

How Important was the So-called 'domino theory' in Forming US Policy Towards Indochina During the Cold War?

Written by Katie Smith

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How Important was the So-called 'domino theory' in Forming US Policy Towards Indochina During the Cold War? Were Other Factors More Important?

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KATIE SMITH, DEC 22 2007

Indochina was a central battleground of the Cold War for more than two decades in which poorly-armed Vietnamese guerrillas fought successfully against the USA. Some saw it as an ideological struggle between capitalism and communism, and others, as a misinformed US attack on anti-colonial nationalism. The reasons for American involvement are unclear and have led to fierce debate among academics.

Before the second world war, Indochina was a French colony consisting of what we now know as Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. It was occupied by the Japanese during the war but reclaimed by the French after the Japanese defeat. After WWII, Vietnam became a site of international interest; it declared independence in 1945 but France chose to fight to regain control. In 1954 the French were defeated and Vietnam was divided in two; the north controlled by a communist-nationalist government and the south under anti-communist control with US support. Vietnam was the overwhelming focus of US policy towards the area and the site of a massive American troop commitment. Therefore, in this essay I will focus on US policy towards Vietnam and not Laos and Cambodia.

'Domino theory' is frequently cited as a major influence on US policy towards Vietnam, not least by the politicians of the time. The idea is that if one domino (in this case a country) falls (to communism) it will knock down all those surrounding it. I will argue that domino theory played a significant role in early decision making but that raw materials and European pressure were also important. Domino theory remained influential until the late 60s but, once the US had openly committed to protecting South Vietnam, US prestige also played an important role; becoming dominant towards the end of the conflict as the US was faced with the possibility of defeat.

Domino Theory

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The idea that communism was a contagious force that spread from country to country, later called domino theory, was first proposed by General Marshall in 1947 (Bell, 2001: 117). However, it was not seen to be applicable to Vietnam until 1950 when new fears of Chinese communism surfaced. The victory of Mao Tse Tung's communists in China and the swift beginning of the communist military campaign in Korea proved to many in the US that there was a Sino-Soviet conspiracy against the 'free world' and that the Soviet treatment of Eastern Europe was not an isolated case of expansionism (Landon: 23; and Morgenthau: 9; in Hsiao, 1973). The recognition of the Vietnamese communists as the legitimate government of Vietnam by the People's Republic of China and the Soviet bloc served to confirm these suspicions (Bradley, 2000: 177). The notable absence of any efforts to acquire specific information about the Vietnamese communists (Record, 2002: 157) suggests that this myth of an international communist conspiracy was widely believed and rarely questioned (Elliott, 1996: 25).

That the spread of communism had to be contained was not under question during the Cold War but the US commitment to anti-communism in Vietnam was unusual in its extent. At the same time that the French were fighting communism in Vietnam, the British were engaged in similar struggles in Burma and Malaya but these campaigns were not given US support (Landon in Hsiao, 1973: 19). The special treatment accorded to Vietnam can be explained by the perception in the US that it was a key domino in a Southeast Asia chain (Immerman, 1990: 9). During the Japanese occupation of the area in 1941, Vietnam was seen to be a very important strategic position to hold; it was the site for the launches of Japan's attacks on Malaya, Southern Singapore, the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies (Bell, 2001: 214). Concerns that this type of regional dominance would reoccur if the communists triumphed in Vietnam were supported by the British, who had important colonial possessions in the region (Immerman, 1990: 6), and the French, whose motives may have been influenced by their desperate need of US assistance (Irving, 1975: 103). Estimates of the effect of the Vietnamese domino falling varied from communism spreading to its immediate neighbours to the 'loss' of all land in the region including Australia and New Zealand (Letter, Eisenhower to Churchill, 04/04/54 and Security Council Documents, NSC-64 and NSC-68, in Bell, 2001: 117 and 213). French assessments emphasised the danger posed to all land west of Vietnam until the Suez Canal (Irving, 1975: 103).

