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11. Eclipse

In February 1963 the then Chief of Staff of the US army General Wheeler presented President Kennedy with a report on prospects in South Vietnam which he had just visited. He thought the prospects for the Diem regime and its US ally good, but wanted Ho Chi Minh to be brought to account for the ongoing Vietcong insurgency in the South. 'We should do something,' Wheeler wrote, 'to make North Vietnam bleed.'

The American tendency to identify the conflict with Ho became, if anything, more evident as the 1960s went on. Yet it did so at a time when Ho's career in the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP) was demonstrably in eclipse. This was because, from 1959 onwards (when he was almost seventy), Ho's faction on the Politburo, which included Giap and Truong Chinh, was in retreat over the very issue of whether North Vietnam (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam [DRV]) should open a new war front in the South and bring down Diem and his regime. All the evidence suggests that Ho, who had been cautious about opening hostilities with the French in 1945–46, opposed this in preference to a political campaign.

Conversely, the backers of a southern war, Le Duan, the new First Secretary, and Le Duc Tho were in the ascendant. It was Le Duan, not Vo Nguyen Giap, Ho's old comrade from Pac Bo and the victor of Dien Bien Phu, who would plan the famous Tet Offensive early in 1968.

The rise of Le Duan

It is to Le Duan, therefore, that we must turn our attention to at this point. In 1957, when he was appointed First Secretary of the VWP, Le Duan was a relatively unknown figure to his fellow communists. He was pre-eminently a man of the South, fixated about it even when absent from Saigon for nearly twenty years after 1958. Le Duan was born in Quang Tri province in 1907, a rural area just north of Hue, and his background was distinctly different from Ho Chi Minh's. Ho came from the scholar-gentry class, whereas Le Duan's father was a carpenter.

Le Duan's involvement in radical politics started in the 1920s when he was a railway worker, but he did not join the Communist Party until 1930. This was the year of the Yen Bay Mutiny and the subsequent communist-inspired revolts. In their wake and that of the so-called 'White Terror,' Le Duan was arrested and spent five years in prison. He then directed the Party in Central Vietnam until the French imprisoned him on the sinister island penal colony of Poulo Condor. He spent another five years there (1940–45). It was a classic revolutionary Vietnamese profile. Le Duan had earned his spurs, and no one could accuse him, like his enemy Giap, of having a privileged French-style education. He was seventeen years younger than Ho Chi Minh at the point when he began to undermine his authority.

Le Duan was freed from Poulo Condor, when the Japanese surrendered in 1945, and returned to the Vietnamese mainland to run the Southern branch of the Communist Party until victory was achieved over the French in May 1954. Le Duan was small in stature, less sophisticated than Ho, given his rural background and someone whom comrades found arrogant and unwilling to take correction. This self-confidence meant that he was even prepared, as a relatively young man, to

challenge the authority of Ho Chi Minh. He has been further described as ‘totally devoted’ to the cause of national reunification.

Le Duan was fortunate in his timing. After years in the South he was recalled to the DRV at the point when the Party leadership, wounded by Truong Chinh’s failure with his agricultural reforms (and Ho and Giap were tainted by their association with them), sought a new leader who was not associated with failure. It may have been too that Le Duan had no obvious power base in the VWP and was seen as loyal and efficient but not regarded by Ho and the other leading figures on the Politburo as a threat. This proved to be a serious misjudgement.

The parallel with the young Josef Stalin is striking. He was the very first general, or first secretary, of the Soviet Communist Party in the 1920s, dull and plodding in comparison with the brilliant Trotsky and the gifted Zinoviev. He, like Le Duan, appointed First Secretary of the VWP in 1957, was an able organizer who worked his supporters into the Politburo. **Le Duc Tho was the most important of Le Duan’s faction on the Politburo in the late 1950s.**

Giap would have been the obvious successor to the now ageing Ho Chi Minh, but he was rejected because of his French associations and the fact that he had not served his time at the ‘school of bolshevism’ on Poulo Condor. Worse, Giap had applied for a scholarship to study in France and been sponsored by a French Sûreté official in a bizarre fit of generosity. Le Duan seemed to have the blessing of Ho Chi Minh himself, which was crucial, although he was only acting First Secretary and therefore had to behave with some circumspection.

