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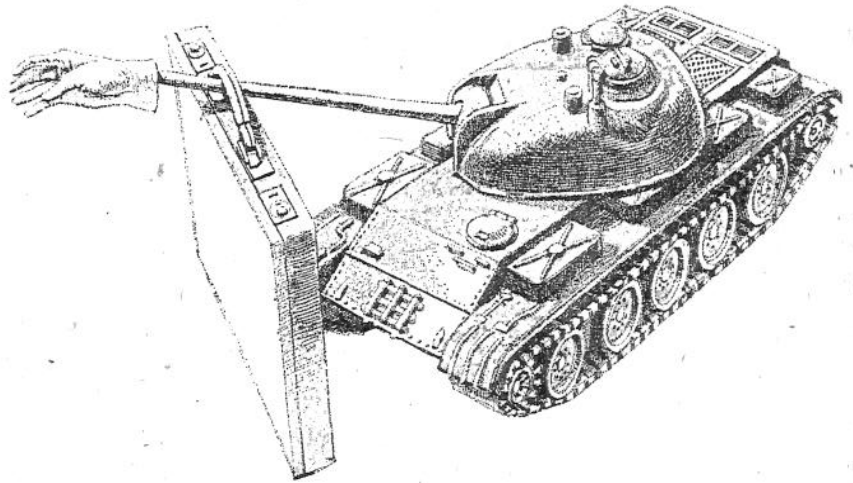
# East Asia: An Uncertain Future

TOKYO—A senior Philippine planner now "reassessing" his country's security wonders when and whether the Soviet fleet will base itself for Asian voyages at the former U.S. base at Camranh Bay. A Singapore businessman asks for a report on the size and competency of Thailand's army. A Soviet ambassador, over tennis, tells a ranking Japanese politician that the time is right for a Moscow-Tokyo non-aggression pact. An international banker with responsibility for energy matters inquires about the safety of South Korean investments in view of a possible new invasion from the North.

Throughout the vast and varied region of East Asia, the recent collapse in Indochina has set off tremors of speculation, reassessment and concern. Not for three decades has the region been so much in flux. All indications are that this is only the early stage of fundamental shifts in thought and action — quite possibly the most important changes in the area since the upheavals of World War II.

The view from Washington centers on American commitments and assurances, as if the region were waiting to be acted upon by the United States. The view from Asia is quite different. In five weeks of travel in Southeast and Northeast Asia since my departure from Saigon on April 10, I found alliances and allegiances to be shifting and new ideas in motion. The pieces on the chessboard have been suddenly shaken out of position, and even the rules seem to be changing. Nobody can quite identify the game yet, much less the intermediate moves or final outcome. Even so, some initial impressions come through clearly.

The United States, which has been the central power in East Asia since World War II, has become one of several central powers. U.S. decision and action are still important, but they are no longer nearly all-important.



By David Suter for The Washington Post

cretely in Paris, against Philippine participation in the earlier evacuation of Danang.

Though diminished militarily, the United States remains the single most important power in the region economically. The only serious rival for trade and investment is Japan, which in turn is dependent in large degree on the United States for its markets and prosperity. If Washington's influence is reduced, the same cannot be said for that of New York, Chicago, Akron and Detroit. It is on these markets for raw materials and manufactured goods that Asian hopes for better living standards—a prerequisite for internal stability—largely depend.

In highly sophisticated fashion many Asians are turning to Communist diversity—rather than U.S. military strength—as a source of potential se-

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curity. National leaders and diplomats are calculating and taking comfort from the deep antagonisms between China and the Soviet Union and, on a smaller but vitally important scale, between North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese, and between them both and Cambodians and Laotians.

In a number of Asian capitals the difference between optimists and pessimists is that the former believe it will take several years at least for the victors of Indochina to stabilize their relationships with one another before turning their new found power toward their neighbors. The pessimists are not sure that it will take so long.

