial to Chinese interests, than would be a Drang nach Süden.

It is difficult, in conclusion, to find any reliable basis in fact--in past behavior, in geographic and political realities of the present, or in predictable future courses--for the application of the domino theory to Southeast Asia. It is at best simplistic, at worst (and perhaps accurately) a model based on an inappropriate analogy and applied in either ignorance or defiance of an array of data which controvert it at nearly every point. The domino theory is no fit companion for anyone who calls himself a thoughtful man. It is a poor substitute for rational inquiry.