

THE 1954 GENEVA AGREEMENT ON VIETNAM AND THE 1973 PARIS AGREEMENT: DIPLOMACY AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE VIETNAMESE REVOLUTION

Pierre Asselin

During the French and American military interventions in Indochina, Vietnamese revolutionary leaders waged a three-pronged resistance involving military struggle (*dau tranh quan su*), political struggle (*dau tranh chinh tri*), and diplomatic struggle (*dau tranh ngoai giao*). Of the three modes of struggle, the diplomatic one was ultimately most consequential in cementing the victory of the Revolution.⁽¹⁾ The military and political struggles were certainly significant as they helped revolutionary forces secure a variety of gains on and off the battlefield. Ultimately, however, the fate of the French and the Americans in Vietnam, the outcome of the First and Second Indochina wars, and, most importantly, the achievement of national liberation and reunification (that is, the triumph of the Vietnamese Revolution)

⁽¹⁾ Ph.D., Assistant Professor of History, University of Hawaii - Kapiolani.

⁽¹⁾ The term "Revolution" refers to the effort spearheaded by the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP) and initiated by its previous incarnation, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), during World War II. That effort had three objectives: "liberate" Vietnam from the clutches of the Japanese invaders, French colonialists, and, subsequently, Vietnamese reactionaries and American neo-imperialists; achieve national reunification from three territories (Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina) under French rule and two polities after 1954; lastly, institute socialism. The most pressing objectives, national liberation and reunification, were essentially achieved simultaneously in April 1975 with the fall of Saigon; the march to socialism is, by official accounts, ongoing.

were determined at the negotiating table. While the Geneva and Paris agreements did not formalize victory, they created conditions that made it untenable for the French and the Americans, respectively, to sustain themselves and their allies and policies in Vietnam, thus allowing for the eventual fulfillment of revolutionary objectives.

This paper offers a comparative analysis of the origins and implications of the Geneva Agreement on Vietnam of 1954 and the Paris Agreement of 1973. Beyond considering and assessing the circumstances under which they were forged, the paper discusses the ramifications of both settlements as they affected the situation in Indochina generally and in Vietnam specifically. The Geneva and Paris settlements, this paper concludes, were key milestones in the triumph of the Vietnamese Revolution.

In the aftermath of the Japanese surrender at the end of World War II in Asia, on 2 September 1945, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the advent of the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN). His proclamation marked the culmination of a relatively peaceful process known in Vietnam as the "August Revolution," during which

communist nationalists seized the reins of government in Hanoi from the Japanese and forced the abdication of the last Nguyen emperor, Bao Dai, thus ending the ten-centuries old dynastic system in Vietnam. Although its jurisdiction over Vietnam and the rest of Indochina had been effectively abolished by Japan in March 1945, France never assented to the end of its *mission civilisatrice* in Indochina, and was working to repossess the peninsula even as Ho Chi Minh spoke. Unwilling to accept the reimposition of French authority, Ho mobilized Vietnamese nationalist forces and spearheaded a revolutionary movement called the "Resistance against French Colonial Aggression" (*cuoc khang chien chong thuc dan Phap xam luoc*).⁽²⁾

Following the re-occupation of Indochina by the French military and the prompt outbreak of a new war against the occupation in December 1946, the newly-formed DRVN government retreated to the mountains of northern Vietnam at Pac Bo, on the Chinese border. From that position it coordinated a three-pronged resistance to achieve national liberation. The military struggle aimed to wear down French forces by attrition and thereby induce demoralization. The political

struggle, the second prong, entailed the conduct of propaganda activity among the masses to recruit and retain fighters and other partisans and supporters. The diplomatic struggle, the resistance's third front, involved enlisting international support through diplomacy and propaganda, and engaging the enemy in public fora and media to expose its neocolonial designs and pressure the French government to pull its forces out of Indochina and acquiesce in Vietnamese self-determination. The diplomatic struggle might eventuate in serious negotiations with the enemy at opportune times to ratify gains achieved through the political and/or military struggles.⁽³⁾

Throughout the war of resistance, revolutionary leaders relied on the military and political modes of struggle, with mixed results. In November 1953, Ho Chi Minh told a Swedish newspaper the DRVN was prepared to negotiate an end to the war with France. If Paris wanted "to negotiate an armistice in Viet Nam and solve the Viet Nam problem by peaceful means," Ho said, "the people and Government of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam are ready to meet this desire."⁽⁴⁾ A few weeks later, in response to domestic pressures, the Laniel government agreed to peace talks

