

Indochina 1945-1960: It Started Not With a Bang, but a Whimper

by

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Abstract

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Indochina 1945-1960: It Started Not With a Bang, but a Whimper

There is no reason that the French forces should not remain in Indochina and win. They have greater manpower, and a tremendous advantage over their adversaries, particularly airpower.

—Richard M. Nixon
Vice President of the United States, 1954

The long, bloody, and expensive conflicts in Vietnam beginning in 1946 with France and ending in 1975 with the North Vietnamese unification of the country, still have much to teach students of strategy and policy making. These conflicts not only provide military lessons learned, but also lessons on policy and strategy formulation in the complex world that was post World War II. This paper will provide a case study on French policy making, strategy, and experiences in Indochina, and how they subsequently shaped the American theater strategy in building South Vietnamese military capability.

French Policy Making that Led to War

Indochina was France's richest and most populated colony in its empire at the end of World War II. After the abrupt surrender of Japan in September 1945 with the resulting power vacuum, Indochina became the most important issue to be solved by French colonial policy makers. In the late years of World War II, de Gaulle and his supporters viewed the colonies as the key means to restore France as a World Power.¹ According Martin Shipway, France was prepared to grant some autonomy, but not outright independence, according to the following colonial policy recommendation put forth in 1944 which stated, "The ends of the civilizing mission accomplished in the colonies exclude any idea of autonomy, all possibility of evolution outside the French

bloc; also excluded is the eventual establishment of self-government in the colonies, even in the distant future.”²

As late as July 1945, the French expected the war to last another two to six months, but the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki helped produce the surrender of the Japanese in Indochina just over two weeks later. That prompted a general insurrection across the colony and the establishment on September 2, 1945, of the Vietnamese Democratic Republic (DRV), with the leader of the Viet Minh, Ho Chi Minh, as its president.³ The French would never again establish the degree of control in Indochina they had prior to the Japanese takeover.⁴

In December 1945, the French returned to Indochina and were able to reestablish control of the south within four months, but they were unable to reestablish control in the north due to the presence of the DRV.⁵ As a result, the French negotiated the March Accords in 1946 with the DRV which allowed a French military presence in the north.⁶ The March Accords and the follow on Fontainebleau Conference, which was held between the French and DRV in July 1946 to determine a more permanent solution regarding the status of Indochina, would ultimately fail in maintaining peace and result in the First Indochina War. The primary reason for the failure was deliberate sabotage by the colonial administrators.

The mainland France, known as the Metropole, efforts to maintain peace from 1945 to 1946 in Indochina were continually undermined by the colonial administrators, especially the French Vietnamese High Commissioner Admiral d’Argenlieu, and the Commander in Chief of French forces in Indochina General Valluy, who viewed war as a positive step in solving the Indochina issue.⁷ D’Argenlieu and Valluy undertook a

number of unilateral actions to undermine the Metropole's relations with the DRV. These included the deliberate delay of communications between the DRV and France following the breakdown of the Fontainebleau Conference; the declaration Cochinchina, the most valuable of region in Indochina, as an autonomous republic and therefore separate from any negotiations with the DRV; and the occupation of Annam by French forces.⁸

Pride, honor, and fear heavily influenced events. First, the colonial administration was under pressure from colonists to seek revenge for its humiliation from March to September 1945 when the Japanese ousted the Vichy administration, followed by the subsequent liberation movement. Second, the administrators were motivated by the military pride of General de Gaulle, who saw the maintenance of the colonies as a means to reestablish France as world power. Lastly, any French concessions to the Ho Chi Minh government would set an example for other nationalists to seek their own, especially those in North Africa.⁹ The colonial administration was ultimately successful in their efforts to provoke a conflict.¹⁰ In December 1946, war finally broke out between the DRV and France.

War

Not all French commanders were convinced of a complete military victory over the Viet Minh. Some doubted the ability of France to finance a war in Indochina. General Humbert, the chief military advisor of the pre-Fourth Republic transitional coalition government headed by Leon Blum, warned that Indochina would be a bottomless pit and exceed the resources of France. Leclerc, the former acting High Commissioner of Indochina, also added as early as December 1946, that "Since we do not have the means at our disposal to break the back of Vietnamese Nationalism by

force of arms, France must work to reconcile French and Vietnamese interests".¹¹ As early as September 1946, military spending in Indochina was 50 percent above what was outlined in the budget.¹²

D' Argenlieu and Valluy had the utmost confidence in French military power and were confident it would prevail. However, their failure to achieve a quick victory resulted in the French becoming more and more reliant on their allies, who were reluctant to support a war to retain colonial possessions.¹³

1946-1949

It is not the intent of this paper to go into detail on the campaigns throughout the conflict, but rather to explain the impact the operations during this time period had on military and political decision making for both France and the US. The fighting from 1946-1949 was characterized by French efforts to seize major population centers, destroy Viet-Minh military forces, and capture its leadership through the execution of large envelopment operations.¹⁴ Simultaneously, T'ai tribe battalions indigenous to the T'ai mountain region in northwest Vietnam successfully cleared the Viet Minh from their native areas.¹⁵

Although the Viet-Minh sustained significant casualties and lost equipment in some of these operations, they were able evade destruction and fight another day. They avoided major engagements in order to continue to build up forces while relying on militia and guerillas to harass the French and deny access to the areas most coveted by the Viet Minh for supplies and recruits.¹⁶ These large sweeping operations marked the beginning of the French obsession with seeking the large scale set piece battle where they could fully bring their advantages in firepower, airpower, and mechanized units to

bear. The French would not find the decisive battle they wanted until 1954 at Dien Bien Phu.¹⁷

