6

Hanoi's Politburo at War, 1969–1975

PIERRE ASSELIN

This chapter considers the war's latter stages from the perspective of the main decision-making body in Hanoi, the Politburo of the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP).[1] Under the thumb of First Secretary Lê Duẩn, a hardened former revolutionary and admirer of Stalin, the Politburo directed the "anti-American resistance for national salvation," as it branded its war against Saigon, the Americans, and other forces allied with them. The armed forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN, or North Vietnam), the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), answered to its core leaders. The same was true of the Southern-based "Viet Cong," namely the National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam (NLF) and its armed wing, the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF). Claiming to constitute an autonomous entity for political reasons, the NLF reported to Hanoi, which set its operational guidelines.

The Vietnamese communist leadership displayed a remarkable degree of ingenuity and resourcefulness in its quest to drive out the Americans, finish off the regime in Saigon, and win the conflict by achieving national reunification under its exclusive aegis. At times, it proved callous to the extreme, making choices it understood might result in massive death and suffering for its people. Increasingly reliant over time upon military and other aid from socialist allies, most notably China and the Soviet Union, it still jealously guarded its autonomy, refusing even to consult those allies about major strategic matters. The audacity and temerity of the Hanoi Politburo were matched only by its impenetrability and staunchness. In the end, it prevailed over its enemies owing less to their shortcomings than to the merits of its masterfully crafted and carefully calibrated strategy of "struggle" on three separate, yet closely intertwined, fronts.

1 The Politburo comprised about a dozen top-ranking political and military leaders, including the general/first secretary, who ran its meetings. Together, they charted the state's domestic and foreign policy.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316225288.009 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Interestingly, the story of those who opposed the regime in Saigon and its foreign, including American, allies remains largely untold in the West. Decades ago, analysts including Douglas Pike, Carlyle A. Thayer, and David Elliott, as well as historians such as William Duiker, related part of that story on the basis of captured communist documents, Rand Corporation interviews with PAVN, NLF, and PLAF prisoners and defectors, and other available sources in Vietnamese, French, and English.[2] The opening of Vietnam in the early 1990s prompted a new generation of scholars to scrutinize the strategies and tactics employed by Vietnamese communist authorities to eventually win the war. Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, Ang Cheng Guan, Tuong Vu, and Pierre Asselin focused on decision-makers in Hanoi.[3] Meanwhile, Robert Brigham, David Hunt, and others turned their attention to Southerners and the NLF/PLAF specifically.[4] All things being equal, neglect of the Vietnamese communist viewpoint and experience is as tragic as it is stupefying. After all, how can we ever hope to understand the war and its outcome if we cannot even get a sense of what those resisting Saigon's and Washington's policies and armies were thinking and doing during the conflict?

Economy of Forces

The Tet Offensive and follow-up "mini-Tet" campaigns of 1968 paid major political and diplomatic dividends, but also dealt a devastating military and psychological blow to the Politburo's war effort. Thereafter, its highly dogmatic and steely First Secretary, Lê Duẩn, and other core leaders had to

2 Douglas Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism, 1925–1976* (Stanford, 1978); David W. P. Elliott and C. A. H. Thomson, *A Look at the VC Cadres: Dinh Tuong Province, 1965–1966* (Santa Monica, 1967); Carlyle A. Thayer, *War by Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Viet-Nam, 1954–60* (Crows Nest, Australia, 1990); William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, 1981); and James Harrison, *The Endless War: Vietnam's Struggle for Independence* (New York, 1983).

3 Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012); Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (New York, 2004); Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (New York, 2017); and Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York, 2018).

4 Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca, 1999); David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst, MA, 2008); David W. P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975* (Armonk, NY, 2006); and Michael R. Dedrick, *Southern Voices: Biet Dong and the National Liberation Front* (Lexington, KY, 2022).

reconcile themselves to the idea that victory – which they defined as the unconditional surrender of the regime in Saigon and attendant withdrawal of all US and other foreign forces allied with them from Indochina (i.e., Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) – was not within their grasp and was, in fact, unlikely to be achieved any time soon, by force of arms, at least. In failing to engage in the "general uprising" that the Politburo assumed would surely follow the large-scale coordinated attack by communist-led forces, the South Vietnamese masses and those in cities in particular had made clear their reluctance to buy into the anti-American, anti-Saigon revolutionary effort. Not only that, but scores of Southerners suddenly rallied to the government of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam) under President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, so dejected were they by the devastation wrought upon their country below the 17th parallel by those same communist-led forces.[5]

In the face of this bleak situation caused by its own impetuousness and overconfidence, the VWP Politburo reassessed its strategies and tactics. Since ordering the onset of major combat operations in the South and deploying the first PAVN units there in late 1964, it had predicated its strategy on three carefully calibrated "modes of struggle": military – to confront, attrite, and overcome enemy forces on Southern battlefields and in the skies above North Vietnam; political – to develop the party apparatus and recruit fighters in the South, encourage the defection of troops from the South Vietnamese army (*địch vận*), and organize "front groups" of women, Buddhists, intellectuals, students, and urban laborers against Saigon and US intervention (*dân vận*); and diplomatic – to secure maximal material support from socialist allies while rallying world opinion against "US imperialist aggression" and in support of the "national liberation" cause. After Washington proceeded to "Americanize" the war in spring 1965 by committing large numbers of its own combat forces and initiating continuous bombings of the North, the Politburo sustained all three modes of struggle. However, it hedged its bets on and prioritized military struggle, determining it was most likely to deliver "decisive victory" in a reasonable period.

Somewhat humbled by losses suffered over the course of 1968, nearing 40,000 PAVN and PLAF troops killed in action and tens of thousands more wounded, to say nothing of the decimation of the NLF's infrastructure, the

5 Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, "The War Politburo: North Vietnam's Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tet Offensive," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1 (1–2) (February/August 2006), 4–58.

