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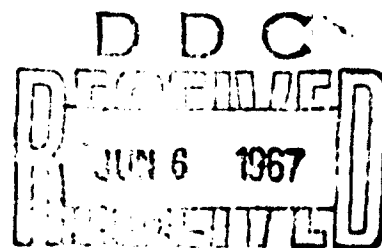
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THE ROLE OF
THE SANCTUARY IN INSURGENCY:
COMMUNIST CHINA'S SUPPORT TO
THE VIETMINH, 1946-1954

J. J. Zasloff



PREPARED FOR:
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE PROJECT RAND

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PREFACE

This Memorandum briefly surveys the history of Communist China's support for the Vietminh in their struggle against the French from 1946 to 1954. Undertaken by The RAND Corporation for the United States Air Force, the intent of the work is to examine a specific example of the "outside sanctuary" in revolutionary warfare. The expectation is that study of this historical instance will contribute to our understanding of problems relating to the use of force in underdeveloped areas.

The study focuses on the Vietminh, assesses the effect of Chinese assistance on Vietminh military achievements, and examines both internal and external political consequences of that assistance. It is based on French and English open sources, which necessarily limits the account, since both the Chinese and the Vietminh sought to conceal the nature of their relationship. Given the keen interest that attends any consideration of the degree of Communist support for Hanoi in the current conflict, however, an examination of the history of the earlier conflict seems relevant at this time despite the lack of access to source materials essential to a more definitive analysis.

J. J. Zasloff undertook this study as a RAND consultant. He is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Pittsburgh.

SUMMARY

Chinese Communist support for the Vietminh against the French between 1946 and 1954, though estimated at less than 20 percent of Vietminh supplies (and perhaps one-ninth of the amount contributed by the United States to the French war effort), contributed significantly to the Vietminh success. Whether Chinese assistance, tangible or intangible, was indispensable to the Vietminh victory is impossible to judge. Communist China was able to influence the outcome of the struggle in Indochina without directly intervening.

Chinese supplies rose from 10 to 20 tons per month in 1951, to 250 tons per month by the end of 1952, then to between 400 and 600 tons in 1953 and to 1,500 tons when the battle of Dienbienphu began; they reached a peak of 4,000 tons in June 1954. By the time of the cease-fire in 1954, the Communist Chinese are reported to have trained, in China, some 40,000 Vietminh military personnel. To Vietnam itself, the Chinese committed limited numbers of personnel, largely in training and technical capacities, and a few military and political advisors.

By 1950, the Vietminh had developed a military capability which, with subsequent Chinese assistance, permitted them to undertake operations against the French at battalion and regimental level. For the crucial battle of Dienbienphu, the Chinese provided the bulk of the ammunition and the key weapons for the Vietminh victory.

Among the intangible forms of support, the Chinese Communists afforded psychological and ideological reinforcement to the Vietminh cause. The "triumph of Marxism-Leninism" in China, and particularly of Mao Tse-tung's

revolutionary doctrine (which had a marked influence in shaping Vietminh strategy and tactics) confirmed the belief of the Vietminh leaders in their own ultimate victory.

Chinese supplies were carried into Vietnam with great secrecy. Even up to the present, neither the North Vietnamese nor the Chinese leaders have acknowledged it. From the Vietminh point of view, to have been recognized as recipients of Chinese aid would have helped neither their appeal for popular support nor their quest for international sympathy. Communist China did not wish to alarm non-Communist nations by appearing as an "exporter of revolution," especially after late 1952 when Chinese foreign policy was attempting to organize an "anti-imperialist" coalition of nations in Asia. Moreover, both the Vietminh and the Communist Chinese feared that open support from Peking would increase the risk of direct U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

Although Chinese Communist influence inevitably accompanied Chinese assistance, the Vietminh leaders appear to have retained independence of decision in conducting their revolution. After 1950 when Chinese assistance began, it is true, the Vietminh leaders adopted increasingly tighter control measures, many of which were based on the Chinese model (although the Soviet model was also influential). It appears, however, that the Vietnamese Communist leaders adopted these measures for their own convenience rather than to oblige the Chinese. Nevertheless, the Chinese Communist example impressed them, and Chinese assistance undoubtedly enhanced their ability to enforce tighter discipline.

The more active Communist control measures, especially the public denunciations that accompanied the beginning of the land reform and the political purges, seriously damaged Vietminh popularity. The Vietminh lost adherents among nationalists who had embraced their movement as the only one that stood a chance of ousting the French. The Geneva Accords of 1954 provided for a free exchange of populations. After their signature, more than 750,000 refugees, largely Catholic peasants, with some non-Communist intellectuals and other members of the middle class, fled to the South.

Communist Chinese assistance strengthened the Vietminh cause by its impact on the French attitude toward the war. In France, denunciation of la sale guerre (the dirty war) mounted when the Vietminh acquired their formidable ally. The fragile governments of the Fourth Republic became even more reluctant to commit the volume of resources that would have enabled France to hold Indochina. Inside Vietnam, French officials responsible for political and military policy in Indochina tended to overemphasize the impact of Chinese intervention to explain away the shortcomings of their own policies. On the other hand, the Vietminh cause was damaged by the massive increase in U.S. aid to the French, which was in part a response to the Chinese involvement in Indochina after 1949. By 1954, the United States was underwriting the total cost of the war for the French.

The point at which Communist China might have intervened directly in the Vietnam struggle is a matter for speculation. Such intervention might well have induced the United States to take military action in Vietnam.

Moreover, it would have raised the risk of U.S. retaliation against the Chinese mainland. It has been said that the Chinese had promised to intervene if the Vietminh were threatened with a decisive defeat. The Vietminh were never in serious danger of destruction, and the French never presented a serious threat to Chinese territory. In the circumstances, it was neither in China's nor in the Vietminh's interest that China should intervene.

At the Geneva Conference in 1954, the Chinese realized their primary aim of excluding American bases and alliance systems from Indochina, but at the cost of DRV control over an independent, unified Vietnam, free of foreign troops. From the Vietminh viewpoint, the Chinese proved too willing to pursue their own goals at the expense of a dependent ally.

There seem to be certain stages in which external support can be particularly important to a revolutionary movement. China was valuable as a sanctuary in the initial stage of the Vietminh revolution, when the Vietminh leaders were busy planning and organizing. When they had developed competent political and military leadership and an adequate manpower base, they reached a stage in which they could profit from Chinese material assistance.

It seems that the intangible elements of external assistance, such as psychological support, ideological reinforcement, propaganda, and diplomatic advocacy, may be as important as, or more important than, material support.

External assistance is likely to be a valuable asset, but the outside power may well present a political bill

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at a later date. Those receiving such assistance cannot tell what the ultimate costs may be.

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I. VIETNAM AND CHINA: A BRIEF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The history of Vietnam is intimately linked with that of China. It was from southern China that the people came who settled what is now North Vietnam. A small state on the fringe of the Chinese Empire, Vietnam was part of the Chinese tributary system until 1038, when she freed herself from China's rule. Except for a twenty-year period of reconquest by China early in the fifteenth century, Vietnam was able to maintain its precarious independence, though still subject to Chinese influence, until the French conquest in the nineteenth century.

The intimate historical connection with China has had a deep influence on Vietnamese society, and has resulted in an ambivalent attitude toward the Chinese. One scholar has summed up the feelings of the Vietnamese toward China as "a mixture of admiration, envy, resentment, and fear."¹ On the one hand, the Vietnamese live in constant fear that their small territory may be swallowed up by the giant neighbor to the north. Their history is filled with the efforts of leaders to appease, bargain with, and frequently fight the Chinese. This fear of China also permeates Vietnamese folklore; the plays that delight village audiences often have as their villain a wicked Chinese potentate pounding the floor with his

¹Harold C. Hinton, China's Relations with Burma and Vietnam, Institute of Pacific Relations, New York, 1958, p. 10. In making this observation, Hinton quotes Charles Labarthe, "Annamites et Choinois au Tongkin," Revue de Geographie, Vol. 13 (1883), pp. 37-49.

staff. The national holidays, many of which are celebrated in both North and South Vietnam, venerate such Vietnamese heroes as the Trung Sisters, who led the first of the Vietnamese revolts against Chinese rule in 39 A.D., for their courage in combating the Chinese enemy. Vietnamese fear of China has probably been reinforced in modern times by other negative sentiments of the Vietnamese populace toward the Chinese community in their country. As in other Southeast Asian countries, there is widespread bad feeling in Vietnam, especially in the South where the larger number of Chinese settled, against the Chinese commercial class, which dominates business and money-lending activities, and against the special privileges granted to Chinese nationals by the French administration.

On the other hand, the Vietnamese see China as a source of wisdom and new ideas. It was through China that Confucianism, Taoism, and Mahayana Buddhism were introduced. Vietnamese authors and intellectuals were greatly influenced by Chinese literature and they often wrote in Chinese. Much of the Chinese educational system was adopted. The mandarin system, imported from China, provided the framework for Vietnamese administration down to the colonial period. So deep is the respect and emulation accorded to Chinese civilization in Vietnam that the Vietnamese nation has been called "the smaller dragon," a cultural offshoot of China, "the greater dragon."² Viewing this cultural impact from the Chinese angle, a distinguished American scholar has written:

²See for example the history of Vietnam by Joseph Buttiger, The Smaller Dragon, Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., New York, 1958.

Separated from the West, the Chinese Empire grew by the acculturation of its borders. Its expansion was the expansion of a way of life.... The Chinese were impressed with one fact: that their superiority was one not of mere material power but of culture.... Gradually but invariably the barbarian in contact with China tended to become Chinese, by this most flattering act reinforcing Chinese convictions of superiority.³

The "imitation effect" of China's culture in Vietnam can be seen in some twentieth century Vietnamese intellectual currents. The demands of Chinese intellectuals, early in this century, for vast educational and social reforms were echoed by their Vietnamese counterparts.⁴ Ironically, while under French suzerainty, Vietnam was flooded with Chinese translations of Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, which the intellectuals studied with a passion formerly reserved for Confucius.⁵

In 1912, when the Chinese revolution forced the abdication of the emperor and the promulgation of a parliamentary constitution, Pham Boi Cham, a prominent Vietnamese intellectual,⁶ organized the Association for the Restoration of Vietnam among Vietnamese émigrés in China, in order to press for reforms. The growth of the

³ John K. Fairbank in Far Eastern Quarterly, February 1942.

⁴ Phan-Quynh, Nouveaux essais franco-annamites, Hanoi, 1938, p. 26. Cited by Paul Isoart, Le phénomène national vietnamien, Librairie générale de droit et de jurisprudence, Paris, 1961, p. 227.

⁵ Isoart, Le phénomène, p. 227.

⁶ Philippe Devillers, Histoire du Vietnam de 1940 à 1952, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1952, p. 38.

Kuomintang as a major power in Chinese politics had its counterpart in Hanoi with the formation, in 1927, of the Vietnam Nationalist Party (VNQDD). Teachers, administrators, secretaries, and journalists eagerly joined the group, which aimed at familiarizing the masses with new ideas, notably those of Sun Yat-sen. The association advocated nationalism, democracy, and socialism. Its organization was modeled upon that of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.⁷

ORIGINS OF THE VIETMINH AND THE ROLE OF CHINA AS A SANCTUARY

Foreign sanctuaries often provide opportunities for discontented elements to meet in safety, to discuss grievances, and to plan, organize, and train for revolution. During the French colonial rule in Vietnam, China provided such an opportunity for a small group of young Vietnamese, who founded the Vietminh revolutionary movement. The revolutionary ferment abroad in China undoubtedly stimulated these youths, already discontented with foreign rule. The relative security of Chinese territory enabled them, in 1925 in Canton, to create what was to become the most powerful revolutionary force in Vietnam. China's role as an inspiration for Vietnamese revolutionary nationalism thus existed well before the establishment of Communist power in Asia.

Ho Chi Minh was the key leader in the founding of this seminal Vietnamese Communist group. Ho, then known as Nguyen Ai Quoc, came to China as secretary and interpreter for Michael Borodin, the Soviet advisor to the

⁷Ibid., p. 56.

Kuomintang. Ho organized perhaps ten young Vietnamese émigrés into the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League, the forerunner of the Indochinese Communist Party. Other young revolutionaries later came from Vietnam to join the group. Some attended a political-military school at Whampoa which Borodin had helped create and staffed with Soviet instructors, in order to form Communist cadres in the Chinese army.⁸ In 1927, when the Kuomintang broke with the Communists, Ho fled Canton with Borodin but the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League continued to operate in China against the French without interference from the anti-French Kuomintang.

Under the auspices of the Youth League at least 250 Vietnamese received a revolutionary education in China. By 1929 some 200 had returned to Indochina to set up committees in Vietnam. They organized a hierarchy of committees from the village to the central directing committee, a structure resembling that of the Kuomintang and the CPSU.

Continuing his organizational activities in exile, Ho Chi Minh, in 1930, brought together in Hong Kong several Vietnamese revolutionary factions, including the Youth League, to form the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). Though the ICP went through several phases of organization, the core of its leadership and its central ideology remained remarkably constant until it achieved power.

⁸George F. Kennan, Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin, Mentor Edition, New York, 1962, pp. 252-253; Conrad Brandt, Stalin's Failure in China, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1958, pp. 41-42.

