

## CHAPTER IV

### HO CHI MINH AND THAI-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS

#### 1945-1948

The main political theme of the immediate post-WWII period in Asia concerned anti-colonialism, particularly in India, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Indochina. As long as the Chinese Nationalists still held power in the Middle Country and communist parties in Asia were still on the way to compete for the leadership role in the struggle for national independence, Asia in general and Indochina in particular were still on the periphery of the Cold War, which was at that time very much centered in Eastern Europe.

The end of WWII opened a new chapter for Vietnamese history. Under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh, the Vietnamese people nationwide rose up to regain power from the Japanese. On 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1945, Ho solemnly declared the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) as an independent country. Being the head of state and foreign minister, Ho played a crucial role in the DRV's foreign affairs and relations.

While still tirelessly struggling for its international and regional recognition, the young DRV, almost isolated from the international community and surrounded by "unfriendly" forces, i.e. the Chinese Nationalists and the French colonialists, had to encounter a war against the French in the wake of the latter's return to Indochina. The context helped to highlight the importance of Thailand to the DRV at the crucial moment. Unsurprisingly, the thumbprint of Ho had been either directly or indirectly seen in much of the DRV's policies and moves towards Thailand.

If the end of the Second World War would offer an invaluable opportunity for the Viet Minh to gain independence, it also witnessed a power transfer in Thailand, i.e. the Japanese-affiliated military regime was replaced by the Seri Thai led civilian government in 1944. Dominated by the progressive faction under the leadership of the Pridi-Isan leaders alliance, the Thai government extended fruitful assistance to national movements in Indochina in the context of an aggressive return of the French, whom the Thais at that time saw as an enemy regarding territorial conflicts between Thailand and French Indochina.

Against this background, this chapter will assess the role of Ho Chi Minh in shaping the DRV's Thailand policy as well as explore the Seri Thai's perception of Ho Chi Minh. The first part will begin by providing an overview of the DRV's political circumstances in the wake of the French return to Indochina in order to highlight the utmost tasks defined by the ICP and Ho Chi Minh. It then will be followed by pragmatic foreign and domestic policies adopted by the DRV to fulfill the defined tasks, which more or less had impacts on the Thai governing elite's perception of the Viet Minh and Ho Chi Minh. Next will be the discussion of the DRV's Thailand policy and the assessment of Ho's role in the DRV-Seri Thai government interactions.

In order to thoroughly understand the Thai governing elite's perception of Ho Chi Minh, the second part of this chapter will examine the political development in Thailand in the Seri Thai era. The focus will be the rise of the progressive Seri Thai led by Pridi-Isan leaders alliance. In particular, the ideas of Pridi as well the Isan leaders will be employed as the background to the Seri Thai government's foreign and domestic policies. This, together with discussed factors concerning the DRV's policies, provided the rationale for the sympathy the Thai elite held towards Ho as well as the assistance the Seri Thai government extended to the DRV and the Viet Minh in Thailand, which will be presented in the latter half.

#### **4.1. Ho Chi Minh's role in shaping the DRV's Thailand policy**

"In Nguyen Ai Quoc it possessed a highly charismatic leader who could inspire trust and devotion from his followers and appeal to moderates and radicals alike. Nguyen Ai Quoc was also a gifted strategist who had the ability to articulate his message in a way that appeared to sum up the aspirations of the vast majority of his compatriots" (Duiker. 2000: 32).

Immediately after holding power, the Ho Chi Minh government realized that it had to face a great amount of difficulties. First and foremost, the newly born DRV urgently needed an international recognition while it was on the way to build up and consolidate the administration system. At the same time, the ICP had to deal with "reactionary" forces, both external, particularly the French and the Nationalist Chinese, and internal, to maintain its leadership as well as to realize its immediate and uppermost goal of national independence.

Unsurprisingly, the first task of a newly independent country arising from a colonial system was to gain recognition of other countries, especially from the "mother country" as well as super powers. Fifteen days after Ho declared independence, on 22 September 1945 he sent a confidential message to Joseph Stalin to inform the Soviet

leader about the birth of the DRV and asked for assistance from the Soviet Union. On 21 October 1945, Ho sent an official note to the Soviet government, affirming the status of an independent nation that had started “the national construction in line with the UN charter” and condemning the French for violating the peaceful treaties signed by the UN. Thereafter, Ho sent other official notes to the government of [the Nationalist] China, the US, and Britain, appealing for their help in “stopping French invasion” and “presenting the Indochinese issue before the UN” (Lien and Hong, 2005: 265).

However, two main factors blocked Ho’s DRV to move ahead on the way to seek diplomatic recognition. Firstly, though the Cold War was at that time still centered on Eastern Europe, it had significant impacts on the DRV. In the wake of the increasing influence of the Soviet Union (USSR) in Europe, in March 1946, Britain’s Prime Minister Churchill called for cooperation among Western countries and especially the US, to deter the expansion of the USSR, marking the arrival of the Cold War. On the one hand, this drew the attention of the Soviet Union, the main ally of the DRV later on, to East Europe; thus the former saw little interest in the Vietnamese revolution, not to mention that Moscow doubted the “identity” of Ho given his thought on national liberation revolution. On the other hand, the competition in Europe worried the West about the nationalist movements led by the Communists in Asia, which threatened the interests and privileges of colonial powers, particularly Britain and France.

Secondly, the fact that Ho was a Comintern veteran gave the French colonialists a very good excuse to retake power in Indochina and denounce the legitimacy of the Viet Minh and the DRV, which could be seen as an acute threat to the interests and privileges of the French empire. While French colonialists accused that Ho did not want to negotiate with France for a future of Vietnam because he was a Communist and “pursuing another policy”<sup>1</sup>, an accusation which is very much alike that used by the US in the Vietnam War, Washington also questioned the identity of the DRV. The US Secretary of State General George C. Marshall remarked, “We cannot lose sight [of the] fact that Ho Chi Minh has direct Communist connections and it should be obvious that

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<sup>1</sup> The French socialist Oreste Rosenfeld said in the Assembly of the French Union: “It is said that ‘Ho Chi Minh’ is a communist’. I know it, I don’t doubt it; but he is at the head of an important faction of the Vietnamese people. If we can come to an understanding with him to end the war, what importance has it for us that he is a communist?...If you are so certain that Ho Chi Minh does not want to negotiate with us, you have to force him back to the wall... You will be able to address yourself to the Vietnamese people and say to them: we have given you satisfaction in all your national demands; Ho Chi Minh does not want to negotiate because he is a Communist, because he is pursuing another policy” (cited in Hammer, 1968: 237)

we are not interested in seeing colonial empires and administrators supplanted by philosophy and political organizations emanating from and controlled by Kremlin” (cited in Duiker. 2000: 404). When tension between the Viet Minh and the French force happened, the US Consul in Saigon warned Washington that if the Viet Minh drove the French out of Cochin China, Cambodia and Laos would be under direct threat from the menace of international communism (Duiker. 1995: 60).

