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QUANG NAM

PRIORITY AREA

The national priority pacification campaign in Quang Nam is in considerable difficulty. The reasons for this lie in three different fields--the fragmentation of command of GVN resources in the area; the strength of the enemy; and the current attitude of the Viet Nam Quan Dan Dang, the strongest political group in Quang Nam province. Of these three areas, the last presents the greatest difficulties.

1. The fragmentation of command. This is the problem that Americans and Vietnamese in the Quang Nam area talk about the most, and it is the one which should be easiest to solve. General Thi created an organizational monster to run pacification efforts in Quang Nam and he could eliminate it with a single order. Over the heads of the province chief and the mayor of DaNang, Thi created a Quang Nam Special Sector, commanded by Col. Dam Quang Yeu, and divided it into northern and southern zones. In addition to thus creating two unnecessary echelons of command, Thi went on to place all pacification activities within the Ngu Hanh Son area under the direct command of the commander of the 51st ARVN Infantry Regiment, Lt. Col. Nguyen Tho Lap. Almost all of Lap's regiment is actually tied down in static defense missions outside the Ngu Hanh Son area, so Lap--along with his headquarters company--sits in a regimental CP along National Route One, and tries to oversee the pacification effort. To do this he has an extra staff section specially for pacification, headed by an ARVN major. But the idea of running a complex pacification effort from the tents of a regimental CP is inherently weak, and Col. Lap, who does not enjoy this assignment and wants to run a regiment, is quick to admit this.

Col. Lap is not the only person who directs efforts in the Ngu Hanh Son area. Ostensibly, he controls the cadre and the FAY's, but actually, the province chief, Lt. Col. Ngo Thanh Tung, has a major interest in them, and they are paid through him.

The best way to observe the chaos created by these command arrangements is to make a visit on the district chief of Hoa Vang, Captain Nguyen Hoa. The U.S. Mission is fond of saying that the most important man in pacification is the district chief, but Captain Hoa says that he has not control over pacification in the Ngu Hanh Son area. The only thing he controls, he says, is the nine village chiefs. Thus at the very outset the command lines for village chiefs on the one hand and cadre and troops on the other is split. Captain Hoa continues: "I have five different bosses, and they often give me different orders. First, Col. Tung, the province chief in Hoi An. Second, Col. Yeu, the Quang Nam Special Sector commander. Third, Lt. Col. Yeu, the Quang Nam Special Sector, northern zone commander. Fourth, Col. Lap, the 51st Regiment commander. And finally, General Thi, who often gives me direct orders."

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Until the command structure is clarified -- preferably by the elimination of the Quang Nam Special Sector entirely -- there is no hope for a satisfactory pacification effort in Quang Nam. The resources of the GVN, including the number of qualified staff officers, are simply too fragmented right now to concentrate enough talent on a single problem at any time. Col. St. Clair, the deputy senior advisor to General Thi, has given Thi a letter recommending that Quang Nam Special Sector be eliminated, but so far no action has been taken, and there is a general air of resignation among the Americans about it. Recent reports indicate that Gen. Thi intends to enlarge the boundaries of Da Nang autonomous city to include several villages of Hoa Vang. How this will affect the pacification effort is unclear.

Yet resolution of the chain of command problem will not open the road to a successful pacification effort in the nine villages; it will only remove the largest artificial stumbling block placed there by the Vietnamese themselves. The two basic problems outlined below will still exist.

2. Enemy strength. The nine villages of the ngu Hanh Son campaign are sub-divided into the first phase group of the five western villages and the second phase group of the four villages near the coast. At this time the cadre and the PAT's are working only in the first five villages, and no GVN troops are deployed in the second group. The entire nine-village area is inside the TAOR of the 9th Marines, whose 1st battalion is deployed near the coast in the area of the second four villages.

The Viet Cong have been by now reduced to small-scale activity in the five western villages. All five village chiefs are in place, the last having returned last week. Only in the Cam Ne area on the westernmost fringe of the five villages are the Viet Cong still in open control. As for the next four villages, here three out of four village chiefs are still in exile, all living with or near the headquarters of the 1st battalion, 9th Marines.

The area is one with considerable VC strength, but it is not a major enemy base. In some ways, it is an area which the Government had abandoned and the Viet Cong moved into. The bulk of the population in the five villages is now back under GVN control, with the current estimate being 16,000 out of 23,000. However, the Government says that out of the entire 23,000 people, only 682 are young men between the ages of 17 and 30.

The basic problem posed by this lack of manpower must be solved before the area can be expected to participate in its own defense. Until it is solved, the Marines and the ARVN will remain tied to defensive missions involving them with the population. No one in Quang Nam sees any immediate solution to this dilemma.

