

## **VIETNAM IN 1948: AN INTERNATIONAL HISTORY PERSPECTIVE**

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*This paper revisits the year 1948 in an effort to determine whether 1948 can be considered the starting point of the Cold War in Vietnam. Historical periodisation is a tricky affair, and it is often difficult to pinpoint the genesis of events. By reconstructing the political and military developments in 1948 from the indigenous perspective as well as from regional and international perspectives that directly impinged on Vietnam, I hope to ascertain whether Vietnam's war of liberation was indeed transformed into a "Cold War" from 1948 onwards—in other words, whether it was in 1948 that the Vietnamese struggle assumed an ideological complexion that shifted from nationalist/anti-colonial sentiment to include communist/anti-capitalist sentiment as well.<sup>1</sup>*

*Before we embark on our consideration of the year 1948, it is useful to recount in broad brush-strokes some key developments in Vietnam leading up to 1948. In order to put the year 1948 in context, it is also necessary to consider in some detail two key developments in 1947.*

Keywords: Vietnam, Calcutta Conference, February 1948, Zhdanov's Two Camp Doctrine

### **BRIEF BACKGROUND**

On 2 September 1945, some three weeks after the Japanese had surrendered to the Allies in the Pacific war, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the

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<sup>1</sup> It is instructive to read Wang Gungwu's "Afterword: The Limits of Decolonisation" in Marc Frey et al. (eds.), *The Transformation of Southeast Asia: International Perspectives on Decolonisation* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), Chapter 17, 268–273.

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birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) at Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi. This was possible because earlier, on 9 March 1945, the Japanese had eliminated French control over Indochina and at the same time did not prevent Ho and his associates from taking power. Ho's government was able to consolidate control over North and Central Vietnam after Chinese (*KMT*) troops, charged at the Potsdam Conference with the task of disarming Japanese troops north of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, withdrew in March 1946. Ho's government, however, was unable to prevent the French from regaining control over the South (Cochin China), owing to the support of the British who were charged with disarming Japanese troops south of the 17th parallel.

The weakness of Ho's provisional government and the intransigence of the French, who had no intention at all of relinquishing control over Indochina, resulted in a series of abortive negotiations between March and September 1946 and eventually culminated in the "First Indochina War", or what the Vietnamese describe as the "War of Resistance against the French", which began on 19 December 1946. This marked the start of a long and bitter Franco-Vietnamese war and culminated in the French defeat in 1954 at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

## **THE EVE OF 1948**

We need to highlight one significant military event that took place in Vietnam during the autumn-winter of 1947 and one political event that occurred in Thailand. On 7 October 1947, the French launched a major offensive, dubbed "Operation Lea", into the Viet Bac (the area between the Chinese border and the Red River, which Nguyen Khac Vien described as "the very cradle of the resistance"<sup>2</sup>). This campaign lasted until the end of 1947. The aim of this military operation, in the words of General Valluy, Commander-in-Chief of the French Army in Indochina, was "to pursue the Vietminh into their lair," to seize the heart of the Vietminh stronghold, i.e. 8000 square kilometers of mountainous and forested terrain - in order to consolidate French dominance not only in the urban/delta areas or cities (which the French already controlled) but throughout North Vietnam and particularly in the northern border area.

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<sup>2</sup> Nguyen Khac Vien, *Vietnam: A Long History* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1993), 263.

In this operation, Ho Chi Minh narrowly escaped capture, and he and his colleagues were forced to move out of the Viet Bac area, where he had based himself since December 1946.

The details of the military campaign need not delay us here except to note that the French failed to eliminate the Vietminh. Operation Lea did, however, mark a temporary setback for the Vietminh. They were forced to abandon any plan for a conventional war against the French and were forced to resort to guerrilla warfare. As Jacques Dalloz put it, the Vietminh had been “severely tested, but had not been forced to capitulate by a model campaign”. As for the French, the fact that Operation Lea had not been an unqualified success ultimately meant that the hope of ending the war in one stroke was dashed.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, in November 1947, a coup took place in Bangkok that ousted Pridi Panomyong and his Seri Thai allies. Pridi had been strongly supportive of the DRV’s anti-colonial struggle. Using Bangkok as their headquarters, Vietnamese representatives there had been in the forefront in the establishment of the Southeast Asian League to resist the return of European colonialism. The League was established on 8 September 1947 as an informal organisation and included representatives from Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia and the Philippines who resided in Bangkok. Evidently there had been a plan that had to be jettisoned because of the November coup, which included intentions to convene a special meeting to discuss foreign policy matters in the light of the changing regional and international environment as well as the need for a regional institution.<sup>4</sup>

Following the coup, Pridi was replaced by Phibun Songkhram, who had a track record of being anti-communist. *An Internal History of the Communist Party of Thailand* describes: “At the end of 1947, the fascist military group again rose to power. American influence began to dominate Thailand. In 1948, the Thai fascist military group signed a

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Dalloz, *The War in Indochina, 1945–1954* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), 97. Also, see William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 408–410.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher E. Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885–1954* (Surrey: Curzon, 1999), 260, 282. For details, see Chapters 6 and 7.

