A People's Army For South Vietnam: A Vietnamese Solution

Brian M. Jenkins

A Report prepared for
ADVANCED RESEARCH PROJECTS AGENCY
This research is supported by the Advanced Research Projects Agency under Contract No. DAHC15-67-C-0142. Views or conclusions contained in this study should not be interpreted as representing the official opinion or policy of Rand or of ARPA.
A People's Army For South Vietnam: A Vietnamese Solution

Brian M. Jenkins

A Report prepared for

ADVANCED RESEARCH PROJECTS AGENCY

Rand
SANTA MONICA, CA 90406

APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION UNLIMITED
Bibliographies of Selected Rand Publications

Rand maintains a number of special subject bibliographies containing abstracts of Rand publications in fields of wide current interest. The following bibliographies are available upon request:

- Aerodynamics
- Arms Control
- Civil Defense
- Communication Satellites
- Communication Systems
- Communist China
- Computer Simulation
- Computing Technology
- Decisionmaking
- Game Theory
- Maintenance
- Middle East
- Policy Sciences
- Program Budgeting
- SIMSCRIPT and Its Applications
- Southeast Asia
- Space Technology and Planning
- Statistics
- Systems Analysis
- USSR/East Europe
- Weapon Systems Acquisition
- Weather Forecasting and Control

To obtain copies of these bibliographies, and to receive information on how to obtain copies of individual publications, write to: Communications Department, Rand, 1700 Main Street, Santa Monica, California 90406.
PREFACE

As American forces are withdrawn from South Vietnam, attention is turning to what sort of military organization the South Vietnamese will create for themselves. The present military establishment, a replica of the American army, is clearly beyond the country's means, and the South Vietnamese know it. While they may continue to ask for large amounts of military equipment, they are at the same time planning for the day when they must defend their country with less external support. Increasingly, they talk of a people's army as a possible answer to the threat of protracted war.

This Report, which is part of a continuing program of research undertaken by The Rand Corporation for the Advanced Research Projects Agency, Office of the Secretary of Defense, examines the concept of a people's army, suggests the steps by which such a concept could be implemented, and estimates the costs that would be incurred and potential savings that would result from implementation.

The author, a staff member in Rand's Social Science Department, conducted the research for this Report while in South Vietnam during the first four months of 1971. In addition, he has drawn on his prior experience in Vietnam as a Captain in the United States Army Special Forces (1966-1967) and as a civilian member of the Long Range Planning Task Group at MACV headquarters in Saigon (1968-1969).

This study has been the subject of numerous briefings by the author to representatives of the NSC, JCS, Joint Staff, OSD/ISA, OSD/SA, OSD/DDR&E, and the Army Staff in Washington, D.C., and at CINCPAC and USARPAC headquarters in Honolulu.

* Nine months have now passed since this Report was written and its conclusions briefed to government officials. In the intervening period the North Vietnamese have launched a major conventional invasion, their drive has been halted, and the South Vietnamese have mounted their first counteroffensive. South Vietnam's foremost defense problem at the present time obviously is not the threat of protracted war. It is unlikely, however, that should the North Vietnamese forces be driven back, Hanoi and the Viet Cong will totally abandon their efforts to take over South
Vietnam. South Vietnam still will face a variety of threats to its security, ranging from renewed conventional attack to low level protracted war. The basic problem of defending the country with less external support will remain, perhaps become more acute.
SUMMARY

The Vietnamization program has been successful in enabling the United States to withdraw its combat forces, but it will not end the war. South Vietnam will face alone a tenacious enemy that is determined to go on fighting. There is no evidence that North Vietnam has abandoned its objective of total victory. It is unlikely to withdraw the troops it has deployed in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, and South Vietnam does not have the military capability to destroy them entirely or to drive them back home. Within its borders, South Vietnam confronts the Viet Cong, who survive though weakened by South Vietnam's pacification campaigns. They are still feared; in some areas they are still popular; and in the past they have demonstrated great resiliency. Facing these threats, South Vietnam must be able to sustain its defenses in a war that, with occasional interruptions of peace, could continue indefinitely.

To carry on after American withdrawal, the United States has created in South Vietnam a large, conventionally structured army. South Vietnam cannot support this army for very long. It has neither the men nor the money. Almost half of the country's able-bodied men are already soldiers. The number that desert or are killed each year exceeds the number of young men reaching the draft age, and with the South Vietnamese army taking on a greater share of the fighting, neither desertions nor casualties are likely to decline.

As it is now, not only does the United States pay all the costs of fighting the war, it also helps pay the salaries of South Vietnam's soldiers and subsidizes the country's economy. No guarantee can be given that the U.S. Congress will continue to vote the $3 billion a year necessary to sustain the war effort, a figure that does not include the cost of American forces, any residual advisory group that may remain in Vietnam, or the air interdiction campaign in Laos. Even with continued American assistance, South Vietnam faces serious economic problems that could produce popular unrest, political agitation, and government instability, which would ultimately be reflected in weakness on the battlefield. South Vietnam could be in danger of collapsing under
the weight of its own military establishment. This may become a greater threat to the country than that of being conquered militarily.

Designed originally to meet the threat of a Korea-style invasion from the north, South Vietnam's army is far too dependent on lavish artillery and air support, which are expensive and destructive. Its style of fighting and the often bad behavior of its soldiers toward the populace tend to alienate the very people it is supposed to defend. Fighting as it does now, this army will exhaust the country in the protracted war that the opponent seems to have decided on.