Nevertheless, Le Duan soon became the symbol of a resolute challenge to both Ho and Giap’s reluctance to authorize a military struggle in the South, where the Vietcong (or Vietnamese Communists, so-called by Diem, who refused to call them Viet Minh) were suffering badly at the hands of the South Vietnamese army and secret police.

Le Duan’s brazenness is encapsulated in a reported comment he made to the venerated ‘Father of the Nation’: ‘Do not fear, Uncle Ho. I have anticipated and taken care of everything.’ This meant preparations for a **Southern campaign which Ho dreaded.** Le Duan argued that as the deadline for 1956 all-Vietnam elections had well passed, and the Geneva Accords had been ignored by Diem (who rightly claimed that he had not signed them), force was the only answer. The Vietcong, until then prevented from fighting, were being massacred by Diem’s forces.

In 1957, Ho Chi Minh was sixty-seven years old, and his health was frail. There were echoes from the past when he visited his home village for the first time in half a century and finally admitted that he was indeed the Nguyen Ai Quoc whom the French had chased halfway around the world. ‘Uncle Ho’ was now the subject of hagiographical biographies, as he was still the ideological symbol of the Vietnamese revolution.

In the previous year 1956, Ho and his colleagues had to take on board the ideological earthquake brought about by Nikita Khrushchev’s speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Ho noted the ‘great significance of’ Khrushchev’s revisionist analysis and his desire for ‘peaceful co-existence’ with the West, but he warned his colleagues that ‘we must be vigilant to detect the warmonger’s schemes’; the people must not forget that ‘their principle enemies are the American imperialists.’

However, the 9th Plenum of the Party in 1956 had rejected Le Duan’s demand for a military option in the South while avoiding any direct criticism of Khrushchev’s revisionism (involving a

denunciation of Stalin) and demand for peaceful coexistence. The VWP had to manoeuvre cautiously as it became clear that the People's Republic of China did not accept either the debunking of Stalin or the doctrine of peaceful coexistence which derived from Soviet fear of nuclear confrontation with the United States. Instead, Mao Zedong ridiculed the atomic bomb as a 'paper tiger' and stressed the importance of national liberation movements such as the one in Vietnam. The DRV Politburo was presented with an acute problem. How was it to maintain good relations with Beijing and Moscow, when the two communist giants seemed to be following diametrically opposed policies?

The answer was that it, too, fragmented into two opposing fractions. Ho led the 'North-Firsters,' while Le Duan led the 'South-Firsters': reconstruction in the North and economic development versus a new military campaign in the South designed to lead to national reunification.

The parallel with the ideological battle on the Soviet politburo in the 1920s is again striking. In supporting the so-called 'permanent revolution' Trotsky was tainted with the label of warmonger by Stalin, whose 'socialism in one country' concentrated on internal economic development. Ho Chi Minh did undoubtedly prefer to concentrate on internal DRV reconstruction but to portray him as an opponent of national reunification, as Le Duan tried to do, was absurd. As was the case with Stalin and Trotsky (who never opposed economic development), it was a matter of perception, linked to a power struggle on the two different politburos. In the DRV, Le Duan was to use the debate about a southern military campaign to undermine Ho and his chief ally Giap.

In 1958, Le Duan made progress in his campaign for a southern war, when the Politburo authorized a secret mission by the new First Secretary to the South, below the seventeenth parallel. Le Duan reported that the comrades in Cochinchina and southern Annam were in grave peril from the ruthless assaults of Diem's supporters. He was able to force a military option on the Politburo on his return to Hanoi by also manipulating the Sino-Soviet split. China had been the VWP's main support in the French war, and its national liberation doctrine fitted in with Le Duan's demands for a reunification war. The Soviet doctrine of peaceful coexistence did not, and Le Duan's attack on it had the added advantage of discrediting his great rival Vo Nguyen Giap, whose Soviet sympathies caused him to be nicknamed 'the Soviet.' Ho Chi Minh could do nothing to prevent his ally being demoted to sixth position on the ruling politburo by 1960.

