14

The Indochina wars and the Cold War, 1945–1975

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The struggle for Indochina after 1945 occupies a central place in the international history of the twentieth century. Fought over a period of three decades, at the cost of millions of lives and vast physical destruction in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the conflict captured in microcosm all of the grand political forces that drove the century's global history: colonialism, nationalism, communism, and democratic-capitalism. It was both an East–West and a North–South struggle, that is to say, intimately bound up with the two most important developments in international relations after World War II, the Cold War and the breakup of the colonial empires.

It took time, however, for Indochina to become a major cockpit of tensions in the international system. In the early years, the conflict was largely a Franco-Vietnamese affair, resulting from Paris leaders' attempt to rebuild the colonial state and international order from before World War II, and Vietnamese nationalists' determination to redefine that state in a new post-colonial order. France had lost colonial control when, after the fall of France in 1940, Japan swept southward and gradually gained effective control of the whole of Southeast Asia. The Tokyo authorities initially found it convenient to leave the day-to-day control of Indochinese affairs in French hands, but in March 1945 the Japanese brushed aside the French in favor of ruling Indochina themselves. By then the tide of the Pacific War had turned against them, however, and in the weeks and months that followed, the French government and various Vietnamese nationalist groups – the most powerful of which was the Communist-led Vietminh under Ho Chi Minh – jockeyed for power. They continued to do so after Japan's surrender until, in late 1946, large-scale war broke out.

East–West tensions were by then becoming serious in Europe and the Near East, and one might have expected the same to be true in Vietnam, because Ho Chi Minh and his chief lieutenants were dedicated Marxists. In fact, though, Paris leaders cared little that the Vietminh was Communist-led;

what mattered was that Ho refused to accede to French colonial control. The British government backed the French less out of concern for Ho Chi Minh's political philosophy than out of fears for what a Vietnamese nationalist victory could to do to their own colonial holdings. As for Soviet leader Iosif Stalin, he showed scant interest in Southeast Asia; it was for him always a backwater. He did not extend diplomatic recognition to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) that Ho proclaimed in September 1945, and instead continued to regard France as the legitimate ruler of Indochina. His attention on European issues, and distrustful of Ho Chi Minh (for being too independent and nationalist-oriented), Stalin early on offered the Vietminh neither material nor diplomatic support and, indeed, endorsed the French Communist Party's backing of the first war budget and emergency measures related to the prosecution of the struggle.

Stalin's pawns?

If Ho Chi Minh's Communist orientation mattered significantly in any major world capital in this early period, it was in Washington. Soviet–American relations had deteriorated sharply in 1946 and early 1947, as Moscow and Washington clashed over a range of issues: over European reconstruction, over the division of Germany, over Iran, and over the civil war in Greece. By spring 1947, Soviet hostility was a staple of both American policy documents and much journalistic reporting. Equally important in historical terms was the fact that, by then, there was no mistaking the growing salience of apocalyptic anti-Communism in American political discourse. French leaders, always keen to find favor in Washington, shifted their public diplomacy on Indochina in response to this emerging US–Soviet confrontation and this changing American mood. In Vietnam, Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu, the French high commissioner, early in the year moved what was then still a localized and strictly Franco-Vietnamese conflict to the highest international level, that of East versus West. He insisted before all comers that Ho and the Vietminh were mere pawns in Stalin's struggle for world supremacy, and that Indochina was where the West must make a stand.[1]

That basic message, articulated also by other French officials – including some who didn't believe in it, who thought anti-Communism would be a useless weapon against a nationalist uprising – found a receptive audience in

1 Philippe Devillers, *Le Viet-Nam contemporain* (Paris: Comité d'etudes des problems du Pacifique, 1950), 2; Thierry d'Argenlieu, *Chroniques d'Indochine* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1985).

Washington. Despite the fact that the State Department found no evidence of mass popular support for Communism within Vietnam, and further that it was not ideology but a desire for independence and a hatred of the French that drove the unrest, the principals in US decisionmaking proceeded on the basis of worst-case assumptions. Losing Indochina to Communism, senior planners worried, could upset the strategic balance in Southeast Asia, particularly if, as these officials anticipated, other countries in the area were to succumb as well. It would also harm the economic recovery of Japan and other key allies, who were dependent on maintaining commercial ties with the primary producing areas of Southeast Asia.

American strategists also feared the effects in France itself of a French defeat in Indochina. Might a loss cause Western-oriented moderates to lose their grip on power in Paris and enhance the prestige of the Soviet-supported French Communist Party (FCP), maybe even bring that party to power? The thought made US officials shudder, and made them reluctant to quibble with Paris over its pursuit of a military solution. True, these men acknowledged, Stalin showed only modest interest in fomenting revolution in France and, indeed, kept the FCP at arm's length, but this was only because he sought to avoid an international crisis while the future of Germany remained an open question; once that issue was resolved, he would surely turn his focus to France.

Yet senior officials were loath to simply throw US support behind the French war effort. It was too much a colonial affair. Harry Truman's team ruled out direct assistance to the military campaign and told Paris planners that any attempt to retake Vietnam by force of arms would be wrongheaded. At the same time, the administration knew full well that a sizable chunk of the unrestricted US economic assistance to France ($1.9 billion between July 1945 and July 1948) was being used to pay war costs. In this way, though American leaders declared themselves to be neutral in the conflict, theirs was a neutrality that tilted toward the European ally. French messages were always answered, while those from Ho Chi Minh – who had modeled his declaration of independence on the American version of 1776, and several times in 1945–46 pleaded for US help – were ignored.

