

## **Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategy in Tonkin (Vietnam) during the First Indochina War (1950-1952)**



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**ABSTRACT:** Since 1950, the war in Indochina entered a fierce phase, especially in Tonkin (Vietnam). Viet Minh forces, supported by China and the Soviet Union, cornered the French expeditionary army and lost many important bases on the battlefield. That is why the US has increased its support for the French army in the war and at the same time trusted a very talented General of the French army, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny went to Indochina to implement a strategy to reverse the situation of the French army with a series of effective military policies. The strategies of General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny caused many difficulties for the Viet Minh and the Indochina battlefield also had great changes. However, as his strategies were being implemented, he died in 1952 and the French army lost a man capable of turning the tide. The rise of the Viet Minh and the strength of the Vietnamese patriotism completely defeated the French army in 1954. This article refers to General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategy in Tonkin (Vietnam) battlefield, thereby clarifying his military policies in the first Indochina war.

**KEYWORDS:** Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, Tonkin (Vietnam), Indochina war, Viet Minh, French army

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In 1946, the first Indochina War broke out, the French army attacked Hanoi and Hai Phong and quickly occupied the whole of Tonkin. The Viet Minh withdrew to Viet Bac and built a resistance base. The war lasted and caused France a lot of damage, French public opinion was not satisfied with the war and supported the withdrawal solution.

In 1949, China established a new government with support from the Soviet Union, which was led by Mao Zedong. China and the Soviet Union quickly aided the Viet Minh and stepped up material support for the Viet Minh to fight the French. For the French colonialists, the US quickly donated a lot of money and military equipment to France to balance its influence in the region and implement a more long-term plan of replacing France in Vietnam. At this time, the Indochina war became a hot spot in the cold war, where two representatives, the Soviet Union and the United States, competed for influence.

With support from the US, France quickly sent Jean de Lattre de Tassigny to implement a military strategy to defeat the Viet Minh. Research on this issue can include Archimedes Patti, he mentioned the diplomatic strategies that China and the Soviet Union had towards the Viet Minh and the US interventions towards France in Indochina. Observations from a researcher like Patti provided perspectives on the first Indochina war, explaining the French defeat, including the strategies of General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny (A.Patti, 2008).

When talking about the first Indochina war, Christopher E. Goscha (2011) is a historian who has provided most of the very profound documents about the first Indochina war, whether in the form of dictionaries or studies. This is the foundation to learn about the first Indochina war in general and about the strategies of Jean de Lattre de Tassigny in particular.

General Vo Nguyen Giap of Vietnam was the general who directly dealt with the strategies of Jean de Lattre de Tassigny and was the general who completely defeated the French army at Dien Bien Phu. He made notes in his memoirs about Jean de Lattre de Tassigny and made objective and scientific observations on military tactics during the first Indochina war.

An elaborate study by Lucient Bodard (2004) showed that General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny considered Tonkin (Vietnam) the most important part of his strategy. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny concentrated all his resources on stabilizing the Tonkin situation, in order to defeat the Viet Minh and lead to a victory for the French. However, one thing that Jean de Lattre de Tassigny underestimated was the will and strength against the French of the Viet Minh, which represented a nation that rose up against the French colonialists, it was clear that advanced weapons could not be subdued. get their will. In addition, support from China and the Soviet Union during the cold war made De latte's strategy challenging.

According L.V.Lo and N.Thach (2002) The First Indochina War demonstrated the French ambition to return to invade Vietnam. This brought France into a war with the Viet Minh and against the entire Vietnamese nation. It was in that context that

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Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategies formed and saved a bogged down French war. But even with a perfect plan, the French could not reverse the outcome of the first Indochina war.

In general, studies on the First Indochina War have mentioned the strategies that General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny used in Tonkin, although they did not give complete perspectives but were an important source of material to explore this issue thoroughly.

