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1992

Executive Research Project

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**Through the Eyes of the Dragon**  
**Vietnamese Communist Grand Strategy**  
**The Second Indochina War**

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Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. 20319-6000

98 8 26 068

93-06281



11308

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION Unclassified			1b. RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS		
2a. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY N/A			3. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF REPORT Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.		
2b. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE N/A			5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S) Same		
4. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S) NDU-ICAF-92-250			7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION National Defense University		
6a. NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION Industrial College of the Armed Forces		6b. OFFICE SYMBOL (if applicable) ICAF-FAP	7b. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) Fort Lesley J. McNair Washington, D.C. 20319-6000		
6c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) Fort Lesley J. McNair Washington, D.C. 20319-6000			9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER		
8a. NAME OF FUNDING/SPONSORING ORGANIZATION		8b. OFFICE SYMBOL (if applicable)	10. SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS		
8c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)			PROGRAM ELEMENT NO.	PROJECT NO.	TASK NO.
			WORK UNIT ACCESSION NO.		
11. TITLE (Include Security Classification) <i>Through the Eyes of the Dragon: Vietnamese Communist Grand Strategy During The Second Indochina War</i>					
12. PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) <i>Malen B. Jackerman</i>					
13a. TYPE OF REPORT Research		13b. TIME COVERED FROM <i>Aug 91</i> TO <i>Apr 92</i>		14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day) April 92	15. PAGE COUNT <i>120</i>
16. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION					
17. COSATI CODES			18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)		
FIELD	GROUP	SUB-GROUP			
19. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)					
SEE ATTACHED					
20. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT. <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS			21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION Unclassified		
22a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL Judy Clark			22b. TELEPHONE (include Area Code) (202) 475-1889	22c. OFFICE SYMBOL ICAF-FAP	

ABSTRACT

**THROUGH THE EYES OF THE DRAGON:**

**Vietnamese Communist Grand Strategy During  
The Second Indochina War**

**Author: LTC(P) Galen B. Jackman**

This research paper examines the elements of national power of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and their insurgents in South Vietnam, and the evolution of the DRV's grand strategy during the Second Indochina War (1954-1975). Its thesis is that the Vietnamese Communist leaders were able to craft and execute a successful grand strategy from superior understanding and assessment of the relative elements of national power within the context of the strategic situation.

The author first examines the elements of power within the framework suggested by Hans J. Morgenthau:

- |                      |                         |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| ■ National Character | ■ Science & Technology  |
| ■ National Will      | ■ Military Preparedness |
| ■ Population         | ■ Intelligence          |
| ■ Geography          | ■ Quality of Government |
| ■ Natural Resources  | ■ Quality of Diplomacy  |
| ■ Economic Strength  |                         |

Second, he surveys the evolution of the Vietnamese Communist grand strategy by focusing on seven critical decisions made by the Communist leaders during the course of the war. Inherent in their strategy was the application of the stronger elements of power, the compensation for those that were weak, and the exploitation of their enemy's vulnerable power elements.

Finally, the author concludes that in the realm of grand strategy, the Vietnamese Communist leaders were more effective national leaders than their U.S. and South Vietnamese opponents.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**MAPS**

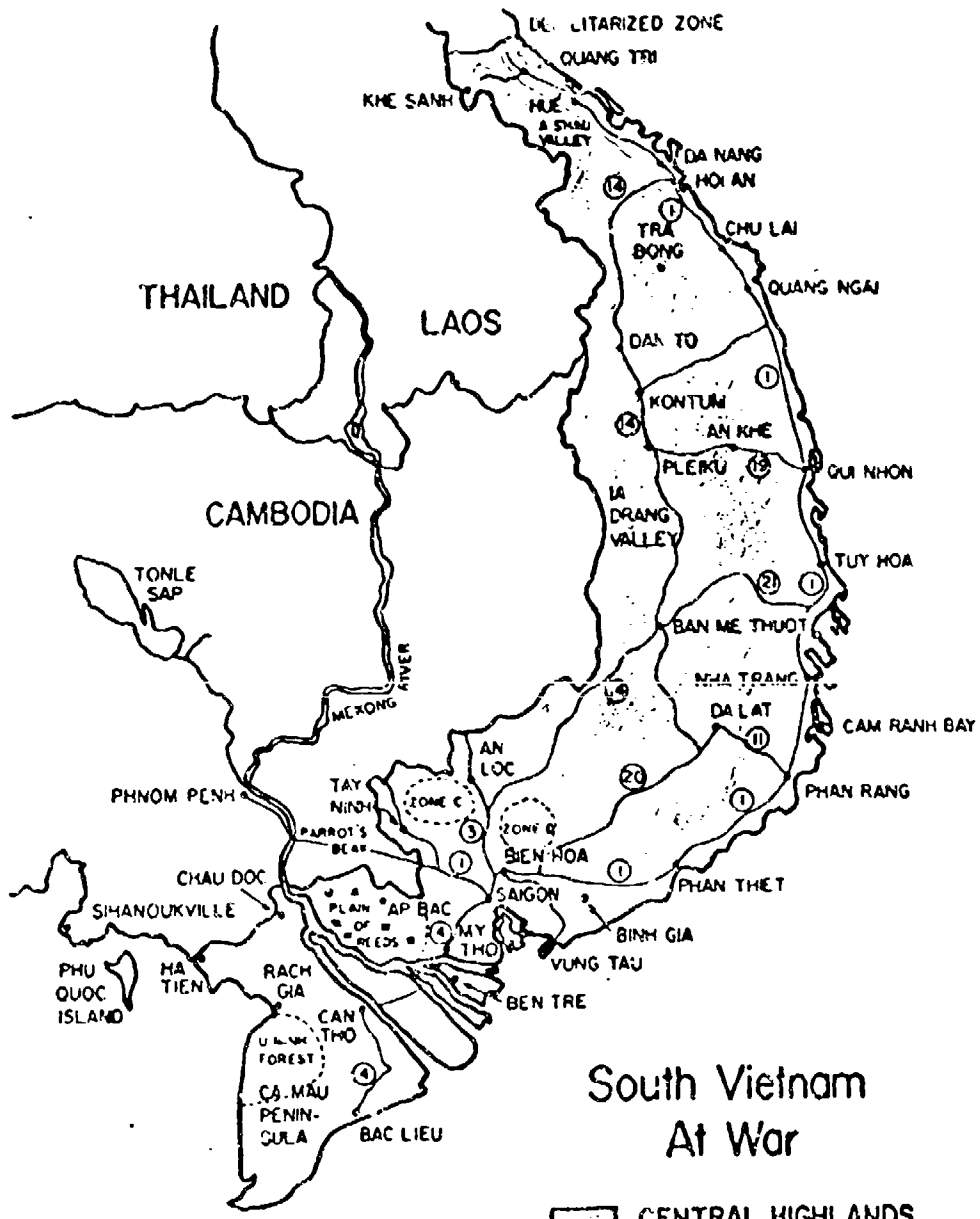
INTRODUCTION	1
THE ELEMENTS OF COMMUNIST POWER	6
THE DECISION OF 1959	26
THE 9TH PLENUM - 1963	33
THE 12TH PLENUM - 1965	45
THE WINTER-SPRING-SUMMER OFFENSIVES - 1967	57
NEGOTIATE AND FIGHT - 1968	65
THE 21ST PLENUM AND THE TIDE OF EVENTS - 1973	74
THE DECISION FOR FINAL OFFENSIVE - 1974	86
CONCLUSION	92
NOTES	98

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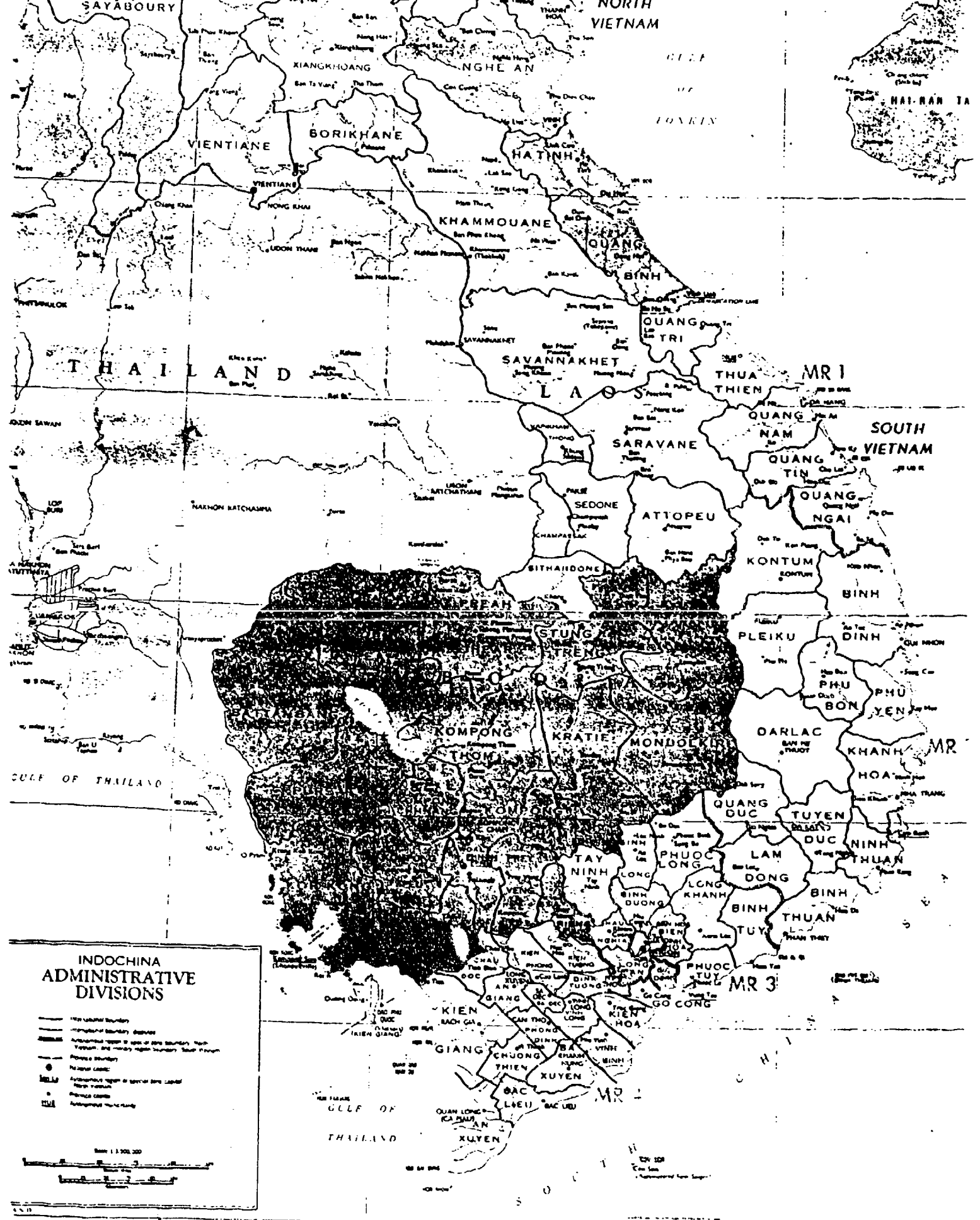
Vietnam, Laos,  
And Cambodia



## South Vietnam At War

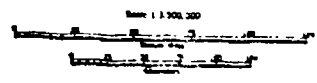
 CENTRAL HIGHLANDS





### INDOCHINA ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS

- International boundary
- Administrative boundary
- Provincial boundary
- National capital
- Provincial capital
- Administrative capital of special zone capital
- Provincial capital
- Administrative center



## INTRODUCTION

*Therefore, I say: Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles, you will never be defeated. When you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning or losing are equal. If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are sure to be defeated in every battle.<sup>1</sup>*

--Sun Tzu

Sixteen years have passed since the fall of Saigon, and time has begun to clean the lens of retrospection. Historians, strategists, and many participants in the drama of Vietnam have since critically analyzed the War. The common question normally addressed by analysts from the United States is, why did we lose the Vietnam War? This leads to a second logical question, what lessons can be drawn from the U.S. experience in the Vietnam War that can be applied to the future?

These assessments have been valuable for national-level decisionmakers and military strategists. They have rekindled study of the great strategists and brought greater integration of purpose among political and military leaders. The linkage between the political objectives of national and coalition strategy has been reestablished with the strategy, operational art, and tactics of the military. The planning and execution of OPERATIONS DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM in the Mideast demonstrates this successful linkage. President

Bush, on several occasions during the conduct of these operations, alluded to the impact the lessons of the Vietnam War had made on several of his decisions.

Most assessments, however, are incomplete. They are, for the most part, trapped in the American paradigm. They are views through American eyes. William Turley has best described this phenomenon:

*Americans have tended to view that war as an essentially American drama. In popular consciousness, the words Vietnam War are likely to trigger images of conflict in the U.S. Congress, media, and streets as they are to call forth images of war in padi fields of lands far away. If the countries, peoples, and terrain of Indochina have any place in these images at all, it is mostly as dim background against which U.S. soldiers fought valiantly but, in the end, vainly. These images reflect the haunting suspicion that the war's outcome was determined by what happened inside the United States, not in Indochina.<sup>2</sup>*

There are several reasons for this phenomenon. Many of the analysts were participants in the war, in the decisionmaking process, or in the debates during the war. Consequently, their perspective on the war is heavily influenced by their experience. Second, because of their experience, and because most are Americans, they share the common post-war American pattern of thought. This was the first war we lost, and because we had become so divided over the war itself, we were compelled to look deep within ourselves and at each other to find answers that would explain how the nearly impossible had happened. Subconsciously, we could not, and still cannot admit that we

were defeated by a third world country of little people. We have concluded that we defeated ourselves, or that it was just a bad mistake--we should not have been there in the first place. These are one-sided conclusions.

The reality is that the Vietnamese Communists forced the United States to withdraw from South Vietnam, defeated the Army of the Republic of Vietnam on the field of battle after our withdrawal, caused the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN) to collapse, and reunited the country. The paradigm of our reflections on the war is consistent with our perspectives of the Communists in Vietnam before and during our involvement in Vietnam. In the classical terms of Sun Tzu, we failed to know them. To a large extent, we still refuse to know them today.

From the Communist perspective, there were three wars that involved all the countries of Indochina: Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The First Indochina War was a war for independence from French colonialism that began in 1946 and ended with the defeat of France and the signing of the Geneva Agreements in 1954. The Second Indochina War was a war fought to reunite a divided Vietnam. It began in 1954 and ended with the fall of Saigon in 1975. The Third Indochina War began with the subsequent invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam. This paper focuses on the Second Indochina War.

Broadly, I intend to answer the question posed earlier: How did the nearly impossible happen? Or more specifically,

how did the most powerful nation on earth, the United States, and its Republic of Vietnam ally lose a war to a seemingly powerless third world developing country, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)?

The short answer is that the DRV's application of its national power through its grand strategy was superior to that of the United States and her ally. Accordingly, my approach will be an examination of the DRV's grand strategy.

Colonel Harry G. Summers begins his celebrated book *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* describing his conversation with a North Vietnamese colonel in April 1975. "You know you never defeated us on the battlefield," remarked Summers. "That may be so," replied the North Vietnamese colonel, "but it is also irrelevant."<sup>3</sup> Implied in this exchange is the difference between military strategy and grand strategy.

