



The domino effect of 1954

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Certain years are special-1954 was one of them. Perhaps the only echo which my generation may remember from that year is "That's Alright Mama", the first song recorded by Elvis Presley in July 1954 in Memphis. The young singer instantly became the idol of an entire generation (at least in the West). On the political scene, too, events occurred which would have repercussions for decades. One such event is the Conference which assembled at the end of April in Geneva (around the time the Panchsheel Agreement was signed) and ended successfully on July 21, 1954.

However, let us first go back a few months, to the end of 1953 (another coincidence: It corresponds with the beginning of Sino-Indian talks on Panchsheel!). The Viet Minh forces led by General Giap had begun concentrating their forces around a small, but strategic village in north-western Vietnam. The village was called Dien Bien Phu. By occupying the area, the French forces thought that they could control this zone and prevent the Viet Minh from taking over the entire north-western region. When the Chinese military advisers working closely with Ho Chi Minh's troops discovered this, they got the go ahead from Beijing to trap the French paratroopers in the Dien Bien Phu bowl. This became the main focus of the entire battle for Indochina.

Mao understood that the implications of the battle were not only strategic and tactical but also political. A few weeks earlier, a proposal had been made by the Soviet Union to have a Conference between the five Great Powers and the Indochinese states (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) in order to find a solution to the conflict in the peninsula. Zhou Enlai, on behalf of Communist China, immediately supported the move which was also accepted by the Western powers.

Before sitting at the negotiating table, a victory at Dien Bien Phu was of great importance for Beijing. Mao decided to pour Chinese military might into the battle. During the Dien Bien Phu campaign alone, more than 200 trucks, 10,000 barrels of oil, 100 cannons,

2,400,00 bullets, 60,000 artillery shells and 1,700 tons of grains were despatched from China to the front. What irony! This was happening while negotiations on "peaceful co-existence" and "non-interference" were being held between India and China on the Five Principles.

The precarious situation of the French troops led the US to fear a "domino effect". Should Dien Bien Phu fall, nothing could stop the communists from taking over the entire Indochinese peninsula: After Vietnam, it would be the turn of Laos and then Cambodia to fall under communist control. Washington threatened to intervene, but Mao did not bite the US "paper tiger's menace".

The final assault was ordered on May 5. Two days later, the French forces surrendered to the communists. Mao could be satisfied, he had achieved his objective. In Geneva, the talks to find a "solution" for the peninsula began the next day. Nehru strongly believed that the fate of Asia (and the world) would be decided during the conference. The matter was simple according to him, either nations like Vietnam would become free or a conflict would start again which could lead to another World War and a nuclear conflict engulfing Asia. The principles enunciated in the preamble of the Panchsheel Agreement could tackle any conflict situation, according to Nehru. This would produce a powerful movement which would spread slowly, first in Asia and then the world over and ultimately help create a third neutral block.

The Indian Prime Minister also believed that Geneva could provide an opportunity to talk about the remnants of the French colonial empire in India.

Though India was not officially invited to Geneva, Nehru would often send his faithful collaborator VK Krishna Menon to Switzerland to offer "India's help".

China on its part was determined to show to the world that it favoured "peaceful co-existence". What better assurance to the world than a declared "friendship" with India? However, in order to achieve his overall objectives, Zhou had to accept some compromises. He was ready to offer to Western powers to keep the status quo in Laos and Cambodia, honestly acknowledging Vietnamese involvement in these two countries. It meant stopping the Viet Minh armed intrusions and the recognition of the old royal regimes.

Zhou Enlai, a Machiavellian but charming and suave diplomat, was the most suitable person to save the Vietnamese revolution from an American intervention and to articulate China's redefined foreign policy. In mid-June, one event changed the course of the conference and gave it a fresh breath of life: the Laniel Government in France fell and Pierre Mendes-France was appointed as the new French Premier. He had previously declared that he would not accept office unless his majority was independent of the communists. The French Parliament gave Mendes-France an absolute majority. Not being prisoner of communist votes, he could go ahead with his plans.

When he took oath on June 19, he swore to solve the problem of Indochina within a month or quit. The deadline was July 20 midnight. In the meantime, the negotiations for the cession of the French Establishments in India had just failed in Paris. Mendes's idea was to solve Pondicherry's fate at the same time as the Indochinese tangle.

Zhou was concerned about the constitution of a commission which could ensure that the agreement would be respected by all parties. Here again he needed India and Nehru who, though not invited to the conference, had been closely following the proceedings. At the end of June, Zhou flew to Delhi to confer with his Indian counterpart. The Five Principles were reemphasised. Peaceful co-existence and non-interference were a godsend to avoid American interference or intervention in Vietnam.

In Geneva, an accord was eventually arrived at on July 21 at three am. By respect for Mendes-France, the date on the official documents was shown as July 20.

Nehru thought that India should be "rewarded" for softening Zhou's stand and the "hard work" done behind the scene by Krishna Menon. But Mendes-France, like most Western diplomats, had a poor opinion of Menon. In a cable, he wrote that during the Geneva Conference, Menon "produced an intense activity, though practically of no use." In fact, the confidence in Menon was so low, that though the decision to abandon Pondicherry and the other Establishments had been taken on July 6 by the French Cabinet, Menon (who was also in Geneva) was kept in the dark about the decision. Mendes-France, however, admitted: *"Whatever it is, it is better not to irritate him (Menon). He possesses a great vanity and he systematically tries to put himself forward and to attribute to himself a role that nobody asked him to play."* Nehru congratulated nonetheless "his dear Krishna" for his "unceasing, unobtrusive and very effective work".

A week after the end the conference, Delhi was informed of the decision of the French Government. The official "merger" occurred three months later, on November 1. The events of the year continued to unfold: France got involved in the Algerian war (the day Pondicherry was handed over); Nehru persisted for sometime with the idea of friendship with China; the Indochinese states learned the meaning of "peace" (at least for a few years); SEATO was signed in September 1954 at Manila to check the communist expansion in Asia; Tibet, despite the Dalai Lama's long diplomatic visit to China, lost its autonomy; and, Pondicherry had to wait eight more years to see its de facto transfer ratified by the French Parliament. Unfortunately, though Delhi believed it was playing a great role in international affairs, the reality was often different, at least until Pokhran.