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The Crisis of 1963 and the Origins of the Vietnam War

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In most histories of the Vietnam War, the year 1963 is depicted as a moment of contingency, missed opportunities, and tragedy. The reason for this is not hard to fathom: both at the time and in hindsight, 1963 appears as a year full of dramatic and consequential events in Vietnam. The year began with the stunning victory of communist-led insurgents over a much larger South Vietnamese army detachment in the battle of Ấp Bắc in early January. Following the battle, tensions rose between the South Vietnamese government of Ngô Đình Diệm and the United States, its most important foreign ally. Then, in May and June, Saigon and other South Vietnamese cities were rocked by anti-government protests led by Buddhist monks and nuns. Those protests garnered worldwide attention after a bonze named Thích Quảng Đức burned himself to death on a Saigon streetcorner on June 11. In August, after Diệm used government security forces to crack down on the movement, senior officers in the South Vietnamese Army began plotting a coup against the South Vietnamese president. On November 1, the generals launched their uprising. Rebel soldiers killed Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu the next day. The coup had received the qualified approval of US President John F. Kennedy, who was destined to meet his own fate just three weeks later. In the aftermath of these events, senior leaders of the Vietnamese Workers Party (VWP) met secretly in Hanoi. At the urging of VWP General Secretary Lê Duẩn, they endorsed plans for a major escalation of North Vietnam's war effort in South Vietnam. That escalation, combined with the post–coup turmoil in Saigon, would bring the South Vietnamese government to the brink of collapse by late 1964. In response, Lyndon B. Johnson opted to send US military forces into combat in both North and South Vietnam during the first half of 1965.

Given this chronology of turmoil and momentous decisions, the notion that 1963 was a year of crisis in Vietnam seems indisputable. But what, exactly, were the origins and nature of this crisis? Many authors have struggled to

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make sense of the confusing welter of rivalries and violent events that unfolded over the course of the year. Vietnamese Communist Party accounts emphasize military developments in the war between Diệm's forces and the communist-led National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam (NLF). In these accounts, the communist victory at Ấp Bắc was merely the first move in a broadly successful insurgent offensive that by year's end had plunged the Saigon government "into a state of continual crisis from which it could not recover."[1] In contrast, many Anglophone authors treat the 1963 crisis as a product of the authoritarian policies of the Diệm government. In the memorable phrase of the journalist Frances FitzGerald, Diệm was the "Sovereign of Discord" whose fate was sealed by his atavistic desire to restore a lost premodern social order.[2] More recent accounts by historians have eschewed Fitzgerald's Orientalist framing but still emphasize Diệm's missteps as the key factors that precipitated the crisis.[3] Others, however, have blamed the crisis on Diệm's South Vietnamese political opponents, or on certain US government officials and American journalists.[4]

In this chapter, I offer a broader view. Instead of revisiting the debate over responsibility for Diệm's overthrow and murder, I reinterpret the crisis of 1963 as emerging from an intertwined set of conflicts over *sovereignty* in Vietnam. These sovereignty conflicts involved multiple states and nonstate groups. Although some of them pitted Vietnamese actors against other Vietnamese, others involved confrontations between Vietnamese and "external" actors. I will emphasize three sets of sovereignty conflicts in particular: (1) the rivalry between Diệm's anticommunist Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and the communist-led Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN); (2) the growing tensions between the two Vietnamese states and their respective superpower allies (China, the Soviet Union, and the United States); and (3) the clashes between Diệm's government and other anticommunist nationalist groups in South Vietnam.

1 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), 121.
2 Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston, 1972), chapter 3.
3 Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS, 2002); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, 2013); Nu-Anh Tran, *Disunion: Anticommunist Nationalism and the Making of the Republic of Vietnam* (Honolulu, 2022).
4 Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Cambridge, 2006); Geoffrey Shaw, *The Lost Mandate of Heaven: The American Betrayal of Ngo Dinh Diem, President of Vietnam* (San Francisco, 2015).

None of these conflicts over sovereignty in Vietnam was new in 1963. Each could be traced back to the uneasy peace that emerged after the Geneva Conference of 1954. At Geneva, diplomats successfully ended the French Indochina War and paved the way for the final dismantling of French colonial sovereignty in Vietnam. But the Geneva Conference did not address the question of how sovereignty in postcolonial Vietnam would be wielded, or the equally critical question of who would wield it. As a result, in the years after 1954, conflicts over sovereignty in Vietnam gradually intensified in all three of the arenas identified above. At first, however, these conflicts remained mostly separate from each other. It was only in 1963 that these three strands of conflict over sovereignty became deeply intertwined.

The crisis that erupted in 1963 had consequences that went far beyond the demise of the Diệm government. Instead of resolving the conflicts over sovereignty, Diệm's downfall prompted all the other actors in the drama – both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese – to double down on their sovereignty claims. Those responses, in turn, led directly to the escalation of the military struggle in Vietnam during 1964–5, and to the massively more violent war that emerged thereafter. By placing clashes over sovereignty at the center of analysis, we can better understand not only the roots of the 1963 crisis, but also how and why the events of that fateful year transformed the Vietnam War into one of the twentieth century's most destructive and bloody wars.

National and Imperial Sovereignties in the Indochina Wars

My reframing of the events of 1963 draws on recent scholarly efforts to historicize sovereignty in imperial and postcolonial contexts. For centuries, political theorists in Europe and elsewhere have theorized states as autonomous, territorially bounded units. From this perspective, sovereignty inheres in a state's exercise of political authority over spaces, populations, and institutions, and in its efforts to secure recognition of that authority. Since the 1990s, however, some international relations theorists and political geographers have questioned whether sovereignty is always exercised on a territorial basis.[5] At the same time, historians have challenged the traditional practice of portraying sovereignty in all-or-nothing terms – that is, as an absolute and indivisible

5 Merje Kuus and John Agnew, "Theorizing the State Geographically: Sovereignty, Subjectivity, Territoriality," in Kevin R. Cox, Murray Low, and Jennifer Robinson (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Political Geography* (London, 2007), 95–106.

status that a state or ruler either possesses or lacks. Not content merely to show that sovereignty can be contested, scholars now explore the many ways in which sovereignty has been shared, graduated, layered, or fragmented.[6]

The emphasis on the divisibility of sovereignty has been particularly evident in the study of modern empires and postcolonial societies. Instead of treating empires and nation-states as organized around uniform models of either colonial or national sovereignties, historians increasingly view imperial sovereignty as contingent and improvised.[7] This approach is reflected in Ann Stoler's discussion of contemporary empires as "imperial formations." According to Stoler, imperial formations are not necessarily organized around colonial forms of rule, nor are they always defined by clear borders and boundaries. Instead, they are "macropolities" that function as cobbled-together patchworks of territories, laws, rights, and forms of citizenship. In these formations, Stoler argues, political authority is defined by varying "degrees of imperial sovereignty" rather than by hard-and-fast distinctions between imperial rulers and colonial subjects.[8]

