

CANBERRA PAPERS  
on STRATEGY and DEFENCE

No. 6

ROBERT J. O'NEILL

---

# The Strategy of General Giap Since 1964

\$A0.90

Robert J. O'Neill is a Senior Lecturer in History, Faculty of Military Studies, University of New South Wales. A graduate of the Royal Military College of Australia and a Bachelor of Engineering of the University of Melbourne, he read philosophy, politics, and economics at Oxford before gaining a D.Phil. in Modern History. After returning from Oxford, he spent a year in Vietnam as an intelligence officer. He left the Australian Army in 1968.

His publications include *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933-39*, *Vietnam Task* which describes his own experiences in Vietnam, *Indo China Tragedy 1945-54*, an account of the first Vietnam war, *General Giap—Politician and Strategist*, and numerous articles.

CANBERRA PAPERS ON STRATEGY AND DEFENCE

6

**PLEASE RETURN TO:-**  
**EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT**  
**AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

*Publication date 10 Oct. 69*

This book was published by ANU Press between 1965–1991.

This republication is part of the digitisation project being carried out by Scholarly Information Services/Library and ANU Press.

This project aims to make past scholarly works published by The Australian National University available to a global audience under its open-access policy.

# The Strategy of General Giap Since 1964

ROBERT J. O'NEILL

*A publication of  
The Strategic and Defence Studies Centre*

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY PRESS    CANBERRA 1969

© Robert J. O'Neill 1969

This work is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without the written permission of the Publisher.

*SBN 7081 0535 1*

*Library of Congress Catalog Card no. 71-96464*

*National Library of Australia reg. no. AUS 69-2602*

*Printed and manufactured in Australia by  
Gillingham Printers Pty Ltd, Adelaide*

## GIAP'S CAREER TO 1964

Vo Nguyen Giap was born in Quang Binh Province, Central Annam, in 1912. In his early years of schooling, he fulfilled the hopes of his father, a respected scholar, by gaining admission to the *Lycée National* at Hue. He developed a strong interest in nationalism in 1925 and 1926 and joined the *Tan Viet*, a radical nationalist party. When the *Tan Viet* split in 1927, he followed the left wing which merged with the Communists in the Indo-China Communist Party which was reconstituted in 1931. Giap was sentenced to three years in prison for his part in the 1930-1 uprisings but served only a few months before he was released for good behaviour. Moving to Hanoi, he studied law at the University, graduating in 1937. He also devoted much of his time to propaganda work for the Communist Party. Poverty forced him to abandon postgraduate studies in 1938 and he became a schoolteacher.

Severe French measures against the Communists taken as a result of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 led to Giap's flight to China on 4 May 1940, to join Ho Chi Minh. After a year in southern China, the Communist leadership returned to Vietnam and hid in remote jungle near the Chinese border. As World War II progressed the Communists grew stronger and developed a military force of their own, which was placed in Giap's hands. In August 1945 the Vietnamese Communists took over control from the Japanese, only to lose Cochin China to the French in September.

Because the French showed that they wanted to regain control of Annam and Tonkin, Ho Chi Minh had to decide whether to fight or to negotiate. Protracted discussions between the French and the Viet Minh in 1946 led to increased hostility and to the outbreak of war in December 1946. Giap became Commander-in-Chief of the Viet Minh forces and withdrew into the mountains of northern Tonkin.

The basis of his strategy for the next three years was to remain on the defensive and to thwart the efforts of the French to penetrate his stronghold. He used these years to build and train large forces in readiness for a major offensive when the time was ripe. He was aided greatly by the Chinese Communists when the armies of Lin Piao reached the Vietnamese border in 1949, and thereafter Giap had copious amounts of supplies and transport, as well as military advisers, from China.

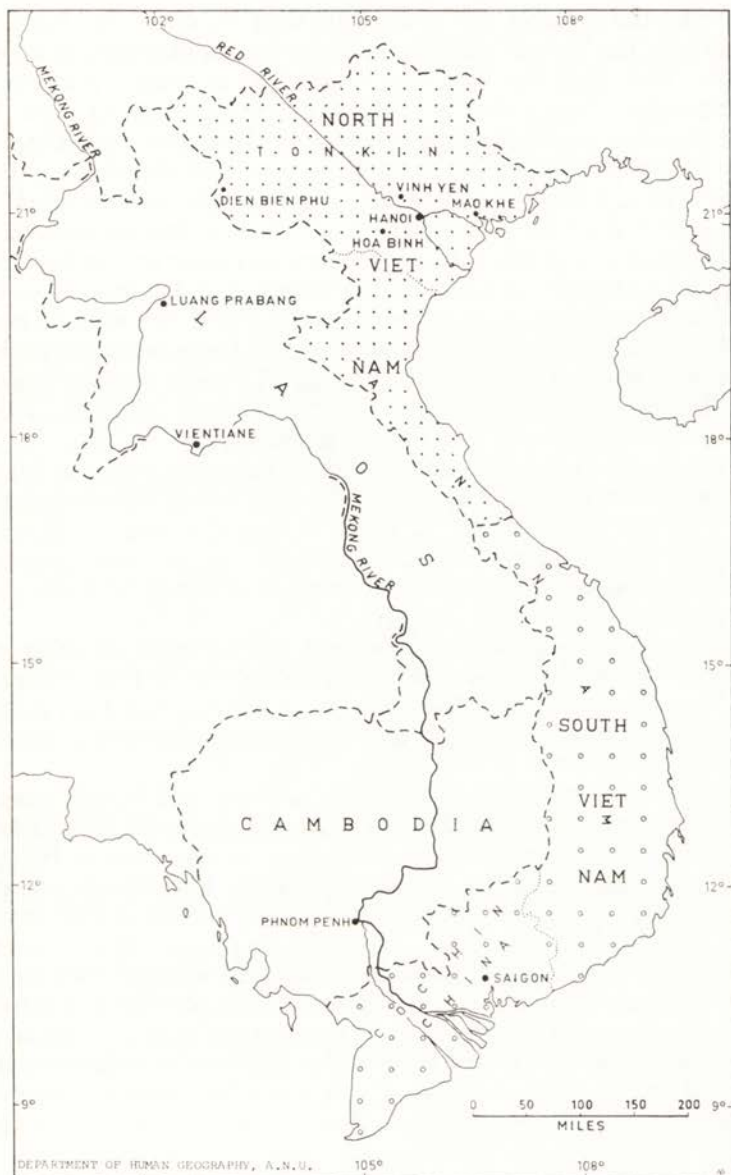
By 1950 Giap had assembled several divisions of main force troops, and he then launched an offensive which drove the French out of their positions along the eastern half of the Sino-Vietnamese border. The French had no intermediate positions between the border and the crucial Red River Delta, and so by early 1951 Giap's soldiers were within a few days' march of Hanoi, declaring that they would enter the city before *Tet*. However, Giap's thrust to break through the French defences around the Delta was rebuffed by General de Lattre at Vinh Yen in January 1951. Unwilling to admit defeat, Giap tried again at the eastern edge of the French defences near Mao Khe. Once more, in March, he was repulsed and forced to reconsider his aims. In May and June he ordered another series of attacks along the western edge of the Red River Delta, and for a third time his forces were hurled back.

