Reflections on the Internationalization of Military Cooperation during the Indochina War: A Micro and Macro View

Christopher Goscha

Introduction

Between September 1945 and July 1954, the First Indochina War pitted the French and Vietnamese against each other over the destiny of Vietnam. It was a war of decolonization to be sure, but it was also the product of two global conflicts – the Second World War and the Cold War. What makes the Indochina War so interesting is how these three conflicts intertwined to create fascinating if complex forms of international military cooperation. Some of them are well known; others are less so. In this essay, I would like to explore a few of them in light of the larger theme of this conference on international military cooperation. In the first part, I will examine the collaboration that emerged in Vietnam following the Second World War when the French scrambled to internationalize their cooperation with the Allied forces sent to Indochina to accept the Japanese surrender. Allied support was essential to their ability to reconquer their Indochinese colony which the French had lost to the Japanese during the Pacific war. As part of this, I will explore a little-known form of international military cooperation that emerged early on at the local level when the French, the British, and the Vietnamese intensified their military cooperation with defeated Japanese troops to achieve their respective goals at the outset of the First Indochina War.

In the second part of my reflection, I would like to go to the macro level to consider how the combined events of the Chinese communist victory of October 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 internationalized military cooperation for the two main belligerents fighting in Indochina – the French and the Vietnamese. The Indochina War became a major armed conflict in the Cold War. My goal here is to consider in general terms how the Americans and the Chinese in particular threw their military weight behind their respective allies in Indochina as part of a wider contest for influence in the Asia-Pacific region and a parallel if opposing desire to protect and prevent this long rimland on which Vietnam is perched from falling into hostile hands as it had for both of them during the Pacific War.

From the Ruins of Empire: Early International Military Cooperation in Indochina

Allied Occupation and French Efforts to Internationalize Military Cooperation

In 1945, the Americans presided over the dismantling of the empire the Japanese had constructed across much of the Asia-Pacific region since the turn of the 20th century. If the Soviet Red Army had played the leading role in rolling back Germany's imperial hold over Eastern Europe, the Americans drove the Japanese from the Pacific in a series of bloody victories. When the nuclear explosions over Japan and the Soviet entry into the Pacific War via Manchuria brought an unexpectedly early end to the fighting in Asia on 15 August 1945, several million Japanese soldiers and civilians still remained scattered across the eastern half of the Asian mainland and all of Southeast Asia. They awaited the arrival of the Allies who would accept their surrender, disarm,

and then repatriate them[1].

The Japanese empire was not the only one to fall as a result of this global conflagration.[2] In 1942, the Japanese had themselves overthrown longstanding Euroamerican empires in Asia – the British in Burma, Malaya, and Singapore; the Dutch in Indonesia; the Americans in the Philippines and the Pacific, most notably Guam. Indochina was different, however. The German defeat of France in 1940 and Vichy's subsequent collaboration with the Nazis – Japan's ally during most of the war –, saw the Japanese occupy and administer Indochina in collaboration with the French. That changed in March 1945, when the Japanese, fearful of an Allied landing, overthrew the French and their colonial state and installed local monarchies to help them run Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The Japanese interned Vichy colonial administrators, security officers, and troops in Indochina. A few months later, on 15 August 1945, Japan capitulated to the Allies. Suddenly around 75,000 Japanese soldiers in Indochina joined the defeated Axis camp but without having ever lost a battle to the Allies in Indochina. Japanese soldiers were to await the arrival of the Allies.[3]

From the ruins of this global conflagration and the crumbling of the Japanese and French empires in the Asia-Pacific emerged an independent Vietnam. Four days after the Japanese capitulation, on 19 August 1945, the Vietnamese nationalist front led by Ho Chi Minh and his communist party seized power in Hanoi and then rapidly spread their control southwards to Hue and Saigon over the next few weeks as French administrators and colonial troops looked on from their internment. Although the Japanese high command did not cooperate militarily with Ho (who had cooperated with the Americans against the Japanese during the conflict), they did not stop Ho from declaring Vietnam's independence. On 2 September 1945, the day the Japanese formally surrendered to the Allies in Tokyo, Ho stepped before tens of thousands of enthusiastic Vietnamese in Hanoi to declare Vietnam's independence in the form of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Meanwhile, the new leader of Allied-liberated France, Charles de Gaulle, had just dispatched the French Expeditionary Corps to regain Indochina and re-establish France among the Allied powers in the Asia-Pacific.