⁽²⁾ David G. Marr, "World War II and the Indochinese Revolution" in Alfred W. McCoy (ed.), *Southeast Asia Under Japanese Occupation* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Monograph no. 22, 1980), 126-58; and Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Viêt-Nam, de 1940 à 1954* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 81. For a comprehensive account of the events of 1945 see David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁽³⁾ Bo Quoc phong - Vien lich su quan su Viet Nam, *Lich su nghe thuat chien dich Viet Nam, 1945-1975* (Ha Noi: Nha xuat ban: Quan doi nhan dan, 1995), 14-253.

⁽⁴⁾ That portion of the interview is reproduced in Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1976), 154.

with DRVN and other representatives in Geneva to begin on 8 May 1954.⁽⁵⁾

In an ironic twist of fate, Vietnamese nationalist forces overwhelmed the sizeable French garrison at Dien Bien Phu on the eve of that day, 7 May 1954.⁽⁶⁾ Less than twenty-four hours later, the international conference on the future of Indochina convened in Geneva.⁽⁷⁾ Jointly chaired by representatives from Britain and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the conference aimed at ending hostilities in Indochina by finding political solutions to the conflicts between French colonialists and their indigenous opponents in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Besides Britain and the USSR, participants included delegations from France, the DRVN (representing Vietnamese nationalists), and the royal governments of Laos and Cambodia.

After weeks of bargaining, negotiators on 20 July 1954 reached three separate agreements, one for each of the Indochinese states - Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia - which, among other results, ended the First Indochina

War.⁽⁸⁾ In the "Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam," signed by France and the DRVN, the two parties agreed to an immediate cease-fire, the independence of Vietnam, the temporary division of the nation into two regroupment zones separated by a demilitarized zone at the seventeenth parallel, a mandatory regroupment of all forces loyal to France south of that line and to the DRVN north of it within 300 days, and a voluntary regroupment of individual Vietnamese along the same lines.⁽⁹⁾ The two parties also agreed to prohibit the introduction of additional foreign military forces into Vietnam and refrain from retaliating against former enemy combatants. To supervise the implementation of these processes and provisions and monitor violations of them, the settlement created a Joint Commission for Vietnam with representatives from France and the DRVN, and an International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) with representatives from India, Poland, and Canada.

In view of the balance of forces in the country in the summer of 1954, the DRVN inherited jurisdiction over the northern regroupment zone, and France

⁽⁵⁾ On the prelude to the Geneva talks see Robert F. Randle, *Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 3-156.

⁽⁶⁾ The best account of the battle is Bernard B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1966). One of the most recent is Martin Windrow, *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003).

⁽⁷⁾ The Geneva Conference officially opened in April 1954 to discuss the postwar situation on the Korean peninsula. At the conclusion of those talks, on 8 May, the focus shifted to Indochina.

⁽⁸⁾ The French national assembly ratified the Geneva agreements on 23 July 1954 by a vote of 462 to 13, with 134 abstentions (Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 251).

⁽⁹⁾ The text of the agreement is reproduced in United States Senate - Committee on Foreign Relations, *Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam, 90th Congress, 1st Session* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), 50-62.

received jurisdiction below the seventeenth parallel. As the partition of the nation was meant to be temporary, the Geneva negotiations produced an additional document entitled "Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference: On Restoring Peace in Indochina, 21 July 1954" which called for consultations between "the competent representative authorities of the two zones" to begin in April 1955 to set the terms for nationwide elections leading to reunification under a single government by July 1956, at which point all French forces were to be withdrawn from the country.⁽¹⁰⁾