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treaty of economic and military assistance with America. From then on, America was the number one external enemy of Thailand”.<sup>5</sup> Christopher Goscha points out that more important than losing the Southeast Asian League as a consequence of the coup was the possible loss of the Viet Kieu and trading networks in Thailand, which had been so critical to sustaining the Vietminh in their struggle against the French.<sup>6</sup>

### **THE YEAR 1948**

The Vietminh leadership entered 1948 with the two problems described above hanging over their heads. There is consensus amongst Vietnamese historians that from 1948 forward, the Vietminh gradually seized the initiative from the French; this culminated in their victory in the 1950 Border Campaign, which was one of the major turning points in the Resistance War against the French (First Indochina War).<sup>7</sup> But this is an evaluation based on hindsight. A recent study is perhaps more accurate in suggesting that in 1948, “No major maneuver operations took place; troops were dispersed in small posts for local security. The “War on the roads” was initiated on the Tonkin/China border, as the VM repeatedly ambushed convoys serving French posts along RC (Route Coloniale) 4 and RC 3bis, and mounted probing attacks on small garrisons.”<sup>8</sup>

According to the official Vietnamese history, in the wake of Operation Lea, the Party’s Central Committee convened an enlarged session on 15 January 1948 where it laid down the strategic plan for 1948.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> “An Internal History of the Communist Party of Thailand” (first drafted in 1974, updated in 1978) (translated from Thai by Chris Baker) in *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 33(4), 2003, 510–541.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 282–283.

<sup>7</sup> Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, “Vietnamese Historians and the First Indochina War” in Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (ed.), *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), Chapter 3, 44–45.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Wiest (ed.), *Rolling Thunder in a Gentle Land: The Vietnam War Revisited* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2006), 40.

<sup>9</sup> “40 Years of Party Activity”, *Vietnam Documents and Research Notes*, Number 76, 123; *The 30-Year War 1945–1975, Volume 1: 1945–1954* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2000), 135–136; Ban Nghien Cuu Lich Su Dang Trung Cong, *Nam Muoi Nam Hoat Dong Vua Dang Cong San Viet*

Vietminh leadership anticipated that the French would ram up their operations in the North and consolidate their control of the South. As such, the broad goal of the Vietnamese communist leadership was to “smash the enemy’s winter offensive in Bac Bo and to foil the mopping up operations in Nam Bo” through “a people’s war” in enemy-controlled territories. The objective was to “destroy the enemy’s isolated positions and narrow their zone of occupation”. The Vietminh leadership hoped to drive the French out of Viet Bac, in particularly Bac Can, Cao Bang and Lao Cai.

To achieve this, the main force was divided into “independent companies along with armed propaganda teams to penetrate deep into enemy-controlled areas, to set up political bases, to develop the militia force and to start a guerrilla war”. Indeed, guerilla warfare would now be the main form of fighting, while mobile warfare would play a secondary role. Through this, the leadership hoped that they could gradually re-build their regular army and that the balance of forces would eventually change in their favour. To ensure that there was effective command and control of the guerrilla war, the Central Committee consolidated the seven zones in Bac Bo into three inter-zones (1, 3 and 10); the four zones in Trung Bo would become inter-zones 4 and 5; and in Nam Bo, there would be three zones (7, 8 and 9). The Saigon-Cholon zone would be designated as a special zone. The most difficult task was to effectively convey the Central Committee’s decisions at the local level. 1948 was described as “a year when the war raged everywhere”<sup>10</sup> At least two major cadres conferences were convened in May and August 1948, and another met in January 1949 to disseminate the January 1948 decisions.

In July 1948, the Supreme Defence Council, under the chairmanship of Ho Chi Minh, was established. The objective was “to achieve a unified, concentrated leadership over all fields of resistance work.” In mid-July, more than 100 representatives from the battle zones, army generals and senior officials of the Defence Ministry-Army High Command attended

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*Nam* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Su That, 1982), 98–99; *Lich Su Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam, Tap I* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1977), 331–334.

<sup>10</sup> *The 30-Year War 1945–1975, Volume 1: 1945–1954* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2000), 135.