The key turning point was the Third Congress of the VWP in 1960, but the writing was already on the wall for Ho before that, notably when, in 1959, Group 559 was created by the Politburo which constructed the famous Ho Chi Minh Trail to move supplies down to the South. Ultimately units of the North Vietnamese army were to be sent down it as well. Such a strategy, if adopted, was a gamble because in 1958–59 the DRV's main ally was still recovering from the loss of a million troops killed in the Korean War and would not be in a position to offer much assistance to the DRV in any southern campaign.

Yet Le Duan was able to secure his objective on the Politburo, by underlining the parlous state of the southern comrades, and how a military conflict would invigorate the peasant masses. His victory was underlined in two ways. He was formally recognized as the VWP First Secretary at the Third Congress in 1960, and Ho and his allies were sidelined. This coup has been described as 'the greatest usurpation of power in the annals of the Vietnamese Communist Party.'

Publicly Ho Chi Minh supported the Party line at the Third Congress as he saw it. In a speech to the Congress on 5 July 1960 Ho stated that ‘the present task of the Vietnamese revolution is to take the North to socialism and to struggle for national reunification by *peaceful means*.’ This seems to ignore, on the face of it, the new military option in the South demanded by Le Duan, which rejected the political emphasis laid down in 1954, focussed on political re-education in Mekong Delta villages, cadres who helped with harvests or even took rice to nearby markets (though local officials were killed).

This strategy was partly evolved by Truong Chinh, who had repaired his career somewhat and even buried the hatchet with Giap, who loathed him. He too was discredited as a Soviet supporting revisionist by 1960, as was Ho’s other ally and long-term associate, Pham Van Dong.

It is interesting that Le Duan was not himself discredited for his unorthodox family life. He had two wives and two separate families although the Party ruled that the family could consist of only one husband and one wife (Vietnam was not like Leninist Russia when divorces could be initiated by a postcard saying one partner had had enough). Le Duan was unwilling to divorce his second wife Nga, who was harassed by the Party Women’s Union in Hanoi, obliging her to move to China to resume her studies. Another sign of Party unorthodoxy was when Le Duan was allowed to send his children to study in the USSR, contrary to normal practice. Personality factors were also central in the years when Le Duan rose, and Ho and his supporters were side-tracked. Le Duan’s southern fixation was combined with his ‘deep seated jealousy of Giap.’

The personal impact on Ho of the rise of the South-Firsters was considerable. The outcome of the Third Congress of the VWP was that the Politburo decided that he ‘would play only a diplomatic and symbolic role’ in future. Ho’s position as the ‘Father of the Nation’ was secure, but his position on the Politburo was not assisted by the relative failure of modernization programmes in the North. The problems of the agrarian reform programme have been discussed at length in the last chapter, but these were combined with a serious failure in the industrialization programme which was part of the Three Year Plan (1958–60), which was introduced by the Party in February 1958.

It was similar to the Chinese ‘Great Leap Forward’ (1958–59), which was also a disaster with its crude backyard furnaces designed to produce iron ore for the Chinese economy. By 1961 East European advisors brought in by the VWP were reporting on ‘chaotic conditions’ in the areas around Hanoi where industrial redevelopment was attempted.

Laos

The debate about the future which engaged the VWP Politburo involved the small neighbouring country of Laos, which also secured its independence from France in 1954. It, like Vietnam and Cambodia, had been the object of the French monarchical strategy before 1954, which did not, though, allow for the possibility that the head of the Lao ruling house, Prince Souvanna Phouma, would ally himself with the native communist insurgents, the Pathet Lao, in a coalition government in August 1960.

This obviously presented an opportunity for the VWP, which already had links with the Pathet Lao, by opening Laos as a pathway for the Ho Chi Minh Trail down to Southern Vietnam. Indeed in 1960, the last year of Dwight Eisenhower’s presidential term he was so concerned by developments in Laos that he stated himself ready to fight for it ‘with our allies or without them.’

Nikita Khrushchev stirred the US pot with his statement on 6 January 1961 that ‘wars of national liberation were “sacred”.’ This did not really represent the Soviet position as far as Indochina was concerned, but both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations took it literally (even supposed doves like Roger Hilsman as has been seen). What they saw was a Ho Chi Minh Trail which ‘wound its way under a forest canopy for some 650 miles in the strip of land, some 10 miles wide, just inside the frontier with Vietnam. A knife into the heart of Diem’s regime.

