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# Hanoi's Three Decisions and the Escalation of the Vietnam War

KING C. CHEN

As the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese in 1975 launched their heavy assaults in South Vietnam, the world's attention was attracted once again to the temporarily forgotten but unsettled Vietnam problem. In historical perspective, the renewed fighting in 1974-1975 had a crucial connection with the past. That fighting was simply a continuation of the long-term Vietnam war that had been briefly de-escalated after the 1973 Paris cease-fire accords.

Many books have been published on the roots of the United States role in the expansion of the Vietnam war, but not so much has been written on the origins of the North Vietnamese escalation.<sup>1</sup> Insofar as Hanoi is

<sup>1</sup> Among numerous publications on the origins of the Vietnam war the following are most frequently cited: Department of State, *A Threat to the Peace: North Viet-Nam's Effort to Conquer South Viet-Nam*. Two Parts, Department of State Publication 7308 (Washington, D. C., December 1961); The Senator Gravel Edition, *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision-making on Vietnam*, 4 Vols. (Boston, 1971); Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations: 1945-1967*, 12 books (Washington, D. C., 1971); Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers*, as published by *The New York Times* (New York, 1971); The Committee for the Study of History of the Viet Nam Workers' Party, *An Outline History of the Viet Nam Workers' Party, 1930-1970* (Hanoi, 1970); Ho Chi Minh, *Against U. S. Aggression for National Salvation* (Hanoi, 1967); Le Duan et al., *South Vietnam: Realities and Prospects*, special issue of *Vietnamese Studies*, nos. 18-19 (Hanoi, 1968); George McT. Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York, 1967);

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concerned, three major decisions in 1959–1963 had a crucial relationship to the origin and escalation of the war. The first decision of January 1959 approved in principle the resumption of armed revolt by the Communist movement in the South for its own protection against the suppressive measures of the Diem regime; the second decision of September 1960 set the general policy of the “liberation” of the South—i.e., the overthrow of the Diem regime and the establishment of a coalition government favorably disposed toward reunification with Communist North Vietnam; and the third decision of December 1963 adopted a more aggressive, offensive strategy including intensifying the sending of troops and matériel aid to the South. After these decisions were made, Hanoi found it hard to retreat from its commitment to the war. And yet, what was the background of these decisions? How were these decisions made? In other words, did Hanoi initially make these decisions or was she forced into them? And what were the content and context of these decisions? This article is directed to probe these questions. To be sure, it is difficult to apply the decision-making approach to this study because of the lack of data from the decision makers in Hanoi.<sup>2</sup> Yet, public documents, secret papers, and interviews provide us with sufficient information to deal with the subject. And an examination of the issue at this juncture, when the unpopular United States involvement in the war was over but the renewed fighting has rekindled our concern about Vietnam, will enable us to see calmly the nature and origin of the Vietnam war and help us understand the possible development in Indochina.

#### CAUSES OF THE WAR: TWO OPPOSING VIEWS

There are two major opposing theories on the causes of the Vietnam war. The first is that the war originated from the expansion of commun-

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Russell H. Fifield, *Americans in Southeast Asia: The Roots of Commitment* (New York, 1973); Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York, 1970); David Schoenbrun, *Vietnam: How We Got In, How to Get Out* (New York, 1968); Victor Bator, *Vietnam: A Diplomatic Tragedy: The Origins of the United States Involvement* (New York, 1965); Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York, 1964); Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley, Calif., 1972); Jean Lacouture, *Vietnam: Between Two Truces* (New York, 1966); Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation under Stress* (Boston, 1963); Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966); Dennis Warner, *The Last Confucian* (Baltimore, 1964); and Donald S. Zagoria, *Vietnam Triangle: Moscow, Peking, Hanoi* (New York, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Unlike Glenn D. Paige on Harry Truman's decision on Korea in *The Korean Decision* (New York, 1968), or Townsend Hoopes on Lyndon B. Johnson's decision on de-escalation of the Vietnam war in *The Limits of Intervention* (New York, 1969), the

ism from the North to the South. The second asserts that the conflict was caused by United States military intervention and aggression. Despite their different reasonings, they seem to reach a common conclusion—i.e., the war was inevitable.

The first argument is too familiar to dwell on here. But briefly, this view was maintained by Washington and Saigon as well as many other governments and individuals. As the State Department asserted, when the Communists were negotiating with the French in Geneva in 1954, they had already made "plans to take over all of Viet-Nam."<sup>3</sup> A number of party members and guerrilla units were not evacuated from the South to the North after July 1954; they were assigned to stay in the South. Arms and ammunition were cached in secret spots running from Saigon to the jungle areas. The men were instructed to await further orders to renew warfare.<sup>4</sup> Under these circumstances, the outbreak of the war was only a matter of time.

To cope with the Communist expansion, the United States first offered military aid to the French colonialist authorities in Indochina. Then in early 1954, with the Dien Bien Phu crisis, France requested Washington to intervene militarily. This request, after a heated debate among the decision makers, was denied by President Eisenhower due to the lack of support from Congress and the allies.<sup>5</sup> Soon after, the U. S. government turned down a French request to send United States military personnel to train the South Vietnamese army. After the Geneva settlement, however, a compromise between the "hawks" and "doves" was reached: the United States was to start anew to assist non-Communist South Vietnam, and this assistance would include the training and advising of a national army. This compromise was made between the Departments of State and Defense in which "political considerations . . . were allowed to govern."<sup>6</sup> To be sure, such a decision was guided by the containment policy.<sup>7</sup>

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outsiders of Hanoi's decision-making circle will probably never have access to significant inside data on Hanoi's decisions on the Vietnam war.

<sup>3</sup> Department of State, *A Threat to the Peace*, Part I, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: The White House Years, 1953-1956* (New York, 1963), p. 347.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, Book 2, IV, A. 4., pp. 2.1 and 1-3. For the debate and compromise, see another account by a participant, James M. Gavin, in collaboration with Arthur T. Hadley, *Crisis Now* (New York, 1968), chap. III.

