

Ho Chi Minh and People's War

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On December 19, 1946, military forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) attacked French installations throughout the city of Hanoi. For the next three days, the two sides waged a bitter battle, as Vietnamese units (popularly known as the Vietminh) gradually withdrew to prepared positions in the mountains skirting the Red River Delta. The first Indochina war had begun.

On December 22nd, while the guns were still blazing in Hanoi, the Standing Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) issued a statement to party members calling for a war of national resistance against the French colonial regime. The coming conflict, it declared, would take the form of a protracted war, and would proceed in three stages. After a first phase of temporary withdrawal from the major cities, resistance forces would establish liberated zones in the countryside and begin to engage in periodic attacks on vulnerable enemy positions. In the final stage, Vietnamese units would launch a general offensive to defeat the French and unify the entire country under Vietnamese rule.¹

To seasoned observers of international politics, the strategy enunciated by Vietnamese leaders appeared to be a classical rendition of the doctrine of people's war as originally enunciated by the Chinese revolutionary Mao Zedong. In several articles written over a period of several years before World War II, Mao had outlined a strategy of protracted war that would take place in three stages and culminate in a final general offensive. Clearly, Vietnamese war planners had decided to adopt the Chinese model in carrying out their own war effort.

As the years progressed, the Franco-Vietminh conflict appeared to unfold according to the predicted scenario. After their retreat into the rugged terrain north of the Red River valley (known to Vietnamese as the Viet Bac, or "northern Vietnam"), Vietminh forces gradually emerged from their mountain lair to confront the French in the lowlands. Then, in the first weeks

of 1951, under the leadership of the party's chief military strategist, General Vo Nguyen Giap, they attempted to mount a general offensive aimed at seizing the entire Red River Delta and occupying the capital city of Hanoi. When that assault was repulsed, the Vietminh temporarily returned to the second stage of guerrilla war. But in the spring of 1954, they returned to the offensive, launching a vigorous attack on the French mountain base at Dien Bien Phu, a small market town in the northwestern corner of the country. The Vietminh victory there in early May provided a backdrop for the peace conference that had just gotten underway at Geneva, and became a major factor in bringing about a negotiated agreement.

In the years following the end of the Franco-Vietminh war, the notion that DRV leaders had adopted the Maoist model as an integral component of military doctrine in Vietnam became accepted wisdom among many analysts in the United States. That assumption, in turn, helped to shape the U.S. assessment of the nature of the threat posed to the government of South Vietnam as the Second Indochina War got underway in the early 1960s. As time went on, however, other observers argued that Vietnamese military strategy had diverged in significant respects from the somewhat rigid formula of the Maoist three-stage hypothesis and had evolved into a more nuanced approach involving diplomatic and psychological as well as purely political and military factors. The ensuing debate over Hanoi's strategic thinking raged unabated until the end of the Vietnam War and even beyond.²

The purpose of this paper is to examine the evolution of Vietnam Communist military doctrine during the war against the French, and the influence of that experience on the later conflict against the United States. As a crucial part of that analysis, it will seek to single out the role played by Ho Chi Minh in the formulation of Vietnamese revolutionary strategy. Although most of the credit for developing Vietminh military strategy against the French has usually been ascribed to Vo Nguyen Giap, or to the party's general secretary Truong Chinh, the fact is that both Vietnamese leaders relied to a considerable extent on the ideas and the experience of the veteran revolutionary Ho Chi Minh.

Roots.

Biographies of Mao Zedong, in seeking the roots of Mao's revolutionary ideology, have often pointed to his youthful experience in growing up in a rural village in central China. Mao's father was a farmer, hardworking and astute but lacking in any formal education and authoritarian in his approach to raising his children. According to the conventional wisdom, the young Mao grew to maturity with a strong dislike of traditional Confucian morality and of the rigid parental discipline which characterized its application in China. Although educated at a normal school in the provincial capital of Changsha, Mao deeply resented the arrogance of urban intellectuals (some of whom became founding members of the Chinese Communist Party) toward the rural population and, after he himself became a member of the party, was quick to view the future of the Chinese revolution as taking place primarily in the countryside, not in the teeming coastal cities.

A comparison between the upbringing of Mao Zedong and the youthful experience of Ho Chi Minh is instructive. Like Mao, Ho was born in a rural village located far from the urban centers of power and, after his father became an official at the imperial court in Hué, was probably treated like a country bumpkin by many of his more cosmopolitan classmates. Like Mao, Ho chafed at the arrogance of Confucian mandarins (as well as the French colonial officials who presided over them) and his first political act was to take part in a peasant tax revolt in 1908.

Here, however, the similarities end. Ho Chi Minh's father was a scholar well versed in Confucian teachings who instilled in his son with a deep respect for the content, as opposed to the practice, of Confucian humanist teachings. Later, enrollment in a French-run school in Hué provided him with a deep respect for the key tenets of Western civilization. Unlike Mao, who throughout his lifetime expressed a deep suspicion of the world outside China, Ho Chi Minh was cosmopolitan in his political and cultural interests and comfortable in dealing with Western leaders in the arena of international politics.³

That curiosity about the outside world was in clear display in the summer of 1911, when the young Ho Chi Minh, now in his early twenties, left Indochina for the West with the goal of

learning more about European civilization. After several years of service as a mess boy at sea and a manual laborer in France, England, and the United States, he settled in France at the end of World War I, where in December 1920 he became a founding member of the French Communist Party (FCP). In his own words, at that time he had no clear understanding of classical Marxism. What attracted him to communist ideology were the ideas of the Bolshevik leader V.I. Lenin, who had electrified the young Vietnamese with his declaration that the new Soviet state must support nationalist uprisings throughout the colonial world as the first stage in provoking a worldwide socialist revolution against the capitalist order. As a young man inflamed with a sense of patriotism, Ho found Lenin's strategy of allying communist parties with local nationalist groups highly relevant to the situation in Asia.⁴

Voice in the Wilderness.

Inspired by Lenin's ideas and operating under the pseudonym of Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot), Ho rapidly emerged as the FCP's chief spokesman for the colonial peoples, organizing colonial subjects from Africa and Asia who were living in France into an organization called the Intercolonial Union, and promoting the colonial issue within the ranks of the FCP. He soon found, however, that most party members had little interest in the "colonial question," which was generally considered to be a sidelight of the world revolution. In an article in the journal *l'Humanité* he lamented that there were many militants in France "who still think that a colony is nothing but a country with plenty of sand underfoot and of sun overhead, a few green coconut palms and colored folk, and that's all. And they take not the slightest interest in the matter."⁵

In the summer of 1923, he was invited to Moscow to study Marxism and work at Comintern headquarters, where he discovered that the Eurocentric attitudes that he had encountered in Paris were present in Moscow as well. Undaunted, he became a member of the Peasant International (Krestintern), where he spoke bluntly about the importance of the rural population in bringing about the collapse of colonial regimes throughout Africa and Asia. Such views flirted with ideological unorthodoxy, but with friends in high places his views were tolerated within the

Soviet hierarchy. At the Fifth Comintern Congress in July 1924, he vocally criticized European parties for their inattention to the colonial problem. Once again, however, his views were generally ignored, provoking him to lament to a friend that he was a “voice in the wilderness.”⁶

In the fall of 1924, Ho Chi Minh left Moscow for south China, where he served on the staff of Mikhail Borodin, the official Comintern emissary to the revolutionary government of Sun Yat-sen in Canton. His primary activity, however, was to recruit Vietnamese exiles living in the area into a new organization called the Revolutionary Youth League, a broad alliance of workers, peasants, and the urban middle class designed to lead the struggle for national independence against the French. Cooperative efforts with other anti-colonial parties were encouraged, but the League was careful to maintain its own independence of action. An inner core of committed revolutionaries formed the nucleus of a future communist party, which was expected eventually to carry out the second, or socialist stage of the Vietnamese revolution.

