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The Vietnam War, 1962–64: The Vietnamese Communist Perspective

In the last decade, there have been a growing number of scholarly writings on the Vietnam War seen from the communist side. R.B. Smith identified three broad phases in the evolution of western scholarship on the communist side of the war.¹ The first generation of writings relied mainly on official media material, while the second was largely based on documents captured or collected during the Indo-China War. Besides the captured documents, we now have a critical body of North Vietnamese, Chinese and Russian primary and secondary materials in both their original languages and translation, many of which only became available in the 1990s. A third phase in the development of historical writings on the communist side of the war has since emerged. Those who have made use of these *more recent* materials in their writings include Chen Jian, Qiang Zhai, Ronnie Ford, Ilya Gaiduk and the present author. Chen Jian and Qiang Zhai are the leading scholars writing on China's involvement in the Vietnam War based on Chinese sources,² whereas Ilya Gaiduk works on Russia's involvement with documents from the Russian archives.³ Ronnie Ford has published on the Tet Offensive of 1968 using North Vietnamese communist sources.⁴ These historical studies have expanded and deepened our knowledge of 'the other side' of the war. The period just before 1965, particularly from the perspective of the North Vietnamese communists, however, has not received as much attention. It was in those years before 1965 that, in the words of David Marr, 'key attitudes were formed and vital commitments made prior to the first American combat unit touching the Vietnamese soil'.⁵ This article, therefore, attempts to reconstruct Hanoi's decision-making process in the years 1962–64 by integrating three groups of materials: old and recent North Vietnamese communist materials, research based on Chinese and Russian documents and western/non-communist sources.

1 R.B. Smith, 'The Vietnam War "From Both Sides": The Crisis of 1967–68 in Perspective' (unpublished paper, March 1998). I am most grateful to Professor Smith for giving me a copy of this paper.

2 Chen Jian, 'China and the First IndoChina War, 1950–54', *China Quarterly*, no. 133, March 1993; idem, 'China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964–1969', *China Quarterly*, no. 142, June 1995; Qiang Zhai, 'China and the Geneva Conference of 1954', *China Quarterly*, no. 129, March 1992; idem, 'Opposing Negotiations: China and the Vietnam Peace Talks, 1965–1968', *Pacific Historical Review*, February 1999.

3 Ilya Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago 1996).

4 Ronnie Ford, *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise* (London 1995).

5 David G. Marr, *Vietnam* (World Bibliographical Series, vol. 147) (Oxford 1992), 127.

From late-1960 to mid-1962, it was Laos rather than South Vietnam that was the focus of international attention. From the Kong Lae coup on 9 August 1960 till the summer of 1962, developments in Laos overshadowed the armed struggle in South Vietnam (which was under way by the end of 1959). With a common border with North Vietnam and communist China, Laos was of strategic importance to both countries. Much of the Ho Chi Minh Trails, which were so critical to the success of the Vietnamese communist military struggle, passed through Laotian territory. An American presence in Laos would pose serious problems to the Vietnamese plan and would also be too close to China for Beijing's comfort. In the view of President Eisenhower, if Laos should fall to the communists, then it would just be a matter of time before South Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma followed. Laos was considered the keystone to the whole of south-east Asia. Vietnam, in comparison, was considered less critical.⁶ It was in Laos (and not in South Vietnam) that the Russians, who had been staunchly opposed to a military solution to the Vietnam problem, found themselves deeply involved after the Kong Lae coup.

Under the circumstances, therefore, the neutralization of Laos was seen by both the communists and non-communists as the solution to keeping the other party out. By July 1962, with the conclusion of the one-year-long International Conference on the Settlement of the Laotian Question held in Geneva, the Laotian problem had been more or less resolved for the moment. The next stage was to make the Geneva settlement work. Attention shifted back to South Vietnam. Following the trip of Ho Chi Minh and Nguyen Chi Thanh to Beijing to request Chinese military assistance in summer 1962, Beijing began to provide military assistance in the form of small arms and ammunition to the Vietnamese communists in the South, on the understanding that the armed struggle would not escalate into a major war with the USA.⁷ Over in Cambodia, within the Khmer communist underground, the assassination of the party's secretary-general Tou Samouth around 20 July 1962 and the subsequent appointment of Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) to the post, was to have long-term implications for Vietnam's relations with Cambodia and China. The summer of 1962 is therefore an appropriate starting-point for this article.

Ilya Gaiduk identified 1964 as a transitional year for the USA, Vietnam and the Soviet Union. In his analysis, before the Gulf of Tonkin crisis in early August 1964, there was still the possibility of avoiding a military confronta-

⁶ 'Memorandum of Conference on 19 January 1961 between President Eisenhower and President-elect Kennedy on the subject of Laos' in US Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations 1956-1960*, 1360-4; *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. II (Senator Gravel edn) (Boston 1971), 635-7.

⁷ Huang Guoan et al., *Zhongyue Guanxi Jianbian* (Guangxi Renmin Chubanshe 1986), 209; Guo Ming (ed.), *Zhongyue Guanxi Yianbian Shishi Nian* (Guangxi Renmin Chubanshe 1992), 69; Wang Xiangen, *Yuanyue Kangmei Shilu* (Jinan Chubanshe 1992), 18; *Dangdai Zhongguo Wajijiao* (Beijing 1990), 159; 'On Hanoi's White Book', *Beijing Review*, no. 47, 23 November 1979; Hoang Van Hoan, 'Distortion of Facts about Militant Friendship between Vietnam and China is Impermissible', *Beijing Review*, no. 49, 7 December 1979.

tion. However, after the crisis, the Soviet attitude changed from one of non-engagement to substantial support for the Vietnamese communists.⁸ To Robert Schulzinger, 1965 was ‘the point of no return’ for the USA.⁹ The two years between the summers of 1962 and 1964 were, therefore, pivotal.

