

# **Prelude to the First Indochina War: New Light on the Fontainebleau Conference of July-September 1946 and Aftermath**

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**Abstract:**

In the wake of the Viet Minh “ August Revolution ” of 1945 leading to the proclamation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) , the French government began negotiations with both the Viet Minh and the Nationalist Chinese for a return of the French army to Vietnam north of the 16th parallel. In this transaction, the Viet Minh revealed themselves willing to accept French rule to rid Vietnam of Chinese occupation, especially as Ho Chí Minh feared it would become permanent. As a less well remembered phase of modern Vietnamese history, this article steps out the three key conventions surrounding the Franco-Viet Minh entente, namely, the Accords signed in Hanoi on March 6 , 1946 , its diplomatic sequel at Dalat in May 1946 and, finally, the Fontainebleau Conference in August-September the same year. It then traces the breakdown of the entente, with especial reference to the events in Haiphong and, in highly summary form, the military sequels down until the French denouement at Dien Bien Phu.

**Keywords:** Indochina, Fontainbleau, Viet Minh, Ho Chi Minh, France

Although firmly installed in Hanoi following the August Revolution of 1945 , the newly minted Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) also faced down intense political and military pressure from the Chinese Nationalist forces and their local protégés who had entered Vietnam north of the 16<sup>th</sup> parallel to take the surrender of Japanese forces. Recalling historical precedent, it then appeared to DRV President Ho Chi Minh and his circle that the Chinese intended to make their presence permanent. In a post-famine situation, the presence of over 200,000 Nationalist troops also added an intolerable burden upon precarious food security (See Gunn , 2011) . In February 1946 , Paris began negotiations with both the DRV and the Nationalists for a return of the French army to Vietnam north of the 16th

parallel. With the Sino-French agreement of February 28, 1946, pre-war French territorial and diplomatic concessions in China were traded for Nationalist Chinese cooperation in Vietnam. By this stage, the Nationalists were also confronting a major challenge from their communist adversaries in northern China. In this Faustian pact, the Viet Minh were willing to accept a French role to end Chinese occupation.

In drawing attention to this little-known period of modern Vietnamese history, this article seeks to capture the nuances of the Franco-Viet Minh entente of March-December 1946, especially in the face of the Nationalist Chinese "menace" allowing that, in the light of a significant political accord signed between the two adversaries in Hanoi, namely the March 6, 1946 "Preliminary Convention," a future French role in Indochina seemed assured. After all, as Ho Chi Minh informed his major French interlocutor Jean Sainteny (1953: 168) in October 1945, Vietnam needed French teachers, engineers and capital. But the risks of conflict were also embedded in the March 6, 1946 Convention, subsequent negotiations at Dalat in May 1946, as well as in the Modus Vivendi of September 14, 1946 arising out of the Fontainebleau Conference. As suggested, the March 6, 1946 Accords represented a set of compromises between the two sides, albeit dogged by vastly different visions of the future as much by imprecision in interpretations. Essentially recognizing the DRV, and with a pledge for future elections, the Accords represented a high watermark in postwar relations but one never achieved again. As described by historian Stein Tonnesson (2010: 234-59), the 1946-49 period in French-Vietnamese relations was one of lost chances and missed opportunities. Especially, this article argues, the chances of an enduring Franco-Viet Minh entente were always limited, not only by the tenuous outcome of the Fontainebleau Conference, and the earlier stalemate at Dalat, but right back to the Preliminary Convention of March 6 1946, especially its military protocols. Without diminishing Ho Chi Minh's willingness to compromise with France to defend hard won independence, along with his initial caution in seeking communist allies, the article also traces the breakdown of the entente, with especial reference to the events in Haiphong leading to war and, in highly summary form, the military sequels down until the French denouement at Dien Bien Phu.

### **The March 6, 1946 Preliminary Convention (the Ho Chi Minh-Sainteny Agreements)**

Notwithstanding its de facto declaration of independence on September 19, 1945, by early 1946, the fledgling DRV lacked the capacity to preempt a French return. On the other hand, the French were realistic enough to conclude that they would have to enter into some kind of

power-sharing arrangement with Ho Chi Minh, just as communist deputies took their place in the French National Assembly. As a former Gaullist emissary heading Free Free intelligence operations against the Japanese, Sainteny would not only lead the negotiations with Ho Chi Minh, culminating in the agreements of March 1946, but would enjoy a level of trust with the Vietnamese revolutionary that would continue through the dark days of the American war. Following a first meeting on October 1, 1945, Sainteny would be in regular consultation with Ho Chi Minh. As with other French figures who had met Ho during these months, Sainteny painted a picture of an intelligent and astute person committed to the independence of his country and, in the circumstances, also prepared to accept a period of "autonomy." Presenting himself as an "Indochinese Gandhi," Ho also gave the impression of eschewing force. His love of children was already evident. The Vietnamese leader also gave the impression that he preferred France (or French communists) over other potential supporters. But, just as the French looked to identifying hardliners and softliners within the DRV, it was also understood that Ho still had to deal with the *tongbo* or central committee, all northerners, all Moscow-graduates (Sainteny 1953: 168-9).

#### *Internal French Politics*

Domestic French politics also imposed constraints upon policy-makers. To wit, the communists in France emerged postwar with both high prestige and a place in government and threatened even more gains in forthcoming elections. Under the leadership of Maurice Thorez (Vice President of France, 1946-47), the French Communist Party (PCF) were also opposed to war with Ho Chi Minh, but they were also pro-France. France was also plagued by internal divisions such as erupted following liberation from the Nazis and, locally in Indochina, between old colonial hands and Gaullists. According to journalist Jacques Despeuch (1953: 14), and many would agree, the appointment of the autocratic Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu as the top French civilian official in Indochina (High Commissioner) was a disaster, as the man knew nothing about Indochina. On the other hand, the Vichyite Admiral Jean Decoux, obviously knowledgeable, was escorted out of the country back to France by gendarmes, disgraced for losing French face to the Vietnamese (Navarre 1958: 15). As Sainteny relates (1953: 168), these and other domestic French divisions imposed constraints upon a unified French negotiating position with the Vietnamese, just as the eclipse of the French communists in the spring of 1947 also pushed Hanoi into abandoning their diplomatic line for one of force.

After numerous conversations and contacts, by February 16, 1946, Sainteny gained his first impression that Ho Chi Minh was agreeable to an accord. Even so, by not mentioning

the “ independence ” word, the French position did not deviate from the unhelpful and inflexible Gaullist conception - the bottom line as far as d’Argenlieu was concerned - of “ Etat Libre ” ( free state ” ) within an Indochina Federation and the French Union (See Sainteny 1953: 175-6) . As pioneer American specialist on the Viet Minh, George Tanham (1961: xvii) , has elaborated, French failure to define what they meant as “ free state ” - perhaps deliberately - was a failure that was also the germ of future serious difficulties. Obviously, neither side really respected the agreements and further conferences in the spring and summer of 1946 , a reference to the Dalat conferences, merely served to underscore the irreconcilable differences between the two sides. Even September discussions, a reference to the Fontainebleau conference broaching economic and culture matters, skirted the real issues.

Even so, as Sainteny told Charlton and Montcrieff (1979: 28) long after the events , “ what we were seeking was to avoid conflict [even]. . . at the price of accepting a Vietnamese government which included four or five communists - even if the head of this government was a communist, in the person of Ho Chi Minh - that didn’t seem to me too high a price to pay. ” But Sainteny’s political agreement reached with the government in Hanoi after many months of negotiation (freedom within the French Union) , or a government of national union, lasted barely several months. Non-communist parties and identities were the big losers in this period.

Fundamentally, Sainteny was also constrained in his negotiations by both Paris (working through Comindo, the key French agency in charge of Indochina affairs and answering directly to the Prime Minister of the French Provisional Government) , and d’Argenlieu with his office in Saigon. As spelled out in a missive by Comindo to d’Argenlieu in six bullet points, the following were germane to any agreement.

- First, the Provisional Government of the Republic of France recognized the right of Vietnam to constitute a “ self-government ” within the Indochinese Federation and the French Union.
- Second, in line with the DRV desire to welcome French advisers and technicians, then France will look to administrative planning for this venture.
- Third, that Vietnam guarantee to France the maintenance and eventual development of economic interests on the territory it had acquired.
- Fourth, that Vietnam and France adopt the same position in the cultural domain.
- Fifth, that Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) will freely decide its own future position versus Vietnam.
- Sixth, that the Hanoi government declare itself ready to warmly welcome the French army in conformity with the access granted in relation to relief of Chinese troops.

Backed by France, the High Commissioner (d'Argenlieu) should be prepared to conclude in its name an accord with Hanoi on these terms. The accord would then immediately come into force. The High Commissioner (or his representative) should then request Ho Chi Minh to confirm his acceptance in writing to be made public at a determined time. The High Commissioner should be prepared to conclude an accord on these terms with the Hanoi government " which will facilitate with all its powers the installation of (French) troops and will use its authority to prevent incidents " (AOM SLOTFOM XIV, XI , 3 tél Comindo à Haus-saire, Saigon, d'Argenlieu, Paris, Feb . 20 , 1946 " Apropos d'Argenlieu intervue Ho Chi Minh, Feb. 17 , 1946) .

