

# Resurrecting the French Empire: British Military Aid to Vietnam September 1945 – June 1947

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## **Abstract**

Using British archival evidence, and published primary and secondary literature, this article offers a reassessment of Britain's military aid commitment to French Indo-China following the Second World War. British military aid and training in support of the French return in 1945 is analysed revealing both a more complex British and also Anglo-American military involvement in Vietnam than has been previously argued.

**Keywords:** French Indo-China; South East Asia Command; Military Aid; Vietnam

## **Introduction**

British military involvement in the return of France to Indo-China following the Second World War has become a controversial subject. The Gravel Edition of the *Pentagon Papers* has contributed to this. In order to disassociate itself from the bloody return of imperialism and the origins of the Vietnamese revolution the logic of United States historical interpretation in the *Pentagon Papers* has attributed aid to the French in Indo-China to British support.<sup>1</sup> This has reinforced the belief of American neutrality concerning the origins of the First Vietnam War. Yet the French were not solely supported by the British. They were able to purchase from the United States not only relief supplies but also the shipping for its transportation.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Britain encouraged French procurement of supplies to prevent reliance upon British donations.<sup>3</sup> Regarding war material the *Pentagon Papers* stated that the United States did not want to aid the French and that the Secretary of State for War had been advised by the American State Department that it was contrary to United States policy to 'employ American flag vessels or aircraft to transport troops of any nationality to or from the Netherlands East Indies or French Indochina, nor to permit use of such craft to carry arms, ammunition or military equipment to these areas'. The *Pentagon Papers* claimed that Britain not only arranged French war transport but also supplied the war material. It implied that the United States was trying to extricate itself from the situation in French Indo-China and stated that President Harry S. Truman only reluctantly agreed to the British turning over 800 lend-lease jeeps and trucks because 'removing the equipment would be impractical'.<sup>4</sup> However, despite these claims to the contrary this article highlights that the British position was more complicated than previously stated and that the United States was involved also in equipping the French in Indo-China.<sup>5</sup> In 1945 Britain was almost financially bankrupt and its resources severely stretched. The United States was already the senior partner in the Anglo-American special relationship and the logical source for rehabilitative aid.

## **British Military Aid**

The Potsdam Conference, July 1945, transferred the area of French Indo-China below the 16th parallel into the operational theatre of British South East Asia Command for the purpose of wartime Allied Land Force operations. France had offered two military divisions for campaigning in the war against Japan and the Anglo-American

Combined Chiefs of Staff had agreed that the best place to employ these troops would be in Indo-China. The United States Commander-in-Chief of the Army, General George C. Marshall, asked the British Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia Command, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, to accept these two divisions as part of his command.<sup>6</sup> In August, following the Japanese surrender, South East Asia Command became responsible for undertaking liberation duties in southern Indo-China whilst France restored its colonial infrastructure. However, the limited South East Asia Command force of the British 20th Indian Division that arrived in Saigon found itself in the middle of a violent power struggle between Vietnamese nationalism and French colonials.

On 2 September 1945, the Vietminh nationalist coalition declared independence and proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. On the same day the Allies received the formal Japanese surrender and rioting broke out against French nationals in Vietnam. On 6 September, the first British troops arrived in Saigon.<sup>7</sup> Following the British arrival in Saigon an uneasy peace initially had ensued, but after eleven days the Vietminh called a general strike and British and French troops were forced to occupy key buildings. Maberly Esler Dening, Chief Political Adviser to South East Asia Command, foresaw that there would be local opposition to the return of the French, and demonstrations broke out against British troops on 19 September.<sup>8</sup> French forces began a counter-revolution and occupied significant administration buildings in Saigon.<sup>9</sup> South East Asia Command had been able only to place dangerously small resources and troop numbers into Allied Land Force tasks in Indo-China. In order to alleviate the situation, the emphasis was now upon whether Britain and the United States would rapidly transport French forces to Indo-China.

The Joint Planning Staff in London continued to support the British troop build-up. It insisted that this was to be concentrated in Saigon and that the Allied Land Force commander Major-General Douglas Gracey should leave the rest of the country to the French and only assist where necessary.<sup>10</sup> South East Asia Command began talks with the Vietminh.<sup>11</sup> On 2 October a cease-fire was agreed in Saigon. To boost troop numbers Mountbatten used Japanese prisoners of war to keep order.<sup>12</sup> Also, he lobbied London and reminded the government of the impossible situation in south Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> He requested additional shipping and troops including the French Ninth Colonial Division.<sup>14</sup> The Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, asked Major-General Hollis, of the War Cabinet Secretariat, for a report on the situation in Indo-China.<sup>15</sup> Attlee decided to bring the Indo-Chinese situation and Hollis's report to the Defence Committee for discussion on 5 October.<sup>16</sup> In the meantime, Attlee asked Hollis for further clarification regarding the movement of the French Ninth Colonial Division. Hollis replied that, according to the British Chiefs of Staff, to accelerate the French division would either mean that Britain had to accept a delay of three months in the return of the 12,000 Indian troops due to leave the Mediterranean in October, or a similar delay of the drafts of 6,000 British troops from Britain to India. In addition, there would be a further delay of about a month for any shipping sent to Saigon to return to India and continue Operation Python duties releasing men from India to the United Kingdom as part of the general demobilisation of British forces following the end of the Second World War.<sup>17</sup> The violence in Saigon had not placed a ceiling on the number of troops that Britain was willing to commit to Indo-China, Operation Python and other external factors had.<sup>18</sup>