Skilful manoeuvring by Giap in early 1952 robbed the French of the strategic advantage they had gained by the occupation of Hoa Binh, the capital of the Muong tribes, on the Black River. Giap then regained the initiative and, in late 1952, launched a drive into the highlands of north-west Tonkin and into Laos. By this strategy Giap forced the French to reinforce garrisons which were much less defensible than the Red River Delta, he made the French fight on ground of his own choosing, and he gained a valuable respite for those guerrillas who were active within the Red River Delta. Furthermore, he forced on the French the difficult decision of whether to defend Laos or to abandon it and be content merely with coastal enclaves in Vietnam and Cambodia.

The logic of French strategic resources made unpalatable the only practicable course of action. Although the French government had decided that no sacrifice was to be made for Laos, it could not bring itself to dispel from the mind of the French commander in Indo-China, General Navarre, the obligation to defend the only one of the three Indo-Chinese states which was prepared to join the French Union. In this state of confused relations, Navarre committed a major force to Dien Bien Phu, in order to prevent Giap from capturing Luang Prabang in 1954.

Because the French had sent several battalions to Dien Bien Phu, Giap had to decide whether to undertake a major battle there or whether





Indo-China

to by-pass the position and to continue with his drive into Laos. His appraisal of the French inability to supply the requirements of a major battle at Dien Bien Phu may have helped him to reach a decision. He reacted rapidly and within a week of the French landing, four Viet Minh divisions were preparing to move to Dien Bien Phu. Giap had major supply problems of his own, but he overcame these sufficiently to permit a steady increase of men and materials near the battlefield.

By March 1954 his preparations were complete and he launched an 8-week attack which resulted in the French surrender on the day before the Geneva Conference discussed the future of Indo-China. Not only was Giap's strategy in accepting battle at Dien Bien Phu soundly based, but also his tactical control of the battle was of a high order. Particularly outstanding were his use of artillery to cut off French supplies from the air and his series of overlapping wave attacks which struck the French defences first on one side and then on the other.

Between 1954 and 1963 Giap remained Minister of Defence, but was concerned more with internal problems within North Vietnam, particularly with the aftermath of the Land Reform Programme. However, he kept the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) in good order, increased its size, and trained it, no doubt for future use to reunify Vietnam under Communist rule.

During these years, Giap wrote several articles, some of which were published together as *People's War, People's Army* in 1961. Generally these writings show that he has lost none of the propagandist's skills of the 1930s, but they do not make any significant contribution to strategic thinking.

In his various roles up to 1964, Giap distinguished himself more as a skilful practitioner of strategy and tactics than as an originator of ideas. Although his impatience led him into serious errors in 1951, he learned from these and has not repeated them. His strategy generally has been characterised by flexibility, surprise, and an indifference to heavy losses to his own troops. An outstanding aspect of his career is the way in which he has combined political and military roles so that his authority as a commander is reinforced by his position as a member of the Politburo, and vice versa. As a result of his successes against the French, particularly at Dien Bien Phu, his authority in military matters is limited by few of the restrictions with which his opponents have had to contend.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For further information on Giap see the author's *General Giap—Politician and Strategist* (New York, Praeger; Melbourne, Cassell Australia, 1969).

## THE STRATEGY OF GENERAL GIAP SINCE 1964

IT SEEMS extraordinary that after several years of heavy fighting in Vietnam we have so little idea of the way in which the war has been conducted. Some very good accounts of the campaigns of 1914 had been written by 1916 and during World War II one could follow the unfolding of the strategies of the major contestants with great ease by map, photograph, article, and book. It is not the purpose of this paper to speculate on why the war in Vietnam should be shrouded in such mystery despite the incomparable attention which it has received from the mass media, but it is only fair to point out that much of what follows is merely a personal interpretation of evidence which lends itself to a variety of different deductions.