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the 5th military conference in Viet Bac to evaluate and exchange views regarding and experiences from the resistance war since December 1946. Some of the key conclusions reached at this conference were:

- (a) the Vietnamese way of fighting so far could be described as “mobile guerrilla warfare”, which was different from guerrilla warfare because the forces involved were much larger and the objective was annihilation and not attrition;
- (b) the need to remain close to the people: “The terrain might be temporarily lost, but by remaining close the people, the lost terrain could be regained;”<sup>11</sup>
- (c) there was also supply/logistical difficulties in some areas; and
- (d) this was not yet a “war of movement” (which was the eventual goal) because the Vietnamese soldiers were still poorly trained and ill-equipped, and also because they were technologically inferior to the enemy. Combat was therefore restricted or confined to tactics such as encirclement, ambush, surprise raids or combinations of these forms.

Until July 1948, Vietminh troops were unable to attack any platoon-size position. The change came in the Phu Thong (located along Highway 3 from Cao Bang) battle on 25 July 1948, when the Vietminh 11th battalion succeeded in assaulting the French post at Phu Thong defended by a hundred or so legionaries. This operation won commendations from the Party’s Central Committee, and the 11th battalion was renamed the “Phu Thong Battalion.” According to the Vietminh official history, it was the 11th battalion that “ushered in the movement to wipe out small enemy garrisons at the threshold of the season of military deeds in the autumn-winter of 1948”.<sup>12</sup>

But such successes were limited. As David Elliot noted, the Vietminh revolutionary leaders had little military training and had to learn through trial and error; “surprising military success were followed by crushing defeats, but each time the revolutionaries regrouped, they analysed their performance and set about devising a new response to overcome the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 141–142.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 141–145.

difficulties”.<sup>13</sup> William Duiker, citing a French military observer, noted that after Operation Lea the conflict became a “war of stagnation.”<sup>14</sup>

The second problem that the Vietnamese communist leadership had to tackle in 1948 was the fallout of the coup in Thailand.<sup>15</sup> In the attempt to protect its Thai operations, on 10 February 1948, General Nguyen Binh sent a personal letter of congratulations to the new Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram “as part of a well-calculated bid to maintain Thai sympathy at this crucial point in the supplying of the south”.<sup>16</sup> Besides extending the good wishes of the Vietnamese, Binh also played on Thai antipathy towards the French. This apparently succeeded and, at least initially, Bangkok allowed the Vietnamese to continue their activities in Thailand. The Vietnamese communist leadership sent one of its most senior members, Hoang Van Hoan, to Thailand to manage the delicate situation. Hoan arrived in northeast Thailand in May 1948 and, while there, established the Overseas Working Bureau, the function of which was to support the resistance in Vietnam from the west via Laos and Cambodia.<sup>17</sup>

Phibun’s goodwill, however, did not last beyond 1948. Immediately after the coup, Phibun asked for US military and monetary support to strengthen the Thai army. The United States was initially reluctant, as Washington viewed Phibun as a wartime enemy, given that Thailand was an ally of the Japanese during the Pacific War. In order to change the view of the Americans and also to garner patronage and support,

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<sup>13</sup> David W.P. Elliot, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta 1930–1975* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 62.

<sup>14</sup> William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 411.

<sup>15</sup> For a brief account of internal Thai politics in 1948, see Paul M. Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand’s Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 90–93.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 283. For details, see 283–284; The best account is Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947–1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Engelbert and Christopher E. Goscha, *Falling out of Touch: A Study on Vietnamese Communist Policy Towards an Emerging Cambodian Communist Movement, 1930–1975* (Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, 1995), 35–36; Also see Hoang Van Hoan, *A Drop in the Ocean: Hoang Van Hoan’s Revolutionary Reminiscences* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1988), Part Five.

Phibun gradually burnished his reputation as an anti-communist and anti-Chinese leader. Those in the northeast of Thailand who were seen as either opponents of his government or else pro-Prudi were especially targeted and charged with plotting the separation of the northeast so that it might be incorporated into a communist-dominated Indochina.<sup>18</sup> In the words of Daniel Fineman, “from viewing him in 1947 as a fascist inimical to US interests, the Americans had come to see him by late-spring 1948 as a friendly leader...”<sup>19</sup> The United States and Britain ultimately recognised Phibun’s government in April. Consequently, within a year of assuming power, Phibun had changed his policy towards the Vietnamese communists and vigorously clamped down on Vietnamese communist activities in Thailand.<sup>20</sup>

