

7/10/53

~~PH~~  
050.95452  
H 14 R

## REVIEW OF THE PRESENT POSITION IN INDOCHINA

By COLONEL MELVIN HALL, D.S.O.

Colonel Melvin Hall, D.S.O. (U.S.A.F. ret'd.), was chief of a special liaison mission to Indochina in 1952.\* He travelled extensively round Indochina and had the opportunity to observe what the French and the Associated States were accomplishing on that vital anti-Communist front. He has kept in close touch with developments in this area since his return to France.

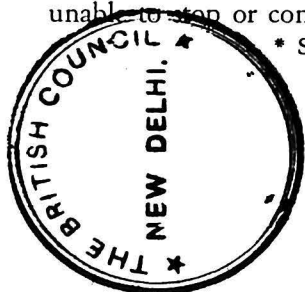
THE situation in Indochina is so fluid, with such latent potentialities as could completely alter it almost overnight, that any attempt at analysis can at best be valid as of the date written and may well be inapplicable soon after. Under such circumstances, predictions or prophecies are both futile and dangerous, yet it may be permissible to survey the consequences of certain developments at least within the range of possibility.

Among the potentialities that could gravely affect the situation not only in Indochina but throughout South-east Asia and probably the whole of Asia, the following may be noted. They are not the only factors which could upset the balance and bring disaster, but they are the most disquieting.

The first is the effect of the so-called Korean truce; a truce which appears fraudulent on the part of the Sino-North Korean Communists and of dubious permanent advantage to those member-States of the United Nations which fought to resist aggression in that area. It is giving the Chinese the time to recuperate from the pounding their "volunteers" suffered in Korea, where they were being decimated both in trained manpower and effective equipment and could, in the opinion of many qualified to judge, have been so shattered that their Korean venture would have held little continuing appeal. It has been highly damaging to Western and United Nations prestige in Asia: the Communist propaganda having skilfully turned their own defeat into a defeat of the United Nations, especially of the United States—which is now fairly generally accepted in Eastern Asia. And it is allowing the Chinese to build up a massive and well-equipped military machine, substantial elements of which can easily be diverted to other Communist ventures, such as the support of the Viet Minh in Indochina.

The second and most disturbing potentiality for uprooting the whole South-east Asian situation stems partly from the first, as outlined above, though the latent threat existed before the Korean truce. That is an open invasion of Chinese "volunteers" or "liberation army" into Indochina in support of Ho Chih Minh. This, if undertaken, would hardly be done in dribbles, and the Franco-Vietnamese forces presently engaged would be unable to stop or contain an invasion on the scale that would have to be

\* See p. 204, Vol. XL, July/October, 1953.



Library

IAS, Shimla

TMP 050.954 52 H 14 R



00016452

expected for more than a very few days or at most weeks. In such event all of South-east Asia would unquestionably collapse to the Communists, in short order. Indochina is the present key to the anti-Communist lock on South-east Asia; once this door is wide open none can say where the onrush would end. But the political and psychological effects, at least, would assuredly spread to the Middle and Near East, and to Africa.

The third potentiality is correlated to the second, though it could be used either as an accompaniment of a direct invasion of Chinese ground forces or by itself, but in effective support of the Viet Minh. That is Communist air support, with modern equipment including jet aircraft. The French have at present complete control of the air, apart from climatic conditions and anti-aircraft fire, since the Viet Minh possess no air force. There are, however, no jet aircraft in Indochina—they are not required under present circumstances—nor are there more than one or two fields from which jet aircraft could be operated, these far from ideal. An air cover of Viet Minh operations on the ground, by Chinese “volunteer” pilots flying from bases within the Chinese frontier and including jets, could be disastrous to the Franco-Vietnamese forces, gallant as they are.

The fourth potentiality that could disrupt the situation is one of morale and war-weariness. This in no wise reflects on the Franco-Vietnamese troops engaged in Indochina. Their morale is superb, and there is no defeatism in their attitude, rough as the going is. But in Paris it is different: the difference between the enthusiasm of the troops when they can *see* their enemy and get to grips with him, which unhappily is too seldom the case, and the cold grey light through which some of the politicians look, seeing no future in all this, but only the cost in money and in lives—which has been and continues to be great—and the inevitability of eventual withdrawal. They have their arguments, some of them irrefutable; yet the alternative to a continuance of the struggle would be a major disaster to the western world. And when they talk of “negotiating” with Ho Chih Minh it may be pointed out that even Jawaharlal Nehru, who has recently expressed his willingness to be the intermediary for a negotiated settlement when the time may be appropriate, feels unconvinced that at the present moment his intervention would serve any useful purpose.

There appears little possibility of negotiating with Ho Chih Minh unless he be soundly defeated or forced to recognize imminent defeat; or the anti-Communists accept defeat by him and bow to his conditions. They would not be negotiable conditions, as long as Communist China and the U.S.S.R. continue to support him, even without direct intervention of Chinese troops. There is no evidence that such support is likely to be withdrawn.

