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Chinese Borders and Indigenous Parallels: France, Vietnam, and the “Korean Model”

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The border between China and Vietnam is ancient. France took over from Vietnam at the end of the 19th century, and the demarcation of this border was a long and difficult process that took place over a period of more than ten years. It was completed in 1896¹. For the French, Indochina, and particularly Tonkin, was a “balcony over China”. But even though France participated in the “westphalization” of the Far East, the country remained haunted by the heritage of the Chinese empire and the “tributary system”. In the years 1945-1947, France believed that it had snatched North Vietnam away from Chinese ambitions, returning to a *status quo ante*. Yet from 1949/50, the Chinese-Vietnamese border and Tonkin saw a struggle with much at stake. We will see how France “lost” this border, and how for France Tonkin became the border of French identity, since it was established as the border of the “free world”, of the French Union, and of French virility. Thirdly, and finally, we will see how the “Korean model” influenced the handling of the question of Indochina, the war concluding with the creation of the demarcation at the 17th parallel, a new “border”.

The documentation of the Indochinese war is vast. We now have at our disposal a range of new materials made public through the law allowing access to archives under the sixty-years rule. Thus I was able to consult all of the proceedings of the Committees for the National Defense² in the French presidential archives, which contain several preparatory documents for these Committees. However, those who are familiar with the practices of those in power know that these documents should be considered cautiously, since they were revised and corrected by the participants, and the final texts of these proceedings were sometimes not definitively established for several months. The same is true for the records of proceedings for international meetings, for which it is better to consult the handwritten notes taken by the participants. More broadly, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of private papers. For my thesis, I had access to the papers of the main civil and military leaders. Since then, I have also had access to the papers of the Minister of Associated States for a period of three years (1950-1953), Jean Letourneau, and one of his major collaborators, Pierre Bolotte, as well as the papers of the director of the Presidential Cabinet of Vincent Auriol, Jacques Kocsiusko-Morizet, and am currently participating in the organization of the boxes of documents left

¹ Charles Fourniau, « La frontière sino-vietnamienne et le face à face franco-chinois à l'époque de la conquête du Tonkin », P.B. Lafont (dir.), *Les frontières du Vietnam. Histoire des frontières de la péninsule indochinoise*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1989.

² The President de la République, the Président du Conseil, and the main ministers dealing with national defense topics are members of the “Comité de Défense Nationale”. The military side is not represented there, except by invitation. The Committee of Chiefs-of-staff (“comité des chefs d'état-major”) gives only its opinion through papers called “avis du Comité des Chefs d'état-major”.

by his advisor for the French Union, Chérif Mecheri³.

The Turning Point of 1949/51: The Issue of the Frontier

In 1947, General Valluy led his troops on a forced march over 1200 kilometers to pursue Ho Chi Minh all the way to the Chinese border. He put in place a network of small isolated posts at the border to prevent Viet Minh contraband trade with China. The Viet Minh thus had more difficulty obtaining products from China from 1947 to 1950, if not via maritime transport⁴.

It was at the Committee for National Defense on March 29, 1949 that the agenda included for the first time “the reinforcement of means in Indochina on the supposition of pressure from China”. General Blaizot, commander of troops in Indochina, wanted an offensive to “clear out the Viet Minh haven in the High Region before Mao Zedong’s Communists reach the border with Indochina,” and for this he asked for reinforcements⁵. But this request was not followed up on. During the summer, discussions focused on the reorganization of the operation in Tonkin, and especially the possible evacuation of Cao Bang. General Revers and High Commissioner Pignon considered that “we cannot lose much in Cochinchina, but we would suffer a disaster in Tonkin”. The Minister of Defense, Paul Ramadier, worried about such a disaster: “What a prospect, to see the French army beaten by a Chinese army!” he exclaimed, while President Auriol had already explained that “it is absolutely necessary to emphasize to the Americans the danger of China⁶.” The choice was made to evacuate certain posts that immobilized many men, in particular Cao Bang, and to insure in depth the essential part of the border between Langson and Moncay. The idea of creating a specific command for the Chinese border was not carried out. It would not have enough depth and thus remained a sector of the general operation in Tonkin. Moreover, an autonomous command could have been interpreted as a provocation; incidents could have led to a Chinese intervention⁷.

On September 2, 1949, General Carpentier replaced General Blaizot. The instructions given to the new commanding general made border defense against an exterior enemy a priority. Carpentier, who had made his career in Africa, considered that abandoning the border would be “a loss of face” in relation to China. On site, General Alessandri, who was commander in Tonkin, did not wish to

³ The documents quoted hereafter are from the following archives: National Archives (Archives Nationales, here AN, 4AG means the papers of the President de la République), archives from the Ministry of Defense (Service Historique de la Défense, here SHD, previously SHAT, SHAA and SHM), archives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, here AMAE (with the archives of the defunct ministry of the Associated States) and in Nantes (Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes, here ADN, where one can get the archives from numerous French embassies and consulates), Archives d'Histoire contemporaine in Sciences Po in Paris (here AHC) which is dedicated to the gathering of private papers, and the Pierre Mendès France Institute (here IPMF) with papers from Mendès France.

⁴ Christopher E. Goscha, « The Borders of Vietnam's Early Wartime Trade with Southern China », *Asian Survey*, Novembre-décembre 2000.

⁵ Analysis of a document of General Blaizot from February 25, 1949, March 16, 1949, Archives Nationales (AN), Papers of the General Secretary of the Présidence du Conseil, Box F60 3036.

⁶ Report from the Committee for National Defense July 25, 1949, AN, Box 4AG 245.

⁷ Memorandum of the Secrétariat Général Militaire, July 21 1949, AN, Box 4AG 245.

abandon the possibility of offensive operations in the High Region. Moreover, the Viet Minh was suspected of wanting to take hold of the border to intercept the retreating Chinese nationalist armies to disarm them, and of wanting to transform Cao Bang into a provisional capital where it could set up its government and receive diplomatic representatives from powers who had recognized it. The French Command was proud to have disarmed 40,000 Nationalists who passed into Vietnam; the maintenance of the border was thus justified.

The chiefs-of-staff in Paris insisted that Cao Bang be evacuated. President Auriol considered that this type of post imposed heavy constraints with no operational efficiency, but he wanted the evacuation to be accompanied by progression toward another zone so that it was not done under pressure from the enemy, and so as not to fuel Viet Minh propaganda. General Alessandri and the High Commissioner Léon Pignon refused, even though the post did not in any way restrict Viet Minh provisions in China, and was increasingly isolated.

The start of the Korean War and the American reaction led to the thought that the Chinese would be busy in Northeast Asia, and that a Chinese attack towards the South would lead to American support of France. This new context was useful for the Ministry of Defense and the high officers in Paris who feared excessive engagement in Asia and wanted above all to create a strong army on the European continent. The latter advised the Minister of Defense to remove Carpentier from the duty of defending the border⁸. The minister explained that the priority should be pacification, and that it was thus possible to transfer some battalions from the North toward the South for a few months. The president du Conseil, during the Committee for National Defense of August 28, 1950, considered that “this risk can be taken, must be taken by the government,” even if “Carpentier must insure the defense of the Chinese border, and proceed in the defense of Indochina.” So, Paris brought about the “standstill on the Chinese attack” without renouncing defense of the border, because Carpentier had insisted for months that he could face a Chinese attack if it was not supported by strong aviation⁹.

