

UNITED STATES ARMY SPECIAL WARFARE SCHOOL

~~REVIEW TO 22 JUNE 1968~~ VIET-NAM

THE REPUBLIC OF VIET-NAM occupies the extreme southeast of the ASIAN continent. It is long and narrow in shape and varies in width from 45 miles at the Demilitarization Zone in the north to a maximum of approximately 140 miles just north of Saigon. It has a coast line of 1500 miles and an interior border of approximately 900 miles, about 600 of which are with Cambodia and the remainder with Laos. The entire border is ill-defined and the swamps and jungle through which it runs makes actual ground identification or location extremely difficult. The traditional hostility of the Vietnamese and Cambodians has resulted in a very sensitive political situation along the Cambodian border with frequent incidents claimed by both governments. This has in turn led to charges and counter-charges between the two governments reference the existence or non-existence of Viet Cong safe havens within Cambodia from which the Viet Cong sally forth to attack Vietnamese installations and troops and to which they return to escape ARVN operations. The Laotian border is also of military significance since it is through this area that much of the large scale infiltration of the summer of 1961 occurred which resulted in the ICC censure of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam for its interference in the Republic of Viet-Nam internal affairs. The political situation in Laos is currently such that the infiltration of personnel and supplies across this border by the Viet Cong must be considered possible. We will touch on this again in a few minutes when we discuss the Viet Cong military organization.

Viet-Nam can be divided into three geographical regions. The Delta, or Southern Region, comprises approximately 1/3 of the country; however, it contains about 2/3 of the population of approximately 14 million people. Typically flat, it is cut up by many distributaries of the Mekong river, other streams and a dense network of canals. The transitional section north of Saigon is heavily forested and throughout the region are numerous patches of vegetation which afford cover and concealment for guerrilla bands. The Plaine Des Jons and the mangrove swamps of the Ca-Mau peninsula, two large swamp areas, are the outstanding features. The old French war zones C and D are located in the jungle areas north of Saigon.

A narrow coastal plain stretches north from the Delta to the Demilitarization Zone. The plain is broken at several points by the mountains coming down to the sea. Unlike the Delta, which produces a surplus of food, the people of the coastal plain depend, in part, on the rice surplus of the Delta region for their food.

The third region of the Republic of Viet-Nam is the high plateau, often referred to as the Highlands. This mountainous area is sparsely populated and rather undeveloped. The mountain tribes, semiprimitive and existing on a bare subsistence diet, are grouped under the generic term of Montagnards. Recently there has been a widespread movement of Montagnards to escape Viet

Cong harassment and particularly the large-scale stealing of food which has occurred in the past few months. The harvest season in the Highlands is approaching and food is particularly scarce at this time of year. The Viet Cong pressures have literally driven the Montagnards into the hands of the government. The Government of Viet-Nam is making a distinct effort to improve the lot of these tribesmen and settle them in controllable villages. This is the most encouraging development in the Highlands since control and support of the Montagnards is the key to this strategically important area of the Republic of Viet-Nam.

Communications in the Republic of Viet-Nam are poor, both in quantity and in quality. Roads are inadequate and unsuited to heavy traffic. In the coastal plain and Highlands regions, the roads are generally unpaved and narrow. Loads are further restricted by the low capacity of bridges. The situation is somewhat better in the Delta; however, the lack of fixed crossings at the many streams and canals serve to restrict movement. As you would expect, the primary means of travel in much of this area is boat. A single track railroad runs from Saigon along the coastal plain to Hue, just south of the Demilitarization Zone. This railroad formerly ran to Hanoi in North Viet-Nam. The railroad is a favorite target for Viet Cong sabotage. Activity against the railroad reached a peak in July with hostile acts ranging from track removal to derailment and ambushing of selected trains. The number of incidents decreased in August and early September as the Government of Viet-Nam took additional security measures; however, since the last week of September the Viet Cong have again increased their efforts against this vital communications link. Night trains which were discontinued last April were reinstated last month and continue to operate despite the Viet Cong pressure.

Although there are telephone systems in the major cities, there is no land line link between the major centers of population. Until quite recently communications between villages and district headquarters was primarily by messenger. The USOM village radio system currently being installed will provide radio communications between the villages and district headquarters, which in turn have radio communications with the provincial capitals. Installation of this system is expected to be completed by the end of this calendar year. The military significance of this can readily be seen, since it provides for fast reporting of Viet Cong attacks against villages which in turn makes possible more rapid reaction by government military forces.

Although the communist movement in the Republic of Viet-Nam dates from the early 1930's the present Viet Cong structure dates only from the signing of the Geneva Accord in 1954. At this time the communists withdrew approximately 80,000 troops to the north and nearly one million refugees streamed south to escape the forthcoming communist regime. However, the nucleus of an underground organization was left behind in the old war bases of the south, the U Minh Ha forest, Plaine des Joncs, and Zone D.

