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HANOI'S STRATEGY AND TACTICS

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Summary of lecture

- Problems encountered in the study of Hanoi's strategy and tactics: inadequate documentation, unreadability of texts, unfamiliar conceptual frame.

- The Hanoi theoreticians (Truong Chinh, Le Duan, Vo Nguyen Giap) and their definitions of strategy and tactics. Military and Leninist definitions. Strategy as identification of the main enemy.

- The organic relationship between war and politics. Armed form and political form of struggle have equal importance. Politics is war and war is politics.

- How the CPV leaders analysed the problems of war. Nature of the war, fighting conditions, and balance of forces determine choice of prolonged war strategy and people's war form.

- Difference in strategy and tactics applied to France and U.S. Aiming at withdrawal of U.S., then lightning assault on South Vietnamese armed forces and government.

- General Giap's people's war tactics: forms of fighting; categories of forces and careful calibrating of proportions and coordination; rules of engagement; object of fighting: systematic dispersion of enemy forces and destruction of enemy manpower; manipulation of enemy public opinion; destabilising of enemy's rear (cities). Fighting while talking. Diplomacy as a form of war.

- The crucial question of bases and sanctuary. Why Communists succeeded in Vietnam and failed elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The decisive role of external base: sanctuary and massive aid from a neighbouring big power (China).

- Conditions for success in people's war. Indifference to loss of lives and property. Practically impossible for merciful western democratic nations to defeat fanatic Leninists-Stalinists.

To understand Hanoi's strategy and tactics, we should know what the Vietnamese communist strategists thought about it and how they came to think that way. In this we face three major problems.

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In the study of Hanoi's strategy and tactics we face three major problems.

The first problem is inadequate documentation. Translations of some key writings of the leaders of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) are not, or not yet, available; for example, Le Duan's Thu_Vao_Nam (Letters to the Comrades in the South), which contains many very important revelations on how the CPV ran the war in South Vietnam from Hanoi.¹ Besides, the translations are not always accurate.

The second problem is the CPV leaders's strong desire to display their mastery of the dialectical interplay of ideas. This is a source of endless repetitions and padding of text which makes the reading of their writings, in particular General Vo Nguyen Giap's writings, very tedious.

The third problem, the most important one, however, is that of frame of analysis. Most people are familiar with the definitions of war, strategy and tactics, and the frame of analysis proposed by Clausewitz. The Vietnamese Communist leaders have obviously read Clausewitz also, and have borrowed many ideas from him, but they have adopted a different frame. They constantly referred to their military theory and military art as a continuation of the Vietnamese national military traditions,

¹. Le Duan, Thu_Vao_Nam (Letters to the Comrades in the South), Hanoi, Su That, 1986.

and especially as "the application of Marxism-Leninism to the concrete conditions of Vietnam". Unless we have a clear idea of what this means, we can miss some important aspects of Hanoi's military theory and practice.

I shall describe Hanoi's strategy and tactics as the CPV leaders conceived and applied them in the period 1945-1975. For a meaningful assessment of the results, and especially of the merits, of these strategy and tactics, I would however suggest that we take the period 1945-1990 as a whole, with two main sub-periods - 1945-1975 and 1975-1990. Only then can we see clearly, in terms of costs and benefits, what real service to the Vietnamese people the CPV has really achieved, and will it be possible to argue rationally about the Vietnam War.

With regard to the formulation of Hanoi's theories, three men stand out: Truong Chinh, Le Duan, and General Vo Nguyen Giap. Truong Chinh and Le Duan were general secretaries of the CPV, and General Giap was minister of defense and commander-in-chief of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) before 1975. Giap is the better known of the three to the outside world as the mastermind of Hanoi's strategy and tactics. But, in fact, Giap was mainly responsible for operational matters. On the higher plane of broader strategy, it was Truong Chinh and Le Duan who dominated. This is clear from their writings which show greater depth, coherence, as well as readability. I have not mentioned Ho Chi Minh because, although he had initiated his disciples to guerilla by translating early Chinese works before 1945, after that date he concerned himself essentially with politics and diplomacy.

How did the CPV leaders define strategy and tactics?

Strangely enough, not all the three theoreticians mentioned have given formal definitions of these terms. Giap has discoursed extensively on these subjects but has not given formal definitions of them. The closest he has come to a definition is in Banner of People's War when discussing military art. To him, military art "determines correctly the organic relationship and interaction among strategy, campaign and tactics, which are the components that make up this art", and he added that "strategy is the main component" which should "create the fundamental condition for the favourable fulfilment of the tasks of campaign and combat".² But he did not define the term strategy.