<sup>7</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Role of the United States in Indochina," in Gene T. Hsiao (ed.), *The Role of External Powers in the Indochina Crisis* (Edwardsville, Ill., 1973), pp. 8-9.

A feeling that American military mentality was superior to that of the French seems to have entered into the minds of the policy makers in Washington at that time. The Defense Department stated:

The reasons the United States undertook the training of the Vietnamese armed forces had their roots not only in the desire to contain Communism and preserve the freedom of South Vietnam, but also in the U.S. discontent and frustration with French military policy during the Indochina war. A strong desire to *correct French mistakes* generated considerable bureaucratic momentum.<sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly, this strong “correct-French-mistakes” desire was reinforced by the belief in the capability of American military power. As events turned out, the subsequent United States involvement in Vietnam became a natural development from training and advising to actual fighting. It needed a miracle to reverse the trend in the early 1960s.

The second argument was held by the North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, together with many other individuals and governments. Hanoi has clearly and repeatedly stated that Vietnam is one nation and that the Vietnamese revolution, in the North and South, is a revolution in two different stages. The completion of it, including national reunification, is the “sacred” mission of the Vietnamese. They will allow no obstacle to stand in their way. To this end, they can use either political or armed struggle, or both. It is only a matter of strategy.<sup>9</sup>

After the Geneva conference in 1954, Hanoi was hopeful about national reunification by peaceful means. But, Hanoi argued, the American intervention prevented this. What the United States wanted in Vietnam was to colonize the country. As Ho Chi Minh denounced the United States in 1950, the American “imperialists” contrived to “kick out” the French colonialists and “occupy” Indochina themselves.<sup>10</sup> Im-

<sup>8</sup> Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, p. 2.1. (*Italics added.*)

<sup>9</sup> “The Path of the Revolution in the South” (*Duong Loi Cach Mang Mien Nam*) was a document of guiding principle for the South in 1956-1959. It was believed to have been written by Le Duan, then secretary of the Nam Bo Regional Committee and a member of the Central Committee. Captured in Long An province in 1957, a copy of it was deposited with the Center for Research Libraries by Jeffrey Race as Race Document 1002. Also consult *Working Paper on the North Vietnamese Role in the War in South Viet-Nam* (hereafter cited as *Working Paper*), Document 301. The text of the *Working Paper* was reproduced in *Viet-Nam Documents and Research Notes*, nos. 36-37 (Saigon, June 1968), and in *Congressional Record*, Vol. 114, Part 10 (May 9, 1968), pp. 12614-12620. “Resolution on South Vietnam” of the Ninth Conference of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers’ Party, December 1963, in *Viet-Nam Documents and Research Notes*, no. 96 (Saigon, 1971). Le Duan, *The Vietnam Revolution: Fundamental Problems, Essential Tasks* (Hanoi, 1971), pp. 62-82.

<sup>10</sup> Ho Chi Minh’s interview with Voice of Vietnam, Vietnam News Agency (hereafter cited as VNA), July 16, 1950.

mediately after the French left Indochina, the Americans supported the "reactionary" Diem regime, trained its "puppet" army, and helped murder thousands of Vietnamese patriots—both Communist and non-Communist. To stop the United States intervention and aggression, the Communists were forced to resort to armed resistance. It was, therefore, "the United States policy of intervention and aggression" that began the Vietnam war, Hanoi asserted.<sup>11</sup>

Separately, neither of the above arguments offers a really convincing explanation; but jointly, they provide one. Since the completion of the revolution had been decided as the "sacred" mission of the Communists, a military confrontation with the United States containment policy was a foregone conclusion. Consequently, war became inevitable.

#### THE SITUATION IN THE SOUTH, 1955–1959

The immediate post-Geneva years were relatively peaceful. North Vietnam was engaged in social and economic reconstruction, China adopted peaceful policies at home and abroad, and the Soviet Union was campaigning for its peaceful coexistence policy. But the United States actively assisted Ngo Dinh Diem. The Diem regime began to build its national army, while it consolidated its political position, improved its economic condition, and above all eliminated a good number of the Communists. This created a growing difficulty for the Communist activities in the South.

Diem began his anti-Communist campaign in mid-1955. In May 1956, his government announced that the campaign in a period of ten months had "entirely destroyed the predominant Communist influence of the previous nine years." More than 94,000 former Communist members had "rallied" to the government and 5613 other cadres had "surrendered" to the government forces.<sup>12</sup> As the time went on, the campaign intensified. In the province of An Xuyen alone, for instance, a five-week campaign which ended in late February 1959 had resulted in the surrender of 8125 Communist agents, and the denunciation of 9800 "other" agents and of 29,978 sympathizers.<sup>13</sup> These official figures must have included all of Diem's political foes, Communist and non-Communist.<sup>14</sup>

The Phu Loi prison incident of December 1958, in which more than

<sup>11</sup> Xuan Thuy's statement at the Paris Peace Talks, VNA (Hanoi), June 24, 1971.

<sup>12</sup> U. S. Operations Mission to Vietnam (USOM), *Saigon Daily News Round-Up*, May 14, 1956, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> USOM, *ibid.*, February 28, 1959, pp. 4–5.

<sup>14</sup> Consult Pike, *Viet Cong*, p. 59; and Philippe Devillers, "The Struggle for the Unification of Vietnam," *The China Quarterly*, no. 9 (January–March 1962), 12.

twenty Communist detainees were reportedly poisoned, added new fear to the campaign. The drive reached an apex in May 1959 when Diem announced his severe Law 10/59 against both his Communist and non-Communist enemies.<sup>15</sup> It generated increasing discontent with his regime.

The campaign up to mid-1959 had caused the Communists great losses. The party apparatus could no longer function regularly; thousands of party members had surrendered or been captured or killed; and there was no place secure enough for members to stay except in the jungle and remote areas. The Diem regime, as a captured document reported at that time, had "truly and efficiently destroyed" the party.<sup>16</sup> This captured paper was supported by a Hanoi source of 1974. It stated rather frankly:

The revolutionary movement suffered heavy losses. Hundreds of thousands of cadres and people were arrested or massacred. The self-defence organizations in the countryside were broken up. The armed forces in the resistance bases had to be reduced. In particular, the resistance army of the religious sects dwindled into a mere token force.

