DECOLONIZATION

PERSPECTIVES FROM NOW AND THEN

REWRITING • HISTORIES

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NATIONAL DIVISIONS IN INDOCHINA'S DECOLONIZATION

Stein Tønnesson

Introduction

'Decolonization' can be defined as the process by which a subordinated territory becomes a sovereign and independent state. For a territory to be successfully decolonized, four essential conditions must be met: a government must be created locally which can act on behalf of the whole population; the colonial power must transfer its sovereignty formally and in practice to this government; the local government and the colonial power must agree on the extension of the new national territory; and finally, the new state must receive international recognition and membership of the United Nations.

If the above definition is applied, then Indochina's decolonization, which started in 1945, was not complete until 1975–6, when the 'Vietnam War' ended in the creation of three communist regimes, each represented in the United Nations. An international conference in Geneva in 1954 had affirmed the national sovereignty of French Indochina's three successor states – Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos – but their territories continued to be contested by rival regimes and armed movements, and some local governments reverted to foreign domination. Indochina's decolonization is therefore best seen as a process lasting from 1945 to 1976.

The two most obvious reasons for the drawn-out and conflictual character of Indochina's decolonization are, first, that France clung more firmly to its empire than the other colonial powers in Southeast Asia; and second, that the United States decided to support France and its local collaborators in Vietnam rather than the Viet Minh, the leading nationalist force, and eventually took over the French role in trying to repress the Indochinese revolution. This essay does not purport to refute these explanations, but argues that they are insufficient. An additional explanation will be sought in the inability of the Indochinese elites, in particular the Vietnamese, to establish a minimum of national consensus concerning institutions, territory and international alignment.

The essay will discuss how basic questions of national profile and identity were left unresolved through the various phases of Indochina's decolonization, how the local elites failed to establish national unity, how they fought each other, and how some of them continued to invite foreign domination. The main characteristic of Indochina's decolonization is no doubt its extreme degree of violence. This cannot be blamed solely on the policies of France and the USA. The two imperial powers could act as they did because there were groups within the Indochinese nations who were willing – even eager – to collaborate. Inside the 'long wars of resistance' against French colonialism and US imperialism there were civil wars between Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian groups, sects and regimes.

First, the main phases in the process should be summarized. It started in March 1945, when Japan detached Indochina from French colonial rule and encouraged the monarchs in Hue, Phnom Penh and Luang Phrabāng to proclaim their independence. Next, there were local revolts in the aftermath of the Japanese capitulation of August 1945, leading to the establishment of new governments. The return of French forces in late 1945 led to a drawn-out guerrilla war. France then initiated a controlled, gradual transfer of power to new collaborator regimes. By January-February 1950, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia had gained international recognition, but it took until 1953–4 before they were given the normal attributions of independent states. The next twenty years, which encompass the 'Vietnam War' (1959–75), was characterized by the territorial division of Vietnam, and the internationalization of a civil war in South Vietnam.

This civil war had started already during the war against France. While France had negotiated the terms of decolonization with its collaborators in Viang Chan (Vientiane), Phnom Penh and Saigon, a broad communist-led national movement (the Viet Minh) had waged a 'war of national resistance' in defence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), which had been created in 1945. Because of solid local support, and because the Viet Minh was able to capture or assassinate many collaborating village leaders, the DRV retained control of most of the countryside and prevented the establishment of an effective French-sponsored regime. In Laos and Cambodia, the traditional monarchies enjoyed more popular support, so the French were able to manage a more convincing controlled decolonization.

In 1953, Cambodia gained full independence. Laos became independent at the same time, but by contrast to Cambodia it remained a member of the French Union, a new 'voluntary association' of former French colonies. An international conference in Geneva 1954 agreed on the terms for an armistice between the belligerent forces in Indochina, and declared that this should 'allow Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam to

exercise henceforth, in full independence and sovereignty, their role in the pacific community of nations'. Peace would be instituted on the basis of 'respect for the independence and sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam'. Vietnam, however, was temporarily divided in North and South Vietnam, under separate, hostile regimes. Cambodia and Laos gained membership of the United Nations in 1954, but Vietnam had to wait till 1976, after South Vietnam had been defeated by North Vietnam and its southern allies in the Vietnam War. Laos and Cambodia were dragged into the war, and were also split between anti-communist governments and communist-led guerrilla movements. After the communist takeover of all three Indochinese states in 1975–6, a new Socialist Republic of Vietnam strove to establish a special, almost colonial-type, relationship with similar regimes in Laos and Cambodia.

Background: inside Indochina

The term 'Indochina' has two meanings. At first it was a European name for the lands between India and China, a space now commonly referred to as 'continental Southeast Asia' (Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam). In the second half of the nineteenth century, after 'Indochina' had gained currency as a geographic notion, France colonized its eastern part. This became 'French Indochina', meaning 'the French part of Indochina' as opposed to the British and Siamese parts. Later, the term 'Indochina' became synonymous with 'French Indochina'. Thailand and Burma were rarely referred to as Indochinese, and in the 1940s became part of a region called 'Southeast Asia'. This essay uses 'Indochina' in the conventional way, as encompassing the territories of today's Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

However, French Indochina did not consist of three, but five territories, which had been colonized at different times: Cochinchina (1862), Cambodia (1867), Annam and Tonkin (1884) and Laos (1893). Before colonization there were a number of princely states in the area with loosely defined borders. By far the largest and most powerful was Dai Nam (Great South), also sometimes called Dai Viet (Great Viet), Viet Nam (Viet South) or An Nam (Peaceful South), which since 1802 had been ruled by the Nguyen dynasty from the imperial city of Hue.

The pattern of French colonization in the second half of the nineteenth century forms the background for the painful questions that the three main ethnic groups in Indochina (Viet, Khmer and Lao), as well as a range of smaller ethnic groups, had to struggle with for the next hundred years.[1] The Cambodian state and the several principalities that existed in today's Laos were weak and easily subdued by the French, and some of the local elites saw French protection as preferable to domination by

Siam or Dai Nam (Vietnam). Soon, however, the Khmer would discover that the French were more intrusive than the Thai or Viet had ever been. For the French it was not enough to gain tribute from the local princes. They set out to educate, employ and tax the locals. The French also stimulated Viet immigration into Cambodia and Laos, since the Viet were found to be more efficient traders, troops and civil servants than the Khmer and Lao. Thus under French auspices, Laos and Cambodia were drawn away from Siam while receiving a steady stream of Viet, and also Chinese, immigration.