There was no direct military component in the League’s program – in Ho’s view the peoples of Indochina were not sufficiently prepared to launch a revolutionary uprising to overthrow French colonial authority. But he attended lectures at the Peasant Institute in Canton, a program run by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to train cadres in organizing the rural population in preparation for the future Chinese revolution, and took a strong interest in the efforts of the CCP activist Peng Pai to organize the peasants in rural areas of Guangdong province. In a short article that he authored later in the decade, Ho argued that a close alliance between workers and peasants was the proper road to revolution in colonial Indochina.⁷

The program of the Revolutionary Youth League, which emphasized the goal of national independence and a broad alliance of town and country - was fully in tune with the tactics formulated by V.I. Lenin in the early 1920s. But in the summer of 1928, the Comintern suddenly shifted tactics and began to emphasize a more doctrinaire approach that focused on class struggle and an urban-based revolution. Cooperative efforts with bourgeois nationalist or peasant parties were now discouraged in favor of independent efforts to organize the urban proletariat. When a

communist party was formally established (to be known, after October 1930, as the Indochinese Communist Party, or ICP), it obediently echoed the new line in Moscow. Younger members of the League who had been trained in Moscow during the late 1920s openly criticized Ho Chi Minh for his now outdated emphasis on national independence and a peasant-proletarian alliance.

Although a rural uprising broke out in central Vietnam in the summer of 1930, the results appeared to confirm the doubts expressed by the supporters of the new line: workers, farmers, and the urban bourgeoisie in other parts of the country did not rise in support of their compatriots in the central provinces, and for the most part stood by as the French suppressed the uprising.⁸

During the next several years, Ho Chi Minh's program based on national independence and a worker-peasant-bourgeois alliance remained in eclipse. After a stay in a Hong Kong prison, Ho arrived in Moscow in 1934. It was not a propitious moment, for the Soviet Union was in the grip of a reign of terror, as thousands of "old Bolsheviks" were executed for allegedly treasonous activities. Ho apparently only survived the purges by virtue of continued support from influential supporters within the Comintern. But his prospects were about to improve. With the rise of Hitlerism in Europe and militarism triumphant in Japan, Stalin changed tactics once again, and at its Seventh Congress in 1935, the Comintern returned to the broad united front tactics that had been applied during the early 1920s. In 1938, a now rehabilitated Ho Chi Minh returned to China with instructions to provide intelligence information on conditions in eastern Asia to Comintern headquarters. After a brief visit to the CCP headquarters at Yan'an (where he evidently did not meet with Mao Zedong), Ho served as an administrator with CCP units in South China. In his spare time he wrote articles for progressive journals on the spreading Asian crisis. In the summer of 1939 he was assigned as a radio operator for a guerrilla training program in Guiyang, where he took advantage of the opportunity to learn more about Chinese guerrilla tactics.

Inside Indochina, party leaders were responding in their own way to the rapidly evolving events in the region. In early September 1939, French colonial authorities cracked down on ICP operations following the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in late August. Two months later, the

party Central Committee issued a resolution calling for the formation of an alliance of progressive forces to launch a general uprising to overthrow the colonial regime. The tactics to be applied were not spelled out, although some party members, including the young activist Vo Nguyen Giap, had begun to give thought to the possible employment of guerrilla warfare. In the spring of 1940, Giap left for South China, where he met with Ho Chi Minh in April. For the first time in almost a decade, Ho was in direct touch with party leaders inside the country.

The Vietminh Front.

Having observed closely the dramatic rise of international tensions since his return to Asia, Ho was well aware of the potential significance of a Pacific war for the future of the Vietnamese revolution movement. When Japanese forces began to expand into northern Indochina in the fall of 1940, he realized the significance of the action and made plans to return to Vietnam to begin preparations for a population uprising to be launched at the close of what was rapidly becoming a region-wide conflict. Lacking direct contact with Moscow, or with CCP leaders in north China, ICP leaders were compelled to formulate their own strategy for the coming struggle. The centerpiece of the party's strategy was the creation of a new four-class alliance (to be known as the League for the Independence of Vietnam, or Vietminh Front) to seek the dual goals of independence and social reform. The new organization reflected Ho Chi Minh's own strategic vision. As had been the case with the Revolutionary Youth League in the 1920s, the Communist leadership of the new front was disguised, and primary emphasis was placed on the goal of national independence. A modest land reform program was set forth, but future plans to redistribute land holdings from the wealthy to the poor were not mentioned in order to avoid alienating moderate elements among the urban bourgeoisie and the patriotic scholar-gentry.

At its inception, the new front appeared to be primarily a political organization. This orientation reflected Ho Chi Minh's view that the most important initial challenge was itself political in nature: to create an organization designed to mobilize the support of a broad cross-

section of the Vietnamese population to liberate the country from foreign rule. Under the surface, however, the Vietminh Front contained a military component that would eventually be required to supplement the force of the people's will. As a result, in the months following the formation of the front, preparations got underway for the creation of guerrilla units in the mountains north of the Red River Delta, where the party might hope to create a liberated zone from which to launch an attack on the enemy at an appropriate moment. To help provide training materials for the creation of such military units, Ho translated into Vietnamese several training materials issued by the CCP for the use of its own guerrilla forces in China.⁹

In Ho's judgment, however, an equally important task was to seek external support for the struggle for national independence. That task was undoubtedly facilitated by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, which brought the United States into the Pacific war. In the summer of 1942, Ho traveled secretly to China to seek support from Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Government in Chongqing. He also sought to obtain support for his cause from U.S. military and intelligence representatives stationed in South China. Ho had no illusions that the United States was an imperialist nation that was fundamentally opposed to the spread of international communism; still, the promulgation of the Atlantic Charter the previous August had suggested that the Roosevelt administration might support the principle of self-determination for all colonial peoples at the end of the war.