Naturally, the more the people's self-defence organizations shrank, the more aggressive the cruel agents in the localities became and the bloodier the crimes they perpetrated. More and more cadres were arrested and many more revolutionary organizations in the villages and hamlets were broken up. The South Vietnamese people call this "the darkest period."<sup>17</sup>

An interview with a former party member of Long An province confirmed this "darkest period" (1958-1959).<sup>18</sup> Another source from Hanoi stated unequivocally that party membership in the South had declined from 15,000 in 1957 to 5000 by mid-1959.<sup>19</sup>

The demand for armed struggle increased daily. Many party members believed that political struggle was no longer applicable. A captured document said that "the majority of the Party members and cadres felt that it was necessary to launch immediately an armed struggle in order to *preserve* the movement and *protect* the forces." But the Nam Bo (south-

<sup>15</sup> According to the law, the Diem government had the power to eliminate not only Communist agents but also those who committed crimes "with the aim of sabotage" of the economy and finances of the State, or "of infringing upon the security of the State, or injuring the lives or property of the people." For the text of the law, see Marvin E. Gettleman (ed.), *Viet Nam: History, Documents, and Opinions on a Major World Crisis* (New York, 1965), pp. 256-260.

<sup>16</sup> *Working Paper*, Document 301, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Ta Xuan Linh, "How Armed Struggle Began in South Viet Nam," *Viet Nam Courier*, no. 22 (March 1974), 22.

<sup>18</sup> *Race, War Comes to Long An*, p. 99.

<sup>19</sup> *Tinh Hinh Nam Bo Tu Sau Hoa Binh Lap Lai Den Hien Nay* (The Situation in the South from the Restoration of Peace to the Present), p. 26. (A captured document, hereafter cited as *Tinh Hinh Nam Bo*.)

ern part) Regional Committee leadership, which was then in charge of the southern revolution, hesitated. The principal reason was the fear of violating the party line<sup>20</sup>—the line of political struggle set forth by the party.

The friction between the individual members and the party apparatus grew wider. Some members became so angry that they "took weapons the Party had hidden and came out of the jungle to kill the officials who were making trouble for them or their families. . . . Sometimes these individuals were so angry at the Party that they purposely allowed themselves to be captured afterwards—just to spite the Party."<sup>21</sup> Under these circumstances, "responsible elements of the Communist Resistance in Indo-China came to the conclusion that they had to act, whether Hanoi wanted them to or no."<sup>22</sup>

To understand the situation thoroughly, Le Duan reportedly made an extensive trip to the South in late 1958. There is no further information available about his trip or his findings. But undoubtedly, it must have been a combination of Duan's findings and the increasing desire for armed struggle that prompted Hanoi to make a new decision.

#### HANOI'S FIRST DECISION—JANUARY 1959

The general party line prior to 1959 had guided North Vietnam to engage in economic and social reforms, notably the land reform and the Three-Year Plan. Even after the party activities in the South had suffered severely, Hanoi still hoped to achieve a gradual and peaceful reunification. For instance, the Fourteenth Enlarged Central Committee Conference in November 1958 deliberated mainly on the Three-Year Plan,<sup>23</sup> and in December of that year Pham Van Dong proposed a plan to Ngo Dinh Diem for the normalization of South and North relationships. Even if Dong was playing a game with Diem, the major points proposed were not "militant" nor were they really unfavorable to Diem.<sup>24</sup> In fact, several proposed items, such as no military alliances for either side and trade between the two sides, were among the tentatively agreeable conditions between Hanoi and Saigon in secret negotiations in early 1963 (see discussion below). Internationally, Hanoi endorsed Khrushchev's proposal for the creation of a peace zone in the Pacific area. And in March 1959 *Nhan Dan* praised the Soviet-British talks as an effort to safeguard world

<sup>20</sup> CRIMP Document, in *Working Paper*; also see *Tinh Hinh Nam Bo*, p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> Race, *War Comes to Long An*, pp. 99–100.

<sup>22</sup> Devillers, "Struggle for the Unification of Vietnam," p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Hanoi Radio, in Vietnamese, December 8, 1958.

<sup>24</sup> Pham Van Dong's note to President Ngo Dinh Diem, dated December 22, 1958, VNA, December 26, 1958.

peace.<sup>25</sup> These domestic and foreign policies explain, at least partially, why Hanoi was late in responding to the demand for armed revolt in the South. But the urgent situation there forced Hanoi to resort to the "people's war."<sup>26</sup>

The first new decision approved the resumption of armed struggle. It was made in principle at the Fifteenth Central Committee Conference in January 1959. But the order (directive) to carry out this decision was not issued until after the Politburo meeting in May 1959.<sup>27</sup> In view of the timing of the directive's issuance, Law 10/59 (May 6, 1959) must have served as the last impetus to the action.

The communiqué of the Fifteenth Central Committee Conference of May 13 (four months after the conference) made no mention of armed revolution.<sup>28</sup> Other sources, however, clearly suggested the date of the first decision on war.

One day after the publication of the communiqué *Nhan Dan* carried the following editorial on how to achieve the Vietnamese reunification:

Our compatriots in the south will struggle resolutely and persistently against the cruel U.S.-Diem regime, holding aloft the tradition of the (1941) South Vietnam uprising, the (1945) Ba To uprising, and the August (1945) general uprising . . . and other valuable traditions of the workers' movement and of countless legal and semilegal struggles. . . . Our people are determined to struggle with their traditional heroism and by all necessary forms and measures so as to achieve the goal of the revolution.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, the editorial was disseminating the party's permission of armed uprisings—the first new decision—against the Saigon govern-

<sup>25</sup> *Nhan Dan* (People's Daily), March 5, 1959.

