

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

ANNEX 10X

THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE
OF THE SSIONS OF THE
DETERMINING THE

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

ANNEX IX

THE COMMUNIST VIEW AND APPLICATION
OF LESSONS LEARNED IN
FIGHTING THE FRENCH

The attitude of the North Vietnamese leadership toward the current military situation in South Vietnam is shaped to a considerable extent both strategically and tactically by their experience in fighting the French. Drawing heavily upon this experience, they have carefully plotted their actions in the current war to duplicate as far as possible their successes against the French and to avoid mistakes committed in the earlier war.

I. The Three Phased War

Their experiences in the Franco-Viet Minh war doubtless convinced the Communists that the predictions on the course of this conflict made in 1947 by the then Party Secretary General Truong Chinh had proved valid, and could probably be applied in the planned takeover of South Vietnam. In essence, Truong Chinh's blueprint for victory called for a protracted struggle through three stages which would enable the small and weak forces of the Viet Minh to defeat the more numerous and better-equipped French forces.

According to Truong Chinh, the first phase of the war would see the French in control of the cities using primarily "conventional" tactics. In this period the French would be on the "offensive." The Viet Minh, on the other hand, were small, poorly armed forces and therefore had to fight a "defensive" type of war. The chief strategy for the Viet Minh during this period, argued Truong Chinh, should be to attack the enemy using guerrilla tactics, i.e., ambushes, sabotage, and small-scale attacks on French units of smaller size than the local Viet Minh unit. The Viet Minh during this period, he said must avoid pitched battles with the enemy and must build its strength.

Truong Chinh took the position that, although the Viet Minh would be strategically on the defensive, tactically they should always be on the offensive. Since the French would be strategically on the offensive, they would over-extend themselves, thus giving the Viet Minh opportunities

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

for attacking isolated and small units. During this first stage of the "people's war," he said, the Viet Minh must also concentrate on gaining the support of the peasants. Political efforts, Chinh held, were in some respects even more important than military efforts, because without the support of the people there could be no military effort.

At some point, Truong Chinh asserted, the enemy would extend his position as far as he could. At that time, the harassing action of the guerrillas would combine with the enemy's inherent weaknesses to create an equilibrium. During this stage of the war, the enemy would concentrate on consolidating his overextended positions with particular emphasis on his lines of communications and supply. He would continue to launch attacks on the Viet Minh strongholds. In the political sphere, the enemy would concentrate on setting up "puppet" local administrations, infiltrating the Communist zones with spies, and repressing the Viet Minh political movement.

The Viet Minh, during this period, should employ to the maximum the tactic of guerrilla warfare to harass the enemy day and night. This would be designed to force the enemy to disperse his forces, to overextend his area of operations further, and to use up his manpower and resources. The key tactic during this period would be a combination of guerrilla and mobile warfare, with the guerrilla taking the lead at first, followed by later and stronger efforts at mobile warfare. The tactic of positional war was given only a limited role at this stage, since the enemy would still be able to bring superior force to bear on static defensive positions.

During the second phase of the struggle, the Viet Minh forces would swing from a defensive strategy to an offensive one. This stage should see not only military defeat of the enemy but also a collapse of morale on his home front, i.e., in metropolitan France. Economic and morale problems at home would have a decisive effect on France's will to fight. On the battle front, the French would be forced to withdraw from their advanced positions in order to defend their major bases. The Viet Minh would depend primarily on mobile warfare tactics supported by guerrilla activities. Finally, in the third phase near the end, mobile warfare would often be transformed into positional warfare for the decisive battles.

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

Truong Chinh's analysis proved an amazingly accurate prediction of the actual course of the war with the French. Chinh's assessment of the weaknesses of the French was unerring and his program for the development of both tactics and strategy for the Viet Minh proved effective. His views permeated the outlook of the Viet Minh leadership and particularly that of General Vo Nguyen Giap. It was largely Giap's responsibility as commander of the Viet Minh army to put into practice Truong Chinh's military concepts. He did just that and led the Viet Minh to final victory at the famous battle of Dien Bien Phu.

The extent to which the Vietnamese Communists still rely on this basic design for victory is evidenced in the writings of their leaders. On several occasions in the last two years Giap, in his articles, has applied Truong Chinh's concepts of military analysis to the situation in the South. In remarkably similar terms, Giap has stressed the need for a prolonged war, emphasized that the US would become overextended in its ability to supply its troops in the field, and predicted that popular dissatisfaction with the war in the United States would undermine the determination of the administration to continue the war. Giap has claimed that the tendency of both French and US strategists to fix short deadlines for accomplishing major goals is proof of their inability to outlast the Communists.

According to Truong Chinh's criteria, the Viet Cong presumably would have reached the point of equilibrium with the ARVN in 1964 or early 1965 and would have gone over to the offensive relying more and more on mobile rather than guerrilla tactics. However, the use of US forces in a combat role has since then probably removed any notion from the Communists' minds that they have managed to move into an advanced part of Truong Chinh's second phase, one in which the opponent is forced to withdraw from his advanced positions to defend his bases. This is evidenced in their discussions of the large and successful US/ARVN offensive raids into Viet Cong base areas this year.

Apparently the Hanoi high command believes that its forces in the South, at least in the northern half of South Vietnam, are in the first part of Truong Chinh's phase two, that is to say, that the US and ARVN are now overextended and are concentrating on keeping open lines of communication to their exposed outer posts. To some

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

extent, of course, this is true. What is new in the situation, however, is the fact that with its improved intelligence, extreme mobility, heavy firepower, and tremendous air-support capability, the US can also attack Viet Cong strongholds and thus by spoiling actions throw Communist tactical planning and movements off balance.

