

FORECASTING VIETNAM'S FUTURE:  
THE NEXT STAGE IN THE WAR

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How will the Vietnam war end -- or not end? Neither side seems willing to quit. Five years ago, Hanoi was telling its people to prepare for a long war. North Vietnam's leaders promised then to fight fifteen, twenty years or longer. It was no idle boast, but rather an accurate measure of their tenacity. These were the veterans of thirty and forty years of struggle, first against the French and later the Americans. We Americans think in years; they think in decades.

South Vietnam's leaders also seem resigned to a generation of war. As things now stand, with continued American support they can fight on indefinitely and probably inconclusively. They worry about that support being suddenly withdrawn. Few Vietnamese on either side of the conflict entirely trust the commitments of their backers. One suspects that they all have their own contingency plans. When asked what he thought the outcome of the war would be, General Cao Van Vien, the chief of South Vietnam's Joint General Staff and a veteran of some thirty years of fighting himself, replied simply, "We will survive." Which leaves a lot of room for maneuver. Which is, perhaps, what General Vien wished to imply.

It is easier to see how the fighting will continue than it is to see how or when it will stop. Let me describe five possible endings or, more accurately, nonendings to the war in Vietnam: *South Korea* -- the closest to what would be regarded as a favorable outcome by the present

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South Vietnamese government and possibly by us; *Stalemate* -- a costly prolongation of the present situation; *Stand-Off* -- up to battalion-size skirmishes and local accommodations following a declared ceasefire; *Six Kingdoms* -- the division of South Vietnam into separate territorial strongholds; and *Shanghai* -- the collapse and disintegration of the South Vietnamese army and government.

None of these five scenarios is really an outcome. War and postwar in Vietnam are not likely to be sharply defined, either in time or in territory. They are open-ended scenarios. They are new stages in the struggle rather than its termination. All of them postulate some form of continued fighting. All allow considerable room for maneuver.

The victory scenarios of both sides have been deliberately omitted from the list. I imagine the victory scenario of Hanoi and the National Liberation Front to look something like a combination of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and Petrograd in 1917: a battlefield triumph, a general uprising in the South, a flourish of red banners in Saigon, the creation of a Soviet, a victory parade like the one in Hanoi eighteen years ago. I am not sure what ours looks like. I had once suspected that the sole purpose for ordering the battleship New Jersey to Indochina waters was to provide a suitable place for receiving Vo Nguyen Giap's surrender following which all of our prisoners would be returned and we would begin a huge postwar reconstruction program throughout Indochina. Materially, North Vietnam would be better off capitulating. But the New Jersey came home. So did most of our troops, and our victory scenario got Vietnamized along with the rest of the war. I am not sure what that scenario looks like, but no matter. A clearcut victory by either side seems unobtainable now, leaving us with some murkier in-betweens, ranging from something less satisfying to us than the way things turned out in South Korea, to something less satisfying to them than what the Chinese Communists attained in 1949.

#### SOUTH KOREA

The South Vietnamese armed forces continue to hold their own militarily, imposing a high cost on the North Vietnamese as the latter continue their offensive. In order not to exhaust itself in a costly

conventional war, North Vietnam drastically scales down its fighting and reverts to a lower level of fighting, providing weapons and a smaller number of recruits for the Viet Cong. Without the North Vietnamese military muscle, the National Liberation Front steadily declines as a national political force. The government of South Vietnam maintains reasonable control over most of the populated portions of the country. President Thieu finishes his second term, having silenced his critics in Saigon and having steadily increased his hold over the countryside. After attempts to have the South Vietnamese constitution altered to enable him to seek a third term, he is forced to step down. Another South Vietnamese general succeeds him. As collapse becomes more remote, foreign investors show up and the South Vietnamese economy slowly improves.

The amount of U.S. air support required decreases with North Vietnam's change in fighting style. U.S. military aid continues at a high level (\$2.5 billion for several years, gradually declining to something around \$1 billion). Economic aid continues at a high level, then it, too, gradually declines.

South Vietnam looks like it might become another South Korea, but the South Korean model does not fit entirely. North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units remain within South Vietnamese territory or poised on its borders. The National Liberation Front remains strong in its traditional satrapies. Eastern Laos and Northeastern Cambodia are firmly in North Vietnamese hands. The environment of insecurity and problems caused by maintaining a huge army forestall the economic takeoff that South Korea achieved in the 1960s.

The *South Korea* scenario is dependent on two developments. First, North Vietnam must be willing to abandon its current offensive and at least postpone the achievement of its objectives in the South. There is, as of the present, no evidence to suggest that is what will happen. Second, the United States must be willing to continue providing South Vietnam with a substantial amount of military aid to maintain its huge armed forces and economic aid to sustain its economy. This appears contrary to recent developments, particularly in Congress, which suggests that the United States may become increasingly unwilling to provide anywhere near the amount of resources we have in the past.