In Whitehall, the Defence Committee debated the need to accelerate movements of French troops to Indo-China due to the imposition that this would place upon Operation Python and other shipping requirements. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Lord Alanbrooke, in response to a question by Attlee, thought that it was too early to foretell the direction of events in Indo-China: 'He [Alanbrooke] recommended that the situation was not at present sufficiently serious to pay the expense involved in speeding up the arrival of the extra French division by one month only'. However, Oliver Harvey, Assistant Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, said that the Foreign Office was anxious to speed up the arrival of the French division and return law and order to the French but that France had not raised the prospect of an acceleration. The Foreign Office was sympathetic to France and believed that a strong France was vital to British security in Europe. The Prime Minister sided with Alanbrooke. Attlee concluded that the situation did not warrant a change to the schedule of French troop movements to Indo-China, therefore condemning Gracey to a further period of uncertainty regarding the role of the Allied Land Force. The Joint Planning Staff felt that Britain would remain legally responsible for law and order but that British commitments should be limited to a minimum and thereafter handed over to the French.<sup>19</sup> In the meantime the French Navy was able to use its ship in the region, the *Richelieu*, to transport troops although its capacity was limited.<sup>20</sup>

The French Ninth Colonial Division that Mountbatten had requested was 'organised on American war establishment and war equipment tables' and was therefore 'fully armed, clothed and equipped in accordance with the standard establishment of a United States Army Infantry Division'.<sup>21</sup> It would be impossible to maintain such a force with American material unless the United States withdrew its ruling that no American equipment was to be issued to French forces in South East Asia Command.<sup>22</sup> Mountbatten had hoped that the Commander French Expeditionary Corps to the Far East, General Jean Philippe Leclerc, would be able to take over in Indo-China on 2 October, when the French would have 2,425 troops in southern Vietnam or at the latest by 20 October when a further 2,150 had been scheduled to arrive.<sup>23</sup> Mountbatten planned to use a South East Asia Command brigade in Indo-China to relieve the Australian Allied Land Force in Borneo by 31 October.<sup>24</sup> The British Government was also aware of the bad publicity that the use of Indian troops in French Indo-China could have with Indian public opinion.<sup>25</sup> It was important for the government to withdraw Indian troops as soon as possible to avoid Indian nationalist claims of the British using Indian troops to suppress Asian nationalism on behalf of a white French colony.<sup>26</sup> The British Commander-in-Chief India felt that he could not even agree to the movement or staging of French troops through India on route to Indo-China.<sup>27</sup> Therefore Britain sought to alleviate the situation by discussing with the United States the shipping of troops to Indo-China.<sup>28</sup>

The Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, was desperate that any available United States warships be used to speed up troop deployments to the Dutch East Indies and French Indo-China.<sup>29</sup> Fearing further British involvement in Indo-China the Commander-in-Chief Allied Land Force South East Asia Command, General William Slim, reported that no French forces of any real value were yet available. British forces were maintaining essential services and preventing the massacre of French civilians but he warned that if there was a full scale uprising then the British forces would be unable to cope. He stated that the situation was very dangerous, that the British were very unpopular with the Vietnamese and therefore needed to leave as

soon as possible.<sup>30</sup> Eight ships were provided by the United States to transport the 7,700 troops planned to leave France for Indo-China in October and an additional 14,000 from Marseilles on 23 October.<sup>31</sup>

On 24 October Bevin responded to a question from the House of Commons with a statement on the situation in Indo-China. The historian John Saville in his analysis of the statement has argued that this was a mixture of 'half truths and untruths: it was a louche statement of lies'.<sup>32</sup> Certainly Bevin's statement was a bland synopsis of events since August. The Foreign Secretary's oratory side-stepped the gravity of the situation in the south of Vietnam and it reiterated Attlee's desire not to become 'involved in the administration or the political affairs of non-British territories'. Bevin discharged the government's responsibility by concluding that 'every effort is being made to expedite the movement of French troops to Saigon'.<sup>33</sup> Bevin's performance was symbolic of the Labour Government's policy towards Indo-China; it was a minor concern in an era when Britain was still unsure where its economic and political post-war role lay.

