



# THE STRUGGLE FOR INDOCHINA

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ELLEN J. HAMMER

WITH A PREFACE BY RUPERT EMERSON

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TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER

## NOTE

THIS book forms part of a group of studies prepared under the auspices of the Institute of Pacific Relations on the nationalist movements of Southeast Asia since World War II. Other volumes in this series include *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* by George McT. Kahin, *Japan's Role in Southeast Asian Nationalism* by Willard H. Elsbree, *Asian Nationalism and the West* edited by the undersigned, *Malaya: Communist or Free* by Victor Purcell and forthcoming volumes on the Viet Minh regime by Bernard B. Fall and on representative government in Southeast Asia by Rupert Emerson and others.

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Though the book is issued under the auspices of the International Secretariat of the Institute of Pacific Relations, it should be noted that responsibility for opinions expressed in it rests solely with the author.

WILLIAM L. HOLLAND  
*Secretary-General*

*New York*  
*March, 1954*

### NOTE ON THE SECOND PRINTING

THE recognition accorded the timeliness of this book has made it necessary to order a second printing while the Geneva Conference is in progress. There has not been time for the author to revise the text in order to take account of the discussions, still inconclusive, which have taken place at the conference, or of the numerous official statements made by the various governments. This second edition, which will be distributed through the History Book Club as well as through bookstores, therefore appears without any revision of the text of the first edition except for a few minor typographical corrections.

W.L.H.

*May 24, 1954*

## PREFACE

BY RUPERT EMERSON

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IT WOULD BE difficult to find any corner of the world in which the major problems of our troubled times come more acutely to a focus than in Indochina. Despite the fact that only the French and the Indochinese are direct participants in it, the global and symbolic significance of the conflict is so great that, as in Korea, the sufferings of the millions of people whose land has been the battleground are almost lost to sight. For a decade colonialism, Communism, and nationalism have battled here for predominance, in so confused and tangled a fashion as to baffle the efforts of either active statesman or armchair analyst to reduce the issues to simple and orderly coherence. East and West, in both senses of those geographical terms, have met in an open and head-on conflict whose world-wide implications have been obscured but not concealed by the unreadiness of the powers in the background—the United States, Communist China, and the Soviet Union—to commit themselves fully to the sides they champion. The ending of the fighting in Korea has thrown more sharply in relief the complex nature of the Indochinese problem and the stark fact that here is a long-continued and brutal war to which no answer has been found.

The more the conflict has come to involve the United States, the more it has served as a testing ground for the grand strategy of American policy and for the relations of the United States both with her allies and with the peoples of Asia, neutralist as well as partisan. Of the significance attached to Indochina by Moscow and Peking we have less direct evidence than for the United States, but it is possible that their attitudes will be more clearly revealed at the forthcoming Geneva conference which was virtually the sole fruit of the recent meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Big Four at Berlin. The continuance and outcome of the struggle profoundly involve the role of France in the world at large, in her relations with NATO and with Germany, and in her hold over the remainder of her great colonial empire. In the opinion of many, looking back to Japan's use of Indochina as a springboard for further attack, the fate of the country may prove the determining factor in the destiny of all of southern Asia.

The scene of bitter warfare since 1946 and one of the potential breeding grounds of the dreaded third World War, Indochina has been the constant concern of the Foreign Offices of the powers—and yet, paradoxically and almost inexplicably, it has never made a full-dress appearance on the stage of the United Nations.

The one outstanding element which most significantly distinguishes the



situation in Indochina from that which has existed in the other countries of Southeast Asia and, indeed, everywhere else in the world, is that nationalism has come to be largely identified with Communism. When this is combined with the fact that Viet Nam shares a considerable frontier with China, which since 1950 has been in Communist hands, the makings of the present dilemma are evident.

In all the neighboring countries, despite the efforts of the Communists to put themselves forward as the only true spokesmen for national aspirations, the nationalist leaders and groups have not only distinguished themselves from the Communists but have, either continuously or from time to time, engaged in active warfare with them. In Indonesia, between the two colonial wars which the Dutch euphemistically labeled police actions, the Indonesian Republic met a Communist rising by force and successfully put it down. In the Philippines the Hukbalahap, however justifiable its grievances in terms of land tenure and poverty, never represented more than a relatively small minority, and was dealt with as an enemy of the Philippine state. Thailand, apparently only slightly infiltrated by the Communists, has exhibited no tolerance for the movement, and the Burmese government has battled with the Communist factions which threatened the nationalist regime in that country. To seek to draw more than the most superficial parallel between the state of affairs in Indochina and the lengthy struggle in Malaya is grossly to misread the situation. Virtually all observers agree that in the former country even at the present day the forces headed by Ho Chi Minh have a wide hold among the Vietnamese, whereas in Malaya the Communist guerrillas represent only some fraction of the Chinese community and have achieved no significant standing among either the Malays or the Indians.

