

Eisenhower and Southeast Asia, Part I: Building Containment

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This essay represents an initial attempt to analyze the Eisenhower Administration's policy toward Indochina in the context of the global Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union. By definition, the analysis of U.S. foreign policy and the strategy on which it was based cannot be conducted in a vacuum, or in a discreet bipolar compartment, but must be part of a global matrix that includes an analysis of Soviet strategy and foreign policy, as well as the strategies and policies of the relevant participants. In this case, these were The People's Republic of China, Great Britain, France, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), Laos, and Cambodia. The picture that emerges from such a global, strategic approach is markedly different from the conventional view.

The bipolar structure of the Cold War in fact disguised a great strategic triangle comprised of the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. The tripolar structure emerged with the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, but it was quickly obscured by the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, which, on paper, bound Moscow and Beijing together for thirty years. NSC-68, its secret reciprocal, set forth the U.S. strategy of global Containment.

These arrangements served both Moscow's and Washington's purposes in insuring that China remained within

the Soviet security sphere. For Moscow, the Sino-Soviet alliance removed a threat to the Soviet Union's Far East. For Washington, at least initially, keeping the Communist powers together justified the cost of maintaining a global forward presence on the Eurasian landmass to contain them. The Korean War and China's entry onto the field of battle against the United States reinforced this disguised tripolar structure, but it did not long outlast Stalin's death in March 1953.¹

Eisenhower and the Building of Containment

Initially, based on American strategic weapons supremacy, the Eisenhower Administration continued and added to the Truman Administration's Containment strategy, supplementing the collective security arrangement of NATO with structurally similar arrangements in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, ringing what was then perceived as a unified Communist bloc. By the middle of the decade, however, the emergence of the intercontinental ballistic missile forever altered the nature of international politics. Varying perceptions of which side held the strategic weapons advantage affected the content and timing of the conduct of foreign policy on the part of Washington and Moscow, often in unpredictable ways.

Strategic differences also emerged within both camps. China's break with the Soviet Union and France's break with the United States affected both powers differently as the Soviet Union sought to contain China while promoting a change in its policy and leadership and the United States played down what was a growing antagonism with France. Both developments would have a major impact on U.S. policy in Southeast Asia.

Based on these larger developments, the thesis of this essay is that while the Eisenhower Administration carefully monitored and quickly responded to changes perceived to be

¹ For the strategic steps that led to the Korean War, see the author's *Odd Man Out: Truman, Stalin, Mao, and the Origins of the Korean War* (Dulles: Brassey's, 2000).

occurring in the strategic weapons balance with the Soviet Union, it utterly failed to take account of, let alone take advantage of, the Sino-Soviet split, or, indeed, of the French break with the United States in its policy toward Indochina. Worse, the failure of the administration to develop a counterinsurgency capability for its allies left it incapable of meeting challenges to Containment as they occurred. Indeed, these strategic omissions led to the failure of the administration's policy in Southeast Asia.



President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles wielded U.S. nuclear supremacy to gain concessions from Moscow.

Image source: Wikimedia Commons.

At the outset of his administration, Eisenhower employed both carrot and stick in his Containment-building efforts. While wielding America's nuclear supremacy in a coercive mode, he also offered to reach mutually acceptable settlements of contentious issues with Moscow. Most importantly, he was also the beneficiary of a fortuitous development within two months of assuming office that offered an unparalleled opportunity to move

forward on his agenda. This was the death of Stalin on March 5, 1953.

As it became apparent that the Soviet leaders were undergoing a succession crisis, Eisenhower offered Moscow a carrot. In a speech on April 16 he sought “concrete evidence” of the Soviet Union’s desire for peace. If Soviet leaders would assist in resolving such problems as the Korean stalemate and the Austrian impasse (a treaty ending WWII had not yet been concluded), the United States would be prepared to work out “just political settlements for the other serious and specific issues between the free world and the Soviet Union...[including promotion of] a broader European community and a free and united Germany.”²

A few weeks later, following a non-committal reply from Moscow, he brandished the stick.³ As the president put it in his memoir, “we dropped the word, discreetly, of our intentions. We felt quite sure it would reach Soviet and Chinese Communist ears.” In the absence of “satisfactory progress” on reaching an armistice in Korea, “we intended to move decisively without inhibition in our use of weapons, and would no longer be responsible for confining hostilities to the Korean peninsula.”⁴ To underscore the nuclear threat, Washington transferred atomic warheads to Okinawa. When an armistice agreement was signed on July 27, 1953, both Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, believed that the agreement was reached in no small part due to the administration’s threat to use its atomic power.

At the same time, and perhaps for the same reason, Eisenhower chose this moment to resolve a festering and debilitating crisis between Great Britain and Iran. London and

² “Text of Speech By Eisenhower Outlining Proposals For Peace in World,” *New York Times*, April 17, 1953, 4.

³ “Text of the Soviet Union’s Statement Replying to President Eisenhower’s Speech,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1953, 64.

⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *White House Years, I: Mandate for Change* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 181.

Tehran had been locked in a two-year struggle over British oil rights in Iran with no positive outcome in sight, and with a growing prospect of a Soviet-inspired coup by the Tudeh Party. Eisenhower assumed, however, that the Russians were too preoccupied with internal matters to interfere, and in early April 1953 he authorized the CIA to cooperate with British intelligence to bring about the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddeq in Iran.⁵

Restoring the shah to power established Iran as a strong ally of the United States for the next twenty-five years and opened the door to American oil companies' access to Iranian oil, the issue which had precipitated the original dispute with Great Britain. The Iranian coup revealed the dual nature of American strategy. Not only did the United States move to construct an important segment of the anti-Communist containment structure around the Eurasian periphery, but did so in part at the expense of the former colonial power, Great Britain.

Meanwhile, with the proclamation of the People's Republic, the Chinese leadership turned to the domestic task of transforming the rudimentary party, military, and state organizations that had emerged during the revolution into an institutionalized and centralized state structure. Disagreement over form and content pitted Gao Gang, the Manchurian party chief, and Rao Shushi, the East China chief, against Mao Zedong, who was able to surmount their challenge with support from Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. In return for their assistance in defeating the Gao-Rao challenge, Mao promoted Liu and Deng to high positions in the newly created Party-State structure.⁶

⁵ "Memorandum of Discussion at the 135th Meeting of the National Security Council," *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1952-1954, Iran, 1951-1954, Volume X, eds. Carl N. Raether and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1989), Document 312.

⁶ See the author's *China: A Political History, 1917-1980* (Boulder: Westview, 1982), 238-42.



Contrary to appearances of Sino-Soviet collaboration, Mao wanted to pursue an independent course.

Image source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Digital ID cph.3c11093

Following Stalin's death, China's leaders also began to debate the nation's future strategy and global orientation. Chairman Mao, refusing to accept subordination to the Soviet Union, argued in favor of shifting China out of the alliance and into an independent position, while Vice-Chairmen Liu and Deng, based on their new positions in the leadership hierarchy, argued that China should remain within the Sino-Soviet alliance. The rift created a permanent split in the leadership between pro-Mao and pro-Soviet groups that would be a crucial factor shaping Moscow's policy calculations toward China.

Vietnam and the Strategic Triangle

The French position in Indochina had been deteriorating steadily through the early 1950s. During World War II, President Roosevelt had consistently opposed the French return to Indochina, seeking instead to organize a trusteeship for the region. President Truman continued to uphold FDR's policy even though the French had in the meantime returned to Indochina with British assistance after the war. Their return quickly led to the outbreak of war as the Communist Viet Minh took up arms against the French.

The victory of the Chinese Communists in 1949 brought about a change in American policy toward Indochina. As part of the larger strategic decision to pursue global containment, President Truman extended U.S. support to the French in Indochina. Although Washington granted over \$2 billion in aid to the French, by the time Eisenhower assumed office, the French position had reached a crisis point.

Eisenhower initially continued the Truman policy of support for the French cause in Indochina, underwriting in the fall of 1953 the Navarre Plan designed to defeat the Viet Minh and secure French control. In an attempt to deter Beijing from countering French efforts with additional support to the Viet Minh, or, perhaps direct military intervention, Secretary of State Dulles raised for the second time the U.S. nuclear threat. He warned "the Communist Chinese regime should realize that such a second aggression [after Korea] could not occur without grave consequences which might not be confined to Indochina."⁷

Neither the Navarre Plan nor U.S. attempts at deterrence succeeded, and by early 1954 the looming French collapse at Dien Bien Phu persuaded the Eisenhower Administration to change course and seek a diplomatic solution. Fortuitously, but for entirely different reasons, both the leaders in

⁷ Seth King, "Dulles Rules Out Yalu 'Sanctuary' If Foe Renews War," *New York Times*, September 3, 1953.

