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1

Churchill and Roosevelt, January 1943–July 1945

The origins of Britain's relationship with French Indo-China lay not in London but across the Atlantic with the US President Franklin Roosevelt. He wanted to remove Indo-China from French colonial control and to create a post-war trusteeship that would advance Indo-Chinese independence. Roosevelt did not intend to restore the European balance of power at the end of the war, but to create a new 'international order based on harmony, not on equilibrium'.¹ The Anglo-US Atlantic Charter of 1941 had been produced to calm American fears that it 'was underwriting British war aims', i.e. the return of imperialism. Article three of the charter provided indigenous peoples with the right to determine their own future.² Trusteeship was Roosevelt's method of sponsoring indigenous evolution towards independence. However, the Atlantic Charter 'cast the problem of post-war security entirely in Wilsonian terms and contained no geopolitical component at all'.³ The charter was an attack on the imperial system, fuelled by economic motives.⁴ Former President Woodrow Wilson, 1912–20, had advocated values of 'democracy, nationalism and the American way', these were shared by his Assistant Under-Secretary for the Navy, Roosevelt.⁵

Roosevelt's policy of trusteeship for Indo-China demonstrated US commitment to national self-determination as stated in the Atlantic Charter. It was 'a test case for anti-colonialist resolve' by an anti-imperialist who had sardonically remarked to Churchill that 'the British would take land anywhere in the world even if it were only a rock or a sand bar'.⁶ Trusteeship occupied a special place in Sino-US relations, because Roosevelt envisaged China as one of the four world policemen predestined to protect post-war peace and security.⁷ Britain was not in favour of a US policy that made China a great power and, due to

Britain's own colonial interests, doubted the transparency of Chinese intentions for Southeast Asia especially as a trustee.⁸

Roosevelt 'was a juggler' and 'ambiguity was part of Roosevelt's character'. He held Wilsonian ideals but 'hated taking decisions'.⁹ Lord Halifax, British Ambassador to the US, noted that 'the President was one of the people who used conversation as others of us use a first draft on paper'.¹⁰ The Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden compared Roosevelt to 'a conjuror, skilfully juggling with balls of dynamite whose nature he failed to understand' but Eden's 'scepticism about the President blinded him to Roosevelt's devious ways of getting things done'.¹¹ Reciprocally, Roosevelt expressed 'confidence in Mr Churchill, but not in the British Foreign Office'.¹² The US Secretary for War, Henry Stimson, remarked: 'The President is the poorest administrator I have ever worked with' but noted also that he was 'a tough customer'.¹³

An Anglo-US alliance was a crucial facet of Churchill's wartime strategy. He had worked like 'a beaver' and sought to be on 'the most intimate terms' with Roosevelt who, when Churchill was in the US during 1942, visited 'him [Churchill] in his bedroom at any hour' and as Churchill said was 'the only head of state whom he, Winston, has ever received in the nude'. However, Churchill was selective with his work ethic; in dealing with the Lend-Lease Agreement the British Embassy in Washington doubted that he would read the relevant telegrams let alone 'apply his mind to it'. Likewise on the issue of post-hostilities planning, Churchill was 'pretty bored with anything except the actual war'.¹⁴ He wrote to the Cabinet and expressed caution against promises made concerning post-war arrangements that might not be fulfilled when the final victory materialised.¹⁵ Not an advocate of trusteeship or a new world order, he lambasted Eden: 'Nobody cares a damn about the United Nations'.¹⁶

Churchill's strong anti-trusteeship policy was shared by many in Britain's coalition government. The Labour Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, ascribed that 'it would be like giving a child of ten a latchkey, a bank account and a shot gun'.¹⁷ Nevertheless Churchill was myopic and forgetful about Britain's Indo-China policy: he refused repeatedly to act in any direction that would result in conflict with Roosevelt and create a crisis in the Anglo-US relationship. Initially 'his instinct was to see Roosevelt's views on Indo-China as an aberration, ... [and] Churchill's instinct was the governing factor in British policy'.¹⁸ However, worried about his place in history, he was eventually galvanised into action following the 9 March 1945 Japanese *coup d'état* in Indo-China. Had the Foreign Office dictated British Indo-China policy

from the outset then probably Anglo-US diplomacy and the special relationship would have developed along more confrontational lines. Churchill had to tread carefully; he was the fulcrum of Anglo-US relations, pushed by US anti-imperialism and pulled by Foreign Office support for colonial spheres of influence based upon imperial association; he cut a lonely, isolated and out of touch figure.

Churchill was not aided in his Anglo-US alliance by his tempestuous – and the Foreign Office’s more placid – patronage of the Free French leader General Charles de Gaulle. At the Allied Casablanca Conference in January 1943 Roosevelt found de Gaulle arrogant.¹⁹ De Gaulle’s ‘autocratic temperament and his constant practice of playing off Britain against America’ did not endear him to the US or Roosevelt and threatened Anglo-US relations ‘through the belief that de Gaulle enjoys full British backing’ despite the actuality that he did not ‘enjoy the unqualified support’ of the government.²⁰ French capitulation to Germany in Europe and Japan in Asia had not endeared France to Roosevelt.²¹ Roosevelt felt that de Gaulle advocated a ‘process of infiltration’. He used the example of French membership of the Allied Commission for Italy to complain to Churchill that ‘his [de Gaulle’s] presence there will, as we know from experience, cause controversy and more trouble with the French Committee’. Reflecting on the constraints of his British ally and the pro-French nature of the Foreign Office, Roosevelt sympathised with Churchill ‘I know what problems you have with your own Foreign Office’, and lamented ‘I wish you and I could run this Italian business. We would not need any help’.²² Roosevelt continued to remain at odds with de Gaulle. Six months later he wrote to Churchill concerning the arrangements for the supply of supplementary currency to France and castigated ‘it seems clear that Prima Donnas do not change their spots’.²³ Roosevelt believed that de Gaulle represented “‘acute and unconquerable” nationalism’ and that France as a nation no longer had the status of a great power to shape the world – a view shared by his Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, and the State Department.²⁴ US Indo-China policy served to accelerate Roosevelt’s policy of colonial liberation and to punish the French.²⁵

Roosevelt’s grand scheme for colonial territories was not limited to Indo-China but also included parts of the British Empire, i.e. Hong Kong, and other fanciful directions, i.e. the ‘idea of Australia purchasing Timor from Portugal’.²⁶ Hull would later guarantee to Britain a US ‘agreement to respect Portuguese sovereignty in all Portuguese colonies’.²⁷ But Roosevelt was not embarrassed by previous US guarantees concerning the ‘territorial integrity of the 1939 French Empire’

made to Vichy France and Generals Giraud and de Gaulle; or a similar statement made after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that guaranteed 'an unqualified undertaking that they would support the return of Indo-China to France in all circumstances'.²⁸ These pledges had been made on behalf of Roosevelt and he had duly informed Churchill of this US policy.²⁹ Eden noted the contradictions between US pledges and Roosevelt's trusteeship statements on Indo-China. He briefed Churchill that Roosevelt now made 'little of guarantees about the integrity of the French Empire in general' and therefore had 'little doubt that the French would contrive a "leak" before long'.³⁰ Indo-China was the political side-show to wartime Allied military policy but Britain needed to develop a coherent policy that would protect its own interests and navigate unforeseen dilemmas.

Trusteeship and French participation in the war in the Far East

On 7 January 1943, at a meeting of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Roosevelt expressed 'grave doubts' about restoring Indo-China to France, and 'urged the British not to make further promises to restore the French Empire'. Lord Halifax spoke with Hull who was embarrassed at the State Department's exclusion from some of Roosevelt's personal 'predilections'.³¹ Churchill despatched Eden to the US for three weeks 'in order to facilitate the establishment of closer relations between the State Department and the Foreign Office'.³² On 24 March Eden and Halifax met with Sumner Welles, Assistant Secretary of State. Welles elaborated that France should be separated from Indo-China due to 'world interest in the quality and direction of their administration' and he hoped that Britain would be prepared to hand Hong Kong back to China.³³ Two days later Eden and Halifax met Roosevelt at the White House. Roosevelt raised the question of trusteeship for Indo-China; he believed that the actual details concerning trusteeship should be arranged in the 'ironing out of things after the war'. Eden felt that Roosevelt 'was being very hard on the French'.³⁴ No doubt Roosevelt held that the US, as the major creditor to the European colonial powers, would be able to dictate the form of the new world order.

On his return to Britain, Eden reported to the War Cabinet. He stated that discussions about France were 'of a somewhat varied nature' and that Hull 'clearly hated General de Gaulle'. The US was apparently against the creation of a single French Civil Authority in exile to deal with French issues and preferred to deal with each rival leader,

Generals Giraud or de Gaulle, separately. Eden maintained during his stay in the US that Britain supported the opposite view. Meanwhile a meeting between Eden and the Chinese Ambassador to the US had yielded the assurance that China possessed no territorial ambitions in Siam, Indo-China, Burma or Malaya.³⁵ This was a significant statement as Britain feared Chinese encroachment in South and Southeast Asia which contained large indigenous Chinese populations.

