

VIET-NAM

DOCUMENTS AND RESEARCH NOTES

Document No. 23

March 1968

VIỆT CỘNG POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

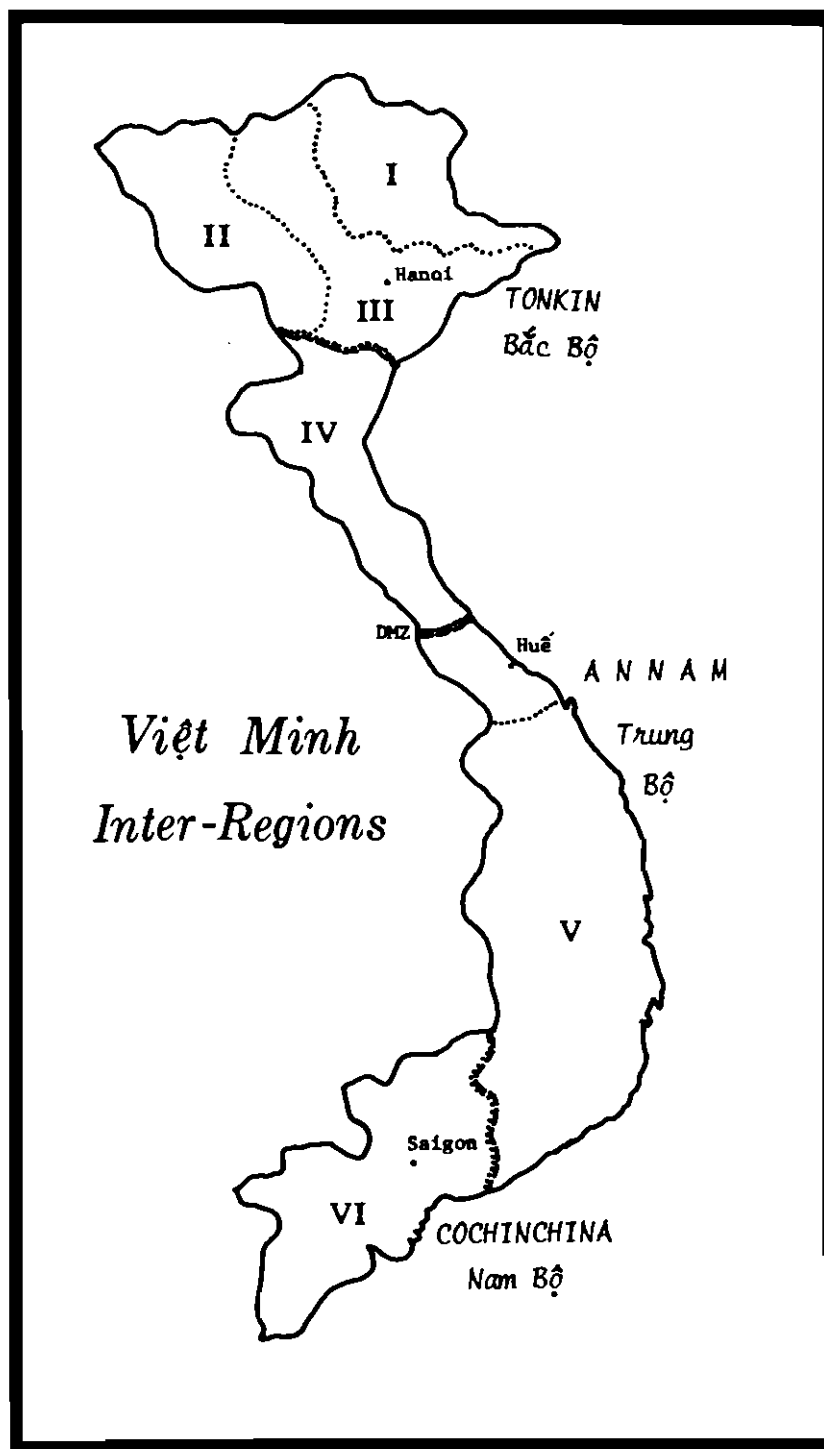
by Albert E. Palmerlee

Documents captured from the Việt Cộng are filled with strange numerical designations, code words and unfamiliar administrative terms. Names of VC military regions, provinces and other geographical entities, for example, often fail to coincide with those used by the Government of Việt-Nam (GVN). The VC have evolved their own administrative geography. This fact complicates interpretation of the captured materials.