Inside Vietnam, according to the party source, the DRV at the same time had to face serious external and internal “enemies” during the period of 1945-1946. Under the Potsdam Agreement, in late August 1945, just several days after the “19<sup>th</sup> August Revolution”, around 20,000 strong Nationalist Army entered the North Vietnam with the policy of “putting an end to the Communists, arresting Ho”, binging with them members of the Kuomintang-affiliated Vietnam Nationalist Party (Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang or “Viet quoc”) and the Vietnam Revolutionary League (Vietnam Cach Mang Dong Minh Hoi or “Viet cach”)<sup>2</sup>. From the 16<sup>th</sup> parallel southwards, British troops supported the French to occupy Saigon and expand their control to South Vietnam (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training. 2006: 150-151).

Right after getting rid of the Chinese Nationalist troop and reached agreements with France in a move called “peace in order to advance”<sup>3</sup>, Vietnam was on the brink of war with the latter in the wake of the French troop’s return to the North. A month after the 14 September 1946 Modus Vivendi was signed between the DRV and France, the French set up a customs agency in Haiphong without Hanoi’s approval, as Thierry d’Argenlieu instructed his subordinates to draw up plans for a coup de force. On 23 November, the French forcibly took control of Haiphong, an important northern port city, Langson, a northern province bordered with China, and Danang, an important central port city. On 16 December 1946, the French commanders met to discuss the plan to occupy Hanoi, issuing an ultimatum to the DRV to accept their demands to disarm by

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<sup>2</sup> The two parties had established their own provincial governments in several Northern provinces with the backing of the Kuomintang and asked for more privileges in the Assembly and the government. Nguyen Hai Than, a septuagenarian but still a leading member of the Viet Cach, had been attacked the government, which he described as “Ho and his gang of cutthroats”, for its willingness to compromise with the French. Also convinced that the Chinese would ultimately be forced to support them, nationalists like Vu Hong Khanh (Viet Quoc) adopted a hard line in talks with the Viet Minh (Duiker. 2000: 338).

<sup>3</sup> To deal with external and internal pressures, Ho accepted to make certain concessions to the French as well as Chinese Nationalists in order to have the DRV recognized, to have time to consolidate the new administration and prepare for the resistance. While he opened talks with the French (Jean Saindeny), Ho counseled his colleagues to be patient and advised Viet Minh leaders in the south to adopt guerrilla tactics until he could find other ways to bring the conflict to an end (Duiker. 1995: 56).

20 December 1946. Impossible to give more concessions since doing so would mean to formally give up the national independence, at 8pm on 19 December 1946, Ho Chi Minh, on behalf of the government, declared the national resistance against the French. “We would rather sacrifice everything than become slaves again”. The war broke out. As a result, the headquarters of the resistance had to move to the war zone of Viet Bac.

Unsurprisingly, in the wake of the war whose result could decide the fate of the DRV and its newly gained independence, the uppermost task of the ICP and the Viet Minh was national liberation. This was clearly defined on 25 November 1945 in a party directive named “National Resistance and Construction” which pointed out that the Indochinese revolution was “currently a national liberation revolution” with the slogan of “the nation first; the country first” (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training. 2006: 153) – a policy and a slogan that reflected Ho’s thought on the Vietnamese revolution presented in his 1930 “Brief Platform” and “Brief Policy” for the Vietnamese Communist Party. In the wake of the war against France at the end of 1946, Ho pointed out, “In order to bring the resistance to victory, it is necessary to put into play the strength of the nation and the international solidarity, of which the national strength is the overriding force; to combine military, political and diplomatic factors, of which military and political factors are the overriding forces” (cited in Ly. 2005: 114).

In order to fulfill this task, Ho Chi Minh’s DRV, inheriting an empty treasure left by the colonial regime, facing acute famine and epidemic diseases, owning an army that had just been formed by gathering guerrilla groups and para-militias who were very poorly armed and trained, and earning no international recognition, particularly singled out two strategies. Firstly, it was necessary to call for support and assistance from the international community, first and foremost from super powers and from countries that newly gained independence and were therefore likely to sympathize with the national liberation cause of the Vietnamese. Secondly, more than ever every resource of the country needed to be mobilized for the resistance against a much more powerful enemy, i.e. French colonialist. Ideologically, these policies reflected Ho’s causal beliefs on people’s power and solidarity, and on the need to maximize friends and minimize foes.

From his international experiences, for Ho Chi Minh, besides the defense, diplomacy was an indispensable factor for an independent state. Accordingly, Ho and other party leaders pointed out that the main diplomatic task of the DRV was to “accede to the UN, to do utmost to make the international community know about the DRV”, to “strengthen the international propaganda in various forms to gain support for the

resistance from anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist movements...to take advantage of divergence of interest among hostile forces to Indochina, especially among the US, Chang [Kai-shek's China] and France to split them and restrain their plan to expand the war...to unite with Laos, Cambodia, and to be friendly with peoples of China, *Siam*<sup>4</sup>, Myanmar and peoples worldwide who love democracy and peace” (Ly. 2005: 93, 117).

As a result, on the diplomatic front, the Vietnamese president, while trying his best to reach acceptable agreements with France, paid considerable attention to establishing links with other super powers as well as Asian countries in order to call for assistance and support for the DRV and for a peaceful solution for Vietnam independence.

On 18 February 1946, Ho Chi Minh sent an official note to the governments of the US, China, the Soviet Union and Britain, claiming that the French colonialists in Indochina had betrayed the Allies by cooperating with the Japanese during WWII, informing them of the struggle for independence of the Vietnamese people as well as the famine in Vietnam, and asking for their help in addressing the Indochinese issue to the UN. On 26 February 1946, the Vietnamese president sent a letter to Truman to criticize “French invasion”, asking the US to accept the independence of Vietnam. “We request the US, in a capacity as the vanguard of the international justice, to take a decisive step to support our independence” (cited in Lien and Hong. 2005: 292). After this, through radio, Ho sent messages to the US, China, the Soviet Union and Britain, asking for the intervention of the four powers in Vietnam and for their initiative in presenting the Indochinese issue to the UN. Before wrapping up his visit in France, the Vietnamese president visited the US embassy in Paris on 11 September 1946, appealing to cooperate with the US. Though Ho stopped sending letters to the US by March 1946, under his direction, Vietnamese officials continued maintaining links with the US through the US delegation in Bangkok.

In Asia, the Vietnamese president tried to take advantage of the decolonization context in India and Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, to call for support and sympathy to the DRV. Days after the French takeover of Saigon in September 1945, Ho told Archimedes Patti, an OSS officer, that he had given thought to the necessity of forming a “pan-Asiatic community” consisting of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Malaya, Greater Burma (including Bengal), India, Indonesia and the Philippines. In

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<sup>4</sup> Italized by the researcher

Ho's view, these nations would promote "political and economic programs for the common good" and "live in peaceful coexistence with the US, Great Britain, and France" (Goscha. 199: 244).