Moscow and in Beijing sought the same end. Indeed, the resulting Geneva Accords would be, perhaps, the only instance during the entire Cold War when all three powers would act in parallel to achieve a common end, in this case at the expense of their respective allies, the French and the Viet Minh.

The French collapse in Indochina in 1954 offered Khrushchev an opportunity to reinforce the alliance with China and to strengthen his own position in the post-Stalin succession struggle. It gave Mao the opportunity to establish a defensible security structure along the southern border. And it offered President Eisenhower the chance to construct the Southeast Asian sector of global Containment.

At first, the crisis at Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954 produced a U.S. attempt to work out a multi-national support effort on behalf of France, which the Laniel government spurned. Although the United States provided some clandestine air support to French forces, defeat became inevitable and with it the French decision to terminate its military involvement in Vietnam.

The French thereafter pursued a complex strategy some described as a “double game,” designed on the one hand to withdraw forces from Indochina, while retaining economic and cultural ties to the region. On the other hand, Paris acknowledged the de facto control of the Viet Minh in Hanoi, while granting de jure recognition to the Government of Vietnam in Saigon. The Communist powers recognized the DRV—the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam, while the western powers recognized the GVN—Government of (South) Vietnam.

As military victors, the Viet Minh sought complete French withdrawal and immediate control of all Indochina—Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam—the “Big Vietnam” concept. They proposed the division of Vietnam at the thirteenth parallel, which would have given them control of most of Vietnam and all of Cambodia and Laos, and left the Government of Vietnam in control of a

small portion of territory comprising Saigon and the surrounding Mekong Delta. Finally, they demanded unsupervised immediate elections carried out by local governments to legitimize the outcome.

Hanoi's dreams quickly fell victim to the strategies of the major powers, principally, the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. Failing to obtain British and French support for a policy of United Action, in mid-April U.S. Secretary of State Dulles set in motion his own plan. First, he put forward the concept that would in September become the South East Asia Treaty Organization, or SEATO, a regional collective security component of the global Containment strategy.⁸

On April 25, a few days before the Geneva conference opened, Dulles announced that the United States would not support any agreement contrary to its interests, and advanced the idea of the partition of Vietnam. The next day, a Soviet delegate approached the U.S. delegation to say that Moscow agreed with the idea of partition and that "the establishment of a buffer state to China's south would be sufficient satisfaction of China's security needs."⁹ (The United States purposely had no interaction with the Chinese, so the Soviets played the role of intermediary.)

Thus, at the very outset of the Geneva conference, American, Soviet, and Chinese leaders had already decided upon the fundamental outcome of a divided Vietnam. Dulles, acting from behind the scenes largely through British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden, followed up on this common understanding with a seven point proposal that repudiated all of the Viet Minh's demands and was largely accepted by both the Soviet Union and especially by China, whose representative,

⁸ "U.S. Military Planning and Diplomatic Maneuver, January-July, 1954," *United States-Vietnam Relations 1945-1967, Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force*, * Part III, A1-A9 [Online at www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers.] * Hereafter referred to as *Pentagon Papers*.

⁹ "Sino-Soviet Objectives and Strategy," *Pentagon Papers*, Part III, C22.

Zhou Enlai negotiated the main outlines of the accords.¹⁰ Indeed, although never publicly acknowledged, Dulles' seven-point proposal would constitute the essential framework of agreements that became known as the Geneva Accords.¹¹

The seven-point proposal would split off Cambodia and Laos from Vietnam, rather than including them as the Viet Minh demanded. Vietnam would be more equitably divided at the seventeenth parallel, not the thirteenth. Elections would not occur immediately, but only after two years and were to be supervised by an International Control Commission, not managed by the Vietnamese themselves. Vietnamese would be permitted to relocate to either side of the parallel, as desired, and no impediment would be placed in the way of eventual reunification of the country.

Dulles' seven-point proposal offered a solution, but it was Khrushchev and Mao who brought it to fruition. The outcome was largely the work of Khrushchev, who, seeking to strengthen the Sino-Soviet alliance, negotiated a far-reaching agreement with Mao, of which the Geneva Accords were a part. Not only did Khrushchev agree to establish a North Vietnamese buffer state on China's southern border, but he also agreed to withdraw Soviet troops from Manchuria, returning full control to Beijing. In addition to satisfying Mao's territorial interests, Khrushchev also agreed to additional economic aid, including Soviet assistance in constructing two railroad lines to connect to the Soviet rail system.¹²

Mao's strategy in Southeast Asia only became apparent in the course of time. Although professing support for the Viet Minh, he opposed Hanoi's "Big Vietnam" strategy, seeking instead the establishment of buffer states on China's southern

¹⁰ Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 92-112.

¹¹ "U.S. Military Planning and Diplomatic Maneuver, January-July, 1954," *Pentagon Papers*, Part III, A-37-A-39.

¹² Thornton, *China: A Political History*, 239.

border. He assumed that a fragmented region, even with the United States supporting the GVN, meant that Vietnam would not emerge as a threat on China's southern border. In the short run, this objective was accomplished by the creation of the DRV and the putative independence of Laos and Cambodia.

The irony of the Geneva Accords was that the French were put into the position of negotiating their own exit, on terms that were determined by the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. The French and the Viet Minh were the only signatories and were the only responsible parties tasked with the implementation of the accords. In particular, they were to manage the elections two years hence. But the French became consumed by the Algerian revolution and devoted few resources to Indochina; the Viet Minh would not permit free elections in the North and could not force them in the GVN.

The GVN, now led by President Ngo Dinh Diem, had rejected every provision in the accords, publicly declared that they would not comply, and did not sign them—even though the accords conferred international legitimacy on the Government of Vietnam. Declared to be temporary, the seventeenth parallel became a *de facto* division line, and nationwide elections were never held.

The two-year election reprieve gave both Vietnamese governments the opportunity to consolidate their respective regimes, the north more successfully than the south. Secretary Dulles, publicly dissociating the United States from the accords, quickly established the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), which included a protocol extending its protection to the free states of Laos, Cambodia, and the Government of Vietnam. Washington immediately extended aid programs to them, replacing the French in South Vietnam, and supplementing them in Laos and Cambodia.¹³ The Mendès France government accepted the inevitable, but with great resentment. French

¹³ SEATO membership was: United States, United Kingdom, France, Pakistan, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines.

indignation found expression in Paris' rejection of the U.S.-sponsored, but French-devised, European Defense Community plan a month after the end of the conference.

The Fifties' Strategic Crucible

The mid-1950s saw the Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian leaderships go through a tortuous decision-making process to make strategic choices that would govern their respective foreign policies for the next two decades. Khrushchev began the process in early 1956 at the 20th Party Congress with his speech denouncing Stalin and proclamation changing Communist doctrine from the inevitability of war to peaceful coexistence. These changes were a startling reversal of the Stalinist policies he himself had espoused in the first phase of his struggle with Georgi Malenkov for Stalin's mantle. Then, it had been Malenkov who advocated détente with the west and Khrushchev who had opposed it.

In repudiating Stalin and switching to peaceful coexistence, Khrushchev set about attempting to change the leaderships throughout the Communist world, whether those installed by Stalin, as in Eastern Europe, North Korea, and North Vietnam, or those who had arisen through indigenous struggle against Stalin's men, as in Yugoslavia and China. The ensuing turmoil led to rebellion that fall throughout Eastern Europe, resulting in Soviet military interventions in Hungary and Poland. Accompanying political turmoil in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia would lay the foundation for the war in Vietnam.

In China, pro-Soviet leaders Liu and Deng forced Mao to concede some portion of his power, but could not dislodge him. At the 8th Party Congress in the fall of 1956, the new party constitution emphasized collective leadership, instead of promoting Mao Zedong as sole ruler. Liu was named chairman of the newly created politburo standing committee and Deng was named to head the party secretariat, promotions that gave both

men control over the party apparatus. Mao, it seemed, was being eased upstairs to a largely ceremonial role, while his adversaries wielded real power.

Continuing the peaceful coexistence line, in late January 1957, the Soviet Union sponsored a crafty UN scheme to seat North Vietnam and North Korea. In response to a proposal from one of their friends in the assembly to seat South Vietnam and South Korea, the Soviets proposed to seat North Vietnam and North Korea, too.¹⁴ Within a few weeks, by early March, however, the Soviets themselves scotched this scheme, but it was too late to avoid the consequences, especially in Indochina.