Like Giap, Le Duan, who has theorised much about "offensive strategy" and "revolutionary strategy", has not taken the trouble of giving formal definitions either. Only Truong Chinh has done so. And he has given us even two definitions. One in his famous essay "The ^Sresistance will win" is: "strategy is the art of war directed at winning victory in a given war. Tactics is the art of fighting to defeat the enemy in a given battle."³ Another, much more elaborate, in "Forward along the path chartered by Karl Marx" is:

"Revolutionary strategy consists in determining the principal enemy on whom to concentrate our forces in order to overthrow him at a given stage of the revolution...It discerns the allies of the working class at each stage, and elaborates a plan to align the revolutionary forces, win over allies, correctly use direct and indirect reserve forces and utterly isolate the enemy. It consists in aiming the main blow at the main enemy and struggling for the

². General Vo Nguyen Giap, Banner of People's War, The Party's Military Line, New York, Praeger, 1970, p.75.

³. Truong Chinh, "The resistance will win", in Selected Writings, Hanoi, Foreign Language Publishing House, p.174.

implementation of this plan..."⁴

And revolutionary tactics is defined as:

"the guiding principle to be followed by the working class at each period of ebb and flow of revolution. It chooses the forms of struggle, organisation, propaganda, and the agitation slogans suitable for each period, each situation. It replaces old forms and slogans by new ones, or combines these forms of struggle and organisation to secure success for each drive of struggle."⁵

Clausewitz would feel comfortable with the first definition, but he would surely find the second puzzling because it obviously deviates from strictly military concerns. Yet, that is precisely what the CPV leaders mean by "applying Marxism-Leninism" to military theory. To them, war is just one part of revolution; war is armed struggle; and armed struggle is just one form of struggle besides political struggle. Armed struggle and political struggle are two forms of revolutionary struggle of equal importance and constitute an integrated whole. Depending on the situation, war or politics will be the dominant form used. But war should never be separated from politics, and politics should never be separated from war. In the CPV's dialectics, war is politics by other means, and politics is war by other means.

Lastly, if to the CPV leaders war is just one part of revolution, this revolution itself is an integral part of world revolution. "Our people, said General Giap, has in the past as well as the present, contributed to the common cause of world revolution", and "it is in the forefront of the struggle of the peoples of the world against imperialism, with American

⁴. "Forward along the path chartered by Karl Marx", in Selected Writings, p.618.

⁵. - ibid -, p.619.

imperialism at its head".⁶ It should be noted in this connection that when speaking of imperialism the CPV always added "headed by the U.S.", and they always referred to the U.S. as "chieftain of imperialism" or "ringleader of imperialism".

I have described the conceptual frame used by the CPV leaders to analyse military problems. Now, how did these leaders analyse these problems in practice? They first considered very thoroughly the nature of the war, then the concrete conditions in which the war had to be fought, and only then did they decide on strategy and tactics.

Concerning the nature of the war, mindful of what Lenin had said about just wars and about the necessity of involving the masses, the CPV leaders decided from the very beginning that theirs should be a war of liberation and a people's war, i.e., a revolutionary war involving the totality of the country's resources, both human and material, i.e., a total war. This was in their eyes the fundamental principle which determined all the rest and which explained their victory.

In People's War, People's Army, General Giap said that people surprised by Vietnam's ability to defeat a France backed by the United States tried to explain this "extraordinary fact" by the correctness of strategy and tactics, by the form of combat and the heroism of the Vietnam People's Army. Of course, he said, these factors contributed to the outcome, but "the most precise and the most complete answer" to the question why were the

⁶. Vo Nguyen Giap, La guerre de liberation nationale au Vietnam, Hanoi, Editions en langues etrangeres, 1970, pp.33 and 81.

Vietnamese people able to win must be: "The Vietnamese won because their war of liberation was a people's war".⁷ *toàn dân*

A war of liberation is a revolutionary war and a people's war. Its principal, or rather immediate, aim is the reconquest of national independence. But it is impossible to win such a war without the total involvement of the masses. And since these masses are constituted by the peasants, and since the peasants need leaders and their natural leaders can only be the working class, "a people's war is essentially a peasants' war under the leadership of the working class", so argued General Giap.⁸

To get the peasants fully involved, a strong incentive must be offered to them. This incentive is land. Since most of the land is in the hands of the French colonials and the Vietnamese landlords, it must be confiscated from these and given to the peasants. A communist revolution is necessary. The war becomes a war for both national independence and communism.

Here, however, the problem becomes complicated by the necessity for the CPV to secure the cooperation of every section of the population, including the bourgeois and the landowning elements, in order to have national unity, which is an essential condition for success in the fight for independence. The opposition of the non-communist, and especially of the anti-communist, elements must be neutralised by a careful camouflage of the communist objectives at the beginning, the first stage. They will be suppressed only in the second stage, after the

7. - ibid -, p.27.

