

**77 CONVERSATIONS  
BETWEEN CHINESE AND FOREIGN LEADERS  
ON THE WARS IN INDOCHINA, 1964-1977**

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## Tracking Multi-Directional Dominoes

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The Domino Theory, as first formulated by President Eisenhower in 1954, was an inherent part of the Cold War and of the wars in Indochina.<sup>41</sup> This conclusion emerged clearly, yet again, at a conference held in Hanoi in late June 1997, where American and Vietnamese former officials and scholars discussed the events and lessons of the Vietnam War.<sup>42</sup>

While focusing on the mindsets of each side during the 1960s, several members of the US delegation, notably former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and former Central Intelligence Agency and State Department official Chester Cooper, tried to make the Vietnamese understand how deeply, albeit erroneously (“We were badly mistaken”), the Kennedy and Johnson administrations had believed in the domino theory. What McNamara, Cooper, and some other ex-U.S. officials wondered was why the Vietnamese leaders had allowed the United States to make such a tragic mistake. Why had not Hanoi taken initiatives to make Washington understand that the aim of the war was merely national independence and unification, not the expansion of communism to other countries? If Hanoi had made this clear, they implied, the escalation of the war could have been avoided.

As the following documents suggest, the answer is very simple: the domino theory accurately reflected Communist intentions. Communist leaders in China,

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<sup>41</sup> The website “Vietnam War—A Critical Analysis of Australia’s Entrance Into War” ([http://rubens.anu.edu.au/student.projects/vietnam/public\\_html/home.html](http://rubens.anu.edu.au/student.projects/vietnam/public_html/home.html)) defines the domino theory as a “theory which holds that if one South-East Asian country falls to Communism, then the momentum caused by such an event would trigger the rise of Communism in its neighbouring countries in a chain reaction (reminiscent of dominos).” For a summary of how the domino theory affected the definition of US objectives in Indochina, see William J. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 364-367.

<sup>42</sup> “Missed Opportunities?: Former U.S. and Vietnamese Leaders Reexamine the Vietnam War, 1961-1968,” conference organized in Hanoi, late June 1997, by the Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for

Vietnam, Cambodia, and elsewhere certainly intended to expand communism. They believed strongly in the fraternity of communist movements and states, and saw it as a matter of obligation and pride to use victories in one country to sustain and enhance revolutionary movements in the next. Hanoi and Beijing wanted dominoes to fall as much as Washington wished to keep them standing. The domino theory, then, was absolutely correct—as far as beliefs, hopes, and intentions were concerned.

### **How the Theory Was Right**

It was always a presumption within the international communist movement that a successful seizure of power in one country would be used as a stepping stone to promote revolution in others, through political, financial and military means, although not in the form of outright military invasions. The communists saw their international movement both as a means of achieving national liberation for oppressed peoples and as an instrument for world revolution. The principle of proletarian internationalism rested on a sense of fraternity and shared mission within a movement in which all parties were, in principle, equal (everyone's title was "comrade" almost regardless of rank), but which in reality was quite hierarchic. The earlier and more successful its seizure of power, land reforms, collectivization, and industrialization, the higher a national communist party would rank in the international hierarchy of prestige. During Stalin's time all recognized him as the big boss (or elder brother), but after Stalin's death, Mao came to see himself as the true leader, not only of the revolutionary movement in China and Asia but worldwide. The Soviet leadership had, in his view, forfeited its right to leadership by choosing a revisionist line based on peaceful co-existence with the West. In Asia, Mao felt his supremacy to be self-evident: During his Moscow meetings in December 1949 and January 1950, and Liu Shaoqi's trip to Moscow the previous summer, he had gotten

China's special responsibility for promoting revolutions in Asia explicitly recognized by Stalin.<sup>43</sup>

