LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT DOCTRINE: WHO NEEDS IT?

by

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The US Army is revising its doctrine for low-intensity conflict . . . or counter-insurgency . . . or stability operations. This facet of operational-level doctrine has had many names. Additionally, a new and more encompassing definition for low-intensity conflict is being created. The Army's last experience in this field was not a happy one, and unless a careful review of past errors and lessons is made, future endeavors are not likely to be any more glorious than the recent unpleasantness in Southeast Asia.

The new definition is apt to include terrorism counteraction, as well as peacekeeping and rescue operations. Low-intensity conflict is therefore rapidly becoming a catchall. Before peripheral activities begin to obscure the essentials, a word on the additions is in order. Published principles and standard procedures for both rescue and peacekeeping operations are probably long overdue for the US Army, but these subjects can hardly be characterized as proper war-fighting doctrine at the operational level. Terrorism counteraction may be considered at the operational level of doctrine, but the terrorist must be placed into perspective. Despite his capability to be a nuisance, to conduct spectacular media events, and to provoke resource-consuming countermeasures, the terrorist has yet to overthrow a government, threaten a vital interest of the United States, create a popular mass-based army, or cause a sizable deployment of the US armed forces. The insurgent, however, is a wholly different matter. Insurgents have toppled governments. For this reason alone, the focus of our future low-intensity conflict doctrine should be centered on methods to defeat the insurgent.

The writers of low-intensity conflict doctrine must answer several vital questions before they set about their task: Should our doctrine be founded on some sort of hypothetical threat or on practical experience? Should the US armed forces fight the insurgent or should US efforts be directed to providing advice and assistance to allies who are fighting insurgents? And if we do not fight the insurgents ourselves, what military measures should we take against those nations that sponsor insurgency?

The proposal here is to look to empirical evidence as opposed to a dimly perceived future threat. The evidence selected is that of the Asian insurgent, not because his methods are directly transferable to other regions of the world, but because he has been the most successful, the one who is more apt to be emulated, and because his methods pose the most difficult obstacles for the counterinsurgent. To write our future doctrine without considering the Asian insurgent is to hope our adversaries will be lesser breeds. The best way to depict such a threat is to look first at the

doctrine of the Asian Marxist insurgent and then examine how he applied that doctrine. By tracing the evolution of our own doctrine it is possible to learn from our own experience. A careful examination of the past leads to rational, experience-based conclusions: our new doctrine should not be based on US forces fighting insurgents unless a US military government exists; we should continue a doctrine based on US assistance and advice to allies beset with the insurgent; and our range of options against insurgency should include mid-intensity, not low-intensity, offensive ground operations against those nations that sponsor insurgency.

ASIAN MARXIST INSURGENCY DOCTRINE

The doctrine of the Asian insurgent is easy to understand and remained relatively unchanged from the 1930s until the 1970s. The prime oracles have been Mao Tse-tung, Truong Chin, and Vo Nguyen Giap. They were successful practitioners of the craft of insurgency and recorded their doctrinal precepts. Although Mao had written earlier tracts, the clearest explanation of his thought came in 1939, after considerable experience against both the Chinese Nationalist and Japanese armies. Truong Chin's concepts were first printed during 1946 and 1947. Giap's best doctrinal work was produced after he defeated the French in the 1950s. The experience of all three included warfare against their own countrymen as well as war against the forces of an industrialized nation. Each of the authors wrote not only for his own followers but for an international audience as well. They all addressed a central theme: how a peasant army could defeat the army of a modern industrialized state. With one exception, their prime tenets were identical.

Mao's *On Protracted War* included the three familiar stages: guerrilla warfare, mobile warfare, and positional warfare. He described mobile warfare as battle using regular forces so as to annihilate the enemy. Mao's concept of positional warfare sought to engage the adversary in a war of attrition. Guerrilla warfare preceded both of these stages and was envisioned to subject the enemy to both attrition and annihilation. Although Mao advocated the creation of mobile, regular forces from local guerrilla units, he said that these guerrillas were to be replaced as they moved on. In Mao's doctrine, guerrilla warfare is a continuous activity—even into the final stages of war. The guerrilla would exist at the start of the conflict and would play an important part at the end.[1]

Truong Chin adopted Mao's three stages but described them in a different way. His concept has been translated as an initial phase of contention or low-level combat followed by an equilibrium stage in which mobile combat is featured on both sides. He saw the final stage as a counteroffensive by the insurgent forces that have by then created regular combat units. Truong Chin's terminology has been translated in other portions of his works using Mao's guerrilla, mobile, and positional phases.[2] He too stated that the need for guerrillas was continuous, and claimed that their prime task was to keep the enemy dispersed, allowing his defeat in detail.[3] Truong Chin largely parroted Mao, but the essential difference is the use of the general uprising, a well-timed, carefully managed insurrection: a peasant coup d'etat. This technique had been briefly successful for the Vietnamese communists in 1945 against the Japanese. Truong Chin attributed the lack of complete success for the 1945 general uprising to a lack of revolutionary fervor in South Vietnam.[4]