8. Vo Nguyen Giap, People's War, People's Army, Hanoi, Foreign Language Publishing House, 1961, p.43.

achievement of national independence. Thus, the people's war is not a socialist revolution, but "essentially a people's national democratic revolution...the anti-imperialist struggle being the primary task", said General Giap.⁹ The revolution will be a two-stage one, with the second stage carefully camouflaged. And it is integrated into the struggle against world imperialism.

In 1945 the main enemy was the French colonialists ;after 1960 he was the American imperialists. It was against them that the CPV mobilised all the forces it could mobilise into a national united front. This united front was completed by an international front supporting Vietnam against French colonialism or American imperialism. We can see now why Truong Ching has defined revolutionary strategy in terms of identifying the main enemy, allies, neutrals and reserves, and has given this question more space than that of military strategy and tactics.

The next kind of analysis undertaken very thoroughly by the CPV leaders concerns the concrete conditions under which their forces would have to fight. Here they drew inspiration as much from Vietnamese history as from Marxism-Leninism. They recalled that historically Vietnam is a small country with a small population and limited resources which frequently had to fight against invaders from a much larger country with a much larger population and greater resources, that was China. Next, they took into consideration the existing conditions, and made a careful assessment of the balance of forces.

⁹. - ibid -.

In this assessment, whereas China, like Vietnam, was a feudal and backward country, France was a modern country with a modern and well equipped and experienced army. It was much stronger than China, and still stronger than Vietnam, especially at the beginning. However, if Vietnam had weak points, it also had strong points, just as France had strong points and weak points. This aspect was analysed thoroughly by Truong Chinh in 1946 in his famous essay "The resistance will win" referred to earlier.

In chapter XII on "the balance of forces" Truong Chinh listed seven points working against the French and four in their favour. The weak points were: 1) reactionary war aims; 2) internal division; 3) low morale of troops; 4) waging an aggressive war in a foreign country; 5) many enemies and few friends; 6) exhausted finances and economy; and 7) armed forces limited in size and scattered throughout the French Union. The strong points were: 1) abundant supply of modern weapons; 2) a large and well trained army; 3) a high level of organisation; and 4) a well orchestrated propaganda abroad.

The Vietnamese had four weak points and five strong points. The weak points were: 1) they had few weapons and these were of poor quality; 2) their army was small and poorly trained; 3) their level of organisation was low; and 4) their propaganda abroad was weak. Their strong points were: 1) their war was a just war; 2) their people was united; 3) the morale of their troops was high; 4) they were fighting on their own native soil; and 5) they had many allies.

Comparing the advantages and disadvantages of the two sides, Truong Chinh concluded that: 1) the advantages of Vietnam were

the disadvantages of France and conversely; 2) France had more weak points than strong points; 3) most of France's strong points were military ones while most of Vietnam's strong points were political ones; 4) France had more weaknesses than Vietnam; and 5) the strong points of Vietnam were fundamental while those of France were secondary. Thus, the French's strong points would be of no avail to them.¹⁰

On the basis of his analysis Truong Chinh concluded: "From the strategic point of view, we must prolong the war; but in every individual campaign and from a tactical point of view, we must achieve quick results."¹¹ He argued:

"if we prolong the war, our forces will grow stronger, the enemy forces will become weaker, their already low morale will become still lower, their already poor finances will become still worse. The more we fight, the more united our people at home will be, and the more the world democratic movement will support us".

On the other hand, he said:

"the more the enemy fights, the more the anti-war and democratic movement in France will hold him back; the rising revolutionary movement in the French colonies will oblige him to spread his forces; and he will himself be in a position of isolation in the international arena".

Truong Chinh concluded:

"To achieve these results, the war must be prolonged, and we must have time. Time is on our side - time will be our best strategist, if we are determined to pursue our resistance to the end."¹²

With regard to tactics, Truong Chinh said that "it is only by applying the tactics of lightning attack that we can destroy

¹⁰. Truong Chinh, "The resistance will win", in Selected Writings, pp.158 and ff.

¹¹. - ibid -, p.109.

¹². - ibid -, p.108.

the enemy sector by sector"; after many battles, "the enemy's forces will be weakened and demoralised, while our forces will increase and our fighters' morale will be strengthened."¹³

After 1960, when confronted by the United States, which was a much more formidable enemy than France, especially in regard to mobility and firepower, Le Duan and Vo Nguyen Giap admitted that they faced a new situation, but did not modify their analyses of the nature of the war and the balance of forces. They took full account of the international factor to stress their absolute political advantage as well as their strategic superiority. The U.S. could not use nuclear weapons, and it could not extend the war to the North; it would be forced to limit the war to the South, and there, to face a prolonged war, Le Duan argued in Thu Vao Nam. He summed up the situation as follows: "The advantage the U.S. has, nuclear weapons, it cannot use; and the advantage we enjoy, people's war, he does not have."¹⁴

On the other hand, Le Duan said, the events in Laos indicated that the American determination to hold on to the South had weakened.¹⁵ He was referring to President Kennedy's acceptance of a coalition government in Laos, and to Harriman's approach to the Hanoi government, behind the back of the Saigon government, during the Geneva Conference on Laos in 1961-1962. With authorisation from President Kennedy, Harriman, head of the American delegation, met secretly with the Hanoi delegation to

¹³. - ibid -, p.109.

