Chapter III

THE POST-WAR POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES TOWARDS VIET NAM
One of the important consequences of the Second World War was the emergence of the United States militarily and economically as the most powerful nation in the world. Isolationism and traditional notions of neutrality ceased to be significant factors in the national consciousness. Unlike the years that followed the Great War of 1914-18, the post-Second World War period witnessed the United States undertaking newer and vastly greater commitments. This was a logical extension of the active role which it played in military operations in the various conferences held during the course of the war, on the post-war reconstruction and reorganization of the world. These vastly increased activities of the United States involved it in the concerns of both Europe and Asia, though not to the same extent in each case.

The United States has had its interests in the East for over a century. However, its interests and activities had been mainly confined to the three East Asian countries of Japan, China and Korea. Its interests in the region of Southeast Asia were very marginal and indirect. Even this marginal interest was mainly due to the role these small Southeast Asian nations were assigned to in the strategic calculations of an aggressive Japan, and was born as a result of the exigencies of the war in the East. Its involvement in the problems of Southeast Asia, in the post-war years, was slow and gradual, and was brought about by many intra-regional and external events which changed the power-position in this remote part of the world.
The Second World War, when it ended, had left its deep impression on Asia, and the "Sleeping Orient" had woken up to find itself in a period of seemingly unending turmoil and bloodshed. Nationalism had asserted itself as the most potent force and the western colonial powers were faced with a direct challenge to their power and possessions. The map of Asia changed quickly and considerably. Several new states made their appearance; in a number of other countries, struggles for independence attained increased momentum. A confused and complex situation had emerged and the United States was not adequately prepared to respond to it effectively.

There was also a changed power position in the East. During the War, Japan had been the principal antagonist of the United States in Asia, and China, its closest ally. The American leaders had hoped that after the defeat of Japan, China, ruled by a regime friendly to the United States, would become a stable and leading power in the Far East. The post-war developments in China, however, belied all these hopes, thus necessitating a radical revision in its policies. While the Communist take-over of China in 1949 lent some clarity to the confused Chinese scene, it had reversed the American picture of the future Asia. (The United States was faced with the task of finding an alternate ally in Asia.)

The American attitude to the Post-War Asian Problems

In the year 1945 Asia was still a dark continent to most of the general public in America. The policies of the Truman Administration were also during the immediate post-war years, Europe-oriented. The problem of Germany, the question of the recovery and
reconstruction of a war-devastated Europe, the formation of a stable peace-time alliance with the countries of Western Europe, were some of the European problems which had preoccupied its attention. The US policy-makers paid more attention to Europe, because of racial and cultural affinity and a conviction that Europe was the first line of defence of the United States. As far as the problems of Asia, more especially Southeast Asia, were concerned, the United States was not ready or willing to play any active role. It was also reluctant to embark on a course that might be regarded as interference in the affairs of the possessions of the Western colonial powers, which happened to be its closest allies in Europe and whose moral and political support it needed, in its disputes with the Soviet Union.

The most burning question of Asia, however, was the very issue of freedom from colonial rule. The American attitude towards colonialism at this time appeared to many Asian nationalists as one of aloofness and non-commitment. The US Administration seemed to have entertained the view that the Colonial Powers would be able to adjust their policies to the new pressures and to decide on the timing, method and extent of such adjustments. It kept its hands off the matter, as a problem to be settled between the colonialist "mother-country" and the "native" inhabitants, and refused to go beyond urging the parties concerned to settle the future of these colonies speedily and by peaceful rather than forceful means.

To many Asian nationalists it looked as though the American response to colonialism in Asia during this period did not live up to the oft-repeated claims of the State Department that the United States was in favour of the early fulfilment of the aspirations of
non-self governing peoples. (1) President Harry S. Truman, in a
Navy Day Address on 27 October 1946, stated that the United States
believed that "all peoples who are prepared for self-government
should be permitted to choose their own form of government by their
own freely expressed choice, without interference from any foreign
source." (2) He also said, on another occasion, that the process
of colonial peoples moving towards independence was something that
the Americans could understand and sympathize with, since it
paralleled their own struggle for independence. He even offered
American guidance and help whenever possible. (3) However, in
actual reality, the President did not follow through with any
significant measures to hasten the process of decolonization.

The United States' policy of non-involvement in the colonial
issue was criticized both at home and abroad. It was felt, the
United States as a leading power, should use its influence to bring
about a better state of affairs for the colonial people, rather
than just voicing pious hopes. The US Administration was criticized
for its preoccupation with Europe and neglect of Asia. While it was
pouring large amount of money into Western Europe by way of Marshall
Plan and European Recovery Program, with a view to strengthen the
region against a Russian expansion, its contribution to a similar
recovery of the Asian countries from the unsettled economic
conditions was practically nil. Nor did the United States concern

1. Department of State Bulletin (Washington, D.C.), 14 April

2. Department of State, The United States and Non-Self-Governing
Territories (Washington, D.C., 1947), p. 44.

3. Ibid.
itself with the deteriorating health situation in the Far East.

Referring to this, the New York Times editorial pleaded for greater interests of Americans in this area. (4)

Such a policy of ignoring Asia, with the possible exception of China, was also criticized as being suicidal to American aims and policies in Europe. The US Administration was warned against the danger of communist penetration in Asia. The Marshall Plan while successfully containing Communism in Europe, might lead to these forces being diverted to Asia. It was a policy, pointed out Edgar Ansel Mowrer, of direct pressure in one area with all the concentrated peacetime strength of the mighty America and that it did not attempt to contain Russia in Asia. (5) The New York Times warned that unless the United States attempted to break the stalemate in the Far East and help/the solution of the problems of the area, it might lose the cold war in Asia by default. (6) The National Foreign Trade Council too, pleaded for "an aggressively administered Far Eastern policy, long range and definite in nature, involving aid and assistance". (7)


7. Ibid., 11 November 1948.
Senators Robert A. Taft (Republican, Ohio), George W. Malone (Republican, Nevada) and Walter H. Judd (Republican, Minnesota) were among those who criticized the Administration for "ignoring Asia". Representative Jacob Javits (Republican, New York) called for "an immediate, vigorous and affirmative" programme in Asia. (8)

The indifferent attitude of the American policy-makers disappointed the Asian opinion too, which had looked forward to vigorous and positive assistance from America to solve their problems. The Hindu of Madras (India) pleaded strongly for "active intervention in Asia". It declared that mere expression of American good-will and sympathy for Asia or for the Asians who were fighting for freedom would not satisfy them. (9) The American reluctance to extend economic aid to Asia (excepting a small amount to China) also came in for criticism. The Eastern Economist of New Delhi wondered whether there was no appreciation among US policy-makers of American strategic interest in Asia. The journal was of the opinion that US aid would help in stabilizing the conditions in Asia. (10)

Even the Western colonial powers like Britain, France and the Netherlands, were, for their own reasons, disappointed by the non-committal American attitude. In response to the feelers sent by these countries for the formation of a regional economic organization consisting of the French, British and Dutch territories in Asia, the United States contented itself with the response that it

had no objection to such a scheme. It did not volunteer to lend any active aid or assume any other commitment to this area. This discouraged the Western European Powers which believed that the American power and its influence in Asia would be necessary to make such a plan a success. (11)

This complete indifference towards Southeast Asia in the post-war years could be partly attributed to the changes of personnel in the key policy making posts. Neither President Truman nor his first two Secretaries of State, Edward R. Stettinius and James F. Byrnes, were familiar with or specially interested in Southeast Asia's problems as the previous President or his Secretary of State Hull were. Even Secretary George C. Marshall, who had some knowledge of conditions in China, relegated Southeast Asia to secondary consideration. American policy-makers gave primary importance to tackling the problems of Europe and, in Asia, they gave some attention to the crisis in China. Not much thought was given to the implications for Southeast Asia of the possible establishment of a strong centralized Communist regime in China and the emergence of a Communist regime in other places.

The American Attitude to Viet Nam question

The American attitude during this period to the question of the future of Viet Nam, fitted into this general outlook towards Asia. In the period following the War, the cases of Indo-China and Indonesia, posed a challenge to American views on freedom and self-determination.

Though the United States itself stood by its earlier promise and granted independence to its Asian possession, the Philippines, soon after the war, there was an obvious reluctance on its part to persuade its Western Allies to take a similar course. Its anxiety not to annoy or intervene in the policies and possessions of the Western Allies and the tendency to keep itself uninvolved in the troubled Asian situation were reflected in its policy towards French Indo-China. The Truman Administration was apprehensive of committing itself to an anti-colonial policy in this region, because of its commitments to France and its interest in French co-operation for a European security system. Consequently the earlier American proposals about the future of Viet Nam were shelved.

