



## CHAPTER 5 CHINA AND THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR, 1950–1954

Despite its obvious significance, China's involvement in the First Indochina War has long been an under-researched and inadequately understood subject in Cold War studies. Until recently, because Chinese and Vietnamese sources were inaccessible, the many plausible English-language publications on the First Indochina War either completely ignore, or give only marginal attention to, China's connection to it. King Chen's *Vietnam and China, 1938–1954*, using contemporary newspapers and radio broadcasts, offers the most detailed and generally reliable treatment of the Chinese–Viet Minh relationship, but even this study is restricted by its sources and fails to provide a comprehensive picture of the strategic cooperation between the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists. Consequently, the study leaves a crucial lacuna in judging the extent and nature of their relations.<sup>1</sup> This chapter uses recently released Chinese sources to shed new light on China's role in the First Indochina War.

### **Early Contacts between the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists**

The Chinese Communist Party and the Vietnamese Communists had a history of close associations. Early in the 1920s, Ho Chi Minh, who could speak fluent Chinese and often visited China, and many other Vietnamese Communists established contacts with their Chinese comrades in Europe.<sup>2</sup> In 1924, Ho was dispatched by the Comintern to China to assist Mikhail Borodin, the Soviet agent working for Sun Yatsen and the Guomindang government in Guangzhou.<sup>3</sup> In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Ho, while conducting revolutionary activities in China, became a member of the CCP-led Eighth Route Army and stayed in the CCP's Red capital Yan'an for several weeks.<sup>4</sup> After the end of the Second World War, Ho's Indochina Communist Party (ICP; after 1951, the Vietnamese Workers' Party, or VWP)<sup>5</sup> led a national uprising and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) with Ho as president. When the French returned to reestablish their control, Ho and his fellow



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Communists moved to mountainous areas to fight for independence. The First Indochina War began.

When the DRV was established, the CCP decided to send many of its Vietnamese members back to their own country to promote the Vietnamese revolution. After the outbreak of the First Indochina War, the Chinese Communist guerrilla forces in Chinese-Vietnamese border areas occasionally assisted the Viet Minh's military operations.<sup>6</sup> The CCP's Hong Kong Bureau Branch, following the party Central Committee's orders, provided intermittent financial support for Ho and the Viet Minh.<sup>7</sup> However, having its own revolution

as top priority, the CCP was unable to provide direct and substantial support to the Viet Minh before the end of 1949. Because of technical difficulties, no reliable telegraphic communications existed between the Chinese and Vietnamese Communist leaderships during this period.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the Vietnamese Communists had to fight a war against the French basically by themselves from 1946 to late 1949.

### **Planning China's Support to the Viet Minh**

The Chinese Communist victory in 1949 changed the international environment for the Vietnamese revolution. For the purpose of promoting the PRC's international reputation and enhancing its southern border security, the CCP leadership was willing to play an outstanding role in supporting the cause of their Communist comrades in Vietnam.

From late June to early August 1949, the CCP's second in command, Liu Shaoqi, secretly visited Moscow and held a series of meetings with Stalin and other Soviet leaders. A main part of the discussions covered how to promote an Asian revolution in general and the Vietnamese revolution in particular. The Chinese and Soviet leaders reached a general consensus that it was primarily the CCP's responsibility to provide support to the Vietnamese revolutionaries.<sup>9</sup> On 24 December, during a meeting between Mao Zedong and Stalin in Moscow, the two leaders confirmed this arrangement.<sup>10</sup>

The Vietnamese Communists were also eager to receive support from their Chinese comrades. In August 1949, when the victorious Chinese People's Liberation Army, in chasing the remnants of the GMD forces, was about to reach the Chinese-Vietnamese border area, Ho Chi Minh wrote a letter to Mao Zedong, describing the situation in Vietnam and asking for Chinese aid in any and all forms. Ly Ban and Nguyen Duc Thuy, two ICP envoys with close personal ties to the CCP, delivered the letter to Beijing in October.<sup>11</sup> On 24 December 1949, Liu Shaoqi chaired a CCP politburo meeting to discuss China's support to Vietnam, which concluded with the decision to invite a high-ranking Vietnamese delegation to Beijing to "discuss all important issues." In order to learn more about the situation in Vietnam and to establish direct contacts with the Vietnamese Communists, the CCP leaders also decided to send Luo Guibo, a PLA commander who, as a guerrilla leader during the anti-Japanese war, had extensive experience in dealing with complicated situations, to Vietnam as the CCP's general representative.<sup>12</sup> On 25 and 28 December, Liu Shaoqi twice telegraphed Ho to inform him of these decisions, particularly mentioning that the PRC would dispatch a high-ranking adviser to Vietnam and was ready to grant

diplomatic recognition to the DRV.<sup>13</sup> Early in January 1950, Hoang Van Hoan, an ICP Central Committee member with close ties to China, arrived in Beijing to establish direct contact with the CCP.<sup>14</sup> On 18 January, the PRC formally recognized and established diplomatic relations with the DRV.<sup>15</sup>

Early in January, when Liu Shaoqi met with Luo Guibo to assign him to work in Vietnam, he made it clear that Luo's appointment was approved by Mao and the CCP Central Committee. Luo's task in Vietnam was to establish communications between the two parties as well as to provide the CCP leadership with firsthand materials for formulating plans to assist the Vietnamese Communists. Liu stressed to Luo that "it is the duty of those countries that have achieved the victory of their own revolution to support peoples who are still conducting the just struggle for liberation" and that "it is our international obligation to support the anti-French struggle of the Vietnamese people."<sup>16</sup>

While Luo was on his way to Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, after walking for seventeen days on foot, secretly arrived at China's Guangxi border around 20 January 1950.<sup>17</sup> When Ho arrived in Beijing on 30 January, Liu Shaoqi received him the same evening and reported his visit to Mao Zedong, who was then in Moscow. Liu emphasized in his telegram to Mao that it was necessary for the CCP to "satisfy all of Ho's requests," to which Mao agreed completely.<sup>18</sup> The CCP Central Committee immediately established an ad hoc commission composed of Zhu De, vice chairman of the Central People's Government and commander in chief of the People's Liberation Army, Nie Rongzhen, acting general chief of staff of the PLA, and Li Weihai, director of the United Front Department of the CCP Central Committee, to discuss with Ho his mission in China.<sup>19</sup> Ho made it clear that he came to obtain a substantial Chinese commitment to support the Vietnamese Communists.<sup>20</sup> He also wished to meet Stalin and Mao in Moscow and obtain Soviet and Chinese military, political, and economic assistance. Through arrangements by the CCP and the CPSU, Ho left Beijing by train on the evening of 3 February and arrived in Moscow one week later.<sup>21</sup>

Ho's secret trip to Moscow brought him mixed results. Although the Soviet Union decided to recognize Ho's government, Stalin, in the wake of the 1948-49 Berlin crisis, had concerns in Europe and was unfamiliar with, and to a certain extent even suspicious of, Ho's intentions. He was therefore reluctant to commit the strength of the Soviet Union directly to the Vietnamese Communists and turned Ho to the Chinese.<sup>22</sup> To Ho's great satisfaction, Mao and Zhou, first in Moscow and then in Beijing (to which Ho returned with Mao and Zhou on 3 March), promised that the CCP would do its best "to offer all

the military assistance Vietnam needed in its struggle against France.” When Ho returned to Vietnam he was certain that he could now rely on China’s support.<sup>23</sup>