STALEMATE

The North Vietnamese halt their current offensive, perhaps in return for a bombing halt, but hold on to their forward positions in Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam. Periodically, two or three years apart, they launch major offensives. In between these, they continue to support the Viet Cong with arms and recruits. The Viet Cong survive, and expand or contract according to North Vietnamese inputs. A large and expensive South Vietnamese armed force holds most of the populated portions of the country, but at night there is widespread insecurity.

U.S. military involvement continues at a high level. South Vietnam clearly depends on it. It is apparent that with less U.S. support, South Vietnam's armed forces will hold less. A sizable U.S. Military Assistance Group of 20,000-25,000 men remains in the country. The United States continues to bomb infiltration routes in Laos and periodically bombs North Vietnamese troop concentrations near the demilitarized zone. To reduce obvious South Vietnamese dependence on U.S. air support, the United States begins to supply the South Vietnamese with additional aircraft, including Phantom jets and gunships. Some of these periodically strike targets in the North. Vietnamization of air support and the reduction of U.S. air involvement takes two to three years.

Owing to the prevailing atmosphere of insecurity in the countryside and the prospect of periodic North Vietnamese offensives which scare off investors, the South Vietnamese economy does not develop. A high level of U.S. economic support is necessary. President Thieu remains in power until 1975. He is succeeded by General Kiem or some other soldier whose political base remains dependent on the army.

Like the previous scenario, *Stalemate* is dependent on a continuing high level of U.S. military and economic support. Unlike the previous scenario, it requires no abandonment or postponements by North Vietnam other than those necessary to rebuild its forces for another offensive, making *Stalemate* slightly more probably than *South Korea*.

STANDOFF

Both of the major participants in the conflict are unable or unwilling to make the investment necessary to continue the war on a national scale. North Vietnam is no longer willing to postpone development indefinitely, suffer American bombing, and send thousands of men south each year in order to provide the National Liberation Front with favorable conditions for supplanting the government. After a sharp but unpublicized debate in the Politburo, Hanoi decides, without abandoning its objective, to amortize the war and pay only enough interest to guarantee NLF dominance in its traditional strongholds. The United States, anxious to reduce its own investment, agrees to halt its bombing of North Vietnam, North Vietnam agrees to return all U.S. prisoners and reduce infiltration, there is a ceasefire (though not necessarily in that order).

The ceasefire leaves the North Vietnamese army in control of some terrain, perhaps northern Quang Tri Province. Viet Cong domination of major strongholds and scattered villages is tacitly recognized although not accepted by either side as permanent. Some areas are solidly under Saigon's control. Local accommodations allowing free passage from one area to another are widespread. Military skirmishes up to battalion size are also common. They do not interrupt the nationwide ceasefire since no one desires to resume the war on a national scale.

*Standoff* is intriguing in that it offers an opening for an eventual political solution: Political competition between the present government and the National Liberation Front begins locally rather than nationally through any attempt at forming a coalition government in Saigon. Local accommodations by military commanders are followed by local cooperation on small matters of mutual interest -- water distribution, agreement on market sites, the reopening of some roads. Known NLF men show up in government-held areas. They are not bothered. The NLF endorses some candidates in future assembly elections or even runs its own candidates in a few areas.

At some future date, provincial elections are held, a few at a time. It is recognized in advance that NLF candidates will win sometimes,

but the survival of the national government is not jeopardized and accommodations are made. Nobody is willing to renew the war. Ultimately, national elections are held. Candidates compete to put together a coalition of groups, the NLF among them, as big city politicians in the United States traditionally have dealt with different ethnic and interest groups.

#### SIX KINGDOMS

That no one participant in the war can impose its control over its opponents becomes apparent territorially. "Six Kingdoms" is the "warlordization" of South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese army occupies the northern two provinces. Content for the time being with Hue, Hanoi does not want to spread its army too thin or occupy territory that will prove difficult to pacify. The Viet Cong dominate several provinces -- Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Tay Ninh, Hau Nghia, and perhaps several other traditional strongholds. The South Vietnamese government remains in tenuous control of the rest of the country, but regional commanders take advantage of Saigon's weakness and their own local strength to exercise virtually autonomous control in their own areas. Regionally-based ethnic groups, the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai, do the same. The South Vietnamese government becomes an alliance of anti-Viet Cong, anti-Hanoi generals holding enclaves along the coast, around Saigon and the Delta, and in Cambodia. Collectively, the alliance is weak but its individual members are tenacious. Sporadic warfare continues, with limited, perhaps covert U.S. support for the anti-Communist commanders.

