

The 1954 Geneva Agreements - A historic milestone of Vietnam's diplomacy

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70 years ago, the Geneva Agreements were signed, thus opening up a new chapter in our people's struggle for national liberation and reunification. Seven decades later, the lessons learnt during the process of negotiating, signing, and implementing the Agreements still fully retain their values in the building, development, and safeguarding of our Fatherland today.

In late 1953, amid tremendous shifts in the Indochinese battlefield, our Party and President Ho Chi Minh decided to wage a battle on the diplomatic front in conjunction with the 1953 - 1954 Winter - Spring Offensive to put an end to the war and restore peace in Vietnam and Indochina as a whole. In his interview with a Swedish reporter on 26 November 1953, President Ho Chi Minh stated that: "If the French Government has learnt a lesson from this years-long war, and wishes to cease hostilities in Vietnam through negotiations and settle the Vietnam issue in a peaceful manner, then the people and Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam stand ready to welcome such intention" and "the foundation for the cessation of hostilities in Vietnam is the French Government's sincere respect for Vietnam's true independence."¹

On 8 May 1954, exactly one day after the Dien Bien Phu victory that "echoed across five continents and shook the entire world", the Geneva Conference began to discuss the restoration of peace in Indochina. After 75 days of complicated and intense negotiations with 31 sessions, the Geneva Agreements was signed on 21 July 1954. This, coupled with the Final Declaration on Restoring Peace in Indochina, affirmed the independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of Vietnam, prevented the deployment of military officers and personnel to Vietnam, and determined the temporary nature of military borders as well as the need for an eventual free general election, among others.

In his rally following the successful Geneva Conference on 22 July 1954, President Ho Chi Minh announced that: "The Geneva Conference has concluded, and

¹ *I. National Political Publishing House (2011), Ho Chi Minh: Complete Works, Vol. 8, p. 340.*

Vietnam's diplomacy has achieved a great victory."² Indeed, while France only recognized Vietnam as a free state within the French Union in the 1946 Preliminary Agreement, with the Geneva Agreements, for the first time in the history of our country, Vietnam's fundamental rights of a nation, including independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity, were officially affirmed in an international treaty, and recognized by countries at the Geneva Conference. This constituted an important political and legal basis for our people to continue the fight on political and diplomatic fronts, so as to subsequently liberate the South and reunite the country.

Together with the Dien Bien Phu victory, the signing of the Geneva Agreements led to the successful conclusion of the Vietnamese people's resistance war against the French colonial empire, and put a decisive end to the reign of colonialism over Vietnam for nearly 100 years. The Agreements had thus paved the way for a new strategic phase for Vietnam's revolution - the building of socialism in the North, and the pursuit of national and people's democratic revolution in the South, with a view to truly achieving national independence and reunification.

The triumph at the Geneva Conference was built upon the correct path of revolution, as well as the able guidance and leadership of the Party and President Ho Chi Minh. Said victory also owed much to the burning aspiration for peace, patriotism, and the bravery and wisdom of the Vietnamese nation that have been tempered over thousands of years of nation building and protection. The Geneva Agreements was the culmination of the persevering and steadfast struggle of the army and people of Vietnam, from the 1947 Autumn - Winter Viet Bac Campaign to the 1950 Autumn - Winter Border Campaign and the 1953 - 1954 Winter - Spring Offensive, with the most significant event being the Dien Bien Phu victory.

Alongside the 1946 Preliminary Agreement and the 1973 Paris Agreements, the 1954 Geneva Agreements marks a momentous milestone in the history of Vietnam's revolutionary diplomacy, showcasing the ideology, style, and art of the Ho Chi Minh diplomacy. The Geneva Conference helped create many remarkable leaders and diplomats during the Ho Chi Minh era, such as Pham Van Dong, Ta Quang Buu, Ha Van Lau, and other outstanding diplomatic officials. Looking back upon the signing of the Geneva Agreements 70 years ago, we are very grateful to President Ho Chi Minh and generations of our revolutionary forefathers, as well as

² *National Political Publishing House (2011), Ho Chi Minh: Complete Works, Vol. 9, p. 1.*

to our army and people for their tremendous sacrifices during the resistance war against the colonial French.

We shall always recall the heartfelt solidarity and invaluable support that the people of Laos, Cambodia, and other socialist countries, as well as peace-loving individuals worldwide, including French nationals, have accorded to Vietnam in its resistance wars against colonial and imperialist forces. In this connection, the Geneva Agreements was not only a triumph for Vietnam, but also a shared victory for all three Indochinese countries, and for every oppressed nation in their respective fight for liberation. The Geneva Agreements and the Dien Bien Phu victory provided a great inspiration for the movement towards peace and national salvation and paved the way for the collapse of colonialism around the globe. From 1954 to 1964, 17 out of 22 French colonies reclaimed their independence. In 1960 alone, 17 African nations managed to do so.