This, however, was easier said than done and de Gaulle knew it.[4] His provisional government had been excluded from Allied meetings at Potsdam in mid-1945 that had laid out among other things how the Allies would occupy, disarm, and accept the Japanese surrender in the vast Asia-Pacific region. Allied Order no. 1, approved by US President Harry Truman and issued on 15 August, was the core document that established Allied international military cooperation in Asia, including Indochina. In this formal instrument of surrender, specific Allied military commands received the authorization to accept the Japanese surrender, care for Allied prisoners of war, and maintain order. The Republic of China was responsible for China (except Manchuria), Taiwan, and French Indochina above the 16th parallel; the British-led South East Asia Command tended to the Andaman and Nicobar islands, Burma, Thailand, French Indochina below the 16th parallel, Malaya, and the Netherland Indies; the Commander-in-Chief, US Army Forces in the Pacific, was responsible for the Japanese main islands, the Ryukyus (including Okinawa), Korea below the 38th parallel, and the Philippines. The Soviets

[1] Ronald Spector, *In the Ruins of Empire: The Japanese Surrender and the Battle for Postwar Asia,* (London, Random House, 2008).

[2] On empires at war between 1931 and 1945, see: Richard Overy, *Blood and Ruins: The Last Imperial War, 1931-1945,* (New York, Viking, 2022).

[3] For more on this, see: Spector, *In the Ruins of Empire.*

[4] On Charles de Gaulle's lifelong struggle to restore French *grandeur*, lost in 1940, see: Julian Jackson, *De Gaulle,* (New York, Belknap Press, 2018).

were in charge of Manchuria and the northern half of Korea. Order no. 1 established four "Allied Powers" in the postwar Asia-Pacific – the United States; the United Kingdom and the British Empire; the Republic of China; and the Soviet Union. In a massive blow to the French international position, France, whether 'Vichy' or 'Free', was not an "Allied Power" in Asia, nor in its former colony of Indochina. This is why the commanding Japanese officers in Saigon and Hanoi refused to follow French instructions, whether they came from the imprisoned Vichy governor general or Gaullist officers arriving in Indochina to reassert French sovereignty. Allied Order no. 1 formally forbid the Japanese from doing so.[5]

This was a major obstacle to the French ability to internationalize military cooperation vital to the restoration of their colonial control over Indochina and to the elimination of this national government Ho was scrambling to build before the Expeditionary Corps arrived. Moreover, compared to the Americans, the British, the Australians, and the Indians, de Gaulle's 'Free French' forces had played almost no military role in the Pacific War (and Vichy's collaboration with the Japanese, no matter how fragile it was, did not help de Gaulle make his postwar case). This was a problem because the French now badly needed Allied support to provide them with shipping, access to ports, airbases, weapons, and supplies. Lastly, the Expeditionary Corp did not have enough troops at the outset – less than 5,000 men landed in Saigon on 5 October – to reoccupy all of Vietnam if ever Ho refused to capitulate and rallied the population behind him.