Domino theory was an influential factor in decision making in the US from 1950, until the assumptions that supported it started to be dismantled in the 60s and 70s. By the 1970s, the presence of a communist government in North Vietnam was followed only by the spread of communism to half of Laos, and the Sino-Soviet alliance that was thought to be controlling the Vietnamese communists showed signs of a serious split as early as 1956 (Morgenthau in Hsiao, 1973: 14, 12). The theory's influence was not overwhelming, however, even during the early 1950s. President Eisenhower's administration had questioned the domino theory and concluded that the 'loss' of Vietnam

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would not be a disaster for the 'free world' and that Laos and Cambodia were in little danger (Immerman, 1990: 17). As President, Eisenhower's rhetoric suggested that Vietnam was an essential domino, but in practice his policies were much more flexible and cautious (Bell, 2001: 117). It is clear that other factors also played a role in deciding US policy towards the area, particularly in the very beginning of US involvement and the latter part of the war.

Geo-political Factors and the Role of Europe and Japan

In the immediate post-war period, Indochina's worth to the US was based on more than its role as a barrier to communism; the area was rich in raw materials considered necessary for America and its allies (Immerman, 1990: 7; Sanders, 1998: 14). During WWII, America had considered the area economically important enough to risk provoking Japan in order to get access; action which resulted in the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbour (Immerman, 1990, 2). In the Cold War environment the need for Indochinese raw materials was complemented by a desire to keep them out of the hands of the USSR (Immerman, 1990: 5) and therefore the US had considerable interest in keeping the region friendly.

As the colonial power in the area until 1954, France made considerable use of the Indochinese resources. Its prestige was also threatened by the loss of colonies and, when Vietnam declared independence in 1945, France fought to maintain control. In the early Cold War environment, US interest in the conflict initially stemmed not from the nature of the war in Indochina but from the French domestic situation. France's war was unpopular at home and very expensive. Much of the Marshall plan aid that was received was channelled into Indochina rather than into improving the French economy and challenging the growth of French communism (Immerman, 1990, 6). The link between French communism and the French war in Indochina was noted by the US. The threat of communist electoral success in France and other western European countries was a serious issue for the United States immediately following WWII and one far accorded far more importance than communist expansionism elsewhere in the world (Immerman, 1990: 5). Aiding the French military efforts would be a small price to pay for ensuring the failure of communism in France.

France had another reason to expect US support for its war; it was an essential ally for the US in the emerging Cold War and French troops were needed in NATO. A strong Western alliance was seen by the US to be far more important than the fate of Indochina and made it necessary to keep France friendly (Irving, 1975: 98). Britain was very supportive of France in this situation as it too had Southeast Asian colonies where it was fighting independence movements. Britain and France portrayed themselves as necessary for European security and as essential trading partners, forcing the US to sacrifice its anti-colonial ideals in return for more material advantage (Immerman: 3, 7;

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Walker, 1994: 61). Indeed, they were considered so important that some American politicians suggested the US voluntarily take over responsibility for France's war in Indochina (Immerman, 1990: 6).

In terms of its raw materials, Indochina was also important for the Japanese economy in its period of recovery following WWII. The USA had made substantial commitments to Japan economically and valued it as a barrier to communism in the Pacific and as the home of numerous American military bases. It was anxious to ensure that Japan would have non-communist trading partners in the area to prevent it establishing any kind of commitments to its communist neighbours (Immerman, 1990: 10-11).

The combination of these factors in the late 1940s and early 50s provided a compelling case for assisting the French in Indochina; aid and military advisors were provided from 1950 and, by the French defeat in 1954, the US was paying for 75% of the war (Bradley, 2000: 177). America was concerned with keeping the Indochinese resources in friendly hands for the benefit of itself and its allies. Its reliance on Britain and France for European security made it necessary to overlook its commitment to self-determination for colonies and to actively attempt to strengthen colonial power. The presence of communists in Indochina was the official reason for involvement but during this period the futures of France, Britain and Japan were also very influential (Walker, 1994: 61).

National Pride and Prestige

As the USA got further and further embroiled in Vietnam, domino theory and geopolitical considerations began to lose their importance. During the 1960s it became increasingly clear that China and the USSR were in severe disagreement and that communism was not a monolithic entity; by 1970 it was established that the Vietnamese communists were independent of China and the USSR and that the Vietnam war was not 'containing' China (Morganthau in Hsiao, 1973: 12-13). It was also shown that the fall of the North Vietnamese 'domino' had had no effect on the political persuasion of Southeast Asia nor was likely to, with the exceptions of Cambodia and Laos (Bell, 2001: 298). Britain and France were strong allies of the US and were no longer requesting American involvement in the area. However, with these considerations largely removed, the US discovered that withdrawal from Vietnam was in fact virtually impossible because of the blow that a defeat would deal internationally, to American pride and prestige, and domestically, to the popularity of the President.

