The Vietnam People's Army: Regularization of Command 1975 - 1988

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ABSTRACT

The Vietnam People’s Army (VPA) is the fourth largest army in the world and easily the most powerful army in Southeast Asia. As with the Soviet Red Army and the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, the VPA was commanded and controlled by a complex system of military commanders and political officers at all levels, from the High Command to the smallest unit.

Yet during a conflict with Kampuchea in 1979, the VPA scrapped the thirty year old system in favour of a Soviet inspired ‘one-command system’—a significant change for any communist army to make!

This book consists of an indepth analysis of the regularization of the party-military command relationship in Vietnam since 1975. It includes an examination of the three phased replacement of the ‘system of leaders’ with the one-command system between the Fourth and Sixth Communist Party Congresses. It analyses the effects of Soviet aid and the Third Indochina War on the introduction of the new system. Finally, this book examines the accompanying rise in the VPA’s professionalism and decline in its party values. It analyses the interoperability of the three Indochinese armies, and discusses the possible effects of regularization on Vietnamese domestic politics and Southeast Asian security.
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Despite the help provided by this dignified group, any errors of fact, analysis and judgement, are entirely my own.

D M FitzGerald
December 1988
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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author, and not necessarily those of either the Minister for Defence or the Department of Defence.
# LIST OF FIGURES

5. Party Apparat within the VPA: 1985-1988  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Vietnamese High Command Structure: 1958-1976</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Politico-Military Command: VPA Battalion, 1967</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Soviet Military Aid to Vietnam: 1974-1986</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Vietnamese High Command Structure: 1985-1988</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Party Apparat within the VPA: 1985-1988</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>VPA Divisional Headquarters: 1985-1988</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In May 1979, after almost thirty years of divided command, the Vietnam People’s Army (VPA) began the introduction of the one-command system. In the past, command and control in the communist army split command and leadership functions between the commander and political officer, and the subsequent party organization within the army was linked by a vertical chain of party committees from highest to lowest echelon. The one-command system changed the politico-military relationship dramatically, such that all command and leadership functions were vested in the hands of the commander, and the chain of party committees broken at several important points.

It is important to understand the difference between command and leadership at this point. The VPA defines command as the lawful authority which an individual in the VPA exerts over his subordinates by virtue of his rank and position. Command is supported by the VPA’s Code of Discipline and orders, decrees and resolutions from the Council of Ministers and VCP Central Committee. It involves ‘the use of orders regulations and rules that must be executed to ensure uniformity of action’. Leadership on the other hand, is the art of the commander consistently influencing and directing men in tasks in such a way as to obtain their willing obedience, confidence, respect and loyalty. It is ‘chiefly reflected through the actions, qualities, ethics, and capabilities’ of the leader.

There are numerous works on regularization of the command systems in the Soviet Red Army and Chinese People’s Liberation Army. In contrast, there has been little interest in changes in the Vietnam People’s Army. There are two reasons that account for this. First, there has been a decline in interest in Vietnamese studies since 1975. In contrast to the proliferation of

published works dealing with the war, few books have been published on the post-war period itself. The first comprehensive review was published in 1983, and the second in 1988. \(^3\) Neither deals with the military in Vietnam in a comprehensive manner. Beresford’s book *Vietnam: Politics, Economics and Society*, for example, examines ‘defence’ under the broader heading ‘domestic policy’ and devotes only three pages to the VPA. This is surprising given the size and influence of the VPA in Vietnamese society. Of more significance, only one book has been written entirely on the VPA: Douglas Pike’s *PAVN*. This book glosses over the importance of the one-command system in a short two page treatment. \(^4\)

Second, information about Vietnam’s military is scarce and has not been readily available. Few Western scholars have visited Vietnam and the obvious need for military secrecy has prevented them from researching the VPA in any great depth. \(^5\) Few Western libraries receive Vietnamese language publications, such as the army paper *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* or its journal *Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan*. Western researchers interested in Vietnam, in the main, are forced to rely on the selective translations provided by the U S Joint Publications Research Service (JPRS).

**Why Study Regularization of Command?**

A study of the regularization of command in the VPA is of particular importance in three main respects. The first concerns the sheer size and combat power of the VPA. Current estimates rank

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3 Nguyen Van Canh, *Vietnam Under Communism, 1975-1982*, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, California, 1983, and Beresford, Melanie, *Vietnam: Politics, Economics and Society*, Pinter Publishers, London, 1988. The basis for Beresford’s sub-section on defence is an article by William Turley written thirteen years ago. Beresford is inaccurate (by one year), on the date of the introduction of the one-command system, and she reduces the party control mechanism of the system of leaders to a: ‘parallel political command structure’ which was ‘borrowed from the Soviet Union’. These statements are grossly inaccurate.


5 This problem has largely been overcome. See Guide to Sources at the beginning of the Bibliography. Of the four Western scholars who have worked on Vietnam, only Turley and Thayer have been permitted entry since 1975. Lockhart, until recently, has not been granted a visa, while Pike has not visited Vietnam since 1975.
the VPA as the fourth largest army in the world. In 1963 the VPA had 223,000 combatants in the army, with only 2500 to 5000 men in its naval and airforce components. Yet in 1987, the size of the VPA had grown to 1,260,000, including a 40,000 strong navy and a 20,000 strong air force. During the last twenty-five years the VPA has undergone a number of changes, including the standardization and modernization of its equipment, training, and discipline. Vietnam has established compulsory military service and developed a capacity to fight with and resupply formations of Corps size. Twenty-five years ago it was a predominantly infantry based force. Now it is a force consisting of 65 Divisions, 10 Armoured Brigades, and includes 3 Regiments of helicopters and a Naval Infantry component 27,000 men strong. At the regional level, Vietnam dominates Kampuchea and is the only army to successfully engage the might of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. The VPA has been constantly engaged in combat during the period, and has not been defeated in a major battle for over twenty years.

The change in the VPA over the last twenty-five years has greatly increased its combat power. Combat power is a qualitative judgement on the ability of an army to use its firepower in conjunction with the army’s ability to manoeuvre its troops and weapons, while maintaining the morale of its soldiers at a level sufficient to render them effective in battle. Regularization of command in the VPA, particularly in the form of the one-command system, greatly enhances the commander’s ability to manoeuvre his troops and affects the ability of the party committee to maintain morale. That is to say, the introduction of the one-command system in the VPA greatly enhances Vietnam’s ability to fight, and win, large scale wars.

The second reason why a study of the regularization of command in the VPA is important is because of the influence of the VPA on the internal politics of Vietnam. Domestically, the VPA has been at the backbone of the economic reconstruction of postwar

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8IISS, op. cit., p 162.
9Ibid.
10 The Tet Offensive of 1968 was the last military defeat inflicted on the VPA. See Van Tien Dung, 'Strategic Victory', Nhan Dan, January 30-31, 1988.
Vietnam, and provides employment and education and acts as an agent of modernization and socialization. The VPA indoctrinates its soldiers in party values and in the Vietnamese work ethic. Many members of VPA are also members of the VCP Central Committee, Politburo and Secretariat, bodies which make policy decisions on all aspects of Vietnamese life, including military affairs. Thus a change in the military command and party control relationship that had been in effect in Vietnam for the past three decades is extremely significant. This change is certainly worthy of serious academic consideration.

Third, a study of the regularization of command in the VPA is important to the sub-field of political science known as civil-military relations in communist systems. In this field of study political scientists, including Amos Perlmutter and William LeoGrande, Dale Herspring, and Roman Kolkowicz, have analysed the effect of the introduction and acceptance of the one-command system in communist armies, particularly the Soviet Red Army. One common hypothesis is that as technological modernization increases and with it the changes in the military command and party control relationship, politicization of the military is deemphasized, resulting in a more professional military and a decline in party values. Perlmutter and LeoGrande argue that:

Where the complexity of military technology requires specialized knowledge inaccessible to non-military elites, the autonomy of the military will tend to be high and the relationship between party and army will tend to be coalitional.11

In accord with Perlmutter and LeoGrande, Herspring has argued that increasing reliance on military technology ‘neither strengthens nor weakens the Party’s control over the armed forces’. Herspring argues that:

Rather, the Party’s willingness to introduce new technology (and with it many of the changes in Party control mechanisms that appear to accompany increased technology) is indicative of its rising confidence in the political reliability of the armed forces.12

12 Herspring, Dale R, ‘Technology and the Changing Political Officer in the Armed Forces; The Polish and the East German Cases’, Studies in
An alternative view has been put forward by Kolkowicz who argued that as technology increases, the party is forced to allow greater autonomy to the military on issues where the military is most knowledgeable. Kolkowicz appears at odds with Herspring, and Perlmutter and LeoGrande, when he argues that technological modernization weakens the party's control over the military:

The growing influx of new technocrats into the military has aggravated the problem of internal control, since these young specialists tend to resent and oppose the Party's political involvement and activity on the grounds that it drastically interferes with their vital duties.13

Methodology

How can these opposing viewpoints be reconciled? On the one hand, Perlmutter and LeoGrande, and Herspring argue that technological modernization leading to a change in the politico-military command relationship does not affect the the party’s influence over the military. On the other hand, Kolkowicz argues that the party’s influence declines. A study of the one-command system in Vietnam will show that both arguments have merit, as they are concerned with different levels of party control over the military. The importance of delineating between party control outside the military and party control inside the military has not been raised by analysts of communist party control over the Vietnam People's Army. The argument of this monograph is to show that these seemingly paradoxical schools of thought can be integrated. In order to illustrate how party control can be maintained, while at the same time be reduced, this monograph examines party control from two levels: High Command and Unit-Level Command. High Command refers to those organizations of the VCP, the state and the VPA having a direct bearing on policy formulation over the VPA, and within the VPA, at army level. Unit level Command refers to units and formations of the VPA having a direct bearing on policy implementation at below army level. A third group known as the Political Organ System will be examined when analysing the One-Command System. This level refers to those organizations of the VCP, the state and the VPA having a direct

VPA Regularization of Command

bearing on policy formulation and implementation within the VPA, from army down to divisional level.

Recent works on reforms in communist armies have been criticized for failing to come to grips with critical elements of the reforms. A recently published work on reforms in the Chinese People’s Liberation Army was criticized for ‘failing to address two crucial aspects of the military reforms: PLA depoliticization and organizational changes’. This monograph evaluates several hypotheses that advance the view that technological modernization causes organizational change in the party-army relationship leading to depoliticization and decline in party values. Changes in military strategy, tactics, and quantitative analysis of orders of battle and military equipment are side issues best left to the military analyst, and are not covered by this monograph.

This monograph is divided into five chapters. The following chapter, Chapter Two discusses the emerging command structure of the VPA, and the predecessor of the one-command system, the system of leaders, focusing on its operation and faults. The aim of Chapter Two is to demonstrate, first, how the VCP implemented control over the VPA and struggled to maintain that control at various times. Second, this chapter discusses how the VCP failed to grasp the need for the VPA to change its command structure commensurate with an increasing level of technology, for fear of losing control of the VPA.

Chapter Three examines the three phased introduction of the one-command system and the VCP’s continuing attempts to maintain control over the VPA. This chapter discusses the effects of the border war with Kampuchea and the attack by the Chinese. This chapter also introduces the notion of interoperability of forces between the Indochinese states and the Soviet armed forces.

Chapter Four demonstrates the workings of the one-command system and discusses the operation of the new method of party control of the VPA, both externally and internally. This chapter looks at the workings of the VPA’s High Command, the Political Organ System, and command in the VPA at unit level.

Chapter Five is divided into three sections. The first demonstrates the rise in professionalism in the VPA. The second section evaluates how the party has maintained control over the VPA externally, but despite a great deal of effort, is facing a decline in party values within VPA units. The third section examines the interoperability of the three Indochinese military forces as a possible motive for the regularization of command in the VPA.
THE DEVELOPMENT OF VPA COMMAND

The development of military command and party control within the Vietnam People’s Army is poorly documented, and constitutes an area that Vietnam specialists tend to gloss over. This is particularly true with the position of the political officer. Indeed in the most recent book written on the VPA, the origins of the political officer in Vietnam are mentioned in only one brief sentence.1

Military Command and Party Control in the Early VPA

The emergence of military command and party control in the VPA as it exists today owes itself largely to the decisions made at the Bac-Ky Military Conference in 1945. At this conference the party decided that all armed organizations should be merged to establish the Vietnam Liberation Army (VLA), and after several name changes, the army was titled the Vietnam People’s Army.2 The party organized the system of political officers within the units of the VLA along more orthodox communist military lines. Each unit was organized along the same lines as China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA), using the ‘three by three’ system, of a company containing three platoons of three sections each. The company was commanded by a commander with ultimate authority vested in the hands of the company’s political officer. Like the PLA, the VLA had political officers posted to company level and above. This is an important adaptation, as the Soviet model employed political officers at battalion level and above.3 The political officer was

1 The book concerned is Pike, op. cit.
2 Van Tien Dung, ‘The Vietnam People’s Army: 40 Years of Fighting and Building’, op. cit., p 52.
3 The Political Officer at Battalion level and above was known as the Chinh-uy, while those below battalion level were named Chinh-tri Vien. Both were in charge of political affairs in military units, thus the distinction is by relative rank, and not the functions they perform. See Turley, William S, ‘Army, Party and Society in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: Civil-Military Relations in a Mass-Mobilization System’, Doctoral Thesis, University of Washington, 1972, p 39. Chinh-uy equates to the term political
appointed by the 'Revolutionary Military Committee' whose new members included Van Tien Dung and Vo Nguyen Giap. The committee was empowered to appoint both commander and political officer.

Prior to the August Revolution, the military commander and political officer shared command. The political officer aided the commander in his day to day duties, but the political officer neither assumed direct command nor held any military responsibility. On political matters though, the commander and political officer 'had to reach agreement' on decisions. The functions of the political officer during this period were for recruiting members for the party, and indoctrinating new recruits. Unlike the earlier Soviet and PLA models of control, the Vietnamese political officer was not employed to ensure the commander's loyalty to the party. The party had ensured that its military leaders were already party members, thus the question of loyalty did not arise. William Turley argues that these commanders were not military leaders so much as they were uniformed party leaders of the military, whose views were generally harmonious and compatible with non-uniformed party members.

The primacy of the military commander ended after the August Revolution. The rapid development of the VPA was accompanied by a wholesale recruitment of officers from non-party sources. To maintain political control over the great number of Vietnamese who had joined the army, the VPA had to ensure that commanders came under closer supervision. Unlike the party's earlier military commanders, the commanders appointed since the August Revolution were predominantly drawn from the urban petit bourgeoisie elements, therefore the party saw it necessary to have military orders counter-signed by a political officer. The system seemed to be implemented only on an ad hoc basis, as the party was still apprehensive about placing too much responsibility in the

commissar, while Chinh-tri Vien is translated as political instructor. The Vietnamese word uy means to confide, entrust, commit or confide. Vien is a grammatical term for officials or officers. See Bui Phung, Tu Dien Viet-Anh, Trung Dai Hoc Tong Hop Ha Noi Xuat Ban, Hanoi, 1986.
4 Referring specifically to the period, see: Dang The Chuong, 'The Party's Leadership and the Single Commander System in the Army', Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 1, January 1984, pp 52-63.
hands of new political officers, coming from the same petit bourgeois background as their military counterparts. Despite this, military control was still subordinate to the political officer’s functions of administration and indoctrination.