Nevertheless, by November Mountbatten was still pressing the War Office for the French to relieve him of the burden of Indo-China 'owing to the very delicate situation in Netherlands East Indies and the big calls it is likely to make on my resources, more than ever necessary to shift the burden of French Indo-China onto French shoulders with all possible speed'.<sup>34</sup> With increased French troop numbers Leclerc asked Britain to supply one squadron of Royal Air Force spitfires to be flown by French pilots. Leclerc believed that his operations were disadvantaged by not being able to use British air support for French troops and by not having suitable French aircraft available. Mountbatten accepted Leclerc's request and advised the British Chiefs of Staff that one squadron of Spitfire Mark IV's and spares could be turned over to the French with the financial aspect of the arrangement left to the British and French governments to settle.<sup>35</sup>

The French frequently had asked the British and the United States for transport for troop movements and equipment for their forces, both of whom obliged. The United States would have been well aware of French requests to the British as much of the correspondence was copied to the Joint Service Mission in Washington; thus implicating a legitimate British expectation of United States involvement pertaining to French requests. Similarly, the British were aware of American sensitivities concerning the use of their equipment under South East Asia Command control. The First Sea Lord, in reply to a French request to supply landing craft to their forces in French Indo-China, had responded that as most of the stock attached to South East Asia Command was of United States lend-lease origin the British Navy would be only able to supply two craft. If the French got the approval of the United States to use American craft then he would be able to supply more.<sup>36</sup> Despite claims to the contrary, the United States was willing to supply equipment to the French in Indo-China especially if the French were prepared to purchase such equipment. For example, in December 1945, 279 vehicles purchased by the French from the United States were awaiting shipment in Calcutta for Saigon.<sup>37</sup>

The British were wary of merely handing over lend-lease material to the French without American approval and in order to avoid any political problems sought in the first instance that 'British substitutes should be used where possible'.<sup>38</sup>

Yet Britain could not avoid the lend-lease issue. In trying to supply equipment for the French Third Colonial Division the British War Office had intended that no lend-lease material was to be used.<sup>39</sup> Only 900 vehicles of British origin were available to transfer from the 20th Indian Division but a further 1,300 vehicles were available to transfer which were of United States lend-lease origin.<sup>40</sup> Major F.H. Weaver, dealing with the problem, cabled Mountbatten and requested that 'you obtain permission of the Americans' for the lend-lease equipment transfer.<sup>41</sup> Weaver then cabled the United States to seek agreement for the transfer of lend-lease vehicles the quantity of which had now reduced to approximately 800.<sup>42</sup> Britain also supplied training teams to the French for the equipment supplied. However, these proved to be under-used by the French who had a tendency to 'rush equipment up country before it has been put in working order'.<sup>43</sup> South East Asia Command was prepared to continue to assist in the maintenance of French forces 'until such time as the French no longer require[d] such assistance' yet after 15 February 1946 this was qualified as all such issues would be upon repayment.<sup>44</sup> Maintenance responsibility for French forces eventually expired on 31 March.<sup>45</sup>

In the meantime, the question of the Indian response to the situation in French Indo-China was again brought to the fore. It was difficult to move French or Dutch supplies from Europe to French Indo-China or the Netherlands East Indies without using bunkering and watering facilities in India. The British could not use Ceylon for fear of a port strike and labour unrest. Singapore was too far for many vessels and possessed only limited stocks due to South East Asia Command duties. The Commander Indian Expeditionary Force had already agreed to accept two or three French vessels a month but labour strikes were threatened. The Viceroy of India, Field Marshall Archibald Wavell, therefore agreed to accept ships flying British or United States flags carrying French forces provided that no more than two or three harboured together at any one time for a maximum of two or three days. No French troops would be allowed to land and their presence was to be concealed. No provisions were made available; the operation was to be top secret and if details were leaked out then the resultant labour strikes would preclude any further ships using Indian harbours.<sup>46</sup>

In January 1946 the United States became keen to disassociate itself from the formulation of military policy in the Netherlands East Indies and French Indo-China.<sup>47</sup> Despite the United States disassociation it insisted that southern Indo-China was to remain within South East Asia Command until all the Japanese prisoners of war in all of South East Asia Command were evacuated. In recognition of the changing circumstances in French Indo-China the United States was prepared for such tasks to be delegated to the French.<sup>48</sup> Alanbrooke felt that as the United States did not want to hand command over from South East Asia Command in Indo-China to the French that 'the Americans wished to have it both ways' and he recommended that Mountbatten relinquish command for Indo-China as soon as possible 'lest any further occurrences started there'.<sup>49</sup> The British Chiefs of Staff were unable to agree with the United States proposal to keep French Indo-China within South East Asia Command and offered the compromise that Mountbatten would keep the responsibility for the Japanese through Leclerc.<sup>50</sup> Alanbrooke was eager for the question of responsibility for French Indo-China to be settled rapidly by the Joint Service Mission in Washington as French operations were starting in southern Vietnam (which led to French troops landing in the north) that could have grave implications for

Mountbatten and South East Asia Command should they still be responsible for southern Indo-China.<sup>51</sup> The United States agreed to the British compromise solution and both Britain and the United States were able to disassociate themselves from French military actions in Indo-China.<sup>52</sup>

