

Vietnamization: The Accelerated Exit of the United States and Expansion of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

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In June of 1969, the Vietnamization strategy introduced by the Nixon administration aimed to end American involvement in the Vietnam War. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) planners using the tenets of operational art knew the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) could not deal successfully with a combined Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) threat in South Vietnam without a residual US advisor presence. On January 23, 1973, the Nixon administration accomplished its primary political aim agreeing to a cease-fire agreement with North Vietnam, the Viet Cong, and the government of South Vietnam. The United States would no longer provide advisors or air support to influence the outcome. Reliant on technology and firepower the RVNAF were unable to sustain their forces trained in US tactics and doctrine. In the end, without support from the United States, the government of South Vietnam was unable to make the political, military, economic, and social changes needed to defend their sovereignty as a nation. The approach used during Vietnamization reveals lessons learned for the ongoing efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan to improve combat effectiveness by providing extensive training, logistical assistance, and coordinated air support. As with Vietnam, no matter the military effort only the Iraqi and Afghan governments can make the necessary changes required for sustained success in their countries.

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Acronyms

ADRP	Army Doctrine Reference Publication
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
GVN	Government of Vietnam
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
VC	Viet Cong

Introduction

In January of 1969, Richard Nixon was sworn in as the thirty-seventh president of the United States. Nixon had won the election by promising to end the war in Vietnam. Immediately the administration issued National Security Study Memorandum 1 requesting responses to specific questions on the state of the armed forces of South Vietnam, the political situation, and US strategic objectives. General Creighton W. Abrams Jr. the Commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) responded that the South Vietnamese with sufficient buildup would be able to contain the Viet Cong (VC) threat but without continued US aid and assistance would be unable to defend against an attack by both the VC and North Vietnam Army (NVA).¹

US forces led combat operations in South Vietnam, as Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) were incapable of defending their country against North Vietnam and VC aggression. The incoming Nixon Administration had campaigned on ending the war in Vietnam. How could the United States achieve an acceptable military outcome while appeasing the growing sentiment for withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam? On 28 March 1969, the US strategy aim shifted towards Vietnamization of the war as a policy of the administration to end American involvement in Vietnam. Through expanding, equipping, and training South Vietnamese Forces, the United States would withdraw combat troops while simultaneously seeking a peace settlement with North Vietnam. Although the policy expanded the armed forces of South Vietnam by 1975, the Government of South Vietnam collapsed.

This study aims to examine the strategy aims and campaign objectives that shaped the Vietnamization period of the Vietnam War. The objective is to examine whether General Abrams and MACV planners used the tenets of operational art to meet the strategic objectives of the Nixon administration and achieve an acceptable outcome. Several parallels may inform

¹ James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam, How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 11.

contemporary American efforts to stabilize situations in Iraq and Afghanistan as advisors work to improve the effectiveness of indigenous forces, providing training and material support. The future operational environment and persistent conflict around the world will require the United States to train and advise foreign military forces. Understanding the problems faced during Vietnamization might serve as a guide to prevent the same results that plagued South Vietnam.

The terms of this study used to define operational art are from current doctrine, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0 *Operations*. Operational approach is the description of the actions a force must take to transform current conditions into the desired end state. Operational art is the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose. Through the tenets of operational art, commanders translate their operational approach into a concept of operations to express what to accomplish and how it will be done using available resources.²

Army doctrine describes operational art as a cognitive approach by commanders and staffs using skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means. The theoretical framework of this study is the understanding of operational art as the employment of means to achieve a strategic objective derived from a policy aim that provides its purpose. The location of operational art lies in the discourse between policy and the tactical means. It is from this discourse that an operational approach is developed to achieve the aim of the policy in the application of the ways that tie the tactical means to the strategic goal.³

This study uses four hypotheses, to test the thesis, followed by several focused questions to uncover the empirical conditions to answer the hypothesis. The first hypothesis asserts that

² US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2016), 2-2.

³ Stephen G. Lauer, "The Tao of Doctrine," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 82, (3rd Quarter 2016): 118-124.

when military planners use the tenants of operational art, they can prepare a host nation to conduct successful offensive and defensive operations. The second hypothesis proposes that when military planners ensure that the host nation has operational enablers, then the host nation can defend their sovereign borders. The third hypothesis suggests that when military planners ensure the host nation has operational enablers the host nation can conduct successful offensive operations. The fourth hypothesis declares that when current operations doctrine for Vietnamization was used it provided a sufficient foundation for operational success.

This case study relies on unclassified information from published military history works, official government historical documents, and case studies. There is sufficient information available to construct the case. This study will focus on the strategic objectives of Vietnamization and MACV operational plans to meet the strategic objectives. It will focus on RVNAF capabilities during combat operations from 1968 to 1972. This study will also assess the enabler support provided by US forces and RVNAF capabilities. This study will only provide the context of the South Vietnam political situation as it affected the conduct of operations by the RVNAF.

MACV in addition to continuing its advice and support efforts of the RVNAF directed the operations of American military personnel. The first assumption of this study is that General Abrams and MACV developed a successful campaign plan to implement Vietnamization. The second assumption is that RVNAF could defend their sovereign borders but were unable to overcome the loss of US advisor and logistical support. The third and final assumption is that RVNAF trained in US tactics, reliant on technology and firepower could not operate without an abundance of material support.

This study is composed of seven sections in a logical sequence: the introduction, a literature review, a methodology, two case studies of battles, case study findings and analysis, and the conclusion. The literature review provides an overview of the currently available literature concerning the subject of the study and provides the underlying foundation. The methodology introduces the study and provides the framework for evaluation. The case studies of battles during

the Vietnamization period provide a detailed examination and answer seven research questions. The findings and analysis compare the results of the research questions with the four hypotheses. The conclusion discusses the implications of the findings on future policy and areas for further research.

Literature Review

The direction of American involvement in Vietnam changed in 1968. A series of battles known as the Tet Offensive became a pivotal point in the conflict. Changes in the conduct of military operations began following this event signaling a dramatic shift in the operational approach. After the Tet Offensive, General Creighton W. Abrams replaced General William C. Westmoreland as commander of MACV, the Johnson presidency ended, and US domestic support for the Vietnam War steadily declined. Beginning with the Nixon presidency was a planned force reduction and eventual end of American involvement and financial support. The literature review will primarily focus on published accounts and records after the Tet Offensive in 1968 that detail the change from a war of attrition under Westmoreland to a one-war approach under Abrams that focused on the reduction of US forces and buildup of the South Vietnam Army known as Vietnamization.⁴

The study of the Vietnamization policy and pursuit of political goals through military force in time, space, and purpose are being examined through the lens of operational art. Operational art applies to all aspects of operations and integrates ends, ways, and means while accounting for risk. Theory suggests that the challenge of operational art is to establish an equilibrium that permits the optimal generation and application of military power to achieve the political goal. Viewing time, space, means and purpose requires skill in organizing, weighing, and envisioning masses of complex, often contradictory factors. These factors exist for extended

⁴ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), xii-23.

periods, over great distances and with a mixture of players, systems, and beliefs, pursuing political goals that may not be apparent, logical, or finalized.⁵

Similarly, Clausewitz's theory that the political object, as the original motive of the war, determines both the aim of the military force and the amount of effort required. This same political object may produce totally different effects upon different people or even upon the same people at different times; therefore, it is essential to consider the political object as the measure. Clausewitz further states if the aim of the military action is an equivalent for the political object, the action will in general diminish as the political object diminishes.⁶

Dr. Stephen Lauer contends that the location of operational art lies in the discourse between policy and the tactical means. It is from this discourse that an emergent strategy appears. The purpose of this emergent strategy, then, is to achieve the aim of policy in the application of the ways that ties the tactical to the strategic in agreement with that policy. The operational artist is the person tasked with both the authority and responsibility to decide and order the ways in which the means will be employed, within the defined policy aim. The location of the art of operations in the realm of the ways drives the placement of an operational artist as the person charged with this role. General Abrams met with President Nixon and his chief civilian policy advisors such as Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird to determine the policy aims, the means, and ways necessary to accomplish the strategy in Vietnam. It is in the theater of operations, where the joint force commander is in discourse with policy in the determining the means required to achieve policy goals, which becomes the strategy through the application of operational art. This

⁵ US Army, ADRP 3-0 (2016), 2-2; James R. Robinson, "The Rommel Myth," *Military Review*, Vol. 77), Issue 5 (Sep/Oct 97), p81.

⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 81.

study aims to examine the strategy, and military objectives developed through operational art and applied by MACV during the period of Vietnamization to achieve an acceptable outcome.⁷

The end state is a set of desired future conditions the commander wants to exist when an operation ends. Commanders include the end state in their planning guidance. A defined end state promotes unity of effort; facilitates integration, synchronization, and disciplined initiative; and helps mitigate risk. Operational reach reflects the ability to achieve success through a well-conceived operational approach. Operational reach is a tether; it is a function of intelligence, protection, sustainment, endurance, and relative combat power. The limit of a unit's operational reach is its culminating point.⁸

Transitions mark a change of focus between phases or between the ongoing operation and execution of a branch or sequel. Transitions require planning and preparation well before their execution, so the force can maintain the momentum and tempo of operations. Political interests are defined by the activities associated with the governance of a country or other area, especially the debate or conflict among individuals or parties having or hoping to achieve power. An understanding of these terms is essential to objectively analyze the RVNAF during the period of Vietnamization through the case studies and historical reports.⁹

Lewis Sorley contends in the book *A Better War*, that late in 1970 or early in 1971, the United States had essentially won the Vietnam War, returned effective control of most of the population to the South Vietnamese, and created a situation where South Vietnam forces could continue the war on their own. This was contingent however, on the United States providing adequate supplies, intelligence, and continuing to bomb North Vietnam if they violated any part of the peace agreement. This situation developed through the changes in strategy and tactics

⁷ Stephen G. Lauer, "The Tao of Doctrine," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 82, (3rd Quarter 2016), 121-123.

⁸ US Army, ADRP 3-0, (2016), 2-4, 2-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-8, 1-2.

implemented by General Abrams after replacing General Westmoreland in 1968. The author contends that eventual victory would require support for the South Vietnamese government and that in 1972, with the VC essentially eliminated as an effective fighting force, the RVNAF decisively defeated the North Vietnamese Army during the Easter offensive.¹⁰

Kevin M. Boylan in the book *Losing Binh Dinh* examines the facts on the ground in Binh Dinh, a strategically vital province that was the second most populous in South Vietnam that, controlled key transportation routes, and contained one of the nation's few major seaports as well as the huge US Air Force base at Phu Cat. Taking an in-depth look at operations that were conducted in the province, Boylan provides fundamental flaws in the dual objectives of Vietnamization and Pacification efforts. The inefficiency and corruption of the South Vietnam government and armed forces was so crippling that progress in pacification occurred only when Americans took the lead increasing the dependence on support from the United States.¹¹

Dr. Jim Willbanks writes in his book *Abandoning Vietnam* that Vietnamization was a potentially viable plan that was begun too late. It is argued that some progress was made and that South Vietnam, with the aid of U.S. advisers and American airpower, held off the NVA during their massive offensive in 1972. However, the Paris Peace Accords left NVA troops in the south, and the loss of U.S. military aid negated any gains produced through Vietnamization. These factors coupled with corruption throughout President Thieu's government and a glaring lack of senior military leadership within the South Vietnamese armed forces ultimately led to the demise of South Vietnam.¹²

These publications are mixed in their reviews and seem to agree with the hypothesis of when military planners use the tenants of operational art they can prepare a host nation to conduct

¹⁰ Sorley, *A Better War*, 321.

¹¹ Kevin M. Boylan, *Losing Binh Dinh: The Failure of Pacification and Vietnamization, 1969-1971* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 292-293.

¹² Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 286.

successful offensive and defensive operations. There is some agreement with the second hypothesis of when military planners ensure that the host nation has operational enablers then the host nation can defend their sovereign borders. In most accounts, South Vietnam forces were capable but severely limited without American support. Further analysis through case studies of events will answer the third hypothesis of; when military planners ensure the host nation has operational enablers, the host nation can conduct successful offensive operations. The case studies will also provide information to answer the fourth hypothesis that when current operations doctrine for Vietnamization was used it provided a sufficient foundation for operational success.

Methodology

A case study is a research method involving an up-close, in-depth, and detailed examination of a subject of study (the case), as well as its related contextual conditions. The case studies of Vietnamization propose to examine the concepts and the origins of planning tied closely to an in-depth examination of the battlefield performance of the RVNAF. The methods and logic of the structured, focused comparison study of Vietnamization are meant to be simple and answer general questions regarding the 1968-1972 period of the Vietnam War. It is meant to deal only with certain aspects of this historical experience and provide useful data that may be joined later by additional cases. The goal is to discover insight into the strategy aims and whether the means used met the political objectives during this period of the Vietnam conflict.

The cases chosen will adhere to the period of 1968-1972 and examine operation Lam Son 719 a limited-objective offensive campaign conducted in the southeastern portion of Laos between 30 January and 06 April 1971. This battle provided an early indication of the progress made by US advisors during Vietnamization. The objective of the campaign was the disruption of a possible future offensive by the North Vietnam Army (NVA). The second case study will examine the NVA Easter offensive a military campaign conducted against South Vietnam Forces between March 30 and October 22, 1972. This bold strike against South Vietnam involved

massive NVA assaults against RVNAF positions with infantry, armor, and artillery to seize population centers.

These two studies are chosen to provide a focused, structured comparison in the approach and capabilities of South Vietnam Forces between 1971 and 1972 before the Paris Peace Accords and complete withdrawal of US forces. The findings should indicate that the capabilities of the forces improved dramatically and that with enabler support the South Vietnam forces were effective against the NVA to answer seven focused research questions. The first question asks what the US political aims of Vietnamization were. The second question asks what the military objectives of Vietnamization were. The third focused question asks what the operational approach for the plan. The fourth question asks what the operational constraints of Vietnamization were. The fifth focused question asks what were the operational successes and failures of Vietnamization. The sixth focused question asks what operational enablers did the South Vietnamese have. The seventh question asks what operational enabler did the South Vietnamese need or require.

Data sources used for this research are from the definitive studies of multiple sources. The Center of Military History's US Army in Vietnam series provides insight and records of MACV senior-level commanders during the years of buildup and withdrawal. Another great resource provided by the Center of Military History, the Indochina Monograph series examined the conflict from the view of senior commanders in the RVNAF. Other primary sources for references are the Combined Arms Research Library and the Texas Tech University Center for the study of the Vietnam conflict in Lubbock, Texas.

