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VIETCONG STRATEGY AND TACTICS

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EDITED TRANSLATION

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ABSTRACT The author analyzes and classifies the strategy and tactics of the Viet Cong (VC) according to a typology that includes the following: (1) encirclement; (2) hold-and-strike; (3) hit-and-run (including surprise attack); (4) attack at opportune moment; (5) others (including raids, infiltration, defensive tactics for small contingents occupying a large area, war of two fronts in which guerrillas conduct raids behind enemy lines, attack-and-hold action). The description of each category includes a definition of the tactic, its characteristics, and one or more examples drawn from recent US combat experience against the VC in Vietnam. The author concludes that the VC will continue to fight a war of movement in which annihilation of the enemy is more important than occupying ground. The guiding principles of VC strategy and tactics are also discussed and analyzed.				

VIETCONG STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Pen-t'ao Chung

1. Terrain in Vietnam

Vietnam, formerly called Indo-China or Annam, is located on the east side of the Indo-Chinese Peninsula. It is bounded on the north by China, on the east and south by the South China sea, and on the west by Cambodia and Laos. The territory is in the form of a narrow strip, like a sponge gourd, with the Annamite chain of mountains extending longitudinally to the Laotian border. The whole territory is dominated by mountainous regions, with the exception of the delta of the Red River in the north, the delta of the Mekong River in the south, and some coastal plains. Due to its subtropical climate, Vietnam has dense forests and is warm in all seasons. Communications and transportation are inadequate, industry and commerce underdeveloped, and culture retarded. From the military viewpoint, mountains, jungles, and poor transportation make Vietnam most suitable for Vietcong guerrilla forces and an ideal place for waging guerrilla warfare.

2. Origin of Vietcong Military Thinking

In discussing Vietcong military thinking, it would be more realistic to speak of Mao, Tse-tung's military thinking. The Ho Chi Minh regime basically has no military thinking and does not understand what it is all about. Then, should we say that the Vietcong has its

own way in fighting? No, ever since Ho Chi Minh got to know Mao, Tse-tung, he has treated Mao as his tutor and copied Mao's notes on military thinking. But, except as a housebreaker and bandit, what does Mao know about military thinking? Whatever he knows is only a patchwork of established concepts including the following:

1) Inherited from Soviet Russia. The outstanding feature of Russia's military thinking is that war is considered a class struggle, and thus a work on social history covers only historical materialism and class struggle. Mankind's military history is interpreted by Soviet Russia as the history of class struggle, and their military operations are dominated by this thought.

2) Copied from the essence of Chinese military masters. Many senior cadres, such as Lin Piao and others, infiltrated into our renowned Whampoa Military Academy to receive the best training. The Academy, with President Kai-shek Chiang as the commandant at the time, combined all military thought, both Chinese and foreign. At the time of its founding, President Chiang devoted himself energetically to training our revolutionary cadres. It is only natural that Lin Piao is so valued by Mao in military matters.

3) a. In order to struggle for existence during the mainland insurrection period, the Chicom army stopped at nothing in fully utilizing and squeezing the manpower and materiel in occupied areas. Combat zones were controlled under strict organization, and a high degree of mobility was maintained by the Chicom army. Widespread infestation at will was possible either in the form of advance or retreat. For this reason they formulated such tactics as "one point, two plane," "surprise attack from a distance," "pocket battle," "encircle point, strike reinforcements," and "block reinforcements, strike point."

b. The Chicoms sustained relatively heavy losses in participating in the Korean war. Because of the differences in terrain, people, and language from the mainland insurrection period, and due to the fact that the U. S. forces were the principal opponent in this war, improvements were made in tactics. Thus emerged the

tactics of "mobile attack," "mobile defense," "two-line battle," "sharp-sword plunge," and "infiltration and splitting."

From the above account, we can say without doubt that Mao's military thinking is framed from bits and pieces.

3. Vietcong Tactics Most Often Used

1) Encircle-point-strike-reinforcements tactic (also called "fishing tactic").

a. Meaning. This means to encircle a point in order to induce reinforcement, and to wipe out the reinforcements on the way.

b. Salient features.

(a) Attack unexpectedly with a superior number of troops, forcing enemy reinforcements into a battle under your own control.

(b) Such tactics as encirclement, ambush, and surprise attack from a distance can be used in combination.

(c) There is still the freedom to leave the battlefield in case the enemy is so strong as to make its annihilation impossible.

(d) The staffs can be notified beforehand about the situation and intention, thus boosting the morale.

c. Case history. (Case histories given below are prominent campaigns in the Vietnam war in 1965.)

