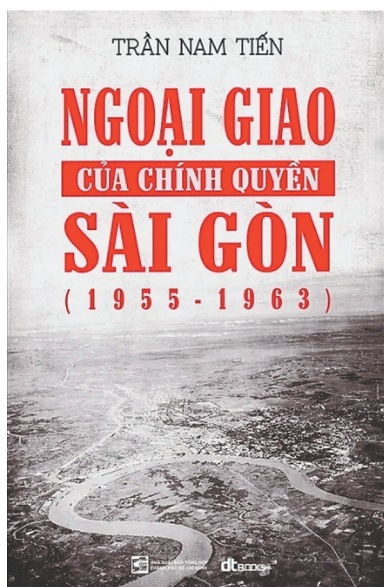


Ha Trieu Huy

The First Republic of Vietnam Diplomacy (1955—1963) Through the Lens of Tran Nam Tien Analysis



Trần Nam Tiến. *Ngoại giao của chính quyền Sài Gòn (1955—1963)* [Tran Nam Tien. *Diplomacy of the Saigon Government (1955—1963)*]. Ho Chi Minh City: General Press. 313 p. ISBN: 978-604-58-9456-9

Abstract. The review examines “Ngoại giao của chính quyền Sài Gòn (1955—1963)” [Diplomacy of the Saigon Government (1955—1963)] by Tran Nam Tien, a prominent Vietnamese historian, which investigates the formation and evolution of the First Republic of Vietnam’s diplomacy during the presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem amid the Vietnam War. The book comprises three chapters: Chapter 1 lays the historical foundation for national diplomacy, Chapter 2 delves into the establishment of foreign policy, and Chapter 3 focuses on Saigon’s relationships with major international actors. In addition to providing critical insights into the novelty, structure, and content of each chapter, the review highlights significant weaknesses that persist, thereby pointing to ongoing opportunities for further research on RVN diplomacy in the future.

Keywords: The Republic of Vietnam, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, Ngo Dinh Diem, anticommunism, Southeast Asia.

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Взгляд Чан Нам Тиена на дипломатию Первой Республики Вьетнам (1955—1963)

Чан Нам Тиен. Дипломатия сайгонских властей (1955—1963). Хошимин: General Press. 313 с. ISBN: 978-604-58-9456-9

Аннотация. Рецензия рассматривает книгу выдающегося вьетнамского историка Чан Нам Тиена «Дипломатия сайгонских властей (1955—1963)», в которой исследуется становление и эволюция дипломатии Первой Республики Вьетнам в период президентства Нго Динь Зьема в условиях Вьетнамской войны. Книга состоит из трёх глав: глава 1 посвящена историческим основам дипломатии РВ, глава 2 — становлению её внешней политики, а глава 3 — отношениям Сайгона с основными международными игроками. В рецензии дается критический анализ новизны, структуры и содержания каждой главы, а также отмечаются существенные недостатки, что даёт возможность для продолжения исследований дипломатии Республики Вьетнам в будущем.

Ключевые слова: Республика Вьетнам, холодная война, Вьетнамская война, Нго Динь Зьем, антикоммунизм, Юго-Восточная Азия.

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Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese historians have recently added to a growing body of research on the Republic of Vietnam's political existence during the difficult years of the Vietnam War. Scholars have examined various aspects of this government, such as education, economy, and diplomacy, to offer a more comprehensive historical portrayal of a now-defunct state that shared a common political stance against Communists as a Cold War-era US ally in Southeast Asia. Despite the persistence of opposing political viewpoints, the availability and transparency of primary sources, such as the National Archives Center 2, virtual libraries across the United States, and unclassified Pentagon documents, have cleared up misunderstandings and shed light on previously unknown chapters of the Republic of Vietnam. Tran Nam Tien's work, *Ngoại giao của chính quyền Sài Gòn (1955—1963)* [*Diplomacy of the Saigon Government (1955—1963)*], highlights President Ngo Dinh Diem's efforts to establish legitimacy and collaborate with Free World partners, despite obstacles.

