

PROTECTING THE BRITISH EMPIRE: THE DILEMMA OF SENDING MILITARY AID TO FRENCH INDOCHINA (1948–1950)

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Over the last decade a number of detailed studies have emerged that consider Britain's concern towards French Indochina during the First Vietnam War. This article seeks to add to this Anglo-centric approach. By using archival evidence from Britain and France, the article traces the evolution of Britain's internal debate, between 1948–1950, to supply military aid to France to combat the threat of communism in Indochina. Britain and the United States had both previously supplied military aid to France in 1945, to enable French colonialism to return to Indochina. It is not the purpose of the article to debate this controversy, but rather to reassess the British decision to supply aid to the French in the fight against international communism and explain the context for an eventual French decision to snub British aid in preference for being supplied by the United States.¹

Keywords: Britain; France; the United States; China; Asia; Vietnam War; communism; military intervention

I

By April 1948 the British Ministry of Defence (MOD) had not yet determined a line in the Far East beyond which it was necessary to stop communist advances. However, the MOD regarded that neither plans nor action without the United States (US) was pointless.² A Foreign Office (FO) paper prepared for Ernest Bevin, the foreign secretary, to take to The Hague concluded: "There is no direct evidence of coordination by Russia of communist activities throughout

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¹ For an analysis of British and American military aid to Indochina in 1945 see T. O. Smith, "Resurrecting the French Empire: British Military Aid to Vietnam September 1945 – June 1947," *University of Sussex Journal of Contemporary History* 11 (November 2007): 1–13.

² The National Archives, Public Record Office, London (hereafter: TNA), Defence Office (hereafter: DEFE) 5/10, COS(48)74(0), 6 April 1948.

Southeast Asia, though it is strongly suspected.”³ During talks at the US State Department, Maberly Denning, the assistant under-secretary of state at the FO, noted that the US appeared to be “toying” with some kind of intervention in Indochina. He advised that there was little that Britain or the US could achieve for the moment due to the “hypersensitive” nature of the French.⁴ Back in London J. O. Lloyd, at the FO, briefed Bevin that if Indochina fell to communism then this would have grave implications for Britain’s regional security. He advised that the US was “fully alive” to the potential danger and that the US was equally persuaded that it would be catastrophic if France was to relinquish Indochina.⁵

Nevertheless, in the autumn of 1948, France requested British assistance to supply ammunition for their troops in Indochina. The MOD declined. The FO urged the MOD to reconsider the French request, as communist success would threaten Britain’s strategic position in Southeast Asia.⁶ Again the MOD refused. It considered that its own stocks were below minimum requirements.⁷ The US, however, was not as reticent. It declined to allow the direct export of arms and ammunition to Indochina, but it permitted “the free export of arms to France ... for reshipment to Indochina or for releasing stocks from reserves to be forwarded to Indochina.”⁸

II

As tension on the world stage escalated, Britain and France exchanged information about communist leaders who had been expelled from Indochina; it was feared that they might cause further agitation in the region.⁹ Also the FO increased Malcolm MacDonald’s remit, as commissioner-general for Southeast Asia, to include defence matters.¹⁰ The British Embassy in Paris observed that the US appeared unwilling to take on any direct liability for Southeast Asia.¹¹

³ Ibid., Foreign Office (hereafter: FO) 371/69694/F10350/727/61, revised brief for the secretary of state for The Hague, Lloyd, 17 July 1948.

⁴ Ibid., FO 959/20, Grey to Gibbs, 24 June 1948.

⁵ Ibid., FO 371/69657/F10613/255/61, Lloyd to Bevin, 26 July 1948.

⁶ Ibid., FO 371/69657/F12048/255/86, Lloyd to Battye, 10 September 1948.

⁷ Ibid., FO 371/69658/F14021/255/86, Battye to Lloyd, 4 October 1948.

⁸ “Department of State Policy Statement on Indochina, 27 September 1948,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1948*, vol. 6, *The Far East and Australia* (Washington D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1974), 43–49.

⁹ TNA, FO 959/23, Gibbs to Scrivener, 19 October 1948.

¹⁰ Ibid., FO 371/69690/F15948/286/61/G, minute by Christofas, 15 November 1948.

¹¹ Centre des Archives d’Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence (hereafter: CAOM), INDO/NF/1395, British Embassy in Paris aide-memoire, 29 December 1948.