In accepting the Geneva Agreement, the DRVN seemed, uncharacteristically, to compromise, to place at risk the achievement of substantive revolutionary goals. It has often been suggested that it did so reluctantly and under pressure from the USSR and the PRC.⁽¹¹⁾ According to that reasoning, the Soviets and the Chinese "sold out" their Vietnamese allies by insisting that they accept a partition of the country and a highly problematic plan for its reunification because Moscow and Beijing wanted to improve their own relations with western-bloc countries, including the United States (US). Coming on the heels of the end of the

war in Korea, the Geneva Conference, according to this view, presented an opportunity to effect a thaw the Soviets and Chinese then needed in the Cold War. By one Vietnamese account, the Soviets went to Geneva "with the intention of rapidly ending the only hot war remaining in the world after the flames of the Korean war were extinguished." Their aim in doing so was "to bring about favourable conditions for detente" and "international cooperation."⁽¹²⁾ At the same time, the Chinese wanted to play a prominent role in settling a major international problem in order for the only recently founded communist government there to establish its credibility as a major player in world politics.⁽¹³⁾ According to the same Vietnamese source, the Chinese were so eager to make a deal satisfactory to the West that they acquiesced in "a Korea-type solution for the Indochina war, namely, a military armistice without a full political settlement."⁽¹⁴⁾ According to another, more problematic, Vietnamese source, the Chinese pressured the DRVN delegation in Geneva to accept the partition of the nation because Beijing feared Washington would intervene militarily

⁽¹⁰⁾ The text of the Final Declaration is reproduced in United States Department of State, *The Department of State Bulletin*, Vol. XXXI, no. 788 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2 August 1954), 164.

⁽¹¹⁾ See Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991) 38-9; Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 48; and George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), 39-40.

⁽¹²⁾ Le Kinh Lich (ed.), *The 30-Year War, 1945-1975 - Volume I: 1945-1954* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2000), 368. See also Ban chi dao Tong ket chien tranh - Truc thuc Bo chinh tri, *Tong ket cuoc khang chien chong thuc dan Phap: Thang loi va bai hoc* (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia, 1996), 216-17.

⁽¹³⁾ For an elaboration of the Chinese position at Geneva see François Joyaux, *La Chine et le règlement du premier conflit d'Indochine - Genève 1954* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1979) and Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 49-63.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Le Kinh Lich (ed.), *30-Year War*, 368.

in Vietnam if it found the outcome of the Geneva talks objectionable.⁽¹⁵⁾

While Soviet and Chinese pressures may have affected the outcome of the Geneva talks by making the DRVN more accommodating to the proffered settlement, Hanoi had reasons of its own to enter in the Geneva Agreement. Dien Bien Phu may have been a spectacular victory for Vietnamese nationalists, but it was also a bloody and costly climax to a long and devastating war. During the siege, revolutionary forces suffered more than 20,000 casualties, including perhaps 10,000 killed in action, and in the aftermath, those forces were in desperate need of respite.⁽¹⁶⁾ Furthermore, though the outcome of the battle definitively undermined the French position in northern Vietnam, it did little to affect its strength or the strength of the indigenous allies of the French in southern Vietnam. In fact, the colonial apparatus there remained virtually intact. At Dien Bien Phu, the French, anticommunist side lost a battle, not a war.⁽¹⁷⁾ DRVN president Ho Chi Minh recognized that reality in a letter in May 1954 addressed to participants in the Dien Bien Phu campaign. The victory marked “only the beginning,” he

told the participants. “We must not be self-complacent” because the revolutionary struggle “may be long and hard” before “complete victory can be achieved.”⁽¹⁸⁾

More importantly, Hanoi signed the Geneva Agreement and endorsed the Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference because those documents created favorable conditions for the triumph of the Revolution in the whole of Vietnam. In compelling France to recognize the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Vietnam and to withdraw all its forces from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, they effectively ended French colonial rule in Indochina. In the area above the provisional military demarcation line at the seventeenth parallel, the two documents provided for the complete disengagement of France and its armed forces within 300 days, thus formalizing the liberation of the North by revolutionary forces. That was “a major victory for our people’s struggle for liberation,” read a Vietnamese Workers’ Party (VWP) pronouncement, as it allowed for the establishment of a “solid base” (*dat co so vung chac*) to “achieve peace, unity, independence, and prosperity in [all of] Vietnam.”⁽¹⁹⁾ With

⁽¹⁵⁾ *Su that ve quan he Viet Nam-Trung Quoc trong 30 nam qua* (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Su that, 1979), 32.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Jules Roy, *La bataille de Dien Bien Phu*, (Paris: René Julliard, 1963), 568 and Phillipe Devillers and Jean Lacouture, *End of a War* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969), 149.

⁽¹⁷⁾ “We emerged victorious from that war” with the French, one cadre later commented, “but his forces had not been completely destroyed. That is why we signed the Treaty of Geneva” (quoted in J.J. Zasloff, *Political Motivation of the Vietnamese Communists: The Vietminh Regroupees* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1968), 53).

