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THE PROSPECTS FOR SELF-DETERMINATION
IN SOUTH VIETNAM LAOS AND CAMBODIA

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THE PROSPECTS FOR SELF-DETERMINATION
IN SOUTH VIETNAM, LAOS AND CAMBODIA

by

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this essay is to determine the possibilities for stability in Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam in the 1970's, after withdrawal of U.S. Forces. Review the power potential and aims of Communist China vis-a-vis the three countries, and assess the potential within Indo-China to face this threat. The essay concludes that in view of China's threat and due to the inability of these target nations to sustain themselves on a unilateral basis, regional cooperation in social and economic interests is the primary alternative available to these countries if they are to continue as self-determining governments.

Vietnam has been the United States' most important, and divisive, foreign policy problem. To most Americans - and to people throughout the world - Southeast Asia or Indo-China has meant Vietnam and the Vietnamese War. With the phased withdrawal of American military forces from Vietnam progressing, it is essential that the prospects for stability in the area be assessed, not only in the context of Vietnam, but also viewed along with her neighbors, Cambodia and Laos. This assessment must consider these nations, which make up the former French colony of Indo-China, in relation to the primary force in the area, Communist China. For the sake of brevity, Indo-China as referred to henceforth will be South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. North Vietnam will be considered, politically, in the same context as China.

This paper has three objectives: first, to provide a broad understanding of the importance of Indo-China to Red China, along with China's objectives in the area; secondly, to appraise the potential for stability in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia; and lastly, to determine the effect of the above on the Free World objective of self-determination in Indo-China.

The major actors, directly or indirectly involved in Vietnam, "seem agreed that the war has a much wider importance than the immediate issue of who is to control South Vietnam."¹ The degree of this importance is the key to stability in Indo-China in the 1970's.

¹Milton E. Osborne, "Post Vietnam: The End of An Era in South-East Asia?" International Affairs, April, 1969, p. 223.

INDO-CHINA - THE TARGET

Indo-China comprises a land mass of almost 600 thousand square kilometers and a population of over 21 million people. The area is one of great change, and potentially, one which can change even more in the future. The three nations which make up Indo-China have a common heritage and, even though extremely diverse, face common problems in the future.

Indo-China, strategically situated on the main axis between India and China, has always been influenced by its proximity to China. Its ease of access along the sea routes has resulted in a long history of subjugation by foreign powers. Historically, Indo-China has been unable to react favorably to these incursions because of fragmentation and concern over relations with neighbors. Colonial powers developed--and exploited-- the economies of Indo-China. Aside from the all important staple rice, the colonial powers left to the heirs of the colonial system economies that were based upon the production of raw materials and the extraction of minerals that had to be processed elsewhere. The limited number of agricultural and extractive export commodities resulted in fluctuating incomes for the inhabitants.

With the exception of Vietnam, which has a semblance of racial and cultural unity, Laos and Cambodia, like the rest of Southeast Asia, are extremely diverse in cultural and ethnic foundations. The colonial powers tended to capitalize upon this diversity by playing minority against majority in order to effect their own ends. This same manipulative control restrained economic growth because the colonials overdeveloped parts of the economy to

serve their own needs, while failing to stimulate the components of development that had previously spurred the rise of the west. An example of this was the slow growth of cities.

Nationalism was an outgrowth of colonial rule and it emerged, in its early development, out of a fundamentally religious context. These nationalistic forces, forming with a Marxist element, brought about the liberation of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Subsequent to gaining independence, the aims of these countries were to pursue a course of self-determination and to build modern, diversified economies. Implicit in these objectives was the accommodation of minority groups, however, this in itself became a problem. Many argue that racial and ethnic accommodation is a basic solution for internal stability in a nation, however, the example of instability in Vietnam disproves this premise.

Problem Areas in Indo-China

According to one author the major foreign affairs problem facing the three target nations is "sheer survival."² The raw materials and possible markets for goods make the area extremely attractive to Communist China and her subordinates. Beside the pressure generated by external forces, a number of problems common to the three nations have prevented a regional outlook that could, in the long run, create a balance of force that would reduce outside danger. The basic cause of turmoil after independence was caused by interaction between the forces of nationalism and

²Robert C. Bone, Contemporary Southeast Asia (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 123.

communism. The resultant conflict had both political and economic origins.

Politically, these peasant societies, suddenly freed by their colonial rulers, were deficient in political and administrative experience and as a result their governments failed the people by omission. The new group of leaders failed to recognize and synchronize the economic and socio-cultural changes that face a developing society. Further, the three nations competed with one another. Faced with boundary problems left over from colonialism, they joined in bi-lateral defense arrangements against one another that eventually facilitated external subversion.