The thrust of the proposal to bring both North and South Vietnam into the UN implied that the conflict in Indochina was over, which greatly incensed the North Vietnamese, then already discussing their response to Diem's refusal to hold elections. That same thrust encouraged the neutralist Royal Lao Government to press for an end to conflict in their land. Within weeks, however, by early March, Khrushchev reversed course in the Far East because it had become clear that his expectations that a pro-Soviet leadership would emerge in Beijing would be disappointed.

As Mao had done before and would do again, in early 1957, he began the battle to reclaim lost power. Mao's speech in late February, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," signaled the beginning of his comeback. It would kick off a six-month "hundred flowers campaign," an extensive purge and promotion process throughout the central and provincial party apparatuses. At the same time, Mao may also have supported Khrushchev's internal adversaries, who mounted an effort to remove him from power in what became known as the "anti-party crisis" of June 1957.¹⁵

¹⁴ Mari Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnamese Relations and the Role of China 1949-64, Changing Alliances* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 73-74.

¹⁵ Khrushchev certainly thought so. Later, in 1963 when the Sino-Soviet conflict had erupted in open polemics, Khrushchev warned the Chinese publicly not to try

During a four-day Politburo session, June 18-21, Khrushchev's adversaries exercised a seven to four voting majority in an attempt to oust him. Malenkov, Molotov, Kaganovich, Pervukhin, Saburov, Bulganin, and Voroshilov voted against Khrushchev, Mikoyan, Suslov, and Kirichenko. However, Khrushchev challenged the validity of the vote, charging the majority with illegal action based on a 1922 party ban on factional activity. Taking the issue to the Central Committee, where he held the majority, his supporters overturned the Politburo vote and in addition voted to remove five of the seven Politburo members who had voted against Khrushchev. Only Bulganin and Voroshilov were retained and the Politburo itself was enlarged from eleven to fifteen members, giving Khrushchev a clear majority.

The "anti-party crisis" was a turning point in Soviet history, but the strategic issue in question was never disclosed, except to say that the anti-party group were "shackled by old notions and methods, that they...fail to see the new conditions, the new situation, that they take a conservative attitude and cling stubbornly to obsolete forms and methods of work that are no longer in keeping with the interests of the movement toward communism."¹⁶

In retrospect, from the policy shift that occurred at this time, it is apparent that the issue over which the Politburo had fought was Khrushchev's proposal to adopt a more muscular strategy. A review of subsequent Soviet policy behavior allows reconstruction of its main thrusts.

Two points were cardinal. The first was a decision to utilize the power of a new weapon that would soon revolutionize world politics: the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). The Russians held an early lead in ICBM development and

"to change the leadership in our country...and not poke your noses in our country." See "N.S. Khrushchev, Speech to Visiting Hungarian Delegation," 19 July 1963, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, July 22, 1963, BB 13-14.

¹⁶ *Pravda*, July 4, 1957, 1.

Khrushchev sought to employ this advantage against the United States in geopolitical crises as part of an effort to leapfrog the Containment structure. (Of course, as we know, Khrushchev overestimated Soviet missile capabilities, as would be dramatically demonstrated during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but he in fact subtly employed Soviet missile claims to advantage during the Syrian-Turkish crisis of late 1957.)¹⁷

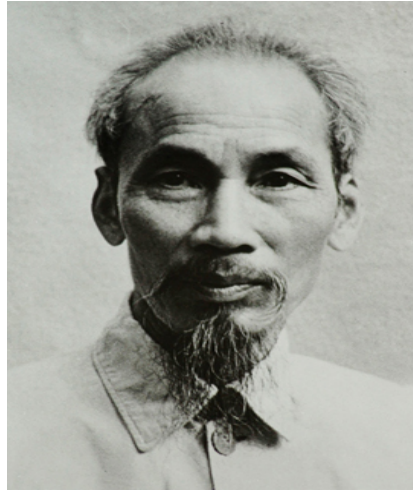
The second point was a decision to adopt an active containment strategy against China to forestall a break. Taking the initiative in the incipient Sino-Soviet conflict, Khrushchev strove to contain China by improving relations with its neighbors, even while attempting, as we shall see, to support Mao's opponents. Thus, he moved to strengthen relations with India, North Korea, and North Vietnam, even Indonesia. The key step was the reversal of policy toward North Vietnam.

Following the failure to hold nationwide elections in 1956, the North Vietnamese leadership had begun to debate the way forward toward South Vietnam. The question was should Hanoi embark on full-scale war against the South, as proposed by the pro-Soviet Le Duan, or move to low-level insurgency, as the pro-Mao Truong Chinh advocated? Through 1956, it seemed that Truong Chinh would prevail.

Mao's resurgence in early 1957, however, persuaded Khrushchev to reverse his earlier position, which led to the "anti-party" crisis in mid-year. In pursuing his containment strategy against China, he offered to support a decision for war that would satisfy North Vietnam's long-term objective of establishing a Big Vietnam. Khrushchev also calculated that war in Vietnam would heal the breach in the Sino-Soviet alliance, if the United States and China were drawn into conflict. It would be a replay of a similar scheme that Stalin had crafted during the Korean War. Mao, hoping to avoid another conflict with the United States on China's border, consistently advocated the lesser of two evils—a

¹⁷ For a discussion of the crisis, see Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria* (London: Oxford, 1965), 303-305.

low-level insurgency against South Vietnam, which would not entangle China, while Liu and Deng supported a big war.



With Soviet support, Ho Chi Minh sought to unify Vietnam under Communist control. *Image: Portrait of Ho Chi Minh, 1946—Wikipedia*

Raging through the second half of the year, following a Maoist-like “hundred flowers” movement and dissident purge, the North Vietnamese had their own “crisis of 1957,” which was only resolved in late December when Ho Chi Minh, Le Duan, and Vo Nguyen Giap appeared together in public, and Truong Chinh faded from view.

The strategic issue had been settled in favor of Moscow.¹⁸

The decision, as became clear in retrospect, was to begin the conflict as a low-level insurgency, and then gradually escalate it into full-blown war. In what would be a continuing and growing dilemma, the Vietnamese realized that a Sino-Soviet split would severely hamper their own plans for revolutionary unification of Vietnam and made every effort to heal the growing breach between Moscow and Beijing.¹⁹

Ho Chi Minh played a crucial role in this effort. Often depicted as neutral between Moscow and Beijing, Ho was

¹⁸ “Hanoi and the Insurgency in South Vietnam,” *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV. A. 5., Tab 3, II, 50-52.

¹⁹ See Ang Cheng Guan, *Vietnamese Communists’ Relations with China and the Second Indochina Conflict, 1956-1962* (North Carolina: McFarland, 1997) for a detailed analysis of this effort.

anything but. A Comintern agent and loyal Stalinist since the 1920s, Ho was in full agreement on the long-term strategic objective of a Big Vietnam, which called for not only the unification of Vietnam, but also the incorporation of Laos and Cambodia into Hanoi's sphere.

Ho's great challenge was to convince Mao that this objective was worthy of Chinese support. While Mao agreed to the Big Vietnam strategy in principle, he did not support it in practice. In truth, Mao's strategic objective for Indochina had already been achieved with the Geneva Accords of 1954, which fragmented the region politically, minimizing the possibility that any threat could emerge on China's southern border.

Determined to pursue the Big Vietnam strategy, Hanoi's first practical steps, taken in great secrecy, were to develop revolutionary bases in South Vietnam and logistical access from North to South Vietnam, which focused on securing control of the territory in Laos and Cambodia through which a crucial part of the supply line would pass. This territory would come to be known as the Ho Chi-minh trail. But the endeavor was complicated by the fact that their ally, the Pathet Lao, had just entered into a political agreement neutralizing Laos—a problem that had to be circumvented.

Laos in Soviet and North Vietnamese Strategy

The irony was that Khrushchev's initial promotion of peaceful coexistence through 1956, reinforced by his proposal to gain South Vietnam's admittance into the UN, even though quickly repudiated, now worked to his advantage. Under the impetus of peaceful coexistence, left-leaning, neutralist Lao Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma had been persuaded to seek a political reconciliation with the Pathet Lao, as prescribed by the Geneva Accords. Their preliminary agreement of August 7, 1956, to establish a coalition government, integrate the Pathet Lao armed forces, and return the border provinces of Houaphan (capital: Sam Nuea) and Phong Saly to central control was,

according to Fall, “beyond a doubt due at least in part to Soviet influence.”²⁰



To work out the details, Souvanna Phouma went first to Beijing on August 19, 1956, and then to Hanoi ten days later. The Chinese supported the agreement; but while insisting that Laos neither allow the establishment of any American bases, nor accept American advisers, they had “no objection” to French bases and advisers permitted by the Geneva Accords. The Chinese were not concerned about a French threat, but wanted no American military presence in bordering Lao.