### **2. DISCUSSION**

#### **Truman's Doctrine and the United States Intervention in the First Indochina War**

The “Truman Doctrine” considers the Soviet Union as the main object and argues that some revolutionary movements for national liberation are also communist minions controlled by Moscow, using the guise of nationalism to expand their political sovereignty. Therefore, the US strategy is to encircle and prevent the Soviet Union and socialist countries, and support non-communist countries in South Asia, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and the Northeast Asia. To strengthen America's allies, the Truman Doctrine adopted the Marshall Plan in Europe. The Marshall Plan aimed to restore Europe with economic aid from the United States and military assistance. The UK, France, Belgium, Austria, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Ireland, Switzerland, Greece, Turkey, Italy, Portugal, West Germany... The Marshall Plan has just been completed. helped the United States not fall into an economic crisis but the years 1929-1933. It also helped the United States gather more Western European allies that would not be able to resist if attacked by the Soviet Union.

In early 1950, the US officially sent military aid to France in Indochina. In January 1951, France received twenty M24 tanks, forty 105-mm cannons and two hundred and fifty conventional bombs and napalm bombs, ammunition and automatic weapons. By January 1953, France had received nine hundred armored vehicles along with 15,000 military transports. The French Air Force received 160 F6F Hellcat and F8F Bearcat aircraft, 41 B-26 bombers, and 28 C-47 transport aircraft, along with 93,000 bombs.

American aid to France in 1950: 52 billion francs (19% of the war budget), in 1951: 62 billion francs (16% of the war budget), in 1952: 200 billion francs (35% of the war budget) , 1953: 285 billion francs (43% of the war budget), in 1954: 555 billion francs (73% of the war budget). In two years (1952 - 1953), the amount of money the US lent to France was 314 million USD.

#### **Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategy in Tonkin (Vietnam)**

Jean de Lattre de Tassigny (1889-1952), was a General of the French Army (Général d'Armée), considered a hero of France in World War II. From the end of 1950, he became the Commander-in-Chief of the French Expeditionary Army in Indochina. On December 6, 1950, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny went to Vietnam, he outlined a military plan consisting of four main points:

- (1) Quickly concentrate European - African armies to build up a strong strategic maneuvering force.
- (2) Building the National Army of Bao Dai's government.
- (3) Build strong defensive fortifications throughout Tonkin to deal with the Viet Minh.
- (4) Waging war of destruction on a large scale, defeating the Viet Minh and ending the war.

The main idea of Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's plan was to focus the efforts of the French expeditionary army on the battlefield of Tonkin, making Tonkin a “bolt of the door”, a “bolt of the universe”. According to General Vo Nguyen Giap<sup>1</sup> (2006) Jean de Lattre de Tassigny decided to build a line with bunkers and a “white belt” around the Tonkin plain to prevent invasions of the Viet Minh. This concrete line will cover Tonkin midland provinces such as Hon Gai, Dong Trieu, Luc Nam, Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, Son Tay, to Ha Dong and Ninh Binh. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny was proud of his plan, thinking that his Line would be the frontier of civilization and he would be the sword of the free world. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny waged a food war with the Viet Minh to blockade food supplies to the mountains, where the Viet Minh resistance was based. Bodard (2004) called it the “rice war”.

Jean de Lattre de Tassigny accelerated the process of “jaunissement” of the invading army. The Vietnamese had to take on their own responsibility to fight the Viet Minh. He established training schools for Vietnamese military officers in Da Lat, Thu Duc, Nha Trang, Hue, and Nam Dinh. France supported Bao Dai<sup>2</sup> as President and Tran Van Huu as Prime Minister, and a pro-French government was established. In May 1951, the Ministry of Defense of the Bao Dai government was fully organized by the French,