For Britain there was not yet the perception of a crisis and there was no need to prepare for any possible intervention. A commanders-in-chief Far East paper saw no threat of military invasion in Southeast Asia. But, reflecting British commitments, it stressed the psychological need to resist communism in Hong Kong.¹² The Cabinet Far Eastern Committee considered that it could do nothing to prevent a communist victory in China, but instead it recommended that Britain should build up opposition to communism in adjacent nations. This would be achieved by solving internal political disputes, developing the region's economic position and building cooperation between interested nations.¹³ Indochina was regarded as a "poor buffer" to a communist China.¹⁴

Bevin met Robert Schuman, the French foreign minister, in London on 13 and 14 January. The two men discussed various means for the exchange of information between Britain and France through MacDonald's office in Singapore.¹⁵ On 20 January Harry S. Truman, the US president, announced that "Point Four" assistance (technical aid for underdeveloped countries) was a vital weapon in the war against communism.¹⁶ The British chiefs of staff (COS) considered that the strategic implications of a communist victory in China necessitated the prompt settlement of the crises in Indochina and Indonesia: to protect the unity and military potency of the British Commonwealth and the Western European nations. The COS concluded that the guiding principle of Britain withholding military aid needed to be maintained until appropriate political circumstances developed.¹⁷

The French welcomed any exchange of information with Britain about the communist leaders and arms smuggling. France also supported joint economic development and technical aid, through MacDonald and the United Nations Economic Commission for the Far East. France therefore urged Anglo-French-US cooperation in Southeast Asia to combat regional communism and the potential threat from a communist victory in China.¹⁸ MacDonald complained to Lord

¹² R. Aldrich, *British Intelligence, Strategy and the Cold War 1945–51* (London: Routledge, 1992), 323.

¹³ TNA, Cabinet Office (hereafter: CAB) 134/285, FE(0)(48)8th meeting, 4 December 1948.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, CAB 21/1947, FE(0)(48)34(Revise), 10 December 1948.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, FO 800/465/FR49/4, conversations between secretary of state for Foreign Affairs and French minister for Foreign Affairs in London 13–14 January 1949, 14 January 1949.

¹⁶ E. Colbert, *Southeast Asia in International Politics 1941–1956* (London: Cornell University Press, 1977), 141.

¹⁷ TNA, CAB 21/1947, COS(49)29, 20 January 1949.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Colonial Office (hereafter: CO) 537/4832, FE(0)(49)9, 24 February 1949.

Killearn, his predecessor, about the urgency of the situation: "I am afraid that we are building with diplomacy rather than with military and economic resources."¹⁹

On 9 March a FO assessment of Indochina noted an increased level of US anxiety about Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, at the same time, the US still did not believe that it had any responsibility for counteracting communist influence in the region. The FO therefore concluded that a bilateral Anglo-French understanding was needed. British and French military commanders had already met to exchange military intelligence.²⁰ Clement Attlee, the British prime minister, established and chaired a ministerial committee to consider China and Southeast Asia.²¹

MacDonald held private talks with Léon Pignon, the French high commissioner for Indochina, who seemed to understand the urgency of the matter. He regarded that France and Bao Dai, France's nationalist Vietnamese leader, had between six months and a year before the Chinese communists dominated the northern frontier.²² About 18,000 irregular Chinese troops had already begun operating in Northern Tonkin.²³ The FO was not convinced. It doubted whether France would be able to reinforce successfully any troop numbers in Indochina – 14,158 French troops had already been killed.²⁴

When Bevin travelled to Washington to sign the North Atlantic Treaty, he advised Dean Acheson, the US secretary of state, that in conjunction with Anglo-American labours in Europe and the Middle East, Britain and the US should promote an atmosphere of collaboration and autonomy in Southeast Asia within a vision of creating a universal defence against Soviet growth in the region. He urged Acheson that such containment could sway the position in China away from the communists. Bevin cautioned that Asian Governments would also have to be included in any cooperative action. Technical advice and assistance, capital, goods and arms would need to be provided.²⁵ H. A. Graves, at the British Embassy in

¹⁹ University of Durham, the papers of Sir Malcolm MacDonald (hereafter: MJM) 22/6/80–81, MacDonald to Killearn, 26 February 1949.

²⁰ TNA, FO 371/75961/F3519/1015/86, memorandum on Indochina by Blackham, 9 March 1949.

²¹ *Ibid.*, FO 371/76013/F4286/10119/61G, Dening to Bevin, 16 March 1949; FO 371/76013/F4286/10119/61G, minute by Barclay, 17 March 1949.

²² *Ibid.*, FO 371/75962/F4920/1015/86, MacDonald to Dening, 29 March 1949.

²³ *Ibid.*, FO 371/75961/F4667/1015/86, Clarke to FO, 30 March 1949.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, FO 371/75962/F4949/1015/86, minute by Palliser, 7 April 1949; F5164/1015/86, British Embassy in Paris to FO, 7 April 1949.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, FO 800/483/NA49/10, secretary of state's conversation and meetings during his trip to Washington for the signature of NATO 30 March – 8 April 1949, chapter 9 "Indonesia," annex "Southeast Asia," memorandum by secretary of state to Acheson at the meeting on 2 April 1949.