The case studies chosen are to examine the elements of the Vietnamization campaign and an in-depth analysis of the RVNAF during Lam Son 719 and the Easter Offensive. The structured comparison study of two separate engagements is meant to answer focused research questions regarding the 1968-1972 period. Current published works provide mixed opinions on the abilities of South Vietnam Forces, and whether they were capable of success without US advisors and

airpower. Data sources and analysis of the two case studies will be used to answer the central research question of whether General Abrams and MACV used the tenets of operational art to meet the strategic objectives of the Nixon Administration.

Case Study 1 Lam Son 719

South Vietnamese army forces invaded southern Laos during an Operation named Lam Son 719. The mission supported by U.S. aviation, airlift, and artillery from firebases inside South Vietnam was to disrupt the communist supply and infiltration network along Route 9 in Laos, adjacent to the two northern provinces of South Vietnam. This battle was an early indication of progress made by US advisors to enable South Vietnam to defend its borders and conduct offensive operations against the NVA. The battle examined against several focused research questions is used to guide the analysis of this case.¹³

Operation Lam Son 719 was a combined ARVN and US operation conducted from the 30 January to 6 April 1971 under several constraints. US forces including advisors were prohibited from operating on the ground in Laos. The ARVN would go into battle without their American counterparts that they had become accustomed to helping coordinate US air strikes, assault helicopters, long-range artillery, and logistical support. The US aim was to measure the effectiveness of Vietnamization and the ARVN forces ability to defend its sovereignty following the subsequent withdrawal of US forces.¹⁴

The overall ground commander in Laos was LTG Hoang Xuan Lam Commanding General of the ARVN I Corps. His US counterpart LTG James W. Sutherland of XXIV Corps commanded all involved US Army Forces in South Vietnam to provide logistical, long-range artillery, and helicopter support for the operation. The primary objective of Lam Son 719 was to

¹³ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 99.

¹⁴ Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1988), 473.

seize Base Area 604 in the Tchepone area about 50 kilometers from the border of South Vietnam, identified as a junction of supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. After securing Tchepone the ARVN Forces would for the remainder of the dry season interdict the trail and destroy any logistical facilities in the area.¹⁵

The attack was to be made by the most highly rated ARVN troops, the 1st Division, 1st Armored Brigade, three Ranger Battalions, and most of the elite Airborne and Marine Divisions from the strategic reserve. Initially, sixteen thousand South Vietnamese troops would be employed with later reinforcements increasing the total to twenty thousand. Ten thousand US combat engineers and other troops would support the effort from Quang Tri Province inside South Vietnam. MACV planners were optimistic about the outcome of the operation and anticipated light opposition. The tank threat was considered minimal, and the reinforcement capability for the NVA would require fourteen days for two divisions to arrive from north of the DMZ border of South Vietnam. A planned two-day preparation of the area before D-day by tactical air would effectively neutralize the enemy anti-aircraft weapons of mixed caliber in the operational area. Unknown at the time was that the strength of the NVA Forces surrounding Tchepone numbered over twenty-two thousand troops and would increase to thirty-six thousand by the start of the mission.¹⁶

By 5 February, the US forces had finished most of their tasks clearing and repairing route 9 from the border of South Vietnam north to the DMZ. While US forces secured assembly areas near the border, the lead ARVN forces crossed the line of departure on 8 February 1971. Bad weather on 6 February forced the cancellation of air strikes to neutralize NVA anti-aircraft guns along Route 9. Armored columns attacked west along the road as planned. Led by M-41 tanks

¹⁵ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War*, 244-245.

¹⁶ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 103-105; Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2007), 326.

and M-113 armored personnel carriers the column pushed nine kilometers into Laos the first day, slowed by dense jungle and bomb craters adjacent to the route. The airborne forces inserted on the northern flank took their objectives against light enemy contact. The ARVN 1st Infantry Division on the southern flank also secured their initial objectives with little enemy contact.¹⁷

Heavy rains severely restricted movement but ARVN Forces reached their first objective on 10 February at A Luoi a point halfway to Tchepone and linked up with an Airborne Battalion that had been air assaulted by US helicopters. At the same time, ARVN forces in positions on the northern and southern flanks closed on areas adjacent to A Luoi. In the north, the 3rd Airborne ARVN Brigade established two firebases 30 and 31 while the 21st and 39th ARVN Ranger battalions established two outposts, Ranger Base South and Ranger Base North to provide early warning of any NVA reinforcements coming south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail initiating a network of four mutually supporting bases, in the north. Similarly, the ARVN 1st Infantry Division established five firebases south of Route 9 to secure that flank from enemy attack.¹⁸

On February 11th the ARVN ground attack stopped, giving the NVA an opportunity to send in additional reinforcements. The NVA had ordered their 308th Division located at an assembly area near the DMZ to begin moving towards Route 9, while the 2nd NVA Division moved from positions further south of the Tchepone area to intercept the ARVN armored column. Although NVA elements were already in the area, an additional four infantry regiments and a tank regiment were sent to reinforce the battle. As these forces closed in the ARVN forces remained stationary. It became clear to the US forces that the ARVN attack needed to regain momentum before the NVA gained the initiative; however, General Lam was resolved to remain stationary.¹⁹

¹⁷ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 105.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 106.

On 16 February, General Abrams and General Sutherland met with General Lam at the forward command post in Dong Ha to initiate movement of the 1st ARVN Division farther west along the southern axis of advance to establish firebases in support of an airborne-armored thrust along Route 9 to Tchepone. By this time, the NVA had reinforced blocking positions to restrict the resumption of the attack. On 18 February, the 308th NVA Division was identified in action for the first time on the northern flank, and the 2nd NVA division appeared in front of the lead ARVN units. By Early March, the NVA outnumbered the ARVN forces by a two to one margin. Heavy mortar and Artillery rained heavily on all ARVN positions. The delay had caused the ARVN to lose the initiative for the remainder of the battle.²⁰

Restricted by dense fog and rain the few helicopters that were able to fly had to do so at low altitude making them vulnerable to enemy ground fire. On 20 February, ARVN forces were in direct contact with the NVA and under siege from repeated NVA frontal assaults. Units began to encounter heavy artillery and Soviet T-54 and PT-76 tanks, especially the northern flank of the airborne and ranger units. The ARVN forces fought back but were usually severely outnumbered and repeatedly demonstrated the inability to coordinate maneuvers with artillery fire and air support due to the absence of US advisors. Compounding the problem was the shorter range of the ARVN artillery to provide adequate counter battery fire in comparison to the NVA batteries. Making matters worse was the effectiveness of the NVA air defense that was much denser than intelligence had anticipated.²¹

The NVA had isolated the 39th ARVN Ranger Battalion at Ranger Base North on 19 February, surrounding the base with over two thousand troops. Over a three-day period, the NVA pounded the position and then pursued the Rangers as they tried to break out. From a total of 430

²⁰ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War*, 248-249.