Ho's plans to establish a relationship with Allied governments were temporarily disrupted in August 1942 when he was arrested by local authorities and held in prison for several months, but after his release a year later he resumed his activities and was eventually able to patch together a shaky coalition with non-Communist groups living in exile in South China. Recognizing that a key to success would rest in the ability of the new organization – known as the Vietnam Revolutionary League, or Dong Minh Hoi – to present a moderate face to the outside world, he attempted to disguise the role of the ICP in its formation and adopted a new pseudonym for himself to hide his own revolutionary past.¹⁰

In the winter 1944-1945, Ho Chi Minh returned to North Vietnam, where preparations for a general uprising at the close of the war were well underway. Some of his more militant colleagues, including the young Vo Nguyen Giap, urged a more aggressive approach in preparation for the final grasp for power, but Ho Chi Minh vetoed the proposal, arguing that a premature shift to military operations could provoke a vigorous response from Japanese occupation forces. "The phase of peaceful revolution has passed," he declared, "but the hour of the general insurrections has not yet sounded." As a consolation to this young colleague, he authorized him to form the first units of the future Vietnamese Liberation Army (VLA). To reflect the fact that their first duties would be primarily paramilitary in nature, they were to be called Armed Propaganda Brigades.¹¹

The August Revolution.

By the spring of 1945, Vietminh forces began to move southward from the border area in preparation for their planned general uprising. They now possessed some limited support from U.S. military representatives in South China, who had been assigned to train Vietminh forces for their final assault against Japanese forces in Indochina. Still, the rapidity of the collapse of Imperial Japan in August was undoubtedly a surprise to Vietminh leaders, who had assumed that Allied invasion forces would invade Indochina prior to the final end of the war. In some ways, the sudden Japanese surrender operated to their disadvantage, since their units in the southern part of the country were not fully prepared to take part in a general uprising. As a result, when the war came to an end on August 14th, southern leaders, lacking direct communications with Vietminh headquarters in the North, were virtually left to their own devices.

Nevertheless, the August Revolution, as it came to be known in revolutionary folklore, was a stunning success. Popular demonstrations, orchestrated by Vietminh activists and supplemented by local militia units in many instances, resulted in a quick Vietminh takeover of the northern and central parts of the country. In the South, Vietminh elements were compelled

to share power with non-Communist nationalist groups until the return of French forces in October drove resistance elements out of the capital and into the countryside. In recent years, some scholars have questioned the dominant role of the ICP in the August Revolution, stressing the spontaneous character of many of the demonstrations. Without Vietminh leadership, however, it is highly doubtful that local nationalists would have been able to organize resistance against the return of the French.

The August Revolution resulted in the creation of a new provisional republic, with Ho Chi Minh as president and presiding over a mixed cabinet composed of both ICP and non-Communist figures. To allay suspicion of its motives, in November the party declared itself replaced by a Marxist Studies Group. The new government was faced with challenges on several fronts. Ho labored strenuously in the diplomatic arena, seeking to placate commanders of arriving Nationalist Chinese troops, lobbying U.S. representatives for recognition of the new government, while seeking to negotiate a compromise agreement with the French that would provide the DRV with at least some of the attributes of statehood. Militant nationalists and some party members opposed any compromise with Paris, but Ho argued that in view of Vietminh military weakness the government must be prepared to accept an agreement calling for complete independence in five years.

Ho Chi Minh's focus on the diplomatic front reflected his view that the fate of the Vietnamese revolution, unlike that of its counterpart in China, depended in considerable measure on the shifting course of international politics. As he noted in remarks to his colleagues at a party meeting in August, the immediate future of Indochina would depend in considerable measure on the state of relations among the victorious allies. If the "Grand Alliance" between the United States and the USSR held together, the former might decide to support Vietnamese independence against the French. But if tensions between Moscow and Washington increased, the United States would probably back the French in seeking to restore

their authority over Indochina. If so, it would be necessary to exploit the contradictions among the Western allies to best advantage.¹²

Ho Chi Minh's analysis of the world situation was all too accurate. As Cold War tensions in Europe mounted during the winter of 1945-1946, suspicions in Washington of Ho's communist credentials mounted, and was a factor in the decision by the White House to recognize French sovereignty in Indochina. Emboldened by U.S. support, Paris adopted an intransigent attitude in peace talks with DRV during the summer of 1946, leading to a dramatic increase in tensions during the remainder of the year. Ho Chi Minh labored to delay a total breakdown in peace talks, but in November he finally authorized his senior military commanders to prepare for war.

People's War.

With the resumption of military conflict in December 1946 the ICP, still operating in secret behind the veil of the Vietminh Front, once again turned to China for inspiration. Party leaders had borrowed selectively from Mao's strategy of people's war after the formation of the Vietminh Front in 1941. Now, with the decision announced on December 22nd to adopt Mao's three-stage process, the debt would be more explicit. A few weeks later the decision was reaffirmed with the publication of a treatise authored by ICP General Secretary Truong Chinh and later translated into English as "The Resistance Will Win."¹³

By now, Truong Chinh had begun to emerge as a prominent spokesman for the party on ideological matters, and the appearance of his treatise, the first major exposition of Vietnamese revolutionary strategy since the formation of the Vietminh Front in 1941, led many observers to conclude that he had now become its leading military strategist as well. It is more likely, however, that the ideas presented in the book reflected the consensus views of the party leadership as it entered a new phase in the struggle for power and probably represented Ho Chi Minh's own views as well.¹⁴

The author described the upcoming conflict as a protracted war based, as earlier indicated, on Mao Zedong's famous three stages of people's war. In the first, or defensive stage (*phong*

ngu), Vietminh forces would resort to both positional and mobile war to harass the enemy, while simultaneously retreating from heavily populated areas to defensive positions in the countryside. The second stage of equilibrium (*cam cu*), which Chinh described as the "key stage" of the conflict, would be attained when French troops had reached their maximum strength and began to shift their attention to the task of pacifying the countryside and wiping out remaining Vietminh units. Although resistance forces would then be subject to occasional bouts of pessimism and the temptation to compromise, this would be the moment when they would be called upon to intensify their activities and to wage guerrilla operations in enemy-controlled areas in order to expand the territory under their own control.

The final stage of general counteroffensive would consist of large-scale attacks on enemy forces involving both mobile and conventional forms of combat. The author cautioned that the transition from one stage to another could not be rigidly predicted and would be dependent upon a variety of factors, including the strength of the Vietminh armed forces, the level of popular support for the insurgent movement, and the degree of demoralization of enemy troops.

Although the similarity between the ideas contained in the pamphlet and the Maoist doctrine of people's war is striking, the Vietnamese approach differed from its Chinese counterpart in several respects. In the first place, the Vietnamese rejected Mao's analysis of the role of terrain in a revolutionary environment. Mao had argued that certain two factors unique to China permitted the successful application of people's war: 1) its semi-colonial status, which limited imperialist rule to the cities and left the rural areas substantially untouched by enemy control, and 2) its vast territory, which allowed revolutionary forces to wage extensive guerrilla operations in areas far removed from the heartland of enemy authority.

