

Rear bases and revolutionary strategy in Southeast Asia (1945-1975)

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This study, as its title indicates, covers the 1945-1975 time spans. This is a well defined period: it corresponds to the duration of the Vietnam War, a major event in this Southeast Asia period. It is a period marked by major attempts by the communist revolutionary movements in the region to seize power. However, except in Vietnam (and in the wake of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), none of these attempts were successful. This may be the consequence of the execution of an incorrect strategy. But, as we are dealing with communist revolutionary movements, which implemented the revolutionary strategy of Mao Zedong, a strategy that had proved itself in China, we cannot say that the strategy was flawed. We must, therefore, conclude that this is an incorrect application or an inability to execute this strategy.

There was therefore error. What is this error? The study of the history of communist revolutionary movements in this region will probably give us an answer to this question. But without waiting for the results of such an analysis, resorting to geography allows us to have, at least intuitively, that answer. A quick glance at the map (see Map I) allows us to see immediately that this is a question of *external support*, that is to say, a *secure rear*. It's not a mere accident that the only communist revolutionary movement that could win in this region during the period, Vietnam, was also the only one to be able to rely on such a rear base because it was *geographically* linked to the vast communist camp in China and, through China, the Soviet Union. This fact is crucial --but poorly understood until now--in explaining the *total* victory of the Vietnamese communists, and therefore requires a closer look at the case of Vietnam. This appraisal will lead, in turn, to the reassessment of certain points of views on international relations in Southeast

Asia during the time in question.

The revolutionary movements of Southeast Asia during this period were Communist-led. So they looked to either Moscow or to Beijing for the "direction" to follow. Until 1947, this direction was provided by Moscow. It was that of an united front internally as well as externally. But with the changes in Moscow in 1947, the situation will change in Asia. Following the proclamation of the new direction - struggle against imperialism in a world divided into "two camps" - proclaimed by A. Zhdanov in September 1948, sponsored by the Conference of the Southeast Asian Youth in Calcutta in February 1948, the Communists unleashed armed revolution throughout Southeast Asia. From 1949, Beijing offered these movements a theoretical weapon for their armed struggle--Mao Zedong's revolutionary strategy --and at the same time, it took over the leadership of the Asian revolutionary movement. This direction, accepted by Moscow, was acknowledged by Liu Shao Chi at the Conference of Asian Trade Unions and Australia, held in Beijing in November 1949. Liu said there that the Chinese working class accepted "the glorious responsibility "to give a spiritual and material" support to the capitalist countries' working class or those under imperialist domination in need of such assistance. ¹

In his opening speech, Liu proclaimed "the way of Mao Zedong" as model for the revolutionary struggle. He said: "The armed struggle must be the main form of struggle for the national liberation movements in many colonies and semi-colonies. This is the fundamental path taken by the Chinese people for victory in their country; that approach is... the Mao Zedong's way. It can be the fundamental path forward for the peoples of the colonies and semi-colonies in their struggle for liberation. " ²

What is this "Chinese path", "path of Mao Zedong"? It was revealed by Mao in his many writings between 1928 and 1949 (together in one volume: "Military Writings of Mao Zedong." ³ With "Dictatorship of People's Democracy," ⁴ they

¹ LIU SHAO CHI, *Collected Works* Hongkong, Union Research Institute, 1974. p. 185 Speech delivered November 23 1949.

² *Ibid.*, p. 197. Opening speech November 1st 1949.

³ *Écrits militaires de Mao Tsétoung*, Pékin, Foreign languages editions, 1968.

contain the essence of the Asian communist revolutionary doctrine offered by Mao. This doctrine will be presented in a compact form by Lin Piao in his 1965 "Long Live the Victorious War of the People."⁵ It's the strategy of the People's Revolutionary War, which Lin characterizes as "invincible" and applicable not only in China, but also in the revolutionary struggle of the oppressed peoples of the world."⁶ Lin sums up this theory as: " Relying on the support of the peasants, establishing bases in the country, encircling the cities from the countryside and capturing towns, this is the path taken by the victorious Chinese revolution." ⁷

The creation of bases is therefore of vital importance in the revolutionary strategy advocated by Mao Zedong. In his military writings, the latter devoted many passages to this question, right in his early theories on the revolutionary war (*Why is it that Red Political Power can Exist in China?* written in 1928; *The struggle in the Tsinkiang Mountains*, written in the same year). In *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War*, written in 1936, among the six fundamental strategic tasks, creating support bases is assigned a third place, and Mao devotes an entire section to this issue. The war (against Japan) will be long and relentless, he said, and "without a support base, it will not be possible to sustain long partisan warfare at the rear of the enemy"; without support bases "we cannot rely on anything to accomplish all the strategic tasks and achieve the goals of the war." ⁸

Mao speaks of "revolutionary bases", "support bases", "general base." All these bases are *revolutionary bases*, in that they offer indisputable military, economic and political advantages : total *security*, *assured subsistence*, total and effective support from the *population*. All this will enable the development of the revolution, especially of the armed forces. Mao defines these bases as follow: "These are the strategic bases on which detachments of farmers can rely on to accomplish their strategic tasks and achieve their goals: maintain and increase their strength, destroy and drive out the enemy ". ⁹ A revolutionary base must meet the following conditions: 1) it is a good mass base, 2) an organization force for the Party ; 3) a sufficiently powerful Red Army; 4) a fertile ground for military

⁴ MAO TSÉTOUNG, La dictature de la démocratie populaire, Peking, Foreign languages editions, 1949.