As a reference aid, this issue of *Viet-Nam Documents and Research Notes* reproduces an outline map and table showing military regions and provinces according to the VC system. The map, compiled in 1967 by the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, is based primarily on evidence extracted from VC sources. For comparative purposes, a map showing the provinces and corps tactical zones of the Republic of Việt-Nam is also reproduced.

The geographic divisions used by the VC delimit both political and military areas of responsibility—the jurisdictions of the People's Revolutionary Party or National Liberation Front committees at various levels and the commands of the South Viet-Nam People's Liberation Army. Central administration comes from the Central Office, South Việt-Nam (COSVN) (*Trung Ương Cục Miền Nam Việt Nam*) for all of the Republic of Việt-Nam, except for the Trị-Thiên-Huế Region and Region 5. These two regions are directly subordinate to the North Vietnamese High Command (*Bộ Tổng Tư Lệnh*). The next level of organization is the region (*khu*).¹ The region is composed of a number of provinces (*tỉnh*); provinces are further divided into districts (*huyện*), districts into villages (*xã*), and villages into hamlets (*ấp*). There is not necessarily a correlation between the divisions used by the VC and the GVN administrative divisions of corps tactical zone, province, district, village and hamlet. Villages and hamlets usually correspond in the two systems, because they are based on traditional ties, but the place names

Mr. Palmerlee is a Systems Analyst with FMA, Inc., and has been working in Việt-Nam since August 1966. A former naval officer, he has B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Kansas, and has published a number of specialized works in the field of cartography.



VIET-NAM DOCUMENTS & RESEARCH NOTES is issued as a research service by the United States Mission in Vietnam. It presents a selection of significant materials on Southern Viet Cong and North Vietnamese affairs. Copies of Vietnamese-language originals of all captured documents used and full texts of any translations abridged may be obtained on request from the Minister-Counselor for Information, American Embassy, Saigon, Vietnam.

are very often different. In some areas the names and actual boundaries for provinces and districts established by the VC and the GVN are the same; this is generally true when the boundaries are sharply delineated by natural features. But more often different names are used and the actual areas of responsibility differ. This is very often deliberate, for it complicates the coordination of anti-guerrilla activities by dividing the responsibility for a single VC entity among several GVN areas.

Also, there is no true correlation between the VC boundaries and areas of actual VC control. On the central coast, for example, the VC have a political and military structure for Phú Yên province that closely parallels the GVN organization. In 1965 the VC claimed control of 256,000 persons—75% of the province population. A secret report issued on 13 May 1967 stated that control had dropped precipitously to 20,000 persons, or to about 6% of the population. Yet the provincial structure remains nominally the same in the VC system.

Traditional Divisions of Việt-Nam

Historically Việt-Nam has been divided into three areas, now generally referred to as North Việt-Nam, Central Việt-Nam and South Việt-Nam. The names Tonkin (or Tongking), Annam and Cochinchina were used by the French for these areas, and are better known even today to many people outside Việt-Nam. In Vietnamese, however, they were called *kỳ*, being respectively *Bắc kỳ*, *Trung kỳ* and *Nam kỳ*. Because of its association with the French régime, the Việt Minh replaced *kỳ* with the word *bộ*. After the division of Việt-Nam into northern and southern halves, the government in the South adopted the term *phần*, but the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam (DRV) and the Việt Minh in the South continued to use the term *bộ*. *Kỳ* is no longer used except to refer to the period before 1945.

Although the Geneva accords divided Việt-Nam at the 17th parallel, the traditional three-fold division is still used by the Communists. Central Việt-Nam is considered divided between the North and the South.