Giap's role in the current Vietnamese conflict is still incapable of exact resolution. Events in South Vietnam are not all directed from Hanoi, as is evident from the establishment of a separate high command structure, the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), with such leaders as Nguyen Chi Thanh, a general whose prestige has rivalled that of Giap on occasions. Indeed, according to some reports, Nguyen Chi Thanh held for a short time in the late 1950s more influence than Giap himself. That part of the war which is directed from Hanoi has many facets, military, political, and economic, necessitating overall control by the Politburo rather than by the Minister for Defence alone. Where, then, ought one to look for the influence of Giap? There can be no sure answer, but if the methods of command employed by the Viet Minh high command, essentially the same group of leaders as the North Vietnamese Politburo today, are any guide, then Giap has almost exclusive personal control over the military operations of the People's Army of Vietnam. His influence may well have extended into the fields of military economics, manpower allocation, dispersal of industry, and propaganda. However, this appraisal will treat only those activities whose direction is

most probably in the hands of Giap alone, namely military operations in the South.

Even the extent of Giap's control in the South is open to dispute, as has been indicated above. Much of the early guerrilla operations which were mounted in 1959 and afterwards could not have been directly controlled from Hanoi because the scope of these operations was too localised. COSVN itself does have some initiative in controlling several divisions of Viet Cong and direct contact between COSVN and Hanoi is as limited as that between the Australian Government and General Blamey in the Middle East during World War II. Nonetheless, it is Hanoi which provides the greater part of the military supplies used by the troops under the command of COSVN, and many of the senior personnel in this headquarters have been loaned by North Vietnam. Consequently, although the levers of control may be rather long and a trifle indirect, they are nevertheless effective and it is difficult to conceive of COSVN taking any major initiative which does not have the prior approval of Giap. Despite its title, COSVN does not control all Communist forces in South Vietnam, because the regular North Vietnamese divisions which are active in the northern provinces and central highlands fall outside its authority. Consequently in the deployment of these divisions in particular we may reasonably look for the guiding hand of Giap.

Some observers claim that the war in Vietnam has major events only by accident and that it has been a confused mass of battles, large and small, which have taken place, if not in a random manner, then at the behest of section and platoon commanders, rather than of generals. Against this I would contend that Giap's strategy since 1964 has passed through four distinct phases: an attempt to split South Vietnam into two parts in 1964-5, a 3-year plan aimed at the capture of Saigon, 1965-7, a desperate effort to detach the northernmost province of Quang Tri in 1966-7, and finally in 1968-9 a series of operations whose principal aim has been to influence public opinion outside Vietnam. The first two of these strategies differ from the last two in that the former were aimed at a direct victory in the war while the latter were indirect approaches, relying for success on influencing events elsewhere.

Coupled with this military strategy has been a constant political offensive in the South and a diplomatic offensive aimed at accepting negotiations with the United States only when the latter is in a position of great weakness. The methods which have been used to pursue these aims have varied according to the military situation, while the planning of military actions has been influenced by political and diplomatic

requirements. Earlier analysis of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese methods, notably by Douglas Pike, has outlined a framework within which these various designs have been worked out: an initial period of five years ending in 1964 during which it was hoped to trigger off a general uprising or *Khoi Nghia*, followed by the three classical phases of protracted warfare. The first part of Pike's analysis is founded on ample evidence, including captured documents, and Pike's treatment, although brief, provides a good explanation of the way in which operations in the opening years of the war were conducted by the Viet Cong. However, the second part, when viewed with the additional hindsight of three years, seems extremely unsophisticated.

During 1964, Giap and the other members of the North Vietnamese Politburo were faced with the need to take a fundamental decision concerning their policy towards South Vietnam. The light guerrilla offensive which had been mounted against the Governments of Ngo Dinh Diem and his successors had not been successful in precipitating a general uprising. Although considerable hostility to these régimes existed in the South, it had not been fully mobilised and there seemed good reason for the North Vietnamese to believe that even if all of this hostility were united and organised, it would not have been sufficient to install in the immediate future a National Liberation Front government in Saigon. Either this plan had to be dropped or greater resources had to be provided from the North. However, the continued expansion of the South Vietnamese and American armed forces in South Vietnam presented a grave problem. As against 23,000 American advisers and 559,500 South Vietnamese troops, the Viet Cong could muster only 103,000 men, aided by several thousand North Vietnamese.

Yet when one considers today what control the Viet Cong had established over the countryside by 1964, levying taxes in forty-one out of the forty-four provinces, and denying Government access to some 80 per cent of the area of South Vietnam, it seems that the local Communist situation in Vietnam was really most favourable. The morale and fighting power of the Government forces were decreasing rapidly and it seemed that within a few years, given no radical change in the degree of American support, Saigon would be the seat of a Communist Government.

Why then did the North Vietnamese take the step of increasing their activity in the war which brought about the commitment of American troops in a fighting role and at least deferred victory by several years? One reason might be the rapidity of South Vietnam's decline during 1964. Perhaps it seemed that only one more gentle push would topple the whole

structure of the Republic of Vietnam and that even if the Americans were to increase their forces in Vietnam, they could not do so in time to save the South. Another reason might be that the North Vietnamese did not believe that the United States would become directly involved in the fighting, no matter what the North Vietnamese did. When one reads the statements of President Kennedy and other American leaders during the years 1962-3, one is struck by the force of the American intention not to become deeply involved in a land war in Asia. Hanoi knew that Washington had grave fears of being bogged down in another Korea and so it was all too easy for the American sensitivity concerning her world position to be underestimated.