The combination of military stalemate and changes in the Thai political complexion had implications for Vietnamese communist relations with the Khmer Issarak (Cambodia) and the Lao Issara (Laos). Prior to Phibun, both the Khmer Issarak and Lao Issara movements had the support of the Prudi regime as well as the Vietnamese communists, with Bangkok serving as their base. The Viet Minh mission in Bangkok directed the resistance movements in Cambodia and Laos. As Mutoo Furuta described, “in the early years of the resistance joint Cambodian-Vietnamese and Laotian-Vietnamese forces were at the core of the Khmer Issarak and Lao Issara, respectively”.<sup>21</sup> However, because the Vietnamese communists were preoccupied in their own liberation struggle against the French, they had been until that time unable to control and direct their counterparts in neighbouring Cambodia and Laos. The military stalemate forced the Vietnamese communists to extend their operations into Cambodia and Laos, which became “crucial second

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<sup>18</sup> For details, see Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 144–145; David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 266–268.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947–1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 61.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Engelbert and Christopher E. Goscha *ibid.*, 37–38.

<sup>21</sup> Mutoo Furuta, “The Indochina Communist Party’s Division into Three Parties: Vietnamese Communist Policy towards Cambodia and Laos, 1948–1951” in Takashi Shiraishi and Mutoo Furuta (eds.), *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1992), 146.



lines of defence” for Vietnam. At the same time, the deprivation of Thai support for the Khmer Issarak and Lao Issara led the Cambodians and Laotians to turn even more toward Vietnam for support.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from military strategy, the enlarged session of the Party Central Committee in January 1948 also discussed political, economic and cultural issues. The Vietnamese communist leadership endorsed the view of the Cominform (formed in September 1947) that the world was divided into two opposing blocs, East and West, and that the Vietnamese communist resistance against the French belonged to the democratic camp of the East-West struggle.<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, at the August 1948 conference, the leadership re-defined the Indochinese revolution as a “new democratic revolution”. As Mutoo Furuta noted, “through 1947 the ICP had accepted the definition used by Mao Zedong when he introduced the concept in 1940. As redefined, however, the term “new democratic revolution” meant a “people’s democratic revolution” possessing the potential to evolve into socialism under communist-party direction”.<sup>24</sup> But constrained by the on-going armed conflict with the French, the leadership judged that it would be premature to reveal their true communist colour, as this would “expose it to assault from international anti-communist reactionary forces and would stir up domestic unrest among participants in the united front.”<sup>25</sup>

Thus, with regard to political strategy, the focus continued to be consolidating the unity among the population by broadening the national united front as well as securing the support of the socialist countries and “progressive, peace-loving forces of the world.”<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting that in 1947, Ho Chi Minh sent Vice Minister Pham Ngoc Thach to Bangkok

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<sup>22</sup> For details, see Mutoo Furuta, “The Indochina Communist Party’s Division into Three Parties: Vietnamese Communist Policy towards Cambodia and Laos, 1948–1951” in Takashi Shiraishi and Mutoo Furuta (ed.), *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1992), 147–153.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>26</sup> Ban Nghien Cuu Lich Su Dang Trung Cong, *Nam Muoi Nam Hoat Dong Vua Dang Cong San Viet Nam* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Su That, 1982), 98–99.

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to explain the Vietminh policy to the Americans.<sup>27</sup> On 12 December 1947, the Party Central Committee circulated an internal directive explaining that “because the American threat has not been direct, statements in our media should be friendly with the United States and we should make use of the Vietnamese-American Friendship Association to favourably publicise us”.<sup>28</sup> George Abbot, the American Consul in Saigon, reported in early 1949 found it “peculiar” that the Vietminh had not indulged in as much anti-American propaganda as was expected.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, from 1947 to early 1950, the DRV’s news media avoided any criticism of Washington.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to appealing to the United States, the Vietminh also tried to elicit the assistance of the KMT government in Nanking. Twice in 1947, Ho Chi Minh sent a Vietminh delegation to Nanking, but both times it failed. The mission led by Nguyen Duc Thuy, which left for China during Operation Lea returned to Viet Bac in late spring 1948. The second, failed attempt to reach Nanking was also Ho’s last attempt to connect with the KMT. After the fall of Manchuria in October 1948 to the Chinese communists, Ho did not make any further effort to make contact with the KMT.

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<sup>27</sup> Robert S McNamara, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), 81.

<sup>28</sup> Nguyen Vu Tung, “The Chinese Factor in the relationship between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the United States 1949–1968” (unpublished paper, The Norwegian Nobel Institute, 1995), 8–9. The Vietnamese-American Friendship Association was formed on 17 October 1945. Tung quotes from *Party Document, Volume 4* (Hanoi: compiled and internally circulated by the Nguyen Ai Quoc Party High School, 1964).

<sup>29</sup> Andrew J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 101.