⁵ LIN PIAO, Vive la victorieuse guerre du peuple, Peking , Foreign languages editions, 1965.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸ *Écrits militaires*, p. 188.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

operations; 5) important economic resources.¹⁰ Mao emphasizes that the creation of support bases must meet three basic conditions: 1) create armed forces; 2) inflict losses on the enemy; 3) mobilize the masses.¹¹

Mao believes it is essential to consolidate and constantly develop support bases, converting partisan regions into such regional bases. This will be accomplished "when large forces of the enemy have been destroyed or crushed and the power of the puppet government has been checked, when popular masses have been awakened to activity, when mass organizations fighting against the Japanese and the people's armed forces have been created in those regions along with the establishment of the Resistance's forces and a Resistance power."¹²

Mao did not develop the idea of "general rear country"; he was content to mention it. Lin Piao, who took upon the task of interpreting and developing Mao's theory, did not enlighten us on this point. He merely talked about "bases in the country," stating that support bases "became centers of resistance" and that isolated bases "were transformed gradually into large areas under a single occupation and each of the support bases "functioned as a state."¹³ This aspect of the revolutionary war theory--the concepts of "rear and large rear"---will be developed by General Vo Nguyen Giap of Vietnam, as we shall see below.

An important feature of Mao's theory deserves mention. In 1965, Lin Piao tries to establish the thesis that "a people's revolution and war of the people in a given country is the business of the popular masses of that country, and for this revolution and this war, we cannot but only rely primarily on ourselves."¹⁴ However, in 1949, to those who argue that victory is possible even without international help, Mao replies: "It's a misconception. At a time when imperialism still exists, a genuine popular revolution in any country cannot be successful without the support of international revolutionary forces; likewise, it is impossible to consolidate victory if we do not get this help."¹⁵ Moreover, in 1928, speaking of the conditions of the "red areas," Mao poses, as a first condition, a favorable international situation, i.e., there must be power frictions and infighting among the white powers. If one has a relatively long period of "stagnation," i.e., if the frictions and infighting amongst the white powers cease, "the existence of small

¹⁰ " La lutte dans les Monts Tsinkiang ", *Écrits militaires*, p 17.

¹¹ " Problèmes stratégiques...", *ibid.*, p. 195.

¹² *Écrits militaires*, p. 192.

¹³ LIN PIAO, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁵ MAO TSÉTOUNG, *La dictature, op. cit.*, p. 11

red areas will become impossible." ¹⁶

Among the important points of the protracted war strategy (with its three phases: strategic defense, balance of forces, strategic offensive) taught by Mao, emerges the decisive role of regular warfare. There is a widespread view--which is at the origin of the "bully" theory ¹⁷ --that the revolutionary war successfully waged in Asia (especially Vietnam) is a guerrilla war, and that "heavily armed " modern armies (French or American) have still been beaten by ragged guerrillas armed with shotguns." Nothing is less true. Partisan warfare plays an important role in the three phases of the protracted war, but said Mao Zedong: "If we look at the Resistance War throughout its development, *regular operations play the main role* and supporting operations an auxiliary function, *because only regular operations will decide this war ...*" ¹⁸

Another no less important, and often also overlooked matter, is that to run a successful guerrilla war a vast territory is required." ¹⁹ For the partisan war to be possible, says Mao, one condition is sufficient: a vast territory." This is essential to allow partisans room to maneuver. This is important, "even vital." ²⁰ Mao did not insist on this point in his writings because, for him, China naturally benefits from this condition. But he cites Belgium as an example of where "the possibility of partisans' war is very small or zero." ²¹ Finally, another point that has not caught sufficient attention was the importance of material conditions. Mao said that the outcome of the war was determined mainly by the military, political, economic environment in which there were two conflicting parties and that if the outcome of the war was also determined by the subjective ability of the two parties in the conduct of the war, "a military leader could not hope to snatch victory by going beyond the limits imposed by normal conditions." ²²



In light of Mao Zedong's teachings, it becomes clearer why, in Southeast Asia during the period 1945-1975, with the exception of Vietnam, no communist revolutionary movement has succeeded in taking power. None could reach the second phase of the protracted war--the balance of power--without which it is

¹⁶ " Pourquoi le pouvoir rouge peut-il exister en Chine ", *Écrits militaires*, p. 8.

¹⁷ A larger person harassing a smaller one

¹⁸ " Problèmes de la guerre..." *Écrits*, p. 317. The emphasis is ours.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

²⁰ " Problèmes stratégiques..." *Écrits*, p. 195.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 96. The emphasis is ours.

impossible to move to the third--the strategic offensive with a powerful regular army--a decisive phase, which should lead to the annihilation of the enemy and installation of revolutionary authority. The reason was that none has been able to develop its military forces adequately for multiple reasons: none could fully mobilize the population; none has been able to build a strong and united party; and most importantly, none could establish secure bases of support and back-bases with access to a solid general rear, which itself was connected to a larger rear--the communist camp--because geography did not allow it. In addition, the two basic ingredients of a revolutionary war in the colonies--the nationalist frustration and rebellious peasantry--were missing. We cannot, for lack of space, consider in detail the case of each of the Southeast Asian countries; we shall only deal with the basics.

