

The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

No. 052/2024 dated 24 May 2024

Dien Bien Phu, 70 Years after the Battle

Paco Milhiet

SYNOPSIS

Seventy years ago, the battle of Dien Bien Phu between the French army and Viet Minh's communist forces marked the end of France's almost century-long colonial presence in Asia. In 2024, French political authorities were officially invited for the first time by Vietnam to Dien Bien Phu to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the battle, symbolising the positive and growing bilateral relationship between Vietnam and France.

COMMENTARY

From 13 March to 7 May 1954, the battle of Dien Bien Phu took place between the French Far East Expeditionary Corps and Ho Chi Minh's communist Viet Minh. The French army surrendered [after 56 days of relentless combat](#). This defeat led to the [Geneva Accords](#) on 21 July 1954, ending nearly a century of French colonial presence in Indochina.



The battle of Dien Bien Phu between the French Far East Expeditionary Corps and Ho Chi Minh's communist Viet Minh lasted for 56 days, from 13 March to 7 May 1954. In 2024, Vietnamese authorities invited their French counterparts to participate in the 70th anniversary of the battle for the first time, marking a symbolic milestone in their dynamic bilateral relation. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

History of the French Indochina

In the 19th century, France aimed to expand its influence in the Mekong region to compete with other European colonial powers. It secured control over Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) in 1862 and made Cambodia a protectorate in 1863. Following the Franco-Chinese War in 1884, France colonised Annam (central Vietnam) and Tonkin (northern Vietnam). In 1887, these territories were unified under the "[Indochinese Union](#)", soon joined by Laos (1899) and the enclave of Kouang-Tchéou-Wan in China (1900).

Unlike Algeria, Indochina was not a [colony of settlement](#). In fact, the French national population never exceeded 40,000 (0.2% of the total population). Instead, Indochina was mainly valued for its rich natural resources like rubber, minerals, and rice, eventually earning the title of "[jewel of the colonial empire](#)".

During World War II, Japan occupied Indochina [while collaborating](#) with the French Vichy authorities. In March 1945, fearing an Allied invasion, Japan dismantled the French colonial administration. The power vacuum after the war allowed the Viet Minh, a communist-led movement, to declare Vietnam's independence. In an international context marked by the emerging decolonisation movement and the beginnings of the Cold War, France attempted to regain control by reorganising [Indochina as a federation](#) within the French Union. However, failed negotiations led to the First Indochina War in late 1946.

Dien Bien Phu, a Crucial Battle

The Franco-Vietnamese War unfolded in [two distinct phases](#): from 1946 to 1949, characterised by guerrilla warfare, followed by a more direct and frontal conflict from 1949 to 1954. During the latter phase, the [Americans provided](#) material, financial, and logistical support to the French army, while the Viet Minh bolstered its conventional army with backing from [Communist China](#) and the Soviet Union. To counter-balance the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi and the Viet Minh, an "independent" State of Vietnam was established in Saigon in 1949. This shift transformed the conflict

from colonial reconquest into [a civil war](#). Additionally, Cambodia and Laos both achieved independence in 1953 through peaceful negotiations with France.

A series of [military setbacks](#), [growing scepticism in France](#), unclear political objectives, and insufficient financial support led the French military high command to realise that victory in Vietnam was compromised. However, in March 1954, a final large-scale military operation (Operation Castor) was planned to occupy a former [Japanese airfield at Dien Bien Phu](#) to secure the Laotian border from Viet Minh incursions and enable favourable negotiation positions.

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu stands out as one of the major conflicts of the 20th century. It saw the French Expeditionary Corps, with around 15,000 troops, face off against nearly 70,000 Vietnamese. The French underestimated their enemy's firepower, especially from cannons positioned on the surrounding mountains that had been transported piece by piece through the jungle on foot or bicycle.

After 56 intense days of fighting, the French army surrendered. The toll was heavy, with almost [10,000 Viet Minh fighters and 3,500 French soldiers dead](#). Additionally, 10,700 French soldiers were captured and began a long walk of hundreds of kilometres [to re-education camps](#) near the Chinese border, with only a third surviving. In France, the fall of Dien Bien Phu was a profound shock and ultimately led to the end of the colonial era in Asia, soon followed by decolonisation in Africa.

This battle marked a significant milestone in the relationship between France and Vietnam.

Franco-Vietnamese Reconciliation

Unlike its African colonies, which gained independence in the 1960s, France did not maintain strong ties or cooperation with its former Asian colonies. Amid the Cold War, France lost its influence in Indochina to other powers: the USSR and China in North Vietnam, and the United States in South Vietnam.

However, shortly after the conclusion of the Second Vietnam War in 1973, France promptly restored diplomatic ties with Vietnam. Throughout the 1980s, despite a US embargo, France was the only Western nation actively engaged in collaboration with Vietnam across [multiple areas](#). The official visit of [French President François Mitterrand in 1993](#) marked the beginning of the official reconciliation process. Concurrently, France was among the first countries to support foreign investments when Vietnam opened its economy to foreign trade and investment in the early 1990s. The French Navy regularly operates in the region to demonstrate its commitment to freedom of navigation in the South China sea and has visited Vietnam every year since 2000 (33 vessels have made port calls in 25 years). The two countries signed a [strategic partnership in 2013](#).

The official celebrations of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 2024 represent a symbolic landmark of the dynamic bilateral relation. For the first time, a French political figure, the French Minister of Defence, Sébastien Lecornu, [was invited](#) by Vietnamese authorities to participate in the national ceremony, commemorating this shared history

without omission or animosity and paying tribute to the French and Vietnamese soldiers who fell on the battlefield.

A new “Indo-Pacific” Component in the Bilateral Relation?

France and Vietnam maintain significant ties, but there is still room for improvement. While Vietnam is a member of the International Organization of La Francophonie, the use of French has become marginal since the country's independence. [Economic relations](#) remain modest, with France ranking 21st among suppliers and 24th among customers in Vietnam, lagging behind other European countries like Germany.

The French diplomacy has been seeking to recalibrate its [Indo-Pacific strategy](#) towards ASEAN countries, notably by promoting a balanced and neutral approach, emphasising similar principles on major subjects such as the primacy of the rule of law, the promotion of multilateralism, and the securing of maritime spaces. Thus, the France-ASEAN development partnership involves consolidating bilateral partnerships with ASEAN member states, which are drawn to [France's approach](#) of balance and mediating power. The longstanding and close Franco-Vietnamese relationship can play a significant role in this regard.

Vietnam's foreign policy is influenced by two ambivalent dynamics, justifying its "[Four No's and One Depend](#)" policy (no military alliances, no foreign military bases, no taking sides between countries, and no use of armed force). While China is its top economic partner, Vietnam also faces territorial and maritime disputes with Beijing, making the security guarantee from the United States appealing. Strategic, industrial, and technological cooperation with France would enable Vietnam to address its security needs without aligning with one major power against another.

The "[One Depend](#)" aspect, which signifies that under specific circumstances Vietnam will consider developing necessary and appropriate defence and military relations with other countries, presents an opportunity for France to deepen its cooperation with Vietnam.

Considering all these factors, the announcement of [President Macron's visit to Vietnam in 2025](#) could signify the start of a new chapter in the bilateral relationship.

Paco MILHIET holds a PhD in International Relations jointly conferred by the University of French Polynesia and the Catholic Institute of Paris. He is currently a Visiting Fellow at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.