And so, the Vietminh fought alone, largely isolated in non-Asian world opinion. The French had a massive superiority in weapons and could take and hold any area they really wanted. But they were fighting far from home and could never deploy sufficient numbers of troops to secure effective control. The war quickly reached a stalemate. The French dominated the cities and towns but were unable to extend their control to the villages and countryside, where most Vietnamese lived and where the Vietminh had broad popular

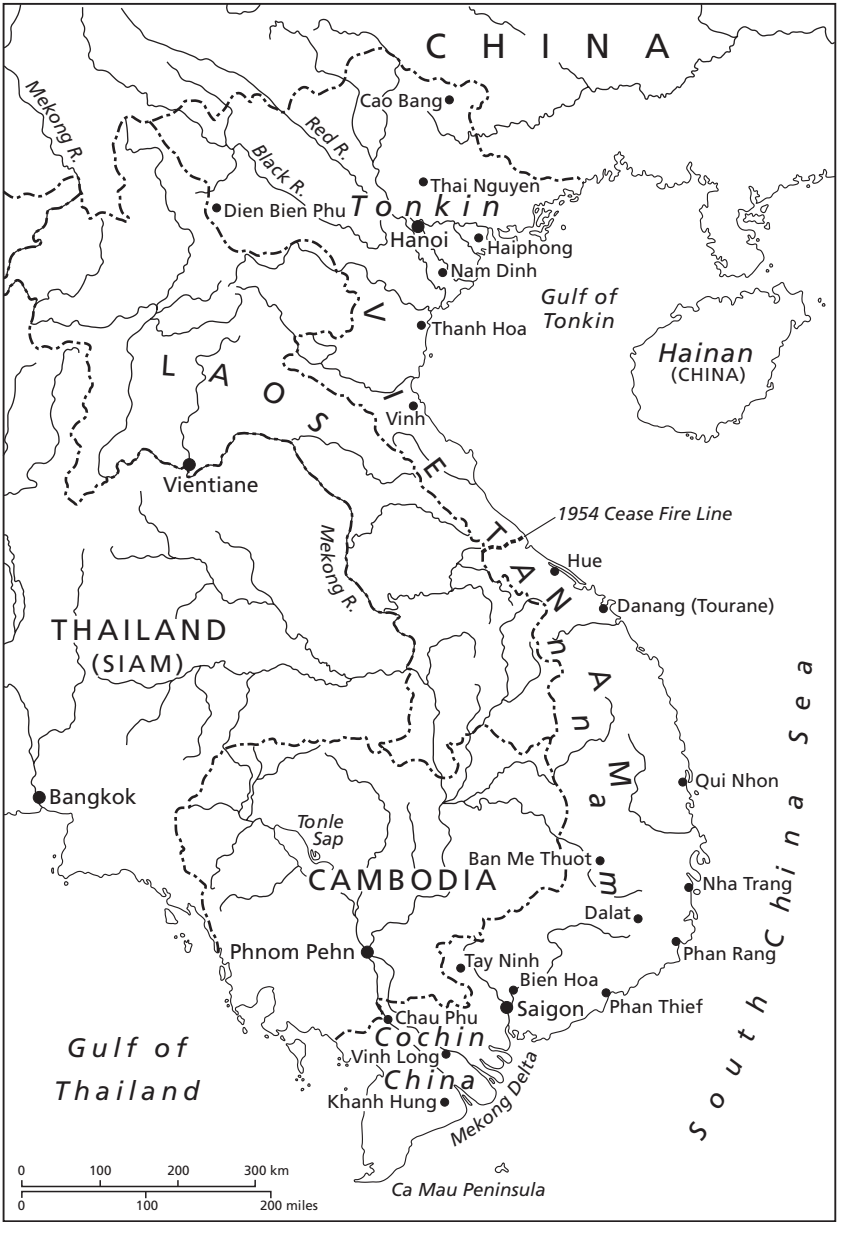
support. It soon became clear that the French would have difficulty achieving victory by conventional military means. Far-reaching political concessions to a Vietnamese government – involving the transfer of genuine executive and legislative authority – would be essential to achieving early pacification, yet successive French governments were unwilling to grant such concessions.

In June 1948, the French did go partway, facilitating the creation of the first central government for Vietnam in opposition to Ho Chi Minh's DRV. Rightly seen by most Vietnamese as largely a French creation, it marshaled little national support. In March 1949, the French struck another deal, this time with Bao Dai, the former Vietnam emperor who had abdicated in 1945. Under this deal, Vietnam was brought into the French Union without reference to the wishes of Ho Chi Minh. Real power, however, remained in French hands. The same was true in Laos and Cambodia, whose monarchs agreed in 1948 to bring their respective countries into the French Union. Together, the three formed the Associated States of Indochina (les États Associés de l'Indochine).

An internationalized war

If French leaders hoped these various agreements with Indochinese monarchs would have a galvanizing effect on the anti-Vietminh effort, they were soon disappointed. In Vietnam, Bao Dai's government won little public backing, while in Cambodia and Laos the DRV countered France's Associated States by facilitating the creation of two of its own: the "governments of resistance" led by the Khmer Issarak (Son Ngoc Minh) and the Lao Issara (Prince Souphanouvong). More ominously still, in 1949, Mao Zedong's Communists won control of China, which meant that the DRV would now have a friendly government across Vietnam's northern frontier. In early 1950, both Beijing and Moscow extended diplomatic recognition to Ho's government; soon thereafter, Mao moved to support the Vietminh with arms, advisers, and training. No longer would the Vietminh be dependent on weapons it could manufacture in the jungle or capture on the battlefield; no longer would they have to rely solely on their own limited resources and facilities for the training of their men. On the flip side they would now have to put up with increased Chinese influence over military planning and strategy. Beijing sought through its support for the Vietminh to promote the People's Republic of China (PRC) as an international power in Asia and to enhance the security of its southern border.

The internationalization of the conflict also served French strategy in Indochina, for in early 1950 Paris, too, landed a major outside patron – the


CHINA
Cao Bang
Red R.
Black R.
Mekong R.
Thai Nguyen
Dien Bien Phu
Tonkin
Hanoi
Haiphong
Nam Dinh
Gulf of Tonkin
Thanh Hoa
Hainan (CHINA)
LAOS
Vinh
Vientiane
1954 Cease Fire Line
Mekong R.
Hue
Danang (Tourane)
THAILAND (SIAM)
Annam
Qui Nhon
Bangkok
Tonle Sap
Ban Me Thuot
CAMBODIA
Nha Trang
Dalat
Phnom Pehn
Tay Ninh
Phan Rang
Bien Hoa
Saigon
Phan Thiet
Chau Phu
Cochin China
Vinh Long
Gulf of Thailand
Khanh Hung
Mekong Delta
South China Sea
0 100 200 300 km
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Ca Mau Peninsula

3. Indochina

United States. Washington officials chose this time to move beyond their French-leaning neutrality in favor of open support of the anti-Vietminh effort. Since 1948, US analysts had watched with concern as insurgencies erupted in Burma and Malaya and as Mao's armies gained ground in China. In early 1950, the Truman administration made the first step toward direct American involvement in Indochina – it opted to prop up an embattled colonial regime in order to prevent a Communist victory and also to retain French support in the European theatre of the Cold War. In February, the administration granted diplomatic recognition to the French-sponsored Bao Dai government. In early March, it pledged to furnish France with military and economic assistance for the war effort. The outbreak of the Korean War in late June, together with concern about the intentions of the Chinese Communists, solidified Washington's commitment.