<sup>26</sup> P. J. Honey, in *Communism in North Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 67, suggests: "The desperate and increasing food shortage led the DRV leadership to decide—probably at the meeting of the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party held in May 1959—to change its tactics toward South Vietnam and to revert to the technique of the 'people's war.'" New evidences have proved that the main reason for this change was for the survival of the revolution in the South, not for the food shortage in DRV.

<sup>27</sup> The date of the Fifteenth Central Committee Conference had previously been a confusion. Early sources tend to suggest May 1959 (VNA issued the conference's communiqué on May 13, 1959); but both "The Resolution on South Vietnam" of the Ninth Conference of the Central Committee of December 1963 and *An Outline History of the Viet Nam Workers' Party, 1930-1970* indicate the date was January 1959. It can be established that the conference was held in January 1959 but was not made known until May 1959 when the Politburo decided to issue its armed struggle "directive." I would like to express my thanks to Carlyle A. Thayer for his discussion of the matter with me.

<sup>28</sup> Hanoi Radio, May 13, 1959.

<sup>29</sup> *Nhan Dan*, May 14, 1959.

ment. The so-called tradition of uprisings, "all necessary forms and measures" and "legal and semilegal struggles" indicate that the end justifies the means.

A second source is a captured secret document of the "Resolution on South Vietnam" of the Ninth Central Committee Conference in December 1963. It stated categorically:

The Resolution of the 15th Central [Committee] Conference (January 1959) and the subsequent Resolution of the Third Party National Congress have clearly set forth policy for the revolution in the South and the struggle guideline designed to win victory.<sup>30</sup>

A third source of evidence is a captured notebook of an unidentified but apparently high-ranking cadre. This secret document, contained in the *Working Paper*, read as follows:

Since the end of 1959, particularly after the Phu Loi massacre, the situation truly ripened for an armed movement against the enemy. But the leadership of the Nam Bo Regional Committee at that time still hesitated for many reasons, but the principal one was the fear of violating the Party line. *The directive of the Politburo in May 1959 stated that the time had come to push the armed struggle against the enemy.*<sup>31</sup>

Thus it is obvious that the first decision was made in January 1959, and the resulting directive for armed struggle was issued in May 1959.

Soon after, Hanoi launched a strong propaganda campaign against the United States and Diem (My-Diem). Originally, it was supposed to be a month-long drive (July 1959); it turned out to be a decade-old anti-American movement. According to Hanoi, 4 million people in the North had participated in rallies and demonstrations during the drive from July to November.<sup>32</sup> More significantly, *Hoc Tap* (Studies), on the occasion of the August revolution, carried a forceful editorial calling for the strengthening of the united front in the South, and explaining why and how:

In view of the present situation in the South, the front must have a minimum platform and rational organizational forms so as to be able to group together different strata of people, including political and religious sects; people's organizations; various nationalities; individuals interested in peaceful reunification, independence, and democracy; and even southern officials opposing Ngo Dinh Diem's subservient policy. We must profit by the experi-

<sup>30</sup> The "Resolution on South Vietnam" of the Ninth Conference of the Central Committee of December 1963 in *Viet-Nam Documents and Research Notes*, no. 96, pp. 3 and 41.

<sup>31</sup> *Working Paper*, Document 301. (Italics added.)

<sup>32</sup> VNA, July 19, 1959 and November 27, 1959.

ence of the Viet Minh front and the August revolution to unite with every person, win him over to our side, or neutralize him whenever possible.<sup>33</sup>

It went on to say that the front should "allow itself to be led by the workers' party" and "carry out the party's plans." In short, Hanoi wanted the front to have a fresh, vigorous struggle program under the party's command.

#### THE SECOND DECISION—SEPTEMBER 1960

In the South, the Viet Cong began to increase armed activities in the fall of 1959. A few months later, their activities had become a threat to the life of many local government officials. In late February 1960, for instance, the Viet Cong, grouped in small bands, attacked government offices, personnel, security forces, and schools in Vinh Long, Long An, Kien Hoa, and five other provinces. In April, the clash between the government and Communist forces broke out 126 times throughout South Vietnam.<sup>34</sup> Another report on Long An province offered some specific figures. In 1959 in that province alone, the government lost 21 people (including the killed and kidnapped), the Viet Cong lost 440; the former was approximately 5 percent of the latter. In 1960, the government losses were 175, the Viet Cong 797; the former had increased to 22 percent of the latter.<sup>35</sup>

When men's lust for power is generated mainly by passions and not by reason, they transform "revolutions into dictatorships."<sup>36</sup> This is the evil aspect of human behavior which was reflected in Diem's rule at that time. As of 1960, Diem's repression policies had provoked serious discontent and anger from the non-Communist people. In April of that year, for instance, eighteen non-Communist political leaders (many of whom were Diem's former aides) publicly charged Diem with copying "dictatorial" rule.<sup>37</sup> These eighteen leaders well indicated the national mood of serious dissension.

<sup>33</sup> *Hoc Tap*, editorial, "It Is Necessary to Strengthen and Develop the United People's Front," no. 8, August 1959.

<sup>34</sup> Report in *Hsin-wen T'ien-ti* (Newsdom, Hong Kong), May 21, 1960, pp. 14-16.

<sup>35</sup> Race, *War Comes to Long An*, p. 114.

<sup>36</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago, 1946), p. 195.

<sup>37</sup> The eighteen leaders included Dr. Tran Van Do, former foreign minister under Diem, Dr. Phan Huy Quat, former minister of national defense, Tran Van Van, former minister of economy and planning, and seven other former ministers. *The New York Times*, May 1, 1960, p. 1. In March 1960, the Nam-bo Veterans of the Resistance Association also issued a declaration, calling upon the people to put an end to the government's bloody operations and repression in South Vietnam. The declaration might have been the product of a meeting of the Association in following the decision of the Central Committee in 1959.

