LAST March, the Inter-Asian Conference at New Delhi gave clear expression to the sympathy of Asia’s peoples with Vietnam in its fight against colonial imperialism. And this was not just an empty gesture. The Hindu government has decided to place limits on the passage of French airplanes over India; and Indian longshoremen have refused to work for the revictualling of French troop transports.

There are those who will see an “Asiatic racism” in such manifestations as these. They will recall the Japanese propaganda for a “Greater Asia” which in fact would but have been an Asia dominated by Nipponese imperialism. The Inter-Asian Conference assumes an entirely different significance. It resumes the long-term trend which began in the first decade of this century, for the renovation of Asia by the democratic ideal of Western Europe. Such Chinese writers as Luong Kai-shi (Luong Khaisieu) and Kuong Luong (Khuong Luong), and a group of statesmen, the greatest among them Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Chinese republic, had carried on an intensive propaganda for the ideas of the French Revolution. Vietnam, having lost its independence, was swept into this movement. Vietnamese writers read Rousseau and Montesquieu in Chinese translations and sought to diffuse among their compatriots the essentials of Western culture. The popular enthusiasm which they aroused made them suspects; they were arrested by the French authorities and sent to the island of Poulo Condore. In China, Sun Yat-sen took office in 1912, but the Kuomintang has not yet achieved the democratic revolution. The civil war with the Communists transformed it into a party of reaction and retarded both the destruction of feudalism and the establishment of a democratic regime.

Thus ran aground a movement which might have sufficed to satisfy the Asian peoples’ desire for genuine participation in Western civilization. Had the revolutionary democrats succeeded in China and in the countries of Chinese culture, such as Vietnam, the integration of the Far East in the international community might have taken place peacefully. The obstruction of this movement brought Japan to the head of the campaign for the renewal of Asia and tempted it to adopt fascist methods. The revival of Asia took the aggressive form of a new imperialism.

1 Translated from the French by Bruno Lasker.
The Japanese showed too much brutality to be able to lead the masses of the Far East. China resisted heroically for fourteen years and in the end won out. India, in spite of its ardent desire for liberation from British imperialism, was foresighted enough to take part in the war effort of the democratic countries against fascist imperialism. In Vietnam the Japanese, in spite of the foothold they gained with the Franco-Nipponese agreement of 1940, failed to produce a single movement in favor of the “Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” At the Pan-Asianic conference of 1943 in Tokyo, Vietnam was not even represented. On the contrary, there formed, throughout Vietnamese territory, networks of resistance—not only against the Japanese occupation but also against the French administration which supported the Japanese. The abdication of Emperor Bao Dai and the proclamation of the Vietnamese republic in September 1945 resulted from a popular revolt of the people against imperialism of any kind.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Vietnam was accorded an especially warm welcome at the Inter-Asian Conference at New Delhi. Japan’s defeat had succeeded in discrediting fascism and in demonstrating that the liberation of Asia could be brought about only by the will of the people to achieve independence, not by an Asiatic imperialism. The Vietnamese revolution, along with that of Indonesia, shows what a people can do when it is determined to win freedom.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of Vietnam in the world of Eastern Asia. Its territory occupies a strategic position; around it China, Malaysia, and India form an immense circle; Saigon, the principal Vietnamese port, is about 1,200 miles from Batavia, Manila, and Hongkong, about 1,500 miles from Ceylon and Calcutta. From ancient times the present territory of Vietnam was a meeting ground of Far Eastern peoples. In prehistoric times it was inhabited by a racial group which may have come from Indonesia.² Its uplands were repeopled again and again by invasions from the north and the west. At the beginning of the Christian era the Tonkin delta and the plains of north Annam were occupied by the Vietnamese themselves. They were subjected by the Chinese and took from them their culture and most of their institutions. Central and southern Annam were occupied by the Cham, who had received a Hindu civilization from the Indian merchants and priests who settled among them. The Vietnamese, who under Chinese domination had retained their language and nationality, regained their independence.

²It seems unlikely that the early inhabitants came from Indonesia but rather that they belonged to the Indonesian group of peoples.—*Editor.*
in the tenth century and since that time have defended it successfully against many attempted Chinese invasions. They expanded toward the south and absorbed the Cham. In a sense, this conquest was a victory of Chinese over Hindu civilization; but some of the elements of Cham culture, especially its music, passed into Vietnamese culture. In the eighteenth century, the Vietnamese occupied Cochinchina and assimilated its ancient inhabitants, Cambodians with a Hindu civilization.

The present territory of Vietnam, extending over Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, thus was a meeting ground between Chinese and Hindu culture. Present-day Vietnam has a culture of its own; for although Chinese elements predominate, many other influences also have left their traces. The ports of Vietnam shelter ships from Japan, the Philippines, Java, and India. At Feifu (Faifoo) there was in the sixteenth century a Japanese colony which gradually merged with the local population.