A major renovation of the politico-military command relationship began in 1948. In this year, a more formal system was introduced in preparation for the raising of main force regular army units. In a sweeping change, the Central Committee completely abolished the party committee system from the highest echelons down to regimental level. The Standing Committee of the Party Central Committee issued a Resolution on Establishing a System of Political Officers to Represent the Party in the Army, which initiated a major change. Political officers were placed in a vertical chain of command at the central, interzone and regimental level. Their function was to:

Assume responsibility for the party work and for leading the military work in the army in each sphere: at the national level, at the inter-zone level, and in each regiment.

This served to strengthen the party and political work system within the VPA, although not as it was intended. While the move was designed to strengthen the party’s dominance over military affairs, the net outcomes were twofold. First, the change gave an enormous amount of flexibility to the military to control its own political organization. Second, and of far greater importance, the new system concentrated unprecedented power in the hands of Vo Nguyen Giap and Van Tien Dung. The concentration of power in the hands of Giap and Dung did not last long. The General Political Directorate (GPD) was established as a directorate within the Ministry of Defence. Instead of choosing Vo Nguyen Giap as its head, the VCP Central Committee chose a rival in Nguyen Chi Thanh. Giap headed the Central Military Party Committee, a body which at the time lacked power, and was directed in its actions by the GPD. Under the pretext of establishing a more conventional Marxist-Leninist relationship under the Central Committee, the

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7 Dang The Chuong, op. cit., pp 52-63.
VCP Central Committee actually usurped Giap’s and Dung’s previously acquired power. As Turley argues, personal frictions and factional fighting accounted for more than institutional rivalry, and the change seemed to be designed to curb Giap’s growing power in the army.

Having deconcentrated power in the Army, the party committee system was reintroduced. The Central Committee issued a resolution on the setting up of the party committee system, which stipulated that each unit was to be led by a commander and political officer. Both were responsible to the party committee. The commander was responsible for military tasks, while the political officer was responsible to the party committee for political work, although both were supposed to be closely coordinated with each other. The system was defined as:

The party committee exercising collective leadership and the unit commander and political officer carrying out a division of labour in organizing implementation, depending on their responsibility.

This system of dual command was later termed the ‘system of leaders’ and, apart from minor variations, operated until the Fourth Party Congress in 1976. Before the system of leaders is discussed however, it is necessary to look at regularization and modernization in Vietnam.

Regularization and Modernization Reform Programme, 1957-59.

In 1958, the National Assembly passed the ‘Law Establishing a System of Service for Officers’, with far-reaching implications. Like the PLA and the Red Army before it, the law began a ‘party values versus professionalism’ debate within the

9 See the editor’s comments on page iii of Vo Nguyen Giap’s article, ‘Arm the Revolutionary Masses’, op. cit., Part 2. The editor clearly states how power was shared between Giap and Thanh during 1959-61.
11 Dang The Chuong, op. cit., Number 1, January 1984, p 60.
12 Loc. cit.
VCP and VPA, including the laying of preliminary foundations for the acceptance of the one-command system.

In the PLA, 'red' is used to describe the view that embodies belief in political consciousness, morale, self-sacrifice, loyalty to the party, esprit de corps and equality as important factors determining the character of a revolutionary army. The term 'expert', on the other hand, looks to professionalism, technological advancement, centralized command and decisive action as necessary facets of a modern army. Unlike the PLA, the split in the VPA was, and is not, defined. In the VPA, there are not obvious factions of officers that continually express a red or expert point of view. Rather, the debate is characterized by a state of mind, and not characterized by actions. Discussions occur over specific examples, rather than red or expert being regarded as a fundamental concept.

Just after the law was passed, a secretary of a regimental party committee wrote that: 'The first phase of the movement to promote a sound basic Party organization at our level, the regimental party committee, has ended.' In the article, Le Trung warns against individualism such that deviation from party ideology occurs. Moreover the author warns against a party member’s lack of faith in the Party’s guidance in their revolutionary role.

As with the earlier reforms, the actual outcomes went beyond the face value of the law. On the surface, the law established the formal rank structure of the VPA, regularized the system of officer promotion and provided assessment criteria for promotion. The net effect however, was that the law marked the end of the ‘resistance’ army and ushered in the modern hierarchical structure of today’s VPA. As Turley stated, the objective was to make the VPA a more professional army, and the officer corps a more expert profession. Doubts remained within traditional

15 Turley, William S, 'The Political Role and Development of the Peoples Army of Vietnam', Zasloff, Joseph S, and Brown, MacAlister, Communism
elements of the party and army about the effects of the change, and in a 1959 article in the VPA’s daily newspaper, Le Chuong announced that:

In the process of modernizing our army into a regular one, there has appeared the phenomenon of overstressing the cultural and technical facets while overlooking the problems of political orientation and thought. We went so far as to neglect all our political activities and pay very little attention to party leadership.16

This was a central theme pushed by those who advocated the ‘red’ line from the introduction of the law, and as will be discussed in Chapter 3, right up to the planning and implementation of the one-command system. The Vietnamese openly acknowledged that technological modernization affected the organizational structure of Vietnamese units in the past, for as General Giap argued in 1971:

A military organization based on a feudal system also depended on material and technical conditions and on the production level of the regime. The development of technical equipment, from crude bows and crossbows to ‘Lien Chau’ crossbows using bronze-tipped arrows, other kinds of weapons, stone catapults, flame throwers, big ships and elephant-mounted guns was one of the decisive factors in determining the organizational structure, fighting methods and fighting strength of our people’s armed forces in the past.17

The System of Leaders

Under the system of leaders, branches of the VCP were present at all levels of military command within the VPA. In all spheres, the VPA was subordinate to the VCP. Article 11 of the 1960 Party Statutes placed the VPA under direct control of the Central Committee.18 As with all military organizations, the levels of

16 Le Chuong, ‘Significance of Political Training of the Army in 1959’, Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 564, 7 April 1959, pp 2-3.
command can be broken into two distinct areas: the High Command and Unit Level Command. The system of leaders will be examined in terms of those areas.

The Vietnamese High Command

The High Command level is an organizational grouping that concerns those organizations that have a direct bearing on policy formulation and implementation over the VPA and within the VPA. The Military Affairs Committee, General Political Directorate, Ministry of National Defence and Office of the Commander-in-Chief, the Directorates, and the National Defence Council constitute the Vietnamese 'High Command', if not by decree, then by function. Figure 1 shows the politico-military command relationship of the Vietnamese High Command.

The National Defence Council (NDC), was declared the highest state policy making body after the Third Party Congress. Article 65 of the Constitution that followed the Congress provided that the President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) also held the office of supreme commander of the armed forces, thus giving the President the chair of the National Defence Council. Article 63 provided that the President appointed and removed members of the NDC, and gave the President the power to declare war, mobilize the armed forces, and to proclaim military law. The NDC commanded the Ministry of National Defence, the Office of the Commander in Chief, and the Ministry of Public Security.

The Military Affairs Committee was the highest VCP committee in the VPA, a permanent body appointed by the Central Committee made up of military and civilian members. The Military Affairs Committee interpreted resolutions and directives passed down from the VCP Central Committee and transformed them into military policy. As the Central Committee rarely met, the Military Affairs Committee monopolized military policy. The Military Affairs Committee (later known as the Central Military Party Committee), was authorized to control all military affairs and strategy, and functioned as a body to oversee political and military control of the armed forces.

\[\text{nam Documents and Research Notes, Document Number 103, Part 1, United States Embassy, Saigon, February 1972, p 53.}\]
Figure 1 was constructed from information drawn from: Central Intelligence Agency, 'North Vietnam’s Military Establishment', Special Report SC Number 00624/538, Office of Current Intelligence, 27 December 1963; Fall, Bernard B, The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis, Pall Mall Press, London, 1966, p 496-497, and Smith, op. cit., pp 403-406.
In order to be admitted to the VCP’s apparat within the VPA, a candidate had to be approved by the Military Affairs Committee. Under the system of leaders the Military Affairs Committee played a vital role in the policy making process, as it often met with the Politburo, who more often than not approved the decisions of the Military Affairs Committee.

The Ministry of National Defence and the Office of the Commander in Chief reported to the National Defence Council. The operational command and control of the military was under command of the Minister (constitutionally also holding the position of Commander in Chief), who was appointed to the position by the President. Militia units however, remained under operational command of the respective commanders of military regions, although still under the control of the Minister/Commander in Chief. Command of the VPA was exercised primarily through the General Staff and the other Directorates.

The General Political Directorate was responsible for ideological and organizational matters throughout the VPA and was the body directly responsible for the Vietnam Communist Party’s supervision of the VPA. The basic missions of the GPD were: direction of political consciousness in the VPA, leading party development, and the execution of the party’s policy on strategy and combat plans. The GPD was subordinate to the Military Affairs Committee and the Commander in Chief, yet remained the most powerful directorate within the High Command, as it disseminated party doctrine and policies throughout the VPA. Members of the GPD were elected from within the ranks of the VCP Central Committee, and members of subordinate party committees were nominated by the GPD subject to the Central Committee’s approval. In some specialized areas including the commissary and troop education, the GPD determined the membership of the party.

20 During the final offensive on Saigon, the Military Affairs Committee worked hand in hand with the Politburo. The relationship was not a ‘chain-of-command’ type, but rather a division of labour between the two bodies. For an excellent insight into the policy-making process, see: Hoang Van Thai, ‘The Decisive Years: Memoirs of Vietnamese Senior General Hoang Van Thai’, Saigon Giai Phong, Ho Chi Minh City, 13 March—May 1986.  
committees. The GPD oversaw the training of political officers down to company level and supervised their activities.

One of the most important functions of the GPD was the direction of indoctrination within the VPA. In this area the GPD prepared pamphlets for political officers to hold study sessions and give lectures, and held special conferences for officers and men to explain any new party or governmental policy with military implications.\(^\text{22}\) The GPD was also in charge of recreation and entertainment within units, and ensured that the military remained reliable and efficient by supervision by party committees from top to bottom of the VPA.

The General Directorates for Rear Services and Training supervised logistics, transport, and medical services, and individual and unit training respectively. A knowledge of their functions is not necessary for an understanding of the system of leaders, thus they will not be dealt with in any greater detail. They demonstrate the interrelatedness of the Directorates of the High Command. For example, mobilization, militia, naval and air forces were coordinated and supervised by several Directorates and the General Staff, each within the realms of its specific field. Another example is the Armed Public Security Forces, which was under operational command of the National Defence Council, operational control of the commander in Chief and Minister of Defence, and communicated with various Directorates.\(^\text{23}\)

The organizations of the High Command also demonstrate this interrelatedness in their membership, as many members have overlapping roles. For example, in the sixties, Vo Nguyen Giap was Vice-Chairman of the National Defence Council, the Minister of National Defence and the Commander in Chief, while concurrently holding membership of the Politburo and VCP Central Committee, as well being a Vice-Premier. Thus Giap was militarily and politically responsible to the VCP.\(^\text{24}\) Giap was but one of many members who held overlapping roles. Thus it is important in the case of Vietnam to also examine the relationship of individuals within the organizations of the VCP and VPA, as this may give a clearer view of the decision-making process than the

\(22\) Smith, \textit{op. cit.}, p 407.  
\(23\) ibid., p 406.  
\(24\) ibid., p 405-7.
theoretical workings of various bureaucratic organizations. Overlapping roles still exist in the party and army today.

Unit Command Level

On the lower level, political control originated from the GPD down to party committees at all levels. Party activity was coordinated from the regimental level and from the regional level, depending on whether the unit was main-force or militia. For the purpose of analysing party affairs at the Unit Command level, a 'standard' battalion structure will be examined. Although the precise structure of party organization varied from unit to unit, Figure 2 shows the politico-military command relationship within a 'standard' battalion, representative of the majority of VPA battalions.

The VCP maintained firm control of lower level units in a firm hierarchical structure, right down to the three-man cell. The battalion political officer headed the battalion's executive section of the Party Chapter Committee, while company chapters, platoon cells and Youth Group chapters branched from the battalion executive. The four levels of the system functioned as follows.

First, the three-man cell was a political and emotional control mechanism adapted from the Chinese PLA. The VPA believed that the cell system increased the soldier's ability to stay alive in combat and succeeded in counteracting any feelings of isolation that the VPA soldier might have felt. This was especially true in Kampuchea before the introduction of the one-command system, which to the VPA conscript was a foreign country. What the platoon criticism and self-criticism sessions did not highlight, the party member within the cell was supposed to observe and correct. Thus the three-man cell was an effective method to prevent negative emotional afflictions as well as a powerful tool for mutual surveillance within the cell, providing party control at its lowest level.25

Second, Party platoon cells met roughly once a week to discuss matters concerning discipline, training, morale and other concerns that required criticism and self criticism.

Figure 2.

Figure 2 was adapted from: Gurtov, Melvin, Viet Cong Cadres and the Cadre System; A Study of the Main and Local Forces, The Rand Corporation, California, 1975, pp 43-46. In Figure 2, political officers are shown at platoon level. This was the case in southern based units before 1968, where dispersal rather than concentration of units was the norm. Political cadres were required at platoon level because of the greater need for control. In main force VPA battalions, political officers were employed down to company level. See pp 42-43.
The platoon commander or platoon second-in-command convened the cell, and soon after, the whole platoon was summoned to be advised of the strengths and weaknesses of the platoon. During these sessions individuals within the platoon would be singled out for praise or condemnation. The criticism and self-criticism sessions were a form of group therapy where a soldier was first criticized by his peers then was expected to criticize himself. Junior ranking soldiers were free to criticize non-commissioned officers, although the net flow of criticism tended to go the other way. These sessions apparently provided an emotional catharsis, in that they served to release undesirable tensions or to prevent them from arising altogether.

Third, company Chapter Committees consisting of platoon and company cadres, met monthly, under the auspices of the company political officer. This level was quite important as here the political officer had the most direct influence on VPA troops. During the meeting of the company executive section, the company political officer would delegate tasks including: motivation of soldiers, conducting emulation campaigns, propaganda and cultural activities. At the meeting, platoon cadres would report the progress of their platoons, and the company political officer would explain any new resolutions or directives from higher echelons of the Vietnam Communist Party. The company political officer would then in turn report to the battalion executive section. The company executive section would also convene an assembly of the whole company to allow an exchange of information from the commander and political officer, and the company’s men. A western military equivalent would be the ‘Commanding Officer’s Hour’, where the unit Chaplain conducts a similar session to that of the political officer. One serving officer stated that the sessions allowed the men:

To contribute their constructive ideas, assisting the cadre to correct defects in styles of command and leadership, rectifying in a timely fashion the appearances of deviation in executing discipline and orders as well as every stipulated system within the unit... The military council corrected the ideas of the men, organized a lively plan suggestion program and was able to assist the commander in resolving many difficulties, creating many strike methods appropriate to the detachments and the small teams within the

26 Gurtov, op. cit., p 45.
27 Kellen, op. cit., p 36.
Development of VPA Command

company. The cadre and men were caused to quickly become unanimous in their tactical ideology.29

The Youth Group Chapter was also prominent at the company level and its executive section normally met weekly, along similar lines to the company executive section.30 The youth group was the ‘institutional embodiment of the higher expectations and more rapid achievement the VCP reserved for youth.’31 Within the VPA, the youth group had extremely high status, as promotion from the youth group to the party proper was comparatively easy, and membership of the VCP was extremely important for career advancement. The youth group system was important as it stressed strict adherence to VCP standards and the standards expressed by the political officers of the unit.

