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CONTROVERSY OVER THE INDOCHINA FEDERATION QUESTION

Introduction

The Indochina Federation question has been a major issue of dispute between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) and the Democratic Kampuchea (DK). The DK during 1975-78 and the partners in the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) formed in 1982 to fight the Vietnamese forces in Kampuchea—the Khmer Rouge, the Sihanoukists and the rightists led by Son Sann, Prince Sihanouk's former Prime Minister—alleged that Hanoi wanted to dominate the entire Indochina region by reviving its old plan of an Indochina Federation—first proposed in the 1930s—comprising Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Hanoi, however, rejects these charges.¹

1. It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the response/perspectives of the CGDK to the Indochina Federation concept, which is an important issue and warrants separate treatment. It may be mentioned very briefly here that although the CGDK coalition partners remain divided amongst themselves over the question of coordinating their fight against the Vietnamese in Kampuchea they show remarkable unity in condemning Vietnam for using the Indochina Federation plan to dominate the other two countries in Indochina. For the CGDK, "the annexation of Laos by Vietnam, the invasion of Kampuchea by thousands of Vietnamese troops, and the settlement, so far, of 70,000 Vietnamese nationals on Kampuchea's territory aimed at swallowing her up are irrefutable and sufficient evidences of Vietnam's Indochina Federation strategy."

In this paper an attempt would be made to analyse the Indochina Federation concept by trying to answer a series of questions : How did the concept emerge ? How did the Vietnamese leadership view this ? Why did the Vietnamese communists propose such a plan ?

In our analysis we should be aware that Vietnam's strong sense of nationalism, its national, and above all, its 'revolutionary interests' in Indochina shaped its expectations about the Indochina Federation concept—a model for the kind of special relationship that it wanted to maintain with the other two Indochinese countries.

Indochina Federation : Its Origins

The concept of an Indochina Federation comprising the three states of Indochina is as old as the history of communism in that part of the world. It was under the aegis of the Vietnamese dominated Indochinese Communist Party—the forerunner of the present-day Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV)²—that the Indochina Federation concept was first broached, occasionally referred to in Party resolutions and left in abeyance over a long period of time.

See "The Mastermind of the Indochina Federation Strategy of Vienam" Annex II in *Kampuchea Under Foreign Occupation: The Struggle Progresses* (Place of publication not mentioned: Department of Press & Publication, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, March, 1986). The Khmer Rouge in a document published in 1978 had bitterly attacked the Vietnamese for masterminding and following the policy of Indochina Federation into the present. See *The Black Paper* (Phnom Penh: Department of Press and Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the Democratic Kampuchea, 1978): 19-28.

2. The Communist Party of Vietnam was set up in Hong Kong in February, 1930. It was renamed the Indochinese Communist Party in October of the same year. It was formally wound up at its Second Congress in 1951. At this Congress the Vietnamese named their party the Vietnamese Worker's Party. In 1976, after the communist victory, the Fourth Congress of the Party decided to revert back to the original name of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

Before we analyse the meaning of the term 'Indochina Federation', it would be useful to examine the origins of that concept by delving into the milieu surrounding the birth of the CPV on 3 February 1930, in Hongkong, and the arguments over the change of the Party's name from the CPV to the ICP in October, 1930.

Birth of the CPV

The birth of the CPV was not an easy one. Since the communists in Vietnam had begun to organise themselves in the 1920s, the movement was plagued with division and factional in-fighting. Each communist faction claimed to be the genuine political party of the working class in Vietnam and tried to win the coveted recognition from the Communist International. In their activity, propaganda, admittance of new members, those communist groups indulged in invective against each other and mutually competed for influence among the masses.

The Communist International was dismayed with the fractious developments of the communist movement in Vietnam and criticised the disunity among the Vietnamese communist groups. In order to correct this situation the Communist International sent a sternly worded secret directive, dated 27 October, 1929, to its compatriots in Vietnam.³ The directive showed the Communist International's annoyance with the divisions among the communists in Indochina and warned that such a state of affairs could not be tolerated because these divisions were dangerous for the revolution. To the Communist International the solution was a forced union among the squabbling communist organisations in Vietnam. Therefore, the secret directive instructed their comrades in Vietnam to set up a revolutionary party which it was made clear "should be the only communist organisation in Indochina."⁴

3. "Secret Comintern Directive of 27 October, 1929, On the Formation of the Indochinese Communist Party", in *Nhan Dan*, (6 January, 1970), *Translations On North Vietnam, Joint Publication Research Service (JPRS)*, (3 February, 1970), p. 2.

