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AIR WAR IN VIETNAM: PAVN ASSESSMENT - McGarvey 1968

HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR ON MICROFILM

## Missiles, MIGs, and Men

The North Vietnamese Army was primarily a ground-oriented organization until mid-1964. It had literally no experience in modern air defense. During the French war for Indochina, the Chinese Communists had supplied the North Vietnamese with conventional anti-aircraft artillery, but they had no modern jet interceptors or sophisticated missile defenses, and, more important, no training programs that would produce the skilled technicians needed to man such defenses. With the first American raids on North Vietnam in September 1964, the North Vietnamese were faced with the crushing necessity of arming and manning a defense system that could cope with the sophisticated United States Navy and Air Force arsenal. We do not know exactly when the North Vietnamese acquired their missile and MIG defenses, but by the time the United States began air attacks on a regular basis, in February-March 1965, the MIGs were on hand. In a matter of weeks, missile sites, too, appeared. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara testified before Congress on January 23, 1967, that the jet aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, and anti-aircraft artillery guns in North Vietnam came from the Soviet Union. The magnitude of Soviet assistance to North Vietnam's air defense can be gauged by the estimate of the United States Air Force Commander in South Vietnam, General William Momyer, on September 19, 1967, that North Vietnam had nearly ninety MIG fighters. This figure is almost doubled, however, when we add the number of MIGs downed by American pilots as of September 1967—eighty-five. The number of missile sites grew steadily from none in 1964 to over two hundred by September 1967. In the same period the North Vietnamese expanded their air-defense organization to include over 125,000 troops, according to the United States

Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp.

In June 1967, after more than two years of American air attacks on North Vietnam, the Chief of Staff of the North Vietnamese Army, General Van Tien Dung, published a detailed analysis of the North Vietnamese side of the air war (Document 7). Previous comments from Hanoi had been largely limited to reports of individual air encounters and American losses. General Dung's studious approach to the subject sheds much light on the problems encountered by the North Vietnamese, particularly the tradition-bound military hierarchy, in coping with modern air defense.

The North Vietnamese have made a veritable shrine of the Viet Minh's defeat of the French in the Indochina War. The military leaders who hold this attitude in its most extreme form believe that everything to be learned about warfare was learned during the war with France. Rooted in the nationalistic fervor of the 1940's and 1950's, this spirit sustains itself on the legendary exploits of "the people" against the French and the purported ability of the Vietnamese soldier to overcome all hardships, to endure unimaginable suffering. To the present generation, the North Vietnamese Communist Party has represented the defeat of the French as the latest episode in the long Vietnamese history of repelling foreign invasion. This spirit has created an aura of imperturbable confidence in Vietnamese military prowess among both leaders and cadres. In many ways, General Dung personifies this spirit. All his writings testify to his tremendous faith in indigenous military theory. In 1964, before the beginning of American air attacks and the introduction of American troops, Dung vehemently opposed any request by the Vietnamese military for material assistance from foreign countries.\* He argued against unnamed persons who put undue emphasis on the need for modern weapons, advocating instead reliance on North Vietnam's economy "to solve the problems of weaponry and armaments for our country." He was particularly incensed by those who "praise modern techniques and weaponry, and deprecate the importance of the political factor, the morale factor, and the masses." He believed that the gradual industrialization of North Vietnam would enable the country to meet its own needs for modern arms. He condemned those who would reject Vietnamese experience and seek guidance from "foreign military doctrines." He pictured a modern, foreign-assisted

\*Adhere to the Party's Viewpoint in Build-up and Combat Readiness of the Armed Forces," *Nhan Dan Daily*, December 19, 1964.

Vietnamese army as one "preoccupied with calculations of how to shoot a gun, how to calculate the strength of a regular army in a confrontation with another regular army, and so forth." He assailed himself and his opponents for "wanting to apply the fighting standards of a foreign regular army, and hence neglect our own precious past experiences." He admitted that there were things to be learned from foreign armies, but cautioned that the Vietnamese should be "selective."

