

Chapter 1 : Vietnam's Development Strategies – IDEAS

Vietnam's development record over the past 30 years is remarkable. Economic and political reforms under "Đổi Mới", launched in 1979, have spurred rapid economic growth and development and transformed Vietnam from one of the world's poorest nations to a lower middle-income country.

This clandestine organization initially focused on political organization and propaganda, and came under heavy pressure by the Diem regime. Diem was an implacable enemy of the Communists and his nationalist credentials were comparatively clean, but he had inherited a very fragile situation. From the beginning he faced the threat of military coups, thrusting criminal gangs, a weak bureaucracy and army, and fierce factional fighting within South Vietnam between not only political factions, but religious groups Buddhists and Catholics as well. Diem's bravery and calm demeanor during these attempts to kill him often won the esteem of American supporters. In addition, some Buddhist opponents of Diem, it is held, were not the innocent religious leaders often portrayed in the press but sometimes collaborated with or were manipulated by that opposition. His land reform measures for example, while not going to the extent urged by American advisers such as more sharply limiting the number of hectares one farmer could own, in the words of one historian, "did succeed in breaking up the vast estates in the delta, and it changed the landless peasants in the South from the large majority to a minority. The Communists would later lament that this redistribution of land "seriously interfered" with their subsequent efforts to win over the peasantry through land reform. Rice production for example which had fallen below pre-World War II production levels in 1954, surpassed the previous level by 1960. Production of rubber rose from 54,000 tons in 1954 to 75,000 in 1960, and cattle and pigs registered a threefold jump over the same period. Diem also placed limits on foreign capitalists and the amount of control they could exercise in various sectors. The agricultural boom, combined with the opening of hundreds of new primary and secondary schools and new hospitals staffed by American-trained nurses and physicians, raised South Vietnamese living standards at a pace that would have been impressive in any underdeveloped country, not to mention a country that was simultaneously bracing for a massive attack on its homeland. Harsh methods to suppress dissent, and abrasive personalities in his administration alienated a number of South Vietnamese, particularly Buddhists. His large scale resettlement of the peasantry, a key component of his rural strategy, floundered due to communist infiltration, poor planning and arbitrary implementation. While dependent on US aid, Diem was not afraid to disagree with or stand up to his American sponsors when he felt their demands were unworkable, incurring the enmity of the new US Ambassador Henry Lodge in 1964 and certain US media figures that kept up a steady drumbeat of negative press, undermining his efforts. Or "as I had hoped" "are we partners in a common cause?.. If you order Vietnam around like a puppet on a string, how will you be different" "except in degree" "from the French? Ambassador Lodge boasted privately to Kennedy that "the ground in which the coup seed grew into a robust plant was prepared by us.. As early as 1959, the Central Committee of the Party had issued a resolution to pursue armed struggle. Thousands of regrouped were re-infiltrated south, and a special unit was also set up, the 5th Transport Group, to establish way-stations, trails, and supply caches for the movement of fighting men and material into the zone of conflict. While much propaganda was expended in presenting armed elements opposed to Diem as independent and spontaneous, all communist forces in the field - from village guerrillas, to Main Force Units and NVA regulars were under a single command structure set up in 1960, and controlled by Hanoi. Standardizing the polyglot VC inventory of fighting arms, including rifles the AK and machine guns using a common caliber round. Other excellent arms included the RPG-2 and various recoilless rifles. Organization of VC units into larger formations, from battalions to regiments, to the first VC division, the famous 9th VC. Deployment of NVA regulars to build up logistical networks for later infiltration, the 5th Transport Group and insertion of complete regular units such as the 7th Division in remote border areas. The Battle of Binh Gia also known as The Battle of Ap Bac in many Western histories, where the victorious VC held the battlefield for 4 days rather than simply melt away as in earlier times is a vivid example of their confidence and effectiveness. VC confidence also showed in a number of attacks against American installations and troops, from assaults against places where US soldiers and advisers gathered, to sinking of an