While in China early in World War II, Ho was imprisoned by the Kuomintang for his affiliation with the Communists. In 1943 the Nationalists released Ho to return to Vietnam with the expectation that he would foment trouble against the Japanese and send intelligence reports from Vietnam. Ho's return to Vietnam, under Chinese auspices, bore a remarkable similarity to Lenin's sealed-train ride to Russia during World War I under German auspices. Though he did make trouble for the Japanese, Ho's primary purpose was to organize the Vietminh to seize power in Vietnam after the departure of the Japanese, an aim he successfully achieved.⁹

NATIONALIST CHINA AND THE VIETMINH: 1945-1946

The frequently witnessed Chinese-Vietnamese drama -- in which China seeks to control Vietnam while the Vietnamese maneuver to rid themselves of that control -- was re-enacted in 1945-1946. In accordance with an Allied agreement made at Potsdam, Chinese Nationalist forces entered Tongkin, in North Vietnam, after the Japanese defeat, supposedly to disarm the Japanese in the territory south to the 16th parallel. The Nationalists sent a force of

⁹ For references to these early Vietnamese Communist relations with China, see Ellen J. Hammer, Struggle for Indochina, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif., 1954, pp. 74-82; Milton Sacks, "Marxism in Vietnam," in Frank Trager (ed.), Marxism in Southeast Asia, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif., 1959, pp. 115-124; Devillers, Histoire de Vietnam, pp. 56-61; A. Doak Barnett, Communist China and Asia, Harper Vintage Books, New York, 1961, pp. 480-481; Hinton, China's Relations with Burma and Vietnam, pp. 10-12.

some 180,000 men under General Lu Han, their wives and children, a band of porters, and few supplies. They selected the best living quarters, lived off the land, looted, and blackmarketed. They liquidated locally at a handsome profit the weapons, ammunition, and equipment seized from the surrendered Japanese. (Purchase of some of these stocks by the Vietminh helped arm them for future hostilities.) The economic exploitation of Vietnam by the Chinese was facilitated by their introduction of Chinese currency as legal tender at an advantageous rate of exchange. A Le Monde correspondent estimated in November 1945 that the Chinese occupation of half of Vietnam during their few months in Tongkin cost the country several times more than the Japanese occupation of all Vietnam for several years.¹⁰

Though appalled by this new example of Chinese cupidity and fearful of continued Chinese domination, the Vietminh leaders, recognizing their relative weakness, kept open their negotiations with the Chinese occupying force and yielded, at least in appearance, when Chinese demands were heavy. The Vietminh had issued a Declaration of Independence in September 1945, prior to the Chinese arrival, which established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). They were attempting to consolidate their control throughout the whole country, but their success during these first months was limited largely to the North. During 1945, the Chinese exerted heavy pressure on behalf of the Dong Minh Hoi and the VNQDD, Vietnamese political

¹⁰ Le Monde, November 3, 1945. Cited in Hammer, Struggle for Indochina, p. 135.

groups hostile to the Vietminh. Under this pressure Ho Chi Minh promised to reserve 50 seats in the new national assembly for the VNQDD and 20 for the Dong Minh Hoi, in a total of 350 seats, regardless of the outcome of the election to be held under Vietminh auspices during January 1946. Although this election brought an overwhelming victory to the Vietminh, they kept their promise and admitted the two rival groups into governmental positions. Afterwards, it appears that the Chinese leaders (particularly General Hsiao Wan, in charge of Chinese relations with Vietnamese nationalists), impressed by the popularity of the Vietminh, began to support Ho, hoping to bring him under Chinese influence and prevent him from reaching an understanding with France.¹¹

The Vietminh, nevertheless, were eager for the Chinese to return to China, and were willing to negotiate with the French to this end. The French, too, had an obvious interest in Chinese withdrawal from Vietnam. The latter therefore were in a position to extract important concessions from the French. In exchange for their departure by March 31, 1946, the Chinese gained the French renunciation of extraterritorial rights and concessions in China, exemption from customs and transit duties on Chinese merchandise shipped over the Haiphong-Kunming Railway, and a free zone for Chinese goods at Haiphong. France also agreed to cede ownership of the segment of the railway that lay in China. Chinese nationals in Vietnam were assured the legal rights of French nationals,

¹¹ Hammer, Struggle for Indochina, p. 144.

which included the right to be tried under French law, and they were to pay taxes no greater than those paid by Indochinese nationals.¹² Ho Chi Minh joined in giving certain guarantees to both the Chinese and the French in return for Chinese withdrawal. In explaining these concessions, he later told Paul Mus, the French historian, "that it would be better to smell the excrement of the French for a little while longer than to eat the excrement of the Chinese for the rest of one's life."¹³

THE COMMUNIST CHINESE VICTORY AND THE VIETMINH

Mao's victories in China and the arrival of his troops at the Vietnamese frontier in December 1949 gave good cause for exhilaration to the Vietminh, who had been fighting the French without significant outside assistance since 1946. There was the reassuring prospect of material support from the Chinese Communists for their revolution against the imperialists. There was ideological reassurance as well. Both parties had a common Marxist-Leninist revolutionary heritage. Both regimes sprang from Communist movements within peasant societies -- movements that had used nationalism as an important instrument for gaining peasant support. The Chinese Communists had

¹² Ibid., p. 147.

¹³ Cited in Hinton, China's Relations with Burma and Vietnam, p. 13. For an account of the Chinese occupation of North Vietnam, see Devillers, Histoire de Vietnam, pp. 191-204, and Pierre Cel erier (pseudonym), Menaces Sur Le Vietnam, I.D.E.O., Saigon, 1950, Part I, pp. 7-80; Donald Lancaster, The Emancipation of French Indochina, Oxford University Press, London and New York, 1961, pp. 124-128; Hammer, Struggle for Indochina, pp. 128-147.

broadened their base of popular support when the Japanese invasion made the Chinese peasantry sensitive to the nationalist appeal of the Communist leadership.¹⁴ Similarly, the Vietminh achieved their popular base through their near-monopoly of the struggle against the French. Vietminh leaders who had taken refuge from French colonial rule in Nationalist China had been involved in the Chinese Communist struggle, and strongly hoped for a Communist victory. Ho Chi Minh's association with the Chinese Communists was cordial and of long duration. According to Bernard Fall, it included a stay with the Chinese Communist Eighth Route Army in 1938 and, in 1940, service as party cell secretary to a guerrilla training mission sent to South China under Yeh Chien-ying.¹⁵

A former member of the Vietminh, a medical student in a school organized by the Resistance, whom the author interviewed, reflected the enthusiasm for the Chinese Communist victory that many Vietminh fighters shared:

¹⁴ See Chalmers A. Johnson, Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif., 1962, pp. 49ff.; see also a critical review of this book by Donald G. Gillin in Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 23, No. 2, February 1964, pp. 269-289.

¹⁵ Bernard Fall, "A 'Straight Zigzag': The Road to Socialism in North Vietnam," in Doak Barnett, Communist Strategies in Asia, Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., New York, 1963, p. 224. Fall speculates that this stay with Yeh Chien-ying, now a Chinese Communist Field Marshal, may give a clue to the visit of Yeh to Hanoi in January 1962. Another indication of the identification of some Vietminh leaders with the Chinese Communists can be found in the pseudonym adopted by one important leader who called himself Truong Chinh, meaning "Long March."

We knew well that Mao Tse-tung had defeated Chiang Kai-shek and we were encouraged. We were exuberant with joy.... We were at medical school and we saw that the Resistance would win. We knew that our situation was linked closely to that of China because of the Sino-Vietnamese frontier.

He remembered the Chinese Nationalist troops who had come to his native city of Hue in 1945. "Those Chinese were not soldiers," he claimed with sarcasm, "they were bandits." For him, the troops of Mao were a world apart. The Communist troops "work for the people ... they do not pillage." He had no fear that the new revolutionary forces of China would try to dominate Vietnam. For him and many others the Communist Chinese troops were the principal force behind the change from feudalism to a new era of promise. "The Chinese revolution was an ideological revolution," he said. "The troops of Mao made the revolution to abolish whatever was evil in a feudal country. They wouldn't do the same thing that the troops of Chiang Kai-shek had done. They had the same ideology as we had."

While the major reaction of the Vietminh to the Chinese Communist victory was a feeling of confidence and solidarity, some were apprehensive about the influence of their new ally. Non-Communist nationalists were the most susceptible to this fear. The enthusiasm they may have felt for the prospective arrival of material support for their cause was offset by the specter of the traditional Chinese enemy interfering in Vietnamese affairs. As the Communist Vietminh leaders embraced Chinese-style methods

in 1950, according to a Vietnamese writer living in the North at the time, intellectuals increasingly deserted the Vietminh movement. He wrote:

The more the principles learned from the Chinese Communists were applied, the longer became the lines of disillusioned intellectuals abandoning the ranks of the Resistance. Doctors, engineers, professors, lawyers, writers, and journalists, together with tens of thousands of others, abandoned their posts as inspectors, directors, committee members, headmasters, and the like, to make the long journey past hundreds of checkpoints manned by the people's guerrillas, resistance soldiers, and the people's security police, back to the cities of north and central Vietnam.... Not a single intellectual harbored any more illusions about the nationalist character of the Resistance government any longer.¹⁶

Even the most committed Vietnamese Communist could not ignore the long history of Chinese rule over Vietnam. He had to weigh his warm feeling of solidarity with this active phase of the revolution against his natural suspicion of Chinese ambitions. He had to be alert to see which element of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship would dominate.¹⁷

¹⁶Nhu Phong, "Intellectuals, Writers and Artists," in China Quarterly, No. 9, January-March 1962, pp. 51-52.

¹⁷For a French journalist's discussion of Ho Chi Minh's cautious attitude toward the Chinese, taken from several of his interviews with Ho during the French-Indochinese War and after, see Jean Lacouture, "Uncle Ho Defies Uncle Sam," New York Times Magazine, March 28, 1965, pp. 25, 110-111.

II. CHINESE COMMUNIST SUPPORT OF THE VIETMINH FORCES

This section will describe the various types of aid given to the Vietminh by the Chinese. It will assess the effects of this aid on the course of the war and on the crucial battles culminating at Dienbienphu. Finally, it will deal with the implications of the clandestine character of Chinese assistance.

In order to clarify and provide a context for the discussion of military support, the question of non-military support will be taken up first. The latter category includes psychological, ideological, diplomatic, and political assistance.

INTANGIBLE SUPPORT FROM CHINA: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL

The intangible support that the Vietminh received from Communist China was equally, if not more, important than the material aid. The triumph of the forces of Mao Tse-tung stiffened the Vietminh will to fight. They were reassured in their faith that they were riding with the tide of history, and that their cause would triumph. Mao's revolutionary strategy and tactics, which had strongly influenced General Vo Nguyen Giap and his subordinates, had now succeeded for the Chinese, and they believed that similar methods would equally serve the Vietnamese.

Bolstered by the help of a strong Chinese ally, the Vietminh's demands increased in negotiations with the French. The French had nourished the hope that their military efforts against the Vietminh would ultimately produce an accommodation favorable to French interests

and the French presence in Indochina. In the summer of 1949, the French succeeded in engaging representatives of Ho Chi Minh in negotiations. These talks began to break down when aid from China loomed on the horizon as a result of the rapid advance of Mao's armies toward the Vietnamese border. Pham Ngoc Thac, Director of the Politico-Military Delegation of the Vietminh Government in South Vietnam, clearly indicated the impact of the Communist Chinese victory on the Vietminh when he declared on July 9, 1950, that "the success of the Chinese army in the evolution of world events announces the approaching end of our dark days. The war against the French is now entering its decisive phase...."¹ With the arrival of Mao's troops at the Vietnamese border, Vietminh morale rose even higher. A Vietminh radio broadcast of December 2, 1949, proclaimed:

The victory of the Chinese people constitutes for us and for all the oppressed peoples who struggle in Asia a precious encouragement. For four years our people have been struggling alone against the enemy. This struggle, begun with sticks, today enters its decisive phase.²

¹Philippe Devillers, Histoire du Vietnam de 1940 à 1952, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1952, p. 451. Harold Hinton shares the judgment that the triumph of the Communists in China stiffened the Vietminh's attitude toward France. He writes: "Presumably the approval of Chinese power and the prospect of Chinese military and economic aid both enabled and compelled [Ho Chi Minh] to repudiate all ties with France." Communist China in World Politics, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1966, p. 239.

²Devillers, Histoire du Vietnam, p. 452.

Assessing the impact of the Communist Chinese success in retrospect, General Giap has written:

1949 saw the brilliant triumph of the Chinese Revolution and the birth of the People's Republic of China. This great historic event, which altered events in Asia and the world, exerted a considerable influence on the war of liberation of the Vietnamese people. Vietnam, no longer in the grip of enemy encirclement, was henceforth geographically linked to the Socialist Bloc.³

This linkage with the socialist world, a secure northern border, and, best of all, promise of support in arms, ammunition, and matériel, nerved the Vietminh military leadership to prepare for Phase III of their campaign, the "general counteroffensive." General Giap, in an essay published in 1950, just when the new phase was to be launched, pointed out that the prerequisites for unleashing the major offensive had been attained: (1) Vietminh forces had become more powerful than those of the enemy; (2) the international situation was favorable; (3) there were signs of exhaustion and disorder in the enemy camp. Moreover, the victory of the Chinese Communists was of the first importance:

We will enter into the phase of the General Counteroffensive under circumstances where international influences will be extremely important for us and for the enemy [Giap's emphasis]. These influences will become more direct and more potent every day.

³General Vo Nguyen Giap, People's War, People's Army, Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., New York, 1962, p. 22.

The international factor has always played a large role in Indochina. Up until now, it has almost always favored the enemy exclusively. The situation has changed since the recognition of the Vietnamese government by the USSR and the popular democracies.

With the arrival of new China, the neo-democratic world stretches in one piece from the West to the East up to the frontiers of Indochina. Indochina has become the forward stronghold of the democratic world in Southeast Asia.⁴

DIPLOMATIC AND POLITICAL SUPPORT

On January 16, 1950, Communist China officially recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The Soviet Union followed suit on January 30, and was soon joined by its Eastern European satellites. Preoccupied in Europe and reluctant to aggravate tensions in the Far East, Moscow had been lukewarm in its support of the Vietminh until the Chinese Communist involvement. From this point on, the DRV drew support from both the Soviets and the Chinese.