<sup>30</sup> Nguyen Vu Tung, “The Chinese Factor in the relationship between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the United States 1949–1968” (unpublished paper, The Norwegian Nobel Institute, 1995), 8–9. Nguyen cites personal interviews with Vietnamese researchers in Hanoi and party documents compiled and circulated by the Nguyen Ai Quoc High School.

### **The Calcutta Conference, February 1948**

To appreciate the impact of the Calcutta Conference on the Vietnamese communists and the Vietnamese dimension of the Cold War in Southeast Asia, we need to contextualise the conference within the backdrop described above. The Calcutta Conference of Youth and Students of Southeast Asia Fighting for Freedom and Independence<sup>31</sup> convened from 19 February to 26 February 1948. Because this conference placed a great deal of emphasis on the use of violence, contemporary analysts have linked the conference to the communist-led insurgencies that erupted in Burma, Malaya and Indonesia soon after the conference. In the case of Vietnam, as we have noted, the war had already started in December 1946.

The Vietnamese delegation to the conference was given the honour of delivering the keynote message. The report was a detailed discussion of the Vietnamese experience with guerrilla warfare. Vietnam was represented at the conference by a delegation of seven Vietminh military officers, which, as Ruth McVey had suggested, was perhaps the reason for the military emphasis of the report. But given that the Vietnamese communists had only recently engaged the French militarily, it was not surprising that the Vietnamese report would focus on their military experience and current condition.

During the event, while the military focus of the report seemingly gelled with the general tenor of the conference, the Vietnamese position actually differed from the consensus position at the conference. The Calcutta Conference issued a political thesis that reiterated the Zhdanov interpretation of the international situation.<sup>32</sup> It condemned the Indian socialists for openly preaching “the illusion that socialism may be achieved by constitutional means” and had called upon the communists to forge a “Democratic Front of all militant sections and honest revolutionaries to launch the final struggle to win real freedom and

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<sup>31</sup> See Ruth McVey, *The Calcutta Conference and the Southeast Asian uprisings* (Ithaca: Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, Department of Far Eastern Studies, Cornell University, 1958).

<sup>32</sup> Cited in M.R. Masani, *The Communist Party of India: A Short History* (London: Derek Verschoyle, 1954), 89–90, 281–282 footnote 4, 283 footnote 5.

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democracy”. But as Ruth McVey noted, “the Vietnamese delegates showed no inclination to accept the meeting’s declaration as law.” Indeed, they denied its most important point: the rejection of all compromise with imperialism. Instead, they approved of the Indian and Burmese path toward independence. They were apparently unrepentant in the face of criticism. Upon returning from the conference, the Vietnamese expressed irritation at the attempts to impose the international line on the Vietnamese movement.<sup>33</sup> The Vietnamese steadfastly maintained that the “struggle for independence and democracy takes on a different character according to the actual conditions prevailing in each country”.<sup>34</sup>

The Calcutta Conference, then, did not have any immediate effect on the Vietminh experience. This is not to say that the Vietnamese communist leadership did not subscribe to the view of a world divided between the socialists led by the Soviet Union and the imperialists led by the United States. Indeed, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) had anticipated the two camps as early as the Eighth Plenum in May 1941.<sup>35</sup> But while some quarters within the Vietminh leadership supported Andrei Zhdanov’s “Two-camp” theory (September 1947), the general consensus was inclined towards the pragmatic view that the bourgeoisie could still be harnessed against the anti-imperialist movement as part of a front led by the communist party.

This strategy would change in 1949, but the slow shift was already discernible in 1948. To better understand the reasons for the change and the process, we now need to turn to the involvement of the US, the Soviet Union and China.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Tuong Vu for sharing with me his paper “From Cheering to Volunteering: Vietnamese Communists and the Coming of the Cold War, 1940–1951.”

## UNITED STATES, SOVIET UNION AND CHINA

### United States

Scholarship in the English language on Vietnam between 1944 and 1950 is relatively scant compared to the historiography on the Indochina Wars post-1950, particularly after the United States became involved.<sup>36</sup> Washington had for some years been concerned about the communist character of Ho Chi Minh's government. It had been receiving intelligence reports of DRV contacts with Moscow and the Chinese Communist Party headquarters in north China, and had been informed that Vietminh cadres were being trained by the Soviets and the Chinese communists. In fact, as early as 1946, the US Consul in Saigon warned that should the Vietminh manage to evict the French, Indochina would be vulnerable to international communism.<sup>37</sup>

At the beginning of 1948, neither Washington nor London had yet formed a coherent policy towards the First Indochina War.<sup>38</sup> Recent scholarship generally agrees that it was developments in China in 1948 and 1949<sup>39</sup> – rather than in Vietnam itself – that led Washington to focus more intently on the danger of communism in Southeast Asia (just as the British gradually became more willing to support the French following the communist insurrection in Malaya in 1948). This gradual change of attitude from initial sympathy for the anti-colonial struggle in Southeast Asia can be discerned in the Department of State policy paper of 27 September 1948, which addressed the need to eliminate communism in Southeast Asian and foster governments that would be friendly to the United States. Regarding Vietnam, the difficulty was how to support

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<sup>36</sup> See Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> William J. Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1995), 60.

