

1. Solution in Indochina

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"What we have here is a sort of *gouvernement crépusculaire*—a twilight government," said the French colonel in charge of the Pacification Bureau in Hanoi. "In our own area we control the cities and major roads from daybreak till nightfall. Thereafter the Viet-Minh has the country to itself to levy taxes, attack our posts, and execute the 'Vietnamese traitors,' that is, the nationalists who still profess to believe in victory for our side." Such, in a nutshell, is the situation in war-torn Indochina, a country about eight times the size of the Republic of Korea, after more than seven years of bitter fighting. France has spent twice as much on the Indochina War as it has received under the Marshall Plan for its own rehabilitation, and America has furnished much more military and economic aid—calculated on a per capita basis—than it ever gave to Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists. Why, then, has the war become a military stalemate in which the French and Viet-Nam nationalists are unable to hold the countryside and the Viet-Minh, short of massive Red Chinese intervention, cannot hope to breach French defenses around the major urban strongholds?

Politically, the situation looks even more hopeless for the West. France has not succeeded in convincing the Vietnamese that it will make good its promises of full independence, though it has already granted more independence to Bao-Dai than Ho Chi Minh ever asked for. At the same time the Vietnamese nationalist government, by its accumulating psychological mistakes, has been divorced not only from the mass of the farmers but from its most promising military cadres. A young graduate of the Ecole Militaire Inter-Armes at Dalat said to me: "How do you think it feels getting oneself killed in the jungle for that man who comes up here

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to swear us in wearing a Riviera suit, a polka-dot tie, and inch-thick crepe soles?" He was referring to His Majesty Bao-Dai, commander in chief of the Vietnamese forces, who has not yet been seen in the uniform of his army.

As long as the military situation had not too seriously deteriorated and as long as the Chinese Communists were committed in Korea, the possibility of a political solution of the Indochina conflict was pushed into the background by everyone concerned. Now, however, the French are obviously eager to stop the fighting in any way possible, and the Big Four, influenced by the problem of German rearmament, have agreed to a broad conference on both Indochina and Korea to be held at Geneva next month.

Repatriation of the troops in the Far East would increase France's field forces in Western Europe and North Africa from about twelve divisions to an army of some twenty-two fully equipped and well-trained divisions and put a stop to the heavy drain of casualties on its elite commissioned and noncommissioned officers. The easing of the strain upon French financial resources would also speed up domestic economic recovery. This line of reasoning has been expounded by the French left for the past seven years—with emphasis upon the fact that an end to the Indochina conflict would mean "liberation from American tutelage." Last fall the debates in the French Parliament made it dramatically clear that the desire to put a halt to the war had cut across all party lines. It was a Gaullist deputy, a former general, who presented the problem in its simplest form: "Having promised independence to the Associated States, we would have to leave Indochina even if we won a total victory. So what are we fighting for, and for whom?"

The vote to continue the war was more a matter of political pork-barreling than an expression of the deputies' feelings. The widespread desire to "get rid of the whole mess" was heightened by Ho's offer of peace talks made through a Swedish non-Communist newspaper and by Mr. Dulles' threat of an "agonizing reappraisal" of United States foreign policy if EDC did not go through. Another discouraging fact was the refusal of the Vietnamese "congress," which had been hand-picked by Bao-Dai, to rubber-stamp his policy of integration into the French Union or even to vote a motion of thanks to the French soldiers who were fighting and dying within gunshot of the building where the con-

gress met. Few nationalist leaders seem convinced of the "usefulness" of the war, not to speak of the possibility of an ultimate victory for France and the nationalists.

That truce talks must and will eventually take place is by now accepted by every responsible French politician. It is merely a question of when, how, and with whom. A face-saving victory that would make negotiation palatable has eluded General Navarre for the past six months, and the military situation, while by no means desperate, was never more humiliating than at this moment.

On the other hand, self-styled experts on both sides of the Atlantic have oversimplified the situation by comparing it to Korea. Both countries have a Communist government supported by the Soviet bloc and a nationalist government supported by the West, but here the similarity ends. Korea, as a peninsula, has well-defined boundaries on three sides, while Indochina's borders are so uncontrollable that their tracing is a matter of doubt and controversy. Korea is a country of bare hills, while Indochina is 85 per cent covered with thick subtropical jungle which makes movement of large units impossible and considerably reduces the effectiveness of modern heavy weapons. It also renders enemy movements practically immune to air observation and bombing. A Western defeat in Korea would not immediately affect its neighbors, separated from it by hundreds of miles of open sea, but a Communist victory in Indochina would immediately outflank Thailand and rip wide open the unruly northern Burmese border. In the latter area Kuomintang guerrillas are not the only foreign troops. The Cominform headquarters for all Southeast Asia are at Muong-Lene, under the command of a Viet-Minh general, Nguyen Van Long, and are protected by a Viet-Minh regiment alternately stationed in Burma and Yunnan.