Politburo revised its approach. It decreed that, moving forward, its armies would pursue a policy of "economy of forces," meaning that for the time being they would scale back the scope and frequency of their attacks against enemy outfits and positions. This, Lê Duẩn and his comrades hoped, would give both the PAVN and PLAF time to regroup, reorganize, and rebuild. Meanwhile, and largely to buy time for its armies to recuperate, the Politburo agreed to expand ongoing semipublic peace talks by allowing RVN diplomats to join DRVN and US representatives in Paris, on condition that a NLF delegation was admitted as well. That did absolutely nothing to make the talks more productive, but it did serve to enhance the international prestige and legitimacy of the NLF.

In 1969, low-level guerrilla operations became the order of the day for communist-led armies as the Politburo suspended "mass combat operations" below the 17th parallel. PAVN/PLAF regular forces did their best to avoid contact with large units of American, South Vietnamese, and allied forces thereafter. They reverted to hit-and-run, ambush-type operations against smaller outfits in remote parts of the South, as Southern guerrillas had characteristically done before the North-Vietnamization of hostilities in 1964–5. Since several PLAF units had not recovered from losses suffered the year before, Hanoi ordered the PAVN to lend them some of its own troops. The partial Northernization of PLAF units was the only way to keep that army afloat, though it also served the Politburo's purposes by making its control over the resistance effort in the South more complete.[6]

As it hit the reset button and scaled back military activity in the South, the Politburo leaned more heavily on the diplomatic mode of struggle to advance its resistance. To win over hearts and minds internationally while demonizing US President Richard Nixon, it invited sympathetic foreigners, including Americans, to visit North Vietnam and witness first-hand actual and alleged war crimes perpetrated by US air forces against its people. Meanwhile, DRVN and NLF delegations of women and students attended international conventions to spread a carefully scripted message intended to generate sympathy and support for the struggle against Saigon and the Americans. Delegations of writers, filmmakers, singers, dancers, and other artistic guilds contributed

6 The best work on communist-led forces at this and other stages of the Vietnam War is Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975* (Lawrence, KS, 2002). The book is a translation by Merle L. Pribbenow of a 1994 official history published in Vietnam.

to this international charm offensive by exercising their talents at festivals and commemorative events worldwide, including in Western countries. Interestingly, traditional forms of artistic expression considered variously as feudal, bourgeois, and reactionary by the Politburo and therefore banned in the DRVN were showcased and on full display overseas as demonstrations of the richness and sophistication of Vietnamese culture! Collectively, these and related initiatives generated greater and wider moral, political, and material support for Hanoi's travails by fostering the illusion that the anti-Saigon, anti-American cause constituted a veritable "people's war" inspired and driven by the ardent nationalism of Vietnam's people. That obfuscated the reality that committed Marxist-Leninists in fact engineered everything, which was sure to prove a liability in the effort to win over friends and allies beyond the socialist camp.[7]

The Politburo also expanded its diplomatic engagement with Washington. As the semipublic peace talks in Paris stopped producing meaningful propagandistic dividends, it accepted a White House offer to open a secret "backchannel" with Nixon's national security advisor, Henry Kissinger. Removed from media scrutiny, this forum allowed more frank and less bombastic discussions about ending the war through a negotiated settlement. Hanoi was not at that point desperate enough to give up on its core objective of securing complete victory. It was, however, keen on "probing" the Nixon administration, on getting a better sense of the US president's goals in Indochina and of his resolve to achieve them. In the Politburo's own formulation, it was prepared to engage in "talks" (*tiếp xúc*) but not "negotiations" (*thương lượng*) to uncover what Nixon really meant when he spoke of securing "peace with honor" in Southeast Asia. The secret channel offered an ideal opportunity to learn just that.[8]

None other than First Secretary Lê Duẩn's longtime comrade-in-arms and most trusted ally inside the Politburo, Lê Đức Thọ, assumed the role of head DRVN negotiator in the secret talks. He and Kissinger met over a dozen times over the next few years at undisclosed locations in France, usually the private residence of common acquaintances to maintain the veil of secrecy. Despite Hanoi's reservations about them, the secret talks produced tangible

7 See Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution* and Pierre Asselin, "Forgotten Front: The NLF in Hanoi's Diplomatic Struggle, 1965–67," *Diplomatic History* 45 (2) (April 2021), 330–55.

8 On the secret negotiations, see Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002) and Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York, 2002).

dividends, including establishing the contours of a diplomatic settlement between Hanoi and Washington. In a breakthrough in 1971, Washington agreed to allow PAVN troops already in the South to remain there after a ceasefire took effect in exchange for Hanoi's acquiescence in returning all US prisoners of war (POWs) in its and the NLF's custody. Over time, the talks also helped Thọ and Kissinger establish a healthy rapport that served their respective governments well once the latter settled on peace, later. Until then, the main sticking point in their talks – beyond the obduracy of each government – remained the political future of South Vietnam and the fate of President Thiệu. While the Politburo insisted on the latter's abdication and the formation of a new, neutralist regime in Saigon *before* a ceasefire, the Nixon administration maintained that such matters were for the Vietnamese themselves to decide *after* hostilities ended and prisoners were returned. In other words, Washington sought a diplomatic settlement covering military matters only, while Hanoi wanted one addressing political matters as well.

