Caught in the Cold War: The Evolution of the First Indochina War

In 1946, the first Indochina war broke out between the French and the Viet Minh. This conflict was marked by opposing ideologies, namely communism and Western liberal democratic tendencies. Moreover, the first Indochina war was an anti-imperialist struggle, between France, a former great colonial power, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), which demanded independence from France. Between 1946 and early 1950, the Viet Minh fought off the French forces without any outside help from the Tonkin area.[1] During this period, the first Indochina war remained a contained conflict between France and the DRV. In January 1950, however, the People's Republic of China (PRC) formally recognised the DRV and opened the gateway for a closer relationship between the neighbouring countries. Given the geographical proximity between Indochina and China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Vietnamese communists had close ties to one another. In fact, Ho Chi Minh, leader of the DRV, lived in China during the 1920s and spoke fluent Chinese.[2] Thus, the victory of the Chinese communists under Mao Zedong in 1949 emboldened Ho to seek aid and international support from his northern neighbour.[3] The Chinese's official recognition and subsequent support would later 'internationalise' the conflict in Indochina. This essay seeks to determine why and how the conflict in Indochina became 'internationalised' during 1950. First, this essay will turn to the historical debate about the year 1950 regarding Chinese, and US involvement in Indochina. Second, this essay will examine the definition of an 'internationalised' conflict and, third, will turn to the historical context of the first Indochina war and analyse why and how the Indochina conflict moved from a regional anticolonial struggle for independence into the broader context of the globalised cold war.

The internationalisation of the first Indochina war in 1950 was a critical juncture for Southeast Asian geopolitics. Historians have explored various dimensions of this process, the

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[1] Chen Jian, "China and the First Indo-China War, 1950–54," *The China Quarterly* 133 (1993): 85–110, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0305741000018208, 86.

[2] Jian, "China and the First Indo-China War," 86.

[3] Jian, "China and the First Indo-China War," 86.

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roles global powers played, and how the broader cold war influenced those powers. Historian Gary R. Hess elucidates in his article "The First American Commitment in Indochina: The Acceptance of the "Bao Dai Solution," 1950" how the US first came to be involved as a third-party actor in 1950. Hess writes that US involvement "was derived from the cold war with the Soviet Union and from the Chinese communist victory."[4] According to Hess, Washington viewed Southeast Asia as a cold war battleground and thus ensnared itself militarily and economically in the conflict. Kathryn C. Statler, in her book *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam*, provides an account of how China's communist victory enabled France to position itself as the last line of defence against communism in the region. Statler argues that "the French had succeeded in convincing the Americans of the importance of viewing Korea and Indochina as part of the same fight against communism and of providing a coordinated effort in Indochina."[5] Statler prescribes the French an active role by establishing that they cleverly appealed to the US' ideological fears to secure their aid. Chen Jian, in his work "China and the First Indo-China War, 1950–54," offers insights into China's role in the internationalisation of the Indochina conflict. Chen Jian explores how the Chinese Communist leadership, under Mao Zedong, perceived the conflict in Indochina as intricately linked to their own security concerns.

To answer why and how the conflict in Indochina became 'internationalised,' it is necessary to define what an international conflict is and why the period before 1950 is not regarded as such. Traditionally, an international conflict is described as a conflict between two nation-states. Legal scholar Kubo Măcák writes that a conflict can be considered internationalised "when two independent subjects of international law become engaged against each other as the conflict develops."[6] According to Măcák, this may be subject to the involvement of an external actor such as a third state."[7] Moreover, a conflict may still be

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[4] Gary R. Hess, "The First American Commitment in Indochina: The Acceptance of the 'Bao Dai Solution,' 1950," *Diplomatic History* 2, no. 4 (1978): 331–50, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1978.tb00441.x, 350.

[5] Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 35.

[6] Kubo Măcák, *Internationalized Armed Conflicts in International Law* (Oxford: Oxford university press, 2018), 31.

[7] Măcák, *Internationalized Armed Conflicts in International Law,* 31.