The Foreign Office believed that the US motivation behind trusteeship and the Atlantic Charter was 'really the old Wilsonian principle of self-determination dressed anew'.³⁶ Likewise, the Foreign Office was carefully studying events concerning the forthcoming presidential election: 'Roosevelt's attitude is perhaps largely due to his fear that Wilkie next year will mobilise American anti-imperialist sentiment against him'.³⁷ It predicted that Roosevelt would argue that 'the Atlantic Charter is the document governing the post-war world', but concluded that the 'American conception of the world is not static, and the President might contend that it is for him to interpret and secure the realisation of this as and when appropriate'.³⁸

De Gaulle established a committee to consider the Indo-Chinese question for the allies and French participation in its liberation.³⁹ The French requested representation on the Allied Pacific War Council. In response the State Department cautioned that 'the President may possibly be averse to the idea' and sought Britain's perspective.⁴⁰ Churchill decided that the Foreign Office had 'better leave this quiet for a bit. No need to reply for some days'.⁴¹ However, Sir Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, lobbied Churchill for French representation at some Pacific War Council meetings.⁴² Churchill remained unmoved: 'No need for action yet'.⁴³ Cadogan persisted: 'A refusal would confirm the French in their present suspicions that neither we nor the Americans (particularly the latter) wish to see them resume sovereignty over Indo-China. This would add to their sense of frustration and wounded pride'. Considering the US attitude to the restoration of colonies to their former colonial powers Cadogan concluded that 'there is much to be said for the colonial powers sticking together in the Far East'. The French, not content with mere representation on the Pacific War Council, now requested permission to send a military mission to SEAC.⁴⁴ Churchill replied that 'this can certainly wait'.⁴⁵ When asked three days later if he wanted to mention the French request to Mountbatten, Churchill noted: 'Nothing doing while de Gaulle is master' and instructed Eden: 'We should adopt a negative and dilatory attitude'.⁴⁶ The Foreign Office, Dominions Office

and Colonial Office all believed that British policy towards French possessions should be made in consultation with the Dominions. They agreed that 'above all, we must avoid a position in which the Dominions side with the US against us'.⁴⁷

On 30 November Clement Attlee, Deputy Prime Minister, wrote to Churchill for guidance and clarification as to the Prime Minister's position regarding the future of Indo-China.⁴⁸ Churchill answered 'Britain does not pre-judge the question of status of Indo-China any more than that of ... British possessions' and summarised his perception of Roosevelt's position that the 'President at the moment contemplates some changes in status of Indo-China but he has not yet formulated any definite proposal'.⁴⁹ Briefing the Cabinet on the outcome of the Cairo and Tehran Conferences (November–December 1943) Eden indicated that Indo-China would be 'under some kind of international control'. He noted with interest that the Russian Prime Minister Josef Stalin 'had been highly critical of the French' at the Tehran Conference, declaring that 'the French had not really tried hard in the war and he obviously regarded the state of France as rotten'.⁵⁰ Stalin had been particularly shrewd as it was he rather than Roosevelt who had raised the question of Indo-China and 'he played most effectively on the President's ... fears of post-war French stability and resentment against General de Gaulle' as well as 'Roosevelt's Wilsonian beliefs in national self determination'.⁵¹ Stalin asserted that he and Roosevelt were 'of the same mind' that 'France should not have all her possessions restored to her'.⁵²

De Gaulle continued to develop an Indo-China policy and issued a declaration affirming French sovereignty but sanctioning 'collective development, in the form of a "free and close association between France and the Indo-Chinese peoples"'.⁵³ Nevertheless, Roosevelt proceeded to concoct his own policy for Indo-China. On 16 December in Washington at a meeting with Chinese, Turkish, Egyptian, Russian, Persian and British diplomats he announced that:

He had been working very hard to prevent Indo-China being restored to France who during the last hundred years had done nothing for the Indo-Chinese people under their care. Latter were still as poor and as uneducated as they had ever been and this state of affairs could not be allowed to continue. He thought that Indo-Chinese who were not yet ready for elective institutions of their own should be placed under some United Nations trusteeship, which would take them toward the stage when they could govern themselves.⁵⁴

Churchill informed Eden that although he had often heard Roosevelt's opinions on Indo-China he had 'never given any assent to them' as they were a matter for 'the end of the war'. Churchill advised that the US could not 'take territory from France forcibly without agreement with France after a French Government has been formed on the basis of the will of the French people'. Again a matter for the conclusion of the war, due to the need for the liberation of France and subsequent elections. Churchill requested from Eden copies of the declarations already made by Roosevelt on 'the integrity of the French Empire'.⁵⁵ Eden considered that 'a note of caution' should be raised in Washington. He proposed that Halifax should consult with Hull to ascertain whether Roosevelt's remarks represented 'a concerted White House-State Department policy'. Eden deemed it important for Britain to have a 'definite policy on this matter', especially as the French had established a military mission in Chungking and were keen to develop one in SEAC, both of which could result in French forces being deployed in the Far East.⁵⁶ Churchill agreed but still considered that 'questions of territorial transfers should be reserved till the end of the war'.⁵⁷ When Halifax spoke to Hull in Washington, Hull 'knew no more about it than I did'. Halifax concluded the 'President's remarks did not represent any settled policy in which [the] State Department has concurred'.⁵⁸

The Foreign Office remained vehemently critical of Roosevelt and US policy which it felt was driven by a combination of a delusion of power and dollar imperialism.

President Roosevelt is suffering from the same kind of megalomania which characterised the late President Wilson and Mr Lloyd George (the latter to a lesser extent) at the end of the last war and proved the former's undoing. ...

I trust that we shall not allow ourselves to quarrel with the French, without being on very strong grounds, for the benefit of a United States President, who in a year's time, may be merely a historical figure.

If Indo-China is not restored to France on the ground that 'the poor Indo-Chinese' have had no education and no welfare (I have never heard that the Indo-Chinese were anymore unhappy than the share croppers of the Southern United States), the Dutch and ourselves may later on be told that the oil resources of the Netherlands East Indies and Borneo have never been properly developed, nor the rubber resources of Malaya, that the natives are insufficiently

educated according to Washington standards and that these territories must be placed under United Nations trusteeship (perhaps with United States oil and rubber controllers).⁵⁹

The Foreign Office was still sceptical of Chinese motives regarding Indo-China. Likewise, it held that it was unrealistic to prevent France from taking some part in the war in the Far East. The French had 'officers with a knowledge' of Indo-China, which neither Britain nor the US possessed, and could 'provide a substantial number of troops from Africa' in their own ships. In response to a French offer of assistance, it would be difficult to explain to the British public a reply of: "No, thank you; we prefer to have more of our own soldiers killed".⁶⁰ The Defence Committee had decided already that it was imperative for a French Mission to be established, as soon as possible, at SEAC to avoid any risk of incidents developing with French troops on the Sino-Indo-China border.⁶¹

Eden broached the subject of Indo-China again with Churchill on 11 January 1944. Eden had received a report from the British Embassy in Chungking that was fearful of British relations with France and 'post-war collaboration in Western Europe' and concerned about the possibility of a precedent being established which could also be applied to British colonial possessions if Roosevelt succeeded with his designs for Indo-China. The report cautioned that the Chinese would welcome UN trusteeship of Indo-China through which they might be able to extend economic control.⁶² Churchill decided that the Foreign Office should pursue the Indo-China issue with the State Department 'and leave till a later stage any direct communications between me and the President'.⁶³ This was not a shrewd ploy by Churchill to appeal to the State Department. A parallel State Department policy on Indo-China to that of Roosevelt's had not begun to evolve in earnest until spring 1944.⁶⁴ Instead it was further evidence of Churchill's desire to avoid the Indo-Chinese issue and thereby a crisis in the Anglo-US relationship.