The conduct of President Johnson during the aftermath of the Gulf of Tonkin incident certainly did nothing to make more apparent the true American reactions to increased participation in the war by the Communists. Speaking on 12 August 1964, Johnson said of those who were 'eager to enlarge the conflict':

They call upon us to supply American boys to do the job that Asian boys should do. They ask us to take reckless action which might risk the lives of millions and engulf much of Asia and certainly threaten the peace of the entire world. Moreover such action would offer no solution at all to the real problem of Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

These sentiments were repeated on several occasions and so Giap and his colleagues could easily have felt that they had nothing to lose by hastening to supply more men and materials to the Viet Cong and by concerting the sporadic activities of the guerrillas into a national strategic plan.

Unfortunately for Giap, the state of Viet Cong organisation in 1964 left little scope for the sort of sophisticated strategies he had employed against the French. The South Vietnamese Government still possessed military strength in the vicinity of Saigon and other major cities and so there was more to be gained from an offensive directed at the rural areas which would isolate important parts of South Vietnam from each other, so that they could then be devoured piecemeal. In view of the natural strength of the Viet Cong bases in the central highlands and of previous Viet Minh experience in this region, it seemed only natural to select the central region as the point at which South Vietnam was to be divided. Consequently after General Westmoreland arrived to take up his command in July 1964, he found himself being enveloped in a desperate situation in which the Viet Cong seemed about to sweep the South

<sup>2</sup> *The War in Vietnam*, Senate Republican Policy Committee, Public Affairs Press, Washington D.C. 1967, p. 44.

Vietnamese forces into small pockets, prior to mopping them up. Westmoreland quickly perceived the gravity of this turn of events and made urgent requests for the intervention of large numbers of American troops to hold the line until the South Vietnamese forces could be made battle-worthy.

A closely contested race then ensued between the Viet Cong and the Americans. The Viet Cong rapidly amalgamated guerrilla companies and battalions into regiments and commenced moderate offensives aimed at smashing what was left of the South Vietnamese forces before the Americans could assemble sufficient military strength to take on the weight of the fighting themselves. As we now know, the Viet Cong lost this race by a very narrow margin and Giap was faced with the need to make yet another fundamental decision. His offensive to cut South Vietnam into two pieces had nearly succeeded by late 1964, but clearly with the despatch of American troops into the combat zone the Viet Cong would not be sufficient by themselves to make any substantial advances into the defended and closely populated areas around bases such as Da Nang, Bien Hoa, and Saigon. A total reorganisation of the Viet Cong was necessary or the war aims would have to be either scaled down or readjusted to transfer the emphasis from military to political operations.

Possibly Communist successes by the end of 1964 were too great to permit Giap to hold back the southern Viet Cong. Even by American estimates, the Republic of Vietnam was only weeks away from collapse when the arrival of American combat troops in March 1965 turned the tide. Consequently it seems feasible that the mechanism of escalation had ensnared Hanoi as well as Washington—too much was at stake for the leadership to be able to resist the temptation to make a modest increase in their efforts, yet had they seriously thought that they would be required to make the huge contributions which the level of fighting in 1967 and 1968 was to demand, another option may well have been chosen. Raising the level of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese participation involved costs which were similar in kind although not as extensive as those which have had to be borne by the United States. Larger Communist armies meant more conscription, increased taxation, and greater demands on the civilian population under Communist control and so the war became less popular amongst Viet Cong supporters. While the apparatus of control in the 'liberated areas' was sufficient to prevent more than a trickle of defections, many of those who lived in the wide areas of disputed control withdrew their support from the Viet Cong, although they did not always transfer allegiance to the South Vietnamese Government. In view of what we now know of American determination to win

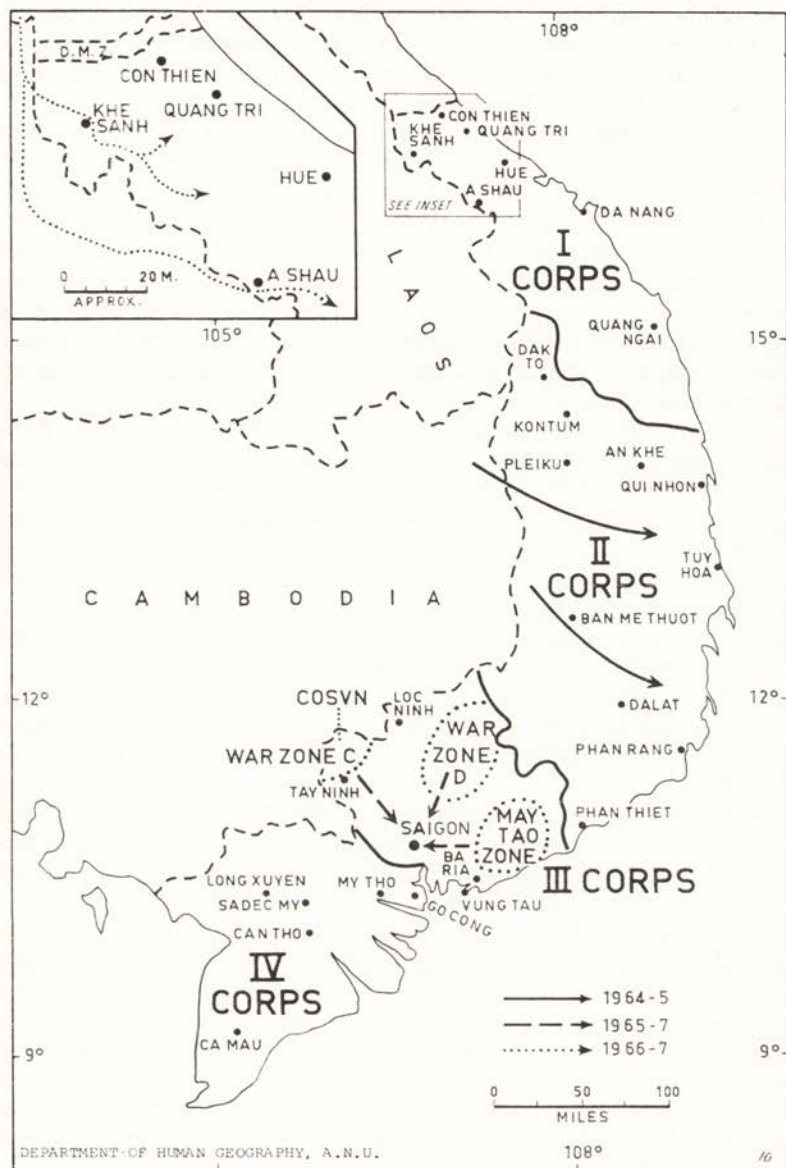
the war in 1965 and 1966, it may be argued that Giap would have been wiser to adopt the alternative of changing emphasis from the military to the political struggle.

