

The Zombie Domino Theory Returns

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An especially damaging development in the history of U.S. foreign policy was President Dwight D. Eisenhower's promulgation of the domino theory. Adoption of its assumptions led directly to America's disastrous military intervention in Vietnam. Although the simplistic doctrine was widely ridiculed after the Vietnam debacle, it has continued to have its adherents. Worse, the domino theory has seemed to make a full comeback with respect to Washington's current attitudes toward both Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Eisenhower first presented his argument during a press conference on April 7, 1954. [He argued](#) that preventing communist forces from taking power in France's disintegrating Indochina colonial empire had much wider importance. Eisenhower invoked an image that would become infamous. "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences."

The president spun a nightmarish scenario. A communist success in Vietnam would lead to "the loss of Indochina, of Burma, of Thailand, of the Peninsula, and Indonesia following." The Red menace would then undermine "the so-called island defensive chain of Japan, Formosa, of the Philippines and to the southward; it moves in to threaten Australia and New Zealand." Even Japan would have little choice except to turn to the communist world. Consequently, "the possible consequences of the loss [of Vietnam] are just incalculable to the free world."

Eisenhower and his advisers ignored a fundamental point. Countries are not dominoes; each nation is a unique society with its own traditions, values, interests, and priorities. Merely because a political or ideological outcome occurs in one country does not signify that the same outcome will take place in a neighboring country, much less in a more distant locale.

Hawkish members of the US foreign policy establishment and their counterparts in Europe and East Asia increasingly ignore that reality with respect to both Russia and the PRC. It has become a cliché with the poohbahs in NATO that if the Kremlin succeeds in its war against

Ukraine, Russia will [pose a dire threat to all of Europe](#). Indeed, a victorious Russia supposedly would menace the stability of the [entire “rules-based” international system](#).

The notion that a country with an economy [just modestly larger than Spain’s](#) and a military budget [less than one-tenth](#) the size of the US military budget could pose a threat of that magnitude should seem absurd on its face. Even without Washington’s involvement, Russian forces would have difficulty conquering even one major European power, much less NATO Europe as a whole.

Moreover, the assumption ignores extensive evidence that [Ukraine is uniquely important](#) to Russia for both cultural and security reasons. In particular, Russian leaders were not about to allow the United States to [turn Ukraine into a NATO military asset](#) directed against their country. It does not follow at all that they would make a similar effort or incur comparable risks to conduct a geo-strategic offensive against other portions of Europe. Even if Ukraine falls to the Kremlin’s current military operation, there is no credible reason to assume that Poland, the Baltic republics, or Slovakia – much less such major powers as Germany, France, or Italy – would be next on an expansionist agenda.

A similar simplistic formulation is beginning to influence thinking in the United States regarding policy toward China, especially among the growing roster [of anti-PRC hawks](#). The underlying assumption is that if Beijing successfully uses coercion to gain control of Taiwan, the PRC will then pose an expansionist threat to all of East Asia and become [a candidate for global hegemony](#). Just as analysts who embrace a refurbished domino theory with regard to Russia ignore Ukraine’s exceptional importance to Moscow, people who contend that Beijing’s acquisition of Taiwan would trigger an expansionist binge ignore the island’s unique status for PRC leaders and China’s population. For many Chinese, Taiwan is the last unresolved territorial issue from the civil war that ended on the mainland with a communist victory in 1949. The island also is seen as territory that a foreign power (Japan) stole during China’s “long century of humiliation.”

Regaining Taiwan has importance of a much greater magnitude than any other territorial ambitions. The PRC does want to become the leading global power and dilute US hegemony, but that goal does not automatically translate into a rogue expansionist agenda. Moreover, just as Russia’s power would be constrained by the presence of other major European economic and military players, the PRC would face an array of key countries in its neighborhood, including Japan, India, and Indonesia, with incentives to limit Beijing’s ambitions.

The domino theory was simplistic nonsense when Eisenhower presented it in the 1950s. The current zombie version is equally detached from reality. It needs to be rejected emphatically, lest it entangles the United States in even larger unnecessary, disastrous conflicts than the original version did.

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Featured image: President Dwight D. Eisenhower (National Archives)

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