Four main chapters structure the book. In chapter 1, Tran Nam Tien investigates foundational elements that led to the formal establishment of the first Republic of Vietnam (RVN) from 1955 to 1963. In particular, he observes a close relationship between the Vietnamese political landscape and international changes, which in turn influenced the interests of major powers in Southeast Asia. Russian-American tension

escalated during the Cold War, and American foreign policy viewed Southeast Asia as a strategic region. Understanding the failure of France in Indochina and the insidious effects of communism in Vietnam, Washington intervened to support and install a non-communist regime in South Vietnam, exemplified by the State of Vietnam under the leadership of former Emperor Bao Dai. Subsequent to the Fall of Dien Bien Phu, Washington ruminated over more practical solutions to back Ngo Dinh Diem to become the first president of South Vietnam and demarcate the country alongside the 17th parallel in 1955. Tran Nam Tien elucidates the lawful establishment of South Vietnam as a crucial aspect of foreign policy execution, guiding readers from the inception of Ngo Dinh Diem's presidency to the processes by which he appointed government officials and formulated foreign policy. The third section of this chapter offers a comprehensive examination of foreign policy frameworks, establishing the foundation for an extensive discussion of Saigon's partnerships in subsequent chapters of this book. The chapter 3 dedicates to the United States, an intimate comrade of Saigon. Tran Nam Tien dichotomizes this relationship into two historical phases: 1955–1960 and 1961–1963, which is compatible with two American presidencies of Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy. The chronological division is essential for clarifying the historical development of Saigon's foreign policy, influencing diplomatic relationships, and improving the effectiveness of diplomatic activities during the First Republic. This chapter outlines Saigon's partnerships with non-communist states in the Asia-Pacific region and its efforts to broaden its diplomatic influence internationally. Tran Nam Tien critically analyzes Northeastern Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. As a result of the US's large impact on Vietnamese people's domestic affairs, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) becomes a central figure in the dynamics of Saigon's relationships. This leads to an intriguing analysis of a possible reconnection between Saigon and Hanoi.

Tran Nam Tien commenced writing this book by examining the foundational rationale for the RVN's political existence in South Vietnam. Similar to several Cold War texts authored in Vietnamese and English, this book explores two dimensions of the external political landscape: the worldwide rivalry between Washington and Moscow, and the proliferation of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. The RVN is fundamentally anchored in the dynamics of the Cold War, characterized by a power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union, both of which aimed to guide the world and influence other nations toward the divergent ideological frameworks of capitalism and socialism. Tran Nam Tien highlights two major influences: The Domino Theory and the Korean War (1950–1953), both of which significantly shaped Washington's perception of Indochina's relevance in the context of the communist threat. France diminished its political influence in Indochina, even though an anticommunist authority, the Etat du Vietnam (State of Vietnam, or SOV), was established under the deposed emperor Bao Dai. This authority contested the DRV and heightened Washington's apprehension regarding its dominance in Southeast Asia.

In addition to the prevalent perspectives of Vietnamese historians on anti-communism as a hallmark of Cold War politics, Tran Nam Tien explored the operational dynamics of the SOV, which was a core principle of the RVN at the time. Despite placing the state name in quotation marks, the author rejected the legitimacy of this regime as a political entity within the Southeast Asian Cold War landscape. This

stance potentially undermined his analysis of the SOV's diplomatic contributions to the RVN. He elucidated the state's evolution from the ephemeral Autonomous Cochinese Republic to the temporary central administration of Vietnam, presided over by Nguyen Van Xuan, before its metamorphosis into the State of Vietnam. The Elysee Agreement between Bao Dai and France subsequently signified this transformation.

Nevertheless, the book predominantly disregarded the assertion that the SOV, as a member of the French Union, collaborated closely with both France and the United States to ensure its survival and emerge from the French political shadow. It is essential to conduct additional research to analyze the intricacies of SOV foreign policy and the regime's management of its relations with Paris and Washington. When the first Indochina War ended in 1954, Tran Nam Tien also reveals some exciting analyses over covert talks between Paris and Washington that the United States gave support to the demarcation of Vietnamese territories along the 17th parallel so that an Americanism state could be established in the south of Vietnam as well as inhibit the spread of communism in Southeast Asia (pp. 71—75).

In Chapter 2, the author made analytical efforts to perceive the interplay between the establishment of the RVN and its diplomatic building. At first, Ngo Dinh Diem rejected becoming the new prime minister of the SOV, as he believed that this regime was not yet independent of France. It was not until Buu Loc and French Prime Minister Laniel reached an agreement for the formal recognition of an independent Vietnam that Diem accepted that political offer. Tran Nam Tien also renewed a long-standing concept that Washington was involved in Bao Dai's decision to choose Diem as the new prime minister. However, he saw the potential of Diem to lead the regime through the political maelstrom following France's defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 (p. 80).