Vietminh leaders, of course, were confined to a much more limited physical environment and confronted an enemy armed with advanced weapons; in consequence, they adopted a different approach. While Truong Chinh's pamphlet conceded that terrain was an important factor in protracted war, he asserted that popular support and a disciplined people's army led by the

party could overcome the limitations of geography and colonial status. Even a country like Vietnam, he concluded, was not too small for the establishment of revolutionary base areas.¹⁵

Vietminh strategists also departed from the Chinese model in their view of the preponderant importance of the world situation. Mao Zedong had devoted little attention to the role of international politics or to estimating its importance for events inside China. In Vietnam, where resistance forces might be unable to achieve a decisive advantage on the entire battlefield, external factors would play a major role in promoting or hindering the revolutionary cause. In the first place, the longer the war lasted, the more the Vietnamese revolutionary movement would earn the sympathy of democratic forces around the world, placing increased pressure on the French government to compel it to withdraw its troops. A shift in the world balance of power (here the author presumably referred to the growing political and military power of the Soviet Union, or a victory by Communist forces in China) might also further undermine the strength of the imperialist powers and redound to the advantage of the Vietnamese revolution.

Finally, Vietminh strategists counted on psychological factors to assist them in their efforts. Declining morale in the military ranks and increasing public resistance to the war on the home front would seriously weaken the French military effort. In bringing about such conditions, diplomacy might be used as a tactic, with what Truong Chinh described as "false negotiations" utilized to weaken the enemy's resolve while the revolutionary forces prepared for their final military assault.

In such conditions, some Vietminh war planners were apparently convinced at the outset that absolute military superiority over the forces of the enemy need not be a necessary precondition for the launching of the final stage of general offensive to achieve total victory and a revolutionary seizure of power. In their view, superiority might be relative in character, a combination of military power with political and diplomatic factors. Under such circumstances, the war might come to an end not with an outright military victory, but with a negotiated settlement.

Despite such departures from the Chinese model, Truong Chinh had drawn much of his material from Mao's treatise "On Protracted War," composed at Yan'an in 1938, the same year as Ho Chi Minh's brief visit to the CCP headquarters. Clearly, as the conflict opened, party leaders had become convinced that the road to victory would follow, in broad respects, the path previously charted by Mao Zedong.

Withdrawal.

By the time the directive of December 22nd had appeared, the first stage of withdrawal was already underway. Taking advantage of the enemy retreat, French forces seized the capital of Hanoi and occupied most of the province capitals in northern and central Vietnam. They then reopened the major transportation routes in the delta and down the coast to the south. Whenever possible, Vietminh forces avoided combat in order to preserve their own small main force units, although there were some rearguard skirmishes in Hanoi and other urban areas undertaken by guerrillas or local paramilitary forces.

Beyond the cities, however, the Vietminh remained in control of much of the countryside in northern Vietnam. In early April 1947, a central party cadre conference issued a resolution calling for an immediate shift to guerilla operations in order to regain the initiative and establish a tactical advantage during the defensive phase. To achieve this end, a number of main force regiments of the VLA were broken down into small guerrilla units in order to harass French forces. Each village under Vietminh control was instructed to establish a self-defense militia unit, while training programs on guerrilla warfare, taught by deserters from the French foreign legion and the Japanese army, were established in liberated areas. In the meantime, Ho Chi Minh launched a number of diplomatic initiatives to test the atmosphere in Paris and Washington, D.C. The response to his efforts was disappointing: the French had no interest in resuming negotiations, while the Truman administration was content for the moment to observe the hostilities from a safe distance.

For the Vietminh, it was a race against time - to build up their strength before the French could break the back of the resistance. During the spring and summer, the French had limited their operations to consolidating their control over highly populated areas in the Red River delta and along the central coast. But in the fall of 1947 they launched a major offensive in the mountains north of the Red River Delta in the hope of destroying the bulk of resistance forces and seizing Vietminh headquarters, now located in the jungles near the provincial capital of Tuyen Quang.

On the surface, the fall campaign was a success. French troops inflicted heavy casualties on Vietminh units and then advanced northward to garrison frontier towns along the Chinese border. Additional clashes took place in the far northwest, where inexperienced Vietminh units fighting for the first time in set positions absorbed heavy losses and were forced to flee into the mountains. Some troops abandoned their positions under pressure or refused to obey their commanders. Ho Chi Minh and his high command escaped capture, but allegedly by less than an hour. The French commander General Salan optimistically reported to Paris that enemy forces were now totally isolated and could now be wiped out by simple police operations.¹⁶

Salan's analysis of the situation, of course, turned out to be far off the mark. Although the French offensive had disrupted enemy operations and forced Vietminh headquarters to change its place of operations, Ho Chi Minh was still at large, while his movement still posed a potential threat to the security of French Indochina. In a tacit recognition that Salan's had overstated the results of the fall campaign, French authorities decided to approach ex-emperor Bao Dai with a plan to form an autonomous government that could win support from moderates inside Vietnam. If the various non-Communist factions inside the country could be unified into a cohesive political force, there would be for the first time a viable alternative to the Vietminh for the loyalty of the Vietnamese people. Although the public reaction to the French initiative was cautious, the willingness of many ardent nationalists to consider cooperating in a joint effort against the Vietminh was evidence that the latter were having some difficulty in

broadening their urban political base beyond the radical fringe traditionally sympathetic to the revolution. Ho Chi Minh countered by broadening his own government, replacing Vo Nguyen Giap and Pham Van Dong – two prominent members of the ICP - with moderates.

The performance of the Vietminh during the first year of the war had thus been mixed. It had been able to survive the first onslaught of French military attacks, but at the cost of severe losses in weapons, territory and personnel. On some occasions Vietminh commanders had displayed a lack of experience in applying the techniques of guerrilla war. Truong Chinh cited the case of one officer who refused to allow his troops to enter combat on the grounds of preserving his forces. In other instances, officers reportedly lost control over their troops at the height of the battle, causing the latter to abandon the battlefield and run away. On the political front, the movement was spreading its base in the countryside, but still suffered from a lack of serious commitment by many poor peasants, especially in the South, where Vietminh leaders were struggling with limited success to broaden their base of operations in the marshy lowlands of the Mekong Delta.¹⁷

Equilibrium.