4. *Ibid.*

At the party unification talks in Hongkong,⁵ despite the existence of such a directive to organise an Indochina-wide Communist Party, Ho Chi Minh on 3 February, 1930, named the party the Communist Party of Vietnam. Did he ignore the Comintern's directive of 1929? There is no doubt that Ho's decision was deliberate because he specifically rejected the name of the Indochinese Communist Party on the grounds that this name was too broad. It is worthwhile to cite Ho Chi Minh's own reasons for rejecting Comintern's instruction because this gives us an insight into his views on the future political structure in Indochina. Ho Chi Minh wrote,

The term 'Indochina' is very broad, and in accordance with principles of Leninism, the nationality issue is a very serious one and we cannot force the other nations to join the Party as this would violate the principles of Leninism. The term 'Annam' is narrow because Annam is only the central region of Vietnam and our country has three other regions : Bac Ky, Trung Ky, and Nam Ky. As a result, the term Vietnam is suited to all three regions and not contrary to the principles of Leninism regarding the nationality issue.⁶

The above discussion makes it clear that at the time of the unification talks in 1930; in organising the new party, Ho Chi Minh's mind was very much Vietnam-centred. At that time he was unwilling to include the other two countries within the Party even if it meant violating the Comintern's secret directive to organise one single party for the whole of Indochina.

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5. This conference was held from 3 to 7 February, 1930, in a small apartment of a worker in Kowloon. Before the conference was held, Ho Chi Minh had met with each delegate at a soccer field in Hong to exchange opinions. See, "A Contribution Toward A Deeper Understanding of Nguyen Ai Quoc and the Founding of Our Party", *Tap Chi Cong San*, No. 5, (May, 1982), *Vietnam Report*, No. 2384, *JPRS*, No. 81423, (30 July, 1982), p. 32.
 6. Ho Chi Minh, "The Matter of Unifying the Communist Organisations", (On file at the Institute of Party History Research of the Marx-Lenin Institute, Hanoi), cited in *ibid.*

The nature of talks at Hong Kong convinced Ho to name the party the CPV. The meeting was to consider "the options of the delegates concerning : a) unifying the various communist organisations and establishing a new, genuine communist party, and b) the plan for establishing this organisation."⁷ The agenda of the talks thus clearly reveals that the attainment of unity among the quarreling communist groups in Vietnam was the chief and only aim of the meeting in Hong Kong. Ho Chi Minh did not want any other contentious issues to distract him from achieving that objective. At the Hong Kong talks, delegates from northern Vietnam opposed the idea of including Laos and Cambodia in the new party. They felt that "in accordance with Leninist self-determinism they could not make the Cambodian, and Lao proletariat enter the party with them."⁸ Ho, an astute manipulator, could understand that this controversy over the question of inclusion of Laos and Cambodia within the new party could frustrate his efforts to unify the Vietnamese communist factions. Therefore, he settled on the name of the CPV and set about organising the new party.

The Communist International was happy with the knowledge that at least the communists in Vietnam were grouped under the banner of one single communist party. However, it did not look kindly at the naming of the party as the CPV and not the ICP as it had instructed in its secret directive of 27 October, 1929. Therefore, the Communist International sent off a letter to the CPV raising the question of renaming the CPV as the ICP.⁹

7. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

8. William S. Turley, "Vietnam's Challenge to Southeast Asia Regional Order", Forthcoming in Young Whan Kihl, and Lawrence E. Grinter (eds), *Asian-Pacific Security: Emerging Challenges and Responses*, Boulder, Colo. : Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1986), p. 7.

9. I. A. Ognetrov, "The Comintern and the Revolutionary Movement in Vietnam", in R.A. Ulyanovski (ed.), *The Comintern and the East*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979), p. 476.