It is only since the end of 1949 or the beginning of 1950, as Miss Hammer points out, that the leadership of the Communists in the Vietnamese nationalist movement has come to have much more than local importance. The key turning point was presumably the dramatic advance of the Red forces in China, reaching the Tonkinese border in December 1949. With China in Communist hands a total reassessment of the situation was in order for all concerned—and there were few who were not. Particularly for the United States, this shattering of a principal plank in the American foreign policy platform meant that, even before the dust had settled, new lines of policy must be worked out which, given the centrality of the United States as the leader of the shaping free-world coalition, could not help having vast effects for everyone else. As far as Indochina was concerned, the outbreak of war in Korea only served to harden and extend decisions which had already been taken in the preceding months.

The detailed account of the events of these months is contained in Miss Hammer's lucid narrative; but in summary fashion it may be said that the

most important results were the explicit lining up of the great powers on the two contesting sides, and the decision of the Viet Minh to leave no doubts as to its attachment to the Communist camp. The Viet Minh's recognition of the new Chinese government was followed by the return recognition of the Viet Minh by the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, and other members of the Communist bloc; while, on the other side, the United States and Great Britain extended their recognition to the French-sponsored government of Viet Nam and to Cambodia and Laos. So far as the French themselves were concerned, no major change was involved since they were already committed to the Bao Dai experiment, but they could now expect both that they would receive American aid in the war and that their opponents would be able to derive substantial benefits from the existence of a friendly government across the border. Furthermore, the French were now in a better position to make use of the contention, hitherto little developed by them, that this was no colonial campaign in which they were engaged, but one of the fronts on which the free world was holding back the onslaughts of Communism. At a little later stage, the Korean analogy, slim as it was in some aspects and dangerous as it was in others, could serve the French well for propaganda purposes. It should, however, be noted in passing that one of the more recent and significant twists given it lies in the argument that if a cease-fire without full victory were possible in Korea, why might not the French with equal justification seek a negotiated settlement in Indochina?

The alignment of forces which was shaped in 1950 has held firm up to now, but there are deep and perplexing contradictions within each of the coalitions which has been formed. At least on the free-world side none of the parties has been happy with its role and with the company it is obliged to keep. Such discomfiture as may have been felt by the two major Communist powers has at all events been more adequately concealed than that of their adversaries, who habitually allow their disagreements to be aired in public. All those involved are in one sense or another trapped by the commitments they have entered into; the end result is the perpetuation of a conflict which can neither be decisively ended without running the gravest risks nor compromised without sacrificing basic positions of one or more of the contestants.

In the case of Ho Chi Minh and the group surrounding him it is difficult to conceive that they can be wholly satisfied with their intimate dependence upon a foreign regime which is both Communist and Chinese. In the earlier years of the struggle it was a point of strength for Ho that, whatever his past record as a Moscow Communist, he now put himself forward as a nationalist heading a national government in which a number of groups and parties were represented. There can be no doubt that Ho retains much of his former national stature, but the drift away from the Viet Minh since 1950—although it has swelled the ranks of the *attentistes* rather than of the backers of Bao Dai

—must in part be attributed to the fears of many concerning both Communism and China. On the latter score, however, it is well to keep in mind that while the Vietnamese share the general Southeast Asian antipathy to the Chinese, against whom they boast of having defended their independence for a thousand years, it is also true that the Vietnamese culture is closely related to that of China, and that the Vietnamese nationalist leaders and groups have repeatedly over the last decades based themselves in China and established friendly working relations with corresponding Chinese parties and movements.

Whatever political disfavor Ho Chi Minh may have suffered from his association with China is presumably slight as compared with the antagonism inevitably faced by Bao Dai when, his checkered career having led him to part from the Japanese and from Ho, he returned to Viet Nam under the explicit patronage of the French. Given the almost universal determination of the Vietnamese to get out from under French rule, the one essential condition for the success of Bao Dai was that he establish himself as an independent national leader; yet it is only plausible to assume that the French turned to him because they believed that they would, at least in the long run, have to make lesser concessions to him than to the Viet Minh. Whatever the protestations of both Bao Dai and the French, it was all too evident that his return to power rested almost wholly on the troops with which France controlled the areas it had been able to regain. Bit by bit, the logic of events has forced the two uneasy partners—on one side to seek, on the other to grant—increasing increments of substantive independence; but it still appears to be the fact that a Bao Dai unsupported by French arms would be doomed to a short and troubled reign. The still unresolved difficulties which he has had in drawing into his government men with national standing and a broad popular following are irrefutable evidence of his own lack of national appeal and of his failure to break down the suspicion that he is tied to French apron strings.

