

After Geneva: The French Presence in Vietnam, 1954-1963

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Seven years of war were required for our ‘enemies’ to chase us out of North Vietnam. One and a half years of ‘solidarity’ with our allies were sufficient for them to chase us out of South Vietnam.

(Maurice Duverger, *Le Monde*, 21 March 1956)

Introduction

By mid-July 1954 the weary Geneva Conference participants saw the light at the end of the tunnel. On 21 July, French and Vietminh representatives signed the Geneva Accords, bringing the First Indochina War to a close, temporarily dividing North and South Vietnam at the 17th parallel and stipulating that Vietnamese elections would take place in 1956 to reunify the country. For France, eight years of *salle guerre* had finally been resolved. French leaders took the conference provisions seriously, and, at the time, it appeared that Paris would play a major role in implementing them. However, the international situation evolved quickly after the conference as the Ngo Dinh Diem government and the Eisenhower administration supplanted the *présence française* in Vietnam. By 1956, Paris had lost political, military, and economic control to Saigon and Washington: a *fait accompli* that none of the signatories to the Geneva Accords had anticipated.

Because of France’s apparent withdrawal from North and South Vietnam, scholars tend to downplay France’s role in Vietnamese affairs after Geneva. Those more critical of France tend to dedicate a sentence or two explaining that France “refused to endorse the United States’s Diem experiment,” and “abandoned any pretense of shared Franco-American responsibility for the security of non-communist Southeast Asia.” Others, who decry increasing American involvement, claim that “the Eisenhower administration intervened directly in Vietnam, displacing France as the major external power.”¹ In fact, the situation was far more complex, with a number of factors leading to a reduced

¹ See Seth Jacobs, “‘Our System Demands the Supreme Being’: The U.S. Religious Revival and the ‘Diem Experiment,’ 1954-1955,” *Diplomatic History* (fall 2001):596 and George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America*

French presence. First, Franco-American difficulties in arriving at a coordinated strategy toward Diem as well as Diem's triumph in the 1955 sect crisis reduced France's political presence. Second, the South Vietnamese and American determination to reduce France's military presence, which resulted in the disappearance of the French High Command, French Expeditionary Corp (FEC), the Ecole Militaire Supérieur (EMS), and the French presence in the Training Relations Instruction Mission (TRIM), led France to disengage from its responsibility to uphold the 1956 elections. Third, American determination to replace France at every level, whether it be political, military, economic, or cultural, increased Franco-South Vietnamese conflict and prompted France to engage in a last ditch effort to preserve a presence in Vietnam.

Despite these setbacks, the French presence in Vietnam continued via education, cultural exchanges, aid programs, commercial trade, and French language courses. In fact, by the early 1960s France had staged a considerable comeback. Paris's support of South Vietnam's bid to enter the United Nations in 1957 caused Diem to view the continued French presence in Vietnam as a counterweight to the sometimes heavy-handed American presence. Franco-South Vietnamese relations thus improved while the American-South Vietnamese relationship became more strained. To the surprise of American officials then, and perhaps to historians today, the *présence française* endured in Indochina as French officials worked quietly behind the scenes to help reform the Diem government and maintain French cultural institutions.

Diem and the French Political presence

France's immediate goal after Geneva was to avoid a resurgence of war. Vietnamese Emperor Bao Dai's appointment of Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister presented an immediate problem to this goal as it seemed unlikely Diem would uphold the Geneva Accords. In addition, Diem's antipathy toward the French led them to view his rise to power with trepidation. Compounding the problem was the Franco-American relationship in Vietnam. Although France and the United States had agreed to a policy of

action commune (joint action) in South Vietnam, the American determination to keep Diem in power was the first step in the decline of French political control.

While the French saw Diem as a risky experiment at best, not all French officials opposed Diem, as Eisenhower administration officials tended to assume.² Contrary to the Americans, French officials publicly recognized Diem's flaws—"his ineffectiveness, his inability to match Ho Chi Minh's leadership qualities, personality, and mystique, his lack of support in the South, his dearth of political finesse, and the challenges he faced from various politico-religious sects, parts of the army, and some Catholics."³ French officials in Saigon thus debated on whether to maintain Diem in power.⁴ After ruling out Bao Dai's return, a coup d'état, and a new, more pliable South Vietnamese government, they decided to try to persuade Diem to enlarge his regime.⁵ The French at this point still considered themselves masters of the game in Saigon, but French High Commissioner to Vietnam General Paul Ely recognized the importance of securing American cooperation in supporting a South Vietnamese government.⁶ According to Ely, official opinion at the French Foreign Ministry, or Quai d'Orsay, was that sooner or later South Vietnam would be lost to the North, and thus French policy should be to cooperate with the North.⁷ To avoid

² 10 July 1954 memorandum, Chateau de Vincennes, Service Historique de l'Armée de la Terre, Ely papers, vol. 40 (hereafter SHAT). In fact, Diem had a number of high level influential supporters—Deputy Prime Minister Paul Reynaud and French Under Secretary for the Associated States Marc Jacquet among them. Several French officials thought Diem was South Vietnam's only chance. Former French High Commissioner in Indochina Georges Gautier and Director General of the Associated States Ministry Robert Tezenas de Montcel thought that Diem's bellicosity fit well with the tone the French wanted to achieve at Geneva. Laurent Cesari, "La France, les Etats-Unis, et L'Indochine, 1945-1957," Diss. Université de Nanterre, 1991, 812.

³ Alain Ruscio, La Guerre Française d'Indochine (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1992), 229. France preferred to work with pro-French elements such as former premiers Tran Van Huu, Nguyen Van Tam, or Buu Loc, William Duiker, U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 198. Former French Commissioner General Maurice DeJean had a very grim outlook about Diem's possibilities for success and suggested Buu Loc as a potential replacement. DeJean to MAE, 10 September 1954, Documents diplomatiques françaises, 1954 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1987), 320-321 (hereafter DDF).

⁴ Ministère des Affaires Etrangères note, 29 July 1954, MAE, Cabinet du Ministre, Cabinet Pineau, vol. 18 (hereafter MAE).

⁵ 24 August 1954 discussion in Saigon, SHAT, Ely papers, vol. 37.

⁶ 21 August 1954 meeting, SHAT, Ely papers, vol. 37.

⁷ Memorandum of meeting in Paris, no date, SHAT, Ely papers, vol. 37. Public and Parliamentary debate

American accusations of unilateral abandonment of South Vietnam and to maintain a voice in the decision-making process, Ely and others advocated integrating French and American policy as closely as possible.⁸

A coordinated policy appeared elusive. Tensions between American and French officials increased over how to proceed in South Vietnam to the point where French Minister in Charge of Relations with the Associated States Guy La Chambre and Ely came to Washington in September to discuss the situation.⁹ By the end of the meetings, the French and Americans had agreed to support the Diem government in an attempt at joint action.¹⁰ La Chambre declared that "from now on there would be no place for the slightest misunderstanding, the least divergence of views between France and the United States, on Southeast Asian questions. Those who try to play the United States against France or vice versa will be thwarted." Yet only two months after the September meeting, French Prime Minister Pierre Mendès France, during his visit to Washington in November accused the United States of "replacing" France in South Vietnam and refusing to consider alternatives to Diem despite his inability to stabilize the South Vietnamese government.¹¹

periodically occurred over whether France should support South or North Vietnam. Jacques Daloz, The War in Indochina, 1945-1954 (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), 198.

⁸ Telegram from French official Philippe Baudet to MAE, 13 August 1954, MAE, Asie, 1944-1955, Indochine, dossier 157.

⁹ David Anderson, Trapped By Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961 (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 1993), 81.

¹⁰ Paragraph 4 of the minute of understanding agreed to during conversations between Under Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith, Acting Minister of Associated States Guy La Chambre, and Finance Minister Edgar Faure, 27-29 September 1954. Top secret telegram from Smith to the Embassy in Vietnam, 28 September 1954, Foreign relations of the United States 1952-1954 (Washington, 1982) 13:2080-81 (hereafter FRUS).

¹¹ Top secret memo of conversation between Mendès France, British Prime Minister Anthony Eden, and American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, 23 October 1954, MAE, Asie 1944-1955, Indochine, dossier 194. See also Frank Costigliola, France and the United States: The Cold Alliance 1940-1990 (New York: Twayne, 1992), 109. Franco-American meetings at the end of 1954 indicated to Paris that Washington would consider alternatives to Diem if he did not enlarge his government, but in the end Washington resisted any changes Secret telegram from American Ambassador to France Douglas Dillon to the Department of State (DOS), 6 January 1955, FRUS 1955-1957 1:19. The French felt that Dulles had indicated that the United States was considering alternatives whereas Dulles argued he had not made any commitments to replace the Diem government. See top-secret telegram from American Chargé in France Theodore Achilles to DOS, 18 January 1955, FRUS 1955-1957 1:45. Also, see summary of tripartite meetings, 18 December 1954, MAE, Asie 1944-1955, Indochine, vol. 157.

Mendès France's replacement, Edgar Faure, assured American officials that it was the policy of the French government "to work 100% with the U.S." in Indochina and that the "closest Franco-American cooperation [in Indochina was] not only important to Indochina states but essential to the Free World." According to Faure, the French government would "not play a double game in Vietnam," following one policy in the South and another in the North.¹² Despite Faure's claims, when the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen united to overthrow the Diem government in March 1955, the French decided the moment had come to replace Diem.¹³ As the crisis deepened, the Faure government repeatedly urged the Eisenhower administration to set up meetings between France and the United States so that some sort of joint action could be established. In mid-April, a list of questions from the State Department asking for specific alternatives to Diem indicated to the French that the Americans were at last serious about replacing him.¹⁴

The Quai d'Orsay was concerned that any recommendation to replace Diem would be labeled a "French decision," and that they would be held accountable for any problems arising from this decision.¹⁵ Paris decided to proceed despite private qualms, and, after consulting with Ely, French officials produced a fairly detailed outline of how Diem could be replaced. The Quai argued that both the French and Americans must agree on a successor to Diem. Once the decision had been made, the regime change

¹² Secret telegram from Director of the Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs Kenneth Young to DOS, March 25, 1955, FRUS 1955-57 1:147.

