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France's Indochina War

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Legislative measures often determine the official chronology of a war, both its start and finish. After careful discussions starting in 1950, the French government approved the creation of a "Commemorative Medal for the Indochina War" on August 1, 1953. This official medal established the starting date of the "Indochinese campaign" on August 16, 1945. Legislation passed on January 29, 1958, set the end of the war on August 11, 1954, when the cease-fire brokered during the Geneva Conference officially entered into effect. During this conflict, in all, some 21,000 French soldiers from Metropolitan France had died. This represented, however, less than a quarter of the total 89,000 military deaths suffered by the French Union camp: 11,500 North Africans, 3,700 Africans, 9,200 Foreign Legion soldiers, 27,000 indigenous (mainly Vietnamese) auxiliary personnel, and 17,000 members of the armed forces of the Associated States of Indochina (the majority of whom were Vietnamese).[1] As many as 500,000 Vietnamese died during the war, civilians and combatants alike.

There are many ways to study the French side of the Indochina War. Here we focus on the international context, examining the complex issues French decision-makers faced at the crossroads of imperial, global, and regional events. Stuck in a difficult position since the humiliating defeat at the hands of Germany in the spring of 1940, French policymakers were particularly sensitive to the international dimensions of the Indochina War.

How the War Began, 1945–7

The Indochina War began at the intersection of three phenomena. First, although Europeans had realized during World War II that their empires needed to be modernized and reformed to make room for the demands of

1 For a summary of the death toll, see Service Historique de la Défense, GR2R145.

the elites of the colonized peoples, many still considered them to be an essential component of international power and prestige. During World War II, Free France relied heavily on the African empire, a source of manpower for a Free French army. Liberated by the Allies in 1944, the French counted on their empire to help rebuild a war-torn economy and return the country to the world stage. Empire would also allow the French room to maneuver between the two post–1945 giants, the United States and the Soviet Union.

Second, the humiliation of 1940 followed by the Axis occupation of France in Europe and Indochina in Asia imposed upon the French after the war the pressing need to recover their territorial possessions *ante bellum*. It was essential to erasing the stain of 1940 and affirming the "white man's prestige" in Indochina. French settlers, officials, and businessmen in Indochina were traumatized by the Japanese coup de force of March 9, 1945, which brought French Indochina down. And because the French could not intervene when the Japanese capitulated to the Allies on August 15, 1945, Hồ Chí Minh and the nationalist front he created in 1941, the Việt Minh, took advantage of the power vacuum to declare Vietnam's independence on September 2, 1945. This meant that the French would have to reconquer Indochina in order to reestablish their sovereignty there. The context in which this would occur would be one of nationalist turmoil, a result of the economic, social, and political consequences of the world war, the sudden disappearance of the Japanese empire, and anticolonial sentiments which the Japanese had fanned. It was a difficult situation for the French. Losing the Indochinese link in the imperial chain could set a precedent, encouraging nationalists in other parts of the empire to follow suit. Nonetheless, it was still possible that this anti-imperialist effervescence could still be quickly suppressed and controlled, as it had been after World War I. Or at least that's what some French leaders thought. In any case, the French, on left and right, wanted their empire back.

Third, the imperative of reconquering and controlling the empire led to a wave of repressive violence from North Africa to Vietnam by way of Madagascar.[2] In East Asia, this wave of colonial violence combined with the brutalization of Asia societies during World War II, under the Japanese, and at the hands of a host of armed groups used by the Japanese, the British, and the Americans, to say nothing of the associations and paramilitary organizations the Japanese had operated among the young. The legitimacy of the empire and the repression used to restore it enjoyed widespread support at

2 Martin Thomas, "From Sétif to Moramanga: Identifying Insurgents and Ascribing Guilt in the French Colonial Post-War," *War in History* 25 (2) (2018), 227–53.

the time in the French ruling class. In the early years, the French Communist Party (FCP) was not yet an advocate of decolonization. Not only did the FCP want to show its nationalist credentials acquired during war against the Nazis, which guaranteed them electoral successes immediately after 1945, but the communists were also of the mind that France, for cultural and historical reasons, could and should still do much for the colonial peoples. It was also important for the PCF to protect French colonies against US imperialist ambitions.

Starting in 1943, the French provisional government led by Charles de Gaulle in Algiers sought to prepare the liberation of Indochina by force, and, to this end, de Gaulle did his best to incorporate Free France's Indochinese strategy within the wider plans of the Allied Powers. The French provisional government begged for Allied help in arming and transporting some troops. However, the Japanese coup of March 9, 1945, not only eliminated a good deal of the underground resistance inside Vietnam, but Paris quickly realized that the liberation of Indochina would occur without the French. The Americans seemed to want to keep the French at arm's length in the Far East. At the Potsdam Conference in mid-1945 (to which the French were not privy), the Allies decided that the Republic of China would disarm the Japanese in Indochina north of the 16th parallel while the United Kingdom would do the same below that line. Surprised by the unexpectedly early Japanese surrender, de Gaulle could not accept this. He actively pursued the departure of the Chinese and British troops and their replacement with the French Expeditionary Corps whose soldiers, upon arrival, would have the right to circulate freely in all of Indochina.