As it turned out, Vietminh fortunes were about to improve. By the end of 1947, recruitment in villages under Vietminh control had begun to recoup losses from the French military offensive, and the size of revolutionary armed forces was steadily on the rise. Although the French had successfully occupied most of Red River Delta and dislodged the Vietminh from substantial parts of the Viet Bac, party leaders sensed that the enemy had reached his maximum strength and would now turn his attention to pacification operations in place of ambitious military operations. A meeting of the ICP Standing Committee in January 1948 formally decreed that the process of withdrawal was complete and announced the opening of the second stage of equilibrium.¹⁸

One of the key tenets of the second stage of people's war was that now resistance forces must then attempt to seize the initiative on the battlefield. The main objective would not be simply

to survive, but to wear down enemy forces and expand the territory under Vietminh control, thus permitting an increase in recruitment as well as in the financial and material resources available to the movement. In Indochina, that meant expanding operations into the central and southern part of the country, and beyond Vietnam into neighboring Laos and Cambodia, thus forcing the enemy to divide his military forces and making them more vulnerable to attack. As Truong Chinh put it in an article written in 1947, "If the enemy attacks us from above, we will attack him from below. If he attacks us in the North, we will respond in Central or South Vietnam, or in Cambodia and Laos. If the enemy penetrates one of our territory bases, we will immediately strike hard at his belly and back..., cut off his legs [and] destroy his roads."¹⁹

According to Vo Nguyen Giap, in the new stage guerrilla operations would now be expanded throughout all areas in Indochina. But Giap conceded that guerrilla war by itself would be inadequate to achieve the major objectives of the new stage. At least a few large and well-equipped regular units, capable of mobile operations over a relatively wide area, would be required. So during the final months of 1947, a few selected mobile battalions were formed, and by early 1948 the first battalion-sized attacks were launched upon enemy forces.²⁰

The shift to a more aggressive approach began quickly to yield dividends. The size of revolutionary forces increased from 50,000 at the beginning of the war to more than 250,000 two years later. Vietminh troop strength had reached near numerical parity with the French, although they were still inferior in firepower. The political apparatus had also spread dramatically, and now exercised control over 55 percent of all villages throughout country, with a total of over 12 million people.

The Communist Victory in China.

Perhaps the most promising development for the Vietminh at the end of the decade was the victory of Communist forces in China. During the early years of the Franco-Vietminh conflict, the DRV had only limited contacts with CCP headquarters in North China. Telegraph links were established in 1947, and a year later PLA military units along the border began to

cooperate with Vietminh forces across the frontier. But in 1949, contacts increased dramatically with the imminence of the Communist victory.

Since the creation of the DRV in September 1945, Ho Chi Minh had been reluctant to discuss the commitment of his government to the principles of Marxist ideology, and a constitution drafted in the fall of 1945 made no mention of the creation of a future communist utopia. In interviews with Western journalists, Ho consistently stressed the determination of Vietnamese leaders to adopt a position of neutrality in international affairs. But the Communist triumph in China presented the Vietminh for the first time with the promise of support from a powerful ally. The elusive benefits of a policy of diplomatic neutrality now clashed with the growing promise of an outright military victory. In the fall of 1949, the DRV quietly sent two delegates to Beijing to feel out the leaders of the new People's Republic of China (PRC) on establishing diplomatic ties between the two governments.. The following January, an official delegation led by Ho Chi Minh visited Beijing to cement these ties and work out an agreement for military and economic assistance. From there Ho went on to Moscow, where Mao Zedong was engaged in negotiations with Joseph Stalin on a new Sino-Soviet mutual security pact. The two Communist leaders promised to support the Vietnamese struggle for national independence, although Stalin indicated that China should take primary responsibility for the project.²¹

Mao Zedong evidently viewed Stalin's offer as an opportunity. Convinced that war with the imperialist powers was only a matter of time, he wanted to adopt an offensive posture in Southeast Asia to forestall a possible U.S. effort to strengthen its own role in the region. Beijing thus not only agreed to grant diplomatic recognition to the DRV, but also to provide military assistance and advisors to assist the Vietminh in their struggle against the French. That Chinese leaders viewed the conflict in Indochina through the prism of their own revolutionary experience seems clear. In a widely-publicized speech in November 1949, PRC Chairman Liu Shaoqi had declared that the peoples of Southeast Asia would eventually follow the Chinese model to overthrow oppressive colonial regimes and restore their own independence.

During the next few months, Beijing established a Chinese Military Advisory Group (CMAG) in North Vietnam to provide guidance to Vietminh war planners in their struggle against the French. Training camps for Vietnamese cadres were constructed in South China, and a civilian advisory team was also established to assist the Vietnamese in remodeling their party and government along Chinese lines. Although the new relationship was limited – there were no provisions, for example, for the possibility of active Chinese intervention in the Indochinese conflict unless the survival of the Vietminh appeared threatened – links between the two parties were now closer than they had been since the mid-1920s, when Ho Chi Minh had set up the headquarters of his Revolutionary Youth League in Canton.

The new relationship was destined to have momentous consequences for the struggle in Indochina, and changed the character of that conflict in several respects. In the broadest sense it led to a more open reliance by the DRV on the Chinese model of people's war. In the months following the establishment of full diplomatic relations, a spate of references appeared in the Vietnamese media on the significance of the Chinese experience for the Vietnamese revolution. Ho Chi Minh himself declared that Chinese aid had been a decisive factor in changing the Vietminh approach to overthrowing the French. In an interview with the U.S. journalist Andrew Roth in August, he remarked that the Vietminh movement had "changed its tactics" and was now following the Chinese model. Chinese training materials were translated into Vietnamese and distributed widely among the troops and political cadres, and study sessions were held to master the new doctrine.²²

There was obviously an element of artificiality in the sudden outpouring of praise for the Chinese model, since the party had already declared its reliance on Mao Zedong's strategy of people's war at the beginning of the Franco-Vietminh conflict in December 1946. Still, the new relationship with Beijing did result in several significant changes in Vietnamese revolutionary strategy. In the first place, the DRV now openly moved openly into the socialist camp. Until now, the role of the Communist Party as the vanguard of the national liberation

movement had been carefully concealed, while its commitment to violent revolution – a precondition insisted upon by Lenin at the formation of the Comintern in 1919 as well as by Mao Zedong – had also been obscured by Ho Chi Minh's penchant for diplomatic maneuvering. Now, however, the famous “three treasures” (*san bao*) of Maoist doctrine – party, united front, and armed struggle – were adopted as the centerpiece of the Vietnamese revolution. At its Second National Congress, held in February 1950, the party (now renamed the Vietnamese Workers' Party, or VWP as a gesture to emphasize the continuing priority of the national over the class struggle) was formally re-established. In his keynote speech to the congress, General Secretary Truong Chinh declared that the party would now play an open and leading role in the Vietnamese revolution, which was now clearly placed on a Marxist-Leninist path. Although the struggle against imperialism continued to hold priority over the anti-feudal task, Chinh affirmed that once the imperialists had been defeated, a new government would be set up under clear proletarian (i.e., Communist Party) leadership that would “grow over” into a socialist revolution. The party had thus tacitly abandoned the clear dividing line between the first and second stages of the revolution that had first been introduced by Ho Chi Minh in late 1920s.²³

When the results of the congress were made public, there was speculation in the world press that they represented a serious setback for Ho Chi Minh. After all, many of the changes adopted at the meeting – such as the new prominence of the party, the importance of class struggle, and the abandonment of gradualism – represented a departure from the views that he had espoused since the founding of the party in 1930. Whatever the truth of these assertions, Ho did not divulge his feelings on the matter and in his public remarks appeared to endorse the new strategy as appropriate to the current stage of the revolution.²⁴