Accurately reading the political climate in the South, Le Duan, for the first time, strongly asserted in April 1960 that the liberation of South Vietnam was "not only a task of the southern people but also of the entire people, of the South as well as of the North."<sup>38</sup> And in May 1960, Hanoi began to argue that it "was impossible to negotiate peacefully with warmongers."<sup>39</sup> It thus became militant on the South. In July, Pham Van Dong said at the Second National Assembly that the reunification of Vietnam was a "sacred task" of the Vietnamese people.<sup>40</sup> In August, Nguyen Chi Thanh, in applying the experience of the resistance war of 1946–1954 to the situation in 1960, drew a conclusion that the correct way to solve the "contradiction" between the Lao Dong party and its enemies was to use "revolutionary violence."<sup>41</sup>

Against this background, Hanoi made another significant move by convening the Third Party Congress in September 1960.

In retrospect, Hanoi's second decision on the war as made at this Congress was clear: (1) it set a general policy line for consolidation of the North, liberation of the South, and reunification of the nation; (2) it called for the establishment of a united front and a coalition government in South Vietnam; and (3) it urged the application of the August revolution "model" to the South. Of the three, the first was the most important and logical policy. National reunification required the "liberation" of the South which, in turn, depended fundamentally on the success of the socialist construction in the North. Of all the public documents released immediately after the Congress, an article by Minh Tranh was probably the most instructive. It specified "who," "what," "how," and "when" to accomplish the general policy line:

The problem of the struggle for the unification of the country and that of the revolution in South Vietnam are indivisible. They are closely bound together. . . .

Now, *who* will have to struggle to realize the unification of the country? Since there are two zones, it is natural that the people in both zones must consider this struggle as their own task and responsibility. . . .

To achieve unification of the country, *what* path should the revolution in South Vietnam follow? . . . Everyone is aware that the enemy of unification is nobody but the U.S. imperialists and their agents who are governing South Vietnam. . . . It is obvious that any hopes to turn the present southern regime into a government which would willingly and peacefully discuss with us the

<sup>38</sup> Le Duan, "Leninism and Vietnam's Revolution," *On the Socialist Revolution in Vietnam*, 3 vols. (Hanoi, 1965 and 1967), I, p. 48.

<sup>39</sup> *Nhan Dan*, May 18, 1960.

<sup>40</sup> VNA, July 7, 1960.

<sup>41</sup> Nguyen Chi Thanh, "Our Party Has Skillfully Led the Revolutionary War, the Building of the Army, and the Strengthening of National Defense," *Hoc Tap*, nos. 8 and 9 (August and September 1960).

unification problem are merely utopian. [How?] We should, then, completely destroy the present southern government and set up another one. . . .

One thing is certain . . . [when] the day our southern compatriots succeed in completely liberating themselves from the yoke of the U.S.-Diem clique, a democratic and national concord government will be set up in South Vietnam. Then the possibility of peaceful unification of our country will become a reality.<sup>42</sup>

Hanoi had now moved from a decision advocating a war for self-protection of the Viet Cong to one for the overthrow of Diem and the establishment of a coalition government including Communist elements. To this end, the Congress called for the establishment of a united front which led to the organization of the National Front for Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) in December 1960.

The connection between the "call" and the "establishment" of the front, however, has become a controversial subject. The State Department asserted that the front was "Hanoi's creation," whereas scholars rebutted it.<sup>43</sup> It seems that Hanoi had played a crucial role in the establishment, a view substantiated by the following two sources.

Apart from *Hoc Tap's* urge for a new program for the front in August 1959, Le Duan made a formal appeal at the Third Congress. He strongly suggested that the Communists

establish a united bloc of workers, peasants and soldiers and to bring into being a broad national united front with the worker-peasant alliances as the basis, directed against the U.S.-Diem clique in South Vietnam.<sup>44</sup>

Another source, a captured document, revealed some precise information. After the front was established, a southern regional committee of the party issued in January 1961 "instructions" to zones 1, 2, 3, and 4 (eastern, central, and western zones of Nam Bo and the Saigon-Cholon zone). It explained that the alliance of the workers and peasants was the basic force composing the front, but that in the situation in the South, these two classes did not have such capability of achieving decisive victories. This "reason prompts the Party to apply the policy of the Front [sic] and to *set up* the People's Front for Liberation of South Vietnam to attract bourgeois intellectual circles which comprise young men and girls and students in the cities, middle and rich peasants in the countryside."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Minh Tranh, "The Revolution in South Vietnam and National Unification," Hanoi Radio, in Vietnamese to South Vietnam, October 19, 1960.

<sup>43</sup> Department of State, *Aggression from the North: The Record of North Viet-Nam's Campaign to Conquer South Viet-Nam* (Washington, D. C., 1965), pp. 2 and 20. For the rebuttal, see Kahin and Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>44</sup> Le Duan's speech at the Third Congress, Hanoi Radio, September 5, 1960.

<sup>45</sup> Department of State, *A Threat to the Peace*, Part II, p. 97; the document's photostatic copy, p. 96.

If Hanoi had played no role in the formation of the front, why did it call for and "set up" the organization? Naturally, the factors for the creation of the front were complicated. But, judging by the available evidence, it is fair to say that Hanoi did not "create" it, but it did take the initiative to urge and set a concrete policy for its establishment.

Hanoi in early 1959 began to nurse its expectation of an "August revolution" in the South. At the Third Congress, General Vo Nguyen Giap praised the August revolution as a "model" of revolution:

The August general uprisings are a model of successful uprising in a colonial and semi-colonial country and a model of a clever association between political and armed struggles and between the political forces of the masses and the revolutionary armed forces.<sup>46</sup>

Giap implied that the revolutionists should apply this "model" to the South for its liberation. In fact, a second "August revolution" had been a dream of Hanoi's strategists since 1959. To this end, a concrete revolutionary machinery was soon to be established which included in the South a united front, an army, and a Communist party.

#### THE THIRD DECISION—DECEMBER 1963

Two months after the Third Congress, a coup broke out in Saigon. The incident, albeit abortive, served to indicate the rebellious mood against Diem. One month later, in December 1960, the news media in Saigon and Phnom Penh reported the organization of the NLF. Hanoi Radio did not make such a report until January 29, 1961.<sup>47</sup> Its ten-point program, which was announced by Hanoi in February, emphasized the overthrow of the Diem regime and the establishment of a democratic coalition administration. No socialist item was included.<sup>48</sup> Yet on February 15, the real strength of the NLF, the People's Liberation Armed Forces, was officially established.