Washington, sensed US wariness to the proposal: “they have burnt their fingers so badly in China that they are at present in a very cautious mood.”²⁶

On 4 April the North Atlantic Treaty was signed creating a regional defence organisation for Europe. Bevin, however, did not regard this as a precedent for other regional defence alliances. Three weeks later he stressed to Attlee that there were too many internal conflicts at this stage for a Southeast Asian version of NATO.²⁷ Instead, Britain eagerly sought to ascertain the direction of US policy in the region. In May a working party commenced a study of the Far East in the context of Truman’s “Point Four” pronouncement.²⁸

Tension mounted again during August. The British Defence Coordination Committee Far East (BDCC) warned that a French withdrawal from Indochina would damage British security in Southeast Asia.²⁹ Similarly, Colonial Office officials feared that a French withdrawal from northern Indochina would facilitate communist supplies into Burma and Thailand. They also cautioned that a French withdrawal from Cochinchina and Cambodia would result in “a direct strategic threat to Malaya.”³⁰ The commanders-in-chief Far East considered that Britain should support the French in Tonkin to enable a friendly government to be established which would ultimately allow France to redeploy forces for the defence of Europe.³¹

The US continued to be anxious about communist activity in Southeast Asia. On 8 September US Vice-Admiral Oscar Badger, commander of Naval Forces in the Far East, warned that if the Chinese communists were not stopped in Southern China then Indochina, Burma and Malaya would fall.³² The next day Dening, during talks at the State Department, dropped the bombshell that in a Vietnamese radio broadcast Ho Chi Minh had thanked Stalin for the supply of arms against the French.³³

²⁶ Ibid., FO 371/76023/F5743/1023/61G, Graves to Dening, 16 April 1949.

²⁷ A. Bullock, *Ernest Bevin Foreign Secretary: 1945–51* (London: Heinemann, 1983), 744–745.

²⁸ Aldrich, *British Intelligence*, 324.

²⁹ TNA, CO 537/5013, COS(49)256, 3 August 1949.

³⁰ Ibid., CO 537/5013, Harris to Briggs, 13 September 1949.

³¹ Ibid., DEFE 5/15, COS(49)281, 1 September 1949.

³² W. C. Gibbons, *The U. S. Government and the Vietnam War*, pt. 1, 1945–1960 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 58.

³³ Memorandum of conversation by the assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs, Butterworth, 9 September 1949, in *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1949*, vol. 7, pt. 1, *The Far East and Australia* (Washington D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1975), 76–79.

In London, a COS report by the Joint Planning Staff (JPS) considered the implications of a French withdrawal from Indochina on British interests in Southeast. It concluded that:

A partial French withdrawal from French Indochina would adversely affect British interests in Far East and Southeast Asia. A complete withdrawal would have the most serious implications for which the release of several French divisions for service elsewhere would be an inadequate compensation.³⁴

The FO panicked and British plans to start the aerial photography of Indochina were halted.³⁵ The FO feared that had this gone ahead then this would have been interpreted “as a prelude to active intervention” by the communists.³⁶

On 18 October British long-term policy to encircle Soviet Russia and communist China and to prevent the increase of communism in South and Southeast Asia was set out in a cabinet paper:

The creation of some form of regional association between all the Governments in the area for political, economic and (if necessary) defence cooperation, this association working in partnership with the association of the North Atlantic Powers on the one hand and with Australia and New Zealand on the other.³⁷

Bevin briefed Attlee that communist success in China had resulted in the Chinese communities of Southeast Asia favouring a communist government. He felt that there would now be added pressure from communists in all of the other areas of Southeast Asia.³⁸ Attlee agreed.³⁹ The Cabinet endorsed the policy of working towards regional, political and, if necessary, military cooperation through economic coordination.⁴⁰

From 2–4 November a conference of British regional representatives in Southeast Asia met in Malaya. The general diagnosis was that the region had entered a state of emergency. Action against communism could not be put off any

³⁴ TNA, CO 537/5013, JP(49)87 (final), 22 September 1949.

³⁵ Ibid., Air Ministry (hereafter: AIR) 8/1584, GHQ Far East Land Forces to COS, 3 October 1949.

³⁶ Ibid., AIR 8/1584, VCOS meeting, 10 October 1949.

³⁷ Ibid., CAB 134/288, FE(0)(49)81 final, 15 December 1949.

³⁸ Ibid., FO 800/445/COM49/42, Bevin to Attlee, 18 October 1949.

³⁹ Ibid., FO 800/465/FR49/15, Attlee to Bevin, 22 October 1949.

