Chapter I

BACKGROUND OF THE VIETNAM QUESTION
INTRODUCTION

The Second World War had a profound impact on the western colonial system in South and Southeast Asia. The situation that the western colonial nations confronted was sharply different from what it had been in 1939. They were exhausted by their war-time travails and they had to reckon with the effect that their own proclamations of liberty and right of self-determination had evoked. The spirit of nationalism among the hitherto "subject" people of Asia could no longer be held back by promises or threats. The moves that paved the way for Britain's withdrawal from its great imperial bastion in the Indian sub-continent marked the beginning of the end of the old imperialist order.

However in the two colonies Indonesia and Indo-China a struggle against their colonial masters ensued. The war in Indo-China against French rule which went on for almost another decade, came to interest many other nations of the world, thereby widening its scope and international repercussions. The four states now called North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and known collectively as Indo-China, form the eastern part of the south-eastern extremity of Asia. Of these four, the North and South Vietnams constitute more than half of the Indo-Chinese area. They also account for a major proportion of the Indo-Chinese population.

The Vietnamese have had a long history. Though much of their earlier history is not very clear, one can trace the
existence of the Vietnamese kingdom to as early as 500 B.C. In 200 B.C., this kingdom was conquered by the Chinese Generals from the north and it became a Chinese colony in 111 B.C. For more than a thousand years it remained a Chinese colony. It was by 940 A.D. that the Vietnamese secured full control of their country, though China continued to be formally the suzerain. In the coming centuries, the Vietnamese extended their control over the South where lay the kingdom of Champa and the Mekong Delta. By the end of eighteenth century, Vietnam had expanded to the full extent of its present day boundaries of North and South Vietnam.

The Vietnamese came into contact with the French missionaries and traders for the first time during the seventeenth century. In 1846, the French obtained commercial concessions from the Chinese Emperor. This was followed by frequent clashes of the French naval squadrons with the Vietnamese in defence of their trade and missionaries, resulting finally in the establishment of a French protectorate over Vietnam on 6 June 1884. A year later the Chinese who had been the traditional overlords of this region recognized French suzerainty over Vietnam by concluding a treaty with the French to that effect. Here started the French colonial rule over Indo-China which came finally to an end with the Geneva Conference of 1954, except for a brief period of six months between March and September 1945, when the control over Vietnam temporarily passed on into the hands of the Japanese and then on to the occupying forces of Britain and China.

The fall of France in June 1940 to the invading German armies, encouraged the Japanese to move in the direction of seizing control over Indo-China. The Japanese warlords had for
long cast their envious eyes on the natural resources of Indo-China. Occupation of Indo-China could be the key to the Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia. Cut off from France, the French representatives were clearly aware of their helpless condition in an alien territory. Within forty-eight hours of the French surrender, the Japanese acquired from the authorities in Saigon permission to station a Japanese military mission in Tonkin. This was followed by further concessions to the Japanese in the next twelve months. In July 1941 the Japanese were allowed to station their troops in Indo-China and granted the use of all airports as well as naval bases.

The Japanese were not slow in extending their control over the economic life of the country. Gradually the Japanese made more and more inroads into Indo-China, though the French continued to rule the country. It was only in the spring of 1945, five months before the V-J Day, that the Japanese actually occupied Indo-China. On 9 March, the Japanese brought to an end the continuity in the French sovereignty over Vietnam, thereby marking the end of an era in Vietnamese history. In the next five months of Japanese occupation, the Vietnamese had their first taste of Japanese-sponsored "self-government".

Following the Japanese coup the Vietnamese Emperor, Bao Dai who had been installed on the throne in 1925 by the French, agreed to collaborate with the Japanese. In return the Japanese Government agreed to recognize and support the independence of Vietnam. Bao Dai repudiated the protectorate treaty of 1885 with France and appointed a cabinet with Tran Trong Kim as the Prime Minister, on 17 April. The Japanese occupation also reversed the French policy by unifying the three kys (Provinces) of Annam, Tonkin and
Cochin-China into one Vietnam - a long time demand of the nationalists.

In spite of these innovations, the Vietnamese were really not free. The Japanese-granted independence, with the Japanese "advisers" taking the place of the French governors, had not satisfied the Vietnamese who revived the cry of Doc Lap (independence). After a brief interval, the nationalist movement reappeared with increased intensity. The Government instituted by the Japanese was not effective or popular enough to rally all the nationalist elements in Vietnam. When the Japanese left, it was not the Kim Government to which the people looked forward to defend their independence. The Kim Government came to be called a puppet regime of the Japanese and it fell in August, a week before the Japanese surrendered. The leader to whom many Vietnamese looked as their authentic spokesman was Ho Chi Minh.