Regarding *Thailand*, this country has never really had a major communist revolutionary movement because although it fills the territorial requirement--a large area with difficult terrain, especially in the north and northeast--it has no common border with a large communist country. It therefore lacks a large rear. Moreover sociopolitical conditions are unfavorable to the occurrence and especially the development of a communist revolutionary movement. Until recently, said David Wilson, "Thai communism was almost a monopoly of the Chinese and Vietnamese."²³ On the other hand, said Jay Taylor, because of the "sterile" sociopolitical climate in Thailand, particularly the lack of a colonial past and a major peasant problem, until the 1960s, the Thai Communist Party was "the frailest of Southeast Asian parties." In terms of organization, the Thai Communists bloomed late, and "they were undoubtedly the laggards in terms of armed struggle."²⁴

The TCP, founded in 1942, took to the bush in 1948, but it was only in 1969 that the *first* call to armed struggle was launched. The first units of the people's army were officially set up in 1965, and the Thai Liberation Armed Forces--in the Maoist mold, were not created until 1969. In the interim, "while in most of the rest of Southeast Asia, communist parties were engaged in armed struggle, the small TCP merely distributed leaflets and organized itself."²⁵

In the *Philippines*, the Communists went underground in the maquis in 1948. But because of divisions within the party, the general insurrection was only triggered in 1950. The People's Liberation Army was created, and bases were established in the Central Luzon, in the Sierra Madre Mountains. The party believed it could win

²³ Cited by Jay TAYLOR, in *China and South East Asia*, New York Praeger, 1974, p. 252

²⁴ J. TAYLOR, *op. cit.*, p. 252

²⁵ TAYLOR, *op. cit.*, p. 259

the war in two years. But the handling of the fight against the guerrillas (known as the Huks) by Ramon Magsaysay, first as Secretary of State for Defense in 1950, and then as president in 1953, and the reforms that he undertook in the social, economic and political fields, undermined the Huks revolutionary base. In May 1954, their leader, Luis Taruc, whose men were discouraged, left the party and gave himself up to the government. He had been preceded by commander Laban, an important member of the PCP. In 1964, another important leader of the PCP, Jesus Lava was captured by government forces. His role was taken over by Jose Sison (who took Armado Guerrero as his war name) . In 1966, Sison proclaimed a new armed struggle. In 1969, a New People's Army was created on the Maoist mold. But the party was divided and, although there was a peasant problem in the Philippines, the fundamental ingredient to effectively aid a communist revolutionary movement in the fight for national independence was missing. In addition, and most importantly, the country's geography did not lend itself to the establishment of rear-bases and a safe rear, not to mention a junction with the international communist base. Armado Guerrero recognized this fundamental handicap when he wrote in "Specific Characteristics of Our People's War," (the equivalent of Vo Nguyen Giap's "People's War, People's Army"): "Driving a people's war in an archipelago country like our country is probably an extremely difficult and complex issue for us. In a small country like the Philippines, or more precisely in Luzon as an island, it would have been madness for the central leadership to settle in a limited area, gathering there all Party staff and their efforts because it would invite the enemy to marshal its forces, due to its ability to move rapidly on an island where communications are developed." ²⁶

Regarding Burma--It is a country that shares a border with China and thus could count on a secure and large rear. However, it does not offer a communist revolutionary movement, elements it needs to run a successful revolutionary war. The country became independent in 1947, and the Burmese government has always distanced itself vis-à-vis the "imperialists" powers and pursued a policy of neutrality whilst maintaining friendly relations with China. On the other hand, the Communists were not the only armed elements opposed to the government: there were also the Karens, Kachins, Shans, who had their own territories and were

²⁶ (26) Armado GUERRERO, *Specific Characteristics of Our People's War*, Oakland, California, International Association of Philippines Patriots, 1979 (1970), p. 187.

sometimes allied, sometimes opposed to the Communists. Finally, the Communists were divided, and their leaders were liquidating each other frequently and with great brutality. As said John Badgeley: "The Communist movement in Burma in the mid sixties had three heads (Thakin Soe, Than Tun, and leaders of the Red Socialists in prison), four arms (the red flags, white flags, red Socialists and student organizations), but no body or legs to move." ²⁷

These certainly were not the conditions under which a communist revolutionary war could be carried out successfully. On the other hand, Burmese Communists could not establish secure rear-bases. Their first base in central Burma was seized by government forces in 1951, and their headquarters north of the Pegu Yoma Mountains were captured, and their military commander killed by government forces in 1967. It was not until that year that, with the help of the Chinese and a Kachin leader of the BCP, Naw Seng, they were able to establish a "liberated zone" from 5 to 16 kilometers deep along the Chinese border of Yunnan. But in 1970, the Kachins turned against Naw Seng, and he had to move his headquarters to Bhamo, closer to the border and away from populated areas. As for China, through the voice of Liu Shao Chi, in 1963, it advised the Communists to lay down their arms and negotiate their surrender to the government. Anyway, in 1951, it was clear that the communist revolutionary movement was defeated because its leaders were willing to negotiate with the government the terms to end their armed rebellion and to forming a coalition government. This will be repeated in 1958 and 1963.

In Malaysia--for the Communists, the situation was worse than in Burma. They lacked almost all the basic elements for the success that a communist revolutionary movement needed to fight for national independence: the need to find for national independence, popular support, a favorable terrain for establishing bases of support and rear bases as well as a great rear, more conducive to guerrillas' war. From 1948, it was clear that Malaysia was surely moving towards independence (which was declared August 31, 1957). The Malaysian Communist Party was essentially a Chinese party in a country whose population was predominantly Malay and Indian--yellow fish in brown water! The Malaysian economy was based on the extraction of tin and rubber and palm plantations, and two-thirds of its food was imported.