⁴⁰ Aldrich, *British Intelligence*, 324.

longer, and a policy of economic cooperation would take too long to bear any fruit. But the conference considered that in the immediate future the Chinese communists were unlikely to attempt any belligerence against their neighbours.⁴¹ However, the delegates felt that China would sponsor guerrilla operations in Southeast Asia and that Indochina was the weakest part of the region. They feared that if the communists dominated the rice producing areas of Indochina, Siam and Burma then this would suffocate the region.⁴² The conference concluded that the current exchange of military intelligence with the French was too limited. It recommended that this be reconsidered by the COS or the BDCC.⁴³

Britain considered Indochina's immediate problems as military and political rather than economic.⁴⁴ MacDonald desired that the British and US Governments should issue a declaration similar to Acheson's concerning Hong Kong, that if the Tonkin border were attacked then the crisis would be referred to the United Nations Security Council.⁴⁵ Denning and Sir William Strang, the permanent under-secretary at the FO, were against this idea and therefore did not pursue it further.⁴⁶ Following a visit to Indochina, General Revers, the commander-in-chief of the French Army, informed the British military attache in Paris that it was essential for Britain and France to develop a united policy towards the communist threat.⁴⁷ The COS considered that this placed British policy in the region in an awkward situation. If Britain failed to recognise communist China then this could cause the Chinese population in Malaya and Singapore to regard Britain as anti-Chinese. But recognition could be disastrous for Bao Dai and thereby lead to a French withdrawal from Indochina – which would then threaten Singapore and Malaya.⁴⁸

In December the FO withdrew its objections to the British aerial survey of Indochina.⁴⁹ Meanwhile the US decided upon a Military Aid Programme Bill of \$75 million for Southeast Asia.⁵⁰ This provided the financial wherewithal for Truman's "Point Four." General Carpentier, the French commander-in-chief in Indochina, indicated that during a forthcoming visit to Paris, he would call upon the British

⁴¹ TNA, CAB 134/288, FE(0)(49)81 final, 15 December 1949.

⁴² Ibid., Prime Minister's Office (hereafter: PREM) 8/964, MacDonald to FO, 6 November 1949.

⁴³ Ibid., CAB 134/288, FE(0)(49)82 final, 8 December 1949.

⁴⁴ Ibid., CAB 134/288, FE(0)(49)72 final, 10 November 1949.

⁴⁵ Ibid., FO 371/75977/F18202/1026/86, minute by Scott, 1 December 1949.

⁴⁶ Ibid., FO 371/75981/F18832/10345/86, minute by Lloyd, 19 December 1949; FO 371/75981/F18832/10345/86, minute by Strang, 22 November 1949.

⁴⁷ Ibid., FO 371/75991/F17742/1201/86, Harvey to FO, 23 November 1949.

⁴⁸ Ibid., DEFE 4/27, COS(49)179th meeting, 30 November 1949.

⁴⁹ Ibid., AIR 8/1584, COS(49)180th meeting, 2 December 1949.

⁵⁰ A. Short, *The Origins of the Vietnam War* (London: Longman, 1989), 76.

Embassy to discuss the possible exchange of secret military information, joint Anglo-French staff talks in the Far East and British supply of military equipment to Indochina. In discussion the COS were in favour of achieving a triangular Anglo-French-US policy towards Indochina and believed that the FO should contact the State Department. The COS supported the idea of Anglo-French talks provided that the boundaries were approved in London ahead of time.⁵¹

At a second meeting, three days later, the COS decided that any submission by the French for the supply of equipment should be given favourable contemplation. It ordered that the JPS and the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) should consider how best to execute Anglo-French staff talks with representatives in Indochina. The COS supported the idea that an aerial survey of Indochina should be conducted as soon as possible.⁵²

The French asked the BDCC whether Britain would support France if Indochina was attacked by China, if Britain was not committed elsewhere.⁵³ On 16 December, ministers on the China and Southeast Asia Committee chaired by Attlee ruled that Britain was not to become militarily involved in Indochina. The FO therefore instructed the COS not to undertake any talks that implied military action by Britain. The FO agreed that Indochina was vital in the battle against communism. But it stressed that the FO was now giving political support for the development of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam instead. Thus the FO welcomed the idea of talks with France on Southeast Asian defence. But it insisted that Britain would also need to inform the US that Britain would not now become militarily involved in Indochina even if Chinese communists invaded Vietnam.⁵⁴ The Ministry of Supply contacted the Colonial Office and indicated that “if the scale of the attack is increased by the occupation by the enemy of bases in Burma, Siam or Indochina the defences [in Singapore] should be increased.”⁵⁵

III

On 27 January, the COS finally ordered the aerial survey of Indochina to commence.⁵⁶ Britain’s financial bankruptcy and own commitments in the region meant that any long-term burden could only be borne by the US. Britain’s ability to

⁵¹ TNA, DEFE 4/27, COS(49)183rd meeting, 9 December 1949.

