

# Operational Art in the People's Army of Vietnam: From the 1972 Easter Offensive to the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign

A Monograph

by

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## Abstract

Operational Art in the People's Army of Vietnam: From the 1972 Easter Offensive to the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign, by MAJ Gary M. Klein, US Army, 46 pages.

In April 1975, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) defeated the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, which enabled the unification of Vietnam. Most historical studies of the Vietnam War have explained this outcome by focusing on the decisions and actions of the United States and South Vietnam. This monograph attempts to contribute to a more holistic analysis of the Vietnam War by exploring this conflict through the perspective of North Vietnamese operational art.

This study conducts a structured, focused comparison of the 1972 Easter Offensive and 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign by asking six research questions related to operational art. These questions focus on testing two hypothesis concerning the North Vietnamese leadership's understanding of the strategic environment and its efforts to combine and arrange tactical actions using depth, simultaneity, and tempo.

The empirical evidence examined supports this monograph's thesis that the PAVN successfully applied operational art during the Ho Chi Minh Campaign of 1974-75, which enabled it to defeat the ARVN and unify Vietnam as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. During the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, unlike during the 1972 Easter Offensive, the PAVN understood the strategic environment, which enabled it in its application of operational art, integrating operational depth, simultaneity, and tempo, to achieve operational effects, and, ultimately, its strategic objectives.

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## Acronyms

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnamese Army)
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
LOO	Line of Operation
OODA	Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam (North Vietnamese Army)

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## Introduction

“If an Abrams or a Hollingsworth had commanded the NVA troops at Kontum or An Loc [during the Easter Offensive], those battles might well have gone quite differently.”

—Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975*

In April of 1975, the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) defeated the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, which enabled the North Vietnamese to unify Vietnam. The Ho Chi Minh Campaign was the third major campaign that the PAVN had launched against the ARVN between 1968 and 1975 – the other two being the 1968 Tet Offensive and the 1972 Easter Offensive.<sup>1</sup> These campaigns evolved from an emphasis on irregular warfare during the Tet Offensive to more conventional warfare in 1972 and 1975. Given the similar character of the Easter Offensive and the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, what was it about the latter that enabled the PAVN to defeat the ARVN and achieve its political goals?

This study will attempt to answer the above question by studying the 1972 Easter Offensive and the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign through the lens of operational art and from the perspective of the PAVN. The challenge is determining whether the PAVN applied operational art during these two campaigns or whether the PAVN simply exploited the actions of South Vietnam and the ARVN. Much of the existing literature explains the PAVN victory by exposing the degraded status of the ARVN or poor decision-making within the ARVN and South Vietnam. However, there is evidence that suggests the PAVN’s application of operational art had a significant impact as well.

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<sup>1</sup> This monograph will refer to North Vietnam’s 1974-75 offensive campaign against South Vietnam as the Ho Chi Minh Campaign. According to General Van Tien Dung, the Politburo first used this name in an April 14, 1975 telegram. Prior to this, North Vietnam referred to the campaign as the Tay Nguyen “Western Highlands” Campaign or Campaign 275, which was its code name. After the war, General Vo Nguyen Giap and the PAVN’s official history refer to the campaign more generically as The Spring 1975 General Offensive. See: Van Tien Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam*, trans. John Spragens (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 27, 160; Vo Nguyen Giap, *The General Headquarters in the Spring of Brilliant Victory* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2010); and Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

The PAVN successfully applied operational art during the Ho Chi Minh Campaign of 1974-75, which enabled them to defeat the ARVN and unify Vietnam. During the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, unlike during the 1972 Easter Offensive, the PAVN understood the strategic environment, which enabled it in its application of operational art integrating operational depth, simultaneity, and tempo, to achieve operational effects, and, ultimately, strategic objectives. The purpose of this study is to reveal how the PAVN understood the strategic environment and applied operational art during the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign by combining and arranging engagements to achieve its desired operational effects and strategic objectives. This study will analyze the strategic context and planning leading up to the Easter Offensive and the Ho Chi Minh Campaign. Additionally, it will examine the execution of these campaigns to explore whether the PAVN successfully integrated the operational tenets of depth, simultaneity, and tempo. The PAVN's successful integration of these tenets during the Ho Chi Minh stood in contrast to its earlier campaigns when the PAVN struggled to apply operational art.

This study is significant for its contribution to the historical body of knowledge on the Vietnam War and military practitioners seeking to understand operational art. The historian will discover that the PAVN's success was due to its military efforts as much as the status and actions of the ARVN. The military practitioner, on the other hand, will discover that operational art requires creatively integrating tenets such as depth, simultaneity, and tempo when combining and arranging engagements to obtain strategic objectives. It is through the creative application of tenets like these that the military can hope to achieve strategic effects. This study does not suggest that operational art can be replicated and applied in a prescriptive way, but the Ho Chi Minh Campaign is a historical example of a campaign designed for a specific circumstance that enabled a military force to defeat its opponent and achieve its strategic objectives.

The actions of the PAVN will be analyzed through the lens of operational art theory and the tenets of depth, simultaneity, and tempo, so this study must first clarify the definitions of these terms. Establishing a shared understanding of these terms will enable a common language

and serve as a basis for comparison with other studies. Operational art is the creative arrangement and combination of military engagements to achieve strategic goals. Tenets such as depth, simultaneity, and tempo can aid the operational artist in creatively arranging and combining engagements.<sup>2</sup> These tenets are defined as follows: depth is the vertical distance from a defined military front line to subsequent defensive belts or rear areas, simultaneity is the ability to engage more than one enemy echelon at the same time, and tempo is described as the ability to act at a frequency faster than the enemy can react.<sup>3</sup> This study will use these terms to enable a structured, focused comparison of the Easter Offensive and Ho Chi Minh Campaigns.

This study asserts that the PAVN applied operational art during the Ho Chi Minh Campaign to defeat the ARVN and achieve its political goals. The study will rely on two hypotheses that, if correct, will support the assertion that the PAVN used operational art. The two hypotheses are: when the PAVN understood the strategic environment, it enabled the PAVN to achieve strategic objectives; and when the PAVN integrated depth, simultaneity, and tempo, it achieved operational effects. This study will test these hypotheses by seeking to answer the following questions:

1. How did North Vietnam and the PAVN understand the strategic environment?
2. What were the North Vietnamese political objectives?
3. What were the North Vietnamese military objectives?
4. What were the North Vietnamese military options?
5. What was the North Vietnamese operational approach?

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<sup>2</sup> Georgii Samoilovich Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013), 65-70; Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 68; Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory*, 17-18; Robert R. Leonhard, *Fighting by Minutes: Time and the Art of War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 11.

6. How did the PAVN integrate depth, simultaneity, and tempo in the conduct of its campaigns?

This study will seek to answer these questions given several limitations. Many of the primary source documents are in Vietnamese, but this study will rely on English language translations. Additionally, this study will only use open source and unclassified documents, which may be incomplete or distorted due to the sensitive nature of these campaigns and continued nationalistic narratives. Finally, various operational details will be omitted to enable a clear and concise analysis of the hypotheses and research questions.

To manage the enormous amount of information and detail on the Vietnam War, this study will focus on military actions that took place inside South Vietnam during the March to June 1972 and December 1974 to April 1975-time frames. Notable exceptions to this delimitation are the various North Vietnamese Politburo meetings, which will be analyzed to understand the strategic environment, political objectives, and military objectives. Additionally, this study will assume that the North Vietnam and South Vietnam governments, as well as the PAVN and ARVN, made their own decisions and were not forcefully coerced by outside influences.

This study is organized into seven sections. The first section is this introduction, which included a description of the research problem, its purpose and significance, and the definitions of the theoretical framework and basic terms that will be used throughout the study. Additionally, it included the hypotheses and research questions that will be used to test the thesis, as well as, the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions of this study. Section two presents a literature review, which includes a more detailed discussion of operational art theory and the terms: depth, simultaneity, and tempo. Section three describes the methodology of this research. Section four and five will discuss the 1972 Easter Offensive and 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign case-studies, respectively. Section six will present the findings and comparative analysis of these campaigns. Finally, section seven will conclude this study with an assessment of the evidence to determine if

in fact the PAVN employed operational art to enable it to achieve its desired operational effects and strategic objectives.

## Literature Review

This section will review some of the primary source literature on operational art theory and the concepts of depth, simultaneity, and tempo. A foundational understanding of this theory and these basic concepts will enable a comparative analysis of the 1972 Easter Offensive and the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaigns. Additionally, this section will review some of the research studies covering these campaigns to understand some of the prevailing explanations for why the PAVN failed to achieve its strategic goals in the Easter Offensive, yet succeeded three years later during the Ho Chi Minh Campaign. Many existing works have looked at these two campaigns from the South Vietnamese and American perspectives, but this study will compare these campaigns from the North Vietnamese perspective, an existing gap in the current literature.

The cognitive development of operational art is generally credited to Soviet military theorists following World War I.<sup>4</sup> Alexander A. Svechin, Mikhail N. Tukhachevskii, Vladimir K. Triandafillov, and Georgii S. Isserson successively developed a theory of operational art that replaced the bifurcated understanding of war as strategy and tactics with a tripartite conceptualization of war. In *The Evolution of Operational Art* – a distillation of Soviet thought on operational art prior to World War II – Isserson noted that by the First World War, decisive wars of a single point had evolved into wars of exhaustion across a continuous front.<sup>5</sup> Napoleon had been able to disperse and concentrate his army in time and space; usually assailing one of his enemy's flanks. However, the increasing size of armies in the 19th and 20th centuries, in combination with the continued pursuit of the enemy's flanks, caused armies to extend themselves and meet along a long continuous front. Invoking Clausewitz, "changes in the nature of tactics must also influence strategy," Isserson realized the need for a new way of thinking

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<sup>4</sup> Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, iii, vii-xxii; Bruce W. Menning, "Operational Art's Origins," *Military Review* (September-October 1997): 32-47.

