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VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST EXPERIENCE
SINCE THE CEASE-FIRE

Last March the quarterly number of CNA devoted to North Vietnam studied the circumstances of Dr. Kissinger's meeting with Le Duc Tho in Paris during December 1973, the substance of that meeting, and the influence of what transpired upon the forward planning of the N. Vietnamese leaders.

Following Tho's return to Hanoi on that occasion there was a protracted meeting of the Party Politburo, at which his report was presented, and N. Vietnamese policy was amended, in the light of what he had to say. Afterwards, in January or early February, a plenary session of the Party Central Committee was convened to endorse the new policy and, in accordance with N. Vietnamese practice, this was followed by a plenary session of the National Assembly which accorded official government approval to the policy elaborated by the Party. Because the proceedings of the Party Politburo and Central Committee are secret, outside observers were obliged to await the published proceedings of the National Assembly for details of the new policy.

Speeches made by prominent Vietnamese communist leaders at the plenary session, especially the lengthy and detailed report of Le Thanh Nghi, laid unusually heavy stress upon the urgent need for economic reconstruction in N. Vietnam and, while Nghi did not omit to mention "the North's obligation to the revolutionary struggle...in the South", he appeared to suggest that the main emphasis would be on political rather than military struggle. Because of the content of this and other speeches cast in similar mould, CNA drew the following conclusion: "It would appear, therefore, that the N. Vietnamese leadership has now decided not to base its hopes of victory on a massive military onslaught in the South, at least in the immediate future, but rather to revert to political subversion allied with such military activity as is..."
deemed necessary to ensure the effectiveness of the political struggle”.

An eye on the US

Since these words were written there has been no massive military onslaught, though the necessary military materials are available to the communists in South Vietnam, and the political struggle has been waged with considerable energy. The military struggle has, however, assumed larger proportions than was then suggested and now shows every likelihood of further increase rather than abatement.

Information which has since become available indicates that the definitive planning of the struggle in South Vietnam was completed in the summer of last year, when senior leaders of the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) journeyed to the North in late June and finalized the planning together with northern communist leaders. These plans are still effective, having undergone only modifications of detail since they were drawn up. That N. Vietnamese spokesmen at February’s plenary meeting of the National Assembly made scant, almost ritual, reference to the struggle in the South and virtually ignored its military aspect is, presumably, to be explained by N. Vietnam’s wish not to be held publicly responsible for military operations in South Vietnam. The DRV, after all, signed the Paris cease-fire agreements and, in doing so, undertook not to conduct military operations on South Vietnamese territory. Indeed, the N. Vietnamese have taken great pains to incorporate their soldiers into so-called South Vietnamese military units in an attempt to conceal their presence there.

The broad outlines of the Vietnamese Communist experience during and after the 1972 Easter offensive and the subsequent cease-fire agreement, together with the salient features of communist planning for South Vietnam, form the subject of this report. The information has come directly from communist sources, almost exclusively from recent defectors in South Vietnam who enjoyed access to the information and who were themselves present at the official communist briefing sessions. It is here reproduced because, as readers will discover, the whole planning was designed to produce a climax of activity in the year 1976, when President Nixon was due to reach the end of his term of office. The reason for this was that earlier N. Vietnamese assessments of Nixon’s probable reactions had invariably proved disastrously wrong and had cost the Vietnamese communists dearly. The leadership had, therefore, planned to move into the decisive stage of the struggle only after Richard Nixon had ceased to be President. Now that Nixon has resigned well in advance of that date, it is possible that the Vietnamese communists will attempt to shorten the time frame, to abandon their caution, or even to revert to large-scale military attack.

It is a truism to say that the planning of N. Vietnam’s communist leaders is always carried out with one eye firmly fixed on the domestic political situation inside the US. The timing of the Tet offensive in the spring of 1968 was determined so as to exert the maximum influence upon the presidential election due to take place in the autumn of that year, and it did indeed do so. The great Easter offensive took place in 1972 because that, too, was a presidential election year, and the Le Duc Tho-Kissinger peace negotiations were timed for the late summer for that same reason. It was reasonable to assume, therefore, that the next major move in the communist planning to capture South Vietnam would be made in 1976, the next American presidential election year, but President Nixon has already resigned and, in so doing, once again confounded Vietnamese communist prognostications.

