

NIE 63-54

Consequences Within Indochina of the  
Fall of Dien Bien Phu

30 April 1954

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NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

CONSEQUENCES WITHIN INDOCHINA OF THE  
FALL OF DIEN BIEN PHU

APPROVED FOR RELEASE  
DATE: JAN 2005

(b) (3)



NIE 63-54

Approved 28 April 1954

Published 30 April 1954

*The Intelligence Advisory Committee concurred in this estimate on 28 April 1954. The AEC and FBI abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.*

*The following member organizations of the Intelligence Advisory Committee participated with the Central Intelligence Agency in the preparation of this estimate: The intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.*

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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## CONSEQUENCES WITHIN INDOCHINA OF THE FALL OF DIEN BIEN PHU

### THE PROBLEM

To estimate the probable consequences within Indochina during the next two or three months of the fall of Dien Bien Phu within the near future.

### SCOPE

The consequences of the fall of Dien Bien Phu on the political situation in France, and the repercussions of major decisions in France or Geneva on the situation in Indochina, are excluded from the scope of this estimate.

### CONCLUSIONS

1. The fall of Dien Bien Phu would have far-reaching and adverse repercussions, but it would not signal the immediate collapse of the French Union political and military situation in Indochina. As a consequence of the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the morale of French Union forces would receive a severe blow. A crucial factor in the military situation thereafter would be the reliability of native units, particularly the Vietnamese. There would almost certainly be increased desertions, and the possibility cannot be excluded that the native components of French Union forces might disintegrate. However, we believe that such disintegration would be unlikely during the ensuing two or three months, and that for at least this period the major part of the native troops would probably remain loyal.
2. Assuming no such disintegration, the fall of Dien Bien Phu would not in itself substantially alter the relative military capabilities of French Union and Viet Minh forces in Indochina during the next two or three months. The French stand at Dien Bien Phu has produced certain compensatory military results. It has prevented an overrunning of Laos and has resulted in the inflicting of casualties upon the Viet Minh comparable in number to the total French force committed at Dien Bien Phu. The bulk of Viet Minh forces released by the fall of Dien Bien Phu would probably not be able to move, regroup, and re-equip in time to be employed in new major operations during the next two or three months, although some lightly equipped infantry battalions might be made available more rapidly for operations in the Delta region.

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3. Although the Viet Minh have a substantial capability to organize demonstrations and carry out sabotage and terrorist activities in the major cities of Indochina, we believe that French Union forces could maintain control in those cities.

4. The political consequences in Indochina of the fall of Dien Bien Phu would be considerably more adverse than the strictly military consequences and would increase the tempo of deterioration in the over-all French Union position in Indochina, particularly in Vietnam. There would probably be a serious decline in the Vietnamese will to continue the war and to support the Vietnamese military programs. However, we believe that general collapse of French and native governmental authority during the next two

or three months would be prevented by the continued existence of organized French Union forces and the hope among Indochinese that the US might intervene in Indochina.

5. We believe that although the fall of Dien Bien Phu would not immediately lead to collapse of the French Union position in Indochina, it would accelerate the deterioration already evident in the French Union military and political position there. If this trend were not checked, it could bring about a collapse of the French Union position during the latter half of 1954. It should be emphasized that this estimate does not consider the repercussion of major decisions in France or Geneva and elsewhere, which could have a decisive effect on the situation in Indochina.

## DISCUSSION

6. We believe that the fall of Dien Bien Phu, if it occurred as assumed in the problem, would result from: (a) French capitulation; or (b) an overwhelming of the French either by assault or by gradual constriction of the French position.

7. If the French were to capitulate without further heavy fighting, the adverse military and political consequences would be essentially similar in kind, though possibly of greater intensity, to those accompanying the fall of the fortress through heavy fighting. Viet Minh losses in the event of capitulation would be less than those which would be incurred during further heavy fighting.

