



Dien Bien Phu: strategic mistake or good idea that went wrong? (2)

Earth Thought Notebooks

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Histoire & stratégie

Dien Bien Phu has already been the subject of numerous writings, analyses and publications of all kinds. Following last June's issue 40, the Cahiers are pleased to publish the second part of the remarkable study on this epic battle by Jean-François Daguzan, researcher and assistant director of the Fondation pour la recherche stratégique. Published last year on the Diploweb.com website on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the battle, both a historical fresco and a strategic analysis, this reference text highlights episodes and lessons from the battle that may have never been seen before.

Pendant and after: failures, heroism and illusions

- Tactical Centre of Gravity: The First Three Days and the Failure of Command

The battle was lost between March 13 and 15, 1954.

This is not a question of once again blaming those responsible for the tactical conduct of the battle. Some were blaming Castries when others pointed to Langlais, his overconfident operational assistant, or castigated the whole chain. In any case, the Castries-Langlais-Hanoi-Saigon command continuum makes two major mistakes that will condition the inevitable defeat by not resuming, once the surprise and shock have passed, at all costs the positions lost, especially Beatrice [1], and then Gabrielle and Anne-Marie whose control conditions the maintenance of the runway [2]. In three days Giap destroyed the French centre of gravity which in this case is the defences of the aerodrome and therefore the aerodrome itself. The rest is a matter of heroism. Bigeard, with his obvious tactical genius, could only, later on, help to push back the inevitable. The battle is therefore lost between the ^{first} and ^{third day}. We won't go back over the tactical sequence so often described. The next 77 days will be a slow agony.

As Henri de Brancion put it in an enlightening way, "... if the protection of the runway was a priority for the French, it was, by symmetry, Giap's n°1 objective. In fact, it was put out of use on the first night and could never resume its essential role in the battle, which

completely changed the conditions of the confrontation" [3]. Psychological collapse, bad appreciation of the conduct of the battle? This priority objective disappeared from the French tactical concern on the second day of the battle and sounded the death knell for the entrenched camp. The parachute drops and the sacrifice of "paratroopers for a day" and airmen would only serve to delay the inevitable. On 7 May at 5.30 p.m. the fighting ended by "letting the fire die" in Cogny's words and without a white flag. The camp had not surrendered, it had just stopped fighting. Giap had just won the first Third World battle against a Western force since the 19th century.

- Dreams and illusions

American bombings (from massive raids to atomic bombs!)

The French request or the American proposal to use the atomic bomb to save the entrenched camp was one of the great historical mysteries of the Dien Bien Phu affair [4]. One can only remain circumspect, even skeptical about the idea that some French people - including high-ranking ones - may have had of American intentions. Let us recall that Truman had refused to use nuclear weapons in Korea and dismissed General MacArthur for demanding it. His successor, the President - and General Eisenhower - could hardly be seen to subscribe to this demand "as a matter of urgency" for a matter out of all proportion to the size of Korea. Foreign Minister Georges Bidault, who had gone to Washington to negotiate, swore that it had come from Allen Dulles himself. Did he over-interpret the benevolent words of the American minister? Did he self-intoxicate? Was there an error in translation? We will not know. The "proposal" that would have been endorsed by some military people on both sides and which could also have been supported by the military's own deeds, is a proposal that has not yet been put to the vote. The "proposal", which would have been endorsed by some military personnel on both sides and which could also have been supported by the "go to war" statements of Richard Nixon, then Vice-President, was rejected by the President of the Council, Joseph Lainiel, and ultimately by Bidault himself...[5]. This academic history is nonetheless illustrative of a general state of mind, especially on the French side waiting for a "miracle" that will not come.

On the other hand, a massive bombardment of the Vietnamese positions by the American air force (Operation Vautour) could have unblocked the situation by avoiding surrender. But in the end no one wanted to assume the political and diplomatic consequences that this gesture would have entailed. However, this option came very close to becoming a reality. In the end, it was the opposition of the British (Churchill!), whom Eisenhower had unwisely consulted, that tipped the balance. Moreover, for some diplomats, the direct intervention of the Americans would have internationalized the conflict de facto (forgetting that Russians and Chinese were already "advising" the Vietminh on the ground) [6].

The impossible escape: operations Xenophon, Ariane, Condor, Albatros, Desperado...

