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THE STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL GENIUS OF GENERAL VO NGUYEN GIAP:  
A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO HANOI

by

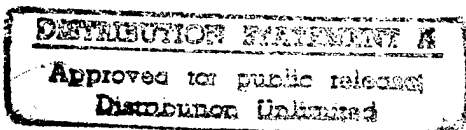
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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

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 STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL GENIUS OF GENERAL VO NGUYEN GIAP:  
A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO HANOI

In his role as Commander of the Viet Minh, General Vo Nguyen Giap developed into an extremely effective military leader who demonstrated significant strategic and operational acumen in his approach to the war. However, in the subsequent conflict against South Vietnam and the United States, his effectiveness was constrained by the additional duties and responsibilities he had been assigned. He was further hindered in executing the war as he saw necessary due to the involvement of the Politburo in the military strategic decision making process.

Although North Vietnam ultimately compelled the United States to leave the country and subsequently conquered the South, a comparison of this effort with the manner in which they defeated the French raises questions for further study dealing with the issue of what is the most effective way to fight a revolutionary war.

## COMMENTS

The purpose of this paper is to consider the strategic and operational effectiveness of Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap in his revolutionary war against the French and contrast that with the subsequent war directed against South Vietnam and the United States. The methodology used includes a historical review from an operational art perspective of key events in the war against the French (1946 to 1954) while General Giap was Commander of the Vietnamese Liberation Army (also known as the Armed Propaganda and Liberation Unit) and Minister of Defense of the fledgling revolutionary movement. In the second half of this paper, key events are reviewed from a perspective of General Giap's *inability* to conduct the war against South Vietnam and the United States the way he wanted to. During this latter period, Giap had been promoted to a position on the Politburo where, in combination with his roles as Commander of the People's Army of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and Minister of Defense, one would presume he would have been able to have an even greater impact on the conduct and course of the war. Such was not the case.

The staggering losses the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese suffered as a result of Giap's strategy not being followed hints intriguingly at a possible dichotomy in the supremacy of politics as applied to revolutionary war versus conventional war. It further demonstrates problems encountered when political leaders dictate military strategy. These issues, many in the form of raising additional questions, are covered in the final chapter.

The nature of this review, utilizing an operational art point of view, presumes the reader has basic knowledge and understanding of the elements of this subdiscipline of military art. Terminology commonly used in operational art will not necessarily be

specifically highlighted; its associated definition will not be defined. The treatment of this topic is, by virtue of the time frame covered, and within limitations imposed by the length of this paper, broad-brush in nature.

The following is provided for a common reference point:

Operational art can be defined as a component of military art that deals with both theory and practice of planning, preparing, conducting, and sustaining major operations and campaigns aimed to accomplish operational or strategic objectives in a given theater.<sup>1</sup>

Although the tone of this paper may make Giap out to be an infallible hero who won the war(s) single-handedly, this is not the intent, nor is it historically accurate. He did make mistakes, sometimes of disastrous proportions, and experienced failures in spite of his best planning. He was most certainly assisted in his decision making by extremely competent military advisors. However, in the end it was his leadership, vision, and military acumen which created the necessary conditions to force foreign troops from Vietnamese soil.

## MAO TSE-TUNG'S THREE PHASES OF REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE

During his years of battle against the Kuomintang forces, Mao Tse-Tung devoted a tremendous effort to develop and refine his concept of revolutionary warfare. He settled on a three-stage approach which would allow a rag-tag band of guerrilla fighters to evolve into a force of considerable size and sophistication which would be capable of defeating the enemy through a massive uprising and definitive military engagement.

Phase 1: Organizational and political mobilization. The emphasis is on creating an underground network and infrastructure in the rural area. Although a defensive stage, occasional acts of low level guerrilla warfare may occur. It is, however, primarily a period of education and indoctrination.

Phase 2: There is an increase in guerrilla activity, to the point where the insurgents have gained control of the rural areas and surrounding countryside. Major base camps are established. Regional forces emerge. Occasional acts of mobile warfare are conducted, some of which, particularly in the latter portion of this phase, may consist of a relatively large attacking force.