A watershed moment it was. Henceforth, the First Indochina War was simultaneously a colonial conflict and a Cold War confrontation. The arrival of Chinese Communist aid and advisers across the frontier was one reason for this transformation; the other was the decision by Washington, spurred by fears of further Communist expansion in Asia and beyond, to throw its support behind the French war effort. A National Security Council (NSC) report penned in mid-1949 speculated on the meaning of Mao's victory: "If Southeast Asia is also swept by communism, we shall have suffered a major political rout the repercussions of which will be felt throughout the rest of the world, especially in the Middle East and in a then critically exposed Australia … the colonial-nationalist conflict provides a fertile field for subversive Communist movements, and it is now clear that Southeast Asia is the target for a coordinated offensive directed by the Kremlin."[2]

There was in fact no such coordinated offensive. Stalin's interest in Southeast Asia remained minimal, and his feelings about the Chinese developments were decidedly mixed. Still, it was not altogether fanciful for Washington analysts – and many non-Communist leaders in Southeast Asia – to think that Communism was on the march in the region. In addition to Mao in China and Ho in Vietnam, there were Communist-led rebellions in Indonesia, in newly independent Burma, in Malaya, and in the Philippines. All four rebellions would fail in due course, but in late 1949 their mere existence fueled Western fears. Did the historical momentum now lie with the

2 A portion of this report is in *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Senator Gravel ed. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), vol. I, 82.

Communists? Even if it didn't in objective terms, might the perception gain hold that it did, sending messages that could have a pernicious impact on American national security interests? It seemed all too possible.

Domestic political pressures also inclined the Truman White House to link Indochina developments to broader developments. What historians would call the Second Red Scare was now underway, and Truman experienced ferocious partisan assaults for supposedly "abandoning" Chiang Kai-shek and "losing" China. He and his aides felt pressure to show their firmness elsewhere in the region, and providing aid to the French was one way to do so. It is of considerable significance in this regard, as historian Robert McMahon has noted, that the initial American dollar commitment to the French effort in Vietnam came from funds designated by the president's congressional critics for containment of Communism "within the general area of China."[3]

American strategists were not the only ones to see the Indochina conflict through a Cold War lens. DRV officials did too. Senior Vietminh theoretician Truong Chinh, for example, welcomed the coming of the Cold War to Vietnam and declared that the war against France was now not just a national liberation conflict but an integral part of the international Communist struggle against the United States in Asia. Vietnamese Communist sources make clear that leaders were keen to push the revolution not merely in Vietnam but beyond, and that their views on this score jibed with those of leaders in Beijing.

Important though the Chinese and American assistance was to the fighting capabilities of the two sides, it did not change the overall strategic situation: the Vietminh continued to hold the advantage, notwithstanding the fact that US aid to the French war effort was massively larger than that of Beijing to the DRV. The French in 1951 achieved some tactical successes under General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, beating back daring offensives by General Vo Nguyen Giap, but these results did not seriously impair Vietminh capabilities. By early 1953, with the fighting now entering its seventh year, and with no end in sight, French popular disenchantment with the war grew markedly. From across the political spectrum came proposals for early withdrawal from Indochina. The proposals were rejected. The French government, feeling pressure from Washington to remain steadfast in the struggle, insisted that its policy of holding on in Indochina was working and that the war-weary Vietnamese were bound sooner or later to accept any arrangement that promised a stable regime and

3 Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 40.

security. The Vietnamese would rally to Bao Dai, Paris officials vowed, if the Communists could only be held back by military action a little longer.

Privately, these same Paris leaders were much more circumspect about the prospects. Many wanted to end the war by negotiation, a notion that found no favor in Washington (this despite the fact that the Americans were themselves pursuing the diplomatic option in Korea). And so the fighting raged on, while the United States kept raising the level of its material aid until American taxpayers were carrying, by the spring of 1954, about three-quarters of the financial cost of the French effort. Bombers, cargo planes, trucks, tanks, naval craft, automatic weapons, small arms and ammunition, radios, hospital and engineering equipment plus financial aid flowed heavily. Between 1950 and 1954, US investment in the war in Indochina reached a total of approximately $3 billion.

Dominoes, anyone?

By 1953, if not before, American planners were in fact far more committed to the French war effort than the French were. The apocalyptic scenario depicted in the 1949 NSC report quoted above remained operative, even though its dire warning of a "coordinated offensive" in Southeast Asia directed by the Kremlin had not come true. The NSC report had been an early version of the so-called domino theory, and it was followed by other, similar articulations in the years thereafter, all arguing the same point: If Vietnam was allowed to "fall," other countries would inevitably and perhaps swiftly follow suit.

It was, of course, Dwight Eisenhower who famously used the metaphor of falling dominoes at a press conference on April 7, 1954, as French forces faced the prospect of a major military defeat at Dien Bien Phu in northwest Tonkin. Even before that date, his administration had pushed the theory harder than did its predecessor. In August 1953, for example, Eisenhower declared: "If Indochina goes, several things happen right away. The Malayan peninsula, the last little bit of the end hanging on down there, would be scarcely defensible … all India would be outflanked. Burma would certainly, in its weakened condition, be no defense."[4] Vice President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles spoke in similar terms, with the latter telling Congress that defeat in Indochina could trigger a "chain reaction throughout the Far East and Southeast Asia."[5]

4 Quoted in *Pentagon Papers*, vol. I, 591–92.

5 Allan B. Cole (ed.), *Conflict in Indo-China and International Repercussions: A Documentary History, 1945–55* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1956), 171.