The Region

During 1945-1946 the Việt Minh divided Việt-Nam into 14 regions (*khu*). These proved too cumbersome in operations, and in March 1948 they were merged into six inter-regions (*liên khu*).² The inter-regions were in some cases subdivided into regions. At some point there were nine regions, numbered 1 through 9 from North to South. Regions 1 through 3 were in Bắc Bộ, 4 through 6 in Trung Bộ, and 7 through 9 in Nam Bộ.

When the National Liberation Front (NLF) was proclaimed on December 20, 1960, six divisions for the area south of the 17th parallel were also established:

South Trung Bộ	(<i>Miền Nam Trung Bộ</i>)	
Western Highlands Autonomous Region		(<i>Khu Tự Trị Tây Nguyên</i>)
Eastern Nam Bộ	(<i>Miền Đông Nam Bộ</i>)	
Central Nam Bộ	(<i>Miền Trung Nam Bộ</i>)	
Western Nam Bộ	(<i>Miền Tây Nam Bộ</i>)	
Saigon-Cholon-Gia Định Special Zone		(<i>Độc Khu Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn-Gia Định</i>)

The first two of these made up Inter-region V, and the three Nam Bộ regions made up the Nam Bộ Inter-region (formerly Inter-region VI).

In May of 1963 Southern Trung Bộ was split into Regions 5³ and 6. The Nam Bộ Inter-region and the Saigon-Cholon-Gia Định Special Zone remained unchanged, but numbers were assigned to these areas, making the Regions 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Initially, a lack of staffing at the regional level made the inter-region the primary level of planning and coordination. However, as the overall organization of the VC became more complex, the regional level increased in importance. This was due in large measure to the difficulties in coordination caused by the extremely poor transportation and communications available between local organizations and the inter-region headquarters. In the early 1960's the inter-region level was completely eliminated, and the regions became independent. The inter-region V committee was dissolved; the Nam Bộ Inter-region committee was re-formed into COSVN.

The region is now the fundamental organization for both military and political control. It may be referred to both by the traditional name, as Eastern Nam Bộ, or by

the number assigned to it, in this case Region 1. In military matters, the term *quân khu* is used. The *khu* and the *quân khu* cover exactly the same area, representing purely a distinction between political and military organizations. In each case, the boundaries established have been natural ones, based on geographical and political considerations; the same is true for the delineations of the provinces and the districts.

With the major shift in strategy from guerrilla tactics to a general military offensive, and the accompanying increase in troop strength, this fundamental organization did not always meet the requirements for control. Beginning in 1966, local adaptations were made to meet specific problems; these included the establishment of front commands, sub-regions and special regions.

The Highlands

The initial organization of the NLF in 1960 included a Highland Autonomous Region (*Khu Tự Trị Tây Nguyên*) for the Western Highlands. On May 19, 1961, a congress of montagnard tribal representatives organized a Highland Autonomy Movement (*Ủy Ban Dân Tộc Tự Trị Tây Nguyên*). However, it appears the autonomous government was purely a paper organization, for Pike mentions that "in a message on 20 December 1962 the NLF Central Committee encouraged the montagnards to establish an autonomous zone in the highlands."⁴ There is evidence that from August 1962 to August 1963 a Region 10 was established, covering Quảng Đức, Phước Long, Bình Long and Lâm Đồng provinces of the southern part of the Western Highlands. A Region 7 may have existed for a very short period in the highlands, but if so, it was quickly integrated into Region 6 after its formation. Although the highlands are said to have been represented on the Central Committee in Hanoi, the VC montagnard policies were largely unsuccessful, and it appears probable that the entire region always remained subordinate to Inter-Region V and, later, Region 5.

In April 1966 recommendations were made by the Region 5 Party Committee to Hanoi that the region be divided into three subdivisions. In June of that year a formal subdivision was made, creating the Trị-Thiên-Huế Region and the Western Highlands Front Command, leaving as Region 5 the remaining provinces along the coast. Various prisoners and ralliers have referred to the Western Highlands as a military region, but because its authority is not complete, the term "front command" (*bộ tư lệnh mặt trận*) is more accurate. One rallier from the staff of Region 5 specifically stated the "the Western Highlands Area did not possess a region Party Committee and the Region 5 Party Committee remained responsible for providing political guidance to the provinces located in that area. MR 5 [also] provided staff guidance . . . on guerrilla and militia activities at the local force level."