Phase 3: This is the strategic offensive stage; large-scale conventional warfare attacks are conducted by the combined forces and a general uprising of the people occurs.

In this theory of warfare, each phase includes those actions of the previous phase. Therefore, in Phase 2 political education and indoctrination would continue. Likewise, in Phase 3 political education, indoctrination, and guerrilla warfare tactics are conducted in conjunction with the conventional warfare attacks.

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## INTRODUCTION

Much has been written on why and how both France and the United States lost their wars in Vietnam. However, less attention has been given to discussion on *how* the Viet Minh, North Vietnamese, and Viet Cong managed to defeat these western powers. Pat answers attributing their success to external support, provided by China and Russia, or their willingness to sacrifice the lives of tens of thousands of their populace do not begin to adequately explain the manner in which they achieved victory.

Regardless of their aims, weapons, or numbers, these forces could not have achieved the success they did without the influence of a great military thinker; an individual who possessed incredible leadership skills and who could assess the situation and apply the correct actions to achieve a final strategic victory. They found such an individual in General Vo Nguyen Giap who was a lawyer by training, former school teacher by trade, ardent student of Communist ideology, and guerrilla fighter.

It was Giap's overlaying of the concepts of operational art with selected doctrine from history's greatest strategic military thinkers which ultimately allowed the North to achieve their political objective of reunification. Specifically, Giap melded guerrilla warfare with the conventional warfare of regional militias and regular army troops, applying the phase of revolutionary warfare he deemed most appropriate for the situation.

The Viet Minh, Viet Cong, and North Vietnamese brought not one, but two great military powers to their knees through their understanding and application of revolutionary warfare. It is no accident that General Giap was the prominent military leader in the wars against both countries. However, Giap's effectiveness as a great military leader was diluted



in action against the United States for two reasons: Politburo involvement prevented him from dictating policy and strategy to the same degree that he did in the war against the French and, secondly, his responsibilities in the newly formed People's Democratic Republic of Vietnam precluded him from the degree of personal involvement at the theater-strategic and operational levels that he had previously exercised. He was, instead, relegated to proposing grand strategy and incorporating requirements of the Party at the national and theater-strategic levels of the war.

## GIAP: THE MAN BEHIND THE MYTH

Vo Nguyen Giap was born 28 August 1911 in Quang Binh Province. At age 13 his name was already in the files of the French security service for coordinating revolutionary activities of fellow school students. Despite continuing conflicts with the authorities, he graduated from university at age 26 with a degree in law and political economics.

In 1940 Giap went into exile in China – the Communist Party had been banned and his activities put him in danger of being arrested by the French. In China, Giap came under the tutelage of Ho Chi Minh, immersed himself in the doctrine of Mao Tse-Tung and other military strategists, and attended a political and guerrilla warfare school. A rising star in the Indochinese Communist Party, he was given increasingly important leadership roles.

When the Vietnamese Liberation Party was formed in September 1944 Giap was named its commander. At the end of 1945 his military experience was approximately that of a major in a western army. By the time the Viet Minh declared war on the French one year later, he had the responsibilities of a four star theater commander.<sup>2</sup>

It was during these early years that he tested strategies and operational doctrine on the battlefield, analyzed his successes and failures, and developed his own version of revolutionary warfare – it was Maoism with a twist. Specifically, his model incorporated a more robust capability and intent to shift back and forth between the various stages of warfare, dependent on the situation as well as the region where the fighting was being conducted. Giap understood the need to tailor the form of war to meet the requirements of the period.<sup>3</sup> This flexible method suited his purpose well and repeatedly confounded the enemy's attempts to predict and prepare for the next battle.