⁵² *Ibid.*, DEFE 4/27, COS(49)184th meeting, 12 December 1949.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, DEFE 6/11, JP(49)162(0)(TofR), 14 December 1949.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, DEFE 5/18, COS(49)458, 29 December 1949.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, CO 537/6278, Lamb to Morgan, 7 January 1950.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, DEFE 4/28, COS(50)3rd meeting, 6 January 1950; DEFE 4/28, COS(50)10th meeting, 16 January 1950; DEFE 4/28, COS(50)16th meeting, 27 January 1950.

commit military assistance to Indochina was thus proved to be limited. In London, Philippe Baudet, the chief of the Asia-Oceania Section of the French Foreign Ministry, met with Denning and enquired about the outcome of talks between British and French generals concerning the provision of military equipment for Indochina. As the French were eager to pursue the enquiry, Baudet suggested that a military attache at the French Embassy should contact the British Ministry of Defence.⁵⁷

Britain agreed to the recognition of the Associated States of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam on 7 February.⁵⁸ René Massigli, the French ambassador in London, therefore requested for Britain to contemplate further steps such as the appointment of a military representative or mission to Indochina. Bevin declined:

Our hands were already full with the problems of Malaya and Hong Kong, and there might, I added, be intensification at the present time of the Malaya question in particular.⁵⁹

On 10 February the US controlled Export-Import Bank granted Indonesia a \$100 million loan.⁶⁰ US willingness to supply large quantities of financial assistance was not overlooked by the French. Six days later the French ambassador in Washington called upon Acheson and proposed a triangular Franco-British-US statement to protect the northern Indochinese border. He also suggested that talks should be established between France and the US concerning possible economic and military aid.⁶¹

Both the State Department and the French Embassy in Washington questioned the British Embassy about supplying military equipment to Indochina. The State Department had already indicated that the US was close to making a decision to contribute either military or economic aid. It was eager for Britain to supply light bombers to the French. The British Embassy recognised the US trap that “the State Department would like to avoid too close association with items whose provenance would be so patent.” The Embassy therefore replied that it could not deal with such a request. It warned the US that Britain was already overstretched with Malaya and Hong Kong.⁶²

On 21 February Massigli delivered to Strang a list of urgent military requirements for Indochina. He indicated that France was hoping for US aid in

⁵⁷ Ibid., FO 371/83595/F1015/16, minute by Denning, 25 January 1950.

⁵⁸ Ibid., PREM 8/1221, CM(50)4th, conclusions minute, 4, 7 February 1950.

⁵⁹ Ibid., FO 371/83628/F1051/47, Bevin to Hayter, 8 February 1950.

⁶⁰ A. J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 178.

⁶¹ TNA, FO 371/83655/F1201/6, Franks to FO, 21 February 1950.

⁶² Ibid., FO 371/83655/F1201/5, Graves to Scott, 14 February 1950.

equipping local forces on a long-term basis.⁶³ British assistance, however, would be limited. The British Embassy in Washington was instructed to discuss short-term economic aid on an “*ad hoc*” basis in order not to prejudice discussions with the Commonwealth ... and aid to Southeast Asia as a whole.”⁶⁴ In contrast, US planners concluded that as the US had recognised Bao Dai it was now imperative to prevent him from failing.⁶⁵ The US had lost its political leverage upon France.⁶⁶ Its blind commitment to containment thereby gave the French increased influence over the US.⁶⁷

A British Army team visited the International Horse Show in Phnom Penh. MacDonald believed that this helped to improve British prestige in Indochina.⁶⁸ The JIC, in London, concluded in its regional assessment that communist China posed no threat to Hong Kong, Indochina or Formosa.⁶⁹ Bevin therefore regarded any Anglo-French staff talks on external defence in the Far East as premature.⁷⁰ In parallel the COS believed that Britain could not spare any land or air forces for Indochina. There were possibly limited naval resources available. But these would be for offshore operations only.⁷¹ Due to Britain’s global commitments, Bevin was unsure how much Britain could actually do.⁷²

Schuman therefore attempted to snare Bevin into an aid commitment by drawing attention to the \$75 million the US had allocated to Southeast Asia. He indicated that France did not know what percentage it could legitimately expect. But any military equipment Britain and the US allocated for Indochina would definitely have an excellent psychological effect on French forces. Bevin avoided the snare. Although he agreed that France was a worthy contender for US aid, he failed to mention any direct British commitment.⁷³

⁶³ Ibid., FO 371/83655/F1201/7, FO to Paris, 23 February 1950.

⁶⁴ Ibid., FO 371/83644/F1103, Denning to MacDonald, 3 March 1950.

