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The Viet Minh's Diplomatic Strategy Toward the Chinese Nationalist Government, 1945–1946

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Abstract. After the August Revolution of 1945, the newly established Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) faced an unusually constrained diplomatic environment. French authorities sought to restore colonial rule, while the Chinese Nationalist Government, the then legitimate government of China, deployed forces into northern Vietnam pursuant to the Allied arrangements for accepting the Japanese surrender. This paper examines how the Viet Minh adjusted its strategy toward the Chinese Nationalist Government between 1945 and 1946. Drawing on Chinese diplomatic and party archives, Vietnamese party documents, French diplomatic records, British reports, United States materials, and contemporary memoirs, it argues that the Viet Minh did not treat relations with China as an isolated bilateral issue. Instead, it placed them within a triangular Chinese-French-Vietnamese configuration. The Viet Minh initially avoided direct confrontation, emphasized Vietnamese nationalism to address the Nationalist Government's political concerns regarding communist influence, and made limited political accommodations in response to Chinese military and political demands. It then used Sino-French tensions to resist French pressure while simultaneously negotiating with France in order to facilitate the withdrawal of Chinese troops. Once the Chinese military presence receded, the Viet Minh moved decisively against Vietnamese nationalist parties that had maintained close ties with the Nationalist Government. The case demonstrates how a newly established revolutionary government used flexible diplomacy amid changing relations among China, France, and Vietnam to preserve political autonomy during a moment of extreme vulnerability.

Keywords: Viet Minh, Chinese Nationalist Government, Sino-Vietnamese relations, French Indochina, diplomatic strategy

1. Introduction

The end of the Second World War transformed northern Vietnam into a political space in which multiple international and domestic political and military actors interacted. On 2 September 1945, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi. Yet the new regime had not received international recognition, France intended to return to Indochina, and Chinese Nationalist forces, acting pursuant to the Allied surrender arrangements, were assigned to accept the Japanese surrender north of the sixteenth parallel. Between September 1945 and the withdrawal of the Chinese forces in 1946, the survival of the Viet Minh-led government therefore depended to a

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considerable degree on how it handled the Chinese Nationalist Government and the military authorities operating in northern Vietnam [1-4].

Existing scholarship has examined Ho Chi Minh's diplomacy, Franco-Vietnamese negotiations, the return of French power, and the broader development of the First Indochina War. The Chinese dimension has also been discussed, particularly the relationship between the Nationalist Government and Vietnamese nationalist organizations. Nevertheless, the Viet Minh's policy toward the Nationalist Government is often treated either as a subsidiary part of Franco-Vietnamese relations or as a prelude to later Sino-Vietnamese revolutionary relations. This can obscure the specific strategic problem of 1945–1946: the Chinese force actually present in northern Vietnam was the army of the Nationalist Government, while the Viet Minh simultaneously had to prepare for the restoration of French military power [2-5].

This paper therefore focuses specifically on the Viet Minh's diplomatic strategy toward the Chinese Nationalist Government. It argues that the Viet Minh did not pursue a fixed policy of alignment with or opposition to the Chinese Nationalist Government. Rather, it adjusted its behavior according to the changing balance among China, France, and the DRV. Its strategy moved through three connected stages. First, it avoided a direct military confrontation with Chinese forces and presented itself increasingly through a nationalist rather than communist political language. Second, it used tensions between China and France, especially over military finance, French authority, and the Indochinese monetary system, in order to resist French pressure. Third, it negotiated with France when French military return became the practical means of ending the Chinese military presence. After Chinese withdrawal reduced the political leverage available to Vietnamese nationalist parties with close ties to the Nationalist Government, the Viet Minh abandoned earlier accommodation and suppressed these rivals. This sequence reveals a consistent strategic objective: preserving the Viet Minh-led government by preventing any single political or military actor from obtaining decisive leverage over it.

2. The Chinese military presence and the Viet Minh's strategic adjustment

The Nationalist Government entered northern Vietnam pursuant to the Allied surrender arrangements rather than as part of a plan to establish a permanent Chinese administration. Chiang Kai-shek's government continued to regard domestic Chinese political and military problems as its central concern. The movement of Yunnan forces into Vietnam also intersected with Chiang's effort to weaken the position of Long Yun in Yunnan. Contemporary Chinese materials thus suggest that the deployment in northern Vietnam was important but not a primary long-term strategic project for the Nationalist Government [5-7]. This limited commitment created room for the Viet Minh, but it did not remove the immediate political and security constraints created by the presence of a large Chinese military force.

The Chinese entry into northern Vietnam generated substantial friction. Vietnamese local reports recorded disputes over military requisitions, food supplies, currency, accommodation, and violent incidents involving Chinese troops. In places such as Thai Nguyen and Bac Ninh, local authorities reported unpaid supplies, intimidation, looting, and clashes. Such episodes placed the Viet Minh in a difficult position. A frontal confrontation with the Chinese army could have destroyed the new regime, but passivity risked undermining its domestic legitimacy. The worsening situation in the south, where French forces were returning with British support, made a two-front conflict even more dangerous [2, 4].