The CCP’s attitude toward Vietnam was first and foremost the natural result of the Chinese Communists’ belief that it was Beijing’s mission to promote an Asian revolution following the Chinese model. Mao and other CCP leaders had consistently seen the Chinese Communist revolution as part of a world proletarian revolutionary movement initiated by the Russian Bolsheviks. As it progressed, however, and differed from the Russian revolution by concentrating on largely rural instead of urban areas, Mao and the CCP leadership had second thoughts about the nature and significance of their revolution. During 1948–49, they began to talk in terms of a much broader anti-imperialist Asian and world revolution. First, their model of revolution transcended China and offered an example of universal significance to other peoples struggling for national liberation. Second, the victory of the Chinese revolution represented the beginning of a new high tide of revolutionary movements of oppressed peoples in Asia and in the world. Consequently, they believed it their duty to assist Communist revolutionaries and national liberation movements in other countries in order to promote an Asia-wide or even worldwide revolution.<sup>24</sup>

The CCP’s policy of supporting the Vietnamese Communists was also consistent with Mao’s “lean-to-one-side” approach, one of the cornerstones of the CCP’s domestic and international policies in the early years of the PRC. As discussed earlier, during Liu Shaoqi’s secret visit to the Soviet Union in late June–early August 1949, Stalin strongly encouraged the Chinese to take a larger role in promoting revolutionary movements in East Asia. When Mao visited Moscow, the Chinese and the Soviets further divided the sphere of responsibility between them, leaving the support of Communist revolutionaries in Vietnam as China’s duty. The CCP’s commitment to Ho’s struggle in Vietnam was apparently compatible with this basic strategic arrangement between Beijing and Moscow.

CCP leaders also believed that standing by their Vietnamese comrades would serve their goal of safeguarding China’s national security interests. Interestingly, Mao, though a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary, demonstrated an approach similar to many traditional Chinese rulers: the safety of the Central Kingdom could not be properly maintained if its neighboring areas fell into the hands of hostile “barbarian” forces. In 1949–50, while considering potential threats to China’s national safety, Mao and the CCP leadership were particularly concerned with the prospect of a possible military confrontation

with imperialist countries and their acolytes in the Korean Peninsula, Indochina, and the Taiwan Strait. Convinced that events in these areas were closely interrelated, they viewed supporting the Vietnamese Communists as an effective means of strengthening their position against the threat to China from the United States.<sup>25</sup> This view was supported by the fact that some Chinese Nationalist units who were still loyal to Jiang Jieshi had fled to the Chinese-Vietnamese border area, making it a source of insecurity for the newly established Chinese Communist regime.<sup>26</sup> After the outbreak of the Korean War, although Mao and the CCP leadership placed the emphasis of their strategy regarding the United States on Korea, they continued to view the Vietnamese Communist struggle against the French as part of the overall anti-imperialist struggle in the Far East.<sup>27</sup> Thus, from Beijing's perspective, providing support to the Vietnamese Communists became an integral part of enhancing the PRC's vital security interests.

### **The Establishment of the Chinese Military Advisory Group**

When the decision to support the Vietnamese Communists was made, the CCP moved forward immediately. On 13 March 1950, Liu Shaoqi telegraphed Luo Guibo, who had arrived in the Viet Minh's Viet Bac (northern Vietnam) base four days earlier, instructing him to start his work in two stages. First, he was to deal with the most urgent problems, including providing the CCP Central Committee with a clear idea about the way in which Chinese military, economic, and financial aid should be given to the Vietnamese and how that aid could reach Vietnam. Second, Luo was instructed to carefully investigate the overall military situation in Vietnam so that he could offer the CCP Central Committee suggestions about how to prepare a long-term strategy for beating the French colonialists.<sup>28</sup>

In April 1950, the ICP Central Committee formally forwarded to Beijing a series of requests for support, including dispatch of Chinese military advisers, China taking the responsibility for training Viet Minh troops, and China's delivery of large amounts of ammunition and military equipment.<sup>29</sup> The CCP leadership responded immediately. On 17 April, the Central Military Commission of the CCP ordered each of the PLA's Second, Third, and Fourth Field Armies to provide advisers at battalion, regiment, and division levels for a Vietnamese division. The Third Field Army organized the headquarters of the Chinese Military Advisory Group (CMAG), and the Fourth Field Army set up a military school for the Vietnamese.<sup>30</sup> On 26 April, the CMC instructed the PLA Northwestern, Southwestern, Eastern, and South Central Headquar-

ters to offer another thirteen cadres over battalion level to join the CMAG to work with the Vietnamese Communists at the top commanding positions.<sup>31</sup> The military advisers gathered in Beijing during May and received indoctrination courses on the CCP's international policy. They also met top CCP leaders to receive instructions. General Wei Guoqing, political commissar of the Tenth Army Corps of the Third Field Army, was placed in charge of the preparation work.<sup>32</sup>

On 25 June 1950, before the Chinese advisers' training was completed, the Korean War broke out. As the war quickly changed into an international crisis, with Washington announcing that it would rescue South Korea and dispatch the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait, Beijing's leaders were convinced of an overall American plot of aggression in the Far East, against China, Korea, and Vietnam.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, Mao and the CCP leadership decided to push forward their support to the Viet Minh.<sup>34</sup>

On 27 June, two days after the outbreak of the Korean War, Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De, and other top CCP leaders received the Chinese military advisers who were preparing to work in Vietnam. Stressing that supporting the Vietnamese Communists was the "glorious internationalist duty" of the Chinese revolutionaries, Mao assigned the advisers two major tasks: to help the Vietnamese organize and establish a formal army, and to assist them in planning and conducting major operations to defeat the French colonialists. Liu Shaoqi explained the reasons for the decision to support the Viet Minh. He emphasized that Vietnam was an important area and that sending Chinese military advisers there would have worldwide significance. If the Chinese failed to support the Vietnamese revolutionaries and allowed the enemy to stay, Liu stated, this would cause more difficulties for the Chinese.<sup>35</sup>

Late in July, the CMAG, composed of seventy-nine experienced PLA officers, was formally established, with General Wei Guoqing as the head, associated with Generals Mei Jiasheng and Deng Yifan, both army-level commanders from the Third Field Army. To maintain secrecy, they were known publicly as the "Working Group in Southern China." Members of the group finally arrived in Vietnam in early August and began to serve with the Vietnamese Communist forces.<sup>36</sup>

### **Chen Geng and the Border Campaign**

As early as May 1950, the CCP leadership had decided to send Chen Geng—one of the most talented high-ranking commanders in the PLA, a member of the CCP Central Committee, and commander of the PLA's Twentieth Army Corps—to Vietnam to help organize a major military campaign along the

Vietnamese-Chinese border, so that the Viet Minh would be directly backed by the PRC.<sup>37</sup> Ho had suggested that Chen Geng be put in this position during his visit to China in early 1950 (Ho had known Chen Geng since the 1920s), and his idea was received with much enthusiasm by the CCP leadership.<sup>38</sup> On 18 June, Liu Shaoqi sent a telegram to Chen Geng, outlining his main tasks in Vietnam:

In addition to discussing and resolving some specific issues with the Vietnamese comrades, your primary task is to work out a generally practical plan based on Vietnam's conditions (including military establishments, politics, economy, topography, and transportation) and on the limits of our assistance (including, in particular, the conditions for shipping supplies). We will use this plan as a guide to implement various aid programs, including making a priority list of materials to be shipped, training cadres, training and rectifying troops, expanding recruits, organizing logistical work, and conducting battles. The plan should be practical, and it should be approved by the Vietnamese party Central Committee.<sup>39</sup>