It is curious that the passage of time since 1949 had only made US officials more attached to this kind of theorizing. Never mind that in no previous case had the fall of a country to Communism triggered the rapid fall of a whole string of other countries. Even in a weaker form, envisioning only a short row of dominoes, in this case only those countries nearby in Southeast Asia, the theory seemingly bore little relation to reality. China, the world's most populous country, had gone Communist in 1949, but that event had not caused dominoes to fall.

Just how much Eisenhower believed in a mechanistic domino theory is a matter of debate. But it's clear he endorsed the general proposition that Communism was expanding, and that this was dangerous and should be prevented. Hence, the close consideration he and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, gave to intervening militarily in Vietnam in the spring of 1954 – in April they asked Congress for authority to use, if necessary, US troops to save France's position. The lawmakers refused to go along unless the British also joined, and Winston Churchill's government declined, on the ground that the intervention might precipitate a disastrous war with China if not with the Soviet Union too. British officials were dubious in any case that limited military intervention had any real hope of salvaging the French position and, accordingly, pinned their hopes on a negotiated settlement. Eisenhower refused to go in alone, and no US military intervention occurred that spring.

Important though Cold War strategic concerns were in shaping Eisenhower's policy on Indochina in 1953–54, he – like all six US presidents between 1946 and 1975 – also acted partly out of domestic political concerns. Savvy politician that he was, Eisenhower understood that he could face criticism at home from two different directions if he downplayed Indochina's importance. On the one side, the American public and their representatives in Congress would be reluctant to allocate funds on a matter not deemed critically important to US national security concerns. On the other, McCarthyism remained a force to be reckoned with in American politics, and the president had no desire to see the "Who lost China?" question posed again, this time with respect to Vietnam. Eisenhower knew he was already suspect among some in the Republican old guard for agreeing to an armistice in Korea the previous summer – an action, they grumbled, that constituted snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

Interregnum

On May 7, 1954, Giap's forces overran the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu. The following day, an international conference already in session in Geneva

began to discuss a basis for a ceasefire in the war. Although the conflict was approaching its climax and Vietminh leaders vowed to continue fighting until they won a definitive victory, there was reason to hope that a negotiated settlement might be possible. France was plainly losing the will to continue a war that many of its leaders doubted could be won. Many NATO powers wanted Paris to cut its losses in Southeast Asia to concentrate its attention instead on pressing matters close to home, such as the proposed European Defense Community. Neutralist Asian states likewise wanted an end to the fighting, which they saw as retarding the development of newly independent countries in South and Southeast Asia. Most important, both China and the Soviet Union saw, for different reasons, much to gain from a political settlement. Moscow leaders worried that a prolongation of the fighting would only increase Chinese and American influence in the region, while officials in Beijing saw in the Geneva Conference a chance to demonstrate simultaneously their great power credentials and avoid indefinitely matching in Indochina the stepped-up pace of US military aid, with the attendant risk of a general war.

The Vietminh and the Americans were less enthusiastic participants. Hanoi leaders were reluctant to agree to a compromise settlement when military victory seemed within reach but were persuaded by Moscow and Beijing to accept a settlement that left them in control of only a part of the country. Take one half of the loaf now, the Communist powers in effect told them, and count on getting the other in the not-too-distant future. The senior American representative at Geneva, Secretary of State Dulles, meanwhile had grave misgivings about the negotiations, and he encouraged the French to continue the struggle in Indochina in the interest of the "free world." The French refused, and after ten weeks a peace settlement was signed. Vietnam was partitioned at the seventeenth parallel pending nationwide elections in 1956. The Vietminh took control north of the parallel, while the southern portion came under the control of the Catholic nationalist Ngo Dinh Diem, who had the backing of the United States.

And with that, the struggle for Indochina entered a kind of interregnum; a war had ended but what replaced it was not quite peace. In the North, the DRV leadership set about consolidating its control, while Diem sought to do the same in the South. The Eisenhower administration, meanwhile, tried to salvage what it could from what senior officials considered a major Cold War setback for the United States. Accordingly, in September, it took the lead role in the formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), a largely toothless anti-Communist alliance intended to signal resolve to Beijing and Moscow. The other members were France, Britain, Australia, New Zealand,

20. French prisoners of war and their Vietnamese captors, July 1954. Losing the battle of Dien Bien Phu made France withdraw from Indochina.

Pakistan, and, as the only Southeast Asian representatives, Thailand and the Philippines. In South Vietnam, the administration moved swiftly to supplant French influence with American dollars, advisers, and *matériel*. All too aware that Ho Chi Minh would likely win a nationwide election, the administration supported Diem's refusal in 1955 to hold even the consultations with the DRV that had been envisioned in the Geneva Accords.

Diem's truculence caused consternation in the other major world capitals, but none of these governments were willing to push the matter. The new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev did not want a fracas over elections in Vietnam to interfere with his policy of "peaceful coexistence" with the West. Chinese officials also stayed largely silent, content to issue tepid protests. Britain, with the Soviet Union the sponsor of the Geneva Conference, initially worked to ensure the implementation of the accords, but backed off when Washington made its position clear. Prime Minister Anthony Eden griped that his government was being "treated like Australia" by the Americans, but he was not willing to risk a serious falling out with his powerful ally on account of Indochina.[6] The July 1956 deadline for national elections in Vietnam came and went with no balloting taking place.

6 Anthony Eden, quoted in Arthur Combs, "The Path Not Taken: The British Alternative to US Policy in Vietnam, 1954–1956," *Diplomatic History*, 19 (Winter 1995), 51.

The Saigon leader and his American patrons had what they wanted, and for a time it looked like the young Republic of (South) Vietnam would become a stable and prosperous entity. The other world powers seemed content to keep the country divided indefinitely, with the Soviets in 1957 even floating the idea of admitting both Vietnams into the United Nations. (The Western powers, fearful of the implications for Germany, said no thanks.) As American aid dollars, technical know-how, and products poured into the South in the second half of the 1950s, some US officials spoke hopefully about a "Diem miracle," about South Vietnam being a "showcase" for America's foreign aid program.