⁽¹⁸⁾ The letter is reproduced in Vo Nguyen Giap, *Dien Bien Phu* (Hanoi: The Gioi, 2000), 8. In a recent interview, Giap himself admitted that the victory at Dien Bien Phu was important only to the extent that it “contributed to the success of the Geneva Conference, which recognised Viet Nam as an independent and unified nation and completely liberated North Viet Nam and the capital city of Ha Noi” (Vietnam News Service, 5 May 2004).

⁽¹⁹⁾ Quoted in Vien nghien cuu chu nghia Mac-Lenin va tu tuong Ho Chi Minh, *Lich su Dang cong san Viet Nam*, Tap II: 1954-1975 (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Chinh tri quoc gia, 1995), 27.

respect to the South, the Final Declaration's emphasis on the fact that the military demarcation line between the two Vietnams did not constitute a political or territorial boundary and the imposition of a July 1956 deadline for nation-wide elections portended its reintegration under peaceful conditions. In the meantime, prohibitions on the introduction of other foreign troops and the establishment of additional military bases constituted strong legal guarantees against outside - i.e., American - interference in the process.

Ho Chi Minh justifiably heralded the Geneva Agreement as a "big victory" (*thang loi lon*). That settlement, Ho insisted, had compelled the government of France to "recognize the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of our country."⁽²⁰⁾ The Central Committee of the VWP subsequently reiterated this view, adding that the Geneva Agreement was a "great victory" (*thang loi vi dai*) for the people and the armed forces of Vietnam. The victory was doubly pleasing since it not only marked the collapse of French military power in Indochina, but signaled "the defeat of the American imperialists's plan to transform Indochina into an American colonial outpost and military base."⁽²¹⁾ Unlike Ho,

whose statement on the subject made no reference to the US, the Central Committee voiced definitive concern about American purposes. Acknowledging that the French position in Indochina generally and Vietnam specifically had been critically undermined by Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Agreement, the Central Committee nevertheless warned that the future of the Revolution remained uncertain because American intentions were unclear. The people, the army, and the Party must remain vigilant as the US might endeavor to sabotage the peace process established by the settlement. Only by keeping "their fighting spirit" well honed could the future of the Revolution be assured.⁽²²⁾

Despite a number of flaws, the Geneva Agreement indeed represented a significant success for the Vietnamese Revolution as it secured what no military endeavor had managed to achieve: mainly, the liberation of half the nation and a commitment from the French to recognize the independence and territorial integrity of Vietnam and pull out of Indochina completely. The Geneva Agreement thus portended more than the end of a conflict; it portended the end a century of French interference and domination in Vietnam. The outcome of the Geneva talks marked a

⁽²⁰⁾ "Loi kieu goi sau khi Hoi nghi Gionevo thanh cong, ngay 22 thang 7 nam 1954," in *Dang cong san Viet Nam, Van kien Dang - Toan tap*, Tap 15: 1954 (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia, 2001) [hereafter referred to as *VKD 1954*], 229.

⁽²¹⁾ "Loi kieu goi của Ban chấp hành Trường uông Đảng lao động Việt Nam, ngày 25 tháng 7 năm 1954," *VKD 1954*, 234. "By their intervention in Indo-China," Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đông added later, "the American imperialists pursued the aim to gradually oust the

French from Indo-China and turn Indo-China into an American colony" (quoted in *American Imperialism's Intervention in Viet Nam* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1955), 21).

⁽²²⁾ "Loi kieu goi của Ban chấp hành Trường uông Đảng lao động Việt Nam, ngày 25 tháng 7 năm 1954," *VKD 1954*, 236.

culmination and significant triumph for the anticolonial struggle. While the Revolution itself was not complete, the VWP took an important step forward through signing the Geneva Agreement.

In the late 1950s, after it became obvious to Hanoi that the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in Saigon - which had forcefully asserted itself as the new government of South Vietnam following the demise of the French - and its American backers would never honor the letter or spirit of the Geneva Agreement and allow for peaceful reunification of the nation, the VWP leadership endorsed the pursuit of armed struggle in the South to precipitate the collapse of the southern polity and bring about national reunification.⁽²³⁾ By 1965, that armed struggle had turned into a major, two-front war directly involving the US and an assortment of other parties.

