

# A Domino Theory of Peace

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The fate of Laos and Cambodia, the other two states in what was once French Indochina, are inexorably linked to the eventual shape of the settlement in Vietnam.

The vital question is, what are to be the limits of Vietnamese dominion in Indochina? The agreement to end the conflict provides for the neutralization of both Laos and Cambodia with a withdrawal of all foreign forces.

But will the Vietnamese Communists feel that Vietnamese suzerainty, if not direct control, should extend over all of what was once French? Or will they see it as in their interest to re-establish Cambodia and Laos as truly independent neutral buffer states while they turn their attention to the eventual unification of Vietnam?

It is encouraging that during the course of the second Indochina war the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese have never tried to overrun all of Cambodia or Laos. They have been content to control only those areas that they deemed necessary to carry on the war in the South.

The limit on Vietnamese control, however, is a question that has dominated the histories of Laos and Cambodia for over half a millennium, and Americans forget that the shifting lines of the conflict that divide Communist and non-Communist control in these two countries are superimposed upon the lines of a far more ancient struggle between the Indian influenced cultures of Thailand, Cambodia and the lowland Lao, and the Chinese-oriented culture of the dynamic Vietnamese.

## French Expansion

The frontiers of both Laos and Cambodia owe their existence to the expansion of French power into Southeast Asia in the 19th Century.

The once great Khmer empire that produced Angkor Wat in Cambodia fell to the Thais in the 15th Century and by the 18th Century the Vietnamese had pushed into Cambodia and across the wild mountains of the Annamite Cordillera, in what is now Laos, to confront the Thais along the

Mekong. Much of what is now Laos and Cambodia recognized an uneasy dual suzerainty to both the Thai and Vietnamese empires. Like Poland in Europe, both Laos and Cambodia have suffered at the hands of more powerful neighbors.

The coming of the French ended this competition. In the 19th Century, following the conquest of Vietnam, the French moved into Cambodia and then Laos. The frontiers as we know them today were not finally established until 1907 when the French forced the Thais out of their last provinces in Cambodia and Laos.

The Japanese forced the French in 1940 to cede Laotian and Cambodian territory back to Thailand, but the Thais in turn were forced to give the areas up again after the war.

European power, as it did all over Asia, froze local rivalries, but the French extended Vietnamese influence in Laos and Cambodia and all the worse was the chaos when European power receded after World War II.

In the anti-French national struggle that followed the Second World War, the Communists never played as big a role in Laos and Cambodia as they did in Vietnam, despite the efforts of the Vietminh to promote an Indochina-wide movement.

The "Free Cambodians" and the Pathet Lao were not seated alongside the Vietminh at Geneva in 1954, when the French war came to a close. Chou En-lai pressured the Vietminh to withdraw their forces from both Laos and Cambodia on the promise that the Americans would respect their neutrality.

Under the terms of the 1954 agreements, Laos and Cambodia were to be neutral buffer states and Vietnam was to be temporarily partitioned with nationwide elections in two years. The failure of the 1954 agreements to settle the Vietnamese question eventually doomed both Vietnam's neighbors to the west.

In the late 1950s, however, Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia was able to weather storms from both the right and the left to achieve a working measure of internal stability. He refused the protection of SEATO and made friends with the new Communist

government in China. The Thais and the United States saw him as a dangerous element in their cold war planning and they organized exile groups against him. But in retrospect, Sihanouk's Cambodia of the late 50s came the closest of any to fulfilling the terms of the Geneva agreements.

## Prisoner of Geography

Laos, bordering as it does on North Vietnam, China and Thailand, was a prisoner of geography and was dragged quickly into the cold war.

Prince Souvanna Phouma tried several times in the 1950s to form a government of national union to include the Communist Pathet Lao. But these efforts were resisted by the United States and Thailand, who wanted to see a strongly anti-Communist government in Laos.

In 1960, Long Le's neutralist coup brought Souvanna Phouma back to power and he tried once again to unite the country by steering a middle course between the right and the left. The neutralists were driven from the capital by a right-wing military attack on Vientiane, and a big power confrontation developed with the Russians supporting the neutralists with arms and the Americans supporting the right wing.

So serious had the situation become that President Eisenhower told incoming President Kennedy that Laos would be his worst problem and that he might have to send American troops.

Both Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and Mr. Kennedy decided that the eccentric little kingdom of 2 million people and three warring princes was not the place for a big power confrontation. Prince Sihanouk's suggestion of another Geneva Conference on Laos was accepted by all the powers involved, including China.

The 1962 Geneva agreement on Laos called for neutralization and the setting up of a tripartite government to include both the right and the Pathet Lao but giving the majority of government portfolios to Souvanna Phouma's Neutralists.

But even then the resurgence of the war in Vietnam, following the U.S.

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backed refusal of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem to hold elections, made the tripartite effort impossible. Both the North Vietnamese and the Americans needed Laos to fight their war in Vietnam.