<sup>38</sup> For details, see Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> For the historiography of Sino-US relations, see Warren I. Cohen (ed.), *Pacific Passage: The Study of American-East Asian Relations on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), Chapters 1, 7 and 9.

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both the interests of the French and, at the same time, fulfill the aspiration of the Vietnamese people—how to strengthen the position of the nationalists and weaken that of the communists. The paper, however, offered no clear solution regarding how to achieve a win-win situation for both the French and the Vietnamese; nevertheless, it recognised that a French withdrawal would lead to communist domination of Vietnam and possibly even Chinese communist domination.<sup>40</sup>

By the end of 1949, however, the United States had begun to place Vietnam in the context of a West versus East or democracy versus communism dichotomy. This was clearly spelt out in NSC 48/2 (The Position of the US with respect to Asia), dated 30 December 1949.<sup>41</sup> Washington's changed attitude had serious implications for Vietnam. In February 1950, Washington recognised the French-created Bao Dai government and also pressured Bangkok to recognise it, which the Thai government did under Phibun in March 1950. In May 1950, Washington finally supported the French war effort in Indochina. Luu Doan Huynh recalled that the Americans were more or less neutral about the war in Vietnam between 1945 and 1948: "Maybe not 100 percent. Maybe 80 percent neutral... To us, 80 percent neutral was acceptable". Huynh pinpointed 1950, "not before, not after", as the time when the American "downfall" began.<sup>42</sup> To the Vietnamese communists, 1950 was the year when the United States intervened in Vietnam. In the words of Nguyen Khac Huynh, After this "intervention", the Vietnamese people perceived both the French and the Americans as the enemy".<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> William J. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in IndoChina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 66–67.

<sup>41</sup> See *The Pentagon Papers, Senator Gravel editions, Volume 1* (Boston: Beacon, 1971); Yano Toru, "Who Set the Stage for the Cold War in Southeast Asia?" in Yonosuke Nagai and Akira Iriye (ed.), *The Origins of the Cold War in Asia* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1977), 321–337.

<sup>42</sup> Robert S. McNamara, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), 81.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 78–79.

## Soviet Union

With regard to the question of Soviet assistance to the Vietminh, the current scholarly consensus is that there is still no evidence to support this idea. Ilya Gaiduk, who has studied the Soviet sources on the Vietnam War, has advised those who are searching for the origins of Soviet involvement in the Indochina conflict to pay attention to what happened in Moscow in late 1949 and early 1950, noting that nothing significant in Soviet-Vietnam relations happened before that.<sup>44</sup>

Despite its professed sympathy for the struggles of national liberation, Moscow never paid much attention to Southeast Asia during this period. Indeed, the Soviets had been apprehensive that the Vietminh's war of resistance against the French would adversely affect the political prospects of the French Communist Party (FCP) in France. It is absolutely significant that both British and American intelligence were hard-pressed to find any concrete evidence of Soviet-Vietminh connections. As an Office of Intelligence Research report submitted during the Fall of 1948 tersely remarked: "if there is a Moscow-directed conspiracy in Southeast Asia, Indochina is an anomaly (sic) so far."<sup>45</sup>

Moscow was apparently critical of Ho Chi Minh's insistence on maintaining the united front approach and also his dissolution of the Indochinese Communist Party in November 1945.<sup>46</sup> According to William Duiker, there were no Soviet contacts with Ho until 1949, and Stalin was skeptical that the Vietminh could win the war against the French. Indeed, Stalin had doubts as to whether Ho was a genuine Marxist-Leninist.<sup>47</sup> It is noteworthy that it was only with Mao's strong recommendation that Moscow eventually recognised the DRV on 30

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<sup>44</sup> Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954–1963* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 101.

<sup>46</sup> William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 142.

<sup>47</sup> See William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 418–423; 648–649, footnotes 29 and 30.