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internationalised when an asymmetry between a state actor and a non-state actor remains if the non-state actor "acquires the requisite legal attributes."[8] In addition, the "conflict between communism and liberal democracy has continued with spasm of violence" and the cold war can thus be considered an international conflict on its own merits, since it can be "waged on [a] military, economic, diplomatic, and propaganda front."[9] Hence, the lens through which we can understand internationalisation is to look at whether a third party gets involved into a conflict, if a non-state actor acquires official legal attributes, such as recognition, and lastly whether a conflict is part of a broader global conflict such as the cold war.

In 1950, the DRV received official recognition from the PRC and, shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union. Therefore, 1950 is a signifier of change in the first Indochina war. Halfway into the conflict, neither the French nor the Vietnamese had received notable third-party support, and the war was widely regarded as a French colonial enterprise with the aim of reconquering her empire.[10] Statler argues that the PRC's recognition of Ho Chi Minh's government transformed a colonial struggle for independence into a conflict that was part of the globalised cold war.[11] Statler's assumption about the first Indochina war qualifies as 'internationalisation' since the conflict was now part of the broader global conflict between communism and liberal democracy. Considering that the DRV received official recognition after the communist victory won in China in 1949 and the Soviet Union successfully detonated their first atomic bomb that same year,[12] the threat of communist expansion loomed large in Washington. In addition, the official recognition of the DRV internationalised the conflict, since the asymmetry between France and the DRV was lifted, and the DRV was transformed into a state actor with recognition by a global power. China's support for the DRV did not end there. In January 1950, Luo Guibo was sent to Vietnam

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[8] Mǎcák, *Internationalized Armed Conflicts in International Law,* 31.

[9] Quincy Wright, "International Conflict and the United Nations," *World Politics*, October 1957, 24–28, 25.

[10] Marek Thee, "The Indochina Wars: Great Power Involvement - Escalation and Disengagement," *Journal of Peace Research* 13, no. 2 (1976): 117–29, https://doi.org/10.1177/002234337601300204, 117.

[11] Statler, *Replacing France*, 15.

[12] Statler, *Replacing France*, 17.

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to establish communications between the DRV and PRC and provide the PRC with information, so they could support the Vietnamese in their quest for independence.[13] Luo Guibo recounted China's involvement in the first Indochina war in 1992:

> "Chairman Mao said: 'Because the Chinese people have won a revolutionary victory, we now have an obligation to help the peoples whose countries have not yet been liberated: this is internationalism. Vietnam is struggling in a war of resistance against French aggression, but remains isolated, lacking the assistance of others. In this difficult time, Vietnam is looking to us for help. We are obliged as revolutionaries to provide assistance to Vietnam that is selfless, free of charge, and completely without political strings attached. Thus China will provide to the Vietnamese anything that they need which is in our possession.'"[14]

According to this conversation between Mao and Luo Guibo, it was Mao's objective to support the DRV because it was their duty as communist revolutionaries to prop up other communist revolutionaries. While China did develop a plan for an anti-imperialist Asia, there were also various security concerns, which motivated China. If its neighbouring areas were to fall into Western hands. China was dreading a confrontation with Western forces in Indochina. Therefore, supporting Vietnam would safeguard China's national security interests. The fact that nationalist units loyal to Chiang Kai-Shek fled to the Chinese-Vietnamese border area substantiates that China was acting partly because of security concerns.[15] Furthermore, China entered the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance. Jian suggests, that "the Chinese and the Soviets may have further divided the sphere of responsibility between them, leaving the support of Communist revolutionaries in Vietnam as China's duty."[16] When Ho travelled to Moscow, he secured Soviet recognition but no military assistance, since Stalin prioritised Europe.[17] However, when the Vietnamese requested aid from China in April, Beijing

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[13] Jian, "China and the First Indo-China War," 87.