Fourth, the battalion party chapter reviewed company reports and in turn met at regular intervals. This group met around every nine months, to review past plans, to make new plans, and elect a new committee.32 The battalion political officer was the secretary of the battalion chapter committee, while the battalion commander had only a limited say in party affairs. As General Vo Nguyen Giap stated:

Even in the military domain the final resolutions for combat were made by the Battalion political officer. In comparison with the Battalion commander (who ranks third in a battalion’s party structure), the Battalion political officer had more authority than the former in the Party, because the political officer was a Party Committee Secretary, while the Battalion commander was only a Party Committee member.33

The system of leaders thus emphasized strict party control through a rigid system of party committees from the GPD down. The system encouraged maximum participation of all members beginning at the level of the three man cell. The system promoted success and high standards of excellence and political

29 Huang Phuong, ‘Good Military Council Activity is the Foundation for Company Combat Strength’, Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 16 March 1967.
30 Gurtov, op. cit., p 45.
32 Gurtov, op. cit., p 45.
33 Vo Nguyen Giap, People’s War People’s Army: The Viet Cong Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries, Praeger, New York, 1962, p 120.
consciousness within the individual, for not to comply meant certain criticism, and criticism meant humiliation or punishment. Although the system of leaders provided a strong cohesive force, it was also conducive, as will be shown, to encumbered decision making.

Problems With The System of Leaders: the Experience in the South.

Towards the end of the Second Indochina War, the system of leaders became outmoded in three general areas. First, with the transition to battalion, regiment and divisional warfare, the system of local party committees exercising control over local guerrilla units became more complex, and the need for streamlining became evident. Second, technological modernization of the VPA brought the need for quick, decisive command to enable the use of modern weaponry and communications equipment to optimum levels of efficiency. Third, and as a result, political officers were finding that their role was becoming usurped by military officers who commanded units without their consultation. The commander found the position of the political officer obsolete, and the party found it was losing control. These three areas will now be examined.

Mobile Units and Local Party Committees

In 1964, People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) units in southern Vietnam began a concerted build-up to main force battalion, regiment and divisional units. These units were not stationary and when mobilized, travelled from province to province at the order of the PLAF headquarters or military region commands. This made it impossible for the commander of a unit to liaise with his local party committee, and raised the question of how the commander should liaise with the party committee in the new area of operations. This problem was further compounded when VPA units infiltrated southern Vietnam, as their own party committees and political officers were under direction from the GPD in Hanoi.34 In late 1967 Army of the Republic of Vietnam

34 See editor's comments in 'The Party in Command: Political Organization and the Viet Cong Armed Forces', Viet-nam Documents and Research
(ARVN) forces captured notes taken at a Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) training conference by an official of Military Region Three. The notes state that there were already debates about the party-army relationship:

There is now difficulty and confusion in some places. Misunderstandings have occurred. [Some people argue that] the military agencies are purely professional and should only assist the Party Committee, as do other professional agencies. Other people believe that since the party already has its organization in the armed forces, they are under the leadership of the party, therefore it is not necessary to respect the leadership of the local party committee.35

The COSVN training conference concluded that if the military commander was ‘unable to report each directive received’, he should make a ‘recapitulative report periodically, so that the party committee can closely follow the trend of the military authorities.’36 This statement clearly shows the irrelevance of the party committee in unit level command, as the new phase of warfare prevented the party committee from taking part in the decision making process. The problem was later solved by bringing these units under direct control of the Ministry of National Defence, thus bringing them under further centralized control.37

Command and Technological Modernization

As the air war over Vietnam escalated, and the VPA began receiving more complex weaponry, quick, decisive command and control on the battlefield became a necessity in fighting what was fast becoming a modern conventional battle. Offensives were now on a larger scale and operational coordination of the various arms and services of the VPA was much more complicated. Furthermore, the commander had to acquire a greater knowledge of higher level tactics as he moved from commanding a regiment, to

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36 Ibid, pp 16-17.
37 Cited in the editor’s comments on Vo Nguyen Giap, ‘Arm the Revolutionary Masses’, op. cit., pages not numbered.
a division, to an army corps. The party committee meanwhile, still had to concern itself with basic party affairs, thus the task of commanding the unit fell totally in the hands of the commander, while the task of leading the unit depended predominantly on the personality of the individual commander or political officer, and the relationship between the two.

In the light of this situation, the VPA had no option but modernize its command structure to allow the commander to make quick decisions without first consulting his party committee. This problem was addressed by Vo Nguyen Giap after the Easter Offensive, late in 1972, when the VPA were having little success in integrating armoured and infantry warfare. Giap implied that in units commanded by party committees as well as the military commander, there was not enough unity in practice. Yet rather than usurp the power of the political officer, Giap laboured the point that it was necessary to ‘harmonize very well the relations between centralization and democracy, between the party committee’s leadership and the role of commanders.’

Thus, at this stage, party decision-makers had recognized the problem, but had not come to grips with the need for change. In order for this change to occur, Giap and those like him would have to change their minds, or the VPA would have to wait for their departure from High Command decision making. This aspect will be examined in Chapter Three.

Commandism: the ‘Regime of the Commander’

Prior to the ‘liberation of the South’, commandism became increasingly more prominent in VPA units. Commandism is a style of command that involves the commander dominating the leadership of the unit at the expense of the party committee. Giap was opposed to this style of leadership, but in many cases there was no alternative. This was caused first, by the shortage of party cadres towards the end of the war, and second, the low level of military education of political officers. In some instances, members of units refused to obey the directions of the political officer, as they doubted the political officer’s competence in military affairs.

38 Ibid., p 24.
40 A later incident is cited in Khanh Van, ‘A Question has been Answered’, Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 25 June 1981, p 3.
Yet as the war shifted to predominantly big formation warfare, opposition to party committee interference increased. During the 1968 Tet offensive, a COSVN commander wrote that:

The Party Committee is unable to accomplish professional and technical tasks. But these tasks cannot be effectively performed unless they are directed and guided by a political brain.  

The commander stated that experience had proven that if ‘the unit head is given room to think, make suggestions, report on the situation and mobilize his men to carry out his decisions’, the task could be carried out more efficiently. The commander further stated that ‘the knowledge of professional requirements is necessary in providing leadership in professional matters.’ It can be seen then that by the end of the Second Indochina War, the problem of command being vested in the hands of a commander and political officer had been solved. Yet the answer of placing command in the hands of one man created a two level problem. First, how would the party maintain political control within the VPA, and what would be the consequences if a unit commander or even the Minister of Defence became a competing source of influence to the party?

Conclusion

The VCP had always insisted that the Vietnam People’s Army be under direct party control. Towards the end of the Second Indochina War, this fundamental concept had conflicted with the need to centralize command. Military command had swung from the commander, prior to the August Revolution, to command exercised jointly with a political officer. Although Giap and Dung had by default inherited a great deal of power, the Central Committee established the General Political Directorate to return control to the party.

Under the system of leaders, political control within the VPA was thus placed in the hands of the GPD, constraining the authority of the Minister of National Defence. The Military Affairs Committee provided the most direct control over the VPA. Within VPA units, the party committee echelon played an important role in indoctrination and criticism and self-criticism. The party cell

41 Muoi Khan, op. cit., p 10.
42 Loc. cit.
provided tight control over the individual soldier through the emphasis on conformity.

The increasingly bureaucratic nature of leadership by party committees became unworkable in mobile warfare. Modern warfare required quick decision making and knowledge of the use of modern technological equipment. By the end of the Second Indochina War, progressive elements within the party were advocating that command should be placed in the hands of a single cadre. In retrospect, Senior Colonel Dang The Chuong argued that the party leadership and command system that existed, 'was correct and in accord with the historical conditions of that time'.43 If the change was to occur in the future, how would the party retain its dominance, and how would the party prevent the Minister of National Defence from competing with the Central Military Party Committee as the authoritative source of influence over the VPA? These aspects will be examined in Chapter 5.

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THE INTRODUCTION OF THE
ONE-COMMAND SYSTEM

Phase One: Experimentation to Implementation.

Since the adoption of the system of leaders, four significant changes had occurred in Vietnam’s situation to enable the introduction of the one-command system. These changes affected the VPA in a dramatic way, and a discussion of these changes serves to put the introduction of the one-command system in proper perspective. First, the Vietnamese defeated the US and its allies and achieved the reunification of the country under a central government in Hanoi. The majority of the party’s leaders had been fighting to achieve this since the French occupation. Thus after many decades the Vietnam Communist Party had finally achieved that aim.

Second, Vietnam’s relations with Pol Pot’s Kampuchea had been on the decline since April 1977, when Pol Pot inaugurated border clashes and moved closer towards Vietnam’s adversary, China. As Paul Quinn-Judge argued, Vietnam was: ‘fighting the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia because it was better to fight them (and by implication the Chinese), there rather than at home.’\(^1\) Border warfare between the two states had been escalating, later including an attack by Kampuchea into Vietnam’s Tay Ninh province in September 1977. In return, Vietnam attacked Kampuchea’s Svay Rieng province with a force of six divisions.\(^2\) The Soviet Union immediately took Vietnam’s side, while China tried to remain neutral.

Third, Vietnam became increasingly reliant on the Soviet Union for aid and military hardware since reunification.

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Figure 3.
Soviet Military Aid To Vietnam: 1974-1986

Figure 3 shows Soviet economic and military aid to Vietnam between 1974-1986. The Soviet Union viewed Vietnam as an 'important element in their Asian strategy of encircling China with a containment belt of collective security pacts'. Soviet military aid provided to Vietnam since reunification can be divided into three periods. First, from 1975 until the signing of the 1978 Treaty, aid was comparatively small and consisted of the 'palace guard type designed to keep the regime in power.' Second, the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea saw more expensive military hardware demands including the provision of capital weapons such as tanks, armoured vehicles, helicopters and field communications systems. Third, the Chinese attack on Vietnam’s northern border saw Vietnam receive expensive military hardware needed to fight a conventional war. This included 'complex air missile defence systems, advanced aircraft, modern naval vessels and technical installations at Cam Ranh Bay and Danang.'

Fourth, as Vietnam continued to receive more complex military hardware and quick, decisive command and control on the battlefield became a necessity in fighting a modern conventional battle with a modern conventional enemy, Vietnam had no option but modernize and standardize its armed forces. The developments in technology had to be accompanied by parallel developments in the methods of command and control of the VPA, and communication within the VPA. Based on the command experiences of fraternal socialist countries, particularly one-man command in the Soviet armed forces, the one-command system was gradually introduced into the VPA. As Vietnam received more complex Soviet weapons, and was trained by Soviet advisers at a higher level, Soviet command structure was adopted to ensure continuity between Soviet technology and tactics. Numerous articles on one-man command in the Soviet army appeared in Vietnamese military journals to support this view. However the VPA did not adopt the

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5 Loc. cit.
6 These included Van Trong, 'On the One-Person Command System in the Soviet Armed Forces', Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 8, August 1979, and Bukop, A I, 'The One-Person Command System—A Most Important Principle for Building the Soviet Armed Forces', Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 5, May 1981 and Number 6, June 1981.
Soviet model in its entirety. Major General Bui Phan Ky noted in 1987 that:

There have not so far been any tendencies to ‘import wholly’ those procedures for organizing and using forces which are suitable only to those industrialized countries having numerous troops, great potentials and very high levels of technological development.7

The Vietnamese socialist ideology insisted that party collective leadership within the VPA was a set principle, thus a balance had to be struck between the two. As Senior General Van Tien Dung argued:

We must review our armed forces extremely rich experiences in performing political tasks over the past several decades and at the same time, study and apply them and develop the efficient implementation of the political task under the new conditions. The political task must be developed in line with our armed forces’ new developments in structure and organizational scale, weapons and technical equipment, and military science and art.8

This was based on the view that Vietnam had achieved the reunification stage of their revolution and the change from guerrilla war to modern war had occurred. Technological modernization should not be considered the only impetus to reform. If the introduction of the one-command system was ‘one of a range of many changes in party control mechanisms in a communist army that appear to accompany increased technology’,9 as Herspring argues, it does not explain why communist armies with low levels of technology adopt one-man command. For example, why did the Lao People’s Army (LPA) introduce the one-command system in November 1986?10 This question will be analysed in Chapter 5.

7 Bui Phan Ky, ‘Some Initial Thoughts About Renovation of Thinking in Military Affairs’, Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 3, March 1987.
9 Herspring, op. cit., pp 370-393.
Towards the Fourth Party Congress

The above four factors were present in the minds of the decision makers at the Fourth Party Congress. Reunification had occurred, the Chinese-Kampuchean alignment was strengthening after the signing of the August 1975 Chinese-Kampuchean Treaty of Friendship, Soviet military aid was beginning to increase, and the end of the Second Indochina war enabled the VPA to capitalize on the technological modernization it underwent in the latter phases of the war, by regularizing and standardizing its organization. The introduction of the one-command system was one change amongst the many major changes that were to occur within the VPA after the Fourth Party Congress, as part of the campaign to Develop the Fine Character and Increase the Fighting Strength of the People’s Armed Forces. Other changes included the organization of three categories of troops, the use of the VPA in economic construction, and major changes in the education methods of officers and cadre that contributed to the growing professionalism within the VPA.11


The Fourth Party Congress of the Vietnam Communist Party announced the major overhaul of the party-army relationship, and was part of the entire movement towards achieving post-reunification socialist reconstruction. Prior to the Fourth Party Congress an article by Le Duc Anh appeared in the April issue of Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, while a speech by Van Tien Dung was published in Quan Doi Nhan Dan in late June. While neither directly mentioned the changes that would be initiated at the Fourth Party Congress, both foreshadowed the changes by preparing the VPA for their new role in economic reconstruction. In the article directed to the VPA Officer Corps, Le Duc Anh argued that:

The political cadres and the political work organs of each unit must undergo rapid and strong transformations in all respects to contribute in a timely and most positive manner to encouraging

and organizing troops to strictly carry out and victoriously fulfil the unit's production labour and economic construction missions.¹²

Senior General Van Tien Dung's speech to high-level cadre stressed that regularization of the VPA in the current phase of the revolution was of the utmost importance to meet the requirements of modern war and enable coordinated combined arms operations on an increasingly larger scale.¹³ He stressed that unity was the principal factor in regularization.