All for Victory

One reason why Ho Chi Minh might have given his blessing to the new strategy was that it permitted the party to reevaluate its strategic options in the war with the French. A dramatic

increase in Chinese assistance would create the conditions for a significant strengthening of Vietminh forces and the launching of the third phase of people's war, the general offensive. In preparation for a possible escalation of the war, in February 1950 party leaders called for a general mobilization of the population in liberated areas under the new slogan "All for the front, all for people's war, all for victory." Still, there were hints that some party members were skeptical that conditions for were ripe for an advance to the third stage. In a speech delivered to the Third National Conference, held in January and February 1950, Truong Chinh even implied he might be one of the doubters, cautioning that Chinese assistance did not guarantee success and adding that the Vietnamese people must still rely on their own efforts to bring about victory. The campaign, he pointed out, was unlikely to result in a quick victory, and might even lead to direct intervention by Great Britain or the United States.²⁵

The strongest case for a shift to the third stage was apparently made by General Vo Nguyen Giap. In a pamphlet published later in the year and entitled The Military Task in Preparing for the General Counter-offensive, Giap declared that conditions for launching the general offensive were now present. Although the enemy continued to possess military superiority throughout Indochina, his will to resist was crumbling. At the same time, the revolutionary forces possessed absolute moral superiority and strategic leadership. Finally, he pointed out, international factors (i.e., the Communist victory in China and the growing strength of the Soviet Union) were operating in favor of the movement.²⁶

Giap was ambiguous on the precise nature of the coming campaign, however, insisting on the need for flexibility in thought and action. While conceding the possibility that the third stage might be take the form of a single decisive battle, he thought it more likely that it would emerge through a series of skirmishes, leading to a gradual shift in the balance of forces on battlefield. Resistance forces should thus advance cautiously but confidently toward a final military confrontation with the enemy, moving from limited attacks on smaller positions to large-unit attacks on major positions ending with assaults on enemy cities. Because of the strategic

importance of the Red River Delta and its accessibility to the border area, Giap declared that the primary focus should be in the North, rather than the South, where the French continued to hold the strategic advantage.

Whether the final stage would be brief or protracted would depend on the capabilities and astute leadership of the resistance forces and the rapidity of the disintegration of the enemy's will to resist. In a gesture to the skeptics within the party leadership, Giap conceded that the results of the offensive could be affected by the unpredictability of the international situation, including the possibility of U.S. or British intervention. Also, he noted, the French might decide to consolidate their position in the South in case of a crumbling of their position in the North.

The General Offensive.

As Vietminh commanders made their preparations for a transition to the third stage, their first priority was to seize control of the northern border region as a means of facilitating the movement of goods and personnel from China. While Vietminh guerrilla units roamed the nearby mountains at will, the French continued to occupy a string of border posts from Lao Cai in the interior down to the coast. Despite the tortuous terrain, the French sent frequent military convoys up Route 4 as far as Cao Bang to maintain communications along the border.

In the early autumn of 1950, Vietminh strategists – with the consent of their Chinese advisers – decided to test their new capabilities. Vietminh units, now in possession of substantially increased firepower, launched a series of aggressive attacks on enemy convoys and border posts. The campaign was stunningly successful, resulting in heavy French casualties and propelling them into a headlong flight to the coast, thus opening up the entire frontier to occupation by resistance forces. Chinese advisers, however, noted a number of deficiencies in the Vietminh performance, including a lack of troop discipline, inexperience on the battlefield, and a reluctance by military commanders to ignore the needs of their troops or to report bad news.²⁷

The success of the fall offensive buoyed the optimism of Vietminh leaders, some of whom now urged that plans be adopted for a larger offensive on the fringes of the Red River Delta the following year. Skeptics feared that a general offensive would be premature, on the grounds that the revolutionary forces still did not possess the capacity to engage in an open confrontation with the French. Supporters of the plan, however, argued that unless Vietminh forces could expand their control over the delta, the shortage of rice in liberated areas could become desperate. Vo Nguyen Giap added that enemy morale was disintegrating, and that the revolutionary forces could move over to the third stage so long as they had a clear advantage over the enemy on a single battlefield, even though the French had a material superiority throughout the country as a whole.²⁸

Ho Chi Minh - who had been pleasantly surprised at the results of the border offensive - expressed his own reservations about the new plan, reportedly advising one of his headstrong commanders that a major offensive, like a woman's pregnancy, must await its proper time. Chinese advisers were reportedly also ambivalent. Vo Nguyen Giap claimed that General Chen Geng, the chief CMAG adviser, had given his approval, but some civilian leaders in Beijing apparently expressed their reservations. In a letter to Ho Chi Minh in December 1950, Liu Shaoqi expressed agreement with Ho's preference for a strategy of protracted war based on a policy of self-reliance, so long as it was based on careful preparations.²⁹

In the end, party leaders adopted a compromise position put forward by Truong Chinh, calling for a gradual transition to the third stage through a series of partial offensives on the margins of the Red River delta to test the level of French resistance. The Vietminh offensive, which opened in January 1951 with an assault on the district town of Vinh Yen, on the northern fringe of the Red River Delta, provoked a vigorous response from French units who, made good use of newly-arrived U.S. weaponry to rebuff the attack and drive Vietminh forces back in the mountains with heavy losses. Later attacks elsewhere in the Delta were also defeated, and by early spring the campaign had been abandoned. General Giap was forced to undergo a

lengthy self-critique, admitting it had been an error to confront the French directly on open terrain; he also conceded the shortcomings of Vietminh forces, who sometimes displayed a lack of aggressive spirit and tenacity. Ho Chi Minh, whose commitment to the general offensive had apparently been lukewarm at best, now alluded to the crucial importance of guerrilla operations and protracted war.³⁰

Retrenchment.

The failure of the 1951 general offensive, then, had a sobering effect on Vietnamese war planners, and led them to retreat from the third stage of general offensive. Vietminh slogans no longer called for a general offensive and adopted a more limited objective of waging “an offensive during a strategic stage according to plan and to make the enemy lose.” A key component of the new approach was to divide the enemy by extending the conflict into the mountainous northwest, as well as into neighboring Laos and Cambodia, and then to attack the enemy at selected points of vulnerability. Although Vietminh leaders evinced little interest in resuming negotiations, it is clear that they were now counting on weariness with the war on the home front to force the French government to sue for peace.³¹

During the next two years, the new strategy brought several dividends. The strength of Vietminh forces continued to mount, aid levels from China were on the rise, while public disapproval of “la sale guerre” was growing in France. To undercut support for the Vietminh among the local population, the French had created a new autonomous government under Chief of State Bao Dai, but its dependence on Paris was obvious and earned it little public support. The only disquieting sign was the growing danger of direct U.S. military intervention. In 1950 U.S. President Harry S. Truman had responded to the creation of the Bao Dai government by agreeing to provide France with military assistance in prosecuting the war. In the spring of 1953, the new Eisenhower administration raised the ante by urging the French to adopt a more aggressive posture to seek total victory in Indochina.

Fighting and Talking.