Nor did British general Douglas Gracey who had been sent by the Allies to accept the Japanese surrender in Indochina below the 16th parallel. Upon his arrival in Saigon on 13 September, he discovered that Ho Chi Minh's people were determined to defend Vietnam's independence against a French settler population that was bent on reasserting French colonial rule. Whatever one thinks of Gracey's role in Vietnam at this time, he was in the undeniably difficult position of having to manage tense relations between the French and the Vietnamese in Saigon with only 1,500 troops in September. In a fateful decision of military cooperation, in the early hours of 23 September, Gracey released the interned Vichy colonial troops of the 11th Colonial Infantry Regiment (*11ème Régiment d'infanterie coloniale*). This British-led operation easily dislodged the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from Saigon as Franco-British troops rapidly occupied administrative buildings throughout the city. However, French colonial soldiers and settlers went on a violent rampage that same day in Saigon looting, pillaging, and arresting in vigilante style hundreds of Vietnamese. The British officer class in Saigon was aghast at the French behavior. Hopping mad, Gracey ordered the 11th Regiment back to its barracks and decided that it was much wiser militarily to rely on the Japanese until the Expeditionary Corps arrived a few weeks later. He did and this is how (defeated) Japanese soldiers began to play a role in the First Indochina War from its very start in Saigon on 23 September 1945. Instead of disarming the Japanese, from the 24th, one British officer explained, "it soon became obvious that with the small number of troops at the disposal of the [British] Mission, it was essential to make the fullest possible use of the Japanese while maintaining our own forces as a reserve".[6] I will return to this

[5] 'Instruments for the Surrender of Japan, General Order no. 1, Military and Naval', Washington, 15 August 1945, in 'Directive by President Truman to the Supreme Commander for the Allied Power in Japan (MacArthur)', Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States : Diplomatic Papers, 1945, The Far East, China,* volume VII, @ https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v07/d390

[6] For a detailed study of the British occupation of southern Indochina after the Second World War, based on British archival sources, see: Peter Dunn, *The First Vietnam War,* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1985), p. 204 for the citation. For a general account of the British role in postwar Asia, see: Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars,* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007).

question shortly.

Meanwhile, the British welcomed the arrival of the French Expeditionary Corps on 4 October. It would help them reestablish order in southern Indochina. De Gaulle was relieved that the British accepted to cooperate with his army. It would allow him to reconquer Vietnam and restore French sovereignty to all of Indochina – the real French strategic goal. For both sides, the British and the French, this international military cooperation now meant defeating the DRV forces below the 16th parallel. Viewed from his government's capital in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh now saw little difference between the French and the British. They were both militarily moving against his state's sovereignty. The British privately acknowledged that their military cooperation with the French (and the Dutch in Indonesia against nationalists there) put them in an embarrassing situation in Asia.[7]

In the north, above the 16th parallel, the Republic of China refused to cooperate militarily with the French, fearful of setting off a destabilizing, full-scale colonial war on their watch. As a result, the Chinese required the French and the Vietnamese to negotiate a preliminary accord in March 1946 and fired on the French navy in Haiphong when the French overplayed their hand by trying to land troops in the port there as if they were an Allied power and as if upper Vietnam was already theirs. A barrage of Chinese artillery fire reminded the French that they were wrong on both counts. Order no. 1 still applied for the Republic of China. The signing of the March Accord between the French and the Vietnamese provided the Chinese with the diplomatic cover they needed to withdraw militarily from northern Indochina. By September, the Chinese had pulled their troops from northern Indochina while the British had handed off the war below the 16th parallel to the French by this time. Neither the British nor the Chinese wanted to get trapped in a colonial war. And they were right: on 19 December 1946, full-scale war broke out in Hanoi between the French and the Vietnamese and would last until July of 1954.[8]

But what about the nearly 75,000 Japanese troops in Indochina who were not repatriated until June of 1946? It was during this time that a largely unknown form of international military cooperation occurred at the micro level during which the British, the French, and the Vietnamese relied on Japanese troops to help them militarily on the battlefields to realize their respective goals. I will not go into detail here; this subject requires more research and not just for Indochina in 1945-1946 but also for places emerging from the ruins of empire, like Indonesia and Burma. My point in the following two sections is to suggest that the endgame of the Second World War in Indochina led to a form of international military cooperation with the Japanese that made them military actors in the First Indochina War something which the literature on this conflict has largely failed to recognize. Let us begin with Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam before turning to the British and French cooperation with Japanese troops at the local levels.

