

minh triumph, would destroy the French Union and condemn Indochina to communism. Zhou Enlai and the Chinese wanted to partition Vietnam. They did not want a united Vietnam—French or Vietnamese—to the south. The Soviet Union was conciliatory. Joseph Stalin's death in 1953 had removed the most militant voice in Moscow, and the new Soviet chieftains did not want a confrontation with the United States, not over a faraway place like Indochina. Only they and the British, represented by Anthony Eden as foreign secretary, came to Geneva without a firm political agenda. The two emerged as the leaders of the conference.

The various delegations spent their first two weeks at Geneva on other questions before turning their attention to Indochina. On May 6, just when the talks began, Vo Nguyen Giap attacked the French fortress, hitting it with new Soviet Katyusha field rockets, which the French dubbed "Stalin's organs" because of their roar, and sending thousands of Vietnamese out of the trenches, through the exploding shells, and into the base. On the afternoon of May 7, after bitter, hand-to-hand combat, Vietnamese entered the French headquarters and struck the flag. In a final radio message, Castrics cried: "Our resistance is going to be overwhelmed. The Viets are within a few meters of the radio transmitter where I am speaking. I have given orders to carry out maximum destruction. We will not surrender. We will fight to the end. . . . Long live France!" The Vietnamese seized Castrics moments later, along with more than 10,000 of his comrades. The French prisoners spent the next ten weeks in horrible prison camps before their repatriation began on July 20.

Vo Nguyen Giap's troops had sustained 22,900 casualties, 7,900 killed and 15,000 wounded, while the French buried 2,080 dead and treated 5,613 wounded. But Giap was the victor. He regrouped his four divisions at Dienbienphu and marched them east toward the Red River Delta and Hanoi. Certain that a general French defeat was near, General Navarre rearranged his troops in the Red River Delta and placed them around Hanoi and along Highways 5 and 18 between Hanoi and Haiphong, the last escape route out of Tonkin.

The defeat toppled the French government. Prime Minister Joseph Laniel resigned on June 12 and Pierre Mendes-France, a radical socialist, became prime minister. He stunned the French Chamber of Deputies announcing, "I promise to resign if, one month from now, on July 20, I have failed to obtain a cease-fire in Indochina." Mendes-France was committed to ending the war that had brought only humiliation to his country.

The Eisenhower administration realized that a settlement in Geneva was inevitable and that the communists would gain part of Indochina. On June 24 Dulles told congressional leaders that the United States would have to look beyond Geneva and try to salvage something in

Southeast Asia. In particular, he talked of assuming the responsibility for making sure that not another domino fell in Indochina. In order to "keep freedom alive," Dulles worked for a NATO-like regional alliance system in Southeast Asia. Nobody was farsighted enough to recognize that the United States was setting itself up for another Asian land war.

Mendes-France's promise and the change in the American position breathed new life into the Geneva talks. Anthony Eden began assuming a central role in the conference, as did Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet representative. Along with Zhou Enlai, they persuaded Pham Van Dong and the Vietnamese to accept a temporary partitioning of Vietnam to be followed by reunification elections. The French and the Vietnamese hotly debated the question of where to divide Vietnam and when to hold the elections. Bidault wanted the dividing line as far north and the elections as far into the future as possible. Pham Van Dong wanted the dividing line as far south and the elections as soon as possible. Unlike Dienbienphu, this battle went to the French. The Geneva Accords divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel into North Vietnam and South Vietnam. The accords imposed a ceasefire and provided for the withdrawal of French forces from North Vietnam and Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam within the next three hundred days. Both the French and the Vietnamese were to withdraw their troops from Laos and Cambodia. The accords provided for free elections in 1956, with the goal of reunifying the two Vietnams. An International Control Commission composed of representatives from India, Canada, and Poland was established to monitor compliance with the accords.

Ho's acquiescence in the partitioning of his country caught many Vietnamese offguard. The victory at Dienbienphu should have let them dictate the diplomatic settlement at Geneva and secure outright independence. Ho Chi Minh, however, still hoped to work out a rapprochement with the United States, to restore some of the trust he had enjoyed during World War II. That the United States had granted the Philippines independence without a fight in 1946 left Ho with the conviction that many Americans must have been sympathetic with the aspirations of colonial peoples. He was also convinced that in 1956 he would win the election handily and see his country reunited without more bloodshed.

Signed on July 21, 1954, the Geneva Accords received a wholesale endorsement only from France, Great Britain, China, and the Soviet Union. Pham Van Dong signed the agreement for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, but Vietnamese leaders were privately bitter about the partitioning. The Geneva Accords accomplished little. Pham Van Dong left the conference expecting free elections in 1956 to bring about the long-awaited unification of Vietnam. But Georges Bidault and the French left hoping to maintain French authority in Saigon and the Mekong Delta. They dreamed of bringing Tonkin back into the French Union. Ngo Dinh Diem, the anticommunist Vietnamese nationalist who became prime

minister of the State of Vietnam on July 7, refused to sign the accords. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told the American delegation to leave the agreement unsigned. The first Indochina War was over, and the second was beginning.

