NIE 35

Probable Developments in Indochina During the Remainder of 1951

7 August 1951

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: JAN 2008

Central Files

COPY NO. 131

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR ONE

SECRET

(b)(3)

DEC 3 1951

NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

PROBABLE DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA DURING THE REMAINDER OF 1951

NIE-35

Published 7 August 1951

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

SECRET

NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

PROBABLE DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA DURING THE REMAINDER OF 1951

NIE-35

The intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Joint Staff participated in the preparation of this estimate. All members of the Intelligence Advisory Committee concurred in this estimate on 2 August.

PROBABLE DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA DURING THE REMAINDER OF 1951 *

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the current situation and probable developments in Indochina during the remainder of 1951.**

CONCLUSIONS

1. The current military stalemate in Indochina appears likely to continue at least through the end of 1951, unless the Chinese Communists directly intervene with forces over and above the estimated 30,000 "volunteers" which they can introduce as individuals or in small units in probable continuation of present assistance to the Viet Minh.

2. If the Chinese Communists directly intervene with large forces over and above those introduced as individuals or in small units, the French would probably be driven back to a beachhead around Haiphong. The French should be able to hold this beachhead for some time, unless the Chinese Communists achieve air superiority.

3. Direct Chinese Communist intervention is not likely as long as the Chinese Communists are extensively committed in Korea.

4. If hostilities in Korea end, or the Communist commitment there can be substantially reduced, there will be an increased likelihood of direct Chinese Communist intervention in Indochina. On balance, however, we consider such intervention unlikely during the period under review.

DISCUSSION

The Current Situation

5. The present military situation in Indochina is one of stalemate. In the period since General de Lattre de Tassigny assumed command, the Franco-Vietnamese forces have repulsed the Viet Minh drive to conquer Tonkin, and firmly hold the key Red River delta around Hanoi and Haiphong (see map). French successes apparently resulted from: (a) the energetic leadership of General de Lattre, who revived flagging French morale; (b) MDAP aid; (c) the arrival of French reinforcements; (d)

* The emphasis in this estimate is on probable developments in the key area of Vietnam, and particularly Tonkin which is the focal point of present military operations.

** This estimate covers only the first part of the 1951–52 dry season, the season most favorable for large-scale operations. Available intelligence did not permit a reliable estimate beyond the end of 1951.

the inexperience at large-scale warfare of the Viet Minh guerrillas; and (e) the limitations of Chinese Communist support. The inadequate staff work and lack of supporting arms of the Viet Minh forces placed them at a serious disadvantage in pitched battles with the French, who were strengthened by the timely arrival of US military aid, including aircraft, napalm bombs, patrol and landing craft, and ground combat materiel. The Chinese Communists, upon whom the Viet Minh forces are dependent for logistical support, have been supplying them with ammunition, light weapons, and some artillery. Some 10,000 Chinese personnel have been infiltrated into the Viet Minh in cadre, technical, and advisory capacities. This number is believed to be increasing. However, the Chinese Communists, while apparently maintaining roughly the same level of material assistance as of last December, have not intervened directly or with substantial "volunteer" forces or noticeably stepped up arms aid. Under these circumstances General de Lattre, drawing reinforcements from other areas of Indochina and skillfully using mobile reserve forces, was able to hold the Franco-Vietnamese military position intact and to inflict heavy losses on the Viet Minh.

6. Political developments, however, have been less favorable. Despite the gradual French transfer of certain responsibilities, the Vietnamese government has been slow to develop and has continued to suffer from a lack of strong leadership. It has had to contend with: (a) French reluctance to relinquish ultimate control of political and economic affairs; (b) lingering Vietnamese suspicion of any French-supported regime, combined with the apathetic and "fence-sitting" attitude of the bulk of the people, which has deprived the government of broad-based popular support; (c) the difficulty common to all new and inexperienced governments, of training the necessary personnel and building an efficient administration; and (d) the failure of factional and sectional groups to unite in a concerted national effort.

7. In January 1951 the opportunity arose of forming a broad-based cabinet representing most non-Communist group in Vietnam; instead Premier Huu formed a cabinet composed primarily of members of his own pro-French faction. Although Huu has displayed some administrative skill and his government has gained slowly in effectiveness, the weakness of the Huu cabinet and its alleged "French puppet" status have limited its appeal to Vietnamese nationalism and have alienated strong nationalist groups, including the powerful Dai Viet group in Tonkin. Communist control of much of the country and Viet Minh infiltration of large areas under nominal French control have also discouraged many people from openly allying themselves with the government.