Dung has repeated the same theme with varying degrees of candor since 1964. In an August 1965 article dealing with defense of the North, he attributed local successes to the "people who have heightened the absolute revolutionary spirit and have drawn on the collective strength and collective intelligence to discover and apply the highly skillful, creative, and clever tactics that are unique to Vietnam."\* In a February 1966 article he alluded to the dangers of "dogmatism in military doctrine," declaring that the Vietnamese must "overcome all tendencies to rely on weapons."† His most recent analysis (Document 7), published in June 1967, echoed the same theme. He has continued to emphasize that it is "the people," not the weapons, who form the backbone of air defense.

With the initiation of the American air campaign, the "central task" of the North Vietnamese economy, according to Dung, became that of ensuring communications and transport, which meant, in essence, supporting the Communist forces in the South. The entire economic organization of the country had to be redirected, and needless to say, Dung's analysis claimed that the change in direction was smoothly accomplished. Civilians were organized to participate in the war and military production, in air defense, civil defense, and road repair. (Admiral Sharp has estimated that the North Vietnamese have 500,000-600,000 people working on the roads alone.) Dung also claimed that in addition to reorganizing to defend the North and ensure the flow of war materiel south, a foundation had been laid for the postwar reconstruction of the country. All these accomplishments, to Dung's mind, demonstrated the superiority of socialism. He claimed that despite enemy attacks, "we have considerably increased the assistance of the great rear to the great front", an unusually direct claim of North Vietnamese assistance to the South. Indeed, Dung went to great lengths to link the North with the South, describing the battles as inseparable: American air attacks on the North would end only when the United States had been defeated in

\*"We Are Determined to Defeat the War of Destruction of the U.S. Imperialists," *Nhan Dan* Daily, August 5-6, 1965, and *Nhan Dan* Magazine, August 1965.

†"Our Armed Forces and People Have Won, Are Winning, and Will Surely and Completely Win Over the U.S. Aggressors," *Hoc Tap*, February 1966.

the South, a position that has rarely been spelled out by the North Vietnamese. He reasoned that since the enemy has not "resigned himself to being defeated in the South, he certainly has not yet renounced his plots and acts to destroy the North." Like many North Vietnamese leaders, Dung believes that the war in the South governs the United States' actions in the North, and he opposes any tendency to divorce the two zones.

Like his compatriots, Dung regards American strategy in the air war over the North as further testimony to basic weaknesses in the American position. The United States had failed to achieve any of the objectives of its air campaign. The bombing had not shaken the determination of Hanoi's leaders; rather, Dung wrote, "It is in the face of enemy bombs and bullets that our determination has been tested and forged and become more steadfast than ever before." The movement of supplies south had not been interrupted by the bombing; in fact, Dung claimed, it had been stepped up, along with assistance from the rest of the Communist world. The morale of the South Vietnamese government, which the air campaign was supposed to bolster had not, in Dung's view, improved.

Maintaining that victory depended on an accurate understanding of the enemy's plans and capabilities, Dung discussed the United States's position in some detail. Each new escalation in the North, he said, brought him a certain degree of comfort, because it meant that the Communist revolution in the South had achieved new victories. The United States had become "politically isolated" because of the air war, and had been forced to "limit its military actions and resort to deceptive political and diplomatic tricks." He revealed that as early as mid-1964, the North Vietnamese suspected that the Viet Cong's victories in the South might precipitate American air attacks on the North, and they had then put part of their armed forces on "a war footing" and strengthened their combat readiness. Dung may be referring here to a decision to seek military assistance, such as MIGs and missiles, from their allies. It seems logical for the decision to have been made at this time, since it was about then that Hanoi began to send regular North Vietnamese Army units south. Early in 1965, Dung said, it became obvious that the United States would soon carry out air attacks on the North on a regular basis. The stepped-up tempo of the war against the North he attributed to American failures in the South: "The enemy's serious escalation steps since the end of February 1967, including the use of warships to bombard coastal areas, the use of planes to drop submerged mines into the rivers of the North, and the bombing of industrial enterprises and the populated areas of Hanoi and Haiphong, were closely related to the bitter setbacks suffered by more than a million

United States and puppet troops on the South Vietnam battlefield in the 1966-67 dry season." The North Vietnamese call this the "law of the United States war of aggression."