<sup>5</sup> Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 76.

about war.<sup>6</sup> The solution was operational art, a way to conceptually link tactical actions across a front and in depth to obtain one's strategic aim. Isserson described operational art through the lens of deep operations, a Soviet theory of warfare as an example. As a result, *The Evolution of Operational Art* focuses on the spatial and temporal arrangement of tactical actions in warfare.

Theorists have continued to explain operational art in terms of linking tactical actions in time and space, but many have emphasized or added additional aspects. The most significant of these is the need to link tactical actions and operations to strategic objectives. Isserson alluded to the goal of operational art as attaining a general intent or aim, but James Schneider and others have been more deliberate in emphasizing that "operational art is the employment of military forces to attain strategic goals."<sup>7</sup> US Army doctrine combines this idea with those of Isserson to define operational art as "the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose."<sup>8</sup>

Brigadier General (Ret.) Shimon Naveh made additional contributions to operational art by describing it through the lenses of complexity theory and Colonel (Ret.) John Boyd's observe, orient, decide, and act (OODA) loop. In his book *In Pursuit of Excellence*, Naveh describes war as a competition between belligerents within an open system. He uses Boyd's OODA loop to describe maneuver warfare theory and its ability to impose operational shock on one's opponent. He argues that an army can cognitively shock its opponent by operating with depth, simultaneity, and tempo, thereby disrupting decision making.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, this study will use depth,

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<sup>6</sup> Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 11; Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 266.

<sup>7</sup> James J. Schneider, *Theoretical Paper No.3: The Theory of Operational Art* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, 1988), 52; Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0: Operations (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2016), 2-1.

<sup>9</sup> Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory*, 11-14, 258, 259.

simultaneity, and tempo to assess operational art qualitatively, but to enable this assessment these tenets must be defined first.

US Army doctrine defines depth as “the extension of operations in time, space, or purpose to achieve definitive results.”<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this study, depth will focus on the spatial dimension, in line with Isserson and Naveh. Time and purpose will be assessed through the concepts of simultaneity and operational art. Returning to the definition of depth, Isserson describes depth qualitatively as acting upon successive belts or echelons of combat forces simultaneously.<sup>11</sup> Naveh describes depth more quantitatively as the vertical distance from the front.<sup>12</sup> This study will assess depth similar to Naveh, measuring the depth of penetration from the front.

The second tenet that this study will analyze is simultaneity, which US Army doctrine defines as “the execution of related and mutually supporting tasks at the same time across multiple locations and domains.”<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Isserson described simultaneity by emphasizing the concurrent actions of an attack echelon and a breakthrough echelon. While the attack echelon breaches the enemy front, the breakthrough echelon moves through the breach and attacks the enemy’s subsequent defensive belts until it can envelop the enemy forces.<sup>14</sup> By engaging the enemy at the same time in different places (*i.e.*, simultaneously), a military can fix its enemy, or at a minimum, create a dilemma for the enemy, who must decide where to mass its effects. Although simultaneity can be quantitatively measured using time (*i.e.*, how close together), this study will simply assess whether two or more actions occur at the same time or not.

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<sup>10</sup> US Army, ADRP 3-0, (2016), 3-15.

<sup>11</sup> Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> US Army, ADRP 3-0, (2016), 3-15.

<sup>14</sup> Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 65-70.



The third element of operational art that this study will analyze is tempo, which US Army doctrine defines as “the relative speed and rhythm of military operations over time with respect to the enemy.”<sup>15</sup> In his book *Fighting by Minutes*, Robert Leonhard presents a detailed analysis of the temporal characteristics of war, including duration, frequency (*i.e.*, tempo), and sequencing. Leonhard defines frequency as the speed at which events happen. He then argues that an army can gain an advantage by operating at a faster frequency than its opponent.<sup>16</sup> The army that dictates the frequency or tempo of battle usually has the initiative, since the slower force is constantly reacting to its antagonist. This study will qualitatively address tempo by seeking to determine whether the PAVN or ARVN had the initiative, or more precisely, which belligerent was responding or making proactive decisions, as opposed to the other, who was reacting to the one with the initiative.<sup>17</sup> The 1972 Easter Offensive and the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign were both offensive campaigns initiated by the PAVN, so the PAVN had the advantage of initiative and the ability to dictate the tempo at first. However, the initiative might have changed as the belligerents made decisions and executed operations following the initial attacks.

Since the war’s conclusion, authors have developed a number of different explanations for how North Vietnam and its army was able to defeat South Vietnam. Some have claimed that the PAVN was able to exploit weaknesses in the South Vietnamese government and its army, particularly their leadership.<sup>18</sup> Others have attributed the South Vietnamese loss to US actions,

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<sup>15</sup> US Army, ADRP 3-0, (2016), 2-7.

<sup>16</sup> Leonhard, *Fighting by Minutes: Time and the Art of War*, 10-11, 69-85.

<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed discussion of reactive, responsive, and active systems, see: Jamshid Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking: Managing Chaos and Complexity: A Platform for Designing Business Architecture* (Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufmann, 2011), 36-37.

<sup>18</sup> Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson Limited Publishers, 1988), 791-93; George J. Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, (New York: Encounter Books, 2012), 6.

specifically its withdrawal of economic and military support.<sup>19</sup> The military historian Lewis Sorley argues that the continued presence of the PAVN in South Vietnam after the 1973 Paris Peace Accords was a fatal flaw.<sup>20</sup> Regarding military support, most authors recognize that the PAVN benefitted enormously from the lack of US air power in the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign.<sup>21</sup> In *The Final Collapse*, the former Chairman of the ARVN Joint General Staff Cao Van Vien argues that the ARVN had become overly reliant on US money, equipment, mobility, and air power.<sup>22</sup> Finally, some have ventured to ascribe the PAVN's victory to its modernized army and improved sustainment capabilities in 1975.<sup>23</sup>

Examining North Vietnamese sources, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam* and *Our Great Spring Victory* both emphasize the PAVN's superior political system and strategy to explain how the PAVN achieved its strategic objectives.<sup>24</sup>

However, these arguments seem to reflect their sources' dedication to communism and protracted war theory, while failing to explain the differences between the Easter Offensive and the Ho Chi Minh Campaign. Readers can gain a more granular appreciation for the differences between these

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<sup>19</sup> James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 3-4; Willard J. Webb and Walter S. Poole, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and The War in Vietnam 1971-1973*, History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Washington, DC: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2007), 361.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 1999), 357. Sorley adds three other causes to the collapse of South Vietnam: the decrease in aid from the United States, ineffective South Vietnamese leadership, and the failure to cut off North Vietnamese infiltration routes and resupply along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

<sup>21</sup> Dale Andrade, *America's Last Vietnam Battle: Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 491-92; Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975*, 706-711; Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 6; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 3-4.

<sup>22</sup> Cao Van Vien, *The Final Collapse* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1983), 5-7; Cao Van Vien and Dong Van Khuyen, *Reflections on the Vietnam War*, CMH PUB 92-8 (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1984), 133-35.

<sup>23</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 441.

<sup>24</sup> Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam*, 252, 260; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 435-50.

campaigns by focusing on *Victory in Vietnam*'s chapter on the failed 1972 Easter Offensive. In this chapter, the PAVN admits that its logistical shortcomings and US airpower severely hampered its 1972 campaign.<sup>25</sup>

Turning to western accounts of these campaigns, two of the most comprehensive works are LTG Phillip Davidson's *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975* and George J. Veith's *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-75*. Davidson, a former US chief of intelligence in Vietnam, covers Vietnam's military history from the First Indochina War starting in 1946 to the reunification of Vietnam following the Second Indochina War in 1975. His analysis and conclusions regarding the 1972 Easter Offensive and the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign indicate a number of factors that contributed to North Vietnam's victory in 1975. Davidson argues that the PAVN failed to defeat the ARVN in 1972 because it struggled to maintain its offensive tempo. Its attacks repeatedly culminated because of sustainment challenges, which allowed the ARVN to seize and retain the initiative.<sup>26</sup> However, by 1975, the PAVN had established a logistical system that enabled them to project and sustain an overwhelming force. Davidson goes on to describe other contributing factors such as weak South Vietnamese leadership, the withdrawal of US air support to the ARVN, and ineffective coordination between the different military and political decision-making bodies.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, Davidson ascribes North Vietnam's victory to its superior strategy of revolutionary war, which the American and South Vietnamese were never able to comprehend or counter.<sup>28</sup>

George J. Veith's *Black April* reveals many of the same conclusions as Davidson's *Vietnam at War*, but it includes significantly more operational details and insight into North

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<sup>25</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 311-27.

<sup>26</sup> Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975*, 706-711.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 791-93, 804.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 795, 811.

Vietnamese decision making during the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign. Veith presents a series of arguments from all sides to explain how the PAVN was able to defeat the ARVN. Some of the well-trodden reasons include the significant reduction in US aid, lack of US air support in 1975, and the lack of a strong centralized South Vietnamese military command system. On the North Vietnamese side, Veith argues that the PAVN succeeded in its offensive because of its unpunished violations of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords; improved command, control, and logistics; and communist spies in the South Vietnamese government and military.<sup>29</sup>

This study agrees with the aforementioned factors detailed by the PAVN, Davidson, Veith, et al., but it aims to fill an existing gap by describing another contributing factor; the PAVN's successful application of operational art. Whether it was conscious or not, by 1975, this study asserts that PAVN senior leaders applied operational art by combining and arranging tactical actions in time, space, and, purpose to achieve its strategic objective of unifying Vietnam. This study will test this assertion by assessing two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that when the PAVN understood the strategic environment, this enabled it to achieve its strategic objectives. The second hypothesis is that when the PAVN successfully integrated depth, simultaneity, and tempo into operations, this allowed them to achieve operational effects. If both of these hypotheses are correct, this will support the thesis that the PAVN successfully applied operational art.