In March–April 1962, the idea of an international conference to settle the question of South Vietnam was broached by Sihanouk, first in an editorial in the Cambodian newspaper *Nationaliste* on 25 March 1962 and then in a speech on 5 April at the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Phnom Penh.¹⁰ In a private conversation with a ‘delicate source’, Sihanouk revealed that he had been encouraged by the Chinese to take the initiative and that the Russians had indicated that they would support him.¹¹ In a discussion with Marek Thee at the beginning of April 1962, Ambassador Abramov also expressed the view that it might be useful to force the USA to accept negotiations on South Vietnam within the framework of the 1954 Geneva Conference. According to Liu Chun, the chargé d’affaires of the Chinese mission in Khang Khay, Beijing more or less shared this view. Chen Yi, in a conversation with Andrei Gromyko, suggested that the Soviet foreign minister could remain as a permanent co-chairman. Beijing’s hope was to neutralize the whole of south-east Asia.¹²

At about the time when the idea of an international conference on Vietnam was proposed, on 13 and 14 April 1962 respectively, Hanoi and Beijing finally reported on the First Congress of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLFSV) (which took place between 16 February and 3 March 1962) and its resolutions. The Congress was reported to have agreed that the responsibility of the Front was to unite everyone to struggle resolutely against American imperialism and the Diem regime so as to establish a democratic, free, neutral and independent South Vietnam.¹³ On 1 July 1962, the NLFSV sent the co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference a memorandum backing Sihanouk’s proposal, which was endorsed by the North Vietnamese press. On 23 July, the émigré Vietnamese politician Tran Van Huu issued a statement welcoming the newly-concluded Geneva Agreements on Laos and urged that a

8 Ilya Gaiduk, op. cit., xv.

9 Robert D. Schulzinger, ‘“It’s Easy to Win a War on Paper”: The United States and Vietnam, 1961–1968’ in Diane B. Kunz (ed.), *The Diplomacy of the Crucial Decade: American Foreign Relations during the 1960s* (New York 1994), 195.

10 *Phnom Penh Radio*, 6 April 1962, SWB/FE/919/A3/1.

11 FO 371/170153, DV 2231/1, 20 September 1963, Foreign Office Minutes.

12 Marek Thee, *Notes of a Witness: Laos and the Second IndoChinese War* (New York 1973), 245–50.

13 Tran Van Tra, *Nhung Chang Duong Lich Su Cua B2 Thanh Dong (Tap I): Hoa Binh Hay Chien Tranh* (Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan 1992), 241–2; *Vietnam: The Anti-US Resistance War for National Salvation 1954–1975: Military Events* (JPRS 80968), 50–1. It was only reported more than a month later. See *VNA*, 13 April 1962 and *NCNA*, 14 April 1962, SWB/FE/923/B/3–4.

similar conference be held to settle the Vietnamese problem. Apparently HUU had been approached by North Vietnamese officials and was being encouraged to play the role of a neutralist Souvanna Phouma in a South Vietnamese coalition government.¹⁴

According to Arthur Lall, head of the Indian delegation at the Geneva Conference, many of the Conference delegates had expected that a conference on Vietnam would follow a few weeks after the successful conclusion of the one on Laos.¹⁵ However, the idea of an international conference on Vietnam was suddenly dropped in late July 1962. In a conversation with the respected French scholar of Vietnam, Bernard Fall, soon after the Geneva Conference, Pham Van Dong told him that while Hanoi was prepared to negotiate, the situation was not yet ripe, because the Diem regime showed no intention of compromising.¹⁶ On 1 August, Chen Yi also said that China supported Sihanouk's proposal, but since very few countries had responded, the time was perhaps not ripe. When the struggle reached a certain stage, a conference would become inevitable.¹⁷ By 20 August 1962, Sihanouk appeared to have completely lost interest in a conference on Vietnam. Instead, he now began to press for an international conference on Cambodia. It would appear that soon after 23 July Hanoi and Beijing changed their minds regarding an early international conference on South Vietnam. Unfortunately, we do not know the reasons for this. One possibility is that the communists felt that they were not in a good negotiating position. At the July 1962 Honolulu Conference, US Defense Secretary McNamara was informed by the Commander, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) that there had been 'tremendous progress' in South Vietnam in the last six months and that the South Vietnamese communists could be eliminated in about a year.¹⁸

Hanoi's position in mid-1962 regarding Vietnamese communist strategy for the reunification of the country can be gleaned from a conversation in late July 1962 between Bernard Fall and both Pham Van Dong and Ho Chi Minh,¹⁹ as well as a July 1962 letter by Le Duan to his comrades in the South.²⁰ In this conversation, Pham Van Dong informed Bernard Fall that Hanoi would not take any military action in the South that could give the Americans the pretext for military intervention in North Vietnam. He felt that it was unnecessary at that point in time to intervene militarily. Dong was of the view that the struggle in the South was proceeding satisfactorily and that, given time and

14 *Journal de Genève*, 24 July 1962, cited by Gareth Porter in Jayne Werner and David Hunt (eds), *The American War in Vietnam* (Southeast Asia Program) (New York 1993), 11, fn. 13.

15 Arthur Lall, *How Communist China Negotiates* (New York 1968), 180.

16 For the transcript of the interview, see Bernard B. Fall (ed.), *Ho Chi Minh: On Revolution (Selected Writings, 1920-66)* (London 1967), 352-8.

17 NCNA, 1 August 1962, SWB/FE/1012/C1/1.

18 *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of US Decision Making on Vietnam*, vol. II (Senator Gravel edn) (Boston 1971), 164.

19 Fall, op. cit., 352-8.

20 Le Duan, *Thu Vao Nam* (Hanoi 1985), 50-67.

patience, American weariness would compel them to withdraw. Meanwhile, Hanoi would keep up the publicity about American intervention and Vietnamese resistance. Ho's assessment was that Ngo Dinh Diem was in a very difficult position and did not have popular support. Both Dong and Ho agreed that it would be a protracted struggle. Fall left the meeting with the impression that in the near future Hanoi was unlikely to risk its internal development by provoking American retaliation in the form of undisguised bombing of the Northern centres. Hanoi's short-term objective was not the reunification of the country but a neutral South Vietnam that excluded Diem and any American military presence.

Le Duan put across the current Vietnamese communist strategy succinctly in his letter of July 1962 to the Southern comrades. According to Le Duan, although the revolutionary struggle in the South had made much significant progress in the last eight years, there were new difficulties. The American imperialists were determined to prevent South Vietnam from being absorbed into the orbit of socialism and it was their intention to make South Vietnam a springboard from which to attack the North. South Vietnam was to serve as a wall to prevent the tide of socialism from engulfing south-east Asia. Therein lay the complexity of the revolution in the South. Unlike Laos, South Vietnam did not share a common border with China. It was thus probable that the Americans would be less hesitant about a direct invasion of South Vietnam because, unlike in Laos, they would not run the risk of colliding with China. The Vietnamese communists therefore needed to fight cautiously.