²⁷ John BADGELEY, " The Communists in Burma ", in Robert A. SCALAPINO, *The Communist Revolution in Asia*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1965. p. 306.

Geographically, the country is ill-suited for guerrilla warfare because it is narrow and has good communications. Moreover, it is virtually cut off from the outside (the sea on three sides and anti-Communist Thailand in the north) thus, no opportunities to get substantial support from sister parties. Very thick jungle is a handicap for the government but equally so for the rebels. Finally, the British were determined, and the local government was honest and efficient.

The armed rebellion erupted in June 1946. It was almost crushed in 1952. JM Gullick aptly summarized the situation as follows: "The communist strategy was: 1) cause the collapse of the Malaysian economy by attacks against plantations and mines, many of which were at the edge of the jungle, 2) establish "liberated areas "under their control; and 3) lead a popular revolt in the form of "liberation army" to connect with the liberated areas and complete the conquest of Malaysia. This strategy, along the lines of the victorious communist campaigns in China, was too ambitious under Malaysian conditions. It was doomed to fail. The Communists have caused much damage but could not achieve the total collapse of the economy, planned for Phase I. Phase II and III remained a dream." ²⁸

In June 1955, Chin Peng, head of the MCP, made advances to negotiate with the government to end the armed struggle. These negotiations were held in Baling in December, but they were unsuccessful. Malaysian Prime Minister Tunjku Abdul Rahman, offered amnesty to the communists but denied legal status for their party. A second attempt was made in 1957, but without success. Acceptance of negotiations by the MCP was in itself an admission of defeat.

The MCP itself admitted in 1949 that it was beaten. In a document of the military high command of the of the Party Political Bureau captured by the government, the Party attributed its defeat to three basic reasons:

- 1) Military geography: Malaysia is a country with relatively narrow dimensions, with highly developed communications; because of this "British forces could reach the guerrilla units with greater speed":
- 2) "Our army still has no bases";
- 3) "We can take ourselves away to the mountains. But the masses do not live

²⁸ (28) J. M. GULLICK, *Malaysia*, London, Ernest Benn, 1969, p. 113.

there." ²⁹

Compared to the other three countries discussed above, the case of Indonesia is very different. Indonesian communists did not practice the strategy of protracted armed struggle, but preferred either coups or a top united front to cooperation with the government in order to seize power legally. Unlike the doctrine of the revolutionary war, the Indonesian Communist Party (IKP) has not established a revolutionary base in the country, nor created an armed force. It attempted an ad hoc armed rebellion in Madiun in 1948, and was crushed and decimated. Its September 1965 attempted coup failed, and it was virtually wiped out. Its leadership was almost completely liquidated; its leader Moussa was killed in October 1948 and his military commander captured in November. Another, Amir was captured in December. After the September 1965 coup, its leaders were either executed or imprisoned.

The IKP has adopted a policy of collaboration with Indonesian President Sukarno, with Beijing's blessings, hoping to increase its political influence and thus expanding its grip on the masses (the Party's numbers increased from 8,000 in 1952 to over two million in 1965) and to acquire power legally. This was planned for 1970. But Sukarno was removed from power in 1967, and with him died the hope of the IKP.

According to Suripno, a leader of the PKI in prison, the most important factor in the failure of the Indonesian Communist revolutionary movement was that "we had very little support from the population." ³⁰ But apart from the absence of another very important factor - the struggle for national independence - geography was against the PKI. Indonesia is an archipelago of islands stretched in length, where it is difficult to secure rear-bases, and China is too far away to give effective support: the large rear is missing. This was clear in 1965, when the new head of the IKP, Jussuf Adjitorop proclaimed a new armed struggle and established a base in the south of Blitar in East Java. This base was swept by the Indonesian army and its

²⁹ Cited by Gene HANRAHAN in *The Communist Struggle in Malaya*, mimeo, New York Institute of Pacific Relations, 1954, p. 66. Also see Richard CLUTTERBUCK, *The Long, Long War: The Emergency in Malaysia 1948-1960*, London, Cassel, 1967.

³⁰ (30) Cited by par Arnold C. BRACKMAN, *Indonesian Communism: A History*, New York, Praeger, 1963, p. 100.

military commander and nine Politburo members were captured.

Now we come to the case of Vietnam, which is a special case, and the most interesting one of all, because it is a "success story." Revolutionary strategy, as applied by the Communist Party of Vietnam, is obviously the Maoist stratagem. But there are two major differences: 1) the issue of rear base and especially large rear plays a much more important role in Vietnam; 2) Red China--as a large rear of Vietnam--played a key role in the survival and in the victory of the Vietnamese communists, something that has remained poorly understood until now.