Several historians have begun to apply these alternative approaches to sovereignty to the study of colonial Indochina and the French Indochina War. Instead of framing the war of 1945–54 as a straightforward clash between French colonialism and Vietnamese nationalism, Christopher Goscha describes it as a "savage war of sovereignties." This multisided conflict featured "embattled embryonic states, colonial, national and hybrid ones, each of which was determined to contest or indeed suppress the other's sovereignty."[9] Similarly, Brett Reilly argues that the history of the State of Vietnam (the immediate ancestor of the RVN) shows that sovereignty in late colonial Indochina was "a malleable and divisible set of practices."[10] Reilly also shows that the French Indochina War was, among other things, a civil war – an important historical fact long neglected by scholars.[11]

6 James J. Sheehan, "The Problem of Sovereignty in European History," *The American Historical Review* 111 (1) (February 2006), 1–15; Douglas Howland and Luise White, *The State of Sovereignty: Territories, Laws, Populations* (Bloomington, 2009).

7 Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010).

8 Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC, 2016), chapter 5.

9 Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York, 2016), chapter 8, quotation on 224.

10 Brett M. Reilly, "The Sovereign States of Vietnam, 1945–1955," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11 (3–4) (2016), 103–39.

11 Shawn McHale, *The First Vietnam War. Violence, Sovereignty, and the Fracture of the South, 1945–1956* (Cambridge, 2021); François Guillemot, *Des Vietnamiennes dans la guerre civile: L'autre moitié de la guerre, 1945–1975* (Paris, 2014).

Following Goscha and Reilly, I contend that a more contingent approach to sovereignty can be usefully applied to the study of the Indochina Wars in general and to the origins of the Vietnam War in particular. Such an approach allows examination of the complex interactions among multiple national and imperial sovereignties in Vietnam. The contest over national sovereignties was most obvious in the rivalry between the DRVN and the RVN, nationalist states that both claimed sovereignty over all of Vietnam's territory and population. However, even as the Hanoi and Saigon regimes attacked the other's nationalist legitimacy, they also faced legitimacy challenges from various nonstate actors. The massive migration of nearly a million Vietnamese from North to South Vietnam during 1954–5 – an exodus enabled by a provision in the Geneva Accords – was deeply worrisome for DRVN officials, who recognized that it undermined their claims to wield sovereign authority over the entire Vietnamese population. At the same time, the newly established Diệm government faced armed resistance from various sectarian groups and militias, as well as from the leaders of the South Vietnamese Army. Although both the DRVN and RVN states survived these early challenges, the episodes underlined the unstable and fragmented qualities of national sovereignty in Vietnam after Geneva.

These pitched contests over national sovereignty in Vietnam were heavily impacted by foreign actors. Although the list of states that deployed military forces to Indochina during the Vietnam War runs to more than a dozen, the most consequential interventions were those of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China (PRC). All three states justified their actions in Indochina as efforts to defend the sovereignty of a legitimate Vietnamese state (with Washington backing the RVN and Moscow and Beijing supporting the DRVN). Yet these interventions were also deeply connected to the Global Cold War and to each state's interest in shaping the future development of the decolonizing nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. From this perspective, each of these "superpowers" was an imperial formation that sought a measure of sovereign authority in Indochina, even though its leaders disavowed any colonial aspirations.

From the early 1950s, the US intervention in Indochina was framed as part of Washington's global strategy to contain Soviet expansion. But American sovereign claims in Indochina were not born of anticommunism alone. Recent scholarship on US empire has linked Washington's post–1945 engagement with the "Third World" to older ideas about American capacities to bestow liberty and guidance on backward nations and peoples. The salience of these racialized uplift narratives was especially evident in

Washington's increasing interest in modernization and development in the Global South.[12]

This does not mean, however, that American development policies for Vietnam and other countries was merely an updated form of colonialism. Instead of building American neocolonies, US leaders envisioned a "Free World" of allied states committed to both anticommunism and American-style capitalist modernity. Yet this US-conceived world was also a heavily militarized one that included a sprawling global network of American military bases and military advisors – what one scholar aptly describes as a "pointillist" American empire.[13] The integration of "Free Vietnam" into this American empire of development aid and bases began in 1950 when Washington established both a Military Advisory and Assistance Group (MAAG) and a US Operations Mission (USOM) in Saigon. By the late 1950s, South Vietnam received more US military and economic aid than almost any other country in the world. During 1961–2, as the communist-led insurgency spread across South Vietnam, Washington expanded its aid commitments to the RVN and upgraded its military presence through the creation of Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV).

While Washington tried to pull Vietnam into the "Free World," leaders in Moscow and Beijing envisioned a different kind of postcolonial destiny for Indochina. As Marxist–Leninists, Soviet and Chinese leaders agreed that post–1945 international relations would be defined by the global rivalry between the socialist (or "democratic") nations and the capitalist ("imperialist") bloc. They also believed the eventual triumph of the socialist camp was assured. As a result, both Moscow and Beijing recognized the DRVN in 1950 and strongly backed its war effort against France. After 1954, the two communist "older brothers" continued to supply economic and military aid to Hanoi, along with advisors and development expertise.

But the shared commitment to the "two-camp" worldview actually concealed significant ideological differences between the Soviet Union and the PRC. As Jeremy Friedman has argued, Soviet leaders emphasized the importance of anticapitalist revolution, a position that made them suspicious of nationalists and nationalism. In contrast, Mao Zedong and other leaders of the Chinese Communist Party stressed anti-imperialism and China's struggle

12 Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2005), chapter 2.

13 Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York, 2019).

to overturn a century of subordination to foreign powers. Although these positions were not absolutely incompatible, the differences between them became more pronounced during the late 1950s, resulting in the rift that would become known as the Sino-Soviet split. In this situation, Moscow and Beijing each sought to recast their support for the DRVN as proof of their claims to be the sole legitimate leader of the global communist movement.[14]

By the early 1960s, the conflicts over sovereignty in Indochina appeared to be intensifying. The rise of the DRVN-backed insurgency against Diệm's RVN state showed that tensions over national sovereignty in Vietnam were becoming more acute. At the same time, the region was increasingly viewed as a potential new hotspot in the Global Cold War. This elevated risk was evident not only in the Kennedy administration's increased aid to South Vietnam but also in the eruption of a new civil war in Laos – a conflict in which the United States and Soviet, PRC, RVN, and DRVN states were all engaged as sponsors of one or other of the warring parties. The tensions were further exacerbated by the emerging rivalry between Moscow and Beijing, each of which now publicly accused the other of betraying the cause of international socialist revolution.