On 18 January Roosevelt met with Halifax in Washington. Roosevelt appeared not at all embarrassed by his position on Indo-China, jovially retorting that he hoped his ideas would be reported back to the French. In presenting his case for trusteeship Roosevelt confirmed, contrary to Churchill's doubts, that Chinese intentions were that the President Chiang Kai-Shek did not want to acquire Indo-China and that Stalin regarded trusteeship as the best solution. Roosevelt emphasised that he had 'spoken about it 25 times but the

Prime Minister has never said anything'. Did Roosevelt really understand Churchill's position? Churchill desired to maintain Britain as a world power; the Anglo-US relationship was of importance to him, but he showed a lack of interest in post-hostilities planning. If Roosevelt had understood these issues then Churchill's silence should not have been a surprise. Roosevelt denied to Halifax that his previous guarantees about the status and integrity of the French Empire had any bearing on the question of Indo-Chinese trusteeship. Halifax was annoyed with Roosevelt's stance and hoped that he would not hold a 'monologue' with Churchill. When Halifax raised the question of a precedent being established which could be applied to British colonies Roosevelt dismissed the idea and defended the British colonial position, apparently 'we and the Dutch had done a good job but the French were hopeless', Halifax noted. Halifax responded with the need to rehabilitate France as a great power but Roosevelt retorted 'tell Winston I gained or got three votes to his one as we stand today' (China, Russia, and the US versus Britain). Halifax was left with the impression that Roosevelt 'has got this idea in his mind a bit more than is likely to be quite wholesome'.⁶⁵ The Foreign Office continued to 'resist strongly any proposal to consult the Chinese but not the French'.⁶⁶

Churchill remained committed to a Europe-first strategy regarding wartime policy and activities.⁶⁷ Maberly Dening, Chief Political Adviser to SEAC, questioned the purpose of SEAC's role within a solely US Far East strategy in a note to the Foreign Office. 'For the Southeast Asia Command there appears to be no role at all, except to cover General Stilwell's supply route and to employ British forces at the maximum disadvantage to themselves with minimum effect upon the enemy'.⁶⁸ The War Cabinet Post-Hostilities Planning Sub-Committee remarked that the actions of the Japanese in seizing Southeast Asia demonstrated the threat to India, Australia, New Zealand and other British possessions in the region of a weak Indo-China. It held that Britain would not be able to meet this threat in the future without the assistance of the US. Roosevelt's position indicated that the US intended participation in the defence of Indo-China, but if the US deprived France of Indo-China the resentment 'would seriously endanger our post-war co-operation' with France and this could result in an 'unfriendly France' hindering British security in other regions. The Committee concluded that US co-operation in the defence of Indo-China should be encouraged and that in order not to offend the French this should be achieved by the establishment of UN bases.⁶⁹

The Foreign Office persisted in its criticism of Roosevelt's opinions on Indo-China: 'this is one of the President's most half baked and unfortunate *obita dicta*'.⁷⁰ Eden agreed.⁷¹ On 24 February the War Cabinet approved a memorandum by Eden on the future of Indo-China and French Pacific possessions; this included papers by the Foreign Office and the Post-Hostilities Planning Committee and concluded that Britain 'should aim at continuance of French sovereignty'. Lord Cranborne, the Dominions Secretary, was requested to consult the Dominions in order that an 'Imperial Policy on this matter' could be formulated.⁷² However Churchill was cautious of raising the matter with his US ally, preferring not to discuss the Indo-China issue with Roosevelt before the presidential election in case Roosevelt used it to pander to the anti-imperial nature of the US press and electorate. Churchill did not believe the matter to be urgent and considered Roosevelt's opinions 'particular to himself ... chance remarks ... made in conversation'. He held that 'nothing is going to happen about this for quite a long time' and thus the Dominions' Prime Ministers could be consulted when they arrived in Britain in two months.⁷³ Cranborne pressed Churchill for greater immediate consultation with the Dominions.⁷⁴ Churchill agreed but only after he had first approved any telegram to the Prime Ministers, thereby preventing an instant approach. Oliver Stanley, Colonial Secretary, expressed his concern about US hypocrisy over trusteeship and its economic benefits.⁷⁵ Eden would later note in September 1944 that the Dominions still had not been consulted about Britain's Indo-China policy, although Australia had told Hull in February that it was in favour of a French return.⁷⁶ However, when Roosevelt's digressions concerned the future of the British Empire Churchill offered a forthright defence: 'my irrevocable principle is that no Government of which I am the Head will yield one square inch of British territory or British rights in any quarter of the globe except for greater advantages or moral scruples'.⁷⁷

Mountbatten noted how 'determined' the French were to regain Indo-China. He stressed the importance of accepting a small French mission being established at SEAC lest the French concentrate their efforts on China Theatre headquarters at Chungking instead and thus diminish British influence in the region.⁷⁸ Churchill persisted in his inaction, instructing the Foreign Office, 'It will be better to delay. One can always concede'.⁷⁹ General Hastings Ismay, Chief of Staff to Churchill in his role as the Minister of Defence, instructed the Foreign Office 'For the time being, therefore, there is nothing that we can do'.⁸⁰ Cadogan reflected on Churchill's intransigence, 'I can only infer that

the P.M., knowing as I do President Roosevelt – and Admiral Leahy’s – sinister intentions regarding Indo-China, is careful not to do anything that might imply our recognition of French input there’.⁸¹ Lord Selborne, responsible for the SOE which would conduct clandestine operations in Indo-China, pressed both Churchill and Eden on the issue of the French mission to SEAC. He highlighted that the delay would damage SOE operations and add to French suspicions of British intentions in view of Roosevelt’s opinions.⁸² Eden supported the argument but Churchill was not going to be pushed into taking any action. He lambasted Eden:

It is hard enough to get along in SEAC when we virtually have only the Americans to deal with. The more the French can get their finger into the pie, the more trouble they will make in order to show they are not humiliated in any way by the events through which they have passed. You will have de Gaullist intrigues there just as you now have in Syria and the Lebanon.

Before we could bring the French officially into the Indo-China area, we should have to settle with President Roosevelt. He has been more outspoken to me on that subject than any other colonial matter, and I imagine it is one of his principal war aims to liberate Indo-China from France. Whenever he has raised it, I have repeatedly reminded him of his pledges about the integrity of the French Empire and have reserved our position. Do you really want to go and stir all this up at such a time as this?

I do not like the idea of Mountbatten’s command becoming a kind of minor court with many powers having a delegation there. The fact that the Dutch have a section is because we are studying those countries which they own with a view to attack and we certainly have no plans in prospect for liberating Indo-China.

...

It is erroneous to suppose that one must always be doing something. The greatest service SOE can render us is to select with great discrimination their areas and occasions of intervention.⁸³

Nevertheless, on 1 June Mountbatten raised the matter again with the COS. He held that ‘it is militarily necessary to obtain the maximum co-operation of the French in pre-occupational work in Indo-China’.⁸⁴ The COS raised the issue again with Churchill and enquired if the issue was still to be conceded.⁸⁵ Churchill wrote to Major-General Leslie Hollis, War Cabinet Secretariat at the Ministry of Defence: ‘Is there any

reason why we should not wait and see how we finish up with de Gaulle?'⁸⁶ The COS agreed that there was no need to press the issue and informed Mountbatten: 'On the instructions of the Prime Minister a decision is to be deferred for the time being'.⁸⁷

Brendon Bracken, British Minister of Information, remained cynical about Roosevelt's attitude and motives: 'Now that Roosevelt is talking to God he may be even more unreasonable. We have got to tell the gentleman that Europe cannot be wrecked by his Dutch obstinacy'.⁸⁸ Reflecting on Roosevelt's relationship with de Gaulle, Churchill sardonically quipped: 'I think it would be a good thing to let the President know the kind of way de Gaulle interprets friendliness. I have now had four years' experience of him, and it is always the same'.⁸⁹ However, Bracken believed that Churchill was 'becoming more reasonable about the French', although this did not spare himself, British officials or the French from subsequent Churchillian outbursts.⁹⁰ Duff Cooper, British Ambassador to France, so 'irritated the Prime Minister by his extreme Francophilism ... and by his admiration for de Gaulle' that Churchill mocked "'a cat purring at the feet of de Gaulle'" and added that 'he could not recollect ever meeting a decent Frenchman'.⁹¹ Bracken was called a 'lackey of the Foreign Office' and slurred as "'a Foreign Office hack even more ignorant than its normal inhabitants"'.⁹²

On 28 July, due to the changed military situation following D-Day and the destruction of Vichy France, the War Cabinet COS Committee reconsidered the question of a French mission being established with SEAC.⁹³ As the relationship between the French colonists and Japanese in Indo-China began to deteriorate Churchill agreed to a French military mission as well as the French Corps Leger military unit being established at SEAC.⁹⁴ The COS placed proposals before the US COS for French participation in the war against Japan.⁹⁵ The US COS re-evaluated the issue and consequently agreed with the French request to participate in the war against Japan, except in the area of political warfare which they believed should be limited to the SEAC area.⁹⁶ However, Roosevelt ruled that 'approval could not be given to any of these proposals until the President had the opportunity to discuss them with the Prime Minister at their next meeting'.⁹⁷ The Foreign Office noted on the issue of SOE work in Indo-China that 'If we were a nation of angels we would still be suspected by some Americans of having sinister motives for anything we did' and regarded the issue as a 'molehill' rather than the 'mountain' the US insisted.⁹⁸

On 14 August, without Churchill, the War Cabinet considered further the issue of the future of Indo-China as this would be one of the topics likely to be discussed between René Massigli, French Ambassador, and Eden during forthcoming talks. The Cabinet affirmed its position of 24 February – the continuance of French sovereignty – and approved Eden's recommendation 'to leave the initiative to M. Massigli on this subject as far as possible'.⁹⁹ Ten days later Eden met Massigli at the Foreign Office. Massigli observed that the US attitude towards Indo-China 'had not been cleared up' and that during de Gaulle's recent talks with Roosevelt the President 'had been very vague'. Eden indicated that in the interest of international security Britain was prepared to 'give facilities where others did the same' but would not consider any withdrawals; it was a policy of 'what we have we hold'. He asked Massigli that if Britain undertook a policy of consultation and a joint use of bases as part of an international security process then would France be prepared to do likewise? Massigli personally believed that France would not object to such a policy on the understanding that this did not relinquish sovereignty.¹⁰⁰ John Colville, Churchill's Private Secretary, sent a message to Churchill at the second Quebec Conference (September 1944) to remind him to discuss the French mission to SEAC with Roosevelt.¹⁰¹ However, despite Churchill's new-found support for such a venture, he strangely 'did not have an opportunity of raising this matter with the President' in Quebec; nor did he raise the matter, following a further reminder, during his visit to Roosevelt's home in New York.¹⁰²