Laos became part of the Cold War, but also, due to its geographical proximity, part of the Vietnamese civil war. This was shown immediately by the Soviet airlift of arms to the Pathet Lao in 1960, despite Khrushchev’s low-key policy on Indochina. When the United States threatened to send in troops via Thailand, a SEATO ally, Ho and the VWP Politburo, led by Le Duan, were concerned that the situation might get out of control with a massive escalation of US involvement.

Le Duan also saw Laos as a possible model for how the southern campaign could be managed. Where Laos was concerned, the VWP could deny involvement (which was real but small scale). The same tactics could be used south of the seventeenth parallel: small-scale military operations combined with political activity on the 1954–59 model. This might reassure sceptics like Ho and Giap, until the situation was ripe for large-scale warfare of the type Giap had initiated in 1951 and 1953–54.

It is clear that Ho did not agree with Le Duan’s strategy. He feared American military power, recognized Diem as a tough opponent, and advocated a guerrilla war strategy which had served the Viet Minh well in the years between 1946 and 1950. Ultimately, the weaknesses of the RVN would bring Diem down. This was Ho’s position when the Politburo discussed these issues in October 1961.

As far as Laos was concerned, Ho demanded from his Party comrades that they ‘resolutely support the Laos people’s present valiant struggle against American imperialism, a struggle aimed at leading Laos along the road to national concord, independence, unity, peace and neutrality.’ He had always recognized the right of the Lao and Cambodian parties to their own sovereignty and independence. The mass of Party colleagues hearing this were unaware that Ho’s position had been upstaged by Le Duan, who had been nicknamed the ‘Ho of the South’ earlier in his career because of his southern obsession.

American intervention

Ho Chi Minh had always feared large-scale US intervention in Vietnam. He had always recognized that the Americans would be a much tougher opponent than the French had been (they after all had been heavily dependent on US military and financial aid from 1950 onwards). This view arose also from a recognition that the Soviet and Chinese comrades were unable or unwilling to assist a southern campaign in the way the People’s Republic of China had done in the early 1950s. Despite the 1960 Soviet airlift to Laos, Moscow was unwilling to become militarily involved in South Vietnam, at the point where Le Duan’s hawkish cohort was overshadowing Ho’s faction on the Politburo. Khrushchev preferred to limit the Soviet role in Vietnam to one of supportive propaganda.

It seems that Ho was regarded with suspicion by the Chinese Party in the early 1960s. At a Politburo meeting in February 1963, the Chinese leader Liu Shaoqi expressed those suspicions quite bluntly. ‘Ho,’ he told his colleagues,

has always been a rightist. When we implemented land reform he resisted... After the war with the French had ended, he could not decide whether to build a capitalist or a socialist republic. It was we who decided for him.

These comments are instructive on another level; the Communist world was never the united monolith that Cold War warriors in the West liked to pretend.

More important, though, than what China and the Soviet Union did was what the Americans would do. Both Ho and Le Duan realized this.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident (1964)

In the event it was a freak naval incident in the Gulf of Tonkin which escalated the war in a way which Ho Chi Minh dreaded. Its origins lay in the American decision, via what was code-named OPLAN 34A, to encourage South Vietnamese commando raids on the DRV coastline, which were carried out in combination with the US Navy patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin.

At the centre of the incident, which was to bring about the escalation of the war was the USS *Maddox*, a destroyer ‘which was crammed with electronic intelligence (ELINT) gear.’ The *Maddox* was on patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin during the period between 30 July and 4 August 1964 when South Vietnamese commanders attacked the North Vietnamese islands of Hon Me and Hon Ngu. They failed to land in operations on 30–31 July but raked the island installations with gunfire before retiring to their base.

Two days later, on 2 August, three North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked the *Maddox* which called in air support from the aircraft carrier *Ticonderoga*, also on patrol in the Gulf. The North Vietnamese fired torpedoes which either missed or failed to explode, and the *Maddox* suffered only minor damage to its superstructure. The destroyer retaliated, and its gunfire sank one torpedo boat, while jets from the *Ticonderoga* strafed the other two torpedo boats which fled the scene. When President Johnson heard the details of the incident on the morning of 2 August (Washington time), he did not order any retaliation.

