

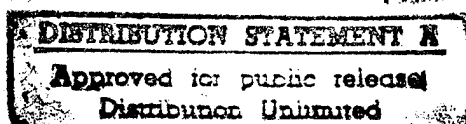
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THE TET OFFENSIVE AND THE PRINCIPLES OF WAR

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations,

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of

THE TET OFFENSIVE AND THE PRINCIPLES OF WAR

Although not a decisive operational success, the Tet Offensive is the acknowledged turning point of the Vietnam War. Using the Principles of War as a framework, we can gain insight into the cultural, operational and situational factors that influenced North Vietnamese planning strategies and execution realities, leading to this result.

Although the Communists considered the Principle of War when they planned this major operation, execution of the plan revealed weaknesses in a number of areas. These weaknesses, due in large part to North Vietnamese cultural bias and perceptions, consequently created obstacles to the successful execution of the plan.

Understanding the impact of cultural and political factors on the planning and execution of military operations is increasingly important in the context of today's multinational coalitions, non-traditional adversaries, and military operations other than war.

THE TET OFFENSIVE AND THE PRINCIPLES OF WAR

This Spring far outshines the previous Springs,
Of victories throughout the land come happy tidings.
Let North and South emulate each other in fighting the US aggressors!
Forward!
Total victory will be ours.¹

Students of Vietnamese history now agree that the above poem, read by Ho Chi Minh over Radio Hanoi, was more than a New Year's wish--it contained Hanoi's order to launch the Tet Offensive. On January 30 and 31, 1967, the Communists mounted near-simultaneous assaults on 36 of 44 South Vietnamese provincial capitals, nearly 70 of 245 district capitals, five of six autonomous cities, at least six major air bases, and numerous Army bases and Headquarters²--taking the Allies by surprise. Fierce fighting throughout the country continued for several weeks before the Communist forces were finally repelled. Figure 1 illustrates the magnitude of the Tet attacks.

Although Tet was not a decisive operational success, the Offensive is the acknowledged turning point of the Vietnam War. By examining the Tet Offensive, we can gain some insight into the North Vietnamese planning strategies and the execution realities that led to this result. Using the Principles of War as a framework for this study enables an understanding of the impact of operational, situational, and cultural factors on planning and execution processes.

The Tet Offensive in Context

The design of the Tet Offensive is best understood in the context of Hanoi's overall concept of war and the reality of the Communist situation in 1967.

Tet strategy was based on the concept of *dau tranh*. Loosely translated, this term means "struggle," but it is a powerful and emotional Vietnamese term. This struggle has two components: an armed military component (*dau tranh vu trang*) and a political struggle (*dau tranh chinh tri*). The armed and political components are further subdivided as illustrated in