France did not administer the five colonies independently, but as subunits of an Indochinese Union, which was created in 1897 with Hanoi as capital. This meant that the former lands of Dai Nam, although all primarily populated by ethnic Viet, were partioned in three. The Khmer were also divided into a majority population in Cambodia and a minority population in Cochinchina. On their part, the Lao living east of the Mekong were separated from their brethren on the west bank, who were gradually assimilated in Thailand. The French administered the east bank Lao, together with the highland populations to their east and north, in a new unit called 'Laos', the French plural of the ethnic term 'Lao'. Out of Indochina's five territories the French set out to create a modern colonial state, using forced labour to construct roads, railroads and ports. Telegraph lines were laid out, new schools and prisons built. The governor-general of the Indochinese Union did his best to make the colony economically viable by extracting taxes on salt, alcohol and opium, and encouraging exports of rice and rubber.

In the French-directed Indochinese Union the local governments, while being deprived of their independence, gained increasing power over the inhabitants. There had always been tension between the villages and government officials. Both the French and the city-based local elites saw the village elders as backward, attached as they were to local customs and autonomy. A kind of triangular relationship emerged between tradition-bound village authorities and courtly officials, the new educated classes in the cities, and the French colonial regime. The French would sometimes support the local conservatives as a way to obtain peasant loyalty, while on other occasions encouraging the younger modernizers. Cochinchina, by contrast to the protectorates of Annam, Tonkin, Cambodia and the Lao principalities, was a directly ruled French colony with legal status as French territory. It developed a vibrant commercial life and a highly unequal distribution of land, and rapidly became a hotbed of new religious and political sects and parties. The protectorates remained more closely attached to indigenous traditions.

The formation of French Indochina created new conditions for identity formation. The superior energy of an impatient and arrogant France impressed, inspired and humiliated the locals, and instilled in them a

sense of shame, mixed with hopes of a new beginning. From the setup of the Indochinese Union in 1897 to the Greater East Asian War of 1937–45, Indochina remained firmly under French control. After the failure of the anti-colonial struggles in the 1880s and 1890s, the most independent-minded mandarins sought refuge in scholarship or low-level administrative posts. Their offspring would often become leading revolutionaries. Around 1900 a Darwinian-inspired sense of inferiority held ground among intellectuals. The white race had reached a superior stage, and Asians would have to go through a process of regeneration in order to catch up. Japan's victory over Russia in 1905 and the European war of 1914–18 provoked the first changes of attitude. The 'superior' whites were beaten both by Japan and by each other, and they cynically exploited their colonies instead of living up to promises of local development. Close to 100,000 Indochinese were shipped to France to serve, together with Africans, as factory workers or cannon fodder in the European war, and in Indochina the heavily taxed opium trade became the favoured method of funding the colonial administration. This stimulated revolts and the founding of secret societies. In the 1920s and 1930s two new religious sects were formed in Cochinchina, the syncretic Cao Dai and the Buddhist Hoa Hao, and also a number of nationalist parties. A basic conflict emerged between those who sought national emancipation through collaboration with France and those who organized clandestine networks in preparation for a chance to revolt. In 1930, in connection with the disastrous social effects of the world depression, there were new revolts, this time under the leadership of nationalists and communists with modern doctrines and organizational skills acquired through participation in international revolutionary networks. However, the revolts were violently repressed. The same repeated itself in 1940, when the communists in Cochinchina and a Japan-inspired nationalist group in Tonkin each tried to carry out an insurrection and were severely repressed. Even in the 1941–4 period, when the French Vichy government allowed Japan to occupy Indochina militarily and exploit it economically, the French colonial government continued to control the local populations and repress local nationalism, including some pro-Japanese groups.

The division of Indochina into five constitutive parts had a great impact on local politics. As inhabitants of a directly administered French territory, the Cochinchinese enjoyed the greatest intellectual and political freedoms; a small minority were even allowed to hold elections for representative institutions. A Constitutional Party emerged, but the French neither repressed it nor bowed to its demands. Thus it gained neither success nor martyrdom and hence no widespread following. Hue remained the centre of Viet court politics. The French lost an opportunity to open a path to decolonization here when the young emperor Bao Dai

took up his reign in 1932. He formed a reform cabinet and tried to carry out new policies, but the local French advisors would not give up their prerogatives. Bao Dai's new minister of the interior, the young Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem, resigned in protest, and the emperor withdrew to an indolent life. Hanoi, the capital of Tonkin (and the Indochina Union), held an intermediate position between cosmopolitan Saigon and traditional Hue. Tonkin was a separate protectorate, under the nominal rule of an imperial delegate representing the Hue-based emperor. In practice both Tonkin and Annam were governed by a French 'superior resident', but the cities Hanoi, Haiphong, Tourane (Da Nang) and Vientiane (Viang Chan) had a separate status. Hanoi was close to China, and it was here that the French built Indochina's only university.

Luang Phrabāng and Phnom Penh remained centres of traditional courtly politics, quite like Hue, while Viang Chan, the administrative capital of Laos, became a city dominated by Viet officials and Chinese shopkeepers. Some of the poorest peripheral provinces of Annam and Tonkin, and also the area around the Mekong Delta, became hotbeds of communism. Nghe An province in northern Annam produced an impressive number of communist leaders. Saigon had a plethora of parties, and the Cochinchinese countryside was divided into regions dominated by either the Cao Dai or Hoa Hao religious sects, or communist groups.

The French colonial regime played an equivocal role as far as national emancipation was concerned. On the one hand, the schools and media encouraged an overarching Indochinese identity, which was eagerly embraced by Viet immigrants in Laos and Cambodia. The French tried to knit Indochina together through communication networks, shared administrative services, and an all-Indochinese indigenous advisory council. On the other hand, the French also encouraged separate identities for each of Indochina's constituent parts. In Cambodia, Annam and the kingdom of Luang Phrabāng, the local monarchs became the focal points of French-sponsored local traditionalism, while Cochinchina and to a lesser extent Tonkin developed a cosmopolitan or 'modern' culture. In the protected monarchies, the idea was to gradually develop autonomous nationhood, under French tutorship. Meanwhile in Cochinchina, and also the towns with a separate status, some members of the local elite were granted French citizenship. Together with the French *colons* (local residents) they elected their own representatives to the French National Assembly. The French *colons* however, were jealous of their racial prerogatives. The more farsighted reformers among the colonial administrators had to fight against the petty interests and ingrained racism of the *colons* and government officials, and were never able to stimulate the emergence of a moderate indigenous nationalism of the Indian Congress kind.