A second part of this message was directed at Sainteny then in Hanoi (and signed off by d'Argenlieu) . As it commanded , " preoccupied as you are by the negotiations, do not delay to reach a conclusion . " However, he pointed out, there were also a number of substantial modifications to the clauses assented to by Ho Chi Minh. First, the integration of Vietnam into the Indochina Federation and the French Union, as accepted by President Ho Chi Minh, implied that France would represent Vietnam abroad and would be charged on its territory with the protection of French and foreign interests. Accordingly, French diplomatic missions would be introduced into French Indochina to assume this role. At the same time, nothing implied that France would recognize the merger of the southern (Cochinchina) army with that of the north (Tonkin) . It was also imperative that Ho Chi Minh acknowledge that the populations of Cochinchina would decide their own future. In other words, if France accepted to deal officially with the Hanoi government, it did not imply acceptance of the principal of the three *kys* (north, center and south) forming one political and territorial entity (Ibid.) . Obviously, such a bargaining position placed Sainteny between a rock and a hard place, especially as the unity principle was Hanoi's sticking point carried through to Fontainebleau. As mentioned below, Sainteny would also have a role at future negotiations in France later in the year.

In the event, the accord, sometimes dubbed the Ho Chi Minh-Sainteny Agreements, was signed in Hanoi on March 6, 1946 by Sainteny, representing the High Commission for France (d'Argenlieu) , and with the DRV government represented by President Ho Chi Minh and Council of Ministers special delegate, Vu Hong Khanh. Also present on the Vietnamese side was Nguyen Tong Tam, minister of foreign affairs and VNQDD (Vietnamese Nationalist Party) leader, Hoang Minh Giap , " secretary and eminence gris " of Ho Chi Minh (who would subsequently accompany him to France) . Also witnessing the signing ceremony were three individuals who had assisted Sainteny, namely future High Commissioner Léon Pignon, Louis Caput of the Tonkin section of the French Socialist Party, and

General Raoul Salan, along with other French, British, Chinese, and American Allied representatives. As mentioned below, the atmosphere was also clouded by the near simultaneous Chinese attack upon French forces then arriving in Haiphong. Neither were all on the DRV side convinced as to an agreement acknowledging the legitimacy of French forces in the north and the deal had to be sold to supporters of the revolution, just as the Accords also presented a political risk for Ho Chi Minh. Notably, on March 7, Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap were obliged to defend the Accord before a crowd of 100,000 in Hanoi.

In summary, the basic terms of the March 6, 1946 Franco-Vietnam Accords devolved upon the notion that France recognized the DRV "as a free state," having its own government, parliament, army and treasury, and belonging to the "Indo-Chinese Federation and to the French Union." Unification of the three *ky* (Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina), would be left to a referendum. On the other hand, the DRV proclaimed itself ready to "amicably" accept the French army when it relieved Chinese forces. Entering into immediate force, hostilities were to cease immediately with military forces in their respective positions, so as to "create the favorable climate necessary to the immediate opening off friendly and frank negotiations." Hanoi, Saigon, or Paris, were reserved as potential sites for a future conference. In an annex to the agreement it was decided that relief forces would comprise 10,000 Vietnamese including those under Vietnamese military control, and 15,000 French, including French forces then located in the territories of Vietnam north of the 16th parallel. These would be French forces of metropolitan origin exclusively, except for soldiers guarding Japanese prisoners. In turn, these forces would be placed under supreme French command with the assistance of Vietnamese representatives. Mixed commissions would be created at all echelons to ensure liaison in a spirit of friendly cooperation between the French and Vietnamese forces. French and Vietnamese forces were to be stationed in especially designated demarcated zones. The French were disallowed from using Japanese prisoners for military ends (Lèvy 1946; See text in Sainteny 1953: 182-4).

According to a French intelligence report, the main obstacles delaying the signing of the accords had been, first the question of Cochinchina becoming a component of Vietnam, the question of foreign diplomatic representation (such as would be held over for the Paris negotiations); second, issues relating to the military Convention annexed to the treaty, specifically relating to the disposition of French forces. Obviously subject to much bargaining and discussion, French responsibility fell into three categories, first, guarding Japanese, who were to be repatriated within six months. Second, guarding the border and maintaining order. Third, disposing strategic forces "without restriction." In the wake of the treaty, the

major propaganda themes emerging from the north were unification of Cochinchina with Tonkin without the need for a referendum, a ceasefire in Cochinchina and the upcoming negotiations in Paris, already made public (AOM 14/SLOTFOM XIV, II (XIV, XI, 2) " Note d'Information au sujet des récentes événements et de leurs répercussions au Tonkin, et en Cochinchine, " Capt. Borel, Chef de 2ième Bureau, SWGDN, Saigon, Aug.7, 1946) .

To recap, as French military historian, Teulière summarizes, two important innovations were at issue. First, the accord recognized Vietnam as a " free state " within the Indochina Federation and the French Union, thus conferring the right to support its own government, parliament, army and finances. Second, the destiny of Cochinchina would be determined by a free election. The words unity and independence were not broached but nevertheless implied, and otherwise remained to be defined according to Article 3 of the accord, under diplomatic relations of Vietnam with foreign countries; the future status of Indochina; and French economic and cultural interests in Indochina. Moreover, the Viet Minh government pledged to welcome the French armed forces to take over from their Chinese counterparts according to international accords. As specified in an annexed accord, this would be a mixed Viet Minh-French force (10,000 Vietnamese and 15,000 French) under a French commander with Vietnamese deputies, and a joint commission to maintain collaboration.

#### *Acting upon the March 6, 1946 Accords*

Almost immediately (and timed for the Haiphong high tide) , French forces under General Philippe Leclerc, the liberator of Paris and French representative to the Japanese surrender in Tokyo, began to arrive by sea and from Yunnan in China overland. Aside from the clash with Chinese forces at Haiphong on March 6, 1946 , this movement of French forces to new barracks proceeded peacefully. On March 16 , Sainteny (1953: 190) had gained agreement from the Chinese Nationalist command in Hanoi headed by General Lu Han as to the entry into Hanoi of French forces. Once again, and to the obvious satisfaction of the French community, the tricolor flew in Hanoi. With French troops arriving in Hanoi on March 18 , Leclerc quickly established cordial relations with Ho Chi Minh. A military convention (Salan-Giap) spelled out details on troop deployments and movements (although was silent on Cochinchina) . French forces moved into Hanoi, Haiphong, Hong Gai, Nam Dinh, Hue, Danang, Hai Duing, Dien Bien Phu and border regions. With Leclerc personally escorted in the streets of Hanoi by Giap, the Vietnamese showed constraint. The exception to this happy " cohabitation " of several weeks, were the virulently anti-French nationalist militias, the Tu-Ve (Sainteny 1953: 192-3) . For the Viet Minh, the Accord led to the final, albeit delayed and disorderly departure of the Chinese. As mentioned below, the Accord also per-

mitted the Viet Minh to do away with the VNQDD and the pro-China Dong Minh Hoi (DMH) (largely eliminated or imprisoned in the summer of 1946 during Ho's absence in France) . This operation was left to Giap. Nevertheless, the war continued in the south (Teuliere 1972: 38-42) .

Obviously the elimination of the anti-Viet Minh forces was part of the quid pro quo behind the signing of the accords on the part of the Viet Minh, just as the pro-Chinese parties accused the Viet Minh of selling out to the French. Nevertheless, according to a French intelligence report, the VNQDD and DMH together posed a dangerous threat to the Provisional Government. But rather than going over to the offensive, they also played a waiting game, seeking to reap victory from the negative propaganda attached to popular discontent with the Viet Minh bargain with the French (and as the contradictions in the bargain became irreconcilable) . As the report further reveals, as of April 1946 , the VNQDD forces then controlled the Red River, with the DMH troops controlling the Lang Son region. Ahead of the departure of the Chinese forces, the VNQDD leader, Vu Hang Khanh, made active preparations for an armed showdown with the Viet Minh. Meanwhile, DMH leader Nguyen Mai Thanh backed off to Lang Son to take command of his forces for similar reasons. At the village level, the DMH self-defense troops were in a permanent state of alert while other forces were regrouped towards potential combat sectors. Only the incident of March 29 , whereupon French forces reoccupied the finance building , " united " the three parties (Viet Minh, DMH and VNQDD) in their mass protests, at least in the way of seeking to demonstrate their authority over the masses. Nevertheless, it was Ho Chi Minh who called off the strikes and boycotts that accompanied this incident. As the French report acknowledged, in playing his delicate diplomatic and political balancing act, Ho Chi Minh could capitalize upon the relief of the population at the departure of the Chinese. However, as also acknowledged, an excessively Francophile attitude could also potentially compromise him (with the hardliners) (Capt. Borel, Chef de 2ième Bureau, op.cit.) .

#### *Baie d'Along (March 24) and the Road to Paris*

On March 24 , in a ceremony that also involved General Leclerc and other French officials, d'Argenlieu met with Ho Chi Minh for the first time aboard the French warship *Emile Bertin* in the Baie d'Along, with Ho flying in from Hanoi's Gia Long airport aboard a Catalina accompanied by Sainteny, the non-communist novelist, Nguyen Tuong Tam, and Ho Chi Minh loyalist, Hoang Minh Giam. Over d'Argenlieu's objection, Ho Chi Minh then made known his preference of Paris over Saigon or Dalat as the future venue of a conference (Sainteny 1953: 194-5; Neville 2007: 143) . He could thereby put distance for himself from

the nationalists (and therefore avoid meeting d'Argenlieu while moving onto a larger stage) . In the interim, as also agreed, a Vietnamese " friendship " delegation headed by future DRV premier Phan Van Dong arrived in Paris on April 26 , departing on May 16 following various symbolic receptions (Sainteny 1953: 197-9) .