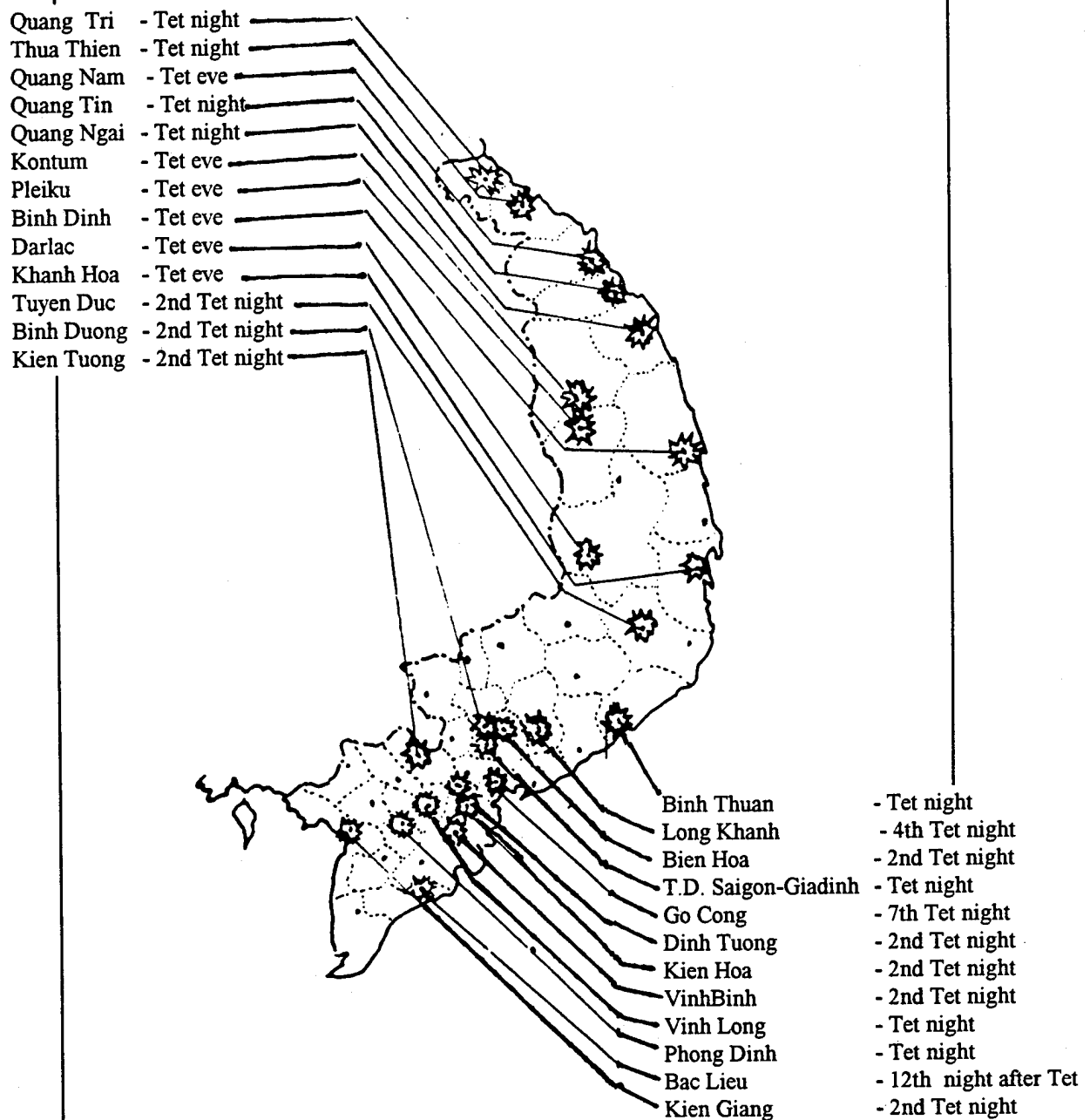


Figure 1 - Cities Attacked by Viet Cong During Tet

Figure 2. The result is a multi-dimensional model for conflict.³ The Tet plan incorporated all of these dimensions.

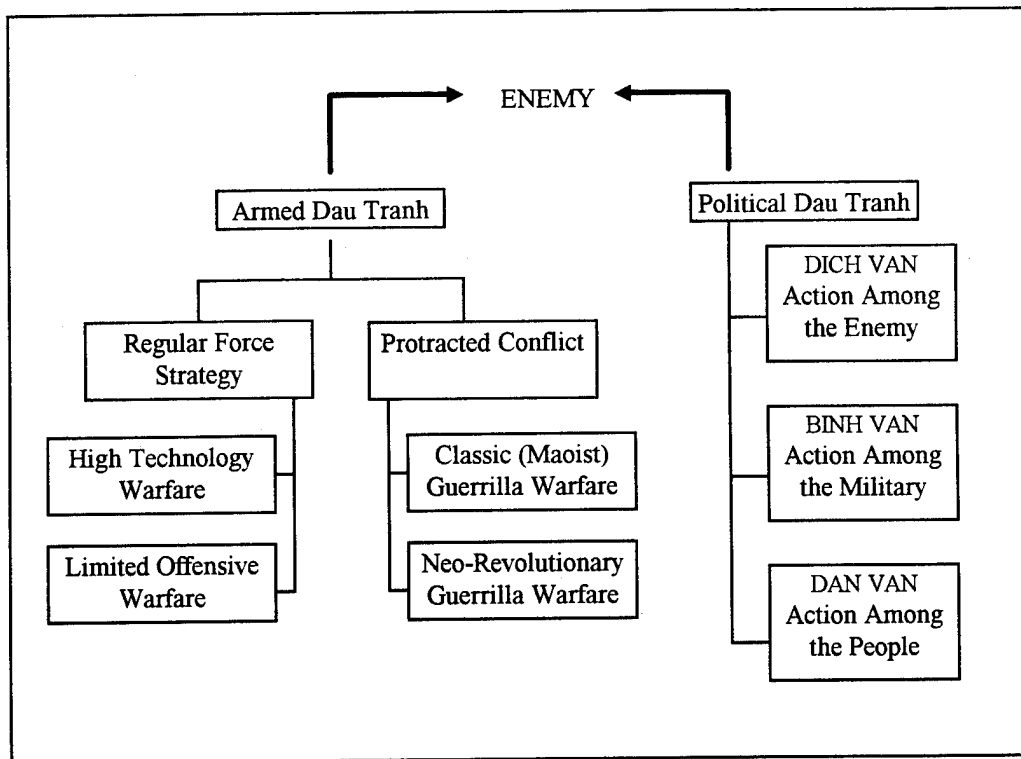


Figure 2 -- Vietnamese Concept of War

Until 1967, the North Vietnamese believed that victory in the South could be won using military *dau tranh*. The main debate was the type of armed struggle to be used.⁴ Most early activities used classic Maoist-style guerrilla warfare, concentrating on rural areas.