There can be no doubt that the United States has already considered what course it would take in the event of the loss of Viet-Nam. It is certainly not by sheer coincidence that General Donovan, wartime OSS chief, is now Ambassador to Thailand. However, the separation from Viet-Nam of the ethnically related states of Laos and Cambodia—as was discreetly suggested in a Thai note to those states a few weeks ago—would have dubious results. The present peacefulness of Thailand, though hailed by the Department of State as the success of a "working democracy," is more



FIGURE 1

probably due to the fact that Thailand is an extremely useful transit base for the Communist regimes around its borders. Arms can be imported through it and such dollar-earning exports as opium, wolfram ore, and rice can be sent out of Viet-Minh-held areas. No one has any immediate interest in disturbing the proverbial goose that lays the golden eggs.

What can be done, by the French alone or by the Big Four at Geneva, to bring about a cease-fire in Indochina? Two alternatives may be ruled out—a "total" French victory and a fighting evacuation à la Dunkirk. A decisive victory would require a war effort which France could not make when the war was still young, and certainly not now, without depleting its European forces to the point of mortal danger. A fighting evacuation is equally senseless, for the army would have to take along 50,000 French civilians living in Indochina, about 300,000 Eurasians who are French nationals, and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese too compromised to be left behind for mass "people's court" trials. Thus negotiations offer the only solution, and the first step, as Nehru has suggested, must be a cease-fire.

A cease-fire, however, is likely to prove even more difficult to achieve in Indochina than in Korea, where negotiations were held up for eight months, for in Indochina no front and no battle lines exist. The French Army guards the Red River Delta with pillboxes, forts, and bunkers, but French intelligence acknowledges that from 30,000 to 60,000 guerrillas are within the delta, including certain famous regiments. The same infiltration is found along the northern and central Laos fronts, the tiny sliver of French-held Annamite coast, and in sizable areas of southern Viet-Nam. An armistice would stop the French from hitting major enemy units while giving the Viet-Minh a unique chance to enter Franco-nationalist areas in such numbers as to paralyze completely whatever remains of orderly government.

It has been argued that Indochina should be partitioned across its waist, on the 16th parallel, just as Korea was divided. In that case the northern part, which contains the Viet-Minh's strongholds and is contiguous to Red China, would be left in the hands of Ho's regime. This would mean handing over to the Viet-Minh two-thirds of Viet-Nam's population, the bulk of its industry, some of Asia's best anthracite fields, the flourishing port of Haiphong,

and the capital city of Hanoi, with its powerful transmitter and the country's only full-fledged university. Most of Indochina's non-ferrous metals, including uranium phosphates, are also located north of the 16th parallel. Moreover, there would be no iron-clad guaranty against further Viet-Minh infiltration into the part of the country left to Bao-Dai. The Franco-nationalist side could hardly win popular support after having sold down the river more than half of the territory and about 14 million of the 23 million inhabitants of Viet-Nam.

If a cease-fire could be arranged, the most promising next step would seem to be the establishment of an intermediary government, after an internationally supervised cooling-off period. The West would still have a number of trump cards in Indochina which the Soviet bloc could hardly match. The southern part of the country is its "iron lung," with its huge rice surplus and dollar-earning exports of rubber, pepper, coffee, and precious woods. It is obvious that, deprived of the south, the Ho Chi Minh regime would face either starvation—as in 1946 when it was deprived of southern imports—or a type of integration into the Red Chinese economy that would be the equivalent of annexation. And any Vietnamese, no matter what his political color, is highly wary of the Chinese "big brother." Therein lies the great opportunity for the West: massive economic aid might swing the balance and substitute for the total loss of Indochina in a creeping war the building-up of a neutral regime. Such a regime would depend upon Western supplies to survive economically, for neither Red China, plagued by its own lack of consumer goods, nor the Soviet Union, already behind in its promised deliveries to North Korea, could possibly fill the immediate requirements of the ravaged country.

Political successes almost entirely due to the intelligent dispensation of economic aid have been won elsewhere—notably in Yugoslavia and Austria. Economic aid to all of Indochina, under either United Nations or neutral auspices, might make possible a solution acceptable to both sides. Ho Chi Minh's interview with the Swedish *Expressen* made specific reference to such aid.

Any solution that accomplishes the effective neutralization of Indochina would be more desirable than this hopeless stalemate in the jungle swamps. In this lies the importance of the Geneva conference. We need have no illusions about Ho's regime; it is of

course Communist-dominated. But so are North Korea and Red China, with whom the United States sat at the conference table for two years; and so is the U.S.S.R. and its satellites, with whom the United States, and France, maintain normal diplomatic relations. A farsighted policy in Indochina based on well-administered aid might do more to stem the Communist tide in Southeast Asia than the sending of a few technicians or of a few additional plane-loads of napalm.