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VIETNAM AND SOUTHEAST ASIA:

THE NEGLECTED ISSUE

by

W. W. ROSTOW

The United States' involvement in Vietnam and greater Southeast Asia evidently had and still has, both in that region and at home, many dimensions: military and economic, social and political, human and moral. I tried to evoke the multiple facets of that involvement in my book *The Diffusion of Power*. In the present article, however, I will focus on one important and largely neglected aspect of the subject: the strategic significance of Southeast Asia to all the countries with a stake in the disposition of power in the region.

In their serious effort to analyze the US involvement in Vietnam, Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts take as their central thesis the following proposition:

> US leaders considered it vital not to lose Vietnam by force to communism. They believed Vietnam to be vital, not for itself, but for what they thought its 'loss' would mean internationally and domestically.[1]

George Herring's interesting historical assessment, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, contains a brief, accurate passage evoking the reasons for anxiety about Southeast Asia in Washington in the wake of the communist takeover of China in 1949;[2] but so far as my reading revealed, there is no further discussion of the strategic importance of Vietnam or Southeast Asia.

The general view of those who opposed US policy toward Southeast Asia in the 1960s is quite well captured by J. K. Galbraith's bon mot of April 1966: "If we were not in Vietnam, all that part of the world would be enjoying the obscurity it so richly deserves."[3] Or, take the following passage from an August 1968 interview with Eugene McCarthy in *The New York Times*:

> I [interviewer] asked him [McCarthy] the final question about Vietnam: 'How are we going to get out?' He said 'Take this down. . . . [T]he time has come for us to say to the Vietnamese, We will take our steel out of the land of thatched huts, we will take our tanks out of the land of the water buffalo, our napalm and flame-throwers out of the land that scarcely knows the use of matches. We will give you back your small and willing women, your rice-paddies and your land.' He smiled. 'That's my platform. It's pretty good, isn't it?'[4]

At first glance, there would appear to be some evidence for the view that the US government did not regard Vietnam of intrinsic importance; for example, neither in office nor in his memoirs did Richard Nixon or Henry Kissinger discuss Southeast Asian policy except as an inherited burden and a responsibility that had to be honored if the credibility of US guarantees elsewhere were to be sustained. As I shall note later, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson (but not all members of their Administrations) took a different view. And the fact is that over the past 40 years nine successive Presidents—from Franklin Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan—have made serious strategic commitments to the independence of Southeast Asia, in every case with some pain and contrary to other interests.

The story begins, in a sense, with this passage from Cordell Hull's memoirs—which is where the Pentagon Papers should have begun but didn't:

> Japanese troops on July 21 [1941] occupied the southern portions of Indo-China and were now in possession of the whole of France's strategic province, pointing like a pudgy thumb toward the Philippines, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies . . . .
>
> When Welles telephoned me, I said to him that the invasion of Southern Indo-China looked like Japan's last step before jumping off for a full-scale attack in the Southwest Pacific . . . .
>
> On the following day the President, receiving Nomura, proposed that if the Japanese Government would withdraw its forces from French Indo-China, he would seek to obtain a solemn declaration by the United States, Britain, China, and The Netherlands to regard Indo-China as a 'neutralized' country, provided Japan gave a similar commitment. Japan's explanation for occupying Indo-China having been that she wanted to defend her supplies of raw materials there, the President's proposal took the props from under this specious reasoning. A week later the President extended his proposal to include Thailand.
>
> Indicating our reaction to Japan's latest act of imperialist aggression, the President froze Japanese assets in the United States on July 26 . . . . All financial, import, and export transactions involving Japanese interests came under Government control, and thereafter trade between the United States and Japan soon dwindled to comparatively nothing . . . .
>
> From now on our major objective with regard to Japan was to give ourselves more time to prepare our defenses. We were still ready—and eager—to do everything possible toward keeping the United States out of war; but it was our concurrent duty to concentrate on trying to make the country ready to defend itself effectively in the event of war being thrust upon us.[5]

It was, in fact, the movement by the Japanese from northern to southern Indochina in July 1941 and Roosevelt's reaction to it which made war between Japan and the United States inevitable, despite Roosevelt's deep desire to avoid a two-front conflict. The story continues down to the more familiar commitments in Southeast Asia, from Truman to Nixon, to the less well-known fact that on four separate occasions the Carter Administration, in the wake of the communist takeover of South Vietnam in April 1975, reaffirmed the nation's treaty commitment to the defense of Thailand;[6] and, on 6 October 1981, President Reagan said this to the Prime Minister of Thailand on the occasion of his visit to Washington:

> I can assure you that America is ready to help you, and ASEAN, maintain your independence against communist aggression. The Manila Pact, and its clarification in our bilateral communique of 1962, is a living document. We will honor the obligations it conveys.[7]

That is where we are. With large Vietnamese forces in Kampuchea, just across the shallow Mekong from Thailand and dominating Laos as well; with the Soviet Navy based in the installations we built in Cam Ranh Bay, the Soviet Air Force based in the airfields around Danang, and a major port in Kampuchea being enlarged for Soviet strategic purposes—all just across the South China Sea from the US bases in Subic Bay and Clark Field—Southeast Asia is not likely

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soon to disappear from the national security agenda of the United States government. I doubt, however, that there is a wide awareness in the United States of how tightly drawn the confrontation is along the Mekong and across the South China Sea. Nor do I believe there is a wide awareness of the commitments reaffirmed in the region by President Carter and President Reagan. But, for the present, my point is this: We cannot understand what we have experienced in Asia over the past two generations, nor can we formulate and sustain a workable policy in Asia, until we as a nation come to a widespread understanding of the strategic importance of Southeast Asia to our own security and to the security of the other powers concerned.