In Hanoi, on August 29, the Viet Minh were equally responsive, insisting only that the “Pathet Lao be given a voice in Laotian affairs commensurate with its political and military

²⁰ Bernard Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis: The Story of the Laotian Crisis of 1960-1961*, (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 72.

importance.” The agreements reached in Beijing and Hanoi were mutually reinforcing and, it seemed, paved the way for conclusion of an accord with the Pathet Lao that would integrate them and their forces into the Royal Laotian government and return the two key border provinces of Sam Nuea and Phong Saly to central control.²¹

During the ensuing negotiations, however, the Communists procrastinated by making increasing demands. As Fall put it, “it was not entirely clear...whether their obstreperousness...was due to secret orders from outside or to an ideological struggle between various factions within the rebel organization itself.”²² The reason for the Pathet Lao’s procrastination was that in the meantime Khrushchev had changed his strategy toward China in mid-1957, which had major implications for North Vietnam and Laos.

All this was unknown to Souvanna Phouma and the Royal Lao leadership, who, continuing to act on the assumption that peace was possible, pressed for conclusion of the agreement with the Pathet Lao. On October 13, 1957, after much soul-searching on the part of Souvanna Phouma and his associates, and against the advice of the United States, who warned that any coalition government scheme with the Communists would only lead to a takeover, the Laotian parliament approved of the negotiation of a coalition government between Souvanna Phouma and the Pathet Lao.

The change in Soviet strategy meant that North Vietnam’s strategy had also changed—from seeking a resolution of the conflict to preparing for war against South Vietnam. This, in turn, meant consolidating control of the territory along the Laos-Vietnam border for construction of the main supply line to South Vietnam, the Ho Chi-minh trail. Thus, Hanoi’s objective in the ongoing negotiation between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao government changed from simply gaining Pathet Lao

²¹ Ibid., 74.

²² Ibid., 75.

participation in a coalition government, to securing control of the provinces along the trail.

In retrospect, the coalition government agreement of November 12, 1957, was overtaken by events by the time it was signed, even though on paper it brought Pathet Lao representatives into the parliament, integrated military forces, and returned the provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly to government control. To strengthen the deception, even the pro-Hanoi “Red Prince” Souphanouvong, Souvanna Phouma’s half-brother, returned to Vientiane, ending his rebellion against the government. Laos, it seemed, was finally at peace for the first time since the end of WWII.

It was but an illusion. The agreement was simply a deception by the Communists, exactly as Washington had warned. For at virtually that very moment, the Viet Minh and Pathet Lao were commencing the process of consolidating control in village after village, employing classic insurgency war tactics along the border connecting southern Laos and eastern Cambodia to South Vietnam.

The vulnerability of Laos, like all Asian societies, derived from its loose socio-political structure. The central government appointed provincial and district officials, but not village headmen, who were locally elected. Royal Lao government authority did not extend to the village level, except for the periodic and fleeting appearance of the army and tax collectors. It was a relatively simple matter for the Pathet Lao, supported by their North Vietnamese patrons, to gain control of the Laotian countryside.

It was also at this moment that the earliest glimpses of the Sino-Soviet conflict could be seen. At the November meeting of Communist and Workers Parties in Moscow, Khrushchev strove to reach a compromise with an unhappy Mao, including signing an agreement to extend nuclear technology to China. But Mao demanded that Khrushchev take a tough line against the

West. If Khrushchev was attempting to prod China into a confrontation with the United States, Mao, it seemed, was attempting to do the same to Khrushchev. Each sought to employ the stratagem of “sitting on the mountain to watch the tigers fight.”

Insisting that a peaceful transition to socialism was possible in “a number of capitalist countries,” Khrushchev slyly agreed to insert in the Moscow Declaration that “in conditions in which the exploiting classes resort to violence against the people, it is necessary to bear in mind another possibility—the non-peaceful transition to socialism.”²³ That, after all, with regard to South Vietnam and Laos, was a decision he had already made.

Le Duan, returning to Hanoi from the Moscow conference, declared in a speech that the conference proceedings “not only confirmed the line and created favorable conditions for North Vietnam to advance toward socialism, but have also shown the path of struggle for national liberation and have created favorable conditions for the revolutionary movement in South Vietnam.”²⁴ (Lao Dong Party historians would later refer to the fall 1957 meetings in Moscow as “one of the pivotal events in the modern history of Vietnam.”)²⁵

From early 1958, Moscow eclipsed Beijing as the principal source of aid for North Vietnam. In turn, the Viet Minh not only began to send small groups of “organizers” into South Vietnam to reactivate long-dormant stay-behind cells, they also supported the Pathet Lao in extending control of territory in the Laotian border area, including the provinces of Phong Saly and Houaphan.²⁶

²³ “Hanoi and the Insurgency in South Vietnam,” *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV. A. 5., Tab 3, 50-51.

²⁴ *Vietnamese News Agency*, December 7, 1957.

²⁵ “Hanoi and the Insurgency in South Vietnam,” *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV. A. 5., Tab 3, 50.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55, 60.

Even better from their point of view, in the May 1958 National Assembly elections, Pathet Lao political candidates—the Neo Lao Hak Xat (NLHX)—had made substantial inroads, winning nine seats (neutralists won four others) of twenty-one contested. The electoral gains by the Communists strengthened the leftist coalition in the assembly to 21 of 59 seats. Conservative leaders were “badly shaken by the Communist show of strength,” for their hopes for a truly neutral Laos were now at risk.²⁷

U.S. Responses to Crisis: Saigon, Vientiane, Phnom Penh

The Eisenhower Administration only belatedly understood the Soviet Union’s complex and carefully disguised change of strategy toward China and if it was understood never adjusted U.S. policy behavior to reflect it. There were reasons but no excuses for the failure to perceive the change in Soviet strategy as well as the implications in the emerging Sino-Soviet split. While Soviet policy came under greatest scrutiny, Washington’s focus, it seems, increasingly was on Moscow’s strategic weapons program. Perceptions of advantage, or lack of it, in the accelerating missile race would affect all foreign policy choices.

The administration was understandably fixated on the strategic weapons balance, especially the first Soviet use of the missile threat in a coercive manner against the United States during the Syrian-Turkish crisis in the fall of 1957. The administration had sought to prevent Syria’s slide into the Soviet camp, but backed down in the face of Khrushchev’s nuclear bluster.²⁸ CIA Director Allen Dulles later wondered whether the

²⁷ “Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to the Secretary of State,” May 17, 1958, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, eds. Edward C. Keefer and David W. Mabon (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), Document 174.

²⁸ Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria* (London: Oxford, 1965), 303-304.

Soviets had chosen this instance “to capitalize on a moment of possible missile superiority.”²⁹

The administration’s grim and apprehensive interpretation of the strategic weapons balance in the fall of 1957 changed to near euphoria in the spring when it became clear that the tables were turning. The Soviet Union’s missile program suffered a severe setback, delaying deployment of a missile force, especially an ICBM force, by several years.³⁰ At the same time, the U.S. program, after several missteps, began to make rapid progress, insuring at the very least a counterbalancing U.S. capability. Accordingly, from the spring of 1958, as Soviet missile testing ceased, Eisenhower and Dulles conducted U.S. foreign policy with renewed vigor and purpose, exemplified by the Lebanon-Iraq and Taiwan Straits crises.

In the Middle East crisis, Khrushchev’s determined *reluctance* to challenge the United States stood in stark contrast to his aggressive actions the previous fall during the Syrian-Turkish crisis. Then, in the context of the launching of Sputnik and claims of Soviet strategic weapons superiority, he had warned, “when the guns begin to fire, the rockets can begin flying.”³¹ But in mid-1958, Eisenhower moved forcefully to resolve the Lebanon/Iraq crisis by deploying 14,000 troops to Beirut without a shot being fired and the Soviets actually taking a cooperative stance. (This circumstance, of course, would not last.)

In the Taiwan Straits crisis that immediately followed, Beijing announced its plan to invade Taiwan punctuated by artillery barrages against the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu. Eisenhower and Dulles both initially assumed that a visit by Khrushchev to Mao just prior to the outbreak of the bombardment meant that they were collaborating. In a memorandum for the record on September 4, they interpreted

²⁹ Allen Dulles, *The Craft of Intelligence* (New York: Lyons Press, 1963), 165.

³⁰ Lawrence Freedman, *U.S. Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 70.

³¹ “Text of Interview with N.S. Khrushchev,” *NY Times*, October 10, 1957, 1.

