

Vietnam, the Chipped Domino:
Nationalism and Vietnam's Inexorable Communism

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INTRODUCTION

Forty years has come and gone since the Fall of Saigon, the historic point marking the end of the Vietnam War. The amount of literature circulating this topic rises in volume day after day across those forty years, encompassing topics from both sides of the war. These intensive works dive deep into the vivid personal accounts, dust-covered memorandums, and newly declassified documents that shout excitement to researchers.

Many who came out of the war from the battlefield, the strategy desk, the White House – now at the grayer years of their lives – are patching pieces of memory, retracing the documents and trying making sense of past decisions in their memoirs and books. For one part, they owed an emotional part of their life to the war and its consequences. For another, they feel the responsibility to be righteous: to admit one’s faults, and to draw a lesson.

Scholars of the war would concur. They owe their research passion to the historical lessons from the war. I approach this research in the same manner: The Vietnam War insinuated in me an unyielding passion for a better reading of it, not only for understanding it, but to entertain the questions, “What could we have done, and how do we use this knowledge in the future?”

In the magnificent speaker hall of the Marshall Center on the late afternoon of September 29, 2010, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, an original supporter of the Vietnam War, revisited the war from a more mature and worldly perspective. Holbrooke now denounced the war and its basis of the domino theory, “The dominoes didn’t fall unless you count Cambodia and Laos.”¹ Mark Moyar, in his critique of the conference papers, completely refuted this argument, positing America’s involvement in 1965 had resulted in a geopolitical shift that prevented the falling of

¹ Richard C. Holbrooke. *The American Experience in Southeast Asia, 1946-1975*. Keynote Address in the 2010 Conference on the American Experience in South East Asia, 1946-1975.

dominoes ten years later. Moyar further refuted Frank Cain's more controversial proposal: Had France and the United States kept their feet out of the region, Indochina nationalism would have emerge. In fact, the dominoes never fell, but was Moyar correct in arguing "the shortage of falling dominoes in 1975 did not necessarily mean that the theory was invalid in 1965?"

This article seeks to justify Frank Cain's proposal and refute Moyar's domino theory claim. Communist Vietnamese are inherently non-expansionists in their independence movement, at the heart of which was an unchallengeable sense of nationalism that served as the driving force for their struggle rather than the internationalism hypothesized in the domino theory.

Despite the American intervention, the victory of the Vietnamese communists was inevitable. Such success was inexorable given two intertwined factors – the force of nationalism in the country, and the popularity of the Communist independence movement. However, the nationalist element in this Communist-led movement would never have knocked the rest of the dominoes with it, as opposed to the internationalist thinking. The sense nationalism profoundly developed through the country's history, and by the time of 1965, it continued to be present in all Vietnamese people – the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam, communists, anti-communists, and all those in-between.

VIETNAM, THE CHIPPED DOMINO

Imagine a domino with a chipped lower left corner. This imagery represents Vietnam and the political sophistication therein during the war. For one part, the domino metaphor answers directly to Moyer's argument and the domino theory. It is chipped, however, as a manifestation of the policymakers' failure to comprehend situations in the country that would eventually lead to two decades of America's longest war. This missing piece, to American policy makers and several scholars up to this point, is the idea of Vietnamese *nationalism*. For another part, the chipped corner threw this Vietnam domino off-balance, and as this paper will demonstrate, the domino would fall sideways to the left, as Vietnam would come under the rule of Communism. This motion of nationalism, however, would prevent any other pieces of domino from falling, as history has shown the invalidity of the domino theory after 1975.

The two halves of the imaginary chipped domino represent the two intertwined ideas in this paper that I identified to be important but scarcely explored knowledge of the war. First, the two halves of the domino denote literally the geographical North and South of the country.

Despite many differences, at the hearts of both parts of the country lay the Vietnamese sense of nationalism. Many policymakers and researchers failed to see this fundamental idea and dismissed the Southern region as either a puppet regime or lands of the Southern communists who took orders from Hanoi. Second, figuratively the two halves of the domino represent the interplay between Vietnam's communism and nationalism. Contrary to the binary view of these two ideas, they had much in common, and both played important roles in the result of the war.

Therefore, I set out to prove in this paper the nationalism within parts and layers of this Vietnam domino piece. The fall would inevitably be a victory for the Vietnamese Communists,

but this central factor would act as the force pushing the domino left instead of forward, thus invalidating the [hitting of other countries, or the](#) domino theory.

NATIONALISM IN VIETNAM: A DEFINITION

In the scope of this paper, Vietnamese *nationalism* encompasses the will of the Vietnamese people to determine their own fate. To Vietnamese as a people, this concept is widely shared as an integral tradition. First and foremost, this nationalism has in it the historical patriotism, a deeply-rooted collective mindset the Vietnamese people have welded over the course of over two thousand years of history. For half of this history, the Vietnamese people were under the imperialism of other countries. Four times, totaling more than a millennium, the country came under Chinese domination (111 B.C.-39 A.D. under the Han Dynasty; 43 – 544 under the Jin; 603 – 938 under the Tang; and 1417 – 1427 under the Ming). Vietnam’s animosity towards China was a historical remnant, which the Pentagon Papers well documented as “widespread anti-Chinese odium among the people of North Vietnam.”² In a 1945 Lao Dong (Vietnamese Worker’s Party) Politburo debate, Ho Chi Minh blew up at the pro-Chinese members, “You fools! Don't you realize what it means if the Chinese stay? Don't you remember your history? The last time the Chinese came, they stayed one thousand years! As for me, I prefer to smell French shit for five years, rather than Chinese shit for the rest of my life.”³

Prior to the American involvement, Vietnamese were under the colonialism of France for eight decades, from 1858 to 1940. From 1940, their fates once again fell into the hands of Japanese Nazis, who would soon be ousted at the end of the World War II. Victorious but crippled, many European countries yearned to reclaim their prewar colonies with a view to

² *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision-Making on Vietnam*. Volume 1, Chapter 1, “Background to the Crisis, 1940-50.” (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), [p. X](#).