Meantime, returning to Saigon from his meeting with Ho, d'Argenlieu set about creating the so-called Provisional Government of the Republic of Cochinchina with southern landowner Dr. Nguyen Van Thinh as President. But, as Shipway (1996: 190-1) records, by now the Minister of Overseas France, Maurice Moutet, an old confidant of Ho Chi Minh, was having reservations about Saigon's Cochinchina policy, especially with the Paris meeting looming. In the advent, the government was formally inaugurated on June 1, 1946 , fully answering to d'Argenlieu.

#### *Sizing up the Democratic Republic of Vietnam*

More generally, as revealed in a French intelligence summary of May-June 1946 , the French viewed northern Vietnam (Tonkin) as the political center of all Indochina, just as Ho Chi Minh had made Hanoi the DRV capital. Inter alia, Tonkin had been the territory in which French forces had made their stand over the longest period of time, thanks to direct support offered by the Chinese army and indirect support offered by the American OSS. Ambiguously, the northerners were viewed as more " natural and exalted " relative to their fellows in the center and south. At the same time, as demonstrated by the devastating famine of the 1944-45 , Tonkin was the poorest part of Indochina and it sought to profit from the agricultural riches of the south (AOM Indo NF , " Aperçus d'ensemble sur la Situation au Tonkin, " c. May-June 1946) .

It was believed that Ho Chi Minh was also seeking international support from, variously, the Soviet Union, China, and the United States. The Soviet Union was seen as lending ideological support. On the other hand, the US was seen as seeking Vietnamese economic resources, the management of ports, namely Haiphong, potentially rivaling Shanghai and possibly serving as a naval base in the advent of a future Soviet-American war. On its part, China sought to extend its empire in line with tradition alongside a long history of pillage arising from neighboring Yunnan and Guangxi provinces (Ibid) . In fact, as discussed below, the Soviet Union was hands off at this juncture, the US had no demonstrable commercial designs on Indochina, and the claims of the Nationalist Chinese would of course be eclipsed with the Chinese communist victory (Ibid. ) .

Ho Chi Minh was also viewed as preaching resistance to the French from within all Indochina. Although a number of nationalist parties then existed in Indochina, he sought with

the departure of the French to establish a kind of mandarin state around a group of pro-independence intellectuals. According to the French analyst, in a fundamental misreading of Viet Minh dynamics, this elite-centered set up had had little impact upon the masses after years of trying. At the same time, Ho sought through his person and army to eliminate French influence from Indochina, targeting French capitalists accused of exploiting the agricultural and mineral resources of the land and the distribution of its resources. This program was designed to appeal to all down to the last coolie (Ibid).

Although understood by the French as a Marxist, Ho Chi Minh was also seen as recapturing the spirit of the old nationalists who wished to reunite the three regions or *ky* of the Vietnam empire. More than that, he was understood to uphold a covert plan to unite Laos and Cambodia with Vietnam. Although Cambodia's "independence" had been quickly secured thanks to French (actually British) actions, by March-April 1946, King (Sihanouk) was already facing down the challenge of an independence movement. Nevertheless, fearful of becoming "a simple Vietnamese colony," as the king's brother had made known, Sihanouk had agreed in May to a return to the status quo of 1939, otherwise accepting French protection. The recent French reoccupation of Tonkin had also revealed to many Cambodians that the restoration of French power in Indochina was just a matter of time. As for Laos, nothing was defined, but with operations still underway. While Ho Chi Minh viewed Tonkin and Annam as a bloc, the same could not be said of Cochinchina, which the French believed was propitious terrain for them. The June 1 accord signed with Cochinchina by France (d'Argenlieu's diplomatic coup) proclaiming its autonomy was viewed as a setback for the Viet Minh (Ibid). Striking a far more cautious line on the DRV than that portrayed by Sainteny, it is clear from this account that divisions existed within the French camp such as would later emerge in ways that would blunt the diplomatic approach.

### **The Dalat Accords of May 9, 1946**

With the passage of time, the French had to face up to certain realities namely that, although the reach of the state was weak in the countryside, the DRV under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh was firmly established in Hanoi, and that a range of problems could only be solved through dialogue. This shared view led the French and the Viet Minh to meet in the Dalat resort town in the southern highlands, present-day Lam Dong province, leading to the French-Vietnamese Modus Vivendi of May 9, 1946. Vo Nguyen Giap was the main Vietnamese representative and, as Neville (2007: 145) points out, "was far more anti-French than older nationalists like Ho Chi Minh." As a preliminary convention, it was always ex-

pected that the March 6 Accords would be followed up with more detailed conversations. The discussions at Dalat not only dwelt upon the terms and interpretation of the Ho Chi Minh-Sainteny Accords, but entered into more detailed discussions, especially on the proposed French Federation.

According to a French intelligence report, a ceasefire had been declared in Saigon parallel with the opening of negotiations between representatives of France and the Viet Minh. Several guidelines were established for French negotiators. First, there would be no discussions with "dissident troublemakers," operating under the cover of nationalism but continuing to act as bandits against their compatriots (code for the DMH and VNQDD). Second, it was acknowledged that the Viet Minh included honorable and sincere elements with whom "normal" exchanges of view could be conducted. But negotiations with the Viet Minh would not imply their recognition as representatives of Indochinese opinion. Third, other political fractions would equally be consulted prior to determining the definitive statute of the Federation (AOM Ind NF/366/2907 Directive d'Information, No. 14, "Les Négociations Franco-Annamites," nd). As implied by the briefing, the French were obviously holding out for a formula that included political pluralism. But it was also evident that the DRV was equally adamant in excluding all other non-communist voices.

From a strictly military point of view, the Dalat Conference leading to the French-Vietnamese Modus Vivendi of May 9, 1946, set down the following modalities on military questions; first, the maintenance of French forces in Indochina, second, cooperation between the French and Vietnamese forces under a French command, and third, military instruction for Vietnamese forces. Specific to the maintenance of a French military presence in Indochina, zones of occupation, no go zones, non-recruitment zones for the French forces, etc, were also included. Although a French command structure was agreed, for matters of self-esteem, as the French observed, the Vietnamese refused to reveal their internal military structures ("Aperçus d'ensemble sur la Situation au Tonkin," op.cit.).

As Paris summarized the proceedings, the 1st Preparatory Conference at Dalat offered opportunities for the Vietnamese delegates to define their position on federal problems. But no agreement had been reached between France and the (Democratic) Republic of Vietnam (now going by that name for the first time in French correspondence) and the conference was deemed a failure. In the French vision, the official language of the federation would be French, alongside the use of vernacular languages as the official languages of the constituent states. In this vision, there would be a 60 seat assembly headed by a president with 10 seats reserved for French interests alongside 10 seats for each of the constituent states. This assembly would vote on budgets. Conflict between federal powers and local state interests

would be adjudicated by a supreme court. Needless to say, the concerns of the DRV delegation were for the unification of the three *kys* and the timetable for a referendum. As an internal French document outlined, a referendum had to be conducted by secret ballot, universal suffrage with both male and female participation, organized in each region and assisted by an electoral commission. But, the document stated, it could only be conducted in a “ calm and peaceful ” atmosphere at a date to be decided in a future accord (MAE Asie Océanie 1944-1955 Indochine 52) . Still, to the dismay of the Vietnamese side, the 1st Dalat Conference was silent on plans for the agreed referendum for unity, at a time when d’Argenlieu was preparing to endorse a provisional Cochinchina government (Tønnesson 2010: 79) .

*The 2nd Dalat Conference, August 1, 1946.*

The so-named Second Dalat Conference, of August 1, 1946 was emphatically not part of the Sainteny-Ho Chi Minh agreements, nor was it even on the agenda of discussions at Bai d’Along or at the 1<sup>st</sup> Dalat Conference. Not only was it outside of the larger Franco-Vietnamese entente, it was a deliberate attempt by Saigon-based d’Argenlieu to install the French Federation and to keep Vietnam divided. As described below, news of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dalat Conference very nearly derailed the upcoming Fontainebleau Conference.

Not surprisingly, federal issues became the object of the 2nd Conference of Dalat. Opening on August 1 , 1946 , and presided over by d’Argenlieu, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dalat Conference brought together representatives of Cambodia, Laos, and the “ autonomous state ” of Cochinchina, precursor to the State of Vietnam, in turn the Republic of Vietnam, or Saigon-regime as it came to be known in the north. Not only was the DRV not invited, an issue which would interrupt the progress of the almost simultaneous Fontainebleau Conference, as discussed below, but d’Argenlieu apparently acted without the unanimous consent of the Paris government. As Tønnesson (2010: 73) summarizes, d’Argenlieu held that the March Accords were only binding for Tonkin and he was adamant to sign up separate agreements with Cambodia (January 7) , Laos (August 27) , and Cochinchina (June 3) . He was also prepared to site the new capital of the federation in Dalat.

As Tønnesson (2010: 79: 81) further reveals, contrary to instruction from Comindo not to undermine the March accords, d’Argenlieu acted by fiat in setting up the Cochinchina Republic, notwithstanding mixed signals from Paris, obliging Comindo to fall in line several days later. Lacking precise instructions from Paris as to the 2nd Dalat Conference, d’Argenlieu’s actions practically provoked a French cabinet crisis, especially besetting Minister Moutet, who wished d’Argenlieu’s replacement, as well as Prime Minister Bidault. However, it was not that Paris supported Vietnamese unification, it was merely concerned

at the ill-timing of d'Argenlieu's moves at a time of delicate diplomatic negotiations.

