An analysis of the formation of the ‘Domino Theory’ up to and including President Eisenhower’s statement of April 1954.

Abstract: When US President Dwight D. Eisenhower announced the ‘domino theory’ at a news conference on April 7th 1954, he was not announcing a radical departure in America’s understanding of the emerging situation in Indochina. He was simply making public aspects of American foreign policy that had been in the making since the end of the Second World War, which interacted with even older themes. This essay will attempt to map the formation of the ‘domino theory’ from the containment policy of the Truman administration, to the importance of the events in Asia, through to the crisis at Dienbeinphu, and briefly look at the broader implications of such an approach to foreign policy. The reader will also be introduced to various themes in US foreign policy, and the historiography of the Vietnam Wars will be examined.

Introduction

‘Gaps between rhetoric and reality in U.S. foreign policy have often been large; indeed such gaps might be said to constitute a defining characteristic of this nation’s diplomacy’

When US President Dwight D. Eisenhower announced the ‘domino theory’ at a news conference on April 7th 1954, he was not announcing a radical departure in America’s understanding of the emerging situation in Indochina. He was simply making public aspects of American foreign policy that had been in the making since the end of the Second World War, which interacted with even older themes. This essay will attempt to map the formation of the ‘domino theory’ from the containment policy of the Truman administration, to the importance of the events in Asia, through to the crisis at Dienbeinphu, and briefly look at the broader implications of such an approach to foreign policy.

Themes in the Cold War foreign policy of the US and the conclusion of WWII

19th century American ideas/ideals such as ‘Manifest Destiny’ and the ‘open door’ policy regarding Asia were to have an important impact on Washington’s decisions in Asia in the immediate post-war period. US history, from the 1890’s onwards, had often been concerned with trying to contain Russian expansionism, principally in Asia. Russian expansion had always been political (contrasted with American economic expansion), and so Russian expansion into Asia was anathema for Washington’s ‘open door’ policy. This ‘open door’ ideal was also severely threatened in 1949 when the civil war in China concluded in a communist victory. America was adamant to not let the ‘door’ close any more than it already had. In the post-war period, America desired a ‘free’ and ‘open’ Asia for an additional reason- Japan was important to America’s security and economic growth.

In Europe, the US and the UK talked of the vital importance of ‘self-determination’ and the holding of democratic elections across the globe. This rhetoric was largely aimed at Soviet Russia, as an attack on their actions in Eastern Europe. But ‘self-determination’ was only applied to governments palatable to the US. This hypocrisy of self-determination played a large role in the situation in Vietnam. This has been a constant theme in US foreign policy from 1945 till today – ‘democratic elections’ means ones that produce Washington friendly governments (unlike those in Gaza, Venezuela, for example).

Russia was severely weakened from WWII, and US officials estimated it would take at least 15 years to recover (to a state where it would be a military threat to the US), ‘thus at the outset of the Cold War, [President] Truman's problem was certainly not the threat of Soviet invasion of Asia or Europe’.

The domino theory ‘rested on the assumption that Stalin, like Hitler, was intent on unlimited conquest’. Walter LaFeber claims that this was a perfect example of how using an historical analogy simplified arguments and distorted reality. For Stalin's and Hitler's foreign policy were certainly not analogous.

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3 LaFeber, *Cold War*, p.37
4 LaFeber, *Cold War*, pp.37-8
As America called for a 'free and open world' criticizing Russian closure of Eastern Europe, the US was closing off the Americas. Stalin’s actions in the late 1940's in Iran and Turkey were attempts to get oil and access to sea ports that Stalin believed were due after the heavy costs of WWII. Washington should have realized this, and not interpreted events in Asia (China, Korea, Vietnam) in the same way. Another problem was that the US had used a firm hand with Russia in the cases of Iran and Turkey, and had been successful. Therefore they were inclined to use these methods in other situations.