Indochinese nationalists often disagreed among themselves, or were uncertain, as to the territorial extent of their nation and its ethnic scope. Some dreamed of an independent all-Indochinese Republic, to be liberated not only from France but also from old habits and kings. This was the vision of modernists in Cochinchina, of ethnic Viet officials serving the colonial administration in Laos and Cambodia, and of activists learning socialist doctrines abroad. For internationally minded communists it was natural to adopt an all-Indochinese rather than a narrow ethno-national approach. In the beginning, however, there was much confusion within the communist movement. Among the first organized groups, one adopted 'Indochina' in its name, another 'An Nam' and a third 'Viet Nam'. In 1930, on the instructions of the Comintern, the name became 'Indochinese Communist Party' (ICP). The ICP soon became a strong political force among the Viet, and also to some extent the Chinese minorities (Hoa) in all parts of Indochina. It recruited very few members among the Lao and Khmer.

Several nationalist leaders had a strong feeling for history, and wanted to link up with traditions from the former Lao kingdom of Lan Xang, the Khmer kingdom of Angkor and the ancient Viet dynasties. The debates about the extension and character of nationhood had not been resolved by 1937, when Japan initiated its war with China, in pursuit of a Greater Asia. Some Indochinese groups, such as the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects, and also some political parties, would sympathize with Japan, as an example of a vigorous Asian nation, while the Viet Nam Quoc Can Dang (VNQDD) – a party inspired by the Chinese Guomindang – and the communists sided with China against Japan. All of them hoped, although in different ways, that the war in Asia would give them a chance to liberate themselves from France.

A veteran communist leader, who had left Indochina as a young man in 1911 and become one of the Comintern's main organizers in Asia, travelled from Moscow to southern China in 1938. He crossed into Indochinese territory in 1941, shortly after the French had quelled the communist insurrection in Cochinchina, and around this time started to use the pseudonym Ho Chi Minh. Until 1940, the ICP leadership had been based in Cochinchina. Now a new clandestine leadership was established in Tonkin, and guerrilla groups were formed in the border region to China. In this period, when anti-fascists everywhere were utilizing nationalist symbols, Ho Chi Minh skilfully grafted international communism onto a nationalist historiography of Viet struggles against foreign oppression, and organized a formula for national insurrection. The key term in his formula was not 'Indochina' (Dong Duong), but 'Viet Nam'. By using 'Viet Nam' in the name for a new league of national liberation, 'Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh' (Viet Minh), Ho Chi Minh was able to ground his movement in a nationalist version of Viet history.

He also moved closer to the VNQDD and gained support from Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese government, who remained in control of the Indochinese border. The Viet Minh established itself with a secret headquarters in a cave just inside Tonkin. Here, leaflets and clandestine newspapers were produced and sent southwards. In 1942, Ho Chi Minh wrote the first version of his long poem *Lich su nuoc ta* ('Our history') which – at least in its later editions – ended with the prediction of a national revolution in 1945.

Breaking out

During the period of Japanese occupation, the dilemma of collaboration or revolt presented itself in a new way. There were now two collaborative options: France and Japan. The monarchs and their courts in Hue, Phnom Penh and Luang Phrabāng remained under French protection until March 1945, and with basis in the authoritarian conservatism of the Vichy regime, which collaborated with Germany, the French did their best to enhance the authority of the monarchs over their populations. After the Japanese coup of March 1945, which eliminated the French colonial regime, the Emperor of Annam and the King of Cambodia swiftly shifted sides, proclaimed themselves independent from France, and let Japan take over as protecting power. The King of Luang Phrabāng was less eager to join up with Japan, and later received much praise from France for his loyalty.

There were three parties who considered both Japan and France as enemies: the pro-Chinese VNQDD and Dong Minh Hoi, and the communist ICP. All of them operated from sanctuaries in Guomindang-controlled China. Under the Viet Minh formula, and by establishing an alliance with the other two parties, the communists were able to build a highly effective organization in northern Indochina, and to obtain assistance from Chiang Kai-shek and also US and British agencies. After the March 1945 coup, the Japanese released most political prisoners from the French jails, thus providing the Viet Minh with highly dedicated organizers who spread out and established revolutionary cells. Meanwhile, Emperor Bao Dai and his new national government were unable to do anything effective to prevent a famine in north central Vietnam, which cost the lives of up to a million people. Ho Chi Minh, who now moved down from the hills to be closer to the Red River Delta, planned to carry out a national insurrection in convergence with an Allied invasion of Indochina, and fight alongside the Allies against Japan in the same way as the French communists had done in France. The invasion never came, but when the Japanese surrender was announced in August 1945, Vietnam had its 'August Revolution'. Local groups seized power in all the main towns of Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin. Revolutionary

governments were established in Hanoi and Saigon. Ho Chi Minh moved into Hanoi and became leader of a provisional government. The government that Japan had installed in Hue resigned. Emperor Bao Dai abdicated and was driven in a car to Hanoi together with the young Laotian Prince Suphānuvong, who at that time worked in Vietnam. By the time they arrived in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh had proclaimed the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) on 2 September. Bao Dai was invited to serve as Supreme Advisor to the republican government, and Suphānuvong and Ho Chi Minh formed a life-long friendship.

Ho Chi Minh and Suphānuvong agreed that the new Democratic Republic should encompass only the three Viet lands, and that Laos should be considered a nation of its own, which would have its own revolution. Whereas the Viet Minh had strong appeal in all of the three Viet lands, it did not arouse much enthusiasm in Laos and Cambodia, except among the local Viet minorities. In Vietnam the pro-Japanese parties had been sidelined, but in Cambodia and Laos the formerly pro-Japanese leaders Son Ngoc Thanh and Phetxarāt retained the initiative in anti-colonial politics. There was no August Revolution in Laos and Cambodia. The difference between the political trajectories of the three main ethnic groups in Indochina forms the background for Ho Chi Minh and Suphānuvong's decision to consider Vietnam and Laos (and by implication Cambodia) as separate nations, although all three would need to cooperate in preventing the return of French colonialism.

By early September 1945, all three Indochinese countries had new independent governments, but none of these had been internationally recognized. In Laos, a small French military force had survived during the whole of the Japanese period, and was now able to reinforce French power in some of the cities. It could build on the pro-French attitudes of the King. The French troops in the other Indochinese countries had been disarmed, and continued to be held in Japanese captivity, while the troops who had fled to China when they came under Japanese attack in March, now lived under precarious conditions with no means of returning either to a hostile Tonkin or a mountainous Laos. The Allies had, moreover, decided to give Chiang Kai-shek's China the responsibility for occupying northern Indochina and disarming the Japanese troops there. In the South, the Allies had charged Britain with the same task. The British rearmed the French prisoners-of-war and helped de Gaulle to send some of his best divisions to reoccupy southern Indochina. Thus the populations in Cochinchina, south Annam, southern Laos and Cambodia would have to face French reconquest much earlier than those in the north, who instead had to endure the presence of a large Chinese occupation force.

