THE OFFENSIVE
Hanoi’s Change of Strategy

The series of closely coordinated assaults on the cities and towns of South Vietnam which began on the occasion of the Tet Nguyen Dan (Lunar New Year) at the end of January 1968 burst like a thunderflash on an astonished world. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam had battled for two years without winning a single victory of any significance; defections from the communist forces had mounted steadily month by month from early 1965 until the autumn of 1967, and the rate of increase was such that the number of defectors during the first half of 1967 exceeded the total for the whole of 1966; the communist casualty figures continued to increase; more and more territory was wrested from communist control; and communist recruiting inside S. Vietnam declined dramatically. The war, it seemed, was moving inexorably in favour of the S. Vietnamese Government and its allies, while the situation of the communists was visibly deteriorating. True, an American camp in the mountain region adjoining Khe Sanh was threatened by a large force of N. Vietnamese soldiers, but this was generally regarded as further proof that the communist main force units had been driven out of the populated areas and forced to fight in the thinly populated territory close to the frontier.

The world press has analysed the communist attacks and their effects at inordinate length and, for the most part, with scant understanding. That subject lies outside the scope of this quarterly CNA bulletin, which is concerned primarily with N. Vietnam. The reasons for the sudden attacks are, however, a matter of deep concern because the change of basic strategy which they represent reflects an important shift in the thinking of N. Vietnam’s communist leadership. The nature of the change, as well as the reasons for it, sheds light on Hanoi’s thinking about the war in the South.

The Giap Doctrine

Since the outbreak of the French Indochina war, Vietnamese communist strategy has remained fundamentally the same and N. Vietnamese leaders have never ceased to underline the close similarities between that war and the present one. General Vo Nguyen Giap described the strategy succinctly when he wrote:

"A war of this nature in general entails several phases: in principle, starting from the stage of contention, it goes through a period of equilibrium before arriving at a general counter-offensive. In effect, the way in which it is carried on can be more subtle and more complex, depending on the particular
written by Le Duan, First Secretary of the Lao Dong (communist) Party, a speech delivered by General Nguyen Chi Thanh, and two independent sets of notes taken of a speech made by N. Vietnamese General Nguyen Van Vihn. All three of these highly placed leaders stated unequivocally that the balance of forces was unfavorable to the Viet Cong. All three stressed the need for further fighting before equilibrium could be achieved. But the documents were written in the summer of 1966 and important changes could have taken place in the interval.

A year later, in the summer of 1967, N. Vietnam's army newspaper published a lengthy and detailed review of the war situation in S. Vietnam:

"The southern armed forces and people," it wrote, "have stepped up their offensive, developed their mastery over the battlefield one step further and, at the same time, have striven to consolidate, build up, and enlarge their political and armed forces in a steadfast manner with a view to making forward to achieve greater military and political success." 10

The claim is a modest one since it does not allege that mastery over the battlefield has been attained, but simply that it has advanced one step. Again, the Viet Cong are not said to have enlarged and consolidated their political and military forces, but merely to have striven to do so. This is a far cry from the articles published by this same newspaper during the last three years of the French Indochina war. Then it was claimed that the third stage, that of the general counter-offensive, had been reached and communist forces were masters of the battlefield. From this and similar articles published in the N. Vietnamese press it is apparent that, in Hanoi's opinion, the Viet Cong were still struggling to achieve a stage of equilibrium with the enemy, in other words were trying to move from stage one into stage two. The same assessment was offered by the Viet Cong radio which, at roughly the same time, repeated Ho Chi Minh's statement: 11

'The war may last another 5, 10, 20 years or longer'. At no-time did any communist source state publicly that the third and final stage had been neared.