³ Ibid.

rejuvenating their badly damaged economy. While the Dutch found this goal impossible and gave independence back to Indonesia, such was not the case for France and its Indochina colonies. In fact, the latter brought back with them an army, the French Expedition Corps to reestablished colonial rule with force. From such experience as a people, the Vietnamese have developed a mindset that was strongly averse to foreign invasion. Through all these wars to become a nation state, patriotism and the will for self-determination lies at the heart of the Vietnamese people. After the Geneva Accords in 1954, American presence in Vietnam would be seen as the Western imperial power, a continuation of foreign domination to people of this country. With Americans at their door right after the French left, Vietnamese' independence was once again threatened.

Nationalism in the next twenty years of the Vietnam War consequently existed in the fusion form of aversion to foreign domination and post-colonialism sentiment. This abhorrence gave rise to Vietnamese' will for self-determination and independence. In the words of Ernest Gellner, Vietnam's independence movement is the exact case of nationalism as "...the feeling of anger aroused by violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment. A nationalist movement is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind."⁴ After a thousand years of Chinese domination and almost a century of French recolonization, American intervention became the straw that broke the camel's back.

Later on in the paper, I will demonstrate this is the shared spirit the Vietnamese people have in times of war, regardless of which part of the country they are from, which government they worked for, what ideology they aligned with. This nationalism, then, is juxtaposed against the idea of internationalism in the Communist expansionist sense. This key argument will

⁴ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 1.

demonstrate that the domino in fact fell to the left instead of forward, not knocking over all the rest.

AMERICAN ORIGIN OF INVOLVEMENT: THE DOMINO THEORY

The United States got itself involved in Vietnam as a sophisticated continuation of French colonialism. Haunted in American politics at this point is the domino theory, a concept of Communist expansionism existed since the victory of the Chinese Communist Party. This rhetoric and rationality of such theory caught fire from a National Security document dating back to June 1949⁵. The theory would continue to dominate the White House from then on, the outset of irreversible of American involvement.

At the conclusion of the Second World War, the new world order emerged ideologically bipolar with the United States on one side, and the Soviet Union on the other. The domino theory began to haunt American politics from this point on, assuming Communist aggression must be contained and defeated, otherwise it would incessantly knock neighboring countries over as Marxist clients of the Soviet Union and China, just as the domino metaphor supposed. With the assumption of this theory, American policy makers never managed to see the missing piece of the Vietnamese struggle, its nationalistic driving force.

Up till this point, East Asia has been the hotpot of the new world order. With the imminent defeat of the Nationalist Chinese – the Guomindang – in 1949, President Harry Truman signed the China Aid Act, a bill to provide military aid to “the General Area of China,” which really meant any potential battlefield around China – including Indochina.⁶ Certainly, the concept and principle of “freedom” has been central to the United States as a nation ever since its

⁵ *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of Decision Making on Vietnam*, Senator Gravel Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1948, v.7, 513

foundation and in every action it engage on in the world. If China fell to communism, it would be possible that the dictatorial regimes of the world would be expanded. More importantly to Washington, the deteriorating situation around the Guomindang and the popular development of the CCP would directly undermine American national interest. Such was also the argument in the first indoctrination of the domino theory.

What followed next gave Americans the chill. China fell to Communism in October 1949, and so did North Korea in 1953. This successive historical progress gave the United States an imperative to act on the deterioration situation in Vietnam: the Vietminh was on the rise, an organization with which in principle was run by the Communist Vietnamese.

In the intermission of Japanese ouster and French resettlement, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was established with the leadership of the charismatic Ho Chi Minh, the leading patriot of the then Vietnamese revolution for independence. French reluctantly recognized this government, but not for long. In the events that followed, French recognized Bao Dai, the last monarch descent, as the figurehead of Vietnam. Bao Dai headed the puppet government for the Japanese during their occupation, indisputably an act against Vietnam's very nationalistic people. To them, hardly could a figure that cooperated with foreigners have any foothold. While Bao Dai's puppet government was recognized by many Western countries in the world, the Communist-led DRV existed alongside as legitimate to the communist bloc. The first brick for Vietnam in the path to the Cold War was set.

The China bill was ambiguous enough to consequently provide French with up to 80% of military expense for its struggle in Vietnam for the next five years until 1954. Not only did the U.S. provide military assistance, but it was also involved with providing manpower on the Military Assistance and Advisory Group. On the other hand, assistance from China began to find

its way to the DRV, setting the stage for the bitter American politicians to dampen [\[Do you mean political strategists anticipated “saving” Vietnam to counter the loss of China? \]](#) their “lost China” rhetoric. While the DRV received aid from China and other Communist countries, the U.S. began to assist France in its military effort and [France’s](#) “dirty war.”⁷ Thus, the Cold War’s second brick – American’s first brick in the twenty-year war was also set.