Being divided

Only two to three years after the successful and immensely popular revolutionary breakout from French Indochina, the Vietnamese nation allowed itself to be divided in two hostile camps, one betraying the Democratic Republic and entering a French-directed effort towards gradual decolonization, the other aligning itself with communist China and the Soviet Union. The division of the Vietnamese nation dragged the whole of Indochina into a process of civil war and foreign intervention, and led the Laotian and Cambodian nations to also be divided.

The split among the Viet was based on opposite answers to a tortuous question: collaborate or resist? In the beginning there was a general will to resist, almost a national consensus, but the propertied classes, much of the urban population, some of the highland ethnic minorities, the Catholics, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao after a few years ceased to support the communists. They either went into passivity or sought an arrangement with France. Nevertheless, the Viet Minh was able to retain an alliance between a tightly knit group of dedicated intellectuals, some of the highland ethnic minorities and, notably, a great number of peasant leaders with strong village-based political support. In Cambodia and Laos, the resistance forces (Khmer Issarak and Lao Issara) were weaker, so the French could recruit new government officials and reconstitute a viable state. Most Khmer and Lao accepted or passively tolerated their government's collaboration with France. Thus the French were satisfied to see a 'return to normality'. In Cambodia the French had arrested prime minister Son Ngoc Thanh on 12 October 1945, without meeting serious resistance.

Laos developed its own national polity, in a tense relationship with France, and with mostly non-violent internal power struggles. A process of gradual decolonization was on its way. Once having re-established control of the two countries, France was eager to honour the loyalty of the local populations by offering them autonomy and democratic institutions. Cambodia and Laos could then be held out as examples of the generosity and farsightedness of the new France. *Modus vivendi* agreements were signed with Cambodia in January and with Laos in August 1946, and institutional reforms, including the adoption of constitutions, were announced. Multi-party elections were held in both countries from 1947 onward, but the electorates disappointed France by tending to prefer the most impatient nationalist parties.

Until the 1950s the populations of Cambodia and Laos were not engaged in internal warfare. Political opponents were not in the habit of killing each other. The national divisions in Indochina had their origin in Vietnam. By January 1946, British and French forces had crushed all open resistance in Cochinchina, but the communists and other nationalists in

Cochinchina and south Annam reorganized to form a guerrilla army, harassing the French occupation forces and intimidating or assassinating the most notorious collaborators. In the north, the Chinese occupants tolerated Ho Chi Minh's national government, which claimed to represent all three Vietnamese 'regions': *Bac bo* (northern region; Tonkin), *Trung bo* (central region; Annam) and *Nam bo* (southern region; Cochinchina). For Ho Chi Minh's government, and for all Vietnamese nationalists across the political spectrum, the three regions constituted an indivisible 'Vietnam'.

The Chinese were not the only ones to tolerate Ho Chi Minh's government. Chiang Kai-shek also obliged the French, through astute tactics, to enter an agreement with Ho Chi Minh. On 28 February 1946, a Sino-French agreement was signed whereby France gave up all of its special treaty rights in China. In return, China agreed to withdraw its troops from northern Indochina, and also to facilitate French reoccupation. A huge French invasion force sailed north from the ports of southern Indochina in order to land in the port city of Haiphong. The French made ready to seize Hanoi by force, and to pacify northern Indochina in the same way they had done in the south. However, the Chinese troops were still in place. Their commanders, no doubt operating on Chiang Kai-shek's orders, refused to stand idly by while France took Tonkin by force. Instead the Chinese put pressure on the French and Ho Chi Minh to reach an agreement. Ho Chi Minh formed a new government of national union and demanded recognition of Vietnam's independence and unity. When confronted by the risk of war with China, the French commander decided he had to cut a deal with Ho Chi Minh, almost at any cost. The invasion force could not turn around, but had to land in Haiphong on 6 March.

Only hours before the landing, a French representative and the president and vice-president of the DRV signed an agreement in Hanoi. It recognized 'Vietnam' as a 'free state' (*état libre*) within the French Union, and stipulated that a referendum on national unity, i.e. the inclusion of the French colony Cochinchina in the free state of Vietnam, should be held. The main Vietnamese concession in the 6 March 1946 agreement was to allow the temporary establishment of French military garrisons in the north. For the DRV, the agreement was a significant victory. It enhanced the government's national legitimacy and gave it a semi-recognized status. Ho Chi Minh would now represent the Vietnamese nation *vis-à-vis* France. The role of China in obliging France to sign the 6 March accord was not known at the time. In the international press it was falsely interpreted as a sign of French liberalism, and for a short period the French were praised for being more liberal and farsighted than the Dutch in Indonesia.

The 6 March agreement was a significant victory for the Vietnamese national idea of unifying Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina (but not Laos and Cambodia) into a unitary nation. Few doubted that in a referendum, a great majority in Cochinchina (Nam bo) and Annam (Trung bo) would opt for national unity, and accept inclusion in the DRV. This was anathema to France – also to the French socialists – for several reasons. One was that in the French perception, Cochinchina retained its legal status as French territory. The French protectorates could change status through negotiations, but Cochinchina could only be ceded by a qualified majority decision in the French National Assembly and Senate. Another reason was that the unification of Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina ran counter to a French plan to remould the Indochinese Union into an Indochinese Federation, consisting of five units. This plan had been prepared by the most reform-minded members of the Colonial Ministry, and had been declared as official French policy by General de Gaulle's provisional French government on 24 March 1945. If Indochina consisted of five units, France could preside over the Federation as a mediating judge ('arbitre de tous'), sorting out differences between the various states. If, however, Vietnam were to be unified, it would dominate the Federation. Then it would be difficult for France to play a mediating role.

While negotiating with Vietnam from April to September 1946, France refused to follow up its pledge to hold a referendum, and generally treated Ho Chi Minh's government as representing only the northern half of Vietnam. Meanwhile the French High Commissioner, who resided in Saigon, initiated his own rival decolonization process in the South. From June to September 1946, he encouraged the creation of a separate Cochinchinese Republic, with its own president, and convened a conference of representatives from Laos, Cambodia, Cochinchina, south Annam, and also a recently established autonomous highland minority region, to establish the institutional framework for an Indochinese Federation.

Thus two overlapping institutional frameworks for decolonization were established in parallel: On the one hand there was a locally constituted free republic which claimed to represent the whole of Vietnam if not Laos and Cambodia, and who negotiated officially with the French government. On the other hand the French high commissioner was constructing a five-state federation under French administration and local representation, in which Tonkin for the time being did not participate. Cambodia had been under full French control since October 1945, Laos since April-May 1946, but the French soon discovered that the Khmer and Lao were less than happy with the federal concept. They feared that strong federal institutions would in the short run prolong French colonial domination and in the long run become a vehicle for Viet

hegemony. Thus they opted for as much local autonomy as possible. The French had expected support for its federal project from the more cosmopolitan and economically developed populations of Cochinchina, but here French power was compounded by an increasingly active guerrilla movement, and also by the general popularity of the Vietnamese national idea.