In the absence of an evacuation that could have been carried out at the right time with great means, the idea of an "escape" of the able-bodied combatants to the maquis of the rear made its way. Five options were studied. The first of great magnitude, Xenophon, in January 1954 envisaged an evacuation with men and equipment. At the same time a simple evacuation of the troops (Ariane) was studied [7]. 7] The other plans were only severely degraded variants of the second, which planned to evacuate all the troops by road, but in all cases, the magnitude of the necessary means made the command retreat. The other two, Condor and Albatross, were drawn up as the situation worsened in order to

exfiltrate the survivors. The last one was abandoned. Strongly suggested by Cogny, but refuted by Navarre, who would not resolve it until it was too late, the principle was that the mobile groups that were leading the guerrillas in the rear would be able to move in and out of the area. The principle was that the mobile groups which led the guerrilla warfare in the enemy's rear in Laotian country, with the Meos substitutes in particular, should get as close as possible to Dien Bien Phu and receive the "escapees" according to a predefined plan. Captain Sassi, Lieutenant-Colonel Godard (who later distinguished himself differently in Algiers) and Captain Loustau commanded these groups of varied origins [9]. 9] But here again, this hypothesis was a dream. Giap was holding his prey and was not going to let it escape [10]. 10] The "offensive" attempts before the battle itself had all turned short and the evacuation of Laïchau (another support point in the north), whose garrison was supposed to reinforce that of Dien Bien Phu, had ended in a massacre of Thai auxiliaries. The advance detachments of these mobile groups and commandos were content to see the camp burn down and returned home with only a handful of lucky survivors picked up at random.

The politico-strategic centre of gravity: the Geneva conference

The Geneva Conference, which opened on 26 April 1954, changed the nature of the battle. From tactical, it became strategic for the Vietnamese, who saw in the conjunction of dates the miraculous fusion of their objectives. This major "detail" is not seen or does not want to be seen by the French, who lock themselves in the nasse.

In fact, this conference that nobody had put on the international agenda was suggested by France itself on January 25, 1954 at the Berlin conference, thus inaugurating a singular form of diplomatic suicide.

- The underestimation of the result or the "Dark Knight" syndrome

In the British comedians' film "Sacred Grail", the Monty Python, a knight in black armour blocks the path of the two heroes and challenges them to a singular combat. The Black Knight has one arm cut off, gets up and wants to continue the fight. He gets a second arm cut off, and he goes on the attack. Having successively lost all his limbs, the Black Knight jumps on his dismembered trunk (English humour!) and calls the knights who pass by cowards. This parable can sometimes be applied to some generals who refuse to admit defeat, but not only to soldiers: "War is not an autonomous category," says Hervé Guiraud, "and that's what the military sometimes find hard to understand. The purpose of war is to bring about a political situation" [11].... "The strength of character leads us to obstinacy, which is a degeneration of it" recalls Clausewitz [12]. 12] This, however, is what differentiates Churchill in 1940 and Hitler in 1945.

- From tactical to strategic defeat

Losing is almost part of the DNA of war. Uncertainty, the "fog" of which Clausewitz speaks, is one of its major principles - "...the result is never certain, but only probable..." [13]. Napoleon's opponents, over 15 years, will lose almost every battle, except the good one! However, the refusal on the part of some military leaders not to see that an a priori relative tactical defeat actually signals the death knell of a strategic, diplomatic and political disaster, remains a historical constant.

In other words, the defeated soldier blames the political power for having lacked the minimum courage that would have enabled him to prevail over the adversary in the end in a "last little effort" - "I was betrayed by the rear" claimed General Gamelin in June 1940, and General Westmorland in Vietnam a few years later thought he had been deprived of victory by not invading the North. Sometimes the military leader is right, but not always...

Clemenceau certainly said that "he who is victorious is the one who can, a quarter of an hour more than the opponent, believe that he is not defeated". [14]; but it was in the context of a bilateral confrontation that was played on "equal terms" and compatible ways of thinking. In the particular case of the Vietnam wars, as in other asymmetrical conflicts that would follow (including Algeria), it was a matter of the quantitatively weaker adversary bending the will of the other by counting on his psychological weaknesses (accuracy of the cause at the time it was unfolding, public opinion, number of deaths, etc.). In Dien Bien Phu we are therefore at the heart of the Clausewitzian war whose result is to "submit to our will" [15]. [15] But it is also the demonstration of what General Gambiez [16] calls "the indirect style" which "aims at putting the adversary in a state of inferiority by preliminary actions that dislocate him morally and materially, before finishing him by surrender or by battle" [17]. [17] Moreover, the irregular opponent has a major competitive advantage: Defeat in the military sense only plays for one of the partners and not for both, because time is the ally of the guerrillas. Giap could lose the battle, but not Navarre! Thus, two mental conceptions of war confront each other. This process is still incomprehensible to some people today. Yet these are the limits of counter-insurgency and its theories.

