

## Background Briefing—France

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The political and economic survival of France are at risk because of the situation in Indochina. The economic costs of the war, which has been going on for eight years, have been draining the French treasury and preventing our full economic recovery from the ravages of the war against Germany. Nearly two trillion francs have been spent on this war. This is more than twice the amount of total aid received from the U.S. Marshall Plan. Our officer corps has been decimated, with more than 8,200 killed, and our military colleges cannot graduate enough officers to replace those killed and disabled. We are unable to fulfill our commitments to the defense of Europe because of the burdens of this war. Our political life has been disrupted and governments have fallen because of public discontent. Pierre Mendes-France, our new premier, has pledged to bring the war to a close within thirty days or he will resign. Only the sending of French draftees to Indochina can guarantee the security of our forces already there, and we know that the French people will not tolerate this. While the dangers of allowing this strategic area to fall under communist control are very great, and the loss of this valuable part of the French empire cannot help but inflict deep and lasting wounds, we can no longer continue the struggle. Our nation's future is at stake!

The century-long role of France in Indochina should never be a source of shame for our country. On the contrary, we have brought the blessings of modern administration, medicine, economic development, and, of course, French culture and values. All Vietnamese, not just those who have been enlightened by French education, have benefited from our guidance. Long before the Americans recognized the dangers of communist aggression in Asia, we were fighting to halt the encroachment of communism into Southeast Asia. Until 1950, we fought this battle alone, suffering the unjustified criticisms of our allies. Although the United States since June 1950 has contributed part of the costs of the war, the blood shed in Indochina has been French, not

American. Ambiguous, last-minute offers from the United States to send ships, warplanes, and perhaps even troops have come too late. Much earlier American attitudes fatally undermined French rule in Indochina, and we cannot but suspect that the United States intends to take our place in this resource-rich area of the world. The tragic outcome of this war cannot, however, dim the glory achieved by the French soldiers, administrators, and educators who have contributed so much to Indochina during the century of enlightened French guardianship.

Our objectives are to end the financial and human costs of the war, to limit the gains of the communists, and to retain as much French influence in the area as possible. We fear that if the communists at this conference achieve the total victory they have been unable to gain on the battlefield, then all of Southeast Asia will be lost to communism. The smaller states will be unable to resist the pressure from their communist neighbors. French economic and political interests can be protected by limiting the area ceded to communist control and by strengthening those areas that can be denied to the communists. The conference in Geneva should limit itself to the resolution of the military situation and defer to the future the resolution of the more difficult political issues.

The aggressive appetites of the Vietminh and the Chinese communists who have supported them will not be satisfied for long with a partial victory. Now that the eyes of the British and Americans have been opened to this threat, we hope that collective actions can be taken to check the spread of communist influence. In particular, it is necessary that the United States, which has made no secret of its reluctance to attend this conference and participate in its deliberations, commit itself to guaranteeing the settlement which is achieved here. Only the Americans have the resources to stabilize the situation.

An immediate cease-fire and regrouping of the respective forces is necessary, followed by

the exchange of prisoners of war. A temporary military division of Vietnam along the 18th parallel could be made. We wish, in addition, to preserve an enclave in the Red River delta, near Hanoi. Vietnamese who wish to relocate south and thus avoid being subjected

to communist control should have that right. Elections to settle the political future of all of Vietnam should be held no sooner than eighteen months after the cease-fire to allow the ravages of war to heal.

## From the Historical Record

*Article by Jacques Soustelle, a leading spokesman for the French Gaullist party, October 1950*

“The United States has been fighting in Korea since June 26, 1950, and France has been fighting in Indochina since December 19, 1946. The two conflicts differ from each other in many ways. However, each clearly has a place in the same strategic and political complex. They share a common factor. Each results from the expansion of Soviet power toward the sea, pushing its satellites ahead, and exploiting against the West the nationalism, even xenophobia of the Asiatic masses.... When the Japanese themselves were forced to acknowledge their defeat, there were no more French cadres, no organized French force, either in Asia (near Indochina) or in the interior of Indochina itself. This combination of circumstances accounts for the importance suddenly assumed by the Viet Minh.... The Viet Minh also received arms, and in large quantities, from the Japanese when the latter realized that they had lost.... The Viet Minh made its appearance, proclaimed the ‘Democratic Republic of Viet Nam’ and set about entrenching itself and digging in at Tonkin before the French could return.... Too often there is a tendency to believe that France had done little or nothing for Indochina and the Indochinese. In fact, the economic development of Indochina had made great progress since the beginning of this century.... It cannot fairly be denied that this progress has benefited the many, and not only an oligarchy of French origin.... France did not neglect her duties towards the Indochinese in the cultural field.... And it is to be remarked that these French educational activities gave large scope to primarily Indochinese subjects.... France did all that was in her power for the people of Indochina...except to open