What triggered the outbreak of the Indochina War in December 1946 was the failure of Cochinchinese separatism. The small and disparate group of Francophiles who agreed to serve in the government of the separate Cochinchinese Republic were ridiculed in the Saigon media, who largely supported Vietnamese unity. By October 1946 it was clear to all that Ho Chi Minh commanded authority also in the South, and that the Cochinchinese government was despised, inept and powerless. In November, the Cochinchinese president committed suicide. This provoked a sense of crisis among French decision makers. Cochinchina was the main foundation of French power. It had been the first region to be colonized, the only area to create an economic surplus, and was meant to serve as the cornerstone of the Federation. Now French power was about to erode. A decision was therefore made by the French government in Saigon to confront the Viet Minh in the north in a hope that a 'psychological shock' would make the local intelligentsia, both north and south, understand that their only option was to take part in the Federation. The collection of customs duties, the French argued, would be a federal prerogative; none of the five states should be allowed to have its own customs service. To enforce federalism, the French deliberately provoked a conflict over customs in the northern port of Haiphong, seized the city in a brutal military offensive, and subsequently provoked a crisis in Hanoi that forced the Vietnamese government to react.

On 19 December the Vietnamese army and militia retaliated with an ill prepared and badly coordinated attack against the local French forces. Some forty European civilians were assassinated, 200 taken as hostages, and there was an outcry in France. The result was an immediate French counter-offensive leading to full-scale war. France rapidly took control of all the main towns in the north. But the effect on the local intelligentsia was the opposite of what the French had expected. Only a tiny minority were shocked into collaboration. Many joined up with Ho Chi Minh's forces in the countryside, and for a long time even outspoken anti-communists remained politically passive. The initial reaction to the outbreak of war was thus a demonstration of national unity in defence of the DRV.

This unity gradually eroded from 1947 to 1949. In conjunction with the onset of the Cold War internationally and the victory of Mao's Red Army in China, the Vietnamese nation allowed itself to be divided. It was this division that so strongly hampered the decolonization process. If all of

Vietnam's main religious and political groups had continued to refuse collaboration, and had demanded the reinstitution of Ho Chi Minh as president, France would eventually have been obliged to give in. Then the communists would have got the upper hand, but Ho Chi Minh might not in that case have aligned himself as completely with Mao and Stalin as he did later. He knew the international communist movement intimately, and would probably have guarded his national independence if he had not been forced to depend on China for support. If, on the other hand, the vast majority of Vietnam's village leaders and educated classes had turned away from Ho Chi Minh in 1947–8, and opted for a decolonization strategy similar to that of Laos and Cambodia, then France would have come under strong local and international pressure for granting genuine independence. Indochina could then have achieved independence, while remaining a part of the French Union and allowing a certain level of French cultural, economic and military influence. However, this was not possible. Ho Chi Minh was too popular, the Viet Minh too well organized, and there was no other leader who could seriously challenge President Ho's legitimacy.

The decolonization of Indochina was delayed for the same reason as in British Malaya: division and struggle between communist and anti-communist forces in the domestic arena. In Malaya the division followed ethnic lines, the British allying themselves with the Malay Muslim majority in defeating the ethnic Chinese communists. In Indochina the French could not defeat the communists, despite allying themselves with the main representatives of the Khmer and Lao, with several highland minority populations, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects, the gangster syndicates of Saigon, a class of wealthy Viet landowners and a plethora of Viet anti-communist groups. The reason why France lost its war in 1954 was, first, the strong legitimacy that Ho Chi Minh had won for himself and the Viet Minh movement during 1945–6; and second, the fact that Vietnam bordered on China so the Viet Minh could receive massive support from the People's Republic of China once Mao gained control of the provinces bordering Vietnam in early 1950.

How did Vietnam's fateful division come about? Not in the way that France had hoped for in 1946. Cochinchinese separatism remained weak, and the Cochinchinese Republic did not fare much better in 1947–8 than it had in 1946. Already in 1947, the French had to concede the defeat of the Cochinchinese experiment and let the Cochinchinese Republic enter a process of formally merging with the rest of Vietnam. The Cochinchinese leaders now established an alternative, non-communist government for all of Vietnam, and sought contact with former Emperor Bao Dai. In 1949 the French government agreed to cede Cochinchina to this new Vietnam, a decision accepted by the French Senate in February 1950. The division of the Vietnamese nation thus no

longer took the form of a split between separate regions or territories, but instead between two rival regimes claiming the same territory.

Two men played the leading roles in dividing the Vietnamese nation: former emperor Bao Dai and the Catholic mandarin Ngo Dinh Diem. Bao Dai was a weak character, but at French and Cochinchinese instigation he agreed to form a new regime, based on a broad but loosely organized anti-communist alliance, which lasted from 1949 to 1956. Ngo Dinh Diem was a strong-willed leader who ousted Bao Dai in 1955, sent the French packing, invited US aid, and destroyed the broad local alliance that had sustained Bao Dai's government. Diem created an authoritarian, military state in South Vietnam, based on the country's Catholic minority. Diem's state enjoyed formal independence, but in practice came to depend on the USA.

The origin of Diem's state was the so-called 'Bao Dai solution'. After Bao Dai's abdication in August 1945, he served as supreme advisor to Ho Chi Minh's government, and was sent on a mission to China in April 1946. He stayed abroad and entered into talks with French representatives. In these talks, Bao Dai had to compensate for his lack of national legitimacy by extracting more concessions than Ho Chi Minh had been able to when he negotiated. Bao Dai demanded that the French use the term 'independence' and endorse the formal inclusion of Cochinchina in Vietnam. By May 1948, the French were ready to yield the necessary concessions in principle, and signed an agreement with Bao Dai which included the terms 'independence' and 'unity', but the French did not yield real powers. The legal status of the three Indochinese states was now altered to that of so-called 'associated states'.