As this diplomatic dance went on in France, Hanoi engineered the creation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Southern Vietnam (PRG, *Chính phủ Cách mạng Lâm thời Cộng hòa miền Nam Việt Nam*). Formally established in June 1969, the new entity sought to further enhance the international legitimacy of the NLF by suggesting it exercised formal authority over sizable portions of the area below the 17th parallel and, by extension, that the power of Thiệu's regime was waning. In reality, the PRG was a government in name only, created to advance Hanoi's diplomatic struggle through enhancing the image and global footprint of the NLF. Consistent with these aspirations, the Politburo made Nguyễn Thị Bình the public face of the PRG overseas.[9] The grandniece of the famous nationalist leader Phan Châu Trinh, Bình was a seasoned diplomat who had previously assumed various postings around the world as a member of the NLF's foreign service. In her capacity as head of the NLF delegation to the semipublic Paris talks, she had gained a measure of notoriety. Intelligent, articulate, capable, and worldly, she excelled at relating to non-Vietnamese, including Westerners. In public appearances, she typically wore either a form-fitting *áo dài*, Vietnam's traditional female dress, or a "Mao suit" of sorts with her trademark checkered scarf. She quite consciously indulged and captured the foreign imagination as both Vietnamese woman and guerrilla fighter, unable to be the former without the latter.

9 *New York Times*, September 18, 1970, 3.

She became a media sensation who reshaped perceptions in the West. The so-called Viet Cong, she demonstrated, were more than simple-minded Southern Vietnamese men and women in black pajamas fighting with rudimentary weapons. They were human beings with a keen sense of social justice. In hindsight, the Politburo's decision to appoint her leader of the NLF/PRG delegation in Paris was a stroke of genius. As it turned out, she had no authority of her own in the negotiations: her positions were dictated by Hanoi, and North Vietnamese advisors surreptitiously wrote or vetted all her position papers.

The Politburo's diplomatic offensive of 1969 was impressive, to say the least. Not to be outdone, Washington also took a series of steps intended to improve its prospects in the post-Tet 1968 context. The first major move to that end came when President Nixon announced the first of what became a series of incremental withdrawals of US forces from Indochina. In July 1969, he confirmed that henceforth his administration would reduce the number and scale of US military commitments in Southeast Asia and elsewhere and expect allies to do more to ensure their own security. That meant, to borrow from the formulation of former US President Lyndon Johnson, that from now on Saigon could no longer count on American boys to do what South Vietnamese boys ought to do for themselves. To offset the departure of US forces, the Nixon administration pledged dramatic increases in military and other aid to Thiệu's regime in Saigon. By popular accounts, the application of the so-called Nixon Doctrine to Indochina translated into a "Vietnamization" of hostilities. In fact, the Vietnam War was always, at its core, a Vietnamese affair. By that rationale, incremental withdrawals of US forces simply meant that that affair, Americanized in 1965, would reassume its pre-1965 civil-war character.[10]

Publicly, the Politburo celebrated the Nixon Doctrine, claiming that the attendant Vietnamization of the war attested to the failure of the American enterprise in Indochina. Privately, it feared that the resumption of pure civil war would make it more difficult to market its war effort as a resistance against American imperialism, a central theme of its diplomatic struggle. To be sure, Hanoi took great offense when the Western press portrayed its indigenous enemies and other detractors as anything other than "puppets," "lackeys," and "reactionaries." These "traitors" worked against – on behalf of first the French and now the Americans – Vietnamese nationalism, which only Hồ Chí Minh and the VWP, by extension, incarnated. As the war thus

10 David L. Anderson, *Vietnamization: Politics, Strategy, Legacy* (Lanham, MD, 2020).

proceeded, responsibility for its continuation fell increasingly on Hanoi. In their efforts to rally domestic and world opinion, DRVN authorities had insisted all along that the United States must disengage from the South in order to enable Southerners to decide their own fate for and by themselves. As Washington complied with that exigence and pulled its troops out of South Vietnam, Hanoi became a prisoner of its own rhetoric and faced mounting pressure, including from its own socialist allies, to do the same. Vietnamization troubled the Politburo for other reasons. Increased fratricidal violence meant more bad blood among Vietnamese, presaging long-standing rancor likely to compromise postwar reconciliation, reconstruction, and development. Such violence also tarnished Vietnam's image as a model of the possibilities of national liberation, dear to Hanoi. More pressingly, expansion of the South Vietnamese armed forces, a core aspect of Vietnamization, hampered NLF/PLAF recruitment efforts, already challenging.

Soon, Vietnamization was not the only thing keeping Hanoi leaders up at night. To improve Saigon's prospects in the context of de-Americanization, Washington sanctioned major military operations against communist sanctuaries in Cambodia in 1970 and Laos the following year. Preceded by a coup in Phnom Penh that overthrew the neutralist government of Norodom Sihanouk and replaced it with a pro-American, "reactionary" junta under Lon Nol, the Cambodian incursion dealt a significant political and logistical blow to Hanoi. The primary target of the incursion, the Politburo's nerve center in the deep South known as the Central Office (Directorate) of South Vietnam (COSVN), escaped destruction. Its work, however, was severely disrupted. While Sihanouk had turned a blind eye to the Politburo's use of Cambodian territory to move men and supplies into South Vietnam, his successors were less accommodating. Suddenly, communist cadres and forces were no longer virtually immune to enemy ground attacks in Cambodia. The incursion into Laos spearheaded by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in February 1971 could have been equally devastating for Hanoi. But thanks to local and international press reports announcing it, the PAVN had enough time to beef up its military presence there. Unsurprisingly, its forces of 36,000 heavily armed regulars inflicted heavy casualties on ARVN units involved in the attack. Soon thereafter, the widely circulated photograph of a South Vietnamese soldier allegedly deployed into Laos and hanging from the skids of a returning US helicopter suggested that this first test of Vietnamization, as observers at the time

called it, had been a dismal failure, making the victory of communist-led forces a moral one as well. As it turned out, heavy American bombardments and a gritty ARVN performance during the campaign killed some 15,000 PAVN troops, making this a pyrrhic win for the Politburo, much like the Tet Offensive.[11]

In hindsight, the enemy incursions into Cambodia and Laos did not gravely impair the Politburo's war effort. Still, they were costly in various respects and, therefore, cause for concern. Since the onset of major combat operations in 1964–5, Hanoi had largely dictated the terms of the ground war, including when, where, and how to fight it. Suddenly, it seemed, the enemy had claimed the military initiative, compelling the Politburo to react, to fight on the defensive, and to tailor strategies and tactics accordingly.

