

Vietcong Insurgency: Why was it Successful?

Author

Imran Khan

Ph.D. Scholar, Area Study Center, University of Peshawar

The United States opposed North Vietnam as the spearhead of a Soviet-Chinese design. China supported Hanoi to blunt a perceived American thrust to dominate Asia. Both were mistaken. Hanoi fought only for its own national account.

Dr. Kissinger

Abstract

The paper investigates into Vietcong's successful resistance against French and American forces in light of the Vietnamese dreams of self-determination fostered due to the suppression of external powers. The Atlantic Charter and the termination of WWII were taken as an end to centuries-long humiliation but the decline of French withdrawal once again took away the realization of self-determination. The American military involvement following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phurepulsed pro-American feelings in Hu chin Min. The article discusses how American misunderstanding of Vietnam, not only channelized anti-imperial sentiments toward America but also pushed nationalist Vietnamese into the communist bloc. The article elaborates on the role of Vietnam's history of deprivation and grouping up of variegated ideologies- anti-imperial, Nationalist, communism- against the American occupation of Vietnam.

Keywords: Vietcong, the Atlantic Charter, Self-determination, Communism, Nationalist.

Historical Background of the Vietcong Nationalist Ideology

Dr. Robert Kaplan argued “Long before the North and South Vietnams of the Cold War era, there were northern and southern Vietnams that had existed across this civilizational fault line and across the chasm of the centuries between antiquity and modern times: Dai Viet being a young and insecure kingdom in the north after having been a province of the Chinese Empire for over a thousand years”(Kaplan, 2014). Vietnamese nationalism can be traced to 200 B.C when Viet people started to migrate southward from China. These people were called Baiyue or Yue people in mainland China, non-Chinese people in the land of Chinese people. In search of identity and overwhelmed by the sentiments and sense of being a separate nation they migrated to the southern part of China, Guangxi, and then beyond. They were called Viets by mainland Chinese and following their migration beyond Guangxi, today's Northern Vietnam, their home was named the Nam Viet (Land of the Southern Viets).

However, owing to geographical proximity to the then “the Mandate of Heaven’s China”, their dreams of a separate national identity never came true in full spirit for the next millennium. In 111 BC Chinese Han dynasty arrived to colonize the Viets’ land Nam Viet (Land of the Southern Viets). Next 1000 years China made them a colony. During 1000 years of Chinese colonization, intermittently, the Vietnamese launched secessionist movements for their autonomy but in vain. However, China's internal weakness corollary to domestic power struggles and its gradual decline paved the way for the Viets’ dream of an independent home. The sentiments of independence would bequeath generation after generation and the Cold War war era success of the Vietcong’sinsurgency can be credited to its ideological structure and its connection to Vietnamese traditions (Shultz, 1978).

In the wake of the collapse of the Tang dynasty in 907 AD, Viets found the first opportunity to break the yoke of Chinese colonization to realize their millennium-old dream of Dai Viet (Greater State of Viet). And this time their struggles for national self-determination yielded under the aegis of the Li Dynasty. However, independent but nascent 11th century Dai Viet was confronted with domestic power struggles. The power struggle was partially the outcome of its expansion at the cost of the champ's empires.

In a series of bloody battles in the late 15th century, led by the Le Dynasty, the Viets conquered all of the Kingdom of Champa and annexed its territory. In the face of its southward expansion till today's Central Vietnam, Dai Viet slowly and gradually started to slide into domestic turmoil as an outcome of power struggles between two powerful families, the Trinh and Nguyen. By the time of the 17th century, these two powerful families, the Trinh and Nguyen, within the Le dynasty emerged as power centers in the north and south respectively. But both continued to swear fealty to the Le Dynasty, whose rule was largely ceremonial. However, the domestic power struggle did not impact Dai Viet's "South March". The South March brought

Viets deep into the Mekong Delta, then part of the Khmer kingdom. By the late 18th century, politically divided Dai Viet between the Trinh and Nguyen had assumed the S-shaped geographical contours with which we are now familiar.

Often amidst difficult times anarchy gives rise to revolts, and reformist movements aimed to rejuvenate the national spirit to promote national unity and ensure survival. The success and failure of such movements can be debatable but a sufficient quarter of a nation usually does support, follow and appreciate such initiatives. In the late 18th century, Domestic power struggles between Nguyen and the Trinh and the deteriorating law and order situation galvanized the Tay Son brothers to safeguard their defined dream of Dai Viet (Greater State of Viet). They struggled to restore peace and unity, however, their success against the Trinh and Nguyen proved short-lived and partially succeeded.