[7] Bayly and Harper discuss this embarrassment in *Ibid.*

[8] Stein Tonnesson, 'La Paix imposée par la Chine: L'Accord franco-vietnamien du 6 mars 1946', *Cahiers de l'Institut d'histoire du temps présent* (1996), pp. 35-56; and Stein Tonnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began,* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009), pp. 39-64.

Belated Allies: Japanese Military Cooperation with Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam[9]

The Vietnamese army that defeated the French in set-piece battle at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 was not the army that arrived in Hanoi in August 1945. Created during the Second World War under the leadership of Vo Nguyen Giap, the People's Army of Vietnam was at the outset a small guerilla force of a few hundred men, almost all of whom were badly trained, poorly armed, and woefully inexperienced. Upon taking power in mid-1945, the Vietnamese scrambled to recruit young men and former colonial soldiers, to obtain arms from French, Japanese, and Chinese stockpiles, and to train a new officer class. In mid-1946, the army counted around 100,000 men, most of whom were concentrated in areas above the 16th parallel. The outbreak of war in southern Vietnam almost immediately after the end of the Second World War had left little time to organize an army there.

It was in this context that the Vietnamese recruited into their ranks Japanese soldiers who could help them build up their military force. They recruited soldiers and officers who were sympathetic to the Vietnamese nationalist cause, who were unwilling to surrender to the Allies, or who were opposed to returning to Japan for various reasons. In all, some four thousand Japanese soldiers, including a couple dozen ranking officers, left their units before repatriation got fully underway in the spring of 1946. Of that number, probably only two thousand actively participated in the Vietnamese war effort in the early years. They served as military advisors to newly created platoons, companies, and battalions that were sent into battle against the French and British troops moving up the roads and the coast towards the 16th parallel. Japanese served in a dozen or so military academies giving crash courses in the handling of firearms, the basics of command, and the fundamentals of battle tactics and operations. Japanese instructors taught classes in the Tran Quoc Tuan Military Academy near Hanoi and the Quang Ngai Infantry Academy near the 16th parallel.

The Quang Ngai Infantry Academy was the site of an important if 'belated' level of international military cooperation between the Vietnamese and the Japanese against 'Western colonialism'. Its director, general Nguyen Son, recruited a dozen or so Japanese officers who helped him recruit, train, and arm some of the first companies sent into battle against the French below the 16th parallel. Japanese officers working in the Quang Ngai academy included: Ishii Takuo, Kazumasa Igari, Mitsunobu Nakahara, Tokuji Kamo, and Kikuo Tanimoto. Ishii Takuo was probably the most important officer at the academy and among all of the Japanese to crossover to the DRV. He was a lieutenant-colonel in the general staff of the 55th Division in Burma and a highly trained intelligence officer. He had been involved in major battles in Burma against the British before transferring to Indochina in July 1945. He was deeply involved in training Vietnamese officers in 1946 to command platoons and companies that engaged the French and British in battle. The Vietnamese made him a colonel in exchange for his service.

French, Japanese, and Vietnamese sources confirm that platoons trained by the Japanese and

[9] I rely in this section on my 'Belated Asian Allies: The Technical Contributions of Japanese Deserters to the Viet Minh (1945–1950)', in Marilyn Young and Robert Buzzanco, eds., *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 37-64; «Alliés tardifs: les apports techniques des déserteurs japonais au Viet-Minh durant les premières années de la guerre franco-vietnamienne»,Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains, nos. 202-203, 2, (2001), pp. 81-109; Kyoichi Tachikawa, 'Indoshina zanryu Nippon hei no kenkyu', *Senshi Kenkyu Nenpo,* no. 5, (2002); V.K. Nguyen, 'Activities of the Japanese 'New Vietnamese' in the period 1945-1954', *Journal of Science and Technology Development,* vol. 3, no. 1 (2019), pp. 55-62; and Thi Hong Luong, 'The Repatriation of Japanese in Vietnam from 1954 to 1960', *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities,* vol. 64, no 3, (December 2022), pp. 96-104.