**Containment**

President Truman’s address to Congress on March 12th 1947 marked a major turning point in American foreign policy. He railed Congress for military and economic aid for Greece and Turkey and spoke with fiery rhetoric of ‘this moment in world history [when] every nation must choose between alternative ways of life’ and that a nation’s choice in this matter was ‘often not a free one’. He stated that should the United States fail to provide military and economic aid to nations’ fighting against ‘totalitarian regimes…. [then] the effect will be far reaching”⁵.

Truman proclaimed that ‘it must be the policy of the US to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures’⁶ Behind this idealistic language though, was the ‘new approach’ in American foreign policy aimed principally at arranging the balance of power in Washington’s favour. This was done for two main reasons: the need for assurance of American political power and the survivability of that power; and the guarantee of their economic capability and opportunity.

Containment was the logical next step in a series of efforts aimed to curtail Soviet influence in the post-war world since as early as 1942. Russian power in Europe was a serious concern for the US because, according to John Lewis Gaddis, ‘the most important requirement

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⁵ The Avalon Project, Lillian Goldman Library, Yale Law School, President Harry S. Truman's Address Before a Joint Session of Congress, March 12, 1947
⁶ Ibid
for a congenial international environment has been that Europe not fall under a single, hostile state.\(^7\)

The Truman doctrine attempted to ensure that the post-war balance of power was favourable to US. With the war’s end, Washington realised that their ‘ally’ was going to emerge as a rival superpower. With the Soviet Union now within striking distance of Germany and Japan and with what the US viewed as ‘subservient’ communist parties globally, it seemed that the world was in the very situation America had fought to avoid: namely the ‘control of two or more world power centres by forces hostile to the United States’\(^8\). Soviet advances in Eastern Europe reaffirmed the American view of Russia as expansionist and a threat. The events in Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the immediate post-war setting fanned these fears.

The new atomic bomb meant the US was able to defeat Japan without the aid of Russia, allowing them to exclude the Soviets from negotiations after Japan’s surrender. This military superiority helped strengthen the policy of ‘firmness and patience’ that Truman adopted with the Kremlin. When in early 1945, Russia demanded joint control of the strategically important Dardanelles Straits with Turkey, Secretary of State Acheson viewed this as a direct threat to Turkey. He warned that if Turkey were to fall under Soviet influence, then a ‘domino effect’ would cause the fall of nations in the Middle East, Asia and beyond.\(^9\) An armed aircraft carrier was sent into the region and Washington asserted that the straits belonged to Turkey. When Russia backed down, Truman and Acheson saw this as vindication of their tough stance. This stance helped shape the Cold War, and America’s approach to it.

In his 1946 election speech, Stalin blamed the war on ‘the development of the world economic and political forces on the basis of capitalist monopoly’\(^10\). A month later Churchill’s ‘Iron curtain’ speech, declared America as ‘the pinnacle of world power’, and communism ‘a growing challenge and peril’ to the west\(^11\). In the midst of these two public Cold War declarations, a then little know diplomat, George Kennan, sent his famous ‘long telegram’ to

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\(^7\) Gaddis, ‘Was the Truman Doctrine a Real Turning Point?’, p.387
\(^9\) LaFeber, the Cold War, p. 37
Washington. In it, Kennan portrayed the Soviet leadership as paranoid, secretive, and bent on undermining the west, and promoting groups in other nations who ‘could be encouraged and utilized for Soviet purposes’. These expansionist ideals and the idea that the Soviet leadership could find ‘no permanent accommodation with the West’, moulded the US attitude of containment, set the course for the new path in foreign policy undertaken by the Administration and was enshrined one year later in the Truman doctrine.

Both the state of the U.S economy and the precarious state of other nations was a huge concern of U.S domestic and foreign policy. At the end of the war the US economy was in a potentially strong state, holding ‘three-fourths of [the worlds] invested capital’ and was the largest exporter of goods. On the domestic front, the Truman administration was keen to move past the ‘boom and bust’ economic cycles haunting America. The last ‘bust’ - the Great Depression – made Truman adamant to ensure that the economy did not enter another period of isolationism. Thus, it was essential to have a healthy global economy that the US could fully participate in. The main way to ensure these open markets around the globe –a key aspect of capitalism- was to have strong healthy economies in countries friendly to the United States. The idea of a strong, self-sufficient Russia, able to withstand ‘capitalist encirclement’ was the antipathy of the US’s notion of free trade and a free world.