The principal contents of regular deployment are unity in organization and equipment; unity in leadership, command and management; unity in operational training; unity in discipline; and unity in regulations governing daily life. Those contents are manifested in the form of orders, statutes, regulations, and rules which everyone must observe absolutely and strictly.¹⁴

As well as showing the need for unity, the last sentence demonstrates his expectation of an unwary reception for the one-command system by warning cadre of their duty to follow orders. The Fourth Party Congress of the Vietnam Communist Party was the first party congress held since 1960. On the politico-military command relationship the Congress resolved that:

We must study ways to improve the party's leadership of the army, to strengthen the organization of the party and the principles and organization of political work within the army to be consistent with the organizational development and the new tasks of the army.¹⁵

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¹² Le Duc Anh, 'Some Matters Regarding Political Work Among Troops Fulfilling Economic Construction Missions', Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 4, April, 1976, p 12. Italics added. General Anh, later commander in chief of VPA forces in Kampuchea, was promoted directly to the Politburo following the successful testing of the one-command system in Kampuchea during 1979 to 1982.


¹⁴ Loc. cit.

This resolution was embodied in the statutes appearing after the Congress, formalizing the relationship between the VPA and the VCP. Article 12 of the Statutes placed the VPA under:

the party’s absolute, direct, comprehensive leadership. Party organization in the VPA is set up according to the vertical system from the basic level upward under the Party Central Committee’s comprehensive, direct leadership. It operates in compliance with the party statutes and the Central Committee’s directives and resolutions.16

The roles and tasks of the Central Military Party Committee and the General Political Directorate were also defined.

The Central Military Party Committee, placed under the comprehensive, direct leadership of the Political Bureau and the Secretariat, is dutybound to lead and direct all aspects of the party’s activities in the army, within the scope determined by the Central Committee.

The VPA’s General Political Department assumes the party’s tasks and the political tasks within the army under the leadership of the Central Military Party Committee.17

Although the Statutes did not mention the introduction of the one-command system,18 it follows that there must have been some discussion of the system at the Congress. This can be seen in the Resolution of the Standing Committee of the Central Military Party Committee on Implementing the Commander System.19 The Resolution clearly stated that the ‘commander system’ was to be implemented ‘in accordance with the stipulations of the Party Central Committee’. The editorial also stated that the decision to organize the implementation was made by the Central Military Party Committee.20

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17 Ibid.
18 No documents published directly after the Fourth Party Congress mentioned the one-command system.
19 Resolution cited in the editorial of Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 9, September 1979.
20 ‘Implementing the Commander System well within the Vietnamese People’s Army’, Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 9, September 1979, p 8.
As examined in the previous chapter, the introduction of the one-command system seemed completely alien to party and military leaders who knew nothing but dual command, and as Le Tat Thang argued, ‘everything from outlook and thinking to work procedures and methods must change accordingly’. For that reason, the one-command system was implemented slowly in selected units, and was accompanied by a very large ‘campaign’ to explain the new system. The campaign was best demonstrated in Senior General Dung’s release of the most significant statement on the role of the Vietnam People’s Army since the end of the Second Indochina war. The article was broadcast over the Hanoi Domestic Service between May to August of 1977 and published in Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan over the same time period, thus ensuring it major coverage nationwide. The article began by restating that the VPA was subservient to the VCP and that Vietnam was entering a new revolutionary phase. The thesis of the paper could be summed up by a paragraph that appears midway through the article:

We must base ourselves on the requirements of the law of building and struggle of our armed forces to determine system and rules or legislative regulations and orders pertaining to the armed forces. Our armed forces’ systems, rules, regulations and orders reflect the objective requirements of armed struggle and of the use of modern weapons and equipment.22

Thus Dung demonstrated the methodology behind the decisions made at the Fourth Party Congress to change the command relationship and prepared the VPA for the changes yet to come. This he addressed in the second half of the article examining several questions on High Command and Unit level command.

On High Command, he argued, the National Military Organization System should be built on the basis of the present military organization ‘so as to form a unified organizational system under strict leadership and command’. Second, for the present he re-endorsed the party committee system, but warned that the party’s direction at the Fourth Party Congress could not be realized without taking into account the principles and conditions of ‘fierce

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21 Le Tac Thang, ‘Several Experiences in Implementing the One Person in Command System,’ Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 10, October 1980, p 7.
22 Van Tien Dung, ‘Build a Powerful People’s Armed Forces’, op. cit.
23 Ibid.
and decisive combat of modern warfare'. This point was developed later in the article where General Dung stated that to increase the ‘efficiency of organized command’, the VPA must develop the ‘hierarchic system according to the party Central Committee’s regulations’. This, he stated, ‘is a new task for our army’ and ‘proper preparations must be made’ to carry out the task effectively.

On Unit level command, General Dung was strongly critical of political officers who failed to remain intimate with their units, thus preventing them from ‘implementing all directives, orders and plans from the upper echelons in a positive and scrupulous manner.’ Under the party’s new ‘hierarchic system’ though, he stated that:

We must understand that any cadre commanding an army unit is not merely the chief of this unit in the military aspect, but must be a commander responsible for his units activities in all fields—military, political, logistical and technical. He must exercise leadership in combat, military training, political training as well as economic construction.

The party went to great lengths in emphasizing that the party committee system was not being usurped by the one-command system but rather it was being strengthened. In October 1980, Le Tat Thang argued on the basis of data contained in a preliminary review of the one-command system conducted by the GPD, that:

The implementation of the one person in command system within the army is designed to constantly strengthen the leadership role of the party committee collective and fully develop the responsibility of the commander to ensure the development of leadership strength in conjunction with increasing the effectiveness of command.

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
The Delay in Implementation: December 1976 to May 1979

The one-command system was not systematically introduced until May 1979, two years after the Fourth Party Congress. Prior to the implementation, the system was experimented with by its introduction in selected units. On the basis of available evidence it appears that units within IV Corps under Major General Hoang Cam were the first to introduce the system, followed by the Third, Fourth and Fifth Military Regions. At least 104 units were involved in the evaluation. This is significant as it helps explain the reasons for the delay in implementation. The reasons for the delay were threefold.

First, as with all major organizational changes in a bureaucratic organization, methods of operation, introduction, training systems and the like have to be tested, implemented, approved, and the doctrine written. An army, in this case the VPA, is no exception, as the VPA would have had to undergo several lengthy steps to implement the CMPC’s guidelines, the GPD’s directions and in turn formulate its own policy. This would have involved such steps as analysis of the present system, designing of a system to replace the old system, developing the new system in preparation for testing, implementing the new system on a trial basis in selected units and closely monitoring its performance. Finally, and most importantly, the new system has to be validated in terms of the effectiveness of achieving the aim of improving the efficiency of the organization. This methodology is evident throughout Van Tien Dung’s mammoth 1977 article, and the validation phase appears at all levels in the VPA through criticism and self-criticism (as discussed in Chapter Two). Emulation campaigns, in this case the Bring into Full Play the Fine Nature and Increase the Fighting Strength of the People’s Armed Forces

30 The only evidence available is from corps level and above. In these units the positions of commander and political officer are held by the same person. The date of their holding both offices simultaneously equates with the date of introduction of the system. See US Central Intelligence Agency, Directory of Officials of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, National Foreign Assessment Center, CR 80-/5659, December 1980, pp 73-83.
31 See figures of VPA units that received awards for the introduction of the one-command system at the conclusion of the emulation campaign: Hanoi Domestic Service, (BK251400), 1100 GMT, 23 January 1981.
campaign, are methods most widely used by the VPA to set the goals, requirements and validation. On the one-command system:

The objectives and requirements set forth by the Party Secretariat are the key points in bringing into play the revolutionary nature and increasing the fighting strength of our armed forces. The successful fulfilment of these objectives and requirements will bring about a new, basic change in the overall quality of the armed forces. This is also the main theme of the present ‘determined to win victory over the aggressor army’ emulation movement in all the people’s armed forces.32

This procedure was then carried out in selected units from the highest to lowest echelons, and only after validation from these units were the doctrine, regulations and standard operating procedures written, and the system finally implemented.33 As the one-command system was designed for combat, it is understandable why the testing of the one-command system was conducted in VPA units in Kampuchea.

The second reason for the delay in implementing the one-command system, according to the collective opinion of many Vietnam analysts, was internal opposition from within the VPA. Hal Meinheit argued that the delay before the change was formally implemented was ‘almost certainly as a result of the controversial nature of the reform.’34 William Turley argued that ‘this change has been resisted by individuals who have feared it would erode the authority of the party organization and of political officers.’35 Meinheit and Turley cited only one source, an October 1980 article by Bui Bien Thuy, which hardly describes any ‘opposition’, ‘controversy’, or ‘resistance’. What the article does, however, is quite deliberately use a question and answer technique to allay any fears about the consequences of the introduction. The questions are

33 This methodology was later expressed by the present Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Major General Nguyen The Bon, in ‘Renovating the Curriculum of Detachment Training in Keeping with the Combat Mission’, Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, May 1987, pp 11-17.
34 Meinheit, Hal ‘Vietnamese Army: Politics or Professionalism’, Cable from the United States Consulate, Hong Kong, to the United States Secretary of State, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs Memorandum, HK13010, 5 July 1984.
posed as 'devil's-advocates', rather than expressing any dissent. As Bui Bien Thuy stated:

Will the assignment of the responsibility for commanding and managing the unit to only one person weaken the leadership of the unit party committee? In fact, there is no clear evidence that it will. The leadership system and the command system form an integrated whole designed to constantly improve the effectiveness of both leadership and command.36

This article cannot be taken as evidence to suggest that there was any opposition to the one-command system, although the article suggests that there was, or could potentially be, some conservative wariness to changing a system that had worked for the past two decades. As will be shown later, the system was criticized at this stage, but on the grounds that the commander was not given enough freedom to lead, not because he had been given too much. If there was any opposition to the system, these views were not permitted to surface in party controlled media.

The third reason for the delay in implementing the one-command system was Vietnam’s relations with Kampuchea and China. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Vietnam’s relations with Pol Pot’s Kampuchea and China were rapidly deteriorating, and war was a distinct possibility. Indeed, Vietnam was already involved with escalating border conflicts with Kampuchea, and China had cut aid to Vietnam from mid-1978. In Hua Kuo-Feng’s report to the Fifth Chinese National Party Congress he referred to Vietnam as a ‘sham socialist country’, ending China’s neutrality.37 In the light of this situation, many officers believed it unwise to change the command structure at this particular time. For to be caught unawares during this period would indeed have affected the VPA’s combat effectiveness. The party warned against units not paying attention to party development, ‘under pretext of pressing combat duties’. In retrospect, combat was said to provide ‘an

36 Bui Bien Thuy, ‘Dealing with the Initial Experiences gained by a number of Units that have Successfully Carried Out the One-Person Command System—Formerly known as the System of Leaders—Which is an Important New Issue Facing Our Army’, Hanoi Domestic Service, 2330 GMT, 26 October 1980.
opportuné occasion to further party development in the most objective manner and with a guarantee of quality.'38

Phase Two: 'Perfecting and Improving' the One-Command System

Two years after the implementation of the one-command system, the GPD was happy with the progress that had been made in implementation, but realized that the initial version of the one-command system needed to be modified. The Director of the GPD, Senior General Chu Huy Man, stated that the party's new military line 'had proven to be very correct.' General Man stressed, what all party-military writers had suggested since the introduction of the one-command system, that:

We must emphasize the collective leadership role of the party committee echelon in conjunction with heightening the responsibility of the commander, thereby insuring that troops are led, commanded and managed in such a way that they complete every task and win victory over the enemy.39

The system operated on the principle that the commander was the decision maker, although he should follow the party's leadership in making his decision. Note well the distinction between 'command' and 'leadership' as detailed in the Introduction of this work.

In our army, the party's leadership role with regard to the cadre task is manifest in the principle that the party committee leads the collective and the commander organizes the implementation of the cadre task. The standing committee of the party committee determines the policies and plans of the cadre task with regard to the assignment and promotion, and use of cadres according to the authority delegated to it. The commander directly controls and organizes the implementation of the cadre task, manages and observes cadres, and takes the initiative in recommending policies and plans regarding the organization, promotion, and

38 'Party Development in Combat Units', Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 27 June 1984, pp 1 and 4.
appointment of cadres so that the party committee as a whole can discuss them and make decisions. 40

Major General Hoang Phuong added that:

The commander is the person who organizes the implementation of every order from the commander on the upper echelon, the resolutions of the party committee on his echelon and the directives and guidance of the agencies on the upper echelon.41

Under the system the commander appeared to function more as a manager than a true commander. In combat he was the unit’s decision maker and in all respects commanded the unit. Yet unlike in western armies, the commander was not tasked to lead. As Le Tac Thang stated in January 1982, the implementation of the one-command system was also ‘a process of experimentation, of search, of application of new methods’ to draw conclusions regarding ‘the building of various genres of basic party organizations.’42 Thang further stated that ‘the regime of the commander had been implemented one step further’ in the VPA, and in the future, ‘these regimes shall be expanded, perfected and made into a pattern.’ The thesis of the article was that ‘the more consolidated the structure of command, the better the units tasks get accomplished.’43

Towards The Fifth Party Congress

Between the Fourth and Fifth Party Congresses, Vietnam had come up against a number of important obstacles. First, the invasion of Kampuchea brought the massive Chinese retaliatory attack on the northern border and the on-going border dispute forced scarce resources to be diverted to continue the war. This placed a severe strain on the Vietnamese economy as well as diverting great numbers of troops away from possibly achieving a quick victory in Kampuchea. Second, continued Vietnamese reliance on the USSR saw greatly increased Soviet aid including: expensive

43 Ibid., p 9.
military hardware such as 'complex air missile defence systems, advanced aircraft, modern naval vessels', as well as economic aid in the form of power generation, oil and gas exploration and hydro-electricity. This put further strains on the VPA, as they had to familiarize and use the increasingly modern equipment in combat, as well as in economic construction. Finally, the continued occupation of Kampuchea proved to be a good testing ground for the one-command system, and any modifications to it could be seen as a direct result of operational experience in Kampuchea and on the northern Vietnamese border. Thus immediately prior to the Fifth Party Congress, the GPD was advocating that the one-command system become even more firmly entrenched in the VPA's doctrine, by transferring more responsibility to the military commander.

On the eve of the Fifth Party Congress, the General Political Directorate published a very important document reviewing party and political work over the previous five year plan. The review strongly criticized the fact that the effectiveness of the change in command structure 'had not been high and had not brought about a strong, stable change in the political and ideological change of the troops.' This was attributed to 'the organizational structure and work methods and style still [being] weak.' The article stated that there were three basic problems that needed to be solved.

First, it was deemed necessary to define the organizational system of the party apparat within the VPA. 'It is necessary to determine on which levels political staffs should be organized' and to 'define the function and tasks of the political agency on each level.'