Appearances deceived. US aid, necessary though it was, inevitably fostered a dependent relationship, which undercut the Saigon government's legitimacy with the southern populace. Though a man of principle and personal courage, Diem had a limited concept of political leadership and was inflexible and despotic. His policies – which favored the Catholic minority and showed little sensitivity to the needs of the Vietnamese people – alienated many. He demonstrated limited interest in enacting meaningful political reform. From time to time, American officials pushed him in that direction, but usually they got nowhere. Contrary to many historical accounts, it was Diem, not the United States, who was the dominant voice in South Vietnamese politics. Washington never had as much influence over Vietnamese affairs after 1955 as the French had before.

Slowly, beginning in 1957, a guerrilla insurgency arose in the South to challenge Diem's rule. The fighters included former Vietminh who had remained in the South after partition, but also included new recruits, non-Communists alienated by Diem's repressive actions. The insurgency was not imposed by Hanoi; on the contrary, the DRV leadership went through a wrenching series of deliberations about whether to support it, with some Politburo members arguing for the need to focus exclusively on building a socialist state in the North. Precisely when Hanoi leaders gave their approval for armed struggle in the South remains a matter of debate (many accounts point to the 15th Plenum of the Party Central Committee in early 1959), but give it they did, although through the end of 1960 Hanoi still emphasized the political over the military struggle. Only in January 1961 did the Politburo assert that "the revolution in the South is moving along the path toward a general insurrection with new characteristics, and the possibility of a peaceful development of the revolution is now almost nonexistent."[7] Henceforth, military struggle should thus be placed on equal footing with political struggle.

7 *Cuoc Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc 1954–1975* [The Anti-American National Salvation Resistance 1954–1975] (Hanoi: Army Printing House, 1988), 81.

The Second Indochina War

By the start of 1961, then, the Second Indochina War was underway. A new American president, John F. Kennedy (JFK) took office at just this time, and Indochina was from the start an important foreign-policy issue for his administration. Initially, however, it was not Vietnam but Laos that loomed largest. Laos had been declared neutral by the Geneva conferees in 1954, and Washington had thereafter sent aid and advisery personnel to try to secure stable, pro-Western rule in the small, landlocked country. The Vietnamese countered by building up the Pathet Lao in the east. By the time of Kennedy's inauguration, the US-sponsored government of Phoumi Nosavan faced imminent defeat at the hands of Pathet Lao guerrillas, heavily backed by the DRV. Outgoing president Eisenhower and several senior US officials urged JFK to intervene militarily, but he demurred, in part due to opposition from the British and French governments. Instead, Kennedy opted to back a Soviet-sponsored initiative to convene a new Geneva conference on Laos for the purpose of negotiating a settlement among the competing factions. In July 1962, a deal was signed. It did not bring lasting peace, but it did remove Laos from the list of Cold War hot spots.

For Kennedy, diplomacy seemed the only viable option on Laos. But he feared that by choosing this course he had opened himself up to charges of being "soft on communism" from his domestic opponents, many of whom were also attacking him for the failed effort to overthrow Fidel Castro in 1961. He determined to stand firm in Vietnam. The administration consequently stepped up aid dollars to the Diem regime, increased the air-dropping of raiding teams into North Vietnam, and launched crop destruction by herbicides to starve the Vietcong (as the insurgents in the South became known) and expose their hiding places. Kennedy also strengthened the US military presence in South Vietnam, to the point that by 1963 more than 16,000 military advisers were in the country, some authorized to take part in combat alongside the US-equipped Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

Meanwhile, opposition to Diem's repressive regime increased. Peasants objected to programs that removed them from their villages for their own safety, and Buddhist monks, protesting the Roman Catholic Diem's religious persecution, poured gasoline over their robes and ignited themselves in the streets of Saigon. Intellectuals complained that Diem countenanced corruption in his government and concentrated power in the hands of family and friends, and blasted his policy of jailing critics to silence them. Eventually US officials, with Kennedy's approval, encouraged dissident ARVN generals to

remove Diem and his influential brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. On November 1, 1963, the generals struck, ousting Diem and then murdering him and Nhu. Less than three weeks later Kennedy himself was assassinated in Dallas.

The timing and suddenness of Kennedy's death ensured that Vietnam would be a particularly controversial aspect of his legacy. Just what would have happened in Southeast Asia had Kennedy returned from Texas alive can never be known, of course, but that has not stopped historians (including this one) from speculating. Consensus is usually elusive in such counterfactual exercises, and even more so in this case given the contradictory nature of Kennedy's Vietnam policy. He expanded US involvement and approved a coup against Diem, but despite the periodic urgings of top advisers he refused to commit US ground forces to the struggle. Over time he became increasingly skeptical about South Vietnam's prospects and hinted that he would end the American commitment after winning reelection in 1964. Some authors have gone further and argued that he had commenced an American withdrawal from Vietnam even at the time of his death, but the evidence for this claim is thin. More likely, JFK arrived in Dallas still uncertain about how to solve his Vietnam problem, postponing – as veteran politicians often do – the truly difficult choices until later.

Lyndon Johnson (LBJ), too, sought to put off the tough decisions for as long as possible. In the early months, he viewed all Vietnam options through the lens of the 1964 election. "Stay the course" seemed to be the wisest strategy in that regard, far less risky than either precipitous withdrawal or major escalation. Yet Johnson also wanted victory, or at least to avoid defeat, which in practice amounted to the same thing. As a result, throughout 1964, the administration secretly planned for an expansion of the war to North Vietnam and never seriously considered negotiating a settlement. In early August, the president launched the first direct US military attacks on North Vietnam, after two American destroyers reported coming under attack in the Gulf of Tonkin. He did so despite conflicting evidence as to what had occurred in the Gulf and why. Johnson also pushed through Congress the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave him the authority to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." In so doing, Congress essentially surrendered its war-making powers to the executive branch. The resolution, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara later noted, served "to open the floodgates."[8]

8 Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crown, 1995), 141.