sometimes manned with Japanese soldiers fought the French and British in fierce battles for the roads, bridges, and towns below the 16th parallel like Saigon, Dalat, and Nha Trang. This was true above that line, too: during the battle of Hue in early 1947, the French estimated that they had encountered an assault force of 150 Japanese soldiers. A Japanese intelligence officer worked in Giap's general staff in the lead up to the battle of Hanoi in December 1946 and some Japanese soldiers had fought there. Their superior training and experience were such that Japanese troops often inflicted high casualties on their adversaries. The Japanese also died in clashes with the French and British forces in late 1945 and in 1946. How many? We will never know for sure but at least five hundred men must have perished in the early years of the conflict. When the Chinese communists led by Mao Zedong arrived in power in 1949, the leaders of the DRV pushed their Japanese 'allies' to the side in favor of a new form of international military cooperation with the communist bloc discussed below.

International Military Cooperation: The Use of Japanese Troops against Ho's Vietnam

The French condemned the Vietnamese publicly in their propaganda for using the Japanese in their ranks, but they should have held their tongues for one simple reason: The French and the British were using Japanese soldiers themselves in a form international military collaboration that no one among them wanted to recognize at the time or since.[10] This paradoxical military collaboration was driven by one factor alone – a shortage of troops on the ground. In September, the British had only 1,500 troops concentrated in and around Saigon. That number increased to around 7,000 troops in October and reached 20,000 by late November while the French Expeditionary Corps counted only 5,000 troops until late 1945. It was not enough, especially in October, November, and December when the fighting below the 16th parallel was fiercest. As a result, the British turned to Japanese soldiers to help them maintain order as required by Order no. 1 and then enrolled them in their combat operations against the Vietnamese outside of Saigon and further north. Because of their collaboration with the British, the French could also use Japanese imperial troops to help them reoccupy southern Vietnam to the 16th parallel and restore their own imperial order (The Japanese, however, would only cooperate with the French if ordered by the British). Again, the logistical realities of the time on the ground led the British and French commands in southern Vietnam to use Japanese troops to help them do what they themselves could not have done on their own for lack of manpower.[11]

British and French sources confirm the use of Japanese troops against the DRV below the 16th parallel. As the author of the best account of the British occupation of southern Indochina in 1945-46, Peter Dunn, wrote: "The important part played by the Japanese troops at this stage cannot be over-emphasized". The British (and through them the French) mobilized them to clear road blocks, patrol, investigate and round up enemy suspects, provide intelligence, and engage in combat operations. The Japanese were involved in British-run military operations against the DRV in Thu Duc, Bien Hoa, My Tho, and Thu Dau Mot provinces in late 1945. The British relied on the 'Sato Battalion' of five hundred men to help them win fierce battles for Xuan Loc in late October 1945. Japanese troops played the essential role in taking this strategic city opening the way to the north at the cost of over one hundred

[10] An official French newsreel from 1947 on the battle of Hanoi makes a point of emphasizing the fact that Ho Chi Minh had relied on Japanese troops. See the end of the following newsreel: https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/afe85002297/premieres-vues-authentiques-des-evenements-d-indochine

[11] I rely in this section on Peter Dunn, *The First Vietnam War*, London, C. Hurst & Company, 1985 and my own research in the British archives and Gracey papers.

Vietnamese lives.[12] This was one form of international military cooperation operating at the micro level. Let me now turn to another kind of collaboration occurring at the macro or global level.

The Cold War Internationalization of Military Cooperation in Indochina

The Chinese Communist Victory and the Cold War Shift to East Asia[13]

Few would disagree that the Chinese communist victory of October 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 shifted the Cold War firmly to the eastern side of Eurasia. In response, the Americans extended their containment policy from the Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region for fear that another hostile Asian power, a communist one now, would march down this long coastline like the Japanese had done a decade earlier and threaten the American hold over the Pacific. Of course, Mao Zedong saw things differently. He feared that the Americans had now become the main threat to his vulnerable coastline and to the survival of his newly created People's Republic of China. And the fact that the Americans occupied the Japanese archipelago off the Chinese coast until 1952 only reinforced Mao's security fears.