I shall begin, therefore, by trying to evoke the character of the strategic interests at work in Southeast Asia; point out the linkages of Vietnam to the rest of the region; outline the strategic evolution of Southeast Asia since 1940; and, finally, reflect on the implications of the story for US policy, past and future.

THE STRATEGIC INTERESTS OF THE POWERS

At some risk of oversimplification, I shall now try to define the major strategic interests of each of the principal powers concerned with Southeast Asia.

Japan. The Japanese have three abiding interests in Southeast Asia: First, a straightforward security interest that Southeast Asia (and thus the South China Sea) not be controlled by a potentially hostile power, with all that would imply for the sea approaches to the Japanese islands. Second, trading access to the countries of Southeast Asia that have been and remain major sources of raw materials and major markets for Japanese exports, markets notably expanding in recent decades. Third, an interest that the Straits of Malacca remain reliably open for Japanese trade with the rest of the world, an interest greatly heightened by the remarkable emergence of Japan as a global trading nation and its heavy reliance on an unobstructed flow of Middle East oil.

Japan sought to achieve these objectives by creating the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in 1940-45. When that effort failed, it fell back to reliance on the United States (and, to a degree, its own diplomacy and defense forces) to assure these vital interests.

China. China has an enduring interest that Southeast Asia not be dominated by a potentially hostile major power. Such dominance would threaten it both over land and via the South China Sea, where Vietnamese bases could bring pressure against important coastal cities. China has pursued these interests since 1949 by contesting vigorously Soviet efforts to dominate Southeast Asian communist parties, notably the Vietnamese; by leading the 1964-65 effort to collapse noncommunist resistance in Southeast Asia, in association with Hanoi and Sukarno and Aidit in Indonesia; and, after the Cultural Revolution, by establishing relations with the United States and by contesting independently what the Chinese regard as Soviet efforts to encircle and isolate China.

USSR. Russia has had a continuing interest that Vladivostok remain open as a trading port and a naval base. And, since the trans-Siberian railway went through in the 1890s, that nation has been a recurrent contestant for power in Northeast Asia, notably vis-à-vis Japan and China. In the post-1949 period the Soviet Union moved out from this regional role to broader vistas of Asian and global power. Its contest for power developed two new dimensions: the struggle with the Chinese communists, which was initially confined to contention for leadership of Asian (and other) communist parties but in early 1958 became a cold war between the two countries; and the thrust, based on the radically expanded Soviet Navy, to develop a string of alliances from Southeast Asia through the Indian Ocean to the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa. (I shall have more to say later about this policy, which can be formally dated from June 1969.) The Soviet air and naval bases in Indochina are, evidently, fundamental to this strategy both to neutralize the US bases at Clark Field and

Subic Bay, which have hitherto dominated the South China Sea, and to guarantee Soviet access to the Indian Ocean through the Malacca Straits.

India. Aside from an Indian Ocean open freely to commerce and not dominated by a single potentially hostile power, India's concern with Southeast Asia is that the countries of the region—Burma, above all—remain independent. It is an interest that parallels, for example, India's concern for an independent Afghanistan—a concern only recently articulated by Mrs. Gandhi.

India's interest in Southeast Asia is rarely discussed in public by its political leaders. Nevertheless, the fundamental strands of Indian policy toward the region have been consistent and deeply rooted in memories of the Japanese occupation of Burma and the possibility of a recurrence of danger on India's northeast frontier.[8] For this reason India supported Burma and Malaya against communist guerrilla movements in the 1950s.

Australia. The abiding interests of Australia in Southeast Asia are dual: that its sea routes to the United States, Europe, and Japan (now its most important trading partner) remain open; and that Southeast Asia—above all, Indonesia—remain independent of any major power and not hostile. The Australians are not likely to forget what a close call it was in 1942 when they were saved from Japanese invasion by the American victories in the Coral Sea and at Guadalcanal. And, unlike most Americans, they remember how close to a communist takeover Southeast Asia was, including, especially, Indonesia, in July 1965 when Johnson made his decision to introduce large US forces into Vietnam.[9]

In the changing circumstances since 1965, Australian foreign and military policy has continued steadily to support the independence of Southeast Asia.

The United States. US policy in Asia began, of course, with a simple concern for the maintenance of trading access in the face of special interests developed by Western powers operating in the region. From, say, the ambiguities of the Open Door notes of 1900 and Theodore Roosevelt's tilt toward the Russians in 1905 at Portsmouth in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War, a strategic dimension to US policy emerged parallel to that which emerged during the First World War in Europe, namely, a US interest that a balance of power be maintained in Asia and that no single power dominate the region. A power with hegemony in Asia would command the resources to expel US naval power in the Pacific back to Hawaii at least, just as a hegemonic power in Europe could dominate the Atlantic, as German submarines twice came close to demonstrating. The United States has acted systematically on that principle for some 80 years when the balance of power in Asia has seemed under real and present danger. At various times, that instinctive policy has brought us into confrontation in Asia with Japan, China, Russia or their surrogates; and, at various times, it has brought us into association with Russia, China, and Japan.