Johnson, delighted with the broad authority the resolution gave him, also appreciated what the Gulf of Tonkin affair did for his political standing – his public approval ratings went up dramatically, and his show of force effectively removed Vietnam as a campaign issue for the Republican Party's presidential nominee Barry Goldwater. On the ground in South Vietnam, however, the outlook remained grim in the final weeks of 1964, as the Vietcong continued to make gains. US officials responded by fine-tuning the secret plans for an escalation of American involvement.

In Hanoi, as well, plans were laid in 1964 for stepped-up military action. Already in December 1963, in the aftermath of the Diem coup, DRV leaders had decided to escalate the fighting in the South, in the hopes that further deterioration would either cause the Americans to give up the ghost and go home or leave them insufficient time to embark on a major escalation of their own.

Having made this decision, Hanoi officials were slow to carry it out, in part because their allies in Beijing and Moscow urged caution. Neither Communist giant was keen to see an Americanized war in Vietnam, one that could confront them with difficult choices and potentially bring them into direct contact with the US Seventh Fleet. Their own bilateral relationship deeply fractious, they also each sought to keep the other from gaining too much influence in Hanoi. Both advised the DRV to go slowly, and to avoid provoking Washington. The North Vietnamese professed to agree, even as they used the final weeks of 1964 to step up the infiltration of men and *matériel* into the South. Premier Pham Van Dong said during a meeting with Mao Zedong in October 1964: "If the United States dares to start a [larger] war, we will fight it, and we will win it. But it would be better if it did not come to that."[9]

Americanization

But come to that it did. In early December, after Johnson's massive election victory, he and his aides agreed on a two-phase escalation of the fighting. The first involved "armed reconnaissance strikes" against infiltration routes in Laos – part of the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail that carried men and *matériel* into the South – as well as retaliatory airstrikes against North Vietnam in the event of a major Vietcong attack. The second phase anticipated "graduated military pressure" against the North, in the form of aerial bombing and,

9 O. A. Westad, Chen Jian, Stein Tønnesson, Nguyen Vu Tung, and James G. Hershberg (eds.), *77 Conversations between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Vietnam*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 22 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 1998), 83–84.

almost certainly, the dispatch of US ground troops to the South. Phase one would begin as soon as possible; phase two would come later, after thirty days or more.

In February 1965, following Vietcong attacks on American installations in South Vietnam that killed thirty-two Americans, Johnson ordered Operation Rolling Thunder, a bombing program planned the previous fall that continued, more or less uninterrupted, until October 1968. Then, on March 8, the first US combat battalions came ashore near Danang. The North Vietnamese met the challenge. They hid in shelters and rebuilt roads and bridges with a tenaciousness that frustrated and awed American officials. They also increased infiltration into the South.

That July, Johnson convened a series of high-level discussions about US war policy. Though these deliberations had about them the character of a charade – Johnson wanted history to record that he agonized over a choice he had in fact already made (and many historians have obliged him) – they did confirm that the American commitment would be more or less open-ended. On July 28, the president publicly announced a significant troop increase, disclosing that others would follow. By the end of 1965, more than 180,000 US ground troops were in South Vietnam. In 1966, the figure climbed to 385,000. In 1967 alone, US war planes flew 108,000 sorties and dropped 226,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnam. In 1968, US troop strength reached 536,100. The Soviet Union and China responded by increasing their material assistance to the DRV, though their combined amount never came close to matching American totals.

The 1965 Americanization came despite deep misgivings on the part of influential and informed voices at home and abroad. In the key months of decision (November 1964 through February 1965), Democratic leaders in the Senate, major newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, and prominent columnists like Walter Lippmann warned against deepening involvement (though, in the case of the lawmakers, they did so quietly, behind closed doors). Inside the administration, the opponents included Under Secretary of State George W. Ball and Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey. The latter assured Johnson that the Republican right's dismal showing in the November elections gave the administration ample maneuverability on Vietnam. Abroad, all of America's main allies cautioned against escalation and urged a political settlement, on the grounds that no military solution favorable to the United States was possible. Remarkably, even many of the proponents of the escalation shared this pessimism. They knew that the odds of success were not great, that the Saigon government was weak and getting weaker, lacking even the semblance of popular support.

Why, then, did Johnson and his advisers choose war? Think domino theory again, only in a new form. The worry now was less tangible, more amorphous than in the early 1950s, as US officials began to expound what Jonathan Schell has called the "psychological domino theory."[10] To be sure, from the start, the domino theory had contained an important psychological component; now, however, that component became supreme. *Credibility* was the new watchword, as policymakers declared it essential to stand firm in Vietnam in order to demonstrate America's determination to defend its vital interests not only in the region but around the world. Should the United States waver in Vietnam, friends both in Southeast Asia and elsewhere would doubt Washington's commitment to their defense, and might succumb to enemy pressure even without a massive invasion by foreign Communist forces – what political scientists call a "bandwagon" effect. Adversaries, meanwhile, would be emboldened to challenge US interests worldwide.

Vietnam, in this way of thinking, was a "test case" of Washington's willingness and ability to exert its power on the international stage. Even the incontrovertible evidence of a deep Sino-Soviet split, which affected the strategic balance in the Cold War in the mid-1960s in serious ways, evidently did not lessen the importance of the credibility imperative. Beijing appeared to be the more hostile and aggressive of the two Communist powers, the more deeply committed to global revolution, but the Soviets, too, supported Hanoi; any slackening in the American commitment to South Vietnam's defense could cause an increase in Soviet adventurism. Conversely, if Washington stood firm and worked to ensure the survival of a non-Communist Saigon government, it could send a powerful message to Moscow and Beijing that indirect aggression could not succeed.

Many of the aforementioned opponents of the 1965 escalation rejected this line of argument. They rebuffed the notion that US credibility was on the line in Vietnam and that a setback there would inevitably cause similar losses elsewhere. Some said US credibility would *suffer* if Johnson made Vietnam a large-scale war, as audiences around the world questioned Washington's judgment and its sense of priorities. On occasion, top officials allowed that the critics might be right, but they pressed the credibility argument anyway. One reason was that for many of them, it was not merely *America's* credibility that was perceived to be at stake; it was also the administration's *domestic political* credibility and officials' own *personal* credibility. Johnson

10 Jonathan Schell, *The Time of Illusion* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 9.

worried that failure in Vietnam would harm his domestic agenda; even more, he feared the personal humiliation he imagined would inevitably accompany a defeat – and for him, a negotiated withdrawal constituted defeat. Senior advisers, meanwhile, many of whom had for years publicly trumpeted Vietnam's importance, knew that to start singing a different tune now would expose themselves to potential ridicule and endanger their careers.