However, for some quarters the struggle for rejuvenation and while for others revolt brought in a new contender, the French Empire- technologically far superior, economically sounder, militarily gigantic, and with overflowing ambitions of occupation. It was the era of colonization. Great Britain, Portuguese, French, and Dutch were rivaling for overseas colonies. The European powers were far more modern and developed and there was no match for them.

In 1802, Nguyen Anh of the Nguyen dynasty furnished the French help to quench the Tay Son revolt. Nguyen Anh established the rule of the Nguyen dynasty (the last dynasty of Vietnam) but soon turned against his patron, France. After a quarter-century of turmoil, Nguyen Anh (imperial title Gia Long) unified the then divided South and North Vietnam. Although he had maintained very close relations with the French government but never let the French exercise its preponderance. When Gia Long's successors tried to root out French influence and attempted to throw missionaries out of the country, the French's mighty military retaliated with unappeasable fury. As a result, in 1862, Emperor Tu Due ceded three southern provinces to the French, who promptly named the region Cochin China, ruling it as a colony until 1945. Once again Dai Viet was divided but this time into three regions: Tonkin (North), Annam (Central), and Cochin China (South).

Although onward 10th century, the dream of national self-determination was realized but yet it was engulfed by domestic turmoil and civil war. The turmoil-ridden, the century of humiliation for China, and the era of European colonization brought back the cure of colonization on Dai Viet. But this time France replaced China. The centuries-long simmering sentiments of national integrity found another impetus addendum to anti-colonial and anti-western sentiments. In the aftermath of WWI & WWII, changing winds over European continents and HoChe Minh's leadership resurrected the hopes of self-determination in the Vietnamese. But Vietnamese found themselves in securitized structures during the Cold War, which pushed them into the communist bloc. The Vietnamese struggled against colonial France and then America established effective political and military apparatus that culminated in its victories against both. Had, over the last century, the gradual accretion of variegated ingredients

to Vietcong ideology - nationalism, anti-imperialism, anti-American sentiments, and securitized eastern-communist-based structure of the Cold War, been forerunners for the success or failure of its insurgency?

A necessity for a Cause/ Ideology

Virtually all politically minded Vietnamese have spent at least their adulthood, if not their whole lives, during the Communist struggle for power (Carver, 1966). The Vietcong were Southern Vietnamese who were struggling for the communist cause. The French defeat at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu ended the first phase of the war at the Geneva Conference (July 1954). It was decided at Geneva Conference that the election would take place in 1956. The hopes of a unified Vietnam under the command of Ho Chi Minh (Nguyen That Thanh) resurrected in the hearts and minds of various quarters of Southern Vietnamese and the overwhelmed majority of the northern Vietnamese. The sentiments of centuries-old nationalism, that now compounded with communism, anti-imperialism, and more or less anti-Americanism, were just a couple of years away from realization. At the advent of the Cold War, the communism-based-ideological structure was complementing the millennia-old Vietnamese dream of national self-determination.

Even both in Moscow and Washington there were prevailed confusion that the Vietnamese were the first communists or nationalists. In both powerhouses, sundry deliberations took place to conclude the question. However, the success of the communist revolution in China, and the loss of millions of people to communism, blurred the decision capability in Washington.

In his telegram to the U.S. Consulate in Hanoi on May 29, 1949, Secretary of State Dean Acheson gave instructions:

All Stalinists in colonial areas are nationalists. With the achievement of national aims (i.e., independence) their objective necessarily becomes a subordination state to Commie purposes and ruthless extermination of not only opposition groups but all elements suspected of even slightest deviation (Acheson, 1949).

The then America president Eisenhower succinctly elaborated on American fear of communism in the concept of the "Falling domino" (Mandelbaum, 2022).

So far, the paper has discussed two aspects of the Vietcong's ideological aspect: the prevailed structure of communism and nostalgia for a unified Vietnam. Independent to their will and beyond their capabilities Vietnamese were locked down in the securitized structure of the Cold War. They had to choose one of two; either capitalist-led securitized half part of the Cold War structure or the remaining half of the communists. Vietcong quite later developed as a result of many failed struggles of Ho Chi Minh to integrate the Southern half of Vietnam with the northern half. Ho Chi Minh, from the Paris Treaty of 1919 till to Japanese surrender in 1945 did his hard to win freedom amicably from America. But America is in close alliance with France during WWII and never took Ho Chi Minh seriously. At the end of WWII, Ho Chi Minh wrote

to President Truman “What we ask has been graciously granted to the Philippines. Like the Philippines, our goal is full independence and full cooperation with the UNITED STATES. We will do our best to make this independence and cooperation profitable to the whole world”(Young et al., 2003).