The Viet Minh leadership had anticipated this dilemma before the Chinese troops arrived. At the Indochinese Communist Party conference of 14–15 August 1945, the leadership called for the

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avoidance of conflict and for friendly negotiation with the Chinese forces, while retaining passive resistance and mass political mobilization if Vietnamese interests were violated [1]. Ho Chi Minh conveyed a similar position to the American Office of Strategic Services officer Archimedes Patti, emphasizing that the Viet Minh should avoid provocations that might lead to violent conflict with Chiang Kai-shek's representatives [2]. Local resistance nevertheless occurred during the first weeks of the Chinese military presence, including demonstrations, transport disruption, and armed incidents. As the French return in southern Vietnam became increasingly evident, however, the Viet Minh leadership restrained these confrontations and adopted a more systematic strategy of accommodation.

3. Accommodation, nationalist presentation, and political compromise

Accommodation did not mean political submission. The Viet Minh attempted to reduce Chinese hostility through a mixture of negotiation, personal diplomacy, material concessions, and nationalist rhetoric. Ho Chi Minh cultivated relations with Chinese officers and representatives. Vietnamese and Chinese memoirs describe exchanges with Lu Han and Xiao Wen, while the Viet Minh leadership also made practical concessions to Chinese demands. The "Gold Week" fundraising campaign, launched in September 1945, was officially intended to strengthen the new government's finances and defense, but contemporary accounts also indicate that part of the collected resources was used to purchase Japanese weapons from Chinese troops and to ease relations with Chinese officers [2, 8, 9].

More important was the Viet Minh's effort to present itself as a broad nationalist movement rather than as a communist regime. This strategy had precedents in Ho Chi Minh's wartime contacts with Nationalist officials in China. Chinese sources recorded his familiarity with Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People and his willingness to emphasize Vietnamese nationalism in conversations with Nationalist officers. In northern Vietnam after August 1945, this political language served two purposes. It reduced the likelihood that the Nationalist Government, whose anti-communist orientation must be understood in the context of renewed Kuomintang-Communist rivalry and armed confrontation following Japan's surrender, would treat the Viet Minh as an enemy to be eliminated, and it helped the Viet Minh claim legitimacy as the representative of Vietnamese national independence [3, 7].

The formal dissolution of the Indochinese Communist Party on 11 November 1945 strengthened this presentation. The public declaration argued that national unity required the party to sacrifice its separate organizational interests. Chinese intelligence did not accept the dissolution at face value and regarded it as a tactical move, while communist activity continued through other channels [1, 7]. Yet in diplomatic terms the gesture was effective. Some Chinese military representatives became more willing to work with Ho Chi Minh and less confident in the rival Vietnamese nationalist organizations that had long operated in China. Chinese mediation increasingly focused on forcing the Viet Minh, the Vietnam Nationalist Party, and the Vietnam Revolutionary League into political compromise rather than replacing the Viet Minh government outright.

The Viet Minh accepted these compromises while the Chinese military presence remained decisive. It agreed to share positions and legislative seats with Vietnamese nationalist parties that maintained close ties with the Nationalist Government even though the Viet Minh possessed far greater organizational strength in much of northern Vietnam. Before the January 1946 election, seventy seats were reserved for the Vietnam Nationalist Party and the Vietnam Revolutionary League. British observers regarded the coalition arrangements as largely tactical, while the Viet Minh retained control over the most important instruments of power, including the army and internal

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security [3, 10]. Accommodation therefore functioned as a temporary political price for reducing the likelihood of direct political or military confrontation with Chinese authorities.

The political value of this accommodation can be seen most clearly in the relationship between the Viet Minh and Vietnamese nationalist parties with longstanding ties to the Nationalist Government. The Nationalist Government had longstanding connections with the Vietnam Revolutionary League and the Vietnam Nationalist Party, both of which returned to northern Vietnam with support from Nationalist authorities after the Japanese surrender. The Viet Minh possessed far greater grassroots organization in many areas, but it could not simply eliminate these rivals while Chinese troops remained in place. Chinese officers repeatedly intervened in disputes and attempted to mediate among the competing Vietnamese organizations. At moments, some Chinese military representatives even expressed disappointment with the effectiveness of the parties they had previously supported and showed greater respect for Ho Chi Minh's political skills [3, 7].