The officials of the DRV expressed elation at the recognition they received from the Socialist Bloc. As Ho Chi Minh later expressed it:

⁴Vo Nguyen Giap, The War of Liberation and the Popular Army: The Three Strategic Phases, Editions "Ve-Quoc Quan," National Army Publishing House, 1950, pp. 33, 34. (In manuscript, translated from the French by R. Wohlstetter, May 1961.)

A few years of resistance have brought our country the greatest success in the history of Vietnam -- recognition of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as an equal in the world democratic family by the two biggest countries in the world -- the Soviet Union and Democratic China -- and by the new democratic countries. That means we are definitely on the democratic side and belong to the anti-imperialist bloc of 800 million people.⁵

This recognition added to the self-assurance and prestige of the Vietminh leaders. Their struggle as an "independent government" fighting for freedom against an imperialist power was now legitimized by recognition of their sovereignty. They could no longer be considered outcast rebels, as the French claimed, conducting an illegal uprising against a legitimate government. This recognition was all the more precious because, at the time, the Western powers, including the United States and Great Britain, had not recognized the Bao Dai government, which had been granted "independence" by the French in June 1949. Recognition of the Bao Dai government by the United States and Great Britain came only in February 1950, after the Chinese and Soviet action.

With the commitment of Communist China and Soviet Russia to the Vietminh cause, the DRV now had powerful advocates on the international scene. A barrage of political support for the Vietnamese "war of national liberation" now poured from Peking and Moscow. At international conferences, in foreign capitals where the Chinese gained representation, in thousands of radio

⁵Voice of South Vietnam, August 16, 1950, as cited in Hammer, Struggle for Indochina, pp. 250-251.

broadcasts and press releases, the justice of the struggle for independence in Vietnam was proclaimed and the evil of French colonial repression was denounced. Great sympathy was created, especially in the newly emerging nations, for the Vietnamese independence struggle. The prestige which the Chinese Communists had won with their victory was put to powerful use in pressing the Vietminh cause.

MILITARY SUPPORT

Before the Chinese began active assistance to the Vietminh revolution, the latter's arsenal contained a mixed bag of arms. Some had been parachuted by the Americans and British to Vietminh "liberation troops" during World War II, in the belief that they would be used against the Japanese. One lot of 30,000 rifles, 1,000 automatic weapons, and several 75 mm cannons were delivered to the Vietminh by the Japanese, who had seized them from the French Army of Indochina in 1945. Many weapons had been purchased, as pointed out earlier, from the Chinese Nationalist troops before their departure in 1946. A few crude items were manufactured locally. The largest continuing source of weapons was the French army in Vietnam, much of whose equipment was captured by the Vietminh. Thus, in their struggle against the French from 1946 until late in 1949, the Vietminh had to rely on their own resources for equipment and supplies, except for what they could capture from the French.

By May 1950, Chinese aid had already significantly strengthened Vietminh military capability. The Chinese trained troops and supplied technical assistance, arms,

ammunition, and equipment. The Vietminh had built up a good capacity to utilize the aid which the Chinese gave, and they pressed this new advantage effectively. Operating only at the battalion level before the Chinese reached the border, the Vietminh soon undertook multi-battalion, regimental, and (by the fall of 1950) divisional operations as a result of their imported supplies. Not only did the regular army receive substantial equipment, but the territorial forces became more regularized and professionalized.

Training of Personnel and Technical Assistance

The training of Vietminh troops in China, and by Chinese instructors in North Vietnam, began shortly after the arrival of Mao's forces at the Vietnamese border. The French Premier, René Pleven, told the National Assembly in the summer of 1950 that 20,000 Vietminh troops had been trained and fully equipped inside Chinese territory. As the war progressed, Red China provided schools for non-commissioned, company grade, and staff officers, as well as assistance in training men for the use of special weapons. Engineers were sent to a school in China at Nanning, and tank troops were trained at an armored-vehicle school at Wu Ming. By the time of the ceasefire of 1954, some 40,000 Vietminh soldiers were reported to have received training in Red China.⁶ Thus China was able

⁶George K. Tanham, Communist Revolutionary Warfare, Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., New York, 1961, pp. 62-63; Hammer, Struggle for Indochina, p. 252; Jean Marchand, Le drame Indochinois, Peyronnet, Paris, 1953, pp. 8-9; Bernard B. Fall, Street Without Joy, Stackpole, Harrisburg, Pa., 1963, p. 27.

to exert an important influence upon the outcome of the struggle in Vietnam, without directly intervening.

Chinese military personnel were committed in Vietnam in very limited numbers, largely in training and technical capacities. In a book published in 1960, Bernard Fall claims, without citing his source of information, that the Vietminh army had within its ranks "from 20,000 to 30,000 Chinese combatants who joined individually as 'volunteers' and not as organized units."⁷ This report appears to be a great exaggeration. No Chinese prisoners ever fell into French hands, and no responsible participant in the Indochinese War has contended that the contribution of Chinese personnel, at least in numbers, was significant.⁸ Small numbers of Chinese Communists were sent to Hanoi as technical assistance specialists and as military and political advisors.⁹

⁷Fall, Le Viet-Minh, Armand Colin, Paris, 1960, p. 196.

⁸See Charles Favrel, Le Monde, April 22, 1954; France-Observateur, "Le Vietnam: l'armée dégage sa responsabilité," April 29, 1954, p. 9; Jules Roy, The Battle of Dienbienphu, Harper and Row, New York, 1965, p. 203.

Interviews by the author, in December 1964, with highly-placed French intelligence officers confirm the judgment, to be found in the significant literature of this period, that there were no Chinese "volunteers," and that the small number of Chinese personnel who were in Vietnam had largely technical and advisory roles.

⁹An interesting Chinese "Handbook for Political Workers Going to Vietnam," dated December 15, 1952, marked top secret, contains guides for behavior in Vietnam, a sort of Communist overseasmanship. It includes health and military precautions to be taken on

Supplies and Distribution

There was a report of a lend-lease agreement made by Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse-tung in April 1950, when Ho visited Peking. Earlier, General Ho Lung, the former commander of the 120th Division of the Eighth Route Army, was reported to have led a military mission to Ho's headquarters, and Giap subsequently was said to have gone to Peking for discussions with Marshal Peng Teh-huai.¹⁰ Though both parties denied making an assistance agreement,¹¹ there is no question that aid from China began to flow by early 1950. Chinese assistance was extremely important for the Vietminh in their difficult situation. Successive Japanese

the trip to Vietnam, and gives instructions for proper comportment with Vietnamese counterparts. It advises cadres to contact the Chinese minority in Vietnam "in a friendly manner and ask them for information concerning local customs, language problems and other matters." It also recommends that the local Chinese should be organized to oppose French colonial rule and its puppet Bao Dai. Excerpt in Allan B. Cole (ed.), Conflict in Indochina and International Repercussions: A Documentary History, 1945-1955, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1956, pp. 125-130.

¹⁰Denis Warner, The Last Confucian, Penguin Books, New York, 1963, p. 40.

¹¹Harold C. Hinton speculates that the plans for Chinese aid to the DRV, to fit into roughly coordinated offensives against South Korea, Taiwan, and the Hanoi area, may have been made at the World Federation of Trade Unions Conference in Peking in November 1949. In an exchange of telegrams with Ho Chi Minh during that conference Mao stated, "China and Vietnam are meeting on the front of an [anti] imperialist struggle. With the victorious development of our struggles for liberation of the two peoples,

occupations, destruction, pillage, and wartime disorder had reduced to almost nothing the production in factories under Vietminh control. The problem of getting credits for imported arms and supplies was great.

According to George Tanham, petroleum products and ammunition comprised 75 percent of Chinese aid, while the remaining 25 percent consisted of arms and medical and signal equipment. For 1951, he gives an estimate of some 10 to 20 tons of supplies per month; for late 1952, 250 tons; and for 1953, between 400 and 600 tons. When the battle of Dienbienphu began, the flow was reckoned at 1,500 tons per month, and it reached a peak of 4,000 tons in June 1954.¹²

the friendship between our two peoples will surely become closer day by day...." (Quoted in Milton Sacks, "The Strategy of Communism in Southeast Asia," Pacific Affairs, Vol. 23, No. 3, September 1950, p. 240.) Hinton points out that, though this statement does not strictly imply governmental action, it does not exclude it. "Context provides the clue," he writes, "and the context here suggests that plans for covert Chinese aid to the DRV were being formulated at the time." Hinton, Communist China in World Politics, p. 238.

¹²Tanham, who had access in Paris to French Army records, cites these as reliable estimates. Tanham, Communist Revolutionary Warfare, pp. 68-69. Other estimates of supply tonnage vary, but within similar magnitudes. A French general has written that in 1953 "Sino-Soviet" aid was 2,000 tons monthly, having increased from an earlier average of 1,000 tons. (He has also estimated U.S. aid to the French at 10,000 tons per month in 1953, an increase from 7,200 tons monthly in 1951.) Marchand, Le drame Indochinois, pp. 296-297. Fall puts the Chinese contribution between 3,000 and 5,000 tons per month but does not specify dates. Le Viet-Minh, p. 196.

The Chinese supplies had diverse origins. Most of them were American, captured by the Communists from the forces of Chiang Kai-shek or in Korea. Trucks had been made in the USSR, bazookas and recoilless rifles in Czechoslovakia, light arms in China. A French intelligence officer, charged with the task of keeping track of Chinese aid to the Vietminh, estimated (in an interview with the author in December 1964) that the gross contribution of the Chinese matériel never exceeded 20 percent of the Vietminh's total supplies.

In order to distribute the Chinese supplies and generally to raise the logistical system to a sophisticated level, the Vietminh undertook, with Chinese assistance, development of roads and communication arteries. After 1951, conscripted Vietnamese laborers under the direction of Vietminh and Chinese Communist engineers worked at this task.¹³ China pushed its railways, which had ended at Nanning, to the Vietnamese frontier near Long Son, and a highway was built from Lung-chu to Hoa Binh via Cao Bang, in North Vietnam. With prodigious energy the Vietminh developed a spider-web network of roads for vehicles along formerly impassable jungle paths, an important element in the later decisive victory at Dienbienphu in 1954.

¹³Handbook of World Knowledge (Chinese language), Peking and Shanghai, 1954, lists two Sino-Vietnamese agreements on posts and communications, one signed on February 6, 1952 (p. 103), the other on March 3, 1953 (p. 185), though it says nothing of Chinese military aid to the Vietminh. Cited in Harold C. Hinton, China's Relations with Burma and Vietnam, Institute of Pacific Relations, New York, 1958, pp. 18-19.

French Attempts to Counter Chinese Communist Support

Military measures by the French to interdict Chinese material support were inadequate and ineffective. The French did not have adequate resources to threaten bombing the outside base in South China, even if they had contemplated such dangerous retaliation.¹⁴ U.S. abstention from bombing China in the Korean War made it obvious that American leaders were not inclined to take such action on behalf of the French. The French could even less envisage sending ground troops to attack aid depots in China. In fact, the French forces were insufficient to control the northern regions of Tongkin, inside the territory over which they were presumably legal masters, and movement of Chinese supplies in this region was unimpeded.

The French effort to interfere with Chinese shipments was limited primarily to sporadic sorties by the French Air Force. In 1952 an extensive air interdiction program concentrated on truck garages and warehouses. At one point, the French claimed to have reduced the flow of Chinese aid from 1,500 to 250 tons per month.¹⁵

¹⁴ According to an Australian journalist, the French Air Force Commander in Indochina, General Chassin, complained that the United States had not provided France with enough planes to fight the war internally in Indochina. Chassin blamed Washington for not supplying him with Sabre jets and delayed-action fuses for his bombs. Warner, The Last Confucian, p. 46.

¹⁵ Tanham, Communist Revolutionary Warfare, pp. 107-108.

The Vietminh reacted by perfecting their camouflage, transporting supplies at night, relaying matériel to thousands of coolies who serpented in through well-covered paths, and developing more skillful crews to repair roads and bridges.¹⁶ As antiaircraft weapons arrived in increasing numbers in 1953 and 1954, the Vietminh took a damaging toll of the limited French air power.

The French attempts to counteract the intangible Chinese support to the Vietminh were also largely unsuccessful. The French tried diplomatic probes to achieve a limitation of Chinese assistance for the Vietminh, but Mao's government, knowing the French military weakness in Indochina, did not respond.¹⁷ The rise in self-confidence of the Vietminh and their adherents, the belief that the Chinese Communist victory justified faith in their common ideology, their assurance in their sense of mission -- in fact, all the psychological support which the Vietminh derived from the Chinese Communist victory -- could hardly be diminished by French pronouncements. The added prestige and legitimacy resulting from Chinese and Soviet Bloc recognition were not vulnerable to French counteraction. As the Western colonial power, France was at a great

¹⁶Roy, Dienbienphu, p. 110.

¹⁷Jean Lacouture and Philippe Devillers, La Fin d'Une Guerre, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1960, pp. 39-45.

disadvantage in attempting to win public support by denouncing the foreign ties of the Vietminh. French propaganda organs in Vietnam, however, did conduct an active campaign to link the Vietnamese and the Chinese parties, broadcast the terms of the treaty allegedly made between Ho and Mao, and reported joint operations by Chinese Communist and Vietminh troops along the northern border.¹⁸ Though the French propaganda may have persuaded some that the Vietminh were plotting with Vietnam's traditional enemy, it convinced others that the DRV had powerful allies who were willing to help crush colonial domination.