A proportion of the equipment, however, that was used by the French in Indo-China had been supplied by Britain, thus the resupply of this equipment and other military issues in Indo-China continued to concern the British. The British Inter-Service Mission attached to the British Consulate had been responsible temporarily for various transfer duties with the removal of Indo-China from South East Asia Command and Britain wanted to maintain a staging post in Saigon for use on the main air traffic routes to Hong Kong and Japan.<sup>53</sup> It was intended to replace the Inter-Service Mission by a small inter-service body attached to the Consul-General's staff.<sup>54</sup> In the meantime, a number of Indian transportation units remained in Saigon to assist the French with dock operations and maintenance. These units were withdrawn during April 1946 and in May it was agreed that the Inter-Service Mission would be scaled down with the removal of Royal Air Force staff and the disbanding of the air section, although a Royal Air Force staging post remained at Saigon operated by 330 Royal Air Force personnel.<sup>55</sup>

The French military campaign against the Vietminh continued. During June, Britain supplied two hospital ships to evacuate French women and children from Saigon and in July – expecting further casualties and civilian evacuees - the French requested more hospital ships from Britain. Lt.-Commander Williams noted that of the two ships already supplied the percent of actual sick had been very low and that there were only five stretcher cases in total.<sup>56</sup> The British Special Commissioner Southeast Asia, Lord Killearn, later advised the French High Commissioner in Indo-China, Admiral Thierry D'Argenlieu, that Britain was unable to supply further ships and suggested that he should approach the United States.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile, Dr Think of the Cochinchina Government asked the Foreign Office representative in Saigon E.W. Meiklereid if Britain could assist in the supply of 500 rifles for each of the republic's 20 provinces as the French were experiencing supply problems. Meiklereid dodged the issue by referring Dr Think to D'Argenlieu via whom the request would have to come.<sup>58</sup>

As French military operations in Indo-China progressed, increasingly France became concerned about resupply issues. The French had purchased aircraft from the Royal Air Force but were worried about the transfer of American lend-lease materials such as the propellers on the purchased aircraft.<sup>59</sup> The British Ambassador in Washington, Lord Inverchapel, raised the matter with the State Department. The United States Government explained that it would oppose the transfer of lend-lease material to Indo-China but not the sale of war material to the French Government in Paris. Inverchapel advised that the French should forget the lend-lease issue and that the aircraft should be transferred.<sup>60</sup> In January 1947 the Governor of Burma, Sir Hubert Rance, expressed concern at potential political repercussions of the transit of French aircraft there on route to Indo-China.<sup>61</sup> However the British Air Ministry, anxious to be accorded an agreement to over-fly French territories to reinforce Hong Kong from Singapore, urged Air Headquarters Burma to ensure a speedy transit of French aircraft.<sup>62</sup> The Governments of India and Burma took a similar position, allowing five military aircraft each way per month.<sup>63</sup>

In the meantime, the French asked the British Headquarters of the South East Asia Land Force in Singapore for large supplies of weapons and ammunition. Killearn warned that if Britain supplied Indo-China from Singapore some of the supplies would have to be sourced from India. In order to avoid political repercussions he requested that supplies were provided from Europe rather than Singapore, and cautioned that 'compliance by me with this request might well land us in extremely deep waters'.<sup>64</sup> In Paris the British Ambassador, Duff Cooper, understood Killearn's predicament but highlighted the risks attached to the French not being able to restore control in Indo-China as soon as possible.<sup>65</sup> A week later Cooper briefed the Foreign Office that the French were becoming increasingly sensitive to suggestions in Burma of the raising of nationalist volunteers to help fight the French in Indo-China and of a dock strike in Singapore against the loading of supplies for Indo-China.<sup>66</sup> Suspicion already had led the French Government to complain to the British Embassy in Paris of British and American arms being smuggled to the Vietminh in commercial ships flying Panamanian and British flags.<sup>67</sup> The British investigated these charges but no conclusive evidence of these shipments could be produced, though limited arms smuggling was occurring between Siam and Cambodia.<sup>68</sup> A paper prepared by Denning, now the Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, on Southeast Asia, cautioned that British co-operation with Indo-China depended on the French resolution of the conflict.<sup>69</sup> Bevin met with Denning, Michael Wright, Pierson Dixon (Bevin's Principal Private Secretary) and Sir Orme Sargent (Permanent Under-Secretary Foreign Office) to discuss Southeast Asia. Bevin agreed that an approach should be made to the United States to request their attendance at Defence Committee meetings in Singapore.<sup>70</sup>

Bevin briefed the Cabinet about Killearn's concerns regarding the supply of munitions to Indo-China from Singapore. However, it was feared that if this was refused, the refusal along with other requests that previously had been denied might push France towards the Soviets. The Ministry of Defence strongly supported the need to restore the French in Indo-China. The Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, opposed the munitions shipments from Singapore and the meeting concluded with an agreement that Britain would supply only munitions from Britain to metropolitan France, and that the French would be responsible for their distribution.<sup>71</sup> Bevin was asked in the House of Commons what British arms, equipment and aeroplanes had been supplied to Indo-China in the past six months. Bevin replied that during the last war Britain had aided the armed forces of its Allies with military equipment including the French forces in metropolitan France. He concluded that 'when British forces in French Indo-China were replaced by French forces, a certain amount of war material was handed over to them in order to complete their equipment'.<sup>72</sup> The next day the French also asked Britain to supply aviation and motor spirit to Indo-China. Britain had already agreed to supply 4,000 tons of aviation spirit and 28,000 tons of motor spirit between January and April 1947. The French were now asking for the same rate of delivery from May to December. The Foreign Office considered this new request against Attlee's munitions ruling. Gordon Whitteridge felt that 'we would rather not have been asked this question' but argued that 'fuel like food and water, should be available in the normal way of commerce to all nations with whom we have normal friendly relations'. In avoiding a moral dilemma he concluded that 'its eventual use is of no concern to the supplier'.<sup>73</sup>