Second, the GPD believed the organizational structure of the political apparat needed to be defined. 'The apparatus of the

45 Political General Department, 'Toward the 5th Congress of the Party: Thoroughly Understanding the Revolutionary Line of the Party and Increasing the Effectiveness of Party Work and Political Work Among the People's Armed Forces', Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 2, February 1982, pp 9-10.
political agency must be streamlined and consist of competent cadre who possess good qualities'.

Third, the GPD sought to define the relationship between the party and the army within the principle that the party leads, 'consistent with the effort to perfect the one-person-in-command system within the army.'

The Fifth Party Congress, March 1982

As with the Fourth Party Congress, the speeches and resolutions of the Fifth Party Congress did not directly mention the one-command system. The Fifth Party Congress emphasized the need for stronger party control over all areas of daily life, particularly in building an 'ideologically and organizationally strong Party with a view to ensuring a successful implementation of its lines.'

On National Defence, Van Tien Dung argued that the consolidation of 'national defence and building the armed forces' must be interrelated with the party's other policies. He argued that military policy:

must also be institutionalized by laws and decrees, ensured by organizational systems, and translated into action by the entire people and army and by all sectors from the central to the grassroots level.

Although not directly stated at the Congress, the failings of the first version of the one-command system seemed to be related to the 'experience at a number of frontline infantry units' in Kampuchea and on the northern border. At the Fifth Party Congress, Dung argued that the change in the command system was 'restricted obviously by the fierce designs of enemy aggression and sabotage, the short time available, objective difficulties and

46 Ibid., p 10.
49 'Party Development in Combat Units', Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 27 June 1984.
even subjective shortcomings.\textsuperscript{50} The two most often cited deficiencies were first:

In the face of fierce combat ordeals, the strength of combat participants resides not only in their individual awareness of duties and their combat abilities but also in the effect of the orders issued by the commander and in his will-power, energy, and creativeness.\textsuperscript{51}

Thus the party also deemed it necessary for the commander to lead his unit as well as command the unit. The second deficiency was that the party committee was only able to discuss in the ‘initial phase’ of combat, and mission effectiveness was reduced by the commander ‘relying excessively on the collective’.\textsuperscript{52} The commander was thus given more flexibility in his command, and the party echelon forbidden ‘to criticize the commander’s orders and directives during their execution.’\textsuperscript{53}

The Vietnam Communist Party’s statutes went further than was reported at the Congress. The national situation was described as requiring the continuation of building a:

powerful revolutionary people’s army with an ever-increasing level of standardization and modernization. In order to meet the requirements for building the army and consolidating national defence, we must further strengthen party leadership over the armed forces and, at the same time, fully implement the system of one-man command so as to ensure that commanders can fully develop their responsibilities in carrying out the tasks entrusted by the party and state.\textsuperscript{54}

Article 12 of the party statutes was amended to state that ‘the organization of party leadership in the armed forces will be determined by the Central Committee’. The remainder of Article 12, as stated at the Fourth Party Congress (cited earlier), was deleted from the party statutes altogether. Second, a central

\textsuperscript{50} Van Tien Dung, ‘Speech to the Vietnam Communist Party Fifth Party Congress’, \textit{op. cit.}


\textsuperscript{52} ‘Party’s New Leadership Mechanism’, \textit{op. cit.}, p 30.

\textsuperscript{53} Le Xuan Luu, \textit{op. cit.}, p 89.

department subordinate to the Political Bureau was to be set up to assist 'the central level in the management of cadres belonging to the armed and security forces.'

Following the Congress, the Politburo issued Resolution number 07/NQ-TW entitled: *On Changing and Improving the Mechanism whereby the party leads the Vietnam People's Army and National Defence work and Implementing the One Person in Command system within the Army*, in mid-1983. The resolution was to institute five major changes to the politico-military command relationship.

First, the VCP Central Committee was to provide 'direct, centralized and unified leadership of every aspect of the Vietnam People's Army'. The Central Committee and Politburo were to 'decide all major questions regarding the construction and combat of the army'. Power was 'specifically concentrated in the Politburo and Secretariat.' The Ministry of National Defence was to apply the VCP's resolutions in its 'command and management activities throughout the army'. A very important change was that now 'unit commanders at all echelons [were to] carry out the orders and directives of the Minister of National Defence'. This change had the potential to make the Minister a very powerful man indeed.

Second, the Politburo was seen as overworked in the current stage. Lieutenant General Dang Vu Hiep stated later that: 'The Political Bureau does not have enough time or the conditions to specifically and promptly resolve the problems of the military and national defence by itself.' For this reason a Standing Agency of the Politburo was set up subordinate to the Central Committee and Politburo, to exercise party leadership over the armed forces.

Third, the one-command system was implemented on all echelons of the army. The commander was given by the party and state:

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55 *ibid.*, p 108.
57 'Party's New Leadership Mechanism', *op. cit.*
All the responsibility needed within the scope of his responsibility and is personally responsible to the party, the state and the commander on the upper echelon for his performance in the commanding of combat operations, the build-up and management of troops and the implementation of the decisions and policies of the party and state and the tasks of the unit.60

Thus for the first time the commander was in control of the unit he commanded and was able to exercise his own style of leadership without the watching eyes of a political officer. In place of the political officer, ‘military councils were established on prescribed echelons as collective military leadership organizations’. The military council functioned ‘to ensure the constant combat readiness of the troops, ensure high quality military training and political education’, and met to discuss major policies to deal with the ‘daily life of troops’.61 The commander was also the chairman of the military council, and could override any of the military council’s decisions.62

Fourth, the system of party committee echelons was abandoned from the Central Military Party Committee down to the basic-level party organizations.63 The political agencies within units provided party leadership and performed party-political work, but were not linked in any chain of command, as before. In other words, they no longer led the unit, but directed the unit in party-political affairs.

Finally, the appointment of a commander or political officer on the divisional level or above, had to be approved by the GPD and Secretariat. The tenets of Resolution 07 were reaffirmed in July 1985 in Politburo Resolution 27/NQ-TW. The full operation of the one-command system will be examined in Chapter 4.

**Phase Three: The Party Struggles to Maintain Control**

The Sixth Party Congress reaffirmed the one-command system as a principle in party control of the VPA. Chapter VI of the VCP Statutes was added to amend the task of the party

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61 *Loc. cit.*
62 ‘Party’s New Leadership Mechanism’, *op. cit.*
organizations within the VPA to express the concerns of the Secretariat and the CMPC. Articles 37 to 40 of the Party Statutes consisted of strict rules on the organization of the party apparat within the VPA, particularly with the relationship between political organs, the Secretariat and the command echelons of units and formations. The organization of the party apparat within the VPA is now referred to as the Political Organ System. The Political Organ System will be discussed in depth in Chapter 4.

Following the Congress the Central Committee introduced a number of measures to prevent a decline in party values inside the VPA. In late 1987 the CMPC issued a resolution on a Campaign to Purify and Enhance the Militant Strength of Party Organizations and the State Apparatus and to Ameliorate Social Relations within the Army. The aim of the campaign was to remove ‘degenerate and deviant members’ from the party, and was to build on earlier successes. These included the sacking of a Divisional commander, Be Ich Quan, and the trial of the military commander of Haiphong, Nguyen Truong Xuan. The second measure was the institution of an ‘anti-negativism’ drive in the military press, instituted by the GPD. The aim of the drive was to criticize publicly ‘the ills of bureaucracy, authoritarianism, militarism, and to condemn wasteful practices.

Conclusion

As soon as reunification was achieved, the party realized that change to the command structure was of the utmost importance if the VPA was to remain an effective fighting force.

64 See Lieutenant-General Dang Vu Hiep’s comments in: ‘Fundamental Elements in Organizing Party Leadership Within the Vietnam People’s Army, Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, September, 1987, pp 15-27.  
Attacks by Kampuchea and the breakdown of diplomatic relations with China showed up the problems in the VPA’s command structure. This was exacerbated by even more Soviet aid of a greater technological level and the need to maintain a degree of interoperability between the three Indochinese states and the Soviet Union.

The Fourth Party Congress instituted a half-way measure whereby the military officer exercised command, while the party committee exercised leadership. This side-stepped the problem of the party losing political control of the VPA as had happened from 1948. There was a considerable delay in introduction, caused by the need to fight a two-front war, the planning of the introduction of the new system, and conservative wariness within the High Command.

Combat experience in Kampuchea and the defence against China, coupled by ever increasing Soviet aid provided the impetus for further change. The need to regularize and centralize command was of supreme importance. The commander was thus given the authority to lead as well as to command. The Minister of Defence, by default, was given command of the entire VPA.

Vietnam was facing two changes that could dramatically effect the party-military balance within the country. Could the VPA under the command of the Minister of National Defence see it compete with the VCP as the legitimate source of influence within Vietnam? Second, would the change to the one-command system result in a more professional military and result in a decline in party values? These questions will be addressed in Chapter 5.
THE WORKINGS OF THE ONE-COMMAND SYSTEM

Under the one-command system, branches of the VCP are present at all levels of military command within the VPA. Yet the party no longer has direct control of VPA units as it had done via the vertical chain of party committees under the system of leaders. The VCP no longer has direct control of the GPD,1 which now receives its orders from the Ministry of Defence, although still under the leadership of the Politburo and Secretariat. The party no longer has direct control over the units and formations of the VPA or the military regions, which are now controlled through the Political General Department, but under overall command of the Minister of Defence. Furthermore, on all levels of command in the VPA, the VCP has given maximum decision-making power to the commander. The position of the political officer has been reduced to an assistant in collective decision making on matters affecting troop morale and the like. Actual command, management, leadership and responsibility now lie entirely in the hands of the commander, regardless of level. From Politburo to GPD, executive organizations for collective decision-making have been added, yet these bodies only decide party policy, and have no jurisdiction over the command of the unit.

Chapter 2 showed that as with all military organizations, the levels of command within the VPA can be broken up into two distinct areas: the High Command and Unit Level Command. These two groupings remain functional under the one-command system. In addition, a further grouping, referred to in Vietnamese military writings as the Political Organ System will be analysed.

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1 The General Political Directorate is now referred to in Vietnamese writings as the Political General Department. The abbreviation GPD will continue to be used to avoid confusion.
The Vietnamese High Command

The High Command level was described as an organizational grouping concerning those organizations having a direct bearing on policy formulation and implementation within the VPA. It is important to view the High Command as an organizational grouping, rather than a strict chain of command. The overlap of individuals between various bodies serves as a division of labour as well as a 'check and balance'. The Party Control Committee, Central Military Party Committee, Council of Political Organs, Political General Department, Ministry of National Defence, Military Council, the Directorates, and the National Defence Council constitute the Vietnamese 'High Command' under the one-command system. Figure 4 shows the politico-military command relationship of the Vietnamese High Command. This Chapter will not concern itself with those elements of the High Command, examined in Chapter 2, whose roles and functions have changed little since the end of the Second Indochina War, but will concentrate on the new relationship between the party and the VPA.

The VCP Central Committee, according to Article 37 of the 1986 revised Party Statutes, places the VPA 'under the direct, centralized, and unified leadership of the party in all respects, according to a strict regulation established by the party Central Committee.' The Central Committee’s power on military affairs is a lot less than the Party Statutes suggest. The Central Committee acts more as a body that formulates general policy on the military line and national defence. Furthermore, the Central Committee meets annually, thus it cannot administer daily military affairs. The Central Committee’s real voice in the control of the VPA is exercised through the Politburo and Secretariat, and to a lesser extent the Organization, Training, and Central Control Departments of the Central Committee.3

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3 'Increase the Effectiveness' op. cit., pp 1-8; For the identification and workings of several VCP Central Committee Departments see: 'Understanding the New Leadership Mechanism', op. cit.
Figure 4. Vietnamese High Command Structure, 1985-1988

Figure 4. was constructed from information drawn from: US Central Intelligence Agency, *Socialist Republic of Vietnam: Party Structure*, Directorate of Intelligence, CR-83-10680, September 1983; 'Understanding the New Leadership Mechanism of the Party as Regards Our Army; the Political Organ and the Political Cadre Component, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 26, 27 April 1984; Le Xuan Luu, 'Revamping and Improving the Mechanism by which the Party Leads the Army', *Tap Chi Cong San*, Number 7, July 1984, pp 27-33; 'Increase the Effectiveness of the Party's Leadership of the People's Army and National Defense', *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Number 2, February 1985, pp 1-8.
The Politburo of the VCP Central Committee consists of thirteen members and one alternate member. The Politburo exercises the greatest influence over the VPA, and is the real 'power broker' within the VCP on military affairs. It was the Politburo's Resolution Number 07 of 15 December 1982 that established its important position over the VPA, as well as the Politburo's own position over the VPA with regard to the Secretariat and the Central Committee itself. The Politburo determines the specific roles of the VPA, and decides on the emphasis the VPA places on national defence versus economic construction. The Politburo determines the size of the VPA and the 'direction and mission of building the people's armed forces'. In addition, the Politburo makes policy on 'combining the economy with national defence and bringing combined strength into play in the enterprise of defending the homeland'. The change to the one-command system has seen the usurpation of power from the Central Military Party Committee into the hands of the Politburo. This has been achieved by the establishment of a standing agency of the Politburo, the Party Control Committee.

The Party Control Committee was set up by the Politburo to resolve 'various military and national defence problems'. Decisions made by the Party Control Committee are institutionalized as orders, decrees or directives of the Council of State or the Standing Committee of the Council of Ministers, and are implemented by various ministries. This committee has become the most influential body in the Politburo's policy formulation process.

The Secretariat is made up of thirteen members of the Central Committee, almost half of whom are also on the Politburo. The Secretariat leads the party's daily work, 'especially cadre work, and party member work, and control[s] the implementation of party resolutions'. In daily political affairs, the Secretariat is subordinate to the Politburo, but in military affairs, the Secretariat functions alongside the Politburo as a policy making, as well as a policy implementing body. The Secretariat determines policy on building the corps of cadres within the VPA, party-political work in the VPA,

5 'Increase the Effectiveness', op. cit., pp 1-8.
6 Dang Vu Hiep, 'Continue To Perfect the Mechanism of Party Leadership', op. cit.
and makes policy on military work at the local level. This is a distinct change from the system that existed under the system of leaders. After the Fifth Party Congress the Secretariat set up its own standing agency, the Council of Political Organs, which appears to have functioned since mid-1984. Its resolutions on party-political work in the VPA take the form of directives to political directors at divisional level and higher. The Council of Political Organs directs the ‘criticism and self criticism’ drives within the VPA, and in sum controls the ‘party consciousness’ within the VPA.

The CMPC is an advisory body having two primary functions. First, the CMPC serves as a staff for the three higher organizations: the Central Committee, Politburo and Secretariat. In this area, the CMPC develops plans on: the defence of Vietnam; developing the VPA’s combat effectiveness; military strategy; increasing party consciousness within the VPA; and improving the party-political work system in the VPA. Second, the CMPC serves as the highest party committee echelon in the VPA, and is tasked with leading the VPA in the fulfilment of the VPA’s mission. Under the system of leaders the CMPC was the most influential VCP body in the military field as it was the highest party-military echelon. The CMPC retains this position, yet the establishment of the Party Control Committee has usurped a great deal of the CMPC’s influence. Furthermore, the CMPC is no longer directly linked to the GPD, and has to operate through the Politburo and Secretariat, which in turn operate through the Ministry of National Defence. The Central Military Party Committee’s membership is appointed by the Politburo, comprising a number of members of the Central Committee serving in the VPA. The General-Secretary of the Central Committee serves as the head of the CMPC.