Chen traveled to the Viet Bac bases in mid-July. After a series of meetings with Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and other Viet Minh leaders, he suggested that in carrying out the Vietnamese-Chinese Border campaign the Viet Minh should "concentrate [its] forces and destroy the enemy troops by separating them," a principle that had proved effective for the Chinese Communists during China's civil war. Ho and the Vietnamese accepted Chen's plan.<sup>40</sup> On 22 July 1950, Chen reported by telegraph to the CCP Central Committee that he had reached a consensus with the Vietnamese leaders concerning the general strategy of the forthcoming Border campaign. They would first annihilate some automotive units of the enemy in mobile operations and destroy a few small enemy strongholds. This would allow the Vietnamese to gain experience, stimulate and consolidate the momentum of their soldiers, and win the initiative on the battlefield, so that they would be ready for large-scale operations. Then they would start an offensive against Cao Bang, a small town on the Vietnamese-Chinese border, by adopting a strategy of "besieging the enemy to annihilate its relief force": instead of attacking the town directly, they would surround it and sweep out the enemy's strongholds in the peripheral areas one by one, while attracting and destroying the enemy's reinforcements from Lang Son, and then seize Cao Bang. Chen believed that this strategy would guarantee the occupation of Cao Bang, "thus thoroughly changing the balance of power between the enemy and us in northeastern and northern Vietnam."<sup>41</sup> The CMC approved Chen's plan in a telegram on 26 July,



instructing Chen “not to begin the campaign by directly attacking Cao Bang, but by attacking some of the enemy’s small strongholds and then eliminating the enemy’s reinforcements.”<sup>42</sup> To guarantee that Vietnamese units would fully follow Chen’s strategy, Chinese military advisers, with Ho’s approval, were assigned to the various battalion, regiment, and division headquarters of Vietnamese troops.<sup>43</sup>

In order to strengthen the Viet Minh’s combat capacity in the Border campaign, the Chinese also provided assistance with military equipment and other war materials. As early as the end of March 1950, Luo Guibo asked the CCP Central Committee for military equipment, ammunition, and communication equipment for 16,000 soldiers, to be used in military operations aimed at Cao Bang and Lao Cai.<sup>44</sup> From April to September 1950 the Chinese delivered to the Viet Minh more than 14,000 guns, 1,700 machine guns, about 150 pieces of different types of cannons, 2,800 tons of grain, and large amounts of ammunition, medicine, uniforms, and communication equipment.<sup>45</sup> In the meantime, the Viet Minh sent its troops to China’s Yunnan province for training and reorganization by PLA officers.<sup>46</sup>

The Border campaign started on 16 September. After forty-eight hours of fierce fighting, Viet Minh troops seized Dong Khe, a strategically important spot on Route Colonial Four, which linked Cao Bang with Vietnam’s interior.<sup>47</sup> The French Command was surprised and dispatched a mobile army corps to Dong Khe while sending five battalions to attack Thai Nguyen, the location of the Viet Minh center. Chen judged that their real purpose was to rescue their isolated units in Cao Bang. So, instead of withdrawing troops from the Dong Khe–Cao Bang area to defend the Viet Minh center, he increased the pressure on Cao Bang. On 3 October, as he had predicted, French troops retreated from the Dong Khe–Cao Bang area and moved south, to fall into his trap in the nearby mountains. In Beijing, Mao Zedong paid close attention to the battles in the Vietnamese–Chinese border area. In response to Chen’s report about the situation there, Mao dispatched a lengthy telegram on 6 October to give Chen clear instructions on how the final stage of the campaign should be fought:

It is correct for you to plan to first concentrate your main forces to eliminate the enemy troops southwest of Dong Khe whom we have now surrounded, and then, according to the situation, surround and annihilate the enemy troops escaping south from Cao Bang. If the enemy troops southwest of Dong Khe can be annihilated in a few days, the enemies from Cao Bang can be held, and the enemy reinforcements in Lang Son and other places will

not dare to come out, or we can use part of our troops to stop the enemy's reinforcements, defeat the enemies both in Cao Bang and in Dong Khe, and thus win two victories. So, you have to annihilate the enemy troops southwest of Dong Khe swiftly, resolutely, and thoroughly; your determination should not waver even in the face of heavy casualties (and you must anticipate that some cadres will start to waver). Meanwhile, you have to hold the enemies escaping from Cao Bang and make due preparations for the enemy reinforcements from Lang Son and other places. If you can properly solve these three problems, victory will be yours.<sup>48</sup>

Chen shared Mao's instructions with Ho and other Vietnamese Communist leaders. They, in turn, ordered the Viet Minh troops to begin the final assault on 6 October. By 13 October, seven battalions of French troops, about 3,000 men, were defeated, and the French were forced to give up the blockade line along the Vietnamese-Chinese border, which they had held for years.<sup>49</sup> Chen Geng left Vietnam in early November 1950 to take new commanding responsibility in Korea.<sup>50</sup>

### **Setbacks in 1951**

The Viet Minh's victory in the Border campaign changed the balance of power on the Indochina battlefield. With the vast territory of the PRC backing them, Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communists were now in an unbeatable position. Encouraged by their new victory, Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of Viet Minh forces, and other Viet Minh military leaders, together with members of the CMAG, planned to lead the war to the Tonkin Delta area. They hoped that a series of victories against the weak links of the French defensive system on the Delta would create the conditions for a total Viet Minh victory in Indochina.<sup>51</sup> Beijing's leaders and the ICP Central Committee endorsed the plan.<sup>52</sup>

In the wake of the Border campaign, at almost the same time that the Viet Minh's new offensive was planned, major changes were being made to the French strategy in Indochina. General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny was appointed by the French government as high commissioner and commander in chief in Indochina. Immediately after his arrival in Saigon, he started a program to strengthen the French defensive system in the Delta area. By integrating into his defensive planning every means available, including the French air force, which was now using new American techniques, he ordered French soldiers to dig in to the last in defense of the Delta.<sup>53</sup> The Viet Minh's new offensive plan was now faced with a difficult French general.

From late December 1950 to June 1951, Viet Minh troops initiated three major offensive campaigns, respectively, in the Vinh Yen area, about twenty miles north of Hanoi (the Tran Huong Dao campaign), the Mao Khe area next to Hai Phong (the Hong Hoa Tham campaign), and the Ninh Binh area (the Quang Trung campaign). The Viet Minh high command used its best units, including the “iron division” (the 308th Division), in these operations, hoping that this “general counteroffensive” would bring the Vietnamese Communists closer to a final victory. In the face of firm French defense supported by superior artillery fire, however, Viet Minh forces suffered heavy casualties without making any significant strategic gains. General Giap had to give up plans for head-on attacks against fortified positions in the Red River delta area by mid-1951,<sup>54</sup> and the Viet Minh high command and the Chinese advisers working in Vietnam had to reconsider their whole strategy. Chinese advisers were now convinced that it was premature for Viet Minh forces to wage a “general counteroffensive” aimed at seizing the Delta area, and that they must instead shift the direction of their operations.<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, the French hoped to expand their victory. While continuing to consolidate their control over the Delta area, French troops began a counteroffensive against Hoa Binh, the key point in the Viet Minh’s north-south line of communication. If the French were allowed to control this area, they would, among other things, occupy a favorable position to establish a corridor from Hai Phong through Hanoi and Hoa Binh to Son La, thus totally cutting off the connection between Viet Minh forces in the north and the south.<sup>56</sup>