This is not to suggest that it was feasible for the Viet Cong to cease military operations, for without control over their large base areas they could not maintain a substantial political offensive by means of Party cadres who were infiltrated into villages. However, the decision to keep the major emphasis on the military operations of the war was also a decision to forgo some of the advantages which could have been conferred by the ebbing tide of Government popularity and status in early 1965. This decision to increase the level of hostilities was not the only side of Hanoi's policy. As U Thant has revealed, the North Vietnamese leaders accepted his invitation to meet American representatives secretly in Rangoon in September 1964. Unfortunately the American presidential campaign was in full swing and, fearing the effect on the elections, President Johnson declined to participate. When U Thant repeated his proposals in early 1965 Washington again declined to talk to the North Vietnamese, possibly because of Johnson's overwhelming victory at the polls and a rather poor bargaining position.

In view of this situation, the North Vietnamese turned to direct participation in the war, using their own troops in significant numbers. The first PAVN regiment was infiltrated into the South probably in late 1964. Its mission was to commence substantial diversionary operations in the northern provinces while a long-range plan was being put into effect around Saigon. This plan was to concentrate a force of three divisions which was to isolate the capital from the surrounding countryside and then to destroy the Government forces protecting it. The general offensive was to be launched in 1967, so that 1968 would be the year of victory. Details of captured documents which have been published by the United States Government confirm that this was the outline of Viet Cong hopes as announced to Communist troops. During early 1965, regiments were to be formed from the battalions which were in the southern provinces. These regiments were then to be amalgamated into divisions which were actually raised in the latter half of 1965. The divisions were to build up secure base areas in War Zones C and D and in the May Tao Zone, and during 1966 they were to establish control over the major land links between Saigon and the neighbouring Government-held towns. When the time for the general offensive was right, each of these supporting centres was to be cut off from Saigon, while a massive assault took the capital and installed an NLF government.

This plan was particularly vulnerable to the sort of tactics which





Giap's offensives, 1964-7

General Westmoreland was able to put into effect. Once American forces of brigade and divisional size were available, he sent them directly at the main base areas of the Viet Cong in the South, particularly War Zone D. Although the American forces were unable to drive the Viet Cong out of these bases, their attacks were sufficiently strong to force the Viet Cong to disperse, and, with very few exceptions, the Viet Cong have not launched any divisional sized operations south of the central highlands. The Viet Cong continued to keep several regiments within seventy miles of Saigon and to maintain two divisional headquarters which controlled some of these regiments in a loose sense, but by late 1966 it was clear that the serious threat to Saigon had passed. The regiments of Viet Cong had received important supplements of North Vietnamese troops, frequently a whole battalion at a time, but they were kept on the defensive until 1968.

By early 1966 it was apparent the Communist military plans for a quick victory had been thwarted. As far as Giap was concerned, however, he had lost a battle but not the war. The incoming American forces had been able to protect the most important towns and strategic points, but the 389,000 men available to General Westmoreland at the end of 1966 could secure only a small part of South Vietnam. The central highlands and the southern base areas were still controlled by the Viet Cong and the supply links between these forces and North Vietnam were not closed. Provided that the Viet Cong main force units were able to keep beyond the reach of American offensives, they could survive and bide their time for another strike. While the American expansion was continuing, Giap must have felt some anxieties lest the numbers of Americans grow to a point where none of the Southern bases would be secure. When in 1967 the Americans halted their increase at 500,000 rather than the one million which were a prerequisite for dominating the whole of the war theatre, Giap would have realised that even if military victory was beyond him, military defeat was unlikely.

Meanwhile, in 1966, Giap was shifting his point of attack from the Saigon area to the northern provinces just below the Demilitarised Zone. Large numbers of North Vietnamese troops entered the South, regiment by regiment, until a force of several divisions had been assembled. In the light of the heavy fighting which has taken place in the northern provinces since mid-1966, it seems likely that Giap was attempting to detach the northernmost province of Quang Tri, either to demonstrate the inability of his opponents to maintain the territorial extent of South Vietnam or to begin swallowing the northern provinces one by one. The claim of the Viet Cong to have already taken a complete province from

the Southern régime, namely Phuoc Thanh whose borders approximated to those of War Zone D, had been frustrated by a technicality. When it appeared that the Viet Cong hold on this area had become dominant, the South Vietnamese Government dissolved the province and extended the areas of the bordering provinces to include what had formerly been Phuoc Thanh.

