17

North Vietnam's Road to War

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The road to war in South Vietnam taken by the leadership of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) between 1954 and 1963 was a gradual process. Although the DRVN's long-term strategic goals did not change during this period, its leaders constantly recalibrated their forces and adjusted their plans in response to changing conditions in Vietnam and abroad. This chapter traces this process through four distinct phases during the post–Geneva decade, culminating with Hanoi's decision to commit its own regular military forces to the southern battlefield in 1963.

Hồ Chí Minh and his fellow leaders of the DRVN and the Vietnam Worker's Party (VWP) embraced an ambitious vision of developing a communist society and considered themselves the only legitimate rulers of all Vietnam.[1] But the Geneva Accords in 1954 left them in control of only the northern half of the country. It also left them with two somewhat contradictory goals: promoting revolution in South Vietnam while creating a socialist system in North Vietnam modeled on the Soviet and Chinese systems. The agenda for the North included the nationalization of industry and trade, collectivization of agriculture, and economic development through central planning. This socialist-building agenda required substantial foreign aid as well as a massive commitment of government resources and manpower. It also dovetailed with the new policies of Soviet leader Khrushchev, who declared that the communist and capitalist camps could peacefully coexist and the struggle between them would be determined by economic productivity and technological achievements. Hanoi's other agenda – fomenting revolution in the South – did not sit well with Moscow or Beijing, both of which specifically discouraged Hanoi from resuming the hostilities in the South that could provoke US intervention.

1 Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (Cambridge, 2017); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Berkeley, 2013).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316225240.022 Published online by Cambridge University Press

North Vietnamese leaders, all loyal followers of Marxism–Leninism, were committed to coordinate their policy with that of the Soviet camp out of deference to their patrons and a sincere desire for and belief in socialist solidarity. Yet they also did not want to abandon revolution in South Vietnam, where they intentionally left behind thousands of cadres. Many top leaders were from the South or had spent their whole revolutionary careers there. There were also more than 100,000 rank-and file Southern cadres who had regrouped to the North after 1954 and who yearned to return. Like Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, and Kim Il Sung, many top leaders of the VWP disagreed with Khrushchev's policy and had few qualms about confronting the United States if necessary. It was these leaders who eventually led North Vietnam to war, drawing China, the Soviet Union, and the United States into the conflict. In 1959, with the VWP on the verge of being wiped out in the South, Hanoi took its first tentative steps toward escalating its efforts to overthrow the Saigon government of Ngô Đình Diệm by force. By 1963, the party was leading a growing insurgency in the southern countryside. When Diệm was overthrown in a US-backed coup, VWP leaders committed themselves to a plan that aimed to conquer the South in the shortest time possible. Soon after, US leaders responded with their own escalation. This process transformed the Vietnam War from a rural insurgency into a major conflict of global significance.

Challenges and Setbacks in the Aftermath of Geneva

At the Geneva Conference in 1954, France and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) agreed to the cessation of war and to the breakup of French Indochina. Laos and Cambodia became independent states, while Vietnam was divided along the 17th parallel to facilitate the regrouping of communist forces to the North and anticommunist forces to the South. The Geneva Accords were the result of politics in France, the balance of forces on the battlefield in Indochina, and the international trend of East–West compromise following Stalin's death and the end of the Korean War. Although the DRVN endorsed the accords, the results were not what Hanoi hoped.[2]

2 Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, chapter 1; Alec Holcombe, *Mass Mobilization in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945–1960* (Honolulu, 2020), 213–19. For a helpful overview, see R. B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War, vol. I: Revolution versus Containment, 1955–1961* (New York, 1983), 19–33.

During the negotiations at Geneva, the French found the communist side to be open to compromises. Even with the communists' victory in Điện Biên Phủ, the military balance of power was not clearly in the DRVN's favor. After nine years of war, communist forces were as exhausted as their enemies. The time was also right for dealmaking, as the Soviet Union and China, the main patrons of the DRVN, did not want the war to continue for fear of American intervention. In the aftermath of the Korean War and the death of Stalin, neither Moscow nor Beijing wished to have another war with the United States over Indochina.[3]

Following both Soviet and Chinese advice, as well as their own instincts, DRVN leaders accepted the ceasefire and temporary division of the country despite the fact that the United States and the State of Vietnam (SVN) led by ex-emperor Bảo Đại and Premier Ngô Đình Diệm refused to sign the accords.[4] Available documents do not reveal whether DRVN leaders truly expected that the 1956 national elections promised in the "Final Declaration" would actually take place. It is evident that they believed that the accords were the best deal they could get at the time. They also fully trusted their Soviet and Chinese brothers to look after their interests and to support the implementation of the accords. They also likely anticipated that the Diệm government would quickly collapse, paving the way for them to take power in the South.

The Geneva Accords effectively ended war between French and communist forces but not between the two internationally recognized Vietnamese parties – the DRVN and the SVN.[5] Both states immediately sought to position themselves diplomatically and militarily to be ready for the continuing struggle. While the DRVN held up the accords as a victory and pledged to abide by their terms (but in fact violated them), the SVN denounced the accords and then proceeded to comply with most stipulations (except for the 1956 election mandate). The rivalry between the states was intensified by the violent contests for power that took place within both North and South Vietnam after

3 See Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954–1963* (Stanford, 2003), chapter 3, on the Soviet position; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000), chapter 2, on Chinese policy; Pierre Asselin, "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique," *Cold War History* 11 (2) (2011), 155–95.