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Vo Nguyen Giap described the first two stages of insurgent warfare in the same manner as Mao: the guerrilla and mobile warfare phases. Giap's last stage has been translated as entrenched camp warfare, possibly due to the specific nature of his success at Dien Bien Phu. There seems little point in arguing the difference between Mao and Truong Chin's positional and Giap's entrenched camp phase.[5] Up to this point, the Vietnamese appear to be reading Mao. The difference between Mao and the two Vietnamese is that the Vietnamese have added the concept of a general insurrection to Mao's doctrine. The Vietnamese doctrine writers believed in a comprehensive clandestine organization that would have the capability to overthrow the target government in a single blow. Like Truong Chin, Giap selected the Vietminh uprising in 1945 against the Japanese as his practical example.[6] While the Vietnamese concept of a general uprising can be seen as an important distinction, all three are in agreement on the concept of continuous guerrilla warfare. The Vietnamese leaders stress the essential need for guerrilla troops to be maintained and their activities to continue throughout each phase of the war. In Giap's eyes, a prime value of guerrilla actions is to cause the enemy to defend everywhere, making him vulnerable to defeat in detail.[7]

The end game for the Asian insurgent is to place his adversary in a position where he must not only face regular troops in stand-up battles, but face the guerrilla as well. If one were to define low-intensity conflict as a form of warfare where irregulars fight regular armed forces, then the Asian insurgent's first phase could be described as low-intensity conflict. If one defines mid-intensity conflict as battle between regulars, the last two phases of the Asian insurgent model would be mid-intensity conflict. But it is essential to note that the irregular is still on the battlefield, still contributing. Thus, the last two stages are a combination of both low- *and* mid-intensity conflict. Not only does the counterinsurgent have to defend everywhere, he must fight in two types of conflict.

This early doctrine of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s may be viewed as being applicable only to unique, communist experience against two overextended and vulnerable foes, the Japanese and French. However, Vietnamese devotion to the doctrine extended beyond the 1950s. In 1967, Vo Nguyen Giap, as the North Vietnamese Defense Minister, reaffirmed his faith in the doctrine and perhaps gave the clearest rationale for why it should be retained. He stated that guerrilla warfare in South Vietnam had forced American troops to be employed in pacification tasks, a role that prevented their total concentration against Viet Cong and North Vietnamese main forces. He claimed that continued adherence to the established doctrine would ensure that the large numbers of American, allied, and South Vietnamese forces would be dissipated. They would have to defend everywhere. Giap also stated that following the doctrine would render useless the American mobility advantage. The Americans would be reactive and always one step behind.[8]

The Asian insurgents had thus devised a doctrine of warfare to counter and defeat an industrialized state's advantage in mechanized mobility. The doctrine had also compensated for their opponent's ability to field large numbers of troops. Success for the Asian insurgent was predicated on the ability to protract the war, to coordinate the efforts of local and regular troops and guerrillas, and to offset their enemies' mobility and numerical advantage by maintaining great depth to the battlefield. The enemy must be continuously presented with local guerrilla actions as well as large-unit, stand-up battles. It is for this reason that in the midst of knock-down, drag-out battles against regulars, Americans in Vietnam found themselves referring to "The Other War," the counterguerrilla campaign.

APPLICATION OF ASIAN INSURGENT DOCTRINE

The application of this insurgent doctrine within Indochina can be divided into the various Indochina wars. The First Indochina War, 1946-54, resulted in a victory for the Vietminh over the French and their Vietnamese allies. The Second Indochina War

involved the United States, its allies, and the Republic of Vietnam pitted against the combination of the South Vietnamese Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese army. This second war can be dated from 1960 and logically terminated with the negotiated cease-fire of January 1973. The Second Indochina War began with a northern-supported insurgency in the South, but by the time US combat forces entered, North Vietnamese regulars were being employed in South Vietnam in battalion-sized strengths. US ground forces thus began a conflict in which both guerrilla and main force units were being employed throughout the country. In 1973, at the negotiated close of this second conflict, the same situation prevailed. The Second Indochina War was therefore inconclusive. The Republic of Vietnam still existed; the communists had not won, but they had not lost. Since there was no definite outcome of this war, the applied doctrine of one side or the other cannot clearly be judged as either successful or unsuccessful.

The Third Indochina War, from January 1973 until April 1975, can be analyzed in the light of conclusive results. Like the First Indochina War, it resulted in a communist victory. There is little doubt as to how the Republic of Vietnam fell. Excellent accounts are available from both South Vietnamese and American officials who were involved witnesses of the defeat. We also have the story of the other side. The North Vietnamese general who led the final phase of the campaign has written his account, and we now have the record of Colonel General Tran Van Tra, the military commander of COSVN, the Central Office of South Vietnam. Tra's account is particularly important, since it is highly probable that he was the actual initiator of the plan for the final 55-day campaign that concluded the war. He was probably the most experienced soldier on either side.