On the way to France in 1946, Ho Chi Minh stopped over in Myanmar, India, Pakistan, Iraq, Egypt, and Algeria. In Rangoon, he announced publicly that the DRV supported Nehru's call for a pan-Asian conference. In January 1947, Ho sent letters to the leaders of nationalist China, India and Myanmar, denouncing French attempts to disrupt peace in the region and calling for closer collaboration against colonialism. He also wrote a letter to Nehru calling for closer cooperation between the two countries in their bid for full independence. In April 1947, Ho sent Nguyen Duc Thuy, one of the Directors of the Bureau of Chinese Affairs in the Foreign Ministry and Chief of the DRV's External Trade Committee, on a high-level mission to China to win over Kuomintang diplomatic and material support (Goscha. 1999: 249-250).

In January 1947, Ho sent telegrams to Asian leaders to call for their assistance and support for the Vietnamese resistance. "Dear Asian brothers. Let help Vietnamese brothers in their fight for independence and unification" (cited in The Ho Chi Minh Museum. 2005: 48). In a letter to Asian peoples in June 1947, the Vietnamese president appealed, "Dear Asian brothers!...Vietnam is one important part of the great Asian family. To fight for independence and freedom of Vietnam is also to fight for independence and freedom of the great Asian family. You brothers have sided with us before. From now on, [I] hope you brothers foster your support. With your assistance and support, our resistance will certainly win" (cited in the Ho Chi Minh Museum. 2005: 135-136). These efforts more or less paid off. At the Inter-Asian conference in New Delhi on 23 March 1947, which was participated by candidates from various Asian countries, including Thailand, "considerable sympathy and admiration were expressed by delegates from various countries for the struggles for freedom now going on, particularly in Indonesia and Vietnam" (Goscha. 1999: 252).

At the same time, Ho Chi Minh favored an open foreign policy which stated that "The DRV is willing to establish cooperative and friendship relations with any country on the principle of respecting each other's sovereignty and integrity..." (Ly. 2005: 75). In *The Appeal* to the UN in 1946, the Vietnamese president (cited in Ly. 2005) expressed the foreign policy of the DRV as follows:

1. With reference to Laos and Cambodia, Vietnam respects their independence and wishes to cooperate on the basis of absolute equality.

2. With reference to democratic countries, Vietnam is willing to carry out the policy of open policy and cooperation in every aspect:
  - a. Vietnam facilitates investments from foreign capitalists and technicians in every technical and technological sector.
  - b. Vietnam is willing to open its all ports, airports, and roads for international trade and transit.
  - c. Vietnam is willing to accede to every international organization under the leadership of the UN.
  - d. Vietnam is willing to sign special security agreements and concerned treaties with armies and navies in the UN framework.

Obviously, not only was Ho emphasizing respect for other countries' sovereignty and integrity, but he also put the DRV's policy towards Laos and Cambodia before that towards other countries intentionally to clear the allegation of the ICP's aim of turning Indochina into a communist federal, which undoubtedly raised concerns among the West. This policy clearly reflected Ho's thought on national fundamental rights. Moreover, it served to back up his idea on a "pan-Asiatic community". In particular, the policy announcement must have had impacts on the Thai elite, especially the conservatives who were definitely concerned about the creation of either a French Indochina or a Communist Indochinese Federation, to voice their support for anti-French movements of the Viet Minh.

In order to call for support from the international community as well as to mobilize an all-out preparation for the resistance against the French, and not least to circumvent damages to the party likely to be caused by possible attacks from Chinese Nationalist forces, Ho Chi Minh saw an overriding need of emphasizing the independence cause rather than a socialist one. Ideologically, this time his ideas on the relationship between principles and tactics were employed. Accordingly, Ho himself kept his Comintern biography closed. Giving interviews to foreign correspondents from 1945-1949, Ho avoided directly accepting that he was a Communist and portrayed the DRV as a broad-based government<sup>5</sup> and the Viet Minh front as "a broad-based movement armed with a program that could appeal to all progressive and patriotic

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<sup>5</sup> Answering the question as to whether Ho was a Communist, Ho said: "Everyone has right to studying a doctrine. For my part, I have studied Marxism. 2000 years ago, Jesus Christ said we had to love our enemies. This hitherto has not been able to be carried out. As for the issue of when Marxism can be realized, I cannot have an answer. In order to realize communism, it is necessary to have technology, agriculture and everyone can develop their full ability. In my country, these conditions are still far from being achieved" (*Cuu Quoc*, No292, 15 July 1947). In another interview, Ho responded: "Reactionary French colonialists, especially Admiral D'Argenlieu, propagated that we are communists, fascists, imperialists, pro-Japan, anti-foreigners and so on. There is nothing surprising about this since they do not like us. But we are sure that people in the world will not believe them, because firstly the Vietnamese government has the participation of members of different parties and of non-party people; and secondly Vietnam's policy is very clear: to make Vietnam become an independent and unified country, to make the people enjoy freedom and get rid of poverty and suffering" (cited in Lam and Chau. 2005: 55).



forces” (Duiker. 2000: 344). In his words, “...firstly the Vietnamese government has the participation of members of different parties and of non-party people; and secondly Vietnam’s policy is very clear: to make Vietnam become an independent and unified country, to have the people enjoy freedom and get rid of poverty and suffering” (cited in Lam and Chau. 2005: 55). In his meeting with Abbot Low Moffat, chief of the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs, Department of State, on 3 December 1946, Ho tried to reassure his guest that his main objective was independence. He also repeated his earlier offer for a US naval base at Cam Ranh Bay as an inducement for US support (Duiker. 2000: 390).

From this vantage point, the ICP was dissolved on paper on November 11, 1945. Mentioning about the party, Ho said: “If [we] need a party, it will be the Vietnamese National Party. The sole objective of the party would be to make Vietnam become a full independent country. Its members would be all Vietnamese people, except traitors and embezzlers” (*Cuu Quoc*, No147, 21 January 1946). In May 1946, in order to prove the mass based characteristic of the resistance as well as to unite more Vietnamese people of different backgrounds and ideologies for the national liberation cause, the National United Vietnam or Lien Viet was established following the suggestion of Ho. The front would then consist of Vietnamese individuals as well as organizations that had not been members of the Viet Minh, which was at that time well known as a Communist led front.

Moreover, Ho tactically made concessions to the Kuomintang affiliated Viet Quoc and Viet Cach to participate in the Assembly, without being elected, and in the government. After the 6 January 1946 election, the Viet Quoc was granted fifty seats and the Viet Cach twenty seats in the assembly. The cabinet was composed of two members of the Viet Minh front, along with two each from the Viet Quoc, the Democratic Party, Viet Cach and two independents. In March 1947, Ho appointed Hoang Minh Giam, a moderate, as the foreign minister. In August 1947, he dropped reputed hard-liners like Ton Duc Thang and Vo Nguyen Giap from the ministries of interior and national defence and replacing them with moderates. These tactics paid off. Addressing before the Kuomintang’s Central Committee Meeting in October 1946, General Xiao Wen, one of the two Kuomintang generals who were charged with disarming the Japanese troops in Vietnam, expressed, “Everyone regards Ho as a Communist, and his government is a symbol of a Communist regime. In fact it is not the

case. The Viet Minh is one of Vietnamese revolutionary organizations and was set up before [the establishment of the DRV]) (cited in Huan. 2005: 90-91).