The twofold task was to protect the peace so that the North could carry out its socialist construction and at the same time resolutely resist the Americans and their lackeys so as to liberate the South. North and South Vietnam were interrelated. If they did not struggle against the Americans in the South, the stability and peace of the North could not be assured. And if they did not protect the peace and allow the North to complete its socialist development, the revolution would encounter even more difficulties.

Le Duan urged those who emphasized military struggle and underestimated the value of political struggle to evaluate fully and objectively their own capability. He cautioned against underestimating the power of the enemy who was superior to them in everything — numerical strength, weaponry, transportation and modern communication. He cited the successful struggle in Laos that had 'just temporarily ended' as an example of following the correct line and strategy of persistently struggling against the imperialists and at the same time knowing when to exercise restraint in order to avoid a war between the two opposing camps.

Finally, Le Duan reiterated the importance of combining the political and military struggle, especially in countering the 'strategic hamlet' programme. In his assessment, it would be a long struggle, but there was always the possibility that the enemy would 'throw in the towel' at some point when the cost of continuing was higher than it was prepared to pay, as had been the case in Laos and Algeria.

Hanoi's views regarding the reunification struggle remained the same in December 1962. This was despite a string of communist military successes in August, September, October and November. According to the Vietnamese communist account, between 15 and 30 August 1962, the communist forces in Ca Mau, My Tho, Bac Lieu, Soc Trang, Long An, Tay Ninh and Bing Duong thwarted Operation 'Binh Tay' which comprised 5000 enemy troops. Provincial forces of Binh Thuan attacked enemy reinforcements at the provincial capital Ham Tan, and destroyed a company and another 150 soldiers. The 90th Battalion from Quang Ngai defeated an enemy Ranger Battalion supported by helicopters in the Na Niu base area, Tra Bong district, and shot down 13 helicopters in the encounter. In September 1962, the 514th Battalion from My Tho defeated the enemy along Route 4, killing 40 and capturing a number of weapons. The Military Region V Command used four battalions of regular troops supported by regional forces to carry out an operation across the Tien River to destroy the strategic hamlets in Tien Phuoc, Que Son, Thang Binh and Tam Ky. In October 1962, the 840th Battalion from Khanh Hoa with the 186th Battalion put out of action the enemy in the base area of B5 (Tuyen Duc). A company from the 514th Battalion from My Tho defeated a company of special mobile troops and shot down three planes. Two major military setbacks on the non-communist side not mentioned in the communist accounts were Operation Morning Star (October 1962), a major South Vietnamese effort to control Tay Ninh Province, and Operation An Lac (November 1962), which was aimed at gaining control of the highland area in Darlac Province.²¹

At a Politburo meeting (6–10 December 1962), the Hanoi leadership acknowledged that the revolution in the South had achieved a number of successes against the enemy in the previous two years. In the assessment of the Politburo, although the armed forces had made rapid advancements, they were still unable to match the Americans. Political struggle amongst the masses was still not fully developed, military education in many regions was ineffective, and the liberated areas were small and faced many difficulties. They had also been unable to counter the enemy's mobility achieved through the use of armoured vehicles and helicopters. There was therefore an urgent need to expedite further the development of the military in the South in all aspects in order to out-manoeuvre the agility of the enemy as well as demolish its 'strategic hamlet' programme. To achieve this, the Politburo advocated the expansion of the guerrilla war in the South and closer co-ordination amongst the main, regional and guerrilla forces. Military Transportation Group 559 (first formed on 19 May 1959 with the mission to construct the first road connecting the North and the South, and to organize the transfer of weapons and supplies to the South) was assigned to facilitate the movements of more

21 Bo Quoc Phong *Vien Lich Su Quan Su Viet Nam*, 50 *Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam* (Hanoi 1995), 182–3. For the non-communist accounts of the fighting during those three months, see Lester A. Sobel (ed.), *South Vietnam: US-Communist Confrontation in Southeast Asia, Volume 1, 1961–65* (New York 1973), 46–53.

troops and resources into the South. Many local units were also tasked with studying how they could counter the mobility of the enemy.²²

According to a CIA assessment, the communists needed to progress gradually toward conventional warfare, an objective they were unlikely to be able to achieve within a short time. They also faced some very serious problems in the South. The Diem government had destroyed their food stores and there were increasing reports of low morale due to hunger and the lack of medical facilities, particularly in the Central Highlands region. In the view of the CIA, despite their improving ability to down helicopters, the communists found it difficult to concentrate and move troops in the face of greater South Vietnamese mobility. On balance, the war was at 'a slowly escalating stalemate'.²³

The famous battle of Ap Bac must therefore be seen from the perspective of the above sequence of events and the current line of thinking of the North Vietnamese communist leadership on the strategy for the reunification of the country. The details of the battle are well known²⁴ and only the broad outline needs to be highlighted here. South Vietnamese soldiers of the 7th Vietnamese Infantry Division, which was led by American military advisers and supported by planes, artillery and armour, and which outnumbered the communists by ten to one, refused to engage the communist forces at Ap Bac, a hamlet in Dinh Tuong Province, on 2–3 January 1963. As a consequence, the USA suffered its highest casualties of any battle in Vietnam up until then. Of the 14 US helicopters, 11 were shot at and 5 crashed. The battle became famous because of the public criticism by the US military advisers of the South Vietnamese soldiers, particularly the outspokenness of Lieutenant-Colonel John Paul Vann, who was the senior military adviser of the 7th Division.²⁵

It was only to be expected that the victory would bring about much jubilation and self-congratulation. The victory was seen as having 'important historical significance' in that it 'signified the coming of age of the new revolutionary armed forces in the South' and 'opened the way for the bankrupting of the "helicopter mobility" and "armoured vehicle mobility" tactics, the trump

²² *Lịch Su Quân Đội Nhân Dân Việt Nam, Tập II – Quyển Một* (Hanoi 1988), 200–1 (hereafter cited as *LSQDND*); Bo Quoc Phong *Vien Lịch Su Quân Su Việt Nam, 50 Năm Quân Đội Nhân Dân Việt Nam*, op. cit., 184–5; *The Anti-US Resistance War for National Salvation, 1954–1975* (translated by FBIS/US Joint Publications Service, Washington DC, June 1982), 53.