Realizing that their nation cannot alone afford its present military establishment or depend for long on American military assistance, a number of South Vietnamese are considering a different concept of military organization, one better suited to South Vietnam's needs and capabilities than what it has now. They envisage a vast people's army composed of lightly armed soldiers responsible for the defense of their own localities. In time, this inexpensive militia would be able to assume much of South Vietnam's defense burden and thus allow reductions in the size of the regular armed forces. It is a kind of army South Vietnam can afford, one that is derived from durable Vietnamese traditions of national defense.

South Vietnam already has an incipient people's army in the People's Self-Defense Force, Popular Forces, and Regional Forces, which together comprise over four million part-time and full-time local soldiers. A three-phase program is suggested to show how these three organizations could be combined, made more effective, and transformed into a people's army.

In the first phase, which would begin immediately, the Regional and Popular Forces and People's Self-Defense Force would be placed under a single command and renamed officially the People's Army. At the same time, the fighting capabilities of the People's Self-Defense Force would be improved by reinforcing PSDF units with a small cadre of veterans drawn from the regular forces, by giving them more and better training, and by furnishing more small arms and some crew-served weapons. The first phase would also include measures to prepare for the eventual demobilization of the regular army, such as the creation
of a territorial reserve force to be attached to existing Regional and Popular Forces units, and the establishment of military-agricultural colonies, or don dien, on abandoned land in strategic areas, a concept similar to the Israeli kibbutzim but deeply rooted in Vietnam's history.

In the second phase, as the people's army became capable of assuming a larger portion of the defense burden, probably sometime in 1973, the army could begin a limited demobilization, starting with soldiers who could be readily absorbed into the economy. Those who remained should be given vocational training part-time to reduce the danger of urban unemployment and unrest that might otherwise follow the release of thousands of soldiers, the great majority unskilled in any civilian occupation, from the service. At the same time, South Vietnam could create an urban auxiliary militia composed of part-time soldiers who could take over some of the routine tasks now performed by full-time regular soldiers, allowing further demobilization.

The people's army would reach maturity in the third phase, possibly around 1975, allowing substantial reductions in the size of the regular army. Fully formed, the people's army would include a sizeable People's Self-Defense Force encadred by veterans of the regular army. It would be assisted by a single territorial force of 300,000-400,000 full-time but still local soldiers. Backing this would be a much smaller regular army.

The naturally greater vulnerability of a people's army to large, conventional enemy offensives would be compensated for by other strengths. Should the enemy plan an offensive like that of Tet 1968, that is, widespread attacks on population centers, first it would have to mass troops and pre-position supplies. The people's army's continuous presence in all populated areas would allow it to forestall such a buildup. Against the alternative possibility of an enemy offensive against a single military region, the mobile, highly professional regular army could gradually redeploy to the most vulnerable areas of the country as the people's army freed it from territorial defense.

As the people's army grew stronger and the regular army were gradually reduced to 300,000 men, a goal mentioned by President Thieu, then approximately $640 million could be saved annually. That saving
would not be enough to make South Vietnam independent of U.S. military assistance. (The United States would save most of the money.) But South Vietnam would save men. Demobilization would allow the return of thousands of men to productive roles in the South Vietnamese economy, thus decreasing the country's dependence on American economic assistance.

Indications are that the South Vietnamese are moving toward creating a people's army. Given the alternatives, they have no choice but to try to develop a cheaper way to defend their country. Opposition is likely to come from the regular army, particularly senior commanders, who may regard the people's army as a direct threat to their military commands as well as to the political power they exercise as commanders of large military formations.

The American role should be positive but low-key. We cannot create a people's army for the South Vietnamese as we have created their regular army. We should, however, increase their sense of urgency. Frank discussions indicating that U.S. military assistance will decline sharply would encourage the South Vietnamese to develop a low-cost defense force. More positively, the United States should materially support their efforts in this direction.

Not only is the concept vital to the survival of South Vietnam, but the development of a people's army there might reveal principles of defense organization that could be applied in other nations in Southeast Asia. There is a need in the region as a whole for the creation of low-cost but effective defense forces that are not an overwhelming burden upon local societies and economies and are not totally dependent on American support.

Appendix A looks ahead and attaches actual numbers and costs to some of the ideas described, if implemented, and estimates the potential savings that would result as the people's army assumed a growing share of the defense burden, thus allowing gradual reductions in the present armed forces.

Appendix B looks back and describes some Vietnamese solutions to the historic problem of sustained mobilization. Despite their ultimate failure against the French challenge in the nineteenth century, Vietnam's precolonial institutions for nine centuries preserved the
country's independence against numerically and technologically superior enemies. To fight the long wars that were a regular feature of their history, the Vietnamese developed techniques that enabled them to reduce the strain of sustained mobilization while maintaining their defense. These included special recruiting procedures; measures for supporting the families of soldiers; various schemes of rotational active duty; an economic role for the army; and the deployment of military-agricultural colonies (don dien) to clear new terrain and to defend the frontiers.

Don dien are the subject of Appendix C. This traditional institution has great relevance to South Vietnam's current problems, as it offers a means by which the country could shift some of its military manpower to agricultural production without complete demobilization. The don dien could serve several purposes at once: reclaim land that has been abandoned as a result of the war; resettle demobilized veterans; and assist in the defense of strategic areas of the country.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many South Vietnamese civilian officials and Army officers, who cannot appropriately be cited here, contributed with insight and frankness to the present Report. Similarly, several U.S. officials and military officers in CORDS, OSD/ISA, OSD/SA, and OSD/ARPA greatly assisted through comments, criticisms, and fresh suggestions, not to mention advice in the formulation stage and support during the period of field research.