As is evident from this brief review, Southeast Asia is a critical element in the balance of power in Asia because of its relation to sea routes and the exercise of sea and air power, because of its resources, and because of its location with respect to China, India, and Japan. For the United States, Southeast Asia has a quite special meaning as an area of forward defense of the Pacific—a relationship vividly demonstrated after the loss of the Philippines to Japan in 1942. But for victory in the Battle of Midway, we might, at best, have held Hawaii.

In addition, the United States shares to a significant degree the specific interests in Southeast Asia of its allies and others whose security would be threatened by the hegemony of a single power in Asia; that is, at the moment we share to a significant degree the interests of Japan, China, India, and Australia, as outlined earlier. It is, essentially, a negative interest satisfied, as all the Presidents from Roosevelt to Reagan have stated, by an independent, neutral Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia. Excluding the three states of Indochina, Southeast Asia contains some 300 million people, a population approximating that of Latin America or Africa. They are diverse in their racial origins, historical experiences, degrees of modernization, and forms of government. History has also given them territorial and other deeply rooted conflicts to overcome. What they share is a desire to modernize their societies in their own way, true to their own cultures, traditions, and ambitions; and to be left in peace and independence by all the external powers. They do not wish to be run from Tokyo or Washington, New Delhi or Beijing, Moscow or Hanoi. They also shared an astonishing economic and social momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, including an annual per capita growth rate in real income averaging about four percent and a manufacturing growth rate of about 10 percent, as well as high rates of increase in foreign trade. They export about 83 percent of the world's natural rubber, 80 percent of its copra, palm, and coconut oil, 73 percent of its tin, and a wide range of other agricultural products and raw materials. Their literacy rates, which ranged from 39 percent to 72 percent in 1960, now range from 60 percent to 84 percent.

Out of their several and collective experiences as objects of the strategic interests of others, strongly encouraged by Lyndon Johnson (who made Asian regionalism a major, consistent theme of his policy), and conscious that the US role in Asia was likely to diminish with the passage of time, the five Southeast Asian countries beyond Indochina—Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines—created the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. It is an organization committed to economic and technical cooperation, to the peaceful settlement of its inner disputes, and, above all, to the pursuit of "stability and security from external interference in any form or manifestation."[10]

ASEAN moved forward slowly, building up the habit of economic cooperation and political consultation.

When the communists took over Vietnam in April 1975, ASEAN, alarmed by the turn of events, moved forward rather than backward. At a historic, carefully prepared session of the chiefs of government at Bali in February 1976, they strongly reaffirmed a 1971 declaration calling for a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality in Southeast Asia. And they have subsequently sought widened international support for this objective. Specifically, they have led the international effort to achieve the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea and have fostered the negotiated establishment of a new national coalition of Kampuchean leaders committed to the authentic independence of their country. Although the countries of ASEAN command neither individually nor collectively the military power to deter or defeat a Vietnamese thrust into Thailand or to assure control over the critical sea lanes that surround them and link them to each other, the sturdy unity that they have managed to maintain for 15 years makes ASEAN an element to be reckoned with in the Asian equation of diplomacy.[11]

To sum up this review of various strategic perspectives on Southeast Asia, one can assert two propositions:

- The legitimate interests of all the powers concerned with the region would be satisfied by a neutral Southeast Asia left to develop in independence, with its sea lanes and strategic straits open by international consensus.
- The fundamental character of the various interests at stake in the region decrees that the effort of any one power to achieve dominance in the region will confront serious and determined opposition from multiple directions.

VIETNAM AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Vietnam has tended to be discussed in isolation by Americans. Yet none of the nine Presidents caught up in Southeast Asia thought in such terms, not even Nixon, who was the most reticent about articulating the importance of the region as a whole and the US interest in its fate.

Rather than taking Vietnam's strategic importance for granted as part of Southeast Asia, it is worth briefly specifying both its intrinsic importance and the nature of its linkages to the rest of the region.

A glance at a map of Southeast Asia suggests the various strategic roles of Vietnam.

First, its geography places it on the Chinese frontier; its ports and air bases make it of strategic importance with respect to both south China and the international sea lanes of the South China Sea. Thus, the Soviet naval and air bases in Cam Rahn Bay and Danang are a very serious matter, indeed, for China, Japan, the United States, every country in noncommunist Southeast Asia, and every country with an interest in the independence of Southeast Asia.

Second, easy overland access to Laos and Cambodia from Vietnam makes it likely that those in power in all of Vietnam would quickly gain control of all of Indochina. And that likelihood is increased by the extremely difficult logistical problems that an outside power would face (for example, the United States or China) in bringing its forces to bear in defense of Laos or Cambodia against an overland thrust from Vietnam. Further, control of Cambodia by an outside power would substantially increase the capacity of that power to bring air and naval forces to bear across the air and sea lanes of the South China Sea. For example, the destruction of the British battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battle cruiser *Repulse*, critical for the defense of Singapore, was accomplished by Japanese bombers in December 1941 based on a hastily constructed airfield in Cambodia.