From the CPV to the ICP: Controversy Over Change in the Party's Name

The CPV Central Committee met at its first session in October, 1930. According to a Vietnamese source this meeting was chaired by Ho Chi Minh himself.¹⁰ Besides electing Tran Phu as the first Secretary General of the Party, the first plenary meeting of the Central Committee, accepted the instructions of the Comintern, contained in the 27 October, 1929, directive and repeated in a letter sent to the Party soon after it came into being in February, 1930, to change the Party's name from the CPV to the ICP.

A Party document reveals that the Central Committee had little choice but to change the Party's name. That document states that on instructions from the Comintern the Central committee...decided to drop the name 'Communist Party of Vietnam' and take the name of 'Indochina Communist Party'.¹¹ However, the Party, through the adoption of a resolution at that Central Committee meeting, admitted that the Comintern's instructions were not the only consideration for changing the Party's name into the ICP. In a resolution adopted at the first Central Committee meeting the Party spelled out further its justification for changing the Party's name in the following manner,

If the Party is called the Communist Party of Vietnam, this means that it will not embrace Cambodia or Laos. It would be wrong for them to remain outside Party influence, because,

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10. "Reminiscences of The First Party Congress", *Vietnam Courier*, No. 1, (January, 1982), p. 10. A Vietnamese source traced Ho Chi Minh's movement between February and October, 1930, in the following manner: "Following the founding of the CPV in February Nguyen Ai Quoc [Ho Chi Minh] made a second trip to Thailand in March. The next month he went to Malaya. On the way, he arrived in Singapore. He returned to Hong Kong to supervise the merger of Vietnam's communist organisations." See "His Many Names and Travel", *Vietnam Courier*, No. 5, (May, 1981), p. 10.
11. *Party Documents, 1930-1945*, p. 87, quoted by William S. Turley, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

although the proletarians of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos speak different languages, have their own customs and belong to different peoples, they are closely linked politically and economically.¹²

How could the Party now emphasise the necessity for having a single communist party for the whole of Indochina when just a few months back it thought wise not to accept Cambodia and Laos in its fold? This volta-face on the part of the Party may be explained in two ways. First, as the discussion have showed there was strong pressure on the CPV from the Comintern to change the name of the Party into the ICP. Having disregarded the Comintern's instructions earlier, Ho Chi Minh could no longer ignore Comintern's directives in this regard. He needed the Comintern connection in building up the Party locally by training the top cadres in Moscow. Moreover, the Comintern was the only international connection that the Party had at that time. Therefore, the Party could not risk a break with the Comintern over the issue of the naming of the Party.

Second, the Party's changed mood over the question of its name can be explained with reference to Ho Chi Minh's idea of organising an Indochina wide revolution. Five years before the CPV was set up Ho had been advocating bonds of unity among the three Indochinese countries so that the French colonial rule could be ended. In 1925 Ho Chi Minh published a brochure *Le Process de la Colonisation Francaise*.¹³

In this pamphlet Ho accepted the thesis of the Communist International as it applied to the colonial countries. Accordingly, the

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12. "Resolution of the first Central Committee Meeting of the CPV, October 1930". Quoted in "The People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea: The Vanguard of the Kampuchean People", *Voprosy Istorii, KPSS* (Kamachean News Agency) (Moscow), No. 10, (October 1984), *JPRS-SEA-85-019* (31 January, 1985), p. 1.
 13. *Political Alignments of Vietnamese Nationalists*, (Washington, D.C., Department of State, 1 October, 1949), p. 29.

development of the proletarian revolution in Indochina was envisaged in two stages : the bourgeois-democratic revolution leading to independence, and building of communism in the next. Two years later in Moscow, Ho further explained his thesis and underrated the necessity of a communist party for Indochina at that stage, because in his own words, "no one as yet understood the significance of the word communism"¹⁴ Instead he proposed to "constitute an Indochinese nationalist, socialist, and revolutionary party whose leaders would be responsible for bringing all its members step by step to orthodox Marxism."¹⁵

Debates among the communist factions had made Ho painfully aware of the need for unity among the Vietnamese communists. Therefore, at the Hong Kong talks he tried to achieve just that. Once the Comintern, after the Hong Kong talks unification talks in February, 1930, repeated its earlier directive of October, 1929, to the CPV, to change its name to the ICP, Ho complied because the Comintern's directives indicated his earlier arguments for waging an Indochina-wide struggle against the French.