It took some time for the Vietnamese nationalists to become aware of the changing attitude of the United States. During the last days of the war, American OSS agents in Indo-China who worked with the Viet Minh were reportedly sympathetic to the cause of the Vietnamese independence. The presence of the American officers at the Viet Minh functions following its capture of power and the flying of the American flag over the American residences and buildings in Hanoi gave the appearance, mistaken or otherwise, of American support and backing to the Viet Minh. Not merely the Vietnamese, but even the surviving French mistook this to mean that the United States had established "official relations" with the Viet Minh regime. The Viet Minh regime even exploited the resemblance between their flag and that of the American bombers. They persuaded the people to believe that the American bombers and fighters were
part of the mighty Vietnamese air force. (12) Ellen J. Hammer, in her book, relates another similar incident. On 2 September 1945 when the Vietnamese took out a procession celebrating the independence, two American planes with their white star insignia flew low over the demonstrators. This gave the appearance of American support for the Viet Minh leaders. (13) The Vietnamese too, interpreted it as such. The Vietnamese leaders had also looked forward for the American blessings over the inauguration of an independent Viet Nam in September 1946, and the subsequent help of the United States. The reported American opposition in the Potsdam Conference of August 1945 to return Indo-China to French rule, following the Japanese surrender, had not only earned the gratitude of the Vietnamese, but confirmed their belief that more American support would be forthcoming.

However in the Department of State there were differences regarding the American approach to the Viet Nam issue. Some who were cognizant with Asian affairs advocated a decisive American stand in favour of an interim trusteeship for Indo-China. On the other hand, there were some who wanted to preserve the status quo and a hands-off policy towards the European colonial areas in Asia in order to avoid offending the respective European governments. The "Europe-first" voices in the State Department prevailed at this time.

12. Bernard B. Fall, The Two Viet-Nam, A Political and Military Analysis (London, 1953), pp. 100-1. The Vietnamese flag was a five-pointed yellow star on a red field whereas the American insignia was a five-pointed white star.

On 2 September 1946, following the Japanese withdrawal from Indo-China, the Viet Minh declared the Vietnamese independence. The United States neither encouraged nor discouraged the nationalists in their course. When three weeks later, the French returned to the southern half of Viet Nam and with the help of the occupying British forces under General Gracey, soon overthrew the Vietnamese regime, the American Government once again was silent and acquiescent. It chose to follow the line of least resistance and announced that it recognized French sovereignty. John Carter Vincent, Director of the Office of the Far Eastern Affairs, Department of State, declared on 20 October 1946, that the United States did not question French sovereignty in Viet Nam. He only expressed the hope that an early agreement would be reached between the representatives of the French Government and the Annamese. The farthest that the United States was ready to go was to lend its assistance, if requested, in reaching such peaceful agreements. (14) The American hope seemed to have been based on its assumption that the European colonial powers and the Asian nationalists would themselves work out a suitable and peaceful arrangement for self-government and independence. Oliver E. Clubb, Jr., also talks of the belief of the Department of State which viewed that it was desirable to restore French colonial rule over Indo-China. (15) Such a view of the State Department was based on


15. Oliver E. Clubb, Jr., The United States and the Sino-Soviet Bloc in Southeast Asia (Washington, D.C., 1952), p. 51. Clubb was, at this time, an official of the Department of State, who had a first hand experience in China for more than two decades as an American officer in various parts of China.
the assumption that the French were capable of restoring their control over Indo-China.

The American attitude convinced Ho Chi Minh that it would be futile to expect any constructive help from the United States towards achieving independence. Realizing that they could promote their interests only by their own efforts, the Vietnamese chose to negotiate their future with the French Government. On 6 March 1946, the French and the Vietnamese arrived at an agreement, by which the French recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. However, neither the 6 March Agreement, nor the Dalat and the Fontainebleau Conferences in the summer of 1946, provided peace to Vietnam. The relations between the French and the Vietnamese deteriorated and war broke out between the two forces in Viet Nam towards the end of November 1946.

The war in Viet Nam, in the years 1946 and 1947, did not evoke much of a response from the American authorities. It was during this time that the United Nations was discussing, rather heatedly, the question of Indonesian independence and that issue overshadowed the war in Viet Nam. The United States, especially, did not feel impelled to take any interest in Indo-China even as much as in Indonesia. It made no effort to bring the Vietnamese question to the UN forum, nor offer itself as a mediator between the French and the nationalist forces, at a time when the Vietnamese question looked more amenable to a settlement than any other problem in this area. The Vietnamese were willing to go farther than any other nationalist group, Burmese or Indonesian for instance, in making concessions to the colonial power. By the March 1946 Agreement, Ho Chi Minh had even granted to the French military, political and economic concessions on a substantial scale. The Vietnamese had
also looked forward to the United States for support and would have, perhaps, accepted its mediation. The Vietnamese provided another opportunity too for action towards a settlement through UN intervention. Ho Chi Minh had appealed more than once to the United Nations, to take up the case of Viet Nam and settle it by peaceful means. (16) He even offered an open door policy and sea and air bases in Viet Nam, if only the Big Five would intervene and settle the issue. (17) The United States, as also the other members of the United Nations, ignored these appeals.

Indo-China did not at that time rate high in the strategic calculations of American policy-makers. Nor did the United States or Great Britain have any substantial investment in Indo-China, as they had in Indonesia. American leaders, on the other hand, had to take note of the possible effects of any stand that they might adopt on the political alignments in France. They were, perhaps, fearful that even a strong American criticism of the French policy, might bring down the present Socialist government in France and bring to power an extremist government, either Right or Left. (18)

The United States, in the initial period, confined itself to expressing its concern over the bloodshed and wishing for a speedy end to the war in Indo-China, through a "pacific basis of adjust-


17. Ibid., 20 January 1947.

18. In December 1946, the French had a Socialist-led coalition government under M. Leon Blum and this was replaced by another government led by the Socialist Premier, Paul Ramadier, This government was in office till 20 November 1947. The last few months of Ramadier Government witnessed the revival of Gaullist forces which secured nearly 40 per cent of the votes in the municipal elections of October 1947.
ment". (19) It, however, tried to convey to France its view that the maintenance of 120,000 French troops in Indo-China in an effort to maintain its sovereignty was a "wasteful, maladroit policy". It would adversely affect the economy of France and hamper Western European defence. A demonstration of the weakness of the Occidental armies against the Oriental guerrillas would undermine Western prestige in Southeast Asia, it was argued. On these grounds the United States tried to suggest to France that a prolongation of the conflict in Viet Nam would be undesirable. The United States maintained during the period, a neutral position in this colonial war. For instance, the United States promptly denied a Vietnamese broadcast which construed the visit of an American consul to the Viet Minh quarters, as an indication of support to the Vietnamese cause. (20)

**Criticism of American Attitude**

The American policy of non-involvement was criticized by various sections of American public opinion.

Some Republican Senators agreed with the Asian nationalists and criticized the American attitude as one that supported the Western European colonial regimes. Senator George W. Malone (Republican, Nevada) said that the US aid given to France, through the the Marshall Plan and/European Recovery Program (ERP) was helping the latter in holding down the nationalist movement in Indo-China. Its help in re-establishing the tottering empires would send the people to the Communist army, if that was the only one to fight for

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freedom. (21) Senator Wayne Morse (Republican, Oregon) who expressed a similar view warned, the United States should not destroy the independence movements in the East in its endeavour to destroy Communism. (22)

The American policy to offer military aid to its Western European Allies under the North Atlantic Pact also came under fire. Senator William E. Jenner (Republican, Indiana) felt the American commitment to help France and other colonial Powers to reimpose their rule in Asian colonies would help to spread the "Communist plague" even more rapidly. It would also lead to a continuous "blackmailing" of the United States by the European associates to use the threat of Communism in their colonial possessions. (23) Senator Walter F. George (Democrat, Georgia) too viewed, the United States by ratifying the Atlantic Pact might be committed to give aid to the Pact members, who had "colonial troubles". (24) These and other Congressmen pointed out the dangers inherent in a victory of Chinese Communism, and the threat it posed to other countries in the region. They urged for a positive China policy which would shield the area from the spread of Communism. Senator Malone, on the other hand, felt the United States was being pushed around by the European Powers to preserve the Asian markets and sources of raw materials for themselves. If the United States had to protect these areas for the Empire-minded nations, he said, it should at least ask for equal access to the markets of these areas and the privilege for these

21. Ibid., 16 December 1948.
23. Ibid., p. 6508.
24. Ibid., p. 6509.
colonies to deal with the United States on an even basis. (25)

However, one notices in these opinions of the Congressmen, the absence of any reference to the war that was going on in Indo-China, or any positive suggestion to put an end to it. This becomes all the more significant, as one notices the frequent references to the Indonesian question and the interest the latter evoked among the Congressmen. Sumner Welles, former Under-Secretary of State, however, warned that the Vietnamese revolt marked "the beginning of a period of anarchy". He thought that the United States, as the only power with no stakes involved in this war, could assume leadership without evoking any suspicion of its motives. He warned rather prophetically, that unless the United States took the initiative and offered a constructive solution to the problem of the dependent peoples, the revolt in Indo-China might rapidly reach proportions which even organized international action would not be able to control. (26) Major-General Patrick J. Hurley, who resigned from the post of Ambassador to China, accused the American diplomacy as one which supported colonialism as against communism, instead of putting its weight behind the UN Charter. He attributed the "American failure" in Asia, to its support to the imperialist bloc. He found the reason for this attitude in the "weakness and opposition of the United States Foreign Service". (27)