Third, and most important for American policy in the 1950s and 1960s, a power emplaced in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia would confront Thailand across the long line of the shallow Mekong. The frontier is not only long and virtually indefensible against a massive attack by well-armed conventional forces, but the Mekong is also a long way from the Thai ports. As I have explained at length elsewhere, this is why John Kennedy in 1961 made the decision to defend Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia by seeking via diplomacy the neutralization of Laos and by fighting the battle for Southeast Asia in Vietnam.[12]

Thailand is, ultimately, critical to Southeast Asia because of its geographical relation to Burma, on the one hand, and to Malaysia and Singapore, on the other. If a single major power were to control all of Indochina and Thailand, the vital interests of India, Japan, the United States, Indonesia, and Australia—specifically, Burma and the land route to the Indian subcontinent, control over the South China Sea, and control over the Straits of Malacca—would be in real and present danger. That is why Carter and Reagan each reaffirmed the applicability of our treaty commitments to Thailand and why ASEAN's major political thrust, overwhelmingly backed by North and South in the United Nations, is to effect the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Kampuchea and the line of the Mekong and to create an authentically independent Kampuchean government.

FOUR EFFORTS AT HEGEMONY

As Franklin Roosevelt suggested to the Japanese Ambassador in July 1941, a neutral Southeast Asia (of the kind ASEAN now proclaims) would satisfy the legitimate interests of all the powers, but Roosevelt could not accept Japanese control over the region. Roosevelt's policy has, in effect, been the policy of all his successors. And the fact is that for more than 40 years a succession of powers has sought hegemony in the region and met serious resistance. This sequence of efforts is reflected in the analysis thus far presented, but it may be useful to briefly specify when and the context in which each occurred.

First, of course, was the Japanese thrust of 1940-45. Its frustration required a homeric and bloody effort by the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, China, and India.

Second came the systematic communist efforts to exploit by guerrilla warfare the postwar dishevelment of the region and the confusions and conflicts of the transition from colonialism to independence. Stalin organized this campaign impelled by (to him) the surprising likelihood that the communists would emerge victorious from the post-1945 civil war in China and by Truman's counterattack of Soviet aggression in Europe. The Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan of 1947 clearly set a limit to the ample European empire Stalin acquired in the wake of the Second World War.

But with Mao evidently on his way to control over China in 1947, ambitious new communist objectives in Asia were enunciated by Zhdanov at the founding meeting of the Cominform in September. Open guerrilla warfare began in Indochina as early as November 1946, in Burma in April 1948, in Malaya in June of that year, and in Indonesia and the Philippines in the autumn. The Indian and Japanese communist parties, with less scope for guerrilla action, nevertheless sharply increased their militancy in 1948. As final victory was won in China in November 1949, Mao's politico-military strategy was openly commended by the Cominform to the communist parties in those areas where guerrilla operations were under way. Stalin and Mao met early in 1950 and confirmed the ambitious Asian strategy, planning its climax in the form of the North Korean invasion of South Korea, which took place at the end of June 1950.

The American and UN response to the invasion of South Korea, the landings at Inchon, the March to the Yalu, the Chinese communist entrance into the war, and the successful UN defense against the massive Chinese assault of April-May 1951 at the 38th parallel brought this phase of military and quasi-military communist effort throughout Asia to a gradual end. Neither Moscow nor Beijing was willing to undertake all-out war or even accept the cost of a continued Korean offensive. And elsewhere the bright communist hopes of 1946-47 had dimmed. Nowhere in Asia was Mao's success repeated. Indonesia, Burma, and the Philippines largely overcame their guerrillas. At great cost to Britain, the Malayan guerrillas were contained and driven back. Only in Indochina, where French colonialism offered a seedbed as fruitful as postwar China, was there real communist momentum. The settlement at Geneva in 1954 permitted an interval of four years of relative quiet in Indochina.

Although there were latent tensions between Moscow and Beijing during this phase and some contest over control and influence of the various Asian communist parties, by and large the USSR and PRC conducted this second effort to achieve hegemony in Asia in concert.

The third effort emerged at a meeting in November 1957 in Moscow in the wake of the Soviet launching of Sputnik in October. The chiefs of all the communist governments assembled. They agreed the time was propitious for a concerted effort to expand Soviet power. As Mao said in Moscow:

> It is my opinion that the international situation has now reached a new turning point. There are two winds in the world today, the East wind and the West wind. There is a Chinese saying, 'Either the East wind prevails over the West wind or the West wind prevails over the East wind.' It is characteristic of the situation today, I believe, that the East wind is prevailing over the West wind. That is to say, the forces of socialism are overwhelmingly superior to the forces of imperialism . . . .
>
> The superiority of the anti-imperialist forces over the imperialist forces . . . has expressed itself in even more concentrated form and reached unprecedented heights with the Soviet Union's launching of the artificial satellites . . . . That is why we say that this is a new turning point in the international situation.[13]

Many enterprises followed from this assessment of "the new turning point": from Berlin to the Congo to the Caribbean. For our purposes, the most important was Soviet and Chinese agreement to permit Ho Chi Minh, under pressure from the communists in South Vietnam, to relaunch Hanoi's effort to take over Laos and South Vietnam by guerrilla warfare after four years of relative passivity.

The spirit at Moscow was relatively harmonious between Russia and China; but by early 1958 the split, long latent, became acute over the question of the degree of control Moscow would exercise over the nuclear weapons it promised to transfer to China.[14] From that time forward the competition for influence in Hanoi between Moscow and Beijing, long a major issue, became intense.