Nevertheless, as the year 1963 began, it was far from certain that Indochina was about to be plunged into a new "savage war of sovereignties." Even though the multiple conflicts among the claimants to national and imperial sovereignty were escalating, those conflicts were still fairly distinct and separate from one another. But that was about to change. Over the following year, the multiple rivalries over sovereignty in Indochina began to intersect and collide with each other in new and more dangerous ways. As it happened, the first signs of the impending collision would be glimpsed not in Saigon, Hanoi, or any foreign capital, but in a rural village in the heart of the Mekong Delta.

The DRVN, the RVN, and the Battle of Ấp Bắc

The battle of Ấp Bắc took place in two hamlets in Định Tường province on January 2, 1963. During the daylong battle, elements of two NLF battalions – fewer than 400 guerrilla fighters – mauled an attacking force of more than 1,500 RVN troops backed by helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft, and armored vehicles. The rebels shot down or damaged fourteen of the American-piloted

14 Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015).

helicopters and killed or wounded nearly two hundred of the enemy, while suffering comparatively light casualties in their own ranks. At the end of the battle, the insurgents successfully withdrew from the area, evading the units deployed to block their retreat.

Communist propagandists during and after the Vietnam War celebrated Ấp Bắc as a major breakthrough that showed the NLF had devised new tactics to overcome the South Vietnamese Army's superior firepower and resources. In contrast, US military advisors and American journalists attributed the insurgent victory to mistakes and flawed leadership on the government side. While some Americans accused Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) officers of incompetence and cowardice during the battle, others blamed senior political officials, especially Ngô Đình Diệm. In his influential postwar account of the battle, American journalist Neil Sheehan claimed that Diệm had ordered his commanders to avoid battlefield losses at all costs because he was more worried about a military coup than about defeating the insurgency, thus leading to hesitation and defeat at Ấp Bắc.[15]

Recent scholarship confirms the importance of communist tactical innovations at Ấp Bắc, including a new "stand and fight" doctrine. By using strict fire discipline and by placing their forces in well-concealed and well-protected positions, the insurgents neutralized the mobility and firepower advantages conferred by the US-supplied aircraft and armored vehicles. Confronted with these new tactics, South Vietnamese officers failed to devise an effective response. Communist commanders quickly recognized that the Ấp Bắc model could be incorporated into a strategy to paralyze the enemy's operational capabilities across broader geographical areas.[16]

This does not prove, however, that the ARVN defeat at Ấp Bắc was due to cowardice or to a reluctance to take the fight to the enemy. Diệm's alleged intolerance for casualties is uncorroborated by any evidence other than rumors and hearsay among US military advisors. It is true that Diệm and his brother Ngô Dình Nhu were concerned about the danger of a coup; it is also true that they staffed key military command positions with loyal officers. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the Ngô brothers still expected the ARVN to fight and defeat the NLF. In fact, by early 1963 the Ngôs were firmly convinced that they were winning the war and that victory was within reach – a belief they sustained even after Ấp Bắc.

15 Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York, 1988), 122–5.

16 David W. P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975* (Armonk, NY, 2003), 1:397–406; Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 191–2.

For Diệm and Nhu, the battle of Ấp Bắc was merely a minor episode in their long-running struggle to defend the sovereignty of the RVN state. During the first years of Diệm's rule, the Ngôs appeared to have the upper hand in that struggle. Per the Geneva Accords, the DRVN transferred control of large swaths of territory in central Vietnam and the Mekong Delta to the RVN. These DRVN withdrawals, combined with Diệm's military victories over the Bình Xuyên cartel and other noncommunist militia forces, left his government in effective control over most of South Vietnam's territory – a feat that the Bảo Đại-led State of Vietnam had never come close to achieving. Diệm also moved to bolster his legitimacy by organizing a head-to-head referendum against Bảo Đại in October 1955, followed by elections for a National Assembly and the promulgation of a new RVN constitution in 1956. Although the government staged these events in ways calculated to marginalize or exclude its critics, Diệm could still plausibly cite these measures as evidence of his commitment to republicanism and popular sovereignty. Diệm's sovereignty claims were further enhanced by the withdrawal of the last French colonial troops from South Vietnam in 1956, and by the diplomatic recognition of the RVN by dozens of foreign states.[17] Meanwhile, within South Vietnam, RVN state authority was consolidated via an indoctrination and security program known as the Denounce Communists Campaign. While this campaign did little to build Diệm's popularity with rural Vietnamese, it still increased the government's power and authority over the population. The campaign also severely damaged the party's network of "stay behind" cadres and operatives, large numbers of whom had been arrested or killed by 1958.[18]

Communist Party leaders were not content to allow Diệm to win the contest for sovereignty in South Vietnam without a fight. As early as 1956, Lê Duẩn – who had remained in the South after Geneva – was laying the groundwork for a response. In his essay "The Path to Revolution in the South," written when the party's fortunes in the South were near their nadir, Lê Duẩn argued that the party could and should challenge Diệm's claims to sovereignty at the local level, even while "struggling according to a peaceful line." "All accomplishments in every country are due to the people," he declared. "That is a definite law; it cannot be otherwise." Significantly, Lê Duẩn did not call for the immediate rebuilding of the DRVN state apparatus

17 Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters: Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned* (Annapolis, MD, 2008).

18 Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*, 1:181–95; Carlyle Thayer, *War by Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Vietnam, 1954–1960* (Milton Park, 1989), 116–17.

in the South. Instead, he exhorted party cadres "to mingle with the masses, to protect and serve the interests of the masses and to pursue correctly the mass line."[19] In these words lay the kernel of a new strategy: By fostering a new mass resistance movement, the party would cast the resistance in the South not as a clash between two rival Vietnamese states, but as a conflict between the RVN state and "the Southern people." While the communists' ultimate goal remained the same – establishing DRVN sovereignty over all of Vietnam – Lê Duẩn now argued that Diệm would have to be delegitimized and overthrown before Hanoi could reclaim the South.

By 1959, Lê Duẩn had secured the VWP Politburo's authorization for his strategy of localized resistance operations. During 1960, cadres organized a series of "concerted uprisings" across the Mekong Delta. Although these included some small-scale military operations, they were focused mainly on the mobilization of the rural population through demonstrations and other "political struggle" actions designed to weaken RVN legitimacy. The insurgents also sought to degrade the Diệm administrative apparatus via assassinations and kidnappings of local government officials and supporters. Meanwhile, DRVN material support for the rebels began flowing from North Vietnam to the South via the network of paths and roads that would become known as the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. While the volume of weapons and supplies remained limited prior to 1965, the Trail delivered another crucial resource: thousands of Southern-born communist cadres who had "regrouped" to the North in 1954. These returning Southerners played key roles in the establishment and expansion of the NLF, the ostensibly noncommunist and independent insurgent organization set up in 1960. By seeding the NLF apparatus with Southerners, DRVN leaders could credibly represent the insurgency as a popular rebellion, even as they maintained close control over it.