During the period 1954-1961 the Viet Cong concentrated their efforts toward establishment of cadres throughout the rural areas of the south and the conduct of a propaganda campaign aimed at the overthrow of the Government of the Republic of Viet-Nam.

In 1954 at the end of the civil war, President Diem was beset by many problems. He had to wrest control of the Saigon police force from the Binh Xuyen, the notorious bandit group, before he could gain control of the capital city itself. Following this struggle which saw a series of bloody street fights in the shadow of the Presidential Palace, the government was faced with the task of subduing the various private armies which had sprung up throughout the country. Most prominent among these were the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, two religious sects which still have strong followings within the country. To further the problem, the Vietnamese governmental ministries had to be staffed by Vietnamese who had served only in clerical positions under the French, and the army commanded and led by men who had served only as noncommissioned officers in the French led forces.

Despite these hardships, by 1961 it became obvious to the communist authorities in Hanoi that their hopes of subverting the Republic of Viet-Nam purely by propaganda could not be realized, and the stage was set for the large-scale military operations that were presaged by the heavy infiltration during the 1961 rainy season.

Before we discuss the build-up of Viet Cong military forces, let us consider briefly the Viet Cong political organization. The Viet Cong is an adjunct of the Lao Dong, the Communist Party of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam (North Viet-Nam). The political machinery consists of regional, inter-regional, provincial, and district committees. These committees receive their instruction from Hanoi and are supported at each echelon by Viet Cong Main Force military units of battalion, company, and platoon size, to carry out the military phase of their activities. There are approximately 20,000 and 25,000 Main Force or "Hard-Core" communist troops in the Republic of Viet-Nam. To this total must be added the irregular or militia type troops. These are the farmer by day, and guerrilla by night, peasants who operate within the immediate vicinity of their home villages and hamlets. Serving as intelligence agents to obtain information on ARVN troops and government installations, they also make up the front ranks in the attacks, thereby conserving the Hard Core cadre of the Main Force units. These irregulars probably number approximately 100,000.

As I previously mentioned, during the summer of 1961, the rainy season for the Delta and most of the Highlands, the Viet Cong infiltrated numbers of cadre into the Republic of Viet-Nam for the purpose of initiating stepped up military activity during the following dry season. The bulk of these cadre were former RVN who had been held together in PAVN (People's Army of Viet-Nam) units during their stay in North Viet-Nam. After service with the Viet Minh against the French, and subsequent service with PAVN, these hard core cadre were experienced and dedicated communist guerrilla fighters.

Beginning in September and increasing through October and November, the Viet Cong military activity created the crisis which resulted in General Taylor's visit to the Republic of Vietnam and President Kennedy's decision to increase US military assistance to the Government of Viet-Nam. As a result of these increased efforts, we have seen a gradual decrease in the scope and number of Viet Cong initiated military actions in the past few months. Although it is certainly premature to say that the war is won, there are military as well as political and economic indicators that the tide is turning.

Currently the Viet Cong activities vary within the different geographic areas of the country. In the Third Corps, the Delta, the primary activity is directed against the many villages and hamlets guarded by small Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps posts. Overrunning these small outposts helps the Viet Cong acquire needed weapons and ammunition, and accomplishes the secondary mission of eroding government control in these areas through the terrorizing and propagandizing of nearby villagers. In the coastal plain the primary activity is harassments of lines of communication, assassination of public officials and propagandizing of villagers. These are increasingly desperate Viet Cong efforts to stem the growing tide of governmental influence as the provincial rehabilitation efforts and the strategic hamlet programs gain momentum. Lastly, in the highlands the Viet Cong are foraging for food and stealing from the Montagnard villagers as they await the forthcoming harvests. This growing food shortage has partially caused the large-scale migration of the Montagnards from their homes to the more accessible areas of Government control where they can be resettled under the army's protection.

Concurrent with the decrease in Viet Cong activity has been an increase in the scale and effectiveness of the friendly operations. The increasing number of Viet Cong losses and the comparative decrease in losses by government forces is yet another indicator of the changing tide.

Despite these encouraging signs, the Viet Cong have continued to demonstrate their ability to maintain an effective military force. This is due to two sources of manpower; recruitment, and infiltration. The local recruitment of irregular militia into their main force units has increased; however, there is evidence that this may be encountering some difficulty, primarily, the increasing number of Viet Cong who are rallying to the government cause and the necessity for more use of terrorism in order to keep the people "in line." As previously stated, the border situation is difficult to assess, since the terrain is extremely difficult to traverse and maintenance of complete border surveillance impossible. Certainly political considerations in Laos at this time do not preclude the possibility of continued or even increased infiltration at such time as it may serve the communist plan of action.

The military campaign is only part of the fight to eliminate the Viet Cong threat in the Republic of Viet-Nam. This threat, as with all insurgency, is an all-out battle for the hearts and minds of the people. Only by combined military and civilian programs can the Government of Viet-Nam win, and it is here that the war must be won, as it is the people's war.