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## South East Asia and the Powers

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THE endemic troubles of South East Asia tend to induce a view of the area as a sort of natural and inevitable Balkans, a congeries of small weak peoples leaned on, or potentially leaned on, from every side by stronger peoples, as well as plagued by local enmities and destabilizing minorities. Recent events in Vietnam particularly reinforce this impression, for since the U.S. air-strikes of February and the Russian visit to Hanoi, the trial of strength and intentions between the outside Powers has overshadowed the divisions, real as they are, between the Vietnamese of the North and of the South. This is not to say that the final decision (if there is one within the foreseeable future, and whether it is military or diplomatic) can ignore the strength of particular currents of political feeling among the Vietnamese. But the prospects cannot be assessed without analysis of the Powers' estimates of their own respective interests in Vietnam and in South East Asia generally. One must add the wider context of South East Asia to that of the particular crisis of South Vietnam, since that unhappy small country is perhaps seen by all the Powers rather as a token, or the hinge to a door, than as a vital interest in itself.

Looking at the area first as a set of problems facing Western policy-makers, one may say that the issues reduce themselves—though one could hardly say simply—to three categories: those of the containment of Chinese power, those of the ambiguities and harassments of Indonesian policy, and those of the uncertainties and weaknesses of the minor countries. There is not much point in trying to disentangle these three sets of issues from each other, since it is precisely their intertwinedness that is the distinguishing characteristic of the situation from the viewpoint of Western policy. This is one of those situations where the whole is a good deal more than the sum of the parts, and it is therefore positively misleading to attempt to consider the problems of Laos and Cambodia or Borneo in isolation.

It is more difficult to assess the aspect that the situation wears from 'the other side of the hill', that is from the viewpoint of China and Russia. One might venture an assumption that from Peking it may look much as Latin America would look to Washington if the Monroe Doctrine had been shattered for a hundred years and the opportunity then seemed to be presenting itself to restore the *status quo ante*. Before the West impinged on South East Asia, Chinese ascendancy over the area was certainly as great as U.S. ascendancy over Latin America in the palmiest days of the Monroe Doctrine, round about the time of the Roosevelt corollary, and equally regarded as part of the natural order of history. Looking at the course of Chinese diplomacy since China effectively re-entered the conversation of the Great Powers, at the 1954 Geneva conference, one cannot but be struck by how steadily, and with how considerable a degree of success, Mr Chou En-lai has worked to re-establish China's old sphere of influence in this part of the world.

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