Following the big sweeps of 1947, there was an operational pause for both sides from 1948-1950. Vo Nguyen Giap, the commander of Viet Minh forces, used the time to train, organize, and equip his guerilla forces into a conventional force capable of challenging the French on the battlefield, while the French did nothing and lacked the strength to mount decisive operations. Giap saw the transformation of the Viet Minh military to a more conventional force as a prerequisite to conduct sustained, and eventually decisive, offensive operations.¹⁸

The French government in Paris was disturbed by the lack of progress in Indochina and ordered an investigation by their Chief of Staff, General Revers. He produced a sobering report that recommended the evacuation of fixed positions along the Chinese border, a request for significant American aid, a rapid build-up of a Vietnamese National Army (VNA), and the pacification of the populous Red River delta region, prior to the resumption of offensive operations. The recommendations were never holistically acted upon by the French Government because they would have resulted in a loss of prestige from abandoning territory, and required granting a level of independence to Vietnam to form a VNA.¹⁹ During this time a pattern began to emerge that demonstrated the French could only control what they occupied. Although the French controlled the population centers, the Viet Minh ruled the countryside and were able to sustain supplies and recruitment.²⁰

Domestically, polls demonstrated very little enthusiasm for the war. In June 1947, 65 percent of socialists and 34 percent of conservatives were in favor of an immediate

peaceful solution to the war, demonstrating the shaky will of the French people.²¹ Internationally, France faced anti-colonial backlash not only from western powers, but also within southern Asia, that directly threatened its ability to continue military operations in Indochina. India and Burma refused to allow French aircraft or ships access to its facilities. Stevedores and longshoremen in Malaysia, Singapore and Ceylon refused to unload or service French ships, resulting in expensive diversions to other ports.²² The situation produced a lesson learned that the tenuous “12,000 kilometers separating France from Saigon were a crushing liability.”²³

Despite the shaky domestic support, international colonial backlash, and the prospects of a long war that France that did not have the means to conduct, the government was determined to carry on the war. Recognizing its allies would never provide the amount of aid needed to bring about a successful conclusion to a war that was increasingly seen as one of colonial suppression, the French government sought to redefine the conflict as resisting the spread of communism.²⁴

By 1947 France could not deny the fact that nationalism was prevalent not only among the Viet Minh, but also among the Vietnamese people not aligned with the communists. The French government decided to install a non-communist nationalist leader, Bo Dai, to rule over a united Vietnam that would accept French presence.²⁵ He was the last emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty and ruled over Annam from 1926-1945. He later ruled over Tonkin and Annam from March 1945 until August 1945, after being placed on the throne by the Japanese following their successful coup against the Vichy Regime.²⁶

The Bo Dai solution, as the policy was to become known, was designed to demonstrate to the allies of France its devolvement of colonial aspirations. The Bo Dai solution also marked the first attempt by France to move towards a political solution rather than a purely military one.²⁷ Although the policy suffered some initial setbacks which saw Bo Dai exile himself on two separate occasions, France announced in January 1948 it would only negotiate with the Bo Dai government on the future of Vietnam.²⁸

The Bo Dai solution did not gain momentum until the signing of the Elysee Accords in March 1949. Under the accords, the three regions that made up Indochina, Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, would be united to form the State of Vietnam and granted status as an Associated State within the French Union, along with Cambodia and Laos. The Accords provided for some autonomy, but not independence, for Vietnam. The Accords also stated Bo Dai would have control over local affairs, but France would continue to control national defense and foreign affairs.²⁹ Any unifying effect the Accords would have had on the populace was lost due to the length of time it took for the Accords to be ratified by the National Assembly. Due to d'Argenlieu's unilateral action of declaring Cochinchina an autonomous republic in 1946, the National Assembly had to vote to repeal the autonomous status of Cochinchina before it could be united with Annam and Tonkin to form Vietnam.³⁰

The Bo Dai solution was marked by three years of sluggish execution from its inception in 1947 to the ratification of the Elysee Accords in 1950, and in the end, didn't fully satisfy either the French or Vietnamese.³¹ However, the Agreements did lay the foundation for the formation of a Vietnamese National Army (VNA) and, most

importantly, resulted in the recognition of the Bo Dai government by the US, which was deemed an essential first step in securing American aid. By 1949, the military setbacks and losses had become so severe that the lack of resources halted offensive operations, so US aid was needed now more than ever.³²

1950-1953

By 1950, Giap's military was ready to conduct a general offensive. The Viet Minh began with an attack on Cao Bang and the French border forts Revers had recommended be abandoned. When the fighting was over, the French control of North Vietnam was lost forever, mass amounts of equipment were captured by the Viet Minh, and garrison units as well as reinforcements that were committed to the battle were destroyed.³³ This devastating defeat marked the first time France approached the US for massive aid in continuing the war.

Giap then shifted the focus of the offensive south in an effort to seize Hanoi and the Red River Delta region. The offensive resulting in the battles of Vinh-Yen, Mao Khe, and Day River proved ultimately unsuccessful, but greatly influenced Giap's decision-making and future operational approach. Due to the losses in the battle as a result of French firepower, Giap would never again commit his force in a large scale direct approach to penetrate the Red River Delta region, but would instead use indirect methods to take advantage of the French lack of cross country mobility.