Giap's strengths were many. Those which were particularly relied upon over the course of his efforts include his vision and grasp of the major issues, leadership capabilities, conduct of guerrilla warfare (singularly and in conjunction with mobile and main force efforts), innovative operational and tactical expertise, mastery of tremendous logistics demands, and the ability to learn from his mistakes.<sup>4</sup>

A review of Giap's military writings reveals he was not what one could consider an original strategic thinker. Rather, his truly remarkable talents lay in extracting and applying elements of his choosing from an array of military strategists and tacticians who included Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, Napoleon, T.E. Lawrence, and Mao Tse-Tung. He shaped the battlefield in the way he thought most advantageous for his forces. Committed to making the enemy fight on his terms, he used every tool available to make it happen *his* way.

Another outstanding success of our Party consisted in creatively applying the military science and art of people's war and revolutionary war; correctly determining the direction and targets of our attacks; choosing the right time for our attacks; moving rapidly and concentrating our forces; adopting the most effective method of combat; taking advantage of and aggravating the errors of the enemy; repeatedly delivering swift, powerful and unexpected blows to the enemy; ensuring a dynamic, firm, daring and flexible command; wiping out bigger and bigger combat groups of the enemy and eventually wiping out and causing the disintegration of the whole enemy force.<sup>5</sup>

- Vo Nguyen Giap, Summer 1975

Giap credited the Party for all successes, but the words and responsibilities were clearly his. However, one cannot help but believe that in spite of this ideological rhetoric, he must have experienced extreme frustration on the occasions when the Party directed him to conduct operations and campaigns which he knew could end only in disaster for his forces.

## GIAP'S REVOLUTIONARY WAR AGAINST THE FRENCH

The Vietnamese Independence League was formed in May 1941, with the Viet Minh as its military arm. During the earliest years of their existence, the Viet Minh focused their efforts on classic Phase 1 actions of proselytizing and recruiting new members. However, immediately after the formation of the first Armed Propaganda Brigade on 22 December 1944, Ho Chi Minh ordered Giap to achieve a military victory for propaganda purposes.<sup>6</sup> This was clearly an effort to establish an aura of legitimacy for the insurgents and goes to the heart of what the leaders saw as the strategic center of gravity – the hearts and minds of the populace. Giap was successful in these efforts and the ranks of the Viet Minh continued to grow rapidly with progressively more territory falling under their control.

Giap's theater-strategic concept of operations was organized around a three-tiered military structure: regular army, district militias, and village self-defense units.<sup>7</sup> Guerrilla fighter came from the ranks of the self-defense units. Upward mobility conceivably could continue to where they became members of the regular army. The district militias were best suited for conducting mobile guerrilla strikes and fighting alongside the regulars. The regulars were capable of conventional warfare, but in the early years before they dared take on the vastly stronger French were more likely to conduct mobile and guerrilla-style attacks.

This remained Giap's basic model throughout the revolutionary struggle. It is extremely critical to understand the impact this had on enhancing unity of effort. It became obvious early on that a symbiotic relationship existed between the elements – no one element could achieve their objectives without the active support and involvement of the other elements. As the Viet Minh matured in their fighting techniques they developed a

*modus operandi* where guerrillas would attack in the enemy's rear to wear out and destroy his reserves, while the mobile forces conducted large strikes aimed at attriting his forces and damaging morale.<sup>8</sup> Main force efforts relied on these attacks forcing the enemy to spread his forces thin and thus make him more susceptible to defeat.

The period from 1948-1950 was focused on building up and training the Viet Minh forces while Giap refined his operational vision and developed doctrine and strategy. Politically, 1949 marked a watershed year as the Viet Minh received official recognition from the newly installed regime of the Chinese communists, followed shortly thereafter by Russia and the Soviet Block countries. More importantly, this recognition provided the Viet Minh military leaders with links to vitally needed supplies and equipment. It was this external support which ultimately allowed them fight a sustained war.

Giap spent the first half of 1950 defining his operational scheme in preparation for his first-ever transition to Phase 2 warfare. Probing attacks were ordered against isolated French garrisons to test the French response as well as provide more combat experience to the Viet Minh.<sup>9</sup> The border campaign (Battle of Dong Khe) against the French in October was, quite literally, a smashing success brought about by his detailed preparation and not a small degree of French smugness toward what they perceived as a weak and inferior force. The victory also meant Giap's objectives of securing his rear area had been met.