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So far GVN efforts have been sporadic at best. General Thi told visitors on February 5 that many of the young men from this area now work in Da Nang, and he is going to send agents into the area to speak to them when they return on weekend visits; he hopes thus to be able to form some badly-needed PF units in the area. An effort is just starting in Hoa Da village to recruit PF; it is too early to tell whether this will have any success, but past efforts in this field have not been encouraging.

3. The Viet-Nam (Moc) Ban Phong (VNQDD). The VNQDD dominates a large part of the province of Quang Nam. At least nine of the twelve provincial council members in Hoi An are overt or covert members of "The Party" (as it is known in Quang Nam). Mr. Ho Van An, the chairman of the Quang Nam central committee of the the VNQDD, claims that 15,000 people in the province are members of the party, and many of these are now in VC areas. (In Hue's A-14 of October 22, the VNQDD claim only 4,000 members.) Mr. An also claims that at least 60% of the village committees are controlled by the VNQDD.

His figures may not be exaggerations. In the nine villages of the Ngu Hanh Son campaign, every village chief appears to be a member of the VNQDD; this is based on the statements of the Hoa Vang district chief, and on talks with three village and hamlet chiefs in the general area, and talks with three members of the provincial council, in addition to Mr. An.

The VNQDD, furthermore, is opposed to the Ngu Hanh Son campaign in its present form. The reason its spokesmen give for their opposition is simple: "We were not consulted in the formulation or implementation of this plan." This statement is essentially correct; despite the efforts of the fine USAID provincial representative in Hoi An, Col. Tung systematically refused to work with the provincial council, and finally alienated them completely. For this reason, if for no other, his removal from the province, which is imminent, will be a welcome thing. Whether or not he is a good soldier is no longer relevant; he almost deliberately antagonized the most powerful pressure group in the province, and they in turn found ways of bringing him down. He was a bad politician, and the situation in Hoi An requires a very good one.

The strength of the VNQDD in Quang Nam is substantial. The party, however, is clearly divided into warring factions. While no American has yet been able to clearly identify the factions and their leaders, it is possible to discern the outlines of three or four different groups.

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A. The older group, composed of the senior members of the party who fought the covert fight against Ngo Dinh Diem -- these men are considered the most moderate, and probably have the greatest influence over the village chiefs of the province.

B. A younger group, more aggressive than the first group, and perhaps quite antagonistic to them -- this group seems to have some representation in the PAT program in Quang Nam.

C. Young People's Revolutionary Party -- this is a relatively new group, headed in Quang Nam by Captain Duy Lam. They have begun organizing in some villages in Hoa Vang district, particularly one village at the base of the Ai Vang pass. This factionalism can at times become quite violent. A few weeks ago some members of faction number two (above) tried to murder the head of the census-grievance teams, a member of the older faction.

Nonetheless, all these men -- village chiefs, members of the provincial council, members of the PAT and C-G programs -- all give common allegiance to the party, and at present some steps are underway towards a unity conference, perhaps to be held in Hue, for the entire I Corps VNQDD. (Its major strongholds, beside Quang Nam, are Quang Tin and Quang Ngai.)

Furthermore, the VNQDD has many self-proclaimed friends in the area, particularly in Da Nang. Thus the full extent of their influence may be greater than is readily evident. (In Da Nang itself, the VNQDD is not as powerful as the Buddhists; only one member of the municipal council is a member of the VNQDD -- and he ran as a Buddhist.)

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My visit to Quang Nam left me with the following tentative conclusions:

1. The VNQDD is the strongest non-communist force in Quang Nam, and has a large number -- perhaps a majority -- of the villages organized in its name.
2. If the VNQDD opposes a plan or a person, that plan or person is probably going to fail.
3. The VNQDD at this time opposes both the province chief and the Ngu Hanh Son plan, and the province chief is on his way out.

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4. The Ego Nanh Go plan, despite the valiant efforts of the Marines, is in trouble, caused by a confused and fragmented chain of command, a lack of skilled cadre, inability to recruit locally RV and PW -- and the open opposition of the VNQDD.

5. The best long-range chance for success in pacification in Quang Nam lies in finding a province chief who can involve the VNQDD in his programs. He does not have to be a member of the VNQDD; as a matter of fact, as long as the factionalism continues, it would be better if he is not -- but he must be acceptable to the party.

6. The present AMVN command arrangements in Quang Nam are intolerable; as long as they last, progress in Quang Nam is unlikely.

7. The USAID provincial representative, James Herbert, should be encouraged to continue his informal contacts with the VNQDD party through the provincial councils and continue to support small projects through the provincial council. This is a delicate problem, but Herbert is doing his job well, and by providing a continual ear to the VNQDD, may ultimately be in a position to bring the party and the provincial administration more closely together in a single pacification effort.

8. The PAFs should be controlled by the district chief, not the regimental commander. CAS, which is aware of the VNQDD influence on the PAFs, should work with USAID in an effort to get the VNQDD and the GVN in accord on a pacification program.