Throughout 1952 and 1953, the Viet Minh conducted operations into Laos to threaten French control over what was considered its most loyal Associated State, and reestablish control over the mountain tribal areas in northwest Vietnam. These operations preserved Viet Minh fighting strength and took advantage of its cross country mobility. In contrast, they forced France to fight at the limits of its operational reach,

stretch its logistical supply capabilities, and dissipate its strength because of the need to reinforce and defend the Associated States in accordance with the Elysee Accords.³⁴

Development of the Vietnamese National Army

As the war continued, France was increasingly unable to balance its strategic requirements. At this time, France saw its three defense priorities as the need to contribute to European Defense, ensure the internal and external security of the Metropole, and reestablish order and stop the spread of communism in Indochina.³⁵ At the end of 1950, Indochina accounted for half of French military spending, and as a result, it was unable to meet NATO rearmament goals.³⁶ The maintenance and security of France's African possessions were also of strategic importance and required garrisons. They were seen by French military leaders as a fallback position in case of a Soviet invasion.³⁷

The only way out of the predicament was American aid and the building of the VNA that led to in a US presence in Vietnam for the next 25 years. French Premier Plevin justified his decision to create an indigenous army by stating, "The only possible solution is to build up a strong and sufficient native army to make possible the gradual withdrawal of the French Army for use in Europe."³⁸

Within ten days of the US recognizing Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in February 1950, the French government requested direct military aid for Indochina by explaining to American leaders that unless US aid was given to France, the cost of the Indochina War would force France to withdraw from the region to fulfill its NATO commitments. In November 1950, the then Minister for the Associated States, Jean Letourneau, announced that the primary means of destroying the Viet Minh while increasing the

legitimacy and the capacity of the Bo Dai government would be based on the “twin pillars of American aid and the Vietnamese National Army”.³⁹

The new strategy resulted in an increase in US funding despite the State Department’s assessment that more aid would not have the desired effect on the Viet Minh. The assessment further stated that the Viet Minh had successfully resisted the French force of 150,000 for four years, and even if the aid did produce a military reversal for the Viet Minh, they would just dissolve their main forces and resort to guerilla operations.⁴⁰

The increasing American aid also resulted in more American influence on French policy and strategy. The American terms for aid were no negotiations with the communists or recognition of Mao Tse-Tung, more independence to the Associated States who should receive the majority of the aid directly, and the establishment of the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Vietnam.⁴¹ The mission of MAAG was to oversee the distribution and use of US military aid.⁴²

The French initially started to form Vietnamese units in 1948 and 1949. These forces were referred to as Armed Forces of the Associated States, which further illustrated French reluctance to refer to the Indochina as a separate nation. By 1950, the Vietnamese soldiers under arms numbered 16,000 with no higher headquarters or staffs.⁴³ Following the Elysee Accords, the French reenergized their effort to build a VNA when they reached an agreement with the Bo Dai government during a military convention in December 1950. Under this agreement, most of the officers and NCOs of the VNA would be French, but they would be subject to Bo Dai’s orders as the supreme

commander of the Army. Additionally, the majority of Vietnamese officers and enlisted personnel serving in French units would be transferred to the Vietnamese Army.⁴⁴

The continued formation of the Army was seen by the US as essential to demonstrate to the Vietnamese the legitimacy of the Bo Dai government. However, the process was repeatedly delayed and poorly managed. The Vietnamese Army numbered just 40,000 men by 1951 with only 24 of the expected 34 battalions formed. Further undermining the effort was the total lack of Vietnamese officers and the continued recruitment of Vietnamese for the French forces. The constant changing of cabinets in the Metropole produced disagreements between the French and the Vietnamese on the amount of resources and money each side would contribute towards the formation of the VNA. Until the French released control of the major revenue producing industries and government functions to the Vietnamese, such as customs services, the Vietnamese would be unable to contribute much towards building an army.⁴⁵

The outcome of the fighting in 1952 was again inconclusive, which prompted the US to call on the French to produce a truly independent VNA. The new concept put forward by the French was the formation of 40 to 50 Kinh-Quan, or light battalions. The light battalions were designed to beat the enemy at their own game, by establishing persistent contact with the population to expose Viet Minh operatives, providing security to the population, and conducting information operations to gain popular support for the government. The battalions were also to be well versed in Viet Minh tactics and counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare. What was actually produced was a draftee unit not imbued with nationalist tendencies and with little knowledge of COIN warfare, where the leadership was selected from the ranks after a short period of training.⁴⁶

The Letourneau and Navarre Plans

The Letourneau Plan, put forth by now High Commissioner of Indochina Letourneau, was the result of a statement by President Eisenhower to the French leadership that a precondition for additional US aid was a plan that “if it did not lead to complete victory, would, at least, give hope of an ultimate decision.⁴⁷ The plan was devised in March 1953 by Letourneau while on a visit to Washington, and consisted of three phases. In the first phase, the French and Vietnamese forces would secure the rear areas in central and south Vietnam. These areas would then be taken over by the new VNA light battalions. In the second phase, the French and remaining Vietnamese forces would concentrate in the north as security in the south improved. The third phase consisted of decisive operations in the spring of 1955 to destroy the Viet Minh forces. The plan required the formation of a 120,000 strong VNA and no decisive offensive operations by the Viet Minh for a period of two years.⁴⁸ The plan was considered risk averse, slow, and expensive by the US military and civilian leadership, but was accepted because no other options were forthcoming from the French leadership. The plan was also better than a continuation of the status quo of inaction and stalemate.⁴⁹

The Navarre Plan, based on the Letourneau Plan, was an operational concept formulated as a way to bring the military situation back under French control, and enable the French to negotiate from a position of strength through victory on the battlefield.⁵⁰ Additionally, the plan came at a time when French operations within Indochina were seen by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) as lacking in offensive spirit, and led US leadership to question the amount of aid going to France to conduct the war. In essence, the US was telling France that failure to embrace an offensive mindset and gain the initiative would result in a reduction of aid.⁵¹

The objective of the plan was to demonstrate to the Viet Minh that they had no chance of defeating the French militarily, and must therefore accept a negotiated settlement. The plan was to maintain a defensive posture, in the north while conducting operations in the south during the 1953-54 campaign, then shift mobile forces to the north for decisive operations during the 1954-55 campaign. During this time, Navarre would also continue building up the VNA, gradually granting it more autonomy in operations.⁵²