Of all the parties to the conflict—save, always, the Indochinese peoples themselves—it is the French who are most gravely trapped. Even apart from the deep cleavages within France and the inability of any recent French government to come to firm and clear-cut decisions, the dilemmas by which France is confronted in Indochina are peculiarly painful and unpalatable. To read into the French public mind a unity of purpose which is actually nonexistent, it may be surmised that by now the goal most likely to secure general adherence would be a speedy ending of the war in such fashion as to leave the formally independent states of Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Laos, members of a French Union in which France would play the leading role and be able to safeguard her cultural, economic, and other interests. But no one has yet been able to conceive the terms or conditions under which such a termination of the war could be brought about.

There is no need to amplify what has already been said of the relations between Bao Dai and the French: if he is to be effectively useful as a national rallying point against the Viet Minh, he must be endowed with real independence; and if he is endowed with real independence, much of his charm for the French necessarily evaporates. Since no third force of major consequence appears to have arisen, the alternative to Bao Dai is the Viet Minh, and here the failure to capitalize on the agreements of 1946 and the redefinition of positions in 1950 render very dim the prospects of any lastingly satisfactory arrangement. There remains the possibility of working out some type of Viet Minh-Bao Dai coalition regime, but there is scant reason to think that Bao Dai could hold his own in such a deal.

Internationally, the French position is as equivocal as it is in relation to the internal affairs of Indochina, and for much the same reasons. Carrying on an exhausting and inconclusive war which has been increasingly portrayed as devoted not to the French colonial interest but to the preservation of freedom against Communist imperialism, France has been highly reluctant to invoke the international collaboration which such a cause might seem to deserve. Although particular reasons can be found to cover each stage of the argument, it seems not improbable that the root cause of the French hesitations is to be sought in a perpetuation of the feeling that Indochina is a French colonial problem to be dealt with under French sovereignty. Any real opening of the international doors would weaken the French claim to regard the country as a more or less private preserve within the Union. As far as submission of the conflict to the United Nations is concerned, the French are well aware of the hostile reception they would receive in a number of quarters and are also disinclined to do anything which would further an expansion of international jurisdiction in the colonial sphere. If Indochina, why not Morocco, Tunisia, Madagascar, and who knows what else?

Within the more restricted family of the NATO powers France could count on a more sympathetic response because of the much greater immediate concern with the Indochinese drain on French military strength and the consequent intensification of French opposition to German rearmament. From these powers France has sought and received moral and diplomatic endorsement of her role in Indochina. In addition she has made it plain that she would welcome financial and material aid, but she has desired no direct military participation by others, in part because she wants to retain sole command of the situation and in part because of fears that Peking might respond by throwing Chinese troops into the battle.

Aside from possible token contributions, it is only the United States which has felt itself in a position to meet the French pleas, and a large and growing share of the costs of the war have in fact been met from the American treasury; but on neither side is the relationship a very satisfactory one. The French

no doubt have lingering memories of the American hostility in the course of World War II to a restoration of French rule in Indochina and, with greater relevance to the present state of affairs, they view with somewhat contradictory dismay both the American pressure for larger independence for the Indochinese peoples and the possibility that the United States might end by squeezing out France as the leading economic and political power in the area. American aid is desperately needed and sought, but if the price to be paid for it includes the necessity of surrendering the determination of policy and strategy to Washington there would be many who would regard it as too dearly bought.

By all accounts the war in Indochina is, thoroughly understandably, a vastly unpopular one in France, but the difficulty of ending it is as great as the difficulty of stirring up any popular enthusiasm for it. Year by year military victory has been postponed to the following year, and there has never been assurance that military victory could be translated into a political decision compatible with French desires and ambitions, however they may be defined. Here again the tie-up with the United States complicates matters because it seems unquestionable that the French ability to work out a negotiated settlement is hampered by the rigorous American opposition to any deal which would have the look of appeasement of Communism.

The American dilemma is compounded of a number of different elements. The United States has entangled itself in a war in a distant corner of Asia in which it resolutely does not want to participate and from which it equally resolutely cannot abstain. It has committed itself to the cause of France and of Bao Dai, but enough of the old spirit of anticolonialism is left to make this a somewhat unsavory commitment: it cannot bring itself wholly to ignore the fact that the free world looks less than free to a people whose country is being fought over by a foreign army. Aware that a lasting peace can be built only on satisfaction of the national aspirations of the Indochinese, the United States must at the same time conciliate a France reluctant to abandon her colonial past. At a further remove, the United States, as a champion of the right of peoples to self-determination, backs the claim of the Vietnamese to make their own free choice in the world; but if they should choose Communism, as seems not unlikely, is it then also the American obligation to save them from themselves?