A month later the Reuters news agency reported from Paris that, over the last 16 months, Britain had supplied £17,500,000 of military equipment direct to Indo-China to aid the French against the Vietminh. The report stated that a new Franco-British agreement worth £1,726,000 had been made to equip an airborne division and 'contract purchase' 92 warships. Geoffrey Thompson, the British minister in Bangkok, concluded that this was French propaganda designed to give the appearance that Britain was supporting the French against the Vietminh in Indo-China. He warned that 'this will do us great harm'.<sup>74</sup> However, a certain element of the report was true as on 22 March the French Assembly approved military credits to purchase from Britain the equipment for one airborne division in Indo-China.<sup>75</sup> The question of British military aid to the French in Indo-China was raised again in the House of Commons. Due to the Cabinet's conclusion on 19 February, the Foreign Office Minister Hector McNeil replied that 'No aid specifically designed for Indo-China has been given to the French armed forces'.<sup>76</sup> The French intended the equipment for Indo-China but Britain was supplying France not Indo-China; the eventual use was being ignored.

In July the Joint Planning Staff outlined proposals for the terms of reference of the new British Defence Co-ordination Committee Far East, under the Governor-General of Malaya and Borneo, Malcolm MacDonald. This revitalised the British Defence Committee Southeast Asia to include enhanced terms of reference similar to the Commanders-in-Chief Committee Far East, and both Indo-China and China were included within its remit.<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, in May the India Office wrote to the War Office worried about the sale of surplus military lorries and tractors to Indo-China. They were alarmed about the possibility of a reaction from the Indian population which could provoke dock strikes.<sup>78</sup> The Foreign Office was livid at not being consulted on the problem by the India Office and informed both government departments that they should suspend any further action until the Foreign Office had consulted Paris and formulated a view.<sup>79</sup> Upon considering the situation, the Foreign Office evaded responsibility for the supply issues and the potential crisis. Richard Allen instructed the French Ambassador in London that unless they could arrange the appropriate transfer directly with the Government of India and provide the shipping needed for transportation, no tractors or lorries could be sent to Indo-China.<sup>80</sup> Meanwhile the Foreign Office noted that, in contrast to the investigations in January and February when limited arms smuggling had continued between Siam and Cambodia, large scale smuggling was now occurring between China and Saigon. American arms that had been supplied to the Chinese Nationalist Army were being bought by Chinese merchants and being smuggled into Saigon through Hong Kong. The arms were loaded onto legal cargo vessels in Hong Kong and transferred onto Vietnamese junks outside Indo-Chinese territorial waters.<sup>81</sup>

The global context, however, of British military aid to French Indo-China was changing. In March 1947 American global policy had entered a new phase. On 5 March Dean Acheson, the Under-Secretary of State, noted it would be important to study regions of the world where technical and military assistance might be required.<sup>82</sup> Seven days later the President announced the 'Truman Doctrine'; this was 'the political embodiment of containment', 'to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed forces or outside pressures'.<sup>83</sup> Military and economic assistance was offered to Greece and Turkey, though in order to placate the United States Congress Acheson explained to the Foreign Relations Committee that this did



not set a precedent for intervention elsewhere and that all future requests would be assessed individually.<sup>84</sup> During the second half of 1947 American concern about the international threat of Communism began to escalate. The Truman doctrine fundamentally altered the British and French approach to military aid for Indo-China as the shadow of the Cold War began to encroach upon South East Asia.

### **Conclusion**

Following the Second World War Japanese surrender, contrary to historiographical claims of sole British support for the restoration of French imperialism, both Britain and the United States supplied military aid to French forces in Indo-China against the Vietnamese nationalists. France, a victorious Allied power in Europe, would have expected nothing less. The resurrection of the French empire was associated with its own national rejuvenation. The United States had already rehabilitated France as a great power at the San Francisco Conference - awarding it a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council - thereby compromising American anti-colonialism. The British Foreign Office believed that a strong France was vital to Britain's security in Europe. When issues of restocking in Indo-China later arose Britain feared that the denial of French requests could push France towards the Soviet Union and threaten Britain's security.

