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CRITIQUE OF GENERAL SON HAO'S ARTICLE OF APRIL 1965

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Military Stresses in North Viet-Nam

The North Vietnamese regime's willingness to continue the war in Viet-Nam has been clearly demonstrated in recent weeks. The Hanoi-directed Viet Cong have stepped up both the scale and intensity of the war in the South, and on June 9 threatened (by means of Radio Hanoi) for the first time to appeal for "volunteers from the armies of North Viet-Nam and of friendly countries" to come to their aid (emphasis added). In turn, Hanoi has continued to reject all offers of meaningful negotiations on Viet-Nam and has called for a stepped up struggle against the United States and the government of South Viet-Nam.

The militant course chosen by Hanoi has resulted in heavy burdens (e.g., hours of extra work and various forms of belt tightening to preserve food) for all sectors of the North Vietnamese populace. Perhaps the greatest burden, however, has been placed on the North Vietnamese military. The military establishment, led by General Vo Nguyen Giap, must defend the North against U.S.-SVN air attacks, continue to supply guidance, men, material and weapons to its VC guerrilla arm in the South, and prepare for the possibility that Hanoi's revolutionary policies will lead to an outright conventional conflict with Free World forces in Indochina.

As can be imagined, these heavy tasks do not lend themselves to ready completion, and a number of strains and weaknesses have been revealed in the Ministry of National Defense's efforts to meet the regime-imposed challenges. There are some signs of lukewarm support for the regime's "liberation" policy in Viet-Nam, and other indications of military fears that a "people's war" strategy may fail against modernized U.S.-Free World forces. Even more concretely, there is evidence that the Viet-Nam People's Army is having significant problems in adjusting its organization to meet the requirements of the current crisis situation.

Military Strategy

The military view of the current situation has been expressed in some detail in the recent writings of Major General Song Hao, head of the VPA's powerful Directorate-General of Political Affairs.

214

These and other writings on military strategy have appeared in the thrice-weekly Army journal Quan Doi Nhan Dan.¹

According to Song Hao, the "whole of Viet-Nam is in a state of war" in which the "Vietnamese people" are defeating U.S. attacks against the North and the "South Vietnamese people" are winning decisive victories against the United States all over the South. The situation is so positive that "the liberation war in South Viet-Nam at present is developing from guerrilla war to conventional war." The only U.S. response is to step up the war against both North and South.²

In response to this favorable situation the DRV must develop fully the "people's war" strategy, the "military line of a small and weak people opposing an enemy who is much stronger."³ The United States has more money, material and weapons, but the DRV and Viet Cong, who are fighting in their own country and who are used to the climate, have "absolute political and military superiority" resultant from fighting a "just" war. U.S. troops are inferior to the "Vietnamese people" in morale, motivation and battle experience, and it is man, not weapons, that decides the outcome of any war. Moreover, the DRV and Viet Cong have the correct political line; ergo, the United States will inevitably be defeated.

¹ Song Hao's first article appeared in the journal on April 17, and was followed by a second article that appeared in installment form during the month of May. The Viet-Nam News Agency (VNA) began carrying installments of this article on May 29.

The Directorate-General of Political affairs is a Lao Dong Party institution of great influence and power. Basically, it is charged with maintaining training standards, sustaining morale, supervising politico-military discipline, and directing the political indoctrination of the DRV armed forces.

² Song Hao's statement on the war entering a new phase was carried by VNA on June 11. This would appear to indicate the belief that the guerrilla war in the South is entering the third and final phase of "mobile" warfare, but as yet no other authoritative Hanoi source has made this statement.

³ General Giap, "Let Us Hold Firmly to the Party's Military Line and Advance Toward Achieving Further Success," Quan Doi Nhan Dan, December 22, 1964.

Song Hao dismisses the troublesome thought of a possible nuclear attack on the DRV in one paragraph: the United States would not dare use nuclear weapons against the DRV because of the danger of return nuclear blows from the "socialist camp" and the negative reaction of world public opinion. "Besides, nuclear weapons, like all other weapons, are not the decisive factor for victory in a war. The decisive factor is justice, man, the fighting spirit, and a correct political and military line."