Rand colleagues who made substantive contributions include: S. L. Canby, G. C. Hickey, F. P. Hoeber, S. T. Hosmer, F. C. Ikle, and W. A. Stewart. As usual, many others at Rand read, listened, and made constructive suggestions. Of particular note, Robert W. Komer was an active participant in fostering the research and in its final presentation.
CONTENTS

PREFACE ................................................................................... iii

SUMMARY ................................................................................... v

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................ xi

Section

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1

II. THE PROSPECT AND BURDEN OF A LONG WAR ......................... 3
    A Tenacious Enemy ................................................................. 4
    Inadequate Human Resources ................................................... 5
    The Economic Burden .............................................................. 7
    An Army Well Equipped But Ill Suited ......................................... 8
    Notes ..................................................................................... 10

III. A STRATEGY OF PROTRACTED DEFENSE AND
    A PEOPLE'S ARMY ............................................................... 12
    The Concept of a People's Army ............................................... 12
    South Vietnam Has an Incipient People's Army ............................. 13
    Notes ..................................................................................... 16

IV. DEVELOPING A PEOPLE'S ARMY ............................................ 17
    Immediate Tasks ...................................................................... 17
    The Second Phase .................................................................. 23
    The Third Phase ..................................................................... 26
    Reducing the Burden ................................................................ 27
    Meeting the Threat .................................................................. 28
    Notes ..................................................................................... 32

V. POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN ESTABLISHING
    A PEOPLE'S ARMY ............................................................... 33

Appendix

A. HISTORICAL SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM OF
    SUSTAINED MOBILIZATION .................................................. 35
    Notes ..................................................................................... 40

B. DON DIEN .................................................................................. 42
    Notes ..................................................................................... 60
Co cua lay cua che tham.
Khong co cua lay tham che cua.

The rich man uses his property to protect his life.
The poor man uses his life to protect his property.

-- Vietnamese proverb
I. INTRODUCTION

A high-ranking American officer was recently heard to say, "We have given the South Vietnamese the best-equipped army in the world and provided them with the best training in the world. If they can't figure out how to win the war with it, that's their problem." However true the statement may be, it misses the point that the United States may be unwilling to support this army, and the South Vietnamese by themselves are incapable of supporting it.

Amid the recurrent crises of this interminable war looms a crisis that is no less so because it will be chronic rather than acute: how are the South Vietnamese going to defend themselves when American forces leave, if they cannot support their present army and if the United States refuses to?

This Report describes a kind of military organization that promises to meet this crisis. Its basis is a lightly armed, vast militia of local soldiers, which can be called a people's army. As following discussion will show, a people's army could eventually assume a major portion of South Vietnam's defense burden and thus allow partial demobilization of the current overly mechanized and costly regular army. Relatively inexpensive, the people's army is an army that the South Vietnamese can afford. It is an army that they can accept: the very concept of a people's army derives from durable Vietnamese traditions of national defense.

Changes in organization and tactics that would be required in the creation of a people's army will undoubtedly be resisted by the Americans and South Vietnamese who have a vested interest in the current military organization and mode of fighting. However, the crisis is so serious and the potential benefits from a people's army are so great that objections of infeasibility will probably be overcome. Already, there is evidence that top Vietnamese officials favor a people's army.

How the South Vietnamese will manage their defense after American withdrawal is, of course, uncertain. The author believes that they will move toward establishing a people's army while continuing to demand of the United States a high level of military assistance that many
realize will not be granted. Given the alternatives, the South Viet­namese have no choice but to try to develop a cheaper way to defend their country, and to do so before reductions in foreign aid immobilize the army they have now, and before the society collapses while trying to support and man it.

A people's army is no panacea. It will not solve all of South Vietnam's problems. Problems of political leadership, motivation, and cohesiveness, not dealt with here, will remain, no matter how the armed forces are organized and equipped. The author does believe, however, that a people's army offers a means of reducing the burden of sustained mobilization and increasing South Vietnam's chances of survival in the difficult years ahead.
II. THE PROSPECT AND BURDEN OF A LONG WAR

In all likelihood, the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam will not end the war. Nor will our efforts to build up a large South Vietnamese army to replace our own forces guarantee the survival of South Vietnam. We have provided the South Vietnamese with a replica of the American army; it is a formidable military machine, but, for economic and social reasons, South Vietnam cannot support it for very long, and the United States may not be willing to support it for the likely duration of the war. Despite its strength on the battlefield, South Vietnam could fall. In fact, the danger that the country will collapse under the weight of its own military establishment may equal or even exceed the danger that it will be conquered militarily. There is also the danger that South Vietnam's army will be arbitrarily reduced to meet budgetary requirements without sufficient forethought as to the consequences for the country's defenses and for its society if thousands of soldiers, the great majority of whom are unskilled in any civilian occupation, were suddenly demobilized.

As faith in conventional military methods and in the inexhaustibility of American resources diminishes while the prospect of continued war remains, many Vietnamese have begun to think about a different kind of an army to defend their country, one that is cheaper and less burdensome on the people, and might be more effective than the present cumbersome, conventionally structured, and overly Americanized army. They foresee South Vietnam's future defense force as a vast militia of armed peasants and part-time soldiers backed by a much smaller conventional army. This is hardly a new idea. In fact, it is probably close to the way the Vietnamese would have organized their own defenses if they had not been so imbued with French training and American military advice.