Not surprisingly, d'Argenlieu was obliged to defend his actions to Comindo. In a telegram of August 2, he lashed out at the "false allegations" of the Viet Minh delegation in Paris, also referring to his earlier telegrams (July 12 and 26). [In fact in an unsigned telegram to Comindo of July 24, d'Argenlieu or his office signaled that the meeting would open in Dalat on August 1 attended by delegates from Cambodia, Laos, Cochinchina and the peoples of Annam and the southern highlands.] Ambiguously, he also claimed to be acting upon instructions of the Minister for Overseas France (telegram of April 3). As he argued, the conference would permit the views of the "true friends" of France and, "Nothing here contradicts the March 6 Accords" which, "*n'ont pas reserve en IC au seul gouvernement de Hanoi le droit deliberer*" (did not reserve to the Hanoi government the exclusive entitlement to deliberate on Indochina). Besides, he added, France should not lose sight of the fact that it was in the presence of those to whom "falsehoods are a normal means of action," persons hardly dignified to offer "righteousness lessons" and to demand respect for the words "they themselves endlessly violate" (AOM SLOTFOM XIV, II (XIX, XI, 2 tél official Haussaire Indo, Saigon, à Comité Indochine, d'Argenlieu, Aug. 2, 1946).

As Brocheux (2007: 107) points out, d'Argenlieu's insistence upon separating Cochinchina was not acceptable to the DRV side just as Ho Chi Minh, then in France, was infuriated to learn of the conference. On the one hand, Laos sought strong federal protection against neighbors but also because it simply lacked resources. Cambodia, like Laos, also saw merit in the federation proposals but was far better endowed than Laos. The Cochinchina position was even more complex. As even the French foreign ministry concluded, "The French Indochina Federation is at present a vague expression that each interprets at convenience, but it commences to take body and life." Written at the end of August, the Federation would be in tatters within four months (MAE Asie Océanie 1944-1955 Indochine 68 "Note sur le Deuxième Conférence Préparatoire de Dalat," Dalat, May 9, 1946). Discussions on ethnic minorities were also broached by the French at Dalat, also in ways not acceptable to Hanoi.

## **The Fontainebleau Conference of July-September 1946.**

Following on from the Dalat Conference of May 9, 1946, a Vietnamese parliamentary delegation of 13 along with six advisers assembled in Paris together with President Ho Chi Minh to participate in the Fontainebleau Conference (July 6-September 12, 1946). It should be pointed out that, because he was not an official member of the Vietnamese negotiating team, Ho Chi Minh himself did not personally attend the conference venue in suburban Fon-

tainebleu but remained in Paris using his time to network with journalists and politicians among others, including the Vietnamese community. However, upon invitation of the two delegations he did visit Fontainebleau on July 26 in an endeavor to kickstart the stalled talks (Duiker 2000: 375-6).

For a number of reasons, including a French cabinet crisis following French elections of June 2, the conference was delayed until a new government was formed, that of Georges Bidault, head of the conservative *Républicain Mouvement Populaire*. Arriving in France on June 12 by air, Ho Chi Minh along with Hoang Minh Giam, and one adjutant, spent 12 idle days in Biarritz also visiting the Basque country, escorted by Sainteny. Neither was the Vietnamese President well humored, especially having learned during a stopover in Cairo on June 9 that, a week earlier, d'Argenlieu had arbitrarily set up an "Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina." Ready to call the whole show off, according to Sainteny, Ho Chi Minh was only mollified by assurances that the results of a referendum would have to be taken into account. At the same time, Ho was obviously vulnerable to attack from the radicals back in Hanoi, notably military strategist Vo Nguyen Giap, for selling out to French chicanery (Sainteny 1953: 200; Tønnesson 2010: 73; 79).

Duly arriving in Paris on June 22 to an extravagant official welcome, it was with some irony as Sainteny observed that, as a head of state, Ho Chi Minh now surveyed the city he left some 23 years earlier in vastly different circumstances (Sainteny 1953: 203). At a press conference held on June 25 ahead of the formal conference starting on July 6, Ho Chi Minh summarized the diplomatic negotiations to date. As he explained, his government had signed an accord in Hanoi (Preliminary Convention of March 6, 1946). Then followed the Preparatory Conference in Dalat (May 9, 1946). He had also met up with the French High Commissioner for Indochina (d'Argenlieu on May 20). As the DRV President further explained, he was visiting France with a parliamentary delegation, looking forward to a "sincere, agreeable and fruitful collaboration." Ho Chi Minh also took the opportunity to comment that, although France had "suffered terribly" over four years under the Nazi occupation, from observation, it appeared to have recovered from the scars proving "the dignity of French people." Obviously, these statements were as diplomatic as they were cautious, just as expectations for a successful outcome from the conference were low.

On the cusp of the conference, d'Argenlieu also went on the offensive spelling out a set of desiderata for the benefit of Comindo. As he pointed out, the road to Fontainebleau had been prepared through a series of meetings held in Hanoi, in Baie d'Along, then at Dalat, and back again in Hanoi. D'Argenlieu himself had met Ho Chi Minh on May 20. Each time, he deplored, Hanoi had sought to gain substantial political advantages. In particular, one of the

DRV themes was the principle of the Atlantic Charter of August 1941 (on the right to self-determination) and its refusal to countenance the right of Cochinchina to choose its own destiny. As he pointed out, Hanoi's "campaign of terror" in the south had provoked an immediate negative reaction on the part of the southerners who dreaded being delivered up "hands bound" to Hanoi. As he elaborated, Viet Minh "death squads" in Cochinchina were 80-90 percent "Tonkinese" (northerners) anyway, with the balance drawn from released prisoners. France, moreover, had responsibility for the 500,000 odd highland people and sought to guard their "autonomy." The presence of other minority groupings in Indochina also raised questions as to special administrations. He also pointed out the symbolic importance of the French reoccupation of the Governor General's palace in Hanoi on June 20 (in conformity with agreements with the Chinese high command). Through his (High Commissioner's) office, he asserted, France dealt with Indochina in its entirety whereas the government of Ho Chi Minh "only represents part of Annamite opinion" (AOM SLOTFOM XIV, XI, 3d d'Argenlieu à President du Comité Interministeriel de l'Indochine, Paris, nd.). Not only was d'Argenlieu out of touch with reality, he could not even utter the "Vietnam" word, then part of official French vocabulary.

Opening on July 6, 1946, the conference was further delayed until August 1 owing to a general objection by the Vietnamese delegation (going by the title, République Démocratique du Viet-Nam) as to the opening of the so-called 2nd Dalat Conference, stage-managed by d'Argenlieu, along with a specific objection to the unilateral declaration of a French-sponsored Republic of Cochinchina one month earlier) (Sainteny 1953: 205; Tonnesson 2010: 73). But having gone ahead, the Fontainebleau Conference also ended abruptly on September 12 over disagreements relating to the federal issue and the referendum. On the French side, it did not help that French military and civilians in general in Vietnam were then coming under repeated acts of victimization, just as the radicals in Hanoi (Giap notably) were seeking to discredit the negotiators at Fontainebleau (Sainteny 1953: 207-8).

As summarized by Sainteny (1953: 204-5), the main obstacles at the discussion table were, the integration of Cochinchina with Vietnam, customs issues, such as would give way to the "irreparable" incident in Haiphong four months later, the issue of diplomatic representation, and the future status of French language in Vietnam. Nevertheless, on September 14, 1946, the two sides issued a Joint Declaration. They agreed to uphold the Preliminary Convention of March 6, 1946. They agreed to sign a modus vivendi in the interest of restoring calm and confidence for the next round of negotiations (slated for January 1947). The date of the proposed referendum would be deferred (MAE Asie Océanie 1944-1955 Indochine 68 "Déclaration Conjointe des Gouvernements de la République Française et de la

République Démocratique du Viet-Nam " ) . In fact no referendum was ever held.

The French were cognizant that, in hosting the DRV delegation in France, they were also conferring legitimacy upon the DRV government. Importantly, as Noel Henry of the judicial section of the MAE advised, although the March 6 Preliminary Accords had not actually been ratified , " it appears indispensable to take it as a basis for our arguments. " However, he deplored the insertion of additional clauses into agreements such as might appear to (independently) admit " Vietnam's diplomatic relations with foreign countries. " Although not in French interests, he observed, there were three elements that could not be dismissed, namely that Vietnam had given itself a constitution, possessed a Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and that its President had been received in Paris as a " quasi-sovereign " (power) (AOM 14/SLOTFOM XI , 3 " Ho Chi Minh " " Negotiations franco-vietnamienne, " MAE, Service Juridique, July 16, 1946) .

Among other matters, it irritated the Vietnamese that their communications radio was impounded upon arrival in France. In a cable dated June 27, 1946 , d'Argenlieu personally advised to reject a request from Ho Chi Minh that the device be restored. Denied the use of coded transmissions, Ho Chi Minh was obliged to send official cables to Vietnam through French channels, namely Comindo. In one such intercepted telegram of August 9, 1946 , the Vietnamese president thanked his government for sending books and newspapers. He also requested further information about the " Bac Ninh incident " whereby French troops had occupied a building in a town northeast of Hanoi, in apparent violation of the April 3, 1946 (military) Convention (See Tønnesson 2010: 283n) . Characteristically, this letter was signed off with " affectionate thoughts for the government and people . . . affectionate kisses for the children " (AOM 14/SLOTFOM XI , 3 " Ho Chi Minh " ) . Just as the DRV President found time in Paris to meet with a group of Vietnamese children, he also carried on a kind of tourism, revisiting Versailles, where he had made his famous appeal to Allied leaders in 1919 , and even revisited his old quarters on Impasse Compont (Duiker 2000: 371-3) .