What, then, of the stated objective of helping a South Vietnamese ally repulse external aggression? That too figured into the equation, but not as much as it would have had the Saigon government – racked with infighting among senior and mid-level officials and possessing little broad-based support – done more to assist in its own defense. Talented and courageous anti-Communists dedicated to the war effort certainly existed in the South, including in the halls of power, but never in sufficient numbers, even after the ascension to power in 1965 of a more stable regime under Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky and General Nguyen Van Thieu. The Ky–Thieu government, a rueful Robert McNamara would remark two years later, in June 1967, "is still largely corrupt, incompetent, and unresponsive to the needs and wishes of the people."[11]

To the Paris Accords

The American forces fought well, and their entry into the conflict in 1965, together with the aerial bombardment of enemy areas, helped stave off a South Vietnamese defeat. In that sense, Americanization achieved its most immediate and basic objective. But if the stepped-up fighting in 1965–66 demonstrated to Hanoi leaders that the war would not swiftly be won, it also showed the same thing to their counterparts in Washington. Chinese and Soviet military and economic aid now flowed into North Vietnam in increased amounts, and Beijing also sent – beginning in June 1965 – support units to assist the war effort. Until March 1968 they would come, ultimately totaling some 320,000 troops – including anti-aircraft artillery units, defense engineering units, railway units, and road-building units.

As the North Vietnamese matched each American escalation with one of their own, the war became a stalemate. The US commander, General William Westmoreland, proved mistaken in his belief that a strategy of attrition

11 Robert McNamara, quoted in Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York: Norton, 1989), 51.

represented the key to victory – the enemy had a seemingly endless supply of recruits to throw into battle. Worse, the American reliance on massive military and other technology – including carpet bombing, napalm, and crop defoliants that destroyed entire forests – alienated many South Vietnamese and brought new recruits to the Vietcong. A major Communist offensive coinciding with the Tet lunar New Year in early 1968, though inconclusive in its military effects, inflamed American domestic opinion and indirectly caused an embattled LBJ to rule out (publicly at least) a run for reelection.

This was the situation that confronted Richard Nixon when he assumed the presidency in January 1969. "I'm not going to end up like LBJ," Nixon vowed before the inauguration, recalling that the war had destroyed Johnson's political career. "I'm going to stop that war. Fast." He didn't, and the main reason is he wanted to win it first. Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, understood that the conflict was generating deep divisions at home and hurting the nation's image abroad, and that they had to begin withdrawing American troops. The difficulties of the war signified to them that American power was limited and, in relative terms, in decline. Yet the two men feared, just like the Johnson team before them, that a precipitous disengagement would harm American credibility on the world stage. Nor were they any less committed than their predecessors to preserving an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam, if not indefinitely then at least long enough to get Nixon reelected. To accomplish these aims, Nixon set upon a policy that at once contracted and expanded the war.

A centerpiece of Nixon's policy was "Vietnamization" – the building up of South Vietnamese forces to replace US forces. Nixon hoped such a policy would quiet domestic opposition and also advance the peace talks underway in Paris since May 1968. Accordingly, the president began to withdraw American troops from Vietnam, decreasing their number from 543,000 in the spring of 1969 to 156,800 by the end of 1971, and to 60,000 by the fall of 1972. Vietnamization did help limit domestic dissent – as did replacing the existing draft with a lottery system, by which only those nineteen-year-olds with low lottery numbers would be drafted – but it did nothing to end the stalemate in the Paris negotiations. Even as he embarked on this troop withdrawal, therefore, Nixon intensified the bombing of North Vietnam and enemy supply depots in neighboring Cambodia, hoping to pound Hanoi into concessions. When the North Vietnamese refused to buckle, Nixon turned up the heat: in April 1970, South Vietnamese and US forces invaded Cambodia in search of arms depots and North Vietnamese army sanctuaries.

The president announced publicly that he would not allow "the world's most powerful nation" to act "like a pitiful, helpless giant." Maybe not, but the invasion triggered nationwide protests in cities and on college campuses, and caused an angry US Senate to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution of 1964. After two months, US troops withdrew from Cambodia, having accomplished little. Another invasion the following year, this one into Laos and involving no regular US ground troops, likewise yielded no appreciable results.

The fighting continued through 1972, but there was also a diplomatic breakthrough. When Hanoi launched a major offensive across the border into South Vietnam in March, Nixon responded with a massive aerial onslaught against the DRV. In December 1972, after an apparent peace agreement collapsed when the South Vietnamese refused to moderate their position, the United States again launched a furious air assault on the North – the so-called "Christmas bombing." Months earlier, Kissinger and his North Vietnamese counterpart in the negotiations, Le Duc Tho, had resolved many of the outstanding issues. Most notably, Kissinger agreed that North Vietnamese troops could remain in the South after the settlement, and Tho abandoned Hanoi's insistence that the Saigon government of Nguyen Van Thieu be removed. Nixon had instructed Kissinger to make concessions because the president was eager to improve relations with the Soviet Union and China, to win back the allegiance of the United States' allies, and to restore stability at home. On January 27, 1973, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho signed a ceasefire agreement in Paris. Nixon then compelled a reluctant Thieu to accept it by threatening to cut off US aid while promising to defend the South if the North violated the agreement. In the accord, the United States promised to withdraw all of its troops within sixty days. North Vietnamese troops would be allowed to stay in South Vietnam, and a coalition government that included the Vietcong eventually would be formed in the South.

The United States pulled its troops out of Vietnam, leaving behind some military advisers. Soon, both North and South violated the ceasefire, and large-scale fighting resumed. The feeble Saigon government, whose military by the start of 1975 possessed a huge numerical advantage in tanks, artillery pieces, and combat-ready troops, could not hold out. Just before its surrender, hundreds of Americans and Vietnamese who had worked for them were hastily evacuated from Saigon. On April 29, 1975, the South Vietnamese government collapsed, and Vietnam was reunified under a Communist government in Hanoi.