The Viet Minh therefore treated political concessions as a temporary diplomatic instrument. It accepted the inclusion of opposition leaders in a coalition government, allowed reserved legislative seats for the two Vietnamese nationalist parties with close ties to the Nationalist Government, and cooperated with Chinese-mediated efforts to display national unity. Even after the January 1946 election, in which the Viet Minh and its allies dominated the vote, the previously negotiated allocation of fifty seats to the Vietnam Nationalist Party and twenty to the Vietnam Revolutionary League was maintained [3, 10]. This arrangement reduced the likelihood that Chinese military authorities would become directly involved in disputes over the opposition's political position while allowing the Viet Minh to preserve control over the armed forces, internal security, and the core machinery of the new state. In other words, political pluralism during the Chinese military presence was closely tied to the prevailing balance of political and military power in northern Vietnam rather than to a stable domestic settlement.

Another area in which the Viet Minh adapted to Nationalist priorities was the treatment of overseas Chinese communities in Vietnam. Chinese authorities had made protection of overseas Chinese an explicit concern when their forces entered Indochina. At the same time, wartime disruption and longstanding economic tensions had produced serious friction between Vietnamese residents and Chinese merchants in several localities. The Viet Minh leadership recognized that uncontrolled anti-Chinese violence could give the Nationalist military a direct reason to intervene in local administration. It therefore sought to restrain conflict and to bring overseas Chinese affairs more firmly under government supervision [4, 7]. This policy had a diplomatic as well as a domestic purpose. By demonstrating that the DRV could protect Chinese residents and manage communal tensions, the Viet Minh reduced one of the Nationalist Government's stated justifications for political pressure. The issue illustrates a broader feature of Viet Minh diplomacy in this period: domestic policy was frequently adjusted in response to the priorities of the Chinese military authorities whose presence the new government could not yet remove.

4. Using Sino-French rivalry

The policy of accommodation toward China was accompanied by an effort to use conflict between China and France. The two powers disagreed over the conditions under which French authority could be restored in northern Indochina, and financial questions quickly became particularly contentious. Chinese forces required large quantities of local currency and supplies, while French authorities resisted financing an army whose presence they had not requested. Chinese military and diplomatic records show repeated demands for French advances in Indochinese piastres and

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warnings that the inability to finance the Chinese military deployment could produce serious consequences [5, 11].

The most visible monetary confrontation occurred when French authorities attempted to invalidate 500-piastre notes issued during the final months of the war. Chinese authorities in Hanoi objected strongly, and the Viet Minh mobilized public pressure against the measure. On 26 November 1945, Hanoi radio called on Vietnamese residents to exchange the notes at the Banque de l'Indochine, and a large demonstration developed outside the bank. The confrontation escalated into violence, after which Chinese forces took control of the bank and detained its manager. British observers concluded that the crisis had produced a much stronger reaction than French officials had expected. American mediation helped bring about a settlement, and the French attempt to impose the currency measure in northern Vietnam was checked [10, 11].

For the Viet Minh, this episode demonstrated the utility of Sino-French rivalry. By mobilizing Vietnamese public action at a moment of acute Chinese-French tension, the Viet Minh could resist a French policy without directly confronting France alone. The final arrangements for exchanging the disputed notes also provided a larger allocation to Vietnamese residents than to French residents. More broadly, the episode showed that the Viet Minh could use the presence of Chinese forces as a temporary counterweight to French colonial authority [5, 10, 11].

Yet the same Chinese presence that could be used against France was also regarded by the Viet Minh leadership as a major long-term strategic constraint. The Viet Minh therefore pursued apparently contradictory policies: it used Chinese pressure to restrain France while at the same time exploring an agreement with France that would facilitate Chinese withdrawal. Contacts between Vietnamese and French representatives had begun before the Chinese military presence was fully consolidated. During late 1945, Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap continued discussions with Jean Sainteny and other French representatives. By early 1946, both sides understood that the question of French return north of the sixteenth parallel was directly connected to the replacement of Chinese forces [12-14].

The monetary dispute also revealed the scale of the financial problem behind Sino-French tensions. Chinese military authorities reported that an initial allocation of fourteen million units of locally denominated currency was insufficient even for half a month of military expenditure. Chinese officials subsequently pressed the French side to advance approximately ninety-five million piastres per month, while the French delayed or resisted these requests [11]. The disagreement was therefore not merely about a banknote. It reflected a deeper conflict over who would bear the costs of the Chinese military presence and who possessed practical authority over the financial system of northern Indochina. For the Viet Minh, such disputes were strategically useful because they preserved the DRV's room for maneuver by delaying a full Sino-French accommodation over postwar arrangements in northern Indochina.