At the same time, Mountbatten held that pre-occupation operations could not begin until questions concerning Indo-China, SEAC and China Theatre boundaries had been resolved.¹⁰³ Churchill informed Eden and Ismay that Mountbatten's enquiry should be dealt with by the COS who decided that this could 'remain unsettled a little longer'.¹⁰⁴ Mountbatten considered that Britain was already committed to French participation in the war in the Far East as Britain had accepted a French battleship to be deployed against the Japanese. He believed that if delays concerning the French mission resulted in China Theatre control of Indo-China then this would restrict not only China Theatre operations but also British policy in the Far East.¹⁰⁵ Eden observed: 'This is all very well but PM may take same view as President'.¹⁰⁶ Mountbatten and Eden remained both in contact and in agreement over the participation of the French in the war in the Far East.¹⁰⁷ Eden was embarrassed with Anglo-US inability to satisfy French inquiries.¹⁰⁸ A Foreign Office minute suggested that the continued

delay could result in the French mission being established in the China Theatre rather than SEAC, thus diminishing British influence. It requested that Churchill telegram Roosevelt and urge him to make a decision.¹⁰⁹ Eden agreed with both the assessment and the request.¹¹⁰ In the meantime Britain permitted 'a temporary personal visit' by French General Roger Blaizot to Mountbatten and SEAC.¹¹¹

The French eagerly awaited acceptance of their participation in the war in the Far East but the US COS continued not to respond to British COS proposals. The situation appeared to be locked in a stalemate requiring resolution at a higher level. Churchill finally seemed to want to resolve the dispute. He asked Eden 'had we not better talk this over in Cairo with Mountbatten'? Yet, aware of Roosevelt's likely reaction to the proposals, Churchill appeared reluctant to act. He advised Eden to 'draft a telegram to the President at your leisure'. Churchill would have to approve any draft and did not intend to do so in the near future. He reasoned with Eden that Roosevelt would 'not like the French being let into Indo-China, and we had better keep this particular item till other more urgent matters have been settled' especially as the situation at SEAC 'shows no hope of advance before the beginning of 1946', although he lamely attested 'I am trying to improve this'.¹¹² Hollis wrote to Churchill advising that the COS recommended that Churchill ask Roosevelt to agree to the French mission and participation in the war in the Far East.¹¹³ Eden agreed with the COS and the next day, with pressure mounting, Churchill made a decision. He instructed Eden to 'proceed as the Chiefs of Staff propose' for the retention of the French mission to SEAC but sought to avoid a conflict with Roosevelt by ruling: 'There is no need for me to telegraph to the President'.¹¹⁴

Meanwhile, during September, the French requested to be supplied with an aircraft carrier which they would operate off the coast of Indo-China.¹¹⁵ Churchill again appeared reluctant to make a decision despite having already made one on the French military mission to SEAC. Due to the 'heavy pressure of work' he directed, three months later in December, that 'it be brought up on a later occasion' as he had 'not yet had time to look at it closely'.¹¹⁶ The US again sought to avoid any commitment to employ French forces in the Far East. The JSM in Washington maintained that political as well as naval considerations were directing the US response. The British Admiralty believed that it could possibly assist in the refit of French naval vessels. The alternative was for Churchill and Roosevelt to make 'a clear cut decision' but as it proved impossible to supply the French

with ships or conduct refits, a decision did not have to be made for the time being.¹¹⁷ Churchill agreed with the delay and reflected 'I do not expect the French will like it much. If they do not agree, the matter must be settled between the Heads of Government'.¹¹⁸ The stark warning was that this would involve Roosevelt.

In November rumours circulated in Washington that Mountbatten would have to be recalled due to his bad relations with an unspecified US General.¹¹⁹ Lt.-General Joseph Stilwell, Mountbatten's deputy at SEAC, the US commander of Chinese armies in Burma and Assam and also Chief of Staff to Chiang Kai-Shek, had had a troubled relationship with Mountbatten. 'Vinegar Joe' Stilwell was a zealous 'enemy of imperialism', and an Anglophobe with an 'equally stark contempt for China'. He had been replaced in October by US Lt.-General Al Wedemeyer who had previously possessed good relations with Mountbatten as his Deputy Chief of Staff. However, Wedemeyer now regarded his role as Chief of Staff to Chiang Kai-Shek to defend Chinese interests even to the detriment of SEAC.¹²⁰ By 13 November the Foreign Office determined it was important to resolve the problems that continued between Britain and the US over clandestine operations in Indo-China, French participation in the war in the Far East and the French military mission to SEAC. Nonetheless, before the matter could be brought before Churchill for him to contact Roosevelt it was proposed that Halifax should broach the issue with the State Department and 'urge them to clear it with the President'.¹²¹ Initially this idea had been proposed by Churchill but the Foreign Office was 'dubious ... of achieving the desired result through this channel, since the decision clearly lies with the President'.¹²² However, Eden now considered it important at least to try to resolve the matter through Halifax before returning the issue to Churchill.¹²³ Perhaps this would circumnavigate Churchill's intransigence to discuss Indo-Chinese matters with Roosevelt. The Foreign Office informed the US Ambassador in London

It would be difficult to deny French participation in the liberation of Indo-China in light of the increasing strength of the French Government in world affairs, and that, unless a policy to be followed toward Indo-China is mutually agreed between our two governments, circumstances may arise at any moment which will place our two governments in a very awkward situation.¹²⁴

At the same time Churchill remained resolute in his defence of the British Empire but appeared to have lost touch with the trusteeship

debate. On New Year's Eve he wrote to Eden, 'How does this matter stand? There must be no question of our being hustled or seduced into declarations affecting British sovereignty in any of the Dominions or colonies'. Noting the irony that the US wanted to maintain control over certain Japanese islands post-war for its own security agenda, Churchill blessed the US proposals but maintained "'Hands off the British Empire" is our maxim and it must not be weakened or smirched to please sob-stuff merchants at home or foreigners of any hue'.¹²⁵ Eden replied 'we are anxious to persuade the Americans not to go in for half baked international regimes', i.e. trusteeship, 'nor to advocate them for others but to accept colonial responsibilities on the same terms as ourselves'.¹²⁶

Halifax 'repeatedly urged [the] State Department to give ... a reply' to Foreign Office concerns. On 26 December the new US Secretary of State, Edward Stettinius, informed him that 'the question was still on the President's desk'.¹²⁷ At the beginning of January 1945 Halifax again broached Foreign Office concerns with Stettinius, who informed Halifax that Roosevelt still thought that any political or military action over Indo-China was premature and that the President intended to raise the issue with Churchill. Halifax protested over the implied delay, citing Mountbatten's urgent military requirements, but Stettinius declined to offer further assistance.¹²⁸ Two days later Halifax met with Roosevelt and attempted to resolve the deadlock over SEAC and French clandestine operations in Indo-China. Roosevelt cryptically responded that 'if we felt it important we had better tell Mountbatten to do it and ask no questions. He did not want in any way to appear to be committed to anything that would seem to prejudice [a] political decision about Indo-China [that was] in a sense favourable to [the] restoration [of the] French *status quo ante* which he did not wish to see restored'.¹²⁹ Denning believed that as everything was now in place to begin pre-occupation duties in Indo-China it was time to revert solely to Mountbatten's informal Gentleman's Agreement with Chiang Kai-Shek, and to halt further representations to Roosevelt whose intervention could damage SEAC operations.¹³⁰ Roosevelt's statement to Halifax placed Britain in an opportune position. Halifax, Mountbatten, the COS and the Foreign Office agreed that 'we should let this particular sleeping dog lie' and Eden pertained that the matter was now solely an issue to be dealt with by the Foreign Office.¹³¹ Stanley, in Washington for discussions on dependent areas, received Roosevelt's continued affirmation of trusteeship for Indo-China.¹³²

In the meantime Eden attempted to have France accepted as an attendee at the forthcoming Allied conference at Yalta (February 1945). Writing to Churchill, Eden reminded him that many of France's imperial interests complemented those of Britain. Stating 'we must plan for the future' Eden pressed that it was necessary to have French co-operation; France was a member of the European Advisory Commission, it was due to administer one of the German occupation zones after the war and was to have one permanent Security Council seat at the UN.¹³³ However, Churchill was not convinced of the need to include France at Yalta: 'we shall have the greatest trouble with de Gaulle, who will be forever intriguing and playing two off against the third'. Churchill doubted that France's rehabilitation was complete and declared that it could not 'masquerade as a great power for the purpose of the war'. Warning to his subject Churchill concluded with a personal outburst against de Gaulle, 'I cannot think of anything more unpleasant and impossible than having this menacing and hostile man in our midst, always trying to make himself a reputation in France by claiming a position far above what France occupies, and making faces at the allies who are doing the work'.¹³⁴ Eden pleaded that Churchill's stance could turn France towards Russia for support which would cause problems for British post-war security, but Churchill was unmoved.¹³⁵

Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill met at the Yalta Conference to discuss the foundations for the post-war world. Returning to the question of trusteeship Churchill vetoed Roosevelt's plans, but he did not pursue the question of further French participation in the war in the Far East as Roosevelt had no military advisers present and thus could not be expected to make a considered decision.¹³⁶ Roosevelt was less generous to Churchill during a post-conference press briefing: 'Stalin liked the idea. China liked the idea. The British don't like it. It might bust up their empire', he considered 'it would only make the British mad. Better to keep quiet just now' as Churchill was 'mid-Victorian on all things like that'.¹³⁷ Denning remained curious as to French motives about the return of Indo-China, 'do they expect us to bear their cross for them'? From SEAC he concluded 'I am gradually gaining the impression that the French we have are either *mal élèves* or just stupid, or trying to pull a fast one'.¹³⁸

A month later Churchill returned to the question of trusteeship. Reflecting on the scheme of voluntary trusteeship established at Yalta for colonial territories he warned 'I myself oppose such a departure which might well be pressed upon nations like Britain, France,

Holland and Belgium who have had great colonial possessions by the United States, Russia and China who have none'.¹³⁹ Churchill appeared to have come full circle. The Foreign Office noted the continued hypocrisy with the US position on trusteeship, 'the Americans have not disdained the use of our territories particularly India and Burma and the considerable resources which those territories have made available for them'.¹⁴⁰ It was sardonically commented that 'The "fundamental principle on which the very existence of the United States rested" was ... in abeyance when the US wrested what is now Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas from the Mexicans, and when the North forced the Confederate southern states to stay within the Union'.¹⁴¹ Meanwhile the French Government issued the Brazzaville Declaration to unite the aims of France with the Indo-Chinese Federation as part of a new French Union. It was intended as a progressive statement of direction. The Union would be the basis for French post-war relationships with its Empire; however 'liberty' was only permitted within the Union.¹⁴² In April the Foreign Office replied to Denning's misgivings about French motives. British policy was 'to help her [France] to recover her former strength and influence and to cultivate the closest possible relations with her. We regard a strong and friendly France as an essential factor for our post-war security'.¹⁴³ It was important for Britain to defend the interests of all the colonial powers over both trusteeship and voluntary trusteeship lest a precedent be established that would destroy all colonial relationships. However, this represented much more than the future of colonial territories: the stability and security of post-war Western Europe were at stake, also economic regeneration and political harmony would be needed to face the potential threat from Russia. A common European colonial policy could bolster Britain's position as a great power, especially if the Empire and the Dominions in unison alongside the other Western European colonial nations could act as a balance of power against Russia.¹⁴⁴ However, the high policy debate over trusteeship and French participation in the war in the Far East had, for the moment, been eclipsed by a conflict between SEAC and China Theatre command over Allied operations in Indo-China.

Inter-theatre rivalry

Differences between Britain and the US over Indo-China also existed between SEAC and the China Theatre. Officially Indo-China was in the

China Theatre but since the creation of SEAC in 1943 Mountbatten had maintained an operational interest in Indo-China and Siam, as it was through these areas 'that runs the Japanese land and air reinforcement route to Burma and Malaya'.¹⁴⁵ Originally the British COS had intended that the boundaries of SEAC would include Indo-China, Siam and Malaya.¹⁴⁶ However, the first Quebec Conference (August 1943) between Roosevelt and Churchill confirmed both Siam and Indo-China in the China Theatre.¹⁴⁷

When Mountbatten arrived at SEAC he discovered that 'Anglo-American relations in this theatre were far and away the worst I have ever come across' and he found Stilwell to be 'entirely anti-British'.¹⁴⁸ US personnel within SEAC quipped that it stood really for 'Save England's Asian Colonies'.¹⁴⁹ Mountbatten attempted to end the conflict of personalities both within SEAC and between it and the China Theatre. Mountbatten met Chiang Kai-Shek in Chungking which resulted in a Gentleman's Agreement concerning Indo-China. The Gentleman's Agreement permitted Mountbatten to attack Siam and Indo-China and if successful transfer Siam and Indo-China from China Theatre into SEAC. In the meantime Mountbatten would be allowed to carry out intelligence and other pre-occupational activities.¹⁵⁰ Mountbatten wrote personally and informed Roosevelt of the outcome of the meeting which was confirmed to Roosevelt by US Lt.-General Brehon Somervell who also had been present and who had helped to broker the agreement.¹⁵¹ However, Mountbatten's personal letter to Roosevelt merely informed him of a congenial meeting with Chiang Kai-Shek to remove distrust and barriers between the commands but did not specifically mention the Gentleman's Agreement.¹⁵² Similarly, Mountbatten's letters to both Churchill and Sir Alan Brooke, CIGS, concerning the meeting also failed to mention the Gentleman's Agreement.¹⁵³ Roosevelt seemed pleased with both SEAC and Mountbatten and expressed confidence in the resolution between the commands, a success that he personally accredited to Mountbatten; but had he, Churchill and Brooke been misled?¹⁵⁴ If Mountbatten had made reference to the agreement and if Somervell had mentioned it to Roosevelt then could the agreement have been clarified at this stage and the later conflict between the Britain and the US concerning SEAC operations in Indo-China been avoided? The essence of the Gentleman's Agreement was confirmed in a further verbal agreement between Mountbatten and Chiang Kai-Shek in September 1944.¹⁵⁵ However the questions of the theatre boundaries and the Gentleman's Agreement would continue to reverberate in par-

allel with the matter of French participation in the war in the Far East throughout 1944 culminating in the spring of 1945.¹⁵⁶

On 29 January 1945, Wedemeyer wrote to Mountbatten detailing his plans to co-ordinate and integrate all Anglo-French-US clandestine operations in Indo-China.¹⁵⁷ Halifax was instructed to inform the US General of the Army, George Marshall, of Roosevelt's cryptic approval of Mountbatten's clandestine operations in case Wedemeyer continued to create problems over this matter.¹⁵⁸ Despite the long-standing Gentleman's Agreement between Mountbatten and Chiang Kai-Shek, the senior British liaison officer to China Theatre, Lt.-General Adrian Carton de Wiart, felt that 'only a decision from the Combined Chiefs of Staff will alter his [Wedemeyer's] position'.¹⁵⁹ Despite Chinese reassurances to Britain, Chiang Kai-Shek had imperial ambitions for Tonkin and therefore often 'told Mountbatten one thing and Wedemeyer the other'.¹⁶⁰ The growing disagreement over clandestine operations in Indo-China was complicated further when two British aircraft were shot down by US night fighters over Northern Indo-China having failed to give the US in Kunming 'previous warning' of their operation.¹⁶¹ Air Vice Marshal Whitworth-Jones accepted responsibility on behalf of SEAC and recommended that the investigation be wound down and 'sealed lips' kept on this tragedy.¹⁶² Wedemeyer wrote again to Mountbatten, on 10 February, in a friendly and gracious tone concerning the growing dispute over clandestine operations in Indo-China, 'You and I are 180 degrees apart with reference to French Indo-China but that requires decisions on a higher level than our own and I am making appropriate representation to clarify and obtain decisions for both of us'.¹⁶³ Despite the amicable tone of the letter Wedemeyer had revealed already his political views in Chungking – that he 'has been quite unable to understand why the British Commonwealth holds together, still less why it should do in the future'.¹⁶⁴ French General Jean Boucher de Crevecoeur was less generous in later commenting that Wedemeyer's stance was due to both his German ancestry and his time spent as an exchange student at the Berlin Military Academy.¹⁶⁵ Carton de Wiart reported to Churchill that 'Wedemeyer very much resents any activity on part of SEAC in Indo-China and says they must do nothing there without his permission'. Ominously he predicted 'I feel if [this] situation regards Indo-China is not cleared up very soon it will lead to considerable trouble'.¹⁶⁶ Meanwhile Britain ascertained that the 'Japanese have completed preparations for the occupation' of Indo-China.¹⁶⁷

The War Cabinet COS Committee reiterated Indo-Chinese importance in post-hostilities planning to British security in Southeast Asia, 'Indo-China is of the greatest importance since it forms the anchor of the chain of bases designed to cover Malaya, Burma and North Borneo and to prevent a serious threat to Australia and India developing ... The security of this alternative chain of bases requires the existence of stable and friendly regimes in Indo-China and Siam and settled conditions in Malaya'. It predicted that Indo-China would be of specific importance if Russia established a presence in Southern China, and that this would require full British, Commonwealth, US and French co-operation in Indo-China's defence.¹⁶⁸