Other events in Vietnam also weighed heavily upon the minds of the Vietnamese delegation. On June 27 , on impressive new DRV letterhead, Ho Chi Minh wrote a personally signed letter of protest to Marius Moutet, complaining that, contrary to a April 20, 1946 annex to the March 3 (9) Accords, French troops in Hanoi had reinstalled themselves in the " colonial Bastille, " the old Palais du Gouvernement Général. As Moutet blandly replied to Ho Chi Minh in a note of July 1 , the measure was entirely in line with the Franco-Chinese Accords whereby all buildings previously occupied by vacating Chinese troops would be retroceded to France ( " Ho Chi Minh, " op.cit.) .

Serving as head of the Vietnamese parliamentary delegation, at the July 17 session at Fon-

tainable, Pham Van Dong questioned General Raoul Salan as to the issue of mutual military assistance. Dong repeated that the Vietnam State *tient à rester* (wished to remain) in the French Union but he could not give his agreement to French proposals " because the two countries are not bound in any intimate fashion. " Further exemplifying the convoluted discussions, at a session of the French delegation on August 16 , Sainteny recalled of his recent meeting with Ho Chi Minh, that the President had offered no counter-proposal or written document, but simply proposed oral modifications to the French *aide-mémoire*. But Ho also questioned certain points agreed at Dalat. Discussions continued as whether to prepare a new text. A 15-day suspension was suggested. On August 20 , Ho Chi Minh finally delivered a written counter proposal to Moutet. The next meeting was fixed for August 28 . In the interim, Ho's direct return to Vietnam was opposed by doctors who ordered him to convalesce in France as long as possible or at least through unto October ( " Ho Chi Minh, " op.cit.).

Ho Chi Minh's delayed return to Vietnam and even choice of ship over airplane has been subject to much speculation but the then pressing issue was the *aide-mémoire*. As official French correspondence reveals, the Vietnamese *aide-mémoire* was deemed " totally unacceptable, " and even " a regression " from the position taken at Dalat and (earlier) at Fontainebleau. The entire text was seen as an attempt to " limit the scope of obligations on the part of the Vietnamese " and to allow them a broad range of interpretation . " Once again, " the French report concluded, this was a *décor de théâtre* set up by President Ho Chi Minh. Referring to the Vietnamese delegation, the memorandum concluded , " We should perhaps let them know directly that we are not prepared to accept a parallel *marche de dupes* (fool's bargain) " ( " Ho Chi Minh, " op.cit.) . There is no doubt that Fontainebleau was headed for utter failure, yet it was salvaged by last minute compromises.

#### *Military Issues: Seeds of the Future Conflict*

The French authorities in Hanoi, namely the " Commissioner of the Republic for Tonkin and North Annam, " a position then headed ad interim by General Jean Valluy, also weighed in on the Fontainebleau conference in a missive of August 9 with express attention to the " military clause. " As the Valluy missive pointed out, certain gaps in understanding on military issues had to be addressed by the Fontainebleau accords. First, Chinese forces were disrupting communications, especially on the Hanoi-Haiphong route. Second, though denied by the Hanoi government, some 2,000 Japanese soldiers were still working in Tonkin and northern Annam in armament factories and as Viet Minh military instructors. Third, the Viet Minh authorities were systematically obstructing the creation of an " *armée de relève*. "

as prescribed in the March 6 Accords. Notably, incidents at Hong Gai (July 2) ; Lang Son (July 10) ; and Bac Ninh (August 3) ; were provoked by the close proximity of Viet Minh and French troops and the negative influence of anti-French propaganda. With the exception of certain officers, great mistrust existed between the French and Viet Minh, with the latter perpetuating acts of robbery and violence. In other words, four months after the signing of the March 6 Accords, the creation of a relief army had not even started. It is clear, the report continued, that the Viet Minh did not wish to lose control of their forces to French command. As pretext, the Viet Minh claimed that they lacked French-speaking officers, which carries a ring of truth. Also, General Le Tiet Hung, the Viet Minh soldier in charge of the *armée de relève* had been on prolonged three month "tour," and was inaccessible. While there had been no formal refusal on the part of the Viet Minh, it appeared clear that they had no intention of even commencing to fulfill the terms of the March 6 Accords (and the April 3 annex) apropos the *armée de relève*. As the memorandum concluded, it was imperative that the two armies should not remain separated by an "unbreachable wall" (AOM 14/SLOT-FOM XIV, II (XIV, XI , 2) Commissariat de la Republique, le Tonkin et le Nord Annam , "Memo pour Haute Commissaire de France à l'Indochine, " Hanoi, Aug.9,1946).

With the conference over, and the negotiating team departed, reflecting on the prospect of returning home empty handed, Ho Chi Minh actually turned to Moutet to offer a concrete document. The result was a compromise. Moutet wanted a ceasefire in Cochinchina by October 30 and the resumption of negotiations in January 1947 . Ho refused, but returning to the table at a midnight meeting he finally agreed to the principle of a Vietnamese representative working with d'Argenlieu to bring about an armistice. With the intercession of Sainteny, this initiative led to the Modus Vivendi Agreement, of September 14, 1946 with Ho Chi Minh signing for the DRV, and with Moutet, signing for the Provisional Government of the French Republic. Fully cognizant of the risks he faced back home on the part of the anti-French camp, as the Vietnamese president confided to Sainteny (1953: 209) , " Haven't I just signed my death warrant? To be sure, as Ho acknowledged, this was a " pathetic " bit of paper to bring back to Vietnam after two months of negotiations (Duiker 2000: 380) .

Accompanied by Sainteny to Marseille on September 17 , Ho Chi Minh departed France the following day aboard the French warship *Dumont d'Urville*, only arriving in Haiphong on October 20 . To be sure, during Ho's absence of four long months, the Viet Minh position had strengthened considerably with the elimination of the DMH and the weakening of the VNQDD. Many question remained as to the real reasons behind Ho Chi Minh's delayed return, though he would also return with his status secure (Sainteny 1953: 210-11; Tønneson 2010: 87) , welcomed by thousands after the ship docked in Haiphong.

Slated to go into effect on October 30, 1946, as much debated, the Modus Vivendi fell short of satisfying either side, just as it contained elements of ambiguity. The Agreement did set out preliminary decisions relating to common French-Vietnamese economic, customs, and currency matters. It sought to put an end to acts of hostility and violence on both sides, it sought agreement between French and Vietnam general staffs, the release of political prisoners, cultural exchanges etc. The parties agreed to resume negotiations on the final conclusion of a general treaty no later than January 1947, although that never transpired. Even so, as Tønnesson (2010: 83) iterates, the two principal problems, namely independence and unity were skirted.

As Brocheux (2007: 123) contends, the fact that Ho Chi Minh consented to sign, even at the last moment prior to his departure from France, and in the face of opposition from a range of opponents, indicates his “profound sympathy towards France and French people in general.” In so doing, he accepted the principle of a French Federation, while the French accepted the principle of holding a referendum on the status of Cochinchina. Shipway (1996: 222) is less sanguine, observing that the modus vivendi was unsatisfactory for all; sides, “a compromise settlement resolving nothing, signed *in extremis* by two political actors, and despised by a third (d’Argenlieu).” It did, however, provide a six week breathing space, especially for the Viet Minh both north and south of the 16<sup>th</sup> parallel.

## **Events in Haiphong, Breakdown of the Modus Vivendi and War, November 1946**

More generally, it was the breakdown of the Fontainebleau Modus Vivendi that ignited the “First Indochina war.” As Tanham (1961: xvii) explains, the common view of the origins of the war can be linked to the French bombing of the Vietnamese quarter of Haiphong on November 23, 1946, leading to the deaths of over 6,000 Vietnamese and the decision taken by the Viet Minh to launch nation-wide attacks on French forces on December 1 (See Tønnesson 2010: Chap.4). Driven out of Hanoi on December 20 to the highland zone in Tonkin, Ho Chi Minh came to understand that a quick military victory was not possible. The military leadership around Giap reverted to the Maoist concept of guerrilla war itself paying off in victory at Dien Bien Phu on May 7, 1954. More than anything, the Haiphong incident symbolized the slide to war between the Viet Minh and the French following the breakdown of the Agreement.

In fact, as Sainteny (1953: 213-5) surveys, certain “irreparable” incidents dating back to November already poisoned the atmosphere. Notably Giap forbade a joint French-Viet Minh

commemorative ceremony and with incidents multiplying as with the demonstrations mounted by the youth-encadred Tu-Ve militia now harnessed to the Viet Minh. The arrival of Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi on October 21, 1946 , fresh from a meeting with d'Argenlieu and General Morlière in Cam Ranh Bay on board the *Durmot-d'Urville*, was a staying hand. Greeted by thousands in the streets, and with rounds of official meetings with top Viet Minh leadership, Ho Chi Minh's worst fears may have been allayed. But with the radicals in the ascendance, and the Tu-Ve rampant, a showdown with the French appeared unavoidable. Eventually, it came to a head with clash on November 20 over the French seizure of a junk involved in smuggling and an armed Tu-Ve riposte. This led to the Haiphong Incident and the denouement.