In General Vo Nguyen Giap's writings, it appears that the Vietnamese Communist leaders have given importance and even greater attention to the issue of rear bases than Mao Zedong. In "*People's War, People's Army*," Giap said: "We cannot talk of armed struggle, of building the revolutionary armed forces without addressing the problem of rear bases. This is a major issue of strategic significance, of decisive importance both for the future of the armed struggle and the building of the armed forces."³¹ He added that "the problem of the bases and rear was obvious from the start of hostilities, and all along during the resistance; our Party has always considered it extremely important to maintain our bases and to consolidate our back."³² We know that in a *modern* war, the rear ranks come *first* as *permanent* factors in deciding victory."³³ This theme is repeated in his book "*The War of National Liberation in Vietnam*."³⁴ It often appears in the book by General Van Tien Dung, "*And We Took Saigon*."³⁵

Giap speaks of "revolutionary bases", "rear-bases", "guerrilla bases", "local rear support", "rear country", "great national rear", "big rear constituted by the fraternal socialist countries",³⁶ "immediate rear "" liberated areas "," free zones "," revolutionary bases in the cities "," main resistance base, "" revolutionary base throughout the entire country."³⁷ In `` *The War of National Liberation in*

³¹ General Vo Nguyen GIAP, *Guerre du peuple, armée du peuple*, Hanoi, Foreign languages edition, 1961, p. 159. The emphasis is ours.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 160.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³⁴ General Vo Nguyen GIAP, *La guerre de libération nationale au Vietnam*, Hanoi, Foreign languages edition, 1970.

³⁵ General VAN TIEN DUNG, *Et nous prîmes Saïgon*, Paris, Sycomore, 1979.

³⁶ V.N. GIAP, *Guerre de libération*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, *Guerre du peuple*, pp. 59-62

Vietnam," he devoted an entire chapter to them and separates the "Problem of the Bases and Rear." By examining the contexts in which these numerous terms were used, there were six categories: 1) revolutionary bases; 2) guerrilla bases; 3) rear (local, immediate or large base or free zone or liberated region); 4) national rear (or great national rear or main base resistance or revolutionary base across the country); 5) revolutionary base in cities; 6) great socialist rear.

All mentioned bases are rear bases and Giap positioned them forth as a permanent factor of victory because "it was them that feed men on the front with food, equipment, and constantly bring them political and moral encouragement."³⁸ A guerrilla base is an "operational base".³⁹ A rear is a zone free from enemy threat, that is to say, a liberated zone; it is an immediate regional rear base. The main resistance base is the free area of North Vietnam in 1949-1954. The national rear is North Vietnam in the period 1954-1975. A revolutionary base in cities is a clandestine underground political organization whose goal is to "maintain insecurity in the rear of the enemy and gradually transform it into a battleground."⁴⁰ The large socialist rear is obviously China, and behind China, the Soviet Union and other communist countries.

All bases are revolutionary bases (political-economic-military) in the Maoist sense. But of all those bases, as will be seen, Communist China is the most important, in the first as well as the second Indochina war.

One only needs to look at a map (see Map 2) to understand the importance that the rear base represents for total victory in Vietnam. For the period of 1945-1954, the rear of the revolutionary army was the Viet Bac region (North Vietnam), which included six northern provinces of North Vietnam along the borders of China, which was itself the rear base of Vietnam. For the period of 1954-1975, North Vietnam was "the large rear back for the great Southern front" and played "a very important role in the nation's fight against US aggression."⁴¹ The characteristic of these large rear bases was that they were inviolable: China for the period 1949-

³⁸ V.N. GIAP, *Guerre de libération*, p. 64.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴¹ V.N. GIAP, *Guerre de libération*, p. 68.

1954, North Vietnam and China for the period 1954-1975. Absolute inviolability for China, and inviolability in terms of invasion and occupation of North Vietnam. Let us add that the communist revolutionary forces still had rear bases in Cambodia⁴² and an access road to South Vietnam through Laos, the famous "Ho Chi Minh Trail" (see Map 3), called "Harriman Memorial Highway" by the Embassy of the United States in Saigon.⁴³ General Van Tien Dung speaks of "our 8 meters wide road," and marvels at this spectacle 1975: "Large trucks, armored tanks circulating at high speed in both directions, day and night in any season, carrying hundreds of thousands of tons of various equipment to all fronts, in anticipation of the battle." ⁴⁴ Dung talks of roads "east" of the Annamite Chain, but a Lao official who defected after 1977 reveals that under the border treaty between Vietnam and Laos on 17 July 1977, Vietnam had obtained the cession of a strip of territory west of the Vietnamese border, that is to say in Laos, for historical reasons: this strip, 15 to 30 kilometers wide, contains the historic Ho Chi Minh Trail.⁴⁵

Giap therefore had a large rear base. "Our resistance to American aggression, he said, combines the bases and rears of the South to those of the great national rear, the socialist North, which is itself connected to the vast socialist camp"⁴⁶ and "having a rear that is increasingly wider and more powerful, a national rear base and local rear bases, our people can still rely on the immense potential of the large rear constituted by the fraternal socialist countries ..."⁴⁷.

The existence of the great socialist rear, especially Chinese, enabled the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) to establish a balance of power and move on to the strategic offensive against the French troops in 1950, a year after the arrival of Chinese troops at the Indochina border; and later, after 1965, the existence of the double rear bases, the great Chinese rear and North Vietnam, will allow communist forces to successfully resist the US attacks, to turn around American opinion in 1968 - and thereby deprive South Vietnam of its great rear base, and achieve total victory in 1975. As we will see, thanks to Chinese

⁴² See the witness account of Norodom SHANOUK, *L'Indochine vue de Pékin*, Paris, Seuil, 1972, p. 51.

⁴³ Harriman refused to demand a stricter control of the use of laotian territory at the Geneva conference on Laos in 1961-62, thus allowing North Vietnam to freely use that territory, Micheal CHARLTON and Anthony MONCRIEFF, *Many Reasons Why*, London, Solar Press, 1978, p. 65.

⁴⁴ V.T DUNG, *Et nous prîmes*, p. 17.