Eden invited the US Ambassador to China, General Patrick Hurley, to London *en route* from Washington to Chungking and the COS asked for the invitation to be extended to include Wedemeyer so that discussions could take place concerning operations in Indo-China.¹⁶⁹ Wedemeyer declined the invitation.¹⁷⁰ On 1 March Churchill wrote to Eden and Ismay and asked 'What action do we take?' on the Wedemeyer-Mountbatten dispute.¹⁷¹ Roosevelt had not yet approached Churchill, as Stettinius had indicated in January he would, over political and military matters concerning Indo-China but because of Wedemeyer's attitude, the Foreign Office conjectured, the Indo-China question could not be deferred any longer.¹⁷² Eden replied to Churchill three days later. Accentuating that Wedemeyer and Mountbatten sparring on Indo-China would be a 'constant source of friction between ourselves and the United States', Eden suggested that the only course of action 'likely to produce a decision' was a direct approach from Churchill to Roosevelt. Eden hoped that the President would confirm 'the oral understanding between Chiang Kai-Shek and Mountbatten' and that an exchange of 'intentions, plans and intelligence' could be made between Mountbatten and Wedemeyer in all matters of mutual concern. The Foreign Office asked the COS for its views and Churchill agreed to 'consider an approach to the President' when the Foreign Office paper and the opinions of the COS had been accumulated.¹⁷³ If Churchill had intended to use the Foreign Office-COS consultation to delay making a decision, this was swiftly countered as both the Foreign Office paper and the COS views had been prepared during the two days between Churchill's initial enquiry to both Eden and Ismay and Eden's reply to Churchill on 4 March.¹⁷⁴

On 9 March the Japanese launched a *coup d'état* in Indo-China, overthrowing the Vichy French regime alongside which it had co-existed. The French previously had been directly responsible for the adminis-

tration of Indo-China but were subject to Japanese supervision and occupation. Most French military resistance was rapidly overcome but a force under General Alessandri attempted to retreat to Son La. The Vietnamese Emperor Bao Dai and Cambodian King Norodom Sihanouk quickly proclaimed independence within Japanese 'Greater East Asia'.¹⁷⁵ Two days later Eden again wrote to Churchill concerning the Mountbatten-Wedemeyer dispute and this time presented him with the Foreign Office and COS papers. Mountbatten's activities in Indo-China were restricted, as proposals put by the British COS to the US COS concerning greater 'French participation in the Far Eastern War, still remained unanswered' due to the 'inaction of President Roosevelt'. Eden doubted if Britain would 'ever get an answer' although ambiguity existed because of Roosevelt's "'off the record'" comments to Halifax concerning his intention 'to turn a blind eye to such activities as Admiral Mountbatten may consider necessary'. However, Wedemeyer insisted that he could not 'agree to activities in Indo-China by Admiral Mountbatten without his prior consent in the absence of instructions from his own higher authorities' because 'Indo-China is in the United States strategic sphere'. Eden acknowledged that, although Wedemeyer's stance was 'technically correct', Wedemeyer 'entirely disregards the oral understanding, of which you [Churchill] are well aware, between Mountbatten and Chiang Kai-Shek'. The COS supported Eden and the Foreign Office desire that 'joint confirmation' by Britain and the US was needed of the Gentleman's Agreement and the appropriate liaison arrangements agreed between Wedemeyer and Mountbatten concerning Indo-China. Similarly the COS agreed that Britain was 'not likely to obtain a satisfactory solution except through your [Churchill's] personal intervention with the President'.¹⁷⁶

The next day, amidst the growing crisis both in Indo-China and between Mountbatten and Wedemeyer, Churchill decided to act, although not decisively. He requested a brief from Ismay as to the course of events within Indo-China since the start of the war. Churchill appeared unaware as to whether Indo-China was still a Vichy province, or part of de Gaulle's France, or if there were French troops located there. Confusion certainly existed as Indo-China was the only French area not to rally to support de Gaulle following the Allied liberation of France, but considering it was co-habitant with the Japanese this was unsurprising. Churchill concluded: 'I have not followed the affairs in the country for some time'.¹⁷⁷ At the same time Massigli approached Eden concerning the crisis and the possibility of transporting the 600 men of the Corps Leger to the Far East to

assist in French resistance against the Japanese. Eden reported the request to Churchill.¹⁷⁸

Churchill eventually wrote to Roosevelt five days later and requested that as Wedemeyer was currently in Washington it would seem appropriate to resolve the Mountbatten-Wedemeyer dispute,

as you [Roosevelt] know he [Mountbatten] has an oral understanding with Chiang Kai-Shek that both he and the Generalissimo shall be free to attack Siam and Indo-China and that the boundaries of the two theatres shall be decided when the time comes in accordance with the progress made by their respective forces. The Generalissimo agreed after Sextant [the Cairo Conference] that this understanding extended to pre-occupational activities.

...

This is a situation from which much harmful friction may spring. Could not you and I clear it up by jointly endorsing the oral understanding which seems a sensible and workable agreement?

Churchill suggested that a mechanism 'for full and frank exchange of intentions, plans and intelligence' be established between Wedemeyer and Mountbatten.¹⁷⁹ Meanwhile limited French resistance to the Japanese inside Indo-China continued and the War Cabinet JIC Sub-Committee suggested that SEAC increase supplies for French forces fighting in Indo-China.¹⁸⁰ In the US, Marshall requested that British Field Marshal Henry Wilson, Head of the JSM in Washington, confer with him over the Mountbatten-Wedemeyer dispute. Wilson held that the CCS never had agreed at the Cairo Conference which theatre Indo-China was to be placed in.¹⁸¹ He failed to appreciate that despite this disagreement in reality a decision had already been made three months before Cairo at the first Quebec Conference.¹⁸² Nevertheless both the COS and Churchill concurred with the line that Wilson now proposed to take.¹⁸³ Ten days after the Japanese overthrow of the French in Indo-China, Churchill appeared to want to take decisive action to assist French forces in Indo-China but instead of raising the matter with Roosevelt he instructed Wilson to convey to the US COS through Marshall that: 'The Prime Minister feels that it would look very bad in history if we were to let the French force in Indo-China be cut to pieces by the Japanese through shortage of ammunition, if there is anything we can do save them. He hopes therefore that we shall be agreed in not standing on punctilio in this emergency'.¹⁸⁴ Eden agreed.¹⁸⁵ A

day later Churchill acted, he instructed Ismay that Mountbatten should take 'emergency action' to assist the French.¹⁸⁶ By coincidence Marshall informed Wilson that US General Claire Chennault had been ordered to fly ammunition to the French forces.¹⁸⁷ Ironically whilst the policy debate raged between London and Washington, US Major-General Robert McClure in the absence of Wedemeyer, and SOE Force 136 had already separately aided the French in Indo-China before Churchill and Marshall's intervention, although by 16 March the US Army Air Force had resumed normal bombing missions and would not supply French forces without permission from Washington.¹⁸⁸

On 22 March the limited French resistance in Indo-China requested further equipment and the resumption of intervention by the US Air Force. General Alessandri expected that his position at Son La would fall within two days.¹⁸⁹ Five days later, having successfully reinforced and held Son La with additional French units fleeing the Japanese, the French requested finances and medical supplies for the besieged forces.¹⁹⁰ The JSM held that 'it was embarrassing and unfortunate that the Combined Chiefs of Staff should continue to give the French no encouragement'.¹⁹¹ Britain arranged to send the money and medical supplies requested by the French forces in Indo-China.¹⁹² Chennault protested to Marshall about the lack of co-ordination for operations within Indo-China.¹⁹³ Marshall informed Wilson "Whatever the differences which remained unsettled regarding priority rights in Indo-China operations, it seems to me that Mountbatten's Headquarters should at least notify Chungking of what they are doing or we are riding for a fall out there".¹⁹⁴

Roosevelt, whilst agreeing to full and frank discussions between Wedemeyer and Mountbatten, sought in a telegram Churchill's approval that 'all Anglo-American-Chinese military operations in Indo-China, regardless of their nature be co-ordinated by General Wedemeyer'.¹⁹⁵ Marshall was in agreement with Roosevelt on this but continued to hold that Wedemeyer could not actually control such operations.¹⁹⁶ In Washington Hurley regarded US policy on Indo-China as 'still nebulous' and informed Wilson that Britain could expect more trouble from the 'President and State Department over Hong Kong' and also 'lend lease equipment being used for recovery of colonial territories'.¹⁹⁷ Hurley had been invited to visit London on his return to China.¹⁹⁸ The Foreign Office prepared a brief for the intended visit. The personal analysis of Hurley considered that his 'bark is probably worse than his bite' but identified that he possessed 'crude ideas

about our "imperialism". Hurley had already informed the Dutch Ambassador in Chungking that the US was 'not going to clear up the mess for the imperialism of Britain and Holland in the Far East' and was suspicious of Anglo-Dutch-French 'collaboration ... to promote their imperial interests' whilst 'keeping the Americans in the dark'.¹⁹⁹ However, the brief assumed that because Hurley had been reported as 'not happy about President Roosevelt's attitude on Indo-China' he would be 'receptive' to the British position.²⁰⁰ The eventual meeting between Hurley and Churchill proved to be an anti-climax. Churchill noted 'Hurley seemed to wish to keep the conversation to civil banalities' and in his meeting with the COS Hurley limited his discussions to background conditions in Indo-China and would not be drawn on its 'political outlook'.²⁰¹