After the setback in the Red River Delta in 1951, Vietminh strategists had focused the bulk of their attention on the mountainous area northwest of the Red River Delta, where isolated French outposts were vulnerable to attack by small resistance units. Successful operations in this area also opened up opportunities for an advance into northern Laos, which created a political problem for the French. But without major operations in the two densely-populated delta regions or along the coast, the probability of a dramatic advance on the battlefield was limited. As Vietminh war planners gathered in the early fall off 1953 to discuss the following year's campaign, General Giap proposed a new campaign in the Red River Delta to counter the French buildup there. Chinese advisers were more cautious and, with Ho Chi Minh's approval, planning got underway for additional operations in the northwest.

Now, however, the Vietminh strategy of protracted war finally began to pay dividends, as the French government began to express new interest in a negotiated settlement. It was a propitious moment for a diplomatic solution on the international scene as well, as both Moscow and Beijing, each for its own reasons, wanted an end to the war. Vietminh leaders had some misgivings about engaging in peace talks, since conditions on the battlefield were now increasingly favorable, but Ho Chi Minh undoubtedly warned his more militant colleagues that without firm support from its allies – and especially from China – a total victory for the DRV was not feasible in any case. In a November interview with the Swedish journal *Expressen*, he declared that the DRV government was always ready to search for a peaceful solution.

For the French, as well as the Vietminh, conditions on the battlefield would be a major factor in determining the shape of a final peace settlement. In the fall of 1953, the commander of French Expeditionary Forces, General Henri Navarre, ordered the occupation of the district capital of Dien Bien Phu, in the mountains near the Laotian border, as a means of disrupting enemy operations in the region. After lengthy discussions, Vietminh war planners, with the apparent encouragement of their Chinese advisers, decided to attack the new French base in a

bid to bring about a dramatic shift in the military balance of power on the eve of the peace conference.

Vietminh leaders were convinced that Dien Bien Phu represented less of a gamble than the abortive 1951 general offensive since resistance forces possessed a clear geographical advantage in the area. Located far from the enemy base of operations in the Red River Delta, it would be difficult for the defenders to supply and less exposed to a French counterattack. Equally important, it was easily accessible to the frontier, facilitating the shipment of Chinese weapons and other equipment to Vietminh units operating in the area. Still, there would be an element of risk, since it would be the first time that the Vietminh had decided to attack a target strongly defended by the enemy.³²

The nature of the proposed attack apparently aroused some disagreement. General Wei Guoqing, the senior Chinese adviser, recommended a lightning assault based on the “human wave” tactics used successfully by the PLA in Korea. But after initial assaults on the base proved costly, Vietminh leaders shifted to a more gradualist approach in March, seizing the enemy’s outlying strong points one by one, while using artillery placed in the surrounding mountains to destroy the small airstrip and cut off the French source of supply. The base was finally seized by a massive Vietminh assault on May 6th, on the eve of the peace conference to bring an end to the conflict.

The victory at Dien Bien Phu had a measurable impact on the negotiations at Geneva, as Vietminh leaders had anticipated. Under increased public pressure to bring an end to the war, the French government agreed to accept a compromise settlement that called for the final departure of French military forces and the temporary division of the country into two separate regroupment zones. The results, which had been essentially forced on the DRV by its chief allies, aroused considerable anger within the movement, compelling Ho Chi Minh to declare at a meeting of the VWP Central Committee in July that “some comrades” neglected to see the Americans behind the French. It was time, he said, for the Vietnamese people to bind up their

wounds and begin building a new society in North Vietnam in preparation for reunification in the future.³³

By the end of the war, then, the Vietminh had replaced the Maoist three- stage scenario with a more nuanced approach that made greater use of other forms of struggle. They had learned that in a small country like Vietnam, a large impregnable base area was less important than a reliable sanctuary beyond the frontier, and that broad support from allies and the sympathy of world public opinion was essential when facing a powerful enemy whose base was outside the country. And they had faced the painful reality that sometimes the final victory must be postponed into the indefinite future.

The end result was an amalgam of Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, with a dash of Lenin thrown in. Lenin had laid the political groundwork with his concept of a four-class alliance, while Maoism weighed in with the strategy of people's war. Ho Chi Minh contributed his own views on the importance of diplomacy and the techniques of psychological warfare in promoting the revolutionary cause. What had been created, then, was not so much a new model of revolutionary war as a patchwork of ideas designed to meet the particular circumstances of the Vietnamese revolution. As an exercise in pragmatism, it was vintage Ho Chi Minh.³⁴

The Legacy.

To what degree did DRV leaders apply the lessons of the Franco-Vietminh war in their later conflict against the United States? When the peace process broke down in the years following the Geneva Agreement, VWP leaders were initially reluctant to return to a policy of revolutionary violence to complete national reunification. But the rise of popular discontent against the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam eventually forced their hand, and in January 1959 a tumultuous meeting of the VWP Central Committee voted to return to a policy of revolutionary war to complete the process of reunification.

Party leaders could not initially decide, however, on what strategy to adopt in the South, and over the next few years there was considerable debate over whether to apply the people's war

model used against the French, or the more political approach used during the August Revolution. Ho Chi Minh apparently argued for a cautious policy that combined political, diplomatic, and paramilitary activities to unseat the Diem regime without running the risk of U.S. military intervention. But when Washington began to escalate its own role in South Vietnam to avoid a collapse of the Diem regime, DRV responded by returning to the three-stage model. Unlike the original Maoist version, however, the new strategy culminated in a combined general offensive and uprising, reflecting Hanoi's view that in a war against the United States (whose technological superiority on the battlefield was conceded), a greater reliance on popular unrest and psychological warfare would serve to minimize the military advantages possessed by their adversary. They had also learned the crucial importance of diplomacy as a means of isolating the United States and its South Vietnamese ally on the world's stage.

As it turned out, the new strategy was a success, but only when it was supplemented by a high level of military operations to reduce enemy morale and undercut public support for the war effort in the United States. And after the Paris Treaty of January 1973 brought about the departure of all U.S. combat troops from South Vietnam, DRV war planners – no longer fearful of U.S. military intervention - returned to the original Maoist concept of a general offensive to complete their final takeover of the South. Ironically, they had come full circle since their original adoption of the Chinese three-stage model a quarter of a century earlier.³⁵

¹. The statement is printed in Van kien Dang , 1945-1954, Vol. II, Part 1 (Hanoi: Ban Nghien cuu Lich su Dang Trung uong xuat ban, 1979), pp. 11-16.

² . For a few examples of this debate, see Douglas Pike, Viet Cong : The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), esp. pp. 33-34 and 50-51, Chalmers Johnson, Autopsy on People's War (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, pp.48-49, and Harry G. Summers, Jr., On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 79 and *passim*.

³ . For further information about Ho Chi Minh's early years, see my Ho Chi Minh: A Life (New York: Hyperion, 2000), chapter 1.

⁴ . Ho Chi Minh, "The Path which led me to Leninism," translated in Bernard B. Fall (ed.), Ho Chi Minh On Revolution (New York: Praeger, 1967), p. 24.