Losses

The costly military failure of the 1968 Tet offensive and the subsequent follow-up offensives opened the way for South Vietnam’s accelerated pacification programme, which brought vast areas of the country under government control for the first time in many years. Communist defectors now reveal that a Directive issued by COSVN in May 1971 admitted that 80 percent of the Viet Cong controlled territory in the lowlands had been lost since the 1968 offensive, and 60 percent of the forest areas. The general drift of this Directive was the necessity for the communist side to win back the lost territory and thus establish a “decisive advantage” over the government side, but the most it could offer by way of encouragement was that the war had spread throughout the whole of Indochina, so that enemy forces were spread more thinly than before. There is still no informa-
tion about precisely when the decision was taken to mount the 1972 offensive, but the massive infiltration of military units from N. Vietnam into the South to carry out the attack is now known to have commenced in the summer of 1971.

Saigon City Party Committee met in November 1971 at a conference known as Binh Gia to discuss a new COSVN Resolution. Both the Resolution and the briefing, which was given by Muoi Cuc, stated that a major offensive had become necessary in South Vietnam to prepare the way for a cease-fire. Its aim would be to create a situation such as had existed in 1963 when, the Resolution claimed, the communists had controlled two-thirds of the territory and three-quarters of the population of South Vietnam. If the offensive proved successful and achieved its objective, then the communists would be able to negotiate a cease-fire upon more or less their own conditions. In the course of the ensuing discussions Muoi Cuc asked the members of the City Committee to conduct a study of what could be done to promote a general uprising in Saigon and the task was assigned to Hai Viet, the Committee's Chef de Cabinet. This study, when completed in February 1972, concluded that the general uprising was simply not feasible because the communist cadre in the capital had been decimated since 1968.

The massive offensive commenced at Easter and the first official intimation that all was not going well reached the communist cadres in South Vietnam during June, and took the form of a letter from Le Duan, first Secretary of the Lao Dong Party. This called on cadres to alter existing plans and concentrate efforts on winning land in the rural areas. The prospects of fomenting popular uprisings in the cities he described as "hopeless", and COSVN was ordered to suspend attacks on all cities and towns. Later, in August, COSVN presented its own comprehensive assessment of the offensive, and one of the recent defectors was actually briefed about the document by Nam Xuan, the younger brother of Le Duc Tho. It stated that the offensive had achieved "basic success" insofar as the communists had progressed from a position of "having no land" to one of "having land", so that they could now negotiate a settlement "favourable" to them.

Southern cadres
No less interesting are the reactions of the native South Vietnamese Communist cadres. They admitted to being deeply impressed by the fact that the civil population of An Loc, the town which sustained such a lengthy siege, had fled to the government rather than the communist side. The offensive itself they regarded as a failure caused, to a very great extent, by the inability of the southern and northern cadres to work together. So great was the dislike of each for the other that the southern cadres used the term Tay to describe their northern allies, a term used hitherto only on the French and American "foreign aggressors". Moreover, the civil population living in the communist areas was reluctant to help or harbour the northern soldiers, complaining that these stole their property and raped their women. Because of these grievances, the southern cadre adopted the attitude of "let the North Vietnamese soldiers do the fighting and run the risks". Senior officers of the N. Vietnamese 5th and 7th Divisions stated after the siege of An Loc that both divisions had unnecessarily suffered heavy casualties as a result of the rivalries between their northern and southern components.

Plans
The offensive had, or so the N. Vietnamese claimed, created the conditions necessary for the negotiation of a cease-fire agreement, and the first COSVN Resolution concerned with the actual terms agreed in Paris was circulated and discussed in February 1973. The Resolution postulated two possible outcomes of the cease-fire agreement, the first of which it clearly regarded as more favourable than the other. This envisaged the formation of the National Council for National Reconciliation and Concord (NCNRC), a body called for in the agreements and one through which the communists plainly hoped to work in order to seize power in South Vietnam, though COSVN was realistic enough to recognize that there was little chance of the Council being set up unless two pre-conditions had been fulfilled. The first of these was the premature removal of President Nixon from office for domestic political reasons, and the second was the overthrow of President Thieu in South Vietnam. Should the NCNRC not be set up, then the COSVN Resolution envisaged "continued fighting
while talking". More enlightening are the reports of the briefings, again given by Muoi Cuc, to senior southern cadre and the ensuing discussions, all of which have now become available from defectors present at the time.