The Ministry of National Defence has become a very powerful body under the one-command system. A significant change is that now ‘unit commanders at all echelons [are to] carry

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8 ‘Increase the Effectiveness of the Party’s Leadership’ op. cit., pp 1-8.
11 Nguyen Quyet, ‘Speech to September 1987 All-Army Training Course for High Ranking Cadres on Effecting the Party’s Leadership over the People’s Armed Forces’, Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, December 1987, pp 15-23.
out the orders and directives of the Minister of National Defence'.
In the past, the system of party committees extending from the CMPC to the basic level party units saw that the Minister of Defence could be by-passed by the VCP. Now, the party’s dominance of the affairs of the VPA has ended. The change has severed the VCP’s direct control of the VPA and enables the VPA to control its own internal affairs as an autonomous unit. Senior General Dang The Chuong argued that this change enables ‘more centralized, unified, and solid’ leadership. This is correct as now, in order to address the VPA, VCP bodies must go through the Ministry. The party still ‘leads’ the VPA, but from the outside. It is the Ministry of Defence, in particular, the Minister of Defence, who exercises command and manages the day to day affairs of the VPA.

The Political Organ System

The Political Organ System or the System of Political Agencies is the system enabling the VCP to maintain control within the VPA. The political organ system replaces the chain from GPD to three man cell that existed under the system of leaders. In its place, a party control system with much greater flexibility and responsibility for commanders at all levels has been instituted. Figure 5 shows the political organ system that exists from army down to divisional level.

The Political General Department is at the head of the ‘System of Political Agencies’ within the VPA, coordinating the activities of the Political Departments and Political Offices of the VPA. The GPD has a dual function. First, as a general department subordinate to the Ministry of National Defence, the GPD reports to the Military Council of the Ministry and the Minister of Defence. In this role the GPD is responsible for troop morale, political work within the VPA and reporting on the quality of leadership in the armed forces. Second, the GPD is a body that assists the Secretariat in supervising party and political work in the VPA.

13 Ibid.
Figure 5. Vietnamese Communist Party Apparat within the Vietnam People’s Army, 1985-1988

Figure 5. was constructed from information drawn from: Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan editorial, ‘The New Leadership Structure’, op. cit., pp 1-8; Dang The Chuong, ‘The Political Organ in the Party’s New Leadership Structure in the Army’, Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 11, November 1984, pp 24-32; Dang Vu Hiep, ‘Continute To Perfect the Mechanism of Party Leadership’, op. cit. Information regarding the existence of Political Offices below VPA Branch level is not available.
In carrying out its task the GPD closely coordinates its activities with the Department of Propaganda and Training, the Central Control Department and the Organization Department of the VCP Central Committee. The GPD reports to the Central Committee on the party and political situation within the VPA, as well as on the status of the party activity within the GPD itself. The organizational structure of the GPD is determined by the Secretariat, and the GPD in turn determines the duties and organizational structure of the agencies within the political organ system.

The Political General Department Council was established in 1984 to ensure collective decision making at the executive level. The Director of the GPD serves as the Chairman of the GPD Council, and decisions made by the Council are issued as directives of the Director. The council examines and issues resolutions on such aspects as party building at the basic level, and party discipline. The GPD Council, as with all lower level councils, does not make decisions on operational plans, but only on activities that concern a soldier's life.

Political Departments (or Directorates), are permanent bodies established at the military region, branch, general department and VPA units of corps level. The Political Directorates implement the policies of the Military Council of the GPD, as appropriate in their own formations. For example, Military Region Political Departments have the responsibility of supervising party and political work in local militia and defence troops. The executive body of the Political Department is the Political Department Council, which functions in the same way as the GPD Council, on its own level. In addition to the Political Department Council, Political Departments have a Political Work

19 Note the distinction between a VPA branch and a VPA corps. A branch is a functional grouping, such as Artillery, Armour, or Infantry, commanded by a branch head. A branch is an administrative, and not a combat grouping. A VPA corps is a combat formation usually consisting of 3 to 4 divisions, consisting of units from VPA branches, appropriate to corps level.
Office, appropriate to the role of the supported organization. For example, the General Directorate for Rear Services has a Trade Union Section, while VPA corps have a Special Propaganda Office.

Political Offices (or Bureaus), are permanent bodies existing in both geographic zones and VPA units of divisional size, depending on the nature and mission of the formation. The tasks of the Political Offices are the same as that of the Political Department, although on a smaller scale. In the VPA division, the Political Office forms part of the divisional commander’s staff, (See Figure 6).

At divisional level, the deputy commander for political matters directly organizes party-political work in the division, and supervises the activities of the deputy commanders for political affairs in VPA regiments. Unlike under the system of leaders, the deputy commander for political matters is one among all of the divisional commanders staff. As Senior-Colonel Dang The Chuong stated:

It is not the case that the deputy commanders and the commander hold collective discussions and then reach unanimous agreement.
It is also not the case that the deputy commanders assist the commander in all regards.20

Thus the deputy commander for political matters no longer has special privileges, but is now only on the staff to advise the commander on party-political matters. The deputy commanders for operations (military matters), or staff assume command in the absence of the divisional commander, and the deputy commander for political matters always remains below the level of the acting commander.

Unit Level Command

The chain of departments and offices from GPD to divisional level is broken at regimental level. In the VPA regiment and equivalent size units, there is no permanent party echelon. This change effectively makes units of regimental size and below autonomous military units devoid of party control.

20 Ibid., pp 52-63.
Figure 6. was constructed from information drawn from: Interviews with Thai Ministry of Defence Senior Intelligence Staff, Bangkok, January 1988; and Dang The Chuong, 'The Party's Leadership', *op. cit.*, pp 52-63.
The command exercised by the regimental commander is the most flexible and responsible command ever to be allowed in the VPA since its inception. Within the headquarters of VPA regiments, battalions and companies is a deputy commander for political affairs. The deputy commander for political affairs organizes the unit's party committee with members of the unit who are also members of the Communist Party. Two aspects of command at unit level need to be examined: first, the relationship between the commander and the deputy commander for political affairs, and second, the role of the basic party unit.

The commander is given full authority to lead and command his unit by the VCP and the state. The commander is held:

personally responsible before party and state, commanders at higher levels, and the party committee at his own level for the situation and all results of his unit's performance of duties.21

Vietnamese commanders are encouraged to 'develop a dynamic and decisive character and [to] adopt a bold approach' when commanding their units, and in combat, make 'immediate decisions aimed at successfully fulfilling the mission'. The commander is thus no longer tied to a party committee in times where quick decision-making is paramount to success. This does not mean that the commander is allowed to disregard party policy. The GPD has emphasized that the one-command system is being exercised as the basis of party leadership. That is, the commander must maintain a very close relationship with his political echelon and the local party committee. His decisions are guided by the leadership of the party.22 Numerous articles appearing in Vietnamese military writings between 1984 and 1987 emphasize the qualities a commander should endeavour to acquire. These include expressing the party's will, researching party and state policy, understanding military tactics, modesty, and being against arrogance and favouritism.23

23 Hoang Van Thai, 'The System of the Single Commander and Forging the Quality and Ability of the Commander: A Talk to Cadre during a Training Conference at Military Region One', Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, February 1984, pp 7-11.
The deputy commander for political affairs is subordinate to the commander on all levels and holds no military rank. He plays no part in operational planning and methods of production. Rather, the deputy commander for political affairs acts as a motivator for party activity within the unit. He is at the commander’s disposal for use in maintaining morale and educating soldiers in party policy. In many ways, the deputy commander for political affairs performs the same functions as chaplains, legal officers and welfare agencies in western armies. The deputy commander for political affairs supervises the basic level party organizations within the unit.

The basic party unit is organized at regimental level and normally consists of the Regimental Party Committee, Battalion Party Committees and Company Party Chapters. The role of the basic party unit within the VPA is the same as any party unit in Vietnam, as defined in VCP Statutes. The tasks and authority of the basic party unit in the VPA were defined late in 1986 as:

leading the cadres and soldiers of the unit in gaining a thorough understanding of and fully complying with the lines, positions and policies of the party, the laws of the state, the tasks and the Code of Discipline of the army and the resolutions, directives and orders of the upper echelon.

Party Committees are democratically elected by members of the unit, subject to the approval of a higher party committee. The VCP retains the right to appoint a party committee in place of an elected party committee. Military Region Party Committees are also composed of secretaries of party committees of provinces, municipalities and special zones of the military region. The party committees of the Border Defence Force and Militia units are supervised by local party committees. One innovation is that party committees of company level units now hold a ‘company political day’ and a ‘monthly plenary meeting of soldiers’, where

leading cadres and commanders hold criticism and self-criticism sessions with the soldiers of the unit.²⁸

The Ho Chi Minh Youth Union and National Defence Trade Union remain important organizations for maintaining political consciousness at the individual level. The status of both organizations remains high for career minded soldiers, as promotion to the party proper is still comparatively easy, and membership of the VCP is extremely important for career advancement. The system is important as it stresses strict adherence to VCP standards. The Youth Union and Trade Union are only found in basic-level units. They have their own cadres, but party committees and commanders have been urged to strike a balance between allowing the independence of the organizations,²⁹ and leaving all the mass proselytizing work in the hands of young people. As General Nguyen Quyet argues:

Without the leadership of party committees, the guidance of political organs and the attention of commanders, these cadres cannot carry out this important and complex work satisfactorily.³⁰

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THE EFFECTS OF REGULARIZATION

The Rise in Professionalism

Following the seventh troop withdrawal from Kampuchea in 1988, the Director of the GPD, Senior General Nguyen Quyet formally announced a very important change for the VPA. In November 1988 General Quyet stated that:

Our army is undertaking a basic change of direction in strategy. It is vigorously transforming itself from a wartime army—or an army that bears many of the characteristics of a wartime army—into a peacetime army.

As the VPA gradually moves towards a peacetime footing, there is mounting evidence of a rise in professionalism inside the VPA. This has become more evident since early 1987 and can be viewed in three distinct areas.

Reduction in Size of the VPA

In September 1988 the VCP announced plans to reduce the VPA from its present size of 1.26 million to half that amount. The formal plan of troop reduction is expected to be announced in 1990, following the completion of the Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea. The reduction has already begun to occur in senior positions in the officer corps, for example, in June 1988 the VPA retired 70 Generals and 3000 Colonels, but only 20 Generals and 2000 Colonels will be replaced. The reductions will be significant in raising the level of professionalism in the VPA, as the GPD and

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3 'Military Strength Reportedly to be Halved', Kyodo, Tokyo, 0429 GMT, 6 September 1988.
4 'Cuts in Army Leadership to Begin this Month', Agence France Presse, Hong Kong, 1242 GMT, 13 June 1988, FBIS-EAS-88-14, 14 June 1988.
Ministry of National Defence are using the reductions to ‘retire’ old and inefficient cadres. The need for early retirement was first expressed by Lieutenant General Nguyen Nam Khanh in early 1987. General Khanh said that:

Long-standing [cadres] in positions of authority with some achievements in revolutionary struggle and war, have shown signs of pessimism and vacillation over party lines and leadership, and have gradually lost their confidence and sense of direction in the struggle. They have worked nonchalantly to ‘keep their positions’ and enjoy benefits... They have become parasites on the party body, jeopardizing the party’s fighting strength and prestige.5

The number of poor quality cadres in the VPA remains a significant problem. In November 1988 Senior General Quyet announced the GPD’s new policy on the ‘Renovation of the Contingent of Party Cadres in the Army’, as an attempt to alleviate the problem of poor quality cadres.6 General Quyet argued that the quality of cadres had deteriorated and ‘their skills in educating and managing troops and managing the material and technical base are also limited’.7 The new policy involves the gradual and planned retirement of party cadres from decision-making positions in the VPA, and has been evident (although unofficial), in the VPA since the ‘August Revolution’ generation of officers, including Senior General Van Tien Dung, began to retire. In accord with a CMPC resolution, the GPD is tasked with the planning of the ‘placement of key cadres’ from 1988 to 1995. According to General Quyet, it is the military region, armed force branch and ministry level that have been targeted first. Furthermore, since the conflict in the Spratly islands the emphasis will be on increasing the number of high quality cadres in ‘front line, border areas and islands’, especially areas where mobility is essential.8

The onset of the reduction in size of the VPA has been accompanied by two other changes. First, officer and non-commissioned officers are now being promoted on merit rather than length of service. The CMPC’s resolution specified that

5 Nguyen Nam Khanh, ‘Enhance the Quality of Party Members, Purify the Party, and Enhance the Party’s Fighting Strength’, Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 5, May 1987.
6 Nguyen Quyet, ‘Renovate the Contingent’, op. cit.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
'cadres must not necessarily be promoted gradually as their turn arrives but can be advanced several grades', particularly if the officers are ‘really competent to assume leading positions’. The second change is the drive to stringently enforce party discipline at the Unit level. During the first six months of 1987 the Control Committee of the CMPC reported that the number of violations of party discipline was still on the rise in VPA units. The committee stated that the practice of heavily punishing junior soldiers while only lightly punishing high-ranking officials must cease. Earlier that year, the Secretariat Directive Number 79 proclaimed that the criticism and self criticism drive conducted since the Sixth Party Congress had not achieved its aim. The deputy director of the GPD, Lieutenant General Nguyen Nam Khanh, argued that commanders must ‘severely deal with all violations of socialist assets, misappropriation of funds and swindling subordinates’. This had not been happening and was badly affecting morale in the VPA and lowering the status of the VPA in the community.

The VPA as an Interest Group

As the VPA moves towards a peacetime establishment it is beginning to be less concerned with national defence and more concerned with the welfare of its own troops. This change began to occur in early 1987, when the editorial of the Army’s daily newspaper urged most strongly to better the living conditions of soldiers. Repeated appeals to increase the standard of soldiers’ meals and their living conditions, particularly in Kampuchea, have appeared in the Vietnamese press since then. In mid-1988 the nature of the appeals changed dramatically. Where previously the appeals had been directed at commanders at all levels within the VPA, now the appeals are directed from within the VPA towards the VCP and state! The result is that the VPA now lobbies the VCP and state for improvement in its conditions of service. In April 1988 the Minister of National Defence, Senior General Le Duc Anh

9 Ibid.
11 Nguyen Nam Khanh, op. cit., pp 1-10.
13 See, for example: ‘Military Units Urged to Improve Daily Life’, Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 22 June 1987; Le Hoe, ‘Combatants’ Meals’, Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan, Number 6, June 1988; and ‘Ensure Soldiers’ Meals’, Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 15 July 1988.
appealed for improvement in the wages and conditions of service for VPA members, including changes in conditions for housing, retirement benefits, care of war invalids and the families of fallen soldiers.\textsuperscript{14} In November the Director of the GPD, Senior General Nguyen Quyet criticized the Vietnamese public for the demise in status of the VPA in Vietnamese society. The VPA ‘needs and deserves special treatment’, he argued, but his attack went much further.\textsuperscript{15} On the material treatment of officers and their dependents General Quyet stressed that it was not the VPA’s responsibility but Vietnamese society’s. He argued that:

\begin{quote}
This is society’s responsibility and not a favour to those who bear arms. This is a principled political issue which must be settled in a revolutionary and scientific spirit of renovation, and not in a casual manner.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

The above attacks suggest the nature of the relationship between the party and state is in the process of change. Perlmutter and LeoGrande refer to change in civil-military relations as one from a symbiotic to coalitional relationship. Symbiotic relationships, they argue, are characterized by low levels of differentiation between military and civil elites, and the circulation of elites between military and civil posts.\textsuperscript{17} They continue that ‘the functional and institutional boundaries between military and non-military structures may well be obscure’.\textsuperscript{18} This was certainly the case in Vietnam prior to the Fifth Party Congress.