Europe was America’s most vital trading partner. Having suffered the devastation of war, Western Europe was in dire straits, while to the East, Romania, Poland, Bulgaria and Hungary signed trade agreements with the USSR. This eastward rather than westward trading was detrimental to the US for several reasons. The commodities that Eastern Europe supplied were needed badly at this time for Western European recovery. From a larger perspective though, Washington worried that the worsening situation would in turn encourage people in other nations to join communist parties who, in power might sign agreements with Russia, which could

12 The National Security Archive, The George Washington University, The Charge in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State, February 22, 1946
13 Ibid.
14 Melvyn P. Leffler, The Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War, (California, 1992), p.2
15 Leffler, The Preponderance of Power, p.7
‘easily [be] developed into political blocks [and]...friction between such blocks caused world wars’\textsuperscript{16}.

Washington clearly ‘recognized the connections between economic and political spheres’\textsuperscript{17} and the need for massive economic and military aid to certain nations – a difficult package to sell to Congress and the US public, as Republicans held the majority in the House and Senate, and they were keen to implement budget cuts. This spelled potential disaster for any prospect of a healthy US economy. The reality was that Europe was ‘threatened not by the red army, but by internal collapse’\textsuperscript{18}. Truman needed a catalyst to get Republicans and the public behind him, which arrived in early 1947 when London announced that, unable to fund Greece and Turkey any longer, Washington ‘must assume the...burden’\textsuperscript{19}.

If Greece fell to the Soviet sphere of influence, the harsh conditions in neighbouring countries and Soviet expansionist policies could lead to the fall of other states in the Near East, Europe, Africa and so forth. US access to the oil rich Middle East would be lost. It would also leave Turkey, a US ally bordering the USSR, encircled by hostile communist states. This was unacceptable to Truman and Secretary of State Acheson.

Truman and Acheson had found their ‘ideological shield’ behind which the US could rebuild the west and fight the radical left. Acheson was adamant that the importance of the economic factors of the doctrine be minimised. Instead they would have to focus on the ‘high-minded definition of the national purpose...to acquire support.’\textsuperscript{20} In Truman’s announcement to Congress, he painted the world in black and white and put the emphasis on fighting communism everywhere and anywhere. The speech itself ‘was designed primarily to overcome public and congressional opposition to direct US involvement in Europe [and elsewhere]’\textsuperscript{21}.

\textsuperscript{16} LaFeber, \textit{Cold War}, p.9
\textsuperscript{17} Leffler, \textit{The Preponderance of Power}, p.16
\textsuperscript{18} LaFeber, \textit{the Cold War}, p.44
\textsuperscript{19} Donald R. McCoy, \textit{The Presidency of Harry S. Truman}, (Kansas, 1987), p. 305
Indochina

Asia had symbolic value – men had given their lives there in WWII. China was supposed to be the stabilizing force in Asia after Japan. Also the US wanted to expand into Asia through China. Thus the fall of China in 1949 was a big loss. Political, as well as economic opportunities were lost.

A further correlation to the Truman Doctrine and the formation of the domino theory was the situation surrounding the announcements. Truman made his speech at a time when Russia was less aggressive than normal. The Soviets where biding their time, reasoning that the economic crisis in Europe would lead communist parties to sweep to power. Similarly in the immediate run-up to Eisenhower’s April 1954 press conference, Russia was again less aggressive in the foreign arena. Stalin had died in 1953, and the party was busy concentrating on internal issues, and was not pursing an antagonistic foreign policy. The crisis was now in Asia – decolonization – and the Kremlin believed that European powers reluctance to grant independence was fueling anti-western sentiment, and would thus drive the new nations into the arms of Russia and communism. So the State Department realized that a ‘proper settlements’ (i.e. the establishment of pro-US governments) was needed in the colonies. The US and the USSR were in a ‘battle for allegiance of the less industrialized nations’. Greece was fueled by internal forces. Vietnam was an independence struggle. Both were misread as ‘an alien hegemonic movement’. Washington misread the nationalist independence struggle in Indochina as another example of monolithic communistic expansion, hot on the heels of the ‘fall’ of China and North Korea.