Following the Chinese communist victory, the leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, pivoted from eastern Europe to East Asia. If the Soviet leader had been 'contained' in the West by the Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization of 1949, things suddenly looked pretty good to him in the East. In February 1950, he and Mao signed the 'Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance' aimed at the Japanese and the Americans. It was agreed that Mao would run the revolutionary show in Asia while Stalin would take care of Europe. In January 1950, Mao recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, followed by the Soviet Union and the rest of the communist bloc. Chinese military assistance followed. This included the dispatch of a military advisory delegation to the DRV in mid-1950 whose members helped Vo Nguyen Giap create a professional armed force consisting of seven divisions. The Chinese sent modern arms to their communist allies including artillery and AA defenses. In late 1950, thanks to this Chinese support, the People's Army of Vietnam fought a set piece battle against the French in Cao Bang and won, consolidating an international road across the border to the entire Eurasian communist camp. In 1954, the Vietnamese would defeat the French in the battle of Dien Bien Phu, such was the importance of this internationalization of military cooperation during the second half of the Indochina War. No other state fighting a war of decolonization in the 20th century ever fielded a divisional army, engaged in set piece battle against a Western army and won, or duplicated the battle of Dien Bien Phu, not in Indonesia, not in Algeria, or even more recently in Afghanistan.

The North Koreans, however, fielded an army similar to the Vietnamese one and enjoyed the support of Mao Zedong also. Sharing a border with the Chinese and the Soviets, the communist leader of North Korea, Kim Il-sung, looked to the communist superpowers to support his plan to take South Korea by force (Allied Order no 1 had divided Korea at the 38th parallel). Convinced that the Americans would not go beyond their western Pacific perimeter to fight a land war on the Asian continent (Secretary of State Dean Acheson seemed to have omitted South Korea from the American

[12] Dunn, *The First Vietnam War*, pp. 279-283.
[13] See among others: Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) and Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975,* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

"defensive perimeter" in an early 1950 speech), Mao and Stalin signed off on Kim's invasion of the south. A second 'hot war' broke out in June 1950 on the eastern edge of the Chinese continent when Kim Il-sung's troops invaded South Korea.

Determined to push back against any sign of communist expansionism into the American Pacific, Truman rushed the 7th Fleet and mainly American troops to South Korea under the United Nations flag and General Douglas MacArthur's command. When MacArthur's troops threatened to defeat the North Koreans, thereby allowing the Americans to control the entire Korean peninsula to the Chinese border, Mao sent in his troops in October and pushed American-led forces back to the 38th parallel. The Americans were now fighting a direct war against the Chinese and the North Koreans on the northern end of this rimland while, on the southern side, the French were fighting against Mao's ally, Ho Chi Minh.

Indirect War: The Internationalization of US Support for the French in Indochina

For the Americans, the 'loss of China' and the outbreak of the Korean War focused their attention laser-like on this second fault line located further down the Chinese coast in Indochina. The American fear in 1950 was not only that the communists would march into Southeast Asia via Vietnam like the Japanese had done only eight years earlier. Strategists worried, too, that the Soviets and Chinese would exploit the wave of decolonization the Japanese had triggered by upending so many Western colonial states. This would now allow the communists to spread their message more easily at the expense of the liberal order the Americans counted on building. In late 1949 and 1950, National Security Council (NSC) documents confirmed the shift in American policy toward preventing this Eurasian communist corridor from running any further into the American Pacific and decolonizing Southeast Asia. The "colonial-nationalist conflict," as NSC-48 put it, provided a "fertile field for subversive communist activities, and it is now clear that Southeast Asia is the target of a coordinated offensive directed by the Kremlin." American strategists identified the Soviet Union as "an Asiatic power of the first magnitude with expanding influence and interest extending throughout continental Asia and into the Pacific." If, the reasoning continued, the Soviets extended their control of China to include Japan, then they would have the strength to shift the balance of global power "to the disadvantage of the United States." In February 1950, NSC-64 identified Indochina as the linchpin in American policy to protect Southeast Asia from communist seizure. Internally, American strategists had already referred to Southeast Asia as a "vital segment" in a "great crescent" of containment extending from Japan to India.[14]