As its armies fended off the enemy in Laos and Cambodia, the Politburo confronted an assault of a different kind on the diplomatic front. It turned out that expansion of the war across the rest of Indochina was not the only trick Nixon had up his sleeve to ratchet up the pressure on Hanoi: he also made a series of friendly overtures toward each of its main allies and suppliers of aid, namely China and the Soviet Union. Nixon was clearly trying to take advantage of existing cleavages and war fatigue in the socialist camp to serve his goals in Vietnam while undermining Hanoi's own. That deeply unsettled the Politburo, which understood that, at this late juncture in the war, Beijing and Moscow might each be seriously tempted to sacrifice Vietnamese interests for the sake of healthier relations with Washington. The Sino-Soviet dispute had reached new heights following a brief but violent border clash in 1969. Neither Moscow nor Beijing wanted frosty relations with two large powers at once. Having recently identified the Soviet Union as the primary threat to its national security, China felt particularly vulnerable; the Politburo rightly assumed it would not pass on an opportunity to endear itself to the Americans.[12]

In 1971, the US national table tennis team made a very mediatized visit to Beijing that set the stage for a secret visit to the Chinese capital by Henry

11 John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS, 2005); James H. Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Sơn 719 and Vietnamization in Laos* (College Station, TX, 2014); and Timothy Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: United States Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955–75* (New York, 1993).

12 On the Sino-Soviet dispute, see Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split, 1956–1966: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, 2008).

Kissinger shortly thereafter. Following that visit, Zhou Enlai arrived in Hanoi to brief the Politburo on that and other recent events. Sensing the Chinese had committed themselves to rapprochement with the United States, Politburo members became livid when Zhou informed them that Beijing had invited Nixon to a summit with Mao in 1972. The Americans aspired to undermine the Sino-Vietnamese alliances, the members felt, and Beijing was falling for it. Zhou's assurances that the warming of Sino-American relations would have no bearing on China's Vietnam policy fell on deaf ears. In Vietnamese eyes, Beijing's reciprocal entreaties toward Washington amounted to nothing less than a betrayal of their cause. They were "a torpedo" aimed directly at Vietnam's anti-American resistance.[13]

The Politburo's protests were to no avail; Beijing had made up its mind about the Americans and its own need for rapprochement. While Lê Duẩn and his comrades seethed in anger privately, they subsequently acted vis-à-vis Beijing as if they had moved on because they recognized they had to. Their armies still desperately needed Chinese military support and, in light of severe flooding in August 1971 resulting in significant crop losses in parts of the DRVN, their people needed food as well. Besides, condemning Beijing for its duplicity in the context of renewed Sino-Soviet tensions might be interpreted by leaders there as indicative of DRVN alignment with Moscow in their dispute, likely to produce a total aid cutoff. In hindsight, Sino-American rapprochement damaged the Sino-Vietnamese alliance beyond repair. That alliance had witnessed its fair share of ups and downs since the heydays of 1963–4. But the events of 1971 irreversibly changed it. Mutual trust and respect gradually but surely gave way to mutual enmity and mistrust, shaking Hanoi's confidence in its ability to continue the war much longer.[14]

That confidence suffered another major blow when Moscow made clear its own desire for improved relations with the United States and, in October 1971, invited Nixon to visit the Soviet Union the following year as well. If both China and the Soviet Union had evidently had enough of the Cold War and of the war in Vietnam by extension, it stood to reason that the rest of the socialist camp felt the same. Suddenly time was no longer

13 Quoted in "Information on the Visit of the Vietnamese Party–Government Delegation in Beijing," December 5, 1971, Arkhiv na Ministerstvoto na Vunshnite Raboti (Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sofia, hereafter cited as AMVnR), opis 22p, archivna edinitsa (file) (hereafter cited as a.e.) 90, 303. Document translated by Simeon Mitropolitski and provided by Lorenz M. Lüthi of McGill University.

14 Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).

the Politburo's ally. In the new international context, the longer the conflict dragged on, the more likely Hanoi was to suffer losses of material, political, and moral support. Nixon had upped the military pressure by going after communist sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos and then the diplomatic one by courting Chinese and Soviet leaders. Unless it did as its own allies were doing, and constructively engaged Washington with a view to ending American involvement on terms satisfactory to the American President, the Politburo would likely face punishing military and diplomatic consequences.

As it happened, Chinese leaders welcomed Nixon to Beijing in February 1972. By the terms of the Shanghai Communiqué announced at the summit, Washington recognized Taiwan as part of China, and both governments pledged to keep working toward establishing full diplomatic relations. Privately, Chinese leaders promised Washington to lean on Hanoi to end the war by negotiations. Lê Duẩn and his comrades deeply resented this meddling in their affairs. "The basis for all of China's actions is Chinese nationalism and chauvinism," grumbled one DRVN official. Others speculated that China had never been genuinely interested in their revolution, that it had only sought to bleed the United States in Vietnam "to the last Vietnamese." In acting as it did, Beijing had forfeited its right to be recognized as a revolutionary vanguard. China's leaders were not real revolutionaries, a dejected Lê Duẩn exclaimed privately, but "traitors to the interests of the revolutionary forces of the world."[15] Mao had replaced disgraced Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev as the leading Marxist-Leninist revisionist and threat to international communist solidarity, Politburo members thought. The Soviets, meanwhile, prepared to roll out their own red carpet for Nixon. But because of the closeness of their relationship in recent years, the Politburo found Beijing's behavior much more frustrating and unsettling. Soviet–American détente was disgraceful, but it amounted in Vietnamese eyes to no more than a renewed commitment to the policy of peaceful coexistence introduced more than a decade and a half ago by Khrushchev. Since then, Hanoi had made its peace with Moscow's revisionist tendencies, inasmuch as those tendencies had never precluded Soviet support for the DRVN in the American War.