The American public too had, in general, little awareness of the implications of the French attempt to re-establish its colonial

25. Ibid., pp. 3699 and 4035.
26. As reported by The Hindu, 26 October 1945.
regime in Indo-China. Some small groups of Americans, mainly left-wing elements, and some liberal organizations like Vietnam-American Friendship Association, and Committee for the celebration of Viet Nam Independence, These societies tried to win support for the nationalist cause among the American public and sought US support for the cause of Vietnamese independence. They also pleaded for an end to the American aid to France, as they were convinced it would be used against the Vietnamese. W.E.B. Du Bois, a well-known Negro leader and the Vice-Chairman, Council on African Affairs, for instance, described the American Military Assistance Program to Europe as one "not so much to protect Western Europe from the east, as to enable it to put down colonial unrest among 250,000,000 colonial peoples". (28)

Far more significant than the activities of the liberal and left-wing groups was the fact that some sections of the American press too vigorously supported the Vietnamese struggle and pleaded for US action. The New York Times gave a comprehensive coverage to the developments inside Indo-China and consistently supported the cause of independence. It blamed the French as being responsible for a colonial war and strongly condemned the French attempt to retain its grip in the Far East by force. The newspapers said that the French were disregarding history in trying to hold Indo-China and its population of twenty-five million by force. The French, it argued, would lose the war both because of their own weak military and economic position, as also due to the internal differences among the political parties of France. It also recognized the weakness...

and unpopularity of the French authority within Viet Nam as also of the regime the latter had set up.

The New York Times did not regard the Vietnamese nationalists as a Communist group. It did not agree with the French view that Ho Chi Minh was wholly a Communist, though he was a Comintern agent years ago. The Viet Minh was "a real national movement supported by people who know no more of communism than they do of democracy, but who intend to have their freedom", The Times wrote. (29)

The newspaper pleaded for a speedy end to the war and a settlement to be reached by negotiations, as it was causing a huge economic drain both to the French and to the Vietnamese. It said the Vietnamese had lost their confidence in the French that they would be in a position to offer any technical aid to the Vietnamese. It reported the Vietnamese most admired the United States and pleaded for a speedy action on the part of the United States.

The newspaper recognized that it was the American arms and loans which were instrumental in giving Indo-China back to France and in helping the latter hold on to its eastern possession. While not asking for a stoppage of this aid, the paper referred to the US reluctance to assume any responsibility for Indo-China either through the United Nations or outside it. It pleaded for a quick decision on the part of the United States. The New York Times also warned, whenever the United States compromised with the principle of self-determination as inscribed in the Atlantic Charter, it failed to

live up to its heritage and was weakening itself to that extent. Edgar Ansel Mowrer wrote the United States, because of its "real and urgent" interests in Europe, chose to be indifferent to the Asiatic nationalist aspirations. This failure to stand firmly on the principle of full and rapid emancipation shook their faith in the United States. (30)

The New York Herald Tribune too opposed the French attempt to re-establish themselves in Indo-China. It viewed the French motive as one of trying to exploit the colony by dividing it and bringing about an internal conflict. It had little doubt that the French attempt would end in a failure. (31) The well-known columnist Walter Lippmann pleaded for support to the independence movement in Asia. (32)

Columnist Samuel Grafton of New York Post observed that the wavering and indecisive policy of the United States towards colonial problems led to the successes of the Russians who could pose as the conscience of mankind. (33) The Atlantic Monthly expressed a similar view and felt that the US Government was acting in the "most conservative" fashion and was responsible for "slowing down the rate of change". (34)

It was also felt that if the United States wanted to maintain its prestige in Asia, it would be done here and now by lending its

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31. As reported by The Hindu, 14 May 1947.


33. As reported by The Hindu, 6 January 1949.

34. As reported, ibid., 15 March 1947.
weight for freedom and self-government. This might also have averted the future bloodshed and the unenviable role which the United States was called upon to play in Indo-China. The New Republic too advocated a similar action by the United States towards a UN intervention and mediation in the Indo-Chinese dispute. (35) It criticized the American stand in this dispute as one which sought to maintain the status quo, and warned that such a "referee attitude" to the yearning of the Eastern people would make the latter believe that the Soviet Union was a better friend than the United States. (36)

Harold R. Isaacs, the staff correspondent of Newsweek believed that the Vietnamese Communists were essentially nationalists and stood isolated from the Russian and French Communists. They hoped that the United States would be able and willing to support them politically and materially. (37) Walter H. Briggs, a free lance reporter writing frequently in the New Republic held a similar view. He advocated strong measures by the United States to help the Vietnamese attain economic security and political independence. (38)

The Progressive Party led by Henry Wallace and the Socialist Party referred in their election platforms of 1948, to the issue of colonialism. However, it was only the Progressive Party which specifically referred to the struggles for independence in many


Asian countries. It affirmed that world peace and prosperity would not be attained unless those people won their freedom. It urged the United States to co-operate with the other countries inside the United Nations, to get the colonial system abolished. (39)

The years 1946 and 1947, indeed, did offer a propitious opportunity when the United States could have helped to bring about a solution. The United States was the only Western Power which enjoyed any prestige and goodwill among the Asian nationalists. It was the only Power to which the Vietnamese looked forward for support and sympathy. As a Power which proclaimed that it had no selfish motives in this area, the United States was in an advantageous position to act as a mediator between the two parties. On its goodwill depended French national survival and recovery.

The United States was thus in a position to influence the French action had it made its aid to France conditional on the grant of independence to Viet Nam. The fluid situation in Indo-China in the beginning of 1946, and the time-gaps between the Japanese withdrawal and the reassertion of French authority, did offer a breathing space, when the United States could have arrived at a definitive policy of supporting either the old colonial regime or the nationalist movement. In the end, the vague and indefinite attitude of the United States, its pre-occupation with Europe and its eagerness not to get involved in the Indo-Chinese maelstrom, only led it into greater and greater complications resulting in direct large scale involvement.

The French Reaction to American Attitude

The American attitude to Indo-China disappointed all those nations which were interested in the future of Indo-China, though for different reasons. The Vietnamese nationalists were offended by what they regarded as the indifference and neutral attitude of the Americans to the most vital question of freedom from colonial rule. Other Asians who had looked forward to the US intervening effectively on the side of peoples struggling for freedom, were also disappointed. On the other hand, the French already distrustful of the United States, were equally dissatisfied with the American attitude to Indo-China as lacking in understanding and support for the French point of view.

French distrust of the Americans was born even before the Second World War was over, and France was liberated. President de Gaulle had personified this by refusing to permit the hungry French to be fed by the US Army or even UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. The French were distrustful of American power, and of the economic and political ends for which it might be used. This French fear of American power and of the possible obligations that American economic aid might entail France, was even more intense in respect of the colonial issue. The French fear of American intentions towards its colonies was only confirmed and strengthened by the "ambiguous and dual role" which the United States played towards the French in Indo-China during and after the war years. The criticism of President Roosevelt regarding the French rule in Indo-China, his proposal for a trusteeship for Indo-China, his rejection of the repeated French offers for participating in the war against Japan, had deeply disturbed the French Right. The French blamed the United States and more
especially Lt.-Gen. A. C. Wedemeyer for the division of Indo-China along the 16th Parallel and for arranging for the British and Chinese occupation South and North of this line of division. The French thought it was the American refusal to allow the British occupation of entire Indo-China, that was responsible for the emergence of Ho Chi Minh. They tended to believe that it was Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek who set up Ho Chi Minh as the head of the Government. Thus the French logically argued that the United States inadvertently played a part in the events that led to the present acute problem of Indo-China. The French also viewed with suspicion, the sympathy of the OSS agents to Ho Chi Minh and the supply of American equipment from the Philippines, Thailand and China to the Viet Minh in the latter's resistance to the Japanese.

The French also began to question the nature and motives of the US policy in keeping itself aloof from the developments in Indo-China following the Japanese withdrawal. Many Frenchmen were obsessed by the bogey of American business infiltration into Indo-China and of American strategic designs on the country. To them, the OSS was the vanguard of a new imperialism. The liberal French newspaper Le Monde reported an alleged OSS offer to Ho Chi Minh that the economic interests with which General William Donovan, the OSS chief was associated, would help reconstruct railroads, roads and air-fields in exchange for economic privileges in the region and that Ho rejected the offer. (40) An article by J. R. Tournoux in the French paper Liberation expressed similar fear. "The United States asks that it participate in the industrialisation of our overseas

40. Le Monde (Paris), 13 April 1947, as quoted by Hammer, n. 13, p. 130.
territories - that is, the opening of our empire to American capital and merchandise - a participation that risks becoming preponderant," it said. (41) Hence, the French interpreted the American opposition to their re-entry into Indo-China, as one born out of selfish American designs in respect of Indo-China. The French also systematically tried to counteract the pro-American sentiment among the Vietnamese. They started thinly-veiled newspaper sniping at the American Consulate and the activities of the USIS. They also tried to spread an anti-American feeling by circulating the rumour that "America wanted to take over Indo-China".