The Indochinese Federation concept appeared for the first time directly on a resolution adopted at the First Congress of the ICP held in March, 1935, in Macau. That resolution dealt with the Party's policy on the question of nationalities and it stipulated,

After driving French imperialists out of Indochina every nation will have the right to self-determination; it may join the Indochinese Federation or set up a separate state; it is free to join or leave the federation : it may follow whichever system it likes. The fraternal alliance must be based on the principles of revolutionary sincerity, freedom and equality.¹⁶

14. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

15. *Ibid*

16. "The Resolution Adopted At The First Congress Of the ICP, Macau, 1935". Quoted in "Facts About the Indochinese Federation Question", *Kampuchean Dossier*, Vol. 1, (Hanoi: Vietnam Courier, 1978) p. 95,

This resolution invited the three countries in Indochina to form a federation. However, the Party also recognised their rights of self-determination. This resolution pointed out that they could remain outside of the federation framework if those states decided to do so. Those were also given the right to choose their own forms of government. But by insisting on a 'fraternal alliance' among the three countries which was to be based on the three principles of revolutionary sincerity freedom and equality, the Vietnamese communists were indicating their inclination towards a special relationship among the three countries in Indochina.

Six years later, in June, 1941 a resolution of the Eighth Plenum of the Central Committee once again mentioned the Indochina Federation concept. This resolution stressed the need of 'correctly' implementing the principle of self-determination on the Indochinese peoples, and once again promised that they would have the choice of either to join the proposed federation or remain outside the framework of the union. The resolution expressed its desire to respect the principles of self-determination for the Indochinese peoples in the following way.

"After driving out the French and the Japanese, we must correctly carry out the policy of national self-determination with regard to the Indochinese peoples. It is upto the peoples living in Indochina to either organise themselves into a Federation of Democratic Republics or remain as separate national states.¹⁷

An examination of the resolutions adopted at the Macau Congress of the ICP and that at the Eighth Plenum of the ICP Central Committee, reveals that those were devoid of any specific reference to the organisation of the proposed Indochinese Federation. On the contrary, these two resolutions emphasised close cooperation in foreign and defence affairs among the partners in the proposed federation of the Indochinese countries. These factors along with the Vietnamese

17. *Ibid.*

insistence that the countries of Indochina be grouped into an alliance suggests that even at the earlier days of the Party, the Vietnamese showed more serious interest in developing unity among the three by insisting on the creation of 'fraternal alliance' than in creating an Indochinese Federation out of the three countries.

There was compelling reason for the Vietnamese to give such strong emphasis on the theme of unity among the Indochinese peoples. This was due to their rising security concern about Laos and Cambodia. In 1930 the Vietnamese communists perceived little threat emanating from Laos and Cambodia. But this perception began to change soon after World War II when the French colonial power staged a comeback and attempted to organise political forces associated with France. In particular, the Vietnamese communists began to feel increasingly threatened when the French commenced "...attacks ...from bases in these countries [Laos and Cambodia] against the Viet Minh's mountain redoubts in 1947"¹⁸. In this situation, from a strategic point of view, the notion of considering Indochina as one unit made sense to the Vietnamese communist leaders. The arguments laid down by the Comintern in its secret directive of 27 October, 1929 could now be used to rationalise their own attempts to unify the Indochinese countries by proposing the Indochina Federation and thwart French military attacks on their outpost. By the same token Vietnamese leaders in the ICP could also justify stationing of their troops in their neighbouring countries and use their territories for the Vietnamese war efforts against the French.

How is this composite Vietnamese communists' view of the Indochina Federation concept, as drawn here, related to the term 'federation', as commonly understood? Below, we shall attempt to answer this question by looking at the meaning of the term 'federation' and comparing that with the Vietnamese communists' view of an Indochina Federation.