#### *American Reactions to the Haiphong Attack*

The French attacks on Haiphong provoked strong reaction in Washington, obliging them to finesse their position on the question of Vietnamese independence, alongside concerns also brewing in official circles of the threat of communist expansionism. On January 7, 1947 , as Gibbens (1986: 26) relates, Abbot Low Moffat, the top US State Department official dealing with Southeast Asia, then in Bangkok, advised Washington to take moral leadership to end the war, and to throw its support behind Vietnamese nationalism and an independent Vietnam. He could not see the hand of the Soviet Union in this affair (and he was correct) . Moffat was sent as an envoy to Hanoi as a last ditch effort to prevent war. There, he met with Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, trying to broker a solution. The US government's instructions to Moffat at the time, however, doomed any possible deal, namely not to forget " Ho's clear record as an agent of international communism, " and with the warning that , " the least desired eventuality would be the establishment of a Communist-dominated, Moscow-oriented state in Vietnam " (Acheson to Reed, Dec 1946).<sup>1</sup>

According to French diplomatic sources reporting upon a meeting in Washington on December 24, 1946 between the French Ambassador and Dean Acheson, Undersecretary of State under President Truman, Moffat made allusion to the " incidents " in Haiphong in November commenting to the effect that a military action cannot be seen to overrule a political problem and that world opinion would not tolerate civil conflict in Vietnam. He believed that armed conflict could be avoided if there was less distrust on both sides, such as mediated through the good offices of a neutral power. Moffat also affirmed that American intentions were amicable. As reported, this senior American official did not disguise his surprise

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<sup>1</sup> The Moffat episode is documented in *Foreign Relations of the U.S. 1946* , vol. 8 , The Far East, pp. 52-54 , 67-69 . A summary can be found in Hess (1990: 36-38) .

at the naivety of the Viet Minh point of view and declared that France should stay its course in Tonkin and not withdraw. Even so, he asserted, it was preferable that France conduct itself in a discrete but efficacious manner as by way of advisers to the government which did not yet appear secure. In an allusion to the earlier and highly controversial OSS role in Vietnam, Moffat also appeared to sincerely regret the (propaganda) "advantages" gained by the Hanoi government from the American visitors to Ho Chi Minh. He blamed this upon the "nefarious" activities of the American secret service agencies. Moffat insisted that he would advise Acheson not to establish an information service in Hanoi analogous to that directed by (US Consul) Robison from Saigon (AOM Indo NF/366/2907 tél, Saigon, Haus-saire. Jan . 11 , 1947) , a reference to perceived US meddling in French affairs in the south. Still, as Duiker (2000: 390-2) writes of the Moffat mission, the mere fact that he mentioned communist influence in Hanoi, touched off anxieties in Washington as to a potential "domino" theory effect.

#### *The Vietnamese War of National Resistance*

We do not have to look far beyond Graham Greene's, literary classic *The Quiet American* (1953) to gain a broad sense of the sweep of the French war in both northern and southern Vietnam. Mobile patrols backed by air strikes with little regard for civilian casualties defined the French war in the north, temporarily winning concessions from the communists but, through their own use of counter-revolutionary terror, utterly losing the battle for what the Americans would later term "hearts and minds." As Brocheux (1995; 197-9) elaborates, the March 6, 1946 Agreements was a short-lived peace in the south dubbed Nam Bo in Vietnamese. Indeed, the war never ended. Even while the French were in discussions in Fontainebleau with Ho Chi Minh, they were on the offensive in the south, just as individual Viet Minh commanders ignored ceasefire orders. On their side, the French played upon the internal divisions and strife among the anti-French forces. The Viet Minh war meantime swept up ideological rivals, collaborators naturally, and Catholics especially. Both sides sought out wavering allies especially among the ethnic minorities, with the Tai and Tho divided by clan loyalties. Meantime, the French command in Saigon faced down a rural-backed insurgency in the southern and northern delta regions alongside sporadic acts of violence and terror perpetrated by the sects.

With the French seizure of Haiphong and with French troops pushing towards Hanoi, the party center elaborated a plan for national resistance. With negotiations with the French still ongoing, Viet Minh sappers struck the Hanoi central power plant, then under joint French-Viet Minh control. As Duiker (2000: 393-6) elaborates, there was a real sense that General

Valluy sought to snare the Viet Minh into a fight, but neither did the incoming Blum cabinet offer him the military reinforcements to boost his strength. On December 12 , Prime Minister Léon Blum announced measures which would lead to Vietnam being granted independence. Meantime, Ho Chi Minh and Sainteny kept up last minute exchanges, with Ho giving the latter a letter to present to Blum on concrete measures to solve the crisis. But the letter did not arrive in Paris until December 19 , “ at which time it was too late. ” Meantime, General Valluy ordered General Moliere, who still exercised command of military functions in Tonkin, to send French forces into the streets, while issuing a series of ultimatum. On the morning of December 18 , Ho Chi Minh issued an order to the Viet Minh to prepare for a counterattack the following day. But he also sent a telegram direct to Blum, anxious that his earlier message may have gone astray, while penning one last letter to Sainteny requesting he work it out with Giam while awaiting a reply from Paris. Overall, Duiker (2000: 398) finds Valluy’s ultimatum provocative leading him to believe that French blame in precipitating the conflict was “ substantial. ”

Rather infamously, given the rhetoric, on December 19, 1946 , Ho Chi Minh launched by way of radio broadcast his “ sword for a sword, hoe for a hoe ” call for national resistance or defense of the fatherland, a document he had scripted the previous day (See Lawrence 2010: 33) . Arriving back in Hanoi on December 2 , as “ French Commissioner , ” Sainteny achieved a meeting with a very unwell Ho Chi Minh the following day, but with Hoang Minh Giam (Marxist rather than communist) stepping in as mediator. Given the dire situation and the general pessimism, not even visiting state department official Moffatt could salvage the situation. However, with the Viet Minh attack on Lang fortress, the full-on war was ignited. On December 23 , Sainteny himself was caught up in the violence, wounded and hospitalized (Sainteny 1953: 224-5) . Almost as a final card, the incoming Blum government dispatched Minister Moutet to Hanoi. With Hanoi literally on fire, Moutet was received at Hanoi airport by General Leclerc accompanied by Generals Valluy and Moliere subsequently meeting a heavily bandaged Commissioner of the Republic, Sainteny. Scenes captured on film (*Les Actualités Françaises* - 16/01/1947) , scripted by Georges Méjat, show a strained Moutet escorted through a veritable battlefield of smoking ruins with corpses strewn in the streets. Even though Ho Chi Minh kept up an intermittent flow of messages calling for resumption of talks (continued through to April-May and meeting French scholar-diplomat Paul Mus on May 12 in Thai Nguyen) , Moutet departed Hanoi without even attempting to contact the Vietnamese president (Duiker 2000: 401) . Obviously, this was the point of no return and obviously the message he took back to Paris.

Following the breakdown of the peace, the DRV government evacuated to the mountains,

taking radios, industrial equipment, food and salt. By February 17 the last Viet Minh defenders had fled the city, ammunition exhausted. Ho, Giap, and the leadership moved their command to Tan Trao, the decision-making site for the August Revolution a year and a half before. French intelligence summaries offer some flavor of the battlefield. Declining to meet French forces head-on in battle, the so-named Northern Free Resistance Area of Viet Bac comprised a swathe of mountain territory including the provinces of Cao Bang, Bac Can, Lang Son, Thai Nguyen, Tuyen Quang, and Ha Giang. As of March 1947, or one year after the signing of the Ho-Sainteny Agreement, the French were already engaged in running armed actions against the Viet Minh across the country with both sides jockeying not only for power in the north but also, crucially, for the loyalties of diverse sections of the population. Around Hanoi, the French engaged Viet Minh patrols down to the village level as with one contested village on the Hanoi-Haiphong road. French forces also successfully mounted patrols crossing into Laos from Annam. In Sonla-Sam Neua, the French held onto their system of military posts notwithstanding Viet Minh attacks. More generally, in the north, the French congratulated themselves on securing security. Most military convoys could move around and work repairing the rail line continued "normally." As French intelligence remarked upon the situation in the north, the Viet Minh do not represent the totality of the population. In certain villages they were even expelled by the locals. But confidence in the north was not necessarily matched by a more fluid situation in Nam Dinh and the coastal regions. Although Danang was controlled by the French as a virtual territorial concession, Cochinchina was already contested territory, just as the Viet Minh launched attacks on terrestrial communications and, in a shift of strategy, commenced to launch attacks via rivers and waterways, and even engaged in economic disruptions as with collections of paddy and rubber stocks. An attempt was also made to isolate My Tho in the Mekong Delta. As the French report highlighted, "our reactions are naturally very violent," reporting 25-75 enemy killed. As the French rationalized, owing to the nature of the compromise in the north, the Viet Minh were concentrating their effort in the south, supported by strong lines of weapon procurements arriving from Siam (AOM Ind NF/137/1244 Juin, Missonier, BR, March 9-11, 1947).

In March 1947, coinciding with a French offensive in the north, and following extensive debate in the French parliament, d'Argenlieu was replaced as High Commissioner by Emile Bollaert. As of mid-1947, the character of French military operations had not changed, although the rhythm of guerrilla operations had slackened off. The reason was under study but the annual harvest was bad, and somewhat premature. In Tonkin, French forces experienced only several attacks including river raids, including several ambushes on RC

(route) 6 , a failed attack on the rail line, and some acts of intimidation against villages. Viet Minh activity in the delta was viewed as weak. The Groupement Nord-Oeust had repulsed several attacks at Lang Son. French forces repulsed an attack by 300 Viet Minh at Chy Khe. A French sweep of central Annam from the coast to the base of the Annamite Chain continued, although ran into difficulties in the Hoi An region. Notably, in the region of Nano, two French officers were killed. Elsewhere, west of Danang, villagers had massacred the entire local Viet Minh committee. French forces occupied the Cham Islands offshore Hoi An. Attacks on convoys, posts, and ambushes were less frequent in Cochinchina and south Annam. An exception was Viet Minh-Khmer Issarak activity in the Cambodia-Cochinchina border area. French forces occupied Phu Quoc Island inflicting rebel casualties. The French were vigilant against Viet Minh activities including ambushes in Mytho and Soc Trang .