²³ Current Intelligence Memorandum prepared in the Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 11 January 1963, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), Vietnam 1961–1963, vol. III, 19–22.

²⁴ See Neil Sheehan, *A Bright and Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (London 1990), Book 3. This account was constructed using John Vann's after-action report and the captured communist document.

²⁵ See Neil Sheehan, 'Vietnamese Ignored US Battle Order', *The Washington Post*, 7 January 1963, reproduced in *Reporting Vietnam, Part One: American Journalism 1959–1969* (New York 1998), 68–70.

cards of the US-puppet forces in the “special war”.²⁶ The victory boosted the morale of the Vietnamese communists who had been struggling against great odds for many years to reunify the country. The fear for helicopters and tanks was finally eradicated. In the words of Le Duan, ‘After the Ap Bac battle, the enemy realized that it would be difficult to defeat us.’ Not surprisingly, the victory gave rise to a movement to study and emulate the Ap Bac success.²⁷

The communists culled the following lessons from the victory. One, it convinced them that the strategy of concentrating well-organized and well-equipped troops on the battlefield of South Vietnam was a correct one. The troops should also be well trained in both technical and tactical skills. Two, the fighting force firmly grounded in the art of people’s war and the political war incorporating the masses must work hand in hand. When all these factors were present, it would be possible to defeat the large-scale mopping-up operations, new tactics and weapons of the Americans. One of the most important developments which emerged from the Ap Bac experience was the decision to launch what was described as ‘a combined campaign’ involving both ‘military’ and ‘political’ forces which could simultaneously carry out an armed and a political struggle.²⁸

Despite the Ap Bac victory, American intelligence in April 1963 believed that the communist progress in the South had been blunted. The Vietnamese communists were in difficulties because of the strengthened capabilities and effectiveness of the South Vietnamese military. However, it concluded that there were yet no persuasive indications that the communists had been grievously hurt.²⁹

In June 1963, the Central Military Commission met to review the progress made so far with regard to the regularization and modernization of the Vietnamese People’s Army (VPA), a process which began in 1955 with the first Five-Year Military Plan (1955–60). At the end of the first five years, in 1961, the leadership concluded that there was still much room for improvement in the areas of organization, weaponry, science and military art. The target set in the second Five-Year Plan (1961–65) was to speed up the process of modernization and regularization so that the VPA would be ready to fight a war in Indo-China, which the communist leadership thought was imminent.³⁰ The June 1963 meeting which Le Duan attended was therefore a mid-term appraisal. The Commission was satisfied with the progress and was confident

²⁶ *The Anti-US Resistance War for National Salvation, 1954–1975*, op. cit., 54; Van Tien Dung, *Ve Cuoc Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc* (Hanoi 1996), 26.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.; Bo Tong Tham Muu Cuc Nha Truong, *Giao Trinh Lich Su Quan Su, Tap IV: Chien Tranh Va Nghe Thuat Quan Su Viet Nam Thoi Ky Khang Chien Ching My Cuu Nuoc (1954–1975)* (Hanoi 1997), 56.

²⁸ *LSQDND*, 212–13; Ban Chi Dao Tong Ket Chien Tranh Truc Thuoc Bo Chinh Tri, *Tong Ket Cuoc Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc: Thang Loi Va Bai Hoc* (Luu Hanh Noi Bo) (Hanoi 1996), 54–5.

²⁹ National Intelligence Estimate–53–63, 17 April 1963, *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961–1963, vol. III, 232–5.

³⁰ *LSQDND*, 161, 164, 170 and 172.

that North Vietnamese troops were capable of assisting in the revolution in Laos. It also noted that the communist strength in the South had increased. However, the leadership still felt that a number of fronts needed to hone their war-fighting skills further and it was agreed that the training of cadres in the South should be accelerated. Finally, the meeting decided on a plan of action which included drawing up a war-plan, mobilizing troops, expanding the armed struggle, and shifting the peacetime economy on to a wartime footing. Speaking at this meeting, Le Duan told the military that it must explore and make use of new and fresh methods to defeat the enemy.³¹

Soon after the meeting, there was an increase in the movement of troops and equipment from the North to the South. Also, people's air-defence units were established in the North. According to North Vietnamese senior researcher Luu Doan Huynh, Hanoi was already anticipating the bombing.³² In October 1963, the Military Command of South Vietnam was established. Nguyen Van Linh, a member of the party central committee as well as secretary of the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), was concurrently appointed as secretary. Lieutenant-General Tran Van Tra, a member of the party central committee and deputy Chief of Staff, was appointed commander; and Major-General Tran Do was appointed political commissar.³³

Although the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem on 2 November 1963 was only briefly mentioned and President Kennedy's death on 22 November 1963 hardly referred to in the Vietnamese communist accounts, it was evident that developments in the aftermath of these two events were very closely monitored. The North Vietnamese accounts noted that there were many changes in the situation in South Vietnam in the months before the end of 1963 but the conditions were still not conducive for peace. The Saigon governments remained tools of American imperialism. The dual mission of preparing to protect North Vietnam and fighting the 'special war' in the South remained unchanged. Seizing the advantage of the temporary disorientation in the aftermath of Diem's death, the communists intensified the military struggle by eradicating even more strategic hamlets. But Hanoi was ever conscious that despite the significant progress made by the communist forces since the Ap Bac victory, in that short period of one year they had been unable to confront the Americans militarily in an expanded war.³⁴

According to a CIA report of 2 December 1963, the most notable communist success was the apparent unimpeded entry of a 300-man force into the US Special Forces civilian irregular training camp at Hiep Hoa in Hau Nghia province on 24 November, which resulted in a large number of casualties and

31 Ibid., 189–90; Bo Quoc Phong Vien Lich Su Quan Su Viet Nam, *50 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam* op. cit., 186.

32 McNamara et al., op. cit., 205.

33 Ibid., 225. The *LSQDND* stated that Tra and Do were deputy commander and deputy political commissar respectively whereas in *50 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam* Tra was described as the commander. Tran Do was not mentioned. See 188–9.