American aviation transport ship, the USS Card at a Saigon berth in The communist strategy was to kill as many ARVN effectives as possible, paving the way for a collapse of the South Vietnamese regime before the Americans could arrive in force. In other areas, NVA regulars operated in disguise as "local farmers" - adopting peasant garb like black pajamas and straw hats, and removing manufacturing marks from weapons made in Soviet Bloc countries and shipped to Vietnam. War was to be waged on all fronts: Historian Douglas Pike notes that Dau Tranh was divided into military and political spheres: Intensive indoctrination and total mobilization of all civilian and military personnel in North Vietnam. Binh Van- Action among enemy military: Subversion, proselytizing, and propaganda to encourage desertion, defection and lowered morale among enemy troops. These phases were not static, and elements from one appear in others. Preparation, organization and propaganda phase Guerrilla warfare, terrorism phase General offensive " conventional war phase including big unit and mobile warfare As part of the final stage, emphasis was placed on the Khoi Nghia, or "General Uprising" of the masses, in conjunction with the liberation forces. This spontaneous uprising of the masses would sweep away the imperialists and their puppets who would already be sorely weakened by earlier guerrilla and mobile warfare. The Communist leadership thus had a clear vision, strategy and method to guide their operations. Broad use of terrorism and low intensity guerrilla warfare Widening the field of conflict logistically by expanding bases and troop movement in Laos and Cambodia Small-unit mobile warfare using VC Main Forces and NVA regulars over the expanded space- especially during seasonal offensive thrusts Limited conventional operations where overwhelming numerical superiority could be concentrated to liquidate the maximum number of enemy effectives or control strategic blocks of territory A General Uprising by the aggrieved masses as the enemy weakened Full-scale offensives by conventional forces with secondary guerrilla support Overall, this approach was generally successful. It did not occur in a vacuum however. It both shaped and reacted to events in the arena of struggle. These included some , refugees who voted with their feet to move South when Vietnam was partitioned in Coordination between the two allies was poor, and both seemed to fight separate wars for much of the conflict. However needed reforms in cleaning up government corruption, land redistribution, attacking the VC infrastructure, and improving the ARVN armies were uneven, or poorly implemented, especially after the death of Diem. Unlike Communist forces, the GVN also failed to effectively mobilize a critical mass of its populace behind a nationalist or even an anti-communist narrative on a sustained, large scale basis, although several initiatives were started. This style involved heavy logistical tails, ponderous organizational structures, dependence on firepower, and frequent roving "sweep" tactics that shortchanged the vital counterinsurgency war for the population base. A primary GVN weakness was motivation and morale of its general issue forces. ARVN desertion rates in for example had reached epidemic proportions, and draft dodging was also serious, with some , evaders failing to report for duty. In , US General Westmoreland forbade the creation of any more ARVN units until the existing ones were brought up to some minimum level of strength. Understrength units for example, sometimes kept "phantom" soldiers on the roster, with leaders pocketing the extra payroll of the bogus troops. Some ARVN commanders sometimes refused to commit enough troops to an operation, or found ways to delay or sabotage execution, because orders from Saigon forced or encouraged them to keep troops on hand to guard against coups, or participate in some other internal political maneuver. The GVN made measurable progress in securing its population base"retaking areas once dominated by the VC and rooting out their clandestine infrastructure. The war however had ceased being primarily a guerrilla conflict and had become conventional, with Hanoi openly bidding for victory during the Easter attack. ARVN troops simply could not cope in the long term without US assistance and firepower against a ruthless, well organized, and well supplied conventional Northern foe. With hundreds of thousands dead, and many localized examples of excellent combat performance, important segments of South Vietnamese society put up a strong fight against Northern hegemony. During the Easter Offensive for example, such resistance highlighted credible performances, not only by elite units like Rangers, Marines or Paratroops, but among elements of regular divisions as well. Strong leadership in the form of commanders like Maj. Knowing their local areas in detail they had significant potential for local population security and represented a constant threat to the Viet Cong Infrastructure and communist troop movements. As such they came under special attack, suffering a higher casualty rate than

