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ACSC Quick-Look

Catalyst for Air & Space Power Research Dialogue



Building Indigenous Security Forces in the Face of an Insurgency: Vietnam

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The Problem. The United States faced a terrible set of problems when it attempted to build up South Vietnam's ability to defend itself. South Vietnam was in turmoil between 1963 and 1966; political factions were more concerned with governmental power and self-preservation than they were with securing the country against communist insurgents. The central government bore more of a resemblance to a warlord's court than it did to a nascent democracy. Leaders within the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) preoccupied themselves more with perks and casualty avoidance than with fighting the enemy. US leaders reacted with disdain and contempt, and became much more directive in the war, not only with their decision to introduce massive numbers of US ground troops in 1965, but also with their decision to act more as ARVN troop commanders they were assisting than as advisors endeavoring to produce effective, independent-thinking officers. Later in the war, however, the two allies achieved some notable successes against the insurgency.

Limited Successes, Serious Failures. Success seemed to grow best from the bottom up. The Marines, for instance, achieved significant successes using Combined Action Platoons. To field such a unit, a few Marines would not only provide training and leadership to a platoon of rural militia, they lived with them in their village. This made it possible for Marines to build bonds of trust with locals, and for them to find out who supported insurgents. They not only "effectively dealt with intimidation" by the Viet Cong, by patrolling at night they also threatened the insurgents' most precious sanctuary—rural areas under the cover of darkness. Indeed, local militias, in concert with larger units of the ARVN and the US, were able to gain back more and more of the populated areas of Vietnam from the communists. Ironically, these various forms of local militia—Regional Forces, Provincial Forces, and Combined Action Platoons—did not have to attain enough fighting skill in order to destroy comparable adversaries. They only had to gain enough fighting power to force the insurgents to coalesce into larger, less-fluid formations which regular troops could then kill before they scattered. Indeed, these types of armed forces killed more insurgents than did full-time soldiers. There were, however, too many militia-paramilitary organizations.

Police forces are a critical element in combating insurgents. "Only by eliminating the roots of the insurgency can local security forces truly protect the people from a resurgence of enemy activity from within." Since police can "swim among the people" like insurgents do, to paraphrase one of Mao Tse-tung's dicta, police are able to identify the insurgents who are running the guerrilla political-recruiting apparatus—the taproot of insurgent movements. Indigenous police are better weapons against guerrilla cells than are foreign professional soldiers. Citizens are more inclined to help the police when they know that they will be protected from insurgents' reprisals. Vietnam provides several lessons for the establishment of an effective police force:

- To help prevent corruption, the government has to pay its police well.
- The regular army must be sure that it does not take all of the best men and women for itself; it must keep its hands off of large numbers of first-rate recruits so that the police can enlist them.
- The government must also ensure that the police receive good materiel and not cast-offs.
- The army and the police have to work together—the army has to protect the police from squad and platoon-sized guerrilla attacks, since police do not normally operate in units large enough to fend off assaults of that size.
- Police recruiting should be local; a policeman who knows and is known by his community has the connections necessary to counter the recruitment of and hiding of insurgents.

Overall, the police in Vietnam lacked good leadership, solid recruits, adequate pay, and suffered from corruption. We must note that historical research on police forces in Vietnam is exceedingly thin.

In establishing the various armed forces of South Vietnam, the US attempted to transfer a machine-based, firepower-intensive Western infrastructure to a third-world country. The Americans felt compelled to do so because South Vietnam faced a grave threat of conventional invasion by the North Vietnamese Army, one which became real when the NVA invaded in the spring of 1972. By endeavoring to field a mechanized conventional army that could function independently, however, the Americans were going to have to first establish the skill set within South Vietnamese society that would be able to support such things as avionics repair, electronic intelligence, and a logistical base able to provide the endless amounts of supplies modern mechanized armies require. The South Vietnamese were unable to make this transition; they should not be blamed for not accomplishing something which requires decades of time. What resulted early on was an unfortunate codependency on technology and firepower. In fact, in the ARVN and the American ground forces, it often seemed as if weaponry and firepower substituted for the “intangibles of leadership, will, and purpose.” Moreover, the Americans assumed that ARVN divisions could be moved around as a national army, but when units were transferred to places far from the homes of the soldiers, they deserted in large numbers to be near their families. Clearly, one has to consider the concept of national identity—be it nationhood, nationalism, tribe, religion, or region—when fielding an army. Even with these impediments, some ARVN units were excellent by the early 1970s. One American general rated the 1st ARVN Division as good as any US Army division.

Clearly several elements have to exist before one can field effective security forces, be they local police or professional national army soldiers.

- The soldiers have to support the national government.
- They have to have some certainty that their families are secure.
- They must trust their leaders, who have to avoid corruption in favor of merit and duty. Sensible leadership is one of the keys to establishing security forces under fire. President Diem, for instance, considered it a failure if, during a successful battle, a single ARVN officer was killed.
- Because a counterinsurgency is such an inherently local and small unit effort, leadership and integrity have to be prominent at all levels.
- Finally, time is indispensable. It took several years, not months, in Vietnam to see security efforts bear fruit. Indeed, the North Vietnamese conventional invasion of South Vietnam may be the best testament to the success of the war against the Viet Cong

By 1971-1972, the South Vietnamese had the upper hand against the guerrillas; North Vietnam had to resort to conventional warfare if it hoped to finally conquer South Vietnam.

For Further Reading:

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