VIETNAM:
AGGRESSION FROM THE WEST

Bob Catley

THE ECONOMIST's 'Foreign Report', confidential and never to be cited, is no doubt a great boon to academic commentators on foreign affairs; a useful short note on the latest activities in far-flung places, providing ample data for notes on current affairs. Its report on Vietnam, describing Hanoi's admission, via an editorial in Nhan Dan of the failure of this year's offensive was my first reintroduction to Western reporting on Indochina since my return from the DRV. While there, I had the opportunity to talk to the editor of Nhan Dan, and writer of the editorial, Mr. Hoang Tung; I also read the editorial. The Vietnamese make no such admission. On the contrary, they regard the offensive as the latest in a series of strategic defeats which have been dealt to American policies in Indochina.

In the view of the DRV, the war in Indochina may be viewed as a war of resistance to American efforts to impose a neo-colonial government in Saigon. Each American strategy to achieve this objective has been defeated; each defeat has produced a new strategy, which has in turn been defeated. At first, the French provided the means for US policy; they were forcibly evicted in 1954. A Saigon client regime was then organised, with Richard Nixon a major architect. By 1961, this was on the verge of collapse and was only rescued by Kennedy's despatch of thousands of US military advisers and the utilisation of 'special war' techniques. By 1964, this policy was in ruins both militarily — the NLF was recording impressive victories — and politically, with the series of coups which followed Washington's abandoning Diem. Johnson resorted to naked US force in the form of both combat troops and aerial bombardment. The Tet offensive of 1968 saw the denouement of both that strategy and its creator.

In 1969, Nixon who, like all his predecessors, had been the peace candidate in the election campaign, again reformulated American strategy in Indochina, but in crucial respects his objectives remained the same. He made two crucial decisions, neither of which has been rescinded at the time of writing: to win the war — that is, to preserve an unpopular, client Saigon regime; and to win the 1972 US elections despite winning the war. Again, like his predecessors, he had to do this in the face of declining US capabilities in Indochina. The US army was inefficient, costly, politically expensive and facing severe morale problems. In addition, US options were being reduced by the considerable erosion of its global supremacy, both economically, as international financial crises were to testify, and militarily, as the necessity to choose between competing military demands in strategic weaponry, Europe and Indochina brought home.

The means the Nixon Administration adopted to implement US policy in Indochina were designed to overcome these problems. They are by now well known. The Saigon forces were to replace the Americans and were suitably equipped for this purpose by large increases in US arms shipments. A stepped up "pacification" campaign, staffed by Saigon forces with US equipment, supervised by extensive, increased USAF bombardment of rural Vietnam, backed by the herding of millions of refugees into urban ghettos and resettlement camps, and supplemented by assassination programs against the "Viet Cong infrastructure"; these were its features. It was cheaper, less visible, and more destructive. The 1969 campaign season witnessed its formulation, inauguration and political camouflage. In 1970, Nixon re-implemented Johnson's abortive efforts to cut supplies to the South. Cambodia was invaded in a farcical attempt to locate the NLF command structure and the Cambodians joined the Indochinese resistance. In 1971, Southern Laos was invaded and Saigon's crack forces beaten back in total defeat.

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In 1971, Nixon attempted a more daring and original manoeuvre. He opened personal contacts with both Peking and Moscow. The Vietnamese and Chinese both viewed these initiatives as indications of Nixon's weaknesses, arguing that had the US retained its supremacy of the 1950s, a US President would not have considered such personal diplomacy. They also appreciated that a subordinate objective to the relaxation of inter-state tensions was an attempt to persuade the Soviets, by offers of trade deals, and the Chinese, probably by suggestions of technical assistance, to relax their support for Hanoi.

In early 1972, many commentators, ranging from such anti-war veterans as Alex Carey, to the DLP, argued that Vietnamisation had succeeded and that the war in South Vietnam was all but won by the US. Diplomatically, the US had totally rejected the negotiating position of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam. The PRG had proposed in its 7-point program of July 1 1971 the establishment of a tripartite Saigon government of National Concord, one-third PRG, one-third urban opposition, one-third pro-US (minus Thieu), to supervise democratic elections in the South. American forces would withdraw on a timetable that would also see the release of the POW's from the DRV. South Vietnam would be non-communist, neutral and independent and then negotiate with the DRV on the question of re-unification. The Americans utterly rejected this proposal by supporting the farcical one-candidate presidential elections Thieu organised and won with over 90 per cent of the vote in late 1971. Even McMahon admitted Australia did not consider it worthwhile to send observers. The Americans were indeed confident: the cost of the war was down, its destructiveness was up; only McGovern seemed likely to try to make it an election issue; victory seemed once more around the corner.