Although the efforts to build VNA light battalions were progressing, the results were still poor. French refusal to take US training advice, lack of any plan to systematically build officer and non-commissioned officer strength, and most importantly, lack of development of any organizational structure that would facilitate eventual independent operations, all contributed to a poor rating of VNA units. General Trapnell, then Chief of MAAG, was of the opinion that only a full scale US run training program, like that in Korea, could fix the problem.⁵³ Visits to Vietnamese units by MAAG personnel saw a Vietnamese General and his skeleton staff reduced to monitoring French administrative and logistics offices that oversaw the VNA units, some of which were assigned to French commands, and no operational responsibility.⁵⁴

From the French point of view, the poor training, development, and autonomy for the Vietnamese officers and units, although unfortunate, were necessary due to the dire military situation and need to deliver a military victory. With reinforcements from the Metropole not forthcoming, the rapid expansion of the VNA was paramount and the immediate need was combat units supported by French logistical and administrative functions. The creation of a command and support structure at the operational and

strategic levels that had the capability of commanding and supporting VNA operations was out of the question. The French lacked the time needed to create the indigenous knowledge and expertise for those levels of command, and the amount of resources required.⁵⁵ However, US support was based on the establishment of an independent VNA. A battlefield circulation conducted in 1954 by the American MAAG officer Colonel William Rosson, led him to conclude that, “the VNA organized as an appendage to the FEC and wanting for nationalistic zeal, was ineffective.”⁵⁶

French Defeat

In April 1954 the French finally found the set piece battle they were seeking for years at Dien Bien Phu. It resulted in the destruction of the French theater reserve and a loss of leverage at the negotiating table. Roughly two months later would come the destruction of Mobile Group 100, the famed Korea Battalion, and a phased withdrawal within the Red River Delta, followed by the signing of the Geneva Accords on July 21, 1954

Post Geneva Accords

The United States position at the end of World War II was that the “legitimate nationalist aspirations of the people of Indochina must be satisfied, and that a return to the prewar colonial rule is not possible.”⁵⁷ However, changes in the global strategic environment prompted a change in US policy. These included the 1947 Truman Doctrine that vowed to support free peoples resisting subjugation, the defeat of Chinese Nationalist Forces in 1949 and the establishment of the Peoples Republic of China, the Korean War which demonstrated to the US it had mainland Asian national interests at stake, and the growing confrontation with the Warsaw Pact.⁵⁸ MAAG was established primarily as a means to monitor US military and economic aid for France, but within one

year of the Geneva Accords, the US would have the primary responsibility for training the VNA, and after 67 years of rule, the French would withdraw from Indochina.

The Geneva Accords signed on July 20, 1954 officially ended the fighting. The major provisions of the Accords were the establishment of a northern zone for the Viet Minh and a southern zone for the French at the 17th Parallel into which the opposing forces would withdraw, the establishment of civil administration in their respective zones, a provision for general elections that would decide reunification of the country, and the prohibition of any new equipment, personnel, or military bases. The final provision would have lasting consequences on the US advisory effort and placed a cap of 342 military advisors on MAAG that would take years to alter.⁵⁹ Politically, Bo Dai remained Head of State but relocated to Paris. As a result, political leadership in South Vietnam was in the hands of Ngo Dinh Diem, who was appointed as Prime Minister on June 25, 1954.

During this time the US prepared to take over training of the VNA. Prior to assuming such responsibility, the US JCS stated that four conditions needed to be met: a reasonably strong government; a request from the Associated States to conduct the mission which would entail providing equipment, financing, training, and political advice; France granting full independence; and the size and composition of the forces would be based on local military requirements and US interests.⁶⁰

Following the Geneva Accords, any actions taken by the US in South Vietnam required the approval of the French High Commissioner, General Ely, who still retained French civil and military authority to protect their interests.⁶¹ Due to this development, LTG J. Lawton Collins was dispatched to South Vietnam on a fact finding mission with

ambassadorial rank in November 1954. His mission was to gain unity of effort with the French, and assess the military and political situation. He was also given authority to direct, utilize, and control agencies and resources of the US.⁶²

Under Collins, France and the US developed a policy in December known as the Collins-Ely Agreement which outlined the initial force structure of the VNA. The Agreement called for a reduction of the VNA from 170,000 men to 88,000 organized into 3 Field, or Conventional Divisions that would delay a DRV invasion with French Expeditionary Corps (FEC) support, and 3 Territorial, or Light Divisions with the dual mission of internal security and the reinforcement of the Field Divisions as needed. This force structure and troop level was based on the amount of aid the US would provide, not an in depth analysis of the environment.⁶³ The Agreement also stated the MAAG would have the authority to organize and train the VNA under French Direction beginning January 1, 1955.⁶⁴ Ely and Collins also agreed on the establishment of the Training Relations and Instruction Mission (TRIM) to execute the expanding advisory mission. The establishment of TRIM marked the transition of MAAG from supervising the delivery of aid to a true advisory effort.⁶⁵

US Advisory Efforts

The policy that outlined the MAAG mission stated the US would support the government of Vietnam under Diem to promote internal security and political stability, establish and maintain control by the Vietnamese government throughout the territory of Vietnam, and effectively counteract Viet Minh infiltration and paramilitary activities south of the 17th parallel. The policy further stated that MAAG should immediately develop and initiate a program for training the VNA in executing the above missions. Clearly, the organization and training of the VNA was for a pacification mission to gain control of the

population at the local level with security forces, not for repelling a conventional invasion by North Vietnamese forces.⁶⁶

Despite the initial collaboration between Ely and Collins, the process to form and train the ARVN was continuously derailed by political turmoil in South Vietnam. From February to May 1955, Diem was in open confrontation with the sects that were used to maintain order by the French during the war. For over a year the VNA was consumed with this mission, which prevented key training for officers, the consolidation of units into divisions, and their subsequent deployment to the Military Regions.⁶⁷