This study will use the knowledge of operational art, depth, simultaneity, and tempo developed in this literature review to assess whether the PAVN applied operational art during the 1972 Easter Offensive or 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign. The existing literature has explained the outcomes of these two campaigns by describing some contributing factors involving the three primary parties involved: the South Vietnamese, North Vietnamese, and Americans. This study

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<sup>29</sup> Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 6; General Cao Van Vien, the ARVN Chief of Staff, believed that unpunished violations of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords contributed to the South Vietnamese losing the war as well. See: Vien and Khuyen, *Reflections on the Vietnam War*, 131.

seeks to investigate an additional, unexplored contributing factor: whether or not the PAVN applied operational art in these campaigns. This examination will fill an existing void in the analysis of the Vietnam War and provide a historical case study for aspiring operational artists.

## Methodology

This study will use the structured, focused comparison methodology to qualitatively assess two campaigns using a series of research questions. The “structure” is provided by six research questions this investigation will use to acquire comparable qualitative data to assess the two case studies. Meanwhile, the “focus” of this comparison will be assessing the PAVN’s application of operational art.<sup>30</sup> By comparing two cases, this study seeks to reveal one or more contributing factors that help explain the different outcomes of the selected campaigns. Given the limited time available, an analysis of two campaigns will enable broader, but not as detailed results. Finally, this study acknowledges that correlation does not mean causation, especially within the complex system of war, which trends towards contingency. The rest of this section includes a brief overview of the two cases this study will analyze, the research questions this study will use to conduct its analysis, and the sources this study will use to obtain qualitative data.

This monograph will analyze the 1972 Easter Offensive and the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign as its case studies. These campaigns were selected because of their similar characteristics, yet different outcomes. Both of these campaigns were primarily conventional, offensive operations initiated by the PAVN. However, the outcomes of these campaigns are vastly different. The PAVN’s 1972 Easter Offensive achieved some short-term tactical gains, but the ARVN was able to defeat the PAVN offensive and re-establish the status quo. This case study will analyze this campaign from March to June 1972. The second case study, the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign ended with a PAVN military victory, resulting in the unification of Vietnam; North Vietnam’s primary political objective. This campaign will be studied from December 1974 to April 1975. Notable exceptions to these time frames are North Vietnamese Politburo meetings,

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<sup>30</sup> Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 67-72.

which will be analyzed to determine North Vietnamese political objectives, military objectives, military options, and their understanding of the strategic environment.

This study uses six focused research questions to collect empirical data and compare the two case studies. The structured, focused comparison includes three steps. The first step is gathering the empirical data to the research questions, which is presented in the case studies portion of this study. Steps two and three are found in the findings and analysis section, which compares the empirical data gathered using the research questions (step two) and analyzes the implications on this study's hypotheses (step three).

This study's six research questions focus on strategy and operational art; three in each category. Beginning with the strategic questions, the first question is: how did North Vietnam and the PAVN understand the strategic environment? This question will explore the diplomatic, information, military, and economic environment relevant to these campaigns. Additionally, it will help determine whether the PAVN assessed the strategic environment to adequately account for this when developing operational plans and during execution. The second question is: what were the North Vietnamese political objectives? Understanding this will help describe the enduring conditions that North Vietnam hoped to achieve at the end of the war.<sup>31</sup> The third question is: what were the North Vietnamese military objectives? This question will describe how the North Vietnamese planned to use their military to attain their political objectives.

While the strategic questions examine the operational environment and North Vietnam's political and military objectives, the operational questions seek to determine the PAVN's military options, operational approaches, and how the PAVN integrated the tenets of operational art. The first operational question, fourth overall question, is: what were the North Vietnamese military options? Understanding this will help describe some of the different operational approaches that

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<sup>31</sup> William J. Davis, "The End of End State - Strategic Planning Process for the 21st Century," *InterAgency Journal* 6, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 16–23.

the North Vietnamese government could have used to attain their political and military objectives. The fifth question is: what was the North Vietnamese operational approach? This question will describe the broad military actions the PAVN decided to take to achieve its objectives.<sup>32</sup> The sixth question is: how did the PAVN integrate depth, simultaneity, and tempo in the conduct of its campaigns? Understanding this will help highlight whether or not the PAVN used operational art to achieve operational effects. Finally, the combination of these questions will help determine whether or not this study's thesis is correct; that the PAVN understood the strategic environment, which enabled it in its application of operational art integrating operational depth, simultaneity, and tempo to achieve operational effects, and, ultimately, strategic objectives.

This study uses a mixture of primary and secondary sources to obtain the data necessary to answer these questions. It draws upon official military histories, personal accounts, operational histories, military doctrine, biographies, and a handful of theoretical papers. The three books this study will use most extensively to understand the two campaigns are Phillip Davidson's *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975*; *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*, and George J. Veith's *Black April*. This study will cross reference these three studies to ensure the reliability of the information used in this analysis and facilitate accurate findings.

This section outlined the structured, focused comparison methodology this study will use to qualitatively assess the 1972 Easter Offensive and 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign. Additionally, it introduced this study's two case studies, six research questions, and three primary data sources. This study will use this framework to analyze the two campaigns and test this study's thesis as to whether or not the PAVN applied operational art in the final three years of the Vietnam War.

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<sup>32</sup> US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, Joint Planning (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), IV-16.



## Case Studies

Having reviewed the theory and terminology relevant to this study in the literature review, this section will outline the two case studies and answer the focused questions described in the methodology section. By answering these focused questions, this section will begin to collect the data necessary to compare the 1972 Easter Offensive and 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign. These two campaigns are similar in that the North Vietnamese prioritized conventional warfare and the efforts of the PAVN in both of them, but their results were vastly different. The 1972 campaign ended in defeat for the PAVN, while the 1975 campaign resulted in the defeat of the ARVN, the overthrow of the South Vietnamese government, and the eventual establishment of a unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This section is broken up into two subsections, one for each of the two case studies. Each subsection will begin with a historical overview of the case followed by the answers to the focused questions using empirical data.

### 1972 Easter Offensive: Campaign Summary

The 1972 Easter Offensive was North Vietnam's second major military offensive in South Vietnam, but it was the first one that prioritized PAVN conventional warfare. The first offensive was the 1968 Tet Offensive, which emphasized Viet Cong irregular warfare. The Easter Offensive lasted from March to September 1972, and it encompassed operations in three regions of South Vietnam: in the north near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and the city of Quang Tri, in the Central Highlands near Kontum, and in the south around An Loc (Figure 1). The PAVN launched more limited attacks against the ARVN elsewhere, but those attacks had negligible effects. This study will focus on the aforementioned three areas. Temporally, the Easter Offensive can be broken down into two phases. From March to May the PAVN was on the offensive against the ARVN, and from the end of May to September, the ARVN launched a counteroffensive that forced the PAVN to withdraw from South Vietnam.

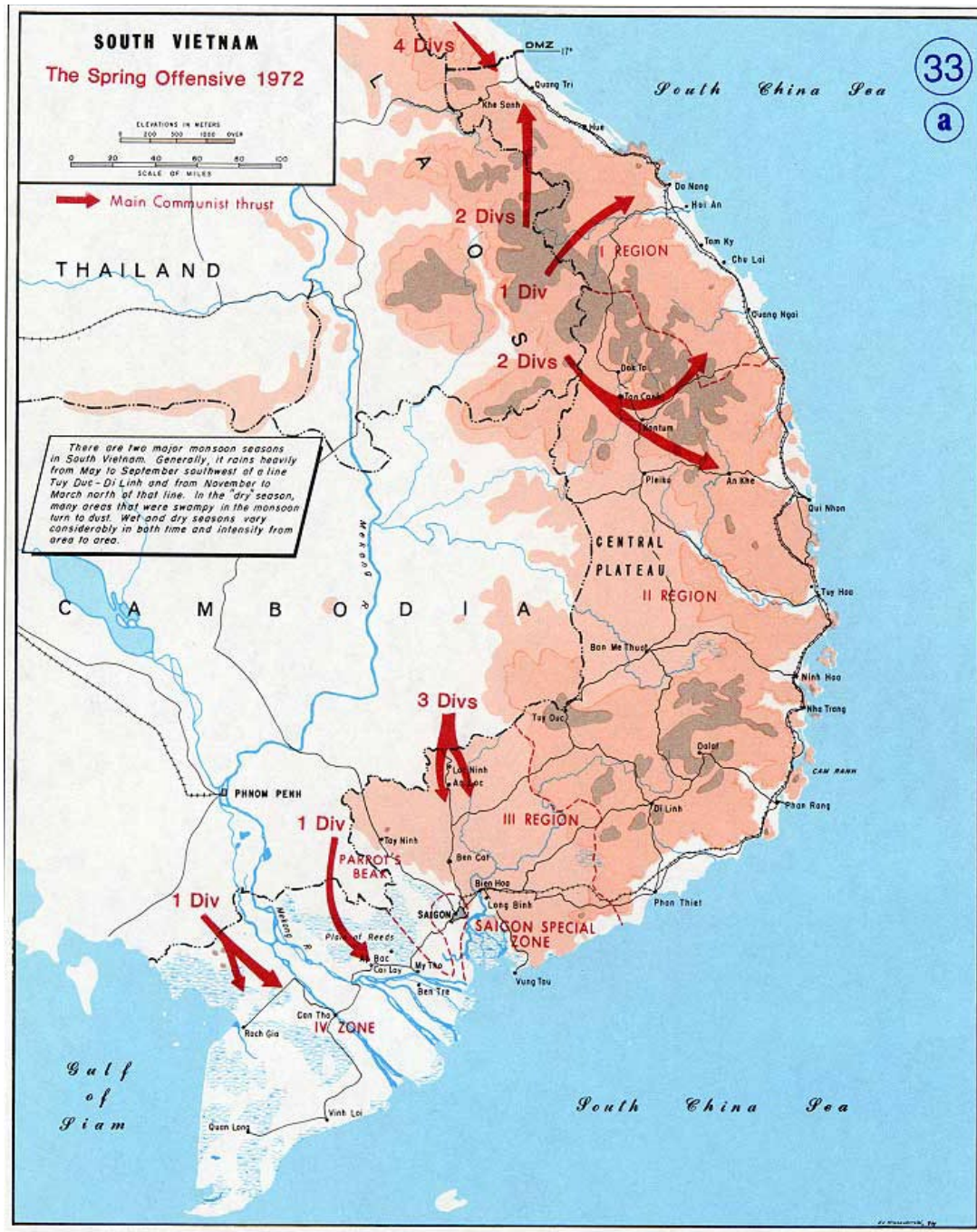


Figure 1: Easter Offensive Map, 1972. Map courtesy of the Department of Military History, United States Military Academy, "The Spring Offensive, 1972," *United States Military Academy Atlases*, accessed November 2, 2017, <http://www.westpoint.edu/history/SiteAssets/SitePages/Vietnam%20War/vietnam%20war%20map%2034.jpg>.

