La Troisième guerre d’Indochine, 1975-1999: Sécurité et géopolitique en Asie du Sud-Est, Bui Xuan Quang

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This book is difficult to nail down. It is many things at once. And it is not always what one thinks. What is sure, however, is that this is one of the most ambitious attempts undertaken in the last decade to study what has commonly become known as the “Third Indochina War”: the regional conflict that broke out when Asian communists turned on each other shortly after the Americans pulled out of Indochina in 1975.

Bui Xuan Quang is professor of International Relations at the University of Nanterre (Paris X) in France. He has long been interested in and taught the wars that ripped former French Indochina apart, how they impacted upon the region, and their place in the larger context of world affairs, and he has written scores of important articles and books on this subject. He has also worked on the births, consolidations, and excesses of the communist states that came to power in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, and published widely on these issues in Studestasie, Politique Internationale, Politique Etrangère, and Le Quotidien de Paris, among many others. Unfortunately, the author does not include his articles in the impressive bibliography of this book. Editorial pressures no doubt explain this absence. To find his works, look for "BXQ" in the footnotes. For M. Bui Xuan Quang is, to his enormous credit, a very modest scholar.

Modest, perhaps, but this book is eminently ambitious. In terms of sheer size, Bui Xuan Quang’s study of the Third Indochina War, spanning from 1975 to 1999, weighs in at 824 pages! It is armed with an impressive and extensive bibliography, including books written in English, French, German, and Vietnamese. While many non-French specialists will already be familiar with much of the English-language titles, they will be pleased to discover an array of little-known French authors and sources covering the geopolitics and security issues related to this region. The author also provides a gamut of helpful tables, graphs, maps, and chronologies to make his points and to help out the reader – though the maps are not always easy to read. An added delight is the peppering of Philippe Franchini’s naughty little political cartoons throughout the text.

This book is not a history of the Third Indochina War, such as Nayan Chanda1 and Grant Evans and Kevin Rowley2 traced in their books, published in 1986 and 1990, respectively. Indeed, Bui Xuan Quang has incorporated very little of the new materials flowing out of China, Russia, and Vietnam since the end of the Cold War. A consultation of the Cold War International History Project’s translations and publications of many important internal documents on the Indochinese war would have contributed considerably to the author’s analysis.3 The use of some Soviet sources, like Steven Morris contributed considerably to the author’s analysis.3 The use of some Soviet sources, like Steven Morris3 had done in his study of the Third Indochina conflict,4 would have also been helpful here.

However, this book is not focused on describing the breakdown in relations among former communist brothers in arms (though the question is most certainly taken up). On one level, Bui Xuan Quang seeks to use the Third Indochina War as a way of exploring the complexity and originality of “security” and “geopolitics” in Southeast Asia, as the sub-title of his book suggests. Throughout this war for Indochina, the author argues, ensuring security was the common denominator and the final objective at the national, regional, and international levels. On a second level, the author adopts a very Braudelian approach to show how terrestrial, maritime, and human factors combined with the unique strategic position of Southeast Asia to ensure that the Third Indochina War focalized security on these three factors. Geography and strategy are thus implicitly at the heart of his analysis. As he remarks in the last sentence of his introduction, “geopolitics – the deciphering of political itineraries and strategic dynamics from geographical factors – explains to a large extent the Third Indochina War.”

Bui Xuan Quang divides his discussion and analysis into four major parts. The first part analyzes and provides a definition of security in its various dimensions: internal, external, collective, regional, and global. Security, for the author, is a fluid and ambiguous concept. It is, above all, a dialectical relationship between internal situation(s) and the external environment, which regulates the relationship among humans, societies, and states. The second chapter of this section adds an original
geographical component by painting a portrait of Southeast Asia in its geographical, structural, and functional terms. Working from this, the author then turns to an historical overview of the nature of security relationships in Southeast Asia before 1975.

This geo-historic background sets the stage of the second part of the book – War by Security. In this section, Bui Xuan Quang analyzes the impact of the communization of the former states of French Indochina – Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Of particular importance is how the internal radicalization of the communist regimes led to a siege mentality and a loss of popular support. In order to head off internal disenchantment, the Parties increased the mobilization of the society by putting it on a war footing. Security concerns and actions thus also stem from these internal considerations. For Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and to lesser degree, Laos, Bui Xuan Quang shows how the development of a “war of communisms” is linked to the breakdown of revolutionary policies inside each country. Security was thus determined by this complex interplay between internal and external factors.

The third part of the book returns to a more geographical vision of security, by examining security issues in terms of overland and maritime factors, as well as in terms of human conflicts and movements. In order to apply an effective policy of security and to ensure it, each state in Southeast Asia must be able to administer its land, its waters, and its people. Here the author examines how the newly communized countries of Indochina asserted their national sovereignty over these three elements in spatial terms, and how this directly affected their security and that of the region. In this section, the author summarizes the major border issues dividing the states of Southeast Asia. He pays particular attention to the border conflicts opposing Vietnam and China, on the one hand, and Vietnam and Cambodia, on the other. Both are at the heart of security concerns and, in turn, at the heart of the Third Indochina War. Similar analytical attention is given to maritime differences that were and remain at the heart of the communist wars over nationalistic sovereignty projected into the seas. Here, Bui Xuan Quang’s discussion of the importance of water for understanding Southeast Asia provides new insights into why this question became such an important security concern. As he points out, the question of the islands in the South China Sea is a territorial one (national possession), a strategic one (the control of the space), and an economic one (access to resources and, especially, minerals) (p. 462). The last chapter of this section factors in people, and shows how demographics, ethnicity, racism, and xenophobia led to the exodus of millions as refugees or to their manipulation and repression for security reasons. If the Khmer Rouge transformed the Viet kieu (Vietnamese foreign residents) into the hated Other, the Vietnamese found their nationalist enemy in the person of the overseas Chinese, the huagiao. Both fled for fear of their lives, and, in so doing, became focal points in building tensions between states. Internal factors, again, reinforced this. In the case of communist Vietnam, anti-bourgeois policies targeted the Chinese, even those who had lived in Vietnam for decades. Security was psychological, too.