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January 1950, after Beijing had done so, and that he willingly left the Vietminh to the guidance of Chinese.<sup>48</sup>

## **China**

We must now turn to the crucial Sino-Vietnamese connection in this puzzle. While we now know much more about Sino-Vietnamese relations after 1950, our knowledge of the relationship between the Vietminh and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the period from 1945 to the establishment of diplomatic relations between DRV and PRC on 18 January 1950 remains patchy. Chinese accounts have acknowledged that Vietnamese and Chinese communists became much closer after the October Revolution in Russia. Much of Ho's early revolutionary activities were conducted in the Guangxi border area, which served as the base for the Vietnamese communists. As King Chen noted, the Vietminh's sanctuary in the border areas between Vietnam and China (Kwangsi and Yunnan) and cooperation between the Vietnamese and Chinese communists were important factors in the Vietminh's ability to survive the French attacks in 1947–1948.<sup>49</sup>

On the Chinese communist side, during the War of Liberation (Chinese Civil War – April 1927 to May 1950), when the Guangdong-Guangxi and Yunnan-Guangxi detachments encountered difficulties from the KMT attacks, they moved into the Vietminh-liberated areas.<sup>50</sup> One such case is worth highlighting: In 1946, the first regiment of the Southern Guangdong People's Force, which was the main CCP force in Guangdong-Guangxi, moved into Vietnam to avoid the KMT attack. It was a small and poorly-equipped regiment. While in Vietnam, where they remained until August 1949 at the request of Ho, the regiment helped to train the Vietminh troops—specifically to train Vietminh officers and to set up an intelligence system. By July 1947, over 830

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<sup>48</sup> For an account of Soviet-Vietminh relations between 1945–1950, see Christopher Gosha, “Courting Diplomatic Disaster? The Difficult Integration of Vietnam into the International Communist Movement (1945–1950)” in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 1, No. 1–2, February/August 2006, 59–103.

<sup>49</sup> King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China 1938–1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 192–195.

<sup>50</sup> Editorial Board of the Journal of International Studies, “Facts about Sino-Vietnamese relations” in *China and the World* (1979), 99.



Vietminh cadres had been trained. An overseas Chinese self-defence force numbering over 1,000 was also created and subsequently incorporated into the Vietminh army.<sup>51</sup> However, Hoang Van Hoan (who was the DRV's first ambassador to China) recalled that between 1947 and 1949, the military situations in both Vietnam and China made Sino-Vietnamese communication very difficult.<sup>52</sup> Chinese sources confirmed that ties between the two parties were limited between 1945 and 1949. There was also no evidence of any substantial Chinese technical assistance during this period.

In her unpublished 1990 PhD thesis<sup>53</sup>, Laura Calkins noted that a new phase in Vietminh's international linkages emerged in the first half of 1948. According to Calkins, after pursuing a strategy of cultivating both communists and non-communists in the region, the Vietminh leadership in mid-1948 strengthened its ties with the Chinese communists, who at the same time were taking a growing interest in Southeast Asia and the Vietminh in particular. This phase of improving Chinese communist-Vietminh relations was marked by cross-border collaboration between the two sides. In his message to the 5th Cadres Conference (8–16 August 1948), Truong Chinh observed that the French were becoming more dependent on the American imperialists. He anticipated that the eventual victory of the CCP would have a major positive impact on the Vietnamese resistance struggle. This did not mean that the Vietminh would rely on “outsiders”, but a united front of the Vietnamese and Chinese communists would certainly be better able to resist the American-French imperialists.<sup>54</sup>

According to Chinese communist accounts of their War of Liberation, the war reached “the decisive phase” in the autumn of 1948. The CCP's

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<sup>51</sup> Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1974* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 11–12.

<sup>52</sup> Hoang Van Hoan, “Distortions of Facts about Militant Friendship between Vietnam and China is Impermissible” in *Beijing Review*, 7 December 1979, 12.

<sup>53</sup> Laura Calkin, “Sino-Vietminh Relations 1948–1952” (unpublished PhD thesis, SOAS, University of London, 1990).

<sup>54</sup> Truong Chinh, “We Struggle for Independence and Democracy” distributed at the Fifth Central Cadres Conference, 8–16 August 1948 in *Lich Su Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam*, Tap I (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1977), 334–335.

victory, however, was not yet a foregone conclusion. Significantly, total KMT military strength still exceeded that of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The CCP leadership led by Mao Zedong decided to throw caution to the wind, which led to three major consecutive campaigns beginning in September 1948 – the Liaoxi-Shenyang campaign, the Huai-Hai campaign and the Beijing-Tianjin campaign. The PLA finally captured Nanjing, the KMT capital, on 23 April 1949. The military success of the Chinese communists was therefore fortuitous for their Vietnamese counterparts. Not only was their military struggle against the French at a stalemate,<sup>55</sup> in late-1948, they were also under great pressure to relocate the Bangkok-based liaison headquarters.<sup>56</sup> Chinese communist military forces gave substantial operational assistance to the Vietminh for the first time in early 1949. Before the First Regiment returned to southern China in the autumn of 1949,<sup>57</sup> it helped create the first People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) division in August 1949.