Things changed in 1967 for several reasons. Hanoi was surprised by the scope and pace of the U.S. buildup between 1965 and 1967.⁵ Allied search-and-destroy missions were disrupting logistics support to the People's Army of North Vietnam (PAVN) and National Liberation Front (NLF) forces*, causing a significant decline in combat capability. Further, U.S. pacification

*The People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) is commonly referred to as the NLF or as the Viet Cong. These terms refer to the armed forces of the Southern revolutionary movement in South Vietnam. The PAVN is the regular army of Hanoi.

efforts and South Vietnamese popular acceptance of the Americans contributed to a decline in NLF morale.⁶ By mid-1967, North Vietnamese leaders formally acknowledged that time was no longer on their side. The only hope for liberating the South was the withdrawal of U.S. forces, which, they agreed, would occur only when the cost of the war exceeded its benefits.⁷ Since the previous way of war had been unsuccessful, it was time for a change.

General Vo Nguyen Giap proposed a new direction, *Tong Cong Kich, Tong Khoi Ngia* (TCK-TKN)--General Offensive, General Uprising. The concept of TCK-TKN was not new; it had deep roots in Vietnamese military history.* It was completely different from previous plans, which had favored protracted conflict, launching large scale attacks only in areas where the enemy was vulnerable and revolutionary forces had clear superiority.⁸ General Giap's plan called for the integration of all military resources and every political instrument (diplomacy, political agitation, etc.) to achieve a decisive victory. This would be the centerpiece of the 1967-1968 Winter-Spring Campaign.⁹

The TCK-TKN plan was the second phase of the Campaign. According to Nam Dong, a high ranking Viet Cong, the 1967-1968 Campaign:

...was neither an ordinary campaign nor one staged with the intention of scoring a propaganda victory. It was a campaign designed to bring about a decisive victory and end the war.¹⁰

The ultimate North Vietnamese goal was a unified Vietnam under their control. To accomplish this, the North Vietnamese Communists planned to attack the U.S. in two ways. First, escalated

*TCK-TKN was a long-awaited event and proud piece of Vietnamese history. For the Communists, it was both a legend and a source of hope. TCK-TKN symbolized the struggle for sovereignty of a people who had been invaded and ruled by various powers for over a thousand years.

fighting would increase the cost of the war, fuel mounting American anti-war sentiments during a presidential election year, create fear among the South Vietnamese masses, and force the Saigon government to sponsor a massive "refugee assistance program."¹¹ Second, installation of a Communist-dominated "democratic" coalition government of respectable South Vietnamese from all strata and walks of life would turn world opinion in their favor.¹² Even if the Campaign did not win the war, it would improve the North Vietnamese position in future negotiations.¹³

The 1967-1968 Campaign plan was a dramatic departure from those of previous years. Using the entire range of military and political assets, it was the very essence of *dau tranh*. Hanoi hoped that the campaign would win the war in the South or at least slow the momentum of Allied offensive operations and buy time.¹⁴ It had three phases.

Phase I (October and December 1967) was a preparation phase.¹⁵ Highly coordinated conventional operations would target fixed installations and enemy concentrations along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and along the Laos and Cambodian borders.¹⁶ Primarily conducted by PAVN forces, this phase was designed to draw U.S. forces away from populated areas while masking Communist infiltration into South Vietnam urban areas in preparation for Phase II.¹⁷

Another goal, according to a captured training manual, was to

...destroy a large part of the U.S. combat forces to render them incapable of carrying on the war and saving the puppet government and army from disintegration. Inflict heavy losses on U.S. forces, both politically and militarily.¹⁸

The final and perhaps most important goal was to assess U.S. reactions. Hanoi wanted to avoid an Allied invasion into North Vietnam at all costs. If the U.S. response to Phase I conventional attacks threatened the North Vietnamese homeland, then Phase II would become just another annual military campaign instead of TCK-TKN.¹⁹

Phase II (January - March 1968) was the jewel in the Campaign crown. The plan used

“neo-revolutionary guerrilla tactics,” which combined regular and guerrilla forces in simultaneous attacks against key targets in South Vietnam.²⁰ The Offensive concentrated on major cities; airfields and aviation-related installations; Government of South Vietnam (GVN)-Allied logistics, transport, and communications networks; and civilian and military headquarters.²¹ Attacks would begin with guerrilla and commando urban assaults with subsequent support from NLF regular force units staged in near-by suburban areas. According to the plan, these military attacks would be followed by political agitation, culminating with the overthrow the current regime and installation of a new Communist-dominated coalition government.²² Even if Phase II did not result in change of government, the North Vietnamese believed it would significantly reduce the morale and military strength of the South Vietnamese, making Phase III more effective.²³

Phase III (April - June 1968) was the “fighting while negotiating” phase. Additional North Vietnamese regular units would pour across the DMZ to reinforce the Southern forces.²⁴ Rocket and mortar attacks on towns and villages and continued military pressure on Saigon would enable the Communists to expand “liberated areas” and force serious peace negotiations. The purpose of Phase III was not merely to stage demonstrations but, as stated in the 6th Resolution of the Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN), “...to make use of violence to overthrow the enemy state power and build the people’s revolutionary state power.”²⁵

Communist Application of The Principles of War

The Principles of War provide a good framework for the study of major military operations. In this framework, examination of the North Vietnamese plan provides an insight into the influence of cultural bias and perception on the planning process and its potential impact on operational reality.

