

U.S. INHERITS ANOTHER HEADACHE

France Turns Over Indo-China Job to America

Red Pockets in South Vietnam



Another hot spot is now a U. S. responsibility. That's the inside story of a new plan for checking the Communists in Asia.

U. S. is to replace France as policy maker in Indo-China. The deal was made when Premier Mendès-France visited Washington.

French forces are to be reduced. So is the Vietnamese Army. U. S. dollars instead of troops are the key to this project.

PARIS

The U. S. is going to shoulder the job of saving what is left of Indo-China from the Communists. Under the new American plan:

- Two out of three South Vietnamese now under arms will be demobilized during the coming year.
- French forces are being encouraged to speed up, rather than slow down, their departure from Indo-China. More than half the French expeditionary corps will be shipped home by next December.
- Economic aid to South Indo-China will be stepped up from 25 million to 100 million dollars in 1955.



FOR U. S.: GENERAL COLLINS

... a build-up in dollars

● Full backing is to be given South Vietnam's anti-French Premier Ngo Dinh Diem, who is an anti-Communist nationalist.

With this program, the U. S. is taking over from France the primary responsibility for Indo-China policy. High policy decisions heretofore made in Paris or by the French military commander in Indo-China will be made from now on by the U. S. and its new special envoy to Saigon, Gen. J. Lawton Collins.

This is the program brought back by Premier Pierre Mendès-France from his recent talks with U. S. officials in Washington. The details are confirmed by informed Americans here. Mendès-France disagrees with the plan and is convinced it will fail, but he is giving the U. S. a free hand to carry it out.

A joint directive, signed by Mendès-France and by U. S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, has been sent to French General Paul Ely and General Collins in Saigon, according to officials in Paris. It terminates the five-month conflict between the U. S. and France over what to do about South Vietnam, the truncated half nation created by the Geneva armistice last July.

French officials interpret the directive as meaning Mendès-France has now washed his hands of responsibility for Indo-China. The Premier's view, they say, is that the U. S. can run the show from now on—and take full credit if it succeeds, but full blame if South Vietnam falls to the Communists. In Washington, the French Premier told U. S. officials he considered the Far East primarily an American sphere.

French withdrawing. The degree to which the French have abdicated in Indo-China is shown by one incident in the Washington talks. The U. S. presented a surprise proposal to reduce the Vietnamese forces from 270,000 men to a 90,000-man security force. Mendès-France thought this meant creating a 90,000-man *gendarmerie* in addition to the 220,000-man Vietnam Army he proposed. Only when he returned to Paris did he learn that the 90,000 were to take the place of a Vietnamese Army. Nevertheless, he accepted.

Out the window now is the French military plan which called for keeping a fighting force in South Vietnam equal to the Communist forces in the North.

Under this plan, the French expeditionary corps, now 150,000 strong, would have been reduced to 100,000 by next December. On Vietnamese forces, the French proposed amalgamating the 170,000-man Vietnamese National Army and the local units, totaling 100,000 men,



FOR FRANCE: GENERAL ELY

... a cutback in troops

which now are attached to the French expeditionary corps. They suggested cutting back first to 200,000 for more effective training, then building up to a 220,000-man Army by December of 1955. The troops would have been organized into combat divisions to defend the 17th parallel, which is Indo-China's truce line. Americans estimated it would cost the U. S. upwards of 400 million dollars a year to maintain this Army.

In contrast, the U. S. plan now going into effect will reduce Vietnamese forces from 270,000 to 90,000 by next December. These will be organized into small mobile battalions for the most part. Their function will be internal security in the South, rather than training for actual warfare. Cost to the U. S. is estimated at about 200 million dollars a year.

The U. S. is offering to put up a hundred million dollars in 1955 for the French expeditionary corps as against 400 million this year. French forces, the U. S. has suggested, can be reduced by next December to 30,000 men, concentrated around Saigon. But French generals believe a 60,000-man force is the minimum that could fight its way out if trouble develops. They are planning to reduce to 60,000 or 70,000 men by December, 1955.

Undefended border? The American plan for wholesale reduction of military forces in South Vietnam means that the 17th parallel will be left virtually undefended by forces on the ground, French sources say. They insist the plan ignores a steady military build-up by the Communist Viet Minh.