8. In any event, the Viet Minh would have suffered heavy losses in the prolonged fighting at Dien Bien Phu. Estimated Viet Minh casualties in the fighting there to date are approximately 13,000; roughly 50 percent of this number have been killed or rendered perma-

nently ineffective. Although a few experienced units have been sent as reinforcements, individual replacements for the most part have consisted of partially trained personnel. As a result of the Dien Bien Phu operation, the effectiveness of the Viet Minh offensive striking force will be greatly reduced during the next two or three months.

9. French Union casualties at Dien Bien Phu to date have been approximately 5,500. The defeat of the force now at Dien Bien Phu would add another 11,000, thus bringing the total French Union losses to roughly 17,000. At least two-thirds of these troops are experienced, professional units from Algerian, colonial and foreign legion forces. Moreover, six of the thirteen parachute battalions in the French Union forces in Indochina are at Dien Bien Phu. The loss of these elite French Union troops would reduce the French Union offensive striking force by approximately one-

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quarter, thus markedly reducing over-all French Union capabilities for offensive operations in Indochina.

10. As a consequence of the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the morale of the French Union forces would receive a severe blow. Their will to win would be diminished, largely because of a widespread belief that military victory was no longer possible. The loss of morale would probably not be sufficient to reduce the effectiveness of the professional soldiers of the French Expeditionary force. However, a crucial factor in the military situation thereafter would be the reliability of native units, particularly the Vietnamese. There would almost certainly be an increase in Vietnam desertions, and the possibility cannot be excluded that the native components of French Union forces might disintegrate. However, we believe that such disintegration would be unlikely during the ensuing two or three months, and that for at least this period the major part of the native troops would probably remain loyal. Therefore, we estimate that the impact upon the morale of the French Union forces would be severe, but not of such severity as to preclude their employment as an effective military force during the next two or three months.

11. The fall of Dien Bien Phu would not in itself substantially alter the relative military capabilities of French Union and Viet Minh forces in Indochina during the next two or three months unless there were large-scale desertions from the French Union forces. The victorious Viet Minh troops at Dien Bien Phu would have suffered heavy casualties and their efficiency would be reduced. In order to bring these forces up to full strength, the Viet Minh would probably move them from Dien Bien Phu to their main supply and training areas adjacent to the Red River delta. Prior to the rainy season, this redeployment would require at least three to four weeks. After the full onset of the rainy season, which is unlikely before mid-May, the movement would take between two and three months to complete. We therefore estimate that the bulk of the Viet Minh troops at Dien Bien Phu would not be available for major operations elsewhere in

Indochina during the next two or three months, although some lightly-equipped infantry battalions might be made available more rapidly for operations in the Delta region.

12. Although the over-all capabilities of the Viet Minh would be reduced as a consequence of the losses inflicted upon their main striking force, Viet Minh forces elsewhere in Indochina would have the capability during the rainy season to maintain and in some instances increase military pressure against French Union forces. In the Red River delta, they could intensify efforts to sever land communications between Hanoi and Haiphong, ambush French detachments, attack villages, air bases, and other installations, and lay siege to isolated French delta strong points. The scale of Viet Minh operations in the Delta, however, would be restricted by the adverse effects of heavy rains on maneuverability. The Viet Minh could use their force concentrated in the Pleiku region in southern Annam to launch fairly large-scale attacks against French forces engaged in the "Atlante" operation. They could also use units from this force for raiding operations in the Mekong River area or to reinforce the Viet Minh battalions now in Cambodia. Combat operations in southern Annam, the Mekong valley, and in Cambodia would be restricted by the tenuous nature of resupply of ammunition and other military equipment for these units. The Viet Minh could at the same time organize demonstrations and carry out sabotage and terrorist activities in the major cities of Indochina. The Viet Minh capability in this regard is probably substantial.