Although there was no proof that Stalin or Mao were preparing to march on Southeast Asia, it followed that the "loss of China" was a grave threat to the American hold on the Asia-Pacific. With China now in hostile hands, Indochina assumed an essential role in protecting Southeast Asia from attack for the Americans. One does not have to agree with this way of seeing the world to recognize how entrenched it was in the thinking of an American political class convinced that the Pacific was theirs, not just for economic reasons, but for geopolitical ones reaching back over a long nineteenth century and to the Second World War in particular. The 'Domino Theory' has its roots in the fear that

[14] NSC 48/1, 'The position of the United States with Respect to Asia', December 23, 1949, in *Containment,* p. 253 and NSC64 @ https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v06/d480 and Michael Schaller, 'Securing the Great Crescent: Occupied Japan and the Origins of Containment in Southeast Asia', *The Journal of American History,* vol. 69, no. 2 (September 1982), pp. 392-414 (citation on p. 402).

the Chinese would march to the Indian Ocean and into the Western Pacific as the Japanese had done a decade earlier. This is why the Americans were determined from 1950 to stop Ho Chi Minh at the Indochinese pass. And it explains why Washington agreed to back the French there from this point rather than force decolonization on them as they had on the Dutch in Indonesia.

The Chinese communist victory, Mao's support of Ho's Vietnam, and especially the outbreak of the Korean War led the Americans to internationalize their military cooperation with the French in the form of an 'indirect war' in Indochina against the Chinese. It occurred as the Americans engaged in a head-on war in Korea against Chinese troops. The Americans administered their war in Indochina War against the Chinese in several ways. First, they worked with the British to pressure the ex-emperor Bao Dai and the non-communist Vietnamese nationalists lined up behind him to accept a neocolonial form of independence in the framework of the 'Associated State of Vietnam' led by the French. Second, Washington recognized the Associated State in early 1950, followed by the British and the rest of the "Free World" to counter the diplomatic recognition Ho's Vietnam had just received from the communist bloc. Third, the American Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) began operations in August 1950 to supply military and economic assistance (at the very moment the Chinese military advisory group crossed into northern Vietnam to help the DRV). Fourth, the 7th Fleet visited Saigon in 1950 in a clear sign of American support and the MAAG provided naval vessels, planes, and refurbished ports. It did so from its bases in the Pacific, through Hawai'i, Guam, the Philippines, and Japan, thereby linking Indochina militarily to the American Pacific. Fifth, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) financed French mobile commando groups to operate behind communist lines. Lastly, the Americans played the essential role in building up a Vietnamese army allied with the French. But most important was keeping the French Expeditionary Corps fighting in Indochina, "the only military bulwark in that area".[15]

Indirect though it was, American intervention in the Indochina conflagration from 1950 made the First Indochina War a Franco-American war. If Washington was paying 70 percent of the war bill by 1954, it was because the second half of Indochina war was theirs as well as France's. Although the French insisted that the Americans respect their sovereignty in Indochina by funneling all aid through them, the French knew that the MAAG was an American instrument of global military containment (the Americans ran similar MAAG's in Europe and in Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines). Almost $3 billion in aid would flow through it by 1954. Instead of pressuring the French to leave Indochina, the Americans saw in the French, their Expeditionary Corps and its allied Vietnamese army, the troops they needed to help protect the American position in the Pacific along this eastern crescent now running from Korea to Vietnam.