9. The PAFs should be more responsive to the wishes and ideas of village committees in areas in which they are working; this is a recurring criticism made of the PAFs now.

10. The village committees of Quang Nam should be retrained now, in advance of the pacification effort, in either Hoi An or Quang Nam, so that they are aware of the pacification program and of the additional support and resources that will be available. Nothing along these lines is now being done, or, to my knowledge, being planned. Yet today, in Quang Nam, over 300 village and an estimated 900 hamlet officials are drawing salary as village and hamlet officials -- while living in exile in Da Nang or district towns. Here, certainly, is the greatest untapped human resource in Quang Nam, and no one is doing anything about it. (This point was made to be by the vice-chairman of the provincial council.)

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It will probably be possible for the Marines and the GVN, by sheer military presence, to keep the area south of the DaNang airfield--that is, the nine villages of the Hoa Binh Son campaign--clear of large VC units, and thus make it difficult for the enemy to threaten the vital base installations of the III MAF at DaNang. This is now being done, primarily by the 9th Marines. Within their TAOs, Marine units are slowly going to push southward, systematically searching possible VC hideouts, and seeking battle with the enemy. The Marines, moreover, are painfully aware of their own limitations--their inability to build by themselves the essential structures of Government, an effective police system, a commitment by the population to the Government, a local self-defense unit. All of these things, they know, can come only from within the GVN itself, with U.S. advice.

Nonetheless, the Marines have unavoidably become involved in pacification, for given their approach to their basic mission of securing the "advance base" of DaNang as a possible future staging area for future military operations further inland or to the south, they had little choice. Besides, Americans are naturally generous, and in the presence of suffering and obvious human needs, it was inevitable that the Marines would turn to civic action projects in areas in which they operated.

Examples of this abound: the village chief of Hoa Mai, who was almost assassinated by the VC recently, now lives with his family in a tent in the CP of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines; selected troops from Marine engineer units and Seabees take turns patrolling in a three-hamlet complex south of DaNang which is not slated for a GVN pacification effort until at least April, and these patrols actually stay part of the time in the hamlets as perimeter defense; Marines help build schools, provide personal security for PAV's (i), work directly with village chiefs, encourage (so far unsuccessfully) bus companies to expand their routes into risky areas, provide 24-hour security for at least one pagoda (Khuac Bac, where earlier the Marines were involved in an incident), and send medicines everywhere.

For all this, the Marines are naturally popular in most areas. Indeed, the inescapable conclusion is that at this time they are more popular than any other troops who ever occupied the tortured land of Hoa Binh district--and this includes the Viet Minh, the French, the Japanese, and, of course, the ARVN.

And so the crucial questions: can the Marines transfer their popularity with the people to the GVN; are their efforts the first step in the process of building commitment to the Government; will the population undertake any portion of its self-defense requirements, by joining RF or PAV units?

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So far, the answers have been in the negative, and the national priority pacification plan in Quang Nam--the so-called nine villages, or Ngã Hân Sơn campaign--is in difficulty.

To improve the situation, the Marines, in cooperation with I Corps and General Nguyen Chanh Thi, have begun several interesting experiments with the Regional and Popular Forces. Of these, the Combined Action Companies are the most promising. In them, a U.S. Marine captain will command a unit composed primarily of PF, with a few Marines attached to each platoon. The company exec will be an ARVN aspirant or lieutenant. Experiments (already reported) in the Hue Phu Bai TAOZ were judged to be successful, and General Thi has told the Marines that he wants similar companies formed in the Da Nang TAOZ. Their promise is substantial; the PF, in the words of one Marine, "get involved in being a Marine;" the esprit and discipline of the Marines communicates itself to the PF, whom now ARVN officers have ever taken seriously. The Marines hope to be able to leave behind PF units which continue to fight effectively after the Marines have left; this is going to be very hard, perhaps impossible, for the GVN is unlikely to support PF, and qualified NCO's will remain non-existent.

A second experiment conducted by the III MAF attached a squad or platoon of Marines to an RF company. The Marines continue to operate as a unit, but merely by being there, they serve as additional firepower, a boost to morale, and a constant linkson direct to the Marines in case air, artillery or reinforcements are needed.

These experiments both seem to have achieved the short-range goal of producing Vietnamese fighting men to aid in the defense of the TAOZ. But in a sense they dramatize the problems the Marines face. The Marines are inevitably regarded by the population as an occupying power (despite their frank warnings to the population that they will not stay forever). If they do leave, it is likely that the GVN will fail once again to fill the vacuum militarily. Today, a civilian vacuum continues to exist. If they stay, the Marines will remain tied down in an essentially defensive mission of protecting the population and their base area. If they do choose the latter course, the dangers of eventually alienating the population by an accumulation of inevitable small mistakes increase daily, especially if we are unable to deal with the VC in the area decisive defeats.

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