

**TRANSFRONTIER RESERVES FOR  
PEACE AND NATURE:  
A CONTRIBUTION TO HUMAN SECURITY**

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# Chapter 7

## PEACE AND WAR: COOPERATION AND CONFLICT IN 20TH CENTURY INDOCHINA

*Stein TØNNESSON*

### Introduction

This chapter focuses on the history of Indochinese cooperation in the twentieth century. Indochina has been the victim of so many drawn-out wars that it is impossible not to touch upon conflict as well, but the purpose here is to present the main efforts undertaken to promote cooperation among the Indochinese peoples. As little as possible is said about war and as much as possible about cooperation (see Notes 7.1 & 7.2).

Thus, the subject of this article is mainly cooperation between Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam (cf. Appendix 3). However, this cannot be discussed solely as a triangular affair. First, the role of the ethnic minority groups that inhabit many of the border regions must be considered (Condominas, 1989). Second, in certain historical periods Viet Nam was split into two or three separate entities. Third, the role of external powers—such as China, France, and the USA—must be considered. Fourth, Indochinese cooperation must be seen within a regional framework: the relationship between Thailand and Viet Nam, and—particularly for the years since 1975—the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Jakarta).

This chapter builds upon secondary works in English and French as well as upon the author's own researches: those concerning the Vietnamese August 1945 Revolution and the outbreak of the First Indochina War of 1945-1954 (Tønnesson, 1985; 1987; 1988; 1991) and those concerning developments since 1986 (Tønnesson, 1989; 1992).

### Geopolitics and the effects of French colonization

Geopolitically, the Indochinese peninsula is characterized by two main features: (a) the proximity to China; and (b) the relationship (or

rivalry) between the two largest groups, the Thai and the Viet. The peoples and states between Thailand and Viet Nam serve as buffers between the two larger states.

For well over 2000 years, some of the kingdoms on the Indochinese peninsula paid tribute to the Chinese emperor, and the Viet availed themselves of the main aspects of Chinese culture, notably the Confucianist moral code, with its emphasis on education, virtue, harmony, and respect for elders. In the period from World War I to the onset of the Cold War in Asia, two generations of Vietnamese intelligentsia went through a mental transition from Confucianism to Communism—with the aims of modernizing and of overcoming European colonialism. That transition followed similar, though independent, paths in China and Viet Nam (Marr, 1981; Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974; Trinh Van Thao, 1990; Woodside, 1989). One significant role of French colonization was to break the Indochinese countries away from their ancient tributary relationship with the Chinese center, a liberation that would in any event have had to happen at some point during the process of modernization (Fourniau, 1989, p. 18). French rule in Indochina coincided with a period of weakness and internal division in China. When China was united under Communist leadership in 1949-1950, French control of Indochina became doomed, and China reappeared as a major source of influence in Indochinese affairs.

It has always been in the Chinese interest to avoid the establishment of a strong independent state to the south of its borders. Since the only state that could pose a threat to China from the south was the Viet kingdom, there was a community of interest between China and the states further south in counteracting the military strength of the Viet, but this never led to joint military efforts before the second half of the 20th century. Since the decline of the Khmer state of Angkor in the 15th century,

the foreign policies of the Khmer and Lao princes consisted in trying to balance the Thai and the Viet against each other, sometimes trying to call on China for support. In periods when either the Thai or the Viet became much stronger than the other, the Khmer and Lao states were truncated or subjugated. One significant effect of French colonization was to draw a wedge between Thailand and the Indochinese states. By the Franco-Siamese [Thai] Treaty of 1893, a permanent border was established between Cambodia and Laos on the one hand, and between Laos and Thailand on the other (Gay, 1989; Phinith, 1989). The border, which for the most part ran along the Mekong River, separated the Lao-speaking peoples of the east bank from many Lao of the west bank, the latter to some extent assimilated into Thai culture. Except for the period 1941-1946, the western border of Indochina has been respected. The historical importance of the border established by France can be seen from the fact that even today, a century later, there does not exist one single bridge over the Mekong River—although a modern bridge is now finally being built at Vientiane (Johnson, 1992, p. 85).