The Duc Co campaign. On June 4, a battalion of U. S. special troops was besieged at Duc Co, 215 m north of Saigon, by two regiments of Vietcong forces. Reinforcements composed of U. S. and South Vietnam forces were ambushed several times by the Vietcong, taking advantage of favorable positions on both sides of route 19, and were split into segments. Heavy losses were sustained by both sides. The encirclement continued for 67 days and was broken on

August 10 only after the use of a large number of aircraft and massive reinforcements by the U. S. forces. This campaign may be the largest in the Vietnam war.

2) Block-reinforcements-strike-point tactic (closest to regular tactics).

a. Meaning. This means to concentrate thoroughly a superior number of troops to engulf a smaller number, using a small force as required to hold the area to be passed through by the U. S. and South Vietnam troops and thus blocking the advance of reinforcements by delaying action so as to gain time to strike the point.

b. Salient features.

(a) Overwhelm a small force with a large one; namely, attack a point by concentrating a superior number of troops.

(b) Striking a point is made the primary action and blocking the reinforcements secondary action, so that attack and defense are conducted simultaneously.

(c) Troops striking the point attack fiercely, seeking a quick military decision.

(d) Troops blocking the reinforcements make a sustained defense so as to trade space for time.

c. Case history.

The Quang Ngai campaign. In the small hours of May 30, two battalions of crack South Vietnamese troops in the Quang Ngai region were closely surrounded and attacked fiercely in a surprise blow by more than two regiments of Vietcong guerrillas with an absolute numerical superiority (4 to 1). Also, a small number of Vietcong troops pinned down the reinforcements. The South Vietnam troops had suffered more than 50% casualties when reinforcements arrived the next day, and the Vietcong had disappeared.

3) Surprise-attack-from-a-distance tactic (including raids).

a. Meaning. In order to wipe out a certain enemy detachment, a sudden strike is made by a rapid, concealed approach from one or more distant points, thus catching the enemy by surprise.

b. Salient features.

(a) Attack on exposed troops from concealment; attack on stationary troops by mobile troops. Accurate intelligence should be secured first, and information on the action should not be disclosed.

(b) Raid and attack are made together.

(c) Action should be fast and clandestine; swift advance and swift withdrawal.

c. Case histories.

(a) Raid on Da Nang oil depot. At 1 a.m. on August 5, the U. S. oil depot at Da Nang was shelled by Vietcong 81-mm mortars. Tanks exploded and 2,000,000 gal of fuel burned.

(b) Raid on Bien Hoa Airfield. In the early morning of August 24, the Vietcong shelled the Bien Hoa Airfield with 81-mm mortars, damaging 49 U. S. aircraft.

(c) On July 2 and 3, the Vietcong raided separately U. S. airfields at Da Nang and Soc Trang.

4) Mobile attack.

a. Meaning. This tactic implies the Chicom mobile-warfare principle: "Fight when you are sure to win; retreat when you are not sure to win." It involves unexpected attack and precipitous pullout, as well as flexibility in shifting the main point of attack.

b. Salient features.

(a) Seek out the opponent's weak point, initiate unexpected attack, in an action similar to a raid. Avoid persistent attacks on strong positions.

(b) Pull out quickly whenever the offense meets a setback, maintain the initiative throughout, and avoid a stalemate or a seesaw battle.

(c) Maneuver troops flexibly so that they can shift the main point of attack quickly.

c. Case history.

Destruction of U. S. ammunition convoy on Da Lat highway. On May 15, about two battalions of Vietcong forces made a surprise attack on 14 fully-loaded ammunition trucks of the U. S. forces moving on the Saigon - Da Lat highway. The convoy was air-covered and guarded by more than one hundred armed personnel. Within a 15-minute period, one truck was captured, 13 trucks were totally destroyed, and the armed personnel were either killed or captured, amounting to a total rout.

5) Other tactics.

a. Gap-penetration tactics. This means to enter enemy territory by making use of gaps between troop units; it includes two methods:

(a) Gap penetration by counter-advance. It implies: "You come to my home, and I go to your home."

(b) Gap penetration by unexpected attack. This is also called the "Achilles heel tactic." Crack troops are selected to penetrate to the enemy's rear from a thinly deployed enemy position by taking advantage of enemy negligence in alertness. The enemy command post, communication center, and other facilities are attacked furiously to create internal chaos. This is coordinated with a simultaneous frontal attack.

b. Point assault. A strong force of attack troops is concentrated at the position to be broken through, forming an assault spearhead narrow in frontal area but preponderant in troop strength. The spearhead is composed of the first echelon, the rear echelons maintaining the proper safe interval. Continued assaults are made under a concentrated, sustained fire-cover to effect a breakthrough in the center, like the stab of a sharp sword, for subsequent exploitation.

c. Infiltration-and-splitting tactics.