While the Chinese civil war was still going on and even when the Chinese communists appeared to be winning, especially after the fall of Manchuria in October 1948, Ho remained very cautious and discreet about Sino-Vietnam relations. Until late August of 1949, he appeared neutral, although his colleagues had on various occasions remarked that the success of the Chinese communists would have positive implications for the Vietminh. The current scholarly consensus is that the Chinese communist victory in 1949 and the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 October 1949 constituted a critical turning point in the Vietnamese colonial struggle. Shortly after 1 October, Ho Chi Minh dispatched two envoys, Ly Bich Son and Nguyen Duy Thuy, to Beijing to seek Chinese assistance.<sup>58</sup> It was also beginning in late 1949 that the

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<sup>55</sup> David W.P. Elliot, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta 1930–1975* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 70–71; William J. Duiker, *US Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 87; Nguyen Khac Vien, *Vietnam: A Long History* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1993), 267.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Engelbert and Christopher E. Goscha, *Falling Out of Touch: A Study on Vietnamese Communist Policy Towards an Emerging Cambodian Communist Movement, 1930–1975* (Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, 1995), 38–39.

<sup>57</sup> Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1974* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 12.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

war took on a significant international dimension and became part of the wider Cold War struggle.

The DRV and the PRC established official diplomatic relations on 18 January 1950. According to Nguyen Vu Tung, based on his interview with Vietnamese researchers in Hanoi in 1994, Beijing pressured a reluctant Ho Chi Minh to establish diplomatic relations. Ho went to Beijing in January 1950 to seek Chinese aid but not to establish diplomatic relations. He wanted to avoid having to explicitly take sides for fear of inviting US military intervention in Vietnam. In fact, in his interviews with Andrew Roth and Salt Sanders in the fall of 1949, he told the two American journalists that the DRV would follow the Swiss model of neutrality.<sup>59</sup> Ho also did not offer his congratulations to the PRC until November 1949. We will not be able to compare the Chinese and the Vietnamese accounts until the Vietnamese side allows access to its archives on this period. What we can say is that, reluctantly or otherwise, the establishment of diplomatic relations marked the uncategorical acceptance of Zhukov's "two-camp theory" and spelt the end of the strategy, tactical or otherwise, of cultivating broad support from both communists and non-communists. On 17 April 1950, the CCP Central Military Commission ordered the formation of the Chinese Military Advisory Group (CMAG) to assist the Vietminh.<sup>60</sup> By 1951, Truong Chinh for the first time made the claim that the balance of forces between the democratic and imperialist camps had tipped in favour of the former.<sup>61</sup> Also in 1951, the Indochinese Communist Party, which was dissolved in 1945, re-emerged as the Lao Dong or Vietnam Workers' Party.

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<sup>59</sup> Nguyen Vu Tung, "The Chinese Factor in the relationship between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the United States 1949–1968" (unpublished paper, The Norwegian Nobel Institute, 1995), 5–6.

<sup>60</sup> See Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1974* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Chapter 1; Chen Jian, "China and the First Indo-China War, 1950–1954" in *China Quarterly*, 133, March 1999, 85–110.

<sup>61</sup> Report to the Second National Congress of the Vietnam Workers' Party, February 1951, Truong Chinh, *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977), 235 cited by Gareth Porter, "Hanoi's Strategic Perspective and the Sino-Vietnamese Conflict" in *Pacific Review*, 57, No. 1, Spring 1984, 11, footnote 12.

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## CONCLUSION

1948 has not been considered to be a particularly significant/eventful year by Vietnam scholars. The important years are supposedly 1946, 1950 and 1954. In 1948, the resistance war against the French remained the top priority. The colonial struggle was at a stalemate and the prognosis for the long term was not favourable to the Vietnamese communists. Increasingly, as this reconstruction of events shows, the Vietnamese communist leadership had to take into consideration the Cold War environment developing around Vietnam, even as it single-mindedly pursued its goal of national liberation/independence.

With regard to the question of whether 1948 could be considered the beginning of the Cold War in Vietnam, the answer that emerges from this account is that the transformation from a purely colonial war into a Cold War indeed started in 1948, although it only became clear in 1950. That said, it is prudent to end on a cautious note. As Shawn McHale put it as recently as 2006, Vietnam scholars are “still grappling to understand the internal dynamics of Vietnam in this period, not to mention the regional and international contexts of the war”.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> H-Diplo Roundtable (2006) on Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). H-diplo@h-net.msu.edu

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