¹⁴. Le Duan, Thu Vao Nam, pp.106-107, 123-128.

¹⁵. - ibid -, p.98.

ask whether it would accept a Laos-type solution for South Vietnam. Le Duan told his worrying southern comrades that in these conditions it would be possible to defeat the U.S. by introducing a number of modifications regarding strategy and tactics.

Hanoi was aware that it could not defeat the U.S. forces on the ground as it had defeated the French, but it could produce a situation in which the U.S. would be forced to withdraw "without losing face", as Le Duan put it.¹⁶ This would be achieved by fighting hard to inflict heavy casualties on the American forces on the one hand, and by manipulating American public opinion to intensify American anti-war sentiment on the other hand, to undermine America's will. As a consequence, Hanoi resorted to high level armed and political struggle and carried this struggle into the cities; they also added diplomatic struggle to the two other forms of struggle. Their strategy became fighting hard everywhere, and fighting while talking and talking while fighting. If to the CPV leaders war is politics by other means and politics is war by other means, so, now, diplomacy is also war by other means. As General Giap put it during the Paris peace negotiations: "while the delegations are discussing, we go on with the war".¹⁷

The three forms of struggle were three fronts converging on the U.S., the principal enemy in terms of Truong Chinh's analysis. The objective was the withdrawal of American troops and

¹⁶. - ibid -, p.75.

¹⁷. Oriana Fallaci, Interview with History, Boston, Houghton and Muffin, 1976, p.86.

not their defeat in the field. Once the Americans were gone, Hanoi would turn on the South Vietnamese armed forces and government, and finish them off, no longer in a prolonged but in a lightning war so as to preempt a return of the Americans and an intervention by the Chinese.¹⁸

Before turning to tactics, I would like to mention briefly three points closely linked to the strategy of prolonged war. One relates to stages. Prolonged war is to go through three stages: 1) defensive stage; 2) stage of equilibrium; and 3) stage of general counter-offensive. There is no set time for passing from one to the next. This is reminiscent of Mao-Tse-tung's strategy of protracted war.

Another relates to offensive. The strategy of prolonged war is a strategy of constant offensive. It is also a "step by step" strategy, which aims at pushing back the enemy gradually, scoring one victory after another until total victory. The revolutionary forces must maintain the offensive in all three stages of the war, including the defensive stage.¹⁹

The third relates to the international factor. General Giap stressed that time was needed for "availing ourselves of the changes in the international situation".²⁰ Read this as meaning : "until China can come to our aid". This is a very crucial question, about which I shall say more later on.

¹⁸. Le Duan, "La revolution vietnamienne", in Ecrits, p.120.

¹⁹. Le Duan, Ecrits, p.120.

²⁰. People's War, p.101.

Now, with regards to tactics, General Giap was the undisputed master in this field, and it is to him that we must turn for enlightenment. The passage I shall quote summarises his ideas. It is rather long, but I shall quote it in full because it is the most comprehensive, the clearest, and the most readable statement of Giap's doctrine on tactics.

That is from the viewpoint of doctrine. Applicationwise, there are many books on Hanoi's strategy, in particular edited reprints of General Giap's writings, but it is rather hard to find good accounts on tactics. There are many accounts by French or American officers who had fought in the Vietnam Wars of course. But these accounts do not give us the right flavour because they do not tell the full reality as seen from the Vietnamese Communist side. I was lucky enough to find one very recently. It is the memoirs of a man whom the French used to call "the King of Road number 4". This is the road running from Cao Bang to Lang Son along the Chinese border, on which the French suffered their first shattering defeat of the war in the autumn of 1950.

This book, published in 1987, tells about every ambush against the French forces on Road 4 from 1947 to 1950, with every detail about planning and execution, from the moment the idea of ambush was born until the moment when the last truck was emptied of booty and pushed down the ditches. For those particularly interested in ambushes and defense against ambushes, this book makes useful and fascinating reading, especially as it is written by a man who quit Medical School at the age of 23 to become regimental commander at the age of 26, and who won every battle

he fought. His name is Dang Van Viet, and the title of the book in Vietnamese is Duong so 4, con duong lua (Road number 4, the road of fire".²¹ The book was given to me by a friend on behalf of the author who had been my neighbour and senior in Medical School before 1945.