In October 1966, shortly after the front command had been formed for the Western Highlands, Region 10 was activated covering Quảng Đức, Phước Long and Bình Long provinces. According to a captured diary, the establishment of base areas, control of the southern end of the infiltration route, ethnic minority problems, and land development for the large plantations in the three provinces were the principal problems to be solved by the new region. A printed news bulletin called this region the South Western Highlands (*Nam Tây Nguyên*).

Region 5 was activated in 1960 under the name of Miền Nam Trung Bộ, covering the area of Inter-region V with the addition of Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên provinces. As the region increased in organizational complexity and its activities expanded, the size of the region required that a subdivision level between the region and the province be established. Initially, in May 1963, the southern part of Region 5 had been formed into a new Region 6. Then, about 1964, the northern and southernmost groups of provinces were organized into sub-regions (*phân khu*). These sub-regions functioned in the same manner as the region, acting as an intermediary control level between the province committees and the regional committee.

Southern Sub-Region

The Southern Sub-region (*Phân Khu Nam*) covers Phú Yên, Khánh Hòa and Daklak (GVN Darlac) provinces, and has continued to function since its activation. However, Daklak province forms a part of the Western Highlands, and, as such, also comes under the Western Highlands Front Command. The Front Command controls main force units in the area, while political guidance and the control of local forces and guerrillas is the responsibility of the sub-region.

Trị-Thiên-Huế Region

The Northern Sub-region (*Phân Khu Bắc*) covered Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên provinces, which had originally been part of Military Region IV of North Việt-Nam. In June 1966 the Northern Sub-region was elevated to full region status and given the name Trị-Thiên-Huế Region, a name derived from the second halves of the names of the two provinces covered, and Huế, the ancient autonomous capital city. When this change was made, a regional party committee was formed to provide overall political guidance, thus distinguishing it from the front command system established for the Western Highlands about the same time. The region controls not only Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên provinces, but also the central part of the Laotian panhandle; prisoners have occasionally referred to it as the Trị-Thiên-Central Laos Military Region (*Quân Khu Trị-Thiên-Trung Lào*). Captured documents from this area also mention a Forward Military Region (*Quân Khu Tiền Phương*), but whether this refers to the DMZ area or to the two northern provinces is not clear. There have been, however, occasional references to a Bình-Trị-Thiên theater; Bình-Trị-Thiên is a contraction for Quảng Bình province of North Việt-Nam, above the DMZ, and Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên provinces south of the DMZ.

Provinces and Districts

Under French administration each of the three areas of Việt-Nam had been divided into provinces. During the first two years after the Geneva agreement was signed, the old provincial boundaries and names continued in force. On October 22, 1956, the government of South Việt-Nam promulgated a major reorganization of the provinces by changing many of the boundaries and the names associated with the French period. These changes were not recognized by either the Democratic Republic of Việt-Nam or by the Việt Minh.

The delineation of the VC provinces in general followed the old French provinces, although there were some notable exceptions to this practice. They also used many of the older names for these provinces—names which were more familiar to the people.

In other cases, however, the VC followed the newer GVN structures. An example of this was the establishment by both organizations of Phước Thanh province north of Saigon. Interestingly enough, this province was later dissolved by both the GVN and the VC and divided among the adjacent provinces. In the process, however, the VC renamed Bình Dương province Thủ Dầu Một, a name from the days of the French (although the area of the new Thủ Dầu Một province is quite different from the old).