Once they got themselves entrenched in Saigon with the help of the British Commander, the French were anxious not to allow any outside intervention, even of its own European allies. The French also started to picture the struggle in Indo-China and the resistance of the Vietnamese to their reoccupation as a "Civil War". Towards this end, they began their efforts to set up a regime which, while being indigenous, would not oppose the French domination. The French, thus, insisted that the conflict was a domestic matter and hence resisted any suggestion of the UN intervention or American initiative.

Though the French were opposed to any outside intervention, they were still very eager to get outside aid. The outbreak of the war with Viet Minh put additional strain on the already weak finances of a war-devastated France. The French Government had perforce to turn to the United States for this help. France also needed military equipment for which it depended on aid from abroad. Hence the French had to justify their colonial rule to the world.

41. As reported in New York Times, 14 May 1947.
public opinion and more especially to the American press and public. The French tried to picture the conflict in Indo-China as an ideological war and as part of the war which the United States was waging in Europe against Communism. The political background and ideological leanings of Ho Chi Minh and a few of his colleagues were cited in support of the French argument.

The French also depicted Ho Chi Minh as a Japanese stooge, who had been assisted in the past by 2,000 Japanese instructors and who had obtained modern American arms and equipment from the Chinese. At the same time they also proclaimed Ho Chi Minh's government was a 'front' for the Communists in Asia. They spoke of the Viet Minh as a totalitarian rule, marked by concentration camps and political assassinations. The French argued that the American opposition to French return to Indo-China was due to their ignorance of the true nature of the Viet Minh and of the French policy in Indo-China. They affirmed that their policy was similar to the American policy in the Philippines and not one of the old-fashioned colonialism.

The enunciation of the Truman Doctrine on 12 March 1947 increased the French hopes of a change in America's stance regarding Indo-China. They contended that France was serving the interests of the "Free World" in Asia and was trying to establish a politically stable and economically productive group of states in Southern Asia, on the edge of a disturbed and divided China. As such, they deserved American sympathy and support in their effort of putting an end to the resistance.

42. Ibid., 7 January 1947.
The French effort to depict him as an unsavoury Communist did not seem to carry much conviction with the American public in the initial stages. Robert Trumbull, the New York Times correspondent reported that the nationalist movement in Viet Nam dated even before Communism, (43) and that only 10 to 20 per cent among the rank and file were Communists. (44) However, as the cold war tensions mounted, the situation began to change slowly, especially as the American Government became involved in erecting a defence alliance in Western Europe, with France playing a pivotal role.

When the French Government took steps to set up a Vietnamese regime under Bao Dai with the purpose of drawing the nationalists away from the Viet Minh, the United States made it known to Bao Dai that American support would be more readily available to a non-Communist nationalist regime. (45) This offer had the effect, to some extent, of making both the French Government and Bao Dai work towards a settlement more earnestly than before. The years 1948 and 1949 witnessed more and more paper concessions by the French, till at last on 8 March 1949 the Elysee Accords by which Bao Dai

43. Ibid., 23 January 1947.
44. Ibid., 27 June 1948.
became the Head of the State of Viet Nam, were reached.

The Elysee Accords failed to capture popular support and were criticized within Indo-China as one which agreed to too many concessions to the French. The United States, however, hailed it as a development that would "serve to hasten the reestablishment of peace in that country and the attainment of Vietnam's rightful place in the family of nations". (46) It hoped that the Agreement would "form the basis for the progressive realization of the legitimate aspirations of the Vietnamese people". The enthusiastic welcome accorded to the Elysee Agreement by the US Administration could be attributed, to some extent, to the fear created by the Communist successes inside China, and the arrival of the victorious Communist Chinese forces along the northern borders of Tongking. The United States viewed, a Vietnamese government however important, would be able to compete with the Viet Minh for the loyalty of the Vietnamese population better than the French government, and could act as a barrier against the Communist onslaught.

THE CHINESE REVOLUTION AND ITS EFFECT ON AMERICAN POLICY TOWARDS INDO-CHINA

The Revolution in China which brought the world's most populous country under the rule of a Communist regime, was one of the most important developments in post-war Asia. China had been the focal point of American policy in Asia in the first half of the twentieth century. The United States had gradually got itself involved in the domestic politics of China. When the War was over the United States found itself being regarded by the Nationalist

Government as its guardian and protector - externally as well as internally. The efforts of the United States to mediate between the Chinese Nationalist regime and the Communists failed and in 1947 civil war broke out, culminating eventually in the declaration of a People's Republic of China by the Communists on 21 September 1949.

The Communist success in China which touched off a serious controversy within the United States, was a major defeat for the Asian policy of the United States and a reversal of its expectations and assumptions in this part of the world. It marked a turning point in the American policy not only towards China but towards South and Southeast Asia as well.

The Communist gain in China threatened the whole basis of American security in the Pacific and thus necessitated a reappraisal of its existing arrangements. An immediate change came with the substitution of Southeast Asia and Japan for the position earlier reserved for China in the American policy planning. One of the important effects of this change was the intense efforts to formulate an integrated policy towards the entire region. Till now there was no such global or even regional approach to the problems. Different groups in the Department of State as well as among the general public focussed their attention on one country or other. The American Administration approached the problems not as parts of the whole, but in their individual context. Though there was a general consensus of opinion about the opposition to Communism, it gave rise to the most varied interpretations when applied to the complex situation in Asia.

With the success of Communism in China the Department of State gradually began feeling its way towards a policy in South-
east Asia. In fact, even before the Civil War came to an end and the new regime was proclaimed, the United States had begun taking steps to meet the Communist challenge. President Truman in his inaugural address of 20 January 1949, had advanced the Point Four idea of technical aid and assistance to the underdeveloped nations of Southeast Asia. On 24 July 1949 Dean Acheson the Secretary of State called for "the best brains available" to work on a China policy, in a full scale effort to create a new pattern for American diplomacy in this area. A Committee of Consultants under Ambassador-at-Large Philip C. Jessup was appointed with the function of reappraisal and reorientation of the US policy. Its task was to review the reasons which led to the impasse in China and devise ways of preventing such conditions from being repeated in the countries of Southeast Asia. This policy as spelled out in the various public statements by the President and the Secretary of State, was one of containing Communism with a special twist to the Asian situation. It was containment of Soviet Union plus China. The first six months of 1950 were an anxious period of what John Kerry King calls as "fact-finding and fence-mending", (47) in which there were a rapid succession of official missions, major policy speeches, serious Congressional debates and increased diplomatic activity - all directed to an area that had received only secondary consideration till now.

The change in the American attitude towards Southeast Asia had its special influence on its policy towards Viet Nam. Till now the United States confined itself to expressing its general sympathy to the national movement and persuading the French to

47. John Kerry King, Southeast Asia in Perspective (New York, 1959), p. 120.
grant greater autonomy. But now the United States was compelled to
decide its future course of action more specifically. In this the
US Administration was faced with two questions. Firstly, could it
afford, in the face of the emergence of a big Communist Power in
Asia, to separate itself from the friendly Western nations on
whose co-operation its security in Europe presumably depended?
The countries of the West had to work out a mutually acceptable
basis for co-operation with each other, and with Asia, in their
efforts to contain Communism. The second question the US foreign
policy-makers had to resolve, was to choose between a Communist or
a pro-Communist government claiming to have popular support, and a
"legitimate" but not very popular government associated with and
acting under the orders of the old colonial power.

The Elysée Accords of March 1949, presented the United
States with such a situation in Viet Nam. Obviously, the United
States chose to recognize the French sponsored, non-Communist regime
of Bao Dai as against the Ho Chi Minh Government. The task of
timing such a recognition was made easier for the United States by
the recognition of Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Viet Nam
by the Communist world on 30 January 1950. Following the ratifica-
tion of the Elysée Agreements by the French Assembly on
2 February 1950, the United States went ahead and recognized the
Bao Dai regime on 7 February 1950, as an "Independent State"
within the French Union. It is, however incorrect to say, that the
American decision to recognize Bao Dai's regime was caused or even
occasioned by the Communist recognition of the rival regime. Even
as early as December 1947 the visit of William C. Bullitt to Viet
Nam and his meeting with Bao Dai had given an impression in France,
mistakenly or otherwise, of American support for Bao Dai, and this had convinced the French that the United States had taken an initiative in launching "the Bao Dai policy". Once again the leading American newspaper New York Times reported as early as January 1949, that the French Government had received assurances from the United States that it favoured the French effort to make peace in Viet Nam by setting up Bao Dai as the leader. The United States agreed that Bao Dai was the only hope of stability in that strategically and economically important corner of Asia. The United States also had recognized that it was better for France to remain in the existing outposts, by coming to terms with the nationalist movements. (48) Thus the United States offered its support to Bao Dai in view of the Chinese Communist success and hence the unquestioned welcome accorded to the Elysee Accords.

Again, even while the French Parliament was debating the ratification of the Elysee Agreements, the US Ambassador-at-Large Philip C. Jessup on 27 January 1950 took the unusual step of extending to Bao Dai, on behalf of the Secretary of State, the confident best wishes "of the American Government for the future of the State of Viet Nam with which it looks forward to establishing a closer relationship". (49) Thus the United States had opted for the Bao Dai regime even earlier than the Communist recognition of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam. Hence one may not completely agree with Secretary Acheson's statement that "the recognition by the Kremlin of Ho Chi Minh's Communist movement came as a


surprise". (50) The Soviet recognition only provided a suitable opportunity for the American recognition of the Bao Dai regime.