The French aim was now to form a new all-Vietnamese government through negotiations with and between various non-communist groups. Some important leaders, such as Diem, stayed out of the game, but many other nationalist leaders of less stature took part in the Bao Dai solution. The French were also able to benefit from conflicts between the communist Cao Dai and Hoa Hao guerrillas in the south. Most of the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao had broken off relations with the communists and now found a place within Bao Dai's state. On 8 March 1949, an agreement was signed between the French president and Bao Dai, which stipulated that Cochinchina would become part of an independent State of Vietnam. Bao Dai then returned to Vietnam, but not to the imperial capital of Hue. Instead he took up quarters in Saigon and became a 'head of state'. Never before had he ruled Saigon, and the population there did not care much for him. There were no enthusiastic crowds to greet him, and in practice the French continued to run the country. The State of Vietnam did not, like Cambodia and Laos, have a national assembly or independent financial means. The British and US governments were unimpressed by Bao Dai, but supported his regime as a lesser evil. They

refused to recognize the State of Vietnam until the French Senate had ratified the agreement to grant it unity and independence. The United Kingdom and the USA then recognized the independent states of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia on 7 February 1950.

In the meantime the DRV had been recognized by China and the Soviet Union. The Bao Dai solution pushed Ho Chi Minh into the arms of Mao and Stalin. After the outbreak of war in December 1946, Ho Chi Minh had used Bangkok and Rangoon as his main diplomatic outlets and had appealed to the USA, Britain and other countries for help. But it became more and more difficult for communists to cooperate with non-communist nationalists. After a right-wing coup in Thailand in late 1948, the Viet Minh and the Lao Issara were deprived of Thai support. At the same time, Soviet policy became more hard-line. The Vietnamese communists were targeted for criticism in Moscow because the ICP had been formally dissolved in 1945, and because the DRV government had failed to carry out land reforms. By 1949, however, the Red Army was winning the civil war in China, and Mao was eager to expand the Chinese revolution to neighbouring countries. Inside Indochina the ICP was now reconstructed; new members were recruited, and there was an increasing emphasis on ideology. The United States was now also increasingly demonized in Viet Minh propaganda. In 1949, DRV forces provided assistance to Chinese communist guerrillas fighting the Guomindang on the other side of the border, and in mid-January 1950, presumably at Mao's invitation, the DRV officially recognized the People's Republic of China. Beijing responded, on 18 January, by recognizing the DRV. At this time Mao was in Moscow to negotiate the Sino-Soviet treaty of alliance, and on 30 January Stalin followed the Chinese initiative and also recognized the DRV. The ICP now eagerly discussed how to stimulate revolts against the French-sponsored regimes in Laos and Cambodia, and decided it would be best to appeal to the independent national feelings of the Laotians and Cambodians. It was decided to have separate parties for each of the three states. At a party congress in 1951, the ICP changed its name to the Vietnam Workers' Party (Lao Dong). A Cambodian party was founded shortly afterwards, while the Laotians had to wait until 1955 before they got their own revolutionary party.

If formal international recognition were to be sufficient proof of decolonization, then Indochina's decolonization was completed in January-February 1950. Yet this is not normally considered the date of independence. The DRV, although recognized by the socialist camp and commanding widespread support in the Vietnamese villages, was not yet in possession of any major city. The State of Vietnam was independent in name only, and the French also continued to control key functions in Laos and Cambodia. For these two countries, the date of

independence is normally said to be 1953, when France 'perfected' the independence of Laos and Cambodia by transferring full sovereignty (except over defence planning). For Vietnam, the year of full independence is normally set at 1954. On 24 June of that year, after the French military defeat at Dien Bien Phu, a new treaty was signed between France and Bao Dai, similar to that which had been signed by Laos. This happened while the Geneva conference was in session. At this conference the royal governments of Laos and Cambodia and Bao Dai's State of Vietnam were represented, and there was also a delegation from the DRV that included representatives of the Pathet Lao and a Cambodian Liberation Movement. On 21 July the conference ended with the signing of armistice agreements between the forces of the DRV, the Pathet Lao and the French Union, involving a temporary division of Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel and the regrouping of Pathet Lao forces in two provinces of northeastern Laos. French forces would be withdrawn from North Vietnam, and DRV forces would withdraw from Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam. The agreement also stipulated that there would be elections in Laos 1955, and in all of Vietnam before July 1956.

Studies of Soviet and Chinese archives have shown that the Soviet and Chinese communist leaders expected the promise of national elections to be kept. Thus the Soviets and Chinese put pressure on their Vietnamese comrades to aim for peaceful national reunification, and refrain from any armed struggle against the French and the Bao Dai regime after Geneva. France had committed itself to arrange for national elections, but France now lost control of South Vietnam. During the Geneva conference Bao Dai had taken a decisive step towards real independence by asking the staunchly anti-French Ngo Dinh Diem to form a new government. Diem used support from the United States to build his own personal power, ousted Bao Dai in 1955 and refused to take any steps towards the holding of nationwide elections. In view of the risk that Ho Chi Minh might win such elections, Washington chose to support Ngo Dinh Diem's policy.

Since 1953, the Vietnamese communists had been carrying out radical land reforms in the north and instituting a more Soviet-style government. This provoked social conflicts, leading to much loss of life, and to an apology from Ho Chi Minh in 1956. The result of these policies was to weaken the ability of the DRV to speak on behalf of the whole Vietnamese nation, and to facilitate the nationally divisive policies of Ngo Dinh Diem.

Inviting recolonization

In the period 1955–62, Ngo Dinh Diem ran his personal dictatorship in South Vietnam, with a narrow social basis. Economically his state

depended on the USA, and his army could not operate without US advice. Although it was not Diem's intention, the effect of his actions was to instigate the recolonization of South Vietnam by the USA. It is a paradox that Diem, who had been made premier in 1954 because of his strong nationalist credentials, was the man who cemented the partition of the country.

By appealing to US anti-communism and its scepticism towards France, Diem pulled the USA into Vietnam. Most of the literature describes Diem as a tool of American policy. It was as much the other way round. Diem knew Vietnam intimately. He had been playing cat-and-mouse with the French and the communists for many years. Washington had little knowledge of Indochina, particularly in the 1950s when the main Asia experts had been forced to resign from the State Department because they were suspected of pro-communist leanings. Diem had left Bao Dai's cabinet in protest in 1932. In 1944–5 he had been ready to form a government with Japanese backing, but seems to have been too demanding, so the Japanese turned away from him. Shortly after Bao Dai's return to Vietnam, there were negotiations with Diem for the creation of a new government. Just as in 1945, however, he was too demanding. He now wanted to replace French with US aid, and left for a long stay in America. Here he used his Catholic connections to build support for a political solution that would at once be anti-colonialist and anti-communist. His chance came in 1954, when France lost its decisive battle with Viet Minh forces at Dien Bien Phu. Diem returned to Saigon and was able to persuade Bao Dai, with US backing, to grant him full authority as new head of government.