The VC provincial structure has remained reasonably static since its initial setup except in Region 1 (Eastern Nam Bộ). Late in 1966 the provinces of Region 1 were consolidated on a major scale, with Tây Ninh being the only province to remain unchanged. Bình Dương and most of Phước Thanh provinces were merged to form Thủ Dầu Một province. Long Khánh, Biên Hòa and Bà Rịa (GVN Phước Tuy) provinces were merged to form Bà Biên province (also called Long Bả Biên). Now the entire region was divided into only three provinces. These mergers were accompanied by corresponding consolidations of the Party structures, and by the merger of some of the districts within the area. There are indications that this consolidation was necessary because of the lack of adequate cadre for both provincial and district administration.

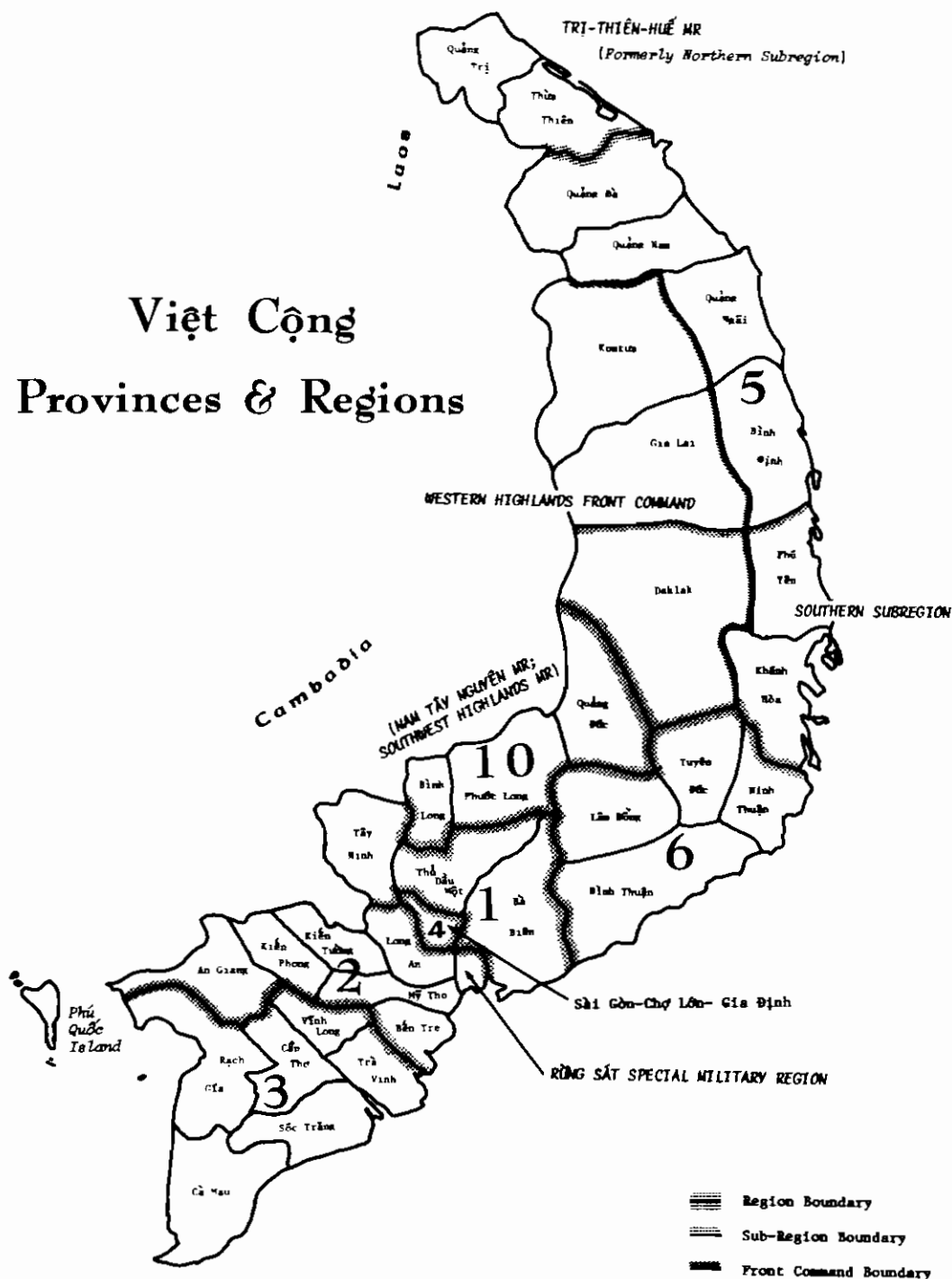
Special Regions

In the early organization set up by the VC, the Saigon-Cholon urban area and surrounding Gia Định province were considered as a special zone (*đặc khu*). However, when Military Regions 7, 8 and 9 (covering the Nam Bộ area) were renumbered as Regions 1, 2 and 3, the Saigon-Cholon-Gia Định Special Zone was renamed Military Region 4. Its area is small compared with the other regions, it has no province structure under it, and has a heavy organizational emphasis on propaganda, proselyting, intelligence and sapper elements. It is still considered a special zone in the Party structure.

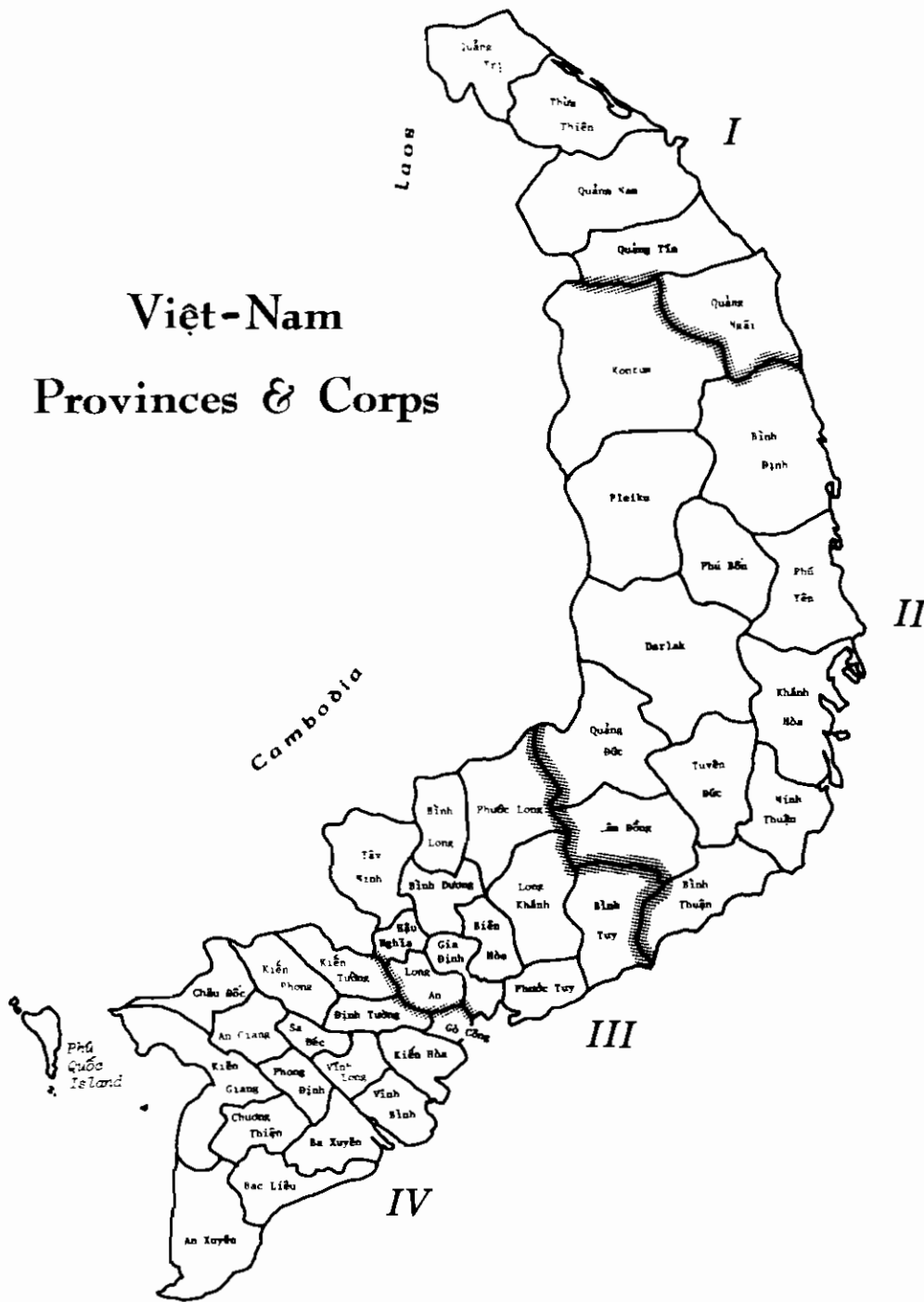
Early plans were also made for special zones for the cities of Huế and Đà Nẵng, but seemingly these were never activated.