4 On the Ngô Đình Diệm government's policy and the broad opposition to the partition and the Geneva Accords among various Southern noncommunist groups, see Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngô Đình Diệm, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, 2013), 66–70.

5 A classic study on the two Vietnams in the 1950s and 1960s is Bernard Fall, *The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis*, rev. edn. (London, 1965).

Geneva. Both states took over new territories that needed to be consolidated. The VWP's control of the DRVN state was firm, but the recently appointed Ngô Đình Diệm had to win the trust of the United States while also establishing his state's authority over its territory and its own armed forces. DRVN leaders were in a more favorable position but not an ideal situation, given their ambition to establish communist rule throughout Vietnam.[6]

On the surface, the DRVN appeared truly committed to the implementation of the Geneva Accords. Their forces from south of the 17th parallel were ordered to regroup to the North and the areas under DRVN control in the South were transferred to the SVN. Ships provided by socialist allies transported about 130,000 communist cadres and other supporters from the South to the North. DRVN Premier Phạm Văn Đồng wrote to Diệm, asking to resume trade and mail links between the two regions in preparation for eventual reunification. At the same time, the DRVN secretly prepared to undermine Diệm's fledgling government. Lê Duẩn, the senior VWP leader in the South, opted to remain in the South and to operate clandestinely.[7] At least 50,000 Communist Party members and soldiers and secret weapon caches sufficient to equip 6,000 troops were deliberately left behind in the South.[8] Lê Duẩn held meetings with rivals and opponents of Diệm in the South, including leaders of the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo religious groups, laying the groundwork for an armed alliance.[9]

The accords allowed 300 days (until May 18, 1955) for migration between the two zones to take place, and this period was later extended for two more months. As Alec Holcombe has demonstrated, the DRVN government sought to prevent many Northerners from leaving for the South despite the guarantees provided in the agreements. In internal documents, the leaders blamed enemy propaganda for enticing many to leave, and voiced their fear that too many Northerners leaving would cast a negative image of their regime in world opinion.[10] Despite such obstructionism, nearly 1 million Northerners moved to the South. Many of the migrants were Catholics and landlords who feared communist persecution.

6 Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngô Đình Diệm, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), chapter 3.
7 On Lê Duẩn's rise to power after 1954, see Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), chapter 1.
8 William Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 2nd edn. (New York, 2008), 25, 34.
9 Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 29.
10 Holcombe, *Mass Mobilization*, 222–7; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 18–21. See also Chapter 16.

After taking control of Hanoi, DRVN leaders faced massive problems: a looming famine and a rural economy exhausted after nine years of destruction by and mobilization for war.[11] As famine relief and economic aid from fraternal socialist countries poured in, planning began for the long-term development of the North. The leadership was united on the importance of developing the Northern economy, consolidating communist rule, and creating a strong foundation for socialism in the North as a means to promote revolution in the South. Since the 1930s, Hồ Chí Minh and his comrades had dreamed of the day when they could implement a socialist system in Vietnam based on the Stalinist model that they observed and admired. Now that they had control over half the country's territory and people, it would have been hard to wait any longer. Since the DRVN had already launched its land reform campaign in some areas under its control in 1953, the continuation and expansion of land reform throughout North Vietnam was a logical next step.[12]

Senior party leaders were also increasingly paranoid about enemy infiltration into their ranks.[13] The party ordered land reform teams to entice peasants to stand up not only against landlords or rich farmers but also against local VWP cadres, many of whom had been loyal party members but were now viewed as potential enemy agents. During the last phase of the land reform campaign from 1955 to 1956, thousands of those cadres were falsely accused of being undercover spies, and some were subjected to torture and execution. It is not known how many of those who had *actually* collaborated with the French or worked for the SVN were persecuted, in violation of Geneva terms. By hunting down alleged enemy sympathizers and spies, and by unleashing peasant violence on landlords, the party in effect continued the war in Northern villages during 1955–6.

While DRVN leaders tried to keep the outside world from knowing about the violence in North Vietnamese villages, they still called on the Southern government to hold elections to reunify the country peacefully as promised in the Geneva Accords' Final Declaration.[14] Ngô Đình Diệm rejected these calls on the grounds that free elections in the North were impossible under the communist government. Although the winner of the never-held elections

11 Balasz Szalontai, "Political and Economic Crisis in North Vietnam, 1955–1956," *Cold War History* 5 (4) (2005), 395–426.

12 The most thorough and up-to-date study on North Vietnam's land reform is Holcombe, *Mass Mobilization*, chapters 6–8, 12–13; see also Chapter 16.

13 Tuong Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (New York, 2010), 148–54.

14 Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 26–36.

remains an unknowable counterfactual, the growing backlash against the DRVN land reform debacle in the North suggests that a communist victory may not have been a foregone conclusion. What is clear in hindsight is that Ngô Đình Diệm surprised everyone with his ability to stay in power. Thanks in part to the organizing efforts of his brother Ngô Đình Nhu and to his impeccable reputation as a dedicated nationalist, Diệm went on to defeat a host of challengers, including his own rebellious military commanders. In late 1955, he organized a referendum that deposed Bảo Đại and made him the founder and first president of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).[15]

Diệm's unexpected triumph disrupted Lê Duẩn's plans to build an anti-Diệm alliance in the South. By late 1955, with the help of many defectors from Hồ Chí Minh's government such as Trần Chánh Thành, Diệm launched the "Denounce Communism" campaign to uncover and arrest communist cadres left behind in the South. With the passing of the Geneva-mandated deadline for national elections in mid-1956, the revolutionary tide in the South appeared to be ebbing.