Diệm and his supporters were badly shaken by the VWP comeback and the rapid expansion of the insurgency during 1960 and 1961. In the Mekong Delta, the insurgents overwhelmed the government's Agroville Program, an agrarian development initiative designed to modernize and control the rural population by concentrating them in town-like settlements. The government's increasingly draconian security measures – such as the infamous 10/59 decree, which created military tribunals with the power to execute suspected communists – seemed ineffective against the onslaught. By mid-1961, the insurgents wielded effective control over roughly half of South Vietnam's territory.

19 Lê Duẩn, "The Path to Revolution in the South," in Edward Miller, *The Vietnam War: A Documentary Reader* (Malden, MA, 2016), 61–9.

But Diệm was preparing a comeback of his own. To bolster the RVN military effort, he turned to US President John F. Kennedy. In late 1961, Kennedy agreed to a large expansion of military aid for South Vietnam, including helicopters, armored personnel carriers, and other offensive weapons systems that the ARVN had previously lacked. He also sharply increased the number of US military advisors in South Vietnam. Diệm viewed these US advisors warily, since their presence seemed to confirm communist claims that his government was an American puppet regime. On the other hand, the military impact of the aid appeared to be extraordinarily positive for the RVN – at least in the short term. During 1962, the ARVN's battlefield fortunes improved dramatically, thanks to the increased mobility and firepower conferred by the new equipment.[20]

For Diệm, the influx of American aid was not the only reason for the shift in the tide of the war during 1962. In his view, the key to the turnaround was the launch of a new RVN counterinsurgency initiative, the Strategic Hamlet Program (SHP). Designed and overseen by Ngô Dình Nhu, Diệm's younger brother and closest advisor, the SHP was the most ambitious and grandiose of all of Diệm's nation-building schemes. Nhu proposed to gather all rural residents into government-fortified hamlets as a means of separating them from the NLF. But the SHP was not merely about ensuring the security of the population. According to Nhu, the program also aimed to enlist the population in the fight against the NLF. This goal was supposed to be achieved via the indoctrination of hamlet residents in the principles of personalism, the abstruse form of communitarianism that the Ngôs trumpeted as the official philosophy of their regime. In Nhu's imagination, each strategic hamlet would be both "a defense system in miniature" and a self-sufficient community of RVN citizen-farmers.[21]

Most retrospective assessments of the SHP have emphasized the gap between Nhu's theories and the actual implementation of the program. Even Diệm's supporters admitted that many of the thousands of hamlets built by the government were constructed in an overly hasty manner by officials who were corrupt, incompetent, or both. There is precious little evidence that hamlet residents ever understood what personalism was, or how they were supposed to apply it in their daily lives. But in the heady days of 1962, both US and RVN officials often discounted evidence of the program's ideological and practical shortcomings.

20 Miller, *Misalliance*, 222–31; Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*, 1:385–95.
21 Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, chapters 4 and 5; Miller, *Misalliance*, 231–9.

Nhu's faith in the program was especially fervent. In November 1962, he ordered the RVN civic action ministry to begin preparations for the liberation of North Vietnam from communist rule. According to Nhu, the news of the success of the hamlet program in the South would soon inspire the ordinary people of the North to begin building their own strategic hamlets, ideally with covert assistance provided by the RVN.[22]

Diệm and Nhu's ebullient optimism about their prospects for victory was the lens through which they viewed the battle of Ấp Bắc. For the Ngôs, the outcome of the battle was disappointing. But it was not cause for alarm. In the aftermath of the battle, Nhu insisted that the clash had been a "partial victory" for the government since the NLF forces eventually departed from the battlefield. He also believed the ARVN would continue to "wear down the enemy through envelopment."[23] Neither Nhu nor senior ARVN commanders seemed to take note of the new "stand and fight" tactics that the NLF celebrated as the main reason for their triumph.

The Ngô brothers also discounted another important reason for the insurgents' success at Ấp Bắc: the weapons that they used. Prior to 1962, the rebels had fought mainly with small arms, many of them antiquated. At Ấp Bắc, however, the NLF forces had deployed up-to-date recoilless rifles and anti-aircraft machine guns against the enemy's helicopters and armored vehicles. Without these heavy weapons, the new "stand and fight" tactics would have been useless. How had the insurgents acquired these big guns?

Although most American observers mistakenly believed that the rebels had captured them from South Vietnamese armories, postwar Vietnamese accounts show that the new weapons actually came from North Vietnam.[24] Moreover, they had been brought to the South not via the Hồ Chí Minh Trail through Laos and Cambodia, but by sea. In the spring of 1962, a small fleet of four North Vietnamese junks disguised as fishing vessels began smuggling weapons and other supplies across the South China Sea, making clandestine deliveries along the South Vietnamese coast. The opening of the "Hồ Chí Minh Sea Trail" (Đường Hồ Chí Minh trên biển) proved to be a major strategic breakthrough. Between late 1962 and early 1965, North Vietnamese ships smuggled nearly 5,000 tons of weapons and supplies into South Vietnam by sea. While Ấp Bắc was probably not the first time that insurgents had used

22 Ibid., 251.
23 Ibid., 252.
24 For the captured weapons theory, see Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, 99–101.

these seaborne weapons against ARVN forces, it was certainly the first time they had deployed them to such dramatic effect.[25]

The opening of the sea trail puts the battle of Ấp Bắc in a different light. The NLF's victory resulted not only from the tactical innovations devised by its commanders, but also from the opening of transportation links between North Vietnam and the battlefields of the Mekong Delta. Those links would eventually transform the intensifying struggle over sovereignty in South Vietnam. During the French Indochina War, as Chris Goscha has shown, VWP leaders relied on sea-based networks to keep the party's isolated Mekong Delta base areas connected with the rest of the DRVN's territorial "archipelago." The re-establishment of these connections to the delta during 1962–3, coupled with the spectacular victory at Ấp Bắc, led Lê Duẩn and other communist leaders to conclude that they had found the elements of a new strategy for victory in the South. The Ngô brothers may not have realized it, but the struggle for sovereignty in the Southern countryside had entered a new phase.