After assuming power, he drew in the USA by inviting aid and advice. This made him powerful enough to expel all remaining French forces and advisors, and to organize a referendum to depose Bao Dai and proclaim himself head of state. In the spring of 1955 he launched a risky all-out attack against the groups who had sustained Bao Dai's regime: first the Binh Xuyen (a gangster syndicate in Saigon), then the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao. Through swift military action he succeeded in crushing his enemies, and then ousted Bao Dai. Diem subsequently almost succeeded in crushing the communist party in the south, but the local communists were still not permitted by Hanoi to resume armed struggle.

Diem came across as an anti-communist hero in the United States. In the process, however, he had alienated most other groups, and came to rely heavily on the Catholics who had left the north and settled in the south after the partition of Vietnam in 1954. His power depended on fear. With US help he created a kind of regime that would be unacceptable to Americans once its true character was known. Americans were insensitive to atrocities committed against suspected communists, but when non-communist Buddhist protesters were subjected to similarly brutal repression, there was an outcry in the US and

international media. Washington asked Diem to liberalize his regime, carry out land reforms, and allow basic freedoms. Diem ignored the advice.

Diem's policy was to enforce his own power, while relying on US support. His political isolation forms a stark contrast to the policies of cautious national bridge-building pursued by the leading statesmen of Cambodia and Laos at that time. King Norodom Sihanouk, who had welcomed the French back in October 1945, was also no democrat. In 1952–3 he severely curtailed the power of the party politicians and took personal leadership of the political struggle for independence, but his government had far more national legitimacy than Diem's. Sihanouk abdicated in 1955, left the throne to his father, and formed his own political party, which gained massive support in national elections. Sihanouk, who remained the country's real leader, adopted a neutral stance in the Cold War and took part in the Bandung conference of non-aligned countries in 1955. At Geneva in 1954, when Vietnam was divided in two, and the Pathet Lao obtained a regrouping zone in northeastern Laos, Sihanouk managed to prevent the Khmer Issarak from gaining any recognition. Sihanouk's repressive internal policies alienated the people who would later form the political basis of the Lon Nol regime in the period 1970–5 and the Pol Pot regime in 1975–8, but for a long time these groups remained marginal. Cambodia's unity was made to depend on Sihanouk's person, and in the end this was not enough. Yet Sihanouk managed for a number of years to pursue his balancing act both internally and externally. He remained attached to France, forged close relations with China, and secretly allowed the DRV to import arms through a Cambodian port. Ngo Dinh Diem and the United States, of course, despised his neutralist policy.

In Laos, the main protagonist of neutralism and national unity was Prince Suvanna Phūmā. He managed to establish a succession of coalition governments in Viang Chan, with representatives both of the pro-Western aristocrats in the southern part of the country, the traditional royalty in Luang Phrabāng (he himself belonged to the royal family), and the leftist Pathet Lao faction of Prince Suphānuvong. Repeatedly, however, their coalitions broke down, and in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Laos was a hot spot in Cold War diplomacy, leading to a special Geneva settlement on Laos in 1962. With the escalation of the Vietnam War, Suvanna Phūmā's policy became impracticable. The North Vietnamese army took control of the areas closest to Vietnam, which were crucial to the transportation networks that linked North Vietnam to the main battlefields in the south (the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail'). In Viang Chan the government was dominated by right-wing politicians and their US advisors, so Suvanna Phūmā became a figurehead.

A comparison between Sihanouk, Suvanna Phūmā and Diem shows the difference between conditions in the three non-communist states of

Indochina. Sihanouk led a nation that was under his control. Suvanna Phūmā strove to keep together a weak nation with many centrifugal forces. Diem was trying to wield absolute power in a society where he had little support, and where a strong communist movement was aided by a Chinese-supported government in Hanoi. If Diem had pursued a policy of national reconciliation, he would have faced the risk of playing into the hands of his main enemy. This, in addition to Diem's autocratic personality and visceral anti-communism, may explain his policy of national division.

By 1959, after years of severe repression, the communists in South Vietnam were finally authorized by Hanoi to resume armed struggle. They formed the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF), which soon gained support from non-communist groups alienated by Diem's policies. The NLF's mounting guerrilla campaign rapidly undermined the Saigon regime. By late 1963 the Americans had lost their patience with Diem and gave the green light for a military coup in which he and his brother were assassinated. This resulted in the formation of a moderate military regime, which came under French influence and probably wanted to adopt a policy similar to those of Sihanouk and Suvanna Phūmā. The Americans suspected the new Saigon leaders of seeking contact with Hanoi. This was anathema to Washington, who encouraged another coup, led by a young officer. It took place in January 1964. The new government was so weak that in practice the Americans took over the administration of the country. Thus South Vietnam had been effectively recolonized by the USA. This forms the background for the escalation of the Vietnam War in 1964–5, leading to the bombing of North Vietnam and the introduction of half a million American troops.

The United States never planned to colonize South Vietnam. The American involvement happened in the same way that so many territories had been colonized by Europeans in the previous century. Factional struggles within African or Asian countries led the weaker party to seek aid from powerful Europeans. With aid came advice, and when the locals failed to heed advice or to safeguard Western interests, the Europeans started to manipulate local politics. Eventually they would take full control and encompass the new territories within their empires, either as directly ruled colonies or protectorates. By the 1960s the imperial idea had been discredited worldwide, not the least through American efforts. Thus the American domination of South Vietnam, which was soon expanded to include Laos and in 1970 even Cambodia, was always portrayed as assistance to independent states. In reality, however, it was informal colonization.

The USA did not take up the old French plans for a federation of the Indochinese states, but wanted to economically integrate the non-communist countries along the Mekong River (Thailand, Laos,

Cambodia and South Vietnam) in order to create a vibrant growth area in continental Southeast Asia, and isolate north Vietnam. The USA had to fight an enemy who saw the whole of Indochina as one battlefield, with a vast north-south land-based transportation system through Laos and Cambodia (the Ho Chi Minh Trail). In its effort to destroy this communication system, the United States were able to use airfields in Thailand, and aircraft carriers in the South China Sea. By 1964 the United States found itself in the same situation as the French in 1946. The regime it sustained in Saigon was falling apart because of its incapacity and a mounting communist insurgency. In their desperation the Americans followed the same impulse as the French: They brought the war to the north. Where the French had used a customs conflict to legitimize their conquest of Haiphong in November 1946, the Americans used a naval incident in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964 as a reason for beginning the bombing of North Vietnam. For fear of provoking a Chinese invasion like that of Korea 1950, the USA did not, however, occupy any territory north of the seventeenth parallel.