Meanwhile, North Vietnam was thrown into turmoil by a series of events that sent shockwaves throughout the communist bloc. In February, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev read a report at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, denouncing Stalin for his many crimes and his cult of personality. Khrushchev's daring move unnerved leaders in client communist states in Asia and Eastern Europe who had revered Stalin and built their own personality cults.[16] Many of them also viewed Khrushchev's new policy of peaceful coexistence with the capitalist bloc as naive and dangerous. But since Moscow remained the sun of the communist solar system, the change of direction forced the satellites to adjust, if not enthusiastically follow.

Khrushchev's speech triggered a wave of upheaval and internal criticism across the Soviet bloc. In May 1956, three months after Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, Mao Zedong called on Chinese to criticize their government. In June, Polish workers in Poznan protested and stormed government offices. By fall, the turmoil had reached North Vietnam, as party leaders were forced to apologize for the excessive use of violence as well as for the paranoia about enemy spies. At a party plenum in October 1956, General Secretary Trường Chinh resigned from his position while three other high-ranking officials involved in directing the land reform were demoted. At this meeting, the party also discussed the report by Lê Duẩn on the rapidly deteriorating

15 Miller, *Misalliance*, chapters 2–3.
16 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA, 1967).

situation in the South and endorsed his call for changing revolutionary strategy, given the success of Ngô Đình Diệm.[17] Lê Duẩn's allies Lê Đức Thọ and Phạm Hùng would soon be brought into the Politburo, while Lê Duẩn himself took over Trường Chinh's position.

The liberal moment in the communist bloc did not last long. In November 1956, Warsaw Pact nations sent tanks into Hungary to crush a student-led revolt that had toppled the government the previous month. In North Vietnam, thousands of peasants in Nghệ An demonstrated against the government in November but were crushed by the military.[18] In December the government cracked down on the *Nhân văn–Giai phẩm* intellectual movement protesting against abuses of power and demanding greater creative freedom.[19] In hindsight, the events of 1956 likely helped the DRVN leadership in Hanoi close ranks and move forward even more resolutely with their socialist revolutionary agenda in both North and South Vietnam.

By mid-1957, communist forces in the South had begun to fight back against the Ngô Đình Diệm government rather than surrendering. Lê Duẩn and the Regional Party Committee in the South had given their rank and file the order to organize small-scale armed assaults on military posts and to conduct terrorist activities such as assassinations and abductions of local government officials and sympathizers. From May 1957 to May 1958, one estimate put the number of communist assassinations of local officials at 700.[20] When the Soviet Union floated a proposal to admit both North and South Vietnam to the United Nations, DRVN leaders immediately rejected it.[21] The path to revolution in the South was unclear, but Hanoi would not countenance any step that might help turn the 17th parallel into a permanent boundary. Unification of the country under VWP aegis remained the party's ultimate goal.

Waging Revolution on Two Fronts, 1958–60

During the late 1950s, DRVN leaders remained preoccupied with the changes and tensions that continued to ripple through the communist world. In

17 Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*, 135–8.
18 Fall, *The Two Vietnams*, 156–7; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 38.
19 Peter Zinoman, "Nhân Văn–Giai Phẩm and Vietnamese 'Reform Communism' in the 1950s," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13 (1) (2011), 60–100.
20 Estimate by Bernard Fall cited in Mike Gravel (ed.), *The Senator Gravel Edition: The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision Making on Vietnam*, 4 vols., vol. 1 (Boston, 1971), 336.
21 Ilya Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954–1963* (Washington, DC, 2003), 84–8.

China, Mao Zedong launched the Great Leap Forward in 1958 with the goal of overtaking Great Britain in industrial production in fifteen years. Mao also sought to turn the entire countryside into large-scale collective farms in the shortest time possible. Mao had misgivings about Khrushchev's policies of de-Stalinization and détente, and his clash with Khrushchev over various issues led Moscow to reduce Soviet aid to China. Despite Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence, East–West relations remained tense, with confrontations in West Berlin and in the Taiwan Strait. In the latter episode, China bombarded islands controlled by Taiwan for several weeks, leading to a formal US promise to defend Taiwan and the Eisenhower administration's threat to use nuclear weapons against China.

Following Mao's lead in China, North Vietnam enthusiastically launched campaigns to collectivize its agriculture and nationalize trade and industry (and would achieve these goals by 1960).[22] Both campaigns would prove to be economically disastrous, but they helped the government have better, if not absolute, control over food and manpower in the countryside. They also strengthened the state's control over families and individuals as the government became the only source of employment and livelihood for most urban and rural North Vietnamese.

In early 1959, amid these economic and political changes, the party met and approved Resolution 15, which laid out a new strategy for the Southern Revolution involving both political and military struggles. Based on social class analysis and noting that support for peace and neutrality had increased among Southern intellectuals and "national capitalists," the party ordered the preparations for creating a united front tasked with assembling the largest possible class coalition to lead the political struggle for peace, neutrality, and national unity. Under the party's close but secret supervision, the ultimate goal of this front was to socially isolate and politically challenge the Saigon government. Militarily, the party authorized offensive operations by small units within local areas. The Politburo also approved sending Southern regroupees back to the South, and dispatching supplies and funds to accelerate the Southern revolution.[23] A separate measure provided stepped-up

22 Đặng Phong (ed.), *Lịch sử Kinh tế Việt Nam 1945–2000* [An Economic History of Vietnam], vol. 2 (Hanoi, 2005), chapters 4–6; see also Chapter 16.