In a decision dated April 15, 1966, the Rừng Sắt was established as a special military region (*đặc khu quân-sự*), with the mission of building a strong base area and interdicting the water lines of communication to Saigon. The Rừng Sắt is a heavily forested swampy area lying astride the river mouths leading to Saigon, and is a lightly populated area. Before this time the Rừng Sắt had come under the administration of

Việt Cộng Provinces & Regions



Việt-Nam Provinces & Corps



Biên Hòa province, forming two of its districts. A functioning staff organization for the new special military region was not built up until June 1, 1966.

The organization of a special military region differs from that of a military region (*quân khu*) in that in the former the control of both military and political affairs is directed by the military organization, while in the latter separate structures are established for military and political activities. This is a logical adaptation for an area of distinctive geography. It is also a special region for the GVN.

Recent Reorganizations

It is probable that the VC have formed a new province, called Bắc Bình province, from the northern half of Bình Thuận province. So far, however, there are few references to it.

In November 1967 COSVN ordered a major reorganization of Regions 1 and 4, resulting in their dissolution. The districts surrounding Saigon were formed into various sub-regions (*phân khu*), each with a party committee as well as a military organization. This was a careful design to support VC operations within the capital zone. It is not reflected on the map of VC regions and provinces.

The Significance of the Changes

The first major reorganization of administrative divisions was undertaken in 1966, and included the formation of Region 10 and the Trị-Thiên-Huế Region, the establishment of the Western Highlands Front Command, and the consolidation of districts and provinces in Region 1. Each of these was done in response to specific situations. In the first two of these three cases it was the establishment of new management organizations for areas of specific importance.

The reorganization of Region 1, however, was required because of the erosion of the infrastructure from extensive allied operations; the limited number of cadre available made the consolidation of existing structures the only means of maintaining a viable organization. Yet similar reorganization of the province structure has not been found in other areas of extensive operations, such as Bình Định province. However, a quick look at the geography of the Bình Định area reveals that any merger with an adjacent province would make an area too large to administer, either too long and narrow along the coast, or mixing lowland and highland areas. The new structures in Region 1 are still sufficiently well designed for efficient administration.

The total reorganization of the III Corps area in late 1967, however, is revealing of the VC's capability to change to meet the current situation, for here we have not a simple series of mergers, but a completely new design that abrogates all historical precedent. The traditional Nam Bộ divisions have been ignored and established provinces dissolved to create newly designed entities.

In their initial organization the VC deliberately avoided disturbing the existing territorial structures. But as the war has changed its complexion, the VC have responded through the creation of new types of command structures to meet the new demands, each tailored to the specific situation.

NOTES

¹ The term *khu* is variously translated as "region" or "zone," *liên khu* as "inter-region" or "inter-zone." Throughout this paper the translations "region" and "inter-region" are used. The term *miền* is also used for a region when it is referred to by name, as *Miền Đông Nam Bộ*, Eastern Nam Bộ Region. But also *Khu Miền Đông Nam Bộ* and *Quân Khu Miền Đông Nam Bộ* are found in captured documents. The term *Miền* by itself is used as a contraction for *Miền Nam Việt Nam*, i.e., Việt Nam south of the 17th parallel.