The Ngôs and the United States

In early April 1963, the US ambassador to South Vietnam met with Ngô Đình Diệm at the latter's office. The session did not go well. Although Fredrick Nolting had enjoyed close working relations with Diệm since his arrival in Saigon in 1961, he found the president in an intransigent mood. Diệm had previously informed the embassy that he intended to end the involvement of US military and civilian advisors in the Strategic Hamlet Program. Nolting now implored him to reconsider, arguing that Americans had played crucial roles in implementing the program. Diệm countered that the US advisors' increased presence and visibility in the provinces had become a threat to RVN sovereignty by perpetuating a "colonial mentality" among South Vietnamese. When Nolting remarked that rural residents seemed more friendly to Americans than before, Diệm replied that this was precisely what worried him. "The people believe that the Americans are now the government and disregard the authority of my local officials," he complained.[26]

25 The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 115–16; Christopher E. Goscha, "The Maritime Nature of the Wars for Vietnam: A Geo-Historical Reflection," *War & Society* 24 (2) (2005), 73–80.

26 Telegram 882, Saigon to DepState, April 5, 1963, printed in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. III, Vietnam, 1961–1963 (Washington, DC, 1991), 207–13.

Ngô Đình Diệm viewed his alliance with the United States as both essential and problematic. A staunch anticommunist, Diệm sought US support even before he became leader of South Vietnam in 1954. Once he assumed power, his government relied on US aid not only to train and maintain the RVN's armed forces, but also to fund his ambitious array of nation-building programs. Diệm also benefited from US recognition and support in the diplomatic realm – not least when Washington backed his opposition to the Geneva-mandated 1956 reunification elections, over Hanoi's strenuous complaints.

Nevertheless, Diệm knew that US support for him was far from unconditional. In the spring of 1955, the senior US envoy to South Vietnam recommended that Diệm be replaced, on the grounds that he was refusing to follow American advice. US President Eisenhower briefly endorsed that proposal, reversing himself only after Diệm unexpectedly defeated the Bình Xuyên in the battle of Saigon. Although Eisenhower and other US leaders subsequently heaped praise on Diệm – especially during his 1957 state visit to the United States – the memory of his near-abandonment by Washington lingered. During the late 1950s, Diệm sparred frequently with US officials over the form and content of his nation-building programs. Tensions between the allies worsened during 1960, as the communist-led insurgency gathered momentum and strength in the countryside. Diệm was annoyed in October 1960, when US Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow forcefully pressed him to implement reforms and to reduce his brother Nhu's influence in the government. Annoyance turned to anger the following month, when an attempted coup by ARVN paratrooper units nearly toppled Diệm from power. The Ngôs were incensed that US Embassy officers had been in contact with some of the coup leaders during the uprising, and that they smuggled one of the plotters out of the country after the rebellion collapsed.[27]

Relations between the allies remained fraught following the inauguration of John F. Kennedy in early 1961. The Ngôs were encouraged by the replacement of Ambassador Durbrow with the more pliable Nolting, and by the official visit of Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson to Saigon in May 1961. However, tensions resurfaced later in the year when Washington proposed to expand US–RVN military cooperation against the communist insurgency, which was continuing to make gains in the countryside. Diệm was happy to

27 William Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam: American Vietnam Policy, 1960–1963* (New York, 1985), chapter 1.

accept more American advisors and more advanced weapon systems for the ARVN. But he balked at US attempts to link the new partnership to administrative reforms. After a moment of hesitation, Kennedy withdrew the reform demands. In the short run, this decision seemed to pay off handsomely, as ARVN troops inflicted significant losses on the insurgents throughout 1962.

In early 1963, following the ARVN debacle at Ấp Bắc, relations between the two governments once again slipped into crisis – though not because either side viewed the battle as a breakthrough for the communists. Indeed, Diệm and Nhu seemed less upset by the outcome on the battlefield than by the comments of US military advisors, who claimed that the Ngôs were deliberately preventing the ARVN from defeating the enemy. The brothers were also irritated by the publication of a report by US Senator Mike Mansfield, who had visited South Vietnam in late 1962. A former staunch supporter of Diệm's, Mansfield now expressed dismay over the RVN's lack of progress toward "popularly responsible and responsive government."[28]

In response to these criticisms, the Ngôs decided to press for changes in the terms of their relationship with Washington. They began to speak both privately and publicly of a "revisionist" approach to American aid under which the RVN would exercise more exclusive control over the military and economic assistance they received from Washington. This approach was evident in Diệm's declaration of his intent to end American participation in the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program, despite Ambassador Nolting's strident objections. In early May, Nhu told a *Washington Post* interviewer that the number of US military advisors in Vietnam had grown too large and should be reduced by 50 percent or more; he also declared that some of the advisors were "daredevils" who lacked the patience needed to defeat the enemy. Nhu's complaints seemed to echo prior comments by his wife Trần Lệ Xuân (better known as "Madam Nhu"). She had warned of "false brothers" who were undermining Vietnam's right to self-determination even as they professed support for the RVN.[29]

In the end, the Ngôs were unable to secure their desired "revisions" to the US–RVN alliance. Nhu's comments in the *Post* generated controversy and speculation that the brothers might be preparing to sever their ties to Washington altogether. In fact, Diệm and Nhu had no desire for an outright rupture in relations. By late May, they had backpedaled and worked out a face-saving deal with the embassy that allowed the American role in

28 Mike Mansfield et al., *Viet Nam and Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC, 1963), 8.
29 Miller, *Misalliance*, 254–60.

the Strategic Hamlet Program to continue. The brothers also quietly shelved their demands for a drawdown in US advisors.

Nevertheless, the mere fact that the Ngôs had sought to reduce the overall scope and scale of the US role in South Vietnam would have far-reaching consequences. By explicitly casting the American presence as a threat to Vietnamese sovereignty, the regime was challenging a key feature of Kennedy's approach for defending the "Free World" in Southeast Asia. This clash did not necessarily mean that the nearly decade-old alliance between Diệm and the United States was unraveling. But it did raise that possibility in both Vietnamese and American minds. With the onset of a new crisis in South Vietnam during the summer of 1963, the doubts about the durability of the US–Diệm alliance would become more pressing.

The "Buddhist Crisis" and the Making of the November Coup

Despite the growing tensions between Washington and Saigon, there seemed little reason to believe that the fall of the Ngô Đình Diệm government was imminent in the spring of 1963. Despite controlling many rural districts, NLF insurgents had not demonstrated an ability to threaten Saigon or other centers of RVN power. Meanwhile, the US government remained officially committed to its alliance with Diệm, and American military and economic aid continued to flow into South Vietnam. Although Diệm had faced rebellions led by disgruntled ARVN officers in both 1960 and 1962, those short-lived uprisings had notably failed to attract the support of senior army commanders.