¹³ Secretary of State of the Associated States Robert LaForest to Ely, 31 March 1955, DDF, 1955, 373-374. Tran Van Huu, Nguyen Van Tam, or Dr. Phan Huy Quat were all possibilities.

¹⁴ The list addressed the issues of who would succeed Diem with the best prospects of carrying out government programs and strengthening free Vietnam, when such a change would take place, which actions would be taken to ensure government control of the national police under the Binh Xuyen, what procedure would be followed in any proposed change, how the French would ensure the sects' support of a new government, and what support a new government could count on from French forces. According to Cesari, this list was a stalling tactic to give Diem time to reorganize, but nothing in American documentation suggests that the United States had already decided against considering alternatives. Cesari, "La France, Les Etats-Unis, et L'Indochine," 1042. Anderson points out in "J. Lawton Collins, John Foster Dulles, and the Eisenhower Administration's 'Point of No Return,'" Diplomatic History 12 (1988): 136-138 that Washington was seriously considering alternatives. My research findings support Anderson's argument.

¹⁵ Dillon to Dulles, top secret, 16 April 1955, National Archives Records Administration, microfilm, C0008, reel 3 (hereafter NARA).

should be carried out as soon as possible.¹⁶ The Quai also claimed that the Binh Xuyen had already promised to behave and that a new government should be established in three phases: first a Franco-American decision on a replacement for Diem, then a Franco-American-Vietnamese discussion in which French and American officials would approach Bao Dai secretly, then a Vietnamese declaration (by Bao Dai). Only the Vietnamese phase would be made public. The French believed that the sects would support a new government if they were included in it. Finally, Paris would maintain a position of non-intervention but sympathetic neutrality while the presence of the FEC would guarantee order.¹⁷

The moment for action had finally arrived as Washington prepared to implement French recommendations. French officials believed they had convinced Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to sacrifice Diem in exchange for close Franco-American cooperation.¹⁸ On 27 April, the American Embassies in Paris and Saigon received instructions to initiate a change in the government. The diplomatic maneuvering had finally come to an end and the French and the Americans had made their decision--too late.

On that same day, fighting broke out again and the instructions to replace Diem were blocked by Dulles. For the next few days it was not clear whether Diem would triumph and French and American officials continued to meet to discuss options.¹⁹ But by 2 May, when Eisenhower's special representative

¹⁶ Dillon to DOS, 13 April 1955, NARA, RG 59, microfilm, C0008, reel 2. The French maintained that they were loyal to the idea of "action commune" and that therefore no successors could be decided upon without American approval. If the United States did not replace Diem, the Quai believed France should withdraw completely from South Vietnam, Antoine Pinay to French Ambassador to the United States Maurice Couve de Murville, 21 April 1955, DDF 1955, 484-486.

¹⁷ Top-secret questions from the United States to France, 13 April 1955, from First Secretary of American Embassy William Gibson to Deputy Director General of Political Affairs Jacques Roux, MAE, Asie 1944-1955, Indochine, vol. 196. See also telegram from Roux to MAE, 14 April 1955, MAE, Asie 1944-1955, Indochine, vol. 87, telegram from LaForest to Ely, 13 April DDF 1955, 437-439, and top-secret telegram from Dulles to Saigon, NARA, RG 59, microfilm LM071, reel 15.

¹⁸ Murville to MAE, top secret, 28 April 1955, DDF 1955, 523-524.

¹⁹ There is little doubt that Diem started the fighting and was most likely aided by the CIA. The French certainly believed that the CIA, and Edward Lansdale in particular, had been instrumental in the resumption of hostilities. See Anderson, Trapped by Success, 110-113, for more detail. See Edward Lansdale, In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 244-312 for a first hand account of the sect crisis. See Pinay to Murville letter, 29 April 1955, DDF 1955, 541-543 for a summary of Franco-American discussions.

General J. Lawton Collins returned to Saigon, Diem had vanquished the sects and was still in control of the government. The French felt betrayed by the Americans after having received what they considered guarantees to replace Diem. Paris had devoted substantial time to formulating a plan for a new government, coordinated with Ely and the sects, and worked with the United States in a number of Franco-American meetings. Ely commented that the French had insisted that the Vietnamese should determine their own government but that "it was along the Potomac that Diem's fate had been decided and where future South Vietnamese governments would be decided."²⁰

The sect crisis was critical to the continued French presence in Vietnam. The consolidation of Diem's regime in 1955 gradually shifted the balance of power between the Western allies in Vietnam, with the United States supplanting France. This process culminated in Paris in May 1955 in a series of talks among American, French, and British representatives where American officials underscored the fact that they were taking charge in Vietnam. Ely left at the end of May, claiming that "a *politique commune* between France and the United States was now impossible."²¹ The sect crisis in spring 1955 thus destroyed Franco-American attempts to create a coordinated policy. France had begrudgingly supported Diem to avoid breaking the unity of action among the Western powers that France had been so desperate to keep. In the end, France lost not only Franco-American cooperation in Indochina, but also French political influence on Vietnamese affairs.²²

The 1956 elections and the French Military Presence

²⁰ Ely to MAE, top secret, 21 April 1954, SHAT, Ely papers, vol. 39.

²¹ See Daniel P O'C. Greene, "John Foster Dulles and the End of the Franco-American Entente in Indochina," *Diplomatic History* 16 (fall 1992): 511-549 for a detailed discussion of the May talks. Ely complained that he had successfully persuaded two American Ambassadors to his way of thought and to what he considered a sane policy only to find them overruled on each occasion by Washington officials who refused to listen to their advice and who only thought in terms of Congress's reactions and American public opinion. Ely had no reason to believe that if he stayed on he would not suffer the same experience again and had no inclination to try. Ely to MAE, top secret, 6 May 1954, SHAT, Ely Papers, vol. 39 and Ely to MAE, 15 May 1955, SHAT, Ely papers, vol. 40.

²² MAE to French Ambassador to South Vietnam Henri Hoppenot, 2 August 1955, MAE, *Papiers d'Agents*, Henri Hoppenot Papers, vol. 15.

The second factor leading to a weakened French presence in Vietnam was the issue of the 1956 elections.²³ By mid-July 1954, the Geneva Conference participants had reached an agreement on all major issues except for the difficult problem of national elections. The Vietminh refused to end hostilities until all parties settled on a specific date for Vietnamese reunification elections. As a result, point 14a of the cease fire between the French and Vietminh recognized a two year interval before general elections "which will bring about the unification of Vietnam."²⁴ The only other mention of the elections existed in the final declaration. According to point seven, "...general elections shall be held in July 1956, under the supervision of an international commission composed of representatives of the Member States of the International Supervisory Commission, referred to in the agreement on the cessation of hostilities. Consultations will be held on this subject between the competent representative authorities of the two zones from 20 July 1955 onwards."²⁵

The problem of how to bring about, or not bring about, the 1956 elections, was a critical juncture for the French.²⁶ Despite the vague wording of the cease fire and final declaration, the French took the

²³ A proposal to hold general elections was first made by North Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Van Dong on 10 May 1954. Dong brought up the point again on 16 June after military matters had been settled. The majority of negotiations on this point were carried out secretly by the Vietminh and the French.

²⁴ Article 14(a) of the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam. The agreement also stated that "the conduct of civil administration in each regrouping zone shall be in the hands of the party whose forces are to be regrouped there in virtue of the present agreement." In other words, France, not the State of Vietnam, would be in charge in South Vietnam. Even if the Saigon government took over from the French, article 27 provided that "the signatories and their successors" had to uphold the accords. It is important to note that the Vietminh bargained ferociously over the elections issue and were not simply going through the motions. See Frank Weinstein, Vietnam's Unheld Elections: The Failure to Carry Out the 1956 Reunification Elections and the Effect on Hanoi's Present Outlook (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 6-10.

²⁵ Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference on Indochina, 21 July 1954, on the problem of restoring peace in Indochina, in which representatives of Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, France, Laos, the People's Republic of China, the State of Vietnam, the USSR, the United Kingdom, and the United States took part. Anthony Eden and V.M. Molotov were the co-presidents of the conference. See James Cable, The Geneva Conference of 1954 on Indochina (New York: St. Martins, 1986), François Joyaux, La Chine et le règlement du premier conflit d'Indochine. Genève 1954 (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1979), Robert Randle, Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), and Lucia Rather, "The Geneva Conference of 1954: Problems in Allied Unity," unpublished dissertation, George Washington University, 1994 for detailed discussions on the Geneva Conference.

²⁶ Precisely how these elections would be conducted remained unspecified. While the cease fire agreement was considered a valid document under international law, the final declaration was more ambiguous since the United States and South Vietnam refused to attach their names to the document and issued separate statements.

elections seriously and expected them to be held. In the period immediately following the Geneva Conference, Paris feared that a failure to hold elections would violate the spirit of Geneva. More importantly, the French feared that if the elections did not take place, North Vietnam would have a pretext to renew the war.²⁷ The French Foreign Ministry also hoped that an entente between North and South Vietnam would result in smoother Franco-Vietnamese relations. At the same time, French officials did not want to promote the elections too forcefully for fear of creating a diplomatic rift with the United States. For Paris, an election would terminate their responsibilities, but so too would an overt American or South Vietnamese assumption of blame for the consequences of what might follow if elections failed to take place.²⁸

Much of the current scholarship dismisses the 1956 elections as a non-event due to firm American backing of Ngo Dinh Diem's refusal to consider elections.²⁹ I suggest that France's reduced military presence, rather than American support of Diem, played a bigger role in the failure of the elections. The American assumption of the training for the Vietnamese National Army on 1 January

Considerable debate exists over what legal obligations the United States and South Vietnam incurred under the Geneva agreements. Robert Randle, Geneva 1954 and Richard Falk, ed, The Vietnam War and International Law (Princeton, 1968), 543-573, and Weinstein, Vietnam's Unheld Elections, 11-13 address this issue. Most recently, a fall 2000 H-diplo discussion, prompted by reviews of Robert McNamara's book Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), led to spirited debate over whether nationwide elections, as noted in the final declaration, were binding on the United States. Interestingly, no one in the discussion raised the point that no matter the American obligations, the cease fire agreement made the elections binding for the French and North Vietnamese.