Now back to General Giap on tactics. He said:

"To wage revolutionary war, we rely on the force of the entire country, using the people's armed forces as the core.....By coordinating political struggle with armed struggle, armed insurrection with revolutionary war, guerilla war with regular war, and by coordinating the fight against the enemy in the three strategic zones, we have created.....a strategic situation in which the enemy's modern army is split up, encircled, and everywhere attacked from all four directions, thus making it impossible for him to find an area that he can call safe in a war where there is no front, no rear, and no definite front line, and where every place becomes a battlefield."

Submerged in the great ocean of people's war, Giap said,

"the enemy finds that he is blind and deaf. He fights without seeing his opponent, he strikes without hitting, and he is unable to make use of his strong combat methods. For this reason, although the enemy has many troops and much equipment, his forces are scattered, weakened, and unable to develop their efficiency as he wants".

Under such circumstances, Giap pursued,

"our forces can develop our powerful effect, always hold the initiative in striking at the enemy, fight him anywhere, at any time, and at our own choosing, hit him each time they strike, and wipe him out in great numbers."²²

There is a great deal of matter compressed in this passage.

For lack of time, I cannot develop all the aspects of it. So, I shall focus on the most significant ones.

First, concerning the forms of fighting. Three forms are used: guerilla, mobile warfare, and positional warfare. One of

²¹. Dang Van Viet, Duong so 4, con duong lua, Hanoi, Vien Lich Su Quan Su Viet Nam, Nha in Bo Tong Tham Muu, 1987.

²². Banner of People's War, p.85.

the three may be dominant at a particular time, in a particular situation, on a particular battlefield, but all of them will be used concurrently, in various proportions. At the beginning, guerilla is the main form of fighting, as a matter of necessity. At some stage, it will be used concurrently with mobile warfare, but still remain the chief form. Then mobile warfare will become the main form. But at some stage, positional warfare will be introduced, then become the main form, but it will be used concurrently with mobile warfare and guerilla warfare.

The role of guerilla is to harass and exhaust the enemy in all phases of the war. That of mobile warfare is to annihilate the enemy forces in concentrated fighting, first on one battlefield, then on a widening scale to cover the whole country. Finally, positional warfare will be used in the last stage to finish off the enemy.

General Giap stressed the necessity of maintaining "a correct ratio" and ensuring "a correct coordination" of the three forms of warfare according to the strategic requirements. The same applies to the categories of forces: self-defense militia (used for guerilla), regional troops (used as core in local situations), and main force units (armed forces of high combat quality for use anywhere, or in strategic operational areas).

One aspect should be stressed here: one of the major functions of the guerillas and regional troops is to provide highly accurate intelligence to the main forces and to serve as their local guides. In addition, they provide unlimited reserves as well as manpower for transport, permitting the main forces to travel light, avoid dependence on the roads and escape detection,

and maintain a high ratio of combat troops. These forces thus enjoyed a tremendous advantage over the French and the American troops, who were heavily equipped, had to operate on unfamiliar terrain, and lacked precise intelligence on the enemy.

With regard to fighting proper, General Giap taught his troops to engage combat only when they are absolutely certain of winning. To engage the enemy in battle, they must have overwhelming majority. To this end, the attack must be planned very carefully: there must be a large body of troops outnumbering the enemy at least three to one; the proportions of the various categories of forces must be carefully measured (or calibrated, as we would say now); the troops must be concentrated quickly; fighting must take place only when and where the enemy is sufficiently exposed; the battlefield must be prepared in advance, thoroughly and in absolute secrecy.

In the fighting, the rules are: surprise, rapidity, flexibility, resourcefulness, initiative, suddenness in attack and withdrawal. If victory becomes uncertain, one must not pursue the combat so as to avoid losses, for the preservation of the revolutionary forces, especially of the main forces - the regular army - is a major consideration.

The reverse applies in dealing with the enemy. Giap's main objective was the systematic destruction of his enemy's manpower by inflicting as many casualties as possible on the enemy forces in complete disregard of the huge losses to his own. There are two main reasons for this.

One is military. Giap knew that his enemies, French and Americans, lacked the manpower to accomplish all their necessary

tasks. His operational and tactical calculations aimed at forcing the enemy to disperse his forces and to deplete his reserves by multiplying operational areas and attacks.

The other reason is political. Giap and his colleagues in the politburo fully realised that French and American public opinion were adverse to sending more boys to Vietnam, and that in the particular case of America, a very high premium is placed on life. By inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy, they will force him to seek replacements and reinforcement. This, and the dramatised reports of the fighting by the media, would generate increasing anti-war sentiment at home. Thus, politics was joined to war, in conformity with Marxist-Leninist principles.

The CPV leaders joined politics to war in another area: in the cities, especially after 1960. They provoked popular uprisings, tying up the South Vietnamese administration, and allowing the Communist forces to operate more freely in the countryside and the mountain regions. The aim of this political form of war was to bring down the government by a popular uprising, and replace it with a government proclaiming neutrality and asking the United States to leave. If that did not happen immediately, uprisings and political agitation would generate insecurity and instability in the rear of the enemy.