De Gaulle wanted Indochina back in the empire. The problem is that this would not be so easy. Taking advantage of the Japanese overthrow of the French in March, followed by the Japanese capitulation to the Allies on August 15, the independence leader and founder of the Việt Minh, Hồ Chí Minh, declared the independence of Vietnam on September 2, 1945. The Vietnam the French had eliminated from the map of the world in the late nineteenth century was back and would not be sidelined so easily again in the mid-twentieth. Based out of the capital of Hanoi, the new nation-state was called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN). It claimed all of Vietnam in a single territorial state – the regions the French called Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin to refer to the colony in the South and the protectorates in central and northern Vietnam, respectively.

De Gaulle and most of the French political class at the time still thought in these prewar colonial terms. The framework of the Gaullist Indochinese

policy had been hammered out by the provisional government on March 24, 1945. An Indochinese federation consisting of five "regions" (Annam, Tonkin, Cochinchina, Cambodia, and Laos) would be created and join a French Union, the new name for the empire but which had yet to be formally created.[3] In negotiations with Hồ, the French were determined to create a French Union and to place Indochina within it, including Hồ Chí Minh's Vietnam. Annoyed by Emperor Bảo Đại's abdication in late August 1945 and his support of Hồ's national government, de Gaulle had turned to another member of the royal family to help him recover French Indochina, Prince Vĩnh San. Nothing came of this royalist card, though: the latter died in a plane crash in December 1945.

Upon arriving in Saigon in early September, British General Gracey facilitated the return of the French to southern Indochina below the 16th parallel. The situation in Saigon was, however, very complicated. Vietnamese revolutionary committees, not all of them under Hồ Chí Minh's control, had operated freely since the Japanese surrender a few weeks earlier. Thousands of Japanese were awaiting disarmament and repatriation. US officers who had arrived, too, sent reports to Washington on events in Indochina. Meanwhile, French settlers made no secret of their desire to see colonial rule re-established quickly, nor did they hide their disdain for the envoys from metropolitan France who counseled patience and compromise. Hostilities broke out in this explosive southern mix when Gracey allowed colonial troops imprisoned by the Japanese in March to dislodge Hồ Chí Minh's officials from Saigon. The troops of the French Expeditionary Corps, sent by de Gaulle and led by General Leclerc, landed in southern Indochina in October and began to reestablish French sovereignty below the 16th parallel by force but not before a Vietnamese massacre of around a hundred French settlers in Saigon. War had effectively begun below the 16th parallel.

The Chinese were reticent to facilitate the return of the French to their zone of responsibility in northern Indochina, fearful of setting off a colonial war above the 16th parallel as the British had just done below it. As a result, the Chinese effectively allowed Hồ Chí Minh's government to continue to operate from Hanoi while war raged in the south. The French realized that they would have to negotiate with the Vietnamese government in Hanoi and the Chinese occupation forces in order to return to Indochina above the 16th parallel. The treaty signed with the Chinese in February 1946 secured the withdrawal of Chinese troops. Most left in June, with the last soldiers withdrawing in September. At the same time, the French signed an accord with DRVN President Hồ Chí Minh, on March 6, 1946. This document allowed the

3 Alain Ruscio, *La guerre française d'Indochine* (Bruxelles, 1993), 51.

French to transfer 15,000 troops above the 16th parallel to replace the departing soldiers. The French did not, however, have the right to overthrow the government they now recognized as part of a future Indochinese federation. The accord also stipulated that the French forces would withdraw from the DRVN within five years. In mid-March, General Leclerc entered Hanoi as French troops assumed positions in the main cities in upper Indochina. To maintain order, French military commanders joined with their counterparts in the DRVN to eliminate anticommunist nationalists who had rejected any compromise with the French in March. Meanwhile, hardliners in Paris felt that the French had given away too much to Hồ (they derided the March 6 agreement as a new "Munich"), particularly the annex limiting the duration of the French military presence in Vietnam.

Between March and December 1946, a "strange war" occurred. French officers who believed that the military situation was improving in their favor felt that it was now possible to adopt a tougher line in negotiations. On the other hand, those who believed the situation remained fragile pleaded for additional military reinforcements. Follow-up negotiations took place in Vietnam (in Đà Lạt first, which was to be the capital of the Indochinese federation) and then in France (in Fontainebleau). The question of the diplomatic representation of the DRVN was a major point of contention. The French were concerned about DRVN efforts to gain international recognition and affirm its national sovereignty as an independent state. But for Paris, there was no question about responsibility for the Union's diplomacy – it would be the French, not the Vietnamese. Another dispute concerned the unity of Vietnam claimed by Hồ Chí Minh. De Gaulle's high commissioner for Indochina, Thierry d'Argenlieu, who at this time enjoyed the support of the postwar government in Paris, insisted that Cochinchina was a French colony separate from Hồ Chí Minh's Vietnam – a position backed by most settlers and certain other elites in the region.