In 1961, the Viet Cong scored several victories. The development alarmed Diem who in October of that year called the conflict a "real war"—no longer a guerrilla action. In the same month, General Maxwell D. Taylor, in his capacity as President Kennedy's military advisor, was sent to South Vietnam on a fact-finding mission. As a result, a new assistance program was recommended, including a "U.S. military task force."

<sup>46</sup> Giap's report to the Third Congress, Hanoi Radio, September 12, 1960.

<sup>47</sup> In view of the lateness of Hanoi's report on such an important event (one month after the reports from Saigon and Phnom Penh) and in view of Hanoi's capacity and practice in serving as the spokesman for the revolutionary activities in the South, it is fair to say that Hanoi had chosen to delay the report so as to show its "noninvolvement" in the establishment of the front.

<sup>48</sup> Hanoi Radio, February 11, 1961.

In mid-December, two United States military helicopter companies arrived in Saigon, marking the first direct United States military support to Diem. Hanoi must have been very concerned about this new development. To boost morale and show its potential strength, in late December Hanoi invited a strong Chinese military delegation for a visit. It seems that both the United States and North Vietnam had begun to prepare for a future military conflict.

On January 1, 1962, the Vietnam People's Revolutionary party (Dang Nhan Dan Cach Mang Viet Nam) was founded in the South, proclaiming its objectives of independence, freedom, democracy, socialism, and communism. On the United States-Saigon side, in February the United States Military Assistance Advisory Group in Saigon became the more powerful "United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam." It was actually the headquarters of a military command. Moreover, the United States began to arm the tribesmen and delivered to Saigon more helicopter companies and other military aid. And American helicopters had already engaged in fighting with the Viet Cong.

The year 1963 was punctuated by a series of crises in the South. Diem's repression became intolerable. The people's rebellious mood ran high.<sup>49</sup> At the height of the Buddhist crisis in late August, Ho Chi Minh issued a statement, calling on the people in the South to continue their struggle until complete victory was achieved. On the following day, Mao Tse-tung responded with a statement strongly endorsing Ho's stand. But the overthrow of the Diem regime in late October, for which Hanoi had repeatedly called, was not carried out by the NLF forces, but by Diem's generals with the involvement of the American CIA. The postcoup situation was chaotic and critical. The United States, as Secretary of Defence McNamara reported in December, was now seriously concerned that the "indecisive and drifting" junta regime might go Communist if the situation was not reversed in two or three months.<sup>50</sup>

Against this background, Hanoi convened the Ninth Central Committee Plenum in December 1963. It was an extremely important conference on South Vietnam and on the Sino-Soviet dispute. Of its four signifi-

<sup>49</sup> One of the most effective means of Diem's repression was the so-called Can Lao Nhan Vi Cach Mang Dang (Personalism-Labor-Revolutionary party). Led by Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's brother, it launched a "three-anti movement"—i.e., anti-Communist, anti-American, and antiweakness. The party's repression policy was often criticized as being Fascist.

<sup>50</sup> Document #61, "Vietnam Situation" from Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara to President Johnson, December 21, 1963, in *The Pentagon Papers* (*The New York Times* version), pp. 271–274; for the November 1963 coup, see chap. 4 of the book. Another account of the coup was given by Henry Cabot Lodge, *The Storm Has Many Eyes—A Personal Narrative* (New York, 1973), pp. 205–214.

cant documents available as of early 1975, three public ones were on the dispute, and one, the "Resolution on South Vietnam," was classified "top secret."<sup>51</sup> According to this "secret" document, the ten-day meeting, apart from reaffirming Hanoi's confidence in the struggle and assessing the United States role, made Hanoi's third decision on new strategies and tasks for the war.

Three new strategies and tasks were included: (1) to confine the war within the boundaries of the South, (2) to intensify aid from the North, and (3) to adopt an offensive strategy on both the political and military fronts.

As of December 1963, the United States had not yet bombed the North; but Hanoi saw "the necessity to contain the enemy in the 'special war' and confine this war within South Vietnam." Clearly, it was a strategy of "war in one country." Such confinement later proved to be essential to the survival of North Vietnam. In operation, therefore, Hanoi decided not to openly become involved in the war so as not to provoke the United States to retaliation. Instead, Hanoi decided to act quietly and secretly. And yet the situation in the South, though favorable, still needed a strong push in order to achieve its "liberation." The conference therefore resolved that the North should play a truly active role in the fight by intensifying its aid to the southern insurgents. As the resolution stressed, the leadership should have a strong determination in its support and aid; both *mien* (sides—i.e., South and North) must make "maximum efforts" to defeat the enemy. What kinds of aid were offered to the South? Although the resolution did not specify, the war development later proved the aid to be both manpower and matériel.

The adoption of an *offensive strategy* for the South was probably the most urgent decision at that moment. The same "secret" resolution repeatedly discussed the issue of the "balance of forces" in the world and asserted that the revolution in South Vietnam would inevitably evolve into a "general offensive and uprising." Of all the data available today, the most forcible and revealing argument for such offensive strategy was an article in the January 1964 issue of *Hoc Tap*. It was actually a summary and interpretation of the aforementioned four documents of this conference. It rebutted the idea that an offensive strategy would lead to a major war and denounced the "defensive strategy" of compromise and cooperation with the imperialists as a policy of "abandoning revolution." It went on to say:

Since 1961, U.S. imperialism has launched a "special warfare" against the people in South Vietnam. This is the biggest war now being fought in the world. Such being the case, the people in the South should not pin their hope

<sup>51</sup> See *Viet-Nam Documents and Research Notes*, no. 96.

on the "sincere desire for peace" of the U.S. aggressor, nor should they wait for fifteen or twenty more years for the defeat of the imperialist camp by the socialist camp in their economic competition, before they can bring about a peaceful reunification of Vietnam. On the contrary, they should rise up and integrate their political struggle with armed struggle to uphold their right to existence. The road of struggle now taken by the people in South Vietnam is the only correct road to liberation.<sup>52</sup>