By 31 March Churchill had still not yet replied to Roosevelt's telegram concerning the Wedemeyer-Mountbatten dispute. Churchill admitted to being 'a little shy of overburdening the President'. He fantasised that the President's telegram 'was obviously not his own' and regarded that the Mountbatten-Wedemeyer dispute should be settled at COS level as he considered Roosevelt to be 'very hard pressed, and I like to keep him as much as possible for the biggest things'.²⁰² Three days later Churchill appeared to relent. He notified Hollis that he was 'quite prepared to bring this before the President in a day or two'.²⁰³ This was an open statement with no indication that he intended to carry it out. Mountbatten met with Wedemeyer for full and frank discussions and reminded him that both the US COS and Roosevelt had previously approved of the Gentleman's Agreement. Mountbatten showed Wedemeyer two documents which demonstrated this and it was agreed that Wedemeyer could veto only operations that clashed with China Theatre operations.²⁰⁴ Wedemeyer's subsequent report to Washington also stated that British operations could not be executed until approved by Chiang Kai-Shek.²⁰⁵

Churchill at last wrote to Roosevelt on 11 April but by now the dispute appeared to have been resolved. Churchill notified Roosevelt that both Mountbatten and Wedemeyer had reached an understanding concerning SEAC and China Theatre disputes over Indo-China. He proposed that Mountbatten should keep Wedemeyer 'continually informed of all ... operations since forces of China Command will also be operating in the same theatre'. Further disputes would be referred to the CCS. However, Churchill would not subject Mountbatten's operations in Indo-China to Wedemeyer's approval and bluntly warned Roosevelt that 'it would look very bad in history if we failed to support

isolated French forces ... or if we excluded the French from participation in our councils as regards Indo-China'.²⁰⁶ Churchill had boldly aligned British military and political policy over Indo-China with his post-Yalta policy of defending the colonial possessions of European nations. Unfortunately Roosevelt did not have an opportunity to reply as he died the next day.

Roosevelt's death and the ascension of Vice-President Harry Truman to the presidency marked a watershed in US policy and Indo-China in particular. Truman replied to Churchill that Wedemeyer had reported that Mountbatten had agreed to notify Wedemeyer of operations. But Wedemeyer had introduced a new element to the debate that operations could not be actioned until approved by Chiang Kai-Shek, and if SEAC operations could not be integrated with China Theatre plans then Mountbatten would have to withdraw the proposals. Truman approved Wedemeyer's report of the resolution as a 'satisfactory method of solving the problem'. In case of further problems he agreed with Churchill that future disputes should be reported through the respective COS to the CCS and that Wedemeyer had been 'instructed to give the French resistance groups such assistance as is practicable without prejudice to his present or future operations'.²⁰⁷ Churchill directed Ismay for 'Action this day'.²⁰⁸ Four days later Ismay informed Churchill that the COS agreed to trial the resolution detailed in Truman's telegram.²⁰⁹ A day later Churchill replied to Truman that he agreed to trial the proposed resolution.²¹⁰ Meanwhile, reflecting a perceived change of political attitudes in the US, Churchill believed that French and Dutch participation in the war against Japan should be discussed by Eden in Washington.²¹¹ Ten days later the COS told Mountbatten that the CCS had agreed that the Corps Leger would be sent to Ceylon as soon as possible.²¹²

However, the conflict between Mountbatten and Wedemeyer continued. This concerned Mountbatten flying sorties to aid French resistance groups in Indo-China.²¹³ Wilson learnt that, in the course of an examination of theatre boundaries, the US COS appeared unlikely to object to Indo-China being included as part of an enlarged SEAC. Despite previous political disputes over Indo-China, Marshall did not know the current direction of White House thinking on this issue.²¹⁴ Mountbatten believed that Wedemeyer had 'introduced new factors and interpretations' into the Gentleman's Agreement with Chiang Kai-Shek. Wedemeyer held Indo-China 'of vital importance to the China Theatre' and believed that as Commander-in-Chief to Chiang Kai-Shek he could not agree to the terms of the Gentleman's

Agreement as stated by Mountbatten, especially as the Generalissimo 'desired prior arrangement' of operations as Supreme Allied Commander China Theatre. Wedemeyer attacked Mountbatten's interpretation of the agreement as not being 'in consonance with standard military practice'.²¹⁵ Mountbatten replied to Wedemeyer that the dispute needed to be dealt with 'officially'.²¹⁶ Wilson confirmed to both the COS and Mountbatten that Wedemeyer could only veto conflicting operations.²¹⁷ Marshall cautioned Wilson that Hurley was sending strongly worded anti-British reports to Washington from Chungking, as was Wedemeyer.²¹⁸ Marshall remarked to Wilson 'there must be an extraordinary importance to the clandestine operations being carried out ... to justify the possible creation not only of ill will but of a feeling that there is a lack of good faith'. Because of previous correspondence between Churchill and Truman as well as Marshall and Wilson on this dispute, Marshall did not hold that anything further would be gained if the dispute was brought before the CCS.²¹⁹ Wilson was surprised with the idea that there was nothing to be gained and concluded that 'there is more in it than meets the eye'.²²⁰ The COS wearily informed Wilson that 'if Wedemeyer acted in the spirit of his directive and if good liaison is established in Chungking, the difficulties would cease' and asked for Marshall to 'advise' Wedemeyer of this.²²¹

Meanwhile in India, Britain arranged for the French to use facilities to train French colonial administrators and, in China, the OSS (forerunner of the CIA) organised equipment and training for the Vietminh in return for intelligence reports and the rescue of downed US pilots.²²² The CIGS, Brooke, raised the question of the transfer of Indo-China from China Theatre to SEAC with the COS; they agreed that the SEAC boundaries should be enlarged to include Indo-China.²²³ Wedemeyer naturally was opposed to the transfer but the issue was now before the Potsdam Conference (July 1945) and Indo-China was secondary to the Pacific Theatre.²²⁴ In the European victors' arena the ambiguities and distrust appeared to have been mostly forgotten. Truman flattered Mountbatten that both he and the US COS were 'grateful ... for the impartial way' that Mountbatten had managed SEAC and added that 'we in America regard you in exactly the same light as Eisenhower is regarded by the British; that is, we really do appreciate your integrity, and the admirable way which you have run your command'.²²⁵ In a compromise gesture to Chiang Kai-Shek, Truman and the new British Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, divided Indo-China between SEAC and China Theatres at the 16th parallel.²²⁶

Resolution

The immediate resolution of Britain's conflict with the US over the question of Indo-China lay not within the diplomacy of the Foreign Office or the political acumen of Churchill but in a transformation in the nature of Franco-US relations and the opportunity afforded by a change in President. Although Roosevelt's anti-French and anti-imperial opinions were partially shared by many of his advisers (Hull, Hurley, Stilwell, Wedemeyer, Admiral Leahy Chief of Staff to the President and Chairman of the JCS, and General Donovan Head of the OSS) the positions taken were not appreciated by large elements of the State Department or the armed forces. In February 1943 Roosevelt received a thesis from the State Department Sub-Committee on Security Problems that argued for a strong France as an element in US security policy against a future Soviet threat.²²⁷ Initially Roosevelt had managed to keep the State Department isolated from the Indo-China debate. However, from 1944 onwards, the State Department questioned China's commitment to the Atlantic Charter and as the importance of China in Roosevelt's foreign policy declined so too was his Indo-China policy undermined.²²⁸

The White House and the State Department each developed different approaches towards Southeast Asia and as a result Roosevelt was more restricted in his policy ramblings.²²⁹ The second Quebec Conference moved the focus of US policy towards a Pacific island-hopping strategy and away from SEAC and China Theatre.²³⁰ In October Roosevelt granted diplomatic recognition to the Provisional French Government. This blunted Roosevelt's policy.²³¹ France was reconstituted as a European power and the State Department was able to restrict Roosevelt further.²³² On 1 November the State Department lobbied Roosevelt to seek further clarification of the Indo-China policy. Roosevelt decreed that no help was to be given to France over the Indo-China issue.²³³ Meanwhile Hull retired and was replaced as Secretary of State by Stettinius; the European Office of the State Department appeared to be in the ascendancy.²³⁴ In January 1945 the Secretaries for State, War and Navy met with Presidential Adviser Harry Hopkins to discuss Roosevelt's Indo-China policy and the damage to Franco-US relations.²³⁵ Hopkins suggested that there needed to be a revision not just of US Indo-China policy but also of the entire US approach towards France. As part of this new approach Hopkins visited Paris and later in the spring a return visit was made by Georges Bidault, the French Foreign Minister, to Washington

where he was received by Vice-President Harry Truman. Franco-US relations appeared to be thawing.²³⁶