The over-all effect of French colonization was to seal off the Indochinese states from the rest of the peninsula, and to create a new federal, colonial state with its own internal power relations. The internal power relations in French Indochina were characterized by the overwhelming numerical and educational strengths of the Viet, but the Khmer and Lao élites could no longer draw on Chinese or Thai support when they tried to assert themselves against the Viet. They instead had to rely either on France or on an anti-colonial alliance with Vietnamese nationalists. Although obliged to use a number of skilled Viet in the administration of Cambodia and Laos because of a paucity of educated Khmer and Lao, the French authorities consistently tried to reduce Viet influence by bolstering the position of the Khmer and Lao princes, and by dividing the Viet people into three federated states: Cochinchina in the South, Annam in the center, and Tonkin in the north.

### The federal idea

***The Indochinese Union:*** From its establishment in 1887 to the French recognition of the so-called 'associated states' in 1949, the Indochinese Union constituted an ambitious attempt to establish a French-directed federal state for all Indochinese peoples (Duong Kinh Quoc, 1988; Maspero,

1929, vol. I, pp 28-30). Through heavy taxation, European investments, and the exploitation of rice fields, rubber plantations, and coal mines, France managed to build a state with an elaborate infrastructure of roads, railroads, post and telegraph systems, a handful of European-style towns, a university, an advanced research center (the Pasteur Institute), prisons, schools, a colonial army and militia, and—last, but not least—a much feared police force (*la Sûreté*) (Morlat, 1990).

Administratively, the colonial state was built on a mixture of direct and indirect rule. The capital of the Indochinese Union was Hanoi, where the palace of the Governor General was constructed. The Governor of Cochinchina (a direct French colony with Saigon as its capital), and the four Superior Residents in Hanoi, Hue, Phnom Penh, and Vientiane, were all subordinated to the Governor General in Hanoi. Formally, the Superior Resident was the advisor to the local prince, but in reality the Superior Resident wielded real power himself. The emperor in Hue, his viceroy in Hanoi, and the kings in Luang Prabang and Phnom Penh were mere puppets.

Quite a lot was achieved by the French Indochinese Union, both for good and bad, but the federal concept as such ran into major problems. First, there were the numerical and educational strengths of the Viet. France found it extremely difficult to prevent the Viet from achieving a dominant position in the Indochinese administration even in Cambodia and Laos. The response of the government to this problem was to bar access to influential positions for all natives and to use French personnel in all key positions. This led to serious resentment, chiefly among the Viet. The second problem was the rise of modern nationalism. Vietnamese nationalists demanded the fusion of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina (the 'three Ky'), and this demand ran contrary to the whole idea of a federation consisting of five equal-sized parts. It is difficult to have a triangular federation in which one of the three federees outweighs by far the other two. Third, the only section of the young educated élite that saw the whole of Indochina as its political arena—and therefore tried to establish an inter-ethnic movement of Khmer, Lao, Viet, and other ethnic groups—embraced a political doctrine radically opposed to French colonialism, to Confucian tradition, and to the indigenous bourgeoisie: one of Marxism-Leninism. Indochinese Communists were persecuted, harassed, exiled, and thrown into jail whenever they became a threat to the

authorities, but the strength of the Communists grew all the same. Thus, the two main protagonists of Indochinese integration, the French colonialists and the Indochinese Communists, were constantly at war with each other. If the French Communists had been able to dominate French politics after World War II, they might have allowed for a fusion of the two projects into a Francophilic federal republic of Indochina. Instead came the First Indochina War of 1946-1954.

**The democratized Federation:** It is fair to say that during its whole history the French Indochinese Union consistently failed to build local political support. Apart from low-level bureaucrats, those willing to collaborate with the French belonged mainly to the most conservative of the traditional élites. Towards the end of World War II, General Charles de Gaulle's Colonial Ministry planned, with full support from French Socialists and Communists, to democratize the Indochinese Union while at the same time changing its name from 'Union' to 'Federation'. A federal council, an assembly, and a federal citizenship were to be instituted, and civic rights were to be guaranteed. This came to nothing. The destruction of the French colonial régime in March 1945 at the hands of the Japanese paved the way for the Vietnamese August 1945 Revolution instead of for French reforms. The democratized federation which had been promised by the 'New France' became a castle of sand held together by an occupation army, at constant war with a Vietnamese national army. In 1949, France more or less gave up the federal idea, and in 1954-1955 pulled out of Indochina altogether.

As was the case with the Dutch federal project in Indonesia, the French attempt to establish an Indochinese Federation did not merely fail. It additionally discredited the whole federal idea in the eyes of the population.