The late 1940’s and early 1950’s was an era marked by the collapse of colonialism throughout Asia and Africa. Emerging nations were both poor and unstable, and resentful of Western domination. The US was allied with Western Europe – the third world’s colonist masters – and thus was seen in an unfavorable light by many nationalist movments. When it was

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22 LaFeber, the Cold War, p. 30
23 LaFeber, the Cold War, pp. 49 -50
24 LaFeber, the Cold War, p. 50
discovered that (especially by Ho Chi Minh in Versailles) that President Wilsons ‘self-determination’ applied only to the whites of Europe, many colonies took US calls for their independence as hollow. In reality, Washington was pushing for independence of the colonies for two main reasons. In the US quest for free markets, they wished to break the relationships between colonizer-colonies in order to have better access to markets and raw materials. Secondly, and more importantly for the Truman and Eisenhower administrations was that the feet-dragging of France, Britain, and the rest of the European powers in granting independence was infuriating the local peoples and driving them further in to the ‘arms’ of the Soviets and (later) the Chinese.

Washington wished to speed up the process of independence to ensure the likelihood of pro-Western government coming to power in former colonies. The longer the wars of independence raged on, the more support the revolutionaries in the colonies would seek from the USSR. Ho Chi Minh’s frustration with America was such that in a 1950 interview he argued that American ‘imperialists’ was seeking to eject the French colonialists simply in order for America to colonize Indochina themselves26.

Orthodox historians would later view Vietnam as a case of ‘flawed containment’, seeing that ‘US national security was not on the line in Vietnam’27, and the containment doctrine was misapplied. They challenged i) the view of the Communist world as monolithic. In addition, they claimed that ii) Vietnamese communist leaders were determined not to be dependent on any of the major communist powers, especially China (Vietnam’s historic foe, who thousands of years dominated Vietnam – Ho Chi Minh didn’t want to eat their shit for the rest of his life28). The combination of these two facts suggests for orthodox historians ‘that a communist victory in Vietnam would have little geopolitical impact beyond that country’29.

NSC – 68

29 Hess, Vietnam, p. 18
The document NSC-68 of 1950, was a natural evolution of the containment policy. It led to tripling the defense budget, the establishment of NATO and the rearming of West Germany. It stated that in its quest for hegemony, the USSR is ‘now directed toward the domination of the Eurasian landmass’\(^\text{30}\). NSC-68 ‘proved to be the American blueprint for waging the Cold War’\(^\text{31}\). Truman and Acheson needed something to get NSC-68 past Congress and into action. Just as with the Truman Doctrine, without an immediate threat of communist expansion (Greece in the earlier case), the penny pinching Republicans Congress would not allow for further enlarging of the defense budget. Then, the threat came: Korea.

Korea

Occupied by Japan in WWII, Korea had been in a civil war since. US intervened in Korea from 1950- under a UN resolution but unilateral in all but name and the UN troops took orders from the US. Russia wanted China to get involved in the Korean War, as it would leave China weakened, more reliant on Soviets and less of a regional threat and would weaken and distract the US.