²¹ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 106; MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 331; Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 473.

rangers when the battle started, 178 were killed or missing and 148 were wounded. After two days of heavy fighting, General Lam decided that the Rangers position was untenable and ordered them to withdrawal to Fire Support Base 30.²²

The NVA overran the 3rd Airborne Brigade at their firebase on 25 February capturing the brigade commander and his entire staff. As the operations continued, South Vietnamese President Thieu became upset with the indecision and poor conduct of the battle by General Lam. On 28 February, President Thieu decided that the mission of Lam Son 719 should shift from destroying the NVA base area to taking Tchepone. This public perception ploy allowed President Thieu to declare victory and withdraw his forces before the upcoming fall election. The objective of occupying and destroying the enemy base areas in Laos were abandoned in favor of a meaningless effort to get ARVN forces into Tchepone for political purposes.²³

From 3 to 6 March, elements of the 1st ARVN Division executed a series of heliborne assaults into the west along the southern advance, establishing three firebases named Lolo, Liz, and Sophia. The NVA presented strong resistance, as eleven helicopters were shot down and four others damaged as they brought ARVN troops into Fire Support Base Lolo. On 6 March, after a bombardment of the NVA positions by fighter bombers and B-52's, two infantry battalions from the 2nd ARVN Regiment of the 1st ARVN Division were lifted by 120 US helicopters from Khe Sanh to Landing Zone Hope four kilometers northeast of Tchepone. On 7 March, ARVN forces entered Tchepone, reaching their objective.²⁴

On 9 March, General Lam flew to meet with President Thieu pleading for the withdrawal of forces. General Lam stressed the exposed position of the ARVN forces and proposed to disengage and extract them by helicopter. General Abrams strongly disagreed urging President

²² Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 107.

²³ *Ibid.*, 108-109.

²⁴ Sorley, *A Better War*, 253-254.

Thieu to reinforce his forces in Laos with the ARVN 2nd Infantry Division, and fight it out to the finish with the NVA. President Thieu, not willing to risk more casualties on 12 March, ordered General Lam to begin the withdrawal of his forces. By this time, the NVA had moved a total of five divisions into the area to inflict as much damage as possible on ARVN Forces. The NVA attempted to surround and destroy the ARVN units, but US tactical air support and attack helicopters prevented a complete annihilation. The last ARVN troops crossed back into South Vietnam on 24 March, and the operation was officially terminated on 6 April 1971.²⁵

President Thieu addressed the survivors of the incursion and claimed that the operation in Laos was a great victory. Despite the proclaimed success, enemy movement on the trail system increased immediately after the conclusion of the operation. The American claims of success were more limited in scope as MACV fully understood that the operation had exposed deficiencies in ARVN Forces ability to plan, organize, lead, motivate, and operate successfully. For the NVA, Laos was viewed as a complete success and the military expansion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the west that had begun in 1970 quickly accelerated. Another result of the operation was a firm decision by North Vietnam to launch a major conventional invasion of South Vietnam in early 1972, known as the Easter Offensive.²⁶

The case studies are used to examine the concepts of Vietnamization and analyze of the performance of South Vietnamese Forces to answer the following focused research questions. The first focused question is; what were the US political aims of Vietnamization? In June of 1969, the Vietnamization strategy introduced by the Nixon administration aimed to reduce American involvement in the Vietnam War by transferring all military responsibilities to the government of South Vietnam, adopting a policy of negotiation with North Vietnam and

²⁵ MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 333; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 110.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 339-348.

unilateral withdrawal of US combat troops. Combined with efforts to strengthen South Vietnam's Forces the policy was dependent upon maintaining a favorable security situation in South Vietnam. The success of the policy would give South Vietnam a chance to survive while allowing the United States to depart on acceptable terms.²⁷

The second focused question is; what were the military objectives of Vietnamization? By 7 August 1969, under the direction of Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird the mission of MACV had changed to the assurance of the South Vietnam Governments right to determine their future without outside interference. The main effort centered on the rapid development of ARVN forces to increase their role in combat operations. Planning considerations centered on the redeployment of US forces on an accelerated timeline of six increments.²⁸

Even with the reduction of US forces, operations in all four corps tactical zones focused on campaign plans to defeat the enemy and increase the influence of the South Vietnam Government. Essential tasks were the destruction of enemy base areas, expansion of security zones, protection of the populated areas and maintaining lines of communications. Plans focused on the organization, training and equipping of ARVN units and employment of those forces by their capabilities. Field commanders were directed to place RVN forces in the forefront of combined operations to improve their tactical capabilities.²⁹

The third focused question is; what was the operational approach for the plan? The planners defined limited immediate and intermediate US objectives based on the gradual expansion of secure territory within South Vietnam by continuing pacification and national development efforts. The immediate goal was the security of large population centers no later

²⁷ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 16; MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 143.

²⁸ MACV: *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 143-149.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.

than July of 1970. The intermediate goal entailed extending security to other inhabited areas of South Vietnam before the 1972 presidential election to coincide with the end of US troops in a combat role and transition of MACV to an advisory group. The RVNAF Improvement plan emphasized maximizing combat forces based on an indefinite US advisor support presence.³⁰

The fourth focused question is; what were the operational constraints of Vietnamization? One limitation that hampered early efforts to improve RVNAF was the role of the US training advisor. The MACV Training Directorate and detachments were only at 70 percent of assigned strength. The US Army at the time regarded service as an advisor as less desirable than serving in a regular unit. A result was officers, and non-commissioned officers avoided advisory duty. The training was limited to a six-week program with only some instances of additional language training. The shortfall in personnel caused many to incur multiple tours or the creation of advisors lacking the required experience, training, or desire to fill this role.³¹

Another constraint was the Secretary of Defense demand for RVNAF to deal successfully with a combined VC and NVA threat. Planners at MACV determined current budget guidelines, expected force withdrawal timelines, and training requirements, made such a request impossible. MACV planners stated that the accelerated expansion program to increase equipment and personnel to a ceiling of 993,000 overextended the RVNAF. The defeat of a combined enemy threat would only be possible with US assistance.³²

The fifth focused question is; what were the operational successes and failures associated with Vietnamization? Early success during Vietnamization included operations by the ARVN Forces in Cambodia. During April and May 1970, a series of multi-battalion cross-border operations into Cambodia were executed using ARVN forces from the II, III, and IV Corps

³⁰ MACV: *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 136-137.

³¹ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 38.

³² Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 354.

Tactical Zones. The structure of operations centered on regimental task forces of combined infantry and armored units controlled by a small provincial headquarters. ARVN Corp Commanders personally directed the attacks demonstrating prudent leadership in the field. These forces operated independently from one another and in some instances, occupied Cambodian areas for extended periods building staging bases for future operations. The purpose was to interdict NVA forces and stop the supply of material and manpower into South Vietnam.³³

The sixth focused question is; what operational enablers did the South Vietnamese have? MACV planners assumed that an American residual force would remain to assist South Vietnam. Training activities for operational enablers existed in the fields of aviation, engineers, communication, psychological operations, and intelligence. MACV depended on subordinate commands for detailed planning and implementation. In areas such as transportation, quartermaster, ordnance, tactical communications, and maintenance the lack of central direction and inadequate training resulted in poor performance from RVNAF to in these areas.³⁴

The seventh question is what operational enablers did the South Vietnamese need or require? Large-scale combat operations were not considered in the planning assumptions for Vietnamization. MACV molded the RVNAF logistical system into an area support configuration formed for low-intensity counterinsurgency. Additionally, communications, tactical aviation, intelligence, and local road networks were all developed based on the counterinsurgency threat. RVNAF helicopter squadrons increased tactical mobility to combat VC operations but would be vulnerable to a conventional threat and sophisticated air defense weapons. South Vietnam lacked the strategic mobility of large troop transport fixed-wing aircraft that could rapidly move forces and equipment that helicopters could not.³⁵

³³ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 418-420.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 435-443.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 445.