The repeated negative response from Washington D.C from 1919 to 1945 pushed America-loving Vietnamese toward the communist bloc. The disappointment fostered any factor of anti-American sentiments. Here tapped in another ingredient of anti-American sentiment to bolster their ideological strength. And during 20 years crisis period, between WWI & WWII, communism seemed to hold the answer to the fundamental problems facing colonized people everywhere. A substitute to the Western democracy and anti-imperialist ideological foundations of communism had great appeal to the colonized people and provided an alternative platform in the post-world war for HoChe Minh to bandwagon the Vietnamese cause of national self-determination with anti- French, anti-America, and anti-imperialist ideology. It served well.

The two components of the Vietcong ideology, the anti-French and anti-American components, held quite overlapping characteristics but also had a sharp line of distinction. The anti-Western component was shaped over the course of the last quarter of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. It had more entrenched roots and second vital moving engine of Vietnam's war to Vietnamese nationalism. The other component, anti-American, was more or less accidental and momentarily. The anti-American sentiments stemmed from the American reactionary approach in light of the "Domino Effect", its intimate and strategic relations with France, and then in the wake of China's communist revolution. The multi-layered, multifaceted ideological approach had quite a broader reach and greater numbers of audience. Both in the north and south, the recipients of Ho Chi Minh's message outnumbered and outwitted firstly French imperial forces, second Diemregime, and finally Americans. All these great forces left behind victorious Vietcong and Northern Vietnam forces under the command of Ho Chi Minh.

American Strategic Miscalculation turned into Vietcong's ideological Strength

To facilitate the cause of “Vietminh” in North Vietnam and Vietcong in South, American miscalculations put their due share from time to time. *Firstly*, being in the American alliance system during WWII, when the Japanese surrendered, the leader of the Vietnamese national cause HoChe Minh was expecting a respectable share in the terms of Vietnamese independence. On September 2, 1945, HoChe Mine started the Vietnamese independence Declaration from the immortal statement of the American Revolution, "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; - among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness(Lindsay, 2016)." But hardly a year later, opposite to the spirit of Wilson's fourteen points, the Atlantic Charter, and Franklin Roosevelt's "National-Self Determination principle", America supported French aggression and colonizing ambitions on the Indo-China peninsula. America chose the First Indochina War over America-spearheaded Vietnamese independence.

Second, following the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, Americans did not commit to the Geneva accord. It had been obsessed with China's revolution. No doubt, the situation in the region was profound by then but China's loss to communism and then further strategic miscalculation of unfolding regional structure thrust America into an unnecessary and unwinning war. In later years Dr. Henry Kissinger analyzed the then strategic picture "The United States opposed North Vietnam as the spearhead of a Soviet-Chinese design. China supported Hanoi to blunt a perceived American thrust to dominate Asia. Both were mistaken. Hanoi fought only for its own national account" (Kissinger, 2011, p. 376).

Third, the American installed puppet regime of Diem at a particular movement even turned against his master. Diem adopted repressive measures that further complemented Ho Chi Minh's cause. Diem was a catholic Christian and adopted the cowboy style to deal with prevailed problems and chaos. His odd and hard measures towards other religions led to the self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức. The event shocked congressmen, and even President Kennedy. The aforementioned strategic miscalculation played a vital role in establishing Vietcong and then as a catalyst and precipitant for the ideational popularity of Vietcong.

This variegated, accumulated, overlapped, and expanding spectrum and outreach of ideologies kept bringing various quarters of Vietnamese from both north and south under the universal umbrella of Ho Chi Minh's leadership. Vietcong spearheaded the cause in South Vietnam. Various preconditions that kept setting the stage for insurgency for long - nationalism, anti-western sentiments, and simmering struggles for decolonization- precipitated the ideational burst and then provided solid foundations for the Vietcong (Crenshaw, 1981).

Geographic Conditions and Guerrilla warfare

In the national power ingredients, geographical factor plays a vital role. The variable of the geographical terrain has been discussed for centuries by different writers from Thucydides to Niccolò Machiavelli to Robert D. Kaplan. Mackinder's charismatic theory of "Heartland" is established on the distinct feature of the terrain during ancient, medieval, and early modern ages, in absence of ICBMs, that enabled the Mongols' horses to rule over great vast Europe from the steppe of central Europe to the of Ice-capped mountains. In the Vietnam case, Robert D Kaplan's assertion fits more accurately that the Terrain determines the pace and method of fighting (Kaplan, 2013, p. 95). Southern Vietnam has long stretches of forest, its climate can be divided into a tropical and a temperate zone vulnerable to change, high rate of precipitation in the monsoon season often causes floods, which more or less lie in the tropical region. During the second Vietnam War, Americans tried to bring changes in weather patterns to use it to inundate sundry supplying tracks.