A native of the Saigon region, Tran Van Tra began his insurgent career in the general uprising of 1945. Tra was caught and imprisoned by the French, but on gaining his freedom he resumed his efforts, walking all the way to North Vietnam in order to meet Ho Chi Minh. At this 1948 meeting, Tra received a mandate for the "liberation" of South Vietnam. His exact position, authority, and status are unclear for the 1950s, but he claims to have commanded all Viet Cong elements in South Vietnam in 1963 and probably became the theater commander of the B2 Front in 1967. This theater of war contained two-thirds of the Republic of Vietnam's population and most of its industry and food crops. It stretched from Darlac Province in the highlands to the tip of the Cau Mau Peninsula, fully half of South Vietnam. Tra directed Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army (NVA) forces in this region against US, allied, and South Vietnamese forces during most of the Second Indochina War. At the 1973 cease-fire, Tra was appointed by Hanoi's leadership to represent the People's Revolutionary Government delegation in Saigon.[9]

As soon as it became apparent that the Saigon talks would be of little importance in the eventual outcome of the conflict, Tra returned to his command of B2 and began planning for the 1973-74 Dry Season Campaign. Tra's efforts reflected the same objectives as those of his early campaigns: using his main force elements to thrust and parry with Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) divisional units while his guerrilla and local force units expanded their control of population and resource areas. For the B2 Front, this meant using old line divisions, the 7th and 9th, to keep the ARVN 5th, 25th, and 18th divisions occupied and reactive in the Government of Vietnam's (GVN) III Corps area. Tra sent his remaining divisional unit, the 5th, further south into the upper Mekong Delta of the GVN IV Corps area against the ARVN 7th, 9th, and 21st divisions. The "big-unit war" had a number of purposes, but an important one for Tra was to provoke the large ARVN units to stay concentrated. This would prevent their use in rooting out the VC infrastructure and guerrillas with small-unit actions in populated regions. Tra's major objective was to increase his control of the Mekong Delta's resources.[10]

The results of Tra's 1973-74 offensive were rapidly felt by the South Vietnamese and

duly observed by the few Americans left in Saigon. ARVN had claimed victory over Tra's rice control efforts in early 1973, but as the campaign began to develop more fully, their control of the Delta's resources began to slip. The IV Corps area became the most intense area of combat in June 1973, and that year saw the highest incident rate of the entire war.[11] As GVN control of the Delta began to fade, a rise in guerrilla forces was also noticed. One of the most serious effects of Tra's Delta Campaign was that disappearing GVN control diminished Saigon's ability to recruit for its own army. The senior GVN military officer, General Cao Van Vien, noted that South Vietnamese citizens were being enlisted into enemy ranks before they reached an eligible age for service to the Republic of Vietnam. The South Vietnamese army failed to meet its strength level while enemy guerrilla strength was expanding. At the beginning of 1973, overall enemy guerrilla strength in South Vietnam was rated by ARVN at only about 41,000. Of this, 13,000 or about 30 percent were in the Delta. This was the base upon which Tra was building.[12] In order to equip his growing forces, Tra persuaded his superiors in Hanoi to dip into his future supply allocations so that COSVN could receive earlier shipments of weapons.[13]

By the end of 1973, widespread battles against guerrilla and local force elements throughout the Republic of Vietnam began to tell on the South Vietnamese army. In Hau Nghia Province, just north of Saigon, the Rice Harvest Campaign had caused more ARVN casualties than the NVA main force offensive of Easter 1972.[14] Further north, in I Corps, VC units had begun their recovery, interrupting the rice harvest, interdicting roads, and disrupting GVN programs.[15] In mid-1974, the leadership of COSVN had enough confidence in their growing capabilities against deteriorating ARVN strength to sense a final end to the long war. In June, and unknown to Hanoi, COSVN was predicting the possibility of triumph in 1975 or 1976. By September, a plan was available that took into account the lessons learned from the disastrous 1968 Tet Campaign. Tra estimated that forces available to him in the south would not be enough to win rapidly. He believed that with three additional divisions from the north, the balance would be so tipped that a quick victory in 1975 was entirely possible.[16]

When Tra was ordered back to Hanoi in October 1974 for a planning conference, he found that his optimism was not shared by the northern military leadership. The Hanoi conference continued into late January 1975 and was marked by acrimony. Tra's representation was to the Military Commission of the Central Party Committee. His opposition within that body was General Van Tien Dung, a respected northerner who had never been to "Nam Bo," the southern half of South Vietnam.[17] Dung, probably remembering the failed 1968 Tet Campaign, the high casualties suffered during Lam Son 719 fighting in Laos in 1971, and the bloody Easter Offensive of 1972, was evidently not ready to put his faith in Tra's hopes. He instructed Tra to wait until 1976.[18] The northern leadership had not provided COSVN with a proportionate share of manpower resources since 1968. For example, despite the fact that COSVN was responsible for half of the south, Hanoi had apportioned COSVN only 25 percent of the replacements shipped south.[19] Perhaps another factor in Dung's thinking was that the Delta was now increasingly inaccessible. Not only had the Khmer Republic denied ports that had been used in the late 1960s, the Khmer Rouge, Hanoi's supposed allies, were skirmishing with VC and NVA forces.[20] Additionally, Dung considered that Tra's guerrilla pressure in the Delta was not enough to prevent the three ARVN divisions there from reinforcing the three divisions of III Corps for the defense of Saigon.[21] Using any rule of thumb ratio for the attacker, the communists would have to assemble sizable numbers of large divisions just for the battle of Saigon if ARVN's Delta divisions joined the ARVN III Corps divisions.