Lam Son 719 demonstrated that despite the efforts of MACV Advisors, South Vietnamese Forces still suffered from significant deficiencies. Poor leadership by a corrupt and politicized officer corps, an inability to coordinate fire support, neglect of troop welfare and desertion were issues that plagued RVNAF. MACV added force structure and equipment without thorough analysis on the suitability of the forces. RVNAF lacked experience as most forces before Vietnamization concentrated on static territorial security and pacification missions. Planners assumed the enemy was most likely to keep up a steady but relatively low level of military activity in support of the political fight and negotiation strategy failing to address the possibility of North Vietnam waging a different kind of war.³⁶

Case Study 2 the Easter Offensive

Late in 1971, North Vietnam broke off peace negotiations in Paris with the Nixon Administration aimed at ending the conflict in Vietnam. Inspired by their experience during Lam Son 719 the NVA believed they could easily defeat South Vietnam as the reduction in American troops had reached a level that limited the United States ability to influence the strategic situation. The Easter Offensive took place from March 30 to October 22, 1972 and was characterized by massive coordinated assaults against RVNAF positions with infantry, armor, and artillery. The NVA committed their entire conventional combat force to seize selected population centers in South Vietnam for political purposes. This battle during the period of Vietnamization will be examined against several focused research questions used to guide the analysis of this case.³⁷

The offensive began at noon on 30 March 1972, when an intense artillery barrage rained down on the northernmost RVNAF outposts in Quang Tri Province. The NVA attack had been timed to coincide with the seasonal monsoon that produced low cloud ceilings that would negate

³⁶ MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 10-11,138.

³⁷ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1991), 654-655.

the effectiveness of US airstrikes. The size and ferocity of the assault caught the defenders off balance because the attackers struck on three fronts simultaneously with the majority of the NVA. Three divisions crossed the DMZ in Northern South Vietnam overrunning advance bases of the new ARVN 3rd Infantry Division followed three days later by more enemy divisions headed south across the Cambodian border toward Saigon surrounding positions held by the 5th Division. Two weeks later, an additional two divisions attacked the ARVN 22d Infantry Division in the Highlands, while smaller units attacked towns in Binh Dinh Province along the coast. Due to the timing of events, the operation was termed the Easter Offensive and represented a radical departure from past NVA strategy and tactics. Allied intelligence had failed to predict either the scale of the offensive or the method of attack, giving the NVA the initiative and a crucial psychological edge over defenders who had not expected the NVA to attack across the DMZ.³⁸

In the northern zone after weeks of heavy fighting, the NVA overwhelmed both the ARVN 3rd Infantry Division and the 20th Tank Battalion. Camp Carroll, an artillery firebase halfway between the Laotian border and the coast, was the key to the South Vietnamese Northern and Western defense line and was the strongest obstacle for the NVA to overcome before Quang Tri City. On 2 April, Colonel Pham Van Dinh, Commander of the 56th ARVN Regiment, surrendered the camp and his 1,500 troops with minimal resistance. Later in the day, ARVN troops abandoned Mai Loc, the last western base. This allowed North Vietnamese forces to cross the Cam Lo Bridge, eleven kilometers to the west of Dong Ha. The NVA had almost unrestricted access to western Quang Tri Province north of the Thach Han River and capitalized by seizing the city of Quang Tri. In the Highlands, the NVA decimated the 22nd Division and threatened to capture Kontum City. Above Saigon, they seized Loc Ninh, destroyed the 9th Regiment of the

³⁸ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 481.

ARVN 5th Division, and surrounded the remainder of the forces at An Loc halfway down the road leading to Saigon.³⁹

Following these powerful actions, the NVA tried to capitalize on their gains while attacking An Loc and Kontum. Possession of either of these cities along with Quang Tri would greatly enhance their positional advantage to control parts of the country while the capture of An Loc would lead to the eventual assault of Saigon. The actions for the following weeks became characterized by massed NVA assaults that were stopped by B-52, tactical air, helicopter gunship attacks and RVNAF troop counterattacks against remaining enemy forces. In the Northern zone, ARVN Ranger and Marine units arrived to help ARVN 1st Division defend Hue City, while in the Highlands the bulk of the ARVN Airborne and 23rd Infantry Division forces reinforced Kontum. In the III Corp Region, the South Vietnam Joint General Staff ordered both ARVN Ranger and Airborne units into An Loc and shifted the ARVN 21st Division from the Mekong Delta to protect Saigon. This was an incredible risk; successfully moving an army division from one zone to another, but reflected the grave concern on how the battle would unfold.⁴⁰

Reacting to the fierceness of the battle, and reluctance of North Vietnam to accept efforts to negotiate, President Nixon authorized tactical airstrikes from the DMZ north to the 18th parallel, the southern panhandle of North Vietnam. This effort was the first systematic bombing carried out in North Vietnam proper since the end of Operation Rolling Thunder in November 1968. Between 1 May and 30 June, B-52s, fighter-bombers, and fixed-wing gunships had carried out 18,000 sorties over North Vietnam while battles raged in the south throughout the summer. The ARVN found their light M-41 Tanks no match for the Russian made battle tanks used by the NVA and continued to have to rely on US air support, and light anti-tank weapons to destroy

³⁹ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 133.

⁴⁰ LTG Ngo Quang Trong, RVNAF, *Indochina Monographs: The Easter Offensive of 1972* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1980), 31-33.

enemy armor. The NVA needed to try to avoid the devastation caused by the US air attacks because of their decision to wage a conventional battle. Defenders were often entrenched well and the attacking forces on either side suffered heavy losses.⁴¹

In the end, stiff RVNAF defense at An Loc and Kontum supported by fierce counter attacks by ARVN Airborne and Marine units around Quang Tri along with heavy US air support including massive numbers of B-52 bomber strikes directed by the remaining American advisors slowly destroyed the NVA. By mid-June, the NVA abandoned the sieges of Kontum city and An Loc and on 26 September, RVNAF troops reoccupied what was left of Quang Tri City. The North Vietnamese leadership had made two critical errors in assessing the abilities of South Vietnam. The first was to underestimate the fighting ability of the RVNAF; secondly, the NVA in choosing to launch a conventional battle did not account for the effectiveness of US air power, and suffered massive casualties as a result.⁴²

The case studies are used to examine the concepts of Vietnamization and analyze the performance of South Vietnamese Forces to answer the following focused research questions. The first focused question is; what were the US political aims of Vietnamization? By 1972, the administration had concluded that the political pressure to end the conflict was rising, which forced the Nixon administration to shift the aim to a negotiated cease-fire, and return of US prisoners of war. A negotiated settlement was desired to give enough time for South Vietnam to decide its own fate while allowing the United States to leave. Military escalation of bombing and mining of the Haiphong harbor during the Easter offensive were pursued to force North Vietnam to continue negotiations that had broken off before the battle.⁴³

⁴¹ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 144-148.

⁴² Anthony J. Joes, *The War for South Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 102-103.

⁴³ Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979), 1038-1039.