In September-October 1950, France saw a series of defeats that cost 6,000 men and led to the disappearance of French presence along the entirety of the Northeast border. This was the disaster of Cao Bang and the rapid evacuation of Langson. The loss of Langson in 1885 had caused the government to fall. In the autumn of 1950, and then during the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, it was the government and even the regime that seemed threatened, at a time when the Gaullists were criticizing the Fourth Republic, considering it powerless: Langson and Dien Bien Phu, like the Maginot line in 1940, were the borders of the republican regime, but it was eventually the Algerian-Tunisian border that killed the Fourth Republic in 1958. The advisor of the High Commissioner wrote, “The occupation of the border, which in any case was only illusory, was untenable. Revers had understood this for over a year, as well as the commanding colonel of Langson, Constans. It is

⁸ Report of the meeting held at the Ministry of Defense, in the presence of Minister René Pleven and General Carpentier, June 14, 1950, AN, Pleven Papers, Box 40.

⁹ Report of the Committee for National Defense, August 18, 1950, AN, Box 4AG 247 ; during the Committee for National Defense of November 17, 1950, Vincent Auriol recalled these affirmations of General Carpentier during the Committee meeting June 22, AN, Box 4AG 247.

because of the likely parliamentary repercussions that we held onto Cao Bang and Dong Khe¹⁰.”

After having been overly sure of its means and superiority, and ignoring intelligence describing the reinforcement of Viet Minh battle corps, the command that had resisted requests to evacuate the border suddenly panicked and evacuated under difficult conditions¹¹. The Minister of Associated States commented, “Last June, at the Committee for National Defense, with only minimal aerial reinforcement we said we could resist a Chinese offensive! Before Cao Bang there was no question of retraction but of operations in Tonkin and in Cochinchina¹².” Nevertheless, the evacuation of Cao Bang was presented as part of a larger strategy for the reorganization of the Chinese-Vietnamese border. The authorities felt barely responsible; the High Commissioner Léon Pignon explained, “There is no other explanation of our defeats other than the concentration of forces protected by the Chinese border, evading our view and our shots¹³.”

At the same time, American troops were fighting in Korea. The president du Conseil, René Pleven explained to Truman, “There is a great parallel between the situations in Korea and Indochina. We thought that the approach to the border could explain the Chinese intervention, but after the crossing of the 38th parallel (by Chinese troops), we can no longer think that way¹⁴.” The French troops, like the Americans, feared being thrown into the sea, and from the beginning of the year 1951, the French pressed the Americans to know if they would send boats to carry out an evacuation, recalling Dunkirk in 1940. The possibility of American aid in the form of bombings over Hanoi made French authorities in Vietnam uncomfortable, for it evoked the Allied bombings over cities in Normandy in 1944.

The objective nevertheless was to hold onto the Hanoi-Haiphong axis with an outlet to the ocean, and the coal mining region of Hongay, considered vital, and which was home to the Nung populations, who were favorable toward France. However, Léon Pignon considered that “if the government decides to pursue efforts in Indochina, it seems demonstrated by facts that it will be absolutely necessary to return to the border and reoccupy the posts that we have abandoned¹⁵.” This reoccupation was never considered and would never take place. Pignon admitted that “it isn't possible to take lessons from the Korean War. It is out of the question to cut off the Viet Minh from its land supply bases in China. The Viet Minh is not vulnerable in its means of communication, being that it is the Viet Minh itself that has destroyed roads and railroads (...) There is no longer a Chinese-Tonkinese border aside from us¹⁶.” In the summer of 1953, the French did not respond to American

¹⁰ Letter from Jean-Pierre Dannaud to the Socialist parliamentary representative Alain Savary, November 8, 1950, Archives d'Histoire Contemporaine (AHC), Savary Papers, Box 64.

¹¹ Jean-Marc Le Page, *Les services de renseignement français pendant la guerre d'Indochine (1945-1954)*, Thèse Sciences Po Paris, 2010, p. 197-215.

¹² Letter from Jean Letourneau to René Pleven, November 1, 1950, AN, Letourneau Papers, Box 13.

¹³ Telegram from Léon Pignon to Jean Letourneau, October 11, 1950, AN, Letourneau Papers, Box 10.

¹⁴ Handwritten notes of Alexandre Parodi, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the meeting between Truman and Pleven, January 29, 1951, AHC Parodi Papers, Box 25.

¹⁵ Report of Léon Pignon, November 7, 1950, AN, Papers of the General Secretary of the Présidence du Conseil, Box F60 3036.

¹⁶ Letter from Léon Pignon to Jean Letourneau, October 5, 1950, AN, Letourneau Papers, Box 13.

requests for determined military action in the Northwest to cut off Viet Minh supply routes from China¹⁷. The Council of Ministers maintained only the necessity of defending Hanoi, and General Juin stated, “The evacuation of Hanoi would be a sign of withdrawal from all of Indochina.”¹⁸ The loss of the border and the Chinese-North Korean offensive in Korea during the autumn of 1950 were used to justify the appointment of a prestigious general combining civil and military functions, General Delattre. His instructions indicated that he “was planning and preparing with infinite discretion for partial evacuations that would possibly be necessary, creating a solid state of defense, fortifying the bridgehead of Hongay-Campha and the Haiphong haven, which as a last resort must act as a strategic base.”¹⁹ In the month of December 1950, the hypothesis of an evacuation of Tonkin remained “an absolute secret,” and was to be implemented “only in the case of a massive Chinese intervention, which would not be isolated given the situation in the Far East.”²⁰

From the fall of 1949, the defense of Tonkin was promoted from the joint allied point of view; if the Chinese offensive seemed like a prelude to World War Three, France would have the support of the Allies. For Pignon, history taught that it was necessary to “hold onto Tonkin to hold onto Indochina,” and the French had in mind the progression of Japan during World War II. During the years 1950-52, the French diplomatic objective was to convince the Americans and the British to affirm the primacy of Tonkin for the defense of Southeast Asia. But there remained the threat of a scenario like that in Korea. In January 1952, General Salan requested instructions in the case of Chinese aggression. He was asked to act in terms of his “intuition”. President Auriol was concerned: “I do not know about the imminence of a Chinese aggression. The liberty that you accord the commanding general could have been subject to the precondition of the intelligence and motives that led him to make his decision. Since the unfortunate event of Cao Bang, freedom is necessary, but with government control.”²¹ The fate of the Expeditionary Corps in the case of Chinese aggression became a priority, but this did not manifest itself through official instructions; the commander in chief needed to have “the greatest latitude in exercising his responsibilities.” The approach of armistice in Korea led to the worry that Chinese troops would want to achieve in Vietnam the victory that they were unable to obtain in Korea, while the Communist press in France denounced both the war of substitution that the Americans wanted to carry out in Indochina, since they were furious with their failure in Korea, and the role of American imperialist mercenaries played by the French Expeditionary Corps.

Border of the Free World, Border of French Virility

From the year 1950, Tonkin became a border of the “free world”. The start of the Korean War created a windfall effect for France; the country could proclaim that it had already been fighting

¹⁷ Handwritten notes of General Navarre, Service Historique de la Défense (SHD), Navarre Papers, Box 4.

¹⁸ Telegram from René Pleven to Léon Pignon, November 8, 1950, AN, Pleven Papers, Box 40.

¹⁹ Directives for General Delattre, AN, Box 4AG 249.

²⁰ Telegram from Jean Letourneau, top secret, December 9, 1950, AN, Letourneau Papers, Box 10.