At the same time, the Viet Minh did not assume that Sino-French conflict would continue indefinitely. Its leaders understood that China and France could ultimately reach an agreement if their larger interests converged. This possibility explains why the Viet Minh maintained channels to French representatives even while benefiting from Chinese pressure on France. In September 1945, Vo Nguyen Giap met Jean Sainteny and expressed willingness to establish closer contact; on 1 December, Ho Chi Minh, Giap, Sainteny, Léon Pignon, and other French representatives held a further meeting [14]. By January 1946, negotiations had become more concrete. Ho Chi Minh insisted that any French return be accompanied by a formal political recognition of Vietnamese autonomy or independence, while French officials increasingly viewed an agreement with the Viet Minh as necessary for an orderly replacement of Chinese troops [13, 14]. The Viet Minh thus used

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Sino-French rivalry not as an end in itself but as a means of improving its bargaining position before an expected rearrangement of power.

5. From Chinese withdrawal to the suppression of Vietnamese nationalist rivals

The diplomatic situation changed decisively in early 1946. On 28 February, China and France signed agreements that provided for the relief of Chinese troops in northern Indochina by French forces. On 6 March, only hours after a Chinese-French clash at Haiphong, Ho Chi Minh's government and France signed the Preliminary Agreement. The accompanying military arrangements permitted French forces to enter northern Vietnam as replacements for the withdrawing Chinese troops. British diplomatic analysis at the time explicitly linked Ho Chi Minh's willingness to sign the agreement with the Chinese decision to withdraw [10, 13, 14].

The agreement did not represent a simple Viet Minh alignment with France. The Viet Minh continued to maneuver through the available diplomatic channels and even maintained political contacts with China after March 1946. Nevertheless, the strategic result was clear: the Chinese military presence, which had constrained the Viet Minh since September 1945, was now scheduled to end. The final withdrawal was repeatedly delayed, and the last Chinese troops did not leave until September 1946, but the political balance had already shifted [13].

This shift transformed the Viet Minh's relationship with Vietnamese nationalist parties whose political position had been strengthened by their ties to Nationalist authorities. During the Chinese military presence, the Viet Minh had accepted coalition arrangements and reserved political representation for the Vietnam Nationalist Party and the Vietnam Revolutionary League. As Chinese forces withdrew, the security services under Vo Nguyen Giap adopted increasingly coercive measures against these organizations. In July 1946, Viet Minh security forces attacked the Vietnam Nationalist Party base on On Nhu Hau Street in Hanoi and arrested more than one hundred people, including members of the National Assembly. Further operations later in the year destroyed much of the remaining organized opposition [9, 10, 15].

The timing is important. The Viet Minh's earlier political compromise was not evidence of a stable commitment to pluralism, just as its cooperation with Chinese representatives was not evidence of a durable alignment with the Nationalist Government. Both policies were conditioned by the distribution of power in northern Vietnam. While Chinese troops remained present and could affect disputes involving Vietnamese nationalist parties with close ties to Nationalist authorities, the Viet Minh accommodated those organizations. As that military and political constraint receded, the Viet Minh shifted rapidly toward eliminating them. The same strategic flexibility characterized its diplomacy toward both China and France.

The Viet Minh nevertheless continued to signal that the end of the Chinese military presence did not mean the end of all relations with the Nationalist Government. Less than two weeks after the Preliminary Agreement, a Vietnamese political delegation departed for Chongqing. French colonial officials reacted with concern and warned about possible continuing cooperation between Chiang Kai-shek's government and Vietnamese actors [5]. Such contacts are important because they show that the Viet Minh did not simply replace a "China policy" with a "France policy." Even after the basic mechanism for Chinese withdrawal had been established, it still preserved channels to China in order to maintain leverage against France. This was consistent with the broader pattern visible throughout 1945–1946: the Viet Minh sought to avoid dependence on any single diplomatic relationship and repeatedly used one relationship to balance another.

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6. Conclusion

Between 1945 and 1946, the Viet Minh's policy toward the Chinese Nationalist Government was shaped less by ideological affinity than by the immediate problem of political survival. The Chinese military presence created substantial political and security constraints, but the Nationalist Government's limited interest in maintaining a permanent military presence in northern Vietnam and its growing conflict with France created opportunities for maneuver. The Viet Minh first reduced friction with Chinese authorities through personal diplomacy, nationalist political presentation, and temporary compromise with Vietnamese nationalist parties that maintained close ties to the Nationalist Government. It then used Sino-French conflicts to resist French pressure while simultaneously negotiating with France over a settlement that would remove Chinese troops from northern Vietnam.

Seen in this way, the apparent reversals in Viet Minh policy form a coherent strategy. Cooperation with China, the use of Chinese pressure against France, negotiations with France, and the later suppression of Vietnamese nationalist parties with close ties to the Nationalist Government were not separate or contradictory episodes. They were successive responses to a changing triangular balance. The central objective was to preserve the Viet Minh-led DRV during the period in which it was militarily and diplomatically weakest. The experience of 1945–1946 thus provides an early example of the flexible diplomacy through which Vietnamese revolutionary leaders sought to preserve autonomy while operating among stronger political and military actors.

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