- The stake: poker or Russian roulette?

General Navarre will one day say: "I therefore consider that the troops gathered in Dien Bien Phu constitute the "bet" that it was possible and necessary to make for the defence of Upper Laos and to maintain our presence in the Upper region. This "stake" can give considerable results if we win the battle. It could be largely lost if we lose this battle. In any event, Dien Bien Phu will have played the role of fixation abscess and will have made it possible to avoid the general battle of the Delta" [18].

This notion of "stake" is important in strategy. Any general will make a choice engaging his forces and is supposed to calculate at the same time the gain and the risk. "Napoleon played his army in the Russian campaign", notes Raymond Aron, "and he lost his bet; price paid for great hopes" [19]. [19] "Enormous stakes that he voluntarily put on this colossal game, to the gain of which he attached so much price," Clausewitz adds [20]. Engaging in war and battle is thus betting as in poker. But in this affair, Navarre is content to bet a little, while Giap, as they say, goes all in. And that's the difference. By refusing to turn away from his other, albeit secondary, objectives, the General-in-Chief loses everything: the battle and Indochina.

Navarre - an argument that was also taken up by General Catroux - tried to justify his choice and to limit its importance by claiming that in this battle he did not have any other choice. had lost only 5% of the expeditionary force and that it was only a tactical setback that did not call into question the overall defense of Indochina [21]. On a cold analysis of the figures, the general was right [22]. [22] But it was forgetting the psychological shock and the strategic and political dimension of Dien Bien Phu.

As General Beaufre rightly pointed out, "Dien Bien Phu was an episode of 'rational mechanics' in a campaign conducted under the sign of indirect strategy" [23]. [23] Two fundamentally different mental universes were opposed.

In the middle of the Geneva conference, the defeat demonstrated the French inability to hold Indochina and de facto legitimized Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh government. It also gave a decisive argument in France to those who wanted, for whatever reason, to get rid of the Indochinese burden[24]. 24] It was not a marginal tactical defeat; Geneva had turned it into a strategic maelstrom.

The political connection between the conduct of the battle on the Vietminh side and international events seems to be confirmed by General Giap's timing. According to French intelligence (later confirmed by Vietnamese sources) Giap had decided to open the fighting on 25 January. However, he postponed this decision, citing allegedly technical reasons. In reality, the Vietnamese government, very well informed, knows that the Berlin conference is about to begin, in which the Indochinese question will be raised. For Ho Chi Minh, it is thus essential that the battle follow the diplomatic tempo[25].

This coincidence of the battles with the international calendar could explain a tactical mystery. Why did Giap not annihilate the French heavy artillery from the beginning of the battle when, despite its initial weaknesses, it will play a considerable role in delaying the battle?[26]

One hypothesis is that Giap was overwhelmed by his success, as were the Germans who, using poison gas for the first time on the Somme, did not know how to exploit it. Another could be that the Vietminh command decided, sparing him, to make the entrenched camp last so that it would fall just at the time of the conference. By conquering the camp point by point and despite the colossal losses and internal disputes that followed,[27] Giap created the conditions for an epic battle that found its apotheosis at the best political moment. A brutal and untimely defeat might have altered its dimension and impact.

Somehow the two men played poker well. But the political dimension ("the colossal stakes" of Clausewitz) sublimated the Vietnamese game. One didn't want to bet everything; the other did!

- Crime

French and Vietnamese fought fair in this Homeric confrontation. One won, the other lost. Of that there is nothing to say. But it was in the aftermath that the war turned into a war crime. For a strength of 15,090 men on 5 May (which includes parachutes) and notwithstanding the losses of the following two days, the Vietminh thus captured 5,500 able-bodied and 4,500 wounded. 858, the untransportable were returned just after the fall of the camp [28]. 28] When the agreements were signed a few months later, he returned 3,900 of the 10,000 [29]. 29] The others had died of exhaustion in the death march to the camps, then of deprivation and mistreatment - all accompanied by an ideological bludgeoning that would mark the spirits of the survivors for good.

Conclusion: "He who is not clearly aware of his objectives does not know how to respond to the enemy".[31]

"The defeated one meditates on his fate because his defeat is always the result of the errors of thought he must have committed, either before or during the conflict," said General Beaufre [32].