As the conference wore on, Tra's credibility was bolstered by a victory in the south and evidently by his persistence. Tra was able

to report that by December 1974, 500 of the 3300 GVN outposts had fallen to his forces in the Delta and that for the first time in the long war, an entire GVN province, Phuoc Long, had been conquered.[22] Despite this impressive demonstration of clout in the Delta and success in the lower highlands, Tra finally had to go over the head of the military commission to sell his plan. In December, Tra requested and received an audience with Le Duan of the Central Party Committee to state his case.[23] Tra was convincing. On 9 January 1975, Le Duc Tho announced to the central military commission that 1975 was to be the year for the final offensive.[24] After Tra convinced the northerners that Ban Me Thuot and not Duc Lap should be the opening target, he again headed south to direct his forces in their final campaign.[25]

Although it was unknown to Tra and Hanoi's leadership, one of their worst fears was realized soon after their offensive began at Ban Me Thuot in March. President Thieu decided to cut his losses and consolidate. Thieu outlined a plan to his senior military officer, General Cao Van Vien. The plan was to withdraw from the north and hold about half the country.[26] Both Tra and the northerners had dreaded what they termed the "Gavin Plan," the establishment of a defensible enclave in southern South Vietnam.[27] Unfortunately, Thieu and his military leaders could not execute a withdrawal that saved most of their northern ARVN units. The only significant fighting elements that Thieu managed to save were parts of the Airborne Division, the Marine Division, and the 22d Division. With the advice of General Frederick C. Weyand, sent from Washington by President Ford, President Thieu then established a second enclave. The new defensive perimeter protected Saigon with a line that extended from the Cambodian border through Cu Chi, Bien Hoa, and Xuan Loc to the coast.

President Thieu's decision was predictable. Thieu knew that the strength of the South rested in the Delta and the III Corps area. He had indicated his reluctance to pay any large price in the northern reaches of South Vietnam when he overruled General Abrams' objections and refused to reinforce his forces in Laos during the 1971 Lam Son 719 operation.[28] The fear of the northern Marxist hierarchy regarding a southern enclave was based on the possibility of the eventual commitment of US ground forces if ARVN was able to establish a defensible position. During the Hanoi planning conference, Pham Van Dong had said that possibly only US air and naval action could be expected during the final offensive, but that would not be powerful enough to deter success.[29] After the first successful blow at Ban Me Thuot, the communists imagined that they faced a formidable problem. It would be some time before the armor columns of the northerners could reach the south. Thieu could not be allowed to consolidate all of his available forces in a solid defense perimeter north of Saigon. If Thieu could portray a valiant defense and bog down the communist attack, it was entirely possible that the new American President would eventually honor President Nixon's promise and assist in the defense.

Dung, Tra's opponent in the planning process, had been appointed to lead the northern forces in the highlands. Despite his initial success, he faced serious problems. Even if he were successful in defeating or displacing the South Vietnamese forces in the II Corps area, he was not assured of being able to secure his ever-lengthening line of communications as he plunged southward. Unless his rear could be secured for him, his forces would rapidly be absorbed in a version of Napoleon's 1812 Russian Campaign. Napoleon had experienced "strategic consumption," the need to establish garrisons along the route of march. Dung's problems became even greater when consideration was given to his need for supplies. As his lines of communication lengthened, the more he needed to transport, the greater his need for logistical units, and the greater his requirements for rear security garrisons. Both of these able commanders, Tra and Dung, thus had to contend with classic military problems that have always had the potential of sapping an operational-level offensive of its power. There is no doubt as to the competence,

daring, and determination of the communist Indochinese military forces in the 1960s and 1970s, but they were not immune to the cruel realities and fundamental requirements of war.

In less than 60 days, Dung and Tra had triumphed. They had overcome the toughest of age-old military problems in what superficially appeared to be a rapid blitzkreig offensive that had been conducted with apparent ease. How had they solved their problems? First, consider Dung's difficulties. His logistical problem had been largely reduced with Tra's planning and aid. Several months before Dung had crossed the South Vietnamese border, Tra had ordered his guerrilla and local force elements to begin prestocking clandestine forward depots for the impending battle of Saigon. It was a massive task involving the movement and hiding of some 33,000 tons of food, fuel, ammunition, and other supplies.[30] Dung's second problem, securing his rear, was also substantially reduced by guerrilla and local force elements in the first and second corps regions of the northern half of South Vietnam. Their task was a crucial one. There is no indication that significant numbers of the hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese Regional and Popular Force troops in this area withdrew with the retreating ARVN main force units. Thus, Dung would have a sizable and potentially dangerous enemy in his rear. However, communist guerrilla and local forces not only countered this threat but, in fact, seized a number of important objectives such as Qui Nhon and the Phuoc Ly and Phuoc Hai peninsulas. These forces also assisted the northern main force invaders in securing Hue and Da Nang. As guerrilla and local force elements were left in the wake of southbound North Vietnamese divisions, they provided invaluable services to Dung in repairing roads and organizing for the protection of his rear.[31]

Perhaps the greatest service that the communist forces in the south performed for the northern invasion was accomplished in the Delta. Tra had previously sent a main force division to that region in order to contest the three Delta ARVN divisions. There were a number of regimental-sized main force communist units in the Delta. Additionally, the Delta had the largest numbers of regional and local communist guerrilla troops of the four corps regions. No one knows the percentage of northerners in these Delta forces. In 1972, General Cao Van Vien estimated that northern troops made up 60 to 80 percent of the communist local units throughout the country.[32] It is highly probable that a far higher percentage of the Delta's local units were of southern origin. With access through Cambodia increasingly contested and the decrease in the numbers of northern replacements going into the Delta, the southerners probably predominated by 1975.