To 1965, by and large the Chinese influence was predominant. Hanoi's enterprise, notably its introduction of regular North Vietnamese units into South Vietnam in 1964, was orchestrated by the Chinese with the Indonesian confrontation with Malaysia. Sukarno left the United Nations and openly joined with the Chinese, North Vietnamese, Cambodians, and North Koreans in a new grouping of forces as Hanoi's efforts in South Vietnam moved forward toward apparent success. On 1 January 1965, Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi proclaimed, "Thailand is next." No leader in Asia, communist or noncommunist, doubted the potential reality of the domino theory in July 1965 when Johnson made his decision to introduce substantial US forces into the region. (This was the ominous setting Ambassador Beale evoked in his explanation of why Australia joined in the American effort [see endnote 9].)

The US move was followed by the joint communist effort, acquiesced in by Sukarno, to assassinate the Indonesian Chiefs of Staff and set up a communist government. It failed. And, for related but obscure reasons, Mao's Cultural Revolution began in China a few weeks later. The Russians took over the major role in Hanoi of arms supplier and economic supporter, a position they still occupy.

The fourth and current thrust for hegemony in Southeast Asia, to which we have already referred, was authored by Brezhnev. From the low point of their fortunes in 1965, the South Vietnamese moved forward slowly but consistently over the next two years in military, political, and economic terms. Then, in the face of their waning position, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong assembled their accumulated capital and threw it into a maximum effort at Tet 1968. The result was a major military and political victory for the South Vietnamese, but a concurrent major political victory for Hanoi in American public opinion.[15] With Nixon's decision for Vietnamization, Moscow proceeded to design and announce a new ambitious long-run policy based on a more confident position in Vietnam.

That policy was explained by Brezhnev to a group of communist leaders on 7 June 1969.[16] His plan was based explicitly on the "vacuum" left by the British withdrawal east of Suez, the expected US retraction in Asia reflected in Nixon's Guam Doctrine, and alleged Chinese efforts to expand into the resulting void. Implicitly, it drew its strength from the greatly expanded capabilities of the Soviet Navy generated during the 1960s and planned for the future. It also constituted a response to Nixon's interest in an opening to China.

The plan called for a new Collective Security System for Asia entailing a series of pacts with countries in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, including Soviet bases in the periphery from the South China Sea to the western coasts of the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Over the next decade this policy, systematically pursued, included as major moves the setting up of Soviet bases in Indochina and support for the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea; the 1971 Soviet pact with India; the creation of new Soviet ties to Yemen and Ethiopia; and, indeed, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The policy has been reflected further in the number of Soviet operational ship visits in the Indian Ocean: They rose from one in 1968 to an average of 120 a year from 1974 to 1976.[17]

The outcome of the Soviet-led Collective Security System for Asia, in the great arc from Vladivostok to Aden and Djibouti, is, evidently, still to be determined.

SOME REFLECTIONS

Before considering the future prospects of the region and US policy toward it, we might reflect a bit on the meaning of the analysis I have presented.

Perhaps the first thing to be said is that while Americans may still debate the importance of Southeast Asia to the balance of power in Asia as a whole, there is little ambiguity about the matter among the governments and peoples of Asia, including the Soviet Union.

As for us Americans, some may draw from the account I have sketched the simple conclusion that all nine of our Presidents since 1940 have been wrong—that is, that the United States has no serious legitimate interests in preventing the control of Southeast Asia by a major, potentially hostile power. In that case, they should advocate the abrogation of the network of commitments we have in the region and urge us to organize urgently to face all the profound military, diplomatic, and economic consequences that would flow from that decision.

If we assume that I have described more or less accurately the interests of all parties at stake in Southeast Asia, the sequence of events since 1940, and where the region now stands, there are a few reasonably objective observations to be made that provide perspective on our travail over Vietnam.

First, the nature of US interest in Southeast Asia is quite complex—more so in Vietnam itself; and even when US interests have been less complex, we have had difficulty acting on them in a forehanded way. When the chips were down in 1917—with the German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare in the Atlantic and the Zimmerman note promising the return of Texas to Mexico by a victorious Germany—it was not difficult for Wilson to gain congressional support for a declaration of war in a hitherto deeply divided country, and only five months after he was reelected on the slogans "He kept us out of war" and "Too proud to fight." But such critical circumstances were required to bring the country to act on the basis of a wide consensus. Similarly, it required Pearl Harbor to bring the United States into the Second World War after a long period dominated by an isolationism FDR couldn't break. And it took a straightforward invasion of South Korea to evoke a military response there. What Truman and Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson were trying to prevent in Southeast Asia was a circumstance so stark and dangerous that once again, late in the day, the American people would finally perceive that vital interests were in jeopardy and be plunged into major war.

Behind their efforts was a consciousness that there has been, historically, no stable consensus in our country on the nature of our vital interests in the world. We have oscillated between isolationism, indifference, wishful thinking, and complacency, on the one hand, and, on the other, the panic-stricken retrieval of situations already advanced in dangerous deterioration. We have operated systematically on the principle enunciated by Dr. Samuel Johnson: "Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." Right or wrong, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson did not doubt that the American people and the Congress would react to support the use of force if communist forces were actually engulfing all of Southeast Asia; but they judged a typical, late, convulsive American reaction—a fortnight from the gallows—too dangerous in a nuclear age.[18]

Second, and quite specifically, they fought in Vietnam to prevent the situation we now confront and what may (but may not) follow from it, that is, large Vietnamese forces on the line of the Mekong backed by a major hostile power. Historians, as well as American citizens, will no doubt assess their judgment on this matter in different ways. What I am asserting here as a matter of fact is that US policy in the 1960s cannot be understood without grasping this dimension in the perspectives of Kennedy and Johnson.