One grave concern throughout the region centers on the billions of dollars in usable American weapons—particularly small arms, grenades, land mines, mortars, battlefield rockets and naval craft—recently inherited by a Vietnamese Communist army that does not need them. Almost every Southeast Asian country is afflicted by insurgent groups—often from ethnic minorities—in sparsely populated or disadvantaged areas. China and the Soviet Union have kept most of these fraternal insurgencies on short rations and outmoded weapons. This could change dramatically if the Vietnamese succumb to the temptation to become arms merchants or fraternal benefactors. The glut of modern weapons is considered a more serious threat than any spreading ideological infection among potential "dominoes."

In Northeast Asia, which is far more important to the United States than

Southeast Asia, recent events seem to have enhanced the U.S.-Japan alliance in curious and unexpected fashion. Here the most significant thing is what hasn't happened in Japan.

Longstanding apprehension has been felt in many quarters—most recently expressed in blunt terms by Philippine Foreign Minister Carlos P. Romulo—that a worried Japan could turn away from the U.S. security umbrella toward its own remilitarization, conventional and nuclear. There is no sign of this, and every sign to the contrary. The initial reaction of Japan's government and power structure is to hug the U.S. "security blanket" a bit tighter in realization of its importance to stability in and around Japan.

The main concern of Tokyo at the moment is not Indochina, which is nearly 2,000 miles away and of peripheral interest, but South Korea, which is 115 miles away across a narrow strait. Given Japan's geography and resources, it is doubtful that a unified Korea under Communist rule would pose a realistic threat. But a Communist takeover of Korea by force under present circumstances would demolish the remaining credibility of the United States security treaty, the pillar of foreign policy for the world's first unarmed industrial power. This could indeed turn Japan toward revolution, whether from the right or left, and swift rearmament. As a major power, Japan is one of the few "swing countries" whose turn to new policies and alliances would profoundly affect events throughout the world. Japan's GNP is third in the world and about five times as large as the combined GNP of the rest of East Asia, excluding China. Japan's GNP is about twice that of China.

In East Asia today the greatest constant is uncertainty, and the greatest need is time to take account of events and changes and to sort things out. Despite the widespread expectation that South Vietnam would not survive in the long run, the collapse came so quickly that nearly every nation—Communist, U.S.-Allied and neutral—was caught unprepared. Because of the current American economic slump and political uncertainty, the sudden collapse probably made the United States seem more impotent than it really is.

Having failed in Indochina largely through ignorance of Asian ways, the United States needs to be more attentive—rather than less—to trends of thought and action in the region. The United States is still an important power, probably the most important single power. But it must find new ways to listen to and work with Asians, giving greater emphasis to political and economic relationships as military options are diminished.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik said recent events have brought about "a new geopolitical configuration in Southeast Asia to which all nations have to adapt themselves." Asians are masters at adapting to nature, to fate, to outside and internal forces beyond their control, and they are well into the process of adjustment now. Asian leaders could see what was coming well in advance of the final debacle in Indochina. For many months they had been cautiously forging or reinforcing their ties to China, the Soviet Union and the now-formidable regional power centered in Hanoi. This process has accelerated and taken on new meaning since the fall of Phnom Penh on April 17 and of Saigon on April 30.

The recent whirlwind U.S. action to recapture the freighter Mayaguez and its crew has demonstrated the fact that the United States remains an important military power in the area. But new limitations, arising from the new configuration in East Asia, were also evident. The Thai government's strong objections to the use of Thai bases for the operation against Cambodia make these installations of doubtful value in any future Indochina incidents, even if Thailand should reconsider its earlier decision to close the bases within a year. In this, the Thais are motivated not by anti-Americanism so much as by the need to accommodate the suddenly important interests of the new and nearby regimes in Cambodia and Vietnam.

Use of the existing U.S. bases in Japan and the Philippines to mount future combat operations in Southeast Asia is likely to be sharply limited in view of newly-forged diplomatic relations of Tokyo and Manila with the Communist governments in the area. The Philippines' seemingly puzzling restrictions on the use of Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base by U.S.-sponsored Saigon refugees is a hint of what is to come. Manila's edginess had roots in a staff protest from the Hanoi government, delivered se-