But the situation changed dramatically during May and June 1963 with the emergence of a new challenge to Diệm's political authority: a protest movement led by Buddhist monks. The Buddhist movement began in the central Vietnamese city of Huế, where government security forces killed eight people during a demonstration on May 8. After protests spread to Saigon and other cities, Diệm government officials and Buddhist leaders struck a deal in early June that addressed most of the latter's demands. But the agreement was upended by Madame Nhu, who publicly denounced Buddhist leaders for making "false utterances" about RVN officials. On June 11, a monk named Thích Quảng Đức sat down on a Saigon streetcorner and burned himself to death in protest. Because the self-immolation was captured in a series of stunning photographs by an American journalist, it garnered global attention and marked a dramatic escalation of the political crisis. In mid-August, after weeks of unrest and additional self-immolations, the Ngôs ordered police and other

security units to crush the movement. Thousands of monks, nuns, and other movement supporters were arrested during midnight raids on the pagodas that served as the movement's headquarters. The crackdown came despite the staunch objections of US Embassy officials, who had warned Diệm not to use violence against the movement.

Many accounts of the "Buddhist Crisis" of 1963 depict it as a struggle for religious freedom.[30] Religion was indeed a defining feature of the Buddhist movement, but so too were concerns about nationalism and sovereignty. The monks who led the demonstrations were proponents of the Buddhist Revival (Chấn hưng Phật giáo), a revitalization movement that dated back to the early twentieth century. In addition to advocating for the rehabilitation of Buddhist institutions and practices, the revival was also self-consciously modernist and nationalist. Both clerical and lay Buddhists called on their fellow Vietnamese to cultivate "national Buddhism" and to embrace Vietnam's identity as a Buddhist country.[31]

In the early years of Diệm's rule, this Buddhist brand of nationalism appeared compatible with the government's official nation-building agenda. Diệm allowed the leading Buddhist organization in South Vietnam to stage a national congress and even funded the construction of its Saigon headquarters. But by the early 1960s, many Buddhist leaders complained of anti-Buddhist discrimination by Catholic government officials. They also came to view the government's official philosophy of personalism – a doctrine first elaborated by European Catholic philosophers – as a stalking horse for a plot to Christianize the South Vietnamese population. Diệm, for his part, viewed the Buddhist accusations as an attempt to undermine RVN state sovereignty. He noted that the initial protests in Huế had been triggered by a government ban on the public display of religious flags. While the Buddhists denounced this measure as blatantly discriminatory toward their faith, Diệm insisted that it aimed to compel respect for the RVN national flag.[32]

In the immediate aftermath of the May 8 incident, several leaders in both the government and Buddhist organizations advocated negotiations to defuse the crisis. But the chances for a deal became remote following Madame

30 See, for example, David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), chapter 8; and Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950–1963* (Lanham, MD, 2006), 142–54.

31 Edward Miller, "Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building: Reinterpreting the 1963 'Buddhist Crisis' in South Vietnam," *Modern Asian Studies* 49 (6) (2015), 1903–62.

32 Ibid., 1915–21, 1925–6.

Nhu's public broadside and the self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức. In addition to turning the protests into a major international news story, Quảng Đức's death rekindled old debates about the legitimacy and effectiveness of Diệm's rule. The skeptics included John F. Kennedy who, despite his personal admiration for Diệm, now wondered if the RVN president could be counted on to end the crisis and win the war against the communists. As a replacement for Ambassador Nolting, who was due to rotate to another post, Kennedy nominated Henry Cabot Lodge, a patrician Republican with a reputation for high-handedness in diplomatic affairs. In an August meeting at the White House prior to Lodge's departure for Saigon, the president indicated he would rely on the ambassador's judgment about Diệm. "I don't know whether we'd be better off [without Diệm]," Kennedy said. But "if so, then we have to move in that direction."[33]

The escalating crisis also impacted the calculations of senior leaders of the ARVN. General Dương Văn Minh, known as "Big Minh" to the Americans and affectionally called "Fatty" by his own soldiers, had earned praise from Diệm for leading the successful 1955 operations against the Bình Xuyên. But Minh subsequently fell out of favor with the palace and lost his field command position. He was incensed when the Ngôs investigated his suspected involvement in the failed November 1960 coup against Diệm. Although he was cleared, Minh began to discuss the possibility of a new coup with Trần Văn Đôn and Lê Văn Kim, two fellow generals who had also been sidelined. But the three officers only began plotting in earnest after Quảng Đức's fiery death prompted a new wave of international condemnation of Diệm's policies. Their determination to act was sealed in late August when Ngô Đình Nhu accused them of masterminding the government's brutal crackdown on the Buddhists – a false claim designed to conceal Nhu's own responsibility for the raids.[34]

The generals initially planned to launch their coup in late August. But Nhu discovered the plot and disrupted it by raising doubts in the generals' minds about whether Washington was prepared to support Diệm's overthrow. What neither Nhu nor the generals knew was that Kennedy and his administration had already shifted to a policy of qualified support for regime change. On August 24, shortly before the generals put their coup plans on hold, the US State Department transmitted a cable to Ambassador Lodge, authorizing

33 National Security Archive, "Transcription of Kennedy-Lodge Meeting Tape, August 15, 1963": https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20586-doc-03-transcription-kennedy-lodge-meeting.

34 Miller, *Misalliance*, 208–11, 282–5.

him to contact ARVN commanders and assure them that they would have Washington's support in the event of a successful coup. The cable was drafted by Roger Hilsman, a senior official who had long been skeptical of the Ngôs' ability to win the war against the NLF. Although Hilsman's move was backed by several of his State Department colleagues, it was opposed by some of Kennedy's more senior advisors, including Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and other top Pentagon officials. Kennedy was angry that Hilsman had secured approval for the cable over a weekend when the president and most of his cabinet had been out of town. Yet Kennedy was also dismayed about Diệm's hardline response to the Buddhists and worried about his ability to lead the RVN to victory in the war against the communists. As a result, he made no effort to recall Hilsman's cable or to revert to a policy of untrammeled support for Diệm's rule. Although his administration was more divided than ever over what to do about Diệm, Kennedy had decided to keep open the option of US support for a coup.[35]

The debates in Washington and the intrigue in Saigon continued for two months after the non-coup of late August. On November 1, 1963, the generals finally made their move. Diệm and Nhu knew that another plot was in the works but allowed it to go forward, expecting that loyalist officers would crush the uprising after it began. But the coup leaders took steps to prevent pro-Diệm units from reaching Saigon; they also recruited the commander of the capital military region to join the putsch. Realizing that they had misjudged their opponents, the Ngô brothers slipped out of their besieged palace and made their way to a safe house in Saigon's Chợ lớn district. Although Nhu wanted to flee the city, Diệm made the fateful decision to contact the coup plotters and surrender, evidently expecting that he would be able to negotiate an accommodation with the generals.[36] While the brothers were being transported to the coup leaders' headquarters, rebel soldiers shot them dead and then repeatedly stabbed their bodies. Although the generals made a clumsy attempt to portray the deaths as suicides, the testimony of ARVN insiders suggested that the executions had been ordered by General Minh.[37]

Viewed in hindsight, the downfall of the Ngô Đình Diệm government in 1963 was a highly contingent event. The expanding NLF insurgency in the countryside formed the backdrop for the events in Saigon. But communist actions did not precipitate the Buddhists' revolt or the November coup.