The Japanese coup of 9 March in Indo-China clarified the Indo-Chinese issue further. As long as the French had collaborated with the Japanese, Roosevelt could indulge in anti-colonialism towards Indo-China.²³⁷ Now, symbolically, Indo-China had lost its association with Vichy France and had become an occupied territory in Southeast Asia with the French seeking to liberate an occupied people in the same vein as the British in Burma, Singapore, Malaya and Hong Kong, and the Dutch in the Netherlands East Indies. De Gaulle did not miss the opportunity to attack the US attitude towards France by claiming in true Machiavellian spirit that an anti-French policy would push France towards Russia.²³⁸ The US State, War and Navy Committee again sought clarification as to US Indo-China policy.²³⁹ The State Department wanted a consistent policy towards Southeast Asia but US policy remained locked in dual camps; although Roosevelt did concede the concept of a conditional French trusteeship for Indo-China.²⁴⁰ British Admiral-of-the-Fleet James Somerville informed Mountbatten that talks with Admiral Ernest King, Commander-in-Chief of the US Navy, had revealed that the US COS was not in favour of Roosevelt's policy of keeping the French out of Indo-China.²⁴¹ The Secretary of War, Stimson, challenged Roosevelt's control of the trusteeship debate and an OSS report analysing US policy warned against trusteeship 'which may provoke unrest and result in colonial disintegration and may at the same time alienate us from the European states whose help we need to balance Soviet power'.²⁴²

Roosevelt's untimely death eased the internal US debate between the State Department and the White House. The US Army representative on the State, War and Navy Committee held that a lack of US policy on Indo-China was a 'serious embarrassment to the military' and that Roosevelt's interdiction of their debate must be reviewed.²⁴³ The San Francisco Conference (April-June 1945) provided the opportunity for the external resolution of the Indo-Chinese dispute. Bidault angrily announced to Stettinius that France did not intend to place Indo-China under any form of trusteeship, but Stettinius's amnesia allowed him to reassure Bidault that 'the record is entirely innocent of any official statement of this government questioning, even by implication, French sovereignty over Indo-China'.²⁴⁴ France's rehabilitation appeared to be complete. Stettinius announced that the fifth permanent seat on the UN Security Council had been accorded to France:

‘The United States welcomes this important step in the return of France to her rightful place in world affairs’.²⁴⁵ Eden found that the new President possessed an ‘air of quiet confidence in himself’. Truman informed Eden “‘I am here to make decisions, and whether they prove right or wrong I am going to take them’”.²⁴⁶ John Hickerson, sub Head European Office of the State Department, revealed to the British delegation that the option of voluntary trusteeship (category C) introduced at the Yalta Conference had been ‘partly phrased by the State Department in order to permit a climb down from the position that President Roosevelt had taken in conversation as regards Indo-China’. It was made ‘clear that the State Department felt that President Roosevelt had gone too far, and that category C was a useful face saver’.²⁴⁷ The US now required friendship with Britain and France against Russia, in the new post-war world order.²⁴⁸

A lost opportunity

Historical debate traditionally has focused analysis upon whether or not the concept of trusteeship died with Roosevelt. Tonnesson has identified that two distinct schools of thought have emerged. Firstly the ‘school of lost opportunity’ because trusteeship was neither a serious factual policy nor continued after Roosevelt’s death. Secondly the ‘school of continuation’ which argued that as Truman endorsed the French return it marked a continuation of Roosevelt’s own revisionism towards the subject.²⁴⁹ Interwoven into this has been the idea that military necessity and British imperial intransigence destroyed a unique opportunity although it can be argued also that Roosevelt’s ill-defined policy delayed a French return thereby creating a lost imperial opportunity.²⁵⁰

Roosevelt’s concept of trusteeship came in two parts. One, an ideological desire to see independence granted to the colonial peoples, born from the US anti-imperial subconscious. This continued throughout the period 1943–50 and physically manifested itself in the US policy debate towards Indo-China, Indonesia and the Philippines. Two, a practical policy of trusteeship that was in constant revision as Roosevelt engaged in the day to day ebb and flow of power brokering between the Allied powers on both wartime and post-hostility planning. Roosevelt was politically at his most dangerous when the practical and the ideological came together. By maintaining these two streams and not committing himself to a more factual policy Roosevelt created a situation where, after his death, Truman struggled to produce

clear directives resulting in some sections of US agencies (China Theatre and the OSS) continued application of Roosevelt's anti-French policy, 'FDR's foreign policy had been so personal to himself that it was doubtful whether Truman or anyone he asked really appreciated what its "general line" had been'.²⁵¹ Likewise it is possible that trusteeship symbolically aided the Allied cause; internally in the US, trusteeship could be used to prove that the US was not fighting a colonial war on behalf of Britain and France; externally, trusteeship could produce the hope of freedom from Japanese imperialism and its hollow promise of Asian nationalism. Certainly this argument was not lost on the Vietminh leader Ho Chi Minh.

It was because of Roosevelt's astute political prowess and ability that trusteeship remained in constant revision and unintegrated into any formal policy. Roosevelt was well aware of wartime constraints and complexities both of a physical and a political nature not only within his own administration but also amongst his allies, most notably the British.²⁵² Roosevelt's frequent outbursts on the subject to the US Joint COS were not just an attack on the British and the French but also an attempt to win the military and political debates about US mandate territories and the future of the Japanese Islands. Fortunately, Roosevelt had the foresight to see that the US would end the war as the only major creditor nation and therefore the major world power. It would be 'an American peace, that belonged to him to dictate its organisation'.²⁵³ Thus he could afford to wait and discuss post-war planning, reconstruction and politics, only involving trusteeship when it was really necessary: this partly explains some of his silence and inactivity. The only eventuality that he had not considered was his death.

However, Britain reacted badly to the trusteeship debate. Roosevelt's fluid revisionism, lack of integration and imprecise policy caused particular discomfort at the Foreign Office: 'The Americans do not wish us to recover our previous position in Asia, confuse this wish in their minds with the principle of self-determination (alias "freedom") and so see in every move to recover lost property a similar desire to enslave native peoples'.²⁵⁴ The Foreign Office was openly sympathetic to the Free French cause and feared that the French were blatantly being left out of policy and the decision-making process by the US. The French were convinced of US plots and obstruction against them in many areas during the Second World War. Britain rightly suspected that trusteeship for French Indo-China would be only a first step and that Roosevelt would use this precedent to dictate trusteeship to other colonial areas including Hong Kong. Roosevelt had to be careful not to

draw the other colonial powers into an alliance with Britain over trusteeship and in Britain Churchill was worried that Indo-China and Foreign Office concern for the French would get in the way of his special relationship with Roosevelt. The silence on this issue by both leaders at various stages of the war helped to cool the pressure on a sensitive area where each others' personal feelings would have created further diplomatic problems and anxiety. Similarly the voluntary trusteeship arrangement agreed at the Yalta Conference was not a victory for the colonial powers in an attempt to derail trusteeship. Roosevelt would have no doubt seen the agreement as merely stalling the inevitable. He could afford to be both pragmatic and magnanimous. The US would finish the war as the major Allied creditor, its power in European reconstruction and the implementation of the UN would leave plenty of room for manoeuvre.²⁵⁵ Indeed, in what are often quoted as Roosevelt's final words on trusteeship before his death to Charles Taussig, US Adviser on Caribbean Affairs, the President could afford to be verbally generous to the French but he did not abandon his ideology or commitment to colonial peoples: 'independence was the ultimate goal'.²⁵⁶ Likewise, Churchill was aware of the changes that would have to be made to the geopolitical map after the war. Britain expected and even desired the US to be an active world power, not wanting the US to return to its position of interwar isolation. An active Anglo-US foreign policy could strengthen Britain domestically, economically, within the Empire and mitigate against the fate of rapidly becoming a diminished world power. Foreign Office intransigence lay also in the belief that planning for a post-war world was needed and the logic of European history dictated that a strong France was vital to British security against a threat from Russia or Germany.²⁵⁷ In addition it was part of a grooming ritual that proved to itself that Britain was still a world power. US naivety failed to recognise that European global economic networks would need to be considered as part of any future debate.²⁵⁸ The Foreign Office was defending imperial interests against dollar imperialism by supporting the French against the US over Indo-China.

Although by the Potsdam Conference the trusteeship debate for Indo-China was over, Roosevelt left the legacy of independence for colonial peoples permanently enshrined as Article 73 of the UN Charter and on 4 July 1946 the US granted political independence to the Philippines.²⁵⁹ Trusteeship had never anticipated the growth of Asian nationalism but the war had invigorated it, thereby creating problems for returning colonial powers.²⁶⁰ Ironically, had Roosevelt

lived it has been argued that he would have committed Chinese or US troops to Indo-China, in fact he had requested that an invasion plan be developed.²⁶¹ However, he did not live and Britain had realised its goals in the trusteeship debate over Indo-China. The Potsdam Conference was about to throw Britain into greater involvement in the Indo-China issue with the potential boundary change from China Theatre to SEAC and the possibility of Allied liberation duties.

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