At the moment, the fashion is uchronic [33]. General Ely, who replaced Navarre as commander-in-chief, had once asked the question of victory and its consequences: what if Navarre had won? [34] A little luck; a better defense on the ground; relevant reactions the first three days; the arrival of the Americans, like the cavalry in the Westerns. Like Waterloo, we always redo lost battles. Fuller tells us that "if Napoleon had won ... it is almost certain that the Seventh Coalition would have collapsed. But it would undoubtedly have been followed by an eighth and perhaps a ninth, and finally France would have been defeated" [35]. As for Waterloo, it is not sure that at Dien Bien Phu the victory could have changed much in the great history. Perhaps it would have delayed the loss of Indochina? Not much more. The abandonment of Tonkin and the retreat to the South (envisaged by General Blanc) was emerging as a strategic option and, already, the Americans were pointing their noses at it since they were providing all the financing for the war.

But could we win? The accumulation of tactical and strategic errors inevitably led to failure in the face of the Vietnamese who had the tactical and strategic unity (a political goal, a strategic goal, a tactical plan and the means to achieve it). The conjunction of the goals of war(Zweck) and the goals in war(Ziel) - as identified by Clausewitz - produces a decisive advantage over the one who does not. Hence the French impossibility - both for Navarre and the government - of using the few strategic moments available to get out of the trap. At no time do the French know what they really want! Apart from his personal mistakes, Navarre was merely the expiatory victim of a gangrenous system - as the commission of inquiry readily acknowledged, but in veiled and secret terms. The loneliness of command and the pride of the man alone did the rest.

Obsessed with domestic and European issues, successive governments saw the Indochinese affair as secondary. For the commander-in-chief, Dien Bien Phu was a problem - albeit an important one - among others... [36]

Navarre would later acknowledge that the Geneva conference had changed the nature of the battle. But at the time, he did not draw any concrete conclusions from it [37]. [37] For their part, Giap and Ho Chi Minh will act on the four centers of gravity of the adversary: at the international level, the weakness of the French position; at the national level, the indifference then the hostility of public opinion; at the strategic level, accepting the battle proposed by the French; at the tactical level, paralyzing the airfield. That says it all.

The 18th^{century} Japanese swordsman^{Matsumura} Seisan, sums up the Dien Bien Phu question in an enlightening formula: "When one wins, there are surprising victories; but when one loses, there is no surprising defeat" [38]. Without necessarily having read Clausewitz or perhaps even the Chinese strategists, Giap knew how to use the notion of "che" or "the potential born of the disposition" [39]. [39] The French command brought it to him on a platter. All that remained was to act then on the centers of gravity; which was done with consummate skill. The case of Dien Bien Phu shows that one cannot oppose Sunzi and Clausewitz. Hasty readers take the philosophical reading of the war in Book 1 (duel, ascent to extremes, trinity, unlimited violence) as recipes to be applied on the strategic and tactical field. However, the same flexibility is found in both authors' use. Giap will make a striking demonstration and an implicit synthesis.

In the end, the French went into this affair without doing everything to win it (including on the ground itself) and with a mixture of lightness and morality towards the adversary, whereas the Vietnamese went in doing everything to win it.

1) There is debate: Castries said that the decision was made by Hanoi and that he would have refused it if he had to decide alone.

Rocolle (p. 360) states that it was made by General Gambiez in the absence of Navarre in Saigon. Gras (p. 547) and Roy (p. 207) consider that it was taken by Cogny, which seems to be confirmed by the memoirs of Navarre, who would have refused the truce if it had been seized. «The time of truths» op. cit., p. 428.

2) Castries accepted the Vietminh's proposal of a truce to pick up the wounded after the fall of Beatrice, de facto forbidding the resumption of this key point of the defense.

[3] «Dien Bien Phu, Gunners in the Furnace» Presses de la cité, Paris, 1993, p. 258.

4) See Laurent Césari and Jacques de Folin, "Le projet "Vautour" en France: nécessité militaire, impossibilité politique", in Denise Artaud & Laurence Kaplan (eds), [4] See Laurent Césari and Jacques de Folin, "Le projet "Vautour" en France: nécessité militaire, impossibilité politique", in Denise Artaud & Laurence Kaplan (eds), [5] "Dien Bien Phu, the Atlantic Alliance and the defence of Southeast Asia" La Manufacture, Lyon, 1989, pp. 137-156.