North Vietnamese infiltration into the South followed two major routes in the western highlands. Each of these led through Laos, the one to branch sharply eastwards and enter Quang Tri Province via Khe Sanh, the other to make a more gradual swing to the east, crossing the border at A Shau. Attacks on South Vietnamese outposts during 1964 and 1965 had severely limited operations designed to control the border areas, and the establishment of American Marine outposts was given priority in 1966. The seizure of the A Shau Special Forces camp on 9 March 1966 by a North Vietnamese force of some 3,000 caused particular concern. When in June the movement of 324 B Division through the Demilitarised Zone was detected, the American Marines launched a spoiling attack to frustrate the apparent North Vietnamese intention of taking the provincial capital, Quang Tri city. 324 B Division withdrew to lick its extensive wounds, and American control over the central northern sector of the province was established.

Giap then moved the infiltration routes to the east, around Con Thien. In September another American operation closed this infiltration route to large North Vietnamese forces and their attention turned again to the western routes. Westmoreland ordered the establishment of a Marine base at Khe Sanh to attempt to close the more northerly of these routes, and in October American patrols began to comb this area. Although moderate activity was maintained throughout the northern provinces in late 1966 and early 1967, the centre of strategic interest shifted again to the area around Saigon.

By late 1966, General Westmoreland had sufficient troops to launch an attack on the Iron Triangle, the area which contained the Viet Cong headquarters for Saigon. This attack, Operation Cedar Falls, was successful, and Westmoreland was able to consider a more ambitious project—War Zone C, the site of COSVN. During February 1967 the American commander began to assemble a force of nearly four divisions, the largest of the war at that time, by means of a series of diversionary operations which enabled these divisions to be within striking distance of War Zone C by 22 February. After a slow start, this operation, Junction City, also produced significant results and COSVN was forced to withdraw into Cambodia. These two operations and a third, Atle-

boro, carried out in October 1966, had cost the Viet Cong nearly seven thousand dead and a great quantity of supplies. By mid-1967 the military outlook for the Communists in the southern provinces had begun to look black.

At this point Giap initiated another series of offensives aimed at distracting American attention from the southern provinces before Westmoreland had time to establish some degree of permanent control over War Zone C and could begin to operate against War Zone D and the May Tao Zone in the same way. North Vietnamese divisions in the central highlands and northern provinces commenced a new wave of local offensives and Westmoreland was forced to transfer troops from the south. It is not difficult to imagine Westmoreland's reluctance to abandon entirely the projects which had begun with Operations Cedar Falls and Junction City. He left some brigade-sized units in the south to prevent the Viet Cong from returning to their former bases and sent his reserves to the northern and central regions.

The subsequent North Vietnamese thrust towards Kontum, one of the two more important highland towns, caused a major redistribution of American forces. By late 1967, Giap had assembled several of his divisions in the central region and it looked as if he were trying to repeat his successful plan of 1954, which had been carried out in the same area. In this earlier operation, he had taken Dak To, north-west of Kontum, then Kontum itself, followed by a sweep to the east to seize An Khe before closing in on the last important town, Pleiku. His offensive against the Americans opened in the same place, and although the North Vietnamese got no farther than Dak To, they caused an appreciable concentration of American resources to be diverted to this area.

In the meantime, a wave of new attacks was being launched by the North Vietnamese in the northern provinces and the garrison at Khe Sanh became surrounded. It was not long before some observers began to note several points of similarity between the situation of the Americans at Khe Sanh and that of the French at Dien Bien Phu. Both were remote outposts with little obvious connection with the areas of greatest strategic importance. Each was in a hollow which was overlooked by enemy held hills and which could be shelled by direct observation. Each depended upon aircraft for supplies and each was garrisoned by élite troops who disdained to construct deep defences. Of greater importance was that each was surrounded by Giap's troops after several years of warfare, at a time when public opinion in France and in the United States had swung against continuation of the war.

As soon as he heard that Giap had moved two divisions around Khe

Sanh, President Johnson realised the full extent of his peril. At Dien Bien Phu the French had lost a battle and public opinion saw to it that the French Government also conceded the loss of the war. Johnson repeatedly telephoned Westmoreland for assurances that Khe Sanh could be held against all odds. Westmoreland's initial reaction had been one of confidence because it was apparent that there were also several significant differences between Khe Sanh and Dien Bien Phu. The former was only a 30-minute flight away from one of the greatest logistic bases in Vietnam while the latter was several hours from a base of only modest proportions. The range of airpower available to Navarre did not compare with that of Westmoreland and the position at Khe Sanh could be directly supported by heavy artillery fire from other bases such as the Rock Pile only thirteen miles away. However, Johnson's urgency impressed itself onto Westmoreland and more troops were moved up to Hue and Da Nang. Urban garrison units were pared down elsewhere in order both to hold along the front of the American gains and to provide a reserve for an emergency in Quang Tri Province.

The attack on Khe Sanh failed to materialise. Was it that American air power, particularly B52 bombardments, had broken Giap's forces before they had been able to deliver such an assault? Is it too fanciful to suppose that Giap understood the way in which the spectre of Dien Bien Phu would haunt the minds of interested observers and lead the Americans into an overcommitment of their not unlimited resources, a situation in which Giap could catch them unawares at points where their response had been weakened? Or does the answer lie somewhere in between—that Giap simply played with the opportunity of attacking Khe Sanh until he saw what effect his threat had on American dispositions elsewhere in Vietnam?