The Easter Offensive began near the DMZ between North and South Vietnam on March 30, 1972. The PAVN attacked with two infantry divisions and two armored regiments towards the city of Quang Tri across the DMZ and the Laotian border. By April 2, the PAVN defeated the ARVN 3rd Division defending along the DMZ, and the PAVN 308th Division advanced to the Cua Viet River. The PAVN continued its attack from the north and west, but a week into the campaign, the PAVN began to face logistical challenges and ARVN counterattacks. On April 4, the PAVN initiated a five-day operational pause to resupply, resuming its attack south on April 9. However, they had to pause again from April 11 to April 27. In its official history, the PAVN attributes these pauses to its inability to deploy its reserves promptly. Because of these delays, the PAVN was not able to seize Quang Tri until the second of May, thirty-four days into the campaign.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, the PAVN opened up a second front by attacking towards An Loc on April 2, two days after the initial attacks near the DMZ. The PAVN attacked towards An Loc with three infantry divisions and one armored regiment. The PAVN 5th Division cleared villages north of An Loc, passing the 9th Division to attack An Loc, while the 7th Division bypassed An Loc and seized the Tau-O Bridge on April 7. By seizing this bridge, the PAVN was able to block most ARVN reinforcements and Highway 13, the only high-speed avenue of approach to An Loc. The PAVN initiated its first attack on An Loc on April 13th.<sup>34</sup>

Five days before the attack on An Loc, on April 8, the PAVN opened its third front in the Central Highlands. The PAVN 2nd, 3rd, and 320A Divisions attacked and seized key terrain and

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<sup>33</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 290-93; Albert Grandolini, *The Easter Offensive, Vietnam 1972. Volume 1: Invasion Across the DMZ* (Solihull, England: Helion and Company, 2015), 21-37. See also: Andrade, 36-156; Ngo Quang Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, Indochina Monographs (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1977), 24-47.

<sup>34</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 294-96; Albert Grandolini, *The Easter Offensive, Vietnam 1972. Volume 2: Tanks in the Streets* (Solihull, England: Helion and Company, 2015), 10-32. See also: James H. Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 39-72; Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 112-19.

villages northwest of Kontum, resulting in the seizure of Dien Bien on April 25. However, like the attacks in the north, this initial success was followed by 18 days of reduced offensive activity from April 26 to May 13. On May 14, the PAVN resumed its offensive and attacked Kontum, but by then the ARVN had established well-prepared defensive positions. The PAVN offensive around Kontum reached its high-water mark on May 30 when the tides turned, and the ARVN began to seize the initiative.<sup>35</sup>

The PAVN offensives near Quang Tri and An Loc began to falter around the end of May as well. Following the PAVN seizure of Quang Tri in early May, the 324B Division continued the offensive towards Hue, but it culminated at the outskirts of the city. In June, the ARVN launched a counteroffensive and began pushing the PAVN back across the Laotian and North Vietnamese borders. Similarly, the ARVN 5<sup>th</sup> Division in An Loc, with the support of an additional airborne brigade, successfully defended An Loc until June, when a relief column from Saigon defeated the PAVN 7<sup>th</sup> Division blocking Highway 13 and lifted the siege. The ARVN continued clearing PAVN forces from the DMZ, Central Highlands, and An Loc through September, but by June the PAVN offensive had peaked.<sup>36</sup>

## 1972 Easter Offensive: Focused Research Questions

The senior leaders in the North Vietnamese Politburo launched the 1972 Easter Offensive with some assumptions regarding the strategic environment. Two assumptions regarding the strength of the ARVN and the willingness of the US military to intervene would have a profoundly negative impact on the campaign itself, and one regarding patron state support

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<sup>35</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 293-94; Grandolini, *The Easter Offensive, Vietnam 1972. Volume 2: Tanks in the Streets*, 38-51. See also: Andrade, *America's Last Vietnam Battle: Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive*, 228-96; Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 85-103.

<sup>36</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 290-98; Grandolini, *The Easter Offensive, Vietnam 1972. Volume 1: Invasion Across the DMZ*, 21-27; Grandolini, *The Easter Offensive, Vietnam 1972. Volume 2: Tanks in the Streets*, 10-51. See also: Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc*, 72-146; Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 48-66, 119-35.

hastened their decision to begin the offensive. In 1971, the ARVN had launched Operation Lam Son 719 to disrupt PAVN operations along the Ho Chi Minh trail in southeast Laos. Although the ARVN reached the trail at Tchepone, the PAVN forced it to withdraw almost immediately.<sup>37</sup> The PAVN's success against the ARVN led the North Vietnamese to believe their conventional army was stronger than the ARVN. On the other hand, the PAVN was worried about the US military, but it believed that continued US troop withdrawals and the political situation in the United States would significantly inhibit the United State's desire to support the ARVN.<sup>38</sup> Lastly, the North Vietnamese believed that President Richard Nixon's improving relations with China and Russia jeopardized Vietnam's relationship with its communist patrons.<sup>39</sup> Together, these three assumptions about the strategic context influenced the North Vietnamese decision to launch an offensive in 1972. In retrospect, these three assumptions were incorrect to a degree. The ARVN fought back tenaciously, the US military provided significant advisory and air power support, and North Vietnam's patrons would continue to support it after 1972.

The North Vietnamese political goals for the Easter Offensive centered on the enduring goal of an independent and unified Vietnam. Subordinate goals included expanding the political struggle within South Vietnam and neutralizing perceived diplomatic threats. By the end of 1971, political negotiations between North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the United States had been ongoing in Paris for three years with little progress. At the same time, relations between the United States and North Vietnam's Russian and Chinese patrons were warming.<sup>40</sup> The North Vietnamese feared that these warming relationships and increased political pressure from Russia

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<sup>37</sup> Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975*, 649-54.

<sup>38</sup> Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975*, 673-74. See also: Peter Macdonald, *Giap: The Victor in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 327-28.

<sup>39</sup> Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc*, 14-16; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 311.

<sup>40</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 5; Macdonald, *Giap: The Victor in Vietnam*, 58-66. Ongoing Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) between the United States and the Soviet Union and the publically announced Nixon visit to China were both evidence of the warming relations between these countries.

and China, both of whom were encouraging a negotiated settlement, might lead to decreased political leverage and military and economic aid. To avoid this, North Vietnamese leaders thought a military victory in the Easter Offensive would strengthen North Vietnam's position with its patrons and in its negotiations in Paris.<sup>41</sup>

The North Vietnamese had a number of political goals, but they believed the best way to gain leverage at the Paris peace negotiations in the short-term, and to attain an independent, unified Vietnam in the long-term, was through a military victory in 1972. To enable this, the Politburo developed some military objectives for its army. The Politburo wanted the PAVN to destroy as many ARVN forces as possible, liberate key South Vietnamese cities (*i.e.*, Hue, Kontum, An Loc), expand PAVN base areas, discredit Nixon's Vietnamization and pacification program, hasten the withdrawal of the US military from South Vietnam, and ultimately, seize control of South Vietnam.<sup>42</sup> The Politburo acknowledged that these were ambitious goals, but at the least, it recognized that the more terrain the PAVN could seize and hold, and the more ARVN forces the PAVN could destroy, the more political leverage they would have at the Paris negotiations.<sup>43</sup>

Given the ambitious military objectives that the Politburo developed for the PAVN, it is unfortunate that there is little North Vietnamese documentation on the military options that the Politburo and PAVN considered for the 1972 offensive. However, historians and ARVN officers analyzing the campaign in retrospect have suggested some of North Vietnam's military options. In his book *Hell in An Loc*, ARVN LTG Lam Quang Thi suggested that the North Vietnamese

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<sup>41</sup> Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*, 233-34; Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975*, 676. See also: MacDonald, *Giap: The Victor in Vietnam*, 328.

<sup>42</sup> Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc*, 17; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 283-84; Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975*, 676.

<sup>43</sup> Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*, 233-34; Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975*, 676.

could have launched an offensive similar to the 1968 Tet Offensive, which began with guerilla warfare and transitioned to conventional warfare. However, he went on to argue that guerilla warfare had been discredited following the Tet Offensive and that a conventional invasion was their best option.<sup>44</sup> Within a conventional approach, the PAVN still had options. In *The Easter Offensive, Vietnam 1972*, Albert Grandolini suggested that the PAVN could have focused their forces and the offensive on an attack across the DMZ.<sup>45</sup> The third option – and the one that the Politburo chose – was a conventional three-pronged attack into north, central, and south South Vietnam.<sup>46</sup>

Once the North Vietnamese Politburo decided to launch an offensive focused on conventional warfare, the Central Military Party Committee developed the specifics of the operational approach. The military committee's plan, which was approved by the Politburo before execution, was a three-pronged offensive with simultaneous attacks in the north near the DMZ, in the Central Highlands towards Kontum, and in the south near An Loc. While the focus was on conventional warfare, the North Vietnamese sought to encourage and support mass popular uprisings as well, which was their previous focus.<sup>47</sup> By attacking in three regions simultaneously, the PAVN thought they would maximize surprise and create a dilemma for the ARVN as to where it should commit its reserves.<sup>48</sup> North Vietnamese leaders recognized that the PAVN offensive might not succeed in all three regions, but they believed that success in any one region

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<sup>44</sup> Lam Quang Thi, *Hell in An Loc: The 1972 Easter Invasion and the Battle That Saved South Viet Nam* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2009), 35.