When the victorious Dung arrived to take command of the Saigon Campaign in April, he reported on the rapid growth of guerrilla units that would be supporting his forces.[33] The performance of these forces was to be vital to the success of the last phase of the overall campaign. If the three ARVN divisions in the Delta could have reinforced the defensive perimeter being established by the three divisions above Saigon, the invasion might have been brought to a halt. However, Thieu's three Delta division commanders rapidly found themselves in a major contest for control of their region. All during the months of March and April, fighting raged in the Delta and was so intense that Thieu had to reinforce the area even in the face of a northern armor assault plunging southward toward Saigon. Initially, in March, a brigade of marines was ordered south of Saigon to fight enemy guerrilla and local forces.[34] By April, the only ARVN division to escape from the north relatively intact, the 22d Division, was also deployed south of Saigon and not in the line of defense that was being established north of the capital. Communist guerrilla and local forces in the south had performed well, precisely as Tra had planned.[35]

Not only did the communist guerrilla and local forces greatly assist in seizing many objectives to assist the northern invaders, they had secured the main force rear, prestocked supplies for the North Vietnamese

armor columns, kept lines of communications operable, and prevented the establishment of a viable South Vietnamese defense of III Corps and IV Corps regions. In the end, ARVN had to defend everywhere, fulfilling the doctrine of Mao, Truong Chin, and Giap.

But what of the general uprising, the facet of Vietnamese insurgent doctrine that differed from Mao? When the final campaign finally unfurled, it appeared that the northern victory was not accompanied by the same phenomenon that had occurred in 1945 and 1968. According to Tra, the general uprising was ordered and executed, but in a very special fashion. Having been the theater commander of B2 during the Tet attack of 1968, Tra believed that his severe losses and failure were due to the inability of his guerrilla and local force elements independently to attack and hold ground against enemy regular forces. He had based his plan of 1975 on the lessons of the Tet Offensive and understood well the protests of guerrilla and local force representatives who conferred with him prior to the 1975 offensive. Tra's ultimate decision was to refuse to set a specific date and time for the general uprising until the very last moment, when main force elements were deep in the south, close to the ARVN combat units. During the extended planning session in Hanoi, Dung had been against a general uprising. The Vietnamese communist military leadership was therefore badly divided over Truong Chin's doctrinal dictum of the general uprising.[36]

The communist political leadership, however, had little doubt of the need to follow Truong Chin's doctrine. On 31 March 1975, as Dung was moving south, he received a message from the Political Bureau which stated that in the forthcoming month, the time would be ripe for a general uprising. Shortly after Dung arrived at Loc Ninh and took command of all military forces for the Saigon Campaign, he received yet another Political Bureau message. This one stated that a general uprising was to be executed. If that were not enough, Hanoi dispatched a political overseer in the form of Le Duc Tho to Loc Ninh. Among the messages and guidance he brought, one had to do with the power of the underground in Saigon and the need to use it during the campaign.[37] Hanoi was determined to offer the southern infrastructure, guerrillas, and local forces a stake in the victory. Their support would be needed later in the control of the south.

Tra had been made a deputy to Dung for the Saigon Campaign, and in the end his views seemed to prevail. Tra's plan was to use the general uprising not to attack ARVN regulars, but to seize vital facilities in densely populated areas, to prevent sabotage and destruction by withdrawing or trapped South Vietnamese forces, and to make the transfer of power as trouble-free as possible. Although the general uprising would affect every area of contested control, it was primarily aimed at Saigon, a city that was jammed with over three million people, many of whom were armed but dispirited. Dung and Tra obeyed their orders from Hanoi but waited until the last minute, 29 April, to call for the general uprising. They coordinated it with the actual attack of Saigon's crumbling defenses by main force elements. It is quite possible that there would have been no need for the general uprising, since any sort of GVN discipline or organized resistance was rapidly vanishing. However, Dung's troops were often greeted in Saigon by working public services, utilities, and facilities that had already been taken over by an in-place communist infrastructure, a move that was greatly aided by the evacuation of much of Saigon's leadership.[38] The general uprising was an anticlimax and was never designed to duplicate the disaster of 1968, but it was nevertheless executed. Dung and Tra had faithfully followed the prime tenets of their established doctrine.

Beginning in the 1930s, Asian insurgent leaders had developed a highly successful doctrine of warfare. The answer to Mao, Truong Chin, and Giap even at this date is not to be found in "minor warfare," "counterguerrilla operations," "operations against irregulars," "stability operations," or even "internal defense and development." The Asian leaders never intended to win by using only guerrillas, irregulars, or the

creation of internal instability. At the heart of their doctrine lay a far greater, more encompassing concept. From its inception, it entailed the fielding, employment, and triumph of a regular armed force supported by guerrilla and local forces. Their adversaries may have had to begin the conflict against the irregular, but they would finish it in stand-up battles against regulars at the same time they were fending off the guerrilla.