The United States has declared the stalemated Indochinese war to be a vital part of the defense of the free world, but it is well aware that the only remaining step of sending American combat forces would be opposed by France and by much of home opinion, would rouse the wrath of neutralist Asia, and would not improbably bring similar Chinese aid to the Viet Minh, with the grave risk of provoking World War III. It would like to channel the massive American aid direct to the Indochinese states, but it has been met by French

obstruction on this score, and it cannot evade the fact that these states remain weak instruments. On any realistic view it is the French command which dominates the scene. If there were to be direct and overt Chinese intervention in the war, the American position would in a sense be simplified, although at an appalling cost; but as it is, the United States is deeply involved in a war in which it does not want to fight.

With the ending of the fighting in Korea, Indochina was left as the one area in which Communist and anti-Communist forces were engaged in open warfare and as the principal specific barrier to an approach to the general Far Eastern settlement which it was hoped might emerge from the Korean cease-fire. In consequence, during recent months there has been increasing concern over the actual military progress and intensified efforts to secure an international solution.

Even the procedural questions involved in working toward an agreement on Indochina were far from simple. No agreement which lacked the approval of Communist China and the United States was likely to be of lasting significance or to lessen tensions in the Far East. These two powers, however, were not formally participants in the war and were also not on speaking terms with each other, even though they had met to transact business in Korea. Responding principally to strong French pressures, the Foreign Ministers of the Big Four, meeting in Berlin in February, found an answer to this phase of the controversy in their decision to hold a further conference in Geneva in April, this time including the Chinese People's Republic, at which, as the official communique stated, "the problem of restoring peace in Indochina shall also be discussed." This decision came at a time when the United States was already reexamining its commitments in Indochina and the implications of the New Look in American policy announced by Secretary of State Dulles on January 12.

Despite optimistic assertions by high American officials, it was obvious that things were not going well either in France, where there were growing demands for an end to the war on almost any terms, or in Indochina, where the military initiative seemed to rest with the Vietminh rather than with the French. To bolster French morale and avert the possibility of serious reverses in the field, the flow of American military aid was speeded and increased, and, most significantly, a substantial number of Air Force technicians were rushed to Indochina to train French ground crews in the servicing of American military planes which had been made available. With the Geneva conference looming ahead, it appeared imperative to deny the Communists the prestige of even minor victories, yet American public and Congressional opinion was deeply alarmed at the prospect that the United States might shortly find itself plunged into the war.

The Indochinese war provided an unhappy testing ground for the new

American doctrine of "massive retaliatory power" to be applied at places and with means of our own choosing, which the Secretary of State had proclaimed. In Indochina, the United States was committed in a place obviously not of its own choosing to an assistance program which was strictly limited, even though in its latest formulation it involved a pledge to supply whatever equipment might be needed for victory. Massive retaliation seemed wholly inapplicable within Indochina itself and would probably mean bringing in China and perhaps the Soviet Union as active belligerents—an eventuality which few, if any, could desire. Furthermore, the Geneva conference necessarily involved a recanvassing of the embattled issue of American recognition of Communist China, or of the seating of its representatives in the United Nations, without which agreement on Indochina might prove impossible.

American anxiety mounted toward the end of March as the beleaguered garrison of Dienbienphu was heavily assaulted by Vietminh forces. On March 29 Secretary Dulles in an important policy speech asserted that "the imposition on Southeast Asia of the political system of Communist Russia and its Chinese Communist ally, by whatever means, would be a grave threat to the whole free community. The United States feels that that possibility should not be passively accepted, but should be met by united action." Acknowledging the risks involved, he said that these were "far less than would face us a few years from now, if we dare not be resolute today." He went on to reaffirm the opposition of the United States to recognition of Communist China and to its admission into the United Nations.

The recent intensification of activity strongly suggests that the struggle for Indochina is shaping toward a climax which cannot be long postponed, but the nature of that climax still remains obscure. Whatever the ultimate resolution of the conflict may be, one stark fact must accompany the statesmen to the conference tables of Geneva: the incalculable human tragedy of a war fought with savagery and brutality on both sides. Although Indochina has been spared the horrors of the atom or hydrogen bomb, it has known the grim effects of air strafing and napalm incendiary bombing, which strike both soldiers at the front and civilians in the villages. In France today the war is justly termed *la sale guerre*; but the French loathing for it can be only a pale shadow of that of the people of Indochina. Be the issue colonialism, nationalism, or Communism, a staggering price has already been paid in human misery.

March 30, 1954



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