Carlyle Thayer argues that civil-military relationship is already becoming coalitional.\textsuperscript{19} A coalitional relationship is defined as requiring a relative degree of autonomy between civil and military structures where the two ‘maintain relative equality and independence from one another’.\textsuperscript{20} This is not yet the case in Vietnam as the appeals by the VPA demonstrate its dependence on the party for the improvement of its conditions of service. The party

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14}Ibid., pp 8-16.
\item \textsuperscript{15}Nguyen Quyet, ‘Renovate the Contingent’, \textit{op. cit.}
\item \textsuperscript{16}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{17}Perlmutter and LeoGrande, \textit{op. cit.}, p 784.
\item \textsuperscript{18}Loc. Cit.
\item \textsuperscript{20}Perlmutter and LeoGrande, \textit{op. cit.}, p 784.
\end{itemize}
is well aware of the problems faced in the VPA and is seeking ways to improve conditions in the VPA. As General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh argued in December 1987:

> The party and state are very sympathetic to your difficulties. As our economic achievements are still poor, we can in no way fulfill all the welfare demands of soldiers at the same time. But in the future, we must strive to seek ways to lessen the difficulties facing soldiers.21

On the other side of the symbiotic relationship, the VCP will continue to depend on the VPA for its external and internal defence, and there can be no change in the civil-military relationship until defence ceases to be a major priority. With the final VPA withdrawals from Kampuchea due in 1989 and a stable China border, the emergence of a coalitional relationship is very likely during the 1990's.

Decline in Military Representation in the Central Committee

Turley argues that the VCP’s ‘remarkable record of internal unity’ assures that the VPA ‘will not exceed the limits of its legitimate political participation’.22 This is true of the present situation in Vietnam, but as Thayer shows, the military composition of the Central Committee has dropped from 16% to 7% since reunification.23 This could signal a change in party-army relations as those officers who grew up under the system of leaders disappear from the regimental level over the next ten years. The change is likely to remove future generations of VPA officers from mainstream politics, as since the Fifth and Sixth Party Congresses military representation on the Central Committee has been limited

by the organization of the army. At the Sixth Party Congress, only four new military members were elected, and then only on the grounds that they held positions that automatically gave them a seat on the Central Committee. For example, the Minister of National Defence, Director of the GPD and Chief of the General Staff hold positions as a rule. Each Military Region (MR) and Corps has a representative on the Central Committee. This is most often the commander. For example Generals Nguyen Thoi Bung and Nguyen Trong Xuyen are commanders of MR-7 and MR-3 respectively, and also hold the Central Committee seats allocated to their military region. General Dam Van Nguy on the other hand holds the Central Committee seat allocated to MR-1, but is the deputy commander of that region. The point to be made here is that as the VPA is reduced in size following the withdrawal from Kampuchea, a parallel reduction will occur in its representation on the Central Committee.

The Decline in Party Values

Accompanying the rise in professionalism in the VPA is the decline in party values, although the latter has been evident for a longer period of time. Mounting evidence of major shortcomings in the party-army relationship has appeared since the Fifth Congress, and continues to be expressed today. Evidence of these shortcomings appears in publications throughout Vietnam. All major party and army journals, and army and daily newspapers carry the articles, and most are broadcast throughout Vietnam as well. The publication of these articles after the Fifth Party Congress was the most prolific that has been seen on the subject since the debates of 1958 (See Chapter 2), and is aimed at two areas. First, the party wishes to reassert its dominance over the VPA. Second, the party wishes to reassert its dominance inside the VPA and correct the deficiencies that have appeared during the implementation of the one-command system.

24 Interview: C A Thayer with General Tran Cong Man, editor of Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Hanoi, 30 October 1987.
25 Ibid.
27 The size of the reduction in VPA ‘seats’ on the Central Committee will only be significant if the VPA is reduced by formation and unit, not just in manpower.
Party-Military Relations: the Legitimacy of the VCP’s Supremacy

During this period, the party continued to emphasize the legitimacy of its supremacy over the VPA. This was particularly evident throughout 1984. The VCP justified its supremacy for two reasons.

First, party supremacy was in accord with Marxist theory. Lenin was often cited to add weight to this argument. According to Senior Colonel Dang The Chuong, party-political work in the VPA ‘is a matter of foremost importance of marxist-leninist theory with regard to building the new-style army of the proletarian class.’ Senior General Chu Huy Man argued that the first principle to grasp was that ‘the military line is part of the political line, political strategy is the basis of military strategy, and the military obeys the political.’ On the one-command system, Major General Le Xuan Luu cites Lenin as calling ‘for the one-commander system in the military field.’ Lenin was quoted as writing that the change from a:

vague collective leadership system to an organizational one which has deeply permeated all army organs and which, as a common trend, has now become the unit commander system, the only correct working method.

Second, the party reiterated that the army was a tool to be used by the working class. ‘The proletariat promptly saw the need for a revolutionary army in order to seize the revolutionary power.’ Senior General Hoang Van Thai stated that the proletariat also realized that the ‘Communist Party must assume leadership over the army.’ As well as being just a subset of the entire party organization, the VPA was reminded that ‘the leadership of the party of the working class is the origin of, is the factor determining the growth and victories of the Vietnam people’s armed forces.’

Article 37 of the revised 1986 party statutes (the present statutes),

reaffirmed the VPA’s placement ‘under the direct, centralized, and unified leadership of the party in all respects.’ To date this system has not been modified.

The VCP continues to dominate the VPA externally and there is no evidence that the VPA will become a competing source of influence to the party at this stage. This has been achieved, according to the Vietnamese, by ‘testing the advanced experiences of the parties and armies of the fraternal socialist countries, most importantly of the Soviet Union’. There are two reasons why the VCP maintains control externally. The first concerns the lack of a clear demarcation between the civil and military roles of the VPA officer, as discussed in Chapter 2. Turley argues that the differences of role within the VPA, and role conflict between military and political army officers, ‘may continue for some time to be more politically significant than the presumptive division between party and army.’ This is a valid argument, and there is no evidence to suggest that division between party and army is occurring.

Second, the party maintains control over the military by ensuring collective decision making on party-political affairs, at all levels of the High Command. The establishment of collective decision making bodies on party-political affairs at all levels ensures that no individual or organization can compete with the VCP as a source of influence. These bodies, the Party Control Committee of the Politburo, the Council of Political Organs of the Secretariat, the Military Council of the Ministry of National Defence, the Executive Council of the GPD and party organs within the political organ system act as a ‘check and balance’ on decision makers. This situation is not likely to change while the VPA remains in Kampuchea and is more concerned with fighting rather than civil issues.

34 The acknowledgement of the position of the Soviet Union is at the forefront of discussion on party-army relationships since the Fifth Party Congress. Dang Vu Hiep, ‘Fundamental Elements in Organizing Party Leadership’, op. cit., p 15.
Party Leadership within the VPA Unit

The VCP has also sought to improve its hold within the VPA. This has resulted from the decline in party values at unit level. The decline in party values can best be viewed in the following two areas: first, the relationship between the commander and his political staff, and second, the indoctrination of basic level cadre.

During the introduction of the one-command system, there was apparently some confusion about the roles and tasks of the commander and his political staff. To correct this failing, Major General Le Xuan Luu wrote in *Tap Chi Cong San*, that ‘the leadership of the party and the command organization within the army combine as one and absolutely never contradict each other’. That is to say, the command function exercised by the commander, is a subset of the overall leadership system. The command organization was defined as ‘a function that occurs subsequent to the party’s adoption of a line, task, position or policy’ for the purpose of implementation.36 Senior General Hoang Van Thai warned that ‘to neglect the party-political tasks is to violate the organic relationship of the commander and the party’s organization’. This would then badly affect the unit’s overall performance.37 The situation became much more serious during 1987. In December 1987 General Nguyen Quyet appealed against the general trend of commanders by-passing the party committee. This has occurred at regimental level and below where no permanent party body exists. General Quyet argued most strongly that:

At various echelons and in many areas, individuals are found to be drowning out the voice of the collectives and putting themselves above the latter. If there were ever any forms of democracy, they might have been merely formalistic or acts of evading responsibility and refusing to accept shortcomings and mistakes. This must be seen as one of the most serious causes leading to the aggravation of the militancy of the party, making it impossible for the party to maintain its leadership role.38

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36 Le Xuan Luu, ‘Revamping and Improving the Mechanism by which the Party Leads the Army’, *op. cit.*, pp 27-33.
37 Hoang Van Thai, ‘The System of the Single Commander’ *op. cit.*, p 142.
38 Nguyen Quyet, ‘Party’s Leadership over the People’s Armed Forces’, *op. cit.*, pp 15-23.
The reason given by the VPA for the decline in party values was twofold. First, commanders neglected to implement party principles and party policies were not fully discussed by the party committee before the implementation of the policies. Colonel Nguyen Nhu-Lang argued in May of the same year, that:

At conferences people no longer debated to determine what was right and what was wrong; outside the conference halls, people talked and criticized in an unprincipled manner.39

The second criticism was that resolutions did not specify individual responsibility, and criticism and self-criticism was conducted in a loose and haphazard manner. The introduction of the ‘company political day’ was expected to alleviate this problem to a greater extent, but as shall be shown, this did not occur.

The indoctrination of basic level cadre was the second area that the VPA argued was below the required standard. Towards the end of 1983, the Secretariat issued Regulation Number 22/QD-TU, On the Basic Organizations of the Party within the Vietnam People’s Army. Lieutenant General Dang Vu Hiep argued that in combat, ‘if they are built well and closely led, the basic organizations of the party and the army can complete their tasks in an excellent manner.’40 Yet during the conflict in Kampuchea, ‘the corps of basic unit cadres [was described as] still inadequate and weak, especially in the areas of platoon leaders and deputy company political officers.’ This situation was attributed to the lack of training, as well as poor quality cadres.41 General Quyet added in December 1987 that:

No party members and cadres are allowed to cite the nature of armed conflict or the special characteristic of the military organization as an excuse for loosely observing or disregarding the party’s principles, or acting at variance with its uniform regulations.42

40 Dang Vu Hiep, ‘Building the Basic Organizations of the Party Within the Combat Units of the Vietnam People’s Army’, Tap Chi Cong San, Number 2, February 1985, p 36.
41 Hoang Van Thai, ‘Building the Corps of Basic Unit Cadre’, Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, June 1984, p 63.
Despite appeals from the Director of the GPD, mounting evidence shows that party values within the VPA are on the decline. A survey by Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Phu, a VPA psychologist, of all soldiers within a VPA division showed that almost 54% of all soldiers questioned displayed a lack of interest in the political training sessions in the unit. Only 18% of the soldiers showed any interest in party-politics at all. This was attributed to the fact that the soldiers study politics 'sitting on the ground, on their sandals or on a brick' and that commanders and political cadre in basic level units were weak.

Part of the problem is that while 95% of political cadres are appointed from northern Vietnam, almost all VPA conscripts in Kampuchea are from southern Vietnam, and want to 'quickly fulfil their active duty obligation and return to their locality'. In late 1987, 96% of VPA soldiers were aged between 19 and 25 (none being over 30), thus nearly all VPA soldiers did not serve under the system of leaders. The point to be made here is that the change to the one-command system removed the authority of the party below regimental level, and this change has 'led to the current political-spiritual decline among soldiers'.

This problem remains a 'pressing requirement of decisive significance' today, and unless it can be solved, a change from the VPA's subordinate position in relationship to the VCP may come under threat from inside the VPA.

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43 Nguyen Ngoc Phu, 'An Investigation into the Psychology of Soldiers and Several Matters Concerning Political Education on the Company Echelon', Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, September 1987, pp 54-59. Colonel Phu conducted an investigation of the attitudes of soldiers within a VPA division. Confidential questionnaires were filled out by all soldiers of the division and handed directly to the research team. Without examining the actual questionnaire, it is not possible to verify the research methods of the survey. Colonel Phu states in his report that: 'Of course it is possible that some soldiers did not express precisely what they think. However, these results can basically be considered accurate data supporting research with a rather high degree of reliability.'

44 Interviews with Thai Ministry of Defence Senior Intelligence Staff, Bangkok, January 1988, and Nguyen Ngoc Phu, op. cit., pp 54-59.

45 Nguyen Ngoc Phu, op. cit., pp 54-59.

Interoperability of Indochinese Military Forces

The third major effect of the regularization of command in Vietnam may well have been one of the causes of regularization occurring. In Chapter 3 Herspring's hypothesis, that the introduction of the one-command system could be 'one of a range of many changes in party control mechanisms in a communist army that appear to accompany increased technology', was briefly examined. Yet this does not explain why communist armies with low levels of technology adopt one-man command, such as the Lao People's Army introduction of the one-command system in November 1986. Laos still encounters internal opposition and the LPA is not technologically advanced at all. The answer lies, as explained in Chapter 3, in the need to maintain a degree of interoperability between the forces of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and with their military aid and training supplier the Soviet Union.

In January 1988 Soviet military advisers were employed at divisional and corps level of the VPA, with Vietnamese advisers at divisional level in the LPA. As the General-Secretary of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Kaysone Phomvihan said of the one-command system, 'let us strengthen the militant alliance and all round cooperation between Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia... and with the Soviet Union'. On joint warfare between the VPA and People's Republic of Kampuchea Armed Forces (PRKAF), Colonel Vo Khac Ve stated that 'the common military duty [of the VPA] is to

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47 Herspring, op. cit., pp 370-393.
49 See Le Duc Anh, 'The Vietnam People's Army and our Noble International Mission in the Friendly Country of Cambodia', Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 12, December 1984, especially p 83.
50 Interviews with Thai Ministry of Defence Senior Intelligence Staff, Bangkok, January 1988.
stand shoulder to shoulder with the Cambodian Armed Forces'. Colonel Ve went much further by urging that:

Main-force units must enhance their proficiency in combat coordination with artillery, engineer, and sapper units, as well as armoured and tank units when necessary.52

Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea all receive their military aid and weapons from the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the three states all receive a degree of training from the Soviet Union.53 The point here is this. As was the case in the VPA, Soviet military aid and training would increase the ability of the LPA and PRKAF to fight. The regularization of command in the armed forces of the three states, in this case the introduction of the one-command system, would have a far greater effect. The VPA, LPA and PRKAF would be capable of joint operations on a regional scale. The repercussions of having such a powerful force in Southeast Asia should be of some concern to regional non-communist states.