Effect of Chinese Communist Military Aid on the Course of the War

As mentioned earlier, 1950 was the year General Giap launched Phase III of the Vietminh campaign, "the general counteroffensive." While the Vietminh never matched the French Army weapon for weapon (for instance, they were not given airplanes), Chinese assistance enabled them to organize battalion and regimental level operations sufficient to undertake large-scale attacks against French positions. Not long after the Chinese arrival at the Vietnamese frontier,

¹⁸ See Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, The Left Wing in Southeast Asia, Sloane, New York, 1950, pp. 48ff.

perhaps up to eighteen Vietminh battalions crossed into China to receive training equipment.¹⁹

Utilizing these new resources, General Giap launched his general offensive in September-October 1950. He inflicted on the French their most crucial defeat prior to Dienbienphu. He won battles in the region of Cao Bang and Lang-Son. By mid-October he had destroyed all the French forts near the Chinese frontier, thus clearing

¹⁹This estimate was made by a reliable French intelligence officer in an interview with the author in Paris, December 1964. Fall, in Le Viet-Minh, pp. 195-196, claims that "by the end of 1950 some 40 battalions, 10 of which were heavy, had been entirely equipped by the Chinese. The French intelligence service estimates Chinese aid for 1951 at 18,000 rifles, 1,200 machine guns and submachine guns, 150 to 200 heavy mortars (81 and 122 mm), plus about 50 cannons, for the most part recoilless, recently captured from the Americans. But these figures are still below the real ones." Fall cites Jacques Despuech, le trafic des piastres, Paris, 1953, p. 143, for the statement that Chinese aid in 1952 was estimated at double that for the previous year.

Fall's figure of 40 Vietminh battalions equipped by the Chinese Communists exceeds by 22 the number estimated by the French intelligence officer who studied Chinese aid during the period in question. Fall does not say that these Vietminh battalions went across the Chinese border for training and equipment, as did the 18 battalions mentioned by the French officer. The discrepancy may be accounted for in part by the shipment of Chinese supplies into Vietnam to equip a growing number of additional battalions. It may also be explained in part by a difference in the length of time involved in the two estimates. The present author's informant stated that 18 battalions were trained and equipped prior to the battle of Cao Bang, which took place in October 1950, while Fall's figure runs to "the end of 1950." Otherwise, the author finds it impossible to account for the divergence in estimates.

access to the Chinese sanctuary.²⁰ This defeat cost the French 6,000 troops and enough arms to outfit an entire Vietminh division.²¹ Some thirty Vietminh battalions were involved in this campaign, and operations at divisional level were undertaken for the first time. The French regarded this defeat as so serious that, on December 4, the High Commissioner officially ordered that families of French civil and military personnel serving in North Vietnam be ready to leave on short notice.²²

The equipment captured by the Vietminh in this engagement, along with the new supplies from China, added importantly to the Vietminh military capability.²³ As

²⁰ Donald Lancaster, The Emancipation of French Indochina, Oxford University Press, London and New York, 1961, p. 219; Marchand, Le drame Indochinois, pp. 187, 200.

²¹ According to Fall, these arms included 13 artillery pieces and 125 mortars, 450 trucks, and equipment for 3 armored platoons, 940 machine guns, 1,200 submachine guns, and more than 8,000 rifles. Street Without Joy, p. 28.

²² Le Monde, December 6, 1950, cited in Lancaster, The Emancipation, p. 219.

²³ A table in Tanham's study of Vietminh strategy and tactics demonstrates that the Vietminh were building a professional fighting force capable of putting to good use the Chinese supplies. (Tanham, Communist Revolutionary Warfare, p. 48.)

The Growth of Viet Minh Regular Battalion Units

	April 1949		June 1951	
	Regular	Regional	Regular	Regional
Tongkin	20	50	78	6
Annam	7	43	21	6
Cochinchina	<u>5</u>	<u>44</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>25</u>
TOTALS	32	137	117	37

Tanham's examination of Regiment 9, one of the best units but not an isolated case, may help to interpret this table.

Chinese assistance and Vietminh military competence increased, the latter took a damaging toll from the French forces, though they suffered heavy losses themselves. They could claim tactical victory if they forced the French to evacuate, as in the Battle of Hoa Binh in late 1951 and early 1952. The French inflicted enormous losses on the massive human assaults of the Vietminh, but they finally withdrew and left the Vietminh with an important strategic and psychological victory.

In the face of rising Vietminh offensives, the French were confronted with what seemed to be an insoluble tactical dilemma. They had far too few troops to carry out the dual task of maintaining law and order throughout the country and taking the initiative to wipe out the growing power of the Vietminh. If they spread out their forces and attempted to pacify larger segments of the country, the Vietminh would infiltrate the Delta and speed up the process of pourissement (the rot). At the same time, when the French concentrated their forces in key regions, such as the Delta, they tended to immobilize themselves, and left open substantial segments of the countryside where the Vietminh could obtain new recruits and supplies, take refuge, and enforce political control. This dilemma was never solved.

In 1948, this regiment had 6 battalions, with a total of 1,800 men, and was equipped with only 2 mortars and 2 75s, plus a few rapid-fire weapons. Three years later it had only 3 battalions, but 3,500 men, and possessed 24 mortars, 9 recoilless cannons, 18 machine guns, and over 60 rapid-fire weapons. (Ibid.)

A tactic which the French employed with some effectiveness, however, was to draw the Vietminh into attacking strong French emplacements so that the defenders could bring to bear their superior firepower and technical advantages. It was precisely this tactic which led General Henri Navarre, the final French Commander-in-Chief in Indochina, into his horrible blunder at Dienbienphu.

The availability of Chinese material assistance was an important element in the Vietminh's decision to mount their attack, and counted significantly in the achievement of their stunning victory.

Dienbienphu -- Tragedy and Triumph

The eight years of war between the French and the Vietminh reached a dramatic, awesome climax at the siege of Dienbienphu. For the French, Dienbienphu was total, heartbreaking disaster. For the Vietminh it was an overwhelming triumph achieved at the politically crucial moment. The Geneva talks, with the Indochinese as well as the Korean question on the agenda, had been slated before the siege began in March 1954. The French acknowledged complete defeat on May 7. The Geneva talks began the next day. The Russians and the Chinese, speaking for the Vietminh, were in a strong bargaining position. This sequence of events makes it clear why the Dienbienphu battle was decisive.

In 1953, when General Navarre was named Commander-in-Chief in Indochina, the French government was no longer committed to "winning" the war in Indochina. Its strategy

was to play for time by holding on militarily until a political settlement permitting the withdrawal of French troops could be achieved. Navarre's instructions were to keep his military measures in conformity with the resources already available to him in Indochina.²⁴ No reinforcements would be sent. By early 1954, the Vietminh had built a formidable army, including regulars, regional troops and local militia, with an estimated strength between 300,000 and 400,000. Troops fighting on the French side totaled some 420,000: 200,000 in the shaky Vietnamese National Army, 178,000 from the Expeditionary Corps, the religious-military sect armies, and others.²⁵ This nearly one-to-one ratio of fighting personnel gave great advantages to the Vietminh because in a revolutionary war, the rebels can select their targets without the obligation to maintain law and order throughout the country. In other insurgency wars, defenders have found it necessary to mount a favorable ratio of from one to ten or one to fifteen before defeating their enemy. Even the task of "holding the line" in Indochina, therefore, was a formidable challenge for General Navarre.

The Commander-in-Chief developed a strategy, known as the Navarre Plan, which he believed would deal such severe blows to the enemy that France would be in a favorable negotiating position. A key element of this plan was the

²⁴Roy, Dienbienphu, pp. 6, 12, 17, 41-42.

²⁵Hammer, Struggle for Indochina, p. 287; Bernard Fall, "How the French Got Out of Vietnam," New York Times Magazine, May 2, 1965, pp. 28-29, 113-119.

build-up of a French fortress on the high jungle plateau, at Dienbienphu in North Vietnam near the border of Laos. Major fortifications were constructed at this site with the object of inviting an attack by General Giap's forces. Navarre reasoned that French superiority in guns, heavy artillery, airpower, and armor would pulverize the attacking Vietminh units. Navarre apparently calculated that the enemy could not mobilize more than a reinforced division for this attack, largely because of the difficulty of supplying troops through the hilly jungle terrain devoid of roads; he also believed that the topography and difficulty of supply would prevent the enemy from bringing up artillery. For their own ammunition and provisions, the French counted on air supply to the enlarged airfield at Dienbienphu.

As many accounts have shown,²⁶ Navarre made serious miscalculations. General Giap brought up more than four divisions to fight at Dienbienphu, not the one reinforced division for which Navarre had calculated. To supply these troops, tens of thousands of porters, mobilized from the peasant population, carried tons of ammunition and supplies on their backs, by draft animals, by bicycle, and by motor vehicles. The Vietminh carved out jungle paths and provided good camouflage against air attack for their logistic flow. Part of the supplies from Communist China were sent by Molotov trucks over the route built,

²⁶ See, for example, Roy, Dienbienphu; Colonel Robert Rigg, in F. M. Osanka, Modern Guerrilla Warfare, Free Press of Glencoe, New York, 1962; Fall, Street Without Joy.

in late 1953, from Mengtzu, in Yunnan, China, through Laichau to Dienbienphu.

It is difficult to assess precisely the amount and effect of Chinese assistance at Dienbienphu. The tonnage of Chinese supplies, as pointed out earlier (p. 22), rose from an estimated 1,500 tons per month at the beginning of the battle to 4,000 tons at its termination in June 1954. Antiaircraft weapons, mortars, machine guns, ammunition, and military equipment came in with the Chinese supply. The presence of Chinese personnel at Dienbienphu to assist the Vietminh was rumored during the course of the battle, but there is debate as to whether any in fact were there. Secretary of State Dulles told the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives on April 5, 1954, that he had a report of a Chinese general, Li Chen-hou, stationed at the headquarters of General Giap along with a score of technical-military advisors and numerous others at the division level. The same report stated that special telephone lines were installed, maintained, and operated by Chinese personnel; that radar-controlled, 37 mm anti-aircraft guns were manned by the Chinese, and that 1,000 supply trucks were driven by Chinese army personnel.²⁷

In an interview with the author in Paris, during December 1964, a highly-placed French intelligence officer expressed amazement at this "highly exaggerated estimate"

²⁷ Testimony by Dulles to House Committee on Foreign Affairs, April 5, 1954, New York Times, April 6, 1954. See also report of his speech to Overseas Press Club on March 29, 1954.

of the involvement of Chinese personnel. He contended that there was no hard intelligence showing the presence of Chinese advisors and technicians in the numbers cited by Secretary Dulles. He then recalled that his office had received a request from Paris for data on Chinese personnel committed in the Indochinese hostilities. The data were to be transmitted to the United States, which at the time was weighing the possibility of giving direct air support to the French. He replied that his office could supply no hard evidence on Chinese involvement. He then speculated that the desired data may have been "produced" elsewhere within the French intelligence community in Indochina for subsequent transmittal to the interested American authorities.

On the question of Chinese personnel at Dienbienphu, Jules Roy, who had interviewed General Giap and DRV officers in 1963 while preparing his impressive study of the battle, writes:

The statements made by John Foster Dulles and General Navarre about Chinese technicians were inspired simply by the desire to explain away their failures by attributing them to extraneous causes. There may have been a Chinese, General Li Chen-hou, at Giap's headquarters, but there were none at the divisional and regimental command posts, where the nationalist sensitivity of the Central Committee and the People's Army would have made them undesirable. The Vietminh waged its war as it saw fit, and waged it alone. If Navarre was to lose the battle of Dienbienphu, he would lose it to Giap and not because of the Chinese.

Every time I put this question to officers of the North Vietnam Army, indignation transformed every face. 'It is inconceivable that we should ever take orders from foreign officers,

even Chinese ones. We regard your questions as deplorable. Nobody in the People's Army ever prepared baths for the Chinese; nobody ever walked beside their horses.' Giap dismissed this allegation as a legend.²⁸

A crucial factor in the Vietminh victory at Dienbienphu was their effective use of artillery. French artillery experts at Dienbienphu were convinced that, even if the Vietminh managed to bring in artillery pieces, these would represent little danger to the French emplacement in the Dienbienphu basin. Artillery pieces are normally fired indirectly, or so classic French military practice teaches. The crests of the hills surrounding the basin in which the French were located (called the "chamber pot" by French troops to describe its topography, with the French in the center and the Vietminh dominating the sides) were too high to permit indirect firing. An artillery trajectory traced from the far slope would overshoot the French basin. Instead of firing indirectly, the Vietminh placed 105 mm howitzers, under cover of darkness and fog, on the hillside facing the basin, and fired directly at the exposed French positions, copying the artillery technique that the Chinese Communists had used in Korea. Their fire was devastatingly accurate, and largely because of poor visibility neither the French counter-artillery nor their air strikes could eliminate the Vietminh positions. Estimates differ as to the number of guns brought into Dienbienphu by the Vietminh. Jules Roy states that

²⁸Roy, Dienbienphu, p. 203.

there were twenty-four 105's.²⁹ A French intelligence officer stationed in Hanoi following the Chinese supply maintained that the Vietminh had a total of only twelve 105's, eight of which had been supplied by the Chinese and four captured from the French.³⁰ Whether there were twelve or twenty-four 105's, they devastated the French garrison. The ammunition supplied by the Chinese for this Vietminh artillery attack was essential to its success.

The rest of the story of Dienbienphu is well known. The French airfield, the only source of reinforcement, was immobilized by fierce antiaircraft barrages. The topography of the area where Navarre had chosen to commit his large force proved a catastrophic liability. French casualties totaled about 12,000 men. Though the Vietminh casualties were probably double that number, the surrender of the French was a tremendous psychological victory for the Vietminh at the very time when it was politically most propitious.

CHINESE COMMUNIST AID: A CLANDESTINE EXERCISE

Chinese assistance was rendered under a cloak of great secrecy. The Vietnamese Communists' experience in dissimulating outside support during their struggle against the French proved to be useful in their later (and current) campaign to seize control of South Vietnam. During the Indochinese War they developed a

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 123, 125.

³⁰ Interview, Paris, December 1964.

clandestine style of operation that served them well in the later insurgency in South Vietnam.