23 For the text of Lê Duẩn's political report and the resolution of the 15th Central Committee Plenum in January 1959, see Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, *Văn kiện Đảng Toàn tập* [Collected Party Documents, hereafter *VKDTT*], vol. 20 (Hanoi, 2002), 1–92 (see 85–9 for the discussion of the united front). For a recent analysis, see Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 67–9.

military support for the Pathet Lao to engage the Royal Lao Government's forces.[24] As with the 1956 decision, the party endorsed a graduated escalation of the war in the South within certain limits while continuing the ambitious economic agenda in the North. The limits were mostly imposed by the Soviet Union and China, but both gradually came around to endorse or acquiesce in Hanoi's policy of escalation by 1960.[25]

Hanoi's decision in early 1959 gave the Southern Revolution a great boost, intensifying violence in many parts of the South.[26] The revolution now received much greater attention from Hanoi. Over the next two years, Southern communist forces were joined by more than four thousand fresh fighters as well as commanders trained in conventional warfare who infiltrated from the North.[27] The number of assassinations and abductions nearly doubled to 1,200 between May 1958 and May 1959 from 700 the year before, and doubled again to 2,500 by May 1960.[28] In response, the Saigon government enacted the harsh Law of 10/1959 to allow the trials of accused communists by special military tribunals. The Army of the RVN (ARVN) also stepped up military operations to crush the emergent insurgency.[29]

The conflict in South Vietnam further accelerated in 1960, with the communist side seizing the initiative. In late January 1960, the insurgents launched a successful attack against a South Vietnamese military base in Tây Ninh province. In the same month, communist operatives launched a series of "Concerted Uprisings" (protests backed by armed assaults) in the Mekong Delta. A wave of assassinations swept Long An province, resulting in 26 deaths and terrorizing local officials to the extent that nearly all hamlet chiefs resigned subsequently.[30] In response, the Saigon government launched a

24 On North Vietnam's relations with Laotian communists, see Christopher E. Goscha, "Vietnam and the World Outside: The Case of Vietnamese Communist Advisers in Laos (1948–62)," *South East Asia Research* 12 (2) (2004), 141–85. See also The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, Merle Pribbenow (trans.) (Lawrence, KS, 2002), 114.

25 Cheng Guan Ang, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (Abingdon, 2002), 37–40. See also Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 110–15; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 81–3.

26 For accounts on the revolution at provincial levels, see (for Dinh Tuong) David W. P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975* (Armonk, NY, 2003); (for Long An) Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley, 1973).

27 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 65.

28 Estimate by Bernard Fall cited in Gravel (ed.), *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, 336.

29 Miller, *Misalliance*, 200–2; Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (New York, 2006), 102–3.

30 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 43; Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 113–15.

"Rural Consolidation" campaign, sending cadres to villages in the provinces surrounding Saigon to win farmers' support through propaganda and civic action programs.[31] The government also expanded the Republican Youth Movement to recruit and train young members for rural development and security.

From the perspective of Hanoi leaders, several trends began to come together in 1960. The campaigns to collectivize North Vietnam's agriculture and nationalize trade and industry were drawing to an end with most rural villages now being members of collective farms while all significant urban businesses and enterprises were now under some form of government ownership. Preparations for the 3rd Party Congress were well underway; the congress would meet in September, affirming Lê Duẩn's leadership and his militant policy as the official party line.[32] The congress also approved an ambitious plan to transform North Vietnam's economy into a "socialist economy" in five years through an emphasis on heavy industry and larger-scale collective farms.

Meanwhile, Ngô Đình Diệm's government in the South seemed less invincible than before. On April 26, on the very day that South Korea's President Rhee Syngman resigned in the face of massive street protests, a group of South Vietnam's prominent political dissidents and opposition politicians made public their manifesto calling on Ngô Đình Diệm to enact political reforms to curb corruption and abuses of power and to restore public trust and military effectiveness. The government ignored this manifesto (called the Caravelle Manifesto for the hotel in downtown Saigon where the group met), but later arrested a few who were suspected of being involved in a failed coup by several military units in November that year.[33]

Hanoi's decisions about how to proceed in the South during 1960 took place amid increased bickering within the Soviet bloc, and the escalation of the Sino-Soviet dispute.[34] Leaders of China and Albania disagreed with Soviet policies of peaceful coexistence, and conflict broke out into the open after Khrushchev cut off Soviet assistance to both. North Vietnamese leaders were internally critical of Khrushchev but did not support the split of the bloc into

31 Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS, 2002), 87–8; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 74; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 98.

32 Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*, 142–7.

33 On the Caravelle Manifesto and the 1960 military coup in Saigon, see Nu-Anh Tran, *Disunion: Anticommunist Nationalism and the Making of the Republic of Vietnam* (Honolulu, 2022), chapter 5; Miller, *Misalliance*, 202–13.