²¹ Letter from Vincent Auriol to Jean Letourneau, January 10, 1952, AN, Letourneau Papers, Box 13.

communism in East Asia for five years. Before leaving for Washington, General Delattre explained to the president du Conseil that he was not going to plead the moral defense of French policy in Indochina, but say that “the conflict led by the Viet Minh is not a war for Vietnamese independence. This independence is already obtained. It is rather a war of secession from the French Union and from free nations (...) Removing Vietnam from its association with France would be removing Vietnam from its Western alliances, to integrate the country into the bloc led by Moscow.”²² He equated the maintenance of Hanoi in 1951 with that of Berlin in 1949. Furthermore, he added, “if Berlin is a haven in the Russian zone, if Korea is a dead-end, Tonkin is a door and a stronghold”; “Indochina is both the cover of India and the complement of Japan,” since “if Tonkin is broken through, there is no other blockage before Suez.”²³ In the spring of 1953, Captain Galula, military attaché in Hong Kong and future theoretician of the counter insurrection, would revive the comparison: if Korea was a “dead end”, “Indochina opens magnificent paths to expansion.” Moreover, he explained, if the aggression in Korea was doomed, the war in Indochina could look like a war for independence, generating the benevolence of other Asian countries²⁴. But France posed as a disinterested power, protecting young states that had recently gained independence, and fighting for the general interest of Free States.

During parliamentary debates in 1950, those who were in favor of increased military efforts explained that “in the mountains of Tonkin, France holds part of the borders of freedom. The defense of the sector falls to the international community, subject to French political and military primacy.”²⁵ From 1951 to 1953, the French ambassador to Washington set up a public relations campaign using American professionals, in order to gain acceptance for the war being waged by France²⁶. Tonkin was presented as the “keystone” of Southeast Asia. To obtain the support of NATO countries in 1952, the Minister of Associated States, Jean Letourneau was prompted to present an apocalyptic vision, which foreshadowed the domino theory, explained by Eisenhower in April 1954, but which was already largely present in the American discourse²⁷. Following Eisenhower's message on March 28, 1954 during the battle of Dien Bien Phu, President Coty responded that “the French Union troops and the national armies of the Associated states are fighting in Indochina not only for the maintenance and the independence of the Associated States, but also for the common ideal that is the concern of the entire free world, as our American friends well know.”²⁸

In Western Europe, the French endeavored to push the line of Western defense, and thus the defense of France, far to the east of the Rhine, confronting advocates of a peripheral strategy (Great

²² Letter from General Delattre to René Plevén, August 26, 1951, AN, Letourneau Papers, Box 14.

²³ Memorandum from General Delattre on the Indochinese problem, September 6, 1951, AN, Plevén Papers, Box 43.

²⁴ Memorandum from Captain Galula on the consequences of an armistice in Korea, June 15, 1953, Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères (AMAE), Corée, Box 50.

²⁵ Synthesis of the positions taken during the debate of October 19, 1950, established by the director of the French Presidential Cabinet, AN, Kosciuszko-Morizet Papers, Box 4

²⁶ Documentation in AMAE, Etats-Unis, Boxes 370 et 533.

²⁷ Elements for the presentation of M. Letourneau, December 12, 1952, AMAE, Etats associés, Box 188.

²⁸ Letter from René Coty, altered by the president, AN, Archives de la présidence de la République, Carton 4AG 28.

Britain, Greece, Turkey, and northern countries), and advocates of nuclear dissuasion. France had the impression of being on the front line on two fronts, and it is for this reason that the country needed allied support. The French representative to the Atlantic Council Hervé Alphand suggested convincing the Council in order to have NATO approve of the French effort in Southeast Asia. The Committee of National Defense leapt at the idea²⁹. On December 17, 1952 French diplomats obtained a declaration of solidarity, the only exception to NATO's "non-policy" "out of zone"³⁰. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was jubilant: "For the first time our Atlantic partners – and no longer only the Americans – recognize that the war of Indochina is a part of the fight for the defense of the free world against a concerted aggression." The principle of the interdependence of theaters accepted, the relationship "between the capacity of France to participate at once in the defense of Europe and of the extent of its engagements in the Far East" became evident³¹. The General Commissioner of Indochina, a diplomat for the first time in 1953, considered that "in the future, the defense of Indochinese borders will be increasingly integrated into general treaties or the UN."³² Nevertheless, after the Geneva Conference, France was opposed to the 17th parallel becoming a SEATO border resembling that of NATO³³.

In 1949-50, France requested material, financial, and diplomatic support from the United States, because it was participating in a global combat. The difficulty was knowing how to enter Tonkin into the negotiation, on which France had embarked for the benefit of the free world. France did not want to be marginalized in defining allied strategy, as it was during World War II, and did not want to sacrifice its Asian interests after their difficult reestablishment in 1945-46. In 1951, the French looked to organize an inter-allied command in the Far East, and to create a war theater analogous to that entrusted to Eisenhower in Europe, and which would extend from Japan to Australia. The committee of chiefs-of-staff agreed in October to put in place an inter-allied military authority with representatives of the three major concerned nations, the United States, Great Britain, and France, since the Standing Group could not take responsibility for it, the region being outside of the NATO zone³⁴. The ideal remained a global strategic direction for a unified allied strategy, although not much could be expected of the Anglo-Saxon allies in Asia³⁵. The United States was very reluctant.

France was experiencing the traditional dilemma of alliances: the fear of abandonment and the fear of entrapment. The French sometimes wished for a continuation of the Korean War so as not to be fighting alone in Asia, as they were for a year from July 1953 to July 1954, and which would

²⁹ Committee of National Defense, December 11, 1952, AN, Box 4G 252.

³⁰ Frode Liland, « Explaining NATO's Non-Policy on Out-of-Area Issues during the Cold War », In : Gustav Schmidt (ed.). *A History of NATO – The First Fifty Years*. Volume 1, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001.

³¹ Memorandum of the General Director of Political Affairs for the President, January 14, 1953, AMAE, Indochine, Box 287.

³² Telegram from Maurice Dejean to the Minister of Associated States, September 29, 1953, AMAE, Etats associés, Box 185.

³³ Pierre Grosser, « La France et la défense de l'Indochine après les accords de Genève », In : Christopher E. Goscha et Karine Laplante (eds.) *The Failure of Peace in Indochina, 1954-1962*, Paris, Les Indes Savantes, 2010.

³⁴ Notice of the Committee of Chiefs-of-staff, October 24, 1951, AN, Box 4AG 250.

³⁵ Memorandum of the SGPDN, December 4, 1952, AN, Box 4AG 252.

justify their dealing with Communist powers in Geneva. With the first rumors of armistice, the French worried about an end to the Korean War, which could reduce the Chinese efforts in Northeast Asia. A memorandum from the French intelligence agency to the president du Conseil went so far as to state, "A continuation of the Korean War is a much lesser evil than its pure and simple cessation."³⁶

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs alerted the French ambassador to the United States that "it would be regrettable, after having extinguished the fire in one part of the Far East, to contribute by commitment to peace to its revival in another part of this region of the world, in a way that is highly dangerous for us."³⁷ The embassy, but also general Delattre during his trip to the United States, strove to obtain a guarantee that Chinese troops would not be transferred to the South, and if possible, a promise of automatic military support, drawing especially on a reserve of forces from Korean War battles. Thus began a long and difficult search for allied support in the case of another case like the Korean scenario with Chinese "volunteer soldiers".

The Americans, beginning in November 1951, considered writing a declaration stating that in the case of a resumption of hostilities in Korea after the signing of an armistice, the allied military response could not be limited to the Korean territory. The British worried about the risk of escalation, while at the same time wanting to participate in military planning, enabling them to keep an eye on the Americans. France wanted a less threatening text, but one that covered Indochina. Nevertheless the Americans, despite reassuring words, wanted to move the decision to after the signing of an armistice, and explicitly refused to include Indochina in the declaration³⁸.