Another effect of this tactics is that the western press, seeing the trees of popular agitation and government repression without seeing the Communist forest behind them, would direct their fire at the Saigon government instead of at the Communists, thus undermining support for the South Vietnam government.

While the anti-revolutionary forces had no safe rear, the

revolutionaries had bases in Vietnam, sanctuaries in neighbouring Cambodia and Laos, a solid rear in North Vietnam, and especially a huge and safe rear in China. This brings me to a factor which I have mentioned earlier: the international factor.

There is little doubt that the victory of the Communists in China in 1949 and the massive aid and firm support of the Peking government to Hanoi made it possible for its forces to defeat the French, consolidate its power in the North and use it as a base which rest on another bigger, stronger, base - China - for subverting and eventually conquering the South. Undertsnading this aspect is crucial to a full understanding of the Communists' victory in Vietnam.

In the post-war history of Southeast Asia one major fact stands out: of all the Southeast Asian countries which faced Communist insurgencies only Vietnam fell to Communism. Why? The obvious reason is that only Vietnam had a contiguous border with a major militant Communist country, that is China. Without massive Chinese support all the genius of Ho Chi Minh and other CPV leaders and their appeal to Vietnamese patriotism and self-reliance would have been of no avail.

Before massive Chinese aid became available, from 1946 to 1949, the Communist forces could not break out of their bases in the jungles of north-western Vietnam, and the population, including large part of the peasantry, was not yet fully committed to Ho Chi Minh's government. Ho had only been able to build First Base. It was only in 1950 that the Vietnamese Communist forces, in division strength, well trained and fully equipped with modern armament in China by the Chinese, could go

on the counter-offensive and inflict on the French a spectacular defeat in a big battle on the Sino-Vietnamese border. It was only then that the Vietnamese who had stood on the sideline, including large numbers of peasants, decided to join Ho Chi Minhs' side. Thus, not only could Ho break out of First Base, but he could also move on to Second and Third Base, score and win. The last inning ended with Dien Bien Phu in May 1954.

Giap repeatedly stressed that in the achievement of victory by the CPV political education played a large part. This education made the people and the troops accept sacrifices and fight with determination and heroism. What the Communist propaganda instilled in the troops and the people was above all an absolute belief in final victory. This was done through indoctrination in Marxism-Leninism.

The main thrust of Leninism is that the world is moving through a phase of history in which imperialism is breathing its last, and socialism is bound to triumph. The troops and the population were told that in this historical process, a defeat is only a temporary setback. The facts, in the world, in the United States, and in Vietnam, seemed to confirm Lenin's assertion, and in Communist-controlled areas there was no possibility of hearing, saying, or even thinking the contrary. This gives the Communists a decisive advantage over a democratic country, which changes government and policy every four or five years, or even less, and whose population lacks the necessary conviction and patience to endure long years of sacrifices and tensions.

It now remains for me to assess the results and merits of the strategy and tactics adopted by Hanoi. I shall do so only

from the point of view of the real interests of Vietnam and of the Vietnamese people.

No doubt, for a small country, with a small population and a backward economy, to defeat a modern great power is a formidable feat. But this feat was made possible only by resort to prolonged and total war, in complete disregard for the loss of Vietnamese lives and property. As Douglas Pike has pointed out, the essence of this strategy was "the idea of the people as the chief instrument of warfare.....people as weapons....All people are to be regarded as weapons of war".²³

The costs of such a war for the Vietnamese people are horrendous. A French Communist author has estimated that what he called Vietnamese sacrifices for the cause of world revolution between 1965 and 1975 alone amounted to 7.3 million killed or wounded for a population of 45 million.²⁴ This would correspond to 25 million Americans. There is no precise statistics of the destruction of property, but the state of the country after 1975 indicates the extent. The country was physically exhausted and economically crippled. The poverty of the Vietnamese today is hardly believable: the average income is US \$ 5-7 per month, the lowest in the world, just above that of Bangla Desh. What characterises Vietnam today is a pervasive feeling of hopelessness; for the Vietnamese the horizons are totally dark. This explains why so many have tried to leave the country, in

²³. Douglas Pike,, PAVN, People's Army of Vietnam, Novato, CA, Presidio Press, 1986, pp.247-249.

²⁴. Pierre Rousset, Le Parti communiste vietnamien, Paris, Henri Maspero, 1975, p.353.

spite of the news of what awaits them in places like Hongkong.