⁵ . Nguyen Ai Quoc, "Some considerations on the Colonial Question," in l'Humanité, May 25, 1922, cited in Fall, Ho Chi Minh on..., p. 26.

⁶ . The remark is cited in A. Neuberg (ed.), Armed Insurrection (London: NLB, 1970), p. 22. Ho Chi Minh shared the view of the Indian Communist M.N. Roy, who had unsuccessfully argued at the Second Comintern Congress in 1920 that the Asian revolution was a necessary prerequisite to the overthrow of world capitalism. See my Ho Chi Minh, p. 95.

⁷ . The article, entitled "The Party's work among the peasants," is contained in Neuberg, pp. 255-271. Some observers question Ho Chi Minh's authorship of this piece, which has never been definitively established. In any event, it appears to reflect his views on the strategy and tactics to be applied in the Vietnamese revolution.

⁸ . Ho himself was skeptical about the prospects for the uprising, popularly known as the Nghe-Tinh revolt, but he felt that it should be supported by the ICP. See my Ho Chi Minh, pp. 183-184.

⁹ One such pamphlet is contained in Ho Chi Minh Toan Tap [The Complete Writings of Ho Chi Minh], first edition, Vol. 3 (Hanoi: Su that, 1980), pp. 163-209.

¹⁰ He had apparently used the name Ho Chi Minh for the first time during the course of his visit to South China in 1942. The name became familiar to millions of his compatriots after the establishment of the DRV in September 1945.

¹¹ Ho's comment is cited in several Vietnamese accounts of the period, including Hoang Van Hoan's A Drop in the Ocean: Hoang Van Hoan's Revolutionary Reminiscences (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1988), pp. 187-188.

¹² See Ho Chi Minh: A Life, pp. 328-329.

¹³ An English translation of the tract is contained in Truong Chinh: Selected Writings (Hanoi: Foreign Language Press, 1977), pp. 85-216.

¹⁴ In an interview with me in Hanoi on December 5, 1990, his son Dang Xuan Ky declared that in his view Truong Chinh had written the treatise at the request of President Ho Chi Minh, and that the ideas contained therein reflected the overall views of the party leadership. As the ICP's general secretary and its chief ideologue at the time, Chinh was probably a natural choice to author the piece.

¹⁵ Truong Chinh, p. 188. Mao later retracted this view. See The Selected Military Writings of Mao Zedong (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972), p. 186n.

¹⁶ Yves Gras, Histoire de la Guerre d'Indochine (Paris: Editions Denoel, 1992), p. 196.

¹⁷ Truong Chinh, Selected Writings, pp. 175-76.

¹⁸ Ngo Tien Chat, "Notes on the Tradition of Heroic Struggle of Nationalities in the Northwest from the August Revolution to the Present Resistance Against America," in Nghien Cuu Lich Su [Historical Research], no. 95 (February 1967), cited in Joint Publication Research Service No. 9609 (Translations on North Vietnam), no 151, p. 6. See also The Outline History of the Vietnam Workers' Party (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Press, 1972), p. 56. There has been some disagreement among Vietnamese historians over the date of the beginning of the second stage. Vo Nguyen Giap once commented to a Cuban journalist that it was difficult to pinpoint an exact date, as there was no firm demarcation between the two stages.

¹⁹ Cuoc khang chien thanh cua nhan dan Viet Nam [The sacred war of the Vietnamese people], vol. 1 (Hanoi: Su that, 1958), p. 239.

²⁰ Vo Nguyen Giap, People's War, People's Army, (New York: Praeger, 1962), p. 92. .

²¹. For a discussion of Ho's visit to Moscow and relevant sources, see my Ho Chi Minh, pp. 420-423.

²² . See Georges Boudarel, "L'idéologie importée au Vietnam avec le Maoïsme," in Boudarel et al (eds.), La Bureaucratie au Vietnam (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1983), pp. 31-106.

²³. Truong Chinh, Ban ve Cach mang Viet Nam [On the Vietnamese revolution], (Hanoi, 1956), p. 6.

²⁴. It is curious that he did not attend the conference in the winter of 1949-1950 that had decided to adopt these changes. At the time he was en route to Beijing. See my Ho Chi Minh, p. 429.

²⁵. Truong Chinh's speech is cited in Van kien Dang (1945-1954), vol. 2, part 2, pp. 265-338.

²⁶. Vo Nguyen Giap, Nhiem vu Quan su truoc mat chuyen sang Tong phan cong (Hanoi, 1950).

²⁷ . See Qiang Zhai, "Transplanting the Chinese Model: Chinese Military Advisers and the First Vietnam War, 1950-1954," in *The Journal of Military History* (October 1993), pp. 700-703, and Chen Geng Riji [Chen Geng's Diary], vol. 2 (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 1984), pp. 38-39.

²⁸ . In his People's War, People's Army, Vo Nguyen Giap later said that the revolution "had to move" to a third stage, and that the concept was "a general law of a revolutionary war such as Vietnam," since such a war could be victorious only when it could liberate land and annihilate a substantial proportion of the enemy's military forces. See p. 88. He felt that mobile warfare would play the primary role in the final phase of the conflict, however, because it could most effectively utilize the spiritual advantage of the revolutionary forces, while positional war should be avoided because it magnified the enemy's material superiority on the battlefield. Vo Nguyen Giap, Nhiem vu, p. 33.

²⁹. See Liu Shaoqi Nianpu [Liu Shaoqi's Chronicle] (n.p.: Central Documents Press, 1996), telegram of December 8, 1950, p. 265. The role of Chinese advisers in planning the general offensive is discussed in

Zhongguo junshi guwentuan fang Ywe kang fa douzheng shishi [The Chinese Military Advisory Group in Vietnam during the Anti-French War] (Beijing: Liberation Army Publishers, 1990), p. 27.

³⁰ See Ho's political report to the Second Party Congress in Ho Chi Minh: Selected Writings (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Press), pp. 114-117.

³¹ The quote is from Bui Dinh Thanh, "Nghien cu cac giai doan cua cuoc khang chien" [Studying the stages in the war of resistance] in NCLS, No. 45 (December 1962), p. 14.

³² Vo Nguyen Giap, People's War, p. 148.

³³ Report to the Sixth Plenum of the VWP, July 1954, translated in Ho Chi Minh: Selected Writings (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), pp. 181-183.

³⁴ Vo Nguyen made his own contribution, of course, to the Vietnamese version of revolutionary war, but the record suggests that his role was primarily tactical in nature, to carry out grand strategic decisions made by the party leadership as a whole. He was also one of the chief spokespersons of the Vietnamese revolution, authoring several books on the war as seen by someone who had been present from the outset.

³⁵ After the fall of Saigon in the spring of 1975, Hanoi's mythmakers clung to the fiction that the final "Ho Chi Minh Campaign" against South Vietnamese troops had been a successful application of the "general offensive and uprising" format. In reality, it was a conventional military offensive that relied almost exclusively on military operations by main force units from North Vietnam.