Even up to the present (late 1966), neither the North Vietnamese leaders nor the Chinese Communists have admitted that any Chinese contribution of men or supplies was made to the Vietminh in their struggle against the French. Ho Chi Minh frequently denied getting assistance from China. In General Giap's book on the Vietminh strategy and tactics in the war against the French, published in Hanoi in 1961, he scrupulously avoids any mention of a Chinese contribution, except for allusions to the boost in morale that came to the Vietminh with the Chinese Communist victory and to broad, but vague, moral support and ideological reinforcement. The Chinese Communists themselves (the Chinese delegate to the Geneva Conference, for example) have frequently denied giving any assistance to the Vietminh.³¹

There have been a few inadvertent public references to Chinese assistance from sources apparently connected with the DRV. One allusion to Chinese aid can be found in a book by an Australian Communist, published in Hanoi by the government press. The author's intention is to minimize the role of Chinese assistance to the Vietminh, but in doing so he affirms it:

³¹New China News Agency Broadcast, Geneva, May 14, 1954. Cited in Hinton, China's Relations with Burma and Vietnam, p. 18.

Much has been written about the Chinese military aid to the Vietnamese, which became possible after the frontier campaign. It has become an article of faith of the ideologists of the cold war that this aid was decisive in the Vietnamese victory. This is quite nonsensical [like] most other propositions of the gentlemen concerned.

If foreign aid could have decided the problem on either side, then China was in no position to match what the Americans were just then beginning to do for the French. Even bourgeois writers, prone as they are to exaggerate the extent of Chinese aid, in no case put the volume of this aid higher than one-tenth of U.S. aid to the opposing side. Almost certainly, it was much less.

In purely military terms, Chinese aid, for example, never included air forces: from the beginning of the war to the end, the Vietnamese had not a single plane in the sky. Yet they defeated an enemy who was aerially very strong.³²

Such admissions have been rare.

³²Malcolm Salmon, Focus on Indochina, Foreign Language Publishing House, Hanoi, 1961, p. 133.

Hinton quotes a DRV broadcast to Rangoon on April 20, 1953, which included the following (curious for the DRV) language:

The Chinese [Communist] military forces have been so busy with the Korean War since the intervention of the United Nations that they would think twice before committing any overt act of aggression. China will grant facilities to its brother fighters who are able to ask for aid, such as the aid given to the fighting forces of Vietnam.

Hinton, China's Relations with Burma and Vietnam.

Reasons for the general silence on Chinese aid are not difficult to uncover. During April 1954, American policy-makers actively discussed the desirability of dispatching military support, probably air reinforcement, to the beleaguered French at Dienbienphu. It would have been easier for Secretary Dulles to justify intervention both to the American public and to other nations if the Chinese had been openly providing assistance to the Vietminh.³³ The Chinese knew from their Korean experience that the Americans might well join the fight against Communism in Asia on Vietnamese soil. Moreover, both the Vietminh and the Chinese had an interest in convincing the world that the struggle in

³³Discussing, in his memoirs, the possibility of U.S. intervention in Indochina in support of the besieged French forces at Dienbienphu, President Eisenhower disclosed how maintaining secrecy about Chinese aid had helped reduce the danger for the Vietminh of U.S. or allied intervention. Eisenhower concluded that the United States could intervene only in concert with other nations and pointed out:

While we recognized that the burden of the operation would fall on the United States, the token forces supplied by these other nations, as in Korea, would lend real moral standing to a venture that otherwise could be made to appear as a brutal example of imperialism. This need was particularly acute because there was no incontrovertible evidence of overt Red Chinese participation in the Indochina conflict.

Eisenhower, Mandate for Change, 1953-1956, Doubleday and Co., New York, 1963, p. 340.

Vietnam was a genuine war of national liberation carried on solely by a subject people struggling for freedom. The Vietminh did not wish to have their prestige diminished or, more important, their independence infringed upon by the introduction of Chinese troops. The Vietminh did not lack manpower. But they needed logistical support and training, and these could be obtained covertly from the Chinese. To have publicly acknowledged Chinese support would have helped neither their appeal to the people nor their quest for international sympathy.

Since the Sino-Soviet rift, the Chinese might have been expected to contrast their positive assistance to the Vietminh with the "empty words" furnished by the Russians; but they have not done so. The polemic advantages of such a claim have apparently been outweighed by the expected penalties of admitting their real role.³⁴

In addition, an important theme in the Chinese revolutionary doctrine is that wars of national liberation are inevitable and must be sustained primarily

³⁴Even now, a Chinese statement about former support for the Vietminh would probably reduce the prestige of the leaders in Hanoi and damage their current struggle in South Vietnam. In the competition with the Soviet Union for the favor of North Vietnam, the Chinese, in addition to their overwhelming geographic advantage, can use their past contribution to claim loyalty from the North Vietnamese leaders. Upon the visit of President Liu Shao-ch'i to Hanoi in 1963, the Vietnamese intoned their gratitude, in vague and noncommittal terms, for Chinese support in their struggle.

on a self-reliant basis. For obvious reasons, the interests of the Chinese required that they camouflage the extent of their support for external revolutions. Moreover, Peking did not wish to appear as "the exporter of revolution" after late 1952, when Chinese foreign policy sought to reduce tensions with potentially neutral nations for the purpose of forging an "anti-imperialist" coalition in Asia. From the standpoint of doctrine and operations they were eager to portray the Vietnamese revolution as an indigenous struggle by Communists and Nationalists for independence from Western colonial rule. Consequently the task before the Chinese was to assist the Vietminh in such a way as not to impair other Asian governments' perceptions of the Vietnamese war as a genuinely national struggle rather than a war of external Communist aggression.

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III. INTERNAL CONSEQUENCES OF CHINESE COMMUNIST
SUPPORT FOR THE DRV

This section discusses the increasingly "Communist" character of the measures taken by the Vietminh Lao Dong Party, the oppression that accompanied their enforcement, the consequent hostility of many of those affected, and the "correction of errors" that the Lao Dong leaders undertook when they recognized the devastating effects of their former policies. These events are related to China's claim that the workers of Asia must follow the Maoist path to emancipation. It appears that Chinese influence over the Vietminh leaders was indirect and that these leaders retained full power to make their own decisions within the territory under their control. No doubt Chinese assistance, in its various forms, made it easier for the Vietnamese Communists to come to the fore and to institute tighter controls over the population. This assistance may also have encouraged the Vietnamese Communists to overlook, as long as they were able, the excesses of those entrusted with the enforcement of the new measures.

Although Chinese Communist influence inevitably accompanied China's valuable assistance to them, the Vietminh leaders apparently retained independence of decision in managing their own revolution. DRV programs were influenced by the example of Mao's regime, but apparently not by commands from China. As the Vietminh position strengthened with Chinese assistance after 1950, their measures became more clearly Communist in inspiration. Many of their Communist ideas and techniques were drawn from the

Chinese Communist model (though the Soviet model was also influential), but they were adapted to the Vietnamese revolutionary environment, and Vietnamese nationalism remained the predominant force in Vietminh policies. As for military policy, the Vietminh commander, General Vo Nguyen Giap, avoided the trap of excessive reliance upon Chinese assistance. In an essay published in 1950, he showed his caution when he wrote: "We will have to receive aid from abroad in order to be able to carry out the counteroffensive, but to count solely upon it without taking into account our own capabilities is to show proof of subjectivism and of lack of political conscience."¹

THE VIETMINH AND THE CHINESE REVOLUTIONARY MODEL

Shortly after they came to power, the Chinese Communists began to assert claims to leadership of the Asian "national-liberation movement" by calling attention to the appropriateness of the "path of Mao Tse-tung" for many "colonial and semi-colonial countries." In November 1949 the Asian-Australasian Trade Union Conference was held in Peking, and the Vietnamese Federation of Labor sent delegates to it. The Vice President of the Chinese government, Liu Shao-ch'i, gave the keynote address on November 16; he pointed out that "without aid and reciprocal international support, the working classes cannot effectively attack imperialism. With this aid and support

¹General Vo Nguyen Giap, The War of Liberation and the Popular Army: The Three Strategic Phases, Editions "Ve-Quoc Quan," National Army Publishing House, 1950.

the development of revolutionary movements will be carried out faster and faster."² He then pronounced that this struggle should be accomplished by following the Chinese model in various "colonial and semi-colonial" territories where similar conditions existed.³ A Vietnamese delegate to the conference presaged the Vietminh acceptance of this line by loudly proclaiming that the workers of Asia, including those of Vietnam, must follow the Chinese Communist path to emancipation.⁴

During this period, Communists moved into positions of power within the Vietminh hierarchy and these newcomers were marked by their emulation of the Chinese Communist doctrine and methods. A rising pro-Chinese faction in the Vietminh Politburo, led by Truong Chinh, carried out a purge of "unreliable elements" in 1950-1951.⁵

There was a spurt of interest in, and access to knowledge about, Chinese political techniques. A Vietnamese

²Le Thanh Khoi, Le Viet Nam, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1955, p. 486.

³New China News Agency, November 23, 1949, as cited in Allan B. Cole (ed.), Conflict in Indochina and International Repercussions: A Documentary History, 1945-1955, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1956, pp. 87-88.

⁴Shen-yu Dai, "Peking and Indochina's Destiny," Western Political Quarterly, September 1954, p. 356, as cited in Harold C. Hinton, China's Relations with Burma and Vietnam, Institute of Pacific Relations, New York, 1958, p. 18.

⁵Jean Lacouture and Philippe Devillers, La fin d'une guerre, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1960, p. 31; Robert Shaplen, The Lost Revolution, Harper & Row, New York, 1965, pp. 71-75; Hoang Van Chi, From Colonialism to Communism, Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., New York, 1964, pp. 71-72.

intellectual who lived in North Vietnam at this time writes:

Early in 1950, in addition to the arms, the munitions, the military and political advisors sent by the Chinese Communist Party across the border to help the Vietnamese Communists . . . there was a plentiful supply of Communist instruction books suitable for use by people of every intellectual level. Vietnamese intellectuals with a knowledge of Chinese were mobilized to work in shifts around the clock, translating into Vietnamese the basic documents on Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, Mao's utterances before the Central Committee of the Party, texts on the Chinese revolution, articles by Liu Shao-ch'i on thought reform, and countless others of the same kind. All had to be translated so that the Vietnamese leaders might study them and try to find Chinese methods applicable in Vietnam.⁶

THE VIETMINH INSTRUMENTS OF REVOLUTION

In March 1951 the Lao Dong (Vietnamese Workers') Party, essentially the Communist Party under a new name, proclaimed the Leninist-Stalinist line: "democracy for the people, dictatorship over reaction, imperialists and traitors." The state was to use three principal instruments: the Party, the National Front, and the Popular Army.⁷ The Lao Dong Party had all the earmarks of its Maoist and Stalinist model.⁸ The nationalist theme, however, was still the most important element in Vietminh

⁶Nhu Phong, "Intellectuals, Writers and Artists," China Quarterly, No. 9, January-March 1962, p. 51.

⁷Le Thanh Khoi, Le Viet Nam, pp. 483-492.

⁸See the manifesto of the Lao Dong Party, issued in March 1951, Cole (ed.), Conflict in Indochina, pp. 106-110.

official statements. The Lien Viet (Fatherland or National Front) organization was used to demonstrate the national-front characteristics of the movement, and the Communist leadership within the Lao Dong Party was still played down, especially for the peasantry. Nevertheless, key posts in the administration and the army were increasingly taken over by Communists. Every administrative committee had a Party cell that maintained the effective power.⁹ Territorially, a political-administrative committee held power at every echelon: village, district, province, group of provinces. There was, in addition, another set of organizations which grouped people according to their interests, beliefs, occupations, and social positions. Depending on age, sex, or profession, the Vietnamese citizen would belong to a boys' group, a girls' group, an old men's or an old women's association, a workers' or a farmers' league, etc. These associations were collectively represented in the National Front (Lien Viet), which by 1952 claimed 8,000,000 members. The small, elite Lao Dong Party numbered some 365,000 members.¹⁰

The third key instrument of power, the army, was also reorganized according to the Chinese model. By 1953, ten "bureaus," the most important of which was the political Bureau of the Staff, had replaced the four former staff divisions. As we noted earlier, some Chinese advisors

⁹ Paul Isoart, Le phénomène national vietnamien, Librairie générale de droit et de jurisprudence, Paris, 1961, pp. 389-395.

¹⁰ Ibid.

were attached to the Vietminh Army, especially to the general staff. Vietminh officers, and some units, received training in Chinese schools.¹¹

EXTREMISM AND REVOLT

After the partition of 1954, the tightening of Communist controls in North Vietnam was accompanied by the promulgation of social, economic, and political "reform" measures. A land tax system was developed on the Chinese Communist model. From 1953 to 1956, a comprehensive agrarian reform law, similar to Mao's program, was put into effect. The entire peasant population under Vietminh control was classified into categories ranging from landlords and rich peasants, to middle and poor peasants. "Agrarian reform committees" were established to classify the population and redistribute the land according to the following principles:

Much will be given to those who lack much;
little will be given to those who lack little;
nothing will be given to those who lack nothing.
We shall take where there is abundance to give
where there is poverty. We shall compensate
for land of bad quality with good land; we
shall proceed to expropriate lands.

Special Tribunals of the People were charged with "judging traitors: reactionaries, powerful notables, and the dishonest, as well as those who attempt to oppose the agrarian reform or to sabotage its application."¹²

¹¹George K. Tanham, Communist Revolutionary Warfare, Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., New York, 1961, p. 39.

¹²The Agrarian Reform Law was approved by the National Assembly of the DRV at its Third Session on December 4, 1953. Cited in Cole (ed.), Conflict in Indochina, pp. 150-158.