Diem held a referendum to consolidate power with voting beginning on October 23, 1955. On October 26, he deposed Bo Dai and proclaimed himself President, established the Republic of South Vietnam, and became Supreme Commander of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces.⁶⁸ The VNA would also be known as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). President Eisenhower sent a letter to Diem on October 25 proposing an examination of how America could support his government, much to the consternation of the French, who were always reluctant to allow direct aid to Bo Dai, and were also concerned about the fragility of the Diem government.⁶⁹

The political turmoil in South Vietnam and the US backing of Diem widened the gulf between the US and France to the point where the French no longer saw any utility in staying in South Vietnam. Motivated by the recent insurrection in Algeria, France accelerated the withdrawal of their forces through the summer of 1955 and dissolved the High Command on April 26, 1956. Fourteen months after standing up MAAG-TRIM, the partnership ceased to exist with almost no progress made toward creating an ARVN capable of defeating internal or external aggression.⁷⁰ With the withdrawal of the French

Expeditionary Corps (FEC), the force structure developed as a result of the Collins-Ely agreement was no longer suitable because it relied heavily on a FEC presence in South Vietnam to assist the ARVN in the event of a DRV invasion.⁷¹ A new force structure for the ARVN was needed.

The O'Daniel ARVN Force Structure

Various intelligence estimates after the Geneva Conference pointed to a North Vietnamese campaign to accomplish its objective through unconventional means. Two separate intelligence reports from the CIA, the first of which was published in August 1954, stated that the communists intended to extend their control over the area by means short of large-scale military invasion.⁷² The second report in September 1954 added more detail and indicated that the North Vietnamese would continue try and secure all of Indochina by not violating the Geneva Accords with a full scale invasion, but would pursue that goal through political, psychological, and paramilitary means.⁷³

However, the US advisory efforts in Indochina were highly influenced by experiences during the Korean War. As the US assisted the Vietnamese in organizing their national defense, MAAG advocated an operational concept of a defense in depth that consisted of conventional forces deployed from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) southward. With this array of forces, the mission of the ARVN was to fight a delaying action against a perceived Viet Minh invasion from the north until SEATO forces could arrive in sufficient strength to defeat it.⁷⁴

In May 1955, Major General O'Daniel, Chief of MAAG, recommended a force structure capable of performing a dual role mission of combating both internal and external aggression, and replacing the rapidly dwindling FEC presence. The structure proposed consisted of 4 Field Divisions, 6 Light Divisions, and 13 Territorial Regiments.

If needed, the Territorial Regiments would be capable of being consolidated into 3 Light Divisions.⁷⁵ The Light Divisions were devised as the answer to the French inability to operate cross country effectively. The Light Divisions were one third the size of a US Division at 5,254 men.⁷⁶ What they lacked in numbers, they made up for in firepower. The Light Divisions had 30% more light machine guns (LMGs) and 10% more Browning Automatic Rifles (BARs) than a US division and the same amount of mortars. The Light Divisions did not have organic artillery or logistics units, and very little transportation, thus freeing it from a large logistics tail that so effectively limited French operational reach, but providing very little sustainment capability.⁷⁷

O'Daniel departed South Vietnam in November 1955 and was replaced by LTG Samuel Williams. By early 1956, eight months after devising the new force structure, and one year after the Collins-Ely Agreement, virtually no progress had been made on building a cohesive ARVN. Due to the continued operations against the sects, no training had taken place, commanders at the regiment and division levels did not know their men, and only one division had its full complement of men and equipment but had not trained as a unit or deployed to its operational area. The ARVN was a collection of battalions, much the same as it had been under the French.⁷⁸

The Williams Force Structure

In November 1956, Williams published a summary of MAAG activities covering his first year as Chief of MAAG. He stated the need to create an ARVN “which will be in the best interests of the both nations.”⁷⁹ He also commented on how the adoption of US methods by the ARVN often took second place to the Vietnamese need to demonstrate that they were their own masters, hindering the consolidation of units and their subsequent training.⁸⁰ US advisors continued to focus on developing the conventional

force to delay a DRV invasion. A division level training exercise in 1957 evaluated the ability to conduct a series of retrograde and defensive operations. No time or training was devoted to sustained offensive operations or area security operations. The training clearly depicted operations in Korea that were seen as irrelevant by the ARVN commanders and took units away from necessary security responsibilities.⁸¹

Under Williams, a reorganization of the ARVN began in the fall of 1956, roughly one year after his taking over. The goal was to increase the organic logistics capability and support elements without changing the end strength of 150,000. The resulting force structure added an ordnance company to the Light Divisions, established two Corps Headquarters and some Corps level artillery, slightly increased the Navy and Air Force, and strengthened support units, at the expense of nearly all 13 territorial regiments.⁸²

While the reorganization of 1956 was being executed, Williams was concerned about the ability of the Light Divisions to effectively combat a DRV invasion. He was most concerned with their lack of mobility and ability to rapidly reinforce the Field Divisions.⁸³ From 1957 to 1959, extensive tests by MAAG and ARVN senior leadership were carried out to determine the best type of division that could fight conventional forces or guerillas under a dual mission concept, while meeting the logistical and maintenance requirements using a single type combat unit organization.⁸⁴ The final force structure established 7 Heavy Divisions and disbanded the Light and Field Divisions. Also established were division artillery, independent artillery battalions, and an additional Corps Headquarters.⁸⁵ The reorganization started in 1959 and was completed in 1960.⁸⁶

Paramilitary Forces

The forces for internal security consisted primarily of the Civil Guard (CG) and the Self-Defense Corps (SDC). The SDC were organized at the village level into platoon sized units under the command of the district or village chief.⁸⁷ The Civil Guard were regional forces organized into more mobile company sized units that operated at the regional level and would eventually become capable of multi-company level operations.⁸⁸ Throughout 1955-1960, the US and Vietnamese government failed to devise a clear concept for their development and employment.⁸⁹