With the arrival of the UN/US forces, the North Koreans were quickly pushed back. Mao convinced his weary colleagues to intervene as ‘it was necessary for the sake of the Eastern revolutions to prevent the “American aggressors” from occupying Korea and “rampaging” unchecked’\(^\text{32}\). Acheson claimed that ‘even if allowing US forces to cross the 38\(^{\text{th}}\) parallel entailed some risk, a greater risk would be incurred by showing hesitation and timidity.’\(^\text{33}\)

‘[T]he agony of Korea foreshadowed a more disastrous undertaking in Vietnam.’\(^\text{34}\)

\(^{30}\) NSC-68 quoted in LaFeber, the Cold War, p. 96
\(^{31}\) LaFeber, the Cold War, p. 95
\(^{33}\) Acheson quoted in Hershberg & Chen, ‘Reading and Warning the Likely Enemy’, p. 51
This document, titled ‘Objectives and Courses of Action with Respect to Southeast Asia’ played a crucial role in the creation of the domino theory and the US response to Vietnam. Written in the midst of the Korean War (July 1952), it stated that the objective of the US was ‘To prevent the countries of Southeast Asia from passing into the communist orbit, and to assist them to develop the will and ability to resist communism from within and without and to contribute to the strengthening of the free world.’ Whether it was achieved internally (subversion) or externally (invasion), ‘Communist domination … of all Southeast Asia’ would endanger American ‘security interests’ in the short and long term. It suggested that “the loss of any single country would probably lead to relatively swift submission to or an alignment with communism by the remaining countries of this group.” Followed by “an alignment with communism” of the rest of Southeast Asia, India, the Middle East, and so on. “Such widespread alignment would endanger the stability and security of Europe.” NSC 124/2 spoke of ‘alignment’ as the problem. The loss of Southeast Asia would weaken security of Australia and New Zealand. The loss of this region would lead to “Japan’s eventual accommodation to communism”.

In the proposed course of action in Southeast Asia, emphasis was put on acting in “agreement with other nations”, “including France, the UK, Australia and New Zealand” and obtaining “international support” for any action. It was also important to “make clear to the American people the importance of Southeast Asia to the security of the United States”. In face of Chinese invasion of Indochina, the US should be ready “to should consider taking unilateral action” if alliances are not forthcoming. 35

Eisenhower

‘[W]hile the Cold War originated under Harry S. Truman, it took its mature form under Eisenhower’36. John Foster Dulles had advised Eisenhower in 1952 that containment as practiced by the Truman administration ‘would lead ultimately to both excessive reliance on military power and to heavy drain on the American economy’37. The Eisenhower administration

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36 Bowie & Immerman, Waging Peace, p.3
37 Divine, Eisenhower, p13
‘developed the first coherent and sustainable war strategy suitable for the basic conditions that would prevail during the following decades’\textsuperscript{38}.

This war strategy, called ‘New Look’, formulated throughout 1953 kept in line with older ones and stressed the importance of stopping Soviet expansion and hostility. The US ‘would require cooperative action by a vigorous free world’\textsuperscript{39}. Drawing from his WWII experiences and successes, Eisenhower realized he would need to act in concert with allies. The New Look aimed to ‘continue Truman's containment without Truman’s budget’\textsuperscript{40}. New Look policy called for a shrinking of conventional troops, while simultaneously increasing the air force and the use of strategic weapons. It also stressed the use of pacts (i.e. SEATO) “In essence, Eisenhower had adopted for a policy of deterrence to replace containment – the threat of force as a way to avoid limited wars and unlimited defense expenditures’\textsuperscript{41}.

Fall of French Empire and the beginning of American involvement in Indochina

1950 was a pivotal year for Vietnam, when first Beijing and shortly after Moscow recognized Ho Chi Minh’s government. Not coincidently, it was the year when Washington re-committed itself to the French in Indochina who had been fighting a losing war against the Vietminh since the end of the Second World War. With the fall of China to communism and later the outbreak of the Korean War, Washington realized the essential nature of preventing the Vietminh from securing victory in Vietnam.

The US was indeed anti-colonial. Although they preferred not to upset their European allies, the US did support the idea of independence for colonies. But the motivations were more to do with realism than any liberal notions of freedom. More importantly, the US supported independence now rather than later. They saw the process as inevitable (Europe could no longer maintain control) and they felt that the longer the process took, the more anti-western

\textsuperscript{39} Bowie & Immerman, \textit{Waging Peace}, p.5 (emphasis added)
\textsuperscript{40} LaFeber, \textit{Cold War}, p. 153
and radical the revolutionaries were becoming. As independence movements increasingly saw their appeals for help fall on deaf ears in Washington, they started to turn to the East – the Soviet Union, and increasingly for Asian states, to China.