The second focused question is; what were the military objectives of Vietnamization? By 1972, the United States turned responsibility for offensive operations over to RVNAF with American Troops remaining in an advisory or defensive role. This was a complete reversal of when Vietnamization had started with US forces in the lead offensive role and RVNAF in a defensive posture. MACV's primary goals were continued withdrawal of US forces to continue efforts of reverting to a Joint Military Assistance Advisory Group to provide advice and support to South Vietnam Forces, manage military support programs, and air support operations until its ending phasedown.⁴⁴

The third focused question is; what was the operational approach for the plan? The goal was to contain communist expansion within the sovereign territory of South Vietnam, and there was never an approach that was focused towards offensive operations in North Vietnam. Only on two occasions were RVNAF directed to cross the border and strike into enemy bases in Cambodia and Laos, but never as a continued and deliberate strategy. The South Vietnam forces were directed towards two primary lines of effort; to control the national territory, through pacification in populated areas and search-and-destroy operations to eliminate enemy forces in unpopulated areas. Throughout the period of Vietnamization during the war, this operational approach kept the armed forces of South Vietnam in a reactionary posture against the enemy and unable to seize the initiative.⁴⁵

The fourth focused question is; what were the operational constraints of Vietnamization? Although US forces had operated side by side with RVNAF since the beginning of American participation, no unified command existed to direct the various combat forces involved. The United States insisted on the use of principles of cooperation and coordination through advising

⁴⁴ MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 208-211.

⁴⁵ GEN Cao Van Vien, RVNAF, *Indochina Monographs: The Final Collapse* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1983), 159.

RVNAF staffs at all levels. This approach brought about limited results when complexities of heavy battle such as the Easter Offensive occurred and misunderstandings became very significant. Without a single command and unity of effort, operations suffered from inadequate planning and delayed decisions, leading to inefficient use of forces and resources.⁴⁶

The United States imposed a strategic limitation upon itself, and consequently upon South Vietnam. Its strategic objective was to defeat the Communists in the South but not those in the North. Consistent with this strategic distinction, the United States provided South Vietnam with the means to defend its own territory but not to carry the war to the north. This limitation provided a strategic advantage to the north that they used effectively. By early 1972, the RVNAF had assumed the primary responsibility for the ground war. The government of South Vietnam ordered that all territory had to be held at any cost. This was an incredible task that the RVNAF was simply not able to execute with the vastness of territory to protect.⁴⁷

The fifth focused question is; what were the operational successes and failures associated with Vietnamization? During the initial stages of the Easter Offensive, the RVNAF reacted with indecision and delay. Many of the assigned units were well below assigned strength at the start of the battle. Part of the issue was that troops were assigned in military regions with family living within their community. Due to the lack of housing for dependents on secure facilities, and the troops concern for their family high rates of desertion resulted. Quang Tri was an example of problems with employment of systems and units to counter the combined arms conventional attack launched by the NVA. While the enemy used artillery to maximum effect, RVNAF units and artillery batteries were fragmented and unsynchronized in fixed positions.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 87-96.

⁴⁷ COL Hoang Ngoc Lung, RVNAF, *Indochina Monographs: Strategy and Tactics* (Washington DC, Center of Military History, 1983), 135; Trong, *Indochina Monographs*, 168.

⁴⁸ Trong, *Indochina Monographs*, 169-170.

After the initial onslaught of NVA Forces, General Abrams and the MACV advisory staff were able to influence President Thieu to replace leaders in the field and organize forces so that with US air support they were able to improve their situation. Slowly the RVNAF were able to coordinate efforts with US airpower and artillery fire with their combined forces to defeat the NVA. Enemy forces were stunned by the effectiveness of the RVNAF to counter attack and defeat their forces in areas such as An Loc, Kontum, and Quang Tri. The forces of South Vietnam had improved dramatically and pushed back the attacks from elements of ten NVA Divisions.⁴⁹

The sixth focused question is; what operational enablers did the South Vietnamese have? The major factor that contributed to the RVNAF success during the Easter offensive was the support of the US. The increase in air and naval fire support was superior to any support received prior to the offensive. This also coincided with a bombing campaign of NVA positions in South Vietnam, interdiction of supply lines in Laos, bombing of targets in the north, and the mining of ports to reduce the effectiveness of the communist forces. RVNAF could not have retaken the city of Quang Tri or retained An Loc and Kontum without continued US close air support and B-52 bombing raids. Troops were equipped with M-72 antitank rocket launchers, TOW missiles, M-48 tanks and self-propelled 175-mm. guns after the Communists had begun the use of highly effective T-54 tanks and 130-mm. guns. MACV even with the reduction of forces increased the number of advisors assisting units as the intensity of offensive had become apparent.⁵⁰

The seventh question is what operational enablers did the South Vietnamese need or require? The adverse effect of continued US support was that over time the RVNAF had become too dependent on it substituting technology for human ability and tenacity. Since air support was so effective and always available, tactical commanders tended to disregard their own supporting weapon systems that were seldom used. The tendency to rely on B-52's or tactical air in the place

⁴⁹ MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 363.

⁵⁰ Trong, *Indochina Monographs*, 171-173.

of organic fires and maneuver became so commonplace that it inhibited initiative and caused delays in conducting attacks. Prior to US involvement, the RVNAF were trained and conditioned to survive in austerity and with a lack of human and material resources. With the interdiction of direct military aid from U.S. Forces, they could not operate without an abundance of material support. RVNAF using an approach that required a large logistical support system would have to quickly adjust to a state of material privation after the United States ended involvement in Vietnam.⁵¹

In 1972, in the face of the impasse in both open and secret negotiations and aware that the United States would not yield to their demands, the NVA decided to break the deadlock by striking across the 17th Parallel and in all out conventional attack. By the end of the Easter Offensive, many enemy battalions in South Vietnam were down to a hundred men. Even though clearly defeated, parts of Quang Tri and Binh Long Provinces remained under communist control. The NVA suffered approximately one hundred thousand casualties and destruction of all its tanks. Although US forces did not play a major factor, the use of air power greatly enhanced the RVNAF. South Vietnam had proven that they were fully capable of carrying out their mission, provided they were given adequate and timely material support.⁵²

Findings and Analysis

The United States efforts during the period of the Vietnam War known as Vietnamization involving the increased responsibility of the South Vietnamese Government in the defense of their country was the result of policy decisions made in March of 1968, after the Tet Offensive. The focus changed from the defeat of the Communists to efforts to end all American involvement and redeployment of US troops. With the election of President Nixon, the reduction of US forces

⁵¹ GEN Cao Van Vien, RVNAF, *Indochina Monographs: The Final Collapse* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1983), 158.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 163-165.

in Vietnam accelerated, while United States policy shifted away from direct involvement in third world conflicts. Certainly, history considers the American effort in Vietnam as a failure as by 1975 the country of South Vietnam collapsed. The purpose of this study is to examine Vietnamization separating the military outcome from the policy aim and determine if it was successful.⁵³

The first focused question asked what were the US political aims of Vietnamization. The empirical evidence demonstrates that in June of 1969, the Vietnamization strategy introduced by the Nixon administration aimed to reduce American involvement in the Vietnam War. The administration adopted a policy of negotiation and unilateral withdrawal of American combat troops combined with efforts to strengthen the armed forces of South Vietnam. The political aims were to achieve an acceptable settlement in Paris with North Vietnam.⁵⁴

Success would provide an interval for South Vietnam to decide their future while the United States departed under acceptable terms. By 1972, the political pressure of congress threatening a mandate for a withdrawal of all US efforts in Vietnam and the presidential election intensified the effort. Political aims shifted to the return of US prisoners of war and a negotiated settlement with North Vietnam. The Nixon Administration initiated bombing and mining efforts in the North during the Easter Offensive to force renewed talks in Paris to end the conflict.⁵⁵

The second focused question asked what the military objectives of Vietnamization were. The empirical evidence demonstrates that by 7 August 1969, the mission of MACV was to assure the South Vietnam Governments right to determine their future without outside interference. The main effort centered on accelerated US redeployment of forces in six increments, and the rapid

⁵³ Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 251.