Clearly, the adoption of such offensive strategy was the final outcome of this conference. However, it must be pointed out that in 1963 there were secret contacts between Hanoi and Saigon for an accommodation. Leaders like Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong reportedly still hoped to seek a peaceful settlement first with Diem and then with the post-Diem junta. Western diplomats to Hanoi reported at that time that such a settlement would permit a resumption of South-North trade and mutual visits and would gradually force the departure of American military personnel. Hanoi desired this settlement for three reasons: the economic difficulties in the North, the possibility of a deeper military conflict with the United States, and the strain of the Sino-Soviet rivalry in Vietnam. Immediately after the November 1963 coup, the new minister of security in Saigon said that the junta had learned about Diem's negotiations with Hanoi through the Polish representative on the International Control Commission.<sup>53</sup> In January 1975, this Polish diplomat, Mieczyslaw Maneli, confirmed the report and revealed some details of this unsuccessful development. He said that in the spring of 1963 he was asked secretly by Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, to approach the Hanoi government to explore the possibilities for a peaceful resolution of the struggle. Such a resolution would lead to the withdrawal of American military forces. In the summer of 1963, after long discussions with the North Vietnamese leaders, Hanoi produced plans under which the North and South could gradually develop postal, economic, and cultural relations. Other details were even more important:

The North would not press for a speedy reunification, but instead a coalition government would be set up in the South. . . . Such a government could be headed by Mr. Diem. . . .

Hanoi had always sought neutralization of the South. As for the North, both Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong were reluctant to accept the label "neutralization," but were eager to accept the idea. North Vietnam would not become an aggressive outpost against other countries, and neither Soviet nor Chinese troops would under any conditions be allowed on Vietnamese soil. . . .

<sup>52</sup> "Balance of Forces and Strategic Offensive," *Hoc Tap*, January 1964; Hanoi Radio, February 11, 1964.

<sup>53</sup> *The New York Times*, November 10, 1963.

What guarantees could be offered to the West that Hanoi would keep its word? . . . The answer was that in case of a United States withdrawal, the North would be prepared to give all kinds of substantial guarantees and American participation in the supervisory process was not excluded.<sup>54</sup>

Several questions would have to be raised. First, what were the objectives of Hanoi and Saigon for reaching such an accommodation? Hanoi, probably under the influence of the 1962 agreement on the neutralization of Laos, seems to have believed that a neutralized South Vietnam would force the United States departure and would eventually work in favor of the Communist desire to take over the country. Meanwhile, Saigon hoped that such a neutralization would at least reduce the threat from the Viet Cong and lead to the withdrawal of United States forces and pressure;<sup>55</sup> such a development would, in consequence, help Diem to continue to stay in power. Second, what caused the breakdown of the secret contacts? They were apparently interrupted by the Buddhist crisis in the summer and cut off by the postcoup junta. Third, did the United States block the possibility of such accommodation? It seems that the United States had at least blocked it by attempting to replace Diem and/or Nhu and by implicitly or explicitly endorsing the November coup of the Saigon generals who firmly rejected the Saigon-Hanoi secret talks.<sup>56</sup>

Consequently, it can be assumed that only after the Saigon junta had rejected in early November Hanoi's attempt to resume secret negotiations had Hanoi made in December her new decision on offensive strategy. It was, therefore, a decision in response to the chaotic situation in the South and the uncompromising position of the junta.

Peking also was concerned about the situation. Peking offered strong, although unspecified, advice of a cautious but flexible strategy of protracted war to the Vietnamese revolutionaries. The advice was carried by an article published both in Chinese and English. The Chinese version appeared in *Jen-min Jih-pao* on July 31, 1963, when the Saigon Buddhist crisis ran high, and the English version appeared in the *Peking Review* on November 15, 1963, when the postcoup situation was critical. A sense of urgency was clearly shown in the article by the repeated use of strong words, such as "must" and "essential," in pointing out how such a war should be fought.

To highlight the significant development of Hanoi's strategies for the

<sup>54</sup> Mieczyslaw Maneli, "Vietnam, '63 and Now," *The New York Times*, January 27, 1975, p. 25.

<sup>55</sup> The United States was exercising her influence seeking the removal of Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. See *The Pentagon Papers*, chap. 4; and Lodge, *The Storm Has Many Eyes*, pp. 206-210.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*; see also *The New York Times*, November 10, 1963.

South from 1959 to 1963, a content analysis of the public documents of the above three meetings (1959, 1960, and 1963) was made. As Table 1 shows, a report and a communiqué of the Central Committee meetings of 1959 and 1960 were also included in order to illustrate the major points of analysis.

The table warrants the following analysis: (1) As stated by the 1963 resolution, the party "set forth the policy" and "directed" the revolution in the South. It began to act at the January 1959 conference, continued at the September 1960 Third Party Congress and other meetings, and finally at the December 1963 Plenum (major policies and themes developed from "national reunification," "smash U.S. imperialism and its lackey," "liberation of the South," to "the North increases aid to the South," and so forth). The policy developed from general to specific. This development unequivocally indicated the consistency of Hanoi's strategies to guide the revolution in the South. (2) The theme on "socialist revolution in the North" developed from ten times (71.4 percent) in 1958, twenty-five times (36.77 percent) in 1960, to three times (7.14 percent) in 1963; and the emphasis on "national reunification" shifted from three times (21.4 percent) in 1958, twelve times (60 percent) in 1959, thirty times (only 44.12 percent) in 1960, and two times (4.76 percent) in 1963. But, Hanoi's urge for the coordination between the "political and military struggles" and preparation for "the general offensive and uprising" advanced from zero at the meetings of 1958, 1959, and 1960 to eighteen (42.86 percent) and ten times (23.81 percent) respectively in 1963. Likewise, the party's decision on the intensifying of aid to the South, which included both weaponry and manpower, developed from zero at earlier meetings to a new and urgent appeal in 1963 (three times —7.14 percent). This trend shows clearly the growing intensity of Hanoi's involvement in the armed struggle. In sum, this analysis serves to prove that North Vietnam's commitment to the war in 1959–1963 had developed from general guidance to specific assistance, and from political struggle to armed revolt.