In the economic area, all three nations have a need to industrialize and manufacture more than consumer goods, but all lack the necessary capital and technology. Furthermore, their rapid population growth reduces their surpluses and limits their capability to export, thereby restricting the possibilities of attracting foreign capital. The resultant was an over-dependence upon foreign aid.

The response to the need for foreign aid came primarily from two sources; the United States and China. Stated simply, with different ideological and political intentions, these sources of aid stimulated the dynamism that was latent in Indo-China. Although both principals believed that their objectives were manageable, their courses of action inevitably became the basis of conflict. The terms of this conflict have been aptly stated by one scholar as "Whether some accommodation between a stable system of international relations and a revolutionary system is feasible,

or whether the terms are exclusive victory and annihilation of the position of the other."³

CHINA AS A WORLD POWER

China is a country wherein her basic aims and goals have remained unchanged for centuries. Two of her goals will remain unchanged in future years: the security of China, and her desire for self-sufficiency. Although China does not have the industrial base to sustain herself in a nuclear war with a super power, "China is a great power and already was in 1950."⁴ China's power can be measured by the fear of China that is the center of concern in the policies of numerous Asian and other governments.

Although she has a strong desire for a more effective voice in foreign affairs, China's most pressing need is internal. After the violent and disruptive Cultural Revolution, China needs time, without interference from outside sources, in order to put her house in order. Mao Tse-tung has fallen well short of the goals that he wished fulfilled during his lifetime. Even so, China had made great strides in uniting her people. However, policy changes prevalent during the Cultural Revolution disrupted a great deal that had been accomplished and recovery will be dependent upon years of pragmatic management.

China must develop an industrial and technologically complex economy. In doing this she must exact a total effort from the population. In order to overcome scarcities in capital investment

³Kenneth T. Young, Jr., The Southeast Asia Crisis. (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana Publishers, Inc., 1966), pp. 14-15.

⁴Brian Crozier, South-East Asia in Turmoil. (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 79.

needed to develop industry, China must save and re-invest a larger portion of her GNP. This requires sophisticated and pragmatic management and dictates a necessity for changes in present foreign and domestic policy. Whether or not the post-Mao leadership will be willing to vary from present communist orthodoxy remains to be seen.

China's Objectives

China's long-standing fear of encirclement by the United States and the USSR has made concern for her border areas a matter of paramountcy. In attaining her domestic goals, China has attempted to project some form of power into her immediate border areas. Southeast Asia and particularly Indo-China become natural targets.

China, blocked on the north by the USSR, would like to expand its influence southward in order to attain the rich resources and rice surpluses needed to adequately feed her expanding population. The Chinese leadership recognizes that agricultural and industrial production increasing faster than its urban and industrial population are fundamental to economic growth. China's population growth is a threat in itself. As Dick Wilson has stated,

If China's economic planners are burdened by this built-in handicap to growth, which compels them, in the Red Queen's phrase from Alice Through the Looking Glass, to run hard merely to keep their place, China's neighbors . . . are fearful of its political consequences.⁵

China's objective is Indo-China, along with other areas in

⁵Dick Wilson, Anatomy of China. (New York City: Weybright and Talley, Inc., 1968) p. 141.

Southeast Asia. Their leaders feel that with Indo-China as a satellite the political and economic interests derived from the union would change the world balance of power in China's favor.

In its historical context, the thrust for Chinese hegemony over Indo-China is a left-over from China's past. This was the abstract view of a cultural and moral civilization revolving around the "Middle Kingdom." China considers these nations as an integral part of her own heritage. In the past the people of Indo-China came to China for help against the Europeans. The resultant dual sovereignty caused the boundary problems that plague Indo-China today because these nations were considered by China to be a part of the same empire. These boundaries, established by colonial powers as administrative arrangements, have only become important in modern times.

Indo-China represents to China protection of its southern boundary and an important extension of its hegemony into Asia. Implicit in this new direction is the elimination or at least the neutralization of SEATO and other collective security pacts directed against her.

China's Strategic Alternatives

In appraising China's strategic alternatives, it has been assumed that China's goals in the 1970's will be pragmatic as long as her vital interests and her status are recognized. Further, that China, in setting her domestic priorities, will find a compromise between national interest and communist doctrine, and between her aspirations and resources.

Alternatives available to China in attaining suzerainty over Indo-China are:

- Direct aggression
- Sub-limited warfare
- Threat
- Negotiation

Historically, China's use of any degree of military force has been keyed to low-risk, selective adventures. It can be expected that this policy will be continued in the future; that China will only use her forces when her border areas are threatened. Also, whenever China has intervened with troops--as in the cases of Korea and India--her prestige and influence declined to a great extent. And this fact has not been lost on China's leaders. An important constraint on China's use of direct aggression is that she cannot afford a confrontation with a super-power now or at any time during the 1970's. Further, any expansionist adventures, more likely than not, will force the target nations into seeking help from the United States. In essence, although calling out for revolutionary action, there will probably be little direct intervention by Chinese forces. Her troops will be used only to suppress domestic conflicts or in support of border clashes.