Facing this urgent situation, Giap asked advice from Luo Guibo and Deng Yifan (Wei Guoqing and Mei Jiasheng were then taking sick leave in China).<sup>57</sup> After asking for instructions of the CMC in Beijing, Deng suggested that the Viet Minh’s forces cope with the French attack with medium- or small-scale mobile wars. Luo further proposed that Viet Minh troops not only focus on defending the Hoa Binh area, which they could not afford to lose, but also dispatch some units into the rear of the French-occupied zones to conduct guerrilla operations aimed at harassing the enemy and restoring guerrilla bases.<sup>58</sup> The Vietnamese Communist leadership carefully studied these suggestions and decided in late November to start an all-out effort aimed at repulsing the French offensive. They would deploy four divisions to defend the Hoa Binh area and send the 316th and 320th Divisions into areas behind the enemy’s lines.<sup>59</sup> The Viet Minh’s counteroffensive began in early December 1951. After three months of struggle, General Giap and his troops successfully turned away the French offensive, maintained their position in Hoa Binh, and strengthened their overall strategic status.

## **The Northwest Campaign**

The Viet Minh's setbacks in 1951 convinced their Chinese military advisers of the necessity of leading the war into the enemy's rear by breaking up the weak link in the enemy's defensive system. Luo Guibo, who was then also in charge of the CMAG during General Wei Guoqing's sick leave,<sup>60</sup> recommended that the Viet Minh consider bringing the war to Vietnam's northwestern region adjacent to Laos, so that the overall military situation in Indochina could be turned to the Viet Minh's favor.<sup>61</sup>

Early in 1952, after several months investigating the situation on the battlefield, the CMAG sent two reports, "A Study of the Conditions between the Enemy and Us in Northern Vietnam and Our Tasks and Policy Lines in the Future" and "Tasks and Policy Lines for 1952," to the Vietnamese, proposing to start a new campaign—the Northwest campaign. Chinese advisers believed that this effort would further consolidate the Viet Minh's liberation zone in northwestern Vietnam and form the basis for a general strategic counteroffensive in the future.<sup>62</sup> On 16 February 1952, the CMAG proposed to the Viet Minh high command that for 1952 they focus on guerrilla tactics and small-scale mobile wars so that their main formations could go through political and military training in preparation for combat in the Northwest.<sup>63</sup> The same day, Luo Guibo stated in a report to the CMC that in the first half of 1952 Viet Minh troops would focus on reorganization and training; in the second half of 1952 they would try to eliminate enemies in Son La, Lai Chau, and Nghia Lo, all in northwestern Vietnam, and consolidate their control of these areas; and then in 1953, they would establish bases in northwestern Vietnam from which to initiate operations in upper Laos.<sup>64</sup> This plan was quickly approved by Chinese leaders in Beijing. Liu Shaoqi commented that "it is very important to liberate Laos."<sup>65</sup> The Vietnamese Communists also gave their approval. On 18 March, the Viet Minh high command decided to include the organization of the Northwest campaign as one of its three major tasks of 1952 (the other two being conducting political rectification of Viet Minh troops and leading guerrilla operations into the rear of the enemy). In April 1952, the VWP politburo formally decided to initiate the Northwest campaign, and Chinese military advisers were authorized by Ho himself to command it.<sup>66</sup>

On 14 April, Luo sent a telegram to Beijing, reporting on the CMAG's initial plan for the Northwest campaign. Offensive operations in the northwestern provinces would begin in mid-September. Viet Minh troops would first attack Nghia Lo, the northwestern province closest to the Viet Minh's Viet Bac bases, and then march toward Son La. After the liberation of most of the Northwest region in 1952, Viet Minh troops would attack Lai Chau in 1953. Beijing's

leaders approved Luo's plan in a telegram to him on 19 April. Anticipating fierce fighting in seizing Nghia Lo, they stressed the importance of making proper preparations before the start of the campaign.<sup>67</sup>

Luo and Mei Jiasheng, then deputy head of the CMAG, further analyzed the military situation in the Northwest and sent a telegram to Beijing on 11 July, suggesting that the Northwest campaign be conducted in two stages. In the first, the Viet Minh would use two divisions to seize Nghia Lo and at the same time annihilate the enemy's paratroopers, if they were used as reinforcements. In the second stage, three regiments would be dispatched to enter Son La, while the other three regiments, together with another two regiments in Phu Tho, would march toward Lai Chau. Viet Minh troops, Luo and Mei believed, would thus be able to occupy Vietnam's entire northwestern territory by the end of 1952. Responding to the requests of the Vietnamese, they also asked Beijing to send Chinese troops in Yunnan province to take part in the attack on Lai Chau.<sup>68</sup>

On 22 July, the CCP Central Committee replied that it was impossible for China to send troops directly into the fighting in Vietnam, and that this had long been an established principle. Chinese troops, however, could be deployed along the Chinese-Vietnamese border, in the Hekou and Jinping areas in Yunnan province. The telegram also instructed Chinese military advisers to adopt the strategies of "concentrating our own forces" and "the easiest first and the most difficult last" by seizing Nghia Lo province before considering occupying the entire Northwest. Beijing's leaders reminded the Chinese advisers that Viet Minh troops lacked the experience of offensive operations and asked the CMAG and the Viet Minh high command not to pursue a total victory in the Northwest by the end of 1952 but to prepare for a protracted war.<sup>69</sup> In early September, the VWP politburo decided to conduct the Northwest campaign following these suggestions.<sup>70</sup>

In late September, Ho Chi Minh secretly visited Beijing, where he and the CCP leaders reached a consensus on the overall strategy for the next stage: the Viet Minh's forces would first direct their main attention to the Northwest (including northwestern Vietnam and upper Laos), then march southward from upper Laos to push for the Red River delta. Meanwhile, in terms of the concrete plan of the campaign, following the suggestions of CCP leaders, and Mao Zedong's and Peng Dehuai's in particular, Chinese and Vietnamese military planners decided to concentrate on Nghia Lo. After seizing Nghia Lo, Viet Minh troops would not attack Son La immediately but focus on establishing revolutionary bases around Nghia Lo and constructing a highway linking Nghia Lo with Yen Bay. General Giap may have had different opinions about

the narrowing down of the campaign goals, but the Chinese emphasized the importance of winning a steady victory, and Giap finally yielded.<sup>71</sup> Wei Guoqing, after almost a year's sick leave, returned to his post in mid-October to participate in commanding the campaign.

The Northwest campaign began on 14 October 1952. The Viet Minh high command concentrated eight regiments in attacking French strongholds in Nghia Lo. In ten days, they annihilated most enemy bases and, after a short period of readjustment, continued to attack the French in Son La and Lai Chau. By early December 1952, Nghia Lo, Son La, southern Lai Chau, and western Yen Bay, all in northwestern Vietnam, had been liberated by Vietnamese Communists.<sup>72</sup>

After the victory, the VWP Central Committee, having consulted with the CCP leadership several times, decided in February 1953 to move farther to the west by organizing the Xam Neua campaign in upper Laos. The purpose would be to connect the "liberation zone" in northwestern Vietnam with Communist occupied areas in northern Laos, thus placing greater pressure on the French.<sup>73</sup> On 23 March 1953, Wei Guoqing and Mei Jiasheng led some members of the CMAG to Laos to organize the campaign, which began in late March and lasted until early May. According to Chinese statistics, the Viet Minh's troops annihilated three battalions and eleven companies, seizing control of the entire Xam Neua province and part of Xiang Khoary and Phong Sali provinces.<sup>74</sup> The Viet Minh's bases in northwestern Vietnam were now linked with these areas in upper Laos, further enhancing the Communists' military position.