Dung conceded that the American arsenal was impressive, but claimed that political factors limited the effectiveness of American air supremacy. Although he did not explicitly state that the United States was inhibited in its air campaign by fear of the reaction of the Communist world to large-scale or strategic raids, he certainly implied as much when he said that "the present balance of international forces" was one reason why the United States Air Force was obliged to "escalate step by step." Linking the air war with the ground war and the diplomatic arena, Dung summarized American strategic weaknesses as follows:

They have escalated step by step while overcome with fear. They have struck at us while probing and exerting pressure on us. Their escalation steps have depended on the developments of the war in the South and on their diplomatic tricks. That is why they escalated, then de-escalated, and then escalated higher than before. Sometimes they have taken a risky step in order to probe the situation, and then de-escalated.

In Dung's view this see-sawing combination of diplomatic and military moves made it impossible for the United States Air Force to "develop its strength and strong points." He pointed to the alleged complaints of American air commanders embittered over the lost opportunity for "strategic bombing to play a decisive role." As for the air tactics themselves, Dung believed that American equipment and tactics were "not entirely consistent with the war conditions." The targets were too numerous, of minor importance, and sometimes moving. The United States had to use "nuclear-carrying aircraft to drop ordinary bombs, and up-to-date warplanes costing millions of dollars to hit such a target as a bamboo pontoon bridge." He also repeated the optimistic view, echoed in many North Vietnamese publications, that the number of American aircraft is "limited; aircraft losses have surpassed productive capacity . . . the number of bombs and shells is insufficient . . . professional pilots have gradually been lost and the shortage of United States pilots has become serious, and, most notably, the United States Navy has to use the pilots of the United States strategic defense forces." It is interesting to note that the North Vietnamese impression of American air power has undergone a radical change since the beginning of the air campaign. North Vietnamese writings generally had held that the United States was applying the full weight of its military strength in North Vietnam. What brought about the realization that the United

States was not exploiting the full resources of its air power is difficult to say; it may have been a close reading of the world press by the Vietnamese Communists, or consultation with their Soviet allies.

Perhaps the most important revelations in Dung's analysis of the air war were those which dealt with Hanoi's view of modern weaponry. On the surface, Dung's attitude can simply be written off as the traditionalist North Vietnamese view, but more fundamental issues seem to be involved. Essentially, the problems caused by efforts to assimilate modern MIGs and missiles underscore the lack of technical depth inherent in any largely agricultural society. The question of national ego is involved, too, and the dependence on foreign assistance, which runs counter to the traditionalist spirit, was on the one hand admitted as necessary, but on the other played down as if it were of secondary importance. Dung blamed the failures of MIGs and missiles not on Vietnamese technical shortcomings, but on the equipment itself and Soviet tactical doctrine. He asserted that the traditional Vietnamese strategy of "people's war" formed the basis of Hanoi's response to American air attacks, and the key to the alleged success of this response was the individual soldier manning conventional anti-aircraft artillery, the machine gun, and the rifle.

The conflict alive today in the minds of many North Vietnamese leaders is not dissimilar to that which plagued the nineteenth-century Chinese gentry when confronted with the Western world. Essentially, it revolves around the blending of "essence and utility," a Chinese precept that called for the preservation of the "essence" of the Confucian way while at the same time utilizing selected facets of the Western way. For the North Vietnamese this means preserving the "essence" of the principles of "people's war," while making selective use of MIGs and missiles, alien inventions that bring with them alien military tactics. Dung described the dilemma as "relying mainly on one's strength, and at the same time striving to struggle for international assistance." International assistance was very important, but "no matter how great it may be," what made it effective was the way it was used by the North Vietnamese. It was "our party and our people themselves," he emphasized, "who had solved all the problems relating to the lines, policies, aims, strategy, and tactics of our people's war in a correct and creative way." He maintained that the party's "creative application" of the principles of people's war in the new circumstances not only had marked an advance in the theory of people's war, but also had "brought some sharp changes in the current military theory of many developed countries of the world today—especially theory relating to the role of an air force and

missiles, and the various means and methods to be used against modern weapons and techniques."