This resulted from the US view of counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare, limited funding, and Diem's focus on maintaining control of the ARVN. The US outlook on COIN was that it was primarily political and economic in nature, and although Williams recognized the need for paramilitary forces, the prevailing thought at the time was COIN operations were best left to civilian agencies. It was also believed that the Communists were incapable of conducting an insurgency that would threaten the stability of South Vietnam.⁹⁰ As a result, the SDC and CG were seen as a police force and fell under the US Operations Mission (USOM) for training and organization and were not funded by the Military Assistance Program (MAP).⁹¹

The Vietnamese saw such organizations as absolutely indispensable to maintain territorial security, and advocated for a more robust SDC and CG. In particular, Diem wanted a CG organized at the battalion level and capable of assisting the ARVN.⁹² Diem also wanted the CG upgraded and placed under the Minister of Defense for training and logistics, but remaining under the operational control of the Minister of Interior. Additionally, most members of the CG were loyal supporters of Diem and as such, Diem saw a more capable CG as a means to counter any coup attempt by the Army. Williams

decided to back this unorthodox arrangement proposed by Diem on the grounds it would free up the ARVN for its conventional mission and training, and move the CG's funding stream from USOM to the more plentiful MAP. USOM, and the US Ambassador to South Vietnam, Ambassador Durbrow, were skeptical of Diem's motives and maintained their position that the CG was a police force and not a paramilitary force. As a result, the CG remained within the USOM mission and under the Ministry of the Interior.⁹³

Not helping the matter was the contentious relationship between Williams and Durbrow. Williams maintained a very close and personal relationship with Diem based on the fact Diem was his own Minister of Defense and had daily involvement with the US MAP. The daily conversations between Diem and Williams resulted in decisions being made by MAAG regardless of the impact on the embassy and the US Mission headed by Durbrow. Durbrow was head of the country team but "but Williams sure didn't believe it, didn't like it, and wouldn't put up with it anymore than he had to."⁹⁴ The uncooperative relationship resulted in bureaucratic rivalries, hostility, fierce competition for and the husbanding of resources, and poor decision making.⁹⁵

Despite the efforts of Williams and Diem, the SDC and CG were not adequately trained, equipped, or organized when the insurgency began to have a serious impact within South Vietnam in 1960. In 1956, it was estimated there were up to 10,000 Viet Cong (VC) operatives in South Vietnam. In the midst of the bickering between MAAG, Diem, and USOM, and the numerous force structure redesigns, the VC focused on recruitment and the establishment of bases in the south. In 1959 as the ARVN were completing the last force structure change under Williams and the SDC and CG

remained an afterthought, the VC launched a coordinated insurgency that began to spread through the entire country. By 1960 the VC began to execute battalion level attacks, and by 1962 were estimated to number 75,000. As LTG Dong Van Khuyen stated:

Concern for territorial security was relegated to lower priority, as seen through the disbandment of military region headquarters and the low regard for territorial forces. This was a sound organizational concept if the assumption of Korea style invasion had been correct. But the war broke out not with a bang, but a whimper.⁹⁶

It was against this backdrop that the CG and SDC were finally placed under the Ministry of Defense in 1960, and not until 1961 did MAAG funding cover both forces. By this time it was too late.⁹⁷ The steady increase in VC capabilities and ARVN inability to establish territorial control would ultimately result in the decision to deploy US forces to Vietnam.

Conclusion

French Strategy

First and foremost, the political instability that characterized the Fourth Republic was a key factor in the inability of the French government to agree on a policy and then formulate a strategy that was acceptable and feasible. From 1946-1954, the Fourth Republic saw a staggering 17 different cabinet changes.⁹⁸ The result of the revolving door of cabinets was the appointment of cabinet ministers who were risk averse and not willing to take a stand on Indochina.⁹⁹ The lack of firm action left a policy making vacuum at the national level that was quickly filled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Overseas France, and the High Commissioners, resulting in a lack of whole of government approach.

Unlike the Fourth Republic cabinets, the ministries remained stable with minimal changes in leadership and staff, and were dominated by Gaullists and conservatives. These ministries “had become fiefdoms of conservative policymaking elite dedicated to the grandeur of France. Both were virtually off limits to Communists.”¹⁰⁰ Additionally, the High Commission in Saigon operated thousands of miles away from the political chaos that was the Fourth Republic. The lack of consistent direction from the Metropole combined with the hawkish behavior due to the humiliation suffered during World War II, meant the High Commissioners had no reservations about acting autonomously and “were not timid about forcing showdowns with Paris or presenting the ministries with *fait accomplis*.”¹⁰¹

The combination of weak cabinets, policy making ministries dominated by Gaullists, and hawkish High Commissioners ensured any negotiations taking place with the Viet-Minh lacked unity of effort or were dismissed outright, virtually guaranteeing war. From December 1946 to March 1947, Ho Chi Minh appealed to the French seven times for a cease fire, but none were heeded.¹⁰²

Government and military organization also contributed to disjointed policy making and strategy formulation. For much of the conflict, the war was waged by colonial ministers that were not only responsible for the policy and administration of Indochina and the Associated States, but also for military operations conducted under the direction of the Commander in Chief of the FEC. Under this arrangement, no direct communication existed between the Commander in Chief in Indochina and the Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff.

It was not until March 1954, during the climactic battle of Dien Bien Phu, that a War Committee was formed at the national level. The purpose of the Committee was to oversee the conduct of the war and provide necessary guidance to the commander in chief in Indochina. This arrangement would more effectively oversee the implementation of national level objectives and policies in Indochina.