The fourth part moves up to the global level, scrutinizing the interplays in security making at the regional and global levels of the Third Indochina War. Bui Xuan Quang examines how Southeast Asia was divided into two halves: the communist model in Indochina, in opposition to the “liberal” model in ASEAN (p. 612). He explains how, after defeating the Khmer Rouge, Hanoi resumed the creation of a communized Indochina under its tight control, whereas ASEAN, anti-communist in its conception and evolution into the 1980s, developed into a stabilizing factor for Southeast Asia. He then analyzes the changing security perceptions and relations on the part of the Chinese, the United States and the Soviet Union, and how Indochina came to be at the center of their concerns, again.

This is the rough layout of the author’s 800-page analysis of how the Third Indochina War brings out the importance of security and geopolitics in the understanding of the war and of the region. Security and geopolitics have been and will remain, he argues, “constants” in this part of the world.

A brief review such as this cannot take up all the important conclusions that the author reaches. Specialists will be interested in what he has to say about “war communism” and “communisms at war,” that is, how internal radicalization and alienation led communist states to adopt more diplomatically assertive policies. Bui Xuan Quang’s treatment of Vietnamese communist domination of
C'est donc un historien reconnu au parcours accompli qui nous livre ici un ouvrage important de plus de 800 pages, qui entend retracer, avec une précision chronologique à laquelle l'auteur est attaché, la trame événementielle de cette première période de la colonisation française du Vietnam. Clairement affichée dès l'avant-propos, l'ambition de l'ouvrage est de devenir une référence pour des étudiants en manque de repères conjoncturels. Et c'est bien une histoire factuelle qui est ici revendiquée avec un aplomb certain, alors même que ce type d'histoire n'a plus vraiment le vent en poupe.

Ce n'est pas seulement l'ouvrage d'un chercheur confirmé qui a directement travaillé sur les sources d'archives, qu'il cite avec précision. C'est aussi et surtout celui d'un professeur qui reconnaît et mentionne les études de ses anciens élèves-chercheurs. Et la mise en avant des travaux universitaires (mémoires de maîtrise et de DEA et thèses de doctorat) que l'auteur a dirigés tout au long de sa carrière relève d'une bienveillance reconnaissante envers ses émules.

Autre aspect intéressant de cet ouvrage – et qui correspond bien à cette « déformation professionnelle » fort stimulante d'un directeur de recherche ayant conseillé de nombreux étudiants –, le fait que C. Fourniau soulève à plusieurs reprises quelques problématiques qu'il faudrait éclairer ou fouiller davantage. Les pistes signalées, qui ne sont évidemment pas exhaustives, correspondent naturellement aux préoccupations historiographiques classiques de l'auteur. Elles ont en tout cas le mérite d'être soulignées et de baliser quelques perspectives nouvelles de recherche.

Un plan « chrono-géographique » divise l'ouvrage en trois livres bien distincts. Les deux premiers, « L'affaire de Cochinchine de 1858 à 1879 » et « L'affaire du Tonkin de 1872 à 1896 », retracent les principales actions coloniales de la conquête et les réactionsnationales dans les différentes parties de l'ancien Empire d'Annam. L'auteur insiste largement ici sur l'importance de la conjoncture, aussi bien locale que métropolitaine, pour expliquer certaines décisions qui paraissent aujourd'hui comme parfaitement iniques, mais que l'on ne doit pas détacher de leur contexte. L'histoire événementielle très méticuleuse de ce premier « contact franco-vietnamien », pour reprendre le titre d'un autre ouvrage co-dirigé par l'auteur, permet ici de prendre la mesure des hésitations, aussi bien du côté français que vietnamien, des retournements multiples de situations, ainsi que des possibles qui ont été évités (ou manqués, selon le point de vue adopté !).

Notes


Par Karine Delaye

Charles Fourniau est l'une des figures marquantes et engagées de l'histoire coloniale du Vietnam. Agrégé d'Histoire, il a été correspondant de presse pour L'Humanité à Hanoi dans les années 1960 avant d'enseigner dans le secondaire et d'entreprendre une colloque thèse d'Etat sous la direction de Pierre Renouvin et de Jean-Louis Miège. Cet immense travail d'investigation achevé, c'est dans le cadre aixois de l'Institut d'histoire des pays d'Outre-mer (IHfOM) que C. Fourniau a encadré de nombreux travaux et exercé, dans les années 1980 et 1990, une influence décisive sur des générations de chercheurs. Et c'est par son enthousiasme qu'il a su les convaincre de l'impérieuse nécessité qu'il y avait à travailler sur l'Indochine coloniale et le Vietnam. Il a enfin participé à l'installation de l'IRSEA dans les Bouches-du-Rhône. Pour lui rendre hommage et faire le point sur cette historiographie, un colloque s'est tenu à Aix-en-Provence à l'automne 2003 (voir ce numéro de Moussons).