It is noteworthy that in order to realize these policies and tactics, in particular cases Ho Chi Minh had to use his charisma to convince his hot headed colleagues of the rationale of his moves. Explaining the reason why he negotiated with the party's bitter rivals, i.e. the Viet Quoc and the Viet Cach, Ho assured his comrades that it was for tactical purposes only. "By themselves, they [counterrevolutionary elements] are nothing to fear, but they have masters. To accomplish a big task, we must know how to look ahead" (cited in Duiker. 2000: 349). When some of his colleagues questioned the decision to guarantee seventy seats to the opposition, affirming that the difference between the Viet Minh and their rivals was like that between fire and water, the president concurred, but pointed out that if water was placed over fire, it would boil and could then be drunk safely (Duiker. 2000: 352). Highlighting the need to reach an agreement with the French to drive out the Chinese Nationalists amidst disparate opinions among the Standing Committee, Ho remarked, "Can't you understand what would happen if the Chinese stayed? You are forgetting our past history. Whenever the Chinese came, they stayed for a thousand years. The French, on the other hand, can stay for only a short time. Eventually, they will have to leave". "The problem now is not whether we wish to fight. The problem is to know ourselves and know others, to realize objectively all conditions which are favorable and unfavorable in the country and abroad, and then to advocate correctly" (Duiker. 2000: 361).

#### **The DRV's Thailand policy**

Unquestionably, the DRV's policy towards Thailand was reflected in the DRV's foreign policy and the pan-Asian idea with the aim of appealing for assistance and support for the national independence and the resistance against the French. The foreign policy statement, which was released on 3 October 1945 and which was believed to be drafted by Ho, stated that "Vietnam friendly and sincerely wants to cooperate with big countries on the basis of equality and mutual assistance" and "Vietnam wishes to have cooperative and equal relations with neighboring countries" (cited in Ly. 205: 110-111). In the wake of the war against France at the end of 1946, the Vietnamese president pointed out, "The foreign policy of our party at this time is...to unite with the peoples of

Laos and Cambodia; to be friendly with the peoples of China, *Siam*<sup>6</sup>, Myanmar, India, and the peoples who love democracy and peace in the world” (Ly. 2005: 114). He also emphasized, “Our objective is to gain freedom and independence. Being our friends at this moment are any countries, any peoples or forces in the world who support the objective...Therefore, our best external friends are colonized and semi-colonized peoples who are fighting for independence and freedom...” (2005: 115). As a result, in the 22 December 1946 Resistance Program of the party, importance was attached to the need to link up with the Cambodians and Laotians, and to establish closer relations with the Chinese, Siamese, Indians, Burmese and Indonesians (Goscha. 1999: 247).

Here it is noteworthy that Thailand under the leadership of the Seri Thai’s progressive faction led by Pridi-Isan leaders was undoubtedly considered by the ICP a progressive country that “loves democracy and peace”. Moreover, immediately after Phibun took power, Thailand was still seen as a friendly force to Vietnam’s national liberation cause. Ho, giving an interview to the Thai journalist Nai Utthon Polkul of *The Praxa Thipatay* on 2 September 1949<sup>7</sup>, contended that “Vietnam must always stay close to Thailand and Thailand to Vietnam, because we are neighbors and kin” (*Cuu Quoc*, No1375, 19 October 1949). He also did not forget to express his gratitude to the Thai government and people for helping the Viet Kieu.

In particular, Thailand during the 1940s played a strategic role in the Vietnamese revolution. Being the sole country in the region that was not officially colonized, bearing unfriendly attitudes towards the French, and housing diplomatic delegations from most Western nations after the war, Thailand was important to the DRV in two respects. Firstly, given that the DRV was by and large encircled by the French, Thailand with its favorable political and geography conditions would provide the DRV opportunities to open access to international and regional communities as well as war material supply for the resistance. The importance of Thailand to the DRV can be inferred through Goscha’s assessment of the political and security conditions of the DRV.

“Throughout 1946, the security of the Hanoi-based DRV government and resistance forces located below the 16<sup>th</sup> parallel was coming under increased pressure as the French expanded their military control over large parts of southern Trung Bo [central Vietnam] and much of Nam Bo [Southern Vietnam]. To the southwest, Vietnamese leaders faced the French reoccupation of

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<sup>6</sup> Italized by the researcher

<sup>7</sup> Utthon Polkul sent Ho an interview letter. Ho typed the answers by himself (Lam and Chau.

Cambodia and southern Laos. To the east, the French Navy was increasing its presence along the Vietnamese coast and in the Gulf of Tonkin. To the northwest, the decision by Chungking to allow around 2000 French troops to cross into northern Laos and northern Bac Bo [Northern Vietnam] in early February rekindled fears of a French attack from that direction...It was clear to Vietnamese leaders at the outset of 1946 that Vietnam was increasingly encircled by the French and isolated from both the region and the world" (1999: 237)

Moreover, the Northeast of Thailand was currently home of a considerable number of Vietnamese patriots among whom the ICP had built up a wide revolutionary network. Not only could these Vietnamese play an important role in assisting DRV's officials working in Thailand and ensuring transportation of war materials to Vietnam, they also formed bases to back up revolutionary activities in Laos and Cambodia, which were militarily seen as important western flanks of the DRV in the context of the French return to Indochina.

None of these factors were lost sights of by Ho Chi Minh and other DRV leaders. As early as 1946, Nguyen Duc Quy and Pham Ngoc Thach were sent to Bangkok to establish a Vietnamese representative office of the DRV (Phai Vien Quan) in order to carry out the task set up by Ho and the ICP – "To do utmost to make the international community know about the DRV" (Ly. 2005: 117). According to Goscha (1999: 236), Ho had first selected Nguyen Duc Quy, who was fluent in Thai and proficient in Chinese, English and French, during the Tan Trao Conference a year earlier. Thach was Ho's trusted adviser and later his personal doctor. In their "mission" to Thailand, Thach acted as the DRV's Under-Secretary of State. Upon arriving in Bangkok, Thach forwarded a DRV's official letter to Pridi and discussed the matter of establishing a delegation<sup>8</sup>. Though the Thai did not officially recognize the DRV, Pridi agreed to allow the Vietnamese to set up their delegation in Bangkok. The delegation was charged with consolidating relations with the Seri Thai government and at the same time acting as "a front station to expand diplomatic activities to countries in different regions in the world, especially in Southeast Asia and South Asia" (Ly. 2005: 118).

From 1947-1949, from the legation in Bangkok, ten news agency offices were set up in Paris, New York, London, Bangkok, Rangoon, Singapore, Hong Kong, New Zealand, New Delhi, Zurich. Particularly the legations in Bangkok and Rangoon, which was opened in February 1948, played a crucial role in gathering information to report to

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<sup>8</sup> According to Goscha (1999: 236), it was Ho's letter to Pridi. However, Ly (2005: 118) mentioned about an official letter signed by acting president Hung Thuc Khang on 7 July 1946 that was handed by the Phai Vien Quan. Given the contemporary situation of the DRV at that time, the latter source was probably more credible.