²⁷ Duiker, U.S. Containment Policy, 213, 217, Weinstein, Vietnam's Unheld Elections, 20.

²⁸ Anderson, Trapped By Success, 123-124.

²⁹ Scholars who address the 1956 elections issue typically do so in a fairly cursory manner and, for the most part, remain focused on American agency in supporting Diem's refusal to begin consultations with North Vietnam in preparation for the 1956 elections. See, for example, George Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975 (New York: Knopf, 1986), 55-56, Robert Scigliano, South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), 134, Kahin, Intervention, 89, Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History (New York: Viking, 1983), 24, and Laurent Cesari, "La France, Les Etats-Unis, et L'Indochine," 891-892, 913, 968, 1074-75. Some scholars, such as David Anderson, acknowledge other factors at play, but their discussions are brief. Anderson concludes that Saigon and Washington had sought to sabotage the 1956 elections, "but they had accomplices in London, Paris, Moscow, and Beijing who were not eager to risk involvement in a rekindled conflict for the sake of Hanoi." Anderson, Trapped by Success, 127. See Bernard Fall, "How the French Got Out of Vietnam," in Marcus Raskin and Bernard Fall, eds. The Vietnam Reader (New York: Random House, 1965) for the French perspective.

1955, the South Vietnamese call for the disappearance of the French High Command and withdrawal of the French Expeditionary Corps (FEC) by April 1956, and American-South Vietnamese interference with the Ecole Militaire Supérieur Vietnamienne (EMS) and insistence on ending the French role in the Franco-American Training Relations Instruction Mission (TRIM) led France to reevaluate the nature and extent of its responsibilities to the Geneva accords and hence the 1956 elections.³⁰

France's military presence posed the biggest challenge to Franco-Vietnamese relations after Geneva. According to South Vietnamese officials, Franco-Vietnamese relations would improve and the elections issue could be resolved once military issues were settled.³¹ As a result, on 16 February 1956 a key meeting of the Committee on National Defense took place to discuss Diem's calls for French High Command and the FEC's withdrawal by April 1956. The Committee agreed that the French withdrawal of forces, which would reduce the French military presence to the point where France could no longer guarantee security, would necessitate France's disengagement from its responsibilities under the Geneva accords.³²

The next Franco-Vietnamese conflict occurred over the EMS, which had always employed French and Vietnamese instructors in its training of Vietnamese forces. In January the Vietnamese had replaced the French command at the school.³³ In addition, of the Vietnamese to be trained abroad in 1955, 729 were sent to France and 166 to the United States, in 1956, 450 were sent to France and 881 to the United States. Furthermore, the Americans ended funding for 600 Vietnamese officers who were

³⁰ February 11 1956, note from Asie-Oceanie, "French Policy in Vietnam," DDF, 1956, 190-192.

³¹ Hoppenot to French Foreign Minister Antoine Pinay, 18 January 1956, DDF 1956 vol. I, 55-56. The Vietnamese had agreed to keep the French air and naval missions with renewable contracts every 3-6 months. The bigger issue was the number of French troops who would stay in South Vietnam.

³² Note for the Minister, top secret, 16 February 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, 40. The French had requested \$330 million from the Americans for support of the FEC in 1955. Only \$100 million was forthcoming. See The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of the United States Decision-making on Vietnam, vol. 1, Gravel ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 217 and Ronald Spector, Advice and Support: The Early Years of the United States Army in Vietnam, 1941-1960 (New York: Free Press, 1985), 238.

³³ Hoppenot to MAE, 2 March 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 38 and Hoppenot to MAE, 19 March 1956, CLV, SV, vol. 38.

training at various French military schools, and in June 1956 Diem suspended the training of all Vietnamese officers in France.³⁴ For the French, it was difficult to imagine that the diminishment of the EMS did not have an American origin when Vietnamese officers were being sent to the United States for training.³⁵

The French were also forced to reduce their presence in the Training Relations Instruction Mission (TRIM), which had been a Franco-American attempt to jointly train and organize the Vietnamese army.³⁶ Because the High Command would no longer exist, French forces would be placed under the American command.³⁷ According to French Ambassador to South Vietnam Henri Hoppenot, "the Americans were taking over."³⁸ General Samuel T. Williams, who had replaced John O'Daniel as the head of the Military Advisory and Assistance Group (MAAG), notified Paris that French officers who left TRIM would not be replaced until Franco-Vietnamese military negotiations had ended, and that thirty American officers would be included in French air training mission. Adding insult to injury, Nguyen Huu Chau, Delegate Minister to the Council of the Vietnam Presidency, informed Hoppenot that South Vietnam would subordinate all four branches of the French mission under an American general. Hoppenot subsequently suggested to the Quai that if the French military presence was placed in such a

³⁴ 6 March 1956, Hoppenot to MAE, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 38 and 15 June 1956, Hoppenot to MAE, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 38. Jean Payart, Hoppenot's successor, recognized the importance of France's military missions in keeping French political influence. "The day no Vietnamese officers went to France, would be the day French influence was over," according to Payart. Payart to MAE, 20 October 1956, CLV, SV, vol. 43.

³⁵ 12 July 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vols. 38 & 13, July 1956 notes, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 38, and Hoppenot to Minister, top secret, 13 August 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 73. Hoppenot claimed he had in his possession a letter from General Williams dated 16 March that proved that the idea of closing the EMS was an American initiative.

³⁶ American General John O'Daniel began command of TRIM under Ely's authority and a French Colonel was designated as Chief of Staff in 1955. Four offices were directed by the French—air, navy, organization and general studies, and plans. The Americans directed the other three offices—logistics, instruction, and pacification. At its inception about sixty officers served in TRIM, and of these sixty about half were French.

³⁷ According to Pineau, the French would keep training and instruction missions, the only French troops left would be at the Seno base, military responsibilities would be done by country, and the naval division would not be stationed in Vietnam. All these decisions resulted from the National Defense Committee meeting in February and from meetings at the end of 1955. 17 February 1956, top secret, Pineau to Minister of National Defense, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 40.

³⁸ 11 August 1956, Hoppenot to MAE, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 43.

"contrary position to French prestige and dignity," then France should "withdraw completely."³⁹

Hoppenot recognized French representation in TRIM had become completely symbolic. The coup de grace to the French presence came at the end of April when General Williams notified the remaining officers in TRIM that due to the dissolution of the French High Command, they would cease their functions as of 28 April 1956.

TRIM's reorganization left the French completely out of the loop. A Vietnamese leader and a powerful American presence in the organization would henceforth exclude French input, and France thus refused to be a part of the organization.⁴⁰ Furthermore, French officials protested to American Ambassador to France Douglas Dillon that the United States was trying to control the French air and navy missions still left in Vietnam. Although Washington did not want the two missions to leave since MAAG ceiling limits prohibited the United States from replacing them, Dulles stated that "it might be the lesser of two evils just to get the French out."⁴¹

The American determination to create a Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission (TERM) in South Vietnam presented the final challenge to the French military presence. Immediately following the Geneva Conference, the Americans had increased their training mission but feared bringing in too many Americans in violation of the Geneva accords. TERM would provide a convenient pretext to place more American personnel in Vietnam.⁴² In February 1956, Washington offered Paris a deal. If Paris agreed to use 1000 French officers to recover American equipment still in Vietnam, then the Americans would intervene with Diem for a continued French military mission. It appeared that the Americans were attempting a *quid pro quo*—TERM for the FEC's continuation in Vietnam.⁴³ According to Hoppenot, if

³⁹ 11 August 1956, Hoppenot to MAE, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 43.

⁴⁰ Quai to Washington, 14 August 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 43.

⁴¹ Dillon to DOS, Dulles to Paris and Saigon, 15 August 1956, NARA, RG 59, 651.00/3-2455 to 651.51G9/1-12-55, Box 2618.

⁴² Note for Pineau, 29 February 1956, MAE, Cabinet du Ministre, Cabinet Couve de Murville, vol. 30.

⁴³ Couve de Murville to MAE, secret, 25 February 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 44.

the French endorsed TERM, France would continue to be held responsible for the application of the Geneva accords, South Vietnam would think France supported its policies unconditionally, and it would cause problems with Hanoi.⁴⁴ Hoppenot concluded that "France would find itself in the worst possible situation because it would be responsible for the application of the accords, in particular the non-augmentation of military personnel, and, at the same time, would be associated with the United States and South Vietnam in violation of this accord."⁴⁵

Paris agreed with Hoppenot's argument and declined to support TERM, stating that "since Diem insisted that the French withdraw the FEC from South Vietnam before he would begin consultations on the 1956 elections, Paris no longer had any responsibility to enforce Geneva."⁴⁶ Hoppenot remarked that "neither Dulles, nor any of his colleagues showed the slightest interest, even as a common courtesy, to achieve a better collaboration between our two countries in Vietnam."⁴⁷ In a 14 May 1956 note to the co-presidents of the Geneva Conference, Anthony Eden and Vyacheslav Molotov, France stated that it had ceased to have any further responsibility with regard to the execution of the Geneva agreements but was willing to use its good offices providing South Vietnam would accept them.⁴⁸ France was clearly hesitating between continuing its commitment to Vietnam and washing its hands of the whole affair.⁴⁹ Both the Vietnamese and American displacement of the French in military matters led the French to renounce their responsibility to the Geneva agreements as well as the 1956 elections.