34 *LSQDND*, 190, 215–16.

weapon losses. Though the intensive communist activity failed to induce panic in the new regime, it demonstrated both a continuing and an enhanced capability for sustaining a high level of activity over several weeks. Even more serious was their growing capability against air-supported assault.³⁵ It was also reported that the Southern communists had developed larger and better tactical units, including some of regimental size. These growing capabilities had been made possible with the infiltration of about 800 cadres from the North into the South in 1963. It was believed that this figure was a gross underestimation and the number was likely to be equal to if not more than the estimated 3000 who entered South Vietnam in 1962.³⁶

Soon after the unexpected deaths of Diem and Kennedy, the Lao Dong Party Central Committee convened its 9th Plenum, considered by the Vietnamese communists as one of the landmarks in the party's history.³⁷ We still do not know the precise dates of the 9th Plenum, just that it was held in December 1963 and ended before the start of 1964. However, it was not until 21 January 1964 that *Nhan Dan* published an editorial on the Plenum. A very recent official Vietnamese source disclosed that the Plenum was convened as early as November 1963.³⁸ If that is correct, it would have to have been soon after Diem's and/or President Kennedy's death and have stretched into December. We now know that it was a lengthy Plenum consisting of at least three sessions.³⁹

The 1970 version of the Plenum simply stated that it was convened to elaborate on the international line and tasks of the party. The 1977 version stated that the Plenum analysed the characteristics of the world situation and the task of the international communist movement, and concluded that it was

. . . the responsibility of the party to partake in the struggle to safeguard the purity of Marxism-Leninism, contribute to the restoration and strengthening of unity in the socialist camp and the international communist movement . . . and strengthen the unity and fighting strength of the party.⁴⁰

³⁵ Central Intelligence Agency Information Report, 2 December 1963, *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961–1963, vol. IV, 647–9.

³⁶ Memorandum from the Chairman of the Central Intelligence Agency's Working Group on Vietnam (Cooper) to the Director of Central Intelligence (McCone), 6 December 1963, *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961–1963, vol. IV, 680–5.

³⁷ See 'Landmarks in the Party's History' (*Vietnam Courier*, no. 254, 2 February 1970) reprinted in *Vietnam Documents and Research Notes*, Document 76 (Joint United States Public Affairs Office, Saigon), 118–27 and 'The Communist Party of Vietnam: Historic Landmarks' in *Vietnam Courier*, no. 56, January 1977, 15–16.

³⁸ Bo Tong Tham Muu Cuc Nha Truong, *Giao Trinh Lich Su Quan Su* (Hanoi 1999), 252.

³⁹ See *LSQDND*, 221.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

The focus of these accounts was on the ‘serious disharmony among some communist and workers’ parties at the time’.⁴¹

The 1980 account was more revealing.⁴² It said that the Plenum was held to discuss a number of matters regarding the international and revolutionary situations, as well as the missions in South Vietnam. With regard to the revolution in the South, the view was that there were three developmental stages: ‘Winning partial victories, advancing step by step, and advancing to a general offensive-general uprising’. The immediate and urgent task was to restrain and defeat the enemy’s ‘special war’. There was unlikely to have been serious disagreement over this point. However, there were differences in opinion during the Plenum on the issues of ‘quick victory’ versus ‘protracted war’ and the relative emphasis to be given to the political and military struggles. Bui Tin disclosed that Vo Nguyen Giap, who was minister for defence, had been sidelined from 1962 onwards.⁴³ Decisions on matters of politics, military and foreign affairs were concentrated in the hands of Le Duan, Le Duc Tho, Nguyen Chi Thanh, To Huu, Tran Quoc Hoan and Van Tien Dung,⁴⁴ who insisted that party members must ‘fully understand the motto of protracted conflict would also take advantage of opportunities to win victory in a relatively brief period of time’, and that they must ‘flexibly combine political struggle with armed struggle . . . but with “*military struggle playing the direct decisive role*”’ (emphasis added).

The official history of the Vietnamese People’s Army (1988) recorded that the 9th Plenum reaffirmed that the struggle to liberate the South was both a political and an armed struggle which was expected to be protracted even though the inevitable victory would be decisive and relatively swift. Everyone in the North and the South must put in the effort. Most important, the North must help the South by increasing its military force. According to the official history, the Plenum marked the maturity in the debate about the correct strategy and organizational ability of the Party to fight against the Americans. The resolution that was passed at the end of the Plenum called on all to remember the international responsibility of the Party, to protect the North and to do their utmost to achieve victory in the South.⁴⁵ Immediately after the Plenum, war preparations went into full swing in both North and South. There were three areas that required immediate attention: protecting the

⁴¹ See ‘Forty Years of Party Activity’ (*Vietnam Courier*, no. 254, 2 February 1970) reprinted in *Vietnam Documents and Research Notes*, Document 76 (Joint United States Public Affairs Office, Saigon), 64–5; ‘The Vietnam Workers’ Party’s 1963 Decision to Escalate the War in the South’ reprinted in *Vietnam Documents and Research Notes*, no. 96.

⁴² *The Anti-US Resistance War for National Salvation, 1954–1975*, op. cit., 55–6. Also, see *50 Years of Activities of the Communist Party of Vietnam* (Hanoi 1980), 156–7.

⁴³ This would explain why Giap was not mentioned in the official military history for this period.

⁴⁴ Bui Tin, *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel* (London 1995), 44–6.

⁴⁵ *LSQDND*, 220–34. Also, see Bo Quoc Phong Vien Lich Su Quan Su Viet Nam, *50 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam*, op. cit., 190.

North, intensifying the struggle in the South and supporting the ongoing Laotian revolution.⁴⁶

During the USA–Vietnam Dialogue in 1998, North Vietnamese senior researcher Luu Doan Huynh disclosed that Diem’s assassination was viewed with alarm in Hanoi because it substantially raised the odds of a direct American intervention. Consequently, the 9th Plenum decided to try to win the war before the USA could mount a successful intervention.⁴⁷ North Vietnamese senior researcher Nguyen Khac Huynh also revealed that Hanoi began to send combat troops to the South at the end of 1963, in an effort to achieve a quick victory after Diem’s assassination and before the Americans could take over the war.⁴⁸ Bui Tin, in his memoir, also noted that the period of full-scale war began after the 9th Plenum.⁴⁹ Bui Tin, along with 11 other high-ranking cadres, was assigned by the top military leadership to make a reconnaissance trip at the beginning of 1964 to the South where he spent almost ten months.⁵⁰

The second military five-year plan (1961–65) had catered for a peacetime and wartime army. The plan was to cap the regular army at approximately 170,000 during peacetime and 260,000 when the country was in a state of war. Up until the end of 1963, North Vietnam kept its troop strength at 173,500. But the target was adjusted for 1964–65 to 350–400,000 and for 1966–67 to 500,000. The total strength of the regular army in the North stood at 300,000 in 1964.⁵¹ The Central Military Commission and the Ministry of National Defence established a wartime unit to co-ordinate all the activities of the military units and regions.