On the French side, there was no common position in these negotiations. During 1946–8, a large part of the political battle for Indochina was played out in Paris. The hardliners opposed to decolonization succeeded in imposing themselves through bureaucratic micro-actions, such as political appointments or budgetary arbitration. The colonels of the colonial army within the National Defence General Staff were influential, too, working in cooperation with officers advising French officials in Indochina. Meanwhile, d'Argenlieu was urged to act like Gallieni and Lyautey, both of whom had confronted Paris with imperial faits accomplis in the nineteenth century. The unstable political landscape in the metropole allowed the high commissioner to do this. Even following de Gaulle's resignation in early 1946, d'Argenlieu took

advantage of the changing governments in Paris in 1946 to advance his policy to retake all of Indochina. Events came to a head in late 1946 when the Fourth Republic finally came to life. D'Argenlieu and fellow hardliners in Indochina and France suspected Léon Blum, the newly appointed socialist leader of the republic, of wanting to make concessions to Hồ. These men enjoyed the support of the Mouvement Républicain Populaire (MRP) and encouraged d'Argenlieu to act against the DRVN. They would cover him. Socialists who had colonial responsibilities, such as Marius Moutet, also supported the aggressive line on Vietnam.

The French bombing of the port city of Hải Phòng in November 1946 was one of those faits accomplis pushed by the hawks working with d'Argenlieu at the helm in Indochina. The heavy-handed reoccupation of Haiphong came at the cost of hundreds – perhaps thousands – of Vietnamese civilian lives. The high commissioner was angered by the partial application of agreements by the DRVN thus far. He also wanted to expand France's colonial grip whenever and wherever he could, as well as to be in a position of strength to launch wider military operations if necessary. After Haiphong, leaders on both sides were losing patience with the voices calling for conciliation. Unless one side ceded on its claims to sovereignty over all of Vietnam, war was inevitable by late 1946. Their backs to the wall, the Vietnamese attacked the French on the evening of December 19, 1946, setting off full-scale war in all of Vietnam. The Vietnamese massacre of dozens of French settlers in Hanoi during the street fighting in late December allowed the hardliners to put an end to the "farce" that had constituted the talks with the Vietnamese, who, in their view, had shown their duplicity and barbarism just like the Japanese before them. It was, in fact, a pretext to retake all of Indochina by force if necessary – just as de Gaulle had directed d'Argenlieu to do upon naming him high commissioner in September 1945.[4]

Several goals guided French military operations following the outbreak of full-scale war. First, the army sought to free central Vietnam from the DRVN's hold, considered "frightening but not invincible." Second, toward the end of 1947, the French would attack the resistance government in the Northern Highlands by capturing its leadership and destroying its army with an airborne operation known as Opération Léa. It came close to achieving the first goal, but failed on the second. Third, although the French had backed Vietnamese expansionists, ambitions upon building Indochina at the turn of the twentieth century, they now supported all those who had problems with

4 Thomas Vaisset, *L'Amiral d'Argenlieu. Le moine-soldat du gaullisme* (Paris, 2017).

the Vietnamese government led by Hồ. The French warned the Cambodians, Cochinchinese, and the minority peoples living in the Highlands of the dangers of "Annamese imperialism."

In late 1947, as the French Expeditionary Corps went on the offensive against the DRVN, the new high commissioner for Indochina, Emile Bollaert, terminated negotiations with Hồ Chí Minh and initiated talks with Bảo Đại. The former emperor was now living in Hong Kong, where he had gone into exile after a brief stint as advisor to Hồ Chí Minh's government. The French now sought to win over Bảo Đại and have him lead a noncommunist Vietnam in association with them and fellow states in Laos and Cambodia, all of them part of the French Union. The man behind this postwar royalist project was Léon Pignon, political advisor to d'Argenlieu in 1945–6 and then high commissioner for Indochina between 1948 and 1950. The accords of June 5, 1948, signed by the French and Bảo Đại in Hạ Long Bay, allowed for the territorial unification of the three colonial regions (Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin). However, Bollaert encountered resistance from the MRP while French settlers continued to oppose the unification of Vietnam, whether under Hồ Chí Minh or Bảo Đại. Faced with Chinese communist victories to the north and thanks to support from Britain and the United States, Pignon finally succeeded in winning over Bảo Đại's support for the creation of a less-than-independent noncommunist Vietnam in exchange for the territorial unification of the country, something that the French had denied Hồ Chí Minh a few years earlier.[5] Bảo Đại returned to Vietnam in 1949 to serve as the head of state of the Associated State of Vietnam (*Etat associé du Vietnam*), working in tandem with sister associated states for Laos and Cambodia. All three states were officially ratified in 1949. Together, they were part of a wider federal structure known as the Associated States of Indochina. The United States, Britain, and others formally recognized Bảo Đại's Vietnam in early 1950, following the Chinese communist victory and Mao Zedong's recognition of the DRVN.