Note the didactic tone of Mao's oral statements to his Laotian, Vietnamese, and Cambodian visitors in the first of the documents published in this Working Paper. He acted as their teacher, conveying authoritative instructions as to how they were to conduct their local struggles. Note also the reverential way in which visitors (in the following cases three Vietnamese leaders) addressed the Chairman: "Our Politburo has made a decision on this matter, and today I am reporting it to Chairman Mao" (Pham Van Dong to Mao, 5 October 1965); "It is correct, Uncle Mao. We are persistently fighting until the South becomes entirely independent and free, until national unification is attained. By so doing, we adhere to the orders from our President Ho as well as yours" (Nguyen Van Linh to Mao, 17 November 1968); "We are very much in need of getting Chairman Mao's instructions" (Le Duan to Mao, 11 May 1970). Note also how Mao tried to initiate Prince Sihanouk to the fraternity by making him read *The Communist Manifesto* and ally himself with the masses (Mao to Sihanouk, 28 September 1964). This must have represented quite a problem for Sihanouk, not only because of his attachment to French culture and aristocratic habits, but also because of his blood. The blood metaphor was used to depict distinctions of class, across national border lines. On 10 April 1967, Zhou Enlai told Vietnamese leaders that neither the Cambodian Lon Nol nor the Laotian Phoumi Nousavan were trustworthy, despite their attempts to speak nice words about China and boast of Chinese blood: "But their blood is feudal, capitalistic." (Laotian Prince Souphannouvong, though, seems to have overcome this problem, becoming a brother and "Red Prince.")

Blood was not just a metaphor for class, but also, as always, a central element in the rhetoric of war. In the case of the Vietnam War, the enormous bloodletting became easier to accept because it served the cause of revolutionary forces worldwide. At a meeting with a Vietnamese party delegation on 23 March 1966, Zhou Enlai praised the

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<sup>43</sup> Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 104. Chen Jian's source was the memoirs of Shi Zhe, Mao's and Liu's Russian-language interpreter.

Vietnamese people for shedding blood “for the Vietnamese revolution as well as for the world revolution.” He also stated, during talks on 11 April 1967: “The struggle of Vietnam is in the common interest of the Indochinese and Southeast Asian peoples.”

Mao certainly planned to expand the revolution in Vietnam not only to the rest of Indochina, but also to other countries in Southeast Asia. This is evident from a telling remark to Ho Chi Minh on 16 May 1965, during a discussion about the construction of roads in northern Laos: “Because we will fight large-scale battles in the future, it will be good if we also build roads to Thailand.” It is also obvious from a discussion among Zhou Enlai, Pham Van Dong, and Vo Nguyen Giap, on 10 April 1967, that they had more than the Indochinese countries in mind. They discuss developments on the whole Southeast Asian scene, and as late as 7 March 1971, Zhou Enlai states to Le Duan and Pham Van Dong:

The Thai government is very much afraid of the Thai Communist Party’s armed forces. It knows that weapons to the TCP armed forces are transported via Vietnam and Laos. It also knows that China has a road that runs to the Sino-Lao border. Therefore, it faces the threat of the war expanding all over Southeast Asia. We hold that support to the peoples’ revolutionary struggles cannot be sacrificed for the sake of relations between governments. Only traitors do that.

Le Duan replies with an even more ambitious plan to knock down dominoes:

We want to smash the US-Japan alliance as well as the alliance between the US, Japan, and the regional bourgeois class. We have to establish a world front that will be built first by some core countries and later enlarged to include African and Latin American countries.

The Vietnamese Communist Party leader wanted China to take the lead in establishing a People’s Front to smash the Nixon Doctrine of building up regional allies to safeguard U.S. security interests. Le Duan had also on an earlier occasion gone quite far in advocating true internationalism. In a meeting on 13 April 1966, at which Deng Xiaoping had wanted to know if China had been showing “too much enthusiasm” in its help to Vietnam, thus causing suspicion among the Vietnamese comrades, Le Duan answered in the negative:

Now, there are more than a hundred thousand Chinese military personnel in Vietnam, but we think that whenever there is something serious happening, there

should be more than 500,000 needed. This is assistance from a fraternal country. We think that as a fraternal socialist country, you can do that, you can help us like this... We need assistance from all socialist countries. But we hold that the Chinese assistance is the most direct and extensive.