In the South, at the beginning of 1964, Vo Chi Cong, a member of the party central committee and deputy secretary of COSVN, was appointed secretary-cum-political commissar of Military Region V. In March, the military leadership placed part of the air-defence/air force in the North on a war footing. On 1 May 1964, the Central Highlands Front was established within Military Region V. Senior Colonel Nguyen Chanh, deputy commander of Military Region V, and Senior Colonel Doan Khue, deputy political commissar of Military Region V, were appointed commander and political commissar of the Front respectively. The Central Highlands was of strategic importance because control of communist infiltration depended on the control of the Highlands.⁵²

Equipment and reinforcements were sent to the South via both the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the sea route. Between 1961 and 1963, over 40,000 cadre-

46 Ban Chi Dao Tong Ket Chien Tranh Truc Thuoc Bo Chin Tri, *Tong Ket Cuoc Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc Thang Loi Va Bai Hoc* (Luu Han Noi Bo) (Hanoi 1996), 56–8.

47 Robert S. McNamara et al., *Arguments Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York 1999), 200–1.

48 *Ibid.*, 92.

49 Bui Tin, *op. cit.*, 46.

50 *Ibid.*, 49–53.

51 *LSQDND*, 164.

52 Memorandum from the Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs’ Special Assistant (Jordan) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Harriman), 20 March 1963, *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961–1963, vol. III, 165–8.

fighters trained to be regular soldiers in the North moved to the South, of whom 2000 were commanders and technical personnel. The largest fighting unit of the regular troops in the South in 1964 was the regiment.⁵³ According to an American report of 2 March 1964, there was mounting evidence that the infiltration from the North into the South was of 'such proportions as to constitute an increasingly important factor in the war'.⁵⁴

On 29 June 1964, the Politburo once again emphasized the need to increase the state of readiness to fight an imminent war. All North Vietnamese forces were exhorted to be prepared to kill any enemy invading the North and to push ahead in support of the South. At the end of June, Chief-of-Staff General Van Tien Dung ordered the Vietnamese People's Army to go on alert. Capability to take on US air power was considered a top priority. Much attention was therefore focused on the readiness of the air-defence units. Air-defence training and preparation were stepped up, although the weapons and communication equipment still in use were old.⁵⁵

It is perhaps at this juncture that we should shift our focus briefly to Laos and Cambodia. The Vietnamese communist leadership had always considered the whole of Indo-China as a single battlefield. Despite the signing of the Geneva Agreements on Laos in July 1962, Hanoi never withdrew its forces from Laos. As Roger Hilsman wrote: 'The Viet Minh were the military backbone of the Pathet Lao and the shock troops in attack.'⁵⁶ The military situation in the strategic Plain of Jars continued to deteriorate and Pathet Lao–North Vietnamese forces were positioning themselves to control the Plain. Since April 1963 the Pathet Lao had broken ranks with neutralist forces led by Kong Lae, following the death of Quinim Pholsena. A CIA report of 1 November 1963 showed that key routes to Laos from North Vietnam had been re-opened and communist re-supply activities were detected along Route 7 into the Plain of Jars, Routes 12 and 8 into central Laos, as well as various routes into the Tchepone region.⁵⁷ In February 1964, Pathet Lao–North Vietnamese forces advanced into central Laos. On 27 May 1964, the post-1962 Geneva Conference Laotian coalition government collapsed.⁵⁸ As for Cambodia, under the astute leadership of Sihanouk, the country was still able to resist being fully

53 *LSQDND*, 222–34; Bo Tong Tham Muu Cuc Nha Truong, *Giao Trinh Lich Su Quan Su*, op. cit., 252.

54 Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (McNamara), 2 March 1964, *FRUS*, Vietnam 1964–1968, vol. 1 (1964), 110–11.

55 *LSQDND*, 229–30; Bo Quoc Phong Vien Lich Su Quan Su Viet Nam, *50 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam*, op. cit., 195–6 and *Hau Phong Chien Tranh Nhan Dan Viet Nam (1945–1975)* (Hanoi 1997), 151; Bo Tong Tham Muu Cuc Nha Truong, *Gia Trinh Lich Su Quan Su*, op. cit., 253.

56 Memorandum from the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Harriman), 24 September 1962, *FRUS*, Laos Crisis 1961–1963, vol. XXIV, 897–901.

57 Special Report Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, 1 November 1963, *FRUS*, Laos Crisis, 1961–1963, vol. XXIV, 1054–7.

58 *The Anti-US Resistance War for National Salvation, 1954–1975*, op. cit., 58–9.

sucked into the war during this period. Sihanouk was, however, unable to persuade the major powers to convene an international conference to guarantee the neutralization of Cambodia. According to the US State Department, although there were numerous reports since 1956 about Vietnamese communist cells in Cambodia, there was no indication of any serious intensification of communist activities there.⁵⁹

Hanoi needed both material and moral support from the Soviet Union and China to be able successfully to carry out the war. So, while all these military activities were going on, Le Duan led a delegation, which included Le Duc Tho, To Huu and Hoang Van Hoan, to the Soviet Union, arriving in Moscow on 31 January 1964. The purpose of the visit was to inform the Russians of the decisions taken at the recent 9th Plenum and to obtain Russian support. The North Vietnamese communists viewed the growing rift between Moscow and Beijing as detrimental to their cause. Consequently, Hanoi tried very hard to avoid taking sides in the intensifying Sino-Soviet quarrel and Ho Chi Minh did his utmost to persuade both sides to mend their differences. From the 22nd Congress of the CPSU (17–31 October 1961), Hanoi found it increasingly difficult to sit on the fence. It discovered itself sharing similar views with Beijing on a number of issues, such as Albania (October 1961), the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 1962) and the partial Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (July 1963). The fundamental problem was that Khrushchev's strategy of peaceful coexistence with the west, specifically the USA, did not sit well with Hanoi's reunification aspirations. Consequently, other than continued propaganda and moral support, the North Vietnamese delegation failed to obtain any material support from the Russians. Khrushchev very bluntly told the Vietnamese that unless Hanoi changed its position, there would be no prospect of concrete Russian assistance.⁶⁰