The War Committee consisted of the Prime Minister, the Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff, and the Ministers of National Defense, Foreign Affairs, and Indochina Affairs. Forming the War Committee this late in war, despite repeated requests to do so earlier, could not reverse the fortunes of France. About all the Committee could do was to try to find a solution to the reversal in the military situation.¹⁰³

France did not have sufficient finances or public support to effectively conduct the war against the Viet-Minh. As the war progressed, France found itself increasingly seeking financial and material support from either Great Britain or the US. It was not until the Elysee Accords and the installation of Bo Dai that the US decided to assist France with equipment and financial aid. The aid steadily grew throughout the war. In 1952 the US covered 26% of the war expenditures, 34% in 1953, and 67% in 1954.¹⁰⁴

The lack of aid prior to 1953 also had the effect of retarding the growth and capacity of the fledgling government. Although the Elysee Accords awarded autonomy to the Bo Dai Regime, the financial woes of France made it hesitant to relinquish control of public finance and other revenue generating ministries. It was not until 1951 that the Bo Dai government took control of the customs and postal services, coal mines, and agricultural services. In 1952 it took control of the railways, steel, and iron industries.¹⁰⁵

It was not until 1952, three years after the Elysee Accords, that Bo Dai's government had its first budget. By 1954, the Associated States as a whole contributed only 8% of the total costs toward their own defense and the bulk of financing the war remained with the French.¹⁰⁶

French reluctance to grant independence also had a detrimental effect on the build-up of the VNA and the effectiveness of the FEC. Following the Elysee Accords, the attempts to create the VNA consistently fell short of recruitment goals. The slow implementation of the Elysee Accords by the French inhibited Bo Dai's ability to rally the Vietnamese people to his nationalist cause. As Phillip Davidson states, "There was no motivation for the pro-French Vietnamese to fight. While the Viet-Minh knew they fought for independence, the Vietnamese National Army knew they only fought only for Bo Dai and the French, and neither inspired them."¹⁰⁷ It was not until March 1953 that the VNA was entirely under Vietnamese command.¹⁰⁸

Domestically, the FEC struggled to maintain its fighting strength while building up the strength of the VNA to conduct combined operations. To this end, twice as many French Officers and NCOs were assigned to Associated States units than were required by a Metropole unit.¹⁰⁹ The additional reluctance of the National Assembly to allow conscripts to serve in Indochina meant that only regulars served there, for extended periods which resulted in fatigue and exhaustion. By 1952, 52% of the regular force had served in Indochina and it was increasingly challenging to obtain recruits, who knew that there was high probability they would be sent to Indochina.¹¹⁰ This policy also forced the French to recruit an astonishing 70,000 Vietnamese to fill their ranks, further angering the Bo Dai government and delaying the growth of the VNA.¹¹¹

Finally, the French Government, at best, only received a tentative backing from its citizens for the war. As the military stalemate continued throughout the conflict, what little backing remained, was replaced by calls for disengagement from the war. In 1947, public opinion among conservatives and socialists alike, favored negotiations and a peaceful solution. The prevailing conclusion was “support for a hard-line policy rested on a wobbly base that might disintegrate if the war went badly.”¹¹² By May 1953, only 15% of those polled advocated reinforcing Indochina while 15% favored abandonment, and 35% favored negotiations, with a sizeable remainder expressing no interest. By February 1954, only 7% of those polled favored reinforcement, 18% favored withdrawal, and 42% wanted negotiations, with a growing reminder expressing no interest.¹¹³ Final proof of war weariness and fatigue of the French citizen came in 1954 when Mendes-France was chosen by the Assembly to be Prime Minister after stating he would conclude the Geneva Conference with peace terms within 30 days, or he would resign. He was successful.¹¹⁴

US Efforts

One of the main reasons for the defeat of the French was its strategy of predominately using conventional military means to achieve its ends, even when their lack of effectiveness was repeatedly demonstrated. The US recognized this as well as early as 1950 when an assessment concluded that a military solution was not attainable, and the French should therefore seek a political solution. Despite this assessment, the US essentially did exactly as the French when devising the ARVN force structure.¹¹⁵

The faith in a military solution backed by superior US military and technological superiority shaped the early advisory efforts of the US. As a result, the highly

conventional ARVN units would rely on vastly superior firepower over that of the enemy, which would guarantee victory. Later force redesigns of the ARVN saw the addition of more and more firepower to the divisions and the Corps level.¹¹⁶ When the ARVN force structure was devised, the Korea experience was still fresh in the minds of much of the US leadership, resulting in the faulty assumption that conventional forces could adequately secure South Vietnam, and neglected the paramilitary units.

When Williams touted the final force structure of 7 divisions as dual mission capable, just as mobile as guerilla forces, and suited to the terrain of Vietnam, the force that was created was essentially road bound. The result was an ARVN soldier shouldering a BAR with a 30 pound rucksack, and conducting a foot march of up to 30 kilometers, all of which in combination is hardly suitable to pursue guerillas cross country.¹¹⁷ As Ely so aptly stated after his experience in Indochina:

The command arrived rather quickly at the conclusion that guerilla forces cannot be combated with large battalions. Such battalions are unwieldy, because of the large number of personnel and the fact that their equipment must stick close to roads, and they cannot survive without a viable supply line. In fact, guerilla forces can be mastered only with counterguerilla forces using the same methods, trickery, flexibility, and mobility.¹¹⁸

The conventional force created was ill-suited for COIN operations and far from the force recommended by LTC Edward Landsdale, the head of the National Security Division of MAAG, chief of the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) Saigon Military Mission, and advisor to Diem.¹¹⁹ Landsdale recommended in 1955 to Diem small, elite, lightly armed, confident units with the necessary cross country mobility to pursue guerilla forces while paramilitary units maintained security in villages and cities.¹²⁰ The fact of the matter was, the French Mobile Groups, although impressive on paper and representing the French dominance in technology and firepower, accounted for very

only a fraction of the operations to gain territorial control during the first Indochina War.¹²¹

The rapid ARVN sweeping operations envisioned by the US planners were just as ineffective for the ARVN as they were for the French. The tendency for the ARVN was to execute sweeping operations that lasted at most seven days, while relying heavily on massive amount of firepower instead of maneuver.¹²² Following the Indochina war, the French noted in their lessons learned, "clearing, sweeping, and related types of operations yield deceptive results not compatible with the effort involved. In these cases, they irritate the population and demonstrate their relative ineffectiveness."