Giap's fighting forces had been aided by the transformation of his vision into an operational infrastructure. He previously realized the same methodology could not be used to fight this predominantly mobile warfare phase and implemented changes to better prepare for the escalation. In the two years leading up to Dong Khe, Giap established a command and control architecture for the forces which included reorganizing his staff on the western model

(G-1 = personnel, G-2 = intelligence, etc.) and dividing the country into military regions. Regular army troops received extensive training (ideological as well as military) and were grouped into battalions, regiments, and divisions. Division-sized movements were practiced. Giap also established four corresponding divisional headquarters and called on the Party to enact conscription (which they did).<sup>10</sup>

Among the many actions Giap took during this time of preparation there are two elements which stand out as excellent examples of operational art. First and foremost, in the arena of operational leadership his ability in psychologically preparing raw recruits for the revolutionary war they were engaged in provides significant insight into a powerful and mesmerizing personality. He applied communist doctrine and education techniques to mentally forge a determined fighting spirit into these illiterate, distrustful, suspicious rural villagers who possessed no concept of centralized governmental authority.<sup>11</sup> He instilled in them, as he would the civilian populace, the willingness to sacrifice everything for the “people’s war.” Giap repeatedly called on this spirit of self-sacrifice, particularly during periods where troop morale faltered (e.g., Dien Bien Phu during the drawn out siege and battle). Secondly, Giap demonstrated incredible mastery in the arena of operational logistics. Although he is most likely best known for the success of his logistics plan in the 1954 attack against the French at Dien Bien Phu, few realize it was under his direction five years later that work on the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail commenced, forging a vital supply route between the North and South. Indeed, logistics planning was the hallmark for the duration of Giap’s tenure. This current plan was, however, his first attempt at supporting such a large-scale operation. He identified the requirements, quantified them in an amazingly simple fashion, and enacted the human portage concept to move goods from

China through the mountains and jungles. This effort was nothing short of and provided Giap with critical baseline logistical data on transportation means and quantities that he would need years later as he continued the war against South Vietnam and the Americans.

At this point, however, Giap's victory at Dong Khe led to a misplaced sense of confidence which overcame his usually meticulous military planning. He made the decision to transition to Phase 3 warfare shortly after the border campaign, but failed to assess what he now faced. In particular, he failed to consider what the arrival of the new French commander would mean in terms of changes in French strategy, objectives, and tactics.<sup>12</sup> In the Red River Delta campaign, waged from January to June of 1951, Giap suffered massive losses during attacks against Vinh Yen, Mon Khe, and along the Day River. Included among his problems was the fact that the local population was predominantly Roman Catholic and, therefore, primarily pro-French. As a result, he was unable to mobilize local support. This meant there were no guerrillas to call upon to attack and divert French troops or otherwise compel them to spread their forces out.<sup>13</sup> Although he demonstrated some degree of operational acumen with his maneuver, use of geography, and operational fires, Giap's lack of experience in conventional warfare resulted in critical flaws in his plan. By failing to maintain any forces in reserve, he was unable to exploit opportunities or shore up weak points. He was also seriously deficient in command and control equipment and procedures.<sup>14</sup> Reviewing his situation after the debacle, Giap correctly recognized his sector of main effort was in the north, so he concentrated his forces and focused on conducting Phase 2 (mobile warfare) operations in this area. The significant problems encountered vis-à-vis command and control and logistics support, combined with Giap's requirements for troops in the sector of main effort, caused him to regress to Phase 1 in the south.

The huge casualties suffered in Maoist “human wave” attacks during the Red River Delta Campaign were of special concern to Giap. From this point on, he would not utilize such tactics unless the benefits outweighed the risks. His last minute decision to forego such an assault two years later at Dien Bien Phu, in spite of the outrage of his Chinese advisors, bears testament to the lessons he had learned.