Looking back at the Third Indochina War and the actions of Tran Van Tra, it is clear that he knew he could not win with guerrilla and local forces alone, hence his request for three fresh divisions to augment his own main force units for the final campaign. It is also unlikely that North Vietnamese regulars could have defeated the South Vietnamese without the support and preparation provided by guerrilla and local force units in the south. Without these elements, they would have faced many more ARVN divisions to counter the northern armor columns. NVA logistical problems would have multiplied, and large numbers of armed GVN forces would have been unchecked in the northerners' rear. It is highly probable that the Vietnamese communists never even considered a campaign that was to be wholly conducted by guerrillas or one that was to be conducted solely by regulars. Their doctrine was clear—both were to be used, and used in concert.

US LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT DOCTRINE

The US doctrine to counter the insurgent predates the Asian insurgent doctrine but has a more checkered career. In the early years of this century, the US Army regarded guerrilla warfare as a somewhat trivial matter which posed certain legal questions. In 1905, the Army Field Service Regulations stipulated that before imposing the death penalty on a captured guerrilla, the commander should convene a board of three officers, but if that was not possible, one would do.[39] Authority for summary execution vanished with Senate ratification of the Hague Conventions of 1907, and by 1911 doctrine for what was termed "minor warfare" appeared. "Irregulars" were pictured as a battlefield irritant, because "they assemble, roam about and disperse at will." The specified remedy was aggressive small-unit activity.[40] It is not surprising that Army officers of this era would treat guerrilla warfare in such a cavalier fashion. Many field grade officers had a successful background in both the Indian Wars and the Philippine Insurrection. It was a military activity that the US Army excelled in, one that would only be lightly touched upon as a lesser, included problem of conventional warfare.

While Army doctrine dealing with guerrilla warfare all during the first half of the century was superficial and usually covered in four to five pages, the Marine Corps took a more thoughtful, detailed approach to the subject in 1940. In the USMC *Small Wars Manual* of that year, Corps writers who were obviously experienced devoted over 380 pages to methods designed to defeat the guerrilla.[41] The Marine authors drew attention to the fact that the time-honored Clausewitzian dictum of destruction of the enemy armed force often would not be the prime objective. They said that a more likely mission would be to establish satisfactory conditions for negotiations or the achievement of a stable government. They also remarked on the utility of employing native troops.[42] Although this appears to represent excellent doctrine for a US intervention and subsequent counterguerrilla operations, it was not predicated on answering Mao's concept, and, more important, its basis rested on substantial US control of the political processes of the country undergoing insurgency, the host nation.

Army doctrine in 1941, 1944, and 1949 took little note of the more substantial Marine doctrine of 1940. The Army afforded the other side of the coin, offensive guerrilla warfare, equal space with counterguerrilla warfare. The writers went so far as to drop the pejorative term "guerrilla" in favor of the word "partisan." Army counterguerrilla doctrine in this era remained at less than one percent of the Field Service Regulations.[43]

The first substantial body of counterguerrilla doctrine produced by the Army was published in draft by the Infantry School one month prior to the invasion of South Korea by the North Korean army. Based on a study of Soviet and Allied World War II experience, the draft matched the earlier USMC effort of a decade before in detail and analysis. The doctrine specified three prime objectives in the defeat of the guerrilla: isolation from the civil populace, denial of external support, and destruction of the guerrilla movement. The manual did not take Mao or Truong Chin's concepts into account, assumed the existence of a US military government in the conflict area, was predicated on US forces executing the operations, and appeared to be pointed at a European scenario. The draft drew attention to the probable utility of helicopters but treated the use of indigenous troops lightly. It was published with little change in February 1951.[44]

A sudden, high-level focus on counterguerrilla doctrine came with the Kennedy Administration in 1961. As one of his first actions, the President expressed his displeasure over the apparent lack of emphasis by the armed forces on the subject.[45] As a result, Army doctrine highlighted counterguerrilla operations by expanding its treatment in the keystone operational manual, *FM 100-5*. Whereas unconventional warfare usually had occupied about one or two percent of the manual before the expressed presidential interest, operations against irregulars, guerrilla warfare, and "situations short of war" absorbed about 20 percent of the revised edition. However, there was little substantive change in concept. Basic counterguerrilla doctrine in the early 1960s envisioned US troops carrying the burden of fighting guerrillas, albeit with increased reliance on host-country troops. The doctrine writers also added to the three tenets of isolation, blocking external support, and destruction; they additionally stressed the need for intelligence at the inception of operations and the provision of economic assistance to the host state in order to undercut the popular appeal of the guerrilla. The possibility of external support for the guerrilla was discussed, but the writers evidently believed that measures such as internal border control would suffice to stymie such activity. In sum, the Kennedy "counterinsurgency era" did not produce a revolution in Army doctrine.[46]

In 1967, in the midst of the Vietnam War, a noticeable and substantive change began to occur in Army counterinsurgency doctrine. In 1964, the doctrine writers had characterized the Army's role in counterinsurgency as "the major military role." Three years later and after considerable practical experience in Southeast Asia, this was changed to read "a major role." Increasing emphasis was placed on indigenous troops fighting the guerrilla. Texts for this form of warfare began to read like a US government directory as the doctrine writers spelled out what such organizations as the Agency for International Development, the Department of State, and others were supposed to do in a counterinsurgency war. Army writers continued in this vein, reversing the role for US ground forces as host-nation troops were pictured as conducting the actual fight against the guerrilla. The recommended counterinsurgent role for the US Army was increasingly envisioned as advisory in nature.[47]