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<sup>1</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap (1911–2013) was a Vietnamese military leader and politician. He was the leading important leader of the Viet Minh in the First Indochina War, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Vietnam People's Army (Democratic Republic of Vietnam). Vo Nguyen Giap was the commander of operations in the First Indochina War (1946–1954), was the leader of the Vietnamese army during the Vietnam War (1960–1975). He is hailed as a national hero of Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup> Bao Dai (1913 - 1997) was the last king of the Nguyen Dynasty, also the last emperor of the monarchy in Vietnamese history. When the First Indochina War was taking place, in 1948 Bao Dai accepted to represent the national parties to establish the Nation of Vietnam in cooperation with France to fight the Viet Minh. In 1955, Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem deposed Bao Dai to establish the Republic of Vietnam. Since then, Bao Dai was in exile in France until his death.

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led by General De Latour of France. The French supported the Bao Dai government to set up 4 infantry divisions. These infantry divisions were all commanded by French generals.

Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategy caused the Viet Minh many difficulties. In some areas, many villages were destroyed, the Viet Minh resistance base was destroyed, and the Viet Minh had to implement strategies to deal with Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategy. In response to Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategy, Viet Minh organized three large-scale military campaigns, namely campaign Tran Hung Dao, campaign Hoang Hoa Tham, and campaign Quang Trung to defeat Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's plan but without success. The fortified lines of the French army organized throughout Tonkin were effective, and the French army began to have victories on the Tonkin battlefield.

After defeating the Viet Minh's military campaigns, Jean de Lattre de Tassigny decided to choose Hoa Binh as a new decisive battleground with the Viet Minh in the hope of blocking the North-South traffic at Tonkin and defeating the Viet Minh. On 9 November 1951, Jean de Lattre de Tassigny used a strategically mobile force of about 20 Infantry Battalions, 7 Artillery Battalions, 1 Armored Battalion and many ships. On November 14, 1951, the French army captured Hoa Binh. The Viet Minh quickly sent their troops to fight the French at Hoa Binh led by General Vo Nguyen Giap to regain Hoa Binh. However, at the most critical moment of the battle, Jean de Lattre de Tassigny fell seriously ill and had to return to France and he died of cancer. The French government posthumously awarded him the post of Marshal and held a national funeral. After his death, the Viet Minh withdrew from Hoa Binh without major losses, and the French failed to destroy the Viet Minh at Hoa Binh<sup>3</sup>. French generals then sent to Indochina such as Raoul Salan and Henri Navarre failed to fulfill their mission and France eventually lost the battle in Indochina.

### Why did Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategy fail in Vietnam?

- *France's dependence on the United States during the First Indochina War*

Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategy in the First Indochina War depended heavily on American support. On September 14, 1951, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny went to meet President Harry Truman, the US Secretary of Defense and General Collins to ask for aid for his plans. From July 1950 to January 1, 1952, the US provided France with nearly 300 million USD in weapons and military equipment. At the conference of the United States, France and the United Kingdom in Paris to discuss Southeast Asian issues on May 28, 1952, the United States agreed to increase by 150 million dollars in the fiscal year 1952-1953 in military aid to France and the Vietnamese nation. American military aid would account for 40% of the war costs in Indochina. From 1950 to 1954, the total amount of US economic and military aid to France during the Indochina war exceeded \$3.5 billion. General Navare<sup>4</sup> wrote position has changed to that of a mere mercenary for the United States.

The increasing US aid also meant that the US influence in the first Indochina war was growing. In the early years of the cold war, especially during the unresolved period when the Korean War was still unresolved, the United States did not want to focus on Indochina, but only aided France to carry out the American intentions. Therefore, after the end of the Korean War, the United States began to pay more attention to Indochina and Vietnam, they quickly removed the influence of the French in Vietnam. According to Félix Green (1971) the US's target is not only Vietnam and Indochina, but the whole of Southeast Asia. Because this is one of the richest regions in the world, open to whoever won the battle in Indochina. That's why the US is increasingly interested in the issue of Vietnam. The United States is a region that must be embraced at any cost.