Thus Le Duan seems to have been so committed to the idea of socialist fraternity that he had no objection to a massive presence of Chinese troops in Vietnam. Le Duan repeatedly declared his sincere commitment to revolution and proletarian internationalism, not only in public speeches, but also in confidential talks with Chinese comrades. Obviously the Vietnamese leader must have wanted to impress Mao with such statements, but we must assume that Le Duan's words also reflected genuine internationalist conviction.

Beijing took the Vietnamese wish for more assistance most seriously, and suggested in late 1966 that a limited number of Chinese military experts be sent to serve the struggle in South Vietnam. When making this suggestion to Pham Van Dong on 23 August 1966, Zhou Enlai was unashamedly cynical in expressing the need to not seek peace, but instead prolong the suffering of the Vietnamese in order to encourage anti-imperialist movements in other countries:

Patience means victory. Patience can cause you more hardship, more sufferings. Yet, the sky will not collapse, the earth will not slide, and the people cannot be totally exterminated. So patience can be traded for victory, thus causing historic changes, encouraging the Asian, African and Latin American countries...

The record published here does not reveal any Vietnamese misgivings to such statements, but the incomplete sources available do not permit any firm conclusions concerning the Vietnamese leaders' true attitude toward the sacrifices their people had to endure in the interests of world (as opposed to national) revolution. For this, we must await access to documents concerning internal Vietnamese discussions.

The Chinese leaders also, of course, had a reverse version of the domino theory. During the height of the Cultural Revolution (1966-69), they felt encircled by hostile powers, with the Soviet Union to the north, and the United States to the south and east. North Vietnam was their only outlet, the only standing communist domino in China's vicinity that had not succumbed to "revisionism." If it fell in the wrong direction, it

would topple into China, perhaps causing a war of aggression against the PRC itself. Vietnam would thus have to fall in the right direction. This provided an additional reason for Beijing to urge the Vietnamese to keep up their struggle instead of seeking peace. As will be seen from several of the documents published below, the Chinese leaders reacted strongly when on 13 April 1968 the Vietnamese declared their willingness to start talks with US representatives. The Chinese felt that Hanoi was being lured into peace talks by the Soviets. But the Vietnamese assured their Chinese comrades that they would continue fighting until victory: "That we are victorious will have a positive impact in Asia. Our victory will bring about unforeseeable outcomes," said Pham Van Dong on 29 April 1968, to which Zhou Enlai replied: "You should think that way."

Later the Chinese were pleased to discover how obstinately the Vietnamese behaved at the negotiating table in Paris, so that the war could go on and maintain its stimulating effect on world revolution...well beyond the moment when China itself decided to abandon the struggle and invite Nixon to Beijing.

### **How the Theory Was Wrong**

I have said that the domino theory was correct. Yes, it was correct, on the level of beliefs and intentions. Still the theory was wrong. Fraternity had its limits. Already by the time when our documentation begins, China had decided to no longer consider the Soviet Union as part of the international brotherhood. By 1964, the Chinese leaders were warning the Vietnamese comrades against Soviet revisionism. Mao decided to provide substantial assistance to Vietnam, including (as mentioned by Le Duan) more than 100,000 troops who were mainly constructing roads in northern Vietnam and Laos.<sup>44</sup> The Chairman clearly saw it as his prerogative to organize and control all fraternal help to the Vietnamese comrades, and did not want Soviet interference. Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin's visit to Hanoi and Beijing in February 1965 therefore represented a watershed,

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<sup>44</sup> For solid documentation of Chinese help to Vietnam, based on Chinese sources, see Chen Jian, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-69," *China Quarterly* 142 (June 1995), pp. 356-387. For China's attempts to discourage peace talks and make the Vietnamese keep on fighting, see Qiang Zhai, "Beijing and the Vietnam Peace Talks, 1965-68. New Evidence from Chinese Sources," Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 18, (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, June 1997).

causing consternation in China at how eager the Vietnamese were to receive aid from the Soviet and East European “revisionists.”