The French conquest and the commercial relations between the colony and the metropolis which resulted from it weakened, though they did not altogether eliminate, the ties which had connected Vietnam with its natural environment. China continued to receive rice, dried fish, and cinnamon, and sent in return tea, noodles, drugs, and textiles. To Japan Vietnam exported such industrial raw materials as coal, rubber, and lacquer, and from it imported manufactured commodities. It also maintained commercial relations, though less important ones, with India, Singapore, the Netherlands Indies, and the United States. But the colonial regime inevitably favored trade with France. Vietnam sent rice, tea, pepper, rubber, charcoal, and in return received manufactures. One must also add the important "invisible imports," [which benefited France], consisting for the most part of savings returned to France by civil servants and colonials who had come to enrich themselves in the colony, and of dividends paid by the colonial enterprises to their shareholders in Europe.

At the time of the economic crisis in 1929, Vietnam's balance of accounts with the Far East was highly favorable, while that with France was unfavorable. Before the first World War its exports to the Far East exceeded imports from that region by 49 per cent; after 1920, the excess was one of 139 per cent. France, on the contrary, sold more to Vietnam than it purchased from it — the statistical variations being in compensating symmetry with those shown in the trade relations with the Far East. This result was obtained by means of a peculiar tariff system which obliged the Far East to make up for the deficit in the colony's commercial balance with the metropolis. The French authors of this system have explained it
as a natural outcome of Vietnam's economic structure. It did seem advantageous, indeed, that articles of mass exportation should be sold in neighboring countries, while manufactured goods, which predominate among the imports, might come from far away, since in proportion to their relatively small weight they represent high values, so that the cost of freight is insignificant in relation to price.

After 1929, the Far Eastern countries, drawn into the world crisis, on their part adopted protectionist measures; and France was forced to receive a larger share of Vietnam's export products. Cochinchinese rice, now finding a poor market in China, was shipped to Marseilles. The differential between exports to and imports from France decreased, although the latter still retained a margin beneficial to the mother country. This margin was somewhat reduced by the exchange rates in the Far East which remained slightly in favor of Vietnam.

Soon the system of "imperial economy" revealed grave difficulties. Rice imports from Vietnam competed with the wheat and other cereals produced in the metropolis, and this evoked energetic protests from the French peasants. Efforts to integrate the economy of Vietnam threatened to throw that of France out of balance. Moreover, it was hardly reasonable to impose on so heavy a commodity as rice the cost of a long sea transportation, or entirely to prohibit enjoyment by the people of Vietnam of low prices for manufactured articles when these could be obtained in the Far East. As a matter of fact, these manufactures had to be accepted in order to drain off those exportable products of Vietnam which France was unable to absorb. It became evident that, because of its situation between India and China, on the edge of the Pacific, and facing the Oceanic world, the economy of Vietnam belonged to a system of natural economic relations from which it could not be altogether extricated.

Geographical, historic, and economic facts converge to give Vietnam an unusually interesting position in the center of Eastern Asia; but this did not until recent times receive much attention. Under the colonial system, Vietnam as such had no place on the international scene. Only revolutionary movements from time to time recalled the bonds which connected the country with the rest of the world, or more precisely with the Asiatic world. Mention has already been made of the disciples in Vietnam whom Chinese democrats imbued with their ideas near the beginning of this century. Many of these were deported by the French government in 1908. But before they engaged in such repressive measures, the French authorities had attracted to Vietnamese territory such Chinese
revolutionaries as Sun Yat-sen himself. The governor-general at that time, Paul Doumer, thought he could make use of them to lay his hand on south China; for Tonkin constituted a natural taking-off point for the penetration of Yunnan, Kwangsi, and Kwangtung. However, the era during which one could reasonably contemplate a division of China between the great powers was over; and the residence of Chinese in Tonkin in the main served quite another end; it provided them with opportunities for closer contact with Vietnamese circles. Vietnamese revolutionaries took part in the Chinese revolution in 1911–13. After the first World War, China became a place of refuge for members of Vietnam's nationalist and communist parties who from there carried on the fight against French rule.

It was during that war that the strategic importance, and hence also the political importance, of Vietnam first became apparent. All military experts agree that the attack precipitated on Malaya and the capture of Singapore would have been impossible without Japan's disposal over Saigon as a base of operations under the Franco-Nipponese agreement of 1940. Furthermore, the excellent natural ports on the coasts of Vietnam which were at the disposal of the Japanese should not be forgotten — among them especially the Bay of Camranh, where in 1905 Rodjetsvensky's Russian fleet cast anchor before the battle of Tsushima, and the Along bay which, close to the coal mines of Hon Gay, protected from winds and currents, affords an immense anchorage with a natural depth of more than thirty feet.

The favorable situation of Vietnam served Japanese imperialism as the bridgehead for its aggression. But it is also capable of serving peaceful and constructive ends. Henceforth, the progressive development of communications will permit us to look upon India as an integral part of a region which includes China, Japan, and all of Malaya. Located in the center, Vietnam may well become the crossroads for the region's main lines of communication. With the defeat of Japanese imperialism, Asia's evolution definitely tends in the direction of democracy. Vietnam would be no more than a pawn — though, to be sure, an exceptionally important one — if there were a return to the use of force. But if the progress of the Asiatic peoples takes place by democratic means, if their natural solidarity — founded not in some absurd racial theory, since they are of very different stocks, but in a common economic situation — does not permit barriers to the independence of any one of them, then a country like Vietnam, in spite of its restricted territory and its relatively small population, may well prove a necessary connecting link. Then it may play a fecund part in the evolution of the whole.