In 1945, while the South East Asia desk of the State Department strongly argued against involvement as a continuation of French colonialism, the European desk won out. This unfortunate course of event signaled the initial recognition of the United States helping the reinstalling of French colonialism. However, situation in Western Europe denied this recognition of any significance, and deeper and deeper the U.S. became involved in Indochina. The argument of the European desk at this point essentially was the containment doctrine, a policy designed to limit expansion of the Soviet Union as the dominant communist power. Thomas L. Ahern’s declassified research confirmed from CIA record the denial of the South East Asia experts’ opinions, “Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist, he was also a Communist” and showed reservation at Ho’s “history of connections with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.”⁸ This argument later played right into the rhetoric and rationality of the domino theory: Moscow and China would push the series, and dominoes would fall accordingly in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, then reach out to all South East Asia country. The domino theory had a deep root.

⁷ Christopher Gosha, “A ‘Popular’ Side of the Vietnamese Army: General Nguyen Binh and the Early War in the South (1950-1951).” In *Naissance d’un Etat-Parti: Le Vietnam depuis 1945*, ed. Christopher E. Gosha and Benoit de Tréglodé (Paris: Indes Savantes, 2004), 339.

⁸ Thomas L. Ahern, *CIA and The House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954-63*, [Provide the online URL](#) n.d., 3.

Moving into the year of 1949, a National Security Council document formally indoctrinated the theory.⁹ Following this first installment of the theory, American-British communication was filled with employment of the theory as the former was trying to persuade the latter to participate in the war. Two events in 1954 pronounced Washington's serious adoption of the theory. At the Geneva Conference, John Foster Dulles rejected the Geneva Accords that France and the Communist-led DRV agreed to. Instead, he supported the South Vietnam. Also presented at the conference was Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Minister who would go on to become its Prime Minister a year later. Deeply worried of the development of communism after the Korean War, the new development in Dien Bien Phu put Indochina on Eden's radar. Nevertheless, Eden had always been dubious of the theory [as applied](#) to Indochina. Eden, therefore, rejected the line of domino theory's argument.¹⁰ This perspective from a less politically interested state could have saved the U.S. from further involvement and escalation. As we can see from this case, John Foster Dulles had attempted to communicate the rationale of intervention using the domino theory to the world. Before Dulles' mission to Geneva, President Eisenhower had pronounced the theory to the American people in a press conference, stating the Indochinese fall to communism would be "a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences."¹¹ Not only did Eisenhower fail to appeal for British support for intervention, he also did not get congressional approval for intervention. Both domestically and abroad, the United States had started using the domino theory for its engagement in the war. Department of State made clear its application of the theory in 1957:

⁹ *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of Decision Making on Vietnam*, Senator Gravel Edition

¹⁰ Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014), 502.

¹¹ President Eisenhower's News Conference, April 7, 1954, *Public Papers of the Presidents*, 1954, 382

...[M]ost national Communist parties masquerade as normal, patriotic political parties, purporting to reflect indigenous political impulses and to be led by indigenous elements... By appearing to support the interests of the common man, communists endeavor to direct his energies along lines which serve their basic purpose: to discredit the established society and ultimately to seize power on behalf of the Kremlin.¹²

During the war, domino theory was deeply the belief of the White House. President Kennedy in 1964 expressed his belief in the theory, "I do accept the view that there is an interrelationship in these countries and that is one of the reasons why we are concerned with maintaining the Geneva Accords as a method of maintaining stability in Southeast Asia."¹³ Present in one of the first envoys to Saigon in 1961 was Vice President Lyndon Johnson. Since this moment on, Johnson had been a firm believer of the domino theory, "convinced that if the Communists were allowed to take South Vietnam, they would soon push their war to 'the beaches of Waikiki.'"¹⁴ In a New York Times article in 1965, Hans Morgenthau remarked that Johnson had linked American involvement in Vietnam with the prevention of "unlimited Chinese aggression."¹⁵

The very basis of American intervention in Vietnam was its own national interest. For one thing, if the domino theory had been true, a big part of the world would have fallen into the hands of authoritarian regimes, a world order that was detested by the American foundational values. For another thing, and arguably the more important and closer to the hearts of American policy-makers, the fall of Vietnam would bring about the unstoppable spread of expansionist

¹² U.S. Department of State, *A Case Study of Communist Penetration: Guatemala* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1957), 8-9.

¹³ President Kennedy's View of the "Domino Theory," News Conference, April 24, 1963. In *The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel Edition, Volume 2, 818-819.

¹⁴ Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*, Reprint edition (New York: Times Books, 2007), 155.

¹⁵ Hans J Morgenthau, "We Are Deluding Ourselves in Vietnam," *The New York Times*, April 18, 1965.

Communism, a scene of chaos that would inevitably undermine American influence in this part of the world – economically and politically. Washington had been viewing the Vietnam War within the scope of the Cold war, whereas Vietnamese only had their nationalism at heart.

THE COMMUNIST NATURE OF THE VIETNAMESE WAR

The Vietnamese quest for independence had a communist nature in leadership. This nature was influenced by two dominant factors: the communist path that Ho Chi Minh rose as a visionary and the popularity of the communist-led Vietnamese liberation force. As Vietnamese people walked out of the nineteenth century chained to colonialism, any forces of liberation would become the popular force to the people. During Ho's years overseas, Marxism was on the rise, and Ho's reading on Marxism prompted him to become a founding member of the French Communist Party. It is important to note that the influence of Marxism had on Ho initially started with his desire for his people's independence. This was Ho's original intention for boarding the *Amirale de Latouche-Tréville* steamer to France in 1911. In 1924, already a communist, Ho wrote to a friend that all communists were responsible for returning to their country of origin and "make contact with the masses to awaken, organise, unite and train them, and lead them to fight for freedom and independence."