Moscow’s assistance led to many crises in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, primarily over the use of Chinese territory for the transportation of Soviet weapons and other goods. Zhou Enlai lectured the Vietnamese on China’s bad experiences with the Soviets. And Deng Xiaoping took up the problem of friction between Chinese advisors and their Vietnamese comrades in a 1966 meeting, shortly before Mao turned against him. We have already heard how Le Duan, who was listening to Deng Xiaoping on that occasion, asked for more instead of less Chinese involvement. He also, however, tried to define what he saw as the main difference between Hanoi’s and Beijing’s perspectives. The Vietnamese party head shared the Chinese view, he said, that a relatively strong reformist movement had engulfed Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, but he also thought that China, “while upholding the revolutionary banner, should cooperate with reformist countries to help them make revolution.” And he even went so far as to cite the precedent for Chinese Communist Party cooperation with the Guomindang in the 1920s and 1930s as an argument for cooperating with the Kremlin, actually comparing the Soviet Union to the Guomindang! This seems to indicate that Le Duan shared the Chinese desire to deepen the war against the United States and did not accept Soviet advice to seek a political settlement. On the other hand he needed Soviet help. By cooperating with the Soviet Union, then, he appears to have hoped that Vietnam and China could have a radicalizing influence on it.

A conversation between Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi and North Vietnamese negotiator Le Duc Tho on 17 October 1968 reveals the limits to the kind of “we” feeling that can exist between an elder and a younger brother. The word “we,” as we know, can be used inclusively (we together) and exclusively (we as opposed to you). In this conversation, Chen Yi at first used the inclusive “we” when describing what had been done in Vietnam: “We withdrew our armed forces from the South to the North [after the Geneva agreement]. We at that time made a mistake in which [... and now he turned to the exclusive “we”:] we [Chinese] shared a part.” When Le Duc Tho answered, he used



only the exclusive “we”: “Because we [Vietnamese] listened to your [Chinese] advice” [the mistake was made in Geneva]. The elder thus went much further in his “we” feeling than the younger.

As the above-mentioned exchange reminds us, the 1954 Geneva settlement was a time-bomb within the Asian communist fraternity. The Chinese and Soviet comrades had more or less deceived their Vietnamese brethren by imposing on them a settlement leading to the abandonment of the revolutionary struggle in the southern half of the country. Another significant aspect of the Geneva agreement, as agreed upon by Vietnamese and French representatives, is that it also led to the abandonment of armed struggle in Cambodia. Thus many Cambodian communists also felt deceived, not only by China and the Soviet Union, but by their Vietnamese mentors as well. As a result of the settlement, some 500 Cambodian communists were compelled to take refuge in North Vietnam and remain there until 1970-71; when they finally returned to Cambodia they were suspected of being Vietnamese agents. In the early 1960s, a new Cambodian communist leadership had emerged inside Cambodia, with Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) as secretary general from 1963 on. In the late 1950s and early 1960s the Vietnamese communists had fought hard to make Beijing and Moscow endorse a resumption of armed struggle in South Vietnam. In the second half of the 1960s, it was the turn of the Cambodian communists to try to compel Hanoi and Beijing to endorse a resumption of armed struggle in Cambodia. Beijing and especially Hanoi were reluctant to do so since they preferred to keep Sihanouk in place so long as he continued his neutral policy, allowed the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam to maintain its sanctuaries in eastern Cambodia, and permitted provisions for the NLF to be channeled through the port at Sihanoukville. Pol Pot’s first serious attempt to obtain support for a Cambodian insurgency was made in mid-1965, when he met Le Duan in Hanoi and then went on to Beijing. The meeting between Pol Pot and Le Duan seems to have been a cultural clash. Pol Pot presented a resolution adopted by his party, which Le Duan criticized quite heavily in a rather paternalistic lecture. He wanted Pol Pot to understand that victory in Cambodia would come later, as a result of victory in Laos and southern Vietnam, and to make his point understood, he used the inclusive “we” throughout: “We will use