THE GROWTH OF THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT IN VIETNAM

The Vietnamese as a people had resisted foreign rule even from the very beginning of the Chinese conquest. The thousand years of Chinese rule had been marked by brief but frequent rebellions. Although these attempts ended abortively, the Chinese overlords never quite succeeded in controlling the colony. The French who replaced them, in their turn, faced the Vietnamese resistance from the time they established their protectorate over Indo-China. The young Emperor Ham Nghi who had come to the throne in 1884, led a guerilla warfare against the French supported by the mandarins and scholars. This was, however, put down by the French even in its early stages, when they captured the Emperor in
1888. In spite of this, guerilla fighting kept breaking out intermittently, more especially in the upper reaches of Tongking. However the resistance at this time was more in the nature of an attempt to reinstate the dynasty and was confined to the mandarins, rather than a popular movement with a broad platform for political and social reform.

With the turn of the century these nationalists were greatly inspired and influenced by the corresponding nationalist movements in China and Japan. The emergence of Japan as an important power after its spectacular victory over Russia in 1905, kindled the dream of a strong and free Viet Nam. The Vietnamese nationalists came to be convinced that the modernisation of Viet Nam by providing more educational facilities, would make the country powerful enough to oust the French. To this was added the example of Chinese nationalists who under the Kuomintang, were seeking to overthrow the Manchu Emperor and to establish a nationalist, republican government. It was through China that the Vietnamese nationalists learned of the need for reforms, and the revolutionary ways of achieving them. After 1917, when the Manchu regime fell, Canton became an important centre for organising the Vietnamese movements against the French. It was here that they came into contact with the revolutionary nationalism of Europe. In the next decade, various movements led by members of the imperial family as well as others, continued to resist the French rule. Most of these attempts were put down by the French rulers. However, there were other underground movements largely confined to Tongking and Cochin-China, which continued to nurture the nationalist ferment.
The period between the two World Wars witnessed an increased intensity in the movements, with correspondingly increased demands from the French rulers. This was also a period which introduced elements of western ideologies into the Vietnamese nationalist movement. Many of the Vietnamese who were in France, including students, workers and others who had taken part in the French war effort during the Great War of 1914-18, had learned at first hand about the French Revolution, French nationalism and their technological progress. From the leftwing elements in France, they had also come to know of French Socialism and later on Communism. They came to believe that only the Western methods and tools would help in ousting French imperialism. The Bolshevik revolution, its anti-imperialist posture, and the Soviet effort to transform Russia into a modern state also had a deep impact on the Vietnamese nationalists. For many of them the dynamic methods of Soviet Russia appealed as the only effective technique for bringing about the anti-colonial revolution and modernisation. Hence in the 1920s the pro-Russian and pro-Communist elements came to be introduced into the Nationalist movement, thus marking the beginning of a Communist movement in Vietnamese history.

The Rise of Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Movement in Vietnam

The resurgence of Vietnamese nationalism in 1920s and more especially the birth of the Communist movement there could be traced to the emergence of one personality Nguyen Ai Quoc alias Ho Chi Minh, in the Indo-Chinese politics. Nguyen Ai Quoc, whose original name was Nguyen Van Tranh, came into contact with the "Western" concepts of nationalism and communism during his trip to
Paris and London in the early years of his life. A staunch anti-
imperialist, he organized an Association of Vietnamese Patriots,
on whose behalf he sought to make an appeal to the statesmen
assembled at Versailles in 1919.

In 1920, Nguyen Ai Quoc became the first Vietnamese member
of the French Socialist Party but was later attracted to the Third
International when it adopted a strong anti-colonialist position.
In 1922 he attended, as a member of the French Communist Party, the
Fourth World Congress of the Comintern in Moscow and stayed back to
study Communism, its technique and organization. In 1925 he came
to Canton as an interpreter for Michael Borodin, a Russian adviser
to the Kuomintang. He stayed there till 1927 when Borodin returned
to the Soviet Union, following the rupture in the relations between
Soviet Union and Kuomintang.