34 Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, 2010).

opposing camps.[35] Hồ Chí Minh sought to mediate between the two "elder brothers," impressing on them the need for socialist solidarity to confront imperialism. At the same time, North Vietnam began to quietly distance itself from the Soviet Union while moving closer to China. Beijing's stand on strategy for world revolution was more appealing to Hanoi even though at that point China still advised North Vietnam to maintain the status quo in the South.[36]

As DRVN leaders struggled to preserve brotherly relations with both communist giants, the Sino-Soviet conflict became a blessing in disguise for them by creating fierce competition between Beijing and Moscow for the allegiance of other communist parties around the world. This competition was to benefit Hanoi: Even though neither Beijing nor Moscow by themselves would have favored the escalation of war in South Vietnam, aid would continue to stream into North Vietnam from both powers in service of Hanoi's war goals.

In approving Resolution 15 in early 1959, the party planned to create a multiclass united front to lead the political struggle in the South. That plan was carefully developed throughout 1959 and 1960. Applying class analysis to study the unfolding revolutions in Iraq (1958) and Cuba (1959), the party believed that their *bourgeois* leadership explained why imperialist powers did not intervene to save the Hashemite monarchy or the Batista dictatorship.[37] Given the current military balance still favoring imperialist forces worldwide and in Southeast Asia, party leaders reasoned, a bourgeoisie-led revolution in South Vietnam would help avoid their intervention, increasing its chance of success. When it was proclaimed in December 1960, the National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam (NLF) was in fact led by lawyers, doctors, engineers, and teachers rather than by workers and peasants. It championed neutralism so as not to pose a direct threat to the regional allies of imperialist forces. Directed from within by Hanoi-appointed leaders, the NLF assumed the cover of an independent entity to help the DRVN maintain the fiction that it still upheld the Geneva Accords and avoid open defiance of the Soviet Union.[38]

35 Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 78–82, 104–8.
36 Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*, chapter 5.
37 "Điện mật của Trung ương Đảng số 160 gửi Xứ ủy Nam Bộ (đồng gửi Liên khu uỷ V để nghiên cứu)" [Secret Cable from Central Party to Southern Committee (copied the Fifth Inter-Zone Committee for study), April 28, 1960. *VKDTT*, v. 21 (Hanoi, 2002), 290.
38 For a somewhat different analysis, see Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 87–90.

The Revolution at a Crossroads, 1961–2

With regular supply and close supervision by Hanoi, the Southern insurgency grew rapidly after mid-1959. It is estimated that about 5,000 troops (mostly former regroupees) from the North were sent South secretly during 1959–60, equipped with modern weapons. During 1961–2, that number quadrupled to nearly 20,000.[39] By the end of 1963, more than 40,000 soldiers, including over 2,000 mid-ranking and higher-level cadres and technical personnel, had been sent South from the North. The fresh troops made up 50 percent of insurgent forces and 80 percent of their commanding officers. During 1961–3, 165,000 weapons had been shipped to the South via Laos, including artillery pieces, mortars, and anti-aircraft guns, but not including other kinds of military equipment.[40] Roads were not the only venues for North Vietnam to infiltrate the South. After two trial shipments in 1960, a special operation was established to open a sea route for more large-scale transportation of weapons from North to South Vietnam. The first such shipment was successfully made in late 1962. By the end of 1963, twenty-five shiploads of weapons had been delivered to insurgents deep in the Mekong Delta, totaling 1,430 tons of weapons, including many heavy pieces.[41]

The insurgency was also quite successful in recruiting new soldiers and cadres by tapping into rural resentment against the Saigon government. By 1961 insurgents had become increasingly bold, deploying battalion-sized units to attack district capitals and ambush government troops. In the first half of the year, clashes with insurgents caused the ARVN to suffer 1,500 casualties, while communists assassinated or abducted more than 2,000 officials and government supporters.[42] The ARVN scored many victories but they were spread thin in defensive positions while the communist forces were growing rapidly.[43] The trend was alarming for Saigon but even Hanoi did not expect any victory soon as insurgent forces were still much weaker than the ARVN.

From Hanoi's perspective, the undeclared war was going well and the initiative was on their side as the insurgency continued to expand and the government became more isolated. By October 1961 Hanoi announced the formation of the People's Revolutionary Party as a member of the NLF in the South – ostensibly an independent southern communist party but in

39 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 65.
40 The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 115–17.
41 Ibid., 116.
42 Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 108.
43 Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 124.

reality merely the southern office of the Vietnam Workers' Party, set up so that Hanoi could more easily recruit members for the party among southern activists and guerrillas while allowing the Southern command greater tactical flexibility in directing the revolution. In captured documents of the Southern office at the time, there were talks of a "general uprising" and a "high tide" of revolution in the near future in the South, indicating a new, higher level of confidence in late 1961.[44] For the moment, VWP leaders seemed unwilling to deploy regular units of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) to the South. Such a move risked provoking Chinese and Soviet objections, as well as the possibility of a US invasion of the North.

VWP leaders also intervened in Laos to support their Pathet Lao client there while upgrading the mountainous route for the faster transportation of men and materiel from North to South Vietnam.[45] The situation in Laos had become increasingly favorable for the communist camp, with the neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma collaborating with the communist Pathet Lao backed by North Vietnam.[46] Moscow and Beijing joined Hanoi in Laos, supporting communist and neutralist forces. Since 1959 the United States and Thailand had provided aid to the right-wing forces under Phoumi Nosavan that controlled the Vientiane government. But this government remained unable to stop the communist advance. US President John Kennedy, after taking office in January 1961, briefly considered sending American troops to Laos. But he soon decided to cut a deal with Khrushchev under which Laos would be "neutralized." At the same time, Kennedy stepped up military aid and advice to the Diệm government's counterinsurgency efforts.