The Communists now have under arms 350,000 men, organized in 12 combat divisions. Two of these new divisions are reported to be armored. By the end of next year, if present plans are carried out, the anti-Communist forces in the South will be outnumbered more than two to one by Communists in the North.

Some Vietnamese nationalists are demanding that all French troops be shipped home before July, 1956, when national elections are scheduled to reunify the country. If this happens, the South Vietnam Army will be outnumbered four to one by Communists on election day.

The question raised by French officials here is what will happen in Indo-China when the 1956 elections roll around. Five months of truce have passed without the slightest gain in South Vietnam's strength. On the contrary, the situation in Saigon has been heading toward chaos.

There have been violence and assassinations. The influx of 350,000 refugees from the North has added to the confusion. Corruption is rife. Vietnamese sol-

I n d o - C h i n a

diers are deserting. Reforms in this atmosphere have been impossible. The confusion has enabled the Communists to infiltrate many areas, set up shadow governments (see map on page 24).

French officials blame much of the trouble on Premier Ngo Dinh Diem, but, even if he were replaced immediately, neither the French nor most Vietnamese believe enough strength could be built into South Vietnam by 1956 to enable the anti-Communists to win elections.

Some American officials here agree with the French that the best hope for keeping South Vietnam out of Communist hands lies in finding a way to postpone elections—but backing out of elections means running a risk that the Communists will resume the war.

The question French officials are now asking is whether the South Vietnamese or the U. S. will be willing to run such a risk when overwhelming Communist military superiority will make the risk far greater than it would be otherwise.

American officials, however, give the following reasons for the U. S. plan:

- Congress has appropriated only 700 million dollars for all of Southeast Asia next year. Under the new U. S. plan, Indo-China alone will cost 500 million, including aid to Cambodia, to Laos and to North Vietnam refugees. There isn't enough money for bigger South Vietnamese or French armies.

- Congress is unlikely to approve additional funds. South Vietnam isn't a good-enough risk to be worth much bigger American investment. Everything may go down the drain in 19 months.

- The immediate objective is to prevent the Communists from taking over South Vietnam by infiltration before the 1956 elections. That's why a mobile force for internal security is more urgent now than a Vietnamese Army.

- Communist aggression during the next 19 months is unlikely. The Communists are too interested in promoting "peaceful coexistence" for the moment and are hopeful they will win the South without fighting.

- Even though the prospects are poor, an attempt must be made to build a Saigon Government that can win 1956 elections in South Vietnam. Neither Ngo Dinh Diem nor any other Saigon Premier can convince the people there is real independence unless the bulk of French troops depart.

The U. S. isn't going to decide what to do in 1956 until 1956 arrives. If Vietnamese factions stop fighting each other and unite in a strong anti-Communist government, the U. S. will back them to the hilt against Communist take-over. But if the present disorder continues, Washington may wash its hands of South Vietnam in 1956.

Starting January 1, the U. S. will give its aid directly to the Saigon Government instead of funneling it through the French. American officers under General Collins next month will take over the direction of training Vietnamese troops.

Much of actual training will continue to be done by French officers, since the U. S. has only a small military-aid mission in Saigon. A 1,500-man American mission would be needed to take over all training, and the Indian chairman of the International Armistice Control Commission opposes the entrance of additional American personnel as a violation of the armistice. But American methods will be used by the French officers under American supervision.

U. S. taking over. All in all the United States now is getting itself more and more deeply enmeshed in Indo-China while the French are on the way

I n d o - C h i n a



VIETNAMESE SOLDIERS

. . . numbers are deserting

out. Some French officials predict an American take-over will find the U.S. soon bearing the brunt of the criticism in Indo-China instead of the French. And many observers here suspect that the U.S. is cutting back aid and military forces in Indo-China because it already has decided to write off South Vietnam.

But: One thing is clear—by sharply reducing South Vietnam's military forces at a time when American officials are taking over the chief responsibility for Indo-China policy, the U.S. is embarking on one of its biggest gambles in Asia since the Korean war.

U.S. News & World Report

OldMagazineArticles.com