After all, only Ho himself knows the degree to which he identified with nationalism versus communism, but evidence regarding his conducts supported the former. During the struggle against Japan, Ho worked with America's Office of Strategic Services (OSS) to train Vietminh guerilla. After the war, Ho made several contacts to President Truman, all without responses, and only then did the DRV turn to the Chinese and the Soviets for help.¹⁶ Ho had his own reservation about the communism, too. Bao Dai recognized this reservation, "I saw Ho Chi Minh suffer. He was fighting a battle within himself. Ho had his own struggle. He realized communism was not best for his country, but it was too late. Ultimately, he could not overcome

¹⁶ Jane Franklin et al., *Vietnam and America* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1995), 6.

his allegiance to communism.”¹⁷ In fact, in November 1945, Ho dissolved the Indochinese Communist Party into a Marxist-Leninist association to incorporate non-communist members to garner wider domestic and international support.¹⁸ Nevertheless, to Ho, nationalism and communism might not have been two contrasting ideas, but in fact a close association.

Since the end of World War II, Ho’s Vietminh had been the driving force behind Vietnamese struggle against French recolonization. A *de jure* coalition organization, Vietminh was actually dominated by Communist party members. However, many join the party for less the Marxist ideology than their intrinsic nationalism. Operated with a noble aim since the Japanese occupation – at least to the hearts and eyes of the Vietnamese people, the Vietminh gained significant legitimacy and was “in control of and effectively governing all of Vietnam.”¹⁹ After Dien Bien Phu, the DRV government with Ho as the leading figure effortlessly became the Vietnamese people’s guiding light to independence.

Later on in the struggle for independence, organizations such as the National Liberation Front of Southern Vietnam (NLF) shared the same communist nature with an underlying sense of nationalism. They were founded and operated from the desire of the people to be free of foreign rule, the inherent post-colonial and nationalistic sentiment. An active Southern communist insurgency since the 1940s and founding member of the NLF, Vo Van Kiet cited the desire for Vietnam’s self-determination as his original motivation for joining the Communist party several times in interviews. Kiet told anecdotes of his growing up experiencing the hardship imposed by

¹⁷ Shaplen Robert, “Ho Chi Minh,” in *Light at the End of the Tunnel: A Vietnam War Anthology*, ed. Andrew J. Rotter, 3rd Edition (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 15.

¹⁸ Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 23.

¹⁹ *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision-Making on Vietnam*. Volume 1, Chapter 1, “Background to the Crisis, 1940-50.” (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

French colonialism, citing this as the root to many of his later insurgent activism.²⁰ He later admitted never really understanding Marxism until being elected as Deputy Prime Minister in 1982. Truong Nhu Tang, another non-Communist founding member, confirmed the association of many NLF members with the Lao Dong but asserted that the organization was a coalition of intellectuals and political activists from all walks of life, all for the end goal of gaining independence to Vietnam.²¹

Despite Communism was at the core of the foundation of the Vietnamese independence movement, the nationalistic desire for self-determination and independence was strong across the country. For many members of the Vietminh or the NLF, it was the call of the country that they became involved with the Indochinese Communist Party and later the Lao Dong. During this period, Communism in Vietnam was less the tool for class struggle or social reform than the cohesion with which the people assembled to fight outlanders.

TWO HALVES OF THE DOMINO:

INTERNATIONALIST COMMUNISM VERSUS INDIGENOUS NATIONALISM

Communism as the leading force of independence in Vietnam deviated greatly from the internationalist and expansionist idea of communism. As noted earlier, Ho's first contact for assistance was not the Soviet Union or China but Western countries, the U.S. included. The DRV had neither an intention nor foothold to expand its territory, and from 1945 until 1965, the Vietnamese communist government had never threatened the security of its neighbor countries, or any others in the world. From a Politburo member's account, in 1950 when Ho met Stalin in

²⁰ Huy Duc, "Ký ức về Võ Văn Kiệt Kỳ 1: Những Ngày Thơ Ấu," *Tuoi Tre*, June 13, 2008, <http://tuoitre.vn/Chinh-tri-Xa-hoi/262994/Ky-uc-ve-Vo-Van-Kiet-Ky-1-Nhung-ngay-tho-au.html>.

²¹ Trương Như Tảng, David Chanoff, and Van Toai Doan, *A Vietcong Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 1-5.

Moscow, the latter pointed at two chairs to offer to Ho, stating one is the “internationalist communism,” and the other “nationalism.” Ho chose to stand.²²

Vietnam-Soviet-Chinese relationship was the first rebut to the domino theory. In fact, the two Communist patrons stood as Vietnamese’ most challenging hindrance to nationalistic independence and self-determination. According to Kiet – who would later become Vietnam’s prime minister, strength of the Southern force in 1954 would have allowed unification of the country.²³ Party secretary general Le Duan confirmed Vietnam would not have agreed to the North-South partition had it not been for “pressure from China and the Soviet Union.”²⁴

[\[Interesting reference\]](#) Vietnam was in dilemma with these two powers for their interest: the now divided South Vietnam would act as the buffer for China, and the containment of American influence in South East Asia for the USSR. Without implementing Geneva Accords in the South, the Politburo worried Vietnam would be cut off all aids from China and the Soviet Union, the supply that would potentially be necessary for future struggle amidst the world turbulence of 1954.