Souvanña Phouma watched the neutralist position whittled away until bipolarization was complete. The Pathet Lao withdrew to the hills and by the mid-1960s neither the Pathet Lao nor the government could be considered masters of their own fate.

The North Vietnamese controlled the Pathet Lao and the United States controlled the Laotian government. CIA-trained tribal irregulars and bombing planes were ranged against the North Vietnamese efforts to control the Laotian provinces near their border and at the same time keep open the Ho Chi Minh trail to the South.

Peace in Laos depends on the willingness of the North Vietnamese and the Americans to free their clients. But should a Vietnam settlement allow it, the Laotians should find it easier to form a government of national reconciliation than will the Vietnamese.

The hatreds that divide the combatants do not run as deep in Laos as in Vietnam. Ideology does not play so great a role and both sides agree in principle to a return to coalition government under the terms of the 1962 accords.

A fairly straightforward cease-fire line could be drawn in Laos with far fewer of the contested "leopard spots" that make the division of South Vietnam so difficult to determine.

Such a cease-fire line would roughly conform to the ancient delineation between the lowland Lao of the Mekong Valley with their ties to Thailand, and the upland peoples of Laos with their ties to North Vietnam.

One can only guess at Hanoi's intentions, but during the long war the North Vietnamese have never seriously threatened the Mekong River Valley, although they have always had the power to do so.

If Laos were neutralized there is at least a chance that the Thais and the Vietnamese, as well as the big powers, could be persuaded not to interfere.

Thailand, with its 35 million people, has roughly the same population as

both North and South Vietnam together. It has never been under Vietnamese influence nor has it ever been a European colony.

While Laos and Cambodia, with a combined population of little over 10 million, may find themselves eventually within Vietnam's orbit because of geography and history, Thailand is not at all a fragile domino. Despite a nagging insurgency problem, Thailand remains a remarkably stable country.

Vietnamese guerrillas will not find Thailand an amicable sea in which to swim, and the answer to Thailand's insurgency is to be found at home in the willingness of the Thais to reform themselves.

The situation in Cambodia, which, until 1970, was so much more stable than Laos, is now far worse.

In the 1960s Sihanouk, too, was beginning to feel the rising pressures of the Vietnam war. Sihanouk said he favored the cause of the Vietcong in Vietnam, but not in Cambodia. Pressure grew upon him to allow free passage of North Vietnamese men and arms through his country.

## U.S. Held at Bay

Sihanouk knew that the North Vietnamese had the power to take what they wanted and he made a deal whereby the Vietnamese Communists could use Cambodian sanctuaries but only if they left the Cambodian people alone. The South Vietnamese and the Americans did not like it, but the force of Sihanouk's personality on the international scene was enough to hold the U.S. military at bay.

Ironically, Sihanouk had already begun to tilt towards the Americans by denouncing the sanctuaries and restoring diplomatic relations with the United States the year before he was overthrown. But his arbitrary one-man rule had alienated the Cambodian educated classes as well as the military.

The end came when, taking advantage of Sihanouk's absence from the country, the Cambodian government overthrew their chief of state. The leader was Lon Nol, premier and commander-in-chief of the army—a slow thinking but trusted Sihanouk lieutenant

who, after some initial hesitation, decided to play the role of Brutus during the ides of March, 1970.

The Americans' role in the coup is still unclear, but they were quick to take advantage of it. Lon Nol demanded that the Vietnamese Communists quit their sanctuaries and in May the South Vietnamese and Americans invaded the eastern provinces.

Cambodia quickly dissolved into savagery, anarchy and war. Much of the countryside was destroyed by contending armies and refugees flocked into the cities.

The U.S. military deemed it necessary to destroy the Cambodian sanctuaries if Vietnamization was to be a success, but today the North Vietnamese are back in the same old sanctuaries.

Cambodia's economy and social fabric lie in ruins, and no firm leadership has risen to fill the vacuum left by Sihanouk.

The Cambodian Communists are now more of a force to be reckoned with than they were when Sihanouk was in power, but there is a leaderless, anarchistic element to the Cambodian fighting that is reminiscent of the Congo.

Lon Nol, now enfeebled by a stroke, burst into tears in front of a foreign visitor recently and said, "What have we done?"

Although Sihanouk is still very popular among the peasantry, neither the government in Phnom Penh nor the Communist Khmer Rouge love him and it is questionable if his restoration could bring about reconciliation.

As in Vietnam, a de facto cease-fire in Cambodia and a formal cease-fire in Laos will probably result in a de facto partition of both countries with the communists retaining control of the regions that border Vietnam.

One should hold no illusions that stability will be easy to achieve or maintain in the two tragic lands that have the misfortune to lie along the Vietnamese frontier. But an end to big power confrontation in Southeast Asia and a cease-fire could at least give Laos and Cambodia a chance to extract themselves from the Vietnamese struggle, and that is their only chance for peace. □