In response to the deployment of American ground forces in the South and the sustained bombing of the North, the VWP organized and coordinated an effort called the "Anti-American Resistance for National Salvation" (*cuoc khang chien chong My, cuu nuoc*) modeled after the previous effort against the French. Although diplomacy generally and negotiations with the enemy specifically had proven their merits in the war against France, VWP

leaders rejected that approach in the struggle against the Americans and their allies as they believed they could defeat Washington militarily. In an article in *Hoc tap*, a Party journal, Politburo member Le Duc Tho, who was also head of the VWP Organizational Committee, openly denounced those in the Party and government who supported negotiations.⁽²⁴⁾ Consumed by the desire to liberate the South quickly and reunify the nation while building socialism in the North, Hanoi decided that it was impossible to compromise with American aggressors and their Saigon collaborators, and thus sought decisive victory on the battlefield.⁽²⁵⁾

Moreover, Hanoi did not believe the Americans would negotiate honestly. From the VWP's perspective, nothing short of military defeat would disabuse the Americans of the idea that they could maintain their presence and power in Indochina. In a speech before the National Assembly in April 1965, Pham Van Dong explained that in the aftermath of the Geneva Agreement, "the U.S. imperialists [had] gradually replaced the French colonialists in South Vietnam, set up the Ngo Dinh Diem puppet administration, wiped out one by one the opposition groupings, and carried out most ruthless and wicked repressions against the people." The Americans showed no respect for the

⁽²³⁾ Le Mau Han, *Dang cong san Viet Nam: cac Dai hoi va Hoi nghi Trung uong* (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia, 1995), 80-81; Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 9-10; Le Duan, *Ve chien tranh nhan dan Viet Nam* (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia, 1993), 413-14.

⁽²⁴⁾ William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 269.

⁽²⁵⁾ The VWP formalized its commitment to the fulfillment of those revolutionary objectives during its third national congress in 1960. See *Van kien Dai hoi, Tap I* (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Su That, 1960), 174.

rights of the people of Vietnam as they “drowned in blood all patriotic forces aspiring to independence, democracy and peaceful national reunification.”⁽²⁶⁾ Negotiating with a reckless, aggressive foe was futile. “Popular violence is the only way to oppose the violence of the imperialist aggressor.”⁽²⁷⁾

Stein Tønnesson has argued that VWP leaders preferred war over diplomacy because they were internationalists who recognized the Vietnamese Revolution as a vanguard movement with the potential to inspire oppressed peoples around the world. In Tønnesson’s reckoning, Hanoi found the possibility of an “enormous bloodletting” tolerable because its leaders believed that their own struggle “served the cause of revolutionary forces worldwide.”⁽²⁸⁾ There is some evidence for that position. “We have to establish a world front that will be built first by some core countries and later enlarged to include African and Latin American countries,” VWP first secretary Le Duan once told Chinese premier Zhou Enlai.⁽²⁹⁾ On another occasion, the First Secretary stated that fighting the Americans until final victory was the “moral obligation”

of the people of Vietnam “before the international Communist movement.” For the sake of “the spirit of proletarian internationalism” and “the international Communist movement,” the Vietnamese were prepared to suffer and shed their blood. “It doesn’t matter if the process of socialist development in the south of Vietnam is delayed for 30 or 40 years,” Le Duan defiantly asserted.⁽³⁰⁾

In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive of 1968, Hanoi softened this stance and agreed to public and private talks with the Americans, and a year later commenced secret negotiations with the Nixon administration via National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. Then, in 1970, VWP leaders elevated diplomacy as a form of struggle, and thus the secret Paris peace talks, to a par with the military mode. During the ensuing two years, Hanoi wavered between serious negotiation and intensified military activity. Ultimately, problems resulting from the 1972 Spring Offensive and the resumption of sustained American bombings of the North, including savage raids on Hanoi and Haiphong in December 1972, convinced Hanoi to enter into the Paris Agreement with the US.⁽³¹⁾ Le Duan

⁽²⁶⁾ . “Government Report Submitted by Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, April 1965” in *Against U.S. Aggression: Main Documents of the National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 3rd Legislature – 2nd Session, April 1965* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1966), 15.

⁽²⁷⁾ Ibid, 54.

⁽²⁸⁾ Stein Tønnesson, “Tracking Multi-Directional Dominoes” in Odd Arne Westad et al. (eds.), *77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964-1977* (Washington, D.C.: Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 22, 1998), 33-34.