Vietnam and bring information about the Vietnamese resistance to the world. The Bangkok delegation, as Goscha (1999: 241) points out, acted as an important link for DRV leaders to the international press. "Press conferences were arranged regularly by the delegation for the representatives of the different consulates and legations in Bangkok. This sort of publicity could only help the DRV's drive for international recognition...On numerous occasions, the delegation relayed questions to Ho Chi Minh from foreign journalists and made press statements according to government instructions". Also through operations of these legations, hundreds of tons of weapons and supplies were transported via the sea routes as well as ground routes to war zones in the southern and central areas, as well as to Cambodia and Laos.

It is worth noting that Bangkok at that time provided the DRV with opportunities to gain access to big powers through relevant delegations, especially the US Embassy. In April 1947, Pham Ngoc Thach, the DRV's under-Secretary of State and Ho's trusted adviser, contacted several American businessmen living in Thailand, as well as Lieutenant Colonel William Law, the assistant military attaché at the US Embassy in Bangkok. Talking with Law, Thach emphasized the broad and non-partisan character of the Vietnamese government, and its commitment to national goals rather than those of development of social revolution. Its economic program would "favor the development of capitalist autonomy and call on foreign capital for the reconstruction of the country" (Duiker. 2000: 403-405). Shortly after, Thach submitted an appeal to representatives of the US business community in Thailand, offering economic concessions in return for various types of agricultural and industrial equipment as well as rehabilitation loans. Though these efforts were of no avail since the US, and even the Soviet Union, as Goscha (1999: 246) notes, "balked an idea of risking French support in Europe by supporting the DRV's case too strongly against the French in the UN", it helped to mitigate the impression of the West about the "identity" of Ho and the DRV, which probably more or less had impacts on the Thai elite's perception of Ho.

As well as to the West and other Asia countries, access to Southeast Asian nations was high on the DRV's agendas in Thailand. By attempting to establish links with regional countries which were also colonies, the DRV hoped to add weight to their revolution and to seek political and economic assistance. Amidst Ho's efforts to call for pan-Asian spirit following the initiative of Nehru, in early 1947, the DRV representatives in Thailand started campaigning for a formation of a Southeast Asian bloc. Goscha (1999: 258-261) points out that on 1 January 1947, representatives from

the DRV, Free Khmer (Khmer Issara) and Free Lao (Lao Issara) held a meeting in Bangkok to discuss the formation of a Southeast Asian Federation which consisted of Thailand, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. From April 1947, Vietnamese representatives began pressing the Thais to take the lead in forming a Southeast Asian bloc, leading to the formation of the "Southeast Asian League" in Bangkok in September 1947. DRV diplomats also decided to use the "Mixed Commission" to contact the US and the UN in their bid to stop the French on the international level (Goscha. 1999: 248).

Also through the Bangkok delegation, the Viet Kieu in Thailand were linked closer to the Vietnamese resistance. Sometime in 1946 or 1947, in a move designed to expand the Viet Minh's holding over the Vietnamese communities in all of Thailand, the Viet Kieu National Salvation Association was dissolved to form a larger one, the Viet Kieu Assistance Association of Siam. Though being busy as the head of state and foreign minister, Ho still spent time to communicate with his compatriots, including overseas Vietnamese. In a greeting letter particularly to the Viet Kieu in Thailand on the occasion of the 1946 traditional new year, Ho remarks "Now we have regained the authority, compatriots in Siam also enthusiastically support the [national] independence and our resistance in the South. The year 1946 will be the year that our people have to resolutely fight for total independence. I hope our compatriots in Siam in the new year will readily and strongly contribute to the national salvation together with the compatriots in Vietnam and in other countries. I wish our compatriots in Siam a happy new year and could overcome every difficulty to effectively make contribution to the national independence" (*Cuu Quoc*, No131, 2 January 1946).

In the wake of the November 1947 coup, after considering the situation in Thailand, Ho Chi Minh sent Hoang Van Hoan, a party Central Committee member, to the country to direct the operation of the Viet Kieu organizations. According to Hoan, Thailand was so important to the party at this point that Ho made Hoan the "Special representative of the ICP's central committee" to Thailand and empowered him to administer all affairs relating to work among the Viet Kieu. On the government level, Ho approved documents making Hoan the "special representative of the DRV abroad" (Goscha. 1999: 285).

In brief, during 1945-1948, Ho played a crucial role in the DRV's foreign relations in general and in the DRV's Thailand policy in particular. Unsurprisingly, Ho's views on national liberation revolution and foreign affairs were appealing to many

countries, especially Asian states. Also Ho's external and domestic policies confused many of his opponents about his "true color". Though he was busy in dealing with the French as well as in appealing for assistance and support from big powers, Ho paid a special attention to Thailand as a gate way to access international connections and war material supplies and not least as a foothold to back up the Vietnamese revolution. These, together with other factors, undoubtedly created the background for the Thai governing elite's perception of Ho and the DRV, to which the chapter will now turn.

#### **4.2. A Nationalist Ho Chi Minh and the Seri Thai-Viet Minh relationship**

"...These patriots, who had different political ideologies, sought refuge in Siam. One of them was Nguyen Ai Quoc, who had entered Thailand several times. His name means 'Nguyen The Patriot'...I deeply sympathized with these patriots..." (Pridi. 1986: 85)

In order to understand the Thai ruling elite's perception of Ho Chi Minh, it is worth recalling that the post WWII period saw the rise of the progressive school of the Seri Thai through the parliamentary system. As Sorasak points out (2005), being in the alliance of four Thai elite groups, i.e. the royal family, the aristocracy, the new elite and the local elite led by the Isan leaders, the Seri Thai movement was quickly split after their common goal, i.e. to bring down the military regime led by Phibun, had been realized. Through the parliamentary representative means, the alliance between Pridi's civilian faction and Isan leaders could now hold power and formulate policies in line with their backgrounds and ideologies.

By mid 1944, when the war situation changed to the advantages of the Allies, Phibun's regime had been weakened. As a result, Seri Thai's conservative faction, i.e. the royalists and the aristocracy, cooperated with the progressive, i.e. Pridi's civilian faction and Isan leaders, to bring Phibun down. Anticipating the possibility that the Regency Council might reject his resignation or accept it but reappoint him, Phibun submitted his resignation to the latter on July 24. To Phibun's disappointment, his resignation was quickly approved and Khuang Aphaiwong was appointed to replace him on August 1<sup>st</sup> 1944. According to Sorasak (2005: 487-488), Khuang was a son of a royal governor and turned revolutionary, but his subsequent political tendency was different from that of Pridi. After the war ended, Khuang entirely reserved his position and linked himself to a group of royalist-conservatives led by M.R. Seni and M.R. Kukrit. Khuang was succeeded by Thawi Bunyaket and then M.R. Seni, the leader of the Seri Thai in the US.