Just as the French capture of Haiphong and Hanoi in 1946 had failed to provoke a 'psychological shock' forcing the Vietnamese into compliance, US bombing also failed to break the will of North Vietnam. Instead, the bombing galvanized the fighting spirit of the population, who readily sent their young men south to fight and die with the NLF. US bombing also provoked a decision by the post-Khruschev regime in the Soviet Union to contribute massive aid to the DRV, and added wind to a wave of worldwide anti-Americanism. By 1968–9 even the American public had turned against the war, and the USA was forced to negotiate with Hanoi and pursue a policy of decolonization, called 'Vietnamization'. Negotiations dragged on for four years until the Paris accords were finally signed in 1973. Meanwhile the administrative capacity of the Saigon regime improved, and the government of Nguyen Van Thieu gained gradually more leverage in relation to the US 'ambassador' and commanding general. Thus, to some extent, the policy of decolonization was successful.

To make Hanoi negotiate, the USA was obliged to periodically halt the bombing of North Vietnam. In order to continue the demonstration of US resolve, and to try and block the NLF's use of Cambodian territory, the USA put increasing pressure on Sihanouk's Cambodia. After Sihanouk had been deposed in a right-wing coup in 1970, the USA launched a devastating bombing campaign in the eastern part of the country. Until then, Sihanouk had successfully maintained national unity under his neutralist formula, keeping special relations both with France and China, although he had not been able to avoid the creation of a guerrilla force, the *Khmer Rouge*, who cooperated with the Vietnamese communists. The coup in 1970, which led General Lon Nol to power, dealt a deathblow to

Cambodian national unity. The result was to create a favourable situation for the Khmer Rouge, who could now fight in the name of Sihanouk, recruit thousands of soldiers, acquire better arms, and initiate larger offensives. After the Paris accords, South Vietnam was therefore not the only regime in Indochina to be threatened by a mounting communist insurgency. The same was the case in Cambodia and Laos, although the Vietnamese put brakes on the armed struggle in the Lao lowlands, since the highlands played such a significant role for supplying the struggle in South Vietnam. The military commanders in Hanoi had always considered Indochina as one battlefield, and their intention was to liberate the Laotians and Cambodians alongside the Vietnamese. Hanoi had, at least officially, given up the idea of establishing a formal Indochinese Federation, but between the three brotherly peoples, there would continue to be a 'special relationship'.

Vietnamization

To colonize other countries went against the dominant ideology in the United States. The Americans had themselves fought a war of national liberation, and there was full consensus in the USA to condemn colonialism as such. Only for a short period at the beginning of the twentieth century did the US tend towards a 'manifest destiny' of possessing territories abroad and subordinating other peoples. This quickly gave way to the principle of national self-determination, which formed a crucial part of US ideology during the First World War of 1914–18 and the World War that began with the Japanese onslaught on China in 1937 and ended in 1945. After 1918, US policy played a significant role in ensuring national independence for the countries of the dissolving Habsburg and Ottoman empires. In 1945, the USA hosted the foundation of the United Nations, which was based on the principle of national sovereignty, and in 1946 fulfilled the promise of granting independence to the Philippines. Subsequently, each time the US entered into a colonial-type relationship through attempts to assist or rescue a non-communist regime, this was conceived as assistance to an independent state. This held the United States back from establishing a formal empire.

The term 'Vietnamization', which was Richard M. Nixon's slogan when campaigning for the US presidency in 1968, represented an implicit realization that the southern half of Vietnam had become a virtual US colony.[2] There is good reason to consider 'Vietnamization' and 'decolonization' as synonymous, although Nixon of course did not. In the American decolonization of South Vietnam, the Paris accords of 1973 form a crucial juncture, since they involved the withdrawal of US troops. Even before the accords, however, the number of troops had been drastically reduced. After 1973, although still receiving substantial economic

and military aid and advice, South Vietnam became more autonomous. This further revealed the inherent weakness of the regime, which fell apart with amazing speed when subjected to North Vietnam's massive spring offensive of March and April 1975.

The formation of Democratic Kampuchea in 1975, the 1976 unification of North and South Vietnam in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), which led to Vietnamese membership of the United Nations, and the formation of the Laotian People's Democratic Republic in 1976, form the end of the decolonization process in Indochina. Hanoi's subsequent domination of southern Vietnam should not be considered colonization, since this was not a relationship between nations but regions within the same nation. Nevertheless, it needs to be said that the so-called 'national unification' was a unification of national territory, not of people or minds. Tens of thousands of losers were placed in re-education camps, and in 1978–9 there was an exodus of ethnic Chinese, of city-based Viet upper classes, and of those who had served under the Saigon regime. They left their home country on small boats and became known as 'the boat people'. Many drowned, while the survivors settled around the world. Thus a Viet diaspora was formed that would retain the memory of the Saigon regime. A resourceful minority had been excluded from the Vietnamese nation. Thus the history of national division did not end.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to address the question of why the decolonization of French Indochina took longer and was more violent than the decolonization of most other territories in the decades after 1945. There are two standard answers. The first is that France held more stubbornly onto its empire than did other colonial powers, a fact also proved in Algeria. The second is that the decolonization process in Indochina became embroiled in the Cold War, thus leading the United States to first support France and later replace it in its colonial role. These arguments are both valid, but it has been argued here that the length and violence of Indochina's decolonization must also be explained by local factors. The first such factor is the division of the Vietnamese nation between those who remained loyal to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, which Ho Chi Minh had proclaimed in 1945, and those anti-communist groups who opted for collaboration with France or invited US domination. The other local factor was the unresolved relationship between the three countries of Indochina. On the one hand, they were increasingly recognized from all sides as independent countries. On the other hand, both France and the Vietnamese communists had plans to federalize Indochina, and for logistical reasons, Indochina was always seen as one battlefield. What allowed the decolonization process to reach its end was the fall of the

non-communist regimes in Phnom Penh, Saigon and Vian Chang in 1975–6, but even then the relationship between the three Indochinese countries was not resolved. Vietnam wanted a 'special relationship'. This was acceptable to the Laotian communist leaders, but not the Khmer Rouge, who instead sought support from China. The result was ten years of post-colonial warfare in Cambodia. Only with the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s did the former French Indochina cease to be a political bloc, so the three independent countries of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos could join Southeast Asia and the world, and face the challenge from globalization.

Notes

1 This essay uses the terms 'Viet', 'Khmer' and 'Lao' for the ethnic majority groups in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, and 'Vietnamese', 'Cambodians' and 'Laotians' for the nationals of the three states. Thus a Viet who has taken French citizenship and given up his Vietnamese nationality will remain Viet, but not Vietnamese. On the other hand a Vietnamese citizen who is ethnically Chinese (Hoa) will be Vietnamese, but not Viet.
2 The French had used the same term when they tried to give Bao Dai a greater share in the responsibility for warfare in 1953. Charles-Robert Agéron (1991) *La décolonisation française*, Paris: Armand Colin, 90.

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