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THE STRENGTH OF THE VIET CONG IRREGULARS

Summary

A review of captured Communist documents available in Washington strongly suggests that the long-used estimate of Viet Cong irregular strength--100-120,000--is too low. Analysis of the documents suggests the estimate should probably be at least doubled. If the estimated strength of the irregulars is raised to a more realistic level, it will help resolve some of the analytical problems which have arisen in connection with estimates of Communist numerical strength. Most important, perhaps, is that it would help explain why the southern Communists have been able to field an increasingly large regular army despite heavy casualties and a high desertion rate.

The evidence put forth in the following pages represents a review of about $\frac{1}{2}$ of the documents available in Washington. The case for a higher estimate of irregulars could probably be strengthened slightly by a further review of the remaining evidence available here. However, a better way to approach the problem would involve calling on MACV in Vietnam for a new study of irregular strength in which they could use the greater amount of material and expertise available in Vietnam.

Definitions

1. Irregulars are subordinate to the Communist apparatus in villages and hamlets. There are three types:
 - a. Guerrillas, consisting of full-time squads and platoons, not always operating in their villages or hamlets.
 - b. People's Self-Defense Forces (SDF, often called "militia"), consisting of part-time paramilitary forces assigned to defend hamlets and villages.
 - c. Secret Self-Defense Forces (SSDF), which operate clandestinely in government-controlled areas.

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Present Intelligence Estimates

2. For over a year, MACV's Order of Battle has held 103,573 as the number of Viet Cong irregulars. The estimate includes 34,315 guerrillas, 35,661 in the SDF, and 33,597 in the SSDF. Using these figures, the intelligence community usually estimates that there are between 100,000 and 120,000 irregulars in the Viet Cong. MACV's OB breaks down the irregulars by province, as well as by type.

Viet Cong Goals

3. We know from Communist documents that the insurgents have been trying to build an irregular force over 200,000 strong. A report issued by the Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN), apparently in the spring of 1965, states that efforts were then being made "to increase the militia-guerrilla strength in the entire SVN to 250,000-300,000 men." The context of document suggests the Viet Cong hoped the goal would be reached during 1965. The report indicated that the recruitment of guerrillas and militiamen during the first quarter of the year had met the "development criteria" set by COSVN.

4. In promulgating irregular force requirements to lower echelons, COSVN seems to have asked for more recruits than it thought it could get. Two similar documents dated August 1965 picked up in Quang Nam and Phu Yen Provinces outlined COVN's requirements. According to the documents, "the participation of the people" was required as follows:

- Guerrillas, 5% of the people in the lowlands and 10% of the people in the highlands.
- Self Defense, 15% of the people. (Here the documents disagree; one says 25%.)
- Women, to make up approximately one-third of the irregulars.

5. It is unclear exactly who the "people" are to which the above percentages apply. Presumably, the Viet Cong mean "people in Viet Cong-controlled areas." The US intelligence community currently estimates there are from 3-5 million people in these areas, but the Viet Cong themselves -- presumably using their own criteria -- stated in a document dated 30 November 1965 that they controlled 6 million people and that another 3 million lived in areas of "mixed control." It seems

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likely also that in applying the percentages, the Viet Cong exclude half the women (since women are to make up only one-third of the irregulars), and all but a few children. In any case, Viet Cong irregular recruitment goals, as promulgated, would appear to be well over 300,000.

Irregular Strength

6. Available evidence suggests that MACV's overall estimate of Viet Cong irregular strength is too low, and that the Communists have reached and perhaps surpassed minimum goals for the recruitment of irregulars set by COSVN in early 1965.

7. In three provinces one can compare MACV's irregular strength estimates with strengths listed in Viet Cong documents. They are:

a. Binh Dinh Province. [REDACTED] 25X1
spring of 1966, the irregular strength for Binh Dinh was listed as 15,084 guerrillas (including 2,990 women), 34,441 people (including 6,147 women) in the SDF, and 719 people in the SSDF, totalling 50,244 irregulars.* MACV's OB lists Binh Dinh as having 1,446 guerrillas, 1,056 people in the SDF, and 2,166 in the SSDF, totalling 4,668 irregulars. MACV's estimate is 9% of the figure in the document.

b. Phu Yen Province. [REDACTED] 25X1
1965, the irregular strength in Phu Yen was listed as 3,304 guerrillas (including 1,226 women), 17,009 people (including 9,334 women) in the SDF, and 94 women in the SSDF, totalling 20,407. MACV's OB lists 916 guerrillas, 2,039 in the SDF, and 255 in the SSDF, totalling 3,210 in Phu Yen. MACV's estimate is 16% of the figure listed in the document.

c. Phuoc Long Province. [REDACTED] 25X1
the irregular strength for Phuoc Long was listed as 174 guerrillas, and 141 in the SDF, totalling 315 irregulars.** MACV's OB list Phuoc Long as having 387 guerrillas, 40 in the SDF and 106 in the SSDF. MACV's estimate is in the right ball park.

* The Strength figures are consistent with those found in other documents captured in Binh Dinh in 1966.

** The document indicated that most people recruited in the province were being placed in regular, rather than irregular, units.

8. A preliminary survey of MACV estimates of irregular strength in other provinces suggests that many are too low. The OB lists Long An Province as having only 160 irregulars, in spite of there having been over 300 irregular defectors in Long An last year.*** A combination of factors--including the level of Viet Cong activity, the number of people controlled by the Viet Cong in the province, and the relatively small number of irregulars listed in the OB -- suggest that irregular strengths have been substantially underestimated in Kien Hoa, An Xuyen, Chuong Thien, Quang Tin and Quang Nam. Probably several other provinces should be on the list as well.

Consequences

9. A raising of the estimated total of irregulars in the Viet Cong would have a number of important ramifications for an analysis of the Communist position in South Vietnam.

10. The most important would be that it would provide an explanation for the Viet Cong's ability to increase its regular force strength despite heavy casualties and a high desertion rate.**** Documents [redacted] [redacted] show that Viet Cong regular units draw heavily on the irregulars for replacements, and in order to create new units.

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11. Secondly, other intelligence estimates would have to be reviewed. Among the subjects needing review would be Viet Cong allocation of manpower, and the strength of the Communist Party in South Vietnam.

12. Finally, a realistic appraisal of irregular strength would enable analysts to estimate more accurately than they can now how many trained soldiers the Viet Cong have. With a reasonably solid statistical base, a more reliable estimate of the relative strength of the guerrillas and the militia could be made. The difference between these two types is crucial. A Viet Cong guerrilla is often an experienced and well-armed soldier. Militiamen of the SDF are frequently unarmed, inadequately trained, and poorly led. In this regard, it should be noted that the MACV OB estimates that the ratio of guerrillas to SDF to SSDF is approximately 1:1:1. Captured documents indicate the ratio is about 20:60:1.

*** In March, 1966, [redacted] [redacted] he thought there were at least 2,000 guerrillas in the province.

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**** One estimate puts the Viet Cong regular desertion rate at 25 per cent, that is, somewhat higher than ARVN's.