Throughout 1966 and the first half of 1967, Vietnamese communist leaders, press, and radio made repeated statements about the efficacy of protracted warfare. The Americans, so the argument went, might enjoy superior firepower and control of the
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As in past years the communists, both the N. Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, declared that they would observe a period of truce for the occasion of Tet Nguyen Dan. This was followed in January by a public declaration from foreign minister NGUYEN DUY TRINH offering talks "about relevant questions" in return for a cessation of American bombing and other acts of war against N. Vietnam. Predictably, voices were raised to affirm that this offer was a genuine one. Textual differences between this message and that of the previous year were alleged to be of vital significance. U Thant laid claim to secret assurances that N. Vietnamese was now ready for peace. Uncertainty reigned in the U.S. Eventually the S. Vietnamese and U.S. governments agreed to a one-day truce for Tet Nguyen Dan. Then, when the communist violated their own declared truce and menacing troop movements continued in the northern part of S. Vietnam, the government cancelled its truce in that area. On the night when Tet Nguyen Dan commenced, when the whole people of S. Vietnam had just completed the rituals to be performed for the occasion of Tet Nguyen Dan. This was when the N. Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, declared that they would observe a period of truce for the occasion of Tet Nguyen Dan. This was followed in January by a public declaration from foreign minister NGUYEN DUY TRINH offering talks "about relevant questions" in return for a cessation of American bombing and other acts of war against N. Vietnam. Predictably, voices were raised to affirm that this offer was a genuine one. Textual differences between this message and that of the previous year were alleged to be of vital significance. U Thant laid claim to secret assurances that N. Vietnamese was now ready for peace. Uncertainty reigned in the U.S. Eventually the S. Vietnamese and U.S. governments agreed to a one-day truce for Tet Nguyen Dan. Then, when the communist violated their own declared truce and menacing troop movements continued in the northern part of S. Vietnam, the government cancelled its truce in that area. On the night when Tet Nguyen Dan commenced, when the whole people of S. Vietnam had just completed the rituals to be performed for this most important festival in the Vietnamese calendar, attacks were unleashed against 48 of S. Vietnam's major cities, towns, and military bases. Surprise was total and a major portion of the S. Vietnamese army was absent from its posts for the festival.

Local Viet Cong troops made up the bulk of the attackers during the offensive against the towns and cities, with a "cutting edge" of N. Vietnamese regulars and special engineer and commando units. These men had been ordered to capture carefully selected public buildings within the cities and hold them. They were promised relief within 48 hours of their assault, but were confidently assured that many government soldiers and policemen would join them immediately following mutinies in both forces, and that there would be virtually no serious opposition. Popular uprisings would take place, and the inhabitants of the towns and cities would greet them as liberators. The N. Vietnamese and Viet Cong radio both continued to claim for several days that these things had actually happened, that the Saigon government had been overthrown, and that revolutionary committees had been set up in both the capital and in Hue to establish a coalition

air, they might be backed by a great power having limitless resources, but they would surely be defeated by the Vietnamese. In a conventional war, it was magnanimously conceded, forces enjoying all these advantages would undoubtedly overwhelm a weaker enemy, but this was not a conventional war. The Vietnamese communists were fighting a limited revolutionary war of liberation, a war having special rules of its own of which the Vietnamese were the acknowledged masters. Of its nature, this kind of war could not be ended quickly. Success could be achieved only by passing through its predetermined stages, and the timetable would depend on the outcome of each stage. This was why Ho Chi Minh was unable to be more precise in his public statement, but it is interesting to note that the minimum duration he named was five years. The emphasis was, therefore, heavily on protracted warfare and almost every communist pronouncement about the war stressed that it would be long drawn out.