In summer 1956, Hoppenot sent French Foreign Minister Christian Pineau a long and detailed

⁴⁴ Hoppenot to MAE, 28 February 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 44.

⁴⁵ Note for the Minister, 27 February 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 44.

⁴⁶ See 29 February 1956 note for the Minister, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 44 and memo of conversation between French Ambassador to the United States Maurice Couve de Murville and Dulles, 28 February 1956, FRUS 1955-1957 1:648.

⁴⁷ Telegram from Hoppenot to MAE, 15 March 1956, CLV, SV, vol. 73.

⁴⁸ 14 May 1956 Note to Eden and Molotov, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 69. France made its offer of good offices conditional upon effective cooperation with South Vietnam and warned that these good offices would stop if such cooperation was absent.

⁴⁹ Hoppenot to Pineau, secret, 14 July 1956, DDF, 1956 vol. II, 99-107.

letter on Franco-American-South Vietnamese cooperation (or lack thereof) in Vietnam. Regarding the elections, Hoppenot contended that no effort whatsoever was made to begin consultations, and exchanges of view on topics of mutual interest only occurred when the French Ambassador initiated them.⁵⁰ In a detailed letter of instructions to Jean Payart, who replaced Hoppenot in late August 1956, Pineau concluded that the “non-elections” were key to Diem's survival as South Vietnam became even more determined to maintain its independence vis-à-vis France. Regarding the Americans, Pineau noted that although Dulles and the State Department had assured France on numerous occasions of their willingness to establish Franco-American cooperation in Vietnam, “the facts showed otherwise.” Pineau urged Payart “to try to build up economic and cultural domains” and reestablish a “climate of confidence between France and Vietnam and develop the collaboration between the two countries.”⁵¹

By the end of November 1956, French officials recognized that Vietnam no longer had need of French aid—military, financial, political, or otherwise—and that France inspired “neither hatred nor envy.” One historian has claimed that France had little leverage in South Vietnam and was too dependent on American economic support and political backing of French interests elsewhere in the world, particularly North Africa, to challenge the repudiation of the elections.⁵² French documentation demonstrates that this was not the case. Rather, Diem's unwillingness to work with the French, the withdrawal of the FEC, the dissolution of the French High Command, the diminishment of the EMS, and the loss of standing in TRIM led France to disengage from its responsibilities to the Geneva accords. Once it was clear that Diem would remain in control of South Vietnam, that the FEC would be withdrawn, and that the Vietminh would not renew hostilities after South Vietnam's refusal to begin consultations by 20 July 1955, France chose to focus on preserving its economic and cultural presence in Vietnam rather than maintaining a political and military one.

⁵⁰ Hoppenot to Pineau, top secret, 13 August 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 73.

⁵¹ Pineau to Payart, 29 August 1956, DDF, 1956 vol. II, 316-324.

⁵² Kahin, Intervention, 91.

Holding on: The French Economic and Cultural presence

By the end of 1956, France had lost political and military control in South Vietnam to Diem and the Americans. Two lines of defense remained—the economic and cultural fronts. The French sought to maintain economic influence through aid programs and commercial trade and they tried to perpetuate their cultural influence in Vietnam through educational institutions, foreign exchanges with the Vietnamese, and French language classes.

The French handed over a number of economic powers to the South Vietnamese during negotiations in late 1954. The Diem government took control of its financial, customs, and monetary policies as of 1 January 1955, the same date that the United States began direct aid to South Vietnam, bypassing the French.⁵³ According to French statistics, aid exports to Indochina had steadily declined since 1954: in 1953 France supplied 80 billion francs in exports to Indochina, in 1954 it was 63 billion, in 1955 it declined to 50 billion, and in 1956 France exported around 20 billion.⁵⁴ The United States contributed to France's reduced financial role in various ways. In November 1955 the United States had replaced France as the number one exporter to South Vietnam. In January 1956 the piaster was officially pegged to the dollar, French exports diminished by more than half, and 20,000 French bureaucrats headed back to the metropole. The preferential tariff for French companies ended on 1 March 1956, France's privileged status in trade matters had been revoked and French products were unable to compete in the race for imports financed by the US aid program. Indeed, the French share of Vietnamese imports fell from 66.7% to 27.4% from July 1955 to July 1956.⁵⁵

Still, France did not simply disappear from the economic scene. French enterprises continued to command a considerable share of Vietnamese industrial and business activity and a substantial amount of

⁵³ Dalloz, The War in Indochina, 196.

⁵⁴ 18 February 1956, aid mission to Vietnam, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 87.

⁵⁵ Saigon Embassy to MAE, 24 April 1956, from Agence Vietnamienne d'information Bac-Bo, Nord Vietnam, 13 April 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 55.

capital remained in Vietnam. Also significant was the fact that the Vietnamese were still accustomed to French products.⁵⁶ France also helped in the public domain—re-equipping a 100 kilometers of track on the Saigon-Hue line, furnishing material for public works and agricultural material, and providing scholarly materials. The French sent missions for agricultural training as well as forty mechanical technicians. Finally Paris continued to supply Vietnamese students in France with grants.⁵⁷ But France's economic presence continued to diminish as the Vietnamese slyly played the French and Americans off—if the French were too slow to respond to a Vietnamese request, the Vietnamese threatened to go to the Americans.⁵⁸

The French staked their last hope for control on the cultural front. In December 1954, the French and Vietnamese reached a number of cultural agreements. Paris and Saigon agreed that the French language would retain a privileged place, that diplomas earned in France and Vietnam would have equal weight, that France would be allowed to maintain its schools and create new ones, that Vietnamese and Vietnamese history would be obligatory, and that a consultative Franco-Vietnamese commission would ensure the carrying out of the agreements.⁵⁹ These agreements formed the basis for France's continued cultural presence in South Vietnam.

The cultural aspect was so important to France that it led to a second series of meetings—this time between the French and the Americans. During an 18 November 1954 meeting between Dulles and Mendès France, Dulles had reaffirmed that the United States had no intention of destroying France's economic, commercial, and cultural positions in South Vietnam. Mendès France was not convinced, and voiced concerns over the future administrative training of Vietnamese officials. Dulles replied that it had

⁵⁶ Etherington Smith to Selwyn Lloyd, 9 November 1956, PRO, FO 371/123425.

⁵⁷ 18 February 1956, aid mission to Vietnam, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 87.

⁵⁸ 29 April 1959, note on American aid, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 63.

⁵⁹ Note on Franco-Indochinese cultural problems, 3 July 1953, AN 457AP/52, note, 1954, MAE, Asie 1944-1955, Indochine, vol. 83.

been specified in instructions to Collins and Ely that competition between the United States and France in this area "would not happen."⁶⁰

The Americans tried again to reassure the French on the issue of training Vietnamese officials during December 1954 bipartite discussions. At the meetings, Ely, Collins, and their subordinates defined Franco-American policy on a number of issues, including education.⁶¹ According to Ely, the French and Americans should work together to ensure that South Vietnam did not slip into isolation and neutralism, or worse, drift toward communism. Ely indicated that the French wanted to keep Vietnam turned toward the West, with an international university. He urged American officials to remember that French was "the language in Vietnam, that all the books were written in French and that Vietnamese teachers, priests, and many parents all spoke French." Ely suggested that trying to change this fact would be a waste of time. During the meetings, Collins affirmed that Washington respected France's cultural influence and did not seek to replace the French.⁶²

The Franco-American working group charged with examining cultural questions arrived at the following conclusions regarding the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA): (1) Vietnam must have teaching adapted to its character and needs but open to external influence; (2) it would be dangerous for Vietnam to focus only on its own culture; (3) thus foreign language should be studied, particularly English, but French would remain predominant; (4) technical and material aid from France and the United States must go to existing structures to avoid an upending of the established system; (5) the ENA would be moved from Dalat to Saigon; and (6) five American instructors would be established at the school.⁶³

⁶⁰ Minute from Quai to French Embassy in Washington, 10 October 1955, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 47.

⁶¹ At the end of 1954, Paris and Washington had recognized that no united Franco-American policy in South Vietnam existed. Subsequently, instructions were sent to Collins and Ely underlining that competition between the two countries should be avoided and that the United States did not seek to replace France. In this new period of collaboration, mixed committees were created to solve problems in the areas of public order, information and propaganda, refugees, agricultural reform, establishment of a National Assembly, economic and financial measures, and education and formation of administrative personnel.

⁶² Memorandum of French working group discussion in Saigon, 3 December 1954, SHAT, Ely papers, vol. 37.

⁶³ Franco-American working group, 15 December 1954, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 47. Installed at Dalat in 1953, the ENA trained Vietnamese administrators. A Vietnamese director assisted by a French counselor organized courses

These six agreements represented a Franco-American attempt to determine a common cultural policy in Vietnam.

Much to French annoyance, the US-led National Institute of Administration (NIA) replaced the ENA in 1956, thus violating the 1954 accords. According to Hoppenot, "France must stop future initiatives of this character to prevent the complete elimination of the French cultural presence." France should therefore fight against the regression of spoken French, improve the formation of technical personnel, engineers, doctors, and professors, provide more French grants to Vietnamese, and increase Franco-Vietnamese contacts.⁶⁴ Evident in Hoppenot's remarks was the concern that the French language was losing ground to English as France withdrew, leaving the Vietnamese with less opportunity to speak French. According to the Director of the French Cultural Mission, Jean-Pierre Dannaud, the French language was dying out not because of a "nationalist, anti-communist, anti-colonialist, clerical, americanophile spirit," but because of "Vietnamese timidity and loss of speaking French habitually." The answer, Dannaud suggested, was to "organize more discussions, movie nights, and sports events to recapture the French language."⁶⁵

Despite pleas from French officials in Saigon to continue France's cultural mission, during the 1954-1956 period France saw a steady decline in the number of French books, journals and newspapers the Vietnamese imported—by 1956 these imports had been cut in half. Almost all imports had been financed by American dollars since September 1955 and the Americans had decided they no longer saw a need to subsidize the importation of French books. Subsequently French books and journals disappeared from the shop windows in Saigon.⁶⁶ In November 1955 French journalists Max Clos and Lucien Bodard

that were taught half in French half in Vietnamese.