Chinese artillery bombardment as “the first phase of a long-range, multi-phased operation” designed to “produce a cumulative rollback effect” of the U.S. position in the Western Pacific from Japan to Southeast Asia.³²

But the Taiwan Straits crisis, too, was settled peaceably when both Khrushchev and Mao separately indicated to Eisenhower that neither wanted war with the United States. Separate Soviet and Chinese demarches to Washington revealed that the Russians and Chinese were *not* collaborating and should have been a clear signal to Eisenhower that there existed opportunities to exploit their differences elsewhere, such as in Indochina, but it did not happen.

Instead, perhaps as a matter of strategic convenience, in 1958 the Eisenhower Administration initially acted on the basis of two dubious assumptions with regard to Southeast Asia: that the Sino-Soviet conflict did not extend into the region and that the insurgencies there were locally inspired. Even though the May 1957 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), *Prospects for North Vietnam* saw Hanoi as totally dependent upon and responsive to the Soviet Union and China, with China having “somewhat greater influence,” it concluded that there was “no evidence that the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communists are at odds over North Vietnam.”³³

The Estimate, in what was a terrible misjudgment, also thought that Hanoi would “restrict its campaign for reunification to ‘peaceful’ means for the next year or two.”³⁴ In other words, U.S. intelligence asserted that Hanoi’s employment of “peaceful” means absolved the North from any responsibility for instability in South Vietnam and Moscow had less influence on Hanoi than Beijing, the very opposite of the truth.

³² Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace; The White House Years, A Personal Account 1956-1961* (New York: Doubleday, 1965) Appendix O, 691, and 293-294.

³³ “U.S. Perceptions of the Insurgency,” *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV. A. 5., Tab 4, 14-15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

Eisenhower's Operations Coordinating Board (OCB), created to oversee and implement presidential decisions, in May 1958 registered the increase in Communist subversive activity, but focused critically on Diem's abrasive "political style" as being responsible for it. Diem, of course, was focused on eradicating opposition groups in Saigon and had allied with the Cao Dai to eliminate the Bin Xuyen and Hoa Hao sects, before turning on the Cao Dai, too. He saw conflict coming from the north and was focused on building a loyal political apparatus, recruiting many family members to his cause.³⁵ But confusing the Communist threat with his "political style" was a grave mistake.³⁶

Lamentably, the administration misperceived the complexity of the crisis in Southeast Asia, and failed to understand the subtle differences in Soviet and Chinese strategy there. Remarkably, the United States blamed its own allies for failure to maintain the peace in the face of an upsurge in military skirmishes, terrorism, and assassinations in South Vietnam and Laos, especially in the area of the Ho Chi Minh trail along the Laotian-South Vietnamese and Cambodian-South Vietnamese borders.

Again, there were reasons but no excuses for the administration's strategic misperceptions. December 1958 had witnessed what was perhaps the worst strategic blunder committed by any American leadership when Eisenhower permitted himself to be bluffed into inaction by Khrushchev over Cuba. This was the story of the Berlin crisis, whose timely outbreak combined with intimations that the Soviet missile program was back on track, dissuaded Eisenhower from going forward with preparations to stop Castro's rise to power in Cuba.³⁷ It was but the first of several instances when

³⁵ "Rebellion Against My-Diem," *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV. A. 5., Tab 2, 12-14.

³⁶ "U.S. Perceptions of the Insurgency, 1954-1960," *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV. A. 5, Tab 4, 19-20.

³⁷ See Earl Smith, *The Fourth Floor* (New York: Random House, 1962), Mario Lazo, *Dagger in the Heart* (New York: Twin Circle, 1968); and Hugh Thomas, *The Cuban Revolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 1977).

Khrushchev would employ a crisis in Berlin to divert action from Cuba.

In Indochina, the Eisenhower Administration responded promptly but cautiously to the increase in insurgent activity in each country. In South Vietnam, the response was to increase the size of the armed forces to 136,000. Unfortunately, Army Vietnam (ARVN) was built more along the lines of a “reduced in scale” U.S. Army, but without heavy equipment, instead of a counterinsurgency force devoted to rural pacification where the Communists were focusing their activity.³⁸

In what was a self-serving intelligence analysis supporting this policy, the Pentagon professed to have “no coherent picture...of communist activities in the period 1956-1959,” nor perceived any “direct links... between Hanoi and the perpetrators of rural violence.” Although citing Bernard Fall, who did perceive a “broad, centrally directed strategy” in the pattern of unfolding terrorist incidents, Pentagon analysts insisted that there was no evidence that Hanoi instigated or orchestrated them.³⁹

Laos was a different story. Depending on one’s perspective, Laos was either the key to the North’s insurgency in South Vietnam, or the cork in the bottle that could stem it. Laos, alone of the Indochina states, bordered on all of the others, as well as China and Thailand. Particularly because it bordered directly on China, Eisenhower was properly extremely reluctant to inject U.S. power openly into Laos. He would take no action that would rekindle in Mao’s mind McArthur’s march to the Yalu River in 1950, which precipitated China’s direct intervention in Korea. Nor would any of his successors.

At the same time, Eisenhower understood that unless the United States could prevent North Vietnam from building a

³⁸ “U.S. Training of the Vietnamese National Army, 1954-1959,” *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV. A. 4., 25-26.

³⁹ “Origins of the Insurgency,” *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV. A. 5., Summary, 2.

secure logistical network to South Vietnam there was no prospect for preventing its fall to the Communists. Working with and through the Royal Lao government, the administration alerted Vientiane to the increase in Pathet Lao activity, but the RLG's passive response prompted the U.S. in frustration temporarily to suspend all economic aid in mid-1958, a step that promptly brought an "agonizing reappraisal" of policy in Vientiane.

The reappraisal led to the resignation of the Souvanna Phouma government in late July. (He would be eased out of Laotian politics for the time being with an assignment as ambassador to France.) Two new anti-communist parties would form the basis of the new government—the Rally of the People of Laos (RPL), led by Phoui Sananikone, and the Committee for Defense of the National Interest (CDNI), a group of young leaders, "young Turks" they were called, which included Generals Ouane Rathikone and Phoumi Nosavan.

The new government formed by Phoui Sananikone on August 18, 1958 excluded the Communists from all posts. Phoui immediately sought to strengthen Laotian ties to Saigon, Bangkok, and Taipei, but not Beijing, Hanoi, or Phnom Penh, and authorized the admission of American military instructors. Although Phoui warned that he would use force to secure control of the border areas, the Laotian army was ineffective, unable to stem the growing influence of the Hanoi-backed Pathet Lao. That task would increasingly fall to the United States.

Throughout this period, the United States had played catch-up. The administration gave money to the Laotian government, supporting its entire defense budget, but could not provide the advice and training necessary to build an effective military force. The Geneva Accords prohibited the introduction into Laos of military bases, advisers, and weapons by any party, except the French, who were authorized two bases and a 5,000-man training mission. But, as Paris was increasingly focused on the growing Algerian War, the French presence in Laos

dwindled, as did their interest in cooperating with the United States, as Charles de Gaulle rose to power.

Accordingly, Washington had substituted a quasi-clandestine Program Evaluation Office (PEO) for a formal military advisory group, staffed it with a few dozen retired military “civilians,” and attempted to provide advice and training, piggybacking on the French presence. Operating from Bangkok and Saigon, the United States attempted to build a Royal Lao “Army” of some 25,000 men and an “Air Force” comprised of a handful of C-47 cargo planes and a few L-20 utility aircraft.⁴⁰

Cambodia offered a third puzzle. While Laos’ response to North Vietnam’s trail building was to shift to the political right in response to Washington’s urging, Cambodia’s response was to shift to the middle. Washington, unable to budge Prince Norodom Sihanouk, regarding him as erratic and unpredictable, quietly encouraged Diem to bring pressure on the Prince to expel the Communists. To engage Sihanouk, Diem chose to create an incident disputing the border, the Steng Truong affair, and fomented rumors of coup plots against him.⁴¹ Washington also encouraged Thai Prime Minister, Sarit Thanarat to cooperate with Diem by exerting pressure on Sihanouk from the west by closing the Thai-Cambodian border.

U.S. policy toward Cambodia backfired. Sihanouk faced a growing dilemma with Hanoi demanding that he look the other way as their agents constructed the Ho Chi-minh trail through Eastern Cambodia, and Saigon and Bangkok demanding that he resist them. While repeatedly publicly condemning the Communists in speeches, Sihanouk chose to leapfrog his dilemma and maintain Cambodia’s neutrality by seeking the support of the Chinese to restrain Hanoi.

⁴⁰ Victor Anthony and Richard Sexton, *The War in Northern Laos: 1954-1973* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1993), 14-17.

⁴¹ U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia Carl Strom doubted “most seriously” that any coup was possible against Sihanouk. See “Telegram from the Embassy in Cambodia to the Department of State,” November 8, 1958, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region, Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 86.