It is only in this context that the objectives and achievements of the spring/summer offensive may be considered. It was a surprise. The US thought an offensive of two or three divisions on one front might be possible; over 100,000 regular forces were deployed and four fronts opened. First, the ten year old defensive line south of the DMZ was smashed. Secondly, the outer defensive line north-west of Saigon, centred on An Loc was attacked. Thirdly, the defensive line for central South Vietnam around Kontum was assaulted. These surprise offensives brought the deployment of Saigon's regular strategic reserves. The decisive front of irregulars on the coast and in the Mekong delta was then opened in conjunction with intensified political activities against Thieu in the cities.

The main objective was never to seize territory for trading off in Paris, to capture a city and set up a government, or to conquer the whole of South Vietnam. As Mr. Hoang Tung said, they cannot kick the Americans into the sea; they only have a small foot. Their major objectives were the American equipped, American trained, and American directed Saigon forces, and the American created pacification campaign. They estimate to have severely damaged both.

Saigon's regular forces have been fully deployed and severely mauled — three of their 13 regular divisions have been entirely destroyed and the remainder badly damaged. Pacification was then manned by the even less well-motivated local forces that the irregular Liberation forces could engage. The army of occupation was withdrawn to meet the offensive and revolution was again on the agenda. Phuoc Tuy was one of its first successes. It will take years to rebuild ARVN and pacification.

In this situation, the reaction of the United States became, as ever, critical. Clearly Nixon's military interdiction policies had failed. Also clearly, despite the conjectures of Western observers, particularly I. F. Stone in the New York Review of Books, and David Horowitz in Ramparts. Nixon had failed to persuade Peking or Moscow to urge surrender on the Vietnamese. On the contrary, China seems more co-operative than before in transporting Soviet equipment and has just signed a new agreement on supplies with the DRV; Podgorny's visit to Hanoi brought no relief to Washington; and Kissinger brought no new crumbs from Peking in June.

It should be pointed out that Peking's reception for Nixon, while continuing its support for the Vietnamese, is contrary to neither its ideological posture nor its present strategic objectives. On the first matter, the Chinese have clearly stated since at least the late 1950s that negotiations cannot be substituted for force, and will not stop American ambitions. At present, in their estimation, which may, of course, be disputed, the US is entering a strategic decline in east Asia and it is this defeat which enables negotiations, not vice-versa. On the second point, they reason that the major contemporary contradiction is between the people of the world and Soviet and US imperialism. Again, the normalisation of state-to-state relations with both is not incompatible with a policy of heightening that contradiction. Whether such views are valid may be debated; but they certainly do not necessarily mean a "diplomatic sell-out" of the Vietnamese, as sections of the Western left have been quick to conclude.

As is well known, Nixon, like his predecessors, escalated rather than abandon Thieu. First, the blockade: will it work? To my untrained eye, Haiphong seemed shut, although the Vietnamese would not admit it. In view of US attacks on smaller vessels, they may well be correct. A CIA estimate of 1969, published in the New York Review of Books, June 1 1972, gives detailed reasons why it would fail. The blockade certainly hasn't stopped the offensive.

Secondly, Nixon has increased the bombing of the DRV. I visited only the Hanoi-Haiphong area which is, by all accounts, less heavily hit than the southern provinces. While the US may well be attacking military targets, it is most certainly and deliberately hitting non-military ones. I saw

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schools, hospitals and residential quarters that had been bombed. Villages have been attacked with fragmentation bombs, the most recent of which use plastic pellets that X-rays do not detect. Phuoc Loc village was attacked by B-52s at 2 a.m., April 16, 1972, and 444 people killed and 517 wounded. The Red River dyke system, built over 1,000 years, and providing life for 15 million people, has been bombed deliberately and clouds seeded to increase the destruction. “Spider” bombs, fragmentation bombs with eight 8-metre springs to attach them to buildings, trees or rubble, are dropped after raids to catch civilians emerging from the shelters. As enthusiastic American estimates of rising crime, prostitution and corruption in the DRV suggest, the main objective of the bombing is the social fabric and morale of the population, not its military capability which Johnson found invulnerable. But at present, American intentions to destroy totally the dyke system and break up the social fabric of the DRV remain a threat; a threat which will be steadily implemented as the stick to encourage Vietnamese acceptance of a bitter carrot, the Thieu regime and its cease-fire.