Tran Nam Tien extensively documented Diem's efforts to formally withdraw requests to the DRV concerning free elections to reunite the country. However, he gradually eliminated French and other opposing forces from South Vietnam and officially established the RVN in Saigon on October 26, 1956. With political and diplomatic support from Washington and other Free World states, the RVN reduced the influence of both France and the Communists, adhering to Washington's political framework to cultivate a democratic and free state for the Vietnamese people in the south. Additionally, Tran Nam Tien wrote in detail about how the RVN organized its government agencies, concluding that its foreign policy stemmed from a national constitution compiled by the President. A significant point emphasized by the author is that the RVN was mindful of national independence, striving to limit the presence of American personnel in South Vietnam while adopting its own strategies to leverage U.S. support in enhancing its relationships with other Free World nations and boosting its international standing (p. 131—133). Consequently, diplomacy became an essential tool for the RVN in managing its global relationships and contesting the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s claims over maritime territories controlled by Saigon from 1955 to 1963 (p. 145).

In Chapter 3, Tran Nam Tien conducts an in-depth investigation into the ties between Saigon and its major partners. In the first section, he examines the peaks and valleys of the Saigon-Washington relationship during the reign of Ngo Dinh Diem, drawing on a broad range of materials, including previous studies and Pentagon papers.

While he argues that the diplomacy of the First Republic was largely overshadowed by Washington, he unfortunately overlooks Diem's efforts to leverage this relationship to expand the RVN's presence on the international stage. Tran identifies a complex interplay between Washington's economic investments and its political interventions in Saigon, echoing a common narrative in Vietnamese scholarship that portrays the RVN as a mere puppet of Washington rather than as an independent entity seeking capital to develop an underdeveloped nation (p. 178). He periodizes this relationship into two chapters that correspond with two American presidencies. During Eisenhower's administration, Saigon and Washington prioritized military, civic, and economic growth. However, the situation in South Vietnam deteriorated after 1961, leading to a shift in focus toward counterinsurgency strategies. Misunderstandings began to emerge in 1963 when Saigon became dissatisfied with the strategic deployment of US personnel in South Vietnam. However, Tran Nam Tien does not elaborate on Diem's nuanced position, which edged South Vietnam toward the brink of war amid a rising nationalism (p. 204–207).

Tran Nam Tien exemplifies two key RVN partners in East Asia—Japan and South Korea. Regarding Japan, he notes that economic interest between Saigon and Tokyo was growing in December 1956, following a compromise between Japan and France to use the dollar as the official monetary unit for transactions between the RVN and Japan (p. 223). Additionally, war reparations play a significant role and are reflected in three categories: The Da Nhim hydroelectric dam, trade exchange, and expert exchange. An agreement signed in March 1959 marked a collective effort by both sides to enhance Japan's presence in Southeast Asia and implied covert support from Tokyo for the US-South Vietnam relationship. More proactively, Saigon deemed it necessary to establish stronger ties with the Republic of Korea (ROK) in light of their shared fate and commitment to international anticommunism. In May 1956, the ROK embassy was opened in Saigon, and the two sides issued a joint communiqué in 1957, which also revealed Diem's hesitancy to fully embrace military support from the ROK for South Vietnam. The RVN embassy was established in Seoul in 1958. In addition to political engagement, Saigon and Seoul advanced their cultural and economic exchanges, grounded in their mutual commitment to anticommunism. Although Tran Nam Tien does not specify the economic outcomes of this dynamic relationship, it is noteworthy that Vietnamese-Korean economic seminars were organized during the First Republic of Vietnam. Additionally, specific statistics illustrating the Korean economic presence in South Vietnam laid the groundwork for a more significant engagement in the subsequent phase.

Next section of the chapter explores how Saigon engaged with its Southeast Asian neighbors. Five partners are superficially examined — namely the Philippines, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Indonesia — raising scholarly awareness of Saigon's active role in fostering these relationships. Although the author dedicates three pages to analyzing the connection between Saigon and Manila, he neglects to detail the specific provisions of the Friendship Treaty of 1959 and fails to delve into Operation Brotherhood, which laid a solid foundation for this relationship during the era of military involvement. Furthermore, Tran Nam Tien omits a significant research project by M. Ragos-Espinas [1997], which provides an overview of the Saigon-Manila

relationship. This absence of critical sources undermines the depth of analysis concerning Manila's intentions to elevate this relationship to a higher level of bilateral engagement. Similarly, the analysis of Thailand — a strategic ally of South Vietnam during the Vietnam War — is hampered by source bias and the unavailability of Thai archival materials due to military dictatorship. Aside from the crucial event of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's visit in 1959, Tran Nam Tien offers little insight into Bangkok's prevailing anti-communist policies or the role of Washington in facilitating greater Thai engagement with South Vietnam during the Cold War.