Ike and Dulles needed to control these revolutionaries. Korea had left the war as an unattractive option. Despite recent successes with CIA backed coups overthrowing democratic nationalist movements in Iran and Guatemala, Eisenhower and Dulles were not convinced that these would have the same success in Vietnam. So they sent military advisors to train native troops, starting ‘Vietmanisation’ a generation before Nixon.42 “The Korean war had shown the difficulty of conducting, and maintaining public support for, a protracted ground war in the developing world”43. So the Eisenhower administration “had to develop alternatives for dealing with such threats on the periphery”44.

Shortly after the beginning of the Dienbienphu crisis ‘the contingency Americans had so feared became reality’45. The French government had the Indochina issue on the Geneva conference. Thus Dulles, in keeping with Eisenhower’s views, the recommendations proposed by NSC 124/2, and the lessons of the Korean War, advocated ‘United Action’. Divine, like other others46, believed that Eisenhower saw the need for support from key allies as vital, a lesson learnt in WWII. Divine also states that acting multilaterally would avoid ‘the appearance of a brutal example of imperialism’47.

This plan was ‘was the creation of a coalition composed of the United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, and the Associated States of Indochina and committed to the defense of Indochina and of the rest of Southeast Asia against

42 LaFeber, Cold War, p. 153
43 Waging Peace, p. 4
44 Waging peace, p.4
47 Divine, Eisenhower, p. 43
the Communist menace."^{48} Herring and Immerman claim that Dulles saw in United Action the threat of deterrence – ‘the mere establishment of such a coalition accompanied by stern warnings to the Communists might be sufficient to bolster the French will to resist and to deter Chinese intervention, thus making outside intervention unnecessary’^{49}. ‘United action’ didn’t materialize. Britain favored a negotiated settlement. French were against the ‘internationalization of the war’ as they saw the matter as ‘an internal French concern’^{50}. Yet they were not against requesting American military help.

The decision by the French to table the Indochina question at the Geneva Conference certainly accelerated American involvement in Indochina and the transfer of responsibility from the French to the US. In a March 29th speech, Dulles reminded the world that ‘Communist success in Indochina would lead to further aggression in Southeast Asia’^{51}. Eisenhower aimed to avoid Truman’s mistake in not seeking congressional approval for the war in Korea. ‘The administration sought ... congressional endorsement of a broad, blank-check resolution’^{52} to prevent communist expansion in Southeast Asia.

Congress was hesitant. Although agreeing in principle with Dulles and Eisenhower, they were weary of another Korea and thus insisted on ‘firm commitments of support from allies, specifically Great Britain’. But London did not want to get involved. Congress had thus denied the administration from enacting the final recommendation in NSC 124/2 – to stop the dominoes falling, unilateral action was permissible as a last resort.

The domino theory ‘had been common currency before Eisenhower articulated the image at a press conference in April 1954.’^{54} Dulles had ‘emphasized the dependence of Japan on

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^{49} Herring and Immerman, ‘Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu’, p. 350
^{50} Divine, *Eisenhower*, p46
^{51} Dulles quoted in Herring and Immerman, ‘Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu’, p. 351
^{52} Herring and Immerman, ‘Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu’, p.352
^{53}Herring and Immerman, ‘Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu’, p. 353
markets and resources of Southeast Asia’ a year earlier at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.55

Conclusion

Thus we see that formation of the domino theory was shaped and influenced by a range of interrelated factors both internal and external. These factors were the legacies of American attempts at Russian containment; the end of WWII; the policies of containment and later NSC-68 from the Truman administration; the Korean War; the New Look of the Eisenhower presidency; and the changes in the geopolitical world: the ‘fall’ of China, decolonization, quest for resources, etc.