He was able to further draw on such lessons in late 1951 when French forces seized Hoa Binh in an effort to interdict the Viet Minh supply line. In his response, Giap demonstrated an understanding that his militarily weaker force could not directly attack the enemy’s center of gravity (the French Army). Rather than get drawn into another battle of attrition, Giap responded by utilizing advantages of the terrain to attack French lines of communication (LOCs), overrun remote outposts, and disrupt air activity with AAA fire and mortar attacks against the airstrip.<sup>15</sup> By attacking critical vulnerabilities, Giap succeeded in forcing the French to commence a humiliating withdrawal in late February 1952.

The next 18 months saw the Viet Minh continuing mobile warfare in the north while conducting a foray into Laos. And, in a bit of a turnabout, they had to deal with French special forces, living with T’ai mountain tribesmen, who recruited and trained the T’ai for attacks against Viet Minh supply camps. Giap continued to refine his strategy and operational scheme.

On 20 November 1953, French paratroopers were dropped into Dien Bien Phu. By day’s end they controlled the area. It was, however, accessible to French forces only by air (a fatal vulnerability). The curtain was about to rise on the final French act.

The enemy wanted to concentrate their forces. We compelled them to disperse. By successively launching strong offensives on the points they had left relatively unprotected, we obliged them to scatter their troops all over the place in order to



ward off our blows, and thus created favorable conditions for the attack at Dien Bien Phu, the most powerful entrenched camp in Indochina, considered invulnerable by the Franco-American general staff. We decided to take the enemy by the throat at Dien Bien Phu. The major part of our forces were concentrated there. We mobilized the entire potential of the population of the free zone in order to guarantee victory for our front line.<sup>16</sup>

- Vo Nguyen Giap

Volumes have been written on the Viet Minh successes at Dien Bien Phu – no attempt will be made to replicate historical facts here. Rather, it is worthwhile to look at the strategic genius and elements of operational art Giap employed in effecting defeat of the French.

Capitalizing on errors in the French strategy (i.e., seizing an objective beyond their ground LOCs, underestimating the ability of the Viet Minh to operate so far beyond their normal LOCs, and underestimating the Viet Minh military capabilities), Giap set about preparing the battlefield to fight the war on his terms. Displaying the confidence of a bold leader, he took a risky gamble with the security of his rear area and decided not to concentrate his forces to counter the French build-up on the Red River Delta. Instead, as indicated in the quote above, he organized mobile teams to conduct operational fires throughout the country and directed guerrilla forces to conduct harassing attacks and raids. With French forces already stretched to their limits, the French general was ultimately forced to use troops he had wanted to keep in reserve for Dien Bien Phu to respond to the attacks against his remote outposts.<sup>17</sup>

In the meantime, Giap designed an amazing operational logistics scheme. The success of this effort was the primary reason for the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu. For not only did this unending chain of humanity transport the food and munitions the troops would need for the battle, they also hauled Chinese-made 105mm field guns by hand over

mountains and across rivers to the battlefield. Giap enforced strict camouflage techniques and did not allow their use in the preparatory fires that were conducted.<sup>18</sup> The deception and surprise worked. The French, unaware their enemy possessed this capability, were totally unprepared to defend against it.

An entire study could be written on the employment of operational art at Dien Bien Phu. The above are simply highlights of the many significant examples available for discourse. Above all, it was once again Giap's vision and operational leadership that brought the Viet Minh victory. He seized the initiative offered by the French occupation at Dien Bien Phu and mobilized literally the entire "free zone" to support this Phase 3 operation. He thoroughly assessed the enemy's strengths and weaknesses; employed the operational factors of time, space, and force to his advantage; applied restraint when his Chinese advisors urged him to go forward with the "human waves;" used PSYOPS to psychologically dislocate the enemy; rotated reserve troops in as needed; and when troop morale began to flag because of the poor living conditions and drawn out fighting, it was Giap's speeches, presence, and direction which gave them the will to keep going. It was, in all likelihood, Giap's greatest moment. His willingness to sustain heavy losses paid off at the ongoing peace negotiations in Geneva (i.e., unlike Giap's earlier devastating experiences with "human wave" assaults, he correctly gauged the losses suffered at Dien Bien Phu were worth the anticipated gains).