A nationalist to his core, Ngô Đình Diệm was not keen on permitting American combat troops to enter his country. While he stalled on American recommendations for political reforms and reorganizing the ARVN chain of command, his government welcomed US expansion of military aid to Vietnam, including more American advisors to the ARVN, funding for training ARVN Special Forces and for the expansion of South Vietnam's Civil Guard, support for the just-inaugurated Strategic Hamlet Program, and new weapons systems for the ARVN such as aircrafts, boats, helicopters, and armored personnel carriers (M-113s).[47] The Strategic Hamlet Program

44 Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 110–12.
45 The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 114.
46 R. B. Smith, *International History of the Vietnam War, vol. II: The Kennedy Strategy* (New York, 1986), 167–9, 185–7, 218–19.
47 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 61–2, 68–9.

played a key role in Saigon's strategy of pacification. It had evolved from the thinking of RVN leaders about rural security and governance. Earlier rural development schemes, including land reform, self-defense corps, and "agro-villes," either did not go far enough, were poorly funded, or took a top-down approach that ended up alienating farmers. By mid-1961, province-level experiments with "combat hamlets" based on self-government and self-defense convinced the government to take the program to the national level.

As Washington and Saigon worked out a fresh approach to counterinsurgency, Hanoi leaders sought to maintain their ties to both Moscow and Beijing. The need for economic aid was especially pressing. Phạm Văn Đồng traveled to multiple communist bloc countries in the summer of 1961 to request aid for North Vietnam's first Five-Year Plan, which included provisions for building eighty new factories with foreign support. This ambitious plan seemed oblivious to the precarious economic situation in North Vietnam in 1961 when bad weather created a severe shortage of food.[48] Collectivization and nationalization of industry and trade brought neither higher labor productivity nor actual economic growth. Economic hardships were generating widespread social dissatisfaction, according to Western diplomats based in Hanoi.[49] While DRVN leaders had no intention of backing away from their plans to build socialism in the North, the continued internal turmoil would increasingly impact their calculations about what to do in the South.

During 1962, the economic crisis in the North intensified while the tide of battle in the South shifted against communist forces. By early 1962, new weapons, training, and the assistance of US advisors greatly boosted the performance of the now much larger ARVN and Civil Guard. Insurgent units were terrified by the United States-supplied M-113 armored vehicles and helicopters that offered the ARVN much greater mobility across the Mekong Delta. Within months the trend of communist advance since 1959 had been reversed, with government forces able to rapidly extend their control over the countryside at the expense of the communists.[50]

The Saigon government attributed its success not only to military victories but also to its Strategic Hamlet Program. With advice and aid from the United States, Saigon made the Strategic Hamlet Program a top priority of national policy in early 1962, planning to establish tens of thousands of such hamlets throughout the country within a few years. By September 1962, the

48 Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*, 158–60.
49 Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 97–100.
50 Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, chapters 6–7.

government reported that more than 3,200 such hamlets had been created, with thousands more under construction. As a nation-building measure that aimed to foster popular backing for the Diệm government's "Personalist Revolution," the Strategic Hamlet Program had yet to demonstrate its viability as a long-term nation-building initiative. But insofar as the hamlets enabled the government to separate the population from the insurgents, the program created significant problems for communist forces. Although the rapid expansion of the program would eventually expose its weaknesses, its initial effects helped the government to regain the initiative during 1962.[51] In Long An province, for example, under the capable ARVN officer Nguyễn Viết Thanh, the tide turned spectacularly as the number of surrenders increased from fourteen in 1961 to 332 in 1963.[52]

For Hanoi, the setbacks encountered in the South were at least partly offset by gains in Laos. After a year of negotiation while fighting, the Geneva Conference on Laos convened in mid-1962 and produced the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos, which was signed by all international participants, including the Soviet Union, China, the United States, the two Vietnams, Cambodia, Thailand, and a few others. While foreign powers agreed not to intervene in Laos and to respect its neutrality, the three fighting Laotian factions, including neutralists, communists, and anticommunists, agreed to form a coalition government under Phouma.

The main foreign signatory parties to the Declaration came to the agreement from different standpoints.[53] On the US side, Kennedy was reluctant to send ground troops into mountainous Laos. He also calculated that Moscow would honor the agreement.[54] Khrushchev and Mao, on the other hand, did not want to push Washington into direct intervention in Laos, possibly precipitating another Korean War-style conflict or the use of nuclear weapons. In contrast, Saigon staunchly opposed the agreement, both because of its distrust of Hanoi and its fear that a deal on Laos would pave the way for the neutralization of South Vietnam. Ngô Đình Diệm's government only signed the Declaration after Kennedy provided personal assurances of unwavering US support for South Vietnam as well as its rejection of neutrality for his country.

51 Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 231–47.
52 Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 130–3.
53 Smith, *International History of the Vietnam War, vol. II: The Kennedy Strategy*, chapter 7.
54 For a critical recent analysis of Kennedy's policy in Laos and the special role of Averell Harriman, the main American diplomat involved in the negotiations, see Geoffrey Shaw, *The Lost Mandate of Heaven: The American Betrayal of Ngô Đình Diệm, President of Vietnam* (San Francisco, 2015), chapter 4.