The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 only reinforced Washington's commitment in the form of military and economic assistance. In exchange, Paris tied its war in Indochina to the wider American struggle against Soviet and especially perceived Chinese communist expansion. They sent a battalion to Korea and committed one warship to MacArthur's landing at Inchon. It meant little militarily, but symbolically it confirmed that Korea and Indochina were connected. "Indo-China and Korea: One Front" was the title of the essay Jacques Soustelle, an influential Gaullist at the time, published in late 1950 in the pages of the widely read American review, *Foreign Affairs*. The much listened to French specialist of international affairs, Raymond Aron, put it in similar terms in articles

[15] NSC64 @ https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v06/d480

he penned in *Le Figaro*.[16]

Thanks in large part to the Cold War and the American support it provided the French, the latter were able to protect their Indochinese empire against any form of American forced decolonization as the Dutch had just experienced. This internationalization of the Indochina War allowed the French to return to table of the 'Great Powers' and even to reinforce their position within the Atlantic alliance. By committing more troops to Indochina in 1951, one of France's strongest defenders of the Atlantic Alliance *and* of the French empire, Georges Bidault, declared: "our action in Tonkin preserves us on the Rhine, since it preserves the Atlantic community."[17]

Although the Americans agreed that both Asian conflicts were connected to the Atlantic alliance, from their Pacific vantage point they viewed Korea and Indochina as two interconnected fronts in a single war against a potential communist threat to their hold over the Pacific. Albeit for opposite reasons, the Chinese agreed that they were also fighting one East Asian war on two fronts. For them, they did so as they stared into this hostile American Pacific wrapping around their coastline. The Americans and the Chinese agreed too that, if they had to clash head-on in Korea, they would; but each preferred to intervene indirectly in Indochina through their respective partners rather than fight each other in both theatres simultaneously. Despite their differences, the Americans and Chinese agreed on one principle in the 1950s: while they fought each other directly in Korea, each preferred to intervene indirectly in Indochina through their respective partners - the French "colonialists" and the Vietnamese "communists". But when Ho's soldiers tightened their grip on the colonial stronghold of Dien Bien Phu in April 1954, everyone knew that the Americans were standing behind the French, and that behind their Vietnamese adversaries were the Chinese, engaged in this wider "Indo-Korean war with the Americans" over the control of this long crescent.

Conclusion

At the micro and macro levels, the First Indochina War thus provides us with a remarkable window into different types of military cooperation. At the local level, at the start of the Indochina War, the French did everything they could to win over British and Chinese support so that they could retake the Indochinese colony they had lost during the Second World War. This early collaboration also included the Japanese. This occurred when the British, French, and Vietnamese turned to defeated soldiers on the ground to help them realize their respective goals. At the global level, following the 'loss of China' to the communists in 1949, it is clear that the Americans assigned great importance to defending Indochina as part of their wider efforts to contain the spread of communism. The outbreak of the Korean War in June of 1950 only reinforced that concern and led to increased levels of cooperation with the French and others in a bid to protect this 'crescent' running from Korea to Singapore by way of Indochina. But just as important was the need to protect the American Pacific against any hostile assault like the one the Japanese had operated against them in the early 1940s. The Japanese were less involved in this global military cooperation in the early 1950 although the Americans did send some of their aid to the French through their bases in Japan (and especially to Korea). Economically, however, Japan was an important part of American-led efforts to contain the communist bloc by

[16] Jacques Soustelle, 'Indo-China and Korea: One Front', *Foreign Affairs,* vol. 29, no. 1, (October 1950), pp. 2-26.
[17] Mark Thompson, 'Defending the Rhine in Asia: France's 1951 Reinforcement Debate and French International Ambitions', *French Historical Studies,* vol. 38, no. 3 (August 2015), p. 473.

facilitating commercial, financial, and investment ties between Japan and Southeast Asia, including Indochina.[18] The war for Indochina did not end with the withdrawal of the French in 1954. Vietnam would remain a source of global tensions. In 1965, American troops landed in Danang as the United States initiated a direct war against the Vietnam Ho Chi Minh had declared independent in 1945. International military cooperation would turn out to be a major challenge for the Americans during the Vietnam War.

[18] Andrew Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987) and Michael Schaller, 'Securing the Great Crescent: Occupied Japan and the Origins of Containment in Southeast Asia', *The Journal of American History,* vol. 69, no. 2 (September 1982), pp. 392-414.