Faced with the prospects of Communist success in China, the American policy-makers had been searching for a barrier or even a secure toe-hold from which they could hope to repel the flow of Communism towards Southeast Asia. They seemed to have found, if not a barrier, at least a toe-hold in Viet Nam though its military situation or strategic potential was still dubious. The French saw in the evolving American mood a last chance opening before them to save their almost hopelessly compromised position.

The American recognition of Bao Dai followed by a similar recognition by the British, had its own implications. It showed the fundamental solidarity of the Western Powers in the face of the Communist danger. It meant that the United States fully endorsed the aims of the French policy in Indo-China and accepted the view that the French had given up any idea of domination and that there was nothing in the French policy to which the nationalists in Viet Nam need object. It indicated which France which stood long alone in its fight against both Vietnamese nationalism and communism in this region, should now be able to count on the alliance of the United States. It showed that the United States had abandoned the "wait and see" policy in Southeast Asia and had decided to carden off Communism in the East; and that, it recognized the presence of the French forces to be necessary in order to confront the Communist threat in Southeast Asia with an effective counterweight.

60. Ibid.
The US recognition of Bao Dai had a mixed reception at home. Ambassador Jessup said this did not mean support for "continuing colonialism". Agreeing with this interpretation as a "correct one", the New York Times called the recognition as a "welcome and necessary step". (51) It called the Russian recognition of Ho, "a grave step" which violated the diplomatic procedure. The USSR, it was asserted, had recognized a rebel fighting against a major power with whom the former had a treaty of friendship. The paper held the view that there was no alternative to Bao Dai and that the recognition was necessary in giving him support and opportunity for his nationalist movement. It felt that the hope of saving Indo-China lay with the native nationalism backed by the hatred for the Chinese and opposition to Communism, and that this would not be possible for the French to achieve.

Walter H. Waggoner, writing in the New York Times, said "The recognition was in accordance with the U.S. policy of making friends with the people of Asia, who were just emerging from colonialism and checking Communism in Southeast Asia." (52) The recognition, however, was opposed by Harold Isaacs, who wrote that it was an "ill-conceived adventure doomed to end in another self-inflicted defeat" as in China. (53) He wrote it would not help in checking Communism in Asia since it had already driven a wedge


52. Walter H. Waggoner, "U.S.-Vietnam Tie Is Due This Week", ibid., 5 February 1950, p. 12.

between the United States and the countries of Southeast Asia. He said the assumptions on which the recognition was based, were not valid. It was a "victory for the French", he added, "but a defeat for hopes of an improved American position in South Asia". The New Republic found in it "a sharp change from the policy that was announced by Secretary Acheson in his National Press Club speech of 12 January 1950. In its view, it was bound to end up as "disastrous a failure" as the policy towards Chiang Kai-shek's China had earlier been. (54) It had earlier pointed out the dangers inherent in such an attitude in "trying to move Asia as a pawn in an external struggle", and suggested "a shift in America's concern away from our interest, towards Asia's interest". (55)

The American recognition of the Elysee Accords was welcomed by M. Pignon, the French High Commissioner in Vietnam, mainly because France had felt that the American attitude in the case of Indonesia and Indo-China was "strangely at odds" with its policy in other parts of the world. By the recognition, the High Commissioner said, the United States had given "a good start to the Bao Dai Experiment" and that it brought "new hope and encouragement". (56)

The American recognition of Bao Dai, generally speaking, antagonized the feelings of many Asians. Many of them could not see in it evidence of American sympathy and support for their struggle for independence, but rather -- an effort to ram a

56. The Statesman (Delhi), 25 July 1949.
political solution down the throats of the Indo-Chinese. It set in motion a chain reaction of doubts, fears and suspicions of the US policy in Asia and its motives. The whole reason for what may be called the misguided policy of the United States was the practice of looking at Asian problems in the context of the Western European situation and not as purely Asian ones. It allowed itself to be dictated by the European and, in particular the French interests and calculations, and by the strategems of the cold war, which distorted its long term vision and the traditional belief it had in self-determination. Soedjatinoko, the Chief of Indonesia's Mission to the United Nations, said, "The American action was a support for the French colonial war and for a feudal ruler who could maintain himself only by relying on a foreign power." (57)

Amar Lahiri in *New Times of Burma* held the view that "hasty" diplomatic moves on the part of the Western Powers had converted Viet Nam into a "veritable tinder box". (58) The *Pakistan Times* lamented that the experience in China had not made the United States wiser in Asia. (59) The pattern of supporting economically, militarily and morally, a regime that did not have the backing of the majority of the public opinion, was repeated in Viet Nam too. The United States had established itself in Asia as a power which always backed the wrong horses, in its anxiety to hold Communism. Further, in the eyes of the Asians who tended to think more in terms of imperialism versus independence, the US policies appeared not


merely anti-Communist but perilously close to anti-Asiatic. A recognition by the United States of the nationalist forces in 1945-46, might have averted the present stalemate in Viet Nam and possibly would have prevented the nationalists from flocking to the Communist fold. But coming as it did in 1950, it was a delayed action and had the effect of confirming the Communist propaganda which identified capitalist democracy with colonialism.

The immediate consequence of the recognition of the two regimes in Viet Nam by the two Big Powers was the internationalization of the problem, a step which the French were anxious to avoid till then. It converted Viet Nam into a cockpit for both the cold and hot wars. It meant the United States had aligned itself for the first time with a colonial power in Asia to solve a national political impasse.

Ho Chi Minh and the Communist World

In view of the recognition by the Communist world of the Viet Minh regime in January 1950, thereby leading to the establishment of another Communist government in Asia, it becomes interesting to study the relationship of Ho Chi Minh with the leaders of the two important Communist states, the Soviet Union and China.

Following the Soviet recognition of the Viet Minh, the Secretary of State Dean Acheson issued a statement on 1 February 1950, in which he said the recognition "should remove any illusions as to the 'nationalist' nature of Ho Chi Minh's aims and reveals Ho in his true colours as the mortal enemy of native independence in Indo-China." (60) The Secretary's statement was based on the assumption

60. Bulletin.
that Ho Chi Minh being a "Moscow-trained Communist", was subject to the dictates of the Kremlin, and that the Viet Minh was a Communist outfit, masquerading as a nationalist movement. Lincoln White, a State Department spokesman, asserted that Ho Chi Minh had now been proved to be an agent of world Communism and not a sincere nationalist, as he claimed. (61) The State Department officials viewed this Communist recognition as another move in the Soviet attempt to create a ring of satellite states. The official view of the United States [was one that had much currency](at that time) though there were, even at that time, some dissenting voices.

There is a broad agreement about the background of Ho Chi Minh and his political and ideological leanings. He had been a Communist since the 1920s and had been trained in Moscow and China. Though this fact had been fairly well-known, it is also acknowledged that the United States chose to co-operate with him towards the end of the war, due to the resistance he and his followers offered to the Japanese. The American authorities in China even pleaded with Chiang Kai-shek in 1943 to release Ho from prison. The United States also did not list him as a Communist in the Congressional Report on "Five Hundred Leading Foreign Communists". (62)

The change in the official American thinking of Ho Chi Minh being an orthodox Communist and his movement in Indo-China as being inspired by International Communism, seemed to have occurred somewhere in the middle of 1948. The American newspapermen in South-


east Asia began reporting about the increased tempo in the Communist activities in Asia and asserting that they were directed and co-ordinated from Moscow. Robert Trumbull of the *New York Times* wrote that there was a solid Communist front maintained throughout Asia. The front was directed by the "Eastern Political Department of Moscow" and it conducted its activities through the Asian trade unions and student organizations. (63) Trumbull added that the various Asian conferences, including the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi, (64) served as a forum for the European Communists to contact their counterparts in Asia. Both Trumbull as well as the correspondent of the Associated Press reported that the main aim of the Communists was to deprive the Western powers of Southeast Asia's natural resources by disrupting normal life and trade and to strike for full political control when the suitable time arrived. Both asserted that Indo-China was the place upon which the Communists placed high hopes. Trumbull even counted Indo-China as already a success for International Communism as, in his view, the continuing guerilla warfare had already destroyed the agricultural production. (65)

Milton Sacks also believed that Communism in Southeast Asia was a co-ordinated movement, the objectives of which were to eliminate the Western influence completely, and create instead


64. This non-official conference was held in March 1947 on the initiative of the Indian Government and was attended by delegations from many Asian countries, independent and otherwise. The main purpose of the Conference was to stimulate co-operation among them by creating Asia-consciousness.