The Pentagon Papers (1971) wrote The U.S.-French ties in Europe (NATO, Marshall Plan, Mutual Defense Assistance Program) only marginally strengthened U.S. urgings that France make concessions to Vietnamese nationalism. Any leverage from these sources was severely limited by the broader considerations of U.S. policy for the containment of communism in Europe and Asia. NATO and the Marshall Plan were of themselves judged to be essential to our European interests. To threaten France with economic and military sanctions in Europe in order to have it alter its policy in Indochina was, therefore, not plausible. Similarly, to reduce the level of military assistance to the French effort in Indochina would have been counter-productive, since it would have led to a further deterioration in the French military position there. In other words, there was a basic incompatibility in the two strands of U.S. policy: (1) Washington wanted France to fight the anti-communist war and win, preferably with U.S. guidance and advice; and (2) Washington expected the French, when battlefield victory was assured, to magnanimously withdraw from Indochina.

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<sup>3</sup> During the military campaign in Hoa Binh, Viet Minh destroyed a large part of the French army with more than 3,000 casualties. Although the Viet Minh suffered similar losses, it was important that the Viet Minh divided the French military formation. To avoid the risk of being destroyed, on February 23, 1952, the French were also forced to withdraw from Hoa Binh town.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Eugène Navarre (1898 - 1983) was a general in the French army. He took part in World War I, World War II. H.Navarre was the Commander-in-Chief of the French army during the battle of Dien Bien Phu. H.Navarre retired in 1956, he wrote the memoir "Agonie de l'Indochine", a book analyzing the causes of the French failure in Indochina.

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Therefore, Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategy depends entirely on the United States, so it has hidden the risk of failure when the dependence is too great. When Jean de Lattre de Tassigny died, no French military commander could take over the role he left behind, leading to the rapid defeat of France in the entire war in Indochina.

- *The resistance of the Viet Minh and the independent will of the Vietnamese people*

France implemented Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategy, in which the focus was on organizing the "Tassigny Line" to protect the delta. Viet Minh forces with their combat prowess organized a series of large military campaigns to attack continuously on the "Tassigny Line". This forced the French army to maintain a large military force to protect the Northern Delta but could not attack Viet Bac to end the war.

The Military Campaign in Hoa Binh organized by Jean de Lattre de Tassigny in November 1951 became a disaster for both sides. When the battle ended in February 1952, the Viet Minh Army suffered heavy casualties, but they learned to deal with French strategy and weapons and they penetrated deeper into the defenses. In early 1951, France strengthened the construction of military defenses in the Tonkin Delta to prevent the invasion of the Viet Minh from the mountains and midlands into the Tonkin Delta. They built about 800 military bunkers. Around the military bunkers is a "white belt" with a radius of 5–10 km. In the "white belts" the French strengthened control of the people so that they could not supply the Viet Minh. France also launched many military sweeps in disputed areas to find the Viet Minh. During these sweeps, the French army burned, plundered, raped, and killed many innocent people suspected of supporting the Viet Minh, which made many Vietnamese people angry and even more determined to fight the French. .

At the end of 1952, Viet Minh carried out a military campaign to attack the Northwest region of Vietnam. The Viet Minh also organized many major battles in central Vietnam and Cochinchina. These attacks dispersed the French military force and gradually led to eventual defeat.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategy in Tonkin was the French attempt to maintain colonialism in Vietnam. The French army after World War II was bogged down in a war in Indochina with no way out and had to rely on the United States to maintain France's war in Indochina. With the strategy of Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, the French army considered the Tonkin battlefield as the most important place and decisive to the victory of the war. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategy was a well-prepared plan that caused many difficulties for Minh Minh. But too much dependence on US aid and the serious decline of France's potential after World War II made this strategy come to a standstill. Under the strong resistance of Viet Minh led by talented military men such as Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, Viet Minh gradually defeated Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's strategy to end the war in 1954 and ended more than 80 years of French rule in Vietnam.

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