The agreement reached later that year in Geneva called for the "temporary" division of Vietnam into North and South. With this, approximately 100,000 communists in the South moved to the North, but a cadre of supporters remained behind and returned to Phase 1 efforts.<sup>19</sup> Those who went North received military training and political indoctrination. They would return five years later and form the core of the Viet Cong.

## GIAP'S EFFECTIVENESS IMPAIRED

In January 1959, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of North Vietnam committed itself overtly to the war in the South. In July of that year, Giap, who was by now Minister of Defense (MOD), head of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), and member of the Politburo, ordered the opening of what became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Now all that remained was to establish official linkage with the forces in the South. This was accomplished in September 1960 by Hanoi's announcement of the creation of the National Liberation Front. The Front was governed by members of the South Vietnamese branch of the Lao Dong Party, the latter being the communist governing party of North Vietnam. This provided the North with their political connection. The military link was effected in 1963, when General Tran Van Tra, a former Viet Minh guerrilla and mobile warfare commander in the Mekong Delta, was sent to the South to take over command of all Viet Cong forces.<sup>20</sup> The North Vietnamese leadership was now firmly in position to control the war in the South.

As Minister Of Defense, Commander of the PAVN, and Politburo member, Giap was theoretically situated to influence, in whole or in part, the national-strategic, theater-strategic, and operational levels of war. Giap's many duties, however, precluded him from injecting the level of theater-strategic and operational control to which he had become accustomed. Additionally, the tendency of the Politburo to dictate issues of strategy, often *against* Giap's recommendations, further diluted his dominance in military decision making.

During the early 1960s Giap faced conflicting views within the Party concerning the best strategy to employ in the South. He preferred Mao's model of protracted revolutionary war while others touted the Russian model of classic urban revolution.<sup>21</sup> However, up until

this point the Viet Cong, who had been operating relatively independently for several years prior to Tra's arrival, had been conducting their own version of Phase 1 revolutionary war. Rather than focusing efforts primarily on attempting to win the hearts and minds of the people, they brutally murdered anyone who opposed them. This led to failure to generate the popular support necessary for overthrow of the government and forced the North to get more directly involved (in effect, they had to prop up the Viet Cong).<sup>22</sup> By 1964 the Viet Cong were well entrenched in Phase 2 warfare (Phase 3 in some limited areas) and the North was heavily engaged in supporting the effort logistically and militarily.

The entrance of the United States into the war in 1965 forced Giap to reassess the challenges they faced for now he not only had a country to conquer, he had a country to defend. He urged return to a strategy of Phase 1 type guerrilla warfare—this would allow the North time to build up their army while forcing the Americans to spread themselves thin. It was the same strategy he employed against the French. However, he no longer dominated military decision making in this structured government environment and was forced to yield to those who wished to increase the Phase 3 offensives. He committed his regular forces to their first large scale direct engagement with the Americans at the battle of Plei Mei (19-27 OCT 1965) and Ia Drang Valley (14-20 NOV 1965). This was the first time they had faced an enemy using helicopter assault tactics and they were totally unprepared to deal with the new threat. Estimates of North Vietnamese troops killed in this offensive range as high as over 2200.<sup>23</sup>

Even after Plei Mei, Giap remained unable to convince fellow Party members of the need to return to Phase 1 warfare. Ultimately, from 1965 to 1967 he conducted the war at different levels depending on the region and its specific set of circumstances:

I Corps Area: Phase 3 (northern South Vietnam)

II Corps Area: Phase 2; Phase 3 (in the Central Highlands)

III Corps Area: Phase 2 and 3 (this area included Saigon)

IV Corps Area: Phase 2&1 (Mekong Delta)<sup>24</sup>

In April of 1967 the Thirteenth Plenum of the Communist Party's Central Committee voted for a "spontaneous" uprising against the South to win the war in the shortest time possible. Once again, Giap was *strongly* opposed to this action but, as had happened prior to Ple Mei, was overruled. He dutifully set about planning the campaign.<sup>25</sup>

Giap developed a three-stage sequential plan. The first stage called for probing attacks in the Central Highlands that Fall. The second was a widespread but loosely coordinated campaign of urban warfare, referred to as the Tet Offensive. The final stage was devised to undermine morale in the South through a campaign of urban and rural battles and psychological warfare, resulting in a general uprising of the people.<sup>26</sup> As the history books show, North Vietnam never made it to the third stage of the plan. Over 40,000 Viet Cong were killed or wounded during Tet, effectively ending their effectiveness as a major fighting force.