The forces of the French Union fought in Indochina as part of an effort to maintain the "imperial security" of not only Indochina but the entire French empire. From 1947 onward, it became a question of the "collective security of the French Union."[6] Many ranking French decision-makers were convinced

5 Daniel Varga, "Léon Pignon, l'homme clé de la solution Bao Dai et de l'implication des Etats-Unis dans la guerre d'Indochine," *Outre-Mers. Revue d'Histoire* 364–5 (2009), 277–313.

6 Pierre Grosser, "Une 'création continue'? L'Indochine, le Maghreb et l'Union française," *Monde(s)* 12 (2) (2017), 71–94.

that a third world war was possible. Some considered the maintenance of the French Union even more important than that of the United Nations. The French negotiated the acquisition of bases in Indochina, not only for local military use but also as part of a wider security calculus for the entire French Union. They did so with their eye on what the Americans were doing in the Philippines. The results were mixed. By 1956, France retained just one military base in Laos.

French colonial troops helped hold this imperial line in Indochina. The number of nonwhite troops coming from the empire increased proportionally as the war dragged on. These deployments were ordered despite early concerns about African racism toward Asians, fears that these troops might commit acts of violence against Vietnamese civilians, as well as concerns about the nationalist "infection" that these troops (especially if they were taken prisoner) might "contract" in Vietnam and then "spread" to Africa upon their return in the form of an "independence virus." As in previous decades, the French Army recruited ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh) to serve as auxillaries and soldiers, even though officers believed Indochinese populations had little taste for fighting (except, they supposed, when they had been radicalized by the DRVN). Although Bollaert still believed in the summer of 1947 that only one army, that of the French Union, could exist, the French failure to destroy Hồ Chí Minh's Vietnam and the reluctance of Paris to send more metropolitan troops (already in short supply due to a permanent recruitment crisis) forced the French to mobilize the Vietnamese. Upon creating the Associated States of Indochina, the French had agreed to begin creating armed forces for each of the Associated States, operating within the French Union and committed to the defense of the empire. Yet French authorities in Indochina remained ambivalent about these new armies. Training remained a problem. Troop morale was low despite increasing American military aid. Bảo Đại would complain that "one cannot count on the Vietnamese army (to fight) and then refuse to give it the right to exist." Little progress was made until General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny arrived in Indochina in late 1950 and accelerated the expansion of the Vietnamese Army, referred to at the time as the "yellowing" or *jaunissement* of the conflict.

Indochina Becomes a Cold-War Battlefield, 1949–51

The Chinese communist victory of October 1949 changed the nature of the Indochina War. The French had already been following closely the course of the Chinese civil war opposing Mao Zedong's communist forces against

those of the Republic of China led by Chiang Kai-shek. French officials worried that hostilities in China might spill over into the northern Vietnamese border areas where overseas Chinese communities lived, transforming a colonial war of pacification in Indochina into a wider Franco-Chinese conflagration. France and China had gone to war seventy years earlier at the time of the French conquest of Tonkin. Between 1949 and 1953, the French disarmed and relocated retreating republican Chinese troops fleeing the border into northern Indochina. With the Chinese communists now providing diplomatic and military support to Hồ Chí Minh and his Vietnamese army, the French looked to their Atlantic partners, the Americans and the British in particular, to help them to protect Indochina's northern border, to recognize the Associated States of Indochina, and to aid the French and, through them, their Indochinese partners. This international support would serve to legitimate the French war effort in the eyes of the peoples of Indochina. It was now more than a simple "colonial reconquest." In early 1950, the Americans, followed by most of their allies in Europe and Asia, formally recognized the three Associated States of Indochina.

After hesitating for a considerable amount of time, the French finally refused to recognize Mao's People's Republic of China (PRC) created in October 1949. Like the French, the Vietnamese also grasped the advantages accruing from making their struggle for national liberation part of this Global Cold War. Mao helped break the DRVN's diplomatic isolation by recognizing the DRVN in January 1950 and by persuading the communist bloc, including a rather reluctant Joseph Stalin, to do the same. It is doubtful that the French could have stopped Mao from aiding Hồ Chí Minh, even if they had recognized the PRC.

The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 seemed like a godsend for those in French ruling circles who wanted to keep Indochina. The North Korean invasion of the South allowed the French to claim that they had been fighting a similar kind of war in Vietnam since 1946 against the communist threat posed by Hồ Chí Minh – and that they had been holding the line alone. The French sent one battalion to Korea to fight alongside the Americans and thereby show that the wars in Korea and Indochina were part of the same regional and global struggle. With the People's Liberation Army (PLA) now bogged down in Korea, the French also saw the chance to strike their Vietnamese enemy in Indochina hard. Things, however, did not work out as they hoped. In late 1950, the French Union forces lost a major battle on the Chinese border at Cao Bằng to a DRVN army now much strengthened by Chinese arms shipments and training. The Cao Bằng catastrophe sent

shockwaves through the French political class, as thousands of French Union soldiers were marched off as prisoners. The newly professionalized People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) had just won its first set-piece battle and opened a direct supply route to China.