Military strategy involves the use of armed forces to attain military objectives and ultimately, their associated political aims. Grand strategy, on the other hand, involves the use of the political, military, economic, and psychological elements of national power, often in a coalition environment, to attain national objectives. Military strategy is subordinate to grand strategy, for it is the political aims and the means provided by grand strategy that allow for an appropriate military strategy to be formulated and executed.

The Vietnamese Communist strategy was not a dogmatic copy of Mao Tse-tung's revolutionary warfare, nor did it follow the precise patterns of the First Indochina War. The strategy evolved during the course of the war. But its objective was always the same--an independent Vietnam reunified under Vietnamese Communist control.

In the course of my study, I have concluded that Communist strategy evolved through, and was revealed in, seven strategic decisions made by the Central Committee of the Communist Lao Dong Party (or Vietnam Workers' Party) in Hanoi:

- The Decision of 1959
- The 9th Plenum - 1963
- The 12th Plenum - 1965
- The Winter-Spring-Summer Offensives - 1967
- Negotiate and Fight - 1968
- The 21st Plenum and the Tide of Events - 1973
- The Decision for Final Offensive - 1974

I will first explore the underlying elements of power of the Vietnamese Communists which were necessarily incorporated into their grand strategy. Then, I will discuss the political, diplomatic, socio-economic, and military factors that influenced each of these decisions, and the results achieved through their implementation. In the conclusion, I offer some thoughts on why these series of strategic decisions led to the Communist victory, and what lessons for the future can be drawn from the Communist perspective of the war.

In the presentation of my research, I have drawn extensively on primary evidence collected in Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions edited by Gareth Porter, and the evidence offered by historians William S. Turley, William J. Duiker, Douglas Pike, and Marilyn B. Young. Of all the written materials I examined on my subject, theirs provided the greatest depth and accuracy. I am also the benefactor of suggestions by Herbert Y. Schandler, my research advisor, for clarity, organization, and perspective of this paper.

I alone am responsible for all that is presented and for all errors and omissions.

## THE ELEMENTS OF COMMUNIST POWER

*All men are created equal; they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness...*

*The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty.<sup>1</sup>*

*--Ho Chi Minh  
Declaration of Independence of the  
Democratic Republic of Vietnam  
September 2, 1945*

In order to comprehend Communist grand strategy during the Second Indochina War, one must first understand the Vietnamese Communists' elements of power. We will later see how they manipulated them into their strategy.

The ultimate power of a nation relative to any other nation can be assessed by examining eleven elements:<sup>2</sup>

- |                       |                           |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. National Character | 7. Science and Technology |
| 2. National Will      | 8. Military Preparedness  |
| 3. Population         | 9. Intelligence           |
| 4. Geography          | 10. Quality of Government |
| 5. Natural Resources  | 11. Quality of Diplomacy  |
| 6. Economic Strength  |                           |

Let's briefly look at these elements as they apply to the DRV and the Communist insurgents in the South.

### NATIONAL CHARACTER AND WILL

Two of the strongest elements of power enjoyed by the



Communists were the character and will of the Vietnamese people. From the American perspective, one of the most impressive characteristics of their enemy, from the part-time Viet Cong foot-soldier in the South to the communist leaders in the North, was his intransigent will. "Short of being physically destroyed," one expert observed of the Communists, "collapse, surrender, or disintegration was--to put it bizarrely--simply not in their capabilities."<sup>3</sup>

It is estimated that the Peoples's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and Viet Cong suffered between 666,000 and 950,765 military killed during the Second Indochina War. This represented 3.5 to 5.1 percent of the population of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) less Communist sympathizers in the South.<sup>4</sup> By comparison, the magnitude of French and German military killed in World War I was 3.3 and 2.7 percent of their populations respectively. In World War II, the heaviest ratios of military killed relative to populations were Germany with 4.4 percent and Russia with 4.4 percent.<sup>5</sup> Dean Rusk, Secretary of State under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, noted of the North Vietnamese in 1971, "They've taken over seven hundred thousand killed, which in relation to population is almost the equivalent of--what? Ten million Americans?"<sup>6</sup>

Industrious and creative, the Vietnamese proudly inherited a history characterized by " a litany of resistance to foreign domination."<sup>7</sup> For nearly a millennium, the

Vietnamese fought Chinese invasion and occupation, the last occurring in 1788. The role of invader was assumed by the French in 1858 as a part of their colonial expansion into Indochina. Japanese incursion replaced the French in 1940. Although Ho Chi Minh had declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 after the collapse of the Japanese, the French reimposed rule in Vietnam and the Vietnamese struggle against imperialism continued. This struggle, the First Indochina War, ended in 1954 after the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu and the signing of the Geneva Agreements.

One significance of this history, as it relates to later Communist strategy, is that it is comparatively long. As in most oriental Asian cultures, the Vietnamese view the present and the future as an extension of the past, and they view them with great patience. That they struggled for a century to shed the yoke of French colonialism is minor compared to the length of their struggle against the Chinese. The fight against the United States and its supported regime in the South for 20 years was even shorter. The history and culture of the Vietnamese cultivate the longer view of present events.

Another significance of this history is that throughout this resistance to foreign domination, the Vietnamese persevered. From this persistence sprang the "myth of national indomitability."<sup>8</sup> Again, common oriental cultural

values emphasizing the importance of ancestors and heritage undoubtedly fertilized the ground from which grew a strong sense of nationalism and the willingness to sacrifice to preserve it.

Their long history of struggle has also made the Vietnamese people warriors. They are willing to fight and they have developed their own unique approaches to warfare. For example, the role of Vietnamese women as leaders and participants in the struggles is common. Fighting against Chinese domination, the legendary Trung sisters and Trieu Au paved an important beginning for the special status that women hold in Vietnamese society. The contribution of women in both supporting and fighting with the Viet Minh and the Viet Cong was substantial.

#### POPULATION AND GEOGRAPHY

The DRV did not enjoy any advantage in terms of population size, distribution, demographics, or health relative to the RVN and the U.S. In 1965, the populations of the DRV and the RVN was estimated to be 18.7 and 16.1 million respectively, with both populations increasing at a rate twice that of the U.S.<sup>9</sup> This does not take into account Viet Cong and communist sympathizers in South Vietnam. The population of the U.S. at this time was approximately 190 million.

Because the Communists did not possess any advantage

from the manpower base, and often early in the war suffered a significant disadvantage in the South, part of their military strategy was to employ guerilla tactics both to preserve their manpower and to gain a temporary preponderance of strength at decisive times. Furthermore, unlike the Americans, the Communists were part of the indigenous population of Vietnam and consequently were able to effectively conduct guerilla warfare.

Another important population factor was that Vietnamese society was basically agrarian. Most of the population lived in the country-side where the basic social and economic entity was the village. It was the populace of the village that became the objective of political control for both the Communists and the government of the RVN. The concept employed by the Communists in attaining political control was through political means, primarily propaganda, and land redistribution. The concept employed by the RVN was through military means, initially in the form of repression by the Diem government, and later in the form of security.

But perhaps the most significant aspect of population was the fact that despite heavy losses, the Communists had the capacity and the willingness to match increases in armed manpower with the RVN and the U.S. as the war began to sharply escalate in 1965. This fact eventually led to the defeat of the U.S. strategy of attrition.

Geography was an important factor in the evolution of

Communist grand strategy. Foremost in the minds of the DRV leaders were those countries with whom the DRV shared borders: China and Laos. Both were traditional enemies and without at least their passive support, prosecution of a war in the South would have been almost impossible. With their support, the DRV was able to mass its military effort to the South, receive logistical support from the Soviet Union and China, and with the additional passive support of Cambodia, sustain the effort in the South via the Ho Chi Minh Trail and provide sanctuaries for the protection and reconstitution of its forces.

The location of China served a psychological advantage for the DRV. Fearful of drawing the Chinese into the war, as had occurred during the Korean War, and possibly tripping the wire to a nuclear World War III, the U.S. limited its ground operations to the South and a minor incursion into Cambodia. This, in effect, protected the sea flank of the DRV from amphibious threat. Further, the air war over the North was restricted.

Additional important geographic factors as they relate to power are the terrain and climatic conditions in Indochina. A combination of jungles and mountains coupled with the lack of a developed road and waterway infrastructure made the accessibility of much of North and South Vietnam and their bordering countries difficult. The terrain conditions were further aggravated by the monsoon seasons and the heat

which periodically limited U.S. air and ground operations. From a military standpoint, these conditions inhibited conventional concepts of maneuver, mass, firepower, speed, and supply.

Historically, the Vietnamese learned to fight effectively against enemies superior in number and strength by making maximum use of the terrain in Indochina. Guerrilla tactics and the concept of insurgency employed by Ngo Quyen against the Chinese in 938, Le Loi against the Chinese between 1418 and 1426, and Vietnamese partisans against the French between 1858 and 1896, relied heavily on terrain familiarity and the use of its unique characteristics in Vietnam. These approaches to warfare were used extensively by the Vietnamese in the 20th Century, and were integral parts of the military strategy that succeeded for the Vietnamese Communists during the First and Second Indochina Wars.

In South Vietnam, the Communists viewed the terrain in a framework of the synthesis of three military strategic areas: the jungles and mountains, the lowlands and river deltas, and the cities.<sup>10</sup> In conjunction with these areas, they coordinated the operations of three types of forces: main, guerrilla, and local forces.<sup>11</sup> For most of the Second Indochina War, the jungles and mountains were the decisive areas because it was here that the Communists could mass, reinforce, reconstitute, and protect their heavier main units

and control their lines of communications. In the more populated lowlands and river deltas, the Communists primarily employed their guerrilla and local forces as an economy of force in an effort to tie down enemy forces.

The cities were normally reserved for the agents and terrorists of the guerilla forces whose role was to gather intelligence, create confusion, and to discredit the effectiveness of the RVN and local governments. However, during the TET Offensive of 1968, the Communists designated the cities as the strategically decisive area. They attempted to use the local and guerrilla forces as the strategic main effort, while using main units as a diversion to draw-off enemy units protecting the cities.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, the main forces were used as the decisive forces against the strategically-designated cities in the 1975 final offensive.

#### **NATURAL RESOURCES, ECONOMIC STRENGTH, AND SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

Of all of the elements of national power, the DRV was weakest in natural resources, economic strength, and science and technology. In relation to the U.S., here lay the greatest disparity in power. The DRV was an agrarian-based, poor country. Coal, steel, and textile production was minimal. In 1954, industrial output claimed only 1.5 percent of total material output, and the urban economy was largely artisan in nature.<sup>13</sup> Most critical raw materials were imported from China and the Soviet Union. War materiel was

furnished by the Soviets and the Chinese, or captured during operations in the South. A science and technology base was almost nonexistent and the French had largely dismantled the infrastructure in the North after the First Indochina War.

The Communists had concentrated primarily on land reform and agrarian production after their war with the French, and consequently, little had been accomplished in building an industrial base prior to the outbreak of the Second Indochina War. During this war, economic activity in the DRV revolved around three centers. The first was rice production for consumption and limited export. The second was increasing industrial production of limited war munitions and supplies. These were primarily cottage industry in form, particularly after the U.S. bombing of the North was initiated. And the third was the creation, protection, and maintenance of a transportation infrastructure with which the Communists could move materiel throughout the North and infiltrate it to sustain forces in the South.

The most infamous part of this infrastructure was the construction of and effort along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Over 300,000 full-time and 200,000 part-time laborers repaired and expanded the 9,600 mile trail network, which extended from the DRV, through Laos and Cambodia, and into the South. Over 10,000 people were known to have perished in its maintenance.<sup>14</sup> U.S. military and civilian leaders understood the criticality of the transportation infrastructure to



Communist military power. They made it the central target of all their air bombing campaigns, but failed to degrade the Communist sustainment effort.

Although Chinese and Soviet materiel support and the transportation infrastructure were decisive in shoring-up these weak elements of power, the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the Communists enabled them to efficiently use and protect the resources they had. Underground complexes in both the North and South and the mastered art of camouflage protected facilities, supplies, and manpower from detection and destruction, particularly from the air. Simple and crude, yet effective explosive devices were created to inflict morale-devastating casualties on the enemy. And units in the South often survived on rice and other food foraged in the South.

In comparison to the massive logistics structure enjoyed by U.S. and ARVN forces, the Communists' structure in the South was light. Stockpiling was accomplished by relatively small prepositioned and widely dispersed supply caches. Limited supply, discipline and minimal consumption meant the Communist soldier carried far less than his American and South Vietnamese counterpart. This lightness proved to be an advantage. At the lowest tactical levels, the Communists possessed greater speed and mobility.

## MILITARY PREPAREDNESS

Neither the DRV nor the Communists in the South were prepared to go to war in 1956. The DRV was internally consumed in consolidating its authority, advancing socialism, and building its young nation. Consequently, precious scarce resources were directed towards those ends.<sup>15</sup> Military preparedness took a back seat. Limited military initiatives were undertaken to prepare against a conventional attack on the North. Naval, air, and air defense forces were practically nonexistent. As noted previously, industrial capacity and technology were wholly lacking.

In the South, between 50,000 and 90,000 people who had fought with or supported the Viet Minh against the French had moved to the North. 10,000 to 15,000 remained in the South.<sup>16</sup> Both the political and military organization was significantly scaled-back. The official policy of the Communist Party in Hanoi had been to support the holding of national elections as decreed in the Geneva Accords. However, there was significant debate and cynicism over whether elections would ever occur given the position and pronouncements of the GVN. As a result, the Party directed Southern leaders to avoid violence and conduct only peaceful and legal activities. At the same time, the Party cautioned them to protect their remaining forces and clandestine apparatus.<sup>17</sup>

About 6,000 weapons had been left in the South after the

First Indochina War. These were distributed among small units of 50 to 200 men who were based in the old Viet Minh sanctuaries in the Quang Nai mountains, the U Minh forest, and the Plain of Reeds.<sup>18</sup> But the Communist political and military organizations had been under severe pressure since Diem's launching of the Anticomunist Denunciation Campaign in 1955. They were fighting for survival. An indicator of the campaign's effect on the apparatus in the South can be seen in the decline in Southern Party membership. It dropped from between 50,000 and 60,000 in 1954, to 15,000 in 1956, to less than 1,800 in 1957.<sup>19</sup>

Although the Communist Party in Hanoi did not give priority to military preparedness for three years following the First Indochina War, several residuals remained from that war that would enable the DRV and the Southern Communists to mobilize effectively beyond 1959. These residuals were experience, proven leadership, and the successful doctrine of People's War. Experience at every level produced a hardened cadre, around which units could be formed. Further, General Vo Nguyen Giap, the brilliant architect of the Viet Minh organization and strategy that defeated the French, and his capable lieutenants were available to lead the military effort if the situation demanded war. As Minister of Defense, he was in a position to influence future strategy and mobilization.

Finally, the doctrine of revolutionary war, which became

known as "People's War", had been used successfully to defeat the French. Refined in its application during the First Indochina War, it was a proven, indoctrinated concept that could be readily applied, with confidence and without substantial revision, should war become necessary.