Events following the Geneva Accords with these two Communist “big brothers” belied Vietnam’s position regarding internationalism. In 1954, Chinese Premiere Zhou Enlai left his first mark of suspicion to Vietnamese officials when he invited to a Geneva celebration dinner Ngo Dinh Luyen, who would later become a member in the cabinet of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).²⁵ As more events unfolded after 1954, Le Duan grew in both his power within the Lao Dong and suspicion towards China. China invariably demanded constant DRV consultation regarding its plan for the war during the next ten years, the failure of which meant immediate cut

²² Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc I - Giai Phong*, 1st edition (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 260.

²³ Ibid, 102-3.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc I - Giai Phong*, 102-3.

in aid. In all types of aid, China would require sending “Chinese personnel for better assistance.” Nguyen Thuy Nga, Duan’s wife in the South wrote in her memoir, concluded that her husband, and the party in general, had never been in a reliable relationship with China without harboring a certain degree of reservation about its intention.²⁶

Moving into the 1960s and 1970s, Vietnam deteriorating relationship with China made all speculations about the former’s internationalism seem an extrapolation. Until this point, it is worth noting that Vietnam still projected to the world the image of its “warm comradeship and brotherhood” with China, which undoubtedly misguided many of its stance on internationalism.²⁷ As bridges had been built between China and the United States behind closed doors towards a rapprochement, China widened its gap in the Sino-Vietnamese “brotherhood.” Zhou Enlai proved to have held much mutual suspicion of the Vietnamese.²⁸ The Tet Offensive proved to Mao Zedong that Vietnam had officially deviated from his “teaching” of the Chinese line of communist struggle and its protracted war strategy.

The outlook was not better on the Soviet’s side. The sharp contrasts in the two’s foreign policies took the Soviet-Vietnamese relation in 1964 the “lowest point.”²⁹ To the Soviets, revisionist discussions in the Lao Dong critical of the Stalin era proved detrimental to this relationship. Khrushchev in a meeting reiterated a previous Stalin criticism that Vietnamese activities in its independence struggle “[did] not correspond to the interest of the socialist camp and the world communist movement.”³⁰ Only after the Gulf of Tonkin incident was there a “turnabout” in Soviet Union’s policy as it saw the danger of military escalation in Vietnam

²⁶ Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc I - Giai Phong*, 105-107.

²⁷ Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 224-225.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 225.

²⁹ Ilya V. Gaiduk, “Turnabout? The Soviet Policy Dilemma in the Vietnamese Conflict,” in *Vietnam: The Early Decisions*, ed. Lloyd C. Gardner, Ted Gittinger, 207-218. (S.I.: University of Texas Press, 2011), 209.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 210.

hurting its national interest and international reputation as the leader of the communist bloc. From this point on, the question of Vietnam became the question of “credibility” (in McGeorge Bundy’s word) for both the USSR and the U.S., thus pushing Vietnam deeper into the entanglement of the Cold War. Gaiduk concluded a political settlement Vietnam pre-1964 became Moscow’s primary concern, and what happened after August 1964 in Gulf of Tonkin took the settlement possibility away.³¹

In Vietnam’s relations with both China and the Soviet Union, there were few links of expansionism. All three countries were viewing the escalating war through their lenses of national interest.³² [\[Perceptive point\]](#) Nguyen Thuy Nga noted Duan invariably tried to shy away from upsetting either China or the USSR and “always ensured the element of national independence and self-determination in his talks.”³³ In the face of diplomatic complications of 1970-1971, nationalism in the party circle consolidated, further marginalizing relationship with China while garnering increasing diplomatic support from Cuba, Eastern European countries, and other Western countries outside the communist blocs.³⁴ During this period of widening Sino-Soviet split, Vietnam sided with neither China nor the USSR but played them against each other, as nationalism rather than ideology was the focus of Vietnamese diplomacy.³⁵ In 1971, as China no longer see Vietnam as the necessary buffer after talks with Kissinger, Vietnamese-Chinese relationship deteriorated.³⁶ Such relationship and suspicion could never have fostered internationalism. On the other hand, nationalism was strong in all Vietnamese relationship

³¹ Ilya V. Gaiduk, “Turnabout? The Soviet Policy Dilemma in the Vietnamese Conflict,” 218.

³² Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 62.

³³ Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc I - Giai Phong*, 104.

³⁴ Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 225-226.

³⁵ George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975 with Poster*, 4th edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 2001), 148.

³⁶ Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 206.

abroad. By the time of 1965, this disproof of internationalism would have invalidated the domino theory.

NORTH-SOUTH DISTINCTION OF THE DOMINO

Viewing two parts of Vietnam post-1954 as two distinct ideologically clashing entities is a lamentable error. What is missing from most perspectives is the implicit nationalism shared across ideology and belief.

As the Geneva Conference drew to a conclusion in July 1954, Vietnam fell into a “temporary” partition. The Communist-led DRV would control the North, and the French and its allies would set up another government in the South. Stiffly believing in the domino theory, John Foster Dulles left the Conference frustrated with the conclusion that Vietnam’s two halves carrying out an election in 1956 would mean a potential Communist victory. Dulles knew that Ho was the dominant figure of nationalism in Vietnam after Dien Bien Phu and would inevitably win such an election.³⁷ The agreed elections in the following two years never happened, and the country would be separated for the next two decades. What unfolded next was the establishment of the Saigon regime under Ngo Dinh Diem, a U.S.-backed Catholic politician. Diem dominated the South with an authoritarian regime controlled by his family and close relatives.³⁸ While one of the earlier American rationales for involvement in Vietnam was to protect the free world, the Republic of Vietnam it helped strengthen in South Vietnam now shouted loud and clear the opposite.³⁹

³⁷ Thomas L. Ahern, CIA and The House of Ngo, 4.