The appointment of Khuang and then Seni Pramoj, however, only saw a short reign of the royalists in power. The 1946 elections saw the victory of the progressive Seri Thai. In other words, it was the victory of Pridi's parties, i.e. the Cooperative Party which was participated by Isan leaders led by Tiang Sirikhan, and the Constitutional Front Party whose membership was drawn from members of Pridi's civilian faction led by Rear Admiral Thawal Thamrong Navaswadhi, one of Pridi's closest associates, over the Democrat Party led by Khuang<sup>9</sup>. Though Pridi had to resign from the premiership post due to groundless attacks on his role in the mysterious death of King Ananda launched by the royalists-conservatives, basically the progressive Seri Thai held parliamentary and governmental power with Thamrong as prime minister.

Like in Vietnam which saw the significant role of Ho Chi Minh in shaping the DRV's policies, Thailand's external and domestic policies were considerably influenced by Pridi, the leader of the Seri Thai movement inside Thailand. According to Nuechterlein (1965: 94), for 2 years following the collapse of Japan in 1945, Thai foreign policy was largely determined by Pridi who "had very definite ideas about the role that Thailand should play in Southeast Asian affairs". As Pasuk Phongpaichit and Christ Baker point out in their introduction for a translated book on Pridi's selected writings (2000), Pridi belonged to the same political generation as Jawaharlal Nehru, Soekarno, Ho Chi Minh, Aung San, and other anti-colonial nationalists of the inter-war period. They all emerged in the same political and intellectual context and shared many of the same ideas on law, constitution, parliament, education, and the potential of the state.

According to Pasuk and Baker, Pridi's ideas were reflected in six aspects. First, the Seri Thai leader attached importance to establishing law based on rights as the foundation for an equitable and efficient society. Second, he saw the constitution as the foundation of all other laws, and as the political weapon to fight against the concept of the supremacy of the ruler's will, and against the privileges and exclusions which resulted. Third, he believed the bureaucratic state had the potential to be the motor of "progress" in all forms through its ability to contrive a more rational organization of society. Forth, Pridi advocated a parliamentary representative system. Fifth, he believed

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<sup>9</sup> Officially born in May 1946, the Democrat party was composed of three powerful conservative factions: the royalists, the aristocrats, and Khuang's group. The Democrat party supported capitalism and relatively conservative democracy whilst protecting the landed interests. Most of the Democrat leaders held large tracts of land, enjoyed ties with royalty and hoped to restore the power and prestige of the monarchy (Sorasak. 2005: 490).



in the perfectibility of human beings and paid special attention to education. Finally, he had an overriding belief in the nation.

These ideas to a great extent represented the worldview, principled beliefs and causal beliefs of the progressive Seri Thai. While they based their thought on a Constitutional monarchy, they advocated an elective parliament, economic well being, equal rights and equality before law, and social welfare. Moreover, the progressive Seri Thai leaders, especially Pridi, Thongin and Tiang, held anti-colonialism sentiment. Like Ho, Pridi also hoped to see an end to European colonialism in the region. He believed in the trend of independence in the region and prospect of Southeast Asian solidarity. As the Seri Thai leader recalled decades later, "After the Japanese had surrendered, the former Western colonial powers returned to rule their former colonies. However, upon returning they had to confront resistance movements led by nationalists in those formerly colonized countries. A certain number of these nationalists came to Thailand in order to ask for assistance from us. From the discussions I had with these nationalists, we came to the view that every country in Southeast Asia would soon have its independence" (cited in Goscha. 1999: 240). On his own account, Pridi remarked, "I hope that when these people [Indochinese nationalists] had regained their independence, we could work closely with them. Then there would be solidarity among the nations of Southeast Asia" (*Bangkok Post*, 28 April 1974).

Unsurprisingly, under the leadership of Pridi-Isan leaders alliance, the Thai government adopted progressive policies. Domestically, the Pridi-Isan leaders alliance favored socialist leaning policies – socialism consisting of all types of "socialists, social democrats and agrarian reformists supporting socioeconomic reform for rural people and the new regime to a full democratic system at both local and national levels" (Sorosak. 2005: 357). It was reflected through the 1946 constitution whose provisions removed many of the institutional mechanisms by which the armed forces and bureaucracy had dominated politics for fourteen years.

Moreover, the ideology of the Pridi-Isan leaders alliance favored friendly interactions between the Seri Thai government and the Thai Communists. Commenting on the Thai military government's anti-Communist policy in an interview in 1974, Pridi said, "...Communism is given different interpretations by different people. The anti-communist act was drafted by people who know nothing about Communism. I have seen some reports of what some Cabinet ministers said about Communism. One minister was quoted by the Press saying Communism is an ideology that destroys

monarchies. If that definition is held to be true, then General Washington could be called a Communist..." (*Bangkok Post*, 28 April 1974).

Inaugurated in December 1942, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) committed to a policy to drive out the "Japanese bandits" and promote democracy. In 1944, the CPT cooperated with the parallel movement of the Seri Thai, and engaged in a few skirmishes before the war ended. In the post-WWII context, the party was able to work in open. During Seri Thai's era after the war, the CPT was active in working through parliament and trade unions. Using their link with the progressive Seri Thai, the communists, as Pasuk and Baker (2005: 181) note, succeeded in gaining repeal of the Anti-Communist Law in October 1946.

Externally, the leaders of the progressive school "capitalized on the pro-regional national movement sentiments, communist or not, against both the Japanese and Western camps" (Sorosak. 2005: 355). Accordingly, the Thai governing elite supported the idea of forming a regional organization to oppose the re-imposition of European colonialism. In an interview in 1974, Pridi, on his exile in China, revealed, "Because we peoples of Southeast Asia have different languages, religions, we should begin our operation not through state organization but through popular organizations. I proposed to set up a league for association of popular organization." (*Bangkok Post*, 28 April 1974). Consequently, on 8 September 1947, the "Southeast Asian League" with the participation of representatives from the DRV, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaya and Indonesia was introduced at the Ratanakosin Hotel. Tiang Sirikhan was elected as President of the Central Executive Committee of the League. Beside the Isan leaders, there were some members of the Cooperative Party involved in the League, namely Sukich, the 1946 senator and MP for Chiang Mai in 1948 and 1951, Dusit Buntham, MP for Prachinburi in 1946.

From the above presented background, the progressive Seri Thai tended to perceive the Viet Minh, like Lao Issara or Khmer Issara, as a nationalist/patriotic movement. Moreover, given Ho's "confusing color" and pragmatic policies, the Thai governing elite saw him as a prominent Vietnamese patriot. Referring to anti-French Indochinese who were operating in Thailand as patriots, Pridi remarked, "These patriots, *who had different political ideologies*<sup>10</sup>, sought refuge in Siam. One of them was Nguyen Ai Quoc who had entered Thailand several times. His name means

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<sup>10</sup> Emphasized by the researcher

‘Nguyen The Patriot’...I deeply sympathized with these patriots...” (Pridi. 1986: 85)<sup>11</sup>. Commenting on Ho Chi Minh’s activities in Siam and the support of the Viet Kieu for Ho’s Viet Minh in an interview given in 1974, Pridi said, “Ho came to Europe working as a cabin boy on a French steamer and then worked as cooking boy in a hotel in England. He worked at many jobs but he always studied. He suffered many hardships but he looked for the best way to help his country” (*Bangkok Post*, 13 January 1974).