By February 1973 Muoi Cuc appeared already to have rejected the formation of the NCNRC as being too improbable to merit serious consideration. Instead he concentrated his briefing on the alternative policy and set out the way in which he believed that policy would be carried out. There was little likelihood, he said, of an early resolution of the conflict, so that N. Vietnam would continue its military and diplomatic efforts against the South. China and Russia would be asked to use their influence to dissuade the US from any future involvement in the Vietnam conflict now that a settlement had been achieved. Direct negotiations would be carried on by N. Vietnam with the US in order to force the Americans to honour their commitment to help in N. Vietnam's post-war reconstruction. Hanoi would also permit Le Duc Tho to continue to hold secret discussions with Dr. Kissinger, not in the hope of deriving any direct benefits from these, but to increase the tension and suspicions between the Saigon government and the US which had been caused by Dr. Kissinger's conduct in negotiating the cease-fire. Most significant of all, Muoi Cuc repeatedly told his listeners that all the operations would be carried out within a time frame of years, working up to a crescendo in 1976, the year in which Richard Nixon was due to end his term as President.

Civilians

One month later a second COSVN Resolution called on the cadre to expand the areas under communist control and to attract more civil population into them. Its content, and the briefing, once more given by Muoi Cuc, showed that the harsh and unpalatable truth had at last been appreciated by the communist side. Contrary to their confident expectations, the communists found that everywhere the civil population of South Vietnam fled from them to government controlled territory, apparently preferring to accept the undoubted hardships of life in a refugee centre rather than remain in their own homes under communist control. Not only were the civilians not helping them to secure and hold territory, they were abandon-

ing the territory already in communist hands, leaving it unpopulated and useless. Consequently, there was no possibility of establishing a sound economic base in the South capable of sustaining, at least partially, the communist soldiers stationed there.

Muoi Cuc enunciated a second unpleasant truth: it was not possible for the communists to overthrow the government of South Vietnam. Cuc explained that the communist tactic would, therefore, be to ignore Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem and the other Saigon leaders so as to concentrate all their efforts on denigrating and undercutting President Thieu alone. This was accepted as sensible, but some consternation was caused among the cadre by Muoi Cuc's description of the cease-fire agreement as simply "a means of ensuring a moratorium so as to facilitate preparations for another war".

Frictions

The effect of the March COSVN Resolution on the southern cadre, at least in Military Region 3, was immediate and profound. They regarded the call to expand territory as signalling a renewal of the war they had thought was at an end, and all became demoralized. They agreed among themselves that they would defend the territory which was theirs by right of the Paris cease-fire and would resist attacks upon it by the South Vietnamese army, but refused to initiate any attacks on government held territory no matter what orders might reach them from COSVN. Their intransigence became so obvious that the COSVN instituted a review of the situation, and this concluded that the southern cadre were "immoveable", with "rightist and peace-loving ideas", and lacking in "vigilance". Thereafter they were regarded with suspicion by the N. Vietnamese, and not even the most senior of them was believed to be entirely trustworthy. Even General Tran Van Tra, Chief of the Viet Cong Delegation to the Joint Military Commission and himself an alternate member of the Lao Dong Party Central Committee, was suddenly recalled to Hanoi without either prior notice or explanation. According to the defectors, he was suspected of having accepted a bribe from the South Vietnamese authorities and was obliged to undergo a political re-education course in the North. After this, he was returned to the South, but only as one of COSVN's lower
ranking deputy commanders, not as second-in-command under General Hoang Van Thai. Again, Tran Bach Dang, formerly Secretary of the T-4 Party Committee, was removed from his post in April 1973 and assigned to the Propaganda and Training section. Muoi Cuc, in May, informed a meeting of intermediate cadre that Dang had been guilty of bourgeois leadership practices and provided them with a lengthy and detailed list of his shortcomings.

Present plans

This was the somewhat unhappy situation of the communists in South Vietnam when To Huu made his inspection visit in the early summer and spoke so critically of the deployment and use of the Propaganda and Training cadres there. Late in June 1973, according to the defectors, several of the highest ranking COSVN cadre travelled to N. Vietnam to study the definitive plan for South Vietnam drawn up by the Party leadership and to make any amendments which might seem necessary in the light of the southern situation before the plan was finalized. This plan, the outcome of much research, discussion, and thought, still remains today the master document governing all Vietnamese communist actions in and towards South Vietnam. It has, of course, been modified or undergone changes of emphasis since that time, especially as a result of N. Vietnam’s very unsatisfactory economic situation and the attitude adopted by Kissinger during his meeting with Le Duc Tho in Paris last December, but none of the basic essentials has been changed. The following is the gist of that plan as reported by the defectors, who learned about it from the COSVN leaders after their return from the North.