During this period, Nguyen Ai Quoc showed himself as a
capable organiser and formed the Thanh-Nien or the Association of
Revolutionary Annamite Youth, among the Vietnamese exiles. Viewing
the Vietnamese struggle against foreign rule as a part of an Asia-
wide movement, he organized a League of Oppressed Peoples of Asia
with members from various Asian countries. Nguyen Ai Quoc at this
time was primarily a nationalist whose chief objective was the
independence of Vietnam. He seemed to have believed that Vietnam
was not yet ready for Communism and that a Communist Party could
not be organized there. A nationalist and socialist revolutionary
platform alone could be understood by the people. He felt that
Sun Yat Sen's Three Principles, a type of nationalism which combined
the independence, democracy and/economic well-being of the people, would
be adaptable to Vietnam. As the instrument for achieving his
objective he formed a new party called Association of Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth and enlisted for the cause several Vietnamese in Canton. These Vietnamese went back to Vietnam and organized revolutionary cells. After 1927, the headquarters of this Association moved from Canton to Hongkong from where it directed the activities within Vietnam and recruited and trained its followers.

The next few years witnessed an intra-party struggle in this movement which led to the formation of three different Communist Parties. One of them, the Vietnamese Communist Party, was born out of the Association of Revolutionary Youth, much against Ho's designs to keep Communism in the background. However it was not until 6 January 1930, that a unified Vietnamese Workers' Party (Dang Lao-Dang) was formed. This came to be called in October 1930 as the Indo-Chinese Communist Party (ICP). The ICP soon expanded in its membership and strength and came to include a number of intellectuals and even officials, who were motivated not so much by Communist ideology as much as nationalism. Ho became its chief liaison with the different Comintern bodies and as such wielded authority over the party from outside the country.

After 1935, when the Seventh Comintern Congress advocated "popular fronts", Ho Chi Minh sought co-operation with anti-French nationalists of all affiliations. In May 1941, the ICP formed the Viet Minh as a front organization. With the gradual decay of the China-sponsored Dong Minh Hoi (Vietnamese Nationalist Party), the Kuomintang Chinese sponsored the formation of a unified Vietnamese revolutionary organization in October 1943. The ICP was banned from this organization but the Viet Minh became a full fledged
member. In March 1944, Ho became the leader of this organization which came to be known as the "Provisional Republican Government of Viet-Nam". It also included Dong Minh Hoi, the Trotskyites and religious groups like the Catholics, the Cao Dai and the Hoa-Hao. The Viet Minh being the most active member of this organization, it very soon came to dominate it.

It is noteworthy that the Provisional Republican Government headed by Ho worked in collaboration with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the intelligence, espionage, and sabotage arm of the United States Government and of the Chinese Government, in the resistance movement against the Japanese. The Viet Minh itself, however, concentrated more on organizing and extending its strength within Indo-China rather than undertaking any major actions against the Japanese. By the time the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, the Viet Minh already had a semblance of control over seven provinces of Tongking and a reserve army of some ten thousand men with experience in guerilla warfare. It had also drawn up a post-war political and economic programme. Above all, it had succeeded in creating a popular image as the only true exponent of the nationalist cause, Bao Dai and Kim having been discredited as Japanese collaborators and puppets.

The Japanese Surrender and the Return of the French

The Japanese surrender on 15 August 1945 in the wake of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki came as a surprise to the Viet Minh and changed the latter's time table. The Viet Minh rallied its militia and youth groups to take over the city of Hanoi. On 26 August Emperor Bao Dai abdicated in favour of Ho Chi Minh, Kim having resigned earlier. This facilitated the Viet Minh
assuming charge peacefully and without a break with the previous regime. This smooth transfer also helped in bettering the popular image of the new regime at home and strengthening its claim abroad. A National Liberation Committee, which included the Viet Minh as well as other political organizations and to which all sections of society including Confucianists and Catholics, conservatives and Communists gave their support, was formed. Eight of its fifteen members belonged to the Viet Minh, five of these being Communists. Bao Dai, now plain citizen Vinh Thuy, became its Supreme Political Adviser. On 2 September, the National Liberation Committee proclaimed the independence of Vietnam and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) was formed.

It looked as if at last the hopes of the nationalists were fulfilled and the colonial rule of the past sixty years had come to an end. The country had been united under a native rule to which the great majority lent its support. However these hopes were soon shattered and Indo-China returned to war and foreign rule as quickly as it got out of it. The DRVN were in unquestioned power only for a brief period of three weeks and the French returned to Saigon.