More importantly, to the Thai elite, Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh were the representative of the Vietnamese people against French colonialism. That helps to explain why even when the progressive Seri Thai was brought down by the 1947 military coup, various Thai statesmen opposed Phibun’s moves to recognize Bao Dai on grounds that Ho’s DRV was the real representative of the Vietnamese. Leading the opposition, as Goscha points out (1999: 316), was the head of the Democratic Party – Khuang Aphaivong. According to a British report emanating from Bangkok, “There is an appreciable volume of support for Ho Chi Minh among the Siamese. This is based on ardent Asiatic nationalism and dislike of the French as opposed to communism” (cited in Goscha. 1999: 317). The perception significantly contributed to the sympathy and assistance the Thai elite offered to Ho’s Viet Minh.

#### **Seri Thai-Viet Minh relations**

As discussed above, in the context of anti-Colonialism after WWII, to the progressive Seri Thai led government, Ho Chi Minh was a prominent patriot and his Viet Minh was the representative of the Vietnamese people in their fight against the French for national independence. The perception was upheld by the fact that Ho had built up a mass-based anti-French movement, i.e. the Viet Minh, and adopted pragmatic and open foreign policy. As a result, the Thais created favorable conditions for Vietnamese refugees to Thailand; turned blind eyes to Viet Minh activities among the Viet Kieu and assisted the Viet Minh to purchase and transport war supplies from Thailand to Vietnam; and last but not least provided the DRV with opportunities for diplomatic opening in Bangkok.

In the wake of the Franco-Chinese accord signed on 28 February 1946 which opened the way for the French to finish reoccupation of Indochina, in response to the Viet Minh’s appeals, Pridi instructed provincial authorities along the Mekong river to

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<sup>11</sup> Khien (in Thanyathip, Theera and Thanh. 2003: 2) and Goscha (1999: 90) suggest that Pridi met with Ho in Paris. However, this is refuted by Suprida, Pridi’s son. In an interview given to the researcher in Bangkok, Suprida affirmed that his father did not meet Ho in Paris during 1920s.

set up more shelters and to find jobs for the Vietnamese refugees who fled the French attacks in Laos (Goscha. 1999: 155). Tiang Sirikhan, then acting Minister of the Interior, traveled to northeastern Thailand to meet with provincial authorities to concretize the instruction<sup>12</sup>. In the aftermath of the French attacks on Laotian provinces along the Mekong, the Thais were said to provide the refugees with jobs, loans, and land. Also the authorities allowed Viet Minh activists to appoint their own representatives in areas that sheltered a large number of Vietnamese migrants; to form employment headquarters; to assemble openly and to broadcast DRV radio emissions. They even provided the Viet Minh with military intelligence on French positions in western Indochina and Bangkok (Goscha. 1999: 155-156).

Another important sort of assistance from the Seri Thai was to create favorable conditions for the Vietnamese to access weapon and war supplies market in Thailand. As Pridi noted in his memoirs (cited in Goscha. 1999: 188), "At the end of the war, a Vietnamese patriot contacted me to make request for arms. I allocated a certain amount of Seri Thai arms to the Vietnamese and, through Khun Sangwon, the military police were employed to guard the loading of these arms onto a train and oversaw their transportation to the border of Battambang, which at that time was still under Thai administration" (cited in Goscha. 1999: 188)<sup>13</sup>. According to Goscha (1999: 188), to celebrate Ho Chi Minh's "birthday" and to underline Thai sympathy for the DRV's struggle, in 1947 Thai premier Rear-Admiral Luang Thamrong Nawasawat delivered the Vietnamese President a "gift" of 10 Springfield rifles, 10 machine gun pistols and 5 Thompsons at an estimated cost of 40,000 ticals [baht].

The importance of the military assistance was, as Goscha (1999: 189) points out, not lost upon Ho Chi Minh himself. Accordingly, Ho, as Pridi remembered, wrote a letter to the Seri Thai leader to express his gratitude for the Thai assistance. "Ho Chi Minh wrote me a letter thanking me for the arms and their transportation. He said that he had just formed two battalions of patriotic Vietnamese soldiers and would now give them the name: The Battalions of Siam" (Pridi, cited in Goscha. 1999: 189). These Viet

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<sup>12</sup> On November 21, 1945 the Minister of the Interior sent a telegram to the Governor of Nongkhai which stated that "Should Vietnamese, Lao or Cambodian refugees seek refuge in Thailand to escape French oppression, they shall be allowed to enter at their own free will. They shall not be turned back or subject to compulsory payment of fees or alien registration procedure." (Chan. 1960: 11).

<sup>13</sup> Khun Sangwon was Thai Rear Admiral Sangwon Suwannachip. During the war he had been a high-level Seri Thai leader and a close confidant of Pridi in charge of all military police in Bangkok and the head of major naval bases (Goscha. 1999).

Kieu “Siamese battalions” were some of the first and probably the best trained combat units to go into battle in southern Vietnam (Goscha. 1999: 189).

Along with assisting Viet Minh’s revolutionary activities, the Thai government also tacitly supported the DRV to access to international community in Bangkok. Though it did not officially recognize the DRV due to the sensitiveness of the issue<sup>14</sup>, the Thai government allowed the DRV to open its representative office, known as the Representational Office of the DRV (*Phai Vien Quan*), and its news agency (Vietnam News Service – VNS) in Bangkok in early 1946. During 1947-1949, from the legation in Bangkok, other news agency offices were set up in Paris, New York, London, Rangoon, Singapore, Hong Kong, New Zealand, New Delhi, and Zurich.

Moreover, through the Vietnamese delegation and the VNS in Bangkok, the name “Ho Chi Minh” and “Democratic Republic of Vietnam” were introduced to the international community and to the Thais, first to the Thai elite, intellectuals and the Thai press. Also English books on Ho Chi Minh were distributed in Bangkok to bring the patriotic life of the Vietnamese president to readers in Bangkok<sup>15</sup>. As a result, on 18 August 1946, representatives from 20 Thai-based newspapers convened in Bangkok opera house to celebrate the (upcoming) Vietnamese national day (Goscha. 1999: 241). Moreover, the name “the Ho Chi Minh government” was used by the Thai government and the Thai press to refer to the DRV.

From the background, it is noteworthy that even some of the Thai traditional elite also supported Ho’s Viet Minh; prominent among them was Khuang Aphaiwong<sup>16</sup>. However, if the Seri Thai progressive adopted a favorable policy towards the Viet Minh due to not only their unfriendly attitudes towards the French colonialists but also their progressive ideology, the main motive for the royalists’ and conservatives’ support for

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<sup>14</sup> At that time the Thai were involved in tense negotiations with the French over contested Indochinese territories and a related bid to join the UN. The Thai leaders, therefore, would not risk upsetting fragile negotiations with the French by supporting a Vietnamese revolutionary state too overtly (Goscha. 1999: 238).

<sup>15</sup> The information is based on the interview with Khun Suprida Banamyong in Bangkok on 13 November 2007. Also according to Goscha (1999), in 1948 to further familiarize the Thai people with the nationalist struggle in Vietnam, orders were given to translate *The Stories on Life and Activities of President Ho Chi Minh* into English and Thais.