There is little doubt that the tenets of People's War were derived from Mao Tse-tung's concept of revolutionary war which he successfully applied in China. Most of the senior Vietnamese Communist leaders had been associated with the Chinese Communists during the late 1930's and 1940's. Through these relationships the concept had been exchanged. Ho Chi Minh, for example, served as political commissar to a special Chinese Communist mission sent to train Chinese Nationalist guerrillas near the Tongking border area in 1940. The mission's leader was General Yeh Chien-ying, Mao's guerrilla expert.<sup>20</sup> Subsequently, high-ranking Viet Minh officers received formal military training from Red China.

The Viet Minh's adaptation of revolutionary war in their struggle against the French was documented by two major figures. Truong Chinh, secretary general of the Indochinese Communist Party, wrote *The Resistance Will Win* in 1947 which provided the basic principles and stages of protracted war. General Vo Nguyen Giap wrote essays during and after the First Indochina War which not only outlined the tenets of People's War, but also included the experiences of the application of the doctrine.

The basic tenets developed for People's War can be outlined as follows:<sup>21</sup>

1. The military line of the Party derives from and always follows its political line.
2. The aim of People's War is twofold:
  - a. National independence
  - b. Democracy by return of the land to the peasants
3. The war must be the work of the entire people, therefore:
  - a. The interests of the peasants must be satisfied
  - b. The masses must be educated, organized, and mobilized
  - c. Unity of effort must be achieved by broadening and consolidating a National Front of resisters
4. Because of the imbalance of forces, the war must be protracted.
5. The war will progress through three stages:
  - a. Contention
  - b. Equilibrium
  - c. Counteroffensive
6. The People's Army will evolve into three tiers of forces, constructed from bottom to top:
  - a. Paramilitary or guerrilla units (bottom)
  - b. Regional units
  - c. Regular units (top)
7. The People's Army will be progressively engaged in two forms of fighting:
  - a. Guerrilla warfare - Preservation; avoid strength and attack weakness, exhaust the enemy
  - b. Mobile warfare - larger forces, more conventional, later years
8. The People's Army must be determined to win at all costs and it must be strictly disciplined.
9. The primary source of supplies will be at the battlefield, taken from the enemy.

10. Political work in the ranks is of the first importance - it is the soul of the army.
11. The war will be a simultaneous political and armed struggle. However, the military effort will always be subordinate to the political.

Perhaps the most significant departure of People's War from Mao's classic revolutionary war doctrine was the concept of general offensive and uprising. Developed as a model by the Communists as a result of their successful planning and execution of the August Revolution in 1945, this concept recognized that special circumstances may arise during any of the three stages of the war that may afford the revolutionary movement the opportunity to overthrow the Government. In the case of the August Revolution, the Communists had politically prepared a great deal of the population, particularly in northern Vietnam. They had also constructed a revolutionary apparatus that they could activate at the decisive moment to mobilize the masses against the Government.

This apparatus consisted of armed propaganda units, militia, and terrorists, and served as a catalyst to create the immediate conditions for spontaneous mass uprisings. These general uprisings, combined with a military offensive against key power centers of the Government, caused the Government to collapse. The special circumstances that existed in August 1945 that enabled this concept to succeed were the political power vacuum that existed in Vietnam at the termination of World War II and widespread famine.

## INTELLIGENCE

The Vietnamese Communists had established, by the end of the First Indochina War, a fairly sophisticated intelligence network both strategically and tactically. On the international level, the loose association of communist political movements in Europe and Asia that began developing in the 1920's matured as some began to seize political power. Communist leaders in the DRV were able to benefit from intelligence shared by the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, and Cuba. Within Indochina, the Pathet Lao communists in Laos and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia became important sources of information on developments on the DRV's western flank.

In the South, the legacies of the Viet Minh infrastructure and the remaining sympathizers created a foundation upon which an extensive tactical intelligence network could be built. Out of the silence and the anger created by the Diem repressions and the return of the landlords, was born a repository of information that became ripe for the picking. Progressively, the Communists cultivated and harvested critical information from those disconcerted. Ultimately, this information provided the guerrilla leaders with what Mao termed "alertness". This enabled them to strike at the time and place of their own choosing, and gain the initiative in the South.<sup>22</sup>

Then, there was the free press in the Western Democracies. Undoubtedly, the press was a source of information for the Vietnamese Communists, accurate or not. After 1963, the growing perceived credibility gap between what was actually happening in the South and what the U.S. Government was reporting to the American people began to be a theme in the U.S. press coverage of the war. This in itself was strategic intelligence. But the real significance was that while the Western press was free, and a source of intelligence, the press in the DRV and in its primary supporters, the Soviet Union and China, was controlled by the state. This not only protected the Communists against the revelation of sensitive or harmful information, but also enhanced propaganda and deception efforts at home and abroad.

#### QUALITY OF GOVERNMENT AND DIPLOMACY

Like the elements of national character and national will, the Vietnamese Communists possessed great power in their quality of government and their quality of diplomacy. And the essence of this power was leadership--particularly the leadership provided by Ho Chi Minh. By the end of the First Indochina War, Ho had become a hero of epic proportions. To most Vietnamese in the North and many in the South, he symbolized the struggle for independence. David Halberstam characterized Ho as ". . . perhaps more than any single man of the century, the living embodiment to his own people--and to the world--of their revolution."<sup>23</sup>



Ho and his lieutenants, Le Duan, Le Duc Tho, Pham Van Dong, and Vo Nguyen Giap, hardened through years of struggle under great personal peril and often imprisonment, exemplified the Vietnamese tradition of resistance to invaders. Their simple lifestyles, even when in power, demonstrated that they saw themselves as part of the people. They were credible leaders. Ho's basic philosophies of national independence and social revolution were attractive to a broad spectrum of the population in Vietnam, except those that stood to benefit from the French. This had enabled the Communists to build a wide nationalist coalition that eventually defeated the French. The quality of government offered by Ho and the Communists was perceived by most Vietnamese, particularly the peasants, as a quantum improvement over the past.

Land reform and social equity had progressed after the war. This progress and the expected unification of North and South through the national elections prescribed in the Geneva Accords appeared to bring Ho's vision close to reality. But the near-term expectation of reunification was shattered with the ascendancy of Ngo Dinh Diem in the South and his support by the U.S.

In addition to his domestic leadership, Ho was a master diplomat. Having travelled and lived extensively in France, the Soviet Union, and China, he had gained notoriety and

credibility in the communist world. He had nurtured a relationship with both the Soviets and Chinese that had won moral and materiel support. He adeptly fostered mutual cooperation with the Pathet Lao and Khmer Rouge to facilitate protection of the DRV's flank, supply to the South, and sanctuaries for all communist forces operating in Indochina. He understood the new world confrontation and balance of the superpowers and how to leverage them for his own country's benefit.

Ho firmly grasped the elements of power of his infant nation and its sympathizers in the South. He was a master at optimizing the strongest elements, finding ways to bolster the weaker ones, and mask his nation's vulnerabilities. Ho cleverly orchestrated the elements of power and inspired traditional cohesion and national purpose in a manner that had won at least a part of his nation's independence in 1954. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam, like its leader, Ho Chi Minh, has become a country of shared vision and indomitable determination.

## THE DECISION OF 1959

*We say that in 1959, the South Vietnamese administration was relatively stable due to the fact that it controlled the administrative machinery at all levels, controlled the army and was able to implement its major policies, etc. However, to retain this temporary stability, it was forced to oppress the masses with extreme cruelty, with police and military terrorism as the essential means. So, stability was acquired at a very high price--that of complete political failure.<sup>1</sup>*

*--Captured document of the  
Regional Committee of the South*

By the end of 1958, the strategic situation had grown complicated for the DRV. For the four years following the end of the First Indochina War, the Central Committee's priorities and resources were devoted to their domestic effort: consolidation of their political power, execution of their social reforms, and reconstruction of the basic infrastructure of the country. Land reform was completed and community cooperatives were established. The Committee established a five year plan to increase industrial production and initiated programs to rebuild the infrastructure for basic services and administration that had been gutted by the French. The Army subdued the ethnic minorities who had sided with the French and subsequently held out in the mountains. Now the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) was bent on an effort to modernize and reorganize into a conventional army.

Internationally, the Soviets were attempting to reduce Cold War tensions. In January 1956, the 20th Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) proclaimed their policy of "peaceful coexistence" and in January 1957, without consulting Hanoi, proposed that both the DRV and the RVN be admitted to the United Nations. In response, Hanoi sent its acting secretary general of the Party to Moscow, and the Soviets subsequently dropped the proposal.<sup>2</sup> The PRC, like the DRV, was focused on internal reconstruction and its move towards socialism. And like the Soviets, the Chinese were wary of encouraging any policy that would heighten the confrontation with the U.S.

In Laos, the Royal Lao Government and Pathet Lao formed a neutral coalition government in November 1957. But in August 1958, a U.S.-backed right wing political faction dissolved this government and arrested the Pathet Lao leaders. Laos became embroiled in civil war. This was a serious development from Hanoi's standpoint because its flank was no longer secure and its vital link to the South was threatened.

In the South, Diem refused to negotiate with the DRV on the subject of elections for reunification. He consolidated power and on October 26, 1955, proclaimed the Republic of Vietnam with himself as President. In April 1956, he declared that the Republic was not obligated to the Geneva Accords and continued to refuse negotiations with the DRV.

The time limit on the referendum for reunification provided in the Geneva Accords expired on July 21, 1956.

In the meantime, Diem was cultivating increased support from the U.S. The U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (USMAAG) took over the training of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) from the French in April 1956. And by that time, South Vietnam was receiving \$270 million per year in aid from the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

As previously noted, Diem launched his Anticomunist Denunciation Campaign in 1955 and the Communist political and military apparatus was in danger of total collapse by 1958. In response to the growing dangers to this apparatus and what he perceived to be revolutionary conditions caused by Diem's declarations, repression, and land policies, Le Duan, then chairman of the Nam Bo Regional Committee in the South, began making recommendations in 1956 to the Central Committee in Hanoi for a change in policy. In his famous pamphlet, *The Path of Revolution in the South*, Le Duan advocated a more activist and aggressive approach to political struggle in the South, an increased effort to promote reunification, and preparations for revolutionary upsurge.<sup>4</sup> Although these recommendations stopped short of overtly calling for armed struggle, there is evidence that Le Duan had already reached the conclusion that military force was required. The Nam Bo Committee had already drawn up plans to further mobilize guerrilla squads and form twenty regular battalions. The

pamphlet, also directed towards Southern Communist Cadre, stressed rebuilding the movement and allowed for armed self-defense.<sup>5</sup>

In response to these recommendations, the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee held in December 1956 approved a new policy of "punishing selected enemies of the revolution in South Vietnam."<sup>6</sup> The Policy led to increased terrorist acts, which in turn brought about a severe escalation of repression from Diem. Over 2,000 suspected Communists were killed and 65,000 arrested in 1957 alone. Most of the Communists fled to sanctuaries in the mountains and jungles to preserve themselves and to reorganize.

It was against this strategic domestic, regional, and international backdrop that the leaders of the DRV found themselves in 1958. In line with the Soviets, Chinese, and their own domestic agenda, they had held to a policy of building the North, peaceful political struggle in the South, and peaceful reunification. But events in the South and Laos forced them to begin reassessing their policy.

It appears likely that Ho Chi Minh, probably influenced in part by Le Duan and the deteriorating situation in the South, saw the writing on the wall in 1956. In what was perhaps his first critical diplomatic maneuver since the First Indochina War, Ho visited Moscow on two occasions between July and October 1957 presumably to win Soviet support and aid for the eventual opening of armed struggle in

the South. Although the Soviets did not publicly support such a policy, increased Soviet aid after 1957 would indicate Ho succeeded in his effort.<sup>7</sup>

The Party leaders' general assessment of the situation in the South in 1958 was that Diem's uncontrolled repression, ineffective land policy, and corruption resulted in two general conditions. First, the Communist Southern apparatus was under extreme pressure and faced possible extinction. And second, Diem's political base, evidenced by growing dissent, particularly in the countryside, was deteriorating. Consequently, in 1958, Pham Van Dong, the DRV Foreign Minister, continued a diplomatic campaign with the GVN by dispatching letters to Diem in an effort to begin negotiations and cultural exchanges that would eventually lead to reunification. A consistent theme in the letters was that the impasse between North and South was caused by U.S. imperialism.<sup>8</sup> Diem never responded.

In order to assess the situation personally, Le Duan, now secretary general in Hanoi, travelled to the South in late 1958. He reported to the 15th Plenum of the Central Committee in January, 1959. It appears that the Committee concluded that political effort alone would not overthrow the Diem government. This they believed was largely due to American intervention.

Significantly, the Committee decided ". . . it was time to resort to armed struggle combined with political

struggle."<sup>9</sup> Responding to this decision, the Central Military Party Committee created a logistics embryo that would eventually grow to great proportions. This consisted of three groups. Group 559 was to infiltrate men and materiel overland from the North to the South. Group 759 was responsible for sea infiltration, and Group 959 would supply men and materiel to the Laotian People's Liberation Army.<sup>10</sup>

From the evidence at hand, to include the decision at the 15th Plenum in 1959, coupled with events before and after, the Vietnamese Communist Strategy that evolved in 1959 can be summarized as follows:

1. Continue to build economically in the North.
2. Continue to build socialism in the North.
3. Modernize and rebuild the PAVN.
4. Cultivate continued support and aid from the Soviet Union and China for a clandestine policy of political and armed struggle in the South.
5. Organize and strengthen the political and military apparatus in the South. Conduct simultaneous political and armed struggle in order to overthrow the Diem government and reunite North with South, without causing overt contradictions in the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence and the Chinese policy of non-confrontation; and without attracting further intervention in the South by the U.S. The ultimate objective was to establish Communist control over a reunited Vietnam.
6. As a contingency, prepare for a protracted conflict.
7. Continue a diplomatic effort with the Diem government with an aim towards peaceful reunification. Drive a wedge between the Diem government and the U.S.
8. Support the Pathet Lao in its civil war against right wing elements now in charge of the government.



Favorably stabilize the situation to protect the DRV western flank and its strategic line of communication to the South.

9. Establish a logistics system and infrastructure that would provide strategic reach to Laos and the South for the purpose of providing necessary resources and staging areas for military action.

## THE 9TH PLENUM - 1963

*Therefore the key point at the present time is to make outstanding efforts to rapidly strengthen our military forces in order to create a basic change in the balance of forces between the enemy and us in South Vietnam . . . If we do not defeat the enemy's military forces, we cannot overthrow his domination and bring the revolution to victory. To destroy the enemy's military forces, we should use armed struggle. For this reason, armed struggle plays a direct and decisive role.<sup>1</sup>*

-- Resolution of the 9th Plenum  
January 1963

Following the decision of 1959, the DRV Communist leaders continued to give great attention and effort to their domestic economic and socialistic goals. Beside the fact that the DRV was in the midst of economic reconstruction, two factors added urgency to their economic development. First was the leadership's desire to develop more self-sufficiency. No doubt this was due in part to their sense of nationalism and aversion to colonialism.<sup>2</sup> Greater self-sufficiency would also give them more freedom of diplomatic action when dealing with the Soviets and the Chinese, both of whom were providing substantial aid to the DRV.