The North Vietnamese delegation spent ten days in Moscow and returned to Hanoi after a brief stopover in Beijing. During this period both Hanoi and Beijing shared a common antagonistic attitude towards the non-communist countries. Most important, Beijing was sympathetic towards national liberation struggles. As already noted, in summer 1962, the Chinese began supplying guns of all types to the Vietnamese communists to be used in the guerrilla war in the South. In March 1963, a Chinese military delegation led by Luo Ruiqing, Chief-of-Staff of the PLA, visited Hanoi. In May 1963, Liu Shaoqi visited Vietnam. On both visits, the Chinese assured the Hanoi leadership that they would assist the Vietnamese communists in their military struggle.

⁵⁹ Memorandum from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Rice) to the Deputy Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Johnson), 10 April 1963, *FRUS*, Southeast Asia, 1961–1963, vol. XXIII, 231–3.

⁶⁰ Gaiduk, *op. cit.*, 6–11, 256, fn. 6. Gaiduk's source on the January 1964 meeting is a top secret memorandum of the Southeast Asia Department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, 'Soviet Moral and Political Support of and Material Aid to the South Vietnam Patriots' (24 March 1966).

American sources reported that modern weapons of Chinese origin, such as recoil-less rifles and quadruple-mounted heavy machine-guns, were being used by the Southern communists, and that these weapons were partially offsetting the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's (ARVN) advantage of air mobility and armoured personnel carriers.⁶¹ In October 1963, Zhou Enlai promised to assist the Pathet Lao during a secret visit to Beijing by Kayone Phomvihane, secretary-general of the Laos Revolutionary Party.⁶² In contrast, Khrushchev was not even interested in discussing Laos.⁶³

Despite the ebb in Soviet-Vietnam relations during this time, Hanoi did not and never intended to 'burn its bridges' with Moscow. According to Nguyen Khac Vien, in 1963, the Lao Dong Party rejected a Chinese proposal to convene a meeting of 11 mainly Asian communist parties and also refused a proposal of Deng Xiaoping that China should give North Vietnam one billion yuan in exchange for Hanoi's refusing all Soviet aid.⁶⁴ According to a Chinese source, apart from China's difference with Vietnam over the handling of the 1956 agrarian *débâcle*, the other significant point of divergence between them before 1965 was the reluctance of the Vietnamese communists to join them in denouncing the Soviet Union for deviating from Marxism.⁶⁵

From July 1956, when it was obvious that there would not be an election as specified in the 1954 Geneva Agreement and that the country would not be united in the near future, there was an ongoing 'debate' amongst the Vietnamese communist leadership regarding the strategy for reunification. There was general agreement that the top priority ought to be rebuilding North Vietnam's economy. But by mid-1958, Diem's renewed efforts to exterminate the Southern communists culminating in the passing of Law 10/59 (6 May 1959) adversely affected the revolutionary struggle. Hanoi realized that it could no longer continue to advocate restraint without losing both the allegiance of the Southern communists and the reunification struggle to Diem. The decision to renew the struggle in the South, taken at the landmark 15th Plenum of the Lao Dong Party in January 1959, must be seen in this context. Even then, when put into action, the political struggle still predominated. This was so because the North, specifically the military, was still far from ready to handle an expansion of the war. Also, developments in Laos, which were not always necessarily manipulated by Hanoi but which had an impact on

61 Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (McNamara), 2 March 1964, *FRUS*, Vietnam 1964–1968, Vietnam (1964), 110–11.

62 Chen Jian, 'China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964–69' in *China Quarterly*, no. 142, June 1995, 356–86.

63 This comes across very clearly in much of the correspondence and many of the memoranda in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Laos Crisis 1961–1963, vol. XXIV, and Laos 1964–1968, vol. XXVIII.

64 Nguyen Khac Vien, *Vietnam: A Long History* (Hanoi 1993), 310.

65 Guo Ming (ed.), *Zhongyue Guanxi Yanbian Shishi Nian* (Guangxi 1992), 101.

Vietnam, dominated in 1960 and 1961. The unexpected death of Diem in November 1963 led to the decision taken at the 9th Plenum in November/December 1963 to escalate the military struggle before the Americans could get directly involved. This decision should therefore be seen as a continuation of the policy adopted at the 15th Plenum. Those who supported the escalation of the military struggle did have a reasonably strong case. According to most of the American intelligence reports from about August 1963, the combat capability of the Southern communists had been improving and they had scored not a few successes. In a 13 December 1963 memorandum, it was reported that the South Vietnamese government had been unable materially to reduce the strength of the communists in spite of the increased number of RVN offensive operations.⁶⁶ However, there were still those in the leadership who continued to hold the view that the North was still not completely ready to support a further intensification of the struggle in the South. As already noted, the targets set in the 2nd Five-Year military plan (1961–65) had yet to be fully achieved. Furthermore, the North was experiencing the worse drought since 1954.⁶⁷ The goal of eventual reunification was never in doubt but there continued to be differences regarding the pace at which the goal should be achieved. This, plus personal rivalry, became entangled with the issue of the Soviet strategy of peaceful coexistence versus the Chinese strategy of supporting national liberation struggles in the colonial countries. Those such as Vo Nguyen Giap, Hoang Minh Chinh and Nguyen Kien Giang who advocated a more cautious pace were crudely labelled ‘pro-Soviet’ and unpatriotic to the national cause, whereas Le Duan and others who shared his view on speeding up the struggle became known as ‘pro-China’.⁶⁸ (It is perhaps worth noting that a decade later Le Duan was re-labelled ‘pro-Soviet’.) Le Duan, who had played a moderating role in the debate over the pace of the reunification struggle from 1956 until November 1963, became more ‘hawkish’ after the death of Diem.