TET

Such was the state of things in the autumn of 1967 when, with neither warning nor explanation, the conduct of the communist forces changed. Defections, which had risen steadily for two years, abruptly fell away to a trickle. Massive human wave attacks were carried out against objectives in the region of the Cambodian and Laotian borders. The communist soldiers seemed to be imbued with a new fanaticism, pressing home their attacks at enormous cost to themselves and continuing to do so even after the arrival of government reinforcements had rendered the objectives patently impregnable. Main force units of the Viet Cong began to concentrate in the region of the border between North and South Vietnam and these were massively reinforced with five divisions of the N. Vietnamese army. A United States base at Khe Sanh was besieged by a vastly superior communist force in a fashion reminiscent of the siege of the French fortress at Dien Bien Phu. None of these developments was consistent with the waging of revolutionary war at the stage of transition from stage 1 to stage 2, or even when stage 2 had already begun.
government. The observer is forced to the conclusion that the communist leadership firmly believed that this was what would, in fact, take place for several reasons. In the first place, any leadership which deliberately misinformed its soldiers before battle would inevitably lose their confidence, as soon as events proved it to have been wrong. Again, the Hanoi and Viet Cong radio stations shattered any credibility they may have had by broadcasting news of events which citizens could see with their own eyes were not taking place, and that can hardly have been the communist intention. The relatively small communist forces committed could not possibly have held any large city unless they won the support of the government soldiers and police, and unless popular uprisings had made it impossible for American forces to bring their own firepower to bear.

**STRATEGY CHANGED**

The reasons for the Vietnamese communists' dramatic change of strategy are discernible. Since early 1966 the Viet Cong had suffered severely from the build-up of American military might in S. Vietnam. Communist losses increased month by month and, in the latter part of 1966, began to assume alarming proportions. The trend continued into 1967 and the deep penetration operations in the early part of that year inflicted very serious damage on the communist high command, yielded copious documentary information to the enemy, involved the loss of huge reserves of supplies, and undermined morale. Despite all their efforts, the Viet Cong and N. Vietnamese forces were driven relentlessly back from populated areas into inhospitable hill and jungle regions. A group of military experts from China, Cuba, and N. Korea infiltrated S. Vietnam in the early spring of 1967 to assess the situation there and afterwards returned to Hanoi to submit their report and recommendations. It is inconceivable, in the circumstances, that they could have reached any conclusions other than that the protracted warfare being waged in the South was meeting with no success and that the communist side was being destroyed at an accelerating pace. Partly as a result of their report, the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party met in April and approved Resolution 13, which stated that the communist forces should seek "a decisive victory in S. Vietnam in the shortest time possible." That resolution, in effect, rejected the previous strategy of protracted war and replaced it with one which was almost its exact opposite.

Another reason for the policy change was unquestionably the steady deterioration in material conditions inside N. Vietnam, resulting from American bombing, the worsening manpower shortages, the crumbling morale, and the increasing administrative disruption. Such strains might well be borne for a limited period in time of war, but the expectation that they could be borne for "twenty years or more" was outside the bounds of possibility.

But the change was not as sudden as the public statements might seem to suggest. Already in mid-1966 N. Vietnamese misgivings over the feasibility of waging a protracted war were apparent. The captured record of General Nguyen Van Vinh's speech discloses something of the confusion present in the minds of the N. Vietnamese leaders:

"Today in restraining and defeating the enemy in the limited war in the South, we also speak of achieving a decisive success within a relatively short period of time. The contents of the guidelines and strategy involving protracted fighting and the contents of achieving decisive success within a relatively short period of time are not mutually contradictory."

Only a little later, however, General Vinh said:

"In a resistance war it is right to speak of protracted war and self-reliance, and the urge to fight and win quickly represents a rightist tendency."

Le Duan, whose letter to General Nguyen Chi Thanh was captured intact, says very much the same thing in these words:

"On the principle of waging a long-term struggle, tremendous efforts are to be made to obtain decisive victory within a relatively short period of time."

It would be interesting to know how General Vinh now explains the 'rightist tendency' which Resolution 13 appears to represent.