² Fall, Bernard B. *The Two Viet-Nams: a Political and Military Analysis*, revised edition (New York, Praeger, 1964), p. 135.

³ Region 5 is also listed as Region V, since it is directly subordinate to the North Vietnamese High Command, which uses Roman numerals for military regions.

⁴ Pike, Douglas. *Viet Cong* (Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1966), p. 205.

Regions

No.	English	Vietnamese
1	Eastern Nambo	Miến Đông Nam Bộ
2	Central Nambo	Miến Trung Nam Bộ
3	Western Nambo	Miến Tây Nam Bộ
4	Saigon-Cholon-Gia Định Special Region	Đặc Khu Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn-Gia Định
5	Central Trung Bo <i>Subdivisions:</i> Northern Subregion ¹ Southern Subregion Western Highlands	Miến Trung Trung Bộ Phân Khu Bắc Phân Khu Nam Tây Nguyên
6	Southern Trung Bo ²	Miến Nam Trung Bộ
10	Southwestern Highlands	Miến Nam Tây Nguyên
-	Tri-Thien-Hue ¹	Trị-Thiên-Huế
-	Rung Sat Special Military Region ³	Đặc Khu Quân-sự Rừng Sát

¹ The Northern Subregion became the Trị-Thiên-Huế Region in June 1966.

² Originally Southern Trung Bộ referred to all of Inter-Region V, now divided into the Trị-Thiên-Huế Region and Regions 5 and 6.

³ During 1966 the Rừng Sát was also called Region 10.

GLOSSARY

- Area (vùng)** 1. A minor administrative division used in highland areas, subordinate to the sector (*khu*) and consisting of several villages.
2. A minor administrative division used in Gia Định province, subordinate to the district (*huyện*) or inter-district (*liên huyện*), or to the sub-region (*phân khu*) established in late 1967.
- District (huyện)** The principal subdivision of a province, responsible for political affairs and the control of local forces and guerrillas. Divided into villages.
- Front Command (bộ tư lệnh mặt trận)** A military command exercising control over main force operations for a specified area, but with the control of political matters and guerrilla and local forces reserved to the region.
- Inter-District (liên huyện)** An administrative arrangement merging the organization of two (or more) districts into a single unit responsible for the entire area and functioning as a district; the component districts cease to function as organizations. The inter-district name is usually derived by merging the names of its component districts.
- Inter-Province (liên tỉnh), see Sub-Region**
- Inter-Region (liên khu)** The highest territorial division, used by the Việt Minh, and by the VC until about 1964. It was composed of several regions (*khu*). Also called Inter-Zone.
- Military Region (quân khu), see Region**
- Province (tỉnh)** The principal VC administrative division, responsible for political and military affairs. It is normally subdivided into districts (*huyện*), although in the highlands some provinces are subdivided into sectors (*khu*).
- Region (khu)** 1. The primary level of VC territorial division, administered by a regional party committee, and normally with jurisdiction over both political and military affairs, although control of main-force operations for specific provinces may come under an independent front command. In military matters it is referred to as a military region (*quân khu*). 2. Some highland provinces are subdivided into sectors or regions (*khu*), which are further subdivided into areas (*vùng*); the translation "sector" is preferred for this usage.
- Sector (khu)** A subdivision used for some highland provinces; also translated as region. Divided into areas (*vùng*).
- Special Military Region (đặc khu quân-sự)** An area primarily of military importance in which the military command controls both military and political affairs.
- Special Region (đặc khu)** A territorial division under a party committee established for the Saigon-Cholon urban area and adjacent Gia Định province, responsible for both military and political affairs.
- Sub-Region (phân khu)** 1. An intermediary administrative level between the region and the province, normally with control over both military and political affairs through the sub-region party committee, although main-force military operations for specific provinces may come under the control of an independent front command. Also called an Inter-province (*liên tỉnh*). 2. In the new reorganization around Saigon in late 1967, a territorial organization subordinate to COSVN replacing the province. It is divided into districts (*huyện*) or areas (*vùng*).

Zone, see Region