The end came even sooner in Cambodia. The Nixon-ordered invasion of 1970 had set in motion a bloody five-year civil war between a US-sponsored

21. Vietnamese try to get on-board a US helicopter sent to evacuate CIA personnel from a building in Saigon, April 29, 1975. The manner of the US exit from Vietnam was humiliating to many Americans and disastrous to the Vietnamese who had collaborated with the United States.

government under Lon Nol and the Communist-led Khmer Rouge. Massive American bombing of Khmer Rouge and North Vietnamese positions in Cambodia propped up the Lon Nol government for a time but devastated Cambodian society in the process. The physical destruction was enormous, and many hundreds of thousands of refugees flooded Phnom Penh and a few other urban centers. Upon returning from a visit to the war-torn country in early 1975, Republican congressman Paul N. McCloskey said: In Cambodia, the United States had done "greater evil than we have done to any country in the world, and wholly without reason, except for our benefit to fight against the Vietnamese."[12] On April 1, 1975 Lon Nol relinquished power and fled the country for Hawaii; on the tenth, US president Gerald Ford ordered the evacuation of all remaining American personnel; and on the seventeenth, the Khmer Rouge triumphantly entered the capital.

Indochina's third domino fell with much less violence and destruction. In early 1973, soon after the signing of the Paris Accords, Laotian prime

12 Quoted in Arnold R. Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 273.

minister Souvanna Phouma reached a ceasefire deal with the Pathet Lao that gave the Communists a dominant position in Vientiane's coalition government. The departure of the United States further strengthened the position of the Pathet Lao, and following the Communist takeovers in Vietnam and Cambodia in April 1975, the non-Communist leaders fled for Thailand. That December the Pathet Lao announced the creation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Truong Chinh's dream of a revolutionary Indochina seemed to have come true.

Indochina and the Cold War

Outside Indochina, however, the dominoes did not fall, and it remains to assess the conception of Indochina as a Cold War battleground – a conception that took shape first in Washington, as we have seen, early in the Franco-Vietminh struggle, and was crucially important to all that occurred in Indochina for the next quarter-century. Ho Chi Minh was a pawn of the Kremlin, so went the argument, and his struggle was one part of a global, Soviet-directed offensive; as such, he had to be stopped. This view of the stakes always had its critics, inside and outside the American government, and it was never a widely held view in official Paris. In retrospect, moreover, it looks decidedly dubious. Stalin had minimal interest in Indochina and, indeed, saw the conflict there as a nuisance. Neither he nor his Kremlin successors had major ambitions in that part of the world, and they sought at all times to avoid a major East–West military showdown over Vietnam. DRV leadership, meanwhile, though dependent on Soviet and Chinese aid after US assistance began flowing to the French, always had considerable (though never complete) success keeping its powerful patrons at arm's length.

There's a deeper problem here. It is not at all clear that had Paris and Washington opted against war, other powers would have concluded that the credibility of US and French commitments elsewhere in the world would be grievously damaged. Harry Truman, it is well to recall, had not vowed to keep China from going Communist in 1949, and that defeat caused no meaningful pro-Moscow realignment in the international system. Nor had the "loss" of Cuba a decade later caused dominoes to fall in Latin America. By the same token, Nikita Khrushchev's humiliation in Cuba in 1962 did not mean that the United States was free to run rampant in Eastern Europe. Nor had French prestige suffered when Charles de Gaulle withdrew from an untenable position in Algeria; if anything, it rose. The list goes on. As George Ball put it

in June 1965 in arguing (too late, as it turned out) against Americanization: "[N]o great captain has ever been blamed for a successful tactical withdrawal."[13]

By their repeated public vows of determination regarding Indochina, French and American leaders backed themselves into a corner and reduced their maneuverability. And not merely in geopolitical terms: for successive American administrations, as for many of the governments of the French Fourth Republic, Indochina's importance derived in large measure from the effects failure there could have at home, on elections, on political alignments and agendas, on individual careers. What James C. Thomson, Jr., said of the Vietnam-era US presidents could be said also of French leaders in 1946–54: they feared they were the last domino in line. From 1947 onwards, officials in Paris and Washington always publicly defined the struggle in Cold War terms, in terms of stopping the spread of Moscow-directed Communist expansion. It was a foreign-policy rationale, and it was indeed one reason for the long and bloody and ultimately unsuccessful effort aimed at defeating the forces of Ho Chi Minh. But only one. Other factors also shaped policy, notably careerist and domestic political calculations.

For Ho Chi Minh, too, the Cold War was an early and constant preoccupation, presenting a range of problems, challenges, and opportunities. Like Sukarno in Indonesia, Ho moved quickly after Japan's capitulation to seek American assistance, framing his request in terms of Washington's historic anticolonialism and support for self-determination. Like Sukarno, Ho was disappointed when US leaders chose instead to back their European Cold War allies. But whereas Sukarno subsequently proved his anti-Communist bona fides by suppressing internal Communist bids for primacy in the larger Indonesian independence movement, thereby ultimately earning the Truman administration's backing for independence from the Dutch (granted in 1949), Ho, the veteran Comintern agent and Indochina Communist Party founder, turned instead to Moscow and Beijing. Their assistance was vital but came at a price: the DRV, as a member of the Communist bloc after 1950, would be unable to use the international system to full effect against France and, indeed, had now to contend with a hostile United States. To a degree not fully evident at the time, the superpower actions in Indochina in 1950 had the effect of intensifying the struggle and prolonging it, and of reducing (but not eliminating) the freedom of action of both France and the DRV.

13 George Ball, "Cutting Our Losses in Vietnam," June 28, 1965, US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1995), vol. III, 222.

Through it all, year after bloody year, DRV leaders persevered, mobilizing every available resource for the struggle, first against France, then the United States and its Saigon ally. Victory would come in the end, on a spring day in 1975, almost three decades after Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence. Ho himself would not live to see it. It would be left to colleagues to preside over the celebrations, and to tally up the enormous costs of thirty years of war.