Ho Chi Minh’s health was beginning to decline in 1964 and he no longer oversaw the day-to-day decisions, which were gradually being made by Le Duan and his associates. But Ho remained the powerful symbol of unity in the country.⁶⁹ The Special Political Conference (27–28 March 1964) convened by Ho Chi Minh should be seen as an extension of the 9th Plenum, which is perhaps the reason why this Conference, unlike the 9th Plenum, was not short-listed for a landmark in the party’s history. On this occasion, Ho made use of his prestige in an effort to resolve the differences over the national struggle by reaffirming the decision made at the recent Plenum. Over 800 officials and

66 Memorandum from the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (Carroll) to the Secretary of Defense (McNamara), 13 December 1963, *FRUS*, Vietnam 1961–1963, vol. IV, 707–10.

67 PRO: FO 371/170097, Hanoi to FO, 1 March 1963; PRO: FO 371/170107, Saigon to FO, 5 September 1963 cited in Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA 1999), 10, 426, fn. 24; ‘The DRV in 1962’ in *China News Analysis*, no. 460, 15 March 1963.

68 For details of the infighting within the Hanoi leadership, see Bui Tin, op. cit., 44–6, 54–6.

69 Bui Tin, op. cit., 65. Ho began writing his will in May 1965.

observers from various groups and strata attended the meeting. Ho prevailed on all in the party and the military, and everyone in the North and South, to unite in order to defeat the Americans and unify the country.⁷⁰

The Gulf of Tonkin incident was the culminating point of this period. We can now confirm that the North Vietnamese torpedo boats did fire at the US destroyer *Maddox* on 2 August 1964, a decision made by the commander on the site. The North Vietnamese, however, maintained that the presumed second attack on the night of 4 August that led to US retaliation with air-strikes against North Vietnam and, soon after, the passing of the Tonkin Gulf resolution, did not take place.⁷¹ The Gulf of Tonkin incident stiffened the attitude of the Vietnamese communists toward the war.⁷² The Politburo, which met again on 25–26 September 1964, once again reaffirmed the earlier decisions made regarding the war, and in October 1964 General Nguyen Chi Thanh was appointed commander of operations in the South. Major-Generals Le Trong Tan and Tran Do and Colonel Hoang Cam were amongst the senior officers sent to the South to oversee the development of the communist forces there.⁷³ The same month, Hanoi dispatched the first complete North Vietnamese tactical unit, the 95th Regiment, to the South.⁷⁴

The Tonkin Gulf incident also strengthened Beijing's commitment to the Vietnamese communists. Soon after the incident, Le Duan made a trip to Beijing and met Mao Zedong on 13 August. Most significant was the conversion of the Kremlin, whose support Hanoi needed just as much. According to Ilya Gaiduk, the Tonkin Gulf incident marked a new turning-point in Indo-China. Moscow finally recognized that both North Vietnam and the USA were bent on resolving the problem by military means. The Kremlin had to support the Vietnamese communists if it was to retain its leadership status within the communist camp and if it did not wish to lose the prospect of strengthening Soviet influence in south-east Asia.⁷⁵ Vietnamese-Soviet relations gradually improved from this point on.

⁷⁰ 'Broadcast Reportage and Ho Chi Minh Report to DRV Special Conference' in *Vietnam Documents and Research Notes* (Joint United States Public Affairs Office, Saigon), no. 98, September 1971. *50 Years of Activities of the Communist Party of Vietnam* (Hanoi 1980), 157–8; *The Anti-US Resistance War for National Salvation, 1954–1975*, op. cit., 57–8; *LSQDND*, 227–9; Bo Quoc Phong Vien Lich Su Quan Su Viet Nam, *50 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam*, op. cit., 194 and *Hau Phong Chien Tranh Nhan Dan Viet Nam (1945–1975)* (Hanoi 1997), 150–1.

⁷¹ Robert S. McNamara et al., *Arguments Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York 1999), 202–5; Mao Zedong's conversation with Le Duan (13 August 1964, Beijing) in *New Evidence on the Vietnam/IndoChina Wars* (Cold War International History Project).

⁷² George C. Herring (ed.), *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Paper* (Austin, TX 1985), 8.

⁷³ Bo Quoc Phong Vien Lich Su Quan Su Viet Nam, *50 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam*, op. cit., 198–9; Bui Tin, op. cit., 61.

⁷⁴ US Department of State, *Working Paper on the North Vietnamese Role in the War in South Vietnam* (May 1968).

⁷⁵ Gaiduk, op. cit., 12–21, 258, fn. 35–8. Gaiduk cites a combination of American and Soviet documents.

To all intents and purposes, the 9th Plenum was the point when the decision to escalate the armed struggle was taken. But it did not mean that the Vietnamese communists had thrown all caution to the wind. The objective of the Vietnamese communists was to try to win the reunification struggle before the Americans intervened directly in the war. In the course of achieving this objective, Hanoi also wanted to prevent as long as possible the USA from attacking North Vietnam. The escalation of the military struggle therefore needed to be handled very adroitly. This came across most clearly in a conversation of both Pham Van Dong and Hoang Van Hoan with Mao Zedong on 5 October 1964. According to Dong, Hanoi would try to restrict the war within the sphere of special war, and would try to defeat the enemy within the sphere of special war. It would try not to let the Americans turn the war into a limited war or expand it into North Vietnam. The various secret negotiations should also be understood in the context of the military struggle. The Vietnamese communists realized very early on that it was not possible to achieve at the diplomatic table that which could not be obtained on the battlefield. Regarding negotiations, Mao commented that the North Vietnamese had 'earned the qualification to negotiate'. However, it was another matter whether or not the negotiation would succeed. Beijing had been talking to the USA for nine years and the Sino-American ambassadorial talks were continuing in Warsaw. 'More than 120 meetings had been held', added Zhou Enlai.⁷⁶

With hindsight, we know that the American troops landed in Danang on July 1965. For the next two years, the war was fought to the point of stalemate. The next significant turning-point for the Vietnamese communists was spring 1967 when the plan for the General Offensive–General Uprising (or the Tet Offensive) was endorsed.⁷⁷

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⁷⁶ Mao Zedong and Pham Van Dong, Hoang Van Hoan (Beijing, 5 October 1964) in *New Evidence on the Vietnam/IndoChina Wars* (Cold War International History Project).

⁷⁷ See Ang Cheng Guan, 'Decision-making Leading to the Tet Offensive (1968) — The Vietnamese Communist Perspective' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 33, 3 (July 1998), 341–53.