

# Vietnam Asks France To Participate In Land-Bridge Development

by Christine Bierre

A conference on great projects of infrastructure development in Vietnam was organized in Paris on May 17, by Vietnamitié, a Franco-Vietnamese friendship association. Vietnamitié, under the presidency of Dr. Louis Reymondon, has been actively promoting economic cooperation between France and Vietnam over the last 15 years. The conference was co-sponsored by the French Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Equipment, Transport and Housing.

The aim of the colloquium was to present to a French audience composed essentially of friends of Vietnam, of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), of businessmen and industrialists working in the area of infrastructure, and of local and national government officials, the very ambitious development projects that Vietnam is developing in the central region of the country.

Vietnamitié is fully involved in those projects. Since last year, French experts have visited Vietnam's central provinces, while delegations of Vietnamese officials travelled to France to define the kind of assistance they need, notably in dealing with weather and environmental problems, and in urban and port infrastructure. The Vietnamese delegations also visited the northwest coast of France, which has similar problems to Vietnam's, in the search for common solutions and cooperation.

## Debate in Vietnam Over Land-Bridges

Vietnam's geographical location and the importance of its infrastructure projects, put the country in a very good position to participate in the projects for Eurasian corridors of economic development launched over recent years by China and elaborated conceptually by *EIR* founder Lyndon LaRouche. These projects are more and more debated within the context of the ASEAN-Plus-3 forum (the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, plus China, Japan, and South Korea). Sources report that there is presently, in Vietnam, a big debate between those who want to participate actively and those who are cautious about any participation.

In launching powerful development projects in the center of the country, the Vietnamese government wants to create a balance, with the strong poles of growth in the northern triangle around Hanoi, and in the southern triangle around Ho Chi Minh City: This assessment came from several of the Vietnamese spokesmen including Vietnamese Ambassador to France Nguyen Manh Dung, Director of the National Urban

and Rural Planning Institute (Ministry of Construction) Tran Ngoc Chinh, and four leading officials of the popular committees of the provinces directly concerned in the projects.

In his presentation, Chinh underlined the strategic role that Vietnam can play in Eurasia. With its 78 million inhabitants and 300,000 square kilometers of land, Vietnam is one of the largest members of ASEAN. Its proximity to the main international maritime lines and its capacity to build deep-water ports — in particular in the central part of the country — give Vietnam a strategic character.

Among the most important national projects, Chinh mentioned the Hanoi-Ho Chi Minh City highway currently under construction, crossing the country from north to south, as well as three transversal routes crossing the center of the country from east to west. These routes are extremely important: They will open a window to the ocean and towards ASEAN, for the very poor mountainous regions which cover the great majority of this area, creating the conditions for sustained development.

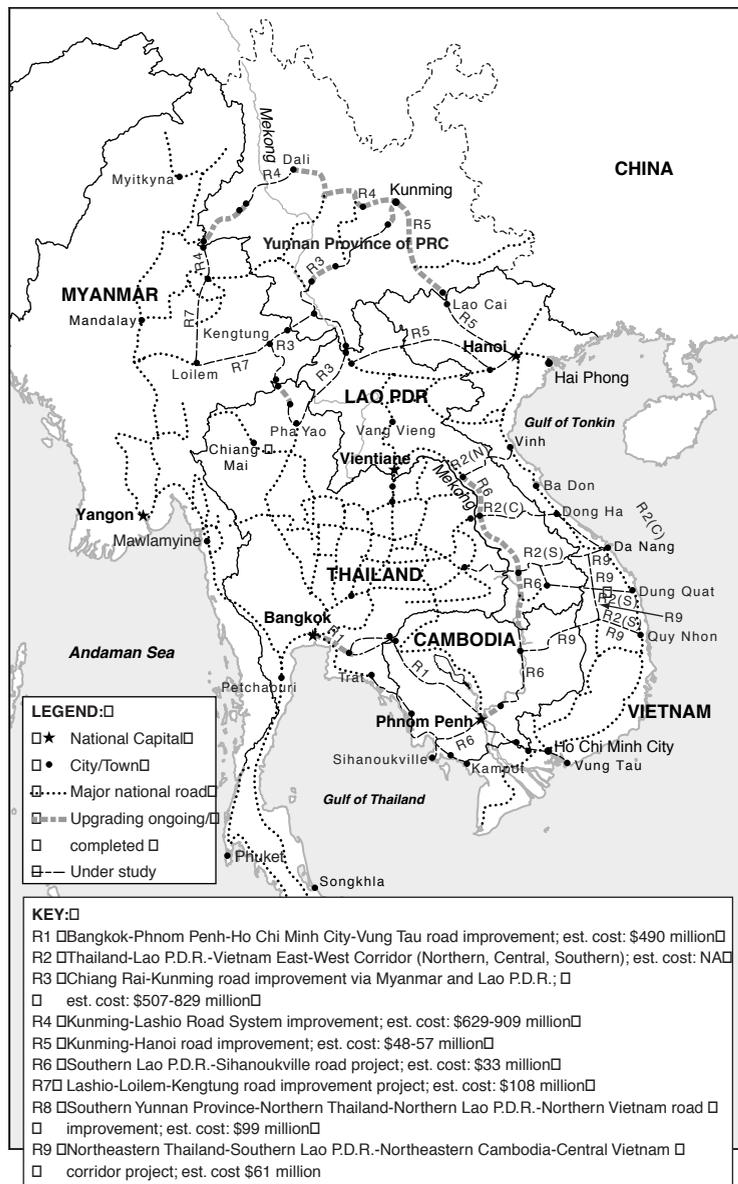
Through the development of its central region, Vietnam will become a crucial link between Eurasia and the oceans, underlined Chinh, before he detailed the assets and the handicaps of the region. Among the assets, he noted the more than 1,000 km of coast with possibilities to build deep-water ports; a potential for tourism due to its very beautiful beaches and its historical/cultural monuments, which UNESCO classes as the "patrimony of humanity." Among the handicaps, he raised the terrible war damage, the poor state of infrastructure, the narrowness of river mouths, and alluvial deposits which block the waterways.