⁶⁴ Hoppenot to French Foreign Minister Antoine Pinay, 11 February 1956, MAE, CLV, SV vol. 51.

⁶⁵ Letter from Inspector General of Public Instruction and Chief of French Teaching and Cultural Cooperation in Vietnam (Director of the French Cultural Mission) Jean Pierre Dannaud to the Commissariat of the Republic, 24 March 1956, CLV, SV, vol. 48.

⁶⁶ Chargé d'Affaires Arnaud d'Andurain de Maytie to MAE, 9 May 1957, MAE, Cabinet du Ministre, Cabinet Pineau, vol. 17.

were expelled and on 4 January 1956 the Diem regime stopped publication of the last French newspaper in Vietnam, *Le Journal d'Extreme Orient*. The newspaper was subsequently reinstated but controlled by the Vietnamese. As English broadcasts became commonplace, France was also forced to sell its radio station, Radio France Asie, to South Vietnam in February 1956. The French news service Agence France-Press continued to thrive in Vietnam after the creation of Agence Vietnam Press in 1951, in part because it maintained an exchange of information with Vietnam Press. But by the beginning of 1956, it began to lose its edge as Anglo-Saxon agencies challenged Agence France-Press's hegemony—United Press International in particular.⁶⁷ Dannaud's belief that if France simply continued to "export professors and import peanuts, then South Vietnam would remain in the French orbit" did not seem to be bearing fruit.⁶⁸

The New Franco-South Vietnamese Relationship

Franco-South Vietnamese relations reached an all-time low in 1956. According to the French, after the Geneva Conference they had engaged in a number of agreements with the South Vietnamese to guarantee Vietnamese independence.⁶⁹ In return, Saigon had done nothing but increase tensions between the two capitals and reduce the French political, military, economic, and cultural presence.⁷⁰ In the face

⁶⁷ 12 August 1958, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 33.

⁶⁸ Dannaud to the French Foreign Minister and Minister of Education, 4 September 1956, MAE, Etats-Associés, 1945-1957, section iv, vol. 191.

⁶⁹ 21 February 1956 meeting of Council of the Republic, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 87. The French had signed a 29 December 1954 agreement ending the economic convention between France, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia created by the Pau conventions in December 1950, reached a commercial accord with Vietnam on 19 March 1955, guaranteed unconditional support to the Diem regime in May 1955, recognized the results of the 23 October 1955 referendum that deposed Bao Dai, turned over a number of civil buildings in December 1955, and decided to send French Foreign Minister Antoine Pinay personally in early 1956 to work on Franco-Vietnamese problems.

⁷⁰ Note 14 January 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 87. Henri Hoppenot was named French Ambassador to South Vietnam on 4 June 1955 but the Vietnamese did not accept him until 20 July. The Vietnamese also recalled a Vietnamese delegation dedicated to resolving military issues from Paris on 13 October 1955 and arrested and detained two French officers. On 28 October 1955 the economic and financial accords of December 1954 were denounced, trade interrupted, civil buildings taken back, an auto-da-fé of French insignia occurred, and the Vietnamese counselors to the French Union Assembly quit.

of rampant francophobia, how the French should proceed stirred up internal debate in both Saigon and Paris, but did not produce a coherent French policy toward South Vietnam.⁷¹

And yet, a relaxing of tensions between the French and South Vietnamese occurred in a variety of areas after 1956. Diem's foreign policy successes and improved internal security, along with major French concessions, resulted in more cordial Franco-Vietnamese diplomatic relations. The French had relinquished the Saigon Arsenal, the Tourane base, and the Gialong Palace to the Vietnamese. In June 1956, Henri Hoppenot informed South Vietnamese Foreign Minister Vu Van Mau that French official Jean Payart would be the next French representative and first French Ambassador to South Vietnam. Payart's arrival was the final step in the changeover from the French high command to a normal diplomatic Embassy that would be on an equal level with all other foreign representations.⁷² A French parliamentary mission to Vietnam, led by Frederic Dupont, was favorably received, and following the mission a Franco-Vietnamese friendship society began. According to Hoppenot, Diem "no longer needed a scapegoat for South Vietnamese problems," and could thus afford to be more cordial to the French, as evidenced by his warm reception of the Dupont mission.⁷³

Although Franco-Vietnamese relations had improved, many French officials continued to resent the increasing American presence. In mid-August, Hoppenot sent a remarkable document to the Quai, detailing how the US had "evicted" France in Indochina. Looking back, Hoppenot traced the evolution, from the French perspective, of how the Americans came to replace the French in Indochina. Since 1945 he saw the US gradually supplanting the French, first through economic aid, followed by military control, and finally through a preponderant political influence in all councils and organizations of the Vietnamese

⁷¹ 21 February 1956 meeting of Council of the Republic, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 87. During a meeting of the Council of the Republic, French Senator Motaïs de Narbonne wanted a definition of French policy in Vietnam, questioned whether or not a joint Franco-American policy could be followed without France being evicted and the United States replacing it, and suggested that if a joint policy could not be established, an independent policy aimed at restoring Franco-Vietnamese friendship and assuring French interests should be implemented.

⁷² 18 June 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 87. When Hoppenot left on 16 August 1956, the Vietnamese were conspicuously absent, but were out in force when American general John O'Daniel arrived for a visit a few days later. Payart arrived in Saigon on 12 September 1956.

⁷³ Hoppenot to Minister, top secret, 3 August 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 125.

government. According to Hoppenot, even though the State Department promised collaboration, the policy of replacing the French was pursued by those in Saigon who had little responsibility to the Embassy. These groups did not hesitate to use anti-French propaganda to eliminate the French. The Pentagon, special services, and technical assistance groups were not content to replace the French at the posts circumstances forced them to abandon, but “tried to eliminate them from all areas.”⁷⁴ He asserted that American Ambassador G. Frederick Reinhardt had made little effort to work with the French, and that they were only indirectly informed of American actions, never consulted or forewarned about American actions that affected the French directly. Hoppenot believed that it was the combination of US anti-colonialism and anti-communism that had led to France's displacement: France had seen NATO allies act as if the présence française in Vietnam “belonged to a closed era” and that “any surviving remnants would not be tolerated except where the United States did not seek to replace France.”⁷⁵

Hoppenot's departure from and Jean Payart's arrival in Saigon in late summer 1956 marked an important transition for the French, Americans, and Vietnamese. The new French representative was untainted by colonial associations. Payart played an important role in soothing Franco-Vietnamese relations. In a meeting between Payart and Diem, Diem recognized that there were valuable aspects to the French mission in Vietnam. He was also well aware of the dangers of American aid, and did not want the United States to take control of the country after he had worked so hard to end French colonialism.⁷⁶ Diem had thus begun to view France as a counterweight to excessive American influence. Payart suggested to the Quai d'Orsay that France should focus on economic influence, which could be achieved

⁷⁴ 13 August 1956 Hoppenot to Minister, top secret, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 73. Hoppenot was undoubtedly referring, at least in part, to the Michigan State University Group (MSUG) activities. The MSUG was notoriously hostile to the French, who reciprocated in kind. When it had first arrived in 1955, the MSUG had planned to reorganize the police services. But the MSUG quickly moved into administrative reform and formation of functionaries, particularly for the NIA. The MSUG also created libraries and reorganized the Ministry of National Education, and directed the instruction of Sureté nationale members and the civil guard.

⁷⁵ 13 August 1956 Hoppenot to Minister, top secret, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 73. Reinhardt had been less forthcoming with the French that his predecessors Donald Heath and General J. Lawton Collins. In addition, Hoppenot was outraged that Vice President Richard Nixon, during his Vietnam visit in July 1956, made no mention of France's past sacrifices.

⁷⁶ Payart to Minister, 3 October 1956, secret, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 87.

through more grants, aid, and investments. He believed such assistance would gradually allow France to gain more political influence in South Vietnam.⁷⁷ Although he recognized that South Vietnam had no further need of France, either militarily or financially, Payart thought that a continued French cultural and economic influence would improve Franco-Vietnamese relations.⁷⁸

A breakthrough in Franco-South Vietnamese relations occurred, not through economic or cultural influence, but because of a single French political decision. In early 1957 a major controversy broke out over South Vietnam's attempt to join the United Nations. North Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Van Dong at the end of January sent a note to the General Assembly and to the Security Council demanding that they reject South Vietnam's proposal.⁷⁹ The French chose to support South Vietnam's claim. France's enthusiastic support for South Vietnam's entry into the UN went a long way toward improving Franco-Vietnamese relations. Diem stated that "France had chosen between North and South Vietnam for the first time since the Geneva Conference."⁸⁰ Of course, according to North Vietnam, this choice was in clear contradiction of the obligations and responsibilities laid on the French government upon signing the Geneva accords on its own behalf and on behalf of South Vietnam.⁸¹ Although South Vietnam's demand to join the UN was ultimately rejected, Franco-South Vietnamese relations continued to improve. Part of the improvement, according to Payart, came as a result of American attempts to work more closely with

⁷⁷ note, 4 October 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 87.

⁷⁸ Payart to Minister, 21 November 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 87.