³⁸ Ang Cheng Guan, *Vietnamese Communists' Relations with China and the Second Indochina War (1956–62)* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997), 11.

³⁹ Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow, America's Century of Regime Change From Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 153.

From this point on, the world would view the two parts of Vietnam in the Communism-Nationalism binary where the U.S. recognized the RVN as the legitimate government of Vietnam and denounced the Communist-led DRV in North Vietnam. What really unfolded in this era constituted the second reading of the chipped domino imagery: North-South division in ideology, a division that marched alongside the oversimplified domino theory assuming the expansionism of Communism. The chipped piece lied in the deep Vietnamese nationalism of people: the revolutionaries of the South, the Southern communists, and even the anti-Communist Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu.

To this day, many Vietnam War scholars, as well as Americans and Vietnamese in and outside of Vietnam, still refer to Diem as a puppet set up by Edward Lansdale and supported by Washington for the Cold War. Edward Miller came out in 2004 with a historical analysis of Diem's rise to power, and argued for Diem's own political effort and agenda. Citing "accounts written in the 1960s," Miller demonstrated Diem's strong aversion to American intervention and highlighted his effort to modernize South Vietnam.⁴⁰ Scarcely mention in scholarship regarding this figure was Diem's background. As early as 1933, by resigning from the post of Interior Minister of the French-ruled government, Diem had shown to be an "uncompromising nationalist."⁴¹ During the years of 1945-1950, Diem had established for himself as a strong nationalist through many political activities for independence, most notably with the "Third Force" and even flirtations with the Vietminh alliance. In 1946, Ho offered Diem a position in the Vietminh government while in Vietminh's detention. At this meeting, Diem firmly negotiated his release with Ho, in which Miller noted, "the Vietminh leader feared that keeping

⁴⁰ Edward Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngô Đình Diệm, 1945-54," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, No. 3 (October 2004): 433-58.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 436; Thomas L. Ahern, *CIA and The House of Ngo*, 4.

Diem in detention might alienate nationalists in his native Central Vietnam.”⁴² After falling out with the Vietminh, Diem established a new anticolonial effort, using strong nationalistic rhetoric, noting “the present struggle [was] not only a battle for the political independence of the Fatherland, but also a social revolution to restore independence to the peasants and workers of Vietnam.”⁴³

After consolidating power in Saigon, Diem became more pro-America for its belief of modernization and technology. Before 1954, his charisma, devotion for Catholicism and anticommunism had won over much influential American supporters such as Senator Mike Mansfield and President John F. Kennedy for his aim of “social revolution.” As Miller concluded, there is no reliable evidence to support the claim of the string pulling in Washington.

While the U.S. recognized Ngo Dinh Diem as the leading figure for the RVN, the individual that was claimed to really pulled the string on multiple issues was his brother and chief advisor, Ngo Dinh Nhu.⁴⁴ For Nhu, there was no domino-style binary of communism versus nationalism. Nhu told a reporter in 1963 that he was in principle against Communism ideologically, but he was

not anti-communist from the point of politics of humanity. I consider the communists as brothers, lost sheep. I am not for an assault against the communists because we are a small country, and we only want to live in peace.⁴⁵

⁴² Miller citing a June 1954 document from the French Foreign Affairs Archive, “M. Ngo Dinh Diem, nouveau President du Conseil Vietnamien.”

⁴³ Ngô Đình Diệm, “Lời tuyên bố của chí sĩ Ngô Đình Diệm ngày 16 tháng 6 năm 1949,” reprinted in *Con đường chính nghĩa: Độc lập dân chủ: Hiệu triệu và diễn văn quan trọng của Tổng thống Ngô Đình Diệm*, vol. 1 (Saigon: Sở Báo chí Thông tin, Phủ Tổng thống, 1956), 221-2. [Declaration of the revolutionary Ngo Dinh Diem, 16 June 1949. In *The Righteous Path: Independence and democracy.*]

⁴⁴ Thomas L. Ahern, CIA and The House of Ngo, 12-14.

⁴⁵ Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow*, 156.

Through many communication efforts with the International Control Commission's Polish ambassador Maneli, Nhu expressed his view of nationalism. Both Nhu and Diem insisted on there being too Americans in South Vietnam, with the later preferring half the American personnel returning home.⁴⁶ [\[unclear prose\]](#)

Not only was the RVN vocal about its concern with American heavy involvement, as soon as de Gaulle voice his support for a neutralization scheme in August 29, 1963, Nhu jumped at the opportunity and “initiated talk with the NLF as a means to corner the Americans.”⁴⁷ With a government supported dominantly by American funds, such was an audacious political move. This development, however, had solely the motivation of preserving the rule of the RVN government in the face of the White House' constant request for reform.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, as of 1963, Americans had become the main concern for the RVN government, not the ideological nemesis DRV. Diem and Nhu's political movements in their last days presented an underlying indication of their zeal for power, but more importantly – as demonstrated earlier with their nationalistic political roots and plans for the independent modernization of South Vietnam – a manifest of nationalism.