The battle of Cao Bằng coincided with the massive entry of Chinese troops into Korea in October 1950, raising the specter that something similar could occur on French watch in Indochina. As far as French military leaders were concerned, they were now fighting two wars, and it was essential that France was not forced to fight alone on either front. The first war focused on helping the Associated States of Indochina fight against "serious internal rebellions." The second conflict was a conventional war against the PAVN. It had started at Cao Bằng in late 1950 when PAVN troops clashed with those of the French Union. It spread increasingly to northern and central parts of Vietnam by 1954. The French were tempted to invite the Americans in to help them in their battles against the PAVN and possibly the Chinese. In the end, though, the French chose to remain in charge in Indochina, but to rally the Western bloc behind their war effort and bring the Indochinese populations into the war through mass mobilization laws approved by de Lattre and Bảo Đại in mid-1951. The French would thus do their best to obtain maximum support from the West while maintaining close control over the conduct of the war. The French expected the Americans to provide assistance but not to infringe French sovereignty in Indochina, given the sacrifices the Union forces were now making on the front lines for the "Free World." Similarly, the French also expected the leaders of their Associated States of Indochina to contain their own attacks on the legitimacy of French rule. The French were willing to transfer their war of pacification against the "rebels" to the Associated State of Vietnam's army, so that they could concentrate on defeating the PAVN. But only if the French remained in overall control.

In late 1950, Paris dispatched the prestigious General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny to Indochina as the new high commissioner and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces there. His tasks were to turn the military situation around and to demonstrate at the same time to the Americans the French resolve to fight on this second front of the Cold War in Asia (Korea being the other one). De Lattre's arrival in Vietnam coincided with the massive US retreat toward southern Korea in the face of the Chinese invasion of the north. In this dire situation, the French and the British feared that the Americans might use the nuclear bomb to turn the tide – and in the process suck them into a third world war. Some felt that the United States,

blinded by its anticommunism symbolized by the virulent McCarthy years, was the main threat to world peace. Others reminded their listeners of what had happened in the 1930s when the Europeans appeased the Nazis. To abandon an ally, no matter how far away, was not only disgraceful but also sure to encourage further aggression from the communist adversary.

From this point a new political line emerged in France explaining why the conflict in Indochina should continue. On the one hand, the French felt that it was important not to undertake any adventurous operations in Asia (beyond US involvement in Korea and that of the French in Indochina). Such actions in Asia would only strengthen the Soviet hand, since Moscow sought to divert Western attention from Europe. This, too, is why it was important not to trigger any direct Chinese interference in Indochina, since it would also require the West to turn away from Europe. At the same time, there would be no withdrawal from Asia, whether in Korea or Indochina. It was important to contain the communists at the Indochinese pass so as to prevent the rest of Southeast Asia from falling into hostile hands, as had occurred during World War II when the Japanese seized vast territories rich in rice and natural resources. Communist control of Southeast Asia could potentially change the global balance of power. The French were thus determined to hold on in Indochina with material assistance from the United States. The creation of a Vietnamese army would help them do that; it would also free up French troops for the defense of Europe where, it was thought at the time, the main threat resided.

The Chinese question was essential. The French fell somewhere between the hardline US view and the more supple British position, but they had to toe the American line on China, given their needs in Indochina which only the Americans could meet. London was more sensitive to the opinions of Asian leaders and was ready to extend a hand to the Chinese, in particular, in order to avoid an escalation of tensions on the part of the Americans. In a strange way, containing the Americans became almost as important as stopping the communists.

The French also wanted to avoid being sucked into an American crusade or being forced to continue the Indochina war beyond reason. By 1953, with the signing of the Korean ceasefire, the French were open to the idea of negotiating with the Chinese and the Soviets to end their support for Hồ Chí Minh's Vietnam. However, France did not have a bargaining chip to use in its negotiations with China. Only Washington had the ability to make the concessions that China wanted, such as entry into the United Nations, or resolution of the Taiwan question. The Americans, however, did not want to

make a global bargain with China over Korea, and were even less inclined to do so on Indochina.

Moreover, the French needed the United States to carry on in Indochina and only Washington could dissuade the Soviets, the Chinese, and the Vietnamese communists from going too far. French leaders believed that nothing would be more dangerous than a US return to the isolationism of the interwar period, should the French fail to convince the Americans of their mettle in Indochina. The US might be tempted to return to its peripheral strategy in Europe, leaving France vulnerable to invasion, as in 1940, or to dismantle the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Such a scenario would leave the French vulnerable not only to the Soviet threat but also to a resurgent (West) Germany, even a rearmed one. The French thus believed they had to carry on in Indochina in order for the Americans to remain committed to defending them in Europe.