### **The Path toward Dien Bien Phu**

By the summer of 1953, the confrontation between Vietnamese Communists and the French on the Indochina battlefield had changed dramatically: the Viet Minh's gains in the past two years put the Vietnamese Communists in a position to pursue other victories aimed at establishing an overriding superiority in the war. Meanwhile, the end of the Korean conflict in July 1953 meant that the Chinese were able to give more attention to their southern neighbor. It was within this framework that the VWP leadership and the CMAG began to formulate military plans for the fall and winter of 1953 and spring of 1954.

The French were also making changes. In the face of a series of setbacks under the pressure of Viet Minh offensives in northwestern Vietnam and upper Laos, in May 1953 General Henri Navarre replaced General Raoul Salan (who had succeeded General Lattre de Tassigny in 1952) as the commander of French forces in Indochina. Supported by the United States, Navarre adopted a new three-year strategy aimed at winning back the advantage on the battle-

field. He divided Indochina into northern and southern theaters along the 18th parallel and planned to eliminate Viet Minh guerrillas in southern and south central Vietnam by spring 1954, and then, by spring 1955, to concentrate the main formation of French forces to fight a decisive battle with the Communist forces in the Red River delta.<sup>75</sup> To carry out this plan, the French began to send additional troops to Indochina. The United States, released from its heavy burden in Korea and worried about the serious consequences of a French loss in Indochina, dramatically increased its military and financial support to France (by an additional \$400 million) in order to check “Communist expansion” in another key part of East Asia.<sup>76</sup>

Facing this potentially disastrous scenario, the vwp Central Committee asked the ccp Central Committee on 13 August 1953 “to help offer opinions” concerning “the understanding of the current situation as well as strategies for operations in the future.”<sup>77</sup> The vwp politburo, following Giap’s initiative, decided on 22 August to transfer the focus of Viet Minh’s future operations from the mountainous northwestern area to the Red River delta. The former area would remain on the Viet Minh’s operation agenda but no longer as a priority. Luo Guibo attended the meeting of the vwp politburo and reported this strategic change to Beijing.<sup>78</sup>

The ccp leadership immediately discussed Luo’s report and sent two urgent messages to Luo and the vwp Central Committee on 27 and 29 August, opposing the change of strategic emphasis and insisting that the original plan of focusing on the northwestern battlefield be continued. In the 29 August telegram the ccp Central Committee stated:

We should first annihilate enemies in the Lai Chau area, liberating northern and central Laos, and then extend the battlefield gradually toward southern Laos and Cambodia, thus putting pressure on Saigon. By adopting this strategy, we will be able to limit the human and financial resources of the enemy and separate the enemy’s troops, leaving the enemy in a disadvantageous position. . . . The realization of this strategic plan will surely contribute to the final defeat of the colonial rule of French imperialists in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Of course, we need to overcome a variety of difficulties and prepare for a prolonged war.<sup>79</sup>

The vwp politburo again met in September to discuss the message from Beijing. Ho favored the opinions provided by the Chinese, and the vwp politburo, after much debate, decided that the strategic emphasis of the Viet Minh’s operations would be kept in the northwestern area.<sup>80</sup> On 10 October, the ccp Central Committee informed the vwp Central Committee that Wei Guoqing

had been appointed as the general military adviser and Luo Guibo the general political adviser, representing the CCP in all military and political decision making in the future.<sup>81</sup> Wei came back to Beijing to report personally on the situation in Indochina to the CCP Central Committee. Mao received him and emphasized again that the Viet Minh should continue to treat the northwestern area as the emphasis of its military operations.<sup>82</sup>

In late October and early November 1953, Wei and the Viet Minh high command worked out the operation plans for winter 1953 and spring 1954. According to this plan, Vietnamese Communist forces would continue to focus on operations in Lai Chau, and would try to seize the entire Lai Chau province in January 1954; then, they would attack various French strongholds in upper and central Laos. At the same time, Viet Minh troops would also march from the mountainous areas in central Vietnam toward Laos, making lower Laos the target of attacks from two directions. The VWP politburo approved this plan on 3 November 1953.<sup>83</sup> Beginning in the middle of that month, five regiments of Viet Minh forces headed toward Lai Chau.

When General Navarre received intelligence reports about the Viet Minh troops' new movement, he, following the spirit of his original plan, decided on 20 November to drop six parachute battalions to Dien Bien Phu, a strategically important village located in Vietnam's northwestern mountains. If the French troops controlled Dien Bien Phu, Navarre believed, they would be able to prevent the Communists from occupying the entire northwestern region and attacking upper Laos. Dien Bien Phu would also form a "launching point" for offensives to destroy Viet Minh forces. The French quickly reinforced their troops at Dien Bien Phu, constructed airstrips, and started building defensive works, making this little-known village a real fortification. Dien Bien Phu was quickly changed into the focus of the whole Indochina battlefield.

On his way from Viet Bac to the northwestern area, Wei Guoqing learned that French paratroopers had landed at Dien Bien Phu. After consulting other Chinese advisers, Wei suggested to Beijing's leaders that the Viet Minh start a major campaign to surround French forces in Dien Bien Phu while still sticking to the original plan of attacking Lai Chau.<sup>84</sup> Beijing approved Wei's plan and instructed him to convey these ideas to the Viet Minh high command. Beijing's leaders particularly stressed that in addition to its military and political importance, a victory by the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu could have enormous impact on the development of the international situation.<sup>85</sup>

Beijing's emphasis on the international significance of the Dien Bien Phu campaign should be understood in the context of the Communists' new general strategy that took shape in late 1953 and early 1954. With the end of



the Korean War, the Communist world launched a “peace offensive” in late 1953. On 26 September, the Soviet Union proposed in a note to the French, British, and American governments that a five-power conference (including China) should be convened to discuss ways of easing international tensions. On 8 October, Zhou Enlai issued a statement supporting the Soviet proposal and followed with another two months later, on 9 January 1954, asserting that international tensions in Asia needed to be resolved through direct consultations by the big powers.<sup>86</sup> The Berlin four-power conference at the end of January finally endorsed the Soviet-initiated plan to convene an international conference at Geneva to discuss the restoration of peace in Korea and Indochina.<sup>87</sup> A victory at Dien Bien Phu would greatly enhance the Communist position at the forthcoming conference.

The Viet Minh high command responded favorably to the CMAG’s Dien Bien Phu campaign proposal. The VWP Central Committee decided on 6 December to start the campaign, and a front-line headquarters, with General Giap as the commander in chief and Wei Guoqing as the top Chinese military adviser, was established.<sup>88</sup> The same day, Ho Chi Minh called on the whole Vietnamese party, people, and army “to use every effort to ensure the success of the campaign.”<sup>89</sup> Thousands of peasants had been mobilized to build roads and carry artillery pieces and ammunition over impassable mountains. From mid-December Viet Minh troops gradually positioned themselves in the areas around Dien Bien Phu to encircle the French forces. In response, General Navarre sent more troops. By the end of 1953, sixteen battalions of French troops were deployed at Dien Bien Phu.