It is in the central part of the country that the government wants to concentrate investments in oil refineries and in zones of economic development. Vietnam, the number-two regional oil exporter, produces 6 million tons of oil per year, and would like that to increase rapidly to 16 million tons.

Of the 11 central provinces, 4 have been designated part of the "key economic zone": Đà Nang-Ville, Thua Thien-Huê, Quang Nam, and Quang Ngai. Đà Nang-Ville is already an important conglomerate, with new urban areas in full development, laying the basis for a 1.2 million population by the year 2020. The port of Lien Chieu will be operational by 2010.

Thua Thien-Huê has great tourism potential, with its three "patrimony of humanity" sites: Huê, My Son, and Hôi An.

## Greater Mekong Subregion Road Projects (as of February 1999)



Source: Asian Development Bank

Japan is involved in this area, in constructing a deep-water port in Chan May, and a 6 km tunnel to circumvent the rugged Col de Nuages mountains.

At the crossroads of a north-south/east-west communications network, the province of Quang Nam will become a pole of industrial and technological development, with a new city in Tam Ky, a deep-water port in Ky Hà, and the important open economic zone of Chu Lai. The province is also presently renovating its large airport, road, and rail infrastructure.

Finally, the province of Quang Gnai, which is at present the poorest, will also become a center of industrial development around the Dung Quat oil complex and its international airport. A new oil refinery will be built through Russian-Vietnamese cooperation, and there is also a deep-water port which will play a complementary role to Ky Hà, in the Quang Nam province.

## French Cooperation

The projects, and thus the need for aid and cooperation, are enormous, and France is very well placed to contribute. In fact, since the Hanoi summit of 1997, due to past relations and to the existence of a particularly large Vietnamese community in France, the Vietnamese announced their decision to become one of the Francophone states.

The collaboration between Vietnamité and several French ministries, and the high-level participation of representatives of the state in the colloquium, indicate that France maintains a strong level of interest in Vietnam. As Nguyen Mahn Dung underlined, France is the second world lender to Vietnam, and one of its six most important commercial partners. One of the collaborators of Equipment, Transport and Housing Minister Jean Claude Gayssot briefed the conference participants on the French contributions. France is training pilots and helping in aviation maintenance; it recently opened a center for training in water management in Hanoi, as well as a building site, and a railway engineering school. France is also helping to train top-level engineers through its prestigious Ecole de Ponts et Chaussées (School of Bridges and Roads).

But this assistance falls far short of the needs of the ambitious Vietnamese projects. A much more important participation by France in the construction of roads, high-speed railway systems, and port infrastructure would aid the French economy. To contribute do this, France would have to extend Marshall Plan-type credits, and entice French companies to participate, through subsidies. To do so would require two things: First of all, France would have to respect the priorities of the Vietnamese development plans. (The French oil company Total, contracted by the Vietnamese government to build a refinery, refused to build it in the central part of the country, and when the Vietnamese authorities insisted, decided undiplomatically to retreat to Singapore.) Secondly, France will have to renounce the neo-liberal ideology of the European Union's Maastricht Treaty, which forbids state intervention in the economy, and will have to support friendly countries through investments in large infrastructure.

Is this all really too much to ask from the country of Jean-Baptiste Colbert and Charles de Gaulle?