Britain, in its role as the liberating Allied power in Indo-China, was both unprepared and under-resourced to deal with the rise of Vietnamese nationalism. Part of this was due to a lack of information as to the internal situation in Indo-China at the end of the war. But it was also because of Britain's own economic decline and virtual financial bankruptcy, the British Government's commitment to Operation Python and the demobilisation programme. Britain was conscious, also, of its own military logistical problems. British reliance upon American lend-lease equipment meant that French requests for military supplies either had to be sourced from within British stock or permission obtained for the transfer of American material. The initial decision of the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff to employ French divisions in the war against Japan in Indo-China and the continued involvement of the Joint Service Mission in Washington implicates a legitimate British expectation of American support. Indeed, Mountbatten actively sought American approval for the transfer of lend-lease equipment from the British Allied Land Force in Saigon to the French. After the British withdrawal from Indo-China it is clear that the British continued to agonise about the re-supply of lend-lease materials to the French in Indo-China. This even involved paranoid questions about individual lend-lease components. However, the American anti-imperial ideological stance had been compromised by its earlier donations and sales of aid, the provision of transportation for French troops, and by its continued supply of metropolitan France because such materials were then used by the French in Indo-China.

Likewise, Britain was vulnerable to pressure from both its own dependent empire, the Dominions and the Commonwealth nations concerning the supply of military aid to French Indo-China. India, Burma, Singapore and Ceylon were all sympathetic to Asian nationalist movements and were suspicious of the restoration of French colonialism. Britain needed the support of both its empire and former empire to maintain its diminishing status as the third great power. Yet reliance enabled such nations to increase their leverage over British policy and made Britain vulnerable to criticism.

It is clear that Britain did supply military aid and training to the returning French forces in Indo-China between 1945 and 1947. But overall British military aid was not supplied in isolation from its now senior American partner. This reflected the decline of the Western European imperial powers and the dynamics of the emerging American ascendancy in western global geopolitics.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *The Pentagon Papers, The Defense Department History of United States Decision Making on Vietnam*, Vol. 1, Gravel Edition, Boston, 1971, pp. 17-18. This argument has been advocated by G.C. Herring, 'The Truman Administration and the Restoration of French Sovereignty in Indochina', *Diplomatic History* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1977), p. 114; M. Lawrence, 'Transnational Coalition Building The Making of the Cold War in Indochina', *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2002), p. 472; M. Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam*, Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005, pp. 112-113, 309. Lawrence identifies the difficulty of piecing together the British archival trail concerning British military aid to French Indo-China. This Anglo-centric article aims to clarify this issue.
- <sup>2</sup> The National Archives Public Record Office London [hereafter *PRO*] BT 64/2864, WO to SACSEA, 74087 cipher CA17, 15 September 1945; *PRO* WO 203/4117, Leclerc to Brigadier Montague-Jones Movements and Transports Department, no. 180/ECO/LI, (Undated).
- <sup>3</sup> *PRO* BT 64/2864, BT to Ministry of Production, Sanders to Harden, 13 September 1945; *PRO* BT 64/2864, Ministry of Production to BT, Harden to Sanders, 28 September 1945.
- <sup>4</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, pp. 17-18.
- <sup>5</sup> In parallel to the complexity in the British situation the American position was complicated by the European and Far Eastern desks in the State Department pursuing conflicting agendas regarding French Indo-China. See G.R. Hess, *The United States' Emergence of a Southeast Asian Power 1940-1950*, New York: Columbia Press, 1987, pp. 149-150, 162-163.
- <sup>6</sup> Meeting of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, 24 July 1945, JCS files, minutes 200th meeting, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conference at Berlin 1945, (The Potsdam Conference)*, Vol. 2, Washington D.C., 1960, p. 377; Memorandum by Foulds, F4715/47/23, FO, 1 August 1945, R. Butler and M. Pelly eds., *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, Ser. 1, Vol. 1, *The Conference at Potsdam July-August 1945*, London, 1984, p. 1145.
- <sup>7</sup> P.M. Dunn, *The First Vietnam War*, London: Hurst, 1985, pp. 123, 136.
- <sup>8</sup> N. Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the onset of the Cold War 1945-1950*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 56, 79.
- <sup>9</sup> F.S.V. Donnison, *British Military Administration in the Far East 1943-1946*, London: HMSO, 1956, pp. 408-409.
- <sup>10</sup> Dunn, *The First Vietnam War*, p. 233.
- <sup>11</sup> P. Dennis, *Troubled Days of Peace: Mountbatten and South-East Asia Command, 1945-46*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987, p. 63.
- <sup>12</sup> Dunn, *The First Vietnam War*, p. 241; P. Ziegler, *Mountbatten: the Official Biography*, Glasgow: Collins, 1985, p. 332.
- <sup>13</sup> J. Saville, *The Politics of Continuity: British Foreign Policy and the Labour Government 1945-1946*, London and New York: Verso, 1993, p. 195.
- <sup>14</sup> *PRO* PREM 8/63, SACSEA to Cabinet Office and JSM Washington, SEACOS 489, 24 September 1945.
- <sup>15</sup> *PRO* PREM 8/63, Hollis to Prime Minister, 28 September 1945.
- <sup>16</sup> *PRO* PREM 8/63, 'R.B.' to Hollis, 29 September 1945.
- <sup>17</sup> *PRO* FO 371/46309/F8070/11/G61, Hollis to Prime Minister, 4 October 1945.
- <sup>18</sup> For analysis that the violence in Saigon did place a ceiling on British troop deployments in French Indo-China see D.G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest For Power*, Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995, p. 542.
- <sup>19</sup> *PRO* PREM 8/63, DO(45) 7th Meeting 18 (Revise) (Secret), 'Situation in Indo-China', Defence Committee, 5 October 1945; *PRO* PREM 8/63, DO(45) 7th Meeting 18 (Revise) (Secret), 'Situation in Indo-China', Defence Committee, 5 October 1945, Annex 1, JP(45)258(Final).
- <sup>20</sup> *PRO* PREM 8/63, DO(45) 7th Meeting 18 (Revise) (Secret), 5 October 1945, Enclosure to Annex 1.
- <sup>21</sup> *PRO* WO 203/2178, (G)SD4 to Gplans, Lt.-Colonel Dawson, no. 79006/SD4, 28 August 1945.
- <sup>22</sup> *PRO* WO 203/2235, SACSEA to CinC India, SAC 21266, 8 September 1945.
- <sup>23</sup> *PRO* PREM 8/63, SACSEA to Cabinet Office and JSM Washington, SEACOS 490, 24 September 1945.
- <sup>24</sup> *PRO* PREM 8/63, Hollis to Prime Minister, 28 September 1945.
- <sup>25</sup> *PRO* CAB 80/97, COS(45)570(0), 'Use of Indian Troops For Occupation Outside of India', 8 September 1945.
- <sup>26</sup> Field Marshal Viscount Wavell to Lord Pethick-Lawrence, L/PO/10/22, New Delhi, 1 October 1945, N. Mansergh ed., *Constitutional Relations Between Britain and India*, Vol. 6: *The Post War Phase: New Moves by the Labour Government 1 August 1945-22 March 1946*, London, 1971, pp. 304-309;