Communist controlled "People's democracies". (66) Richard Stebbins of the Council of Foreign Relations, New York, thought that the Soviet Union would make China the executant of its designs in Asia and would try to exploit the Asian admiration of Mao Tse-tung for its purposes. (67)

These newspaper reports received official confirmation in a statement by Michael W. McDermott, the State Department spokesman, on 16 September 1948. The statement, for the first time labelled the unrest in Indo-China and other Southeast Asian countries, as being Communist-inspired and declared that the Communists in these regions, in order to win power, posed as champions of the cause of local nationalists. (68) It was at the same time that the British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin also stated that the Communist troubles in Southeast Asia were part of a worldwide subversive programme of the Cominform. (69) Western apprehensions about the Communist activities in Indo-China were strengthened by the reports that the Chinese Communists intended to race down to the Indo-China and Burma borders to help the native Communist forces to gain control of strategic bases in Southeast Asia. (70)

According to this line of thinking, the Communist recognition of Ho Chi Minh, was a further step in this direction. The


69. Ibid., 21 September 1948.

recognition was a signal achievement for Ho Chi Minh, as in contrast to the Greek government of General Marcos, the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam could now legally and openly acquire arms and material from its strong Communist neighbours. It also helped domestically in introducing the Communist ideology in a much more open and bold way. (71) It showed the new Communist strategy of breaking off with the former nationalist allies and making a direct bid for power through armed struggle. (72) Representative Judd thought Ho was subservient to Soviet Union and that Stalin made use of Ho Chi Minh, for his own purposes. Since Stalin had found it impossible to eliminate Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia, added Judd, Stalin sought to patch up with Tito. Towards this purpose, he used Ho, by making the latter recognize Tito. Thus, according to Judd, Soviet Union, Viet Minh and Yugoslavia were all part of the same Communist bloc. (73) The statement of Dean Acheson on the Soviet recognition of Ho agreed with this view, and laid the basis for an international power-conflict in Viet Nam.

The official opinion of Ho being the leader of a Communist movement, the Viet Minh as a part of international communism and the wisdom of Washington in recognizing the Bao Dai regime, have been disputed by many writers. Bernard Fall, a well-known writer on Indo-China, was of the opinion that the relations between the Soviet Union and the Viet Minh had not been "unfailingly friendly and close", as the West believed. In the past three years

71. Sacks, n. 66, p. 343.
72. Ibid., pp. 230-6.
(1946-49) of Viet Minh's resistance or prior to that, the Russians had been quite indifferent and detached to the Vietnamese cause. The maximum Stalin went was to approve of President Roosevelt's proposal for a trusteeship. "Soviet policy towards Vietnam - very much as had been said about American policy - 'cloaked nothing but real isolation from Indo-Chinese events'", Fall wrote. (74) Fall traced the reason for this apparent detachment to the possibility that in the post-war period France might become Communist-controlled. If that were to take place, Russia hoped that it could control the French colonial empire too. In this context, it could be noted that the French Communist Party in the initial period did not oppose the French colonial war in Viet Nam, and had even supported the French budget for the Vietnamese war. Even the French Premier Paul Ramadier mistook it as an indication of a policy of restraint and correctness by the Soviet Union. (75) The Soviet Union, as much as the West, had approached Viet Nam through Europe, Fall argued.

A similar appraisal was made by Oliver R. Clubb, Jr. Quoting New Times (Moscow) of 1 November 1945, Clubb argued that the Soviet Union was almost totally ignorant about the ways of the Viet Minh and that it had no link with Ho Chi Minh. (76) Nor did the Soviet Union, which supported Sukarno's non-Communist Republic in the United Nations, heed to the Viet Minh request to discuss its case in the Security Council. The Viet Minh too, on its part, looked to

74. Fall, n. 12, p. 195. Harold R. Isaacs, too expressed a similar view and described the Viet Minh, as an isolated movement. Isaacs, n. 37, pp. 12-19.

75. Hammer, n. 13, p. 201. Fall, however, attributes this statement to M. Schuman. Fall, n. 12, p. 196.

76. Clubb, Jr., n. 15, pp. 13-16.
the United States and Chiang's China, rather than to the French and Russian Communists, for support to their movement. It was only in late 1949 that rebuffed by the West, Ho turned to the Chinese Communists for assistance. Even here it was not the Soviet Union, but Communist China which had its traditionally imperialist aim over Annam, that was the first to recognize Viet Minh in January 1950.

Another important writer who agrees with this viewpoint is Ellen J. Hammer who argues that the motives behind the Soviet recognition of Ho Chi Minh were not so much to embarrass the West or to the fact that he was a Communist, as much as because it was a part of the Soviet diplomacy of supporting "anti-imperialist minded regimes", whether they were Communist or not. She quotes the example of Soviet recognition of Sukarno's government in Indonesia, a little after it had crushed a Communist revolt and executed its principal leaders. (77) Hammer asserted that the US Secretary of State and even the Viet Minh did not understand these "Soviet subtleties" and that by his statement, the Secretary "gave the coup de grace to Western sympathy for the Viet Minh". Many of these writers believe, in short, that till the year 1950 there was practically no contact between Ho Chi Minh and the Kremlin, let alone any directions from the Cominform. It was the Western indifference to the nationalist cause, and their grooming of Bao Dai after 1948 which pushed the Viet Minh to the Communist bloc.

There were, however, others who interpreted the motives of the Soviet recognition differently. The well-known columnist Walter Lippmann reasoned the action of Soviet Union "as a march over

77. Hammer, n. 13, p. 250.
the West". The Soviet recognition, according to him, compelled the United States to recognize Bao Dai, which meant keeping the French and the United States embroiled in Indo-China, and also keeping China away from the Western Powers. (78) It would also mean that the United States would have to back all the three spots of Formosa, Korea and Indo-China simultaneously. By recognizing Ho the Russians prevented a "just settlement" between Ho Chi Minh and the Franco-American combination.

P.J. Honey, a British specialist on Vietnamese affairs, gives Ho Chi Minh the credit or discredit, of converting Viet Minh from a nationalist movement into a Communist front. (79) He asserts that the shift in the nature of Viet Minh had occurred somewhere in late 1949, and the Communist recognition of 1950 only confirmed this shift. Hence the question arises, did Ho undertake this shift on his own or was he under the Communist, especially Chinese Communist pressure? Honey argues that Ho a man of intelligence could not but be aware of the consequences of his action; namely, the possibility of United States jumping into the fray on the side of the French and thus prolonging the war and enlarging its scale. So his conclusion seems to be, especially in view of the subsequent close relations between the Viet Minh and Peking, that Communist China was responsible for turning the Vietnamese crisis into a fight against "Free World".

In conclusion, one might say there is some truth in each of these analyses. Ho Chi Minh had been a Communist as early as 1920

78. The Hindu, 3 February 1950.
and had been in contact with the European Communists before 1945. He was associated with other Indo-Chinese Communists in the nationalist movement. But this does not rule out the possibility, that the Viet Minh was a coalition of all elements who were primarily opposed to the reimposition of the French rule in Indo-China. At least, in the period before 1950, there was a possibility of the nationalists in the Viet Minh overriding the Communists and making it into a purely nationalistic front. The Vietnamese developments repeated what had happened in China a few months earlier. It is pointless to speculate, though very tempting to do so, as to what would have happened if the United States had preceded or at least followed the Communist lead and recognized Ho as the official spokesman of the nationalists. This could have helped the nationalists in the Viet Minh, to assume control of the movement. A recognition of the Viet Minh, followed by a generous grant in terms of economic and other types of technical aid, might have also in course of time turned Ho into an Asian Tito. The European situation, however, did not allow such a possibility at all. The utmost the United States could have done was to follow a course similar to that of India, namely of recognizing neither of the two; but this, probably, was no solution at all, though this would have offered the West a chance to test Ho Chi Minh and his course.

US POLICY TOWARDS VIET NAM FOLLOWING THE RECOGNITION OF BAO DAI

The recognition of Bao Dai's regime opened the doors of Indo-China to American material aid. It began a period in which a policy towards Viet Nam's future began taking shape. This, coupled with the Communist success in China, gave an opportunity
to that section in the Department of State which had been emphasizing the need for greater attention to the Southeast Asian situation and insisting on a sympathetic, active support and encouragement of the economic, social and political awakening of this area. The first few months of the year 1950, were a period of great activity in the Southeast Asian section of the Department of State.

In fact, even before the recognition the Secretary of State in an address before the National Press Club in Washington on 12 January 1950, laid down the essentials of the US policy towards Asia, though in rather guarded terms. Among the other things, Acheson emphasized the need for military security of the area from expansionist Communism. He clearly specified that "The American defense perimeter runs from the Aleutians to Japan, the Ryukyus and the Philippines". While stressing military considerations, the Secretary also recognized the existence of other problems which could not be solved by military means. Thus, the US approach to Viet Nam, following the recognition of Bao Dai Government was one that combined both military as well as economic assistance, though in varying proportions. Under this broad approach, the specific aims of the US policy towards Viet Nam came to be spelled out. An indication of the future policy towards Viet Nam, was given in the declaration that recognized the Bao Dai regime. The Department of State in this statement announced that it was considering steps to further the political stability and the growth of effective democratic institutions in Viet Nam. It also mentioned the American intention to take steps in

collaboration with other like-minded nations, so that this development would not be hindered by internal dissension fostered from abroad. (81)

In January 1350, Ambassador Jessup began a three-month fact-finding tour of fourteen Far Eastern countries, which included Viet Nam. One of the purposes of this tour was to explore the ways and means in which the United States could help toward economic and political stability and security, and to review US policy with the American diplomats in the field. The tour convinced him of the existence of a real Communist threat to the countries of Southeast Asia as a result of the presence of the Chinese army on their very borders. (82) He also viewed it as probable that Moscow and Peking would help Ho Chi Minh in the latter's bid to control the whole of Viet Nam. (83) He concluded that the situation could not be saved except by a more decisive American action. The Jessup mission was also marked by a conference of American Ambassadors in Southeast Asia on 13 February 1950 at Bangkok. The conference agreed among other things that the United States should be ready to give arms and economic aid to any nation, if the people showed a will to fight the Communist threat. It thought the Chinese Communists would supply arms to Ho Chi Minh, though they might not invade Viet Nam. On his return Jessup gave the impressions of his tour in a hearing in the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in which he called Viet Nam one of the priority problems and advised

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82. The Hindu, 19 February 1950.