Coming from a wealthy country and accustomed to comparatively short wars fought overseas, Americans have had little experience with the problems that confront a small, poor country fighting a protracted war on its own territory. Long wars have been a regular feature of Vietnamese history. In often having faced that problem, the Vietnamese developed a number of techniques that enabled them to reduce the strain of sustained mobilization (see Appendix B). We as advisors might do
well to encourage the Vietnamese in their effort to apply some of these techniques, successful in Vietnamese history, to South Vietnam's present problems.

Changes are necessary, both in the composition of the armed forces and in the way they fight. This essay describes a concept of military organization and tactics that will be more tailored to South Vietnam's needs and capabilities than what it has now. It takes into account the limitations imposed by South Vietnam's economy, the possibility that American military assistance will be reduced, and the range of threats likely to be posed by the enemy.

A TENACIOUS ENEMY

South Vietnam faces a tenacious enemy that is determined to go on fighting. North Vietnam has not abandoned its objective of total victory. The Vietnamese have a tradition of long wars, and the North Vietnamese government has thus far shown itself more capable than the South Vietnamese government of imposing on its people the regimentation and austerity necessary to fight one. Members of the Hanoi government are themselves the survivors of thirty and forty years of struggle against the French and the Americans. They are not going to quit now, with the Americans withdrawing and with South Vietnam facing serious economic problems and in greater political disarray than usual. North Vietnam is unlikely to withdraw the 100,000 troops it maintains in South Vietnam or the more than 100,000 it maintains in Cambodia and Laos. Even if they cannot march on Saigon and take over the country, they keep South Vietnam under pressure and can exploit any signs of weakness. The ever-present threat they pose forces South Vietnam to undertake costly offensives such as the one launched last spring in Laos and burdens its society with an expensive defense effort.

Within its borders, South Vietnam also faces the persistent threat of the Viet Cong, who survive though weakened. Government programs aimed at neutralizing the Viet Cong infrastructure have succeeded, at the political cost of alienating many of the people, only in netting a number of mostly low-level cadres, who can be easily replaced. Although
at reduced strength, Viet Cong military units still remain: large ones are holed up in the traditional base areas such as the U Minh Forest, and small ones often hide in orchards just outside villages now rated secure. They are feared, and in some areas -- traditional strongholds of antigovernment resistance -- they are still popular. In Bình Dinh Province alone, where the Viet Minh and later the Viet Cong have been around for so long that they have almost created a Viet Cong society, sympathizers are reported to number 300,000, nearly a third of the province's total population.

South Vietnam does not have and is not likely to attain the military capability to destroy the North Vietnamese army or drive it back home, nor can South Vietnam deter North Vietnam by any credible threat of retaliation. Reduction of the traditional enemy base areas in South Vietnam will take years, and total elimination of the Viet Cong underground and active sympathizers seems hardly possible. South Vietnam must be able to sustain its defenses in a war that, with occasional interruptions of peace, could continue indefinitely.

INADEQUATE HUMAN RESOURCES

The country has neither the men nor the economic strength to support its present military establishment. Almost one-half of South Vietnam's able-bodied men are already soldiers, not counting those who serve part-time in the People's Self-Defense Force. Because of the high casualty rate and even higher desertion rate, the annual net loss to the armed forces exceeds the potential influx of young men who reach the draft age each year. The armed forces maintain their present size only by not allowing the release of any soldiers and by dipping deeper into the manpower pool of 18- to 38-year-olds who have not already served. In the past, this was facilitated by the rapid expansion of government control in the countryside, which made more men available for conscription, but now that 90 percent of the country is under control, the gains from this source have peaked and the available manpower pool is drying up.
The withdrawal of American forces compels the South Vietnamese army to redeploy its forces and assume a greater share of the fighting, both of which in the past have increased the desertion rate. This problem is exemplified most dramatically by South Vietnam's difficulties in redeploying or maintaining units in the Demilitarized Zone. Often a scene of the heaviest fighting, the DMZ has become South Vietnam's "Eastern Front." Many South Vietnamese soldiers regard being sent there as a form of punishment.

The interminability of service adds another motive for desertion. Death, disability, and desertion are now the only means of exit from the army: Defection to the enemy is rare. Usually the soldiers just go home to care for their families. They object more to fighting away from home than fighting itself, for they often join local militia units to remain at home, defend their own families, and not be drafted again. The desertion rate of the Regional Forces, whose soldiers serve in their own provinces, is considerably lower than that of the regular army, and the desertion rate of the Popular Forces, whose soldiers serve in their own villages, is lower yet.

Some believe that a smaller army would be able to handle the future threat, and thus that South Vietnam can begin to demobilize. While this may be true in the long run, rapid demobilization could be as dangerous to South Vietnam's society and economy as sustained mobilization is debilitating. Many of South Vietnam's soldiers have been in the army so long that they have no other profession, and they would not be absorbed easily into the civilian economy. Those that did not return to the family farm but drifted to the cities might simply add to the urban unemployment problem produced by the withdrawal of American forces. Groups of unemployed veterans could combine with the mobs of disabled veterans who are already demonstrating against the government. They might resort to banditry. There are increasing reports that idle soldiers are turning to looting and highway robbery, and able-bodied soldiers as well as disabled veterans openly engage in racketeering among businesses in Saigon. Rapid demobilization (without subsequent absorption of those released into the active labor force), or even a steep decline in the number of
men inducted into the government forces, would furnish the Viet Cong a manpower pool. Persuaded that they had been exploited and then abandoned by the government, veterans today could become Viet Cong tomorrow.