Mechanized forces were not well suited to the terrain in Vietnam. When used in sweeping operations against villages, they were generally confined to the road due to the numerous canals that characterized the surrounding area of a Vietnamese village. There were also costly guard requirements when using mechanized forces during COIN operations. The French used one-third of their infantry force to guard command posts, artillery, and other heavy equipment of their Mobile Groups.¹²³

The most damaging error of the US civilian and military leaders in South Vietnam was the neglect of the paramilitary forces and their labeling as a police force. When nation building is conducted, the focus first tends to be the development of military capabilities to provide internal security, followed by non-security related government services, and South Vietnam was no different.¹²⁴ The policy was based on the false assumptions that the only internal security threats were rival political and religious sects, and the ARVN was capable of performing the dual mission of providing internal security while defending against external aggression. As a result, the ARVN became an

expensive and well-funded force, much to the detriment of the other government ministries and security functions. The rapidly expanding ARVN force structure attracted the best and brightest from society and left very little quality personnel for government administration or the police.¹²⁵

The French experience in the Indochina War led them to comment that ground action generally had three requirements; control of the lines of communication, clearing regions of insurgents by area control, and pacification actions to address the sources of dissatisfaction among the population. The French went on to say, “These types of activities were essentially the task of the territorial troops, and above all of the so-called fixed units.”¹²⁶ Despite these lessons learned, the USOM continued to view the SDC and CD as merely a rural police force.

The neglect of the SDC and CD Forces resulted in a progressive loss of territorial security. Even when the SDC and CD received MAP funding, they were still far below the ARVN in terms of priority.¹²⁷ Building the capacity of the SDC and CD, or even the early territorial and light divisions for that matter, would not only have been the most effective means to establish area security, but it was more cost efficient as well. The cost to maintain one ARVN soldier was three times more expensive than one CD soldier, and four times greater than one SDC soldier.¹²⁸

Finally, although it is outside the scope of this paper to examine the introduction of US forces into the conflict, a brief look at the 1968 timeframe demonstrates the US and South Vietnam essentially making the same mistakes as the French. As the US entered the conflict and began taking on a major role in the fighting, the ARVN began to conduct static guard operations, exactly the condition the French were always trying to

avoid. As the US began to withdraw its forces in 1968, the SDC and CD, now known as the Regional Forces (RF) and Popular Forces (PF) respectively, began to take over the pacification and security duties of the ARVN. The RF and PF became much more competent and underwent a force structure change, to the point where RF units were formed into battalion level organizations.¹²⁹ Thus, the entire war effort in 1968 came full circle to reflect the French solution under the Navarre plan in 1953, the formation of indigenous battalions looked on as ineffective by the US, in order to free up conventional forces to conduct decisive operations.

The lessons learned from the early US involvement hold true in today's security environment. Although the Army of today is downsizing, there is still a requirement to maintain a force capable of regime change.¹³⁰ Following regime change, there would be some responsibility for the US to conduct nation building and the subsequent rebuilding of the host nation security forces. The combination of US interests, resources available, internal and external threats, cultural, ethnic, and religious factors would all combine to shape the composition of required forces.

To conduct effective nation building, unity of effort between the civilian and military leadership is paramount. Failure to achieve the needed unity of effort will result in divergent decision making and slow operations, such as those that plagued early US efforts in South Vietnam. As General Dempsey stated in the Mission Command White Paper, "operations will move at the speed of trust."¹³¹

The Regionally Aligned Forces (RAF) concept was recently introduced as a means to improve the global security environment through increased trust and understanding of partner nations through persistent engagements between our

respective security forces. Key to the RAF concept is units that have cultural and regional awareness.¹³² Such increased awareness will assist the US in tailoring the host nation security forces and their training based on the security environment, and not simply just imposing a US solution to a local problem. Security was compromised at the local level in South Vietnam due to US ignorance of the culture. In Vietnam, the US failed to fully fund a local defense structure proposed by the South Vietnamese government that conformed to the Vietnamese tradition of village self government and defense.¹³³

Finally, in the current fiscally constrained environment, the US will rely on the cooperation of allies and partners to protect US interests with reliance on security cooperation (SC), engagements, and foreign internal defense (FID) to lessen the chances of crisis. These operations may entail more US involvement in the development of increased security capabilities of those allies and partners. With the withdrawal of US forces from forward based static locations around the globe, increased interoperability between the US and its allies and partners will be essential.¹³⁴ The force developed must not only support US national interests, but it must be sustainable, fiscally feasible, and meet the internal and external security requirements of the host nation.

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¹²⁵ Joes, *The War in South Vietnam*, 88.

¹²⁶ Croziat, *Lessons of the War in Indochina, Volume 2*, 52.

¹²⁷ Truong, *The Vietnam War*, 210.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Sydney J. Freedman Jr., "Big Army for Big Wars? Yes! GVC? Probably Not," *Breaking Defense*, November 13, 2013, <http://breakingdefense.com/2013/11/army-regime-change-maybe-gcv-probably-not/> (accessed March 23, 2014).

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¹³² Kimberly Field, James Learmont, and Jason Charland, "Regionally Aligned Forces: Business Not as Usual," *Parameters* 43, no. 3 (Autumn 2013): 2, in ProQuest (accessed March 23, 2014).

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¹³⁴ Richard A. Bitzinger, "Military Modernization in the Asia-Pacific: Assessing New Capabilities," in *Strategic Asia 2010-2011: Asia's Rising Power and America's Continued Purpose*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis, Andrew Marble and Travis Tanner (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2010), 80-81.