⁷⁹ Sainteny to MAE, 29 January 1957, MAE, CLV, RDVN, vol. 32. Dong claimed South Vietnam was not a nation; paragraph 6 of the final declaration at Geneva indicated that the 17th parallel would not in any case constitute a political and territorial border. Also, South Vietnam on 24 April 1955 had signed the final communiqué of the Bandung conference that affirmed that a reunified Vietnam was required before it could become a member of the UN. In response to the USSR's suggestion that both North and South Vietnam be allowed in, North Vietnam pointed out that if both were allowed in, then the official division of Vietnam would be ensured—at least that was the RDVN's fear. The most interesting aspect of this move was that the USSR, supposedly North Vietnam's ally, appeared to be suggesting a de facto division of the country, further confirming to the West that the Soviets were not willing to risk a conflict over Vietnam.

⁸⁰ Letter, 30 January 1957, from French Consulate in New York to MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 71.

⁸¹ Letter to Eden and Molotov from Pham Van Dong, 18 March 1957, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 71. It is curious that the United States did not at least consider the Soviet proposal since it would have allowed the United States a way out of Indochina and tied the communists' hands politically.

the French mission. U.S. officials were finally convinced that "each position from which France was evicted in Vietnam did not necessarily mean a position gained for the United States, and that most often it was a clear loss for the West." In an interesting twist, Payart argued that the Quai d'Orsay should recognize that France had much to gain by the American presence and should try to smooth over emerging American-Vietnamese strains.⁸²

In the summer of 1957, Payart left South Vietnam to be replaced by Roger Lalouette. The Diem government made Lalouette's appointment difficult, in part because South Vietnam was his first posting and the South Vietnamese believed they were being relegated to a third rate country by having such a low-ranking Ambassador assigned. French Foreign Minister Christian Pineau urged Lalouette as he had urged Payart that "no encouragement whatsoever should be given to those who were against Diem and that French should not interfere in domestic affairs." Moreover, he recommended that Lalouette make clear to the South Vietnamese that France wanted to help South Vietnam economically, technically, culturally, and diplomatically.⁸³

The New Franco-North Vietnamese Relationship

As France struggled to redefine its relationship in South Vietnam after Geneva, it also attempted to maintain a separate presence in North Vietnam. French officials notified Washington and Saigon that maintaining such a presence would keep communications open between the Hanoi and the West, and would allow France to monitor North Vietnamese activities, but Washington periodically accused France of conspiring with North Vietnam.⁸⁴ Continued relations with the RDVN, and attempts to create a dialogue with China and Russia made France's international position appear too pro-communist in

⁸² Payart to Minister, 31 August 1957, CLV, SV, vol. 68.

⁸³ Confidential, Minister to Lalouette, 11 October 1958, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 2. Pineau also suggested that Lalouette maintain close contact with American Ambassador to Vietnam Elbridge Durbrow, who replaced G. Frederick Reinhardt in March 1957, so that France and the United States could work together on technical assistance and in cultural matters.

⁸⁴ See top-secret memorandum from Collins to Dulles, 20 January 1955, FRUS 1955-57 1:54.

Washington's eyes. Hoppenot concluded that in Asia, after "paying the price of a hot war," France had become "one of the victims of the Cold War."⁸⁵ From French documentation, it appears fairly clear that the French were not in fact trying to make a deal with the Vietminh. The French wanted to maintain an economic and cultural presence in North Vietnam but were not planning on double crossing the United States in order to do so.⁸⁶

In addition to American accusations, France had to contend with North Vietnamese animosity. The Mendès France-Pham Van Dong agreements of 21 July 1954, which guaranteed the exercise of private rights of French nationals and the continuance of French cultural establishments, met with huge obstacles. After Geneva, Jean Sainteny, who had been appointed French delegate general to North Vietnam in August 1954, was charged with securing safeguards for French businesses.⁸⁷ North Vietnamese discriminatory practices and interference with personnel led to the loss of a great number of French commercial and industrial enterprises throughout 1954-1955.⁸⁸ After the evacuation of Haiphong in November 1955, all French enterprises stopped. The Ecole Française d'Extreme Orient operated at a greatly diminished level and French personnel at the Pasteur Institute, Cancer Institute, and French hospitals dwindled.

One of the reasons for the hardening of Hanoi's attitude was that in summer 1955 the French had indicated that the North would be officially represented in Paris, but failed to follow through. Jean Sainteny had prepared a letter agreeing to the appointment of a personal delegate by Ho Chi Minh in

⁸⁵ 13 August 1956 Hoppenot to Minister, top secret, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 73.

⁸⁶ Dalloz, The War in Indochina, 195-196. Although, right wing liberals and the left periodically favored promoting closer relations with North Vietnam. Bernard Fall, "Indochina Since Geneva," Pacific Affairs, vol. 28 no. 1 (March 1955): 20.

⁸⁷ See Roux to Washington, 20 August 1954, MAE, Asie 1944-1955, Indochine, vol. 84. Roux believed Sainteny was an excellent choice for the North Vietnamese mission even though Ely was against it. According to Paris, close coordination between Ely and Sainteny would be viewed with suspicion by both the North and South Vietnamese. See also, Ely's telegram to La Chambre, 30 November 1954 in which Ely contended that Sainteny's mission was making Ely's job impossible since both the South Vietnamese and Americans thought France was playing a "double game." DDF 1955, 823-824.

⁸⁸ The North Vietnamese nationalized French mining enterprises (including tin wolfram, zinc, anthracite, coal, and iron), cement plants in Haiphong, cotton mills in Nam-Dinh, glass plants, ship repair yards, docking facilities, railroad repair shops, and wood processing plants. Fall, "Indochina Since Geneva," 11-12.

Paris, but Edgar Faure never signed this letter out of fear of South Vietnamese and American reactions to the arrival in France of a Vietminh representative. Faure allowed only a commercial attaché instead.⁸⁹ In addition, Paris reminded the DRV that the French delegation in Hanoi and North Vietnamese commercial representation in Paris did not imply normal diplomatic relations.⁹⁰ North Vietnamese officials retaliated by refusing French entry visas, starting domestic help strikes, and attempting to bribe or coerce French military personnel for spying purposes. In addition, Hanoi refused to consider a replacement of former French Minister in Hanoi Jean-Baptiste George Picot until the diplomatic recognition issue was settled.⁹¹

A second reason for increasing tensions between Hanoi and Paris centered around the 1956 elections. Ho Chi Minh and his advisors made every political effort to see that the elections took place.⁹² The North Vietnamese repeatedly attempted to ensure that the Geneva cochairmen, as well as the ICC, China, and France pressured the United States and Saigon to cooperate.⁹³ In adopting a diplomatic

⁸⁹ J. Aurillac, Chief of Political and Cultural Affairs Services, to Director of Asie Océanie and Chief of Economic and Financing Affairs Services, top secret, 7 February 1956, MAE, CLV, RDVN, vol. 44.

⁹⁰ Note for the President of the Council, 7 June 1958, MAE, CLV, RDVN, vol. 35.

⁹¹ Note, 1 October 1959, MAE, CLV, RDVN, vol. 45.

⁹² The Vietminh seized the initiative regarding the 1956 elections in a 6 June 1955 declaration in which they stated that they were ready to consult. On 9 July North Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Van Dong addressed a letter to South Vietnam, again expressing Hanoi's willingness to begin consultations. When it became clear the South Vietnamese would not begin consultations and the 20 July deadline passed without action, Hanoi protested to the co-chairs on 17 August. Hanoi continued to protest periodically well beyond July 1956, yet its protests were universally ignored or sidestepped by the other Geneva signatories.

⁹³ P.J. Honey Communism in North Vietnam (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1963), 6 asserts that the North Vietnamese did not expect the elections to take place. Jeffrey Race, War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnam Province (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 34 seconds this assertion, suggesting that the North Vietnamese recognized early on that the elections would probably not take place. In contrast, Scigliano, South Vietnam, 133 claims that Hanoi "set great store in elections." Carlyle Thayer, War By Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Vietnam (Sydney: Allen & Urwin, 1989), 6-7 makes the argument that because of the vociferous campaign waged by DRVN authorities to hold elections, it seems probable to conclude that the DRVN favored elections as a means of unifying the country. William Duiker in Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 99-100 suggests that Ho Chi Minh, along with numerous other North Vietnamese leaders, believed that the elections would occur although they were well aware that they might not. Building on Duiker's argument, this study asserts that the North Vietnamese could not have known how quickly the French would lose control in South Vietnam to Diem and the Americans, and that in 1954 and early 1955 Hanoi thought a good chance existed that the elections would take place. More recently, Robert Brigham in Guerilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Vietnam War (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 3 argues that the failure of the Geneva Accords led to the rise of the NLF. Lloyd Gardner reaffirms this point in his review of Argument Without End, H-diplo, fall 2000, by noting that for North Vietnam "the status quo was the defeat of the

strategy, the North Vietnamese focused primarily on France. The DRV welcomed Jean Sainteny's arrival in Hanoi and stated its willingness to preserve cultural contacts with the French. Many of these moves were undoubtedly made with an eye toward the elections because the North assumed France would maintain control in the South. But North Vietnamese officials also realized very early on that the South would resist elections, and that internal problems, including food shortages and peasant uprisings against collectivization, would prevent the North from making as strong a case as possible. In addition, the Soviet Union and China did not support North Vietnam's position to the extent that North Vietnamese officials hoped.⁹⁴ Still, perhaps the most significant mistake Hanoi made was its miscalculation in assuming that France would maintain control of South Vietnam until at least 1956. North Vietnamese officials, along with most of the rest of the international community, counted on Diem's inability to maintain control and continued French command of decision-making in South Vietnam. Once Diem consolidated power in May 1955, indicated his unwillingness to address the issue of elections despite repeated attempts by Hanoi, and attempted to reinforce his anti-Geneva stance on the international level, North Vietnamese demands for consultations became much more strident. Ho Chi Minh's formation of the Fatherland Front in September 1955 indicated Hanoi's continued determination to promote the reunification of Vietnam.⁹⁵

According to French reports, the Vietminh grossly underestimated the Diem regime, believing it would "fall like a ripe fruit either during the general elections or from internal subversion." Hoppenot suggested that since the elections would not take place and internal subversion had not proved successful, the Vietminh had become paralyzed by their policy of waiting. The Vietminh now realized that their French in 1954, and the failure of the expected process of reunification represented a deterioration in normal expectations."