Sihanouk's policy of peace and neutrality in order to avoid bringing Cambodia directly into the war...In Cambodia, we will go with Sihanouk. We cannot topple Sihanouk, but by going with him we must also score victory over him and not allow him to beat us."<sup>45</sup>

The available record does not reveal any occasion when a Vietnamese leader used the inclusive "we" when referring to shared Sino-Vietnamese concerns. The inclusive "we" seems to have been used only downwards, not upwards. Chen Yi was not alone among the Chinese leaders to use the inclusive "we" in talks with the Vietnamese. In a 16 July 1965 meeting with Hoang Van Hoan (held almost at the same time as Le Duan was lecturing Pol Pot in Hanoi), Mao also used the inclusive "we" when talking about military strategy in South Vietnam, and on 17 November 1968, Mao referred to "our forces [in South Vietnam]" in a conversation with Vietnamese leaders. However, Mao was not consistent in his use of the inclusive "we". On 2 February 1973, he leaped from "we" to "your" in a rather interesting way: "...after the Paris agreements have been signed we need at least six months to stabilize the situation in South Vietnam (and) to strengthen your forces." In this sentence he seems, perhaps subconsciously, to conceive of strategy and policy as fraternally shared whereas the military forces involved were Vietnamese. Similar linguistic leaps are also noted by Thomas Engelbert and Christopher Goscha in their analysis of the Vietnamese-Cambodian relationship.<sup>46</sup>

The already mentioned conversation between Mao and a group of Vietnamese leaders on 17 November 1968 is noteworthy for the fact that in his final remark, Pham Van Dong had the courage to state directly to the Great Helmsman: "Ultimately, it is we [Vietnamese] who make the decisions based on the actual situation in Vietnam and on how we [Vietnamese] understand the rule of war." He softened his point a little by adding that it was in accordance with what Mao himself had often said to Ho Chi Minh, and by assuring him that the Vietnamese were determined to fight till total victory. This was "the best way," said Dong, "to express our [Vietnamese] gratitude for the support

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas Engelbert and Christopher E. Goscha, *Falling Out Of Touch: A Study on Vietnamese Communist Policy towards an Emerging Cambodian Communist Movement, 1930-1975* (Clayton, Victoria, Australia: Monash University, 1995), pp. 73-74, 149. The above paragraph is based on this excellently researched publication, which builds on some highly interesting documents from Vietnamese libraries.

<sup>46</sup> For their discussion of the inclusive "we", see Engelbert and Goscha, *Falling Out of Touch*, pp. 103, 150.

and aid provided to us by Chairman Mao and the CCP as well as the fraternal Chinese people.”

This meeting was apparently not the only time when the Vietnamese leaders needed to emphasize their right to decide for themselves. On 20 April 1969, Zhou Enlai stated to a group of Vietnamese party leaders:

You often say to us: “We are determined to fight and we make decisions by ourselves.” Of course, any party and country has the right to make decisions with regard to its own fate. And it is good to have such determination and belief. But as brothers we have to talk with each other in an open manner...

And then he spoke openly, urging his listeners to spend less time and money on negotiations in Paris, and more on keeping up the fighting. Almost three years later, in February 1972, Nixon came to Beijing while the Vietnamese continued to fight and suffer. After this, of course, China could not object to the signing of the Paris agreement. As we know, however, after the unification of Vietnam in 1975, Sino-Vietnamese relations rapidly deteriorated. The Cultural Revolution was then over, and Deng Xiaoping was back in the saddle. Again he complained to the Vietnamese about their behavior, declaring that their textbooks focused far too much on “the threat from the North” (conversation with Le Duan, 29 September 1975).