“ Nothing happened in Laos and very little in Cambodia. ” Taken together, the French concluded that “ the Viet Minh are not sincere in their peace offer. ” Correctly, the French predicted, the improved conditions would be followed up a “ reprise of guerrilla terrorism ” (AOM Ind NF/137/1244 Humbert, Missonier , “ Synthesise de la Situation militaire en Indochine, ” June 2-9, 1947) .

But this was a highly fluid situation. As French military reports for late June recorded, the major French military focus was in attempts to repair and protect dikes along the Red River, just as the Viet Minh sought to disrupt this work, especially south of the Canal de Rapides. Viet Minh attackers on RC 5 were observed to be using automatic weapons. Reportedly, they also sought to kidnap village notables. The French launched paratroop operations at Ha Dong, leading to the capture of prisoners. In central Annam, the Viet Minh attacked French posts around Hue. French patrols inflicted casualties and also took prisoners (Ibid. , June 9 -15, 1947) .

By late 1946 , as Tanham (1961 : 1) summarizes, Ho Chi Minh had at his disposal an impressive 60,000 forces, but only 40,000 guns. By spring 1947 , however, under the threat of French offensive actions, the Viet Minh and remnants of the army were obliged to flee to the mountainous area north of Hanoi. By August 1947 , floods cutting the Hanoi-Haiphong road link brought some respite to conflict, although incidents were recorded in the High Country at Lang Son and Phong Saly in Laos. In southern Annam, the French boasted to have pushed the rebels back to the mountains. In Cochinchina, however, the French faced up to increasing numbers of ambushes, with marked losses on both sides. A single ambush on a convoy was recorded in Cambodia (Ibid. , “ Synthesise de la Situation militaire en Indochine, ” Aug. 19, 1947) . On October 7, 1947 General Valluy launched his carefully orchestrated military operation in the (Operation Lea) to seize the Viet Minh redoubt and con-

solidate French control over the Red River valley right through to the border at Lao Cai. French paratroops and commandos narrowly missed capturing Ho Chi Minh at the Viet Minh communications center at Bac Kan, and destroying remnants of his army. Inflicting heavy casualties upon the Viet Minh, the French enemy was then obliged to abandon its large force groups and to revert to small guerrilla bands such as preceded the August Revolution (Duiker 2000: 408-9) . Having put paid to the theory of a short term victory, the Viet Minh then embraced the Maoist doctrine of protracted guerrilla warfare.

According to Teuillère (1978: 242) , who had access to French military documents, the number of Viet Minh casualties in this period were disproportionately large versus those suffered by France. From February 10 to October 30 , 1946 , Viet Minh losses rose to 8, 000 killed with 9,200 taken prisoner. From January 1 to June 30, 1947 , 16,108 Viet Minh were killed in combat, versus 3,920 on the French side, including 1,946 locals for approximately the same period. This disequilibrium in losses suffered by the Viet Minh would continue, and it is doubtful if these figures included collateral losses suffered by civilians (Teuillère 1978: 38-42) . Undoubtedly, military operations, as with Lea, disrupted life inflicting even greater hardship upon partisans. Notably, napalm was among the weapons of destruction deployed by the French in Vietnam (See Duiker 2000: 411 ; 443) .

With Léon Pignon replacing Bollaert as French High Commissioner in October 1948 , and with General Blaizot replaced by General Marcel Maurice Carpentier in September 1949 , French military policy now looked to defending the delta. As General Salan (1975: 27) summarizes, from January 1948 , the Viet Minh had launched a string of ambushes, attacks on French positions, and “ terror attacks ” in the north and middle regions of Tonkin. It was clear that Giap had rebuilt his territorial organization right across the country, transforming his *doc lap* or independent groups into mobile units numbering in Tonkin in April 1949 90, 000 armed combatants, including 60,000 regulars. Giap now planned the counteroffensive.

Still, rumors of a Viet Minh truce offer, as mentioned above, also reached the media and official French circles. General Carpentier, however, was adamant not to countenance a truce, lest the French completely lose their their military position. As he cabled Paris in November 1949 , “ I affirm that the military situation evolves to our advantage. ” Laos was “ calm, ” and “ pacification ” was proceeding favorably in Cochinchina and north Annam, and “ developing favorably ” in Tonkin. Notably, operations underway in Phat Diem envisaged the entire pacification of the Tonkin Delta in the months ahead . “ Suspension of arms in these conditions would be to abandon all advantage obtained over the previous months on the military plane. ” Moreover, such a concession would ripple through the French Union while sapping morale locally, undoubtedly prompting massive desertions. In a

word, he argued, capitulating to a truce would push the French position back to a state analogous to 1946 (SLOTFOM XIV, XI, 4 " Projèt de Trève, " tél à Presidence Council, Paris, Carpentier, Saigon, Nov.2.1949) . One caveat he mentioned was the difficulty of guarding the Chinese frontier. He was right because by December, Chinese forces had arrived at the border. In the 1949-50 winter campaign, the Viet Minh took the initiative, signaling that the war had reached a new stage (Salan 1975: 28-9) . At that time (December 1949) , Carpentier had warned President Vincent Auriol that the best he could hope for was a political solution. As Duiker (2000: 447) writes, the French withdrawal from the border region the following year appeared to confirm this pessimistic scenario.

By 1948 the Viet Minh had broached relations with the Chinese communists. In December 1949 , Ho Chi Minh set off to Moscow via Beijing where he conferred with Stalin and Mao Zedung securing pledges of support from both and hosted by Mao back in Beijing on March 3 (Duiker 2000: 417-23) . It might be added that a French government protest to the Soviet Union over their recognition of the DRV led to a deterioration of relations between Paris and Moscow. As the Australian Embassy in Paris signaled to Canberra , " the French Union is becoming the principal battleground in the Cold War between Western powers and Russia " (NAA A 1838 461/3/1/2' Indochina-Australia political relations with Vietnam - General, ". Australian Embassy, Paris, to External Affairs, Canberra, Feb.1,1950) .

In June 1950 , Chinese advisers arrived in the Viet Bac in support of the Viet Minh's first important battle, namely to wrest control of the strategic French fortress at Dong Khe commanding the land pass and Viet Minh supply route to China and beyond. On the battlefield, taking advantage of a Chinese communist rear base, the Viet Minh advanced in October 1950 to the position whereby they overwhelmed French positions at Cao Bang along the Chinese border (Duiker 2000: 431) . As Salan (1953: 31) declared in a veiled criticism of Carpentier, the decision to evacuate the forts was taken too late. By late 1950 , Carpentier was replaced by General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny. Forces under Giap were less successful in launching attacks in the Red River Delta in 1951 , where General de Lattre's strategy of defensive blockhouses along with support from the Catholic bishoprics (Phat Dien and Bui Chau) and other elements, bought time for the French. With the general's demise within a year (January 1952) and his replacement by Salan, the French were again thrown back to seeking a political settlement.

#### *The Catholic Bishoprics of Phat Dien and Bui Chau*

With their roots in European missionary activity reaching back 300 years, the Catholic communities in northern Vietnam came to be consolidated under French administration into

a number of Bishopricks. Of principal importance in the postwar period was the Bishopric of Phat Dien, parallel with the northern Annam border, along with the bishopric of Bui Chau. Notably, the Bishop of Phat Diem had appointed all local government officials including the *chefs de province*, while all office holders were recruited from among Catholics. Serving as the head of the Catholic military, the Bishop appointed the officers, using their commitment to Catholicism as a yardstick for promotion. According to Western intelligence assessments, the result was an extremely loyal but poorly trained force of about 2,800 men and officers. In the early stage of the conflict, the Bishop had signed an agreement with Ho Chi Minh disallowing French forces to enter his territory. However, he subsequently broke that agreement, first by his strong allegiance to the French-backed Bao Dai regime, and through Bao Dai by his alignment to French authorities in the area. In his speeches he also denounced the Viet Minh and communism. As Viet Minh threats in the delta increased, the Bishop requested three battalions of Vietnamese troops to assist in the defense of his territory. Two were provided. Intelligence described the Bishop as having "an exaggerated idea of the importance of his area." He was deemed suspicious of the French and, at the same time, exercised such power over his people that he was regarded as a most difficult man with whom to deal with. Initially, it was understood that the Phat Dien force played an important role in defense of the perimeter but, was still unable to check a Viet Minh breakthrough. This required the French to move four battalions to the north. General de Lattre subsequently brought the Phat Dien forces into his command as part of the army in the delta and advised the Bishop to restrict his activities to religious affairs. The analyst felt that such highhandedness would only produce an anti-French backlash. As an Australian diplomat interpreted, there had been hopes that the Catholic bishoprics of Phat Dien and Bui Chau were throwing in their lot with Bao Dai, but recent French military operations in the delta destroyed these expectations. As a consequence, anti-Bao Dai sentiment mounted and evidence emerged of secret cooperation between the Viet Minh and military serving under the bishop (NAA A 4968 25/29/1 Indo China, Political Part 1 "Comment by T.K. Critchley," acting Australian High Comm. to External Affairs, Canberra, July 15, 1951) .