One of the first acts of the 1969 Nixon Administration was to announce the "Guam Doctrine" or "Nixon Doctrine," stating that the host government bore the primary responsibility for providing manpower for its own defense during an insurgency. This policy was clearly identified, with the President's name affixed, in an Army manual in 1972. The book went on to state that US military involvement would be so minimized as to "remain in the background." While previous manuals had understandably had more to say about the Army's role and functions, the 1972 and successor 1974 manuals provided more coverage of the roles and functions of other US government agencies.[48]

If the Nixon Administration had inherited a satisfactory situation in Vietnam, it would have had no need to proclaim the

Guam Doctrine. There would also have been no need for the changes in Army doctrine had the initial body of literature proved successful. The Army entered the counterinsurgency era with flawed doctrine and changed it during the course of the Vietnam War. The prime error was that previous counterguerrilla warfare doctrine was based on an underlying assumption that the United States would have substantial control of the governmental processes of the host nation. Growing doctrinal references during the war to the roles and functions of other US governmental agencies in counterinsurgency were little more than a hope that these agencies would correct the ills of the host government, garner the trust of the people, and undercut the appeal of the guerrilla. The simple fact was that the United States harbored no ambitions to revive colonialism and would not resort to a US military government. Such an act probably would have proved to be counterproductive, creating more guerrillas than were killed or won over. Counterguerrilla warfare is highly political in nature. The ability to win is based on both military and political actions of the beleaguered host government. The United States was not willing to provide a surrogate government for the Republic of Vietnam, nor would it have been wise to do so. And, at this date, the United States is still unlikely to do so in a Third World state. The Guam Doctrine merely stated a fundamental American policy, one that already had been recognized, even if belatedly, by Army doctrine.

A PERSPECTIVE ON LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT DOCTRINE

Asian insurgent doctrine emerged from a now-distant era. Except in the Soviet bloc, colonialism is no longer operative, and it is quite possible that the West will never again see itself pitted against the type of forces it faced in the 1950s and 1960s. Certainly, the North Vietnamese did not use this doctrine in Laos or against Pol Pot's Kampuchea. However, success is often copied. If Asian insurgent doctrine appears again, it would be an error to label the American counterdoctrine as "low-intensity conflict." The Asian insurgent or one who faithfully duplicates his methods fully intends to create a battlefield that features both low- and mid-intensity conflict.

Our future doctrine must not continue to ignore essential, effective operations against those nations that sponsor insurgency. The United States has subjected its soldiers to two wars since World War II wherein the enemy was afforded contiguous sanctuary, free from offensive US ground operations. The payment for this policy has been a lack of US military success; protracted, indeterminate combat; erosion of American public support for US aims; and, most important, increased US casualties. We should have learned by now that a policy of independent air and naval action against an enemy sanctuary does not deter aggression. It may, in fact, strengthen the hand of the aggressor government. This policy was as indecisive in Vietnam as it had been in Korea. As noted above, the North Vietnamese leadership was quite willing to risk US air and naval action against their homeland in 1975. Affording sanctuary for the insurgent is particularly damaging to the cause of the counterinsurgent, since experience clearly indicates that the absence of a sanctuary has often been coincident with the defeat of insurgent movements.

In the specific case of the Asian insurgent, or one following his example, offensive ground operations within the contiguous sanctuary are particularly vital to the counterinsurgent. The regular and regional forces that this breed of insurgent must create will be harbored, nurtured, and poised in the sanctuary awaiting the opportune moment. For the counterinsurgent to win, these forces must be defeated. For the counterinsurgent to survive, these forces must, as a minimum, be engaged. The counterinsurgent must therefore go beyond the bounds of low-intensity conflict and into a realm of mid-intensity conflict. These operations may be wholly conducted by the nation beset with a foreign-sponsored insurgency, by US armed forces, or both.

The last time the Army revised its insurgency counterdoctrine was in 1981. On beginning their task, the writers were directed

to use the term "low-intensity conflict." They were also informed that the manual would supersede all other doctrine in the field. Thus, several supporting manuals dealing with such subjects as counterguerrilla operations, advisory duties, base defense, border control, and intelligence went out of print.

The resulting and current manual has a number of acknowledged weaknesses. By definition, the writers could not delve into mid-intensity conflict and were therefore precluded from detailing the obvious counter to Asian insurgent doctrine: offensive ground operations against the sponsoring nation. A doctrinal subset for counterterrorism was also missing from the 1981 version despite a number of sensational PLO activities in the 1970s. However, it was known at the time that most US allies were creating their own counterterrorist units and that it would be unlikely that any nation would seek to have the US Army enforce its public laws. Additionally, within the United States, the FBI was organizing a Hostage Rescue Team for use in domestic terrorist incidents. The absence of counterterrorist doctrine may be a shortcoming, but it is not a major deficiency. The prime deficiencies of the 1981 manual stem from a highly restrictive definition and the absence of subordinate and supporting doctrinal literature.

Our current doctrine, however, does have some strengths. The thrust is directed at the host nation solving its own insurgency problems with aggressive ground operations, population control, economic development, and political action. The aim is to encourage Third World states to offer their citizens a stake in their own governments, an essential action that is unlikely to be effected by the United States. The manual is therefore in accord with the Guam Doctrine, a policy that the United States has rarely referred to but has closely followed for the last 16 years. The manual has also captured as many of the hard-won lessons of the Vietnam War as space would permit. Finally, it has been translated into Spanish and has been used at the School of the Americas by Latin American allies of the United States.