⁽²⁹⁾ Quoted in Ibid, 35.

⁽³⁰⁾ From the transcript of a conversation dated 13 April 1966 between Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Kang Sheng, Le Duan, and Nguyen Duy Trinh reproduced in Westad et al. (eds.), *77 Conversations*, 95.

⁽³¹⁾ On the history of this process see Luu Van Loi and Nguyen Anh Vu, *Cac cuoc thuong luong Le Duc Tho-Kissinger tai Paris* (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Công an nhân dân, 1996); Nguyen Thanh Le, *Cuoc dam phan Pari ve Viet Nam* (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia, 1998); and Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

himself later admitted that the December bombing “completely obliterated our economic foundation.”⁽³²⁾ As had been the case after Dien Bien Phu, the DRVN needed a pause in the hostilities to mend its wounds.

The Paris Agreement was signed on 27 January 1973. As specified in the agreement itself, representatives from the US, the DRVN, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRGRSVN) signed in the morning, and the US and the DRVN signed a meaningfully different document in the afternoon. The Central Committee of the VWP declared that the signing marked the successful end of the anti-American resistance, and portended the end of the struggle in the South for reunification. “Our people in the North and in the South,” the Committee proclaimed, “should be extremely proud and elated by this great victory of the Fatherland.” For the North, peace meant a new opportunity to build socialism. The state could rebuild the economy without the prospect of American bombers destroying what was rebuilt. The people had every reason to be relieved, the Committee continued, but they must remain vigilant. “The Vietnamese revolution has achieved several important gains, but the struggle of our people must continue to consolidate those victories and achieve

still bigger new ones, [and] build a peaceful, unified, independent, democratic and strong Vietnam.”⁽³³⁾

The Paris Agreement secured a variety of important gains for the revolutionary movement and, though it required concessions from Hanoi and its allies in the South, did not compromise revolutionary objectives. It provided for an immediate cease-fire, which revolutionary forces desperately needed. More importantly, it compelled the US to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Vietnam, cease all military activities against the DRVN, dismantle its military facilities in South Vietnam, withdraw its remaining forces within sixty days, help in the postwar reconstruction of Indochina, including the DRVN, and renounce all commitments to political parties and personalities in the South. The agreement made no references to North Vietnamese troops in the South or to their disposition, suggesting that they could remain in place as the Americans departed. Lastly, the agreement reiterated that the military demarcation line at the seventeenth parallel “is only provisional and not a political or territorial boundary,” and prohibited the reintroduction of foreign troops after their withdrawal.⁽³⁴⁾

⁽³³⁾ *Dang lao dong Viet Nam, Loi keu goi cua Ban chap hanh Trung uong Dang lao dong Viet Nam va Chinh phu* (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Su that, 1973), 10,12,14; *Nhan dan*, 28 January 1973; *Bo ngoai giao nuoc Viet Nam Dan chu Cong hoa, Hiep dinh ve cham dut chien tranh lap lai hoa binh o Viet Nam* (Ha Noi: Vu thuong tin bao chi), 5.

⁽³⁴⁾ The text of the 1973 Paris Agreement is reproduced in Asselin, *Bitter Peace*, 203-14.

⁽³²⁾ “Giai doan moi cua cach mang la nhiem vu cua cong doan” in *Dang cong san Viet Nam, Van kien ve cong tac van dong cong nhan*, Tap III (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Lao dong, 1982), 316.

The Paris Agreement thus ratified a number of objectives the military and political struggles had won, including the end of the American presence in South Vietnam, the cessation of offensive activities against the North, and the termination of American support for the Saigon regime. Additionally, the absence of stipulations in the agreement on the status of North Vietnamese forces in the South excluded those forces from the jurisdiction of the agreement. Consequently, if Washington ever considered retaliating against the DRVN because it believed the activities of DRVN forces in the South violated the agreement, it would have no basis in international law for doing so. Hanoi had finessed this issue of withdrawing its "regular" forces from the South; that too represented a major victory for the VWP.