18. Williams S. Turley, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

Indochina Federation : Meaning

In simple Political Science terminology a federal state is one in which several units and their respective powers are constitutionally or otherwise legally united under the ultimate power of a central state and government. In other words, a federal state signifies a division of governmental powers between the national government and the constituent units. That is, federalism involves two levels of government over the same people and the same land, and not over people living in national boundaries as the Indochina Federation was aimed at uniting. Moreover, as the following discussion would show, the Vietnamese communists did not dwell on the important question of power-sharing aspect between the centre and the constituent units whenever they referred, either directly or indirectly, to the Indochinese Federation concept. On the contrary, each time the concept of Indochina Federation was mentioned, the Vietnamese communist leaders gave strong emphasis to the building of alliances, and special relations, among the three Indochinese countries.

The First Central Committee meeting of the ICP held in October, 1930, adopted the political thesis of the Party as proposed by its newly elected Secretary-General Tran Phu.¹⁹ The thesis affirmed that the Indochinese revolution was a bourgeois revolution under the leadership of the proletariats. The revolution was aimed at launching "a land revolution to abolish all feudal vestiges", to follow a policy of "land to the tillers", and direct "an anti-imperialist revolution to overthrow the imperialists, to win back complete independence for Indochina."²⁰

19. The ICP Political Thesis had three sections. The first section dealt with the world situation while the second section handled the situation then prevailing in Indochina. The Third section identified the fundamental tasks of the revolution. The ICP Political Thesis was published in *Nhan Dan*, (9 January, 1970): 1-2; and in *Qnan Doi Nhan Dan*, (5 January, 1970): 3. *Historic Documents of the Lao Dong Party For The Party's 40th Anniversary Translations On North Vietnam, JPRS*, No. 735, : 6-14.
20. *Fifty Years of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, (Hanoi : Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1980), p. 32.

The political thesis laid down ten essential tasks for the revolution in Indochina. But only two of those are relevant for discussion here. One task was to establish a *government* of the workers and the peasants in Indochina. Another promised the Indochinese peoples that they would be able to exercise their rights of self-determination. However, the political thesis did not spell out whether the principle of self-determination also included the right of the Indochinese people to decide to join such a government or remain outside its framework as independent states.

The concept of self-determination assumes quite simply that the world is composed of separate identifiable nations, and claims that these nations are, as such, each entitled to form a sovereign state.²¹ Since the ICP political thesis did not elaborate on the principle of self-determination, a number of authors, for example, Walker Connor, questions the commitment of the Vietnamese communists to the concept of self-determination, as defined here. Connor argues that since the Party did not elaborate the principle of self-determination in its political thesis, in 1930 it could only mean "colonial self-determination, i.e., the right of Indochina, as a single unit to sever the French connection".²²

However, within two years, the Vietnamese made their position clearer on this issue. In December, 1932, the ICP adopted its action programme, and openly recognised the rights of the Indochinese peoples to form their own government. Although the programme once again called for the establishment of one single government for Indochina, and appealed for setting up of a worker and peasant army, it also recognised the rights of the Indochinese people to decide for themselves

21. Elie Kedourie, "A New International Disorder", in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds.), *The Expansion of International Society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 342-349.

22. Walker Connor, *The Nationalist Question In Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 103.

whether to join a "a fraternal union of all nationalities of Indochina."²³ The action programme unequivocally stated that the "Cambodians, Laotians, and other nationalities of Indochina have the right to freely decide for themselves whether to join such a fraternal union [Indochina Federation]."²⁴

In the subsequent years, the Vietnamese communists, more explicitly expressed their desire to uphold the principle of self-determination. As already mentioned in this paper, the First Congress of the ICP held in 1935 in Macau, had categorically recognised the rights of the constituent parts of the proposed Indochina Federation to join or leave it. In a more forceful manner, a resolution adopted at the Eighth Plenum of the ICP Central Committee in 1941, "totally expressed the issue to nationalism within the framework of each of the countries... Vietnam, Combodia, and Laos... in the spirit of a mutually dependent and closely inter-related national liberation of these three countries guarding and helping one another to achieve victory."²⁵ In this way by 1941 the ICP leaders appeared to have given the 'green light' to the development of separate nationalism in each of the three countries distinct from an Indochinese one.