<sup>45</sup> Grandolini, *The Easter Offensive, Vietnam 1972. Volume 1: Invasion Across the DMZ*, 17.

<sup>46</sup> Thi, *Hell in An Loc: The 1972 Easter Invasion and the Battle That Saved South Viet Nam*, 35-38; Grandolini, *The Easter Offensive, Vietnam 1972. Volume 1: Invasion Across the DMZ*, 17; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 283.

<sup>47</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 283; Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975*, 676. See also: MacDonald, *Giap: The Victor in Vietnam*, 328-29.

<sup>48</sup> Thi, *Hell in An Loc: The 1972 Easter Invasion and the Battle That Saved South Viet Nam*, 37.

would have a significant impact on South Vietnamese morale and territorial integrity. At a minimum, the PAVN planned to seize and retain territory within South Vietnam to strengthen the North Vietnamese stance at the Paris peace negotiations and enable future offensives.<sup>49</sup>

Although the PAVN displayed simultaneity in its attacks in three separate regions of South Vietnam, it struggled to incorporate depth and maintain its tempo during the Easter Offensive. The PAVN achieved simultaneity by April 2 with attacks in the ARVN I and III Corps areas of operation, and across the whole campaign on April 8. Zooming in, the PAVN achieved simultaneity within the three geographic operations as well. For instance, the PAVN attacked both Quang Tri and An Loc simultaneously from two directions. The An Loc operation best exemplifies depth in the 1972 offensive, when the PAVN 7th Division seized the Tau-O bridge approximately 15 kilometers south of An Loc. Unfortunately, the PAVN was unable to exploit the depth it achieved around An Loc because it quickly lost its tempo. The PAVN's official history notes that "preparations for the attack [on An Loc] had taken too long, however, the enemy had time to strengthen the defenses of the city ... The enemy also had time to bring the 21st Division up from the Mekong Delta to Chon Thanh."<sup>50</sup> So while the PAVN achieved simultaneity, it was unable to maintain its tempo and struggled to exploit the depth it achieved around An Loc.

## 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign: Campaign Summary

The 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign was North Vietnam's third major military offensive in South Vietnam, and like the 1972 Easter Offensive, the North Vietnamese prioritized PAVN conventional warfare. The Ho Chi Minh Campaign began on March 1, 1975 in the Central Highlands, but the PAVN soon initiated simultaneous operations in the north and south as well

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<sup>49</sup> Grandolini, *The Easter Offensive, Vietnam 1972. Volume 1: Invasion Across the DMZ*, 17-18; Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 296.



(Figure 2). In addition to the geographic divisions within the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, the campaign can be broken down into four sequential phases. The campaign began with the PAVN dislocating the ARVN in the Central Highlands followed by the collapse of the ARVN I Corps in the north, the fall of the ARVN II Corps in the Central Highlands, and finally, the fall of Saigon.

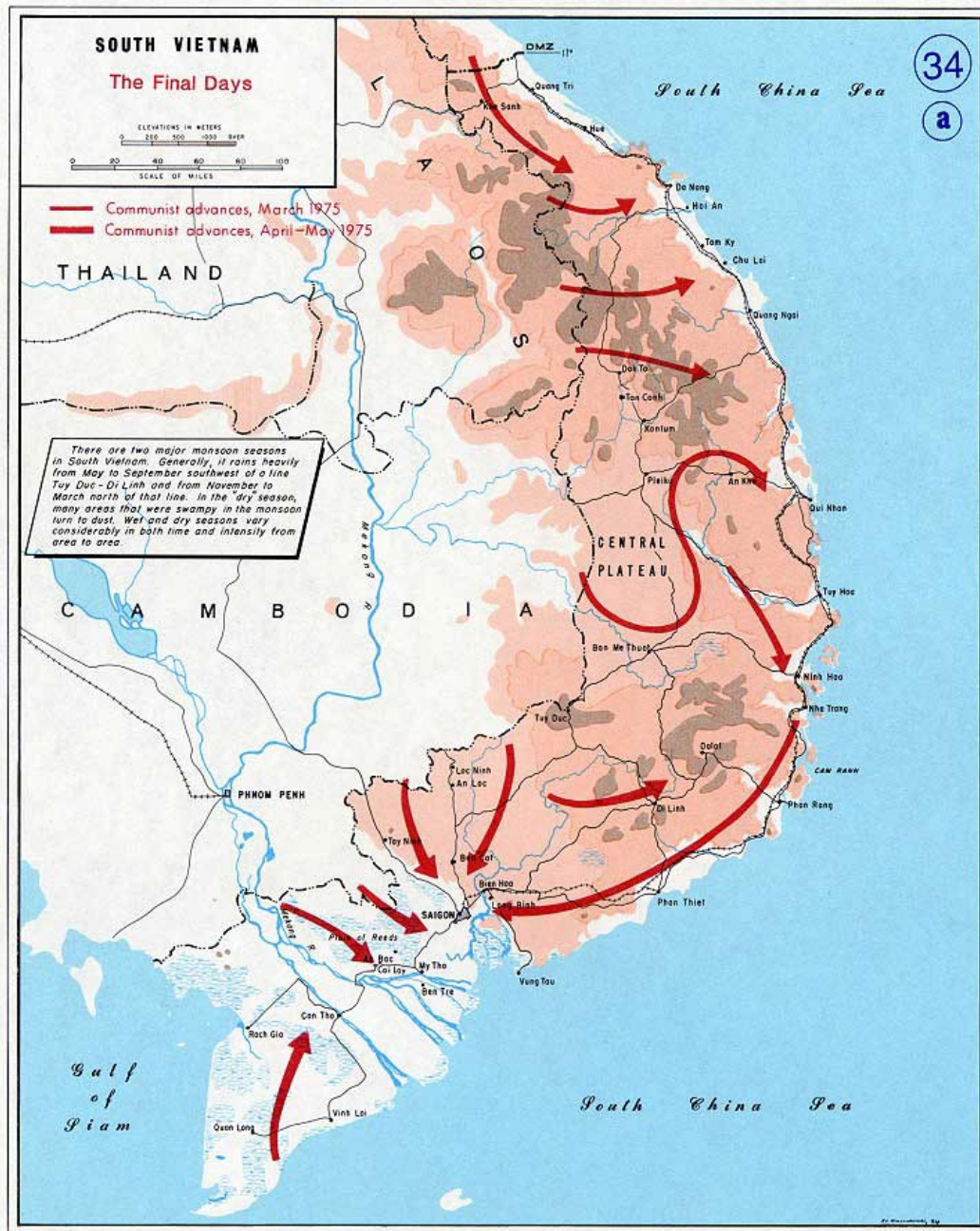


Figure 2: Ho Chi Minh Campaign Map, 1975. Maps Courtesy of the Department of Military History, United States Military Academy, "The Final Days," *United States Military Academy Atlases*, accessed November 2, 2017, <http://www.westpoint.edu/history/SiteAssets/SitePages/Vietnam%20War/vietnam%20war%20map%2034.jpg>

The Ho Chi Minh Campaign began on March 1, 1975 with a deliberate feint towards Pleiku in the Central Highlands. The PAVN 968th Division preoccupied ARVN forces at Pleiku, while three days later the PAVN attacked with two additional divisions and two independent regiments to block three of the four major highways in the Central Highlands. By March 11, the PAVN had blocked Highways 19 and 21, the two major east-west running highways in the region, and Highway 14, South Vietnam's major inland north-south running highway. By focusing on ground lines of communication, the PAVN severely disrupted the ARVN's ability to move reinforcements.<sup>51</sup> The PAVN took advantage of this on March 11, when it isolated and seized the city of Ban Me Thuot.<sup>52</sup>

While PAVN forces in the Central Highlands halted their attacks to prepare a hasty defense and defeat an anticipated ARVN counterattack, PAVN forces in southern and northern South Vietnam began their attack. In the south, the PAVN 9th Division seized the city of Tri Tam on March 10, and soon thereafter blocked Highways 13 and 22 running north and northwest from Saigon. Additionally, the PAVN 6th and 7th Divisions attacked to the east of Saigon cutting Highways 2 and 20. With these four highways blocked, the PAVN cut off all ground lines of communication between Saigon and the Central Highlands.<sup>53</sup> Finally, the PAVN launched its first major attack against the ARVN I Corps in the north on March 21. The PAVN 2nd and 324th

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<sup>51</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap and Van Tien Dung, *How We Won the War* (Philadelphia: RECON Publications, 1980), 48-49; Hoang Van Thai, *How South Vietnam Was Liberated* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1992), 157.

<sup>52</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 367-72; Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 146-67. See also: William E. Le Gro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1981), 147-51.

<sup>53</sup> Tran Van Tra, *Vietnam: History of the Bulwark B2 Theatre : Vol 5--Concluding the 30-Years War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1989), 148. See also: Le Gro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, 165-69.

Divisions initiated limited attacks and feints beginning the first week of March, but on March 21 the PAVN 325th Division seized a section of Highway 1 between Hue and Danang.<sup>54</sup>

By March 21, the ARVN defensive in the Central Highlands began to disintegrate. On March 11 and 12, the ARVN 23rd Division and various Ranger Groups had attacked to retake Ban Me Thuot, but they failed. On March 13, the South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu decided to withdraw the ARVN 22nd Division from Kontum and Pleiku to reinforce the 23rd Division's attack to retake Ban Me Thuot and destroy PAVN forces in the area.<sup>55</sup> Unfortunately, the 22nd Division's withdrawal took thirteen days, which negated the value of the planned retrograde and counterattack. Additionally, withdrawing ARVN forces caused the South Vietnamese in the Central Highlands to panic and flee.<sup>56</sup>

The panic in the Central Highlands quickly spread to the north, when ARVN units moved south from Quang Tri and Hue to halt the PAVN offensive between Hue and Danang. As ARVN forces moved south, Soldiers began to abandon their posts to return home and protect their families, which some scholars have called the "family syndrome."<sup>57</sup> Between continued PAVN attacks and the family syndrome, the ARVN 1st Division completely dissolved as a fighting force on March 24. On the same day, the PAVN seized Hue, quickly followed by the seizure of Danang

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<sup>54</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 372, 379-82, 399; Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 244-51, 274-96. See also: Le Gro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, 159.