Surprise

"Outgunned" by the Allied forces, surprise was critical to Communist success. Its importance to the North Vietnamese is demonstrated by the careful coordination and planning of elaborate deceptions and their willingness to take significant risks to mislead their opponents about Communist intentions, thereby reducing an effective Allied response.²⁶

Although the Allies knew an offensive was planned, the Communists were able to keep the details of their plan a secret until it was executed.²⁷ Although ultimately failing in the battlefield, they were able to achieve initial success because the Allies did not anticipate the scope, intensity, timing, or targets of the Offensive.²⁸

Timing the offensive to coincide with the Tet holiday was bold, but risky. Even though there was historic precedence for Tet attacks,* the Communists knew they could easily alienate the South Vietnamese populace by implementing TCK-TKN during this most sacred Vietnamese holiday. However, the potential benefits outweighed this risk. Taking advantage of the traditional truce and accompanying reduction in force posture and vigilance, the Communists increased the probability of their success.²⁹

The Tet holiday also facilitated the infiltration of people, weapons, and supplies into urban areas. Tet is a time of feasting and celebration; it is also a time people traditionally travel to their birth places to revere departed family members and reaffirm bonds of kinship.³⁰ It was simple for Communist infiltrators to enter urban areas dressed as travelers or as farmers carrying contraband concealed in carts full of produce. Additionally, the joyous, often raucous, celebration and the sound of holiday firecrackers would easily mask the gunfire of initial attacks.

*The most illustrious Tet exploit was the surprise attack, led by Emperor Quang Trung, to rout the Chinese from Hanoi in 1789. According to legend, Quang Trung and his men celebrated Tet early and attacked the Chinese while they were celebrating, forcing them to flee the city and negotiate peace.

To further insure surprise, in November 1967, the NLF declared a seven-day cease-fire, from January 27th through February 3rd. Since the Tet truce was traditionally honored by the belligerents, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) would most likely stand down.³¹ On January 27, a NLF spokesman publicly appealed for observance of the Tet truce, hinting the Communists might even extend it even longer. At the same time, Viet Cong and PAVN units canceled leave and began moving South.³²

Additionally, the Communists masked the significance of Tet-related initiatives by treating them as routine, hoping to reduce their importance in the minds of Allies. For example, after negotiating Chinese and Soviet military aid to keep supplies flowing during the Offensive, they boldly announced a new "Agreement on China's Economic and Technical Assistance to Vietnam."³³

In the tradition of Oriental warfighting, the North Vietnamese further sought to deceive their enemies with the use of aliases and cover names, both for individuals (Ho Chi Minh had more than 50)³⁴ and military units. For example, the 38th Viet Cong Local Force Battalion was also known as Nahien Doan, Labor Union 38, 83rd Battalion, Worksite 83, Thi Xa 38, the 803rd, the 504th, Cong Ty 38, and 48th Battalion. This deception made maintenance of accurate orders of battle a complex and frustrating task for Allied intelligence analysts, who had to determine whether "new" unit identifications were new units or new aliases.³⁵

These deceptions were successful. Allied intelligence analysts knew an offensive was being planned and would probably occur around the time of Tet. However, they believed it would occur in a border area, like Khe Sanh, probably shortly after the holiday. While Hanoi had traditionally used the Tet holiday to move troops and supplies, it was widely believed "...to attack during Tet would be to offend the very people on whose success the 'General Uprising' was

depending.”³⁶ Communist planning was based on the assumption that the Allies would honor the extended truce as they had historically observed cease-fires--D-Day was set for February 4th. The shortened cease-fire forced Hanoi to execute the plan before all players were in position--with disastrous results. Because reinforcements were not in place when the Offensive began, sapper* units could not hold their objectives against U.S. and ARVN counter-attacks; they “...died awaiting reinforcements that never arrived.”³⁷

Sometimes deception can be too good. The popular reaction to the Offensive in Saigon is a good example. Many people did not recognize it as a Viet Cong action. This was, at least in part, due to the surprise. They thought it was another internal coup. Additionally, some Communist units wore ARVN uniforms or civilian clothes, further contributing to the confusion.³⁸

Unity of Effort

The North Vietnamese understood the need for complete coordination between regular forces, local military, and political units if they were to launch simultaneous attacks in diverse areas.³⁹ After all, there were hundreds of cadres** in each township, each with his own mission. Infiltrators had to know where to go, how to contact their commanders, and what to do until H-hour.⁴⁰ Although specific operational details were not revealed, Communist intentions were disseminated early.

In November 1967, Allied forces captured a two-month-old training manual, entitled “Clearly Understand the New Situation and Mission: Take Advantage of Victories to Surge Forward and Completely Defeat the U.S. and Puppet Enemy.” Intended for “low level cadres,

*A commando-raider adept at penetrating Allied defenses for sabotage or terrorism. A sapper is often a demolition expert as well as a trained combat soldier.