Within South Vietnam existed another assumed binary. On the opposite side of the ideology spectrum to the RVN was the National Liberation Front, an organization Washington considered to be nothing but Lao Dong's propaganda creation in South Vietnam. Similar to the Vietminh earlier, the Lao Dong decided to incorporate activists from all political association for the aim of overthrow the government of Ngo Dinh Diem and reunify the country. The NLF was formed in 1960, comprising many left-leaning entities such as the Southern Vietminh, the Lien

⁴⁶ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*, New Ed edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 5.

⁴⁷ Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 62.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 62; Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War*, 7.

Viet, the Fatherland Front, and many non-aligned urban intellectuals. It was “neither a puppet of Hanoi nor an autonomous organization.”⁴⁹ Truong Nhu Tang in fact attributed the creation of the NLF to Diem’s “creating a swell of animosity throughout the country.”⁵⁰ Though having a strong Lao Dong-associated leadership, its interest remained different from Hanoi’s. Often times these Southern leaders would work on their own agenda, which sometimes deviated strongly from Hanoi’s. The majority of communist militants in South Vietnam are southerners, and like Kiet and Tang, their ultimate goal was Vietnam’s independence. The NLF later even pronounced the stance that it was independent of Hanoi, and that America’s stop bombing of North Vietnam would not mean any concessions in the southern struggle.⁵¹ The basis for struggle of the Southerners was nationalism rather than domino-style communism. Moreover, this nationalism was even shared by the Diem regime, although in a different form and with a different cause.

FORCE OF VIETNAM’S FALL TO THE LEFT: NATIONALISM

As we have seen the two readings of the two sides of the chipped domino, Vietnam’s fall to the left was inevitable. With the strength of the Vietminh in 1954, or its later rise in political strength of 1965 prior to the American escalation of the war, had there been no foreign influence, it would have been a communist country. This communist nature had its roots in the communist leadership nature of the Vietminh from the 1940s and that of the NLF from the 1960s. Even when the U.S. intervened, the fall would still be leftward.

As a deeply-rooted nationalistic mindset, liberation from foreign domination had been what the Vietnamese people wanted since the 1940s. While Diem had his own cause that was

⁴⁹ Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF’s Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War*, 1st edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 2.

⁵⁰ Truong Nhu Tang, David Chanoff, and Van Toai Doan, *A Vietcong Memoir*, 65.

⁵¹ Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, 69.

nationalism-oriented, history was not in his favor. Neither did the RVN have sufficient foothold to win the support of the people, nor did his cause appear to be what its patron wanted. Diem's rise to power was strengthened by the U.S., and up to two-thirds of the RVN was supported financially by the same country.⁵² This degree of reliance made Diem an easy target for the U.S. should he become a hindrance to its motive.

Diem could not have the U.S. to turn to, neither did he have the people. Diem's autocratic rule was not appealing to southerners, and the degree of corruption increasingly turned their trust away. Comparatively, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was also less capable than its insurgency counterpart.⁵³ Given Diem's original desire to build the South Vietnam regime, strategically his government was falling out with the U.S. too soon before it could implement enough social policies and modernization schemes that could have won the support of southerners. It was a dilemma: the longer Diem associated himself with the U.S., the more this relationship became detrimental to Vietnamese people who wanted self-determination, thus the more rural population would be lost to the Southern insurgency forces. Before long, Diem and Nhu were taking more American aid and less American advice, and the fallout resulted in the 1963 coup d'état that took away their lives.⁵⁴

What if the RVN had been more appealing to its people, but still maintained its association with the U.S.? I propose this hypothesis because the existence of influence from the latter was unchangeable, due to the U.S. origin of involvement and its domestic politics of the 1960s. However we will also discuss the neutralization scheme, which turned out to be politically a non-option.

⁵² George N. Katsiaficas, *Vietnam Documents: American and Vietnamese Views*, 1st Edition (Armonk, N.Y: M E Sharpe Inc, 1992), 43.

⁵³ Bernard B. Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness 1953-66*, Third Printing edition (Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 65-7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 187.

Assuming this historical “what if,” two scenarios could have happened: 1) the stabilization of the RVN to the degree similar to that in South Korea, or 2) the Nguyen Van Thieu era, a time in which both American involvement and insurgency mounted only to stop at either’s breaking point. Given the strength of the southern insurgency force that had existed since the French colonization and fortified militarily and politically through the consolidation of forces under the NLF, what would unfold next proved the better probability of the Thieu era scenario.

What the situation in Vietnam had but Korea’s did not were the post-colonialism sentiment and the existence of the popular Southern insurgency, which until 1965 had existed for more than two decades. With the existence of a strongly popular NLF, a government in Saigon that continued to associate with the U.S. would certainly go against Vietnamese nationalistic sentiment and their desire for self-determination. Americans, whose politics had been dominated with the fear of communist expansionism until this point, on the other hand, would never have allowed this association to falter, for it needed the association for its aim of ridding South Vietnam of communist forces. If the Americans wanted to exterminate Communism from Vietnam, not only would it have to defeat the NLF, it would also have to escalate war to North Vietnam. All together, the situation in Vietnam invalidated the Korea scheme. As the RVN government continued to falter, the insurgency and independence movement became stronger. Its strength is rooted in the support it won from Vietnamese people, the diplomacy it won from the world, and the military force it gathered domestically and through international aid. This movement would invariably result in the Vietnam domino falling to the left.

This leftward fall could have been avoided only if the Vietnamese struggle for independence had had a different root than the popular Communist-led force. Only if there had been a comparable dominant figure like Ho Chi Minh who were non-Communist to unite the

hearts, minds and will of the colonialism-impooverished Vietnamese people would a different outcome have been possible. There was none.