Second, the Vietnamese Communists realized that support of the struggle in the South, the rebuild and modernization of the PAVN, and support of the Pathet Lao in Laos were going to consume resources. Without a stronger economic base, these efforts would be increasingly difficult, great stress

would be placed on the people in the DRV, improvements in self-sufficiency could not be made, and the DRV would be subjected to greater influence from the Soviets and China.

The DRV made significant economic progress from 1960 to 1965. The Communist leaders established a five-year economic plan in 1960. Although they failed to meet their aggressive goals, industrial output for their major sectors of coal, cement, phosphate, steel, electricity, textiles, tin, paper, and rice production increased. In general, the magnitude of increase was one and one-half times during this time.<sup>3</sup> Rail communications were improved with China and bridges, ferries, and fords where major roads intersected the rivers were developed. As a result of these efforts, reliance on foreign aid decreased from 27 percent of their annual budget in 1959 to 15 percent in 1965<sup>4</sup>.

To propagate their socialist ideals and increase economic productivity, the Communists made a major effort to educate more of their populace. Attendance at elementary through secondary "popular" schools increased from 1.6 million in 1960 to 3.8 million in 1963. Attendance at technical schools and universities improved from 21,800 to 84,600 during the same period.<sup>5</sup> An organized Party overwatch system insured revolutionary ideology was taught in all schools. Additionally, the Communists repressed intellectual opposition by jailing, murdering, and intimidating those advocating "liberalized" views.

Although the DRV made significant economic and administrative progress, substantial military and economic aid was still required from both the Soviet Union and China. Khrushchev's announcement in January 1960 of the Soviet Union's intent to support wars of national liberation confirmed the diplomatic groundwork laid in 1957 by Ho Chi Minh. Trade and aid agreements were signed between the DRV and the Soviet Union in 1961.

However, as world events unfolded during the early 1960's, the Vietnamese Communists began to face a deepening dilemma in its relations with the two major powers in the socialist camp. The Soviets, moderate in their approach towards the West and ever wary of precipitating a major confrontation, had backed-down during the Cuban Missile Crisis and signed a nuclear test-ban treaty. Further, Moscow had supported India in its border war with the Chinese.

The Chinese, on the other hand, advocated a more radical and aggressive approach in the application of Marxist-Leninist principles to the international arena. Although they were concerned about open confrontation with the U.S., the Chinese believed progress could be made through the process of Mao's doctrine of revolutionary warfare. Also, due to the geographic location of Indochina, the Chinese were more acutely interested in limiting the influence of the U.S. in their region of the world.

Consequently, an ideological rift developed between the

Soviets and the Chinese, and each held different views over the relative importance of the Communist struggle in Vietnam. Relations cooled between the DRV and the Soviets, and the Vietnamese Communists were openly critical of the Soviets. But cognizant of their need for flexibility, international leverage, and their historical experiences with the Chinese, the Vietnamese Communist leaders, through their power of diplomacy and the timely ouster of Khrushchev in 1964, were able to maintain a delicate balance in their relations between the two powers. Aid continued.

During the early 1960's, the DRV was able to secure its immediate western flank. On 9 August 1960, after two years of civil war in Laos, a military coup reestablished a neutralist government. Almost immediately, rightist counterattacks drew Laos back into civil war. On 1 January 1961, the Pathet Lao, supported by PAVN Group 959 and combat elements, pushed the Royal Lao Army off the Plaine des Jarres. Subsequently, the Pathet Lao expanded military control to roughly one-half of Laos. In May 1961, a ceasefire was established and a Geneva Conference convened in an attempt to restore a coalition government. By July 1962, the Conference ended in the restoration of a second coalition government in Laos and the signing of a treaty declaring Laos neutrality.

Operations by the PAVN and the Pathet Lao and the subsequent political solution in Laos gave the DRV

unrestricted access to Routes 8, 9, and 12 in Laos, the opportunity to improve the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and increase infiltration of men and materiel through Laos to the South. Group 559, aided by engineers, doubled the capacity of the Trail by 1961. By 1964, with the help of trucks mostly provided by the Chinese, the Group was moving 40 times the tonnage of materiel as in previous years.<sup>6</sup> It is estimated that 44,064 people infiltrated from the North to the South between 1959 and 1964.<sup>7</sup> The majority of these infiltrators were original Southerners who had gone North after 1954. Most were trained by the 324th Division, an infiltration training unit, and they became an important nucleus of cadre for the Southern struggle.<sup>3</sup>

According to their strategy that evolved in 1959, the Vietnamese Communists made significant gains in the South in organizing for simultaneous political and armed struggle. Based on the August 1945 Revolution model, they rebuilt a parallel political and military apparatus. The basic concept of this apparatus was to organize and spur spontaneous general uprisings at the decisive moment within the population in the South with the political arm, and complement the effort with the military arm. Once the uprisings occurred, the military would capitalize on the situation, seize local power, and defend the gains against GVN counterefforts.

On 20 December 1960, the Central Committee of the Lao

Dong Party in the North unveiled the creation of the National Liberation Front (NLF), an umbrella organization whose aim was to harness the various groups who opposed the Government in the South into a coalition front. Linkage to the North was kept clandestine in order to preserve the image that the movement in the South was indigenous and autonomous.<sup>9</sup> It represented numerous political, religious, and ethnic groups and its members included both Communists and non-Communists.

In February 1961, under guidance from the Political Bureau of the Central Committee, all opposition armed forces in the South were united into the People's Liberation Armed Force (PLAF).<sup>10</sup> This became the military arm of the NLF and gained the title of Viet Cong from its enemies in the South.

In September 1961, the Central Committee created the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), its own branch in the South. COSVN had been originally created in the South by the Communists in 1951 during the struggle with France, and was subsequently disbanded in 1954 with the defeat of the French.<sup>11</sup> COSVN's mission was to provide Party authoritative direction over the NLF and its military arm, the PLAF.<sup>12</sup> General Nguyen Chi Thanh was selected chairman.

Although the Communists did not represent the NLF exclusively, they eventually gained control from the NLF Central Committee down through the village level.<sup>13</sup> In 1962, the southern branch of the Lao Dong Party was in essence renamed the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) in order to

deceive the enemy by maintaining ". . . the outward appearance of a separation from the Lao Dong . . . countering their [RVN and U.S.] accusations of an invasion of the South by the North . . . [and permitting] the NLF to recruit new adherents and to gain the sympathy of nonaligned countries in Southeast Asia."<sup>14</sup> The PRP Central Committee and COSVN were one in the same, but always worked through the NLF.<sup>15</sup> Figure 1 presents a visual schematic of the eventual evolution of the NLF organization to include the PRP political apparatus and the PLAF military organization. Again, it is important to understand that COSVN controlled the NLF Central Committee.

In January 1961, the Central Committee in the North provided its initial guidance to the NLF. Its mission was to rally revolutionary forces over a broad spectrum in the South and strike a balance between political and military struggle in the three strategic areas of the South. The struggle in the mountains and jungles was to be primarily military. Equal political and military struggle was to be pursued in the lowlands. And the effort in the cities was to be primarily political.<sup>16</sup>

Through a well-conceived and effective means of communication, the NLF began developing increased popular support. Villagers were brought the message of the Revolution through a carefully orchestrated process of propaganda and agitation, and their grievances were fueled



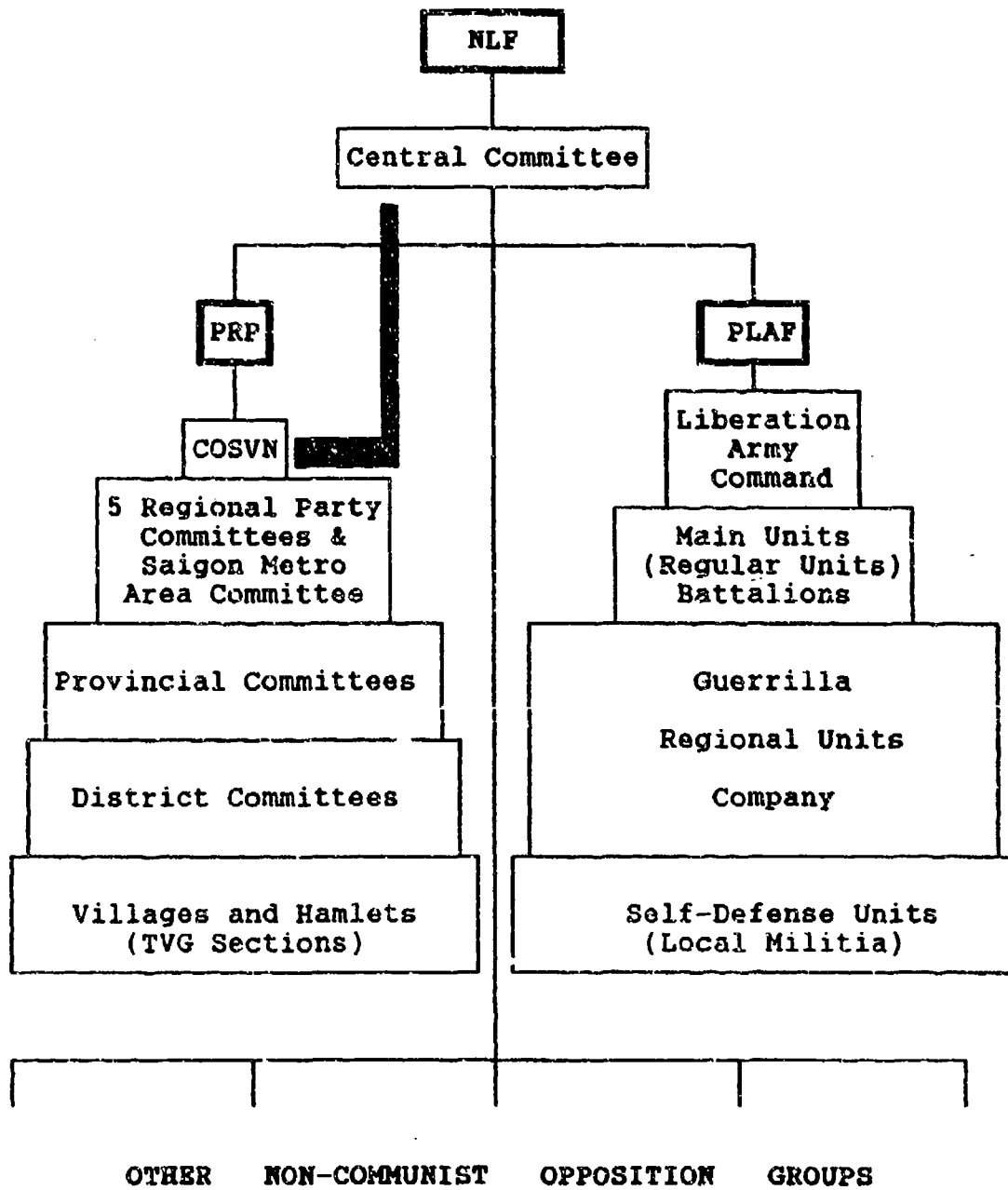


Figure 1

and converted into action. This was accomplished by well-trained "agit-prop" cadre also known as TVG sections.<sup>17</sup> These cadre organized social associations within the village as a means of indoctrinating the people. Then with these organizations as a base, they moved-on to political and military activation in an effort to mobilize the population and diminish Government influence in the rural areas. Violence and terrorism were employed where necessary. By the end of 1962, it is estimated that the NLF grew to approximately 300,000 members with one million passive followers. Committees were established in 38 of the 41 provinces in the South.<sup>18</sup>

The Liberation Army Command was led and staffed by former PAVN officers, most of whom had been born in the South. The units were fed from the bottom of the military organization. Local militia provided personnel for guerrilla units, which in turn provided personnel for the main units. Due to infiltration of personnel from the North and the success of NLF organization and communication, the PLAF expanded rapidly. Main or regular units grew from 4,000 soldiers in 1960 to 25,000 in 1963. Militia and regional guerrilla forces grew from 3,000 soldiers in 1960 to 140,000 in January 1964.<sup>19</sup>

The symbolic effectiveness of the PLAF build-up was demonstrated at the battle of Ap Bac in the Plain of Reeds on January 2, 1963. Here the 261st Main Force Battalion,

reinforced by the 514th Regionals and local village militia, soundly defeated an ARVN force of 2,000 men, inflicting 165 casualties and destroying five helicopters, while sustaining 12 casualties themselves.<sup>20</sup> The PLAF had proven itself capable of effectively challenging the ARVN with large-size units.

The Diem Government responded to the Communist political and military build-up by creating the Strategic Hamlet Program in which thousands of peasants were uprooted from their villages and transplanted to newly built hamlets. The goal was to provide the villagers with a better defense structure against the Communists. The U.S., under President Kennedy, responded by providing more military aid to Diem. This "special war" assistance came in the form of increased advisors, more military equipment to include helicopter transport, and air cover. American advisors helped develop Civilian Irregular Defense Groups in the Central Highlands and village Civil Guards in the lowlands. However, the response to the build-up by both Diem's Government and the U.S. met at best only limited success.

Diem and his Government were doomed to failure. His inability to gain a wide popular base, coupled with widespread corruption, his harsh response to Buddhist dissent, his loss of most of the country-side to NLF influence, and his loss of the confidence of the U.S., guaranteed that his Government would not survive. Oddly enough, after much had

been gained in building the political and military apparatus in the South, the Communists were unable to capitalize on the Coup against Diem in November 1963.

Progress in laying political groundwork in the urban areas had been slow and because little emphasis had been given to building a military framework there, a general uprising similar to the August 1945 Revolution could not be accomplished. Now, the Regime that was the source for fueling discontent was now gone and the new Revolutionary Military Council, headed by Duong Van Minh, was enjoying wide popularity. The ARVN appeared to stiffen its backbone against the PLAF, and probably most important, the U.S. threw its support behind the new Government.

Throughout the early 1960's, the DRV did not abandon its diplomatic effort with the GVN to reunite peacefully. In July 1962, hoping the U.S. might be willing to accept resolution of the situation in the South as they had done in Laos, Hanoi called for a coalition government. This was rejected by both the GVN and the U.S. Again, after the Coup in 1963, Hanoi began a dialogue of peace with the new Government. This initiative was also rejected.

Until the last two months of 1963, Communist strategy that had been devised in 1959 appeared to have been the formula for success. The DRV made domestic progress. Given a tense Sino-Soviet situation, they secured aid from both the Soviets and Chinese. They secured their western flank in

Laos and built a viable logistics system and transportation infrastructure that created strategic reach to the South. They developed a solid political and military apparatus in the NLF that was beginning to be effective.

However, the timing of the Coup was too early and momentum was now ebbing. The Vietnamese Communists had not developed the situation in the South to the point where they could exploit such an opportunity. A general uprising was not ready to occur and it was unlikely that the GVN would topple until the ARVN was destroyed. Moreover, they had not been able to persuade the U.S., now under the leadership of President Johnson, to back-away from Vietnam. It became increasingly apparent to the Communist leaders in Hanoi that strategy would have to be revised in order to attain reunification.

During the Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee in December 1963, the Party concluded that only armed struggle with the support of the DRV would be successful in the South. They decided to escalate the level of armed violence. The primary means of achieving victory would be by "general offensive and uprising."<sup>21</sup>

The Communist Strategy that evolved out of the events of 1963 can be summarized as follows:

1. Continue to build the economy and develop socialism in the North.
2. Strengthen the PLAF and reinforce the South with

elements of the PAVN to change the balance of forces.