The ideological battle of the Cold War led to considerable American emphasis on its role as protector of the 'free world'. When decisions were made to escalate the Vietnam war rather than pull out, this factor was very influential; a loss or withdrawal would undermine America's credibility (Immerman, 1990: 8). President Eisenhower in particular

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was concerned about the trust of the US by its allies if it was seen to be abandoning a dependent state to communism (Immerman, 1990: 12-13).

Many others, including President Kennedy, saw the conflict from a slightly different angle; for them the Cold War was a zero sum game in which communist success was seen as a loss for American prestige and international standing and where communist challenges had to be met and dealt with (Bell, 2001: 275-6). This approach was linked very closely with a belief in the communist conspiracy which led to assumptions of the homogeneity of international communism and greatly overestimated the influence of Moscow and Beijing (Morgenthau in Hsiao, 1973: 9). To lose in Vietnam was to lose to communism – the hated enemy of the US, and must be avoided (Kent and Young, 2004: 165). Eisenhower recognised the importance of this factor when he predicted that, if any US troops were committed to Vietnam, US prestige would demand a victory (Immerman, 1990: 15).

Of particular sensitivity was the prospect of the incredibly powerful US military machine being seen as unable to defeat poorly-armed, peasant guerrillas. That the US would win was assumed for almost the whole course of the conflict (Record, 2002: 157; Neustadt and May, 1986: 137) and, when the victory proved to be further out of reach than supposed, the logical conclusion was to commit more troops and resources (Bell, 2001: 275-6). In this context it was almost impossible to concede defeat. In an attempt to avoid this, President Nixon embarked on a policy of 'Vietnamisation' that involved handing over full responsibility for the conflict to the South Vietnamese army and withdrawing American troops (Landon in Hsiao, 1973: 33). By this method the final victory of the Vietnamese communists occurred after the US had left the country.

For the presidents involved, the Vietnam war took on a personal aspect; none would want to be seen to be soft on communism or remembered as the first US president to lose a war. The McCarthy 'witch-hunts', in which Senator McCarthy and his Committee for Un-American Activities removed suspected communist sympathisers from all positions of influence, dominated the domestic arena in the early 1950s. As a result, not one prominent person spoke up against the idea of an international communist conspiracy (Landon in Hsiao, 1973: 24). Throughout the 50s and 60s the Cold War atmosphere meant that any signs of weakness towards communism were avoided, particularly in election campaigns (Sanders, 1998: 58). Memory of the electoral fate of those seen to have 'lost' China to the communists were still fresh (May, 1973: 99). President Kennedy especially, needed to show his determination and ability to combat communism following the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba which marked the first months of his presidency (Sanders, 1998: 42). The two US presidents faced with the possibility of defeat in Vietnam, Johnson and Nixon, both declared privately their determination not to be the first American president to lose a war (Morgenthau in Hsiao, 1973: 16). Nixon managed to avoid the title only by the 'Vietnamisation' described above.

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The role of the Vietnam war as a measure of ideological and military strength in the context of the Cold War cannot be overlooked. This made US pride and prestige a very restricting factor when considering withdrawal or defeat. The 'Quagmire' analogy sums up the situation by describing US Indochina policy as stuck in a bog where it was not possible to get out, only to sink further in. The effect of a loss on US military and ideological prestige and on the fate of the president was seen to be reason enough to increase commitment to winning.

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that domino theory was indeed very influential on US policy towards Indochina during the Cold War but that it was not overwhelmingly so. The immediate post-war situation was dominated by the need to secure Europe and Japan from communism and Indochina was seen as an important tool in this. Domino theory came in to play in 1950 when the communist victory in China and subsequent war in Korea were seen as a threat to Southeast Asia. The combination of these factors persuaded the Eisenhower administration to begin aiding the French in their war. By the time the French conceded defeat and the Geneva agreements partitioned Vietnam into South and North in 1954, domino theory had become more prominent and the US transferred their support to the South Vietnamese government. Once the US was committed openly to defeating the communist guerrillas in South Vietnam, prestige came into play as a factor influencing US decision making and came to dominate it. US pride demanded that defeat could not be conceded, militarily or ideologically.

Domino theory was an important influence on US foreign policy towards Indochina during the Cold War, but so were French, British and Japanese concerns, and US prestige; no one factor was dominant overall.

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