A third objective observation is that within the American foreign policy establishment of the 1960s, including some in the Executive Branch, there was a kind of geological fault line between those who regarded the balance of power in Southeast Asia as important for the United States in itself and those who, holding what I have called an Atlanticist view, regarded the maintenance of our commitments there as significant only for the credibility of our commitments elsewhere—for example, in Europe and the Middle East.[19] The hypothesis of Gelb and Betts, stated at the beginning of this article, reflects the latter view. In the early 1970s, having gathered strength for some time, a version of that view became widespread, namely that the costs of holding the US position in Southeast Asia were excessive, even though our ground forces were withdrawn by 1972 and our air and naval forces in 1973. The view was not always expressed in the colorful terms quoted earlier from Galbraith and Eugene McCarthy, but it was there.

From the perspective of the 1980s, I would only observe that the view that Southeast Asia doesn't much matter may have diminished somewhat with the emergence of ASEAN and the remarkable expansion in the economies of its members, including sophisticated trade and financial relations with the United States. They may not have yet achieved the respectability of Japan in the eyes of Atlanticists, but they are clearly beyond the water buffalo stage and on their way.

A fourth observation arises from the fixation in the quarter century after 1949 with China as the ultimate threat to Southeast Asia. I suspect, but cannot prove, that one element in the extraordinary performance of the American Congress toward Vietnam in the period 1973-75 may have been a belief that with Nixon's new opening to China the strategic threat to Southeast Asia had been once and for all lifted and, therefore, the aid promised by Nixon to Thieu could be ruthlessly reduced. The possibility of the Soviet Union replacing China as a threat to the region, not difficult to deduce from Brezhnev's collective security plan of 1969, appears not to have been envisaged by the Congress—and, perhaps, not by many in the Executive Branch.

So much for the complexities of interpreting the nature and extent of the nation's interest in the independence of the countries of Southeast Asia.

Now, what about the future?

From one perspective, the Soviet position in the region—and Brezhnev's 1969 plan as a whole—does not, at the moment, appear on the verge of success. The movements of Soviet naval and air forces around the region constitute significant psychological pressure and political presence; but, for the time being, one would not expect a decisive Soviet thrust to dominate the region like that of Japan in 1941 and 1942. The Soviet Union confronts a considerable array of problems that render this an apparently unpropitious time for great adventures: the costly stalemate in Afghanistan; India's taking its distance from Moscow on Afghanistan, despite the 1971 treaty; the state of Poland and all its multiple implications for the Soviet security structure; deep and degenerating problems within the Soviet economy. Similarly, the presence of Vietnamese forces on the Thai frontier are a source of great anxiety, indeed, to all the noncommunist governments of the region and China; but Hanoi appears to have quite enough trouble in South Vietnam, in Kampuchea itself, and in trying to achieve an economic revival at home, without plunging into a wider Southeast Asian war. Besides, it has been reminded forcefully that Chinese forces are on its northern frontier.

There are, no doubt, those who will say: Some but not all the dominoes have fallen; life goes on in most of Southeast Asia; what is there to worry about? But two facts should be remembered. First, the communists, unlike ourselves, are patient, persevering, and stubborn in pursuing their long-run strategies; and, second, there is no power capable of preventing the Soviet Union from dominating Southeast Asia—indeed, all of Asia—except the United States. Asia would promptly become a quite different place if the United States closed down Clark Field and Subic Bay, pulled the Pacific Fleet back to Hawaii, and announced that the guarantees to Thailand were no longer operative.

In short, despite the debacle of 1975, the possibility of an independent, neutral Southeast Asia—so important for so many, including the 300 million men, women, and children who live there—has not been lost. But that prospect requires a deep and steady understanding in the United States of the stakes involved—an understanding notably lacking in our nation in the intense domestic debate of the period 1965-75 and in the subsequent literature on the subject.

As a coda to this analysis, I would only add that beyond our time, in the next century, the peace of Asia is likely to depend on a solemn agreement between India and China that Southeast Asia should be supported by both in its desire for independence, thus creating a buffer that might avoid the two countries' repeating in Asia the tragedy of France and Germany in Europe. But that is a subject for quite another article.

NOTES

1. Leslie H. Gelb with Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: Brookings, 1979), p. 25.

2. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: John Wiley, 1979), pp. 10-12. The heart of this passage is the following:

> The loss of an area so large and populous would tip the balance of power against the United States. Recent Communist triumphs had already aroused nervousness in Europe, and another major victory might tempt the Europeans to reach an accommodation with the Soviet Union. The economic consequences could be equally profound. The United States and its European allies would be denied access to important markets. Southeast Asia was the world's largest producer of natural rubber and was an important source of oil, tin, tungsten, and other strategic commodities. Should control of these vital raw materials suddenly change hands, the Soviet bloc would be enormously strengthened at the expense of the West.
>
> American policymakers also feared that the loss of Southeast Asia would irreparably damage the nation's strategic position in the Far East. Control of the offshore island chain extending from Japan to the Philippines, America's first line of defense in the Pacific, would be endangered. Air and sea routes between Australia and the Middle East and the United States and India could be cut, severely hampering military operations in the event of war. Japan, India, and Australia, those nations where the West retained predominant influence, would be cut off from each other and left vulnerable. The impact on Japan, America's major Far Eastern ally, could be disastrous. Denied access to the raw materials, rice, and markets upon which their economy depended, the Japanese might see no choice but to come to terms with the enemy.
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> American officials agreed that Indochina, and especially Vietnam, was the key to the defense of Southeast Asia.