Look broader into the post-colonialism East Asia, the same sense of nationalism was prevalent in most countries. Many countries experienced the same acrimony for oppression under imperialism and colonialism, and nationalism developed therein. In the case of Thailand, the only country in the region free of colonialism, the Communist Party of Thailand never had the historical basis to develop the symbiosis converging communism and nationalism, the element that gave many other communist parties in the region the foothold to rise as the liberation force among its people.

What Washington failed to see was this force behind the fall. It was not Red Communism. It was not Soviet and Chinese expansionism. It was simply Vietnamese nationalism. Had the U.S. known this, it would have realize Viet's leftward fall would not result in the other countries' being knocked over in a domino series. Vietnam had a strong antagonism with China from both its historical perspective and ever-deepening mutual suspicion. With the leader of the Communist camp – the Soviet Union, Vietnam never amounted to much weight. Stalin had an inherent distrust of the internationalism in the Communist Vietnamese, and the two countries had many contrasting outlook on the world in 1964, a point deemed lowest in this relationship. Aids from either country were merely the necessary element to ensure their national interest in the Vietnam War, and Vietnam had always been playing these “big brothers” against one another while maintaining its nationalistic emphasis. It entirely had no flirtation of influencing other countries whilst it was still war-ridden. There was zero sign of internationalist expansionism, and so many signs of nationalism.

Could there have been a different way out? I fear not. Strong voices spoke up, but they were left unheard. Most outspoken at this point was France's General Charles de Gaulle, someone who was convinced of Vietnamese nationalism by French experience from the First Indochina war. Realizing the factor of "nationalism" in the Vietnam War, the General's initiative in Asia began on August 29, 1963, stating that France was in favor of neutralization in Vietnam "independent... from the outside, in internal peace and unity and in harmony with [its] neighbor."⁵⁵ Beside de Gaulle's proposal, the NLF at this point was garnering certain success in the world with its neutralist diplomacy platform.⁵⁶ While de Gaulle was vocal in his solution across the world, those in the White House had already developed many problems with him and the solution. France's earlier rejection of the Multilateral Force, the French-German Treaty of Friendship among others were viewed in the White House as gestures targeting the U.S, a development that significantly reduce de Gaulle's credibility in Americans' eyes.⁵⁷ [\[Good source work\]](#) The White House dismissed de Gaulle's proposal as being too French-y vague to the practical Americans, with Secretary of State Dean Rusk saying they did not understand what the French president meant by "political solution," and that he did not specified "neutralization" with any "concrete contents."⁵⁸ To the more extreme end of the spectrum were Secretary of Defense McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor, who in a fact-finding report to the White House stated that de Gaulle's proposal would only lead to a "straight communist takeover" in South Vietnam.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ *Major Addresses, Statements, and Press Conferences of General Charles de Gaulle, May 19, 1958 – January 31, 1964* (New York: French Embassy Press and Information Bureau, 1964), 241.

⁵⁶ Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, 19-39.

⁵⁷ Charles G. Cogan, "'How Fuzzy Can One Be?' The American Reaction to De Gaulle's Proposal for the Neutralization of (South) Vietnam," in *The Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1964-1968*, ed. Lloyd C. Gardner, Ted Gittinger, 144-61. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 144-6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 152-3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 151.

Conversely, there were opponents of de Gaulle's proposal on the American side. One major voice was George Ball, who was sympathetic with the French president on neutralization. However, Ball saw reason only in de Gaulle's requirement to acquiesce China, but also drew domino-style connection between the "expansionist" Soviet Communism of 1917 and Chinese refusal of "any arrangement that would limit or prevent the spread of Communism in Southeast East Asia."⁶⁰ The second voice, a less effective one, was David Nes', Henry Cabot Lodge's number-two at the American Embassy in Saigon. However, this voice eventually only yield subordinate to Lodge's. Above all, the Secretary of State was closest to the President, and Dean Rusk happened to be extremely doubtful of the French president and a major dissident of his proposal. Any supporting voice could hardly reach the Oval office.

At the Fall of Saigon, communism in Vietnam was evident. Until this day, the question of "How did they do it?" still haunts many brilliant American minds. While many attribute the outcome of the war to the "tenacity" of the Vietnamese communist forces, what they missed seeing is the deeper reading, the more implicit layer in this tenacity: Vietnamese nationalism. The United States entered the war with the assumption of a untested theory, whose effect fed right into the Red Fear so contagious in "the land of thee free" in the 1950s. Once it had stepped foot onto Vietnam's lands, its internal politics prevented it to get out for the next two decades. Across the span of twenty years, few policymakers in Washington saw the fallacy of such theory. For those who did, they were shoved aside. To be fair, in a bipolar world order post-1945, such visions were attained only by those who rose higher than the Cold War worldly view, and such deeds were not easy to most people. It required experience, knowledge, deep analysis and careful deliberation.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 155.

Yet, the concept is so simple and comprehensible ten thousand miles from Washington: To the Vietnamese people, it is the natural instinct of a people to defend for their rights, the rights to freedom from foreign oppressors, the rights to their land, and the rights to their lives. Their leaders were communists – some ideologically, some for the convergence of liberation and a phenomenon, but what mattered to them was nothing but their final march to regain what they deem truly theirs.

Amidst the street signs of Starbucks, McDonald, Citibank, were President Eisenhower to be in Ho Chi Minh City (the post-war Saigon) today, he might have thought America had stopped the fall of the dominoes and won the war. Unfortunately, it was Vietnamese nationalism that did.

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