83. Ibid., 7 February 1950.
sending military aid, especially small arms to help support the anti-Communist effort there.

One of the immediate and important results of Jessup's Asian tour was the recognition of Bao Dai's regime - a clear effort to bolster up an anti-Communist regime. Within a fortnight Secretary Acheson gave his speech of "total diplomacy", in which he laid stress on the change in the US policy towards Asia and a new willingness to apply the Truman Doctrine to Southeast Asia. Shortly thereafter the United States invited France to submit a list of arms and military equipment which the latter might want to be sent to the Bao Dai regime. France had also been asked to draw up a plan for the future, indicating what might be achieved through the US aid, towards the stabilization of the Vietnamese situation on the basis of virtual independence. On 27 February, France submitted a detailed list of war materials amounting to thirty million dollars. The French case for US arms was further strengthened by the rumour that Communist China was helping Ho Chi Minh with heavier arms and military training. The French also asked for an effective economic blockade of China, in an effort to offset the advantages of Ho.

Meanwhile, on 23 February 1950, was announced the proposed economic survey of South Asia by a special mission, headed by R. Allen Griffin, publisher of the Monterey Peninsula Herald and the former Deputy Head of the ECA Mission in China. The Griffin Mission's task was to study the needs of the area and to prepare the ground for technical assistance in the future. Its terms of reference also included, in addition, the possibility of ECA assistance to Viet Nam. (84) The Griffin Mission submitted a

84. Ibid., 25 February 1950.
report recommending a programme of £64 million in economic aid and £30 million in military aid to Southeast Asia. Viet Nam seemed to have received priority in the American policy, as the area where Communist activities were alarming and as one with easy accessibility to possible Chinese Communist interference. The Mission's recommendations were not made public on the ground that "they were still in the process of review", and that negotiations were still going on. (85) However it came to be known that it had asked for immediate short-range assistance programmes with a view to help the French achieve political and military stability and to underwrite a public health programme. This would save the French the dollar drain and also win the people's heart for the "liberating" troops. (86)

The official decision to extend both military and economic aid to Indo-China, received widespread support from public opinion which demanded prompt and proper action on the part of the United States. The American move was depicted as aimed at stabilizing Bao Dai regime rather than as one of assisting the French military effort against the Viet Minh. Representatives Judd, James G. Fulton (Republican, Pennsylvania) and Javits called for increased attention to developments in Southeast Asia. Judd criticized the view that the United States should not align itself with any government in Southeast Asia, for fear that it would be deemed as supporting the reactionary, feudalistic and undemocratic governments. He thought very few people in Asia understood the meaning of democracy but

85. King, n. 47, p. 128.
that they would understand and appreciate the American assistance better. (87) Javits, on the other hand, advocated a Pacific Pact for the Far Eastern countries and said the United States should act as a "shield" for these states. (88)

General William J. Donovan, the Chief of the OSS in Hanoi in 1947 and the Chairman of the Committee on United Europe, made a bold proposal of military aid on the basis of the entire Southeast Asia as one strategic unit, under a Supreme Commander with discretionary authority to deal with military, political and economic measures for that area. He believed that the new governments in Asia would gladly accept the American leadership and American military help. He would not like to discuss the colonial question in Indo-China; for him, it was a purely a question of Communist penetration. Hence not to lose the war in Viet Nam, America should spend the money and try to win it. Not to do so now, would make the war degenerate into an expensive shooting war. (89)

The New York Times too supported the new policy towards Viet Nam, as one that could thwart the sweeping expansion of Communism in Southeast Asia. It thought Viet Nam was even more important than Greece, as it kept the French army in the other side of the world. (90) It did not, however, specify what type of aid should be extended, though one would think from its previous


88. Ibid.

89. Ibid., pp. 254 and 259.

editorials, that it emphasized economic aid.

In the meantime, the US official opinion towards French rule had also undergone a gradual change. The months following the recognition of Bao Dai witnessed a volte-face in the US attitude to the nationalist question and France's fighting the war in Viet Nam. It was recognized widely that the war was bleeding France white and the French economy was in a "serious" condition. The stationing of a number of its effective troops in Viet Nam and the financial drain on a military budget of over 400 million Francs, had affected its ability to play a larger part in North Atlantic Security. (91) However, this did not deter the United States from supporting the war in Viet Nam. Nor did the United States Administration support the view that the French should withdraw their troops from Viet Nam. Acheson thought such a step "would bring about a very serious condition". (92) Ambassador Averell Harriman, the US Special Representative in Europe, though aware of the weakness of the French economy, thought such a "withdrawal on the part of the French which would contribute to extending the tide of Communism in Asia would be a serious blunder". (93) Barry Bingham, Chief, ECA Special Mission to France, thought that France had made some appreciable gains in the battle of Viet Nam and in the economic, political and military fronts within France. The ECA representative had also argued for a continuation of the

91. The financial drain had been estimated as follows: The expenditure on Indo-China was estimated at 8 per cent of the total expenditure of the French treasury in 1949. This amounted to about 167 billion Francs or $475,000,000. R.J. Bissell, the Assistant Administrator for Programs, ECA, in his statement, U.S., House of Representatives, n. 73, p. 86.

92. Ibid., p. 364.

93. Ibid., p. 88.
fighting to "save" Viet Nam, on the plea that it had been a dollar
earner for France before the war started and that once Viet Nam was
"saved" and the war was over, she would become again an important
trading country with the West. (94) In the face of the weak economy
of France and the keenness that the war should go on, the only
logical conclusion seemed to be that the United States should step
in and render massive assistance to the French, both to recover
economically and to bring the war to a successful close. This
decision to support the war moulded the subsequent American policy
towards the French and the Vietnamese.

Hence the Department of State decided to offer both military
and economic aid to Viet Nam. It, however, found the various
suggestions for a Pacific Pact or a Far Eastern Recovery Programme
impossible. It preferred that such a pact should be arrived at by
the Asian countries themselves and the United States should only
encourage such efforts. To do anything more, would be to hinder
such efforts. (95)

The Department of State went ahead and formulated its policy
of aid to Viet Nam. In the course of this, there developed an
interesting controversy. It was with regard to who should be the
direct recipient of the American aid. The United States, in the
initial stage seemed to be keen to send the arms to the local
Vietnamese authorities, so that it would not be used by the French
army in Viet Nam. This, however, was not acceptable to the French.
Lion Pignon, the French High Commissioner in Indo-China, in an
interview to the L'Aurore, said that to defeat Ho, the Americans

94. Ibid., p. 311.
95. Secretary Acheson, in his statement, Ibid., pp. 35 and 366.
should give their aid in the "most direct and efficient way" and that the French alone should be made responsible for it. He said it would be more effective if aid was given to the French than to the young administration of Bao Dai, and that such a course would enable the United States avoiding any wastage of its aid, as it happened in the case of Chiang Kai-shek's China. (96) General Marcel Carpentier, the French Commander-in-Chief had made it clear that he would resign if the United States gave military aid directly to the Vietnamese. (97) The French seemed to be afraid that direct aid to Vietnam might mean the replacement of France by the United States in Viet Nam, and that the Vietnamese might turn their eyes towards Washington instead of Paris. They were also afraid the American businessmen might seek economic advantages in Vietnam at the cost of the French. General de Gaulle was also critical of what he called foreign interference in France's relations with any part of the French Union, notably with Indo-China. (98) The French, while being anxious for the American aid for Indo-China, were reluctant to allow an American presence there. The dismissal of Nguyen Phan Long in May 1950 as the Prime Minister of Bao Dai's Government, could also be traced to these factors. Long had made it clear that he wanted the friendship of the American Government and that he wanted the American aid, both military and economic, to be given directly to the Vietnamese. (99)

96. The Hindu, 13 May 1950.


99. As cited by Shaplen, n. 97.
The New York Times suggested setting up a joint Franco-Indo-Chinese authority for the purpose of taking advantage of the American assistance, with the insistence that it should be directed to Indo-China and not to the French in Indo-China and that it should be used in complete co-ordination with the French forces and the French Command. (100) The economic aid was finally given jointly to both France and the Associated States of Indo-China.