#### CONCLUSION

An examination of Hanoi's three major decisions in 1959–1963 makes the questions raised earlier fairly clear. Hanoi sees the origin of the war in ideological perspective; revolutionary interests are often placed at the apex of policy-making deliberation. The revolution is long and difficult, and the use of peaceful or violent means is only a matter of strategies and tactics. If the peaceful means fail, violence will be employed, and vice versa. The Vietnamese revolution, therefore, is characterized by the long, hard political and military struggles. Hanoi does not regard the

TABLE 1

Frequency of Major Themes of Hanoi's Decisions on South Vietnam, 1958-1963

Major Theme	Report of the 14th Central Committee Meeting, Nov. 1958	Communiqué of the 15th Central Committee Meeting, May 1959	Communiqué of the 18th Central Committee Meeting, July 1960	Resolution of the Third Party Congress, Sept. 1960	Resolution on South Vietnam of the 9th Central Committee Meeting, Dec. 1963
Socialist revolution in the North	10 (71.4%)	2 (10%)	.....	25 (36.77%)	..... 3 ( 7.14%)
National reunification	3 (21.4%)	12 (60%)	..... 1 (14.3%)	30 (44.12%)	..... 2 ( 4.76%)
War preparation by U.S.—Diem	1 ( 7.2%)	2 (10%)	.....	.....	.....
Terror and massacre of U.S.—Diem	.....	3 (15%)	.....	2 ( 2.94%)	.....
To smash U.S. imperialism and its lackey	.....	1 ( 5%)	..... 1 (14.3%)	.....	..... 1 ( 2.38%)
Unity of the Socialist camp	.....	.....	..... 4 (57.1%)	..... 3 ( 4.41%)	.....
Approval of the communiqué of the Bucharest Conference	.....	.....	..... 1 (14.3%)	.....	.....
Liberation of the South	.....	.....	.....	..... 4 ( 5.88%)	.....
Political struggle coordinates with armed struggle	.....	.....	.....	.....	..... 18 (42.86%)
The party sets forth the policy for, and directs, the revolution in the South	.....	.....	.....	.....	..... 5 (11.91%)
The North should increase aid to the South	.....	.....	.....	.....	..... 3 ( 7.14%)
To prepare for general offensive and uprising	.....	.....	.....	.....	..... 10 (23.81%)
TOTAL	14 (100%)	20 (100%)	7 (100%)	68 (100%)	42 (100%)

problems of war and peace as two separate, short-term issues as does the United States. They are only two aspects of one issue—the revolution. In this context, Hanoi's "sacred mission" of, and commitment to, the completion of the revolution in the South do serve as a fundamental cause of the origin and escalation of the Vietnam war.

And yet, North Vietnam's main domestic concern in the post-Geneva years was her socioeconomic construction. Her Three-Year and Five-Year Plans were geared to build socialism in the North. Her economic difficulty and political-struggle policy prevented her from taking an initiative to launch a war in the South at that time. It was the growing military campaign of the Diem regime against the Communists with America's support that compelled Hanoi to decide to revert to war. Once the war decision was made, Hanoi found it hard to retreat. Undoubtedly, there were other decisions made by party conferences; but the three discussed were the most important. And these decisions must have been originated and formulated by a few top leaders.

The first decision of January 1959 on the resumption of armed struggle in the South marked a departure from the party line of political struggle established after 1954. This decision was made originally for self-preservation rather than "aggression." The second decision of September 1960 resolved to liberate the South in order to achieve national reunification. To this end, Hanoi guided and accelerated the build-up of the revolutionary machinery in a concrete form: the NLF (December 1960), the People's Liberation Armed Forces (February 1961), and the People's Revolutionary party (January 1962). And to make the revolution successful, Hanoi let the southern revolutionaries run a relatively independent course. This decision advanced Hanoi's stand from a policy of self-protection to a more ambitious strategy of liberating the South. The third decision of December 1963 was the adoption of an offensive strategy. Meanwhile, Hanoi committed itself to a really determined and active program of aid for the southern revolutionaries. By making this decision, Hanoi promoted itself to an aggressive, specific, and effective position toward the South. As of December 1963, it would have been a miracle if both Hanoi and Washington had reversed their commitments to the war.

Although Hanoi in late 1963 had decided to fight, its strategy was to confine the war to one country—South Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh may have taken into consideration the neutralization of Laos (1962), China's advice, and Khrushchev's cool attitude.<sup>57</sup> But such strategy was adopted mainly because of Ho Chi Minh's fear of America's massive intervention

<sup>57</sup> For a discussion of the cool Soviet attitude toward Hanoi, see King C. Chen, "North Vietnam in the Sino-Soviet Dispute, 1962-64," *Asian Survey* (September 1964), 1023-1936.

and his hope to keep the North out of the war. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution shattered his hope completely.

#### POSTSCRIPT

On April 30, 1975, the assaults of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forced the Saigon government to unconditional surrender. In a period of two months, the North Vietnamese drove Saigon's troops to a total collapse and compelled the hasty and complete evacuation of American personnel. The tragic Vietnam war was over. It was the final victory of Hanoi and the Viet Cong, and a great, humiliating failure of American intervention there.

In retrospect, it is evident that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong followed closely Hanoi's three decisions of 1959-1963. They accomplished almost all of the objectives as laid down by Hanoi—i.e., the overthrow of the Saigon government (Diem, Thieu, Huong, and Minh), the departure of all American personnel, and the "liberation" of the South. The final goal that remains to be achieved is the national reunification of the South with the North. As Saigon has been renamed "Ho Chi Minh City," the first cornerstone of reunification has been quietly and cleverly placed. They will accomplish this goal in due course probably through a general election. The completion of the Vietnamese revolution is at hand. With the recent takeover of Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge and the shaky coalition government in Laos, a Communist victory throughout Indochina seems to be only a matter of time.\*

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