THE ECONOMIC BURDEN

It costs about $3.5 billion a year for South Vietnam to maintain its armed forces and fight the war. (This excludes what is spent on the American forces.) With no reduction in the size of its armed forces and the style of fighting unchanged, the cost will not change significantly. Most of the economists who have looked at the Vietnamese economy would agree that the country is unable by itself to support a military force such as the one currently deployed. South Vietnam's economy has been dislocated by the war. Rice and rubber exports, the two traditional revenue producers, have declined dramatically, and recapture of these markets would take time, perhaps a decade, under the best of conditions. Meanwhile, the provision of services and products to American soldiers has become one of South Vietnam's major industries and its principal source of foreign exchange, but this is declining with the withdrawal of American forces.

True, as a result of American expenditures during the war, new capabilities have been created -- port facilities, a road network, and many trained personnel -- but these are more relevant to postwar economic growth than they are to the country's ability to support its present military effort. The problem is not one of postwar economic development, but rather a continuing state of war. South Vietnam will continue to be almost totally dependent on the United States to finance its defense effort. Given the climate of opinion in and the obvious economic difficulties of the United States, no guarantee can be given that it will provide the necessary financial support indefinitely.

Even with continued American assistance, South Vietnam faces economic difficulties that could produce popular unrest, political agitation, and government instability, which ultimately would be reflected in weakness on the battlefield. Dissatisfaction over continued inflation;
unpopular government measures to impose economic austerity or raise revenue; unemployment resulting from the American withdrawal; and the plight of South Vietnam's soldiers, who find themselves impoverished by low salaries and soaring costs, could lead to an explosive situation in the urban areas where the population is concentrated.

AN ARMY WELL EQUIPPED BUT ILL SUITED

If South Vietnam's present armed forces cannot be adequately manned and paid for, their effectiveness hardly seems relevant. Nevertheless, many would question their effectiveness even if they could be adequately maintained. While South Vietnam's army has become more competent and more aggressive -- in other words, has performed more like us -- it suffers from many of the disadvantages of a large conventional army faced with an unconventional foe. Despite the apparent superior mobility afforded by its armored personnel carriers and helicopters, it cannot seem to concentrate its forces rapidly enough to trap or pursue the enemy. In battle, the army, says one Vietnamese officer, "is addicted to the opium of heavy weapons."

A former Viet Cong battalion commander with almost twenty years of experience observed that so accustomed were South Vietnam's regular soldiers to relying on heavy artillery and air support that they often left their own mortars at home and thus found themselves outgunned by the Viet Cong, who brought small mortars with them. And as South Vietnam's forces retreated under heavy U.S. air cover from the Cambodian town of Snoul, General Abrams himself was heard to say, "Dammit, they've got to learn they can't do it all with air. They've got to do it on the ground with infantry."

The performance of the South Vietnamese army contrasts unfavorably with that of its opponent, whose weapons a man can carry or pull and whose mobility is measured by how far and how fast it can march. Except near the Demilitarized Zone, rarely has the enemy used armor or artillery, and not once has it relied on air support. Perhaps General Chassin, who once commanded the French Air Force in Indochina, was right when he wondered if the Viet Minh were not compelled by their lack of heavy weapons to practice methods of warfare that were capable of stalemating most modern armaments.
Superior firepower is useful only in battles where firepower is relevant. Large deployments of artillery and American B-52 bombers give the South Vietnamese forces a clear-cut advantage in large engagements only where the enemy is willing to stand and trade punches. But these are rare; in the most common kind of engagement, the enemy has an advantage in being able to choose whether to fight, or to avoid battle, conserve losses, and thus prolong the war.

Reliance on heavy weapons is expensive -- over a third of the regular army's operating costs go for artillery ammunition alone -- and it is also extremely destructive. It has contributed heavily to the South Vietnam army's dependence on American support and alienation from the people. As reliance on foreign technology replaced local support, the army grew indifferent to the people. When soldiers have helicopters, they seem to worry less about the disposition of the population along the roads they would otherwise have to travel. When they have armor, the attitudes of villagers seem less important. The indifference is reciprocated. Some people in South Vietnam have come to regard their own army as a foreign army, fighting according to an imported doctrine and entirely dependent on foreign support, or, according to the propaganda of Hanoi, as "puppets." Its destructive style of fighting coupled with the bad behavior of many of its soldiers cause the people to fear the army that is supposed to be defending them as a bigger threat to their own security than the enemy.
NOTES

1. These traditional centers of dissidence can tentatively be identified as the highlands and some coastal areas of the northern part of the country, particularly Quang Nam, Quang Tin, Quang Ngai, and Binh Dinh Provinces; portions of Tay Ninh and Hau Nghia Provinces, the Plain of Reeds, and parts of the Ca Mau Peninsula. Some of these areas have been Viet Minh, and later Viet Cong, strongholds for years. A typical example is part of Hau Nghia Province. Traveling in the area in 1962, Gerald C. Hickey observed that the peasants used Viet Cong propaganda in their everyday speech. For example, they naturally used the expression "Diem-American gang" to refer to the government. Some families boasted of three generations of males in the Viet Minh. (See Gerald C. Hickey, Accommodation and Coalition in South Vietnam, The Rand Corporation, P-4213, January 1970, pp. 37-41.) This same area can boast of many generations of rebels, bandits, and river pirates before the Viet Minh. It was mentioned by French officials as a rebel stronghold as early as the 1860s, and the French missionary Bouillevaux described the same parts of western Cochinchina as being infested with river pirates in the 1840s and 1850s.