8. Efforts to create a National Vietnamese Army—an essential prerequisite to growth in the political stature of the Vietnam government and to an ultimate non-Communist solution in Indochina—have made some progress, and Vietnamese units have performed creditably in recent engagements. French intention to proceed with the building of the Vietnamese Army is evidenced by their assignment of sizeable French cadres and training missions to assist in organization and training. Plans call for the expansion of the army from its present strength of 54,000 to 100,000. However, it will take considerable time before the planned forces are organized, trained, and equipped in battalion units, and even longer before effective divisional units can be put into the field. Progress in the formation of the army is retarded by lack of capable officers at all levels of command, shortages of equipment, and the apathetic attitude of the population. At the same time, differences of opinion between the Vietnamese leaders and the French, particularly over who will exercise control over the Vietnam Army, have prevented full cooperation and maximum progress in the army's development. Delay in establishing a Vietnam Army under Vietnamese control has been a contributing factor in limiting popular support of the Vietnamese regime.

9. On the opposing side, the political structure of the Viet Minh has been reorganized upon more openly and aggressively Communist lines, following the usual pattern of political development in other Communist coun-

tries. The Communist Party role has been strengthened, with strict party-liners coming more into the foreground and Ho Chi Minh himself apparently playing a less important part. This development may have been timed to forestall any "nationalist-deviationist" tendencies in the Viet Minh, and as a prelude to greater Chinese Communist participation in and direction of the movement. In the absence of further military victories, Viet Minh popular support appears unlikely to increase. While we are unable to determine whether the Viet Minh is actually losing any of its popular appeal, the regime apparently is dependent more and more on tightened Communist controls. These tighter controls may prevent defections and facilitate the exploitation of people already under Viet Minh control.

Viet Minh and Franco-Vietnam Capabilities

10. The improved morale of the French forces, scheduled reinforcements, the gradual increase in the Vietnamese Army, and the continued arrival of MDAP aid will probably give the French, by October 1951, the capability of launching a limited offensive and possibly of recovering some lost territory. However, the French and Vietnamese will not, in the period under review, be able decisively to defeat the Viet Minh.

11. On the other hand, we consider it highly unlikely that the Viet Minh can seize the Hanoi-Haiphong area, even with continuation of the present type of Chinese Communist assistance. Although the Viet Minh, with continued Chinese aid, will be somewhat strengthened by the end of the rainy season in October, the Franco-Vietnamese forces will receive substantial quantities of MDAP aid during the next few months, and at least some of the 15,000 to 20,000 reinforcements promised de Lattre (of which four battalions are believed to have arrived).* French air strength, which is completely unopposed, will be further increased. The French Navy, which is to be reinforced by an aircraft carrier, can increasingly hamper the flow of seaborne supplies to the Viet Minh and facilitate French amphibious operations. Moreover, by December the French ring of fixed defenses around the delta will be completed. Under these circumstances, the French would have the advantage of fighting from fixed defenses, which would permit them to assemble larger mobile reserves and to take advantage of their superiority in conventional as distinct from guerrilla warfare.

Chinese Communist Capabilities and Intentions

12. It is a basic Chinese Communist and Soviet policy to promote Communist control over Southeast Asia, and Peiping and Moscow recognize Indochina as a key to this region because of its strategic location and because of the advanced revolutionary situation already existing there. Peiping has already supported the Viet Minh regime by recognizing Ho Chi Minh's regime and by providing it with technical and material aid. There are numerous indications of Chinese preparations for greater military support of the Viet Minh, possibly including direct intervention with Chinese Communist forces.

13. The Chinese Communists are capable of substantially increasing their present type of aid to the Viet Minh, particularly by the integration of sizeable numbers of personnel as individuals or cadres into the Viet Minh Army. We believe that the reinforced Franco-Vietnamese forces could hold the bulk of their Tonkin perimeter against the Viet Minh even if the Viet Minh were supported by as many as 30,000 infiltrated personnel, although with such additional support the Viet Minh might win some local victories. Continued Chinese Communist infiltration on a large scale, however, would gradually make the French position increasingly precarious.