During the second half of the Indochina War, the French sought to convince the Americans (and the British too) that they were part of the great power club, again, equal in standing at least to the United Kingdom. To fight in Indochina was to show the country's determination and virility, essential to changing the widespread image since 1940 of France being the "sick man" in the Atlantic alliance, divided and in decline, with a political regime that de Gaulle referred to as a "eunuch." The French bet on the geopolitics of the Indochina War to help them do this: Tonkin provided them with the geopolitical "bolt" or the "wall" in northern Vietnam. It was essential to the protection of Southeast Asia from the communists, just as France was essential to the Atlantic defense of Europe and Africa, thanks to its North African empire. Moreover, with their return to the club of the "Big Powers," the French could participate in major decisions taken by the "Free World" in a Cold War that was truly of a global kind. The absence of the French from major Allied conferences during World War II had badly injured France's global position since 1940. By continuing to fight in Indochina, the French had restored France international status, but had not yet been able to influence major decisions. The new questions raised by the intensification of the Cold War, symbolized by the Korean War, offered the French the chance to influence choices linked to their security and those of a global kind. The French strategic goal in the early 1950s was the creation of a NATO capable of supporting the French in Indochina and North Africa, led by three great powers: the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. In order to serve as a great power, however, the French required diplomatic, military, and financial assistance. Again, the French received this aid thanks to their war in Indochina. In other words, the

French were a great power based on "credit" and acquired it through a form of blackmail by pleading the country's limited resources, even while emphasizing the sacrifices of its army in the Far East.

As such, the de Lattre "business card" was designed in part to demonstrate to the United States that the French were fighting valiantly. The French Union forces had repulsed the offensive on the Tonkin Delta led by general Võ Nguyên Giáp in 1951 thanks in no small part to considerable American aid (airplanes, communications equipment, the refurbishing of ports, roads, and air bases, and the distribution of napalm) and the fact that the Chinese could not assist their Vietnamese allies effectively as they had to focus on fighting the Americans in Korea. De Lattre requested troop reinforcements from the metropole. However, Paris balked. Its priorities remained focused on Europe and North Africa. For de Lattre, the priority in 1951 had to be Indochina, even if it meant diverting troops briefly from the European theater for the simple reason that French credibility was on the line in the eyes of the Americans. While Europe remained important, the most immediate need was for France to prove its mettle in Asia, where the hot war was taking place.

Endgames, 1952–4

By 1952, it was clear that French forces in Indochina had lost the initiative de Lattre seemed to have provided them a year earlier. The French Union soldiers were fairly good at adapting to battle situations, innovating technically, in mounting pacification operations that incorporated American and British experiences. General Raoul Salan, the new French commander-in-chief who knew Indochina well, searched for ways of countering his adversary's maneuvers. It was said of Salan that "you will never have an Austerlitz with him; but you won't have a Waterloo either." Some observers complained that Salan reacted to present circumstances rather than devising a military strategy for the future. In any case, Salan's overriding goal was to hold his ground until a political solution could be reached.

Officials in Paris, however, were impatient for action, like officials in the United States and the United Kingdom, because the Indochinese problem prevented the French from dedicating themselves to the defense of Europe and to the ratification of the European Defence Community (EDC). Even though the French had devised the idea of a European army themselves in order to control the rearming of Germany and stave off a possible Soviet attack, the proposal soon divided the French political class. Critics worried that the French military risked becoming a minor player, reduced to checking

the Germans and the Soviets, while Britain would retain its status as a great power and partner of the United States. Britain's admission to the "nuclear club" in 1952 only heightened these fears.

To the Allies, France seemed inscrutable: the French asked for assistance and solidarity but they fought half-heartedly, saying they did not want to provoke the Chinese into intervening. They also resisted granting real independence to the Associated States. Yet France was essential to Allied plans for the defense of Europe and Southeast Asia (including British positions in Singapore and Malaysia). The French wanted more assistance but opposed the measures needed for victory: increased military spending, an expanded draft to send French boys to Indochina, independence for the Associated States, tolerance of American influence in Indochina, and alignment with Washington's hardline opposition to Beijing. The French had "Vietnamized" the war (and the casualties) but they still wanted Washington to pay the bill. They also wanted the armies of the Associated States to fight on but refused to give up command. Accusations of ingratitude were rife, between the Americans and the French, no less than between France and the Associated States.

1953 was a watershed year. The arrival of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the White House and the increased influence of the Republican Party created hope on the French side that American aid would increase its commitment to containing China. At the same time, American hostility toward Beijing reduced the chances of a political settlement in Indochina while increasing the pressure on France to ratify the EDC. The Americans stepped up their visits to Vietnam and vaunted their success in building a South Korean army, seemingly forgetting that the two wars were very different. They asked the French to launch a real offensive against the PAVN divisions rather than "trying to sponge up water without turning off the faucet."