**The Indochinese Communist Party:** As mentioned earlier, the Indochinese Communist Party was the only political faction in Indochina which deliberately tried to organize at the Indochinese level. The choice of the party name in 1930, apparently at the instigation of the Communist International, marked the acceptance by the Party of the French Indochinese Union as the arena of its political struggle. The aim was to replace the colonial state with a democratic, socialist state; and the fight for democracy during the Popular Front period (1936-1938) was made in the name of all

Indochinese, not only of the Vietnamese. However, the Communist Party was able to recruit only a very limited number of Khmer and Lao. It was more successful among some of the ethnic groups in the Chinese border region, where the Viet Minh League was to establish its headquarters during World War II.

Part of Ho Chi Minh's genius as a national leader was to play down the 'Indochinism' of his party during the establishment of the Viet Minh League from 1941 onwards, and to abandon the federal concept after the Vietnamese August 1945 Revolution (Tønnesson, 1991, pp 420-422). Ho Chi Minh understood that the mobilization of popular support depended on appeals to the historical memories and to the pride of each of the Indochinese peoples. He also realized that the Communists were not strong enough in Cambodia and Laos to draw these countries into a Communist-led union with Viet Nam. In August 1945, virtually every province in all of Viet Nam was submerged in revolution. But in Cambodia there was only a *coup d'état*; and in Laos the king stayed loyal to the French, so that a faction of princes establishing a 'national' government was unable to assert itself.

In November 1945, the Indochinese Communist Party publicly dissolved itself, and when the party reappeared before the public in the 1950s, it was in the form of three independent parties: one for Cambodia, one for Laos, and one for Viet Nam (the Lao Dong).

As an operational goal, the federal idea ceased to exist in 1949-1950, first with the French recognition of Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam as sovereign states associated with France, and then with the establishment of three independent Communist parties.

## National liberation

The national liberation struggles in Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam were closely connected, but nonetheless followed different paths in the periods both before and after the Geneva Accords of 1954.

**Cambodia:** Cambodia was successful in maintaining a neutral posture during both the First Indochina War of 1946-1954 and the Second Indochina War of 1961-1975. In the whole period from the full independence of Cambodia from France in 1955 until 1970, the Cambodian government managed to keep out of the wars that were ripping Laos and Viet Nam apart. But neutrality had its price. The Cambodian

government had to tacitly tolerate the use of its border regions to the east as sanctuaries for the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front and as channels of provisions from North Viet Nam to the southern struggle.

This led to repeated protests to Phnom Penh from South Viet Nam and the USA. In 1970, the USA supported a pro-Western military coup and initiated an intense bombing campaign against the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front sanctuaries in Cambodia (Shawcross, 1979). The 1970 coup and the United States bombing had a catastrophic impact. The new government in Phnom Penh lacked both legitimacy and a solid basis, and the main effect of the coup was therefore to provoke a sudden, dramatic increase in the power of the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge was a guerrilla-based organization which, despite its alliance with North Viet Nam and the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front, would prove to be strongly anti-Vietnamese, and also extremely violent and ultra-leftist in its internal policies.

**Laos:** Although providing for Cambodian and Laotian neutrality, the Geneva Conference on Indochina of 1954 also set aside two provinces in Laos for military regroupment of the forces controlled by the Hanoi backed national liberation front (the Pathet Lao) that, after a few years of political maneuvering, by May 1959 again had an active guerrilla force. The result was that Laos was torn apart, and from 1959 to 1962 the country was at center stage in international affairs. A special Geneva Conference for Laos in 1961-1962 reached an agreement for continued neutrality under a coalition government.

Since it was virtually impossible to send provisions to the southern insurgents through the demilitarized zone between North and South Viet Nam, North Viet Nam already by 1959 started to build an elaborate southward transportation system through the eastern provinces of Cambodia and Laos: the 'Ho Chi Minh trail'; and the use of that trail increased after the 1962 agreement on Laos. The Plain of Jars in central Laos was subjected to United States bombing beginning in October 1964.

The same regions that were used for the Ho Chi Minh trail were the strongholds of the Pathet Lao, whereas most of the lower Mekong basin was left under the control of the now United States-backed coalition government. In the mountainous regions of Laos and central Viet Nam, the Vietnamese People's Army and the USA (via its Central

Intelligence Agency) rivalled for the allegiance of the ethnic minorities.

This sad state of affairs lasted until 1973, when the Paris Agreement between North Viet Nam and the USA led to the establishment of a new coalition government. At the end of the Second Indochina War of 1961-1975, the power balance tipped in favor of the Pathet Lao. Then the most Western-oriented political leaders fled the country, and the Democratic People's Republic of Laos was proclaimed.