On July 18, Cambodia and the People's Republic of China established diplomatic relations. Sihanouk traveled to Beijing in August for talks with Mao and Zhou Enlai and concluded an aid agreement. To reinforce his neutrality, the prince then traveled to Washington, D.C. at the end of September for conversations with Secretary Dulles. The prince "expressed the hope that Cambodia would have stronger links with the U.S. and his thanks for our understanding of Cambodian policy which is necessitated by his country's special situation." Secretary Dulles had no criticism of Cambodian policy, was "not asking Cambodia to depart from its neutrality policy," and only hoped that Cambodian independence "would not be lost through accident or carelessness."⁴²

The Eisenhower Administration, bent on maintaining the Containment strategy with its assumption of Sino-Soviet cooperation, failed to identify, let alone take advantage of the emerging split between the two Communist giants. It had responded to the early signs of crisis in Southeast Asia by assuming it was locally inspired and providing support to South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. But Washington's effort was modest and not well coordinated, the response in each country quite different, and the results were mixed. When the conflict sharply intensified early in the next year, Washington would already be at a sharp disadvantage. Indeed, the failure to shut down the supply line to South Vietnam portrayed in microcosm Washington's larger failure in Southeast Asia.

⁴² "Memorandum of Conversation," Department of State, September 30, 1958, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 84.

Preparations for War in Indochina

As we have seen, the North Vietnamese leadership had decided in principle on war with South Vietnam at the end of 1957. Before serious military operations could begin, however, there were political and logistical preparations that had to be completed. Logistically, throughout the following year, the North Vietnamese and their Laotian allies worked secretly to consolidate control of the land on the Laotian side of the Laos-Vietnam border and in eastern Cambodia, and began to build the supply line that would sustain military operations in the south. By the end of 1958, enough of the Ho Chi Minh trail, the name the Americans gave to the old Truong Son trail, was completed and enough munitions and supplies had been prepositioned to support the initiation of hostilities.



But there was still the all-important matter of unified Communist-bloc support, especially from China. A low-level insurgency was one thing, but for the North Vietnamese to embark upon a major war without support from China would be a

risky proposition, indeed. By all accounts, they insisted upon full Communist-bloc support for the war. They knew that Mao did not favor an all-out war, despite Ho's efforts to persuade him, as he repeatedly urged a low-level guerrilla insurgency, not a major war.

In December 1958, however, came signs of political upheaval in Beijing that greatly heartened the North Vietnamese. In a sudden and unexpected development, Mao abruptly announced that he had decided to step down from the presidency of the PRC. In addition, Liu Shaoqi and other leaders fully supportive of the war and of China's alliance with the Soviet Union ascended into positions of power. Liu would replace Mao as president.

Chinese politics were on a roller coaster. Earlier in the year, Mao had recovered from the setback at the 8th Party Congress of 1956 to convene an unprecedented second session of that Congress in May 1958. At the plenum that followed, Mao had been able to promote allies into the Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee who supported his strategy of breaking with the Soviet Union and moving onto an independent path. In particular, the promotion of General Lin Biao to the now seven-man Politburo Standing Committee had given Mao the necessary voting support to gain adoption of his strategy of the three red banners: the general line; the Commune program; and the Great Leap Forward.

From mid-year, reflecting the "general line," Beijing had begun to criticize "revisionists" in the Communist movement, an implicit attack on Moscow. There also began the consolidation of China's collective farms into giant communes, part of the effort to build a self-reliant and independent economy, and the "Great Leap" forward, which effectively disengaged the Chinese economy from the Soviet Union.

The almost immediate failure of these grandiose economic policies, whether because of their impracticality, poor planning, or sabotage, not only precipitated chaos and

hardship—including widespread famine—in the countryside, but also prompted Chiang Kai-shek on Taiwan to probe for weaknesses and assess prospects for a return to the mainland. Mao's response had been major artillery strikes against the close-in Nationalist-held islands of Quemoy and Matsu, demonstrating that no invasion could succeed. The bombardment also triggered the "Taiwan Straits Crisis" that led to a brief confrontation with the United States.

The cumulative negative effect of these events persuaded the Chinese leadership to force Mao to relinquish his post of China's president in early December, a setback that was only thinly disguised as undertaken at his own volition.⁴³ Mao had relinquished control of the state apparatus to his archrival Liu Shaoqi, who assumed the presidency, but retained the chairmanship of the CCP and of the military, which enabled him to continue the battle with his adversaries. The outcome was that the PRC was under a leadership divided over strategy in pursuit of contradictory and confusing policies.

As soon as Mao stepped down, the North Vietnamese promptly convened their 15th party plenum to decide that the time was opportune to intensify the war. In a meeting that lasted nearly a month until January 13, 1959, the principal decision of the plenum, as was quickly revealed in captured documents, was to take the war against the South to a "new stage."⁴⁴

Although the North Vietnamese had decided to intensify the war, they attempted to keep the decision secret until they became convinced that Beijing had committed to their support. When Liu Shaoqi formally succeeded Mao as PRC president in January 1959, and promptly extended a major loan

⁴³ Ang, *Vietnamese Communists' Relations with China*, chapter 4, presents a meticulous account of the almost continuous movements of the top North Vietnamese leaders to and from Moscow and Beijing during this period, leaving little doubt that they were fully aware of the implications of the high-level contention between the Russians and Chinese, and of Mao's resignation.

⁴⁴ "Hanoi and the Insurgency in South Vietnam," *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV. A. 5., Tab 3, 55.

to the DRV, and the Soviet Union extended additional loans to both, the North Vietnamese became convinced that they now had full bloc support. They then announced the decision for war in mid-May.⁴⁵

The decision reflected the North Vietnamese calculus that with the pro-Soviet Liu Shaoqi in control of China's state apparatus, Sino-Vietnamese relations were secure. In fact, they had acted prematurely, for the leadership issue was not settled. Indeed, that summer Mao would survive a major attempt to depose him and emerge from the challenge stronger. But that could not be foreseen.

In the meantime, Hanoi continued preparations. To divert attention away from the December decision meeting and to create a broad justification for raising the stakes, the North Vietnamese triggered incidents in South Vietnam and Laos while intensifying propaganda attacks against the United States. The incident in South Vietnam, the Phu Loi incident, focused worldwide attention on South Vietnam's alleged brutality, as part of Hanoi's campaign to discredit Saigon. Just after the 15th plenum ended, on January 18, 1959, Hanoi leveled the charge that Diem had ordered the massacre of *six thousand* people incarcerated at the Phu Loi re-education camp located twenty miles north of Saigon.⁴⁶

Following his drive against the "sects," Diem was mounting a highly effective campaign against the Communists in South Vietnam. By 1958 his forces had rounded up thousands of Communists and their sympathizers and placed those who could be rehabilitated into political re-education camps. It was at one of

⁴⁵ King Chen, "Hanoi's Three Decisions and the Escalation of the Vietnam War," *Political Science Quarterly* (2000), 5-6.

⁴⁶ See *New Facts: Phu Loi Mass Murder in South Vietnam* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959).

these camps, at Phu Loi, on December 1, where “more than twenty Communist detainees were reportedly poisoned.”⁴⁷

As Ang concludes, “the incident was deliberately magnified after the decision was taken at the 15th Plenary session to intensify the revolution in the South.”⁴⁸ The North Vietnamese had been clever. Waiting forty-eight days before making the charge made it difficult to ascertain that Hanoi had grossly exaggerated the number of dead by a magnitude of over three hundred, or determining whether it had been a simple case of food poisoning, or sabotage, as opposed to a *massacre*. In other words, the lengthy delay between the event and the charge made it difficult if not impossible to ascertain the truth. Worldwide coverage in the communist media, however, signaled Moscow’s complicity in the decision to blame Diem for their own decision to go to war.

In Laos, at the same time, the Huong Lap incident appears to have been the product of a coincidence of interest between Hanoi and Moscow. The North Vietnamese needed secure control over the Ho Chi Minh trail to sustain operations in South Vietnam. The Russians supported Hanoi’s effort, but with the additional motive of using Laos, which bordered directly on China, as the battlefield on which to prod the United States and China into conflict.

The Huong Lap incident accomplished Hanoi’s objective, but not Moscow’s. In doing so, however, it precipitated a lengthy Laotian, U.S., UN *and* Chinese reaction that hampered Vietnamese use of the trail through 1959. Hanoi’s forces had seized three villages in the area of the trail around Tchepone near the border of North and South Vietnam and renamed the strip of land Huong Lap.⁴⁹ Following a clash with RLG military

⁴⁷ King Chen, “Hanoi’s Three Decisions and the Escalation of the Vietnam War,” *Political Science Quarterly* (2000), 5-6.