<sup>55</sup> Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 172-82; Vien, *The Final Collapse*, 75-84.

<sup>56</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 372-77; Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 204-34. See also: Vien, *The Final Collapse*, 91-93; Le Gro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, 151-54.

<sup>57</sup> J. Edward Lee and H. C. "Toby" Haynsworth, *Nixon, Ford and the Abandonment of South Vietnam* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2002), 89; Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 295, 329; Charles J. Timmes, "Vietnam Summary: Military Operations After the Cease-Fire Agreement, Part II," *Military Review* (September 1976): 24.

on March 29. Some ARVN forces were evacuated south by the navy, but the ARVN I Corps ceased to exist as a fighting force.<sup>58</sup>

On March 28, the day before the collapse of I Corps, the remnants of the ARVN column from Pleiku arrived in the coastal city of Tuy Hoa, but by then the tides of battle had shifted considerably. Instead of counterattacking towards Ban Me Thuot, ARVN II Corps was now forced to defend itself from the continued PAVN offensive towards the coast. The PAVN began attacking Qui Nhon on April 1, but it faced minimal resistance as remnants of the ARVN II Corps began naval evacuations to Saigon on the same day.<sup>59</sup>

Once the PAVN had captured the Central Highlands and the central coastal region from the ARVN II Corps on April 3, the PAVN shifted its offensive south towards Saigon. From April 1 to April 22, the PAVN and ARVN fought significant battles at Phan Rang and Xuan Loc, but the battles increasingly favored the PAVN as its relative combat power grew. During these battles, PAVN forces from the former ARVN I and II Corps areas of operation joined those already fighting around Saigon. On April 21, President Thieu resigned, leaving the presidency to his Vice President. Five days later, the PAVN began its attack on Saigon and on April 27, Thieu's successor resigned as well. That same day, the South Vietnamese assembly elected General Duong Van Minh as the president in hopes of opening diplomatic negotiations, but the PAVN attack continued.<sup>60</sup> The military campaign ended on April 30, 1975 when President Minh declared the unconditional surrender of South Vietnam.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 382-5, 388-94; Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 300-29. See also: Le Gro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, 159-61.

<sup>59</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 395; Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 332-59. See also Vien, *The Final Collapse*, 117-19.

<sup>60</sup> Vien, *The Final Collapse*, 143-46.

<sup>61</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 403-21; Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 416-91; Tra, 162-202. See also: Le Gro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, 173-77.

## Ho Chi Minh Campaign: Focused Research Questions

The senior leaders in the North Vietnamese Politburo launched the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign with a number of assumptions regarding the strategic environment. Based on events and assessments from the end of 1974, they believed that they had attained the upper hand over South Vietnam militarily, economically, and politically. Militarily, the PAVN had defeated ARVN forces in the Battle of Phuoc Long in December 1974 and seized most of that province.<sup>62</sup> The North Vietnamese leadership viewed the PAVN's success at Phuoc Long and the lack of a US military response as a "strategic reconnaissance" of ARVN strength and US military intentions.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, the North Vietnamese perceived burgeoning South Vietnamese and United States economic problems and civil dissent as temporary, but it presented an opportunity for the North Vietnamese to exploit. Moreover, they feared that South Vietnam would strengthen its ties with China and Japan the longer it survived and its situation improved.<sup>64</sup> Finally, two events shed light on international support towards North and South Vietnam. In late 1974, a high-ranking official from the Soviet Union visited North Vietnam in what appears to have been a gesture of support; evident through the quadrupling of Soviet military aid to North Vietnam in early 1975.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, international and US aid to the South Vietnamese government was declining.<sup>66</sup> Together, these events and accurate assessments about the strategic environment influenced the North Vietnamese to launch an offensive in 1975 and subsequently hasten their offensive with successive military victories.

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<sup>62</sup> Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 92-114; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 356-60.

<sup>63</sup> Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam*, 12, 19, 22-23; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 359; Giap, *The General Headquarters in the Spring of Brilliant Victory*, 99, 118-19; Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975*, 768; Thai, *How South Vietnam Was Liberated*, 144.

<sup>64</sup> Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 501.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 498-501.

The North Vietnamese political objectives during the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign were very similar to those from the 1972 Easter Offensive. The ultimate political objective was still an independent, united Vietnam.<sup>67</sup> For years North Vietnamese leaders had argued that if the Americans left South Vietnam, the South Vietnamese government would collapse, thereby enabling unification. However, this did not happen when the US military withdrew from Vietnam in 1973, so the Politburo realized that political victory still required military action.<sup>68</sup> As such, the Politburo sought to complete its “people’s democratic revolution” to reunite Vietnam.<sup>69</sup>

Leading up to the 1975 campaign, North Vietnam developed seven military objectives for the PAVN focusing on defeating the ARVN, seizing the Central Highlands region of South Vietnam, and supporting South Vietnamese sympathetic to its cause. Specifically, the PAVN’s objectives were to annihilate ARVN units, destroy ARVN war facilities, defeat ARVN offensives against PAVN enclaves in South Vietnam (*i.e.* foil the ARVN pacification program), liberate provinces in the south Central Highlands, expand the PAVN’s logistics system from the Central Highlands to Saigon, build up strategic forces (*i.e.* reserves), and support the political movement of local forces sympathetic to the North Vietnamese cause in South Vietnam.<sup>70</sup>

Given its policy of a people’s democratic revolution and its military objectives, members of the Politburo debated its military options in terms of the correct combination and arrangement of its “military struggle” and “political struggle.” In their extremes, these military options are equivalent to large-scale offensive operations and irregular warfare, respectively.<sup>71</sup> Within this

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<sup>67</sup> Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 8. See also: Giap, *The General Headquarters in the Spring of Brilliant Victory*, 55-57; Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam*, 7.

<sup>68</sup> Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 37.

<sup>69</sup> Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam*, 7.

<sup>70</sup> Giap, *The General Headquarters in the Spring of Brilliant Victory*, 95-96; Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 68; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 361-62. See also: Thai, *How South Vietnam Was Liberated*, 112,119-20.

<sup>71</sup> Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 36.

spectrum, the Politburo's General Secretary Le Duan seemed to favor a broad offensive focused on revolutionary uprisings, similar to the 1968 Tet Offensive, while the Secretary of the Central Military Commission Vo Nguyen Giap seemed to favor a conventional military offensive aimed at destroying the ARVN, similar to the 1972 Easter Offensive.<sup>72</sup> However, in his proposal, which the Politburo ultimately approved, Giap sought to strengthen the main-force offensive by improving the PAVN's synchronization, sustainment, and the use of reserves; three weaknesses he identified from the Easter Offensive.<sup>73</sup>

The PAVN had a number of other military options related to the duration of the offensive, to concentrate or disperse, and where to attack. In regards to the duration, North Vietnam had a range of options between Mao Tse-Tung's concept of a protracted war and seeking a more swift decision. However, there was consensus within the Politburo that now was the time to seek a final decision.<sup>74</sup> In regards to concentration or dispersion, North Vietnam could have focused their attacks on any of the four ARVN Corps' areas of operation: I Corps near the DMZ, II Corps in the Central Highlands, III Corps around Saigon, or IV Corps in the Mekong Delta. Based on their assessment of the ARVN disposition, they chose to focus their offensive in the Central Highlands initially, the area with the lowest number of ARVN divisions. Furthermore, the PAVN intended to attack in the southern Central Highlands where they believed the ARVN had the least combat power.<sup>75</sup> Even after they had chosen to focus on the south Central Highlands, the PAVN could have focused their initial attacks on large population centers, like they had previously during the 1968 Tet Offensive and 1972 Easter Offensive, or they could have

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<sup>72</sup> Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 46. See also: MacDonald, *Giap: The Victor in Vietnam*, 333.

<sup>73</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 291-94, 297-98; Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 46.

<sup>74</sup> Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 37-40.

<sup>75</sup> Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam*, 20-21; Giap, *The General Headquarters in the Spring of Brilliant Victory*, 73, 79, 90-93.

focused on lines of communication. In his memoirs, General Van Tien Dung, the senior PAVN field commander in 1975, stressed the importance of attacking the highways (*i.e.* lines of communication) and how it isolated areas in South Vietnam and divided ARVN forces, which the PAVN could subsequently destroy.<sup>76</sup> During the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, for the first time during the Second Indochina War, the PAVN chose to focus on cutting ARVN lines of communication (highways within the Central Highlands and those connecting this region to Saigon) and critical road junctions (*e.g.* Ban Me Thuot).<sup>77</sup>

Finally, it is useful to highlight another choice that the PAVN had after its successful seizure of Ban Me Thuot. North Vietnam's leaders had considered the prospect of seizing all of South Vietnam in 1975, but there were no concrete plans on how they would do this. After the PAVN's catastrophic success in the Central Highlands, the Politburo had to decide whether the PAVN should pivot south and immediately focus on attacking Saigon or continue east to destroy the ARVN II Corps before pivoting south. Senior leaders in Hanoi desired an early pivot south to attack Saigon, but General Dung argued on multiple occasions to continue the offensive to the coast so that the PAVN could destroy the ARVN II Corps first.<sup>78</sup>

Given the options described above, the Politburo developed an operational approach for the PAVN based on conventional warfare that sought a decision by 1976. It planned its offensive in two stages. Stage one consisted of three phases: Phase I (December 1974 to February 1975) was a limited offensive in the area north of Saigon, Phase II (March to June 1975) was a multi-division assault to seize cities in the southern portion of the Central Highlands, and Phase III (August to October 1975) was an attack in the ARVN I Corps area to foil the ARVN pacification

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<sup>76</sup> Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam*, 45.

<sup>77</sup> Giap, *The General Headquarters in the Spring of Brilliant Victory*, 90-93; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 368.