This revolutionary land reform was accompanied by a program of organized popular denunciation (To Kho). Trials were conducted before a village mobilized for the spectacle; the accused were denounced for crimes of exploitation and treachery. Punishments and executions were carried out in public. Land reform, popular denunciations, and mass indoctrination degenerated into a campaign of brutality and terror. Fear and suspicion grew as unfounded accusations, indiscriminate classification, and new repressive measures found victims in almost every family. A wave of indignation arose. First expressed in the agitation and literature of the intellectuals, popular discontent caused a peasant revolt in Quynh' Luu District, Nghe-An Province, where some 20,000 people rose in 1956. By then the campaign of intimidation had reached such heights that Ho Chi Minh announced a campaign for "correction of mistakes." The Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party admitted that "a number of grave errors [had] been committed during the execution of the land reforms," and promised that these errors would be corrected. It announced, at the same time, that it would "improve the conditions of life of the workers, the soldiers, the cadres, and the officials." The Party publicly expiated its admitted mistakes by discharging Truong Chinh from his position as Secretary General. Ho Chi Minh assumed this office.¹³

¹³For discussion of Vietminh policies during this period, see Nhu Phong in China Quarterly, January-March 1962, pp. 47-69; Ellen Hammer, "Progress Report on Southern Vietnam," Pacific Affairs, Vol. 30, No. 3, September 1957; Hoang Van Chi (ed.), The New Class in North Vietnam, Cong Dan, Saigon, 1958, pp. 35-99; Hoang Van Chi, From Colonialism to Communism, Part V.

THE INDIRECTNESS OF CHINESE INFLUENCE

The tightening of Communist controls, the political purges, the beginnings of agrarian reform, and popular denunciation seriously undercut the solid popular support the Vietminh had enjoyed. The prime appeal of the Vietminh was to nationalism. As it revealed to the more sophisticated its clearcut Communist orientation, the movement lost adherents. Many non-Communist, nationalist intellectuals, who had embraced the Vietminh as the only nationalist movement that could oust the French, began fleeing to the Bao Dai zones in 1953. Sizable segments of the peasantry, too, especially the Catholics, became fearful of the future under Vietminh domination. When the Geneva Conference of 1954 provided for a free exchange of populations during the first three hundred days after signature of a treaty, more than 750,000 refugees joined the exodus from the North, and more would have come had the routes to the South not been closed before the termination of the three hundred days.

It is difficult to determine to what extent the adoption by the Vietminh, after 1950, of the more severe Communist control techniques was a product of Chinese Communist influence. Certainly the Chinese example was important, and Chinese assistance undoubtedly enhanced the capability of the Vietnamese Communists to enforce tighter discipline. Chinese Communist influence on Vietminh internal policies, however, was largely indirect: the key political, economic, and military decisions seem to have been made by the Vietnamese leaders themselves.

IV. EXTERNAL CONSEQUENCES OF CHINESE
SUPPORT FOR THE DRV

This section considers Chinese aid to the DRV against the background of international politics. It has a good deal to say about the mutual repercussions of Chinese and U.S. aid to their respective allies in Indochina, and about the mutually deterrent effect of Chinese and American policies in an area where the stakes for both "outside" powers were high. Franco-American relations were greatly complicated by the crisis that culminated in the French defeat at Dienbienphu. Both France and Britain found reasons for rejecting U.S. military intervention, and in doing so put themselves on the side of a large segment of American public opinion. A Sino-American confrontation was avoided as a result of President Eisenhower's decision to follow a policy of restraint. At the Geneva Conference, China proved ready to sacrifice the objectives of the DRV when they conflicted with her own. Her political support was as limited as her material assistance.

IMPACT ON FRANCE

The Vietminh gained an important psychological and military advantage from French dismay over the arrival of Mao Tse-tung's troops at the Vietnamese frontier in 1949. The French had found the Vietminh alone to be a formidable opponent. With assistance forthcoming from China and with the constant possibility of Chinese intervention, the danger of a French disaster became even more apparent. As early as December 13, 1948, the French Ambassador to

Nationalist China in Nanking, concerned about the future role of the Chinese Communists in Indochina, had cabled Paris:

We should not have any illusions about the intentions of Chinese Communists. The peril which menaces us in Indochina is, in my opinion, of extreme gravity. The Vietminh will receive arms, ammunition, and, over a common frontier, an inexhaustible source of voluntary combatants. Will they go further? As far as direct intervention? Even this possibility must not be excluded To avoid this danger, something must be done as soon as possible.¹

The Queille government sent the Army Chief of Staff, General Revers, to Indochina in May 1949 to study the consequences of a Communist victory in China for the French position in Vietnam. He reported that the arrival of the Communist Chinese troops at the border would have a serious effect on the general military situation. Should this happen, he recommended that the frontier garrisons be withdrawn and the Red River delta defenses strengthened.

To prevent unintentional provocation of the Chinese, the French did subsequently withdraw their forces from the immediate border area, leaving crucial territory to uncontested Vietminh control. The confidential Revers report fell into the hands of the Vietminh, who were elated by its revelation of French fears. (The disclosure of this report was accompanied by complex political intrigue in France, which led to a parliamentary inquiry known as the

¹Quoted in Jean Marchand, Le drame Indochinois, Peyronnet, Paris, 1953, pp. 112-113.

"Affair of the Generals," and increased the French public's disgust with the war in Indochina.)² Another sign that the French were concerned about reducing the risk of Chinese intervention was their prompt internment of some 30,000 Chinese Nationalist troops who escaped into Vietnam in December 1949 and the early months of 1950.³

The alignment of China on the Vietminh side added to the domestic political problems of the French government. Opponents of the war were even more strongly convinced of the futility of government policy once it was clear that Communist China was assisting the enemy and might even intervene. French resources available for Vietnam were severely limited by the absence of political support for the war effort in Indochina. For example, no government of the Fourth Republic dared send out draftees; only professionals and volunteers went to Indochina.

During interviews in December 1964 with French scholars and French officials formerly in Indochina, the author frequently heard the criticism that the involvement of Communist China in support of the Vietminh induced French officials in Indochina and French politicians in France to evade recognizing the shortcomings of their own policies inside Vietnam, and to give excessive weight to the effects of intervention from the outside. As evidence, several

²See Philippe Devillers, Histoire du Vietnam de 1940 à 1952, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1952, p. 451; Donald Lancaster, The Emancipation of French Indochina, Oxford University Press, London and New York, 1961, Appendix I, pp. 407-417.

³Milton Sacks, "The Strategy of Communism in Southeast Asia," Pacific Affairs, Vol. 23, No. 3, September 1950, p. 240; Donald Lancaster, The Emancipation, pp. 202-203.

military intelligence officers pointed out that French commanders used the fact of Chinese supply to Vietminh troops to explain the growing strength of their enemy, while underestimating the loss and sale of weapons to the Vietminh by their own troops and by the paramilitary forces associated with them. Several scholars pointed to the even more serious political consequences of the French exaggeration of the Chinese Communist role in Vietnam. Insistence by French authorities, especially from 1950 on, that they were fighting against Red Chinese expansionism, "la marée rouge" (the red tide), diverted them from understanding that the fundamental strength of their Vietnamese enemy was drawn from Vietnamese nationalism.⁴ The Vietminh had deeper roots in Vietnam, and broader popular support, than most colonial authorities believed. Having underestimated the strength of the revolution within Vietnam and overestimated the role of support from the outside, France failed to take the necessary measures to serve her fundamental interests in Indochina. Though it is difficult to discover the extent of truth in these criticisms from French sources, it does seem that there is much substance in them. Insofar as they are true, the Vietminh cause was served by the inaccurate French analysis of their own shortcomings.

IMPACT ON THE UNITED STATES

The alignment of the Communist Chinese on the Vietminh side brought the Indochina conflict into the Cold War. Until 1950, the United States offered little support to

⁴See Devillers, Histoire du Vietnam, pp. 460-474.

what appeared to it as a war of colonial reconquest by the French, fighting against nationalist rebels. A new French theme, launched in 1950, that France was fighting the same struggle against Communism in Indochina as the Americans were in Korea found sympathy in the United States, particularly after the Chinese intervention in Korea. American leaders, both Democratic and Republican, now underplayed the nationalist ingredient of the Vietminh revolution and emphasized its Communist component. Accordingly, when China and the Soviet Union granted diplomatic recognition to the DRV in January 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson stated that this recognition would remove "any illusions as to the 'nationalist' nature of Ho Chi Minh's aims and [reveal] Ho in his true colors as the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina."⁵ President Eisenhower has written in his memoirs that, with the Communist victory on the Chinese mainland in 1949, the Indochinese struggle "became more intense and began gradually, with Chinese intervention, to assume its true complexion of a struggle between Communism and non-Communist forces rather than one between a colonial power and colonists who were intent on attaining independence."⁶

⁵Department of State Bulletin, February 13, 1950, p. 244. For discussions of the change of character in the war, see Ellen J. Hammer, Struggle for Indochina, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1954, pp. 250-251; Lancaster, The Emancipation, p. 203.

⁶D. D. Eisenhower, Mandate for Change, 1953-1956, Doubleday & Co., New York, 1963, p. 167.

U.S. massive assistance to the French in Indochina began after the Chinese involvement. The Vietminh's acquisition of a powerful ally in China provoked the retaliation of a new and still more powerful enemy, the United States.

U.S. aid to the French in Indochina soared steadily from 1950 to 1954. In late 1951, the U.S. Government announced that it would provide between \$300 and \$400 million in a two-year program of aid to support the French war effort.⁷ By June 1952 the U.S. aid allocation was estimated to represent 33 percent of the total French expenditure;⁸ it was further increased during the latter half of the year to cover some 40 percent of the total cost of the war, amounting in 1952 to 569 billion francs.⁹ In September 1953, Premier Laniel announced that additional U.S. dollar grants would defray 70 percent of France's war costs. Finally, according to a New York Herald Tribune report, the United States was underwriting the total cost of the war, appropriating \$1,175 million for this purpose. This included the payment to the Expeditionary Corps of \$400 million, \$325 million for military supplies, and \$385 million for budgetary support of the Associate States.¹⁰

The U.S. aid to France was clearly far greater in amount than the Chinese aid to the Vietminh. The

⁷The Times (London), November 25, 1950.

⁸Combat, June 26, 1952.

⁹Le Monde, December 18, 1952.

¹⁰Homer Bigart in New York Herald Tribune, December 18, 1954. Figures in the foregoing paragraph, and the newspaper sources from which they were drawn, are taken from

following table gives a comparison of the estimated tonnage provided by China and the United States:

COMPARISON OF TONNAGE OF U.S. AID TO FRANCE
WITH COMMUNIST CHINESE AID TO VIETMINH
IN INDOCHINA WAR

	<u>U.S. Aid</u>	<u>Chinese Aid</u>
1951	7,200 tons per month	10 to 20 tons per month
1953	10,000 tons per month	500 to 600 tons per month
1954 (June)*		4,000 tons per month

*No tonnage figures are available for this final month of the war, but judging by the substantial increase in dollar aid for 1954 as a whole, the amount was considerable. Figures for the U.S. tonnage are cited by General Marchand, pp. 296-297. Figures for the Chinese tonnage are taken from Tanham (who drew them from official French sources), pp. 68-69.

Lancaster, The Emancipation, pp. 416-417. For more data on U.S. aid to the French war effort in Indochina, see Miriam S. Farley, U.S. Relations with Southeast Asia, American Institute of Pacific Relations, 1955, p. 4; Hammer, Struggle for Indochina, p. 313; Jean Lacouture and Philippe Devillers, La fin d'une guerre, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1960; Paul Isoart, Le phénomène national vietnamien, Librairie générale de droit et de jurisprudence, Paris, 1961, p. 396; Lawrence S. Finkelstein, American Policy in Southeast Asia, American Institute of Pacific Relations, 1951, mimeo., p. 44; New York Times, February 7, 16, March 6, April 7, August 2, 1954. See also a table, "U.S. Aid and Loans to France and Indochina, 1948 to 1954," in Allan B. Cole (ed.), Conflict in Indochina and International Repercussions: A Documentary History, 1945-1955, Cornell University Press, New York, 1956, pp. 260-261.

There were complaints from some French officials that this aid was not suitable for the kind of war being fought in Indochina. General Navarre, the last French commander in Indochina, perhaps searching for reasons to explain away his defeat, bitterly charged that U.S. matériel was designed for conventional warfare and not for anti-guerrilla combat, so that it was actually a disservice to the French cause.¹¹ Navarre implied that the Vietminh were better served by Chinese aid and made the following comparison:

Behind us, distant America, disbursing, according to a meticulous but rigid plan, a regular flood of matériel. Behind the Vietminh, nearby China, not only furnishing aid of limited volume, but able at any time to amplify it massively.¹²

Despite French dissatisfaction, there can be little doubt that American intervention confronted the Vietminh with a new and formidable enemy, as Ho Chi Minh recognized in a speech of August 1950, when he stated that the Americans had "advanced one more step to direct intervention in Vietnam," and thus that the Vietnamese had "now one principal opponent, the American interventionists."¹³

¹¹Henri Navarre, Agonie de l'Indochine, Plon, Paris, 1956, p. 28. Bernard Fall echoes this complaint, charging that the U.S. equipment was too heavy, too old, or inappropriate, and adding, "Quite often . . . the French would capture from the Communists American equipment produced in 1950 or 1951, while French equipment of similar manufacture dated from the earlier part of World War II." Street Without Joy, p. 50 fn.

¹²Navarre, Agonie, p. 60.

¹³Voice of South Vietnam, August 16, 1950; cited in Hammer, Struggle for Indochina, pp. 250-251.