⁵⁴ MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 143.

⁵⁵ Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1038-1039.

expansion and equipping of RVNAF to increase their role in combat operations. Essential was the placement of RVNAF in all four corps tactical zones focusing on combined operations to destroy enemy base areas, expand the security zones, and protect the populated areas. By 1972, MACV had turned complete responsibility of offensive operations over to RVNAF with US troops remaining in a defensive role. MACV continued implementation of Operation Plan J198 reverting to a Joint Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to conduct limited intelligence, communications, pacification and air operations until its eventual elimination.⁵⁶

The third focused question asked what the operational approach for the plan was. The empirical evidence demonstrates, during the period of Vietnamization MACV planners utilized US forces prior to major withdrawal, to expand secure territory to enable pacification and national development efforts. The assumption was that the enemies immediate goal would be to discredit the pacification effort and that the redeployment of combat forces would limit US ability to influence the security situation. The Improvement of RVNAF assumed US forces would remain as advisors, and the enemy would continue their existing strategy of main force guerrilla and terrorist activity never envisioning the dramatic conventional operations launched during the Easter Offensive. Only on two occasions were RVNAF directed to cross the border and strike into enemy bases in Cambodia and Laos. Throughout the period of Vietnamization, the operational approach limited the armed forces of South Vietnam to that of a reactionary force and they were never able to seize the initiative.⁵⁷

The fourth focused question asked what the operational constraints of Vietnamization were. The empirical data demonstrates a critical constraint was the Secretary of Defense demand for the plan of Vietnamization to enable the RVNAF to deal successfully with a combined VC and NVA threat. Planners at MACV determined that such a request was not possible. Under the

⁵⁶ MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 211,253.

⁵⁷ MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 136-137; Vien, *Indochina Monographs*, 159.

budget guidelines, expected US force withdrawal timelines, and training requirements even an increase in equipment and manpower would not enable the RVNAF to defeat a combined enemy threat without US assistance. MACV advised that within mandated withdrawal and improvement parameters accelerated expansion would overextend RVNAF personnel and training capacity.⁵⁸

By early 1972, a limited amount of US forces was still in Vietnam and committed only to the defense and security of US bases and installations. The United States could only provide advice, logistics, and combat support. American influence of the structure and efforts of RVNAF were evident; their strategic objective was defeat the communists in the South but to not to engage in ground warfare in the North. The United States had imposed a strategic constraint upon itself, and consequently upon South Vietnam. Consistent with this strategy direction, the United States provided South Vietnam only with the means to defend its sovereign territory but not to carry the war to the North. This limitation provided a strategic advantage to the north that they effectively used. When the RVNAF assumed the primary responsibility for the ground war, President Thieu continued a defensive strategy of securing all national territory at any cost.⁵⁹

The fifth focused question asked what were the operational successes and failures associated with Vietnamization? The empirical evidence shows that early operations by the RVNAF in Cambodia during April and May 1970, demonstrated success in a series of multi-battalion cross border operations. These centered on smaller regimental task forces of combined of infantry and armored units where commanders personally directed the attacks. Forces were able to conduct these operations without direct US advisor involvement or logistical support.⁶⁰

During Lam Son 719 and the initial stages of the Easter Offensive, the RVNAF reacted with indecision and delay. Commanders ordered actions from units and shifting forces from other

⁵⁸ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 354.

⁵⁹ Lung, *Indochina Monographs*, 135; Trong, *Indochina Monographs*, 168.

⁶⁰ Trong, *Indochina Monographs*, 418-420.

areas in a frantic manner. These unsynchronized efforts inevitably caused command and control problems and the inability to employ combat systems effectively. While the enemy used artillery to maximum effect, RVNAF units and artillery batteries were fragmented and immobile due to being placed in fixed positions. President Thieu replaced ineffective leaders at the urging of General Abrams and the situation with the aid of US air support improved significantly. RVNAF learned through trial and error to coordinate air and artillery fire. Enemy forces during the Easter Offensive were stunned by RVNAF and their ability to hold firm and push back the attacks of NVA under tremendous pressure.⁶¹

The sixth focused question asked what operational enablers did the South Vietnamese have. The empirical evidence suggests that MACV planners in April of 1968, received instructions to emphasize the combat role of RVNAF and expand ground combat units at the expense of support units for self-sufficiency. This improved when 1st Logistical Command General Support Group focused on strengthening South Vietnamese area logistics in transportation, quartermaster, ordnance and other support fields. Prior MACV efforts lacked central direction, and produced training programs that were inadequate reflecting the marginal performance by RVNAF. The critical enabler that contributed to the RVNAF success during Lam Son 719 and the Easter Offensive was US air and naval fire support. Additionally, the bombing campaign of NVA positions in South Vietnam, Laos, and targets in North Vietnam during the Easter Offensive, destroyed the communist forces. Without continued US fire support, helicopters and B-52 bombing raids RVNAF could not have escaped Tchepone or have retaken the city of Quang Tri, retained An Loc or Kontum.⁶²

⁶¹ Trong, *Indochina Monographs*, 169-170; MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 363.

⁶² MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 122,443; Trong, *Indochina Monographs*, 171-173.

The seventh question asked what operational enablers did the South Vietnamese need or require? The empirical evidence demonstrates that MACV did not consider the possibility of large-scale conventional operations as planning factors. ARVN Artillery was inadequate in comparison to the longer range NVA 152mm howitzer and 130mm guns that could outrange the 105mm and 155mm pieces. Lam Son 719 exposed ARVN forces weakness in the ability to coordinate either organic or US air and fire support. Without the assistance of US advisors, the South Vietnamese displayed deficiency in requesting and controlling artillery or tactical air. Weapons were poorly matched to targets, air strikes were requested for targets more suitable for artillery, and field artillery was often requested to attack targets beyond capabilities exposing a critical training deficiency.⁶³

The adverse effect of continued US support was that over time the RVNAF had become too dependent, substituting technology for initiative, ability, and tenacity. Since air support was so effective and always available, ARVN relied on B-52's or tactical air in the place of organic fires and maneuver. Advisors reported several instances of units delaying departure from the assembly area until a B-52 strike or pausing during a final assault to wait for maximum preparatory fires. This dependence on sophisticated weapons and equipment exposed the inevitable problem when US aid was reduced combat capability would decrease.⁶⁴

This study's first hypothesis asserts that when military planners use the tenants of operational art they can prepare a host nation to conduct both offensive and defensive objectives. The evidence suggests this hypothesis is a mixed outcome. The geographical aspects of the territory meant that only a defense in depth was the only feasible strategy for South Vietnam. The RVNAF main effort focused on pacification and the development of populated areas. The MACV campaign during Vietnamization utilized an operational approach based on the defense of South

⁶³ MACV, 474-494.

⁶⁴ Vien, *Indochina Monographs*, 158.