Field Marshal Viscount Wavell to Lord Pethick-Lawrence, L/PO/10/22, Kashmir, 9 October 1945, *Ibid.*, pp. 319-324.

<sup>27</sup> *PRO* WO 203/2235, CinC India to SACSEA, no. 99620/SD5, 16 September 1945.

<sup>28</sup> *PRO* CAB 119/200, Director of Plans London to Director Plans SEAC, Magneta 186, 9 October 1945.

<sup>29</sup> *PRO* CAB 80/97, COS(45)598 1(0) 'Reoccupation of Dutch East Indies' 3 October 1945, FO to Secretary COS.

<sup>30</sup> *PRO* CAB 80/97 COS(45)607(0), 'Dutch East Indies and French Indo-China', 9 October 1945, Annex, DO OCC/2B, Slim to CIGS, 6 October 1945.

<sup>31</sup> *PRO* CAB 80/97, COS(45)619(0), 'French Indo-China' Memorandum by WO, 13 October 1945, Annex 1, Cabinet to SACSEA.

<sup>32</sup> Saville, *The Politics of Continuity*, p. 202.

<sup>33</sup> *Hansard House of Commons Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 414, cols. 2149-50, 24 October 1945,

<sup>34</sup> *PRO* WO 172/1790, SACSEA to WO, signal SAC27379, 3 November 1945.

<sup>35</sup> *PRO* CAB 121/742, Mountbatten to COS, information Joint Service Mission, SEACOS 555, 27 November 1945.

<sup>36</sup> *PRO* CAB 121/742, COS(45)333, Memorandum by the First Sea Lord, 24 December 1945.

<sup>37</sup> *PRO* WO 203/2236, ALFSEA to ARM India, Major Weaver, no. 2131SD2, December 1945.

<sup>38</sup> *PRO* WO 203/2236, Troopers to East Africa, no. 78730LM3, 10 October 1945.

<sup>39</sup> *PRO* WO 203/4292, WO to CinC India and SACSEA, no. 81090Q(AE), 2 October 1945.

<sup>40</sup> *PRO* WO 203/2236, HQALFSEA to Troopers, Major Weaver, tel. 146, (undated); *PRO* WO 203/2236, Troopers to HQALFSEA, no. 89364/WSC, 14 December 1945.

<sup>41</sup> *PRO* WO 203/2236 ALF to SACSEA, Major Weaver, no. 2120SD2, 24 December 1945.

<sup>42</sup> *PRO* WO 203/2599 ALF to CG USF IBT, Major Weaver, tel. 161, no. 31512/SD2, (undated).

<sup>43</sup> *PRO* WO 203/6066, ALFSEA to SACSEA, Report of GSO OPS1, I/SM to French Indo-China Saigon 6-9 March 1946, Summary Report, no. 10410/G(0)1, 11 March 1946.

<sup>44</sup> *PRO* WO 203/6419, SACSEA to SACSEA ISM FIC, Browning to Maunsell, SAC 7486, 22 February 1946.

<sup>45</sup> *PRO* WO 203/6419, WO to ALFSEA, 99235Q(OPS)1, 27 February 1946.

<sup>46</sup> *PRO* WO 203/4292, D of ST to PSTO Middle East, DST France, SSTO Southern France, 21 December 1945, ALFSEA to WO, 6 December 1945.

<sup>47</sup> *PRO* CAB 21/1950, Halifax to FO for Cabinet, no. 464, 20 January 1946.

<sup>48</sup> *PRO* CAB 119/200, JSM Washington to Cabinet, JSM 175, 26 January 1946.