15 "Report by Vladislav Videnov, Ambassador of the PR Bulgaria to the DR Vietnam: Regarding Some Assessments and Points of View of the VWP on the Events and the Situation in Vietnam during the Last Two Months (since April 15 till June 10)," June 22, 1972; a.e. 33; opis 23p; AMVnR, 27. Document translated by Simeon Mitropolitski and provided by Lorenz M. Lüthi of McGill University.

Figure 6.1 Lê Duẩn, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Workers' Party, visiting the crew of an anti-aircraft unit in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1967).
Source: Sovfoto / Contributor / Universal Images Group / Getty Images.

Going for Broke, Again

Facing mounting pressures domestically and internationally as a result of Nixon's schemes, the Politburo set out to reclaim the initiative, to put itself back in the driver's seat. After heated and contentious internal deliberations, it settled on another major offensive in the South of a magnitude comparable to the 1968 Tet Offensive. The central objective of this latest effort would be routing and demoralizing the ARVN by crushing its main-force units and achieving "total victory" within ten to fifteen months. "The time had come to lay all cards on the table" and finally "sweep away the Saigon forces and regime" all the way to Saigon, Lê Duẩn believed.[16] Given recent military and diplomatic setbacks and the fact that communist-led forces in the South were still recovering from manpower and materiel losses suffered in their last big offensive, the plan was risky. However, 1972 was a presidential

16 Beijing to Paris, June 16, 1972; File 145; Asie-Océanie: Vietnam Conflit, Archives Diplomatiques de France, La Courneuve, Paris, 1–2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316225288.009 Published online by Cambridge University Press

election year in the United States. Even if things did not go as planned militarily, the Politburo felt it would still reap political and diplomatic dividends, just as it had four years before. At a minimum, the new offensive would disrupt and quite possibly derail entirely Sino-American rapprochement and Soviet–American détente, including the upcoming Brezhnev–Nixon summit scheduled for May. Hanoi leaders were convinced that the renewal of major hostilities in the South would leave Moscow and Beijing no choice but to rally behind Hanoi and take some distance from the Americans.

The Quang Trung Offensive, named after the leader of an army that had defeated a Chinese invasion in 1789, began on March 30, 1972. On that day, five PAVN divisions comprising approximately 120,000 men crossed into the South from bases inside the North and sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia. Unlike the Tet Offensive, this was a conventional-style invasion involving armored and heavy field artillery units. Anti-aircraft units previously assigned to the defense of Northern cities and largely idle since the suspension of US bombings of the DRVN in late 1968 accompanied the invading force. Hanoi expected a heavy air response by the United States, less against the North itself than against its forces in the South and their supply lines running through Laos and Cambodia.

The offensive proceeded well at the onset, with PAVN forces conquering large swathes of the South's northern tier. Heavy US bombings, including raids on supply lines, slowed but did not stop the offensive. In early May 1972, Washington extended the bombings to the area above the 17th parallel, effectively resuming the air war against the DRVN suspended four years earlier. To the Politburo's consternation, the Americans also mined Northern harbors, including Hải Phòng, to dissuade foreign ships from docking, and thus curtail the flow of aid arriving by sea. The impact was almost immediate. In conjunction with sustained attacks on supply lines in the South, the bombing and mining campaigns severely hindered the transfer of men and materiel to the invading force in the South. Smelling blood, ARVN forces mounted a series of successful counteroffensives, eventually reclaiming Quảng Trị City in a highly symbolic victory. By September, communist-led forces were running out of steam. Later that month, Hanoi decided to cut its losses and indefinitely suspended the Quang Trung Offensive.

To the Politburo's astonishment, Moscow and Beijing only mildly condemned the bombing of the DRVN and the mining of its ports by the Americans. Adding insult to injury, each ally proceeded as before with its engagement of Washington. Moscow did not even postpone the Brezhnev–Nixon summit, which occurred as planned in May in an atmosphere so cozy

and friendly as to make Hanoi leaders reel. When the Soviets turned down its request for assistance in de-mining North Vietnamese harbors – as only they possessed the necessary hardware – the Politburo knew its struggle was on life-support. The Quang Trung Offensive constituted the third "go-for-broke" effort launched by Hanoi during a US presidential election year that failed to meet its intended objective. This latest setback was especially devastating, as the losses in men and materiel incurred were such that they called into question the long-term prospects of the Marxist-Leninist Vietnamese revolutionary project. While equally costly militarily, the 1968 Tet Offensive had at least produced tangible political and psychological dividends, including the end of Johnson's presidency. Nothing of the sort resulted from the 1972 campaign. Admittedly, the PAVN now enjoyed a larger troop presence below the 17th parallel, but that offered little solace to those forces and their leaders at the time. Yet again, Lê Duẩn and his Politburo had gambled big, and lost big.