⁴⁵ Amphay DORÉ, *Le partage du Mékong*, Paris, Éditions Encre, 1980, p. 211.

⁴⁶ V.N. GIAP, *Guerre de libération*, p. 72.

⁴⁷ V.N. GIAP, *Guerre de libération*, p. 80

revelations, we now know what the scale of China's contribution was in the victory of the DRV in 1954 and 1975.

The rear bases of the communist forces in Cambodia and Laos (see Map 4) also played an extremely important role in the DRV victory. In 1970, the Cambodian Rear contained, according to figures released to the American people by President Nixon, subsequent to attacks on these bases:

- 22 892 individual weapons, enough to fully equip 74 battalions of North Vietnamese infantry;
- 2509 collective weapons, enough to fully equip 25 battalions of North Vietnamese infantry;
- More than 15 million cartridges, or the equivalent of consumption by Communist troops throughout the year 1969;
- 14 million pounds of rice, enough to feed all the communist forces in South Vietnam for four months;
- 143.000 rocket shells, mortars, recoilless cannons, equivalent to the consumption by the communist forces for 14 months;
- More than 199 553 anti-aircraft shells, 5,482 mines, 62,022 grenades, 83,000 pounds of explosives;
- More than 435 vehicles, 11,688 destroyed bunkers and other military buildings.⁴⁸

In March 1972, according to US sources, there were 70,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos and 64,000 North Vietnamese and NLF troops in Cambodia.⁴⁹ To prepare the attack against the South in 1973, North Vietnam has built or improved 20,000 km of roads and installed 5,000 km of pipelines.⁵⁰ This could have been done without risk of detection and attack only through Laotian territory. Through this route, the "Harriman Highway," the North brought to South Vietnam for its great offensive in 1975, according to Van Tien Dung:

"hundreds of thousands of men, five experienced regular army corps, excluding our strategic reserves Our regular units were extensively equipped with rocket

⁴⁸ Henry KISSINGER, *White House Years*, Boston, Little and Brown, 1979, p. 507.

⁴⁹ *Thailand, Laos, Cambodia: A Staff Report Prepared For the Use Of The Sub-Committee on US Security*, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1973, pp. 10 and 25.

⁵⁰ Van Tien DUNG, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

tubes and mortars of all calibers, thousands of tanks and armored cars, tens of thousands of tons of shells, not to mention bombs and SAM rockets from our DCA (Anti Air Defense), our aviation and our marine. The further we advanced on the front, the more we realized what the first great socialist bases, back in the North, had done for us. The rear is generally one of the determinants of victory." ⁵¹

Regarding the North itself, in the 1945-1954 period, the establishment of a rear base, the free Viet Bac zone, backing China, allowed it to escape annihilation in the strategic defensive phase. But, it is from the end of 1949, with the victory of the Chinese communists and their arrival at the Sino-Vietnamese border, that the strategic situation turned to the detriment of French troops. From 1950, after fully training and arming themselves on Chinese territory, therefore beyond the reach of French troops, the DRV troops were capable of launching their counter-offensive, starting from the border region where French forces sustained their first major defeat from RDV troops that were as well armed as French troops. ⁵²

Speaking of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Giap said: "This great historic event, which changed the face of Asia and the world, had a considerable influence on the Vietnamese people's war of liberation. *Free from isolation* imposed by the enemy, *Vietnam was now linked to the socialist camp*. This fact, along with others, including the recognition of the DRV by China and the Soviet Union, helped to change the face of war in our favor." ⁵³

Much has been written about the defeat of the French forces in the border campaign of 1950 and Dien Bien Phu by General Vo Nguyen Giap and his men. We now know, thanks to the revelations of Hoang Van Hoan, former DRV Ambassador to Beijing and a member of the Politburo of the VCP, that it was were not the whole truth since there was a direct and substantial Chinese participation.

⁵¹ Van Tien DUNG, *op. cit.*, p. 130

⁵² Between the end of 1949 and October 1950, 35 Vietminh battalions were trained and armed in China, and every month, six new battalions were formed, Jacques SUANT, *Vietnam 1945-1972*, Paris, Arthaud, 1972, p. 101. In 1947, for 1 800 men, the Vietminh had 10 FM, 2 machine guns, 2 mortars, 25 cannon 1 and 2 guns 75. In 1950, each Vietminh battalion (700 men) was equipped with FM 27, 3 heavy machine guns, 5 mortars 60 mortars 2 81 5 75 guns in addition to DCA. Yves GRAS, *Histoire de la guerre d'Indochine*, Paris, Plon, 1979, p. 300, et SUANT, *op. cit.*, p. 101

⁵³ V.N. GIAP, *Guerre du peuple*, pp. 20-21 The emphasis is ours.

We quote below , verbatim, Hoang Van Hoan's revelations for two reasons: 1) the exceptional qualities of Hoan give his revelations indisputable authority⁵⁴ ; 2) these revelations, hidden secrets from the public, by Beijing and Hano, for a long time, now shed new light on the history of the Vietnam War. Here was what Hoang Van Hoan revealed in an article published in Beijing Renmin Ribao (People's Daily) November 27, 1979:

"In early 1950, President Ho Chi Minh had secretly visited China to seek help. The CCP Central Committee decided to aggressively and massively support the Vietnamese revolution. To get aid to Vietnam, it was then necessary to clean the Vietnamese border regions, the main lines of communication being controlled by French troops. It was agreed to start with a border battle. So, Comrade Chen Geng (with the Vice Minister of National Defense at the time, now deceased) representing the CCP Central Committee, came to Vietnam to help train cadres, train troops and organize the battles. Meanwhile, the Central Committee sent, at the request of President Ho Chi Minh, a military advisors' mission headed by Comrade Wei Guoqing (now a member of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee and head of the General Political Department of the People's Liberation Army).