3. Escalate the level of armed violence through general offensive in order to destroy the ARVN and create conditions for a general uprising in the South. Continue the same strategy involving the three types of forces and the three strategic areas.
4. Continue to improve the logistics system and transportation infrastructure for strategic reach to the South.
5. Maintain stability on the DRV western flank to secure the strategic line of communications to the South.
6. Keep the negotiated settlement option open as a means of securing the withdrawal of the U.S.
7. Prepare for U.S. intervention.
8. Obtain Soviet and Chinese political and military support (aid) for the escalation. Do not exacerbate the Sino-Soviet dispute to the extent that either party withdraws support.

## THE 12TH PLENUM - 1965

*If the U.S. itself directly enters the war in the South it will have to fight for a prolonged period with the people's army of the South, with the full assistance of the North and of the Socialist bloc. To fight for a prolonged period is a weakness of U.S. imperialism. The Southern revolution can fight a protracted war, while the U.S. can't, because American military, economic and political resources must be distributed throughout the world. If it is bogged down in one place and can't withdraw, the whole effort will be violently shaken.<sup>1</sup>*

-- Le Duan  
Speech to Cadre Conference  
6 July 1965

Knowing they lacked the industrial base to escalate the armed struggle in the South, the DRV leaders sought increased aid from their main supporters. In January 1964, Le Duan and Le Duc Tho travelled to Moscow to explain the situation and ask for more assistance. The Soviets, still concerned over the possibility of the spread of war in Southeast Asia into a major superpower confrontation, hesitated to fully support the Vietnamese.<sup>2</sup> This hesitation, coupled with the recent frustrations in the South, stirred considerable debate within the Lao Dong Party regarding the wisdom of the strategy they had adopted. Ho Chi Minh was forced to step in and call for unity and sacrifice within the Party. He succeeded in quieting the dissent and elaborated the need for armed struggle.

At this juncture, the Vietnamese began seeking greater

assistance from the Chinese. The Chinese had begun to provide increased aid as early as 1962 by supplying 90,000 rifles and machineguns to the Vietnamese.<sup>3</sup> But following the Vietnamese decision to escalate, the Chinese increased the supply of weapons, trucks, gasoline, rails, and food. They assisted the Vietnamese in railway construction and provided them hard currency.<sup>4</sup>

But the Vietnamese Communists skillfully navigated through the treacherous waters of the Sino-Soviet dispute. When the Chinese offered a large aid package to the Vietnamese in 1964 under the condition that they drop further aid from the Soviets, the Vietnamese declined.<sup>5</sup> In August 1964, after the Gulf of Tonkin naval incidences and the U.S. retaliation bombing of the North, Le Duan again visited Moscow in an effort to secure air defense weaponry. Although the Chinese refused to embark on a cooperative aid program at the Soviet's request, Moscow promised increased military aid.

This change in Soviet policy occurred with the ouster of Khrushchev in October 1964 and was probably an effort by the Soviets to keep the Vietnamese from exclusively joining the Chinese camp. The Vietnamese agreed to curtail their criticism of the Soviets and try to prevent the war in the South from spreading beyond South Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> In February 1965, as further U.S. bombing reprisals were executed, Kosygin visited Hanoi and promised increased Soviet assistance to include hard currency, surface-to-air missiles,



and anti-aircraft guns.<sup>7</sup>

Trouble flared-up again on the DRV flank as the 2d Lao coalition government collapsed in May 1964 and the Pathet Lao, assisted by the PAVN, were forced to retake the Plaine des Jarres. The U.S. initiated bombing attacks in the Pathet Lao zones and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This had little impact on infiltration of men and supplies as engineer improvement of the Trail progressed. The flank stabilized.

The North began to brace internally for war in 1964. Motivated by the CIA-orchestrated OPLAN 34a ARVN commando raids in the North, the Tonkin Gulf naval incidences, and the U.S. retaliation bombing, the DRV upgraded its own defenses. It expanded its militia to 10 percent of the population, declared special Civilian-Military days, and initiated a concept called combat hamlets. Chinese military personnel assisted in establishing an air defense system to protect against anticipated future U.S. bombing.

The DRV also began to support the effort in the South with PAVN regulars in 1964. PAVN units began training for infiltration in April and by December the PAVN Independent 808th Battalion and 95th Regiment had entered the South.<sup>8</sup> In the next six months, three additional regiments crossed into South Vietnam and it is estimated that PAVN regulars in the South reached approximately 6,500 personnel.<sup>9</sup> By the end of 1965, ten PAVN regiments were operating in the Central Highlands.

In South Vietnam, the new regime's popularity was short-lived. Political crisis set in. A series of coups occurred over the next year and a half that resulted in 8 different cabinets. Riots broke out between Catholics and Buddhists. In the midst of this turmoil, the NLF and PLAF continued to grow. By March 1964, the NLF controlled roughly 40 percent of the population and land area of South Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the year, this had grown to 50 percent. The PLAF grew to between 30 and 45 main battalions, 35,000 regional guerrillas and 80,000 local militia. As the PLAF grew and military operations were increased, ARVN casualties mounted. They increased from 1,000 a month in January to 3,000 a month in December 1964.<sup>11</sup> Desertions sharply increased to 73,000, up 50 percent over the previous year.<sup>12</sup>

The growth and effectiveness of the PLAF was clearly demonstrated in January 1965 at the battle of Binh Gia. Beginning two months before the battle, two main force battalions infiltrated south from Tay Ninh Province, around Saigon, to Phuoc Tuy. There they picked up weapons that had been infiltrated by sea from North Vietnam. They lured two companies of ARVN rangers accompanied by tanks into an ambush and destroyed them. In all, the ARVN fed seven battalions into the fight and lost 200 men.<sup>13</sup>

In May, the PLAF struck in larger force. About a thousand main force troops overran the Phuoc Long province capital. Later, two PLAF regiments raided the Government

military headquarters at Dong Xoai in the same province and a nearby U.S. Special Forces Camp. Other main force units destroyed two ARVN battalions at Quang Ngai in central Vietnam. By mid-June, the ARVN had lost its best battalions.<sup>14</sup>

The DRV leaders made a critical decision to direct the NLF to attack U.S. personnel and facilities. In October 1964 they mortared Bien Hoa airfield killing five Americans. In December, terrorists blew-up the Brinks Hotel in Saigon killing two and injuring 58. Two months later, near Pleiku, the PLAF raided an American air base killing eight, wounding more than a hundred, and destroying ten aircraft. And finally, later in February 1965, the PLAF bombed U.S. military billets at Qui Nhon killing 23 servicemen.

The Communists had taken a calculated risk. The aim of the attacks appeared to be twofold: to demonstrate their ability to attack U.S. targets in the South should the U.S. decide to initiate further bombing of the North; and to demonstrate to the population in the South the myths of American invincibility and America's inability to protect them.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, the Communists calculated that even if the Americans chose to intervene in the South with combat troops, the war would be limited to South Vietnam because the U.S. would not risk a global military confrontation with the Chinese and the Soviets. The Chinese had warned the U.S. in

1962 about intervention in Laos<sup>16</sup> and now in 1964 had exploded its first atomic weapon. Likewise, Krushchev had sharply reminded Johnson immediately after the Tonkin Gulf incident of Johnson's responsibility for ". . . ensuring that dangerous events whichever area of the globe they begin with, would not become first elements in the chain of ever more critical and irreversible events."<sup>17</sup> Brezhnev had also promised the DRV that the Soviets would support them if they were attacked by the U.S.<sup>18</sup>

PAVN forces played a significant role in the South beginning in 1965. The Communists decided to accelerate infiltration of units into the Central Highlands in early 1965. This enabled the PLAF to concentrate in the lowland areas. The balance of forces had shifted in favor of the Communists.

But the U.S. responded to the deteriorating state of the GVN and ARVN, and to the provocation of the NLF by choosing one of the only two realistic options open to them: cash in its chips and negotiate a settlement to the conflict, or directly intervene in the fighting by increasing the bombing in the North and introducing U.S. combat troops. It chose the latter.

Retaliation bombing of the military barracks at Dong Hoi in the North followed the PLAF raid at Pleiku. Then on February 18, 1965, the U.S. Air Force initiated Operation ROLLING THUNDER, a bombing campaign that would last three

years. The aim of the campaign was to interdict Communist logistical support from the North and cripple the economic infrastructure of the DRV in order to coerce Hanoi into stopping its support of the conflict in the South.

In response, the DRV began evacuating its major urban areas and moving what industries it could to the country-side and underground. In 1965, it also developed an economic plan aimed at self-sufficiency for each province and enlisted the aid of Chinese soldiers to repair the transportation infrastructure. As mentioned previously, the DRV secured increased economic and military aid from both the Soviets and the Chinese.

The U.S. began introducing Marines in March 1965 and by the end of 1965, U.S. military personnel totalled 184,000. The initial clashes between U.S. troops and both the PLAF and PAVN demonstrated the clear superiority of U.S. firepower and mobility, and the solid fighting will of the American soldier. In the summer, Marines took on a PLAF regiment in the battle of Van Tuong on the central coast, killing 599 and capturing 122 main force soldiers while suffering 50 dead and 150 wounded.<sup>19</sup> Later that same summer, the 1st Cavalry Division locked horns with three PAVN regiments in the Ia Drang Valley in the Central Highlands, killing 1,000 regulars while sustaining 300 casualties.<sup>20</sup>

During the period 1964-65, the Communists pursued diplomatic action to reach a favorable negotiated settlement.

Some members of the Military Revolutionary Council that had replaced the Diem Regime, to include General Duong Van Minh, favored a negotiated settlement and had opened a dialogue with the NLF in January 1964. However, this ended with the coup against Minh and his supporters on January 30.

An American diplomatic initiative was started in the summer of 1964 and it lasted for 12 months. The dialogue between Washington and Hanoi was established through the Canadian representative to the International Control Commission. Premier Pham Van Dong responded with the following conditions for negotiations: withdrawal of the U.S. from Vietnam and termination of all support to the GVN.<sup>21</sup> No progress was made.

Following Johnson's call for unconditional negotiations on April 7, 1965, Hanoi issued its "Four-Point Proposal":

1. Withdrawal of U.S. from South Vietnam.
2. Observance of the 1954 Geneva Agreements.
3. The internal affairs of South Vietnam to be settled by the South Vietnamese in accordance with the program of the NLF.
4. Peaceful reunification of Vietnam without foreign interference.<sup>22</sup>

Hanoi dropped the precondition of immediate U.S. withdrawal for opening the talks, but insisted on an unconditional halt to the bombing. In May, Johnson countered by temporarily halting the bombing in an effort to get discussions started. Hanoi viewed this as an ultimatum and chose not to agree to

talk. Johnson again countered by linking a bombing halt to removal of the PAVN from the South. Hanoi refused, and after reiterating its Four-Point Proposal again in the summer, the diplomatic exchange ended.<sup>23</sup>

At the end of 1965, with the GVN in disarray, the ARVN becoming increasingly ineffective, American combat troops on the ground in the South, and American planes bombing the North, the Lao Dong Party met at the Twelfth Plenum to map-out future strategy. Once again, momentum that had been gained in the struggle in the South had been curtailed--this time by direct American intervention. The basic question posed was how to deal with the American intervention and escalation.

The Party recognized that quick victory over the American military was unlikely and therefore protracted struggle would be required. It essentially faced two choices: scale-back military operations to preserve the forces, maintain the gains, continue the political struggle, and wait out the U.S. (i.e. go on the defensive); or maintain the initiative by meeting the escalation, conducting offensive operations, and forcing the withdrawal of the U.S. The first option was lower cost, but would hand the initiative to the GVN, ARVN, and U.S. The second option would keep the pressure on the enemy, but at a potentially higher cost.

The Communists decided on the second option. The

essence of their strategy in the South was to attack the two vulnerabilities of South Vietnam -- the ARVN and the GVN. They would tie-down U.S. ground forces and annihilate the ARVN. This in turn would lead to general uprising and cause the collapse of the GVN and force the U.S. to withdraw.

Historians have debated over the question of when dissenting public opinion in the U.S. became a significant factor in the war. For example, Marilyn Young notes that Gallup and Harris Polls in mid-1967 indicated that more Americans believed that U.S. involvement in the war was a mistake than those who did not.<sup>24</sup> However, the more relevant questions here are threefold. Did the Communist leaders, in contemplating their grand strategy, conclude that American public dissent could play a potentially significant role in the outcome of the war? If so, was exploitation of the dissent part of their grand strategy? If so, when was this exploitation incorporated into their strategy?

Evidence exists that as early as 1965, the Communist leaders were keenly aware of the increasing public debate in the U.S. over the war. They viewed this debate as evidence of the moral contradiction of American imperialism. General Giap noted in two articles published in January 1966 the growing acuteness in the U.S. of the anti-war protests and Congressional debate. He went on to conclude that the movement was ". . . gaining momentum everywhere on a scale unprecedented in the history of the United States."<sup>25</sup>



Undoubtedly, Giap shared his views on the subject with the Central Committee prior to the publishing of the articles, so it seems probable that the Communist leaders were aware of the potential significance of the dissident movement. Their only means of influencing the impact of the movement fit neatly into their strategy: prolong the struggle and increase the cost of American involvement in terms of dollars, lost opportunity, world influence, and the lives of American servicemen. The price of American lives would become the most vivid cost in neighborhoods across the U.S. Therefore, I conclude that as early as 1965, a part of the Communists' grand strategy was to influence the public opinion on the American home-front.

Communist Grand Strategy that evolved up to and including the decision of the Twelfth Plenum can be summarized as follows:

1. Mobilize the DRV for an intense and protracted conflict with the U.S. and South Vietnam.
2. Improve an internal defense system to guard against invasion of the North to include coordinated bombing.
3. Protect the economic infrastructure and build a repair capability for the infrastructure, with priority to the transportation infrastructure.
4. Continue to strengthen the PLAF and reinforce the South with PAVN units.
5. Continue to spread political influence in the South through the NLF.
6. Maintain the initiative on the battlefield in the South. Main effort to annihilating the ARVN through general offensive in order to spur general uprising.

Tie-down U.S. forces and keep them off balance.  
Gain U.S. home-front visibility of the war and  
influence public opinion by causing U.S. casualties.  
Continue to use the same strategy involving the  
three types of forces and the three strategic areas.

7. Continue to improve the logistics system and transportation infrastructure for strategic reach to the South.
8. Maintain control on the DRV western flank, to include both Laos and Cambodia.
9. Keep the negotiated settlement option open as a means of securing the withdrawal of the U.S.
10. Retain Soviet and Chinese political and military support for the escalation. Do not exacerbate the Sino-Soviet dispute to the extent that either party withdraws support.