The PAVN invasion of Laos in April 1953 confirmed that the war had become a truly Indochinese one. The highland populations and the opium trade became components of the war, just as people and rice were in the northern delta. French defenses could not be arranged in a linear fashion but were organized instead around strong points such as air bases. But these were difficult to supply over long distances. Paris refused to bring the Vietnamese invasion of Laos before the United Nations for fear of interference in French Indochinese affairs. Meanwhile, the French devaluated the Indochinese piaster, angering the leaders of the Associated States of Indochina who had not been consulted. Their demands for full independence became more strident. French business leaders stepped up their withdrawal from Indochina. An increasing number of French politicians began to call for an end to the

war without necessarily proposing a realistic solution to do it. They did so even though the cost of the Indochina War for France had actually diminished because of rising American assistance. Just as the British had closed their "dollar gap" by selling Malaysian rubber to the Americans, French soldiers in Indochina guaranteed the flow of dollars needed to shore up French currency reserves.

With the death of Stalin in spring 1953 and the Korean ceasefire that summer, new possibilities for peace emerged. French decision-makers hoped for a détente that could end many of their dilemmas. Some even imagined an alternative to the Atlantic Alliance: overtures to the Soviets, the Chinese, and even the DRVN for the purpose of ending the Indochina War and the EDC in Europe. This proposed diplomatic reset tempted both Gaullists and French communists, as well as the left in the MRP and the radicals gravitating around Mendès France. The potential shift toward a new foreign policy track, one that foreshadowed de Gaulle's in the 1960s, was a major development in French politics.

But the Americans had other ideas. Having accepted a stalemate in Korea, they now pushed France to take the offensive in Indochina while warning China of dire consequences should Beijing intervene directly. The Laniel government's strategy in mid-1953 appeared a coherent attempt to balance these competing priorities. It proposed to "perfect" (*parfaire*) the independence of the Associated States of Indochina while simultaneously taking the offensive with the Navarre Plan. Both moves aimed to mollify the Americans while opening the way for negotiations. An increase in American aid would strengthen the Associated States armed forces in order to prepare the way for a hand-off of power when the time came. Laniel also wanted to take advantage of the spirit of détente that had emerged to enter into the multilateral negotiations with other "great powers" in which France had traditionally shone. But Laniel had no interest in striking a grand bargain with Moscow for the sake of getting out of Indochina. Peace in Indochina would not be purchased at the price of abandoning the European Defense Community.

Demands on the French from the Associated States of Indochina, especially from Vietnam and Cambodia, to grant them full independence made it ever harder to justify the war to the French public. It would also make negotiations more complicated when the time finally came. Some State of Vietnam (SVN) leaders wanted to negotiate with the DRVN in order to avoid a Korean-like partition of the country. Others refused any contact with the enemy. Meanwhile, Paris failed to communicate clearly to Navarre that he would have to adjust his ambitions to the actual means at his disposal. Partly due to pressure from the Americans, who wanted him to strike the enemy on the battlefield, Navarre

changed his initial plans to focus on the deltas and took a stand at Điện Biên Phủ in northwest Vietnam in order to block an enemy march on Laos. The Americans by early 1954 were financing almost 75% of the French war effort in Indochina and did not want the French to negotiate with the communist camp. French visitors to Điện Biên Phủ before the battle were convinced that the DRVN would be in a stronger position the longer the war dragged on. But they opposed any negotiations with the DRVN even though they agreed that only a political solution could end the war. In early 1954, several of them, as well as some officers, began to suggest the solution of dividing Vietnam in two.

In early 1954, there was still hope on the French side. By underestimating the capacity and the determination of the DRVN to win in set-piece battle, the French still believed they could stop any enemy offensive wherever it occurred. Such was Navarre's confidence that he did not abandon his plans to liberate lower-central Vietnam, no doubt with an eye on a possible division of the country at the negotiating table. The minister of foreign affairs, Georges Bidault, convinced the other powers to add the Indochinese question to an upcoming meeting in Geneva a few months later. The discussions would include China.

The French now had what they wanted: a central role in international negotiations. If there was ever a time for the French to make good on their "Indochinese calling card" (carte de visite), as a great power, this was it: they had to convince the Americans that they were committed to containing Beijing and Moscow, but also needed to juggle pressure coming from the French Communist Party's propaganda machine calling for direct negotiations with Hồ Chí Minh. They also had to consider the possibility of American sabotage at the peace talks. Yet they also knew that the Chinese and Soviets would be reluctant to see France replaced in Indochina by a more aggressive United States.

For French leaders, the spring of 1954 was extremely tense. On the one hand, they worried about the intense public attention focused on Điện Biện Phủ, and on how the fall of the garrison would recall the humiliations of 1940. (Newspaper press runs following the surrender were the highest in French history, surpassed only by France's soccer victory in the 1998 World Cup.) On the other hand, leaders also feared that US intervention to save Điện Biên Phủ would lead to the internationalization of the conflict. In the end, American inaction enabled France to take the lead at the negotiations, despite the defeat at Điện Biên Phủ. It also allowed Paris to distance itself somewhat from Washington, and to deal directly with the Soviets and Chinese.