Thus, in a particular international context, under a leadership that is ruthless, fanatical, and expert in what S.Rajaratnam, a Singaporean journalist and former foreign minister, has called "creative destructiveness",²⁵ a small country can defeat a great power, especially a democracy with a moral conscience. Such a victory would be acquired at the cost of the destruction of the country and the condemnation of its people to unshakable poverty. But the CPV leaders did not blink from this prospect. General Giap told French general Salan in 1945 that "the aim of war is the annihilation of the enemy, and therefore there should be no limit to violence"²⁶. He told major F.Fonde in 1946 that the loss of a million lives would not matter, and Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci in 1969 that he was prepared to wage war for 50 years if necessary, until he achieved victory.²⁷ And Ho Chi Minh told major A.Patti of O.S.S. in 1945 that he was determined to achieve his ends "even if all Vietnam, from North to South, was reduced to ashes and it meant the life of every man, woman and child".²⁸

²⁵. S.Rajaratnam, "Riding the Vietnamese tiger" in Contemporary Southeast Asia, Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, March 1989, p.350.

²⁶. Raoul Salan, Indochine rouge, le message d'Ho Chi Minh, Paris, Presses de la Cite, 1975, p.14.

²⁷. Talk with major F.Fonde in 1946, cited in Gras, Histoire de la guerre d'Indochine, p.152; interview with Oriana Fallaci in 1969, in Interview with History, Boston, Houghton and Mifflin, 1977, p.87.

²⁸. Cited by A.Patti in Why Vietnam?, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980, p.4.

Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and of course, all the other leaders of the CPV were fanatic Leninist-Stalinists. This, more than anything else, made it practically impossible for merciful western democratic nations to defeat them.

5 March 1990

UNFAMILIAR TERMS AND NAMES

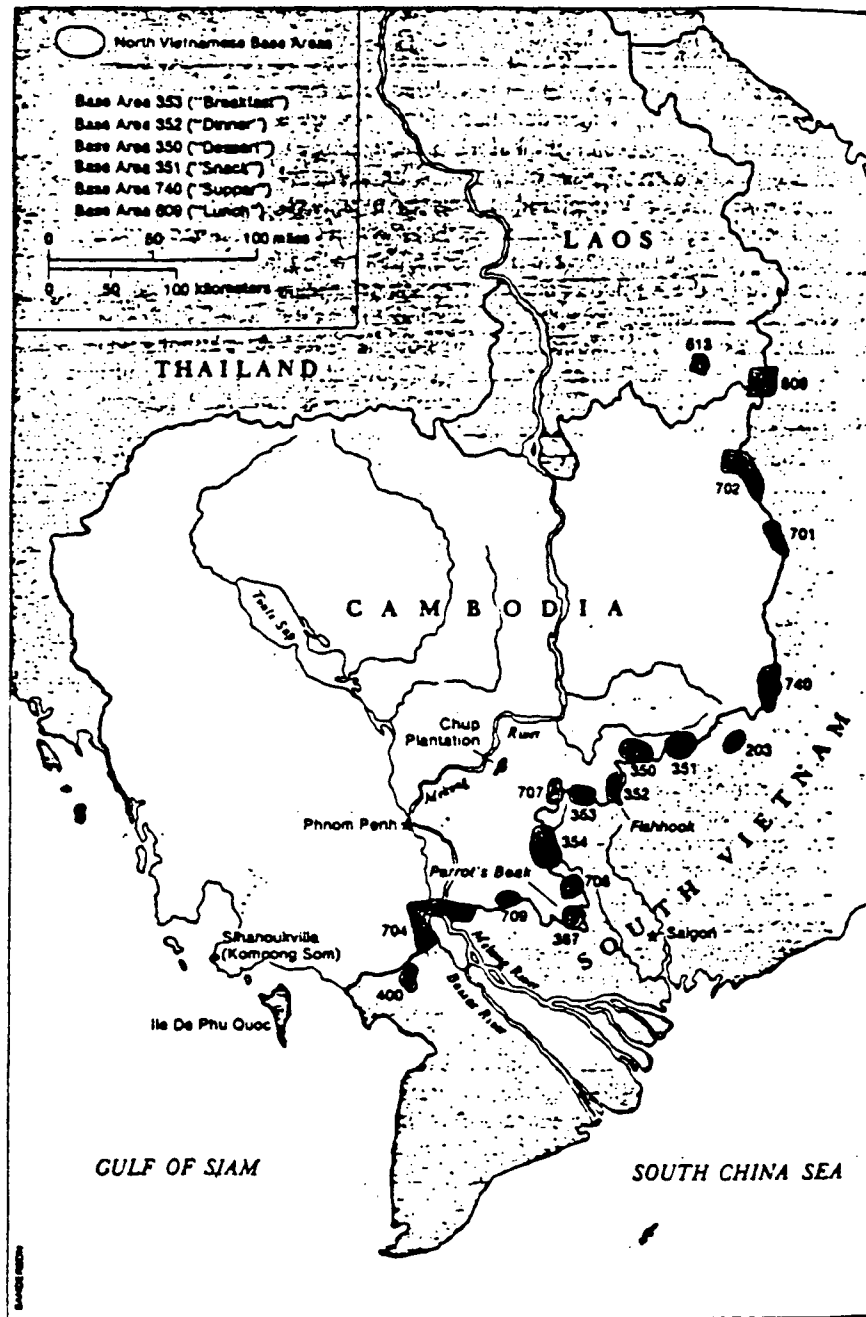
1. CPV (Communist Party of Vietnam)
2. Le Duan
3. Thu_Vao_Nam (Letters to the comrades in the South)
4. Vo Nguyen Giap (or Giap)
5. Truong Chinh
6. Cao Bang (city on Chinese border)
7. Lang Son (ibid)
8. Dang Van Viet (Vietminh regimental commander)
9. Duong_so_4,_con_duong_lua (Road number 4, the road of fire)
10. S.Rajaratnam (journalist and former foreign minister of Singapore)
11. Major Archimedes A.Patti (chief of O.S.S. - North Indochina)
12. O.S.S. (Office of Strategic Service, precursor of C.I.A.)
13. Major F.Fonde
14. Oriana Fallaci