In fact the French had started their campaign to regain control of Indo-China from the Japanese much earlier. In their view, once Japan was defeated by the Allied forces in the Far East, there would be no other force to take over Vietnam. As Joseph Buttinger has shown, the French were either uninformed about or underestimated the activities of the Viet Minh and the real mood of the Vietnamese people. (1) The French had believed that their

right to return to Indo-China would be based entirely on their participation in the war against Japan. This was why the French were anxious to have a part in the South East Asia Supreme Command. The French aim was, however, defeated mainly by the American reluctance to restore France in Indo-China. (2) It is however doubtful whether the French would have been in a position to reestablish themselves peacefully, even if the United States had been acquiescent. It did not apparently occur to the French leaders that they would have to first re-establish themselves in the eyes of the Vietnamese people and that, in any event, the prospect of their being welcomed back to the seats of authority, were slim. The French misconceived the Vietnamese resistance, believed that the people would on the whole welcome their return and refused to recognize the strength of the popular support behind the Viet Minh. Hence they began making military preparations to take over Indo-China after the Japanese surrender. They also undertook to introduce political reforms not so much to please the indigenous population as to placate China and the United States which might place obstacles on the French return. The political reforms envisaged by the French Provisional Government on 24 March 1945 provided for a federal Indo-China within a French Union and a federal representative assembly but with limited powers. Though it was claimed to be a scheme to give autonomy for the Indo-Chinese, in actuality it gave some kind of autonomy only for the French Governor-General. These changes left the Vietnamese indifferent, as their demand was for complete independence.

2. This aspect has been dealt with in Chapter II.
In August Paris appointed Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu as the High Commissioner (the new designation for the Governor General) for Indo-China. A Carmelite monk on leave from his monastery, who had risen to high rank in the Free French Navy, Argenlieu shared General de Gaulle's vision of maintaining the glory of the French empire. A staunch conservative, he was given the specific task of re-establishing the French sovereignty.

Meanwhile, in July 1946, the Potsdam Conference had decided that following a Japanese surrender, Vietnam north of the 16th parallel would be occupied by the Chinese armies and the Southern portion by the British. It was these British and Chinese forces and not the French who were assigned the task of disarming the Japanese and evacuating the Allied prisoners of war. This was clearly a rebuff to the French and an indignity that Charles de Gaulle could hardly forget.

When the French sought to re-enter Vietnam, there were three different elements to confront with - the British in the South, the Chinese in the North and the Viet Minh seeking to rule the entire Viet Nam though its main base of power was Tongking in the north and Cochin-China in Central Vietnam. The return of the French, therefore, mainly depended on the attitude of the occupation forces.

As between these two occupation forces, the French could expect sympathy and support from the British, both as a European and a colonial power. It could not, however, expect the same from the Chinese who had good reason to exploit the French difficulties, to prevent them from returning to Indo-China. The British and the Chinese also differed in their attitude to their respective missions
on hand. The British Government viewed it as a military assignment of disarming the Japanese and restoring order. The British Commander of the occupying forces, General Gracey, viewed it even more broadly. He took it upon himself to restore to the French the territory under his command. The Chinese, on the other hand, found in it an opportunity to establish their power and sought to set up a puppet regime under the Dang Minh Hoi.

This made the French look forward to British help in reinstating themselves in power in the British zone. To this was added another favourable factor. The Viet Minh which was firmly entrenched and efficiently organized in the North, was comparatively weak in the South. Cochin-China was disunited and ill-prepared for independence. This explained why the French when they attempted to return to Vietnam did so in the region south of the 16th parallel.

The fortnight between the arrival of the British forces and the outbreak of hostilities in Saigon, was a crucial period in the recent history of Vietnam. The events during this interval considerably moulded the future of Indo-China. It was a time when the French could have changed their course completely and helped to avoid eight years of bloodshed. As Ellen J. Hammer puts it:

This was a time when a man of prestige and authority might have had the foresight and the power to break into the past and make a gift to the Vietnamese of the independence they expected. It was a time to be generous while a grant of independence would still have constituted generosity, and not simply a concession wrung from France when the French had no other alternative. (3)

General de Gaulle who, seventeen years later, had the vision and courage of conviction to withdraw the French rule from Algeria, was in 1945, consumed by a determination to rebuild France's colonial empire as a means of restoring its shattered prestige.

The arrival of the British forces accompanied by some French soldiers led to a strained atmosphere in Vietnam. Very soon anti-French activities spread leading to the French seeking British protection. The British commander, now faced with a political problem, tried to solve it by freeing the French prisoners of war from the Vietnamese jails and rearming them. The British decision was of momentous consequence and earned for them the blame for the war which followed the French return. It led to violent incidents by the freed French forces against the Vietnamese. On 23 September they threw out the Vietnamese and seized all public buildings in Saigon, without encountering practically any resistance. Many of the Vietnamese leaders in Saigon escaped into the countryside.