Thirdly, the Nixon Administration has increased enormously the American fire power at its disposal. The number of B-52s has been quadrupled to over 200; the number of tactical planes tripled to over 1200; the 7th fleet greatly strengthened. Perhaps 200,000 U.S. servicemen remain engaged in the war, only a quarter of whom are stationed in South Vietnam.

Finally, Nixon offers the message to Hanoi; McGovern will not win. I will compromise now, but after the elections I will have no incentive to do so. You must compromise and accept my Saigon regime, and you must compromise now. If you don’t, I will win the election and you will be dead. To the world, Nixon’s message shows a different face. We are entering a period of peace and compromise, in Europe, in the arms race, in Korea, with China. Only the DRV remains obstinate. The American press even quotes, out of context, what its Nixon administration has increased the American fire power at its disposal. The number of B-52s has been quadrupled to over 200; the number of tactical planes tripled to over 1200; the 7th fleet greatly strengthened. Perhaps 200,000 U.S. servicemen remain engaged in the war, only a quarter of whom are stationed in South Vietnam.

For more detailed figures, see The Indo-China Chronicle of the Indo-China Research Centre, 1322 18th Street, N.W., Washington, DC, 20036, particularly the supplement on Nixon’s escalation.

Can the DRV, backbone of the Indochinese Liberation Movement, hold out? At every level from Foreign Minister to factory worker, from diplomat in China to hospital patient, determination and optimism were forcibly expressed. I could retail the concrete grounds for this, their effective air defences, their shelter system which minimises casualties, their well equipped air force and army, their cohesive, democratic social structure, but this would prove lengthy. Perhaps more impressive was their consciousness of their historic moment. In their view, their history was one of defeating invasion, of creating a Vietnamese nation through two thousand years of struggle, of integrating themselves and their culture to their environment, of creating a specific Vietnamese community. US policy of grafting an alien social and material form on this fabric was painful and destructive, but would finally fail, if not this year, in 1976 or 1980 or . . .

Can the United States continue? Militarily and financially, Hanoi seems to accept that the US can continue its present policy for some time, but that it will encounter political pressures that will make the game not worth the candle. In order to assess the strength of this view, it is necessary to ask what precisely are the stakes?

The PRG representative claimed extensive control in four border provinces, along the coast and in the Mekong delta. In addition, he argued that the urban opposition opposed US policy, but was forced to operate legally in a situation of extreme repression. All three movements were adamant that their local opponents were non-nationalistic, their major weakness, and without US support would collapse rapidly — Saigon in 15 days.

The PRG has offered Nixon an olive branch in its seven-point proposal; its Paris delegation reports that area; 500,000 tons per annum under Johnson, one million tons per annum under Nixon; $250 of bombs per person per year, in an area with an average per capita income of $60. Mr. Sinannen, the Cambodian Ambassador, estimated that Lon Nol was little more than “the mayor of Phnom Penh”, controlling Battambang, Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville, and a few smaller townships. Communications between these centres is extremely limited and their economies to a large degree regulated by the surrounding forces. Mr. Soai, the PRG representative, claimed extensive control in four border provinces, along the coast and in the Mekong delta. In addition, he argued that the urban opposition opposed US policy, but was forced to operate legally in a situation of extreme repression. All three movements were adamant that their local opponents were non-nationalistic, their major weakness, and without US support would collapse rapidly — Saigon in 15 days.

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The PRG has offered Nixon an olive branch in its seven-point proposal; its Paris delegation reports that he still wants the whole tree. Mr. Hoang Tung argued that there is no fundamental disagreement on the issues of a US withdrawal, the release of American POWs or a ceasefire. The crucial question is the character of the Saigon government. Only Thieu is unacceptable to the PRG; perhaps only Thieu will implement US policy. Despite widespread treaties on the imperialist character of US policy, with which I am in sympathy, it still seems absurd that the US should expend over $100 billion, 50,000 lives, weaken its economy and alienate opinion throughout the world in order to maintain a corrupt militarist in power.