⁶⁵ R. H. Spector, *The U. S. Army in Vietnam: Advice and Support: The Early Years* (Washington D. C.: Center of Military History, 1983), 102.

⁶⁶ Telegram from Acheson to the Embassy in the UK, 30 January 1950, in G. Porter, ed., *Vietnam, the Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, 1979), 224–225.

⁶⁷ *The Pentagon Papers The Defense Department History of United States Decision Making on Vietnam*, vol. 1, Gravel edition (Boston: Beacon, 1971), 75–81.

⁶⁸ MJM 29/3/83, MacDonald to Harding, 16 February 1950.

⁶⁹ TNA, DEFE 4/29, COS(50)28th meeting, 17 February 1950.

⁷⁰ Ibid., DEFE 5/20, COS(50)81, 2 March 1950.

⁷¹ Ibid., DEFE 4/29, COS(50)35th meeting, 6 March 1950.

⁷² Ibid., FO 800/465/FR50/5, record of a conversation between Bevin and Schuman during the French presidential visit to Britain, 7 March 1950.

⁷³ Ibid., FO 800/462/FE50/10, record of a conversation between Bevin and Schuman during the French presidential visit to Britain, 7 March 1950.

The COS now decided to consider international developments against a possible wartime strategy.⁷⁴ The commanders-in-chief Far East and MacDonald recommended the development of a “regional security-plan” that included friendly Asian countries. They also reassessed Malaya’s defences.⁷⁵ On 17 March parameters for Anglo-French information talks between the commanders-in-chief Far East and the French authorities were finalised by the JPS. The talks were designed to fortify French morale, assess military needs, comprehend French plans and exchange information on internal communist threats.⁷⁶ A JPS paper considering a strategy for a major war in 1957 ominously cautioned: “Indochina will have a Communist Government in control of most of the country.”⁷⁷

At a COS meeting on 24 March, Denning held that Schuman had attempted to blackmail Britain into aiding the French in Indochina with the threat that any failure to assist France would result in a complete withdrawal from Indochina. Lt.-General Nevil Brownjohn, vice quarter master general at the MOD, concluded that it was impossible now to separate the internal and external threats to Indochina. Denning explained that the FO believed that it was credible to discuss the internal Indochinese situation in any Anglo-French information talks but that Britain would not be drawn into assisting France in Indochina. He added that Bevin had already expressed to Schuman that it was unwise for Franco-British-US interplay to appear to be resolving the crisis without consulting with other Asian powers.⁷⁸

On 29 March the MOD asked Attlee to consider the military implications of a further deterioration in Indochina. It had already concluded that as France was overstretched, a decisive victory was unlikely. But it also considered that a Chinese offensive was unlikely in the near future. The MOD feared that if France did not receive any assistance a withdrawal was possible and that any subsequent communist victory would threaten the Malaya campaign. France was suffering heavy casualties but it could not inflict a severe defeat on the communists due to the communist tactic of conducting a war of attrition. Time was on communism’s side.

The COS concluded that everything possible should be done to support the French. But it acknowledged that Britain would be unable to contribute any forces and could only offer discussions. These would be on an informal basis and were supported by Bevin and Attlee.⁷⁹ The commanders-in-chief Far East were therefore

⁷⁴ Ibid., DEFE 5/20, COS(50)89, 9 March 1950.

⁷⁵ Ibid., CO 537/6264, COS(50)89, 9 March 1950.

⁷⁶ Ibid., DEFE 4/30, COS(50)49th meeting, 24 March 1950.

⁷⁷ Ibid., CO 537/6264, annex to JP(49)108(0), 22 March 1950.

⁷⁸ Ibid., DEFE 4/30, COS(50)49th meeting, 24 March 1950.

⁷⁹ Ibid., PREM 8/1221, MOD to Attlee, 29 March 1950; note by Attlee, 30 March 1950.

instructed to proceed.⁸⁰ The secretary of state for Commonwealth Relations thought that it was important to inform the Commonwealth Governments. He feared that there was an implicit danger in engaging in talks to boost French morale if Britain could not actually offer any assistance.⁸¹ Dening held that if the Commonwealth Governments were informed of the talks in advance then this could encourage deeper suspicion, especially from India. He favoured releasing a statement afterwards that indicated that British officers had only been to Saigon in order to study the developing situation.⁸²

The COS began planning for the evacuation of British subjects in the event of a war in the Far East.⁸³ On 19 April the COS decided that the US should be informed of the Anglo-French talks before they commenced.⁸⁴ The JPS had already prepared a brief on British defence policy in Southeast Asia and the Far East. It stated that, although the defence of Indochina in a major war would have to depend upon French security forces, Indochina was strategically important. A communist victory however would act as a potential stepping-stone for communism to spread into the rest of Southeast Asia. This could threaten Malaya. In these circumstances, France would need to acquire aid from the US. The JPS concluded that it was vitally important for Britain: to encourage France to complete a transfer of power to indigenous leaders in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos; to monitor India's reaction; to aid France with intelligence information, arms and other equipment; and to aid France with material assistance.⁸⁵