For Hanoi, the promotion of neutrality was perfectly in keeping with their overall strategic objectives. Hồ Chí Minh, Lê Duẩn, and their comrades had earlier realized that their Lao client, the Pathet Lao, did not have the military strength to take control of the whole country, even with the assistance of the 12,000 North Vietnamese troops already there in 1961. Within the framework of the agreement, DRVN leaders certainly hoped the Pathet Lao would over time be able to dominate the coalition government. In the meantime, they planned to continue to use Lao territory to send men and supplies to South Vietnam. As the military situation and revolutionary prospects in South Vietnam seemed to dim, and as the United States continued to deepen its commitments, the idea of a neutral South Vietnam became increasingly attractive. Such an arrangement could offer a solution to the recent setbacks in the South: if the United States could be removed from the scene, the path would be clear for the NLF to prevail in a political–military struggle against anticommunist forces.[55]

Hanoi leaders also viewed alternatives to a negotiated agreement at Geneva as less appealing. If the conflict in Laos continued, it could lead to direct American intervention there. As the chief patron of the Pathet Lao, North Vietnam might be blamed for overturning the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence. Hanoi leaders also feared that the deployment of US troops to Laos would heighten the chances of an American attack on North Vietnam. In contrast, the Geneva agreement would prevent the United States from legally intervening in Laos in the future, while the DRVN's continuing illegal operations in Laos would be easy to cover up. For Hanoi, the deal struck at Geneva lowered the risks and also offered a potential path out of the stalemate.

The 1962 agreement did not end the military conflict in Laos. Within months, the coalition government collapsed when it tried to integrate the forces of the three factions. While the United States withdrew most of its personnel in Laos, it continued to provide training and assistance to ethnic minority groups in southern Laos to help protect the western flank of South Vietnam. Hanoi continued to support its Pathet Lao client, which launched several military campaigns to seize full control of eastern Laos and provide protection for the dispatch of supply and manpower to South Vietnam (Figure 17.1). North Vietnam's documents suggest that Lê Duẩn might have read Kennedy's decisions on Laos as a sign of his determination to limit US involvement in Indochina.[56] This perception was critical, insofar as it led Lê

55 Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, chapter 5.
56 Le Duan, "Thu cua dong chi Le Duan," July 18, 1962. *VKDTT* v. 23, 719.

Figure 17.1 Lao and Vietnamese porters carrying supplies south along the Hồ Chí Minh Trail to resupply the insurgency in the South (c. 1963).
Source: Pictures from History / Contributor / Universal Images Group / Getty Images.

Duẩn to conclude that the danger of a US invasion of North Vietnam was waning, despite Kennedy's tough talk.

"Gifts from Heaven" for the Revolution

In early January 1963, communist forces claimed a high-profile victory at Ấp Bắc in the Mekong Delta, when two NLF battalions inflicted heavy losses on a much larger ARVN force backed by US-supplied helicopters and M-113s.[57] This was the first battle in which the insurgents exploited the government's shortcomings in intelligence collection, equipment design (including the lack of a shield for gunners on the M-113), and tactical mistakes in the deployment

57 For a detailed and balanced analysis of the battle that presents accounts from both sides published during and after the war, see Nguyễn Đức Phương, *Chiến tranh Việt Nam* [The War in Vietnam] (Toronto, 2001), 61–76.

of armored vehicles and helicopters. As tension was increasing between the Diệm and Kennedy governments, the small clash at Ấp Bắc came to play an outsized role in the course of the war.[58] Following a year of defeats at the hands of the ARVN, Ấp Bắc boosted the sagging morale of communist soldiers. It also created serious public relations problems for Saigon as some American advisors and reporters cited the defeat as evidence of deeper weaknesses within Ngô Đình Diệm's regime.

While the security situation in South Vietnam in 1963 was largely unchanged from the previous year, international events and political developments in Saigon contributed to Hanoi leaders' decision to launch an all-out war in the South late in the year. In hindsight, the decision was the result of three interlocking trends. The first was a sharp intensification of Sino-Soviet tensions after a lull in 1962.[59] This was the result of the Soviet Union's withholding support for China in the Sino-Indian border war, Khrushchev's decision to withdraw nuclear missiles from Cuba over the objection of Cuban leaders, and the signing of the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union – all of which took place in 1962. China denounced all three Soviet policies as attempts to appease the imperialist camp and as acts of betrayal to the interests of world revolution. As Beijing's rhetoric escalated, China became more supportive of radical movements around the world, including Hanoi's war in South Vietnam.[60] In May 1963, Vice Chairman Liu Shaoqi visited North Vietnam and promised that China would defend the North in the case of an American invasion. Even though Hanoi did not accept Beijing's invitation to join a new communist camp led by China, China was prepared to back North Vietnam's request for greater support of the Southern revolution.

The second trend was the ascendancy of a pro-China militant line in Hanoi.[61] Within the North Vietnamese leadership, Lê Duẩn and Nguyễn Chí Thanh had expressed their disapproval of Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence since 1960. Encouraged by Chinese denunciations of Soviet policies during 1962 and Beijing's promise to support Hanoi's war in the South, they continued to pressure their VWP comrades to adopt the Chinese position. But other party leaders continued to trust the Soviet Union as the leader of world revolution. The conflict between the militants and their opponents

58 Mark Moyar considers the battle a tactical failure for government forces and a strategic defeat for the communists. Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, chapter 8.
59 Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*.
60 Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, chapter 5.
61 Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*, chapter 5.

concerned not only the question of strategy in the South but also the plans for economic development in the North. The militants sought an autarkic economy relying on the mobilization of labor in the Maoist style of the Great Leap Forward. Their critics, in contrast, wanted North Vietnam to develop its economy in close coordination with the Soviet Union and the more technologically advanced members of the communist bloc.