[14] "A Glorious Model of Proletarian Internationalism: Mao Zedong and Helping Vietnam Resist France", 1992, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Luo Guibo, "Wuchanjieji guojizhuyide guanghui dianfan: yi Mao Zedong he Yuan-Yue Kang-Fa" ("A Glorious Model of Proletarian Internationalism: Mao Zedong and Helping Vietnam Resist France"), in Mianhuai Mao Zedong (Remembering Mao Zedong), ed. Mianhuai Mao Zedong bianxiezhu (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian chubanshe, 1992) 286-299. Translated by Emily M. Hill https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/120359

[15] Jian, "China and the First Indo-China War," 90.

[16] Jian, "China and the First Indo-China War," 89.

[17] Jian, "China and the First Indo-China War," 88.

sent war materials such as ammunition, weapons, and communication equipment.[18] Overall, China's involvement in Indochina went beyond mere recognition of the DRV, as it extended military support to the Vietnamese in their fight for independence. Mao Zedong's commitment to assisting fellow communist revolutionaries rooted in the principles of internationalism. However, behind this altruism lay strategic considerations, with Mao recognising the potential threat of Western dominance in neighbouring areas. China's fear of a confrontation with Western forces in Indochina and its broader anti-imperialist agenda converged, leading to comprehensive support for Vietnam. As a result, when the DRV sought aid, China responded by supplying crucial war materials, including ammunition, weapons, and communication equipment.

China's fall to communism enabled a geographical consolidation of communism, connecting northern Indochina, North Korea, and the Soviet Union into one imminent big block of red on the world's map. Further, it meant that over a fifth of the world's population lived under a communist regime. China at the time had an estimated population of half a billion, and the world's population was approximately two and a half billion. Suddenly, the first Indochina war turned from a local anti-communist struggle into the focal point of the cold war.[19] Not only did communism start to consolidate in Asia, but shortly after, Chinese recognition followed Soviet recognition of the DRV. The DRV, under Ho's leadership, gained an ever-increasing amount of legitimacy for its nationalistic aspirations against its former colonial ruler. The backing of the DRV by two communist global powers enabled France to portray itself as the last line of defence between the liberal democratic West and communism. Statler describes Paris positioning itself as the anti-communist heroic saviour of Southeast Asia to gain US political favour.[20] By emphasising the spread of communism, France strategically pandered to US foreign policy interests of containment. Considering China's proximity to Indochina and a resilient show of force by the Viet Minh against the French, Washington was concerned by the prospect of a communist Vietnam. The belief was that if Vietnam fell to communism, so would the rest of

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[18] Jian, "China and the First Indo-China War," 93.

[19] Statler, *Replacing France*, 18.

[20] Statler, *Replacing France*, 15.

Southeast Asian countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Indonesia. The National Security Council laid out in a report in February 1950 that their prime concern in Indochina was driven by the larger implications of the cold war as opposed to any tangible reasons such as economic interests or strategic geopolitical positions.

> "[T]he threat of communist aggression against Indochina is only one phase of anticipated communist plans to seize all of Southeast Asia. [...] Burma is weak internally and could be invaded without strong opposition or [...] the Government of Burma could be subverted. However, Indochina is the area most immediately threatened. It is also the only area adjacent to communist China which contains a large European army, which along with native troops is now in armed conflict with the forces of communist aggression. A decision to contain communist expansion at the border of Indochina must be considered as a part of a wider study to prevent communist aggression into other parts of Southeast Asia."[21]

This top-secret government document, which was written after Chinese and Soviet recognition implies that Indochina became the frontline in the West's struggle against communism and that the Viet Minh and their nationalist aspirations were regarded as firstly communist aggression. In addition to the menace of a communist expansion, the US' credibility was severely compromised when their longtime ally Chiang Kai-Shek was defeated in the Chinese civil war.[22] Within the power dynamics of the cold war the US had established itself as the most vehement anti-communist power and defender of liberal democracy. Chiang Kai-Shek's defeat then signalled to allies around the world that the US did not take the necessary measures to prevent China falling into communist hands. The threat of Indochina, which was governed by a liberal democracy that had been aligned with the US since World War II, falling into communist hands was a threat to their global reputation and to their allies. Allies would question the validity of the US' word and promised protection faced against communist expansion. Ultimately, the communist victory in China simplified Washington's outlook on the first Indochina war into a one-dimensional conflict, in which two ideologies were opposed.