**An individual or political group, trained to control and indoctrinate others, promoting the Communist revolutionary cause.

Party members, and the sympathetic masses who are the target of the Party's development," the document provided a general outline of the strategy and the early phases of the Tet offensive. It also identified the need to increase recruitment and popular support.⁴¹ Similarly, a November document issued by the Current Affairs Committee of the Women's Liberation Association of Binh Dinh province instructed female cadres to join village or hamlet guerrilla forces and to motivate husbands, brothers, and sons to join the army.⁴²

The Communists took calculated risks to broadcast information into the South. They were in a "Catch-22" position--they had to maintain secrecy, and, at the same time, provide tasking and information to thousands of cadres and sympathetic city dwellers throughout South Vietnam.⁴³ To do this, they used passive deception strategies to conceal their preparations and active deception methods to draw enemy attention away from Tet target areas.⁴⁴ They would send instructions to the South and follow immediately with attacks on places, like Khe Sanh and Dak To, diverting attention away from their primary targets. As predicted, Allied intelligence analysts typically associated the tasking with these peripheral attacks. However, Viet Cong cadres, who were privy to secret communications and fluent in Vietnamese revolutionary jargon, understood their significance.⁴⁵ Focusing Allied attention and firepower in the northern and western rural regions not only masked the infiltration of supplies, weapons, and troops into Saigon and other urban areas, but also provided training opportunities for North Vietnamese and NLF forces and insight into anticipated Allied response.⁴⁶

Although the Communists understood the importance of unity of effort and took considerable pains to ensure it, their emphasis on secrecy and need-to-know, the complexity of the plan, and the diversity of forces became insurmountable obstacles to success in this area.

Economy of Force

The North Vietnamese have been criticized for their ineffective use of resources during the Winter-Spring Campaign. Their elaborate deception plans were resource intensive, resulted in significant military casualties, and severely taxed their command structure capability.⁴⁷ This accusation may be a little harsh. The Communists planned resource allocations carefully--they understood the risks and were willing to accept heavy casualties in Phase I. These losses were exacerbated by the fact that planning, which "...involved extensive preparation, highly coordinated attacks, new troops, cadres, weapons, and tactics, including direct frontal assaults...."⁴⁸ was based on optimistically exaggerated reports about conditions in the South.

It was widely believed in Hanoi that the South Vietnamese masses were ready to support the communists--they were so unhappy and disliked the Americans so much that they would overthrow the Thieu regime if given a little encouragement. They also believed that the GVN was on the verge of collapse; the ARVN was so inefficient it would disintegrate as a coherent military organization rather than fight,⁴⁹ and attacks on Allied C3 systems would halt the American partnership in the war.⁵⁰

Additionally, the NLF claimed to have secret underground organizations in all communities in South Vietnam as well as control of four-fifths of the area; guerrilla units consistently submitted reports of the "vigorous movement in the South;" and urban cadres, wishing to keep their soft jobs and avoid the harsh guerrilla jungle life, consistently submitted enthusiastic progress reports--all were false.⁵¹ In other words, force planning for the Offensive was based on faulty assumptions and misinformation. Further, when Southern commanders, to their horror, were directed to prepare for TCK-TKN, they could not "lose face" by protesting or admitting the truth--they had to support the decision as best they could.⁵²

Similarly, for the plan to work, it was necessary for regular forces and local forces to coordinate closely. When effective coordination did not occur and local forces faced situations they could not handle alone, they were hesitant to report it to higher headquarters.⁵³ As a result, the plan could not be effectively supported with available forces and readiness levels. From an economy of force perspective, the Offensive had little chance of success.

Security

Planning was conducted in secret by senior officers with a strict need-to-know. Subordinates were provided the general aims and appropriate tasks but not the date or scope of the Offensive.⁵⁴

In addition to good operational security, the North Vietnamese sought to learn enemy intentions. Beginning in September 1967, the Viet Cong increased the number of female agents. These agents were tasked to gather information about the military installations in Saigon and other urban areas but they were not told why or how the information was to be used.⁵⁵

Phase I border wars also revealed U.S. intentions. To measure the U.S. response, PAVN forces, equipped with Soviet weapons and communications gear attacked the ARVN I Corps near the DMZ and a U.S. Marine firebase at Cong Thien in September. Although the reaction was immediate and resulted in huge PAVN losses, the U.S. defended South Vietnam rather than attacking the North. An October attack of ARVN III Corps and U.S. Army outposts at Loc Ninh and Song Be had the same result. The North felt confident that the response to TCK-TKN would be defensive.⁵⁶ They were correct.

As the Tet holiday approached, intelligence collection increased and target lists were finalized. The Communists took advantage of the 1967 Christmas truce to conduct first-hand surveillance in urban areas.⁵⁷ With Allied attention focused away, North Vietnamese commanders

anxiously awaited the order to execute the Offensive.