There is no dispute between American and North Vietnamese accounts of what happened on 2 August. What took place on 4 August, by contrast, was a matter of considerable controversy for decades thereafter. The actual events were eventually clarified by the release of two hundred documents under the US National Security Act in 2005–2006. These included top-secret phone transcripts, oral history interviews, signals intelligence (SIGINT), messages and chronologies.

The evidence is conclusive and points to fundamental errors by the crew of the *Maddox* in wrongly concluding that they were under attack from the North Vietnamese on 4 August 1964. Key to the new evaluation is the message sent by Captain Herrick of the *Maddox* in the early afternoon of 4 August, saying that reported torpedo attacks and contacts with North Vietnamese torpedo boats were ‘doubtful.’ Herrick put down the errors variously to fine weather impact on radar and ‘overeager sonarmen,’ plus poor equipment performance. Other explanations suggest technical errors caused by schools of dolphins’ movements, being seen as torpedo wakes by inexperienced sonarmen.

Much of the controversy surrounding the Gulf of Tonkin episode has centred on the Johnson administration's subsequent reaction to the alleged events on 4 August. Vietnam was twelve hours ahead of Washington, so Johnson and his Secretary for Defence Robert McNamara only got reports in the late morning of 4 August. They concluded, despite the sketchy evidence that aggression had taken place against the Maddox, and late that evening, Johnson went on nationwide television to announce retaliation against the DRV. On 7 August the US Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, empowering Johnson to take all necessary measures against the North Vietnamese. All this, despite the judgement of a leading analyst (an American one) that 'the overwhelming body of reports if used would have told the story that no attack occurred.'

In particular the US Naval historian Lieutenant Commander Patterson has accused McNamara of misleading Congress and the American public by claiming that the Americans were unaware of South Vietnamese actions under OPLAN 34A and further telling a press conference that the South Vietnamese acted on their own: it seems clear that US Naval intelligence gathering and South Vietnamese commando activity (there were other raids) were part and parcel of the same activity. Indeed McNamara can be heard admitting on an audiotape that there was a link between the events on 30–31 July, 2 August and 4 August to President Johnson, who himself admitted later that stupid sailors in the Gulf had been 'shooting at flying fish.'

What of the Politburo in Hanoi, while all these events were taking place? It seems clear that Ho and his colleagues did link the US Naval operations with the South Vietnamese commando raids. And that DRV leaders were convinced by the Gulf of Tonkin incident that the United States was intending to escalate the war and merely using the events of early August as an excuse to do so.

Some days later the Politburo made the crucial decision to send the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the South. Le Duan flew to Beijing, where Mao Zedong encouraged the DRV to escalate the war in Vietnam while putting the People's Republic on full alert. **The effect of this was neutralized in fact by the Chinese signal to Washington that they would not become directly involved in any Vietnam conflict.**

Ho was known to be unenthusiastic about Le Duan's forward policy in the South. Ho might, though, have been reassured by the reappraisal of Soviet policy in the wake of the Gulf of Tonkin events, which also seems to have been linked to the downfall of Nikita Khrushchev in October 1964. Khrushchev's card had been marked by his Politburo colleagues. The USSR had been humiliated over the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, the Soviet leader's agricultural reforms had gone badly wrong, and his style of leadership was deemed embarrassing with his shoe banging at the UN, and enjoyment of the 'can-can' in the United States. He was also held responsible for the Sino-Soviet split.

In contrast the new First Secretary Leonid Brezhnev tried hard to improve relations with the DRV, and his co-leader Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin (subsequently overshadowed by Brezhnev) visited Hanoi in 1965. In return Hanoi avoided criticisms of revisionism and was rewarded in February–March 1965, when there was a massive airlift of much needed Soviet military equipment to North Vietnam. **The Gulf of Tonkin affair thus produced a crucial volte-face in Soviet policy.** With its small communist ally under full-scale US attack, the USSR could no longer sit on the fence where Vietnam was concerned, as it had done in the Khrushchev

period. Vietnam was becoming a true Cold War conflict. As far as Ho Chi Minh was concerned, the Soviet turnabout presented an opportunity to rebalance Vietnam's posture between the two communist giants and avoided what he believed was undue dependence on China. This equipoise was well demonstrated on 16 October, when Ho and Le Duan congratulated Leonid Brezhnev on being appointed First Secretary and the next day congratulated Mao on the explosion of China's first atom bomb (contradicting his statement that it was 'a paper tiger').