Sub-limited warfare on the other hand, has a great appeal to Chinese leadership. It is suggested that the low-risk is attractive and does not interfere with economic growth. In other words, it is cost effective. Because of historical experience in their own revolution and in Vietnam, Mao and other leaders believe that China can manage and win wars at the sub-limited level since, in

Chinese terms, the outcome is determined by their ability to manipulate the political and psychological factors involved.

The advantages, in China's thinking, in pursuing sub-limited warfare in Indo-China are that this course of action:

- Increases popularity and political support in the target nations.
- Will bring about new communist regimes, dependent upon China.
- Will cause non-aligned nations to remain non-aligned.
- Gains time needed to advance development at home.

The obvious disadvantage is that the subversion and conversion processes take time and material resources.

China's ability to gain objectives by sheer threat is dependent upon the credibility of the possible use of Chinese military force. Since the nations of Indo-China are in different stages of development, China's impact upon them is likely to manifest itself in different degrees of apprehension. The major lever that China will have in the 1970's will be her developing nuclear capability. One author states that with a limited ICBM capability China will have a greater capacity to menace her neighbors after 1975 than she has today.⁶ The evidence suggests that China can be expected to use the combined threats of nuclear force and sub-limited warfare as weapons of blackmail to become a more significant influence in Asian affairs in both political and psychological terms.

This, then, raises the question: What part can negotiations

⁶Paul C. Davis, "The Coming Chinese Communist Nuclear Threat and U.S. Based ABM Options." Orbis, Volume XI, Spring, 1967, pp. 47-48.

play? Although China has not reached maturity in foreign relations, she has learned that the means for political success can be secured by participating in negotiations and truces. As their wars of national liberation wear down the resolve of their opponents, the option of peaceful approaches will be kept open. In this way there is a greater possibility of China's soliciting favorable world opinion while she covertly tries to control the political development of the target countries.

The possibility of China's participation in multilateral arms control agreements in the 1970's is not favorable. So long as the tremendous gap exists between the nuclear capability of China and that of her present antagonists (the United States and the USSR) China will look upon such negotiations as a danger to her existence as a nation.

In the light of these judgements, although China's foreign policy will continue to be pragmatic, and there is evidence to show a willingness on her part to become better acquainted in world affairs, China will continue to stir up trouble in Indo-China, without engaging in direct military operations. China recognizes, after numerous failures, that nationalism, as a force, limits her options in Indo-China and, as a result she will remain intransigent. The degree of this intransigence will depend upon: (1) how effectively she controls her population; (2) her success in modernizing her weapons; and (3) the effectiveness of alliances against her.

THE POTENTIAL IN INDO-CHINA

Since it was stated that China's impact on the target nations

will vary, one effect of the draw down of U.S. Forces from Southeast Asia is that it would clearly isolate China as being the major threat. Withdrawal would preclude over-control by the U.S. which might be propagandized as "imperialism." With this phase-out of U.S. involvement, then, what are the prospects for these nations walling out aggression and determining their own courses?

Individually, these nations all have great potential; potential in the skills of the people; potential in natural resources. However, in an individual frame these nations will probably be faced with internal turmoil because of political instability. All are in the hands of inexperienced leaders who, though strongly nationalistic, are wanting in experience in organized politics and lacking in willingness to deal with partisan groups. This type of instability is self-perpetuating and it could be years before these countries learn to recognize changing social forces and effectively organize their governments. In the interim, better organized Communist groups may fill the vacuum of leadership in a fashion that, given enough time, the resulting change in power relationships could only be rectified by military force.

Laos is a small, land-locked, almost artificial country with little history as a nation and, in variance with the rest of Indo-China, weak in nationalism. Laos has mineral and timber resources but no significant economic potential. In short, continually under strain from foreign sources, Laos needs outside help. Her primary significance is strategic; she is a buffer state, and her lowlands in the Mekong Valley are strategically important.

Cambodia, the focal point of Indian and Chinese cultures,

has been described as a good example of Balkanization. Although now firmly committed against Chinese influence, Cambodian politics has been a series of expedient adjustments. Before the recent coup, Sihanouk followed an erratic course due to his fear of South Vietnam and pressure from Hanoi. Without U.S. assistance, and facing her present predicament, Cambodia's potential for existence as a nation is doubtful.