As it had a habit of doing when the military situation turned disadvantageous, the Politburo at once turned to diplomacy. In the fall, it agreed to the resumption of bilateral talks in Paris between Kissinger and Lê Đức Thọ. No longer secret since Nixon revealed their existence during a January 1972 televised address, the Kissinger–Thọ negotiations remained private and the most viable channel for serious discussions and reaching a settlement. In the official DRVN account, by acting as it did in late 1972 the Politburo shifted from a "strategy of war" to a "strategy of peace."[17]

In the days prior to a negotiating session scheduled for early October, the Politburo convened to decide on a course of action. Acknowledging the imperative need to de-escalate the conflict and arrive at an accommodation of sorts with the Americans, if only to give communist-led forces a chance to recuperate, it decided to drop the long-standing demand calling for the removal of RVN President Thiệu as a precondition to a ceasefire. The decision had the desired effect. When Thọ informed Kissinger, the latter was ecstatic, because he recognized this was the breakthrough needed to bring their talks to a successful conclusion. Over the ensuing days, the two men and their respective teams of assistants worked assiduously to finalize a comprehensive draft agreement. Consistent with American wishes, the resulting draft agreement settled pressing military matters and left more problematic

17 Khac Huynh, "Đàm phán Pari và hiệp định Pari về Việt Nam với phương châm giành thắng lợi từng bước" [The Paris Negotiations and the Paris Agreement on Vietnam with the Policy Line of Winning Step by Step], *Nghiên cứu Quốc tế* [*International Research*] 11 (1996), 24; Lưu Văn Lợi and Nguyễn Anh Vũ, *Các cuộc thương lượng Lê Đức Thọ-Kissinger tại Pari* [*The Lê Đức Thọ–Kissinger Negotiations in Paris*] (Hanoi, 1996), 222.

political issues, including the future of South Vietnam, to be resolved among the Vietnamese parties themselves after the cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of remaining US forces. Peace, Kissinger would state publicly shortly thereafter, was finally "at hand."[18]

Optimism gave way to gloom after Washington informed Saigon of the terms of the draft deal. Never a party to the secret/private talks, nor apprised of their progress, Thiệu's regime had ample reason to object. Pressed for specifics by the Americans, the RVN president explained that his government could not abide the continued presence of PAVN forces in the South after a ceasefire. Unless the agreement was revised to address that and a series of other, less grave matters, Thiệu would never endorse a deal. If Washington still wanted one despite his objections, then it could sign a bilateral agreement with Hanoi, he boldly told the Americans.[19]

Once it got word that something was amiss between Saigon and Washington, the Politburo sought to capitalize on the situation. During a private negotiating session in November 1972, Thọ informed Kissinger that the Politburo had no intention of revisiting the terms of its agreement with Washington, which it considered finalized. It remained obdurate even after Nixon won reelection in a landslide victory that seemed to validate his military and diplomatic maneuverings. In another round of discussions with Kissinger in early December, Thọ remained intransigent. With the talks at an impasse, Kissinger notified Thọ that Nixon might resort to extreme measures to bring about the finalization of a deal satisfactory to all parties, including Saigon, sooner rather than later. That included another campaign of sustained bombings of the North, the likes of which Hanoi had never seen, the American warned his North Vietnamese counterpart.

Upon returning to Hanoi, Thọ relayed Kissinger's threat to the other members of the Politburo, doing his best to impress its seriousness upon them. Immovable at first, Lê Duẩn and like-minded Politburo hardliners eventually agreed with Thọ that finalizing an agreement that was not ideal but at least provided for the end of all US military activities and the withdrawal of foreign forces was, at that juncture, preferable to the continuation and, possibly, escalation of hostilities. Unfortunately, by the time the Politburo was ready to inform Washington of its decision, Nixon had run out of patience and ordered the start of a new campaign of sustained bombings of the North.

18 *New York Times*, October 27, 1972, 18.
19 George J. Veith, *Drawn Swords in a Distant Land: South Vietnam's Shattered Dreams* (New York, 2021), chapter 21.

As Kissinger had warned Thọ, Linebacker II, the "Christmas Bombing" campaign initiated on December 18, turned out to be the most savage and intense waged by the United States against the DRVN. Seeking to cripple his enemies militarily as well as psychologically, Nixon sanctioned for the first time the use of large strategic B-52 bombers to attack targets in and around Hanoi and Hải Phòng, heretofore off-limits to such aircraft. The loss of substantial anti-aircraft assets, including equipment and personnel, in the Quang Trung Offensive made the North quite vulnerable. That is not to say its air-defense system and forces were impotent. Quite the contrary, they mounted a surprisingly spirited and lethal resistance to the renewed air war, especially during its opening days. The problem was that they were not prepared for, nor did North Vietnamese military planners anticipate the possibility of, such a sustained and high-intensity effort by Washington at this late stage in the war. Partly as a result, by the end of the first week of bombing anti-aircraft units across the North were running out of assembled, ready-to-use surface-to-air (SAM) missiles, severely diminishing their capabilities. By the time Nixon suspended the campaign on December 29, the Americans were attacking with increased impunity. No wonder, then, that the Politburo caved in, informing Washington through a backchannel on December 26 that it agreed to resume negotiations once the bombing ended.

Privately, the Politburo regretted not indulging Nixon sooner and sparing the country another round of bombing and attendant devastation. Publicly, however, it claimed that Washington had unconditionally suspended the bombing because it could no longer sustain such high losses in men and equipment as those inflicted by DRVN defenders. In support of that premise, Hanoi launched a public relations campaign predicated on the notion that these "twelve days and nights" (*mười hai ngày đêm*) of bombing constituted no less than a "Điện Biên Phủ of the skies" (*Điện Biên Phủ trên không*) for the US government. Just as a valiant campaign by communist-led forces had delivered an epic triumph in the remote northwestern valley back in 1954, a similarly heroic effort had achieved victory in the skies above North Vietnam in late 1972. This constituted a gross exaggeration, to be sure, but Hanoi exercised full control over the production and dissemination of information across the DRVN, rendering its claims credible domestically if only because it was impossible to disprove them. Hanoi's cause in this instance was also served by the international community, which loudly and angrily denounced and protested this latest escalation of the war at a time Washington was supposed to

be ending it. Some of the harshest condemnations of the bombing came from Americans themselves – from journalists as well as some members of Congress in particular.[20]