The third trend was the rising political dissent and disenchantment with Ngô Đình Diệm's government among Saigon elites and within the South Vietnamese military.[62] The government had become increasingly authoritarian since 1960, which created even greater resentment. In the summer of 1963, an incident in Huế in which government security forces killed eight Buddhist protestors led to massive protests in Southern cities against Ngô Đình Diệm's rule. This led to the resignation of many high-ranking officials and encouraged ambitious military officers to organize coups. The protests raised the pressure on the Kennedy administration to demand that Saigon carry out political reforms. When Ngô Đình Diệm refused, top American officials through the CIA lent their support to the disloyal generals in Saigon to stage a coup against Ngô Đình Diệm. The coup took place on November 1, 1963, and Ngô Đình Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu were assassinated the next day.[63]

Lê Duẩn believed that a new window of opportunity had opened with the fall of the Diệm regime. At a central party plenum in December 1963, he called for a new and risky strategy for the South. After fierce debate, the plenum endorsed a resolution in favor of the new approach. Known simply as "Resolution 9," the measure acknowledged that the coup was an American attempt to find a more pliable South Vietnamese leader.[64] It also acknowledged the possibility that the United States might deploy its own ground troops to Vietnam in the near future.[65] Yet the resolution considered such a scenario unlikely, since the United States was also concerned about the risk of being sucked into a protracted large-scale war in Vietnam, which could weaken US ability to intervene elsewhere in the world.[66] In light of this, the party called for a wave of attacks throughout the South to demonstrate

62 Miller, *Misalliance*, chapter 9.
63 Two detailed analyses of events in 1963 that led to the coup include Francis Winters, *The Year of the Hare: America in Vietnam* (Athens, GA, 1997); and Ellen Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam 1963* (New York, 1987).
64 "Nghị quyết Hội nghị lần thứ chín" [9th Plenum Resolution], December 1963. *VKDTT*, v. 24, 813.
65 See also Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side* (London, 2002), 75.
66 "Nghị quyết Hội nghị lần thứ chín," 820–1.

communist resolve and to raise American fears of being drawn into a quagmire. Even if the United States was not deterred, the offensive would prepare the Southern Revolution to face the American military. The resolution's authors also calculated that their forces might quickly overwhelm the South Vietnamese army, preempting an American intervention.

Hanoi lost little time in putting its new strategy into action. In South Vietnam, communist forces adopted a three-pronged strategy that included attacks on strategic hamlets; military campaigns at the regiment level in the Central Highlands, coastal central Vietnam, and western Saigon, with the goal of destroying large units of the Saigon military; and strikes on prominent targets in Southern cities designed to generate profound psychological shock and fear. Those targets included both people (especially Americans) and key facilities (airports, ships, depots, and military bases). In support of these goals, efforts were made to speed up the transfer of soldiers and weapons to the South to aid Southern communists. During 1964, nearly 9,000 Northern troops marched south. In late 1964 alone, more than 4,000 tons of weapons in eighty-eight shiploads were transported to South Vietnam, an increase of nearly three times the entire amount of shipment from 1961 to 1963.[67] Hanoi also sent General Nguyễn Chí Thanh and a number of high-ranking military commanders to the South to take direct command of the NLF and the growing numbers of PAVN forces operating there. Having opted for a strategy designed to win an early military victory, Lê Duẩn and his comrades did not expect to win by half measures, or by waging protracted warfare of the guerrilla variety. They were going for broke, and the stakes for their state and party could not have been higher.

Conclusion

The Geneva Conference in mid-1954 ended France's war in Indochina but did not resolve the conflict between the two Vietnamese states with rival claims for sovereignty over all of Vietnam. In the North, class warfare proceeded as leaders of the DRVN extended their land revolution to the newly gained territory to consolidate their power. In the South, forces loyal to the newly appointed Premier Ngô Đình Diệm fought street battles against the militias of religious sects that were secretly supported by communist forces. Diệm's early success set into motion a dynamic process that eventually led to the escalations of the early 1960s and ultimately to the American phase of the war (1965–73).

67 The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 127.

In hindsight, the dominant theme that shaped the DRVN's path to renewed war during 1954–63 was its leaders' refusal to give up their dream of a single communist state that would rule all of Vietnam. They maintained this aspiration even when their superpower patrons seemed willing to compromise or abandon it; they also persisted despite continued hardship and setbacks in their efforts to build socialism in the North. In the long run, Hanoi's actions would draw three of the world's most powerful nations – the United States, China, and the Soviet Union – into the escalating conflict. This is not to say that the interventions of foreign powers in the Vietnam War were an automatic or inevitable response to the DRVN's decision for war in South Vietnam. The transformation of the Vietnam War into a major global conflict in the mid-1960s was also profoundly shaped by the domestic and global agendas of American, Chinese, and Soviet leaders. Nevertheless, Hanoi's decisions for war still loom large. For the leaders of the Vietnam Workers' Party, the Vietnam War was ultimately a war of choice, waged in the service of their political ambitions.