35 Marc Selverstone, *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam* (Harvard University Press, 2022), 140–5.
36 Miller, *Misalliance*, 319–24.
37 Nguyen Ngoc Huy, "Ngo Dinh Diem's Execution," *Worldview*, November 1976, 39–41.

Instead, the more consequential steps were those taken by (1) the Buddhist protestors who publicly challenged Diệm's authority; (2) the US officials who concluded that his tarnished legitimacy made him expendable; and (3) the ARVN generals who resented being sidelined.

Yet the most fateful moves of all were those made by the Ngô brothers themselves. It is telling that the key players in the coup drama – the Buddhist leaders, the Americans, and the generals – had all previously *supported* Diệm's efforts to build an anticommunist state in South Vietnam. By steadily alienating these and other former allies, Diệm and Nhu became the unwitting authors of their own demise. The consequences of the Ngôs' miscalculations would be far-reaching – not only for themselves, but for all the other states and leaders who aspired to wield sovereignty in Vietnam. That included the leaders of the Vietnamese Communist Party, who now sensed an opportunity to bring down the RVN state once and for all.

The DRVN, China, and the 9th Plenum

For nearly a decade prior to 1963, the leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had consistently supported the Soviet Union's policy of "peaceful coexistence" in the Cold War. At Geneva in 1954, the communists effectively agreed to transfer the competition over sovereignty in Vietnam from the military arena into the political realm. They maintained this commitment during Diệm's crackdown on "stay behind" communist cadres in South Vietnam in the late 1950s, and even after the emergence of the NLF insurgency. Although the VWP Politburo endorsed small-scale insurrectionary activities in 1959, its carefully worded directives still downplayed the importance of armed resistance in comparison to nonviolent political struggle.[38] In its founding manifesto, the NLF called for the establishment of a neutralist government in Saigon – one that would promote "universal peace" and negotiations on the reunification with the North.[39] Hanoi affirmed its interest in neutralism in 1962, when it backed a Soviet-led effort to negotiate the neutralization of Laos. Although the DRVN continued to use Lao territory to infiltrate men and supplies into South Vietnam, its leaders still viewed neutralization as a viable long-term strategy for taking over the South without waging a large-scale war.[40]

38 Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War* (Berkeley, 2013), 53–64.
39 "Program of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam," in Miller, *The Vietnam War*, 75–80.
40 Asselin, *Hanoi's Road*, 122–37.

It was only in 1963 that Hanoi decisively rejected "peaceful coexistence" as a strategic principle. Over the course of the year, DRVN leaders adopted a strategy aimed at securing their sovereignty objectives through the rapid escalation of the war in the South. This shift in strategy was enabled by three developments. First, the opening of the Hồ Chí Minh Sea Trail in late 1962, coupled with sharp increases in the size of the NLF's armed forces, provided communist military commanders with the means to wage a much larger and more lethal war effort in the South. Second, the intensification of the Sino-Soviet split helped DRVN leaders to secure Chinese promises of support for a more aggressive strategy in the South – including pledges to help defend North Vietnam from US attacks. Finally, the ouster and death of Diệm in November 1963 seem to confirm that the opportune moment to escalate the armed struggle in the South had finally arrived.

As we have already seen, the opening of the Hồ Chí Minh Sea Trail during 1962 significantly enhanced communist military capabilities in South Vietnam. The insurgents' growing firepower coincided with another important change: a dramatic increase in the overall size of communist military forces in the South. According to postwar Vietnamese publications, a total of around 25,000 soldiers served on a fulltime basis in NLF military units during 1961. During 1962, the numbers serving in such units rose to more than 40,000; the trend continued in 1963, rising to a total of more than 70,000.[41] Most of this increase resulted not from land-based infiltration of cadres and soldiers from North Vietnam (which remained relatively low prior to 1965) but from stepped-up recruitment efforts in the South. Party accounts show that the NLF inducted around 10,000 Southern recruits into its military forces in 1962, and a whopping 24,000 in 1963 – the single highest annual total for the entire war.[42] Thus, by 1963, communist forces in South Vietnam were better armed, more capable, and much more numerous than they had been just two years earlier.

The NLF's growing military strength provided DRVN leaders with the option to escalate their war effort in the South, should they choose to do so. But escalation would imply abandonment of "peaceful coexistence"

41 The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 459 n41. See also Cục Tác Chiến Bộ Tổng Tham Mưu [Combat Operations Office of the PAVN General Staff], *Lịch sử Cục Tác chiến, 1945–2005* [History of the Combat Operations Office, 1945–2005] (Hanoi, 2005), 401–2.

42 *Tổng kết công tác hậu cần chiến trường Nam Bộ-Cực nam Trung Bộ (B2) trong khang chiến chống Mỹ* [Overview of Logistical Operations in the B2 Theater during the Resistance War against America] (Hanoi, 1986), 546.

and would undoubtedly anger their Soviet allies. Hanoi also worried about another potential consequence of escalation: US military strikes against North Vietnam.

For DRVN leaders, the possibility of direct US attacks on North Vietnam was not to be taken lightly. In 1954, DRVN leaders had decided to make peace at Geneva in part because of fears that Washington might send US combat forces to Indochina.[43] Those fears resurfaced during 1959–60, as the Southern insurgency gathered momentum. A January 1961 VWP Politburo directive warned that the United States might conduct "armed provocations" against North Vietnam if the Saigon government was close to collapse.[44] The dangers were elaborated in a June 1962 "draft strategic evaluation" prepared by the PAVN General Staff. The report sketched several scenarios in which US regular combat forces might be deployed to Indochina – including some in which the United States attacked North Vietnam with air, naval, and ground units.[45]

Despite these risks, however, DRVN leaders still wanted to explore the possibility of escalating the war in the South. Although the prospect of US attacks on North Vietnam was daunting, PAVN planners believed their forces could successfully resist and even repel such attacks. To do so would require careful planning and the mobilization of the entire North Vietnamese population. It would also depend on receiving external aid and support from Hanoi's communist allies. DRVN leaders knew the chances of gaining Moscow's approval for an escalatory strategy were virtually nil. But the prospects of winning Chinese support for such a plan appeared much better. Indeed, during 1962–3, PRC leaders appeared not just willing but downright eager to support a more aggressive strategy in the South – even if that would require China to help defend North Vietnam.