Even though intelligence collection and peripheral attacks provided insight into enemy intentions and although they were master manipulators and deceivers, the Communists fell into a "mirror imaging" trap. Although they accurately predicted the U.S. government and GVN response to their extended truce proposal, they did not correctly assess the U.S. Army response. They expected that General Westmoreland and the U.S. Army to be controlled from Washington, to follow orders with virtually no deviation or independent thought. This was not the case; General Westmoreland was against the extended truce. In fact, he suggested the cease-fire be canceled altogether. Although the South Vietnamese refused to cancel the it entirely, they did agree to shorten the period and to maintain ARVN units at half strength.⁵⁸ As discussed above, this forced the Communists to change their plan, significantly reducing the effectiveness of the their attacks.

Objective

One of the most important aspects of any operational mission is a clearly defined, decisive and attainable objective which contributes to accomplishment of strategic goals. The strategic goals of the 1967-1968 Winter-Spring Campaign were to form a Communist-controlled coalition government in South Vietnam, force the United States to abandon its support of South Vietnam, and enhance the North Vietnamese bargaining position in future negotiations. To facilitate these aims, the primary military objective of the Tet Offensive was to "...annihilate the puppet army [ARVN] to hasten the collapse of the Saigon regime."⁵⁹

This was to be done through several intermediate objectives, which were widely disseminated as diverse elements began preparations for the Offensive. In the spirit of *dau tranh*, political activities, integral to ultimate success, were interwoven with planned military actions. A

captured document revealed that the Viet Cong were directed to:

Use very strong military attacks in coordination with the uprisings of the local population to take over towns and cities. Troops should flood the lowlands. They should move toward liberating the capital city [Saigon], take power and try to rally enemy brigades and regiments to our side one by one. Propaganda should be broadly disseminated among the population in general, and leaflets should be used to reach enemy officers and enlisted personnel. The above subject should be fully understood by cadre and troops;....⁶⁰

Although general operational objectives were stated, breakdowns often occurred at lower levels where troops were not privy to the "big picture." A typical example was the attack on the U.S. embassy. A small sapper unit penetrated the compound exterior wall and entered the compound, killing the duty MPs. Once inside, they stopped. Although there are no indications that this was to be a suicide raid, nothing had been said to them about replacements or an escape route. They carried enough explosives to blast their way into the Chancery building, but had no order to do so. Without specific orders or a clear mission, the sappers took up defensive positions and returned fire. Eventually all were killed or captured.⁶¹

Offensive

The Vietnamese define *offensive* as "...a process involving continuous struggles of all kinds, and not military attacks alone...."⁶² In addition to military attacks, the Tet Offensive included political assaults against the urban populace by troops and agitators, especially in poor sections. Because conventional enemy forces, with help from the U.S., could generate superior firepower and fighting capability, Tet planners counted on surprise to carry the war to the enemy, enabling them to gain, maintain, and exploit the initiative.

The COSVN had received the plan outline as early as August 1967 and knew that the Offensive would involve extensive preparation to accomplish highly coordinated, simultaneous attacks on numerous populated areas.⁶³ By October, tactical plans had been developed, cadres at

the regiment and company level had been briefed about the general objectives, and Viet Cong units had begun learning to operate ARVN armored vehicles.⁶⁴ By January, the first phase of the Campaign had successfully diverted U.S. forces from urban areas, significantly increasing Communist chances of success. However, as Tet approached, this did not make NLF leaders especially confident.

As in other wars of attrition, high Communist casualties had resulted in a force of young, inexperienced boys, many of whom were conscripted from rural areas. This created significant problems for the Communists. In addition to reduced readiness, these young soldiers were sometimes as fearful of the urban environment as they were of death. They were also much less committed to the Communist cause. The following account from a Saigon merchant is typical:

I saw them right in my area...about 10 to 15 of them...were sitting together and eating and smoking. I saw they were very calm, and didn't show any signs of fear or fright at all, although...there were some MPs and policemen surrounding the area.... They said that they had obeyed their superior's orders to come and take over Saigon and that they were not attacking anyone or doing any fighting at all. But if GVN forces hit them, they would fight back.⁶⁵

Mass

Tet planners knew, even with assistance from their Chinese and Soviet benefactors, they couldn't match U.S. firepower with a head-on confrontation. Rather, they planned to mass effects rather than concentrating forces. The plan focused attacks on what the North Vietnamese considered the enemy's "weak links"--the GVN and the ARVN⁶⁶--while avoiding direct conflicts with U.S. forces. The Communists were confident that North Vietnamese methods of guerrilla warfare would frustrate the U.S. conventional mindset and give them an advantage. As one North Vietnamese author stated:

...the superiority of modern guerrilla science lies in the fact that guerrillas use a small force to fight against a greater enemy force, hit the enemy accurately, face no difficulties concerning the supply of weapons...the enemy--no matter how numerous

his troops are--will be bogged down increasingly deeply and unable to recapture or achieve any significant victory on the battlefield.⁶⁷

The integration of guerrilla units with regular and political forces would be an additional force multiplier, enabling sustained operations once they had seized the initiative.