The negotiation, signing, and implementation of the Geneva Agreements can be considered an invaluable guidebook for Vietnam's diplomatic style, with a myriad of lessons regarding the distinctive principles, methods, and arts of the Ho Chi Minh diplomacy. And such lessons still hold true to this very day. The first lesson is the unflagging need to uphold independence and self-reliance on the basis of national interests. The negotiation and signing of the Geneva Agreements provide us with a better insight into the values of independence and self-reliance when it comes to international issues. As all countries act to further their own gains, only through the steadfast pursuit of independence and self-reliance can we manage to remain proactive and best ensure our national interests.

The second lesson is to utilize the combined strength of the nation and the times, and of national and international unity to create "an unparalleled might." Apart from harnessing our country's righteous cause and great national unity, our Party made the accurate decision to further bolster Vietnam's solidarity with the world, starting with Laos, Cambodia, socialist states, international friends, and the peace-loving people around the globe.

The third lesson is to be unwavering in objectives and principles, and responsive in strategies, true to the principle of "to be firm in principles but flexible in their applications". President Ho Chi Minh stated that "our unflagging goal is still peace, reunification, independence, and democracy. Our principle shall remain firm, and our actions flexible."³ In the negotiation and implementation of the

³ *National Political Publishing House (2011), Ho Chi Minh: Complete Works, Vol. 8, p. 555.*

Geneva Agreements, Vietnam's "unwavering" basis was independence, reunification, and territorial integrity. These factors were consistently upheld all the way until the Paris Agreements later in 1973. And when Vietnam had not managed to fully achieve its ultimate goal, "flexibility" in its strategies was necessary in the path to eventually fulfil its unchanging objectives. Such was the art of the Ho Chi Minh diplomacy that was creatively built upon and further developed in Vietnam's subsequent reform and international integration efforts. In addition, such measures representing the nature of "Vietnamese bamboo tree" in our country's revolutionary diplomacy, with a "strong root", "sturdy trunk", and "flexible branches."

The fourth lesson is to pay due importance to the work of research, assessment, and forecasting. It is necessary to "know oneself" and "know others" and know when to "seize the times" and "seize the opportunities", so as to "know when to advance and when to retreat", and "know when to take a tough or soft stance." This is an insightful experience, especially when the world today is facing major, complex, and unpredictable shifts. In such circumstances, it is necessary, more than ever, to better study and make forecasts of the global situation, particularly changes in prevailing trends and adjustments in the policies and strategies of partners. Only then can we take the initiative in devising suitable responses for different partners and issues.

The fifth lesson is to rely on peaceful dialogue and negotiation to settle disputes and differences in international relations. In tandem with the launching of the 1953 - 1954 Winter - Spring Offensive, our Party opted for peace talks to put an end to the war and forge a new path in the discussion to cease hostilities in Indochina. While perspectives regarding the matter may differ, it is irrefutable that the Geneva Conference offered a timeless lesson on addressing international conflicts and disagreements through peaceful means, particularly at present, when the world is facing numerous complicated disputes.

The sixth and most important lesson is the holistic and overarching leadership of the Party in our people's revolutionary cause and the battle on the diplomatic front in particular. Our Party put in place accurate guidelines, orientations, and strategies for Vietnam's revolution, established a proactive diplomatic front that was utilized in tandem with political and military efforts to foster a collective strength and best ensure our national interests.

Our Party has creatively utilized and built upon these outstanding lessons and other invaluable experiences from the Geneva Agreements throughout the negotiation,

signing, and implementation of the 1973 Paris Agreements, and in the country's foreign affairs at present. In nearly 40 years of Doi Moi, we have upheld the consistent foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, diversification and multilateralization of external relations, and active, extensive, and comprehensive international integration. Vietnam is a friend, a reliable partner, and an active and responsible member of the international community. With this suitable policy, to date, Vietnam has established diplomatic ties with 193 United Nations (UN) member states, Strategic and Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships with all five permanent members of the UN Security Council, and a network of Strategic and Comprehensive Partnerships with 30 nations. Vietnam has also been an active and responsible member of more than 70 important regional and global forums and organizations, such as the UN, ASEAN, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), and the Asia - Europe Meeting (ASEM), to name a few. Moreover, Viet Nam has become a party to or engaged in negotiations on 19 free trade agreements, thus creating an expansive network of economic connectivity with around 60 economies worldwide.

By making the most of the lessons learnt from the Geneva Agreements, and the glorious history of the Vietnamese revolutionary diplomacy, each and every foreign service officer, under the able leadership of the Party, shall steel their resolve to create a strong, comprehensive, and modern diplomatic service, thereby making meaningful contributions to the successful implementation of the foreign policy outlined at the 13th National Party Congress, for the goals of a prosperous people, a strong country, democracy, equality, and civilization.