There was an ever-present possibility that the alignment of the Communist Chinese on the side of the Vietminh would bring direct military intervention by the Americans or the Chinese, or both. The Vietminh clearly preferred the intervention of neither. U.S. entry, obviously, could have brought terrible destruction, possibly defeat, to the Vietminh. Only if the Americans had intervened, would the Vietminh have been willing to tolerate large numbers of Chinese personnel on their soil. The Vietminh needed supplies, not troops. Chinese units would have threatened the freedom of action of the Vietminh leaders, and would have made them vulnerable to charges from their enemies -- and their less-committed friends -- that they had sacrificed Vietnamese independence to a traditional enemy, China. The prestige of Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues would have suffered if there had been Chinese troops in Vietnam, and the major element of the Vietminh popular appeal, nationalism, would have been badly damaged.

The point at which China might have intervened directly is a matter of speculation. A former important National Front (Lien Viet) official, Pham Le Bong, who fled to the Bao Dai zone in late 1952, told of an agreement for Chinese intervention in case the Vietminh were suffering a decisive defeat.¹⁴ Some observers believed that Chinese policy was designed to ensure that the Vietminh avoided defeat, not to guarantee a victory.¹⁵ An experienced French journalist of Le Monde, Robert Guillain, wrote:

¹⁴Le Monde, June 8, 1953, cited in Hammer, Struggle for Indochina, pp. 252-253.

¹⁵As one who holds this view, Harold Hinton writes:
"Chinese intentions toward Indochina at this time certainly

China obeys a simple principle: that the balance of forces should never incline in any durable sense towards the French side. There was no need here, and this made the difference from what happened in Korea, of direct intervention, and invasion. What poured from China was not men, but military supplies. When American aid increased, Chinese aid did the same. If the Vietminh lost speed, China would provide enough to re-establish equilibrium.¹⁶

The principle described above might be interpreted as the quest for a low-cost victory through Mao's conception of protracted war. Although it is evident that Communist China wanted a military success for the Vietminh, and assisted toward its achievement, there were strong reasons against an overactive Chinese role in Indochina. Listing reasons against direct intervention, Harold Hinton points out that there was no serious French threat to Chinese territory; the DRV and its army were never in serious danger of destruction; and Chinese military pressure in Indochina could not promote China's objectives with respect to Taiwan and the United Nations. Moreover, Communist China was already involved in Korea; active intervention

included the sending of aid to the DRV, but apparently not the commitment of combat forces in support of the DRV except in the unlikely event that they should be required to prevent its annihilation." Harold C. Hinton, Communist China in World Politics, Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, 1966, p. 239.

¹⁶Robert Guillain, La fin des illusions: notes d'Indochine (fevrier-juillet), 1954, Centre d'études de politique étrangère, Paris, 1954, pp. 39-40. See also Harold C. Hinton, China's Relations with Burma and Vietnam, Institute of Pacific Relations, New York, 1958, p. 19, and Hammer, Struggle for Indochina, pp. 252-253.

in Indochina would have further drained its resources and raised the risk of U.S. retaliation against the Chinese mainland.¹⁷

Just as the Vietminh were reluctant to see the Chinese intervene, the French were not eager for direct American intervention.¹⁸ France found the threat of U.S. military action useful in deterring Chinese intervention, just as the Vietminh profited from Chinese power to the extent that it deterred American intervention. Both combatants wanted supplies from their allies; neither relished the interference that would inevitably accompany a more direct role for the outside powers.¹⁹ Many French officials believed that the American aim was to force France to relinquish colonial control of Indochina, and some were convinced that the Americans wished to replace France's influence in the region with their own.²⁰ Therefore, until military

¹⁷Hinton, Communist China in World Politics, pp. 237-238.

¹⁸See ibid., p. 244.

¹⁹In President Eisenhower's talks with Premier Mayer and Foreign Minister Bidault in March 1953, the French leaders strongly resisted the U.S. call for "an out-and-out renunciation of any French colonial purpose." Eisenhower, Mandate for Change, pp. 167-168.

²⁰General Navarre clearly held this belief:

The gravest danger from American aid was of a political order. It would, if we did not take formal guarantees in this regard, bring a more and more pronounced U.S. intrusion into our affairs. It would end in the progressive substitution of American influence for ours in the Associated States [Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos]. We had arrived at this paradoxical situation,

disaster was upon them at Dienbienphu, the French abstained from calling for direct American participation. They did, however, succeed in eliciting several American warnings to the Chinese. Following the termination of fighting in Korea, a joint French-U.S. communiqué of March 1953 stated: "Should the Chinese Communist regime take advantage of such an armistice to pursue aggressive war elsewhere in the Far East, such action would have the most serious consequences."²¹

that in accepting American aid we were almost surely losing Indochina, even if that aid should enable us to win the war. (Navarre, Agonie, p. 28.)

Robert Shaplen describes the suspicion of French colonial administrators in Vietnam that American aid was a direct threat to French economic interests, and that the Americans were deliberately, as General de Lattre charged, "fanning the flames of extreme nationalism." De Lattre said to the head of the U.S. Aid Mission in Vietnam, Robert Blum, "Mr. Blum, you are the most dangerous man in Indochina." Robert Shaplen, The Lost Revolution, Harper & Row, New York, 1965, pp. 83-91.

²¹Department of State Bulletin, Vol. 27, No. 719, April 6, 1953, p. 491. According to Jules Roy, both Premiers Mayer and Laniel had conveyed their concern to the final French Commander-in-Chief in Indochina, General Navarre, that the Chinese would be inclined to move into Indochina at the conclusion of hostilities in Korea. They therefore were considering negotiations with the Chinese, and called for Navarre's opinion. Roy described Navarre as confident that the Chinese would not move because of the danger of U.S. counteraction. As for the danger of a step-up of Chinese aid, he believed that his military plan would substantially improve the military situation before the Chinese had time, following the cease-fire in Korea, to augment their aid appreciably. Then France would be in a favorable position to negotiate. Jules Roy, The Battle of Dienbienphu, Harper & Row, New York, 1965, pp. 17, 41-42, 60-61, 100, 104-105.

On September 2, 1953, Secretary of State Dulles repeated the warning.²²

In March 1954, when besieged at Dienbienphu, the French felt it necessary to send an urgent appeal to the United States for direct military assistance.²³ Evidence that Secretary Dulles was preparing public opinion for possible American action in Vietnam appeared in his speech of March 29, 1954, to the Overseas Press Club, in which he showed his concern about China's role:

The Chinese Communists have, in fact, avoided the direct use of their own Red armies in open aggression against Indochina. They have, however, largely stepped up their support of the aggression in that area. Indeed, they promote that aggression by all means short of open invasion.

Under all the circumstances it seems desirable to clarify the U.S. position.

Under the conditions of today, the imposition on Southeast Asia of the political system of Communist Russia and its Chinese Communist ally, by whatever means, must be a grave threat to the whole free community. The U.S. feels that that possibility should not be passively accepted but should be met by united action. This might involve serious risks. But these risks are far less than those that will face us a few years from now if we dare not be resolute today.²⁴

²²New York Times, September 3, 1953.

²³General Paul Ely, French Chief of Staff, arrived in Washington from the scene of the fighting and appealed for a U.S. air strike. He frankly told American officials that the French could not hold out at Dienbienphu without it, and that Indochina would be lost without decisive American intervention. Roscoe Drummond and Gaston Coblentz, Duel at the Brink, Doubleday & Co., New York, 1960, p. 116.

²⁴Department of State Bulletin, No. 772, April 12, 1954, pp. 539-542, especially p. 540.

President Eisenhower, on April 7, 1954, reinforced Secretary Dulles' position in a speech that introduced the "domino theory": loss of Indochina would set up a chain reaction leading to the possible loss of Thailand, Burma, and Malaya to Chinese Communist domination, and threatening Japan, Formosa, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand.

Nevertheless, President Eisenhower did not send direct military support to the French forces at Dienbienphu. He realized that the commitment of U.S. air and naval power might well have to be followed, as General Ridgway cautioned, by U.S. ground forces.²⁵ Once U.S. prestige

²⁵ Army Chief of Staff, General Matthew B. Ridgway, believed that air and naval power would not be decisive in Indochina: they would have to be followed up with ground forces in support. He sent a team of army experts to Vietnam to inspect and report to him the problems that would face a land combat force. "If we did go into Indochina," he contended, "we would have to win We could not accept anything short of a decisive victory." General Ridgway concluded that the cost in men and money for such an involvement would be as great as, or greater than, the cost in Korea. "In Korea, we had learned that air and naval power alone cannot win a war and that inadequate ground forces cannot win one either," he wrote. "It was incredible to me that we had forgotten that bitter lesson so soon -- that we were on the verge of making that same tragic error." General Ridgway passed his report up through the chain of command and it reached President Eisenhower. Ridgway was convinced that it "played a considerable, perhaps a decisive, part in persuading our government not to embark on that tragic adventure." Matthew B. Ridgway, Soldier, Harper Brothers, New York, 1956, pp. 276-277.

General Maxwell D. Taylor, Army Chief of Staff from 1955 to 1958, and later Ambassador to Vietnam, has written with approval of Ridgway's report:

was committed, success would be essential.²⁶ He recognized the tremendous cost such a war would entail, and the possibility that, with the increasing involvement of Communist

The deteriorating situation of the French defense there in early 1954 led to discussions in the Pentagon and White House in April and May of the nature and degree of possible U.S. intervention. Although some exponents of air power urged intervention by aerial bombing, largely through General Ridgway's efforts the fact was eventually accepted that any intervention by that time would be either too late, too little, or of the wrong kind. In particular, it was doubted that any air attack would be mounted on a sufficient scale to offer hope of success without, at the same time, endangering the French defenders. During these deliberations and hesitations, the need was apparent for ready military forces with conventional weapons to cope with this kind of limited war situation. Unfortunately, such forces did not then exist in sufficient strength or in proper position to offer any hope of success.

(Maxwell D. Taylor, The Uncertain Trumpet, Harper Brothers, New York, 1959, p. 24.)

²⁶In his memoirs, Eisenhower shows this conviction when he quotes with approval a memo he received from Dulles, written following a discussion with the French Chief of Staff, General Ely, in which Dulles states:

I did . . . think it appropriate to remind our French friends that if the United States sent its flag and its own military establishment -- land, sea or air -- into the Indochina war, then the prestige of the United States would be engaged to a point where we would want to have a success. We could not afford thus to engage the prestige of the United States and suffer a defeat which would have world-wide repercussions. (Eisenhower, Mandate for Change, p. 345.)

China, the war could escalate to a direct confrontation on the Chinese mainland.

Intervention would bring political liabilities, both domestic and international. Eisenhower had based his electoral campaign of 1952 on a promise to end the Korean War, and in doing so he apparently gained strong popular support. It would have been a distasteful task to send American soldiers into the jungles of Southeast Asia not long after they had returned from Korea. Eisenhower judged that Congressional support for intervention was dependent, in part, upon allied, especially British, participation.²⁷ The British were adamant in their refusal to join in the intervention.²⁸ Moreover, the "anti-colonial" bloc of the "third world" would certainly look askance at U.S. efforts to expand its influence, especially by the use of arms, in Indochina. Here was another deterrent to intervention. Consequently, though the identification of Communist Chinese personnel in Indochina had come close to bringing on American intervention that would have been

²⁷ Ibid., p. 347. (In February 1965, Drew Pearson, in the Los Angeles Times, states that the administration "had taken a secret poll on Capitol Hill to find out how many congressmen would support any decisive military action in Indochina. The poll showed only five congressmen willing to see the U.S. go to war.")

²⁸ British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden summed up the view of the British government regarding intervention at that time with a statement that it would be "the wrong move against the wrong man in the wrong place." Anthony Eden, Full Circle, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1960, p. 114. See also pp. 104-105. For President Eisenhower's appeal for joint U.S.-British intervention, see his letter to Prime Minister Churchill in Eisenhower, Mandate for Change, pp. 346-347.

disastrous for the Vietminh, the danger to the Vietminh was averted by President Eisenhower's decision for restraint.

CHINA'S ROLE AT THE GENEVA CONFERENCE OF 1954

The major roles played by Communist China and the Soviet Union at the Geneva Conference brought obvious advantages to the Vietminh, but also some disadvantages. Although the interests of the two largest Communist powers converged with those of the Vietminh on many issues, they diverged on the definition of fundamental goals. The broad aim of the Vietminh was political power over an independent, unified Vietnam, free of foreign troops. As for the Communist Chinese, their primary objective seems to have been to exclude American bases and alliance systems from Indochina. As this account will show, they were willing to compromise Vietminh aspirations if this was necessary to obtain a settlement to their liking.²⁹

The record of the Geneva Conference shows clearly that the Vietminh representatives were unhappy that their goals were inadequately pursued by Communist China and the USSR. At one point in the negotiations, for example, the Vietminh representatives, after reluctantly accepting the principle of partition with a provision for elections looking to reunification, pressed for DRV control of Vietnam as far south as the 13th parallel. French Premier

²⁹Cf. Harold Hinton, Communist China in World Politics, p. 254.

Mendes-France proposed the 18th parallel.³⁰ The settlement set the border at the 17th parallel. Elections were scheduled for two years after the signing of the agreement, instead of within the six-month limit that the Vietminh had proposed. The Vietminh acquiesced under pressure from their allies, although they were unhappy with these compromises.³¹ The Chinese delegate, Chou En-lai, showed less concern about these details than about ensuring that the three non-Communist Indochinese states were not drawn into SEATO and that the American military presence was totally excluded from Indochina.³²

At another point, after the Vietminh had pared down their demands concerning Cambodia and Laos, Pham Van Dong, the chief DRV representative, was prepared to abandon the Khmer Resistance Movement (Khmer Issarak) in return for the establishment of an autonomous Pathet Lao regime in the two Laotian provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly. But Chou En-lai, in a meeting on July 18 with Mendès-France, agreed to stop supporting these Vietminh claims. Pham Van Dong was reported to be in a state of suppressed fury because of Chou En-lai's "betrayal," and subsequent

³⁰ According to Drummond and Coblenz, Secretary of State Dulles had thought that the 17th parallel was the best solution that could be hoped for in view of the military situation, and had expected Mendès-France to settle for much less. Dulles was astounded, and pleased, by this negotiating position. Drummond and Coblenz, Duel at the Brink, pp. 122-123.