In March 1973, the US withdrew its last military forces from Vietnam and Hanoi completed the release of American prisoners. The Paris Agreement produced little else that was positive or conducive to peace in Vietnam. In light of the refusal of the Saigon regime to hold elections for a new government and the continuing hostilities below the seventeenth parallel, the Central Committee of the VWP concluded at its twenty-first plenary session in July 1973 that peaceful reunification was impossible under current circumstances. It therefore authorized resumption of political and military activity in the South, confident the US would not respond. Certain now that the American

people and Congress would tolerate no new involvement and the White House, paralyzed by the Watergate affair, could risk no new prisoners of war, the Politburo ordered an all-out effort to conquer the South.⁽³⁵⁾ By some estimates, that would take two years to accomplish because revolutionary forces would have to move carefully. One reason for the Politburo's need to act was that after the signing of the Paris Agreement, the USSR had ended and the PRC had substantially reduced aid to the DRVN.⁽³⁶⁾ Moscow and Beijing had thus sacrificed the immediate needs of the Vietnamese Revolution for a new rapport with the US.

As it turned out, however, success came swiftly. Resupplied with weapons, munitions, armored vehicles, and other materiel seized from fleeing South Vietnamese forces who lost the will to fight, North Vietnamese units overran northern and central South Vietnam within three months. Capitalizing on the resulting *élan* and on strategic errors by the Saigon regime - including the premature withdrawal of RVN forces from the Central Highlands - Hanoi assaulted Saigon and the rest of the South in mid-April 1975. Facing defeat, South Vietnamese president Nguyen

⁽³⁵⁾ Ban Chap hanh Trung uong Dang, *Nghi quyét Hoi nghi lan thu 21 Ban Chap hanh Trung uong Dang*, Hanoi People's Army Museum Document Collection, Hanoi, Vietnam.

⁽³⁶⁾ Daniel S. Papp, *The View from Moscow, Peking, Washington* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 1981), 189; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 136.

Van Thieu resigned and fled the country. On 30 April, Saigon was liberated.⁽³⁷⁾

This victory of revolutionary forces was predictable after the signing of the Paris Agreement. Those forces had held the initiative for much of the war, and only the effectiveness of American firepower had contained them. Remarkable, however, was the rapidity of Saigon's collapse. When the Paris Agreement was signed, the DRVN was exhausted economically and militarily, and revolutionary forces in the South were experiencing acute shortages of food and ammunition, among other difficulties. One factor that accounts for the quick turnaround was the cessation of the bombing. Peace in the North allowed Hanoi to bolster its economy and rest and strengthen its armed forces. Moreover, Saigon's evident reluctance to honor the Paris Agreement and allow the war to abate antagonized South Vietnamese liberals and moderates, as well as Buddhists and Catholics, thus undermining support for the regime.⁽³⁸⁾ The rapid erosion of popular support in late 1974 and early 1975 left the RVN with few assets to counter revolutionary forces.

As had been the case in the war against the French, the outcome of the war against the US and its allies was

determined not on the battlefield, but at the negotiating table. There, conditions were created and the stage was set for the conclusion of the war. The Paris Agreement changed the balance of forces in the South as it precipitated the completion of American withdrawal while permitting DRVN troops to remain in place in the South. The fall of Saigon thus occurred in the propitious context created by the Paris Agreement.

In both wars of resistance, the VWP leadership expected to defeat its enemies using military activity as the primary mode of struggle. French and then Americans forces, however, proved more resilient than expected. Unable to neutralize the efforts of those forces by military means, VWP leaders turned to diplomacy to salvage their gains in both wars and achieve revolutionary objectives. The substance of the Geneva and Paris agreements reflected the inability of the military and political struggles to drive France and the US out of Vietnam, but enabled the VWP to build onto the fruits of those struggles. The triumph of the Revolution in 1975 owed as much or more to the diplomatic victories at Geneva and Paris than to anything else. Diplomacy thus proved to be the linchpin of both the anti-French and anti-American resistance movements, and the determinant element in the victory of the Vietnamese Revolution.

⁽³⁷⁾ On North Vietnamese military planning for the conquest of South Vietnam see Bo Quoc phong - Vien lich su quan su Viet Nam, *Lich su nghe thuat chien dich Viet Nam trong 30 nam chien tranh chong Phap, chong My, 1954-1975* (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Quân đội nhân dân, 1995), 467-540.

⁽³⁸⁾ Chen Min, "Myth and Reality of Triangulations: A Study of American Withdrawal from Vietnam" in *Asian Profile*, Vol. 18, no. 6 (1990), 529.