⁹⁴ See Robert Brigham, Guerilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Vietnam War (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 7-10 and Qiang Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 77-81 for a discussion of Chinese and Russian pressure on the North Vietnamese.

⁹⁵ Note of political information, 10 February 1956, MAE, CL V, SV, vol. 124. The Fatherland Front had been created as an instrument of political integration in the North and was not designed to organize revolutionary activity in South Vietnam. The Front set forth in detail the DRV's understanding of how elections should proceed. See Weinstein, Vietnam's Unheld Elections, 34-35 for more detail.

chances of reunifying the country were quickly diminishing. As a result, they accused the Americans and Diem of "sabotaging the Geneva Accords" and the French of "shirking their obligations."⁹⁶ Paris concluded that the situation would remain unchanged unless the Vietminh attacked the South or the South revised its stance regarding the elections.⁹⁷

France had tried to practice a policy of "équilibre" between the North and South, but this policy appeared untenable. With France's continued refusal to pressure the South Vietnamese to begin consultations for elections and its lack of interest in installing an official French mission in Hanoi or an official DRV mission in Paris, Franco-North Vietnamese relations quickly soured. The Cancer Institute was abandoned and the Hospital Saint Paul became jointly run by the French and Vietnamese. As relations between Paris and Hanoi grew worse, the Pasteur Institute closed in 1957 followed by the Ecole Française d'Extreme Orient in 1958. The only remaining institutions were the Lycée Albert Sarraut and the Hospital St Paul.⁹⁸ In an attempt to continue a weak commercial exchange, at most 1 billion francs each year, Paris allowed North Vietnam to install a permanent commercial representative in Paris in March 1958. According to French officials, North Vietnam was reluctant to burn all bridges with the West, thus it continued to permit a French Delegation in Hanoi. The delegation furnished information on the situation in North Vietnam and maintained contact with the Vietnamese people.⁹⁹

This issue of official French representation in North Vietnam remained the biggest sticking point between Paris and Hanoi. North Vietnamese officials continued to push for this representation through subtle, and not-so-subtle means. In 1959, French Foreign Minister Christian Pineau warned the new French Minister to North Vietnam, Albert Chambon, to be on guard against both a lack of supplies and

⁹⁶ Hoppenot to MAE, Top-secret, 1 March 1956, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 23. The French had disclaimed any responsibility for bringing the South into consultations with the North in June 1955. Weinstein, Vietnam's Unheld Elections, 35.

⁹⁷ Hoppenot to MAE, 2 July 1956, CLV, SV, vol. 125, MAE.

⁹⁸ MAE to Chambon, 22 December 1959, MAE, CLV, RDVN, vol. 12.

⁹⁹ Note to MAE, 23 March 1959, MAE, CLV, RDVN, vol. 12. Only about 100 French nationals still lived in the North at this point, compared with over 15,000 in the South.

psychological pressure. The Quai wanted to keep a delegation in North Vietnam as long as possible, but if conditions became too difficult, it would be withdrawn. Outside the delegation, the only French personnel were missionaries and cultural establishments. Although Pineau urged Chambon to focus on the maintenance of the French cultural presence, the preservation of a commercial trade between Paris and Hanoi, and the safeguarding of France's financial and economic interests, Chambon made little progress on any of these issues.¹⁰⁰

Hanoi's plans for reunification soon took precedence over French economic and cultural concerns in North Vietnam. Reunification had become a pressing issue for the DRV following the 1956 non-elections.¹⁰¹ The French speculated on possible reasons why Vietminh forces had not immediately moved South after the failure of the elections, surmising that the South East Asia Treaty Organization's (SEATO) formation and the April 1955 Bandung Conference had played a role. At Bandung, the Chinese and Vietminh foreign ministers, Chou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, were forced to recognize the universal desire for peace of their fellow Asians, making them prisoners of the five principles of peaceful coexistence that Chou himself had crafted with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. But while Ho Chi Minh continued to make periodic calls for elections and peaceful reunification with South Vietnam, particularly during his trip to India and Burma in 1958, the North had begun to consider internal subversion in the South as a means of reunifying the country.¹⁰²

According to Chambon, for five years France practiced a policy of "presence" in North Vietnam. Even though France's allies often misunderstood this policy, the West still might benefit from it--North Vietnam should not be considered irretrievable. But, Chambon did acknowledge that by July 1960,

¹⁰⁰ MAE to Chambon, 22 December 1959, MAE, CLV, RDVN, vol. 12.

¹⁰¹ In Hanoi's view, the breakdown of the Geneva process, provoked by the Saigon regime's refusal to go through with the 1956 elections, relieved the North from the provisions inhibiting it from taking independent action to seek reunification. Duiker, Sacred War, 137.

¹⁰² French delegation in Hanoi to MAE, 11 February 1958, MAE, CLV, RDVN, vol. 12 and 14 February 1959, Lalouette to Murville, secret, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 23. See Race, War Comes to Long An, Duiker, Sacred War, and Brigham, Guerilla Diplomacy on North Vietnamese views on reunification.

reunification of the country had become the North's biggest goal. He also recognized that China continued to play a role in encouraging a harsher stance against non-communist powers, urging Hanoi to develop a more aggressive policy toward the Saigon regime.¹⁰³ French officials also worried that China and North Vietnam were planning a counterattack in response to American increases of MAAG personnel in South Vietnam. Paris thus feared that the day of reckoning between North and South Vietnam was fast approaching.¹⁰⁴

The French Resurgence

Despite a diminishing presence in North Vietnam, advancements in Franco-South Vietnamese relations occurred throughout the late 1950s as the Diem government seemed more willing to allow France to stay in South Vietnam. By 1960, Franco-South Vietnamese relations had undergone a dramatic improvement from their dismal state in 1956. France was once again making its voice heard as it continued its cultural and economic presence while reestablishing a political one.

In 1957-1958 cultural and commercial relations improved as French enterprises in South Vietnam maintained their position and French exports to Vietnam increased.¹⁰⁵ Of the 15,000 French left after 1956, 300 teachers still taught and 500 French firms continued in the plantation, industry, commerce, and banking sectors.¹⁰⁶ The biggest sticking point was French-owned property and buildings. Paris and Saigon could not agree on how France should be compensated for loss of property. Another contentious issue was the foreign exchange program—a number of Vietnamese students in France refused to return to South Vietnam after their studies.¹⁰⁷ But relations between Paris and Saigon remained steady, and

¹⁰³ Chambon to Minister, 1 March 1960, MAE, CLV, RDVN, vol. 13 and Chambon to MAE, 19 January 1961, MAE, CLV, RDVN, vol. 14.

¹⁰⁴ Chambon to MAE, 16 May 1960, MAE, CLV, RDVN, vol. 37 and October 1960 note, MAE, CLV, RDVN, vol. 45.

¹⁰⁵ 14 January 1958 note, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 9.

¹⁰⁶ Dalloz, The War in Indochina, 109.

¹⁰⁷ Payart to Minister, 12 February 1958, top secret, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 9.

received an additional boost when Christian Pineau arrived in early March 1958, marking the first time a French Foreign Minister had set foot in South Vietnam. His visit raised Vietnamese opinion of the French and cemented the political choice France had made in favor of Saigon and against Hanoi. France thus began to lay the foundations for renewed political influence. Part of France's success was due to Ngo Dinh Nhu's increasing amity toward the French and hostility toward the Americans. Although French officials in Paris applauded improved Franco-Vietnamese relations, Payart cautioned the Quai that France should not try too quickly to regain a larger political role, letting things take their own course while trying to work quietly for more French influence.¹⁰⁸

The South Vietnamese, along with most of France, heralded General Charles De Gaulle's return to power in 1958. De Gaulle had emphasized the importance of South Vietnam as a non-communist nation in a number of speeches. The Vietnamese were also drawn to De Gaulle's idea of France as a third force in Europe that maintained its liberty of action vis-à-vis the United States and communist bloc. After a long talk with Diem, Roger Lalouette notified the Quai that Diem felt French policy had turned around, and that, "just as De Gaulle advocated a third force between capitalism and communism in Europe, Diem hoped to create his own third force in Asia."¹⁰⁹

In early February 1959 a series of important consultations on the Far East took place between France, the United States and Britain that indicated how much progress the French had made. Once again the three powers were trying to coordinate action on preserving South Vietnam's independence and consolidating its economic and political means of existence. For the first time, the French, rather than the Americans, were more concerned with promoting their own economic and cultural interests than achieving a common policy.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Payart to Minister, top secret, 30 June 1958, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 129.

¹⁰⁹ Lalouette to Murville, top secret, 31 March 1959, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 131.

¹¹⁰ Minutes of tripartite consultations, 5-7 February 1959, DDF, 1959 vol. I, 163-171.

Cultural issues remained a concern for Paris. Most Vietnamese wanted to learn English, since primarily American tourists and businessmen visited Vietnam, and Diem refused to let students study in France. But Lalouette asserted that the French language and culture could still persevere—the Americans did not have the professors to replace the French ones and the Vietnamese desire to keep universities strong worked in France's favor.¹¹¹ Throughout 1959, Franco-Vietnamese relations steadily improved as Vietnamese-American ones declined. This was not a coincidence, according to Lalouette. The Vietnamese were feeling the too large American presence.¹¹²

On the cultural level, by mid-1959, the Americans were forced to abandon projects of taking over university and high school teaching because Vietnamese students objected, as did French officials.¹¹³ Three French organizations continued to provide technical and cultural assistance in 1959—the French cultural mission, the mission of technical and economic assistance, and a group of professors from the University of Saigon. According to French officials at the University of Saigon, the cultural mission was flourishing—two big high schools in Saigon, another at Dalat, colleges at Nhatrang and Tourane, and an overflowing of students in the primary schools in Saigon due in part to Franco-Vietnamese affinity and superior French teaching.¹¹⁴ And in 1960, after a three-year suspension of the program, Vietnamese students were finally allowed to return to France to study.