14. Turning to Chinese Communist capabilities for large scale intervention with their own forces, we estimate that roughly 100,000 Chinese Communist field force troops could now be made available and logistically supported for an invasion of Indochina. The poor transport net and forbidding terrain of the border region limit the forces which could presently be employed to that number. They could be logistically supported only for short offensive operations of about one week at a

* See Appendix for a table of opposing forces.

time, passing to the defensive during the intervals for replenishment of supplies. However, the Chinese Communists are slowly increasing their capabilities for stockpiling supplies by improving road and rail supply routes into Tonkin and are improving airfields in the border region. Consequently Chinese Communist logistical capabilities for offensive operations are gradually increasing.

15. In addition the Chinese Communists have the capability of mounting intense air attacks of short duration against the French, whose aircraft are concentrated on three vulnerable airfields in Tonkin. Successful Chinese Communist air attacks of this sort would materially enhance Communist capabilities for large-scale ground operations. Communist air superiority in the Tonkin area would also materially hamper French surveillance and naval blockade of the Tonkin Gulf, and consequently permit increased over-water aid to the Viet Minh.

16. If the Chinese Communists intervene before the end of 1951 with 100,000 troops, they could probably eventually drive the French into a beachhead at Haiphong. The French, however, should be able to hold this beachhead for some time, unless the Chinese Communists achieve air superiority.

17. The Chinese Communists will undoubtedly be influenced in deciding whether or not to intervene directly in Indochina by the future development of the situation in Korea. So long as the Chinese Communists remain heavily committed in Korea, we consider it unlikely that they will intervene directly in Indochina. Although the Chinese Communists might drive the French from Tonkin, such a major victory is not assured. An indecisive and protracted campaign would place additional severe strains on total Chinese Communist resources.

18. If the Korean fighting is stopped under conditions which appear to remove the threat of renewed UN attacks, transportation difficulties in the border region would continue to limit the ground forces which could be supported in Tonkin, but the possible diversion of resources from the Korea-Manchuria area would permit early intervention with greater assurance of the continued arrival of supplies and replacements for the operation. We estimate that by two months after a Korean armistice, Chinese Communist capabilities for invading Indochina could be significantly increased, while air capabilities could be greatly increased. The Chinese Communists and the USSR might then consider that Indochina offers more favorable opportunities for a quick and decisive victory with less risk of US and UN intervention than did Korea. They might calculate that the US and UN would be unwilling to undertake another operation of the Korean type and that some UN members would be unwilling to defend what they regard as French colonialism in Indochina. Thus in the event of a cessation of hostilities in Korea, the likelihood of early Chinese Communist intervention in Indochina, particularly after the rainy season ends in October, would increase.

19. On the other hand, the Chinese Communists would probably hesitate to intervene openly in Indochina while they were negotiating for an over-all Korean settlement, including the withdrawal of UN forces, and these negotiations would doubtless take considerable time. Moreover, if Communist acceptance of a cease-fire in Korea indicated a desire to seek a temporary "relaxation" of world tensions, early intervention in Indochina would be unlikely. We also believe that the continuing inadequacies of its line of communications, the strengthening of the French forces, and the risk of foreign intervention, would probably lead Peiping to conclude that it still could not count with certainty on achieving a quick and decisive conquest of all Tonkin, but might become involved in another protracted and costly campaign in which the risk of foreign intervention might increase. Finally, the Communists might expect that through increased cadre, material and technical aid to the Viet Minh they could still wear down the French and achieve successes without the necessity of early large-scale intervention.

20. On balance, therefore, we believe that the increased Chinese preparations in the Tonkin border region probably reflect an intent to facilitate the flow of "volunteers" and material aid to the Viet Minh forces, while prepar-