Ever since the Sino-Soviet split had erupted into public view in 1960, PRC leaders had openly derided Moscow's "revisionist" policies and proclaimed their readiness to face off against the United States. In 1962, following the creation of the US Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) in Saigon, Beijing signaled its support for the liberation of South Vietnam through stepped-up military struggle.[46] That summer, Hồ Chí Minh visited Beijing

43 Pierre Asselin, "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique," *Cold War History* 11 (2) (2011), 155–95.

44 Chỉ thị của Bộ chính trị [Politburo Directive], January 24, 1961, in *Văn kiện Đảng toàn tập*, v. 22 (Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia, 2002), 152.

45 *Lịch sử Cục Tác chiến*, 371–4.

46 Xiaoming Zhang, "The Vietnam War, 1964–1969: A Chinese Perspective," *Journal of Military History* 60 (4) (October 1996), 734–8.

to ask PRC leaders for increased military aid. His hosts responded positively, promising to deliver 90,000 rifles and small arms – enough weapons to equip 230 battalions.[47]

An even more important agreement was reached in October, when DRVN Defense Minister Võ Nguyên Giáp led a high-level military delegation for talks with the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). During the talks, the Vietnamese presented their scenarios for the deployment of US combat forces to Indochina. The two sides agreed that China would provide military equipment and supplies to support DRVN efforts to defeat any US-led "limited war" inside South Vietnam. They also agreed that Hanoi would request PLA air and naval support if US forces invaded North Vietnam. PLA ground troops would not be sent to North Vietnam unless it became "truly necessary." Over the next year, the two militaries held extensive planning sessions, including surveys of defensive positions in the panhandle region of North Vietnam. These contacts culminated in August 1963 in a pair of detailed agreements on military aid and "coordinated combat operations" between the PLA and the PAVN.[48]

By mid-1963, North Vietnam and China had agreed on a plan to escalate the communist-led war in South Vietnam. Although the existence of this plan remained a closely guarded secret, its impact would be far-reaching. For DRVN leaders, the Chinese pledges of support would allow them to launch and sustain a more aggressive war effort in the South – even if the Soviet Union refused to back Hanoi. Meanwhile, Beijing's promises to help defend North Vietnam from US attacks enabled the PAVN to send more soldiers and resources to fight in the South. In June 1963, the VWP's Central Military Committee proposed to raise the rate of North-to-South infiltration "to increase the operations of our fulltime troops on the battlefields of South Vietnam."[49]

The formal endorsement of the new escalation strategy came during the last weeks of the year, at a plenary meeting of the VWP's Central Committee in Hanoi. The conclave began in late November, shortly after Diệm's ouster and death in Saigon, and ran for several weeks. The outcome of the committee's deliberations can be inferred from two documents approved by its members. The first, a public communiqué, was an unprecedently strident denunciation of the "revisionists" within the communist bloc who advocated

47 Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005), 116.
48 *Lịch sử Cục Tác chiến*, 374–83.
49 The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 107–8.

negotiations with the United States. Although the statement did not mention the Soviet Union or its leaders by name, the language used (including references to those in "a number of fraternal parties" who were "undermining" international communism) left little doubt as to the target of the critique.[50]

The second document endorsed at the plenum was a secret resolution. Entitled "Strive to Struggle, Rush Forward to Win New Victories in the South," it presented a resounding call to arms. Asserting that "seizing power through violent means is correct and necessary," the resolution proclaimed that the time had come for revolutionary forces to escalate the war in the South. This military escalation was aimed at achieving two primary goals: the "annihilation" of the RVN's military forces, and the destruction of the Strategic Hamlet Program. The resolution's authors boldly declared that both goals could be achieved quickly, before Washington deployed US combat forces to Indochina. But even if US leaders did intervene, the authors predicted, the number of American troops sent to Vietnam would not exceed 100,000. In that case, the eventual triumph of the revolutionary forces would merely be delayed, not derailed.[51]

Although the full proceedings of the 1963 plenary meeting have never been made public, unofficial accounts suggest that some participants opposed the escalatory strategy presented in Resolution 9. Some historians believe that the "moderate" critics of escalation included senior VWP leaders such as Hồ Chí Minh and Võ Nguyên Giáp.[52] The extent to which Hồ Chí Minh and Giáp were moderates on questions of war and peace in 1963 may be debated. Yet there is no debate about the identity of the prime mover behind Resolution 9: VWP General Secretary Lê Duẩn. Seven years earlier, when the party's fortunes in the South were at their lowest ebb and Hanoi's commitment to "peaceful coexistence" seemed non-negotiable, Lê Duẩn had insisted that the mobilization of the Southern population might yet pave the way for the party to reassert its claims to sovereignty over the South. Now, in 1963, he and other VWP leaders calculated that a rapid military escalation would lead to the revolutionary triumph they had long dreamed of achieving. It was a colossal gamble of lives, resources, and prestige, but it was a wager that Lê

50 Asselin, *Hanoi's Road*, 162–5.

51 Ibid., 165–9. For a partial English translation of the resolution, see "Resolution of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Worker's Party," in Miller, *The Vietnam War*, 96–100.

52 Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), 51–83; Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War* (Cambridge, 2018), 106–8.

Duẩn and his comrades were willing to make in the service of the DRVN's sovereignty objectives in the South. They would eventually achieve those objectives, but victory would take far longer and prove far more costly than they ever imagined.

Conclusion: Sovereignty and the Escalation of the Vietnam War

On November 6, 1963, US Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge sent a cable to Washington in which he analyzed the effects of the recent coup and overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm – an outcome that Lodge himself had done a great deal to encourage. In the ambassador's judgment, the coup had unfolded mostly according to plan, and its leaders had demonstrated unexpected mettle. Based on this assessment, Lodge offered an optimistic prediction: "The prospects now are for a shorter war."[53]

Lodge was wrong – spectacularly so. But he was far from unusual in his capacity for mistaken judgments about matters of war and peace in Indochina in 1963. In both Hanoi and in Saigon, no less than in other capitals across the world, political leaders recognized that the crisis of 1963 marked an inflection point in the long-running struggle over sovereignty in Indochina. Most also acknowledged that the risks that the war in South Vietnam would be transformed into a larger conflict could not be ignored. Yet almost none of them seemed able to imagine how much larger and bloodier the conflict would become, or how long it would last. For Vietnamese leaders, no less than for their American, Chinese, and Soviet counterparts, sovereignty in Indochina seemed worth fighting for in 1963.

53 Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, November 6, 1963, printed in *Foreign Relations of the United States, vol. IV: Vietnam, August–December 1963* (Washington, DC, 1991), 575–8.