The Chinese advisers nevertheless firmly believed that the Viet Minh’s campaign efforts in Dien Bien Phu should continue, and they received full support from top leaders in Beijing. On 24 January 1954, the CMC gave Wei Guoqing instructions on the strategy for the Dien Bien Phu siege: “While attacking Dien Bien Phu, you should avoid making assaults of equal strength from all directions; rather, you need to adopt the strategy of separating and encircling the enemy, and annihilate them bit by bit.”<sup>90</sup> Through a series of discussions with Chinese advisers, the Viet Minh high command decided to accept and adopt the strategies as proposed by the CCP leaders in Beijing.

In order to enhance the Viet Minh’s offensive strength, Beijing’s leaders ordered the acceleration of China’s military delivery and other support to the Viet Minh. To cut off Dien Bien Phu from French airborne support, China sent back to Vietnam four Vietnamese antiaircraft battalions that had been receiving training in China.<sup>91</sup> During the months of the Dien Bien Phu campaign, more than 200 trucks, over 10,000 barrels of oil, over 100 cannons,

3,000 pieces of various types of guns, around 2,400,000 gun bullets, over 60,000 artillery shells, and about 1,700 tons of grain were rushed to Viet Minh troops.<sup>92</sup>

By March 1954, Vietnamese Communist troops had surrounded Dien Bien Phu for three months. The Geneva Conference on Korea and Indochina was scheduled for April, so Zhou Enlai instructed Chinese advisers in Vietnam: “In order to achieve a victory in the diplomatic field, you may need to consider whether you will be able to follow our experiences on the eve of the Korean armistice and win several battles in Vietnam.”<sup>93</sup> Chinese military advisers consulted with the Viet Minh high command, which decided to start the offensive in Dien Bien Phu in mid-March.

On 13 March Communist forces began to attack French positions in the northern part of Dien Bien Phu. By 17 March, they had overrun three strongholds there and temporarily knocked out two French airstrips. The French, suddenly realizing that “the stronghold of Dien Bien Phu was a deadly trap,”<sup>94</sup> rushed another three battalions into the area. In the meantime, France’s chief of staff, General Paul Ely, who was visiting Washington, asked for a more active American involvement in Indochina.<sup>95</sup> But the Communist offensive went ahead. On 30 March Communist forces attacked the central part of Dien Bien Phu, where the French frontal command was located. When their advance was slowed by strong French defensive barriers, Beijing’s leaders, after receiving reports from Chinese advisers in Vietnam, summoned several engineering experts from the Chinese volunteers in Korea to teach the Vietnamese how to dig trenches and underground tunnels.<sup>96</sup>

Mao Zedong was eager for the Viet Minh to win an overriding victory in Dien Bien Phu, and thus to lay the foundation for a future victory in northern Vietnam. In a letter dated 3 April 1954 to Peng Dehuai, vice chairman of the CMC in charge of its daily affairs and former commander in chief of Chinese forces in Korea, Mao stated that the Vietnamese needed to form four additional artillery regiments and two new engineering regiments, which should complete training in six months. If the Chinese did not have enough cannons to equip these new Vietnamese units, Mao suggested, they could transfer the equipment from their own units to the Vietnamese. Also, Mao continued, the Chinese should supply the Vietnamese with instructors and advisers selected from among the Chinese troops who had fought in Korea, including some division and army-level officers. The best training site for these units would be in Vietnam, but somewhere in the Guangxi province would also be acceptable. Six months was a short time to execute this plan, Mao acknowledged, so he asked Peng, along with the General Staff and Artillery Command of the PLA,

to contact the Viet Minh immediately to seek an agreement. Mao believed that with these new artillery units, together with another artillery division already under the command of the Viet Minh, and by amassing five infantry divisions, the Vietnamese would be able to launch direct attacks against Hanoi and Hai Phong. Mao asked Peng immediately to start preparing a sufficient supply of artillery shells and engineering equipment for these units while offering more antiaircraft guns to the Viet Minh. Concerning the current fighting in Dien Bien Phu, Mao stressed: "Dien Bien Phu should be conquered resolutely, and, if things go smoothly and success is certain, the final attack [against Dien Bien Phu] should begin ahead of schedule." In addition, Mao mentioned that the Viet Minh, after their victory in Dien Bien Phu, should quickly mobilize 5,000–8,000 new soldiers to supplement their forces and prepare to attack Hanoi no later than early 1955.<sup>97</sup>

When the Viet Minh's assaults at Dien Bien Phu encountered tough French resistance, the CMC telegraphed Wei Guoqing twice on 9 April, promising him that a sufficient supply of artillery ammunition would be guaranteed to the Vietnamese so that they could use as many artillery shells as they wanted. The CMC also instructed Wei to adopt the following strategies in attacking Dien Bien Phu: cut off the enemy's front by attacking in the middle; destroy the enemy's underground defenses one section at a time by using concentrated artillery fire; consolidate your position immediately after seizing even a small portion of ground, thus continuously tightening the encirclement of the enemy; use snipers widely to restrict the enemy's activities; and use political propaganda against the enemy.<sup>98</sup> In addition, on 17 April, Mao Zedong instructed PLA deputy chiefs of staff Huang Kecheng and Su Yu, "Considering the possibility that a cease-fire might be reached in Vietnam, the training of the new [Vietnamese] artillery divisions should not be conducted in China, and artillery pieces should be transported to Vietnam at the earliest possible time."<sup>99</sup>

By late April, under the fierce offensive of the Communist forces, French troops in Dien Bien Phu were confined to a small area of less than two square kilometers, with half their airstrips occupied by the Communists. At this stage the United States threatened to interfere. In a speech to the Overseas Press Club of America on 29 March, John Foster Dulles, the American secretary of state, issued a powerful warning that the United States would tolerate no Communist gain in Indochina and called for a "united action" on the part of Western countries to stop it.<sup>100</sup> One week later, President Dwight Eisenhower invoked the "falling domino" theory to express the necessity of a joint military operation against Communist expansion in Indochina.<sup>101</sup> Policymakers in

Washington even considered the possibility of using tactical nuclear weapons to stop a Communist victory in Dien Bien Phu.<sup>102</sup>

Without the support of either U.S. Congress or the Allies, the Americans probably were not ready to intervene in the Indochina War in 1954. The threat of direct intervention was primarily used for diplomatic reasons during the Dien Bien Phu crisis and at the Geneva Conference.<sup>103</sup> As will be seen, this tactic eventually worked, though in a complicated way. But it did not save the remaining French resistance in Dien Bien Phu. Chinese advisers in Vietnam insisted on continuing the campaign efforts. Wei Guiqing believed that the American warning was just an empty threat to make the Vietnamese Communists give up the current offensive. Since the Vietnamese had achieved a superior position in the battlefield, Wei stressed, they should not yield to the American threat and lose this opportunity.<sup>104</sup> The vwp politburo, after carefully weighing the arguments, decided on 19 April to commence the final offensive in early May.<sup>105</sup> To facilitate the move, the Chinese transferred a large amount of military equipment and ammunition to the Vietnamese. Two Chinese-trained Vietnamese battalions, equipped with 75 mm recoilless guns and six-barrel rocket launchers, arrived at Dien Bien Phu on the eve of the final assault. Beijing's leaders emphasized to the Chinese advisers in Vietnam: "To eliminate the enemy totally and to win the final victory in the campaign, you should use overwhelming artillery fire. Do not save artillery shells. We will supply and deliver sufficient shells to you."<sup>106</sup>