Under the personal leadership of President Ho Chi Minh, and with the help of Comrades Chen, Wei Guoqing and other Chinese advisors, Vietnam was the victor of the battle, destroying all the French defense system at Cao Bang and Lang Son. This helped re-establish communications between Vietnam and China, reversing the situation in our favor this time. China has since then the so wide rear base of Vietnam. The Chinese military advisor's mission helped us later to organize the battles of Trung Du (Mid-Tonkin) Dong Bac (North East), Ninh Binh and Upper Laos, each time beating troops of the French army forces in major encounters.

⁵⁴ **Member of the** Vietnamese Politburo for 20 years, first Ambassador of the DRV in China and representative of the PCV to the CPC for eight years , head of the International Liaison Department of the PCC for eight years, Close companion to Ho Chi Minh , Vice President the Standing Committee of the National Assembly of Vietnam. Hoan fled to China in August 1979.

The brilliant victory of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 was certainly the consecration of the courage and sacrifices of the army and of the Vietnamese population. However, this victory was also the result of the enormous material support and direct collaboration from Chinese military advisers. It should be noted that at Dien Bien Phu, without the guns provided by China, we would have been unable to destroy the French support points altogether, and without personal involvement of Comrade Wei Guoqing's command on the same front, it would have been difficult to win." ⁵⁵

The Hoang Van Hoan revelations were corroborated by the Chinese authorities; they made them following the publication by the Hanoi government of a White Paper in which the Chinese leaders were accused of betraying Vietnam three times between 1949 and 1979. ⁵⁶ Here is what Beijing says about this period in an article in *Renmin Ribao* of 21 November 1979, and signed "Commentator" (that is to say Central Committee of CPC):

"In 1950, at the request of President Ho Chi Minh, China sent a military advisers mission to help Vietnam win a series of battles, including the Frontier Battle. Between December 1953 and May 1954, the mission helped the army and people of Vietnam to organize and initiate the famous battle of Dien Bien Phu. The quasi-totality of weapons, ammunition, food, medicines, etc ... used or consumed during the battle were provided by China. " ⁵⁷

The Chinese authorities suggested that there was more to this case than they have revealed. In the same article, it said: "The battle ended in a great victory that shook the world. However, on what were based the merits of the decision to start this battle? And what was the cause of victory? That the Vietnamese authorities did not whisper a word demonstrate of their bad conscience."

⁵⁵ Hoang Van HOAN, "L'amitié militante vietnamo-chinoise ne saurait être falsifiée", *Renmin Ribao*, November 29 1979, reproduced in *Beijing Information*, December 10 1979.

⁵⁶ Ministry of foreign relations, Hanoi, *La vérité sur les relations vietnamo-chinoises durant les trente dernières années*, October 1979.

⁵⁷ "A propos du livre blanc de Hanoi", by the Commentators of *Hsinhua* et *Renmin Ribao*, November 21 1979, reproduced in *Beijing Information* December 3d 1979.

As for the Chinese material aid to Vietnam, the figures speak for themselves: Communist China has provided Vietnam, said the "Commentator" Renmin Ribao: "Several million rifles, tens of thousands of artillery pieces, over a billion cartridges, ten million shells, as well as arms and complete industrial equipment and a dozen of billion Yuan (Renminbis) of military equipment including several million meters of cotton, one hundred locomotives, several thousand wagons, over 700 ships of all models and tens of thousands of vehicles. " ⁵⁸

During a press conference held in Beijing in August 1979 GONSU Yang, deputy head of the Chinese delegation to the negotiations with Vietnam, disclosed that between 1950 and 1977, China has provided Vietnam: 2 million small arms and machine guns, 270 million cartridges, 27,000 artillery pieces, 18.8 million shells, 179 aircraft and 145 ships. " ⁵⁹

For his part, Hoang Van Hoan revealed that between 1950 and 1978, the total value of Chinese aid to the RDV exceeded 20 billion US dollars (714 million per year); "More important than any other foreign assistance in Vietnam," this aid included "enough to equip two million men of the three forces," 30,000 trucks, "hundreds of kilometers of track" and all of the rails, locomotives and wagons, five million tons of grain in years of crop failure in Vietnam, nearly two million tons of gasoline, 3,000 km of pipelines, and "hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign currency." On the other hand "at the request of President Ho and pursuant to the October 1965 agreements between the two governments, more than 300,000 Chinese soldiers belonging to SAM (DCA) units, engineering, railways and logistics, came to work in North Vietnam "and " had shot down many enemy planes." It can be said without exaggeration, Hoan added, that "almost all of the equipment and weapons for the South Vietnam Liberation Army were supplied by China." ⁶⁰ Beijing, meanwhile, said that by sending 320,000 Chinese soldiers to Vietnam, China "allowed the Vietnamese People's Army to assemble a large number of troops, sending them to fight in the South." ⁶¹ Le Duan himself told the Chinese leaders in 1957 that "we could not overcome France without Chinese aid,"

⁵⁸ "Avec le temps on connaît un homme", in *Beijing Information*, July 31 1978.

⁵⁹ *Le Monde*, August 1st 1979.