## THE WINTER-SPRING-SUMMER OFFENSIVES - 1967

*The enemy must not know where I intend to give battle. For if he does not know where I intend to give battle, he must prepare in a great many places. And when he prepares in a great many places, those I have to fight in will be few. For if he prepares to the front, his rear will be weak, and if to the rear, his front will be fragile. If he strengthens his left, his right will be vulnerable, and if his right, there will be few troops on his left. And when he sends troops everywhere, he will be weak everywhere. Numerical weakness comes from having to guard against possible attacks; numerical strength from forcing the enemy to make these preparations against us.<sup>1</sup>*

-- Sun Tzu

During the three years 1965-67, the U.S. escalated its bombing effort against the North. The number of sorties grew from 55,000 in 1965 to 148,000 in 1966, with bomb tonnage increasing from 33,000 to 148,000.<sup>2</sup> Transportation, petroleum, and industrial facilities were targeted as well as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The bombing and the DRV's mobilization and protection measures had a long-term effect on the North's economy. Agricultural production and national income had been steadily increasing four and eight percent per year respectively. As a result of the bombings, per capita agricultural output declined and economic growth would be stifled for years to come. Nearly all industrial, transportation, and communication centers built since the end of the First Indochina War were destroyed.

But the bombing failed to slow the movement of men and

materiel to the South. Transportation facilities were quickly repaired or bypass arrangements were made. By 1966, the Chinese had committed 50,000 troops to the North to repair bomb damage, assist logistically, and man anti-aircraft defenses. The commitment would reach 170,000 troops by 1968.<sup>3</sup>

For the most part, because of sustained Chinese and Soviet aid, industrial facilities in the North were not critical to the war effort. So the bombing impact relative to the industrial sustainment of the war was small. Although casualties mounted in the North from the bombings, and food and other basic necessities were in short supply, the will of the North Vietnamese to support the effort in the South was not shaken. If anything, it strengthened their resolve to continue the fight. Men were drafted into the PAVN and women went to work in the factories and the fields.

Whereas the Soviets stood firmly behind the DRV's decision to meet the U.S. escalation and supported the four-point proposal, the Chinese took a different view. The Chinese criticized the Vietnamese for moving too quickly out of the guerrilla stage of people's war. They attempted to persuade the Vietnamese not to negotiate, but to wait until the Chinese were in a more advantageous position to assist them with major offensive operations.<sup>4</sup> But the Vietnamese were not persuaded, and although diplomatic relations cooled somewhat between the Chinese and the Vietnamese, the Chinese

continued to provide aid.

Meanwhile in 1966, the Vietnamese Communists improved their control of the western flank to secure the Ho Chi Minh Trail further south in Cambodia and to secure sanctuaries for the NLF and PAVN units. Although Cambodia was officially neutral, the DRV had arranged shipments of weapons and supplies to the port of Sihanoukville and then overland to 13 PLAF and PAVN sanctuaries in Cambodia. Additionally, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was improved and extended through eastern Cambodia. These arrangements were made through the complicity of Prime Minister Prince Sihanouk and several of his Generals by offering substantial private profits.<sup>5</sup> In turn, the NLF also recognized the Cambodian border and the DRV limited support to the Khmer Rouge in their activities against the government in Cambodia.

The Communist build-up continued relentlessly in order to counter the U.S. escalation. PAVN infiltrations increased to roughly 5,000 soldiers per month by late 1966. In each year after 1966, the DRV infiltrated more than 100,000 regulars into the South. By the end of 1966 PAVN strength reached 46,300 in the South. PLAF main forces were estimated to be 67,700, with guerrilla forces at 112,000, and militia at 208,000. By comparison, U.S. personnel had reached 362,000. ARVN regulars totaled 315,000 with militia at an estimated 315,000.<sup>6</sup> 50,000 Australians and South Koreans had also joined the fighting. In terms of numbers, the U.S. and

South Vietnam enjoyed a significant numerical advantage.

General Westmoreland stepped-up the pressure on the ground by planning and executing the "big sweep" operations such as those code-named ATTLEBORO, CEDAR FALLS, and JUNCTION CITY. These particular operations were directed against the Communist War Zones C and D, and the "Iron Triangle" north and northwest of Saigon. Although the PLAF attempted to avoid decisive combat, losses were heavy. But as soon as U.S. and ARVN forces left the areas, the PLAF moved back in.

In the spring of 1966, an interesting series of events occurred near Da Nang. Dissidents, with the help of the I Corps Commander, General Nguyen Chanh Thi, attempted to set up a Buddhist force in opposition to the Government. General Nguyen Van Thieu, a Catholic and now the chief of state, dismissed the Commander and a general strike broke out. The 324B PAVN Division slipped into Quang Tri Province, but the NLF organization and influence in the Da Nang area was insufficient to take advantage of the situation. The revolt was broken by ARVN troops. This again pointed to the lack of progress the NLF had made in the larger urban areas--one of the three designated strategic areas.

The PAVN continued their build-up along the DMZ and in April 1967 they began a seige of U.S. forces at Khe Sanh. This was execution of their strategy to tie-down U.S. forces. Pacification efforts had slowed the NLF's progress in establishing greater control and influence, so the seige was

intended to draw off pressure from the PLAF guerrilla and militia forces. It also began to cause Westmoreland's fixation with the PAVN build-up near the DMZ.

By the summer of 1967, the escalation on both sides had turned the war into one of attrition and ultimately into stalemate. General Nguyen Chi Thanh, COSVN leader, had adopted an aggressive approach using PLAF main force units and this had been costly. Although they had kept the pressure on, the Communists had lost the initiative. They had continued to push men and materiel South, but had not regained the momentum they enjoyed in 1965. The U.S. had disrupted their progress in the South and began causing significant casualties. The NLF had grown rapidly, but size made it less efficient and effective. Morale suffered.

Some party members in the North, to include Giap, questioned Thanh's approach and called for greater patience and better balance in the use of the three types of forces. So in the summer of 1967, debate once again raged over appropriate future strategy. The general assessment was that a deadlock had been reached in the South, but that this favored the Communists. They reasoned that the U.S. could not stay indefinitely in the South without complete victory.

They had also concluded that meaningful negotiations could not take place until a more favorable situation had been reached on the battlefield. They had in fact used this as a matter of policy over the past year and a half.

They further concluded that the GVN and ARVN were as unstable and ineffective as they had been in the past and still presented the greatest vulnerability in the South. The Communists controlled most of the countryside and had successfully progressed in two of the three strategic areas. But the rebellion at Da Nang coupled with a wide migration of refugees from the countryside held greater promise for development of a revolutionary base in the urban areas.

The Communists were unsure of what the U.S. would do in the short term. They could accommodate further escalation by the U.S., but this would mean a longer and more costly struggle. They felt that they could always pursue the protracted conflict option and eventually win. But General Thanh argued that conditions were such that an all-out offensive would result in general uprisings and the GVN would collapse. The Party became convinced that severe reversals on the battlefield would be required before the U.S. would be compelled to negotiate and ultimately withdraw.<sup>7</sup> So the Party chose the option to accelerate the war's tempo.<sup>8</sup>

The Party decided in the summer of 1967 that a major offensive would be launched within the next year to cause such a reversal for the U.S. The basic concept adopted was to draw U.S. forces towards the DMZ with diversionary attacks primarily by PAVN units, draw the ARVN into the countryside, then strike simultaneously at major urban centers with the



irregulars of the PLAF. This would trigger a general uprising similar to the August 1945 model. Subsequent offensive actions by PAVN regulars could be used to finish off the collapse. It was hoped that stunning successes by the PLAF would demonstrate the strength of the NLF, paralyze the GVN and the ARVN, and drive a wedge between South Vietnam and the U.S. by revealing the futility of U.S. strategy and the vulnerability of the U.S. These conditions would then lead to a total Communist victory or force negotiations on Communist terms.<sup>9</sup>

The decision was a gamble but not a desperate one. In order to move the U.S. towards negotiations, the Communists needed a decisive victory that would shake the confidence of both the American leaders and the South Vietnamese people. Risk was involved because the Communist forces were at an overall numerical disadvantage. But the Communists mitigated the risk by economizing the PAVN and committing the NLF as the main effort. It was a brilliant concept incorporating deception, surprise, offensive action, speed, economy of force, and mass--a lesson in the indirect approach.

The Communist Grand Strategy by the end of 1967 had not changed appreciably over that which had evolved in 1965. The decision that had been taken was a modification in the military strategy that had parallel political aims: at best, the GVN would collapse and a coalition government would be established, forcing the U.S. to withdraw; or faced with a

severe reversal, the U.S. would cease escalation and negotiate.<sup>10</sup> The decision taken by the leaders was to be transformed into a military campaign called the Winter-Spring-Summer Offensives. One phase of that campaign, coined the "Tet Offensive", became popularly renowned throughout the world.

## NEGOTIATE AND FIGHT - 1968

*The Anti-US Resistance for National Salvation waged by our Army and people in North and South Viet-Nam has driven the US Imperialists into serious defeats forcing them to deescalate the war, reduce their bombings of North Viet-Nam and talk to us at the conference table . . . The basic combat concept and goals of the Revolution in South Viet-Nam are aimed at frustrating the US Imperialist's policy of aggression, smashing the country-selling Puppet Government, and forming a national democratic coalition government in South Viet-Nam to bring about independence, democracy, peace and neutrality, and ultimately, peace and reunification of the fatherland. Our stand and basic goals are, as a consequence, unchanged.<sup>1</sup>*

*-- Lao Dong Party Directive  
Ben Tre Province  
October 28, 1968*

Preparations for the Winter-Spring-Summer Offensives proceeded according to the Communists' plan. By the fall of 1967, infiltration of PAVN Regulars reached 20,000 men a month.<sup>2</sup> Most of this activity occurred near the DMZ as the Communists strengthened their forces in the mountains surrounding Khe Sanh and in the A Shau Valley. Again, this build-up was meant to be a diversion to draw U.S. and ARVN units away from the urban areas. In addition, these forces would be in a position to take advantage of the anticipated general uprisings and defend the gains of the PLAF irregulars and guerrillas, similar to the concept employed during the August 1945 Revolution.

Preliminary attacks were executed by the PAVN beginning

in October near Song Be, Loc Ninh, Dak To, and Con Thien. These were also intended to draw ARVN units into the countryside.

The Winter-Spring-Summer Offensives, implied in the name, were conducted in three phases.<sup>3</sup> Phase I was the Tet Offensive and was clearly the main effort. It began with a final series of diversionary attacks conducted in the Central Highlands and coastal areas on January 30. Some have concluded that these attacks were a result of poor operational coordination. I can offer no conclusive evidence to the contrary except to say that it was the Communists' intent to draw-off ARVN units into the countryside, then strike at the urban areas. In order to meet this intent, the timing of the attacks had to be such that the attacks in the Central Highlands and the rural coastal areas preceded the strikes in the urban areas.

The bold strikes were delivered on the night of January 31 during the lunar new year holiday cease-fire. Local PLAF units struck 36 of 44 provincial capitals, 5 of 6 autonomous cities, 64 of 242 district capitals, and a considerable number of villages and hamlets.

A primary target was Saigon. Suicide squads that had previously infiltrated the city, assaulted symbolic objectives such as the U.S. Embassy, Tan Son Nhut airfield, headquarters of the Joint General Staff, Independence Palace, the race track, and the radio station. Assault and

propaganda elements waited in hiding to surface at the opportune moment in order to propel the momentum of the anticipated general uprisings. PLAF main forces were to attack from the city's outskirts to exploit the successes of the assault and propaganda units. A new united front called the Vietnam Alliance of National Democratic and Peace Forces was created as a political entity whose purpose was to assume political control in the event that the GVN collapsed, or establish a coalition government if the outcome evolved into a negotiated settlement.

But the general uprising never materialized. U.S. and ARVN forces were able to regain control in most urban areas by February 5. Only in the old imperial city of Hue did the Communists manage to maintain control for any considerable time. The city had been assaulted by main force units totaling 12,000 soldiers, and when successful were reinforced by the PAVN. The Communists held out until February 25 when they were driven from the city by U.S. Marines and ARVN units. During the occupation, PLAF terror units rounded-up and massacred over 3,000 "cruel tyrants and reactionary elements" in order to extinguish GVN control in the city. The killings included women and children.<sup>4</sup>

Phase II and III offensives planned by the Communists to exploit the Tet assaults were conducted in May and August with little success. However, much of the progress that had been made by the GVN pacification effort in the rural areas

was reversed as many ARVN troops withdrew from the rural areas to protect the cities.

There has been great debate over the effectiveness of the Winter-Spring-Summer Offensives. But there is little doubt that Phase I, the Tet Offensive, was a strategic surprise. How did the Communists assess the effectiveness of the Tet Offensive?

In a COSVN assessment written a month after the January-February assaults, the Communists claimed to have annihilated a third of the ARVN and one-fifth of U.S. combat forces. They noted that they had been able to strike at the GVN and U.S. nerve centers and seriously damage the administrative machinery. Additionally, they asserted that 1.5 million people and significant resources in the countryside had been liberated. Finally, the Communists stated that their armed and political forces had matured owing to the experience of the Offensive.<sup>5</sup>

However, the document went on to point-out "many deficiencies and weak points." Military successes were not substantial enough to act as a lever to create the conditions for a general uprising of the masses. Political organization was not strong enough to motivate the masses to resort to armed struggle in coordination with the PLAF military forces. Inadequate attention was paid to ARVN troop proselyting and consequently a military revolt did not occur. Plans were

inadequate for mobilizing the resources of the liberated areas. Troop replenishment did not adequately support continuous offensives. Lastly, COSVN failed to effectively communicate its policies and strategy to its subordinate echelons.<sup>6</sup>

General Tran Van Tra, one of the Offensive's architects, explained that the Communists had miscalculated the balance of forces between themselves and their enemy. Although Tet created a "strategic turning point" in the war, it was accomplished at a great cost and therefore all gains could not be preserved. This led to "myriad difficulties in 1969-70."<sup>7</sup> Others echoed Tra's critique by pointing out that the follow-on operations in May and August were a costly mistake.

From a tactical standpoint, the Tet Offensive was costly for the Communists. 32,000 PLAF and PAVN soldiers were killed and 5,800 captured. By comparison, U.S. losses were 1,000 killed while the ARVN sustained 2,800 killed.<sup>8</sup> Further, by the end of the second follow-on operation in August, the PLAF had lost 75,000 dead and wounded.<sup>9</sup> To support the the Offensive, the NLF's infrastructure was forced to surface and an estimated 40% of the cadre was killed or immobilized.<sup>10</sup> This, coupled with the Phoenix Program which aimed at neutralizing NLF leaders and key personnel, crippled the NLF.<sup>11</sup>

From a strategic viewpoint, the Offensive failed to meet

the most optimistic objectives of the Communists: general uprisings, the collapse of the GVN, and the forced withdrawal of the U.S. On the other hand, the Offensive achieved a bombing halt and brought the Americans to the negotiating table. The Communists had hoped to shake the confidence of U.S. leaders in the strategy they had adopted. In this they succeeded. Major questions concerning strategy and additional troop requests by General Westmoreland began to surface within the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), and a major rift developed between civilians in OSD and the military men on the Joint Staff and in theater.<sup>12</sup>

An effect unforeseen by the Communists was the eventual impact on public opinion in the U.S. The Tet Offensive called into question the credibility of the military leadership and the Johnson Administration. Despite U.S. escalation and General Westmoreland's optimistic assessments on the progress being achieved against the enemy, the Communists had launched with great surprise a major offensive campaign. Hard questions began to be asked by the public: Was the war winnable? What would be the cost? Why was the U.S. there? Opposition to the war gained momentum and public support for the war dropped sharply.<sup>13</sup> The Communists did not anticipate this immediate affect according to General Tran Do, another architect of the Offensive: "As for making an impact in the United States, it had not been our intention--but it turned out to be a fortunate result."<sup>14</sup>



Tet accentuated President Johnson's dilemma. He was boxed-in by the willingness of Vietnamese Communists to pursue their goals at great cost, the national security strategy of the containment of communism, the inability of the GVN to survive on its own, and public opinion that had turned against the war. This dilemma, coupled with his failing health, would cause Johnson to voluntarily end his presidency.