To guarantee the final victory in the campaign, top ccp leaders carefully considered every possible contingency that might endanger a total Viet Minh victory. On 28 April, Mao Zedong instructed Peng Dehuai and Huang Kecheng to guard against the possibility of a French paratrooper landing at the rear of the Vietnamese, which would cut off their supply line. Mao emphasized that this should be taken as the "most possible danger," which, if it occurred, could force the Vietnamese to give up the campaign. Mao instructed Peng and Huang to "ask the Vietnamese to deploy immediately more troops in proper areas" so that the French parachute landing could be prevented.<sup>107</sup> On 30 April, the cmc, following Mao's instruction, directed Wei Guoqing to consult with the Vietnamese to take preemptive measures against such an attack. On 3 May, General Su Yu, then the Chinese chief of staff, again contacted General Wei, reiterating the importance of preventing a French airborne landing.<sup>108</sup>

The final offensive of the Communist forces at Dien Bien Phu began on the evening of 5 May. The newly arrived Chinese rocket launchers played an important role by destroying the French defenses in minutes. By the afternoon of 7 May, French troops had neither the ability nor the will to fight and

announced surrender. The Dien Bien Phu campaign ended with a glorious victory for the Vietnamese Communists.

### **The Geneva Conference of 1954**

As has happened on many other occasions in history, the First Indochina War was fought on the battlefield but concluded at the negotiation table. On 8 May, the day after the end of the Dien Bien Phu campaign, the Geneva Conference, which had started on 26 April, began its discussion of the Indochina problem. It was at this moment of victory, ironically, that sharp divergences emerged between the Vietnamese and Chinese Communists. Evidence shows that the CCP leaders' view of Indochina was strongly influenced by Washington's warning of direct American intervention there. This development, in turn, caused the Chinese Communists and their Vietnamese comrades to disagree.

In retrospect, the close relationship between the Chinese Communists and their Vietnamese comrades offers no support to the theory of a monolithic international Communist movement. Even at the height of cooperation between the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists, there were signs of contradictions and, in some cases, conflicts between them. Chinese advisers complained that the quality of Viet Minh troops was too poor to realize some of their strategic designs. General Chen Geng mentioned in his diary that General Giap and some other Vietnamese Communists lacked "Bolshevik-style self-criticism" and were unhappy with the Chinese criticism of their "shortcomings." On one occasion, Chen even described Giap as "slippery and not very upright and honest" in his relationship with his Chinese comrades.<sup>109</sup> The Vietnamese, on the other hand, were not satisfied with some of the Chinese advisers' suggestions, especially those concerning land reforms and political indoctrination following China's experiences. The Vietnamese discontent was shown most explicitly in the 1979 official review of Vietnamese-Chinese relations, where, in recalling history, the Chinese were called "traitors" even during the First Indochina War.<sup>110</sup> Seeing signs of Chinese-Vietnamese friction, the CCP leadership stressed in several telegrams to Chinese advisers in Vietnam that they should avoid "imposing their own opinions on Vietnamese comrades."<sup>111</sup> Indeed, the Chinese did not feel comfortable dealing with the Vietnamese, a people who had struggled against Chinese control for centuries and who had so vigorous a nationalist tendency.

With victory in sight, the disagreements between the Chinese and the Vietnamese surfaced, focusing on the final settlement of the Indochina problem. While the Vietnamese hoped for a solution that would leave clear Communist

## *Image Not Available*

*The Chinese delegation attending the Geneva conference of 1954. At the center table (from right to left) are Zhang Wentian, Wang Bingnan, Shi Zhe, and Zhou Enlai. Photo courtesy Shi Zhe personal collection.*

domination not only in Vietnam but also in Laos and Cambodia, the Chinese, supported by the Soviet Union, were eager to reach a compromise, if necessary, by temporarily dividing Vietnam into two zones.<sup>112</sup>

Beijing's attitude toward the Geneva Conference reflected several of its leaders' basic considerations at the moment. First of all, with the end of the Korean War, Beijing's leaders sensed the need to devote more of the nation's resources to domestic issues. In 1953 and 1954, they were contemplating the introduction of the first five-year plan, as well as the liberation of Nationalist-controlled Taiwan, either in peaceful ways, or if necessary, by military means. After five years of sharp confrontation with the United States and the West, many leaders in Beijing perceived that China needed a stable outside environment. They thus did not want to see the continued escalation of the conflict in Indochina. Second, with insights gained from their Korean War experience, Beijing's leaders saw in the wake of the Dien Bien Phu siege the possibility of direct American military intervention. They approached this problem with a "worst-case assumption": they would try everything possible, including pursuing a compromise at Geneva, to prevent American intervention; only if the Americans directly entered the war in Indochina would they consider sending troops to stop American forces from approaching China's borders while

maintaining the momentum of the Vietnamese revolution.<sup>113</sup> Third, Beijing's leaders also believed that a reconciliatory Chinese approach at the Geneva Conference would help strengthen Beijing's new claim to peaceful coexistence as the foundation of the PRC's international policy and create opportunities for "breaking up the American blockade and embargo" against the PRC.<sup>114</sup>

Beijing's considerations were consistent with a central concern of the leaders in Moscow, who, after Stalin's death, also needed to focus on domestic issues and avoid a confrontation with the West in Asia. In the first three weeks of April, Zhou Enlai visited the Soviet Union two times to discuss the Chinese-Soviet strategy at the Geneva Conference. According to the recollections of Shi Zhe, who was Zhou's interpreter during these visits, the Chinese and the Soviets agreed to cooperate with each other at the forthcoming conference. Zhou's views seemed to have been greatly influenced by those of Vyacheslav Molotov. In his meeting with Zhou, Molotov stressed that it was possible for the Geneva Conference to solve one or two problems, but the imperialist countries would certainly look out for their own interests. So the Communist camp should adopt a realistic strategy that would be compatible with this situation. Since this was the first time the Chinese had attended an important international conference, Zhou made it clear that they would try their best to cooperate with the Soviets.<sup>115</sup> These discussions resulted in a consensus: although the imperialist countries, and the United States in particular, would try to sabotage the conference, if the Communist side adopted a realistic strategy, then it was still possible that a peaceful solution of the Indochina problem could be worked out.<sup>116</sup>

The Vietnamese Communist leaders, according to Chinese sources, originally posed no apparent opposition to Beijing's view. From late March to April 1954, Ho Chi Minh, the DRV's president, and Pham Van Dong, the DRV's premier and foreign minister, led a Vietnamese delegation to visit Beijing, which then, accompanied by Zhou Enlai, visited Moscow. In discussions with the delegation, Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, and Zhou Enlai spoke about in particular China's experience gained from the negotiations to end the Korean War, emphasizing that it was necessary to maintain "realistic expectations" for the Geneva Conference. According to Chinese sources, the Vietnamese leaders agreed.<sup>117</sup>

Nevertheless, the victory at Dien Bien Phu made the Vietnamese believe that they were in a position to squeeze more concessions from their adversaries at the conference table. Pham Van Dong, head of the DRV delegation, announced at the conference that the Indochina problem would be settled if, first, the Viet Minh were to establish virtual control of most parts of Vietnam

(through an on-the-spot truce, followed by a national plebiscite, which they knew they would win), and, second, if it were to pursue positions for Communist forces in Laos and Cambodia (by treating the settlement of the Laos and Cambodian problems as part of a general settlement of the Indochina problem).<sup>118</sup>

Behind the scenes of the Geneva Conference, Dong's unyielding approach caused subtle tensions in the relations between the Chinese and the Soviets, on the one side, and the Vietnamese Communists, on the other. In several discussions among the Chinese, Soviet, and Vietnamese delegations, Zhou Enlai pointed out that Dong's attitude reflected how the inexperienced Vietnamese had been out of touch with reality. In justifying his willingness to accept the solution of temporarily dividing Vietnam into two areas, with the north belonging to the Communists and the south to the French and pro-French Vietnamese, and to wait for a national plebiscite, Zhou emphasized that this would allow the Viet Minh to control the entire north and gain back the south after the vote. On the Laos and Cambodia problems, Zhou favored a separate solution, which, he believed, would simplify the whole issue and make the total settlement of the Indochina problem possible.<sup>119</sup> Zhou's stand was fully backed by Mao and the other CCP leaders in Beijing. In order not to jeopardize the prospect of reaching an agreement at Geneva, on 20 June Mao instructed the CMAG not to expand military operations in Vietnam throughout July.<sup>120</sup> However, Dong was not ready to accept the Chinese arguments.