The situation is somewhat similar to that in Laos today. The Royal Laotian Government holds Vientiane and enclaves around the river towns along the Mekong. The CIA-backed Meo army of General Vang Pao operates autonomously. Pathet Lao units dominate certain areas. North Vietnam has virtually annexed some portions of the country.



SHANGHAI

Any number of events could initiate the *Shanghai* scenario: a major military victory by the North Vietnamese such as the capture of Hue or Danang, a disastrous military defeat suffered by ARVN, or a major economic and political crisis in Saigon that paralyzes the national government. Conceivably, it could be caused by an immediate cut-off of all U.S. support for South Vietnam.

A process of disintegration, greater than but similar to the collapse of the ARVN 3rd Division in Quang Tri, spreads throughout the South Vietnamese army producing a political crisis in Saigon. U.S. assistance, if not the catalyst of collapse, is suspended as the situation appears to become hopeless. The Viet Cong take advantage of the chaos to stage a general uprising in Saigon. It would not necessarily be a general uprising, but it would appear to be one. Some senior South Vietnamese military and political leaders with little hope of surviving under the new regime flee the country. Others, particularly junior officers, start to defect to save their own skins. Much of the army rank and file starts to desert and entire units disappear. Organized military resistance ends after a few weeks, but fighting continues. The residual military contest turns into guerrilla warfare.

The provisional revolutionary government in Saigon is unable to impose its rule. The North Vietnamese army is stretched thin by occupying the northern provinces. Large groups remain hostile to the Communists and the North Vietnamese. The dissidents will not lack rifles. Due to the previous efforts of both sides to arm South Vietnam's population, millions of weapons have already been distributed. Many more are left behind by deserters. Arms are in abundance.

Realizing that its army cannot occupy the entire country, North Vietnam tries to form new coalitions that are broad enough to include the old government's bureaucracy, the officers corps of the South Vietnamese army, and the Viet Cong. North Vietnam may even try to save South Vietnam's army from total collapse. But the guerrilla war continues anyway, fueled by hostility to the new government and opposition to North Vietnam's occupation. The result is an NLF-dominated but

not totally controlled central government with only tenuous control throughout the countryside, facing a protracted guerrilla war and a pacification problem.

#### Dramatic Political Changes

These scenarios can follow one another in succession. *Stalemate* could collapse into *Shanghai*, or *Stalemate* could in time gradually become *South Korea*. It is also possible that elements of two of the scenarios could unfold concurrently. The scenarios do not presuppose any sudden internal changes in the existing Vietnamese governments, except *Shanghai* in which the present South Vietnamese government is replaced by an NLF-dominated one. Although they are unpredictable -- who foresaw the overthrow of Sihanouk? -- dramatic political changes in either North Vietnam or South Vietnam cannot be ruled out.

Propelled by an indication that the United States might be inclined to dump Thieu or the prospect of collapse under South Vietnam's present leadership, young army officers (the post '54 generation) might move to take power themselves. Many of the young officers have been fighting for a decade. They also have been running the country at district and province levels, and they are unlikely to willingly abandon their own positions and prospects of leadership. They would face an uncertain future under a Communist-dominated government, and having been born or raised in South Vietnam, they oppose Hanoi's claims to rule all of Vietnam. Anti-NLF, anti-Hanoi, in a way they are also anti-American. They put up with American advice because they need American material support, but privately they tend to resent the tutelage of American advisors whose method of warfare, they believe, has not worked in South Vietnam. They also resent their own senior commanders who have been too openly subservient to foreigners. *Saigon Parisiens* was the expression used by many of them to imply that South Vietnam's generals would still be NCOs in the French army if the French army had not departed. The Vietnamese word for lackey is also heard in the same context. They talk of purifying the army by ridding it of its incompetent and corrupt elements, and of fighting the war differently. Reflecting their long contest with

the Viet Cong, they talk of building a political movement with a new army in the vanguard. But what they would really do once having seized power -- go on fighting, attempt to deal with NLF members directly, or conspire to overthrow each other -- is not clear.

Dramatic political changes in Hanoi are harder to imagine. North Vietnam has been the most stable of all Communist countries. The same men have ruled for twenty or thirty years. Disputes between members of the Politburo have always been settled *en famille*. There have been no widespread purges. No cultural revolutions. No fleeing defense ministers. Past stability, however, is owed in large measure to the influence of Ho Chi Minh. Since his death, there has been evidence of greater competition and sharp differences among his successors. There are other potentially destabilizing forces, for one the strain caused by the war, now more costly to North Vietnam than ever. It is extremely difficult for the government to impose the rigid discipline and austerity on its people indefinitely. On the other hand, should it decide to postpone the war, the problem arises of what to do with its army in the South. Bringing it back home as if in defeat could be dangerous.





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