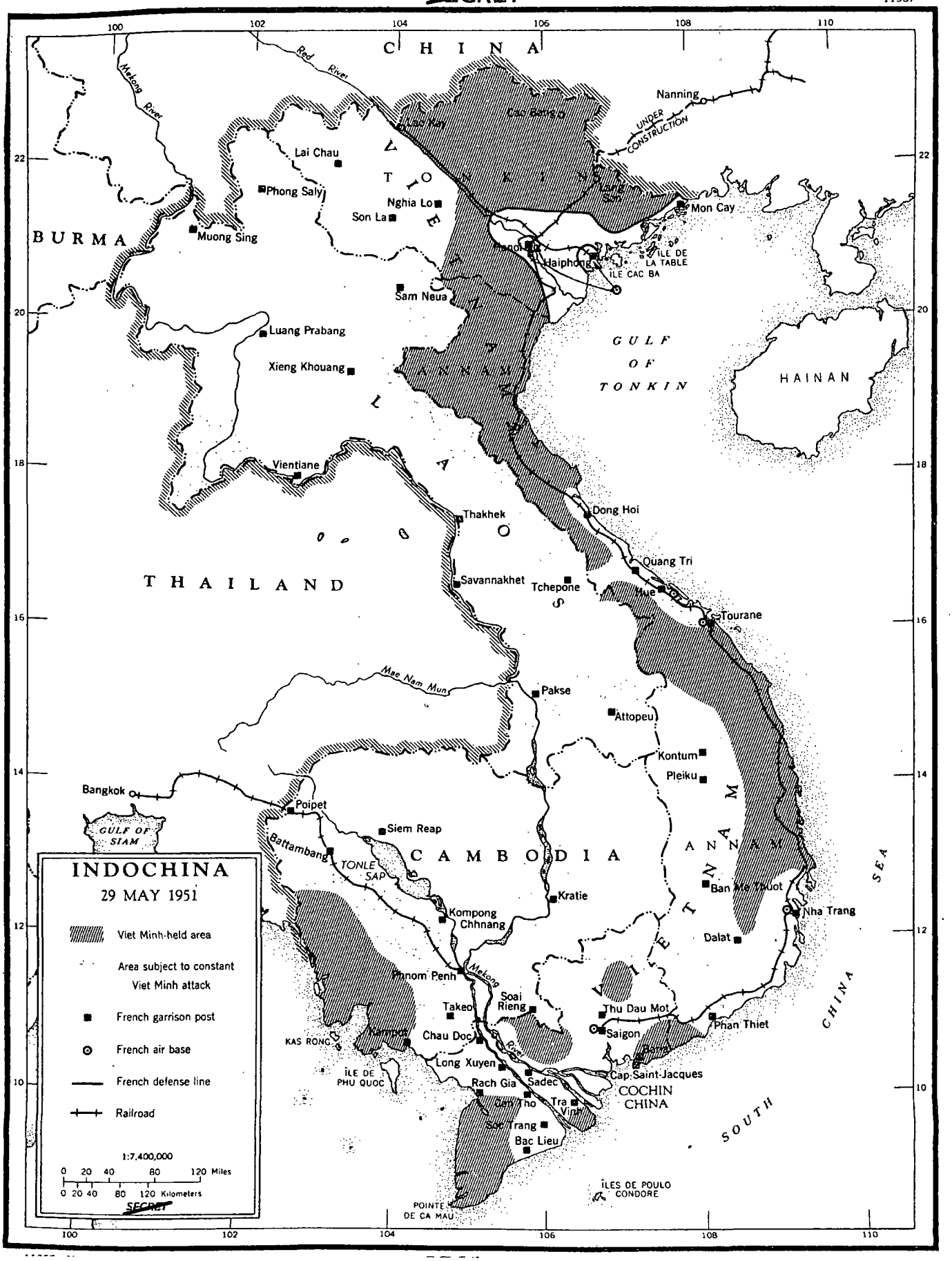
ing for possible large-scale intervention, rather than an intent to intervene during 1951.

21. Consequently, the probable outlook through the end of 1951 in Indochina is one of continued military stalemate, if the Chinese Communists do not directly intervene. The tightening of Viet Minh political control, the further development of the Viet Minh forces, and increased Chinese Communist aid will probably be balanced by the arrival of French reinforcements, more MDAP assistance, and progress toward creating a Vietnam Army. Some territory may change hands but we do not foresee any major victories on either side, at least through the end of 1951.

APPENDIX

Opposing Forces in Indochina as of 1 July 1951

Franco-Vietnamese Forces:		
French ground forces	150,500	
Armed Forces of Associated States	70,700	
Auxiliary troops	70,000	
Semi-military forces (railway guards, etc.)	80,000	
	371,200	
French Air Force	6,858	
French Navy and Naval Air Force	10,000	
Total	388,058	
Viet Minh Forces:		
Viet Minh regular forces	120,000	(est.)
Regional militia	40,000	(")
Irregular forces	85,000	(")
Total	245,000	
Opposing Regular Ground Forces in Tonkin:		
Franco-Vietnamese troops	80,000	
Viet Minh troops	85,000	

SECRET

11957