Another way Hanoi tried to "mass effects" was to weaken the enemy alliance. They effectively used rumors, leaks and deceptions to create an atmosphere of distrust, driving a wedge between the U.S. and South Vietnamese allies. The Communists frequently leaked reports of diplomatic progress, hinting that the U.S. had collaborated with the North to allow Communist troops to attack GVN installations.⁶⁸ These reports appeared to be substantiated when Tet attacks began. Immediately after Tet, there were widespread rumors in Saigon that the U.S. had collaborated with the Viet Cong and allowed them to attack the capital city.⁶⁹

Hanoi also used secret diplomatic exchanges through third parties to deceive the Allies about Communist intentions, creating a sense of false security.⁷⁰ "Operation Buttercup" is a good example. In the fall of 1967, a captured Viet Cong agent produced a letter which allegedly authorized him to discuss "prisoners and other matters." It included a list of Viet Cong prisoners whose release was requested. As a result, the U.S. pressured the GVN to release some prisoners as a good will gesture. To the GVN, this supported the rumors that the U.S. was trying to reach a unilateral agreement with Hanoi.⁷¹

The North Vietnamese not only sowed the seeds of dissention at the highest levels, they also conducted low level PSYOP campaigns to win popular support by announcing new NLF programs promising freedom of the press, free elections, free speech, and a warm welcome to defecting South Vietnamese officers and government officials.⁷²

Many South Vietnamese believed rumors of U.S.-Viet Cong collaboration, but this does not appear to have had a significant impact on the success or failure of the Tet Offensive. The

circumstance that probably had the greatest impact on the ultimate outcome was the Communist failure to incite the expected South Vietnamese popular uprising. Most South Vietnamese were too concerned with their own safety to support either the Viet Cong or the GVN. As a housewife in the village of Thanh My Tay states, "We only thought of how to take care of ourselves. It is innocent people who always get caught in the middle of war."⁷³ That Communist soldiers and cadres often used coercive persuasion techniques during Tet also contributed to this sentiment.⁷⁴

Maneuver

The North Vietnamese knew for their plan to be successful, they had to strike from the best position to accomplish their objective. They had to protect their own force and reduce its vulnerability while keeping the enemy off balance, exploiting their successes, and preserving freedom of action. They took elaborate measures to accomplish this. Border attacks in Phase I reduced the number of Allied forces in urban areas. To take advantage of this situation, the Communists planned lightning strikes in diverse areas to throw the ARVN and GVN off balance. Infiltration of cadres, commandos, and guerrillas provided the basic urban attack force. It was to be reinforced by NLF regulars, with PAVN troops in reserve.⁷⁵

However, Hanoi seriously underestimated the resolve of the South to resist. Rather than the predicted passive response and quick surrender, South Vietnamese soldiers fought fiercely and effectively, beyond even the expectations of the U.S., eventually repelling the Communist advance. This situation was compounded by the last minute change in execution date, making it difficult for NLF regulars and reserve forces to effectively respond to Allied counter-attacks.⁷⁶

Simplicity

History will probably excuse the Americans for not intercepting, translating, comprehending and believing Hanoi's full intent for the TCK/TKN plan and making the necessary preparations to counter it. Because, as it turned out, the Southern revolutionaries did not understand it either.⁷⁷

The Tet plan was daring but complex. Planning simultaneous attacks on multiple areas, coordinating the activities of diverse military and political units, and ensuring appropriate logistics support was an incredible task. Although much effort had gone into detailed planning, there was a major execution problem in addition to those discussed above. In their haste to disseminate the new execution order, Communist leaders told their commands to attack on the first day of the Lunar New Year. However, Communist planners forgot that North and South Vietnam were using different calendars--this meant there were two execution dates. As a result, attacks did not begin simultaneously as planned. Those who started a day late faced troops who were already alerted. This significantly degraded the operation's overall effectiveness.⁷⁸

Conclusions

The Tet Offensive was a complex and complicated operation. In retrospect, it is amazing that the North Vietnamese performed as well as they did. Although the Communists planned the Offensive using Principles-of-War considerations, its execution revealed weaknesses in a number of areas. These weaknesses were due in large part to North Vietnamese cultural bias and perceptions. Understanding the impact of these factors on the planning and executing of military operations is increasingly important in the context of today's dynamic and transitional world.

Cultural "baggage" can significantly affect military planning and, subsequently, results on the battlefield. North Vietnamese planning was severely hampered by the cultural mores which prevented Southern commanders, guerrillas, and cadres from telling the truth about their own inadequacies. Social pressures, like the stigma of familial disgrace, the fear of reprisal, or the demonstration of macho pride, can encourage inaccurate readiness and progress reports, can ultimately sabotage successful planning. In 1973, Hanoi determined that some of their difficulties "...could have been avoided or limited if we had set appropriate requirements or promptly

changed our operational formulas to make them more flexible and suitable to the situation at the time.”⁷⁹

Similarly, the expression, “pride goeth before a fall,” may help explain the Communist failure. The North Vietnamese displayed a “cultural arrogance” which led to a false sense of security. Because they considered themselves superior to the South Vietnamese, they were not prepared for the ferocity of the ARVN response to the Tet strikes. As the world’s “only remaining Superpower,” the U.S. must remember that future adversaries will be as smart or smarter than we are. We must assume they will respond assymmetrically and apply their strengths against our weaknesses.