<sup>16</sup> According to Goscha (1999: 240-241), besides establishing close relations with Isan leaders, Nguyen Duc Quy, the DRV representative, also kept contacts with Chamlong Daoruang, then Acting Minister of Commerce; Duen Bunnag, then Minister of Education; Gen Adun Decharat, then Commander-in-Chief of the Thai Armed Forces; Chuang Chawengsak Songkharam, then Minister of the Interior; Khuang Aphaiwong, the leader of the Democrat Party. “Even the young king allegedly granted Quy an audience”.

the Viet Minh stemmed from their antagonism to the French over territorial conflicts which broke out when the latter returned to Indochina. According to Goscha (1999: 188, 194), Khuang's opposition to the creation of French Indochina was significantly attributed to the Aphaiwong family's close ties to western Cambodia and the Cambodia court. As a result, Khuang voiced his support to the Viet Minh. His family and business associates were directly involved in trading with the Viet Minh in foreign exchange, arms and medicines. Khuang's brother, Chavalit, met secretly with the Viet Minh in Samsen in April 1947 to arrange the transport of over a thousand rifles, six machine guns and three Bofors anti-aircraft guns. Khunying Lekha Aphaiwong, Khuang's wife, head of Borisat Souvannaphoum, a trading house, helped the Viet Minh contact leading Thai military traders of the War Veterans' Organization. She, as Goscha points out (1999), was particularly important to the Viet Minh in terms of trading and speculating on a variety of foreign currencies.

#### **4.3. Conclusion**

The immediate post-WWII period saw the increasing trend of anti-colonialism in Asia. The frustration many Asian nationalist leaders held towards the West due to the latter's preference for reconstruction in Europe rather than decolonization in Asia helped more or less to bind them together in an effort to prevent the colonizers from coming back. In Indochina, the return of the French brought the Thais and the Vietnamese together for their common interests – while the Thais clashed with the French over territorial issues, the Vietnamese continued their fight for independence.

Though Southeast Asia was still on the periphery of the Cold War, regional politics was significantly influenced by big powers, who were main players in the confrontation. Unsurprisingly, the "Free World"-Communist conflict gave Britain and France opportunities to suppress and illegalize native progressive forces in their colonies in Southeast Asia. As a result, the main reason that the West employed to deny Ho Chi Minh's appeal for independence and support was that Ho was a Comintern agent and his DRV, therefore, was a Communist entity.

From the background, while the Soviet Union was still preoccupied with political developments in Europe and the Communist Chinese were still fighting the nationalists, Ho, free to lead the Vietnamese revolution along the path he had chosen in line with his ideas without any pressures from Communist powers, adopted a pragmatic approach to foreign as well as domestic policies. Accordingly, Ho tried hard to persuade

the world, especially the US, that the DRV was not a Communist regime but a mass-based government to fight for independence.

With the onset of the war against the French in 1946, Thailand was once again back on the strategic map of the Vietnamese revolution. Being the sole country in the region that could escape from colonization and sharing the same “enemy” – the French, Thailand gave shelter to Vietnamese revolutionaries and patriots, who supported Ho and the DRV. The DRV’s Thailand policy, therefore, did not concern only the Seri Thai government but also Ho’s and other Viet Minh leaders’ calculations as to opening the southwestern gate to the international community, which at that time could be seen as being of much importance to the isolated DRV, accessing arm and war material supplies, and not least mobilizing the Viet Kieu to back up the resistance in Vietnam as well as Vietnamese revolutionary activities in Laos and Cambodia.

Being the head of state who took charge of foreign affairs, unsurprisingly Ho Chi Minh played an important role in the DRV’s Thailand policy. This was at least reflected in three aspects. Firstly, the Vietnamese president had significant influence on formulating the DRV’s diplomatic moves in Bangkok in line with his ideas on foreign policy; i.e. to open links to big powers as well as non-Communist Asian countries, to appeal for the US assistance and support through the US delegation in Bangkok, to campaign for a “pan-Asiatic community”, and to bring the news on the Vietnamese resistance, which was basically sealed off by the French, to the world. Secondly, for important missions which required high officials to implement, in most of the cases Ho himself selected the cadres who would go to Thailand, i.e. Nguyen Duc Quy, Pham Ngoc Thach, Hoang Van Hoan. Last but not least, whenever it was appropriate, Ho himself made friendly impression on the Thai governing elite, i.e. Ho’s letter to Pridi to thank him and the Thai people for their assistance.

Several months after the Viet Minh succeeded in regaining power from the hand of the Japanese and declaring independence, in Thailand the 1946 elections saw the dominance of the progressive Seri Thai over the conservatives in the Assembly. Through the parliamentary system, the Pridi-Isan leaders alliance could now formulate Thailand’s foreign and domestic policies in line with their socialist leaning ideology. As a result, the Seri Thai government under the leadership of Thamrong, one of Pridi’s closest associates, voiced their sympathy to anti-colonial movements in the region. In particular, Thamrong’s government gave invaluable support to Ho’s DRV in their fight against the French.

The context helped to formulate the Thai governing elite's perception of Ho Chi Minh. First, the Cold War was still centered on Europe. Second, the Thais shared with the Vietnamese a common enemy – France. Thai enmity to this European power resulted from Franco-Thai territorial conflicts in the immediate post-WWII period. Third, Ho's foreign and domestic policies were more or less appealing to Asian leaders for a sense of "pan-Asia" and showed a mass-based anti-French movement for independence rather than a Communist cause. Also Ho himself kept his Comintern profile closed and denied that his DRV was a Communist regime. Forth, Thai politics was temporarily dominated by the progressive Seri Thai whose socialist or liberal leaning ideology probably suited Ho's ideas on democracy and people's power. As a result, the Thai elite, including royalists and conservatives, tended to see Ho as a nationalist or a patriot who represented the voice and aspiration of the Vietnamese people.

The perception, together with other factors, helped to explain the sympathy the Thai elite felt towards Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh. Accordingly, not only did the progressive Seri Thai's government extend fruitful assistance to the DRV and the Viet Minh, Thai elite conservatives such as Khuang also gave a useful hand to Ho's forces. With the support, the DRV could open the southwestern gateway to the international community, access arm and war material supplies as well as mobilize the Viet Kieu in Thailand for the national resistance.

Unfortunately, the rise of the progressive led by Pridi-the Isan leaders, who tended to be less monarchy- and less Western-oriented, posed an acute challenge to the interests and privileges of the traditional elite groups/capitalist class represented by the Democrat Party led by Khuang and M.R. Seni. Accordingly, Khuang and the Democrats, losing to the Pridi-led group both in the elections of the senate and of the lower house in 1946, eyed a return to Phibun. As a result, the Democrats backed the military to stage a coup to bring Phibun back to power. The return of the military-royalist alliance was undoubtedly consolidated by the Cold War context coming to Asia in the wake of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the leadership of the Chinese Communists. Consequently, the Thai governing elite, now the royalist-military alliance, changed their perception of Ho Chi Minh and the DRV. This, together with Ho Chi Minh's role in shaping the DRV's Thailand policy in the new context, will be the main theme of the next chapter.