The Army has thus provided its friends with its own experience. If it is useful to the allies of the United States, that should be reason enough for continuation. However, revision is inevitable and probably needed. The new doctrine writers should not be constrained by a restrictive definition, particularly one that precludes advocacy of offensive, mid-intensity ground operations on the soil of those nations that sponsor insurgency. But as the first order of business, the writers should give much study and thought to whether or not the United States should fight insurgents. If our new doctrine is based on the use of US forces against the insurgent, let us hope we face lesser breeds and that Asian insurgent doctrine is somehow forgotten or is beyond the reach of our adversaries. To keep an Asian-style insurgent within the bounds of low-intensity conflict is to attempt the impossible. Second, if the writers envision the use of US troops in fighting the insurgent, serious consideration must be given to the imperative of US military government. To attempt to fight the insurgent without the levers of political power is to risk a repeat performance of our Southeast Asian experience. We would simply be pitted against the guerrilla, once again without the ability to undercut his appeal or control his movements. If the writers study the past, they will conclude that the United States Army does not need counterinsurgent doctrine for its own use but that the Army should continue providing such doctrine for US allies and the Americans who assist them. In the end, it will be these soldiers who need that doctrine.

NOTES

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3. Ibid., p. 193.
4. Ibid., p. 36.
5. Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army* (Washington: GPO, 1962), pp. 103-08.
6. Ibid., pp. 83, 87.
7. Ibid., p. 108.

8. Vo Nguyen Giap, *Big Victory, Great Task* (New York: Praeger, 1968), pp. 32-33, 55-57, 87.

9. Tran Van Tra, *Vietnam: History of the Bulwark B2 Theater, Vol. 5: Concluding the 30-Year War* (Ho Chi Minh City: 1982), pp. 7, 118, 127, 209, 219.

10. Ibid., pp. 32, 56, 59-64.

11. William E. Le Gro, *Vietnam from Cease Fire to Capitulation* (Washington: US Army Center of Military History, 1981), pp. 51, 62-63, 73.

12. Ibid., p. 51; and Cao Van Vien, *The Final Collapse* (Washington: US Army Center of Military History, 1983), pp. 31-35, 45, 162.

13. Tra, p. 61.

14. Stuart Herrington, *Peace With Honor?: An American Reports on Vietnam 1973-1975* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1983), pp. 37-39.

15. Le Gro, pp. 62-63.

16. Tra, pp. 92-94.

17. Ibid., p. 160.

18. Ibid., pp. 114, 132.

19. Le Gro, p. 39.

20. Author's diary, Phnom Penh, Khmer Republic, December 1974.

21. Van Tien Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam*, trans. John Sprangens (London: Review Press, 1977), p. 20.

22. Tra, p. 117.

23. Ibid., pp. 114-19.

24. Dung, p. 27.

25. Tra, pp. 121, 139.

26. Vien, p. 78.

27. Tra, pp. 95-96. Tra's written analysis of the Gavin Plan was confirmed as being accurate by LTG Gavin in an interview with the author on 17 May 1985.

28. Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1984), pp. 113-14.

29. Tra, p. 125.

30. Ibid., p. 91.

31. Dung, pp. 103-05, 113-15, 122, 138.

32. Vien, p. 19.

33. Dung, p. 151.

34. Le Gro, p. 167; Vien, p. 140.

35. Tra, p. 123.

36. Ibid., pp. 35, 88-94, 132, 139.

37. Dung, pp. 132, 155-56, 159.

38. Tra, 196-202.

39. US Army, *Field Service Regulations* (Washington: GPO, 1905), pp. 207-08.

40. US Army, *Infantry Drill Regulations* (Washington: GPO, 1911), pp. 139-40.

41. US Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual* (Washington: GPO, 1950), p. 9.

42. Ibid., p. 2-2.

43. US Army, *FM 100-5 Field Service Regulations* (Washington: GPO, 1941, 1944, and 1949).

44. US Army Infantry School, *Operations Against Guerrilla Forces* (Ft. Benning, Ga., May 1950). Also see US Army, *FM 31-20 Operations Against Guerrilla Forces* (Washington: GPO, 1951). The lack of attention to Mao or Truong Chin extends beyond this period. In 1953, a bibliography compiled for the Department of Army on unconventional warfare contained over 220 references, some of them Asian, but no references to Mao or Truong Chin. See US Army, ACSI "Bibliography on Unconventional Warfare," 404th Strategic Intelligence Detachment, 13 July 1953 (US Army Military History Institute Document Archives).

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46. US Army, *FM 31-15 Operations Against Irregular Forces*, May 1961; *FM 100-5 Field Service Regulations: Operations*, February 1962; *FM 31-16 Counterguerrilla Operations*, February 1963.

47. US Army *FM 100-20 Field Service Regulations: Counterinsurgency*, April 1964; *FM 31-16 Counterguerrilla Operations*, March 1967; and *FM 100-20 Field Service Regulations: Internal Defense and Development*, May 1967.

48. US Army, *FM 100-20 Field Service Regulations: Internal Defense and Development*, November 1974.