Moreover, there has now developed a serious challenge to what the Communists regard as one of the keys to their ultimate victory, their own rear base. In the war with France, this safe rear was first in China, then in the highlands of North Vietnam. In the current war, the Communists have made it clear that they regard North Vietnam as the rear area for the war. Since February 1965, however, this base for the movement of men and supplies to the Viet Cong has come under heavy aerial attack by the US. While these air strikes have as yet not prevented North Vietnam from continuing to send men and material to the South, they have made the process much more costly and time consuming.

II. Tactical Military Lessons

The lessons learned in fighting the French are being applied in a myriad of practical steps by the Vietnamese Communists in the current war. The reliance on the tactic of ambush, for example, results in large measure from the successful development of this technique against the French. The Viet Cong have frequently set up ambushes against the South Vietnamese and US forces on almost exactly the same spots where French elements were ambushed nearly twenty years ago.

Another lesson, learned the hard way against the French, is the need to avoid precipitous military action against superior forces. In 1951 and 1952, Vo Nguyen Giap launched several major attacks on French forces only to have his units shattered by superior French firepower. Giap drew back, reformed, re-equipped, and retrained his units, and from then on faithfully followed the advice of Truong Chinh who urged that such actions be undertaken only when the Communists positively enjoyed the superior position. Giap's dedication to this formula led ultimately to Dien Bien Phu, where his forces had the superior position. That the Vietnamese Communist High Command learned its lesson is evident in Communist tactics in the present war. The Viet Cong/PAVN forces rarely venture out on an attack now unless they

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

are virtually certain that they will have the advantage. The Communists instead, attempt to draw friendly forces into remote areas where terrain, transportation, and weather tend to neutralize the superior firepower and mobility of the allied side.

The success of the North Vietnamese in keeping their transportation routes open is also due in some measure to their experience in the Franco - Viet Minh war. In addition, they appear to have drawn heavily upon Chinese and North Korean experiences in the Korean War. The extensive use of coolie labor for bomb-damage repair is not something uniquely Vietnamese, but the Hanoi leadership has had great experience, due to the war with France, in forming and operating coolie labor units. The mobilization of rudimentary forms of transportation is also a technique learned well in the war against France.

III. Political Lessons

Experiences gained in the political sphere in the war against the French are also being used by the Communists in the present conflict. They continue to put heavy emphasis on the "political struggle" and to express confidence that enemy military superiority cannot in the long run prevail in a "people's war." To the extent that it is more than propaganda, this line partly reflects adherence to Marxist dialectic principles that "contradictions" in the opposing forces (referring here to "contradictions" between the Americans and their "puppets" as well as to conflicts among the South Vietnamese themselves as evidenced by the recent succession of internal coups) will inevitably work in the Communists' favor. The Communists are mindful of the fact that in the earlier war the lack of positive support by the majority of non-Communist Vietnamese for the French was a major factor contributing to the ultimate defeat of France.

On the practical level, the Communists have in their current "struggle" sought to apply their political view of the war through methods which parallel those used earlier by the Viet Minh. In addition to propaganda which seeks to foster South Vietnamese hatred for the Americans as the true "aggressors," the Communists set out to repeat the combined tactics of terror and benevolence used successfully by the Viet Minh. Thus they have revived the terrorist bombings in Saigon and conducted terrorist reprisals

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

against supporters of the Saigon government at all levels throughout the countryside, while at the same time they have tried to ingratiate themselves with the general populace by various good works--helping with the harvest, improving sanitation, conducting educational programs, etc. Land reform, a technique used with some success by the Viet Minh through simply granting ownership outside the colonial administration, became a platform of Viet Cong's Liberation Front.

The Hanoi leadership also learned in part from the Franco-Viet Minh war to proceed cautiously on the matter of negotiations, even while not rejecting the idea of talks at an appropriate point. Premier Pham Van Dong was the primary agent for the Vietnamese Communists in the series of negotiations with the French between 1945 and 1954. He stated in 1965 that the Vietnamese Communists had learned from their negotiations with the French that the "imperialists" merely use discussions as a technique to gain a pause in the shooting so that they can prepare for further fighting. Dong went on to state that they do not intend to make the same mistake with the Americans. Instead, they intend to wear the US down to the point of accepting the bulk of their terms for a settlement through the tactic of protracted war.

The Vietnamese Communists do have some reason to feel that the various negotiated agreements reached with the French were used to the disadvantage of the Viet Minh. The French moved against Ho's self-proclaimed Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1946 despite an agreement signed with representatives of his government recognizing its autonomy. The aftermath of the Fountainebleau conference in 1946 at which a cease-fire agreement was reached, showed the French moving to escalate the war. The final proof of Western perfidy, in the eyes of the Vietnamese Communists, was the failure of the Western powers to implement the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Indochina, agreements which the Hanoi leaders felt would assure their peaceful takeover of all Vietnam.

Although chary of actually entering into negotiations with the US from a position of relative weakness, the Vietnamese Communists also realize that the tactic of "talk, fight, talk," was in some respects used effectively by both sides in the Franco - Viet Minh war. Thus they have been

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

reluctant to close the door completely to possible negotiations with the US; a talk stage in the "struggle" could prove attractive to Hanoi itself at some point to gain a respite from allied military pressure.

This is probably in part why the North Vietnamese have continued to receive a fairly steady flow of visitors from Western and nonaligned countries with various ideas for getting talks started between Hanoi and Washington. North Vietnam probably has at least two aims in accepting these visitors. One aim is to encourage the notion that the Communists are reasonable, although firm, in their attitude toward what it would take to reach a settlement of the war. The second, and probably more important purpose, has been to put increased pressure on the US to cease its bombings of the North. A number of foreign visitors have come away from Hanoi believing that they had received intimations that if the bombings ceased, talks could begin.

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~