<sup>78</sup> Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 216-20, 260-62, 333-35; Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam*, 119-22; Thai, *How South Vietnam Was Liberated*, 173-74.



plan. Stage two would take place in 1976, but it was never planned. The main effort for stage one was in the south Central Highlands as it was believed that this was the weakest part of the ARVN defense. Additionally, the plan was to use the land the PAVN seized in this area as a base for future operations in stage two, the 1976 general offensive to seize Saigon and all of South Vietnam.<sup>79</sup>

The Ho Chi Minh Campaign in the Central Highlands displayed a clear integration of depth, simultaneity, and tempo. The PAVN 968th Division initiated the offensive on March 1 with a feint towards Pleiku from the Cambodian border.<sup>80</sup> The 968th continued these attacks to draw ARVN forces north and west until March 4, when the PAVN 3rd Division, 25th Regiment, and 95A Regiment attacked Highway 19 and 21 simultaneously. These three PAVN units had infiltrated past ARVN forces in the west and attacked Highway 19 further east, 75 kilometers deep behind the ARVN defensive front at Pleiku. The PAVN attacked Highway 21 in depth as well, blocking this route approximately 30 kilometers east of Ban Me Thuot. Three days later, the PAVN 320th Division attacked to maintain the PAVN's tempo by cutting Highway 14 between Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot.<sup>81</sup> In his memoirs *Spring of Brilliant Victory*, Giap stressed the importance of depth, simultaneity, and tempo. He emphasized how attacking simultaneously and in-depth disrupted the ARVN's decision making while enabling PAVN forces to encircle, split

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<sup>79</sup> Giap, *The General Headquarters in the Spring of Brilliant Victory*, 96; Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 86-87; Thai, *How South Vietnam Was Liberated*, 126-27.

<sup>80</sup> Giap and Dung, *How We Won the War*, 49.

<sup>81</sup> Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 146-55; Giap, *The General Headquarters in the Spring of Brilliant Victory*, 138-43.

up, and prevent the ARVN from escaping. He argued that the PAVN was able to maintain its tempo by having a strategic reserve ready to continue the attack.<sup>82</sup>

The most glaring difference between the 1972 Easter Offensive and the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign was the result. While the 1972 campaign failed to achieve the overarching political objective of an independent, unified Vietnam, the North Vietnamese achieved that in the 1975 campaign. The question remains as to what caused the different outcomes, but the summaries and answers to the focused research questions began to reveal some of the differences. Some of the more obvious differences are related to the strategic environment, North Vietnam's operational approach, and military decision-making. The findings and analysis section will compare the case studies and explore these areas to test this study's hypotheses and its thesis: The PAVN successfully applied operational art during the Ho Chi Minh Campaign of 1974-75, enabling it to achieve its political objective of an independent, unified Vietnam.

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<sup>82</sup> Giap, *The General Headquarters in the Spring of Brilliant Victory*. Giap emphasizes the importance of maintaining "powerful strategic reserves" to seize "strategic opportunities" and maintain continuous attacks [*i.e.* tempo] on pages 112, 130, and 134; encirclement operations [*i.e.* simultaneity and depth] on pages 143, 163-64, 169, 175, and 186; simultaneous attacks on page 156; and feints [simultaneity and depth] on page 140. See also: Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 366, 368. Page 366 mentions the PAVN's use of "deep penetration tactics, while page 368 highlights how the PAVN's attacks to cut Highways 14, 19, and 21 were the first time the PAVN had dedicated forces to cutting lines of communication. For additional discussion of the recognized importance of tempo, depth, and encirclement operations in the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, read: Giap and Dung, *How We Won the War*, 48-53.

## Findings and Analysis

Using the empirical data gathered from the case studies, this section will conduct a structured, focused comparison of the 1972 Easter Offensive and 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign. This comparison will be presented in two halves. The findings portion of this section will compare the data gathered in response to each of the study's six research questions; summarized in Table 1. Following that, the analysis portion will use the results of the findings to test the study's two hypotheses. Ultimately, this section seeks to demonstrate trends in the PAVN's understanding of the strategic environment and ability to combine and arrange tactical actions to achieve its strategic goals.

This study's first question is: how did North Vietnam and the PAVN understand the strategic environment? The empirical evidence suggests that the North Vietnamese and PAVN leadership had a better understanding of the strategic environment in 1975 than in 1972. In both cases, the North Vietnamese leadership assumed that the PAVN was stronger than the ARVN and that the United States would provide limited to no support to the ARVN. These were critical assumptions, and while the empirical evidence suggests that they were accurate in 1975, they appear to have been premature in 1972.

The second question is: what were the North Vietnamese political objectives? The Politburo's political objectives for the 1972 Easter Offensive and 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign were nearly identical. The most significant difference in the empirical evidence was the Politburo's additional goal of shoring up political support in 1972, which it feared might be waning.

The third question is: what were the North Vietnamese military objectives? North Vietnam's military objectives were similar in 1972 and 1975, but they were more focused and specific in the Ho Chi Minh Campaign. For example, instead of aiming to seize key cities in three areas of South Vietnam simultaneously, the Ho Chi Minh Campaign was focused on seizing the

Central Highlands as a precursor to operations elsewhere. Additionally, the Politburo was specific in its desire to extend its logistical system from the Central Highlands towards Saigon in 1975,

**Table 1. Summary of Findings from the Case Studies Table.**

<b>Focused Research Question</b>	<b>Easter Offensive</b>	<b>Ho Chi Minh Campaign</b>
<b>1- How did North Vietnam and the PAVN understand the strategic environment?</b>	Assumption #1: The PAVN was stronger than the ARVN.	Assumption #1: The PAVN was stronger than the ARVN.
	Assumption #2: The United States would provide minimal support to the ARVN.	Assumption #2: The United States would not support to the ARVN.
	Assumption #3: North Vietnam's patrons would stop supporting them soon.	Assumption #3: North Vietnam had more support from its patrons than South Vietnam.
		Assumption #4: South Vietnamese and US economic and social challenges presented an opportunity in terms of morale.
<b>2- What were the North Vietnamese political objectives?</b>	1. Establishing an independent and unified Vietnam.	1. Establishing an independent and unified Vietnam.
	2. Expand the political struggle in South Vietnam.	2. Expand the political struggle in South Vietnam.
	3. Neutralize diplomatic threats.	
<b>3- What were the North Vietnamese military objectives?</b>	1. Destroy as many ARVN forces as possible.	1. Annihilate ARVN units.
	2. Liberate key South Vietnamese cities (i.e. Hue, Kontum, and An Loc).	2. Liberate the Central Highlands region of South Vietnam.
	3. Expand PAVN base/support areas.	3. Expand the PAVN's logistics system from the Central Highlands to Saigon.
	4. Discredit pacification efforts in the south.	4. Defeat the ARVN pacification efforts.
	5. Hasten the withdrawal of US forces in South Vietnam.	5. Destroy ARVN war facilities.
	6. Seize control of all South Vietnam.	6. Build up and maintain operational reserves.
<b>4- What were the North Vietnamese military options?</b>	1. Broad, guerilla-based offensive (like the 1968 Tet Offensive).	1. Irregular or conventional warfare.
	2. Geographically-focused conventional offensive.	2. Protracted or decisive war.
	3. Multi-front conventional offensive.	3. Dispersed or concentrated offensive.
<b>5- What was the North Vietnamese operational approach?</b>		4. Military objectives: population centers or lines of communication.
	A conventional offensive with three, stagger-started, but simultaneous, independent lines of operations. The first was in northern South Vietnam with the goal of seizing Hue, the second was in the south with the goal of seizing An Loc, and the third was in the Central Highlands with the goal of seizing Kontum.	A two stage offensive aimed at seizing the Central Highlands and defeating ARVN pacification efforts in the north during the first dry season (1974-75) and seizing the rest of South Vietnam the second dry season (1975-76). The first stage was broken down into three phases, each designed to enable the next by requiring the ARVN to commit its reserves and allowing the PAVN to extend its lines of support.
<b>6- How did the PAVN integrate depth, simultaneity, and tempo in the conduct of its campaigns?</b>	The Easter Offensive exhibited simultaneity across three separate fronts, but it struggled to integrate depth and tempo. The PAVN 7th Division achieved limited depth by seizing the Tau-O bridge 15km south of the "front lines," but the PAVN struggled to maintain its tempo in all three fronts because of a lack of reserves.	The Ho Chi Minh Campaign displayed clear integration of depth, simultaneity, and tempo. The offensive's initial military objectives aimed to penetrate the Central Highlands in depth to disrupt and isolate ARVN forces. These initial attacks were soon followed up by offensives in the north and south to achieve simultaneity and create multiple dilemmas for the ARVN. Finally, the PAVN maintained operational reserves throughout the campaign, which enabled it to retain the initiative and maintain its offensive tempo.

Source: Table created by Author.

instead of a more generic “to expand our base areas” in 1972.<sup>83</sup> This focus and specificity seem to have enabled the PAVN to concentrate, synchronize, and adjust its tactical actions to achieve operational effects, which is explored further in the fifth and sixth questions.

The fourth question is: what were the North Vietnamese military options? This comparison is inconclusive because of insufficient evidence. Existing studies have developed some theories, but there is little empirical evidence regarding the options the North Vietnamese leadership considered in 1972. This is not the case for 1975. During planning for the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, the Politburo had a robust discussion of military options to determine whether it would execute the campaign along the lines of conventional or irregular warfare, protracted or decisive war, and a dispersed or concentrated offensive.

The fifth question is: what was the North Vietnamese operational approach? The North Vietnamese and PAVN leadership developed a more detailed and synchronized operational approach for the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign than they did for the 1972 Easter Offensive. The operational approach for the 1972 campaign had three lines of operation (LOOs) with staggered starts, but there was little additional synchronization between the LOOs. This is significantly different from the operational approach for the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign, which was synchronized to enable synergistic effects across the different LOOs. The most significant synchronization was the phasing from an initial focus on seizing the Central Highlands, which enabled sequential and simultaneous operations to the north, and finally to the south towards Saigon.