Ho Chi Minh's prediction in 1946 that France would kill ten Vietnamese for every dead French soldier proved prophetic. When the mud dried around Dienbienphu, the eight years of war had resulted in the deaths of nearly 300,000 Vietnamese and up to a million Vietnamese civilians. France counted 95,000 dead. But the war was not a body count, a simple military equation in which the party that piled up more kills emerged as victor. As Ho Chi Minh had believed all along, the first Indochina War was a political conflict in which the Vietnam outlasted the French. It was a lesson the United States would have to relearn.

Above all, such a war would have thwarted the old warrior's great dream of his final year in office—to arrange a summit with the post-Stalin leadership "calculated to bring home to the Russians the full implications of Western strength and to impress upon them the folly of war"³⁰ (see chapter 20).

By now, enough time had passed that, regardless of Great Britain's decision, United Action could no longer save Dien Bien Phu, which fell on May 7 even as the diplomats were discussing Indochina in Geneva. As is often the case when collective security is invoked, United Action had turned into an alibi for doing nothing.

The debate over intervention at Dien Bien Phu showed, above all, the confusion which was beginning to descend on Vietnam policy and the growing difficulty of reconciling geopolitical analysis, strategic doctrine, and moral conviction. If it were true that a communist victory in Indochina would cause the dominoes to fall from Japan to Indonesia, as Eisenhower predicted in his letter to Churchill and in a press conference on April 7, America would have to draw the line regardless of the reaction on other countries, especially since the military contribution of the potential

participants in United Action would have been largely symbolic. Though collective action was preferable, it was surely not a precondition to the defense of the global balance, if that was indeed what was at stake. On the other hand, at about the same time that the Administration was attempting to organize collective action, it had changed its military doctrine to "massive retaliation." Proposing to strike at the source of aggression, in practice, meant that a war over Indochina would be directed against China. Yet there was no moral or political basis for air attacks against a country that was only indirectly participating in the Vietnam War and for a cause which Churchill had characterized to Radford as too peripheral and too dangerous to be sustainable for very long in Western public opinion.

Without doubt, the post-Stalinist leaders in the Kremlin would have been extremely loath in their first year of power to confront America for China's sake. However, since America's military leaders were incapable of describing either the targets or the likely outcome of massive retaliation against China (or within Indochina, for that matter), and since Indochina's independence was still only a plan, no realistic basis for intervention existed. Eisenhower wisely deferred a showdown until the various strands of the American approach could be harmonized. Unfortunately, they were still not in harmony a decade later, when America, oblivious to the vastness of the enterprise, confidently took up the task at which France had failed ignominiously.

Since both the Soviet Union and China feared American intervention, the Eisenhower/Dulles diplomacy of making implicit threats helped to bring about an outcome to the Geneva Conference that on the surface was far better than the military situation on the ground warranted. The Geneva Accords of July 1954 provided for the partitioning of Vietnam along the 17th Parallel. To leave the way open for unification, the partition was described not as a "political boundary" but as an administrative arrangement for facilitating the regrouping of military forces prior to internationally supervised elections. These were to be held within two years. All outside forces were to be withdrawn from the three Indochinese states within 300 days; foreign bases and alliances with other countries were proscribed.

Cataloguing the various provisions, however, gives a misleading impression of the formality and stringency of the Geneva Accords. There were many signatories to different parts of the agreement but no contracting parties, therefore no "collective obligations."³¹ Richard Nixon later summed up the hodgepodge as follows: "Nine countries gathered at the conference and produced six unilateral declarations, three bilateral cease-fire agreements, and one unsigned declaration."³²

What it counted to was a way of ending the hostilities, partitioning Vietnam, and leaving the political outcome to the future. Amateur analysts often invoke the ambiguity of such agreements as a demonstration of the confusion or the duplicity of the negotiators—a charge later leveled against the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. Yet, most of the time, ambiguous documents such as the Geneva Accords reflect reality; they settle what it is possible to settle, in the full knowledge that further refinement must await new developments. Sometimes the interlude permits a new political constellation to emerge without conflict; sometimes the conflict breaks out again, forcing each party to review its bidding.

In 1954, an uneasy stalemate developed which none of the parties was as yet in a position to break. The Soviet Union was not prepared for confrontation so soon after Stalin's death and had only marginal national interests in Southeast Asia; China feared another war with America less than a year after the end of the Korean conflict (especially in light of the new American doctrine of massive retaliation); France was in the process of withdrawing from the region; the United States lacked both a strategy and the public support for intervention; and the Vietnamese communists were not yet strong enough to continue the war without outside sources of supply.