⁴⁸ Ang, *Vietnamese Communist Relations With China*, 99-100.

⁴⁹ Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 115.

patrols, on December 28 Hanoi sent the first of several messages protesting that at the instigation of the United States, Laotian forces were violating North Vietnamese land and air space.

The Royal Lao Government countercharged that North Vietnamese troops were occupying Laotian territory. A flurry of messages followed until January 14, when the RLG announced that it had reported the incident to the United Nations and declared that it was ready to invite neutral parties to investigate. At this point, as Ang notes, Hanoi dropped the issue. "The Huong Lap incident ended as abruptly as it started,"⁵⁰ but skirmishes along the border continued to erupt.

Soviet Strategy and its Complications

At the end of January 1959, the Soviets held their 21st Party Congress. Hailed as a great success in breaking U.S. containment, the conference marked the beginning of a carefully disguised strategic retreat. Recent Soviet foreign policy success had been a direct function of its presumed strategic weapons prowess. Although the record had been spotty, Khrushchev had employed emerging Soviet strategic weapons power convincingly in the Syrian-Turkish crisis of late 1957, but had shrunk from confrontation with the U.S. over the Lebanon-Iraqi and Taiwan Straits crises in the summer of 1958.

However, in triggering the Berlin crisis in November, Khrushchev had folded in the assertion that the Soviet Union would have a deployed missile capability within the six-month deadline he had issued for resolution of the crisis. Thus, through mid-1959, U.S. analysts anxiously scrutinized U-2 and other intelligence data to determine whether the Soviet Union was about to deploy an ICBM.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 93-94.

We now know with some certainty that Khrushchev's policy behavior was closely tied to and dependent upon the success of Moscow's missile program and the lag in the American program. Specifically, his aggressive actions were directly linked to American *perceptions* of Soviet missile progress.⁵¹ His passivity in the Mid-East and Far East crises of 1958 was a reaction to the U.S. recognition that the Soviet Union had had an unexpected setback in its missile program. From March 1958, the Soviets had stopped missile testing, a stand-down that was registered by U.S. intelligence, and continued for an entire year.

Even though testing resumed briefly in April 1959, the missile in question, the SS-6, was deemed unsuitable for full-scale production and deployment. The Soviets decided to cancel the SS-6, which was shifted to the space program, and proceed with development of the second generation SS-7. Shifting to the SS-7, however, meant a further delay in the deployment of a Soviet ICBM and the high probability that the United States would deploy an ICBM sooner than the Soviets did.

The prospect of an American strategic weapons advantage constituted a major crisis in Soviet foreign policy, raising the possibility that the gains made in the previous five years would all be reversed. The 21st Party Congress, then, marked the beginning of a major, if temporary, but well-disguised shift to the strategic defensive for the Soviet Union. An end to tensions would presumably provide the time needed to correct deficiencies in Moscow's strategic weapons program and dissuade the Americans from pursuing an aggressive strategy.

The shift would proceed from the gradual removal of tensions around Berlin, proposals for nuclear-free zones in Europe and the Far East, and lead to Khrushchev's trip to the United States in September. Khrushchev's visit, surrounded by

⁵¹ See the seminal study by Arnold Horelick and Myron Rush, *Strategic Power and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

the hoopla of the spirit of Camp David, appeared to offer hope for détente and the end of the Cold War. In fact, there seemed to be some hope for the success of this strategy, as Eisenhower would agree to a four-power summit in Paris the following May and a trip to the Soviet Union later in the summer.

The turning point in Soviet strategy did not mean that Moscow would move into isolation. Quite the reverse. Khrushchev was still faced with the twin problems of how to protect overextended positions like Cuba, Syria, and Iraq, and how to press forward with the complicated containment strategy against China in relations with North Korea, North Vietnam, India, and Indonesia. Now, however, he would have to do so without a long-range missile capability to back up his policies.

Part of Khrushchev's answer to this problem was deception. The Soviets would keep up a propaganda façade of missile power with highly publicized nuclear tests (of warheads, not missiles); a third Sputnik launch, and a moon shot. Meanwhile, they would seek through proposals to reduce tensions in order to preserve overextended positions.

Another part of Khrushchev's answer was diversion. Knowing that Eisenhower had reduced American conventional warfare capability, Khrushchev sought to stress it. In 1959, he began to play a three-way game involving the continuing attempt to entangle the United States in Southeast Asia, and on-and-off pressure on Berlin to protect Cuba. Cuba became increasingly important in Khrushchev's plans, not only as a forward position to support further penetration in the Western Hemisphere, but also, if the Soviet ICBM program continued to lag, as a means of counterbalancing U.S. ICBM superiority with an IRBM deployment to the island.

A third part of Khrushchev's answer was to support an attempt by the pro-Soviet group in China to unseat Mao. If successful, he would have solved his major problem of reinforcing the Sino-Soviet alliance. The attempt to dislodge Mao was spearheaded by the Minister of Defense, Peng Dehuai, who,

after meetings with Soviet leaders in Moscow and Khrushchev himself in Tirana, Albania, returned to China to challenge Mao at an enlarged Politburo conference at Lushan in July.

Peng attacked the “excesses,” “shortcomings,” and “errors,” of Mao’s policies of the Great Leap and Communes. He charged Mao with being “dizzy with success,” a reference to Stalin’s failed rapid collectivization scheme of 1930. The argument raged for the entire month of July with Mao clearly on the defensive. While enduring the criticism Mao withheld a rejoinder, which did not come until after the Politburo conference at the 8th Party Plenum of the central committee, August 2-16.⁵²

While Mao could not count a majority in the Politburo, he had overwhelming support in the central committee. In the communiqué issued afterward, Mao labeled Peng the leader of a “right opportunist anti-party clique,” seeking to sabotage the dictatorship of the proletariat. Then, at the Military Affairs Conference in September, Mao removed Peng from his post as defense minister and replaced him with his ally, Lin Biao. The attempt to unseat Mao had failed, in fact, strengthening his position.

Insurgency War in Indochina

In Washington, by the spring of 1959 it was no longer possible to ignore the obvious. The major escalation of attacks meant that war was coming to Indochina. A January OCB report concluded that the Communists were “executing a carefully planned campaign of violence aimed at undermining...the Diem government.” The May 1959 NIE on South Vietnam, the first in three years, further noted, “the Communist apparatus in South Vietnam is essentially an operating arm of the North Vietnamese

⁵² Thornton, *China: A Political History*, 253-55.

Communist party... but there have been recent indications of Chinese Communist participation in its operations.”⁵³

The writers of the NIE mistakenly assumed that Chinese participation meant cooperation with Hanoi. Chinese guerrillas, some two thousand strong, were observed, “in small groups scattered along the Cambodian border, the south coast, and in the remote plateau region of the north.” The NIE did not develop this information, but, as would become clear much later, the Chinese were attempting to build independent relationships with the Cambodian and South Vietnamese Communists (Viet Cong) separate from Hanoi’s.

The focus of attention, however, continued to be on Laos. Bolstered by Washington, the Sananikone government decided to take a stand against Hanoi’s border violations. The Prime Minister requested and was given a grant of emergency power from the National Assembly for a year. He declared that the Geneva Accords had been “fulfilled,” were no longer binding, and requested that the United States provide additional assistance.⁵⁴

Eisenhower agreed to increase support for Laos, but declined overt U.S. involvement, continuing with the joint U.S.-French approach. He authorized an increase in the size of the Royal Laotian Army from 25,000 to 29,000 men and also decided to send a 107-man Special Forces group, *White Star*, to provide additional training for both the army and Hmong tribesmen living in the mountains along the Ho Chi-minh trail. One of White Star’s missions was to enlist the Hmong to better ascertain the extent of North Vietnamese infiltration along the trail into South Vietnam.⁵⁵

⁵³ “U.S. Perceptions of the Insurgency,” *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV. A. 5., Tab 4, 20-22.

⁵⁴ Gordon Hardy, *Pawns of War: Cambodia and Laos* (Boston: Boston Publishing, 1987), 61-62.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

Hanoi's decision to take the war to a new stage applied also to Laos. Their justification came in the wake of the RLG's attempt to take control of two Pathet Lao battalions that were to be integrated into the Royal Laotian Armed forces according to the November 1957 agreement. While most of the first battalion surrendered on May 17, the second bolted into the heavily forested and mountainous border area. What followed, as Ang notes, was "a series of military engagements between the Royal Laotian Army and the Pathet Lao, with the assistance of the North Vietnamese."⁵⁶ In fact, the initiative lay with Hanoi.