The centre of nationalist resistance shifted to Hanoi in the North.

On 3 October more French troops led by General Leclerc landed in Saigon. This was followed by rapid re-establishment of French control over the towns and principal roads in Cochin-China. On 9 October, the French signed an agreement with the British in London by which the British recognized the French civil administration as the only one entitled to direct non-military affairs south of the 16th Parallel. The French in the subsequent years were critical of the British for not supplying them with adequate shipping to bring their men and arms to the Far East and as being lukewarm to the French effort to re-establish their authority over Indo-China. The events of September 1945, however, belied this.
Whatever might have been the views of the British Labour Government and the Supreme Allied Commander to the restoration of French rule in Indo-China, the local commander, by his actions had contributed his best efforts to facilitate the return of the French.

Following the re-establishment of their authority in the South, the French conducted negotiations with the Chinese occupation forces in the North, where the Viet Minh continued to rule with the tacit approval of the Chinese. On 28 February 1946 the French signed an agreement with the Chinese by which the latter promised to withdraw their troops by 31 March 1946. In return for this, France renounced its extra-territorial rights and concessions in China. It also guaranteed exemption from customs and transit duties to the Chinese merchandise shipped over the Haiphong-Kunming Railway and promised a free zone for Chinese goods at Haiphong. By the summer of 1946, the Chinese finally left Indo-China.

The signing of this treaty by the Chinese Government had important consequences. It was a serious blow to the emergence of a vigorous non-communist nationalism. The Chinese agreement to leave Indo-China also meant that the Vietnamese were now face to face with the French who made ready to reconquer the area by force. This meant either an open military confrontation between the two or alternatively negotiations towards a mutually acceptable arrangement. For their own reasons both the parties preferred the latter course. The need to solve the immediate problems like famine and illiteracy within its own jurisdiction made the Viet Minh seek peace. It also realized that no effective American support could be expected for the nationalist cause. Under the
circumstances Ho chose to temporize and expressed readiness to negotiate with the French without, however, giving up his basic objectives.

The French on their part were increasingly cognizant of the fact that the Viet Minh represented a national movement which could not be subdued easily or quickly. They had also, by January 1946, reached the end of their search for an alternative to Ho Chi Minh. Hence the negotiations which had already been going on at an unofficial level, received a momentum after the Franco-Chinese agreement.

On 6 March 1946, the French Commissioner in Tonkin, Jean Sainteny signed an agreement in Hanoi with Ho Chi Minh by which France recognized the DRVN as a "free State with its own government, parliament, army and finances, forming a part of the Indo-Chinese federation and the French Union". (4) The French pledged themselves to a referendum to determine whether the three provinces of Tonkin, Annam and Cochin-China should be united. In return, the Vietnamese agreed not to oppose the French army when it arrived to relieve the Chinese. This "preliminary accord" was to be followed by "friendly and open negotiations".

The 6 March Agreement enabled both the sides to achieve their limited aims and helped to provide for the immediate cessation of hostilities. On its significance to the Viet Minh cause, Joseph Buttinger wrote:

... the deal of March 1946, between the French and the Communists was as much a condition for the eventual triumph of Vietnamese communism as was the treaty of Brest-Litovsk for the victory of the Bolshevik revolution. (5)

The 6 March Accord might have very well become a historic document and established the basis for peace in Vietnam but for the French policy of "divide and rule". While on the one hand, it arrived at an agreement based on the unity of Vietnam, on the other hand, it continued to encourage the separatist tendencies in Cochinchina in order to keep it away from Northern control. The Dalat Conference held on 18 April only confirmed this French insistence and showed up more clearly the basic disagreements between the two parties. (6) It was difficult to be optimistic after Dalat.

Negotiations, however, continued and on 6 July talks between the DRVN and the French Government began at Fontainebleau in France. The Conference, from its very beginning, was headed for failure due to the unilateral actions of d'Argenlieu back in Indo-China. On 30 May, he had recognized Cochinchina, apparently without any authorisation from Paris, as a "free state" with its own army, finances etc. On 1 June, this "Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina" was proclaimed in Saigon. Following this on 3 June the French Commissioner for Cochinchina, Jean Cedile, signed a new convention with the new regime. The Viet Minh viewed these actions of the French as a rank betrayal of their confidence. Nor did the French


6. The Dalat Conference between the French Administration in Saigon and the Vietnamese at the resort city of Dalat in Southern Annam, was in the nature of a preliminary conference. It was to pave the way for a later and definitive meeting in Paris, which had been promised in the 6 March Agreement.
Government show itself to be keen on an agreement. All that could be salvaged out of it was a modus vivendi which avoided all the vital issues and confined itself to economic and cultural questions. It also provided for another conference not later than January 1947, to negotiate a final treaty. The Vietnamese, once again, seemed to have given way on many issues and agreed to postpone any settlement of their independence for a third time.

THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

The Fontainebleau Conference marked the last effort at negotiation in an atmosphere of comparative peace. Very soon after this, hostilities broke out. On 20 November occurred what has come to be known as the "Haiphong incident", in which a French patrol ship, while attempting to seize a Chinese junk, was fired at by the local Vietnamese militia. Fighting soon spread into the city and marked the beginning of a regular "Indo-China War". It also signified that the Vietnamese had become convinced that there was little prospect of settling the issue of their independence peacefully. The year 1946 was truly an important period in Vietnamese history. During this period, the possibilities of a compromise were greater than at any other time later on. The Communists had not yet established their predominance either within the Viet Minh or on the public at large. The Vietnamese too were in a mood to yield greater concessions to France in order to achieve political unity and independence. As for the French in Indo-China, their military reinforcements had not yet reached a level as to enable them plan a massive military strike against the DRVN. Hence the time was opportune to arrive at some kind of a workable arrangement between
the two. This was, however, thwarted both because of the narrow outlook and policies of the conservative representatives of the French Government in Indo-China and their conviction that they could restore the French authority with less than fundamental concessions. Apportioning the responsibility for the outbreak of the war, Hammer concludes that "the Vietnamese chose the date on which it broke out, but the policy followed by members of the French administration in Saigon made the war almost inevitable." (7) This policy lay in systematically obstructing the implementation of the 6 March Agreement. Militarily, as Bernard B. Fall wrote, "the French forces sent to Indo-China were too strong for France to resist the temptation of using them; yet not strong enough to keep the Viet Minh from trying to solve the whole political problem by throwing the French into the sea." (8)

However, even in the midst of this fighting, the Viet Minh continued to make efforts to negotiate the future of Vietnam. These attempts ended abortively as France continued to believe in its tactics of encouraging separatist tendencies and revived its efforts to find an alternative to Ho. The most natural choice seemed to be the ex-emperor Bao Dai who, after serving for a brief period with the DRVN, was living in Hongkong.

The French choice fell on Bao Dai mainly because the latter had shown himself in the past as a man of weak character, amenable to external control. They believed Bao Dai would be content to accept terms which the French would be willing to grant and would

succeed in making the Vietnamese agree to them. The Spring of 1947 witnessed repeated overtures from the French to Bao Dai to form an alternate Government. In spite of Bao Dai's reluctance to settle for less than full independence, he was persuaded to do so by many sections in Vietnam which rallied around him either because of old loyalties to the Royal Family or because they saw in it an opportunity to form an opposition to the Viet Minh. In the fall of 1947, Bao Dai accepted the demand by these Vietnamese with a view, as he put it, "to get independence and unity" for Vietnam. However on 7 December he signed a statement of terms with the French High Commissioner Emile Bollaert which gave Vietnam a status far short of independence.

This dissatisfied many of Bao Dai's supporters and drove away many non-Communist nationalists like Ngo Dinh Diem and Tran Van Ly from Bao Dai's future government. However the French themselves found in Bao Dai's willingness, a political weapon against Ho Chi Minh and a justification for military action against the Viet Minh. This marked the beginning of a Bao Dai solution to the Vietnam crisis and became the French policy for the next six and a half years.

With this decision of Bao Dai to accept the French offer, the Vietnamese lost another opportunity in their struggle against the French colonial rule. Many in Vietnam had felt, at this time, that only a Bao Dai-Ho Chi Minh combination would bring about a peaceful independence to Vietnam. Among them were Princes Bun Hoi and Bun Loc, cousins of Bao Dai. A similar proposal was made by Ho Chi Minh himself who asked Bao Dai to carry on negotiations with the French on his behalf. Such a joint solution, had it been accepted by Bao Dai and his supporters, would have not only strengthened his
bargaining position vis-a-vis the French, but might have also prevented a shift of power within the Viet Minh to the extremists.