### **Chinese Communist Support for North Vietnam (1946-)**

While proximity to Yunnan and Guangxi facilitated movement of CCP agents to Tonkin, a perceived CCP push also broadly coincided with the exodus of the Chinese Nationalist forces under Lu Hun. Until May 1946 the KMT and its youth organization, had muscled out the CCP. But, in the interim, the CCP had established links with left-wing members of the Viet

Minh, along with former members of the Indochinese Communist Party (Viet Nam Cong San Dang) (dissolved on November 10, 1945) . With newly established headquarters at 35 Rue Richaud in the residence of Chun Hwa Lung, head of the CCP propaganda section in Hanoi was identified as Kan Khy. Arriving from Bangkok, Kan Khy headed a six-man CCP delegation. As proposed to the Viet Minh, this committee would represent the CCP-wartime capital of, Ya'nan, to the Hanoi government. Meantime, propaganda committees were established in Hanoi, Haiphong, and Nam Dinh. Propaganda was especially directed at youth. Meantime, Kan Khy made contact with such left-wing Viet Minh leaders as Luong Van Han and Tran King Lieu, Viet Minh minister of propaganda and editor of Yellow Star newspaper. Even so, the DRV reacted in a dismissive manner. Notably, a dozen Chinese communists were arrested in Hanoi in May by Chinese gendarmerie (AOM SLOTFOM NTCIP, Paris, Aug 7, 1946) .

The major threat to CCP expansion in the north still came from the KMT and the San Min Cau Y Blue Shirts, a youth organization answering to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. This was led in Hanoi by General Cao Siu Wu also the promoter of the youth journal *Thanh Nien Je Pao* and, in turn, backed by such Vietnamese opposition parties as the VNQDD. There was obviously a period of balance or flux in the Guangxi region between nationalist and communist forces. For example, retreating Chinese Nationalist troops entering Guangxi in the Lang Son region came under attack from a young Hainanese communist guerrilla leader, named Ou Mo Peu. But in Hanoi, the Chinese Nationalist special service tracked the CCP. More generally, the CCP had not won over the masses in Tonkin and especially not even the conservative Chinese business community. Although Chinese Nationalist influence remained strong, its influence would also wane just as the San Min Cau Y would in time be dissolved. In any case, as French intelligence observed, the DRV appeared to be lukewarm to CCP overtures (AOM SLOTFOM NTCIP, Paris, Aug 7, 1946) .

With time, especially after the communist victory in China in 1949 , Western intelligence agencies commenced to track Chinese support for the Vietnamese revolution. According to French intelligence, until April 1946 the CCP presence in Vietnam was weak but had rebounded since that date. While the prewar CCP connection with Vietnam had been focused upon Guangzhou, in the new conjuncture, namely the emergence of the anti-French and anti-imperialist Pridi Phamanyoug regime in Thailand, Bangkok had taken over that role, notably as the new center of the CCP committee for the South Seas. While in the prewar period, the French had been concerned as to KMT propaganda and the China-centeredness of the Chinese communities of Indochina, now they faced down two political blocs, especially in Saigon, Hanoi and Haiphong, movements which they feared would be exploited by, various-

ly, opposition movements and the Chinese government (AOM SLOTFOM NTCIP, Paris, Aug 7, 1946).

As monitored by French intelligence in late 1946, Saigon-Cholon with its important worker population, had witnessed an upsurge in Chinese revolutionary propaganda over the previous two months. This was attributed to, especially, the Hakka congregation and the Trie Cheu, representing the collectivity of the Chinese proletariat in Cochinchina. CCP headquarters in Cochinchina was identified as the Chinese school Nam Keu Hoc Hieu on Boulevard Thompson at Xon-Cui in Cholon. A two-way flow of students heading to and from the "Yenan university" was also identified, with a group of "intelligent, pretty and clever" Chinese girls returning from Ya'nan University in May-June with a view to pursuing careers in teaching. CCP influence was also viewed as profound as with two newspapers in Cholon, the *Nanyang Bao* and the *Viet Nam Nghut Bao.*, and in workers syndicates parallel to those of the KMT. While the KMT was even more deeply entrenched in Cochinchina than the CCP, the role of the CCP in Cochinchina was viewed by French intelligence as far more profound than in Tonkin, especially as it did not face an organized adversary, as with the rump of the Chinese Nationalist organizations including the VNQDD. If the merchant community of Cholon remained hostile to all kinds of political propaganda, not so the working class Chinese who, with tacit assistance from the Viet Minh, remained susceptible to the CCP (AOM SLOTFOM NTCIP, Paris, Aug. 7, 1946).

Alongside the role of communist China in this phase of the Vietnamese revolution, one may well ask, what role did Moscow play at this juncture, given its mentor role to the ICP alongside its virtual creation of the prewar Comintern networks? French archives are silent on this question. According to Gaiduk's (2009: 125-7) reading of Soviet archives, Stalin did not want to undermine his relationship with the PCF in its bid for power in France by supporting the struggle for independence in Indochina. As a result, all contacts with Ho Chi Minh at this time went through the PCF who warned the Viet Minh against "premature adventures." Even though occupying ministerial posts in the French government, the PCF did not block the Indochina war budget. Otherwise, fearful of a "Yugoslav syndrome," Stalin considered Ho Chi Minh as too independent-minded, as with his contacts with the American OSS and even apparent secret contacts with the US in 1946-7.

Famously, the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 to Vo Nguyen Giap's North Vietnamese army rang down the curtain for a French military presence in Indochina, at least outside of an advisory role. As brokered by the great powers, the Geneva Accords of 1954 imposed - however tentatively - some hard and fast rules as to regroupment zones for the communist actors, ceasefires, and future elections. Even so, the agency of local actors

cannot be underestimated. First, the Viet Minh insurgency raged on in the southern delta, as well as across the border in contiguous parts of Cambodia, sometimes in tandem with the Red Khmer (Issarak) . Not all communities in Vietnam, north, center or south, were wedded to Ho Chi Minh's vision of a united Vietnam. Far from it. Certain, such as Catholics, monarchists, and the urban middle classes, had looked to collaborative relationships with the French-backed State of Vietnam under former Emperor Bao Dai. Others, such as the southern-based sects, sought to destroy the state from within. Catholics also fled the northern *en masse* for the south ahead of the complete Viet Minh takeover. As new actors on the stage, Americans vied with the French for influence in the Republic of Vietnam, leading to the eclipse of Bao Dai by the American-backed Catholic mandarin, Ngo Dinh Diem. In Cambodia, King - subsequently Prince - Norodom Sihanouk adroitly maneuvered between the French and the Red Issarak to proclaim his own " Royal Crusade " for independence. In Laos, the communist Pathet Lao went from strength to strength. With France still in the saddle, America had already made its first fatal steps towards active military engagement in Vietnam.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined diplomatic plays by France in a climate where Paris still clung to dreams of empire or, at best, some version of the British Commonwealth. It had devoted time and resources as with institution building in the " associated states, " especially through the co-optation of elites. But, rather than exiting magnanimously as with the British in India in the face of nationalist demands, the French seemingly looked to inspiration from the Malaya counter-insurgency model or even in ways reminiscent of the Dutch attempt to crush the nationalists in Indonesia. Still, decolonization was a complex exercise, not all Vietnamese were wedded to the unity of the nation on Hanoi's terms and, for a moment (between March-December 1946) , even Ho Chi Minh conceded at least the sense of a timetable. Just possibly, Cambodia would have collapsed into warring fiefdoms without the British-French reoccupation pending constitutional devolution and statebuilding. Likewise, Laos was prey to a version of regional warlordism or Balkanization in the absence of the French restoration.

Overall, as Tanham (1961: xix) asserts, the French failed to engage " moderates in the nationalist camp " still given to compromise. In this view, the French remained " blind to the possibilities of an alliance against the Communist threat. " Neither did it help that the French failed to offer concrete independence proposals. In other words, French undervalua-

tion of Vietnamese nationalist sentiments helped the enemy to consolidate leading to eventual Viet Minh victory. Actually , “ third force ” politics were entertained at a number of junctures by a range of actors. As far as the Americans were concerned, the French or French intelligence were a “ third force ” unto themselves, and one of reasons why they dumped Bao Dai. Arguably, the incoming American protégé , Ngo Dinh Diem, himself played this independent role towards the end by opening up channels with the communist opposition. Sihanouk’s variously Francophile and neutralist policies were obviously anathema to the United States, although the tensions would not overtly surface until the late 1950s. American backing in Laos for such figures as Katay Don Sasorith and the Sananikone clan of southern Laos only served to drive a wedge between moderates as with Souvanna Phouma and the Pathet Lao leadership under his half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong.

As this article has underscored, Ho Chi Minh was simply the “ nationalist ” card worth playing in Hanoi, as Jean Sainteny and even Minister Moutet recognized, but French hardliners, d’Argenlieu along with military careerists, simply confirmed the Viet Minh default position that the French were not serious about independence much less unity of Vietnam. Whether or not a Yugoslavia-type outcome could have emerged in Hanoi will never be known, as the Viet Minh pushed to the brink, ran with their Plan B. The die now seemed to be set, with the Americans increasingly bankrolling the French as the positions hardened between the two adversaries. There would be no end to American “ escalation ” in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the international community were also not blind to internal changes within the DRV, just as the foreign intelligence community monitored Moscow and Beijing for clues as to future policy plays.

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