The strongest French asset remained the cultural one. The Vietnamese intellectual and ruling class was steeped in French culture, and Paris was “Mecca” not only for the sophisticated and rich, but for all aspiring toward a higher education. Most educated Vietnamese spoke French well and could quote Racine or Verlaine, and France's influence in Vietnamese education was pervasive. Paris continued to

¹¹¹ Lalouette to Couve de Murville, 15 May 1959, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 48.

¹¹² Lalouette to Murville, top secret, 30 September 1959, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 133.

¹¹³ Note on American policy in Vietnam, 17 August 1959, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 73.

¹¹⁴ Fifty-three French operated or subsidized schools existed in Vietnam with 24,000 pupils and the University of Saigon employed more than forty French professors. 1959 note, R Benoit, Professor at University of Sciences of Saigon, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 47.

spend a significant amount of its total overseas expenditures for cultural purposes on activities in Vietnam. An event at the end of 1960 symbolized the significant progress the French had made in maintaining a foothold in Vietnamese affairs. In December 1960, the French produced a successful exposition in Saigon on French books and journals which demonstrated to the French that they had not lost their cultural influence in Vietnam. The triumph of the "Exposition of the French Book" was a shining moment for the French presence in Vietnam.¹¹⁵ It appeared France's cultural role would continue.

At the same time that French cultural initiatives became more popular, so too did the North Vietnamese insurgency in the South. French officials thus considered retaking political initiatives. According to French Chargé d'Affaires in Saigon Fourier Ruelle, rebel activity had been increasing since September 1959, Diem was completely isolated, and the creation of commandos and increases in MAAG personnel did not resolve the problem. The Saigon Embassy believed a complete reorganization of command and employment of troops was necessary, contending that the agrovilles were useless and the population was increasingly restless. Ruelle argued that the time had come to examine the situation with France's allies, but before doing so, France should have a policy regarding Vietnam before confronting the policies of others. "Close cooperation with the British and Americans, a serious examination of the situation, and permanent contacts with London and Washington appeared to be the best way of discreetly attaining France's goals." Ruelle concluded that France should have a more pro-Diem stance and that France needed to do more to maintain South Vietnamese stability.¹¹⁶ In response to Ruelle's letter, Chargé d'Affaires of the Asian department at the Quai Etienne Manac'h agreed that France should become more involved, attempting an overall policy for Vietnam which the Americans had failed to provide. But Manac'h was less eager than Ruelle to support Diem. Before defining the French position, the Quai d'Orsay thought that a dialogue with the Vietnamese and the Americans was required.¹¹⁷ During this

¹¹⁵ Lalouette to Couve de Murville, 31 December 1960, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 136.

¹¹⁶ Fourier Ruelle to Chargé d'Affaires of the Asian Department at the Quai Etienne Manac'h, 11 April 1960, DDF, 1960, vol. I, 455-462.

¹¹⁷ Manac'h in response to Fourier Ruelle letter, 12 April 1960, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 87. Also in DDF, 1960, vol. I,

period, there was also much discussion among South Vietnamese and French officials of Diem coming to Paris to offset what Diem felt was too much American influence.

By April 1960, American Ambassador to South Vietnam Elbridge Durbrow had adopted an increasingly unsympathetic stance toward Diem. The French recognized that the United States was putting more pressure on Diem; unconditional support from Washington was no longer guaranteed.¹¹⁸ South Vietnamese-American relations had thus deteriorated, but relations between Saigon and Paris continued to improve. With the Franco-Vietnamese accords of 24 March 1960, the two countries liquidated the remaining points of contention, the last piece of French public property was transferred to the Vietnamese government, and Paris and Saigon began to move forward with economic exchanges. The political relationship between the two countries had also become more stable. France had once again become an important player in South Vietnamese affairs.¹¹⁹ According to Lalouette, five years of American experience in South Vietnam had not yielded great results. In spite of significant American aid, no real stability existed and “the American presence weighed too heavily on a newly emancipated country.” What the United States had not yet accepted, according to Lalouette, was that a “rebirth of amity” toward France existed among the Vietnamese and that “increasing Franco-Vietnamese collaboration was paired with increasing anti-Americanism.”¹²⁰ French observers in Saigon watched helplessly as the South Vietnamese and Americans failed to resolve divisive economic and social problems in the South.

French officials in Saigon had become staunch advocates of political reform in South Vietnam. In May 1960, Lalouette suggested to Durbrow a tripartite meeting to discuss South Vietnamese domestic

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¹¹⁸ Note, secret, 23 April 1960, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 10.

¹¹⁹ Note, 28 May 1960, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 71.

¹²⁰ Lalouette to Murville, 17 September 1960, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 75.

difficulties.¹²¹ Wary of moving too fast, Paris forbid Lalouette to take the initiative for holding a three power consultation on the subject of the evolution of the situation in Vietnam and the examination of the means to remedy it. The French position could be misunderstood or interpreted as a return to colonialism.¹²² Another attempt at political reform occurred as French Director R.P. Lebret sent a letter filled with suggestions on government reform to Ngo Dinh Nhu. Lebret, who directed sociologists and French technicians from the Institute de Recherches et de Formation en Vue du Développement harmonisé (IRFED), had been invited by the National Bank of Vietnam to examine Vietnamese problems. Lebret argued for a new conception of the role of the state, the establishment of a government that emphasized development as much as security, the correlative establishment of an administration capable of exercising its authority to all villages, and the real association of the people to the government effort. The study of IRFED was direct, perhaps the most frank document that had ever been sent to the Vietnamese by foreign observers. Nhu received it on 17 October and indicated that he held the study in high esteem. Lalouette hoped that the study would constitute the "psychological shock" needed to revitalize the regime.¹²³

Before the reforms mentioned in the study could be discussed, on 10 November a military coup broke out in Saigon. In a meeting with Lalouette following the coup attempt, Nhu stated that the French had been "totally correct in their actions" during the coup, but that he believed that American agents had supported the rebels. Therefore, Nhu wanted "to work more closely with the French since he could not trust the Americans."¹²⁴ French officials in Saigon thus once again became political advisors to a South Vietnamese government.

¹²¹ Lalouette to MAE, 1 October 1960, CLV, SV, vol. 69.

¹²² Telegram from Chauvel to MAE, 11 October 1960, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 69 and Manac'h to Lalouette, 15 October 1960, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 11.

¹²³ Lalouette to Couve de Murville, 24 October 1960, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 11.

¹²⁴ Lalouette to MAE, 18 November 1960, extremely urgent, MAE, CLV, SV, vol. 136. After the coup, Nhu indicated to Lalouette that he would make serious government and administrative reforms based on the Lebret study. Whether he would have followed through on this promise remains doubtful.

Conclusions

At first glance, the evidence seems overwhelming that France had indeed lost all political, military, economic, and cultural influence in both South and North Vietnam in the two years following the Geneva Conference. Difficulties in coordinating Franco-American policy, Diem's determination to pursue his goals free from French influence, the South Vietnamese and American insistence on France's military withdrawal, France's disengagement from the 1956 elections, an ever smaller economic and cultural mission in South Vietnam, and increasing Franco-North Vietnamese tensions all indicated an end to the *présence française*. But France's apparent withdrawal from Vietnam turned out to be temporary. Although the DRV continued to blame France for failing to uphold the 1956 elections, the Diem government grew more receptive of French diplomats as well as French economic and cultural establishments. France's support of South Vietnam's bid to enter the United Nations in 1957 went a long way toward easing remaining tensions between Saigon and Paris. In the late 1950s, the French continued to make political progress with the Diem government and cultural progress with the Vietnamese people.

By the early 1960s, then, France had made a miraculous comeback in South Vietnam. In many ways, the French had come to be more respected by the South Vietnamese than the Americans were. The French did not overtly challenge the Americans in Vietnam, but they worked quietly behind the scenes to help reform the Diem government, maintain their economic and cultural presence, and even rebuild a moderate political presence as Vietnamese disenchantment with the Americans grew. French President Charles De Gaulle had warned the United States as early as 1961 against deepening America's involvement in Vietnam. He subsequently began to call for the neutralization of South Vietnam.¹²⁵ In

¹²⁵ See Fredrik Logevall, "De Gaulle, Neutralization and American Involvement in Vietnam, 1963-1964," Pacific Historical Review, vol. 61 no. 1 (February 1992) and Logevall, Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 13-15, 68, 129-133, and 187-188 for a discussion of the "neutralization" option advocated by General Charles De Gaulle. De Gaulle used the term neutralization to describe a situation in which the United States would withdraw and the Vietnamese themselves would settle their conflict without external influence. He advocated a Geneva-type conference or a bilateral deal

addition, until Diem and Nhu's assassination in 1963, the French played at least a partial role in the Diem government's willingness to reopen discussions with the North.¹²⁶ The *présence française* thus endured in Vietnam during the 1960s despite the ever-growing *présence américaine*.

between Saigon and Hanoi to determine how neutralization would be implemented.

¹²⁶ When Lalouette met with Diem in early February 1962, Diem for the first time indicated he was willing to consider an exchange of views with Hanoi. Lalouette to Murville, 1 February 1962, DDF, 1962, vol. I (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1999). Nhu also reiterated his desire for closer Franco-Vietnamese collaboration to a number of French officials and visitors. Lalouette to Murville, 2 November 1962, DDF, 1962, vol. II (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1999). Lalouette appeared to be encouraging contacts between Nhu and the North, to the point that Murville had to remind him to be careful about interfering with domestic politics. Murville to Lalouette, 5 September 1963, DDF, 1963, vol. 1 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 2000).