ARVN regulars. Serious efforts to arm and train them properly however came comparatively late in the conflict after the Tet Offensive and their efforts however were often sidetracked by the American and ARVN preference for big-unit sweeps. They were never really integrated into the total war effort. By , the Nixon regime faced growing public dissatisfaction, and unremitting pressure by the US Congress, anti-war protesters and segments of the US media, to quickly exit Vietnam, despite promises made of continued aid. While aid from the Soviet bloc and China to the North continued unabated, American congressional action cut off the use of US military assets and sharply reduced promised aid to the South. Numerous targets were off-limits including some shipment points where war material was imported from the Soviet Union and China. Most of the US bomb tonnage dropped was on the territory of its ally, South Vietnam. Debates over the gradualist approach and bolder plans[edit] The US counter-strategy was ineffective in a number of ways against Communist forces. All of these were rejected by civilian policymakers, with one or two implemented very late in the American War. By that time, the focus was on withdrawal of US forces. Sigma II concluded that the introduction of ground troops would fail to deliver victory and erode political support for the war at home. Both war games also held that cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail would mean little without effective suppression of the VC, since the VC procured a substantial amount of their supplies, particularly food, inside South Vietnam. US forces relied heavily on firepower in their attempt to counter Communist advantages in local concentration, organization, knowledge of the terrain, and the element of surprise in where and when to strike. The VC and NVA had no qualms about provoking US attacks and deliberately using civilians as human shields, sometimes preventing them from leaving an area under attack. Some historians also maintain that generation of refugees was a systematic US tactic, recommended a number of times in official US documents and implemented by military means. Leaders such as Marine General V. Westmoreland as not only sometimes counter-productive, but neglectful of controlling key population bases, and developing more effective ARVN forces. Overall, approximately three times the amount of bombs dropped in World War II were dropped on Vietnam as a whole, making it the most bombed country in history. Along with bombs some , tons of napalm were dropped and some Most of this amount, like that of air-delivered bombs, also fell on the territory of South Vietnam. For example, the force structure came with a massive logistical burden, placing most of the manpower in support formations. The result was under-strength units up front, and huge wastage and theft of weapons, equipment and supplies in the rear. One study of captured enemy documents for example, alleged that actual enemy losses were 30 to 50 percent less than what MACV claimed in official reports. This constant movement generated problems of its own. Not only was the enemy elusive, but some American units developed "firebase psychosis" – a reluctance to move and fight too far away from the supporting fires of fixed bases. The result in many US units was an endless supply of less seasoned "green" draftees or short-training officers, "rotated" in the theater for one year. Such policies were a drag on overall stability and cohesion, and caused the loss of hard-won combat knowledge in-country. American advisers might just begin to see results on the ground when they were rotated out. Supporters of the " pacification -first" approach argue that more focus on uprooting the local Communist infrastructure, and cleaning up internal problems would have denied the enemy their key population base, reduced the destructiveness of US operations, strengthened the Southern regime, and yielded better overall results. Resources were better spent securing key rice-producing villages under pressure by VC operatives, or training ARVN forces to be more effective. The search and destroy approach. Defenders of "search and destroy" maintain that the Communist shift to Phase 3 warfare required "big battalion" activity to remove the most pressing conventional threats to the Saigon regime. They maintain that since Westmoreland was forbidden from striking with ground forces at Communist concentrations and supply routes in the three countries surrounding the battle zone Laos , Cambodia and North Vietnam , his attritional strategy within the confines of South Vietnam was the only realistic option against an enemy that had the weak Saigon government on the ropes by The American pacification effort was also ineffective over several critical years, hampered by bureaucratic rivalries between competing agencies, a focus on big-unit operations, and lack of coordination between South Vietnamese civil agencies concerned with pacification, and the US military. However these reforms were haltingly implemented, and US forces largely continued to operate in the same way – seeking body counts and other attritional indicators, against an

enemy that could always up the ante indefinitely by introducing more troops. Some writers have attempted to reconcile the different schools of thought by linking activity to a particular phase of the conflict. The early stabilization battles such as the Ia Drang, the border battles, and the Tet Offensive, are examples of the efficacy of big-unit warfare. Some writers have questioned whether either pacification or "search and destroy" would have made any difference given dwindling American resolve, the big unit focus, other American and South Vietnamese weaknesses noted above, and the Communist strategy of attritional, protracted war. The role of southerners was to diminish as the war ended, not only in the northern politburo but against VC remnants in the south as well. Prominent "southern-firsters" led by Le Duan and Nguyen Chi Thanh maintained that the Diem regime was tottering on the ropes and quick victory could be assured by an aggressive push that required Main Force confrontations with both the South Vietnamese and the Americans. Debate still continues among some Western historians as to the exact line-up of Politburo personalities and issues, particularly that of Giap. Revolutionary War Preparation late

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