In accordance with the pronouncements and opinions expressed inside the country, the United States announced its aid programme to Indo-China, following a meeting on 8 May in Paris between the US Secretary of State and the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman. (101) In announcing the aid, the Secretary said that the situation in Indo-China was serious and warranted such an aid, in order to restore stability and to permit the Associated States "to pursue their peaceful and democratic development". The Secretary also stressed certain points in the course of his announcement: i) Primary responsibility for the defence of Indo-China would fall on France and the government of Indo-China; ii) US aid was being extended for the "restoration of stability" and the development of genuine nationalism; and iii) American aid would not go to France alone but to both France and the Associated States of Indo-China.

The American official attitude thus committed itself to the continuation of French rule in Indo-China by recognizing the existing links between France and Indo-China, and reconciling with the French position.

101. For the text of the statement, see Bulletin, 22 May 1950, p. 821.
A newspaper report, however, mentioned an American condition to its aid to Indo-China. It speaks of an American demand to the French that the struggle in Viet Nam would not continue to remain one between the French forces and the Viet Minh. The American insistence reportedly was that eventually a native Vietnamese army backed by the local population should emerge to carry on the struggle against the Communists. On the other hand, a report quoting the French Minister for Information, Teitgen, said that the American aid to Indo-China was not conditional and that the United States wanted to "help France to protect the independence of Viet Nam within the French Union". (102)

Following the Acheson-Schuman meeting in Paris, the Department of State announced on 9 May, its proposal to spend $64 million on economic aid to Southeast Asia during the following fifteen months. Out of this, a sum of $23 million was to go to Indo-China. The ECA had also planned to send a team of experts, to assist in administering the economic aid. (103)

Following another meeting of the foreign ministers of the USA, France and England in London on 18 May, the United States increased its extent of collaboration in Southeast Asia. The United States agreed to the view that the economic and political well-being of France and Britain rested largely on the preservation of their "legitimate interests" in Southeast Asia and that the United States should contribute to their defense and prevent their loss for the West. (104) This "defense" of the "legitimate interests" found its

102. The Hindu, 10 May 1950.


expression, very soon, in the form of military aid to the French in Indo-China. The aid, authorized under the Mutual Defense Assistance Act of 1949, was extended exclusively to the French. Defending the aid before the Congress, Acheson said, "Military aid, when such aid can be effective is an essential element of our course of action." (105) From this point started the long period of US economic and military aid to Viet Nam and a vigorous effort on the part of the United States to influence the course of events in that country. A new orientation in the policy outlook of the United States seemed to be in the offing and the United States was slowly evolving a co-ordinated policy towards Southeast Asia. On 10 June, the Defense Department announced the first shipments of arms aid to Viet Nam. It was to consist of eight C-47 transport planes and was to be followed by six 155-foot naval landing crafts. (106)

The US Assumptions and their Failure

The American aid was based on certain assumptions. It believed that the French would continue the fighting and bring the war to a successful conclusion, and that once that was achieved France would grant complete independence to Bao Dai. These and certain other American assumptions were shown to be based on weak foundations. The United States had hoped that the Bao Dai government, if given military and political support, would stabilize itself and would be in a position to draw away increasing number of nationalists from the Communist fold of the Viet Minh. The United States hoped that an increasing measure of freedom to Bao Dai

105. As quoted by King, n. 47, p. 129.
would help in strengthening his hands and would make his regime more popular. It also expected that the process of evolution towards complete independence would be continuous, though gradual.

However the fact was that Bao Dai was not acceptable to the Vietnamese population. Men of stature among non-Communists were not willing to join Bao Dai's government. Ngo Dinh Diem, the future Prime Minister did not look to Bao Dai, as a nationalist leader. He said, "... I believe it is only just to reserve the best posts in Viet Nam for those who have merited best of the country. I speak of the resistsants." (107) The private life of Bao Dai and the fact that he spent most of his time in the French Riviera, when the nation was fighting against the French, did not help in making him a popular figure on the local scene. The New York Times understood this, when it wrote that Bao Dai lacked the necessary follow-up action after his shrewd bargaining with the French, and contributed little to a positive record. (108) Even the United States military and economic help to Bao Dai failed to raise his stature in the Vietnamese eyes.

Many Vietnamese felt, such an aid would be both wasteful and politically a mistake until the government was more independent. As the New York Herald Tribune wrote, the United States would have to both create and support a truly national Vietnamese government. (109) The Vietnamese nationalists were not satisfied with the Bao Dai-Auriel Agreement and treated Bao Dai as only a French puppet.  

The United States also assumed that the Communist recognition of Ho Chi Minh, and his seeking aid from China following the American aid to the Bao Dai regime, would alienate the nationalists in the Viet Minh. But this too did not materialize. The American authorities, perhaps, assumed the Viet Minh's dependence on the Chinese aid would aggravate the uneasiness of the nationalists in the Viet Minh and would result in the latter's breaking away from the Viet Minh. However, in practice, there was no desertion on any appreciable scale from the Viet Minh and not many crossed the border to the French. Even the Vietnam Catholic League would rather co-operate with the Viet Minh, who would win ultimately, than side with Bao Dai and be vanquished. (110) The Viet Minh solidarity was not only due to the fact that the Viet Minh was well organized and disciplined, and took strict measures against the deserters, it was also because Ho Chi Minh was too shrewd to alienate the nationalists who formed a vast majority of his followers by any hasty actions on his part. He would not ride roughshod on the traditional anti-Chinese feelings of the majority of his followers. He even declared that the Viet Minh would not take advantage of China's success. Nor did there seem to be much basis for the rumour that Ho Chi Minh had concluded a secret military agreement with Communist China. The Times reported that "up till now it is practically certain that Chinese arms have been paid for, and Viet Minh independence of action thereby retained". (111) Hence, one is hard put to agree

110. A good study of this theme has been made by J.R. Clementin, "The Nationalist Dilemma in Vietnam", Pacific Affairs, September 1950, pp. 294-310.

with Virginia Thompson who wrote, the Communist recognition of Ho resulted in weaning many nationalists away from their support of the Republic. (112)

One of the reasons why the US assumptions turned out to be incorrect, was perhaps, due to the fact that the number and the qualifications of the American officials and observers in Viet Nam were far from adequate. For instance, the United States had no military attaché in Viet Nam even though the United States was discussing with France the nature and scope of American military aid to Viet Nam. Nor was there any proper inspection of the northern borders of Viet Nam to know about the Chinese incursions and the quantum of aid. Nor was there any American official to study the economic needs of Viet Nam. The Griffin Mission spent less than a fortnight in Viet Nam and its findings were not based on any French statistical records. (113)

Robert Shaplen also refers to a difference of views within the American Legation in Saigon, between those of the Minister Donald Heath and the Consul General Edmund Gullion. The latter advocated a firm American commitment to support the Vietnamese independence and to persuade the French to grant greater degree of independence. Referring to this Gullion said later that the United States "did not consider the exchange of letters [i.e. Elysee Accords] carefully enough at the time" and had hoped to influence the developments in the future. (114) The Korean war however, shifted the emphasis from the independence of Viet Nam

114. Shaplen, n. 97.
to the need to hold it from the Communists. It would, perhaps, be too much for the United States to expect the French to grant complete independence to the Vietnamese. If they did, the French would not be fighting a war there.

In its anxiety to prevent Communism ruling over Indo-China, and in its eagerness to start off anti-Communist pursuits, the United States failed to reexamine its basic assumptions. The result was that many of them failed to live up to the test and fulfill the US hopes. The United States had also, in the process, given rise to growing suspicions about the West among many Asians. It came to share in a large measure, the distrust, resentment and unpopularity of the French among large segments of the population not only within Viet Nam, but also in many parts of South and Southeast Asia.

The United States' decision to send a quantum of economic and military aid, fell short of the expectations that the past statements had raised in various parts of the world. Asian opinion firmly asserted that this policy would not help solve the Vietnamese question. This would neither put an end to Communist inroads in Viet Nam nor succeed in weaning the people away from the Communist fold. In their view, the struggle in Viet Nam was essentially nationalist and only the granting of independence by the French, including in foreign affairs and military control, would have won the nationalist and neutral elements to Bao Dai. In the absence of an assurance of independence, France still remained the national enemy, and the mere act of Soviet recognition of Ho did not make him undesirable in the nationalist eyes. Nor had the United States yet decided "to intervene" in a major way in the
Vietnamese situation. The French and Bao Dai, could serve very well as the means to combat the march of Communism under Ho. The American Administration had not made a wholehearted commitment, in terms of aid. The amount and type of aid, which the United States granted in the middle of 1950, while enough to create misgivings and strengthen the Communist propaganda against "capitalist imperialism" was not sufficient to achieve the American objective of defeating the Communist forces. (115) Unless the scale of aid was going to be increased rapidly, it appeared in 1950, that United States might face a repetition of China in Vietnam too.

The Korean crisis which broke out towards the end of June 1950, influenced the future actions of the United States in Vietnam and thus marked the beginning of a more active US policy there for the next few years.

115. By May 1950, the United States had made, towards Indo-China, a definite commitment of $75 million for military purposes, and a conditional indefinite sum for other non-military purposes. This sum was yet to be apportioned out of the total funds earmarked (i.e. $64 million) for the "general area China". This was, however, expected to amount to $23 million.