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The Prussia of Southeast Asia

Remember those right-wing alarmists who claimed that if South Vietnam fell to the communists the rest of Indochina would also fall — the “domino effect?” Remember our liberals who assured us that the North Vietnamese were only seeking “national reconciliation?”

After 40 years of intermittent fighting, communist Vietnam has conquered South Vietnam, annexed Laos and is presently absorbing Cambodia — or Democratic Kampuchea, as it is now called. In truth, the “domino theory” has proven correct.

Today, Vietnam has the third largest army in the world: 1.3 million, backed by 1.5 million trained reservists. The bulk of this vast force faces hostile China, with whom Vietnam has been skirmishing for 10 years. The remainder are busy occupying Laos and Cambodia.

Cambodians, as noted in a recent column, are fighting back against 170,000 Vietnamese occupation troops and growing numbers of Vietnamese settlers. During the past three weeks, Vietnam's 5th Division has been assaulting camps along the Thai border, which are the centre of Cambodian resistance forces.

On Christmas Day, the Viets savagely attacked the sprawling camp of Rithisen. This week they have mounted regimental-sized assaults against the camp at Ampil. Heavy artillery fire and ground attacks have forced 100,000 Cambodian civilians to flee from these beleaguered camps across the border into Thailand. Many hundreds have been killed and thousands wounded.

The camps are being stoutly defended by two anti-communist Cambodian groups: The Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) and the smaller forces of Prince Sihanouk. Both of these movements receive arms and aid from Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries — Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia — and from China.

This recent fighting has brought units of the Vietnamese Army right to the long border between Cambodia and Thailand. The Thais are growing increasingly nervous as the prospect of clashes with the Vietnamese increases. During the past few years, Vietnamese troops have not hesitated to cross the Thai border in hot pursuit of Cambodian rebels.

Few Thais believe that Vietnam now intends to invade their nation. Though militarily weak, Thailand's 50 million people are for the most part strongly nationalistic and heirs to a long history of independence.

But the Thais are also keenly aware that the growing Vietnamese threat to their border is, in part, intended to make their nation compliant to the wishes of Hanoi. Some Thais fear that Vietnam may plan to invade their nation once the rest of Indochina has been pacified by Hanoi's troops. Lush Thailand's rice would easily feed perennially hungry Vietnam.

Hanoi's efforts to crush the bases of the anti-communist resistance forces come in tandem with recent offensives against the largest anti-Vietnamese resistance group, the Khmer Rouge. This sinister movement, which murdered 1.5 million of its own countrymen, has about 40,000 guerrillas in Cambodia.

While the Khmer Rouge are doing most of the fighting against the Vietnamese, its savage record has made it an international pariah. Most foreign nations recognize, instead, the KPNLF and Sihanouk forces as the legitimate government of Cambodia; only some communist nations and India recognize the puppet regime of Heng Samrin that is kept in power by Vietnam.

The current offensive against the border camps appears aimed at eradicating what much of the world views as the legitimate government of Cambodia. The timing of the attack also seems to coincide with recent Russian-Chinese talks in Peking.

China — the mainstay of the Cambodian rebels — has sought to improve relations with Moscow — the backer of Vietnam. In the past, when Vietnamese pressure against the Cambodian insurgents became too intense, China would launch limited attacks against Vietnam's northern provinces intended to “teach Hanoi a lesson.”

Vietnam may have craftily chosen the very moment to attack China's clients when Peking's leaders were anxious to avoid bad blood with Moscow. So far, China has not responded to the latest Vietnamese attacks with more than verbal protests.

Since the war in Cambodia is a major sore spot between Peking and Moscow, the Cambodian resistance forces must certainly fear that Russia and China may try to improve relations by making a deal at their expense. China has often shown itself willing to abandon clients when the political winds change.

If China does finally allow Vietnam a free hand in Cambodia, the resistance forces will quickly be extinguished. Even if Peking continues to oppose Hanoi, it appears likely that the guerrillas will be slowly but surely ground down.

We must recall that Vietnam is a nation schooled in patience and suffering. It took 40 bloody years — two generations of war — to conquer most of Indochina. Today, Vietnam is on the verge of economic collapse, yet it still is building its huge land armies. For what purpose?

Ask the Cambodians and they will tell you — as they told me — that Vietnam will not stop fighting until it reaches the borders of India. What we are seeing today along the border of Thailand is merely one small, tragic incident in the endless Indochinese war as Vietnam, the Prussia of Southeast Asia, continues its relentless expansion.

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