However, even though Giap suffered a tremendous operational loss, he gained an important strategic victory. Tet had a direct impact on the strategic center of gravity of the United States – the will of the American public to continue their support for the war was irreversibly shaken. Unfortunately for Giap, his forces were in no condition to press the offensive and the Politburo directed a return to a strategic defensive posture. Although they continued with small-scale guerrilla attacks and occasional mobile strikes (conducted

primarily by remnants of Viet Cong forces), it would be a long time before they could muster the forces to return to the Phase 3 offensive warfare of large-scale conventional operations.

“Long enough” did not happen, however, and Giap was ordered by the Politburo to conduct a spring offensive in 1972 (even though U.S. forces had not completed their scheduled withdrawal). Once again, his strong recommendations against such an action were ignored. To Giap it must have seemed like “d  j   vu all over again.” He was forced to mount a major offensive against a force which remained stronger than his. The Easter Offensive, as it came to be known, started 2 April 1972.

The plan this time called for a three-pronged synchronized assault using almost the entire PAVN. One prong of the attack was to be conducted across the demilitarized zone, a second striking into the Central Highlands and aimed at dividing South Vietnam in two, and the third heading to the south and aimed at Saigon. Operational fires were conducted in the form of diversionary attacks in the north. The unique advantage Giap thought he brought into this offensive was the newly acquired Russian T-54 and T-72 tanks. However, ground commanders had a difficult time conducting combined warfare and the tanks were never used to their full advantage.<sup>27</sup> The PAVN forces came under heavy air attack by U.S. B-52 s and tactical air assets and, for the first time, Giap’s logistics support system failed – there was simply nothing left to give him.<sup>28</sup>

Giap’s predictions that they were not ready for such an offensive were supported by the 100,000 casualties suffered by PAVN troops. Despite his earlier cautions against this offensive, he was relieved of duties as head of the PAVN.

## CONCLUSION

To keep the offensive, they must ceaselessly develop guerrilla war and partial insurrection. From regional forces, they must build increasingly strong main force units, and incessantly develop the guerrilla war into a regular war. Only through *regular war* in which the main force troops fight in a concentrated manner and the armed services are combined and fighting in coordination with regional troops, militia guerrillas, and the political forces of all the people, can they annihilate important forces of the enemy, liberate vast areas of land... and create conditions for great strides in the war.<sup>29</sup>

- Vo Nguyen Giap

General Vo Nguyen Giap was successful in his wars against the French and United States (and South Vietnamese) because he possessed three significant traits: his ability to analyze the task he faced and to formulate and execute military operations within a correct strategy while appropriately applying the elements of operational art; his ability to learn from his mistakes; and his leadership skills. These talents were more than amply demonstrated in the war he waged against the French. However, his efforts to implement similar strategy and operational doctrine in the war against South Vietnam and the United States were, at times, resisted by military rivals and members of the Politburo.

The difference in positions he held in the two wars provides an interesting departure point for comparison of his effectiveness, but even more interestingly hints at the possibility that North Vietnam may have been “more successful sooner” if Giap had not been taken away from a greater involvement at the theater-strategic level of war *and if the Politburo had refrained from making decisions on military strategy and courses of action*. Supporting evidence includes:

- Giap was able to stick to his revolutionary warfare model of protracted war against the French and had great operational freedom in his decision-making. The Politburo

wouldn't let him "do it his way" in the war against South Vietnam. As a result, they suffered disastrous losses at Ple Mei and Ia Drang Valley as well as during the Tet Offensive and Easter Offensives. Each setback took considerable time and resources to recover from. This left North Vietnam unable to press the offensive for final victory until after the United States had completely withdrawn from the country and even then it took them another three years to get their forces back up to fighting strength.