2. South Vietnam's population was estimated to be 18,331,000 in 1970. Males between the ages of 15 and 49 numbered 4,425,000, of whom 2,555,000 were judged physically fit for service. Approximately 1.2 million men are full-time soldiers or policemen.

3. Approximately 115,000 young men reach the draft age of 18 annually.

4. Approximately 160,000 men are inducted into the armed forces each year.

5. No figures are available to show what portion of the deserters who are not returned to the service have rejoined local units under assumed names.


7. When the author was last in Saigon, January through April 1971, he personally witnessed shakedowns of owners of small businesses by disabled veterans and was told about many others. See also Iver Peterson, "Crimes Said to Rise in Vietnam's Army," New York Times, September 7, 1971.
8. Discussion between the author and Captain Phan Van Xuong, Saigon, April 16, 1971. Captain Xuong joined the Viet Minh in the 1940s. In 1954 he went north, returning to South Vietnam in 1958. He rose through the ranks of the Viet Cong until he commanded a battalion in the Quyet Thang ("Victory") Regiment in 1968, a temporary organization created for the Tet offensive. He rallied to the government's side in 1968. Xuong said that a Viet Cong regiment normally has nine to twelve assorted mortars (60mm, 81mm, 82mm, occasionally a 120mm), which it uses for close support. These, plus the AK47 and AK50 assault rifles, machine guns, and small rocket launchers, often give the Viet Cong initial fire superiority.


III. A STRATEGY OF PROTRACTED DEFENSE AND A PEOPLE'S ARMY

The South Vietnamese need to gear for a long struggle in which staying power will be more important than firepower. Their strategy should be that of a "protracted defense," to develop the capability of fighting beyond the fifteen, twenty, or more years that Ho Chi Minh promised to fight, and to convince Ho's successors that they can do so. A strategy of protracted defense implies a style of fighting that is cheaper, less destructive, and that conserves men. It also means marshaling the country's manpower for the war effort in a way that interrupts production and economic growth as little as possible. President Thieu himself recently summed up the problem:

Now that we have built a powerful army, naturally, we must gradually assume the responsibility to fight in place of the repatriated allied soldiers. We only need to continue to be supplied with the sufficient necessary means to fight. However, our problem is not simple because, on the one hand, we are poor and must reserve national resources and foreign aid for developing our social welfare and our economy and, therefore, must not forever maintain an army too that can become a burden for the national budget. On the other hand, we must have very powerful armed forces to defend peace as soon as peace is restored, and to stand ready to oppose every act of reaggression by the communists. This has led us to think about a national defense that is not too expensive but still efficient, and that can allow the people to have enough time to improve their livelihood and contribute to developing the country.

THE CONCEPT OF A PEOPLE'S ARMY

The kind of army most suitable under a strategy of protracted defense, one that would preserve military readiness while providing for the nation's economic development, is not the overly mechanized, costly regular army of today. South Vietnam will need, instead, a low-cost but effective force such as the following: a vast militia of armed peasants and part-time soldiers backed by a much smaller conventional army. Most of its members would serve part-time and thus would be able to engage in their own economic activities. To avoid long separations of soldiers from their families and the expense to the government
of supporting soldiers' dependents on army bases, all members of this militia, part-time and full-time, would serve close to their own homes. This is a good idea also since local soldiers tend to behave better because they are close to home and do not desert as often as soldiers serving far from their homes. Many South Vietnamese call this concept *quan doi nhan dan*, which means "army of the people," or "people's army," not because of any resemblance to so-called people's armies in China and North Vietnam but because of its greater reliance on human resources than on costly weapons, and on people defending their own homes than on full-time professional soldiers.

The term "people's army" itself seems to offend many Americans. It sounds vaguely communist. The South Vietnamese who support the idea do not share these ideological reservations. The country already has an organization called the People's Self-Defense Force, and the term "people's army" is often used to describe the kind of military organization envisaged in the future. The idea of a people's army has special appeal to the Vietnamese, for it is basically a return to the military institutions and techniques that for centuries enabled Vietnam to preserve its independence against numerically and technologically superior enemies.

**SOUTH VIETNAM HAS AN INCIPIENT PEOPLE'S ARMY**

South Vietnam already has a people's army of sorts in the Regional Forces (RF), Popular Forces (PF), and People's Self-Defense Force (PSDF). The Regional and Popular Forces, local soldiers whose full-time job is to provide security for the rural population, together outnumber the men in South Vietnam's regular army. As these soldiers are intimately familiar with the terrain and people in the area in which they operate, they have the same advantage as the local Viet Cong. They fight well when given support by the local communities. In highly cohesive communities, such as in An Giang Province, where followers of the Hoa Hao sect predominate and by informal agreement with the government hold most command positions in the area's military units and government, local soldiers can be extremely effective. Proportionally, the Regional and Popular Forces also cost very little, less than
a quarter of the cost of South Vietnam's total land forces (the regular army, the Marines, and the two territorial forces).