The US' adoption of a purely black and white view of the first Indochina war marks a stark contrast to the US' previous more multifaceted position that recognised the nationalist

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[21] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1950, East Asia and the Pacific, Volume VI, eds. Daniel J. Lawler and Erin R. Mahan (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 480.

[22] Hess, "The First American Commitment in Indochina," 345.

claims of the Vietnamese and France's colonial aspirations. Pre-communist victory in China, Washinton debated over its approach towards Indochina. Historically, the US was sceptical towards France's return to Indochina. Contemplating, that the US was a colony itself it comes to no surprise that Washington wanted France to adopt a more liberal colonial policy and make concessions to the Vietnamese and their nationalist aspirations.[23]

> "The United States should continue to use its influence in Asia toward resolving the colonial-nationalist conflict in such a way as to satisfy the fundamental demands of the nationalist movement […] Particular attention should be given to the problem of French Indo-China and action should be taken to bring home to the French the urgency of removing the barriers to the obtaining by Bao Dai or other non-Communist nationalist leaders of the support[…] of the Vietnamese."[24]

In this memorandum, which was written in December 1949, the US is concerned about communism spreading but still emphasised a solution, which would appease the Vietnamese. For the US, this was the Bao Dai solution which would have preserved a Western-oriented Southeast Asia, since the US did not want to risk a Viet Minh dominated state that would effectively become a Soviet satellite state. This solution centred around former emperor Bao Dai to become head of state. France granted Vietnam under Bao Dai a superficial and diluted independence as they retained sovereignty over foreign affairs and defence issues, which was ratified in the Elysée agreement.[25] Hess writes that the success of the Bao Dai government relied upon US support in the form of official recognition.[26] Washington was hesitant to embrace the Bao Dai government, as they were risking "becoming the lone partner of France in a losing colonial enterprise,"[27] especially since other Asian countries, such as India, were reluctant to recognise a government with diluted independence and a lack of popular support. Consequently, Washington urged France to include an evolutionary process towards independence in the Elysée

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[23] Hess, "The First American Commitment in Indochina," 331.

[24] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1949, Volume VII, Part 2, The Far East and Australasia, eds. Daniel J. Lawler and Erin R. Mahan (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 387.

[25] Hess, "The First American Commitment in Indochina," 331.

[26] Hess, "The First American Commitment in Indochina," 340.

[27] Hess, "The First American Commitment in Indochina," 343.

agreement.[28] None of these concessions towards the Vietnamese developed, since the US fully recognised the Bao Dai government in early February 1950, shortly after the Soviet Union officially recognised the DRV. Washington's concerns over Indochina becoming a Soviet satellite state superseded any objections towards France's colonial policy.[29] After US recognition, the Indochina conflict quickly escalated, since France relied upon military and economic aid and Washington viewed French presence as crucial for preventing communist expansion. On May 8, the US entered the Indochina conflict as a third-party actor when they committed ten million dollars in military aid to the State of Vietnam, headed by Bao Dai.

To conclude, 1950 was a pivotal year for the Indochina conflict. The DRV received official recognition from both the PRC and the Soviet Union, thereby lifting the non-state asymmetry between the DRV and France. Consequently, the US viewed Indochina as the frontline in the cold war and was concerned about containment in the area. Since the US wanted to prevent a Viet Minh-led Indochina they promptly recognised the Bao Dai government, without any additional French concessions to prevent Indochina becoming a Soviet satellite state. Both China and the US entered the conflict in 1950 as third-party state actors. The DRV received official recognition and third-party state actors got involved in a prior anti-imperialist struggle. With China's communist internationalism and support for the DRV and the US' stern anti-communism agendas, Indochina became part of the broader cold war, which was an international conflict.

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[28] Hess, "The First American Commitment in Indochina," 343.

[29] Hess, "The First American Commitment in Indochina," 347

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