On March 31, 1968, Johnson ordered a bombing halt above the 20th parallel and called for peace talks with the Communists. Hanoi promptly agreed to ". . . contact the United States representative with a view to determining with the American side the unconditional cessation of the United States bombing raids and all other acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam so that talks may start."<sup>15</sup> Talks began in May. Hanoi's position remained unchanged: an unconditional bombing halt and acceptance of its Four-Point Proposal. The U.S. demanded a withdrawal of all foreign troops from the South and Hanoi's commitment not to seize the South by force. Talks continued unproductively through the summer.

In October, Johnson ordered a total bombing halt of the North and called for formal peace talks in Paris, with a condition that Hanoi not attack Saigon with rockets. Hanoi accepted. This acceptance on the part of the Communists implied that they recognized the failure of the Winter-

Spring-Summer Offensives to achieve the high-end objectives of the collapse of the GVN and withdrawal of the U.S. But it also implied that the Communists recognized that the Offensives had achieved the low-end objective of forcing the U.S. to negotiate. The challenge that lay ahead for the Communists was to negotiate the withdrawal of the U.S. from the South so that the ultimate objective of a reunified Vietnam under Communist control could be achieved.

Although the Communists had forced the U.S. to examine the strategic "contradictions" of their intervention in the South, the military situation remained a stalemate. Further, the NLF had been hurt badly. Consequently, military and political action in the South would have to be temporarily limited until the structure and forces could be rebuilt. A purely defensive military posture would be inconsistent with the aims of diplomatic negotiations.

The Communists revised their grand strategy, but it was again a minor modification to the strategy that had evolved to that point. The basic change was that the Communists chose the negotiating option and decided to maintain pressure on the battlefield to complement the negotiations. This strategic change has been referred to as "simultaneous fighting and negotiating"<sup>16</sup> The following Communist Grand Strategy evolved after the decisions of 1968:

1. Continue to mobilize the DRV for a protracted conflict in the South.

2. Continue to improve an internal defense system in the North.
3. Continue to protect and repair the infrastructure with a priority to the transportation system.
4. Rebuild the NLF to include the PLAF by providing replacements from the North.
5. Defend the liberated areas in the South and continue to spread political influence in the non-liberated areas.
6. Maintain pressure on the battlefield through smaller unit offensive actions. Preserve strength. Continue to gain U.S. home-front visibility of the war and influence public opinion by causing U.S. casualties and heightening the threat of a prolonged conflict.
7. Continue to improve the logistics system and transportation infrastructure for strategic reach to the South.
8. Maintain control on the DRV western flank to include Laos and Cambodia.
9. Negotiate an interim settlement with the U.S. and the GVN in accordance with the "Four-Point Proposal." This may necessitate creation of a coalition government as an interim step to Communist domination in the South. The major objective of the negotiations, however, is to secure the withdrawal of the U.S.

Retain Soviet and Chinese political and military support for the fighting and negotiations. Do not exacerbate the Sino-Soviet dispute to the extent that either party withdraws support.

## THE 21ST PLENUM AND THE TIDE OF EVENTS -1973

*So, although 9 months have gone since the signing of the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam, the people of South Vietnam, because of the violation and sabotage on the part of the Saigon administration, have not had a single day of genuine peace . . . The Saigon administration violated the ceasefire, between Jan. 28 and Oct. 31, 271,125 times.<sup>1</sup>*

*-- Provisional Revolutionary Government  
November 2, 1973*

The DRV began replacing the holes left in the PLAF and NLF cadre infrastructure caused by the Winter-Spring-Summer Offensives. Desertions were up and the NLF had problems recruiting soldiers. By late 1968, 68 percent of the main force units were manned by North Vietnamese.<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that between 1968 and 1971, the strength of PLAF armed forces dropped from 250,300 to 197,700 while the PAVN in the South remained fairly constant.<sup>3</sup> The casualties, influx of Northerners, the Phoenix Program, the Chieu Hoi Program, and the apparent lack of progress were affecting morale.

According to their strategy, the Communists pursued small-unit operations throughout the next three years to keep pressure on ARVN and U.S. forces. However, accelerated pacification efforts by the ARVN to include building village self-defense militia and the GVN's Land-to-the-Tiller program put the NLF on the defensive.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the problems with the Revolution in the South, the DRV leaders began experiencing problems with other parts of their grand strategy. First, a new American President, Richard Nixon, had been elected and American strategy changed. This created for the Communists a greater element of the unknown. Nixon's strategy called for peace with honor through "Vietnamization" of the war effort and diplomacy. But this stopped short of declaring a negotiated settlement as a means of securing peace.

Subsequent actions by Nixon indicated the U.S. did not intend to "cut-and-run" from their position in the South. In fact, from a grand strategy perspective, Nixon seized the initiative. His first move was against the DRV flank. The U.S. had increased its bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in November of 1968, but General Abrams, Westmoreland's replacement, requested Nixon to approve the bombing of Vietnamese Communist sanctuaries in eastern Cambodia. Nixon concurred and the secret MENU bombings began on March 18, 1969.

The situation deteriorated further as a result of the DRV leaders' inability to control the Khmer Rouge in their struggle against Sihanouk's government. Sihanouk, who had passively supported the Vietnamese Communists in return for their control over the Khmer Rouge, was overthrown by General Lon Nol in March 1970. Lon Nol shut down the supply line

from the port of Sihanoukville to the sanctuaries and demanded that the PLAF leave within three days. This posed a serious problem for the DRV and it responded by increasing its support of the Khmer Rouge, assisting Sihanouk in setting-up a government in exile, and forming a coalition with him.

The situation further worsened when Nixon approved the invasion of Cambodia in an effort to wipe out the sanctuaries and destroy the COSVN headquarters. The U.S. first supported the ARVN during attacks initiated on March 27, 1970. U.S. and ARVN troops executed joint ground operations beginning April 28 and lasting until June 29, focusing primarily on the Parrot's Beak and Fishhook regions.

Meanwhile, CIA-backed mercenaries began operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail near the Plain des Jarres. In January 1970, the 19th Plenum had decided to accelerate the improvement of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. So the DRV provided PAVN support to the Pathet Lao in order to drive the mercenaries off the Plain to prevent interdiction and facilitate the upgrade.

These developments on the DRV flanks diverted the Communists' attention and resources, interdicted supplies, and disrupted the effort in the South. This all contributed to the lull of revolutionary activity in the South. Additionally, Hanoi was concerned over the lack of China's response to U.S. actions. This reflected China's

preoccupation with the Sino-Soviet dispute. China's policies had gradually shifted and the Soviet Union, not the U.S., was China's primary concern.<sup>5</sup>

Nixon challenged another foundation of the Vietnamese Communists' grand strategy by laying the groundwork for detente with the Chinese and the Soviets beginning in 1971. The DRV leaders had so effectively used the power of diplomacy with the Soviets and the Chinese that they had virtually guaranteed sustainment of their war effort. Now this necessary support would undoubtedly become issues for discussion in Nixon's initiatives with the Soviets and the Chinese.

Another event which potentially could have shaken the power base of the Vietnamese Communists was the death of Ho Chi Minh on September 3, 1969. But it did not. Power was transferred without crisis to the other leaders of the Politburo,<sup>6</sup> to include Le Duan, Pham Van Dong, and Truong Chinh. This is probably a tribute to the effectiveness of Ho's leadership. The struggle continued much as if he was still alive.

As the Communists attempted to rebuild in the South and Nixon pursued his strategy of Vietnamization, diplomacy, and a wider war, negotiations began to unfold. Realizing that total victory would not come through negotiations, what the Communists could reasonably expect was a U.S. withdrawal and a coalition government in the South. From this position they

could seize political control and unify the country.<sup>7</sup> To represent this anticipated coalition government, the NLF and the Alliance of National Democratic and Peace Forces (ANDPF) formed a Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG).<sup>8</sup> When peace talks began on January 25, 1969, they included four parties: the U.S., the GVN, the DRV, and the PRG.

The initial position established by the U.S. included withdrawal of all foreign troops and a political settlement in the South which included the Thieu regime. The DRV countered with their Four-Point Proposal which included unconditional withdrawal of the U.S. But they indicated a compromise was possible on a political settlement that included Thieu. In May 1969, the NLF submitted a ten-point peace plan which called for the dissolution of the GVN and establishment of a coalition government. But they hinted that members of the Thieu regime might possibly be included in such a government.<sup>9</sup>

The talks stalled. Although Xuan Thuy, representing the DRV, secretly met with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger later on August 4, and Le Duc Tho did the same beginning in February 1970, it appears that the Vietnamese Communists decided to bide their time. While U.S. troop withdrawals proceeded under the Vietnamization program, the correlation of forces became more favorable to the Communists on the battlefield in the South.

Given the stalemate in the talks and on the battlefield,



the DRV leaders made a major decision to accelerate the modernization of the PAVN.<sup>10</sup> \$200 million in arms transfers were secured from the Soviets and the DRV upgraded itself in tanks and mechanized vehicles, artillery pieces, and air defense weapons.<sup>11</sup> Upgraded units and more modern equipment were pushed into southern Laos to position the PAVN for the change in the correlation of forces.

With the ARVN gaining confidence from the Vietnamization program and the recent Cambodia invasion, President Thieu responded to this build-up by proposing an attack into southern Laos to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Operation LAM SON 719 was initiated on February 8, 1971. The operation included ARVN ground forces supported by U.S. logistics and air power. The PAVN routed the invaders and by March 24, the ARVN had withdrawn. This was a significant test, for it indicated that without the assistance of U.S. ground forces, the PAVN could defeat the ARVN head-to-head.

The Politburo decided in May 1971 to make 1972 a year of "decisive victory" that would cause the U.S. to negotiate from a "position of defeat"<sup>12</sup> Once again, the Communists moved onto the path of General Offensive and Uprising. The timing was critical. Nixon's detente initiatives potentially threatened continued support from the Soviets and the Chinese. The correlation of forces had changed as a result of U.S. troop withdrawals. The ARVN had been seriously tested and it had failed. The U.S. President was being

pressed by the public and Congress. And it was an American election year. The Twentieth Plenum held in February 1972 approved the plan.<sup>13</sup>

This decision was translated into a military campaign known as the Spring or Easter Offensive. The plan was to attack with 10 PAVN divisions and PLAF main units on four wide fronts to draw the ARVN into the countryside while local units attacked rear areas in the lowlands. Once the ARVN had been defeated in the countryside, armed propaganda units would help to spur uprisings in the urban areas. In contrast to the Tet Offensive, the main effort was to be made by the PAVN in the rural areas.

The Offensive was initiated on March 30. On the northern front, PAVN divisions overran the northern half of Quang Tri province and seized the approaches to Hue. The PAVN 320th Division, reinforced with tanks, attacked along a second front from the western highlands, overran ARVN outposts and cut-off Routes 14 and 19.

On a third front, three PLAF divisions attacked in and around Tay Ninh province, overrunning Loc Ninh, interdicting Route 13 and surrounding An Loc. In the Mekong Delta, the fourth front, 3 PAVN regiments waited until the 21st ARVN Division departed to relieve An Loc, then attacked lightly defended outposts and seriously crippled the pacification program. The Communists gained important access to the rice and manpower in the Delta.<sup>14</sup>

The ARVN were hard-pressed everywhere. The U.S. responded by mining harbors and conducting a bombing campaign code-named LINEBACKER I in the North. It also provided significant air support to the ARVN in the South. The ARVN conducted a counteroffensive beginning in June. They recaptured the city of Quang Tri in September, but the northern half of the province stayed under control of the PAVN. The Communist offensive ground to a halt. And no uprising of the populace occurred.

North Vietnamese casualties were high. Compared to 12,000 ARVN killed, they had lost nearly 100,000.<sup>15</sup> From an operational level, the offensive was not a decisive victory. Although the Communist blows were heavy and initially knocked the ARVN back, the ARVN were able to fight to a stand-still.

But the Communists had gained valuable experience and information in the offensive. They were able to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the ARVN, how the ARVN would counter such an offensive, and how the ARVN was able to fight against a more modernized PAVN in the South. They also gained experience in large-unit campaigning with modern equipment. They would be able to use this experience to great advantage later.

A combination of the Spring Offensive and the upcoming U.S. Presidential elections appeared to break the deadlock in the negotiations. As William Turley has noted, Hanoi may

have believed, assuming Nixon would be reelected, they could get more favorable terms before the election than after.<sup>16</sup> Nixon, on the other hand, was running out of tools for leverage. Troop withdrawal had dropped U.S. troop strength to 47,000 and Congress was moving to cut-off funds for the war.

In the negotiations in Paris, the U.S. had agreed to establish a timetable for complete withdrawal and no longer insisted on removal of PAVN troops from the South. The DRV no longer demanded that Thieu be removed and it dropped its insistence on a coalition government.<sup>17</sup> Secret agreement was reached between the DRV and the U.S. in October.

But Thieu balked. From his point of view, the agreement left him with intolerable military and political risks. Nixon proposed a delay in the official signing of the agreement and demanded negotiations be resumed to resolve new difficulties surfaced by Thieu. Then Thieu publicly denounced the draft. The DRV leaders sensed that the agreement was about to be derailed, so they publicly revealed the agreement and denounced the difficulties as ". . . an instrument for the United States to sabotage all peaceful settlement of the Vietnam prob'lem."<sup>18</sup>

Kissenger formally presented Tho with 69 revisions to the draft agreement demanded by Thieu. Both sides made headway, but the negotiations stalled. Nixon ordered the LINEBACKER II bombings of the North which proceeded December

18-30. Although the DRV had prepared for both the LINEBACKER I and II bombings by evacuating large numbers of people from the heavy urban areas, they sustained 2,200 killed and 1,500 wounded during the latter bombing. The U.S. lost 15 B-52's while the PAVN expended nearly all its SA-2 missiles.<sup>19</sup> On December 26, the DRV leaders agreed to resume the negotiations.

Talks began again on January 8, 1973. Nixon threatened Thieu with unilateral U.S. signing, and the treaty was signed by all four parties on January 27. It reflected the essence of the U.S.-DRV agreement in October. The U.S. would withdraw in 60 days. The DRV secured legitimate Communist military and political presence in the South. The Thieu regime would remain intact and would participate in the political settlement and reunification process through the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord (NCRC). The U.S. was allowed to continue to provide aid to the GVN. Additionally, an International Commission of Control and Supervision was established to oversee the implementation of the agreement. A ceasefire went into immediate effect in both the South and Laos.

In the settlement, the DRV had won two important points: the U.S. would withdraw and PAVN troops would remain in the South. These were key to the prevention of events similar to those occurring in the South after the Geneva Accords in 1954, and to the eventual reunification of Vietnam under

Communist control.