13. French Union forces, assuming no major Vietnamese defections, would have the capability to maintain their present major fortified positions in the Delta, and elsewhere, maintain control in the major cities, prevent the permanent severing of land communications between Hanoi and Haiphong, repulse Viet Minh attacks in southern Annam and the Mekong River area, and retain the area liberated in the "Atlante" operation. If the Viet Minh were to undertake a major military

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TROOP STRENGTHS AND DISPOSITIONS

FRENCH UNION		VIET MINH	
Regular and Light Bns	274 . . . 402,000	Regular and Regional Bns	155 . . 185,000
Semi-Military	. . . . . 203,500	Semi-Military	. . . . . 106,000
Total	. . . . . 605,500	Total	. . . . . 291,000

MAJOR CONCENTRATIONS <sup>1</sup>

DELTA

65 Regular Bns (35 Fr. Ex. Force)  
19 Light Bns  
83,000 semi-military

22 Regular Bns  
10 Regional Bns  
35,000 semi-military

DIEN BIEN PHU

16 Regular Bns (15 Fr. Ex. Force)

28 Regular Bns  
2 Regional Bns

NORTHERN TONKIN  
(Less DB Phu Area)

13 Regional Bns

NORTHERN LAOS

14 Regular Bns (10 Fr. Ex. Force)  
2 Light Bns

3 Regular Bns  
2 Regional Bns

THAKHEK-SAVANNAKHET

17 Regular Bns (13 Fr. Ex. Force)  
3 Light Bns

8 Regular Bns  
4 Regional Bns

CENTRAL VIETNAM

35 Regular Bns (10 Fr. Ex. Force)  
16 Light Bns

14 Regular Bns  
7 Regional Bns

COCHIN CHINA

17 Regular Bns (3 Fr. Ex. Force)  
20 Light Bns

10 Regular Bns  
2 Regional Bns

SOUTHERN LAOS and  
NORTHEASTERN CAMBODIA

8 Regular Bns (3 Fr. Ex. Force)

4 Regular Bns

WESTERN CAMBODIA

11 Regular Bns (0 Fr. Ex. Force)  
3 Light Bns

Elements

<sup>1</sup> These dispositions cover only infantry units. The regional breakdown does not include the total number of Viet Minh and French bns.

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operation against Cambodia, the defense of Cambodia would require troops from other areas. French Union forces would retain the capability to launch limited offensive operations before the full onset of the rainy season, either in the Red River delta region or on the coast of Annam.

14. The political consequences in Indochina of the fall of Dien Bien Phu would be considerably more adverse than the strictly military consequences, although the two are interrelated. The defeat would increase the tempo of deterioration in the over-all French Union position in Indochina, particularly in Vietnam. The principal political consequences would be: (a) a major blow to French prestige among the Indochinese, and an increased conviction on their part that the French were unable to protect them against the Viet Minh; (b) a serious decline in French and Indochinese will to continue the war, and in particular a further decline in popular support in Vietnam for Vietnamese military programs; (c) exacerbation of French-Indochinese relations, partly as a result of increased Indochinese suspicions that the French will "sell out" to the Viet Minh; (d) a sharp increase of "fense sitting" among politically conscious groups previously disposed to support the Vietnam Government; and (e) a sharp increase, particularly among Vietnamese, of covert support of the Viet Minh. However, we believe that a general collapse of French and native governmental authority during the next two or three months would be prevented by the continued existence of organized French Union forces and

the hope that the US might intervene in Indochina.

15. The political effect in Laos would probably be similar to that of Vietnam. However, the Laotians would probably display a greater disposition than the Vietnamese to stand by the French and to continue the war effort.

16. The political effect on Cambodia would be extremely uncertain. The internal security of Cambodia and a certain minimum stability might be maintained, but Cambodia's vulnerability to future Viet Minh pressure would increase.

17. The Viet Minh would make every effort to make political capital of their victory at Dien Bien Phu. They would concentrate on increasing the sense of hopelessness in the Associated States, and would seek to convince the Indochinese that the triumph at Dien Bien Phu signalled their imminent "deliverance" from colonial rule by fellow countrymen. They would intensify current efforts to enhance the status of the so-called "People's Governments" of Laos and Cambodia.

18. We believe that although the fall of Dien Bien Phu would not immediately lead to collapse of the French Union position in Indochina, it would accelerate the deterioration already evident in the French Union military and political position there. If this trend were not checked, it could bring about a collapse of the French Union position during the latter half of 1954. It should be emphasized that this estimate does not consider the repercussion of major decisions in France or Geneva and elsewhere which are likely to have a decisive effect on the situation in Indochina.

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