During the past six months the situation of the anti-Viet Minh forces—the Franco-Vietnamese—has improved moderately. They have passed from the defensive throughout the whole of the infiltrated area to a series of limited but destructive offensives, which may or may not have upset Viet Minh plans for the latter’s expected dry-weather offensive in northern Tonkin. General Navarre, the new French commander-in-chief, and General Cogny, commanding in the north, have shown great energy in

developing a new strategic plan. In carrying this out they have already obtained several notable successes. They have also received some reinforcements from Metropolitan France and from Korea (most of the French volunteer battalion that did such splendid work in Korea has been transferred to Indochina), and the Vietnamese army is being built up. American support of the Franco-Vietnamese operations, in equipment and financial aid, has been augmented to a point where the United States are bearing approximately two-thirds of the cost of the military effort.

Yet the opposing forces remain too evenly in balance to give hope of an early decision. The war is not being fought in trenches nor where heavy equipment can be the deciding factor, but in the rice-fields and jungles and heavily forested mountains; and while the Vietnamese army may be, as it is, growing in size, an army is rarely better than its officers and it takes time to train officers, especially in a country without an officer caste or tradition. There are still too few trained and disciplined troops to launch vigorous, decisive attacks and at the same time to keep infiltrated areas cleaned up, where the enemy by night is often a simple, law-abiding peasant by day.

Should the French, by political pressure in Paris, decide to withdraw their military support of the new-born Indochinese states, the whole of Indochina would collapse like a house of cards. But the French, with the stout and loyal but limited co-operation of the anti-Communist mountain tribes of Tonkin and the Laotians (the last-named operating only in Laos), do not have the forces sufficient to obtain, in the immediately foreseeable future, a satisfactory decision, and no one is prepared to suggest from where the additional troops required to this end might be drawn. The growing Vietnamese army, stiffened and led by the French through many months to come, may be the ultimate answer; it cannot be the immediate solution.

The political situation is likewise confused. Recent assurances by the French Government have created a more favourable atmosphere than pertained some months ago and more confidence is being felt by the "Associated States" of Indochina in French promises of early full independence. Considerable progress has been made in turning over to the three States various functions of government heretofore administered by the French or under their over-riding control. Inevitably, immediate independent military command is restricted by the fact that the French military effort in Indochina is the one factor holding together a tenuous situation, and further because there are exceedingly few indigenous officers presently qualified to exert high command effectively.

Of the three Associated States, the most stable at the moment is Laos, whose ageing King Sisavang Vong recently signed an agreement with the French which appears basically satisfactory to both sides. Laos has taken no active part in the anti-Viet Minh operations except within its own frontiers, where the small but sturdy Laotian army, supported by the French (and fortuitously by the south-west monsoon), offered a stout and successful resistance to the Communist invasion of that country last spring. The Laotians—the King, his Government and the people—want no part of the Communists and will defend themselves ardently, but are disinclined

to engage their limited effectives in the mêlée beyond their boundaries. They are not over fond of their Vietnamese neighbours. Except when their own territory is invaded, they see no good reason to throw themselves into what they have looked upon in the past as generically a Vietnamese civil war. The Viet Minh invasion of Laos in the spring of 1952 rather shattered this contention, but the Laotian forces are held, which now seems well advised, for the defence of Laotian integrity.

In Cambodia the political situation is so equivocal and confusing as to make any reasoned survey all but meaningless save from day to day. The thirty-three-year-old King Norodom Sihanouk, who was placed on his throne by the French at a time when there was some question of succession, "put on an act" a few months ago by leaving his capital for Bangkok; later—since the Siamese found his presence there embarrassing—retiring to a smallish town in his own country, Siem Reap (from where one visits the massive Khmer ruins of Angkor Wat), as a protest against the slow progress of the French in according Cambodia full independence.

This gesture popularized him with some elements of his country, and he returned to his capital, Pnom Penh, in triumph after the French had conceded certain of his demands. But the demands for "full independence" sometimes go too fast, particularly in a country unable to protect itself in a military sense. Furthermore, there are conflicting parties in Cambodia, not all of which are heartily in favour of maintaining the King on his throne. He has recently agreed to further talks with the French, and proposes to head the Cambodian delegation which will negotiate in Paris the details of Cambodia's future status. At the same time he announced his intention of turning over his powers to the people after the next general elections—whatever that may precisely mean. The King has also stated that Communism is the number one enemy of Cambodia, which he will use all his efforts to extirpate. In this he is doubtless sincere, but unlikely to be able to do much about it alone, despite his pleasant personality.