MacDonald lobbied the FO concerning the need for a further discussion about the provision of material aid. But even if a list could be agreed upon immediately, it would take nearly six months to deliver due to current stock levels, logistics and finance. MacDonald, the British consul-general's staff in Saigon and the French high commissioner's staff in Indochina all supported the need for an immediate token shipment of British equipment. MacDonald proposed that a consignment of wirelesses should be shipped from Singapore to Indochina. MacDonald contrasted the British commitment to Indochina with the continued reports of Chinese arms being delivered across the China-Tonkin frontier. MacDonald considered that recent communist operations in Cochinchina had been intended to cause as much chaos and destruction as possible before any US aid

⁸⁰ Ibid., PREM 8/1221, MOD to Attlee, 29 March 1950; SAC(50)3, 31 March 1950.

⁸¹ Ibid., PREM 8/1221, Cabinet China and Southeast Asia Committee note, 5 April 1950.

⁸² Ibid., CAB 21/3280, Dening to Garner, 19 April 1950.

⁸³ Ibid., DEFE 5/20, COS(50)120, 12 April 1950; DEFE 5/20, COS(50)120, 12 April 1950.

⁸⁴ Ibid., DEFE 4/30, COS(50)61st meeting, 19 April 1950.

⁸⁵ Ibid., DEFE 4/31, COS(50)70th meeting, 2 May 1950.

arrived; although these operations had failed, any delay in assistance to the French and the Indochinese would enable the communists to reinforce and attempt a second offensive. He concluded “he gives twice who gives swiftly.”⁸⁶

On 8 May the US announced that it was prepared to donate military equipment, as well as diplomatic and economic aid to Indochina.⁸⁷ Meanwhile Britain prepared to host the London Conference of bipartite and tripartite meetings between ministers of Britain, France and the US. Against the escalating threat from communism in Europe, the Cabinet believed that it was important to build up the military strength of France for the defence of Western Europe.⁸⁸ Schuman reviewed the current situation in Indochina. He insisted that as France was serving the interests of the free world it should receive urgent and extensive military assistance. The Franco-British-US ministers agreed that although the general security of Southeast Asia was strategically important to the US, both Britain and France possessed direct responsibility for the region. The ministers linked the conflicts in Indochina and Malaya with the conviction that in either area a violent ejection would be a catastrophe. Britain reaffirmed its commitment to its interests in the region. France declared likewise but with active cooperation from the British and US Governments.⁸⁹

Meanwhile General Carpentier informed Britain that France had not yet given permission for Anglo-French information talks on Indochina to proceed. The COS requested that the FO pursue the matter with the French Government.⁹⁰ Four British officers, however, had already embarked upon a two-week attachment to French units in Indochina as part of a local exchange programme.⁹¹ Similarly Admiral Sir Patrick Brind, commander-in-chief Far East Station, had already been in Indochina for talks with the local French naval and military establishment.⁹² In addition, the French believed that Brind had offered British naval assistance to patrol the Indochinese coast to prevent contraband reaching the communists.⁹³

⁸⁶ MJM 20/9/26–27, MacDonald to FO, 8 May 1950.

⁸⁷ Short, *Origins of the Vietnam War*, 81; TNA, FO 800/462/FE50/22, conversation between Bevin and the Indian high commissioner, 26 May 1950.

⁸⁸ TNA, CAB 128/17, CM29(50)3, 8 May 1950, in R. Hyam, ed., *The Labour Government and the End of Empire: 1945–1951*, pt. 2, *Economics and International Relations* (London: HMSO, 1991), 357–360.

⁸⁹ TNA, FO 800/449/CONF50/25, The London Conferences May 1950, summary of conclusions of the 5th Tripartite Ministerial Meeting, 13 May 1950.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, DEFE 4/31, COS(50)80th meeting, 22 May 1950.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, FO 371/83647/F1192/9, consul-general Saigon to Southeast Asia Department, 13 June 1950.

⁹² *Ibid.*, FO 371/83593/F1013/7, Gibbs to Bevin, 8 June 1950.

⁹³ CAOM, INDO/NF/1403, Massigli to Ministry for France Overseas, 1 June 1950.