In the spring of 1953, Korean armistice was becoming probable, and France tried to prevent the Indochinese front from suffering the consequences. There was talk of "indivisible peace," and of "contagious peace"³⁹. The efforts depended above all on the decision of the sixteen powers that had fought in Korea, designed to prevent a resumption of combat. Bidault asked that a fourth paragraph be added to the declaration, drawn up as follows: "We believe that this armistice agreement, which we consider as an affirmation of peace, must not jeopardize the peace in another part of Asia." The formula was reworked and intense diplomatic work undertaken. The Americans and the British pointedly dragged their feet. The text was finally ready on July 22, and published August 8, though the armistice had already been signed for two weeks, and the American-South Korean treaty had been announced⁴⁰.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs nevertheless remarked that seeking an Indochinese armistice after the Korean armistice "could imply, in the French opinion, like Vietnam and the United States, an abandonment of our hopes of military victory, recognition of the adversary the Viet Minh as a

³⁶ Memorandum of the SDECE on the situation in Indochina, May 26, 1951, AN, Papers of the General Secretary of the Presidence du Conseil, Box F60 3036.

³⁷ Telegram from Paris to Washington, July 13, 1951, AMAE, Indochine, Box 217.

³⁸ Documentation in AMAE, Nations unies et Organisations internationales Boxes 150 et 151, Indochine Box 217, SHD, Box 10H288.

³⁹ Pierre Grosser, « La « paix indivisible » ? La diplomatie française, la fin de la guerre de Corée, et l'issue de la guerre d'Indochine », delivered at a conference on the Korean War, June 2010, IRSEM, in press

⁴⁰ On text alterations and the diplomatic ballet, documents in AMAE, Nations unies et Organisations internationales, Box 151, and Corée, Boxes 48 et 50.

combatant, and a certain internationalization, if not of war, than of its settlement. Furthermore, ceasing hostilities in Indochina where the situation is “fluid”, is certainly more difficult than in Korea where the front is continuous and where major powers confront one another.⁴¹”

In fact, France was disappointed at not being informed of the American strategy toward the surrounding Chinese-Soviet bloc in Asia, and was mistrustful of American offensive operations that could have repercussions at the border of Tonkin. Reluctantly, in January 1951 France joined in denouncing Chinese aggression in Korea. The French had left the British on the front lines, not wanting to aggravate their relations with China, at a time when a radio campaign emanating from Beijing could produce an attack by Chinese “volunteer” soldiers and when French public opinion favoring discussions with Beijing could only clash once again with Washington's hostility⁴². The recourse to the United Nations in the case of Chinese aggression in Indochina was complicated, because an invasion by large Chinese units was necessary to obtain support, and the organization could intervene only at a late stage⁴³. Furthermore, the “anticolonialist passion” that had begun to grip the General Assembly could lead to the creation of a mediation commission between Ho Chi Minh and Bao Dai. Finally, the Chinese could register a complaint concerning French action in Indochina, just as it had already publicly protested in November 1950 against the violation of Chinese territory by French aerial forces⁴⁴.

Today we are better aware of the clandestine operations carried out at the borders of China, from Taiwan, Burma, Japan⁴⁵, and soon after, Tibet. The French discovered propaganda and sabotage put in place by the Americans since 1951, particularly by the vice-consul in Hanoi, and which relied on the Chinese of Tonkin⁴⁶. But France did not participate in this harassment. This did not prevent a few clashes at the border. The Chinese captured three French soldiers in 1951, and the negotiations dragged on for four years before they were set free⁴⁷. France was also very cautious in its relations with the Chinese nationalists, mistrusting the information they provided, which overestimated the Chinese threat. France was still counting on Beijing to find a solution to the Indochinese war. France also counted on American hostility toward Red China in order to obtain more aid, but did not want being caught up in the American “crusade” in Asia⁴⁸.

Jean Paul-Boncour, ambassador to Thailand and proponent of discussion with China, for he

⁴¹ Memorandum of the Direction of Political Affairs on Korean negotiations and settlement in the Far East, April 22, 1953, AMAE Indochine, Box 318

⁴² Speech by Plevén during Franco-British discussions on December 2, 1950, AN, Plevén Papers, Box 45.

⁴³ Dispatch from Jean Chauvel for Robert Schuman, « l'Indochine et les Nations unies », January 3 1952, AN, Plevén Papers, Box 43.

⁴⁴ Paper of the Secretary General of National Defense, January 1951, AN, Box 4AG 248.

⁴⁵ Masaya Inoue, “Yoshida Shigeru's “Counter Infiltration” Plan against China. The Plan for Japanese Intelligence Activities in Mainland China, 1952-54”, *World Political Science Review*, 2009, n°5(1).

⁴⁶ Telegram from General Salan to Jean Letourneau, January 21, 1953, AN, Letourneau Papers, Box 12.

⁴⁷ Documentation in AMAE, Etat associés, Box 356 and ADN, Archives from Saigon, Box « Chine ».

⁴⁸ Pierre Grosser, « La guerre d'Indochine et les relations France-RPC (1950-1954) », In : Laurent Cesari et Denis Varaschin (dir.), *Les relations franco-chinoises au vingtième siècle et leurs antécédents*, Arras, Artois Presses Université, 2003.

had hoped throughout his career to be the first ambassador to Communist China, pushed for a return to traditional diplomatic practices, contrary to the non-diplomacy of the Cold War: "On the diplomatic front, the failings of my administration must end. Whether my dear colleagues like it or not, it is part of the diplomatic profession to discuss, with the communist regime in Beijing and if need be with Ho Chi Minh"; "In the Far East, one must negotiate with the adversary directly or indirectly at the same time war is being waged. This is what the French Legation of the Third Republic was doing in Beijing, as well as when Admiral Courbet was crushing Fantcheou, and when General de Négrier was being crushed at Langson. This is what the Japanese and Chiang Kai-shek never stopped doing." He proposed accepting that Tonkin have a mixed regime providing the Chinese Communists with the free zone of Haiphong, claimed constantly by China for its connection with the railroad route of Yunnan", as it was not possible to return to Tonkin "without an avalanche of Chinese volunteers.⁴⁹" He pushed President Auriol to approach the Chinese several times, which was accepted by numerous ministers, but regularly sabotaged by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Racial conflict was also being played out in Tonkin. The Chinese assault and the American setbacks in Korea eroded confidence in the white man. The West was sensitive to this question of prestige. Léon Pignon, when France was awaiting recognition of Bao Dai's regime by the Americans and the British, emphasized the necessity of solidarity among powerful white nations. He recalled that before the Japanese coup of March 9, 1945, Paul Mus had remarked that "the calculation of the international position of France is the key to Annamite psychology"; the High Commissioner consequently stated that "the Vietnamese elite and the masses will accept independence if the main white superpowers approve our policy.⁵⁰" Six months later, he admitted, "I am increasingly convinced that we have underestimated the racial factor – and I would even say the racist factor – in the political complications in Asia. To a great extent, the drawing power and the combativeness of the Viet Minh are due to racism rather than to a doctrine or even to a desire for independence.⁵¹" Several times in his correspondence, he evoked the "nationalist and xenophobic fever" that the Reds were stirring up, and that could also be found among France's partners, that is to say the Associated States.

These were not simply the remarks of a government official who had made his career in the colonies. An analysis by intelligence agencies written at the end of 1950 and approved by President Auriol (it "confirms my theory," he noted), described a "Marxist bloc supporting anti-white movements", and the "enormous potential for Chinese Communism," which was based on "the general xenophobia of the yellow continent.⁵²" In the prestigious review *Foreign Affairs*, the Gaullist Jacques Soustelle made the connection between the wars in Korea and in Indochina, invoking the racial element: "The two conflicts share a basic common factor. Each results from the expansion of Soviet power toward the sea, pushing its satellites ahead, and exploiting the nationalism, even

⁴⁹ Letter from Jean Paul-Boncour to Jacques Kosciuzko-Morizet, March 20, 1952, letter from Jean Paul-Boncour to Vincent Auriol, March 12, 1953, AN, Kosciuzko-Morizet Papers, box 4.