³¹ Lacouture and Devillers, La fin d'une guerre, p. 268.

³² New York Times, July 18, 1954.

relations between the Vietminh and Chinese delegations were clouded.³³

At the close of the conference, Tillman Durdin of the New York Times wrote from Geneva:

Viet Minh leaders are not entirely happy about the peace settlement in Vietnam. A number of members of the Viet Minh delegation have declared openly that pressure from Chinese Communist Premier Chou En-lai and Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav M. Molotov forces their regime to accept less than it rightfully should have obtained here.

The Vietminh officials contended, according to Durdin, that the military situation in Vietnam would have given the Vietminh almost full control within a year, and that Cambodia and Laos could have been taken over eventually. They saw the settlement as a sort of appeasement "in the interests of Soviet and Chinese Communist international relations," and they felt "their revolution [had] been slowed down, if not halted, right on the verge of complete success."³⁴

Chinese Communist tactics at Geneva were aimed in part at winning influence among new Asian nations, and China used the Geneva Conference to make a display of moderation by pressing the Vietminh to grant concessions. During a recess in the conference, Chou En-lai flew to visit Prime Ministers Nehru of India and U Nu of Burma. He reportedly gave a pledge that China would refrain from aggression or subversion against the non-Communist Asian

³³ Roger Massip in Figaro, July 24 and 25, 1954, cited in Lancaster, The Emancipation, p. 334.

³⁴ New York Times, July 25, 1954.

countries in return for India's support on the issue that no American bases be permitted in Indochina and an agreement that India would serve as chairman of the International Control Commission. On July 2 and 3, he flew to confer with Ho Chi Minh somewhere near the Chinese-Vietnamese border. This meeting resulted in a communiqué announcing a "full exchange of views" on the Geneva Conference. Little publicity was given to the meeting in the DRV, and Ho showed little enthusiasm over the results.³⁵ Ellen Hammer writes that Chou's visit to Ho was intended "to convince him of the opposition of non-Communist Asia to Viet Minh insistence on French capitulation."³⁶ Hinton states: "It is hard to resist the conclusion that [Ho] objected to his military victory being made the football of other powers, and that strong Chinese pressure or inducements, or both, were required to secure his acquiescence."³⁷

Communist China's willingness to reach a moderate settlement at Geneva was encouraged by its recognition of the dangers inherent in a collapse of the conference. It was no secret that in the United States there were powerful proponents of intervention and that Secretary of State Dulles and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Radford had been meeting with French and British officials to encourage allied air and naval intervention

³⁵ Hinton, Communist China, p. 252.

³⁶ Ellen J. Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina Continues, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1955, p. 7.

³⁷ Hinton, Communist China, p. 252.

in Indochina, even if Dienbienphu collapsed.³⁸ Had the United States, and possibly other nations, intervened, the Chinese leaders would have been faced with a dilemma: either to respond in kind and run the terrible risk of American retaliation against the Chinese mainland, or to permit American aggrandizement in an area of traditional Chinese influence.

At the time, it seemed that China had achieved her objective of excluding U.S. and allied bases from Indochina. She had gained international prestige, especially with the neutrals, by her role at Geneva. In Hinton's judgment, Communist China "had reason to feel satisfied on balance with the results of the Geneva Conference, and for this satisfaction a feeling of irritation and frustration on the part of the DRV was not too high a price to pay."³⁹

Though pressure from their allies had been an important consideration, other factors helped to induce the Vietminh to accept the final solution at Geneva. Their forces had been badly mauled at Dienbienphu and elsewhere; they welcomed a pause to recover. They feared that the war might widen with the intervention of the United States, and possibly other allies.⁴⁰ Mendès-France had warned that the French Expeditionary Corps would be

³⁸ Cf. Roy, Dienbienphu, pp. 198, 202, 203, 215, 221-222, 290; Drummond and Coblenz, Duel at the Brink, pp. 121-122.

³⁹ Hinton, Communist China, p. 254.

⁴⁰ For General Giap's comment on the danger of American air intervention at Dienbienphu, see Vo Nguyen Giap, Dienbienphu, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Hanoi, 1964, p. 159.

augmented with draftees, for the first time, if the conference failed.⁴¹ Finally, they believed the settlement delayed their acquisition of South Vietnam only until 1956 when, as Ho Chi Minh declared, there would be a "unification of the nation by means of general elections."⁴²

⁴¹ Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina Continues, p. 10.

⁴² New York Times, July 25, 1954.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The Chinese contribution to the Vietminh struggle against France came at a propitious time. Even before the Communists had triumphed on the Chinese mainland, China had served as a sanctuary where Ho Chi Minh and other Vietnamese revolutionaries could plot, organize, and train, in relative security, for the overthrow of the French colonial regime. By the end of 1949, when Mao Tse-tung's troops reached the Vietnamese border, the Vietminh clearly needed certain kinds of Chinese aid.

During the early years of the war, from 1946 to 1949, the Vietminh had forged a competent leadership group, developed committed cadres, and, with their nationalist appeal and an effective military and political apparatus, had drawn wide popular support from the population. Most significantly lacking to the Vietminh were trained personnel, adequate arms, ammunition, military equipment, and economic resources. It was in these items that Chinese material support was so important. With the training and equipment that the Chinese provided, the Vietminh progressively raised the level of their military operations from battalion to regimental, and finally to divisional offensives, and took increasingly aggressive action against French-held positions. At the final battle of Dienbienphu, fought at a politically crucial time just prior to the Geneva negotiations, the abundance of Chinese supplies and logistical support was a key factor in the Vietminh victory.

Intangible Chinese assistance in the form of psychological and political pressure was at least as important to the Vietminh as material assistance. The success of the Communist revolution on the Chinese mainland and the arrival of Mao's forces on the frontier of Vietnam reinforced the morale of the Vietminh fighters. The triumph of Mao's ideology reaffirmed their own, which rested on similar principles. Their cause gained a powerful exponent on the international scene as the new China shaped her propaganda and diplomacy to assist the Vietminh. The presence of a powerful ally on their border also provided a counter to the threat of U.S. intervention, though this reassurance proved to have a negative side.

Although the Chinese supplies reached an estimated 4,000 tons per month by June 1954, they were brought in clandestinely. Right down to the present, both the Vietminh and the Chinese have kept a remarkable silence regarding these deliveries. For the Vietminh secrecy was desirable both to reduce the danger of wider U.S. intervention in the war and to maintain the image, in Vietnam and abroad, that the Indochina conflict was a war of liberation fought exclusively with Vietnamese resources. The Communist Chinese also wished to minimize the danger of U.S. intervention, especially in the form of retaliation against the Chinese mainland. Moreover, they did not wish to appear to other Asian nations as instigators of revolution. The lessons the Vietminh learned from this secret operation proved valuable later in advancing the cause of the South Vietnamese insurgents. The French efforts to obstruct Chinese assistance, both tangible and intangible, met with little success.

In summary, there can be no doubt that Communist China made a significant contribution to the success of the Vietminh revolution against France. Though the material part of this contribution has been estimated at less than twenty per cent of the total of Vietminh supplies -- and perhaps one-ninth of the amount contributed by the United States to the French war effort¹ -- it was an important addition to Vietminh power. Whether the Chinese Communist assistance, both tangible and intangible, was indispensable to the Vietminh victory is impossible to judge. Certainly the Vietminh could not have risen, so early, without this aid, to the level of military competence they achieved. The French might have been less reluctant to commit enough men and resources to ensure victory if the threat of massive support, and even intervention, from Communist China had not been ever present after 1949. On the other hand, if there had been no Chinese Communist support of the Vietminh, it seems likely that there would have been far less support for the French from the United States. Had Vietminh resistance been maintained, even at the level it had reached before the arrival of Mao's troops at the frontier, governments of the Fourth Republic might have found it difficult to go on sinking French men and money into a costly colonial enterprise in a period when empires were rapidly giving way before rising nationalism.

The receipt of Chinese aid did not make the Vietminh leaders subservient to the Chinese Communists. But it

¹Anthony Eden, Full Circle, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1960, pp. 104-105.

was accompanied by the growing influence of Chinese Communist doctrine and methods on the internal politics of the DRV. Military and civilian administration was reorganized along Chinese Communist lines, and many Chinese-style programs, including a radical land reform, were introduced.

The new Vietminh programs alienated many non-Communist adherents, particularly intellectuals, who had been drawn to the Vietminh cause by its proclaimed nationalism. The land reform begun in 1953 in some Vietminh zones caused landowners, including many with modest plots of land, to flee to the Bao Dai zone, before the Geneva Agreements, while after Geneva more than three-quarters of a million refugees fled the DRV. Three-fourths of them were Catholics who, frightened by the prospect of life under a Communist system, were led to the South by their village priests. Insofar as the flight of these refugees reduced the "hard core" opposition to Communism, it served the DRV aim of constructing a "socialist society." On the other hand, the exodus in part testified to the fact that the Vietminh lacked support from important segments of the population in spite of their claim to represent all the people.

Just as Chinese aid and support reinforced Vietminh morale, they discouraged the French. The prospect of a French victory grew more remote; the cost of continuing the war rose. In France, criticism of the war grew more virulent. Successive governments of the Fourth Republic found it impossible to commit the resources necessary to retain Vietnam in the French orbit. The arrival of

Chinese supplies for the Vietminh enabled French colonial officials in Vietnam, civilian and military, to blame outside support for their enemy as the major cause of their problems and to overlook the shortcomings of their own policies.

Communist China's support of the Vietminh internationalized the Indochina conflict and drew it into the Cold War. Chinese Communist involvement elicited massive U.S. assistance to the French. It is interesting to compare the U.S. attitude on the question of aid to the Dutch colonial power during the Indonesian revolution, from 1945 to 1949, with American behavior toward the French during the Indochinese revolution. In the Indonesian war, following its anticolonial traditions, the United States threatened to cut off aid to the Dutch and put strong pressure on Holland to grant independence to the non-Communist Indonesian nationalists.² In Vietnam, the Vietminh's alliance with Chinese Communism helped to dispel the hesitation of American policy-makers about supporting French colonialism. In fact, because of Chinese Communist support to the Vietminh, the United States was on the verge of direct intervention. Since Communist China's entry would have significantly enlarged the conflict, U.S. policy-makers were reluctant to adopt a course of action which could bring this on. Indeed, U.S. intervention would have been most unlikely but for the Chinese Communist role in Indochina. As for the Vietminh, they

²George M. Kahin, Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia, Cornell University Press, New York, 1952.

regarded intervention -- whether by the Americans or the Chinese -- as undesirable.

The DRV enjoyed the diplomatic advocacy of Communist China, as well as the Soviet Union, at the Geneva Conference, but not without cost. From the Vietminh viewpoint, China proved too willing to compromise Vietminh interests in the pursuit of her own. China's assistance to the DRV was an investment that may have strengthened her determination to reap some reward by subordinating the interests of a dependent ally. China could consider the Geneva Conference a success since she obtained the exclusion of American and allied bases from Indochina and gained international prestige, especially among the neutral nations in Asia that were her primary target. But the Vietminh leaders seemed disappointed with the results at Geneva which, at best, delayed the achievement of their primary goal, DRV control over an independent, unified Vietnam.

This case study suggests that insurgent movements go through certain stages in which outside assistance may be particularly useful. China was valuable as a sanctuary in the initial stage, when Vietnamese leaders were planning and organizing the revolution. Later, when they had developed a competent political and military leadership group within Vietnam and had broadened their manpower base, they could absorb the supplies, equipment, training, and technical assistance that Communist China provided. At this stage their ability to absorb outside assistance was high.

The data on the Vietminh case also suggest that intangible assistance from outside may be as important as, or more important than, material assistance.

Some writers have claimed that insurgents who enjoy a privileged sanctuary cannot be defeated. For example, Walter Lippmann has written that "it is for all practical purposes impossible to win a guerrilla war if there is a privileged sanctuary behind the guerrilla fighters."³ Bernard Fall states that "in brutal fact, the success or failure of all rebellions since World War II depended entirely on whether the active sanctuary was willing and able to perform its expected role."⁴ Since the Vietminh insurgents, aided by Communist China, did achieve a measure of success, the Indochina case seems to add weight to these observations. Other scholars have maintained the related proposition that guerrillas cannot win without external support. Paret and Shy have written:

In China and Indochina, guerrilla groups turned into regular armies capable of defeating large enemy forces. In both cases this was achieved with foreign assistance, and there is little evidence that victory can ever be gained without such help.⁵

On the surface, the Indochina case (but not the Chinese case) would seem to support this contention.

³ Washington Post, September 5, 1963.

⁴ Street Without Joy, Stackpole, Harrisburg, Pa., 1963, p. 294.

⁵ Peter Paret and John W. Shy, "Guerrilla Warfare and U.S. Military Policy: A Study," in The Guerrilla, ed. by Lt. Col. T. N. Greene, Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., New York, 1962, p. 45.

The data examined in the present study do not support conclusions as sweeping as those just quoted. The evidence falls far short of establishing that the French would have found it impossible to defeat the Vietminh under any circumstances because of Chinese help to the latter. Moreover, the facts of this case do not support the thesis that the existence of the Chinese sanctuary per se ensured either a Vietminh victory or a French defeat. Even without the sanctuary, the Vietminh might have been able to substitute their own power for that of the French in all or part of Vietnam. Unquestionably, the Chinese sanctuary greatly assisted the Vietminh effort. Nevertheless this study does not demonstrate a causal relationship between the success of the Communist insurgency and the presence of an external sanctuary. The one positive conclusion that can be drawn from the facts is this: While external assistance is unquestionably a valuable asset, it can be accompanied by serious costs to the insurgents, who may be called upon later to make some form of political payment to the erstwhile benefactor.

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