The rejection of such a solution placed Bao Dai in a dilemma between the French intentions and the Vietnamese objectives. The only way Bao Dai could win the people over would be by securing unity and independence which the French had refused to Ho Chi Minh. On the other hand, the French brought out and supported Bao Dai only because they believed he could be counted upon not to be intransigently nationalistic. The Bao Dai solution, from its very beginning, was doomed to fail, mainly because the French were keen on holding on to their colonial privileges even while promising him full freedom. Bao Dai came to be regarded as a French stooge and a traitor to the cause of Vietnamese independence. Instead of splitting up the resistance, as the French had hoped, Bao Dai's association with the French ended up by making the Viet Minh more popular. The Viet Minh came to be regarded as the only genuine rebels against the colonial rule whose sacrifices and struggle were responsible for the little amount of independence Vietnam secured.

Bao Dai's Negotiations with the French Government

The opposition of prominent Vietnamese leaders to the French offer made Bao Dai seek more precise assurances from the French. In the process he allowed the French "to beg him, to cajole, humour, or threaten him in their determination to recruit his services". (9) The deadlock was finally broken when on 27 May 1948,

General Nguyen Van Xyan, the President of the Cochin-Chinese "Republic", formed a "Central Government of Vietnam" from among the Bao Dai supporters. Xyan himself became its President. With the formation of the Xyan Government, which was neither popular nor powerful, the practice of two Vietnamese governments came into operation.

On 5 June, Bao Dai acting on behalf of the Xyan Government, arrived at an agreement with Bollaert. The Ha Long Bay Agreement, as it was called, recognized "independence" for Vietnam. But it had hedged the independence with so many qualifications that the Agreement was no more than a repetition of the Accord of 6 December the of/previous year. Instead of rallying the nationalists, it only confirmed their opposition to the French-sponsored regime and even crystallised more support around Ho Chi Minh.

Meanwhile, portentous developments were taking place in China. By the beginning of 1949, the legions of Mao Tse-tung gained such successes as to raise the spectre of a Communist China. A Communist regime in China, the French and Bao Dai feared, might extend active support to the Viet Minh. Hence both the French as well as Bao Dai were convinced of the need to arrive at an early agreement. On 8 March 1949 the Auriol-Bao Dai Agreement was arrived at the Elysee Palace in Paris. The Elysee Accords recognized the independence of Vietnam. However the Vietnamese were given only a limited freedom in their diplomatic contacts and were denied the powers to formulate their own military and foreign policy. The French position in Vietnam was preserved. By signing these Accords, Bao Dai had accepted terms which had been rejected by Ho Chi Minh at Fontainebleau in 1946. The "independent Vietnam"
of the Elysee Accords was, in effect, a mere protectorate, a kind of extension of the French-founded regime at Cochinchina to the whole country. Even these unsatisfactory Elysee Accords were not ratified by the French National Assembly as late as February 1950 thereby increasing the suspicions of the restive Vietnamese.

Meanwhile proposals continued to be put forward for unity between the Viet Minh and the newly established Government with Bao Dai as Chief of State, but this time from the latter's side. What exactly were the motives behind these moves were not clear. It might be to get the support of the nationalist leaders who did not belong to either of the two. Or it might have been to strengthen the Vietnamese bargaining position vis-a-vis the French Government. As it looked very logical, Bao Dai sought to threaten the French with a possible unity with Ho Chi Minh, in order to get more concessions as well as an early ratification of the Elysee Accords.

But these offers were not taken seriously by the Viet Minh who had denounced the various Accords and called Xyan a puppet of the French. The successes of the Communists in China too strengthened the hopes of the Viet Minh in their struggle against the French. Hence it chose not to recognize the Bao Dai Government. This was also a period when within the Viet Minh itself, the extremists had gained an upper hand. The war in Vietnam had also, in the meantime, come to attract increasing attention in the United States which welcomed the Elysee Accords. Hence to the Viet Minh the war became not only a struggle against French colonialism but against "Franco-American imperialism".

By the end of 1949 the international situation had hardened and the Western sensitiveness about Communism intensified. The
year was crucial for Vietnam as the war there came to be a part of the confrontation between the Western and Communist blocs. With this cold war entering into Indo-China, the division between the Viet Minh and the Bao Dai's Government became sharper. In January 1950, the Soviet Union and Communist China recognized the Viet Minh as the Government of Vietnam. Following this, the French National Assembly promptly ratified the Elysee Accords on 2 February and the Government headed by Bao Dai officially came into existence. It was immediately recognized by the United States and Britain, followed by other countries in the Western bloc.

With the recognition of the two governments by the various countries, the war in Vietnam graduated into a civil war - the Bao Dai government now appearing as a screen for French military action and adding respectability to it. The Indo-China war also came to be described as an ideological struggle between the Bao Dai Government supported and aided by the Western bloc and the Viet Minh by the Communist bloc. Efforts were made to present the struggle in Vietnam as one between Democracy and Communism. This view did not earn the support of neutral nationalists or attentistes for the new Government, let alone wean away the nationalists from the Viet Minh. For most Vietnamese the war continued to be a nationalist struggle against the French who continued to wield enormous power in Vietnam and control important portfolios.