The above quotations come exclusively from persons foremost in the 'hard line' faction of Hanoi's leadership and no indication has ever come to light which suggests that the other faction, of which Premier Pham Van Dong and defense minister Vo Nguyen Giap are the leaders, subscribed to the 'quick victory' policy. Indeed, during
the French Indochina war, Giap succumbed to just this temptation at the period of Tet. Nguyen Dan in January 1951, when he massed large formation of his finest troops at Vinh-yen in preparation for an attack on the French position there. This gave General de Lattre de Tassigny reason to use napalm against the communists and Giap’s error cost him thousands of his best men. He would scarcely wish to risk repeating his mistake in the present war, in which his conduct of the fighting has revealed a caution worthy of Field Marshal Montgomery.

**General uprising**

Another theory about revolutionary warfare had been current for some years among leaders of the Viet Cong, and one which Le Duan describes with approval in the letter cited above, that of victory through the General Uprising. Here is what a leading American authority on the Viet Cong has to say about it: “It was abundantly clear from both the nature of the NLF struggle movement and the priorities employed, as well as from NLF documents, that the early doctrine of the General Uprising and the Giap third stage military assault would be the culmination of the action programs and deliver final victory. The end of the struggle would be marked by a multitude of guerilla-unit assaults, in unit force of perhaps 500 men, erupting simultaneously and in coordinated fashion throughout the country. ARVN (S. Vietnamese army) revolts would break out in every unit as the result of the binh san movement. GVN (Government of S. Vietnam) officials would be assassinated in numbers. But most of all the people of the country, by the millions, would have taken to the streets in one grand struggle movement that would paralyse what remained of the GVN administrative and military power. This was the General Uprising, which could be accomplished without the use of military or paramilitary units larger than a battalion.”

The theory was, of course, well known in Hanoi and, in the period of crisis during early 1967, must have appeared to offer the “quick victory” so badly needed. It is this General Uprising to which Resolution 13 of the Party Central Committee would seem to refer.

There is little likelihood that Vo Nguyen Giap and the members of his faction would have willingly subscribed to it, but the ‘hard-line’ faction is known to command a majority in the all-important Politburo. Subsequent developments strongly suggest that it was approved by the Politburo and Giap’s faction agreed to accept it provided amendments and improvements might be added. The result was the twin policy of Tong Cong Kich/Tong Khoi Nghi (General Offensive/General Uprising) mentioned in recently captured communist documents and mentioned by prisoners. Briefly, it envisaged a series of coordinated attacks on enemy positions in the region of the Cambodian, Laotian, and N. Vietnamese frontiers. The object of these was to capture the positions even at heavy cost and thereby force the enemy to deploy large forces to retake them, which would ensure the wide dispersal of enemy resources.

The surrounding of the post of Binh Xanh and a massive build-up of communist strength in the area of the frontier between North and South Vietnam would effectively tie down additional large numbers of enemy soldiers. Then, with enemy troops fully dispersed and selecting the most favourable opportunity—in the event it was the Tet Nguyen Dan truce—coordinated attacks would be mounted with lightning speed against the major cities and towns of S. Vietnam, Saigon and Hue would constitute the principal targets. In the former, the radio station would be taken and from it the S. Vietnamese Premier—by now captured—would be obliged to broadcast a cease-fire order to his troops. A recorded speech by Ho Chi Minh would also be transmitted. The presidential-palace would be occupied and President Thieu would be killed; the U.S. Embassy would be occupied and its communications with Washington cut; Chi Hoa prison would be emptied, etc., etc. Additionally a carefully organised front movement called the National, Democratic, and Peace Alliance Front would proclaim, itself representative of the people of S. Vietnam and would set up a coalition government comprising Viet Cong representatives and persons known to be non-communists. Several non-communist collaborators had been brought back from abroad and placed in Saigon to await the summons. In Hue the assault-troops would similarly occupy the radio station, the citadel, and parts of the town; they would proclaim the same front...
movement, which would then join forces with that in Saigon and collaborate in nominating the coalition government.