⁵⁰ Letter from Léon Pignon to Jean Letourneau, January 17, 1950, AN, Letourneau Papers, box 13.

⁵¹ Letter from Léon Pignon to Jean Letourneau, July 14, 1950, AN, Letourneau Papers, box 13.

⁵² Memorandum of the SDECE on the situation in the Far East, December 20, 1950, AN, Kosciuzko-Morizet Papers, box 4.

xenophobia, of the Asiatic masses toward the West”⁵³. Delattre accused China of stirring up “the natural xenophobia of its people, striving to liberate Asia from the yoke of the Whites.”⁵⁴ In the instructions he received for the Singapore Conference in the spring of 1951, emphasis was placed on confronting “Communist ideology combined with Asian nationalism and xenophobia.”⁵⁵ Dealing with Ho Chi Minh would, according to the Gaullist Gaston Palewski, “ruin the prestige of the white man.”⁵⁶ The defeat of Dien Bien Phu was seen as a “Stalingrad for the white race”. This perception of racial questions in Asia was largely shared by both the Americans and the British⁵⁷.

Still, the official discourse of the French Union claimed that it was a multiracial group, and that in Indochina, France had created a “Franco-Vietnamese civilization.” It was Communism, then, that stirred up racial hatred and xenophobia, while colonialism “à la française” enabled the surmounting of racial divisions. For the colonialists, France defended Indochina against “red colonialism”. For the anticolonialists who wanted an independent Vietnam cooperating with an “enlightened” France, and who called for direct negotiations with Ho Chi Minh, the threat was Chinese. This was the position of Philippe Devillers, whose *Histoire du Vietnam* was distributed by Americans in North Vietnam, to the great fury of colonial civil servants. For him, “the essential question of the Indochinese conflict isn’t the integral or concealed maintenance of imperialist structures, but rather to save the historic border, the *limes* separating China from Southeast Asia,” or in other words an “anti-Chinese containment.”⁵⁸

In Tonkin, France defended the French Union borders. The country was committed to protecting the borders of Vietnam. The mission of the Expeditionary Corps was to insure the exterior defense of French Union territories. Faced with those who looked to sell a Cold War battle to the Americans, President Auriol, who was also president of the French Union, preferred to deal with the Indochinese question within the French Union, while seeking out maximum aid from allies⁵⁹. Léon Pignon considered that the solidarity of world powers was necessary in terms of the question of the recognition of Mao, but mostly to “insure the Indochinese borders.” If this recognition seemed to him unavoidable in the autumn of 1949, it had to be accompanied by guarantees, in the form of “a unilateral but systematic declaration by each of the superpowers on the borders of Asian countries.”⁶⁰ The recognition of Ho Chi Minh by Communist China was considered by the Council of Ministers as

⁵³ Jacques Soustelle, « Indo-China and Korea : One Front », *Foreign Affairs*, Octobre 1950, p. 56.

⁵⁴ Telegram from Delattre to Jean Letourneau, July 5, 1951, AN, Papers of the General Secretary of the Présidence du Conseil, box F60 3036.

⁵⁵ Directives for the Singapore Conference, AN, box 4AG 249.

⁵⁶ Memorandum of Gaston Palewski, « Une solution aux problèmes d’Indochine », August 19, 1953, AN, Palewski Papers, box 6.

⁵⁷ Matthew Jones, *After Hiroshima. The United States, Race and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945-1965*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

⁵⁸ Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Vietnam de 1940 à 1952*, Paris, Seuil, 1952, chapitre 27, et *La fin d’une guerre. Indochine 1954*, Paris, Seuil, 1960, p. 369-370.

⁵⁹ Annotation of Vincent Auriol on a memorandum of the Military Secretary General, February 1950, AN, box 4AG 246.

⁶⁰ Letters from Léon Pignon to Jean Letourneau, November 7 and 20, 1949, AN, Letourneau Papers, box 13.

“an act of hostility toward the French Union”⁶¹, which made both France's recognition of Beijing's regime and French support of Red China at the United Nations difficult. Defense of the border was at the heart of Franco-Vietnamese relations. Pignon worried in the autumn of 1950 that “it is not unlikely that the Vietnamese consider that we have broken a contract in evacuating the Chinese-Tonkinese border,” and that they would thus claim full liberty of action⁶². In fact, when the outlook of a Korean armistice emerged in the spring of 1951, the Vietnamese government asked the French government for a firm engagement to obtain an international guarantee for the security and territorial integrity of Vietnam⁶³. It is not certain that the negotiations at Geneva would have succeeded if Auriol had still been president of France and of the French Union in 1954 (René Coty was elected in December 1953), and if Georges Bidault, who later fought for France to keep Algeria, had remained in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The two men were top defenders of the integrality of the French Union.

France felt indispensable. The Associated States still needed France, since according to the words of Delattre, “they still have not drawn from themselves the virile energy of creators.”⁶⁴ Albert Sarraut had described Indochina as “the Asian daughter of France,” and Delattre explained, “Asia is female, and needs to be fertilized.” Beginning in 1950, however, General Carpentier denounced “the American “juvenile lead” that is replacing us” and the “flirt” of the Vietnamese with the Americans, who nevertheless did not stop themselves from denouncing before the French “the congenital powerlessness of the Vietnamese to unite and construct.”⁶⁵ After the Sect Crisis in May 1955, the Council president Edgar Faure wrote, “When facing adversity, peoples, like women, prefer the support of a man who may be mediocre, but is secure and faithful, to the seduction of a lover who, although brilliant, is fickle, indecisive, lacking willpower.”⁶⁶

Indochina was thus the frontier of French virility, the test of its capacity to be “firm” and “powerful”. The traumas of the appeasement of the 1930s, of Munich, and the defeat of 1940 were still very much alive. But in 1949-50, Korea was also a test. A member of the French delegation to the United Nations wrote to Paris: “We are resented for having been lukewarm on the question of Korea north of the 38th parallel, for not having pushed the offensive more, for not having emptied Indochina to reinforce ‘the army of the United Nations’; we were resented for remaining careful in this affair.”⁶⁷ Jean Chauvel added, “We cannot permit ourselves to carry more fuel to the fire of American neo-isolationism. It is thus necessary to avoid appearing as protagonists in the appeasement of the Korean affair. We can leave that role to the English.” Following that, according to the French representative to the United Nations, Eisenhower returned from France in January 1951 “struck by our ineptitude at

⁶¹ Telegram from Alexandre Parodi, to Jean Chauvel, French representative to the United Nations, August 18, 1950, AHC, Parodi, Papers, box 25.

⁶² Telegram from Pignon to Jean Letourneau, October 27, 1950, AN, Letourneau Papers, box 10.

⁶³ Letter from Tran Van Huu to General Delattre, July 7, 1951, AN, Letourneau Papers, box 10.

⁶⁴ Memorandum of Delattre on Indochinese problem, September 6, 1951, AN, Plevin Papers, box 43.

⁶⁵ Memorandum from General Carpentier, November 30, 1950, AN, box 4AG 247.

⁶⁶ Memorandum from May 7, 1955, AN, Devinat Papers, box 18.