The terms in which Dung discussed MIG and missile tactics suggest differences of opinion between the Vietnamese and the Soviets who provided the equipment. He described Vietnamese tactics as "wise and vivid, not mechanical and unoriginal." The technical branches of the North Vietnamese Army, the air force, and missile units, he claimed, had developed "original Vietnamese combat methods," which were not "dogmatic and imitative." Vietnamese tactics were a "combination of two main tactical forms: namely, manning battle positions and protecting the objectives, and moving our forces to hit the enemy." This passage presumably refers to the use of surface-to-air missiles in point defense and mobile defense. A point defense calls for massing missile launching sites around a given point in numbers sufficient to render penetration very costly. A mobile defense calls for moving the equipment frequently, so that the enemy is constantly on guard and never certain when or where missiles will be encountered. The Soviets may have felt that, given the lack of maneuvering room in the North Vietnamese terrain—the heart of the country is nestled in the Red River Delta—a point defense of vital targets made the most sense. The roads, constantly subjected to armed reconnaissance, are probably not in good enough condition to allow the easy movement of large missiles, launchers, and radar vans. Nor are the open fields of North Vietnam, being heavily dotted with rice paddies, easily traversed. Dung asserted, however, that the Vietnamese had chosen to rely on a mobile defense:

The active and resolute moving of forces to hit the enemy is a striking proof of our understanding of the concept of active air defense combat, which allows us to become increasingly active, concentrate our forces in time in a determined direction and period, and launch a surprise attack on the enemy. This also allows our air defense firepower network to change constantly, and the anti-aircraft net of fire [words indistinct] to fight the enemy everywhere.

While such tactics are theoretically sound, Dung's claims have to be compared to actual performance. Defense Secretary McNamara told Congress on January 25, 1967, that "as of 24 January, there were about 1,570 surface-to-air missiles fired at U.S. aircraft, and U.S. losses to these missiles numbered forty-three." This means that the North Vietnamese were firing about 36 missiles for every American aircraft downed. Reason credits the Soviet Union with producing a defense system which, if operated according to design specifications, would perform far better than that.

Dung stated that although "reality has shown that we must and can, to a limited extent, equip our people's armed forces with modern weapons and means, such as jet aircraft and missiles," "jet aircraft and missiles are not omnipotent," or suitable for all occasions. This remark may imply that others in the North Vietnamese military hierarchy disagreed with him, and that neither missiles nor MIGs lived up to the original expectations of some North Vietnamese military men, probably air force officers. Dung may have been in the minority opposing the decision to seek outside assistance. He acknowledged the continuing lack of skilled Vietnamese technicians, two years after the introduction of modern Soviet weapons, in remarking that "we must study and grasp some scientific and technical knowledge to be able to properly use the new weapons and methods." His use of the present tense implies that the future performance of the new weapons will be affected by the response to his call.

Returning to his favorite theme, Dung described the use of MIGs and missiles as just one facet of the North Vietnamese air-defense effort. Everyone in North Vietnam was part of the air-defense system. The engineer corps, the transportation corps, infantry units, and militia forces, he said, were all organized and trained in air defense. He called for "close cooperation" among all these forces, and pointed to anti-aircraft artillery units as "the core" of the defense system—rightly, since the majority of American air losses have been to conventional ground fire. He emphasized again and again that the "basic problem" which would determine the success or failure of the air-defense effort, was that of evolving a suitable blend of tactics and doctrine, a blend that would incorporate the necessary mastery of modern weapons with adherence to the basic principles of people's war. This is a large order; it may never be filled.