

## THE FAILURES OF AMERICAN CONSERVATISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA\*

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Ekkehart Krippendorff, a German political scientist and commentator, is an independent leftist whose radical views have made him a controversial figure at the Free University of Berlin where he teaches. In this article he attempts to document a criticism of American foreign policy that is very widespread among Europeans of the center as well as the left—the charge that the United States has dangerously oversimplified the choice between support of the Communist bloc and adherence to the free world. Krippendorff maintains that in Southeast Asia the United States has tended to back unpopular reactionary rulers because they are militantly anti-Communist, in preference to more democratic and nationalist leaderships, which, although often neutralist in foreign policy, offer much better prospects for the establishment of viable democratic regimes. He thus concludes that the United States has consistently supported the wrong forces in Southeast Asia and for that reason has suffered an all but unbroken series of foreign policy reverses.

... To speak of American policy in Asia is to describe the complicated and often contradictory dispositions of American foreign policy since 1954 in the form of a host of small and often petty actions. It means reporting all sorts of attempted intrigues, some successful and others not; the common element in all of them is the fear of being overwhelmed by Chinese Communism, and a deep-seated distrust of the nationalist-neutralist, nonaristocratic elites in Southeast Asia. With a truly amazing instinct for failure, American policy in the 1950's has consistently backed the wrong horse, and has alienated the influential while promoting the incompetent. Thus it was with the lost chance of a neutralist Ho Chi Minh and the consequent absence of any alternative to the support of Ngo Dinh Diem; with the overthrow of Souvanna Phouma in favor of the incompetent and unpopular Boun Oum; with Dulles' unconcealed sympathy for the anti-Sukarno rebellion of 1958 in Sumatra; and with the toleration of Nationalist Chinese refugee forces in the interior of Burma, which almost led to a break of diplomatic relations and in any case to an ostentatious refusal to accept American foreign aid. Still other cases could be mentioned.

This remarkably frequent misinterpretation of the Asian situation, the Eisenhower Administration's constantly repeated cooperation with elites and groups whose influence can only be called problematic (to put it mildly) was nevertheless no accident. It rested, on the one hand, on Dulles' unambiguously formulated premise that "neutralism is amoral," and, on the other hand, on the circumstance that the local groups and individuals who were sympathetic to ideas like these were *not* identical with the young nationalistic elite. Ameri-

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can Asian policy thus became a sacrificial offering to the ideological narrowness of her leading diplomats.

This, however, is not all. It was also a sacrifice to the freewheeling and . . . extreme anti-Communist intelligence service, that is, the CIA. Let it be said in its honor that without the knowledge of the actual ambassador, invariably outside his jurisdiction and often against his better counsel, it was the CIA that inspired the Laotian rightists to overthrow the neutralist regime, that supported the Sumatra rebellion, and that in the case of Quemoy and Matsu nearly involved the United States in an atomic war through calculated provocations. We need only cite a single trustworthy and authoritative witness, Chester Bowles [in *Foreign Affairs*]

In Asia, one U.S. ambassador assured the Prime Minister that we were not involved in an intelligence operation which, to the ambassador's chagrin, he eventually discovered was being masterminded in his own office. The Prime Minister concluded that the ambassador was either a fool or a liar.

We must finally mention a further factor in the precarious, but self-imposed, situation into which the United States has maneuvered itself in Southeast Asia: the corruption of American-supported groups through a truly scandalous administration of foreign aid. Not only have the local "élites" obtained enormous sums out of it by pressuring the Americans with the routine formula that they, as recipients, are the only bulwark against Communism, but the American companies involved have also made indescribably high profits. Money was pumped into these economies which they simply could not meaningfully absorb, the results of which was the sharpening, and indeed the creation of social hatred hitherto completely absent in this form, since little or nothing was obtained by those "on the bottom." The report of the Congressional committee for government activities in Laos, published in 1959, reads like a detective story, and it is sufficiently fair-minded and sober to state in circumspect terms:

The aid program has not contributed to preventing the spread of Communism in Laos. Rather, the Communist victory in the election of last year, which was fought with slogans like "corruption in government" and "governmental indifference," has given rise to the suspicion that the United States aid program has helped to bring about an atmosphere in which the ordinary people seriously question the value of American friendship.

*[After a survey of the situation in different parts of Southeast Asia, Krippendorff concludes:]*

The common element in all these cases can be termed (in a nonpolemical sense) the problem of controlling satellites. That the Soviet Union has been relatively more successful in this can hardly be doubted, even though cracks in the structure have recently appeared. One of its advantages is its ability to threaten alternatives. The Soviet Union has connections to more than one segment of the country in question or of the local Communist Party. But one tactical weakness of American policy is to operate without alternatives. In the case of Diem it rested so much on this one man and his regime that he could even venture to answer the cautious pressure of American diplomats in the winter of 1961-62 to bring about certain reforms, with a calculated anti-

American campaign ("We are not lackeys"). In Laos Boun Oum paid dearly enough for his indispensability, indeed almost to the tune of a complete catastrophe. This absence of alternatives applies to Sarit [of Thailand] and also to Chiang Kai-shek. "When will America learn that it is always a disaster for the cause of freedom and democracy to support a cynical tyrant as the 'sole alternative' to Communism?" Thus a leader of the Democratic Party of Vietnam, exiled in Paris, wrote to the *New York Times*.

The Kennedy Administration, taking over the catastrophic inheritance of its predecessor, seems unable to break out of the vicious circle. It undoubtedly wants democratic reforms, a rise in living standards, and stable social relationships. But it is not ready, even where it could exert almost unlimited power, to develop an alternative to the obsolete traditional elites, and must address its social conceptions to the very circles that could only lose by realizing them. And it is also the prisoner of a second, and even more vicious circle, the policy of "military liberation first." As long as Southeast Asia is threatened by Communism, it will continue to be dangerous to open the sluices of social evolution. Yet the primacy of quasi-military struggle with all its dictatorial and socially corrupting consequences prevents elimination of the soil on which these devastating little wars are nourished.

But the main obstacle to a rational solution of the Southeast Asia problem is the much greater fact of "China." The interest of the United States in the countries on the Chinese perimeter did not awaken into frenzied concern until China fell under Communist domination. The struggle for the last Western bastions in Southeast Asia is at bottom a struggle to maintain strong points against China. Hans J. Morgenthau, one of the shrewdest of American foreign policy experts, sees the key to the decision in Southeast Asia in the clarification of China policy....

What holds the Chinese back today is not the military strength that the United States can bring to bear on Laos, Thailand, South Vietnam, or Formosa. It is rather China's general weaknesses. But in the not too distant future this should change. . . . Then the United States will be confronted with a full-scale choice between retreat and war.... This war, however, will be no jungle war, but a total atomic one.

Two years after Morgenthau's gloomy prophecy, the Kennedy Administration has as yet reached no decision-with the partial exception of Laos indicating a way out of the dilemma. The Indian-Chinese border conflict in part bore out the prophecies, while still giving America a political breathing space. But the delaying of a conflict, if not immediately exploited, is not always favorable to its solution. In the long view, however, America's Asian policy is being decided in China itself.