In Vietnam, much the most populous of the three States and the only one possessing the nucleus of an army of substantial size, the political situation is also complicated. The recent Assembly of "Nationalists" at Saigon threw a number of verbal bricks into a confused atmosphere, which quite confounded the Vietnamese government as well as the French, who thought they were then proceeding logically towards the full independence of Vietnam within the fabric of the French Union. The Nationalists also want to alter the pattern of the French Union. At the end, the Assembly came out with an expression of confidence in and support for His Majesty Bao Dai, the Chief of State of Vietnam (hereditary Emperor of Annam, now Central Vietnam), which was not completely in accord with some utterances on the Assembly floor.

But the Nationalists of Cochin China in the south and of Tonkin in the north do not see eye to eye. It now appears that Bao Dai may be forced to replace the present President of the Council, Nguyen van Tam, an able and energetic patriot with a reputation for honesty, and a realistic Francophile, by someone from Tonkin. Bao Dai is definitely in somewhat of a dilemma, which may be in part of his own making. He is intelligent, quite a big

man for an Indochinese, in his early forties, courageous and personable. I have described him occasionally, and would still do so, as a prince and potential leader who has put on his spurs but has not yet mounted his horse.

For reasons I do not pretend to know, and if I thought I did they would be too complex to analyse here, he seems to show reluctance to assume real leadership which, if he has it in him—and I think he may have if he were shaken out of a seeming political lethargy—could exert a considerable and beneficial influence on the future of Vietnam. He is not a shy man, yet he seems to lack any profound conviction in himself as a leader. He is not a play-boy, in the sense of the ill-esteemed Farouk, though he plays heartily, both indoors and out: the latter being principally the shooting of tigers and elephants in the jungle. But he seems to be dragging his feet in the political situation of Vietnam today, and this is a matter of regret for many who believe in his political capabilities. There is no one at the moment who shows the requisite capacity and prestige to replace him.

I venture to conclude this sketchy review of the Indochinese scene today with a story. It is a factual story, which may or may not have any bearing on the future. I would preface it by saying that I am not superstitious, do not take much stock in miracles, nor do I greatly believe in prophets.

But when the Viet Minh launched their surprise attack on Laos somewhat less than a year ago—with no possible basis of “liberating” a country which had no desire to be liberated (from what?)—the following things occurred. The Viet Minh, in four columns of considerable strength, attacked without warning from the heavily forested mountains of north-western Tonkin. They advanced through northern Laos under cover of the jungle, with only such light equipment as they could carry on their backs, barefooted, sweating and bedevilled by blood-sucking leeches. But they kept on going.

Laos, the high command not having anticipated such an attack, was lightly defended. As the Viet Minh columns approached the royal capital, Luang Prabang, the French threw their aviation support into the defence, but this was seriously hampered by the jungle, where they could not see their enemy, and by bad weather. They flew up reinforcements and equipment to the narrow air-strip of Luang Prabang, located between the hills along the Mekong river, and vigorously started building defence works around the town. Realizing that they could not hold Luang Prabang, they so advised the King, saying that they would take him out by air to Vientiane.

But the King, whose sonorous name of Sisavang Vong sounds so much like the sculptured bronze drums of Laos reverberating through the forest, refused to be taken out. “I am here,” he said, “and here I shall stay. I shall stay with the Prabang” (the gold and silver statue of Buddha which is the patron saint of the town). “He will protect his town,” said the King. The French were unable to persuade the King to budge from his stand.

At the same time there was in Luang Prabang a blind bonze—a Buddhist monk—squatting in a pagoda in a dirty yellow robe. This bonze

had a local reputation as a prophet, and the populace of Luang Prabang flocked around him, asking to know what was going to happen. The blind bonze looked skyward with sightless eyes, and said: "The enemy will come, in great numbers. They will come to within twenty-five kilometres of Luang Prabang and there they will be defeated, turn around and go home." The populace were content with this prediction, though they continued leisurely to build up the defences of the town under the stimulus of the French.

Now the extraordinary part of this story is that both these things happened. The enemy came to exactly twenty-five kilometres from Luang Prabang. They were no doubt pretty well exhausted by their long infiltration through the jungle, but there was no military action at that point. The south-west monsoon came down in full fury, three weeks before it should normally have been expected, inundated the tired Viet Minh troops, who turned around and crept back wetly to their lairs, and the assault on Luang Prabang was abandoned.

"I said," the King observed calmly, "that the Prabang would protect his town. Well, as you see, he brought the monsoon three weeks early."

And the blind bonze said: "Yes, I knew the enemy would be defeated at twenty-five kilometres from our town, turn around and go back."

Perhaps one needs the blind bonze to tell us what is going to happen in Indochina, though his prescience may be valid only in Laos. I am not a blind bonze and do not attempt to predict. I have merely ventured to outline certain eventualities, by no means unforeseen by others who have studied the situation on the spot, should we—the anti-Communist forces—for whatever reason it might be, withdraw our support from that area.

This article was written before the report, through the Swedish newspaper *Expressen*, of Ho Chi Minh's readiness to negotiate a truce in Indochina with the French, and on his terms.

MELVIN HALL,  
November 29, 1953.