Negotiations on Indochina began at Geneva on May 8, 1954, the day after Điện Biên Phủ fell to the PAVN. As the MRP minister of foreign affairs and a man deeply involved in the Indochina War from the start, Georges Bidault

wanted to show that France was ready to carry on if an acceptable peace could not be reached. However, the effects of the resounding French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ remained unclear. Would the DRVN launch a new offensive on the delta? Had the French lost a battle or was it the war itself? The French asked the Americans to issue clear warnings to dissuade the enemy from going any further. The military priority was to preserve the French Expeditionary Corps. Meanwhile, France's Vietnamese allies in Indochina seemed to have lost all faith in the French. For one, Bidault did not include Bảo Đại in the diplomacy at Geneva, going against the principles of the French Union. The French entered into contact with Hồ Chí Minh's Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, in Vietnam and at Geneva. The Americans asked the French to hold on to Tonkin, essential in their view to protecting Southeast Asia, and to accord full independence to the Associated States of Indochina but without proposing any kind of concrete assistance to the Associated States. To the French, the Americans seemed to want to undermine the Geneva Conference. The French wanted to negotiate an end to hostilities in Indochina with international guarantees, including a political solution to accompany a ceasefire. The division of Vietnam into two halves at Geneva quickly presented itself as the best solution for reaching a negotiated settlement, with the DRVN in charge of the northern half and the French and their Vietnamese allies at the helm of a southern state whose political nature remained to be defined. The new French leader, Pierre Mendès France, endorsed such a solution in principle when he became President du Conseil on June 18, 1954.

Mendès France was less worried about the Cold War balance of power than the need to reach a settlement, while keeping the Americans "on board." The British concurred. The Americans were not absolutely opposed to a negotiated settlement but pushed for the creation of a Southeast Asian security organization so as to show the "Free World"'s commitment to the region and facilitate a possible future intervention if needed. Committed to getting out of Indochina, Mendès France relied on alarmist statements made by his generals to justify his desire to end the war and the concessions needed to achieve that goal. Yet he still wanted everyone on board, unwilling to be known as the leader who sold out Indochina to the communists. He approved of the French Army's decision to pull back to areas around Hanoi in Operation Auvergne, allowing the PAVN to seize large areas previously under French control. The combined effect of the French Army's withdrawal to urban centers after Điện Biện Phủ and the opening of negotiations without the direct participation of Bảo Đại's government sowed panic and anger throughout the ranks of the Associated State of Vietnam, including mass desertions in

Figure 7.1 Representatives of the Associated States of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam sign treaties with France that would give economic, financial, and monetary independence to the Indochinese states (December 31, 1954).
Source: Bettmann / Contributor / Bettmann / Getty Images.

its armed forces. Bảo Đại's newly named prime minister, Ngô Đình Diệm, protested French actions. The situation became so tense that the general in charge of the French Expeditionary Corps, Paul Ely, actually feared his Vietnamese allies would turn on his troops out of their anger for what they perceived as a French betrayal.

After Geneva, some of Mendès France's compatriots accused him of failing to extend his hand sufficiently to the Vietnamese and Chinese communists while others agreed with American criticisms that he had conceded too much in the talks. Both groups complained that he had sacrificed the possibility of a continued postwar French presence in Indochina. His diplomatic success in Geneva became a failure to preserve French influence in Asia. Worse, this French policy effectively left the Americans in southern Vietnam and the Vietnamese communists in the North – a situation almost certain to breed future conflict.

In the wake of the Geneva Accords, signed on July 21, 1954, the French could have remained in Indochina to serve as the guarantor of the ceasefire and political settlement (Figure 7.1). But it was not to be. Both Vietnams were

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deeply skeptical of French motives. In the North, the DRVN state demanded French cooperation on key provisions of the implementation of the Geneva Accords, including the organization of elections in 1956, the transfer of people, property, and equipment between the two zones, and the return of prisoners of war. In the south, Ngô Đình Diệm's State of Vietnam (soon to be reinvented as the Republic of Vietnam) aspired to complete the process of decolonization and ultimately spurned Ely's offer for continued French aid and advice. Any remaining French desire to remain in Indochina was removed by the outbreak of the war in Algeria in November 1954.[7] In 1956, the last units of the French Expeditionary Corps withdrew from Saigon. In 1958, French legislators easily agreed without fanfare or controversy to set the official end of the Indochina War retroactively to August 11, 1954. The process of sorting out the complex and contradictory French memories of the conflict would prove far more difficult.

7 Pierre Grosser, "La politique indochinoise de Pierre Mendès France après les accords de Genève," *Relations internationales* 2 (146) (2011), 59–75.