By late 1967, Giap's strategic options were not particularly promising. He had failed to gain dominance of either the approaches to Saigon or the northern provinces and his offensive in the central highlands had not got very far. Apart from continuing the slow grind of guerrilla warfare in order to wear the Americans down, there seemed to be little that he could do in a purely military sense that he had not tried before. In these circumstances it seems only natural that Giap would turn his mind more seriously to influencing American public opinion against continuance of the war. He had been educated to appreciate how popular attitudes could be moulded in his first years of work for the Communist Party and he had seen the tremendous role which war weariness had played in forcing the French to make peace with him. During 1967 some severe strains had begun to show in the fabric of

American public opinion and it seems only reasonable that Giap was seeking an opportunity to cause major dissension in Washington in order to weaken the resolve of American leaders. This rationale conflicts with others, notably the officially-stated Allied view that Giap was still seeking a direct victory by means of a desperate gamble to defeat the Allies in the field and provoke a general uprising of the South Vietnamese people.

Against this background, the *Tet* offensive of 1968 erupted over the major cities and towns. The approaches and environs of the main centres of population were unusually unprotected because of the forward posture adopted to cope with the offensives in the central and northern regions. Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces entered nearly every provincial capital and remained for periods ranging from a few hours to several days. In the case of Hue, it took twenty-seven days before the last of the sixteen battalions which had attacked the city was broken. However, so carefully had Giap focused American attention on to Khe Sanh that not only did senior American commanders disregard Vietnamese intelligence reports which forecast the *Tet* offensive but also during the offensive they maintained that the raids on the cities were simply a stratagem to divert resources away from Khe Sanh and that the capture of Khe Sanh remained the major Communist goal.

I am not meaning to be critical of the Americans in their dilemma. Until the North Vietnamese pulled away from Khe Sanh in April, there was no way of knowing whether Giap intended to create another Dien Bien Phu offensive. Indeed, even had Giap intended to attack Khe Sanh by original design, he is opportunist enough to have been likely to attack the Marine camp had the Americans not maintained a powerful posture there. However, by his decision to overrun the towns for a brief period Giap had constructed a situation in which it was difficult for him to lose. The Americans and South Vietnamese simply did not have the resources both to protect the major centres of population and to guarantee the impregnability of Khe Sanh. If the cities appeared to be well defended, Giap could aim for Khe Sanh and vice versa. Westmoreland was placed on the horns of a dilemma and the point was made to the whole world that even 525,000 American troops were not enough to deprive Giap of the strategic initiative.

Given the tremendous airpower of the Americans and their competence in large-scale conventional engagements, it would seem that Giap was both wise in laying his plans for the towns and fortunate in being able to follow these plans through. Nonetheless, from past experience of Giap's generalship it seems quite possible that he would have

been prepared to bear the large numbers of casualties which an attack on Khe Sanh would have caused, had the prospects of that option seemed the better of the two.

The raids on the towns served also to impress on the South Vietnamese that their Government was unable to guarantee their security, even with American assistance. In many centres, the period of Viet Cong occupation was sufficient to permit the holding of summary trials and executions of 'enemies of the people'. Had these raids been carried out by some foreign army, then it seems likely that they would have served to unite the civilian population more firmly behind the Government, as was the effect in Nazi Germany of the Allied strategic bombing. The fact that it was their fellow-countrymen who were shelling and court-martialing the South Vietnamese must have sowed some fundamental doubts in the minds of many concerning their long-term future.

The full extent of Giap's successes was revealed when President Johnson announced that he would not be a candidate for the next elections and that he would devote his remaining months in office to a search for peace. In the face of the great difficulties which would have accompanied any further American increases in commitment to the war, American strategic options had been reduced to either a struggle of attrition at the existing level of forces or some degree of disengagement. Although Johnson was prepared to support the existing level of combat for an interim period, he had clearly swung towards pursuit of a negotiated settlement.

Given the circumstances in which Johnson was attempting to bring Hanoi to the conference table, it was not difficult for Giap to continue to wring further strategic advantages out of the aftermath of *Tet*. Much of the North Vietnamese effort was being borne by people who lived in the Red River Delta. They supplied the bulk of the PAVN troops, they contributed food, labour and taxation to the general war effort, and they formed the political base from which the North Vietnamese régime derived its support. During the American bombing, their burdens had been increased and their lives had been exposed to danger. The North Vietnamese Politburo badly wanted some visible sign that they were winning the war in order to maintain or improve morale in their heartland. Consequently they held out for a halt in the bombing as a precondition to negotiations and after a protracted round of offer and counter-offer they achieved their aim. It is not difficult to imagine the impact of Johnson's concession on the North Vietnamese people, particularly when they were reminded of some of Johnson's earlier statements. He had said, for example, that without the bombing

the enemy force in the South would be larger. It would be better equipped. The war would be harder. The losses would be greater. The difficulties would be greater. And of one thing you can be sure: it would cost many more American lives.

Clearly the American bombing halt represented a decision symptomatic of a wider trend in American feelings towards the war and equally difficult to reverse.

After the commencement of the Paris Peace Talks, the North Vietnamese negotiators showed no inclination to offer concessions which would enable America to withdraw from the war with some degree of honour intact. On the ground in Vietnam, Giap backed this posture by refusing to let up the pace of his offensives. Waves of 'little *Tet*' assaults have broken over the towns at periodic intervals close enough together to give the watching television viewers a persistent image of American military ineffectiveness, yet sufficiently far apart to enable recovery and rebuilding to make each succeeding offensive a serious and bloody matter for the South Vietnamese and their Allies.