**Viet Nam:** As of 1949, there were two states in Viet Nam that both laid claim to the whole national territory. The one, under Ho Chi Minh, had been established as a result of the Vietnamese August 1945 Revolution, when Emperor Bao Dai abdicated. The other was established in 1949, when Bao Dai returned from exile as head of a new, French-sponsored state. In 1950, Ho Chi Minh's national government was recognized by China and the USSR, and Bao Dai's state by the USA and other Western powers. After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, a temporary compromise solution was reached at Geneva whereby the two states each received one half of Viet Nam, with a demarcation line along the 17th parallel.

Socialist reforms were carried through against much opposition in the North, while in the South Bao Dai had to leave power in the hands of Ngo Dinh Diem, who substituted United States advisors for French ones (Artaud & Kaplan, 1989, pp 267-402; Kaplan *et al.*, 1990). In 1959, the party leadership in Hanoi decided to authorize its southern comrades to resume armed struggle against the South Vietnamese régime. The war that followed from 1961 to 1975 was from the United States and South Vietnamese perspectives a war to defend a non-Communist state against Communist aggression. In the views of the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front and of North Viet Nam, the war was a continuation of the national liberation struggle, now waged against the leading imperialist power in the world and its local puppet.

During the Second Indochina War of 1961-1975, the relations of the two Vietnamese states with Cambodia and Laos were of crucial strategic importance, with much of the war focused on the very area where a transfrontier protected natural area might now be established, the area where the three states meet.

**Cooperation in struggle:** During the entire Second Indochina War of 1961-1975, there was very close cooperation between the Pathet Lao and North

Viet Nam, although the relationship of Hanoi with the Khmer Rouge was less assured. As long as Cambodia remained neutral and tolerated the sanctuaries of the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front in eastern Cambodia, it was not in the interest of North Viet Nam to undermine the authority of the government in Phnom Penh by supporting the Khmer Rouge too openly. A group of Khmer Communists in Hanoi were 'held in reserve', while an independent leadership developed among the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (Becker, 1986; Chanda, 1986; Chandler, 1991; Kiernan, 1985).

After 1970, the North Vietnamese tried to establish much closer cooperation with the Khmer Rouge. But in a period when Hanoi was occupied with diplomatic talks in Paris, with arousing world opinion against United States bombing, with rebuilding the guerrilla forces in South Viet Nam after their enormous losses in 1968, and with utilizing the Paris Accords of 1973 to destabilize the South Vietnamese régime, there was little time left for concentrating on Cambodian developments. The Khmer Rouge leadership was adamant in defending its independence from its Vietnamese comrades, and yet the Khmer Rouge were helped by those same comrades to capitalize on the new balance of forces and to take full control of Cambodia in 1975. With North Vietnamese assistance, an anti-Vietnamese group was thus brought to power in Phnom Penh, which would look primarily to China for support.

### The Mekong basin plan

***The containment of North Viet Nam:*** Before proceeding to what could be considered the Third Indochina War, it is useful to take a few steps back and consider cooperative efforts from the other side during the two previous wars. At one point in 1946, France considered the option of creating a well-integrated federation of Cambodia, Cochinchina, Laos, South Annam, and the highlands of central Viet Nam, while leaving the Viet Minh-controlled Red River delta to its own destiny. It was thought in the policy-making circles of Paris and Saigon that the heavily populated Tonkin delta would become economically asphyxiated, and that the population would hence eventually turn against the Viet Minh and ask for French help (Tønnesson, 1988, p. 119). However, France gave up this plan when its attempt to set up an independent Cochinchinese republic failed, and instead opted for a military surprise action against

the Hanoi-based government of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam and its army.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the USA is likely to have made similar calculations. The USA set out to achieve cooperation among the three non-Communist Indochinese states plus Thailand in containing Chinese and North Vietnamese communism. A Committee for Coordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin (Bangkok) was set up in 1957 within the framework of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East—with Cambodia, Laos, South Viet Nam, and Thailand as members. Enjoying backing from Western donor nations and the United Nations Development Programme (New York) (cf. Appendix 2.3), an elaborate river plan was presented in 1958 (Sewell & White, 1966; White, 1963; 1964).