to them the road to self government...[because] the French carried their respect for the historical and local structure to excess.... I believe that no one, even the Indochinese themselves, could have done for Indochina what France has done. But a tragic inadequacy in the growth of the political structure of the country created discontent within the new native elite. This Communism has been able to exploit.... The Viet Minh is the pawn which the Kremlin [Soviet leaders] is moving up on the Indochinese chessboard.... Ho Chi Minh [has] acted as an agent of a global policy, the double purpose of which was and remains, first, to weaken France in Europe by forcing her to deflect a large part of her forces and resources to the Asian theatre; and second, to open a first breach in the Pacific front.... The war in Vietnam has cost France considerable losses in manpower and an enormous financial burden.... This unsettles French public opinion and seriously undermines the country’s strength and influence in Europe.... If the front held by France in Indochina were destroyed, the position of opponents of Communism in Malaya [Malaysia] and the Philippines would quickly become untenable.... It would be an Asiatic Munich. The conflict in Indochina is only a local manifestation of the resistance of peoples on the periphery of Asia to the Soviet expansion from the heart of the continent.”

*Remarks made by French President Vincent Auriol, May 6 and October 25, 1952*

“We are the supporting pillar of the defense of the West in Southeast Asia; if this pillar crumbles, Singapore, Malaysia and India will soon fall prey to Mao Tse-tung [Mao Zedong].... The defense of freedom in Indochina has practically cost us twice what we received

under that [Marshall] plan and in the form of military aid, 1,600 billion francs as compared to 800 billion.... And for what did our officers, our non-commissioned officers and our soldiers sacrifice themselves? For our interests? No, but for a cause which is not ours alone: for the defense of the young, associated and friendly states [Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia] to which we brought prosperity and to which we gave independence in order to defend freedom in Asia and thereby to defend freedom and security in Europe and the world.... In view of this, who can still be surprised about the reactions of this country when it is treated unjustly, when one overlooks its sacrifices or seems to minimize them, when its warnings are clearly ignored?"

*Speech by French Premier Pierre Mendes-France on July 22, 1954, the last day of the Geneva Conference, in which he explains the position his government took at the conference*

"The nightmare is over.... I do not want anyone to have illusions concerning the contents of the agreements.... The text is sometimes cruel, because it sanctions facts which are cruel; it was no longer possible that it should be otherwise.... If the war were to continue our [forces] would be placed in a perilous position unless it received substantial reinforcements within a short time; the dispatch of conscripts [draftees] then became a pressing necessity unless an armistice could be very rapidly concluded.... [The] results are without a doubt the best that could be hoped for in the present state of things.... The liberation of prisoners was the subject of special provisions, and I do not have to tell you how much importance the French delegation attached to them. A right of option was proclaimed and organized, so that all Vietnamese, regardless of their permanent or present residence, would be able freely to return to the zone of their choice. It was provided...by a unanimous decision of the nine participants, that the settlement would

have only a temporary character, and that the unity of the country would be reestablished as quickly as possible through general elections under international control.... The situation has on the administrative and territorial level the advantage of being clear. The evacuation by our forces of certain zones in the North has its exact counterpart in the evacuation of the Central and Southern zones occupied by the Viet Minh. The obstacles to a good administration of the country south of the 17th parallel are thus removed. Vietnam [the southern zone] can now look forward to prompt economic revival.... North of the demarcation line we face a new situation which is not without difficulties and risks. It seems to me, however, that our adversaries of yesterday, introduced in our schools to our way of thinking, could not remain insensitive to it [French ideas and culture].... The Geneva agreements obviously sanction losses already suffered or losses made inevitable by the deterioration of the military situation.... But they leave intact the possibilities which exist for France to remain in the Far East and to play her role there.... Our mission in Indochina is thus not over, but will undoubtedly take on new aspects.... It [the settlement] will be evident in an inestimable gain—by sparing the lives of our young men—and it will enable us to reinforce our military positions in Europe and in Africa.... Too long indeed were our Allies kept under illusions with regard to the potentialities of our military actions and the objectives we were able to attain. No doubt since the beginning of the year, the realities, the sad realities, have contributed to enlighten them.... Even among the Americans who were not inclined *a priori* to approve our policies, a realistic view of things prevailed. They realized that not only had the worst been avoided, but that waging war in the Far East was a heavy liability for European policy and in a more general manner for all Western policy."