Vietnam. Although Lam Son 719 was clearly intended to be an offensive operation, it stalled once enemy contact was initiated and any success was purely due to American efforts to rescue the operation. In both the case studies, the empirical evidence suggested RVNAF remained a reactionary force never possessing the initiative to conduct offensive operations against the NVA.⁶⁵

This study's second hypothesis asserts that when military planners ensure that the host nation has operational enablers then the host nation can defend their sovereign borders. The evidence suggests this hypothesis is supported. US logistic and enabler support contributed to the RVNAF success during Lam Son 719 and the Easter Offensive. It was US air and naval fire support combined with an overwhelming bombing campaign of NVA positions in South Vietnam, Laos, and in North Vietnam that destroyed communist forces as the intensity of offensive operations increased.⁶⁶

The third hypothesis asserts that when military planners ensure the host nation has operational enablers the host nation can conduct successful offensive operations. The empirical evidence suggests this hypothesis has a mixed outcome. RVNAF primarily conducted defense of the sovereign territory in South Vietnam and never planned to conduct offensive operations against the North. Enabler units lacked central direction and the training program was an inadequate advisory effort in the fields of transportation, quartermaster, ordnance, tactical communications, and maintenance. RVNAF Artillery Batteries continued to secure roads and strategic installations, with no attempts to increase the fire-massing capacity of these units. In areas that had been thoroughly planned as in the case of rotary wing aviation, the degree of success was substantial and Vietnamization encountered few problems. The expansion of the

⁶⁵ Lung, *Indochina Monographs*, 136.

⁶⁶ Trong, *Indochina Monographs*, 171-173.

South Vietnamese Air Force depended on both the availability of excess aircraft and training courses in the United States.⁶⁷

The fourth hypothesis asserts that when current operations doctrine was used for Vietnamization it provided a sufficient foundation for operational success. The empirical evidence suggests this hypothesis is a mixed outcome. During the later stages of the Vietnam conflict, the use of US doctrine by RVNAF was a problem as US tactics and doctrine relied on the use of massive firepower and technology, which without direct US military aid was not sustainable. RVNAF became accustomed to US fighter-bombers, gunships, B-52s, and division artillery and failed to master the tactical art of fire and maneuver using mortars, machine guns, and rifles in close support of assaulting infantry. They never used terrain to their advantage to exploit weak points of enemy positions, the conduct of night raids or ambushes with light forces. Units rarely marched and failed to adapt to the loss of US resources.⁶⁸

The case studies examined the battlefield performance of South Vietnamese Forces, the focused questions examined assumptions, decisions behind the plan, and analyzed common themes. President Nixon inherited the conflict and tied the timeline to political risk forming the administrations criteria to view the success or failure of the efforts to achieve the policy aim. The Vietnamization policy defined success as an interval of stability between the United States withdrawal to provide the South Vietnamese people a right to determine their future without outside interference. Defeat of the enemy was never an achievable goal for General Abrams and MACV because of the rapid rate of troop withdrawal.⁶⁹

The change to MACV's mission was a huge shift in US strategic objectives in Vietnam. Time limited MACV in its ability to achieve its goals and ensure the survival of an independent

⁶⁷ MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 474.

⁶⁸ Lung, *Indochina Monographs*, 133.

⁶⁹ Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 194.

and secure South Vietnam. The level of resources committed to South Vietnam had reached its peak in 1968 and declined rapidly due to antiwar sentiment after the Tet Offensive. The challenge of building a capable military in South Vietnam was formidable, as General Abrams predecessor had not found much success earlier in the conflict when resourced with over five hundred thousand US troops.⁷⁰

Conclusion

By January 23, 1973, the Nixon administration accomplished its political objectives in an agreement signed by North Vietnam, the Viet Cong, the Government of South Vietnam, and US officials. Weeks later in the act of confirmation by representatives of eleven countries the cease-fire stipulated adherence to protocols and respect for the South Vietnamese people's fundamental national rights and right to self-determination. All signatory powers of the Paris Peace Accord agreed to enforcement of the treaty, officially ending the American involvement in the Vietnam the war. Vietnamization signaled a beginning of US policy in third world conflicts of serving as trainers and suppliers to indigenous forces instead of direct involvement.⁷¹

The central research question to answer from this study was whether General Abrams and MACV planners used the tenets of operational art to meet the strategic objectives of the Nixon Administration. The research revealed that MACV, using principles of operational art, developed an acceptable campaign through discourse with the Nixon Administration. A central planning assumption of MACV from the beginning was that US advisors would remain after operations ended to assist the South Vietnam Military. The administration had to weigh political risk against criteria for success and acceptance by the American People to achieve their policy aims. Viewed

⁷⁰ MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 121-130.

⁷¹ Bruce Herschensohn, *An American Amnesia* (New York: Beaufort Books, 2010), 5-7; Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 251.

through the lens of the administration, Vietnamization was successful in meeting the goal of ending American involvement in the Vietnam War. The demand for total withdrawal of US forces while allowing NVA troops to remain within the territory of South Vietnam emerged as part of the peace accord agreement. This submission to domestic political pressure shaped the conditions of the cease-fire ensuring problems of enforcement of the terms of the Paris Peace Accords.⁷²

The empirical evidence within the two case studies revealed that during times of crisis such as the battle of Lam Son 719 and the Easter offensive, RVNAF units were dependent on assistance by US advisors to be productive and successful on the battlefield. US advisor support to coordinate air and naval gunfire, and mentorship of South Vietnam leaders during intense combat enabled the RVNAF to defend their sovereign territory and defeat communist forces. With the departure of US advisors and logistical support following the Paris Peace Accords, it was only a matter of time before the North supported by their surrogate financiers from both China and the Soviet Union forced the capitulation of the RVNAF and surrender of South Vietnam.⁷³

The lessons from Vietnamization can be examined for relevance as the United States continues efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States again is faced with trying to enable allied partner governments whose legitimacy is in question. Both Iraq and Afghanistan rely on US advisors to improve the effectiveness of indigenous forces in combat by providing training, material and logistical assistance, and coordination of fire support. The ability of these forces to sustain operations and not collapse without US resources and aid is yet to be determined. As with

⁷² Herschensohn, *An American Amnesia*, 7-17.

⁷³ Sorley, *A Better War*, 351.

Vietnamization, no matter the military effort only the Iraqi and Afghan national governments can make the necessary political, economic, and social changes required for sustained success.

The question of using the military to influence effective governance in South Vietnam warrants further research and study. Although the United States committed massive amounts of resources, South Vietnam could not implement political, social, and economic reform to foster support from the people to fight for survival equal to the determination of North Vietnam. The US approach in developing partner forces in Vietnam without using a Joint combined command construct is another topic for further study. It is impossible to not reflect on the poor performance of RVNAF leaders and to wonder if one single authority commanded all forces how it would affect the outcome. Third and perhaps most important is to study the operational approach in the early years of escalation and to examine if the Vietnamization strategy had been implemented earlier in the conflict would it have influenced the outcome.

The NVA needed two years to rebuild their forces after the cease-fire that provided the interval for South Vietnam that President Nixon had hoped to achieve. The resignation of President Nixon contributed to the lack of congressional support for the South Vietnam government and commitment to honor the conditions of the peace accord. The collapse in 1975 of the country of South Vietnam fueled a narrative that America tired of the struggle, withdrew unilaterally, and acknowledged defeat. Senior military officials in Vietnam realized that despite their best efforts, they lost the war of perceptions. General Abrams briefing the staff after a visit to Washington DC in Mar of 1968 proclaimed that while the enemy failed to win on the battlefield, they won in the United States, as the loss of support from the American People continued to increase. As a result, President Nixon and his incoming administration's policies stood little chance of success as America saw cutting their losses as the only option.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ MACV, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 88.

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