These discussions show that Vietnam, instead of talking specifically about the Indochinese Federation and illuminating its views on power-sharing among the units of the proposed federation, talked more about building 'fraternal union' and 'fraternal alliance' among the three Indochinese countries. The frequent Vietnamese references to those terms expressed more their desire and the need for an organisation to propagate communism throughout Indochina under their leadership than the building of federation of Indochinese countries in

23. The text of the "ICP Action Programme" is available in Robert F. Turner, *Vietnamese Communism: Its Origins and Development*, (Stanford, Calif. : Hoover Institution, Press, 1975), p. 318-333.
24. "Action Programme of the ICP", in *ibid*, p. 325.
25. Lao Dong Central Cmmittee, Historical Research Department, *The August Revolution (1945), Translations On North Vietnam*, No. 844, JPRS, No. 52097, (4 January, 1971) p. 8.

the conventional sense of the word. Certainly, calls for building up of alliances cannot be considered action-plans for setting up a federation of Indochinese countries. Frequent Vietnamese reference to Indochina Federation, and alliances, epitomizing unity among the three Indochinese peoples, should also be viewed in the light of the Vietnamese efforts to reorganise the Party after the French onslaught on the ICP during 1930-1932.²⁶ Aimed at revitalising the ICP, its action programme (1932) reflected the Vietnamese communists' emphasis on the need for a "solid communist organisation",²⁷ i.e., a new importance on unity, to further the cause of revolution in Indochina.

During World War II, the Japanese forces occupied Indochina and the ICP found itself fighting them as well as the French. Faced with superior military forces, the Vietnamese called for greater unity and coordination among the peoples of Indochina. Designed to raise the consciousness of the people in each country to fight in a new situation and to improve the military coordination throughout Indochina, the Vietnamese communists embarked on a two-pronged policy. On the

26. In 1930, following the fall of the Popular Front government in France, the ICP was outlawed. The French came very hard on the communists in Indochina. By Spring, 1931, the French colonial authorities succeeded in seizing the ICP top leadership. For a description see, William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road To Power In Vietnam*, (Boulder, Colo: Westview, 1981), p.46. The French crack-down during 1930-31 thoroughly shook up the ICP. A Vietnamese author admitted this in the following manner: "The damage done to our Party during the ebb period was truly great. At the beginning of 1932 all of the Party bases in North, Central, and South Vietnam were smashed. The Central Committee was no longer in existence. Most of the Party members in the country were arrested. . . Contact was lost with many party members who were not arrested. A very small number of cadres fled to the mountains or crossed the border to go to Laos, Siam, etc." See Thanh Dam, "Understanding The Three Party Congresses", *Nghien Cuu Lich*, No. 5, (September-October 1976), *Translations On Vietnam* No. 1873, *JPRS*, No. 58401, (23 December 1976) p. 18.

27. "Action Programme Of The ICP", *op. cit.*, p. 323.

one hand, they pushed for organising resistance in each country and on the other, insisted that those forces cooperate with each other. In May, 1941, at the Eighth Plenum of its Central Committee, the ICP clearly stated its preference for organising resistance forces in each of the three countries separately. A resolution adopted there stated that, "it [the ICP] stood for solving the national liberation question within the context of each countries and for establishing in each country a separate National United Front against the French and the Japanese."²⁸ In pursuance of this decision, a separate League for the Independence of Vietnam—Viet Minh for short—was set up in 1941. This was followed by the formation of a Khmer *Issara* for Cambodia and the Lao *Issara* for Laos.

Another resolution adopted at the Eighth Plenum of the ICP Central Committee, May, 1941, pointed to the importance the Vietnamese were putting on developing close links between the three Indochinese resistance movements. It stated that the "national liberation revolutions in those nations must rely upon each other, be closely interlinked, help each other in every way and provide assistance..."²⁹

Features of Indochina Federation

The Vietnamese appear to have not published any document that directly sets out the features of the proposed Indochinese Federation. However, the previous discussion would help to distil some of those. This is important because it would demonstrate decisively that the Vietnamese viewed the Indochina Federation as a foreign policy model for developing special relations among the three countries in Indochina. The earlier discussion reveals the following as the features of the Indochina Federation :

28. "A Resolution Adopted at the Eighth Plenum Of the ICP Central Committee (May, 1941), in "Facts About The Indochinese Federation Question", *op. cit.*, p. 97.
29. Quoted in, "The People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea: The Vanguard of the Kampuchean People", *op. cit.*, p. 3.