However, local terrain, guerilla warfare tactics, and traditional strategies to allure and trapped the enemy worked a lot. The Guerilla warfare concept was first established in the 6th century BC by Chinese strategist Sun Tzu, in his classic book, The Art of War. Many defined

and suggested strategies of guerrilla warfare were very carefully implanted during Vietnam War. Years after, 21st century's leading American geo-strategic Robert D. Kaplan succinctly diagnosed the ineffective relationship between booming over guerilla forces. Robert D. Kaplan maintained that "Aircraft can bombard, but they cannot transport goods in bulk, nor exercise control on the ground"(Kaplan, 2012). The same case was out there in Vietnam. Vietcong controlled the ground, sometimes for their strategic supply supplanting the entire Vietnam through the Ho Chi Minh trail while other times through a complex maze of underground tunnels. However, on the other side, America in the absence of well-studied policy and strategy resorted to the massive use of "disproportionate force". The use of massive force without proper strategy ended in disaster for the American armed forces.

America largely relied on massive aerial bombing methods. During Johnson's presidency, America launched "Operation roller thunderstorm". Massive carpet bombing was conducted over South and North Vietnam to impart gigantic damage to dispersed, hidden, and beneath-the-ground Vietcong. However, poor strategy, the factor of disproportionate force, and successful guerrilla warfare tactics never let "Operation roller thunderstorm" be fully effective.

Analytical Discussion and Conclusion

The Vietnam conundrum took more than a decade to be solved. The Indochina war series has been attached to multiple auxiliary players from France to the US where HoChe Minh remained constant. In every phase of turmoil, foreign occupiers had been changed but the Vietnamese remained together and determined. During different phases, various variables served as vital impetus to keep alive the will to fight, first in Vietminh in the north and then Vietcong in South Vietnam. However, ideological factors played defining role. Richard H. Shultz, an American scholar of international security studies, emphasized the ideological and organizational part as a vital vehicle of the Vietcong's success to oust America from South Vietnam.

The revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh played in a very sophisticated way. He had been fighting for decades and had an in-depth understanding of both Vietnamese and occupying forces. He compiled a coherent string of different ideologies and sentiments- anti-imperialist, anti-Western, anti-American, and communism- and then linked them directly to the sentiments of the ordinary Vietnamese, coated them with a thin layer of nationalism. George A. Carver Jr. In his article "the Faceless VietCong" scholarly averred that the Vietcong had learned from their repeated defeats over the course of the last four decades. In the light of that learned behavior, HoChe Minh deployed the Bismarckian strand of diplomacy. He gave various ideological faces to the Vietcong insurgency that had successfully mustered support from within and without.

References

Acheson, D. (1949, May 20). *Acheson memo 1949*. Vietnam War:: Flash Introduction. https://vietnamwar.lib.umb.edu/origins/docs/Acheson_memo.html

- Carver, G. A. (1966). The faceless Viet Cong. *Foreign Affairs*, 44(3), 347. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20039173>
- Crenshaw, M. (1981). The Causes of Terrorism. *Comparative Politics*, 13(4), 379-399.
- Kaplan, R. D. (2012). *The revenge of geography: What the map tells us about coming conflicts and the battle against fate*. Random House.
- Kaplan, R. D. (2014). *Asia's cauldron: The South China Sea and the end of a stable Pacific*. Random House.
- Kissinger, H. (2011). *On China*. Penguin UK.
- Lindsay, J. M. (2016, September 2). *Remembering Ho Chi Minh's 1945 declaration of Vietnam's independence*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/remembering-ho-chi-minhs-1945-declaration-vietnams-independence>
- Mandelbaum, M. (2022). *The four ages of American foreign policy: Weak power, great power, superpower, Hyperpower*. Oxford University Press.
- Shultz, R. (1978). The limits of terrorism in insurgency warfare: The case of the Viet Cong. *Polity*, 11(1), 67-91. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3234249>
- Young, M. B., Fitzgerald, J. J., & Grunfeld, A. T. (2003). *The Vietnam War: A history in documents*. Oxford University Press, USA.