No doubt the USSR was committed to détente by Khrushchev, who, with his new hotline to the White House and 1963 nuclear test ban treaty, saw the new relationship with the DRV as potentially hazardous. It might jeopardize peaceful coexistence, but the Soviet Union had no choice, fearful that non-engagement would open it to criticism from Beijing.

Johnson in Washington felt under similar constraints. In November 1964 he faced a presidential election against the extreme right-wing Republican candidate Barry Goldwater and dared not open himself to accusations of weakness in South-East Asia. His 'Great Society,' an ambitious programme of social reform, could not, in his mind, be endangered by a failure to engage, a failure to support the domino theory in Vietnam. Imprinted in his mind, and those of McNamara and Dean Rusk the Secretary of State, was the memory of China's fall to the Communists in 1949, which led to McCarthyism and President Truman's decision not to stand for re-election in 1952. Historical memory thus combined with the US belief that the domino theory was a core 'must' in America's foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s. An intrinsic part of this thinking was the belief that China was an aggressive, expansionist power anxious to spread Marxist-Leninism throughout Asia. Vietnam must not be allowed to become a Chinese satellite like North Korea.

In some regards US anxieties about China did prove to be justified. True, Chinese combat troops were not sent into Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution had given a signal about US intentions. Chinese engineers, however, some 300,000 strong, did enter the DRV in December 1964, to help build roads and man Vietnamese anti-aircraft guns which freed up DRV troops for battle in the South. As has been mentioned, China had sent a signal to Washington through diplomatic channels that it would not send combat troops into the DRV, but this was combined with a warning that it would not tolerate US infiltration across the seventeenth parallel into the North. The Americans remembered all too well the catastrophic results of China's intervention in Korea, at least in the short run.

Technically, even after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the United States was not at war with the DRV, though the situation was soon to show every characteristic of an all-out war. In 1968 there were to be 500,000 American combat troops in South Vietnam with a smattering of troops from its Asian and Antipodean allies. One of Johnson's problems was that he could not lure his European NATO allies into the Vietnam conflict. He put immense pressure in particular on the new British Prime Minister Harold Wilson to send British troops to Vietnam (reputedly even begging for a pipe band from the famous Scottish Black Watch regiment). Wisely Wilson refused. In 1969, five years after the Gulf of Tonkin episode, Johnson had just 8,000 Australians, 552 New Zealanders, 2,000 men from the Philippines, 11,568 from Thailand and 50,003 South Koreans fighting alongside his G.I.'s. In that year of Ho Chi Minh's death North Vietnam had contingents of Cubans, North Koreans and East Germans (the German Democratic Republic) assisting it. America's failure to secure British, French (de Gaulle angered Washington by recognizing the DRV) or West German participation in the war was a significant propaganda

blow to Johnson. Conversely, it was a propaganda victory for Ho and the DRV, showing that the American action in Vietnam was viewed with disquiet in Western Europe.

On 3 November 1965, Robert McNamara put forward a Draft Memorandum to President Johnson which encapsulated American thinking about Vietnam and South-East Asia. In it he wrote that US objectives in Vietnam 'were in support of a long-run United States policy to contain China.' He went on to say that China loomed 'as a major power threatening to undercut our importance and effectiveness in the world and more remotely to organize all of Asia against us.' Ho Chi Minh saw matters entirely differently. He wished to reunite his country and told the National Assembly on 15 April 1965 that 'President Johnson has often loudly threatened to resort to violence to subdue our people. This is a mere foolish illusion. Our people will never be subjugated.' These illusions, as Ho Chi Minh saw them, were to lead to twenty years of continuous War in Vietnam, before North Vietnam achieved the final unification of the country.