The general's earnest protestation of the invincibility of a "people's war," when coupled with recent DRV propaganda output on Viet Cong-DRV "victories" and the "weaknesses" of the U.S. soldier,¹ is a reasonable indication that there are many in the DRV military who are not completely sold on either the "people's war" strategy or the desirability of pushing the war against the United States. Song Hao himself admitted the existence of such doubters when he called for a "deep change" in the thoughts and attitudes of the DRV armed forces in order to prepare them for combat. This change requires the eradication of "negative rightist tendencies and exaggerated desires for peace." To offset these weaknesses the officers and men of the DRV armed forces must be "fired with maximum hatred for the enemies and by the determination to fight and win."

The existence of detractors of the "people's war" strategy is not a new event in the short history of the DRV. Debate over this concept goes back at least to the late 1950's, and was particularly evident in late 1964. The debate has tended to be between the Lao Dong Party and certain professional military officers, and has involved several points of conflict other than military strategy (e.g., political controls over the military and debate over the correct makeup of the DRV armed forces).²

¹ A typical example of Hanoi's efforts to downplay the capabilities of U.S. troops was found in a Nhan Dan editorial of June 11. The editorial contended that the troops' strength "lies merely in their weapons and modern equipment," whereas they have no "fighting spirit," are used to a "depraved way of life and have no fighting experience."

² For an analysis of professional military-Party tensions see IRS/AF report R-59-65: Party-Military Conflict in the DRV.

Attitudinal Weaknesses

There are many in the DRV armed forces who are not yet ready to make the transition from peacetime status to combat readiness. The new tasks are heavy and, according to Song Hao, the armed forces must "make a mighty and timely change in their thoughts, organization, attitudes, and daily activities" in order to complete them successfully.

To be combat ready the armed forces "must never entertain illusions" concerning the strength or purpose of the imperialists; they must eliminate "subjectivism," "simplism and formalism," and the fear of suffering and difficulties. All "manifestations of dogmatism and mechanical imitation" must be done away with in training in order to make it as similar to combat as possible.

The officer corps in particular must not be status conscious and desirous of maintaining the status quo in order to protect their vested interests. They must not regard "military tasks as civilian tasks," nor "revolutionary combatants as functionaries." Many officers of this stripe

still have the habit of working slowly. They engage in formalities and take weeks to finish a task which can be finished in one day. They keep a perfunctory hold on situations ... and get caught in red tape. They attend many unnecessarily prolonged conferences. Many of them still maintain affected and complex ways of life.

Organizational Shakedown

The regime imposed task of "struggling to protect North Viet-Nam and supporting wholeheartedly the liberation revolution in South Viet-Nam and the revolutionary struggle movement in Indochina and Southeast Asia" also requires organizational changes.

Major General Song Hao, and others, have indicated that the Viet-Nam People's Army (VPA) is having real problems in adjusting to its expanded military requirements. Song Hao noted that there are "forms of organization and systems which are no longer suitable to the present phase," and called for changes that would make armed forces command and leadership "strong, firm, and at the same time orderly, light, and versatile, thus eliminating bulkiness and intermediacy." Such changes are both complex and difficult, however, and are hindered by "conservative thoughts, the fear of difficulties and changes, and the tendency to maintain old customs."

Logistically, the VPA apparently is not yet ready for an expanded "people's war." Senior Colonel Tran Tho, writing on the transport and supply capabilities of the VPA, declared that there was a need for greater thriftiness and self-sufficiency in the army, plus more flexibility in response to the requirements of various units of the armed forces. He warned that "heavy service machinery and a purely administrative work method in logistics are not suitable to the present situation," and declared that "such things as bureaucracy, redtapism, generalism, formalism, sluggishness, liberalism and so forth," must be eliminated.¹

¹ Senior Colonel Tran Tho, "Let Us Make Strong Changes in Ideology, Organization, and Attitude in order to Step Up Logistic Tasks and Insure Victories in Fighting," Quan Doi Nhan Dan, May 13, 1965.