General Abrams, who succeeded Westmoreland at a respectable interval after the *Tet* offensive, has been giving more emphasis to removing the teeth from the Viet Cong political offensive in the South by concentrating on the village cadres. Remarkably, the South Vietnamese administration has been able to maintain unity and to increase its war effort. In a military sense, Giap is no nearer to victory in the South than he was in 1964 and perhaps he is further away. His opponents are adopting tactics which are less costly to themselves and which are just as damaging to the Communists. Nonetheless these tactics are unlikely to win the war for the South in any short space of time, and unless some unexpected military development in favour of the South occurs, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the outcome of the war will be decided by political factors in the United States. In order to accelerate the withdrawal of the Americans from South Vietnam, Giap is likely to maintain his spasmodic waves of pressure, concentrating especially on inflicting casualties on American troops, rather than the South Vietnamese, and maintaining a wide range of points of attack to maximise the problems of his enemies in fathoming where to concentrate and where to thin out their forces. In this way he can achieve just as great a political effect as by attempting some specific geographic goal as in 1965 and 1966, without exposing himself to the risks which were attendant on these earlier plans.

How then are we to sum up Giap's performance since 1964? One obvious question to ask is 'how difficult has Giap's task been?' What



he tried to achieve, particularly in 1966 and 1967, was very difficult indeed. What he actually accomplished, namely a military stalemate, was not difficult, given the readiness of other nations to assist him, the political support of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, the protected access routes through Laos and Cambodia, the nature of the countryside, and the limited nature of American involvement. Certainly he has shown great competence as an army commander, but just as victory has eluded Westmoreland, so has it also eluded Giap.

How does Giap stand in comparison with the great exponents of classical strategy? First his actions and writings since 1964, including those published in English as *Big Victory, Great Task*, provide no justification for ranking him as an original strategic thinker in the manner of Clausewitz or Mao Tsetung. Second, his unflinching skill in applying sound strategic and tactical notions throughout several years of intense fighting do give him claim to be recognised as one of the most successful generals since Napoleon. Of course it is difficult to think of any other who has been in command of his nation's army for twenty-five years, save the Elder Moltke; but despite the latter's victories he did not spend many years in battle. Commanders such as Montgomery and MacArthur achieved more notable successes than Giap but their opportunities were greater. Consequently Giap deserves respect as one of the most skilled practitioners of his profession since 1815.

His best decision in the years since 1964 appears to be the launching of the *Tet* offensive in 1968. If he planned this offensive to achieve the particular results which it did, his insight into the psychological and political problems of his enemies is brilliant. His greatest fault during these years seems to have been his tendency to press offensives beyond the point of diminishing returns. He may have been misled by American leaders in 1964 and 1965 concerning the nature of their commitment to the war but nonetheless he has lost thousands of his own soldiers to achieve ends which could have been won more easily through greater emphasis on political means. Perhaps it is harsh to apply this criticism to his conduct during 1965, because until he had caused a large number of American casualties there would not have been the degree of political dissension within the United States which he was able to exploit in 1968. Nonetheless, the Communist strength in South Vietnam could have been greater in 1967 had the Viet Cong not subjected the population to so much violence.

Has Giap's ability begun to decline as he enters his late fifties? He does not seem to have shown quite the degree of generalship which he displayed between 1952 and 1954 in outmanoeuvring the French, but

the Americans, although ignoring some of the lessons of the earlier campaign, have not made the disastrous errors of the French. It will probably be several years before Giap can be written off as past his prime. Yet there are one or two disturbing factors which may loom larger to mar Giap's future performance. His apparent lack of concern at admitting to Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci in February that he had lost half a million men in this war and his reported insistence on pursuing 'total victory' even if the war should last 10, 15, 20 or even 50 years may be all façade but even if it is, it is clumsy façade. Has he been brutalised by his unparalleled experiences? Will the Vietnamese people really revere his memory in future generations?

### SELECTED READING LIST

- Armbruster, Frank E., Gastil, Raymond D., Kahn, Herman, Pfaff, William, Stillman, Edmund, *Can We Win in Vietnam?* New York, Praeger, 1968.
- Buttinger, Joseph, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*. 2 Vols, New York, Praeger, 1967.
- Duncanson, Dennis J., *Government and Revolution in Vietnam*, London, OUP, 1968.
- Fairbairn, Geoffrey, *Revolutionary Warfare and Communist Strategy, The Threat to South-east Asia*, London, Faber and Faber, 1968.
- Fall, Bernard B., *The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis*, New York, Praeger, 1967.
- Giap, Vo Nguyen, *People's War, People's Army*, Hanoi, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961.
- *Once Again We Will Win*, Hanoi, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1966.
- *Big Victory, Great Task*, New York, Praeger, 1968, reprint from *Nhan Dan*, Hanoi.
- Girling, J. L. S., *People's War. The Conditions and the Consequences in China and in South East Asia*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1969.
- Honey, P. J. (ed.), *North Vietnam Today: Profile of a Communist Satellite*, New York, Praeger, 1962.
- O'Neill, Robert J., *General Giap—Politician and Strategist*, Melbourne, Cassell Australia and New York, Praeger, 1969.
- Pike, Douglas, *Viet Cong. The Organisation and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1966.
- Senate Republican Policy Committee, *The War in Vietnam*, Washington, Public Affairs Press, 1967.

## Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence

These papers arise out of the work of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre of The Australian National University. The Centre neither holds nor promotes any particular viewpoint, nor is its work limited to affairs of a purely military character. It provides opportunities for research on a wide range of related subjects, and thus tries to contribute to a fuller understanding of issues and events of contemporary importance.

The following papers have been published:

1. Alex Hunter *Oil Supply in Australia's Defence Strategy*
2. Geoffrey Jukes *The Strategic Situation in the 1980s*
3. J. L. Richardson *Australia and the Non-proliferation Treaty*
4. Ian Bellamy *An Australian Nuclear Force*
5. P. H. Partridge *Educating for the Profession of Arms*

Information about future papers may be obtained from

*Australian National University Press  
Box 4, P.O.  
Canberra, A.C.T., 2600*