⁶⁷ Letter from Pierre Ordonneau to Alexandre Parodi, December 29, 1950, AHC, Parodi Papers, box 25.

organizing our national defense; he fears our political instability and our permeability toward Communism, and questions our combativeness.⁶⁸

As of 1951, the objective became to demonstrate, primarily to the Americans, that France “was not lacking in nerve and muscle.” Prestigious visitors traveled one after the other to the United States: president du Conseil René Pleven, French president Vincent Auriol, General Delattre. The second of these men declared during a speech, “France is not limited to the Western Mediterranean and the Atlantic [side] of Europe; the French Union's civilizing influence extends to all parts of the globe, and in its strategy for freedom and peace, France has duties and responsibilities that it accepts manfully, as a global superpower.⁶⁹” The propaganda was not only for an American audience. In order to obtain reinforcements, Delattre hammered out to the Committee for National Defense, “As long as we hold on in Indochina we will be a superpower. If we win the match, we will truly be one of the Greats, and if we lose we will be the sick man of the second half of the 20th century (...) Tonkin is one of the borders of freedom (...) and thus France's action is a test of the country's capacity to fight Communism and the Soviet Union.” He was backed by hawks like Georges Bidault, who maintained that the power of France's defense would be judged on its efforts in Indochina, and who rejoiced at the statement of Eisenhower, that “the French are beginning to fight at last.⁷⁰” The memory of 1940 remained strongly present. General Navarre, loyal to General Juin, had strong words for Paul Reynaud, who strongly influenced the Indochinese policy of Laniel's government. He wanted to show the Americans that the French had “the guts” to fight. He was delighted to learn that he was the number one French person in the United States⁷¹. All told, Dien Bien Phu was a glorious defeat in which French officers, often of noble origin, fought bravely, without the support of the United States. It is this image of sacrifice that French propaganda tried to impose during the travels of the nurse Geneviève de Galard, “the angel of Dien Bien Phu”, to the United States in July 1954⁷². And the evacuation of Tonkin's “refugees” after Geneva, even if it was not carried out by a single French marine, revealed a traditional mission protecting the “feminized” populations of the Orient.⁷³

The Korean Parallel : The Same War? A Similar Partition?

In their attempt to gain aid and support for the war in Tonkin, the French drew many parallels. France claimed to be waging the same battle in Indochina as the United States in Korea. But at first it was an analogy with Greece that was utilized. In February 1950, the French ambassador to

⁶⁸ Letter from Jean Chauvel to Alexandre Parodi, January 8, 1951, AHC, Parodi Papers, box 27. On the risks of isolationism if France did not have enough « willpower and capacity to resist », Memorandum of Jacques Kosciusko-Morizet, director of the French Presidential Cabinet to the president before his meeting with Eisenhower, January 8, 1951, AN, Kosciusko-Morizet Papers, box 1.

⁶⁹ Speech before Congrès, April 2, 1950, AN, Kosciusko-Morizet Papers, box 19.

⁷⁰ Committee for National Defense, March 17, 1951, AN, box 4AG 248.

⁷¹ Intelligence bulletin from October 12, 1953, SHD, Navarre Papers, box 6.

⁷² On the organization of this operation and political relations, documentation in AMAE, Etats-Unis, box 372 and Indochine, box 355.

⁷³ From leaflets of the Bureau of Psychological War, SHD, Boxes 10H 425 et 430.

Washington received instructions to try to obtain from Truman a declaration analogous to that which he had made for Greece in March 1947⁷⁴. Léon Pignon stated at the beginning of 1950 that a massive attack was unlikely, since the Chinese were engaged in Korea, but they would support “rebels” in Vietnam, on the Greek model⁷⁵. In Vietnam in 1953, the French considered that the partisans of a wait-and-see policy saw in the resumption of negotiations the approaching abandonment of the Viet Minh by China, like General Markos was abandoned in Greece by Stalin, allowing for the victory of monarchal forces⁷⁶.

But Delattre made a point to explain that France defended legitimate governments against Communist aggression in Indochina, and was participating in “the same battle for freedom” as the United States in Korea⁷⁷. While Bao Dai and the Vietnamese elites were criticized for not engaging Vietnam enough in the war, the Emperor tried to pass himself off as a Syngman Rhee in American eyes, who was prevented only by French colonialism from being that sort of leader. The Vietnamese ambassador to Washington printed and distributed a leaflet filled with quotes from the Emperor, clearly aimed at an American audience. One of these quotes was dated February 1951: “The Emperor fully realizes the gravity of the crimes of those men whose only wish is to subject their country to the same fate as Korea”⁷⁸. Many French leaders and representatives in Indochina wanted to brand the Vietnamese war as Rhee had done in South Korea, in developing nationalist and anti-Communist sentiment. As of 1953, there was talk in Paris and Saigon of asking the representative Jean-Paul David, who as the head of “Paix et Liberté” had organized anti-Communist propaganda in France, to consider what it would be possible to do in Indochina. David soon traveled to the United States, and corresponded with French diplomats in South Korea to know what was being carried out in that country⁷⁹.

Nevertheless, the French had a great deal of difficulty establishing a Vietnamese army; fifteen years later, they were delighted to see that the Americans hardly had more success. The Americans had in fact widely criticized the French during the war in Indochina. They considered that the French should have taken the lead from the model set in place by the training of the South Korean army. It was the Eisenhower administration in particular that pushed the French to apply methods used in Korea. Marshal Juin traveled to Korea with General Clark, but did not find it useful to “train

⁷⁴ The decision was made at the Committee of National Defense, February 10, 1950, AN, box 4AG 246. Jean Chauvel proposed the proposition again some months later, asking to present the deal to Washington, as the British had done: Memorandum from Jean Chauvel for Alexandre Parodi and Georges Bidault, April 14, 1950, AMAE, Asie-Océanie, dossiers généraux, box 258.

⁷⁵ Letter from Léon Pignon to Jean Letourneau, January 17, 1950, AN, Letourneau Papers, box 13.

⁷⁶ Memorandum from Gautier on the months of March, April 1953, AMAE Etats associés, box 171.

⁷⁷ Marilyn B. Young, « « The Same Struggle for Liberty » : Korea and Vietnam », dans Mark Atwood Lawrence, et Frederik Logevall (eds.), *The First Vietnam War. Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007.

⁷⁸ A copy can be found in the AN, box 4AG 539.

⁷⁹ Letters from the chargé d'affaires in Seoul, February 2 et May 2 1954, Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (ADN), Seoul, box 32.

the Vietnamese with the same mold.⁸⁰ Two Franco-Vietnamese missions went to Korea in the first half of 1953.⁸¹ A combined American and Korean mission went to Vietnam in April, while General Hinh, chief of Vietnamese armed forces was invited to Korea⁸². But for the French, the establishment of an army like that in Korea would have been possible only if the civilian zones were secured and there was a continuous front. France could not support the expense of a “soldier factory” in the American style. Finally, Vietnamese ethnic diversity and other particularities inhibited the centralization of training⁸³.

The French pretended to resist American claims to assure the training of these armies, but the objective after Geneva was to involve the United States (“to pin them down”), so that the French would not be the only ones responsible in the case of defeat in a confrontation with an offensive from the North, and because training had in fact been abandoned already. The chiefs-of-staff of the Ministry of Associated States was indignant: “If you knew the quality of certain officers in the Mission! And these camps are nothing but a parody of training camps, and deserve the criticisms we have received from the Americans!”⁸⁴

The “Korean model” was also considered dangerous. As of the autumn of 1950, those favorable toward negotiations with Ho Chi Minh considered that he was a patriot who wanted neither to turn Vietnam into Korea, nor over to Chinese control, nor provoke American military intervention. The Socialist Paul Rivet was among this group, and wished to resume contact with Viet Minh representatives⁸⁵. For those who were in favor of direct negotiation with Ho Chi Minh, calling on the United Nations in the case of Chinese aggression would lead, as in Korea, to considerable destruction. The Viet Minh made certain advances toward French services in the middle of the battle of Dien Bien Phu for a ceasefire that would avoid the Koreanization of Vietnam⁸⁶. In the debate on France's Indochinese policy after the Geneva Conference, those who wished to extend a hand toward the Viet Minh and not be associated with the aggressive American policies referred to the dangers of a solution “like that in Korea.”⁸⁷

Militarily, Tonkin was not really transformed into a mini Korea, despite Delattre's strategy. He created a “modern and full front” in Tonkin, because he was confronting Viet Minh troops that had become a real army. He had a fortified line over 1200 kilometers long constructed, intended to

⁸⁰ Final Report of Juin's mission, SHD, Navarre Papers, box 4.