Despite the need for the VPA to modernize its command and control, the degree of Soviet influence in the introduction of the one-command system should not be overlooked.

52 Vo Khac Ve, 'Training in Accordance with Combat Duty of Vietnamese Army Volunteers in Cambodia', Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 3, March 1987.
53 See Le Duc Anh, 'Great Russian October Revolution and the Cause of National Liberation and Defence', Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Number 11, November 1987.
CONCLUSION

Despite the influence of Soviet and pre-revolutionary Vietnamese armies on the emerging command structure of the VPA, the resulting command structure in VPA units was a result of Vietnamese units adopting similar command structures to the units and advisers who trained them. As the PLA became increasingly involved with the support, training, and weapons supply to the Vietnamese, and as the Vietnamese had adopted a number of elements of Maoist guerrilla strategy, interoperability between the adviser and the advised was needed for military success against the Japanese and French. The same consideration occurred again during the Third Indochina War when military aid from the USSR increased in both quality and quantity. Infusion of higher levels of military technology saw the need to develop a degree of interoperability between the three Indochinese states and the Soviet Union.

The system of dual command, formally implemented by the VCP thirty years earlier, became outmoded towards the end of the Second Indochina War. This was evident in three general areas. First, with the transition to battalion, regimental and divisional scale warfare, the system of local party committees exercising control over local guerrilla units became more complex, and the need for streamlining became evident. Second, technological modernization of the VPA brought the need for quick, decisive command to enable the use of modern weaponry and communications equipment to optimum levels of efficiency. Third, and as a result, political officers were finding that their role was becoming usurped by military officers who commanded units without their consultation. The commander found the position of the political officer obsolete, and the party found it was losing control within the VPA.

Following reunification, the party realized that a change in the command system was necessary. The Fourth Party Congress instituted a half way measure whereby the military officer exercised command, while the party committee exercised leadership. This side-stepped the problem of the party losing
political control of the VPA as had happened from 1948. There was a considerable delay in introduction, caused by the need to fight a two front war, the planning of the introduction of the new system, and conservative wariness within the High Command. Combat experience in Kampuchea and the defence against China, coupled by ever increasing Soviet aid provided the impetus for further change. The need to regularize and centralize command became critically important. Military commanders were given the authority to lead as well as to command. At the Fifth Party Congress, party and military leaders believed they had solved the fundamental ideological dilemma of lessening the grip of the party on the military. The VCP believed that control of the VPA could be maintained as the VPA de-emphasized the role of the party echelon within its own organization.

This assumption proved to be incorrect. The side effect of giving commanders the authority to lead was that it enabled one man to dominate the unit in political as well as military affairs and saw the influence of the party decline. This problem was alleviated on the High Command by the establishment of collective decision making councils on party-political affairs and the establishment of the political organ system. At Unit level, the VCP continues to battle the rise in professionalism and decline in party values, at this stage with little success. Party control has been maintained by the VCP from outside the VPA, while party control within the VPA is rapidly declining.

The introduction of the one-command system will have varied military and political effects on Vietnam. Militarily the introduction will see a much more organized and powerful VPA capable of defeating any Asian nation standing in Vietnam’s way. As Senior General Le Duc Anh argued:

Our guideline is to build the People’s Army into a regular and increasingly modern force with an ever high general quality. This force must be rationally organized, balanced, compact, and strong. It must have strict discipline and high combat and mobilization readiness.¹

¹Le Duc Anh, ‘Renovate Military Thinking, Persistently Implement and Creatively Apply the Party’s Military Line’, Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan, Number 4, April 1988, pp 8-16.
The VPA under Generals Dung and Anh has come a long way from the VPA that swept through Saigon in 1975. The change in the VPA over those last thirteen years has greatly increased its combat power—that is, its ability to fight and win a modern conventional war using weapons of an increasing level of technology. The regularization of the VPA’s command structure has already shown that military commanders at all levels are able to make quick decisions in the heat of battle, using the increasing level of military expertise required when using modern military technology. This change is important in itself. Coupled with the introduction of the one-command system in the Lao People’s Army, the change has even more repercussions. Previously LPA and KPRAF armed forces received Soviet weapons, Soviet aid, Soviet advisors, and used similar tactics. The final vital factor, a similar command system, will enable the three Indochinese states to integrate their armed forces and fight as a unified Indochinese bloc. This significant change should not be overlooked by strategic defence planners in Southeast Asia.

Politically, the change to the one-command system is beginning to see some important changes in the party-army relationship. The reduction in the size of the VPA will ensure its development into an increasingly more regular force and enable it to rid itself of inefficient and corrupt officers hampering the VPA’s progress. The subsequent decline in party representation at higher levels could result in further depoliticization of the VPA. Below regimental level, a decline in party values has been occurring for some time, despite attempts by the VCP to prevent the decline. A peacetime VPA, worried about the welfare of its troops and its declining influence within the party, could emerge as a ‘pressure group’: a competing source of influence to the VCP.

Of a more general nature, the introduction of the one-command system in Vietnam demonstrates the role of an elite in a communist state. Marxist-Leninist ideology dictates that no group can rival the party as an alternative source of influence. In the sub-field of civil-military relations in communist systems, the introduction of the one-command system demonstrates the communist party’s continual commitment to maintaining control of the military, while allowing the military to modernize to increase its combat effectiveness. The VCP’s eventual willingness to introduce the one-command system demonstrates that Herspring’s hypothesis is also applicable to Vietnam. Herspring argued that:
The Party's willingness to introduce new technology (and with it many of the changes in Party control mechanisms that appear to accompany increased technology) is indicative of its rising confidence in the political reliability of the armed forces.2

This is certainly true in Vietnam. While the party has maintained control of the army from outside the VPA, the party's gradual decline in influence inside the military demonstrates that Kolkowicz's seemingly contradictory hypothesis is also relevant to Vietnam. As Kolkowicz argued:

The growing influx of new technocrats into the military has aggravated the problem of internal control, since these young specialists tend to resent and oppose the Party's political involvement and activity on the grounds that it drastically interferes with their vital duties.3

Thus the two hypothesis can be integrated to give a clearer picture of the nature of party-military relations in Vietnam.

This monograph has only focussed on one aspect of Vietnamese civil military relations since reunification. This study of the one-command system should be relevant to those interested in further research on civil-military relations in Vietnam, or civil-military relations in general. Perlmutter and LeoGrande's hypothesis is not yet supported by the data presented here, namely:

Where the complexity of military technology requires specialized knowledge inaccessible to non-military elites, the autonomy of the military will tend to be high and the relationship between party and army will tend to be coalitional.4

At this stage, the VCP remains dependent on the VPA for external defence—while the VPA is dependent on the VCP for its numerical strength and conditions. The VCP's insistence on collective decision-making on party-political affairs at all levels of the High Command, and the continuing lack of civil and military demarkation, further prevent the civil-military relationship from becoming coalitional. This situation is likely to change as officers educated prior to the one-command system leave regimental level over the next ten to fifteen years.

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2Herspring, op. cit., pp 370-393,
3Kolkowicz, op. cit., p 34.
4Perlmutter and LeoGrande, op. cit., p 782.
In conclusion, perhaps it is now time to consider the Vietnam People’s Army more than just ‘an army we fought a war with’ over a decade ago. It is a modern army that has considerable political influence in Vietnam and has the potential to play a significant military role in Southeast Asia.
Guide to Sources

In the introduction to this monograph a point was made about the inaccessibility of reliable Vietnamese sources for Western scholars of Vietnamese politics. This problem has largely been overcome by using translations of Vietnamese journals, magazines, news agency transmissions, books, periodicals and newspapers. This section serves as a comprehensive guide to sources available to those interested in research on military command modernization in Vietnam in particular, and also as a guide to sources available on the VPA, in general. The Guide to Sources examines, first, the method of research used in preparing this monograph, and second, an analysis of aspects of the Vietnamese press, including an examination of the primary sources cited most often in this monograph. A brief discussion of non-Vietnamese sources concludes this section.

Method of Research

The material used to write this monograph has been obtained from a complete examination of the translated material in the US Joint Publications Research Service (JPRS), Vietnam Report, and Southeast Asian Report from January 1976 to August 1988 and BBC Summary of World Broadcasts from January 1976 to November 1988. All references to radio broadcasts are from the BBC Summary of World Broadcasts unless stated otherwise. Where BBC summaries have not been available, the US Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), has been used and cited accordingly. All references to written Vietnamese materials have been taken from JPRS unless stated otherwise. The page numbers cited refer to the page numbers of the original Vietnamese article.

In addition, material gathered by various governmental agencies has been used to verify information in both Vietnamese articles as well as articles by western scholars. In particular, the Thai Ministry of Defence has been most helpful in granting interviews in January 1988 to discuss the one-command system.
The Vietnamese Press

The Vietnamese press is designed more as an educational medium than a vehicle for reporting news. The press, together with all information reporting sources is controlled by the VCP Central Committee's Department of Propaganda and Training. The control ensures that the Vietnamese press is united in reflecting the policies and military lines of the VCP. At the national level, press publications are intended for a general audience as well as specific groups including the military, Youth Union members and Trade Union members. At the local level, publications appear in the thirty-six provinces, three municipalities and one special zone of Vietnam. This monograph is primarily concerned with those publications at the national level, particularly daily army and party newspapers, party and army journals and radio broadcasts, appearing only in Vietnamese. In this way reliable information can be obtained on the structure and functioning of the one-command system as the Vietnamese see it, cross-referenced with intelligence reports and scholarly articles written by western observers.

_Nhan Dan, (The People['s Daily]),_ is a four page daily newspaper published by the VCP in Hanoi. _Nhan Dan_ began production in 1951 and publishes full texts of speeches and articles by VCP and state authorities. It is a general newspaper, and is not as detailed on party and military matters as other sources.

_Quan Doi Nhan Dan, (People's Army),_ is a four page daily newspaper published by the VPA in Hanoi. _Quan Doi Nhan Dan_ began production in 1950 and publishes international and domestic news, with emphasis on editorial articles, military training and other VPA activities.

_Tap Chi Cong San, (Communist Review),_ formerly known as _Hoc Tap, (Studies),_ is the 106 page theoretical and political journal published by the VCP in Hanoi. _Hoc Tap_ began production in 1956, although its name was changed to _Tap Chi Cong San_ following the Fourth Party Congress. This journal is the authoritative voice of the VCP, where high level examinations over party-military relations are shown and debated.

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Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan, (People’s Army Magazine), is a 72 page magazine published by the Ministry of National Defence in Hanoi. The magazine began publication in April 1948, and its name was changed to Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan in April 1988, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of its founding. This is the authoritative military magazine featuring theoretical articles on warfare, the employment of arms and services of the VPA in combat and in economic construction. Articles appear by high ranking military officers and members of the VCP.

Vietnam Courier and the Vietnam News Agency are published in Hanoi in English, and are designed for foreign consumption. News reports concern major daily activities, although actual news content is at a minimum.

Western sources used in preparing this thesis include the following: The Viet-Nam Documents and Research Notes were issued as a research service by the United States Mission in Saigon between October 1967 and February 1975. This collection includes captured documents, translations, and often an excellent editorial on party and military affairs prior to reunification.

Few scholarly articles on the VPA since 1975 have been published. William Turley and Carlyle Thayer are two academics of international stature in this field. Turley’s PhD thesis is the standard work on civil-military relations in Vietnam. Turley and Thayer are the only academics to have written on Vietnamese civil-military relations since the introduction of the one-command system. Douglas Pike has also written on the VPA since reunification.

Writers on civil-military relations used in this monograph include: Jonathan Adelman, Yosef Avidar, Michael Deane, Andrew Goodpaster, Dale Herspring, Samuel Huntington, Harlan Jencks, Ellis Joffe, William LeoGrande, Amos Perlmutter and William Whitson. On Vietnamese history, King Chen, William Duiker, David Elliot, Bernard Fall, Melvin Gurtov, Konrad Kellen, Greg Lockhart, Milton Osborne, and Joseph Zasloff feature prominently in the following Bibliography.

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2 See Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan, Number 4, April 1988, p 1.
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Biographical Details:
Selected Senior VPA Officers

This section aims to clarify the positions of Vietnamese party-military figures referred to in the body of this monograph. These officers have written on, or featured prominently in, the introduction of the one-command system. The following biographies are by no means complete, and only cover positions in VCP, VPA, and state organizations, relevant to the one-command system, during the period 1975-1988.¹

Le Duc Anh

Rank General (1981)
Central Committee Politburo Organization Department CMPC National Defence Council Vice-Minister of Defence Minister of Defence Chief of General Staff Other campaign

(1982)

Lieutenant General (1975), Colonel Senior General (1984-)
1976-
March 1982-
1982-(?)
1981-
1987-
1981-February 1987
February 1987-
1987-
Deputy-commander Ho Chi Minh
Commander VPA forces Kampuchea

Nguyen The Bon

Rank Central Committee Deputy Chief General Staff

Major General (1981)-
1982-1986
1982-

¹ For a more descriptive biographical discussion of selected VPA generals, see Pike, PAVN, op. cit.
Dang The Chuong

Rank
Senior Colonel (1984)-(?)

Other
Member of GPD tasked with
implementation of one-command system within VPA in 1984

Van Tien Dung

Rank
Colonel General (1972), Senior General
(1980)-

Central Committee
1951(alternate), 1960(full)-

Politburo
1960(alternate), 1972(full)-1986

CMPC

Minister of Defence
February 1980-1987

National Defence Council
1980-1987

Chief of General Staff
1953-1976

Other
Commander Ho Chi Minh campaign (1975)

Vo Nguyen Giap

Rank
Senior General (1948)-

Central Committee
1951-

 Politburo
1951-March 1982

CMPC
1946-1980

Minister of Defence
1946-February 1980

National Defence Council
1964-1971

Other
Committee member drafting SRV Constitution (1976)
Vice-President-Council of Ministers-

Dang Vu Hiep

Rank

Central Committee
1976(alternate), 1982(full)-1986

Vice-Minister of Defence
1978-

Deputy Director GPD
1978-
Nguyen Quyet

Rank: Lieutenant General (1977), Colonel General (1987),
Central Committee: 1976-
Secretariat: 1986-
CMPC: 1979-
Deputy Director GPD: 1985-1987
Director GPD: 1987-

Chu Huy Man

Rank: Lieutenant General (1975), Senior General (1978),
Central Committee: 1960-1986
Politburo: 1976-1986
Deputy Director GPD: 1982-1987
Director GPD: 1982-1987

Hoang Van Thai

Rank: Major General (1965), Senior General (1980),
Central Committee: 1960-1986
CMPC: 1966-1982
Vice-Minister of Defence: 1961-1984
Deputy Chief of Gen. Staff: 1953-1977
Other: Died July 1986
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