To this resentment over the French dominance, were added the scandals of the French economic exploitation which came to be publicised in the affaire des generaux, early in 1950. There was much of mudslinging when the various French political parties like the Communist Party, M.R.P. and the Gaullists exploited the affaire to their own political benefit. The entire war in Indo-China was
shown as one of dirt and corruption and as an "unclean colonialist racket". (10) The war there was criticised, especially by the Communists, as one which served the purposes of Big Business and racketeers. The investigations of the Committee of Inquiry which went into the affaire not only confirmed these allegations, but also revealed that many Vietnamese in high positions who were close associates of Bao Dai, were involved in this racketeering. All this did not redound to the popularity of the Bao Dai Government.

Meanwhile, the war in Indo-China underwent a different military character. While the French continued to adopt the conventional methods of a colonial reconquest, the Viet Minh switched over to guerilla warfare with the prospects of a protracted war. The Viet Minh were helped in this by their political programme which was quite simple, namely independence. Soon the Viet Minh were able to hold much of the countryside including the hill-tribe areas, while the French could control only the low-lands, more especially the cities. The war of attrition that ensued continued till 1954, resulting in an ever-increasing drain on the trained officers and economic strength of France. This made Indo-China the Number One problem for France and for certain inter-related reasons, an important issue to the United States.

In the face of the mounting criticism, both domestic and foreign, and the growing pressure from the Vietnamese nationalists, the French once again agreed to open negotiations with the three Indo-Chinese states. The Pau Conference which started in June 1950

10. A detailed description of the entire affaire and the investigations of the Committee of Inquiry is given by Werth, n. 9, pp. 455-69.
in France, with a view to "perfecting the independence" that had been granted by the Elysee Accords, ended in November after five gruelling months of negotiations among the three Indo-Chinese states and France. While giving more freedom in foreign affairs, these Agreements maintained France's dominant role in military affairs, finance and other fields of special interest to the metropolis. Thereby it fell short of the Vietnamese expectations and made the Bao Dai Government more unpopular.

As the war dragged on, the strain on France became very substantial. An end to the war did not appear near and the military reverses increased. The French came to be convinced of the need to end the costly adventure. As popular criticism and disgust with the continuing war grew in intensity, the French opinion to make peace in Indo-China and withdraw from the region gained in strength. At the same time, the Associated States of Indo-China too brought tremendous pressure on France to reopen negotiations on their future status.

The Laniel Government which came to power in June 1953, applied itself immediately to the Indo-Chinese situation. On 3 July, it offered to reopen negotiations with the three Governments in order to "perfect" their independence and sovereignty by transferring to them various functions which remained under the French control, and to settle other outstanding problems. The talks which began soon after this between France and the three States on a bilateral basis, resulted in the signing of treaties with Laos and Cambodia. As for Vietnam, the French offer marked the beginning of a series of political activities giving rise to various demands. Negotiations between France and Vietnam started on 8 March 1954 in Paris.
In the meantime, attempts were being made, almost throughout 1953, by many influential personalities, both French and Vietnamese, to open some kind of negotiations with the Viet Minh. These efforts, however, came to nothing. The Berlin Conference of Foreign Ministers held in February 1954 had agreed to hold a conference in Geneva at the end of April to settle "outstanding issues in the Far East" such as Korea and Indo-China.

The Geneva Conference which opened on 25 April 1954, came to be dominated by the war that was going on in Indo-China and the need to bring about peace there. The fall of Dien Bien Phu on 8 May to the Viet Minh, sealed the fate of the French side and thereby hastened the French withdrawal from Vietnam, both politically and militarily. On 12 May two draft treaties were made public. By one France had recognized Vietnam as "a fully independent and sovereign state" and by the other, Vietnam accepted membership within the French Union. These treaties were signed on 4 June 1954 and the French rule over Vietnam came to an end after nearly seventy years.

The military withdrawal of France was brought about by the Geneva Agreements of July 1954 which put an end to the eight years old war. Peace descended on Vietnam at last, but only at the price of a division of the country. The Geneva Decisions once again left Vietnam divided along the 17th parallel into two distinct rival states, each one to pursue its own course. While bringing peace only to be shattered by another prolonged war, it left the Vietnamese unenthusiastic about the Geneva Agreements.