⁸¹ Documentation in SHD, boxes 10H292 and 10H399.

⁸² Report from the military attaché in Tokyo on Hinh's trip to Korea and Japan, April 21, 1953, AMAE, Japon, box 14, telegram from Saigon to Associated States, May 19, 1953, SHD, box 10H120.

⁸³ Response to question 6 of the American questionnaire, March 1953, AMAE, Etats associés, box 188.

⁸⁴ Letter from Lieutenant-colonel Bertin to Jean Letourneau, April 20, 1954, AN, Letourneau Papers, box, 12 ; also the papers of General Alessandri, June 1954, SHD, Alessandri Papers, box 2, and the memorandum of Paul Devinat after travels in Indochina, March 23, 1955, AN, Devinat Papers, box 13.

⁸⁵ Paul Rivet, cited in a memorandum from Pleven, November 21, 1950, AN, Letourneau Papers, box 14, letters from Paul Rivet to René Mayer, AN, Mayer Papers, box 31.

⁸⁶ Telegram from Navarre to Ely, April 16, 1954, Letter from Navarre to Ely, April 17, 1954, SHD, Navarre Papers, box 4.

⁸⁷ Pierre Grosser, « La politique indochinoise de Pierre Mendès France après les accords de Genève », *Relations internationales*, été 2011.

protect the populations from Viet Minh invasion, and to prevent the Viet Minh from taking the men and rice that China did not provide them with, via embargo. The Viet Minh would be asphyxiated in its Tonkinese nook. Delattre's fortification line enabled "the tangible establishment of a territorial perimeter, of which the smallest parcel must not be left to the enemy", and showed "the will of the French to defend Tonkin and define the front against Communism." Considering that "concrete is a little-known obstacle to the Chinese army, the human tide is nothing against this defense."⁸⁸ In fact, most observers considered that this line immobilized French Union forces without preventing the Viet Minh from moving about⁸⁹, but it wasn't easy to criticize Delattre's heritage and to lead large operations that could be military failures. At the Committee for National Defense on March 17, 1953, Marshal Juin insisted on the priority of the delta, but considered that "our position is comparable to that of the United States in Korea,"⁹⁰ the line of defense constructed under Delattre having constituted a kind of front.

The objective was to not be pushed into military exploits in Indochina by the United States, while the US remained satisfied with its war map in Korea. For the Americans, who seemed to have forgotten their lessons from Korea, the French Command did not dare engage in offensive operations so as not to provoke Chinese intervention. The handling of the "Chinese threat" by the French would work as an alibi for a wait-and-see strategy and to obtain American aide. Ambassador Heath even claimed that a rapid defeat of the Viet Minh, far from provoking a reaction from Beijing, would dissuade Communist intervention⁹¹.

It is also necessary to consider a neglected aspect of the Cold War in Asia: the coalition plans between nationalist, anti-Communist regimes, including South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and even the Philippines. Beyond a coalition, there was consideration of the aid that South Korea and Taiwan could bring to the Vietnamese fight against Communism. After a Rhee-Chiang Kai-shek communiqué, in which the French saw the hand of the Americans "hawks" (Radford, Knowland), a South Korean observer mission arrived in Saigon on December 18, 1953. On February 13, a short item in *Le Monde* openly reported on an indiscretion by the Pentagon, revealing that Rhee had proposed a Korean division to Laos. The Parisian authorities were reassuring when questioned by Saigon. The hypothesis had nevertheless been seriously studied in Washington several times, even if it was finally judged too provocative and motivated by Rhee's hope to obtain financial and military aid⁹². On February 19, a South Korean mission arrived in Saigon; it proposed to the Vietnamese troops, entry into an Asian anti-Communist bloc, and a trip for the Vietnamese head of state to Korea. The French were worried,

⁸⁸ Memorandum about the fortifications, spring 1951, AN, box 4AG 249.

⁸⁹ Memoire of Letourneau for the Commander in Chief, General Salan, February 12, 1953, SHD Juin Papers, box 8, Memorandum from Pierre Bolotte for Jean Letourneau, February 10, 1953, AHC, Bolotte Papers, box, 5. Handwritten notes of Alexandre Parodi for the preparation of his report after his stay in Indochina in 1952, AHC, Parodi Papers, box 27 (the criticism of Delattre's strategy is not present in the final report).

⁹⁰ Report of the Committee of National Defense March 17, 1953, AN, box 4AG 252.

⁹¹ Telegrams from Heath to the State Department, February 7 and March 12, 1953, F.R.U.S., 1952-54, XIII(1).

⁹² Report from the session of NSC, February 17, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, XIII, p. 1054-1055, Memorandum by the Executive Secretary (Lay) to the NSC, March 2, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, XV, p. 1755-1756, Report from the session of NSC, April 13, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, XV, pp. 1785-87.

seeing American maneuvers upsetting negotiations that were to open in Geneva⁹³. In June, in Washington, Radford proposed the use of Korean troops to General Valluy. The American ambassador to Paris was overheard saying that this was a means for the United States to rid themselves of the situation and not engage themselves, since that risked breaking the armistice in Korea and would serve as an excuse for a Chinese intervention⁹⁴, considering that Chinese propaganda condemned the “American plot to create a military bloc in Southeast Asia, to use Asians to fight Asians.” It was finally on June 15 that a conference took place in Chin Hai, including ultranationalist Asian figures, and in which the former Vietnamese Prime Minister Tam participated⁹⁵. Diem consolidated ties with South Korea and Thailand, but refused the military participation of these two countries in battles in Vietnam.

The Indochinese war finally ended with a solution that resembled the Korean situation, during a conference that did not succeed in resolving Korean political problems. The idea of division was silently omnipresent among all those who thought that the real French interests were in Cochinchina, the historical French colony. Among the senior officers, this idea emerged toward the end of 1953. It was expressed by Colonel Revol, chief of General Navarre's cabinet, because according to him Tonkin could not be abandoned by the Viet Minh, nor could the South be abandoned by the United States⁹⁶. If Navarre continued “Operation Atlande” at the risk of finding himself in difficulty in Dien Bien Phu, it was because he wished to obtain “a war map favorable for negotiations. The French Union would hold the South despite some Viet Minh pockets, and the North at the 16th or 17th parallel would go to Ho Chi Minh, except for the delta enclave.”⁹⁷ For the majority of civil and military figures who traveled to Vietnam at the beginning of 1954, partition seemed the most reasonable solution, since Tonkin was no longer a “lock”; it had become a “wasp nest”! French intelligence learned then that Chinese nationalist authorities were pushing Chinese living in North Vietnam to move toward the South⁹⁸.

Before the beginning of the Geneva Conference, the solution of division was foreseen by the majority of the members of the French delegation, including: Jean Chauvel⁹⁹, head of the delegation; Raymond Offroy, diplomatic councilor of the General Commissariat in Saigon; Jacques Roux, director of Asia for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Colonel Guillerma, the military attaché to Bangkok, who was widely considered to be the best specialist on Chinese questions. Guillerma explained that the situation involved “translating the balance of forces in Southeast Asia into geography.” The division of Vietnam “would make an American intervention that ended in our

⁹³ Documentation in AMAE Indochine box 299.