Winning, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. The very idea of the Tet Offensive seems like suicide to many Westerners. From the Hanoi perspective, however, it was the ultimate application of their concept of war. Rooted in historical traditions and shrouded in symbolism, its goal was to drive yet another powerful invader from Vietnam, as their ancestors had done centuries before. The Communists believed the South Vietnamese people shared their vision and hoped for a decisive victory; but they were willing to settle for not losing if it brought them some bargaining power. The lesson to learn is that cultural biases and traditions affect perceptions and actions. Therefore, we must avoid our natural tendency toward complacency and always expect the unexpected.

When he said, “It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma,” Winston Churchill could have easily been describing the Vietnamese communists rather than the Soviet Union. Illusion is an inherent part of Vietnamese cultural heritage. The Communists employed deception and perception manipulation at every level. For the most part, their ploys were successful. But few of their operational concepts or techniques were new. Most had historical and cultural roots

which made seemingly irrational acts make sense. As we face culturally diverse adversaries in the future, we will continue to be challenged to understand their perceptions (and their "reality") when planning operations.

Unconventional warfare, like insurgency, has different dimensions than conventional warfare--political activities and popular opinion have a greater impact at every level. Tet tactical military actions were fairly effective, but could not be sustained when the popular uprising failed to occur. People--not firepower--were the key to the plan's success. This human element has become increasingly important in the context of multi-national coalitions and military operation other than war. Understanding the unique cultural and political factors of non-conventional conflicts, such as revolutionary warfare, and their effect on military operations will help us meet the future challenges presented by non-traditional allies and adversaries, and enable us to retain our position as a world leader.

NOTES

1. Bruce E. Jones, War Without Windows (New York: Vanguard Press, 1987), 175.
2. Ibid., 191.
3. Ronnie E. Ford, Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 27-28.
4. Ibid., 56.
5. James J. Wirtz, The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 28.
6. Ibid., 44-45.
7. Ford, 57.
8. William J. Duiker, The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 250.
9. Wirtz, 61-62.
10. Pham Van Son, ed. The Vietcong "Tet" Offensive (Saigon: Printing and Publication Center, RVNAN, 1968), 48.
11. Ibid., 48-49.
12. Ford, 57.
13. Wirtz, 18.
14. Ibid., 20.
15. Pham Van Son, ed., 46.
16. Douglas Pike, War, Peace, and the Viet Cong (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1969), 126.
17. Ford, 93.
18. Wirtz, 68.
19. Pham Van Son, ed., 48.
20. Pike, 142-146.
21. Ibid., 126-127.

22. Pham Van Som, ed., 27.
23. Duiker, 273.
24. Ford, 93.
25. Duiker, 274.
26. Wirtz, 2-3.
27. Pham Van Som, ed., 54.
28. Wirtz, 3.
29. Ibid., 65-66.
30. Ford, 103-104.
31. Wirtz, 72.
32. Ibid., 79.
33. Ibid., 67.
34. Ford, 43.
35. Jones, 267.
36. Ford, 103-104.
37. Ibid., 129.
38. Victoria Pohle, The VietCong in Saigon: Tactics and Objectives During the Tet Offensive (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation, 1969) 27.
39. Ford, 117.
40. Pham Van Son, ed., 53.
41. Wirtz, 68.
42. Ibid., 75.
43. Ibid., 81.
44. Ibid., 65.
45. Ibid., 71.
46. Ford, 106.

47. Wirtz, 66.
48. Ford, 89.
49. Pham Van Son, ed., 49.
50. Pike, 126-127.
51. Ford, 89; 116.
52. Ibid., 116-117.
53. Ibid., 117.
54. Wirtz, 66.
54. Ibid.
56. Ford, 91-92.
57. Don Oberdorfer, Tet! (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1971)59.
58. Duiker, 266.
59. Ibid., 243-244.
60. Oberdorfer, 119.
61. Ibid., 7-8; 24.
62. Ford, 80.
63. Ibid., 89.
64. Wirtz, 72.
65. Pohle, 67.
66. Duiker, 243-244.
67. Jones, 81.
68. Pham Van Son, ed., 51.
69. Pohle, 43.
70. Wirtz, 62.
71. Oberdorfer, 63-64.
72. Wirtz, 70.

- 73. Pohle, 35.
- 74. Ibid., 19-20.
- 75. Duiker, 266.
- 76. Ford, 129.
- 77. Ibid., 110.
- 78. Ibid, 128.
- 79. Ibid., 141.

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