At the same time, nothing that was achieved at the Geneva Conference changed the basic views of the protagonists. The Eisenhower Administration had not altered its conviction that Indochina was the key to the Asian—and perhaps the global—balance of power; nor had it permanently abjured military intervention, only intervention at the side of colonial France. North Vietnam had not abandoned its objective of unifying all of Indochina under communist rule, for which its leaders had been fighting for two decades. The new Soviet leadership continued to avow its commitment to the international class struggle. In terms of doctrine, China was the most radical of the communist countries, though, as was learned decades later, it generally filtered its ideological convictions through the prism of its own national interest. And China's perception of its national interest caused it to be deeply ambivalent about having a major power, even a communist one, on its southern border—the inevitable result of Indochina's unification under communist rule.

Dulles maneuvered skillfully through this thicket. Almost certainly he preferred military intervention and the destruction of communism, even in the North. For example, on April 13, 1954, he stated that the only "satisfactory" outcome would be a complete withdrawal of the communists from Indochina.³³ Instead, he found himself at a conference whose only possible outcome would be to give communist rule in North Vietnam an air of legitimacy which, in turn, would expand communist influ-

ence throughout Indochina. With all the bearing of "a puritan house of ill repute,"³⁴ Dulles tried to construct a settlement which, though "something we would have to gag about," would also be "free of the taint of French colonialism."³⁵ For the first time in the course of America's involvement in Vietnam, strategic analysis and moral conviction coincided. Dulles defined the American goal as assisting in "arriving at decisions which will help the nations of that area peacefully to enjoy territorial integrity and political independence under stable and free governments with the opportunity to expand their economies."³⁶

The immediate difficulty, of course, was that the United States had refused to participate officially at the Geneva Conference. It tried to be both present and absent—sufficiently on the scene to uphold its principles, yet far enough to the side to avoid domestic obloquy for having to abandon some of them. America's ambiguity was best expressed in a concluding statement which declared that the United States "takes note" of the final declarations and would "refrain from the threat or the use of force to disturb them." At the same time, the statement warned that "it would view any renewal of the aggression in violation of the aforesaid arrangements with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security."³⁷ I know of no other instance in diplomatic history of a nation guaranteeing a settlement it has refused to sign, and about which it has expressed such strong reservations.

Dulles had not been able to prevent the communist consolidation of North Vietnam, but he hoped to prevent the dominoes from falling in the rest of Indochina. Faced by what he and Eisenhower perceived as the twin evils of colonialism and communism, he had jettisoned French colonialism and would henceforth be free to concentrate on containing communism. He viewed the virtue of Geneva to be its creation of a political framework which brought America's political and military objectives into harmony and provided the legal basis for resisting further communist moves.

For their part, the communists were preoccupied with establishing their system of government north of the 17th Parallel, a task they pursued with characteristic savagery, killing at least 50,000 people and putting another 100,000 into concentration camps. Some 80,000–100,000 communist guerrillas moved north, while 1 million North Vietnamese fled to South Vietnam, where the United States discovered in Ngo Dinh Diem a leader it thought it could support. He had an unblemished record as a nationalist; unfortunately, devotion to democracy proved not to be his forte.

Eisenhower's wise decision not to become involved in Vietnam in 1954 proved to be tactical, not strategic. After Geneva, he and Dulles remained

convinced Indochina's decisive strategic importance. While Indochina sorted itself out, Dulles put the finishing touches on the collective security framework that had misfired earlier in the year. The Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), which came into being in September 1954, was composed, in addition to the United States, of Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and France. What it lacked was a common political objective or a means for mutual support. Indeed, the countries refusing to participate in SEATO were more significant than its members. India, Indonesia, Malaya, and Burma preferred to seek safety in neutrality, and the Geneva Accords prohibited the three Indochinese states from joining. As for America's European allies, France and Great Britain were not likely to run risks on behalf of an area from which they had so recently been ejected. Indeed, France—and to a lesser degree Great Britain—almost certainly joined SEATO in order to gain a veto over what they considered the potential for rash American actions.

The formal obligations contained in SEATO were rather nebulous. Requiring the signatories to meet a "common danger" by their "constitutional processes," the Treaty neither established criteria for defining the common danger nor assembled the machinery for common action—as NATO did. Nevertheless, SEATO served Dulles' purpose by providing a legal framework for the defense of Indochina. This is why, strangely enough, SEATO was more specific about communist aggression against the three nations of Indochina—banned from membership by the Geneva Accords—than with respect to a communist attack on the signatories. A separate protocol designated threats to Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam as being inimical to the peace and security of the signatories, in effect providing a unilateral guarantee.³⁸

Everything now depended on whether the new states of Indochina, especially South Vietnam, could be turned into fully functioning nations. None of them had ever been governed as a political entity within its existing borders. Hue was the old imperial capital. The French had divided Vietnam into three regions—Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina—governed by Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon respectively. The area around Saigon and in the Mekong Delta had only been colonized by the Vietnamese relatively recently, during the nineteenth century, at about the same time that the French arrived. The existing authorities consisted of a combination of French-trained civil servants and a maze of secret societies—the so-called sects—some of which had religious affiliations, but all of which supported themselves and maintained their autonomous status by shaking down the population.

Diem, the new ruler, was the son of an official at the imperial court of