MacDonald stressed to the BDCC that the safety of Indochina represented the key to the whole region. If Indochina fell to communism then Thailand and Burma would unquestionably follow. Thus communists would control the rice producing nations of Southeast Asia and threaten the frontiers of India and Malaya. General Sir John Harding, commander-in-chief Far East Land Forces, therefore concluded that France urgently needed further military equipment for Indochina.⁹⁴ MacDonald recommended that Bao Dai must also receive British or US aid.⁹⁵ Britain had already offered to sell military equipment to France. But this had not been accepted as the French were waiting to see what they could get free of charge from the US.⁹⁶

IV

Due to the sterling crisis, Britain could not afford to donate military equipment to France. But it was suggested during a BDCC meeting in Singapore that because of security concerns for Malaya Britain should “adopt a policy of making a free gift to the French of such British equipment as is essential to the successful conduct of their campaign.” Government policy had been constructed around the fear that if an exception were made for Indochina then this would cause a watershed of free arms requests from Thailand, Burma and others. However the BDCC still thought it better to offer a little aid immediately.⁹⁷

The French were hampered by their own economic needs and therefore lacked sufficient sterling reserves to be able to purchase British equipment.⁹⁸ The COS pondered the issue. It concluded that further consideration should be given to either donating or selling at a reduced rate equipment to France.⁹⁹ The French had already been informed as to which requests for military equipment Britain could realistically meet. The COS noted that the lack of a reply indicated that the French were still waiting for a decision from the US.¹⁰⁰ The Defence Committee of the Cabinet, chaired by Attlee, continued to advocate charging France for surplus British equipment, but doubted whether sufficient equipment reserves could be

⁹⁴ TNA, CO 537/6277, CO to Higham, 21 June 1950.

⁹⁵ Ibid., CO 537/6277, draft, Morgan to Butler-Bowden, June 1950.

⁹⁶ Ibid., CO 537/6277, Marnham to Murray, 23 June 1950.

⁹⁷ Ibid., CO 537/6277, BDCC to COS, 23 June 1950.

⁹⁸ Ibid., DEFE 4/32, COS(50)95th meeting, 26 June 1950.

⁹⁹ Ibid., CO 537/6277, COS(50)95th meeting, 26 June 1950.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., DEFE 4/32, COS(50)98th meeting, 28 June 1950.

found to meet French demands.¹⁰¹ As the French were not forthcoming with any further specific requests the COS recommended that the MOD should contact the French to ascertain their needs.¹⁰²

The Indochinese states remained perilously weak. US army intelligence predicted that within a year the communists would be sufficiently strengthened by Chinese aid that France might have to withdraw from northern Indochina.¹⁰³ The US Senate had already passed the Economic Cooperation Authorisation for 1951, which permitted the \$100 million dollar China aid fund to be distributed in the “general area of China,” and Truman proposed that a further \$75 million fund be allocated for military assistance.¹⁰⁴ On 29 June, eight US Dakota transport planes arrived at Saigon airport. The first US consignment under the military aid programme had arrived in Indochina.¹⁰⁵

Britain did not have the stamina or the resources to compete with the US in meeting the crisis in Indochina. The Cabinet therefore fully approved of US intervention in Indochina.¹⁰⁶ The COS already held that British foreign policy should achieve unison between the British Commonwealth, the United States and France. This would enable a reduction in the French commitment to Indochina and would allow for more resources to be allocated to the defence of Western Europe.¹⁰⁷ Thus, despite the escalation of the crisis in the Far East, the COS were primarily concerned with Europe. With the arming of the East German Police for what Bevin believed could be possible use in a civil war, he predicted: “how troublesome it could be if there were a big civil war in Indochina and one in Europe at the same time.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ Minutes of a meeting of the Defence Committee of the Cabinet held in the prime minister’s room at the House of Commons, 28 June 1950, in H. J. Yasamee and K. A. Hamilton, eds., *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, ser. 2, vol. 4, *Korea June 1950 – April 1951* (London: HMSO, 1991), 7–10.

¹⁰² TNA, CO 537/6277, COS(50)100th meeting, 30 June 1950.

¹⁰³ Spector, *U. S. Army in Vietnam*, 125.

¹⁰⁴ TNA, FO 371/84604/FZ1193/7, E. D. (S. A.)(50)(61), Cabinet Committee on Economic Development (Overseas), Working Party on Economic Development in South and Southeast Asia, “United States Policy towards Southeast Asia,” 26 June 1950.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, FO 371/83593/F1013/8, Gibbs to Bevin, 1 July 1950.

¹⁰⁶ Minutes of a meeting held in the minister of state’s room on 30 June 1950, in Yasamee and Hamilton, *Documents on British Policy*, 21–24.

¹⁰⁷ TNA, CAB 131/9, DO(50)45, Ministry of Defence, 7 June 1950, in Yasamee and Hamilton, *Documents on British Policy*, 411–431.

¹⁰⁸ *Hansard House of Commons Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 475, London, 24 May 1950, col. 2089–2090.