The increased level of conflict set the stage for yet another Soviet ploy to inveigle an overt U.S. response in Laos. On September 4, the Laotian representative to the UN requested dispatch of a UN emergency force to stop what it called a DRV "invasion" of Laos. In the Security Council, the Soviets objected to consideration of the request, suggesting that the RLG cooperate with the 1954 International Supervisory Control Commission to restore order. As everyone knew, the ISCC was a powerless body, whose membership of India, Poland, and Canada was weighted in favor of the Soviet Union. The Soviets may have proposed this approach to buy time to await the outcome of events in China; Peng's dismissal in September signaled that it was time to increase the pressure in Laos.

After charging by innuendo that the United States was attempting to "turn the country into a foreign base," the Soviets acquiesced (by declining to veto) in creation of a UN observation team for Laos, (but not an emergency military force).⁵⁷ The team, a commission comprised of Tunisia, Argentina, Italy, and Japan, traveled to Laos September 15 to October 13, coincidentally arriving in Vientiane the same day that Khrushchev arrived in the United States.

⁵⁶ Ang, *Vietnamese Communist Relations With China*, 118-19.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

The arrival of the commission led to an almost immediate cessation of the fighting. Not permitted entry into North Vietnamese territory, however, the commission unsurprisingly found no signs of a North Vietnamese “invasion,” but did find evidence of conflict along the border.⁵⁸ Part of this “evidence,” was “rifles and submachine guns of Chinese origin, hand grenades wrapped in Chinese newspapers, uniforms typical of Chinese military attire, and medicines labeled as Chinese government supplies.”⁵⁹

If the Soviets thought this conveniently available “evidence” would be sufficient to provoke a direct U.S. response, they would be disappointed. Eisenhower would not bite, although his military chiefs and other advisers did. The Joint Chiefs, perceiving “an increasingly strong Communist invasion,” urged the president to “recast the policy toward Laos,” and “direct CINCPAC to alert his forces at once and be prepared to implement plans for the defense of Laos.”⁶⁰ Eisenhower rejected this advice and declined to authorize direct military intervention, (as would all presidents who succeeded him), but he did change his approach.⁶¹

It was clear that the tough anti-Communist policy of Phoui Sananikone’s government had failed to stop Hanoi and Eisenhower decided on a new course. The Sananikone government’s yearlong mandate was due to expire in December 1959. In October, Phoui had traveled to New York and Washington to confer with UN Chief Dag Hammarskjöld and American officials in the face of mounting domestic criticism that his anti-Communist approach had brought ruin to the country.

⁵⁸ Paul Langer and Joseph Zasloff, *North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1970), 67-68.

⁵⁹ Ang, 125.

⁶⁰ “Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (McElroy),” September 4, 1959, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 254.

⁶¹ See Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 126ff, for an analysis of the campaign of domestic pressures on Eisenhower for direct intervention.

Sananikone's trip was widely perceived as a failure because his meetings with Eisenhower and Hammarskjöld were cancelled, and the trip was cut short because of the death of King Sisavang Vong. Nevertheless, administration officials held "extensive discussions" with him.⁶² It would appear that these officials conveyed Eisenhower's new policy at this time.

Eisenhower's new approach was to return the Laotian government to neutral status, while increasing support for the Forces Armées Laotiennes (FAL), the newly named Laotian army. The idea was to show a non-aggressive intent through support for a neutral government, while at the same time strengthening the army's capability to control southern Laos in hopes of blocking North Vietnamese use of the trail.

Thus, the policy that unfolded from late in 1959 and continued to the end of Eisenhower's term involved several elements. Through new elections, the RLG would shift away from its openly anti-Communist posture back to the middle. The UN would establish a more or less permanent UN Observer presence in country on the theory that continued publicization of Communist activity would be a deterrent. The United States would provide additional training and assistance to the army, including increased air support, and promote greater Thai and South Vietnamese support, as well. Still inchoate, the concept was to build an unacknowledged, defensive barrier from Thailand, across southern Laos, to South Vietnam.

The shift may have been a response to the growing Sino-Soviet conflict and the assumption that it would temper Hanoi's policy. If so, the assumption would also have had to include the notion that Beijing could exert decisive influence on North Vietnamese actions. In any case, the main tactical, military objective remained to interdict Hanoi's use of the Ho Chi Minh trail. The U.S. Air Force and CIA would attempt to step up

⁶² "Editorial Note," *FRUS*, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Document 283.

arming and training of the FAL, now to be increased to 30,000, and develop an airlift and strike capability for its small air force.⁶³ This would mean an increased involvement of Air Force, CIA, and Army Special Forces personnel, but no deployment of combat troops.



Gen. Phoumi Nosavan, leader of the Forces Armées Laotiennes. The U.S. attempt to simultaneously promote a neutral government and a strong army in Laos degenerated into a civil/military struggle for power.

Photo by John Dominis, via Wikimedia Commons.

U.S. efforts to strengthen the FAL also strengthened its leader, Phoumi Nosavan, who rose quickly to prominence and who would play an increasingly important, and to some extent unpredictable, role in Laotian politics. There was, however, a downside to this approach. Growing U.S. involvement, along with the wealth and resources that accompanied it, quickly polarized

⁶³ Anthony and Sexton, *The War in Northern Laos*, 25ff.

the Laotian political and military elite, a part of which became increasingly antipathetic to the larger U.S. role.

Eisenhower's attempt to ride "two horses"—promoting a neutral government while increasing the strength of the army and its leader Phoumi Nosavan—encountered difficulties and was, perhaps, doomed from the start. The dual approach, with the ambassador promoting a neutral government and the PEO and CIA station chiefs managing the military aid program, produced conflict between them, injected a note of confusion about American policy, generated Lao resentment against the United States, and raised questions about American competence and steadfastness. The result was a growing quagmire in Laos just as the war in Vietnam was entering crisis.

On December 7, 1959, the National Assembly granted Phoui Sananikone a further extension of his mandate, until April 1960, when new elections were to be held. The following week Phoui dismissed his entire pro-U.S. CDNI cabinet, including Phoumi Nosavan. The message, as Fall notes, was "that Laos would henceforth return to a policy of effective neutrality."⁶⁴ Apparently not briefed on U.S. plans, Phoumi Nosavan promptly responded on December 25 by staging a coup d'état, forcing Phoui Sananikone's resignation.

As a continuation of an openly anti-Communist government was no longer in U.S. plans, Washington sought to reverse this development. In early January, the U.S. ambassador, Horace Smith, accompanied by the ambassadors of the UK, France, and Australia, met with new King Savang Vatthana, who had succeeded to the throne after the death of King Sisavang Vong.

The ambassadors urged the king to repudiate Phoumi and move forward with planned elections. The king agreed to go ahead with the elections, but declined to repudiate Phoumi.

⁶⁴ Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 175.

Instead, consulting with him, he sought to placate the U.S. by naming Kou Abhay, a court official, to head a caretaker government until the elections. However, real power continued to reside in Phoumi. The new six-man cabinet was composed of three RPL and three CDNI men, with Phoumi in the powerful position of Defense Minister. Surmounting a rocky start, Laos policy seemed settled by early 1960, but events well outside the confines of Southeast Asia would result in yet another shift of policy.

Conclusion

The Eisenhower Administration struggled to formulate policy toward Southeast Asia in large part because it failed to understand the implications for its policy in the changing global strategic balance. It was in U.S. interest to promote the unity and strength of the Communist bloc because that enabled the United States to justify its leadership of the Western Alliance. But the entire edifice of Communist bloc versus Western Alliance was crumbling. By the late 1950s Britain and especially France had developed nuclear weapons. De Gaulle wanted a seat at the great power nuclear table and West Germany wanted at least a hand on the hand that held the trigger.

The Communist bloc was also crumbling as China began to challenge the Soviet Union for leadership of the world Communist movement. Communist bloc troubles lessened the pressure for western unity and especially American leadership. The Eisenhower Administration officially denied these tectonic changes in the global balance of power, continuing to project a policy environment based on original assumptions. In particular, Eisenhower failed to perceive the implications for U.S. policy in Southeast Asia of the Sino-Soviet split.

A key question to consider at this point is what impact Secretary of State John Foster Dulles' death in May 1959 might have had on the subsequent course of U.S. policy. Had Dulles been alive to offer his advice, would Eisenhower have decided to

make the American position in Laos as inoffensive as possible to the Communists? One could well argue in the negative. The fact remains that Eisenhower's decision to promote Laotian neutrality coupled with the simultaneous Moscow-Hanoi decision to intensify the war in Indochina increased the difficulty of interdicting the Ho Chi Minh trail. That, in turn, put the United States and Laos on a path toward conflict in Indochina they sought to avoid, for which neither was prepared, and which soon would engulf both.