Alternative:

Should this General Offensive/General Uprising fail—and it would seem clear that some at least of the Hanoi leadership were confident it would not—then the troops dispersed in the northern provinces of S. Vietnam might be used to carry out a frontal attack against enemy positions. It is true that the war had not passed through the three stages laid down that the war might be used to propose in the northern provinces and onward. the principle of working for a quick demand the withdrawal of all foreign troops. If that General Offensive/General Uprising should fail, then the troops dis- in his writings and that communist troops not yet progressed to the third stage at which they would enjoy superiority over the enemy, but local superiority had been established in the two northern provinces and possibly in the third.

Numerous captured communist documents have made it clear that the hopes of total victory, of driving the U.S. forces from the soil of Vietnam, were abandoned many months ago as being unrealistic. Instead of total victory, the communist side was fighting for what it described as decisive victory. The documents reveal what was meant by this term. Victory would have been achieved when a coalition government containing members of the Communist National Liberation Front had been set up and had won recognition as the only government of S. Vietnam. This government would at once demand the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Vietnam. The Saigon government and would no longer have any legal right there should this invitation be withdrawn. President Johnson would have no alternative to ordering an American withdrawal. The communist documents do not elaborate on what would happen next. There was no need for them to do so.

Should the General Uprising fail, then Giap’s five divisions would attack in the three northern provinces and would strive to capture and hold them, killing large numbers of enemy soldiers and capturing even larger numbers of prisoners. Such an unprecedented victory would stun the enemy, would give rise to bitter recriminations in the U.S., and would shatter confidence in the ability of the American forces to defeat the communists. If, at this critical moment, Hanoi offered to participate in immediate peace talks, President Johnson would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to refuse. The Vietnamese communists would then enter negotiations occupying a very strong position. Indeed. Were they then to offer to abandon all previous conditions for peace and demand merely the setting up of a coalition government in Saigon, then the ostensible reasonableness of their claims would make them irresistible. The United States would have great difficulty in rejecting them.

Careful preparation

This was the thinking behind Resolution 13, which the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party approved in April 1967. From that time onwards the principle of working for a quick victory was accepted and all that remained was to make the necessary logistic arrangements for carrying out the plan. These must have been difficult and complex and doubtless entailed several months of hard work at all levels, but an outline plan was certainly drawn up very early on so that a fairly detailed knowledge of what it was proposed to do must have been available to the highest level of N. Vietnamese leadership—to the members of the Politburo and possibly to the members of the Central Committee as well—from early summer at the latest. In October 1967 N. Vietnam released the news that its delegation visiting Moscow for the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution would include Le Quang, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Nguyen Duy Trinh, all three of them members of the Politburo. The delegation’s return to Hanoi, after a visit to Peking en route, was announced by N. Vietnam on November 18. The magnitude of the proposed military operation exceeded anything undertaken in the past and demanded increased supplies of modern weapons which could only come from the USSR and China. The delegation leaders would, therefore, have had to inform their Soviet and Chinese supporters of their changed intentions during this visit, unless they had been informed earlier, and to justify the new plan. In any case, there is no doubt that Soviet and Chinese leaders were aware of what the Vietnamese communists intended to do by early November at the latest. Their reactions are not known, but would not be hard to guess.

In January 1968, therefore, when N. Vietnam and the Viet Cong declared their intention to honour a Tet Nguyen Dan truce and when foreign minister Nguyen Duy Trinh made his offer to hold peace talks when American was stopped, the plan for the offensive timing was perfectly well known to top guns. Indeed, preparations on the side were in their final stages. Nguyen himself, therefore, and those Soviet gave solemn assurances of the sin offer to negotiate, just quie-decide to secure surprise for the Viet
and bring about a halt in American bombing so that peace talks might be restarted.

N. Vietnamese representatives overseas and those pro-communist western journalists had recently been in N. Vietnam, almost certainly knew nothing of the plans when they insisted that Nguyen Duy Trinh genuinely wanted peace talks.