Any good intentions aside, in the context of that time the plan should be understood in the light of the United States desire to isolate North Viet Nam. The Mekong River has its origin in Tibet, between the Salween and the Yangtze Kiang, and almost half the length of the Mekong is in China. Then the Mekong River forms most of the Laotian border with Myanmar and Thailand, flows slowly through Cambodia until it spreads into the numerous waterways of the South Vietnamese delta. The Mekong basin plan thus required some degree of cooperation between all the countries of continental Southeast Asia—except North Viet Nam. A rhetorical offer was made to North Viet Nam for its cooperation, but the interest that the population of the Red River delta might have in regulating the Mekong would pertain only to indirect effects such as migration opportunities, guarantees for the provision of rice when the northern harvest was insufficient, or the taxation that a unified state might impose on a richer south. All of these factors presupposed the national unification of Viet Nam, as well as a high degree of regional cooperation. No such factor was present in the 1950s and 1960s. North Viet Nam rejected the offer, and the Mekong basin plan never really got off the ground. The neutrality of Cambodia and of Laos were stumbling blocks in the United States efforts to contain communism in North Viet Nam through regional cooperation.

***The Interim Committee:*** After the unification of North and South Viet Nam in 1975-1976, the Mekong basin plan became more interesting to Hanoi as a means of binding the three Indochinese countries together and of improving its relations

ed Viet Nam therefore took amese seat on the Mekong owever, in 1978 Cambodia maining three countries ttee with an interim status, uch.

, the political conditions for n should be more favorable ve been some disagreements ailand and Viet Nam (and and the Bangkok-based nittee)as to its reorganization 992). Nevertheless, it ought t only to readmit Cambodia, e membership from the four include all of the riparian o also include China and also be possible to strengthen he project can move towards consideration for the interests population involved. It is e flooding of huge populated ude irrigation projects in the river on a scale that would ge in the delta region (soil alt water). The recent Chinese : Yangtze Kiang may perhaps spiration, but indeed also as environmental and societal manipulation of the flow of

#### idal war

inese states went socialist in se who presumed that the iests would try to implement alist formula of the 1930s (M. ie cooperation of Viet Nam et Nam with the post-1978 , were based—at least for nition of the national inde ntry. Agreements of friend- negotiated by Viet Nam with endix 4.1), and with Cambod endix 4.2), were made on a 'ietnamese influence in the ghboring countries was or f 'special relationships' with specific purposes, and not as in the 1930s and 1940s it had o give Cambodia and Laos

each a status resembling those of the republics in the USSR, the post-1975 'special relationships' resembled those between the USSR and the nominally independent socialist states in eastern Europe.

***The Khmer Rouge:*** In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge leaders were opposed to any Vietnamese influence. During their short rule (1975-1979) they carried through a far more radical collectivization program than had ever been contemplated in Viet Nam, with mass killings of genocidal proportions. Once the Khmer Rouge were certain of Chinese support, they also launched an aggressive policy towards Viet Nam with raids across the border. This led Hanoi to the fateful decision to invade Cambodia unilaterally, in December 1978, and to impose upon it a friendly government. Although liberating Cambodia from a genocidal régime, the invasion condemned Viet Nam to diplomatic and financial isolation for more than a decade.

***The Third Indochina War of 1978-1989:*** From the perspective of peace and development, the period in Indochina from 1978 to 1989—an era that must be termed the Third Indochina War—is almost as tragic as those of the previous decades. That period included: (a) two invasions and one drawn-out guerrilla struggle; (b) a decade-long interruption of relations between China and Viet Nam; (c) a steady flow of refugees, and the establishment, for the first time in history, of a widespread Indochinese diaspora; (d) economic and diplomatic isolation of the Indochinese states; (e) dependency on inefficient Soviet and East European aid; (f) failed agricultural experiments; (g) failures to industrialize; (h) continued reduction of the forests despite efforts to replant trees (Collins *et al.*, 1991; Nguyễn Quang, 1989; Pfeffer, 1989; Vidal, 1989); and (i) rapid population growth, destined to continue at full speed into the next century (Vu Kien & Vu Ngoc Bình, 1989).

***Security structures within Southeast Asia:*** The 'special relationships' that Viet Nam established with Cambodia and Laos were meant to create a security structure as well as a framework for economic cooperation, but accomplished neither. In fact, a more significant effect of the grip that Hanoi had on Indochina may have been to drive the rest of Southeast Asia into productive and lasting cooperation within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Joyaux, 1991, II, pp 191-194).

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