Clearly, the Communists' intent following the settlement was to seize power through political struggle in the three strategic areas in accordance with the terms of the settlement. However, they recognized that it might be necessary to use political violence of the masses to overcome political resistance. They also recognized that they must be prepared for armed struggle in the event the enemy reneged on the agreement.<sup>20</sup>

Although both the Communists and the GVN maneuvered to gain control of contested areas, the ARVN initiated intense pacification efforts along the coast and in the Delta. Thieu further aggravated the situation by declaring his "four no's": no abandonment of territory, no coalition, no negotiations, and no Communist activities in South Vietnam.<sup>21</sup> It was clear that Thieu did not intend to fully abide by the agreement.

Debate ensued within the Lao Dong Party about how to respond to the GVN's intentions and military activities. Militants such as Giap and PAVN Chief of Staff Van Tien Dung advocated revolutionary violence. Moderates favored a more cautious approach citing the possibility of American intervention and Le Duan's inability to secure increased military assistance from the Soviets or the Chinese.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the DRV was in economic straits. Population growth was soaring at a rate of 2.5 percent a year and

dispersal of the economy to protect against the bombing had significantly lowered efficiency.<sup>23</sup>

The issue was resolved at the 21st Plenum of the Central Committee in October 1973. The basic theme of its decision was a return to "revolutionary violence". It decided to authorize retaliatory strikes against the ARVN and prepare for large-scale warfare.<sup>24</sup>

Through their strategy of negotiating and fighting, the Communists had maneuvered the U.S. out of the war and set themselves up through the 1973 peace agreement for a favorable political solution to achieve their ultimate goal of the reunification of Vietnam under Communist control. But Thieu's actions conjured up the "dark days" of the middle and late 1950's brought about by Diem's Anticommunist Denuncification Campaign. But now the PAVN was in the South and in strength. Motivated by this "tide of events", the Communist strategy shifted back to a priority on armed struggle. In effect, both the GVN and the Communists abandoned the Paris peace agreement within the year after its signing.

## THE DECISION FOR FINAL OFFENSIVE - 1974

*The December 18, 1974-January 8, 1975 conference of the Political Bureau was one of historical significance. It correctly evaluated the essence of the situation, took firm hold of the rules of revolutionary warfare, and discovered new principles in time to determine the correct strategy. It was clear by the end of the conference that the Political Bureau was placing greater emphasis on the need to strike quickly. This desire was based on a scientific analysis once we had discovered our opportunity and grasp it. It would have been a crime against the nation to have let this opportunity slip.<sup>1</sup>*

-- General Van Tien Dung  
PAVN Chief of Staff

After the signing of the Paris peace agreement, the Communists had not sat idly waiting for the provisions of the agreement to achieve their long-term goal. Perhaps it was the haunting knowledge that twenty years before, the optimism brought about by the withdrawal of the French and the signing of the Geneva Accords was quickly dashed as the Accords broke down. Certainly, Thieu's initial reluctance to sign the Paris agreement, his pacification efforts, and his proclamation of the "Four No's" tempered any optimism the Communists might otherwise be enjoying.

So while both sides maneuvered for military control of the countryside, the Communists continued to improve their strategic reach further into the South.<sup>2</sup> It is estimated



that 100,000 to 120,000 PAVN regulars infiltrated into the South in the year following the agreement.<sup>3</sup> Work progressed steadily on improving the logistics posture of the Army further South by building-up the road networks through Laos, Cambodia, and into the South's Central Highlands; building a pipeline into Quang Tri province; stockpiling supplies forward; and continuing to push forward larger quantities of modern tanks, artillery, and anti-aircraft equipment. To continue to secure their flank and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, they reinforced and supported both the Pathet Lao and the Khmer Rouge.

Although the Communists improved their posture, the correlation of forces did not weigh in their favor. ARVN regulars stood at 320,000 compared to 180,000 of the PAVN and PLAF. South Vietnamese irregulars numbered approximately 680,000 while PLAF guerrillas were estimated to be 50,000 strong. The ARVN held roughly a four to one advantage in artillery and vast stocks of equipment had been left by the Americans after the withdrawal.

Pham Van Dong and Le Duan had been unsuccessful in securing additional aid from the Soviets and the Chinese in October 1973.<sup>4</sup> The value of arms shipments from the U.S. to the GVN was ten times that of the Chinese and Soviets to the DRV in 1973 and slightly less than 4 times in 1974.<sup>5</sup>

But from a strategic standpoint, the GVN and the ARVN were vulnerable. The U.S. had provided the South assistance

for two decades and directly supported the war with air power and combat troops for eight years. Now the U.S. had withdrawn, Congress was tightening the noose on further assistance, and the Watergate Scandal had paralyzed the Presidency. This had a significant adverse psychological impact on the South Vietnamese and their armed forces. The economic shock of America's withdrawal and rising prices due to the oil embargo during the Arab-Israeli War in 1973 fueled social and political unrest. Corruption continued to be pervasive in both the Government and the armed forces. Without a base of popular support, Thieu was unable to generate enough political and social cohesion and national will to stand against the Communists.

The ARVN, although militarily stronger in men and equipment, were now spread to defend all of the South. Beginning in the fall of 1973, after the decision to return to armed struggle, the Communists began offensive operations against remote and isolated ARVN outposts and facilities to regain the areas they had lost to ARVN pacification since the Agreement. This was accomplished by the summer of 1974.<sup>6</sup>

In the South, General Tran Van Tra now sensed the GVN's strategic weaknesses could be decisively exploited. Travelling to Hanoi in October 1974, Tra proposed a plan to isolate Saigon from the north, then attack it using five approaches. The Politburo authorized a more conservative operation that was limited to Phuoc Long province.

Tra attacked in December, isolated Saigon from the Central Highlands by seizing Route 14, seized the province capital of Phuoc Binh, and then seized the entire province. But the battle had two strategic implications. First, U.S. reaction was negligible.<sup>7</sup> And second, the successful operation confirmed that the ARVN's strategy of "defending everywhere" left thin areas against which the Communist conventional forces could mass, penetrate, and exploit. The ARVN strategy also minimized a strategic reserve.

During December, the Soviets renewed a pledge to the Vietnamese Communists to provide increased military assistance. Armed with this pledge and the strategic conclusions from the Phuoc Long operation, the Politburo decided to execute a two-year strategic plan to achieve final victory. During 1975, the Communists would initiate large, widespread offensives followed by a final offensive and uprising in 1976. They cautioned against U.S. intervention, but also noted that "if the opportune moment presents itself at the beginning or the end of 1975, we will immediately liberate the South in 1975."<sup>6</sup>

The intent of the Communists' first offensive was to cut South Vietnam in half and concentrate on the destruction of the ARVN forces in the Central Highlands north to Quang Tri province. General Van Tien Dung, given personal command of the offensive, massed four PAVN divisions in the Central Highlands in the vicinity of Ban Me Thuot, a lightly-defended

and vulnerable point in the stretched ARVN defense. In March, using diversionary attacks to fix the majority of the ARVN's II Corps units further north near Kontum and Pleiku, Dung isolated and then struck Ban Me Thuot. The ARVN was taken by surprise. The city fell on March 10th. With Route 14 cut to the north, ARVN units near Pleiku and Kontum were unable to shift to meet the Communist attack. Furthermore, Routes 19 and 21 leading west out of Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot respectively were cut by Communist forces.

In a desperate move, Thieu ordered a general withdrawal of the I and II Corps to establish a defense of the lower third of South Vietnam on a line from Tay Ninh to Nha Trang. Only Hue, Da Nang, and two province capitals were to be retained in the northern provinces. As the Communists continued to cut the major road networks to include Route 1 along the coast, the withdrawal turned into a rout. PAVN units interdicted II Corps' withdrawal to the coast and shredded it. Concurrently, the Communists launched a major attack through Quang Tri province and pushed south. Hue fell on March 25th and the PAVN routed the ARVN I Corps. Communist forces pushed out of the Central Highlands to the coast and severed South Vietnam in half. Remnants of I Corps abandoned Da Nang by air and Da Nang fell to the Communists on March 29th. The Communists now controlled the northern eight provinces of the South.<sup>9</sup>

On March 31, the Politburo met and decided to conduct

the final offensive to achieve complete victory. This decision was transmitted to Dung and he was given four weeks to accomplish this task.<sup>10</sup> Dung's basic plan for the "Ho Chi Minh Campaign" was to cut ARVN units off from falling back on Saigon, encircle the city with forces already located in the area, then mass units moving south from the newly liberated provinces and penetrate into the heart of the city. Armed propaganda units infiltrated into the city would organize and incite a general uprising in Saigon. Special units were given missions to seize key government installations. A major logistics effort proceeded to resupply the PAVN and PLAF for the final push. And plans were made for a transitional revolutionary administration.<sup>11</sup>

As the Communists tightened the ring around the city, Saigon made last-ditch political efforts to prevent the final assault. Thieu resigned on April 21 and was replaced by Tran Van Huong. Huong resigned six days later and was replaced by Duong Van Minh, but the PRG rejected negotiations.<sup>12</sup>

The assault began on April 26. Armored columns entered the city on April 30 and reached the Independence Palace at 10:45 A.M. The two-year strategic plan adopted at the end of 1974 was executed and completed in less than two months. The ARVN was defeated on the field of battle and the GVN collapsed. The Communists had achieved their long-term goal of reunification of Vietnam under Communist control.

## CONCLUSION

The Vietnamese Communists achieved their goal in the Second Indochina War because their strategic assessments and their grand strategy were better than those of the GVN and the U.S. Why?

First, the legitimacy for fighting the war broke down for both the U.S. and the GVN. The Second Indochina War was fought because incompatible visions existed over the future of Vietnam among the Vietnamese Communists, the GVN, and the U.S. The Vietnamese Communists envisioned a Vietnam reunited under their control. The GVN saw two Vietnams: the one in the North under Communist control, the one in the South under its control. The U.S. saw a part of the world where the spread of "World Communism" would be stopped and democracy allowed to flourish.

The heart of the impetus for the North Vietnamese and the insurgents in the South was nationalism--nationalism built out of a strong sense of a long history of struggle against foreign domination. Because of this impetus, the Communists could build a broader base of popular support than the GVN. Communist ideology was a suitable explanation for the conditions the Vietnamese had endured under French and U.S. imperialism, a vehicle to liberate themselves from the yoke of imperialism, and a means of restructuring their future society. But the Communist leaders were first

nationalists, and this was their perspective and approach during the Second Indochina War.

The GVN was a facade of democracy that was consistently unable to win a broad base of popular support. It was corrupt and out of touch. This problem also infected the ARVN. The GVN's only means of survival from 1965 onward was by direct involvement of the U.S.

The monolithic view of Communism, support of an inadequate and corrupt GVN, the threat to U.S. vital interests, and the optimistic but inaccurate estimate of the enemy's eventual inability to prosecute the war, did not hold up under public scrutiny in the U.S. The war was out of character for the United States. Facets of its involvement were inconsistent with its own ideals.

The Vietnamese Communists had the most popularly-accepted vision of the future of Vietnam. The Communist leaders firmly grasped this from the very beginning, and this assessment ultimately allowed them to persevere and overcome great obstacles throughout the course of the war.

Second, the Vietnamese Communist leaders had a better understanding of the dynamics of national power. In their assessments, the national-level decisionmakers in the U.S. essentially viewed the elements of power in absolute terms. This is why the defeat of the U.S. in Vietnam is so unfathomable by so many Americans. How could the most

powerful nation on earth, the United States and its Republic of Vietnam ally lose a war to a seemingly powerless third world developing country?

In absolute power terms, the DRV was no match for the U.S. and the GVN combined. But the relative elements of power must be calculated in the context of the situation. Several U.S. Presidents overestimated the character and will of the American people and the South Vietnamese in the Vietnam situation. This is understandable given the U.S. experience in World War II.

Likewise, these same Presidents overestimated the ability of their South Vietnamese allies to build, under U.S. supervision, a quality government and a quality society. South Vietnamese leaders failed to make fundamental political, economic, and social changes that were required to achieve cohesion and confidence within that country. Herbert Schandler described this point best in 1974:

*As the jungle reclaims American firebases and support installations and as the visible evidence of the American intervention in Vietnam is dismantled and fades away, what remains is the basic structure of a feudal Vietnamese society much as it has existed for centuries. The privileged urban and land-owning class, claiming their Mandarin heritage, rule for their own benefit with little regard for the plight, condition, or welfare of the peasant masses. The Government remains remote, inefficient, unrepresentative and corrupt. The vast American expenditure of treasure and lives has, finally, left nothing of permanence in South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>*

But far more significant is the fact that several U.S. Presidents and their advisors underestimated the national



power developed and used by the Vietnamese Communists. They underestimated the character and will of the North Vietnamese and the insurgents. They underestimated the capacity of the available North Vietnamese population to support the war over time. They underestimated how well the Communists could use the uniqueness of the local geography to their advantage and overcome the difficulties it presented to their strategic reach. They underestimated how, through the powers of their shrewd diplomacy, creativity, and discipline, the DRV could compensate for their relative weaknesses in natural resources, their economy, and science and technology. They underestimated the effectiveness of the revolutionary war doctrine of People's War. And finally they underestimated the quality of leaders they opposed--their ability to organize, communicate, and develop popular support.

This was why the Tet Offensive shocked the United States. The great lesson here is that it is a strategic error to assess the elements of national power in absolute terms. They must be assessed within the context of the circumstances and relative to the potential enemy at hand. Consequently, the circumstances and the potential enemy must be studied thoroughly before critical national decisions are made. The DRV leaders were more accurate in their calculations of the relative elements of power than their enemies.

It is the responsibility of national leadership to weigh

the elements accurately. And when the national leadership commits to a strategic course of action, it also has the responsibility to apply the elements of power decisively. This is what grand strategy is all about. The Vietnamese Communist leaders mastered an effective grand strategy. They flexibly balanced and harnessed their political, military, social, economic, and diplomatic strategies in pursuit of their highest priority, the reunification of Vietnam under their control. By 1965, their approach was total war.

In contrast, the U.S. limited its approach. There was a concern, particularly after the Cuban Missile Crisis, over igniting another World War by expanding the war above the 17th Parallel. There was a question of priorities relative to the Great Society domestic agenda and U.S. commitments around the rest of the world. And there was a hesitancy to mobilize the country for war.

For President Johnson, until 1968, the war was little more than a sideshow. The Government did little to inform the public adequately and accurately about the war and to motivate them to support it. Until Nixon came to power, the U.S. did not use effective diplomacy aimed at disconnecting Soviet and Chinese support to the DRV. And finally, the primary U.S. thrust to assist the GVN was military aid. This did little to help the fundamental political, social, and economic problems that plagued South Vietnam. The limitations the U.S. placed on itself brought limited

results.

So the lesson in all this is that in order to achieve strategically decisive results, a comprehensive and balanced grand strategy must be crafted that effectively harnesses the elements of national power and puts an appropriate priority on its goal. The strategy must be constantly managed as events unfold. This requires effective leadership.

The Vietnamese Communist leaders were more effective national leaders in the realm of grand strategy than their U.S. and South Vietnamese opponents. They had a clear vision of their ultimate goal, accurately assessed the relative elements of power in the context of the strategic situation, crafted an evolutionary and winable grand strategy that focused on the vulnerabilities of their enemies, and effectively managed it to its successful conclusion. They knew themselves and they knew their enemies. And this is why they won.

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