⁹⁴ Telegram from Dillon, June 13, 1954, FRUS 1952-54, XVI, p. 1131.

⁹⁵ Documentation in ADN, Seoul, box 32.

⁹⁶ « Une négociation avec le Viet Minh est-elle possible ? », November 1953, « note au sujet de la paix en Indochine », February 1954, SHD, Revol Papers, box 1.

⁹⁷ Letter from General Navarre to the Minister of Associated States, January 1, 1954, SHD, Navarre Papers, box 4. Navarre spoke about this to René Plevin, Minister of Defense, during his travels in Indochina, AN, Plevin Papers, box 2.

⁹⁸ Intelligence reports, SHD, boxes 10H 270 and 10H 615.

⁹⁹ Memorandum from Jean Chauvel on the Geneva Conference, March 25, 1954, AN, Bidault Papers, box 52.

eviction useless, would make the Vietnamese government more flexible toward us, would preserve a richer and less turbulent Vietnam for us, and would be a clear and easy solution to ensure.¹⁰⁰

But the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Georges Bidault, rejected the division proposed in Paris by the Minister of Defense René Pleven and numerous ministers¹⁰¹, although even the secretary general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained to him that division was “inevitable and acceptable.”¹⁰² Even while the delegation to Geneva was drawing up an ideal map of zones, certainly considered to be provisional¹⁰³, and while Colonel Revol considered that the 18th parallel would be the best solution and the 16th not as good¹⁰⁴, Bidault was promising to Bao Dai, “As of right now, I am able to confirm to His Majesty that nothing would be more contrary to the intentions of the French government than to prepare for the establishment, at the expense of Vietnamese unity, of two independent states.”¹⁰⁵

At the beginning of the month of June, according to Raymond Offroy, “since we have closed the door to any acquisition of a politically, economically, and administratively viable zone to the Viet Minh, Ho Chi Minh will no doubt try to conquer militarily without compensation¹⁰⁶.” Edouard Frédéric-Dupont, Minister of Associated States for eight days, affirmed in the autumn of 1954 that the division was decided before Mendès France came to power, and that he had obtained a more desirable parallel (the 18th). Nevertheless, the officer in charge of secret discussions confirmed that “in the second “official” phase, when we spoke of a parallel it was the 13th. It was then that Pierre Mendès France raised the parallel 50 kilometers by 50 kilometers. This Oriental haggling would have taken place regardless of who was president du Conseil.”¹⁰⁷ In fact, Mendès France was informed when he came to power that the division was still a decision to be made¹⁰⁸. But the decision was pressing, as the officers of the Franco-Viet Minh military commission wrote: “If there is no military division of Vietnam into two zones, it will lead to the continuation of hostilities. The French delegation is nearly certain that an armistice agreement is closely linked to a military division of Vietnam into two zones.”¹⁰⁹ The decision was finally made under pressure from Jean Chauvel, who repeated the traditional logic of a “balanced division” of territories between world powers acting together. For him, this was not a short-term military solution, but “the creation and consolidation of a Vietnamese

¹⁰⁰ Memorandum from the Asia Direction after a conversation with Colonel Guillerma, April 9, 1954, AMAE, Asie-Océanie, dossiers généraux, box 195.

¹⁰¹ On the discussions in the French government, Pierre Grosser, « Défaite militaire et diplomatie : la politique française entre Dien Bien Phu et Genève (18 avril-8 mai 1954) », In : Pierre Journoud et Hugues Tertrais (dir.), *1954-2004. La bataille de Dien Bien Phu entre histoire et mémoire*, Paris, SFHOM, 2004.

¹⁰² Journal of General Ely, May 30 1954, SHD, Ely Papers.

¹⁰³ Memorandum of Claude Cheysson, April 30, 1954 and May 2, 1954, Asie-Océanie, dossiers généraux, boxes 262 et 226.

¹⁰⁴ Memorandum of Colonel Revol on the opportunity for ceasefire, April 21, 1954, SHD, Ely Papers, box 39.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from Georges Bidault to Bao Dai, May 6, 1954, AMAE Asie-Océanie, dossiers généraux, box 226 (drafts are in box 263).

¹⁰⁶ Letter from Raymond Offroy to Alexandre Parodi, June 9, 1954, AHC, Parodi Papers, box 28.

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Colonel de Brebisson to Letourneau, December 29, 1954, AN, Letourneau Papers, box 14.

¹⁰⁸ Memorandum for Jean Chauvel, June 17, 1954, AMAE, Etats associés, box 189.

¹⁰⁹ Memorandum of June 25, 1954, AMAE, Etats associés, box 189.

political reality in the South, with exterior support (ours and that of the United States)” to obtain “an element of balance” in confronting the Vietnam established in the North, which benefits from Chinese support¹¹⁰. Although Mendès France had initially proposed the 18th parallel, the 17th parallel, which became the negotiated boundary, was declared acceptable by military experts several days before the signing of the Geneva Accords¹¹¹.

It would be interesting to conduct a study of the 17th parallel as a boundary line. This line was put in place with much effort. At the beginning of 1955, the officer in charge of discussions with the Viet Minh wrote about the set up: “I would be curious to know how many people, even those who are well-placed to understand, are still unaware that the crossing of this line of national importance is still open despite the efforts of our delegation.”¹¹² It played an important role in the Franco-American negotiations over the inclusion of North Vietnam in the CHINCOM embargo system, which France resisted somewhat to protect its economic interests in the North. It was mainly the Diem regime that wished to toughen the line; it was uncompromising in preventing postal relations between the two “zones”¹¹³. The Viet Minh was occupied mainly with preventing the setup of fixed teams to watch the Chinese-Vietnamese border. Mendès France learned quickly that “this border was a sieve”¹¹⁴.

Conclusion

Perhaps we shouldn't ascribe too much importance to the Chinese-Vietnamese border and to the “Korean model”. The French military stationed in the south of Indochina were rarely preoccupied by Tonkin. In the beginning of 1951, Delattre required the officers leaving to fight in Tonkin to bring their wives and children to Hanoi, in order to involve them further. Bao Dai was still hesitant to go to Tonkin, despite the repeated requests of French authorities. The French military in Indochina was not terribly interested in the Korean War. Fundamentally, serving in Indochina led to a very local perception of problems, both by servicemen and the Ministry of the Associated States. The high military hierarchy did have a global perspective, as well as the Minister of Foreign Affairs. But diplomats never managed to touch Indochinese affairs, at least not before the summer of 1953, and they were criticized by the “colonials” for not understanding local realities¹¹⁵. The chaotic French policies and strategies towards the Indochina problem had thus been an outcome of the gap between local and global perspectives.

¹¹⁰ Memorandum from Chauvel for Pierre Mendès France, June 27, 1954, AMAE, Asie-Océanie, dossiers généraux, box 260.

¹¹¹ Memoranda of the Military Commission, July 14 and 16, 1954, AMAE, Dejean Papers, box 142.

¹¹² Letter from Lieutenant-colonel Susbille to General Delteil, January 8, 1955, SHD, box 10H 5812.

¹¹³ On this subject, ADN, archives from Saigon, box 397, and AMAE, Etats associés, boxes 320 to 323.

¹¹⁴ Telegram from Saigon to the Minister of Associated States Guy La Chambre, December 3 1954, SHD, La Chambre Papers, box Z 14410, memorandum for Mendès France, December 1954, Institut Pierre Mendès France, Mendès France Papers, Indochine box VI.

¹¹⁵ Pierre Grosser, « La décolonisation et la diplomatie française durant la IV^e République : quelques pistes de réflexion », Pascal Cauchy et al. (dir.) *La Quatrième République et l’Outre-Mer français*, Paris, SFHOM, 2009.