(a) Piercing. This means to advance assault troops into the opponent's position by means of infiltration.

(b) The splitting method is a tactic used in coping with a position having a wide frontal area and no exposed flanks.

(c) Splitting includes "counter-advance splitting," "flanking-advance splitting," and "advance-abreast splitting."

(d) Infiltration and splitting together are called piercing-splitting, which is a combined operation of infiltration together with the "two-line" and "sharp-sword" tactics.

d. Temporary defense. A small number of troops is used to occupy a wide frontal position and to make a reconnaissance patrol. The main force is placed in a suitable position in the rear so as to wipe out the enemy by seeking out its weak point and then effecting an attack. If no opportunity is found, and enemy forces are very strong, the main force is transferred rapidly, thus disengaging from the battlefield and maintaining at all times an active position and a high degree of flexibility.

e. Two-line tactic. This means to harass and contain the enemy forces by a large-scale guerrilla raid on their rear in coordination with a frontal attack.

f. Assault-strong-defense-installation tactic. Crack

troops are used to storm an enemy position. This tactic can be used when it is impossible to bypass the enemy position.

Case histories for the above tactics cannot be enumerated one by one. The cases given previously are prominent ones in the Vietnam war. A certain tactic is ascribed to a certain case history whenever it was mainly adopted in that battle. In warfare, tactics can change in an instant, and one tactic is not to be used inalterably in each battle. Warfare generally changes in tactics on account of the subjective and objective situations. That is why a master of military science has said, "The secret of disposing troops lies in maintaining an undivided mind." This means that warfare is an art. Whenever a commander can make an art of disposing his troops, he will be able to "come out victorious in every battle and conquer in every attack."

4. Analysis of Developmental Trends in Vietcong Customary Tactics

1) Vietcong military thinking and its pattern. The Vietcong under a dictatorial regime cannot help using Chicom military thinking, which is based on the assumption that the U. S. and South Vietnam forces are their imaginary enemy. They consider themselves inferior in equipment and weapons. In coping with a superior force, the inferior force, past, present, or future, generally prefers to wage a total war, which is a war of retreat and a war of attrition. In calling for people's war, the Vietcong aims at utilizing human resources to the fullest extent in supporting the war. Thus the Vietcong's war pattern is that of total war.

2) Vietcong strategic guiding principles. The main objective of the military operations is to annihilate the opponent's active forces, and thus the Vietcong will never concern themselves with the gain or loss of a city or a position. In disposing troops, the Vietcong will continue the following trends:

a. The basic principle of mobile warfare will not change.

b. Concentrated forces with absolute numerical superiority will be used in attacking predetermined objectives.

3) Vietcong tactical instructions.

a. Emphasis on preparedness. "Never fight a battle that is unprepared; never fight a battle that is undecisive." Each campaign has to be well prepared before the fighting takes place.

b. First attack the weak and then the strong. First attack the dispersed enemy, and then the concentrated enemy.

c. Be capable of continued fighting. Time for replacement and training between two battles should be as short as possible, giving the enemy no chance to catch his breath.

As can be seen from the various factors above, no changes in Vietcong tactics can possibly be made in the near future.

5. Conclusions

1) Tactics most often used by the Vietcong imply the coordinated use of tactics and strategy. They are all within the scope of military principles and fundamentals, with no mystery or innovations involved.

2) The value of tactical operations lies mainly in creative thought and seizing the initiative, and the Vietcong's advantage is in this. The Vietcong will become stupid and helpless if the U. S. forces can assume the initiative.

3) In studying tactics, detailed analysis should be made objectively, and the various factors of a given battlefield should be regarded with the understanding of one on the spot in person.

4) Investigation of case histories in the Vietnam war shows not a few cases of chance victory by the Vietcong and many examples of serious defeat. Analysis also shows that the victories can be

attributed to persistent attacks accomplished by holding the initiative and maintaining mobility (flexibility), and by the skilled use of intelligence.

5) Henceforth, from the tactical viewpoint, the U. S. forces must engage in guerrilla warfare with initiative, mobility, and movement, with coordinated use of intrinsically excellent equipment, numerical superiority, and excellent intelligence. We are looking forward to their final victory in annihilating the Vietcong.

Photograph No. 1 - Vietcong guerrillas captured by South Vietnamese troops.

Photograph No. 2 - Vietcong guerrilla bugle seized from the body of a dead Vietcong.