As a result of their wide-ranging review of the whole situation in the wake of the cease-fire agreements and the US withdrawal, the Vietnamese communist leaders had finally abandoned all hopes of a favourable political settlement being achieved on the basis of those agreements. While they still hoped to create a National Council for National Reconciliation and Concord and to use that body to help to divide and control the electorate in the South, they realised that this would not be possible so long as Richard Nixon remains president of the US, and accepted that it would have to be delayed until 1976.

In the meantime, the communist side had much necessary work to do in South Vietnam in preparation for the final takeover. Firstly, in the military sphere, the communist side had accumulated very large stocks of weapons and munitions inside South Vietnam and was in a position to launch a major attack at the time of its choice. That it had not done so was because of strong pressures exerted by the Russians and Chinese on the one hand, and the fear that such an attack would bring a renewal of US bombing in Vietnam, for President Nixon would be able to demonstrate to the American people and the world that N. Vietnam had torn up the Paris cease-fire agreements. But if such a major assault could not be undertaken, there was no reason why the communists’ very great military assets should not be used in a limited campaign too small to justify the US President’s undertaking action which would undoubtedly be opposed by a vocal section of American public opinion.

The plan therefore called for increased military pressure in South Vietnam designed to win more territory there for the communists and to put them in a strong position to demand further concessions from the US and South Vietnam. The overall plan governing such military operations called for the employment of small regular military and guerilla units everywhere, coupled with stronger action by larger main-force units in a few selected areas chosen to enable the communists to expand their territorial and population control.

Alongside this military campaign there would be a programme of political action regarded by some, at least, of the communist leaders as no less important. The first, and most essential, part of the programme would have to be the rebuilding of the cadre structure in South Vietnam, for this had been decimated in the preceding years and had since proved ineffective. The task would be far from simple, because almost all the former cadres had been southerners, while the bulk of those from whom the replacements would have to come were N. Vietnamese, and experience had shown that relations between the two regional groups were strained. The solution adopted to resolve the difficulty was to employ only southerners in high level positions and to
select, for preference, those who had spent some time as regroupees in the North and who were too old for active combat duties. Because of the dearth of suitable southerners, some northerners would have to be used, but only men who had served for at least three years in the South might be chosen, and they would be restricted to low level positions.

Not only had cadre to be found for the communist held territory in the South but, even more importantly, cadres to serve in the areas controlled by the Saigon government. In the past the most valuable of these had been the 'legal' cadres, who had lived openly and legally in South Vietnam, many of them working in the government or local government service, or in the armed forces. Such persons were, of course, invaluable as sources of often secret information, might be used to disrupt secretly or to counteract government measures, and served to place the South Vietnamese government at a severe disadvantage vis-a-vis the communists. The new plan was critical of earlier use of cadres because many had been exposed quickly, often for the achievement of relatively unimportant short-term objectives, and so lost their usefulness. In future such cadres would be used as deep penetration agents and would never be exposed, and front groups and sympathisers would never be encouraged to become conspicuous. Admittedly this would lose the communists useful propaganda abroad from gullible foreign correspondents, but the advantages to be derived from the use of long-term undisclosed agents would be immeasurably greater.

The PRG

Also in the political programme is a campaign to improve the somewhat bedraggled image of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) both within the country and abroad. A second 'People's Convention' would be held on communist controlled territory in South Vietnam, probably towards the end of 1974, though the actual date had not been decided, at which the name of the PRG would be changed to "Government of the People's Republic of Vietnam". This, it was calculated, would dispose of the impression of a make-shift administration which inevitably attended the word 'Provisional' and would suggest instead that it was both permanent and popular. Abroad every effort would be made to secure recognition by foreign governments, particularly those outside the communist bloc, and to win admission for the PRG into as many international bodies as possible. Clearly, in the immediate future, bodies such as the UN Organizations were out of the question, but the prospects were very much better in the many international bodies set up by Third World countries. The policy would have the not inconsiderable advantage of forcing the Saigon government to compete for membership, if only to deny it to the PRG, and to do so in an atmosphere far more sympathetically disposed towards the PRG. As the former military ally of the US, and currently dependent on that country for military and economic aid, the Saigon government automatically encounters disapproval from many of the member countries of the Third World bodies. The Vietnamese communists have achieved a limited success with their efforts to date, and have undoubtedly worried the Saigon authorities.