When Thọ met again with Kissinger in Paris early in 1973, he knew that he had to end the war once and for all. Hanoi simply could no longer endure the military pressure of the United States. Their first meeting on January 3 got off to a rough start, as he angrily castigated Kissinger and his government for so savagely and unnecessarily attacking the DRVN in December. Once he was done with his rant, Thọ and Kissinger got to work. Within days they completed another draft agreement that took into consideration some of the issues Thiệu had previously raised, and that had precluded the finalization of a deal in October–November. The most contentious matter remaining at the time of the December bombing was the language in the agreement concerning the status of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between the two Vietnams. At Thiệu's insistence, Kissinger had sought language that could be read to imply that the DMZ was not just a military but also a political marker between the two Vietnams, which the Politburo rejected because it considered Vietnam's territorial integrity sacrosanct. In January, however, it consented to the same language Kissinger had proposed earlier. That concession, inconsequential – a "cosmetic change" – in the eyes of many scholars, was in fact extraordinarily telling of the state of mind of the Politburo at the time and, above all, of its eagerness to end the war.[21]

Finishing Off Saigon

The "Agreement to End the War and Restore the Peace in Vietnam" was signed by representatives of the four parties – the United States, DRVN, PRG, and RVN – in Paris on January 27, 1973. Presumably inaugurating an era of peace, none of its signatories harbored high hopes for its prospects. The agreement resolved a number of issues, mostly as they concerned the American military presence in Vietnam. The matters at the heart of the conflict, namely the competing political ideologies and orientations of authorities in Hanoi and Saigon, were not covered by the agreement, which merely encouraged their resolution through subsequent negotiations among the Vietnamese parties themselves. At the time of signing, the two rival Vietnamese governments

20 *Điện Biên Phủ trên không* [*Điện Biên Phủ of the Skies*] (Hanoi, 2007).

21 George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975,* 4th ed. (New York, [1979] 2002), 317; Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (New York, 2008), 159.

remained as far apart on those issues as they had been since the beginning of "big war" in 1964–5.[22]

As expected, it did not take long for hostilities to resume. No sooner had the United States ended its military involvement and pulled out the last of its combat forces – at which point a good part of the international community lost interest in the situation there – than the two sides started fighting again. While Thiệu surprised no one by refusing to abide by the letter and spirit of the agreement, the Politburo had few qualms about answering Saigon's provocations in kind and reprising the war. Its forces and people had been driven to the point of exhaustion in 1972. However, now that the Americans were out of the picture, it was confident they could bear a continuation of hostilities. Besides, it was never in the habit of sparing its citizens from hardship, and the latter were by now accustomed to giving more just as they thought they had nothing left to give.

In July 1973, VWP leaders convened to discuss and formulate a better response to developments in the South since the de-Americanization of hostilities in late March. Although that had constituted a significant milestone in their reunification struggle, they worried that the Americans might reintervene, since peace had failed to eventuate. From their perspective, that was because Thiệu refused to abide the continued presence of PAVN troops below the 17th parallel, sanctioned under the terms of the Paris Agreement on Vietnam. Since its signing, ARVN units had aggressively and violently moved against PAVN/PLAF-controlled areas, often with great success. That situation could not continue, the assembled leaders surmised. The problem was that a forceful response at that juncture could prompt Nixon to resort to bombing, either of the North or of communist strongholds in the South, and possibly even both. The latter was a long shot, to be sure, but the Politburo had learned by now never to underestimate Nixon's resolve to salvage his country's honor and not abandon Saigon. The good news was that the American Congress appeared to be working on various legislative measures that precluded further US combat operations in the region.[23]

Taking account of both domestic and international circumstances, the Politburo endorsed Resolution 21 calling for resuming armed struggle in the South but strictly to preserve existing positions there and otherwise reclaim territory lost to Thiệu's armies since the signing of the agreement.

22 Pierre Journoud and Cécile Menétrey-Monchau (eds.), *Vietnam, 1968–1976: La sortie de guerre/Exiting a War* (Brussells, 2011).

23 Johannes Kadura, *The War after the War: The Struggle for Credibility during America's Exit from Vietnam* (Ithaca, 2016).

The Politburo did not want its forces to do anything beyond that, for fear it might precipitate a military response from Washington leading to partial US reengagement. If the Americans did not respond, then it would consider adopting a more proactive stance. Besides, communist-led forces in the South remained too weak and disorganized to go on the offensive. Restraint was for the time being the order of the day.

The ensuing back-and-forth between Saigon's and Hanoi's armies produced full-blown war across much of the South by the fall of 1973. Resolution 21's "cautious formulation" was "enough to give the green light to commanders in the South to take more aggressive measures as they saw fit," one observer noted.[24] The escalation of hostilities caused concern in Hanoi, as it afforded the Nixon administration an ideal pretext to come to the defense of its embattled ally. But then, in November, Congress adopted the War Powers Act, which set limits on the presidential authority to deploy US military forces overseas. Around the same time, the Watergate scandal erupted, consuming Nixon. The Politburo interpreted all this to mean that Nixon would find it next to impossible to offer succor to the regime in Saigon. The road ahead was getting brighter.

By 1974, communist-led forces were in the best shape they had been in years and making meaningful, albeit slow, gains across the South, thanks to increased aid deliveries from Moscow. Hanoi was clearly gaining the upper hand over Saigon, whose problems were compounded by severe cuts in aid from Washington. In March, the Politburo began making preparations for another general offensive. If all went as planned, Lê Duẩn predicted that "big and decisive victory" could come within three years. Then, in August 1974, Nixon resigned as president of the United States. Encouraged by the news, the Politburo surmised its armies might be able to complete the liberation of the South in one big, final push by the end of 1976. Absent Nixon, the United States was unlikely to intervene to save Saigon. Vietnam had been his cause; his successor would not want to assume that burden. The Americans would not return to Vietnam "even if you offer them candy," one Hanoi official estimated. That, plus Thiệu's growing tribulations and declining support in the South, made the present an ideal time for escalation.