The sixth question is: how did the PAVN integrate depth, simultaneity, and tempo in the conduct of its campaigns? The PAVN leadership was able to achieve simultaneity and limited depth and tempo during the Easter Offensive, but they were more deliberate in planning to

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<sup>83</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975.*, 284, 361.

incorporate these tenets and successful in achieving them during the Ho Chi Minh Campaign. The 1972 Easter Offensive included three simultaneous operations, but it incorporated minimal depth and struggled to maintain an offensive tempo. This enabled the ARVN to mobilize its reserves, reorganize its defenses, and defeat the PAVN offensive. General Giap learned from the 1972 campaign and designed the 1975 campaign so that the PAVN could maintain its tempo and attack the ARVN in depth.

This study's first hypothesis asserts that when the PAVN understood the strategic environment, this enabled it to achieve its strategic objectives. The evidence suggests this hypothesis is supported. During the 1972 Easter Offensive, the PAVN made some assumptions about the strategic environment that severely hindered its offensive. Influenced by its success during Lam Son 719, the North Vietnamese leadership assumed that the PAVN was stronger than and capable of defeating the ARVN. While this appears to have been true during Lam Son, when the ARVN was on the offensive, this was not the case during the Easter Offensive, when the ARVN was on the defensive. Another PAVN assumption was that the US military would not significantly intervene on behalf of the ARVN. This proved to be incorrect as well. Although the US military did not deploy any conventional ground combat forces to support the ARVN, it did provide US military advisors and air support. The empirical evidence suggests that the PAVN did not accurately assess the strategic environment in 1972, nor was it able to achieve its strategic objectives. The evidence suggests the opposite in 1975. The PAVN made the same two assumptions during the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, but this time they appear to have been accurate, which contributed to the PAVN's ability to defeat the ARVN and achieve its strategic objectives.

The second hypothesis asserts that when the PAVN integrated depth, simultaneity, and tempo, it achieved operational effects. The evidence suggests that this hypothesis is supported as well. During the 1972 Easter Offensive, the PAVN achieved simultaneity by attacking along three fronts at the same time, but it struggled to achieve significant depth or a sustained tempo. The PAVN's deepest attack in the Easter Offensive was at the Tau-O Bridge, 15 kilometers

behind the ARVN's primary defensive positions at An Loc. Assessing tempo based on who had the initiative, the PAVN began to see a reduced tempo two weeks into the campaign, when the ARVN conducted its first counterattack near Quang Tri.<sup>84</sup> Continued reductions in the PAVN's tempo enabled the ARVN to deploy its reserves and maneuver its forces to defeat the PAVN offensive.<sup>85</sup>

The PAVN was more successful at integrating depth, simultaneity, and tempo during the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign. The PAVN began its offensive in the Central Highlands with a feint towards Pleiku, which enabled it to infiltrate forces past the primary ARVN defenses and attack three critical lines of communication (Highways 14, 19, and 21) simultaneously and in depth. These attacks were roughly 75 kilometers deep behind the ARVN's primary defensive positions at Pleiku; four times deeper than the deepest attack in the Easter Offensive. These attacks allowed the PAVN to isolate, encircle, and defeat the ARVN forces around Ban Me Thuot.<sup>86</sup> Following its success in the western Central Highlands, the PAVN deployed its reserves to maintain the initiative and continue its attack east towards the coast. The integration of depth, simultaneity, and tempo enabled the PAVN's tactical actions, which, in aggregate, enabled it to achieve operational effects. A significant example of this was how the PAVN's success in the Central Highlands helped dislocate the ARVN I Corps in northern South Vietnam.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Grandolini, *The Easter Offensive, Vietnam 1972. Volume 1: Invasion Across the DMZ*, 32-33.

<sup>85</sup> Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 158-60; Timothy J. Lomperis, "Giap's Dream, Westmoreland's Nightmare," *Parameters* (June 1998): 18-32.

<sup>86</sup> The PAVN conducted additional encirclement operations around Hue, Danang, Xuan Loc, and Saigon.

<sup>87</sup> US Army, ADRP 3-0, (2016): *Operations*, 2-3 describes dislocation as the employment of forces to "obtain significant positional advantage, rendering the enemy's dispositions less valuable, perhaps even irrelevant." When the PAVN defeated the ARVN II Corps in the Central Highlands, the ARVN I Corps in the north was isolated from III Corps around Saigon. The PAVN had gained a positional advantage that made the ARVN I Corps less valuable to the defense of the South Vietnamese capital Saigon and the country as a whole. See also: US Department of the Army, *Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 5-0.1, Army Design Methodology* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2015), 5-4.

Interestingly, most explanations for why North Vietnam was able to defeat the ARVN and achieve its political objectives in 1975 have focused on an analysis similar to this study's first hypothesis. The differences in the strategic environment were significant: the United States had drastically cut its aid to South Vietnam, the US military had departed South Vietnam, and the ARVN was more vulnerable.<sup>88</sup> However, an explanation that ends with the strategic environment discounts North Vietnamese actions and the decisions of its leadership. This study's second hypothesis has attempted to address that gap in the literature.

The empirical evidence suggests that in the time between the 1972 Easter Offensive and the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign, the North Vietnamese and PAVN leadership learned to employ its forces more effectively to achieve its strategic objectives. For example, in 1975, the PAVN successfully arranged and combined tactical actions around Ban Me Thuot to gain a position of advantage which led to the defeat the ARVN II Corps in the Central Highlands. The PAVN used the effects of its operation in Central Highland to achieve further success in the north, defeating the ARVN I Corps around Hue and Danang. Finally, the cumulative effect of those victories enabled the PAVN to encircle and slowly squeeze ARVN forces in Saigon until the ARVN surrendered and South Vietnam capitulated on April 30, 1975.

The evidence from the case studies suggests that both hypotheses are supported and that the PAVN applied what modern doctrine and theorists call operational art. It is unlikely that the North Vietnamese or PAVN leadership were familiar with this theoretical concept, but the empirical evidence suggests that they did apply its concepts. Recalling this study's thesis: during the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, the PAVN understood the strategic environment, which, combined with operations that integrated depth, simultaneity, and tempo, enabled it to achieve operational effects, and, ultimately, its strategic objectives.

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<sup>88</sup> Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War*, 3-4; Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975*, 706-711, 791-93; Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-1975*, 6; Andrade, *America's Last Vietnam Battle: Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive*, 491-92; Vien, *The Final Collapse*, 5-7.



## Conclusion

This study compared North Vietnam's 1972 Easter Offensive and 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign through the lens of operational art to determine what enabled the PAVN to defeat the ARVN and achieve its political goals in 1975. Historians and military experts have developed different explanations for North Vietnam's success in 1975, but most of these explanations have focused on the decision-making and status of the United States and South Vietnam. This study attempted to fill a gap in the historical literature by exploring the decisions and actions of North Vietnam and the PAVN. The empirical data collected supports this study's thesis, which asserts that the PAVN successfully applied operational art during the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, thereby enabling it to defeat the ARVN and unify Vietnam. During the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, unlike during the 1972 Easter Offensive, the PAVN understood the strategic environment, which enabled it in its application of operational art, integrating operational depth, simultaneity, and tempo, to achieve operational effects and its strategic objectives.

The PAVN's application of operational art was evaluated using a structured, focused comparison of the two campaigns. This study collected empirical data from a variety of primary and secondary sources using six research questions, which enabled a comparison of the findings and analysis of the study's two hypotheses. The research questions ranged from seeking to understand the North Vietnamese leadership and PAVN's understanding of the strategic environment to the PAVN's integration of depth, simultaneity, and tempo in its campaigns. Ultimately, the findings from the two campaigns supported this study's hypotheses and thesis.

The historical comparison of the PAVN's Easter Offensive and Ho Chi Minh Campaign is significant for military practitioners and planners seeking to apply operational art. The similarities and differences in these two campaigns reveal the importance of understanding the strategic environment and how one might conceptualize combining and arranging tactical actions to achieve operational effects and one's strategic objectives. The North Vietnamese leaders made critical assumptions in 1972 about the ARVN's strength and the willingness of the US military to

intervene that proved to be fatally wrong. They made similar assumptions in 1975, but this time they were more accurate. In addition to these external factors, the PAVN reflected on its internal failures during the Easter Offensive and designed the Ho Chi Minh Campaign to integrate depth, simultaneity, and tempo. The PAVN had emphasized simultaneity during the Easter Offensive, but it was not able to achieve operational effects and its strategic objectives until it integrated all three of these tenets.

The PAVN's understanding of its strategic environment and its integration of depth, simultaneity, and tempo contributed to its success in the Vietnam War, but additional research is required to develop a more holistic assessment of operational art within the PAVN. Follow-on research might seek to analyze how North Vietnam and the PAVN applied operational art in the 1978-79 Cambodian-Vietnamese War or the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War. Or it might ask: Did the PAVN deliberately apply operational art, or did its leaders simply combine its components intuitively? Did the PAVN leadership learn operational art from its Soviet patron? Is the synergy between depth, simultaneity, and tempo unique or can other tenets be selected to achieve similar operational effects?<sup>89</sup>

The most common narrative explanations of the Vietnam War attribute North Vietnam's success to the decisions and actions of the United States and South Vietnam, but this only tells part of the story. The complete story includes an analysis from the North Vietnamese perspective as well. This study contributes to the holistic understanding of the Vietnam War by examining the strategic understanding and operational decision-making of the North Vietnamese Politburo and PAVN. It found evidence suggesting that the North Vietnamese leadership understood the strategic environment and applied operational art to achieve its strategic objectives during the 1975 Ho Chi Minh Campaign. Echoing one of Clausewitz's metaphors, the Vietnam War was a

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<sup>89</sup> Hugh Shelton argued that depth and simultaneous attacks enabled the US Army's success in *Operations Just Cause* (1989-90) and *Desert Storm* (1991). Are there similarities between these two campaigns and the Ho Chi Minh Campaign? See: H. Hugh Shelton and Kevin C.M. Benson, "Depth and Simultaneity: Half the Battle," *Military Review* (December 1993): 57-63.

collision of living forces, not the action of one belligerent against a lifeless mass; so the outcomes must account for the actions of each side.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 86.

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