[5] See George Herring & Richard Himmerman, "The day we didn't go to war. American policy at the time of Dien Bien Phu: a re-examination...", idem, pp. 103-136.

6) General Catroux, op. cit. p. 213.

7) Symbolic name which refers to the Greek general who led in 401 BC the retreat of the "Ten Thousand" (Greek mercenaries of King Cyrus). He himself recounts this epic in his book "The Anabasis". See Pierre Journoud & Hugues Tertrais, "Words of Dien Bien Phu, the survivors testify" Tallandier, Paris, p. 88-91.

8) Gift op. cit. p. 149-150.

[9] See Colonel Roger Trinquier, "The war" Albin Michel, Paris, 1980, p. 271. The actions towards the entrenched camp of the Godart and Loustau groups are improperly known as the "Crèvecoeur column" named after the colonel of the same name who commanded in Laos

10) Icing on the cake, the commitment of these groups will be made without any real coordination or mutual knowledge because they do not come under the same operational directorates (Vientana, Saigon, the secret services, etc.). See Jean Sassi with Jean-Louis Temblay, "Special Operations 20 Years of Secret War" Nimrod, Paris, 2009, pp. 240-247 and Henry-Jean Loustau, "[translation] ".The last battles of Indochina 1952-1954", Albin Michel, Paris, 1984, pp. 224-246.

11) Clausewitz et la guerre, PUF, Philosophies, Paris, 1999, p. 34.

[12] «From the war", op. cit., 245

13) Idem, p. 169.

14) Speech of March 8, 1918 before the Chambers.

[15] «From the war" op. cit., p. 33.

16) Gambiez knows what he's talking about. He is Chief of Staff of General Navarre and lost a son in Dien Bien Phu.

[17] General Gambiez & Colonel Suire, "The Sword of Damocles, war in indirect style", Plon, Paris, p. 34.

18) Letter to Secretary of State Marc Jacquet dated January 1, 1954, Roy, op. cit. p. 441.

[19] «Thinking the war" Clausewitz, 1 The European Age, op. cit., p. 334.

[20] «From the war", op. cit., p. 886

[21] Navarre, "The agony of Indochina", op. cit., p. 260-263. Catroux, op. cit., p. 112.

22) See, in particular, Ivan Cadeau, "....Dien Bien Phu 13 March-7 May 1954, History in Battle" Tallandier, Paris, 2013, p. 171.

23) General André Beaufre, "Introduction to the strategy" Pluriel, Hachette Littératures, 1963 - 1998, p. 184.

24] See, in particular, Alain Ruscio, "...Dien Bien Phu, the end of an illusion"L'Harmattan, Paris, 1987.

25] Jean Pouget, op. cit. 1954, p. 179-180; and Pélissier, p. 207-208.

26] "... while launching his human tide against Beatrice, ... Giap passed that day by the idea of genius ... the leader of the A. .P.V. had the means to annihilate the French artillery by setting off all of its tubes against it". Henri de Brancion, op. cit. p. 285

27] Pélissier, op. cit. pp. 343-345 and Giap; op. cit. p. 261.

28] Rocolle, op. cit. pp. 548-549.

29] Valletta, op. cit. p. 331.

30] See Jean Pouget, "Camp One's manifesto."Taillandier, Paris, 2012 & Erwan Bergot, "Convoy 42.", Presses de la Cité, Paris, 1986

[31] Sunzi, "The Art of War"Champs Flammarion, Paris, Paris, 1972, p. 118.

[32] «Introduction to the strategy", op. it., p. 181.

33] According to Wikipedia, In Fiction, Uchrony is a genre based on the principle of rewriting History by modifying an event in the past.

34] Fall, op. cit. p. 489.

[35] J. C. F. Fuller, "[35] J. C. F. Fuller, "The decisive battles of the Western world"Berger-Levrault, Stratégies, Paris 1981, p. 304.

36] This will be one of the major criticisms of the commission of inquiry. In the end, as already mentioned, General Navarre, having accepted the Battle of the North-West, made the mistake of not placing it at his true plan, that is, not to consider it - at least from the end of December - as the main battle of the campaign, the one that had to be won...." in Elgey, p. 587.

[37] Henri Navarre, "The agony of Indochina"op. cit., p. 299.

[38] Quoted by Kenji Tokitsu, "...The way of karate, for a theory of Japanese martial arts"Seuil, Paris, 1979, p. 167.

[39] François Jullien, "The propensity of things. For a history of efficiency in China"Seuil, Points Essais, Paris, 1992, p. 23.

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