3. Compiled by William G. Efros, *Quotations Vietnam: 1945-1970* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 51.

4. *New York Times Book Review*, 4 August 1968, p. 24.

5. *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), II, 1013-14.

6. In the Carter Administration those reaffirmations were made in May 1978 in Bangkok by Vice President Mondale; in Washington in Febuary 1979 by President Carter; in July 1979 in Bali by Secretary Vance; and in June 1980 in Washington by Secretary Muskie.

7. The reference to the "bilateral clarification" is to the Rusk-Thanat communique of 6 March 1962, which stated that the United States' obligation in the event of aggression against Thailand " . . . does not depend on the prior agreement of all other Parties" to the Manila Pact.

8. India's policy toward Southeast Asia is traced to 1960 in Ton That Thien, *India and Southeast Asia, 1947-1960* (Geneva: Librarie Droz, 1963). India's concern was brought home starkly to me when I was sent to India and Pakistan by Kennedy and Rusk, 1-7 April 1963, to assess the likelihood of a settlement of the Kashmir question then under negotiation. At the insistence of the US Ambassador to India (J. K. Galbraith), I spent several hours at his residence with the Indian Army Chief of Staff General Chaudhuri. He underlined the critical importance to India and Pakistan of the continued independence of Burma, which depended, in turn, on the independence of Thailand. He described Burma as "India's Ardennes." Therefore, he wished me to know and to report in Washington India's concern for the continued independence of Laos and South Vietnam, which were buffers for Thailand and Burma. I later asked Nehru if this was a correct interpretation of India's view of its interests. He affirmed that it was. In Dacca I reported this view to Ayub who said that this was, of course, a view common to the military of both countries. Ayub went on to say it was one major reason for the urgency of settling the Kashmir issue. Such a settlement would permit joint staff talks and planning with respect to the subcontinent's northeast frontier, which he said would not be difficult since the officers on both sides had been trained together and shared a strategic view.

9. It is, I believe, worth pondering this passage from the memoir of Howard Beale, Australian Ambassador to Washington in the 1960s (*This Inch of Time* [Melbourne: Melbourne Univ. Press, 1977], pp. 168-69). Beale explains why Australia in 1965 joined in the effort to save South Vietnam:

> It is now [1977] said that there is no foreseeable threat to the security of Australia within the next fifteen years. We have made friends with China; Russia and China are now rivals and not allies; the triumphant North Vietnamese—with an army which is the third largest, best equipped and most experienced military machine in the world and with an unrivalled experience in infiltration and subversion—will, we are told, stop within their own borders, and Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia can relax now that the imperialistic Americans have been defeated.
>
> Perhaps one may be pardoned for being a little sceptical about some of this scenario; in any case the scene was not at all like that when Australia gave assistance [in 1965]. What seemed much more likely at the time was that, had there been no intervention, South Vietnam would have collapsed and so would Laos and Cambodia (as they have now done), and the whole of Indo-China would have become communist; and, later still, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore would also have been 'liberated.' There was no reason to suppose that communists would be content to stop in Indo-China for that was not what they had proclaimed or done elsewhere. This is what Lee Kuan Yew meant when he said, 'We may all go through the mincing machine.'

> The most important problem for Australia was what might happen to Indonesia, 'the real prize' to quote George Ball . . . . Sukarno was already trying to perform a precarious balancing trick between the army and the P.K.I., and it seemed likely that, surrounded by regimes under communist control or influence, and with the United States no longer near at hand, the powerful P.K.I. would have prevailed and Indonesia would have become a communist state.
>
> Success for the P.K.I. would have meant that Australia would have had as her nearest neighbour a communist regime of one hundred and twenty-five million people with (at that time) an uncertain border between Papua and West Irian, and the likelihood of endless disputes about boundaries, and about sea lanes and routes, overflight rights, and oil and mineral rights on or near the continental shelf in the Indonesian archipelago and the Timor Sea. Such a regime in Djakarta could have made Australia's life very uncomfortable indeed, with the strong possibility that, sooner or later, upon some issue or other, we would have had either to give way or fight.
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> Not all of this might have happened (although some of it has), but Australia went into Vietnam with the Americans so that it might be less likely to happen.

10. See Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *10 Years ASEAN*, compiled and edited by the ASEAN secretariat under the direction of Secretary-General Umarjadi Njotowijono, Djakarta, 1978, p. 14. The quotation is from the preamble to the founding Bangkok Declaration, signed 7 August 1967.

11. The confidence and strength built up in ASEAN between 1967 and 1975 by its continued high rate of economic and social progress, combined with the increased solidarity of the organization, contributed to an important result expressed in 1981 by the Malaysian Foreign Minister. (Keynote address by H. E. Tan Sri M. Ghazali Shafie, "ASEAN: Contributor to Stability and Development," at the conference on "ASEAN: Today and Tomorrow," Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Boston, 11 November 1981, p. 15.)