- Giap's "go-slow" approach against the French allowed him to build a firm base of support and requisite communist infrastructure. In South Vietnam, the push in the early 1960s to plunge into Phase 3 warfare (against Giap's recommendations) meant they never established the requisite support of the (South Vietnamese) people that is so critical in a revolutionary war.

- The central theme to Giap's entire gameplan was unity of the people. In the war against France he insisted the Viet Minh treat the populace with respect. For the most part, this happened and they were successful in winning the hearts and minds of the people. It was from these people they were then able to draw the guerrilla forces and support that is so important in all three phases of revolutionary war. In South Vietnam, the Viet Cong were brutal murderers. They never gained legitimacy in the eyes of the populace and had to resort to forcing unwilling conscripts to join their ranks. Significant augmentation and logistics support for the guerrillas had to come from North Vietnam.

These findings raise interesting points based on the "what if" question of what strategic and operational level impact did Giap's decreased effectiveness have on the war against South Vietnam and the United States? If the Viet Cong had taken the additional time



to conduct a proper Phase 1, would that have lengthened or shortened the war? Based on that, and as further impacted by the Politburo's decisions, would casualty rates (for all sides) have been higher or lower? Would the United States have even gotten involved? It all leads back to the basic question of what is the "right" way to fight a revolutionary war.

The impact of the Politburo's involvement raises the issue of what is the best role for the political leadership in a war being fought on revolutionary principles. Unlike most revolutionary wars where the insurgents are battling a government force, this was a case where the government had taken on the role as the insurgent. The fighting forces weren't rallying around a unitary, charismatic figure who dominated the military decision making process (e.g., Mao, Fidel Castro, Giap against the French). Rather, North Vietnam's actions can best be described as "warfare by committee." It appears the Politburo's ambitious plans and quest for quick results ended up corrupting Mao's process, and may very well have prolonged the war and resulted in a significantly higher casualty rate than what would have happened if Giap had been allowed to fight the war his way.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Milan N. Vego, "Operational Art (Lecture)." U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 11 March 1997, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Cecil B. Currey, Victory at Any Cost: The Genius of Vietnam's General Vo Nguyen Giap (Washington: Brassey's 1997), 116.

<sup>3</sup> Giap, Vo Nguyen and Van Tien Dung. How We Won the War, ed. Chris Robinson with introduction by Danny Schechter (Philadelphia: RECON Publications, 1976), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Macdonald, Giap: The Victor in Vietnam (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1993), 341.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>7</sup> Currey, 82.

<sup>8</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap, Inside the Viet Minh, Marine Corps Association (Quantico: 1962), I-12 – I-13.

<sup>9</sup> Robert J. O'Neill, General Giap: Politician and Strategist (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1969), 76.

<sup>10</sup> Currey, 156–159.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Macdonald, 100.

<sup>13</sup> Currey, 172-174.

<sup>14</sup> Macdonald, 101.

<sup>15</sup> O'Neill, 108–110.

<sup>16</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap, People's War People's Army, with a forward by Roger Hilsman (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 25.

<sup>17</sup> O'Neill, 135.

<sup>18</sup> Currey, 195.

<sup>19</sup> Department of External Affairs, Studies on Vietnam. Information Handbook No. 1 of 1965 (Canberra, Australia: August 1965), 7.

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<sup>20</sup>Lloyd J. Matthews and Dale E. Brown, ed. Assessing the War in Vietnam (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 987), 101.

<sup>21</sup>O'Neill, 189.

<sup>22</sup>Department of External Affairs, 12.

<sup>23</sup>Currey, 256.

<sup>24</sup>O'Neill, 194.

<sup>25</sup>Currey, 264.

<sup>26</sup>Macdonald, 262.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 329

<sup>28</sup>Currey, 287.

<sup>29</sup>William J. Duiker, The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981), 279-280.

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