⁶⁰ Hoan Van HOAN, *art. cit.*

⁶¹ *Beijing Information*, December 3d 1979.

⁶² and in April 1966 that "without your generous support we would have lost another two to three million men before winning." ⁶³

Space constraint will not allow us to amplify on the importance of China as an important large rear support for Vietnam. Let us quote some facts demonstrating the vital nature of the Chinese territory bordering Vietnam in the Vietnamese revolutionary strategy. It is from this region that weapons, equipment, supplies were sent to Vietnam "in continuous streams." But these areas also served as a refuge for Vietnamese, allowing them to seek shelter from bombings; hospitals in these regions provided care for wounded and sick Vietnamese; there Vietnam maintained to hospitals, schools, as well as support bases for the revolution; when the Hanoi station was damaged by American bombing, Yunnan station immediately took over the "Voice of Vietnam" broadcast. ⁶⁴

Nianlong Han, head of the Chinese delegation to the negotiations with Hanoi has chosen to make the above revelations in April 1979. At the same time he reminded that more than thirty years ago, the Pingmeng people of the Chinese border region, "at the risk of their lives, had protected and supported the revolutionary activities of President Ho Chi Minh in this region." ⁶⁵ Chinese subtlety!

To date, the above disclosures have not been denied by the Hanoi authorities. On July 30, 1979, the head of the Vietnamese delegation, Dinh Nho Liem, has simply said during a press conference that, for the Chinese to assess their help" is not a correct position" and that Vietnamese authorities will respond "in due time." ⁶⁶



The above facts show the vital importance of rear-bases (local, national, and especially international) in the successful implementation of a revolutionary strategy. These facts also show why, throughout Southeast Asia, only Vietnam has been able to successfully implement the strategy of protracted revolutionary war,

⁶² *Ibidem.*

⁶³ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁴ *Beijing Information*, May 7th 1979.

⁶⁵ *Beijing Information*, May 7th 1979.

⁶⁶ *Le Monde*, August 1st 1979.

win a complete victory and establish a communist revolutionary authority. No other communist revolutionary movement of South East Asia had received, or had been able to receive, the massive and ongoing support that the DRV received from the outside, because the natural physical conditions, as Mao said, and primarily, the geographic condition, did not allow it. Without such help, that is to say without sufficient resources, a revolutionary movement will neither to strategically defend nor establish a balance of power, much less take the decisive step, the strategic offensive counter-attack by regular forces, as Mao emphasized, to annihilate the enemy and win. The massive and continuous supply of the communist forces in the North and then South Vietnam, of men and material from its true and secure rear back--China--has given the resources and confidence to these forces to stand up to France, then the United States, to manage a successful strategic defense and then astrategic offensive. France and the United States could not beat the DRV because their reserves were *unlimited and out of reach* of the French and US forces. France and the United States have not been able to destroy the DRV combat resources. The slogan often sung by Vietnamese and Chinese Communists, "700 million Chinese are the powerful support of the Vietnamese people, and vast tracts of Chinese territory its secure rear" ⁶⁷ is not an empty slogan.

If one wants to beat the opponent, says Clausewitz, the effort must be proportioned to its resistance force. It is the product of *two inseparable factors*: "The extent of the means available and the strength of willpower." ⁶⁸ The will alone is not sufficient to resist the enemy (it's not because of a lack of will that the Germans and the Japanese were defeated in 1945). We still need to have the means, the natural conditions that Mao considered so important. To beat the enemy, says Clausewitz, you must:

1. "Destroy its military forces, place them in conditions that would not enable them to continue the fight.
2. Conquer its territory, as a new military force may be constituted;
3. Force him to sign a peace agreement, or his people into submission. ⁶⁹

But, the French and the Americans have not fulfilled any of the above conditions. By choice or necessity, they have not touched the actual DRV at the rear - China -

⁶⁷ Cited in Hoang Van HOAN, *art. cit.*

⁶⁸ Von CLAUSEWITZ, *De la guerre*, Paris, Éditions de minuit, 1975, p. 54.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

or (and this applies to Americans) occupied its territory. Except for a few short incursions, they have not even touched its bases in Cambodia and Laos. In other words, the DRV followed a protracted total war strategy (objectives, time, space, resources), while France and the United States, especially the latter (with their weak ally, South Vietnam) fought a limited war: Limited in terms of objectives (cessation of subversion); of means (conventional weapons); of time (plans from 18 months to two years); and especially of space (no DRV attack on bases in China, no land invasion of North Vietnam, not even neutralization of Cambodia and Laos). Under these conditions, they would inevitably face defeat.⁷⁰ South Vietnam, for various reasons, has never had a safe national rear base before 1968 and, in 1968, it lost its international rear base, the United States. Thus, it met defeat and destruction in 1975.

Without the Chinese rear base, the DRV could not have won. In any case, it would not have been able to win such a complete victory, or it would have had to conduct a longer war and even sacrificed several million more men before it could win. But this victory would be relative, limited. The Hanoi White Paper revelations on China-Vietnam relations proved it well: Without the Soviet complete support, and especially the Chinese support, the DRV had to agree to negotiate peace in 1954, and satisfy itself with an arrangement that gave it much less than what it wanted.

General Vo Nguyen Giap was right to say that "the rear base is a permanent factor for victory."

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⁷⁰On this point, see Lt. General James GAVIN, *War and Peace in the Space Age*, New York, Harper, 1958, especially pp. 121-135. Also Robert THOMPSON, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy 1945-1969*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1970, pp. 21 and following.