<sup>49</sup> *PRO* CAB 119/205, COS(46) 14th Meeting, 28 January 1946.

<sup>50</sup> *PRO* CAB 121/742, Annex to JP(46)30(Final), 19 February 1946, COS com JPS, 'Responsibility for French Indo-China', draft telegram Cabinet Office to JSM, sent 20 February 1946.

<sup>51</sup> *PRO* CAB 121/742, COS(46) 31st Meeting, 25 February 1946.

<sup>52</sup> *PRO* CAB 121/742, COS to Mountbatten, COSSEA 480, 1 March 1946.

<sup>53</sup> *PRO* WO 203/4933, Sir Keith Park, SAC 325th Meeting, 22 March 1946.

<sup>54</sup> *PRO* CAB 121/742, COS to SACSEA, COSSEA 506, 29 March 1946.

<sup>55</sup> *PRO* WO 203/6276, 'Movements and transportation considerations affecting the export of rice', 22 March 1946; *PRO* WO 203/6209, HQSACSEA to HQ Air Command SEA, 101/SD, 20 May 1946; *PRO* FO 371/53964/F9106/8/61, Meiklereid to Bevin, no. 60, 24 May 1946.

<sup>56</sup> *PRO* FO 371/53965/F10384/8/61, Minutes of the Consul-General's 5th Meeting with Service Representatives held at Saigon, 26 June 1946; *PRO* FO 371/53965/F10994/8/61, Minutes of the Consul-General's 7th Meeting with Service Representatives held at Saigon, 10 July 1946.

<sup>57</sup> *PRO* WO 2036352, Empson to Consul-General Saigon, Killlearn to D'Argenlieu, tel. 327, 27 October 1946.

<sup>58</sup> *PRO* WO 208/4923, Saigon to FO, Meiklereid, no. 195, 8 July 1946.

<sup>59</sup> *PRO* FO 371/53970/F18413/8/61, Minute by Anderson, 31 December 1946.

<sup>60</sup> *PRO* FO 371/53970/F18418/8/61, Washington to FO, Inverchapel, no. 7339, 28 December 1946.

<sup>61</sup> *PRO* FO 371/63459/F132/6/86, FO to Paris, no. 19, 3 January 1947.

<sup>62</sup> *PRO* FO 371/63459/F132/6/86, Air Ministry to Air HQ Burma, MSX 479, 6 January 1947.

<sup>63</sup> *PRO* FO 371/63460/F1905/6/86, Burma Office to FO, Gibson to Anderson, 12 February 1947.

<sup>64</sup> *PRO* CAB 121/742, Killlearn to FO, no. 202, 26 January 1947.

<sup>65</sup> *PRO* CAB 121/742, Cooper to FO, no. 96A, 29 January 1947.

<sup>66</sup> *PRO* CAB 121/742, Cooper to FO, no. 121, 6 February 1947.

<sup>67</sup> *PRO* CO 537/2194, Paris to FO, Clarke to Denning, 3 January 1947.

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- <sup>68</sup> PRO CO 537/2194, Governor of Hong Kong to CO, no. 8, 28 January 1947; PRO FO 371/63455/F8114/5/86, Note by Street, 12 June 1947.
- <sup>69</sup> PRO FO 371/63547/F1969/1969/61, Southeast Asia paper by Dening, 7 February 1947.
- <sup>70</sup> PRO FO 371/63547/F1969/1969/61, Record of meeting summoned by Secretary of State to discuss Southeast Asia, 8 February 1947, Minutes by Dening, 10 February 1947.
- <sup>71</sup> PRO CAB 121/742, Cabinet Session 170/1, 1st Meeting, 11 February 1947.
- <sup>72</sup> *Hansard*, Vol. 433, cols. 174-175, 19 February 1947.
- <sup>73</sup> PRO FO 371/63453/F2431/5/86, Minute by Whitteridge, 20 February 1947.
- <sup>74</sup> PRO CAB 121/742, Bangkok to FO, Thompson, no. 225, 10 March 1947.
- <sup>75</sup> PRO CAB 121/742, Cooper to FO, no. 231, 22 March 1947.
- <sup>76</sup> *Hansard*, Vol. 435, col. 827, 24 March 1947.
- <sup>77</sup> PRO DEFE 6/2, JP(47)68(Final), 26 July 1947.
- <sup>78</sup> PRO FO 371/63455/F7371/5/86, India Office to WO, no. 3942, 22 May 1947.
- <sup>79</sup> PRO FO 371/63455/F7371/5/86, Minute by Allen, 8 June 1947.
- <sup>80</sup> PRO FO 371/63455/F8541/5/86, Allen to Massigli, 11 July 1947.
- <sup>81</sup> PRO FO 371/63455/F8114/5/86, Note by Street, 12 June 1947.
- <sup>82</sup> R.M. Blum, *Drawing the line*, New York: Norton 1982, p. 125.
- <sup>83</sup> A.J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 14; W.C. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part 1: 1945-1960*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 27.
- <sup>84</sup> Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam*, p. 52; J.L. Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War 1941-47*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1972, p. 351.