1. Unity among the peoples in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in order to bring about the defeat of the French.
2. One government for the whole of Indochina but each country was free to join such a union. In other words, the constituent parts of the federation could exercise their rights of self-determination; and
5. Form and strengthen, 'fraternal alliance', special relationship, among the three countries through signing of agreements and treaties of cooperation in the fields of domestic and foreign policies, military, socio-economic and cultural affairs.

A careful look at the traits of the Indochina Federation, as depicted here, suggests that except for the second one none of the features reflect those to be found in any federation set-up. Even the requirement for a single government subsequently became totally redundant. In 1939, two years before the Eighth Central Committee plenum in May, 1941, where the Party decided to settle the issue of nationalism within the framework of each of the three countries, a meeting of the Central Committee spelled out that it no longer stood for the creation of one state and therefore, one government for the whole of Indochina. At that meeting held in November, 1939, a resolution was adopted which stated,

The union of the Indochinese nations does not necessarily compel them to form a single nation, because, nations such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos have enjoyed independence for a long time. Each nation, therefore, has the right to decide its own destiny as it wishes.³⁰

30. *Party Documents, 1930-1945* vol. III, (Hanoi: Party Central Committee Research On Party History Department, 1977), p. 61. Quoted by Senior General Hoang Van Thai, "On the Special relations of Cooperation Among the Three Indochinese Nations," *Tap Chi Cong San*, No. 11, (November, 1981), *JPRS*, (January, 1982) p. 16.

Therefore, it becomes clear that by the early 1940s the Vietnamese communists gave up the idea of organising one single government for the Indochinese countries. In addition, the features, as identified here also suggest that the Vietnamese did not dwell on the question of a division of authority between the centre and the constituent parts concerning financial, judicial or taxation matters. On the contrary as the previous discussion showed the Vietnamese incessantly argued for building and strengthening close relationship among the three countries. Given this context one may conclude that the Vietnamese did not have any blueprint for the Indochina Federation concept. Rather they insisted on a closely knit Indochinese alliance system—the linchpin of a framework of special relationship among those countries.

The nucleus of such a framework of relationship comprising the Indochinese states may be traced back to the viewpoints held on the subject by Ho Chi Minh in 1944-54. At that time he believed that it was possible to build up such a framework of relationship among the Indochinese and other countries in Asia. Ho expressed such views to Major Archmedes Patti, an agent of the United States Office of Strategic Service (OSS), who worked with Ho Chi Minh as a liaison between the DRV and the allied powers in Hanoi during 1944-45. Giving an account of his farewell meeting with Ho, Patti vividly described Ho's plans for re-drawing the political map of the Indochinese and other countries in Asia. Patti reported,

“[Ho] was thinking in terms of a pan-Asiatic community consisting of at least Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Malaya, Greater Burma (including Bengal), an independent India, a free Indonesia, and the Philippines. These nations and perhaps others, working together with the United States, Great Britain, and France, would contribute to a peaceful coexistence, developing political and economic programmes for the common good”.³¹

31. Archimedes Patti, *Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross*, (Barkeley, Calif. : University of California Press, 1980), p. 368.



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Such views of Ho Chi Minh, as recorded here, signified his vision of treating each nation of the Indochinese and other regions in Asia on their own right but grouped in an association of states wherein they would enjoy equal status. Although Ho often emphasised the importance of maintaining close relations among the three countries in Indochina, he never said anything in public which came close to suggesting that he espoused the notion of grouping the three indo-chinese countries into a federation with Hanoi as its capital. But Ho was aware of the important role that Laotian and Cambodian territories would play in sustaining the DRV's war efforts. Once the armed struggle against the French began, Vietnamese communist policy in Laos and Cambodia would be determined not by any abstract principles but by geopolitical and military requirements of resistance war as it developed. One important reason behind the Vietnamese conception of the Indochinese Federation lay in their concern to develop and maintain Indochina as one single strategic unit. As the resistance war against the French began in earnest in 1947, and intensified over the years, Hanoi's communist leaders by 1950 seemed to have become convinced that the strategic unity of Indochina was extremely important for carrying out successful revolution in Vietnam as well as in the other two countries in Indochina. This is reflected very strongly in a paper written by Vietnam's top military strategist General Vo Nguyen Giap. He wrote,