In many respects, the Regional or Popular Forces soldier is a poor country cousin of the soldier in the regular army. He is the most poorly armed and receives the lowest pay. Constantly facing the danger of being attacked, he cannot depend on quick reinforcement, and if wounded he can expect medical treatment inferior to that given the regular soldier. He joined the Regional Forces or Popular Forces primarily to remain near his home, and despite the hardships he probably would not trade places with a soldier in the regular army. In fact, many of his fellow soldiers are deserters from the regular army who, to avoid being sent back, enlisted in a local unit. Opportunities for advancement are limited. No vocational training is given, and few of the rural soldiers have completed enough schooling to obtain the First Baccalaureate necessary to becoming an officer.

When the enemy launched widespread attacks on the populated areas of South Vietnam in 1968, thousands of people asked the government for arms to defend themselves, their families, and their property. The government responded by creating the People's Self-Defense Force. Since then it has grown to an organization of 4.4 million part-time soldiers, of which 1.3 million have received some rudimentary military training and have been issued 600,000 weapons, to be rotated among them. Members are organized into cells of three men each, squad-size teams, interteams, and combat groups. The interteam of approximately platoon strength is the largest tactical unit. The People's Self-Defense Force is expected to warn of enemy attempts to enter populated areas and to repel incursions by small enemy groups. Performance varies widely. In some areas, the People's Self-Defense Force is poorly organized, poorly trained, poorly led, and as a result, virtually ineffective. In a few areas, however, People's Self-Defense Force units have fought off enemy attacks with no outside help.

The costs of the People's Self-Defense Force are miniscule when compared with the other components of South Vietnam's defense establishment. Its only major investment is in weapons, which have been furnished from excess stocks already in South Vietnam and thus do not
represent a new expense. The operating costs of the People's Self-Defense Force are currently about $9.1 million a year, most of which are to defray the expenses of training interteam leaders. Per trained combat member, this comes to about $7 per year. These expenses are borne entirely by the South Vietnamese government; the United States provides no direct support.

Together, the two territorial forces and the People's Self-Defense Force represent a defense force of 5 million men and women, 1.8 million of whom have received at least some rudimentary military training. They embody the principles of a people's army. They are local: the People's Self-Defense Force member defends his own neighborhood or hamlet, the Popular Forces soldier his own village, and the Regional Forces soldier his own province. They cost little -- $460 million a year, or roughly 15 percent of South Vietnam's total defense costs. And many of them are part-time soldiers and thus have time to pursue their own economic activities. Already deployed throughout the populated areas of the country, they constitute a vast military potential.

They also constitute a vast political potential. A people's army of 5 million would be the largest, and the only other, organization besides the Viet Cong and the regular armed forces whose members are drawn from all social classes, ethnic groups, and religions.
NOTES

11. Quoted from a speech by President Thieu on August 5, 1971, Civil Defense Day.

12. Operating costs and other figures relating to the People's Self-Defense Force were furnished the author by Dr. John C. Russell, Chief of the PSDF/YA Division, CORDS, MACV Headquarters in Saigon.

13. Total defense costs here refer only to those of South Vietnam's armed forces. They do not include the costs of the American forces in Vietnam.
IV. DEVELOPING A PEOPLE'S ARMY

To transform the people's army that South Vietnam already has into a more effective organization capable of assuming a larger portion of the defense burden, the following measures are suggested, not as a blueprint, but as an indication of the direction to take. To decrease the disruption occasioned by any military reorganization, the transformation should be gradual; it could be a three-phased program: some modest immediate measures; a second phase, to begin sometime in 1973; and a third phase, to go into effect sometime after 1975. The actual timing of the phases would, of course, depend on the level and kind of threat posed by the enemy and the success attained in developing a people's army.

IMMEDIATE TASKS

We can assume that for the next two years or so the enemy threat will remain at a minimum what it is now. South Vietnam's armed forces also will remain at their present strength. The measures undertaken in the first phase would not result in any substantial cost or manpower savings. Savings would come later as the regular army is reduced in size and relies less on heavy weapons.

Create a People's Army in Name

To instill the idea of a people's army, the People's Self-Defense Force, Popular Forces, and Regional Forces should be combined under a single command and renamed officially the People's Army. This would provide an administrative framework and would create a vested interest in further change. Moreover, even a simple change of name would have symbolic significance, as it would compel people to think about the People's Army as something different from the regular armed forces.

Unlike the Regional and Popular Forces, the People's Self-Defense Force is not now part of the regular armed forces. At the local level, PSDF members select their own leaders, and operational control is assigned to the hamlet chief. At the province level, the deputy
province chief is the formal head of the PSDF, assisted by a Provincial People's Self-Defense Force Committee. At the national level, the PSDF is under the direction of the National People's Self-Defense Force Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, whose directives pass down through the Ministry of Interior. The national committee in turn is under the Central Pacification and Development Council, whose chairman is the President himself.

Because of the political potential represented by an armed organization of 4-5 million members, South Vietnam's President probably would be unwilling to see the People's Army fall completely under the control of the regular armed forces. On the other hand, observers with long experience in Vietnam fear that if the People's Army were completely removed from the regular army command structure, it would lose vital army support. They advise working from within by creating a Vice Chief of Staff for People's Army, who would serve as titular head of the People's Army, and who would report directly to the Chief of the Joint General Staff. This would allay regular-army opposition to the People's Army and insure a measure of general staff support. However, the national PSDF committee's authority would extend to the entire People's Army, and it would continue to issue policy directives. This would preserve a degree of presidential control.