After effect

The communist attacks failed to overthrow the government, failed to produce mutinies in S. Vietnam’s army, or police force, and failed to win the support of the people of S. Vietnam. The Tet Offensive, the operation was a complete, failure, though it unquestionably gained tactical and psychological warfare advantages. Communist casualties in the four weeks following the Tet Offensive amounted to 50,000 and, though some of these were almost certainly killed by war supplies, the great majority were not. One communist general, Tran Do, was killed by the American attack on February 15; another was probably killed by the American attack on February 15. The cost was, therefore, very heavy and the operation appeared to discredit the arguments of N. Vietnamese leaders who make up the ‘hard line’ faction that the General Uprising could be brought about. Clearly, caution seems to have been vindicated by the course of events.

The outcome of the Tet Offensive shows that Hanoi’s leaders are in a very difficult situation indeed. The prisoners taken in the fighting affirm that they had been promised a decisive victory in the spring—this, it appears, was the factor responsible for the sudden drop in defections since the autumn—and failure to win that victory would cause most of the ‘hard line’ faction to defect to the American side. Moreover, Resolution 13 committed the ‘Lao Dong Party’ to a policy of seeking a quick victory. For both of these reasons a return to prolonged war and ‘revolutionary’ war—strategy of people’s revolution—suffered. So faithfully followed by the Vietnamese communists since 1946 now seems impossible. The die is cast. The Party has adopted a new strategy and must now do all in its power to prove it is the correct one. But how will it do this?

Present indications point to a refusal to acknowledge that their policy might be mistaken on the part of the ‘hard-line’ faction. The most recent of the captured documents cites a senior N. Vietnamese official addressing a meeting of cadres on February 15: “If we fight even harder now, he said, ‘we can collapse the puppet government (Saigon government) completely. We have enough strength to carry out a successful General Offensive.’ General Uprising is every province simultaneously.” Moreover, large troop formations still remain in exposed positions in the neighborhood of cities and towns and have not been withdrawn to the hills. The intentions of General Giap and members of his faction remain unclear. He may, if he wishes, mobilize the northern provinces of S. Vietnam and seek to win a purely local victory there as a prelude to negotiations. But the end of the monsoon is fast approaching and skies are already beginning to clear. Good weather would render his formations vulnerable to attack from the air, which would entail heavy casualties at best and, at worst, defeat.

Significantly, a small number of N. Vietnamese prisoners captured in S. Vietnamese cities have attacked the communist leadership on the grounds of age and inflexibility. According to one of them, the present leadership is ‘too old’, ‘too committed to its war policy’, and ‘inflexible’ in its ideas. He believed that the war was proving too costly and that many people in N. Vietnam had long since grown tired of it. Only the introduction of younger men with fresher ideas into the Hanoi leadership could possibly change the country’s policy because the old men are immoveably set in their old ideas. The such sentiments were voiced today is one more reason why the Lao Dong Party has become very anxious to end the war quickly. Events of the next three months will reveal which faction in Hanoi prevailed in the debate about how to do so. It is even possible that both factions have now lost touch with the mass of the Party and the people—and a failure to win a quick victory could prove the detonator which would ignite an explosion in which the present leadership was blown away and replaced by a younger and more representative one.

P. J. Honey

1 People’s War, People’s Army, by Vo Nguyen Giap, Hanoi, 1961, p. 29. The italics inserted by CNA.
2 The Resistance Will Win, by Truong Chinh, Hanoi, 1960, p. 149.
3 Ibid. p. 151 and 152
4 Ibid. p. 152 and 153
5 Quan Doi Nhan Dan, July 20, 1967
6 Liberation Radio broadcast, July 16, 1967
7 The visit was divulged by prisoners interrogated in S. Vietnam.
8 Extract from cadre’s notes of General Nguyen Van Vinh’s speech to senior Viet Cong cadres in S. Vietnam. Document captured in the spring of 1967
9 Ibid.
10 Extract from Le Duan’s letter written to General Nguyen Chi Thanh and captured in S. Vietnam during the spring of 1967
12 Vietnam News Agency bulletin, October 31, 1967
13 Vietnam News Agency bulletin, November 1967