The outside observer cannot discover what progress the communists have made in implementing certain aspects of their overall plan, for example the rebuilding of their shattered cadre structure in the South, but other areas of the plan, by their very nature, cannot be kept secret. For all their success in the Third World organizations and among certain newly independent countries, the Vietnamese communists have achieved little in the way of recognition for the PRG among developed Western countries. Indeed, their clumsy efforts at exerting diplomatic pressure on these countries have produced rather the reverse effect and have given rise to some resentment over breaches of established diplomatic practice. Nor have Vietnamese propaganda efforts overseas to provoke condemnation of South Vietnam and win support for the communist cause achieved even a small fraction of the success which attended them while the Vietnam war was still in progress. The failure is attributable in part to the diversion of interest in the news media to other wars, disasters, and troubles, and in part to disenchantment over Vietnamese communist breaches of the Paris cease-fire. A measure of that failure is to be found in a recent editorial published in the Washington Post, a newspaper which has consistently opposed American actions in Vietnam over a period of several years and proved a source of comfort and satisfaction.
to the Vietnamese communists. The editorial in question\(^4\) reversed its earlier position, disagreed with the recent Congressional decision to reduce aid funds to South Vietnam, and argued strongly in favour of continuing US support for the government of President Thieu.

After Nixon

Until August 1974 the Vietnamese communists' overall plan for South Vietnam was carried out much as its authors had envisaged when it was drawn up in 1973 and, most importantly, it continued to work towards a climactic point in 1976. As has been shown, the communists encountered both successes and failures, but neither in sufficient measure to warrant a drastic recasting of the plan. The unforeseen and premature resignation of President Nixon in August, however, fundamentally altered the entire situation and obliged Hanoi's leaders to look again at their plans. There is no doubt that President Nixon repeatedly confounded N. Vietnamese expectations and, on more than one occasion, took the communist leaders completely by surprise. One has only to recall his official visits to Peking and Moscow while the war was still being fought, his mining of N. Vietnamese ports and waterways without provoking any counter measures from Russia or China, his rejection of the draft cease-fire expectations and, on more than one occasion, took the communist leaders completely by surprise. One has only to recall his official visits to Peking and Moscow while the war was still being fought, his mining of N. Vietnamese ports and waterways without provoking any counter measures from Russia or China, his rejection of the draft cease-fire agreement on the very eve of the presidential election, and his use of immensely damaging Smart bombs in renewed air attacks on N. Vietnam to understand the reason why the Vietnamese communists stood in such awe of Nixon. Consequently, it is not difficult to appreciate why the decision was taken not to mount a final military assault on the South so long as Nixon remained in the White House and to defer the next high point in the Vietnamese struggle until after his retirement from office. Now the Nixon era is gone and the presidency rests with a man who lacks the authority of a popular mandate, and who will unquestionably wish to avoid the risk of a major political controversy inside the US, at least until he can win his own mandate in the 1976 presidential election.

Outlook

The new situation can only strengthen the position of those elements within N. Vietnam's leadership which have always favoured a direct military solution in South Vietnam rather than protracted political struggle. The US is anxious to disengage altogether from Vietnam and to phase out its residual responsibilities there as soon as possible. The Congress favours, and has voted for, sizeable reductions in US aid to Vietnam and, in so doing, reflects the mood of the American people. President Ford, who was never personally involved in America's Vietnam policy, is extremely unlikely to put his own position at risk by initiating further US intervention there now that the painful episode has finally been closed.

The participants in the international conference which met at Paris early in 1973 to take note of the Vietnam cease-fire agreement made it abundantly clear on that occasion that they would, under no circumstances, accept any continuing responsibility for overseeing the correct implementation of those agreements. For all these reasons it seems most improbable that military action by the communist side in South Vietnam would incur counter measures from any outside source, as no doubt the Vietnamese communist leaders favouring the military solution argue with some cogency. Conversely, the case for protracted revolutionary struggle is weakened, for its principal advantage has always been that it is less likely to stir major powers into taking retaliatory action. Moreover, N. Vietnam's poor economic situation would seem to demand an early and decisive end to the war rather than protracted struggle in the South so that the young men under arms may be recalled home and put to work at post-war reconstruction. It is still too early to know whether a decision has yet been taken in Hanoi to shorten the time frame and to aim for a climactic point at a date much earlier than the original 1976. Some are inclined to see in the fighting during August, which increased markedly both in intensity and scale, the first steps in the implementation of a new policy based upon military action. They are, in the opinion of this writer, somewhat premature, but the developments in South Vietnam must be watched very closely during the coming months for evidence of N. Vietnam's post-Nixon policy towards the South.

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\(^1\) CNA 953, March 15, 1974
\(^2\) Hanoi Radio, February 5, 1974
\(^3\) CNA 953, March 15, 1974, p. 5
\(^4\) Washington Post, August 13, 1974