Working through the military region commanders, province chiefs, and district chiefs, the People's Army commander would be concerned primarily with matters relating to equipment, training, logistics and combat support. The National People's Self-Defense Committee, working with the People's Army commander and through the Provincial, Village, and Hamlet Defense Committees, would be concerned with personnel policy and supervision of political training. The organizational changes suggested would not disrupt current functions. At the local level, the organizational framework would remain the same. Province chiefs would still command Regional Forces companies, village chiefs would have operational control over Popular Forces Platoons, and hamlet chiefs would have operational control of the local People's Self-Defense Force.
Increase the Fighting Capability of People's Self-Defense Force

The fighting capability of the People's Self-Defense Force can be increased by giving it a cadre of veterans drawn from the regular army or territorial forces. Young boys, old men, and about 225,000 women make up the bulk of the combat members now. Plans already approved by President Thieu call for the creation of elite interteams, each having four fully trained cadres. These interteams are to replace Popular Forces platoons in secure hamlets, freeing them for redeployment to less secure hamlets. They have already done so in 4681 hamlets. The idea is sound, providing that elite PSDF interteams do not become full-time soldiers competing with the Popular Forces and, like them, requiring a salary. Older regular-army soldiers, particularly those with combat experience, could be released from their units and assigned as part-time cadres to the PSDF. Keeping their individual weapons with them, they would provide the teams with experience and firepower.

By itself, firepower is not the critical determinant of effectiveness. If a local PSDF unit is good with the arms it has now, a few additional weapons will make it better; if it is not good, additional weapons will not make it good. Demonstrated combativeness, competence, and a low weapon-loss rate should be the basis for the distribution of small, crew-served weapons such as light machine guns and small mortars, which are cheap and easy to operate. The ex-soldiers assigned as cadres to the People's Self-Defense Force can teach the civilian defenders how to use them. Following the Viet Cong example, women also can be trained as mortar crews.

The present training program for People's Self-Defense Force members and leaders is inadequate. Training the People's Self-Defense Force should be considered as important as turning out regular soldiers. To train a vast number of people cheaply, the regular army and Regional Forces might form mobile training teams. A thousand such teams of six to ten men could remain in each hamlet for one month every year. A typical team might include an individual-weapons instructor, a crew-served weapons instructor, two instructors of tactics, a political warfare man, and a medical or public health specialist. Training, plus
weapons, will begin to make the People's Self-Defense Force an effective organization. (A more detailed description of these measures and the costs that would be incurred is given in Appendix A.)

**Commission Local Officers**

Unlike present practice, in which officers assigned to territorial units in the countryside are usually from the city, soldiers should be commanded by officers from the same locality. Local soldiers commanded by local officers should defend their own territory, a basic People's Army principle. At least a third of those newly assigned to these units should be selected from the local ranks, preferably from noncoms of demonstrated competence. That would allow the government forces to offer the same incentive as the Viet Cong, in whose ranks it has always been easier to rise.

**Establish Local Defense Committees**

Popular legend has it that when Vietnam was faced with an invasion by a Mongol army in the twelfth century, a General Tran Hung Dao assembled 10,000 old men from all over the country and asked them for advice on whether to submit or fight. They shouted for war, and, thus assured of the people's support, Tran Hung Dao went on to defeat the invaders. Long before Mao Tse-tung put it in different terms, the Vietnamese realized that military operations must have popular support if they are to succeed.

To insure that at least smaller military operations have the support of the local people, defense committees should be organized in each village. Each committee would comprise local military and civilian leaders and notables, the sort Tran Hung Dao would have asked for advice, and it would recommend or advise against certain military operations in its area; explain broad military objectives to the people; and summon and coordinate their support. The committee would *not* command units, but it would have the authority to mobilize its own People's Self-Defense Force and even recall demobilized veterans to temporary active duty. Guaranteed of local support, the units assigned to the area could increase dramatically in effectiveness.
Create a Rotational Reserve System

To prepare for eventual demobilization, South Vietnam should create a reserve system to insure that its veterans can be remobilized when needed and to draw continuing benefits from their military training and experience. It should be an uncomplicated system, local rather than national, and could be built around the present Regional and Popular Forces by creating reserve RF and PF units and attaching them to existing units. Local units could monitor their reserve members more easily than could a national organization, and veterans might be less likely to evade a local than a national call-up. The development of such a system would give South Vietnam the capability to expand its forces rapidly and, just as rapidly, to return its soldiers to productive tasks once the threat has subsided.

The South Vietnamese might also adopt a system of rotational active duty for the reserves. It is an old solution to an old problem in Vietnamese history. In the fifteenth century, the Vietnamese emperor, finding himself with a bigger army than he could afford, divided it into five contingents and rotated them on active duty. While one contingent remained at arms the other four worked in the fields. In the future, reserve soldiers might similarly be divided into contingents, the number depending on the civilian occupations of the reservists and the local security situation. When it is his contingent’s turn to serve, the reservist would report to the local Regional or Popular Forces unit to which he had been assigned.

Rotational active duty lends itself to agricultural pursuits, which are themselves seasonal. Since South Vietnam’s peasants are often seasonally unemployed, their serving as soldiers part-time would not hinder production. Planting and harvesting seasons vary throughout the country and even within individual provinces, so there would be no one time when an area was stripped of its troops or farmers. The regular rotation of reservists in the ranks would also keep the units constantly apprised of the latest local conditions. The Popular Forces in some areas might adopt a similar rotational system and begin releasing soldiers for a certain number of months each year. If