Communist-led forces went to work in November–December 1974. Their mission was simple: annihilate enemy forces and conquer all major cities, including Saigon. Unlike the Tet Offensive, when urban enclaves were targeted simultaneously, in this campaign they were assaulted in sequence,

24 Elliott, *Vietnamese War*, 17.

one-by-one, from various staging areas. The campaign got off to a promising start, with PAVN/PLAF forces scoring a series of rapid and relatively easy victories. In mid-December, they attacked strategic Phước Long province, north of Saigon, and crushed their opposition. Washington took no meaningful action in response to these developments in spite of Thiệu's desperate pleas for assistance. In the aftermath of Phước Long, the Politburo concluded that circumstances were propitious for completing the "liberation" of the South not by the end of 1976, as originally projected, but before the onset of the next monsoon season, in April–May 1975. According to Lê Duẩn, Hanoi enjoyed an "opportune moment" to launch "the strongest and swiftest attack possible" to achieve "a complete, total victory."[25] This was not the first time Lê Duẩn sought to capitalize on such a moment. The years 1968 and 1972 had also been "opportune moments" for achieving decisive victory, he thought. Given significantly reduced aid, including weapons and deliveries from China, communist-led forces could hardly afford to suffer another defeat in yet another major, all-out offensive.

The prospects for victory were better this time. Communist-led forces made significant progress through the early part of 1975. Their enemies fought valiantly but suffered from low morale and a lack of air support, which they had grown accustomed to in the era of Americanization. In March, Hanoi launched a coordinated offensive against the strategically important city of Ban Mê Thuột in the Central Highlands, a core theater of the war. The city was overrun within days, along with a good portion of the rest of the region thereafter. As PAVN units prepared for their next move against Pleiku, another important Central Highlands city, President Thiệu ordered the evacuation of ARVN forces from the region and their redeployment closer to the capital.[26]

The withdrawal of South Vietnamese forces was a major break for Hanoi and, in retrospect, a key reason its ambitious plan for taking Saigon before the onset of the rainy season came to fruition. Everything unraveled for Saigon after Thiệu made the call to pull his troops out of the Central Highlands. For many Southerners, the call presaged Saigon's surrender to the communists. A sizable number of ARVN troops lost what will they had left to fight and surrendered, defected, or simply shed their weapons and uniforms and went home. While most remained loyal to the regime and kept performing

25 Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, 360.
26 On the final months of the war, see George J. Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam, 1973–75* (New York, 2012).

their assigned duties, they proved no match for advancing communist armies made stronger by vast quantities of weapons and other hardware, including armored vehicles and heavy artillery, left behind by fleeing enemies. In late March 1975, with broad swathes of the South under the firm control of its armies, the Politburo gave them the go-ahead to move against Huế and Đà Nẵng, the South's largest cities after Saigon, which fell spectacularly fast. Recognizing that his days were numbered, Thiệu resigned as RVN president on April 21 and fled the country.

The last major battle of the war, the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign, as the Politburo branded it, began on April 26. Its objective was the seizure of Saigon, the ultimate prize. Supervised by former Kissinger counterpart in the secret Paris talks and Nobel laureate Lê Đức Thọ, the campaign unfolded at lightning speed. As communist-led forces advanced toward the capital, remaining American personnel evacuated, taking with them orphans plus tens of thousands of South Vietnamese closely tied to the regime in Saigon, along with their families. In all, more than 150,000 Southerners left their country on or just before that day, becoming the first of what would become millions of Indochinese refugees. By some accounts, Hanoi voluntarily delayed the advance of its forces on to the capital to give the Americans time to complete their evacuation and thus avoid a complicated situation for both governments.[27]

Conclusion

Around noon on April 30, a PAVN tank bearing the NLF flag crashed through the front gate of Independence Palace in Saigon, the South Vietnamese president's official residence. Newly invested President Dương Văn Minh offered his government's surrender to the highest-ranking PAVN officer on site, only to be told by that officer that he, Minh, had nothing to surrender. Interestingly, communist troops in Saigon celebrated cautiously that day, concerned about a possible repeat of what they had endured in the Tet Offensive, when they had easily seized several key cities only to be driven out of each of them after the enemy savagely counterattacked. This time, only peace ensued.

Thus ended the Vietnam War, or the American war in Vietnam in communist parlance, and Vietnam's thirty-year-long civil war along with it.

27 *Chiến dịch Hồ Chí Minh giải phóng miền Nam, thống nhất đất nước* [*The Hồ Chí Minh Campaign to Liberate the South and Reunify the Country*] (Hanoi, 2005); Thurston Clarke, *Honorable Exit: How a Few Brave Americans Risked All to Save Our Vietnamese Allies at the End of the War* (New York, 2019).

Hanoi scored a total, albeit in the final analysis extremely costly, victory. The Politburo finally had its moment of triumph – and vindication for the millions of lives lost or shattered because of the war it had so desperately wanted and had been instrumental in precipitating more than a decade before. Its armies had performed valiantly but endured astonishingly heavy casualties because of their own leaders' hubris and miscalculations on the one hand, and the superior firepower of their enemies on the other. Despite those casualties, which included approximately 1 million PAVN and NLF/PLAF personnel killed according to the official communist record, the Politburo prevailed because it did not limit its efforts to the military front, and simultaneously struggled politically to win hearts and minds at home and diplomatically to rally public opinion against its enemies and behind its own cause overseas. Ultimately, the Politburo waged a better, more sophisticated, war, and won.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316225288.009 Published online by Cambridge University Press