Indochina is a single strategic unit, a battlefield, and here we have the mission of helping the movement to liberate all of Indochina. This is because militarily, Indochina is one bloc, one unit, in both invasion and defence plans of the enemy. For this reason, and especially because of the strategic terrain, we cannot consider Vietnam to be independent so long as Cambodia and Laos are under imperialist domination, just as we cannot consider Cambodia

and Laos to be independent so long as Vietnam is under imperialist rule."³²

As the Viet Minh's resistance war against the French went into high gear, Giap's strategist concept of treating the whole of Indochina as one single theatre of operation played a major role in determining the DRV's military policies with their corollary implications on its political relations with Laos and Cambodia. Therefore, the DRV supported the Lao *Issara* forces to control the Laotian territory adjacent to the borders with North Vietnam. These areas, because of their proximity to Dien Bien Phu, were important as fall-back areas for the Viet Minh troops in the subsequent battle for the control of Dien Bien Phu.

Conclusion

The analysis made in this paper demonstrates that the Vietnamese by referring to the Indochina Federation concept meant the building of cooperation and alliances among the three countries in Indochina rather than taking concrete steps to amalgamate those three into a federation with Hanoi as its capital. Later, as the war in Indochina grew in intensity and engulfed the entire region, the need for strong unity among the revolutionary forces was further demonstrated to the communist leadership in North Vietnam. Within this context, the leaders in the DRV looked at the Indochina Federation concept as a unifying principle, and not as a plan of action to establish a federation comprising the three countries. Rather than creating a federation of the three countries, one notices that the Vietnamese had argued strongly for developing and strengthening an alliance system among the three countries in Indochina. Vietnam's leaders, during the long period of

32. Vo Nguyen Giap, "The Military Mission in Transition to the General Offensive and Uprising", (Ha Dong Committee for Resistance and Administration, 1950), p. 14. In Library of Congress, Orientalla, South Asia, 4 microfilm collection, *Vietnamese Communist Publications*, P. T. Chau (ed). item 40, quoted by Willaim S. Turley, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

revolutionary warfare — and even after the communist victory in Indochina in 1975 — would time and again come back to this theme. However, it was only in the late 1970s that finally Vietnam became successful in uniting the three countries into a formal alliance system. By signing a number of important treaties, and agreements, between the SRV on the one hand and the LPDR and the PRK on the other, the mechanisms of the special relationship would be established.

The controversy over the Indochina Federation concept has kept alive international and regional attention on Vietnam's policy-objectives in the region. Although Vietnam had accepted the existence of three independent countries in Indochina, Vietnam felt it had certain entitlements—because of the role that Vietnam played in the development of communist activities in Laos and Cambodia during the period 1930 and 1954—concerning its relations with the other two revolutionary movements in Laos and Cambodia. But neither the CGDK nor the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are sympathetic to this Vietnamese position. While the coalition partners of the CGDK are unanimous in condemning the Indochina Federation concept as hegemonistic, at least two members of the ASEAN—Thailand and Singapore—have publicly condemned Vietnam for still following the policy of Indochina Federation and using that to dominate the Indochinese countries.

Undoubtedly, a peaceful Southeast Asia warrants an end to the political tension existing between the CGDK and Vietnam on the one hand and the ASEAN countries and Vietnam on the other. This tension is to an extent shaped by the question of Vietnamese aims in Indochina, i.e., whether those are hegemonistic or not. The concept of Indochina Federation has given rise to the controversy over the Vietnamese policy-objectives in Indochina. Therefore, if any peaceful solution is to be found the first positive step would be to scale-down the controversy over the Indochina Federation concept.