American policymakers believed the United States had important strategic interests in Southeast Asia and did not want to see the Geneva Conference reach a compromise. Dulles, the head of the American delegation, followed a line of blocking any Communist initiative at the conference. He truly believed that an inconclusive result was better than any agreement that would provide the Communists with even minimal gains.<sup>121</sup> Dulles's uncompromising stand was matched by Dong's, leading the conference to a deadlock by mid-June.

At this moment a major political change occurred in France: the French parliament, reflecting the public's impatience with the immobility at Geneva, ousted Prime Minister Joseph Laniel and replaced him with Pierre Mendès-France, who, as a longtime leading critic of the war in Indochina, promised that if he did not lead the negotiation to a successful conclusion by 20 July, he would resign. Zhou seized the opportunity to push negotiations at Geneva forward. On 15 June, the Chinese, Soviet, and Vietnamese delegations held a crucial meeting. Zhou pointed out that the key to the deadlock of the conference lay in the Vietnamese refusal to admit the existence of their forces in Laos and Cambodia. He warned that this attitude would render the negotiations



on Indochina fruitless, and that the Vietnamese Communists would also lose an opportunity to achieve a peaceful solution of the Vietnam problem. Zhou proposed that the Communist camp adopt a new line in favor of withdrawal of all foreign forces from Laos and Cambodia, including those of the Viet Minh. The Soviets strongly supported Zhou's proposal, and the Vietnamese, under heavy pressure from the Chinese and the Soviets, finally yielded.<sup>122</sup> On 16 and 17 June, Zhou communicated the change of Communist attitude toward Laos and Cambodia to the French and the British.<sup>123</sup> In late June, in order to prepare for further discussions on the Indochina problem, the foreign ministers agreed to adjourn for three weeks.

From 3 to 5 July in Liuzhou, a city located in Guangxi province close to the Chinese-Vietnamese border, Ho Chi Minh, accompanied by Vo Nguyen Giap and Hoang Van Hoan, visited China and met Zhou Enlai to coordinate their strategies.<sup>124</sup> Zhou particularly emphasized the danger involved in a possible direct American intervention in Indochina, arguing that it would greatly complicate the situation there and undermine the Viet Minh's achievements. He thus convinced Ho that it was in the interests of the Vietnamese Communists to reach an agreement with the French at Geneva. The two sides reached a consensus on strategies for the next phase of the conference: on the Vietnam problem, they would favor dividing the country temporarily along the 16th parallel, but since Route Colonial Nine, the only line of transport linking Laos to the seaport, was located north of the 16th parallel, they would be willing to accept some slight adjustment of this resolution; on the Laos problem, they would try to establish Xam Neua and Phong Sali, two provinces adjacent to China, as the concentration zone for pro-Communist Laos forces; on the Cambodia problem, they would allow a political settlement that would probably lead to the establishment of a non-Communist government there.<sup>125</sup>

When Ho returned to Vietnam, the vwp Central Committee issued an instruction on 5 July (known as the "5 July Document") that reflected the agreements Ho had reached with Zhou at Liuzhou.<sup>126</sup> In mid-July, the vwp Central Committee held its sixth meeting. Ho endorsed the new strategy of solving the Indochina problem through a cease-fire based on temporarily dividing Vietnam into two areas, which would supposedly lead to the unification of the whole country after the withdrawal of French forces and through a nationwide plebiscite. It is notable that Ho criticized the "leftist tendency" among party members who ignored the danger of American intervention and paid no attention to the importance of struggles at international conferences.<sup>127</sup> Ho's comments, and especially his stress on the danger of American intervention, clearly reflected Zhou's influence.

In Beijing, the CCP politburo held an enlarged meeting on 7 July to hear Zhou Enlai's report on the Geneva Conference and the Liuzhou meeting. Zhou reported that the Chinese delegation had adopted a policy line of uniting with France, Britain, southeast Asian countries, and the three Indochina countries—that is, uniting with all international forces that could be united, in order to isolate the United States and to contain and break up the U.S. imperialist plan of expanding America's hegemony in the world. The central part of this policy line, emphasized Zhou, lay in achieving a peaceful settlement of the Indochina problem. Zhou believed that, judging from the progress that had been made at the Geneva Conference thus far, the settlement could be reached. Mao praised and approved Zhou's report.<sup>128</sup>

The foreign ministers' meeting at Geneva resumed on 12 July. Zhou found that Pham Van Dong was still reluctant to accept the new negotiation line. In an overnight meeting with Dong to try to persuade him of the necessity of reaching a compromise, Zhou used America's intervention in the Korean War as an example to emphasize the tremendous danger involved in direct American military intervention in Indochina. Zhou promised, "[W]ith the final withdrawal of the French, all of Vietnam will be yours." Dong finally yielded—probably to Zhou's logic, if not to Zhou's pressure.<sup>129</sup>

Zhou dominated the final stage of the Geneva Conference. Mendès-France insisted that the 17th parallel be the final line of his concession, and that if it was not acceptable, he would have to resign. Zhou made the decision to change the Communist demand from the 16th parallel to the 17th to meet the French prime minister's stand, and he persuaded the Soviets and the Vietnamese in particular to accept this change.<sup>130</sup> The Geneva Conference reached a settlement on the Indochina problem in the early morning of 21 July, before Mendès-France's deadline officially expired.<sup>131</sup>

The real winner at the conference was Zhou. He left Geneva with nearly everything he could have anticipated. The creation of a Communist-ruled North Vietnam would serve as a buffer zone between Communist China and the capitalist world in Southeast Asia (and in this respect, the difference between the 16th and the 17th parallels did not matter to China). The opening of new dialogue between China and Western powers such as France and Great Britain would help break the PRC's isolated status in the world; and, much more important, the crucial role China played at the conference implied that for the first time in modern history (since the 1839–42 Opium War) China had been accepted by the international society—friends and foes alike—as a real world power.

The Geneva agreement of 1954 ended the First Indochina War, but the con-

frontation in this region was far from over. Only two years later, when the United States and the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in Saigon broke the agreement about the national plebiscite in Vietnam, the road to the Second Indochina War was paved; the war would last until the mid-1970s. More surprisingly—and ironically—Communist China and a unified Communist Vietnam would enter the Third Indochina War in 1979 as adversaries. The origin of the confrontation between them, however, can be traced back to their cooperation during the years of the First Indochina War.