To understand Hanoi's strategy and tactics, we should know what the Vietnamese communist strategists thought about it and how they came to think that way. In this we face three major problems.

Map 1

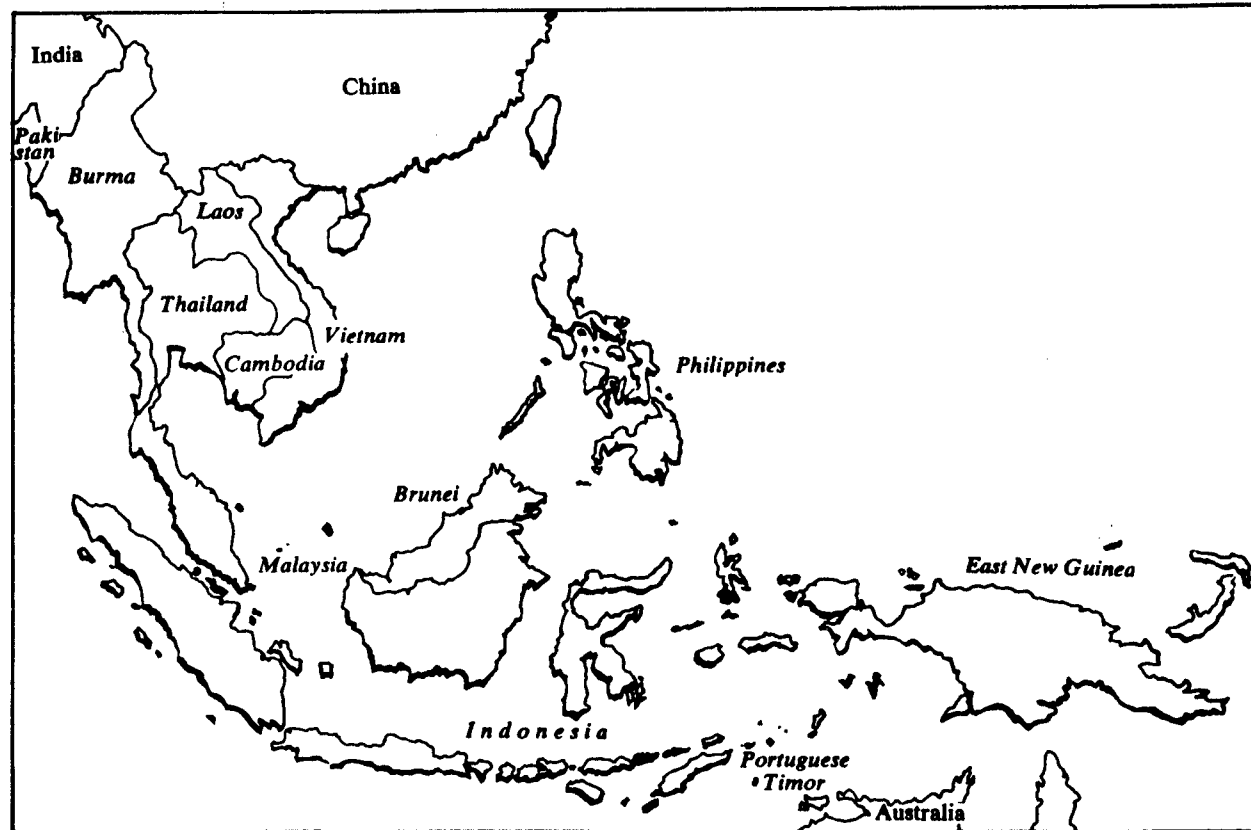


Map 2



North Vietnamese Bases

Map 3



SOUTHEAST ASIA