South Vietnam, the strongest of the three nations, has borne the brunt of a battle for existence for almost two decades. The strong element of nationalism prevalent in her people can be traced to the contacts with democratic concepts and ideas made by Vietnamese troops on the western front during World War I.⁷ However, the South Vietnamese people are indifferent to their government because of aloofness in their leaders and unfairness in government practices. With continual pressure on Vietnam from Hanoi and Peking, the only alternative to some form of U.S. presence in Vietnam would be demilitarization, at least until a viable, stable government is a reality.

REGIONAL APPROACH TO STABILITY

Regional cooperation, has been attempted throughout Southeast Asia for twenty odd years. Despite many initiatives, regionalism has not taken hold in many cases because the terms of reference were vague and misunderstood, or that the arrangement conflicted with national interests within the membership. As an example, the

⁷Amry Vandenbosch & Richard Butwell, Changing Face of Southeast Asia, (Lexington, Ky: Univ of Kentucky Press, 1966) p. 164.

first genuine Southeast Asian attempt at regional cooperation, the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), failed because of the Philippine's refusal to recognize the newly formed government of Malaysia.⁸ Also, past efforts fell short in some instances because these nations gave most of their attention to getting outside help through aid programs.

In spite of the record, the nations of Indo-China must become convinced of the need for some form of cooperation in order to survive as self-determining nations. The quantity and form of aid that these nations have received from the U.S. will not remain the same, and could be curtailed unless there is a measurable guarantee that the aid will result in development and stability within a reasonable time.

Regional cooperation is feasible in Indo-China. As the war wears down it is possible that the youth in these nations will travel more and exchange ideas. This would help mutual trust and strengthen the community purpose of the three countries. Productive cooperation could be on a functional basis with a centrally controlled union of economic and technical interests.

The Mekong River project, which extends over much of Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam, could provide the framework of a community project. The Mekong River has large, untamed resources which could furnish a number of benefits to all of Indo-China. Indeed, it is a large-scale undertaking that would take years and a great deal of foreign support, however, the development of

⁸Bernard K. Gordon, "Regionalism and Stability in Southeast Asia", Orbis, Volume X, Number 2, Summer 1966, pp. 446-447.

hydro-electric power, navigation, irrigation, mineral resources and forestry and fisheries would more than compensate for the resources expended. This project represents a dramatic peacetime goal for Indo-China and other nations in Southeast Asia.

It could be said that the Mekong Project would only benefit that portion of each nation in close proximity to the river. Nevertheless, the development of these regions would affect the social and economic structure of rural areas by improving the standards of living of that rural society relegated to lower-class status. This plan would attract people back to rural areas from overpopulated cities, which are breeding grounds for unemployment, unrest and despair. The Mekong Project represents a hidden resource that would give the three nations a common goal and a possibility for stability.

As stated, this project would require large-scale aid. It will also require a security shield provided by outside sources under which these nations might develop. Developed nations such as Australia, New Zealand and Japan, because of their proximity, should be vitally interested in a tranquil Indo-China, and could provide a large part of the aid required. Whatever shield is maintained should be concurrent with some form of United Nations control so that the internal situation can be verified.

CONCLUSION

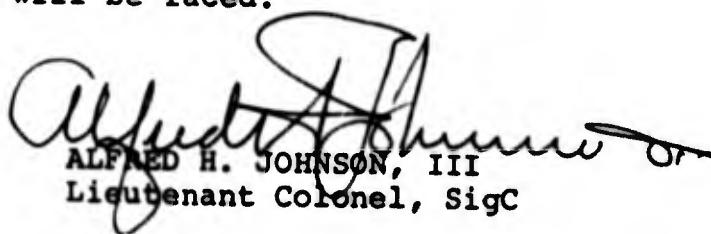
The 1970's represent a challenge for the nations of Indo-China and the Free World. Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam face a triple challenge: (1) the threat of Red China to their

survivability as independent nations, and (2) the problems of facing the social, political and economic changes within each country. China is a reality with the capability to influence the area, and the desire to control it. The third challenge is the determination of a response to these problems.

It is the opinion of this writer that the only appropriate response is economic and social cooperation on a functional basis. By working together the countries of Indo-China can pool resources and minimize the factors that contribute to social and economic instability by elevating the living standard of their people. By development of a combined counter-force to China, they can also minimize the external threat.

The stability of Indo-China is vital to the Free World. The loss of this region to Communist domination would seriously affect all of Southeast Asia and limit our lines of communications with the subcontinent. The resources of the Free World, however, are not unlimited and priorities and allocations must be based upon the potential for economic development in Indo-China.

There are no easy solutions to the problems facing Indo-China, and in the final analysis it will be the responsibility of the leaders in Indo-China and the Free World to ultimately determine how the challenge of China will be faced.


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