Other ties, such as those with Malaysia, Laos, and Cambodia, also lack a compelling argument to highlight the significance of these relationships for the survival of the First Republic. Tran Nam Tien mentions the assistance of the British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) in Malaysia, which supported the RVN in its guerrilla war against the Communists (p. 251), yet he fails to clarify how the Malaysian government prioritized the RVN's situation after its own territorial expansion to establish the Malaysia Federation in 1963. Similarly, while Saigon was ineffective in maintaining strong relations with Laos and Cambodia, the author does not elucidate how Diem navigated his conflicts with Cambodia regarding territorial issues and the political misunderstandings stemming from Phnom Penh's neutral stance. Regarding the Kingdom of Laos, Tran Nam Tien does not explore the collaborative efforts between Saigon and Luang Phrabang aimed at dismantling the Ho Chi Minh Trail and addressing the guerrilla actions of the Pathet Lao, which covertly facilitated Hanoi's invasions of Laotian territory and the transportation of supplies to support active Viet Cong troops in South Vietnam. Notably absent from the author's analysis is the outcome of Ngo Dinh Nhu's visit to Laos in 1957, a significant event that warrants further exploration.

More interestingly, Tran Nam Tien devotes a portion of this chapter to elucidate the Hanoi-Saigon relationship during the First Republic. Like many other Vietnamese historians, he suggests that the rejection of Diem for a general election in 1956 stemmed from the overwhelming influence of US anti-communist policy and a lack of collaboration toward national unification (p. 255). However, the situation is clearly more complex, as communism and anti-communism coexisted, with individuals across Vietnam exercising their rights to support whichever side they believed would bring lasting peace to the nation. The diversity of religious and political perspectives did not ensure a just and fair election for either region. Tran cites numerous events that demonstrate Hanoi's attempts to persuade Saigon to adhere to the 1954 Geneva Accord and its willingness to convene meetings aimed at discussing national reunification, which Saigon notably disregarded (p. 262—265). Tran argues that Saigon's refusals to engage in the 1954 Geneva Accord, coupled with its ill will toward Hanoi's initiatives, undermined hopes for a nationwide election. Furthermore, the intrigue surrounding Hanoi's clandestine meetings with Diem and Nhu in 1963 — efforts to persuade Saigon to cooperate, especially in light of potential US military involvement — continues to pique the academic curiosity of historians.

The final part of this book concretizes two important relationships that the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) had with Taiwan and Australia. Regarding Australia, Tran Nam Tien notes Canberra's role as a proponent of civic assistance and limited military support in South Vietnam through the Colombo Plan and SEATO aid. He marks the visit of

President Diem to Australia in 1957 as the starting point of the Saigon—Canberra relationship (p. 267), yet he does not explore the outcomes of this event for potential collaborations aimed at strengthening the power of the Free World in both military and economic terms. Furthermore, the role of overseas Vietnamese communities in Australia — who were largely influenced by Communist propaganda — and the ways in which the First Republic shaped public opinion to maintain the image of a burgeoning South Vietnam are scarcely mentioned in this section.

As for Taiwan, although it is often seen as a largely unrecognized political entity and is not included in the East Asia chapter of this book, it nonetheless made significant contributions to the RVN's anti-Communist efforts. Taiwan began providing aid to South Vietnam in 1957, cultivating a robust relationship by sharing its hard-earned expertise in anti-Communist affairs with Southeast Asian countries. However, Tran Nam Tien fails to present detailed statistics or discuss the significance of this investment for Taiwan's increasing military support to South Vietnam in the subsequent phases of the Vietnam War.

In general, *Ngoại giao của chính quyền Sài Gòn (1955—1963)* offers a comprehensive account of the diplomatic endeavors of the First Republic of Vietnam, a subject that has received only a modest amount of in-depth research, aside from the excellent work by William Henderson and Wesley R. Fishel, titled “The Foreign Policy of Ngo Dinh Diem” [1966]. More importantly, this book presents the perspective of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), encouraging readers to recognize its active role in the international arena rather than merely portraying it as a pawn of Washington. However, the author's perspectives are still constrained by the conventional narratives espoused by insiders, which suggest that Saigon fell in line with US directives and served as a theater for American foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Additionally, while the book extensively incorporates multilingual documents, its heavy emphasis on the RVN perspective presents a significant challenge in mitigating potential source bias. There are still intriguing aspects — such as Saigon's role in Southeast Asian politics and its efforts to resonate with Hanoi's calls for national reunification, and the relationships between Saigon and New Zealand, European countries — that warrant further exploration in future research.

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