Only two years after Vietnam’s total victory, its revolutionary ambitions had been transformed in Beijing’s view from an example for all oppressed peoples to a regional threat. In the documentation below we include a Sino-Cambodian conversation from 29 September 1977 where the Vietnamese are not present. Now, it is Pol Pot who presents a new kind of domino theory to the post-Mao Chinese leader, Hua Guofeng. Vietnam, Pol Pot claims, not only wants to annex Cambodia and Laos, but “to occupy the whole of Southeast Asia.” Thus China and Pol Pot had come full circle. Their new domino theory was quite similar to the one in which Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and McNamara had once believed. The main difference was that now there were communists on both sides of the row of dominos, and in between them as well. This made it difficult to tell in which direction the dominoes might fall.

## **Conclusion**

Much of the confusion in our debates about the domino theory stems from the human tendency to confuse intention with probability. Even though most communist leaders genuinely believed in the idea of a socialist brotherhood which was bound to win power worldwide, it does not follow that a wisely led non-communist power should have perceived the world's likely future in similar terms. Wise governments base their strategies not primarily on the beliefs and general intentions of their adversaries, but on an overall assessment of their capabilities, relations with each other, and the likely outcome of their actions.

From the documentation below it is easy to see that although the communist leaders clearly intended to topple the dominoes, their capacity for doing so was limited not only by the weakness of revolutionary forces in many of the targeted countries, but also by conflicting interests among the already established communist states. Even regimes with expansionist aims will often be predominantly concerned with their own geopolitical interests, at least when the initial euphoria following a victorious revolution has died down. This could have been understood in Western capitals, and was—it seems—understood by some. The White House, however, decided to stem world revolution in the worst thinkable place: a country where the communist party was perhaps more popular and better entrenched in the rural villages than anywhere else in the world.

A major effect of the US intervention in Vietnam was to transform a vicious, but local, civil war into a highly popular internationalist cause. Communists and socialists all over the world, and eventually social democrats and liberals as well, could rival each other in supporting the NLF and the heroic people of Vietnam. Che Guevara would speak of making “two, three, many Vietnams.” Indeed, few events did more (albeit temporarily) to reinvigorate global sentiments of socialist anti-imperialist fraternity than the US war in Vietnam. And this happened at a time when the West, after a period of fabulous economic growth, should have been in a position to inspire confidence worldwide.

The Vietnam War reinforced the image of the United States as an imperialist enemy not only of liberation movements in “the third world,” but of all democratic left-wing movements. There was a tremendous Marxist upsurge during the 1970s. By the end of that decade, however, after *détente*, when the socialist countries had become more or less secure from direct imperialist intervention, their sense of brotherhood entered a period of terminal decline.

Zhou Enlai was correct when he told Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere on 4 June 1965: “The more America’s strength is bogged down in Vietnam, the better for the movement for national independence and liberation.” But the reverse would also prove true: The more America distanced itself from its involvement in Vietnam, the worse for the world revolution.

Instead of falling one way, many dominoes were never overturned, while others fell in multiple directions. It should, perhaps, already have been possible to predict a more complicated future at the time when the domino theory prevailed. For historians today, with the benefit of hindsight, it must be a challenge to track the complex trajectories of all those multi-directional dominoes. Thus may we liberate contemporary political history from the illusionary straitjacket of a two-dimensional confrontation. The present world disorder already existed, under the surface, while the Cold War raged. Both sides entertained the illusion that countries can be arranged into a single row of dominoes. They correctly interpreted their enemy’s mindsets. In that sense, the domino theory was right. And yet it was entirely wrong: the domino theory was a real existing illusion.