> In 1975 North Vietnamese tanks rolled past Danang, Cam Ranh Bay and Tan Son Nhut into Saigon. The United States withdrew their last soldiers from Vietnam, and the worst of ASEAN's fears which underscored the Bangkok Declaration of 1967 came to pass. But ASEAN by then had seven solid years of living in neighbourly cooperation. Call it foresight, or what you will, the fact remains that with ASEAN solidarity there were no falling dominoes in Southeast Asia following the fall of Saigon to the Communists, and the United States withdrawal from Southeast Asia.

12. W. W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power*, (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 265-72.

13. Quoted in John Gittings, *Survey of the Sino-Soviet Dispute, 1963-1967* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), p. 82.

14. For analysis of this critical turning point in modern history, see my *Diffusion of Power*, pp. 29-35.

15. For a detailed analysis of this episode, see my *Diffusion of Power*, pp. 438-503.

16. Brezhnev's speech and its strategic implications were well reported in a dispatch from Moscow in *The New York Times*, 13 June 1969, pp. 1, 5.

17. Richard B. Remnek, "Soviet Policy in the Horn of Africa: The Decision to Intervene," in Robert H. Donaldson, ed., *The Soviet Union in the Third World: Successes and Failures* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1981), p. 130.

18. Here (from *Diffusion of Power*, p. 270) is Kennedy's articulation of his position late in 1961:

> Before deciding American power and influence had to be used to save Southeast Asia, Kennedy asked himself, and put sharply to others, the question: What would happen if we let Southeast Asia go? Kennedy's working style was to probe and question a great many people while keeping his own counsel and making the specific decisions the day required. Only this one time do I recall his articulating the ultimate reasoning behind the positions at which he arrived. It was after the Taylor mission, shortly before I left the White House for the State Department.
>
> He began with domestic political life. He said if we walked away from Southeast Asia, the communist takeover would produce a debate in the United States more acute than that over the loss of China. Unlike Truman with China or Eisenhower in 1954, he would be violating a treaty commitment to the area. The upshot would be a rise and convergence of left- and right-wing isolationism that would affect commitments in Europe as well as in Asia. Loss of confidence in the United States would be worldwide. Under these circumstances, Khrushchev and Mao could not refrain from acting to exploit the apparent shift in the balance of power. If Burma fell, Chinese power would be on the Indian frontier: the stability of all of Asia, not merely Southeast Asia, was involved. When the communist leaders had moved—after they were committed—the United States would then react. We would come plunging back to retrieve the situation. And a much more dangerous crisis would result, quite possibly a nuclear crisis.

Johnson stated a similar proposition in an address at San Antonio on 29 September 1967 (*Public Papers* [Washington: GPO, 1968], p. 488):

> I cannot tell you tonight as your President—with certainty—that a Communist conquest of South Vietnam would be followed by a Communist conquest of Southeast Asia. But I do know there are North Vietnamese troops in Laos. I do know that there are North Vietnamese trained guerrillas tonight in northeast Thailand. I do know that there are Communist-supported guerrilla forces operating in Burma. And a Communist coup was barely averted in Indonesia, the fifth largest nation in the world.
>
> So your American President cannot tell you—with certainty—that a Southeast Asia dominated by Communist power would bring a third world war much closer to terrible reality. One could hope that this would not be so.
>
> But all that we have learned in this tragic century suggests to me that it would be so. As President of the United States, I am not prepared to gamble on the chance that it is not so.

And, retrospectively, in *The Vantage Point* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), pp. 152-53:

> Knowing what I did of the policies and actions of Moscow and Peking, I was as sure as a man could be that if we did not live up to our commitment in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, they would move to exploit the disarray in the United States and in the alliances of the Free World. They might move independently or they might move together. But move

they would—whether through nuclear blackmail, through subversion, with regular armed forces, or in some other manner. As nearly as one can be certain of anything, I knew they could not resist the opportunity to expand their control into the vacuum of power we would leave behind us.

Finally, as we faced the implications of what we had done as a nation, I was sure the United States would not then passively submit to the consequences. With Moscow and Peking and perhaps others moving forward, we would return to a world role to prevent their full takeover of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East—*after* they had committed themselves.

I was too young at the time to be aware of the change in American mood and policy between the election of Woodrow Wilson in November 1916 ('He kept us out of war') and our reaction to unrestricted German submarine warfare in the Atlantic in April 1917. But I knew the story well. My generation had lived through the change from American isolationism to collective security in 1940-1941. I had watched firsthand in Congress as we swerved in 1946-1947 from the unilateral dismantling of our armed forces to President Truman's effort to protect Western Europe. I could never forget the withdrawal of our forces from South Korea and then our immediate reaction to the Communist aggression of June 1950.

As I looked ahead, I could see us repeating the same sharp reversal once again in Asia, or elsewhere—but this time in a nuclear world with all the dangers and possible horrors that go with it. Above all else, I did not want to lead this nation and the world into nuclear war or even the risk of such a war.

This was the private estimate that brought me to the hard decision of July 1965.

19. For an analysis of this difference in perspective, see, for example, *The Diffusion of Power*, pp. 492-97.

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