In the histiography, the key question vis-à-vis the domino theory as applied to Indochina is: ‘did American officials base their decisions on a rational assessment of US interests’?56 In the ‘necessary war’ argument put forward by revisionists, ‘the loss of Vietnam to communism [would lead to] … an erosion of America’s global stature with potentially devastating geopolitical consequences’57, and thus American policy makers were correct in calculating that a loss of Vietnam would be disastrous to US interests. They claim that ‘involvement in Vietnam was vital in terms of US national security’58, and agreed with domino theory.59 Vietnam was necessary – if it fell, Southeast Asia would fall, then Japan, etc.

55 Thompson, ‘America's Cold War in Retrospect’, p. 752
56 Gary Hess, Vietnam, p. 25
57 Ibid, p. 25
58 Ibid, p. 14
59 In recent study, researchers carried out an empirical investigation of the ‘democratic domino theory’ in over 130 countries between 1850 and 2000. The researchers came to the conclusion that ‘dominoes do in fact fall as the theory contends.’ Although they admit that the “dominoes fall significantly "lighter" than the importance of this model suggests. Peter T. Leeson and Andrea M. Dean, ‘The Democratic Domino Theory: An Empirical Investigation’, American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Jul., 2009), pp. 555
Orthodox historians contend that ‘Vietnam had negligible global significance’⁶⁰. Vietnam as ‘flawed containment’.⁶¹ ‘US national security was not on the line in Vietnam’⁶². Orthodox historians state that the US miscalculated its national security interests. American foreign policy ‘failed to meet the standards of realism’⁶³. They contend that US policy makers lacked a sense of proportion; Vietnam was not Korea, and certainly not China. R B Smith claims that for a backwater agrarian country of 15 million people that it had ‘acquired an international significance out of all proportion to its size’⁶⁴. George C. Herring, *America’s longest war* in the orthodox tradition, contends that the US misread nationalism in Vietnam and was ignorant of Vietnamese history (for instance, its long animosity with China). He says that containment should not have been applied to Vietnam.⁶⁵

Expanding on the concept of what Noam Chomsky termed the ‘threat of a good example’, John Pilger finds that despite conventional wisdom, the US was not defeated in Vietnam, and that ‘the Untitled States gained a significant, if partial, victory.’ Just as US policy makers at the time and after have stated – that the US was not solely concerned with Vietnam alone, but also the surround region – Pilger states that ‘in Vietnam the short-term “threat” came from a nationalist leadership concerned with domestic needs rather than with the transcendent demands of the United States. The long-term “threat” to America was that of a development model which other states might have followed… Far from being vanquished in South-East Asia, the United States has devastated, blockaded and isolated Vietnam and it’s “virus” and has subordinated to American interests almost every regime in the region.’⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Hess, *Vietnam*, p. 25
⁶¹ Ibid, p. 18
⁶² Ibid, p. 18 (emphasis added)
⁶³ Ibid, p. 37
Keith L. Shimko wrote an illuminating piece on the affects that metaphors have on foreign policy decision making\(^67\). A metaphor such as the domino theory implicitly states the interdependence of each state – if one falls to communism, the others will *definitely* follow. All ‘dominos’ are the same, and the pressure for the domino to fall always comes externally (from the previous fallen domino – and never internally. ‘Dominoes do not fall on their own’\(^68\). For these reasons, the Shimko quoted noted Cold War historian LeFeber as claiming that ‘the domino theory was (and remains) one of the most dangerous ideas to attract American’\(^{(1989, p231)}\)\(^69\). Shimko’s astute analysis of the dangers of the use of metaphor in policy making rings especially true to South East Asia. Not all dominoes are the same (Vietnam, was not Korea, nor China); the fall of one domino doesn’t mean the automatic fall of the others (Thailand, for instance, never fell); dominos can ‘fall on their own’ (Vietnam’s communism was principally internal and was not forced upon it); and lastly, dominoes metaphors offer no policy advice. Any state falling anywhere must be kept upright.

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\(^{68}\) Ibid., p. 667

\(^{69}\) Ibid.
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